

Michał Zgorzałek

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Michał Zgorzałek*

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin

**GEORGE A. ROMERO'S DYSTOPIAS:
THE REPRESENTATION OF DYSTOPIA
IN THE UNIVERSE OF HIS *ZOMBIE TRILOGY***

The present paper discusses dystopia in the genre of horror on the basis of George A. Romero's zombie films. Dystopia seems to be inextricably linked with the vision of the world in which the very structure of the society has been destroyed along with moral codes and the only remaining thing is the will to survive. In the *Living Dead Trilogy* Romero skilfully used the zombie apocalypse motif to portray both vices as virtues characteristic to American way of life. Moreover, in his motion pictures, he envisages what may be the implications of possible dystopias arising from the ashes of destroyed human civilisation and, thus, gives the audiences, and the critics, an incredible resource for interpretation and further analysis.

The methodology involves the paradigmatic analysis of the plots in order to show how the motif of zombie apocalypse is used to explore the notion of dystopia. Moreover, the mentioned analysis will also cover explicit, implicit and symptomatic meaning created by the analyzed films.

Keywords: dystopia, social critique, human holocaust, morality

INTRODUCTION

Throughout his career, George A. Romero has directed over sixteen pictures, trying his hand at such film genres as the thriller, comedy, documentary and horror. And this last genre is the focus of this paper. The films examined in this work are the so-called zombie movies directed, and also written, by Romero. All of the films focus on different aspects of a post-apocalyptic reality after an outbreak of a deadly epidemic which turns people into bloodthirsty zombies. However, in each of them numerous approaches to the society arising from the ruins of the past civilization can be found. As a result of this shift, each film shows alternative outcomes and, in the process, diverse dystopias that may emerge.

The intention of the present paper is to analyse the ways in which George A. Romero managed to create his apocalyptic/dystopian visions and the resulting effects. To do so, the theoretical approach is in large measure based on the work of such scholars as James Walters,

* Corresponding author: Michał Zgorzałek, Instytut Anglistyki Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie; e-mail: zgorzalek.michal@gmail.com.

Stanley Cavell and V.F. Perkins¹, among others. Their ideas concerning both the theory of cinema and its practical implications, especially in the context of creating worlds, proved to be of great help for my analysis. Their concepts were valuable not only for a holistic analysis of the motion pictures, but also when the minute details are taken into account. As to the notion of dystopia *per se*, I will follow the definitions provided by Lyman Sargent, as well as Laurence Davies in *Dystopia(n) Matters* (2013). The first argues that “many dystopias are jeremiads” and “[e]ssentially the jeremiad accuses the people of backsliding, of losing the confidence of God, and goes into great detail about the specific ways that the people have erred”. He also adds that “the dystopia, mostly without the religious element, does the same thing, although often only implicitly” (Sargent 2013: 12). Davies, on the other hand, argues that:

[...] it is possible to interpret dystopia not simply (and simplistically) as a parodic inversion of utopia that must necessarily discredit the genre as a whole but, rather, as a generic form which combines satire on existing society with a parodic inversion of transcendent or controlling utopian aspirations. (Davies 2013: 26).

Both of these explanations can be applied to the interpretations of Romero’s films, and not only to the ones concerned with the undead motif. It also supports the idea that the *Living Dead Trilogy* is not merely watered-down entertainment but a legitimate critique of the society it presents.

In his films, Romero unfolds before the audience a world in which most of the human population dies or is killed by either a deadly virus or its animated victims. He shows what reality would look like if the small percent of survivors had to fight for every bit of food, shelter and munitions. He raises serious questions concerning the state of politics, economics, and culture using the “plague” as a means of conveying the message. What is more, from all the media available, he chose cinematography and tried to make the best of its potential. As with literature and painting, film has its own assets and limitations; however, if used and interpreted correctly, it is capable of illustrating much more than the first two. James Walters comments that “[a]s with photography, we are invited to attend to the existence of a world around the camera, outside of the section framed and recorded onto film” (Walters 2008), meaning that what is shown within the frame’s borders is just a mere fragment of the whole implicit world surrounding the scene. What is more, in his *Living Dead Trilogy*, Romero always based the story’s plot on the actual reality of American society of the time and only from this starting point does it diverge. As a result, the audience feels more attached to the movie’s plot, perceiving it, even partly, as more probable. An explanation is again provided by Walters who concludes with:

[...] we arrive at the notion of audiences understanding worlds in film as worlds not only through a cognitive ability to make the two-dimensional three-dimensional but also because of the film world’s relationship to our own: the ways in which it relates to a reality that we already understand through experience. (Walters 2008)

¹ Perkins explains his approach in the article entitled *Where is the World? The Horizon of Events in Movie Fiction* (Perkins 2008).

