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CHAPTER THREE



Zombie Splatter Comedy from *Dawn* to *Shaun*: Cannibal Carnavalesque

Linda Badley

In the modern horror pantheon (*Resident Evil* and *28 Days Later* notwithstanding), zombies tend to be stooges—they specialize in stumbling incoherence, sick jokes, and the splatter film equivalent of taking pies in the face. Certainly from *Dawn of the Dead*¹ through Peter Jackson's *Braindead* (also known as *Dead Alive*)—and occasionally thereafter, as in the recent British sleeper hit, Edgar Wright's *Shaun of the Dead*—zombie cinema has been as hilarious as it has been horrifying. Horror and comedy are hardly strangers to one another, but beyond the parody, “comic relief,” and black humor typical of B films, there is something fundamentally funny about zombies. Even in otherwise bleak splatter epics such as *Day of the Dead*, they are ridiculous, disgusting, pathetic, and absurd—at the same time *and for the same reasons* that they are horrifying. As the sheriff in the news bulletin sequences in *Night of the Living Dead* says when asked if zombies are “slow moving”: “Yeah. They're dead. They're all messed up.”

To put the issue another way, classifying monster icons by primary affect, we might say that ghosts are uncanny, vampires erotic, werewolves bestial and violent, and zombies grotesque. Monsters are grotesque by definition, of course, in the broad sense of being distortions or transgressions of the norm—werewolves, *The Thing*, and the *Helraiser* films easily come to mind. However, I am following Philip Thomson, Wolfgang Kayser, and Mikhail Bakhtin, for whom the grotesque involves an ambiguous response, a mixture

of revulsion and/or fear in the presence of the ludicrous.² Zombies (since *Night of the Living Dead*) are grotesque in all of these senses, but especially in provoking, often simultaneously and in nearly equal doses, the gut-level responses of disgust, horror, and laughter. True, the humor has ranged from the inadvertently ridiculous (*Plan 9 from Outer Space*) to the pointedly satirical (*Dawn of the Dead*) to “black,” existential comedy (*Dellamorte Dellamore*, also known as *Cemetery Man*) to the anarchic splatter comedy of the early films of Sam Raimi and Peter Jackson.

This admittedly sweeping survey also shows how zombie comedy shifted over time: from social allegory in the late 1970s to “splatstick” (splatter slapstick) by the late 1980s and early 1990s, and from concern with the body politic to an obsession with the body itself—the body politicized as a site of anxiety, transgression, adolescent revolt, and liberating laughter. With this shift in mind, I will try to account for why, how, and when movie zombies in the previous three decades were funny and arrive at tentative conclusions about why, in the early twenty-first century—and with *Shaun of the Dead* the notable exception—they rarely are. I begin by analyzing the humor of *Dawn of the Dead*, the film that set the standard for the splatter film and for zombie comedy, from a range of perspectives—from philosophical to psychological to cultural-historical.

Dawn of the Dead: Six Perspectives

The Absurd

Zombie films are based on inherently laughable yet, in our world, absurdly possible premises. The fragmentary and unreliable news reports in *Night of the Living Dead* speculate that a detonated Venus probe carrying radiation brought the dead to life. A decade later, in *Dawn of the Dead*, the zombies are accounted for as a manifestation of “the excesses in our culture,” as the trailer puts it. Their cause is often irrelevant or unknowable, the point being that “They’re us.” The absurdity of such premises calls attention to the absurdity of zombies themselves, who are materializations of the biggest joke of all: the fact that many fans of zombie films love reiterating, “We’re all gonna die.” At some fundamental level, and like all horror only more so, zombie humor is tragicomic, based in a sense of the absurd. But there is more to it than existential laughter.

The Freudian Joke

In Bill Condon’s *Gods and Monsters*, an aging James Whale, plagued by flashbacks from the World War I trenches, escapes by reminiscing with his gardener about making the Universal Pictures Frankenstein films. Through an

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ames Whale, plagued by flash- s by reminiscing with his gar- ankenstein films. Through an

obviously Freudian process, he comes to understand that the films were "comedies about death." He returns persistently to the memory of a comrade named Barnett who was shot and left dangling on the barbed wire demarcating no-man's land, where he gradually decomposed into a "sick" joke:

"Good morning, Barnett," we'd say each day. "How's ole Barnett looking this morning?" "Seems a little peaky. Looks a little plumper." . . . Oh, but we were a witty lot. Laughing at our dead. Telling ourselves it was our death too. But with each man who died, I thought, "Better you than me, poor sod."

The film—which is expressly "about" horror cinema and its raisons d'être—advances Freud's theory that jokes provide a socially accepted means of expressing otherwise unacceptable responses toward taboo subjects (such as decomposition). The "Barnett on the wire" joke deflects the horror of the situation even as it expresses terror, repulsion, aggression, guilt, and anxiety, allowing detachment from the death Barnett has come to represent. *Gods and Monsters*, and the coping mechanism it illustrates, might thus be said to explain why *Dawn of the Dead* repeatedly turned the "living dead" into slapstick routines, as in a scene in which a zombie inadvertently steps up on a box and the top of his head is whizzed off by a helicopter blade. The effect provoked laughter and applause in the film's first audiences.

Bergsonian Mechanicalism

Modeled on Dr. Caligari's Caesar and Paul Wegener's golem, the Frankenstein monster was a direct ancestor of the modern movie zombie. Referred to as "it," unable to speak, reduced to moans, grunts, and growls, he had a halting, lurching walk and a somnambulant, mechanical movement that suggested disability and the "repetition compulsion" of the death drive. In *Bride of Frankenstein* and much later in *Young Frankenstein*, the same characteristics that made the living dead our uncanny doubles turned them, detached from their original context, into great, sad clowns.

