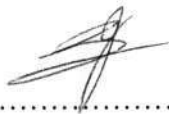


**Dead Reckoning: An analysis of George Romero's 'Living
Dead' series in relation to contemporary theories of film
genre and representations of race, class, culture and
violence.**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the academic requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the
Discipline of English, in the School of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg,
South Africa.

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or
diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the
published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text, and a list of references is
given.

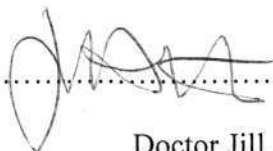


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As the candidate's supervisor I hereby approve the submission of the thesis for examination.



.....
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Abstract

This thesis is an in-depth analysis of George Romero's 'Living Dead' tetralogy of films, comprising *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985) and *Land of the Dead* (2005), examined through the lens of contemporary film genre theory. The project focuses specifically on issues of the representation of race, class, culture and violence in the four films, and how these representations, along with the concomitant social critique evident in Romero's work, change in response to the upheavals and developments which have occurred in the American social, cultural and political climate over the past four decades. It also focuses on how Romero's films respond to changes in the horror genre, and how Romero both structures his films on the binary oppositions which are central to the genre and deconstructs these oppositions, and the implications that this deconstruction (most notably that of the figure of the zombie, which occupies a zone of constantly shifting liminality between the human and the monstrous) has in relation to Romero's socio-cultural and political commentary implicit in the films.

Preface: The Cult of the Zombie

This chapter examines the figure of the zombie and its widespread prevalence in the context of contemporary popular culture, locates Romero's tetralogy within the context of both the zombie sub-genre and the larger horror genre, and begins to touch on the significance of the films in terms of social critique.

Introduction: The Uses of Genre Study

This chapter outlines a number of different approaches to contemporary film genre theory, and positions Romero's 'Living Dead' films in relation to various theories. It also begins to examine the

American socio-cultural and political climate in which *Night* was first released, and how the following films tapped into changing cultural anxieties over the past four decades.

Chapter 1: *Night of the Living Dead*

This chapter situates *Night* in the socio-cultural and political context of the 1960s, and examines a number of central issues in the film in relation to this context, most especially that of the Vietnam War. It examines the representation of space, race and violence in the film, introduces the figure of the Romero-esque zombie and examines the film as a generic product.

Chapter 2: *Dawn of the Dead*

This chapter examines in detail how the figure of the zombie has evolved in relation to the 'Living Dead' series and how the representation of violence has changed in response to the larger horror genre. There is a focus on how Romero begins to undermine the binary opposition between the monstrous and the human, and the significance this has for American culture and politics. There is also an examination of the representation of race, social structures and the trope of consumerism.

Chapter 3: *Day of the Dead*

This chapter examines how Romero pushes the boundaries of viewer identification with the zombies, how he introduces a zombie protagonist into the series, and how he further deconstructs the binary opposition between the human and the monstrous. This chapter examines the representation of militaristic and scientific discourses in the film, and the implications that these representations have for American culture and the system of patriarchal capitalism.

Chapter 4: *Land of the Dead*

This chapter positions *Land* in relation to the development of the horror genre post-2000, as well as examining the film as a conclusion to the 'Living Dead' series. It looks at the film in relation to the current American cultural and political climate (most specifically the context of the invasion of Iraq), and examines issues of (American) class politics as represented in the film. It examines the culmination of Romero's development of the figure of the zombie, and how Romero has again destabilised and undermined binary oppositions, and the significance that this has in relation to the American socio-cultural and political climate.

Conclusion

This chapter briefly examines the central themes of the 'Living Dead' series and how their representation in the films ultimately relates to critiques of issues of race, class, culture and violence in American culture.

**Dead Reckoning
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Preface: The Cult of the Zombie

It is perhaps the lingering intellectual distrust of the horror genre that has prevented George Romero's 'Living Dead' trilogy from receiving full recognition for what it undoubtedly is: one of the most remarkable and audacious achievements of modern American cinema, and the most uncompromising critique of contemporary America (and, by extension, Western capitalist society in general) that is possible within the terms and conditions of a popular entertainment medium.

Robin Wood¹

The word "zombie", in the context of 21st century Western culture, instantly conjures up images of freshly reanimated (or conversely, fairly decayed) human corpses, possessed by a monstrous power, usually either disease-driven or willed by a supernatural and inexplicable force. They "live" only to destroy, bent on consuming living human flesh. Since George Romero's classic, groundbreaking horror film *Night of the Living Dead* was released to American (and later, global) audiences in 1968, the phenomenon of the zombie has entered the lexicon of western culture, becoming just as ubiquitous, if not more so for younger generations, than the "classic" horror figures of the (Dracula-based) vampire, the werewolf or Frankenstein's monster. Despite the fact that scores of zombie films, most of which have adopted the conventions established by Romero, have been made (and continue to be produced) in the years following the release of *Night of The Living Dead*, Romero's zombie films continue to be regarded as the prime and standard-setting examples of the genre. The continuing strengths of the 'Living Dead' series (a moniker which I will henceforth use to make reference to the group of Romero's films comprising *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, *Day of the Dead* and *Land of the Dead*) lie in Romero's consistent complication and undermining of (zombie genre) conventions - which he was largely responsible for introducing - as well as his ability to adapt his interpretation of the genre to accommodate critiques of various contemporary socio-cultural and political issues.

Indeed, since *Night of the Living Dead* virtually created an entire sub-genre of horror there have been hundreds of movies, from the most low-budget, exploitative B-films to full-scale Hollywood productions with multi-million dollar budgets, all devoted to the icon of the zombie, as first "defined", or rather, *re-defined*, by Romero (although the monsters in *Night of the Living Dead* were only later referred to as "zombies"; in the movie they are on one or two occasions described as ghouls). I have been unable to find any record of the first use of the term "zombie" in relation to the Romero-esque monster, but the word is used in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) to refer to Romero's monsters. In earlier horror movies in which the zombie as monster appeared, the zombies were not flesh-eating automatons, but rather, were contextually located within Western perceptions of Afro-Caribbean voodoo beliefs and superstition, and were slaves, corpses with no will of their own, raised by witch doctors or shamans and forced to do their bidding. Had the voodoo-style zombie remained a static and unevolved figure in the world of popular culture, perhaps the zombie genre would have quietly faded into the annals of film history, to be gradually forgotten along with other less memorable monsters such as swamp monsters or martians. However, due to Romero's reinvention of the figure, the figure of the zombie has not only endured the constant shifts and upheavals that the horror genre has undergone over the past few decades, but has also retained its position as one of the most well-known figures to emerge from the genre. This enduring popularity is no doubt a result of Romero's revision of the voodoo zombie, a figure more analogous to exploited workers in the Third World than to anything within the immediate experience of the average American, into a figure which is far closer to the heart of Western culture. Indeed, the flesh-eating, plague-spreading zombie invented by Romero is possibly, throughout the canon of horror monsters, the one that is closest to ourselves. The figure of the zombie is simultaneously self and Other, and nobody is immune from the threat of infection, which comes from within society itself. Romero's zombies, throughout the 'Living Dead' series, embody many of the most profound American cultural anxieties of the late twentieth century, from imperialist wars on foreign soil, to social upheavals at home, the marginalisation of minority ethnic and economic groups, to the spread of consumerist culture and the emergence of quasi-tyrannical governmental regimes. It is

perhaps this "closeness to home", whether consciously or subconsciously acknowledged by the audience, that has enabled the figure of the zombie to retain its popularity over the years.

By the 1970s, after Romero's seminal *Night of the Living Dead*, the figure of the zombie had metamorphosed into the cannibalistic, flesh-hungry monster that is now known in popular culture as a zombie. Andrew Tudor suggests that the zombie film only fully entered its halcyon period post-1970 and that it was as a result of George Romero's "startlingly innovative *Night of the Living Dead* that the distinctively modern zombie film emerged, its narrative distinguished by the relentless attack of the abnormally metamorphosed upon the surviving representatives of normal human life" (Tudor 1989: 101). Indeed, the figure of the zombie had, by the 1980s, become so well recognised that it had spread beyond the immediate borders of the horror film into the realm of popular music, as evinced by Michael Jackson's hit music video for "Thriller", released in 1983. The music video, which depicts the flesh-hungry, shuffling 'living dead' pursuing Jackson and his female companion, obviously presumes fairly comprehensive audience familiarity with the trope of the Romero-esque zombie.

To return to the notion of zombie films, and contemporaneous horror films in general, it is necessary briefly to examine current trends in horror. The most immediate vogue in horror sub-genres (which are constantly shifting and repositioning themselves) over the last two or three years has been the torture film, a sub-genre of horror based on overtly graphic (indeed verging on the pornographic) depictions of perverse, ultra-violent sadism that includes films such as *Hostel* (2006), *Hostel: Part II* (2007), the *Saw* series (2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007) and *Captivity* (2007), although the popularity of this genre seems to be waning (Tourtellotte 2007: 11). Another example of a horror sub-genre which recently peaked and then waned in terms of popularity is the teen-slasher/suspense thriller. The sub-genre, a reworking of the 1980s slasher sub-genre, began with *Scream* (1996), the popularity of which spawned two sequels (1997, 2000), and a number of similar movies, such as the *I Know What You Did Last Summer* series (1997, 1998, 2006) and the *Final Destination* series (2000, 2003, 2006). However, the zombie film, one of the few horror sub-genres to have consistently remained popular within

mainstream horror since its inception (with a few predicable highs and lows over the decades), continues to soldier on as persistently as ever. Two mainstream zombie films have been released in 2007: *28 Weeks Later* (the sequel to 2002's *28 Days Later*, an apocalyptic zombie-plague film by prominent director Danny Boyle), as well as yet another addition to Romero's own series, *Diary of the Dead* (which has been screened at a number of film festivals but is scheduled for commercial release in 2008). *Diary of the Dead*, however, will not be a continuation of the 'Living Dead' series; instead, according to Romero, the narrative follows a group of students who are shooting a film project when a zombie outbreak occurs (Fischer 2007).

It is unquestionable that the zombie has become a cultural icon, embedded within the canon of postmodern popular culture, thanks largely to the works of George Romero, whose zombie anthology comprises almost a film per decade; *Night of the Living Dead* for the late 1960s, *Dawn of the Dead* for the late 70s, *Day of the Dead* for the '80s and *Land of the Dead* for the first decade of the 21st century.

Now, in the 21st century, as the rapid expansion of the information age continues unabated, the cult of the zombie is expanding its influence, infecting everything from computer and video games (for example "first person shooter" style games such as *Doom*, in which the dead come to life in order to attack and devour the living, and the hugely popular *Resident Evil* video game series, based on the "Romero-style" zombie movies - *Resident Evil* has now, in an ironic twist, been made into a movie) to "social networking" websites such as [Facebook](#)², an immensely popular social networking site which allows users to interact with friends online, and includes a "zombie" application which allows users to (virtually) "bite" their friends who thus become "zombies" themselves. There are entire online communities dedicated to the cult of the zombie, which span countries and continents, unified in their devotion to this sub-genre of horror. The website [All Things Zombie](#)³ contains reviews of well over one hundred zombie movies produced over the last few decades, as well as a number of zombie-themed novels, graphic novels and comics. [Home Page Of The Dead](#)⁴ is a website specifically dedicated to Romero's zombie films. [The Zombie Infection Simulation](#)⁵ is an online program which,

as the name suggests, simulates the effects of a Romero-esque zombie outbreak on civilisation as we know it. There are massive multiplayer online games based around the theme of survival in a Romero-inspired post-apocalyptic world overrun by zombies, in which the few remaining humans must fight to survive; for instance, *Urban Dead*⁶, which has close to 650 000 registered players, who can participate in the game as either human survivors or zombies in a *Dawn of the Dead*-inspired city overrun by zombies, complete with a shopping mall to be looted. The figure of the zombie is just as prevalent in popular fiction; numerous books are based on the concept of the flesh-eating, plague-spreading, Romero-style zombie. These include the hugely popular *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* and *The Zombie Survival Guide*, both by Max Brooks, as well as dedicated zombie fiction, comic books and graphic novels, of which a basic web search reveals a plethora of examples.

The widespread recognition of the zombie figure is illustrated by Bruce Kawin in his essay "Children of the Light", wherein he invites the readers to position themselves in a situation wherein they are being threatened by a "shuffling, gruesome, unstoppable crowd of zombies"; he then questions whether the readers visualised the scene themselves, or whether they borrowed the images from memories of Romero's films (Kawin 1986: 236). Indeed, the motif of the zombie is so widely understood and recognised that Curtis White titled his 2005 book about the "dumbing down" and decline of American culture and literature *The Middle Mind: Why Consumer Culture Is Turning Us Into The Living Dead*. If the reference to zombies in the title is not obvious enough, one need only examine the cover art (of the 2005 Penguin edition), which depicts a movie theatre screening a Romero-esque zombie film. The irony of the image is that the audience themselves are the living dead, zombies complete with torn off limbs and rent-open flesh. The idea of the zombie within the English language, in the context of the late 20th and early 21st century, has become so embedded in Western culture that any adult with the most elementary experience of the last 30 years' popular culture will understand that the title "living dead" and that the imagery associated with the trope of the zombie indicates a group of people who have no free will, no desire or ability to think, and are only driven by the overriding, omnipotent urge to *consume* (which, at the risk of grossly oversimplifying his argument, is largely how Curtis describes

the general American populace in his book). Tanya Modleski's essay "The Terror of Pleasure" also takes the zombie as representing the drive to consume, and posits that the advance of technological capitalism, which provides the conditions for greater physical freedom and leisure time, comes at the expense of "spiritual zombieism", and that the proliferation of "dead labour" (technology) in the paradigm of technological capitalism has invaded people's mental, moral and emotional lives, and rendered them "incapable of desiring social change" (Modleski 2002: 268). One could very well understand Romero's zombies in these terms, and indeed Modleski does allude to *Dawn of the Dead* as "depicting the worst fears of the culture critics who have long envisioned the will-less, soul-less masses as zombie-like beings possessed by the alienating imperative to consume" (Modleski 2002: 270). Romero's zombies, throughout the 'Living Dead' series, could thus be seen as presenting a heavily pessimistic vision of the subjects of Western postmodernity, subjects of the final, apocalyptic phase of technological capitalism, which has erased in them every desire except the overwhelming urge to consume, although even this constant is interrogated and re-examined over the course of the series.

While Romero's zombies often embody the spirit of mindless materialism and crass consumerism, his narratives present an equally scathing critique of American society, presenting it in various states of collapse which range from a potentially deadly attack upon society to the ultimate destruction of Western civilisation as we understand it, and beyond. This further illustrates how Romero's 'Living Dead' series stands out from most other zombie films (or many horror films in general), and effectively supports the notion that his films are countercultural entities. Of course, one cannot be so naive as to imagine that a mass produced cultural commodity such as a genre film (which necessarily appeals to the masses) will automatically bring about positive socio-cultural changes via its subliminal (or even overt) critique of the culture and society in which it is located. However, this is not to say that it should therefore be discounted as a voice of dissent. The intellectual elite are often quick to downplay the value of generic products in terms of their effectiveness as vehicles of social critique; however, this is to display ignorance of the extent of their reach and influence. John Brosnan suggests, of horror

films, that they are the ones that are most effectively retained in cultural memory, and that horror films "grow in stature as the years go by" (Brosnan 1976: 3). Writing uncannily prophetically in 1976, he muses on which film will, in forty years time, be considered *the* film of 1974 - "*The Sting*, which reaped so many Academy Awards, or *The Exorcist*" (Brosnan 1976: 3). Thirty one years later, *The Exorcist* is still frequently referred to as "the scariest film of all time". A quick perusal of [The Internet Movie Database](#)⁶ reveals that *The Exorcist* remains popular to this day, even amongst audiences born long after its initial release; indeed, it has spawned a number of sequels (*Exorcist II: The Heretic* (1977) and *The Exorcist III* (1990)), prequels (*Exorcist: The Beginning* (2004) and *Dominion: Prequel to the Exorcist* (2005)), as well as a documentary (*The Fear of God: 25 Years of 'The Exorcist'* (1998)). Whilst *The Sting* has by no means been forgotten, it obviously does not enjoy the continued and renewed popularity, within the sphere of current popular culture, that *The Exorcist* does.

Correspondingly, there exists only a small minority within the sphere of Western popular culture who have not heard of at least one of Romero's 'Living Dead' films, or are not at least familiar with the trope of the Romero-esque zombie. This is not to say that the majority of the (zombie) genre film's audience will necessarily recognise and comprehend – let alone act on - the acute social critique inherent in Romero's 'Living Dead' films, but the cultural subversion will certainly not be lost on all of them.

Popular music has shared an analogous position with the (horror) genre film in the sphere of academic criticism; it too is often perceived as a mass-produced and insubstantial aggregate of what ultimately amounts to trash. However, to broadly label it as such is to ignore an assemblage of popular artists whose work contains compelling intimations of socio-cultural critique. Of course, in the epoch of MTV, men's and women's magazines, infomercials, sitcoms and reality television shows, music or films with an anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist or anti-government ethos are few and far between. Nonetheless, far more people today will learn about (and perhaps do something about), for example, the injustices and human rights violations perpetuated by the invading American forces in Iraq through heavy metal band System of a Down's lyrics⁷, or about the evils of consumerism, the death of independent thought and virtual slavery to television through the words screamed out by Zack De La

Rocha of hip-hop metal's *Rage Against the Machine*⁸, or be exposed to metaphors of all-pervasive domination and oppression of global populations by the heads of multi-national corporations through a film like Romero's *Land of the Dead*, than they would through more inaccessible media, such as the writings of Noam Chomsky. Taking this argument into consideration, the insurrectionary potential of a cultural commodity such as Romero's 'Living Dead' series becomes apparent.

To examine the 'Living Dead' films as countercultural entities which interrogate issues of race, class, culture and violence within contemporary American society, it is necessary, firstly, to examine the nature of genre itself as it is understood in film studies, and secondly, to locate the 'Living Dead' films and the zombie sub-genre within the larger horror genre under which they are subsumed. This will be explored in the Introduction. In each of the succeeding chapters, I will examine how Romero establishes the rules and standards of the zombie genre whilst simultaneously reinventing and undermining the generic conventions of contemporary horror films. I will also examine how he constantly deconstructs and complicates the binary opposition between human and zombie in each film, and how this deconstruction, along with both his representation of various visual tropes, and his generally pessimistic narratives, comprise a critique on issues of race, culture, class and violence in American society.

¹ Robin Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam and Reagan ...And Beyond: Expanded and Revised Edition*. 2003: New York, Columbia University Press, p101

² www.facebook.com (Accessed 21 November 2007)

³ www.allthingszombie.com (Accessed 20 November 2007)

⁴ www.homepageofthedead.com (Accessed 20 November 2007)

⁵ <http://kevan.org/proce55ing/zombies/> (Accessed 20 November 2007)

⁶ www.urbandead.com (Accessed 20 November 2007)

⁷ <http://www.imdb.com/find?s=all&q=the+exorcist> (Accessed 20 November 2007)

⁸ System of a Down's song "BYOB" is an explicit criticism about the war in Iraq, and frontman Serj Tankien is an outspoken critic of the current American political regime.

⁹ Rage Against The Machine was a heavy metal/rap group whose heavily politicised lyrics attack all manner of injustices within American society, from racism and political oppression to support of fascist regimes and dictators in the Third World.

Introduction: The Uses of Genre Study

As I will primarily be approaching the 'Living Dead' films as instances of genre film-making, and looking at how Romero uses and challenges generic conventions in the 'Living Dead' series, it is necessary to expand on a few key points of generic theory. I believe that, for my project, it is more useful to look at Romero's films in terms of genre, rather than taking an *auteur* approach. This is because changing elements of genre over the course of the 'Living Dead' series - such as changing iconography, stock characters, thematics and the figure of the zombie - index key shifts in socio-cultural and political spheres. Thus, tracking and analysing these changes in the context of how they appear and evolve in each film provides a greater focus on each film's central concerns, as well as linking the individual films of the tetralogy as part of a larger entity. This kind of analysis enables one not only to examine the changing thematics and concerns of each film as a whole, and to relate that to changing American socio-cultural concerns, but also to track the development of the films in relation to the larger horror genre itself. It also enables one to examine how evolving horror trends are represented, challenged and reinvented in each film by Romero, and how Romero's interrogation of generic conventions enables different forms of contextual socio-cultural critique, as well as how his projects respond to the larger genre as it evolves.

The horror genre (and I use the term "genre" very loosely here, as horror contains more sub-genres than say, the western or gangster film, and each of these horror sub-genres has quite different conventions and sets of rules by which it operates) is most generally associated with the medium of film: the average person tends instinctively to think of horror *films* before literary texts such as Stoker's *Dracula*, Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Poe's many morbid tales. Within the canon of cinema, horror tends to be associated with mass entertainment and pop culture, as opposed to material supposedly more deserving of academic attention such as *auteur* and art films. Genre criticism was first applied to literature, in the process of classifying plays into categories such as "tragedy", "comedy" or "epic", and even in terms of film genre criticism, Altman believes that "the study of film genre is no more than an

extension of literary genre study" (Altman 2002: 13). However, if one can risk making a single generalization concerning the field of genre criticism, it is that a vast number of greatly divergent and often opposing viewpoints exist within the field. Working to complicate the notion of film genre criticism as an extension of literary genre criticism is the Levi-Strauss-influenced theory of genre as a current embodiment of myth, which adds a cultural anthropological dimension to the study of genre (Altman 2002: 20). This kind of approach might theoretically prove useful in examining the 'Living Dead' series, or any other horror film. For example, the tropes of cannibalism and the resurrection of the dead, which are prolifically represented throughout Romero's films, could then, via the genre-as-myth approach, be linked to transcultural, primordial myths and traditions in which these tropes have featured over centuries. Despite the fact that one could thus perceive this kind of approach as initially useful in that it "legitimises" the study of mass culture commodities such as the zombie film, such an approach can be overly reductive and risks oversimplifying and potentially misinterpreting crucial parts of the films. In terms of specifically film-oriented genre criticism, Browne describes how the structuralist approach was applied to early film genre studies in the 1970s, with an emphasis on identifying distinctive narrative patterns and iconography with genres, and how this trend has subsequently been replaced by a heterogeneity of cultural and historical interpretations of genre (Browne 1998: xi). I will be adopting a more culturally and historically informed approach in terms of my examination of Romero's 'Living Dead' series.

Altman describes two major (and different) approaches to genre study: the ritual approach and the ideological approach. The ritual approach follows on from the genre-as-myth notion. Altman describes it as one that

considers that audiences are the ultimate creators of genres, which function to justify and organise a virtually timeless society. According to this approach, the narrative patterns of generic texts grow out of existing societal practices, imaginatively overcoming contradictions within those very practices. From this point of view, audiences have a very special investment

in genre, because genres constitute the audience's own method of assuring its unity and envisioning its future. (Altman 2002: 27)

One can see how this approach would be useful in analysing the 'Living Dead' series, identifying narrative patterns in the films, as well as evaluating characters in the films. This approach is also propitious in terms of examining how the films' characters, narratives and filmic tropes evolve and develop in relation to the changing film industry, as well as to societo-cultural changes spanning the five decades over which the films were produced. This approach would also be advantageous in terms of reviewing how Romero's approach challenges and interrogates the audience's expectations, a pattern which is consistent throughout the 'Living Dead' series.

