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PHILOSOPHY OF THE LIVING DEAD

AT THE ORIGIN OF THE ZOMBIE-IMAGE

James McFarland

At first sight, the image does not resemble a cadaver, but it could be that the strangeness of a cadaver is also the strangeness of the image.

—Maurice Blanchot, “Two Versions of the Imaginary”

ORIGIN AND IDEA

The zombie-image, familiar from cinema, television, video games, and comic books, has many sources. The American military occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 stimulated popular interest domestically in the subaltern Christianity of the island’s inhabitants, one element of which was the legend of the corpse reanimated to endless labor by a voodoo sorcerer, and this interest was soon reflected in magazine stories, stage plays, and films that featured “zombies” as servile and uncanny revenants.¹ At the same time and independently, vampires and homicidal somnambulists populated the French and German silent cinema of the 1920s and lent the zombie-image elements of its visual iconography. In the 1950s and ’60s, Cold War anxieties motivated such movies as *Invisible Invaders* (1959) and *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), in which aspects of the zombie scenario can easily be recognized.² Yet though all of these deserve to be understood as generative sources, this does not change the fact that the zombie-image has a single, unique origin: George A. Romero’s 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*. It is in this film, a film in which the word “zombie” does not occur,³ that the elements of the image assemble in their significant potency and begin their remarkable historical career.

To say that the zombie-image has an origin beyond its many sources is not simply to credit Romero with particular originality or to ascribe

unusual insight to the film he directed. It is to make a philosophical-historical claim about the nature of this image. As the millions of people who have seen it can testify, *Night of the Living Dead* is an effectively disturbing film, and Romero's unexpected aesthetic skill and the movie's considerable commercial success no doubt contributed to the rapid dissemination of the zombie-image. But the image is not the same as the film that discovered it. Lurid as it may be, the zombie-image has no necessary affinity to horror as a genre,⁴ and its truth is only indirectly related to any particular film in which it appears. The zombie-image is historically original; the films in which it appears are intended works. The theoretical truth of a historical origin is utterly different from the abstract knowledge generated by intentional works. "Origin," Walter Benjamin famously wrote, "although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis. . . . Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its rhythm it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis."⁵

The metaphor of an eddy in a stream suggests the different relation between *time* and *truth* that this philosophical-historical notion of origin invokes. In the stream of time, an origin is not composed of a substance different from the flowing temporal material, and yet its relatively stationary durability distinguishes it from the ceaseless flow of events in time. That relative permanence is its truthfulness; the eddy is stable with reference to what lies beyond the bank of the stream, hence to a horizon outside time. In characterizing that stable relationship between the eddy in historical becoming that the origin represents and a horizon beyond becoming where truth has its absolute being, Benjamin resorts to an ancient terminology from the dawn of Western thinking, the Platonic notion of an *ιδέα*. Temporal phenomena, and the intentional concepts that give knowledge of them, are all continuous with the stream of becoming; an origin, and the truth toward which it points, by contrast, manifest an idea. "Philosophical history, the science of the origin, is the form which, in the remotest extremes and the apparent excesses of the process of development, reveals the configuration of the idea" (Benjamin, 47; 227). The zombie-image has a unique historical origin to the extent that it registers an objective historical rupture in the cultural traditions of human self-representation to which Romero's film as an aesthetic work belongs. To say that the zombie-image has an origin is to say that beyond any of its sources, the zombie-image is an idea.⁶

An idea in this Benjaminian sense marks a discontinuity in historical traditions. The connection between the origin and the sources that inform it—between, in this case, the zombie-image and the postcolonial appropriations of Haitian religious figures or earlier cinematic monsters—is not explanatorily self-evident but becomes itself a problem to be explored. The differences over time, and not the similarities, become expressive. The ghouls of *Night of the Living Dead*, like the *corps cadavres* of rural Haiti, are resurrected corpses; but unlike those anthropological figures, Romero's living dead are everyday middle-class Americans—they return to life without any ritual revivification and once reanimated are insurrectionary rather than obedient and indeed are intent on feasting on the flesh of anyone still living—something without immediate precedent in any voodoo myth. These zombies are not mere continuations or developments of earlier postcolonial mythology but rather register a profound and mysterious dislocation of the racial politics in which the traditional zombie-figure participated. The casting of Romero's film, with Duane Jones, an African American actor, playing the (living) protagonist Ben, together with its ending, in which a white rural posse shoots him on sight, and the film's early marketing and distribution, which paired it with explicitly race-centered movies (in particular Herbert Biberman's antebellum melodrama *Slaves* [1969]) in urban venues patronized by African American audiences, have been much remarked on in the critical literature.⁷ But the significance of these elements and contexts, and in particular their relation to the non-African American zombies at the center of the film, is only obscured if the zombie-image is assimilated a priori to traditions of colonialist representation. The originality of the movie in this respect is correlated precisely with the *absence* of any explicit reference to Ben's race in the course of the film. This absence does not of course mean that *Night of the Living Dead* escapes in any sense the imaginative constraints of contemporary racism. Rather, the zombie-image opens onto racism's genocidal violence in its own terms, and as powerfully as any of the anthropological concepts developed to comprehend and to combat the perverse persistence of that violence.

The rupture in the racial traditions of the zombie that Romero's film represents is an obvious example of the more general historical discontinuity at the site of this work, and the difficulty interpretation has

had with the film and its central image is an index of the profundity of this break in humanist traditions. Almost since the film was released in 1968, the originality of *Night of the Living Dead* was recognized. Despite an initial dose of outrage from *Variety* magazine, a blinkered dismissal by Vincent Canby of the *New York Times*, and a dismayed account by film critic Roger Ebert in *Reader's Digest* of the traumatized reaction of a prepubescent audience dropped unattended in a matinee screening of the film, *Night of the Living Dead* was rapidly and enthusiastically acknowledged to be a significant motion picture by the circle around Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine and reviewers with the *Village Voice*.⁸ Yet critics, for all their gusto, had difficulty accounting for the specific power of the movie and its primal scenario: a random sample of ordinary people forced to take shelter in and defend through a long night an abandoned farmhouse against an inexorable attack by an ever-growing cohort of mindlessly ravenous resurrected corpses.

In the initial appreciations, critics drew attention to the way that the very crudity of the movie's surface, its anachronistic black-and-white cinematography (closer, in fact, to contemporary television channels than to the Eastmancolor films playing on neighboring screens), its ham-fisted acting and lack of sophisticated crane and dolly shots (which were technically far beyond the means of Image Ten, the ad hoc company that put *Night of the Living Dead* together) all contributed to the "realistic" atmosphere it created. Moreover, Romero's refusal to accommodate narrative expectations, symbolized most shockingly by the arbitrary deaths of the sympathetic young lovers in the film's climax and of the film's protagonist at the end, was appreciated by audiences and critics alike. While its graphic sensationalism quickly proved commercially successful, critical appreciation linked its extreme imagery to the historical circumstances in which it was made, the unsettled state of American studio film production and distribution in the late 1960s, the increased penetration of television into the American public sphere, and in general the social and political unrest of the United States and the world at large at this time.

But though these conditions were noticed almost from the movie's release, just how the film and its central image related to these historical circumstances remained theoretically obscure. It was simply obvious that the violence of the movie resonated with the violence of American

society in the late 1960s. Noting that Johnny (Russell Streiner) ends up killing his sister Barbara (Judith O'Dea) while the child Karen Cooper (Kyra Schon) devours her mother and father, critic Elliott Stein in *Sight and Sound* remarked, "the American family is really in trouble" (105). Yet if such intuitions recognized that the intimate dysfunctions and spectacular violence in Romero's film communicated with the cultural disorientation and public violence in the world outside the theater, they were not able to illuminate the specific nature of that violence or to account for the image that precipitated it: the cannibalistic zombie.⁹ J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum's influential *Midnight Movies*, for instance, found in Romero's zombies "a brilliant, open-ended metaphor for topical anxieties." But almost immediately the authors concluded that "*Night of the Living Dead* was not only an instant horror classic, but a remarkable vision of the late sixties—offering the most literal possible depiction of America devouring itself."¹⁰ The vacillation between an open-ended metaphor and the most literal depiction possible reflected not only offhand terminology but also the fundamental difficulty in accounting for the strange inevitability of these unprecedented monsters.

RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

Midnight Movies was an appreciation, not a theoretical analysis. Hoberman and Rosenbaum celebrated the brash energy of Romero's position outside the established institutions and conventions of Hollywood filmmaking, the "moral seriousness" (120) and "apocalyptic panic" (122) his debut film had conveyed. To the extent that the authors did provide a theoretical framework for their discussion of *Night of the Living Dead*, that framework was psychoanalytical. They took zombies, and horror movies more generally, to represent for their audiences a "return of the repressed."¹¹ The suggestion was hardly absurd, and had something like Freud's own authority behind it. In his essay on "The Uncanny" from 1919, Freud explicitly suggests that we find *unheimlich* "one class [of frightening things] in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which recurs [*etwas wiederkehrendes Verdrängtes*]," and immediately gives examples of this class that appear to anticipate the zombie-image: "Many people experience the feeling

[of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts" (1997, 217–18; 1999, 254). More directly and revealingly, it is the film critic Robin Wood in his seminal 1986 study *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* who provided the most eloquent and influential analysis of Romero's cannibalistic corpses in these terms. Here, the zombie is recognized as something more than the exaggerated reflection of general historical crises. The anxiety provoked by the zombie-image, understood as a psychological complex bearing an unconscious meaning, is a surplus affect revealing the underlying social character of the historical moment in which it occurs. Whatever the limits of its methodology, Wood's discussion brought the interpretive seriousness of the zombie-image into view. His diagnosis initiates the dialectical appropriation of Romero's discovery that continues to this day.

For Wood, Romero's zombie films were essentially horror films, and the "basic formula" for a horror film reduced to "normality . . . threatened by the Monster." This normative consensus took the form of a generally static conception of "the heterosexual monogamous couple, the family, and the social institutions (police, church, armed forces) that support and defend them." Jeopardizing this consensus was a "much more protean" monstrous antagonist clothed in the mutable and insubstantial anxieties and terrors that roil through society, "rather as dreams use material from recent memory to express conflicts or desires that may go back to early childhood." What made horror films interesting to Wood was the possibility of a counteridentification with the threatening monster that would hold that normative consensus up to critique. Such a reading redeems the monster's repulsiveness as the price of normative dissidence, and sees the sensationalism of its conflict with normality as the energy of a stigmatized experience. The horrible structure thus clears psychic space for our particular ambivalence toward "the norms that oppress us and which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere" (Wood, 71–72).

While Wood's interpretive schema may well have made sense for certain subversive monster movies of the period, Romero's zombies in fact posed problems for it right from the start. "The zombies of *Night [of the Living Dead]* answer partly to the definition of monster as return of the repressed, but only partly," Wood wrote: "they lack one of the crucial defining characteristics, energy, and carry no positive connotations

whatever" (102). In their shuffling, uncharismatic hostility, these antagonistic monsters lack positive connotations because they stand in the first instance for the actual coerciveness of an alienated normality, the violent strictures of a collective habitus. The zombie horde is itself a figure of consensus and normative assimilation; the human figures defending themselves from that horde are perforce defending sympathetic human idiosyncrasy and individual moral dignity from a mercilessly coercive collectivity. Wood decoded the zombie image as "the patriarchal structuring of relationships, 'dead' yet automatically continuing" (103), or, in the context of Romero's sequel *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), which reimagines the besieged scenario of the first film now in the garish confines of a contemporary shopping mall defended against a universal resurrection of the dead, as "the whole dead weight of patriarchal consumer capitalism" (105). In so doing, he aligned the zombie not with the undisciplined desires that contemporary civilization denounces and denies but precisely with the consensus that muzzles them. What "returns" in these movies is not the repressed but the repression itself.

In order to preserve the subversive ambivalence of his normative/monstrous opposition in the context of Romero's movies, Wood was forced to locate ambivalent sympathy not with the anathematized monster but in a more straightforward identification with certain of the human protagonists over against others. In Wood's reading, the significant conflict in each of Romero's films unfolds between groups of living human beings reacting to the catalytic resurrection of the dead. In both *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead*, Wood perceived not merely a binary opposition between monster and normality but a triadic structure, a conflict in which sympathetic figures, above all the African American protagonists of each film, confront both the living dead and a destructively violent group of humans who become in the course of the film the primary antagonists. "Both films are built upon all-against-all triangular structures" (104), Wood observed, pitting besieged groups against zombies and, in the case of *Night of the Living Dead*, a sheriff's posse that mistakenly kills the only survivor in the farmhouse and, in the case of *Dawn of the Dead*, a nomadic biker gang that raids the reinforced shopping mall and precipitates its eventual surrender to the zombie horde outside. These instances of homicidal human reactions to the ghastly resurrection of the dead "dramatize,

albeit in significantly different ways, the possibility of the development of Fascism out of breakdown and chaos" (105).

While this reading does certainly respond to socially critical tendencies in Romero's films, the price it pays is finally to leave the central defining image, the resurrected cannibalistic corpse, largely superfluous and unexplained. The zombies are the occasion for these interpersonal conflicts among and between groups of living humans, conflicts that demonstrate the fragile artificiality and reactive violence of the everyday social order, but the zombies themselves are at most redundant reflections of living pathologies. "The zombies' significance in both films depends entirely on their relationship to the main [living] characters," Wood said explicitly (105). The deeply unsettling atmosphere the reanimated corpses bring to the screen, the profound alienation from ordinary society they both manifest and provoke, this all clearly animated Wood's interest in Romero's films but found no real explanation in his interpretation.

Yet from another perspective, the fundamental opacity with which the zombie-image confronted Wood's psychological hermeneutic was the most revealing aspect of that reading. In insisting on the impossibility of identifying with a zombie, Wood took as an empirical given what is actually a theoretical axiom. The living dead do not simply lack charismatic energy; they have no subjectivity with which to identify. To assume this principled vacancy to be an empirical datum is to simplify considerably the actual relationship between human beings, whether diegetically situated in the zombie scenario or appreciating it from the safety of the theater seat, and the zombie figure. The vacancy at the heart of the zombie-image seems to affect empathetic effort like a kind of vacuum. However futile the attempt to identify with zombies, there is no shortage of human characters, both in Romero's films and in the many elaborations that have followed his lead, who try. At the simplest level this can be the mistake of expecting a posthumous zombie to react with the same affections it felt in life. Few are the zombie movies that fail to include some naive parent or spouse falling victim to the zombie's undifferentiated anthropophagic drive when it approaches them in the tattered shape of a beloved family member.¹² And even when a human being is fully aware of the difference between zombies and the people they once were, the emotional difficulty of countenancing that difference is frequently emphasized in the plots.

Moreover, the motif of the explicitly scientific attempt to locate some vestige of subjectivity in a captured zombie (a centerpiece of Romero's *Day of the Dead* [1986], but recently revisited in the third season of the television series *The Walking Dead*) rationalizes the lure that zombie vacancy exercises on living subjectivity. And finally, the futile hope expressed by wounded humans who are slowly turning into zombies that they can upon death will themselves not to change into that post-mortem state testifies to the fact that the absence of an identifying instance in the zombie calls out even to its own prior consciousness. At the other extreme, the lack of any empathetically available perspective in the zombie also tempts human aggression toward sadistic, dehumanizing excesses. This, too, is a problem Romero's subsequent oeuvre repeatedly confronts.

Indeed, when Wood, in practice, realigned the conflict between monster and normality from the struggle of humans against zombies to the struggle of sympathetic humans against other humans who reassert jeopardized social hierarchies, he was conceding more than just that zombies challenged his horror formula. The uncanny vacancy of the zombie figure as a version of human self-representation, its troubling fusion of aggression and vulnerability, violence and decomposition, in short, of life and death, called into question audience identification itself as a strategy of cinematic, and beyond this, of social comprehension. The limit to human empathy that appeared when Romero's ghouls staggered out of the Pennsylvania countryside and onto movie screens made the entire process of psychological recognition of the cinematic human being problematic.

This implicit opening, identified but not theorized by Wood, was what Steven Shaviro placed at the center of his remarkable interpretation of Romero's films from 1993, *The Cinematic Body*. "We must radically redefine the very notion of *identification*," Shaviro wrote, "and say rather that the subject is captivated and 'distracted,' made more fluid and indeterminate, in the process of sympathetic participation." And he went on to assert that "transformations of this sort are the explicit subject of many recent horror films, most notably of George Romero's 'living dead' trilogy. The viewer of these films does not identify with their active protagonists so much as he or she is touched by—drawn into complicitous communication with—the passive, horrific, and yet strangely attractive zombies" (52–53).

