

# the BLASE ZOMBIE

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Just as every age gets the art it deserves, so every epoch gets the monsters it deserves. Horror films and literature are well versed in channeling and allegorising social fears and moral panics. In the early 19th century Mary Shelley's Frankenstein literally embodied anxieties regarded the folly of scientific rationalism, and its potentially sacrilegious consequences, while the 1950's saw an army of freaks, monsters and super humans unleashed by the power of the atom.

In 1968 George Romero's seminal Night of the Living Dead unleashed the zombie as a particularly potent, monstrous allegory of contemporary dread. As the green grey faces of Romero's zombie legions routinely lasciviously ripped esophagi out of the tanned bodies of reasonable people, it was clear the multitude of undead just couldn't be reasoned with. Whatever the cause of or motivation for, their uprising and unceasing appetite for flesh, it was quickly clear that the zombie's consciousness was numbed and dumb. Rationality had been switched off and the body ruled. Apart from a well aimed shotgun shell to the head or as amusingly showcased in Dawn of the Dead, the imaginative use of a helicopter blade to carry out cranial surgery, zombies were, despite their often comically slow progress, unstoppable; their hunger, their desire, their appetites were endless. Zombies were never satisfied, seemingly because what they ate always left them wanting more.

Unsurprisingly numerous critics were driven to note how the zombies, especially in Night of and Dawn of the Dead, functioned, in their nightmarish, ravenous disemboweling of all that was good, wholesome and white in American culture, as class avatars and allegorical figures of consumer alienation and the 'numbing effect of popular or mass culture'. As legions of zombies shuffled towards the properties and bodies of decent people, critics were want to describe them in their massed ranks as appearing like an awakened proletariat arisen from their historical slumbers - the worst kind of nightmare for the bourgeoisie. So in the figure of the zombie 'respectable middle class' fears about the potential revenge of the working class surfaced. These were combined with anxieties about the impact mass culture and consumerism upon the very same sleeping proletariat. First generation zombies like Romero's were then, the spectres of modernity, the massed industrial working class impacted upon by the apparently negative effects Adorno's Culture industry. If the zombies retained even a tiny vestige of their human consciousness, it would probably have been endlessly playing My Boy Lollipop as they chewed on human liver.

Zombies functioned as fictional versions of the brain dead morons engaging in anti social behaviour, whose appetite for sex, drugs, alcohol and instant food blighted the good life of decent, responsible, rational people in the suburbs. The kind of alien others, that, like today's immigrants, needed, politically, to be driven to places out of sight and out of mind. In America when Romero made the Dead trilogy he probably had in mind the inhabitants of city projects such as the



black underclass of Chicago (in Britain today we might think of the prison boats or disused army barracks where illegal immigrants are housed or corralled). The zombie presence was uncomfortable then, precisely because of its simple materialisation and reminder of these invisibles.

The critical respectability and political bite (sic) of the early zombie rested then, on this reading of them as subversively staging a political subtext about class exclusion (and possible revenge) and the alienating capacity of consumerism and mass culture. That this reading has lost much of its resonances, and become rather lumpen in its application can be seen in Romero's return to the zombie genre in 'Land of the Dead' (2005). This is a film that suffers from both Dennis Hopper (a kind of Hollywood zombie), and an allegory that like a zombie attacking you with a severed leg repeatedly batters you about the head until you get it (zombie = underclass). Its also founded on a rather out dated Marxist model of class stratification that is often inadequate in detailing the contours of today's neo-liberal, consumerist capitalist debt ridden network.

Thankfully in the more imaginative re-workings of the genre, they have been several attempts to reanimate the zombie as a ventriloquist for the kind of pathologies bred by today's consumerist-capitalist entertainment network. One clear sign is the way Zombies have recently speeded up and become more frenzied. In both 28 Days Later (2002) and the remake of Dawn of the Dead (2004), sprinting has replaced stumbling. Rather than existing in a shuffling flesh hungry trance, they appear more like over animated children who've scored some pure aspartame. The hyper zombie may be consequence of CGI developments, but as with all capitalist innovations it has alternate effects. The speeded up sprinting zombie functions as a rabid allegory for our times, shorthand for the impact of an explosion of information. One that bombards and bedazzles our mind and body with a seamlessly ever rotating, revolving vista of new pleasures, new experiences, new products, new information. The running zombie of '28 Days Later' is then, an hyper allegorical figure for consumers 'plugged into the entertainment-control circuits of hypermediated consumer culture who are 'too wired to concentrate'. If first generation zombies represented fears about the slumbering mass of industrial workers, the new breed are post-Fordist, information society facilitators - the monstrous return of call centre workers from Dartford. Those for whom the hedonistic treadmill of consumerist, nowist society hasn't lead to a better life.

As is increasingly becoming clear, with each new report on mental health problems in western societies, these frazzled minds and bodies are not alone, in fact they are legion. The distracted consumers obsessed by the 24 hr incoherent, gabble and stonk of TV, texting, the feverish, perpetually surfing, gadget addled, virally corrupted sky box watching, i-pod, i-phone i-me me me me me obsessed, sunlight avoiding creatures are more likely to suffer from chronic depression and anxiety disorders, than feelings of well being and fulfillment. Gratification is, after all the one thing that consumerism is structurally forbidden to deliver - a satisfied customer would be a customer with no appetite for further purchases. Or in zombie parlance no hunger for more flesh.

