

## THE BODY RESURRECTED: LUCIO FULCI'S 'ZOMBIE'

The ground splits. Decrepit hands slowly force their way through the dirt. Heads, little more than skulls filled with mud and worms, arise from the earth. Bodies climb out of ancient graves, rising to their feet. Centuries-old clothes hang from centuries-dead flesh, the shredded cloth barely covering worm and maggot infested bodies. The Spanish *conquistadores* have returned.

So begins the climax of Lucio Fulci's *Zombie* (1979), a film filled with visceral bloodletting and splattered innards. Following the European success of George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, produced by Italian horror legend Dario Argento, other Italian producers sought to cash in on the zombie craze. Fulci's film, often derided as derivative, bears little similarity to its American counterpart; aside from the fact that the dead return to life to eat the living, the films couldn't be more unlike. Like Romero, Fulci sets out to prove a sociological point with his film, creating a revenge fantasy in which the Third World rebels against its former masters. Fulci drives home his point via the use of hardcore gore.

In Fulci's film, Anne Bowles discovers that her father is on the island of Matoul, and along with Peter West, a newspaper reporter, and a couple, Brian and Susan, sets out for the remote West Indian island to find him. On the island, Dr. Menard

conducts research on a strange disease that causes the dead to return to life.

En route to Matoul, the horror begins almost immediately. The travelers decide to take a brief rest from the trip. They anchor, and Susan decides to go underwater for some photography. As she snaps photos of undersea life a giant shark emerges and attacks her. The scene at first seems to be exploiting the success of *Jaws*, but quickly takes a drastic turn. As she hides from the shark, a decaying hand, the hand of a zombie, suddenly grabs Susan. They struggle, and Susan finally manages to escape. But the scene does not end there. The zombie battles the shark, biting, scratching and clawing at its hide. The zombie rips out one of the shark's internal organs and eats it, causing the enraged animal to chomp off the zombie's arm. The scene finally concludes with Susan being pulled aboard the boat, safe from both hungry shark and hungry corpse. What is interesting about the zombie/shark battle is that, from a narrative standpoint, it is completely superfluous. It neither propels the story nor adds characterization. Typically, and particularly in an American film, such a scene would end when the tension is relieved and Susan escapes both the shark and zombie threats. But Fulci allows the scene to linger. Having already frightened the audience, he forces them to watch the disgusting scene. This

refusal to cut away is characteristic of Fulci's work and is used to gruesome effect in *Zombie*.

The next instance of horror occurs on the island, before Anne and her entourage arrive. Dr. Menard, speaking to his black servant Lucas, talks about how the living dead could become a threat but haven't yet reached the part of the island where he lives. In his mind, the white people are safe from the zombie threat. Little does he know that a zombie watches their conversation from a distance. That night Menard's wife Paola, left alone while the doctor is at the hospital, showers. She begins to hear strange sounds and has the feeling of being watched. Her suspicions prove to be correct, and before she knows it a zombie is in the house. Paola's attempts to hide are futile and the zombie's hand bursts through the door and grabs her by the hair. What follows is one of the most grisly scenes of violence ever committed to film. The zombie pulls Paola closer and closer to a large wooden splinter until the splinter pierces her eye. While most filmmakers would end the scene there, content to have disgusted audiences with this scene of ocular penetration, Fulci allows the shot to linger, as the zombie forces the spike deeper and deeper into her head. The scene ends as the living corpse twists Paola's head and the eyeball squishes and plops.

Most horror filmmakers establish a sequence of suspense and then release the tension by either allowing the character to escape or by killing her off. Fulci does this but he takes the game a step further, refusing to end with the release of tension. For Fulci, the horror is not merely the horror of death; rather, it is the complete and utter evisceration of the human body. This is confirmed later in the film when the quartet of travelers, having finally arrived at Matoul, enters the house to find Paola's corpse disemboweled, zombies slowly munching on her rotting entrails. In a later scene, Susan is attacked by one of the zombified Spanish conquistadores who bites her in the jugular and rips off the flesh. A geyser of blood spills forth, which Fulci chooses to show in close-up and slow motion. Whereas George Romero softened his *Dawn of the Dead* with scenes of humor and satirical social commentary, Fulci is deadly serious about his zombies. There are no jokes to soften the blow of the relentless horror.

