Rethinking Zombie Apocalypses: Legal Limbo, Bare Life, and Posthuman

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Abstract. The zombie apocalypse is one of the most well-known sorts of zombie flicks, and it depicts a global catastrophe in which zombies can dominate mankind. This article offers new perspectives on the study of the zombie apocalypse and its cultural implications. Using two films as case studies, it begins by asking why zombies in the two selected flicks are more de-humanised than ever before. This paper investigates the ramifications of this question in the context of human-zombie relationships. It consequently draws on Freud and post-humanist theories to investigate the paradoxical boundary between human beings and zombies. The research offers fresh insights into contemporary filmic depictions of zombies in terms of posthuman lives. It concludes by emphasizing new methods of comprehending non-human entities.

Keywords: Zombie films, Bare life, Posthuman, Apocalypse.

1. Introduction

Zombies have always haunted Western culture. A perennial feature of horror tales from the oral literature of antiquity down to the blockbuster success of the AMC TV series *The Walking Dead* (2010-), the zombie has long been employed as a stand-in for the dehumanizing effects of modern capitalism. However, with the recent rise of zombie flicks, especially the importation into Asian films, some striking discontinuities bespeak a similar, but also distinct Asian fascination with zombies. To illustrate this, the following essay will take the Hollywood zombie film *World War Zombie* (2013) and the South Korean film *Train to Busan* (2016) as its case studies.

While most of the scenes in the former case (*WWZ)* is apocalyptic-focused, its depictions of a mothership where the US military is temporarily stationed in the restricted area and thus what will be particularly addressed shortly. This argument supplements the existing scholarship on the relationship between zombies and human beings, and finally proposes the possibility to read an equation of zombies with people in restricted areas, using Giorgio Agamben's notion of 'bare life [1]'. The second case- *Train to Busan* – discusses and reflects on posthuman concepts in terms of non-human figures in contemporary films. In this sense, the paper discusses the 'undead' and 'non-human' condition. It concludes, that as opposed to the older zombie's identity as the quintessential 'Other', a resemblance between zombies and humans.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Current Research: Necropolitics

In the years since Agamben's formulation of the bare life, there have emerged several studies and iterations of necropolitics. The most prominent of which is Mbembé's full-length study in 2003. Here, in *Necropolitics*, Mbembé, one of the leading figures in the new wave of Postcolonial and Francophone critical theory, theorises the genealogy of the contemporary world, a world plagued by ever-increasing inequality, militarization, enmity, and terror as well as by a resurgence of racist, fascist, and nationalist forces determined to exclude and kill. He outlines how democracy has begun to embrace its dark side- what he calls its 'nocturnal body'- which is based on the desires, fears, effects, relations, and violence that drove colonialism [2]. This shift has hollowed out democracy, thereby eroding the very values, rights, and freedoms that liberalism routinely celebrates. As a result,

war has become the sacrament of our times in a conception of sovereignty that operates by annihilating all those considered enemies of the state. Despite his dire diagnosis, Mbembé draws on post-Foucauldian debates on bio politics, war, and race as well as Fanon's notion of care as a shared vulnerability to explore how new conceptions of the human that transcend humanism might come to pass. These new conceptions would allow us to encounter the other not as a thing to exclude but as a person with whom to build a more just world.

2.2. Zombie Film Studies

The confluence of bare life and zombie studies can be found in Kim Jaecheol's article 'Biocalyptic imagination in Japanese and Korean films: undead nation-states in I Am a Hero and Train to Busan'[3]. Jaecheol's analysis of images of the undead is much nurtured by *muselmanner*, a typical image of the twentieth century's *Homo Sacer*- a bare life outside of politico-juridical life. The Agambenian opposition between the Greek term's bios (political communal lives) and Zoe (life in general) is already well known among today's cultural critics, and in this opposition, the undead is easily reduced to a 'bare life' [1]. Concurrently, in opposition to Western depictions of zombie films, Margot Collins and Elson Bond argue that the Asian zombie does not look unrecognizably different in the same fashion as their Western counterparts, because this 'postmodern' zombie forces the audience to consider what it means to be a fully-fledged and autonomous individual. In other words, zombie movies such as the South Korean film *Train to Busan* challenge the audience to revaluate who constitutes a bare life [4].

