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Land of the Dead

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Abstract

This is a review of *Land of the Dead* (2005).

George A. Romero is well known to horror genre enthusiasts as the man who invented the contemporary cinematic zombie myth (divorced from its Haitian roots). The cannibalistic urge of the zombie, its slow-moving pace, and the methods of dispensing with one of them by putting a bullet through its head, or by removing its head altogether, were all invented by Romero when he made the genre-bending cult favorite *Night of the Living Dead*. However, Romero is also known for his very astute and critical appraisals of the political landscape of the U.S.A. In Romero's world, the zombie is much more than a living dead creature seeking warm intestines to snack on; the zombie is a force for social transformation. Furthermore, '*Land of the Dead*' may be Romero's most explicitly political statement of the series – with a strong hint of black liberation theology!

In *Night of the Living Dead*, Romero's brilliant EC horror-comics inspired film from 1968, a zombie attack on a farmhouse is the backdrop for running commentary on race relations in the U.S. of that period. The main protagonist, an African-American man named Ben (Duane Jones), is portrayed as assuming control of a situation that has divided the mostly-white survivors of the farmhouse. Finishing the film only a few weeks before the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, Romero's depiction of Ben resonates deeply with the context of the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s. Ten years later, Romero made *Dawn of the Dead*, again with an Africa-American lead (Ken Foree). This time, however, the zombies are the

backdrop for a critique of consumer capitalism. The film is especially incisive in its prophetic foreshadowing of what will become a dominant trend during the Reagan-Thatcher era of the 1980s.

In 1985, Romero made the third installment of his series, *Day of the Dead*. Here, the military, which has assumed control of an underground complex, is portrayed as more dangerous and cruel than the zombies that encircle it. In this film, the zombies are not solely a metaphoric backdrop for political concerns, but some of them begin to take on personalities of their own. The main zombie protagonist in this film is called Bud (Sherman Howard); he is a lab rat experimented upon and taught human-like characteristics. Romero develops another Bud-like zombie in *Land of the Dead* with the figure of an African-American zombie (Eugene Clark), who is portrayed as the crypto-leader of a new zombie class coming to consciousness.

Unlike the reactionary remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004: Zack Snyder), which depicts the zombies as a chaotic herd of terrorists* closing in on the U.S. from the outside, what many observers of Romero's films tend to overlook is that Romero is always on the side of his zombies. There may be 'good guys' and 'bad guys' fighting to stay alive within the chaos, but ultimately, Romero's zombies represent social change. In *Land* this theme becomes explicit.

The narrative structure of *Land* is very simple. A rich businessman named Kaufman (Dennis Hopper) has built Fiddler's Green, a gated-community for the elite. At the base of its tower lives the rest of the population, also barricaded off from the outside world, which is dominated by zombies. The plot revolves around mercenaries who drive a large tank-like truck called the Dead Reckoning and raid the zombie zone in search of provisions. Romero has created three social classes fenced off from each other in an explosive apocalyptic environment that is ripe for social conflict and unrest: an exploitative elite class, an oppressed working class, and a lumpenproletariat zombie class (the disorganized class). However, something new is in the air and the zombie class is starting to impose its own agency in the world. In the good old idiom of Marxism, the zombie class is in the process of educating, organizing, and agitating. Is this a class starting to radicalize and become a social movement?

Land is a film infused with symbols that suggest a link to black liberation theology. Theologically, the zombies' coming to consciousness becomes evident in a scene where the zombies cross a river that encircles Fiddler's Green. The zombies, like the liberated Israelites from the biblical Exodus story, cross the Red Sea, with a black Moses, in search of Canaan. The repeated concerns expressed about going to Canada by Riley (Simon Baker) not only remind us of Vietnam-period draft-resisters, but also of the Underground Railway during slavery. Black liberation

theologians have repeatedly written about how the use of the word "Canaan" in black spirituals was often a code word for Canada, and was used to alert slaves that the Underground Railroad was coming at nightfall. Like the ancient Israelites, however, Romero's emerging zombie class cannot find its promised land and is forced to wander in the wilderness of a hopeless world.

Romero's new film offers a very important statement on the reality of "lockdown America," with its gated communities, its stark class divisions, and its racial demarcations. It is also a film that speaks to the post-9/11 context, with the talk of security parameters around North America, the reality of walls in Palestine, and the endless fences that barricade the business elite from protesters. The tower of Fiddler's Green evokes the attacks on the twin towers in New York, which is confirmed by Cholo's (John Leguizamo) statement that he will wage "jihad" on Kaufman (and Kaufman's very Bush-like statement that he will not negotiate with "terrorists"). Romero is highlighting here how so-called threats from the "outside" are ultimately linked to the concentration of wealth within the U.S.

Romero's *Land of the Dead* is a serious examination of class and racial antagonisms within a capitalist system that is imploding. It is mind-boggling that this film was released as a big summer blockbuster, for it may be one of the most contestational Hollywood studio films made in several years. *Land of the Dead* is a film about breaking down the barricades, fences, and walls that offer false security

to the powerful. Zombies are always border crossers and boundary breakers. They transgress such rigid categories as life and death. And in Romero's universe, you may learn something about the world, and ultimately about power, by looking at these marginal creatures and whose fences they are breaking down.

* The shots of Muslims praying in the global chaos montage at the beginning of the film lends itself to an analysis of the zombies as a reflection of U.S. anxieties about terrorism at home. This can be likened to some of the "Red Scare" films of the 1950s, where space invaders reflected U.S. anxieties about the spread of Soviet-style communism.