Further detached, more obvious versions of the same "sick" joke, zombies are the more easily played for laughs. Bub, an homage to Karloff's monster and the real hero of Romero's *Day of the Dead*, becomes the clownish double of his military keepers—relearning how to shave (taking skin and all), grunt to Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" on a Sony Walkman, salute, and (mis)fire a gun. Thus a central joke in zombie cinema is explained by Henri Bergson's theory that laughter is a response to "mechanical" behavior easily converted into slapstick.³ Oblivious to pain, reduced to basic drives, and represented as a mass, the living dead are prone to pratfalls and exploding heads. In *Dawn*,

hordes of zombies return to the center of their former lives, Monroeville Mall, and famously go on shopping, choreographed to the Muzak on the P.A. system (or to the Goblins' "The Gonk," described by one fan as "a kind of kooky clockwork big band number that makes you laugh every time you hear it").⁴

"Mechanicalism" is the obvious device for *Dawn's* satire on the emerging postmodern consumer culture that was epitomized in "mailing." "My zombies have tasted the good things in life and just can't figure out why that's not happening anymore," Romero told Adam Simon.⁵ Reanimated by the forces of consumerism advertising seeks to channel, they lend themselves to broad visual puns: they're "born to shop," "live to eat," and walk around with their guts literally falling out. Disemboweling a man—as they scramble for organs and carry off ropes of intestines—they resemble a mob at a sale table. Wearing the clothes in which they expired, they suggest a diverse spectrum of classes, races, tastes, and religious practices that the primary visual image converts into caricatures, making (with deadly irony) the point that as consumers we're fundamentally all alike.⁶ Because zombies are "us," we laugh at them uneasily, registering that we are laughing at ourselves, our friends, and neighbors.

These explanations only partly explain a central issue *Dawn* represented in 1978: the unprecedented level of violence in a film that also critiques a capitalist culture of violence—and the way the violence *itself* was perceived as funny, as in the helicopter scalping scene or the film's third act, where "The Gonk" offsets the violence of the final biker-versus-zombie bloodbath. Although Romero is often quoted on how the idea was to "numb you to the violence," a strategy he hoped would "open the mind" to the satire and the ideas in the film, things worked another way as well: the satire allowed the film to pass unscathed through several European censors. Undercutting the intensity of film violence and releasing audiences (represented in the film by surrogate audiences of rednecks and bikers) from normal "moral" responses to death, humor became a strategy for filmmakers who wished to push the limits.⁷ Thus *Dawn* ushered in the 1980s splatter movies, low-budget films whose aim, according to John McCarty, was not to scare so much as "mortify" audiences with gore.⁸

"Horrority": A Historical Perspective

Departing from the relatively grim demeanor of the early slasher film, splatter comedy infused horror/sci-fi hybrids like *The Thing* and *The Fly* as well as zombie films such as *Evil Dead* and *Re-Animator*. Thus in 1983, Philip Brophy offered the term *horrority* (merging the terms *horror*, *textuality*, *morality*,

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 erns horror, *textuality*, *morality*,

and *hilarity*) to account for the onslaught, in the late 1970s and early 1980s,
 of movies that combined “perverse and/or tasteless”—and often self-referen-
 tial—humor with graphic, fantastically over-the-top body horror effects.⁹
 Reveling in their excess, they were grounded in the body as the center of vul-
 nerability in an increasingly material and visual culture.¹⁰

Horrority helps explain *Dawn of the Dead*’s reliance on what makeup ef-
 fects director Tom Savini refers to as “gags.”¹¹ Romero authorized Savini, a
 former Vietnam War photographer who found taking pictures and fabricat-
 ing wounds to be a coping mechanism, to come up with as many ways of
 killing people as he could. “That became my job,” Savini exclaims on the
 DVD commentary, adding that it was “like Halloween for months!” His “job”
 was topped off by his improvised role as the machete-wielding leader of the
 biker gang, a literalization of his extradiagetic role of “gag” coordinator and
 stuntman. Savini plays his character’s pleasure in gore mayhem (for example,
 in cleaving a zombie’s head) with a sadistic glee that refers to his role as splat-
 ter-effects auteur and trickster. Led by Savini, the bikers turn the zombies
 into the pretext for a literal pie-and-seltzer fight that ends in a rapturous orgy
 of routing, looting, and carnage.

Bakhtinian Carnival

The controversy *Dawn* presented in 1978 is usefully approached from the
 broader sociocultural perspective of Bakhtin’s concept of Carnival as a dia-
 logic space, a temporary liberation from and comic inversion of high culture’s
 ritual fasts and feasts, and a space in which culturally constructed boundaries,
 especially those distinguishing death from life, become permeable. In the
 early Renaissance, Bakhtin noted, death was represented as “natural,” jolly,
 and even joyful, as Carnival diffused fear with a festive, nonspecific laughter
 that went beyond satire.¹² In bringing back the “half-dead forms” of the out-
 cast pagan gods, it was, as Barbara Creed has theorized, the ancestor of mod-
 ern Halloween rituals or horror films.¹³

Especially applicable to zombies is Bakhtin’s concept of a “grotesque real-
 ism” that celebrates the “open” and lower body, taking pleasure in its gross
 functions as processes that connect the individual with the whole. Bakhtin
 singles out certain Kerch terra-cotta figurines of three pregnant hags repre-
 senting “a death that gives birth,” fusing “a senile, decaying and deformed
 flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed.”¹⁴ What
 clinches the image is that the hags are laughing. And so, the grotesque body
 is laughing, anarchic, joyously ambivalent, transgressing the modern canon
 that closes off and abjects: all is open, protruding, secreting, decomposing,
 eating, and being eaten.