Now while I like the fact Zombies have, in evolutionary terms, accelerated, I think it's the wrong allegory for our times. Sure it works quite while as expressing this kind of artificially stimulated pathology, where the need for speed leaves people on the brink of spontaneously exploding from the pressure and anxiety of having to be up to date and continually evolving (constant reevaluation of the life project). Where the continual commodification of the self as a brand to be marketed within the culture of social networking must be carried out with a rapidly receding safety net (deregulation reversing the idea of society or communities caring for those who fail failure is now personal its your fault). But even the feverish zombie

misses the mark. Partly this is due to the demands of producing entertaining action based spectacle. But it's also a problem about identifying the right consumerist pathologies.

It seems to me a better allegorical role for the zombie would be that it just sits, is inactive. What I'm thinking of is a blasé zombie, touched with a hint of the melancholic. The blasé zombie is a zombie who is incapacitated. This isn't about an inability to make a choice, like the strung out consumer who's overwhelmed with forty different types of cheese and shuts down. No this is more about disentanglement from being attached to anything specific. So it's not a case of the Zombie who can't determine between the living dead and living, whose capacity for exercising the only job of zombie differentiation, the basic evaluation between cold brains and warm hearts has been rendered incapacitated. It's worse than that, it's a zombie who can't even be bothered to attempt this basic act of differentiation.

Various writers have recently referenced similar pathological states of impotency and passivity. The blogger K-punk, writing about the generation of teenagers he works with refers to them as suffering from 'reflexive impotence' (they know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it), while the philosopher Simon Critchley has used the term 'passive nihilism'. In a similar vein, the octogenarian writer Zygmunt Bauman writes about the impact of our techno-infotainment culture of information saturation in his book *Consuming Life*. After referencing the fact that the last thirty years has seen more information produced than the previous 5,000 years of humanity, Bauman notes the consequences of a being exposed to this constant rolling news culture of knowledge bites:

We may say that the line separating the meaningful message, the ostensible object of communication from background noise, its acknowledged adversary and most noxious obstacle, has all but been washed away.

In Bauman's conception the cascades of de-contextualized signs more or less randomly connected to each other are increasingly putting us in the position where the capacity to deal with the weight, variety and volume of information is at breaking point, as he notes 'the task of filtering is increasingly outgrowing the capacity of our filters'. The amount of information being distributed at high speed makes it increasingly difficult to create narratives and developmental sequences.

The effect of this Niagara of visual babble can according to Bauman be described as a kind of blasé attitude to knowledge, work or even lifestyle. In using the term blasé Bauman is deliberately referencing Georg Simmel's use of the term in the 1920s when describing the forms of alienation produced by modernist culture. For Simmel the incapacitating effects were primarily the consequences of a money-orientated culture:

the essence of the blasé attitude consists in the blurring of discrimination. This does not mean that the objects are not perceived, as is the case with the half wit, but rather that the meaning and differing values of things, and thereby the things themselves, are experienced as insubstantial. They appear to the blasé person in an evenly flat and grey tone; no one object deserves preference over any other. All things float with equal specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money'.

Bauman updates Simmel's idea, this time the half light perception of everything in a 'evenly flat and grey tone' owes less to the explicit operations of money, and more to omnipotence of, and our exposure to a saturated market of information, pleasures and spectacles in our social network (network having replaced society or community). For Bauman the kind of effect this exposure has is also akin to a melancholic state. Drawing on the work of the sociologist Roland Munro,

Bauman outlines how the melancholic state, stands for disentanglement from being attached to anything specific. To be melancholic is to 'sense the infinity of connections, but be hooked up to nothing'. In short melancholy refers to a form with out content, a refusal from knowing just this or just that. For Bauman this contemporary reading of the idea of blasé stands in for a generic description of the affliction of the contemporary consumer within consumer society.

Don't Stop you'll never get enough

Michael Jackson's death prompted many reactions. Hypocritical celebrations (god bless the pederast) and the kind of multi channel over saturation of infotainment Bauman describes. For my act of reverence I watched the making of Thriller documentary. Apart from the pleasures of seeing Rick Baker explain his art, it also features brief glimpses of the dancers from Thriller, in full zombie uniforms backstage. Memory had convinced me that there was a particular shot of a zombie sat in the canteen, looking bored and staring at a can of coke and a KFC chicken leg. I was wrong; it turned out the zombie was smiling while eating the chicken leg. Not what I wanted, but it set me off writing this, so for once faulty cerebral channels was useful

So, with this fabricated image of a Jackson zombie listlessly staring at a can of coke and a KFC in mind, I propose the making of Blasé Zombie. What I envisage is a zombie movie filled with a cast of distracted, ennui consumed zombies whose look will be familiar to those familiar with numerous rather indulgent French art house movies. Nobody eats anyone and no body bothers to grunt or moan (there's no soundtrack music either, just the occasional pavlovian sounds from mobiles, computers, ineffectually calling to arms the now gadgets bored inhabitants.) The action consists mainly of a great deal of passive, listless inactivity and portentous distracted looks between slumped zombies locked inside nondescript interiors ('decorated' with Ikea furniture) filled with silver gadgets and LCD TVs (none of which are on). To watch it would be or should hopefully generate same level of psychological pain and suffering that physically and psychologically would be akin to watching gaping mouths gnawing at scarlet flesh.

