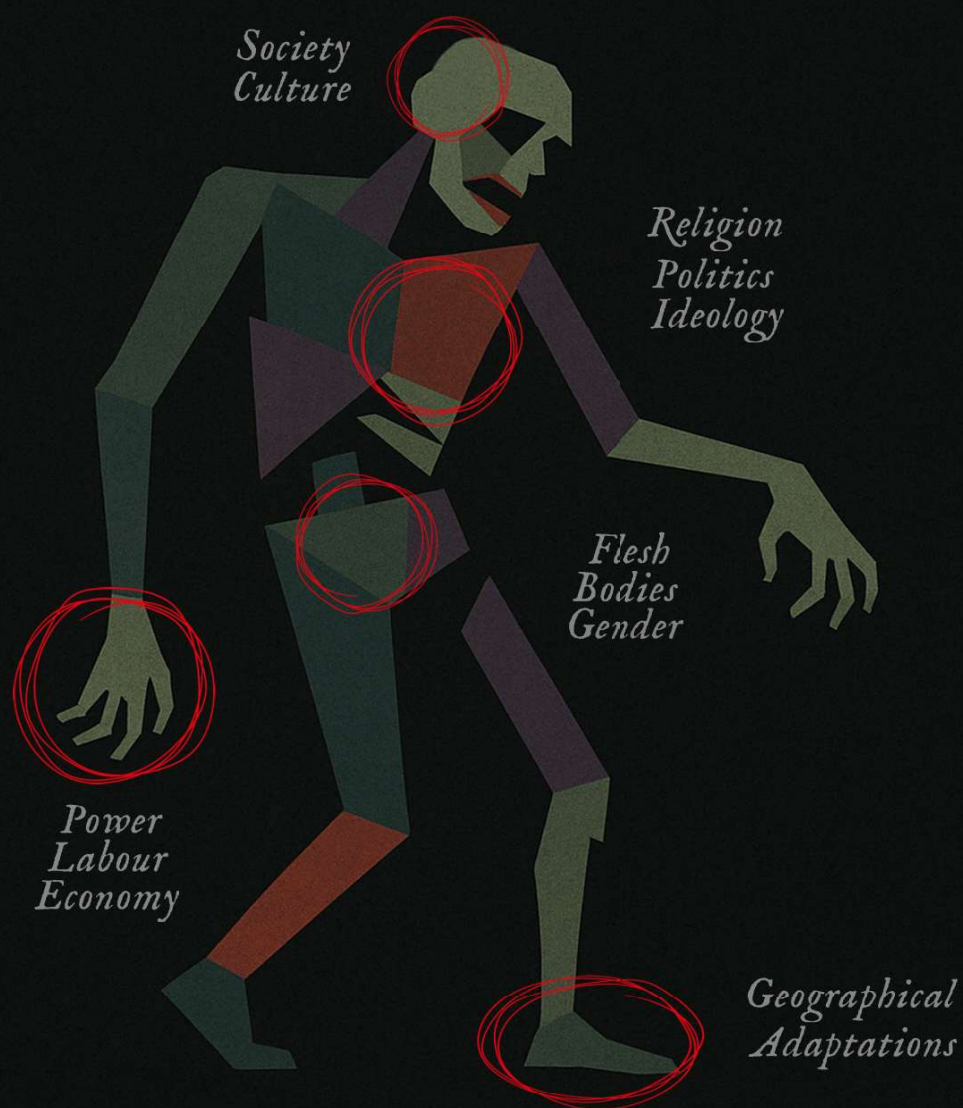


DECONSTRUCTING THE ZOMBIE

CULTURAL AND IDEOLOGICAL APPROACHES



Edited by:
Alfonso M. Rodríguez de Austria and Cristina Algaba

Dykinson, S.L.

DECONSTRUCTING THE ZOMBIE

Cultural and Ideological Approaches

Alfonso M. Rodríguez de Austria and Cristina Algaba (Eds.)

Dykinson, S.L.

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CHAPTER 9.
THE LIVING DEAD AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH VIOLENCE IN
SPANISH CINEMA

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1. INTRODUCTION: ZOMBIES AND THEIR VIOLENT NATURE

The living dead and their inclusion in audiovisual fiction products have always functioned as an attraction for the viewer in the face of the superstition, mystery, terror and fantasy created around these figures. Although their anthropological origin lies in Haitian folklore (Bishop, 2010, pp. 196–205), literature and cinema have raised these creatures to international fame as more dangerous beings than they were in their early days. The evolution of this figure begins “with its presence in African tribal mythology, moving through its transformation into Caribbean religious practices and concluding with its current incarnation as an aggressive, meat-eating threat to the survival of the individual” (Boon, 2011, p. 51).

