

Shawn Rider

shawn@shawnRider.com

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The Silenced Majority: Colonization of the Mind and the Flesh Eating Zombie

"Turn and Turn about; in these shadows from whence a new dawn will
break, it is you who are the zombies."

Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*

It is fitting that Sartre uses the zombie as a metaphor for both the colonized and colonizer. He states in the preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* that European colonizers had relegated natives living in colonial states to the role of zombie. The colonizers' power structure has rendered the natives as a mute subaltern, suitable for slave labor and exploitation. But he goes further to say the natives' rebellion will render the colonizers as zombies – the native will no longer see their dominators as human beings, and they will assign the Europeans to the role of subordinate, dehumanizing and incommunicable. All of this is fitting because the colonizer, whatever his national origin, has adopted a stance toward natives that follows the Haitian tradition: The zombie is a human who has been killed and resurrected as slave labor, a much more docile and controllable beast of burden.

It also makes sense that Hollywood adopted the metaphor. Throughout the 1930s and 40s films like *White Zombie*, *Revolt of the Zombies*, *King of the Zombies*, *Revenge of the Zombies*, *Zombies on Broadway*, and *Voodoo Man* reinforced the traditional view of zombies as ultimate Other. These zombies are without culture or free will, controlled by a mystical villain, often played by Bela Lugosi, who runs a sugar plantation or some other such exploitive business. These films are tales of the

oppressor, bringing to light the hardships and uncertainty faced by colonizing forces. It is possible for the zombie slaves to revolt, but for the most part these films warn of the perils embedded in shoddy colonial governing.

In 1968, George A. Romero set out to rework the zombie archetype. He created the flesh eating zombie, a monster born not out of religious or mystical effort, but created by the faults and flaws of the society. With his first film, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), he began a trilogy that would deal with the ills of our contemporary American society. Influenced by the turbulent 1960s, events such as Vietnam, the civil rights movement, and rampant consumer culture, *Night* lays the groundwork for a series of cultural critiques. Romero's approach laid the foundation for future horror films, and is often cited as the beginning of the modern era of American horror. Kawin and Mast sum up the freedom allowed modern horror films in their textbook, *A Short History of the Movies*: ". . . as an officially despised genre, the low-budget horror film was (and still is) free to take outrageous creative chances and adopt controversial attitudes toward the issues of the day – or eternity" (490). Romero takes on both the issues of his time, and larger issues, extrapolating the effects of capitalism and colonization of the mind. The following films, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985), complete the series, leaving no doubt that they form both a fable of colonization and an act of revolution.

Romero gives the zombies an ambiguous cause. Is it radiation from outer space that caused the dead to walk again, as proposed in *Night*, or is there simply "no more room in hell," as Peter posits in *Dawn*? He works hard to maintain their humanity, dressing them in the garb of 20th Century purpose – we see zombies of all walks of life,

professions, and religious persuasions. In addition, we know that these zombies are not completely without thought process. The most firmly implanted memories of their lives remain, drawing them to locations they frequented in life, and there are hints of a social structure. For example, in *Dawn* the survivors, three men and a woman, set up camp in a mall. They have cleared out all of the zombies, locked the doors, and built a fake wall to disguise the entrance to their makeshift living quarters inside the mall offices. Inevitably, the doors can't stay locked, and a huge zombie jamboree ensues. Stephen, one of the survivors, is caught by the zombies and quickly metamorphoses. After his change, he leads a horde of the undead to the fake wall, they push it down, and they invade the hideout. On some level, the undead recognize Stephen as a leader, and they follow his lead in spite of the fact that they cannot directly know there are humans waiting to be eaten.

Because Romero refuses to dehumanize the zombies, an interesting and convoluted symbolism marks each of the films. The "living dead" trilogy is also a perfect product of its culture. It manifests not from a distinct plan of attack, but more from a rumbling dissatisfaction with the way things are. Since it is so firmly rooted in the American culture and since it makes many of the same claims and criticisms as social activists of the late 60s and beyond, most critics have read the symbolism straightforwardly.

Night is usually seen as dealing with the social activism of the 1960s, including civil rights and feminist causes, a critique of Vietnam and US policy in southeast Asia, and issues of family structure and power relationships. It takes place almost entirely in a farmhouse, a setting that should make bells and whistles go off, alerting the viewer to

the commentary that will follow about the American "home" and "family." As Tony Williams notes, "While America fights and lies to itself in a besieged house, its military machine ruthlessly attacks a Third World nation that stubbornly refuses to be a convenient demonic 'other'" (137). This is not only a symbolic reading of *Night*, but of the climate of the late 60s. As we were butting heads over issues of race and class within the nation, our military was wreaking havoc on small nations, and our government and media told us there was a good reason for this. Unfortunately, the media in the real world was as ineffective at explaining to us the reasoning behind battles like Vietnam as the media in *Night* is at satisfactorily explaining the rise of the undead. Romero also uses media-styled images to show us the shocking conclusion of the film, where Ben, the Black protagonist, is mistaken for a zombie, shot, and added to the pyre. The mistake is debatable, as Romero genuinely draws comparison between the zombie exterminators and racist mobs, and the concluding still photos look very much like media coverage of lynchings.

