"Shoot Everything that Moves": Post-Millennial Zombie Cinema and the War on Terror

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Abstract
This article aims to examine the social and political function of zombie cinema in the years following the attacks on the World Trade Centre and during the ensuing 'War on Terror'. Recent zombie films have established a link between the zombie and the figure of the terrorist or political insurgent, but the concomitant humanisation of the zombie figure has complicated this simple association. The post-millennial cinematic zombie subverts its conventional role as representative of the cultural other. By examining several key films this article will focus on the zombie's increasing sophistication as a Gothic/horror trope; in particular, the humanising process and its consequences for the subject positioning of the audience, who are encouraged to question whether it is the zombie, or the human response to it, which provides the most significant threat.

Keywords: *zombie, terrorism, ethics, anxiety propaganda, the other*

It takes little insight to recognise the allegorical uses of the zombie throughout its eighty-year cinematic history. From the racial anxiety of *White Zombie* (dir. Victor Halperin, 1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (dir. Jacques Tourneur, 1943), through the McCarthyist paranoia of the 1950s 'bodysnatcher' films, to the various agendas of the Romero paradigm, the zombie has continued to provide ample opportunity for cultural and political commentary. The heightened anxiety that dominates contemporary Western culture has certainly contributed to an upsurge of zombie-themed media. Since the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, the zombie has infiltrated numerous branches of popular entertainment. Cinematic treatments of the theme have increased exponentially, even as the undead launched an assault on the literary market in fiction such as Max Brooks' *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003) and *World War Z* (2006), John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Handling the Undead* (2005), and David Wellington's

Monster Island (2006)[1]. Robert Kirkman's ongoing graphic novel series *The Walking Dead* has been successfully adapted for television and may well do for the zombie what the *True Blood* franchise has done for the vampire by providing filmmakers with a narrative space in which to examine the long-term implications of living with the undead. The zombie, it seems, is the monster of the moment but, as this essay will examine, the social and political climate in the wake of 9/11 has resulted in a figuration of the zombie that complicates the simple monstrosity of its earlier incarnations.

An argument can be made that the zombie genre has been fundamentally redefined in the post-9/11 world. Zombies represent an extreme version of social unrest, appearing en-masse and without any recourse to reason or diplomacy. This is emphasised by the now-common technique of juxtaposing images of zombie attacks with real media coverage of rioting and violence. The film *28 Days Later* (dir. Danny Boyle, 2002) and the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (dir. Zack Snyder, 2004) each make this connection overt in their opening montages. As well as the general threat of societal chaos, zombies also signify specific global concerns including bio-chemical warfare, pandemic, and infrastructural disintegration. The contemporary zombie narrative thus evokes a nightmarish vision of the post-9/11 apocalyptic scenario in which all the attendant concerns of the discourse of terror are embodied in one monstrous figure.

The zombie is a particularly anonymous monster, signified by the horde rather than a singular entity. Terrorists, similarly, are frequently conceived in the popular imagination (and stylised in the media) as a homogenous enemy driven by unreasoning, ravenous hate. The zombie narrative has consistently polarised the zombie and the living into irreconcilable groups: the survival of one being predicated upon the annihilation of the other. The zombie film, therefore, seems a particularly apt expression of the dominant ideology in the War on Terror, which George W. Bush famously asserted as "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (Bush 2001). The zombie film enforces the same dichotomy: you are with the living, or you are the undead.

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[1] For a comprehensive survey of the increasing popularity and production of zombie-themed media, see Newitz (2009).

However, this simple association of zombies with terrorists has troublesome consequences. It insists upon an introspective examination of the West's own role in the genesis of the current global unrest. In George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) a priest remarks that "when the dead walk, we must stop the killing or lose the war", reminding the soldiers that each person killed only adds to the number of the enemy, a remarkably prescient insight considering the often-articulated belief that the War on Terror is merely creating more terrorists. Contemporary zombie cinema also questions the authorities' responsibilities toward both survivors and the undead, particularly in cases when the zombie may still be technically alive.

