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## The imaginary of the cinematic zombie in the representation of the defenceless: from Hollywood classicism to contemporary Europe

**Abstract**

**This article proposes a critical and iconographic itinerary through the main historical manifestations of zombies in cinema. From the origins of classical cinema, the figure of the zombie has been associated with that of the immigrant, the slave. The objective of this paper is to observe and establish the evolution of this archetype in history, and to analyse its validity in contemporary European films that deal with the social and political reality of illegal immigrants, revisiting the figure of the zombie. In this sense, the article proposes a historical and political reading of this archetype in popular culture that is so present in both the cinema and television of our times.**

**Keywords**

**Zombie, cinema, immigrant, excluded, figure, motif, Europe, immigration policies**

### 1. Introduction and methodology

A group of African immigrants gather around a bonfire, heating up some screws to burn their digital fingerprints with. It is a raw image in a documentary style, and this sort of voodoo ritual is a real, horrific rite of passage. The Africans talk to the camera and explain that they have to erase their fingerprints in order to reach England and apply for political asylum. Once there, if their digital fingerprint reveals that they had previously requested asylum in another European country, they will be deported. This is why they painfully, patiently get rid of their fingerprints. “Neither dead nor alive. Half way between the grave and... Neither human nor animal, something between the two...” says one of the immigrants as he burns the fingerprints off his hands. This awful image comes from the film *Qu'ils reposent en révolte (Des Figures de Guerres I)*, by Sylvain George, and was shot in 2010 in the French city of Calais, where immigrants risk their lives trying to cross the English Channel towards the UK.

When we see Sylvain George's images and feel the African immigrants' terrible experiences, hearing them speak about their condition of being living dead, we cannot help connecting them to one

of the most unsettling archetypes created by Hollywood's fantasy films of the 1930s: the zombie.

The origins of the first zombies in film history are to be found in the imaginary of African slaves. These re-emerge in the images of contemporary filmmakers such as Pedro Costa (Portugal) and Nicolas Klotz (France), who rework the zombie archetype with an overtly political intention in order to tackle the most vulnerable immigrants of our current times. These new zombies, present in contemporary European cities, demand that we critically review the zombie archetype's double origin in the history of film: colonialism, and the capitalist system, whose marginalized zombies appeared towards the end of the 1960s with George A. Romero's renewal of the archetype in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). As we shall see, we inevitably associate Romero's zombies, whose cannibalism is a critical reflection of capitalist society, with the new poor eating consumer society's leftovers in Europe crisis-stricken cities.

We will research into the zombie motif following Panofsky's definition of the word in *Ensayos de iconología* [Studies in Iconology] (1939): "The world of forms that we recognise as being loaded with primary or natural meanings may be called an artistic motif" (1991: 48). Each and every image presents a motif that corresponds with an experience, with something that proves to be immediately identifiable, verifiable, nameable. A motif is always the result of symbolic production. An inquiry into a motif through the history of its most significant and canonical representations therefore allows us to establish its symbolic production, and more precisely, the imaginary deposited in it by different eras (Brenez, 2006: 13-15). In our case, the zombie motif will allow us to see the evolution of this archetype throughout film history, but also the history of the various social, economic, and cultural imaginaries that progressively shaped it from the 1920s up until today.

The present article therefore proposes a critical itinerary through the main historical manifestations of the zombies in film, with an emphasis on the canonical works that have shaped this horror sub-genre that we associate with representations of those who are most vulnerable in society.

The main hypothesis of this study expounded how some of the most highly regarded and prominent authors of contemporary European cinema (Pedro Costa, Nicolas Klotz, and Sylvain George), have recuperated the imaginary of the classical zombie -created by early Hollywood horror films- to embody those excluded by the capitalist system (illegal immigrants) with a clear political intention.

As well as Panofsky's definition, we have chosen Walter Benjamin's critical studies on the motifs of the *flâneur* and the *clochard* in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Paris as a methodological model for this task. Benjamin took these two typologies of unproductive men who remain outside the capitalist system, and studied the history of their representation, as well as of the imaginaries deposited in them by 19<sup>th</sup> Century Parisian society. In this sense, Benjamin's work on the functions of the *flâneur* and the *clochard* in popular culture and in Baudelaire's poetry are an excellent example of the sort of critical-historical work that we will undertake here<sup>1</sup>.

The criteria we have established to define canonical works are based on the Constance Reception School's theories. Hans Robert Jauss, its main theoretician and a literature historian, pointed out the possibility of recognising in certain works the capacity to contain and sum up a preceding tradition. That is to say, to contain and fulfil its canon. We will therefore define as canonical works for our study those contemporary works that include

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<sup>1</sup> See: Benjamin, W. "Sobre algunos motivos en Baudelaire", *Baudelaire*. Madrid: Abada, 2014; Benjamin, W. "El Flâneur" in *Libro de los Pasajes*. Madrid: Akal, 2005; Benjamin, W. "Tesis de filosofía de la historia", in *Discursos Interrumpidos, I*. Madrid: Taurus, 1992.

and converse with the traditions that have shaped the zombie motif. In this sense, we may recognise how the films of Sylvain George, Pedro Costa, and Nicolas Klotz fulfil and sum up the tradition of zombie films from the 1930s and 1940s, in dialogue with, though not as closely, with G.A. Romero's renewal of the zombie archetype.

