

# The Zombie Narrative as the Representation of Otherness - Social and Cultural Issues in the Zombie Narrative

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**Anamarija Vuk**

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Diplomski rad

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Zadar, 2023.



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Zadar, 5. rujna 2023.

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## 1. Introduction

The beginning of the Gothic, or the horror genre, happened during the 18th and 19th century. There were many important motifs which varied from the female body, medical experiments such as galvanism, the female Gothic, the use of many monsters, etc. The Gothic genre became very popular since it allowed the human mind to explore the deepest and darkest points in the (sub) conscious. To produce fear in its audiences, the Gothic creators relied on haunted spaces, terrifying creatures, paranormal activity and the introduction of the various monsters which proved the creativity of the genre, as well as the creativity of its developers. Many of the Gothic novels at the beginning of the genre began to portray their stories in the similar environment – the castle. The castle was an ideal choice for a fear-inducing atmosphere. The cold, stone walls and round staircases which make it that much easier to fall if one is being chased, and the fact that there is always another door and another passage leaving the characters confused and unable to escape. The producing of another media type was necessary in order to portray the terrifying atmosphere. This is where the broadcast media plays an important role. Movies became an easier way to scare audiences across the world, since the use of one's imagination was no longer a critical component.

The zombie creature has been a staple element in the popular culture for a longer time. The zombie narrative is typically a much different one from the other horror sub-genres. The difference between zombies and any other type of Gothic monsters is a crucial one – the zombie narrative is one of the few narratives in the horror genre that does not have a literary source. However, although the zombie monster is a very different one than the “regular” monsters in the genre, one might say that the modern zombie came to be developed by taking inspiration

from the “older” monster types such as vampires and mummies. Mummies are not exactly monsters but are rather portrayed in this way in popular culture. The zombie narrative has existed in the horror genre for a longer time now. Although the origin of zombies is, in fact, dating to the old Greeks and Haitians, the more popularized “Hollywood zombie” is different to a great extent. The zombie narrative became very popular after Romero's first movie the *Night of the Living Dead* from the 1968. After the movie became widely successful, George Romero came into the possession of an interesting nickname “the father of the modern zombie narrative”. This does not, however, mean that Romero was the first one to make the movie adaptation including the zombie creature, he was however the first one to make it popular. Although most people, including a lot of horror genre lovers, simply identify zombies as creatures that were once human beings but are now dead and feed off human flesh, the backbone of the zombie narrative is much more complex. Since the Hollywood zombie is an American creation, the situation in the United States plays an important role in the development of this new narrative. The zombie narrative is not only a portrayal of hungry dead humans, but also now a portrayal of complex topics and many social issues of a certain time in history. The cultural and racial issues; the fear of capitalism, the American capitalist ideology, the racial inequality, misogyny, the destruction of family, suppressed social fears and anxieties, uncontrolled violence of the Vietnam era, the white patriarchal system is just some of the many issues which have troubled the Americas from the 1960s. All the issues mentioned are now cleverly portrayed as zombies – the creatures that “eat away” the humans. Kyle William Bishop also addressed that the media usually depicts society's anxieties and fears. This is greatly portrayed in the horror fiction which rarely leaves anything to the imagination.

Zombies therefore serve as a symbol for the constant issues that humans endure while displaying cleverly and creatively as the issues that “eat away” humanity. The reason why I chose this topic is the lack of awareness on the importance of the zombie narrative. Although

the horror genre in general is my favourite movie genre, I too was not aware of the complexity of the genre and its origins. The purpose of this paper is to spread awareness of the complexity and the importance of the zombie narrative. Many horror narratives are usually ignored and mostly represented as having a shallow, surface meaning. However, the zombie narrative is one of the few narratives that does indeed hold a deeper meaning. It discusses important issues that are still relevant today, but it also serves as an interesting narrative whether one analyses it or not. This narrative is also a unique one since it is not an adaptation of a literary work of art. Zombies represent the “otherness”, something that is feared and hidden that revolves around the relevant social issues. One of the most important and relevant is the racial inequality, and of course many other issues. The narrative shows the audience the greatness of filmmakers, their aesthetic values and ideas, and their way of dealing with important issues while producing a work that shows us America’s deepest fears.

## **2. Theoretical approaches: Zombies and their cultural significance – A multifaceted examination**

The concept of zombies has permeated global culture, but its origins and significance extend beyond mere horror fiction. This theoretical approach seeks to explore the multifaceted aspects of zombies, their historical evolution, the pivotal role of George Romero, the contributions of Roger Luckhurst, and the critical insights provided by scholars like Christopher Moreman and Cory James Rushton.

Firstly, a book by Roger Luckhurst “Zombies: A Cultural History” from 2015 which is a book that explores the cultural significance and evolution of the zombie mythos. Some of the key points of the book are the historical origins of zombies which trace back to African and Haitian folklore and Vodou traditions. Luckhurst explores how these legends have transformed and crossed cultural boundaries. The book also explores the portrayal of zombies in literature and cinema with a particular focus on George Romero's movies which transformed and shaped



the modern zombie archetype. The book examines the cultural impact of zombies and their presence in popular culture.

Furhermore, the collection of essays edited by Christopher Moreman and Cory James Rushton is of particular importance in this paper. The collection explores the intersection of race, oppression and the zombie mythos. Some of the key ideas of the collection include cross-cultural appropriation given the fact that elements of the Caribbean folklore have been adopted, adapted and reimagined in various cultures over the world. It also mentions the historical origins of zombies which trace back to Haitian Vodou and African folklore and how the tradition has been reshaped and reinterpreted in the Western cultures. The essays also emphasize how the zombie narrative serves as an important tool for social commentary and how it can reflect on and critique the issues of race, gender, violence of war, colonialism, slavery, etc. The essays also provide an aspect of “otherness” and how zombies can be seen as symbolic representations which may, in some cases, induce stereotypes. And lastly, the collection acknowledges the global impact of the zombie narrative which has successfully conquered every aspect of American popular culture. Therefore, the authors of the essays in the mentioned collection shed light on the importance of this unusual narrative which can be used to examine complex issues of race, identity, gender, and representation.

Many other important theoretical approaches have been mentioned in this paper including Kyle William Bishop who offers a thorough explanation of the zombie phenomenon in popular culture. It includes the historical evolution of zombies, it highlights the importance of zombies as social and cultural commentary and their cultural impact. When it comes to capitalism and consumerism, it is important to mention Stephanie Boluz and Wylie Lenz which compare the zombie disease to plague. Johannes Fehrle offers a commentary on zombies and capitalism as well, providing commentary on the connection between the two.

Lastly, the theoretical approaches presented in this paper underscore the complexity and richness of the zombie phenomenon, from its origins in folklore to its global cultural significance. They acknowledge the importance of the theoretical approaches by Roger Luckhurst, as well as the scholarly insights provided by Moreman and Rushton and their collection of essays. Ultimately, this exploration and this paper aims to foster a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of zombies and their cultural implications.

### **3. The zombie narrative**

Although many horror monsters throughout history have been supported by literary evidence, the main difference between zombies and all the other horror, fear producing monsters is precisely a crucial one. Zombies are not supported, nor have they been inspired by literary sources. The zombie has appeared in many cultures throughout history and that is why, including other important reasons of course, the zombie sub-genre is as important as others. For example, Bram Stoker, also known as the author of *Dracula*, has successfully implanted a new horror figure – a blood-sucking vampire which resulted in many different adaptations of the same monster. Vampires have become a very important figure in the horror genre. They were also adapted in many other film genres as well, i.e., in dramas and romantic movies. One might say that zombies came into their existence by taking inspiration from other popular monsters such as vampires and mummies. Although mummies are not monsters per say, they are represented as the “living dead” monsters in many areas of the popular culture. However, this does not in any way mean that zombies are not an original, or an important figure in the horror genre. They do not however possess a substantial amount of evidence in literature.