ALLEGORIES OF DEATH

Shaviro's Deleuzian interpretation of the zombie-image represents the next totalizing attempt to account for its peculiar force and persistence. Though the topic of zombies occupies relatively little of Shaviro's whole book, comprising but one chapter in the company of equally detailed discussions of films by Kathryn Bigelow, Jerry Lewis, David Cronenberg, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Andy Warhol, and Robert Bresson, and though his analysis restricts itself to a broadly auteurist framework oriented on Romero's trilogy of zombie movies as it existed at that time, (that is to say, after *Day of the Dead* in 1986 but before the three further zombie movies Romero made in the late 2000s),¹³ Shaviro's interpretation of zombies as fascinating corporeal agents of transgressive mimetic contagion sets a standard for philosophical cogency and interpretive brio that little subsequent theorizing of the zombie-image has reached.

Shaviro defines the zombies as "*allegorical and mimetic figures*" (87), in terms that are derived from Walter Benjamin. Thus, the zombies are not merely allegorical inasmuch as they artificially display a concrete correlate to an abstract concept. Rather, they are allegorical in the existentially weighted notion of allegory from Benjamin's *Origin of German Trauerspiel*, in which "allegory always implies the loss or death of its object" (87), in which the very artifice of allegory reveals the insufficiencies of representation, the historical transience of communicable meaning. So, on the one hand, Romero's zombies stand for the basic operations of actual postindustrial society: "The life-in-death of the zombie is a nearly perfect allegory for the inner logic of capitalism, whether this be taken in the sense of the exploitation of living labor by dead labor, the deathlike regimentation of factories and other social spaces, or the artificial, externally driven stimulations of consumers" (84). This rather ad hoc coordination of socioeconomic phenomena with the zombie-image does not go much further than the many juxtapositions of the image with contemporary society proposed since it appeared. On the other hand, it is through the invocation of the far more sophisticated and nuanced notion of allegory at work in Benjamin's early twentieth-century treatise that Shaviro opens the door to a genuinely philosophical appreciation of the zombie-image.

The living corpse literalizes the mortality inherent in allegory itself as a trope. "In allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies*

hippocratica of history as a petrified, primordial landscape,” Benjamin had written. “Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death’s head. . . . The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance” (166; 343). It is this line of demarcation between physical nature and significance that the zombie-image illuminates, and its decomposing visage is the face of contemporary history.

Just how the zombie-image can serve as an allegory not merely of “the inner logic of capitalism” but of the melancholy figure of historical allegory itself was a question Shaviro did not pursue. Between the allegorical and the mimetic aspects of the figure, Shaviro was far more interested in the latter than the former. It is as vectors of mimetic contagion that Shaviro celebrated Romero’s zombies. Where Wood found the living dead opaque and antithetical to his own revolutionary sympathies, Shaviro located in their liminal situation and above all in their insistent corporeality—“The zombies are in a sense all body: they have brains but not minds” (86)—a fascinating, if abject, alternative to ordered, respectable public life.

Beyond their allegorical operation, the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead*, but even more in *Dawn of the Dead*, manifest a mimetic possibility of an entirely different sort, a possibility correlated not with significant content but effective force. “They [the zombies] resonate with, and refigure, the very processes that produce and enforce social order. That is to say, they do not mirror or represent social forces; they are directly animated and possessed, even in their allegorical distance from beyond the grave, by such forces” (87). The paradox that rendered Wood’s interpretation so problematic—that the zombies, unlike the traditional horror monster, do not threaten social normativity but embody its coercive, assimilating power—was here mobilized in a different way as the key to Romero’s critique. The zombie-image does not represent (either positively or negatively) something other than itself. Rather, it is in itself as cinematic event a carrier of the forces at work outside the theater. “The movement from allegory to mimesis is a passage from passive reanimation to active, raging contagion,” Shaviro wrote. “This progression is the source of the zombies’ strange appeal. Forever unequal to themselves, they are figures of affective blockage

and intellectual undecidability" (87). Conceptually uninterpretable, the zombies in Shaviro's view become meaningless transistors for the affective energies coursing through society itself.

Shaviro's focus on the zombies' agency, and in particular on their corporeal threat to the living characters, helped to forestall the persistent theoretical shortcomings attending earlier attempts to decipher the image passively in metaphoric terms. But by assimilating the zombies to the living social forces—commodity consumption, urban alienation—at work in the audience that perceives them, Shaviro in effect cordoned them into life and foreclosed on the mortal urgency of the image, the death at its heart. The existential allegory of mortal senselessness and the mimetic contagion of abject violence are not as compatible as Shaviro's account would lead us to think; the passage from allegory to mimesis is also a flight from the anxiety of inevitable death to the pleasures of vital fullness.

This is why the role of violence in Shaviro's account, though central to his interpretation, seems oddly bloodless and abstract. The depiction of gross corporeal injury, whether of living human beings or posthumous zombies, serves to provide a transgressive titillation, but it touches the reality of human violence only through the neutralizing abyss of a totalizing spectatorial abjection, Shaviro's leitmotif. And this abjection is something that occurs only in the resolutely policed and nonviolent environment of the darkened movie theater. The lurid and grotesque aspects of Romero's movies are merely the occasion for public shame and private *jouissance*. Violence is reduced to a vector of emotional contagion, and Romero's great problem in these movies, which is precisely the contagiousness of violence, is inverted into an ultimately individualistic phenomenon, one therefore congruent with the interiorizing psychology Shaviro explicitly rejects, of the violence of contagious reaction.

According to Shaviro, Romero's zombies mediate through a kind of mimetic participation a carnivalesque breakdown of the mythic categories that stabilize social reality. The zombie horde cannibalistically dismembering the human body approaches a Dionysian *sparagmos* and *omophagia*, without, of course, reaching genuinely mythical substance or efficacy. Rather, this mythic limit beneath any ethics operates vicariously in a resolutely singular and pacified spectator. Shaviro's interpretation fails thereby to retain any sensitivity to the critical outrage of

Romero's imagery, what had recommended it so strongly to Wood, and that appears in the verisimilar *telos* inscribed into its representational relation with actual physiological destruction,¹⁴ in the provocative absence of self-preservation in the zombie horde and the military logic that responds to it, in the motivational collapse into gratuitous sadism that is for Romero a more profound danger to humanity than the zombies themselves.

The atmosphere Shaviro's perception of these films creates is joyful and exuberant; he speaks out of a spontaneous speculative enthusiasm licensed by a fundamental innocence at the heart of cinematic experience. The evisceration of the American late capitalist superstructure is performed in the tenor of complaint, not resistance. Zombies, Shaviro claims (and he is speaking quite specifically about the figures in Romero's trilogy), "can be regarded both as monstrous symptoms of a violent, manipulative, exploitative society and as potential remedies for its ills—all this by virtue of their apocalyptically destructive, yet oddly innocuous, counterviolence" (87). That the violence performed by the zombies, and in particular the culminating orgy of cannibalistic dismemberment toward which these narratives of ultimately futile evasion are oriented, that this Grand Guignol excess is "oddly innocuous," not only because of the technical limitations of the filmed prosthetics but just as much because of the culturally inconsequential domain of populist distractions to which it belongs as commercial artifact, is true only inasmuch as that violence disappears entirely into the vicarious cinematic experience and abjures any connection to the kinds of historical (not mythical) examples of corporeal destruction—of gross injury exaggerated beyond its fatal effect—that Romero's violence aspires, for whatever purposes, to recall.

Shaviro speaks of a zombie counterviolence, as if the violence in Romero's movies could ultimately be segregated into antithetical versions: the violence exercised by the humans against the zombies, and a counterviolence performed reactively by the zombies against the humans.¹⁵ As a division this must ignore the fact that an inexplicable resurrection of the dead is a primal figure—perhaps *the* primal figure—of initiative per se, in terms of which all human action is reactive. If any party in Romero's movies is exercising counterviolence, it is the human party. But of course Romero's point is that such a distinction cannot in practice be maintained, that violence unleashed against the zombies

inevitably expands into violence unleashed among humans, and that it is precisely the illusion of that distinction, the purely reactive, self-defensive cast in which human counterviolence appears that accelerates its escape from any humane oversight.

Human violence in Romero's films operates across a nihilistic motivational abyss into which the most basic human decency is always threatening to fall. Once violence is occurring against the zombies it tends to lurch beyond their practical neutralization into a gratuitous sadism, while at the same time it threatens to adjudicate all intrahuman strife. It is the contagious and uncontrollable dimension of violence that Romero is at pains to depict, how its spectacular reality inevitably overwhelms any attempt to organize it into consistent antagonisms, into violence and counterviolence, to instrumentalize its chaotic power. This is why both *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead* begin with scenes of human conflict and culminate in internecine human aggression.

