2009

One Generation Consuming the Next: The Racial Critique of Consumerism in George Romero’s Zombie Films

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“One Generation Consuming the Next: The Racial Critique of Consumerism in George Romero’s Zombie Films”

An American Studies Senior Thesis by Henry Powell
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Introduction

In an interview with the *New York Times*, George Romero describes his zombie films as “being about revolution, one generation consuming the next… all my films are snapshots of North America at a particular moment. I have an ability within the genre to do that.”¹ Romero, one of the greatest innovators in the zombie film genre, uses gory images of zombies consuming human flesh to represent what he sees as a crumbling America. The America that Romero focuses on is one in which consumerism and racism pervade, creating rampant inequalities. Though Romero does not explicitly talk about these inequalities in his films, he uses representations of racism and consumption to depict immoral social hierarchies that perpetuate poverty and lower standards of living for worthy people, most often poor African Americans. In my American Studies senior thesis, I will focus on *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Land of the Dead* (2005) and the ways they portray the ways consumerism and de facto racism marginalize both poor and black Americans at the times of their release.

In the aforementioned quotation, Romero is speaking of the symbolic power of his films. Each film depicts the American moment in which it comes out, showing prejudice and greed as American norms that plague the societies in each of the three films. The experiences of many different social groups with these habits of prejudice and greed are central to the messages of the three films. The group that Romero focuses on most often is African Americans as each of the films features a protagonist who is black and prominent scenes that depict the African American struggle. He is sympathetic to the

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struggles that minorities have experienced at the time of release of the films and depicts the social structures as inherently set up against the minority characters in his films.

Scholars have long discussed the importance of Romero’s films, especially Night of the Living Dead and Dawn of the Dead and their depictions of white masculinity and consumerism, respectively, in America. Often the discussions focus on the conflicts between characters representing microcosms of American inequalities, using certain characters to represent unthinking and selfish whites or mindless middle class consumers. However, these discussions usually focus on either race or consumerism, but not both. While scholars note that race is central to Night of the Living Dead, as the final survivor is black and dies at the hands of unfeeling and probably racist whites, they barely mention its importance in Dawn. Likewise, many of the contemporary analyses of Dawn and Romero’s films since Night focus on the films’ critique of consumerism as Romero depicts a society that almost entirely defines itself by the literal acquisition of material goods, but these analyses rarely look at the representations of race in these films. What makes my argument different from what scholars have discussed previously is that I see race and prejudice as always connected with the consumerism and masculinity that Romero condemns in his films. I will argue that Romero uses consumerism to expound on the ways American society essentially leaves minorities (especially African Americans) behind in its quest for individual success. The following analysis will be my own interpretation of what Romero says about the manners by which consumerism perpetuates racial inequality relating to Dawn and Land of the Dead, as well as what he says about the pitfalls of individual racism and selfishness in Night.
Romero’s films come out in about ten-year intervals so he is able to show the consequences of the events that took place in the ten years prior to the release of the film. One of the most fascinating cases of this is the change between *Dawn* and *Land*, when we see the effects of Reagan’s deregulation on the richest sectors of society and the consequences of greed and mindless material consumption on the poorest people. In general, the films serve as case studies in the ways the thinking or acting of the previous decade has negatively affected our society in terms of marginalizing people and perpetuating inequality among the non-rich and non-white sectors of our societies. The African American characters end up spending much of the films combating that inequity symbolically, with mixed successes in the films.

In understanding the importance of George Romero’s use of race in his zombie films, I must first expound on the depiction of race in the earliest zombie films and describe the ways his are inherently different. The word “zombie” entered the English language in 1871 and comes from the Haitian Creole word *zonbi* meaning “a will-less and speechless human in the West Indies capable only of automatic movement who is held to have died and been supernaturally reanimated.”\(^2\) It is fitting that the dictionary describes the zombie as being West Indian, as that is where all of the original stories of zombies came from and is the locale for all of the earliest zombie films. Haitians described stories of undead humans that were under a spell of a witch or a sorcerer who forced the zombie to do his or her bidding. More often than not, this meant that the walking dead would do manual labor for their masters, working in the fields until their bodies literally collapsed. To be a zombie was to be the epitome of a slave, what Sheller

has called, “a soulless husk deprived of freedom,” someone with absolutely no chance of getting out of his or her miserable situation and whose only hope of escape was death. Given that the term “zombie” solely described West Indians zombies became synonymous with black people as American filmmakers began to incorporate them into their own texts. The zombie underwent an important transformation as American writers and filmmakers used Haitian zombies to represent the third world and show how unintelligent and dangerous the inhabitants Haiti could be.

While the image of the zombie existed before Western influence, Americans eventually took it as their own and used it to show how backwards a place Haiti and the West Indies were. Western society adopted the image of the zombie in the late 19th and early 20th century and warped it to make Haitians seem untamable. Haiti became “a primeval and deeply exoticised ‘other’ to Western modernity, a place set apart from both space and time,” where sorcerers ruled society by turning people into zombies and destroying the social order. Haiti became the representation of the deindustrialized world full of people that would never have the ability to be anything but laborers and therefore could justifiably be used as slaves. This reflects racist ideas about black people that were rampant in the early twentieth century.

In the first American depictions of zombies, evil sorcerers would conjure the spirits of people who had died, bringing them back to life to use for labor on plantations. However, the people under attack from those sorcerers were no longer native Haitians and instead white Americans became the victims. As in White Zombie (1932), the tales

4 Ibid 144
5 Ibid 146
are of couples traveling to Haiti for a honeymoon or a vacation and encountering amoral natives that try to control them. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert describes the ways this represents a central social anxiety during this time, that of the breakdown of wealth and class hierarchies. The victims are most often rich white women under attack from a dark native with a “lack of social standing” overcome by a “sinister, debasing lust.”6 When the sorcerers eventually control the women, social makeup collapses as the least powerful people in the filmic society (dark laborers) come to control the minds of white women, representing the most pure and innocent. The rest of these films center on the liberation of the innocent white woman, “who must be rescued from her zombification before she is basely violated by racially impure hands.”7 This need for feminine salvation metaphorically translates to American society of the time and the pervasive fear that the social hierarchy will collapse and the wealthy white people will lose their power. Order returns, however, by the end of these films as the whites always destroy the transgressing natives and the women regain their faculties. The fear of social collapse is assuaged and the audience can rest assured that their society will not collapse like the filmic one as long as whites stay in power.

The idea of the racially impure and darker character existing as the other in horror film carried over far later than *White Zombie,* as films like *I Walked with a Zombie* (1941) and *Voodoo Island* (1958) used characters that were noticeably darker than the white protagonists were and represented an affront to pure white society. Many horror films center on the idea of difference and monsters often come to represent a terror

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7 Ibid.
wreaking havoc on a predominantly white world. As Ed Guerrero notes, the genre depends “on difference and otherness in the form of the monster in order to drive or energize their narratives.”\(^8\) Often, these films use the monster as a marker. The monster is darker, often African American, and stands in direct conflict with white society. Horror films use characters that are visibly darker than the white leads of the films, emulating certain stereotypical African American or Latino body types, thus completely setting the darker character against the white, supposedly pure protagonists. Elizabeth Young discusses the use of race in *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), which has an enormous Frankenstein monster as the “other” who has stereotypical features of an African American and who terrorizes white society.\(^9\) Even the bride, who is also the doctor’s creation, cannot bear to look at him for he is such an outsider. The bride is white and reverts to her natural feelings about her darker husband despite not being human herself.

*The Bride of Frankenstein* is representative of the depictions of African Americans in many of the horror films before those of George Romero. Those films reflect the American ideologies of their time. In America, African Americans were seen as inferior in society, so they made up the inferior characters in the film and represent the opposite of the white protagonists. As Guerrero argues, “The monster always constitutes the return of the socially or politically repressed fears of a society, those energies, memories and issues that a society refuses to deal openly with.”\(^10\) A common theme is that of the black monster wreaking havoc on white society, representing repressed fears that the socially inferior blacks would overstep their bounds and try to become wealthy,

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corrupting our predominantly white society. With the shift in the late ‘60s to postmodern horror film, this depiction became outdated and the genre changed. Postmodern horror marks the shift by directors from making straightforward horror films to films that were very self-aware and conscious of the implications of their messages. Directors understood what their films meant symbolically and began to be hyperconscious of the things they depicted. Directors began to craft their films to play with generic conventions and expectations as well as to consciously critique the societies they depicted.

Many scholars describe Romero’s Night as the beginning of this shift to postmodern horror and its release marked a significant difference from classical horror films of the ‘30s and ‘40s. Postmodern horror films began to center around violence, which was literal rather than implied as the directors began to show real blood and gore onscreen. Isabel Cristina Pinedo points to 1968 as the moment of change from classical to postmodern horror film and describes in detail the exact changes that occurred. The new films still draw on the conventions of classical horror film, but directors were more conscious of them and played with the implications of what appeared onscreen. Pinedo points to five specific things that work together with classical principles to define the postmodern horror genre:

1. Horror constitutes a violent disruption of the everyday world.
2. Horror transgresses and violates boundaries.
3. Horror throws into question the validity of rationality.
4. Postmodern horror repudiates narrative disclosure.
5. Horror produces a bounded experience of fear.\(^{11}\)

To Pinedo, all five of these rules must apply in order to make the film classify as postmodern and Romero uses each in all three films I will discuss to criticize the society he depicts. The first two elements seem particularly important as they display Romero’s influence in the changing of the horror genre.

George Romero’s first film and subsequent zombie successes fit into this definition of postmodern horror and mark an extreme shift from the zombies described earlier, completely changing the possibilities present in the genre and making the films more progressive in their depictions. First, Romero changed the nature of the zombie affliction. While zombie film prior to *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) focused on the zombification of people through the actions of an evil sorcerer taking over the minds of his victims, Romero decided to focus on an invisible virus that afflicts people and turns them into flesh-eating zombies. The people sick with the virus begin literally to crave human flesh and go around eating their living human counterparts. The violence in the films becomes more real, as it represents the literal consumption of friends and neighbors and a breakdown of social responsibilities. This represents a profound shift in zombie and horror film in general, as the rules of classical horror film go out the window and make way for the new form of gore and social disruption.

Each of Romero’s films begins in a “violent disruption of the everyday world,” leaving the assumed normal society completely broken. Social contracts no longer apply as neighbor, family member and friend alike attack the people closest to them. As Pinedo describes, “violence…explodes our assumptions about normality.” The normality in Romero’s films that breaks down comes in the

12 Ibid.
form of social institutions that have collapsed. In *Dawn*, for instance, we see a
television station, a major American institution, in complete disarray as workers
flee from the zombie hordes wandering outside. From the outset of this film and
all his other zombie films, we start by expecting that our normal world has
completely collapsed, leaving everyone to fend for themselves. In many of the
films, racial and economic hierarchies are the only traditions that are intact,
representing the profoundness of the institutions in the societies Romero depicts.
Romero shows us the folly of the hierarchies he sees in American society as they
inherently marginalize innocent people in his films. In depicting a mall in
complete disarray in *Dawn of the Dead*, Romero tells us that living in a society
where we define ourselves by material goods will lead to the collapse of social
responsibilities as people will attempt to accumulate as much wealth as possible
without concerning themselves with people who are less well off.

In depicting the world as such Romero is in a position to describe exactly
what has brought us to this brink of social collapse and destruction. Philip
Brophy\(^{13}\) describes postmodern horror’s ability to show the spectacle of the
ruined body, to show the destruction at hand in each of the films. The literal
destruction Romero focuses on often symbolically represents the consequences of
the actions of the society that he depicts. He shows us the horrors of our unequal
social hierarchies through the oppressive power they have over the marginal
people in our society. Throughout the three films, the destruction is always
twofold as it is a literal destruction of people and buildings but also stands as a
representation of the consequences of our society’s actions.

