

ABSTRACT

The Zombie Manifesto:
The Marxist Revolutions in George A. Romero's *Land of the Dead*

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Four decades after re-inventing the zombie film into its modern understanding, George A. Romero continues to use the zombie film to assert his leftist political ideologies and social satire. With each subsequent film, Romero's zombies continue to gain self-awareness until *Land of the Dead* where zombies learn they are the oppressed class. Therefore, I argue that to understand not only Romero's evolving zombies but also the entirety of his narrative arc, one must view the films as an allegory for the class antagonism and revolution proposed by Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*. This thesis will analyze the representational fluidity of the zombie within *Land of the Dead* through two distinct Marxist lenses—the proletariat revolt against the bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie revolt against the monarchy—while also exploring the implications of the representationally transferable zombie to the overall meaning of Romero's long-gestating Marxist narrative.

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by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The horror film, despite its tawdry reputation, can make an enormously compelling argument for a set of values or philosophy in certain social groups. Horror relies on an audience's basic sense of right and wrong; it then takes that sense and deliberately offends it before restoring the *status quo* by fully vanquishing evil or featuring momentary wish-fulfillment augmented by an open ending suggesting that evil still persists. When done right, a horror film is simultaneously terrifying, outrageous, and thought-provoking—terrifying because it exists in a realm where things that go bump in the night purposefully and violently attack; outrageous in its expertly rendered manipulations of the aesthetic elements of cinema to portray ghastly scenes of carnage; and thought-provoking in its use of amplified monsters and monstrous themes as allegories for the depravity of mankind.

Accordingly, horror films have developed into a premier genre for subversion and, as Joan Hawkins notes, “often handle explosive social material which mainstream cinema is reluctant to touch” (17). With the ability to subvert topical subject matter underneath a bloody veil of viscera, horror films allow filmmakers nearly unlimited means of expression.

Perhaps no one filmmaker has used the subversive elements of the horror genre more expertly and consistently than George A. Romero. Four decades after single-handedly re-inventing the generic conventions of the zombie film and biological workings of the zombie into its modern understanding, Romero continues to use the

popular subgenre of horror to assert his leftist political ideologies and social satire¹. Even in his earliest formative films, Romero used film as a means to editorialize the nadirs of the period. While every film in Romero's oeuvre has an agenda, none speak more pointedly and viscerally than his five zombie films: *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), *Land of the Dead* (2005), and *Diary of the Dead* (2008).

Despite the expansive range of time and social issues dividing these five films, screening them chronologically reveals a complex but consistent web of thematic motifs, each a surprisingly relevant critique of modern American society. It is helpful to remember exactly how American each of Romero's films are: both the criticism and the zombie threat is limited to the heartland². Releasing each film at a significant point in its respective decade, Romero is able to employ his masterstroke creation, the zombie, as an evolving symbolic conduit for his sociopolitical critiques of an ever-changing America. Like Robin Wood's political analyses, Romero's earlier zombie films are read by critics as various social commentaries; this is no less true of his later and less analyzed works, particularly in his fourth and most overlooked zombie film, *Land of the Dead*.

Since *Night of the Living Dead*³, Romero's zombies have slowly evolved from mindless, id-driven monsters into more cognizant—even pitiable—beings. Despite the

¹ See Wood's article *An Introduction to the American Horror Film*, his book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan...and Beyond*, and his *Diary of the Dead* review in *Film Comment* for a full continuing sociopolitical analysis of Romero's zombie series.

² In fact, until *Land of the Dead*, Romero's zombie films were characteristically shot in and around Pittsburgh, PA.

³ It should be noted that *Diary of the Dead* finds Romero restarting his zombie narrative from the initial rise of the undead, so it can rightly be placed narratively alongside *Night of the Living Dead* in the series.

inherent biological fallacy of their decomposing bodies⁴, the zombies in each subsequent film gain human characteristics—such as speech, compassion, and, above all, self-awareness—until *Land of the Dead* where zombies learn they are the oppressed class: “economically extinct, socially displaced, they return to devour those who have survived them” (Beard 30). For that reason, I argue that to understand not only Romero’s evolving zombies but also the entirety of his narrative arc, one must view the films as an ongoing allegory for the class antagonism and revolution proposed by Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). In this thesis, I will analyze the representational fluidity of the zombie within *Land of the Dead* through two distinct Marxist lenses—the proletariat revolt against the bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie revolt against the monarchy—while also exploring the implications of the representationally transferable zombie to the overall meaning of Romero's long-gestating Marxist narrative.

⁴ Not only does Romero’s evolving zombie not make basic biological sense, but it also contradicts the explanation offered in *Day of the Dead* that the zombie brain is slowly rotting and will cease to function once the brain core has entirely decomposed.

CHAPTER TWO

George A. Romero: The *Zombie Auteur*

George A. Romero's contribution to the modern understanding of the zombie is hard to overstate. Combining such disparate influences such as Classical Hollywood era B-films, Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954), and Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), among others, Romero crafted the archetypal zombie narrative in *Night of the Living Dead*. He is as Peter Dendle defines, the "Shakespeare of zombie cinema" (121). So, like Shakespeare is to drama, Romero is inescapable when discussing the zombie as his influence bleeds through every zombie film that has been released since 1968. In fact, besides superficial advances in makeup effects and CGI, the only notable innovation applied to the zombie outside of Romero's mythology is the addition of the "fast" zombie in Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) and Zack Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) remake, which remains a point of contention between zombie film fans. Romero remains the only sustained presence and true innovator in the zombie film lexicon. Thus, by virtue of his longevity and incomparable contributions to the zombie genre, Romero remains the only true zombie *auteur* (French for "author"), and as such, arguably the main source of study.

Obviously approaching Romero singularly negates a wide range of films and filmmakers; however, an *auteur* approach is particularly fitting when analyzing Romero and his films because his presence is indisputably inherent throughout all his films, not only his zombie films.

The *auteur* theory originated in 1954 when François Truffaut, writing for the hugely influential French film journal *Cahiers du cinéma*, wrote the article *Une certaine tendance du cinéma français*. In the article, Truffaut argues *la politique des auteurs*: a policy of consciously watching films through the lens of their director. At the time, Truffaut’s argument was a political move to redirect critical attention away from the directors of the French “Tradition of Quality” and toward the American and French filmmakers that the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics admired (232—234). Truffaut claimed that a director, if studied as an *auteur*, would have a consistent visual and/or thematic style across their filmography (235). It wasn’t until almost a decade later (and after many of the original *Cahiers du cinéma* critics, including Truffaut, become filmmakers), that the *auteur* theory was popularized in America. In his famous article “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962,” film critic Andrew Sarris provided his own English interpretation of an all-encompassing *auteur* theory:

The three premises of the *auteur* theory may be visualized as three concentric circles: the outer circle as technique; the middle circle, personal style; and the inner circle, interior meaning. The corresponding roles of the director may be designated as those of a technician, a stylist, and an *auteur*. (563)

More rigid than Truffaut’s initial theory, Sarris argued that a director, no matter their technical competence, must express an individual vision and style because, above all, “the way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels” (562).

Despite the rigid stipulations outlined by Sarris, Romero is an easy fit within the *auteur* paradigm. Romero has always been a technically proficient filmmaker, which corresponds to Sarris’ description for the outer circle. Whether it was the micro-budgets

of his early advertisement work and *Night of the Living Dead* or the larger Hollywood budget of *Land of the Dead*, Romero has always displayed a natural awareness of the way film works by adapting a specific aesthetic for each of his films. Notice how in each subsequent film in his zombie series, Romero's camera movements and shot widths expand with the largeness of his evolving narrative—compare the documentary-like intimacy of the squabbling survivors in *Night of the Living Dead*, the epic high angle shots of the zombies rushing Fiddler's Green in *Land of the Dead*, or the hyperactive handheld camerawork in *Diary of the Dead*. Additionally, Romero edited all his films previous to *Day of the Dead*, which implies that not only did Romero have an innate understanding of film composition, but also how his compositions cut together and moved the narrative.

For the middle circle, Sarris is critical of writer-directors because he argues that their personal style can be downgraded by the quality of their scripts whereas studio system directors could impart their style within a film regardless of the scripts quality (562). His argument is a little strained because a director's personal style should be apparent in his/her film regardless of if it is their script or the quality of the script. Thus, judging Romero, who writes all his scripts, as an *auteur* is appropriate because throughout all his films, particularly his zombie series, it is obvious that Romero imparts his own personal style, ideologically leanings, and dark humor into the aesthetic look and movement of the film regardless of the quality of his scripts. For example, the crosscutting between Francine (Gaylen Ross) applying a heavy amount of makeup and a similarly dolled up mannequin in *Dawn of the Dead* or panning down from a neon diner sign reading “Eats” to a sea of zombies in *Land of the Dead*.

