Transvaluing the Monster and the Human: Zombies as Multifaceted Symbols of Critique on American Society in Romero's Living Dead Series.

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Introduction:

This thesis analyses the gradual evolution of zombie symbolism in George Romero's *Living Dead* series (1968-2009), serving as an extensive mirror reflecting both post-World War II neo-liberal driven capitalist societal changes and the shifting landscape of cultural fears and values in terms of power, class and race, within the United States of America over the last fifty years. Originally presented as mindless, flesh-eating monsters, Romero's zombies gradually evolved into more complex and sympathetic humanoids, often in direct contrast to the human survivors who are shown to slowly devolve into unsympathetic creatures with one-dimensional desires. This evolution of the zombie in contrast to human regression aligns with, and critiques neo-liberalist societal- and economic developments over the decades, offering a unique lens through which to critically examine American culture and its citizens' subscription to the developing capitalistic ideology within the U.S. from 1968 up until 2009, both socially and politically. Through the lens of transvaluing, which Nietzsche describes as the process of reevaluating established values and moral principles, typically through "war and victory against all the old concepts of 'true' and 'not true' (58), the zombies in Romero's films transcend their traditional role as simple metaphorical vehicles with fixed tenors, becoming adaptive, multifaceted symbols that Romero uses to critique contemporary American societal issues. As symbols, zombies are juxtaposed to humans, signifying an inherent inverse relationship between the two, in which the zombie serves as a foil to the human, giving Romero the opportunity to express his critique of the human inability to adapt to societal change, such as racism in the 1960s, consumerism in the 1970s, class inequality and economic disparity in the early 2000s , and human coexistence in the late 2000s.

The evolution of zombies in Romero's series mirrors the changing American socio-political landscape, reflecting shifts in cultural fears, values, and thus also the focus of Romero's social critiques. From racial tensions in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and

consumerism in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) to scientific- and military ethics and class struggle in later films such as *Day of the Dead* (1985) and *Land of the Dead* (2005); Romero's living dead are more than merely metaphors for societal issues. They are adaptive symbols that encapsulate broader human conditions and societal critiques. This distinction is crucial when discussing the social relevance of the films. A metaphor presents a one-to-one correspondence, a direct representation of a specific idea or concept, which Kövesces describes as: "a systematic set of correspondence between two domains of experience" (14). In contrast, a symbol is multifaceted, representing complex and varied ideas that cannot be reduced to a single interpretation. Romero's zombies symbolize the multifaceted fears and anxieties of their times, reflecting a range of societal issues. The development from mindless monstrosities to complex beings underlines a progressively more pessimistic commentary by Romero on humanity itself, suggesting that the true horror often does not lie in the monsters American society fears but in the societal structures and behaviors Romero claims America perpetuates. By portraying zombies as both victims and aggressors throughout the films, Romero blurs the lines between human and monster. This evolution in the depiction of zombies highlights the potential for empathy, understanding, and ultimately, societal change and critiques the lack thereof within modern, western society.

In order to analyze the *Living Dead* series, consisting of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and lastly, *Survival of the Dead* (2009)[1], it is pertinent to establish them under the authority of George A. Romero. This approach is supported by the principles of Auteur theory as described by Fabe, which states that the director's personal vision and creative control are essential to defining a film's artistic essence: "Since the director is

[1] As of 2024, a new *Living Dead* film is in pre-production. Directed by Brad Anderson, *Twilight of the Dead* will follow the last human survivors on Earth and their survival on a zombie infested island.

responsible for the images, he oversees the set designs, cinematography, editing, and performances of the actors, and also, in many cases, reworks the screenplay or script. Thus, according to the New Wave critics, it is the director and not the screenwriter whose artistic vision is inscribed into the film" (121).

Auteur theory, originating from the French New Wave movement, proposes that a director's unique personal style and thematic tendencies imprint a distinct signature on their films, which then places them as the primary author of the work. This theory emphasizes the importance of visual style, narrative consistency, and thematic depth that a director brings to their body of work, which often results in recurring motifs and stylistic elements across their filmography. In the case of George Romero, his prominent thematic focus on societal critique, consistent use of horror as a medium for exploring contemporary issues, and specific stylistic choices throughout the Living Dead series solidify his position of auteur. Analyzing these films through the lens of Auteur Theory allows for a detailed understanding of how Romero's work dissects and critiques contemporary societal issues in America.

Chapter one establishes the origin and the evolution of George Romero's zombie motif, beginning with *Night of the Living Dead*, which reestablished zombies from passive Haitian folklore figures into aggressive, cannibalistic entities. Unlike traditional Haitian zombies enslaved by voodoo, Romero's zombies symbolize contemporary societal fears of the American people, reflecting themes of consumerism and social decay. Herbert Marcuse's concept of the One-Dimensional Man provides a critical framework, illustrating how Romero's zombies embody capitalist-driven loss of individuality and agency. The chapter explores Romero's continuous development of zombie cognition and agency across his films, highlighting their role as metaphors for the dehumanizing effects of capitalism. Romero's zombies evolve from mindless consumers to symbols of resistance, challenging societal norms. By comparing Haitian folklore with Romero's modern interpretation, the chapter

underscores the cultural and political dimensions of the zombie motif, illustrating how it reflects and critiques contemporary social issues and power structures, thereby setting the precedent for a further in-depth analysis of Romero's works.

In Chapter two, *Night of the Living Dead* will be analyzed through the lens of societal collapse, focusing on power, race and class, and aligns it with William Domhoff's analysis of American class dynamics. The film exposes deep-seated inequalities that surface during crises, reflecting 1960s America's socio-economic landscape. The depiction of the undead as mirrors of societal panic and violence critiques systemic injustices and racial prejudices. The zombies represent societal breakdowns based on social class, while the confusion about their nature highlights the blurred lines between humanity and monstrosity.

Chapter three analyzes *Dawn of the Dead* as a critique on American Consumerism of the 1970s, depicting the zombies as symbols of mindless consumer behavior. The shopping mall setting emphasizes the theme, with zombies instinctually returning, mirroring humans' materialistic desires. Survivors initially see the mall as a refuge but become trapped by their consumerism, paralleling Erich Fromm's concept of "having" versus "being". By juxtaposing the image of Francine with that of the zombies, this chapter establishes a clear correlation between the inverse relationship that exist zombies and humans within the narrative, as well as the self-destructive nature of humans that succumb to consumerism.

Chapter four addresses the deepening zombie symbolism in *Day of the Dead*, critiquing military dominance and scientific hubris. The film's divided human survivors reflect the dehumanizing effects of the Military-Industrial Complex. The character of Bub, a zombie displaying memory and empathy, challenges the stark human-zombie dichotomy, embodying Herbert Marcuse's ideas of liberation and empathy. The zombies' evolving behavior, especially Bub's emotional responses in contrast to that of the humans within the narrative, underscores Romero's critique of dehumanization and further establishes a rapidly

approaching intersection between the zombie and human inverse relationship.

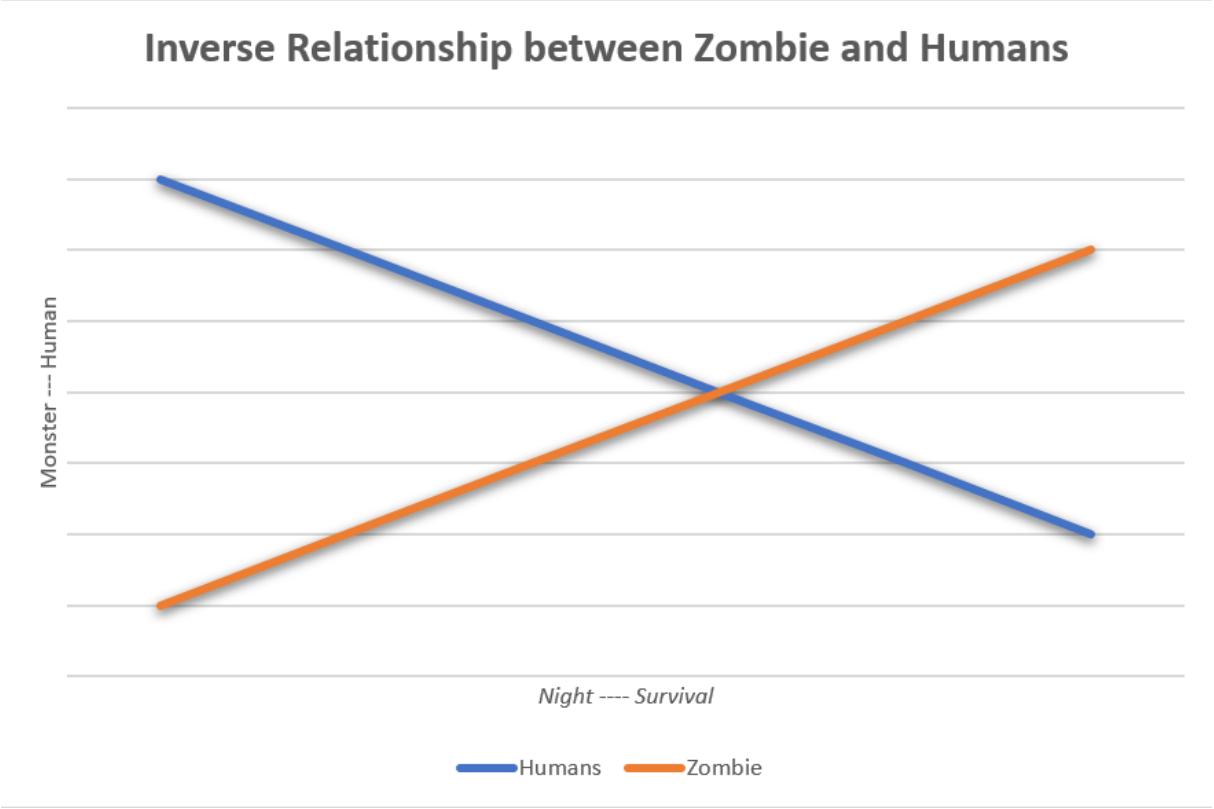

Fig.1. Inverse relationship between Zombie and Humans

The intersection between humanity and zombie is further analyzed in Chapter five, where in *Land of the Dead*, Romero fully establishes zombies as symbols of an oppressed underclass, mirroring early 21st-century concerns about social inequality. The character of Big Daddy exemplifies the zombies' evolving agency, leading an organized revolt against human exploiters. This shift underscores class struggle, with zombies representing marginalized groups fighting against economic disparity and social injustice. This is contrasted by the fortified city of Fiddler's Green, where the wealthy live luxuriously while the poor scavenge outside, starkly depicts this divide. The ruling class's superficial distractions, such as fireworks, symbolize the control methods used to oppress both lower-class humans and zombies. Big Daddy's realization of these manipulations and his subsequent

rebellion highlight the zombies' transformation from passive victims to active resistors, echoing Herbert Marcuse's revolutionary ideas in *An Essay on Liberation* (1969).

Chapter six marks the surpassing of the zombie as post-human as *Survival of the Dead* blurs the line between humans and zombies, integrating zombies into community dynamics and exploring ethical questions of coexistence. Post-humanism, as described by Cary Wolfe, helps understand this shift, challenging traditional human superiority and recognizing the agency of other life forms. Jane Muldoon's act of biting her horse symbolizes a crucial evolutionary leap for zombies, suggesting a self-sufficient future away from human dependency. This contrasts with the humans' stagnation and self-destruction, emphasizing Romero's critique of humanity's failure to adapt and the potential for zombies to establish a more equitable social order.