The history of zombies in film is the history of the dead who continue to suffer the injustices of the system that killed them. As Benjamin thought, "not even the dead will be safe from the enemy if he wins. And the enemy has not ceased to be victorious." (2008: 308). For Benjamin, the enemy that "has not ceased to be victorious" was obviously nothing other than European fascism spurred on and fed by the logic of a savage capitalism.

## **2. The ethnographic and filmic origin of the zombie: slavery and colonialism**

The first description of a zombie comes from *The Magic Island*, by William Buehler Seabrook. Published in 1929, it narrates the bizarre experiences of this former American soldier during his stay in Haiti under the US occupation: "The eyes were the worst. It was not my imagination. They were in truth like the eyes of a dead man, not blind, but staring, unfocused, unseeing. The whole face, for that matter, was bad enough. It was vacant, as if there was nothing behind it. It seemed not only expressionless, but incapable of expression. I must confess I almost fainted" (2005: 211).

This description defines (and shapes) the archetypal image of the zombie, whose eyes, emptied of will, live on in current times. Seabrook's work had a strong impact in the United States, and introduced the figure of the zombie into popular culture, to the point that even Orson Welles made a radio adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in 1936 that was set in Haiti and plagued by voodoo rituals and the living dead. (Uzal, 2006: 14).

The growing popular interest in the figure of the zombie inspired a series of ethnographic studies on Haitian voodoo culture. Among the most prominent ones, it is worth mentioning the work carried out by anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston (1938) in the 1930s. The famous ethnographer Frank Boss sent her to research the myth of men who returned from death. The origin of the word 'zombie' is attributed to the Mitsogho tribe in Gabon, West Africa, who used the term *ndzumbi* to refer to corpses. African slaves who were sent to the colonies of Haiti, Martinique, and Jamaica between the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, popularised its use (and beliefs) in the new land. The fear of being possessed by another person is one of the most prominent features of all the folklore revolving around zombies, and is probably rooted in the terrible memories of years of slavery. The work of Wade Davies (1988) and Marina Warren (2002) back up this hypothesis through the narration of slave masters' awful practices.

This fact marks an important phenomenon regarding the archetype's origins. Zombies were the first supernatural creatures that did not emerge from the European Gothic tradition (like Dracula or Frankenstein). Instead, they came straight out of African slaves' practices, who arrived in Haiti and the Caribbean after much suffering and being uprooted. As Shawn McIntosh (2008) points out, the figure of the zombie travelled from folklore and straight to popular culture without being previously laid down by literature.

Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932) included the first appearance of a zombie in the history of film. It happens at night, next to the sugarcane fields of a large estate in Haiti. An African coachman drives an American couple to a landowner's mansion, where they are to be married. They come across a group of zombies, creatures with a blank gaze, who walk slowly, dragging their feet, as they carry their work tools in their hands. When the groom asks the coachman why he is so upset, he replies: "They are not men Monsieur, they are dead bodies. Zombies. The living dead. Corpses taken from their graves who are made to work in sugar mills and fields at night." The zombies' first appearance in the history of film leaves a strong mark: they appear connected to over-exploitation from the very start, and

their function is not to eat humans, but to continue working for the landowners, even after death. Halperin's ground-breaking film does not include any political dilemma, nor does it offer any form of critique on the zombies' inhumane situation. As its title indicates, *White Zombie's* predicament is not that of the supernatural African slaves, but that of a white bourgeois girl: Madeleine, the film's white zombie, who is turned into a zombie by a voodoo master (Bela Lugosi) because the landowner has fallen in love with her and his love is unrequited. In their environment, we see the black zombies piled up inside a mill, pushing the wheels of the sugar mill like animals. These are the first images (and actions) of these beings to be shown on film, and they appear famished, exhausted, with no will whatsoever in their gazes: almost a foreshadowing of the terrible images of African refugees and immigrants in contemporary detention centres filmed by Sylvain George, waiting to cross the fences that keep them from Europe.

This first film representation shows the beliefs that Americans developed around voodoo and Caribbean African legends during the years of the military occupation of Haiti (between 1915 and 1934). White people's fear of being possessed by exploited black men began to take form in these images at the same time as the dominant colonial classes' sense of guilt began to emerge. In the book *Les chasses à l'homme* (2010), the French philosopher Grégoire Chamayou drew up a detailed history of the hunt of man by other men, from early slave trade to today's manhunts of the immigrants who try to climb over the walls and into Europe's welfare system. Chamayou points out that although the capture and trade of African slaves began in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century with Portuguese settlers, it “doesn't reach its full amplitude until the discovery of America, and the triangular trade that this imposed, that is to say, with the constitution of transatlantic capitalism” (2010: 66). This is the (not so hidden) origin of the figure of the zombie in popular culture. Zombies were born out of the imaginary of the over-exploited slave. They are his worst nightmare: creatures who even rise up from their tombs to continue working during their entire death, for eternity. Real testimonies of slaves literally described life on the plantations as a non-life, as a life for the living dead (Douglass, 1994: 325).

*I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), by Jacques Tourneur, was the first zombie movie to be recognised as a canonical masterpiece of the sub-genre, and of the horror film genre<sup>2</sup>. Also set in Haiti, it begins with a young nurse who travels to the Antilles to work on the sugar plantation of a rich, unhappy family of landowners. In its first beats, the film shows a girl sailing towards a mysterious island on a boat with Africans crowded on the bow, a clear evocation of the first slaves who arrived on that land. Later on in the film, one of the servants tells the nurse that the Hollands (the family of landowners) brought the great-great-grandparents of all the Africans by boat. The nurse's ingenious response is: “At least they brought them somewhere beautiful, right?” This sign of indifference, or of moral anaesthesia, from the white people towards the black servants' suffering, provides a critical and ironic element in Tourneur's film that was unusual in Hollywood films. The film's plot, more typical of horror B movies' anti-establishment functions, places its emphasis on the drama and misery of the white masters before a backdrop of voodoo and zombies.

