

Tamás Kisantal

Living in the Post-Apocalyptic World

From the 1960s onwards, the zombie motif has been among the most dominant in popular culture. Its underlying meaning, however, has continually shifted to suit the cultural preoccupations of the period. This article traces the history of the genre and the changes in conventions it has undergone.

‘There’s a warnin’ sign
on the road ahead
There’s a lot of people sayin’
We’d be better off dead.’
(Neil Young: Rockin in the Free World)

For a decade, zombies have become one of the most prevalent themes in Western popular culture. Countless works deal with the possibilities and consequences of an imagined zombie outbreak; from Hollywood blockbusters, through comics, TV series and videogames, to novels and short stories. This cultural fashion is a relatively new phenomenon since the genre of zombie film flowered from the late ‘60s to the early ‘80s. This golden age, characterized above all by George A. Romero’s zombie film trilogy - *Night of the Living Dead* (1968); *Dawn of the Dead* (1978); *Day of the Dead* (1985) - was followed by a less successful period right until the 2000s when the dead rose again in popular culture.

The resurrection began in 2002 with the movie adaptation of the homonymous videogame series *Resident Evil* (directed by Paul W.S. Anderson), and with the British film of Oscar winning director Danny Boyle, *28 Days Later*. These were followed by many successful films which all contributed to zombies becoming popular icons of our time, alongside vampires. On the one hand, this popularity has been able to come into being due to the skill of the filmmakers and the professionalism of the marketers, but on the other hand, the concept of the zombie undoubtedly embodies some of the contemporary cultural anxieties. This essay attempts to analyze

the context of this popularity, both the immediate generic and broader social and historical contexts. To understand the deeper cultural meaning of the 2000s' horror films, we will study the history of the genre and some basic changes in the generic conventions of the zombie film.

The zombie was originally a less popular theme or sub-genre in horror films. The first zombie film, *White Zombie* (Victor Harpelin), was produced in 1932. It approached the zombie theme from its original roots; the story is set in Haiti and uses voodoo mythology. The zombies are bewitched slaves who have to be obedient to the evil witch doctor portrayed by Bela Lugosi, who famously played a similar character as Count Dracula in Tod Browning's *Dracula* in 1931. The focus of this film – and of the subsequent zombie movies of the '30s and '40s – was centered on the concept of domination.¹ The main characters are usually the protagonist villain, a white man who rules black people, and a white woman (mainly the protagonist's lover). He transforms his victims into zombies, who are robbed of their free will, and are forced to spend their time carrying out his orders. The following conceptions fairly represent the ideological nature of early American horror films: the ruled people are black slaves (these were always supporting characters), and the most frightening event is not their subordination but the zombification and subjugation of the innocent white woman.² It is an important detail that the ruler comes from the white world but is also alien to it at the same time: Lugosi speaks with a foreign accent and his face (a mask) has oriental features. He is – like Dracula – an evil stranger who tries to infiltrate the border lands of civilized territory and conquer the weak (Dracula hypnotizes his victims, usually weak women, while the villain of *White Zombie* uses black magic, similar to hypnosis, to deprive the heroine of her own will).³ In the zombie films produced during the Second World War, the villain was usually a Nazi scientist whose character and activity allegorically expressed the fear of the Third Reich conquering the West. Perhaps this is the origin of the Nazi zombie

1 Examples of such films are: *Revolt of the Zombies* (1936), *The King of the Zombies*, (1941), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943).

2 Kyle William Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic. The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*, (Jefferson 2010) 66-67.

3 The brief analysis of the masculine ideology in the *Dracula* see: Cynthia Freeland, *The Naked and the Undead. Evil and the Appeal of Horror* (Colorado 2000) 128-133.

theme which later has become a quasi-sub-genre.⁴ The frightful character of these early zombie films came from the fear for losing one's personality and becoming puppets which could easily be taken control of by the (subconscious or public) enemy: the strangers from outside the West, the Nazis or later, communists.

In the '50s, the zombie genre can be connected to the most popular theme of that period, the alien invasion, in which the theme of conquering aliens embodied the fear for communists.⁵ The most important paranoia film was Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), in which a strange extraterrestrial organism is able to copy the personality of people and change them into insensitive living 'robots'. Although not a zombie movie, it was undoubtedly influenced by previous zombie films. It expresses both the anti-communist attitude of the Cold War and the paranoid atmosphere of the period. The transformed alien people are similar to real people, but they have no emotions and are only aiming at spreading themselves over the planet. This can be interpreted both as fear of communism as well as critique on the American consumer society.⁶ The enemy lives among ordinary Americans and looks similar to them; the aliens cannot easily be differentiated from normal citizens and even the alien invasion is not a direct attack to the world but rather spreads like an invisible infection.

