

The Icon of the Zombie Mob

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Abstract

The research question of the article is: In the film *World War Z* (Marc Forster, 2013) not only the iconology of the zombie has changed, also its iconography is new. How does this double alteration of the zombie influence its iconic significance? A hypothetical answer to this question is based on an investigation of the locations of the film, including the climactic battle scene with zombies in Moscow Red Square, which was dropped from the final cut. This answer is contextualized in a description of the relatively short cultural history of the zombie with its most recent manifestation in this film. The article sees this zombie manifestation as a mob, a new kind of magnification monster that has entered the global body politic. This is in a more specific sense than the prevalent understanding of the zombie as an icon of fear of globalisation; but it is also a continuation of the cultural critique of mass society as expressed in for instance George Romero's zombie film trilogy. If the zombie has become the mob, then a reciprocal question remains. Why has the mob been depicted as zombies in *World War Z*? Here a historical contextualisation can provide an answer, and the article connects the historical role of crowds and mobs in the world of politics,

including the so-called “Year of the crowd”, 1989 to contemporary media iconography of mobs in especially Middle Eastern politics. Finally, the article connects the double nature of a cultural icon as both popular and a hegemonic tool to the historically dualistic conception of mobs.

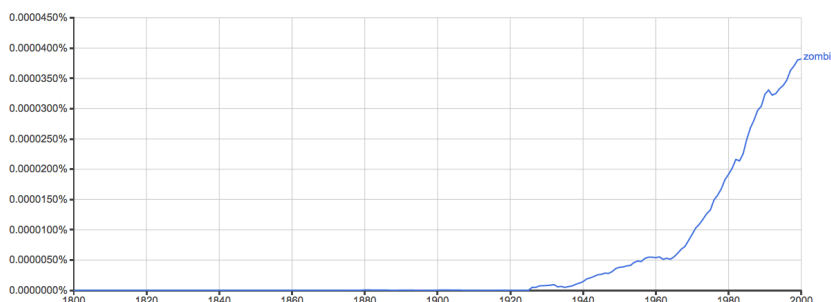
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In contrast to the aristocratic vampire, the zombie has always belonged to the underclass of monsters. With humble folkloristic Haitian voodoo beginnings as a few mindless slaves in sugarcane plantations the zombie of today has become empowered with potential of world domination, and it has become a negative icon of globalisation. In the blockbuster film, *World War Z* (Marc Forster 2013) humanity is on the brink of extinction and millions of zombies nearly take over the world. It is characteristic of the zombies in this film that they manifest themselves as a destructive mob, and it is the aim of this article to examine how and why the icon of the zombie has changed in this way, both iconographically and iconologically. It is the hypothesis of the article that the role of crowds in the present period leads to changes in the general iconography of zombies, and that this change is reflected in *World War Z*. To explain the zombie’s current iconic status as threatening ochlocracy, i.e. mob rule, the article will briefly describe the mutable icon of the zombie. This approach is historical, as its subject is the change in the iconography and the iconology of the zombie. These changes will be explained by primarily the historical development of the role and functions of the crowd, including the form of ochlocracy. Finally, the film *World War Z* will be analysed in this light, and the film will be characterized as a manifestation of the new zombie icon that belongs to the sphere of the global body politic.

The Zombie as Monster

An obvious, but still necessary point of departure is that zombies do not exist in reality. Yet in fiction, they abound. In his *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* (2011), Daniel W. Drezner has demonstrated a spectacular growth in interest in zombies since the 1960s and especially after 2000 (Drezner 2011, 2-5). These findings are sup-

ported by Google's Ngram viewer that records the occurrence of the word "zombie" in Google Books from 1800 to 2008 like this:



Drezner's survey shows that it is not only fiction e.g., zombie movies, video games and television series, which zombies infest, but generally in the media and in scholarly publications. The post-2000 zombie spread in both fiction and other media may indicate that the zombie has become an icon of certain aspects of contemporary life, primarily fear of globalization, but also because of the mindless mob behaviour of modern-day zombies of a globalized world as the ultimate mass society. The bearer of this iconicity is the runner zombie. Metonymically, it has been magnified into numberless crowds that spread exponentially, infesting the whole world unaffected by ineffective and muddled countermeasures carried out far too late by national authorities. The traditional slow and lumbering zombie is the type fusion monster, which in Noel Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror* (Carroll 1990, 42-52) is defined by its being two categories at the same time, in this case dead, yet living. The modern runner zombie that appears in hordes, swarms or mobs, i.e. in great numbers, is also Carroll's magnification monster type. This monster type is a creature that is already dangerous or repellent, but by becoming extremely large in size or in numbers, it becomes monstrous. The combination of its magnification characteristics with the mindless horde behaviour of this zombie type allows it to become a general icon of the mob.

The abject nature of the living corpse, the zombie can cause nausea and fear in its reception in fiction; yet as it does not exist outside fiction, the reception of it is also characterized by what may be called the interpretative imperative. As this monster is a sign, like all other fictional monsters, it has no referent in the real world, and

it must necessarily have other significations. It is here that the zombie can be regarded as an icon that is culturally determined, and as such changeable. This interpretative imperative demands that the audience of a zombie movie like *World War Z* seeks to understand the monster and its specific narrative as nothing but a sign, but also a sign embedded in a specific historical context. This context provides the clues to its significance. Monsters are then signs of what worries and causes fear in a historical and social context (Christensen 2012a, 39) and regarded as this, they are useful objects of analysis and interpretation.

The Film: *World War Z*

The plot structure of *World War Z* departs from both the formulaic narrative pattern of the generic monster film and from the zombie film of the apocalyptic type. The formula of the generic monster film may look like this:

- One or more victims are attacked, but it is unclear by what or by whom?
- The protagonists of the film suspect that the attacker is a monster.
- The protagonists seek to prove the existence of the monster and to convince the authorities (police, army) about its existence.
- The monster visualization: the monster is seen by the protagonists and by the film's audience.
- The monster is defeated.
- Epilogue: The monster may show signs of life and a threat of resurrection. (Christensen 2012b, 43-44)

As it may be seen, the conflict in this formula is just as much of a phenomenological nature as it is physical. The similar pattern and content of the subgenre the zombie film of the apocalyptic type are described by Kyle William Bishop in his *American Zombie Gothic* (2010): "the apocalyptic invasion of our world by hordes of cannibalistic, contagious, and animated corpses... These generic protocols include not only the zombies themselves and the imminent threat of violent death, but also a post-apocalyptic backdrop: the collapse of societal infrastructures, the resurgence of survivalist fantasies, and the fear of other surviving humans." (19) Further generic plot ele-

ments and subgenre characteristics may be gleaned from Bishop: Zombie movies are almost always set during (or shortly after) the apocalypse, where the infrastructures of police or military cease to exist, and there are scanty media reports that zombies have overrun the country before the media gradually become silent (22). Survivors hole up in shopping malls or underground bunkers and are under siege, but relief never arrives (22). Looting becomes practically legal (23). The zombies have a virus-like reproductive process, they cannot be reasoned with (20), and they are in an active state of decay (21), yet “the zombies pursue living humans with relentless, tireless dedication and kill people mercilessly by eating them alive” (20). “Once people start to die at an uncontrollable rate, panic rages through all levels of the government and the military... and most are more interested in saving themselves and their families than simply doing their jobs.” (23)

