

# Zombified Patriarchy: The Role of Nature and Gender with the Undead

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the gender politics that influence the zombie genre through the lens of biopower and bio-essentialist philosophy. Zombie films perpetuate a perspective of masculine superiority over women and mankind domination over nature. The American film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), a classic of the zombie genre, is contrasted against the Danish film *What We Become* (2015) to analyze the ways in which zombie-film tropes change or remain depending on cultural context.

It is a common turn of phrase to “never speak ill of the dead” as they are no longer there to inflict pain nor defend themselves... but what if they were not so dead and harmless after all? Several cultures have some concept of the dead becoming reanimated to terrorize the living. Notable examples include ghouls from pre-Islamic Arabian religion, ro-langs of the Tibet region, draugrs and gjengangers in Scandinavia, or the general European concept of revenants existing throughout the continent.

The specific imagining of the zombie prevalent in modern culture, however, lends its origins to the religious practices of vodun (often referred to as “voodoo”) common to the regions of West Africa and several areas of the African diaspora in the Americas — most notably Haiti. Zombie films have historically been a problematic horror genre with many of the initial zombie films profiting off of white audiences’ fear of Black people and culture, most notably in early zombie movies *White Zombie* (1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) in

which both films feature white main characters who are victimized by the reanimated corpses of Black slaves in the Caribbean during the colonial period.

While there is much to analyze as to the significance of zombies in conceptualizing race and racial power dynamics, zombies also present cultural commentary upon the nature of gender expectations and patriarchal power. Zombie films are often contextualized within an apocalyptic setting, therefore justifying the horrific treatment of others under the guise of survivalism. A “survival of the fittest” rhetoric is a prevalent motif in the zombie genre. A rhetoric that seems to align with Darwinist theories of natural selection but, in reality, is a social Darwinist motif. Rather than a natural decrease in traits that are not evolutionarily advantageous, the social Darwinist attitude is an intentional extermination of “undesirable” traits that is hardly natural. Zombie films often present a conflicting message, one in which the film asserts that biology claims complete control

over individuals' inherent value (bio-essentialism), but that there is also an anxiety about biology being used against people (biopower). The gender dynamics of this genre often express themselves as a general devaluation or hostility of traditionally feminine traits. The devaluation of feminine traits, thus subsequent extermination of female biology, indicates that zombie films represent the anxiety of a possible hyper-masculine world.

Though zombie media and literature exist in several cultures, this essay focuses specifically on the genre as it relates to the American film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) as a template of a typical zombie film and the Danish film *What We Become* (2015) to note the different cultural interpretations of nature and gender politics.

### **Sowing the Seeds of Gender Expectation in the Modern Zombie Genre**

Zombie films (or apocalyptic films, in general) typically paint the fall of society as disastrous and suggest that strong, masculine figures are necessary for survival in the wake of societal collapse. While George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) was not the first ever zombie film, his work became a seminal film in the zombie genre. For this reason, the film serves as a helpful reference for understanding the typical constructs that constitute a zombie film.

Zombie films typically take place within an apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic context, positioning the genre within the realm of speculative fiction. *Night of the Living Dead* situates itself in the former of the two, in which

the film explores the descent of society in the midst of disaster.

*Night of the Living Dead* follows a group of strangers in rural Pennsylvania fighting to survive the sudden onset of murderous undead terrorizing the region. Many zombie films produced after *Night of the Living Dead* occur within the chaos of the greater outside world, capturing their audience's attention by taking advantage of the anarchical horror of this apocalyptic scenario – a fast-paced, action-packed trip of people literally running for their lives. Romero's film, however, is almost entirely developed within a farmhouse; instead of capitalizing on the brutalization of undead bodies, the characters and their dynamics with each other are what drive the film forward. The environment of a cramped, enclosed space forces the characters to be constantly within close proximity of one another. By choosing this narrative, Romero's characters reveal nuanced aspects of their personalities to the audience, identifying themselves as a microcosm of human society – especially in times of catastrophe. Ben (Duane Jones) is the reliable leader and noble hero of the story. Tom (Keith Wayne) serves as a reasonable and utile right-hand man. Harry (Karl Hardman) is an antagonistic, prideful, and selfish individual. Helen (Marilyn Eastman) and Judy (Judith Ridley) serve as supportive roles – or perform a mollifying position – to their male partners. Finally, Barbra (Judith O'Dea) represents the helpless and useless. These are the symbolic roles the characters embody; however, it is no coincidence which characters are seen as driving forces of the film's plot and which characters are seen as tragic, collateral damage.