While Sarris remains obtuse in his definition of the inner circle, even referencing Truffaut's difficult description that it measures to the “temperature” of the director, the interior meaning is that indescribable aspect of a director, that elementary feeling that only he/she can produce (563). In other words, despite the long list of imitators, it is easy to tell a Romero zombie film from a Romero zombie homage. In Romero’s case, it can best be described by his consistent voice and content (despite the varying tones) of his zombie films. Wood’s description of Romero’s zombie series seems especially applicable to the argument:

Looking back over the five films, one is struck by an inherent contradiction: one cannot believe that they were planned as a sequence, each having its own individual characteristics (there are no carry-overs from one film to the next). Yet the more one reflects upon them the more one is struck by an inherent logic in the overall structure. (“Fresh Meat” 29)

So for Romero, his interior meaning is the sum of all his parts. It is the intangibles such as an image of zombies shambling through their environments—be it an escalator in a mall or the abandoned streets of Florida—or his camera maintaining its focus on the quiet moments in between the action, such as Francine exchanging a look with a zombie dressed as softball player in *Dawn of the Dead*. But it is also the overall structure of his zombie series that defines Romero as an *auteur*. While Romero may never have intended it, the narrative arc and interior meaning in his films move as systematically as the times of day in their titles.

It is testament to Romero’s writing that his films do have that inherent logic. His scripts seemingly parallel his zombies' unfaltering determination: always moving forward towards their intended target before violently attacking it. But what makes Romero’s scripts incomparable when compared to most of his imitators is that his scripts define and

mirror the time in which they were written. Filtered through Romero's unique voice, his scripts are a sort of American history lesson as told through zombies: *Night of the Living Dead* as 1960s Vietnam and Civil Rights-era disillusionment; *Dawn of the Dead* as 1970s rising consumer culture; *Day of the Dead* as 1980s Reaganite Cold War geopolitics; *Land of the Dead* as 2000s post-9/11 fears of terrorism; and *Diary of the Dead* as 2000s increasing technological mediation. By being able to continually modify the symbolic allusion of his scripts, Romero has almost unlimited freedom to voice his unique political evaluations of America in each film.

Thus, the argument opens for Romero as not only an *auteur*, but also a *schreiber* (Yiddish for "writer"). In his revisionist book *The Schreiber Theory*, David Kipen proposes the *schreiber* theory: a theory that maintains the screenwriter as the true artistic force behind a film. Kipen describes the theory as:

An attempt to explode the director-centric farrago of good intentions, bad faith, and tortured logic that goes by the name of *auteurism*, and to replace it with a screenwriter-centered way of thinking about film. (Kipen 37—38)

Despite not having the storied past of the *auteur* theory, the *schreiber* theory is no less revolutionary. Kipen's argument is that due to the solitary nature of writing, screenwriters are able to maintain personal and thematic styles throughout their body of work more consistently than directors (38—39). Despite his admirable attempt to debunk the *auteur* theory, Kipen's writer-centric *schreiber* theory falls into the same trap as director-centric *auteurism*: both negate the collaborative nature of filmmaking. By placing a single person in the esteemed position, it denies the hundreds of other influences on a film (i.e., the acting, the cinematography, the editing, the music, the costumes, the sets, etc.). Regardless of the problematic nature of both the *auteur* and

schreiber theory, Romero remains a testament to both theories because he remains the dominant force throughout every aspect of his films and his hugely influential and continuing contributions to the zombie genre make him critical—if not, the only source—for the study of zombies.

CHAPTER THREE

The Representational Fluidity of George A. Romero's *Zombie*

Horror films are routinely seen as Freudian projections of repressed desires or fears¹. As such, many critics equate horror films to dreams, or more correctly, nightmares. Bruce Kawin expounds on the dream-like nature of film (specifically, in horror and sci-fi films) by describing the relationship between the viewer and filmmaker:

Although the dreamer is completely responsible for the dream, he usually avoids this awareness and casts himself in the role of participant or spectator; although the filmmakers are responsible for the movie, the viewer decides which film to attend and so chooses the general content of his experience. (4)

By placing the viewer in such an active role in creating his/her own experience, Kawin theorizes that the viewer has a “pseudo-responsibility” over what is watched and how it is watched (4). Accordingly, by placing the viewer in the position of responsibility and not the filmmaker, it brings up questions of intentionality. Despite a filmmaker's best intent to make a film with a specific message or ideology, Kawin theorizes it is ultimately up to the viewer on how he chooses to interpret the text because films, like dreams, are a dense text of sounds and images that can easily be (mis)interpreted in multiple ways.²

Kawin's theory is especially applicable when approaching George A. Romero's zombie series. Romero has never hidden his intentions for what his zombies mean,

¹ See Wood's *An Introduction to the American Horror Film*, Bishop's *Raising the Dead*, and Kawin's *The Mummy's Pool* for further connections between Freudian dream analysis and the horror film.

² Don Siegal's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) is a famous example due to various political readings viewing the pods as either McCarthyism run amok or anti-McCarthyism, two wildly differing readings on the same film text.

whether they are in the right, “In my films the villains are always the living” (D’agnolo-Vallan 23); their societal placement within the horror genre, “Zombies are the real lower-class citizens of the monster world” (Beard 30); or their representational meaning, “There is some major shit going on out there. And in a distant way the zombies represent what we, the global community, should really be thinking about: something like ... power to the people” (D’agnolo-Vallan 204). While most of the critical analysis has coincided with Romero’s views, Romero's zombie series are not that analytically pat. In fact, Romero’s zombie films allow numerous different approaches and analyses due largely to his own revisionist zombie lore.

While the zombie myth originated with voodoo practices, the modern understanding of the zombie originates almost entirely with *Night of the Living Dead*³. Previous to that film, zombies were generally associated with such films as *White Zombie* (1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) in which they were mindless tools controlled by a villainous human master. But those films provided little primary influence on Romero. Instead, the biggest and most important influences on Romero’s creation of his zombie series are Richard Matheson’s novella *I Am Legend* and Alfred Hitchcock’s film *The Birds*. Matheson’s novella chronicles the daily life of Earth’s sole survivor, Robert Neville, after a global viral pandemic has infected humanity with something resembling vampirism. The narrative has Neville struggling to survive his past and present in Los Angeles, California, while researching for a cure and preparing for the nightly siege of infected, vampire-like humans. Romero’s biggest debt to Matheson is the wholly urban

³ See Peter Dendle’s *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia* and Kyle Bishop’s *Raising the Dead* for full discussions on the cinematic history of the zombie.

description of his protagonist, environment, and monsters. This shift from the fantastical monsters and Transylvania environs of classical horror to the heartland horror of fearing your next-door neighbors and own front yard was an important distinction for Romero, whose films are defined by their ordinary characters put in extraordinary situations, insular urban environments, and most importantly, uncanny human-like zombie.

There is one important distinction between Matheson's novella and Romero's zombie series, however: While Matheson teases with a possible explanation of what caused the initial spread of the vampire contagion, Romero skips any hint of explanation of what caused the dead to rise besides a passing, lackadaisical reference to radiation from a space probe returning from Venus, keeping only the apocalyptic heart of Matheson's novella. However, regardless of Matheson's proposed theoretical explanations, Romero does understand the potential in inverting the hero/villain dialectic that Matheson exploits throughout his novella. In the novella, Matheson subverts the idea that Neville is a hero by having his monsters evolve into the predominant society. By redefining the context of society, Neville is revealed to be the monster because he is this solitary mass murderer who stalks vampires during the day; he is the legend the vampires fear. While Romero does not apply this idea within *Night of the Living Dead* specifically, it does become an increasingly important narrative strain within each of his subsequent zombie films as humanity struggles to maintain normalcy surrounded by an increasing zombie population.

Hitchcock's *The Birds* also acted as a formative influence for Romero's zombie series. The film depicts a series of inexplicable and sudden avian attacks along the California coast. The narrative revolves around a small group of people, including

Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) and Mitch Brenner (Rod Taylor), that is trying to survive increasingly combative avian attacks, eventually barricading themselves within a house. While Matheson supplied similar fortress-under-siege imagery in *I Am Legend*, it is Hitchcock's active group dynamics in *The Birds* that remains an indelible presence throughout Romero's zombie series. Romero uses the microcosmic small groups of the still living to explore the ranging theses of his zombie series by contrasting their varied interactions with the surrounding zombie horde.

The Birds, unlike *I Am Legend*, is also more in-line with Romero's zombie mythos because of the unexplained nature of the sudden avian attacks. Moreover, Hitchcock's birds are also one of the most apt reference point to Romero's zombies—and Matheson's atypical vampire horde—because zombies have more in common with the force of nature horror genre (i.e., birds, locusts, frogs, ants, etc.) than they do with the typical singular monster genre (i.e., Dracula, Frankenstein, the 1980s slasher cycle, etc.). In a typical horror film, these singular monsters can effectively wreak havoc by themselves, while a zombie remains largely ineffective when isolated, much like a lone bird in Hitchcock's film. It is only when focused *en masse* that zombies, like nature, become frighteningly prolific in their destruction.