\(^{13}\) From Stephen Prince’s Horror Film Reader
Along with the literal breakdown of our everyday world in the societies depicted, postmodern horror film also breaks down our “taken-for-granted ‘natural’ order,” as it “transgresses and violates boundaries,” overhauling the themes and ideals present in classical horror film. In Romero’s postmodern horror, the conventional juxtaposition described by Guerrero between white people and the black monsters who terrorize them is overturned. The “natural” boundaries represented in classical horror film between “us” versus “them” (read: black versus white) no longer exists in the same ways in postmodern horror films. In each of George Romero’s horror films, an African American is one of if not the most positive characters and often is the most logical and moral character in the entire film. The idea of the “other” is inverted as we end up pulling for the black character against oppressive whites. Even the zombies are complex characters as we sometimes end up rooting for them as they attempt to topple oppression. In Land, as the zombies, led by a visibly black character, attack the elite stronghold, we are sympathetic to their cause and hate the rich whites they are opposing. The “natural” order here has been denaturalized. We cannot definitively say that the zombies are bad and the humans are good, or that the darker characters should not be trusted compared to the whites. Romero runs with this idea, and as his films are among the most progressive in the horror genre. Night proves to be the quintessential example of a radically enlightened horror film because the casting of Duane Jones, a black man, for the lead role completely changed the genre and the message inherent in zombie film. Unlike classical horror films, which relied upon the idea of the triumph of good over evil, postmodern horror blurs the lines that we expect and leaves us questioning our own belief systems, especially about racial hierarchies.
For instance, in *Night*, the entire film takes place in one house in a remote rural town where the zombies have taken over. A small group of characters, including a white family a woman and a black man, sequester themselves inside of a farmhouse and prepare to defend it from the zombie apocalypse. Almost the entire film takes place in this one farmhouse, which becomes the site of racial conflict between the two main characters. That conflict comes to a head in a violent confrontation as each character (one black and one white) argue about what is best for the group trapped in the house. The African American, Ben, comes out as the more moral and respectable character. I will discuss this depiction of Ben and its comments on American society at the time the film was made - 1968, a time of great racial tension. I will discuss the ways the film’s representation of Ben constitutes a critique of those ideologies. To me, the farmhouse represents ingrained prejudice passed down from generation to generation. After Ben enters to escape the zombie horde outside, he directly confronts that idea of racism. The zombies effectively serve as a catalyst for this interaction and Romero shows us that we need to rethink our ingrained feelings of racism in the late 60s.

Despite surviving until the very end of the film, Ben ends up dying unnecessarily before the credits roll at the hands of an unthinking and unfeeling white mob. I will discuss the ways this represents Romero’s desire to show his audience that the feelings of racism prevalent to the ‘60s might be even more detrimental than the destruction that comes in the form of this zombie attack. The mob’s destruction of the most likeable character stands as a metaphor for the desire for whites to keep African Americans and other minorities from affluence and individual success at the release of this film. The
consequences of the close-mindedness that pervaded society at the time of the release of this film regarding African Americans is clear at the end as Ben dies unnecessarily.

*Dawn of the Dead* stands as the next step in Romero’s American “history” and depicts the society of the 1970s. In chapter two, I examine the discussions of scholars about the depiction of consumerism in the film. There are many moments in the film where Romero criticizes American consumerism and mindless material acquisition. He equates Americans with the zombies who wander around the mall aimlessly to the muzak blaring from the mall’s speakers. The need for material goods surrounds Americans as our society increasingly becomes one of consumption rather than production. While the critique of capitalism is central to the film, something that has largely been absent from the scholarly discussions on it is the relationship between race and consumption that exists in the film.

I propose to take the discussion of *Dawn of the Dead* a step further with my analysis of the film as I take into account what scholars like A. Loudermilk and Stephen Harper have said about the film’s satire of consumption and tie it to depictions of the struggles of minorities to survive in the film. I see the film as tying race and poverty together. The most marginalized people in the world of the film, African Americans and Latinos, are unable to save themselves from the destruction going on in their own homes. The most horrific scenes of the film take place in a housing project as zombies and police alike attack poor minorities who cannot escape their financial woes. Romero shows a brutal police force as well as, through parallel editing, consumer culture in general, as causes for this struggle. Society in the film, and transitively our society, is set up in such a way that it is impossible for these marginalized people to find any reprieve from their
difficult lives. They are unable to buy into capitalist society by consuming and therefore can never leave the poor state in which they live, symbolically represented by their being trapped in the housing project.

In my third chapter, I demonstrate the ways in which Romero takes his discussion of race and consumerism a step further in *Land of the Dead*, where he shows the rich are richer and the poor are poorer, but other than that, not much has changed since *Dawn*. Since there are no scholarly sources to cite in this film, I will provide my own analysis about the ways the film depicts consumerism, in the same way that Loudermilk and Harper discussed *Dawn*. In my discussion, I will focus on the symbolism inherent in the depiction of a giant shopping mall, Fiddler’s Green, where all the rich people live without concerning themselves with the outside world. They are a step up from the consumers in *Dawn* as their lives focus solely on material goods and nothing else. However, in this film, the zombies actually take down the power structure instead of aiding it or taking part in it. I think that Romero shows that the American dream of social and economic mobility has become a lie, and it will remain so, especially for minorities, until the existing power structures are torn down. I will take close looks at all the sectors of society and discuss their significance both within the context of the film as well as in contemporary American society. Through this, I will analyze what Romero says about the connection between race and wealth today as well as possible prescriptions he might have about inequalities prevalent today.
Night of the Living Dead and America in the 1960s

The new zombies of George Romero begin in 1968 with Night of the Living Dead, a very low budget film that is still perhaps his most important social commentary. Night marks a key shift in both the horror genre generally and specifically in the depiction of zombies. As I have discussed in the introduction, the zombies have changed and are no longer under the spell of an evil sorcerer, but now crave human flesh. This marks the beginning of a trend that grows today with horror film; for one of the first times a horror director shows explicitly the violence in his film rather than implies it. Those depictions were so gruesome that the MPAA refused to approve its release. There are many scenes of undead humans with little or no clothing gnawing on an arm or a leg as they stare into the distance, prepared for their next attack. The fear experienced by audiences becomes more real as they actually see a zombie violently disemboweling a human rather than imagining it.

The more important historical resonance of the film, however, is the change in the race of the zombies. For the first time in zombie film, the enemy is not a violent black West Indian, but the zombies instead are average American citizens. All of the zombies depicted are white, many of whom come back from the dead to attack their family members or neighbors. This distinction is central to the messages of the film, for the brutal actions we see onscreen come from our white friends and neighbors and the locale moves from a distant place to our own backyard. In making these changes, Romero makes possible the idea that the zombies represent American citizens. By making the
zombies white, Romero’s film puts them at the center, rather than the margins, of American society and enables us to analyze the makeup of that society.

The question I want to answer then becomes if the zombies represent American citizens when they used to represent brutal black opponents to white society, what become the new symbolic depictions of African Americans in *Night*? Race is central to the resonances of the film, as it shows the sources of America’s continuing inequalities in the 1960s. The main protagonist, Ben (played by the superb Duane Jones), is a youthful African American man who is depicted in a positive light as the most moral character in the film. He ends up looking out for the best interests of the group of humans that is trying to survive the zombie attack. He does everything in his power to protect himself and his fellow survivors. However, Romero sets up a society that is inherently against him, making it impossible for him to survive the apocalypse with ease. Two characters, an uncompromising middle-aged white man named Harry Cooper, and the local sheriff, represent white Americans at the time that made it difficult for African Americans living in the United States. As I will show, the scenes with the militia call to mind images of brutal murders of African Americans in the media at the time of the film and the scenes with Harry recall personal racism pervasive in Heartland America. Ben has to deal with threats from both inside and outside of the house as he attempts to survive in the film. Romero works throughout the entire film to make these characters seem the most brutal and closed-minded, even going as far to make their actions more disturbing than the gore of the zombies. Those whites stand as the real threats to our society. Romero shows their actions as oppressive and continuing a cycle of racism and inequality present during the release of the film. The depiction of African Americans, then, becomes sympathetic as
Romero crafts his film around their struggle and makes their plight one that we sympathize with.

The changing racial ideologies in America during this period give meaning to the significance of the film’s depictions of African Americans. Throughout the beginning of the 20th century, coinciding with the earliest depictions of African Americans in zombie film, there was rampant inequality and violence against black Americans. Whites, especially in the south and rural areas, did not deem it necessary to give equal rights to African Americans and legalized Jim Crow laws, state and local laws that relegated African Americans to segregated public facilities, leaving them with worse public restrooms and schools, among other things. During this period, violence against African Americans was common among whites, who often would take the law into their own hands and viciously murder blacks for what they saw as infringing on the lives of white people (usually white women). One of the more documented cases of this was Emmitt Till, who was a fourteen-year-old boy who apparently whistled at a white woman. A group of white men senselessly murdered Till relying on word of mouth in their attack against the child. This behavior was far too common among whites in the south and Midwest as they used violence as used as a form of a scare tactic, making African Americans fear white Americans, thus keeping them from voting or attempting to strive for equal rights or protection by the law.14

In many instances, the film calls to mind the images and memories of this brutality. One particular character, the sheriff, appears closed-minded and cruel, recalling those whites who decided to murder innocent African Americans. He leads a local militia

in an attempt to eradicate the zombies but Romeo never shows him as a savior, as someone looking out for the interests of the citizens he is helping. Instead, he relishes the fact that he gets to practice his shooting on the undead and never flinching when murder becomes necessary. Our first encounter with him is when he describes the best possible way to destroy these zombies. He recommends that all survivors should shoot them in the head or “burn ‘em or beat ‘em” when they get close to kill them. The image of burning or beating the zombie resonates considering the imagery present during the release of the film, especially considering that the film takes place in a rural setting. Historically rural America was a place that held onto their ideologies and refused to accept change, especially concerning racial ideologies. Especially in the south, rural whites felt threatened by African Americans and were the people who acted most violently against their black counterparts. Cities like Selma and Birmingham erupted in violence as closed-minded white police officers used fire hoses against innocent African Americans. It is clear that Romero calls the brutal treatment of African Americans by whites to mind in the character of the sheriff and the militia, who kill endlessly throughout the entire film.

*Night of the Living Dead* portrays a powerful African American that commands our sympathies when compared to the oppressive whites Romero condemns. The main character in the film is Ben, who seems to be the only sane character in the entire film. He enters a farmhouse inhabited by Barbara, a white woman who had previously seen her brother die trying to escape a zombie. Immediately, Ben assesses the situation and begins to constructively save himself and Barbara. Mark Clark describes his actions in these first scenes as “efficient, determined and carefully thought-out”\(^\text{15}\) as he prepares the house for

defense against the zombie horde. His treatment of Barbara is indicative of his resolve as he calms her down from her hysterical daze, which comes after she enters the house and loses her mind because of the situation. From the first moment we see him, he is strong and in control, assessing each situation thoroughly and making good decisions that will eventually benefit the rest of the group. As I pointed out in my introduction, this depiction is atypical of African American depictions in film, as African Americans were often stock characters or depicted as subordinate to white protagonists. Early in this film, Romero sets up a contrast to the zombies of earlier horror film that attacked white women and a white social order. In those films, we would assume that the strong black man would attack or rape the white woman. Jones serves a breaking point to this depiction as he instead fights against an oppressive system in his struggle to survive. Romero makes sure to show an upstanding black man who genuinely looks out for everyone and is harmless to those who treat him amicably. He will not stand down to oppressive whites in the film and is strong in the face of ignorance and self-interest.

The foil to Ben is the middle-aged white man named Harry Cooper (Karl Hardman) who solely looks out for the interest of his family and does not care about the other survivors sharing the house with him. While Ben is preparing the upstairs for defense against the undead horde, a white family hides in the basement, sequestering themselves downstairs as the people upstairs try to figure out a way to survive. Ben finds a door to the basement and as he forces it open, Harry exits. With a younger man, Tom, he defends himself for not exiting to help sooner. He maintains that he was only staying down in the basement to help his family, “We lock into a safe place, and you're telling us we gotta risk our lives just because somebody might need help, huh?” From the first
meeting of these two characters, we see that there is a growing conflict as Ben attempts to help the whole of the group while Harry only looks to save himself and his family. Harry even goes out of his way to make it more difficult for the rest of the group to survive, marking the immoral opposite to the positive Ben and painting the white alpha male as villainous. Again, Romero calls to mind imagery from the time of the film’s release as many middle-class white people would abstain from the fight for civil rights because of the ways it would make them look in their communities. Middle-class whites would not speak for the African American struggle for fear of being ostracized. While Harry is more extreme than those middle-class whites, literally fighting the African American in the film, I still think Romero wanted to call attention to the lack of support from the white community on behalf of the Civil Rights struggle and points to it as one of the factors of difficulty in the struggle for equal protection.