The narrative of the War on Terror has been undermined by the overzealous, and sometimes inhumane, actions of the coalition forces. So too must the post-9/11 zombie film reflects these negative aspects in its portrayal of the authorities' response to the crisis. Films such as Boyle's *28 Days Later*, its sequel *28 Weeks Later* (dir. Jean Carlos Fresnadillo, 2007), *Planet Terror* (dir. Robert Rodriguez, 2007), and the remake of Romero's *The Crazies* (dir. Breck Eisner, 2010) portray the military as both culpable for the origins of the crisis and as an active threat to the survivors in its wake. Indeed, in each of these films the military's actions prove to be more threatening to the surviving population than the zombies themselves. I propose that the anxieties expressed by the resurgent zombie genre have as much to do with the military, scientific and governmental response to terrorism as with the fear of terrorism itself. Zombies *are* an apt metaphor for the social other, allowing a dehumanisation of the cultural enemy that legitimises a carte blanche response. This essay, however, will discuss the recent tendency in zombie cinema towards a humanisation of the undead figure: a chilling development insofar as it engenders questions about the true location of monstrosity in these films and the culture that surrounds them.

Slavoj Žižek, commenting upon the atrocities committed at Abu Ghraib prison, employs zombie terminology to conceptualise the legal status of prisoners. He explains that their mistreatment is legitimised by their having escaped the bombs. As a consequence, whatever ordeal they are forced to endure is better than the alternative: being dead. Such reasoning has darker implications:

> It puts prisoners into a literal position of the 'living dead', those who are in a way already dead (their right to live forfeited by being legitimate targets of murderous bombings). Thus the prisoners are now what philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls *homo sacer,* those who can be killed with impunity since, in the eyes of the law, their lives no longer count. (Žižek 2004)

Anne McClintock makes a similar connection when discussing the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. In reference to an image of the prisoners undergoing sensory deprivation and 'touchless torture', she declares that "the men are reduced to zombies, unpeopled bodies, dead men walking" (McClintock 2009: 65).

The pre-millennial cinematic zombie is an apt illustration of the legal status of prisoners in the War on Terror. Like suspected terrorists their (un)lives and rights are made forfeit by their dislocation from the social contract. Like the moment in which the bombs fell on the Middle East, dividing the survivors into the dead or 'living dead', zombification is a watershed moment that irrevocably severs the tie to the individual's prior humanity. After transformation the traditional zombie does not 'count'. It is soulless meat, dangerous vermin to be exterminated, and its destruction has no moral consequence for the dispatching survivor. In contrast, post-millennial zombie narratives have increasingly queried this easy objectification.

Unsurprisingly, considering its paradigmatic status, the process of humanising the zombie is most clearly illustrated in George Romero's *Dead* series. Each of the first four instalments presents the undead in an increasingly sympathetic light. The zombies in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) are presented as aggressive automatons, deserving and receiving no sympathy from either protagonist or audience. *Dawn of the Dead* poses the first suggestion that the creatures should be viewed as tragic figures but still adheres largely to the extreme polarisation of human and zombie[2]. *Day of the Dead* (1985) imbues a single zombie, Bub, with special significance and then juxtaposes him with a particularly unsympathetic human antagonist. In the final confrontation between the two, the audience is encouraged to sympathise with the undead figure.

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[2] The priest in the tower block is the first living human who responds to the zombies with sympathy. Unable to kill them he instead locks them in the basement and gives them last rights.

Land of the Dead (dir. Romero, 2005) goes much further. For the first time Romero creates a zombie protagonist in Big Daddy, an African-American gas attendant who organises his fellow zombies in response to their treatment at the hands of human survivors. The film is an extension of the showdown between Bub and his human adversary in *Day of the Dead*, contrasting the survivors' exploitative cruelty with the zombie's increasing social consciousness. In the film's opening scenes Big Daddy is shown to be distressed by the military's indiscriminate killing of zombies and reacts heroically, pushing several to safety. One rookie soldier summarises the imbalance of aggression on display: "I thought this was gonna be a battle. It's a fucking massacre". This massacre is led by Cholo, an amoral mercenary who risks human lives in pursuit of inessential supplies that he intends to use as currency.