Philip Brophy, in his essay "Horrorality – The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films," writes that the trend in modern horror films is to show the human body in an unrecognizable form (7). According to him, the monster in modern horror "does not honor any of our beliefs or perceptions of what the human body is." He goes further by saying that the monsters simply "[do] not recognize the human body" (11). Fulci's *Zombie*, falling into

the time period about which Brophy is writing, exemplifies the former assertion. The monsters in the film do not respect the sanctity placed by humans on their living bodies. The zombies gouge out eyes, rip open jugulars, eat flesh and viscera, and generally perform horrifically unpleasant acts on the human body. They turn living humans into bloodthirsty, mindless gut-munchers like themselves. But much of the horror of Fulci's *Zombie* lies in the fact that the monsters do indeed recognize the human body. The zombies strip the human body to its most basic of needs, the drive to consume food. Fulci's zombies do not respect the human body, but they do recognize it; they reduce rational, thoughtful humans to mindless drones concerned only with bloodlust, effectively creating a cruel parody of the human body and its drive to survive.

Fulci sets up an interesting dichotomy between Dr. Menard and the few other white inhabitants of Matoul and the black locals. It is apparent that Menard considers himself superior to the "natives." The chief native character, Lucas, is Menard's servant, a character completely subservient to the white doctor. In Menard's mind, the blacks seem to only exist to become zombies and so that he can experiment on them to try to discover the cause of the recent spate of zombie activity. They blame the zombies on voodoo. Discussing the situation with his servant, Lucas says, "Lucas not know nothing, man. The father of my

father always say when earth spits out the dead, they will come back to suck the blood from the living." Menard responds, "That's nonsense. That's just a stupid superstition. I don't believe that voodoo can bring the dead back to life." The doctor believes there is a scientific explanation for the zombies and that the locals are superstitious, simple-minded fools, a point he makes numerous times. Phil Hardy, in his Encyclopedia of Horror Movies, writes that the film's "psychic energies [are] addressed by a regression to the pre-oedipal reinforcing the North/South, US/Third World axis of the conflicts" (Hardy 341). Thus, the film's chief conflict is between the West, represented by Dr. Menard and the other white characters and the Third World, represented by the zombies, the whites representing the forces of colonialism and the blacks the victims of it.

This sociological dynamic is explored by Franco Moretti in his essay "Dialectic of Fear." He writes that, "the literature of terror is born precisely out of the terror of a split society and out of the desire to heal it" (83). Moretti uses the two obligatory forces of literary and cinematic evil, Dracula and Frankenstein's monster, to illustrate this point. Moretti sees the Frankenstein monster as a representative of the proletariat and his rebellion against his creator as akin to a worker's uprising. The fear in Frankenstein is the fear of workers rising up and overpowering their capitalist masters. They are seen as

"monstrous," a race separate from their bourgeois overlords (85). Conversely, Dracula represents the capitalist monopolist whose drive is to possess and control, to suck the strength out of the living so this member of the undead can himself live. The fear of Dracula is the fear of being possessed (91-92). Moretti sees Frankenstein's monster and Dracula as representative of the "worker and capital," respectively. Moretti's monsters express "the anxiety that the future will be monstrous" (84).

Fulci's *Zombie* illustrates this dialectic. The zombies in the film are akin to Frankenstein's monster. Many of them are the native inhabitants of the island of Matoul, former slaves who are still subservient to their former capitalist masters. Their transformation into zombies is portrayed as a revenge on their former owners. The white protagonists, particularly Dr. Menard in his taking advantage of dying black natives to research the cause of the zombies, are seen as the monopolists of the capitalist system, exploiting the workers to survive. In this way, *Zombie* reflects Moretti's assertion that the fear in horror is that of a split society, in this case the fear of the past returning to seek revenge on centuries of exploitation, thus expressing the anxiety of a monstrous future by showing the horrors of an already monstrous past. What is interesting, however, is that Dracula's capitalist monopolist is a monster, the chief villain in his eponymous novel. The capitalists in

Fulci's film are the protagonists who are struggling to survive against the onslaught of flesh-eating dead. The audience at once identifies with the capitalists, seeing in them the same Western ethics and values. But as the tide turns against them, and the workers begin to execute their revenge, the audience is forced to confront the fact that they are rooting for a group that has subjugated these workers, enslaved them, and treated them as mere capital to suck the value out of. In *Zombie* the audience is confronted with the zombies, the "race of devils," as a source of fear. But as the film progresses, the audience begins to see within the group with which they identify another kind of monster, the capitalistic monster that has turned these workers into the "monstrous race" they have now become.

