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EATING TIME: THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE

ABSTRACT: Although many connect the popularity of zombie apocalypse narratives with terrorism, pandemics, and natural disasters, this paper argues that the cultural significance of the apocalypse genre lies in the rhythm of the cinematic experience. Considering the genre's two archetypal sequences, the chase and the siege, the article argues that the genre offers catharsis for the feeling of being relentlessly harried through a heightened form of the increasing time pressure in modern Western societies.

One of the truisms of academic research into the recent proliferation of films, books, video games, TV shows, comics and websites devoted to the zombie apocalypse is that the widespread preoccupation with an impossible event must mean *something*. Surely the shambling horde of rotting undead must stand in for an actual terror? As Nick Muntean and Matthew Thomas Payne write, "the zombie's blank, dead visage provides an allegorical screen upon which audiences can project their fears and anxieties" (240), yet there remains no consensus on what modern anxiety the zombie apocalypse invokes. Different scholars have proposed capitalism, terrorism, pandemics or consumerism as the true root of our fear of, or desire for, an imaginary collapse of civilisation, but, while much of this is reflected in zombie lore, these interpretations involve transmuting the zombie into a metaphor and thus lose touch with the basic audience experience of these narratives. In order to understand why a new interpretation is necessary, this article will first survey previous critical readings before offering its own perspective on the cultural significance of the zombie apocalypse.

READING ZOMBIES

One of the most prevalent readings of the zombie has been to see it as a symbol of class oppression and the dehumanisation of the worker under capitalism and imperialism. The original Haitian zombie has widely been read as the product of a slave society, a body without will or purpose controlled by a master or houngan, invariably for evil purposes. Such symbolism has been easily transposed into the industrial era, as Lauro and Embry observe: "Filmmakers and critics have noted the resonance of the zombie with the factory worker's mechanistic performance, the brain-dead, ideology-fed servant of industry, and the ever-yawning mouth of the nation-state" (92).

Kevin J. Wetmore notes that the zombie parody *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright, 2004), which features a zombie apocalypse in a quiet British town, “demonstrates that if a zombie outbreak did occur, most of us would not be able to tell the difference between zombies and working class people stuck in ‘McJobs’” (4). Simultaneously, zombie narratives have been seen as representing shallow consumerism, with George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) praised for its satirical representation of zombies mindlessly wandering a shopping mall, window shopping with blank and hungry eyes. In this reading, the zombie’s overwhelming drive to consume is merely a gory counterpart to the modern individual’s need to shop. As Lauro and Embry further argue:

The zombie has thus transitioned from a representation of the labouring, enslaved colonial body, to a dual image of capitalist enslavement: the zombie now represents the new slave, the capitalist worker, but also the consumer, trapped within the ideological construct that assures the survival of the system. (99)

The zombie apocalypse, in this double-pronged reading, can be read as a proletarian uprising that threatens the structures underpinning the class exploitation that turned people into zombies in the first place: “In societies where slavery has been abolished but capitalist exploitation thrives, the havoc wreaked by zombies encodes anxiety about riot and disorder, a warning that oppression breeds insurrection” (Tenga and Zimmerman 82).

However, despite a general consensus among critics about this interpretation, some problems need to be pointed out. For a start, hardly any films depict zombies as mindless workers, except in the epilogue of *Shaun of the Dead*, when the film shows newly-tamed zombies operating supermarket checkouts for bored customers. There is no counterpart to what Romero did with consumerism in *Dawn of the Dead*; we almost never see zombies sitting in cubicles trying to work staplers or clumsily cutting hair in a salon. On closer examination of the critical vocabulary, we find the phrase “capitalist worker” is a vague, imprecise term. Who represents the zombie capitalist worker, the mindless automaton: bus drivers, builders, pneumatic drillers, receptionists, journalists, waitresses or cops? Perhaps the only satisfying mental image of a silent, mindless slave of the capitalist system is the worker on an assembly line, yet this is precisely the kind of job that has been in decline for decades across advanced nations as factory work is outsourced to cheaper labour elsewhere. The rise of zombie culture therefore parallels a decline among its audience of the kind of work most closely associated with capitalist exploitation and dehumanisation. This is not to say that exploitation has ceased; as I will argue later, it plays a significant role in zombie culture but not in the direct, representational manner previous interpretations have suggested. The connection between zombies and our current economic system cannot be explained simply by equating wage-earners with slaves, especially given the bewildering diversity of available occupations that the division and specialisation of labour has created, nor can all the people in all these occupations be unilaterally declared “alienated” in the classical Marxist fashion. Moreover, Romero’s satire of consumerism in *Dawn of the Dead* was recognised and enjoyed

