

No Safe Space: Zombie Film Tropes during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Space and Culture
2020, Vol. 23(3) 253–258
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DOI: 10.1177/1206331220938642
journals.sagepub.com/home/sac



Lúcio Reis Filho¹ 

Abstract

As COVID-19 spreads across the globe, reports on the crisis evoke many tropes of horror cinema, reinforcing the role of pandemics in apocalyptic imagination. More tied to the zombie film subgenre, horror tropes re-emerge daily in the news and mainstream culture: the unexplainable disease, the silence or denial of the authorities, the political disarticulation, the buzz of the media, the government conspiracy, the collapse of the social order, and the big cities as vast, ruined spaces. Considering the profound changes in urban landscapes, the analogy I intend to establish with a specific horror subgenre highlights the stigma of the infected, the quarantine as a social and cultural experience, and the segregation inherent in it.

Keywords

Zombie films, horror cinema, horror tropes, COVID-19, quarantine

As COVID-19 spreads across the globe, profound changes beset the urban landscapes. The streets and iconic landmarks are eerily empty in New York so that a CNN anchor compared scenes from Times Square to a “disaster film.”¹ Steven Soderbergh’s *Contagion* (2011) comes to mind. Meanwhile, sales of guns and ammunition soar amid coronavirus panic.² Restriction orders are enacted. The dead are being mass buried in Italy, Spain, and Manaus (capital of the Brazilian state of Amazonas) with no sacrament, and bodies are piling up in the streets of Ecuador. “Looks like a horror movie,” said Mario Esteves, mayor from Barra do Piraí, a city in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, as the number of infected grows in the country.³

The apocalyptic imagery unleashed by coronavirus evokes many tropes of horror cinema. The analogy I intend to establish, however, is with a specific horror subgenre: the zombie films. In times of the COVID-19 crisis, zombie film tropes re-emerge daily in the news and mainstream culture. The global pandemic leads us to address the usability of the zombie as representation of post-industrial society, not ignoring the renewal of the concept in the last decades. Should be observed, as well, the stigma of the infected, the quarantine as a social and cultural experience, and the segregation inherent in it.

As Jamie Russell states, “the monsters that dominate any particular culture or period offer an unusual insight into the specific fears and anxieties that characterize that historical moment”

¹University Anhembi Morumbi, São Paulo, SP, Brazil

Corresponding Author:

Lúcio Reis Filho, Researcher, University Anhembi Morumbi, R. Casa do Ator, 275 Vila Olímpia, São Paulo, SP 04546-001, Brazil.

Email: luciusrp@yahoo.com.br

(2010, p. 18). Colson Whitehead, author of the zombie novel *Zone One* (2011), agrees: “The times make their monsters. We have ours, the next generation will have theirs” (cited by Madrigal, 2011). With his cult classic *Night of the Living Dead*, George Romero created the subgenre of zombie films, offering a unique sight of the late 1960s and a powerful projection of 1968, the year it was released, delivering a message that still resonates today. In the plot, a group of survivors lock themselves in a farmhouse after the “living dead” rise and spread across Pittsburgh’s countryside.

A microcosm of American society, the farmhouse is a quarantine space through which Romero developed his “sociopolitical chronicle of the times” (cited by Eco, 2007, p. 422). The farmhouse becomes a battleground for the survivors, whose struggle overcomes the external zombie threat. According to Romero, the zombies represent a certain kind of revolution, a radical turnaround in a world many of the human characters cannot understand, as they prefer to mark the living dead as the enemy, when in reality we are the enemy (cited by Eco, 2007, p. 422). In his words, the film “talked about the revolution, about new generations taking the place of the older ones” (cited by Saracino, 2009, p. 41). As metaphor, the zombies represent the political and economic situation, demographic changes, and the rupture of traditional gender roles in the United States.

In *Night of the Living Dead*, Romero established the tropes of modern zombie narratives: the unexplainable disease, the flesh-eating ghouls, the need to get shelter in quarantine scenarios, the silence or denial of the authorities, the political disarticulation, the buzz of the media, and the disruption of the middle-class traditional values. These tropes became conventions of the subgenre, and others would be added later: the government conspiracy, the lab virus, the epidemic becoming a pandemic, the collapse of social order, and the big cities as vast, ruined urban spaces.