Diary of the Dead (2007) stands out from its previous installments due to the lack of development of the symbolism of the zombies. The film primarily addresses the impact of media and technology, presenting zombies in the context of a digitally connected yet emotionally disconnected society. The film's narrative, physically framed through the lens of a student filmmaker documenting the outbreak, critiques the role of media in shaping perceptions and responses to crises. The constant recording and dissemination of events highlight society's obsession with documentation rather than addressing real contemporary issues. What separates this film from its previous installments is the lacking role of the zombies within the narrative. The zombies in this film serve as a backdrop to the human drama, emphasizing the disconnect between the digital world and the reality of human suffering. Riley argues that Romero's later works were marked by a resurgence in zombie fiction due to the rapid developments in technology and the fears that were brought with that development, drawing a comparison to Shelley's Victor Frankenstein from the seminal *Frankenstein* (1818), stating: "It spots and highlights the dangers in new trends, reinforcing

already-established values. *Frankenstein* (1818), science fiction's ur-text, initiates the genre in exactly this way – Victor's naive and irresponsible dabbling on the edge of science provides a warning to the rest of us to walk carefully where gods tread. These zombie movies do the same, warning us about both the dangers of new technologies and the dangers of plain old human foibles" (Riley 195). The characters' reliance on technology for information and validation mirrors contemporary society's dependence on digital media, questioning the authenticity of recorded experiences. However, the developing role of the zombie as a symbol contrasting the survivors within this film remains stagnant within the narrative. For this reason, *Diary of the Dead* will not be included within the analysis of this thesis.

1. The Origins and Development of George Romero's Zombie Motif

In *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), Romero introduced American cinema to his concept of ghouls that would later be popularized and referred to as the zombie film genre. Unlike previous iterations of the living dead such as *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) and *White Zombie* (1932), Romero's zombies were not as passive as those from Haitian folklore. "Before *Night of the Living Dead*, zombies bore little relationship to their more visceral screen descendants. Originally zombies were creatures based on Haitian folklore who were supposedly corpses brought back to life as a result of supernatural voodoo practices" (Williams 17). It was not until America occupied Haiti that domestic interest in the zombie grew. According to McFarland:

> The American military occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 stimulated popular interest domestically in the subaltern Christianity of the island's inhabitants, one element of which was the legend of the corpse reanimated to endless labor by a voodoo sorcerer, and this interest was soon reflected in magazine stories, stage plays, and films that featured "zombies" as servile and uncanny revenants. (22).

These Caribbean zombies were bewitched labourers of color rather than the mindless, cannibalistic creatures that have become a global phenomenon. They were placed in a position within society in which they were reduced to the lowest rank, the absolute domination of man by man. Herbert Marcuse described contemporary Western social hierarchy in similar terms in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), as "the historical continuum that links pre-technological and technological Reason" (147). In contrast to both Haitian Voodoo's zombie and Marcuse's human cog in a technocratic machine, stand Romero's ghouls: as symbols of an affliction presented as a diseased phenomenon of specifically Western original, which rapidly spreads across the globe to consume humanity whole.

The Origins of the Zombie Motif

The motif of the zombie originates from the religious rituals and practises of Haitian Voodoo, a syncretic religion blending native-African spiritual traditions with elements of Catholicism. Within the Voodoo faith, zombies represent more than simply reanimated corpses; they embody a mixture of spiritual beliefs, social norms and historical legacies. In Haitian folklore, zombies are not mindless flesh-eaters, but rather individuals who have been subjected to a form of spiritual enslavement. These creatures are often believed to be under the control of a sorcerer of sorts, serving as labourers or household servants. The concept of the zombie was brought into Western consciousness in the early twentieth century, through the writings of authors like William Seabrook. He was an American journalist, perhaps best known for his explorations of Haitian Voodoo culture, detailed in *The Magic Island* (1929). In this seminal, although wildly inaccurate, work, Seabrook sensationalized accounts of his experiences in Haiti, introducing American readers to the foreign beliefs and practices of Voodoo, which included the zombie. Similarly, Victor Halperin's film *White Zombie*, played a crucial role in shaping Western perceptions of the zombie motif. With its release in 1932, Halperin has been credited as one of the first filmmakers to bring zombies to the cinema. The film's depiction of Haiti as a land of dark magic and primitive superstition reinforced colonial stereotypes and, according to Gyllian Phillips perpetuated Western prejudices of Caribbean culture, stating that "the world's first zombie movie remains an intriguing, if sometimes clunky, document to American cultural preoccupations" (Phillips 37). She notes that there is a crucial distinction between the two works, arguing that "There are only black, Haitian zombies in Seabrook, no white zombies" (Phillips 33). Phillips refers to the premise of *White Zombie* in which Madeleine Short, a white woman, is turned into a zombie by an evil Voodoo master. She posit that the horror aspect of the story seems to reflect a racial norm being violated. "The central anxiety in Halperin's film, *White Zombie*, is revealed by its title:

zombies are one thing, but a white zombie is a sign of horror" (Phillips 29). Her argument is that Western perceptions of the zombie motif were largely shaped by horror films such as Halperin's *White Zombie*, rather than the original Haitian folklore, suggesting a degree of commodification of the zombie motif that is rooted in American Imperialism.

Chris Vials further illustrates this connection to American Imperialism when discussing Jacques Tournier's zombie horror film *I Walked with a Zombie*, released in 1943, by stating; "while the film acknowledges this history, it draws no explicit moral from it, and, paradoxically, it is this interpretive void that is most illuminating" (41). Vials refers to the colonial history that is present throughout these early zombie films. He continues to note that the zombie motif only gained global popularity due to the American occupation of Haiti at the time and that those original depictions represent a colonial history that reinforces stereotypes and perpetuates a narrative of Western superiority. This is more harmful, according to Phillips, because "for the Haitian citizen, the fear of the zombie metaphorically represents the fear of returning to colonial, slave status or objecthood" (28). This does, however, not mean that all the subsequent iterations of the zombie motif still imply a culture of Imperialism. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the zombie motif underwent a resurgence with Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. "Romero enabled a more progressive bent within the genre by setting the stories in the domestic realm of the viewers and eliminating voodoo as the cause of the outbreak, stripping the genre of its exoticism and disassociating the zombie from Haiti" (Vials 42). Romero opted to move away from the Caribbean setting, choosing the state of Pennsylvania in a more contemporary era as his setting.

Romero's ghouls not only differ from Haitian zombies in their lack of specific social class characteristics, but also in their creation. Zombification as a sickness terrorizes the nation as a whole, affecting the marginalised as well as those at the centre of power as it continues to develop with every iteration of the series. The personal agency of the zombies is

brought into question in the sequel, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). In *Dawn,* both the protagonists and the audience learn that the flesh-eating zombies solely consume the flesh of the living and seem to be drawn to strong desires from their previous life. The character of Stephen notes on this during the film, stating: "Some kind of instinct. A memory, something they used to do. This was an important place in their lives" (*Dawn* 35:00). Bailey argues for an overarching theme within *Dawn*, stating: "Operating at the most base of levels, zombies are mindlessly addicted to consume" (95). This idea of consumerism connects back to Marcuse's idea of technological rationality and the logic of domination. According to Marcuse, "[h]owever, the society which projects and undertakes the technological transformation of nature alters the base of domination by gradually replacing personal dependence with dependence on the 'objective order of things'" (147). In the fourth film in the series, *Land of the Dead* (2005), this view of zombies changes as the audience is introduced to Big Daddy. The film's zombie protagonist. Big Daddy exhibits more humane behaviour as he leads an army of the living dead against the totalitarian regime of Kaufman, the corrupt ruler of a human settlement. Romero's six films continually build upon these cognitive developments of the zombies by contrasting them with the stagnant and eventually devolving humans within the narrative. Bailey argues that *Dawn of the Dead* can be viewed as Romero's critique on American consumerism using the zombies as a vehicle. However, he does not go into further detail on the social-political implications that this brings for the rest of Romero's portfolio, opting to primarily focus on this particular aspect of Marcuse's thesis concerning the dehumanisation of people in Western technocratic society in *One-Dimensional Man* within *Dawn of the Dead* rather than the rest of the *Living Dead* series.

In contrast to Halperin's *White Zombie*, the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead* are white Americans with only the protagonist of the story being an African-American man. In doing so, Romero (deliberately or not) shed all pre-conceived notions of the zombie motif that

previous filmmakers had popularized with Western audiences. Romero initially referred to his living dead as 'ghouls', stating that although he was aware of the Caribbean zombie motif, "we originally thought of them as ghouls. There were a few Universal films about ghouls and that was what was in our minds" (Romero 2005). According to Connors, the term ghoul "probably entered the English language in the early Eighteenth century, when the first translations of the *Thousand and One Nights* appeared" (244). Connors continues to note that these supernatural entities feed on human flesh, which was not the case for the Haitian zombie. Unlike the traditional Haitian zombies, whose souls are enslaved by a sorcerer, Romero's ghouls are not subjected to spiritual manipulation. Rather, they are reanimated through a scientifically ambiguous phenomenon, originally attributed to the radiation of a space probe and later to a mysterious virus. This departure reflects Romero's distinction to ground his narrative in a more scientifically plausible framework, albeit one that remains firmly within the realm of speculative fiction. Unlike the traditional Haitian zombie, which was often depicted as subservient and docile, performing simple tasks when commanded by their master, Romero's ghouls portrayed an indiscriminate and unsatiable appetite for human flesh.

Neither undead creature can be described to possess a free will; however, Romero's ghouls are often described as no longer being human. This is not traditionally part of Haitian folklore, in which the zombie can be freed from the sorcerer's spell or potions, as is shown in Halperin's *White Zombie*. This dehumanization has become synonymous with Romero's variation of the zombie motif, which Ní Fhlainn summarizes as "this horrific spectacle of the familiar zombie takes hold when the 'human' aspect is remove, leaving only a reactionary piece of meat in its place" (139). Although Romero originally did not want to associate his ghouls with the Caribbean zombie motif, he did, however, acknowledge the cultural relations between the two creatures in his subsequent zombie film, *Dawn of the Dead*, released in 1978.

In this movie, the humanity of the ghouls is constantly put into question. At one point, after being asked what the creatures are by the character of Francine, Peter responds “They’re us, that’s all. There is no more room in hell. Something my grandaddy used to tell us. You know Makumbo, Voodoo, my grandad was a priest in Trinidad. He used to tell us; When there is no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth” (*Dawn 1:35:32).* Romero’s allusion to the origin of his ghouls seems to both acknowledge the similarities between the two as well as distinguish his ghouls as something more align with the genre of speculative fiction rather than the original folkloric nature of the zombie motif. The question concerning the humanity of the ghouls, which even Romero later opts to refer to as the more popular term ‘zombies’, remains the main focal point of the subsequent films in the series.