This said, it becomes easier to observe how the director used cinematic tools to create a truly dystopian universe which bears resemblance to reality as the audience knows it, and this world is the subject of the analysis presented below. Moreover, the space in all three films not only serves the function of a simple background for the action, but also dramatizes the events. It is achieved by the remoteness and isolation from the world of the venues and interior designs, which create a disturbing atmosphere signifying the desolation of the characters. On many occasions, it also emphasizes the impossibility of leaving these places, the only alternative being escaping via helicopter with little chance of survival elsewhere. In addition, the characters are as if tied to their (often temporary) shelters and, as a result, they not only have to occupy them but also protect them from both the undead and the living. This resembles Lotman's idea of a semiosphere, which is rigid and unchanging in its centre while the outskirts are the area of dynamic changes.² If applied to the Living Dead Trilogy, it becomes clear that the places where most of the action is set are invaded and/or raided by different agents (protagonists, a motorcycle gang etc.). However, they eventually always return to their initial state, that is to before the films' action took place. As a result, it proves that the movement between the outside and inside of semiotic spheres is, firstly, creating a sense of dynamism in the course of action and, secondly, signifying the unchanging nature of the space itself, as it eventually reverts to previous form.

NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD

The first zombie film created by G. A. Romero is *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). It was shot using black-and-white celluloid film with a minimum financial input of about \$300,000. The undead in the film play an important role, that of the "unknown enemy." It may be referring to the political situation of the time, as the Cold War was in full swing. Nevertheless, the zombies also work as a catalyst which causes a small-scale apocalypse in a small county somewhere in Pennsylvania. The word 'small-scale' is used because the epidemic is, fortunately, quickly taken care of and does not manage to overtake the whole country and/or world. The dystopia resulting from the outbreak is also not great in size; nevertheless, the ideas Romero started working on introduce a basis for further instalments.

The issue the director decided to focus on in his first serious feature-length film is world-building. The characters in the picture are trapped inside a large country house and there are three levels on which they try to survive: the basement, ground floor and the upper floor. Most of the action, however, takes place on the ground floor as the viewer is seldom shown the basement and hardly ever sees the first floor. In the film, the sick child is kept in the cellar and bereft of any attention for some time. Here, one can notice an analogy to space in More's *Utopia*, in which the old and the sick are moved to the borders of the city. The analogy is important in the sense that the situation is similar, although at this point the similarities end. The girl is left alone, soon transforms into a zombie, and eventually kills her parents. It may be interpreted as a dystopian caricature of the utopian system, showing that the weak should not be kept outside the society, otherwise this may rebound on the ignorant society itself.

² The phenomenon is thoroughly discussed in Lotman's *Semiotics of Cinema* (1976) and *Universe of Mind* (1990).

Another observable dystopian element in *Night of the Living Dead* is the way nature is treated. The characters are isolated from the outside, and nature itself is perceived similarly to in *Brave New World*, as unknown and dangerous. Apart from the opening sequence, there are only several scenes set outside the country house. Each of these scenes is shown in a disturbing and threatening way: the pace is hectic and some of the characters fall victim to the infected living dead. It signifies an atmosphere of entrapment which is present in the picture from the very moment Barbra reaches the desolated house. Again, the old order has fallen and the protagonists have to face a new reality.

Dystopian elements are also apparent in the way the survivors try to maintain the “old order”: i.e., the social rules of the time before the outbreak. Nevertheless, just one day after the infection had seized the country, they break the basic rules governing their society and culture. For instance in the way Ben and Sam fight with each other over the domination of the house. Sam is white and he feels superior to Ben and only because of his skin colour, even when wrong, he unceasingly undermines Ben’s authority and decisions. The conflict rises until the moment Sam attacks Ben and is eventually knocked down by him. The scene, in the context of the 1960s, was shocking. This impression intensifies when seen in conjunction with the scene where Ben punches Barbra onto a bed. It again depicts to what degree the old order is disrupted in this reality.

