

CHAPTER 22.
**“WHEN THE DEAD COME OUT OF THEIR GRAVES, THE LIVING WILL
BE THEIR BLOOD...”. ZOMBIE ITALIAN STYLE⁴⁸**

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“The Italians knew how to make zombie cinema an unstoppable machine”. (Gras, 2010, p. 131)

1. INTRODUCTION

Figure 1

Putrid zombie



*Source: frame from *Zombi 2* (Lucio Fulci, 1979).*

⁴⁸This is the slogan that accompanied the advertising materials for the film *Zombi 2* (Lucio Fulci, 1979), serving as a response to the slogan of *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1978)—released in Italy under the title *Zombie*: “When there is no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth”.

On more than one occasion, Bava, an important creator of the modern horror film, has stressed the difficulty of establishing the character of the *undead* in the national imagination: “When I was little, the nanny used to scare us by telling stories of Sardinian outlaws, but nothing about vampires as in Italy we have the sort of sun that makes them all flee” (Bava, 1979, p. 87). There is, therefore, a certain resistance to linking the contemporary success of the zombie in its transmedia set-up with the iconographic origins on the big screen and, specifically, its evolution in Italy. The zombie, therefore, will be understood as a fictional character that, even in its more exotic narratives, tries to respond to very specific political situations: in the case of the United States, for example, there has been a wish to denounce a dangerous homologation caused by political-cultural totalitarianism. With a questionable desire to overcome this at all costs, Martínez considers *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) a foundational film on the figure of the *revenant*. In his opinion, the figure of the undead inhabits the collective imagination from the paranoid climate typical of the McCarthy era, even though the excellence of Siegel’s film moves this type of character beyond the precise historical and geographic referential link. In this way, the metaphorical reading of the film displays an intrinsic relationship between totalitarian alignment and domination: a new feature that, in various forms, will accompany many subsequent representations of the undead (Martínez, 2010, p. 69). Thus, the zombies as a terrifying institution are alienated, who, by multiplying themselves, increase the might of a secret totalitarian power: a mysterious and infallible force in its design to eliminate all traces of independent humanity. In this direction, the development of these *new* monsters receives an important contribution from the Italian cinema that, despite its essentially realistic *imprinting*, eagerly and expertly adopts the figure of the *revenant*. It is important to establish this tendency of transalpine film sensibility as a methodological principle, strongly linked to reality (to the tangible and immediately verifiable referent), because Italian zombies are characters that constantly challenge the limits of visibility. Monstrous beings who perform ignominious acts have multiple interpretations of the allegorical impossibility of pacifying nature with a hypothetical post-mortem humanity. The Italian horror genre, inscribed within a purely fantastical paradigm, constitutes a minority line, a marginal productive phenomenon. Thus, at the end of the ‘50s, the unexpected appearance of a constellation of films with a Gothic rationale and atmosphere was welcomed with surprise and enthusiasm. Italian audiences can finally enjoy a film genre that had been forgotten and censored by Croce’s school of aesthetics for decades, as well as Marxist historicism and Catholic moralism (Venturini, 2014, p. 7).

The preponderance of attention on the social promoted by Neo-Realist militant excellence had found its main conciliatory vulgate in comedy. Everything repressed and expropriated to the *modus ridendi* has been derailed within the melodrama that, in its cinema version, with great difficulty supplies repressed impulses such as eroticism, violence, the oneiric and the fantastic: themes already present in the *fin de siècle* publishing industry,

whether cultured or popular. The Italian cinema had assumed the inheritance of the *Scapigliatura*, of some pages of Fogazzaro, Capuana, even Pirandello, but also of para-literature, popular illustration and the transalpine Grand Guignol theatre (Foni, 2007, p. 7). The recovery of the dark and Dionysian dimension coincided with the *exploitation* of the successes of the Hammer Gothic revival: *I vampiri* [(Riccardo Freda, 1957); see Figure 2], some months before *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Terence Fisher, 1957), without the organizational support of the British producer. On the contrary, drawing from a production structure close to the artisan workshop concept, Italian horror cinema is characterized by a marginal distribution system (of depth) in which spectacle predominates over the narrative thread, with a predilection for sadism and necrophilia and a certain revival of classical mythology, as well as the deadly heroine of lyric-opera (Hormigos, 2007, p. 56).

