

(Zombie) Revolution at the Gates: *The Dead, The “Multitude” and George A. Romero*



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I. Introduction

*But if you go carrying pictures of Chairman Mao,
You ain't gonna make it with anyone anyhow...*
– The Beatles, 'Revolution'

Your revolution is over Mr. Lebowski. Condolences – the bums lost!
– The Big Lebowski

Revolution is not exactly what it used to be. Historically an activity where the sleeping giant of exploited workers/nations/people awoke to address the brutal inequities of a specific system of oppression (be they bourgeoisie, colonizers or nations), the term, sadly, has become devalued and is now most often used to sell us something, or to tell us how much more the product that we ought to buy has improved (with its *revolutionary* new process of air-freshening/space-saving/cutting things). While the terms 'revolution' and 'revolutionary' still imply participation, the nature of this participation has been utterly

transformed in the contemporary cultural milieu from an active process specifically designed to incite change to the contemporary imperative to *actively consume*, a process that is itself ultimately passive.

Faced with the seemingly infinite options of revolutionary activities condoned by the market, how can the contemporary subject possibly be expected to choose one over another? Does he/she, for instance, join the Green Revolution or the Pepsi Revolution? Does he/she discuss the Cultural Revolution or play "Dance Dance Revolution Extreme"? The time-honoured symbols of revolution offer no comfort for this individual, though it is true that the iconic image of Che Guevara actively adorns the T-Shirts, hats and jean jackets of the latest generation in a dazzling display that likely have Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes and of course, Karl Marx, screaming to us from beyond their graves: their prophetic words echoing in our over-stimulated ears.

The same phenomenon occurs with the figures (and images) of Bob Marley and Che Guevara – whose postered countenances grace the walls of many a dorm room in university campuses – and whose iconic presence determines the pretense of an ideological position for the consumer, without them having to do anything besides purchase these symbols that effectively ‘stand for’ their respective ideological stances (i.e. revolution, Rastafarianism, the decriminalization of marijuana to name but a few).

film, and David Fincher’s *Fight Club*, both in 1999) assert that the presence of ‘revolutionary’ material can now be found within the site of the contemporary Blockbuster. Among the loudest of these voices is Slavoj Žižek, who lifts a line directly from *The Matrix* for the title of his book on the September 11th attacks: “Welcome to the Desert of the Real.” In addition to his contention that *The Matrix* is a film worthy of analysis under the rubric of ‘revolution,’ Žižek presents *Fight Club* as an even clearer example of a

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The adoption of a particular ‘stance’ has its equivalent in cinema, where images and concepts that seemingly ‘stand for’ something are more likely assuming a popular (and non-threatening) position, or are merely ‘posing’ rather than making an actual statement. We must consider the relative harmlessness and diffusion of the ‘political’ content of all of this ‘revolutionary material’ within the contemporary space of the market.

Though the issue of passive reception has largely fallen out of fashion in contemporary film theory, nevertheless there remain compelling reasons to investigate movies that purport to depict revolutionary activity while at the same time reinscribing the status quo. Often enough a term like the “Freedom Revolution”¹ most often means the opposite of what it implies; namely, tax cuts for the already wealthy at the expense of social programs to aid the lower classes. It is imperative that we trace how this diffusion of political (and, in particular, ‘revolutionary’) content travels meta-linguistically and comes to inform what is perhaps our most democratic of cultural institutions: the site of contemporary Hollywood film. This phenomenon (the now Orwellian commonplace of words meaning their exact opposite or the “newspeak” of *1984*) is no stranger to Hollywood which, it must be stated, plays a central role in this diffusion (*and emptying out*) of cultural meaning; if it is not responsible for it entirely.

Examining Hollywood’s ‘revolutionary’ films has recently found new utility in the writings of certain (Left) cultural critics, whose analyses of particular movies (including the Wachowski Brothers’ original *Matrix*

film that offers viewers the subversive pleasure of presenting revolutionary material within the site of a Hollywood and through a model of product consumption to boot.² Here, the theorist attributes positive ‘revolutionary’ qualities to the film (which questions the possibility of the contemporary subject dislodging himself from the Capitalist system) in addition to qualities that actively enable the viewer to imagine what Žižek formulates as the “Leninist break.” For Žižek the fundamental problem with the contemporary political debate lies in the discursive schism of “ethics” and “politics.” He characterizes this issue as the “deadlock” between the Left and Right which permeates the sphere of modern political theory. Furthermore, he accuses the Left of flooding this sphere with demands that are totally unrealizable, including “full employment” and the absolute return to the “welfare state.” These requests, in his view, will always and “by definition fall short of the unconditional ethical demand” (Žižek 2001, 1). Instead, what these pleas represent is the desire by Leftists to advocate “grand projects of solidarity, freedom,” while “ducking out” when it is time to pay the cheque (3).

What the Leninist break accomplishes is not only the possibility to realign the system but also that it

...aims neither at nostalgically *reenacting* the “good old revolutionary times,” nor the opportunistic-pragmatic *adjustment* of the old program to “new conditions,” but at *repeating*, in the present world-wide conditions, The Leninist gesture of initiating a political project that would undermine the totality of the global liberal-capitalist world order and furthermore, a project that would unabashedly assert itself as acting on behalf of truth, as intervening in the present global situation from the standpoint of its repressed truth (4).

