



WHITE ZOMBIE AS CAPTIVITY NARRATIVE AND THE DEATH OF CERTAINTY

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ABSTRACT

*Horror films such as *White Zombie* (1932) reveal viewers to themselves by narrating in the currency of audience anxiety. Such movies evoke fright because they recapitulate fear and trauma that audiences have already internalized or continue to experience, even if they are not aware of it. *White Zombie's* particular tack conjures up an updated captivity narrative wherein a virginal white damsel is abducted by a savage other.*

The shell of the captivity story is as old as America and relates closely to the Western and to the frontier myth, from which the Western emerged. What inexorably links the Western and all zombie films is the notion of containment. Whereas the Western sought to contain the American Other, all zombie films ask, instead, what happens if the other breaks through the proverbial gates. In other words, what if containment fails?

Introduction

Horror films reveal viewers to themselves by narrating in the currency of audience anxiety. As a result, such movies evoke fright because they regurgitate fear and recapitulate trauma that audiences have already internalized or continue to experience, even if they are not aware of it. Daniel Drezner has put it this way, “Popular culture often provides a window into the subliminal or unstated fears of citizens, and zombies are no exception.” He is not alone in this view. Aviva Briefel and Sam Miller, for example, offer, “We have come to expect that a monster is never just a monster, but rather a metaphor that translates real anxieties into a more or less palatable form.” For such reasons, monsters amount to “projected fears,” Kendall Phillips observes.

The zombie, America’s own homegrown monster, first emerged on screen in *White Zombie* (1932). Since, according to scholars, zombies in visual culture have been understood as a reaction to the ordeals imposed by and filtered through real-world events ranging from thinly disguised race-hatred, to cold war apprehensiveness, to the disquiet generated by the Vietnam war, to audience anxieties about their bodies, not simply the body politic, which also speaks to fears of contamination, as in HIV or Ebola or SARS, to the concern that rampant consumerism has eaten away at audience free will and now to post-9/11 and abhorrence of migrants and refugees. This list records only the more obvious, which may readily cross-pollinate.

The zombies themselves also vary by narrative, though identifiable trends may be identified to have taken shape over time. For example, initially, they behaved directly at the behest of a zombie master—until they later became driven by an insatiable hunger for human flesh or, even later, demonstrated minimal, if reptilian, cognition. In early representations, they were physically inept and found tasks such as turning a doorknob to be impossible—until they did not. Or they moved slowly, shuffling—until they abruptly did not.

That said, in one respect, zombie films have maintained an elemental feature that has remained unaltered and this is the reason they

have come to occupy turf ceded by the decline of the Western, a genre that also deals in some fundamental ways with American anxieties and trepidations. Containment, in a word, to borrow a hoary old cold war phrase, serves as the common denominator. The Western in its essence, that is, if one traces it to the frontier myth, which scholars generally do, either directly engages in containing the Other (e.g., circling the wagons is a common trope) or employs the backdrop of the possibility of Indian aggression so as to heighten the tension in a given drama, not unlike how the Grand Teton Mountains were specifically employed to contribute to such a mood in (1953), the connective tissue here is the association of the Other with tumultuous nature. In other words, if Westerns are America’s own canvas, as a commonplace has it, the deep setting was rendered by conquest and control of, in the first instance, Aboriginal people. But in short, order, once slavery was established, the Other was also serviced to cast a pejorative imaginary of Blacks and, then later, Jews and Asians and Muslims, as well.

Zombie films, by contrast, tale containment and ask a different question. What happens, all zombie films query, if the imagined barbarians threaten to breakthrough or, in fact, actually break through the gates? Today, and since George Romero’s masterwork *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968), this is typically referred to as a zombie apocalypse. So then what? Considering the zombie film sub-genre in this fashion immediately provides a key to unlocking the source of the zombies’ various attributes across time. The zombie is simply the Other, the sum of suppressed yet nevertheless urgent and palpable fears which themselves were born of the real-world experience of waging war, in particular, on Aboriginals and then Blacks. If the zombie in the film may be dated to 1932, the early and enduring American Other may be dated to the coming of the Puritans starting in 1620.

The second question is why would they want to break through the proverbial gates? The answer lies in the nature of the zombie qua Other. The Western triumphally contained a mythically wrought Other. This Other was in effect a collection of attributes that stood in binary opposition to the ways in which white

settler Americans imagined itself. Accordingly, where settler culture understood itself as, say, strong the Other was necessarily conceived of as weak, where the settler American was honest, the Other was dishonest, where the American exemplifies a hard work ethic, the Other is lazy, where the American is ruled by rationality, the Other is driven by id-like impulses that surface in espied love of wanton savagery, and so on. Of course, these are also the basic characteristics of the zombie—slow (of mind and body), lacking judgment, driven not by the mind but by unfathomable and uncontrollable bodily demands, cannibalistic, and so on. The zombie, in short, is the classic American Other in thinly deracialized guise.

