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# A Culture of Necrophilia: The Rise of the Undead in Film

## **Comments**

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Lugene Rosen

## Abstract

In recent years, the undead have been on the rise in films. Zombies and vampires are taking center stage and raking in money in record amounts. *Resident Evil* moved on to its fourth installment, *28 Days Later* morphed into *28 Weeks Later*, and *30 Days of Night* is scoring some serious box office attention. George Romero, the king of the undead film, released his latest *Land of the Dead*, fourth in the *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and *Day of the Dead* series. There has even been an updated remake of *Dawn of the Dead* where the zombies transform from the shambling mounds of the past to the hyperdrive zombies of today. But what makes these films, so focused upon the living dead, so popular? Are we attracted to the undead because we, as Americans, are morphing into a society of necrophiles? Or are we already a society of necrophiles simply searching for an outlet? By examining the genre with an eye to Erich Fromm's concept of necrophilia in a mechanized world, a new trend reveals itself. According to Fromm, as the world becomes more and more mechanized, humans become more and more disassociated from their selves, creating a move from biophilia to necrophilia. As we become inured to social ills and violence, it's a small step from being distanced from life to being attracted to death. If the trend continues, the undead in films will be mere reflections of the undead in a mechanized world. Art imitates life. In the case of the undead in film, art imitates death. And who doesn't love art?

### A Culture of Necrophilia: The Rise of the Undead in Film

The 20<sup>th</sup> century marked the shift from parlor to living room, from the place where the recently deceased were laid out for viewing to the place where friends and family gathered. Americans couldn't wait to remove the dead from the home. By 1963, Jessica Mitford's groundbreaking book *The American Way of Death* blew the lid off the funeral industry, but it did more than that. The text revealed the American aversion to being part of the death process. We wanted our corpses to appear life-like, we wanted someone else to deal with the intimate details of death and we wanted death to be out of our homes and daily life. By the end of the 1960s, that would all change. The Vietnam War and the increase in our reliance on technology would give rise to a new phenomenon: the popularity of the undead in film. These new denizens of zombiedom were a far cry from the B movie caricatures of previous decades. No longer were zombies created by voodoo priests to do their bidding. The new zombies were born out of humankind's own hubris, whether it be not understanding the ramifications of space probes returning to Earth, nuclear fallout, or scientific experiment. The new undead represented a mirror image of the emotional climate of the time. What we couldn't deal with in the home, we attended in droves at the movie theater. But what caused this shift from repulsion to attraction? How did death become so compelling? One way to answer this question is to examine the paradox through Erich Fromm's concept of necrophilia. According to Fromm, the more mechanized we become, the more we turn away from life and toward death, opening the door for the rise of the undead.

In order to understand fully how Fromm's theory applies, it should be noted that his concept differs distinctly from that of Freud's. As a neo-Freudian, he built upon the

legacy yet offered a new spin on human behavior. In his seminal work, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Fromm (1973) explains that his definition of a necrophilic person is not focused upon the sexual aspect like Freud's, nor does his theory place necrophilia as part of the anal stage of development. Additionally, Fromm (1966) delineates between the two: "Freud derived his typology primarily from biological elements, whereas I derive mine principally from behaviors considered in a societal context" (11). In Freud's school of psychology, humans are driven by instincts, not ways of being. The *eros*, or life instinct, and death instinct are in a constant battle within all humans. The *eros* strives to go about the business of living: eating, drinking, making love, and surviving to propagate the species. The death instinct, on the other, desires to place the human body in dangerous situations, constantly risking physical harm while striving to return to the calm of death. According to Freud, "In the case of the destructive instinct we may suppose that its final aim is to lead what is living into an inorganic state." Commenting on Freud, Fromm (1973) sums it up: "It is the effort of the Eros to combine organic substances into ever larger unities, whereas the death instinct tries to separate and to disintegrate living structure" (485). In Freud's view, these instincts are battling within us every day over every situation presented.