¹ This phrase was used by Republican majority leader Dick Armey in 1995, and reflects the growing use of what was previously viewed as the language of the Left not only to bring Conservative movements to power to The United States, but internationally as well. See Paul Krugman, “A Failed Revolution”, Op-Ed, *New York Times*, December 29, 2006.

² Here Žižek states that “[t]he thing to do... is not aggressively to protect the safety of our [Capitalist] Sphere, but to shake ourselves out of the fantasy of the Sphere – how?” His answer comes in the form of *Fight Club*, a film that he not only calls “an extraordinary achievement for Hollywood,” but one which “tackles this deadlock head-on” (Žižek, 2002, 250).

Central to Žižek's thesis is the idea that this break must replay not only the moment that the revolutionary struggle attaches itself to "a collectivity" but also the period before it attaches to a proper institution (*ibid.*).

However, instead of depicting what Žižek characterizes as the appetite for 'revolutionary material' within *Fight Club* and *The Matrix*, this content only serves as a staging ground for exploiting and maintaining what is very clearly a market. Rather than feeding a genuine desire to overthrow the system, what these films offer instead is an entry point into the 'revolutionary market' – a demographic which is historically occupied by males aged 16-24 – in short, the precise audience that Hollywood executives have historically always actively sought out³. This market thus resembles Hollywood's initial marketing towards (and invention of) the male "teen-age" demographic, where films featuring bikers, hoods and "rebels without causes" merely find their equivalents today as computer hackers, really fast drivers or people who beat each other up in basements. In short, the common denominator linking these films is the basic fact that their protagonists, from Neo to Tyler Durden all rely entirely on the cinematic template (and thus the generic incarnation) of the 'rebel.'

In this strict sense these movies embody the opposite of what Žižek argues houses their subversive potential; instead of changing the cultural moment that he describes as being characterized by the desires for "coffee without caffeine", "war without war", and "revolution without any blood", the films merely reinforce the status quo (Žižek 2006, 309). This sanitized version of revolution, which Žižek paradoxically argues elsewhere, ultimately ends up resembling the desire of the contemporary Left: the liberal dream of "decaffeinated revolution" fuelled by the desire for "a revolution which will not smell" or "in the terms of the French Revolution, a 1789 without 1793" (*ibid.*).

The imperative question, therefore, not only involves locating the depiction of the "real" revolutionary impulse within the site of contemporary film (if it

the political climate from which they emerge.

The problem is not that Žižek's theoretical impulse – to test the possibility of revolution within film

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exists), but also the construction of a template – and perhaps a generic model – for this depiction. Consequently, this essay will test earlier modes of 'revolution' (such as those proposed by Žižek) critiquing them while offering its own solution to the important issues that Žižek raises, namely, what a revolutionary film might look like.

I propose that that we look to the resurgence of the zombie film in order to view how "revolutionary consciousness" is worked out within contemporary movie culture. I will modify early theories of the Horror film (such as those of Robin Wood and Barry Keith Grant) with contemporary Marxist theory – including Fredric Jameson's reading of class and allegory in films he dubs "political" along with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's writings on what they term "The Multitude" – to reconsider this increasingly popular form. Finally, I will attempt to re-situate the zombie film and its resurgence as a 'political eruption' of subgeneric material, and assert that this specific form (as with other subgenres, such as heist and the conspiracy films) only emerges within a *very specific* set of historical circumstances: circumstances which not only relate to, but that also embody

– is misguided, rather, he simply finds inadequate films to prove these assertions: films that ultimately counter his thoughts via their obvious commodification and easy consumption by audiences. These issues extend to the problematic missing central feature of these films; namely that the representation of the people or, as stated by Gilles Deleuze, the "[p]eople who are missing."⁴ In this sense neither *Fight Club* nor *The Matrix* can be considered revolutionary films because they only depict the problems of an 'oppressed' white minority who are saved and redeemed by a violent white saviour. It is impossible to credibly posit the idea of revolution without at least considering the presence of these oppressed workers or those with genuine grievances against the system. We should add that the representation of these demographics, in the form of African, Asian, First Nations and Mexican Americans among many others – barely scratch the surface of Hollywood film, despite their obvious presence in American society. In this sense the missing underclass of proletarians (Marx's *lumpenproletariat*) or even "workers," essential to the history of revolutionary politics, are entirely absent, and as

³ While there are many informed studies on this subject, John Belton's *American Cinema/American Culture*. New York: Rutgers University Press, 2005, pp. 304-325, provides an excellent overview on the development of this demographic.

⁴ "This acknowledgement of a people who are missing is not a renunciation of political cinema, but on the contrary the new basis on which it is founded, in the third world and for minorities" (Deleuze, 209).

such, Žižek's assertions lack a suitable cinematic example to apply his theories to.