2.3. Politics of the 'Living Dead'

Furthermore, Lauren Wilcox's study of the politics of the living dead points out that the zombie, as an icon of Western popular culture, resides in cultural studies and International Relations ideas.[5] Zombie outbreaks have been employed as a metaphor by scholars in different domains to analyze the responses of the world community after a catastrophe, invasion, or natural disaster. The body of zombies, as a historical reality and cultural emblem, is inextricably intertwined with the racialization of political subjects and the dread of the other, according to most scholars [5]. Similarly, John Stratton's 2011 article draws a clear analogy between zombies and displaced people by arguing that popular zombie films, including Romero's series, originate from the cultural anxiety of illegal immigrants [6]. While this article agrees with the connection of zombie-racialised people in a necropolitical sense, it will suggest a more general conclusion in the paradoxical zombie-human relationship: that in certain restricted areas/locations, humans of all races and genders share identical identities of bare life with that of zombies. It thus can provide the means for rethinking and application of necropolitics to contemporary zombie films.

2.4. Theoretical foundation

Necropolitics- 'necro' meaning 'corpse' in Greek- signifies the study of the 'capacity to define who matters and who does not,' in other words, 'who matters and who does not'. As the philosopher Achille Mbembé points out, throughout history, there have been racist ideologies that dictate that one particular race 'matters' more than another: an example of this can be gleaned from the African slave trade as conducted in the United States from 1619 to 1813 [2]. Necropolitics came to the forefront of philosophical debate with the publication of Giorgio Agamben's seminal study *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* in 1998 [1]. Agamben takes his cue from the ancient theories of Aristotle and the biopolitics of mid-twentieth-century philosopher Michel Foucault to argue that from the earliest treatises of political theory, notably in Aristotle's notion of man as a political animal, and throughout the history of Western thinking about sovereignty, a notion of sovereignty as power over 'life' is implicit [7]. The reason it remains merely implicit has to do, according to Agamben, with the way the sacred, or the idea of sacrality, becomes indissociable from the idea of sovereignty. Drawing upon Carl Schmitt's idea of the sovereign's status as the exception to the rules he safeguards, and on anthropological research that reveals the close interlinking of the sacred and the taboo, Agamben

defines the sacred person as one who can be killed and yet not sacrificed- a paradox he sees as operative in the status of the modern individual living in a system that exerts control over the collective 'naked life' of all individuals. The current fascination with Agamben's work has something to do with the intoxicating nature of his conclusions. *Homo Sacer* concludes with the assertion that '[t]oday it is not the city but the camp that is the fundament bio-political paradigm of the West.' Agamben's thesis is that a 'biological paradigm' is responsible for some of the worst atrocities of the twentieth century including the Nazi concentration camps and that it provides the hitherto concealed common link or 'inner solidarity' between Nazism and liberalism [1]. According to Agamben, the same 'paradigm' can explain or illuminate why the post-second World War period, in spite of the dark shadow cast over it by totalitarianism, has witnessed the gradual diminishment of democratic politics and the irresistible growth of autocratic and executive governance.

3. Case Study

3.1. Case Description

In this analysis, the author puts John Stratton's argument into dialogue and critically engages with his finding that zombies and displaced people are the same and, he added, that the cultural significance of this fear traced back to post-colonialist assertions and that the zombie apocalypse films are spurred by an increase of illegal immigrants who surpass national borders [6]. As zombie films are mostly produced by several developed nations, such threat is naturally constructed in zombie narratives. In setting up his discussion of the resemblance, Stratton writes:

The point here is twofold: that excluded from the rights and privileges of the modern state, those displaced people are positioned legally as bare life; and that in this legal limbo, these people can be treated in a way that enables them to become associated with a condition mythically exemplified in the zombie [6].

The following analysis will mainly focus on the second proposition while narrowing down the 'legal limbo' to the locations as a signifier of the zombie apocalypse. Those places vary in form, the most common ones are houses, campuses, ships, planes, etc. One can also think of George A. Romero's zombie series, where human's defensive locations vary from a farmhouse, a military basement, to a shopping mall. Nevertheless, their characteristics in space are similar. This point will be addressed shortly in the case analysis, in which each location of the two film cases will be compared and analysed. In its purest sense, *WWZ* is an authentic depiction of the zombie apocalypse in that, first, the virus spreads globally, and the plot line involves concurrent chaos in the US, North Korea, and the UK. Moreover, it involves a sequential/chronological order, in which the city of Jerusalem was the final to be overwhelmed by the zombies. The 'globalisation' in *WWZ* stands in stark contrast to that in the film *Train to Busan*. The title suggests a group of humans confronting zombies aboard, where it is simple to imagine limited space and dire survival conditions. The train (to Busan) is a place of 'legal limbo', on which all the passengers fall into the category of 'bare life'. Its connection to both Agamben's notion of 'bare life' and necropolitics will be analysed in the following section.

