



THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPTIC SCARE: POPULAR CINEMA AND CONTEMPORARY PANDEMIC POLITICS

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Abstract

Zombies or monstrous posthumans, wreaking havoc in a not-too-distant apocalyptic future, is one of the most lethal concepts of terror which has gained traction over the past couple of decades because as far as the “normal” human beings are concerned their worst enemies are aberrations of their own species — morbid mental deviants who impede their individual liberty and free will. Popular film and literature have taken advantage of this noxious paranoia against the so-called mentally deranged and have visualised many a post-apocalyptic world where sick infected 'ex-humans,' perilously incapacitated by mutated strains of rabies or mad-cow disease, throng the streets chasing “healthy” humans in order to bite them into submission. Likewise, the target audience too is bitten into submission not physically by the reel, ‘undead’ humans but ideologically by the real 'superhumans' who head biocorps and corp-controlled states. These filmic ideological state apparatuses, which seemingly oppose unscrupulous medical experiments, are weaved brilliantly to showcase a crisis which in turn reasserts the ruling ideology and the importance of further unethical research. This paradoxical discourse disseminated with the aid of crises is explored in depth by Naomi Klein in her work *The Shock Doctrine* (2007). The current COVID-19 crisis has served as a blessing for governments world over to push controversial policies and constitutional reforms which may otherwise be resisted by the public. The paper also discusses urban spatial injustice which has exacerbated during the crisis and how zombie movies promote a spatial binary which help in creating aversion to social movements.

Keywords: Zombie Films, Covid-19 Politics, Spatial Segregation, Apocalypse

If one is to map the history of the genre of what we claim as science fiction today one will notice that in the early stages it was nothing but writings based on pure fantasy and wild imaginations. With the advancement in science achieved during the 19th century, fantasy literature, till then looked down upon by many as absurd,

eccentric and even nonsensical, promptly gained much rational ground in its fight against undervaluation and cold-shouldering by the canon. The 20th century saw the gap between the bizarre and the probable narrowing further with the gradual breaking away of the ‘ridiculous’ tag from the etymology of the term science fiction. Now in

the 21st century the 'science' part of the term is under erasure giving way to the new umbrella term 'speculative.' This is because technology has actively pervaded our everyday culture and has demystified its intricacies. Today nothing is unknowable or unattainable as far as modern science is concerned. Speculative fiction has replaced science fiction as the new SF since no imagination is now too wild and no fantasy is now too exaggerated to be scientific in the new sense of the term. Margaret Atwood prefers the term speculative fiction when referring to her works since she believes 'science fiction' to be a label which "belongs on books with things in them that we can't yet do" (*Aliens*). She evinces a clear distinction between the two terms rather than using 'science fiction' as an umbrella term because according to her "speculative fiction means a work that employs the means already to hand, such as DNA identification and credit cards, and that takes place on Planet Earth" (*Aliens*). Thus 'speculative fiction' has come to become a genre foretelling stories weaved out of raw materials available in the present and pertaining to a near future which readers now believe can materialise and be experienced within their lifetimes.

This shift in perspective towards science/speculative fiction also prompted writers to concentrate more on futuristic earthly themes than those based on intergalactic space travel, the extraterrestrial etc. Futuristic cautionary tales of the apocalypse, with underlying social commentary, focusing on environmental abuse and its repercussions, nuclear war, unethical science experiments, end of civilisations, breakdown of morals etc. have pervaded our literary and filmic culture. Various apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic scenarios have been explored through the works of writers ranging from Mary Shelley, Edgar Allen Poe and H.G. Wells to Robert A. Heinlein, Margaret Atwood and Cormac McCarthy and also through works of film makers like Stanley Kubrick, George Romero, the Wachowskis, Alfonso Cuarón, Danny Boyle, Roland Emmerich and Zack Snyder.

Of these prophetic imaginations of impending doom the most horrific is that of the zombie apocalypse. Zombies or the 'living dead' or

the 'undead,' as they are euphemised in filmic circles, are clinically dead human beings with no vital functions happening except part of the brain kept alive by some mutated strain of a virus which aids in movement. They are dehumanized, indefatigable, and hyper-aggressive entities lacking fear, remorse, reason and reflexes. They are characterised only by their homicidal affinity towards the uninfected. Zombies may be looked at as a direct contrast to Atwood's "Crakers" in *Oryx and Crake* (2003), who are a bioengineered group of prototype neo-humans designed to populate the planet after the entire humanity is wiped out. They are dehumanised of all the ills possessed by their predecessors, the tragic flaws and deadly sins like temper, jealousy, malice, lust etc., to ensure their peaceful existence with no animosity among themselves. The zombies too are free of such fatal human emotions. It is the fatality itself they strive to achieve having been victimised themselves. The closest comparison available in the present day world is the plight of rabies infected humans who tend to bite and infect others in their vicinity.