Altman also describes another influential approach, the ideological approach, which imagines narrative texts as "the vehicle for a government's address to its citizens/subjects or an industry's appeal to its clients" (Altman 2002: 27). He describes how it differs from the ritual approach:

Whereas ritual critics interpret narrative situations and structural relations as offering imaginative solutions to a society's real problems, ideological critics see the same situations and structures as luring audiences into accepting deceptive non-solutions, while all the time serving governmental or industry purposes. Here too, genres have a particular role and importance, for it is through generic conventions that audiences are lured into false assumptions of societal unity and future happiness. (Altman 2002: 27)

Whilst this model may undoubtedly be useful for the analysis and interpretation of many genre films, particularly the more "mainstream" films, I feel that it is likely to overlook the potential of many genre films, especially those such as the 'Living Dead' series, to be subversive and to *challenge* and *criticise* the position and interests of the government and other groups which wield power and influence over society and culture.

In line with the ideological approach, Judith Hess Wright claims that genre films

came into being and were financially successful because they temporarily relieved the fears aroused by a recognition of social and political conflicts; they helped discourage any action that might otherwise follow upon the pressure generated by living with these conflicts. Genre films . . . serve the interests of the ruling class by assisting in the maintenance of the status quo, and they throw a sop to oppressed groups who, because they are unorganised and therefore afraid to act, eagerly accept the genre film's absurd solutions to economic and social conflicts. (Hess Wright 1998: 41)

Again, while there is no doubt a plethora of genre films to which this theoretical proposition could be successfully applied, this line of thought is dangerously reductive and fails to account for a number of genre films, such as Romero's 'Living Dead' series, which do not fit the mould, and do not offer a complacent audience an "absurd" (and certainly not a comfortable) conclusion to their narratives, and which frequently pose more questions than they, as Hess Wright would have it, conveniently answer. However, Hess Wright's argument cannot wholly be discounted. Within an examination of the horror genre, the question of whether horror is a genre that merely reinforces a society's fears and repressions, or whether it has the potential to expose and critique those fears is an important one. Unfortunately, a great number of genre films (and of course, this extends far beyond the scope of the horror genre into other popular genres) *do* merely serve to showcase, in an often overtly explicit and graphic fashion, fears hidden just beneath the surface veneer of culture, and deal with the threat by promoting a return to the established social order via the use of culturally sanctioned tools of vengeance against the enemy. One needs to question the motivation behind the production and dissemination of genre films which reinforce society's fears and repressions, and the implications that these films' prescribed solutions have. I would propose that such films generally fall under the category of cultural production that Curtis White describes as "entertainment", which within our culture is produced as a support mechanism for the system of patriarchal capitalism and a factor in willingly submitting oneself to a life of mindless routine; he describes how this entertainment "reconciles work and leisure, and reconciles production and consumption [and] eliminates contradictions that would otherwise be intolerable" (White 2005: 7). Further examining White's and Hess Wright's notions of the mass production and

dissemination of "anti-countercultural" generic products, it is necessary to examine how violence as a tool is legitimised (and far too often, glorified) and sanctioned against a force which threatens the status quo. Indeed, one must consider these implications *beyond* a subtle persuasion of middle and working class American to continue the ultimately unfulfilling and vapid cycle of work and consumption; these implications permeate societal beliefs and ultimately work to culturally sanction violent acts of retribution, such as America's unlawful invasion of Iraq.

Hess Wright goes on to claim that within the horror genre specifically, the narrative is structured so that "only by reliance on traditional beliefs and the domination of a well-defined upper class can we be saved from doom and perdition" (Hess Wright: 1998, 43). Whilst this may unfortunately be true of a number of films within the horror genre, this kind of overarching conjecture fails to take into account the subversiveness of films such as Romero's 'Living Dead' series, in which a faith in "traditional beliefs" is all but destroyed, and the upper class (most especially in *Land of the Dead*) have no solutions to the crisis and are in fact often portrayed as even more evil and monstrous than the zombies. In the light of the fact that a large number of genre films, including horror films, are responsible for a tacit support of the status quo within the paradigm of patriarchal capitalism, culturally subversive films such as Romero's 'Living Dead' series are indubitably necessary in order to provide a platform for dissenting voices. Of course, very few genre films, whether one of Romero's 'Living Dead' films or the latest Hollywood Arnold Schwarzenegger blockbuster, can be unambiguously classified in terms of a polar opposition between, on the one hand, overt pandering to and explicit promotion of the patriarchal capitalist regime or, on the other, a vehement criticism of it; rather, they occupy relative positions along the gradient. Whilst it cannot be denied that a number of horror films pander to ideals of conformity and submission to the prevailing social system, there are at least a handful, of which Romero's 'Living Dead' series are perhaps the prime examples, which perform the function of critiquing American culture, and turn a glaring, exposing light upon the repressions, prejudices, injustices and irrational fears of contemporary American society. Equally significant is the fact that, as mentioned by Robin Wood in the quotation with which I opened this chapter, Romero's

'Living Dead' series manages to use such a popular and accessible medium, that of genre film, as a vehicle via which such subversive critique can be transferred (Wood 2003: 101). Speaking specifically of the horror genre, Modleski comments that

Both in form and content, the [horror] genre confounds the theories of those critics who adopt an adversarial attitude towards mass culture. The type of mass art I have been discussing - the kind of films which play at drive-ins and shabby downtown theatres, and are discussed on the pages of newsletters named *Trashola* and *Sleazoid Express* - is as apocalyptic and nihilistic, as hostile to meaning, form, pleasure and the specious good as many types of high art. This is surely not accidental". (Modleski 2002: 273)

This, I believe is certainly the case with a number of horror films; of those that could be considered countercultural entities, I believe the 'Living Dead' series is a prime example, and aim, via my analysis of the films, to illustrate this in the chapters which follow. Horror is a genre which at its core, deals explicitly with death, in its most visceral and graphic forms, and this in itself imbues the genre with a certain subversive authority; Goodwin and Bronfen state that the dead body has a "peculiar power" and that, in terms of representations of death, "the corpse may have more authority than any other political body. The more corpses, the more authority" (Goodwin & Bronfen 1993: 9). Indeed, because of its preoccupation with the dead body, in the zombie genre, the "living" dead body (which adds another dimension to the theory), horror certainly has the potential to speak with a certain authority, and thus has the potential to effectively critique a number of socio-cultural issues, and Romero's films examine a number of pertinent issues in the changing cultural anxieties of America over the course of more than four decades.

Browne describes how a genre can be thought of as a cultural pattern; he argues that generic change is a process "in which constituencies seek, assert, control, or oppose popular representation", and specifically mentions horror as a genre which "supplies a range of adaptable social references" (Browne 1998: xiii). The films of the 'Living Dead' series quite effectively illustrate this notion via their narratives and portrayal of characters. The films can thus be understood as entities within the

space of generic change and its concomitant: generic adaptation and development as cultural processes which reflect and (sometimes) critique the culture in which they are located. This way of thinking about genre also countermands previous notions of genres as stable and effectively unchanging, and Altman suggests that genres are not "the permanent *product* of a singular origin but the *temporary by-product* of an ongoing *process*" (Altman 1998: 6). He goes on to describe how we "regularly intermingle current and former genres" (Altman 1998: 6). This, along with the notion of genre films as having countercultural potential, also raises the issue of the permeability of genres. Of course, the general narratives, iconography and thematics of the 'Living Dead' series situate the films within the very broad field of horror, and within the sub-genre of the zombie film. However, the thematic concerns of the 'Living Dead' films also stretch them *beyond* the perimeters of horror and into the territory of the disaster movie, another genre with often indistinct generic boundaries. In fact, the boundary between certain horror films and disaster films is so indeterminate that Maurice Yacowar lists the monster movie as a sub-category of the disaster movie; he mentions a number of horror films, such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), and includes *Night of the Living Dead* under the canon of "monster" disaster movies (Yacowar 1986: 219). However, even when classified under a genre generally regarded to be separate from the horror conglomerate, Romero's 'Living Dead' films continue to defy any absolute generic categorisation. Yacowar describes how there is almost invariably a romantic subplot in disaster films (Yacowar 1986: 230). Contrary to this notion, there are no romantic subplots in any of the 'Living Dead' films, although the possibility of romance between Riley (Simon Baker) and the beautiful Slack (Asia Argento) is hinted at in *Land of the Dead*. Yacowar also suggests that "there is an optimism in the genre . . . the centre holds even when chaos has broken loose . . . few films raise a disaster that cannot be survived or that does not bring out the best in the characters and our society" (Yacowar 1986: 228). Obviously, this assumption does not hold fully for the 'Living Dead' series. Although Romero's films do adhere to certain basic conventions of the disaster film (such as having a small group of relative strangers who must work together in the face of an apocalyptic disaster which threatens the structure or existence of society), the optimism that Yacowar suggests is necessary is hard to come by in the 'Living Dead' series, and if it is encountered it is always

short-lived and almost immediately problematised. In all of the 'Living Dead' films, the disaster situation frequently seems to bring out the *worst* in the characters rather than the best. This is further evidence of the countercultural potential of the 'Living Dead' series.

In terms of generic narrative structure, the 'Living Dead' series can certainly be thought of as subversive. At the end of *Night of the Living Dead* it is entirely uncertain as to whether the "normality" of conservative America, which has been disrupted by the invasion of the living dead, can be restored. As *Dawn of the Dead* opens, it is soon revealed that since the end of *Night of the Living Dead* the worst has happened: the anarchy has spread extensively across the entire nation. Once again, no definitive explanation is given for the plague of death and destruction; there is no Other upon whom to lay the blame and subsequently to vanquish and expel, and it is almost immediately evident that there cannot be any return to the previous social order: apocalypse has been visited upon America, and the only question is whether the individual characters in the film will survive the chaos. This theme recurs throughout Romero's 'Living Dead' series, driven further home with each successive film, and it is one of the major leitmotifs which differentiate Romero's series from scores of other generic horror films. Tudor summarises the basic plot-structure of most films in the horror stable as a rather direct "order-disorder-order" sequence, in which, usually, a monster threatens a previously stable situation, the monster then indulges in violence and destruction as people attempt to combat it, and finally the threat is defeated and order restored (Tudor 1989: 81). Of course, he does not suggest that *every* horror film reflects this narrative model, but it is certainly an accurate, if grossly simplified, diagnosis of a majority of films located within the genre. The narrative of Romero's 'Living Dead' films could be seen as an almost complete reversal of this particular structure (aside from *Night of the Living Dead*, which begins with a situation of comparative normalcy), in that they depict a situation of disorder, into which some sort of temporary order is injected (in the form of a group of humans who band together and construct a form of defense against the onslaught of the living dead), but which then gradually descends once again into disorder with only one or two of the humans surviving to face a very uncertain future.

Supporting the notion of the 'Living Dead' films as subversive entities, there is an abundance of genre criticism that *does* take into account the insurrectionary potential of certain genres. Whilst Thomas Sobchack seems to agree that a primary function of genre films is to maintain the current social order (via representation of its disruption and subsequent restoration), he acknowledges that certain directors use the conventions of the genre, including generic plots, characters and iconography, to create an "antigenre" film (Sobchack 1986: 111). The films of Romero's 'Living Dead' series qualify as antigenre films in a number of respects. One of these is in terms of narrative: the conclusions of the films' respective narratives range from heavily pessimistic in *Night of the Living Dead*, to an uneasy uncertainty in *Land of the Dead*; the audience is never given access to a conclusive and optimistic restoration of social order, or even given a hint of the potential for such an outcome. The 'Living Dead' films also defy generic norms in their character portrayal, as well as in the location and function of the characters in relation to the films' narrative; most consistent is the use of a black male in the role of chief protagonist, set against an overwhelmingly white, middle class horde of monsters. Additionally, the role of hero is often problematically represented in the films; in a similar vein, even the zombies occupy a liminal zone, and the viewer is often (especially in the latter films of the series) unsure of whether to be terrified of the zombies, or conversely, to identify with them. In the chapters which follow, I will examine the problematised and often ambiguous roles of the heroes and other characters, as well as the shifting role of the zombies. Even as he was establishing the rules and standards of the zombie genre, Romero was reinventing and undermining the generic conventions of contemporary horror films, and I will examine how he does this in relation to each of the films in their respective chapters.

Romero's genius perhaps lies less in the ways in which he "innovated" the concept and context of the zombie as it is known in contemporary popular culture than in the ingenuity of the manner in which he combined, unified and revolutionised a number of pre-existing tropes. The voodoo slave zombie was used in such films as Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) and Victor Halperin's 1932

film *White Zombie*. Although its zombies are quite different to the flesh-eating ghouls of Romero's films, *White Zombie* has been referred to as "the first zombie movie of all time" (Coccaro 2006: 1). Romero, however, was far more influenced by Richard Matheson's 1954 novel, *I am Legend*, the premise of which involves an apocalyptic plague which turns humans into vampires, and admits that *Night of the Living Dead*'s script was heavily influenced by Matheson's narrative (Biodrowski). The notion of an apocalyptic near-future in which "some form of holocaust has occurred and a small remnant survive in a devastated landscape menaced by voracious enemies" was first represented filmically in *Things to Come* (1936), a film based on a novel by HG Wells in which the trope of a deadly, infectious plague is also central (French 2002). The strength of *Night of the Living Dead* lies in how Romero combined the tropes of an infectious apocalyptic plague with the trope of the zombie, a being influenced by "traditional Haitian mysticism" in which "the permeability of the frontier between life and death" is made explicit (Davis 1988: 58), as well as in his introduction of the overwhelming urge to consume as the major factor which drives the monsters.

In terms of the zombie sub-genre, as I stated earlier, Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* quite conclusively reinvented and steered the sub-genre into a new direction. However, as also previously noted, the monsters in *Night of the Living Dead* are referred to as merely the "living dead" or "ghouls" within the dialogue of the film, only later was the term "zombie" applied to them. According to the *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, the word "zombie" was first used colloquially in common American English in 1946 and the word itself was borrowed from a group of West African languages (Barnhart 1988: 1257). This was no doubt influenced by the voodoo-inspired zombie movies that were contemporaneously popular. These movies, however, dealt with a very different representation of the zombie than the one currently understood in popular culture. The zombies of these early zombie films were not bloodthirsty, flesh-eating ghouls, victims of some inexplicable or supernatural plague which has beset humanity, as the Romero-esque zombies are shown to be. Instead, these earlier zombies need to be understood in the context of Caribbean voodoo, and are merely portrayed as mindless slaves with no free will, corpses reanimated by a malevolent master, usually a witch doctor. These movies

were generally set in the Caribbean, on remote plantations or farms, and invariably made use of the trope of the white capitalists, the outsiders, who are shown to be out of their depth and ignorant in matters of witchcraft, superstition and the supernatural. In other "Pre-Romero" zombie movies, similar mindless, slave-style zombies are created by "monstrous" architects such as a mad scientist in *Teenage Zombies* (1960) or alien invaders from outer space in *The Earth Dies Screaming* (1965) (Tudor 1989: 101). In almost all of these cases, it is noteworthy that the zombies represent some sort of Other (in contrast to the white Anglo-Saxon), or, if not, then they have at least been made into what they are via an Other. One could link this thematic, even if only subliminally, to a socio-political concern with Otherness prevalent during the post-Second World War period, most notably in relation to the ceding of independence by the colonial powers to many of their former colonies during this time. In this context, one may thus be tempted to infer from much of the general horror genre a theme of "reverse colonisation", arising from anxieties derived from both an influx of foreign (the alien Other) immigrants into the United States, and the increasingly compelling voice of protest from African-Americans (the racial Other), as well as a history which had begun to acknowledge (if begrudgingly) the evils that white colonisation had visited upon Native Americans. The theme of reverse colonisation in America has of course been extensively dealt with and contemplated in a wide range of films offering a heterogeneity of ideologies, most specifically in the Western, as well as some horror movies such as Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) and Lambert's *Pet Semetary* (1989) which deal with fears of reverse colonisation via a supernatural threat from an old Indian burial ground. Whilst the 'Living Dead' series undoubtedly deals with a form of invasion by an Other, whose significance shifts frequently and which is far closer to the Self than the Other of most horror films), it involves less a form of colonisation than the outright destruction of a society.

There were a multitude of influences which brought "horror" closer to home in the years following the Second World War; a powerful economy allowed a large middle class to begin to emerge and the migration of this middle class from cities to suburbs which led to the beginnings of inner city decay, and as mentioned, the influx of immigrants from Asia and Mexico coupled with an increasingly vocal

Civil rights movement made for turbulent times punctuated by social upheaval. On the popular culture front, rock and roll music, which took most of its influence from black blues music and combined it with a frenzied, driving energy, replete with sexualised pelvic thrusts and lyrics which dripped with innuendo, tapped into the powerful but repressed sexual undercurrent of the American youth and set into motion the makings of a countercultural revolution. This, in the 1960s, progressed into heavy metal and psychedelic rock, the lyrics of which blatantly alluded to recreational drug use. This music was the driving force behind the Hippy movement, which extolled the values of peace, open-mindedness and sexual freedom and basically shook conservative America to its core. What all of these collective post-war developments essentially entailed was a powerful assault against the core values of American bourgeois society, and this may well have caused many conservative, capitalist American film makers and studios to produce material which could ideologically defend the core institution of conservative, patriarchal capitalist America - the nuclear family - against the ideologically revolutionary forces in all of their guises. And this was where Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* radically departed from many of its contemporaries; the monsters in this film were no voodoo-driven slaves, no helpless pawns of some evil Other, were not infected via the agency of any Otherness. They came from *within* American society itself, and *were* American society, right down to the most intimate of connections, brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers and even children; none were immune, and all were driven to utterly annihilate the society of which they were part. This is where one of the most interesting aspects of Romero's films must be mentioned: the liminality of the zombies. The zombies of Romero's films occupy a zone which is simply not present in many other horror films, a zone in which Self and Other continuously oscillate and change position in relation to audience identification. This oscillation, and the concomitant shifting and problematisation of Self (the humans - whose actions in the films sometimes make them more vile than any of the ghouls) and Other (the monsters, who despite functioning as Other to humans by virtue of the need that drives their existence - the need to consume human flesh - are nonetheless often situated in a position whereby the audience can identify and sympathise with them) grows increasingly complex with each film in the series. This complicating and undermining of many of the standard binaries which conventionally structure genre

films is a theme to which I will continually return in my examination of the respective films of the 'Living Dead' series.

In terms of socio-cultural concerns, Romero's 'Living Dead' films convey a potent sense of apocalypse. The theme of apocalypse, and concomitant fear of the End (the end of humanity, civilisation, or the entire earth itself) is a common, often transcultural concern. Indeed, to briefly step out of the paradigm of Western culture in the latter half of the twentieth century, it can be seen that eschatological beliefs, whose accompanying predictions are more often than not violent and cataclysmic, can be found in virtually all of the world's religions and cultures, from Aztec to Buddhist, to the Judeo-Christian beliefs which formed the foundation of post-Roman Western culture (Baumgartner 1999: 1). Such beliefs have persisted throughout the centuries, and have been depicted and contemplated in both literature and art; the heavily apocalyptically-themed works of Hieronymous Bosch, which depict all manner of monsters and demons literally unleashing hell on earth, retain an unsettling intensity centuries after their conception, even in the secular climate of contemporary Western culture. Returning to the twentieth century one discovers that such beliefs have generally remained, albeit in different forms, and, in certain cases have often been amplified. One only need mention, for example, the Jonestown massacre, or the more recent mass suicide of the Heaven's Gate cult, to gain a sense of the prevalence of eschatological views, and the mutating of such beliefs into instances of extremism, well into the age of technology. Beginning in the late nineteenth and carrying over into the early twentieth century, religious groups with a strongly immediate and emphatic apocalyptic perspective, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses (who attempted to predict, on set dates, the end of the world a number of times during the twentieth century), began to flourish. Pentecostal Christianity, which enthusiastically preaches the coming of the End and the fiery, eternal damnation of those who have not been saved, has spread all over the world. Best-selling works such as Michael Drosnin's *The Bible Code* and *The Bible Code II* claim to have unlocked the "secrets" hidden within the Christian Bible which can predict future events (including the apocalypse). Even beyond the scope of religion, who could forget the widespread anxiety which reached its apogee at the turn of the millennium when millions feared that

the turning over of computer clocks from the digits "99" to "00" would trigger a mass failure of computer systems and thus usher in a veritable technological apocalypse? Obviously, the fear of apocalypse is a relevant, and virtually intrinsic cultural anxiety, and this apprehension is realised in graphic, horrific detail in Romero's 'Living Dead' films.

At no time was the fear of a man-made apocalypse more prominent than in Cold War, post Atomic Bomb-era America, in which the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 almost catalysed the Cold War into a full-scale nuclear conflict. Already, the world had seen mechanised destruction and loss of life on a scale never before experienced in human history, and the discovery and development of nuclear weapons escalated the fear of a global massacre, especially within the United States. The atomic bomb, as demonstrated during the Second World war in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, was a weapon capable of inflicting an apocalypse of biblical proportions and annihilating a city in seconds, while the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles in the years following the War (by both the United States and the Soviet Union) meant that almost nowhere on the planet, and certainly not the cities within the United States, was safe from the looming threat of a nuclear holocaust.

This was a climate of fear and uncertainty, fueled by an increasingly fervent African-American Civil Rights movement in the late 1950s and early 60s as well as the beginnings of the increasingly controversial American involvement in the Vietnam War. Added to these factors was the rapid expansion of new forms of mass media such as television, which was paradoxically associated with optimistic change, such as the musical revolution of the 1960s and which in turn catalysed new modes of counter-cultural revolution such as the hippy movement and the sexual revolution. It was in this socio-historical context, in 1968, that Romero's revolutionary *Night of the Living Dead* was unleashed upon an unsuspecting public, and this film both embodied and took to literal conclusion many of the fears which permeated American culture at this time. Romero's zombie-overridden America represents the ultimate failure of two institutions which form the core of American society: the government and the nuclear family. The films thus directly attack philosophies central to the American way of life: the

notion of "freedom" (a very important notion in American culture) as being attained via the accumulation of wealth, the owning of property, the nurturing of a family, and of course the idea that this freedom, or emancipation (from fear and uncertainty) is unconditionally safeguarded by the government. Both of these expectations are, throughout Romero's 'Living Dead' films, violently nullified and destroyed; the government turns out to be powerless to cope with the crisis, the safety net of the nuclear family disintegrates, the economy is ruined, and people must revert to placing their only hope and faith in primitive tribal societies or must survive by means of a virtual hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

Thus it is apparent that via a simultaneous establishment and restructuring of generic conventions within the sub-genre, a constant challenging of audience expectations, thematics which deal with prominent socio-cultural concerns and anxieties, unconventional narrative patterns and monsters which overturn traditional binaries between Self and Other, the 'Living Dead' series constitutes a group of significant countercultural entities. It is with this in mind that I will commence analysis of the first film in the tetralogy, *Night of the Living Dead*.