Tourneur decided to work with Haitian natives, and shot rituals with a respect and fidelity that is almost documentary in nature, portraying the zombies as something more than terrifying monsters. In his films, like in *White Zombie*, voodoo and extortionate 'zombieism' are practices of white masters, not of the slaves' descendants. Only in the hands

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<sup>2</sup> In this sense see: Deleuze, G. *La imagen-movimiento. Estudios sobre cine I*. Barcelona: Paidós, 1984; Deleuze, G. *La imagen-tiempo. Estudios sobre cine II*. Barcelona: Paidós, 1986; Dufour, E. *Le cinéma d'horreur et ses figures*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France – PUF, 2006; Losilla, C. *El cine de terror*. Barcelona: Paidós, 1993, among many others.

of white people do these rituals become a negative force of possession and domination (Fujiwara, 1998; Uzal, 2006).

The basic paradigm of these pioneers in zombie sub-genre films is founded upon a possessing/possessed device that is evident in both a narrative and a demonstrative level. In *White Zombie*, the voodoo master makes a possession gesture that consists in forcefully crossing his hands and dictating his will to the docile servants. In *I Walked with a Zombie*, the living dead only recognise the voice of the plantation's matriarch, which speaks through a supposed voodoo god. Beyond the ambiguous forms employed to represent possession, the *mise en scène* points towards it by showing the control that the white masters exercise over the African descendants' soulless bodies. The shots-reverse shots of this domination show only one point of view, established by the dominant master as he looks at his slave with a grotesque intention while the latter appears defeated and with a blank look on his face, or a look that is completely devoid of any will. The look of the living dead.

Amongst the numerous versions of this archetype is a work whose eccentricity allows us to recognise the first and unmistakable features from what was an already established canon: *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943), by Steve Sekely, which was produced months after Tourneur's masterpiece. The film opens with a black servant entering a cemetery to wake a group of zombies out of their tombs take with a clear order: "The master said to pick up your spades and picks and get to work". As taught by the Constance School of Reception, the signs of an already canonised imaginary may be detected in a genre's secondary works. The films that give continuity to these foundational features in early zombie films "enunciate the rules of a genre, allow us to recognise the genre as such" (Jauss, 1992). If we look at how the archetype is presented in this minor film, we will observe that together with the usual facial and aesthetic features of the zombie (blank looks, awkward gaits, ragged clothes, the cemetery as a natural habitat, the night as a particular time, etc.), we may also recognise a primordial narrative and ideological act; that of getting up from death to go to work.

On this occasion, *Revenge of the Zombies* tells of the eccentric will of a German master, Von Otterman, who is trying to improve a Haitian spell in order to create an immortal zombie army to fight under the Nazis. This film was one of the first to export the practice of 'zombieism' to new cultures of exploitation. The American characters manage to stop the evil master by the end of the film, the only unease in the film residing in the Nazism driving the B-movie character's intentions. Not only does the making of the zombies not imply any moral problem, it is established as something banal, as a simple backdrop common to any drama remotely set in the Antilles. Two decades later, in *The Plague of the Zombies* (Joe Gillis, 1966), a British film from a famous horror production company, Hammer, the myth is picked up again, set in a small English villa where the poorest settlers mysteriously disappear. In an old tin mine, shut down due to bad safety conditions, a landowner turns his former miners into zombies, condemning them to work for eternity, in secret. We see black slaves mixed with the English workers in the mine tunnels: a significant and allegorical anachronism. The axis of the zombies' inhuman exploitation was still present in the storylines three decades after its debut in the cinema.

### **3. The zombie as a political figure in American 70s cinema: hunger and capitalism**

In 1968 George A. Romero reformulated the figure of the zombie in *Night of the Living Dead*. Firstly, he distanced it from the concrete issue of the exploitation of black slaves so as to develop a general discourse on human relations under capitalism in North America. George Romero "freed the zombie from his master's shackles and didn't give them a function (a job or a task like those voodoo priests would usually give the zombies), but a drive (to eat human flesh)" (Dendle, 2001).

This new portrayal, which runs through the zombie imaginary of most posterior literary, visual, film, television, or interactive productions, recuperates the former archetypal image of the undead that we had already mentioned: wearing ragged clothes, the blank gaze and clumsy walk. Suffering over work is replaced by a hunger that is also seen as a burden: while the original zombie had to repeatedly sink his spade into the ground, Romero's undead continuously sank their teeth into palpitating bodies. In this way, zombie iconography opened up to portray the undead gnawing at human bones or pouncing on entrails or long intestines, tirelessly, with no limit.

And yet the zombie is a weak creature. In *Night of the Living Dead*, Romero presents his first zombie in a cemetery, glimpsed by two brothers who are there to lay flowers on a grave. It is no coincidence that these two characters are from the upper classes, and that one of them makes fun of the figure walking clumsily in the distance. When the stranger comes close -before they suspect he might attack them-, he opens his arms towards them in a gesture of absolute helplessness. This gesture will accompany, starting with this film, future representations of zombies: they don't hide their subhuman condition and at first sight appear to ask for help when they open up their arms. In this way they confound their victims who, moved by pity, end up putting themselves in danger. This trademark scene is staged at the film's climax, just before the zombies enter the farm where the protagonists have taken refuge: at the moment the undead try to make their way through the ditches that strengthen the walls, Romero pauses on the multiple arms that extend and beat up and down as if asking for help. Danger presents itself in the form of a call for help because the zombies need to feed themselves: they are slaves to their own devouring needs. Romero created some horrific bodies, devourers of humans, but inserted the desperation of the socially excluded<sup>3</sup> in the appearance of these creatures by showing their most basic need. Hunger, "the clearest metaphor for poverty" (Caparrós, 2015: 520).