Many people believe that the zombie sub-genre is in fact an American, or to be more precise, a Hollywood creation, but the truth is that the zombie monster has had far more

complicated origins. According to Mark Miller, a journalist for the magazine *Ancient Origins*, the ancient Greeks were also interested in the zombie creature. Their interest in this peculiar creature quickly turned into fear given the fact that they buried corpses while covering them with massive stones so they could not rise and escape their deathly tomb. According to Miller “ancient Greeks on the island of Sicily had a fear of revenants so dire they weighed bodies down with rocks and amphora pieces to keep them from rising from their graves to haunt the living, says a researcher” (“Ancient Greeks apparently feared zombies so much they weighed down the dead”). However, ancient Greeks are not the only ones who showed their interest in the undead. Haitians, for example, closely related to zombies. However, with Haitians the zombies carry a completely different meaning than the one associated with the ancient Greeks. One cannot talk about zombies without mentioning their Haitian origins which paved the way for the zombie trope we are all familiar with to this day.

## **4. The Caribbean origins**

### **4.1. Vodou and Voodoo, the Haitian zombie, and the American interpretation of the said monster**

When it comes to explaining and understanding religion in general, the lack of information about a subject in question may lead to many different misconceptions. That is exactly what happened with the practice of Vodou. Vodou has, for many years, endured many misconceptions. However, it is important to note that Voodoo and Vodou should not be used as synonyms because contrary to popular belief, they do not represent the same concept. Firstly, after the Christianization of the French colony of Haiti formerly called St. Domingue, the official religion in Haiti became Catholicism. However, many people in Haiti practiced another type of religion, a syncretised one, called Vodou. According to Moreman and Rushton (2),

Vodou and Voodoo should not be perceived as synonyms given the fact that Voodoo is closely related to devil-worshipping and black magic as is mostly perceived by the Western cultures, whereas Vodou is the syncretised religion. According to Moreman and Rushton (2) “Vodouisants (practitioners of Vodou) in New Orleans often refer to their spirituality as Voodoo, differentiating the ‘darker’ elements as Hoodoo”. Vodou, a syncretised religion, vastly spread out throughout Haiti as some sort of oppression towards the conversion of slaves to the Catholic Church. Through this religion, the slaves were able to maintain something that only belonged to them.<sup>1</sup> As Moreman and Rushton (2) agree “Vodou resulted from an amalgam of beliefs and traditions of a people who were at once forced to accept, and yet collectively rejected, a colonial religion of oppression while they struggled to retain some sense of African identity and culture”. Therefore, Vodou may be interpreted as a religion that brought slaves together, it helped them regain some type of freedom from the oppressor. Although zombies do represent a walking corpse in the African tradition, they also depict many other types of monsters (Moreman and Rushton 3). Karen McCarthy Brown provides an interesting definition of the zombie, proclaiming it to be “either the disembodied soul of a dead person whose powers are captured and used for magical purposes, or a soulless body that has been raised from the grave to do drone labour in the fields” (9638). The disembodied soul is rather called *zombie astral*, however this type of zombie is not the one that became widely popular. The latter, or the soulless body raised from the dead is something that one may recognize as a *zombie proper* (Moreman and Rushton 3). *Zombie proper* is the one that became widely popular in the Western imagination and various adaptations of it have proven its massive importance in the Western culture. Zombies are now a widespread figure in cinema, literature, and all areas of the popular culture.

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<sup>1</sup> “Catholicism was known and had been successfully amalgamated into some African spiritualities, but in Haiti it was rejected as a religion of the ‘white man’s God’”. (Moreman and Rushton 3)

Since there is an obvious and an important difference between *zombie astral* and *zombie proper*, it is crucial to establish some ground rules. *Zombie astral* is specifically tied to Haiti and, although there were many attempts to generalize it and develop it into the zombie form, we are all familiar with today, those attempts were not successful. However, as it was stated earlier, it was crucial to use the idea of a Haitian zombie to interpret it in a more modern, American way. Therefore, now we have a new creation – zombie – a monster which is still a body raised from the grave with some minor changes. As Lauro and Embry state “in its passage from zombi to zombie, this figuration that was at first just a somnambulistic slave raised from the dead became evil, contagious, and plural” (87-88). This change from a mindless corpse to a deadly monster is a crucial one. In this way the zombie becomes something other, a creature which can escape death, a creature that no longer needs nutrients to feed it but rather needs human flesh, and a creature that is now a symbol of everything we fear. As Lauro and Embry state, Romero did a great job at this point of view – by using zombies as the symbol for fears and anxieties that have for so long troubled the Americas, he gave them a much deeper meaning and enhanced the horror element in this specific narrative. It is also important to note that the Haitian interpretation of the zombie does not rely solely on the horror element, it rather gives importance to the element of punishment. To elaborate, I will present an example. In the African tradition, zombie is a term which is used for children who were misbehaving; therefore, it may be represented as some sort of punishment. However, this may be interpreted in a completely different way. In Haiti, there was a certain compassion for those who were turned into zombies, therefore instead of fearing them, people pitied the ones turned into zombie. The real source of horror in the Haitian tradition was an evil priest called *bokor* (Moreman and Rushton 3) who used black magic to transform people into zombie while enslaving them. Since Haiti was a French colony, it was mostly populated by African slaves it is understandable that people feared becoming a slave in the afterlife as well. Seeing as the Africans were forced to

live and work at another continent without freedom, they did not want to spend both their lives and their afterlives as slaves. In a more reaching interpretation, Romero's interpretation of the zombie was that much more important than the other ones. He created a narrative which does not enslave people in the afterlife, it only makes them a threat to society in general.

Ann Kordas makes many interesting observations about the Haitian origins of zombies as well. With the Haitians, the zombies mostly carry an issue of race, given the fact that Haitian people were slaves. In 1791 in the country of Haiti, formerly known as Saint-Domingue, the slaves initiated a rebellion. Since Haiti was a French colony, it was heavily influenced and controlled by the French. This rebellion quickly erupted into a revolution known as "the largest and most successful slave rebellion in the Western hemisphere. Slaves initiated the rebellion in 1791 and by 1803 they had succeeded in ending not just slavery but French control over the colony" ("Haitian Revolution (1791-1804)"). An interesting and ironic fact here is that the slaves in Haiti were heavily influenced by the French revolution and the "Declaration of the Rights of Man" from 1789. The Declaration was one of the main inspirations for starting their own revolution. However, according to many sources, the Haitian slave revolution outlasted the one in France.

Given their spiritual background, the Haitians have brought a specific new set of "religious beliefs" (Kordas 15). According to Kordas "these Haitian beliefs and the rituals associated with them, known as Vodou, were derived from spiritual beliefs and practices indigenous to western and central Africa, the region from which the Haitian slaves had come" (15). However, this religion turned into what is today known as Voodoo. As Kordas argues "once in the United States, some (but by no means all) of these beliefs combined with the beliefs of American-born slaves, Native American practices, and European folk traditions to create the uniquely American religion called Voodoo, which quickly became popular among people of both African and European descent living in the region" (15). Although many elements of the

Haitian zombie did not endure the transformation into the Hollywood zombie and the American popular culture in general, it was rather transformed into what the American filmmakers wanted it to represent. Although the modern interpretation of the zombie does not have a lot of similarities with the original Haitian zombie, both zombie types possess a similar quality. Both creations carry a metaphor for something deeper – race issues, gender roles and ultimately a threat to “white, middle-class society in the early twentieth century” (Kordas 16).

Haitians believed that zombies may come in different forms. According to Kordas “a zombie could be a soul stolen from a living person by a magician to be used to bring luck or to heal illness. A zombie could also be a dead person who had willingly, at the time of death, given his or her body to the Vodou gods to use as a receptacle. Finally, a zombie could be a reanimated, mindless, soulless corpse taken from its grave to serve the master who had awakened it” (16). The last form of the Haitian zombie is quite like the slave situation in the past. African slaves were thought of as mindless workers, only living to work for and serve the white master. Although slavery was eradicated almost 150 years ago “the institutional, social, economic, and psychological residuals of slavery continue to profoundly impact and oppress black people and other groups of colour” (Parker 1).

The word *zombie* was initially spelled without the final ‘e’ (*zombi*) and, according to Kordas, “it first appeared in an English-language publication in the United States in a short piece of fiction entitled “The Unknown Painter” which appeared in an 1838 edition of an Ohio newspaper called the *Alton Telegraph*” (16). What is particularly interesting here that the plot may be perceived as a way to alleviate the guilt caused by slavery. After the publication of the story the word *zombi* assumed the meaning of “a creature of African ‘origin’ that willingly performed services for whites” (Kordas 16). The word *zombi* was later associated with many different meanings, none of which designate the flesh-eating monster.

