

## Fears of Disaster and (Post-)Human Raciologies in European Popular Culture (2001–2013)

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### Abstract

This article aims at mapping the impact of ‘fears of disasters and crisis’ on European self-representations in terms of racial stereotypes, ‘white fantasies’, gender hierarchies, and heteronormativities. Its methodology is a critical discourse analysis of texts – specifically television series such as the BBC’s *Dead Set* (2009) and the first season of BBC US and UK, *In the Flesh*, (2013) and movies such as *28 Days Later* (2002), *L’Horde* (2009), and *World War Z* (2013) – read through the lens of postcolonial theories, critical race and whiteness studies, the concepts of political philosophy and the theoretical insights of post-human feminism. This composite theoretical framework permits a grasp of gendered, racialised and classed fantasies behind the narratives of catastrophe and the visions of the post-apocalyptic world(s) the catastrophe is supposed to bring to life; it also allows an analysis of the meaning and articulations of catastrophe and post-world spatial constructions, and the latter’s relation to actual and imagined social hierarchies (gender, colour and class of the survivors). These are examined in order to understand whose eyes we are expected to imagine and experience the crisis/catastrophe through; the geographies of catastrophe and of post-world(s) (where in the world, and why); the relation between the undead and the living; life amongst the living before the undead threat; and the way protagonists look at the laws, rule, governmentalities, and use of violence in the past, present and future societies. These are a few of the themes that this article discusses in an attempt to uncover what fantasies of the present are hidden behind present memories of the future.

**Keywords:** Apocalypse, visual products, discourse analysis, postcolonial and cultural studies, critical whiteness studies

## Introduction

In order to grasp how and to what extent ‘fears of disaster’ engender European racist and (hetero)sexist self-representations, this article investigates the emotional coding of ‘sameness’ and ‘otherness’ in zombie narratives, primarily in the form of European television series and films from the past 15 years. These are popular and transnational cultural products, meant for the general public regardless of their location, and they will be discussed from the point of view of ‘fears of disaster and crisis’. The visual and literary texts this essay takes into consideration will be read in terms of European self-representations regarding racial stereotypes, ‘white fantasies’, gender hierarchies, and heteronormativities.

Since the end of the Cold War, Europe has been troubled by fears and an unprecedented sense of vulnerability related to a number of social, political, cultural, and economic phenomena that have transformed them from the ‘centres’ of modern empires to the post-modern ‘peripheries’ (Chakrabarty 2000) of new empires. These same phenomena have often been transfigured in contemporary horror visual productions (contagions, economic crises/natural catastrophes, genetic mutations, weapons of mass murder, etc.); in this essay the zombie narratives discussed will be read within a framework that links them to what I call the ‘return of the repressed colonial memory’: the return of the memory of invasion, expropriation, genocide, slavery, disaster, and death. They will thus be understood as if the memory of future catastrophe recalls the memory of past (colonial) violence; as if the undead stand for the limitless ‘strike back’ of their victims, whose return brings to light the previously unadmitted horror that so-called ‘civilised’ humanity perpetrated on the ‘uncivilised’.

This particular reading was introduced by British sci-fi writer H. G. Wells, who brilliantly stated in his introduction of the famous novel *War of the Worlds* (1897):

before we judge of them [the Martians invading the earth] too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit? (Wells 1897: 7)

The purpose of seeing zombie visual and literary productions as authorial readings of an historically situated fear of the striking back of those who have been the victims of colonial violence – a fear outlined by Sven Lindqvist (1991) – derives from various similarities that those texts show with historical reconstructions and literary narratives from colonialism and slavery (1500s-1900s). The repressed, painful and troublesome colonial memories that I refer to are related, for example, to the physical elimination of natives and the expropriation of their lands and resources through settler colonialism – the Western rule of colonised people, their resources, and production – as well as the objectification and exploitation of men and women

through the slave trade. These memories refer to the emotional records of horrible regimes of segregation, sexual violence, forced reproduction, and death that involved both victims and perpetrators, but also to those who fought for freedom. Those are shared memories; they still produce fears, anxieties, repressions, internal fights, and a sense of guilt, rage, indignation, hatred and self-hatred.

This article's methodology is a critical discourse analysis of texts relating to the undead – more specifically, two television series: the BBC productions *Dead Set* (Brooker 2008) and the first season of *In the Flesh* (Mitchell 2013); and three films: *28 Days Later* (Boyle 2002), *The Horde* (Dahan & Rocher 2009), and *World War Z* (Forster 2013). To provide historic context, the work of director George Romero will also be discussed in some detail. These texts will be read through the lens of postcolonial theories, critical race and whiteness studies, the concepts of political philosophy and the theoretical insights of post-human feminism. This composite theoretical framework permits a grasp of gendered, racialised and classed fantasies behind the narratives of catastrophe and the visions of the post-apocalyptic world(s) the catastrophe is supposed to bring to life; it also allows an analysis of the meaning and articulations of catastrophe and post-world spatial constructions, and the latter's relation to actual and imagined social hierarchies (gender, colour and class of the survivors). These are examined in order to understand whose eyes we are expected to imagine and experience the crisis/catastrophe through; the geographies of catastrophe and of post-world(s) (where in the world, and why); the relation between the undead and the living; life amongst the living before the undead threat; and the way protagonists look at the laws, rule, governmentalities, and – finally – the use of violence in the past, present and future societies.