When Barbra is introduced at the beginning of the film, she is a compelling character who is clever enough to seek safety in her car, take it out of gear to allow the car to roll down the hill, and flee for her life away from a zombie attack. Once she finds refuge within the farmhouse, however, the shock and horror of her trauma render her mute, a state she remains in throughout the majority of the movie until her end. From that moment on, Ben assumes the role of the protagonist whilst Barbra is all but forgotten in the background. This transition of focus from Barbra to Ben also serves as a transition of power, one that occurs so naturally it is only registered unconsciously by the audience. After all, Ben is a strong and admirable character who is able to compartmentalize any shock or emotion into practical, problem-solving, logic. Once the presence of others inside the house becomes known, Ben continues to be the main focus. He assumes the role of a noble leader who looks after the overall welfare of the group, even those who frustrate him. Though Barbra is able to defend herself when alone, she devolves into a passive, victim role once Ben is introduced, allowing him to take on a dominant, authoritative role. The audience does not question this transfer of power — not only because Barbra has become catatonic in her grief but because American society expects men to command the space they occupy while women assume leadership roles only in the absence of a more capable man.

The plot is driven forward by the dynamics between the characters due to its claustrophobic space, yet film critic Robert Alpert notes how gender limits the movements of the characters:

Barbra is the cliched, hysterical woman, obsessively asking, ‘What's happening’ and later is catatonically silent. Judith is the cliched, subservient woman, accommodating Tom, for example, when he condescendingly asks, “Where's the big smile?” And Helen Cooper acts the role of the cliched housewife. Her offer of friendship to Barbra— ‘I'm Helen Cooper, Harry's wife’ --pitifully equates marital status with her personal identity (Alpert, 2015).

The film demonstrates a limited understanding of womanhood, defining its female characters by their relationship to the men in their lives and their extreme emotionality. For both Helen and Judy, it is the adherence to these gender stereotypes that result in their deaths. Helen dies at the hands of her daughter when she leaves the group to check on her, fulfilling her duties as a wife and mother. Judy runs after her boyfriend as she does not want to be separated from him, only for her helplessness to ultimately result in their deaths. After spending the majority of the film catatonic, Barbra surprisingly launches, once again, into a heroine role and fights alongside Ben against the zombie attacks. Barbra dies, however, when she comes face to face with her now-zombie brother, resulting in her freezing into shock once again. For all the women in *Night of the Living Dead*, their gender role expectations and relationships to the men in their lives constrict their freedom and consume their lives until it becomes their literal death.

Gender roles and gender-based expectations limit the male characters as well. The men are engaged in their battle over who is more socially dominant, as seen in their

numerous heated arguments over the “correct” course of action throughout the film. Fed up with the constant challenge to his authority, Ben frustratingly instructs Harry, “Get the hell down in the cellar. You can be the boss down there, but I’m boss up here.” The men are so consumed by their desire to dominate that it limits their possibilities. Either Ben is correct and the group should stay upstairs or Harry is right and the group should hole up in the cellar. Neither man is willing to compromise lest they concede defeat, therefore, they remain locked in place with no progress.

Though no progress is made, zombie films still convince their audience that a reliance upon masculine qualities, especially social domination, is the key to survival. Values such as compromising are coded as feminine attributes and have no place in a disaster scenario. Thanks to their masculine qualities, the men of *Night of the Living Dead* are able to compartmentalize their emotions and trauma in order to assume leadership roles. While women in the film can be helpful, they are not seriously considered to be potential leaders, but rather secondary concerns for the men to worry themselves over once the women become too inconvenient to ignore. Their extreme emotionality is what – supposedly – makes women unfit leaders. Instead, they have to rely on the men to make the decisions on behalf of the group and brave the horrific threat of the zombies. The men argue among themselves while the women are not consulted on the proceedings of the group; men take charge, women follow orders.