The Agency of the One-Dimensional Zombie

Herbert Marcuse’s concept of the One-Dimensional Man offers a critical lens which provides an understanding concerning the dynamics of current society, in particular regarding the suppression of individual disapproval of the status quo as well as the conformity enforced by a capitalist government. In essence, Marcuse argues that advanced industrial society creates a form of social control that limits human agency and reinforces a state of ideological conformity as presented by a dominant order. The one-dimensionality that Marcuse described is the lack of choice or individual agency that people experienced in a developed technological society as he perceived it in 1964. However, in contemporary context, Marcuse's theory continues to remain pertinent, as can be seen in *The Great Refusal: Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements* (2017) where Davis notes: “The liberation of all people depends on our political struggle. This is why a reconsideration of Marcuse’s concept of the Great Refusal is so important at this time” (xi). Social media, network monitoring, and consumer culture illustrate the mechanisms that sustain this one-dimensionality. Platforms designed for free expression often end up promoting homogenized

viewpoints, driven by algorithms that favor presenting popular content and drowning out nonconformist voices. The endless push for economic growth and consumerism perpetuates a cycle where individuals are more focused on material success rather than critical thinking. However, while these mechanisms of control are dominant, grassroots movements, digital activism, and alternative media demonstrate that spaces for nonconformity and resistance still exist. The debate then centers on whether these forms of resistance are sufficient to challenge the established one-dimensionality of capitalist society or if they are simply to be absorbed into the dominant framework, as Marcuse might suggest. The fact that these platforms of non-conformity are still allowed to exist within algorithm-driven, homogeneous media shows that these forms of resistance have the potential to challenge the established one-dimensionality of capitalist society by fostering critical discourse and allowing for collective action, thereby preventing their complete absorption into the dominant order.

Drawing parallels with George Romero's motif of the zombie, a comparison can be made between the depiction of zombies in *The Living Dead* series and the one-dimensional human Marcuse describes. In Romero's *Night of the Living* Dead and *Dawn of the Dead*, zombies embody a form of one-dimensionality in which the individual is reduced to being a mere consumer driven by instinctual hunger for human flesh. Their hunger originates as an unrelenting force of desire to consume. This is first touched upon in *Dawn of the Dead* and later on in *Day of the Dead*. When discussing the epidemic in *Dawn,* the doctor on the television establishes the primary need of the creatures. "They kill for one reason; they kill for food. They eat their victims. That's what keeps them going" (*Dawn* 0:04:39). The zombies are not shown to be able to ignore this primary desire. In *Day of the Dead*, doctor Logan is experimenting on the zombies and further illustrates the one-dimensionality of the creatures as he is sharing his findings with his colleague. "It wants me, it wants food, but it has no stomach. It can take no nourishment from what it ingests. It's working on instinct. A deep-

docked primordial instinct" (*Day* 0:23:20) . Romero's zombies are mindless, perpetual consumers, driven solely by the instinct to satisfy their basic needs. However, throughout the series Romero decides to develop the zombie motif.

Where *Night of the Living Dead* primarily depicts this notion of a gluttonous devourer, *Dawn of the Dead* furthers their development through the usage of a new location. The majority of *Dawn* is set in an abandoned shopping mall which draws in both humans and ghouls. When asked about this location, Romero stated: "This mall had just opened outside Pittsburgh and it just seemed like a temple to consumerism. We were among the first people to notice that" (Romero 2005). The dead mirror mankind's relentless pursuit of material goods and pleasures in capitalist society. The pilot character, Stephen, in *Dawn* remarks on this when asked why the zombies come to the mall. "Some kind of instinct. Memory of what they used to do. This was an important place in their lives" (*Dawn* 35:01). Romero establishes that beyond their newfound innate desire to consume humans, the zombies also retain a certain level of humanity or human consciousness. However, in their state of perpetual consumption, the ghouls seemingly lose all sense of individuality, becoming indistinguishable from one another. This loss of individuality reflects the notion of one-dimensionality that Marcuse poses in his book, in which the individual is stripped of their unique identity and reduced to a simple cog in the machinery of capitalism. Romero contrasts this during several scenes in his movies, where the zombies are dressed in unconventional and nonconforming outfits, such as clowns, religious practitioners or punks. These outfits are satirical, as they represent the illusion of two-dimensional culture as described by Marcuse. "This liquidation of two-dimensional culture takes place not through the denial and rejection of the 'cultural values,' but through their wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their reproduction and display on a massive scale." (Marcuse 60). Romero takes these traditionally three-dimensional humans and reduces them to the one-dimensional consumer that is the

undead. The zombies exist in a constant state of false consciousness, wherein they are unaware of the forces that govern their lives. *Day of the Dead* and *Land of the Dead* further illustrate this. In *Day*, Doctor Logan is attempting to domesticate the zombies, stating: "Knowing what they are, we can begin to approach them properly, condition them, control them. We've got to do this Sarah, it's our only hope" (*Day* 0:25:44). Here, doctor Logan places himself above the mindless zombies and seeks to control them, much like the dominant order that Marcuse mentions. Tony Williams captures this desire when discussing Day, stating: "He (Logan) aims at a more developed totalitarian form of control where zombies may be more compliant and obey orders better than subjugated humans. Despite the danger and uncertainty, Logan believes zombies can be conditioned to behave. His ideal colonized zombie will thus eventually become 'civilized' and 'domesticated the way we want it to be'" (Williams 141). This concept of domestication mirrors the situation of the human settlement in *Land of the Dead*. There, the city is ruled by the elitist upper-class and people dream of obtaining enough wealth to move into Fiddler's Green, unaware of the fact that this will never happen. Kaufman is the dominant order in *Land* as he perpetuates the concept of ownership. He keeps the lower-class inhabitant of Fiddler's Green under control using the threat of the outside world as a contrast to the safety of his city. His claim to exclusivity rests on the concept that "Space is very limited" (*Land* 0:34:01), which he argues for when confronted by the character of Cholo, who is trying to break free from his one-dimensional life. Cholo's response: "You mean restricted, don't you" (*Land* 0:34:03), shows that although this human character is aware of the dominant order that Kaufman represents, he is also not able to break free from this enforced conformity within Fiddler's Green. Similar to these human inhabitants, the zombies are also unaware of their own exploitation and oppression throughout the films, unable to recognize the system of power that makes them servants of the established order. These zombies are not aware of the boundaries that confine them; their motivations are

not governed by a system of self-reflection. Romero's zombie embodies a newly established social standard within society that places them at the bottom. His depiction of the zombie apocalypse serves as a metaphor for the dehumanizing effects of capitalism that Marcuse defines as the suppression of the individual by the advanced industrial society. Although not directly, Romero makes a conscious decision in his depiction of these new subset of humanity. "Zombies are the real lower-class citizens of the monster world and that's why I like them" (Romero 1993). He opts to have his ghouls represent the American working class, thereby turning both the zombie outbreak, as well as the following collapse of American civilization, into a symbol of the inherent instability and unsustainability of capitalist systems, in which the endless pursuit of wealth leads to both social and environmental degradation.

The Development of Romero's Zombie Motif

Romero continues to hint at an underlying development of these creatures within his films. "They used to be us. They're learning to be us again" (*Land* 0:03:20). The character of Riley notes how the zombies are slowly starting to resemble their living counterparts throughout the films. This is similar to the previously mentioned hypothesis, first coined by Peter, in *Dawn of the Dead* and later further elaborated on by doctor Logan in *Day of the Dead.* "You see Sarah, they are us. They are extensions of us. They are the same animal, simply functioning less perfectly' (*Day* 0:49:15). Logan refers to the zombie he is experimenting on, known simply as Bub. Throughout the film, Bub is shown to adhere to Romero's preestablished concept of the zombie, driven by instinctual urges and devoid of consciousness or agency. He is literally chained down and subjected to the experiments and control of the dominant doctor Logan. However, as the story continues, this particular zombie begins to display a certain level of intelligence. He retains some form of military discipline and can be instructed to perform tasks. Although Romero hints at the cognitive developments of the zombies throughout the films, Bub cannot be considered to possess any autonomy in

Day of the Dead, as Williams states: “Bub’s progress involves the basic stimulus-response training shown in the case of Pavlov’s dog and animals trained to perform tricks” (Williams 142). His actions near the end of the film are ultimately determined by external forces rather than his own agency. However, Logan’s experiments on Bub can be seen as representing the dynamics of power and control between government and civilians as described by Marcuse. Logan punishes wrong behavior from Bub whilst rewarding positive behaviour in order to achieve civility: “It’s the beginning, yes, the bare beginning of social behavior. Of civilized behavior. It’s civil behavior that distinguishes us from the lower form. It’s what enables us to communicate. To go about things in an orderly fashion without attacking each other like beasts in the wild. Civility must be rewarded captain. If it isn’t rewarded, then there is no use for it. There is just no use for it at all” (*Day* 0:56:58).

In these later films, Romero’s zombies have taken on the social role that had previously been occupied by the American working class, which perpetuates on the concept that false consciousness present in one-dimensionality as described in Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*. However, Romero’s zombies are seen to have some agency to overthrow the dominant order. This interpretation of the mindless zombie horde as a metaphor for the American working class offers new interpretations of the later *Living Dead* films within Romero’s portfolio. In the resolution stage of the plot of *Land of the Dead*, the zombie horde manages to invade Fiddler’s Green in response to human oppression, portraying the zombies as more than simply mindless creatures. Through the zombie character, credited as Big Daddy, the zombie horde regains some form agency. He possesses a degree of leadership not before depicted in Romero’s zombie motif. The catalyst for Big Daddy’s transformation occurs when he witnesses the death of another zombie at the hands of a human, symbolizing the oppression of the dominant order. This traumatic event awakens a newfound awareness, followed by a sense of purpose. Unlike his surrounding zombies, who still perpetually pursue

their primordial urges, Big Daddy exhibits signs of intelligence and most importantly agency. He asserts his autonomy in the face of oppression and even starts educating his fellow zombies. Marcuse identifies these individuals as existing outside the democratic process and inherently revolutionary:

> Their life is the most immediate and the most real need for ending intolerable conditions and institutions. Thus their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not. Their opposition hits the system from without and is therefore not deflected by the system; it is an elementary force which violates the rules of the game and, in doing so, reveals it as a rigged game. (260)

The character of Big Daddy presents a compelling departure from Marcuse's concept of the one-dimensional man. "This collective movement of the zombies is nothing new since it has characterized previous films. However, what makes this scene significant is the suggestion that zombie attempts at human behaviour are more enduring than temporary and that the presence of a leader may co-ordinate their clumsy efforts into something much more meaningful" (Williams 186). Big Daddy's challenge against the oppressive systems of Kaufman illustrates a refusal to be reduced to mere consumers and further assigns a certain quality of resistance to Romero's zombies against a dehumanizing world.

Although Romero's later *Living Dead* films primarily emphasize the changing role of the surviving humans in this newly established dominant order, he continues to emphasize the original aspect of individuality of his zombie motif in *Survival of the Dead* through the ideology of Patrick O'Flynn, who states: "Dying don't change a person's views. All a dead man can do is remember what he used to be and keep on trying to be the same" (*Survival* 0:04:46). The ending of that film suggests that, through Patrick and Seamus's continued fighting even after death, the zombies are an essential representation of pervasive nature of ideological conformity in Marcuse's advanced industrial society. Neither O'Flynn nor

Maldoon can break free from their imposed order, even when reduced to their primordial instincts. This is, however, contrasted by the character of Jane, Janet's twin sister, who remains capable of horse-riding even after having succumbed to the zombie infection. By juxtaposing Jane with the zombies of O'Flynn and Muldoon, Romero further illustrates the role that zombies play in demonstrating the complexities of consciousness and resistance against the dominant order. Tyson Lewis posits this to be the main message behind the *Living Dead* series, in which the adjective of 'living' eludes to a post-human, post- vital world, stating "If some have argued that zombie is a sign of total global destruction at the hand of capitalist expropriation, I suggest that the zombie is a more complex figure embodying forms of resistance as well. In this sense, if capitalism is monstrous then we must stay on the terrain of the monster in order to combat its force" (91). As a zombie, Jane is opposing both sets of ideals that the families have feuded over for generations. This opposition between human and zombie remains at the forefront of every film in the *Living Dead* series.