## **Zombies, Cannibals and Colonial Genocides**

Following the history of political ideas, cultural anthropology and semiotics, it could be stated that since the very beginning of human social life, monstrosity has always referred to the 'representation of the *finis mundi*', an embodiment of the end of the world. Monstrosity is the embodiment of the border between man on the one side and woman, non-human beings (animated and inanimated nature, and animals), and post-human entities on the other. Monstrosity was associated with Evil and the anti-Christ, and as such has been associated with the act of cannibalising flesh and souls of sinners and infidels:

With six eyes he was weeping and over three chins dripped tears and bloody foam. In each mouth he crushed a sinner with his teeth as with a heckle and thus he kept three of them in pain; to him in front the biting was nothing to the clawing, for sometimes the back was left all stripped of skin (Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXIV, 1304-1321, 56-60, trans. in Warner 1998:161).

Bestialised in iconographies from Scholasticism to the mid-fourteenth century, evil monstrosity is assigned to natives in the travel memoirs of fifteenth-century sailors,

corsairs, and the men of science who rounded the Cape of Good Hope towards the Pacific. During the European Renaissance, the actual or alleged cannibalism of New World natives was considered evidence of their animality and proximity to Satan in a necessarily binary vision of creation and otherworldliness (Good and Evil). Africa, Caribbeans, Amazonia and the Pacific were places inhabited by Shakespeare's misshapen Caliban, a mutated being, a beast – “half man half fish” (Shakespeare 1610-1611: I.ii. 356-357; Vaughan and Mason Vaughan 1991) – of a dark colour (“son of the Devil and an Algerian woman”) who could be educated only to some degree, because the Caribbean/Calibans/Cannibals' “monstrosity and brutality” would never disappear (Schmigall 1981: 176-177).

Those areas were identified as the landscapes of both Heaven and Evil, a double feature that still animated early twentieth century images of the cannibals' land in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and – in the late twentieth century – the censored *Cannibal Holocaust* by Ruggero Deodato (1981), a proto-snuff movie dealing with an expedition of young American anthropologists in Amazonia to study cannibalism.

In early modern colonialist discourse, (cannibalistic) monstrosity featured as the last evil to fight in order to create overseas utopias, where the righteous could build the City of God. Monstrosity and utopia thus became inseparable terms of the same narrative consecrating colonialism (Said 1978, 1993), as well as enslaved (see Fredrickson 1971) and indentured labour (see Banivanua-Mar 2007 and 2005; Biber 2005; Berglund 2006), to a much higher – transcendent – *ratio*. This is testified earlier by late medieval heroic romances (*romans de geste*) describing the Crusades and literature accompanying the conquest of Americas, and is praised by English philosopher John Locke, author of the *Second Teatrise on Government* (1690). Locke famously proclaimed America the chosen land to give birth to a new and more righteous society, grounded on a social contract amongst equals (male, white, Anglo-Saxons, proprietors, faithful to the Crown and its Church) (Locke 1962[1690]). The model of this society was Virginia, but the promise of equality was not extended to the slaves of the colony's plantations.

In order to expropriate the land on which to build utopias, the indigenous human beasts were eliminated or subjected to the rule of Christianity, its political formations, and more recently, to capitalism. *Hic sunt leones* ('here there are lions' – usually written on uncharted territories of old maps), and there *homo is homini lupus* ('man is wolf to man'), as Thomas Hobbes used to say (see Avramescu 2003), a condition to which even the monstrous Leviathan was preferable. In a very Marxian sense, the elimination of the beast was the only way to engender «primitive accumulation» (see Philipps 1998; Bartolovich 1998). In early sixteenth-century American colonialism this meant cannibalizing lands and replacing the natives – who were considered useless for labour – with a domesticated labour force from other colonised lands (Creed 1998; Hoorn 1998). From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, new monstrosities – the black slave, the yellow peril, the brown coolie, the Mediterranean immigrant, and the feminine and queer monstrosities of

Georgian and Victorian times – were forged to serve the construction of differential regimes of exploitation that were gendered and racialised. This was strengthened through mythologies of the *noble savage* and the *unmasterable warrior* during Enlightenment, and later through bodily measurements, as positivism and eugenics hypostatized the perfect measurability of human behaviour.

The Enlightenment was a time when the ideas of humanity had legal, political, cultural, and religious borders, and these were very different from those at the core of early nineteenth-century anti-colonial and anti-slavery feelings; the denied humanity of enslaved and colonial Others brought no limits to the violence of word, rule, and sword.

It is within this framework that the repressed memory of past violence appears like a bad conscience, re-emerging through the rising of the undead, the one who was in the realm between life and death for centuries, waiting for revenge. S/he is the Caliban who has come back to revenge the stigma and persecutions, suffering and grief s/he experienced in life: it is as if Fanon's black consciousness (1952) has escaped from colonial amnesia, to be reincarnated as an entity that mortally wounds both his/her actual persecutors and their heirs.

### **The Rise of the Undead**

The etymology of the word *Zombie* (*nzumbe*) has been traced back to Bantu dialects. It arrived in the Americas through the Middle Passage – first Haiti, then other French and British Caribbean islands – and is a human state of being that results from voodoo rites and consists of the dead returning to life or a condition between life and death. In the twentieth century, the zombie begun its career on the screen. Cannibalism was absent in the few visual representations in US cinema of the 1920s through the 1940s such as *White Zombie* (Halperin 1932) with Bela Lugosi as the sorcerer who neutralises his rivals in love giving them a zombifying powder, *Ouanga* (Terwilliger 1936) which set itself in a Haitian plantation, *King of the Zombies* (Yarbrough 1941) – a spy story where Nazis are attacked by Black zombies – and the famous *I Walked with a Zombie* (Tourneur 1943) where the undead is the manifestation of a community's unbound mourning. All these movies deal, whether evidently or instrumentally, with the sense of guilt owing to the grief and pain suffered by enslaved Black people in the Caribbean and the unconquerable fear of their 'striking back' against Americas' slave and post-slave societies. In some cases, movies bring together Haitian voodooism with vampirism. These movies are all very conservative (see Rhodes 2006:15, 23) – the climax is followed by the restoration of the Good and the defeat of the Bad. The zombies' cannibalism – the idea that the dead want to devour the living as a payback for pains they suffered in life – is only first realised in 1968 by US film director George Romero.