In *Night of the Living Dead*, seven characters lock themselves up in a farm in Pennsylvania to protect themselves from an attack from "common creatures in a state of trance", as defined by the media. Later on, a news programme calls them scavengers, stating that a single blow or a shot through the head can destroy them. Little by little, Romero clarifies the habits of this renewed zombie figure, which distinguishes itself from the original not just because it eats human flesh, but also because may be of any race (although in Romero's film the zombies are mostly white). In contrast, the protagonist who fights against the zombies is now a black figure. This inversion will however take an ironic twist: after dealing with the scavengers, Ben (Duane Jones), the African American character, is left alone among the corpses of the zombies and of his companions, and at the moment he realises his heroic quest is over, some armed civilians, mistaking him for the undead, shoot him from afar. Ben is murdered like a zombie. The historian Jean-Baptiste Thoret points that undifferentiation is precisely the great subject of Romero's next film, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), where the dead can hardly be distinguished from those who are alive due to their increasingly similar behaviour and appearance (Thoret, 2006: 304). In fact, in the six films<sup>4</sup> Romero made on the living dead between 1968 and 2009, he establishes a clear discourse on the lack of a dividing line between zombies and humans.

Some have read *Night of the Living Dead* as a critique of the Vietnam war and American society after the repression of the civil rights movement. Some have also said that the film is

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<sup>3</sup> For the sociological concept of social exclusion see Gil Villa, F. (2002). *La exclusión social*. Barcelona: Ariel, or Tezanos, J.F. (Ed.) (1999). *Tendencias en desigualdad y exclusión social*. Madrid: Sistema. Also by the same author, (2001). *La sociedad dividida. Estructura de clases y desigualdades en las sociedades tecnológicas*. Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva.

<sup>4</sup> The first, as commented above, was *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), followed by *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2007), and *Survival of the Dead* (2009).

an allegory of the battle against racial segregation in the United States (Wood, 1986)<sup>5</sup>. The final images of Ben as he is picked up by civilians are still images. They look like contemporary press photographs (Ben is dragged to a bonfire as if here about to be lynched by the Ku Klux Klan), highlighting, as Jamie Russell points out, that “these events are not part of a supernatural horror, but of something far more ordinary” (2005: 68). Romero is interested in representing “the disastrous American government” (Lerman, 2008: 38), pointing out that zombies emerge from a society that is uncared for, one that is sick and brimming with violence<sup>6</sup>. It is no coincidence that the dead come back to life as a result of a military experiment authorised by the government; neither God nor Voodoo have anything to do with the *zombie epidemic* sweeping across North America<sup>7</sup>. It is man who, through his thirst for destruction, generates these equally destructive mutations. In George A. Romero's first zombie film, a power struggle is established among the group of survivors; a struggle where the patriarch of the family confronts Ben and even tries to get rid of him. This became one of the features that most influenced posterior zombies narratives: hell is not about the dead rising up from their tombs, it lies in the belligerent relations of the survivors.

In 1978, ten years after *Night of Living Dead*, George A. Romero made his second zombie film, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), where he tells the story of four survivors who take refuge from the living dead in a mall, but soon discover that the place is infested with zombies. The explanation for the zombies living there is that they can synthetically reproduce what they did when they were alive: wander around the corridors and escalators, and stare at the shop windows. This impulse to remain in a consumer habitat is the same one the protagonists feel as they excitedly grab at clothes, jewels, or home appliances in the shops: they become echoes of the zombies through their need to consume capitalist society's superfluous goods. The survivors consume insatiably, just like the zombies are seen devouring human flesh: the hungry urge to eat indefinitely clearly connects with the image of an unstoppable capitalism and consumerism. Romero connects the living with the dead in the edit, using images of mannequins in shop windows to link up all these consumers: the static bodies and the plastic faces, devoid of thought, reproduce an anaesthetised humanity that rejects singularity or individual personality. For the first time in history, with the establishment of department stores, consumers begin to consider themselves a mass. (Earlier it was only scarcity that taught them that)”, as Walter Benjamin suspected before World War II (2005: 77).

To appear as a mass is precisely one of the features that has consistently appeared in the portrayal of the living dead since 1968: the image of a zombi moving forward, apparently