Synthesizing Matheson's and Hitchcock's influence, Romero created an entirely new zombie mythology. As Dendle notes, "Romero liberated the zombie from the shackles of a master, and invested his zombies not with a function ... but rather a drive" (6). Romero's zombies, unlike the vodoun zombie, are humans brought back from the dead that crave and devour the flesh of the still living. Moreover, "zombies are an unashamed mockery of humankind's most universally cherished ideal: life after death"

(Dendle 10). Their macabre existence is involuntary; they are victims of forceful placement—either by being resurrected from death or mutilated by another zombie—instead of bewitched humans who can be freed from their sorcerer’s spell. It wasn’t until Romero instilled zombies with supernatural origins and an unquenchable drive for living flesh that they became zombies in the way we understand them today. With no hope for a cure and a collective drive to consume and only a collective drive to consume, zombies gained a presence, purpose, and potential for social commentary.

No longer mind-controlled drones and outfitted with one simple and terrifying intent, Romero’s zombies retain a certain ambiguity. As Kyle Bishop points out, “zombies do not think or speak—they simply act” (196). Consequently, zombies are professedly two-dimensional compared to other film monsters like Dracula or Frankenstein. In fact, “zombies are . . . the only creature to pass directly from folklore to screen, without first having an established literary tradition” (Dendle 2-3). As such, they don’t retain a heavy load of established mythology.

Instead, it is their vaguely human resemblance that makes them terrifying. This resemblance makes zombies exceptional vessels for allegory because, essentially, they are us—or, more accurately, they were us. Since zombies retain their human form, no matter how mangled, we recognize ourselves in them. “In psychoanalytical terms,” explains Bishop, “Freud identifies this fear of the once familiar as the *unheimlich*, a complex term that literally means ‘un-homely’ or ‘un-homey’ but is usually translated as ‘the uncanny’” (198). Zombies are certainly uncanny: they are us but not us, “the ultimately foreign Other” (Bishop 201). They retain definite shards of the human form that we recognize, but they are gnarled and perverse reductions of humanity driven by the

basest of animal instincts. As Dendle writes, “the zombie is simply the hulk, the rude stuff of generic humanity, the bare canvas; passion, art, and intellect are by implication reduced to mere ornament” (12). Thus, zombies are products of the same society they threaten, which allows them multiple intentional and unintentional interpretations.

The inherent simplicity and morbid reduction of the zombie facilitates many readings—possibly too many. Barry J. Mauer attributes extreme “legibility” and “openness” to the success of *Night of the Living Dead* (97), although it is evident in all of Romero’s zombie films. The legibility and openness of Romero’s zombie films can be credited to his matter-of-fact presentation of zombies. Although he distinguishes zombies through job-specific uniforms, distinctive mutilations, and/or props, Romero’s zombies, besides some superficial differences and levels of decomposition, are generally nondescript when presented at their most potent and lethal: *en masse*. Thus, due to their large scope, zombie’s inherent two-dimensionality makes them the ideal canvas for Romero to manipulate them as representations of many different facets of society.

It is this “certain degree of [indeterminacy],” Mauer argues, “[that] is necessary to prevent total predictability and thus boredom, [and] is included to enhance the element of allegory” (97). So despite their well-known formula, the interpretational flexibility of Romero’s zombies keep his films from being predictable and stagnant, unlike earlier zombie films which continually reused the same rote narratives depicting either “the appropriation of female bodies, and the annihilation of female minds, by male captors,” “the slave substratum of zombie folklore,” or “[a] range of creatures and altered states of consciousness that passed under the term ‘zombie’” (Dendle 3—4).

Compared to zombies in earlier zombie films, Romero's zombies are characterizations of the uncanny: they are everyone and no one, they are the faceless mass, overwhelming and devoid of individuality, no longer controlled by one person like earlier zombie films, but by their own instinct. Which, in many cases, makes the zombie an almost pitiable being; their murderous actions are controlled solely by instinct—prior to *Land of the Dead*—which stands in stark contrast to the seemingly bloodthirsty still-living who attack zombies without provocation. Due to this, Romero continually questions in his zombie series who is truly normal and abnormal: the still living or the zombies? Both the still living and zombies maintain the same ultimate goal: to survive and propagate. However, both approach their end goal in different ways. The still-living in Romero's zombie films maintain a consistent strategy of blockading themselves within a fortress-like structure⁴, while the zombies approach to survival evolves with each subsequent film.

And since zombies are the only carry-over in Romero's zombie series, they are the true main characters, a fact underscored by their evolving nature. This provides perhaps Romero's biggest coup in keeping his developing narrative and political commentary topical for over forty years: having his zombies evolve from mindless to intentional in each subsequent film while the still living maintain a languid sameness throughout. By continually utilizing his personally constructed concept of the innate ambiguity of the zombie, he slowly allowed them to become fully active participants of societal change rather than passive representations of it—"In my mind, the zombies have always been evolving," Romero has been quoted as saying (D'Agnolo-Vallan 23).

⁴ The road movie narrative in *Diary of the Dead* stands as the notable exception to Romero's typical fortress-under-siege narrative.

Consequently, as the zombies' self-awareness grows, so does their allegorical meaning. They become a movement of change, a change to which humanity can only react.

Therefore, zombies in Romero's films essentially control humanity's future, leaving the still living in the precarious position between life and death—the figurative plain that zombies literalize. But as Dendle describes, “the undead threaten nothing less than global Armageddon” (7). By depicting humans rising from the dead with minimal explanation and no chance for reversing the zombie plague—unlike earlier films—Romero displaces the typically conservative normality associated with the horror genre by annihilating it completely. Hence, in all of Romero's zombie films, zombies are the indication of current society's impending extinction. For Wood, this apocalyptic nightmare is crucial. He argues that only through the complete denial of a social *status quo* can horror films “lay bare the possibility of social revolution” (“An Introduction” 199).

Wood's assertion rings true: in each of his films, Romero explores humanity's desire to recreate the normality lost to the zombie onslaught. It is this constant struggle for an unrecoverable normality that allows Romero to explore the societal foundations on which humanity depends. As survivors try to reinstate normalcy in a post-apocalyptic world, values the audience may take for granted, such as authority, politics, equality, domesticity, capital, and even our own bodies, are defamiliarized and examined via their placement in an extreme new context. This in turn, creates dueling dialectics—zombies versus the still living and the still living versus the still living—previously unfound in early zombie films but common to the Marxist criticism entrenched in the theories of dialectics and revolution codified in *The Communist Manifesto*.

Since the inception of modern cinema, filmmakers and critics alike have recognized the connection between it and Marxist politics. Whether it was the dialectically charged formal and narrative experiments of Russian and French filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Jean-Luc Godard, the Frankfurt school's examination of cinema's anesthetizing effects in maintaining the cultural *status quo*, or seeing the film culture, especially American film culture, as a capitalistic economic system proliferating the notion of art as commerce, Marxist ideologies provide a multitude of effective ways to analyze film. Chuck Kleinhans offers yet another unique Marxist approach to film criticism:

[Marxism] combines practical progressive and democratic political goals with a social examination that centers on historical development and the dialectical potential for change. For this reason, Marxist analysis is an essential part of much contemporary gender, race-ethnicity, and post-colonial thinking in film studies, even when not explicitly underlined. (106)

Thus, Marxism can be read into all films (the “not explicitly underlined” Kleinhans describes), not only those specifically made with a Marxist intent. For that reason, Marxism as a way for studying change and class distinctions is especially supple when analyzing the horror genre due to the dream-like qualities of most horror films.

Wood offers the idea of the horror film as the “collective nightmare” (“An Introduction” 174). Transplanting the Freudian approach of analyzing dreams to horror films, Wood theorizes that horror films confront and/or resolve materials that have either been sexually and economically oppressed/repressed or “othered” through the symbolic representation of the monster, be it human or inhuman (“An Introduction” 171—174). Furthermore:

If the methodology of Fredric Jameson is adopted and the film is treated as a 'dream-text' with a political unconscious buried beneath a layer of critical defense mechanisms, then it is possible to see that the zombie is a figure of an expanding post-Fordist underclass filtered through a bourgeois imaginary of disgust. (Beard 30)

Herein lies the springboard for a Marxist interpretation of Romero's zombies. By juxtaposing the splintering dichotomies of the zombies' voracious need to consume the still-living with humanity vainly trying to reestablish structure while slowly turning on itself, Romero's films, particularly *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and *Day of the Dead*, can be read as allegorical critiques of unrestrained capitalism and consumerism.

While Marxism and Romero are not an entirely new approach, regrettably few critics have examined his two most recent zombie films, *Land of the Dead* and *Diary of the Dead*. While broader and not as pointedly scathing, his later two films provide some of his most compelling and incisive political commentary. By developing the idea of an evolving zombie throughout his zombie series, Romero is able to voice his most radical opinions within the revolting zombies in *Land of the Dead*.