Similar to the character of Big Daddy, Jane poses a significant challenge to Marcuse's concept of one-dimensionality by embodying the potential for autonomy through resistance within the advanced industrial society that seeks to dominate it. In *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1985), Habermas offers an alternative perspective to Herbert Marcuse's one-dimensionality by emphasizing the potential for communicative rationality and public discourse to encourage critical thinking and democratic engagement. While Marcuse's image of the one-dimensional man posits that advanced industrial societies create a conformist, ideologically-controlled population, Habermas argues that the public sphere can serve as a space for both rational and critical debate and subsequent social transformation. He proposes that through communicative action, individuals can reach mutual understanding and challenge dominant power structures, stating: "It describes structures of action and structures of mutual understanding that are found in the intuitive knowledge of competent members of

modern societies" (383). Habermas provides a more optimistic view compared to Marcuse. He envisions that despite the increasingly-influential pressure of modern capitalism, space for genuine dialogue and resistance remain. This in turn allows for the possibility of overcoming the one-dimensionality Marcuse describes. Through communicative action, Habermas envisions a society where rational discussion and collective will-formation can lead to meaningful societal change, counteracting the repressive forces highlighted by Marcuse. This emphasis on rational and critical debate that is a prerequisite for communicative action is however directly contradicted in the *Living Dead* series through the zombie motif as a non-communicative collective.

This gradual development of the zombie motif throughout the series, according to Lewis, suggests that Romero's zombie is more than just a one-dimensional man, but rather a radical revolution of the exploited and repressed: "This is a politics that lacks an articulate logos and can only be heard in the monstrous groans of the zombie Big Daddy who is not so much a ghostly shell of human society as the infantile birth of a new post-vital potentiality" (99). In the final moments of *Land of the Dead* and throughout *Survival of the Dead*, Romero elevates the post-human nature of his zombies as they are juxtaposed with the humans that fail to adapt to the changes in the dominating order that Marcuse hinted at: "But the chance is that, in this period, the historical extremes may meet again: the most advanced consciousness of humanity, and its most exploited force" (261). *Survival*, in title alone, suggests a post-vital society of zombies as the new established order with Jane's evolution to no longer require human flesh hinting at an autonomy previously tied to the human condition. This revolution of the zombie as the new norm, contrasted by the destruction of human society on the island presents a conclusion to the developing, opposed relationship between Romero's zombies and humans whose origin can be traced back to as early as *Night of the Living Dead*.

By analyzing each film separately, the following chapters address the extent to which each installment in the *Living Dead* series contributes to a comprehensive understanding of Romero's evolving portrayal of zombies. This structured analysis explains how each film builds upon its predecessors, revealing a progressive deepening of the thematic and symbolic complexity of the zombie motif. This not only highlights Romero's continued critique of societal changes in America but additionally his agreement with Marcuse's counter cultural revolution, through his work underlining the continued development of the zombie as a symbol of revolution and adaptation against the backdrop of human failure to evolve, as previously indicated through the graph depicting the Inverse relationship between Zombies and Humans.

2. Societal Conflict of Power, Race and Class in *Night of the Living Dead*

This chapter analyzes how Romero's depiction of societal collapse in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) aligns with William Domhoff's analysis of American class dynamics, revealing the deep-seated inequalities that are present in times of crisis. Through the lens of power, class, and race, the film offers a broader commentary on the socio-economic landscape of late 1960s America, criticizing the entrenched prejudices and systemic injustices that perpetuate violence and oppression even at the time of increasing human rights protests. The film's depiction of the undead, whose humanity is constantly questioned, serves as a mirror to the societal panic, mistrust, and violence among the living, offering a starting point for the development of the zombie as a multifaceted symbol of societal critique. Through Ben's character, Romero underscores the struggles and virtues of the Civil Rights movement, drawing parallels to the disproportionate impact of the Vietnam War on African Americans in the U.S. Ben's tragic fate at the hands of a white militia vividly mirrors the brutal images from the civil rights riots, emphasizing the systemic racism and class struggle prevalent in 1960s America.

In *Night of the Living Dead*, the zombies are, in essence, representations of both contemporary American-societal downfall and collective fear of the unknown. Their mindlessness and relentless pursuit of human destruction symbolize the dehumanizing effects of societal breakdowns based on social class, similar to those imposed on African Americans that resulted in the civil unrest and racial tensions prevalent at the time in the United States of America during the 1960s. However, through transvaluing the zombie, Romero elevates them from mere monsters to profound symbols of contemporary societal fears of social inequality and critiques on the mistreatment of marginalized citizens. From the initial depictions within the film, the degree of humanity which the zombie possesses is often brought into question. The voice on the radio is inconsistent regarding the nature of the undead: they are "Ordinary

looking, appearing to be in some sort of trance" (*Night* 32:45), but soon this is contradicted as they are described as "Misshapen monsters" (*Night* 33:15), that and "The murderers are eating the flesh of the victims" (*Night* 40:15). Paffenroth argues that the true nature of the zombie lies within this confusion: "Ben is misidentified as a zombie in the bleak and ironic ending, while at the beginning, Barbara misidentifies the first zombie as a living person. In the film that created the modern zombie myth, confusion as to who is a zombie and who isn't is an ever-present problem, and a defining characteristic of zombies (and humans)" (20). The zombie can only be regarded as a symbol when contrasted by the humans of the story. The human characters' reactions of panic, violence, and ultimately, mistrust, highlight a society on edge, struggling with both internal and external conflicts. This societal panic is further emphasized throughout the *Living Dead* series' depiction of public media, such as television and radio. These supposed providers of information misinform the American population about the best course of action to undertake, with lethal consequences. This becomes the main topic of *Diary of the Dead,* as previously mentioned. The survivors are not only responding to the external threat, in this case the zombie outbreak, but each character seems more obsessed with their internal struggles regarding each other, such as Harry Cooper's reluctance to collaborate with Ben and move out of the basements.

Ben's character embodies many of the struggles, virtues, and tragic outcomes faced by key figures in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X; both of whom openly spoke out against African American involvement in the Vietnam War during the presidencies of Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon. His depiction with the film reflects the struggles and injustices faced by the African-American community during that time period, highlighting the systemic class issues that dominated the socio-economic landscape of the U.S.

Williams argues that:

> Ben's decision to take control (although initially from an hysterical white female), resembles the Vietnam experience of working-class, ethnic groups bearing an over proportionate share of the conflict going on at the time of film's production and release. Ben is certainly not working class but appears to be a black man who has reached the lower middle-class ladder of economic success made possible after the gains of the 1960s Civil Right movement (26).

Here, Williams highlights the disproportionate racial disparity in the American military during the initial draft for the Vietnam War due to systematic inequality. "College students were eligible for deferments from the draft; because fewer African Americans than whites were students, a disproportionate number of them were drafted. Sixteen percent of draftees during the war were African American, although African Americans represented only 12 percent of the total U.S. population" (Mack-Shelton 434). Mack-Shelton continues to note that the percentage of African American fatalities during the Vietnam War was proportionately higher than that of any other ethnic background due to African American soldiers volunteering for dangerous missions as a way to advance both in the military, as well as financially and socially. The Vietnam War coincided with the Civil Rights Movement, intensifying the struggle for racial equality. Many African American leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., criticized the war, arguing that it diverted attention and resources from domestic issues such as poverty and racial injustice. King's speech, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence" (1967), provides evidence for this stance: "We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem" (King 1967). He continues to reiterate that African Americans were sent to uphold a system that treated them as lesser, thereby further underlining the contemporary racial tensions that were present throughout American society at the time. Although the zombies in *Night* are

shown to consist of only white people, by presenting them as the opposition to the black protagonist, Ben, who faces the threat not only from the zombies but also from the inherent racism and mistrust from the other human survivors, who are white. It underscores the theme of socio-political injustice by inverting racial expectations and highlighting systemic issues. The white zombies symbolize the pervasive and destructive nature of racism and social decay. Ben's subsequent struggle against both them and the human survivors reveals the persistent racial tensions and injustices in society. This juxtaposition emphasizes that socio-political injustice isn't confined to overt racism but is embedded within societal structures.

Fig. 2. Still from Romero, *Night of the Living Dead (1:34:24)*

Additionally, the murder of Ben, the black protagonist, at the hands of a white militia grimly echoes the new coverage of police brutality against African Americans during the Civil Rights movement in the south of America at the time. The ending of Romero's first *Living Dead* film starkly underscores racial tensions, suggesting that the real horror lies within societal prejudices and divisions. The shots during the concluding moments of the film show

the militia unceremoniously dragging Ben's corpse to be burned with zombies. This coldhearted treatment is reminiscent of the brutal images from civil rights riots, in which African Americans were often depicted as victims of violent police action and mob aggression. This treatment is visualized within *Night* through the zombie horde that is shown to only consist of white zombies. The media played a crucial role in the civil rights movement by bringing the brutal reality of racial violence into the public eye. Similarly, *Night of the Living Dead* utilizes the medium of film to highlight these issues. The stark, grainy black-and-white footage of the film echoes the newsreels and photographs of the 1960s, creating a direct visual and emotional link to the contemporary struggle for civil rights. For audiences in the 1960s, the final scenes of the film would have resonated deeply, evoking the ongoing racial strife. The shock of Ben's death, after having survived the zombies, only to be killed by those meant to restore order, mirrors the betrayal felt by African Americans who faced violence from the very authorities meant to protect them.

Fig. 3. Picture #40, taken on 3 Aug. 1964

The portrayal of racial and class struggle in *Night* aligns with the themes explored in William Domhoff's *Who Rules America?* (2006), which examines the power structures and class dynamics in American society. Domhoff analyses class awareness within capitalist America from a top-down perspective, revealing the deep-seated inequalities in social class that defined the American social and economic order of the 1960s. He argues that "the fact the upper-class is based in the ownership and control of profit-producing investments in stocks, bonds, and real estate shows that it is a capitalist class as well as an upper class" (75). This description underlines the established American upper-class's interwoven relationship with corporate ownership and material wealth. In *Night of the Living Dead*, the grim depiction of Ben's struggle for survival amidst the backdrop of societal collapse mirrors Domhoff's analysis of entrenched class structure, emphasizing how deep-rooted social inequalities manifest themselves during moments of crisis. The film's ending, with Ben's unwarranted death at the hands of the militia, underlines the systemic violence and racial injustice prevalent in 1960s American society, thereby paralleling Domhoff's critique of a capitalist upper class maintaining power through exclusion and control.

The struggle for survival in the *Living Dead* series can be seen as a microcosm of these broader American societal dynamic. Ben, as a representation of the marginalized working class, takes charge and demonstrates physical prowess and leadership skills suited for the tumultuous situation that the survivors find themselves in. However, his authority is constantly being challenged by Harry Cooper, a white middle-class man, whose resistance to Ben symbolizes the societal reluctance of the higher-class authority to accept the competence and equality of marginalized, lower-class individuals. This happens throughout their interactions while together in the house as they argue where to make their stand. Cooper refuses to accept Ben's more aggressive plan to which Ben responds; "You can be the boss down there. I'm boss up here" (*Night* 47:41). This tension reflects the broader societal conflict

between the working class and the elite, as discussed by Domhoff. As a traditional white, middle-class American, Cooper considers himself the authority figure within the house, unwilling to even consider the plans of the black, working-class Ben: “With the exception of those few who join the liberal-labor coalition or a leftist movement, members of the upper class also have a conservative outlook on issues that relate to the well-being of the corporate community as a whole” (Domhoff 75). Harry Cooper signifies this conservative mentality of the established order within America at the time. He embodies the entrenched prejudices and resistance to change that characterize the upper class's attitude towards the marginalized. Although middle-class himself, within the context of the house, he considers himself superior to the character of Ben as he decides to shut both himself as well as his family away in the cellar, away from the danger of societal collapse. His antagonism towards Ben is not just personal but symbolic of the broader societal reluctance to relinquish power and accept equality. The inevitable tragic fate of the Cooper family at the hands of their daughter Karen further underscores the self-destructive nature of the obstinate established middle-to-upper class of America. “They cannot rely entirely on economic and social power to ensure that they prevail in any overt class conflict that does arise” (Williams 75). Harry Cooper’s unwillingness to submit to the authority of Ben and his reluctance to adapt to the situation eventually prove fatal for both himself and his family, leaving them as part of the mindless

zombies that Williams notes “are all white. This is shown when Cooper is consumed after his death by his daughter.