The idea of contagion is inherent in Romero’s zombie, as a single bite can kill and transform its victim. Peter Dendle related these monsters to bubonic plague, cancer, AIDS, and even acne (2001, p. 12). Since the late 1990s, however, the preferred explanation for the zombie outbreak is the virus out of control. Some causes cemented this fear in the twenty-first century: the anthrax, an acute infectious disease also used as a bioweapon;⁴ the “bath salts” drug, which led addicts to brutally kill people in the United States;⁵ the SARS and the H1N1 epidemics; and, finally, COVID-19. In any case, the only response is the ruthless execution of the “infected” in the name of order, security, and self-defense.

At the end of *Night of the Living Dead*, the protagonist Ben (Duane Jones) is the only quarantine survivor—and he does not look like a zombie. Ignoring this, a militia member executes him from a distance with a headshot. Besides the rawness of the act, Ben’s death is endowed with a symbolic meaning: He is a black man killed by the hands of a white man the same year Martin Luther King was murdered, at the height of the Civil Rights era. The zombie-can-only-be-killed-with-a-head-shot trope derives from a disturbing record of the Vietnam War, the image of a police chief shooting a Vietnamese prisoner at point-blank (Hervey, 2008, p. 22). In a context of social banditry, the governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro gave the order to shoot the head, authorizing the police to shoot to kill suspected criminals in November 2018.⁶ During the COVID-19 crisis, while a horror film scenario unfolds, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte warned that anyone who violates the country’s lockdown could be shot.⁷

A critique of consumerism, a representation of diseases, or an allegory of the upheaval of rejected social strata, the zombies continue to be used as “a lens through which to view the historical moment” (Bernardini, 2010, p. 179). Romero’s final trilogy—*Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2007), and *Survival of the Dead* (2009)—encapsulates contemporary issues that fueled the reemergence of the zombie film in early 21st century. Kim Newman identifies commentaries on viral infections such as AIDS and swine flu, events such as 9/11 and the War on Terror, Hurricane Katrina, conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the banking and credit crises. The filmmaker resumes the social commentary of his first films and updates the concept of the zombie, now mature enough to function again as social allegory (2011, p. 578).

Co-writer of *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), Simon Pegg related the sudden explosion of zombie films in the new millennium to the fear of the Other and of ourselves, the feeling that everyone could be blown up in a terrorist attack, and to issues such as viral paranoia, fear of foreigners, and xenophobia (cited by Russell, 2010, pp. 228–229). Foreigners are often labeled with archetypes of contagion and dirt. According to Mary Douglas, reflection on dirt involves the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death. Our notion of dirt is based on care for hygiene and respect for conventions, and includes all rejected elements of ordered systems. The dirt is an *anomaly*, “an element which does not fit a given set or series” (1991, p. 52). “In a system where the Same predominates. . . immunological defense always takes aim at the Other or the foreigner in the strong sense,” explains Byung-Chul Han. “The immunologically organized world possesses a particular topology. It is marked by borders, transitions, thresholds, fences, ditches, and walls that prevent universal change and exchange” (2017, p. 13). In times of refugee crisis and exalted nationalism, the zombies stand for minorities and historically segregated ethnic groups.

Land of the Dead resumes the critique of materialism and consumerism of Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), addressing social inequality and class stratification as the evil that resides in such practices. In the plot, the zombies took over the world. The last survivors were divided between the rich, who live in a walled city to protect themselves, and the poor and outcasts, who inhabit Pittsburgh’s underworld. As Bauman observes in *Retrotopia* (2017, p. 98, 99), the lives of the extremely rich are now spent in walled communities, in the new super-luxurious, but also segregated, sheltered, hidden, and super-private enclaves.⁸ Bauman highlights our urge to divide men into “us” and “them,” exclusive group and Others, our civilization, and barbarians. In this perspective, foreigners represent everything that is evasive, fragile, unstable, and unpredictable. It is against strangers (foreigners and immigrants) and to get rid of them that residents of an infected neighborhood “will organize themselves to defend their politics and their local culture,” trying to reshape it as a “small state” (Waltzer cited by Bauman, 2017, p. 61).