Shaviro's reading of the zombie-image avoids many of the pitfalls that attended its psychological interpretation as a return of the repressed. Above all, the visceral immediacy of the image and the challenge it presents to ordinary ethical categories appear much more clearly. At the same time, the physiological framework Shaviro develops, the "cinematic body" that organizes his film theory, limits the philosophical ramifications of his reading of the zombie-image. Ambiguously situated between bodies presented cinematically and the body experiencing cinema, Shaviro's cinematic body is ultimately restricted to a distinct experiential situation: the private theatrical encounter with a projected image. The "loss or death" at the heart of allegory disappears in the face of mimetic contiguity.

Despite his invocation of Benjamin, Shaviro is in fact deeply suspicious of any notion of lack or absence, concepts too beholden to the Lacanian theories of a suturing cinematic apparatus against which his general arguments are polemically marshaled. "The zombies embody a phenomenological loss that—precisely because it is so viscerally embodied—cannot be figured in terms of 'lack.' They continue to participate in human, social rituals and processes—but only just enough to drain them of their power and meaning," he insists (85). And in more general terms, referencing Blanchot's comparison of the image and the cadaver, Shaviro claims "the image is not a symptom of lack, but

an uncanny, excessive residue of being that subsists when all *should* be lacking. It is not the index of something that is missing, but the insistence of something that refuses to disappear" (17). As a corrective to the abstraction and formalism inherent in apparatus theories, this assertion is to be welcomed. Yet it begs the question what the image is the residue of, or why it *should* have disappeared.

Shaviro is too canny and well read not to render the appropriate acknowledgments of death and absence when discussing Benjamin and Blanchot, though the entire tenor of his discussion in its affirmation of the force of the image is largely free of mortal melancholy. Yet for both the French and the German theoretician, the negativity of death is something other than mere loss and absence. "Just when the sense of an interhuman relationship is broken, when our mourning, our care and the prerogative of our former passions, no longer able to know their object, fall back on us, come back toward us—at this moment, when the presence of the cadaver before us is the presence of the unknown, it is also now that the lamented dead person begins to *resemble himself*" (Blanchot, 82). Blanchot's image is uncanny precisely because it is concrete death and not abstract negativity that creates the spacing of a self-identity. The cadaver is at first terribly different from the living person it was, until, separated from life by a sufficient distance, the distance of *mourning* as a practice of forgetting with integrity, it recaptures a resemblance that because it is more intense remains deeply disturbing, perhaps more disturbing than the initial strangeness of the corpse. It is this space of mourning and reactionary collapse before any transcendent resemblance is recaptured, the volatile space where Benjamin's baroque allegory also occurs, that is so graphically at stake in Romero's image of an *unmournable* death: not simply allegory versus mimesis but the very possibility of allegory, of the minimal distance between nature and human intention within which meaning itself can arise. *Night of the Living Dead* inaugurates a scenario that responds to Benjamin's concluding remarks on allegory in *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*: "It is precisely visions of the frenzy of destruction, in which all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins, which reveal the limit set upon allegorical contemplation, rather than its ideal quality. The bleak confusion of Golgotha . . . is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence. In it, transitoriness is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, in its own significance, displayed as allegory" (232; 405–6).

THE DEATH OF ALLEGORY

“We had \$6,000 and a loose idea based on a short story I’d written, which was in fact an allegorical thing,” Romero recalled in a 1972 interview about *Night of the Living Dead*. “We decided to take that and turn it into a real blood and guts film, and that’s how it started” (Romero and Williams, 9). A year later, he gave a similar account: “I wrote *Night of the Living Dead* as a short story, which strangely enough was an allegorical thing, but then when we did the film the allegory went out. But not entirely. It did go out of my mind, though” (44). The trope of allegory appears right at the start of the zombie-image, but with a curious supplemental twist. In another interview Romero clarifies a bit: “an allegory, a statement about society, which dealt with a siege of the living dead. It was much less contrived, I think, than the film is, from the standpoint that it was purely allegorical” (21). Romero speaks here of two stages in the development of the image. A preliminary stage is allegorical and discursive, a subsequent stage is emphatic and contrived. What begins as the allegorical correlation of a material emblem, “a siege of the living dead,” and an abstract meaning, “a statement about society,” is reduced in the creative process to its material dimension, “a real blood and guts film.” The process Romero describes is one of subtraction, the elimination of the abstract correlate behind the allegorical emblem, so that the zombie itself appears on the screen with the intensity of a material remainder. This denuded state of the emblem reduces the obvious purpose of the work, which becomes, Romero says, more contrived, less aesthetically legitimate. Romero’s own endorsement and celebration of that illegitimate status in traditions of aesthetic expression is his genuinely avant-garde position in American cinema. Of course in the colloquial context of an interview, Romero’s concession that the allegory went out of his mind without disappearing entirely could simply be a way of avoiding responsibility for the metaphoric significance other critics did locate in the film without thereby denying its possibility entirely. But if we take him at his word, and imagine that the allegorical emblem continues its representational existence without the animating content of a living abstract intention, how is this developmental process to be understood? Specifically, what can it mean to discard the living meaning of allegory while retaining or even intensifying the emblem whose unintentional operation conveys it?

If the zombie-image is an idea in Walter Benjamin's sense, then Shaviro's reference to Benjamin's *Origin of German Trauerspiel* and its investigation of allegory is fundamentally appropriate. While the first half of Benjamin's treatise explores the idea of *Trauerspiel*, the baroque German mourning play, the second half locates the historical significance of the genre in its transformation of allegory. "Whatever extensive implications may have been gathered by a method that perhaps appeared here and there vague or cultural-historical," Benjamin summarizes, "forms a whole under the aspect of allegory, assembles itself into *Trauerspiel* in its idea" (217–18; 390). It is allegory as a changing mode of signification that mediates the historical truth of baroque drama. The nineteenth-century criticism of allegory as artificial and unnatural is not an insight into the essence of allegory but the index of a changing relationship between its two components, the abstract meaning, on the one hand, and the natural sensory emblem, on the other. These changes in the possibility of allegory, and not the particular meanings conveyed by particular allegories, are the object of Benjamin's inquiry. Medieval allegories, whatever they may have communicated specifically, reflected the conviction that all of created nature was inscribed with divine intention. The correlation between sensory object and abstract significance thus merely mobilized a possibility that nature as such implicitly exhibited. By the time of the German baroque, historical catastrophe had called this theological premise into question. In the baroque, the renaissance attention to nature for its own sake combined with an affinity for otherworldly abstraction expressed in purely conventional writing to precipitate in the medium of ancient hieroglyphic resemblance a new form of allegory, one in which authorial intentions were vested in natural emblems to compensate for the shortcomings of divine significance in history.

The nature that enters into baroque allegory, Benjamin shows, is not the divinely created nature that inspired the renaissance. Rather, "it is fallen nature that bears the imprint of the progression of history" (180; 356). The allegories fashioned by baroque dramatists make use of objects in the natural world whose inherent meaning has evaporated; the allegorical intention occupies a vacated natural domain. Not the organically vital appearance (*Schein*) in which artistic beauty emerges and the mystical symbol occurs, but comprehensible human purposes installed in ornate, artificial constructions—this is the heart of baroque

allegory as Benjamin understands it. These allegorical works do not depict theological ordeals of the human soul in its pursuit of divine salvation but rather present struggles between resolutely historical principles governing publicly consequential actions.

History enters the allegorical mode in two complementary ways. On the one hand, the emblems allegory employs are depicted not as timeless natural objects but in states of decay, collapse, and ruin. “The word ‘history’ stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience” (177; 353). On the other hand, the meanings these emblems display have their sources not in the nature of things but in the intention of the allegorist. As such these artifacts anticipate critical attention, not aesthetic appreciation. For criticism in general is “mortification of the works,” as Benjamin writes: “not then—as the romantics have it—awakening of the consciousness in living works, but the settlement of knowledge in dead ones” (182; 357). It is precisely because baroque allegorists self-consciously built their works from a reservoir of natural and historical emblems whose independent significance had passed away for them that the knowledge they hoped to preserve and convey by means of their allegorical arrangement responds to a critical, intellectual reception. The allegorical perspective transforms the natural world by evacuating its living relevance and consequently emphasizing the intention of the allegorist behind it. “If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind dead, but eternally secure, then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in his power” (183–84; 359). The increasing alienation between the natural world and human intention that Benjamin diagnoses in the German baroque thus both eviscerates the relation between artistic representation and organic integrity and emphasizes the independent intention of the historical artist.