I maintain that the Zombie films stage and test this political material, and furthermore, that their existence on the margins of Hollywood as a subgenre allow for them to transmit material that is not possible to within

taunting birds, and the stoned "club girl" – all resemble their incarnations before they became zombies. In short, the zombie world that the film presents *is no different than the world that existed before the infection.*

This phenomenon is similar to Žižek's "thought experiment" regarding Alfred Hitchcock's 1963

else besides the local pub on a date), and reconcile with his stepfather and his mother while at the same time figuring out a way to include his best friend (lazy slob Ed) into his adult life. What the film's strange outbreak of zombies provides Shaun with is the opportunity to step up and solve the domestic issues which plague him. This is exemplified by the 'to do list' that he writes himself on the fridge after a drunken binge. These immediate goals include: "[sic.] Go Round Mums" "Get Liz Back" and "Sort Life Out!" Up until this point in the film, everyone that Shaun encounters has looked like a zombie, but not been one (as demonstrated by the scene where he takes a bus ride full of sickly people earlier in the day). It is on this particular morning, when he decides to take action to straighten out his life, that a zombie outbreak occurs and Shaun has no choice but to reconcile these issues by confronting them (and the zombies) head-on.

Shaun of the Dead's narrative provides Shaun with the opportunity to solve the most important of his domestic relationships (coming to terms with his stepfather, and his buddy Ed) by way of their individual transformations into zombies. These narrative events allow Phillip to tell Shaun he is proud of him – in addition to allowing Shaun a violent literalisation of Oedipal drama in which he kills his step father – and further enables Ed to occupy the same role he inhabited before. In the latter case, Ed's transformation *actually legitimizes* Shaun's friendship with him, and his laziness and video game playing is henceforth justified by the fact that instead of being living and lazy he is now a member of the "living dead." What this brief consideration illuminates is that the logic that Žižek applies to *The Birds* is equally pertinent to the personal dramas of the zombie genre. I will now attempt to apply Žižek's thought experiment to other zombie films – including *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002) and *Land of the Dead* – as they are all excellent examples of how this phenomenon manifests itself throughout these films.

Having dealt with the "domestic" inflections of the genre (Žižek's issue of 'failed signification' or the way in which zombies stand as oblique markers of inherent domestic

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the larger context of mainstream Hollywood cinema. This phenomenon can be seen within the resurgence of the Zombie film which offers a vision of what Žižek would describe as the revolution (with blood!). Furthermore, what these films offer is precisely the essential, messy detail that all of his examples lack – the construction, and more importantly the *representation* of 'the masses' – which is not only essential to the consideration of a "revolutionary film," but to the conception of revolution itself.

The Zombie film offers us a meaty solution to this problem, as the recent series of films taken together provide the viewer both the representation of revolution within the space of contemporary popular discourse (particularly in George A. Romero's latest offering *Land of the Dead*, 2005), but do so in such a way that they become legitimately political documents in ways that *The Matrix* and *Fight Club* are not.

II. *The Little Red (Zombie) Book*

In the opening sequence of *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright, 2004) several scenes depict the average citizens of London as they begin their morning commute. The homeless, the sick and people listening to their walkmans are all seemingly in a trance-like state. This scene is utilized for comic effect later, as the "infected" that protagonist Shaun encounters – the homeless man he regularly gives change to, the weird guy in the park

film *The Birds*, where the presence or absence of the attacking birds merely serves as a pretense for what was already occurring within the film: namely, the domestic drama between socialite Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren), dashing lawyer (and love interest) Rod (Mitch Brenner), and his mother (Jessica Tandy). What occurs throughout this film, in Žižek's view, is that the birds do not simply attack because they are strangely motivated, but rather, that they serve to emphasize what essentially constitutes the domestic drama of the film. In this regard

...the birds, far from functioning as a "symbol" whose "signification" can be detected, on the contrary *block, mask*, by their massive presence, the film's "signification," their function being to make us *forget*, during their vertiginous and dazzling attacks, with what, in the end, we are dealing: the triangle of a mother, her son, and the woman he loves. If the "spontaneous" spectator had been supposed to perceive the film's "signification" easily, then the birds should quite simply have been *left out* (Žižek 1991, 106).

The affinity between the two forms (*The Birds* and the Zombie film) should be obvious as *Shaun of the Dead* essentially enacts a parallel plot to Hitchcock's film.

Here, a 28-year old electronics salesman (Shaun, played by Simon Pegg) must find a way to fix the errant threads of his personal life that he has ignored for most of his adulthood. These issues encapsulate his domestic sphere: he must deal with his overbearing roommate, negotiate the relationship with his girlfriend Liz (who insists on being taken somewhere

drama) I would now like to turn my attention to the genre's depiction of politics. Here, I will argue, following the assertions of Robin Wood, that the Horror genre deals with the representation of "repressed material" in general, and that the Zombie film deals with the "repression" of racial

sensible people rather than as mere stereotypes.

Robin Wood's early theories of the horror genre are useful here, as he claims that the horror film essentially presents the nightmarish versions of issues that are "repressed" within the "normality" of a society. Central

fusion made possible by the shared structures of a common ideology. It becomes easy, if this is granted, to offer a simple definition of horror films: they are our collective nightmares. The conditions under which a dream becomes a nightmare are that the repressed wish is, from the point of view of consciousness, so terrible that it must be repudiated as loathsome, and that it is so strong and powerful as to constitute a serious threat (70).