Not by chance, the villain of *Land of the Dead* is the rich and powerful man in his “castle.” Kaufman (Dennis Hopper) is “a combination of capitalist robber baron, mad Roman emperor, and organized crime kingpin” (Paffenroth, 2006, p. 125). His name means “merchant,” and this would be the essence of the character. To have the new ruler of the remnants of human society be named “merchant,” shows Romero’s belief that the highest form of power in the old social structure is the commerce.

In this chilling, cynical, but uncomfortably realistic view, it is not the military, the government, or church that exercises real power, but the wealthy, who may use these other institutions as proxies or fronts for their selfish machinations. According to Romero, the White House, the Pentagon, and the Vatican do not run or exploit the world—Wall Street does. (Paffenroth, 2006, p. 125)

A clear analogy can be made with the United States under Trump, a businessman who became president, and Brazil under Bolsonaro, a retired army captain and dictatorship enthusiast who denies the seriousness of the COVID-19 crisis. Trump imitator on social media, he was called BolsoNero by *The Economist* in allusion to the emperor who set Rome afire.⁹ With their conservative, racist speeches, both leaders are the ultimate representation of Ayn Rand’s “virtue of selfishness.” Writing to *The Guardian*, the Brazilian journalist Eliane Brum defined them as “elected despots”:

The COVID-19 pandemic has its villain. And it’s not the virus. Even the most outlandish Hollywood disaster movie wouldn’t entertain the notion of a president who encourages the public to go out more during a public health emergency, as Jair Bolsonaro has done. . . . Bolsonaro has promoted protests

against congress and the supreme court and repeatedly doubled down on denial of coronavirus science: “This virus isn’t everything they say it is,” he said to supporters on 16 March.¹⁰

One of the most critical pieces of the last decades, *Land of the Dead*, proposes to tear down the walls that offer false security to the rich and segregate a vast majority, left in extreme poverty. The film remains trendy today, in times of closing borders, extraditing foreigners, and breaking up international communities. Like the fictional zombie epidemic, the COVID-19 crisis reveals the profound social inequality in urban spaces. Tom Phillips and Caio Briso discussed the role of Brazil’s super-rich in introducing and spreading coronavirus to the country—and the gulf between classes in one of the most unequal societies on the globe. Many fear that while the first coronavirus wave has crashed over Brazil’s white political and economic elite, it is the poor and black people who will suffer the most—without the luxury of being able to self-isolate at home or pay for expensive private hospitals.¹¹ This is exactly what seems to be happening in the United States and Brazil, thus revealing the segregation inherent in quarantine.

Living in uncertain times, our faith in the cohesion of social order has been deeply shaken. The imminence of natural disasters and terrorist attacks, the concern with weapons of mass destruction, and the fear of a nuke being dropped in a large metropolitan center seem to have found an escape valve in zombie films (Russell, 2010, p. 229). Not by chance, they had a fertile ground to revive in post-industrial society, inspiring highly creative productions. For Neil Ferguson,¹² epidemiologist at Imperial College London, to relate the zombie with features that emphasize contagion reflects the fears of our time about the dangers of genetic modification and the spread of unknown diseases by labs. Today, this fear is fueled by xenophobic conspiracy theories that blame China for the creation and spread of COVID-19,¹³ at the expense of its own economy and society. Accusations of a “Chinese virus” were delivered by politicians in the United States and Brazil.

This last rationalization of a biological weapon may be a symptom of a post-9/11 world nervous at the possibilities of bioterrorism, as a previous generation lived constantly in the shadow of nuclear war, and zombies were then depicted as the outcome of radiation. Both nuclear zombies and bioterror zombies are then a symbol of our own mad urges to destroy ourselves, and a terrifying portent that we might succeed. (Paffenroth, 2006, p. 3)

The renewal of the zombie subgenre, however, is due not to cinema but to the groundbreaking game *Resident Evil* (1996). Developed for the Japanese company Capcom and the Sony PlayStation console, the game combines science fiction and survival horror, both identifiable genres in *Night of the Living Dead*, and adds the conspiratorial dimension of *The X-Files* (1993–2002) (Krzywinska, 2008). The premise: After a lab virus gets loose, an epidemic is accidentally triggered by the pharmaceutical corporation Umbrella, infecting humans and transforming them into zombies. *Resident Evil* became a successful franchise, on consoles and on screens. In the second and third games in the series, whose narratives occur simultaneously, the fictional Raccoon City is put on lockdown and later reduced to a post-apocalyptic space. This reminds us of how quarantine has historically been used to separate the sick from the healthy. Both plots converge at the end, as the city is destroyed by nuclear bombs to contain the virus spread.

