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Final Paper

### 3. The 'Otherness' and how the present Zombie Folklore represents the Post 9/11 era

Nick Muntean and Matthew Thomas Payne describe the zombie in their article "*Attack of the Livid Dead: Recalibrating Terror in the Post-September 11 Zombie Film*" as a "filmic mechanism for articulating anxieties about social ills and crises" (Muntean 241). This mechanism is the form of the mindless zombie which Philp L. Simpson states in his article "*The Zombie Apocalypse is Upon Us!*" is a symptom of "the elevated social anxiety attending a series of recent catastrophic events in American history, inaugurated by the terror attacks of 9/11" (Simpson 28). I want to explore Muntean, Payne and Simpson's theories on why they believe the zombie is symbolic to the current apocalyptic enemy that we are fighting today. By doing that I will be exploring with three major changes that occurred within the cultural world of the zombie folklore using George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and Danny Boyle's *28 Day's Later* (2002). The three major key changes that occurred within the zombie folklore between this period are: The zombie's attributes and characteristics; the origin transition from supernatural to biological; and the historical and sociological relevance that was occurring at the time of each film's release.

Canadian film critic Robin Wood argues that the symbolic nature of the zombie represents an 'Otherness' in society, "someone or something that should be repressed, but which

has materialized nevertheless” (Muntean 242). Even though the origin of the zombie is rooted much farther back to voodoo traditions, George A. Romero seemed to transfer those roots so it could perfectly reflect within Western American culture. Throughout the last few decades this zombie representation went above and beyond Romero’s original vision and manifested into a form much more frightening and ruthless zombie, as a way to understandably reflect a newly frightened and heightened anxiety of the American age which is “an allegory of post 9/11, post-Katrina, post-economic collapse America, frozen by the political gridlock between liberalism and a renascent conservatism” (Simpson, 29).

The characteristics of the zombie that remained consistent throughout *Night of the Living Dead* and *28 Day’s Later* are its bourgeois ideologies of patriarchal consumer capitalism. The cannibalistic nature of the zombie and the tearing of flesh and bones represent an ugly truth of the Western culture, in that we are in fact a repressed mindless consumer society that reacts purely on primal instincts. Cannibalism is in fact a metaphor for our exploitative animalistic nature and the zombie or ‘Otherness’ is an invisible enemy that cannot be really recognized because it is one of us. “The zombie is both with us and against us, precisely because it is us” (Muntean 243).

There are precisely three key changes that seemed to manifest throughout the zombie evolution. The first change is the zombie’s attributes and characteristics which seemed to take a major shift from *Night of the Living Dead* to *28 Day’s Later*. The first major change that audiences will immediately notice between Romero’s supernatural zombie of the late 1960’s and Boyle’s biological zombie of the early 2000’s is the swift speed, stealth and strength of the monster. Immediately when first watching *28 Day’s Later* Boyle’s revamped and upgraded zombie was highly parallel to the dangerous and frightening attributes of a diseased human

being. Many of the zombie's physical actions were insanely impulsive and irrational, which are characteristics that are identical to a brainwashed, diluted extremist or a real-life terrorist. "The zombie constitutes the perfect metaphor for the dangers of the age, from the biological to the natural, the nuclear, to the terrorist" (Simpson 38). In *Night of the Living Dead* the zombies are slow, weak, dim-witted drones which drunkenly stagger towards their victim in what seems to be today a quite comical scene. This drunken iconic image of Romero's zombie has become a part of American pop culture which led to such spoof comedies like *Dead Alive* (1992), *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), and *Zombie Land* (2009).