Figure 2

Vampire



Source: frame from *I vampiri* (Riccardo Freda, 1957).

This baroque, heterogeneous fusion, brought together from the contrast with the metonymic (neorealism), pacifying (comedy) and cathartic (melodrama) viewpoint, gives shape to two opposing tendencies: the centripetal, which tends to keep the representation of horror within the limits of the genre (only in popular appearance and in the Italian case, without a codified homegrown tradition); the centrifugal, or *auteur*, which sublimates said limits in the expression of a personal and non-transferable world (Losilla, 1993, p. 128). In a

continuous and stimulating recovery operation of very popular productions, often marginalized (and forgotten), it is interesting to consider *Zombi 2* (Lucio Fulci, 1979) as a confluence of the two lines the historian Losilla drew. Inserted within a sequence of preceding film texts, we can consider the contribution of the transiberine filmmaker to the zombie genre as an example of mannerism of the manifestation: that is, a text that captures recombines and *revitalizes* the most obvious styles of the genre, arriving at brilliant solutions, and which formally, are almost avant-garde. At the same time, thanks to a new critical perspective on Fulci's *opera omnia*, it is possible to display a sort of mannerist concept in the film: a combination of heterogeneous patterns according to an autonomous and personalised discourse (see Figure 1).

2. ALARM ACROSS THE GLOBE: THE WIND CARRIES THE DISEASE IN EUROPE

Figure 3

The alarmed press



Source: frame from *The Last Man on Earth* (Sidney Salkow & Ubaldo B. Ragona, 1964).

Modern cinematographic iconography of the zombie takes shape in Europe, particularly Italy. “Italy, a country of cinematic cannibalism, did not take long to jump on the bandwagon of excesses and the list of unscrupulous *exploitations* is extensive” (Crespo, 1998, p. 69). Thus, just south of the Alps, the new duplication of the terrifying is definitively emancipated from its Haitian origins. In the Antilles, indeed, the *Zumbi* (according to a

Congolese term) were undead figures who belonged to voodoo rituals: beings who, without souls or their own will, could withstand any situation of slavery. These Afro-Caribbean creatures had found transposition in the seventh art thanks to *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* [(Jacques Tourneur, 1943); see Figure 4]: the storyline of these films derived from the travel literature of the occultist Seabrook and particularly for his novel *The Magic Island* (1929), which covers the context of the American occupation of the island of Haiti (1915–1934). However, *The Last Man on Earth* was shot in Italy (Sidney Salkow & Ubaldo B. Ragona, 1964): the first film version of the post-apocalyptic novel by Richard Matheson, *I Am Legend* (1954).

Figure 4

Haitian zombie



Source: frame from I Walked with a Zombie (Jacques Tourneur, 1943).

The same author (with the pseudonym Swanson) had written the script and had proposed it to Hammer. But the British production company, immersed in its spectacular (and colourful) revival of Universal's Gothic corpus, ceded the project to Associated Producers Inc., which requested the collaboration of Produzioni La Regina (Battaglia,

2018). The Italian production company joined the project and appointed its own technical and artistic crew to work with the leading actor and star of the film, Vincent Price. The direction was shared between Salkow (probably with the role of American supervisor) and Ragona, who, with the invaluable help of Franco Delli Colli (cousin of the more famous Tonino), transformed the Roman neighbourhood of the EUR within a gothic, spectral, post-catastrophic setting into the remains of a cold, unreal, apocalyptic city. The dim and uninspiring texture of the black and white and the intensely melancholic soundtrack contribute towards transforming the dearth of resources into a plausibly grim dystopia. Unlike the vampire iconography of Universal and Hammer, the undead's awkward and whitish look resembles *The Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) (Díaz, 2008, p. 8).