The zombie is thus a figure made up of a number of connected cultural inheritances – transnational and transoceanic – that dominated, resisted, interpreted and appropriated each other. It cannot therefore be, as stated by Kyle W. Bishop

(2010), an ‘authentic American product’: as with all cultural constructs, it is un-authentic. As such it is instead an example of a very high synergy of symbolisms, among which the Protestant Gothic plays an important role (see Luckhurst 2012). As a figure, the zombie also draws many of its own features from a constellation of many different Others in sci-fi and fantasy (robots, cyborgs, aliens, clones, vampires, and werewolves) that have been seen over time as enemies and monsters, mirrors of ourselves (the “more human than human” trope, see Sobchack 2000: 138), companions and family members (the most famous example of which is Steven Spielberg’s *E.T.*), and revolutionary subjects revolting against corporate business, individualism, and commodification (see Grebowicz 2007). The zombie is also peculiar in itself for playing with both the familiar (the dead are community and family members), the uncanny (the living dead’s condition), and the colonial monstrosity and its memory. As I have argued elsewhere (forthcoming 2016), other cinematic figures are more respondent to other forms of Modern Otherness and to fears: vampires and aliens more often epitomize migrants in a quite radically different way; vampires also refer to the “the horrors of modernity and decadence in a conservative value system” (Browning & Picar 2009: xvi); cyborgs and clones generally represent human mutations and metamorphoses; and werewolves indicate the Nature/Culture, Civilised/Uncivilised double feature of the white Western *petit bourgeoisie* (see also Kirkup & al. 2000, Christie & Lauro 2011, Giuliani forthcoming 2016).

### **Zombies become cannibals: The Undead from Romero to post-9/11**

George Romero’s thirty-eight year career – from the *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) to *Land of the Dead* (2006) – thematises the return of American society’s wretched, subalterns, and outcasts as cannibal zombies. They are the only ones who are able to reveal the blood-thirstiness of modernity, the failures and violence of which reproduce today’s social division, wealth inequalities, individualism and selfishness – characteristics of late capitalism and its consumerist culture, the verticalisation of power, and the reproduction of marginality and exclusion. Movie by movie, Romero’s zombies are increasingly represented as a mass that becomes similar to what political philosophers Antonio Negri and Micheal Hardt (2002) described as a ‘revolutionary multitude’. More precisely, Romero’s zombie is the result of a restless oscillation between indistinction and self-differentiation, which Marx called modern ‘individuation’ – that is, the construction of men and women as individuals that possess an acknowledged juridical persona, property rights, inviolable bodies, and subjectivity.

In Romero’s last work, *The Land of the Dead* (2006), the multitude achieves its highest level of self-organising, internal self-differentiation (or individuation), and mutual empathy: the African-American man who was the last and most important victim of ‘white liberators’ in his first movie returns as Big Daddy, the living dead

leading a multitude, whose members are mourned when they are killed by the living. In this movie, the zombie subalterns embody the subjectivity of those who have nothing to lose and don't need to negotiate with any power: as the last scenes make evident, their goal is to subvert human laws. In the final scene, after attacking the City where the humans live, the zombies walk away together as a new community replacing the human community. While crossing a bridge, Big Daddy looks down to where the human survivors are hiding and the human leader prevents another survivor to shot him by saying: "they are just looking for a place to go, same with us". The zombies are thus presented as fighting for a new social foundation that gives birth to a society grounded on a set of values that consider Nature as a peer, and focuses on communion, mutual sympathy, support, and equality. There's no production, and hence no capitalist accumulation in this view; no social division or hierarchy, gender relation, sexual reproduction, or time-space boundary is envisioned.

In one sense, Romero's zombie is the inverted figure of the monstrous mob crossing modern cities at the end of the nineteenth century. As described by conservative philosophers across *fin de siècle* Europe, the mob was amorphous, instinctual, beastly; an overflowing river, easily manipulable by obscure agitators. In another sense, however, although Romero's multitudes contest the modernity, progress, individuality and selfishness ingrained in Enlightenment ideas of subjectivity, they do not deny them as such; they are proposing their own (post-human) version of them.

For the living, the result is the realisation of a permanent 'state of exception' (Agamben 2003). An unlikely (or hyper-real) zombie apocalypse is not figured as a state of war, but as a state of permanent survival for both humans and post-humans (Lillemoose 2013). This image of catastrophe challenges the idea that a 'better' human society is possible in the aftermath of a crisis. This is clarified by the structural nature of the post-apocalyptic condition that progressively erases any human mark on earth: it abolishes the space-time dimension established by the living, because it is potentially global; it doesn't have brakes or artificial barriers; it is immortal. The sense viewers get is that in this condition of permanency, a convivial society able to welcome the living as well as the dead is the only chance for both to survive.

What distinguishes Romero's cinematography from more recent movies deeply marked by global wars on terror is that his zombies address a critical point regarding the contradictions, conflicts, and iniquities of globalised US capitalism. His critique of power in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) questions authority – state, military and patriarchal (Towlson 2012). Today the figure of the zombie is more frequently engaged to highlight the enduring necessity of 'eliminating monstrosity' – which is not yet or not only the Cartesian exception, but rather the result of the mistakes and horrible deeds of the living. In contrast to Romero's work, the focus is neither on humanity's horrible deeds (lading to capitalism and State authority) nor on the living dead as the figure representing human mistakes,