Chapter 1: *Night of the Living Dead*

Of the four films of the "Living Dead" tetralogy, *Night of the Living Dead* is the film that has received the highest critical acclaim, and consequently is the film to which the bulk of academic film criticism is devoted. As there is already a fairly substantial body of critical work which focuses on *Night of the Living Dead*, I will engage briefly with some of the more commonly analysed and debated tropes within the film but will also attempt to bring to the fore issues, themes and filmic tropes which have either not been discussed in detail, or for which I have a differing interpretation. In this chapter, I intend to provide analyses and a discussion of the opening scenes (and how they critique American culture and politics); the trope of the house in which the characters are trapped (one of the first instances of the use of claustrophobic space in the 'Living Dead' series); an interrogation of issues of race and representation in the film, and of the visual tropes of cannibalism and violence in the movie (sites in the film where the critique of American society is made explicit); as well as an examination of the film in terms of genre and genre theory. I will begin to examine the zombies themselves, and how they relate to the 'Living Dead' series as a whole, and how Romero uses the zombies to critique American culture and society. I will also begin to examine the ways in which Romero's representation of zombies (beginning with *Night of the Living Dead* and subsequently continuing throughout the 'Living Dead' series) is used to undermine existing generic conventions.

When American audiences initially encountered the first film of George Romero's 'Living Dead' series in 1968, what they saw in the opening scenes contained few visible clues to the horror, violence and gore which would later punctuate the film, shock audiences and critics alike and cause the film for a number of years after to be referred to as "pornography" (Lowenstein 2005: 164). This was in spite of the fact that *Night of the Living Dead* later garnered much critical acclaim and that Romero was invited to screen it at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1970 (Lowenstein 2005: 154). Instead, in these initial scenes, the audience is presented with a series of long, panoramic shots of the American rural landscape, featuring empty winding roads along which a lone car lethargically ambles. The vehicle

ambles along until it turns off the main road onto a stretch of dirt road. A medium closeup of the vehicle then reveals that it is entering a cemetery; an ominous but nonetheless subtle hint of what lies ahead. Following this shot, the car enters the next shot from the screen right, turning and driving away from the viewer and disappearing behind a dark, looming cypress tree, only to reappear in the next shot emerging from the darkness of the trees, driving past the viewer on screen left. What is significant about the shot is the breaking of the 180 degree rule, which unexpectedly reverses the vehicle's direction, and which also performs the function of drawing attention to the American flag, fluttering in the breeze. The flag occupies most of the right half of the frame, and the backdrop consists of a number of graves. Harper claims that "the symbolism of the flag becomes clear as the film progresses: America is a dying country as a result of the zombie menace, and the flag represents the meaninglessness and deadliness of patriotism" (Harper 2005). For a moment, I wish to pause and reflect upon this particular shot, and how it is contextually located within the rest of the film as well as how it is culturally and politically situated in late 1960s America.

In *Cinema and Nation*, Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie describe how, in recent years, film theory has shifted from a psychoanalytic or semiotic approach to an outlook which emphasises the specificity of relevant social, historical and cultural contexts of film (Hjort & MacKenzie 2000: 1). Whilst my focus is not primarily on how Romero's films fit into the notion of an American "national" cinema, it is nonetheless necessary to examine the historical context of the film. Hjort and MacKenzie go on to state that films "do not simply represent or express the stable features of a national culture, but are themselves one of the loci of debates about a nation's governing principles, goals, heritage and history" (Hjort & MacKenzie 2000: 4). Indeed, in interviews, George Romero has himself stated that he was consciously trying to make *Night of the Living Dead* "as much a metaphor as it was a thrill ride" (Curnutte 2004). Taking this comment, and Hjort and MacKenzie's arguments into account, a brief investigation into the socio-historical circumstances which informed and influenced the production of the film, as well as the cultural context in which the film was received and viewed, is called for.

Night of the Living Dead was released in 1968, shortly after a new film ratings code, the National Motion Picture Rating System, was introduced. This new system, which labelled films as suitable for different audiences, replaced the incredibly restrictive censorship through which the Hays code controlled the depiction of overt violence, sexuality or blasphemy (Cook & Bernink 1999: 11). Thus, Romero was able to explore new territory, push limits and expand on themes and imagery which had previously been out of bounds for film-makers, as well as to experiment visually. In addition to this context of an American cinematic revolution, it is notable that the film was released in the turbulent times of the late 1960s, which, according to Romero, informed and influenced the production of the film. He makes this explicit in an interview with the *Orange County Register*:

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER: What were you trying to create when you sat down to write *Night of the Living Dead*?

GEORGE A. ROMERO: A story about revolution. The world was changing, and I was making a comment on it.

OCR: So it was about what was going on in the 60s?

ROMERO: A lot of it was about those angry times. (Koltnow 2005)

It follows that the image of a slightly tattered American flag fluttering in the breeze, juxtaposed with the backdrop of a cemetery, needs to be located in the political and cultural context of 1960s America. Amongst the socio-cultural circumstances and trends which shaped this era was a period of economic prosperity for Americans which began after the end of the Second World War and continued into the 1970s (McKay *et al.* 2000: 1061). Despite this economic stability, however, America experienced cultural revolution in the form of the civil rights struggle, in which African Americans (and a number of white supporters), managed to stand against and eventually overcome an entrenched system of segregation and oppression (McKay *et al.* 2000:1062). Government spending on social benefits and on the "war on poverty" was greatly increased with a number of projects launched to this end. (McKay *et al.* 2000: 1063). This economic prosperity and the democratisation of society had a great effect on the youth of America, who now had more leisure time and who lacked the burden of economic hardship;

most especially the youth of the 1960s, who with the aid of rock music, began to form a counterculture which revolted against the boredom and conformity of middle-class suburbs (McKay *et al.* 2000:1063).

The war in Vietnam would ultimately prove to be the catalyst that would rouse this subculture to full consciousness and give rise to protest *en-masse* against the injustices and the ludicrousness of American involvement in a foreign struggle that was costing thousands of young American lives. The Vietnam War, viewed by millions on national television, divided America; the war in its initial stages was seen as a legitimate cause, a defence against the evils of communist totalitarianism, and was supported by politicians and the American public, but as the conflict dragged on, and many young people, especially politically active students came to believe that this was an imperialist and unjust war against an oppressed people, and an anti-war movement began to emerge and spread rapidly on university campuses across the United States (McKay *et al.* 2000: 1064). Indeed, as the war progressed, events such as the My Lai massacre, in which US soldiers "went berserk during a routine search-and-destroy mission in a 'free-fire zone', shooting 347 unarmed men, women, and children in the hamlet My Lai 4" (Hoberman 2003: 259) were (after initially being covered up by the US military) reported to the American public, fuelling anti-war sentiment. It became obvious that the American public was becoming more and more vehemently opposed to America's continued participation in the conflict. In October 1965 there were anti-war demonstrations in fifty American cities, and after the bloody Vietcong Tet Offensive of January 1968, which resulted in a great loss of life for both sides, criticism of the war reached a crescendo in the United States, and the gradual process of withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam was initiated (McKay *et al.* 2000: 1064).

Thus, *Night of the Living Dead* is contextually located within a decade punctuated by tumultuous socio-cultural upheavals and conflicts that challenged and changed American national consciousness itself, and it is in this context that its images need to be read. The American flag fluttering against the backdrop of a cemetery is not in itself an unusual image within the canon of American film. Typically,

the American flag, as it has come to be culturally understood across national and ideological borders, represents (American) notions of freedom, and individualism. As a filmic trope, the flag is most frequently associated with war films, wherein it is recurrently depicted against a backdrop of a nobly serene military graveyard, majestically rippling in the wind to the tune of rousing (if sometimes a little forlorn) patriotic music. It has also often been used as an image to be set against the barbarism, totalitarianism and fascism of an Othered enemy, thus emphasising the American flag's associations of liberty and justice¹. However, in this scene in *Night of the Living Dead*, the flag is not tattered by virtue of its survival of a heroic battle, but rather, given its weathered look, due to the ravages of the cycles of nature. Also, there are no proud, neatly-ordered military graves receding into the distance, and no rousing or moving patriotic music is to be heard. Instead, the flag is juxtaposed with a few rough, overgrown graves and ripples out of time to an eerie, ominous melody that is more associated with the violent imagery of horror than with patriotism. Thus the opening scenes of *Night of the Living Dead* already, if subtly, hint at the horror that is to be visited upon both the characters and the audience throughout the film, as well as suggesting that conventionally understood imagery, thematics and binary oppositions may well be challenged.

The image of the flag could also be seen as evocative of a number of themes both relevant to the film and indicative of the socio-cultural and historical context in which the film is situated. The fact that the flag is displayed reversed could be taken as an initial indicator of the film's anti-Vietnam War stance, referencing both the bodies of war casualties who were sent home in coffins draped with the flag, as well as the flag itself as symbol of an imperialist invasion into foreign territory. According to Hoberman, *Night of the Living Dead*, which was "shopped to distributors during the *Wild in the Streets* spring of 1969 . . . embodied the Eve of Destruction: battlefields, riots, and mass demonstrations. The movie brought the war home with a vengeance" (Hoberman 2003: 261). Indeed, one could extend this interpretation as an attack on, or protest against the system of American conservative and middle-class ideologies that the national flag would have conventionally evoked.

This notion is furthered when the audience is introduced to the occupants of the vehicle: a young man and woman, brother and sister. Both are, in the context of 1960s American culture, respectable looking and clean-cut; the representatives of a young generation about to take the helm and continue the ideology of middle-class America inherited from their parents. Barbara represents the ideal embodiment of American middle-class femininity - both physically, as she is a slim, attractive blonde with contemporarily fashionable hair and dress sense, as well as in terms of character. From the first instances of dialogue with her brother, Johnny, it becomes clear that she is fairly non-confrontational, deferential and dutiful to the wishes of her mother (indicating her commitment to the values of the nuclear family). Johnny, too, is evocative of conservative middle-class America with his clean suit, neatly-combed hair and black-rimmed glasses. Unlike his sister, he seems, if not exactly rebellious, more pragmatic, constantly complaining about the time wasted on driving to and from the cemetery, as well as the cost of the memorial wreath (which needs to be replaced annually). These traits situate him within the role of masculine breadwinner within the American paradigm and bring to mind the capitalist aphorism "time is money".

After placing the memorial wreath on their father's grave, Johnny begins playfully to tease and taunt his sister about how he used to scare her when they were young. She becomes increasingly upset at his teasing, and we become aware of a lumbering, awkward figure in the background, which initially appears to be nothing more than an old man who seems to be a little drunk. However, as he comes closer, we are aware of a deranged, almost unearthly expression upon his countenance and, Johnny's words proving eerily prophetic, he lunges for Barbara. Johnny is incapacitated when he struggles with the man and falls and strikes his head against a gravestone. Immediately, his power as symbolic capitalist patriarch is negated as he fails to protect his female sibling; this effectively marks the beginning of the series of explicitly subversive narrative and visual tropes. A frantic chase scene ensues, with the strange man (the audience is not yet aware that he is a zombie, although from this point on, I will refer to the creatures depicted in the film as "zombies"), seemingly consumed by some sort of ravenous hunger. He desperately and relentlessly pursues the terrified Barbara through the

countryside, until she reaches the relative safety of a house. This introduces the theme of space within the film. Throughout the 'Living Dead' series, Romero makes use of the trope of space, most frequently as a claustrophobic trap in which the characters are both besieged by zombies and set against each other, a prison in which the inmates often consume one another before the zombies even have the chance to. This use of space begins in *Night* with the farmhouse.

Traditionally, within the paradigm of American patriarchal capitalism in the twentieth century, and particularly in the postwar context, the suburban house has come to be recognised as symbolic of the sum of middle-class achievements within a liberal economy. It is also the physical grounding, the base and fertile ground, from which the patriarchal, nuclear family springs, and within which it develops and is nurtured. It represents safety and privacy, two intertwined concepts; privacy from strangers and neighbours alike (representing the uneasy tension between simultaneous competitors and allies within the mode of individualistic capitalism). It symbolises a refuge from the monotonous "nine to five" work routine as well as a barrier against the intrusions of strangers, both physically as well as in terms of what they can *see*; one is free to be "oneself" within the confines of the home, and is thus not wholly subject to the rules, norms and governances of societo-cultural codes. The suburban house also serves to locate the patriarchal family within an "artificially natural" landscape (ie., a landscape that is removed from the natural surroundings, which are frequently destroyed in order to build houses and suburbs, which themselves mimic artificial, "safe" and "unthreatening" forms of nature through ordered gardens and neat lawns). It thus serves as a placement for the nuclear family within a colonised (from nature) space. This particular house is *not* a suburban house, however. It is more of a farm house, isolated in relation to other human habitation. This situational isolation (within a large, open landscape as well as in terms of lack of other human dwellings) is a precursor to the beleaguerment that the characters (who are later located within the space of the house) will later suffer. The trope of the country house or farmhouse, as used in *Night* as a threatening space (for suburbanites), later became a fairly common filmic theme in later horrors such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974).

In terms of reversals of the association of houses with safety, one cannot but think of the haunted house common to so many ghost stories and horror films. This house is almost universally depicted as an old-fashioned, decrepit or darkened space, overflowing with decayed relics of the past, often overtaken by nature, with a wild, overgrown and thus threatening garden. There is also, in the case of haunted houses, the notion of past crimes or atrocities committed on their premises that have etched the essence of their horror onto the landscape, the physicality of the house, and are possibly symbolic of the sins of past generations returning to terrorise the current generation. A common horror film trope is that of the house built on (and thus attempting to colonise) both the physical as well as the supernatural/spiritual space of the Native American burial ground, evinced in films such as *Pet Sematary* (1989) and *The Shining* (1980), involving a form of "reverse colonisation", in which "what has been represented as the 'civilised' world is on the point of being colonised by 'primitive' forces" (Arata 2001: 162). In other words, "a terrifying reversal has occurred: the coloniser finds himself in the position of the colonised" (Arata 2001: 162). While, of course, the house in *Night of the Living Dead* is not haunted, nor connected with any kind of spiritual or supernatural force, it is a somewhat threatening space. This would relate more to notions of "tainted" space as depicted, for example, in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), wherein a grandiose old Southern house, appropriated by a brutal family of murderers and cannibals, assumes all of the decay, terror and evil associated with them. The house in *Night of the Living Dead* to which Barbara looks for shelter is not as explicitly threatening as the cannibals' house in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, but is pregnant with a more subtle menace. Like the house in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, this house is a large country house, but is initially more welcoming as it appears first at the end of a long shot, a beacon of hope amongst the trees (certainly to the suburban Barbara, for whom a house would effectively represent shelter and safety from a threat). She rushes towards the house, and eventually finds a way in, but inside the house there is no safety, no relief from the tension. Instead, she steps into a dark room heavily draped in chiaroscuro shadows, reminiscent of German Expressionist cinema and films such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922), whilst the eerie score maintains tension, and the ominous

rumble of thunder, a portent of the horrific storm of violent death and carnage to come, is heard outside.

Barbara explores the house tentatively, moving anxiously in and out of darkness as the house becomes more and more menacing a place and Dutch angles and gloomy, omnipresent shadows continue to recall German Expressionist film. In a moment of brief shock, she enters a room decorated with the heads and skins of dead animals, adding to the threatening aspect of the space in which she now finds herself. Outside, the zombie is seen rampaging, looking desperately for a way to enter the house. Barbara manages to find a telephone, that symbol of help, rescue and salvation in the age of technological communication in America; however, it is dead. Even technology, that (illusionary) bastion of reliability and hope within the paradigm of postmodern capitalism, has failed. She looks outside as the darkness falls and sees that, alongside the original zombie, more are emerging from the shadows and trees, shuffling ominously towards the house, which has become both a trap and a fortress against the impending siege. This marks the first stages of the process of unifying the apparently discordant tropes of 'house as refuge' and 'house as evil', a paradoxical but powerful union which continues to permeate the narrative throughout the course of the film. The handling of space in the film is crucial to maintaining the pervasive atmosphere of claustrophobia which characterises much of the narrative. It is not only the house itself which is represented as synchronically 'refuge' and 'threat', but also the basement, which serves as a microcosmic representation of the space of the house. The basement, like the house, is seen as a potential refuge, the benefits of which are heatedly contested amongst the characters throughout the film. However, it is also a site of evil, indeed, the source of evil within the house, both symbolically and literally. The Cooper family are holed up in the basement, and Mr Cooper remains insistent throughout the film that the basement is the only safe refuge, and is willing selfishly to deny the others access to this shelter (he intends to board up the door) if they do not acquiesce to his demands. Yet, it is from within this 'refuge' that the destruction of the nuclear family is initiated. The source of this, of course, is the girl who dies, is 'resurrected' as a zombie and subsequently attacks and devours her mother. The space is later reclaimed by Ben as he destroys the

now-zombie family and seals it off against the invading horde. However, he is tainted by the space; as he finally emerges from it, he is killed.

One of the first instances of the association of space with violence occurs at the point of the narrative where Barbara discovers the true horror of what has been lurking at the top of the stairs. Both Barbara and the audience are confronted with the shocking, grotesque image of a skinned, half-eaten human face. It is presented in an extremely brief medium closeup which rapidly dissolves into a tight closeup, which has an extremely unsettling effect on the viewer. This initial, visceral display of gore is probably the first of many scenes of graphic violence in the film that really offended censors and critics, who, in 1968, so soon after the introduction of the new film rating system, were no doubt unused to seeing such visuals on film. It is of course easy to attack and criticise such images without examining what function they perform, both thematically in the film, and in the manner in which they challenge the viewers and interrogate their assumptions. Indeed, given that at the time America was embroiled in a violent conflict in Vietnam, a war which was extensively covered by both the print and television media, and that Americans were exposed to many images of real-life violence, death and brutality, such as the famous and iconic Eddie Adams photograph, General Nguyen Ngoc Loan Executing a Viet Cong Prisoner in Saigon, it seems a little hypocritical to complain about patently non-realistic and over-the-top gore in a film. Nonetheless, it is necessary to investigate the theme of violence in the film in greater detail.

Andrew Tudor describes how

horror movies presuppose an essentially coercive universe: forms of coercion are the norm for narratively effective behaviour. Except in a few cases . . . both the monster's threat and the combatant's response are fundamentally coercive. Consequently, violence is constitutive of rather than gratuitous to the genre. (Tudor 1989: 110)

Of course, given the context of the current crop of torture films, this statement may be up for debate; however, in the context of the "Living Dead" films, I believe that it holds true; if violence and gore had

been the *objective* of *Night of the Living Dead*, the censors and complainants may have had solid grounding for their objections. However, the violence clearly serves more than one purpose in furthering the thematics and concerns of the film. In terms of the act of violence itself, Girard describes how, in a number of cultures, violent sacrifice "serves to protect the entire community from *its own* violence" (Girard 1977: 8). This mode of thought (if one replaces "violent sacrifice" with "violent retribution" and "violence as spectacle") has clearly remained evident in contemporary American culture throughout the course of the twentieth century up until the present, and is conspicuous in a wide range of cultural pastimes (from the ubiquitous and notorious American 'gun culture', to recreational hunting and other bloodsports, to violent sports such as boxing), as well as in popular entertainment (Hollywood has been responsible for a slew of film genres, from action and adventure to the western, in which the act of violence is often sanctioned and glorified). Girard goes on to describe how despite modern societies' lack of the sacrificial rites of more 'primitive' cultures, violence undoubtedly still exists, albeit in a form simultaneously quelled by and alive in the spirit of vengeance and reprisal (Girard 1977: 14). This, too, is applicable to modern and postmodern American culture in a heterogeneity of instances, from the National Rifle Association's invocation of the Second Amendment of the American Bill of Rights to legitimise all manner of private gun ownership (a precursor to violent reprisal) to the death penalty, surely the ultimate in the ambiguous vengeance-as-prevention trope (which is still legislated in a number of American states). This notion of vengeance-as-prevention can be extended to apply to the wars on communism in Asia of the 1950s, 60s and 70s which have progressed to "wars on terror" in our current epoch. With these arguments in mind when examining the violence in Romero's films, it becomes apparent how he uses depictions of violence to expose the contradictions inherent in American culture, via both a (distorted) mirroring and critique of the omnipresent and deep-seated violence of American culture. The violence of *Night* is, unlike that typical of most American cultural products, stripped of glorified Hollywood stylisation and instead is brutal, gruesome and primal.

Violence in film serves other purposes than furthering and expounding the narrative, neutralising perceived threats (both in the real world as well as within the filmic universe) or echoing the real violence of society. In *Film/Genre*, Rick Altman describes how visual excess "is one of the many ways in which genres embody counter-cultural expression" (Altman 2002: 158). In relation to representations and depictions of violence and gore in *Night of the Living Dead*, this statement is particularly pertinent. The depiction of violence in a horror film was hardly something revolutionary in and of itself; however, in previous horror films, bloody or extreme acts of violence (as opposed to more 'tame' violence such as punching or strangling) were almost always (and often to great effect, such as in *Psycho* (1960)) suggested rather than graphically depicted. However, to have suggested the violence instead of depicting it openly in *Night of the Living Dead* would have resulted in a far less revolutionary film. The violence in the film not only intensifies and adds raw power to the film's vehement critiques of mainstream American culture and society, but also engages with, interrogates and rebels against the expectations and conventions maintained by contemporary American audiences, who presumably had no idea of the visual horror in store for them as they experienced *Night of the Living Dead* for the first time. Indeed, the counter-cultural function of this kind of overt display of gore could be seen as attacking the very core and moral centre of conservative middle-class America. Gregory Waller describes how the representation of violence in horror is "embedded in a generic, narrative, fictional, often highly stylised, and oddly playful context" (Waller 2001: 260), as well as how representations of violence in horror

return again and again to questions concerning the meaning of self-defence, vengeance, and justified violence, to myths of uncommon 'masculine' valour, and all-too-common female victimisation, and to images of violation, sacrifice, ritual and of life reduced to a struggle for survival. (Waller 2001: 260)

Night of the Living Dead, via its portrayal of violence and the monstrous, raises all of these issues and thus probes deeply into the contradictions and conflicts active in contemporary American culture. This argument is supported by Harper's comments in his article on *Night of the Living Dead* in which he states that "the violence in Romero's film can be viewed as metaphorical - it stands for the interracial

violence of 1960s America and for the horrors of the Vietnam war that were so shockingly revealed on American television screens in the late 1960s" (Harper 2005), and he adds that "violence is a theme Romero has worked with in all of his zombie films in order to highlight current social injustices" (Harper 2005).