Although a large part of the contemporary criticism was initially sceptical of a black and white horror film, and even more ludicrous, made in Italy, the film anticipates some themes typical of the modern zombie subgenre. The main idea involves illustrating the fallacy of human beings who, by overcoming their deepest fears, proclaim themselves saviours of humanity. In fact, their most Manichean and conservative part ends up executing them. A bitter reflection appears on the inhumanity of the human being: the survivors, when placed in a limited situation, will show signs of irrationality as dangerous as that of the *revenants* themselves, and the vilest instincts will sprout forth in a peak of selfishness, intolerance and authoritarianism, more harmful than the bite of a zombie (García, 1994, p. 28). Collaterally, the importance of the origin of the undead fades into the background. Only now, in the central flashback, does a newspaper clipping appear announcing a deadly plague coming from the winds of Europe (see Figure 3). As a scientist, the protagonist rejects superstitions, but the news is diluted after the drama of the protagonist, who gradually loses and buries his loved ones. Even less information is dedicated to the reason for the protagonist's immunity: almost *in passing*, he attributes his immunity to the bite of a Panamanian bat that had acted as a vaccine. Conversely, a conceptual zombie environment is established reminiscent of the myths of Lovecraft's Cthulhu, which, three years later, will be developed by Romero. Indeed, the total absence of consciousness in the film's creatures reflects two deeply disturbing archetypes for the Western psyche: the bloodthirsty crowd in the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution (1793–1794) and the mechanical and unstoppable nature of the automaton (the robot, the machine, ...) that performs its mission without any possibility of choice or understanding (Palacios, 1996, p. 57). Ragona's films feature characters that are more like monsters previously seen in genre movies like *The Walking Dead* (Michael Curtiz, 1936), the later *Invisible Invaders* (Edward L. Cahn, 1959) and *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (Ed Wood, 1959). Abbot confirms that the reinvention of the undead is the most interesting element of this *unfaithful* adaptation of Matheson's volume: "In the novel, they are fast and ferocious vampires, whereas in the film, they are the

pitiful-looking living dead, slow in pace and indecisive in movement, slow on the uptake and reckless morons” (2013, p. 110).

It is no longer about the *Body Snatchers* by Siegel (1959); they walk like the Frankenstein brute with an uncertain gait, looking for humans to devour. They have no other aim, nor any kind of thought. They have no soul, no vision of the future. Defiling their only sources of sustenance, they condemn humanity to its complete destruction. An apocalypse is foreshadowed, although, in this text, disturbing references (paranoia about post-atomic fallout or communism as a movement that dehumanizes the individual) are subtly kept in the background. The film’s focus of interest is centred on the protagonist’s adventures and emotional ups and downs. On the other hand, the *Romero* debut presents the threatening power of the zombies as a metaphor against the war in Vietnam, the ubiquitous racism in the cultural substrate and the political power of the arms-producing lobbies. With the hippy movement in full swing, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) alludes to the protest against a war that seems to have no end and anticipates the first military defeat of the United States.

3. “WHEN THERE IS NO MORE ROOM IN HELL”: THE IRONY OF FULCI⁴⁹

The *liaison* between Romero and Italian cinema returns ten years later with the terms reversed. Even if Ragona’s film had practically fallen into oblivion, *Night of the Living Dead* was circulating in the movie clubs and the transalpine counterculture circuits. Although his first work had achieved the status of a cult film, Romero had not yet obtained funding to carry out the sequel *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). The chance is offered by the encounter with Argento (who will be in charge of the editing and soundtrack of the European version) and with Cuomo, an independent distributor who will facilitate contact with the long-standing Italian production company Titanus. Romero’s second film, thanks to the use of colour, paroxysmally increases the violence of its images. Without any concession to satire, the Canadian filmmaker attacks the incipient triumph of hedonism as the latest consumer thrill. Large shopping centres had become the new sanctuaries: cathedrals with multiple chapels, where the new faithful wandered aimlessly, captivated by disturbing colours and music (Frusciante, 2015). However, the new religion does not consider the concept of sharing; there is no idea of a new community. Everyone greedily and indiscriminately grabs what they can: dresses, jewellery, luxury items, with no chance of bringing out the best in anything.

