



## Religious Themes of George Romero's Zombie Movies

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**Abstract:**<sup>1</sup> The zombie movies of George A. Romero can be seen as an updated version of Dante's *Inferno*, giving modern believers or secularists a vision of damnation as endless, sterile, mindless repetition, and offering some glimpses of how one might avoid such a fate. Besides Romero's paradigmatic zombie movies, passing reference will be made to the films of other directors, especially *28 Days Later* and the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004).

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[1] Being a combination of two creatures or being between two physical states is a common characteristic of monsters, frequently seen in classical mythology (e.g. the minotaur, harpies, etc.) and in modern movie monsters, which are filled with lycanthropy, genetic experiments, or robots that are nearly human. Such monsters do not quite belong in either of the two species, and they usually possess the worst but most potent qualities of both species.

[2] What makes such hybrid or divided beings even more interesting is that they are not always just monstrous, but their combined nature is also frequently a quality of what humans consider holy and sacred. There are many beings who straddle the boundary between human and

divine, such as saints, angels, and even Jesus or the Buddha. Though these figures are not monstrous, they are definitely somewhat dangerous and beyond our control, and therefore are not to be treated the way that we treat “regular” people, for that would be both imprudent and blasphemous. At the other end of the spectrum of the hierarchy of beings, animals may also elicit our awe because they can often seem almost human: they are right on the edge of humanity. So too a human corpse is considered simultaneously both gruesome and sacred by most human beings, because a corpse is both still human and yet no longer human; it cannot be treated just like a piece of trash, but also it should not be kept around. It must be disposed of in a way that will respect and maintain its humanness and its sacrality, even while disposing of its impurity and contagion.<sup>2</sup> Creatures straddling the boundary between human and divine, or human and subhuman are not just monstrous, they can also be mysterious, holy, and life-affirming.<sup>3</sup>

[3] With such observations about monsters, the mysterious, and the sacred in mind, the potency of zombies as a symbol is readily apparent.<sup>4</sup> As humanoid monsters who turn other humans into creatures like themselves by biting them, zombies resemble vampires and werewolves in several ways, yet zombies are more ambiguous in their state between human and non-human. Zombies possess none of the supernatural qualities of other such monsters: they cannot fly; they cannot turn into a vapor, bat, or wolf; they are not possessed of superhuman strength; they do not have fangs. As one critic has put it, this means that we do not have “admiration” for them, the way we often do for more powerful, superhuman monsters.<sup>5</sup> While this makes zombies less formidable as opponents, it makes them rather more fully and disconcertingly human. While we cannot admire the slow and clumsy and all-too-human zombies, they are scarier because we identify and sympathize with them in a way that we never

could with more powerful and demonic monsters.

[4] But what makes zombies more terrifying than other monsters is that this confusing resemblance of zombies to normal people never goes away. Unlike vampires, zombies don't sleep in coffins, and unlike werewolves, zombies don't go back and forth between their human and monstrous states: what is especially terrifying with zombies is that their monstrous state *is* their human state; it never transforms or goes away.<sup>6</sup> This adds much to the movies' grotesquery, as it is much more gruesome to watch human zombies devouring other humans than it would be to watch alligators, sharks, piranhas, or scarab beetles doing so - though enough movies traffic in these other kinds of devourings to show that *any* image of being eaten alive is pretty frightening.<sup>7</sup>

[5] The real psychological terror of zombies, however, lies elsewhere: it is not just horrible to watch zombies devouring humans, but it is more subtly and insidiously horrible to imagine the human characters in the movies slaughtering hundreds of zombies who look and, to some extent, still act, exactly like human beings. It is a moral dilemma about which the human characters in Romero's movies frequently express their dismay. Driving a stake through Dracula's heart, or shooting a slaving werewolf with a silver bullet is one thing; putting a bullet in the forehead of a zombie who looks like an elderly lady or a little girl is quite another.<sup>8</sup> Zombie movies imagine a scenario far worse than nuclear war or a cabal of vampires taking over the world. They present us with a world in which humans and monsters become very hard to distinguish, and therefore the moral rules that guide our dealings with other humans - it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it, thou shalt not kill, love thy neighbor, turn the other cheek - are discarded as irrelevant and unfeasible. Even "an eye for an eye" would be considered impractical in a world full of

