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Les Affamés

J. Barton Scott
University of Toronto, barton.scott@utoronto.ca

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Les Affamés,* directed by Robin Aubert.

Keywords

Zombies, Apocalypse

***Les Affamés* (Ravenous) (2017), dir. Robin Aubert**

Robin Aubert's *Les Affamés* recounts a familiar tale of the zombie apocalypse, set this time in rural Quebec. It follows a half-dozen survivors as they struggle to avoid the ravenous undead. Their stories unfold separately at first and then eventually converge, with our characters coming to form a ragtag band of the harried living. Backstories are sketched in minimal detail; these are types (the lay-about nerd, the fearsome rich lady) rather than fully developed characters. The film ends, as many zombie films do, in a bloodbath.

If genre is about repetition, and a successful entrant into a genre becomes pleasurable insofar as it can deliver a minor variation on the standard formula—giving us what we know and like, laced with a slight frisson of the unexpected—then the question to be asked of a film like *Les Affamés* is how it tweaks its genre or pushes it forward. *Les*

Affamés is not a genre-redefining film. But it does nudge the zombie film in at least two different interesting directions.

First, *Les Affamés* invents a zombie religion. For reasons that are never explained, Aubert's zombies hoard human objects and heap them into eerie ziggurats that the zombies then silently encircle, reverently entranced in the open fields. One tower is made entirely of wooden chairs; another, creepily, of dolls. This zombie religion heightens the film's surreal tone. The towers are just one of the many uncanny images (malevolent twins, bloodied pearls, wild horses) that pull against the storyline here, lending this zombie film an almost lyrical quality.

Aubert's zombie religion also recalls the longer history of the genre. The first feature length zombie movie, *White Zombie* (1932)—made during the American occupation of Haiti—appropriated its zombies from Voudun in order to refashion Haitian religion as Hollywood entertainment. As the title suggests, the film is explicitly about race. In early 20th century Haiti, zombies were a means of reflecting on the slave-like labor conditions of the sugar industry. In Hollywood, they became a means of narrating a fear of black bodies and the potential abasement of white women. They also retained a strongly uncanny quality that arguably derived from their religious origins. One might say that Aubert exploits this uncanny quality to an extant that his predecessors had not: he loops the zombie film back to the religious ground from which it arose.

Second, *Les Affamés* explores a distinctive tone or aesthetic: quiet, elegiac, surreal. Indeed, it often seems more an exploration of tone than of zombies per se. While many recent zombie films and TV shows linger over emptied scenery washed in post-human sunshine, *Les Affamés* turns such shots into an aesthetic program. The film

achieves its tone partly via surreal images like the zombie towers. Just as central, however, is the aesthetic space that the film opens up around motifs of sound and stillness, violence and time, ordinariness and apocalypse.

Sound is key from the opening shots, which cut between a silent, mysterious image of a chair cloaked in fog and the roar of racecars. This assault on the ears is soon joined by physical violence, as a hungry zombie attacks a young couple. This alternation between meditative silence and violent noise continues through the film, which lavishes attention on sounds both large and small. This is partly for diegetic reasons. Zombies are attracted to noise, and so the characters fuss over every little sound—the revving of a truck engine, the recoil of a rifle, the snapping of a mousetrap. This close attention to aural detail also spills beyond the storyline, with recurrent non-diegetic shots that focus attention on, for example, the rustling of leaves in the wind—as though to suggest that the world without humans goes on, and maybe more peacefully than before.

These alternations between silence and sound are also alternations between slowness and speed. The modern zombie film is, at bottom, a time game—how long can the protagonists survive? In a loosely structured picaresque film like *Les Affamés*, this is the only plot element that really counts. The passage of time itself becomes the story. But this time is existentially troubling. What, after all, can a survivor of the zombie apocalypse possibly expect from the future? If humanity is almost extinct, and a violent death is all but assured, why go on living? Why fight for survival? Different zombie films explore this problem in different ways. Some, like George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), revel in the depressive boredom of survival. Others, like Yeon Sang-ho's *Train to Busan* (2016), invest hope in the child as a figure for futurity, or gesture to the

reproductive capacities of the heterosexual couple. *Les Affamés* leans on the latter strategy, carving out an *ad hoc* family unit of man, woman, and child and allowing the last of these to carry the plot forward into the film's surreal final shots.

What seems more distinctive to this film, however, and more interesting, is the way that Aubert uses the time-predicament of the zombie film—its relentless push for a future that can be nothing more than a repetition of the panicked present—to slow time down. There's a scene toward the end of the film where our ragtag band gathers at night under the cover of a pine tree forest to have a frugal supper of homemade pickles, steeped in a jar of brine. A sturdy farm lady pulls pickles from the jar, as the other characters line up silently, one by one, to reverently receive them—lumpy and green, wonderfully variable in size and shape. It's a communion of sorts, a literal last supper. In its simplicity, its pastoralism, and its close proximity to apocalyptic death, it echoes the picnic of strawberries and milk that comes at a similar moment in another plague film (albeit one sans zombies), *The Seventh Seal* (1957). Here, as in Bergman, one gets the sense that it is only in the face of death that a person can really appreciate the simple, sensuous, and, above all, ephemeral pleasures that are at the heart of what it is to be human. Pickles. Pine trees. The smile of a fellow traveler. Zombies up the stakes of this existential game. In their sheer physicality and their grotesque inability to satisfy their ravening hunger, they make this simple and humbly human meal more poignant.

At the end of *Les Affamés*, then, what the viewer is left with is a set of moments that both do and don't add up to a full story. These zombies shriek and run and bite the sides out of people's faces—the usual undead stuff. But they also, stuck in the perpetual present of a genre that likewise refuses to die, focus our attention on the simple pleasures

of the pre-apocalyptic now. They aren't reinventing their genre. But they are helping to make it an interesting place to spend time.