Along these lines, and if the living dead constitute and represent a threat to the survival of humanity by persecuting human beings to feed on them and thus infect them, zombies are violent from the very moment they are conceived as such. It is a cause-effect relationship that has a triple aspect. First, it must be considered that the human being’s socialization process turns him into a rational being capable of inhibiting his most primary instincts since “they have been suppressed as we evolved rationally” (Campos, 2005, p. 198). Aggressiveness is one of those instincts that, from socialization and education, can be channelled and controlled so that it does not manifest itself in a harmful and destructive way and turn into violence (Ribotta, 2014, p. 297). Therefore, from the moment zombies cease to be human to become the living dead, reasoning moves away from them, and they begin to be dominated by the impulsivity of their instincts, where survival and obtaining food are priorities to be achieved through uncontrolled aggression that ultimately becomes an exacerbated violence used as a means to achieve their goals.

On the other hand, the fact that zombies are violent per se addresses the threat to humanity posed by their very presence. Before even attacking and infecting humans, the threat to their survival and integrity makes them victims of psychological violence that gradually deteriorates and degrades the human mind. Fear is a germ of violence and violent

behaviours, which, in turn, generate fear, which can be defined as the responses and sensations experienced when danger is present and near (Becerra-García, 2007, p. 76). Thus, the panic and social alarm aroused by the resuscitation of the dead leads to psychological aggression towards humans since the results of the same produce damage and consequences that the victim does not desire, as well as a state of anxiety whose intensity increases “depending on the probability of the occurrence of danger” (Becerra-García, 2007, p. 76).

Finally, it can be said that the direct and physical violence that zombies exert on humans is a consequence of all of the above. If they are depersonalised figures who lack reason, let themselves be carried away by their impetuous impulses and pose a threat to humanity by endangering their survival, their aggressiveness without filters manifest through direct violent acts—they are visible and manifest and easily identified—and of a physical nature—physical force is used to cause damage, injury and even death to the victim, whether or not objects or weapons are used for this purpose (Galtung, 1969, 1990, 1998, 2003). With all this, as the only motivation of zombies is to feed on human flesh, the violence to which they resort to achieve it is varied and of all kinds. Attacking, biting, strangling, killing or eating human flesh and viscera are some of the ways the violence that the living dead exert on their prey is represented. However, depending on the audiovisual product, the genre and the characteristics of the plot, its representation may be more or less explicit and bloodthirsty. The spectacularization of violence is a fact that the audiovisual media know how to exploit because, by enveloping it in a fascinating stylistic atmosphere, it aims to captivate the audience and awaken in it a series of emotions in the spectator, ranging from fear and fright to attraction and excitement.

2. THE FIGURE OF THE ZOMBIE AS AN AGGRESSOR IN SPANISH CINEMA

Zombie cinema has traditionally been framed in the genre of terror and, as such, the living dead generate fear, dread or, at least, restlessness among their viewers. To continue the path of success created by the monstrosity of Frankenstein or Dracula, zombies had to represent the fear of dehumanisation and make the spectator experience a way of living “in a world in which the rule of law has ceased to exist and is not replaced but by direct violence with which all the problems that until then afflicted society are resolved” (Ferrero & Roas, 2011, p. 14). But how have zombies been portrayed in Spanish cinema from the perspective of violence? How are these creatures when they act as aggressors rather than victims of human fury?

2.1. The living dead and violence. Why are they attacking?

The Spanish filmography’s contribution to the zombie genre began with Armando de Ossorio in 1972 with his tetralogy of terror on the Living Dead. Since then, how zombies use violence has evolved, even though the background remains unchanged. Thus, if one

focuses attention on the cause for which zombies attack, it seems evident that it is for the attainment of their objectives—the zombie is, basically, a consumer of human flesh—and, for this, violence is the means by which they manage to reach them. Except for the animated children’s films *Papá, soy una zombie* (Ricardo Jamón & Joan Espinach, 2011) and *Dixie y la rebelión zombi* (Ricardo Jamón & Beñat Beitia, 2014), the living dead who appear in it—fully aware and without losing an iota of their rationality—make no use of violence centred on the voracious ingestion of humans, as it is used only rarely and for reasons that lack transcendence. Returning to the main motivations behind zombies’ use of violence, it can be broadly stated that the impulse—rather than the necessity—to irrationally consume human flesh is the common thread among most Spanish zombie films. Nonetheless, some variations can be observed in their actions’ specific motivations.