So, in response to the critical gap of Romero's latter day zombie films, I will be analyzing the representational fluidity of Romero's zombies in *Land of the Dead* by placing them in two disparate Marxian positions: the proletariat *and* the bourgeoisie. Within both studies, zombies finally unite to overthrow their oppressor: the still living. However, even though the zombies successfully organize in both studies, the final outcome of both revolutions remains ambiguous, which provides Romero's bleak final statement on the conclusion of his Marxist narrative.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Proletariat Zombie Revolution in *Land of the Dead*

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,” wrote Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* (126). Written in 1848, *The Communist Manifesto* was Marx’s reaction to the rising viability of capitalism. Theorizing an increasing societal divide between the bourgeoisie, the upper class, and the proletariat, the lower class, as a consequence of the increasing rights to capital and ownership, Marx called for the removal of the bourgeoisie by means of a proletariat revolution. While a zombie attack suspends the advantage of money, capital, or economic class, Marx’s revolutionary ideology and Communist dogma informs George A. Romero’s zombies in *Land of the Dead*. Stephen Harper argues that throughout all of Romero’s zombie films, “the refrain ‘they’re us’ acknowledges not only the commonality of zombies with all human beings, but also, and more specifically, the identification of zombies with exploited groups of human beings” (8).

Land of the Dead is a distinctive film in the Romero zombie series because it has the widest scope¹. Taking place well after the zombie apocalypse established in his previous films, humanity has failed to eradicate the zombie threat and grasps at the final scraps of civilization in one of the last human cities, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Widening the scope from the typical small group of survivors to an entire city, Romero pushes his allegories beyond microcosmic representation. While this does cause a loss of the

¹ It should be noted that *Land of the Dead* features many narrative elements that Romero’s original *Day of the Dead* script initially included until having to be rewritten due to budgetary constraints, namely the idea of a cognizant group of combative zombies only hinted at by Bub (Howard Sherman).

intimacy and character development that defined Romero's previous zombie films, it also allows for the depiction of large-scale revolution. The zombie threat grows in proportion to the number of survivors: surrounding the city is the eponymous land of the dead in which millions of zombies shuffle around freely.

Because of their irrepressible numbers and lack of representation, the zombies in *Land of the Dead* epitomize the disenfranchised proletariat. Despite being the "monster" of the film, the zombies are bound by their circumstances and instincts. As viewed from the perspective of those in power, they are incapable of individuality. Zombies are the proletariat mass, anonymous and threateningly prolific. Yet, continually distracted by the "sky flowers" (fireworks) of the invading human forces, the zombies remain an underestimated foe. In fact, like the proletariat mass described by Marx, the zombies' latent power remains limited until developing a political consciousness to their situation, "the weapons with which the bourgeoisie conquered feudalism are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself" (130). Ostensibly, zombies are an ineffective enemy unless amassed in a large group. They are powerful by virtue of their numbers and unified drives—which in Romero's zombie films, the still living rarely have either. Steve Beard acknowledges this aspect of the zombie by writing that "individually, [zombies] are slow, stumbling and weak. Collectively, they are a rampaging mob of clawing hands and gnashing teeth" (30). Once the zombies in *Land of the Dead* finally develop an aversion to "sky flowers" they gain the consciousness to unite and overthrow their oppressor, in this case, a bourgeoisie of the still living. Ignoring typical schisms of age, sex, race, and occupation, the zombies typify Marx's ideal communists who "have no interests separate from the proletariat in general" (135).

Herein lies the key fundamental difference between *Land of the Dead* and all of Romero's previous zombie films. Instead of the immediate drive to consume human flesh, the zombies in the film organize seeking sociopolitical dominance. Having already presupposed in *Day of the Dead* that zombies do not need to consume living flesh for survival, the zombies in *Land of the Dead* willfully transpose their instinctual desire to devour for the collective desire to revolt against the oppressive still living. Accordingly, the zombies in the film become radical revolutionaries justified in their violence; their characteristic manner of attack, hands and teeth, is replaced by more complex and efficient weapons. In *Land of the Dead*, the zombies unintentionally carry out the definitive goals outlined by Marx for the proletariat uprising: to organize on a class basis, overthrow the oppressive bourgeois, and establish the proletariat as the central political power (136).

To bring about the desired revolution, the zombies must first break into the human stronghold. Despite being protected on all sides by either rivers or wide stretches of electric fences, humanity lives in a state of tenuous safety. Run with dictatorial despotism by Paul Kaufman (played with malicious panache by Dennis Hopper) from his monolithic tower named Fiddler's Green—an architectural cross between the World Trade Center and the Time Warner Center—the city is set up in a feudal system of class stratification: the rich live in the luxurious Fiddler's Green while the rest cram into dilapidated slums surrounding the tower. Stratified economically, the still living obviously continues to uphold the capitalist holdings of cash money in a post-apocalyptic civilization when the logical priority should be tangible and functional items. In attempting to recreate the normality of their previous civilization, humanity not only

represses the zombies in *Land of the Dead*, but also some of their own because they “[have] left no other tie twixt man and man but naked self-interest and callous cash payment” (Marx 127). This further class differentiation allows for a representation of all the class levels theorized by Marx.

First and foremost, in *Land of the Dead* the bourgeoisie is exemplified by the tyrannical Kaufman, who views all humans as replaceable and everything else as an asset with a set monetary value—he is capitalism personified. Kaufman runs the entire city from a penthouse in Fiddler’s Green—the apotheosis of capitalism and materialism—a building he allegedly didn’t build but “took over.” Owning every aspect of production, Kaufman filters down vices such as drugs, alcohol, and prostitution to the population of the slums, keeping them placated and complacent to his fascistic domination and the surrounding zombie threat. Those who do challenge him are either promptly imprisoned or murdered by his personal military force. In short, Kaufman is the ruling class and the military, maintaining absolute dominance over the city.

Because Kaufman is arguably the sole representation of the bourgeoisie, the rest of still living, including those in Fiddler’s Green and the slums, properly fit into Marx’s maligned description of the lower-middle-class:

[They] struggle against the bourgeoisie to save from extinction their position as sections of the middle class. They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative. And what is more, they are reactionary, because they try to turn back the wheel of history. Should they ever be revolutionary, they are so from fear of being forced down into the ranks of the proletariat, thus defending not their present but their future interests, and thus abandoning their own standpoint to adopt that of the proletariat. (133—134)

Despite marked economic divides, particularly for those outside of Fiddler’s Green, the surviving humans choose to ignore their oppressive conditions and the zombie threat by

either indulging in mind-numbing vices or consumer frivolities. Apathy-inducing coping measures as a way to ignore an external threat has always been an important thematic motif in Romero's zombie films—like the upper-middle-class mall life in *Dawn of the Dead* or the trailer park back porch (albeit, underground) life in *Day of the Dead*—but especially so in *Land of the Dead*. The listless supplication of the lower-class humans stands in stark contrast to the zombies knowingly overcoming the distracting effects of “sky flowers.” By representing the slow devolution of the still living from survival into indifference and complacency, humans lose their individuality and self-awareness, becoming zombies themselves. Like the lower-middle-class proposed by Marx, it isn't until the proletariat zombies surround them that the still living regain their self-efficacy by defending themselves or joining the proletariat mass.

As there must be to facilitate a revolution, there are notable exceptions to these class demarcations, namely the lead human protagonist Riley Denbo (Simon Baker). Riley is a rational and helpful Everyman—a rare find in Romero's zombie films—who leads a group of marauders on continual raids outside the city in order to supply the needs of the people, particularly the wealthy. Riley, however, is set apart from the other lower-middle-class inhabitants of the city because he acknowledges the evolving zombies. Romero highlights this by introducing the audience to Riley as he spies on a group of zombies, noting that, “They used to be us. [They're] learning how to be us again.” While continuing Romero's “they're us” motif, Riley also recognizes the rapidly disappearing distance between the still living and undead. Since Riley is the only character in the film who understands that the zombies are changing, his decision not to kill the remaining zombies at the end of the film, combined with his persistent desire to

leave the city and active dislike of Kaufman, makes him more representative of the zombie proletariat than the passive lower-middle-class.

In telling contrast to Riley is cocky fellow marauder Cholo DeMora (played with slimy precision by John Leguizamo). Despite Cholo “taking out [Kaufman’s] garbage”—the dead bodies of Kaufman’s opponents—Kaufman denies him residence in Fiddler’s Green. Seeking revenge, Cholo steals Dead Reckoning, a monstrous fortified truck, threatening to do a “jihad” on Fiddler’s Green with Dead Reckoning’s weapons system if Kaufman doesn’t pay him money, to which Kaufman responds, “We do not negotiate with terrorists!”—an obvious reference to post-9/11 politics. Cholo, unlike Riley, is concerned only with his own individual well-being and regards the zombie mass as “stinkers.” Ironically, Cholo is the only primary human character in *Land of the Dead* who is later reanimated as a zombie. After Riley reacquires Dead Reckoning, the stranded Cholo gets bitten by a zombie. Deliberately choosing not to kill himself, Cholo decides he “wants to see how the other half lives.” This is important because when Cholo becomes a zombie, his personal desire for revenge is absorbed into the zombie desire for dominance, and he exacts his revenge with zombie-like destructiveness. Consequently, Cholo is a prime example of the still living as the lower-middle-class: even when forcibly transformed into a member of the proletariat, he alters the zombies’ shared revolutionary goal for his own personal purposes.