Methodology

Scholarship invariably ties 'White Zombie' to the American military occupation of the island republic of Haiti, 1915-1934. America's Manifest Destiny, the triumphal appellation granted its long-running racist imperialism, simply demanded it. From that occupation came a book in 1929, *The Magic Island*, written by the travel writer William Seabrook. In turn, the book inspired a Broadway play, "Zombie," in 1932, and then in a sense engendered *White Zombie* later that same year.

While the book, the play, and the film were firsts of their kind, they also expressed ideas as old as the Republic, and even much older. And such notions were used to sanction imperial behavior and white supremacy. Seabrook introduced the term and concept of zombie to America. Inspired by the book, *White Zombie* is notable because it was first, but slow because it explores and exemplifies a genre that in its own right is central to the origins of the Western. This occurs as *White Zombie* conjures up an updated captivity narrative, that is, updated for 1932, wherein a virginal white damsel is abducted by a savage Other. Captivity tales America's oldest and original literary genre, again dating to the early seventeenth century.

These kidnap tales bristle with mythical authority because they contributed importantly to America's founding story, its creation myth, its famous frontier myth. Confronting Native

Americans, whose land they would usurp continually until the remaining Aboriginal peoples were forced on to a reservation in 1890, early seventeenth-century settlers quite naturally employed their understanding of the Christian Bible to make sense of their new world. Most certainly the Bible was not accurate, but it seems fair to say that it was interpreted in such a way as to provide a parsimonious comfort to the invaders. The outcome interpreted and rendered Indians, as they became known, as devils or agents of Satan, sowing early seeds for what would become known centuries later as Manifest Destiny. Thus, these proto-Americans were obliged to oppose and repel destroy Natives at every turn. To vanquish them militarily, and existentially too, an opportunity presented itself, and as chance (or the Lord, as was the view until well into the twentieth century in the minds of many, to skip far ahead) would provide. Indians, in short, were seen both as morally infirm, childlike, yet, oddly, extremely and fiendishly dangerous.

The captivity genre, which grew from the same fertile imagination as the frontier myth, which scholars also date to the earliest settlers, has flourished across the centuries, from James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* to the story of Republican politician John McCain, from the Tarzan novel series to the kidnapping of newspaper heiress Patty Hearst, from the Iran hostage crisis (real-world but also fictionalized in the movie *Argo*) to Nintendo's Super Mario where the Princess Peach has been captured and must be redeemed), from the films *Taken* and *Taken 2*, starring Liam Neason, to ambushed and captured American soldier Jessica Lynch, whom the *New York Times* called "a 19-year old female Rambo." Gary Rhodes has observed a tendency in 1930s horror in which a female "becomes the hunted, the quarry."

In particular, paternal and patriarchal settler society feared that Native "savages" sought to capture and ravish white women, who, despite enduring severely marginalized status in settler society, were epitomized as founts of spirituality, kindness, goodness, and virginity. And while it true that in the ongoing military conflict that ensued between settlers and Aboriginal people, captives were inevitably taken, the captivity

narrative genre is best understood as fictional. And, as it turns out, the captivity story provided a narrative shell into which settler society would readily exchange Blacks for Indians.

This ought not to surprise, insofar as the base characteristics of the Aboriginal Other are similar to the Black Other. And in the same way that espied Native Otherness was used as a pretext to invade and seize the continental lower 48 states with extreme prejudice, so too, once America's continental frontier was closed—and by this, I do not mean fully settled; just that Indians had been effectively forced on to reservations—at roughly that point the United States begin to extend its imperial ambitions outward, in what Greg Grandin simply terms the “New Imperialism,” circa the 1890s.

This was as an expression of a newer wrinkle in Manifest Destiny, in which, it has sometimes been observed, the Caribbean came to be thought of as an American lake, à la the Monroe Doctrine, which articulated America's imperial designs for Latin America, and especially the Caribbean. One example is that US Marines found themselves occupying Haiti from 1915 through 1934. And it was from this experience that voodoo and zombies, naturally filtered through American racist colonial lenses, came to America.

By myth, I refer to the ideological content in the stories a nation or culture tells itself about itself that gives meaning to its collective co-existence. All nations are built upon them, and they are invariably caught up in a given nation's prevailing religious traditions. This is fundamental because it is clearly useful to believe that one has had God's stamp of approval, especially when violence is deemed to be necessary. White American racism, moreover, which both fueled and excused horrific acts of aggression, was long believed to have been endorsed by God, evidence for which might be teased from the Bible. Later Social Darwinists came along and were able to argue that, well no, God's got nothing to do with it—but we can explain and endorse white supremacy with science. Even today the effects of American racism continue to plague the country. I make use of this example because it fits the zombie narrative over time but also hints at the irrational and malleable quality of myth. Myth is

girded by its own emotional logic, generally, and thus stands in neatly for nature or common sense or God's will. “Any attempt to question them is a desecration,” writes Gerard Bouchard.