These remain a common trope of zombie films even into the 21st century, in which hyper-masculine leaders are the group’s

ticket to their continued survival. Any woman is most useful when in supportive roles for their brave leaders – some women are especially coveted for the eventual necessity of repopulating the earth. Romero’s film codifies these tropes, typing character dynamics predetermined by gender as intrinsic to the zombie subgenre of horror. Above all: zombie films call into question the idea of man’s intrinsic nature and the sacrifices he is willing to make in the name of survival. But what is nature? And why is “survival” synonymous with “masculine”?

### **The Gender Politics of Nature**

As ironic as it may sound, the popular Western conception of “nature” is, in fact, quite an unnatural viewpoint; the idea that nature exists “over there”, far away from human society, something found only within the protected lands of national parks rather than within the flora and fauna of one’s own backyard. The idea that human society was designed with the purpose of protecting fragile humans from the uncontrollable forces of nature that could otherwise cause them great harm. “Nature” is entirely a human construction; it serves more as a point of reference to differentiate between civilized society and the untamed wilderness. However, this idea that human society is not a part of nature, and even exists outside of nature, is a false belief – one that situates mankind as the epicenter of natural power. This anthropocentric fantasy rationalization of nature is due to the historical belief of mankind’s exceptionalism, indicated by the

Biblical God giving Adam and Eve complete dominion over the Earth and its creatures.

### **The Sublime and the Frontier: Concepts of Nature**

In his article *The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*, Cronon discusses several issues surrounding the way in which Western societies think about nature and humanity's relationship to the natural world. Cronon discerns the Western cultural understanding of nature into two categories: the sublime and the frontier. The sublime is understood to be the overwhelming feeling of awe one experiences when being in the "true presence" of nature at its most powerful and beautiful, the spaces in which one is overcome face-to-face with their fragility and feeling as if gazing at the face of God. In a way, the familiar world becoming overrun by the undead can be viewed as invoking similar emotions of gawking at the power of nature and one's own feeling of inferiority to its force - though for much more horrified, rather than romantic, reasons. The frontier, on the other hand, evokes a similar pedagogy to settler colonialism: the idea of pristine, untouched land, overflowing with potential.

Scandinavian societies tend to have a romanticized relationship with nature that one can understand as being a product of this sublime philosophy, whereas the frontier is a product wholly unique to an American society informed by its colonialist forebears. Scandinavian societies place heavy importance on regularly going out into nature, even having a popular term for this cultural value "*friluftsliv*" which translates literally as "open-air living."

Scandinavians seek out nature to improve their emotional and mental well-being, relying on these sublime spaces in an effort to improve themselves. While settler colonialist societies in the United States can experience the sublime within the specific government-protected spaces of National Parks, much of American understanding of humanity's relationship to nature roots itself in the frontier - from the political and cultural ideology of Manifest Destiny to campaign slogans invoking the idea of the New Frontier.

In both the sublime and the frontier philosophies, nature is treated as a "cure" to the human plague of society.

### **Masculinity in the Frontier**

Within the frontier, Cronon specifies that man desires to be cured of the feminine aspects of society by rewarding and emphasizing masculinity, stating, "The mythic frontier individualist was almost always masculine in gender: here, in the wilderness, a man could be a real man, the rugged individual he was meant to be before civilization sapped his energy and threatened his masculinity" (Cronon, 1996). The frontier is an incredibly masculine-coded way of thinking, that it is man's right to dominate and conquer "unclaimed" territory. Cronon explains that a driving motivation for men's desire to dominate over nature is that men long to be freely wild and masculine in the wilderness.

Human civilizations are spaces designed for communities to protect and support one another against possible deadly forces. A functioning society requires effective communication in order to live together in relative harmony. Support, communication, and

harmony; these are all feminine qualities, all social conditions by which individuals must abide if they wish to continue to benefit from the protection they provide. Men feel emasculated within the constraining, feminine-coded tendencies of civilization, and nature offers him a return to his roots (Cronon, 1996). The frontier's messaging of man's right to conquer and dominate over nature invokes an aggressive, hyper-masculine figure as a crucial aspect of humanity's role in their relationship to nature. Modern zombie films often maintain a hyper-masculine survivalist narrative in which gross injustices against others are justified. This acceptance of hypermasculine violence as a survival necessity appeals to a frontier ideology in which man is free to unleash this long-repressed desire for domination without social repercussions.