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<sup>5</sup> The political readings of Romero's zombie imaginary are numerous. See for example Newitz, A. (2006). *Pretend We're Dead. Capitalist Monsters in American Popular Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press; Bishop, K.W. (2010). *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland; Ochoa, L.P. (2013). *George A. Romero. Cuando no quede sitio en el infierno*. Madrid: Akal; Drezner, D.W. (2015). *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. See also the articles by Stephen Harper “Night of the Living Dead. Reappraising and Undead Classic”, *Bright Light Films Journal*, Nov. 2005; Christopher Cooker. “Dying to Fight: Some Reflections on Zombies and War”, *International Politics Reviews I*, Dec. 2013, 91-99, or the chapter “Night of the Living Dead: It's Not Just a Wind That's Passing Through”, by Dillard, R. H., in Waller, G. (Ed.) (1987) *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to complement this approach, which focuses on 70s zombie films' political subtext, with the sociological and anthropological standpoint of Jorge Martínez Lucena in relation to the figure of the zombie in Romero's *oeuvre* and its evolution up until to today. See Martínez Lucena, J. (2010) *Vampiros y zombies posmodernos. La revolución de los hijos de la muerte*. Barcelona: Gedisa.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel W. Drezner enumerates the various explanations of the zombie's origins that posterior cinematographic fictions picked up on: extraterrestrial, technological, microbiological, and supernatural. Romero himself changed the radioactive origins in his first zombie film for a more supernatural explanation in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), where zombies return to Earth because there is no room left for them in hell (2015: 27).

alone, soon sees the camera stepping back to reveal the company of others of its kind. This is a clear canonical trademark of posterior representations of these creatures. The visual idea of protagonists who need to control the masses from above also repeats itself. In the case of *Dawn of the Dead*, the mall's terraced roof is the only point from which the masses can be seen in miniature. The aim is to nullify the zombies by making their bodies small, but Romero, in his critical view of North American society, rethinks this miniaturisation as the unstoppable vision of an epidemic that expands out of control. Because of this, the historian Jean-Baptiste Thoret highlights a new feature, the fact that zombies "occupy the integrity of the frame" (2006: 300) and thus conquer it, something that other representatives of the marginal achieved in the films of the seventies<sup>8</sup>. As we will see in the next section, this visual idea was taken up by other filmmakers such as Sylvain George and Nicolas Klotz, who also gave prominence to the masses in their portrayal of immigrants in contemporary Europe, but who also added an element of tumultuous violence.

We would like to highlight the resurgence of the first classical zombie, represented as a slave, in Romero's later films on the living dead: this depiction was fruitfully developed in his fourth film, *Land of the Dead* (2005), where the zombies were literally slaves in a funfair with circus shows and fights between chained zombies. Next to these slaves who are there to entertain humans, some zombies belong to the working class. An African American leader rises among them, teaching his colleagues to use make fire and use rudimentary weapons. They finally overthrow the rich using, significantly, their work tools: shovels, picks, wrenches, screws, or hammer drills representing the most deprived workers rising up against their masters, until they finally defeat -devour- the upper classes.

In *Survival of the Dead*, premiered in 2009, the last instalment of Romero's zombie imaginary, the characters wonder whether the living dead can be domesticated and live together with humans. In this attempt, we see the zombies chained and treated like animals once again. In this way, the living dead subsist under shackles and chains, resuming the original connection with the first depictions of zombies in film history. Half a century after Romero first contributed to the classical tradition with new nuances, his last zombies contain and consume the beginnings of this tradition, demonstrating that zombies continue to represent, the most extreme underprivileged of society, decade after decade. On the one hand, we thus see how the visual imaginary created by Romero left a broad inheritance that was picked up from the likes of Michael Jackson in the music video *Thriller* (John Landis, 1983), up to new zombie comedies such as *Return of the Living Dead* (Dan O'Bannon, 1985), or *Warm Bodies* (Jonathan Levine, 2013). But just as we see in the television series *The Walking Dead* (Frank Darabont, AMC, 2010-), from their traditional depictions up to Romero's imaginary, zombie films, among so many other contemporary cinematic ideas<sup>9</sup>, include a

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to point out how John Carpenter, also interested in a critical representation of the disadvantaged masses, gave the street delinquents in *Assault on Precinct 13* a visual treatment that likened them to zombies. Carpenter confessed that *Night of the Living Dead* had influenced his work, in the way the gangs multiply in the frame, dangerously laying siege to the police station. In the same way, in *Prince of Darkness* (1987), Carpenter shows how the beggars, led by a satanic evil force, move and creep up on the protagonists like zombies.

<sup>9</sup> Jamie Russell presents a comprehensive filmography in *Book of the Dead: The Complete History of Zombi Cinema* (2005), where he shows that narratives about zombies are a film phenomenon that transcended US productions: Australian, British, Chinese, Czech, German, Italian, Mexican, Japanese, or Korean films were made, especially in the 1980s, and were produced in even larger quantities in the 1990s. Daniel W. Drezner points out that fictions about the undead have continued to proliferate in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (2015: 2). See Briefel, A. & Miller, and S.J. (Ed.) (2011). *Horror after 9/11. World of fear, cinema of Terror*. Austin: University of Texas Press; Pollard, T. (2011). *Hollywood 9/11. Superheroes, Supervillains and Super Disasters*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers; Rockmores, T. (2011). *Before and after 9/11: A Philosophical Examination of Globalization, Terror, and History*. New York: Continuum. It is also important to keep in mind the quantity of video games that use the zombie imaginary, as demonstrated by Tanya Krzwinska.

rebellious political discourse that contemporary European cinema will pick up on with greater force and depth.

#### **4. Figures of resistance: the zombie as a representation of undocumented immigrants in contemporary Europe**

After having analysed the two main zombie traditions in the history of cinema (as a victim of colonialism and as a victim of capitalism), we may now return to the article's starting point (the image of immigrants erasing their fingerprints to avoid being thrown out of Europe), in order to address some of the central issues revolving around European contemporary cinema's treatment of this archetype.