Bakhtin's concept became popular in the 1970s and early 1980s, precisely when the "gross-out" began to be embraced by the middle-class youth culture in everything from animal comedy to splatter film and the pleasure of the horror text was, as Brophy put it, "getting the shit scared out of you."¹⁵ Thus, for many viewers, the carnivalesque elements in *Dawn of the Dead* overrode Romero's subtext. The film created a precedent in which zombie movies end in a version of the "feast of fools," an orgy of obscene violence that is perversely procreative, as zombies cannibalistically beget more zombies, the underclass destroys the overlords, the lower body misrules, and we all become zombies. While the film's tone is ambivalent, ranging from nihilism to hilarity, the spectatorial response is "low" pleasure and "inappropriate" laughter.

Seen from this perspective, as biker boss, stuntman, and makeup-effects overlord, Savini found his destiny as a trickster icon, a Lord of Misrule for the horror genre. In *Dawn*, he presided over a space in which pagan rites (of dismemberment and cannibalism, represented as a form of sharing) are restored, death and life are continuous, body parts and fluids that normally remain hidden invade public space, and the underclass prevails. Casting was carnivalesque as well, including scores of unpaid nonactors who masqueraded as zombies, who identified with indie horror film as an underclass, or who wanted to play bikers because they *were* bikers.

Sconce's Politics of (Bad) Taste

Beginning with Romero, zombie movies challenged fundamental concepts of autonomy and rationalism, representing the revolution of the body from the head. Thus *Dawn* was carnivalesque also in its role in the revolution in taste that occurred between the 1960s and the 1980s, and which Jeffrey Sconce has deemed a "politics."¹⁶ Zombie cinema drew from the darkly humorous, graphically violent E.C. Comics that Romero and other horror auteurs had consumed from childhood (and that preceded *Mad* magazine and R. Crumb in carnivalizing middlebrow "adult" values).¹⁷ Enjoying "mindless" zombie movies meant identifying with a youth culture that was positioned against hegemonic "good" taste and expressed the accumulated disillusionment, rage, and war trauma of a generation.

The association between zombies and lowbrow culture was sealed when *Dawn of the Dead* became the bible for splatterpunk, a literary movement that inverted and cannibalized cyberpunk (science fiction's current bid for literary respectability), and also helped to birth the bimonthly fanzine *Fangoria* in 1979. Aimed at "gorehounds," *Fangoria* upended the venerable *Famous Monsters of Filmland* by devoting its coverage primarily to splatter effects and featuring a *Hustler*-style cover foldout of the monster of the moment—for in-

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stance, the creature from Cronenberg's *The Fly* in final molt. Celebrating the making of horror effects, and starring effects technicians Savini, Rick Baker, and their like, *Fangoria* portrayed the *production* of the grotesque as a carnival.¹⁸

1980s Zombie Comedy: "Thriller," *Return of the Living Dead*, and *Re-Animator*

Dawn of the Dead, as Romero says, marked the birth of "a different decade [from the 1960s and early 1970s], a different time. The beginning of prosperity. The major crises seemed . . . over, and everybody was just dancing. Disco. Just listening to the BeeGees, man." Zombie movies reflected the cultural attitude of the moment: you couldn't change the world, but you could dance. By the mid-1980s, zombie cinema had very nearly lost its political-satirical edge. What it offered now was an "open" carnival space in which certain issues of class, gender, and identity might be expressed.¹⁹

One marker for this shift was the extended John Landis–Michael Jackson video "Thriller," which brought a benignly carnivalesque image of zombies into the mainstream. In the video, Jackson's character ("Michael") suddenly finds himself surrounded by zombies, with no way of escaping except by joining and then leading them in a moonwalking dance. Jackson assimilates their revolutionary Otherness into his performance; they in turn (and however paradoxically) lend him the transformative power associated with 1980s special makeup effects. Other indicators of this shift were two cult classics, Dan O'Bannon's *Return of the Living Dead* and Stuart Gordon's *Re-Animator*.

Poised between political satire (on the military-industrial complex and medical science) and a diffused hilarity that ranged from black humor to spoof (on *Night of the Living Dead*) to conscious B-movie cheesiness, *Return of the Living Dead* revised Romero's premises to make zombies virtually indestructible and formidably funny. Contaminated by the corpse-animating 245 Tri-Oxin gas, the product of a misguided biological weapons experiment, they (that is, their parts) keep twitching and grasping long after they have been destroyed, providing endlessly divisible, permutated gore—and thus, in terms of the film's main metaphor, endless "party time." When a helpful mortician cremates one zombie, the oven's smoke seeds the clouds overhead, raining the chemical down on the cemetery, where a spectrum of teenage stereotypes, from punks to Goths to preppies, are having a party and scream queen Linnea Quigley is inspired to take off her clothes and dance. As the dead jump up out of their graves to the Cramps' "Partytime," the teenagers join them. The dominant mood is suggested by the DVD cover,

which depicts a group of pink-and-green-haired, Mohawked, leather- and stud-collar-clad skeletons and features Quigley's substantial (and paradoxically undecomposed) cleavage to complete the image of the fertile hag.

Gordon's *Re-Animator*, based on H. P. Lovecraft's 1922 stories about mad vivisectionist Herbert West, began in all seriousness, focusing its critique on the medicalization of the body for at least forty-five minutes before turning its medical school and morgue settings into anarchic carnival space. While the satire is pointedly "black," the film's cult status has more to do with the mosh pit atmosphere of the last third, the sheer exuberance of its display of bad taste, brought on by a breakdown of the symbolic order. The film makes hash of a hierarchical structure of "loaded" binary oppositions (professors and students, doctors and patients, fathers and daughters, heads and bodies, parts and wholes, sex and death) as all of the characters are turned into raging zombies and/or "mad" scientists.

The catalyst is the boyishly puritanical West (Jeffrey Combs), a Miskatonic Medical School student obsessed with bringing the dead to a grotesque, screaming, frothing version of life by injecting them with an iridescent charreuxe serum. He is joined in his compulsion by the young intern and romantic lead, Cain (Bruce Abbott), and the madder scientist, Professor Hill (David Gale), who, seeking to prove that the soul is located in the brain, plagiarizes West's work. Decapitated by West, Hill's head is invigorated by its liberation (suggesting at first that his hypothesis is true). Sending signals to the trunk, it commandeers a series of lobotomies through which he turns the morgue's cadavers into slaves. When West crushes Hill's head, overdoses the trunk with serum, and Hill's zombies run amok (producing a Dionysian orgy of twitching limbs and rampant organs), the lower body is avenged.