Compare to this the action of *World War Z*. Retired UN problem solver Gerry Lane (Brad Pitt) and his family barely escape zombie attacks in Philadelphia. The zombie infestation spreads like wildfire. Lane is in contact with the UN Deputy Secretary-General Thierry Umutoni, who wants him to combat the zombie plague, and Lane and his family are flown to sanctuary on a U.S. aircraft carrier in the Atlantic Ocean. To try to develop a vaccine against the zombie virus Lane is flown with a virologist to an American military base in South Korea. The virologist is killed, but there Lane is told by a CIA agent that he must go to Jerusalem to seek information from an Israel government official. Lane flies to Israel, which was the first country to believe in the zombie outbreak, and therefore had managed to build high walls to protect its citizens from the zombies. However, Jerusalem is overrun by zombies. Lane notices that the zombie horde ignores a sick old man and a dying boy. Lane and an Israel soldier escape from the city to go to Wales to a WHO virology laboratory. There Lane and some scientists discover that if a human is infected with a fatal disease, he is invisible to the zombies. The zombie is host for the virus, and the virus only wants healthy new carriers. Lane is united with his family, and based on the information he has provided the UN can develop a vaccine so that people become immune to the zombie pandemic. A 12-minutes climatic Russian scene was left out from the final cut (Holson 2013).

In *World War Z* itself, there is no initial phenomenological doubt about the existence of the zombie infestation. This doubt, it is explained, lies before the beginning of the film, and in a scene with the Israeli government official this phenomenological doubt is directly addressed. Due to the tragic history of the Jews, the most unlikely and monstrous occurrences in the world cannot be ruled out, and therefore the state of Israel was quick to respond to the threat. It follows that the monster visualisation is quite early in the film. It appears in a close-up only nine and a half minutes into the film, the total running time of which is 116 minutes. In the same way the protagonist of the film, Gerry Lane has no such phenomenological doubt, and as he is a member himself of the authorities, he does not have to follow the generic narrative pattern of having to convince these authorities of anything. Though the authorities are exiled to ships in the Atlantic, they are the acting protagonist of the film, personalised in Lane. This is a significant shift from the formula, and this change must be seen in conjunction with the hypothesis of the article that the role of crowds in the present period leads to changes in the general iconography of zombies. Local and in many cases national governmental power structures have been destroyed. For instance, the American president and four of six Joint Chiefs V.P have become victims to the zombie virus, but a new more global executive power has arisen in the film with the UN. Another significant departure from the generic zombie genre is the sheer movability of the action of the film. Siege situations with survivors being surrounded by hordes of zombies are present in the film, but the main plot structure is the itinerary of Lane. This is not surprising as he is on a quest to find the elixir or vaccine to save the world. As he advises another character, "I used to work in dangerous places. People who moved survive, and those who didn't... Movement is life.", and so the locations of the film become Philadelphia, Newark, a U.S. aircraft carrier in the Atlantic Ocean, a U.S. army camp in South Korea, Jerusalem, a WHO research facility in Wales, and Nova Scotia. Family values loom large in the film, yet it is only when the protagonist decides to leave his family that the world is saved. The part of the zombie film template that states that "Once people start to die at an uncontrollable rate, panic rages through all levels of the government and the military... and most are more interested in saving themselves and their families than simply doing

their jobs.” (Bishop 2010, 23) is contradicted by this film, which transposes its subject from the private sphere to a public sphere. The conflict of the film is not of an epistemological nature, but it is a physical struggle between world governmental forces and hordes of zombies, and it is not between a group of protagonists and authorities that will not be convinced about the monstrous threat. The conflict is between governmental authorities, which are always presented in a favourable light, and unruly and irrational mobs of zombies, which cannot be controlled or contained. The political aspects of this film are stressed by international UN leadership, but also by the role of national states. For instance, it is reported that grotesquely North Korea solved the risk of infection from contagious zombie bites by pulling out all the teeth of its entire population. The Israeli solution of enclosure by high walls to keep out the zombie realistically mirrors its present-day 440 km long security wall or fence. It may now be tentatively stated that the subject of the film belongs to the body politic, and the next part of the article investigates the concepts of crowds and mobs.