3.2. Case Analysis

(1) Bare life, Legal limbo, and *World War Zombie*

The notion of bare life is commonly used to indicate zombie-human similitude. Centring on a group of humans attempting to exterminate the undead intruders, the zombie-apocalypse narratives in *WWZ* is unusually zombie-biased. This is not only illustrated by how zombies are metamorphosed into pure rivals who can easily defeat the troop or tear down a wall, but also exemplified when they express no more bare life. The author of Zombie trouble (2011) draws a clear analogy between the zombie siege of a survivor camp and illegal immigrants surpassing the border. As Bishop writes in terms of the zombie film *Land of the Dead*: [6]

To ensure the status quo, Dennis Hopper's Kaufman, the self-appointed leader of Pittsburgh. Constructs the world's most extreme border security.'

In the *WWZ*, the place resembling 'the world's most extreme border security' is the warship, to which the leading protagonist (Gerry) and his family were rescued and transported. In her 2020's essay on Horror studies, Jessica Ruth Austin specifically details how such conflict often appears in zombie films, where 'high-level military commanders make decisions that benefit them necropolitically' [8]. This became clear in *WWZ*, where Gerry's family is threatened with removal from the ship after Gerry refuses the command of the military commander. This fear of military control comes into play after the president, who signifies sovereignty and executive power, was reported missing. Reflecting the previous citations on Agamben and his characterization of the concentration camp, here, the extreme power of sovereignty is transported to the US military and, thus, the warship becomes the site where fact and law are blurred.

In a sequence in which Gerry's family is discriminated against for non-contribution to the ship, the hierarchy between the citizen (the family) and the state's power (the military) becomes apparent. Indeed, the lives of the family are considered expendable. That the military gets hold of all the executive authority for expelling civilians is a fact that when the state of exception becomes normalized. In this sense and, as explained in the previous section, the existence of passengers is reduced to bare life, with the authority defining them as useless- thus disposable.

It thus can be concluded that the limited space of a warship and the concentration camp share several structural resemblances: (1) the vessel in the sea is an isolated land, which corresponds to the camp isolated from civilization; (2) the military in control of the ship corresponds to the Nazi, (3) with this in mind, citizens on the ship correspond to victims in the camp, both of whose lives are subjected to the sole power, and thus the sovereignty;(4) that Gerry is forced to carry out the deathly mission and after he is presumed dead, his family is consequently deported from the ship, is correspondent to the concentration camps where sovereignty defines who deserves to live and who should die, (5) and due to this extreme power in exercise, the concealed space is where fact and law become muddled, which is identical to the extermination camp where the sovereign simply wills the normal order to be suspended.

(2) Advanced zombies, Post-humans, and *Train to Busan*

Unlike other Hollywood-produced zombies, In *WWZ* (dir. Marc Forster) zombies are rendered physically stronger than humans in sheer speed and ferocity. In other words, the most non-human nature of the converted humans is reinforced while humans are rendered into their prey; the transformation is accelerated, and their ability to hunt humane flesh is enhanced. Consequently, the proximity of zombie-human is diminished in this sense. Another distinction between *WWZ*'s zombies and other images lies in the former's ability to form as a group. Zombies are commonly depicted as mindless creatures, yet in *WWZ* the undead shares the same goal. In a sequence where Jerusalem's people gather and sing the song to celebrate their triumph in building the wall against the zombies' invasion, a few seconds after the city is overwhelmed by the undead as they pile on top of each other to reach the wall. A parallel of solidarity is drawn in these sequences and, it is found not only in human beings but also in zombie behaviors.