Perhaps one of the most masculine features of the frontier philosophy is its view of the natural world as a vessel through which individual exceptionalism can be used at its beck and call. Yet, nature is a feminine-coded construct – as evident in the plethora of matriarchal Earth goddesses present in several world mythologies, to the common modern usage of the term “Mother Nature.” This feminizing of the earth allows for a highly romantic idea of nature and mankind's relationship to her. Nature can be nurturing: a place of safety, relaxation, and repose. The ideology of the frontier grasps nature as a place where man may take freely from “her” body and find sustenance. Within these impressions of nature's essence, her true nature is often ignored until one is forced to come face to face with it: nature is indifferent. Perhaps this indifference seems cruel to those who revere her, but nature

does not hold the same romantic ideas of human exceptionalism, it simply exists. Perhaps this is the reason for survivalists' philosophy to be synonymous with masculine qualities; if nature's indifference is understood as a maternal rejection, then the subsequent response is to overcompensate for this neglect and rely upon the strong, independent nature of masculinity.

Zombie films promote this same idea of survivalism as synonymous with masculinity. Masculine bodies are favored for survival over feminine bodies with the justification that masculine survival is due to their position as “the fittest,” and any feminine quality is punishable by death. The zombie genre suggests femininity can only exist within the safe confines of society: that it is too fragile to survive in the cruel conditions of nature. The insinuation that only masculine qualities are capable of bearing the harsh conditions of nature implies that femininity is inherently a societal construct that cannot exist in nature. There is an incongruence in which society is too feminine and society is situated in opposition to nature. Meanwhile, nature assumes feminizing qualities and is simultaneously unable to sustain feminine life within this feminized space. The ultimate message indicates that not only can femininity not exist in nature, it actually does not exist naturally at all. Zombie films reveal the false comfort of humanity's separation from the natural world and codify the bio-essentialist rhetoric of gender and its relationship to power.

### **Biology and Power Dynamics**

Whenever disaster scenarios are a topic of discussion, the conversation often centers around a social-Darwinist lens: a tired rhetoric



of “survival of the fittest” that – more often than not – communicates a lack of understanding of Darwin’s original theories rather than an informed opinion. Darwinism is a collection of theories describing the biological adaptations a species undergoes via natural selection due to environmental pressures. It simply describes the biological changes an entire species undergoes for survival; heritable traits that can be observed in the literal gene variations. Social Darwinism, however, is the misapplication of Darwin’s biological theories to describe differences in human social and cultural dynamics (Claeys, 2000).

Though social Darwinist sentiments have historically been exercised in relation to racial discrimination and eugenics, a similar line of thinking can be attributed to how gender differences are conceptualized. In the modern era, there has been a growing rise in alt-right radicalization of young men through online mediums (Malevich & Robertson, 2020). Much of the alt-right rhetoric spread and consumed across the internet concerns re-packaged social Darwinist and bio-essentialist theories suggesting the reasoning behind the different behaviors between men and women is due to their biology rather than their socialization.

Bio-essentialism is the belief that facets of an individual’s personality or identity are innate qualities, meaning they derive from an individual’s biology (Heyman & Giles, 2006). This belief can manifest itself as believing that traits such as intelligence or creativity are traits that can be passed down through genetics rather than qualities that can be gained through experience. Most often, bio-essentialist rhetoric is used to argue that men and women are fundamentally different from each other due to

their different biology — a difference so incredible and absolute that men and women might as well be completely separate species. One of the main issues with this understanding of human interaction is that what these alt-right radicals are mistaking as biology is merely discourse.

### **Biology vs Discourse**

In his book *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault concerns himself with the relationship between sex and power. In order to understand these power dynamics, Foucault offers two main theories to conceptualize the issue: biology versus discourse, and biopower. Foucault makes a distinction between biology versus discourse when it comes to matters concerning individuals and their relationship to societal norms and power. Biology is a natural fact, whereas discourse is a societal fact. This is a critical distinction to make when discussing the difference between what is of nature and what is masked as nature. Male versus female are biological facts; the distinction serves to describe what an individual is physically capable of doing due to their biological attributes. Masculinity versus femininity are societal constructs; though their influence is pervasive.