Harry cannot bear to give up the power and authority in the household and we find that he was keeping a gun in the basement, holding onto the only means of defense for the entire house. The gun becomes an object of contention between Ben and Harry as it will be used to save the entire group or just the interest of the Coopers. Prior to their meeting, Ben seemed in control and level-headed as he thought out all of his options before acting. However, once he meets Harry, we see that he becomes easily frustrated, angry at the people looking out for themselves instead of all the survivors. Ben’s reaction again calls to mind images and responses of African Americans in the 1960s against intolerant whites. At the beginning of the Civil Rights struggle, African Americans worked hand-in-hand with whites for their rights. However, frustrated at the lack of total support, specifically in the political realm, they broke off and formed their own groups,
such as the Black Panther Party, which was exclusively black and vehemently anti-white. Ben’s anger is in line with these attitudes and his reactions are justified when faced with such a self-involved white man. Harry and Ben are at odds with each other for the entire film and Ben treats him with disdain. Through the positive depictions of Ben and the angering depictions of Harry, Romero attempts to get the audience to side with the African American character and against the white man.

I want to point to the selfishness of Harry as Romero’s criticisms of race relations in the United States and America’s drive for personal accumulation of wealth, in this case in the form of property. Harry has some of the characteristics of the intense consumerism and greed that pervade Romero’s idea of America in the latter two films. It is clear from his defense of his actions earlier that he desires only to look out for himself and his family. He does not even attempt to explore the peril of the people upstairs while he is safe for fear that something outside of the doors could threaten his safe world. Jonathan Crane highlights this selfish drive in *Night*:

The farmhouse…functions as a space in which the only domestic conventions obeyed concern tending to one’s own private property with scrupulous care. Endless bickering, futile escape plans, cowardly insults, selfish priority and vapid dialogue… dominate the claustrophobic interior action.

Crane observes this intense drive to protect “private property” in the film and notes that it is at the center of everything that takes place in the house. Cooper will look out for his family by any means necessary and sees other peoples’ needs as a burden and a possible

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barrier to personal safety and property. He does not understand why others would possibly need his help and attempts to keep the most important tool of safety and power, the gun, in his possession. He is a caricature of the property-owning middle-class during this period, which eschewed communal responsibility while looking mostly to help themselves and their families and strive for individual gain. Harry cannot part with the power in the household for if he does, he may lose what he has already gained. Harry eventually decides to stay in the basement and not deal with Ben, yet in doing so gets himself and his wife killed, as his daughter turns into a zombie and attacks them both. Because Harry refuses to relinquish control, hiding behind his selfishness, he leads his own family’s demise. We see the effect of blind selfishness and greed that define the character of Harry. While he was attempting to look out for his family, he ended up speeding up its destruction by closing himself off from the concerns of others and refusing to help anyone who is not his blood relative.

Harry is Romero’s indictment against both middle-class consumption as well as their lack of interest in the black struggle in the ‘60s. While serving as a criticism of selfishness and greed, the tension between Ben and Harry represents the conflict between the races in the United States, as Ben’s experience fighting such a selfish white man is in line with African Americans’ experience against whites in the ‘60s. Images and stories of poor treatment of African Americans by whites influence many of the meanings that scholars have drawn about the situations that occur inside of the farmhouse. Mark Clark makes explicit mention of the frustration and disdain that Ben has for Harry as signs of the experiences Ben has had in his past with forceful and selfish whites. The scenes of direct conflict between the two are all moments where racial tension boils underneath the

17 See Jennifer Whitney Dotson, Jonathan Crane
words and actions going on onscreen. One of the more important scenes comes where
Ben tries to save Barbara after she runs outside thinking she has seen her brother. As Ben
attempts to enter, he notices that the door is locked, as Harry has bolted the door. The two
have a standoff, staring each other in the eye, prepared to come to blows. It is impossible
to ignore the fact that a strong-headed white man does not allow the African American he
encounters to take control of the situation and attempts to keep all the power in the
household for himself. Clark mentions Duane Jones’ use of his own experiences in
making these scenes so meaningful and so symbolically resonant regarding racial tension,
“How often had white men referred to educated, erudite Jones as ‘boy’ or ‘nigger’…How
many Harry Coopers had Jones known in his lifetime.”\textsuperscript{18} The delivery of Jones is hugely
important here because it recalls personal struggles against inequality for African
Americans in the ‘60s. These scenes are so full of tension, we must consider the symbolic
meanings of these scenes, that the fight between Harry and Ben is really a fight by Ben
against the status quo, against the unjust racial ideologies he presumably encountered for
his life before entering this farmhouse.

While there are no explicit references to racist ideologies in Harry, it is clear that
from the outset of their encounter, he is skeptical of the black man who opposes him.
Harry opposes each of the suggestions that Ben makes even when they consider the best
interest of the whole group. He is equated with the closed-off mentality of the heartland
and the farmhouse, which comes to represent what Ken Hanke describes as “a symbol of
the mid-American heartland values that are crumbling around the characters.”\textsuperscript{19} Harry is
a product of that locale, desiring not to change what he sees as a good thing, focusing on

his family despite the need for someone to step in and do what is right for the entire group. Harry represents de facto racism and we presume that if his family were to have survived, he would have passed his narrow-minded thoughts down to the daughter. Romero plays with the demise of Harry and depicts the ways in which his insular beliefs take their toll on the society around him. Nobody can hope to survive here because of his unyielding selfishness. Romero attempts to carry the negative effects of Harry’s selfishness over into American society showing how detrimental those kinds of intolerant people are to strides in Civil Rights and equal treatment.

The tension between Ben and Harry comes to a head during the middle of the film as the two leaders of the group argue over what is the best course of action for the rest of the people in the house. Harry argues that staying in the basement is the best possible strategy while Ben maintains that staying upstairs is the only way for everyone to know what is going on outside in their fight to survive. The two get into an intense argument as they fight over the gun, the symbolic representation of the power over the household. As the fight becomes more violent, Ben shoots Harry and kills him. This is a small success over the oppression of Harry and again Clark’s reference to Jones’ personal experiences as affecting his acting comes to mind. It appears that Ben’s experiences in life against brutal whites guide his hand to do such an extreme act. Ben acts on instinct and memories of prejudice as he shoots his oppressor and wins a symbolic success over white domination. This victory is fleeting, however, as the safety in the household falls apart soon after Harry dies. Alone and in danger, Ben finally takes Harry’s advice and heads to the basement to await his fate.
Notwithstanding the symbolic victory over oppression with the murder of Harry, Romero shows another layer of subjugation that Ben cannot supersede. Ben encounters a group of whites who end up senselessly murdering him, despite the fact that he is of no danger to them. As the sun rises, Ben awakes to look outside and see a group of white militia members with dogs converging on the house, seemingly about to save him. A screen shot, shown here, is eerily reminiscent of images of brutality by white police officers against African Americans during the ‘60s, like the one of Birmingham, Alabama also shown here. The police officer on the right of the screen in the shot is preparing to let loose the dog in his hand as the officers in the photograph do ruthlessly. Images like these came out in newspapers during the 1960s. They allowed all of America to come face to face with the truth of the African American struggle and fully depicted the terrible treatment of African Americans at the hands of vigilante white groups and the police. The shots following the one pictured track barking dogs tugging at their leashes as the militia prepares to unleash them on the zombies. Here, Romero specifically draws from mass media images of the time to make his scenes more powerful as they recall images of more than just scenes of fantastical horror. The following unfeeling violence by the police in

the film thus recalls the unnecessary violence of the police officers in Selma and
Birmingham during the ‘60s.

Ben is unaware of the impending doom and stands up to greet them, preparing for
this is his salvation. As he begins to yell, Romero cuts to the militia aiming a gun into the
house. We hear a body hit the floor and it takes a moment to recognize that Ben has died,
felled by one of their bullets. This is the most jarring scene in the entire film, shocking
because it defies expectations of what is supposed to happen in the film. In the
conventions of the horror genre, the most moral and praiseworthy character is supposed
to survive in the end, beating the monster and surviving because of his morality.
However, Romero’s film does not allow for any sense of rationality and justice to prevail
at the end. He depicts instead what we expect in real life, senseless bigoted whites killing
a positive black man. The brutality with which the militia killed the best character of the
film is unexpected in the film world yet totally expected in American society considering
the pervasive images of police brutality against peaceful blacks.

Again, explicit allusions to racism highlight this most important scene. The sheriff
who discussed burning and beating the zombies earlier in the film, evoking ideas of
lynching and police brutality against the backdrop of Civil Rights, leads the militia again
in this scene as they converge on the house. The militia members are unthinking and do
not mind that they possibly just killed an innocent black man. In fact, they are glad about
it, as the sheriff says, “Good shot… That's another one for the fire!” immediately after his
comrade murders the protagonist. Instead of what we expected to see, Ben’s survival or
even his consumption by the zombies, humans, bigoted and backwards humans no less,
prove to be his murderers. I see this scene and the one that follows as a direct reference
by Romero to the racism of the time when this film came out. He does not make it explicit that the militia killed Ben on purpose, but considering the pictures that follow, backing the credits as the film ends, one cannot help but connect the image of Ben’s death with terrible images of violence that existed throughout the ‘60s. The one rational and likeable character dies due to senseless white militia members, the same types of men who would have lynched an African American.

As the credits begin to roll, we see grainy photographs of bodies dragged off by the militia with meat hooks and other bodies burning in a funeral pyre. Ben’s body is among them, as this photograph indicates, and a shot of him on the ground with a meat hook in the foreground prepared to hook him and drag him away is perhaps the most gruesome of the whole film, far more disturbing than any zombie gnawing on a human arm or leg. The images evoke such strong memories of and connections to brutality against African Americans in the 1960s, such as one of Mack Charles Parker, accused of raping a white woman and subsequently murdered and burned by a clan of

whites. In using these images, Romero puts his finger on icons that provide strong emotional impact for the audience. As the images used during gains in Civil Rights, these images anger the audience, which is disturbed at the demise and the terrible treatment Ben received. It is apparent that with Night, Romero makes statements about American society and provides examples of the pervasive and powerful nature of racism in the 1960s. He depicts different levels of racism, from a group who looks out for their own goals and is skeptical of the infiltration of a black man into their home and family, to a group that is so set in its ways it sees no difference between murdering a deadly zombie and an innocent, praiseworthy black man. The film never gives any sympathy to the cause of those oppressive whites, but instead looks to rebuke the actions of them as well as all whites who perpetuate inequality during the 60s. This is revolutionary in the horror film genre for the film leads the audience to admire Ben and to despise his aggressors, the unfeeling whites.

This film came out in the heat of the Civil Rights movement and asked its audiences to accept a powerful black man, even rooting for him for much of the film. The film was, perhaps not surprisingly, especially popular with black audiences and in poor urban neighborhoods. Thus, an important section of the audience was willing to see an African American in this position of praise and identify with him due to the history of the images of the civil rights movement and the thoughts conjured by the lynch mobs. With help of the images, the most progressive of African American portrayals in horror film coincided with the most heated years of black rights in the United States. Here, Romero

24 Read Kevin Heffernan’s “Inner-City Exhibition and the Genre Film: Distributing Night of the Living Dead (1968)” in volume 41 of the Cinema Journal.
not only breaks horror norms in the portrayal of gore, but also in the depiction of African Americans.

Ken Hanke sees Ben’s death as symbolic of the message of the entire film, as a final blow to rationality in Night, “his death seems to mark the end of reason and so of hope.” ²⁵ I want to extend this end of reason to encompass the film’s representation of race as it depicts the African American experience during the 1960s. For many African Americans, it was impossible to feel safe in their own communities, for the whites who lived around them and even the police could erupt against them for no reason at a moment’s notice. The prejudice and violence that many of them encountered led to an utter feeling of hopelessness, much like the message of this film. An interesting quotation regarding this feeling comes from Bayard Rustin, who helped plan the 1963 march on Washington:

I think the real cause [of hopelessness] is that Negro youth—jobless, hopeless—does not feel a part of American society… People who feel a part of the structure do not attack it. ²⁶

The structures excluding Ben in this film call to mind those structures to which Rustin alludes. They range from the family headed by Harry to the neighborhood in which he lives, depicted by the farmhouse and actions of the irrational police force. He cannot feel a part of the structure of the society around him due to the skepticism Harry treats him with as they attempt to survive the apocalypse. Barriers set up against Ben appear throughout the film and his death marks the final blow to his character and the possibility of superseding the prejudice and

mistreatment he and other African Americans experienced during the time of the film.