Dawn is usually read as an attack on consumer culture, and it does support such a reading. Coupled with the previously introduced issues of racism and class war, it is effective at driving its point home. In the opening scenes, a SWAT team clears out a tenement building in Pittsburgh. The residents are primarily Puerto Rican and Latino, kept captive by the undead both within and without the building. Officers end up indiscriminately murdering residents and zombies, uttering racial epithets and generally being hysterical. The two redeemable officers, Peter and Roger, become part of our protagonist foursome. The group commandeers a helicopter, and seeks refuge in a shopping mall. Not only does Romero drive home points about consumerism by

connecting the zombies' best memories with the mall, but he also shows how hollow a solution commercial culture really is. The survivors become bored, even when faced with a plethora of products at their disposal. In an ultimate bastardization of religion and commerce, Roger, who is mortally wounded in the cleansing of the mall, is buried in a planter in the food court.

Day is generally seen as a reaction to Reaganite economics and social policy. The film takes place in an underground military complex, where records and scraps have been stored for ages. Sitting on the output of a whole society, the survivors in *Day*, this time a bunch of military jerks and a few scientists, try to find a way to repel the zombie hordes, or at least make the world habitable again. *Day* takes on issues of militarism and social control. Dr. Logan, the crazy scientist, works hard to domesticate the zombies, and believes that they can be "conditioned to behave." Indeed, he succeeds to a degree through Pavlovian stimulation and training. But the unsurpassable differences between the humans prove to be their downfall. The military personnel are, almost unanimously, racist and sexist bigots. They slander a Hispanic soldier, the Black helicopter pilot, and, Sarah, the strong-willed and intelligent researcher who struggles to hold together the group.

As Steve Beard writes, however, these are films unaware of their real political significance (30). It is true. The trilogy is more than just illustration of social difficulties; these films are an act of revolution. Shaviro notes that the trilogy "destabilizes structures of power and domination" (102). The zombies do not present a threat to our culture from outside; rather, they are us. They are the potential result of conducting ourselves as we have, or, more appropriately, of our ruling class governing us as they have. While

straightforward, symbolic readings of these films are rewarding, and offer insight into the anxieties and frustrations of the culture at the time the movies were made, it is only through a postcolonial reading of the films that we can extract the true power and force embedded within.

In order to properly view these films, we must have a knowledge of the workings of capitalism and colonization. Beginning with Marx, the notion that we are ruled by the ideology of the ruling class has rumbled around contemporary political thought. Indeed, in any system of government, the values and beliefs of those in charge are filtered down to the citizenry. Because we exist in a democracy, we get some say in how we are ruled and by whom. However, our democracy is not "perfect," and our economic system further mediates a "control of the people." We have the Electoral College, the indirect representation of Congress, all of which remove control from the hands of the constituency. Add to that the financial and time practicalities of politics and campaigning, and it is not so hard to see that we really do not influence our government very much. In fact, that is not necessarily such a bad thing, since the official government is only one part of the ruling class. The ruling class is made up of the government plus lobbying and trade organizations, and the independently wealthy, the upper-crust bourgeois. These are the people who make policies and rule our society. Their ideas are the ones we cling to for salvation. We hope that when the government or a corporation tells us they can solve a problem, they really can. Throughout most of the 20th Century, we believed them when they told us these things, and it has only been since the introduction of films such as the "living dead" trilogy and other revolutionary

messages that we have become skeptical of the intentions and the ability of the ruling class.

The relationship between the ruling and the ruled is a constant power struggle. Edward Said, in his introduction to *Orientalism*, writes that Foucault's notions of power flow are useful for analyzing the dynamic of colonization. In a colonial system, relationships are set up so power flows away from the native, and toward the colonizers. Native languages and religion are usurped by "civilized" versions, destabilizing the native culture. Of course, the colonizers are there to offer their ideology as a restabilizing force. Similarly, in a democratic capitalist system, power relations are set up to benefit the elite, the ruling class. The domination is not as militaristic, and usually carried out through propaganda and advertising.