While it may feel “natural” to fall in line with these gender expectations, these values only describe how people “ought to” behave within a proper society, not what they biologically must do. Traditional “masculine” qualities are traits such as independence, leadership, assertiveness, power, aggression, and logic (Bem, 1974). Conveniently, these are the same qualities that are viewed as essential to ensure survival, particularly as suggested within

the zombie genre. Traditional ‘feminine’ attributes include collaboration, obedience, passivity, receptiveness, harmony, and emotions (Bem, 1974). Coincidentally, these traits are often devalued qualities that have been long dead or outright abandoned in a zombie-override world.

## Biopower

The insinuations of masculinity being essential to survival while femininity is a risk factor can be further understood under Foucault’s theory of biopower. Foucault explains biopower as the “ancient right to take life or let live... replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (Foucault, 2020). Biopower is the justification for the enforcement of power of a “superior” biology over another undesirable or inferior biology.

In a zombie apocalypse narrative, this concept of biopower is intrinsically intertwined within the genre; both in the idea of living versus undead as well as masculine versus feminine attributes. Traits that have been coded as “masculine” are simply regarded as more valuable attributes in this uncertain world. One of the main justifications for masculine qualities holding higher value over feminine qualities is based on the assertion that male biology is superior to female biology. By extension, masculine bodies are valued more highly in the zombie context while feminine bodies are disallowed to the point of death. Framing the extermination of femininity as a tragic necessity for survival diminishes the dehumanizing nature of bio-essentialist gender politics.

## Bios, Zoë and Social Darwinism

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben notes that the Ancient Greeks had two different words to conceptualize different aspects of life: bios and zoë. The term bios referred to “the form or manner in which life is lived” whereas zoë referred only to the “biological fact of life” (Agamben, 2016). Zoë aligns itself with Foucault’s conception of biology, as it is the simple biological drive to sustain life. Bios is understood more as discourse as it is the aspiration to achieve a life beyond the biological mechanisms of nature. Social Darwinist theory suggests a distinction between which life is valuable and which life is expendable (Claeys, 2000). Zombie films distinguish humans as valuable lives due to their position as beings of bios, unlike the expendable lives of zombies who are beings of zoë. Humans are complex creatures capable of achieving a higher sense of life, whereas zombies only seek to fulfill a basic need.

The bio-essentialist motifs of *Night of the Living Dead*, however, contradict this assertion that living humans are products of bios. Bio-essentialism reduces people to their basic biology, indicating that any complexity to mankind can be simplified to a set of biological mechanisms (Heyman & Giles, 2006). Men can never move past their aggression and drive to conquer because they are fatefully ruled by their testosterone. Women’s inherent role, as determined by their biology, is to be nothing but compassionate caregivers. Women do not possess the same capacity of strength as men due to their inferior biology which is why they can never amount to anything more than a helper rather than a leader.



If human beings are intrinsically driven by their biology, then they can only ever perform a passive role in their lives as they fulfill a biologically predetermined fate. Bio-essentialism asserts that bios is not real. Individual people can never amount to anything more than a set of hormones and biological drive, a drive so strong that it is a pointless endeavor to fight against this inevitability. If humans can never aspire to be more than their basic biology, that everyone is driven by the force of *zoē*, then how is humanity any different from the undead they fight?

### **Gendered Power Dynamics on Screen: The Pseudo-Feminist**

Zombie films created within the modern era often feature a pseudo-feminist figure. This figure is an invention borne of the female audience's displeasure over the stereotypical depiction of women in apocalyptic horror combined with male filmmakers failing to grasp authentic womanhood. This character is a "pseudo-feminist" because she is often presented as a supposed ideal of a strong, just-as-capable woman who survives the zombie world.