Mobs and Crowds in History

In Charles Dickens’ *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of Eighty* (1840-41) mob behaviour is described as irrational and without any control, and also insensible in the meaning that the members of the mob or rioters were unaware of bodily pain and injuries (Dickens 1840-41 / 1868, 135). This kind of behaviour is also what characterizes the zombies in many scenes of *World War Z*. They can only be exterminated by direct shots into the brain. All other injuries are ignored by the zombies. In the book, which was adapted into the film, Max Brooks’ *World War Z An Oral History of the Zombie War* the description of the Battle of Yonkers contains this description of zombie behaviour, similar to Dickens’ mob:

And then they came, right out of the smoke like a freakin’ little kid’s nightmare! Some were steaming, some were even still burning . . . some were walking, some crawling, some just dragging themselves along on their torn bellies . . . maybe one in twenty were still able to move, which left . . . shit . . . a couple thousand? And behind them, mixing with their ranks and pushing steadily toward us, the re-

maintaining million that the air strike hadn't even touched!
(Brooks 2006/2007, 102)

The article now sets out to examine whether the physical likeness between the zombie mobs of *World War Z* and these literary mobs is supplemented by any ideological likeness also. In the following, there will be a movement from ochlocracy to historical conceptions of the crowd as a framework for the zombie mobs in *World War Z*.

It was not until around 1950 that crowds were regarded as a possibly beneficial force in the body politic. In Antiquity, Polybius described how mob rule, ochlocracy, was a perversion of popular government, i.e. democracy: "...democracy comes into existence; which again by its violence and contempt of law becomes sheer mob-rule." (Polybius 2014, Book 6.4) Ochlocracy (from Greek *okhlos* "mob" and *kratos* "rule, power, strength") was one of the three forms of bad government, the other two being tyranny and oligarchy. Polybius' characterization of ochlocracy as contempt of law and violence does not necessarily apply to any crowd. In his "Crowds in History" Manfred Gailus defines crowds as "relatively short-term gatherings of large groups of people (on streets or squares or in the countryside—in any event, in the open air), whose actions are goal oriented and, as a rule, conflictual." (Gailus 2001, 3022). Negative and positive attitudes to crowds were personified primarily by Gustave Le Bon around 1900 on the one hand, and George Rudé and Eric Hobsbawm around 1950 on the other.

Gustave Le Bon's school regarded crowds as destructive, irresponsible, irrational, and highly suggestible as the individual in a crowd lost its usual inhibitions and morals and conscious personality. It came "in possession of a sort of collective mind" instead of its own individual faculties (Le Bon 2009/1896, 21), and crowds are regarded as "barbarians", as "Crowds are only powerful for destruction" (12). Le Bon viewed crowds as inherently conservative, and so crowds were not regarded by him as political instruments of any societal progressive change. We shall soon see how the Rudé and Hobsbawm school had the opposite opinion that crowds could be historical, political forces of change. Le Bon's description of the collective mind of crowds adds to this lack of any historical impetus: "they can never accomplish acts demanding a high degree of intelligence... In crowds, it is stupidity and not mother-wit that is accu-

mulated.” (23) It follows implicitly that crowds are led, but the leader of a crowd “is nothing more than a ringleader or agitator” (108), and “The leaders of crowds wield a very despotic authority” (111). Here Le Bon echoes Polybius’ ochlocracy with a mob being manipulated by demagogues as a bad system of government. As this article is dealing with a film about a pandemic zombie infestation, it may be helpful to consider what Le Bon writes about the mechanism of contagion as a special characteristic of crowds: “In a crowd, every sentiment and act is contagious, and contagious to such a degree that individuals readily sacrifice their personal interest to the collective interest.” (24)

More specific historical studies than those of Le Bon have nuanced the view of crowds and their role in history. Gailus stresses that European crowds were not politically aimless. Food riots and riots for liberties have dominated (Gailus 2001, 3024-3025). Rudé and Hobsbawm argued that crowds did have specific goals. These might be a sort of collective bargaining through riots, often performed in the hands of specific social classes such as peasants, working men and women; but they might also be conservative such as “Church and King Mobs”. Therefore, the revision of Le Bon’s *Psychology of Crowds* has as its main thrust that there were not only “bad crowds”, but also “good crowds”, which could be regarded as forerunners of later democratic mechanisms and social and political organisations (Gailus 2001, 3024).