Further violence is encountered in the scenes immediately following Barbara's grisly discovery of the half-eaten body. In a state of shock and terror (a state of mind which would quite possibly be mirrored in the feelings of the audience at this point), she stumbles down the stairs in panic, rushing through the house, attempting to flee from the now threatening and malevolent location. She bursts out of the front door in a flight of fear, only to be blinded by the headlights of a vehicle which is pointed straight at the door. At this point, Ben (who ultimately assumes the role of main protagonist), with a tyre iron in hand, makes an entry. After attempting to take control of the situation in the house (with no assistance from Barbara who at this stage has been reduced to a state of virtual catatonia), he moves outside, where a pair of zombies are attacking his truck. It is at this point that the first real act of violence (not counting Johnny's vain attempts to defend his sister) by the human protagonists is committed against the zombies. It is an important point in the narrative for a number of reasons. Firstly, it provides the audience with some sort of rallying point: up to this moment in the narrative, there has been no indication that the threat presented by the zombies can be countered. The audience will probably be rallying behind Ben's acts of vengeance and violent retribution against the zombies at this point (to return again to Girard's notions of the functions of violence as reprisal within society). The zombies' attempted murder of Barbara and her brother, as well as the horribly mutilated and nameless corpse encountered in the house, demand - according the cultural norms of American society - violent retribution, and Ben is there to provide it. It is not only the fact that he manages to dispatch the zombies, but also the manner in which it is done which is interesting in terms of thematics. Ben sees the zombies smashing the headlights of the car outside, and rushes out to meet them. As Ben steps outside the door, and the final headlight is broken, in a striking and symbolic moment his face is cast into shadow as the hunted becomes the hunter, and the darkness of the human violence within him is

allowed to surface. He throws the zombies to the ground, and using his tyre iron, clubs them repeatedly, and rather ritualistically (a slow, deliberately repetitive motion) over the head, until they are well and truly dead (ie, no longer the 'living' dead). Neil Whitehead describes how

the manner in which violence is enacted is not simply instinctual, psychopathological, or the result of sociocultural primitiveness ("tribalism"), but . . . is also a cultural performance. The poetics of such cultural performance may be utterly enigmatic to Western cultural experience, just as the violence of domestic terrorism, school shootings or serial killing confounds and challenges accepted cultural norms. However, such cultural performances also have an intended audience . . . Clearly, violence as a cultural expression is universal . . . "Cultures of violence" are present within the liberal democracies, either as collective entities, such as militia, terrorist groups, and urban gangs, or as forms of apparently isolated individual expression and psychopathology, as in serial killing or school shootings. Westerners culturally represent the collective violence of others as an aspect of their sociocultural incapacity but, by contrast, see their own violence as criminal or delinquent only in an individual sense, rather than as an aspect of wider cultural patterns. (Whitehead 2002: 246)

Clearly, despite pretensions and claims to the contrary, violence as a ritualised form of cultural expression, whether consciously or subconsciously, exists within the paradigm of Western liberal democracies, and can be seen to exist and manifest itself at very fundamental levels of society. That it performs an important ritual function is also unquestionable; for example, conservative political groups frequently call for the death penalty as both an effective deterrent (again returning to Girard's postulation of state-sanctioned violent retribution as a means to control violence within a society) as well as a fitting punishment for those who have committed acts of violence against the innocent. In *Night of the Living Dead*, violence as a means of dealing with the plague of zombies is advocated by the media themselves, perhaps commenting on the role that the media play in both promoting violence and desensitising audiences to violence. In the latter half of the film, when a reporter is interviewing one of the leaders of a posse, the man says, "if you have a gun, shoot 'em in the head, that's a sure way to kill 'em. If you don't, get yourself a club or a torch, beat 'em or burn 'em, they go up pretty easy,".

Thus, Ben's act of violently, yet ritualistically, dealing with the threat of the zombies is likely to be seen as justified in terms of sociocultural expectations. This violence, however, will not remain unproblematic.

Ben rushes back inside to where Barbara, still in a state of shock, is being threatened by a zombie which has entered the house. This invasion and attempted colonisation of the humans' space presumably crosses a more significant boundary in terms of transgressions; thus, it is met with more violent retribution. Instead of merely clubbing the invading zombie, Ben drives the point of the tyre iron into its forehead, leaving a gruesome, gaping hole when he extracts the weapon. As another zombie attempts to transgress the symbolic threshold by attempting to enter the house, Ben drives the tyre iron into its eye, brutally repelling its attempted entry. He closes the door, and as Barbara stares in shock at the corpse with the gory wound in its forehead, perhaps attempting to come to terms with or justify the act of violence, Ben orders her not to look at it, as he drags it outside. Then, in a further act of symbolic and ritualistic violence (which perhaps recalls the burning of witches and other representatives of perceived anti-Christian evil) he sets fire to the body as the other zombies continue slowly to advance upon the house, and returns inside. Along with the blaze of the flames, Ben orders Barbara to switch on more lights in the house, banishing the heavy shadows in which they have been enshrouded, and perhaps reassuring the audience that despite the darkness of brutal violence into which the humans have sunk, they are still to be identified with light, and thus righteousness, and survival.

Further instances of violence occur at a later stage, after Ben has boarded up the windows and also discovered the group of people hiding in the cellar. As the zombies attempt to break through a window, Ben fires the rifle (which he discovered in the house earlier) at the zombie. In a full shot, from behind the zombie, the audience hears the bang of the rifle, and sees the explosion of blood that indicates that a bullet has passed through the zombie's chest. The zombie, however, is unaffected by the apparently mortal wound, and continues to attack. Ben fires another round through its chest, which

causes it to pause momentarily in its efforts. However, the expressionless face reveals no pain or trauma, and again it attacks until Ben finally, and symbolically (a shot to the head is considered the pinnacle of marksmanship and the ultimate killing shot), places a bullet through its head. Further use of violence against the zombies again involves fire as a weapon, both in the form of petrol bombs tossed from the upper storey of the house into the crowd of zombies, as well as a flaming torch that Ben uses to set fire to the zombies in the scene in which Ben and the young couple drive the truck to the petrol pump. However, it is in this scene that the use of fire as a weapon is turned against the humans; the first of many problematisations and blurrings of the binary oppositions traditionally used in the horror genre; in this case, that of fire and light which are explicitly presented in the first half of the film as signifying good, life and safety. In a horrific scene, the young couple get stuck in the truck after it is set alight by a blunder at the fuel pump, the truck explodes and the two are consumed in the inferno. However, this consumption by fire is a precursor to a more horrific consumption and violation of their bodies by the zombies, who ravenously gorge themselves on all manner of body parts ripped from the bodies, from intestines and livers to bones and even a hand. In this scene, the layer of skin with which we are so familiar and comfortable has been violently removed to reveal the visceral horror of what lies beneath it, and the body itself becomes terrible, threatening, and a grim reminder of our own mortality. In the interlude between the explosion of the truck and the zombies feasting upon the charred remains, we have the first instances of human-on-human violence in the film. First there is the intended violence propagated against Ben by Mr Cooper who locks him out of the house and thus consigns him to a violent death at the hands of the zombie horde. Mr Cooper is very aptly described by Lightning, who says that

through this unattractive, physically unimposing, belligerent, ultimately cowardly man we are given the most privileged figure of our culture, reduced to the bare essentials of that privilege: white, male, heterosexual, father. He guards desperately two manifestations of his privilege: his titular position as head of the family (constantly imposing a discredited authority over his wife) and his role as "father" in the larger society, here unsuccessfully attempting to impose his will on people of color (Ben) and white youth (Tom). (Lightning 2000)

In reprisal for this symbolic violence against him, Ben assaults Mr Cooper and says "I ought to drag you out there and feed you to those things,". In another brutal act of violence later in the film, which perhaps would have been the most shocking to contemporary audiences, the Cooper child (who has died and become a zombie) attacks her mother with a trowel, stabbing her repeatedly and almost ritualistically before devouring her flesh. Harper suggests that this often-discussed shot symbolises "the collapse of the bourgeois domestic family . . . [which] contrasts quite markedly with the more conservative endings of many horror films, where the restoration of family values is seen as the answer to social problems" (Harper 2005).

Another moment of human-on-human violence comes when tensions between the survivors are at a height. The horde of zombies has increased in size, and they are attempting to batter down the barricaded doors and windows. Mr Cooper insists that everyone get into the cellar, a suggestion which is greeted with contempt by Ben, who insists that the cellar is a death trap. Harper claims that Mr Cooper's intended retreat to the basement is, due to historical circumstances, "understandable. During the cold war, the instinct to hide in the basement was the response of many people to the threat of a nuclear attack (the Cooper family are the 'nuclear' family in every sense)" (Harper 2005). A physical struggle between the two ensues, and Ben (whose face is again cast into shadow, highlighting the conflicts in his character), takes possession of the rifle, and, with a cold and calculating expression, slowly and deliberately cocks the rifle and shoots Mr Cooper, putting an end to the conflict which has been simmering between them throughout the course of the narrative. This conflict between the humans, among other things, serves to complicate the relationship between the audience and the protagonist. In *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale discusses the role of "generic verisimilitude" in genre films, arguing that

genres do not consist solely of films. They consist also of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process. These systems provide spectators with

means of recognition and understanding. They help render individual films, and the elements within them, intelligible and, therefore, explicable. (Neale 2000: 31)

Thus, the audience learns from viewing genre films, and then brings to each viewing its own sets of learned expectations and deductions relating to characters, narratives and events. One of these, in terms of the horror genre, would certainly have been that the humans (with whom the audience would conventionally have identified) should not kill each other and, most especially, the main protagonist should not commit cold-blooded murder. Thus Romero again blurs the previously immutable distinctions between monster and human, and upsets the audience's sense of generic verisimilitude. Buscombe claims that, in relation to the Western genre, Sam Peckinpah's western films could, in many ways, be seen as antiwesterns (Buscombe 1986: 23). Similarly, Romero's calculated overturning of generic conventions in *Night*, including the blurring and reversal of traditional binary oppositions, the new and explicit use of gory visuals, the audience's uneasy relationship with the protagonist, as well as the unsatisfying and horrific ending of the film, suggests that *Night* could be considered an antihorror.

Another overturned convention, if not one specific to the horror genre, then surely one endemic at least to 1960s Hollywood, is the lack of a white male in a heroic role. Instead, the portrayal of a *black* male as the main protagonist in an otherwise "white" film was another way in which Romero rebelled against generic standards. Much has been made of Romero's decision to cast Duane Jones as Ben, the heroic (if problematic) black male who attempts pragmatically to defend the house and ensure the survival of the (uncooperative) whites against the tide of zombie attacks. The whole film, in fact, could be seen almost as a photographic negative of something like Endfield's vastly popular film *Zulu* (1964) which depicts courageous whites fortifying a building against the relentless onslaught of the 'barbaric' and 'primitive' black masses; in *Night of the Living Dead* we have a black male almost singlehandedly repelling hordes of 'primitivised' whites, whilst simultaneously trying to deal with the infighting within the fortress, only to be killed at the bitter end by a group of rednecks. In keeping with the notion of Ben as the commanding authority of the house, he finds a rifle (a traditional symbol of white colonising and militaristic power and authority) when searching through the house, and

retains it (except for a brief incident in which Mr Cooper unsuccessfully attempts to wrest control of the gun from him) throughout the film, until his death. Dyer describes Ben as being associated with both light and fire (Dyer 1995: 158), and goes on to describe how this metaphor is extended via Ben's entry into the film:

Barb wanders out of the house into the glare of a car's headlights, out of which Ben seems to emerge; a shot of the lights glaring into the camera is followed by another with Ben moving into the frame, his white shirt first, then his black face filling the frame in front of the light, in a reversal of the good/bad, white/black, light/darkness antinomies of western culture. (Dyer 1995: 159)

This "reversal" is not permanent. Ben's status as a hero is not static, and capable of shifting, for as I mentioned earlier, as his face is thrown into shadow, a darkness sometimes emerges as he kills ritualistically. The subject of race in *Night of the Living Dead* has been one much debated in the corpus of academic criticism on the film (Lightning goes so far as to claim that "race is Romero's primary concern" in *Night* (Lightning 2000)), so I will attempt to touch briefly on some of the major points without going into too much detail on a subject that has already been fairly extensively covered.

Despite the fact that Ben, as a black male, is alone in terms of racial representation in the film (the rest of the characters, both zombie and human, are all white), and that his singularity is emphasised because he occupies the role of main protagonist, his race is not explicitly referred to. However, Harper claims that "by casting a black man as a hero, Romero, the independent filmmaker, implicitly rejected the values of Hollywood, which at that time typically eschewed black heroes" (Harper 2005). However, Romero himself claims that the role of Ben was not specifically written for a black actor, and that Duane Jones was selected for the role simply because his audition had been far better than anyone else's (Lowenstein 2005: 162). Lowenstein goes on to comment that the film's "unintended" racial commentary calls into question the central significance with which some critics have interpreted the racial theme, and that the

lack of overt recognition [of Ben's race] does not prevent Ben's blackness from charging the film's events, but it does signal a certain boundary of frankness and conventionality regarding racial representation that *Night* does not cross. Instead, the film takes certain measures to contain Ben's blackness. Sumiko Hagashi notes that the traditional "supermasculine" threat of the black male is tamed in *Night* through Ben's "desexualised" portrayal as a "technician" associated with "machinery, gadgets and hardware" rather than sexuality. In this sense, Ben resembles the white occupants of the besieged farmhouse". (Lowenstein 2005: 162)

While I will not contest the fact that Ben (along with all of the characters) is portrayed in a "desexualised" way, I think that making this a problematic issue is in itself problematic; the notion of a black male necessarily representing a "supermasculine" threat to the white characters seems in itself to be something of a pandering to racial stereotypes, and that the film should be criticised for "taming" this threat is tantamount to criticism of the way in which the film defies and critiques traditional roles. Also, the statement that Ben is portrayed as a "technician" is not wholly accurate; he asks Tom to drive the truck on the fuel run, because, he says, "I'm not really used to the truck. I found it abandoned", and later Tom says: "I know how to handle the truck, and I can handle the pump. Ben doesn't know anything about that stuff". The perception of Ben as "technician" possibly comes from the fact that he controls and orders the defence of the house, boarding up doors and windows, plans the fuel run for the truck, and comes up with the idea of using molotov cocktails; his character is very practically minded; but to label him as merely a "technician" seems to detract from the positive aspects of the leadership traits he displays in organising the defence of the house and mapping out a plan to ensure the survival of the party. Indeed, perhaps even the notion of his "supermasculinity" being "tamed" is not an entirely accurate interpretation; after all, he commands authority over the other (white) males, and eventually reinforces this authority with the use of physical force against Mr Cooper.

Of course, some of the most striking scenes involving Ben, and ones which, intentionally or not, explicitly involve his race as a factor, occur at the end of the film, and concern his death and the subsequent disposal of his body. Lowenstein describes Ben's death at the hands of "his 'rescuers', a

redneck posse of trigger-happy militiamen," (Lowenstein 2005: 159) and the subsequent burning of his body on bonfire as being "presented as a series of grainy, newspaper-quality photographs that produce inescapable connotations of lynchings and contemporary civil rights-related violence" (Lowenstein 2005: 159). Following up on this image, one could perceive these parallels in the final scenes of the house before the zombies finally overrun it (although Ben escapes the horde by holing up, ironically - as he had been dead set against the idea from the beginning - in the basement). Hundreds of white arms batter and bash through the barricaded doors and windows, grasping desperately at anything they can. The adult Coopers lie dead (although not for long) in the basement, whilst their now-zombie daughter feeds on their flesh. Ben and Barbara try desperately to maintain the integrity of the defenses, but the combined might of the flesh-hungry dead is too much, and the planks begin to break, and gaps start opening up. The door is eventually broken down, and in it stands Johnny, who is himself now one of the living dead. Barbara, is paralysed by shock at the sight of her now-monstrous brother, and she is swamped by (forcibly reintegrated into?) the white mob, in what could perhaps be construed as an implicit critique of contemporary conservative American prejudice against interracial relationships: despite the fact that Ben and Barbara are not romantically linked, their presence as the final two survivors occupying the domestic space of the house could be seen as symbolic. The white girl, who was alone with the black man in a domestic setting, pays the price. Another interpretation of Barbara's death is posited by Stommel, who suggests that Barbara allows herself to be taken by the mob, and that this action

is the first real choice that Barbara has made in the film. After hours of observing the denizens of the house acting in all their I'm-just-another-social-type glory, she determines to flee the world of the film, to let herself be zombified. It is an act not unlike Ophelia's drowning in Hamlet. An acknowledgment that this world offers no place for her and the world of madness and death and the possibility for rebirth is an entirely better option. (Stommel 2007)

After Barbara's demise, Ben retreats to the basement where he barricades himself in, and kills the zombie forms of Mrs and Mr Cooper. For a moment, he loses the steely resolve that he has possessed

throughout the narrative, and in a moment of frustration and despair, throws down the gun and overturns a table. However, he soon comes to his senses and takes up the rifle again, keeping it trained on the door. The final shot of the sequence, which depicts the space of the farmhouse completely overrun by zombies, fades into a diametrically contrasting shot of tranquility; dawn is breaking outside the farmhouse, and birds are singing. The following scenes eerily and uncomfortably reinforce Lowenstein's observations about the way in which Romero's images evoke civil rights-related violence, and lynchings, as well as hunts for runaway slaves. The landscape is overrun; not by zombies now, but by hordes of white militiamen with dogs and rifles. The zombies, who have now left the house, are picked off one by one as they stumble blindly through the countryside. Ben, upon hearing sirens, dogs and gunfire, cautiously makes his way to the surface. Holding his rifle to his shoulder, taking aim (an action unlike any zombie would make), he appears in the window. Despite Ben appearing obviously human, the rednecks (perhaps upon seeing the black man occupying the white space of the farmhouse, and possessing the symbolic power of the rifle) do not bother to confirm if he is indeed human, or merely a zombie; they take aim, fire, and Ben dies. The closing credits roll over grainy stills (which would certainly have recalled both images of civil rights-related violence and shots of the Vietnam war) of Ben's body being cruelly mutilated by the meathook-wielding posse, who finally throw his body onto the pyre with the rest of the despatched zombies and burn it, his own body torched, in a bitterly ironic twist, as he had burned the bodies of the zombies.

Dyer has commented that, given the portrayal of the redneck posse, the white vigilantes are "indistinguishable from the zombies" (Dyer 1995: 159). This is obvious, especially in the aerial shots of the packs of militiamen moving across the plains, their deadly sense of purpose as singleminded as that of the zombies whom they are hunting. Dyer also comments on what he sees as the film's equation of *all* whiteness, zombie or otherwise, with death: he argues that "living and dead whites are indistinguishable, and the zombies' sole *raison d'être*, to attack and eat the living, has resonances with the behaviour of the living whites" (Dyer 1995: 157). Whilst the overt whiteness of the zombie horde cannot be denied in *Night of the Living Dead*, I believe that Romero's representations of the monstrous

in the 'Living Dead' series are open to multitudinous interpretations. They are certainly not confined to whiteness in the later films, especially the final film in the tetralogy, *Land of the Dead*. Of course, I will return to discuss the representation of the zombies in each of the films in their respective chapters, and the degree to which Romero manages to complicate standard binary oppositions between the human and the monstrous in all of his films, but before closing this chapter will briefly examine a few more points related to the zombies of *Night of the Living Dead*.

Gelder describes how in American horror films, "the most powerful country in the world is ceaselessly condemned to encounter forms of its own Otherness" (Gelder 2001: 253), and Tudor describes post-1960s horror as "expressing a profound insecurity about ourselves", and argues that "accordingly the monsters of the period are increasingly represented as part of an everyday contemporary landscape" (Tudor 1989: 48). Indeed, these notions are never better expressed than in *Night of the Living Dead's* monsters, who are, as Dyer has remarked, often all but indistinguishable from their human counterparts, who themselves are often monstrous in their actions and ideologies. The notion that final death can only be brought to the zombies via severe trauma to the brain suggests that it is an idea or ideology that drives the zombies. Harper suggests that the zombies could be interpreted as perhaps representing

in Freudian terms, the "return of the repressed" - those sublimated aspects of ourselves that we hide from public view. Perhaps they are to be equated with the Russians - often conceived by Americans at the time as a barbaric throng, intent on destroying (devouring) the American way of life. Perhaps the zombies represent the younger generation of Americans which, as it seemed to many in the late 1960s, wanted to overthrow traditions and replace them with a new social order. (Harper 2005)

Whilst there are a number of things the zombies could represent, I believe that they are most significantly *ourselves*, reduced to one of our most basic and primitive desires, to consume; an urge that, in the context of American capitalism, has been exploited to the maximum. This at least is made explicit in later films of the tetralogy, such as *Dawn of the Dead*. The zombies of *Night of the Living*

Dead are perhaps less easily defined. Could they also be seen to represent a culture which begins to consume itself? Hoberman suggests that this is the case, and that *Night* "offers the most literal possible image of America devouring itself" (Hoberman 2007: 185). Also, could the trope of the zombie suggest that people's minds have been colonised by ideologies of the dominant socio-economic system, and that this in turn has resulted in them losing all desire for independent thought and action; thus, the only way to destroy them (or, figuratively, the ideology that has polluted them) or to instigate a revolution is through a figurative "bullet in the head", ie, reverse propaganda or revolutionary ideas? These are questions which were raised in *Night of the Living Dead*, and continue to be raised, developed and problematised throughout the 'Living Dead' series.

¹ For a comprehensive survey of themes and representations of patriotism in American film in the twentieth century, refer to Gehring's article "A Fourth Of July Salute To Patriotic Movies".

Chapter 2: *Dawn of the Dead*

I ended the previous chapter by discussing the representation of the zombie in *Night of the Living Dead*, a subject which I will continue to interrogate in this chapter. Due to spacial constraints, I cannot possibly discuss the full range of thematics and tropes represented and problematised in the film; instead, I will briefly touch on issues of race; once again, the somewhat problematic hero of *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) is a black male, as well as issues of gender; *Dawn* sees the rise of a more powerful, less helpless female "victim", a figure which in *Day of the Dead* evolves into a more assertive, aggressive and independent female protagonist. I will also examine the way in which hegemonic American discourses and ideologies, such as consumerism and materialism are represented and critiqued in the film. I will focus mainly on the trope of the zombie. In terms of a progression and expansion of this figure, *Dawn of the Dead* begins to complicate further the definition of the monstrous, an already controversial and ambiguous concept as introduced in *Night*.