To return to the opportunity that representing racial politics provides, *Night of the Living Dead* takes this issue a step further as the film's protagonist Ben (Duane Jones) somehow manages to live through the "night" by locking himself in a basement to survive the onslaught. When morning finally arrives, and local militiamen arrive to kill off the zombies, Ben is mistaken for one and is subsequently not only shot, *but thrown on a fire with a meat hook* by the rowdy crowd. This final sequence of the film – rendered by a series of still photographs that resemble existing documents of lynching – even exploits the medium that these events are usually captured by (photography) and the pyre is indistinguishable from the imagery of a KKK rally.

The application of Wood's and Žižek's theories to this horrific image is extremely revelatory, as the previously hidden (repressed) commonplace of racism within the context of the domestic sphere is revealed by the 'phenomenal' expression of zombies. In this precise sense, the manifestation of zombies demonstrates Wood's "return of the repressed" and systematized "oppression" *plus* Žižek's "failed symbolization": a process (the unfurling of the narrative) that reveals both the basic American domestic situation (and by combining these two elements, 'domestically political') circa 1968. What becomes clear (as in the instance of *Shaun of the Dead*) is that the world without zombies and the world with zombies are *inherently the same*.

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politics in particular. As proof I will briefly consider the genre's modern history, ranging from its appearance in the late Sixties, through George A. Romero's subsequent films in the 70s, 80s and 90s.⁵ Finally, I will return to my discussion of the genre's recent revival and discuss its ramifications in terms of contemporary 'revolutionary politics.'

It needs to be stated at the outset that the zombie movie, as a subgenre of the horror mode, was always a staging ground for political issues, if it was not inherently political to begin with.⁶ *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) has long been considered one of the most overtly political films of its era regarding the issue of racism and must be seen as tilling the broken ground of Norman Jewison's *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), and Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (1967). Because these films present an active and capable black protagonist, they must be viewed as films that advance the nascent cause of the Civil Rights Movement. Most importantly, they are inherently political insofar as they actually present other races (Sidney Poitier as a doctor and a sheriff) as

to this discussion is the depiction of "the Other." For Wood, "Otherness represents that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with..." and what takes place either through a psychological process of "repression" or "oppression" (66). Wood's categories of Otherness include other people, women, children, cultures in addition to "*the proletariat*" and "*Ethnic groups within the culture*" (66-67 – italics in original). This representation of Otherness is not limited to the depiction of the "monster" within the horror genre, but is a cinematic tradition which dates back to the "Yellow Peril" films about Fu Manchu in the 1910s and 20s, to the "Indian" in Westerns, and to the portrayal of enemy combatants in War films.⁷

These political issues urge us to view the horror film as a mediation of these societal fears. Wood's characterization of the popular nature of the horror film provides a rational explanation for the ongoing appeal of the genre. Here, the author states:

Popular films, then, respond to interpretation as at once the personal dreams of their makers and the collective dreams of their audiences, the

⁵ Though other Zombie films have existed before and after this limited examination of them, I have chosen Romero's work strictly because of its distinct political overtones and also his huge influence on the genre: as the filmmaker has made a new *Dead* film in the last four decades, thus making him an ideal case study in this regard.

⁶ Wood, among other writers also considers *Night of the Living Dead* among the first forms of protest to the Vietnam War. See Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan...and Beyond*, for more evidence of this material.

⁷ In this respect, I am tempted to characterize Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001) as an honorary Zombie film: a category which would also include Howard Hawks' *Rio Bravo* (1959) and John Carpenter's *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) in terms of the *besieged* (Wood's term) nature of the protagonists as they barricade themselves against the continued onslaught of "Others."

⁸ It should also be noted that this disturbing material is excised from Zack Snyder's remake *Dawn of the Dead*, 2004.

It is clear that the ‘domestically political’ issue of race stands at the fore of Romero’s next film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) which begins with a dramatic S.W.A.T. team raid of a housing project. While critics have largely ignored this disturbing opening

102). Romero’s continued work on the *Dead* films accentuates this shift in “humanity” from the side of the protagonists to the side of the Other. In short, by witnessing the survivors’ “inhuman” responses to the invasion (by torturing and performing cruel

a “cure” to the outbreak. It is also in this film that Romero adds to the genre’s ongoing development with the introduction of “Bub”: a zombie who not only undergoes training by the scientists but also dehumanization at the hands of the military.

As with the previous film, where the zombies were impulsively drawn to the shopping mall, returning to a place they felt ‘comfortable’ while living, Wood cautions our reading this phenomenon as “humanity” outright, but instead “[t]he implications of this definition” (as human) “need to be carefully pondered, as it is obviously both true and false. The zombies are human insofar as they are “reduced to their residual ‘instincts.’” Further, they don’t communicate “except in terms of an automatic ‘herd’ instinct, following the leader to their next food supply” (289). A central aspect of *Day* tests

Wood’s theory directly, as Dr. Logan, chief scientist in the bunker, restores a semblance of Bub’s living memories through a series of punishments and rewards (*ibid.*). These impulses include remembering how to shave and appreciating music. When Bub is freed, he also remembers how to carry an M-16 rifle (as he was once a soldier) and shoots the main villain in this film (the military commander Captain Rhodes.)