Leah A. Murray interprets Cholo's actions as indicative of the communitarian/individualism dichotomy that is essential to the political subtext of zombie cinema (Murray 2006: 215-8). The tension between individualism and social consciousness has been central to the *Dead* series since the contrast between the socially-minded Ben and the self-centred Harry Cooper in *Night of the Living Dead.* Cholo is an individualist with his own agenda: to gain entrance to Fiddler's Green, the secure tower block that houses affluent whites in luxury and safety. Murray identifies Riley – Cholo's opposite – as the embodiment of communitarian social consciousness in *Land of the Dead.* This is supported by Riley's insistence on only seeking essential supplies, and his angry response to Cholo's risk-taking.

Romero, however, has made a bolder statement in *Land of the Dead* than Murray credits. Big Daddy, rather than Riley, is the film's most significantly communitarian figure. Riley is more socially-conscious than Cholo but nonetheless acts out of indirect self-interest. The reward for his communistic behaviour is that he will be allowed to leave the community and head north to Canada, a 'lighting out for the territories' that epitomises the very ideals of individualism. Big Daddy, on the other hand, has no private motivation for his actions other than a sense of injustice at the barbarity of the treatment his community is forced to endure. His zombified status actively prohibits his seeking any private remuneration, either financial or social. He is instead organising an uprising to improve the conditions

for his entire community. *Land of the Dead* is thus an inversion of the situation presented earlier in the series. Now the human survivors are the lethal force, killing with impunity and without remorse or even recognition of the act. Where once the choice was between individualism and social-consciousness as a response to the zombie threat, now the survivor's insatiable desire for resources from a lost society repositions the living as a threat to the newly socialised undead. Indeed, says Terence McSweeney, the film can be read as a crude analogy of the Bush Administration's aggressive foreign policy and the self-interest inherent in the neoconservative agenda. The film, he says, is an "unsubtle, but potent, allegory of America's self-proclaimed role as global policeman" (McSweeney 2007: 110).

If, as I have suggested, post-millennial zombie-apocalypse is an allegory for the War on Terror, then *Land of the Dead* coerces the audience into a complicated series of associations. Nowhere in recent zombie cinema is there a more blatant allegory for 9/11 than in the assault on Fiddler's Green. The zombies encroach upon the compound from across the river whilst the inhabitants of Fiddler's Green remain assured of their impregnability. From the zombies perspective the image of the city is clearly reminiscent of the Manhattan skyline. The central edifice of the tower block is an obvious analogue for the World Trade Center and Kaufman, its corrupt governor, represents the higher echelons of the Bush Administration. In creating such an explicit re-enactment of the 9/11 attacks, Romero encourages the familiar association of zombie/terrorist. The audience, however, is equally encouraged to sympathise with the zombie's attack on the survivor's base as being at least partially justified and to assign culpability for the attack to domestic political power-brokers.

This is the type of political introspection that Žižek claims has been so far unobtainable in realist depictions of 9/11. Žižek argues that realist treatments such as *United 93* (dir. Paul Greengrass, 2006) and *World Trade Center* (dir. Oliver Stone, 2006) refrain from detailing any wider context than the immediate event. "The result", Žižek claims, "is that the political message of the two films resides in their abstention from delivering a direct political message. It is the message of an implicit trust in one's government: when under attack, one just has to do one's duty" (Žižek 2006). Romero's agenda,

in contrast, is to rail against this implicit trust by highlighting the nefarious agenda of the governing administration and reminding the audience of the enemy's essential humanity. Throughout *Land of the Dead*, the zombie is shown to be exploited and humiliated by the survivors. One scene involves a young, attractive woman having her photograph taken with a pair of chained zombies. The pose is strikingly reminiscent of the photographs taken at Abu Ghraib; particularly the now-infamous image of Sabrina Harman posing with the corpse of a prisoner[3]. McClintock regards the recorded torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo as a visual response to the impossibility of retribution for 9/11. With the bodies of the hijackers themselves unavailable the government "had to turn ordinary people into enemy bodies, bodies that could be subordinated to what I call 'super-vision' and put on display for retaliation" (McClintock 2009: 57).