Despite the stratified class system within the still living, it is the humans’ collective oppression, exploitation, and massacre of zombies that cause the zombie horde

to revolt. Led by Big Daddy (Eugene Clark)², the lead zombie who early on displays a capacity for communication, rational thought, and the manipulation of tools (most importantly, a machine gun), the unified zombie horde lumbers toward the city. Quickly infiltrating the city walls, the zombies rampage through the streets on their way toward Fiddler's Green as Kaufman impotently watches from above³. Their collective movement and efficiency in overthrowing the bourgeoisie contrasts with the complacent inhabitants of the city, further accentuating the Marxist idea that the proletariat is the only truly revolutionary class (133). Hence the zombies, because of their violence, are the heroes of *Land of the Dead* because they are the catalyst of necessary change. Romero thereupon completely violates our expectations for the horror genre by suggesting that zombies are not only physically but ideologically stronger: "they" are actually superior to "us".⁴

This exchange in power is crucial to the understanding of *Land of the Dead*. While the uniformity of zombies has always been a derisive counterpoint to the petty bickering of humanity, it isn't until *Land of the Dead* that zombies effectively differentiate themselves as superior to the still living. As Wood asserts, the zombies in Romero's films are politically progressive not only because they are symbolic representations of the oppressed, but because they also elicit sympathy, indicting a

² Big Daddy is an inspired continuance of Romero's strong black leading characters because, unlike Ben (Duane Jones) from *Night of the Living Dead* and Peter (Ken Foree) from *Dawn of the Dead*, Big Daddy is the leader of a zombie mass. The band of organized black male survivors in *Diary of the Dead* slightly resembles Big Daddy, but without the singularly defined leadership or breadth that Big Daddy maintains.

³ The scene is evocative of *Dawn of the Dead*, with Kaufman indignantly stating the zombies "have no right" to enter the city much like Stephen (David Emge) regards the motorcycle gang invading the mall.

⁴ Harper notes that Bub suggests this shift at the end of *Day of the Dead* when he kills Captain Rhodes (Joseph Pilato), "an act motivated by human revenge rather than animal instinct" (7).

society that exploits them (“An Introduction” 188—191). While Wood writes specifically about Romero’s earlier work, the zombies in *Land of the Dead* do not diverge from, but rather intensify his argument. Not only do they blatantly expose the flaws in humanity and the cracks in society, but they hold humanity accountable. It is we, the still living, who are the true monsters, not the zombies. This thematic motif is essential in each of Romero’s zombie films—for example, the petty infighting in *Night of the Living Dead*, the motorcycle marauders in *Dawn of the Dead*, and the military in *Day of the Dead*—but only in contrast to the truly superior zombies in *Land of the Dead* is it most explicit: in a bid to survive, humankind will inevitably turn on itself, disregarding societal cooperation for individual self-preservation.

However, Riley, the proletariat zombie counterpart, is again a notable exception. While he does strive for solitude outside the city, he cannot morally stop himself from helping others—Romero emphasizes this by Riley’s persistent impulse to save people, particularly his allies Charlie Houk (Robert Joy) and Slack (Asia Argento). It is interesting to note that besides being allied with Riley, both characters also represent a sect of the disenfranchised class: Charlie is a man with mental disabilities and facial disfigurements and Slack is a woman who is prostituted and over-sexualized. Compounded with Riley’s desire “for a world where there’s no fences” and protecting people in harm’s way, the three consequently become active participants in the dissolution of Kaufman’s bourgeoisie reign whether they realize it or not. Nowhere is this more apparent than when they race back to the city in *Dead Reckoning* to save whomever they can. Finding that the zombies have essentially taken over because the still living were trapped by their own defensive structures, Riley destroys the remaining

electric fences. This act openly aligns him with the zombie masses' first revolutionary act of destroying the barriers surrounding the city.

By tearing down the walls of the city both Riley and the zombies achieve the Communist goal of “the abolition of bourgeois property” (Marx 136). Marx wrote that the bourgeoisie purposely agglomerated the population from the rural to the urban as a means of centralizing their power, production, and property (129). The film echoes this conviction: the still living congregated specifically in the remnants of Pittsburgh because Kaufman built protective barricades around it. Kaufman's actions, however, were not out of generosity but of financial gain and the aforementioned centralization. So when Riley and the zombie horde tear down the barriers surrounding the city, they are, in effect, leveling the urban/rural and bourgeoisie/proletariat divide. But the zombies actually go one step further than Riley by physically breaking through the glass walls of Fiddler's Green.

The scene in which the zombies crash through the glass of Fiddler's Green is particularly provocative. Significantly, some zombies utilize tools of labor as their means of liberation, emphasizing Marx's ideas of bourgeois production being turned against themselves (130). Big Daddy explicitly exemplifies Marx at least twice. Despite knowing how to shoot a gun, Big Daddy chooses other labor-associated tools to execute his objectives. So, as the zombies approach Fiddler's Green, Big Daddy takes a jackhammer from the street, eventually using it to pound through the glass walls of Fiddler's Green dividing the bourgeois from the proletariat. After successfully breaking into Fiddler's Green, Big Daddy traps the escaping Kaufman in his luxury car. Employing gasoline from a nearby gas pump—the mechanism of Big Daddy's previous

trade—he causes the car to explode with Kaufman trapped inside, sending the last of the ruling class up in flames.

Ultimately, the zombies succeed—they overthrow the bourgeoisie and rise to the dominant class. Intriguingly, despite the chaotic nature of their uprising, they appear to have killed only Kaufman, his military force, and some of the inhabitants of Fiddler’s Green. Although there are some initial scenes of zombies rampaging through the slums, Romero centers the carnage around the military and citizens of Fiddler’s Green, not on the poorer citizens. This serves two distinct narrative functions: it reemphasizes that even the poorer humans are still not part of the revolutionary proletariat class because they hide while the zombies overthrow the bourgeoisie and it sets up the ambiguous ending.

With the zombies apparently leaving some humans to survive, Romero, for the first time, introduces the possibility of coexistence. After blowing up the electric fence, Riley meets with the leader of the surviving humans and a staunch opponent of Kaufman, Mulligan (Bruce McFee), for a short but critical conversation:

Mulligan: “Why don’t you stick around? We could turn this place into what we always wanted it to be.”

Riley: “Maybe. Then what will we turn into?”

Mulligan: “We’ll see, won’t we?”

This brief exchange encapsulates the ambiguity with which the film ends. Riley, the zombie proletariat counterpart, chooses not to kill Big Daddy and his followers because he recognizes “they’re just looking for a place to go. Same as us.” In contrast, the combative, lower-middle-class Mulligan and his shotgun-toting gang walk off-screen cocking their guns giving no indication of cohabitation with the zombies, which is reminiscent of the end of *Night of the Living Dead* where a self-described “posse” of rednecks roams the Pennsylvanian countryside shooting everything that moves right

between the eyes. By bookending both the beginning and end of his zombie narrative cycle with humanities' persistent antagonistic tendencies towards zombies, Romero establishes his ultimate pessimism towards his metaphorical ideal of true equality between the haves and have-nots. So despite Riley driving off winningly into the sunset in *Dead Reckoning*, there is the implication that humanity's oppressive nature against the zombies will persist.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Bourgeois Zombie Revolution in *Land of the Dead*

While the zombies in *Land of the Dead* are easy ciphers for the commonly held critical view of zombies as a repressed class striking out against their oppressors, zombies are not so easily defined; in fact, the only thing that is certain about zombies is that they lack clear metaphorical definition. Even Wood attests to the zombie's infinite fluidity of representation in his review for *Diary of the Dead* stating, "when you try to pin [what zombies represent] down, something always gets in the way, refuses to fit, resists the meanings we try to impose" ("Fresh Meat" 29). So while zombies can easily represent the proletariat in *Land of the Dead*, they can also easily represent the complete inverse: the bourgeoisie. By simply switching the dominant roles of the zombie as the bourgeoisie and the still living as the proletariat in the film, it both reiterates Marx's theories of revolution and constitutes the uncomplicated representational changeability of George A. Romero's zombie.