As mentioned above, in the films of Sylvain George, Pedro Costa, and Nicolas Klotz, immigrants are figures without an identity, outside of society (the marginal neighbourhood of Fontainhas, in the work of Costa, is an example of this sort of isolated suburb), without a passport (the immigrants held prisoner at the airport in *La blessure*), with no fingerprints (the immigrants in *Qu'ils reposent en révolte...*), threatened with expulsion (the storylines of *Low life*, by Nicolas Klotz, as well as that of *A caça ao coelho com Pau*, *Tarrafal* and *O nosso homem*, by Pedro Costa, revolve around the arrival of a deportation letter). They exist without existing. They are the living dead.

These characters shape a new depiction of zombies in contemporary European cinema that brings together the two imaginaries analysed above. On the one hand, these new zombies still carry the weight of the history of colonialism and slavery on their backs (their aim is to make the reverse journey of the settlers and reach Europe, though once there the majority become illegal, exploited immigrants; the ancestral curse lives on). On the other hand, they are a defenceless, disadvantaged group, a sort of byproduct of society, abandoned by Europe, where they had hoped to start life anew. "When there is no place left in hell, the living dead return to earth", says Peter in *Dawn of the Dead*, remembering an old saying his African grandfather used to say. Voodoo thus establishes a close connection between the traditional zombie and Romero's living dead. Nowadays one might affirm that when the situation in Africa becomes unsustainable, its inhabitants try to reach Europe. These European movies film a reflection `resented by an uncontrollable mass of the undead as they look for a second chance. The living dead no longer wave their arms or eat human flesh, but are nevertheless figures driven by a desperate urge to return to life after death. This new depiction of the zombie acquires overtones of resistance, carrying a strong political charge and pushing former representations further.

As we saw at the beginning of the article with *Qu'ils reposent en révolte...*, it is common for characters to reflect upon their own condition; to be aware of their living death. In *Cavalo Dinheiro* (2014), Ventura and his hospital companions talk about their curse beyond death. They have all suffered awful occupational accidents: "We will continue to get burnt, we will continue to cut ourselves with machines, we will continue to fall from the third floor. We have always died and lived like this, it is our sickness." The zombie's sickness<sup>10</sup>.

Julio and Khadra Hussein, protagonists of *Low Life*, also discuss their condition with their colleagues. Julio stays in bed, he has stopped eating and talking. He finally explains what has led to this situation; the unease resulting from a demeaning medical checkup

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<sup>10</sup> *Cavalo Dinheiro* includes two musical fragments that make the immigrant's *malaise* explicit. The song *Alto Cutelo* by Os Tubarões, a popular band from the 1970s in Cape Verde, explains the misery of the Cape Verdean immigrants' over-exploited (non)lives in Lisbon. Meanwhile, onscreen, we see images of contemporary zombie/slaves' faces (generally construction workers). Their story is terrible; they are poverty-stricken, yet their faces only express dignity. At another moment in the film two characters sing *Pepe Lopi* and repeat the chorus *ad nauseum*: "I'm hungry and I cannot eat; I'm thirsty and I cannot drink; I'm sleepy and I cannot sleep". They are fully aware of their condition.

carried out by the police to ascertain his age. He feels that the machines that have scrutinised his body are demons who have stolen his memories and dreams, because they say he was born two years before what his mother had told him. They therefore don't recognise his true identity. Julio remains awake but doesn't move; he stops talking again. He chooses silence.

His friend Hussein, from Afghanistan, decides to lock himself up in the room of his loved one, Carmen, upon receiving a letter that denied him asylum. After a long time locked up in a room where he appears to progressively vanish, he wonders where the Europe of human rights has gone. He speaks ironically about the term “migratory flow”, and says that immigrants are treated like excrement. This is the thinking of a dead world, he affirms. He feels hounded, his life slips through his fingers; others have decided how he should live it. He is a zombie at the mercy of bureaucracy and statistics. Hussein and Julio have had their lives stolen from them, they are dead people who wish to integrate in the world of the living, but European immigration policies won't allow it. These immigrants' response to the government's indifference is to turn to ancestral magic and voodoo; ritual practices of African origin. The gestures of rebellion are presented as mysterious, connected to the irruption of “otherness” fostered by fantasy film. It is no coincidence that the immigrants in *Low Life* live on Carrefour Street, a clear homage to *I Walked with a Zombie*.

Contemporary Portuguese cinema, in a more or less evident way, is concerned with a historical reflection on, and confrontation with, the country's colonial past, whose consequences are still felt today. The post-colonial question is very much present in Pedro Costa's films. A connection between zombies and colonialism is explicitly established in *Casa de lava* (1994) (based on Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie*), which presents the daily life of Cape Verde's inhabitants. The protagonist here is a nurse who must take care of Leão, the zombie in this case, a construction worker from Cape Verde who has had an accident in Lisbon. A clear parallelism is drawn between slavery and exploited immigrants. *Casa de lava* becomes a sort of film-womb from which the physical and human geography of Fontainhas unfolds. The neighbourhood, made up of shacks like those in Cape Verde, is shown as one of the most degraded areas of the Portuguese capital. Its inhabitants live in a state of inertia, with no chance of changing or leaving. They are the silhouettes who, like Carrefour in *I Walked with a Zombie*, cross the screen silently, heavily, like sleepwalkers. They appear to have no willpower, because they are not allowed to have any will. They are the invisible victims of capital, the ghosts of a forgotten revolution.