but on the necessity of a new start. According to this viewpoint, the enemy that comes back from underworld, the new (she-) Caliban “who has a voice but no language” (Ashcroft 2008), who roars like an “animal”, needs to be eliminated through an ultimate war and the foundation of a new society – and a new ‘colony’ of superior (the fittest) human beings. This is the case of the zero-budget, award-winning Spanish movie *REC* (2007). Here the epidemic has a satanic origin, and the evil project of recalling the dead to life and transforming him/her to an infernal threat for the living becomes the opportunity for a new Leviathan. This is also the case in the first so-called ‘horror colossal’, *World War Z* (henceforth *WWZ*), which I will analyse in depth later in this article. Although there are many similarities with Romero’s poetics, the ‘state of war’ in *WWZ* aims at the restoration of an idea of Progress that definitely excludes the post-human, which is seen as the ultimate enemy. In all these cases, the enduring state of threat is not – as it is in the critical work of Romero – the ills of contemporary society including post-Fordist capitalism, military power, international politics, and conflict management. On the contrary, the post-apocalyptic society envisioned is based on a new eugenicist/warriorist idea of the fittest and the whites in which the hero is also heteronormative, sometimes bourgeois and elite, sometimes representative of the toughest and most virile of the working class.

In the case of *WWZ*, the mutation that characterizes the figure of the zombie after 9/11 has already occurred; in the next two sections I will analyse that mutation (from living dead to undead mutant), outlining how it makes the new zombie different from earlier versions. I will also discuss the sense in which the ‘imagined catastrophe’ of the contemporary zombie is an allegory for the more likely apocalypses of the present, and how some of the most recent productions in this genre embody a deeper critique of the ontology and normativity of unchallenged, inescapable, multi-layered and multi-located postcolonial global power (for an overview on ‘imagined catastrophe’ in sci-fi, horror cinema and Western culture at large, see Seed 2000).

In the last section I will focus on the idea on which the BBC series *In the Flesh* is grounded: that the living need to reconcile with the undead. These productions propose a shift from what Foucault calls “the state’s power to kill” to the governmental state’s power to ‘let live’ and then ‘rule over the *bios*’. Here the post-zombies are individualised and subjectivated. To a greater extent than in Romero’s films, they are medicated, made docile and unthreatening, their memories are recovered, and they are re-inserted into their former families. They become a governmental object, to use Michel Foucault’s expression – they need to live, in order to let the living reconcile themselves with the trauma induced from the rising. And at the same time they become naked (post-)life – a very particular *bios* if we follow Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito’s articulation (2004) – whose social and biological re-coding as ‘members of society’ depends on the chemicals doctors (and

then families) inject in their spine. The state rules over their biological-cortical constitution, and in so doing, allows people to rebuild their communities. Post-rabid quasi-humans are transformed from an overwhelming threat to the entire community into the living memory of an ineradicable mutation (from human to post-human) involving all contemporary societies.

### **Fear runs fast: zombie mutants in a neo-colonial post-world**

The zombie is now animalistic, charged, and feral, and instead of being predictable, it's now inscrutable and volatile.  
P. Dundle, *Zombie Movie Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, p. 7.

The French film *The Horde*, co-directed by Yannick Dahan and Benjamin Rocher (2009), opens with a funeral and a group of desperate friends and colleagues. They form a police squad made up of French and North Africans and set out to avenge their murdered colleague. Aurore, a white female soldier who is expecting a child fathered by the deceased, is part of the punitive mission. The objective is to exterminate the 'Nigerians' who killed their companion. At sunset, the executioners arrive at a dilapidated building in the Parisian *banlieue* – a suburb far from the centre – that is the base of a criminal gang made up of two Nigerians, a Pole, a Roma, and two white watchmen. (Here, the city is 'provincialized' and the suburbs, normally ignored by the city, are placed in the foreground.) Later, on the terrace of the building, the protagonists become aware that Paris is under attack by the living dead, and they see the city in flames from afar. This nearly abandoned building, a black hole isolated from the rest of the world, turns into a kind of black consciousness for contemporary France.

This sensation is confirmed when the group tries to get out of the building: the good and the bad team up, in line with a certain tradition of violent, urban films such as US cult director John Carpenter's *District 13* (1976). In trying to get out of the building, they encounter an Indochinese war veteran, a disgusting-looking old man that revisits colonialist gestures, language, and behaviours of war constructed for the domination/extermination of 'barbarians'. Symbolic of the old colonial mentality, which is still effective today, the old man shoots the arriving zombies with a machine gun calling them 'dirty gooks'. Faced with a good-looking zombie that he kills in the hallway, he suggests that his new comrades 'do her', leaving them puzzled and disgusted. The group splits up and is decimated, offering fleeting intimate and dramatic scenes. Adawale, one of the two Nigerians, is attacked by Bola, his brother – who after having mutinied and abandoned the group was infected and transformed into a zombie – and is forced to kill him. Quessem, an agent, faces the zombie horde in order to save Aurore and the baby in her womb.

Only she and Adawale will come out of the building unscathed, when the sun is already high. But the final message is clear: even if they likely are the only human beings left on the earth and of opposite sexes (which implies the possibility of a new post-colonial and mixed society), Aurore (the name now absolutely evocative) kills Adawale, to avenge her partner. She is the ultimate girl – a figure so important in horror movies (classic representations of this figure are Laurie Strode in *Halloween* 1978, but also Sally in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* 1974, and more Sydney Prescott in *Scream* 1996) – who dramatically expresses her hatred and suffering for the loss of her partner and, although pregnant, never withdraws from the fight. Even in the face of the extreme threat of disaster and the end of humanity, the fantasy of white supremacy does not make allowances. Despite the fact that the forgotten colonial past has re-emerged, requiring alliances between new victims and executioners of post-colonial France, the future is a white warrior and her baby.