In a similar vein, Fromm also uses the binary concept of life-affirming and destructive aspects in regard to human nature, but here is where the difference becomes apparent. To begin with, Fromm (1973) defines the positive aspect as biophilia. He posits it as "the passionate love of life and of all that is alive; it is the wish to further growth, whether in a person, a plant, an idea, or a social group" (485). So far, the life-affirming aspects of the two appear to be similar. It is only when the negative aspects are

examined that the real differences between Freud and Fromm become apparent. For Freud, both instincts are equal, both parts of a healthy psyche. For Fromm (1973), however, the destructive aspect takes a different tack: “Destructiveness is not parallel to, but the alternative to biophilia. Love of life or love of the dead is the fundamental alternative that confronts every human being. Necrophilia grows as the development of biophilia is stunted. Man is biologically endowed with the capacity for biophilia, but psychologically he has the potential for necrophilia as an alternative solution” (486). In other words, biophilia is the normal impulse whereas necrophilia is a psychopathological occurrence. There is no balance between the two. Instead, one or the other holds sway over a person’s actions and manner of being.

One might wonder how the concept of necrophilia connects to the popularity of films about the undead. The answer is simple. Fromm (1973) defines necrophilia as follows: “Necrophilia in the characterological sense can be described as *the passionate attraction to all that is dead, decayed, putrid, sickly; it is the passion to transform that which is alive into something unalive; to destroy for the sake of destruction; the exclusive interest in all that is purely mechanical. It is the passion to tear apart living structures*” (441). Clearly, an orientation to death, decay, and illness is the bedrock of Fromm’s theory. By examining films within the framework of societal events, it becomes clear that film is influenced by the context within which it was created. As we, as a society, become less and less biophilic, our interests become focused on the necrophilic. This remains true whether the focus is on how we as a society live and interact or how we spend our leisure time.

Beginning in 1968 with George A. Romero's groundbreaking film *Night of the Living Dead*, the rise of the undead began. To put it in a historical context, the film was released during the three year period from 1965 to 1968 when the United States was barraging Vietnam with bombs. A country at war lives by its political policies. On the nightly news, viewers were exposed to body bags, destruction, and mortality counts. Not surprisingly, Fromm (1973) cites Michael Maccoby (1972) as support for his focus on the sociopolitical aspect of necrophilia:

In all of the samples, we found that anti-life tendencies were significantly correlated to political positions that supported increased military power and favoured repression against dissenters. The following priorities were considered most important by individuals who have dominant anti-life tendencies: tighter control of rioters, tighter enforcement of anti-drug laws, winning the war in Vietnam, controlling subversive groups, strengthening the police, and fighting Communism throughout the world. (454)

Based on this and the social climate of the late 1960s, it's no wonder that Romero's politics-laden film captured the necrophilic zeitgeist.

The American approach to the war was to just keep sending young men to die. As we watched the bodies stacked like cordwood, the inevitability of tomorrow's new stack invaded the thoughts of viewers. The certainty of death in our lives took on the same plodding, hiccupping shamble of the zombies in Romero's film. In fact, he uses stacks of dead zombies within the film as a reflection of the nightly news. According to Bishop (2006), "Zombies are not uncanny because of their humanistic qualities; they are uncanny because they are, in essence, a grotesque metaphor for humanity itself" (201).



As we limped our way through the Vietnam War, the daily exposure to death chipped away at the American biophilic way of life. In its stead, necrophilia began to come to the fore.

In war, the concept of the Other is essential. There must be a difference, whether it be physical appearance or ideological belief, in order to compel a soldier to kill another human being. Bishop (2006) states: “Although they were once human, zombies have no real connection to humanity aside from their physical form; they are the ultimate foreign Other” (201). Romero uses this idea as the basis for his film. His characters are battling an enemy that is essentially themselves. By making the antagonists humans, albeit dead humans, Romero underscores the futility of armed conflict. In addition, he carefully uses archetypes as a means of exposing the death of the nuclear family, love, familial ties, and hope. Ben, the hero of the film and the only survivor of the long night, is shot in the head at dawn by his rescuers, who mistake him for another zombie. Although the living seemingly triumph, Ben, who has captured the viewer’s sympathy, is tossed on yet another stack of bodies, again reflecting the societal fascination with death.