In Rabelais's day, the styles of medical and military manuals leaked into literary texts, resulting in a *Gargantua*, which Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist describe as "a happy Frankenstein's laboratory," with Rabelais as the "madcap scientist stitching together body parts and functions that subsequent generations would call monstrous."²⁰ *Re-Animator* is similarly inspired in that its grotesqueness is accentuated by the clinical precision with which the concluding chaos is depicted: a dozen reanimated cadavers, each completely naked and distinguished by wound or cause of death—burn victim, slit wrist, malpractice, gunshot wound, and so forth—join a revolution of uncontrollable, "undead" life over the technologies of power.

Re-Animator's best-known moment is an obscene visual pun that is also an elaborate Rabelaisian inversion of hierarchies, as the mad Dr. Hill's libidinous decapitated head performs cunnilingus on the unconscious (and completely naked) dean's daughter, Megan (Barbara Crampton). The film ends

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as Cain tries to revive Megan, fails, and (of course) injects her with reagent, the screen goes black, and a scream is heard. It is indicative of the "real" message of the film that at this point, in a screening attended by Gordon, the audience shouted, "Use the juice! Use the juice!" They wanted this particular circus to go on. The satire on medical technology was finally a vehicle for the more generalized carnivalesque celebration: of the body in pieces or "without organs," unregulated and grotesque.

"Splatstick": *Evil Dead*

The shift away from social satire is suggested in B-movie star Bruce Campbell's term for his work in the *Evil Dead* trilogy—*splatstick*, which merged the lowest of the low "body" genres, splatter film and physical comedy, to produce the ultimate gross-out.²¹ In the mid-1980s, the zombie craze attracted a younger generation of innovative, self-taught indie filmmakers inspired by Romero's production model and fascinated with splatter technology, resulting in a regressive, extremely physical, relatively unironic version of horror carnivalesque.

Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* had no subtexts other than an understanding of genre formulas and effects, its own effort to produce "the ultimate experience in grueling horror," Raimi's prior filmmaking experience (limited to home-made Three Stooges-style shorts), and the experience of male adolescence. Outside of Ash, the slightly dim, wimpy protagonist, exaggeratedly distraught at having to dismember all his friends, the film lacked characterization or context outside of its postmodern amalgamation of horror-film clichés. Combining Romero's mythos with *The Exorcist's* possession motif, Raimi turned his "zombies" into cackling, writhing hags that hurtled insults like evil clowns and spewed rainbow-colored fluids. In contrast to Romero's slow-moving hordes, Raimi's cheesy-looking "deadites," facilitated by Raimi's kinetic style and inventive camera work, seemed to be on speed and provoked bevvies of nervous laughter. Audiences began talking to the film, telling Ash how stupid he was.²² In short, the absence of A-film characteristics and the crude ferocity of the effects added up to an audience-participation film and a spook tunnel ride.

Among the first to reduce the horror film to a series of comic-book gags, each more creatively fantastic than the previous, the *Evil Dead* films had a long-term impact. *Evil Dead 2*, which announced itself as the splatstick comedy the first film had been unintentionally, was a sequence of gags developed out of the motifs of the body out of control and the monstrous feminine. In sequences derived from the violent physical humor of early cartoons, the

feckless protagonist Ash's (Campbell) body, is dismembered, doubled, hybridized, or "possessed"—as in a sequence in which his hand bludgeons him with kitchen implements until he severs it with a chainsaw. Squealing and gibbering to itself (like the Stooges' Curly), it scuttled into a mouse hole, gave Ash the finger, strangled him, and so forth. Replacing the hand with the chainsaw, Ash transformed himself into a carnivalization of the jut-jawed action hero epitomized by Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger—but whose worst enemy was his own body. Eternally stuck in what Jacques Lacan called the "mirror stage," Ash was destined to be splattered—engulfed in the flesh and flux of comic life.

The latter is personified in nature (POV shots that barrel through the woods, eventually whipping into a whirlwind whose center is a huge, grasping tree) and his girlfriend (whose headless body springs from the grave, performs a lascivious dance, juggling its head while giggling hysterically, before the head, sporting a mouthful of alarmingly pointed teeth, bounces provocatively into Ash's lap). The Übermonster is the professor's wife, buried in the cellar and portrayed (via bodysuit and head puppet) as a campily senile, laughing hag with cheesy flesh and "pregnant" with bowels that spill from her belly. In a final flourish, she becomes a huge Phallic Mother joke, as her neck extends ostrich-like and her head, dangling from above, cackles, "I'll swallow your soul." Mingling male and female anatomies, decaying flesh with maternity, she is the obscene center of the carnivalesque upheaval in which the film seems to conclude (before shifting into another time zone).

Kiwi Carnival: *Braindead*

However different from Romero's progressive, political, and relatively "adult" satire, Raimi's carnivals of regression implied a politics of taste: a choice of gross-out physical humor and self-referentiality over an earlier generation's black humor and social content. But top prize in the regressive category is usually given to the early Peter Jackson, whose *Braindead* was a scatological inversion of the hero's journey, proceeding through the inner spaces of the home and the maternal body.²³ As in the *Evil Dead* films, the body was associated with the maternal—it is the protagonist's overbearing, possessive mother straight out of *Psycho* who starts the zombie plague. Merging silent film slapstick with Monty Python routines, it was also, however, a sweet romantic comedy set in 1950s Wellington, New Zealand, with quaint red street-cars and corner groceries told through splatter gags and some three hundred gallons of fake blood.²⁴

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In Jackson, as in Raimi, Romero's ensemble of embattled, bickering anti-heroes is replaced by a single protagonist, the Keatonesque underdog Lionel Cosgrove (Timothy Balme) who manages to survive in a world in threatening flux—in this case, the flux of the grotesque body—using dismembered parts as tools, negotiating a bloody floor by stepping on heads and organs and swinging from the ceiling by a length of intestine. In an inversion of the conventional zombie siege (in which the goal is to keep zombies *out* of the house), Lionel struggles to domesticate them—starting with his rapacious Mum, Vera (Elizabeth Moody)—by administering animal tranquilizer.