Fig. 4. Still from Romero, *Night of the Living Dead (1:24:29)*

It will not be until *Dawn of the Dead* and *Day of the Dead* that human antagonists will ironically represent the idyllic vision of a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society that 1960s radicals promoted” (26).

This resonance with the Civil Rights Movement and the ending of the film depicts Romero’s work as a world where human irrationality and bigotry are ultimately more destructive to society than the living dead. In this sense, Romero’s zombies transcend from their preexisting allegorical purpose as a representation of a single social issue. They become adaptive symbols of the multifaceted and pervasive cultural fears and anxieties of their time. This shift from metaphor to symbol allows the zombies to encapsulate a broader spectrum of societal concerns, from racial inequality to the loss of individuality and humanity. Ben's death at the hands of other humans, despite his efforts to singlehandedly lead and protect, in turn

reflects the systemic injustices that perpetuate violence and oppression against marginalized groups, aligning with Domhoff's analysis of power and class dynamics. Through this lens, Romero's depiction of the events of *Night of the Living Dead* can be analyzed to not only critique racial tensions but also offer a broader commentary on the socio-economic inequalities that defined 1960s American society, revealing the prejudiced and self-destructive interplay of power, class and race by contrasting the white militia to the zombies as the inevitable, destructive outcome for socially-stagnant American society.

3. Self-Destructive Consumerism in *Dawn of the Dead*

Dawn of the Dead (1978) shifts its focus of American-societal concern from racial tensions towards consumerism, using the iconic shopping mall as a symbolic microcosm of American society. The zombies' repetitive and instinctual return to the shopping mall where they wander aimlessly through its corridors, serves as a biting satire of American consumer culture. Through their mindless behaviour, Romero critiques the insatiable pursuit of material goods, reflecting the societal development towards capitalist consumerism prevalent in the 1970s America. In a post-WW2 America, the blue-collar working class had developed a previously non-marketed purchasing power that was quickly tapped into by marketers. As Cohen describes:

> Class in some form had already mattered to marketers earlier in the century, but their continued attentiveness to class segmentation lends support to arguments that although the rhetoric of the Consumers' Republic was broadly inclusionary, people's lives continued to show enough class difference over the postwar era to convince marketers that it was profitable to segment by social class. (322)

By the 1970s, American populace had become a consumer for products that were marketed to their personal social class and income. "Consumer culture, the compensation offered by capitalists and liberals who believed in liberation offered in place of meaningful work and family life, further eroded psychological integrity. This left individuals with a sense of empty yearning that was impossible to fulfill" (Horowitz 214). Marketers quickly seized the opportunity to expand their demographics in order to increase sales. "In doing so, however, they contributed to framing social class in the postwar period increasingly as a set of lifestyle preferences rather than an economic and power relationship" (322). No longer were people tied to their social position by the dominant upper-class as described by Domhoff, but rather, they were limited in social mobility by their purchasing power. This concept of segmentation

in marketing quickly evolved to not only include social class, but also age, gender, race and ethnicity. It was not long before there was a market for every American.

Romero's use of the shopping mall setting emphasizes this theme of consumerism that is present throughout *Dawn of the Dead*. The location itself becomes both a safe haven and, alternatively, a trap for the human survivors. The film portrays the mall as a place of security and abundance, but this illusion quickly collapses as the survivors become trapped by their own materialistic desires. This aligns with Erich Fromm's dichotomy of 'having' versus "being" as described in *To Have or to Be?* (2009), in which he argues that late-twentieth century American society's obsession with possession over genuine human experience leads to a shallow, unfulfilled existence: "Consuming has ambiguous qualities: It relieves anxiety, because what one has cannot be taken away; but it also requires one to consume ever more, because previous consumption soon loses its satisfactory character. Modern consumers may identify themselves by the formula: I am = what I have and what I consume" (23). The four protagonists originally land on the mall for supplies and a brief respite, but after suddenly gaining wealth, decide to sustain themselves with the supplies that the mall possesses. "For the isolated foursome, consumables camouflage their plight, and they gradually accumulate possessions." (Bailey 101). In their accumulation of materialistic possessions, the four fall victim to Fromm's idea of having rather than being, leaving them unable to satisfy their yearning to consume.

After having cleared the mall of zombies, the survivors initially treat it as a fortress, a place of safety and resources, maintained by excessive firepower. However, after establishing the basic survival requirements, the mall soon transforms into a symbol of their materialistic desires. This is emphasized as the characters run around the mall after having exterminated all the remaining zombies within their newly secured sanctuary. Cheerful music plays as the survivors enjoy their time at the mall with various common activities. Romero presents a

change in tone that satirically represents daily consumerist life. This is further emphasized when the characters start gathering money, even though the currency has lost its value in the societal collapse. The *mise-en-scene*, filled with near-endless consumer goods, becomes a source of needless consumerism for the survivors, mirroring the zombies' mindless wandering and highlighting how even in the face of existential threats, the allure of consumer culture remains potent and self-destructive.

The self-destructive allure of consumerism is particularly telling during Francine's makeup scene. As she applies her newly-acquired makeup in front of a mirror with a revolver by her side, the absurdity of her actions becomes significant. The juxtaposition of the gun, a tool for survival and self-preservation, and the makeup, an emblem of vanity, underscores the conflict between genuine survival needs and superficial desires. Her facial expression, in combination with the highlighted features of her make-up, emulates that of the zombies that are presented within the story. Her perpetual gaze and gaunt, open mouth visually mirror those of the consumerist creature that she is threatening to become through her actions within the narrative.

Fig. 5. Romero, *Dawn (52:30)*

Fig. 6. Romero, *Dead (1:58:55)*

The camera serves as a mirror in which Francine is allowed to reflect on her situation. For a moment, the scene is underscored with a waltz similar to the scenes where the zombies are roaming the mall, which combined with Francine's carefree application of makeup suggests a certain detachment from the severity of the situation. This moment reveals how the survivors, despite their dire circumstances, are drawn to the comforts and distractions of consumerism. Francine's actions symbolize a retreat into familiar, pre-apocalyptic behaviors mirroring the habits of the zombies, seeking solace in routines of beauty and self-presentation even when surrounded by death and danger. This moment marks a possible turning point for Francine in which she becomes enamored by consumer culture. As she finishes her routine, she holds the revolver lightly as she sings to herself in the mirror.

The gun in this scene is not merely a survival tool; it symbolizes the constantly looming threat and the reality of their situation. Yet, its presence has become almost secondary to Francine's focus on her appearance. This distraction indicates a dangerous disconnection from their perilous reality, illustrating how consumerism can dull the survival instinct and promote a false sense of security and purpose. The scene is interrupted by a pre-recorded voice announcing a sale, stating; "Attention all shoppers. If you have a sweet tooth, we have a special treat for you. If your purchases in the next half hour amount to five dollars or more, we'll give you a bag of hard candies free! To take home to the kiddies, or enjoy yourself. So, hurry and do your shopping" (*Dawn* 1:59:00-1:59:28). In an empty fortress, this announcement serves as a voice from the dead, reminding the consumers to continue purchasing goods in exchange for fleeting, personal enjoyment. Having almost completely surrendered herself to the allure of the shopping mall, Francine quickly snaps out of it, as in the following scene, she is seen without her makeup, questioning; "What have we done to ourselves" (*Dawn* 2:01:14), which Williams comments on, stating: "Human beings may survive, die or join a growing army of zombies depending upon the degree of self-realisation

contained withing their very personalities and how they mobilise to prevent their capitulation to what appears to be a life-threatening deterministic situation" (87). As a resulting factor of her comment, the following scene shows Francine finally learning how to operate the helicopter, thereby placing her desire for survival higher than her possessive desires for the mall.

As a reflection of the humans within the story, the zombies in *Dawn of the Dead* are then not just an metaphor for mindless consumers, but they have become symbols of the emptiness and lack of agency from a life focused on possessiveness rather than existence. This is further emphasized by the zombification of two of the protagonist in this film. Both the characters of Roger and Stephen ultimately succumb to the consumerist lifestyle that the shopping mall brings them and end up being transformed into zombies, thereby losing themselves to Fromm's condition of having. The character of Francine is the first to iterate the risks of dependency: "You're hypnotized by this place, all of you. It's so bright and neatly wrapped, you don't see that it's a prison too" (*Dawn* 1:01:18). Paffenroth addresses Roger's unrelenting, destructive desires, by stating: "Early in the film, Roger is killed because he becomes overcome with lust – both for the objects within the mall, and with bloodlust for killing zombies" (21). The feeling of ownership is similarly what proves fatal for the character of Stephen. His decision to fight the raiders comes from a feeling of ownership and consumerism that draws distinct parallels to the instinctual behavior of possession that was previously attributed to the relentless undead. It ultimately leads him away from the group and results in his eventual death.

Francine and Peter manage to let go of their material desires symbolized by physically leaving the shopping mall. Peter's decision to leave the mall with Francine, abandoning his initial thought of suicide, represents a pivotal moment in *Dawn of the Dead* that firmly ties into the film's critique of consumerism. The turning point comes when Peter witnesses

Francine's determination to escape. Francine represents a stark contrast to the allure of the mall's consumer paradise. Her focus on leaving and her pregnancy symbolize hope, future, and continuity of life beyond the materialistic entrapment of the mall. Francine's resolve shakes Peter out of his despondency, reminding him of the value of life and the importance of human connections over material possessions. Romero maintains the symbolic nature of the zombie as being in direct contrast to the human survivors surrounding them in each film. The tragic fates of Roger and Stephen emphasize the thin line that separates the humans from the zombies within the narrative, illustrating that humans who lower themselves to the symbolic zombie are ultimately self-destructive. This contrasting nature becomes more evident when addressing inter-human conflict in the subsequent films.

As mentioned in Chapter one, the very concept of the zombie in Western culture is influenced by Haitian folklore. In this film, Peter is confronted with the old priest in the tenant building that the police raid. The tenants of the building, home to a variety of disenfranchised, non-white residents, are being evicted whilst the police exercises excessive force. This shows that even before the outbreak, the dominant society was subjugating the marginalized groups with militaristic violence as was discussed in Chapter two. Later in the film, Peter mentions his grandfather when asked what the zombies were, stating; “Something my grandaddy used to tell us. You know Makumbo, Voodoo, my grandad was a priest in Trinidad. He used to tell us; When there is no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth.” (*Dawn* 1:35:32). Through a post-colonial lens, this zombie outbreak might be a punishment on the previously dominant order from the subaltern of colonial history. This becomes even more prevalent with the character of Big Daddy in *Land of the Dead* (2005) and will be addressed using Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1994) in Chapter five.