zombies: the only way to stay alive and continue some kind of human “civilization” would be to shoot any suspicious person in the head before s/he tries to tear out your throat and eat you alive, a rule made explicit in the more recent movies, in which bitten or infected humans are routinely and heartlessly killed, rather than waiting for them to turn into zombies. Several times it is said that infected humans and zombies must be “exterminated” (*Dawn of the Dead* [1978]) or “put down” (*28 Days and Dawn of the Dead* [2004]), wording more usual for how one deals with a non-human pestilence like cockroaches or rabid dogs, not human beings. The horrific nature of zombies is that they may force us to act as barbarically and impetuously as they do.

[6] The zombies’ precarious positioning between human and non-human is deep and ambiguous. Zombies do not just look like humans, thereby making it more uncomfortable to shoot them in the forehead; the point in the movies is that zombies *are* human, and humans are zombie-like, as one character exclaims explicitly in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), “They’re *us!*” Romero also makes this point graphically in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) by having the camera shoot from the point of view of the zombie, as though the audience members are zombies looking at the human characters in the film.<sup>9</sup> Zombie movies seem mostly interested in the moral implications of the resemblance of zombies to humans, the disturbing implication that even if we are conscious and the zombies are not, our consciousness does little to make us “better,” even if it makes us epistemically different or more complex. The various movies play this theme out in different ways, and it is clearly one that has developed a great deal since the first movie, becoming the predominant theme in the genre. Unlike aliens, robots, or supernatural beings such as demons, the distasteful and horrible aspects of zombies cannot really be discounted as unhuman, but are rather just exaggerated aspects of humanity. Zombies are essentially primal

humans, humans without much or any reason and intellect. Without reason to restrain them, they descend immediately into orgiastic indulgence of their uncontrollable, bestial hunger and violence. They are completely self-centered, showing no concern for their fellow zombies or mercy to their human prey, at least not until the final installment, *Land of the Dead*. But the humans in the films are, for the most part, little better than their zombie counterparts and tormentors. Many of the human characters are more petty, predatory, and selfish than any zombie could be, for their intellect does not undo or diminish such bad characteristics, it only enables the humans to act on such urges with greater cunning, subtlety, and effectiveness. It is, to be sure, one of the most cynical portrayals of human nature in any film genre - and, indeed, I would say it makes these movies more inappropriate for younger viewers than does the bloodshed - but it is not an estimation without redeeming value. Expecting, depicting, and criticizing the worst aspects of humans may be a necessary part of the diagnosis of their sin and disease.

[7] Besides being on the threshold between human and non-human, zombies also clearly straddle the line between living and dead in a perverted version of the Christian idea of bodily resurrection. As with other monsters, such ambiguity through the hybrid or oxymoronic nature of being “living dead” means that zombies violate the natural order, both of the physical world and of human society. In zombie movies, human society is in a shambles not just because there is a deadly threat, but because the threat consists of turning into something that is neither alive nor dead. The prospect of becoming neither alive nor dead diminishes the human characters’ ability to deal with mortality, which is already a deep enough psychological strain for most of us.<sup>10</sup> Several times human characters are shown being unduly reckless, or, at the other extreme,

committing suicide (regarded by some as a grievous sin and by others as a psychological disorder) rather than become one of “them.” And the fact that a loved one who dies will immediately rise up and try to kill you means that the normal rites and ceremonies of funerals, saying goodbye, grieving, and coping must be discarded, or, much more horribly, replaced with a new expedient of shooting the loved one between the eyes,<sup>11</sup> followed by unceremoniously setting the body on fire.<sup>12</sup> Several times, not surprisingly, the movies depict this situation as placing a terrible, painful psychological strain on the human characters. As noted above, humans need to feel the sacredness of a human corpse, but if that corpse suddenly poses a great physical danger, such feelings must be ignored. However, that does not mean that the feelings will conveniently go away, but will just go deeper down into the psyche and fester. Zombies thus dehumanize humans by eliminating the human characters’ chance to experience normal feelings of grief, mortality, or sacredness, and forcing them to substitute callous, unthinking, reflexive violence.<sup>13</sup>