Ventura, a contemporary and “real” embodiment of Carrefour, is the central figure of Costa's oeuvre. His stories about his awful experiences as a construction worker in Lisbon bring back echoes (the atavistic pain) of slaves who the Portuguese conquerors brought back in crammed boats (Salvadó, 2012). In *Cavalo Dinheiro*, Ventura wakes up under a sign of Amadeu Gaudencio Constructions, the company where he had worked forty years earlier. His work drive takes him back to a routine that no longer exists, to a factory that is in ruins; a life for the living dead. Once there, he takes up gestures from the past and imagines a conversation with the factory owner, who, after going bankrupt, had ran away, taking the money and machinery with him. These small gestures become gestures of a living memory, and therefore, of resistance against destruction.

This is one of the features that distinguishes the new zombie in contemporary European cinema; his capacity to persist (like a ghost), and the political weight of his actions. These contemporary zombies are often undocumented and therefore divested of an official identity, yet they articulate their story, they speak (or remain in voluntary silence): Ventura, Blandine in *La blessure*, Julio and Hussein, the immigrants in Calais in *Qu'ils reposent...* Their experiences and stories are the starting point of the films they star in. The contemporary zombie takes centre stage, his face is distinguishable from the masses (the immigrants in *Qu'ils reposent...* write their names on a wall, on stones, as proof having been

alive); they take the floor in order to narrate their life in death. Words and faces are therefore central elements in the *mise en scène*. A subjective component thus emerges in the attempt to write another History, that of an uprooted, invisible, marginalised people.

Yet despite this individualisation, the masses continue to be a key element, just like in Romero's imaginary. In *Low Life*, Hussein affirms that something is coming near, from outside. His words appear to refer to the immigrants that Europe has abandoned; a sort of invisible force emerging from oblivion that connects with voodoo rituals. It is an offscreen presence, configured by the sum of the individual stories told in these films. The audio environment in Klotz's films, the saturated black and white of George's films, and the chiaroscuro in Pedro Costa's work all point to a threatening presence. Something is happening offscreen; something is silently stirring. The mass of the underprivileged, hungry, and abandoned continues to cry for help, like in Romero's films, unanswered.

These new zombies are no longer driven by a cannibalistic desire, but by the wish to obtain asylum in a European country, to break down borders, the way Romero's zombies would try to invade the frame at all cost. The gesture is not the same, but the idea of a slow, sustained revolt of the disaffected remains. These beings whose identity is denied insist on attempting to cross the borders into the West.

The new living dead don't eat humans, but they do feed off garbage, the leftovers of consumer society. In *No quarto da Vanda*, Vanda's mother skins a cat in the back of her shack. In *Qu'ils reposent en révolte...*, the immigrants share leftover food amongst the rubble, under the cawing of the seagulls hounding them. Cannibalism isn't present (although in *Juventude em marcha*, whether he was a cannibal), but the zombie persists as a critical reflection of consumerist society. Blandine in *La blessure* will have to work as a prostitute; the immigrants in *Qu'ils reposent en révolte...* build their shacks out of cardboard boxes and other materials that are covered in brands and advertising slogans. Ironically, they live sheltered under the language of a market that condemns them.

The space the immigrants inhabit is the result of a construct that leads to segregation, that causes precarity. The shack in The Jungle in *Qu'ils reposent en révolte...*, the slum of Fontainhas in Pedro Costa's work, or the poverty-stricken, crammed immigrant houses in *La blessure* or *Low Life* keep the zombies on society's margins. That is why the narrative intention of these films is always based on the conquest of a space; in the possibilities for inhabiting a space, and for its protagonists' existence.

In *Juventude em marcha* (2006), Ventura and his Cape Verdean neighbours are forced to leave the neighbourhood of Fontainhas because it is about to be demolished. Once again, it is evident that they do not belong anywhere; it is impossible for them to find their place in society. Their non-life is developed in a sort of limbo, a space of suspension between Cape Verde and Portugal. Their illegal condition turns them into invisible, non-existent figures, like the immigrants in The Jungle, another limbo space in *Qu'ils reposent en révolte*<sup>11</sup>.

This non-belonging activates the need for police surveillance, which is just as present in the films of Nicolas Klotz and Sylvain George. The idea is to keep the plague of zombies/immigrants behind a wall of contention<sup>12</sup>. In *Qu'ils reposent en révolte* or in *Low Life* (2011) it is the European borders defended by the police, in *La blessure* it is the airport room

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<sup>11</sup> In an attempt to find a place of their own, both the inhabitants of Fontainhas and the immigrants of La Jungla are in charge of building their own homes/shacks. The limbo-like aspect is also brought about by the insular nature of the spaces occupied by the zombies. Let us not forget that the voodoo tradition came from the slaves who arrived in the Antilles.

<sup>12</sup> Let us not forget that the imaginary of the western genre and of the border is key to Romero's zombie films.

where asylum seekers are locked up before their request are even heard<sup>13</sup>, and the immigrant detention centres. These are control policies within the limits of a space that could well be the frame of the social itself. Yet these filmmakers place their protagonists in the centre of the frame, they're given centre stage (they no longer occupy the offscreen space so typical of the monster in classical cinema; they are like in Romero's zombies, diluted in the masses). And they deal with the violence that wanting to expel them (from Europe, from the frame) involves, especially in the films of Klotz and George.

These filmmakers film immigrants with the potency of the exception within the tradition of fantasy cinema. Furthermore, they produce extraordinary images with them<sup>14</sup> to rival ordinary press images that turn them into a cliché. By returning to the imaginary of the zombies and reworking the power that comes from a state of exception, these images of immigration turn into resilient images. As Walter Benjamin said, the essence of things is not exposed by their ordinary use, it is to be found in the extraordinary. This cinema fights against the vulgarisation of images. It gleans the tradition of cinema to give their very real inhabitants a legendary, supernatural appearance: the resonating power of all the zombies in history<sup>15</sup>.