Violence is a prevalent motif in this instalment of Romero’s zombie films as well. It adopts numerous forms, from screaming and punching to arson and shooting. It is directed not only towards the undead but also the living. This omnipresence of cruelty suggests that this new post-apocalyptic and/or dystopian reality will overcome the current order of the world by means of brute force.

DAWN OF THE LIVING DEAD

The second instalment in Romero’s famous trilogy is entitled *Dawn of the Living Dead*, released in 1978, ten years after the first picture. This time backed by a more substantial budget, the filmmaker could afford to use colour film. In a way, it allowed Romero to experiment with some other ideas. This part pays attention to issues such as consumerism and the role of women in a newborn post-apocalyptic society. However, the vision presented by Romero once more is far from perfect and, one may say, a bit skewed. The scale of events presented is also much wider than previously. Here, the outbreak of the virus causing human corpses to rise from the dead is global and authorities are overwhelmed by the situation and towns, cities, and eventually whole countries fall apart. People, seeing that they cannot count on their governments, seek refuge wherever possible. The by-product of this process is numerous smaller (often far from utopian) communities fighting one another for food, arms and shelter.

One such group finds their way to a forsaken shopping centre near Pittsburgh. After landing their helicopter on the building’s roof, they undertake to cleanse the mall from the walking dead and make it their home for the time being. The mall itself serves as a perfect, isolated space surrounded by the dangerous throngs of the undead – similarly to the island of Utopia, which was surrounded by high cliffs and seas. This relationship is strengthened even

more when the heroes manage to close the mall and get rid of all the remaining zombies, practically purifying the place. Although initially the way they live may seem utopian, the truth is that they are unable to sustain it. The shopping centre itself is equipped with plenty of supplies. It has got everything; starting with food, through clothes, cosmetics and weaponry to luxury products like caviar and jewellery. It's also got its own energy source (probably nuclear) which provides them with virtually infinite electrical energy. Nevertheless, like in other dystopias, the environment degenerates. Isolation leads to solitude and suspicion. Once more the sick, manifested by the character of Roger, are kept on the periphery of the group's makeshift house and once more this idea backfires on the rest of the characters. Soon the protagonists are bored with all the goods surrounding them. Also, the situation exposes some negative features, like when the men discuss terminating Francine's pregnancy. After an initial "shopping spree" and the euphoria caused by finding the mall, with time they are no longer capable of deriving pleasure from having or using all the goods surrounding them.

Furthermore, violence continues to be a prevailing motif in this instalment. From the beginning of the picture, characters almost incessantly face different perils; not only is there the danger of being bitten by the zombies but also from other sources, including the police forces. In the opening minutes of the film one of the Special Forces officers, in a fit of anger, starts shooting civilians and has to be put down by other policemen. Later, there is another group of policemen planning to escape the city on a boat and leave their duties behind. This situation in which even the police forces become uncontrollable shows the scale and seriousness of the outbreak and the powerlessness of the authorities. Violence is also present in the mall, at first directed only towards the living dead occupying the building. However, in the ending sequence of the film, it is raided by a gang which simply sweeps through the mall on motorbikes, shooting and destroying everything in sight. There is nothing left. The prospect of not being able to hold the mall along with the upcoming winter makes it clear that the characters must abandon their temporary home. The world they used to know has come to an end and there is no turning back, the dystopia has achieved its height once again.

DAY OF THE LIVING DEAD

The third motion picture by George A. Romero "starring" the Living Dead was released in 1984 and develops the ideas introduced by the previous films. The director decided to move the action of the movie underground and within the confined space of an enormous cave in which the characters end up. They can be divided into three groups: the scientists, the military and the skilled civilians. This clear separation, both between the characters and from the outer world, indicates that these groups are the only ones to survive the zombie apocalypse; however, they still find it extremely difficult to co-operate. The place itself stands for the world which does not exist anymore, as if the protagonists were supposed to start civilization anew, which is even mentioned by one of them. On top of that there is extremely questionable medical research carried out by a member of the medical team named Logan, also referred to as Frankenstein, whose sole intention is to "train" the undead and make them servants to the living.