For all of these reasons—because of the decaying temporality inherent in its natural emblem, because of the fragmentation implicit in its intentional construction, because of the mortality of its political and social intentions—baroque, (that is, modern) Trauerspiel converges on the allegorical employment of the human corpse.

If it is in death that the spirit becomes free, in the manner of spirits, it is not until then that the body too comes properly into its own. For this much is self-evident: the allegorization of the physis can only be carried through

in all its vigor in respect of the corpse. And the characters of Trauerspiel die, because it is only thus, as corpses, that they can enter into the homeland of allegory. (217; 391–92)

Freed from the government of organic integrity and inherent purpose, exhibiting in the most radical way the irrevocable passage of historical time, permanently banished from transcendence to the immanence of unredeemed nature, the emblematic corpse fuses all the conditions of modern allegory in its struggle for meaning in a desecrated historical world. When, in the short story that has not survived, young George Romero chose the human corpse as his allegorical emblem, he was responding to the deepest impulses of that mode of significance.

Yet Benjamin's account also helps to illustrate just what it is that Romero, by contrast, is doing when, in transposing his "statement about society" from the page to the cinematic screen, he transformed the allegorical mode as profoundly as the sixteenth-century dramatists had before him. The baroque allegorist resurrecting the emblems of a dead nature over which his own sovereign intention comes to rule echoes the baroque figure of the esoteric magus conjuring with hermetic spells, and by extension, the "bocor," or voodoo sorcerer, raising his obedient slaves. When Romero and his young companions jettisoned any explicit allegorical intentions and devoted their attention entirely to intensifying the visceral effectiveness of corpses in their strange new state of animation, they broke the allegorical spell of human intention and exposed the meaning of the human form directly to contemporary mass destitution, without countenancing the individual as audience member, represented figure, or author. Where baroque playwrights had ornamented explicit authorial intentions toward actual historical conflicts with pieces of a natural world that had strayed far from the God who created it, Romero extinguishes intentionality entirely from the allegorical emblem and unchains its inhuman superficiality, which only now, in the mass mediated form of cinematic imagery, can continue to operate without a governing intention, as the allegorical emblem of its own evacuated meaning.

Romero's original abdication in the face of the meaning of the zombie-image, and his consequent discovery that, freed from the spell of foreign purpose and control, the image did not collapse inert but turned on the living world itself, this is what renders the zombie-image the manifestation of the historical present in its most characteristic and

challenging form: the death of meaning as the inevitable consequence of the death of God.

SURPLUS DEATH

Since its origin in 1968 and *Night of the Living Dead*, the zombie-image has proliferated to a remarkable extent. Romero himself, of course, has made five sequels exploring various aspects of the image, at least one of which, *Dawn of the Dead*, is surely among the finest films produced in the United States. But beyond Romero's own franchise, the figure and the scenario surrounding it has been taken up by countless other filmmakers and transplanted into countless cinematic environments. The first five seasons of the AMC television series *The Walking Dead* have attracted audiences of such sizes as to upend long-held assumptions about broadcast and cable television distribution. The image appears in comic books, video games, and periodically in collective "zombie-walks," festive gatherings in which crowds of people make themselves up as decomposing corpses and lurch through the boulevards and avenues of urban centers around the world. The zombie apocalypse forms the setting for novels of genuine aesthetic ambition, such as Max Brooks's *World War Z*, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, Bennett Sims's *A Questionable Shape*, or M. R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*. And perhaps more revealing of the self-evidence that the figure and the scenario it invokes has achieved in the contemporary world are documents such as Daniel Drezner's *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*, or the Center for Disease Control's *Zombie Preparedness* web page,¹⁶ which use the zombie-image to simplify and clarify actual mass emergencies, whether epidemiological or *realpolitisch*. This despite the obvious narrative limitations of the image. Not only can nothing, or nothing else, really *happen* to a zombie, the image is indigenous to a terminal scenario whose outcome leaves little opportunity for development or resolution.

Any explanation of this proliferation that rests on a metaphoric equivalence between the zombie-image and contemporary phenomena remains unconvincing, not only because such metaphors are intrinsically limited but more fundamentally because the zombie-image, while certainly able to participate in metaphors—one need think only of the "zombie banks" that were often in the news in the wake of the financial

collapse of 2008—presents a hermeneutic challenge in its own right, outside of all metaphoric deployments. To equate the zombie-image with an actual emergency is to circumscribe it with life, precisely what its status as “undead” calls into question. To see it as a meaningless transistor of contemporary historical forces may go further in explaining its weird fascination and protean flexibility in occupying the everyday. But this, too, fails to accommodate the mortality at the heart of the image. What I am proposing is that the zombie-image has no positive content whatsoever but rather accidentally registers a profound crisis in human self-representation, a crisis precipitated by the twentieth century itself, in its intersection with mass-mediated society. The zombie is not an allegory of capitalism or consumerism, and only in a decentered and ironic way an allegory of allegorical intention itself. Rather, it is a manifestation of a new impossibility of correlating nature and human significance in any durable way in the present. The decomposing state of its organic form, the eviscerating drive that links it to the still living, the wholesale social disintegration that its mass appearance precipitates—these turn out all to be consequences of a basic incongruity that emerges in traditions of human self-representation, an incongruity that makes visible in cinema the transience of those traditions in the transience of the human beings who produce and perpetuate them. This is the zombie-image as idea, never entirely realized in any given representation, but tied to the historical conditions of its moment of emergence by the deepest mortal affinity.

And so we return to the original moment in which the image appears. Daylight. A black-and-white anonymous rural landscape though which moves a nondescript American car. The title-card reads: *Night of the Living Dead*. We see the car turn into a featureless contemporary cemetery, hear the crunch of gravel beneath the tires as it pulls to a stop. The car contains a young man and woman. The cemetery around them is tended and orderly, the tombstones modern and unprepossessing, the scene far from the dank and gloomy necropolises of traditional gothic fictions. The two young people—brother and sister, as it turns out—have driven from the city in this ordinary car to lay a wreath on their father’s grave.

A simple ritual, but Johnny is irritated at what has become an imposition performed out of an atavistic sense of duty. “You think I want to blow Sunday on a scene like this?” he complains. His slang register

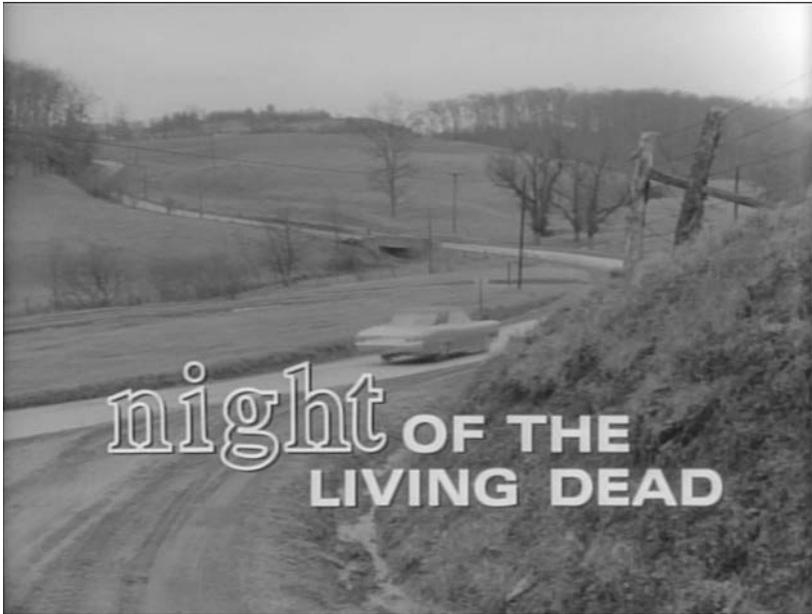


Figure 1. The Menace of the Ordinary: *Night of the Living Dead* Title Card.



Figure 2. A Mourning Chore: Barbara (Judith O'Dea) and Johnny (Russell Streiner), siblings, arrive at an everyday cemetery.

already signals the generational frictions eroding the traditions of ancestral piety, and this motif only grows stronger as the scene progresses. “We still remember,” the son reads from the commemorative wreath they have brought. “I don’t. You know, I don’t even remember what the man looks like.” Outside the car, they do not seem to know exactly where their father lies buried; “Which row is it in?” Barbara asks. When they locate the grave, we watch their approach from behind the father’s tombstone, a shadow looming in the foreground, its inscription invisible to us. All we know of him is what is reflected in the children’s memorial.