The first really successful zombie film, *Night of the Living Dead* by George A. Romero in 1968, was released a decade later. It did not just renew and revive the whole genre, but added some narrative and thematic elements that later became generic conventions. The zombie would no longer be connected to the exotic world and mysticism as the outbreaks began to take place in the USA. Nobody knows the exact cause for the return of dead people (according to an assumption it was created by the radioactive contamination of a space probe) but it isn't important since

- 4 E.g. *Shock Waves* (Ken Wiedernhorn, 1977), *L'Abîme des Morts-Vivants* (Jesus Franco, 1981), *Le Lac des Morts Vivants* (Jean Rollin, 1981), and recently the Norwegian horror-comedy, *Død snø* (Tommy Wirkola, 2009). About the cultural context of Nazi motives in horror films see: Julian Petley, 'Nazi Horrors. History, Myth, Sexploitation.' in: *Horror Zone. The Cultural Experience of Contemporary Horror Cinema*, Ian Conrich ed. (London 2010) 205-226.
- 5 For example in the cultic trash movie of Ed Wood, *Plan 9 from Outer Space* or in Edward L. Cahn's *Invisible Invader* (both in 1959).
- 6 Keith M Booker, *Alternate Americas: Science Fiction Film and American Culture* (Westport 2006) 64-71.

the film concentrates on a fictional apocalyptic situation inspired by the novella of Richard Matheson, *I am Legend* and Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Birds*.⁷ The stories of *The Birds* and Matheson's 1954 work both focus on a house threatened by an attack of monsters (killer animals in Hitchcock's and vampires in Matheson's story). The zombies, here called ghouls, are literally living dead creatures eating human flesh and have infectious bites. Here, the zombie genre intersects with the theme of epidemics, and this intersection characterizes the genre from that time on.

As literary historian Jennifer Cooke explains, there are three broad categories of narrative artworks centered on epidemics. Firstly, the ones that raises questions of faith, of metaphysical and existential problems and of random death.⁸ The second type focuses mainly on scientific, political and ethical questions by alluding to disease (e.g. Michael Crichton's novel *The Andromeda Strain*, 1969, and its film versions from 1971 and 2008). The third category contains the zombie films that – according to Cooke – deal with the former two at the same time. Through the theme of the undead it problematizes death and the human fear of it. Furthermore, through the presentation of a disaster, it points to its social and cultural background.⁹

Zombie films concentrate mainly on the social relations of disastrous situations. In Romero's films for instance these have a permanent storyline showing a group of survivors enclosed in an isolated space (a house in *Night of the Living Dead*, a shopping center in *Dawn of the Dead*, and a military base in *Day of the Dead*) to reveal some of their hidden social conflicts. One of the protagonists of *The Night* is a black man whose leading role against the attacking hordes of corpses insults both the traditions of the films of this period and the (white) characters themselves. The film systematically reflects on the fragility of social ties in this situation and, finally, even the basic differences between people and zombies fade away: the protagonist – the only survivor of the final attack – is shot by local policemen and members of the civilian militia as they mistake him for a zombie. Thus the zombies are no longer the racially and gender-dominated weaklings and the living people have turned as aggressive and brainless as the undead. The

7 George A Romero, 'Preface' in: John Russo ed., *The Complete Night of the Living Dead Filmbook* (Pittsburg 1985), 6-7.

8 For example novels like Albert Camus, *La peste* (1947), Jorge Saramago's *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (1995), or films by Ingmar Bergman's *Det sjunde inseglet* (1957).

9 Jennifer Cooke, *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film* (Houndmills 2009) 163-164.

latter is even more explicitly stated in the remake of the film in which the surviving heroine, confronted with the massacre of rednecks, declares in the final scene about the zombies: ‘They’re us. We’re them, and they’re us.’¹⁰

Romero’s first film, *Night*, was not successful in the USA (partly because of its explicit graphic violence) but immediately became an acknowledged independent film in Europe. According to film theorist Kendall R. Phillips, *Night* expressed the cultural anxiety of the end of the ‘60s and was more acceptable to the European audience after the revolutions of ’68. When it was re-released in the USA, the public was much more susceptible to its pervasive pessimism since the optimistic illusions arisen by hippie and peace movements had largely passed by then.¹¹ The apocalyptic tone of the film is stronger than during the paranoid invasions of the science fiction movies during the ‘50s. It presents an unexplainable and potentially fatal disaster. Although the authorities have restored order by the end of the film, (as we see, they killed the zombies and the black hero as well) the world’s order cannot be rebuilt and will never be the same again.