Romero continued to tap into the zeitgeist a decade later, using the zombie to mirror the American necrophilic bent with his film *Dawn of the Dead*. Set in a shopping mall, this film accents another of Fromm’s delineators for necrophilia: preferring the inorganic to the organic, specifically the focus on acquiring possessions rather than developing relationships. Hausdorff (1972) explains Fromm, “Marx had located the crux of the central human conflict as between labor and capital, but Fromm subsumes this conflict under vitalistic polarity: the greater conflict is ‘between *the world of things, and their amassment, and the world of life and its productivity*’” (84). In other words, when

humans turn to possessions as a means of joy, biophilia is left behind. Fromm (1973) takes this idea even further:

All over the industrialized world there are men who feel more tender towards, and are more interested in, their automobiles than their wives. They are proud of their car; they cherish it; they wash it (even many of those who could pay to have this job done), and in some countries many give it a loving nickname; they observe it and are concerned at the slightest symptom of a dysfunction. . .life without a car seems to some more tolerable than life without a woman. (455)

Keeping this in mind, Romero's film explicitly reveals the deadness of a society intent upon acquisition. Zombies inhabit and surround the center, merely mimicking in death what they did in life: revering the one place where consumerism is god. The neo-Eden Romero creates within the mall consists of three men—Stephen, Peter, and Roger—and a pregnant woman, Fran. The characters drape themselves in expensive clothing, indulge in gourmet food and top of the line liquor, and use of stacks of hundred dollar bills pilfered from the bank to use as chips in a poker game. The concept of accretion comes through loud and clear. The worship of possessions is especially evident in the character of Stephen.

Within the film, Stephen acts as a symbol of American society in the late 1970s: ineffectual, selfish, and commodity-focused. As the father of Fran's unborn child, his attention should be on her safety. Instead, he puts her and himself at risk in order impress the combat veterans Peter and Roger. Again and again, Stephen chooses *things* over people. In fact, it his actions that directly bring about the destruction of their shopping mall Eden. Instead of allowing a marauding gang of survivors to take what they want

from the mall and go, his worry that someone will take away his things causes him to open fire on the intruders, ostensibly bringing about his own death. Once dead, his zombified body leads the rest of the undead to the last survivors, Peter and Fran. It should be noted that Romero's original ending for the film had Peter suiciding and Fran being killed by the blades of the helicopter she intended to use to make her escape. Instead of this end, Romero allows a small glimmer of hope to remain for the two surviving characters; however, it is abundantly clear that their survival is incumbent upon their ability to give up things and form relationships.

As a way of showing the shift in societal values, *Dawn of the Dead* was remade in 2004, reflecting the same focus on consumerism, but updating the zombies into hyper-speed. As life has sped up from 1978, so too do the undead. Consequently, the mall of the 2000s does not hold the same appeal. Possessions are now a given, and the cast does not engage in the same over-the-top indulgence of the earlier film. The survivors in the 1978 film are content with their spoils. In the 2004 version, the survivors quickly become bored with the contents of the mall and become more intent upon taking the ultimate vacation to a deserted island. The same necrophilic aspect drives the new film although the director, Zack Snyder, ends the film without any hope. The new high speed zombie is invincible. Throughout the film, dissention between the characters prohibits them from moving forward. Even though they eventually do band together to try to find a mythical island away from the running dead, it is a case of too little, too late.