Before examining any of the cinematic tropes of *Dawn of the Dead* in detail, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the differences between this film and its predecessor, *Night of the Living Dead*. The most obvious difference, of course, is the use of colour. *Night* was shot in black and white, an effect which added *noir*-ish and German Expressionist undertones to the film, as well as giving it a documentary feel which, as previously mentioned, echoed both footage from the war in Vietnam as well as news coverage of civil rights-related violence in the United States. By contrast, *Dawn* is presented in bright Technicolor. Whilst this is most likely due to a higher budget for Romero, I believe that in visual terms, this has the effect of echoing the oversaturation of colour which is one element of the over-stimulation of the senses so commonly associated with the "mega-mall" experience and hence pointing to a new thematic focus on consumer culture and "consumption". In terms of narrative structure, *Dawn* differs from *Night* in that the ending, whilst ambiguous (two of the human protagonists survive, although they face an uncertain prospect of long-term survival) is more optimistic than the wholly depressing ending of *Night*. The beginning of the film is also different; while *Night*

begins with a situation of relative order which then descends into chaos (which is not completely resolved by the end), *Dawn* begins with a situation of disorder, which descends even further into chaos as the narrative progresses. Also, in *Night*, any possibility of romance between any of the protagonists (a generic norm, even in horror) is denied, whereas in *Dawn* we have a white heterosexual couple (Stephen and Francine). However, as in all of the 'Living Dead' movies, nothing is clear-cut; the couple's relationship is fraught with problems and seems to be mutually unfulfilling; they frequently argue; Francine's pregnancy (a symbol of the potential survival of the human race despite the massive zombie onslaught) seems to be a source of anxiety for Stephen; and despite their constructing a space of white, middle-class domesticity in their fortified room, replete with all of the latest trappings looted from the deserted mall, they are not able to reconcile their differences and consequently drift further and further apart as the narrative progresses. Another difference between the two films includes a more graphic representation of violence, which of course is inextricably tied to the trope of the conflict between zombie and human. In *Dawn*, whilst the violence is more overtly graphic and gory than that of *Night*, it simultaneously contains undeniably comic elements. The violence in *Night* was almost unequivocally shocking and horrifying, and was fairly revolutionary in relation to what had previously been depicted in American films. However, by the time *Dawn* was released in 1978, fairly graphic violence had become quite common in mainstream cinema. It was not only the horror genre which had become more explicit in its depiction of violence in the 70s; films such as *Taxi Driver* (1971), *The Godfather* (1972) and *Dirty Harry* (1971) featured scenes of explicit violence. In this respect, *Dawn of the Dead* could, whilst maintaining the use of violence as a vehicle for social commentary, simultaneously be self-reflexively interrogating the now-commonplace use of graphic violence in a number of American genres.

Perhaps one of the most significant differences between *Night* and *Dawn* is the way that the zombies are portrayed. Looking back to the zombies of *Night*, it can be argued that, as monstrous figures, they were different from the established assortment of monsters generally encountered in the horror genre in that they were *not* from another planet (alien invaders in their many guises), another time (ancient

Egyptian mummies), a foreign culture (the Eastern European vampire), or a conquered or subjugated culture (Voodoo or Afro-religiously-inspired zombies), or the product of an Othered mindset or diseased mind (the mad scientist figure, Dr Jekyll/Mr Hyde). Indeed, unlike even those monstrous figures closer to the human, such as the werewolf, represented as human by day, wolf by night (and thus reinforcing the monster/human binary in that the monstrous acts are committed while the werewolf is in the form of an animal), the zombies of Romero's 'Living Dead' series problematise the notion of the monstrous and, from the beginning of the 'Living Dead' series, begin to deconstruct the binary opposition between human and monster. As argued in the previous chapter, the zombies in *Night* are *ourselves*, strangers, as well as neighbours, friends, brothers, even our own children, reduced to the most basic, primal urge: to *consume*. I also discussed Dyer's comments on the overt whiteness of the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead*, and how the zombies represent conservative white America and a resistance to revolutionary and liberatory ideologies. Dyer also suggests that whiteness represents, and is aligned with, death in *Night* (Dyer 1995: 157), and this notion is furthered as well as complicated in both *Dawn* and *Day of the Dead*. I also wish to comment in detail on the notion of the liminality of the zombie figure, and how sympathies and allegiances towards the zombie and the human are continually shifted and problematised as the boundaries between them are blurred and breached in both *Dawn* and *Day* (the first film of the series to introduce a zombie protagonist).

In terms of the representation of the zombies in *Dawn* versus that in *Night*, Dyer posits that in *Dawn* zombieness is still linked with whiteness, even though some of the dead are black and Hispanic - a black zombie who attacks a living black man in the tenement is whited up, the colour contrast between the two emphasised in a shot of the whitened black zombie biting the living black man's neck; in the shopping mall, an overt symbol of the US way of life, editing rhymes the zombies with the shop mannequins, all of whom are white. (Dyer 1995: 159)

I wish to contest this analysis on two fronts. Whilst it is obvious in *Night* that whiteness is equated with death and the zombie horde is comprised entirely of whites, the representation of the zombie figure is far more ambiguous and contested in *Dawn*. While the black zombie that Dyer talks about is

"whited up" (and he attacks a black *woman*, who was presumably his wife or girlfriend whilst he was alive, because she comes to him - he does not attack a black *man* as Dyer suggests), the white zombies are *also* "whited up" - or, to be more technically accurate, "greyed up". The makeup on the zombies is, throughout the movie, a tinge of bluish grey, which does show up on dark skin as a whitish tint, but contrary to Dyer's analysis, I believe that this "greyiness" is a symbol which represents a state of unity in "living death" rather than whiteness as a social characteristic (particularly if we regard the colour grey as a liminal shade inclusive of all racial groups and exclusive of any single group). In fact, at several points in the narrative, the "greyiness" of the zombies makes identifying separate racial groups amongst the zombies decidedly difficult. Secondly, I wish to contend Dyer's argument that the shop mannequins, who are all white, are equated with the zombies and that this supports his notion of the whiteness of the zombie hordes. Whilst I would agree with his analysis equating the zombies with the mannequins, I believe that the whiteness of the mannequins is merely coincidental and that the effect is a parodic mirroring of the zombies; the zombies look dead (with their numerous open wounds and deathly blue pallor), but are "alive" (in the sense of being animate), whilst the mannequins look alive (from a distance), but are actually inanimate. The "mirroring" in this sequence, which cross-cuts between shots of zombies and shots of mannequins, also comments on the trope of zombies as representing the throngs of affectless and mindless consumers who would normally occupy a mega-mall.

To return to the relationship between zombies and whiteness that Dyer wishes to infer, I believe that it is pertinent to examine examples of other zombies in the film, and to interrogate the notion of whiteness itself. In the context of *Night of the Living Dead*, "whiteness" is obviously applicable to the vicious zombie horde, as well as to the posse of rednecks and local militia who hunt them down; it also extends to most of the occupants of the house who destroy any chances of survival by virtue of their disagreements and self-centredness. Socio-culturally, the zombies as well as the militia/rednecks in *Night*, represent a generalised cross-section of suburban and rural whites. This is echoed again in *Dawn* with very similar shots of the redneck posses continuing gleefully to hunt zombies out in the

countryside. Regarding *Night*, Hoberman comments that the "marauding zombies [provide] a grimly hilarious cross-section of ordinary Americans – if not a metaphor" (Hoberman 2003: 261). This perhaps rings even more true for *Dawn of the Dead*, where the zombie masses, as well as the militia (in various forms), are more representative of a broader segment of the American populace; there are numerous examples of zombies representing people from all walks of life and ethnic groups, and disparate socio-economic status. I believe that this is an implicit comment on the insidious ubiquity of the appeal of consumerism across racial, societal and economic boundaries. There are a number of instances in the film which support this contention; namely a scene in which the raiding bikers (I will return to the issue of whiteness and *humans* later in this chapter) hold down a well-dressed black female zombie, who obviously seems to be a member of the upper class, and strip her of her expensive jewelry. Other scenes in which it becomes obvious that the zombies comprise a more socio-culturally varied group include the scene in which a zombie Catholic nun peers at Fran through the glass door of the department store, and another in which the well-known Hare Krishna zombie makes his way up the stairs to attack Fran. I believe that this figure, whilst superficially being an example of black comedy in the film, is also a poignant reminder, along with the zombie nun, of the perceived failure of religion (both traditional, organised religion as represented by the nun, as well more recent religious cults such as the Krishna Consciousness movement) to combat societal ills perpetuated and aggravated by materialistic values, and of the complete lack of immunity for anyone, including religious devotees, to the ubiquitous lure of media-fuelled consumerism.

As can be seen from these examples, nobody is immune to the threat of "zombification", and this extends beyond social status or religious conviction, and once again, as in *Night*, constitutes an epidemic which threatens (from within) the centre of the structure of American culture; the patriarchal nuclear family. This can be seen in numerous examples in *Dawn*. On the human side, Stephen ultimately fails in his patriarchal role as protector of the family unit (he effectively reverses and completely destroys this position, as after he becomes a zombie he leads the rest of the living dead to the secret entrance which had previously protected the "family" from detection). Within the ranks of

the zombies, we have, as described earlier, the black zombie who attacks his wife/girlfriend, and the theme of the family devouring itself is also evident in another scene in which the group are refuelling the helicopter, and Peter is attacked by two zombie children, whom he is forced to kill. Despite the necessity of this act in terms of the survival of the protagonist, it remains a disturbing scene which leaves the viewer in a distinctly uncomfortable state of mind.

This is but one example of many in which violence as a visual trope is used in the film to position and reposition the audience in an ambiguous relation to both the zombies and the humans. In *Night of the Living Dead*, whilst the audience was not invited to view the human characters with much sympathy (with the exception of Ben), most especially the redneck posse and the selfishly savage Mr Cooper, the zombies themselves were, like most of the human characters, not presented in a particularly sympathetic light. In *Dawn*, however, this begins to change; the peripheries of zombie and human states of being overlap and blur, and sympathies for both human and zombie are continually and alternately interchanged; never is the viewer allowed the comfort of clearly and immutably defined binaries by which means they may align themselves. The use of graphic visual violence is in this sense one of the more important filmic tools used to great effect to enable this constantly shifting and ambivalent identification. The violence here is noticeably different to that of *Night*, and is exaggerated and over-the-top. The blood, in keeping with the garishly oversaturated tones of the mega-mall, is a bright, unrealistic red. I will briefly examine the theme of graphic violence first in relation to the zombies, and then the humans as manifested in *Dawn of the Dead*.

In *Night of the Living Dead* incidents of visual gore, though intense when shown, were sometimes suggested instead of universally openly depicted. In contrast, the violence committed by the zombies in *Dawn of the Dead* is constantly presented in an explicitly graphic manner. However, as previously mentioned, it often verges on the humorous, which given the context of *Dawn* indicates an overt self-reflexivity within the scope of a horror genre that had, by 1978, incorporated the depiction of graphic violence and gore. Also, whilst this would obviously be due to a bigger budget and thus the

opportunity to create more spectacular visual effects, I believe that, as stated previously, this violence is a visual tool used to shift and reposition the audience in relation to the zombies. There are many instances of this in the film; one of the first examples of explicit zombie-on-human violence comes near the beginning of the film, in the shot referred to previously, where the black male zombie attacks the black woman; she runs to him in a state of hysteria, but her embrace is met with a vicious bite which literally tears a chunk out of her shoulder, and again, before he is gunned down by the militia, the zombie bites a hunk of flesh from her forearm. Another instance of fairly gory zombie-on-human violence is when Roger, in a state of psychological breakdown, insists on retrieving his bag from one of the trucks, which results in a chunk of flesh being torn from both his arm and leg as the swarm of zombies, which moments before he has callously and vaingloriously charged through and battered, descend upon him *en masse*. Such instances are reminiscent of the violence committed by the zombies in *Night*, and would not encourage audience identification with the zombies.

However, the most spectacular displays of violent gore committed by the zombies in *Dawn* are reserved for later in the film. After the biker raid, the zombies descend upon the stragglers left behind as the other bikers escape. There are numerous scenes of brutal carnage here; a biker who foolishly attempts to test his blood pressure as the zombies approach is overwhelmed by them, and has his arm literally torn off at the shoulder (although this scene definitely has elements of the comedic); another straggler has his abdominal cavity ripped open by the ravenous masses, who then proceed to remove his intestines and other innards, while he is still alive. However, the audience may not react as strongly to these deaths ("battle casualties") as they would to perhaps the most horrifying human death in *Dawn*: that of Stephen, who is attacked as he is trying to escape from the elevator (after being shot by the raiders). He is pulled back down into the elevator, and repeatedly bitten as he desperately tries to repel the attacks; he eventually forces the zombies out of the elevator, but is mortally wounded. In the scenes that follow, his bloodied corpse emerges from the elevator as one of the living dead. It is interesting to note that in terms of violence meted against humans by zombies, it is (in terms of the main characters) only those humans who "lose their heads" who are successfully attacked by the

zombies; Roger, in his reckless bravado and subsequent psychological breakdown is attacked and bitten, as is Stephen, after he becomes infuriated by the raiders and attacks them (I will comment more on this action when I discuss the perpetuation of violence by humans in the film). It could thus be surmised that "losing one's head" is, in narrative terms, a precursor to zombiehood.

In stylistic terms, however, the violence committed by the zombies against the humans solely involves physical and hunger-driven violence, which is strikingly in contrast to the brutality of the mechanical violence perpetuated by the humans. There are a number of ways of understanding this visual trope: firstly, it could be argued that the zombies' violence is a more "natural", instinctual form of violence more akin to that of animals, and motivated simply by a need to consume, as opposed to *cultural* violence, in which certain forms and modes of violence are instilled and sanctioned by cultures. However, another way of examining this trope is to see it less as animalistic hunger, and more as the violence of cannibalism. The zombies are, after all, simultaneously human as well as non-human; Peter says of the zombies, "They're us.". The visual representation of cannibalism, and its use as a metaphor, are by no means unique to Romero's films; indeed, Frank LeStringant describes how in the seventeenth century the Austrian Benedictine Philoponus used images of cannibalism supposedly encountered in the New World by missionaries as a propaganda tool to demonise those who resisted or opposed colonisation (LeStringant 1997: 26). In an example more immediately germane to Romero's 'Living Dead' films, LeStringant describes how

All tyrannical regimes could be seen [by the modern analyst] as anthropophagous . . . The scandal of eating the dead gives way to the even more intolerable scandal of devouring the living. The slave-trade, usury, feudal services, judicial torture, were all ways of eating one's fellow creatures - not to mention the wars of conquest and the mass roundups of slaves which were common currency in the first decades of European overseas expansion. (LeStringant 1997: 8)

Whilst LeStringant uses examples of practices and systems that have, in the Western socio-cultural context, long since fallen into disrepute and have been erased from current practice by the passing of

centuries, this does not necessarily suggest a teleological notion of "progress" or enlightenment. Instead, the brutal past systems of feudalism and slavery have merely been replaced by regimes which rely on economic exploitation of the Third World's resources and indigenous populations; the citizens of Western nation-states, most especially the United States, have become slaves to a lifestyle based on willful ignorance and cycles of meaningless consumerism as evinced in *Dawn of the Dead* (an ongoing and intensifying process, as I will argue in the chapter on *Land of the Dead*). These lifestyles involve, whilst certainly less directly than previous cultures of slavery, almost as much "devouring" of an Other, even if that Other is more removed from the immediacy of an American middle class existence via geographical distance and partially hidden by ignorance and material distractions. Wars of colonial expansion are now not so much concerned with the colonising of physical territory as with disseminating ideologies; in the context of both *Night* and *Dawn of the Dead*, the conflicts of Vietnam and the ongoing Cold War with the then Soviet Union reflect this. But the regimes remain, as Lestrangant would have it, anthropophagous. Thus, the brutal visual trope of the cannibal zombie in *Dawn of the Dead* could be seen as a metaphor for the "anthropophagous" regime of the United States, economically, socially, culturally and politically. Like the zombies, it requires human food to fuel it, and consumes all; none are immune. The visual metaphor of the zombies' cannibalism can also be understood in relation to the stripping away of the social, economic, cultural and racial boundaries that superficially segregate humans, instead leaving them a macabrely homogenous grey, unified by their driving urge to consume; for that is the foundation of almost all socio-cultural systems of postmodernity. It is illuminating in this context to take heed of Hogg's comments on a "civilised" man enjoying the spectacle of violent tribal warfare and cannibalism, in which he describes how a "civilised" Western explorer relates with relish his experience of observing a cannibal feast (Hogg 1958: 36). The spectacle of horror, and most especially visual, graphic horror extends beyond the borders of cultures and seems to tap into something deeply intrinsic to the human psyche. Even that horror which is not visited upon an Other, but upon ourselves, is consumed with delectation; note the irony in the way that *Dawn of the Dead* has (considering its subject matter) become a favourite showing in American shopping malls, wherein "masses [revel] in the demise of the very culture they

appear most enthusiastically to support" (Modleski 2002: 272). Perhaps on some level, the consumers recognise the revolutionary call to arms; the invitation to rail against the system in which they are willingly imprisoned, but due to their own inextricability from the system, they can only experience such a possibility vicariously, through the zombie revolution against, and destruction of, American culture.

To continue with the analysis of the visual trope of violence, it is necessary to reposition the conceptual lens to focus on the violence committed by the human characters in *Dawn of the Dead*, which in many cases is far more excessive and horrifying than that perpetrated by the zombies. I believe that this is a significant thematic that is quite often overlooked in critical analyses of *Dawn of the Dead*, which tend to focus more on the film's thematising of consumerism/commodity fetishism through the continuous battle for the space of the shopping mall. In interrogating the visual trope of this human-committed violence, there are a number of key scenes to be examined. One of the most intense and metaphorical of these scenes involves the human colonisation of the shopping mall. After the successful implementation of their plan to block off all of the entrances to the mall with trucks, and the subsequent sealing of the doors, the human characters engage in an extermination mission in which they systematically eliminate all of the remaining zombies. After this is complete, the four of them, holding guns, with multiple bandoliers strapped over their shoulders, look out from the upper level of the mall onto the ground floor, littered with corpses of their making. This image of heavily armed conquerors surveying their violently-claimed territory is surely an echo of the bloodstained colonisation, at the hands of heavily armed Europeans, of the Americas themselves.

A similar scene occurs within minutes of the opening of the film. The government has, in an attempt to contain the zombie epidemic, ordered that all private premises are to be vacated and that all citizens are required to report to rescue stations. We are transported to the site of one of these forced evacuations, a run-down high-rise building occupied largely by impoverished black and Hispanic residents situated in what appears to be an urban ghetto. These residents have refused to leave their

meagre homes, and are led in their resistance by a guerilla named Martinez. The National Guard has been called in to forcibly evacuate them, and we are briefly introduced to Roger. However, the focus is on another member of the National Guard, a vicious man who spits out racially tainted slurs and threats of violence:

"Come on Martinez, show your greasy little Puerto Rican ass so I can blow it right off. Blow all their asses off. Low-life bastards. Blow all their low-life little Puerto Rican and nigger asses right off."

A gun battle follows and the members of the National Guard (with the exception of Roger, who tries to get the resistance members to surrender peacefully and avoid bloodshed) systematically exterminate all of the members of the resistance. The National Guardsmen fire tear-gas cylinders into the building and don their gas masks (the covering of their faces a symbolic act of dehumanising which makes them appear to be automatons, killing machines) and in a scene no doubt echoing civil rights-related violence begin forcibly to remove the black and Hispanic poor from their homes. The vicious Guardsman charges down the stairs, firing wildly and taking obvious joy in inflicting violence upon innocent and unarmed residents; in one particularly shocking and nightmarish scene he kicks open a door and, through the haze of teargas, laughing with malevolent glee, blows the head clean off the male occupant of the room as the female screams in terror. The only Guardsman who attempts to stop him is Roger, who pulls off his own mask (casting off the soulless face of the automaton and revealing his human features once again) and tries unsuccessfully to tackle him. The other Guardsmen remain masked, in uniform, and run past seemingly indifferent to the rampage of wanton violence. The psychotic National Guardsman is eventually stopped by Peter, introduced as a tall, ominous figure hidden behind the facade of a gas mask, who coolly and calmly shoots the man in the back; thus introducing him as a highly problematic hero. At this point, the only violence which has been encountered has been that of human upon human, and it soon becomes obvious how the zombie apocalypse was allowed to attain such epidemic proportions: through the fact that the humans cannot set aside their individual differences and cooperate to combat the zombie threat. Two thematics are related to this phenomenon in the film; the notion of materialism and fiercely guarded individual

possession of resources and capital, a value which constitutes the foundation of American capitalism, and its concomitant: racial and cultural prejudice. This prejudice and the exploitation of black and Hispanic workers from the time of slavery to that of segregation and the post-segregation in which they continue to remain relegated to the status of an underclass, are the foundations upon which American capitalism has relied in its proliferation and continued expansion. The thematic of materialism/consumerism and the fiercely defended possession of capital and resources is evident not only in the villains of the film, most overtly in the bikers who raid the mall, but also in the protagonists themselves, and indeed, it proves to be their downfall. As soon as a character elevates his own desire for possession of material resources above an altruistic concern for the wellbeing and survival of the group, he becomes morally equivalent to the consumer-zombies and thus must forfeit his life and be (violently) assimilated into the horde.

This thematic is most especially evident in two separate scenes involving the main characters; the scene where Roger is attacked and bitten by zombies, and the scene in which the bikers raid the mall and Stephen attacks them. In both cases, the rash actions and selfish decisions made by the protagonists lead ultimately to their deaths. In the scene in which Roger and Peter are moving trucks to block off the mall entrances, it becomes increasingly obvious that Roger is becoming more and more reckless; his bravado and carelessness in attacking the zombies reveals an inner turmoil with which he appears to be struggling to cope. Eventually, he is almost bitten by zombies as he carelessly leaves the door open while he hotwires a truck; Peter, at this point the representative of rationality, saves him by shooting the zombie. Roger's face, however, is spattered with the zombie's blood and this is a visual precursor to the tainting of his own blood which will soon occur. As Peter urges him to remain collected and focused, Roger begins to take a malevolent delight in brutally running down the zombies with the truck. He then wastes time and places the operation in jeopardy by shooting zombies that are not a direct threat to him. He becomes irate and demanding when he realises that he has forgotten his bag in the truck; again, an indication of his growing link to the selfish single-mindedness of the zombies. Peter orders him to remain collected, but it has become obvious at this point in the

narrative that he has effectively lost control. Roger retrieves his bag, but drops it. Instead of climbing straight back into the truck, he recklessly attacks the zombies, and is bitten; after this, he begins the tortuous and inexorable descent into zombiehood.

Stephen is the other white male protagonist out of the four main characters. After it has become obvious that Roger will perish, it nonetheless seems reasonable to assume that Stephen will survive; despite the fact that he is not as handy with weapons as either Roger or Peter (this is made explicit in a number of instances), he is nevertheless able to remain calm and to provide reliable support for Peter's plans. However, he too eventually succumbs to materialistically-driven irrationality, and thus becomes assimilated into the zombie horde. Interestingly, this turn of the narrative echoes that of *Night of the Living Dead*, in which the white male characters all succumb to irrational and selfishly-motivated behaviour and consequently perish, leaving ultimately the white female (Barbara) and the black male (Ben) as the final survivors, who nonetheless meet their respective ends, Barbara at the hands of her now-zombie brother, and Ben at the hands of redneck vigilantes. In *Dawn* too, after Stephen's descent into zombiehood, which signals the beginning of the end as he reveals the humans' hiding place, the final survivors are a white female (Fran) and a black male (Peter). Unlike in the overtly pessimistic *Night* though, they survive, albeit facing an uncertain future.