But the son is not thinking either of his father or of the mythic content of his observances as he plants the wreath in the grass but of the wreath as a material object. “Each year we spend good money on these things,” he observes wryly, wondering where they disappear to in the meantime. After the wreath has been placed, the sister kneels at the grave to pay her respects while her brother stands impatiently behind her. Thunder rumbles in the distance. Framed in an isolating mid-shot, Johnny tries to hurry his sister along. “Hey c’mon, Barb. Church was this morning, huh?” At that instant, a bolt of lightning; a



Figure 3. Paying Disrespects: Johnny (Russell Streiner) on their dead father: “I don’t even remember what the man looks like.”



Figure 4. Cenotaphic Dislocation: Barbara (Judith O'Dea) asks after their father's grave: "Which row is it in?"



Figure 5. Averted Inscription: Barbara (Judith O'Dea) and Johnny (Russell Streiner) approach the father's tombstone in the foreground, its inscription invisible.

peal of thunder, as if gothic atmospheric were making a final effort to assert themselves. But Johnny's glance at the sky is meteorological, not superstitious, and he almost immediately turns back to look out idly across the cemetery. Is anyone else reacting to the sudden threat of rain? In a reverse shot, we see the modern cemetery in late afternoon, and near its horizon in the distance, the original zombie-image, impossible to identify, a tiny figure among the trees and headstones. We see it take a few slow, aimless steps.

The shot lasts three or four seconds, no more, and we are immediately returned to Johnny, who is watching the figure and casually pulling on his driving gloves. The camera revisits the long shot of the walking corpse for another two or three seconds, though nothing yet truly suggests its nature. This unremarkable figure fails to capture Johnny's attention; in the next shot he is once again caught up in his petulant short-term impatience. "Hey, I mean, prayin's for church, huh? C'mon," he whines to Barbara. Were it not for the explicitly threatening title that has promised a night of terror and the ominous music that scores the banal scene, there is little enough explicitly unsettling about this initial zombie-image. No rotted hand claws its way through sepulchral



Figure 6. An Evacuated Ritual: Johnny (Russell Streiner) is distracted by the material vehicle: "Each year we spend good money on these things."



Figure 7. Post-revelatory Atheism: Johnny (Russell Streiner) hurries his sister's obeisance: "Church was this morning."



Figure 8. The Zombie-Image as Stain: A tiny figure among the trees and headstones.

sod to grab a fleeing ankle. No imminent attacker looms suddenly round a blind corner. No gaunt fingers slide from beneath the coffin lid, no shocked or triumphant scientist heralds its arrival. Just a dark-suited man in the distance, staggering slightly between the tombstones. And yet the image does unsettle.

In a discussion of Alfred Hitchcock, Slavoj Žižek describes a cinematic technique that he calls the “stain of the Real.” In an otherwise ordinary scene, “a detail . . . ‘sticks out’ from the frame of symbolic reality,” and becomes “a traumatic *surplus of the Real over the Symbolic*” (Žižek, 235). The Lacanian terminology serves to remind us that the photographic consistency of the screen image does not imply an ontological consistency among its constitutive elements. The incongruent stain—the crop duster on the horizon swooping over already harvested fields, the flock of ravens perching on the children’s jungle gym—carries a freight of menace, despite its overtly harmless character, because its presence calls into question the consistency and predictability of the symbolic environment within which it appears. The figure of the zombie among the tombstones in its initial emergence can be seen as such a “stain of the Real,” interfering with the symbolic coherence of the cemetery. What else is a graveyard, after all, but a literal field of signifiers, and what could stick out more from the symbolic order it preserves than their actual signified referent, a corpse now anonymously lurching among the family names?

Žižek contrasts the intrusive stain with the “empty signifiers” that also proliferate in Hitchcock’s world, the McGuffins and false identities, the cyphers and signals that circulate throughout his narratives. Such a superfluous signifier preserves the consistency of the symbolic order by provoking its obsessive reenactment in the course of a permanent search for the always-deferred or already-substituted referent of the empty signifier, in the course of which subjectivity cycles (and is cycled) through the networks of operative meanings, according to a formally interminable “hysterical” movement that frequently enough is realized by Hitchcock as flight and pursuit. In contrast with this superfluous moment of symbolic distortion whose consequences help to manifest the invisible order that harbors it, the stain illuminates a properly exterior, psychotic dimension in the operation of the symbol, an externality that does not merely neurotically distort but psychotically evacuates the binding force of the sign.

The incongruity of the stain exceeds the system of symbolization that situates it with respect to reality. The stain intrudes into the experience of reality as a fragment of the Real, that is, of the non-symbolized, the bare Thing outside of any fantastic support or imaginary mitigation, as it strikes each of us in that singular privacy paradoxically shared by all things that precede or exceed the symbolic framework that makes us comprehensible to ourselves and to each other. Not the superfluous signifier in terms of which our symbolic interactions can be hysterically interrogated and recombined, the stain is rather the incongruous representation that tessellates with a lacuna in the symbolic order, “giving body to the ‘unspeakable’—its inert presence testifies that we are in a domain where ‘words fail’” (239). The stain stands for an insistent aspect of the object that otherwise could not achieve representation. The occasion of the stain is itself a representation only inasmuch as it occurs among functional representations; it does not reproduce its referent in comprehensible reality but, in its odd incongruity with the represented milieu in which it appears, the ontological stain holds open a space for the Real itself in its negative, ungovernable significance.

In Žižek’s account of Hitchcock, the stain marks a category shift, a point at which the coherent symbolic universe of the film, its diegetic reality, is disrupted, and the supervening directorial intention, Hitchcock’s own desire to control his audience, appears. This, Žižek says, is the “Hitchcockian allegory” (217), a “filmic enunciated (the diegetic content)” that “is posited and conceived as the allegory of its own process of enunciation” (218). The exteriority of the psychotic stain is comprehended and redeemed for knowledge by Hitchcock’s manipulative relation to the public, which becomes the paradigm of what is at stake in authoritative intersubjectivity. Hence Žižek’s rather insistent *auteurism*, for Hitchcock’s governing intention provides the significant framework within which this radical interrogation of the image can be conducted. As the title of the anthology indicates (*Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan—But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*), Hitchcock is formally analogous to Lacan, not simply another subjectivity in the intersubjective milieu but a principle of its illumination.

Hitchcock’s films correspond to Lacan’s graphic schemas and abstract formulae as demonstrations of deep organizing structures of interpersonal authority and obedience, deception and trust. If this

recuperative strategy does not work with *Night of the Living Dead* and the zombie-image, this is not because Romero is a lesser director than Hitchcock (whatever that might mean), less in control of his material or aware of its implications, but because the image he uncovered does not exhibit intention but rises to consume any purposeful recuperation whatsoever.¹⁷ The stain of the zombie-image in the graveyard may provoke genre expectations and a mood of dread, but it is not exhausted in its shock effect on the viewer. The ontological discrepancy between the lumbering corpse and the pastoral cemetery does not point up to a master intention but opens out onto the contemporary everyday. Just as within the cinematic diegesis the zombie menace cannot be reduced to the antithetical human hostility of the crop duster's swooping attack or even the generalized natural emergency of the inexplicably aggressive birds, both of which remain circumscribed by life,¹⁸ so too beyond the diegesis, the zombie-image cannot be recognized as the allegorical tool of historical intentions but exists as the remainder of their subtraction. The possibility of allegory after such a subtraction is necessarily correlated with the impossibility of mourning such a death. *Night of the Living Dead* opens in a cemetery not because this is the traditionally liminal setting between the natural and the supernatural where horror can be expected but because the graveyard topographically isolates the process of mourning in which allegory is born and dies.