Marx wrote in *The Communist Manifesto* that the bourgeoisie's ascension to class dominance was not a mere coincidence, but instead, "the bourgeoisie has played in history a most revolutionary part" (127). The acquisitive bourgeoisie's first revolutionary act was the cunning overthrow of the predominant ruling class at the time: the absolute monarchy. But the bourgeoisie did not successfully overthrow the monarchy alone. Exploiting the proletariat's scattered mass, the bourgeoisie united the proletariat to overthrow the monarchy with promise of a republican government, but as Marx describes, "the proletariat [did] not fight its own enemies, but the enemies of their

enemies, the remnants of absolute monarchy” (132). Immediately after defeating the monarchy, the bourgeoisie created the modern industrial system, thereby economically enslaving the proletariat as wage labor. But, inexorably, the bourgeoisie, by enlisting the aid of the proletariat in their struggle against the aristocracy, unintentionally gave the proletariat the tools necessary for them to overthrow the bourgeoisie: rudimentary political consciousness (Marx 132—133). Herein lies the groundwork for an ulterior perspective in approaching the zombie revolution in *Land of the Dead*.

With nothing to lose within their current place in society, zombies’ only societal direction is up. Thus, regardless of which Marxian class one places them, the zombie resides as the figurehead of revolution in *Land of the Dead*. But while general critical analysis views zombies as the underclass, *The Communist Manifesto* celebrates the humanism of the proletariat. And because of their undefined appearance, it is hard to define the humanism of a zombie. So, despite general critical consensus, the zombie actually fits better within the Marxian description of the upper class than the lower class. In fact, by virtue of their mass and harmonious drive for a singular goal, zombies represent an idealized version of the bourgeoisie, especially compared to the petty bickering and infighting of the still living. Interestingly, it is by virtue of the still living’s unique and individualized response—regardless of its pettiness—to the transposable upper-class zombie horde that allows them to fit neatly into the Marxian description of the humanistic proletariat. And true to their lower-class position, the still living in a zombie film have no other action against the zombie revolution but reaction, which the same could be said about the proletariat prior to their newfound knowledge gained after the defeat of the monarchy by the bourgeoisie.

With zombies now re-envisioned as the calculating bourgeoisie, it is best to understand the ultimate goal of the bourgeoisie as described by Marx: “[The bourgeoisie] forces all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it forces them to adopt so-called civilization, i.e., to become bourgeois. In one word, it creates a world after its own image” (129). While obviously never intending to provide corollaries between the bourgeoisie and zombies, Marx’s description is perhaps the most apt philosophy regarding the proliferation of the zombie contagion. Zombies are a nearly unstoppable force that, unwittingly or not, seeks nothing less than total world domination. The grisly method of which one can become a zombie underscores the zombie’s ability to not only forcefully transform others to their side but also to remake them after their own grisly image.

This allows for an interesting dichotomy not generally offered in many horror films because, usually, when someone is killed, he/she is dead; however, in a zombie film, when a character dies, he/she doesn’t cease to be but only ceases to be on the side of the still living. Consequently, the transformation from living to undead is equivalent to the transformation from proletariat to bourgeoisie, “the one-time *protagonists* of the movie become its eventual *antagonists*” (Bishop 203).

So it is not ironic that it is again by virtue of their united mass that the *protagonist* proletariat zombies in *Land of the Dead* can become the *antagonist* bourgeois zombies. Since zombies are the only large collected group within the film—and all Romero’s films—they can easily be transposed into the role of the united bourgeoisie outlined by Marx. They are now the faceless, uncaring bourgeois mass that “has drowned religious ecstasy, chivalrous enthusiasm, and middle class sentimentality in the ice-cold water of

egotistical calculation” (Marx 127). Accordingly, with the zombie now representing the united bourgeoisie, the living in and around Fiddler’s Green, which previously represented the indifferent lower-middle-class, shifts into the role of the scattered proletariat; Riley and his allies, who previously represented proletariat zombie compatriots, are now shifted into the role of the proletariat aiding the bourgeois overthrow of the monarchy; Cholo, who acted in his own class-gaining self-interest against Kaufman even before being turned into a zombie, shifts into the role of a bourgeoisie; and Kaufman, who previously embodied the evil bourgeois capitalist, becomes the absolute monarchy.

With Kaufman embodying the monarchy, he represents the barrier that the bourgeois zombies seek to destroy in hopes of gaining unlimited access to proletarian exploitation. By Kaufman forcibly keeping zombies outside of Fiddler’s Green, he is limiting their primary commodity: human flesh. Consequently, zombies even further correspond with Marx’s contemptuous description of the bourgeoisie:

[Having] transformed personal worth into mere exchange value, and substituted for countless dearly-bought chartered freedoms the one and only unconscionable freedom of Free Trade. It has, in one word, replaced an exploitation veiled by religious and political illusions by exploitation open, unashamed, direct, and brutal. (127)

Since Romero has already established that zombies do not need to feast on the flesh of the still-living to stay reanimated in *Day of the Dead*, the zombie’s sustained need to consume, like the bourgeoisie’s sustained need for power, revolves not around necessity but depraved desire. So in comparison to the previous analysis where the zombie’s appropriation of violence was a means for class equality that could be defined by Marx

not as malicious but utterly necessary, when placed within the realm of the bourgeoisie, the zombie's violence is suddenly no longer necessary but utterly malicious.

The raid of Fiddler's Green is indicative of the zombies' maliciously depraved desire. By largely ignoring much of the still-living that populates the slums surrounding Fiddler's Green and only targeting some of the inhabitants within the tower, the zombies establish their goal of achieving class dominance and not pure anarchy. By attacking Kaufman and his associates who pose a threat (i.e., his military force) and largely ignoring the rest of the still living regardless of what societal class they reside, the zombies fuel the creation of a singular, unstratified underclass—"the proletariat [is] recruited from all classes of the population" (Marx 131)—primed for their unobstructed exploitation. This successful eradication of the monarchy by the bourgeois zombie horde, however, only substitutes one form of absolutism for another, thus prefacing the tipping point between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie and the film's ambivalent ending.

By eliminating Kaufman, his influence, and protective structures, the zombies violently awoke the placated proletariat surrounding Fiddler's Green into consciousness. Looking again at the conversation between Riley and Mulligan, the film again ends on an ambiguous note despite the zombies successfully achieving their revolutionary goal of defeating Kaufman. Previously, the conversation seemed to indicate the reemergence of a burgeoning bourgeois force led by the militant activism of Mulligan; instead, Mulligan's activism can now be viewed as an organized proletariat, finally aware of both their predicament and their power and primed for action. So with the bourgeois zombies positioned for seemingly unhindered exploitation by a newly defenseless underclass,

Mulligan represents the next stage of revolution outlined by Marx: the proletariat versus the bourgeoisie. Consequently, the still living and the zombies exchange the power outlined in the previous analysis because humanity is now the catalyst for necessary change: “they” are now actually inferior to “us.”

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

While *Land of the Dead* hasn't fully entered into the critical discourse of the sociopolitical significance in Romero's zombie series, I argue that the film is imperative to understanding the allegorical arc of Romero's zombie mythology. In the end, "the monster [in George A. Romero's zombie films] is the embodiment of the revelation that the machinations of the world are unstoppable and inevitably destructible and meaningless" (Wells 82). This is never more apparent than in the conclusion of *Land of the Dead*. Despite the zombies effectively overthrowing the remaining human population to gain class dominance—be it as the proletariat or bourgeoisie—neither revolution is proven to be wholly successful, reinforcing little hope for revolution as the brutal class struggles continue to prove to be destructive and meaningless. Consequently, the film ends with the implication that this upsetting of class and power is cyclical. In fact, Marxist dogma inadvertently guarantees ambiguity after revolution because as long as there is a ruling class, there will always be a marginalized or oppressed group under it. Eventually, that group will become aware of their oppression and revolt against it.

With the narrative of revolution always the same—the oppressed overthrowing the oppressor—it is where the emphasis in the ultimate goal of revolution resides that differentiates the classes to Marx. Herein lies the final understanding of the disparate revolutionary narratives in *Land of the Dead*. Depending on where in Marx's revolutionary timeline one chooses to view the film, the zombies either represent the Marxist Dream or the Marxist Nightmare. As the Marxist Dream, zombies are an

organized group *hindered* by class structures and led by a singular goal to usurp the oppressive force limiting their ultimate unified *freedom*; in other words, zombies can be seen as the perfect communist. As the Marxist Nightmare, zombies are an organized group *driven* by class structure and led by a singular goal to usurp the oppressive force limiting their ultimate unified *domination*; in other words, zombies can be seen as the perfect capitalist.

Accordingly, the zombie's representational fluidity directly creates and correlates to the representational fluidity of humanity in Romero's zombie films—a fact largely ignored by the critical consensus. Since the zombie lacks clear representational definition, so does the still-living: they are as representationally fluid as the zombie. Regardless, the zombie is generally automatically defined by critics as representational of the oppressed underclass, the still-living are always seen as the oppressor, exploiting their needs over the feeble zombie.

However, as my dual comparison of Marxist studies of the zombies in *Land of the Dead* attempts to show, the zombie and still-living both equally desire to maintain dominance over their situation by virtue of exploitation. As such, the transference of sympathy for the underclass shifts relative to whoever is placed in the respective roles of the proletariat and bourgeoisie.