by audiences precisely because they did *not* see themselves mirrored in the zombie consumers shuffling through the mall. Getting the joke was a sure sign of the audience's feeling of superiority to the zombie. Thus, espousing a direct relationship between zombie culture and the capitalist worker/consumer requires the critic to assert that people in many common occupations are effectively zombies (which says a lot more about academic elitism than about those occupations) or that consumerism turns people into zombies (despite the best-known cinematic example indicating that the mass audience for these movies think themselves superior to such concerns). The only way to resolve this paradox is a retreat into high theory by declaring that both workers and audiences have been interpellated into hegemonic capitalist discourses, and thus everyone is a capitalist worker or consumer zombie, except the critic, who like Will Smith in *I am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007) is the last self-aware person still standing in the ruins of capitalist civilisation. This may be an attractive critical position for some, but it hardly helps us to understand why zombie apocalypse narratives are so popular.

Since 9/11, many critics have connected the new century's stunning rise in zombie apocalypse narratives with fears of terrorism and the unleashing of biological warfare. According to Kyle Bishop, "because the aftereffects of war, terrorism, and natural disasters so closely resemble the scenarios of zombie cinema, such images of death and destruction have all the more power to shock and terrify a population that has become otherwise jaded by more traditional horror films" (18). Nick Muntean and Matthew Thomas Payne argue that "the label of 'terrorist' possesses an ontological blankness strikingly similar to that of the zombie, as they are both outward physical threats to Western civilisation whose inner motivations remain hidden from view" (255). In films like *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002) and *World War Z* (Marc Forster, 2013), the post-9/11 era has seen the rise of the "fast zombie," defined by its uncontrollable rage against all healthy humans, and as such potentially a metaphor for the fanatical terrorist, driven by zeal and hatred. Yet, while attractive in theory, this interpretation also breaks down on close analysis. The key film in the rise of the "fast zombie" genre is Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later*; yet, as Kyle Bishop notes, "the screenplay was written and filming had begun before Sep. 11, so Garland and Boyle drew from other international crises and disasters for apocalyptic images" (22). While one may argue that the audience read into the film the threat of terrorism, the makers had already created the key concepts before the event that supposedly triggered the new wave of zombie films. The resurgence of zombies in popular cinema therefore needs to be considered instead in terms of prior cultural contexts, and as such, should also be discussed in light of their prior success in other media, particularly the *Resident Evil* series of video games. These games demonstrated zombies' appeal to the same demographic targeted by Hollywood movies and later spawned a series of films.

The problem with trying to connect the zombie with specific crises in Western culture is that the correlations often seem spurious on closer examination. Bishop, for example, argues

that mainstream zombie films were absent in the 1990s because the US “settled perhaps into too much complacency and stability to construct serious, classical zombie narratives” (15). But if zombies reflect fears of pandemics then surely the AIDS crisis, the most lethal pandemic of the past 30 years, should have prompted zombie films in the 1980s and 1990s when the disease was at its most mysterious and threatening. This line of argumentation reaches its nadir in articles like Patrick McCormick’s “Zombie Economics,” which asserts that “through the 70s and 80s clones and remakes of Romero’s film enjoyed a certain popularity as fresh waves of zombie invaders marched across Hollywood screens. This time, however, these legions of the walking dead expressed a growing terror about the collapse of our national economy” (40). McCormick may be alone in asserting that zombies represented stagflation, but his argument, even as a general critical outlier, serves to indicate the blind guesswork involved in decoding zombie metaphors in what can become a “pin the tail on the donkey” game in interpreting zombie movies. The very blankness of the zombie allows viewers to project their own preoccupations onto its vacant stare. For instance, Michael Newbury sees the modern zombie apocalypse as related to the “devastated landscape of apocalyptic agribusiness and fast-food franchise” (97). Yet another critical guess is proffered by Jon Stratton, coming from an Australian perspective, in which the issue of refugees housed in offshore camps rather than being allowed access to the Australian mainland looms large in public discourse. Stratton argues that “the underlying characteristics of zombies are similar to those attributed to displaced people: that is, people predominantly from non-western states striving for entry into western states” (205). Angela Tenga and Elizabeth Zimmerman read the rise of the zombie as the flipside of the romanticisation of the vampire. Allan Cameron sees the modern zombie as related to the mass media, an argument that offers “the zombified body” as “subject to a sudden evacuation of meaning that is both comparable and coextensive with the mediated image’s capacity for embodying non-sense” (80). Any interpretation becomes possible, once the zombie is interpreted as an open metaphor.