The more realisable idea of zombies has, over the past few years, replaced the traditional gothic ghosts as the primary agents of horror in cinema. Ghosts are evil (black) magical and more importantly fantastic creatures. They are the omnipotent agents of Satan sent to disorient the lives of humans on earth. These surreal entities are above tangible existence and they go on haunting hapless humans until God himself is invoked to exorcise them. Such traditional horror movies are typically allegorical in nature with the conventional good-versus-evil plot.

Zombies, on the other hand, are products of rational extrapolations of current scientific knowledge. They are not fanciful imaginary mythical creatures like orcs or ogres and at the same time they are not extreme science-fictional humanoids like Kryptonians or Vulcans. They may be theoretical beings but unlike creatures in fantasy literature they are speculated as palpable beings and more importantly are conceived in the physical image of man which surely is the unique selling proposition of zombies. Nothing is more horrifying than the extreme corporeality of the zombies.

Images of humans against humans and the uncompromising physicality involved with the possibility that the predators can be anyone including one's family or close friend freezes one's blood, because as far as human beings are concerned her scariest enemies are those who pose immediate tangible threats. The "unscrupulous" neighbour who builds a fence encroaching on her property is considered more aggressive than the multinational corporation or the nation state which covertly employ ideological apparatuses to delude people into conforming. Keeping in mind the already existent paranoia, of the so called healthy people, against the "loonies" or the "crazies" and their ostracization from society, one might, from a layman's perspective, define zombies as mentally deranged machine-like savage humans who physically overcome the sane ones, eventually feasting on them. Thus a zombie apocalypse may be equated to a mass break out from mad houses and asylums all over with the "lunatics" thronging the streets unhinging every lucid soul they could find and creating one big bedlam.

The scenario is indeed horrifying but the argument here is that the representation of these scenarios in such movies is more than capable of sending the idiomatic chills down the spine. The seemingly innocuous scenes featuring ontologically corrupt transhumans or posthumans accomplish their purported task of inducing horror and at the same time surreptitiously work to terrorise the people into leading a life of dormancy. People are unknowingly coerced to live the so called ordinary middle class life abiding by the rules of the elite capitalistic world. Evidences pertaining to the above argument abound in zombie films especially in Hollywood productions.

Most of the scripts written are keen to despise, at the first given opportunity, the animalistic fervour espoused by the zombies. Zombies show a tendency to swarm which is essentially an animalistic method or means employed to achieve specific ends. Recognising the advantage of hunting in packs many species across the animal kingdom resort to this idea or are innately designed to work like-wise. Human beings too exhibit this inclination towards swarming when

events trigger mass protest marches or emancipatory and revolutionary political movements. It is the very same movements which states and governments have aimed to quell at first with the overt use of repressive state apparatuses like the police and the military and then covertly through popular entertainment media productions. The iconic CGI scene in Marc Foster's *World War Z* (2013) where hundreds of zombies pile themselves up to breach a very high wall built around the city of Jerusalem is a very clear allusion to images of crowds which have, over the years, thronged public spaces from Tianmen Square to Tahrir Square seeking liberty, justice and equality. Such movie visuals intend to incite aversion towards crowds by focusing specifically on their non-human nature. The extreme long shot framing of the scene ensures that the zombie pile up resembles an anthill or even maggots squirming on a dead body. Moreover the violence and the material destructive outcome of dissent demonstrations like the trail of burning cars, broken glass, abandoned placards and stone-sprinkled streets is equated to trails of destructions left by swarms of army ants or locusts. This particular comparison is made obvious in the credits sequence where images of busy commuters are juxtaposed with images of ants gathering food and a pack of snow wolves devouring and relishing their kill. These movies thus aim at social coaxing, if not coercion — a passive regimentation strategy whereby everyone is exhorted to fall in line. They follow the propagandist pattern of the mental hygiene film of the 1950's which were aimed at enforcing good behaviour and conservative moral values in juveniles prone to substance abuse —

Taking their cues from the training and propaganda films of World War II, mental hygiene films would often use scare tactics to enforce their message, presenting both an idealized vision of American youth and a potentially Apocalyptic one: Conforming to social mores would guarantee success, happiness and popularity. However, transgression or rebellion would bring dire consequences, not just for the individual but for society as a whole. (Towlson 67)