In Night, we see that the problem concerning race in the film is systematic and is inherent in the lives of the white people in this community with heartland values. He depicts patterns of racism in America and the levels of difficulty for African Americans to gain Civil Rights in the 1960s. The racism is systematic, built so deep into the structure of society that those who should look out for everyone in society, the police, can brutally murder an African American and feel no remorse for it. Romero depicts a very personal account, one where the actions of one person or one group of people greatly affect the lives of their fellow citizens, especially those of color. The phenomenon of a small town is highlighted in the film as the setting is so secluded that there are very few people in the entire film. The small town mentality of holding onto previous norms and beliefs is central to the barriers Ben encounters in his experience in the farmhouse. He meets many brutal whites who end up ruining his chance for survival and represent a bleak depiction of Americans in the ‘60s.

It is interesting to note that in casting for this film, Romero said that he was not looking for an African American to play the lead but that Jones was the best person for the role. Considering all the racially symbolic scenes that pervade the film, I find this a hard idea to believe. Perhaps Romero was not concerned at the outset about making the film about African Americans, but once he saw the emotion with which Jones played the part, crafted the film around the messages that I have discussed. Romero has so much possibility to make the film about American norms and how detrimental they can be to

27 Read Paul Gagne’s The Zombies that Ate Pittsburgh: The Films of George A. Romero for more information on the casting of the film and more first hand interviews with the director.
society as a whole by making the film take place in such a small setting. He uses the farmhouse to represent Heartland values and specifically the personal difficulties of one African American man living in America during the 1960s.

As the zombie apocalypse progresses, Romero leaves the Heartland and heads to urban centers in his next film, which depicts the struggles for African Americans in those locations and the rampant poverty in those communities. He also progresses from a small group of people making the experience for African Americans difficult to show the ways the structure of society and American consumerism becomes the new way of marginalizing and subordinating African Americans. Throughout *Dawn of the Dead* and *Land of the Dead*, American society has defined itself so much on consuming (in this case wealth or material goods), that we cannot help but buy into the status quo, striving for the possession of goods and wealth as a marker of success. The people left behind through this then become poor minorities, who Romero shows as living a life without many options because of white greed and consumption of material goods.
Dawn of the Dead and American Capitalism in the 1970s

In Night, Romero focuses mostly on Heartland values and the destructive ideologies of a self-interested and bigoted white American. In Dawn of the Dead (1978), his concern shifts to a critique of capitalist society, as he condemns the mentalities of wealthy urban and suburban centers through the lens of a shopping mall. As the years have progressed since Night of the Living Dead (1968), so too has the zombie apocalypse. What seemed to be in control at the end of Night, the zombie outbreak, has now become out of control. The zombie apocalypse has captured more victims and has spread from the countryside outside of Pittsburgh to what seems to be all of Pennsylvania. Zombies are everywhere in many of the shots and often outnumber the humans in the film. In fact, most of the scenes in the mall are made up of hundreds of zombies and only four humans.

Dawn starts in a television studio and a housing project in Philadelphia and eventually moves its focus to a shopping mall outside of the city, mainly depicting suburban society rather than the rural society we saw in Night. With the change in location comes a change in criticism as well as Romero critiques the consumption of American society. He equates zombies with mindless consumers by showing the mall full of zombies who are there by instinct, and by alluding to the ways American society has become consumer-oriented in the late 1970s. He depicts a society in which material goods rule human passions and in which everyone takes part in a capitalist system, striving for the acquisition of more things.
Many scholars have noted Romero’s focus on consumerism and that he uses zombies to represent mindless Americans who wander in search of goods to define their lives rather than concerning themselves with people around them in his film. I want to take what scholars are saying a step further, by tying Romero’s mentions of race into a discussion of capitalist society. Romero contrasts scenes of capitalist excess with depictions of racial hatred by police officers directed against minorities and zombies thus equating capitalism with marginalization of minorities. I want to explore exactly what these scenes mean when looked at in conjunction with what scholars say about *Dawn of the Dead* and consumerism. I will highlight two important locales in the film, the mall and the housing project, to stand as representations of Romero’s commentary about the American economic and racial situations, respectively. He openly critiques American consumer society and capitalism in general through his scenes in the shopping mall by equating zombies with mindless consumers, but the film’s ideas about race are less obvious than his ideas about commodification. I want to analyze why Romero decides to contrast these racially charged scenes with scenes clearly about capitalism. I see the scenes about race as both a representation of the state of American racial relations as well as a representation of the connection between race and poverty. Many minorities had a difficult time being economically successful and taking part in the American capitalist model. I will use discussions on consumerism, postmodern horror and critiques of *Dawn of the Dead* to solidify my point that Romero uses certain scenes to argue that minorities at this time in America were relegated to poorer neighborhoods and because of capitalist

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28 Read Stephen Harper’s “Zombies, Malls and the Consumerism Debate,” George Ritzer’s “Islands of the Living Dead” and A. Loudermilk’s “Eating 'Dawn' in the Dark Zombie desire and commodified identity in George A. Romero’s 'Dawn of the Dead'”, which all discuss the similarities between American capitalist consumerism and the zombies in Romero’s film.
ideologies (individualism, personal accumulation of wealth), could not triumph over their economic struggles.

It is important to use discussions of postmodern capitalist society as a lens through which to analyze this film. The critiques of our consumption set up what Romero has to say about America in the 1970s and about our mindless materialism. Frederic Jameson, discusses the ways modern society turned away from a culture of production to a culture of consumption: “the new social formation… no longer obeys the laws of classical capitalism, namely the primacy of industrial production and the omnipresence of class struggle.”

America is now a “postindustrial” society and Americans define themselves by goods that they own rather than hard work and production. In this new society, the collection of goods is far more important than the production of said goods. A. Loudermilk’s echoes Jameson’s sentiments, despite never referencing him directly, “Personal identity and consumer identity seem to be two sides of the same coin in a capitalist society.”

I see the striving for material goods as a way of defining our lives as connected directly to television and advertising. With the rise of television came a saturation of advertisements that gave Americans certain images of how they should lead their lives. Advertisements pique our interests by showing us lives that we are supposed to want—happy families free of concerns or the man of our dreams—that we hope will become our own once we obtain the good advertised. The incredible amount of time people spend watching TV, and thus seeing advertisements, leads to a sort of brainwashing where the viewer subconsciously begins to define him or herself by the

goods he or she can attain. George Ritzer discusses this encoding we as Americans get from television, noting that our postindustrial society consumes bodies like the zombies I will describe later by desiring the images we see in advertisements every day.\(^{31}\) We yearn for images and desire the lives of the models as the zombies see humans and desire their flesh.

In such a society, shopping malls are essential places of commerce as well as places of self-definition. Stephen Harper points to the mall as “the epitome of corporate capitalism,”\(^ {32}\) noting that malls are made to be solely sites of consumption—they are all-inclusive locations where the primary goal is to obtain goods or to eat food. People can spend hours eating, shopping and relaxing in enormous areas that are free of worry and living a consumer dream, gobbling up material goods at our own leisure in a prearranged space. The question that Romero and I want to explore, then, becomes what happens to the poorer people of society, many of whom are minorities, in a 1970s society that sees itself as defined by buying goods.

There are terrible downsides to these capitalist paradises, these utopias of goods that make our lives seem meaningful. Ritzer discusses how mindless participation in this consumer society really is. He mentions that malls are set up like islands, in that they are areas where people can totally escape the outside world and are completely dead. They give us a “dull, boring, routine form of existence…” that “…eliminate[es] all negativity.”\(^ {33}\) While malls give us everything that we could ever want at our fingertips, it

is too easy, for we can go from store to store in mere seconds and discover new things, which are actually the same things that the person before us discovered. The shopping mall sets everyone up to lead the same existence. Each mall is set up in a way that there is a path people follow from store to store, in “a near-endless pursuit of goods and services.” The world that the mall creates is not a unique one, but a predetermined one where every human need is taken care of and where there is absolutely no risk. Romero uses his zombies to represent this idea of a mindless consumer who enters the mall because it calls to the consumer in a certain way, because there is an inherent instinct to enter and consume leisurely. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the zombies Romero shows in *Dawn* represent the extremes of our society, consumers who consume because it is second nature and do not think twice of it.

The correlation between zombies and consumers I mentioned above is one of the most documented aspects of *Dawn of the Dead*. Most commentaries mention that Romero equates his zombies with Americans who care too much about material goods that it is hard to see anything else. As I discussed in the introduction to this paper, Romero is very conscious of the periods in which his films come out and this film continues that trend. He intentionally sets much of the film in a shopping mall to make us notice that the lives we lead, where we frequent shopping malls with regularity, are not that different from the lives of the zombies or the humans in his film. Both the living and the undead take part in extreme consumption. The zombies literally consume bodies and return to this site of consumption because, as one of the protagonists, Stephen, describes,

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“they come here by instinct.” A. Loudermilk makes sure to note that the zombies look eerily like humans, making them extremes of our capitalist desires, still wearing clothes that signify their social roles and acting out memory-rooted behaviors… the postmodern zombie’s desire to consume consume consume… is not so different from the capitalist consumer’s desire for more goods.35 They stumble around the mall, fascinated with mannequins (an undead person drags a plastic arm behind it, like a child with a toy) and blindly following their instincts. It is also telling to note the clothing that the zombies wear, that “signify their social roles” in the mall scenes. In the mall, each zombie is dressed nicely. None have torn clothing or excessive amounts of blood, as do zombies in a housing project that I will talk about later. Others are dressed in suits, calling to mind uniquely middle-class consumers and I think that Romero is making a point to equate the zombies that infest the mall with suburban Americans, both to satirize our own consumption and to point to mall shopping and commodity culture as privileged activities.

A perfect example of the zombies representing mindless dupes (like the consumers Ritzer describes in his article) and extreme consumers is when two protagonists, Roger and Peter, are in a two-floor department store. As they are racing from one floor to another to trick the zombies into following them, a zombie, who was hiding behind a mannequin (Romero follows many shots of mannequins with shots of zombies and vice versa, further solidifying his zombie- as-mindless consumer point), jumps out at Roger and grabs onto the shirt he has tied around his waist. Roger unties the shirt and the zombie cannot get up, squirming while still holding onto the shirt. Despite

the human next to him, this zombie here is only concerned with this material good, clutching on as Roger escapes

After the four protagonists Peter, Roger, Stephen and Fran escape their respective locations in a helicopter and land on the roof of a shopping mall, they enter what Stephen Harper calls a “carnavalesque parody of rampant consumerism,”36 which turns out to be the downfall of two of them. They barricade themselves inside the mall because, as Peter says, “we got everything we need right here.” In their quest to rid the mall of zombies, they rig traps, tricking the zombies into following them before they pick them off. After they exterminate all the zombies inside, they take part in a consumer’s paradise. The group explores the mall freely, taking everything they want without having to pay. They go on shopping sprees throughout the stores, stealing guns and playing arcade games, like kids in a candy store. These scenes show the true desires of the main characters, which up until this point focused on doing exactly what was necessary to survive. Despite their conscious efforts to stay focused on survival, once the four protagonists avoid the immanent threat of zombies in the mall, they let their guards down and begin to consume like the zombies. After the protagonists rid the mall of the zombies, they fall into the trap of consumerism, unable to think of anything else but gaining more goods and hiding behind their possession when reminded of the threat.

One scene in particular highlights the connection between the intuitive consumption of the zombies and the humans. After the shopping spree, the group, dressed in their new stolen clothing, is looking at the zombies. Fran, in a moment of enlightenment after their utopian interlude of consumption, wonders if she is different

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from the zombies asking, “What are they?” Peter immediately follows by saying “they are us.” It seems that Peter notices that the group is blindly consuming like these zombies, something that the other characters fail to realize, which proves to be fatal for Stephen. Fran shudders with the thought of the zombies being like them and pulls up her coat. Harper argues that this gesture represents the way “consumer goods provide the psychological protection against any pricks of conscience.” After their shopping spree, all four characters turn away from their survival mode and instead hide behind the materials they have obtained. Here, Fran hides behind her fur coat, protecting her psychologically from the zombies. They are, however, vastly unprepared for what will come next when looters attack, and must flee.