In this sense, the figure of the zombie pushes that of the slave to the point of metaphysical slavery, where any possibility of liberation or moral superiority lies beyond a biological-natural approach. Using Hegel's terms in his famous "The Master-Slave Dialectic", the condition of the zombie involves an incapacity to conquer freedom due to a lack of life. Hegelian ideas reach an unexpected dimension through these films. Hegel points out that if the slave is a slave, it is because he has preferred to live in slavery rather than face death and defend his freedom. He makes the condition of the slave dependent of the slave's will (Hegel in Chamayou, 2010: 77-83). Chamayou makes no concessions and criticises Hegelian dialectics by confronting them with colonial slavery, pointing out that Hegel rejected the liberation of slaves during a revolt which, significantly, took place in Haiti in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He also disdained the value of their sovereign determination to conquer freedom by risking death in their revolt. He positioned himself in favour of a gradual and paternalistic abolition, contending that the emancipatory value of African slaves was relative ("negroes die lightly", contended the German philosopher), and that it should be guided by European settlers (Chamayou, 2010: 79). A terrible ethnocentrism, expressed in Hegel's position, is also made evident in all these European films. To search for a new life in Europe, through death, and to do it as many times as necessary doubtlessly demands a political-fantastical approach. If a dead slave cannot take on his death again to gain freedom and sovereignty, it becomes necessary to tackle the depiction and imaginary belonging from fantasy film in order for immigrants to be able to cross the borders. This is what these contemporary European films appear to be saying.

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<sup>13</sup> Another clear depiction of a limbo. When immigrants are violently forced to board a plane that will take them back to their country of origin, they desperately shout that this will be their death sentence. They would rather die trying to escape their country than return to their starting point.

<sup>14</sup> In each of these cases we are dealing with independent cinema. The experiences during the film shoots of Costa and George are quite solitary (using small digital cameras) and intense, as both of them lived with the protagonists of their films for long periods of time in order to obtain their complicity.

<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that the three filmmakers have often mentioned the influence of zombie films, and of classical auteurs such as Jacques Tourneur in particular. One of Pedro Costa's first films, *Casa de lava* (1994) is a variation on *I Walked with a Zombie*. *Low Life* by Nicolas Klotz, and both *A caça ao coelho com Pau*, *Tarrafal* and *O nosso homem*, by Pedro Costa, were inspired by Jacques Tourneur's *Night of the Demon* (1957). The demonic message of Dr. Karswell takes the shape of a deportation letter in the work of both filmmakers.

## **5. Conclusions: reverting the motif to tell the story of the invisible ones**

Klotz, Costa, and George address the zombie archetype from its constituent paradox, exploring the power of fantasy film and voodoo as forms of resistance. The immigrants who burn their digital fingerprints in George's film say that "if Europeans control our digital fingerprints to deport us, we will develop our own techniques to disappear out of their control". In *Low Life*, the Africans receiving official orders to leave French territory (OQTF<sup>16</sup>) carry out a sort of voodoo ritual on the documents and hide them inside the pockets of policemen or of the bourgeois, who end up dying in tragic accidents. This is a way of using the zombie film imaginary to desecrate the specific dialectics of contemporary oppression. All the films (full of cemetery and voodoo sequences) pick up on the patterns and clichés of the genre in order to revert them politically. They turn the zombie into a figure of resistance, as if they wanted to say: "a dead man cannot die". This sentence, expressed by the immigrants in Sylvain George's film, turns the zombie aporia into a declaration of resistance. Hence the title of the film, "qu'ils reposent en révolte!" To rest in revolt is the oxymoron at the root of a type of violence through which the weak and uprooted manifest themselves. This paradox takes to the streets, its depiction stemming from the tradition of the zombie film sub-genre in film history.

Nicole Brenez believes that cinema, insofar as it deals with symbolic elaborations, must not only be seen as a reflection, a symptom, or an instrument, but as an agent. In this way, any visual enterprise that might reconfigure a motif would be seen as a key element in its research, especially when the aim is to ultimately destroy the motif itself. According to Brenez, a motif becomes interesting when its installation, establishment, and role in the social visual repertory is questioned (2006: 77). This is the use that Pedro Costa, Sylvain George, and Nicolas Klotz make of the zombie: they use it to reconfigure the pitying gaze upon undocumented Africans in Europe. They "desecrate" the zombie motif, in the sense given to this term by Giorgio Agamben (to retrieve something for its free use by man; 2005: 95-121), and invert the slaves' voodoo devices, turning them into forms of political resistance: the burnt fingers, the spell cast on deportation orders. These filmmakers pick up on this archetype in order to resurrect the rage and resistance deposited in its imaginary, blowing up the sanctimonious visual repertory set up by our society.

Costa, George, and Klotz don't film the black zombies of our time like a defeated people. Instead, they revise the history of its representation in order to invert the narrative of possession by depicting contemporary zombies through their gestures of resistance. Their figurative acts amplify and bring to the fore a political reading that was dormant in the archetype, muted in its origins in the history of cinema.

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<sup>16</sup> OQTF are the initials of "obligation de quitter le territoire français", a French administrative measure for the deportation of foreigners, provided by the article L. 511-11 of the code of entry and stay of foreigners and the right to asylum.

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