The concept of an enemy body is especially pertinent in zombie cinema due to the creatures' extreme physicality. Traditionally devoid of intellect or personality, their corroding flesh remains a signifier of both their prior humanity and the distance they have fallen from it. Contemporary zombie cinema has found new ways for the bodies of the afflicted to reflect prevailing concerns in the post 9/11 era. The trope of infection has gained added effectiveness in an audience made paranoid about the threat of weaponised disease. Similarly, portraying the zombie as the result of bio-chemical accident connects with the current paranoia regarding bio-warfare, pandemic, and dirty bombs, and the panic surrounding contagion is reflected in the transmission of zombie 'viruses'. On a symbolic level the viral basis of the zombie can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the spread of fundamentalist ideology. The zombie and the terrorist or political radical are each perceived as being consumed by an overtly aggressive stance toward those who do not share their worldview. Fundamentalism, like zombification, is seen to result in the usurpation of individual identity, replacing it with a crude

[3] Sabrina Harman was one of several members of the American Military charged in connection with the 2003-4 Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse case. Evidence in the case included photographs of Harmen and fellow personnel, posing with abused prisoners. Perhaps the most infamous of these photographs shows Harman giving the 'thumbs up' gesture next to the corpse of prisoner Manadel al-Jamadi.

collective mind-set. The zombie virus irrevocably alters the identity whilst leaving the body largely unchanged (decomposition aside). As such it can be said to represent terroristic ideology, infiltrating and corrupting on a spiritual, rather than physical, level. Lastly, as well as being the result of a pathogen, the zombie horde itself adopts the behaviour of a virus. It colonises the host (the living population) and, as Romero's Big Daddy has shown, it is capable of evolving.

Most of the 'infection' films are thematically similar. They involve the release of a zombifying agent that causes large scale civil unrest and follow the efforts of a small group of individuals to survive the ordeal. In each, the crisis is a result of a malfunction from above. Just as Romero's *Land of the Dead* questions the role of the administration in provoking the zombie assault, each of these films assigns blame for the outbreak to the hubris of the scientific/military community. What is particularly significant in each case is that the greatest menace to extended survival is posed not by the zombies themselves, but by the authorities' attempts to restore order.

This trend is concisely illustrated by the military's draconian response to the infection crisis in *28 Days Later*, particularly the chaining of an infected for the purpose of future study. While this undoubtedly harks back to the capture of Bub in Romero's *Day of the Dead* (especially as, like Bub, the constrained zombie escapes and kills the senior military figure), Boyle's film foreshadows various aspects of the real-world War on Terror. His film imagines both the repressive military tactics that would later arise as a consequence of the War on Terror and the Abu Ghraib photographs of torture. While the torture carried out at Abu Ghraib would later receive official condemnation, the thought remains, as Žižek considers, that the suspects interned by the coalition military exist beyond the remit of conventional morality. Imprisonment as a suspect is sanction enough for the relinquishment of one's rights. Senator James Inhofe's address to the Senate Armed Services Committee concerning Abu Ghraib epitomises this attitude. Inhofe stated that he was "more outraged by the outrage than by the treatment [...] If they're in cell block 1A or 1B, these prisoners – they're murderers, they're terrorists, they're insurgents" (Inhofe quoted in Henry 2004). More insidious is the creeping rationalisation of torture and other extraordinary measures as necessary in the fight against Terror.