Prior to Stephen's descent into recklessness (and thereafter, necessarily, zombiehood), he and Peter attempt to protect "their" collective property against the biker raiders; they tentatively arm themselves, and go and lock up the security gates of the shops. The bikers, however, manage to break through these fortifications and ransack the shops with gleeful abandon. Dyer's comments relating to whiteness in *Dawn of the Dead* may here again be called into question; whilst the raiders are largely a white group, their numbers include at least one black male, and one Hispanic male. As the bikers revel in unrestricted consumption (an almost exact parallel with the unrestricted and voracious consumption perpetrated by the zombies) Peter, the precarious voice of reason, implores Stephen to "just stay out of sight. They're after the place; they don't care about us.". However, unbiased rationality is something

that, throughout the narrative of *Dawn*, is presented as unattainable by humans; this is evident in the actions of almost all of the human characters, from the four main characters to the bikers, the rednecks, network television employees and the National Guard. It is emphasised repeatedly throughout the film by the scientist who appears on the last remaining television broadcasts and, against a background of ridicule and jeering, repeatedly implores the human population to act rationally and unemotionally. He maintains his faith in the efficacy of scientific discourse and rationality in the extermination of the zombie threat; however, as the narrative progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that humans are incapable of this kind of purely rational behaviour. In the final broadcast, the scientist repeats these sentiments. This is met by jeering, and the presenter claiming that despite the kind of scientific rationalism that this man is attempting to promote, that "that's not how people really are". This is borne out by Stephen's behaviour in the biker raid. Despite Peter's suggestion that they just let the bikers take what they want and leave, Stephen, cannot tolerate the threat to his "ownership" of the mall and its resources. He says to himself, "It's ours. We took it," and fires upon the bikers, directing their attention from the zombies to himself and Peter. As Stephen shifts into the role of white capitalist defender of property, so begins his descent into a purely consumption-driven mode of existence (zombiehood). His unsuccessful and rash attack upon the much larger and well-armed army of bikers results in him being chased down, shot, and left to the zombies, whereupon he is attacked and transformed. Peter, on the other hand, fights a running battle with the bikers, and in the process reveals a more disturbing side of his character; one capable of relishing the act of violence, as opposed to the pragmatically-minded and cool-headed Peter we are presented with throughout most of the narrative. Another instance in which this side of his character becomes apparent is the scene in which he and Stephen raid the gun shop, where he revels in being surrounded with freely available firearms. An interesting parallel can be drawn with Ben in *Night of the Living Dead* here; whereas Ben does not exactly revel in the discovery of the rifle in the house, he nonetheless clings to it as a traditional symbol of masculine power, and also a traditional symbol of white colonial power, which he has re-appropriated. Peter, too, chooses a rifle (the *most expensive* hunting rifle in the shop - thus symbolising both traditional power, and the materialistic power of excess within American capitalism)

and guards it possessively throughout the narrative. He describes it as being a gun which would most likely have been bought by someone rich enough to afford it, but too inept to use it properly; thus he can simultaneously be seen as re-appropriating the capitalist symbol of power (a pragmatic but economically disempowered black male appropriating the tools of the white elite), and as succumbing to the problematic charms of a materialistic and violent discourse.

Peter's subscription to the discourse of violence becomes explicit during the biker raid. He appears to take obvious delight in the act of battle, and even after the bikers have retreated and are exiting the mall, he seems to take sadistic pleasure in training the sights of his hunting rifle on a retreating biker and shooting him *after* he has left the mall. The hapless biker is then descended upon by a mass of ravenous zombies. It is at this point that the zombies begin to move again into the realm of the monstrous. Up until now, they have been mercilessly slaughtered and tormented by the bikers (including being "pied" in the face, in a moment of black comedy); and because the bikers are unambiguously portrayed as vicious, violent sociopaths, a degree of audience sympathy necessarily, if rather uncomfortably, has shifted to the zombies. Indeed, some of the more harmless-looking zombies (although no Romero-esque zombie is harmless!) are the victims of the bikers' slaughter, including a number of women zombies and an obese male zombie in swimming trunks. However, whatever sympathies may have been possible when the zombies were being assailed by the vicious bikers quickly disappear after the raid has been completed. A number of stragglers are left behind and they are descended upon and devoured with a single-minded ruthlessness; in these instances, the visual gore far exceeds that of *Night of the Living Dead*, and includes scenes of living humans' arms being ripped off, abdomens being torn open and viscera greedily yanked out to be ingested with gusto by the zombie masses. There is an interesting mix of both comedic, over-the-top ridiculousness interspersed with genuinely disturbing and revolting gore. This perhaps indicates both a self-reflexivity on the part of the film, in relation to the horror genre, which necessarily coexists with a desire to satisfy generic verisimilitude as well as a desire to push the visual boundaries of the genre.

After the bikers have left and the stragglers have been devoured, the zombies begin to recolonise the space of the shopping mall, and after Stephen is attacked in the elevator and becomes a zombie, he reveals the humans' hiding place, and the process of recolonisation is complete. The remaining humans, Peter and Fran, must flee. Peter, in a moment of internal conflict, struggles to relinquish the material wealth of the mall, and is thus in danger of succumbing to zombiehood. At the last minute, however, he changes his mind, abandons the mall, and survives. The final moments of the film, as the end credits begin to roll, depict the finality of the recolonisation of the mall, now completely overrun by zombies who, in the dark and heavily shadowed lighting, are virtually (and ironically) indistinguishable from the human shoppers who would normally occupy the space. Throughout the film, the zombies and humans have, to a far greater extent than in *Night of the Living Dead*, occupied a liminal zone in which identification and sympathies constantly shift. Despite this, it cannot yet be said that a zombie has occupied the role of protagonist; this development is instead reserved for the third film in the tetralogy, *Day of the Dead*.

Chapter 3: *Day of the Dead*

There are two major areas of difference between *Dawn of the Dead* and *Day of the Dead*: one is the introduction of a central, assertive and independent female protagonist, the other is the introduction of a zombie protagonist. Both are ambiguously portrayed; the woman, Sarah, despite her own strengths often requires the support of a male character, and sometimes needs to be rescued by a male character. The zombie, Bub, is portrayed as being "tame", restraining his overwhelming urge to kill and devour humans, and seems to be (re)learning how to behave in a human manner; however, it transpires that the only way to "train" him has been to feed him human meat. Bub is an important character in relation to the constant development and restructuring and evolution of the zombies which occurs throughout the 'Living Dead' series, and in this chapter I will examine how the zombies have changed and evolved throughout the series, and how *Day* expands upon tropes which recur throughout the series.

Additionally, in line with the rest of the 'Living Dead' films, *Day* can be read as a metaphor which critiques a number of aspects of American culture, in particular, the socio-political context of Reaganite America. Robin Wood has already written fairly extensively on *Day of the Dead* in *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan ...and Beyond*, (there is a chapter in the book devoted entirely to *Day*), and while I will mention some of the key issues that Wood identifies in his chapter, my analysis of *Day* will necessarily be brief, and I will focus more on the notion of the zombie as a figure located in a liminal zone between the human and the monstrous, the redefinition and re- and deconstruction of "zombieness" and the development of a zombie protagonist, a trope which will be further developed in *Land of the Dead*.

The zombies in Romero's 'Living Dead' series have, up to this point, occupied a number of positions, from threatening in *Night* to alternating between pitiful and malevolent in *Dawn*. In *Day*, we have the first example of an actual zombie character; previously in the series, the figures who have come closest to this notion have been human characters who have died and "come back" as zombies (a number of characters in *Night*, and Roger and Stephen in *Dawn*). However, in *Day* we have a character named

Bub who is introduced into the narrative *as* a zombie; indeed, his character undergoes a number of changes and a process of development as the narrative progresses, providing a number of insights into the nature of zombies, both in relation to one another and in relation to humans. Wood remarks that:

it was in *Dawn* that the zombies were first defined as "us", and the definition is taken up in *Day* . . . The implications of this definition need to be carefully pondered, as it is obviously both true and false. The zombies are human beings reduced to their residual "instincts": they lack the functions that distinguish true humans, reason and emotion, the bases of human communication and human society . . . The characters in all three films are valued precisely according to their potential to differentiate themselves from the zombies, their ability to demonstrate that the zombies are *not* in fact "us". Something clearly needs to be said about my use of the term "residual instincts". I am not referring here . . . to some God- or nature-given human essence. Certainly one might claim the need for food as a "natural" instinct, but *Day* is quite explicit on that score: "They don't eat for nourishment.". What we popularly call "instincts" are in fact the product of our conditioning, and the residual instincts represented by the zombies are those conditioned by patriarchal capitalism. Above all, they consume *for the sake of consuming*... all good capitalists are conditioned to live off other people, and the zombies simply carry this to its logical and literal conclusion. But it is through "Bub" . . . that the theme is most fully developed. What Bub learns, through a system of punishments (beatings) and rewards (raw human flesh) that effectively parodies the basis of our educational system, is "the bare beginnings of civilised behaviour": in fact, the conditioned reflex. (Wood 2003: 289)

According to Wood then, Bub is the "primordial capitalist", a human-like (but simultaneously non-human) creature reduced to "residual" instincts; these instincts are honed and developed via a system of "education" which teaches him to conform to cultural and societal conventions and perform a function within that society. Bub is not the only zombie who appears to be learning; at the beginning of the film, Sarah and some of the soldiers are ordered to capture two zombies from the underground enclosure for Dr Logan's research. When the zombies appear reluctant to come out into the open, one

of the soldiers remarks, "They're scared". Sarah responds, "They're learning, they're actually learning". This scene is significant in relation to a number of themes that are reflected in *Day* as well as throughout the series. The soldiers travel through the dark underground passages to the caverns where the zombies are held, whooping and yelling maniacally as they go. Private Steel, the most aggressive and malicious of the soldiers, stands atop the fence and unleashes a primal scream into the darkness of the caverns. Steel's character strongly recalls the character of the violent, racist National Guardsman who wantonly killed black and Hispanic ghetto-dwellers in *Dawn*: like the Guardsman, Steel seems to relish the act of violence, and Steel also makes frequent use of racial slurs (he refers to Miguel as a "dirty Spic" on a number of occasions). In addition, Steel simultaneously recalls the bikers of *Dawn*, in his vicious taunting of the zombies as he tries to attract their attention. His threats, which contain blatant sexual aggression, are also focused on Sarah. Steel also represents a "regression" of many of the humans, and this is made explicit when Sarah refers to him as an "anthropological curiosity", translated by the soldiers to mean "caveman" and "throwback", an epithet which he readily adopts for himself. This symbolism is also evident visually; Steel literally straddles the border between the zombies and the humans, the physical fence, marking his regression into the monstrous. In this sequence, the consistent use of low angle shots looking up at Steel both suggest that he is, in this situation, the dominant figure. However, at a subterranean level this also hints at the darker possibility that it is his mode of thought which has been, and continues to be, the prevalent mode of thought amongst the human characters, and that it is this mode of thought which has lead, throughout the zombie apocalypse, to the downfall of human society. In this sequence, in another oscillatory movement of identification, the zombies are portrayed simultaneously as threat and victim. They are, as they have been throughout the 'Living Dead' series, threatening as they advance through the darkness. However, the shot of the zombies helplessly reaching up for Steel, who continues with his torrent of verbal abuse, renders them as pathetic and pitiful, and the shot in which a zombie is pulled through the fence into the caged section, and hooked with the catching pole while a bright light is shone into its eyes recalls images of primates being subjected to cruel experiments at the hands of sadistic scientists. The fact that the zombie must be forcefully pulled through the divider into the

human zone also suggests that, despite Dr Logan's hopes, zombies cannot be integrated into human society. This metaphor can also be extended to the notion of the binary opposition which necessarily remains a key structuring element in the 'Living Dead' films; however much Romero may stretch and undermine these oppositions, they cannot ever be fully deconstructed. However, as in *Dawn*, it becomes clear that the zombies never occupy a stable position; while they are often identified as pitiful, their threatening aspect remains a constant. This is a generic constraint necessary, by definition, in the field of horror, although Romero constantly pushes the boundaries of and destabilises the ways in which the distinction between the human and the "monstrous" zombie can be interpreted. This is most evident in *Day*, in which the character Bub provides evidence of the beginnings of a potential zombie "society", and becomes even more explicit in the later *Land*. Once again, echoing the zombies in *Dawn*, the zombies in *Day* are "greyed" up, making racial distinctions hard to perceive and hinting at the possible egalitarianism of a zombie society in which distinctions of race, class and culture have fallen away. However, the main reason that these distinctions do not exist is because they have been replaced by the overriding urge to consume; perhaps Romero is pessimistically suggesting that the only universal trait common to all cultures is the desire to consume. With reference to both the concept of a zombie being able to learn, and the concomitant potential of a zombie society, the paradox remains that neither the "trained" and "educated" Bub, nor any other zombie, can possibly conform to any human society, because, they are, by virtue of what drives them, *deconstructors* of human society. One could possibly conceive of a zombie society; Wood, however, denies this, claiming that the zombies lack the bases of communication (each individual zombie mostly ignores other zombies, and will only follow another when a food source is discovered) and thus have no foundation upon which to construct any kind of society (Wood 2003: 289). However, the notion that zombies cannot form any sort of coherent social group is overturned in *Land of the Dead* (which was released after the publication of Wood's book) in which the zombies *do* begin to form the structural basis of a primitive society.

I think that in terms of the zombies in *Day* (not only Bub, but the zombies as a group), it is useful to see them as an *anti*-society; anti- in the sense that whilst they are indeed "us" and they harbour our "residual instincts", they disregard everything regarded as central to our conception of society, and indeed exist with, seemingly, the sole purpose of deconstructing and destroying the very foundations of Western patriarchal capitalist society; the desire to consume has been pushed to the point of destroying all other aspects of society. Throughout the 'Living Dead' series, the zombies completely eschew not only what we regard as peripheral elements of societal existence (material wealth in various forms, as well as entertainment) but also what we regard as essential; food (as Wood has established, they consume for the sake of consuming, not for nourishment); shelter (they do not seem to care about weather conditions); familial relations (as has been repeatedly seen throughout the tetralogy, with children devouring their parents, brothers attacking sisters, friends mauling friends, lovers savaging lovers). They even disregard completely the natural cycles of time; they do not acknowledge night or day (although they do seem to fear bright light) and never sleep (unless their whole existence could be seen as a bizarrely extended form of somnambulism!). The one "residual instinct", besides the conditioned capitalist reflex of consumption, which the zombies do retain and perpetuate albeit in a subtle and indirect manner, is that of reproduction, or perhaps to put it more accurately, multiplication, and this is in keeping with the notion of a standard human society, which also aims to reproduce itself and multiply its numbers. The zombie "reproduction" is of course done in conjunction with consumption, and is inextricably tied to the act of "feeding", for, of course, if humans are bitten by a zombie, they in turn shed their humanity via a body which becomes more and more "horrific" as the disease spreads and eventually consumes the last vestiges of consciousness and rational thought.

Also, the zombies completely ignore that element which has ultimately come to define the very basis of the existence of capitalist society - money (out of the whole tetralogy, this is made most explicit in *Day*). This disdain for money is, to an extent, paralleled in the human characters in *Day*, and of course is linked to the collapse of human society in the face of the massive zombie plague. However, the zombies' and humans' relation to money creates an interesting paradox, in that the zombies, as entities

embodying an all-encompassing urge to consume, ignore that transcultural symbol of pure consumption - money. Instead, they aim to consume all humans, and, by extension, the culture of consumption itself. The humans, for whom the urge to possess money (in the context of patriarchal capitalism from whence the characters in *Day* originate) would normally be a primary behavioural motivator, also eschew money (although they are nonetheless far removed from any kind of utopian society). Wood describes *Day* as differing significantly from *Dawn* in terms of its representation of money: "in *Dawn* it was still worth helping oneself from the mall bank, 'just in case'; in *Day*, money blows about the abandoned city streets, so much meaningless paper" (Wood 2003: 289). The worthlessness of money in *Day* is intrinsically tied to the notion of the destruction of society, both by the zombies as an "outside" force whose existence is directed at obliterating society, as well as from within, by a human society (however small, like the group of characters in *Day*) that, despite coming from patriarchal capitalism, has lost its foundation (money), yet continues to exist attempting to utilise the same power structures (militaristic and patriarchal hierarchies) which proved so ineffectual before the fall. The portrayal of the worthlessness of money and cities occupied only by zombies in *Day* could well be a larger metaphor, sarcastically mirroring and inverting the consumerist vision of the 1980s American urban landscape and urban culture, which was characterised by the garish glow of conspicuous consumption.

The opening scenes of *Day* reflect the ultimate collapse of patriarchal capitalist society and the concomitant worthlessness of money, and establish a subtle continuity with *Dawn* in that the motif of the helicopter is repeated (*Dawn* closed with Peter and Fran taking off in the helicopter); *Day* opens with a helicopter, which contains another black male and white female (establishing a form of suggested continuity with the ending of *Dawn*). The helicopter descends into a city in Florida. It becomes immediately apparent that the city has become the site of anti-society; and the idyllic azure sky and lush palms serve to heighten the contrast between stereotypical notions of an idyllic subtropical site of leisure with the reality of a now-dead city, in which abandoned, rusting cars litter the streets along with discarded money and other trash. Wide angle shots in which the two human

characters are miniscule figures against the backdrop of deserted streets which stretch into the distance, utterly devoid of human life, serve to heighten the sense of the utter decimation of American society at the hands of the zombies. A low angle shot of the grandiose, classically-styled bank building pans down to reveal steps strewn with old palm fronds and a darkened doorway in which an alligator basks. This is a multidimensional symbol; the alligator represents the primeval, and if we are to talk of binaries, the savagery of the natural in direct contrast with the reserved and polished facade of Western culture; thus, if the bank (the house of money, the defining pillar of patriarchal capitalism) houses nothing but an alligator, this implies a complete regression, deconstruction and decimation of capitalist society. The alligator is also known as a dangerous carnivorous predator which will attack humans; an echo in the animal world of the zombies who now occupy the recolonised space of the city. Dr Logan mentions that the residual part, the core of the zombies' brains, is that "primal jelly that we inherited from the reptiles", and this has interesting implications in terms of zombie-human relations, which are developed further in *Day*. The fact that both zombies and humans share the "reptilian" brain implicates both groups in a more primal and savage mode of consumption (represented by the alligator), it also shifts the positioning of the humans towards the monstrous, especially as evinced by the behaviour of the soldiers. This symbolism suggests a regression of society into a more primal, survivalist mode of existence and as the alligator can be seen to be "guarding" the bank doors (by preventing humans from entering), it suggests that no reversion to capitalism, or any other recognisable form of human society, will be possible. Thus, *Day* is located progressively further along the apocalyptic timeline than was *Dawn*; *Dawn* opened in a situation of chaos, in the midst of a potential apocalypse, and closed with an (ambiguous) optimism. *Day*, however, situates itself in a distinctly *post*-apocalyptic paradigm in which a few scattered bands of survivors are all that remain of the human race.

The only remaining humans are those with either specialised skills (scientists and pilots), or those in possession of tools of violent domination (soldiers). The small group of survivors featured in *Day* lives in a military compound underground, an echo of the theme of claustrophobic spaces first introduced in *Night of the Living Dead*, although with the base being located underground it becomes

even more restrictive and claustrophobic than the house of *Night*; the rock walls, cool clinical lighting and sterile colours are reminiscent of an institutional space, and evoke a number of places like hospitals, morgues and insane asylums; the threat of injury, death and insanity are ever-present spectres in almost every shot. This mood is made explicit with the opening scene, in which Sarah, alone in a bare, white room stares morosely at a calendar, the days of which are all blank. As she reaches out for the calendar, hundreds of zombie arms burst through the wall. While this is revealed as a dream, it suggests that the compound will later be breached and that no place is safe from the threat of zombieness. Indeed, while the compound (on the surface level) is surrounded by high fences which keep the hungry horde of zombies at bay, there are a number of zombies kept in a group of underground caverns for research, and the dark, threatening space of these zombie-infested caverns forms an intrusion into the humans' space, an evocation of the liminal zone between the human and the monstrous that the zombies occupy, and an omnipresent reminder that there is no shelter to be found from the zombie epidemic, and that the chances of survival in an overrun world are depressingly minimal. Wood suggests that

Day represents an uncompromisingly hostile response to the 80s, both to Reaganite America and to the cinema it produced . . . *Day* is if anything more relevant today than it was when it appeared, as things have only got progressively blacker and more desperate, and events are currently escalating into a world situation of which the end of life on the planet . . . seems a not unlikely outcome. (Wood 2003: 287)

When we are first introduced to the compound, a number of the film's themes become apparent. Firstly, there are several signs that most of the traditional structures, laws and hierarchies which govern society have, even in this overwhelmingly patriarchally-dominated group, been severely eroded. As the helicopter lands, there is a shot of a bearded, shirtless soldier watering his marijuana plant. Given that the military traditionally represents an image of rigorous hierarchical power (of which wearing the correct uniform and maintaining the military's stringent requirements for personal appearance are paramount concerns) and, being aligned with conservative ideologies, purports vehemently to oppose recreational drug use, it becomes apparent that traditional structures of power have been destabilised as

a result of the zombie apocalypse. Despite this erosion, however, some semblance of hierarchical power remains (evinced by the fact that the soldiers do at least wear *some* components of their uniforms) although, as a number of examples in the film illustrate, it is merely an illusion of order and structure, beneath which lies anarchy and savagery.

It initially seems that some of the hierarchical power resides in a *female* character. When Sarah is first introduced, she is portrayed as a progression and germination of the seeds of feminist independence and assertiveness that were hinted at in the character of Fran in *Dawn*. When the helicopter pilot orders the soldiers to refuel the helicopter, she countermands this, and they obey her, dropping the pump immediately. However, a degree of resentment towards Sarah's authority is evident, and this is made more explicit as the narrative progresses. Miguel, a soldier who was assisting her in her reconnaissance mission in the city (and who we later discover is her partner) says bitterly: "We're all collapsing, this whole fucking unit is collapsing, everybody except you. I know you're strong, all right, so what. Stronger than me. Stronger than everyone. So what. So fucking what". Miguel's mental instability becomes increasingly severe as the narrative progresses and, again, this marks a continuity with a theme that was initiated in *Dawn*; that of the ability to deal with a situation in terms of purely rational thought versus "losing one's head" (succumbing to emotional and irrational reactions). Sarah's character is frequently used to champion the rational in *Day*, and this recalls *Dawn*'s scientist, who repeatedly (and unsuccessfully) pleaded on television for people to remain logical and rational in the face of the disaster. However, even Sarah succumbs to emotional responses and irrationality when Miguel is bitten; due to her emotional attachment, she attempts to save him in what already looks to be a lost cause, and this action incurs the wrath of the soldiers and exacerbates the tensions and divisions between the soldier group and the scientist/pilot group. What becomes increasingly apparent, as the narrative of *Day* progresses, is that the display of hierarchical leadership and order is merely a facade; the scientists seem to be pursuing futile goals (especially in Dr Logan's case), and the soldiers can only barely keep their aggression and frustration in check. In *Day*, Romero's critique of society and its perceived failings, illusions and falsehoods is made explicit (perhaps more so than in *Night* or *Dawn*,

as *Day* deals with a hierarchical and structured group of people as opposed to a group of relative strangers) through his examination of the breakdown of this microcosmic example of human society.