⁴⁹ This is the title (which includes the first part of the advertising slogan of *Dawn of the Dead*) of a short documentary that includes interviews with Alfredo Cuomo, the Argento brothers, and the musician Claudio Simonetti, about the production of the 1978 Romero’s film, written and directed by Michele De Angelis.

Because outside the mall, apart from the starving *revenants*, no life remains. The goal is very promising, especially because Argento's backing (who throughout the decade has become a home-grown master of the thriller) is a guarantee. That is why the producer, De Angelis (executive producer of the *Variety Film*³ and Couyoumdjian) had already registered the *Zombi 2* title, anticipating the exploitation of a possible sequel or prequel (as Fulci's film seemed to represent). Fulci admits that by following the productive routines of transalpine cinematography, his project came into existence to exploit the success of *Dawn of the Dead*. However, the result is totally different. While the Canadian filmmaker had accomplished a social metaphor (where the rebellion of the *revenants* represented a cry of desperation from the marginalized), his film contains more adventures; it redirects the zombie figure to its voodoo practices of Jamaican origins (Albiero & Cacciatore, 2015, p. 233). It is true that the pre-production team came together just three days before the *Romerian* premiere, and that it was only after its extraordinary box office success that it effectively took off; but just following the productive trail gives a highly reductive image. As a healthy evolution of the Italian cannibal films, the zombie spaghetti genre knew how to take over easily, filling the screens with graphic spectacularity and sadism, often surpassing their American counterparts in bloodiness.

According to Gras (cartoonist and pop culture scholar), *Zombie 2* represents the founding text of the *Italian zombie movement*, because its author manages to combine in one new terrifying subgenre, the most extreme and lurid solutions of the *mockumentaries* (ante litteram) *Mondo Cane* (Paolo Cavara, Gualtiero Jacopetti & Franco Prosperi, 1962) and of its fictional imitators *Il Paese del Sesso Selvaggio* (Umberto Lenzi, 1972) or *Ultimo Mondo Cannibale*, (Ruggero Deodato, 1977): films that represent episodes of anthropophagy with intense graphic violence (2010, p. 131). The legacy of this false-documentary cruelty (which Gras rightly defines as "graphic") is indeed completed with influences from the world of comics. In 1974, Sergio Bonelli Editore published four issues of *Tex* (an Italian comic series about a character, Tex Willer, linked to the world of the American Old West) with Gothic themes: "Il figlio di Mefisto", "I quattro amuleti", "Magfanera" and "Il veliero maledetto". Then, four years later, in conjunction with the premiere of *Dawn of the Dead*, the same company republished "All'ultimo sangue", "Vudù!", "La note de imaghi" and "Zombie": comics, this time, starring *Zagor*, an adventurer who fights to defend the rights of the Native Americans. The same scriptwriters Briganti and Sacchetti suffer the influence of this contamination between *revenants* and *pulp* comics. Fulci is entrusted with the direction after Castellari's rejection: both of whom were responsible for its eclectic filmography. Genre film champions of the seventies, exponents of a generation of directors: often brilliant perhaps, but almost always forgotten by blind and deaf critics.