These McDonaldized systems, and capitalism in general, encourage a blindly individualistic view on life, one in which people strive to obtain the most goods possible while only looking out for their best interests, rather than interest of their society as a whole. With the rise in consumer culture and shopping malls comes a sense of personal accumulation of wealth and people attempt to get as rich as possible and do not worry about the consequences in other sectors of society in the process. The 1970s was a time of particular insulation from others in terms of monetary wealth. This was not fully due to the fact that people were attempting to gain money selfishly but it was rather in response to the recession and the oil crisis of the early 1970s. People began to worry about their own futures so they “turned towards private satisfactions,” as James Henretta notes. Many middle class Americans were not nearly as effected as their poorer counterparts

were and turned towards their families and their own wealth rather than helping their neighbors. Tom Wolfe even went as far as to coin this period the “me decade,” a time when people eschewed personal responsibility to worry about their own economic freedom.

Romero’s take on the “me decade” emphasizes the middle-class’ actions in the ‘70s and capitalism’s role on self-definition as the characters in the film attempt to continue their capitalist inclinations despite the destruction going on around them. In the first five minutes of the film, we see a television manager who blindly looks for ratings before he hands his station over to the emergency broadcast system despite the doom surrounding him. While at this point the zombies have not appeared onscreen, the chaos of the studio suggests the overwhelming presence of the zombies outside. Romero uses this beginning to foreshadow the demise of capitalism in this zombie apocalypse, for he shows an essential part of the capitalist system, television, an important site of our socialization, on the verge of shutting down. This scene is utterly hopeless as the studio has lost half of its workforce due to their escaping the building for safer places. While a strong female, Fran (who has an upper level position in the studio), urges everyone to shut down the station and stop broadcasting the locations of safe houses because she is unsure they are even functioning, the station manager still reverts to his capitalist tendencies, attempting to stay on air. His fear is that people will tune out if the station does not broadcast something. He is worried about ratings despite the chaos and destruction going on outside the studio. He wants to continue his broadcast with false information at the expense of his fellow Americans who may be watching and will suffer if the safe houses have succumbed to the zombie horde. We see that even when faced
with this scenario, people such as the station manager still govern their behavior by their desire to make money, looking for personal success without worrying about other people. The manager attempts to continue taking advantage of others on the way to his own personal success even in a world where there is little hope for survival and no hope of continuing one’s way of life. Certain capitalist predispositions pop up throughout the film, while people continue to buy into consumerism or personal gain, causing the downfall of many humans against the zombie hordes. With the scenes in the studio, Romero prepares us for a human existence of selfishness and personal striving at the expense of group survival, much as he did with Harry Cooper in *Night of the Living Dead*. We see that capitalism is set to fail when faced with this apocalypse and people must work together and eschew their materialism to survive. As the station cuts to a commercial break -advertisement is the one unmarred institution throughout the film, possibly showing it is impossible for capitalist society to die- Fran pulls the plug on the broadcast and meets her boyfriend, Steven, who flies the traffic helicopter, to escape.

The same scenes show that race is at the center of the zombie conflict from the beginning of the film, when a black newscaster and white doctor fight over what to do in this apocalypse. The doctor echoes federal government instructions that people leave private residences, saying, “The president of the United States has ordered that citizens may no longer reside in private residences, no matter how well-stocked.” This is an obvious allusion to the pitfalls experienced by the characters of *Night of the Living Dead*, in which the protagonists sequestered themselves in a rural farmhouse only to die before sunrise. The announcer, who is black, questions everything the doctor says. The announcer is unwilling to fully accept the bleakness of this apocalypse or take orders
from this white man: “I’m not so sure what to believe, doctor. All we get is what you people tell us.” The emphasis in the announcer’s voice is his own, representing from the outset of the film a clash between African American and white characters. The former is inherently skeptical of the orders of the government and assumes this white man has a personal agenda that will lead to his death. This skepticism is reminiscent of the cultural and historical moment of the film, a time when African Americans still did not feel protected by the law. Here, the skepticism is quite racial as the African American does not want to believe what the government is assuring him is going on. This scene calls to mind interactions between whites and blacks after the Civil Rights Era in the United States and the skepticism of African Americans who interacted with whites. African Americans feared that whites were not looking out for their best interests. Often, white politicians did not concern themselves with the poorer sections of urban neighborhoods, which were predominantly black, leaving African Americans to fend for themselves in some of the most pitiful parts of American cities. Romero cuts away from the interview rather quickly, leaving this racial plot line unfinished, but the effect lingers. By showing us this scene, he sets us up to expect that some conflict will take place between black and white characters as the film progresses, and indeed he shows a conflict that provides many of the most shocking scenes in the entire film.

Race also makes up many of the significant messages about capitalism that Romero discusses in his film. The most difficult scenes to watch in the entire film are when unjust police officers attack African Americans and Hispanics living in a rundown housing project. We see medium shots and close ups of police cars, riot gear and weapons as a SWAT team prepares to overtake a building. Here, we assume they are
going to enter and rid the building of all the zombies. In a twist, The SWAT team starts
yelling at a group of men led by “Martinez” to come out and surrender. A racist SWAT
member then mutters under his breath that he is going to kill all the low-lifes hiding in
the building, bitter at them for their living situation, which he claims is “better than I
got.” As Martinez and his gang of humans exit, both sides open fire and even before we
see any zombies, SWAT team members and minorities from this housing project die
unnecessarily. These scenes call to mind the conventions of postmodern horror that I
discussed in my introduction because they represent a loss of universal truth in horror
film, an inability to clearly define right and wrong. While we would expect the police to
be controlling the masses, escorting them to safety, they instead succumb to their racism
and attacking the most vulnerable characters in the film and, later looting for cigarettes.

These scenes are reminiscent of the American moment of *Dawn*, when America
was under profound distress as many institutions such as car manufacturers had to lay off
employees due to the influx of more economic cars from abroad. Middle and working
class Americans were unable to obtain homes and provide for their families. The racist
SWAT member is obviously concerned about his inability to obtain the life that he wants
as he does not even have access to the terrible living conditions of these minorities. He
reacts in the way that many white Americans reacted against African Americans during
the 1970s, such as Irish Catholics in Boston who rioted when courts ordered that inner-
city minorities must be bussed to their schools. Americans distrusted their government
and their fellow citizens as they perceived threats to their pursuit of personal success
from their neighbors. That distrust often led to anger against fellow Americans and
intense feelings of selfishness. The racist SWAT team member embodies the fears of the
American populace of the 1970s, internalizing the anger and blowing up in this violent scene, taking out his frustrations and fears on black and Hispanic citizens.

Again, a contrast between white and non-white arises in this scene, which sets up a sense of the unjust treatment of the minorities we see in the film. The scenes echo the fears of the black newscaster who was skeptical of the suggestions of the doctor. It appears that African Americans really cannot trust the government, in this case embodied by the police. There are heavily armed white SWAT team members taking on the far outnumbered and weaker minorities living in this building unnecessarily. To this point in the film, we still have not seen a zombie and we begin to think that Romero has chosen to depict the racial tensions of this period- showing the inequality in our societies, rather than highlight the apocalypse. These scenes could easily be the beginning of a film on the struggle for African American Civil Rights in the United States and the barriers minorities have had to overcome in order to lead equal lives in our country.

The people in the housing project are doomed, both economically and socially, as there is no law to turn to that will help them. It is apparent that even if they heed the orders of the government and head to city centers, they will simply end up dying anyway. They cannot even dispose of the bodies successfully, tying them up in rags and putting them in the basement. Their poverty is overt, as all the apartments are tiny and teeming with people, and they have no access to any of the help promised them by the doctor at the beginning of the film, for they cannot even escape their homes. According to Harper, it appears that Romero is equating the zombies with these minorities, who are the poorest people in the film, he notes, “the scene invites the audience to consider zombiedom as a
condition associated with both racial oppression and social abjection.”39 I think that Harper’s point is valid only when discussed in the context of these scenes. The overwhelming despair that Romero depicts in the housing project is clear; the zombies are violent and trapped like their minority counterparts. In contrast, when he cuts to the mall, the (mostly white) zombies are carefree and wandering aimlessly, echoing the “safe” feeling of the malls I mentioned earlier. As the SWAT team enters, it is impossible to discern between zombies and humans, and they cannot successfully shoot anyone.

There is no chance for any of the people in the housing project to escape and they must succumb to their fate at the hands of their loved ones. The racist SWAT team member, however, does not mind and goes off on his own spree, killing zombies and “blow[ing] [the] Puerto Rican and Nigger asses clean off” the humans in the project. This scene recalls the images of the Vietnam War that pervaded American society, when people would mindlessly kill innocent and enemy alike with no regard for the lives of people who did not deserve to die. It also brings to mind a quotation by Huey Newton, a leader of the Black Panther party, who likened the treatment of African Americans by police to the treatment of a colonized people or the Vietnamese:

we’re used, we’re brutalized. The police occupy our community as a troop, as a foreign territory… they are there to contain us… to brutalize and murder us… they couldn’t be there to protect our property because we own no property… the police are only in our community… to see the status quo stay intact.40

These scenes are the most horrible in the film, filled with constant violence and gore and are where I think Romero is pointing out that injustice at the hands of the police brutality against minorities still exists into the ‘70s. We face the terrors of an unjust keeper of law and order and see that maybe the violence that seemed to end in the ‘60s is still around but needs a spark, such as a zombie attack, before it comes out for all to see. He recalls that even after strides for Civil Rights in the ‘60s, police still murdered blacks they deemed threats to security, such as Fred Hampton, who was an African American activist and was killed by the CIA on a brutal police raid. The police, in their final attempt in the film at restoring law and order, attack this housing project, one of the most vulnerable of places and the cultural site of much animosity between minorities and the police. Romero is alluding to much of the racial violence directed against African Americans during the period between Night and Dawn, showing a scene of innocent civilians being murdered in cold blood at the hands of a racist police force, taking the grainy photos from the end of Night a step further, and actually showing the violence, with powerful effect. The crew then begins to dispatch the zombies, entering rooms and shooting anything with a green hue. Romero finally leads us away from these awful scenes to a basement, where Peter meets Roger, another in the crew of four people we follow for the rest of the film.

The scenes in the basement are perhaps the most interesting in the film for they solidify all the things that Romero wants to say about the minorities living in the housing project and poverty in American in general. As Peter and Roger make their way to a back room in the basement, a priest exits, saying he has read the undead their last rights and they are free to kill the zombies. Peter and Roger enter and none of the zombies move towards them, retained by makeshift ropes or distracted by a newfound human limb. At
this point, it is noticeable that Romero is attempting to make a statement about the situations of these people living in this housing project, and people forced into poverty in general. Due to the high concentration of people living in the building, they cannot hope to escape from the horrors going on inside and can do nothing but tie their loved ones up and put them downstairs. They have no money to escape from Philadelphia and are just as susceptible outside of their building as inside. It seems, as Harper argues, that Romero is equating the zombies in the basement with poor minorities, for it is difficult to discern between human and zombie in the basement scenes and many of the zombies tied up look black or Hispanic.

I want to take this further and say that Romero uses this scene to make us notice that race and poverty are connected because capitalist tendencies subordinate non-white and non-middle class members of society. He cuts from a television station, where the people (who are predominantly white) are relatively safe and can still concern themselves with ratings, to this building where there is no hope whatsoever of escaping the zombies. The basement scenes are also contrasted with the scenes of suburbia that follow, where survivors take refuge in a mall and surround themselves with consumer goods, as predominantly white zombies return instinctually to a site of consumerism. To me, the fact that Romero follows the scenes in the housing project with the scenes of the mall represents a sort of effect and cause situation. He goes on to show a mass of zombies returning to the mall, a place that was important to them in life, right after he shows the impossibility of the situation in the housing project. The zombies, as I discuss earlier, represent a certain blind consumption, much like Americans in a postmodern society who define themselves by the goods they acquire. Those same zombie consumers are the ones
who attack the people in the projects, who in turn attack their loved ones, turning them
too into mindless consumers and forcing them into the basement to rot, alone, poor and
unable to escape their situations. The poor zombies in the basement of the project are
dressed in rags and tied in bed sheets, unable to move from the spots where they lay as
they are symbolically unable to move from their lives of poverty, caused by capitalist
society. I think that while the scenes later in the film are important in that Romero
attempts to shun consumer society by satirizing it, these scenes are more telling because
they point to consumption and the continuation of capitalist systems as reasons for
poverty in these community housing projects made up of mostly minorities. As Romero
transitions from these scenes in the housing project, we see the relative ease of suburban
life and how much easier it is to escape this situation in an area less concentrated. The
rest of the film depicts what I described before, a satirizing of consumerist society by
showing brainless zombies wandering around a mall because of instinct.