The real danger of Romero's zombies seems to be not their strength or speed but rather when they appear in greater numbers or if the victim unfortunately enters small enclosed spaces where there seems to be no other way out. Their slow speed (which you would think would take them forever to catch up to you) would suddenly make a frightened surprise for the viewer when inexplicably appearing either right behind the victim or suddenly around the corner. This kind of monster mechanics seems to begin with James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) and remained frighteningly effective with the horror genre all the way up to its present day. The slow-monster clique eventually became a horror movie staple helping to create the slasher icons of such invincible monsters like Freddy Krueger, Jason Voorhees and Michael Myers. These slow-moving monsters have always been the constant image of nightmares, where the victim always seems to be one step ahead the monster and yet for some inexplicable reason the monster always has the ability to inevitably catch up with them.

So when director Danny Boyle made *28 Day's Later* in the post-September 11 era, the speed and strength of the zombie took a shocking and much more frightening turn. The new zombie seemed to have a newfound speed and power. It was much more fast, swift, powerful and

aggressive, with a ferocious speed and strength that was never seen before. The zombies also seemed to have a mind of their own, knew how to be more strategic in their hunting and even knew how to work doors. “These zombies are dangerous individually, as well as collectively... while still incapable of symbolic language, this new species of zombie is also more emotive and committed to capturing it’s pretty than the moaning, glassy-eyed walking dead of the yore” (Muntean 246).

What makes these-new found zombies much more frightening in a post 911 world is that they resemble the movements of a real-life enemy. If a predator wants to attack you they will most definitely run after you with excessive speed and ferocious power. The fast and sudden aggressiveness of these new zombies also brings to mind suicide bombers within this post 911 world, in which a terrorist will just savagely run into a public or a highly crowded population and impulsively blow themselves up. “They are your neighbors, coworkers, and family members. Like the ‘sleeper-cell’ terrorist, the zombie can potentially be anyone at any time” (Muntean 247).

The second change is the origin transition from the supernatural (*Night of the Living Dead*) to the biological (*28 Days Later*). In *Night of the Living Dead* the origin for the zombie is that they are reanimated, human corpses which have for some unknown reason rose from the dead and developed an excessive hunger for human flesh. Within the narrative of *Night of the Living Dead* various experts and the United States military can’t give a scientific, rational explanation to this mysterious supernatural phenomenon. We get a slightly more detailed explanation later in the film when an emergency broadcaster interviews a scientist. This scientist suggests that the cause might be coming from a radioactive contamination from a space probe

returning from Venus which was deliberately exploded in the Earth's atmosphere when the radiation was detected.

The pseudo-science like explanation for the origin of this strange epidemic in *Night of the Living Dead* is much more preposterous and unbelievable than the explanation explained in Boyle's *28 Days Later*. With *28 Day's Later*, the film immediately opens up in a research facility where animal liberal activists break in to try and free the various test subjects. What they don't realize is that the test subjects are contaminated with a Rage-like infection which is a highly contagious virus that is spread through blood and saliva. Twenty-eight days later a hospital patient named Jim awakens from a coma in London. He finds the hospital and the entire city deserted and is suddenly pursued by people infected by this Rage. When he is rescued the survivors explain to him that a blood-born, rage-inducing virus spread uncontrollably among the populace, resulting a global infection that has spread all the way through Paris and New York City.

Unlike the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead*, infection doesn't just occur with a large bite of your flesh but can spread simply with a small dab of blood that could accidentally get into your mouth or eyes. The time period in the change from a human to a zombie is also quite different. In *Night of the Living Dead* the transition from a human to a zombie can take up to a series of hours, unlike the Rage infection in *28 Day's Later*, which changes a person in mere seconds. There is no real root for the cause of this plague in *Night of the Living Dead* which resorts to elide any particular blame, but for *28 Day's Later* there is.

Since the root for the cause in *28 Day's Later* gives more of a scientific and believable explanation towards a drug manufactured infection, the blame can be pointed towards human

beings, which immediately brings to mind the Guatemala syphilis experiment in the 40's, the discovery of AIDs in the 80's and finally the epidemic rise of Ebola which has recently spread to Europe and the United States. Because of the zombie origin being taken out of its voodoo African origin and given a more western and scientific explanation to its causes, that adds an element of realism to its story and heightens the fear and believability that an apocalyptic and biological end is plausible. "The 9/11 terrorist attacks and all the disasters that followed marked a watershed moment in the American nation's shock at having to confront the dire possibilities of an apocalyptic future" (Simpson, 38).