Among the most outstanding motivations is the thirst for revenge, seen in Ossorio’s films and others, such as *El espanto surge de la tumba* (Carlos Aured, 1972). In the former, the corpses of the Knights Templar come to life every night to take revenge for being executed for the practices they carried out in life—performing rituals and sacrifices in which they murdered their victims to drink their blood. In the latter, it is a French knight who, at the moment of his execution, swears revenge and promises to return to life to kill the descendants of his executioners.

Along with this, it is also remarkable that films such as *The Orgy of the Dead* (José Luis Merino, 1973), *The Rebellion of the Dead* (León Klimovsky, 1973), and *One of Zombies* (Miguel Ángel Lamata, 2003)—despite the significant time gap between the first two and the last—incorporate the same motive for which the living dead attack humans. In these films, zombies are governed by the will of their “resuscitators” and remain under their control. In the first, a scientist implants a capsule in the corpses to revive them and make them kill humans so that his experiment funding is not cut off. In the second, a Hindu man knowledgeable in voodoo and magic dedicates himself to resurrecting dead women to use them for murders. In the latter, the character played by Santiago Segura, Entrecot, creates an army of zombies who are slaves to his will and uses them, like hired killers, to torture and kill humans to extract information according to his interests.

However, the most common reason zombies resort to aggression and violence to achieve their goals is simply that they are the living dead. They obey instincts devoid of reasoning and planning, which drive them to attack human beings to consume their flesh and/or drink their blood. As Trigos (2013) states, “All of them have been previously stripped of their basic mental functions, remaining at the mercy of forces that they cannot control (because they are not even fully aware of them)” (p. 15). In this sense, the causes for which zombies resort to violence are depicted in films such as *Do Not Profane the Sleep of the Dead* (Jorge Grau, 1974), where people who have just died come back to life to devour humans after their nervous system is altered by ultrasonic radiation. Similarly, the films that make up

the *REC* saga (Jaume Balagueró & Paco Plaza, 2007–2014) are prime examples of the voracious, exacerbated, and uncontrollable violence zombies unleash when attacking humans.

2.2. Forms and Representation of Zombie Violence

The modus operandi of the living dead, when acting as aggressors and using violence to attack humans, has evolved from its beginnings in Spanish cinema to the present day. If violence is a social phenomenon and a concept that “changes with time when cultural conditioning factors also change” (Sánchez et al., 2014, p. 35), it is logical that its representation on the big screen has also evolved. However, even though the type of violence perpetrated by zombies against humans is direct and physical, the perversity of the aggressions committed by the living dead has increased over time—something to which the evolution of special effects in the film industry has also contributed. If, in the first films of the zombie genre in our country, the aggressiveness of the zombies focused only on their attacks and not on their actions before the aggression—that is to say, they displayed bloody violence when killing but not when chasing humans—little by little, violence has permeated all aspects of the aggression scene, making zombies bloodier, more ruthless, and more savage. Thus, in the 1970s, zombies were not characterized by having aggressive movements. Although they moved toward humans with determination once that goal was set as their sole objective, they lacked speed in their movements—displaying clumsiness and languor—and did not paralyze their victims with terrifying screams. These living dead belong to the classic genre stage and, as observed in the Ossorio saga, do not seem to take pleasure in attacking humans. As Trigos (2013) notes, “the Templars do not seem to be pleased with the punishment they provide to their victims” since “they are also victims of a past to which, through a pact with the Devil, they remain tied” (p. 20). However, there is an evolution in the way humans are attacked.