And so a nation cum community is built upon shared notions conveyed in emotionally charged narratives. And it is no exaggeration to say that such tales made America, and they “imply a built-in audience eager to embrace the ritualistic pleasure of seeing the same story again and again,” according to Meghan Sutherland. And as with the captivity narrative, which constantly rehashes itself, so too with the zombie film: “The remake works in zombie cinema as an element of style and a bearer of textual meaning that accrues that meaning precisely with repetition.”

In its earliest incarnation, the captivity narrative featured American Indians in the role of savage Other, fiendishly imagined as having been desperate to get their clutches on white females and all that they symbolized. In this way, it generated much of the sense of arousal and indignation that stoked Manifest Destiny, that is, American imperial conquest both of the continent and then, later, as in the case of Haiti, of the Caribbean Basin.

With Manifest Destiny and the captivity narrative, American imperialism is turned into something akin to its own opposite—that is, defensive, rational, beneficial for all, morally uplifting, and blessed by God. Thus, for example, the American settler invasion was perceived and promoted as a defensive posture taken against imagined savage Indian aggression. As a result, America had the right, nay, the duty, to fight back by any and all means available. Slavery served similar ends, wherein the peculiar institution was both imagined to constitute a defensive maneuver and conveniently had God's own perceived endorsement. These derogatory ideas about Natives and Blacks neither ended with abolition or the closing of the so-imagined wild frontier with respect to Native people.

Thus the captivity story served the useful colonial purpose, not unlike the structure of a fairy tale, to remind America to remain vigilant and to be very afraid. But afraid of what? Of Indians and Blacks? In real-world terms, and with unspeakable outcomes, the answer is, yes. Yet ultimately, not afraid of real-world Indians

and Blacks but instead afraid of Americans' own imaginations. Such is the power of myth. People will die for it and people will kill for it.

And, indeed, scholars widely acknowledge the inherent racism of *White Zombie*, where the zombies not so subtly represent Black slaves and slavery—the shuffling, as if they're still in shackles, the host of appalling stereotypes—the filth, the presumed stench, the absence of willpower, the need to follow, the animalistic hunger. And on it goes. So, yes, the film reinforces longstanding white cultural visions, that is, as Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki title their lauded book, *The Black Image in the White Mind*. That said, the evil mastermind in the film is one Murder Legrande. Played by Bela Lugosi, who mostly still seems to be playing Dracula, the character that made him famous earlier in 1932. Murder Legrande is of uncertain eastern European background, yet Othered nonetheless. How are we to understand this?

First, Hollywood film abounds in European heavies—sinister, sneaky, corrupted, classist, dishonest, and so on. Nativist sentiment simmered in reaction to immigration such that “Hatred brewed immigrants in the 1920s,” writes Gary Rhodes in his study of *White Zombie*. In other words, not rightly masculine, European males were cast as the antithesis of America's own frontier vision of itself.

This role-playing also emerges from the mechanical and reductive birth of the nation as best and most famously expostulated by Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner gave voice to the creation myth in a widely influential essay published in 1894. The piece asserts that European men came to America or proto-America and strode off to the frontier, infamously demarcated as the line separating “savagery” from “civilization.” Once there, they either died or they were stripped of their effete European cultural baggage, wrote Turner, channeling and expressing long-established American cultural views. They were frontiersmen in-the-making, stripped of cultural baggage and reborn as something pure, distilled, unique, something mythically American. Think Westerns with like *Shane* or *Dances with Wolves* or *Avatar*. Think John Wayne or Tarzan or Clint Eastwood or maybe Gary Cooper. Plus, it is worth

noting that American policymakers in the early twentieth century were deeply concerned about the potential, in fact, the perceived certainty of European interference with the Monroe Doctrine, which to frontier-tinted vision granted America the right middle and shape and direct and intervene at will in the Caribbean, as was happening elsewhere in the Caribbean region at the same.

White Zombie provides us with no such leading man as Tarzan or Dirty Harry, which undoubtedly contributes to the fright because he is comparatively diminished. We also encounter the mythical frontier trope of the Eastern European cad in two guises. First, there is the island aristocrat named Beaumont who has fallen head over heels for Madeline, Neil's bride-to-be. When she politely demures in the face of Beaumont's advances, he schemes to have her zombified by calling on Murder Legrande's nefarious talents, until such time as her fiancé Neil presumably goes away (NB, he does not). Then Beaumont might have her woken from her zombie slumber and have her for his own. (Please keep in mind, audiences need not have worried too much about Madeline's feelings. This was 1932.)