1. Frame capture from *The Horde* 2009. The last survivor, Aurore when fighting inside the building.

In Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) two people of opposite sexes and different colours survive, envisioning the creation of an unorthodox mixed-race family that offers hope for a new world 'purified' of racialised and gendered violence. The survivors are an Irish man called Jim, a young, black woman called Selena, and a white child, Hanna, whose father was infected and shot by the military before his mutation. In this film, the apocalyptic scenario is triggered by animal rights activists liberating monkeys infected with a virus that triggers murderous and cannibalistic instincts. The activists and the laboratory operators are all infected, initiating the epidemic.

The film starts with a simple incident: the protagonist, Jim is hit by a car and falls into a coma. Jim wakes up from his coma 28 days later, looking out onto a

London that is seemingly abandoned, only to discover that in fact it is far from dead but inhabited almost exclusively by infected people. Jim will be rescued by two survivors, including Selena, with whom he will travel through the rubble of a world that still offers hope for humanity and salvation. They eventually reach a fortified mansion, held by the military, but here they meet further violence as the military want to rape the two girls and show no mercy towards the zombies (represented here as subhumans, transformed by the infection into rabid animals).



2. Frame capture from *28 Days Later* 2002. The protagonist, Jim, enters the empty city center (Westminster) of London

*28 Days Later* introduces a new type of zombie that is not (only) the returning dead, but also represents a new and different kind of animalized humanity, governed only by the rules of the strongest in the pack. It is the result of an epidemic (rampant but potentially circumscribed or circumscribable) and embraces both the image of mutants and rabid animals. This image also inspires the zombies of *The Horde*. They do not stumble, like G.A. Romero's living dead, but run fast, implying a type of film direction that expertly blends action and war movies. A typical European product, these fast-running zombies evoke the idea that only young people can survive (and women particularly), especially suburban ones and, in any case, people who are familiar with weaponry (such as people in the military). The future hope of Europeans apparently builds on the abandoned people of its past of racial and gender discrimination: if we look closer we notice instead that these 'margins', in order to be successful in the struggle for survival, need to be reorganised in a traditionally gender hierarchy-based nuclear family that sees the black Selena reverted to women's traditional role of care-giver (she takes care of Hanna) and subaltern companion of their men, and a white man (Jim) that used to be defenceless and powerless (naked, with just the surgical green coat on) to

become the new warrior and defender of the two women (on the socially conservative fantasy behind the imagination of disaster, see Broderick 1993 in response to Sontag 1965).

There are some important contextual narrative differences between *28 Days Later* and *The Horde*. British insularity, at the centre of its national and imperial conception, allows us to imagine that outside, beyond the seas and oceans, the infection has not spread. In contrast, the Paris that we see engulfed in flames in *The Horde* refers to the no-longer-radial and potentially limitless relationship between postcolonial centres and peripheries, where there are no barriers to the spread of cannibalistic violence.

In its opening words, *28 Days Later* contains a criticism of humanity's unbridled sense of omnipotence over nature (reason/technique/language vs. feelings/nature). In *The Horde*, the origin of the resuscitation of the dead is not even hinted at, implying that the catastrophe could be one with apparently no meaning, origin or *telos* (aim). Human beings are faced with the end of humanity as we know it simply because they have been – and still are – bad to each other.

In these two films, the catastrophe is set in the urban space where the protagonists belong (the centre of London in *28 Days Later*) or from which they are partly outcast (the Paris of *The Horde*). The European metropole – the past centre of colonial power, a place that attacks immigrants and has become the testing ground for governmental practices in the present – is the stage for the action. In both movies, the urban mobilization/dislocation of bodies under the rules of biopolitical control and the collapse of the market occurs on the arrival of the cannibals whose frantic group does not admit barriers of class, race, and gender. It is a destructive and engulfing tide that cancels the spatial segregation and devices of capitalist production embodied in European cities.

### **No future (?)**

The rurality that is instead the focus of the critically acclaimed BBC mini-series *Dead Set*, directed by Charlye Brooker, serves to reflect isolation and the inability to defend and control territory – another great theme of globalised geopolitics and wars on terror. Rural territory is not geometrical; it hides monstrosity in its fronds, it cannot be brightened by artificial light, and it escapes actual military action. In European productions, the rural environment often refers to the construction of internal barbarism in conflict with 'civilized' urbanity. In the specific case of *Dead Set*, the critique of mass culture – and of Big Brother television in particular – uses the idea that the broadcast studios are immersed in the green countryside to strengthen the image of enclosed life, the one that is reproduced in the TV show, unaware of the monstrosity that lives outside it.

The mini-series begins during eviction night on *Big Brother*, when a zombie outbreak leads to rioting in several cities across the UK, with emergency services struggling to cope and the military being called in. A production runner travels to

the studio with the mother of one of the Big Brother housemates. As they reach the studio their driver, who was bitten by a zombie earlier, dies and reanimates, killing both women and biting a security guard. As eviction is announced, the guard stumbles into the crowd of fans, dies and reanimates and begins to infect others. The zombies invade the studio's interior and attack the production crew. In the morning, the housemates are wondering why Big Brother seems to be ignoring them, but they are later alerted to the situation by another production runner. Throughout the series the relationships among the runners, the surviving production crew, the producer and their lovers and friends who try to reach the House deteriorate as they need to support each other, find and share supplies, and collaborate on finding a way out of the situation. In this case, no hope is left for a human future: even the last survivor is infected. She finds herself in the last scene of the miniseries watching the TV screens with blank eyes, screens where her image is reflected as a zombie version of the 'stereotyped' audience of Big Brother's television format.