## 4.2. White patriarchal system and African American slaves

What is interesting about the original zombie creature is the fact that it is not particularly frightening. This may be the reason why so many white Americans have taken an interest in it. According to Kordas white Americans preferred the idea of helpless Africans. As Kordas affirmed “Americans of European ancestry in both the north and the south had long feared African Americans, despite the fact that, in most regions of the United States, whites substantially outnumbered blacks, and, in every region, whites held superior economic, social, and political power” (18). Naturally, the slaves could not have been controlled without some sort of violence, however many white Americans used very violent behaviours towards African American slaves simply because they feared them and every possible opportunity for their rebellion. That is the reason why the white supremacists used such extreme, violent tactics. Kordas makes an interesting observation about the zombies being “the perfect laborers” since they cannot think, speak, or feel pain making it easier for the master to control them (19). This is precisely the reason why the original Haitian zombie can be compared to the African American slaves. However, the main difference between the two is the lack of rebellion in zombies given the fact that they cannot think or speak for themselves. As Kordas points out, this is another one of the many racist depictions of African Americans since they were constantly compared to creatures who lacked basic intellect (20). Furthermore, black slaves were mostly portrayed as savages. The Westerners regarded Haiti as a “pre-industrial society inhabited by the ignorant, diseased peasants oblivious to the outside world” (Farmer 50). However, Paul Farmer being one of the essential critics of this view notes that Haiti is “actually a creation of expansionist European empires” and “a quintessentially Western (and modern) entity” (Farmer 50).

As white, middle-class American point of view expanded, the expansion of inclusivity cleared the way in media. There are, in fact, two important black actors which were, in one



way or another, accepted by the American audience. These actors were, however, perceived differently by the audience, finally breaking the stereotypes that have for so long occupied a place in the American cinema. As Bruce (60) points out Sidney Poitier and Duane Jones were one of the very few actors of African American descent who have been accepted by the American cinematic audience. As Bruce acknowledges “the impact Sidney Poitier has had on American cinema and culture is legendary” (60). Bruce (61) quotes Leab (223) who classified Poitier as “the first black actor to achieve and maintain true star status within the industry”. Although Poitier induced many changes in the American cinematic history, George Romero and his movies have had far more significant effect on the audience. As Bruce points out “Night of the Living Dead, a low-budget horror film which would alter the trajectory of its genre and which was the first horror film to feature an African American actor, Duane Jones, in the lead role” (60). Both Jones and Poitier were portrayed as a typical black man with mostly “white values”. There are some differences between the two, given the fact that Jones in Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) was not exactly portrayed as “Poitier’s hero”. Furthermore, “Living Dead ironically suggests that the core values that the hero has traditionally represented in the classic Hollywood cinema no longer have currency” (Bruce 61).

To be accepted by the general American public, Poitier’s characters needed to articulate themselves in a certain way and act in a way that was perceived as proper by the middle-class white American audience. For example, “embodying middle-classness, Poitier also appealed to a “Black America (...) still trying to meet white standards and ape white manners”, since “he did not carry any ghetto cultural baggage with him. No dialect. No shuffling. No African cultural past. And he was almost totally devoid of rhythm. In short, he was the complete antithesis of all the black buffoons who had appeared before in American movies” (Bogle (176) quoted by Bruce (61)). Romero discussed the race issues in the *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), however subtle and even claiming that the only reason Duane Jones was picked out for

the role is because he was the best actor for it. It was later discovered that the main reason behind the casting of Duane Jones as the main character was the fact that his team had the best camera equipment.

Romero's "colour-blindness" as Bruce (62) puts it may, however, be perceived as an act of avoiding conflict while also participating in one. The audience in the 1960s was particularly judgemental. Many African American actors were simply perceived as savages, the anti-hero, "the Negro" (Bruce, 62). Bruce (62) quotes Wood (93) who says that the *Night of the Living Dead* "has often been praised for never making an issue of the black hero's colour". And although Romero and his film production claimed that Ben's race does not carry significance in the movie, it is also true that Ben's race makes him stand out from the other characters and it has an effect that could not have been produced by casting a white actor for the lead role. What is important here is that both Poitier and Jones were somewhat accepted by the general American audience. The reason for their acceptance was simple – "in both form and narrative, then, these films reassure their primary audience – the white middle class – that Poitier's black characters pose no threat to the dominant culture" (Bruce 63). Furthermore, the only way for these actors to be accepted was "embodying white norms and values" (Bruce 64). Bruce also mentions the problematic in filming and using cameras at the time which actually "metaphorizes the problems of representing "blackness" in (white) American cinema" (64). This again motivates Romero to cast the actor with the best-equipped camera crew.

One may ask how the zombie movies did, typically representing various social and cultural issues, become horror movies. The Vodou zombie is typically a slave-like creature, following the master's orders and obeying him unconditionally and unquestionably. The Hollywood zombie is the monster itself. It is typically a cannibalistic creature whose only goal is to attack and feed. Therefore, the Hollywood zombie is the terrifying one, representing zombies as a threat to society and as a creature who "eats away the humanity". On the other hand, the original

zombie was not a blood-driven, cannibalistic monster. The original zombie was a mindless slave lacking basic intellectual skills and following orders without rebellion.

The reason why zombie movies became horror films even with the original plot is a particularly interesting one. Given the fact that the original zombie could not create itself, the person responsible for transforming people into mindless slaves was a cunning priest called *bokor*. According to Keresztesi “bokors are said to be Voodoo initiates who perform acts to harm” (37). Therefore, the fear of transforming into a zombie in the afterlife became more prevalent than the zombie itself and bokor became a terrifying character.

Although there are many differences between the original and the Hollywood zombie, one of the main similarities is the fact that both narratives have deeper meaning and discuss important matters which includes racial issues, immigration, new women and class systems. In a way both zombie types represent a critique of the social and cultural issues in America. For example, the Haitian zombie mainly served as a critique, or rather a commentary, on the racial issues in the Americas. The lack of understanding caused white, middle-class Americans to belittle Vodou as a practice, religion, and a form of education. Their use of violence was a way of preventing rebellion. As Kordas points out “the zombie master was usually black” (22). White, middle-class Americans attempted to portray Africans as cunning priests and savages who turned white men and women into zombies. They wanted to portray African slaves and any other non-Anglo Saxon as a threat to society. As Kordas points out “white, native-born Americans in the industrialized north sought to control another group of potentially dangerous people – immigrants from southern and eastern Europe” (22). Therefore, non-Anglo-Saxons were typically portrayed as savages, people who were difficult to control and impossible to assimilate into the “cultured” Anglo-Saxon world. The prejudice, however, still exists today which can be seen in many areas of popular American culture. For example, Eastern Europeans are typically depicted as uncultured, ill-educated and while portrayed in the media their English

is accompanied by the use of a thick accent. Russians are of no exception. They are often represented as alcoholics, criminals, and physically strong individuals, wearing fur coats and hats and having a strongly accented speech. American cinema has for a long time represented their enemies in a specific manner, manipulating the audience using stereotypes. Stereotypes appear in literature as well. For example, Bram Stoker, the author of the famous *Dracula* used stereotypes in his book, portraying Eastern Europe as a place for blood-driven vampires, urban legends, and savages.

#### **4.3. The concept of the New Woman in early zombie cinema – *White Zombie* (1932)**

*White Zombie*, a movie from 1932, is the first feature length zombie film. Directed by Victor Halperin, this movie presents a start of the zombie cinema, and it holds an interesting and an important message. The *White Zombie* served as an ideal interpretation and inspiration for George Romero in 1968.