It is important that we see this form of domination in a democratic capitalist society as a form of colonization. Our definition of colonization and postcolonialism must be at least broad enough to encompass this internal colonization of the mind, or else we will be unable to study modern forces of colonization. Mental colonization is required for traditional colonization to work, and even if the colony lasts for only a short time, the effects of mental colonization are much more difficult to get rid of. Historically, colonizers set up schools and churches to educate natives in "civilized" forms of thought. The "benefits" of mental colonization are cited as the humanist justifications of colonialism – improving their minds is good enough reason for physically dominating them.

More and more we've realized that physical domination is just too messy and costly. Almost all European colonies have reverted control back to the native population,

negating the sacrifice of many young men who were far away from home. As Fanon suggests, physical colonization will ultimately lead to violence as a means of throwing off the shackles of the oppressor, and that means people will die, property will be destroyed, and money and time will be lost. Money and time being of utmost importance in contemporary society, this form of colonization is no longer useful. We have learned that it is easier to control people by focusing on subtle (and perhaps not-so-subtle) forms of intellectual manipulation. Control is the ultimate prize of colonialism anyway, and we can only now see ways to exercise control without physical presence. Westernization was superficial, restricted to language and perhaps the development of a hybrid religion, in the old mode of colonization, but when we began to package and export our culture and ideology in a tantalizing way we saw new levels of success. Mickey Mouse has done more to spread a love of capitalism and democracy than military action, confrontation, nuclear warheads, or trade embargos. Similarly, the Yugo did more to denigrate communism than Reagan's constant Soviet-bashing.

It sounds as though we could posit that if we realize that physical domination is no longer effective, we could figure out a way to create an exchange of ideas and products without the need to colonize. However, capitalism is built on colonization – it cannot succeed without difference. To sell products, a corporation must colonize a segment of the population. Sometimes to do so companies create propaganda that creates false differences between products, or espouses a need that isn't really there. Hence, the cultural fascination with name brands and labels. It used to be that, if it looked like a dog and it acted like a dog, it was a dog. Now it must look, act, and be properly labelled "dog." To make such a system work, the colonizing corporations must

have access to an exploitable source of consumers. In addition, they must also have an exploitable source of labor. If local labor is too expensive, companies move to Third World nations to set up shop.

Capitalist corporations are key proponents of assimilation. A full market share is their ideal, and they will sometimes stop at nothing to achieve 100% of the potential market. Commercials and propaganda espouse assimilation. The recent GAP, "Everybody in khakis," campaign is a prime example, and for the last few years khakis have grown in popularity. Classic examples are the Dr. Pepper, "Don't you want to be a Pepper, too?" campaign and the "I'd like to buy the world a Coke," ads. All of these involve the consumer in assimilation, and in spreading the propaganda of assimilation. It is through advertisements like these that we begin to develop a sense of consumerism – that what we need to make things OK is more stuff. Accumulation will solve the problems of humanity.

The democratic capitalist government supports and aids the processes of assimilation and consumerism by more directly addressing morals and behavior. In the last century, the US government has pushed a social, economic and military policy that focuses on assimilation and duty. The social approval of suburbs, the Cold War, HUAC, blacklists, southeast Asian conflicts (including Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, and East Timor), and segregation all worked to reinforce the idea that difference is bad and must be stamped out. These policies were offered up as solutions to societal woes, but the irony is that many of these woes were manufactured. It was in the interests, and still is, of the ruling class that we developed a healthy distrust of difference, a lust for assimilation, and a strong desire for accumulation. Leaders have shown us the way with

fancy cigars and huge collections of (mainly) useless luxury items like cars and shoes.

Accumulation is success if we believe the mainstream ideology.

However, we did not all believe the mainstream ideology. The concept of a Truth, an undeniable, immutable Truth, is just as much a homogenizing concept as consumerism. That is really what we were being sold: Assimilation and accumulation are the Truth, all else is flawed and unsatisfactory. It was all a hoax. Allegiance to the Truth of modern America lead to feelings of disenfranchisement because no matter how hard we try, we cannot stamp out the individuality innate within ourselves. Eventually, such a push for conformity created an underlying fear of assimilation. We do not want to be controlled overtly, physically, by a colonizing military force, perhaps. But what we fear even more than that is that we are being controlled subtly, unconsciously, and that we may not even be aware of our real situation.

Capitalism is a parasitic system, and Romero's zombies are the ultimate manifestations of this parasitism. Shaviro writes:

They are the long-accumulated stock of energy and desire upon which our illitarized and technocratic culture vampiristically feeds, which it compulsively manipulates and exploits, but cannot forever hope to control.