From the late 1990s to the new millennium, zombie narratives tell us how a pandemic lead to the collapse of technological modernity and transnational capitalism on a global scale. They became the perfect expression of fears related to a viral apocalypse, and *28 Days Later* is another important piece of this renewal. Written and produced before the anthrax attacks, the smallpox vaccination debates, the search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and the global anxiety related to SARS and swine flu, the release of the film in 2002 fed on the fear of

a microbiological catastrophe. London is empty and few survived after the outbreak of a rabies-associated virus, whose behavior is shocking and unprecedented: transmitted through bodily fluids, it spreads in a matter of seconds, turning the infected into enraged, maddened killers with superhuman athletic abilities, a lifespan that lasts several days, and a compulsion to attack and devour the uninfected.

Bringing the discussion to the present days, *28 Days Later*—as [*Rec*] (2007) and *Train to Busan* (2016)—reinforces the role of epidemics in apocalyptic imagination and the notion of quarantine as a space built to separate “us” and “them.” Envisions of empty cities are familiar today, in times of distancing and lockdown. Social media users were quick to compare the deserted highway of Atlanta, in the promo image of *The Walking Dead* (2010–), to a photo taken from the same place after the COVID-19 restrictive orders. Among the many zombie films tropes that emerged during the pandemic, the comparison reveals how quarantine has profoundly changed urban landscapes.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Lúcio Reis Filho  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6759-6123>

Notes

1. <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/us/2020/04/02/us-new-york-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-times-square-subway-quest-pkg-intl-ldn-vpx.cnn>
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/16/us-sales-guns-ammunition-soar-amid-coronavirus-panic-buying>
3. <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2020-03-28/parece-filme-de-terror-se-1000-pessoas-ficarem-doentes-no-futuro-teriamos-de-escolher.html>
4. In 2001, the anthrax was deliberately spread in letters through the US postal system.
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6. <https://veja.abril.com.br/politica/wilson-witzel-a-policia-vai-mirar-na-cabecinha-e-fogo/>
7. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/philippine-president-rodrido-duterte-coronavirus-lockdown-shot-dead-a9442921.html>
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Author Biography

Lúcio Reis Filho is a PhD in Media Studies at University Anhembi Morumbi (São Paulo, Brazil), historian and author specializing in the relations between cinema, history, and literature. Focusing on the horror and science fiction genres, he wrote the following chapters in academic books: “Not All that Glitters Is Gold: Ziggy Stardust and the Fractured Mask of a Generation,” in *Masks: Bowie and Artists of Artifice* (2020), “Lovecraft out of Space: Echoes of American Weird Fiction on Brazilian Literature and Cinema,” in *Lovecraftian Proceedings No. 3* (2019), the entry “Cloverfield,” in *Aliens in Popular Culture* (2019), and “Demons to Some, Angels to Others: Eldritch Horrors and Hellbound Religion in the Hellraiser Films,” in *Divine Horror: Essays on the Cinematic Battle Between the Sacred and the Diabolical* (2017); “The Withering Corpse and the Resurrection of Zombies in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema” (“El Cuerpo Seco y la Resurrección de los Zombis en el Cine Brasileño Contemporáneo,” 2015) and “The Zombie Invasion on Latin American Independent Horror Films” (“La Invasión Zombi en el Cine de Terror Independiente Latinoamericano,” 2012) both published in horror-themed anthologies by Editorial Isla Negra. He also wrote a biographical study on the American filmmaker George A. Romero, published in a Brazilian anthology on world independent cinema in 2013, and the paper “Draft for a Critical History of Argentine Science Fiction Cinema” (2011), along with Alfredo Suppia, for the *SFRA Review*. Currently, he is editing a book on David Bowie in the cinema.