Versatility is one of the most interesting features of the original zombie trope. Although different, both the Haitian and the more popularized Hollywood zombie served as a commentary of many social and cultural issues of the time. As was mentioned by Kordas, the representation of women in cinema and in general started changing. According to Kordas, “the stereotypical New Woman, who appeared in the United States in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century, was a young woman who delighted in engaging in pursuits previously thought acceptable only by men” (26). This was particularly shocking in the 19<sup>th</sup> century given the fact that women beforehand were only depicted as wives, mothers and servants who should obey their husbands and take care of their children. The New Woman has her own career and is no longer looking for a provider. To elaborate, the new woman started representing herself as an equal to a man. The new woman was educated, she had a career and her perspective started changing; she wanted to find an equal partner for herself. Furthermore, the new woman

enjoyed the company of multiple men and sexual partners. This was particularly shocking for the audience at the time. Kordas states that the New Woman quickly became a threat to the standard white, middle-class American society because she, as many other “groups” of society beforehand, she was difficult to control. After the introduction of the new woman, the patriarchal white, middle-class society developed new anxieties which were portrayed as concern for young women but were nevertheless a way to control the societal “groups”. That is the reason why immigrants became traffickers of young women (Kordas 26). American cinema portrayed any non-Anglo Saxons as threat to young American women.

Another interesting fact about the zombie narrative was its sudden fascination with moral transgression, particularly the sexual one. As Kordas states “by the 1930s and the 1940s, however, more details have been added to the zombie creation account; stories about zombies, such as the 1943 article “Interesting Facts About Zombies – The Walking Dead,” now added the important element that “zombies (were) sinners” (27). This information is closely related to the introduction of the New Woman in society as well as her “mischievous” behaviour. Furthermore, “other connections between sinful behaviour and the zombie made more explicit reference to the sexual transgressions of women” (Kordas 27). In the mentioned article “Interesting Facts About Zombies” the writer confirms to readers that they can only become zombies by acting in a sinful way – “If you keep your skirts clean, you have nothing to worry about” (3) which is a crude connotation about the “sexual transgression of women” (Kordas 27).

The portrayal of women zombies and African slave-like zombies was very similar. Both lacked basic intellectual skills and the ability to think or speak for themselves. Kordas argues that in the *White Zombie* the woman (Madeleine) was both guilty and a victim in her situation. She was seduced and later transformed into a zombie, but she “willingly, if unwillingly, assists in her own destruction” (28). In this way, a woman was portrayed as lacking basic intellect to

save herself from Beaumont, the man who succeeded in seducing her. Furthermore, “Madeleine, instead of becoming incensed at Beaumont’s egregiously bad behaviour, smilingly accepts the poisoned flower as a final gift from him” which is something a nineteenth century woman would never do (28). Madeleine accepted Beaumont’s gift in a cheerful way. This is another crude connotation to the women’s empty headedness. Another interesting fact about the movie *White Zombie* was the fact that “the text of the advertisements often emphasized the sexual dimension of the narrative and blamed Madeleine’s fate on her own desires” (Kordas 28). In this way men’s argument for controlling women is the following one: women are weak and cannot control their sexual desires which is why they should not think or speak for themselves. Furthermore, the constant misogynistic representation of women served as men’s way for control. For example, “women who had knowingly and deliberately violated the sexual rules of society were often presented as villainous and, as villains, were sometimes cast in the role of zombie-maker and not as the more pitiable zombie” (Kordas 29).

The obeying woman of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was beforehand regarded as the “perfect wife”. However, with the more accurate representations of women in popular culture, as well as the constant development of the feminist movement, women fought for equality and control in their lives. Therefore, zombie films depicted men’s desires in a different way. Men despised the idea of a zombie wife. According to Kordas “the lack of sexual desire on the part of women is depicted as unnatural, and the New Woman, the woman who is a romantic companion, intellectual equal, and sexual partner combined, is portrayed as men’s true desire” (29). Therefore, a zombie wife is no longer desirable. In the *White Zombie* (1932) Beaumont realises that Madeleine is unresponsive and completely different from the woman he fell in love with. He pleads to Legendre to reverse the spell. This may be perceived as a crude representation of immigrants. Beaumont, an Anglo-Saxon man, regrets his actions and wants to transform Madeleine to a normal woman, but Legendre, a man of Eastern-European descent, perceives

zombie Madeleine as the ideal life companion. The zombie master is correspondingly a man of non-Anglo-Saxon descent.

The original zombie trope paved the way for the Hollywood zombie and its popularization. The origin of zombies traces back to Haiti, and although it may seem that the original zombie trope disappeared completely, Moreman and Rushton argue that “the Caribbean roots of the ‘only modern myth’ remain the first and perhaps the best way to explain and explore all modern manifestations of zombieness” (2). Many other adaptations were heavily influenced by George Romero and his movies. That is the reason why in all those adaptations the zombies are cannibalistic, contagious, and plural.<sup>2</sup>

As was stated by Jamie Russell (7), zombies were mostly ignored by the critics. Nevertheless, given the fact that zombies hold a significant amount of cultural importance in America, the academic world was always particularly interested in zombies. According to Rushton and Moreman “Zombies are now receiving a great deal of attention because they are both symbolically prolific and textually ubiquitous” (1). Not only did the zombie monster conquer popular culture, but it has also received a significant amount of attention in the academic world. Moreman and Rushton (1) state that the academic world is acquainted with five important facts about zombies:

- 1) the zombie trope has its origins in Haiti,
- 2) given its Haitian origins it is best understood in the postcolonial mode,
- 3) Romero’s idea of zombies altered the narrative as cannibalistic creatures,

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<sup>2</sup> As was said by Moreman and Rushton “If the Haitian zombie is not completely gone from western pop culture, its presence is often muted at best, indeed often roped to the later Romeran or viral form of the zombie” (5).

- 4) Romero's influence when he presents zombies as a metaphor for "mindless consumerism" which may be perceived as critique of capitalism,
- 5) Deleuze and Guattari (Anti-Oedipus) state that the zombie is the "only modern myth".

## **5. How did zombies become symbols for representing America's deepest fears?**

Despite the original, Caribbean origins of the zombie creature, the Roman influence managed to prevail. Romero successfully used zombies as a symbol for the fears and anxieties which have troubled America for a longer time. Zombies are now interpreted as the "Other" or "Otherness" which may associate to the future, to cultural problems, gender roles, race, and capitalism. In a way, zombies are now a cannibalistic creature which "eats away" the American society and manifests itself as fears and anxieties. By introducing this new type of monster George Romero becomes known as the "father of the modern zombie narrative" and the developer of the "zombie invasion narrative". Romero, to all intents and purposes, is the first person to take this horror sub-genre to the next level, placing zombies as another important figure in horror movies. Although they do not possess any type of literary background, zombies now have a deeper, more interesting meaning and they belong in the same range as any other important horror creature. Therefore, there is a list of fears which may use zombies as a metaphor in their representation: capitalism/consumerism, gender roles/gender inequality, race issues, post 9/11 anxiety (unpredictability), unpredictable future, uncontrolled violence of the Vietnam War, the destruction of traditional family, the change from the traditional family and moral values, the dominance of the white patriarchal system, etc.



## 6. George Romero's influence on the development of the zombie sub-genre

George Romero is considered “the father of the modern zombie narrative”. This American Canadian filmmaker successfully implanted a new idea of zombies as flesh-eating mindless consumers. Even though Romero did salvage some traditional elements of the original zombie, he transformed the zombie narrative into the one we are all familiar with today. Given the fact that the original zombie was only a person turned into a mindless, slave-like creature in order to obey his master's wishes irrefutably, the Hollywood zombie popularized by Romero is a creature with entirely different characteristics. The Hollywood zombie is a fictional creature, rather than his long-lost ancestor which was a spiritual one. It is a reanimated cannibalistic corpse (walking dead) which spreads “zombieness” as a virus. This is, again, contradictory to the original zombie given the fact that the *bokor* (priest) is the one responsible for the transformation of someone into a zombie creature. Furthermore, the Hollywood zombie is depicted as a creature with a deteriorating body, and it is closely related to the horror genre. The original zombie, on the other hand, was mostly a spiritual creature and it was in no sense scary to the audience. In the original zombie trope, the *bokor* is the one to be feared. Also, the Hollywood zombie now appears in a horde rather than as an individual monster because “zombieness” is now being spread as a disease. The portrayal of zombies in popular culture is mostly a part of an apocalyptic scenario. The original zombie, however, is seen as a form of punishment. The Haitian zombie has been a subject of interest for a long time, and although the modern zombie trope found an inspiration in the Haitian zombie, the portrayal of Hollywood zombie is often deviating from the original trope. Romero's point of view is a particularly interesting one. Zombies are not only “monstrous symptoms of a violent, manipulative, exploitative society” they are “remedies for its ills” as well (Shaviro 87).