Zombie narratives, through scare tactics, educate people to stay away from mobs because they are, like zombies, single-minded and ruthless and will neither stop to think logically nor compromise until their goal is achieved, which is certainly not the enlightened human way of going about things. It is better to stay confined because it may not just be tear-gas shells or rubber bullets one may have to confront, but real metal bullets which are shot to kill, like in the case of zombies. The great flood of human monsters are coming, so better run to the safety of your ark rather than coming in the line of fire.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic crisis has provided those in power a testing ground to assess how much effect fear and death has on people complying with the government. Leaders around the world have already seized the opportunity to push through controversial policies and even constitutional changes behind the smokescreen created by the virus outbreak. The Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, declared that the country was in a state of emergency in view of the pandemic and on March 30, 2020 a bill was passed in the Hungarian Parliament which gifted him the power to rule by decree. The legislative authority of the parliament was suspended and a gagging order was imposed on the journalists. Although the law was lifted on June 16, 2020, given the authoritarian track record of Orbán, many believe this brief interlude is a sign of things to come. In Russia, the government has made an excuse of the crisis to ban protests and political demonstrations at a time when the President, Vladimir Putin, was pushing for constitutional reforms to extend his presidential tenure. The reforms have been passed by the parliament, but a referendum is scheduled on July 1, 2020 to seek popular support. Experts believe that the whole voting exercise is a sham to hoodwink the people. In India, the government is making use of this lull by actively targeting and incarcerating students and leftist intellectuals who led the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act from the front. In Hong Kong, as soon as the pro-democracy protestors of the extradition bill withdrew from the streets owing to COVID 19, China swooped in and set things in motion

concerning a new security law to be imposed on the city. The new law, in effect, would provide Chinese authorities with teeth to brand protestors as enemies of the state.

Human rights violations by repressive forces are legitimised with the backing of the privileged. They believe that such unfortunate incidents are “sporadic” and are collateral damage incurred in the line of work of the police and the military. The victims of such violations are often the have-nots and the minorities. George Floyd’s death in Minneapolis is a case in point. The massive protests that followed as part of the Black Lives Matter movement received support from all over and it showed the world that people would rather die with dignity than live a life under oppression. In other places, certain communities are being demonised by accusing them of deliberately spreading the virus. There has been an active effort by the far-right wing in India to blame the Muslims for aggravating the COVID crisis. Similarly government backed atrocities are being committed against the people of disputed territories while the rest of the world is preoccupied by the pandemic.

Apocalyptic extrapolations also promote spatial segregation and conform to the concept of gated communities where the affluent are assured of uninterrupted consumerist freedom without mingling with the vicious mobs of the “pleeblands” (Oryx 27). These high security compounds serve as fortresses for the super-rich saving them from the “fangs” of the common people who live in suburban shantytowns, slums and favelas:

The city that best embodies that division is Sao Paulo in Lula’s Brazil, which boasts 250 heliports in its central downtown area. To insulate themselves from the dangers of mingling with ordinary people, the rich of Sao Paulo prefer to use helicopters, so that, looking around the skyline of the city, one really does feel as if one is in a futuristic megalopolis of the kind pictured in films such as *Blade Runner* or *The Fifth Element*, with ordinary people swarming through the dangerous streets down below, whilst the

rich float around on a higher level, up in the air. (Zizek 5)

A spatial binary is thus asserted where the ground is crowded, contaminated and dangerous, while the air is less crowded, clean and safe. The only evacuation possible is through air. The privileged are airlifted to safe havens inaccessible to those infected underprivileged. In *World War Z*, Gerry, along with his family, is airlifted to a warship in the middle of the ocean because he is a former UN high-level employee and scientist and has the right contacts.

Thus one arrives at the alternative interpretation of the word 'movement,' watered down to the basic meaning of motion. The ability to move freely is one characteristic which distinguishes animals from plants and it is this very same feature that authoritarian states would love to negate. Extensive digitisation has already contributed to the people vegetating with the help of gadgets and now disaster movies too, especially those with the epidemic scenarios, inform us that if the compulsive mingling and socialising feature of the humans can be suspended the world would be a much safer place. Viewers of such movies are indoctrinated through advice from state controlled apparatuses like the police instructing Gerry to "Stay in your car" or the news readers and radio broadcasters shouting mayday warnings to the general public not to venture of out of their homes and reach loved ones. As a result of the epidemic, emergency is declared, martial law takes over and all rights are suspended as if legitimising its implementation in similar situations. The only right one can exercise is the right to remain silent as they say in the Miranda warning. Thus such movies impart a shock and disseminate the false idea that a solid government and its violent repressive apparatuses are essential for the good of all —

While crises do shake people out of their complacency, forcing them to question the fundamentals of their lives, the most spontaneous first reaction is panic, which leads to a "return to the basics": the basic premises of the ruling ideology, far from

being put into doubt, are even more violently reasserted. (Zizek 18)

The current COVID-19 crisis has normalised even the language of totalitarianism. Words and expressions like *lock-down*, *stay home stay safe*, *isolation*, *distancing* etc. have now become part of everyday language. It wouldn't be long before people start discussing — if they haven't already — the lock-down in Kashmir, the isolation of West Bank and the social distancing from Muslims as if these are only rational.