What this ongoing discussion of the zombies’ “humanity” presumably demonstrates is the degree to which the representation of the monster as “Other” changes over the course of Romero’s work, and moreover, how this depiction not only comes to positively inform the political discussion of racial representation but its absence in contemporary popular culture. Where for Wood this “herd” mentality basically accounts for the zombies’ patterns of consumption, the introduction of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s concept of the “Multitude” can bring to light the action of this new conception (and newly-inflected politicization) of their behaviour. These instincts thus resemble the “network attack” which counter Wood’s “mindless consumption,” and instead

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sequence – in favour of reading the film’s shopping mall setting as Romero’s critique of Capital⁸ – it is nevertheless a crucial marker of the zombie films inherent politics. Rather than presenting us with the random rural populace of the outskirts of Pittsburgh, what is so disturbing about this sequence is the transformation the poor residents of this urban housing project. While other characters have the benefit of mobility in the film, it is clear that the misfortune of living in this poor setting dooms the project’s residents to a violent, unfortunate death.⁹ While the rest of the film essentially follows a band of characters attempt to fortify themselves in a shopping mall, I think that the racial (and class) composition of the zombies in this case, prefigured as they are in this film as *poor*, is crucial for the consideration of the genre as political.

Wood has commented on the shifting portrayal of zombies between Romero’s two films, and this is marked by the transition of sympathies (which was alluded to in *Night*, but never made explicit) from the band of survivors to the *zombies themselves*. Here, “the zombies of both films are not burdened with those actively negative connotations” and, in no way resemble what he dubs “the evil incarnate” of other horror films (Wood,

experiments on the zombies) the viewer ends up actively rooting for their ultimate destruction at the hands of the monsters. This is demonstrated by the *28 Days Later*’s jarring ending, where the imprisoned zombie is set free to wreak havoc on his human captors.

The work of Romero’s first three *Dead* films serve as an pretense to demonstrate the inherent *inhumanity* of the survivors, as the zombies are not only killed throughout these films, but in certain disturbing scenes, horribly mistreated as well. This heinous conduct, which usually takes place within the auspices of large groups (the posse of the first film, the biker gang of the second, the scientists and military of the third) is precisely what prompts *Dawn*’s protagonist Francine to exclaim “we’re them and they’re us...”

This shift in narrative agency and audience sympathy is also part of the implicit movement within the series’ third film, *Day of the Dead* (1985). This movie, which Wood characterizes as “[i]f not quite about the end of *the world*,” (Wood, 294) takes place in a bunker under further deteriorating circumstances – where we are told that the zombie population outnumbers the human population “400,000 to 1” – and where military and scientists band together in order to formulate

⁹ Here, the “progressive” depiction of blacks in the first film is replaced by their (in Wood’s terms) “monstrous” depiction. The content of this sequence also oddly resembles the reports of the 1969 police raid of the Black Panthers, in which one of the group’s leadership, Fred Hampton, was killed amongst the building’s other residents.

is described as a swarm because it appears formless. Since the network has no center that dictates order, those who can only think in terms of traditional models may assume it has no organization whatsoever – they see mere spontaneity and anarchy. The network attack appears as something like a swarm of birds or insects in a horror film, a multitude of mindless assailants, unknown, uncertain, unseen and unexpected. If one looks inside a network, however, one can see that it is indeed organized, rational, and creative. It has swarm intelligence (Hardt and Negri, 91 – italics in original).

The utility of this passage should be self-evident and can be said to synthesize the issues that Romero's films have presented us with thus far. In other words, the zombies (as 'swarm' in this case) are rational insofar as they possess the ability to look for openings, utilize crude skills, and eventually overwhelm via their inherently cooperative nature. In the zombie film, this continued evolution includes the depiction of positive black protagonists who are killed by mobs (*Night*), the representation of an institutional force taking out what is essentially a poor black housing project (*Dawn*), and finally to the absolute re-humanization of the zombie by way of their increasingly potent mental faculties (*Day*).¹⁰

So far, I have attempted to elaborate the particular manner in which the representation of the lower classes is politicized within the site of popular film. The mobilization of these disparate classes should be seen as an alternative to the revolutionary (Leninist) politics that Žižek insists exists within the sites of *The Matrix* and *Fight Club*. The key assumption here lies in the assertion that we accept Romero's oeuvre as political reactions to the contemporary cultural milieu particularly as they deal with issues of class and race. Here, the mobilization of zombies resembles the mobilization of the lower classes: a concept that I maintain is essential to the cinematic depiction of revolution.