In the case of the zombies as the proletariat, the still-living is seen as the unsympathetic zombie-like lower-middle-class that chose to actively ignore and/or exploit the proletariat zombie. In the case of the zombies as bourgeoisie, the still living in *Land of the Dead* can ultimately be seen as sympathetic characters helplessly situated between the exploitation of the aristocratic Kaufman and bourgeois zombie.

Due to both the zombie's and still living's interconnected representational fluidities, there is no discernible protagonist or antagonist in *Land of the Dead*. In the end, the monsters in Romero's *Land of the Dead*—be they living or undead—remain after the closing credits. There is no reclamation of the *status quo* as in other horror films, only the momentary wish fulfillment that Riley and compatriots survived. As a result, *Land of the Dead*—or all of Romero's zombie films for that matter—might actually be less political than it is philosophical. It is about the flaws of humanity. The still-living in Romero's films are destined to cannibalize themselves with or without the aid of zombies because in their desperate grasping for normalcy, Romero displays that our "normality" is actually perversely based on division and hierarchies. "The first four in the series," describes Wood, "cover and demolish, systematically, the central structures of what we still call our civilization, establishing Romero as the most radical of all horror directors" ("Fresh Meat" 29).

Thus, Romero, in the innocuous guise of a zombie film, reiterates a Marxist view of the world while also repudiating Marx's utopianism by showing how revolution is ultimately futile, forever offset by the innate flaws in humanity. Thus, "[zombies] are a projection of post-modern capitalism's worst anxieties about *itself*" (Beard 30). Yet, at the same time, Romero's films are so open for infinite interpretations that their understanding relies entirely on the viewer's approach.

For an audience trained to view horror films—especially modern ones—as soulless hack-and-slash fare—which Romero's film can be seen as, if one so chooses—Romero's bleak, but subversive, perspectives may be lost. But when examining the greater arc of development in his zombie series, it is undeniably apparent that Romero

continues to be a persuasive example for the power and potential present in the horror genre.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Summaries of George A. Romero's *Zombie Series*

Night of the Living Dead (1968)

George A. Romero's first zombie film, *Night of the Living Dead*, was released at the height of the Vietnam War and the tumultuous civil rights movement. It is a film that is uniquely of its time, but it also serves as the narrative prototype for almost every zombie film after it, including Romero's own. Taking place over a single night, the film chronicles a group of seven people as they try to survive not only the burgeoning zombie apocalypse, but more importantly, each other.

The film opens with the dissonant stirrings of a synthesizer as two bickering siblings, Barbra (Judith O'Dea) and Johnny (Russell Streiner), drive to a rural cemetery in Pennsylvania to visit their father's grave. While they are placing flowers on the gravestone, a nondescript man begins to lumber toward the siblings. Unbeknownst to the both, the man is actually a zombie. After it grabs Barbara, Johnny fights with the zombie only to get killed after falling and hitting his head on a gravestone. Barbara races to the car, leaving Johnny and the car keys behind. Unable to start the car, Barbara coasts the car downhill in neutral until running into a tree. Still being pursued by the zombie, Barbra flees the car and runs to a nearby farmhouse to seek refuge.

Once Barbra finally gets inside, multiple zombies start converging on the farmhouse. Not long after, a mysterious man, Ben (Duane Jones), drives up in a truck and rescues Barbara from one zombie while scaring the other zombies off with the

burning body of the zombie he killed. Thinking logically compared to the hysterical Barbra, Ben starts reinforcing the farmhouse's windows and doors with whatever scraps of wood he can find. After Ben boards up most of the house, he discovers a gun and a radio and eventually a group of survivors hidden in the basement: Harry and Helen Cooper (Karl Hardman and Marilyn Eastman), their daughter Karen (Kyra Schon), and teenage couple Tom (Keith Wayne) and Judy (Judith Ridley). The group—mainly Ben and Harry—argue whether it is safer to barricade themselves in the basement or finish reinforcing the house. Eventually, Ben wins the argument.

Throughout the reinforcement process, the group hears radio broadcasts and watches emergency television reports on an unexplained epidemic in which large groups of recently deceased people are rising from the dead and consuming the flesh of the living. While this is chalked up to radiation from a returning space probe from Venus that exploded while reentering Earth's atmosphere, none of the experts, scientists, or military can explain what is happening. The only fact known for certain is that a gunshot or heavy blow to the head will kill the growing population of zombies.

Realizing that the farmhouse is not going to sustain their survival, Ben devises a plan to use his truck to help the entire group escape to a safer, more secured area. The plan involves Ben and Tom driving the truck to a nearby gas pump while Harry distracts the zombie horde by hurling Molotov cocktails from an upstairs window. Judy chases after Tom as he and Ben race to the truck. While the three of them manage to drive the truck over to the pump, Tom's carelessness causes the truck to explode with both Judy and him in it. Realizing his plan has failed, Ben races back to the farmhouse only to find that Harry has locked him out. Kicking the door down, Ben furiously punches Harry.

In the midst of the commotion, the zombies start to converge on the farmhouse, slowly breaking through the barricades. Despite the chaos surrounding them, Ben and Harry fight over the gun until Ben shoots Harry. With Harry dead and Barbra carried away by the zombie horde, Ben retreats to the basement where he finds Karen, who had previously been bitten by a zombie, has killed her mother, Helen. Killing the reanimated corpses of Harry, Helen, and Karen, Ben hides in the basement until morning. Hearing the commotion of a hunting posse outside, Ben leaves the basement and looks out the living room window only to be mistaken as a zombie and shot dead. The final images of *Night of the Living Dead* depict the posse dragging Ben's body by a meat hook and thrown on a fire with the burning bodies of zombies.

Dawn of the Dead (1978)

A decade after releasing *Night of the Living Dead*, George A. Romero released his second and most popular zombie film, *Dawn of the Dead*. With Vietnam and the civil rights movement largely over, the film explores the new consumer culture explosion of the late 1970s that bled into the excess of the 1980s. As such, Romero shifts the location from the rural to the urban, from a farmhouse to a shopping mall. Still juxtaposing the rising zombie population with a small group of survivors, Romero compares the mindless consumerism of the still living with the zombies that slowly converge on the mall.

The film begins in the middle of the zombie pandemic that started in *Night of the Living Dead*. Opening in the chaotic newsroom of WGON in Philadelphia, the reporting and dialogue make it is obvious that the remaining strands of American society are collapsing and there is seemingly no scientific cure for what is happening. Seeing the need to escape, news employees and couple Stephen Andrews (David Emge) and

Francine Parker (Gaylen Ross) plan to steal the station helicopter and fly it to Canada for safety. Meanwhile, a SWAT team raids a local tenement building that is ignoring the martial law mandates. Chaos ensues as the still living and zombies attack the SWAT team and each other. Two of the SWAT team members, Roger DeMarco (Scott H. Reiniger) and Peter Washington (Ken Foree), decide to desert their orders and join Roger's friend Stephen on the helicopter.

While flying in the helicopter, the group sees multiple groups of survivors, namely the National Guard and rednecks, seemingly maintaining their dominance over the zombie horde. The group eventually stops to rest on the rooftop of the Monroeville Mall. Finding a safe storeroom connected to the roof of the mall, the group rests and debates their plan. Deciding to explore the mall, Peter and Roger look around until they find a control room with building blueprints and store keys. Determining that the mall has all the necessities for survival, the group decides to take sanctuary there. The group then proceeds to barricade the mall by placing semi-trucks in front of the main entrance doors and killing any remaining zombies left inside the mall. During the process, Roger is bitten by a zombie but maintains his resolve to finish the job of taking over the mall. Eventually, Roger succumbs to the zombie contagion, leaving Peter no choice but to kill him.

With the mall clear, the group settles in, making a new life for themselves in the capitalistic paradise while the rest of society continues to collapse around them. But as the months go by, the group becomes restless as their consumer dreams deflate after the thrill of unmitigated consumption fizzles. It is not until members of a roaming biker gang spot Stephen teaching Francine how to operate the helicopter that the group is roused into

action. The biker gang busts into the mall intent on looting it, but in the process open up a path for the surrounding zombie horde. Stephen recklessly initiates a shoot-off with the gang, which Peter eventually joins. Overwhelmed and undermanned, Stephen is shot by the biker gang and attacked by zombies, while Peter is able to successfully navigate back to their hidden living quarters. After the zombies eventually run the biker gang out, Stephen rises as a zombie and leads the rest of the horde back to their hidden living quarters. With no other choice, Francine and Peter fly away from the mall in the helicopter with little fuel or hope to where they are going next.

Day of the Dead (1985)

George A. Romero's third zombie film, *Day of the Dead*, is the most unrelentingly bleak in the series. Taking place almost entirely in an underground bunker, the film is a portrayal of Reagan-era military-industrial complex run amok as the film divides the still living into two sparring factions: scientists and military. In addition to the conflicting viewpoints of the scientists and the military, the film is also Romero's first introduction of the evolving zombie with Bub (Sherman Howard). These dual narratives make the underrated *Day of the Dead* one of the most sophisticated and visceral of Romero's zombie series.