## 6.1. Zombies and popular culture

### 6.1.1. George Romero – The father of the modern zombie narrative

Zombies started appearing everywhere after George Romero's 1968 movie the *Night of the Living Dead*. Zombies massively started to appear in many areas of popular culture such as different movie adaptations, video games, music, literature, and art. Romero completely transformed the original zombie trope. According to Boluz and Lenz "since the introduction forty years ago of the Romero-inflicted figure who replicates by transmitting the affliction through bite or blood, the spread of zombies in the media has become as infectious as the zombie itself. In recent years, there has been an explosion of zombie works across multiple media ranging from survivalist horror (the *Resident Evil* and *Left 4 Dead* series) to satires (*Fido*) to psychological explorations of the figure of the zombie (*Land of the Dead*)" (136). Therefore, zombies started spreading across all areas of popular culture, almost as a disease.

Zombies have become cannibalistic, eager for human brains and flesh, they started appearing in hordes rather than as individuals and their zombieness is now being spread as a disease. Although the Hollywood zombie may at first appear as a mindless cannibalistic creature, the zombie version popularized by Romero holds a much deeper meaning. Although Romero was not the first film maker to use zombies in his films, he successfully revolutionized the zombie genre into a horror sub-genre and managed to inaugurate its defining characteristics. As Luckhursts states while referring to Romero's movies "it is in this sequence of films, from horror cinema's glorious decade of perverse wonders, that the zombie came together as a relentless, devouring, cannibalistic creature driven by insatiable hunger to turn living flesh into dead meat" (137).

As was already mentioned, zombieness is now being spread as a disease, the scenario is almost always an apocalyptic one, zombies are now cannibalistic and slowly "eat away the

humanity". This is another concept that Romero quickly adapted and modernized in his work. "*Night* retains many of the crucial historical resonances of the Haitian zombie and the American culture's post-war massification of the zombie. Romero crystallized, with mythic simplicity, the plot formula that was the logical conclusion to all his massing of the undead: the narrative of what we now call the *zombie apocalypse*" (Luckhurst 140). The concept of plague, which has existed in theatre, literature, and now film was present in many cultures in the early periods. Given the fact that the zombie narrative does not have literary sources whatsoever, it is fairly interesting that this "Gothic" element came to be used in movies. However, it was used in a modernized, transformed way, since the development of technology enabled humans to deal with plague and other diseases more accordingly. In the zombie apocalyptic scenario, people started becoming infected with different viruses which transformed their bodies and brains, making them completely different from the humans they were before. The plague has, in the early periods, represented many anxieties and fears that people had to deal with early on. Many important writers used it in their work as a metaphor for many significant issues.

The original Haitian zombie "illness" did not, however, spread in a form of a disease. The original zombie was only a mindless slave, a harmless person to be pitied for its misfortunes. The Hollywood zombie is a zombie whose illness spreads out in a form of a disease, affecting the people in contact with an indelible virus which quickly turns them into scary, cannibalistic creatures. The viral zombie therefore begins with Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). According to Boluz and Lenz "this film effectively liberates the monster from its folkloric origins, so that it becomes an even more terrifying force as it is no longer a focalized villainous figure serving as the wellspring of evil, but an infectious, automatic horde" (135). Therefore, the zombie virus becomes the ultimate replacement for the plague. "The infectious spread of this fictional and personified virus becomes as metaphorically vital, fungible, and multivalent

as the bubonic plague itself once was. Infection by zombie is just as arbitrary, inescapable, and devastating as infection by plague” (135).

### **6.1.2. Capitalism and consumerism**

Capitalism has, for a longer time, been critiqued by many. According to Jahan and Mahmud “capitalism is often thought of as an economic system in which private actors own and control property in accord with their interests, and demand and supply freely set prices in markets in a way that can serve the best interests of society” (44). There are many “pillars” of capitalism according to Jahan and Mahmud which include “private property, self-interest, competition, a market mechanism, freedom to choose, and limited role of government” (44).

Many criticisms of capitalism comment on the unreliability of capitalism. To quote Heilbroner and Boettke “many critics have alleged that capitalism suffers from an inherent instability that has characterized and plagued the system since the advent of industrialization” (“Capitalism”). Consumerism is a by-product of capitalism. According to Adam Hayes it may be defined as “the idea that increasing the consumption of goods and services purchased in the market is always a desirable goal, and that a person’s well-being and happiness depend fundamentally on obtaining customer goods and material possessions” (“Consumerism Explained: Definition, Economic Impact, Pros & Cons”). Many critics of consumerism critique it on a more cultural level, accusing it of producing a materialistic society.

*Dawn of the Dead* (1978), Romero’s movie that was released ten years after the original *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) represents a heavy critique of US society and its need for consumerism. In the movie, thousands of people have died and been transformed into zombies by an infectious, mysterious virus. While escaping from the zombie creatures, the group of survivors decide that a shopping mall is the ultimate shelter from the cannibalistic monsters. The mall is filled with different goods which allow the group to enjoy the lifestyle they lived

before the zombie apocalypse. This film represents the human desire for materialistic possessions and how the only sense of purpose in life may be found in a shopping mall. Romero critiques the US society for relying solely on materialism and consumerism to save themselves. Although the shopping mall may represent a shelter at first, the characters find themselves enjoying the surroundings of the mall while proclaiming that it is the perfect shelter in which they are able to both escape from the zombies and enjoy the hedonistic lifestyle. The shopping mall is therefore the only chance of survival which offers a sense of comfort. The characters feel as if they are living a normal life again, spending their days consuming materialistic goods.

According to Fehrle “films such as *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), in which the origin of the zombie plague remains a mystery and the action is set almost entirely in a shopping mall, nevertheless do not seem particularly interested in making a statement about the non-human environment” (532). The film is focused solely on criticising the human nature which depends on consumerism and capitalism for achieving shallow life goals. Furthermore, “the mindless zombie hordes which can turn you into one of them can likewise be read as an expression of this (often racially coded) fear of the spread of increasingly precarious living and working conditions under global capitalism” (Fehrle 534).

The need for consumption of materialistic things is in no way motivated by a physical need. That is the reason why the zombie metaphor is an ideal one for the criticism of mass consumption. Zombies do not need nutrients from food to survive since they are no longer alive. Their urges are motivated by something else rather than a physical need. Therefore, “they are creatures composed entirely of excess desire. They hunger for flesh” (Boluk and Lenz 136).

As was already stated, the original Haitian zombie and the Hollywood zombie differ in many ways. They, however, share some similarities. According to Boluz and Lenz “both forms stress a relationship to alienation – one is focused largely around the issue of slavery, while the

more recent cinematic zombie is a contradictory figure that embodies both the dialectical struggle of capitalism against itself as well as a kind of proletarian revolution” (136). The zombie poses as a threat since it may dismantle both the social and economic institutions (Boluz and Lenz 136). Furthermore, what is particularly interesting here is the fact that capitalism usually “solves the problem it creates” (Boluz, Lenz 136). However, the Marxian argument is much different from the one stated earlier, and it entails that “capitalism leads to the end of capitalism – it entails its own demise” (Boluz, Lenz 136).

### **6.1.3. How did zombie movies become a social commentary on capitalism and consumerism?**

Although the original zombie movies provided a decent amount of social commentary on the situation in the Americas, their filmmakers were mostly worried about losing their power to the incoming immigrants, rebellious slaves, and the rise of the so-called “New Woman”. Romero, on the other hand, used zombie movies to provide social commentary of America’s deepest fears and anxieties. For example, Romero’s 1968 movie the *Night of the Living Dead* served as a commentary on racial issues, uncontrolled violence of the Vietnam era, white patriarchal system, misogyny, the destruction of family and many more.

However, Romero’s second movie in the Living Dead series is the one with plentiful commentaries on capitalism and consumerism. Romero’s 1978 movie is based on the living dead which, despite the government’s attempts to prevent this apocalyptic situation, rise again. However, this time the Gothic space is a shopping mall where a group of survivors use it as shelter from the zombies. The shopping mall appears to be an ideal shelter; it is filled with food, medicine and many other options for “consuming”. Romero uses the notion of heimlich/unheimlich in his movies where the place which initially functions as a traditional social structure suddenly collapses at the moment of transformation. For example, the shopping mall seems like an ideal shelter to the group up until the moment when zombies invade it and

transform it from a safe place to a place of danger. The narrative in the *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) problematizes the American capitalist ideology: zombies are represented as mindless consumers who “eat away the humanity”. Another problematic fact is that even after their death, the dead come back to “consume” whether it is a literal or a metaphorical interpretation. The people who hide from zombies are presented as mindless consumers as well: the shopping mall is a place of mass consumption which is the symbol for the emptiness of materialistic possessions. It is presented as the ideal shelter to the characters, since the group is enjoying all the amenities of a shopping mall. At one point in the movie, one member of the group refuses to leave the mall even after it was invaded by the zombies.