This conflict lends credence to Hardy's contention that the driving force of the film is the conflict between the traditional Western and Third World axes. But Jay Slater writes of Hardy's statements in his book Eaten Alive!:

Any supposed heavy political statement, such as casting black people as the living dead (and therefore as society's victims), is surely an unconscious afterthought. If we take this suggestion further, we can see that it simply doesn't work: the majority of the living dead in the film are Caucasian, and it is the white man who makes up the casualty figures [...]

He goes on to write:

The [...] review also implies that the scene where the rotting corpses of the Spanish conquistadors emerge from their coffins is a metaphor for wealthy colonials devouring the Third World poor. [...] Once again, in this scene, where McCulloch, Farrow, Cliver and Giannone are ambushed by the conquistadors [...] the Caucasians are the victims. (Slater, 99)

While Slater is correct in stating that neither the victims nor the zombies are uniformly black or white, he seems to miss the sociological point of Fulci's film entirely. The spate of zombieism seems to have been non-existent prior to the arrival of Dr. Menard. It is only after his arrival, after the presence of the white capitalist has returned to the island, that the plague of the zombies begins to take hold.

Voodoo is pegged as the cause of the resurrection of the dead, a cause that Dr. Menard rejects as mere superstition. But it is the only explanation the film offers. If this explanation is to be accepted as truth, then the black natives are responsible for the zombies, and the arrival of the whites is the event that necessitated the resurrection. It is not the racial makeup of the zombies that proves the film's sociological conflict, it is the cause of the conflict. Voodoo is a product of slavery. Slaves, being captured and taken to the West from

Africa, were forced to accept Christianity by their European captors who saw them as ungodly heathens. As a result, the slaves used their newly adopted Roman Catholicism as a front to practice their native religion. Thus African gods became Catholic saints, and the old religion was practiced under a new guise: voodoo. If colonization and forced Christianity is the Europeans' punishment for the natives' heathenism then voodoo is the heathens' revenge for the same. Voodoo, itself a distortion of Christianity, is seen in *Zombie* as a revenge on the capitalistic Christian West. The central tenet of Christianity is the resurrection of Christ. Voodoo has its own resurrection: zombieism. That the zombies' return to life parallels Christ's rising from the dead is no coincidence. Fulci uses the zombies to cruelly parody the central Christian beliefs, using this bizarre parody to reflect what he sees as Christian brutality.

Parallels to Christian religious symbols do not end there. The zombies' essential (indeed, only) driving force, eating, also reflects Christian religious practices. Catholics believe that the practice of taking communion, through transubstantiation, becomes the actual flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. Those taking part in the Eucharist literally eat Christ's body and drink his blood. Zombie flesh eating is drawn as a parallel to this practice. The zombies' blood thirst becomes a perversion of Catholicism's holy sacrament, thus

representing another voodoo attack on Christianity, and by extension the Western world.

This Church criticism is prevalent in many of Fulci's films. His 1972 film *Don't Torture a Duckling* features a (possibly pedophilic) priest who murders young boys to prevent them from being corrupted by the sins of the world. His first undead outing after *Zombie, City of the Living Dead* (1980), fleshes out Fulci's use of zombies to criticize religion as a priest commits suicide in a cemetery, opening one of the gates of Hell and unleashing the living dead to walk the earth. Unsurprisingly, the next ninety minutes are filled with maggots, eviscerated corpses, vomited innards, worms, severed limbs, and Eucharistic gut-munching.

The use of violence in these films is an extension of Fulci's larger sociological point. Fulci forces his audience to watch scenes of excruciating violence, scenes so protracted that they go beyond the limits of the narrative's constraints as well as good taste. But he also forces them to see something else. In the case of *Zombie*, he forces them to watch as the representatives of the Third World attack those who oppressed them so that those who have ignored the effects of colonialism are now faced with all of its horrific consequences, and seeing its revenge mounted in all its macabre glory.

If, as Slater asserts, Fulci's social agenda is unclear then by the film's end there can be no question of his true message. As Anne and Peter escape Matoul with the infected Brian in tow and head back to New York they hear a distressing message over the radio: zombies are overtaking the five boroughs of New York City. Fulci then cuts to New York as zombies shuffle across the Brooklyn Bridge into Manhattan. The forces of voodoo have now attacked the chief representative of Western ideas and Capitalism, New York City. There is no optimism, no reparations for slavery and exploitation. Apocalypse is implied. That most ultimate of Christian beliefs is itself turned on its head. The dead rise, but not to meet the returned Christ; they rise, doomed to walk the Earth for eternity, their resurrected bodies searching to devour all that lives.

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