Given the bewildering smorgasbord of options, why add one more? I argue that a crucial element of zombie apocalypse cinema has been overlooked because it exists in the *rhythm* of the experience rather than as a symbol to be hunted. Rather than think about what the zombie represents, let’s think for a moment about what we as an audience actually see and feel. Noel Carroll in *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990) argues that what makes monsters monstrous is that they are ontologically impossible: they conjoin two categories that must remain separate, such as the living dead (40). Zombies are also “visually disgusting, ruined and decomposing as they are; what they do (eat live human tissue) is disgusting, viscerally as well as morally” (Clasen 7). Zombies represent a direct physical threat with their desire for human flesh. They threaten our sense of self by being matter without spirit, the body devoid of consciousness and personality. These things on their own are sufficient to make zombies horrifying. But there are two other interrelated elements of the modern zombie mythos that deserve close attention. In the first place, zombies always herald the apocalypse. When they appear, history ends and the survivors wander aimlessly through the end of days. The second

point about zombie culture is that the archetypal experience of fear in a zombie movie is the feeling of being relentlessly, tirelessly pursued. In the end, what defeats the human survivors isn't superior speed or strength but their own fatigue, both mental and physical, their inability to keep up the pace necessary to stay ahead of the pack. The most terrifying thing about zombies is that they offer no respite. The conjunction of endless pursuit and apocalypse suggests something about zombies that has not yet been recognised. Their real threat to modern audiences isn't that they consume flesh; they eat something else of ours that is just as precious but more fragile. What they consume, above all, is time.

TAKING TIME

Whereas previous critics have concerned themselves with the overt content of zombie apocalypse narratives—the spread of contagion, the threat of social collapse, the evils of consumerism—I argue that the narrative's definitive elements lie in its rhythm rather than the ever-shifting causes for the zombie outbreak. Virtually all zombie apocalypse narratives are defined by two kinds of rhythmic sequence: the chase, in which panicked, exhausted human survivors desperately try to elude their relentless pursuers, and the siege, in which the survivors wait anxiously within a place of refuge. Both of these situations revolve around time, either the shortness of it during the chase or the inability to use it effectively during the fraught siege. It is this alternation between rhythms of intense time pressure and dead time that makes the zombie apocalypse a uniquely modern phenomenon, for it responds to social pressures that have been steadily increasing for decades in Western society.

The increasing perception of "time crunch" and its impact on everyday life has in recent years become one of the most important issues in modern culture. Store bookshelves groan under the weight of books offering advice on efficiency or coping with stress; popular magazines abound with articles on "time famine," "the speed-up," and "burnout." Social scientists have investigated the question from a number of angles. In 1991, economist Juliet Schor argued in *The Overworked American* that "hours of work have risen across a wide spectrum of Americans and in all income categories – low, middle, and high" (29), a point that struck a chord with a public looking for explanations for the growth in time pressure. However, Schor's findings have been challenged by others. In *Time for Life* (1997), social scientists John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey argue that there has, on average, been no major change in the balance of work and leisure hours for ordinary Americans. In a parallel Australian study, Michael Bittman and James Rice assert that, "in aggregate, the time available for leisure among the working-age population is indeed increasing, and hence ... Schor's claim about the perverse effects of economic progress on time available for leisure receives no support from the best available evidence" (9). What has changed and is often obscured by looking at averages, however, is the growing polarisation of working hours. As Bittman and Rice demonstrate, "since the 1970s, working times have become more dispersed, with fewer days of work and higher rates of unemployment, but longer working days for