The zoo is a dominant metaphor in *Braindead*, as the film sustains the carnival practice of representing the animal aspects of human materiality—defecating, copulating, eating, decay—and the Feast of Fools, the gluttonous, drunken inversion of the sacred feasts that, Mikita Brottman reminds us, was replete with implied cannibalism, obscene posturings, licentious behavior, filth throwing, and farting.²⁵ Disgusting food gags contribute greatly to *Braindead*'s carnivalesque tone and theme. In one scene, an appalled Lionel draws the leftovers of a German shepherd from Mum's mouth as his girlfriend Paquita (Diana Peñalver) exclaims, "Your mother ate my dog!" One family dinner scene—in which Lionel attempts to feed his tranquilized surrogate zombie family (Nurse McTavish [Brenda Kendall], Father McGruder [Stuart Devenie], Mum, and Void [Jed Brophy]) porridge, as they sit twitching, nodding, and moaning around the dining room table—is told entirely through linked gore and food gags.²⁶

The film's high (read "low") point is an elaborate allegory of toilet training that focuses on Lionel's battle with Void's zombified innards—Void being a 1950s-style "juvenile delinquent" who thinks from his gut and, when bisected and disemboweled, becomes a running scatological visual pun. Thanks to Void, in true Rabelaisian style, the boundary distinguishing the abject from one's true and proper self, inside from outside, is transgressed, lower and upper body priorities are reversed, and (most importantly) "good" taste is affronted as normally unnamed, unseen organs recognize and even "speak" for themselves (in a parody of the mirror phase set in the bathroom). In the final Keatonesque sequence of fantastic physical comedy, Void's guts pursue Lionel through the several stories of the house. At the conclusion of the final "battle" sequence in which Lionel pulverizes a houseful of partying zombies, he looks down at his feet to see Void's indomitable innards on their coils pleading for their "lives." Lionel demonstrates his manhood by applying the lawnmower, the ironic symbol of the domesticated male's territorial control.

On another level, Void's zombified guts are an umbilical cord that Lionel just cannot shake. Like *Evil Dead 2*, *Braindead* represents women as especially

rapacious. Mum is a condensation of dominating/toilet training/dead mother jokes and also perhaps horror comedy's ultimate example of the unruly feminine and the pregnant hag. But, as Barry Grant and Barbara Creed have shown, the film may be read as a postcolonial critique in which the proper suburban mother represents the queen and New Zealand's continued (umbilical, economic) ties to the Mother Country.²⁷ The film thus satirizes the colonialist and bourgeois orthodoxy that proclaims the "sanctity of motherhood" (the theme of Father McGruder's funeral service for Mum).

On yet another level, however, and as the film finally argues, the "forces of death" that (according to the cards) "surround" Lionel (e.g., Mum and the zombie plague she has birthed) are necessary to his coming of age. At the film's climax, swollen to a couple of stories tall, with horselike jaws, pendulous breasts, belly, and ass, devouring Mum is "purged"—but not before Lionel is swallowed and reborn mock-heroically in a pile of afterbirth. The mother is profoundly ambiguous; while she may represent colonialist cultural oppression, it is her mix of orality, aggression, and transgression that destroys the Motherhouse (Mum's colonialist values) and that is the source of the film's final explosion of the bodily canon and the various orders that support it.²⁸ Carnival's hell is transformed into a Bakhtinian cornucopia as "the monster, death, becomes pregnant" and protrusions and size are symptoms of procreative power.²⁹

Although reminiscent of Larry Cohen (*It's Alive*), David Lynch (*Eraserhead*), and David Cronenberg (*Shivers*, *The Brood*, *The Fly*), Jackson's fantastic body horror is assimilated into a film with an entirely different tone. In his early films, exuberant spectacle and comic gore gags override the revulsion and fear characteristic of Romantic or Gothic grotesque, as the body—eating, defecating, cannibalized and cannibalizing, dying and reproducing—is associated with comic resilience and vitality. Thus while notoriously adolescent, seemingly misogynistic, and reactionary, *Braindead* also exemplifies Bakhtinian grotesque realism, in which the bodily canon is inverted, the lower body and the feminine are "on top," and death is voraciously procreative.³⁰ It may be zombie cinema's purest example of a carnival in which political satire is disseminated throughout a text whose tone and purpose are ultimately festive and anarchic. Yet while it provoked wildly carnivalesque responses at various festivals, including Cannes 1993, the film became a cult phenomenon on VHS and DVD rather than a U.S. box-office hit.

By the early 1990s, with the advent of digital video graphics, the mainstreaming of horror, and a backlash against the explicit gore of the previous decade, the zombie splatter comedy cycle was over for the time being. In topping previous efforts, critics said, Jackson had insured its demise. Yet more ac-

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curately, it had already begun to mutate and infiltrate genres such as science fiction (*Terminator 2, Species*, etc.) and the films of Quentin Tarantino, while the horror genre itself had already shifted toward self-reflexiveness and suggestion (*Scream, The Blair Witch Project*, etc.). Similarly, Bakhtinian critique, while infiltrating various methodologies, had lost its fascination.