The topic of race is left unmentioned for the remainder of the film, save for one
example where a looter mentions Peter’s blackness in passing. The character of Peter is
important in the discussion on race because he is central to the film yet his race does not
seem to be a problem, as it was with the SWAT members who fostered hatred against
Martinez and his companions in the housing project. Peter is respected by everyone in the
film, including the members of the SWAT team. Peter is the leader of the group of four
humans who take over the mall and clear it of zombies and he is the most rational
member in the entire film. While each of the other three characters loses their heads at a
certain point, Peter continues to think level-headedly and is able to survive for the length
of the film. In this respect, he is much like Ben in Night of the Living Dead, the most
composed character. Overall, Peter and Ben seem to be cut from the same mold, yet the glaring difference is that Ben does not survive.

The question that this raises then is how is Peter different from both Ben and the blacks and Hispanics we saw murdered brutally by the police officers at the beginning of the film. In order to answer this question, it is important to look at Peter as a character. He is a young, tall African American man who is quite good with weapons, a skill that alludes to Vietnam, which is probably where he learned to fight. Peter also seems like many Blaxploitation-era African American characters, calling other characters “sucker” and almost reverting to violence to make his points at various times during the film. For instance, Stephen almost shoots him when trying to hit a zombie creeping up from behind Peter. Peter glares at Stephen and has to restrain himself from attacking the unskilled shooter. He also has an element of a lone ranger, like Clint Eastwood in old westerns, chewing on a lit cigarillo as he goes about dispatching the zombie hoards. He is the epitome of a hero, combining Western and Blaxploitation images of a strong lead character.

Peter is also the most conscious of the group of four to the threats that surround him. He knows the group must do everything possible to survive, even if something might be illegal. In one scene, as the quartet discusses where to fly the helicopter, he yells at Stephen for suggesting going to an army base. He shouts, “Wake up sucker!” because they are thieves and stole the helicopter in order to escape the mayhem in Philadelphia. For the entirety of the film, he is overly conscious. Because of his consciousness, Peter avoids at all costs falling into the consumerism trap that captures most of the other characters in the film. When the other four loot the stores for consumer goods, he goes
for the “important things,” grabbing necessities and choosing a television and a radio
over the clothing and chocolate that Roger grabs. I think that Romero makes a point to
show that Peter never really falls into the trap of consumerism that most of the other
characters do in the film. While he does consume like the other three, cooking for
Stephen and Fran or playing video games with Roger, he still makes sure to have a
watchful eye on the zombies outside the mall and takes the tools that will best aid him in
this task.

Peter is unlike the zombies in that he is able to avoid the mindless consumerism,
yet is also unlike the people living in the project, an important distinction that Romero
seems to note. The first scene in which we see Peter, he kills the racist SWAT team
member who is taking out his anger on the minorities in the housing project. The shot is
at a low angle, so Peter dominates the screen. He is symbolically in control of the
situation and is the avenger against this racist man. That shot is followed by another shot
of a cluster of black zombies who begin to attack a weak black man in the housing
project. This contrasting shot, between the dominating man and the weak man overcome
by the horde of zombies sets up a position of superiority that Peter has over the zombies
as well as everyone else in the housing project. The contrast is highlighting his social
status. He is literally above the people living in the housing project. This is evidenced by
his familiarity with the mall. He slips into consumer mode as the group goes on a
shopping spree. He is what appears to be Romero’s cure for our mindless capitalism. We
see a character that is able to step away from capitalism when he wants to but is
economically successful enough to be able to step away from the poverty and doom of
the housing project. His knowledge of weapons and military tactics clearly mark him as a
veteran of the Vietnam War, making it seem that his participation in the war gave him the opportunity to escape the poverty of the housing project.

While there is little happiness that at the end of the film, Peter provides one of the moments in which we can see that not everyone is the mindless consumer Romero satirizes and that there may be hope for people in this intensely material-oriented world. As the zombies infiltrate the area in the mall where Peter and Fran have sequestered themselves (Roger and Stephen previously succumbed to the zombie horde), Fran escapes to the helicopter and Peter prepares to commit suicide. He chooses to die rather than face a life of mindlessness. However, as one of the black zombies we saw before in the housing project enters through a door and comes after him, Peter changes his mind—he chooses to fight consumption rather than kill himself, following Fran to the helicopter. As he enters, a zombie grabs his gun, his treasure from the shopping spree earlier in the film. Again, he eschews consumption, ridding himself of a burdensome product of the thievery in which he participated at the mall, and flying away from the reach of the zombies. There is still hope for people in this society, yet we must follow Peter’s model. One must ultimately not succumb to the urges of a consumer and must always be mindful of the traps to which blind consumption can lead.
Land of the Dead and America Today

*Land of the Dead* (2005) was George Romero’s first zombie film for over two decades and the changes from the previous ones are immense. When in the first films, the zombies bite onto animal bones or Styrofoam arms, the special effects in *Land* are far superior as the zombies look like they are really tearing off limbs. While in the previous films, many of the shots were handheld and featured mostly pans and tilts, in *Land*, the shots are more complex, ranging from long zooms on crane shots to perfectly lit dark shots of brooding zombies as they prepare to attack their next human. The zombies are also inherently different. They have evolved much farther from those in *Night*. They are now able to use weapons in their attacks on humans, and can communicate with each other. As *Land* begins, we see black and white newspaper clippings and hear news footage describing the extent of the progression of the apocalypse. Those clippings and footage hearken back to the images of *Night* and *Dawn*, implying that Romero takes many of the implications of those films and meditates on them further. As the footage stops, he cuts to “Today,” a world where the zombies have completely taken over, filling all the shots we see for the beginning of the film. As Romero transitions to the humans, we see they are fully armed, accustomed to taking out the zombies and prepared for any continued attacks from the zombie horde. Their weapons and fortified vehicles overpower everything onscreen as we see “Dead Reckoning,” an armored vehicle with the works, including chainsaws and machine guns, run down three wandering undead.

Romero consciously depicts inequality in wealth in this society, which parallels an American society that continues to define itself through its consuming of material
goods. Kaufman, an immoral, rich white man, brutally controls the society. As the film progresses, members of the lower class challenge this greed and rampant consumerism by fighting against Kaufman and inequalities in America that he creates and stands for. Romero chooses a Latino and an African American character to be the two catalysts to the takedown of the elite white society. This choice is symbolic, for these two groups continue to live in the margins of American society, in large part due to the power structure that stems from our consumerist capitalist society. I will discuss both racial and economic inequalities in this film and the ways they mirror many problems of American society today.

We learn that the army that fights the zombies is under the rule of Kaufman (Dennis Hopper), who is the head of “Fiddler’s Green,” the towering center of the walled city (Pittsburgh) that is really an enormous shopping mall. The people there live mindless existences, so wrapped up in their own greed that they do not notice the harm they cause outside of their walls. As the film progresses, we see that Kaufman dominates all aspects of life in this society. He moderates all leisure activities for the people in the Green from giving them constant television programs to what foods everyone can eat, marking the stifling power he has over even the wealthy whites in the film. Again, we see how far American society has progressed. *Dawn* showed a lawless shopping mall and in this film we see a more exclusive one, where shoppers take the few amenities left and hide behind them in the hopes that they will save themselves in the apocalypse.

In *Night* and *Dawn*, Romero showed the levels of inequality in our society and the sources of the perpetuation of that inequality. Romero again critiques American society, showing the lengths to which material consumption rules our lives and the effect that it
has on the poorer sectors of society. He contrasts the greed of the Green with the
disgusting living conditions of the poor people outside of the wealthy walls. We see that
Fiddler’s Green and Kaufman control even the lives of the poor, giving the underclass
nothing except gambling, alcohol and prostitution, and ordering the soldiers to brutally
murder not only zombies but also humans not buying into his idea of society. The
“utopian” shopping mall that is the Green stands as a physical representation of middle-
class consumers’ collective blind consumption which has the effect of acquiring as many
goods as possible, leaving scraps for the poor.

*Land* focuses on the breaking point of multiple sectors of society. The poorest
people cannot take the treatment of Kaufman any longer and the zombies (now equipped
with feelings) fight back against the violence inflicted on their comrades. The backlash
against Kaufman and the elite whites is strong and comes from multiple sides. Kaufman
angers both the members of the army and, through the immoral deeds of Dead
Reckoning, the zombie horde. Cholo, who does Kaufman’s dirty work (John Leguizamo)
and Big Daddy, a black zombie (Eugene Clark) fight against the stifling power of the
elites, and attempt to take down Kaufman and the Green.

Romero makes the zombies relatable so by the end of the film, we see them as
positive compared to the brutality and immorality of Kaufman and the rich whites. The
two opening scenes highlight the similarities of the zombies, despite their decay, and the
humans watching from afar. Romero pans on a dilapidated playground full of zombies.
The score diminishes, leaving us with the dissonance of a zombie band and as the camera
pans to reveal more of the scene, we see the band trapped in the gazebo, still gripping
their instruments. Here, there is a certain sense of humanity in the zombies. Instead of
frightening us in this first scene by showing zombies brutally attacking humans, Romero makes our first encounter with them a friendly, pacified one. The effect of these depictions is to establish the similarities between the zombies and the humans. By the end of the film, the difference between the poor underclass and zombies is so small we end up rooting against the rich humans ruling society and for the zombies to tear down the power structure.

The symbol of this inequality in wealth comes in the form of Fiddler’s Green, a huge glass shopping mall filled with muzak for all the mindless humans wandering inside. An instructional video boasts that shoppers can find everything they want in the Green and need not worry about the problems outside. This isolation mentality is strangely reminiscent of wealthy America today. Many people have moved outside of the cities to insulated suburbs or gated communities hoping to eliminate worries about crime or the problems that come from living in a city. However, this separation also means that they are interacting less with people of different classes, leaving wealthier people blissfully unaware that people are living terrible lives outside of their modern day walled cities. Our actual human connections are far weaker, as Laura Pappano, a journalist on social issues, politics and gender discusses. We interact only with the people we want—people, mostly, just like us… Our society may be more diverse, but our experiences are growing narrower, our quarters more ghettoized. We draw the circle of concern closer around ourselves.41

This problem arises especially in affluent communities, where people can live in their homes with all the amenities necessary and never acknowledge a world outside of their existence. They do not notice the people who are necessary for their survival, those that work hourly wages to provide the amenities necessary for them to lead happy, worry-free lives. In *Dawn*, those neglected people end up fighting back against the power structure, fed up with being marginalized and mistreated.

The people inhabiting The Green stand as symbols for the aforementioned wealthy population of people, completely detached from everyone else around them. Each shot of the inside of the mall is of zombie-like people walking by without acknowledging each other, shopping for themselves only and avoiding contact with everyone else. In depicting the wealthy in this way, Romero highlights the mindlessness of the elites— they lack the character of the bustling lower class; each scene of the poor, despite being grimy, is lively, full of movement and sound. We must consider that the real zombies in the film, the mindless people looking to devour, are in this case the elite whites, who greedily acquire commodities. Romero shows that if consumption defines our lives, we become unable to relate to anyone else and end up walking blindly in our own consumer world. The inhabitants are the next step from the four protagonists in *Dawn* that sequestered themselves in the mall and hid behind their consumer paradise, forgetting the apocalypse outside. Yet, instead of escaping the false security of the mall as Fran and Peter did, realizing that the goods only served as distraction from saving themselves, these people continue to hide behind their spending until it completely becomes their lives. While the mall seems to keep them safe for a while, when the
zombies break down the glass structure, their world shatters with it and they can no longer hide behind their goods.