those still in paid employment” (21). Thus in an era of so-called “downsizing” and flexible labour markets, the number of people working a standard 40-hour week has been hollowed out, replaced by those earning part-time wages and those with full-time jobs doing over 50-hour weeks due to job insecurity. Moreover, international evidence shows time pressure is especially acute for women. As Marybeth Mattingly and Liana Sayer argue, “one effect of persisting gender inequality in the domestic sphere despite greater egalitarianism in the labour force is that women feel more pressure to combine a high level of domestic output with paid work hours, and this pressure may underlie the lack of association between free time and feeling rushed for women” (217). This problem is reflected in the wave of articles and books about the pressures of working motherhood, all of which centre around the intense feeling of time pressure, the inability to do everything demanded of one in the time available. These shifts in labour and time use have even trickled down to children, with education in the US and elsewhere becoming increasingly competitive as parents groom their children with tutors and extra-curricular activities for the dwindling number of stable professional jobs. This “profound transformation in the distribution of working hours” (Zuzanek 129), rather than suggesting the rise of a zombie-fied workforce under capitalism, has created two social classes in relation to time: those who do not have enough time because they are overworked, and those who have more leisure than they want because they cannot find quality employment.

Although Jiri Zuzanek has shown that “feelings of time pressure seem to be rooted primarily in *contracted* and *committed* rather than *discretionary* time” (128), many scholars argue that the increasing feeling of time crunch is due to subjective factors rather than shifts in labour organisation. Robinson and Godbey argue that, while leisure time has increased, the increasing pace of everyday life in the digital age has exacerbated the subjective feeling of being rushed: “People are doing better than they think they are, but their perceptions of what is happening are increasingly flawed” (56). Even if the perception is flawed, it is clearly growing: “In a 1992 national survey ... 38% of respondents said they had less free time than they had five years ago. Also, more than one out of three ‘always’ felt rushed” (Robinson and Godbey 48). Psychologist Kenneth Gergen in *The Saturated Self* (2000) argues that the problem of time crunch is a postmodern issue because the stable, unitary self has fragmented into multiple selves across a plethora of disparate relationships, thus increasing demands on our time and mental energy. Juliet Schor partly blames the “work-and-spend” mentality of American consumerism for the increasing time pressure, because the more our material demands grow, the harder we have to work in order to satisfy them (at least until the zombie apocalypse arrives and all consumer goods become simultaneously free and meaningless). While the debate over causes remains open, there is a near-universal consensus that one of the major changes to social life in Western societies over the past half-century is the increasing feeling of time pressure and the consequent demands for “quality time,” with the rise of “multitasking” and discussions about how to maintain “work-life balance” in order to cope. The ill-effects of time pressure have been demonstrated by Susan Roxburgh, who

shows that “the subjective experience of high time pressure is significantly and positively associated with depression among both women and men ... [with] higher depression of employed women compared with employed men” (126), due to the greater demands of domestic work on women’s “leisure” time. Beyond mental health, sociologist Arlie Hochschild has chronicled in *The Time Bind* (1997) how the time crunch is affecting family life, with many now viewing the workplace as a haven from the stressful demands of home, where so much has to be done in a short space of time. In *The Outsourced Self* (2012), Hochschild further illuminates how people cope by outsourcing their personal needs to the growing army of “life coaches,” dating website algorithms and personal relations trainers, thus illustrating people’s need to maximise free time by bringing a Taylorist approach to time management into the private sphere.

I argue that the way zombie apocalypse films most truly reflect modern culture is thus not by representing an exaggerated fear of pandemics or terrorism or climate change but in the way the rhythms of zombie films are an exaggerated form of the time pressures that squeeze everyday life, from the hectic, rushed, stressed, harassed, exhausted feeling of being relentlessly short of time to the dread of dead time in which we can do nothing purposeful to improve our miserable situation. The heightened form of these fears, witnessed in the chase and the siege, offer their increasingly stressed audiences a catharsis: however rushed we may feel, we are at least not the people on screen being pursued by a horde of rabid zombies.