I want to be clear to maintain that this discussion of racial politics has as

much to do with the representation of disparate races, classes and genders within these films than it does to do with the conception of the poor. What I have characterized as the revolutionary action of the zombies also corresponds to the common denominator of all of these issues. Once again, Hardt and Negri's words provide us with a fair

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guideline, as their views relate not so much to the “suburban underclass” of *Fight Club* but to the proper conception of a revolutionary consciousness. Here, “[t]he only non-localizable ‘common name’ of pure difference in all eras is that of the poor” (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 156 – italics in original). Further, “[t]he poor is destitute, excluded, repressed, exploited – and yet living! It is the common denominator of life, the foundation of the multitude” (*ibid.*). At this point the link between the poor as the “excluded...yet living” and the “living dead” is more than apparent, as is the correspondence between the “multitude” and its constitutive unit, the zombie.

III. You Do Not Talk About Lenin...

Having traced the history of the zombie film it is now possible to see how these political issues – including considerations of otherness, representation of diverse races in addition to personal issues – inform the recent resurgence of the genre. The opening sequences of both *28 Days Later* and *Dawn of the Dead* foreground the genre's political

purpose, but with a slight modification. In both instances the scale of the critical target has changed in addition to its mode of representation. By combining actual media footage of recent anti-globalization (and antiwar) protests with staged footage of a zombie takeover, the connections between global politics

and representation of alternative voices becomes immediately apparent. One further characteristic should be noted, as both films emulate recent coverage of the Middle East as well, which serves as a clear indication that the magnitude of the films' political resonance has changed to address the particular concerns of its era. Following my earlier assertions about *Shaun of the Dead* it should be clear that the world as depicted within these films (with their outbreaks of zombies) and the world in which we live are no different from each other. The modification that takes place is from the domestically political (*Shaun of the Dead*), to the nationally political (*Day of the Dead*), to internationally/globally political (*28 Days Later*, *Dawn of the Dead*).

Though we can attempt a “political” reading of both films, we must be careful in doing so. I propose one final theoretical model that will aid my consideration of the genre as inherently political. While we should keep in mind Fredric Jameson's assertion that political content in Hollywood film is immediately co-opted and digested within the system

¹⁰ I should mention that though Romero does not specifically make a film in the 90s, scholar Barry Keith Grant considers the remake of *Night of the Living Dead* as one of the director's own works. His criteria includes the fact that the script is based on Romero's original and that it is directed by Tom Savani, who worked as Romero's make-up and special-effects supervisor on the original film. This remake makes the class antagonism of the first film even more explicit, with the introduction of new political inflections and “class (stereo)types”. These include the overall-wearing “yokel” Uncle Rege, and his nephew and his girlfriend (Tom and Judy Rose) who are transformed from two all-American kids in the first film to “bumpkins” as well. Finally, and most importantly, the Coopers (the people who hide out in the basement) are even more obnoxious and Harry is even greedier (and it should be stated, *more stereotypically Jewish*) than in the first film. In short, what the first film does extremely well – in terms of the representation of the various class antagonisms within the overall structure of the film's plot – the 1990 film depicts these issues in an extremely over-the-top (and it should be stated, terrible) fashion.

that produces it, we should also remind ourselves that this is precisely the missing component in Žižek's analyses of *Fight Club* and *The Matrix*. Nevertheless, Jameson states (in a manner resembling Wood's reasoning of the horror film as a nightmare) that

and rally against institutions – usually the military, police, and industries – of oppression instead. Since our conception of class consciousness has essentially been ruptured via the homogenization of culture, we need alternate means to see that these issues

shift in the scale of the genre. *28 Days Later*'s moment of conception, coming after the September 11th attacks, but preceding the invasion of Iraq, also speaks to the ongoing manifestation of authoritarian British culture (as demonstrated by the preceding footage

“In other words, the ‘stars’ of the zombie film are literally overrun by the ‘extras’: a phenomenon which is emblematic not only of revolutionary consciousness, but essentially resembles the reality of the global situation in cinematic form.”

films, as works of mass culture, deal with a society's unconscious life. This particular formulation accounts for 'class consciousness' which has all but disappeared within the Capitalist

cultural sphere in general, and film in particular. Jameson suggests that certain structures within mass culture (particularly in genre films) must be read *allegorically*. The information that they contain need not be interpreted outright, but should be read polysemously instead (Jameson, 26). Jameson defines this mode of analysis in his reading of *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1977) where he urges us not to interpret the shark as representative of anything in particular – it doesn't stand for anything – but more importantly he views it as an object which allows the characters in the film (of different social statuses) to rally together in order to defeat it. In Jamesonian terms, the zombies – as the various classes of society – gain the opportunity to rise up against their substandard conditions

still exist, which is precisely what mass culture can aid us in finding (26-27).