However, she is not the image of "empowering" in the way she is intended to be read, for her power comes from (1) assuming masculine qualities and rejection of feminine qualities, or (2) her individuality ultimately being reduced to her ability to reproduce. This character is "not like other girls." Though she is a woman, she doesn't really "do" emotions, she much prefers typically masculine hobbies and interests. Her daddy taught her how to hunt when she was 12 years old, so she's handy with a

shotgun. Though there is nothing wrong with a more masculine woman, the way this "feminist icon" is communicated to the audience does not read as an "empowered woman" but is instead a male fantasy of what a "bad-ass woman" should be.

This trope, pervasive across genres, dubs this type of character as the "cool girl." A notable example of this "feminist" figure is Barbara (Patricia Tallman) from the 1990 remake of *Night of the Living Dead* by director Tom Savini. This film takes the original "helpless," hyper-feminine Barbra of the 1968 film and transforms her into a more masculine version of herself, one who is actually capable of defending herself and surviving. This adaptation was not particularly subtle with this shedding of femininity as, in the midst of a zombie apocalypse, Barbara immediately ditches her plaid skirt and pastel pink sweater vest in favor of the more practical – and "manly" – attire of a button-down, jean jacket, and cargo pants. This "feminist icon" is not the empowering symbol filmmakers intend her to be because she rejects femininity in favor of assuming masculine traits which, therefore, makes her more "useful" or "badass." Instead, she serves as a reminder that while there is nothing wrong with being a woman, there is something wrong with being feminine.

### **Gender and Power**

Through a bio-essentialism lens, gender is commonly thought of as a fixed and intrinsic aspect of oneself. This reductionist understanding of gender allows for the justification of oppressing and dominating other genders by reducing them down only to the

essentials of their biology (Heyman & Giles, 2006). In contrast, philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler reimagines gender, not as a fixed state of being, but as a performance (Butler, 1993). From this lens, while biological sex is a product of nature, gender is better understood as a set of behavioral teachings acquired from one's society that is then performed for social acceptance. The performance of traditional gender expectations normalizes both the idea of a strict gender binary and the societal power that enforces this social norm, patriarchy.

Foucault explains how power can impose itself effectively, stating that "power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to an ability to hide its own mechanisms" (Foucault, 2020). When considering the motif of biopower within the zombie genre, it may be easy to brush this concept away as an unfortunate "necessary evil" in response to a crisis. It is tempting to claim that these motifs as they appear in zombie movies actually have nothing to do with gender and are simply the inherent drive individuals possess to ensure their continued survival. Or perhaps, this demonstrates the success with which patriarchal power has been masked. Not only are these gender dynamics not even questioned, but they are also aligned with the fatalistic idea of being a part of "nature." If mercy and compassion are feminine-coded qualities that are left out to die, then there is no opposition to the cruelties enacted in this patriarchal idea of survival.

### **Gender and Power in Modern Zombie Films**

Zombie films contemplate societal beliefs of human exceptionalism and bio-essentialist gender dynamics by classifying these ideologies under the term "nature". For a society that is often lauded as socially progressive, how does Scandinavian cinema interpret the social Darwinist and patriarchal motifs of a genre such as zombie films?

Scandinavia and other Nordic countries have an interesting relationship with the horror film genre. Nordic films are produced under the government of the national film censorship boards; the board possesses power over deciding the propriety of the films produced and provides financial assistance to filmmakers, consequently making their preferences even more influential (Gustafsson, 2015). Many Nordic countries instigated officially sanctioned aversions to the production of horror films due to their gruesome, vulgar, and violent depictions, concerned over the moral sensibilities of their citizens (Gustafsson, 2015). Though Scandinavia possesses a rich cultural heritage of mythological creatures and legends from which to draw inspiration for horror material, the Nordic film industry and people alike bemoan the low-brow flicks typical of the horror genre. As a consequence, many of the horror films produced in Scandinavia and other Nordic countries are borrowed directly from American horror film traditions, often featuring a Nordic twist.