4. Challenging Dehumanization in *Day of the Dead*

In *Day of the Dead* (1985), Romero continues to emphasize the dehumanizing effects of military dominance that have previously been developed in *Night* and *Dawn*. In addition, he elaborates on the symbolism through the introduction of scientific hubris through the lens of a post-apocalyptic world, allowing for an increasing polysemic interpretation of the zombie as a symbol . The human survivors in the story are categorized into three ethically-opposed groups: the military, led by Captain Rhodes; the scientists, led by Dr. Logan; and the civilians, including Bill, John and ultimately, Sarah. As the protagonist, Sarah, is confronted by the grim realities of the fractured society where she attempts coexistence. Through this inevitably self-destructive cohabitation, Romero offers a firm critique of the Military-Industrial Complex, a term popularized by former President Dwight D. Eisenhower in his 1961 farewell address, in which he warned against the growing power of the union of American military- and industrial interests: “In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist” (Eisenhower). Released twenty-four years after this address during Ronald Reagan’s presidency, Romero's film reflects the rapidly heightening militarization and technological advancements in the U.S. during the 1980s, as well as the socio-political tensions of the Cold War era. Under the Reagan administration, the United States “embarked upon a massive rearmament program that would assure the U.S. military superiority vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in all areas from conventional weapons to strategic nuclear capabilities” (Kan 46). This is mirrored in both Captain Rhodes and Dr. Logan’s approach to reestablishing society in relation to the zombies around them.

Day of the Dead predominantly takes place in an underground bunker where military personnel and scientists are securely hidden away from the outside dangers, superficially

working together to find a solution to the zombie epidemic. However, the stern division and escalating conflict between these groups crucially illustrate the dangers of Eisenhower's Military-Industrial Complex. The military exemplifies authoritarian control, prioritizing power and order over human life and ethical considerations. Captain Rhodes's dehumanizing, totalitarian approach to leadership is evident in his treatment of both the scientists and his own soldiers; viewing them as equally expendable resources rather than individuals. This approach to military dominance and its inherent disregard for human life is present throughout both *Night* and *Dawn*. This viewpoint mirrors Eisenhower's fears that a powerful military-industrial sector could lead to a society where people are valued only for their utility to the system and discarded for their lack thereof. It is also indicative of the time in which the movie was filmed, during which the president pleaded for a militarization of America during the Cold War: "Reagan sought to build up American military power. Although he slashed government spending across the board, Reagan increased defense expenditures substantially." (Fischer 20). This came at the cost of arms control negotiations at the time. Romero's criticism is not only directed at the blatant militarization and scientific overreach that was occurring in America but also at the underlying societal conditions that allow such a complex to flourish. The bunker, an isolated microcosm, reflects the broader societal trends of America during the Reagan administration, where increased defense spending and technological optimism often overshadowed social and ethical considerations. As Williams explains: "The Reagan era certainly represented the return to life of supposedly dead values and policies with a vengeance. Furthermore, the military buildup and escalation of the Cold War threatened to plunge the world into a situation little better than that revealed in Day of the Dead" (136). Here Williams draws a concrete comparison between American military tension and the threat within the bunker of *Day*. The emphasis here lies on the internal conflict within the bunker rather than the external threat of the zombie horde, as tensions within the human communities

ultimately lead to the mutual destruction of the base. This further underscores the underlying theme of the inverse relationship between humans and zombies in which the humans continually take up the role of the destructive monster rather than the zombie, as embodied in this film by Bub.

Logan's work, although intrinsically driven by a desperate need to find solutions for this global outbreak, crosses ethical boundaries, reducing both the zombies and humans to mere subjects in a cruel experiment. The dehumanization here is twofold: the zombies are stripped of any of their remaining ties to humanity and the soldiers, witnessing Logan's disregard for ethical norms, become increasingly detached and desensitized. Dr. Logan's experiments on Bub reveal an arguably-honest attempt to bridge the gap between humans and zombies as species, suggesting a semblance of hope for reconciliation. Logan, despite his unorthodox and morally ambiguous methods, recognizes the potential for understanding and coexistence. His treatment of Bub as more than just a test subject suggests a more humane approach to the undead by challenging the conventional views of zombies as mere threats. However, Logan's attempt to condition Bub reflect a twisted form of scientific optimism, yet it also underlines the profound ethical and moral compromises that are made in the name of progress, both military and scientific. This prioritization of technological and military advancements over humanistic concerns echoes Eisenhower's critique on the Military-Industrial Complex. Romero's inclusion of these themes, translated into a pop-cultural format, signals a continued relevance of the Military-Industrial Complex within the structure of American Society.

The conflict between Rhodes and Logan reaches a climax during when Rhodes discovers Logan's unethical methods and responds with lethal force, which Williams posits is a key element present throughout the series, namely; "the real threat to survival being the class-based verbal savagery different characters exhibit towards each other rather than the

zombies outside" (131). This confrontation symbolizes the broader clash between military might and scientific ambition, both of which, in Romero's view, lead to dehumanization and moral regression. Under Rhodes' command, the soldiers experience a growing desensitization to violence and a loss of any moral compass, treating their scientific colleagues with contempt and the zombies with sadistic cruelty. This brutality culminates in the breakdown their established social order, resulting a chaotic and violent end of the dominant order where the boundaries between human and monster blur once more. Through the factions' struggles and the ultimate disintegration of their fragile society, Romero critiques the dehumanizing impact of a system that prioritizes military and industrial interests over human values, reflecting the socio-political anxieties of the Reagan era of "peace through strength" (Fischer 51) and Eisenhower's prescient warnings of a Military-Industrial Complex.

The portrayal of zombies marks a direct contrast to humans as it begins to shift. As mentioned previously, the zombies start to exhibit learning capabilities and emotional responses, most notably witnessed in the character of Bub, a zombie who shows signs of memory and empathy. This evolution challenges the striking dichotomy between humans and zombies, suggesting that dehumanization can occur on both sides. Bub is shown to respond positively to music, even attempting to speak. Additionally, he demonstrates a sense of loyalty and affection towards Dr. Logan, his caretaker, whom he grieves after death. The film critiques the militaristic and scientific communities' approaches to progress, highlighting their often cold, detached methodologies that fail to acknowledge the potential for empathy and understanding.

Herbert Marcuse's *An Essay on Liberation* (1969) provides a critical framework for understanding this shift in the dominant order. Marcuse argues for the potential of the oppressed to rise against dehumanizing structures and create a society based on liberation and empathy. He states: "These political manifestations of a new sensibility indicate the depth of

the rebellion, of the rupture with the continuum of repression. They bear witness to the power of the society in shaping the whole of experience, the whole metabolism between the organism and its environment" (*Liberation* 30). He continues to state that the oppressed rebel against the established order by opting to focus more on the collective rather than the singular ego. In this context, Bub's evolution under Dr. Logan can be seen as a symbol of the oppressed slowly finding both their voice and humanity within the militaristic American system that was dominant throughout the Reagan administration as tensions between America and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Dr. Logan's approach, although severely flawed, attempts to awaken the hypothesized, latent human qualities in Bub, paralleling Marcuse's concept of liberation through recognition of another's humanity. However, the military's rigid, authoritarian approach leads to further conflict with the scientists, emphasizing the dangers of dehumanizing the marginalized, whether human or zombie. Contrasting sharply with Logan's approach is the protagonist, Sarah, who serves as a foil in her more humane and ethical stance. A trait of dissent from dominant ideology that remains most prevalent within the marginalized characters in Romero's films, such as Fran in *Dawn* and Janet in the later *Survival*. Originally part of the scientist group, but eventually joining the civilians in their escape, Sarah exhibits compassion and a desire to find a non-violent solution to the ongoing crisis. In that sense, her character development in the films allows for more defined parallels to Marcuse's concept of liberation as she only come to terms with the destructiveness of individual expression of both the military and her fellow scientists. Her desires and actions mirror Bub's potential for empathy and understanding, but places that innate desire within the human survivors. Her relationship with Bub is less direct than Dr. Logan, but equally important; she embodies the possibility of seeing zombies as beings capable of change and worthy of compassion. This indirectly supports Logan's more radical experiments through her advocacy for humane treatment.

However, Sarah's compassion and Dr. Logan's unconventional attempts to communicate with Bub stand in absolute contrast to the military's approach under the reign of Captain Rhodes, who quickly argues against the scientific method. "Formulas, equations. A lot of things that don't mean a thing" (*Day* 28:53). Rhodes is desperate to seize control of the escalating resistance withing the shelter, using any means necessary to keep his opposition in line. In doing so, Romero provides a broader critique of the ways in which the American military structures deal with perceived threats to the established order, both politically and economically.

Fig. 7. Still from Romero, *Day of the Dead (0:54:45)*

Bub's character development is then ultimately a conscious commentary on the nature of humanity and its capacity for empathy when the zombie opts to salute the captain in his final moments after having shot him, or his mournful response to the death of Dr. Logan, thereby arguing that the potential for human qualities exists even in those who seem most alien to a society; be it in the form of zombies or repressed groups within society like Sarah and John.

Aligning effortlessly with Marcuse's ideas, Romero's *Day of the Dead,* and subsequently with Romero as the Auteur, the entirety of his *Living Dead* series, is anchored in the countercultural response to the American mainstream. The portrayal of Bub and the contrasting approaches of the human characters provide a rich exploration of the potential for liberation and empathy in a dehumanized world. Bub's evolution from a mindless monster to a

being capable of emotional responses and loyalty mirrors the potential for societal change when the oppressed are recognized and humanized, foreshadowing the later *Land of the Dead* film. This shift from seeing zombies purely as threats to acknowledging their capacity for human traits aligns with Marcuse's call for a revolutionary change in how society views and treats the marginalized and further argues for the contrasting nature of the zombie as a transvalued symbol contrasting the humans within the respective narratives of Romero's works. In doing so it underscores the rapidly approaching intersection of the zombie and the human within their inverse relationship, in which the humanity of the zombie is hinted to be capable of surpassing that of the humans within the narrative. This inverse relationship reaches a turning point in the subsequent film.

5. Class Struggle in *Land of the Dead*

By *Land of the Dead* (2005), the zombies are fully established in their depiction as an oppressed underclass, as first alluded to in *Night* through the character of Peter and in *Dawn* through the marginalized tenants at the start of the film. This depiction of zombies are shown to be capable of organizing and show clear leadership. This unification of the social underclass is embodied in the zombie character of Big Daddy, as previously mentioned. As a zombie, this character's shift in agency as a response to gratuitous violence from the mercenaries of Fiddler's Green, places him in a noteworthy role as a zombie protagonist within the narrative, similar to Bub in the previous film. This development of the zombie directly comments on issues of class struggle and social inequalities present throughout the film, reflecting early twenty-first century concerns about rising social subdivision and the marginalization of the underprivileged. The human characters' exploitation and dismissal of not only their own lower-class, but more importantly, the zombies mirror contemporary real-world issues of economic disparity and social injustice.

The fortified city of Fiddler's Green, where the wealthy live in luxury under an almost feudal government lead by Paul Kaufman while the poor scavenge for survival outside its walls, starkly illustrates this divide. This concept of a protected community serves as an extrapolation of the gated communities that surged in numbers in the U.S. at the turn of the twenty-first century. Arguing to be a bastion of American values, Kaufman provides the inhabitants of his city with a means to be protected from the zombie horde in exchange for their financial exploitation and complete loss of agency. The people in power live an excessive life in the center of the city, while the working class struggles to get by on the outskirts of town. Romero actively interweaves examples of contemporary events within the narrative in order to fully illustrate the symbolic nature of Fiddler's Green as a representation of contemporary America in a post 9/11 world: "The very real sociophobia in the wake of

9/11 being seen here is a fear of an ongoing war on terror in which 'America', by which we mean the government, the military and all authority figures, is unable to protect its people or solve the problems" (Wetmore 164). This depiction of sociophobia was a conscious choice from Romero, in order to criticize the military response to the terrorist attacks by America, who stated: "We had a city protected by water being attacked. We had this scene where an armoured car goes into a village and kills all the inhabitants and then they wonder why they are upset about it" (Romero 2005). These parallels to contemporary American events present a lens of critique through which the symbolical role of the zombie is to, once more, provide a contrasting viewpoint of American societal critique.