Jonathan Alter, a self-confessed liberal, controversially called for an 'open-mind' on the subject, arguing that:

> We can't legalize physical torture; it is contrary to American values. But even as we continue to speak out against human-rights abuses around the world, we need to keep an open mind about certain measures to fight terrorism, like court-sanctioned psychological interrogation. And we'll have to think about transferring some suspects to our less squeamish allies, even if that's hypocritical. Nobody said this was going to be pretty. (Alter 2001)

The zombie apocalypse allows for the institutionalisation of repressive policies and the suspension of political correctness. The post-apocalyptic world is a neo-con playground, an environment that rewards the possession of arms, personal survival, and the homogenisation and demonisation of the enemy. Recent zombie cinema has maintained this landscape but recognised the potential horror of conservative, authoritarian mastery of it. The narrative of *28 Days Later* fittingly parallels the unfolding narrative of the decade following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The pattern is that of crisis followed by domestic paranoia and a rising fear of the enemy. The second half of the film, like the latter half of the post-9/11 decade, is marked by the emergence of a sinister authority and the realisation that the greater danger may be posed by the unchecked power of domestic governance.

Juan Carlos Fresnadillo's sequel, *28 Weeks Later,* embellishes the themes introduced in Boyle's film. Taking place after the initial containment of the virus, the film is set in a heavily fortified version of the London Docklands. U.S Military forces have cordoned off the area as a headquarters from which to facilitate a further reclamation of the country. Even before it is referred to as the 'Green Zone' in the film, Fresnadillo's militarily controlled habitat offers obvious parallels to the Green Zone in Iraq. American snipers adorn the rooftops watching for any breach of the perimeter, and the atmosphere, like that of Fiddler's Green in Romero's *Land of the Dead*, is one of misguided confidence. When the inevitable outbreak occurs (as a direct consequence of a breach in the perimeter) infected and uninfected alike spill onto the streets. Orders are passed through to the snipers to shoot only the infected but it immediately becomes apparent that it is

impossible to distinguish raging attacker from panicking victim. This prompts the film's most chilling line: "shoot everything". Without hesitation, the soldiers open fire.

The film's political agenda is clear. Fresnadillo highlights the arrogance of the coalition forces in invading a nation, setting up a base and thus considering themselves safe. *28 Weeks Later* dramatises the untenable nature of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. The zombie/infected horde clearly represents the threat of insurgency. Furthermore, the inability of the military to distinguish infected from uninfected can be read as a bleak satire of both friendly fire and the metonymic association of Arab and terrorist.

Concomitant with the incremental humanisation of the zombie – whether by allowing them some residual identity or emphasising the medical nature of their condition – is a corresponding dehumanisation of the military. If post-millennial zombie cinema has one central theme it is the portrayal of the military as a dangerously pragmatic machine. Their response to the crisis is as rigid and non-contextual as the zombie's animalistic need to kill. In *28 Weeks Later* the military machine goes into overload, firebombing the now overrun London with scenes reminiscent of Dresden or Hiroshima. A rebellious soldier helps a group of uninfected escape the slaughter and is later burnt alive by the unquestioning clean-up crews. These scenes simultaneously enact and invert the popular discourse of the War on Terror. First they offer an undisguised analogue for the terrorist threat, but embody that threat in both the zombie *and* the military machine. The most significant destruction in these films is perpetrated by the military.

The threat represented by the soldiers in *28 Days Later* is more intimate but no less indicative of the inhumanity of military authority. Major Henry West in particular embodies the callous pragmatism that has found real life representation in the internment, rendition, and torture of prisoners. It is Major West who is responsible for the chaining of the zombified soldier, and it is he who promises that the soldiers can keep the women in order to begin repopulating the country. The strategic importance of repopulation is of course a smokescreen for the satiation of the soldiers' immediate sexual urges. Again, this foreshadows the future atrocities at Abu Ghraib, in which the abuse was committed under the pretext of legitimate interrogation, disguising personal sadism as military procedure.