Night and its two quasi-sequels represent the infection and zombie outbreak as a critical and apocalyptic situation. In between the two cult zombie films, *Night* and *Dawn*, Romero made a less successful horror/sci-fi film: *The Crazies* (1973), with a very similar structure and storyline. In the film an untested bio-weapon poisons the citizens of a small town, transforming them into a horde of raging insane people. The film concentrates on a group of inhabitants trying to simultaneously escape the virus, the horde of crazies, and the mass of army soldiers who want to capture everybody in the town and put them into quarantine. As zombies and humans appear mixed in zombie movies, *The Crazies* depicts the total confusion of infected and ‘normal’ people: the authorities are completely incapable of keeping order and the ordinary people cannot help but become insane – either literally by becoming infected, or metaphorically as part of a panicking and raging mass – or to be killed by the violent crowd. At the end of the film the unstoppable infection extirpates the whole town and spreads even further: the apocalypse begins.

Romero’s subsequent two horror films, *Dawn* and *Day*, present a world threatened permanently by the walking dead, and mankind is on the edge

10 Tom Savini, *Night of the Living Dead* (1990).

11 Kendall R. Phillips, *Projected Fears. Horror Films and American Culture* (Westport 2005) 84-86.

of total destruction. As the titles of the films suggest, nothing changes from night to day: it is the end of human society and the beginning of the zombies' world – and the latter is much more similar to our world as it would seem at first sight. This similarity is most striking in *Dawn of the Dead*, in which the image of the zombie is used as a metaphor for consumer society. The human characters take refuge in a shopping center where the zombies go back to, as one of the characters commented, as part of 'Some kind of instinct. Memory of what they used to do. This was an important part of their lives.' Most parts of the film take place in this area, functioning as an island of survival that provides the humans with almost endless provisions. Ironically, the humans and zombies have the same aims in the shopping mall. The living characters consume the commodities of the plaza and one after another they also become subject to the consumption of the zombies. In one scene in the middle of the film one can identify a direct parallelism of consumers and zombies: the human characters go 'shopping' in the plaza and they start up some of the mall's equipment (the background music, fountains, escalators etc.). Then the 'awakened' zombies go to the shops, step up to escalators seeming like a crowd of ordinary mindless shoppers.¹² Thus the film represents the mindless character of consumer society, and for Romero the zombies serve as a kind of metaphor or a specific language for criticizing some aspects of our culture.



12 For a profound analysis of the social critique of Dawn see Kim Paffenroth, *Gospel of the Living Dead. George Romero's Visions of Hell on Earth.* (Waco 2006) 45-70.

The golden age of zombie films, from the late '60s to the mid-'80s, presents the outbreaks as threatening and possibly irreversible disasters that are able to destroy our whole civilization. Meanwhile, the European (especially Italian) versions of the theme turned to Haitian storylines, in which the tropical island itself functioned as an isolated place similar to those in the early Romero films. The most well-known Italian zombie film is Lucio Fulci's *Zombi 2*, which is a more brutal and gory film than any of Romero's work, but misses almost the entire metaphorical character of the 'classic' zombie films.¹³ The film focuses on the same global apocalypse as the earlier films by Romero: the disaster starts on an isolated, tropical island (which is then followed by quasi-scientific experiments using black magic) but has reached New York at the end of the film and presumably the rest of the world as well.

With this apocalyptic tone, these zombie films present the Western culture as fragile and easily destroyable, in which a disastrous situation may not only prove fatal to the community, but leads to the triumph of a more united horde of undead over Western civilization. It is not accidental that in this period the theme of apocalypse flourished in popular culture. In some successful films the end of the world happened primarily as a nuclear holocaust which did not cause the instant and total annihilation of the human race, but instead served only as a precursor for a slow and agonizing death for mankind. From the *Mad Max* trilogy (George Miller, 1979, 1981, 1985) through *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984), to the highly successful television movie *The Day After* (Nicholas Meyer, 1983), the nuclear war appears as a real possibility which could break out at any time and the movie asks its viewers whether the human race could be capable of rebuilding civilization again. These films raise the question whether our fate will be total annihilation (as in *The Day After*) or complete anarchy accompanied by a slow descent into extinction (as in *Mad Max* and *Terminator*). Similar to these nuclear war movies, the zombie films of this period represent the anxiety of the world in which its final and total destruction can take place at any time and is inevitable.