3. Frame capture from *Dead Set* 2008. The last survivor, Kelly Povell, sits in the 'confession room' of the Big Brother

As in *28 Days Later* and *The Horde*, in *Dead Set* the zombies can run, creating a strong contrast to the serenity of the rural context. Yet in a sense this is consistent with the speed of television shows – a speed that stuns the audience from the first scenes in the first episode. In this miniseries, humanity is described as devoid of love, empathy, respect and loyalty to people and relationships. It is implicitly presented as not worth saving. Here, as in *The Horde*, humanity comes to terms with itself, with its own vanity and fear, with the selfishness and hatred that distinguishes it. Spectators and fans literally 'eat' the set of Big Brother, the actors, operators and producers included. The metaphor is clear; in a certain sense, it fits the critique of

consumerism – in this case, of TV consumerism – in Romero's zombie movies. The main difference lies in the characterization of the zombies. They are not re-humanized figures (like in the latest movies of the American director) that hint at the emergence of a world inhabited by a new immortal post-human race. They are bearers of a catastrophe that leaves no-one alive.

What seems to emerge from our reading of *28 Days Later*, *The Horde* and *Dead Set* is the reversal of what Elias Canetti argued about the representation of death as 'liberating' the living spectator:

Fortunate and favoured, the survivor stands in the midst of the fallen. For him there is one tremendous fact: while countless others have died, many of them his comrades, he is still alive. The dead lie helpless; he stands upright amongst them, and it is as though the battle had been fought in order for him to survive it. Death has been deflected from him to those others. Not that he has avoided danger; he, with his friends, stood in the path of death. They fell; he stands exulting (Canetti 1960: 228)

The films discussed here seem to suggest that it is not the dead or the undead that are central to reassuring fantasies designed for the contemporary living human being; instead, the focus is on the effects of the catastrophe on the idea of the world and, consequently, the feasibility of a political project for the future. In these European mass productions, white fantasies and gendered regimes are reframed locally while the reach of the catastrophe is supposed to be global: this because the aim of their authors and directors seems to be that of giving back a highly emotional narrative (on the evocative power of sci-fi and horror literature, and movies in particular, see Sontag 1965) of what is not solved in the recent past of their national history in order to invite audience to rethink the monstrous in history rather than in fantasy. The nightmare has strong historical roots and is reproduced in the ways people look at, relate to, and consume Otherness.

### **The (Negative) Power of Progress**

The critique of the superpower of human technologies and their effect on the planet is the underlying theme in *WWZ* as well as in *28 Days Later*. In *WWZ*, the origin of the epidemic that the film addresses is not due to an apocalypse as transcendental event, but the work of nature in response to humanity's nefarious exploitation. It is no coincidence that the opening credits are accompanied by a series of voice-overs (TV and radio) that report the impact of man on the planet in terms of global warming, epidemics, pandemics, carcinogenic transformation of resources, etc. As in *28 Days Later*, *The Horde*, and *Dead Set*, which address the metamorphosis of the undead into infected mutants, the undead do not rise from the grave but arise from an infection that spreads through a bite, or biological contamination resulting from a misdirected experiment in genetically modifying the measles virus. In this post-apocalyptic zombie movie – where the epidemic starts in Pakistan and evolves in Western metropolises – the protagonist, former UN investigator Gerry Lane (Brad Pitt), is called back in service by international authorities in order to deal with an

emergency that is immediately compared to those he experienced in Liberia, Sudan, and Palestine. He left the United Nations because he wanted to be with his own family – his wife and two little girls – but now he needs to break his promise and again be a ‘hero of world peace’ and survival. His world tour in search of a solution to the epidemic (South Korea, Palestine, England, United States) is desperate, and he loses track of his family (first rescued by a US navy carrier in the middle of the Atlantic under the protection of Lane’s former colleague and friend UN Deputy Secretary-General Thierry Umuntoni, but then abandoned in an isolated refugee camp because of the carrier’s overpopulation). Lane’s desperate tour is driven against the revolt of both Fate and Nature against human beings.

Lane flies to Israel, because a CIA agent in South Korea told him that the Mossad knows something more about the epidemic. Observing the cannibal masses attacking humans, Lane notices that the zombies do not attack those who are sick, and theorizes that this is to avoid eating infected and corrupt beings. The narrative thus invites the audience to a new ideology of progress: surviving (strongest, fittest, and Western) humanity, once rescued from the disaster and made even bio-physically stronger through natural selection, will be able to definitely overcome the ultimate reaction of Nature against human despotism. Fleeing from a Jerusalem under attack by the infected coming from the ‘other side of the wall’ (thus presumably former Palestinians), he causes his plane to crash in order to kill zombies in the aircraft and, together with Israeli female soldier Selden, to land close to World Health Organisation headquarters in Cardiff. Here, Lane finds test tubes containing viruses and bacteria and is able to confirm his hypothesis regarding illness as a cure for the zombie epidemic. In most of its recent output, Hollywood reframes the final human catastrophe as something solvable by humans themselves. Here and there, mutation seems to be an allegory for the defeat of humanity in its ‘war of domination’ over Nature. But it is a very temporary defeat: *WWZ*’s apocalyptic scenario is reversed in a new progressive epic that finds a solution to what is meant to be the End of the World by inoculating survivors with a deadly virus, from and through which the world’s scientific and technological progress laid claim to saving ‘real humans’.

In *WWZ*, there is no mention of American social inequalities, the unbalanced power relation and racist segregation between Israel and Palestine, and the violence and genocide; the white, Western-centred fantasy of humanity overpowering Nature and its catastrophes is finally projected on the entire world. This is in contrast to the other texts discussed in this section, where there is no single hero, no solution to the crisis, no human revanchism against the catastrophe in these movies. The protagonists are finally overwhelmed by the post-human version of their removed past.

There is another feature the three visual productions discussed previously noticeably have in common when compared to *WWZ*. This concerns what Talal Asad, in talking about the “little (neo)colonial wars” of the twenty-first century (2007),

refers to as the differential space assigned to someone's mourning for those relatives who have become undead. This space changes according to the position of the subject of mourning within gendered, racialised and classed global hierarchies. The anonymity assigned to the mob is common to the genre and to the productions I have discussed here, but it is less evident or more gently managed in *The Horde* (especially in the relationship between the living Adawale and the undead Bola), in *28 Days Later* (in particular when the father of the little girl who joins the two protagonists notices that he has been infected and gives her his last farewell) and in *Dead Set* (when a black girl becomes infected and her best friend, the 'queer guy' of the House of Big Brother, looks after her until she 'rabidicizes').