Carnival Domesticated: *Shaun of the Dead*

One product of the shift from the political engagement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was that zombie comedy had changed from Romero's darkly humorous social satire to the increasingly grotesque (but finally targetless) body humor in the 1980s films of Brian Yuzna, Stuart Gordon, Sam Raimi, and Peter Jackson—films that functioned as adolescent fantasies of regression and simultaneously as rites of transgression. The emergence and decline of zombie splatter comedy was like that of most cycles or subgenres, the product of a cultural shift (from progressive to conservative) and several interrelated factors: the rise of a youth culture that came to dominate the box office (but that subsequently aged and changed), technological developments in special-effects makeup, the complicated relations between the horror genre and the MPAA rating system, postmodernism, and the self-cannibalistic and cyclical nature of the horror genre.

Two seeming exceptions to this trend have been Rob Zombie's *House of 1000 Corpses*, which (although not a zombie film) returned to the outrageous Feast of Fools mode of the 1980s in a spirit of parody (primarily of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*), and the British zombie comedy *Shaun of the Dead*, directed by Edgar Wright and coscripted by Wright and star Simon Pegg. Originating as an early episode of their popular British sitcom series *Spaced* (in which the protagonists found themselves in the middle of *Resident Evil*), *Shaun of the Dead* advertised itself as an homage to the subgenre Romero had invented but also as something new—a "rom-zom-com," a romantic comedy with zombies.

The real point of 1980s splatstick was the cannibal carnival, with the zombies providing, along with the horror, most of the laughs. The coming-of-age story of an ill-equipped late-bloomer protagonist such as Ash or Lionel, however, was often the vehicle of this grotesque humor. *Shaun of the Dead* features a similar story and protagonist, a balding, thirtyish underachiever (Pegg) who has settled into a comfortable rut in his North London suburb—he plods to his job as an appliance salesman, shares a flat with his loutish best buddy Ed (Nick Frost), and spends his evenings at his favorite pub (the Winchester)—all to the chagrin of his long-suffering girlfriend Liz (Kate Ashfield)—and is

slowly recovering from a hangover for much of the film. Much as in *Evil Dead* and *Braindead*, the zombie plague, which coincides with Liz's breakup with him, rouses him to action. What is new is the prohibition of splatstick, director Edgar Wright explains, citing two rules of thumb: "No screaming" and "No zombie pratfalls"—in fact "no funny zombies" at all.³¹

While the film has its share of gore, the humor is character oriented, notably verbal (packed with legendary one-liners), and situational—according to Wright, the zombies simply provide the circumstances that the protagonists, cluelessly and belatedly, find themselves in: "You could go to the script and replace the word 'zombies' with 'traffic jam' or 'power outage' and it would still make sense."³² At the same time, and in homage to Romero's satire on consumerism (as per the title), *Shaun of the Dead*'s zombies function as the "slacker" generational metaphor for the way people go about their lives. Identically choreographed steadicam sequences make the point by following Shaun's morning routine—from crawling out of bed, shuffling down the street (stumbling on the same curb at crossing), turning into the corner convenience store, and riding a bus full of passengers in bleary-eyed stupor—all the while oblivious to the shuffling zombies he passes or jostles (many of them former neighbors) along the way.³³

Even though it prohibits the grotesque in the form of splatstick, *Shaun of the Dead* shows reverence toward the spirit of the older cannibal carnivalesque. Making special reference to the mayhem that Savini's gleefully violent biker character relished and that *Dawn of the Dead* was celebrated for, the film embodies (and thus safely contains) the carnivalesque spirit in a single character, that of Shaun's Falstaffian roommate Ed, a crotch-scratching, practical joking, hard-drinking PlayStation addict who shares Shaun's fixation on the Winchester. If, as in the 1980s comedies, the zombie plague allows Shaun a chance to become an unlikely hero in an equally unlikely apocalyptic setting, the pub, it also enables Ed to fulfill his fantasies of speeding in a luxury car, swilling beer, and mindless killing—until he (appropriately) is turned into a zombie himself.

In the epilogue, Shaun is living with Liz in bourgeois respectability, and the remarkably unchanged Ed (secured by dog collar and chain) lives a happily contained undead existence on a couch in the shed out back, where Shaun retreats to play video games. Where Jackson's Lionel failed to housebreak his zombies, Shaun succeeds in containing Ed, but at a price. Like the film itself, which confines the zombie splatter genre within a romantic/slacker comedy, Ed is carnival domesticated for the twenty-first century.

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Conclusion: Fast Zombies?

Updating zombie comedy generally and Romero's satire on consumerism specifically for the post-*Simpsons*, post-*South Park*, post-9/11 generation, *Shaun of the Dead* played off culturally attuned viewers' expectations and offered a metaphor for the mindlessness of routinized capitalist culture. Beyond the slacker jokes, however, the zombie plague of *Shaun* (referred to by news commentators as "Z-day") also possibly comments on our post-holocaust retreat into ennui and indifference. Notably, *Shaun's* zombies are slow. As Wright argues, true zombies are a "bizarre tidal, lava-like encroachment" that resembles the slow inevitability of apathy and of death itself.³⁴ Accordingly, fast zombies would be a contradiction in terms or another species.

At this writing, of course, as apocalyptic horrors of biological warfare, contagion, and terrorism have become all too real and war once again appears to be perpetual, zombies have returned with a vengeance and in a range of mutated forms. They speak for the cultural moment—expressing paranoia, alienation, and a sense of ever-present threat. In mainstream films such as *Resident Evil*, *28 Days Later*, and the remake of *Dawn of the Dead*—and in contrast to *Shaun*—zombies are virulent, fast, and deadly serious. In the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, in which zombie-like species are aligned with the forces of good and evil and are treated with the gravity due J. R. R. Tolkien's World War II epic, even Jackson relinquished the more raucous forms of the carnivalesque. The regressive/transgressive spirit of zombie splatter comedy, it seems, has been rendered obsolete by affectionate parody, contained in domesticated forms (as in *Shaun*), or returned underground where it survives in the no-budget, backyard film production mode that inspired *Night of the Living Dead*—in the D.I.Y. movement, the carnivalesque productions of the Troma team, and sundry Internet and cult phenomena. Still, we may take consolation in the hope that, as Bakhtin was fond of stressing, the carnival principle is "indestructible," that even while "narrowed and weakened"—its original forms fragmented, regulated, and commodified—it continues as an occasionally disruptive undercurrent, now and then surfacing "to fertilize various areas of life and culture."³⁵

Notes

1. It is symptomatic that the first modern zombie film, *Night of the Living Dead*, as much a product of cinema as it was of literature or folklore, began as a parody with Johnny's Boris Karloff imitation, "I'm coming to get you Barbara"—followed by the first zombie's equally Karloffian monster walk. While George Romero's trick was to

modulate from seemingly harmless parody to cinema vérité and abject horror, black humor and social satire inflected the film throughout.

2. Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972), 3, 7–9, 12–19; Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 186–89 et passim; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

3. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. C. Brereton (New York: Macmillan, 1926). The word *slapstick* originally referred to two pieces of wood used by clowns to make a slapping sound when they appeared to be hitting one another and refers more broadly to physical (often aggressive or violent) humor. It is achieved by rendering scenes that normally would be painful or worse cartoonlike, mechanical, or fantastic.

4. "Dawn of the Dead: The Unreleased Incidental Music," <http://www.trunkrecords.com/turntable/dawn.shtml>.

5. Quoted in the documentary *The American Nightmare*.

6. The Hari Krishna zombie, who limps in balletic circles, his tambourine dangling uselessly, comments on the decidedly unmystical Western sources of the zombie plague. Steve, the would-be romantic lead for most of the film, charges out to fight a group of marauding bikers for possession of the mall (insisting: "It's ours. We took it. It's ours.") and creates an anticlimactic battle won ultimately by the zombies, who finish off the surviving bikers. Bitten in the struggle, Steve leads them back to his comrades' hideout, like the commander of a stumbling, rotting army or a duded-up cowboy with an irrelevant gun dangling numbly from two fingers, his lurch a skewed rendition of the gunslinger's walk. See Tony Williams, *The Cinema of George Romero: Knight of the Living Dead* (London: Wallflower, 2003), 96.

7. The satire could, of course, carry a social or "moral" perspective, if necessary. The extent to which the satire saved *Dawn* from censorship is shown in the controversy over the European versions overseen by coproducer Dario Argento, who cut the humor (and thus the subtext) from the script in order to turn the film into a "flat-out" horror movie (along the lines of the Italian zombie genre developed by Lucio Fulci). As Romero explains on the DVD commentary track, when various European censors mutilated these versions, Romero sent them copies of the original, which they apparently found inoffensive enough to exhibit without cuts. See Donato Totaro's discussion of Peter Jackson's use of humor to undercut the effect of extreme violence in "Your Mother Ate My Dog! Peter Jackson and Gore-Gag Comedy," *Offscreen* 5, no. 4 (September 2001), http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new_offscreen/goregag.html. More generally, for a useful discussion of comedy and violence in film, see Geoff King's *Film Comedy* (London: Wallflower, 2002).

8. John McCarty, *Splatter Movies* (New York: Fanta Co Enterprises, 1981).

9. Philip Brophy, "Horrority—The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films," in *The Horror Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder (London: Routledge, 2000), 277, 284.

10. See Linda Badley, *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995).

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11. Tom Savini, "Fast Foreword," in *Still Dead: Book of the Dead 2* (New York: Ban- tam, 1992), xiii–xvi.

12. Carnival was licensed and was thus an escape valve and a form of social con- trol. However, Bakhtin insists that it was more than that: it sustained the vital life of the people and continues as an undercurrent whose subversive power can be tapped; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Carlyl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 107. See also Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Uni- versity Press, 1986), who argue that "for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclic ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects and that, given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act a catalyst and site of ac- tual and symbolic struggle" (14).

13. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 24; Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Femi- nism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

14. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 25–26.

15. Brophy, "Horrority," 279.

16. Jeffrey Sconce, "Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and the Emerging Pol- itics of Cinematic Style," *Screen* 36, no. 4 (1995): 371–93. Drawing on Pierre Bour- dieu and Lester Bangs, Sconce argues that an appreciation of paracinema—which ranges from the "punk" art cinema of Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey to "trash" or deliberately lowbrow cinema from John Waters to Troma—implies an opposition to middlebrow or hegemonic "good" taste. Romero undoubtedly shared this role with Tobe Hooper, David Cronenberg, John Carpenter, and Wes Craven, who made sub- versive, deliberately offensive films with similar subtexts in the 1970s, as Adam Si- mon's documentary *The American Nightmare* makes clear. Romero, however, was first, and *Dawn* had a clear political message.

17. See Williams, *Cinema of George Romero*, 17–32, 84–87, 114–27, on the in- fluence of E.C. Comics on Romero's films, and see David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (New York: Norton, 1993), 263–85, on the im- pact of 1950s comic book culture on the horror films of the late 1960s and there- after.

18. The same youth culture that relished zombie splatterfests and *Fangoria* would delight in *National Lampoon's Animal House*, *The Revenge of the Nerds*, and *Porky's*. These gross-out comedies, as William Paul argues in *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hol- lywood Horror and Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), shared with horror a Bakhtinian mood and social function.

19. In such "open" spaces provided by postmodern horror film, the processes of sub- ject formation were possibly changed by the experience of the grotesque, as Barbara Creed suggested in "Horror and the Carnavalesque: The Body Monstrous," in *Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology, and Photography*, eds. Leslie Dev- ereaux and Roger Hillman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 153–57.

20. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA: Belk- nap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984), 297.

21. Ian Pryor credits Peter Jackson with the coinage, but the general consensus is for Campbell, who, after all, came first; Ian Pryor, *Peter Jackson: From Prince of Splatter to Lord of the Rings: An Unauthorized Biography* (New York: St. Martin's, 2003), 102.