One dystopian aspect taken up by the director is the fact that the whole setting for the action is a grand archive of human achievements. John, a helicopter pilot who lives in the depths of the cave, mentions that it is filled with information about the budget of the defence department, immigration records, census reports and official accounts of all the wars, plane crashes, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, etc. that have had occurred in human history. He then asks “What does it matter?” showing the insignificance of all that data. Life in the bunker exists on the remnants of the past and the knowledge gathered there is worthless in this new, post-apocalyptic world. There is no use for money or art anymore. The only two things that have kept their value are military force and science. The balance between the two, however, is wavering and it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. The old order where science once had a privileged position is long gone, only to be replaced by the latter of the two forces. What is more, both groups, the military and scientists (represented by Rhodes and Logan respectively) fall into decay. The soldiers gradually become more brutal; the scientists abandon medical ethics in favour of questionable curiosity. It is only a matter of time for this order is to collapse as well.

The situation in which the protagonists find themselves put is the result of the above mentioned outbreak of the zombie virus, causing human corpses to rise from the dead. A unit consisting mainly of soldiers and scientists is sent to an abandoned military base where the latter are supposed to work on a vaccine or antidote to the disease. Unfortunately for the mission, and the plot, the initial plan takes a different direction. “Dr Frankenstein” comes to the conclusion that it is impossible to either kill all the zombies or to cure them. Therefore, he turns his interests to behavioural studies with the intention of domesticating the undead. Though his research may seem logically legitimate and the results encouraging, the methods he applies to reach his goal are far from acceptable. Moreover, the sole idea of keeping the zombies as ‘servants’ while the living would be the ‘masters’ raises some ethical concerns. The vision he unfolds suggests that there should be a society of the rulers and the ruled, the difference being simply having a blood pulse. This society would be maintained by relentless training of the undead based on a system of punishment and reward. As the plot shows, eventually he is punished for his unethical experiments on humans, but is somehow ‘avenged’ by his favourite specimen Bub, who shoots Logan’s murderer.

DISCUSSION

It is not obvious whether the three motion pictures can be easily summarised in a short paragraph. This may be so due to the wide range of dystopian motifs present in Romero’s *Zombie Trilogy*. It is highly probable that the issues mentioned here are not the only ones. Probably the best summary on the topic has been created by the author himself in the form of the fourth instalment entitled *Land of the Living Dead* (2005), in which the director discusses not only the issues mentioned in this paper but also raises other questions. Nevertheless, as far as the original trilogy is concerned, the most important matter is the state of the society (both the society of the time and the contemporary one) and the role it may play as a base on which to build new, often dystopian, realities in case of global human holocaust. Although often

shocking and brutal, the visions George A. Romero depicted in his films have the potential to be treated as serious works of art. Moreover, their complexity and topicality only prove that these motion pictures remain relevant in discussions concerning probable scenarios that may await humankind one day, and their value should not be neglected.

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DYSTOPIE GEORGE'A A. ROMERO: WIZJA DYSTOPII W ŚWIECIE JEGO TRYLOGII ZOMBIE

Niniejszy artykuł omawia dystopię w horrorze na podstawie filmów o zombie autorstwa George'a A. Romero. Dystopia wydaje się nierozdzielnie związana z wizją świata, w którym bazowa struktura społeczeństwa została zniszczona wraz z istniejącymi kodami moralnymi, a jedyną pozostałością jest wola przetrwania. W *Trylogii Żywych Trupów* Romero umiejętnie wykorzystuje motyw zombie apokalipsy, aby przedstawić zarówno wady, jak i zalety amerykańskiego stylu życia. Co więcej, w swoich filmach przewiduje on, jakie mogą być konsekwencje ewentualnych dystopii wynurzających się z popiołów zniszczonej cywilizacji i, tym samym, daje publiczności i krytykom niezwykle pole dla interpretacji oraz dalszej analizy. Metodologia bazuje na paradygmatycznej analizie fabuły poszczególnych części *Trylogii*, aby pokazać, w jaki sposób motyw zombie apokalipsy może służyć do zbadania pojęcia dystopii. Ponadto wspomniana analiza obejmuje także jawne, ukryte oraz symptomatyczne znaczenie zawarte w omawianych filmach.

Słowa kluczowe: dystopia, krytyka społeczna, zagłada ludzkości, moralność