This is absent from *WWZ*, where very few scenes address the emotional consequences of the transformation of 'loved' or 'known' people into cannibal persecutors. In their escape from a 'lost' Philadelphia under invasion, the Lanes are hosted by a Latino family who are later infected. Their child Tomas escapes, however, and joins the Lane family on the roof of the building, but is never seen mourning the transformation of his loved ones – not even in the scene where his father and mother are trying to tear him to pieces. Instead, the emotional and intimate tension deriving from the fear of loss (from mutation and thus death) is reserved exclusively for Gerry Lane's loved ones; only for his very white family. Indeed, the torment of his wife and daughters, left in the grips of the war economy and US Army 'refugee management' that isolates the survivors on a platform in the middle of the Atlantic, is the main theme of the entire movie. Unlike other innovative plots in which courage does not belong only to white heterosexual men and fathers, female roles are always ancillary to Lane's actions, as with the Israeli female soldier Selden whom Lane saves by cutting off her infected hand.

The emotional element is thereby so completely reduced to the protagonist (and to his family only by extension) that some of the scenes portraying survivors' joy risk becoming grotesque and significantly out of place. I refer to the songs sung by many Jews and very few Palestinians who managed to flee to Jerusalem, while outside the city their loved ones devour each other's relatives, former colleagues, neighbours, and friends. The existence of a common enemy allows a coalition to form between those who had hitherto hated each other. But those who remained beyond the wall, in that area normally known as Palestine, are primarily the Palestinians confined for decades in liminal areas afflicted by poverty and the lack of a means of defence – except for self-organized armies. Nevertheless, from a symbolic and dramatic point of view, the scenes of Lane's visit to Jerusalem are the most interesting of the film. There the walls built to divide the occupied territories and Palestine have been reinforced, multiplied and made even higher to defend against zombies. But the barriers built by men can do nothing against the fury of Nature. Director Marc Forster, who must have been influenced by Juan Antonio Bayona's *The Impossible* (2012) – which depicted admirably the devastating and unstoppable power of the 2004 tsunami – creates the effect of a tide of zombies that, by running

over each other, are able to build a pyramid of flesh that overcomes the protective wall, thus casting the cannibals onto fleeing humans. The images from above of an infected, bloodthirsty, and anonymous tide destroying everything greatly resembles the same shot from above of the violence and destructive speed of water. One might even compare these effects to aerial shots of fleeing civilian populations in war movies that made history and created a model script for films that followed, such as Francis F. Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987).



4. Frame capture from *World War Z* 2013: Zombies climb over the wall separating Jerusalem from Palestine

### **“Death walks with me”: the emotional link between the dead and the living**

In all the productions discussed in the previous section, the zombie is figured as an anonymized mob, like the colonized populations facing public space at the end of the nineteenth century. In *WWZ*, however, the mob is depicted as having no social connection with anyone, as being deprived of any emotionality or aspiration, like an aimless multitude of monsters. For these reasons, the zombie mob only deserves to be sacrificed in the name of humanity and civilisation (in the singular). In this respect, many similarities can be found with the mainstreamed figure of the dehumanised global terrorist that Talal Asad (2009) brilliantly deconstructed in his book, *On Suicide Bombings*. This figure is often depicted in military despatches, mainstream political debates, and international geopolitical agreements as moved by «uncontrollable anger» (rabid, indeed) – instead of embodying an “act of death dealing that reacts to injustice by transgressing the law” (Asad 2009: 47) – and for that irrationality deserving only to be killed:

The right to kill is the right to behave in violent ways toward other people – especially towards citizens of foreign states at war and toward the uncivilized, *whose very existence is a threat to civilized order* (Asad 2009: 60).

Compared with *WWZ*, the zombies in the European productions discussed above – as the ultimate terrorists on earth – appear less an external enemy, and more ‘one of us’, someone who used to belong (to family, to community, and to post-imperial nation).

In this section I will discuss this view of the zombie as ‘one of us’ in the BBC mini-series *In the Flesh* (2013), which focuses on reintegration of the undead into society and the latter’s reaction to this recovered proximity, sometimes seen as a gift, sometimes as something monstrous. *In the Flesh* tells the story of the return of the repressed memory of past violence in the figure of the zombie, whose rise is defeated by the living, but not through extermination. The undead do not disappear; instead, they are domesticated.

In this series, the plot is very intimate and private, dealing with family conflicts in a small Lancashire town, the fictional Roarton (evocatively named, hinting at the roar as the sound of the zombies). The series is set a few years after ‘the rising’, as the zombie apocalypse is called, when the government tries to rehabilitate the undead and reintegrate them into society. Kieren Walker returns, after being rehabilitated as a PDS (person affected by the Partially Deceased Syndrom), and is welcomed by his parents who consider his return as a gift, a second chance to correct parental mistakes made during the ‘first life’ of their son. Kieren had committed suicide after his lover Rick was killed fighting in Afganistan. (It was Kieren’s father who, after Kieren’s disappearance, found him in a cave – the same where Kieren used to meet his lover, as witnessed by the inscription «Rick + Kieren 4 ever» – with his wrists slashed.)