[8] More than any other monster, zombies are fully and literally apocalyptic, as the movies, especially *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) acknowledge: they signal the end of the world as we have known it. In the original meaning of the word apocalypse, they “reveal” terrible truths about human nature, existence, and sin.<sup>14</sup> The dead roam the earth, never at rest, and they never leave the living alone to enjoy “life,” but constantly and savagely try to drag them into a shadowy realm that is neither alive nor dead. Zombies thereby bring the complete breakdown of the natural world of food chains, social order, respect for life, and respect for death, because those categories are meaningless and impossible to maintain in a world where the most fundamental *limen* or threshold - the threshold between alive and dead - has become one that none really cross

over completely, but one in which everyone lives suspended all the time.<sup>15</sup> It is this endless, eternal suspension between two equally horrible states that is the real horror of zombies, not the few seconds of violence that it takes to cross over from human to zombie status.

[9] Zombie movies are especially suited to presenting theological ideas of human nature and human destiny because of the nature of zombies and the threat they pose. Zombie movies deal not just with a deadly attack of monsters, but with a situation in which *all* humans are quickly reduced to a hellish existence, either as zombies who are the walking damned, robbed of intellect and emotion, or as surviving humans, barricaded and trapped in some place from which there is no escape. Either way, people are doomed to a shadowy, trapped, borderline existence that resembles hell. It is probably no surprise, then, that much of the imagery of zombie movies is borrowed, consciously or unconsciously, from the classic description of hell, the *Inferno*, written by the medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321).<sup>16</sup>

[10] The zombies themselves eerily resemble the description of the damned that Dante gives as he begins his descent into hell: they are “the suffering race of souls who lost the good of intellect.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, in all the movies zombies act precisely as humans devoid of intellect and reduced just to appetite. In many ways, they are also embodiments of several of the seven deadly sins.<sup>18</sup> Most of the seven deadly sins are sins of uncontrolled appetite and not of malice: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, and wrath all fall into this categorization, at least to Dante’s mind, and he places their punishment in the uppermost five circles of hell. Zombies represent the nadir of gluttony, eating whenever they can and as much as they can, even though it does not nourish them; they frequently get so distracted in their ghoulish feasts that other humans can easily

slaughter them. They are overcome with uncontrollable rage, frequently shown in all the movies snarling and attacking one another when there are no humans around to kill and eat and there is a shinbone or entrails over which to fight. When they are not fighting or killing, zombies are just as likely to lapse into complete sloth, sitting around doing nothing if there are no humans in sight. More than any other movie monster or mythological creature, zombies vividly exemplify the state of damnation, of human life without the divine gift of reason, and without any hope of change or improvement.

[11] This would perhaps make zombie movies slightly more interesting than the average horror movie, but it is again the human characters who round out and complicate the ideas presented even more, for it is the human characters who in fact embody the majority of the seven deadly sins. Their reason has done little to control their appetites, but has only allowed them the cunning and skill to survive longer to satisfy their appetites and even to develop more exotic and evil desires, like cruelty and treachery. Most of Romero's movies are extremely restrained in their depiction of sexuality, but the most despicable human character in the new *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), Steve, is shown flagrantly indulging in the sin of lust, as well as in others. Greed or avarice is frequent among the human characters. If anything, it is their besetting sin, driving them to the utmost of cruelty and violence. It brings with it envy, as humans foolishly and sinfully risk their lives to take what other humans have. And all of these are symptoms of pride, which is a peculiarly intellectual sin. Pride does not come from physical appetites, but rather gives rise to them: when one is prideful, one has it in mind that one is superior to others and above their petty rules and limitations, and therefore one's desires do not appear to be indulgences, but things to which one is entitled as a superior person. In contrast to the bestial zombies with their bestial

sins, the human characters are frequently conniving and cruel, like the sinners deeper down in Dante's hell, guilty not of lacking reason, but of perverting it to satisfy their sinful desires. The description Dante gives of the sinners lower in hell could just as accurately apply to most of the human characters in zombie movies: “. . . since fraud belongs exclusively to man, God hates it more and, therefore, far below, the fraudulent are placed and suffer most.”<sup>19</sup>