After the new millennium, the zombie movies have retained the apocalyptic characteristics, but some of their narrative features have

13 The title of film as a second part of a sequel had connected it to Romero oeuvre. There were no prequel of it (*Zombi 1*) at all but the Italian title of the *Dawn of the Dead* was *Zombi* and with help of this titling the filmmakers tried to cash in on the success of it.

radically changed. These films show the end of history and even the aftermath of this event, thus expressing a kind of post-historical or post-apocalyptic attitude. I use the terms 'end of history' and 'post-historical' not in the Fukuyamaian sense. After the end of the Cold War and by the fall of communist regimes in 1989, the relatively optimistic prospect on the future does not sketch the apocalypse, but rather – as Francis Fukuyama's famous and highly criticized post-Hegelian approach argues – the post-historical world which fulfills its own teleology and brings into existence the Western-style liberal democracy all over the world.¹⁴ Almost a decade and half after the optimistic reflections of Fukuyama, the works of popular culture show the possibility of the end of (human) history not as the final point but as a historical event leading not to the end of anything. The human race is past the end of the world, living in a post-historical situation in which no more plans and aims (no history) exist, except for day-to-day survival. In this sense, the recent post-apocalyptic zombie films represent a conception of an anti-teleological history. The 'classic' films expressed the end of history as a turning point from which the meaning of the whole Western culture and history is questioned (we have built a culture being incapable of wrestling with an outbreak of the undead). But these new works present the situation after the disaster has occurred and concentrate on the efforts of survivors trying to build a kind of life on the ruins of civilization.

Some of these films are highly reflective both to the contemporary political situation and to the generic conventions of zombie movies. In *28 Days Later*, the infection called 'rage' breaks out from a scientific animal test laboratory. Instead of killing its victims, the disease renders those exposed to it violently mad (similar as in *The Crazies*). The survivors leave the depopulated London behind after they went shopping in a supermarket (it reminds to some extent of *The Dawn of the Dead*) and move to a military base in the countryside (as in *Day of the Dead*) where the human characters have to defend themselves from both the zombies as well each other (as in all Romero's films). At the start of the film the outbreak of the disease causing public disturbances is shown in the style of TV news, pointing to the potential every-day and 'modernist' character of the 'rage'.¹⁵

14 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of the History and the Last Man* (New York 1992).

15 On the term of 'modernist event' and its historical and philosophical connotations see Hayden White, 'The Modernist Event' in: *The Persistence of History. Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, Vivian Sobchack ed. (New York and London 1996) 17-38.

This everydayness is radically counterpointed in the scene where the main protagonist awakens from a twenty-eight days long coma and walks confusedly in a completely deserted London. These uncanny scenes show the city as it ordinarily can never be seen: a totally depopulated, quiet area underlining the post-apocalyptic chronotope of the story.



These kinds of references to the generic tradition and to the contemporary political contexts – more or less explicitly – appear in other zombie films as well. As the film historian Charles Derry points out, the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (Zack Snyder, 2004) has direct allusions to the political situations of the post-9/11 era; the attack of zombies can be interpreted as a manifestation of the cultural anxiety of both the terrorists and the government.¹⁶ The political references in Romero's fourth zombie movie, *Land of the Dead* (2005) are more explicit. It represents the above-mentioned post-apocalyptic situation in which humans have learned to live together with the undead to some extent. The humans are living in a fortified town ruled by a rich leader whose army both protects people from zombies and oppresses them with their military force. The zombies of the film are metaphorically identical to these oppressed people. At

16 Charles Derry, *Dark Dreams 2.0. A Psychological History of the Modern Horror Film from the 1950s to the 21st Century* (Jefferson 2009) 244-245.

the beginning, they are mindless and dangerous creatures who can be dazzled with fireworks (which is used as a weapon since, while they are mesmerizingly gazing at the glittering sky, the humans can easily hunt and kill them). But later they have become an organized throng, capable of acting together and no longer allow themselves to be enchanted by the glittering fireworks. The zombies set off to conquer and destroy the town to change the 'promised land' into the 'land of the dead' (the metaphorical character of the town is more emphasized by the Elysian name of its center: Fiddler's Green). The revolting zombies paradoxically liberate the oppressed humans. Thus, their outbreak has become an ambiguous allegory of the dangers threatening the wealthy West (from the poor people in the Third World through Arabian terrorists, to the oppressed Americans themselves). Some other recent work concerns the zombie theme from a similar post-apocalyptic viewpoint due to which the apocalypse is not literally the end of the world but 'only' the end of our civilization. From horror-comedies such as *Fido* (Andrew Currie, 2006), *Planet Terror* (Robert Rodriguez, 2007), *Zombieland* (Ruben Fleischer, 2009 – the title being a reference to Disneyland), and the Cuban *Juan de los Muertos* (Juan of the Dead; Alejandro Brugués, 2011) through the comics series of *The Walking Dead* (written by Robert Kirkman, 2003), its TV-series adaptation (Frank Darabont, 2010) to zombie novels, these works represent a world threatened permanently by zombie hordes. The zombie outbreak is already in the past and the human race has to live in an undead world. As a comic series, *The Walking Dead* concentrates not on the process of zombie outbreaks but on the daily routines of survivors realizing that the world's order can never be rebuilt and that their only aim can be to survive as long as possible. This world is meant only for zombies since everybody turns into the undead after his or her death, regardless of the cause. The most interesting element in these comics is the total lack of expectation and hope: it chooses to concentrate on the personalities of the protagonists in the zombie infested world.¹⁷ The graphic novel has been publishing continuously from 2003 to the present day since the storyline, as well as the life of the characters, do not advance to a given denouement but stagnates endlessly.