Recent years, which are also the historical context of *World War Z*, have manifested the paradoxical political role of crowds as both conservative and progressive. The changes in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s have been regarded as a result of popular protests when the people of for instance Leipzig, East Germany took to the streets. 1989 was described as “The year of the crowd” by a special issue of *The New Statesman*. The magazine lists crowds as agents of so-called Velvet Revolutions behind the Iron Curtain in Romania overthrowing the dictator Ceausescu, in Prague and Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, riots in Kosovo, pro-democracy protesters in Sofia, Bulgaria, and mass demonstrations in the Baltic States. 1989 was also the year when the Iranian ayatollah Khomeini died, and the mourners at his burial counted millions so that the ceremony was disrupted. People were killed and 10,800 people were treated for injuries. *Time* described the proceedings as “bizarre, frightening – and ultimately in-

comprehensible" (Buchan 2009, 28) with the body falling out of the coffin. The same year a much smaller crowd of 1,000 Muslim protesters burned copies of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in Bradford in Britain (Malik 2009, 40-41). This crowd with the burning book has been described as "an icon of Islamic rage, and portent of a new kind of conflict" (40). On a much larger and much more violent scale this kind of conflict with uncontrollable rage in mobs was regrettably provoked by the so-called Muhammad cartoons controversy in 2005. Crowds or mobs in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Libya, Nigeria, Indonesia, the Palestinian territories and in other countries rioted with more than 150 deaths, and Danish and Norwegian embassies were beleaguered by mobs and set on fire (Wikipedia 2014). News coverage of these riots like "Muslim cartoon fury claims lives" (BBC 2006a) described mob scenes and also showed footage of rampaging mobs (BBC 2006b). Kenan Malik concept of an "icon of Islamic rage, and a portent of a new kind of conflict" (Malik 2009, 40) based on the protest against *The Satanic Verses* in 1989 and hugely expanded almost globally in 2005 and 2006 must be included in a description of the history of mobs or crowds. However, the civil resistance and progressive aspects of the role of mobs or crowds in and after 2010 in the Arab Spring nuances this picture, and the Arab Spring has been compared to 1989 (Cook 2011). The article now moves on to consider how these new manifestations of mobs may have been reflected in fiction films such as *World War Z* and changed the icon of the zombie.

Conclusion: The Icon of the Zombie as a Mob

It is the hypothesis of the article that the role of crowds in this historical period leads to changes in the general iconography of zombies, and that this change is reflected in *World War Z*. We have seen that not only this iconography has been changed, but also that the formulaic structure of the zombie narrative is reformulated in the film. The iconological method has its roots in art history; in particular in Erwin Panofsky's work (Panofsky 1939/1972). Explained in brief, this method deals with the identification of the subject and motifs of art, and its aim is to explain the specific form of a subject in the piece of art to be analysed. There are three steps in this method. In the pre-iconographic step the shapes and colours of a painting are recognized as representations of parts the physical world.

The iconographic step combines these objects into narratives, e.g. The Genesis Flood narrative. The successful completion of this step is dependent on cultural competences. The final step explains why the specific rendition of the narrative has been given its specific form. This is done by combining the symbolical values of the piece of art to its historical, functional context, or as Panofsky puts it to "the political, poetical, religious, philosophical, and social tendencies of the personality, period or country under investigation" (Panofsky 1939/1972, 16).