The mindless consumers are driven by their desires. This critique shows the dangers of capitalism and consumerism and their impacts on society. Romero heavily critiques the class division in the society as well: wealthy people have barricaded themselves in a shopping mall while refusing to let the working class in and save themselves from the cannibalistic monsters. Romero exaggerates most of his scenes and mocks the absurdity of capitalism and mindless consumption.

In the *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) Romero exposes the changes in human behaviour when it comes to survival. People often turn on themselves, unwilling to help each other which eventually leads to their downfall.

#### **6.1.4. Generation Zombie – How did the Generation Z become a horde of mindless consumers?**

Technology has had a massive impact on our world. Younger generations have become dependent on mobile phones, computers, and television to the point of mindless consuming in order to “kill” time. However, the fact that we have become hugely dependent on technology

poses many uncertainties for the future. Have we become a generation of zombies constantly in search for something new to “consume”?

Generation Z is the generation of people born between the mid-1990s to mid-2010s. This generation may be described as a very complex one, given the fact that many members of it are very aware of the world and its changes throughout history. Its members are often very passionate about certain subjects such as environmentalism, politics, and justice. However, generation Z grew up in a considerably different environment than the generations before. The rise of technology and its constant evolving has created many platforms which may be used for relaxation and education, but they may also cause serious consequences on people’s lives. For example, the development of social media has produced hordes of mindless consumers which spend hours on different platforms. Although social media has had many positive outcomes such as relaxation and entertainment, learning new skills, meeting new people, and sharing similar ideas and interest, it has also had a negative impact on people’s mental and physical health. One may argue that different people use technology critically and mindfully to gain new knowledge, learn new skills and meet new people to network with, many members of the generation Z have become widely dependent on social media, which has many negative consequences for the overall health of human beings. The constant creation of new social media platforms has resulted in a negative body image, especially for young girls, mental health issues, and stress. The creation of the newest platform of Tik Tok has resulted in a shorter attention span both in adults and children, since the average video lasts between 3 and 10 seconds. People have become overly reliant on social media which has changed the world over the past couple of decades. This may be recognized as another threat, and another type of manifestation of America’s deepest fears (mindless consuming, the further rise of capitalism, the rich are getting richer, people becoming zombies in a way, instant gratification, dopamine rushes, new platforms and interesting designs, etc.)



Undeniably, many will say that capitalism is the source to all problems. Many literary works are extremely focused on the critique of capitalism.

Although zombies are used as a metaphor for many problems which trouble America, the zombie is mostly associated with capitalism. Zombies are used as a subtle interpretation and critique of capitalism and consumerism. An interesting take by Moreman and Rushton may be applied here “in a fundamental sense, the Haitian zombi – a symbol of the *bokor* or master’s appetite, for wealth, sugar, white women, what-have-you – is not gone, but has rather been invested with that very appetite in its own right ; in the absence of consciousness, that appetite is both undefined (in the sense that the zombie wants only to ingest the humanity it once shared) and all-encompassing (to eat or turn all human life is to destroy all value, as civilization collapses with the disappearance of its human investors and inhabitants)” (7). To elaborate, the zombie simply “eats away” without remorse. That is exactly what capitalism does to humanity. Forcing workers to work harder while struggling to make ends meet, promoting “hustle culture” which is only beneficial to those in power, and promoting a lifestyle which makes people work the jobs that they despise to buy possessions that they do not need. All these possessions, however, mostly carry little to no importance in their everyday lives.

However, what is different when it comes to the “new zombie” is that, although the zombies are now slaves to many future situations and problems, there is no longer a master, or an “alive” one for that matter. The role of the master has now been reprised as more of an idea, rather than a human being. For instance, the capitalism or consumerism has now gained the role of the master. Therefore, one might say that the idea of a capitalist society in this case, or the idea of racial inequality, gender roles, family values, etc. has become the main source of anger, serving as an element for reaction.

The way these movies can mock politics and society as a whole is subtly hidden in different characters whose character flaws are exaggerated. It is possible to conclude that those character flaws are shared by numerous members of society, all of which may be supported by evidence in psychology. Furthermore, one might be able to survive a horror movie by making smart decisions. For example, thinking like the villainous character. However, what do you do in a situation when your villain is a cannibal whose brain is consisted of mush?

One may think that in a difficult, or rather dangerous situation(s), the characters would unite to destroy the monster. However, in most scenarios that is not the case, partly because of their incapacity to empathize and partly because the movie would not be as entertaining. The lack of empathy is a mocking itself. Humanity does not empathize with one another which may be perceived in another way – the humanity eats itself by not helping itself. Therefore, if many political and cultural issues are not resolved, there will be chaos.

Another important factor when it comes to capitalism and consumerism is the war. War is purely an economy. Many horror fans are not fairly interested in political and social commentary; it is mostly about gore. For many people the horror genre serves as entertainment only; media that is consumed when people do not want to think. But is that really the case? The consumption of any type of media is mainly for entertainment. However, the media usually holds deeper meaning.

Vietnam War was at its peak in 1968 which is the year when the *Night of the Living Dead* came out. Many media platforms at that time used every opportunity to critique and symbolically mention Vietnam which is precisely what Romero was doing in all his films. The *Night of the Living Dead* also serves as a critique for the uncontrolled violence of the Vietnam War era, however subtle it might have been. A more prominent critique of the uncontrolled violence of the Vietnam War is displayed in another movie called *Day of the Dead* (1985).

### **6.1.5. *Day of the Dead* – A commentary on the cruel violence of the Vietnam War**

Romero's commentary became one of the most important ones in the zombie narrative. Naturally, Romero's title as the "father of the modern zombie narrative" is more understandable when one analyses his films. He does not only comment on the race issues and feminism, or the problems that seem to be omnipresent in each genre of film. Romero heavily criticizes the destruction of family and traditional values, white patriarchal system and its dominance in society, capitalism and consumerism which have created a diversion from the more important issues. He also heavily criticizes the uncontrollable violence of the Vietnam War where so many soldiers died while protecting their country. Therefore, in Romero's movie *Day of the Dead* the zombies eat and rip apart the flesh of American soldiers which is also a symbol for the uncontrolled violence of war. What is particularly interesting about Romero's movies is the fact that although he tries to differentiate his movies from the traditional, original Haitian zombie trope, the plot of his movies always seems to circle back to at least one traditional and original zombie narrative element. For example, at the end of his movie *Day of the Dead*, the remaining survivors manage to escape to a deserted, tropical island. Therefore, one may connect this island with the Caribbean origins of Haiti. The tradition is omnipresent and, similar to the zombie apocalypse, there is no escape from it.

In the *Day of the Dead* (1985) the flesh-eating zombie is a "subtle" allusion to the violence of the Vietnam War. In the movie, the scientist is trying to end the zombie pandemic which has infected the entire world. While the scientists are working, the soldiers are assigned to protect them. Although this metaphor is an obvious one, the soldiers are protecting other survivors and fighting in order to end the pandemic. The scientist in charge, Dr. Logan, is the one with an interesting point of view. He believed that the zombies could be trained and made obedient. This may be perceived as a metaphor for the American army system which is trying to domesticate the soldiers and make them as obedient and malleable as possible. On the other

hand, Sarah is focused on trying to find the cure for the monstrous virus which has infected the whole world. In this way, the audience sees two points of view in war: on the one hand, a person is trying to find a cure and end the pandemic (i.e., find a solution and end the war). On the other hand, a person in charge is trying to domesticate the opposing side and use them to make a financial gain, use them as an army for further wars or simply use them as slaves. Given the fact that these points of view are opposing in many ways, the result is a catastrophic one. In the movie, the zombies are eating the soldiers' flesh which is another one of the metaphors for the uncontrolled violence of war. One may even associate it to the infamous Battle of the Hamburger Hill.