Jameson's solution to this problem resides within the very structure of the Hollywood star system, which places greater emphasis on some actors and relegates others to the background. This conception can be put to immediate use in our discussion as it relates to the internal possibility that the form employs. Here, the formal structure of the genre inherently depicts the revolutionary (class) consciousness rather than having to present these issues directly within their narratives.¹¹ In other words, the “stars” of the zombie film are literally overrun by the “extras”: a phenomenon which is emblematic not only of revolutionary consciousness, but essentially resembles the reality of the global situation in cinematic form.¹²

In terms of this “global” reading, *28 Days Later* attempts to mediate the shift from local (and national) to global issues (as exemplified by its opening sequence) in addition to the

of protests and the brutal response of riot police) in mainstream film in addition to dealing with rhetoric of disease (as exemplified by the SARS outbreak of 2002-03). In these instances, both *28 Days Later* and the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* embody Wood's characterization of the horror film as a collective nightmare, but do so in such a way that it is not the zombies that we are afraid of, but the systems of containment that are established in order to combat them.¹³

28 Days Later features one further transformation that is emblematic of the latest incarnation of the genre. This change takes place within the space of the narrative, where the protagonist, Jim (Cillian Murphy) must essentially inhabit the position of the zombie in order to free his friends from the military installation where they are being held captive. The film makes this transformation explicit, as Jim, shirtless and pale, literally rises from the pile of corpses that he laid in to escape from being shot and

¹¹ “For the whole qualitative and dialectical relationship is mediated by the star system itself... [i]ndeed we reach each of the major actors in terms of their distance from the star system...” and “our reading of this particular narrative is not a direct passage from one character or actant to another, but passes through the mediation of our identification and decoding of the actors' status as such” (Jameson, 1992, 52).

¹² Here we should recall the situation of *Day of the Dead* where the number of zombies (400,000 to 1) is roughly equivalent to the actual world situation, where 1% of the population owns 99% of the wealth. In short, what the zombie genre's latest “nightmare” depicts – as embodied by its new, “global” conception – is what occurs when the rest of the world's population comes to collect the money they are “owed.”

¹³ It should also be noted that the Wachowski Brothers latest film, *V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue, 2005) uses this material (a totalitarian government formed in the wake of a chemical attack) as its staging ground as well. *Vendetta*, when considered with Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) and *28 Days Later* begs for analysis of the cinematic phenomenon of global plague, its specific location in England and an uprising in each of their narratives, but this is the subject of an entirely different essay.

subsequently frees the zombie that the military has been keeping on a leash to aid him. Finally, Jim explicitly employs the “tactics” of the zombies when he bites the esophagus out of one of his captors. What this film presents, therefore, is the possibility (and indeed the necessity) of having to *negotiate*

raids of these small towns in order to get supplies. In terms of this scavenger imagery, the film resembles the works of George Miller and the post-apocalyptic visions of his *Mad Max Trilogy*.

The major modification that *Land* provides – in addition to the cultural

the film’s representation of ethnicity, gender and class, beg its inclusion for the ongoing evolution (and complication) of the genre’s message.

It should also be clear that the issue of class antagonism is present from the beginning, as there are two sets of under-classes (in short, the proletariat

“In this sense, the movement of the zombies in the movie resembles the slow gathering of masses in Sergei Eisenstein’s *Strike*...which is accented by a flimsy plot which provides a means to ally the audience’s sympathies with the zombies’ (and human poor’s) plight at the hands of their outlandishly rich oppressors.”

with the “Other” by either assuming their position or by walking a mile in their (zombie) shoes.

There is one final film I will discuss which brings all of this material – ranging from Žižek’s Leninist break, to the depiction of otherness within the horror film to the political consideration of the genre’s form/content to the shift in sympathy and finally to the assumption of otherness – together, and this is the latest zombie offering from George A. Romero, *Land of the Dead*.

This film, which critic Manohla Dargis describes as an “allegory...of our contemporary landscape” is the logical sequel to Romero’s other films, except that this time the zombie population and their human counterparts live in an uneasy balance. Here, the human population has taken refuge in the cities, whereas the zombies largely live in the outlying towns. In order to continue their existence, the humans have developed a system whereby they make daring

capital that the film inherits by way of its genealogy – is the issue that the division of class within society has once again become glaringly apparent. Here, the rich reside in a posh condo development called “Fiddler’s Green” (complete with a functional shopping mall at ground level), while the rest of the human populace either work for these figures to fulfill their needs, or beg for scraps in the ever-expanding slums of the city. The film not only presents the ascension of a new human bourgeoisie (who literally rise to the top of their luxurious tower) but also the excess of the human underclass. This formulation is further complicated by the encounter with an entirely new set of zombies, led by “Big Daddy”: a black zombie who continues to work at the gas station that he presumably owned in his lifetime. These zombies, the residents of “Uniontown,” who seem doomed to perform the same ritual duties that they did in their previous lives, namely they continue to “work” as they did when they were alive.¹⁴ This aspect, combined with

and *lumpenproletariat*) in addition to the reconstitution of a post-apocalyptic bourgeoisie. Finally, the portrayal of evil uber-capitalist Mr. Kaufman (Dennis Hopper) brings all these issues into clear focus, as the masses within the film essentially have a target to rise up against.

This is predictably what occurs within the film, as a daring raid by humans on the peaceful zombies of Uniontown (in what is described by one of the humans as “a massacre”) prompts Big Daddy not only to become conscious of the “inhumanity” of the situation, but also to assemble the residents and follow the humans to their stronghold. From here Big Daddy somehow wakes up the residents of the outlying towns, teaches them how to wield weapons, and even frees other zombies that have previously been imprisoned by the humans for the purposes of target practice.