The first archetypal sequence to consider is the chase scene. In the opening of *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968), Barbra is attacked in the graveyard and flees a lone zombie. What Romero does most successfully in the chase scene is the *positioning* of the camera; typically he situates it between the hunted and the hunter, so the audience is always unsure of the distance between the two. Shots of Barbra fleeing down screen are juxtaposed with low angle shots of the zombie approaching the camera, becoming larger and more menacing in our eyes. When Barbra trips and loses a shoe, the camera shows her in close-up, her eyes wildly scanning the view behind us. What is important here is how time pressure influences the decision: she hesitates momentarily about whether to put her shoe back on, then decides she doesn’t have time and kicks the other shoe off and keeps running. This type of moment is repeated across the genre—fumbling with keys, waiting for a car to start, tugging at a stubborn door, changing a flat tyre, all everyday actions made suddenly stressful by the absence of time.

Manipulating the relationship between zombies and time is also the source of many jokes in genre parodies. In *Shaun of the Dead*, when Shaun and Ed try to fend off two zombies in their back garden, they skim through Shaun’s vinyl collection to see which records to fling at their assailants and which ones are too good to throw away, the joke of course being that they have way more time to do this than is typical for the genre. Similarly, at the beginning of *Zombieland* (Ruben Fleischer, 2009), we see the hero in the classic situation of fumbling with

his car keys and dropping them as two zombies bear down. He then tells us the number one rule of *Zombieland*—cardio!—and proceeds to run in a circle to buy more time so he can pick up the keys and get in his car. Humour in these parodies works because the danger is not intense; the protagonists either have more time than we expect or have worked out ways to buy time. In the classic zombie film, time is always shrinking at alarming speed and it is this perception of vanishing time, this accelerated feeling of being relentlessly harried, that offers the audience catharsis for the stressful speed-up of everyday life.

The rise of the fast zombie in this century reflects the increasing pace of life and the ever-growing shortage of time. In *28 Days Later*, rage zombies charge furiously after the weak, stumbling survivors, with quick cuts emphasising their speed and ferocity. Boyle's treatment of time in the film is illuminating. The scenes without the infected are told in montage style, with time effortlessly elided while the protagonists wander the deserted city. When Jim explores a vacant, empty London, the camera follows him in slow pans and languorous tracking shots, particularly emphasised when he climbs the church stairs and the slowly tilting long shot eventually reveals the graffiti, "The end is extremely fucking nigh." In the chase scenes, however, Boyle uses rapid cross-cutting and repetition to *expand* screen time, which demonstrates the shortage of real time for the protagonists as the attacks happen so quickly they can only be narrated at unreal speeds. In Jim's first encounter with the infected, he runs through a gas station in a blur of rapid close-ups that actually slow down the action to a speed the audience can understand as unknown helpers rig the gas station to explode when the infected come through. In the second attack, Boyle shows the rage zombie burst through the glass from three different angles in quick succession, which not only emphasises its violent fury but also paradoxically allows the audience to follow the action by repeating the event Jim only experiences in real time. This editing pattern has influenced most subsequent "fast zombie" narratives, which alternate between slow-paced calm and extremely rapid cutting during attack sequences. The connection between time shortage and work is made clear in these films by what we learn of the protagonists' former occupations: Jim has been in a coma for the duration of the outbreak after being knocked down during his work as a bicycle courier, a profession that exists purely for speed of transport through busy metropolitan areas, while in Zack Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), the protagonist Ana is tellingly introduced as a nurse at the end of a 12-hour shift who is exhaustedly trying to clock off work despite the doctor's uncaring requests. In the morning, she awakes to find her time even more alarmingly curtailed when her dead boyfriend assaults her and she has to scramble to freedom. In *World War Z*, Gerry Lane has given up his job at the UN in order to spend more time with his family, only to be dragged back when the zombie outbreak occurs. In the most important fast zombie films, the protagonists are all somehow victims of the speed-up culture even before the plot begins; what happens afterwards is in many ways simply an intensification of the pressure they already face in everyday life.