The thematic of the breakdown of society is foregrounded in a number of scenes, one of which takes place in Miguel's room after the first operation in which Sarah and Miguel are involved in capturing zombies (in which Miguel's mistake almost causes a disaster). Sarah attempts to give him a sedative, which he angrily refuses. It is a shot-reverse-shot sequence, and in the cool, clinical and sterile background of the room, in the background of Sarah's shot, we see a gun, the symbol of authority, whereas in the background of Miguel's shot there is nothing but a calendar with line upon line of crossed-off, empty days; evidence of the *ennui* and bleak hopelessness of the situation which no doubt becomes a heavier and heavier burden for Miguel to carry. In this scene, where he accuses Sarah of making him "look like an asshole" in front of the other men (symbolically emasculating him), it becomes all too apparent that he has reached breaking point, symbolic of the tensions within the group as a whole and a portent of the psychological breakdown and destruction of the group.

Sarah's authority is also resented by other men, most notably the common soldiers, and their new commander, Captain Rhodes. Rhodes is revealed as the new military commander after his superior dies. When Sarah attempts to reason with Rhodes (in the scene in which he is introduced), he is immediately presented as an unreasonable and tyrannical leader. Whilst making thinly veiled sexual threats, he removes his army jacket (symbolic of his rank and thus hierarchical power, but simultaneously emblematic of the outer veneer which conceals his true self) and reveals a bandolier of ammunition around his chest, with two large handguns (suggestive of masculine power and aggression) strapped to his sides. Yet, despite this conspicuous display of patriarchal might, he inadvertently reveals weakness when he says "I'm short on manpower" and thereby hints at the imminent failure of patriarchal power structures within this society. These examples again reflect the severity of the critique of the facade of societal structures evident in *Day*. Despite the soldiers' frequent verbal threats (often hinting at rape), Sarah maintains that to remain safe "we just need to

pound some logic into their heads". This formulation of course subconsciously equates the soldiers to zombies; by "pounding logic" into their heads, she proposes to nullify their threat, just as "pounding" a zombie's head nullifies its threat.

The preceding examples have illustrated one of the main thematics of the film: the use of militarism to combat the seemingly inevitable annihilation of human society. What becomes increasingly obvious as the narrative progresses is the ineffectuality of the militaristic discourse in combating the threat, for it degenerates into violence amongst the humans, which ultimately causes the downfall of their stronghold. This can be equated to one of the major tenets of contemporary American culture; that of the "god-given" right to impose their interpretation of democracy and capitalism upon the rest of the world. This is also linked to another of the film's major thematics: that of scientific rationality. This discourse, in contemporary American culture, goes hand in hand with imperialistic militarism and the right to impose Western "rationality" upon more "backward" nations. Despite the fact that, in the film, these two discourses initially seem to be at odds with one another, ultimately, they turn out to be more similar than is initially evident; neither can be said to hold true to any sustainable and workable notion of rationality in *Day*. Science is simultaneously represented in *Day* as both rational (as represented by Sarah), and monstrous (in the case of Dr Logan, whose experiments, which seem to be based on an extreme degree of fanatical objectivity fused with a madly delusional vision of the potential domestication of zombies, horrify even Sarah). In one particular experiment, there is a moment of visceral visual gore as a zombie's internal organs fall out of its body and collapse in a bloody mess on the floor. Indeed, the violence in *Day* is far less humorous than that of *Dawn*, and Romero seems to have reverted to a more horrifying portrayal of graphic violence, reminiscent of that in *Night*, perhaps because *Day* deals more explicitly with the collapse of a whole society, and he wishes to be as emphatic as possible in his critique of American culture. However, there are certain moments of humour evident in the portrayal of violence in *Day*, evident of possible self-reflexivity within the genre; the death of Private Rickles, who laughs maniacally while the zombies tear him to pieces, is perversely funny. Also, the death of Rhodes at the hand of zombie horde is extremely over the top and

gruesomely amusing; as the zombies rip his legs from his torso, he gasps "Choke on 'em! Choke on 'em!".

In the conflict between pure objectivity and emotion, Dr Logan is situated at the darkest end of the spectrum of rationality; he appears to have lost all connections with reality and reason and is completely detached from almost all emotional connections (aside from that with Bub, whom he seems to view as his "pet"), as can be seen in his horrendous experiments involving dead soldiers. Romero thus presents a view which challenges the binary of pure rationality versus emotion, and, as he consistently does throughout the 'Living Dead' series, comments on how belief in and reliance on absolutism and binary oppositions are not just ineffectual but dangerous. Logan is genuinely convinced that Bub (and therefore other zombies) can be successfully integrated into human society; his "logic" and belief in the power of unemotional rationality seems to completely disregard the fact that the only way to achieve this is to feed the zombies human flesh. Rhodes, too, is an example of the danger of absolutism; he refuses to give any assistance to the scientists and he believes that the sole solution to the problem is the violent extermination of all zombies. He is a firm believer in the axiom "might makes right". We see his form of absolutism fail as he and his soldiers execute the scientists and thus unwittingly engineer both their own downfall and the downfall of their whole (microcosmic) society.

It is perhaps in the zombie Bub that Romero's element of social critique is most unambiguous. Dr Logan, speaking of zombies, repeats *Dawn's* proclamation and uses it to advance his own theories and observations:

They are us. They are the extensions of ourselves. They are the same animal, simply functioning less perfectly. They can be fooled, you see. They can be tricked into being good little boys and girls, the same way we were tricked into it with the promise of some reward to come. They have to be rewarded. Reward is the key.

Dr Logan repeats this mantra throughout the film, emphatically promoting the ideal of "civilising" and "domesticating" zombies; as mentioned previously, he seems to have developed an emotional attachment to Bub and regards him as a pet (his training sessions, rewards and praise are perversely reminiscent of dog training). Captain Rhodes, however, vehemently maintains that the zombies are "dead" and that it is pointless to "teach them tricks", instead professing that the only solution to the zombie epidemic is their complete and utter extermination. Neither camp's solution seems workable; Rhodes' militaristic advocacy of annihilation recalls the mass of genocidal atrocities perpetuated throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and will only breed further violence; Logan's solution relies entirely upon the premise of rewarding zombies in training them, and of course the only reward they will accept is human flesh, obtained at the cost of further death and violence against humans. This means that Logan's plan to integrate zombies into human society paradoxically requires the destruction of that society because humans (the members of the society he is trying to save) must be killed in order to feed ("reward") and thus maintain the cooperation of the trained zombies. The portrayal of the character of Bub presents a scathing commentary on the patriarchal capitalist model, as the only way he learns and maintains his existence is through the reward system, which relies on a constant supply of human flesh; this is analogous to the system of patriarchal capitalism in which the many suffer for the few to prosper, and resources come at the cost of exploitation and suffering.

In a sequence of scenes, as the narrative progresses, we see Bub appearing to "learn" and "remember" nuances of human behaviour beyond the mere "residual instinct" of consumption; he interacts with objects like a razor and a book, appears moved by music. He also seems to recollect aspects of his previous life (as a soldier); he salutes Captain Rhodes and appears to recall how to use a firearm. Throughout these scenes, he is usually shot in a closeup or three quarter shot in which he is the sole figure, against a background of a blood-spattered wall dominated by three conspicuous crosses, to which he is anchored. The symbolism here recalls classic horror iconography, that of the mad scientist and his monstrous creation in his nightmarish laboratory (this is particularly reminiscent of various versions of *Frankenstein*). Like Frankenstein's monster, Bub simultaneously conveys both menace, as

a flesh-hungry zombie, and pathos, as an unwitting and simpleminded victim of a horrific experiment. The facade of Bub's placid demeanour is also shattered when he escapes his confines and kills Captain Rhodes, and rejoins the zombie horde. This is a damning reflection on the project of patriarchal capitalism which attempts, via a reward/punishment system, to mould imperfect subordinates into obedient and productive subjects, whilst all the while willingly blinding itself to the inherent violence of meaningless cycles of consumption. However, this sequence is not without pathos, as Bub's shooting of the violent and psychopathic Rhodes is motivated by his discovery that Rhodes has murdered his "friend", Dr Logan. In yet another instance of Romero's undermining of boundaries and shifting of the zombies into the interstitial zone between the human and the monstrous, Bub discovers Logan's bullet-riddled body and clearly experiences the emotions of frustration and grief. The audience cannot help but identify with him and sympathise with his reaction which is to exact revenge upon his friend's murderer - a human.

Day ends ambivalently; the space of the military compound and its laboratories are completely overrun by the zombies who indulge in an orgy of flesh-eating, whilst the remaining three humans (once again, a black male and white female, along with a white male) manage to escape to the relative safety of an island. The implications for both groups (human and zombie) suggest a post-post-Apocalyptic future, albeit an uncertain one. This thematic is fully developed, alongside some of the most direct and scathing social commentary throughout the 'Living Dead' series, in *Land of the Dead*.

Chapter 4: *Land of the Dead*

Land of the Dead is Romero's fourth and final installment of the 'Living Dead' series, and it was released in 2005, a year after Zack Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004). The latter film, while sharing a name with *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), was narratively and thematically only loosely based on Romero's 1978 film and was updated for a youthful 21st century audience, replete with rapid editing, a popular music soundtrack, plenty of white-knuckle-jump-out-of-your-seat moments and zombies who, unlike Romero's shuffling, awkward hordes, are vicious, focused predators who can run alarmingly fast. In the wake of the popular success of *Dawn* (2004), *Land* was received with mixed reviews, with comments such as "Romero comes up with good ideas but rarely executes them well", and "recently we've seen three zombie movies . . . any of which were better written, directed and acted than [*Land*]" (Butler 2005). However, despite the lack of audience enthusiasm, many critics wrote far more favorable reviews, with comments such as "George Romero's thrilling, intelligent shocker, *Land of the Dead* . . . [is] gruesome, exciting and grimly funny . . . all of Romero's experimentation comes to fruition in *Land*, which proves he has not exhausted zombies" (Hewitt 2005). The ambivalence with which *Land of the Dead* was received may have something to do with the film's production values, cinematography and characterisation. Whilst the zombies of *Land* (figures which I will analyse in detail later in this chapter), as Hewitt notes, are a successful and intriguing culmination of Romero's constant experimentation in this particular sub-genre, other aspects of the film seem uncomfortably straddled between "classic" Romero filmic rebellion and acquiescence to post-2000 generic norms. The characters, as always in Romero's films, whilst not being particularly interesting as individuals nonetheless represent a broad cross-section of society. However, in the characters, certain filmic stereotypes particular to late-90s and post-2000 horror are represented; the quiet, rugged tough-guy, the sexy but fierce punk/goth girl, the loyal and focused misfit sidekick. Variations of these stereotypes (give or take a character or two) can be found in a number of recent horror films, including the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), the *Scream* series (1996, 1997, 2000), *Vampires* (1998), *Underworld* (2003) and a host of others. The film also marks a departure from "classic" Romero in

that it focuses on a larger group of characters than any of the previous films of the tetralogy, as well as including a re-established (as opposed to disintegrating), highly-populated human society. In terms of cinematography, *Land* shares a visual slickness with its compatriots of the post-2000 horror genre (with the use of heavy camera filtering to give the film a dark, bluish look), and for the first time, Romero dabbles in CGI special effects in his representation of the zombies, in contradistinction to the decidedly low-budget zombies of the first three films of the tetralogy. The film also marks a departure from Romero's more "classic" zombie projects in that while the slum-city and wasteland settings are evocative of the apocalyptic nature of the series, they lack the crucial claustrophobic intensity evoked in the settings of *Night*, *Dawn* and *Day*. However, in line with the previous three films, *Land of the Dead* continues with Romero's project of social and political commentary via the medium of the zombie sub-genre, and this is where the film differs from the majority of its post-2000 horror peers. *Land* is an explicitly political film at a time in which most films in the popular arena are expressly apolitical and special effects-driven thrill rides devoid of any real depth, and this may have some bearing on its lukewarm reception; Lindholm claims that "while American citizens are strongly patriotic and nationalistic, overtly political films have never been popular" (Lindholm & Hall 2000: 32). This may, to some extent, explain why the film never quite captivated the popular market in the same manner as the 2004 remake of *Dawn*, especially when taking into consideration *Land's* blatant attack on and critique of the current American political and cultural climates, in stark contrast to *Dawn's* fairly straightforward celebration of the liberatory power of the (well-armed) individual/tightly-knit group against the attacking hordes, a sentiment more likely to resonate positively with the American masses.

Land is at once a continuation of many of the thematic concerns dealt with throughout the 'Living Dead' series, as well as being a platform from which to investigate a number of previously unexplored questions, namely those of corporate power and exploitation, and the class war and stark divide between the rich and the poor. Returning to the political commentary which was explicit in *Night*, *Land* makes a scathing attack on the Bush regime and American foreign policy, including the war in

Iraq. Where *Land* most obviously differs from its predecessors in the series is the situational climate in which the film opens, in which it is soon made obvious that events have taken a somewhat unexpected turn since the ending of *Day*. In *Day*, the consensus throughout the narrative, reinforced by the film's ending, was that the human race had been almost completely overwhelmed by the zombie hordes, and hope for human survival was almost entirely dead. Indeed, the horological titling of the films of the 'Living Dead' series would seem to have indicated that *Day* was the final chapter; the zombies arose in *Night*, began their overarching revolution in *Dawn* and completed the takeover in *Day*. It would follow then, that the next film in the series should possibly have been named "Twilight", continuing the chronology of the titles. Would this title have implied a halting, failing or regression of the zombie revolution? Perhaps, although I think that there are other reasons that the final film in the tetralogy did not follow the chronological appellations of its predecessors. In the previous films, it had become increasingly evident that the human race was moving toward extinction; that society and culture had collapsed; that the nation, the state, the city, the suburb, the private residence, had all ceased to exist. However, the discontinuation of the horological designation of *Land's* title indicates a shift from this anti-teleology. *Land* opens with a series of intermittent radio broadcasts describing the process whereby the dead come back to life, and following this, a long tracking shot of a small town populated by zombies, a satirically idyllic sequence of snapshots of idealised small-town, conservative America, complete with churchgoers, a young zombie "couple", a zombie "band" attempting to play instruments in the bandstand and a zombie petrol attendant attempting to use the petrol pump. These scenes indicate the culmination of another theme which has been developed throughout the series - the evolution of the zombies. In *Night*, the zombies were little more than hunger-driven shells; in *Dawn*, whilst there was no evidence of communication or any coherence of purpose, there was the irresistible pull to the centre of consumerism, the shopping mall, evidence of some degree of retention of basic memories in the state of living death. In *Day*, the zombie protagonist Bub evinced basic cognitive abilities; the capacity both to remember and to learn. In *Land*, the zombies have achieved communication; they can express simple emotions, and as a result of their ability to learn, remember and communicate, have formed a basic "society". Indeed, there are indications that the zombies have

the potential to move *beyond* the status of mere vehicles of consumption; it is significant to note that Big Daddy, throughout the film, is never seen feeding and furthermore goes as far as preventing other zombies from feeding when it distracts them from more pertinent tasks.

The implications of the zombie developments in *Land of the Dead* are manifold; the binary oppositions between human and zombie which have been steadily eroded over the course of the tetralogy have now been profoundly challenged; yet, necessarily and simultaneously remain. The binary opposition itself between human and zombie can be likened to the state of living death; it is simultaneously both alive/valid (in the fact that the zombies and humans are necessarily antagonistic) and dead/invalid (in that neither the zombies nor humans can be said to be good or evil within the paradigm of *Land*). The notion of a zombie "society" itself is an overturning of the very conventions of the sub-genre, of these binaries upon which generic pleasure is based. It is the destabilising of these binaries, the constant oscillation between the position of human and zombie and that blurry state of liminality between these two which make the title "Land" so apposite; for "Land" indicates the space occupied simultaneously by humans and zombies. The effect of this destabilisation is pertinent in terms of some of *Land*'s central concerns. The challenge to the self/Other binary opposition can be extended to a metaphorical deconstruction of binary oppositions evident in American culture; for example, the American/foreign Other opposition, or the democratic freedom/terrorist oppression opposition.

Further evidence of the simultaneous destruction/construction of these boundaries can be evinced from the opening scenes. Continuing the theme of the human characters' commentary on the nature of the zombies which is used throughout the 'Living Dead' series, two human observers of the small town scene comment that the zombies are "trying to be us", and "They used to be us. They're learning how to be us again". Further comments, which emphasise the liminality of the zones occupied by humans and zombies, include Riley's observation that both zombies and humans are "pretending to be alive". Indeed, a human character (Cholo) ends up electing to become a zombie (he wryly remarks that he has

always wanted to see how the "other half" lives) in order to exact revenge upon the exploitative Kaufman.

The scene in which the two humans are reconnoitering the zombies in the town, however, further serves the function of deconstructing the boundaries between zombie and human. From the moment the audience observes the two humans reconnoitering the zombies with binoculars from a hidden location, visual parallels immediately begin to be drawn with *Dawn of the Dead* (1978); one cannot but help associate these two shady figures with two other sinister figures from *Dawn* - the biker raiders (this notion has already been planted in the mind of the viewer via a snippet from the radio broadcasts of the opening credits, which claims that surviving humans are "establishing outposts in big cities and raiding small towns for supplies, just like outlaws"). As the narrative progresses, it becomes rapidly and alarmingly clear that this parallel is more than mere coincidence. Ripley (the central human protagonist, who is a white male) and his subordinate return to their companions and reveal a scene which is uncannily reminiscent of scenes involving the biker raiders in *Dawn* as well as the redneck posses of *Night* and *Dawn*; groups of armed bikers and humans driving other mercenary-type modified vehicles, including a heavily-modified, -armed and -armoured truck, as they prepare to plunder the town of its resources in a military-style raid.

If one posits *Night's* footage as being evocative of images of the Vietnam war, then certainly *Land's* footage cannot escape comparison with images of the Bush-era Vietnam: Iraq. The images of heavily-armed men, the use of walkie-talkie radios and militaristic lingo ("put some flowers in the graveyard") and most especially the tank-like war machine "Dead Reckoning" barreling through the town with guns blazing are uncannily redolent of images of American troops invading Iraqi towns and cities. These images are repeated throughout *Land*, and the images of chaotic and disordered street battles later in the narrative, as the zombies invade the city, recall televised images of urban warfare (indeed, the human soldiers wear uniforms remarkably similar to those donned by American ground forces in Iraq). The allusion to a militarised self assailing an unarmed Other in a war over the control of

resources is inescapable, and made even more poignant by the cinematic depiction of the raid. The posse blitzes through the town with guns blazing, their war machines and weaponry scything through the helpless small-town/rural zombies. Yet, in an oscillatory shift, the zombies are not only the Other, but also ourselves. More specifically, they can be seen to represent the American public in the clime of the current political crisis; they are distracted by "skyflowers" (fireworks) shot into the sky by the raiders, and due to their undeviating fascination with the empty spectacle of these fireworks, are rendered helpless, unable to protect themselves from the attack, or to attempt to counter the assault in any way. Metaphorically, this equates the spectacle-paralysed zombie masses with an equally incapacitated American public, whose attention to American foreign policy, governmental controversies and scandals and an unsanctioned invasion of a foreign territory is all too easily diverted via mindless media spectacle. These distractions include the inane vacuousness of celebrity gossip which spans all forms of media, countless TV channels running feel-good sitcoms which encourage complacent acceptance of norms and entrench conservative values, 24 hour infomercials which preach the ubiquitous religion of consumerism and a film industry in which the highest-grossing and most popular products are those with recycled, predictable plots, one-dimensional characters and those which are saturated with CGI special effects, muscular macho men and heavily-sexualised female eye candy. The music industry is just as complicitous, fuelled and perpetuated by MTV, in which the top-selling artists advocate complete immersion in a consumerist lifestyle and repetitively drive home the message of instant gratification; rapper 50 Cent's top-selling album titled *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (2003) (riddled with approving references to violence, greed and misogyny) speaks volumes about the current status of the music industry as paradigmatic of the larger entertainment industry. Such "skyflowers" only serve to further the interests of the exploiters, and to keep any resistance or questioning of the status quo to a minimum: the (black) zombie protagonist/revolutionary Big Daddy's initial attempts to divert the zombies' attention from the fireworks in order to organise a resistance are unsuccessful. Such media tactics, as evinced in *Land*, are indicative of Chomsky's 'propaganda model' in which the media "are used as a technique of control, creating the 'necessary illusions' which are in the interests of

the ruling class" (McQueen 1998: 234), and in which the media's function is "to reduce the subordinate population's ability to think, thereby reducing this group to apathy" (McQueen 1998: 235).

The only time that the zombies are able to mount some form of resistance is when the "skyflowers" cease, due to a technical problem on the "Dead Reckoning". However, despite this hint of a comeback, their lack of weaponry and of cohesion as a group leaves them open to slaughter; Mike remarks, "I thought this was gonna be a battle. It's a fucking massacre". This could be seen as mirroring the early stages of the public's perception of the American invasion of Iraq, in which the initial assault in March 2003 by American and coalition forces was broadcast via the media for the world to see as "television images merged cinematic references with reality-style camera perspectives. Viewers gazed across the sand from inside army vehicles, a fantasy ride-along with desert warriors" (Andersen 2006: 235). The public was expecting a walkover, a whitewash of the meagre Iraqi forces by the greatest army in the world. However, by March 23,

unmanaged images from Iraqi state television shattered the grand illusion. As the whole world was watching, Al Jazeera aired video footage of the bloodied bodies of dead American soldiers sprawled carelessly on a slab floor. Iraqi interrogators interviewed the POWs. The war that couldn't wait had suddenly become a problem. Alternative information finally rendered the war real, horrible. (Andersen 2006: 235)

Again, parallels are to be found in Romero's narrative. The vainglorious and overconfident raiders decide, despite the failure of the fireworks, to loot a liquor store. Mirroring the harsh reality of war, it is the raw, young recruit who meets a grisly fate via the jaws of a hidden zombie, not his veteran superiors who had coerced him to contravene orders. And indeed, despite the initial "success" of their campaign (albeit somewhat tainted by the loss of the young recruit), and the prematurely celebrated "victory", it becomes apparent that the zombies are not the clumsy, helpless foes that they were initially surmised to have been, and they mount a resistance assault which, combined with the hijacking of the "Dead Reckoning", ultimately destroys the human outpost.