The very banality of the siblings' squabbles illustrates a failure of mourning, a crisis in the procedures that reintegrate the absent dead into meaningful human life. The collapse is explicitly theological; it is religious observance that has lost its possibility. "I don't see you going to church," Barbara reproaches her brother, and Johnny replies dismissively, "Yeah, well there's not much point in me going to church." Thus when the suited figure appears in the distance, it is into this father-shaped gap in ecclesiastical mourning that it walks. The zombie is not the father—the father whose face has been forgotten, whose tombstone can only with trouble be relocated and once relocated cannot be appropriately recognized. The zombie-image is not the image, however distorted, of the father but the image of his absence. Thus in the graveyard, even as the zombie-image appears, Johnny's recollections vault past the paternal generation to the remembered if decadent authority of the grandfather. "It was from right over there. I jumped out at you from behind the tree, and grandpa got all excited and he shook his fist

at me and he said, 'Boy, you'll be damned to hell!' Ha. Remember that?" It is this grandfatherly narrative context that Johnny tries to bring into the present when he continues teasing his sister. The possibility of divine judgment is thereby correlated as a narrative structure with spurious cinematic threats. Over against this recollection, everything in the scene conspires to eliminate the real presence of the father, whose death is paradoxically presented as a kind of extinction. The surplus of the Real that Romero's opening indirectly captures is not a positive power but the absence of the father beyond and within the symbolic structures in which the inherent claim to permanence that attends his authority is manifested. This discrepancy between paternal authority and the body of the father is the narrow gate through which the zombie-image enters the world.

At first the children miss it. Noticing Barbara's genuine *Unbehagen* in the midst of this evacuated ritual, and prompted by his memory of their grandfather's impotent outrage, Johnny playfully threatens his sister. "They're coming to get you, Barbara!" He pursues her through two shots, shots in which Barbara moves into the frame, objects to her



Figure 9. *Fatherless Child*: Johnny (Russell Streiner) recalls an episode with his grandfather: "It was from right over there."



Figure 10. Exhausted Gothic: Johnny (Russell Streiner) adopts a Boris Karloff voice: "They're coming to get you, Barbara!"

brother's provocations, and moves out of the frame as Johnny moves into it after her. In each shot, the zombie-image, out of focus, inconspicuous, appears in the background. The shots are constructed so that both siblings are only momentarily in the frame together, and nor does the camera pan with any smoothness to follow the two central characters. Rather, these static shots are built to draw subtle attention to the obscure background figure by holding their framing stable relative to his distant movement and not the inconsequential imitation threat passing through the foreground.

At the end of the second shot, the figure catches Johnny's attention. "Here comes one of them now!" he warns mockingly as we see a closer shot of the man walking among the headstones. The son who had impersonated the transitive threat now impersonates its jeopardized object. "I'm getting out of here!" As Johnny's cinematically inspired narrative game collides with the zombie-image, the spatial organization of the sequence, which had been relatively coherent up until this point, begins to disintegrate rapidly. The vectors traversed in the increasingly rapid series of shots no longer cohere; the zombie



Figure 11. A Persistent Stain: The zombie-image, out of focus, inconspicuous, as Johnny (Russell Streiner) taunts Barbara (Judith O'Dea).

moves right to left, then left to right, and the young people are repeatedly reoriented as well. The respective distance between humans and the ghoul, from a narrative point of view the crucial variable in the encounter, remains entirely indeterminate until they converge in the single frame. Once they enter the frame together, the recording camera leaves its mount and begins to bounce alongside them into the encounter. We are just behind the zombie's right shoulder when he reaches Barbara, who is demurely avoiding eye contact. The rhythm of the shots oscillates ever more rapidly as the zombie grasps Barbara's throat, Johnny turns to intervene in the attack, and the dead man grapples with the living. There is a moment Johnny breaks free, but the corpse is desperately violent, pulls his glasses from his face and throws the young man to the ground, fatally striking his head against a low gravestone similar to the father's. Demystified son and symbolic father expire together. In the face of the zombie figure, initiative and response, survival and extinction, life and death, have begun to circulate unstopably. Through the stabilized whirl of these categories, the zombie-image touches its idea. Lightning flashes.



Figure 12. Rules of the Game: Johnny (Russell Streiner) pretends to be frightened of the zombie-image: "Here comes one of them now!"



Figure 13. Encounter with the Real: The zombie (Bill Hinzman) reaches Barbara (Judith O'Dea).



Figure 14. Life vs. Death: The zombie (Bill Hinzman) and Johnny (Russell Streiner) grapple in a field of signifiers.



Figure 15. The Narrow Gate: The demystified son (Russell Streiner) expires along with the symbolic father's forgotten memorial.



Figure 16. A Facies Hypocratica of the Present: The zombie-image (Bill Hinzman) touches its idea.

A NIHILISTIC REVELATION

The origin of the zombie-image mediates more, and in a certain sense less, than simply the pleasures of abjection in an alienated universe; its stain signals more, and in a certain sense less, than the abyss of intersubjectivity in the everyday world. Rather as the paradoxical remnant of its own extinction, the zombie-image recalibrates the very possibility of allegorical investment in the temporal world and calls into question the ultimate horizon of life itself. “Allegories become dated, because the astonishing [*das Bestürzende*] belongs to their essence,” Benjamin observes (183; 359), and Romero’s transformation of allegory is exposed to the same fate. Thus it is not surprising that one of the earliest interpretations of Romero’s film, an essay in *Film Journal* from 1973 by R. H. W. Dillard, written before the astonishment of the film had dissipated, comes closest to recognizing the genuinely apocalyptic consequences of the zombie-image.

Dillard’s reading begins by tying the effect of the film to “a fear of the dead and particularly of the known dead, of dead kindred” (15).

All human cultures resist this fear through funerary rituals designed to reintegrate the recently deceased into the cycles of nature. Romero's film, Dillard writes, "is almost a reenactment of these rituals in reverse. The unburied recent dead stalk the landscape seeking the flesh of the living, and the only defense against them is the shutting of doors and windows and the use of fire as a barricade" (16). And he cites one of the scientists interviewed on the television, whose off-hand dismissal of these ritual necessities is perhaps the coldest and most resonant moment in the movie. "The bereaved will have to forgo the dubious comforts that a funeral service will give," Dr. Grimes (Frank Doak) warns the public. "They're just dead flesh. And dangerous." That the rituals by which death is reintegrated into life have become "dubious," this is one of the keys to understanding the zombie-image.

But beyond this ancient fear of the dead, Dillard sees in Romero's film an even more characteristic fear, one that emerges as the individual vulnerability of the zombies becomes apparent. "The essential quality of the film's setting and of its characters is their ordinary nature," Dillard observes.

The film is, then, the story of everyday people in an ordinary landscape, played by everyday people who are, for the most part, from that ordinary locale. The way in which *Night of the Living Dead* transforms the familiar and ordinary world into a landscape of unrelenting horror reveals the film's moral nature and the deep and terrible fear that is at its heart. (17, 20)

The deep and terrible fear emerges once the living dead have lost the supernatural aura of a return from beyond life and revealed themselves from the resolutely practical perspective imposed by their relentless violence as "really no different from any other natural disaster" (21). As the ancient fear of the dead recedes from the ordinary terrain the zombies come to inhabit, it leaves behind "a much deeper and more powerful fear—the fear of life itself" (22).

This existentialist angst ("it is Søren Kierkegaard's sickness unto death or Edgar Allan Poe's fever called living or Jean-Paul Sartre's nausea pressed to the extreme" [22]) is at the heart of Dillard's interpretation. Here, too, life and its concerns seem to circumscribe the zombie-image. Yet Dillard goes further, conceding of this existential disquiet that "even that does not give the film its special quality." For if the fear of life that Romero's film produces is of a piece with the

fundamentally modern anxieties with which Dillard contextualizes it, the distinct nature of the movie lies in its contemporary response to this fear. And it is Romero's implacable negativity in this regard that genuinely discomfits Dillard. "*Night of the Living Dead* . . . expresses only human smallness and ineffectuality," Dillard concludes. Beyond ritual blasphemy and existential angst, here is where he sees the distinct character at the origin of the zombie-image: nihilism. "The real horror of *Night of the Living Dead* is not, then, a result of its inspiring a fear of the dead or even a fear of the ordinary world. It lies rather in its refusal to resolve those fears in any way that does not sacrifice human dignity and human value" (27).

What Dillard couches in terms of indignation and absent values is indeed at the metaphysical heart of the zombie-image. The alienation from ritualized death as an alienation from ordinary life, the futility of any teleological orientation in the world, the consumptive and contagious violence through which living death persists as homicidal life, the contiguity between social disintegration and organic decomposition, in short, the *biopolitical* challenge of the zombie scenario and its central image point to its genuine historical novelty. Fear is one understandable reaction to this image. But by taking up residence at the intersection of a problematic life and death and there proliferating into a contagious mass movement of total destruction, the zombie-image opens itself to another, and perhaps less paralyzing reaction. For as a genuinely *apocalyptic* image, a radically contemporary version of the ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν, the cannibalistic horde of living corpses promises, beyond any emotional response, what all apocalypses promise: revelation.