17 This presentation of the world as an endless stagnation and agony is similar to the famous post-apocalyptic novel of Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2006), and its film adaptation (John Hillcoat, 2009) where an unexplained catastrophe destroyed the civilization and the survivals are compelled to cannibalism.



Some recent novels approach the zombie apocalypse more peculiarly. Two books by Max Brooks present the story as a kind of non-fiction. His first work, *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003) is a humorous pseudo-handbook teaching how to survive a zombie outbreak and to live in the world of the undead.¹⁸ According to the book the zombie infection is caused by the strange virus ‘Solanum’, which – if it gets to the bloodstream – kills the person and later restarts some bodily vegetative functions turning him into a flesh eating zombie.¹⁹ The handbook contains all various ‘tips’ to survive an attack such as: what kind of weapons one needs or does not need, what the safest and most dangerous places are etc... and how to live in a world ruled by the living dead. The last chapters of the book contain an alternative historiography of zombie phenomena from the prehistoric age to these days since the epidemic is not a unique case, but our history has witnessed some minor zombie outbreaks before: ‘Most of human history has been the story of small islands of order in an ocean of chaos,’ says the narrator ‘people scratching to survive with the constant threat of invasion

18 Max Brooks, *The Zombie Survival Guide. Complete Protection from the Living Dead* (New York 2003).

19 Brooks, *The Zombie Survival Guide*, 2.

always hanging above their heads.²⁰

Brooks second zombie book *World War Z*, is a fictional account of a zombie crisis from its outbreak to the process of it in the style of oral history.²¹ The reality effect of the two books comes from its unorthodox form of approaching the fictional events in a genre of non-fiction. In these ways they present the apocalypse both as a historical and ordinary event in which a zombie outbreak can occur not only at any time, but actually has occurred several times before in history. The same attitude has been expressed by the successful ‘zombification’ of some classic novels. The first and most well-known is the rewriting of *Pride and Prejudice* in which the romantic love story takes place in the presence of a zombie outbreak.²² It plays both with the popularity of Jane Austen’s novel (and of its film versions) and with that of the zombie theme representing a kind of world where the threat of zombies is an everyday experience (the Bennett sisters and Mr. Darcy are both romantic figures and skilled zombie hunters). For example, the classic opening line of the original novel: ‘It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife’²³ is rewritten as if the behavior of the zombies would be a general truth: ‘It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains.’²⁴

Thus the basic difference between the classic zombie stories and the present works is the post-apocalyptic attitude of the latter which represents the end of history not as a final disaster but as an event followed by continuation. If the films of the ‘golden age’ expressed the worries of a final destruction (the consequence of atomic war or of other human or natural catastrophes) the recent works express the anxiety of a permanent threat. The classic and the new wave of zombie films show an unlikely conception of the Western history and civilization. The former films express the anxiety of the ‘decline of the West’, but the new works question the sense of Western history in general since they represent life after the outbreak as a metaphor of our daily routine of life. The catastrophe is no longer a

20 Ibidem, 169.

21 Max Brooks, *World War Z. An Oral History of the Zombie War* (New York 2006).

22 Jan Austen and Seth Grahme-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and the Zombies: The Classic Regency Romance – Now with Ultraviolent Mayhem* (Philadelphia 2009).

23 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Cambridge 2006, 3.

24 Austen and Grahme-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and the Zombies*, 7.

possibility but an experience. While the earlier zombie films represent the potential total destruction of the world and humanity, the new films show our world 'dancing' continuously in a land of chaos. One can survive the apocalypse and be capable to live in a world of undead, but it will be a life of permanent stagnation in the ruins of broken civilization. Thus the recent zombie films express with their pessimism or irony our most radical cultural anxieties and observations of the world, in which disaster has become an everyday experience.