This importation of foreign culture lends itself to both a wealth of innovation and challenges. On one hand, this foreign-cultural injection leads to unique interpretations and re-imaginings of a genre where the culture of origin likely would not have been conceived. One also encounters, however, an issue of a lack

of relatability or a cultural mistranslation. Art is infused with a language unique to its people, emerging from the soil of its land's history. It is filled with linguistic complexities that cannot be adequately expressed in rhyme or meaning to an outsider and are reflective of the hope and strife of the people from which it was birthed. While translation opens borders and allows for cultures to share in their differences, there is often a politics of power exchange infused within its transaction. Where either a cultural relic can be translated directly as it is designed yet may not be fully appreciated, or the translator must compromise the integrity of the cultural body's original meaning in the name of palatability to a foreign consumer. In terms of zombie films, the typical model of these films was encoded within an American context and, therefore, central motifs of zombie films bear particular traits of American society; namely the American disconnection to nature and the assumption of patriarchal gender relations. Scandinavian cultures understand their connection to nature and the relationship between genders differently than Americans, yet these similar motifs persist due to the zombie genre's bearings as a product of American culture.

In Bo Mikkelsen's *What We Become* (2015), the idyllic suburb of Sorgenfri, Denmark falls to ruin with the emergence of a mysterious infection turning the undead into flesh-eating zombies. *What We Become* is centered around a nuclear family grappling with the disease afflicting their friends, neighbors, and eventually, themselves.

Similar to Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, the domestic space is a critical focal point in understanding overarching societal power

dynamics; *What We Become* explores this primarily through the relationship dynamics of the family. Pernille (Mille Dinesen) is a firm yet loving mother who specifically dotes on and is heavily invested in protecting the innocence of her young daughter, Maj (Ella Solgaard). The father, Dino (Troels Lyby), is shown to be a much more passive figure within the house in comparison to his wife. Early illusions are made of this dynamic at the beginning of the film when it is shown that Dino is often more soft-spoken and plays a more passive role in parenting the children than Pernille. Dino takes a relaxed position in running the household, deferring most of these responsibilities to his wife. Their son, however, is anything but passive. Gustav (Benjamin Engell) is quite independent and rebellious in nature, often ignoring and disobeying his parents' wishes while sneaking off on his own escapades. Sonja (Marie Hammer Boda) is the new girl-next-door who is Gustav's love interest. While the film shows bits and pieces of Sonja's personality, her main function is to be an attractive opportunity for Gustav that compels him into taking action for her protection. Already from the beginning of the film, the audience is able to observe various aspects of the relationship and power dynamic among the family members. Gustav is positioned at odds with the authority of his parents, later translating to his rebellion against the authority of the state. Pernille coddles her daughter Maj to the point where she allows Maj to live in an imaginary world; she shields Maj from even basic knowledge such as the fact that a dead body becomes cold. This overprotection of Maj is compounded both by her young innocence as it is by her delicate girlhood.

However, this coddling results in Maj's death, as she never develops a sense of self-preservation.

An interesting divergence of Mikkelsen's *What We Become* from typical zombie films is the focus between the individual and their relationship to the state. When Sorgenfri experiences a mysterious viral outbreak, the Danish government orders a complete lockdown, quarantine-in-place policy for its citizens in which the military is deployed to enforce these public health policies. A large focus of *What We Become* surrounds critiquing statist-individualism, a political philosophy that asserts that the power of the state and the rights and freedoms of the individual are not mutually exclusive and that strong state power can augment the liberties and autonomy of the individual citizens (Berggren, Trägårdh, & Donovan, 2022). The film challenges this statist-individualist ideology through the opposing positions of the father and the son, in which Dino believes that the family should obediently follow the orders of the state – even if citizens are forced to live off of meager rations and continuously kept ignorant of the dire situation – whereas Gustav challenges the state's authority and acts to rebel against its control.

At this moment, Gustav is not only challenging the state's authority, but he is also challenging his father's masculinity. In this scenario, Gustav is presented as a "freedom fighter." Gustav is bold, brash, aggressive, passionate, and action-orientated, all the qualities of a "real" man. Though Dino is the father of the family, he is not the stereotypical patriarchal figure. He is much too passive to fulfill such a role, seen not only in the domestic sphere but also in his passivity in the face of the government enforcing its control over their

town. Gustav rages against what he perceives to be a gross injustice against his autonomy and projects his anger onto his father. Gustav resents his father's acceptance of the state power, resulting in Gustav rebelling both against the state and his father. He feels that his father is not adequately fulfilling masculine gender expectations and Gustav seeks to subvert his father's authority. The audience witnesses Gustav's subverting his father's authority both by sneaking out of the house and defying his father's wishes by returning with his love-interest and her sick mother. It is this masculine intervention that ultimately results in Gustav, unwittingly, releasing the zombies onto the town. While typical zombie narratives applaud the boldness of their masculine heroes, here the audience cannot help but think that their zombie crisis could have been avoided if this rebellious masculine energy had instead been more patient and compliant – more feminine.