(94)

The zombies are the silenced majority who bought into the ideology of the ruling class. They are the laborers who have been exploited and alienated from their product, and they are the consumers who have been led down the road of accumulation and assimilation. While they seem to uphold their individuality, we see zombies ranging in archetype from Hari Krishnas to pee-wee football players, they undermine and usurp

these negligible differences. The power is drained from their individuality, and they are all after the same goal: to satisfy their hunger (Shaviro 84). Romero has commented that he was attracted to zombies because they are the "underclass of the monster world" (Beard 30). Beard extrapolates this to view the zombies as "the disenfranchised underclass of the material world;" they are a "stand in for those workers and consumers who . . . have been thrown on the scrap heap" (30). Indeed, in their undead lives, the zombies cut out the merchant mediator, unrelentingly "shopping" for human flesh, and unwavering in their course.

If the zombies seem foreign to us, it is only because we do not want to see ourselves. In *Night* a radio broadcast proclaims that the zombies are "ordinary people in a state of trance." Additionally, in *Day Dr.* Logan pursues his experiments to condition the zombies for domestic servitude. The idea is that they can be "conditioned to behave" as they were in life, to pursue a set of simple goals and desires. Logan notes, "They are us. They are the extensions of us." Indeed, they exhibit consumer desire and they are drawn to places we are drawn to, such as malls, homes, and bastions of civilization. Their desire is insatiable. Shaviro writes, "Want is a function of excess and extravagance, not of deficiency: the more I consume, the more I demand to consume" (92). Likewise, the zombies become enraged when presented with a "fresh" meal of live humans, and they are content to stumble around for eternity, looking for another bite. Indeed, the zombies are not a foreign invader, but the resurrected dead of late consumer capitalism.

In spite of the horror they inspire, the zombies are alluring to us. We still live in a democratic capitalist state. Capitalism is, in many ways, mob rule, as is democracy. The

zombies have a huge mob, and it is obvious that they are the powerful lobbying force in the post-apocalyptic world they create. Shaviro notes that the zombies "exercise a perverse, insidious fascination that undermines our nominal involvement with the films' active protagonists" (95). There is a strange sense, as a viewer, of identification with the zombies. They are, in many ways, much nicer than the bigoted, sexist humans that we are ostensibly supposed to identify with. We are seduced by them, although we cannot "identify" with them in a traditional way (Shaviro 96). The zombies both illustrate the problems of capitalism, especially when coupled with democracy, and they present an apocalyptic solution – kill all humans (Shaviro 86). They are the colonial violence that Fanon writes about, and they are the revolutionaries. Williams writes that "the zombies represent a politically unconscious version of the 'return of the repressed,' bearing unpalatable truths by their very presence" (134). The zombies are the freedom fighters, tearing apart the system so preciously set in place by the ruling class. They are the individuals who have been assimilated, who have had their differences masked, and who found that situation unfulfilling and undesirable. Romero is quite clear about the answer for those of us who can see the problems and cope with difference. In *Dawn* and in *Day*, the survivors are a Black man and a white woman. In all of the movies, it is this pair, the interracial couple who aren't necessarily romantically involved but can work together, who holds the promise of a future society based on hybridity. Williams writes, "The future is with women and minority groups that are outside dominant social norms" (149). It is up to all of us to remove ourselves from the machine of capitalism, to celebrate difference, and to work toward hybridity.

In his analysis of *Day*, Williams writes:

Romero's director credit appears over a deserted Florida cinema, The Edison. It ironically comments on the cinematic institution's inability to present satisfactory answers to social problems. (268)

While it is true that the "living dead" trilogy has, so far, not been directly responsible for any major change in the world, Williams' conclusion is not entirely accurate. Fanon suggests that the postcolonial artist must come to terms with his culture, develop a sense of hybridity, and further the revolutionary cause. Romero does all of this. He critiques the methods of rule employed by the US ruling class, lashing out especially at racist and capitalist rhetoric. By using the zombie motif, he creates a story that is ultimately born from colonization. The zombie tradition begins in colonialism. The native African word, "zumbi," was used to describe the zombies of Haiti, and the practice of zombification was again colonized by American cinema to provide a convenient other. However, and this is a part of Romero's efforts to further the revolutionary cause, as Shaviro points out:

The hardest thing to acknowledge is that the living dead are not radically Other so much as they serve to awaken a passion for otherness and for vertiginous disidentification that is already latent within our own selves. (98)

The audience does not passively view these films. Rather, they participate "compulsively, vicariously" in them (Shaviro 84). Part of the reason for this is the extreme content of the movies. The gore was enough to, at least partially, stimulate the Motion Picture Association of America to begin rating films, and none of the "living dead" trilogy was ever given a rating. The trilogy is an act of cultural terrorism – it shows

us the gruesome, gorey reality of its world, and it inspires us to prevent our world from becoming like it.

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