The second and more sinister European character is Legrande, the zombie master, who has at some point has earlier zombified a half a dozen of his former rivals and perceived enemies. They mostly appear to be white. And also there are the Black zombies who work mindlessly and expendably at the mill on his plantation. Turns out Legrande also has plans for Madeline.

As this melodrama proceeds, the impulsively unmanly Beaumont complains to Legrande, “You don't seem to realize what this girl means to me...I'd sacrifice anything in the world for her. Nothing matters if I can't have her.”

Legrande, meanwhile, playing a longer terrible game, seizes his advantage. First, he engenders Madeline's zombification. And later, as he endeavors to zombify Beaumont, he says, in words meant to strike terror in our hearts, “I have other plans for Mademoiselle.” His words both invoke the horror that lies at the heart of the captivity narrative as they also issue a reminder of the value and mythical necessity of containment.

In this manner, the film achieves something indeed original and creative. It introduces the first incarnation of America's newfound Hollywood monster cast to fit America's oldest literary form and its deepest fears.

The captivity narrative also presages Turner's articulation of the frontier myth (though to Turner it was not a myth, but an empirically accurate mechanical historical interpretation). Captivity narratives feature the abduction of American innocence, most often in the form of a white female kidnapped by savages on the frontier, in what John Tirman calls the "deepest scar on the national psyche." William Cobb calls them a narrative "descent into hell" and stresses that "the purpose of the captivity was symbolic 'regeneration'." The frontiersman, standing in for a virile and masculine America, in some manner saves her and despatches the savage abductor.

As such, *White Zombie* must be understood in the context of the American invasion and occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) that was, in turn, as noted, informed by America's own dreamscape in which zombies are prefigured by frontier-style Othering, "by bodies utterly surrendered to their own physicality," as Meghan Sutherland puts it. The film also invests heavily in terrain inhabited by the American Black Other, and so speaks to the history of slavery and American colonialism. The other here is African-American, not surprisingly given the date and nature of American society of the day, typically imagined in wildly pejorative fashion in early American arts and culture.

With respect to the latter point, the film serves up a reasonably accurate nineteenth-century rough guide to the racism that would have comforted white American audiences. Black zombies clearly occupy the bottom rung. Then corrupt Europeans Beaumont and Legrande register a step up the ladder of imagined civilization. Further, there are the corrupt Europeans—and one notices that the more sinister of the two, *Zombie* master Legrande is of more decrepit Eastern European origin, which is entirely in keeping with nineteenth-century views. Then there are the whites above them, and of course, male over female always. The other

characters are two French-ish maids, reduced in status both by national origin and gender.

What about American Indians? Though they are physically absent, they haunt the film. Consider the ubiquity of Madeline's betrothed Neil, when he learns that she might still be alive, but zombified. How is that possible, Neil ponders? It's the "natives," he is told. "Surely you don't think she's alive in the hands of Natives!" he cries. "Oh, no, Better dead than that!" In fact, these words could have been spoken in any number of Westerns. This common Western trope resurfaces widely in the genre across the past 110 years of filmmaking. It requires no explanation and normally occurs when the Indians are about to attack and the situation looks dire. At this point, typically, the heroine is simply given a pistol with a single bullet. The idea is that should the Indians prevail, she would kill herself rather than let the Indians get to her, as in the 2019 Coen brothers Netflix film, *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*.

Conclusion

In time, the zombie film has developed and matured to such an extent that by the late 1960s it can be seen to have come to occupy turf ceded by the Western, which gathered sudden speed (not unlike zombies themselves) after the events of September 11, 2001. That is to say, in a sense, containment had failed or, from a different perspective, had perhaps simply run its course. Either way, the real-world analog is America's comparative decline on the world stage measurable by its inability to contain the Other. And observable in zombie films, beginning with *White Zombie*. This is not unlike the commonplace that WW1 led to the death of old certainties. What I am suggesting is that the emergence of the zombie sub-genre, beginning with *White Zombie*, offers a lens through which to witness the decline of particular American certainties as they were and have been reified in the Western, temporally plotted across the twentieth century. The Western fell into sharp decline at just the point that the American zombie film suddenly gained a firm foothold and, crucially, as American certainties about race began to unravel. By 1970 containment was

clearly failing in Southeast Asia, the American political system had in office a President whose undoing would shake America to its core, and simmering racial tensions were on the verge of boiling over, arguably each of which contributed to a cultural narrative that continues to play out with some degree of uncertainty. For these reasons, the zombie apocalypse, which figures prominently in film today, may be seen to have

its origins White Zombie. The very term “apocalypse” suggests how deeply settler America loathed and feared the Other, and perhaps many still do, as additional anxieties confront the nation. As scholars have routinely argued that zombies invariably get caught up in the real world conflicts they reflect, the American military occupation of Haiti, 1915-1934, illustrates the point neatly.

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