The film opens with a small group of survivors led by Sarah (Lori Cardille) flying over a deserted Florida city searching for any other still living. It is obvious from the dilapidated and abandoned nature of the town and old newspaper headlines that society has completely collapsed in the wake of the zombie apocalypse set-up in *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead*. Unable to find any other survivors, the group flies the helicopter back to the underground compound, the Seminole Storage Facility, which

they have managed to fortify against the increasing zombie population surrounding it. The compound itself is a large series of caverns; the developed parts are populated by a small group of surviving military personnel and scientists and the undeveloped parts are used as zombie corrals.

The military unit is led by the combative Capt. Rhodes (Joseph Pilato) while the scientists are led by the obsessive Dr. Logan (Richard Liberty). Dr. Logan has been experimenting with live zombie specimens to figure out their exact biological workings. Dr. Logan's research begins to cause severe dissatisfaction from the military personnel who have lost many of their men corralling zombies for his experiments, which have seemingly yet to prove or explain anything. As tensions flair, Capt. Rhodes threatens to shoot anyone who does not follow his fascist orders.

Dr. Logan continues his experiments despite Capt. Rhodes' threats. Among his discoveries, Dr. Logan finds that zombies do not eat flesh to survive but rather out of instinct. Moreover, his main test subject is Bub, a seemingly domesticated zombie. When given a series of objects like a toothbrush, a razor, a phone, a book, a tape player, and an unloaded gun, Bub makes infantile attempts at trying to use them. His growing reacquaintance with human objects in no way placates Capt. Rhodes, but instead fuels his desire to destroy all the zombies.

After one soldier, Pvt. Miguel Salazar (Anthony Dileo Jr.), loses control of a zombie at the specimen corral, two soldiers, Pvt. Miller (Phillip G. Kellams) and Pvt. Johnson (Gregory Nicotero), are killed and Miguel is bitten. An enraged Capt. Rhodes declares that there will be no more experiments and all the specimens are to be destroyed. But after discovering that Dr. Logan has fed the bodies of Pvts. Miller and Johnson to

Bub, Rhodes goes ballistic, killing Dr. Logan and ordering that Sarah and William McDermott (Jarlath Conroy) be placed within the zombie filled caverns. Meanwhile, a bitten Pvt. Salazar has taken the elevator to the surface and opened up the front gates to the waiting zombie horde.

As the zombie horde infiltrates the underground bunker, the soldiers try to fight but are mutilated by the unstoppable mass. In a particularly indicative scene, Bub, having discovered that Dr. Logan has been killed, finds and shoots Capt. Rhodes, indicating the growing emotion and intelligence in the zombie population. Through the chaos, Sarah, William, and John (Terry Alexander) escape to the surface. Surrounded by zombies, they manage to make it to the helicopter only to discover zombies inside the cockpit. Suddenly, Romero cuts to an ambiguous and uncharacteristic coda of Sarah waking up on a sunny, isolated island safe from harm.

Land of the Dead (2005)

Land of the Dead is a distinctive film in the George A. Romero zombie series because it has the widest scope, which allows Romero to push his allegories beyond microcosmic representation. Using topical colloquialisms and imagery, Romero fashions a stirring film of political collapse and social disenfranchisement. The film takes place well after the zombie apocalypse established in his previous films. Humanity has obviously failed to eradicate the zombie threat and is struggling to maintain the final vestiges of civilization in presumably one of the last human cities, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Despite being protected on all sides by either rivers or wide stretches of electric fences, humanity lives in a state of tenuous safety.

Run with dictatorial despotism by Paul Kaufman (Dennis Hopper) from his monolithic tower named Fiddler's Green, the city is set up in a feudal system of class stratification: the rich live in the luxurious Fiddler's Green while the rest cram into dilapidated slums surrounding the tower. The zombie threat grows in proportion to the number of survivors: surrounding the city is the eponymous land of the dead in which millions of zombies shuffle around freely.

Humanity has not developed a communal peace and self-sufficiency despite the apocalyptic threat. Consequently, groups of lower class humans make continual raids outside the city in order to supply the needs of the people, particularly the wealthy. Protected by a monstrous armored truck named Dead Reckoning and "sky flowers" (fireworks) that distract the zombies, the group of marauders is lead by Riley Denbo (Simon Baker). Tired of the dangerous work, Riley wants to leave the city for the country. Yet, his departure is impeded when a cocky fellow marauder, Cholo DeMora (John Leguizamo), steals Dead Reckoning after Kaufman denies him residence in Fiddler's Green.

Seeking revenge, Cholo threatens to do a "jihad" on Fiddler's Green with Dead Reckoning's weapons system if Kaufman does not pay him money. In response, Kaufman sends Riley to stop him. Riley agrees, not because he wants to help Kaufman, but because he recognizes the mission as a way to escape. Aided by his friends Charlie Houk (Robert Joy) and Slack (Asia Argento), Riley confronts Cholo and reacquires Dead Reckoning, after which the stranded Cholo gets bitten by a zombie.

Meanwhile, the zombie horde has evolved rudimentary communication and cognitive skills. Led by Big Daddy (Eugene Clark), the lead zombie who early on

displays a capacity for communication, rational thought, and the manipulation of tools (most importantly, a machine gun), the unified zombie horde lumbers toward the city. Quickly infiltrating the city walls, the zombies rampage through the streets on their way toward Fiddler's Green as Kaufman impotently watches from above. After successfully breaking into Fiddler's Green, Big Daddy traps the escaping Kaufman in his luxury car. Employing gasoline from a nearby gas pump, he causes the car to explode with Kaufman trapped inside.

Wanting to save whomever they can, Riley and the rest of the group race back to the city in *Dead Reckoning*. Finding that the zombies have essentially taken over because the still living were trapped by their own defensive structures, Riley destroys the remaining electric fences. After destroying the electric fence, the group discovers that, despite the chaotic nature of the zombie invasion, they appear to have killed only Kaufman, his military force, and some of the inhabitants of Fiddler's Green. With the zombies apparently leaving some humans to survive, Romero, for the first time, introduces the possibility of coexistence.

Diary of the Dead (2008)

George A. Romero's most recent zombie film is distinctly different from the rest of his series. Whereas all his earlier zombie films reiterated his classic fortress-under-siege narrative, *Diary of the Dead* is more of a road film. In the film, Romero restarts his zombie narrative from the beginning at the rise of the zombie apocalypse. Purposefully recontextualizing his narrative, Romero places his zombie in our modern hyper-mediated digital landscape, thus allowing him to explore the liberating and alarming aspects of our

increasing dependence on technology through a pastiche aesthetic of handheld/found video footage.

The film begins with a small group of University of Pittsburgh students filming a low-budget mummy horror film in the woods when they begin to hear radio reports of the dawning zombie apocalypse. Two members of the group, Ridley Wilmot (Phillip Riccio) and Francine Shane (Megan Park), decide to leave the group while the rest follow Jason Creed (Joshua Close), the lead documentarian, back to his girlfriend Debra Monahan's (Michelle Morgan) dorm. After picking up Debra from her dorm, the group travels in Mary Dexter's (Tatiana Maslany) Winnebago to Debra's parent's house in Scranton in the hope of finding survivors.

On the way, Mary runs over a highway patrolman and some other zombies while trying to avoid a car wreck in the middle of the road. Due to her religious beliefs, Mary becomes depressed, feeling she murdered the people. In her hysteria, Mary tries to commit suicide by shooting herself with a gun but does not fully succeed. Trying to save her, the remaining group tries to take Mary to the hospital, but end up having to survive a zombie ambush. During the commotion, one of the group, Gordo Thorson (Chris Violetti), gets bitten and Mary dies. After turning into a zombie, Gordo's girlfriend, Tracy Thurman (Amy Lalonde), kills him.

Getting back on the road, the group gets stranded when the RV breaks down. They quickly find a barn owned by a deaf Amish farmer, Samuel (R.D. Reid). The group is able to repair the RV right before zombies start to attack the barn and kill Samuel. On the road again, the group encounters another group of survivors who have managed to fortify a warehouse full of supplies. The group follows the survivors to the warehouse

where they are able to rest and restock. While there, Debra gets a text from her brother that they are safe, and Ridley contacts Jason via webcam telling him to come to his mansion in Philadelphia.

Getting back on the road, the group finally gets to Debra's home, finding that her entire family is already dead and has become zombies. Unable to stay at Debra's house, the group decides to travel to Ridley's mansion, only to find that all of Ridley's staff and family are dead and Ridley has been bitten. Ridley quickly turns into a zombie and attacks the group, killing Elliot and biting Jason. Not wanting to turn into a zombie, Jason has Debra shoot him. Realizing that they have little to no hope of escape or rescue, the remaining group lock themselves in Ridley's panic room as hundreds of zombies invade the mansion. The film ends with Debra vowing to finish Jason's documentary on the zombie apocalypse, *The Death of Death*.

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