The third and final change I want to explore are the historical and sociological changes that have occurred between *Night of the Living Dead* and *28 Day's Later*. Placing both films in the context of when they were released could help point out why such changes of the zombie folklore occurred. *Night of the Living Dead* was released in 1969 which was the end of a bleak decade of great political violence and drastic culture changes, and so many of the visual aesthetics that Romero used seemed to reinforce the public's current personal feelings and anxieties at that time. *Night of the Living Dead* was given a grainy documentary black and white feel, along with the television news and the disturbing still photographs that appeared in the credit sequence of the film; all such visual elements would immediately take audiences back to the gritty and disturbing photojournalism reality of the Vietnam War.

The sociological aspects with Romero's zombies represented various racial metaphors of the Vietnamese, which were the enemies the United States were at war with at the time. Since these enemies overseas were a specific race and came from a specific country, American's could easily use that to generalize, identify and label; so they had a clear idea on who they were fighting and what the enemy looked like. The rural country landscape in *Night of the Living*

*Dead* visually brings to mind the rural country farm-like environments overseas in Vietnam. Many of the images of Romero's zombie's slowly making their way across the rural landscape are reminiscent of the numerous black and white photographs in history books which showed various Viennese civilians wandering through their villages after their homes were tragically destroyed and burned to the ground. The zombies in Romero's films stood out as mindless non-human like forms, which swarmed in large numbers and needed to be immediately shot on sight and wiped out as quickly as possible. This seemed to be the mind-set of the 60's American government and how some of the public even viewed the Viennese; as nothing more than mindless unhuman-like animals that needed to be eliminated for America to prevail.

Things have drastically changed the representation of the zombie character after the heinous terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. When America was attacked by a military like force who were sophisticated enough to high jack American transportation and get through all of our security and military breaches undetected, it completely changed how we viewed potential enemies. "Zombies have shambled back to life in the aftermath of 9/11, with the awakening of a range of American global anxieties seeking adequate symbolic form" (Simpson, 29). The enemy was no longer overseas, had crossed our borders, used our very own technological systems against us and then attacked us on our very own soil. The sudden transformation in Boyle's zombie in *28 Days Later* can be thought of metaphorically as the transformation of how we now view our family, friends, neighbors, co-workers and loved ones who have been brainwashed and indoctrinated in unhealthy ideologies whether religious, political or both. "By depicting people become monsters, the line subverts to demarcating normality from monstrosity and suggests that much of what passes for normal life is in fact quite unseemly" (Muntean 243).

This is where I want to get back to what film critic Robin Wood argues is the symbolic representation of the zombie which is called the 'Otherness' in society. In this post-September 11<sup>th</sup> era, the enemy no longer had a specific race or came from a particular country. They instead were an 'Otherness' a monstrous unidentified enemy hiding in wolf's clothing, who is much harder to label, generalize and detect; especially in a increasing diverse society of various racial and cultural differences. This 'Otherness' or 'Terrorist' possesses a blackness or ambiguity, encompassing a disease and disturbed mind, and upholds hidden dangerous motivations; all which seem quite similar to the zombie.

“Like the zombie, the individuals associated with the September 11 attacks have described in terms of negative values: they ‘hate freedom’, they ‘want to destroy our way of life,’ they will destroy us because we ‘stand in their way’” (Muntean 255). And yet these anxieties have frightened audiences since the beginning, which is probably the main reason why the zombie was created in the first place. Even in the late 60’s when *Night of the Living Dead* was released many Americans were in fear of Communism, the constant threat of the Cold War and nuclear annihilation. And so even today, with the new threat of ISIS terrorism attacks, masked beheadings and massive public shootings, the same question we continuously seem to ask ourselves is: Who is the true enemy, and how can we put a stop to it?