Furthermore, understanding Romero's depiction of zombies through the lens of post-colonial theory and the concept of the subaltern adds depth to the critique. The subaltern, as discussed by theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, refers to groups that are socio-politically and geographically outside of the dominant power structure. Romero's zombies in *Land of the Dead* embody this notion as they are marginalized and voiceless in the world of humans, only gaining agency through rebellion. However, viewing the zombie as representation of the subaltern in the context of the post-colonial, with the human survivors being identified as representing the first-world, creates a new perspective through which to approach the transvalued relationship between the zombies and humans in Romero's *Living Dead* films. The zombies' initial portrayal in the film underscores their dehumanized and voiceless state. They are depicted as mindless and subservient, lacking any form of agency or means to communicate their plight. This aligns with Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot speak within the confines of dominant power structures because their voices are systematically suppressed and misrepresented: "Between the patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-

world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (102). In the context of the film, the zombies' inability to speak or assert themselves mirrors the condition of the subaltern, who are denied a platform within the dominant discourse, which here is the human population in Fiddler's Green.

When viewing the zombies as subaltern figures in a post-colonial context, it is possible to draw a parallel to the Haitian peasants under American occupation. The zombies in the film are marginalized and dehumanized by the dominant American society, living on the outskirts of the fortified city where the wealthy reside. The fireworks, which are unequivocally linked to American rule, are used to distract the zombies and symbolize the superficial distractions and ideological control employed by the ruling class to maintain their dominance, similar to how the American occupiers controlled and manipulated the Haitian population. America occupied Haiti from 1915 until their withdrawal in 1934, during which "all allusions to uplift and progress were forsaken as officials of the occupation frankly predicted that disaster would follow in the aftermath of American withdrawal" (Schmidt 207). This further ties into the connection between the zombie outbreak and its ties to the subaltern from colonial history as mentioned in Chapter three.

As the narrative of the film progresses, the character of Big Daddy is presented as a leader among the zombies horde, signaling a shift towards collective consciousness and resistance. The character is first shown to be a former petrol pump attendant, which Oloff touches upon as another possible representation of the zombie as an evolving symbol of petromodernity. Although his reading of the zombie as an essentially ecological figure does not adhere to the claims made in this chapter, Oloff prefaces this by stating: "To grasp the nature of this symbolic revolution, it is necessary to read the zombie as a figure that turns on successive revolutions in the dialectical relations between human and extra-human natures under world-capitalism" (317). This reading does allow for an interpretation of Big Daddy as

the figure that embodies the relations between human and extra-human natures within the narrative of *Land of the Dead.*

Big Daddy's leadership and the zombies' organized revolt against Fiddler's Green symbolize an awakening of the subaltern. This revolution challenges their imposed silence and invisibility, echoing Spivak's idea that the subaltern must find alternative means to resist and assert their agency outside of the dominant structures that oppress them. A pivotal scene that encapsulates the beginning of this shift is when Big Daddy and several other zombies are living on the outskirts of town when they get attacked by Dead Reckoning. The humans use fireworks, often referred to as "sky flowers" within the film, serving as a symbol of distraction and control employed by the ruling class to manage and manipulate the zombies. The primary function of the fireworks in the film is to distract the zombies, keeping them docile and preventing them from becoming a threat to the human survivors. This reflects the broader theme of how the ruling class uses superficial distractions to control and placate the masses as previously attributed to Marcuse's concept of the one-dimensional man that was also present in *Dawn of the Dead*. The shift occurs when Big Daddy begins to recognize the manipulative nature of the fireworks. His refusal to be distracted signifies a critical awakening and a rejection of the means of control used by the oppressors. His guttural scream of anger after the attack has taken place then literally signifies pivotal moment where the suppressed, voiceless other reclaims their role within the dominant society.

Fig. 8. Still from Romero, *Land of the Dead (8:30)*

The fireworks return in a later scene where the zombies attack the city, using their newfound awareness and coordination to strike back against their oppressors. This moment signifies the zombies' transformation from passive victims to active resistors as the fireworks used to distract them no longer work, symbolizing their growing awareness and refusal to be manipulated. This act of rebellion can also be seen as the subaltern's attempt to "speak" through actions when traditional means of communication are inaccessible.

This depiction of the zombie as a revolutionary resonates with Marcuse's ideas about the potential for revolutionary change through the awakening of the oppressed classes in *An Essay on Liberation* (1969): "the exemplary force, the ideological power of the external revolution, can come to fruition only if the internal structure and cohesion of the capitalist system begin to disintegrate. The chain of exploitation must break at its strongest link" (57). Romero's zombies, particularly in *Land of the Dead*, embody this concept, as they rise up against their exploiters, seeking liberation from their subjugated state. Unlike Romero's previous films, this iteration of his zombie motif shows them existing peacefully outside of

human society. It is only after the attacks from Dead Reckoning at the command of Kaufman, that the oppressed zombies rise up against their oppressor. Additionally, after having broken "the strongest link" (*Liberation* 57), the militia of zombies return to their own peaceful, empathetic lifestyle that the audience is introduced to at the start of the film.

Fig. 9. Still from Romero, *Land of the Dead (24:55)*

Romero continues to denote the sudden shift in the relationship between humans and zombies that has taken place since *Day of the Dead* through the various carnival attractions that are presented within the confines of the city walls. The scene in which the chained up zombies are accompanied by a sign saying; 'Take a picture with a zombie' illustrates the newly established relationship between the people and the ghouls. People are no longer merely surviving and are now experiencing a hedonistic lifestyle reminiscent of the mall scene in *Dawn of the Dead* where the protagonists suddenly give in to their consumerist urges and start shopping. In this newly established society, the zombie has become a normalized, yet still marginalized part of society, and in doing so, has been reduced to a subservient role.

In *Land*, this relationship between living and undead is critiqued in a similar manner to *Day*, through the actions of his protagonists. Riley, having once been part of the oppressive

regime as the leader of Dead Reckoning, has developed a resentment for the system that now limits his freedom that he argues as an integral part of human interactions, saying; “Me too, but every place is the same. Places with people, I’m going to find a place where there’s no people; North, Canada” (*Land* 30:09). The character seeks to withdraw from society rather than fight the corrupt system, similar to Cooper in *Night of the Living Dead*. Romero draws a comparison between the characters of Riley and Big Daddy near the end of the film in which both independently, having overthrown the established order of Fiddler’s Green, are seen leaving the city behind in favor of finding their own freedom. In that moment, Riley’s character signifies a turning point in the narrative, where the disillusionment with the established order and the recognition of the zombies' established humanity and agency suggest a transvaluation of societal values. In this transvaluation, the zombies begin to surpass their former roles as monsters, becoming collectively a symbol of revolutionary potential and the possibility of a more equitable society as the humans within Romero’s narrative continue to express regressive and self-destructive tendencies. This collective potential bears fruit when the zombie horde overcomes their reluctance to cross water. This development marks the turning point for the relationship between the human survivors of Fiddler’s Green and the zombies, as the physical barrier between the two has been crossed. In contrast to *Night* and

Dawn, the zombies of *Land* exhibit greater intelligence and organization, unlike the mindless, instinct-driven zombies of the previous films.

Fig. 10. Still from Romero, *Land of the Dead (59:16)*

By the end of the film, the parallel journeys of Big Daddy and Riley, the human protagonist who also rejects the oppressive regime of Fiddler's Green, underscore a shared quest for liberation from tyranny. Riley's decision to leave the city and seek a place with no people reflects a desire for a new social order where individuals are not subjugated by oppressive structures. Similarly, Big Daddy's leadership and the zombies' decision to return to a peaceful existence after overthrowing their oppressors highlight their aspiration for autonomy and respect. It marks a passing point on the inverse relationship between humans and zombies in which the zombies have now surpassed the inhabitants of Fiddler's Green. This continues to increase as the narrative chronologically continues in *Survival*.

6. From Societal Regression to Post-Humanism in *Survival of the Dead*

Survival of the Dead (2009) further blurs the lines between humans and zombies, depicting zombies as part of integrated community dynamics and exploring ethical questions about life, death, and coexistence. The film focuses on two feuding families on a remote island, each with different approaches to dealing with the undead. One family, the O'Flynns, seeks to exterminate the zombies, viewing them as a threat, while the other, the Moldoons, attempts to coexist with them, seeing them as afflicted family members. Each of them adopts a viewpoint concerning the undead that mirrors those of the previous films. Both families are, in essence, trying to maintain control over their undead family members. In doing so, the film takes a step back from the developments that occurred in *Land of the Dead*, where Riley and Big Daddy signify a turning point in the series where zombies begin to transcend the humans within the story. However, Romero's final film portrays an alternative perspective for this turning point, by creating the larger societal division solely within the human survivors. The conflict in the narrative is mainly perpetuated by the vendetta between the O'Flynns and the Moldoons, with the final confrontation illustrating the destructive nature of an uncompassionate society. When asked about his choice of Irish families, Romero commented: "the idea was to make a film about war or entities that don't die, conflicts, disagreements that people can't resolve, whether its Ireland, or the Middle East, or the Senate… that was the idea" (Romero 2010). Janet Muldoon notes on this when discussing the feud, stating: "My father sees the world one way only and so does Seamus Muldoon" (*Survival* 1:01:37). This film is predominantly a story of conflict between humans, in which the zombies appear to have become side characters. This in turn becomes relevant near the end of the film, where the destructive nature of the humans are surpassed by the post-human developments of the zombies in response.

The concept of post-humanism offers a framework for understanding the developments of the zombie symbol within Romero's *Living Dead* series. In post-humanist thought, as posited by scholars like Cary Wolfe, in *What Is Posthumanism?* (2009), the boundaries between humans and other entities are blurred, leading to a need for re-evaluation of what constitutes life, agency, and ethic consideration. Wolfe argues that post-humanism "forces us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of *Homo sapiens* itself" (xxv). This perspective is crucial in understanding Romero's zombies, who throughout the films have increasingly exhibited behaviors and characteristics that challenge their status as mere mindless monsters. Post-humanism challenges the traditional human-centric perspective, placing emphasis on the deconstruction of the human- and non-human dichotomy, in this case the human and the zombie, and through that, recognizing the agency and value of other forms of life and entities. This philosophical approach aligns with the evolving depiction of zombies in Romero's films, particularly in *Survival of the Dead*. One significant example of post-humanist themes in *Survival* is the Muldoons' approach to zombies. By attempting to keep their undead family members alive and integrate them into their community, the Muldoons challenge the conventional view of zombies as mere monsters. This effort to coexist, despite its inherent flaws and eventual failure, suggests an acknowledgment of the zombies' residual humanity and a shift toward a more inclusive, post-humanist worldview. However, their captivity to the specific locations on the islands suggests an underlying subservient nature between living and undead that more closely resembles Dr. Logan's ideology of control from *Day of the Dead* than true coexistence.