[12] In all this, zombie movies have picked up on what is perhaps Dante's greatest and most surprising notion, that hell is not so much a place of external torments, of tortures or punishments inflicted on the damned from some force outside of themselves, whether it is demons or God. Rather, both Dante's hell and the hell of a zombie-infested earth are places where the hell is primarily internal, of our own making. Again, in this depiction, zombies come off as lesser sinners than humans, for zombies merely behave like animals, unthinking slaves to unrestrained, bestial appetites. Though they exaggerate and parody human urges, we can easily excuse them, for they don't seem to know any better. But there is nothing in these movies that makes the humans behave so badly, except their own sinful natures: they, we feel, should know better, and do not. We therefore blame them more, just as we are more aghast and outraged at the sinners deeper in Dante's hell.

[13] An important corollary to this is that in both Dante's hell and a zombie-infested earth, the really horrifying part is not the tortures or punishments, but the endless boredom and repetition; rather, the endless repetition *is* the punishment of sin. In Dante's hell, the damned are not punished by withholding their heart's desire from them: the lustful can still be with those after whom they lusted, the wrathful can rend each other limb from limb over and over, and the

thieves can steal from each other for all eternity, though none of this brings them any satisfaction, let alone joy. Likewise, zombies go through the motions of their earthly existence - wandering about the mall, going to work - for whatever good it does them.<sup>20</sup> And the surviving humans set up a similarly boring and repetitive world, either in the mall which the undead also crave in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978 and 2004), or in the city/mall/high-riser haven of *Land of the Dead*, rapturously extolling “Life goes on!” in a television ad at the beginning of the movie, beguiling people with advertisements of a life of boring leisure while others starve in the streets and the undead are always just outside the gates, ready to attack. It is a terrifying vision because it proposes that our choices now might have eternal significance, and that death may well resemble and be based on how we live our lives now. As Dante has retained his popularity and relevance while many other visions of the afterlife have long been forgotten, zombie movies gain their edge and relevancy by asking us uncomfortably whether such an afterlife sounds more like heaven, or more like hell.

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## Notes

1. This article is part of the Introduction to my forthcoming *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's Visions of Hell on Earth* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006).
2. See Dillard on corpses: "But the film takes the source of its horrors from another desire and a fear that lies certainly as deep in the human consciousness, if not deeper. This is a fear of the dead and particularly of the known dead, of dead kindred" (15). See also Waller: "Primitive taboos concerning the dead, Freud argues, are rooted in the 'unconscious hostility' and 'evil impulses' that the living project onto the dead." (277).
3. Editor's note: See Otto on this point (40) as well as Beal (6-10).
4. Cf. Russell, "What's striking is the fluidity of Romero's living dead metaphor. Previously styled in the series as the dead of Vietnam, the silent majority of the Nixon era, vapid consumers and now an oppressed (ethnic) underclass, Romero's zombies have a symbolic potential unmatched by any other horror movie monster" (190).
5. See Carroll: "But, then again, the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead* are not seductive, nor is their unavoidable power - only the numbers are on their side - a source of admiration" (168); also, Shaviro: "These walking corpses are neither majestic and uncanny nor exactly sad and pitiable. . . . They are blank, terrifying, and ludicrous in equal measure, without any of these mitigating the others" (85).
6. On the comparison with vampires, cf. Waller: "Romero's living dead cannot transform themselves into mist or animal form, for they are not one-of-a-kind, supernatural beings. . . . Most important, while the undead as depicted by Matheson and Romero are undeniably threatening, they are not Evil in the sense that the vampires in *Salem's Lot* and most Hammer films are Evil. The living dead . . . belong to our world. They are our fellow citizens who, with no leader and no motive besides hunger, have returned to feed on us, and, with no malice and no grand design, to reach out and pull us into their ranks" (275). See also Twitchell: "But for me the most important development is what Romero did to the monster; he bred the zombie with the vampire, and what he got was the hybrid vigor of a ghoulish plague monster. . . . Romero's other innovation is that, while he made his zombies into vampires, he subtracted, rather than added to, their physical power, so that they are now pathetic weaklings able to be destroyed by bashing their heads" (267).
7. Cf. Waller: "*Dawn of the Dead* is, for instance, the antithesis of deadly serious stories that show people at war with killer bees, sharks, or some other form of 'natural' threat that is, in some important ways, superior to human beings" (306).
8. Cf. Waller: "The first of the living dead that we see in the film is a man before he is a thing; he is one of *us* before we realize that he is one of *them*. He and all the rest of the living dead

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retain the physical appearance of human beings. They do not suddenly bare oversized canine teeth or stare with blood-red eyes. Even when they are eating the remains of the two teenagers, the living dead never cease to look like - and therefore in some fashion to be? - human beings . . . . The living dead, as Romero told an interviewer, are ‘the neighbors’” (276-77).

