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Dead Snow

Abstract

This is a review of *Dead Snow* (2009).

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The origins of the cinematic zombie are religious (in Voodoo) and its central principle is magical (reanimation of the dead), yet the zombie has become a popular figure in a society dominated by science and technology, revived over and over again in a long series of movie incarnations. An early subtle film like *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943: Jacques Tourneur), which was in fact the story of Jane Eyre transplanted to the Caribbean, not only played on white Anglo-Saxon fears of pagan magic and misconceptions of Voodoo religion, but also for the first time figured the zombie as a memorial of past suffering and evil, in particular of the slave trade. The justly celebrated films of George Romero, beginning with *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), completely severed the myth from its religious roots. The root cause of zombieism in these films is no longer supernatural, but natural: a vaguely defined but materialistic radiation or biological contagion. Romero also continued and radicalized one element of the social commentary of *I Walked with a Zombie*. Under his hand, zombies became the inevitable product of a racist, inequitable and fascistic society, a kind of return of the repressed in which the unnatural foundations of modern civilization were revealed. In films like *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), and *Land of the Dead* (2005), post-religious apocalyptic anxieties were melded with social criticism.

Dead Snow, a recent independent zombie film from Norway, shows very little of the thought and ethical subtext that makes viewing the Tourneur/Romero

films an edifying yet cathartic experience. The film is slickly edited and has a pop-punk soundtrack running throughout. *Dead Snow* pays conscious homage to another seminal zombie film *The Evil Dead* (1981: Sam Raimi), but displays none of the latter's inventiveness. *Evil Dead* lacks the social consciousness of the Tourneur/Romero films but it at least compensates for this with atmosphere and imagination. In *Dead Snow*, on the other hand, director Tommy Wirkola cuts away quickly before any atmosphere begins to develop.

Dead Snow follows a group of Norwegian medical students that goes for a winter holiday in an isolated cabin. Their flippant banter, fresh faces, pastel-coloured clothing and noisy snow-machine underline both their innocence and indifference to the darker realities of death and suffering. On the first night, after extended frolicking in the snow, they are visited by a somber, older vacationer, who enunciates what many spectators may want to scream at this point in the film: "I presume you spoiled little shithheads didn't bother to check out the local history before you came waltzing in on the bloody snow tractor of yours." He proceeds to tell them of the Nazi occupation in a local town during World War II and a certain Nazi named Colonel Herzog, whose cruelty, avarice, and lust for gold are legendary. Though the local villagers managed to attack and kill many of Herzog's soldiers, the man says ominously, "the devil himself Colonel Herzog escaped –

froze to death in the mountains,” leaving only an “evil presence” that should not be awakened.

Naturally, the Colonel and a platoon of (pretty cool-looking) Nazi zombies show up later to eviscerate all and sundry, with the pretext of recovering a small treasure trove of gold trinkets that is hidden in the students’ cabin.

Disgust is an emotion that appears to be inseparable from the enjoyment of the zombie film. Cannibalism, the one of the few remaining tabooed behaviours in a secular society, is only the most prominent of the transgressive themes in *Dead Snow*. The perilous relationship between sex and the excretory functions is also invoked. One of the first attacks on the students occurs after a sex act in the outhouse, and features, rather implausibly, the girl being drawn down into the latrine, from which she emerges covered in excrement. Zombies disgust, not because they jump out of the dark or want to kill you, but because they erase the distinction between living and dead, food and corpse, sex and shit. Zombies are the dead that will not die, and keep on refusing to die. The tableau of a group of zombies feasting dumbly on human flesh, a sine qua non of any example of the genre, is the culminating, festival moment of disgust. In a secular society, the idea of transgression has become fluid and only vaguely definable, yet the zombie film shows that the need of homo religiosus to distinguish between the unclean and the clean, the profane and the sacred, the dead and the living is still paramount.

One of the key elements of zombieism is its contagious character. One “becomes” a zombie with a single bite, thus erasing the slim distinction between the living and the dead. In hours or moments, your friend, your mother, your daughter turn into zombies. You are nothing other than food for them and your only option is to kill them. Such erasure of the lines that secure the symbolic order, the structural differences that silently preserve order in society and personal life, is perhaps the central frisson in the horror film and the zombie film in particular. An example from the film under discussion: in one of the few effective and inventive shots, the camera adopts the position of the victim and allows us to see her intestines being removed from her own point of view. Visually and aurally, the barrier between living and non-living, conscious and undead, is removed.

If the provocation of disgust is central in horror, so, too, is its catharsis. The zombie genre nearly always requires that the protagonists free themselves from their disgust for blood and take almost delirious pleasure in killing zombies. Two surviving students in *Dead Snow* take up chainsaw and axe to battle Colonel Herzog and his followers. The lust for killing that they are now free to enjoy marks the final transformation of these timid, over-civilized medical students into confident, but brutal, men. The violation of a symbolic order, the erasure of differences both social and moral, and the descent into contagious violence mirrors what René Girard has called the sacrificial crisis. According to Girard it was in the midst of such a

sacrificial crisis that religious ritual was born out of the sacrifice of a scapegoat. It is tempting to view the zombie film as a disguised re-enactment of such a crisis, except in the context of a society which has replaced rituals of purity with law courts and technology. The apocalyptic degeneration of society into murderous competition, relived time and again in zombie films, only underlines the precariousness of that replacement. Zombie films like *Dead Snow* allow the continued re-living and repetition of that unresolved problem of violence that once had an imperfect safety valve in religious ritual.