The Roman filmmaker ironically takes up and transforms the *Romerian* legacy. He only adopts the American zombie iconography outwardly; in reality, his undead cannot even

be minimally confused with their human prey: pale and putrid. They are not just social outcasts, victims, or antagonists of a dramaturgy of adventures. Fulci's zombies are agents of an incipient abjuration of rationality. They discover, exemplify, and show everything the public prefers to forget. Thanks to the relevant use of the subjective camera, the viewer shares with the monsters a direct vision of the horror of power and the cruel colonialism of positivist culture. In the twilight of reason, superstition is rekindled: a subversive fantasy that allows us to conceive the tainted world without going crazy. At the time of resurrection, Fulci adopts the vision of the conquerors. The subjective (wide angle upward view) reaffirms its reacquisition of the fierce discretion over the world: the eye sockets, freed from the tomblake darkness, see the light again, the same light they had sold as evangelical (Albiero & Cacciatore, 2015, p. 242).

Figure 5

Zombies contaminate New York



Source: frame from Zombi 2 (Lucio Fulci, 1979).

Fulci's stylistic decisions respond to his sardonic desire to distort genres and systematically make low-budget films to preserve creative freedom. Defend it strenuously from the omnivorous *blockbusters*, destroyers of any experimentation. Fulci, a brilliant student of the Experimental Center (and perfect connoisseur of all film rhetoric), gives his audience an apotropaic closure: a sequence of zombies staggering forward on the Brooklyn Bridge to invade New York.

4. CONCLUSIONS: “ROME, SEPTEMBER 5: WE SAW *ZOMBIE II*, SCIENCE-FICTION HORROR FILM, GHASTLY; REPULSIVE TRASH”⁵⁰

While the zombies advanced towards the Big Apple, the film triumphed in cinemas worldwide: in Iberian cinemas alone (according to Ministry data) it reached 595.137 spectators. Despite being savaged by the critics, Fulci inaugurates the *Spaghetti Zombie* genre since his *Zombie 2* is more successful than its precursor, *Dawn of the Dead*. Fulci's touch, simple and spectacular simultaneously, gives the zombie character an added extra of violence and luridness, depriving him of any trace of humanity (Gras, 2010, p. 133). Thus, *Zombie 2* inaugurates a line of resistance of horrendous and foul-smelling monsters against the triumph of sculptural beauty: the models of Reaganian hedonism. The beginning of unbridled individualism that dissolves all ethical axes in a liquid-like society. A behavioural flow that barter the consumerism of possession with the phobia of the obsolete: the realm of appearing, at all costs, young and healthy in an unending bulimia (Eco, 2015). This resistance has been organized according to a terrifying itinerary that includes other Fulci texts such as *Paura nella città dei morti viventi* (1980) *Quella villa accanto al cimitero* (1981), Lenzi with *Incubo sulla città contaminata* (1980), Bianchi with *Le notti del terrore* (1980), Marino Girolami with *Zombie Holocaust* (1980), Fragasso with *Virus* (1980) and *After Death* (1989), Lamberto Bava with *Dèmoni* (1985) and *Dèmoni 2* (1986), Lattanzi with *Killing Birds* (1988). Productions of taste and erratic expressive resolutions that have managed to prolong the long agony of the B series thanks to their worldwide distribution through *home video*. Cursed movies that have come back to inspire the all-powerful *mainstream*. It has happened with *Zeder* (Avati, 1982), which inspired the plot of Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* (1983): the novel brought to the big screen by Mary Lambert (1989). Or even more so with *Dellamorte Dellamore* (*Cemetery Man*) (Soavi, 1994) a film inspired by a novel and the lucky comic series *Dylan Dog* (Bonelli again) that almost instantly had its homonymous North American version *Dead of Night*, (Munroe 2010): a sort of pun of Romero's first feature film.

The ebbs and flows await Hollywood's lack of inspiration (teeming with remakes, reboots, sequels and prequels) to revive the cheap but remarkable transalpine productions: “When the dead come out of their graves, the living will be their blood”.

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⁵⁰ (Tarkovsky, 2018).

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