Zombies gradually cease biting the neck to extract the blood of their victims and begin to devour them. They also resort to strangulation or the use of weapons such as swords or various objects to kill humans and feed on their bodies. Their representation becomes more explicit and, at times, even disturbing. For example, in *Don't Profane the Sleep of the Dead*, a group of zombies attacks a police officer in the cemetery by throwing a tombstone at him, wounding him. Once he is on the ground, one zombie strangles him while another digs into his stomach, removes his viscera, and begins to eat them. Additionally, it is worth mentioning the raw brutality with which the aggressions of the living dead are depicted in *Latidos de Pánico* (Paul Naschy, 1983), as the scenes in which the resurrected knight mercilessly murders his victims are incredibly graphic. The aim is to highlight the danger embodied by zombies and the threat they pose to humanity if these creatures were ever to rise from their graves.

Figure 1

Explicit representation of the violence exerted by the figure of the zombie on one of its victims



Source: Panic Beats (Paul Naschi, 1974).

Advancing to the 2000s, the depiction of violence associated with zombies as aggressors becomes significantly more diverse. The violence is even noticeable in their physical appearance, as they are no longer cadaveric, pale, slow, and inexpressive figures. Instead, they are “post-human” zombies who expel the person from his or her own body in order to take possession of it, which explains “the vomited blood, pus, and bodily waste that populate the current subgenre” (Roger, 2008, p. 129). Along with this, it must be added that the fear of being infected causes hysteria and collective panic among the population, making the atmosphere generated by their presence inherently violent. The zombies of this era are no longer just dead people resurrecting from their graves but rather individuals whom a virus has infected, and their contagion is unstoppable. That is why the physical qualities of the latter are very different from those of the earlier ones: they exhibit enormous speed, are quick in their attacks, and act like uncontrolled beasts, out of control and extremely aggressive. Thus, the four films that make up the *REC* saga highlight the characteristics described, as zombies—or rather, infected individuals—are creatures that use extreme violence when biting humans. Unbridled, hysterical, and mad, these beings are possessed by uncontrollable fury when they see humans. Therefore, it is not surprising that the representation of violence they use is extraordinarily expressive and manifest, following the frantic vortex in which they are the protagonists. These zombies take pleasure in feeding on their victims, relishing the act of removing their viscera and devouring all parts of their bodies. This is particularly evident in *REC 3: Génesis* (Paco Plaza, 2012), where the intensity of the violence exhibited by

both the infected and humans shifts the film away from the horror genre, steering it toward an exaggerated and grotesque form of gore designed to elicit extreme emotional responses from the viewer.

Figure 2

Clara, already infected, kisses her husband Koldo and tears out his tongue, infecting him as well.



Source: REC 3: Genesis (Paco Plaza, 2012).

Despite this, there are other films from this stage in which zombies follow different violent guidelines. In *Una de Zombis* (Miguel Ángel Lamata, 2003), although more haggard, the living dead retain a human appearance and seem to have full consciousness as they talk to their victims and understand what they are doing and why. The aggressions they commit are far from those described in the *REC* tetralogy, as they are a gang of shooters working for their leader. Therefore, they use weapons to kill or torture their victims, but not to eat human flesh. On the other hand, in *La hora fría* (Elio Quiroga, 2006), the physical violence of zombies is barely present, giving way to symbolic and psychological violence. The threat of being infected by “strangers” merely through contact looms over a group living in a bunker in a post-apocalyptic environment. *Retornados* (Manuel Carballo, 2013) reflects a similar type of violence: the fear of being infected by a virus, which can only be kept at bay with a daily injection to prevent it from evolving into a zombie, permeates a psychodrama full of psychological and emotional violence.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Aggressive and violent imaginaries have always been present in Spanish zombie cinema, even though it is no longer the exclusive domain of horror. It is now open to combining genres such as animation, comedy, drama, or science fiction. In this sense, it should be noted that the evolution of the living dead and their relationship with violence in Spanish filmography has escalated at all levels of performance and representation. The zombies from Ossorio's films, languid, clumsy and driven by an imperious thirst for revenge, felt the impulse to attack and eat humans, but they are now distant. Progressively, the living dead have evolved into creatures that do not need to act to exude violence from every pore of their skin, as is the case with those in the *REC* saga. Although the zombies of this new era still obey instincts devoid of reason, they now possess an enormous force that allows them to carry out physical aggression in a state of rage, hysteria, and lack of control. However, it should be pointed out that physical violence must now be considered alongside the prominence of symbolic and psychological violence, as the fear and threat of being infected and becoming post-human create an atmosphere of collective panic among the entire population. Despite everything, what remains constant over time is that zombies and the halo of violence surrounding them symbolize the collapse of society as it is conceived in the present moment.

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