DEAD TIME

However, the zombie apocalypse genre also contains long narrative periods when the survivors have more time than they can meaningfully use. The second archetypal scenario in the genre, after the inevitable chase, is the siege. Typically, the human survivors find they can no longer keep running and need to take refuge somewhere, a refuge which is inevitably besieged by zombies. It is here that time expands unbearably as the survivors, nerves frayed by the endless waiting, turn on each other. Among the classic zombie movies, this scenario is most clearly explored in *Dawn of the Dead*, both the original and the remake. Having secured the mall entrances, the survivors initially revel in their sudden release from the structural pressures that cause time shortage, only to discover they now have more time than they know what to do with. They amuse themselves by trying on fashionable clothes, throwing dinner parties and using the mall's facilities, but ultimately they are simply marking time. There is nowhere for them to go and no one is coming to save them. Romero's original has been praised for showing the final emptiness of the "work-and-spend" culture, whereas many scholars were disappointed by the absence of social criticism in Snyder's remake. Yet what unites both is the dread of unproductive time, of time without purpose or meaning. During the siege phase in a zombie apocalypse narrative, however, once the doors are shut and the windows barred, there is nothing to do except kill time. Eventually, as Police Sergeant Hall in Snyder's remake declares, "there are some things worse than death and one of them is sitting here waiting to die." In a culture of time pressure, the worst thing that can happen is time being wasted. Ultimately, for the survivors, fear of dead time is greater even than the fear of death.

Even in the dead time of the siege, time pressure from outside seeps in to distort relationships. Just as Hochschild argues that the pressures of the modern workplace seep into the home, making work a place of sanctuary from the stress of the familial relationships we can spare so little time to nurture, so the knowledge of what is needed to survive outside the sanctuary's walls erodes relationships inside the besieged refuge. In *28 Days Later*, when Jim and Selina first encounter Frank and his daughter Hannah, Jim declares that he thinks they are good people and Selina cynically observes, "That's nice, but you should be more concerned about whether they're going to slow you down." Time and again in the genre, the survivors are confronted with the dilemma of whether to save the group's weakest members. In *Night of the Living Dead*, plans for escape founder on questions of what to do with the catatonic Barbra and Cooper's sick daughter, with Cooper favouring simply barricading himself and his family in the basement and leaving the rest to die. The connection between success at work and sacrificed relationships is made most clearly in *Shaun of the Dead*. Early on, Shaun's flatmate says of Shaun's friendship with the immature Ed, "all he ever does is hold you back"; at the end, when Shaun and his girlfriend flee their place of refuge, the bitten Ed stays behind, saying, "I'd only hold you back." Personal relationships are a weakness in a world dominated by the time crunch, except for those that increase your speed through the world outside the tension-filled home.

It may be argued that the “fast zombie” has obviated the siege narrative as films like *28 Days Later* and *World War Z* move between many different locations rather than one fixed locale under threat, but this confuses an expansion of spatial possibility with a shift in the temporal situation. Paul E. Priester notes that, whereas in the classic Romero films “the vision is claustrophobic with survivors trying to barricade themselves in a fortress for safety,” *28 Days Later* “emphasises solitude and isolation. There are numerous striking images of the two main characters strolling down a vacant urban landscape.” Typically, these images are lingering, extreme long shots cut together with time elided so as to create a dreamlike montage, yet the increase in space does not mean the presence of possibilities. The survivors cannot use the time effectively to protect themselves from attacks and are thus forced into an endless period of anxious waiting, even if they are free to pace the city as they do so. Like the survivors under siege in *Dawn of the Dead*, they are simply marking time. As Selina brutally tells Jim, “plans are pointless. Staying alive is as good as it gets.” Thus, the rhythm of zombie apocalypse narratives remains constant across the genre, with periods of intense activity when time is unbearably short and periods between attacks when time is unbearably long because it consists solely of purposeless activities with people who are often competitors or a hindrance. This rhythm replicates the impact of time pressure in the twenty-first century, oscillating between overwork with no time to breathe and unemployment with no ability to make anything meaningful happen. In the end, the thing to dread most is that the time we have is simply being wasted.

The only major zombie apocalypse film that doesn't quite fit this description is *World War Z*, but then *World War Z* is one of the few zombie narratives that isn't post-apocalyptic. Global forces still fight the outbreak and hope to regain control; in contrast, the archetypal zombie story begins in the aftermath of struggle or in a location where survivors elsewhere cannot help the protagonists. It is in its treatment of the apocalypse that zombie cinema expresses its most profound disillusionment with contemporary time pressures. Here, at the end of days, the survivors find an extreme form of time crunch juxtaposed with the total absence of meaning. If the worst thing that can happen is time being wasted, then the post-apocalyptic setting bleakly suggests that time, however long or short, can *only* be wasted.