In the scene after the climactic showdown between the feuding families, Jane Muldoon is shown biting her horse, thereby marking a pivotal moment in Romero's exploration of post-humanism in *Survival of the Dead* and the evolution of the zombie as a symbol within his

narrative. Jane's successful attempt at eating her horse demonstrates a profound shift in zombie behavior that has driven their motivations since *Dawn*: "They kill for one reason. They kill for food. They eat their victims, that's what keeps them going" (*Dawn* 4:39). Although it had previously been established that the undead only consumed human flesh, this act suggests a potential for survival that does not rely on human predation. It hints at an evolutionary leap where zombies can find sustenance from non-human sources, marking a crucial step towards self-sufficiency, away from human dependency. This scene also emphasizes the film's central theme of human regression versus zombie evolution. While the human characters are stagnating in futile conflicts and power struggles, ultimately leading to their mutual downfall, Jane's action symbolizes the zombies' ability to transcend these destructive flaws. The humans' failure to adapt and their relentless clinging to old ways that seek to emulate a world before the societal collapse, result in their demise, whereas the zombies, through acts like Jane's, are shown to be evolving and adapting to new forms of existence. This mirrors the situation in *Dawn of the Dead,* in which Peter and Francine manage to adapt, while the zombies relentlessly ling to their old ways. From a post-humanist perspective, this moment illustrates the breakdown of traditional human exceptionalism. By demonstrating that these zombies can learn and adapt in ways that the surviving humans cannot, Romero challenges the notion of innate human superiority over all other living organisms on Earth. Jane's biting of the horse then represents the zombies' potential for a new form of life, one that may surpass the flawed and self-destructive American society depicted in the film.

Fig. 11. Still from Romero, *Survival of the Dead (1:17:53)*

Romero has concretely established the underlying horror of his six films, which Moreland touches upon; “This is that the *horror* of Romero’s films has, from *Night* onwards, resided not in the dead, both horrific and pathetic as they slowly come to terms with their ambulatory decrepitude and carnivorous drives, but with the living humans of the narrative, who, consistent with Neville of Matheson’s novel, fail to effectively adapt to their radically transformed environment” (85). Moreland posits that the horror lies not in the slow adaptation of the zombies, but most importantly by the regression of the human survivors within his narrative. This inverse proportional contrast between the symbolic evolution of the zombies in response to the regression of the humans within the narrative becomes more evident as the humanity of the zombies is more explicitly portrayed. Where *Land of the Dead* marked the turning point, *Survival* signifies the conclusive fate of a society that fails to adapt due to unresolvable lack of empathy. Romero’s critique becomes evident in the final moments of the film when Crocket reflects on the self-destructive events on the island: “In an us-versus-them world, someone puts up a flag, another person tears it down and puts up his own. Pretty soon no one remembers what started the war in the first place and the fighting becomes all about those stupid flags” (*Survival* 1:20:36).

Similar to the final scene of *Dawn of the Dead*, the humans abandon their sanctuary as the undead take control as the new dominant inhabitants, signifying the possibility of a more fair society without the humans within Romero's narrative continuing to express regressive and self-destructive tendencies. The zombies in Romero's last films embody post-humanist ideals. They break down the anthropocentric view that humans are the pinnacle of evolution and moral beings. Instead, the zombies' evolution reflects a form of post-humanist agency where they begin to establish their own social order and challenge human supremacy. This evolution of zombies towards a more organized and potentially peaceful existence juxtaposed with the self-destructive behavior of humans serves as a powerful critique of humanity's inability to adapt to a changing society. Knickerbocker argues for this by labelling the zombie as anti-humanist: "I therefore propose that the classical zombie is not only posthuman, but metaphorically anti-humanist: like the thinkers of critical posthumanism, it attempts to wrest from humanity its dominion over the planet" (68). This underscores that true horror of Romero's zombie lies not in the zombies themselves but has always resided in the humans who fail to transcend their primal instincts of enacting control over others – human and non-human – through dominance by any means, in order to ensure their own survival. There is, however, a paradox present within this argument. If the innate desire for control over others is primal, and as such is primary to existence and most importantly survival, that would suggest that transcending this instinct is impossible as part of the human condition. Transcending such instincts of survival would, in turn, lead to the absence of desire for control over others, resulting in an unwillingness to adapt to a changing society. In both situations, humans would not adapt. Romero's use of zombies to explore these complex themes aligns with post-humanist philosophy, which seeks to de-center the human and challenge traditional notions of superiority and control.

Survival marks the last iteration of the *Living Dead* series under Romero's authorship. It establishes the culmination of the thematic evolution of Romero's countercultural response to the American Mainstream as seen throughout the series, offering a comprehension critique of human societal failure juxtaposed with the post-human development of the zombies. The resolution stage of *Survival* underscores the post-intersection of the inverse relationship between humans and zombies by contrasting the newly established post-humanist zombie with the ultimately devolving humans within the narrative through the depiction of the zombification of Patrick O'Flynn and Seamus Muldoon. Each at the head of their respective feuding families, the two refuse to coexist on the island, resulting in their mutual destruction and subsequent zombification. However, as zombies, the two continue their feud, acting on their instinctual desires as first mentioned by Peter in *Dawn of the Dead*. The two are depicted as black silhouettes on a white background, framed to be diametrically opposed, further emphasizing their conflict throughout the film.

Fig. 12. Still from Romero, *Survival of the Dead (1:20:59)*

This depiction, reminiscent of the earlier films, is starkly contrasted by the earlier scene in which the zombies are depicted consuming horse meat in vivid color. O'Flynn and Muldoon's resemblance to the earlier zombies concludes the regression that has taken place within the humans of the story. Even though *Land* and *Survival* have established the evolution of the zombie, Romero depicts these two men as the concluding remark that the roles presented in

the inverse relationship between humans and zombies has resolved itself within his narrative by presenting two zombies acting out their original human instincts, thereby mirroring the behavior of the original zombies in *Night* and *Land*.

Conclusion

This thesis has analytically explored the progressive evolution of zombie symbolism in George Romero's *Living Dead* series (1968-2009), revealing it as an extensive mirror reflecting both post-World War II, neo-liberal-driven capitalist societal changes and the shifting landscape of cultural fears and values in terms of race, class and power, within the United States of America from 1968 until 2009. Initially depicted as mindless, marginalized monsters, Romero's zombies evolve into more complex and even sympathetic figures, often highlighting the devolution of human survivors into unsympathetic, one-dimensional beings driven by base desires. This juxtaposition of evolving zombies against regressing humans provides a potent critique of neo-liberal societal and economic developments, offering a unique lens through which to examine Romero's view on American mainstream culture and its subscription to the neo-liberal capitalist ideologies of its time. Romero's films utilize Nietzsche's concept of transvaluation, which involves reevaluating established values and moral principles. This process allows zombies in Romero's films to transcend their traditional roles as mere metaphors, becoming adaptive, multifaceted symbols critiquing contemporary societal issues. This adaptive symbolism allows zombies to encapsulate broader societal concerns, from racial inequality and systemic violence to the emptiness of consumer culture, ultimately serving as a critique of the dehumanizing forces within American society. This critique spans various issues, from racism in the 1960s, consumerism in the 1970s, to class inequality and economic disparity in the early 2000s, and challenges in human coexistence in the late 2000s. The zombies are juxtaposed against humans, symbolizing an inherent inverse relationship where zombies serve as foils to humans, enabling Romero to critique societal resistance to change. Through comparatively analyzing the developing relationship between the zombies and humans within Romero's work as a form of critique on the self-destructiveness of American society, this thesis has posited for an inverse relationship

between the development of the zombie to the post-human and the decline of humanity to the monstrous.

Night of the Living Dead presents the zombie apocalypse as a commentary on the racial tension and societal inequalities in 1960s America. The film's portrayal of Ben, a black protagonist, who faces systemic racism from the other white survivors even amid a zombie outbreak, mirrors the Civil Rights Movement and highlights racial injustices. The origin of the motif of the zombie in modern media itself is inherently tied to the colonial past of Haiti and the American military occupation of 1915 to 1934. Spivak's concept of the colonial subaltern echoes throughout the narrative of Romero's *Living Dead* series. In *Dawn* it is presented with the marginalized tenants who face the militaristic violence of the police force. Peter's mentioning of his father further establishes a post-colonial lens through which the zombie outbreak symbolizes the rebellion of the subaltern from colonial history against the established order, as similarly described by Marcuse in *An Essay on Liberation* (1969). The culmination of this rebellion in *Land of the Dead* further emphasizes the inherent countercultural critique Romero embeds throughout his film series, as the black zombie, Big Daddy, enacts a rebellion against the neo-liberal capitalist order of Fiddler's Green. By establishing the zombie as the marginalized within the narrative, Romero inevitably portrays the human survivors that subscribe to the pre-established order as antagonists, which further illustrates that for the marginalized zombies to rise up, human society will have to inevitably crumble.

Romero's critique on American neo-liberal capitalist society is present throughout the *Living Dead* series. It becomes most evident through the consumer culture depicted in *Dawn* and *Land*, where the entertainment and gratification of material desire predominantly motivated humanity to continually consume, alluding to the instinctual behavior of the living dead within their respective narratives. Using Fromm's notion of "having" rather than

"being", it becomes evident that Romero's zombies lack the aforementioned desire to possess, which is more prominent in figures such as Roger and Stephen in *Dawn* and Kaufman in *Land*, all of whom succumb as a direct result of their inability to forgo the material. Romero's critique on America's subscription to the dominant order as self-destructive is further highlighted in *Day of the Dead*, in which the military bunker serves as a microcosm of an America led under the military-industrial complex that seeks to further is control by disregarding Fromm's "being". In Romero's narrative, this relationship between the military and scientific community is ultimately self-destructive for the human inhabitants of the bunker, thereby further arguing for a lens of critique when viewing American society under Reagan's presidency.

As the inverse relationship of the zombies and humans progresses through the *Living Dead* series, it suggest an inevitable surpassing of the zombie over the human. Through a lens of posthumanism, zombies first represent a deconstruction of humanity to its innate instincts as presented in *Night* and *Dawn*, where the human survivors question the nature of the outbreak. However, *Day* presents ethical and moral questions that challenge the notion of humanity as the dominant species with inherent superiority. Contrasting the military-industrial complex as shown through Captain Rhodes and Doctor Logan, the zombie Bub embodies the more humane qualities that had previously not been portrayed through the living dead. This humanity is further elaborated upon with Big Daddy in *Land* and is ultimate shown to surpass that of its human inverse through zombies, like Jane, in *Survival,* who by consuming alternative food sources are now challenging the notion of the human subject altogether. The juxtaposition between humans and zombies as an inverse relationship is further established through the zombification of the last humans on the island, who after reverting back to their innate desire, still replicate the innate human flaw of failing to adapt that have presented themselves in throughout the *Living Dead* series.

With the production of a new Living Dead film underway, a continuation of Romero's critique on the American mainstream as posited in this thesis would suggest a narrative that addresses an increasingly pessimistic view of humanity. Having now inverted the lines between human and monster, Romero's zombie has evolved to be post-human. *Twilight of the Dead* can then be hypothesized to elaborate on this evolution, exploring the further blurring of boundaries between human and zombie. The film may present zombies not only as a force of nature but as beings with their own emerging culture and social structures, challenging humanity's last hold on superiority. The narrative might focus on the remnants of human society struggling to coexist with or dominate a new world order led by post-human zombies, ultimately questioning whether humanity can overcome its inherent flaws or if it is doomed to self-destruction. This would be in line with the human protagonists like Peter and Francine in *Dawn*, Sarah in *Day,* Riley in *Land* and Crockett in *Survival,* all of whom have survived by not giving into the self-destructive aspects of contemporary American society. The zombies, now fully realized post-humans, then embody the potential for a new kind of existence beyond the limitations of traditional humanism, pushing the audience to reconsider the essence of what it means to be truly human in a world where the old definitions no longer apply.

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