Earlier, zombie movies used to sport the traditional Romero zombies, slow and shambolic. Even after taking "necessary" precautions if one manages to confront a zombie, it has to be demobilised. Mobility is what makes a zombie lethal. Even though they are clinically dead beings, the motor neurons are kept active by the virus inside their brains. Therefore, in order to render them harmless, tactical physical violence needs to be executed, that is by "removing the head or destroying the brain" as counselled by the television news anchor in the movie *Shaun of the Dead* (2004). Bashing the brain is the only way to completely negate a zombie, similar to lobotomising the violent among the mentally ill. The authority is in a way lobotomising citizens with images of a destructive mob thereby persuading the citizens to stay within the safety of the four walls of their homes thus taking the sting out of rebellions. The passive citizens are in fact being tactfully coerced into despising the rebels so that people will always lead a vegetative existence and can be worked on without resistance.

This is similar to the political theory of shock therapy expounded by Naomi Klein in her work *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007). In the book she explains how governments utilise disasters which impart a shock to the masses and exploit their helpless traumatised state to wipe clean the status quo and establish a new order. She equates it to the methods of the American Psychiatrist, Ewen Cameron, who rejected the Freudian talk therapy and pioneered the shock treatment. He is believed to have collaborated with

the Central Intelligence Agency in conducting mind-control experiments. She says,

According to his published papers from the time, he believed that the only way to teach his patients healthy new behaviors was to get inside their minds and “break up old pathological patterns.” The first step was “depatterning,” which had a stunning goal: to return the mind to a state when it was, as Aristotle claimed, “a writing tablet on which as yet nothing actually stands written,” a tabula rasa. Cameron believed he could reach that state by attacking the brain with everything known to interfere with its normal functioning — all at once. It was “shock and awe” warfare on the mind. (31)

Thus by showcasing a crisis while striking fears regarding their ontological existence a shock is applied which prompts the viewers, “survivors of their own symbolic death,” to betray their radical thoughts and slip into a forced amnesia “ready to accept the new order” (Zizek 19).

It is ironical that the very ideology from which the crisis stems is often reasserted when finally a solution is agreed upon. More than often zombies are shown as ghastly outcomes of a government-initiated medical experiment misfiring or a deliberate letting loose of bio-weapons. Zombies are already seen as a kind of inevitability with the array of deadly viruses like AIDS, SARS and H1N1 proving to be the nemeses of millions around the planet and to add to that we now have ‘rogue’ viruses and microbes increasingly becoming resistant to antibiotics. Therefore the out-of-control situations depicted in disaster movies like *World War Z* are there to shock the viewers with violent images of science gone wild. Instead of advocating a turn of things for the better, this time the shock is administered to further the cause of scientific research. This is like saying that humans have reached a point of no return and if we turn back now there would not be anything left and this being the case it is imperative that we go ahead with more research and experiments to find the antidote. The antidote will obviously be another virus to counter the existing one. The protagonist in

World War Z uses typhus virus to evade detection by the zombies because in the movie zombies are blind to unhealthy or infected humans. He infects himself with a virus to escape being infected by a more deadly one; a perfect case where the cure and the disease are of the same origin. The same is happening in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic where there are allegations pertaining to its outbreak from a bio-weapons lab in Wuhan, China. It has been concluded that the only long term solution is vaccine. Many pharmaceutical companies in different countries have already been given the green signal to carry out even human trials. This stems from the desperation to find a cure as fast as possible — a desperation, ironically, caused in the first place by the very same science. Thus, what is to be despised and condemned is now sought after. Disasters, instead of causing mistrust in mad science, help to reinvigorate it.

Apart from giving thrills, representations of disaster aid in “counselling” the viewers to put their unconditional trust in their governments. Like educational films which overtly enjoin the audience to follow a specific path, disaster movies covertly and passively regiment the viewers through indoctrination by means of fear.

Disaster movies exploit the latent fear that recent events caused on the psyche on the masses, tapping into the anxiety and trauma they cause in order to create tension and terror in the viewers. Then, the “agenda” aspect of these movies kick in as they propose to the viewers the best (and only) way these issues can be resolved. (“Contagion”)

Such ideological inculcation is best achieved by shocking them out of their comfort zones by visually placing them in hypothetical worlds where humanity as we know today is non-existent. What the current COVID-19 exigency has achieved is the disrobing of the hypotheticality of cinema. The simulacrum has now become real and already those in power in different countries have managed to divert the attention of the masses to customised scapegoats. In such times of panic the public has to keep their eyes open to prevent themselves from

falling prey to the hypnotic wheels of their governments.

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