5. Frame capture from *In The Flesh* Season 1 2013.

When the zombies rose, Kieren found himself locked in his coffin and broke out of it. He then chose the local supermarket as his hunting ground for human flesh, together with another risen undead, Amy. The rehabilitation process restores his memories with chemicals that doctors – and later family members – inject into his spine through a little hole cut below his neck. These chemicals stimulate his memory of events before and during the rising, when he was a human and when he was a zombie. In one of these flash backs he sees himself attacking and eating Lisa, the best friend of his sister, Jem. At the time, Lisa and Jem were members of the HVF (Human Volunteers Force) – a paramilitary force was engaged in the extermination or conviction of the living dead. Jem was the one who discovered Kieren and Amy eating Lisa’s brain, but rather than killing him she consigned him to the army for rehabilitation. In contrast to the rest of the Walker family, Jem finds it difficult to accept PDS Kieren; as she gradually comes to love her brother again, she still struggles with memories of what he did to her friend.

The idea of transforming the undead into a new chance for love and redemption is here particularly successful. The undead is still conceived as a permanent threat – for many inhabitants of Roarton they are the living memory of the loss of their beloved, inclined to ‘go wild’ unexpectedly; the HVF is not dissolved and is willing to exterminate rabbits (the rabid undead) as well as PDS. It is formed by a dozen men and women led by Bill Macey, an ultraconservative man who sees himself as the last bulwark against a post-human conception of the world. He led a raid against an old woman PDS, who is dragged outside her house and killed with a bullet to the head in front of her desperate husband – very similar to what armed official and unofficial *militias* used and still use to do against subalterns and supposed terrorists. The clash between humans and post-humans stands as the metaphor of the struggle between the fit and the unfit, at the very core of Western positivism and its idea of the State and its settler colonialism in Europe and its empires. There, the virile male – proud, nationalist, straight and white – fights against the returned, who represent the emancipated girls in the village (Amy), homosexuals (Kieren and Rick) and infidels. In the name of these values, Bill Macey denies that his returned son Rick is a PDS; he is rather a human and a war hero (as if he could not have been a PDS and a war hero too). But when Rick cannot hide his nature any longer and shows up to his father with neither make up nor eye-lenses (prescribed to PDS by doctors to ‘become less monstrous and more acceptable to their communities’), Bill kills him. He believes that Rick is the result of an evil resurrection. There will be, the vicar Oddie said, a second resurrection, the one described by Saint John, and then the dead will come back to life as living beings rather than as undead rabbits. In killing his son, Bill is convinced that he is giving him the chance to resurrect again. But once he kills him, the community revolts against an idea of society based on a virile, white, working-class, non-affective, military idea of social boundaries. The man whose wife Bill shot kills him with a gun. Jem abandons the HVF to protect her PDS brother.

The series has many examples of the emotional ties between the living and the undead. Philip, the vicar's secretary, is in love with PDS Amy, while his mother helps other mothers in dealing emotionally with their PDS children and husbands. Two moments are particularly noticeable for bridging the three worlds of zombies, PDS, and humans into a shared 'emotional community'. First, the scene where Rick does not shoot the two «rotters» the HVF has found in the hood: Kieren opposes him when Rick aims his gun at them, after noticing that the old male rabid is just protecting the young rabid girl he is hiding in the cave (the same cave): he suggests a second chance for them through the rehab he and Rick enjoyed for themselves. Rick agrees, and, in disobeying his father's order to shoot, acknowledges his own PDS condition.

Secondly, the scene that deeply deals with familiar intergenerational conflicts and boundaries. When Kieren runs away from home after the second death of his lover, his mother finds him in the cave, confessing that she knew he was there because she and her husband always knew about Kieren and Rick. She then tells him the story of her near-suicide due to abandonment by her upper-class fiancé. At the pharmacy where she went to find the pills she needed to take her life, she found her future husband, who gently dissuaded her from committing suicide. She thus knows what impossible love means and how painful the loss of your beloved can be.

These scenes somehow explain the director's choice to use extreme horror (the living dead) and the uncanny situation of a community whose members are both human and post-human to talk deeply about marginality and suffering (for gender, racial, and homophobic discrimination) in rural Britain: the post-human and post-apocalyptic – as feminist scientists and post-human philosophers argue (Evelyn Fox Keller 1992; Donna Haraway 1991, 2003, 2007; Karen Barad 2007, 2010; the collection of essays edited by Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman 2008; and more recently Rosi Braidotti 2013) – thematizes feminist and queer critiques of male and white epistemologies, anthropocentrism, heteropatriarchy, and phallogentrism; that is, the privileging of the masculine in the construction of meaning (according to Derrida 1967). Enlightenment and Christian ideas of progress and the order of the State are questioned here via the unaggressive deeds and emotional engagement of a PDS queer quasi-person who fights to reclaim the love and forgiveness of his beloved.

Thus, as in the other visual productions I have discussed, Western modernity is here the locus of the crisis, the secularised construction that undergoes the catastrophe. Its crisis is precisely the event that opens the permanent state of exception which is the condition within and against which *The Horde*, *28 Days Later* – and particularly *In the Flesh* – imagine the building of new 'emotional communities'. This condition strongly recalls all the more recent UK and broadly Western rhetoric against global terror, especially focussed on national security after the attack on New York and Washington, DC in 2001, and the suicide bombings in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005.

As with the enemy in the London suicide bombings, the enemy in *The Horde*, *28 Days Later*, and *In the Flesh* is no longer eradicable. Consequently, as has been shown by media, political, and academic debates around the London attacks, the State and its military forces have three options for dealing with the inheritance of fear, rage, grief and disaster engendered by the 'rising': an extreme *mors tua vita mea* (the wars in Afganistan since 2001, and Iraq in 2003, but also the Israeli bombing of Palestine, as in *WWZ*); a more feasible regime of segregation and totalitarian social control (something UK already experienced in Northern Ireland and in the colonies, which is reproduced in *28 Days Later*); or a project for a new 'affective community' grounded on a collective amendment of past and present violence and discrimination (as exemplified by *In the Flesh*).

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