Since an attraction to illness is another aspect of Fromm's necrophilic society, Danny Boyle's 2002 film (US release 2003), *28 Days Later*, demands examination. According to Fromm (1973), "A somewhat less drastic expression of necrophilia is a

marked interest in sickness in all its forms, as well as in death” (449). Boyle’s film takes the societal fear and fascination with sickness to a new level. In place of AIDS or bird flu, he uses a manmade virus that manifests itself in the form of rage, which couples the necrophilic character’s interest in sickness with the need for destruction. Fromm (1973) states: “Another manifestation of the necrophilous character is the conviction that the only way to solve a problem or a conflict is by force and violence” (449). By focusing his zombies on rage rather than a hunger for human flesh, Boyle presents a reflection of the mindless destruction that marks the early 2000s. In the film, animal activists break in and discover that the test monkeys have been repeatedly exposed to violent acts on film. Without understanding the gravity of their actions, they release one of the animals, which attacks its would-be savior and releases concentrated rage into the contained world of Britain. As the virus spreads and the infected outnumber the living, the survivors gather together.

In Boyle’s film, his central characters are Jim, Selena, Frank, and his daughter, Hannah. The four create a sort of modern blended family, all searching for the answer to infection. Early in the film, Selena and Jim express a crucial difference of opinion regarding whether or not the new world is an every person for him or herself realm or one in which caring for and protecting others ranks as the number one priority. For Selena, she would kill Jim “in a heartbeat” if she suspected him of being infected, and she would leave him behind just as quickly if he slowed her down. Jim, on the other hand, has a more altruistic view of the world. He insists that helping others at the expense of his safety is of paramount importance. This altruistic belief is tested at the end of the film when Jim risks all to rescue Selena and Hannah from their military captors. Like

Romero, Boyle's original ending is less than fairy tale. Jim is killed for his efforts, and the two women are on their own. The theatrical release gives viewers a happier send-off. In this version, Jim lives, the three survivors find a zombie-free cottage where they wait for help. The zombies are dying of starvation although there is still no answer to infection, and society still has no answer as to why rage and violence are the norm.

The last application of Fromm's theory can explain the success of modern undead films. Hausdorff (1972) quotes Fromm: "'In the nineteenth century,' says Fromm, 'the problem was that *God is dead*; in the twentieth century the problem is that *man is dead*'" (93). In other words, humanity itself has become an inorganic entity. To wit, Fromm declares, "Men have more recreational time, and they use it in ways that are increasingly boring, increasingly passive, and increasingly tension-provoking" (86). Nowhere does this ennui express itself more clearly than in the 2004 zombie parody *Shaun of the Dead*. Released in a watershed year of undead films, including *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* and the Snyder remake of *Dawn of the Dead*, Edgar Wright's film is a standout in its depiction of a necrophilic world. From the opening scene of a pair of shambling feet shuddering down a hall, the director uses the iconography of the undead walk before revealing that the feet belong to Shaun as he stumbles to the bathroom before completely waking up. With that one scene, Wright sets the tone.

The two leads, Shaun and Ed, are opposite sides of the boredom coin. Shaun spends his days in a nowhere job at an electronics store while Ed spends his firmly entrenched on the couch playing endless video games. As Shaun boards the bus on the way to his dead-end job, the faces that surround him could pass for the walking dead.

They are lifeless. So much so, that when the inevitable zombies begin to appear, Shaun and Ed are hard-pressed to distinguish between the actual undead and the living.

As the film progresses, Wright plays upon the word “surviving.” In its first incarnation as an exchange between Shaun and an acquaintance, Yvonne, on the street, it defines a lifeless life, a life not lived but merely endured. As it appears toward the end of the film between Shaun and Yvonne, it takes on a more literal interpretation. Shaun has had to face the stasis of his life and take action. He successfully breaks through his apathy and wins the girl, but the final scene of the film depicts him playing video games with the now undead Ed whose life has not really changed at all despite his transformation to zombiehood.

The films discussed here are just a small sampling of the undead films that have gained popularity since Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*; however, they are representative of the elements that attract viewers. As society expresses itself more and more as a necrophilic entity and box office numbers continue to rise, the undead will remain a favorite theme for movie-goers. As long as war, sickness, violence, and consumerism remain a part of American culture, we will continue to move away from the biophilic life and toward necrophilia. If the trend continues, the undead in films will be mere reflections of the undead in a mechanized world. Art imitates life. In the case of the undead in film, art imitates death. And who doesn’t love art?

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