9. I owe this cinematic point to Waller (307, 312-13).

10. Cf. Russell: “By challenging the distinction between the living and the dead, the normal and the monstrous, *Night of the Living Dead* brings terror into the American home, hearth and family” (69). Also see Shaviro: “The dread that the zombies occasion is based more on a fear of infection than on one of annihilation. The living characters are concerned less about the prospect of being killed than they are about being swept away by mimesis — of returning to existence, after death, transformed into zombies themselves” (98).

11. On the strain of executing loved ones in zombie movies, see Waller: “As in most of the retellings of *Dracula*, as well as in *I Am Legend*, *Salem’s Lot*, and many other stories of the living and the undead, one of the most disturbing requirements in the struggle for survival is that a human being can and will be called upon to kill an undead creature who in life was his closest friend, his fiancée, or his lover” (313).

12. On the loss of funeral rites due to the zombie threat, see Waller, *Living and the Undead*, 297: “. . . the bonfire in *Night of the Living Dead* is not a fire of purification or just punishment. It is less like a funeral pyre for a fallen hero than a pile of flammable rubbish” (297).

13. Such stress would be similar to or even worse than what soldiers feel with battle fatigue and post-traumatic stress. On the adverse effect of such violence, see Gagne: “Further, Romero’s protagonists lose something of their own morality as they gun down the zombies remaining in the mall with a zealous cruelty motivated by material greed” (88); also Waller: “All that will be altered are the hunters themselves, who may come to take extermination as a type of sport or may themselves become emotionless zombies as they carry out their work” (302).

14. Cf. Shaviro: “Their vision of a humanity overrun by flesh-eating zombies is violently apocalyptic; at the same time, they remain disconcertingly close to the habitual surfaces and mundane realities of everyday life” (83).

15. On zombies’ liminality, see Dargis: “Neither fully alive nor dead, zombies exist between the margins, in a twilight state that makes them among the most unsettling of all man-made creatures. That’s the essential paradox of all zombie movies, but it’s a paradox that has taken on increasing complexity in Mr. Romero’s zombie quartet.” See also Loudermilk: “Romero’s postmodern zombie rises from a variety of tombs, a hybrid of corporeal and ideological monsters. Voodoo zombie, mummy and pod person, all play into Romero’s conception of the postmodern zombie in *bodies* that tread the liminal position between human and inhuman (or life and death)” (85-86); and Shaviro: “There is no possibility of evasion, just as there is none of mastery, and none of firm and stable identification, for the zombies always come in between: they insinuate themselves within the uncanny, interstitial space that separates (but thereby also connects) inside and outside, the private and the public, life and death. In this liminal position,

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they are the obscene objects of voyeuristic fascination” (104).

16. Often observed of Romero’s work, as recently by Dargis: “The fourth installment in Mr. Romero’s vaunted zombie cycle (which began with his 1968 masterpiece, *Night of the Living Dead*), the new film is also the latest chapter in what increasingly seems like an extended riff on Dante’s *Inferno*.”

17. *Inferno*, 3.17-18.

18. Cf. Newman: “A rotten social order suffers its just desserts in the shape of the Living Dead, who at once epitomize and chastise any number of vices: conservative complacency, consumerist frenzy, mindlessly instinctive political positions, random violence, pointless greed” (209).

19. *Inferno*, 11.25-27.

20. Cf. Shaviro: “Romero’s zombies could almost be said to be quintessential media images, since they are vacuous, mimetic replications of the human beings they once were. They are dead people who are not content to remain dead, but who have brought their deaths with them back into the realm of the living” (85).

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