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Notes

1. For a penetrating analysis of one of the first of these Haitian-themed horror films, *White Zombie* (1932), see Fay.

2. For a helpful overview of the development of the zombie motif in popular culture, see Jamie Russell's detailed and articulate *Book of the Dead: The Complete History of Zombie Cinema*. A full genealogy of George Romero's *Night of the Living*

Dead would extend beyond cinema, of course, and would have to include Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I am Legend* (the source for Ragona's *The Last Man on Earth*, as well as a number of other films) and the lurid comic books by EC Comics, which Romero himself has repeatedly acknowledged as formative on his imagination. Such philological investigation would certainly assist in explaining how the zombie-image came to be, but the provisional mass resurrection of the cannibalistic dead, the particular confluence of elements that constitute the zombie-image and that emerge in *Night of the Living Dead*, would lose none of its originating consequence.

3. The word that "official" discourse in the film uses to describe the creatures, repeated several times on radio and television, is "ghoul." More revealing is the word that the protagonists of the film consistently use to designate their antagonists: "those things." The absence of a narrower concept appropriate to the risen dead suggests that what is at stake in the emergency they embody is something of philosophical generality.

4. One need only point out the numerous comedies that exploit the slapstick elements of the image, films such as *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) or *Zombieland* (2009), not to mention more experimental efforts to realize the image in the context of romantic comedies (*Warm Bodies* 2013) or erotica (*Zombie Strippers!*, in fact a rather loose adaptation of Eugène Ionesco's play *Rhinocéros*). What makes these intentional generic combinations possible, I argue, is more fundamentally that the zombie-image belongs to none of these genres essentially—and indeed is never entirely at home in any narrative structure—but is in fact an apocalyptic image, situated in the dislocation generated by the apocalyptic rupture in history characteristic of the present.

5. Benjamin 1977, 45; Benjamin 1972, 226. Further citations in the text refer to these editions with page numbers for the English and the German versions respectively.

6. The ultimate inaccessibility of the idea of the zombie dictates the need for some terminological consistency in the investigation that follows. As the ideal horizon toward which all representations of zombies are, qua representations of zombies, oriented, we will speak of the "zombie-image." This term encompasses the full range of zombie representations in all their variations, whether the figures move quickly or slowly, whatever narrative explanation is given for their appearance, however accomplished or inept their visual simulation, and whatever emotional reaction they may provoke. Analysis will naturally gravitate toward certain representations that seem upon reflection to embody the idea, or certain aspects of the idea, better than do other representations, but this does not imply either that other versions of the zombie-image can be excluded from consideration by fiat or that any actual representation embodies the idea without reserve. Again to draw on Benjamin's methodological preface, "Ideas [and so the zombie-image as an idea] are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements" (34; 214). The fact that the zombie-image includes such a range of different representations and different narratives hosting those representations suggests a further important aspect of the idea. The zombie-image itself is neither singular nor

plural, for the zombie as a narrative motif cannot be separated from its collective nature. Zombies appear en masse; they could in fact serve as a paradigmatic illustration of what Elias Canetti in his classic study *Crowds and Power* called “die offene Masse,” the open crowd (2001, 14ff.; 1962, 16ff.). “The open crowd exists so long as it grows; it disintegrates as soon as it stops growing” (15; 16). Since in the case of zombies the universal inevitability of death is the principle of the growth of the crowd, the prospect of its destruction disappears. It is this inexorable exponential expansion of the mass of zombies that characterizes the threatening aspect of the zombie scenario. “Every dead body that is not exterminated becomes one of them,” Dr. Foster shrilly insists at the outset of *Dawn of the Dead*. “It gets up and kills! The people it kills get up and kill!” At the same time, each individual zombie is the uncanny reflection of a once-living individual, and the repulsiveness of the zombie scenario is no less intimately tied to this inexplicable resemblance to organic life at the level of the person. The term zombie-image ranges over both of these poles, including, on the one hand, the *zombie horde*—that is, the zombie phenomenon as an open crowd—and, on the other, the *zombie figure*—that is, the particular zombie as a decomposing body suspended between two deaths.

7. For a recent thoughtful review of the racial tensions that pass through *Night of the Living Dead*, see Bruce 2011.

8. Few are the discussions of *Night of the Living Dead* that can resist quoting the *Variety* denunciation of Romero’s “pornography of violence . . . this unrelieved orgy of sadism” (Russell, 65), or Ebert’s narrative of “a little girl across the aisle from [him], maybe nine years old, . . . sitting very still in her seat and crying” (Hoberman and Rosenbaum, 111). But as Ben Hervey has emphasized in his monograph on the film, to imagine that these negative reactions were typical, or that the movie’s achievement was not rapidly perceived, is historically false. “Highbrow publications like *Sight and Sound* and *Positif* were particularly effusive, but even most newspaper critics judged it a terrifying, intelligent, meaningful film” (Hervey, 17).

9. So, for instance, Sumiko Higashi, in her 1990 essay “*Night of the Living Dead: A Horror Film about the Horrors of the Vietnam Era*,” finds the Vietnamese to be an “absent cause” (181) in the Jamesonian sense at work in the film, one mediating the return of a sociological repressed group characterized at the most general level as “the Other in contemporary bourgeois society” (180). Resting in straightforward resemblances between film and reality (for example, the helicopter seen near the end of the film taken as “the quintessential symbol of the Vietnam War” [183]), Higashi’s analysis, like Robin Wood’s before her, is inevitably drawn to the living conflict between Ben and the rural posse at the expense of any exploration of the zombie figure per se.

10. Hoberman and Rosenbaum, 125.

11. This is the title of their chapter on Romero: “George Romero and the Return of the Repressed.”

12. Most notoriously, perhaps, is the failure of Helen Cooper (Marilyn Eastman) to protect herself from her reanimated daughter (Kyra Schon) in Romero’s

Night of the Living Dead. But the first appearance of a zombie in *Dawn of the Dead*, the “Miguelito zombie” (Tommy LaFitte) in the housing project, is embraced by his loving wife, to her spectacular misfortune. Later in the movie, the television scientist (Richard France) makes the point explicitly: “We must not be lulled by the concept that these are our family members or our friends. They are not. They will not respond to such emotions. They must be destroyed on sight!”

13. *Land of the Dead* (2005); *Diary of the Dead* (2007); *Survival of the Dead* (2009).

14. Tom Savini, who designed the special effects in *Dawn of the Dead*, had served in Vietnam as a combat photographer, experiences he drew on in designing the gory injuries that punctuate that film. “My time in Vietnam had big influence on me,” Savini says in a 2004 interview included in the retrospective documentary *The Dead Will Walk* (2004), “as a combat photographer in Vietnam. And that’s what I try to put into the effects that I do. If I don’t get the same feeling that I got when I saw the real stuff, then the fake stuff isn’t real enough for me.” The subsequent history of zombie cinema in general pursues a relentless effort to render the zombies ever more realistically decomposed and ghastly. This verisimilar telos should not of course be confused with an increased proximity to the zombie-image as idea.

15. There is another sense, of course, in which Romero’s movies per se are counterviolence to the real violence at work in the world outside them. But this view, too, would homogenize the violence represented in these zombie movies and neutralize its inherent critical force.

16. The CDC has also discovered the strange flexibility of the zombie-image, its protean relation to the ordinary everyday in emergency. According to its website, “What first began as a tongue in cheek campaign to engage new audiences with preparedness messages . . . has proven to be a very effective platform. We continue to reach and engage a wide variety of audiences on all hazards preparedness via Zombie Preparedness; and as our own director, Dr. Ali Khan, notes, ‘If you are generally well equipped to deal with a zombie apocalypse you will be prepared for a hurricane, pandemic, earthquake, or terrorist attack.’ So please log on, get a kit, make a plan, and be prepared!”

17. Indeed, in an interview in Roy Frumkes’s *Document of the Dead* (1985), when asked about the influence of Hitchcock on his filmmaking style, after denying much conscious imitation, Romero himself recognizes that this sequence in particular is an example of “Hitchcock-type influences.” “I think the sequence in the cemetery in *Night of the Living Dead*, where you see the figure in the background and you don’t really know what it is, and then it gradually gets worked into the plot, it starts to become a threat, and then the threat is a real threat; that’s kind of a Hitchcockian sequence.” Before he began making movies, Romero served one summer as a grip on Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* (Hoberman and Rosenbaum, 119).

18. Which is not to deny the parallels, long noted by Hoberman and Rosenbaum and by Robin Wood, among others, between the inexplicable scenario in *Night*

of the *Living Dead* and the situation in Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), a comparison that has frequently been repeated.

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