22. Bill Warren, *The Evil Dead Companion* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), 95.

23. In Jackson's debut film *Bad Taste*, about invading human-eating aliens who seek to establish an intergalactic fast-food franchise, Jackson played an alien who vomits for several minutes into a huge bowl that is passed around like a communion cup. His next effort, *Meet the Feebles*, returned *The Muppet Show* to its origins in the fabliau as anthropomorphized animals acted out the physiological facts that level the species.

24. In Monty Python's Sam Peckinpah parody "Salad Days," elegant picnickers impale themselves with tennis racquets, hands are severed by a piano lid, limbs inexplicably fall off, volcanic quantities of blood gush forth; in *The Meaning of Life*, Mr. Creosote, a fantastically obese patron, eats until he vomits and vomits until he explodes; and in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, the Black Knight is reduced to a blood-spewing, limbless torso, yet continues to challenge his opponents.

25. Mikita Brottman, *Funny Peculiar: Gershon Legman and the Psychopathology of Humor* (London: Analytic Press, 2004), 92. Jackson's version of the zombie plague begins at the zoo, where Mum is bitten by a Sumatran "rat monkey," an unholy hybrid the zoo keeper explains as follows: "All these great big rats [that] came off the slave ships and raped the little tree monkeys." As Mum screeches, the camera cuts to reaction shots of birds in nearby cages. The motif is extended in the romance between Lionel and Paquita, whose unrepressed "animal magnetism" draws out Lionel's repressed sexuality, provoking Mum's jealousy. But it emerges most plainly in the scenes in which Lionel attempts to domesticate his zombie charges, starting with Mum.

26. As McTavish's porridge seeps from her severed neck, Void shoves a spoon into his mouth and out through the back of his head, Mum snatches the porridge off the spoon, McGruder and McTavish eye each other lasciviously and proceed to kiss until Lionel pulls them apart, their lips stretching until McGruder's rip off, leaving him with an even more lascivious rictus grin, a carnivalesque image of "gay death." McTavish and McGruder, having abandoned their socially sanctioned roles, fall to the floor and copulate enthusiastically. Outside the door, as Lionel tries to conceal his disgraceful zombie "family" from Uncle Les (who wants to usurp the family fortune), rutting animal sounds are heard within, and Uncle Les accuses Lionel of having found his dead father's porn flicks: "Is that the one with the donkey and the chambermaid?"

27. See, for example, Barry Keith Grant, *A Cultural Assault: The New Zealand Films of Peter Jackson* (London: Kakapo Books, 1999); and Barbara Creed, "Bad Taste and Antipodal Inversion: Peter Jackson's Colonial Suburbs," *Postcolonial Studies* 3, no. 1 (2000): 61-68.

28. The scene has the grotesque physicality, humor, and miraculous atmosphere of the birth of Gargantua, the labor pains brought on by his mother's consumption of a

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mor, and miraculous atmosphere of 1 by his mother's consumption of a

vast amount of tripe (the digestive organs of a cow, which contain a certain percent- age of dung). See Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 162–64.

29. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 91.

30. Jackson has been accused of using comedy in order to get away with more ex- treme splatter than otherwise. In an interview with Ian Pryor, Jackson defends splat- stick as "totally different" from violence. "You can punch somebody in the face in a drama, and it's an incredibly violent act. Then you can rip somebody's head off in a zombie film, and it's a comedy. . . . Any discussions about violence in a movie should be totally within the context of what the film is, what genre it is, and what it's try- ing to achieve" (quoted in Pryor, *Peter Jackson*, 102–3). Jackson cites Monty Python and silent comedians Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and the Keystone Cops as ev- idence that violence is and always has been "part of comedy" and that the more fan- tastically "gross" horror effects are, the more comical the film becomes. "That is re- ally the key point: the only harmful violence is believable violence, realistic violence and there's nothing in this film that's realistic at all. It's fantasy" (quoted in Pryor, *Peter Jackson*, 103).

31. Peter Canavese, "Interviews: Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright—*Shaun of the Dead*," *Groucho Reviews*, November 8, 2004, <http://www.grouchoreviews.com/index.php?module=subjects&func=viewpage&pageid=26>.

32. Todd Gilcrest, "Romero High-Fives *Shaun*," *Filmstew.com*, September 24, 2004, <http://www.filmstew.com/showarticle.aspx?contentid=9746>.

33. A comic turning point (and another nod to Romero) is the scene in which the usually clueless group of would-be survivors make their way through a sea of zombies by pretending to be zombies. Understanding "being zombie" as a matter of perform- ance means a step in the right direction of becoming "human."

34. Jeff Otto, "*Shaun and the Dead* Director," *FilmForce*, September 23, 2004, <http://movies.ign.com/articles/550/550221p2.html>.

35. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 33–34.

Zombie Culture
Autopsies of the Living Dead

Edited by
Shawn McIntosh
Marc Leverette



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Contents

Introduction	Giving the Living Dead Their Due <i>Marc Leverette and Shawn McIntosh</i>	vii
Chapter 1	The Evolution of the Zombie: The Monster That Keeps Coming Back <i>Shawn McIntosh</i>	1
Chapter 2	The Folklore of the Zombie Film <i>Mikel J. Koven</i>	19
✓Chapter 3	Zombie Splatter Comedy from <i>Dawn</i> to <i>Shaun</i> : Cannibal Carnavalesque <i>Linda Badley</i>	35
Chapter 4	<i>Vita, Amore, e Morte</i> —and Lots of Gore: The Italian Zombie Film <i>Brad O'Brien</i>	55
Chapter 5	The Space of Apocalypse in Zombie Cinema <i>David Pagano</i>	71
Chapter 6	Zombies without Organs: Gender, Flesh, and Fissure <i>Patricia MacCormack</i>	87

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

use story is ignored.

—Annalee Newitz