In Western culture, the apocalypse offers not just the endpoint to a linear conception of history but holds out the promise of meaning through a final judgment on all that has gone before. As David Pagano puts it:

There at the end, it is not just that time will have run out but also that the good and the evil will be sorted into their respective axiological and spatial categories, the former judged worthy and therefore admitted into the New Jerusalem, the latter judged unworthy and cast into the lake of fire. (72)

In the final moment, the *aleitheia*, the ultimate truth revealed by apocalypse divides the world irrevocably into good and evil (McGinn 1998; O'Leary 1994). As Jacques Derrida has written, "truth is the end and the instance of the Last Judgment" (84). Yet literary scholar Frank Kermode has cogently argued in *The Sense of an Ending* (1967) that narratives of apocalypse in the twentieth century have shifted from tales of imminent to immanent apocalypse (25), that is, not told shortly before the apocalypse but *during* the end of days. Rather than something impending, the apocalypse has already occurred and the protagonists stumble blindly in its aftermath. The true challenge of the immanent apocalypse is that it comes with no revelation. The promise of a meaningful endpoint turns history into *kairos*, moments of time pregnant with meaning for the developing pattern; with no revelation, time returns to *chronos*, mere passing time, mechanically going forward with no ulterior significance. It is this form of immanent apocalypse that zombie narratives embody both in their setting and in the form of the zombie itself, shuffling forward even after its time is up. At the end of the first series of *The Walking Dead* (2011), when the exhausted, desperate survivors reach the CDC in Atlanta looking for government assistance, they find only a lone scientist who tells them "this is our extinction event." Yet like the zombies the survivors have no choice but to keep moving, even after civilisation has died. They do not even have the comfort of knowing good and evil have been separated: their group is riven with internal dissent, with jealousy and suspicion, with power struggles, with moral quandaries.

If the apocalypse suggests at least an end and a resolution, the post-apocalyptic setting of zombie narratives suggests neither. Time did not end, nor did a final purpose emerge. Instead, *chronos* mercilessly streams onward, pushing its human flotsam through rapids and stretches of calm with no terminus in sight. The biggest psychological problem for the survivors is thus the fear that after all the frantic running and desperate struggle for survival, all they have to look forward to is a meaningless death; this becomes most obvious when they reach a temporary sanctuary. It's for this reason that some of the characters in *The Walking Dead* simply choose to die at the CDC rather than go on; if there's nowhere to go, why are they running? But the zombie apocalypse also comments powerfully on contemporary anxieties about the time crunch. What, beneath all the hectic scheduling and overwork, is the point? Perhaps it is for this reason that the genre seems drawn to scenes in which the survivors reminisce about their lives before the fall, ruing the opportunities lost: the child's ballgame missed, the calls to family not made, the dinners together left uneaten. Tellingly, no one ever wishes that they had finished their last work project. In situating their narratives in the immanent apocalypse, zombie films raise their most profound questions about modern time use: if you thought it would all end tomorrow, would you be doing what you are today?

CONCLUSION

In their insistent evocation and questioning of the time pressures that beset modern society, zombie apocalypse narratives allow their audiences to experience a heightened form of daily pressures and thus engage in a catharsis for some of the anxieties of daily life. Do they offer a solution as well as a release? I think the answer is a straightforward “no.” As Jiri Zuzanek has written of modern time pressures:

Most pressures faced by people in modern societies are social or structural. They are embedded in the competitive demands of globalised economies, changing workplace environments, value orientations emphasising rapid material gains and conformity with standardised and fast forms of experience prevalent in popular culture. (139)

Part of the appeal of zombie apocalypse narratives is that they offer a release from such structural pressures by destroying the world, which is hardly a realistic political program. One could take an analogous Marxist stance and call for the destruction of capitalism (as many have), but there is no reason to demand extreme solutions to resolve the issue of time pressure. Rather, as Zuzanek says, “technological and economic progress should and *need not* clash with the goals of social solidarity, cohesion, and human development” (140). There are many practical and workable solutions to this problem; the world’s leading social democracies have found ways to balance work and life through enlightened regulation, strong unions, and a social emphasis on the good life ahead of material success. Unlike in zombie apocalypse mythology, the world does not have to be destroyed to free us from the time crunch. It is, after all, a problem that can be tackled effectively using existing mechanisms, if we have the will, which in the end is the quality we possess that separates us from the creature that haunts our modern nightmares, our own monster of folk legend, the zombie.

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