Therefore, Romero has managed to critique all problems which have troubled the Americas for a long time. He offers critiques the uncontrolled violence of the Vietnam War, a devastating war which lasted for almost twenty years and inflicted sadness and many losses in the American society.

#### **6.1.6. Zombies as a feminist movement**

Zombies served as a metaphor and as a critique for many important events happening in America. For example, Romero uses them as a strong metaphor for capitalism and consumerism in his second movie, the *Day of the Dead*. They also represent a critique for the racial issues in America, gender roles, the destruction of family, as well as the uncontrolled violence of the Vietnam era. However, zombies may also be interpreted as a feminist movement, given the fact that it has represented many different ideas and opinions for decades. According to Greene and Meyer, this is the story of the “walking (gendered) dead” (64). And when talking about feminism, one may ask themselves a simple question: is feminism (un)dead?

Many people do not understand that feminism is simply defined as a movement which attempts to stop sexism and give justice and equality to women. It is, in no way, a man-hating movement, neither does it promote any type of hate whatsoever. Feminists only seek out justice and equality, although they are often described as man-hating, poorly groomed, angry individuals. Given the fact that many different forms of feminism exist, people often criticize the movement and falsely associate it with hate. That is the reason why the paradox of feminism exists. For example, although many people agree with feminist ideas which seek out to improve women's living conditions, very few women claim to be feminists. However, this is the topic for another discussion because women have, for so long, feared that their connection to feminism will label them as angry, man-hating, poorly groomed and not surprising, as lesbians. In this way, the homophobic tendencies only fuel the bashing of feminism. Although many fail to admit it, many women fear that their association with the feminist movement may be perceived negatively by men. Given the fact that women have been taught to rely on men's approval and praise and that for so long women have been regarded as individuals whose only goals are to appeal to their husband and children, it is not surprising that the only way to win men's approval is to not identify as a feminist.

Furthermore, the idea that the equality between men and women has been achieved is the reason why many believe that there is no longer a need for feminism. However, new generations have been reported to associate with the word and continue to embrace it every day. This is why one might say that feminism keeps "rising from the dead". Now, I will continue with the analysis that zombies may be represented as a metaphor for feminism.

America's family values have quietly and submissively been passed down through many American generations. However, in the last century, those values suffered a significant change given the fact that as society slowly changes, the values of the said society change as well. After the 1950s, American family significantly changed. This might have happened due to a

variety of reasons, one of the reasons being the birth of a “new woman” – modern American woman with different values and goals which rarely include motherhood, family, and marriage. For example, traditional values believed the father to be the “head of the household” as well as the main wage earner and supporter of the family. However, contemporary values disagree with this opinion, stating that a mother can also be the earner and the “head of the household” which was, for so many years, frowned upon. Furthermore, traditional values state the importance of the home maker role and assigning the said role to women. However, contemporary values also state that the father may be a stay-at-home parent if the woman/mother of the family earns more money. As one would expect, traditional family values support the criticism of pre-marital sex, whereas contemporary values mostly search for omnipresent sex education in schools to avoid unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Contemporary values also support the freedom of choice and believe in the right to abortion. Lastly, traditional family values support the idea of traditional marriages between men and women, and object the same-sex marriages. However, contemporary family values offer acceptance of all kinds of family structures which include same-sex marriages, single parent households as well as relationships without the marriage certificate.

One might argue that the development of feminism significantly changed the traditional family values. Given the fact that the “new woman” opposes the traditional values of being a mother and the home maker of the family, most “new women” started behaving in an opposing matter. They started pursuing their careers and goals, they stopped believing in the sanctity of marriage and motherhood. That is the reason why many films and books of the time when the “new woman” was born into the world, started projecting their fears. That is why many movie directors criticized women and started representing them in a completely different light than before. Women were, often, compared to African slaves, unable to think and speak for themselves. Blacks were interpreted as savages bound in superstition. That is why, as Inglis

states, “these sorts of books – and later, films – were not only designed to titillate the palates of European and North American audiences keen to hear of wild revels and anthropophagous feasts. They also served to justify morally and politically the U.S. occupation, by representing the population as wholly unable to conduct themselves in anything approaching a civilized manner” (46).

The movies of the time started depicting women and people of colour as uncontrollable and, subtly, a threat to the middle-class white American males. They also feared the possibility of their women being taken by the African slaves and, by portraying both “groups” as uncontrollable, they could easily convince the audience that their control is in order. For example, in the movie *White Zombie* Madeleine is turned into a zombie as was requested by a man who wanted her, however the blame was put onto Madeleine. Although the man requested another man to turn the woman into a zombie, the woman was blamed for their decisions because she “should have known better” and should not have been manipulated into becoming a zombie. It is also implied that Madeleine, as a woman, is not in control of her desires and that she cannot think for herself which is why she needs a man by her side to do it for her.

However, as was mentioned before, many men started rejecting “zombie women” as their wives and started seeking out modern women. Given the fact that modern women had their own opinions and a strong sense of independence, men started rejecting their previously preferred obeying women. This is how feminism may be represented by zombies. By rejecting traditional family values and acquiring a strong sense of independence, women again became an object of men’s desire. The birth of the “new woman”, although it was at first met with criticism, now resulted in changes of traditional values, and offered more freedom of choice for women.

Romero criticized the objectification to traditional values, as well as the destruction of family in his 1968 movie *Night of the Living Dead*. Romero however offers an escape from the traditional and implements more modern ways. This may be interpreted as a sort of paradox since Romero, although he implements a new, modern zombie narrative, criticizes the absence of tradition (for example a traditional family). In the *Night of the Living Dead*, the female lead character, Barbara, is constantly overpowered by men. After her brother's murder, Ben is the one responsible for her protection. He is constantly assuring her and maintaining to keep her calm.

Another one of most important themes in the modern zombie narrative is the omnipresence of the post 9/11 anxiety. After the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, American's popular culture has been saturated with anxiety about terrorist attacks. As Graham states "September 11, 2001, is marked as the day terrorism as a concrete, physical threat to the continental United States as "homeland" entered mainstream America's consciousness" (126).

In a way, the zombie sub-genre uplifted the horror genre while giving it a profound meaning. As Graham states "while the horror genre and the creatures that haunt it often bring to mind low-budget slashers with little substantial content, deeper examination reveals patterns in films nearly aligned with social apprehensions of the times in which they are released" (124). Even a simple monster can represent the fears that may haunt a specific nation. That is why zombies represent a perfect modern monster. As Graham states "zombies are an ideal "millennial monster"; uniquely suited to expressing the collective fears (e.g., pandemic illness and biological/chemical warfare) of modern society" (124). Zombies have, at first, represented many racial issues, given the fact that they were "depicted as pawns in hierarchies topped by greed-incensed masters seeking wealth and financial gain – a thinly-veiled reference to slavery in antebellum America" (125). On the other hand, the modern zombie narrative, as represented by Romero, has served as a metaphor for many America's anxieties and fears. One of the most



prominent anxieties concerned the post 9/11 fears about future acts of terrorism and how it may affect American society. Zombies represent a post-apocalyptic situation which, although unlikely, is feared by many people. As Bishop stated zombies no longer function as individuals, they appear in hordes and offer destruction (24). As Graham states “completely devoid of emotion, rationality, or remorse, zombies’ sole ambition is to stalk and kill innocent victims, an apt allegory in a time in which mass media characterize terrorists in very similar terms” (126). The 2004 remake of Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* symbolizes “helplessness and shock that characterized post 9/11 America” (126).

What is different about the anxiety inducing fear concerning the post 9/11 America is the beginning of “the new terrorism” which is more unpredictable and unstable and, as Graham defines it “completely changed the way most Americans viewed terrorism and its potential to affect their daily lives” (127). In this new type of terrorism “anyone is a target and sources of attacks are less foreseeable than in the past” (Graham 128). That is exactly how the zombie sub-genre implemented itself in the popular culture. By identifying with the audience’s fears and anxieties surrounding the contemporary situations in America, the zombie sub-genre offered the modern representation of concerns. That is how the 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead* ensures the original plot, however it is changed in some ways to reflect the post 9/11 anxieties. For example, the survivors of the apocalyptic situation seek shelter in a shopping mall and after a while stop acting to prevent the monsters from entering the building. In this way, one may interpret the plot as a fear that people in “comfortable” situations stop taking control over their life and stop improving it altogether. The characters settle in a comfortable shopping mall until the zombies penetrate the “isolated area”. The illusion is shattered; although the characters are isolated from a potentially dangerous situation “illusions that isolation can provide security are shattered as completely in the film as they were in the

continental United States on 9/11” (130). In this way the 2004 remake creates a situation filled with fear to which the audiences of the time may relate.