Like American consumers, the people in The Green are happily minding their own business and defining their lives by their material goods. Romero sets up this commodified society as the antithesis of both the zombie horde as well as the poorer whites living outside the tower. Kaufman relegates those powerless poor to a fenced in area, giving them vices to distract them. Gambling, alcohol and prostitution rule their lives. Kaufman mentions the need for these distractions so that the underclass will be happy and, presumably, will not revolt. Many of the more disturbing scenes come in this hub of sin, run by people just as greedy as Kaufman who use violence instead of money to control their worlds. In one of the scenes, a girl is thrown into a cage with two hungry zombies as the crowd bets on which zombie will be the first to kill her. It is obvious that there are no morals in such a place, which is full of grime and illegal activity due to the lot Kaufman leaves the underclass.

Like the two contrasting buildings in *Dawn of the Dead* - the housing project and the mall- I see Romero again showing a cause and effect situation with the poor area and The Green. It does not seem that many of the people living in the poorer area are happy to be there, but are merely taking part in the only things left to them by Kaufman. Romero suggests that the extreme greed the people in The Green take part in is a reason for the extreme poverty just seconds away from their doors. Romero connects the selfishness and material acquisition of middle- and upper-class Americans with that of the people inhabiting The Green.
The sole link between the powerful and the powerless is the army, led by Riley Denbo (Simon Baker). Troops go into the country to find supplies left in abandoned stores. Denbo and his partner, Cholo Demora (John Leguizamo), are the only lower class characters able to talk to Kaufman, yet they simply take orders, they do not actually control their situations. In one scene, Cholo gets a call from Kaufman on a walkie-talkie, saying he needs to “take out his trash.” Cholo accepts and we see him later dumping a bloody wooden box into a landfill. The army is at the disposal of Kaufman and serves to perpetuate the subordination of both the zombies and the poor. This army is a step further than the police are in Night and Dawn because they are no longer acting on their own, but are explicitly controlled by the wealthy class. The army is an essential piece in the film as it is both the way Kaufman keeps the zombies from taking over the city and the way he keeps the poor humans from revolting. Overall, it provides a feeling of martial law in the film; Kaufman will keep his idea of society in place by any means necessary, keeping the richest in power and serving as ruler of all the poor. Romero critiques American society, using this extreme depiction to show the extent to which the richest people in America continue to make money and subjugate the poor, with the help of the military. While our society rarely relies on force in keeping this order intact, there are still barriers in place keeping the wealthy at the top of the social hierarchy and making it difficult for the people under them to succeed.

Standing against the elite white humans in the film are the zombies, led by a visibly black character. Having worked in the living realm as a gas station attendant, he is dressed in a blue-collar jumpsuit, stained with grease, for the entirety of the film. The name on his shirt is Big Daddy, a name reminiscent of stereotypical African American
depictions in film. The contemporary stereotypical image is that of the strong black man who “won’t take no shit from nobody” and spends much of the films where he appears alone and skeptical of his white counterparts onscreen. A wonderful example of this is in the *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) remake, which stars Ving Rhames as a badass police officer who has problems with other peoples’ authority. However, Big Daddy he supersedes this stereotype, providing one of the few characters that we consider morally credible. Above everything else, Big Daddy hopes to save his friends. The poor, then have a sense of community and solidarity, which doesn’t exist with the elitist and hyper-individualistic elites.

To add to the credibility of Big Daddy and the zombies, Romero equates them with the powerless poor, the group in the film that is the saddest. In Big Daddy’s first scene, two soldiers watch as he attempts to pump gas into a nonexistent car. They note eerily that he looks just like them, implying he looks like a poor human, just trying to get by and fulfill his role. His fellow zombies are dressed similarly. In an iconic shot of the film, one we see throughout that stands as a representation of the fight against the immoral rich whites, Big Daddy is flanked by an undead cheerleader and butcher, quintessential blue-collar positions. Early on, we equate Big Daddy and his fellow zombies with the working-class as the poor and the zombies symbolically stand in contrast to Kaufman and the greedy elite whites. Nonetheless, Romero shows the poor humans’ situation as impossible to overcome as none of them have any strength to revolt against Kaufman.

Romero gives the zombies more power than the army or the poor people living in the slums as they actually have the ability to do something about their situation by the
end of the film. He follows the horde as they make their way towards the walled city and the Green, preparing to take it down like bugs attracted to a bug zapper. However, the zombies are not helpless insects and they are intent on moving toward the core of consumerism. They communicate and work together to break into the white settlement, intent on destroying the power structure. Their quarrel is not with the poor—they pass the poorer neighborhood without a fight and head directly for the glass tower of The Green.

The zombies are threatened by Kaufman, who orders his army to brutally murder all the zombies that they see. There are many scenes of soldiers driving by the zombies in motorcycles and cutting off their heads in fits of laughter. In an important turning point in the film, Big Daddy becomes the leader of that pack of zombies and unequivocally represents the lower versus upper class struggle around which the film centers. We watch the army of humans drive by with their armored vehicles and senselessly attack the undead, shooting them and laughing as they murder Big Daddy’s fellow undead. Big Daddy looks on, helpless. He can merely watch, and roar in agony. The last straw comes when he holds the head of an undead comrade as the humans shoot it off. As they ride away, he stands with his companion’s still-moving head, which he stomps on to end its life. The camera tilts up to the character’s face, which puts him in an extreme low angle, so that he dominates the screen. Romero then cuts to an overhead shot in high angle and we see Big Daddy scream while looking up. The agony in him is intense and we again get a feeling of sympathy for the character as he mourns the loss of his friend.

This incident leads directly to Big Daddy’s assumption of authority within the zombies. We see Big Daddy lead the zombie charge throughout the rest of the film, but he does not attack the members of the army. Instead, he attempts to take down the root of
the power structure, the man controlling everything, as he leads his fellow undead toward
The Green. An important thing to note is that Big Daddy does not partake in the most
gruesome aspects of the living-undead fight. While we see all the other zombies eating
people’s insides and biting their necks, Big Daddy refrains and instead kills the living
through premeditated acts of violence. Armed with a gun (which he merely uses to club
people, not to shoot) as opposed to his compatriots who use their teeth, he thinks more
logically and kills out of necessity rather than the desire to consume human flesh, as the
zombies of *Night* or *Dawn* had. As Romero cuts to over his head in the earlier scene, the
setting dominates the screen, making Big Daddy seem miniscule and hopeless; he is
unable to stop the violence against his friends and yells in agony. His intense anger at the
living is highlighted and we presume that if he were able to speak, he would yell about
the senselessness of all this killing. This is an important moment for Big Daddy for it
provides the rational grounds for the killing that will take place later in the film and gives
give him moral and ethical depth. Instead of instinctually murdering humans, as would
his zombie counterparts from the history of zombie film, he now has legitimate reasons
for the destruction, attempting to save his friends from similarly cruel deaths. The film
cuts to a medium tracking shot of Big Daddy walking and screaming, as all the others
follow. He becomes the agent of the ruin of American consumerism as he breaks into
Fiddler’s Green and his zombie horde wreaks havoc. He understands that the top of the
power structure is at fault and goes after only the people necessary to bring down the
elites and eventually take down Kaufman.

Contrasted with Big Daddy and the zombies is another member of the lower class,
Cholo, who attempts to rise in the world using greed and taking advantage of other
people. Instead of taking down the structure, he wants to become a part of it, and throughout the film strives to become a member of Fiddler’s Green. Cholo’s statement, “I don’t care about love. All I care about is money!” defines him as he goes about doing anything possible to make money and make it into the Green, eschewing his social responsibilities to his fellow soldiers and committing immoral deeds while trying to make it to the top. In one scene, Cholo goes into a liquor store to steal alcohol, which will make him a lot of money in the black market. In doing so, he puts his comrade Mike in danger, forcing him into a situation where a hidden zombie attacks him. Instead of attempting to help Mike back to the camp to get treatment, Cholo immediately prepares to shoot his friend while he is still human. He obviously holds no compassion for his fellow men and simply looks out for himself.

Cholo is defined by both his need to make as much money as possible to enter the world of The Green and by his complete disregard for anyone else in the film. However, Romero does not criticize Cholo for this, as Cholo’s greed and amorality all seem to come from his past as an underprivileged person, living in the squalor outside of the Green. Instead, Romero makes it a point to show the ways the structure of the society in the film almost forces Cholo into this situation. There are so few options in life for these characters that they must either commit immoral deeds in order to please the people at the top or continue their life in the underworld previously described. In one scene, Cholo deposits boxes into a garbage dump, a scene that he alludes to later as “taking out [Kaufman’s] trash.” In order to get out of the poor sector of this society, Cholo must do what Kaufman says and attempt to get on his good side or rebel. Even the aforementioned alcohol and cigars Cholo attempted to steal have significance, as they were to be bribes
for Kaufman to let him into the Green. At the heart of all Cholo’s immoral deeds is Kaufman, who has Cholo by a string and controls his every move. Interestingly, it is clear that Cholo uses the same tactics as Kaufman did when getting into his positions of power. Kaufman delights in seeing that Cholo stole the alcohol from the town despite it being against protocol and pats him on the back for the disregard he has for his fellow lower-class citizens. These examples serve to show the connection between the actions of Kaufman and Cholo, that they are cut from the same mold.

Romero sets Cholo and Kaufman side by side as products of the greedy capitalist society that he depicts in his film. They are clearly the embodiments of the Reagan era ideals of personal success and gaining as much money as possible. During Reagan’s presidency, the president deregulated many of the financial sectors in America, removing the checks on the largest companies, allowing them to become monopolies, completely controlling many of their markets. As of today, there are only a handful of companies that control all of the important media outlets, including television and film. Because of this deregulation, there were no checks on the richest leaders of the richest companies. They became exorbitantly wealthy and the idea of striving for as much money as possible at the expense of everyone else was pervasive among the middle and upper classes of society. It is interesting that in his previous zombie film, *Day of the Dead* (1985), Romero does not make explicit mention of that commodified society and waits to criticize the legacy of Reagan’s policies until this film. The mall-dwelling zombies in *Dawn* simply represent the mentality of American consumers not the extent to which material acquisition has imbedded itself in our society. However, Romero does show the

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length to which that greed and selfishness has taken American consumers in *Land*. Cholo and Kaufman are caricatures of those ideals and throughout the film think only of themselves in their lust for power.

There is a powerful distinction, however, between Cholo and Kaufman. When Cholo approaches Kaufman with bribes of champagne and cigars to say that he would like to move into the Green, Kaufman scoffs in his face, saying that he will never be able to live in the tower. His reasoning is vague as he mentions that a board of directors and a membership committee would never allow Cholo in. While it is not explicit, this scene is full of racial undertones, for it seems that Kaufman has no reason to turn Cholo down save for the fact that he is Hispanic and poor.

This situation is an allegory of American society in which certain privileged people make it to positions of power and other people, specifically Hispanic and African American people, cannot, regardless of the amount of money they earn. Kaufman cannot bear to see a Hispanic man in this “paradise” because he does not belong. He does not fit into Fiddler’s Green’s image as he is clearly not white. In this society, being rich is as safe as being white and if you are neither you have no real chance of becoming either and having a worry free life. While Cholo and Kaufman are comparable characters in that they exude the same air of individualism and strive for the same things, Kaufman is in a position of power and Cholo can do absolutely nothing. We can’t actually know why Kaufman excludes Cholo, if it is because he is Hispanic or because he is poor, yet the connection is clear. As I stated in the chapter about *Dawn*, poverty and race are connected through historical barriers people of color could not supersede in America. This inequity still exists today as the gated communities I mentioned earlier are mostly
white and never allow people under a certain monetary level. Romero recalls these de
facto prejudices that still exist today that keep many minorities from economic success in
our society.

It is clear that Romero again cites greedy individualism as reasons for many of the
problems we have in society today. He is more explicit than in Dawn, as he shows us the
members at the top of society keeping the poorer people out. The capitalist tendencies
that Kaufman represents are in direct conflict with other characters’ attempts to rise in the
world, keeping anyone who he does not deem worthy out of his ideal America. As
Kaufman calls security to have Cholo removed, forever barring him from The Green, the
camera cuts to the zombies making their initial breach into the walls of the city. As one
man fails in his attempt to join elite society, another, this one portrayed by and African
American who leads the zombies, breaks in on his quest to upend the social order.