The film closes with an open-ended scene of Gustav and Sonja running away from the zombie-infested town into the woods. This imagery invokes similar iconography to Adam and Eve fleeing the Garden of Eden. This "one man one woman" survivor is a typical trope for zombie films (Sandberg, 2011), however, the insinuation of society likened to Eden functions counter to Scandinavia's treatment of nature as a sacred space. Cronon analyzes the interesting shift in Western culture's treatment of the wilderness from a horrible place, where one only goes when forced, to a space that is revered, stating, "Wilderness had once been the antithesis of all that was orderly and good – it had been the darkness, one might say, on the far side of the garden wall – and yet now it was

frequently likened to Eden itself' (Cronon, 1996).

American zombie films indicate an anxiety regarding nature reclaiming human society. That their safe haven away from the brutal forces of nature was all for naught, nothing but the false comfort of a house made out of sticks. The Scandinavian interpretation echoes this same sentiment, though likely unintentionally. Scandinavians' relationship with nature often supplements a lack of religiosity within their society. Therefore, the presence of an Adam and Eve figure within Gustav and Sonja for a culture that is predominantly secular. Again, this is likely a consequence of Scandinavian zombie film tropes inherently reflecting American cultural norms, and religion is definitely on the ticket.

One of the ways that women are presented in zombie films is that their value is reduced to their ability to reproduce. The film ending with Gustav and Sonja as the lone survivors offers a possibility for repopulation. Sonja's original purpose within the film was to catalyze Gustav's impulsivity; she now represents a beacon of hope for the future of humanity. Though the film initially punishes Gustav for (unintentionally) releasing the zombies unto Sorgenfri, leaving him and Sonja as the only survivors ultimately rewards him for his demonstration of masculinity. Does diminishing Sonja's character as little more than motivation, and later, a means to an end for repopulation, really signify any growth in representations of women in the zombie subgenre since *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)? Can this insinuation truly be explained as a happenstance of zombie films as an American

cultural relic? Or is this a convenient scapegoat for a deeper, repressed truth?

### **Imagining Utopia Beyond a Dystopia**

Zombie films are never truly about zombies. These undead figures are always a metaphor in place of a different anxiety with which the living must combat. These films help their audience examine aspects of modern society and challenge the ways in which it is structured. Zombies provoke questions about humanity's relationship with nature and the power dynamics in gender relations, however, how these motifs are presented are dependent on the culture producing these films. How clear is the distinction between society versus nature? Between man and woman? Between living and undead? While many would claim that these differences are clearly distinct, zombie films suggest the lines between these binaries to be much more blurred than the audience may be comfortable acknowledging.

Due to zombie films' nature as speculative fiction, any assertion these films claim can only be accepted as conjecture. Zombie films (and general apocalyptic films) always paint the fall of society as disastrous. That masculine qualities are essential to survival and the death of feminine qualities is unfortunate collateral damage. What if this isn't true? The anxiety of a possible hyper-masculine world is grounded in the belief that it is mankind's intrinsic nature towards competition and cruelty. The fall of modern society would be disastrous because the laws and regulations of society are the only forces that prevent the average person from committing gross crimes against humanity. However, what if modern

society is the reason for all of the pain, suffering, and cruelty of the world? That it is, in fact, capitalist societies that peddle a “survival-of-the-fittest” pedagogy that enables the exploitation of the weak and poor. What if, without the pressures of society, feminine qualities are more valued due to a lack of competition with the fall

of this capitalist system? It is the common adage to let the dead rest in peace, however, perhaps the dead rising again is exactly the kind of challenge to the normative societal structures needed to promote true change.



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