Further corollaries between the humans in *Land* and American military forces in Iraq (which tragically echoes Vietnam) are to be found in scenes within the fortified city. Much has been made of American human rights abuses in war prisons such as Abu Ghraib, as well as atrocities committed on the front line, and scenes which eerily echo the kinds of brutalities, humiliations and human rights abuses documented in prisons such as Abu Ghraib are to be found in the squalid human city of *Land of the Dead*. Alongside vices brought over from the pre-apocalyptic world, such as alcohol and strippers, zombies (the Othered foe), are tethered and chained to posts, where people can have their photograph taken next to them, or shoot at them with paintball guns. However, in a post-apocalyptic clime wherein death and violence have become commonplace, it takes more than this to keep the human population submissive and acquiescent to the needs and demands of the ruling elite. In a scene which recalls the inhumane horrors of dog-fighting or bear-baiting, punters place bets on two zombies who are about to fight. When Charlie suggests in puzzlement that "stenches don't fight each other", he is assured that they do, when prey is available. This prey turns out to be a live woman. Feminist theorists have for a long time expressed anger and disgust over the increasing objectification of the female body in mass culture; here, this notion is presented in its final (and literal) culmination, wherein the body of the female is to be consumed (by the victor in a battle between two male zombies) before a cheering crowd. It is at once terrifyingly prophetic in terms of a perceived directional trend, and utterly primitive in terms of the female body-as-capital theory upon which patriarchal society has been based for centuries. The woman (Slack) survives after being rescued by Riley, an act that could be seen as regressive in terms of Romero's previous evolution of the independent female character throughout the 'Living Dead' series, although later on in the film it is revealed that Slack is indeed independent and strong-willed, as well as being handy with a gun - although this, combined with her goth-punk looks and feisty attitude, turns her character into something of a caricature.

Of course, this kind of bloodsport "entertainment" is heavily grounded in the need to beguile the masses, in order to render them complacent and obedient. It is uncanny that although patriarchal capitalist society has progressively disintegrated, seemingly to the point of no return, as indexed by the

discarded money littering the streets in *Day of the Dead* (throughout the course of Romero's 'Living Dead' series), it has made such a successful comeback in *Land*. White describes how "capitalism knows better than anyone that it must change in order to survive - and it has, brilliantly if maliciously, and all without ever losing sight of its fundamental logic: profit and privilege" (White 2005: 200). In *Land*, capitalism has indeed emerged as a more focused, sinister and omnipotent force in the post-post-apocalyptic human society. This society is stratified in the extreme, with the opulence, extravagance and vulgar display of conspicuous consumption evident in the skyscraper bastion of the upper class, "Fiddler's Green". Fiddler's Green represents the stark and flagrant contrast between the haves and the have-nots, who are relegated to dirty, crowded slums reminiscent of both contemporary American inner-city ghettos as well as crumbling third-world metropolises. It soon becomes obvious that of all four movies in the 'Living Dead' tetralogy, *Land* is the film most overtly concerned with issues of class, issues which are dealt with both in the representation of the zombies and in that of human society.

What becomes immediately evident in this extremely stratified society is that power and money are inseparable entities; Kaufman, the white male capitalist who owns Fiddler's Green *also* runs the city. There is not even the flimsy illusion of a democratic society; instead, this is a raw depiction and withering criticism of America's current scandal of political leadership intertwined with and acting in the interests of multinational corporations. In the context of the globalised world economy, these corporations have utilised their massive influence upon powerful political groups and figures in order to make decisions which ultimately only benefit the rich majority at the top of the economic pyramid, decisions which often have disastrous consequences for the economically disempowered (whose rights and interests democracy is theoretically supposed to safeguard and promote), particularly those in third world countries. Chomsky has commented that

as long as you have a massive concentration of private power and wealth, there will essentially be dictatorial systems within the economy. A business firm is basically a

dictatorship, with orders coming from top to bottom. As long as these phenomena continue, democracy's going to be very limited (Brown 2005: 36).

In *Land of the Dead*, Kaufman takes this notion to its logical conclusion, running both his company and the city as a dictator. The comparisons with both current American leadership and the nature of multinational corporations are explicit. Kaufman acquires supplies for the city and wealth (with its concomitant, power) via his (mercenary-run) raids on small towns. These tactics are ominously reminiscent of current strategies of the plundering of third world resources by multinational corporations, as well as being representative of America's invasion of Iraq as a means to gain access to oil resources. Indeed, this strategy could (again in another instance of oscillation, in which the identity of the zombies shifts between Other and self) be seen as evocative of the manner in which the American public itself is exploited under patriarchal capitalism, in which immense wealth and power is accumulated by a small elite via the support of the combined workforce of both the underclass and the middle class who, as previously mentioned, are kept in this state of enthrallment via "skyflowers": the entertainment industry and the systems of materialism and consumerism. Kaufman's (and, symbolically, corporate) involvement in the "dirty" entertainment industry (the seedy bar replete with strippers, alcohol and a live woman being fed to zombies) is also revealed, when Charlie asks Slack why she was thrown to the zombies. She replies that it was the "big man" who had arranged it, and that "Mr K" "has got his fingers in everything here. If you can drink it, shoot it up, fuck it, gamble on it, it belongs to him".

The discourse of materialism is also readily expressed by members of the subordinate classes, such as Cholo's exclamation, "All I care about is money, that's all I want", an attitude made further explicit by his actions. Cholo visits Kaufman's apartment to deliver his gift/bribe of expensive liquor. Kaufman's apartment is luxurious in a refined and classy manner; the styling is impeccable, and grave, austere classical music plays in the background. Kaufman, dressed in an expensive suit, and smoking a cigar (the iconography of the financially successful capitalist enjoying the excess of which his wealth and power enable him to partake) is seated in a large, black leather armchair, the iconography which serves

as the index of a corporate executive, and his desk overlooks the entire city, a site from where he can observe the space that he both owns and governs, and the population who are effectively under his control. Cholo attempts to buy his way into Fiddler's Green, but Kaufman makes it painfully apparent that someone of Cholo's social status will not under any circumstances be accepted into the upper class space that he has created. When Cholo attempts to blackmail his way in, by threatening to reveal the "dirty dealings" with which Kaufman is involved, Kaufman summons a personal guard (whose grey uniform is remarkably similar to a Nazi Waffen-SS uniform) to take care of the rebellious Cholo. Cholo escapes the murder attempt, but his materialistic aspirations are not dented. Instead of attempting to negotiate his transition from working class to upper class via money or blackmailing Kaufman, Cholo decides to commandeer the "Dead Reckoning" and use its massive firepower to threaten the very city it was constructed to defend, and thus coerce Kaufman into paying him and acquiescing to his demands. This situation leads to one of the film's more humorous moments, (and one which explicitly identifies Kaufman with the current American political regime), in which Cholo radios Kaufman and presents his threats and demands. One of the members of the Board suggests that to neutralise the threat, they should simply pay Cholo, to which Kaufman responds, "We don't negotiate with terrorists".

With Kaufman representing a personification of almost all of the negative tenets of patriarchal capitalism in its most refined and destructively successful form, there are many instances in which *Land* illustrates the debilitating and exploitative effect such a system has on humanity. Kaufman, in a meeting with the Board, outlines his contingency plan in the event of the fall of the city, in which members of the elite will have stations, supplies and personnel to ensure their survival "wherever [they] want to go". When asked about the survival of "the others" (i.e., the underclasses), Kaufman callously replies, "All the others can be replaced by others". From here, he launches into a speech heavily riddled with ironies:

The day may come when you earn yourself some responsibilities, but right now, the responsibilities are all mine. They're all mine. It was my ingenuity that took an old world and

made it into something new. I put up the fences to make it safe. I hired the soldiers and payed for their training. I kept the people off the streets by giving them games and vices, which cost me money. But I spend the money because the responsibility is mine. Now do you understand the meaning of the word responsibility? We have to do what we have to do.

Kaufman here outlines the essential maxims of patriarchal capitalism, together with all of its intrinsic ironies and contradictions. The focus of his speech is responsibility; he posits himself as both founding father and benevolent guardian of the new society, yet in a contrary twist (which is unfortunately so characteristic of contemporary political leadership) prepares to abandon the people completely in order to ensure the survival of the upper class. In another idiosyncrasy characteristic of ruling classes, he claims to have spent his money in order to better the lives of the people under his protection; however, from the "shady" activities Cholo has threatened to expose to the seedy entertainment industry Kaufman controls, it can be deduced that Kaufman's sole interests with regard to spending money are profit related. Kaufman also repeatedly proves that even his supposed allegiance to the members of his own class is all too effervescent when, as he is fleeing Fiddler's Green, one of the board members questions him about the money he is carrying. Without a second thought, he shoots the man execution-style, proving that the only allegiance he has is to money and power, in yet another compelling critique of the values of patriarchal capitalism. Further irony is evident as Kaufman witnesses the inevitability of the fall of the city as the zombie army invades; "You have no right! You have no right," he exclaims in fury and disbelief, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he, as a coloniser, had repossessed the space of the city in exactly the same manner when he began his own colonisation project.

However, the city falls and it is ultimately the Other that successfully recolonises the city, largely due to the leadership of the zombie Big Daddy. Big Daddy is an evolution of Bub from *Day of the Dead*, although he takes to the next level what began in Bub as remembrance of a past life and of basic ritualistic behaviour (such as saluting and shaving), as well as a capacity to be trained via a reward/punishment system, which was a parody of the induction of the subject into patriarchal

capitalism. Big Daddy, again, invites constantly shifting degrees of identification on the part of the spectator. By virtue of the fact that he is able not only to learn and communicate, but also to express emotion, Big Daddy becomes even more sympathetic a character than Bub was in *Day*. This capacity to express emotion (at various stages throughout the narrative he expresses rage, sadness, frustration and finally, triumph) renders him virtually on a par with the humans, and, despite the fact that he remains essentially a flesh-eating zombie, he is certainly portrayed in a more sympathetic light than people like Kaufman and his cronies. As previously mentioned, it is in *Land* that the destabilisation of the opposition between human and zombie is most radically challenged and the prime instrument of this deconstruction is Big Daddy.

He is also a continuation of the theme of race which has consistently pervaded the 'Living Dead' series. However, in keeping with the oscillatory form of identification which proves to be so significant in *Land*, Romero, rather than casting a black male in the role of main human protagonist, as he did in *Night*, *Dawn* and *Day*, has shifted the figure of black male into main *zombie* protagonist. This has implications in terms of class politics in the film; a major segment of the narrative deals with what is on one level a class war, and something of a proletariat revolution or, depending on one's viewpoint, an act of reverse colonisation. With the trope of the underclass/Othered masses overthrowing and destroying the upper class and bourgeois capitalist regime, *Land of the Dead* may encompass echoes of socialist rhetoric. In *Land*, the exploited/the underclass/the Other (depending on how the viewer is perceives the zombies at various points throughout the narrative) revolt against their oppressors/exploiters/colonisers, although they do not assume control of any means of production or any other form of material or technological power or wealth. Instead, they merely destroy the site of power and exploitation, and move on, leaving their human mirrors, the working class previously exploited and subordinated by Kaufman's regime to take control of the remains of the city, to turn it into a potentially utopian society. Actually, to be completely accurate the zombies *do* at one point take up tools, but those of destruction rather than production. After the zombies attack a group of construction workers, Big Daddy picks up a still-running pneumatic drill, roaring with glee as he

harnesses its destructive potential, while the shot is cross-cut with images of the skyscraper, which he now aims to destroy. The drill stops working when it unplugged, but this does not stop the rest of the zombies from following Big Daddy's example and taking up tools of destruction and ominously advancing on the skyscraper. They do not, however, stay and take over the city. Instead, once the battle is over and their foes have been vanquished, they move on. When the operator of the "Dead Reckoning" prepares to annihilate the migrating zombie horde via a missile attack, Riley stays her hand, saying "No, they're just looking for a place to go, same as us", recognising the breakdown in binaries which has now reached its culmination.

Like the zombies, the central human protagonists do not decide to settle, but instead move on, pushing for Canada. Their position at the end of *Land's* narrative is, like the zombies', uncertain. The final shots of the film depict the "Dead Reckoning" driving off into the dusk, firing off the last of the fireworks, which they now "don't need". This is partly in response to the fact that, due to Big Daddy's leadership, the zombies have overcome their enthrallment to the spectacle of fireworks, but also could be attributed to the fact that the humans now believe that they will reach a utopia where weapons will no longer be necessary. Either way, the most important factor in terms of *Land's* thematics is that this utopia, at least for the main group of protagonists as well as for Big Daddy's zombies, *cannot* be found in the United States; instead, they must head north. The commentary on the current state of American politics implicit in this could be construed as a vehement attack on the current regime. As repeatedly illustrated throughout the course of this chapter, the corrupt city is run by the equally corrupt and evil Kaufman, and the people living under his virtual dictatorship seem, superficially anyway, to have little choice but to accept their lot. A social and political activist who attempts to unify the working class masses and mobilise them for a revolution is later seen being thrown into jail. This would seem to reflect the powerlessness of the common people and the mockery of democracy that the Bush regime has come to exemplify. Indeed, the only means by which the regime is overthrown is via the zombie hordes, under the leadership of Big Daddy, who is, incidentally Kaufman's antithesis, even down to his name, "Big Daddy", an ironic mirroring of Kaufman's status as capitalist patriarch. Once again, we

have an illustration of Romero's ability to use binary oppositions to structure his film as he simultaneously calls those oppositions into question. Kaufman is an obscenely wealthy, white capitalist male who rules via a combination of police brutality, bribery and corruption and providing opiates for the masses in order to keep them subjugated. Big Daddy on the other hand is a black working class male (in his human life, he was a petrol attendant) who leads by example, by empowering the zombies via teaching them how to use tools and "deprogramming" them from their weakness for "skyflowers" and blind consumption. This is not to say that the desire to consume is removed entirely from the zombies, indeed, it remains the primary force that drives them. Big Daddy, however, manages to harness and direct this force, tapping into the massive power of a collective and unified body driven by a singular desire. Whether this could be construed as an act of exploitation on par with Kaufman's tactics is debatable; what is, however, unquestionable is the fact that the motivations that drive both leaders are emphatically contradistinctive. Kaufman, whilst repeatedly aggrandising his supposed "responsibility", is obviously driven merely by greed and the desire to exponentially increase his own wealth and to ensure his own survival. Big Daddy, contrarily, is a leader driven by a far more altruistic urge (in relative terms of course, considering the "monstrous" nature of the zombies). He wishes to end the exploitation and destruction of his "people" at the hands of the humans and, Moses-like, to lead them to some sort of "promised land". Unlike Kaufman, who both relies on military technology for the protection of his person and assets (the "Dead Reckoning") and makes use of the underclass (the militia and soldiers as well as his personal guard and servant), Big Daddy leads from the front line. He is the first zombie to pick up a gun, and always at the head of the army. He is the first to storm the gate. He is also the first to take the plunge into the river. The scene in which the zombies emerge from the river is itself of great significance, in relation to the theme of the liminal zone which the zombies have come to occupy throughout the course of the 'Living Dead' series (and specifically in *Land*), and the position which they occupy in terms of audience sympathy. The scene begins with a closeup of the dark, shimmering waves, from which Big Daddy's face begins to emerge. There is then a cross cut to a distant shot of the city, followed by a cut back to Big Daddy's face, and (in terms of composition) keeps his eyes in the centre of the shot. The camera returns to the

murky water, from which another zombie's face emerges. After another three shots of single zombie faces emerging from the waves, the camera pulls back to a high angle wide shot of the river, and we see, interspersed with cross cuts of individual zombies, a whole zombie army emerging from the black depths. In the final sequence of shots, the camera repositions itself behind the zombie horde, and shows them emerging from the river and advancing on the city. There are three possible readings of this scene in relation to the thematic of the zombies in both the film and the tetralogy as a whole. The first is in terms of a biblical metaphor; Big Daddy has, Moses-like, symbolically parted the waves and led his "people" to freedom and set them on the path to the "promised land". The second reading of these visuals could be seen as a metaphor for a purification ritual; in order to both prove themselves worthy of independence, the zombies must survive the trial of faith which involves plunging into the unknown and passing through unscathed. The third reading relates to a visual metaphor of biological evolution. As water is, in a great number of cultures, traditionally symbolic of origins, birth, fertility and rebirth, as well as being conceived of as the initial source of all life on this planet, then it is no surprise that a new breed of zombie emerges from a river in *Land of the Dead*. Big Daddy emerges first from the river, both as the prototypical new zombie, focused, innovative and capable of both communication and expressing emotions, and as the leader of the new breed. And ultimately, it is his form of leadership which survives, not Kaufman's.

The ending of *Land of the Dead* is open-ended. On the one hand, we have the victory of an Othered, exploited underclass who succeed in throwing off the shackles of their media-fuelled apathy and (partially) overcome their overwhelming desire for instant gratification/consumption. However, there are no fruits of success to be enjoyed, no malicious delight to be had in the wake of the fall of the dictator. Instead, there is only an uncertain future; this at least is in keeping with Romero's narrative tradition. One possibility is that, returning to my earlier observations in the light of the film's metaphorical relation to current American politics and foreign policy, Romero wishes to emphasise the allegorical significance of the zombies in relation to the Iraqi people, who have had violence visited

upon them by a foreign, heavily armed foe, and find themselves in a simultaneously Othered yet sympathetic position.

The fact that the zombies' victory necessarily comes via extreme bloodshed is also problematic. The scenes in which the zombies take over the city are nightmarish, and simultaneously recall images of urban warfare (linking them metaphorically to the invasion of Iraq and the televised conflict) as well as iconic cultural and historical images, such as the hellish apocalyptic visions painted by Hieronymus Bosch. Of course, the context has been updated - whilst Bosch's images of demons and monsters visiting violence upon hapless human victims are often portrayed against a pastoral background, Romero's images of apocalyptic bloodshed take place in the postmodern spotlessness and opulence of Fiddler's Green, as well as in the ruined ghettos of the city. These visuals lend themselves to a number of different and even potentially contradictory metaphorical readings of the zombies. Are they evidence of a primal, deep-rooted fear of an apocalyptic end to human society? Is Romero suggesting that any other form of political resistance is futile, and that the only means to overthrow a corrupt regime is via a violent, armed struggle? Whilst it may be possible to argue this viewpoint on a literal level, I believe that *Land* makes a stronger point on a more subtle stratum. The violence, I believe, can be read as a metaphorical representation of the violence necessary to detach oneself from the opiates of the mass media upon which this generation has come so heavily to rely; the symbolic violence of, to use an example from another film, removing oneself from the "Matrix", the complex and intricate systems of illusion used by those in power to subtly but potently subjugate and pacify the masses. The real power, as evinced by *Land*, lies in liberating oneself from the mental enslavement to "skyflowers", and everything that they represent, and the only way forward is unity.

Conclusion

As evinced throughout the preceding chapters, George Romero's 'Living Dead' films have proved to be contextually relevant vehicles of social critique, which have continually both defied and redefined not only the conventions of the zombie sub-genre (which, in terms of its incarnation since the early 1970s his films largely established), but also the conventions of the horror genre itself. Romero's films have consistently engaged in contemporarily relevant subversive commentary which routinely defies and deconstructs the apparently stable and immutable binary oppositions upon which both generic and cultural values are based. From *Night of the Living Dead*, which shocked critics and audiences alike with its genre-defying narrative and (contextually) unprecedented violence and gore, and planted the seeds for a new breed of horror film that would become the billion-dollar industry that it is today, to the final film of the series, *Land of the Dead*, which continues Romero's tradition of deconstructing many of the central tenets of the genre, Romero's 'Living Dead' narratives have consistently proved subversive of both American cultural norms and generic conventions. *Night* not only rescued the figure of the zombie from fading into filmic oblivion, it reinvented the zombie and catapulted it into the orbit of global popular culture and, helped by the immensely popular *Dawn* in 1978, germinated a cult following which, almost forty years later, has yet to show signs of faltering. Perhaps one of the reasons for the success of the 'Living Dead' series lies in timing; Romero's seminal film, *Night*, with its biting critique of America's racial politics and involvement in the Vietnam war, came out at just the right time, that is, at a time during which the American youth were discovering free love, altered states of consciousness and the power of protest, yet simultaneously a time at which the country was in turmoil over Vietnam and "[reeked] of blood and the memory of blood" (Hoberman 2003: 260). Romero's subversive, independently-made riot of cannibalism, violence and blood could not have been released at a more propitious time. The living dead featured in the film were an affront to the very core of the Western logic and belief in rationality on which American culture prides itself, for the binary opposition between life and death which they violate is perhaps the most fundamental opposition of all. Moreover, they were no foreign foe, but Americans themselves, their affliction

untraceable and unstoppable, with none being immune. Romero's representation of the zombies was not only a scandal to classical logic, but also a direct assault on many of the core cultural American values most relevant at the time each film was released; the attacks on the nuclear family, that most sacred of American institutions; the insidious spread of consumerism and the concomitant plague of apathy, ignorance and materialism; as well as America's foreign policy and the imperialist militaristic discourse which resulted in the invasion of Iraq. By reducing the system of patriarchal capitalism to its most primal value, that of consumption, and representing this in the figure of the zombie, Romero has, over the course of the tetralogy, produced a critique of the contradictions and ironies inherent in the American socio-cultural and political climate over the last four decades, a feat which, arguably, has not been matched by any other horror director. He has also presented a scathing assault on the idea of history as something teleological, something so often vaunted by Western nations, instead tapping into transcultural fears of cataclysmic apocalypse and presenting a vision of a world in which chaos ultimately triumphs and society crumbles to dust. But are Romero's 'Living Dead' films wholly and utterly pessimistic in their outlook? Romero has used the representation of violence in various forms, from brutally gory to comically over-the-top throughout the series, as a vehicle via which he can transmit a message. Whether this is seen as a self-reflexive critique on the genre itself or a call to (metaphorical) arms, the representation of violence is nonetheless significant throughout the tetralogy. Especially in the last film of the series, *Land of the Dead*, Romero seems to be petitioning for change. Viva la Revolution, yes, but the ultimate question remains, what lies *beyond* revolution and the fall of patriarchal capitalism? Neither *Land* nor any other film in the 'Living Dead' tetralogy can provide us with any final answers to this question, although they can ultimately, via their critique of some of America's most cherished cultural institutions, sow the seeds of dissent and encourage us to examine its culture through an ever more critical lens. Heffernan comments that "Baudrillard looks to America as the land of the postapocalypse, of exposure, speed, space, fluid capital, simulation, the bomb, star wars, a 'paradise', a 'desert forever' - the site of the end." (Heffernan 1995: 171). It is over this "site of the end" that Romero casts his critical eye, envisioning a scenario that is both real and fantastical, both future and present. And, in a culture that is at the epicentre of a rapidly changing, globalised society

confronted with ecological, political and economic crises that will forever change the nature of human society, Americans can only begin to question just how different reality is from fantasy, and not how, but *when*, the stuff of horror and nightmares will begin to permeate the boundaries of their existence.

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