## 7. Conclusion

Ever since its beginning, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Gothic genre has been extremely popular amongst audiences. Some of the early motifs in the genre included the female body, experiments such as galvanism, monsters, haunted spaces (i.e., castles), the introduction of the female Gothic, etc. The creators of the genre at the time used a variety of fear-inducing techniques. For example, they introduced many different monsters in the genre, mostly influenced by literary sources. They also used haunted spaces to implement the idea of “no escape zone”, spaces with labyrinths, fake exits, etc. all while exploring the deepest and darkest point of the subconscious human mind. The Gothic genre quickly expanded itself into all areas of human action, constantly producing new ideas to intrigue and amuse its audience with various sources of fear.

The zombie monster is a particularly interesting one seeing that it is the only horror narrative that does not have a literary source and/or a literary inspiration. The zombie narrative has been present in the horror genre for a longer time now. The origin of zombies dates to the old Greeks who believed in zombies and tried protecting themselves from the rising of living dead. The old Greeks used to bury their corpses with stones and heavy objects to prevent them from rising from the dead and terrorizing the community. The Haitian zombie origins, however, are one of the most crucial ones since they paved the way for the more popularized, Hollywood zombie that we are all familiar with today. The Haitians did not label zombies as monsters. They believed them to be mindless slaves, lacking basic communication and intellectual skills. They were thought of as “slaves in the afterlife” which served their master obediently and blindly followed his every wish and demand. The Haitians empathized with those turned into

zombies. Therefore, the Haitian zombies were not feared, they were pitied. The source of evil was the cunning priest also called bokor who had the ability to turn people into mindless zombie slaves. In this way, the Haitian zombie narrative had a very important message to transmit to its audiences and it was the message of racial character. Seeing as Haiti used to be a French colony, it was mostly populated by African slaves. Being a slave was the highest form of punishment, and slaves feared being turned into zombie slaves in the afterlife. Therefore, the Haitians discussed their fears of slavery, which was at that time an ignored subject.

The Hollywood zombie, an American creation, was inspired by the Haitian zombie origins. It was popularized by George Romero, also called “the father of the modern zombie narrative”. The Hollywood zombie carries a commentary on several important issues and sensitive subjects which troubled the Americas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Romero, although inspired by the traditional zombie, created a new, more modern narrative. He managed to transform the genre while modernizing it and distancing it from tradition. Romero transformed the zombie monster into a cannibalistic, living dead creatures which now appear in hordes and whose only goal is to feed and attack. One might say that the zombies represent several issues which troubled America at the time: race, feminism, white patriarchal system, male supremacy, the transformation of traditional values, the transformation of the modern family archetype, the strong criticism of the Vietnam era, as well as the commentary on capitalism and consumerism. Zombies are now a representation of threats which impose themselves on American society and which, in one way or another, “eat away the humanity”.

One might also conclude that even though the Haitian zombie merely served as an inspiration for a much complex narrative, both Haitian and the Hollywood zombie represent a complex set of issues which trouble the society. There are many similarities and many differences between the two. On the one hand, the original zombie was a mindless creature which lacked basic intellectual skills. It only obeyed its master and followed his orders without

rebellion. It was mostly described as the ideal employee. On the other hand, the Hollywood zombie is a monster which attacks people without a particular reason to do so – it is his nature.

In conclusion, two important zombie tropes are to be mentioned in this sub-genre. The Haitian zombie trope which served as a faultless inspiration for the more popularized Hollywood zombie trope. A typical American creation, completely different from the regular horror narratives, the zombie narrative quickly implemented itself as one of the most influential narratives in the genre which extended into all areas of American popular culture. Zombies are now a staple element in many movies, TV shows, comic books, video games, even books. The Haitian origins, Romero and his 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* paved the way for many media in zombie fiction. Who would have thought that an once slave-like creature could transform into such a powerful narrative? The influence is visible everywhere, and the zombie apocalypse may be around the corner.

George Romero, also known as the father of the modern zombie narrative, modernized the genre. Zombies are no longer represented as mindless, easily controlled slaves, they became terrifying, cannibalistic monsters. Romero's work was significant for many reasons, however one of the most important ones is his social commentary on the situation in the Americas. Through his movies, Romero successfully critiqued and commented on the troublesome race issues, gender roles, societal tensions, and post-war era. The social commentary became Romero's signature in many of his later movies and served as an inspiration for many other aspiring creators. Romero expanded the sub-genre and presented zombies as a metaphor for America's deepest fears, giving it deeper meaning and not solely relying on the gore of the movies (although gore was, at least for that time, very much present). Romero's brilliant films resulted in influencing many different areas of popular culture which reproduced different variations of the zombie monster in many different movies, video games and even music.

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## Summary

### **The Zombie Narrative as the Representation of Otherness – Social and Cultural Issues in the Zombie Narrative**

The zombie narrative, typically thought of as an American creation, has its roots in the Caribbean Island of Haiti. The Haitian zombie trope therefore served as an ideal inspiration for the further development of the “Romeran”, Hollywood zombie. George Romero, or the father of the modern zombie narrative successfully modernized the narrative that we are all familiar with today. He transformed the zombie from a mindless, slave-like creature into a cannibalistic, blood-driven living dead eager to attack its victims. The zombie trope therefore represents a metaphor for all fears and anxieties that have troubled the American audience for a long time. It serves as a symbol and critique of capitalism and consumerism which eat away the humanity, the white patriarchal system, misogyny, the destruction of family and traditional family and moral values, as well as critique of the uncontrolled violence of the Vietnam War, racial issues, and societal changes. All these symbols are subtly hidden in Romero’s movies, all while giving them a deeper meaning. The zombie narrative was successfully implanted in the horror genre in general, given the fact that zombies have spread into all areas of American popular culture such as movies, TV shows, comic books, video games, and even music. George Romero has popularized the narrative and provided the horror fans with an interesting sub-genre which has, for decades, dominated all areas of popular culture.

Key words: zombie, narrative, Haiti, Hollywood, cannibalistic, horror genre, movie, metaphor, popular culture, George Romero

Sažetak

## **Zombi narativ kao reprezentacija „drugoga“ – Društvena i kulturološka pitanja u zombi narativu**

Zombi narativ, kojega se često smatra američkom tvorevinom, vuče svoje korijene s karipskog otoka Haitija. Haićanski je zombi stoga poslužio kao idealna inspiracija za daljnjeg „Romeranskog“, holivudskog zombija. George Romero, prozvan ocem modernog zombi narativa uspješno je modernizirao narativ koji nam je svima poznat danas. Romero je preobrazio zombija iz bezumnog roba u kanibalističkog živog mrtvaca željnog napada. Zombi stoga predstavlja metaforu za sve strahove i tjeskobe koje već duže vremena muče američku publiku. Zombi služi kao simbol i kao kritika kapitalizma i konzumerizma koji izjedaju čovječanstvo, bjelačkog patrijarhata, mizoginije, propasti obitelji i razaranja tradicionalnih obiteljskih i moralnih vrijednosti. Također služi kao kritika nekontroliranog nasilja u Vijetnamskom ratu, rasnih pitanja i društvenih promjena. Svi ti simboli suptilno su skriveni u Romerovim filmovima te im daju dublje značenje. Zombi narativ se uspješno uklopio u horor žanr, budući da su se zombiji proširili na sve sfere američke popularne kulture poput filmova, televizijskih emisija, stripova, videoigara pa čak i glazbe. George Romero je popularizirao narativ i ljubiteljima horor filmova ponudio zanimljiv podžanr koji već desetljećima dominira na svim područjima američke popularne kulture.

Ključne riječi: zombi, narativ, Haiti, Hollywood, kanibalistički, horor žanr, film, metafora, popularna kultura, George Romero