When the assembled zombie army finally raids the luxury condo of the rich, they begin to merge with the human population, effectively doubling

¹⁴ To follow this discussion up, it is also worth mentioning the recent Canadian zombie film, *Fido* (Andrew Currie, 2006). This movie, set in 1950s small-town America, depicts a world where the zombies have been tamed via control collars and sold by a major corporation, “ZomCon” to families as workers to perform their menial tasks. This role, it should be noted, certainly evokes issues of dehumanization through work at best and slavery at the worst. The plot also modifies Todd Haynes’ revision of the melodramatic mode in *Far From Heaven* (2002) further by substituting a zombie in place of (black actor) Dennis Haysbert’s portrayal of the love interest in the film. The usefulness in mentioning this movie is that it takes this discussion of representation a step farther, by replacing all visible minorities (or non-white “workers”) with zombies entirely.

¹⁵ Reflecting on the film’s revolutionary politics and Big Daddy’s leadership, Dargis states “I guess Che really does live, after all” (*ibid.*)

the size of their army by combining the army of zombie poor with an army of human poor.¹⁵ In this sense, the movement of the zombies in the movie resembles the slow gathering of masses in Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925), which is accented by a flimsy plot which provides a means to ally the audience's sympathies with the zombies' (and human poor's) plight at the hands of their outlandishly rich oppressors. Finally, it should be noted that the film continues the movement that I outlined in *28 Days Later* by forcing one of the film's protagonists into the position of the Other. In this case, it is the transformation of Mexican-American, Cholo (played by John Leguizamo, who is already made somewhat of an outcast in the film due to his ethnicity) to the side of the zombie that marks this profound transition. After being both double-crossed by Kaufman, and bitten by a zombie, Cholo somehow retains enough of his consciousness to take his revenge on Hopper's character. The implied institutional racism previously exhibited by my reading of the earlier zombie films is made explicit here, as (Capitalist) Hopper exclaims "fucking spic bastard" while shooting at Cholo. This is followed by a gesture of solidarity between Big Daddy and Leguizamo, as Big Daddy aids Cholo in killing Hopper by burning him alive. What is important here is that their racial differences (which have been foregrounded throughout the film) are eradicated in the face of their commonalities as zombies and that they find a common enemy (Kaufman, as Jameson's polysemous entity) to rally against.

IV. Conclusion - Virtue and (Zombie) Terror

What I have attempted is a systemized approach to the issue of revolution, particularly within the site of popular culture. It was my aim to thoroughly investigate the various assertions on the subject of revolution that Slavoj Žižek scatters throughout his *oeuvre* and specifically those which deal with film. My rationale has been to negotiate the sometimes disparate relationship between what Žižek believes his examples represent and how they actually function. In this manner, the

only choice of the responsible critic is to test these theses and to offer a critique of them. My argument has thus taken place within the contested space of contemporary capital, and it should be noted that rather than dismissing Žižek's theories outright, I have actually sought to find more productive examples in order to aid the theorist's vision of revolutionary politics within the site of popular culture.

Here, inspired by Deleuze's statement regarding "a people who are missing," I have attempted to locate the depiction of a revolutionary politics within a mainstream form. Contrary to Žižek's thoughts that we can locate the Leninist Break within the Hollywood films *The Matrix* and *Fight Club*, I assert that this idea comes closer to fruition when a diverse vision of a/the people is represented. In other words, rather than presenting the contemporary subject/consumer with a white revolutionary savior, the zombie film offers a display of absolute difference and leadership through the form of the network. This representation finds its expression within alternate forms than Žižek names. Furthermore, I have sought to supplement his theories by placing them alongside other theoretical models, including Hardt, Negri and Jameson, in addition to the foundational work on the horror genre that Robin Wood provides. Finally, I have centered on a particular form of film that adequately synthesizes all of these concepts, as well as ultimately depicting an allegory of the contemporary sphere of Capital. Such a vision of resistance, it should follow – and which the zombie film represents – would ultimately develop a schema that could illustrate how this movement could occur. It is here that the rationale for my revisitation of the genre should become clear, as I have demonstrated how the zombie film (particularly in George A. Romero's hands) moves from local domestic issues (such as those of racism) to national issues (the depiction of alternate races and classes within the site of contemporary film) to global illustrations of protest (in *28 Days Later*).

Finally, I have discussed a particular film that brings all of these issues into clear focus: *Land of the Dead*. This film serves as a

clear example of how revolutionary consciousness can be depicted within the site of contemporary American film, as its narrative not only shows the coming together of disparate classes (the two separate bands of proletariat in the film) but also how the protagonist of the film (Cholo, Big Daddy) comes to assume the position of the Other within the space of the narrative, yet still retains his revolutionary consciousness.

It is only now, having found a suitable object of analysis, that I can follow Žižek's logic of the Leninist break. Moving on from here requires the fact that it is only by depicting a racially distinctive and diverse set of classes that we can even approximate what Žižek calls for and perform the break that will realign the system entirely.

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