Whereas Major West and *Land of the Dead*'s Kaufman are microcosmic representations of repressive authoritarianism, numerous other films portray the military as anonymous antagonists. *Rec* (Jaume Balaguero and Paco Plaza, 2007) is particularly significant in this regard as it reassigns the facelessness of the zombie to the authorities. *Rec* takes place in a Barcelona apartment building overrun by zombies. As an example of hyperreal 'found-footage', the film gives the appearance of having been shot entirely with hand-held cameras, a procedure which aims at mimicking the form of a real-time news report from a television journalist and her cameraman trapped within the building. This format is immediately suggestive of mainstream media coverage and reinforces the link between the zombie outbreak and social unrest as represented in the news. Aesthetically, therefore, *Rec* is the clearest intersection of zombie cinema with the media's coverage of the War on Terror.

As elsewhere, however, the overt horror of the zombie is accompanied by the terrifying pragmatism of the military. Once inside the building, the two-man news team and the fire brigade they are shadowing encounter the outbreak of zombie-like behaviour. Upon trying to escape they discover that the building has been sealed off by an unspecified governmental/military/scientific agency that refuses to allow them to leave until the situation has been brought under control. Trapped inside with the residents, they record the escalation of the situation, even as they are themselves under the scrutiny of an unresponsive and unremitting military presence. Use of a closed environment such as the apartment block allows for the early introduction of a small number of characters who will become zombified as the film progresses. Each protagonist is imbued with a personality, making it more difficult for viewers in the audience to react with the usual passivity to the ongoing transformations. It is a familiar tactic of the genre to eventually undermine the viewer's by presenting a protagonist who must come face-to-face with the need to dispatch a newly-zombified character with whom an emotional relationship had previously been established over the course of the film.

This dilemma occurs in almost every zombie film, serving as a means by which to shock the audience back into a realisation that the enemy bodies being so gleefully destroyed were once human. *Rec* goes further: while none of the characters are the loved-ones

of the protagonist, they are each given a distinct identity and their essential humanity is reiterated throughout the first half of the film in which they argue, converse and sympathise with each other. As a consequence, they retain their individual significance even after their zombification, never being reduced to the zombie's typical role as anonymous cannon fodder.

In contrast, the military agency outside the building remains anonymous, both visually and in character. The protective suits they wear and the semi-opaque material behind which they stand, combined with the low resolution of the camera, make it impossible to discern any individual human features. They are most frequently seen as silhouettes and heard as a mechanical voice via loudspeaker. As such they, rather than the recognisable zombies, adopt the role of the homogenous other. The polarisation is more complex than usual, moving from the initial split between those inside and outside the building toward the triumvirate of zombie, survivor and military that, due to the microcosmic nature of the film, serves as an excellent summation of post-millennial, post-zombie society.

The twenty-first century cinematic zombie is thus continuing to function as a cultural tool. It still offers scope for representation of the cultural other, being currently the terrorist or insurgent. The significant difference is the increased introspection that the post-millennial zombies occasion in the survivors and the dominant western society that *they* represent. By both humanising the traditional zombie and introducing the still-living, infected zombie, filmmakers have encouraged an acknowledgement of the essential humanity of the culturally de-humanised real-world enemy. The visual nature of the medium is perhaps the reason for cinema's successful emancipation of the zombie figure. Film is able to juxtapose the living and the undead and where once the aim was to emphasise their differences, recent films, especially those in the infection subgenre, derive their impact from the physical similarity of the two groups, as evidenced in *28 Weeks Later*'s 'shoot everything' scene. Post-millennial revisions of the zombie narrative expose discord in the societal reactions to the War on Terror. Whilst the authorities and media attempt to consolidate a dualistic opposition between 'them and us', the films discussed here deny simplistic dichotomisation. Furthermore, they suggest that if a scission exists, it is as much a division between the survivors and

their own authority figures as it is between the living and the undead. The zombie is still a barometer of cultural anxiety with the ability to horrify audiences in its signification of contemporary concerns. More horrifying still, however, is the real monster of current zombie cinema: the inhumane military/scientific/governmental system that serves not as a metaphor but as an exaggerated version of its real-world counterpart.

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