The film builds up to a final scene in which Big Daddy takes on Kaufman and
finally takes down the power structure of the walled city. As Kaufman attempts to escape,
Big Daddy arrives. Kaufman enters his car as his servant runs away, leaving him by
himself for the first time. His amenities can no longer save him and he is doomed. Big
Daddy discovers a gas tank next to the car, shatters the windshield, and pumps gas in,
recalling his life before zombification as a gas station attendant, and standing as a
representation of working class taking down the elites. As Big Daddy leaves to find a
source of ignition, an undead Cholo enters, equally intent on bringing down Kaufman.
The two minority characters are for the first time on the same side in this battle.
However, I still see large differences in the actions of the characters as they have their
final showdown with Kaufman.
Kaufman’s greed and consumption finally catch up to him as the symbolic representation of his immoral deeds, Cholo, jumps on him and bites his neck. As I discussed earlier, Cholo stands as an echo of Kaufman’s road to success, reaching the top by looking out only for himself. In the end, Kaufman’s individualism literally consumes him, in the form of Cholo biting him in the neck. Cholo and Kaufman wrestle while Big Daddy returns with a burning tank of Oxygen and blows both of them up. Herein lies the inherent difference between Cholo and Big Daddy. While Big Daddy consciously destroys Kaufman, killing the man responsible for all the immoral actions in the film, Cholo blindly follows his desires until they destroy him. Despite being on the same side as Big Daddy, Cholo still reverts to his greedy consumer tendencies. He does not give up on biting Kaufman’s neck, which leads to his destruction alongside his idol. As Cholo and Kaufman blow up, we see the consequence of extreme individualism. In looking out only for themselves, Kaufman and Cholo ruined countless lives and in doing so set themselves up for destruction. As the camera turns to Big Daddy again, we see him staring at us intently, with flames in the foreground and for the first time, without gritting his teeth and yelling. He is content, no longer desiring revenge for his friends, after taking down the embodiment of this depraved society.

The zombies have successfully destroyed the city and the ivory tower in which the rich whites lived. I use the word “ivory” quite intentionally I think that Romero clearly points out that the whites are in complete control over all power in this society, by controlling the locus of capitalism and consumption. Access to the Fiddler’s Green level of consumption is a distinctly white privilege, evidenced by the impossibility of Cholo actually being allowed to live in the Green and the glaring lack of any non-white
character inside when Romero shows the mall. While it is clear that in America rich whites do not own everything, the exaggeration is still incredibly symbolic as it satirizes contemporary institutionalized power relations. That institutionalized power relegates many people to worse lives as it does not allow them to succeed. The government fuels this disparity in success as it provides inadequate support to inner-city communities, which are predominantly inhabited by minorities. Our society actually feeds off the labor of these poorer citizens, using them for wage-earning jobs, but keeps them from having much access to more than that due to the makeup of the power structures, which favor well-connected and wealthy whites. This has been especially true with minorities in the United States and I think Romero wants to point out the consequences of capitalism on the poorer African American and Hispanic people in our society. There continue to be far fewer minorities who are among the richest people in the United States. The average white family has an average of $81,000 in net worth, while the average black family only has $8,000.\textsuperscript{43} In 2004, white and non-Hispanic families had a median family net worth of 140.7 thousand dollars to 24.8 thousand of a non-white and Hispanic family.\textsuperscript{44} Very few minorities have major stakes in large companies and therefore lack much of the power inherent in American society for they lack the ability to control major social and cultural sectors of society. An exaggerated society exists in \textit{Land}, yet it still stems from our contemporary society. The disconnect that wealthy people have, neglecting the needs of their poorer American neighbors, is clear in this film. Romero takes the nightmare of those living in the gated communities, who fear infiltration and shows the pitfalls of it,


the negative consequences of leaving people who deserve as much success as the rest of us out of their right to happiness.

The decision by Romero to use an African American and Hispanic character as the catalysts for the takedown of capitalism is important. There are no other central minority characters in the film and each of these represents clearly certain roles of American society. Big Daddy stands as the epitome of the working class, going about his everyday life until it is thrown off course by the elite whites. Cholo is on the other side of the spectrum, consciously attempting to leave the working class world, but, who, upon gaining the money, still cannot break into the upper echelons of society. I think that by showing these two sides of the spectrum, Romero gives a sort of prescription for curing the current divide between classes in America today. It is clear that we should not buy into the greed that fuels capitalism, continuing the vicious cycle of taking advantage of people for personal gain, as was the case with Cholo, who let his greed consume him. Instead, we must work together at the grassroots level, as Big Daddy does, calling support amongst the common man and fighting authority by any means necessary. While Romero might not suggest literally destroying the power structure, I think inherent in his message is an idea of cohesion that will bring us out of this glaring economic difference.

It appears that Romero was right in diagnosing the extent to which our consumerism will affect our society. He showed a world that defined itself by consuming, so blind to the labor on which it depends that it eventually collapsed on itself. Due to deregulation by Ronald Regan, certain people succeeded to an extreme, gaining exorbitant amounts of money and eschewing their responsibility to help the common good. These types of people are the most powerful in our society as well. However, this
ideology leaked into the minds of many more Americans. Those Americans also went in search of personal success and many received it, gaining wonderful lives for their families and future success for their children. However, in doing so, those people left out the people most in need of help as well. Those people, simply because of the nature of our capitalist society, were unable to access the possibilities of their wealthy and white counterparts and suffered because of it. In order to proceed on an even playing field, we must push for equal opportunities for all people to strive for personal economic success regardless of economic or racial starting points.
Conclusion

The racial and economic hierarchies in Romero’s films are complex. Each film shows a strong connection between wealthy and white, which rules over the poor and black or Hispanic. In each of his films, the Americans he shows us are so ingrained in their consumer or racist identities that they cannot look past them even in a time when the characters should only be doing what is important to survive. In Night, Harry dies because of his blind selfishness and bigotry against the African American man who attempts to look out for the group. Stephen and Roger both die because they get too caught up in their consumption and forget about the threat of zombies in Dawn. The biggest perpetrators of greed, though, are in Land, as all of the rich whites who marginalize both the zombies and the underclass of humans in their society die because of their lack of a social contract and desire to acquire goods despite the apocalypse being so close to them. In all three of the films, Romero highlights a positive black character who stands in direct contrast with all the oppressive and blind whites who end up ruining society for the minorities in the films. As each of the films progresses, the ingrained inequalities in American society further marginalizes the minority characters we see. Romero definitely sides with the minority characters in each of the films. He depicts the power structure as brutal and unfeeling and the African American characters as positive and concerned with the safety of everyone. In each of the films, the minority character succeeds over the brutal hierarchy, save for Ben, who only succeeds symbolically as he stands as a martyr in Night, highlighting the brutality of the police force and whites of the ‘60s.
The complex hierarchies in the films mirror the societies in which they were made as Romero picks a specific perpetrator of the racial struggle in the United States. In *Night*, we see the effects of conservative Heartland values and the racism that comes from being closed off and unfeeling regarding the African American struggle. In *Dawn* and *Land*, we see the lasting effects of socioeconomic hierarchies and the need for Americans to consume material goods in order to see their lives as successful. This inherently leaves out many minorities who do not have access to the capital to spend on frivolous things.

Romero attempts to show the ways to overturn these immoral and inherently unequal hierarchies in different ways in each of the films. He shows the possibility of directly combating it in *Night*, reasoning with the people who are most bigoted and attempting to fledge out differences through discussion. In *Dawn*, the best possible way is to simply remove yourself from the capitalist society, to abstain from rampant consumption. In *Land*, however, the commodification has so deeply ingrained itself into American society, that it is impossible to abstain. His suggestion by the end of that film is to completely upend the social structure, taking down the wealthy, in order to return some sense of socioeconomic, and also racial, equality.

Romero is able to satirize the American society of the time of the films due to the genre he chooses. Horror film has the unique ability to depict fears inherent in American society and show what might happen if those fears came true. This is especially true for early horror, as white Americans were afraid of the escalation of violence by African Americans against them. Horror deals with the same set of recyclable problems, of a monster terrorizing a society, that it is able to subtly change the plot or the implications of what the monster means in order to change the messages inherent in the films. Romero
is especially conscious of the changes in his films. He depicts the institutions of racism and economic inequality as it relates to the American societies of the times of his films. His zombies come to represent different things in each of his films, from catalysts of racial conflict in *Night* to consumers in *Dawn* to an agency of change in *Land*. By using the same idea of a completely shattered world where zombies have taken over, he is able to show us the fact that those institutions are so deeply ingrained into our society that even when there is a complete breakdown of social structures, the inequalities remain intact.

Romero shows progressive sentiments in each of the three films that look to make America a place free of prejudice and inequality and take power from the hands of rich and unjust whites to give it to powerless and community-oriented minorities. Scholars discuss the ways Romero single-handedly changed the depiction of African Americans in horror film as he cast Jones as the protagonist in *Night*. While this new form of representation might not have been intentional, I think Romero saw the possibilities present in horror film after viewers saw the symbolism of Ben’s interactions with brutal white characters as a commentary on American society. After *Night*, his representations seemed to become more explicit with regards to race and he continued the depiction of one positive African American character combating inequality in his films. His films are so packed with social commentary and satire that they are very enjoyable to study as Romero uses them to depict the pitfalls of our society and the negative consequences of many of our actions.

In looking at the overall changes in the films of George Romero, the most notable progression comes in the form of the names of the films. He begins with *Night of the*
Living Dead and progresses to Dawn, then Day, then Land of the Dead. I think that the changes in the titles of the films directly correlate to what he sees to be the extent to of the perpetuation of economic and racial inequalities in the societies of his films. As the apocalypse progresses his films embody a more dystopian view of American society, one where the structures of inequality become so ingrained into all levels of society it is close to impossible to break them down. The fist film depicts individual selfishness and racism by Harry against Ben and the injustice of the police force who acts brutally on their own. The racism and subjugation, as well as the eventual death, of Ben come from the feelings of a small group of people who do not see him as equal. Contrasting them are a number of white characters, Barbara as well as a couple who appears for a short time in the house, who have no problems with this strong black man. In this film, the racism is not fully a part of the system and a black man works on his own to combat unequal treatment. Perhaps Romero saw this inequality as outdated and assumed that with the dawn of a new day, the night of prejudice and racism would soon be over.

In Dawn, Romero deems that hopeful end to racism impossible. There is a new day in America of consumerism and wealth and that new day marginalizes people to the same extent to the personalized racism of Night. The marginalization is both personal as well as ingrained into American systems. There are lasting individual racist ideologies, embodied in the SWAT team member who yells racial slurs, that come from personal prejudices and fears about the inability to provide for yourself and your family- he yells that the people in the slums have better than he has. On top of the personal elements of racism, however, is the fact that consumerism is the real thing that marginalizes the underclass as it pushes the wealthier people to acquire more goods at the expense of their
poorer counterparts and generally keeps them unable to elevate themselves from low social standing. Romero still paints the film as hopeful as the two main characters who are eventually able to eschew their consumer identities, escape from the mall and the consuming zombies inside.

As Romero’s zombie apocalypse develops to overwhelm all of society, with only one human stronghold left, in *Land*, we see that America has truly become a land of the dead and that the selfishness in the form of individual consumption has evolved to completely take over the society he depicts. One man defines the entire society as he has control over the inner-workings of all aspects of the lives of both the poor and the wealthy in his society. Now, one man who consciously perpetuates the unequal lots of life in his society heads the racism and inequality. Society has become so defined on the need to acquire goods that it becomes second nature for the wealthy to leave the underclass with no hope of salvation from their terrible lives. In each of the films, the real terror to our society is a person with individual greed or racism who leaves the underclass characters with little hope for any chance to alleviate themselves from their struggles. Romero shows the ways that consumer society subjugate the poor and minorities and that today it is so ingrained into our society that people do not even see the fact that we are perpetuating the inequality. It seems that he suggests an overhaul of the power structure so that the people left out can have a chance to have equal opportunities in life like the rest of us.
Works Cited


**Works Referenced**


**Photograph appearing on page one:**