As opposed to either the classic Western zombie's identity as the quintessential 'Other' or *WWZ*'s whose undeadness forms into a zombie-biased viewpoint, the army of the dead in *Train to Busan* resemble more like a reflection of posthuman concepts of the 'undead'. According to Sigmund Freud, human beings are inherently born with a death drive. That is, we all return to an inanimate state to one extent or another [9]. If, in the new millennium, the survivor has been a metaphor of resilience, the zombie obviously stands for redundancy. This excess population, according to would consist of individuals who are incapable of joining the job market, or of others who, once expelled from it, not only have no chance of getting back into it but do not even count as a reserve army of labour. The malleability of the zombie has made it possible to develop the original germ of "surplus population" to include the whole marginal population whose distinguishing feature would be stigmatization and alienation: from the slave to the proletarian by way of the infected. Yet, as inequality has expanded

with globalization, the definition of redundant has also widened, taking up the concept of "*bare life*", considering that all those people who are relegated to the grey zone of the law, for example, refugees, forced migrants, child labourers, and people denied citizens' rights, would belong to the category. Other authors draw attention to expulsion and, going beyond the strict labour market framework directly related to neoliberal policies [10]. Kim Jaecheol points to the global pandemic of H1N1 (commonly referred to as the 'swine flu') as furnishing forth 'an onscreen zombie craze [3].' With the 'Swine Flu' and the ongoing COVID crisis in mind, films like *Train to Busan* reflect and comment upon humanity's propensity to wreak man-made disasters through the form of scientific experiments with viruses.

What is more, the representation of the zombies in *Train to Busan* underscores how the monsters we fear so much are just another form of human – i.e., posthuman. This is achieved through the relative lack of dehumanizing makeup that is employed to denote a zombie in *Train to Busan*. Margot Collins and Elson Bond argue that the Asian zombies do not look unrecognizably different in the same fashion as their Western counterparts, because this 'postmodern' zombie forces the audience to consider what it means to be a fully-fledged and autonomous individual [4]. Something uncanny is haunting the West—the spectre of religion. The talk of the "return of religion" or its "new visibility" is now ubiquitous in academia [11].

4. Implications

With the exponential acceleration of the twin pillars of secularisation – that is, the decline of religious belief/practice – alongside humanity's growing reliance on technology, zombies in their posthuman form, act as a reminder that any 'redemption' of the human race is 'totally up to ourselves' [12]. To put it another way, just as the zombie apocalypse is not external as it can no longer be explained as God's (temporary) punishment, the solution to the zombie apocalypse is no longer straightforward. The pessimistic ending of *Train to Busan* where all the protagonists ultimately end up as zombies with no 'cure; in sight, speaks to the 'undead' strain in posthumanist theories. The 'undead' feature of posthuman existence is reliant upon the fact that we are not fully alive due to our mindless absorption of technology. As Dale Knickerbocker notes, the lighting speed with which technology has continued enveloping human lives has led to urgent questions among post-humanists such as: 'what does it mean to be human? How would the incorporation of such technologies into our own beings change us? What are the ethical implications of the use of this technology?[13]'

The setting of *Train to Busan* on multiple train cars highlights how, in a posthumanist existence, the vehicle of social progress may in fact contain within it the disintegration of what it means to be human. In other words, the zombie contagion can be interpreted as a deadening metaphor for the dehumanizing effects of public transport. This is particularly true within overcrowded Asian societies like China and South Korea. If zombies, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues, have traditionally represented monsters who (like Frankenstein's creature), haunt their maker asking, 'why we created them?', the lines are not so clear-cut in posthumanist depictions of zombies [14]. Instead, the extension of their lives via virtual reality and technology, upends the relationship between monster and its creator [15].

Table 1. Shared features between 'Warship' and the concentration camp

Warship	Features	Concentration camp	Features
Location	Isolated	Location	Isolated
The military	In power	The Nazi	In power
Citizens	Bare life	Victims	Bare life

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the zombies of *Train to Busan* serve as contemporary experiments in thinking of human vulnerability that philosophers have explored since time immemorial. In the opening decades of the twenty-first century, viral contagions have undercut the idea of human exceptionalism. Rather, from a posthuman perspective, Asian zombies represent the growing fears that human beings will be swept aside by the unsustainable technological advances that have typified this era. The zombies of Western culture have been moved aside in favour of a dystopian vision of the future of humanity as illustrated in *Train to Busan.* The narrative of idyllic life being invaded by foreign monsters (zombies) has become translated to reflect our contemporary posthuman concerns. With our thoughts and emotions constantly being outsourced to technological prostheses, we are all, to some extent, already undead before the so-called zombie apocalypse. In fact, running on the train signifies humans' fruitless desire to fight off the temptations of the death drive – for even though the protagonists of *Train to Busan* are constantly on the move, they are still, materially speaking, still in the same spot.

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