In the case of zombies the pre-iconographic and the iconographic step pose a phenomenological challenge that is met by intertextual competences as zombies do not exist outside fiction, though the zombie can be recognized as an abject corpse combined with a living person as the zombie is a fusion monster (Carroll 1990, 43). As the cultural history of zombies does not go further back than the 1930s, the iconological step is not unsurmountable, and only a condensed history of the zombie icon in "the political, poetical, religious, philosophical, and social tendencies of the personality, period or country under investigation" will be offered here as it is available elsewhere (Bishops 2010, Christensen 2012a, Christiansen 2012). In the 1930s and 1940s, the zombie was a scarce, dumb and slow-moving folkloristic victim and an icon of colonial suppression as seen in Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932) and Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). However, in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s there was an iconological change, as zombies appeared in fairly large numbers and they were cannibalistic. The zombie now became part of a cultural critique of primarily American mass society. In George Romero's films it had become an icon of the family institution, mindless consumerism, and the scientific and military complex in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985).

During the 1980s and 1990s, there was a significant shift in zombie iconology, as the zombie became a magnification monster of pandemic proportions. Zombies became many, often described as swarms or hordes, and they became fast, the so-called runner type. One of the first instances was Dan O'Bannon's *The Return of the Living Dead* (1985) with around 100 zombies of the runner type, and in Ruben Fleischer's *Zombieland* (2009) zombies were pandemic, and they could be iconologically understood as an icon of globalization (Christiansen 2012). It is characteristic of the narrative structure of

most zombie films until now that the action was that a group of survivors holed up under siege and if there was movement, it was only from one safe place to another. However, the iconological change of the meaning of the zombie from its first manifestations has been so fundamental that its iconography has been altered. Present-day zombie are fast, furious and magnificent monsters to the extent that they through their numbers are pandemic. The narrative structure with its locations of *World War Z* and the quest of an American with his Israeli allied against mobs of zombies that are presented iconographically not unlike news media footage of Middle Eastern mobs, but also mobs of zombies in American cities, has added a new iconological signification to the fictional zombie monster. It has now become a contemporary icon of mobs, and this icon can be identified more specifically as the mob, characterized by Le Bon's original, conservative view. The zombie icon of the mob is Le Bon's mob reborn, and this mob is solely destructive and not a political instrument of change for something better. As Le Bon claimed, this mob is manipulated by demagogues, which in this film has made the zombie mobs into unconscious and unwitting instruments of a lethal and global virus. The film's choice of locations is some of the world's hot spots: The Middle East and Korea, and the deleted Moscow scenes. The view of global politics in the film *World War Z* with this choice of locations is bordering on being defeatist as political antagonists are represented as magnification monsters beyond understanding and control. In the film, the zombie as a magnification monster has become a dark cultural icon of a world that is populated by mobs and is globally ungovernable.

A couple of times in the article we have seen that the terms crowds and mobs have been used interchangeably, and we have seen that they have been used negatively and positively about their role in the body politic through history. This dualism also applies to the film *World War Z* and its construction of zombies as a cultural icon. Especially the film's Jerusalem scenes with the wall unsuccessfully keeping out the besieging zombies has so obvious relevance to contemporary Middle-Eastern politics that it more than any other aspects of the film foregrounds the interpretative imperative, and the audience can find it hard not to draw parallels to the conflict between Israel and Palestinians.

In conclusion, this double significance of the icon of the zombies in the film is in accord with how a cultural icon is defined in Walter W. Hölbling's *US Icons and Iconicity* (2006). Hölbling notes that a condition necessary for an icon to obtain a lasting value is its ambivalence. It must function "as hegemonic tools of dominant groups to control the shifting identities of the mass of people, and on the other hand, as democratic elements in the media age, as symbols of popular identities and interests. Icons can thus be expressions both of dominant and popular interest" (Hölbling 2006, 8). That the zombie has taken on the form of mobs in the global body politic in *World War Z* demonstrates this ambivalent and tension-filled cultural and social function of icons.

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