

The Outbreak Narrative and the Psychology of the Uninfected in Popular Zombie Films

سردية تفشي العدوى ونفسية غير المصاب في أفلام الزومبي الشهيرة

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Abstract :

Contrary to common understanding, the zombie narrative is not a mere cultural hit that seeks to amass financial gains from a (horrifyingly) engaging form of amusement. In literature, as in film and videogame, the genre has proven its depth, complexity and even relevance in the face of ongoing global events. The present paper examines *28 Days Later* (2002) and *28 Weeks Later* (2007) as outbreak narratives which expose underlying psychological mechanisms. Relying on Steven Taylor's recapitulative work on the psychology of pandemics (2019), in particular, the analyses examine the striking parallels between the responses that are represented in the films and the traits and reactions that are associated with adaptive or maladaptive practices. The results further contribute to a body of quantitative/qualitative research which suggests a correlation between morbid genres and coping skills during difficult times.

Keywords: Infection; Pandemic; Psychology; Outbreak; Zombie.

ملخص

على عكس الفهم الشائع، فإن قصص الزومبي ليست مجرد موجة ثقافية تسعى إلى جمع المكاسب المالية من خلال قالب ترفيهي (مرعب). في الأدب، كما هو الحال في السينما و ألعاب الفيديو، أثبت هذا النوع من الخيال عمقه وتعقيده وحتى ارتباطه بالأحداث العالمية الجارية. وعليه، تهتم هذه الورقة البحثية بدراسة فيلمين حاصلين على شهرة عالمية. " 28 يومًا لاحقًا" (2002) و "28 أسبوعًا لاحقًا" (2007) يسردان حكاية تفشي وباء جامح و التي يمكن من خلالها الكشف عن آليات نفسية و اجتماعية عديدة. بالاعتماد على العمل الحديث لستيفن تايلور حول علم نفس الأوبئة (2019) تبين التحليلات عن أوجه التشابه المهمة بين السلوكيات (الخيالية) المصورة في الفيلمين وردود الفعل (الواقعية) المرتبطة بالممارسات التكيفية أو غير التكيفية أثناء الأزمات. تساهم النتائج في إثراء الأبحاث الكمية/النوعية التي تشير إلى وجود علاقة بين هذا النوع من قصص الخيال مهارات التأقلم في الأوقات الصعبة.

كلمات مفتاحية: العدوى؛ الوباء؛ سيكولوجيا؛ زومبي؛ سردية التفشي .

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1- Introduction

To many, it might be taken at face value that the zombie genre is a mere exhibition of an eccentric imagination which seeks to trigger cathartic fear or purgative horror. Due to its pervasive evocation of fearful images and exotic plotlines, it is often regarded as a less-serious genre that seeks to camouflage its lack of content with an overdone reliance of extra-diegetic enhancements. To many others, zombies are seen as reincarnations of humans in different shapes and fashions. Such a view attaches a deeper meaning to narratives featuring zombies for several reasons. One of the main reasons is the cautionary nature of such narratives, as they not only coincide with real life incidents but also run in parallel with very significant moments in the history of humankind. The zombie trope has contributed in many instances, through mashup and pastiche, in creating a space for reimagining and rewriting grand-narratives. Perhaps more than any another cinematic genre, the zombie films have widely succeeded in rendering scary scenarios into simultaneously awful and awesome motion pictures. In recent decades, it is noted that, the zombie “outbreak” has shifted from being a sheer incidental moment in a story that seeks to convey other meanings to become itself the focus. Thus, it could be approached as the backbone of the narrative which carries the weight and significance of story.

The famous zombie films, Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later* (2002) and Juan Carlos Fresnadillo’s *28 Weeks Later* (2007), picture the survivors as the true “wretched of the earth” who helplessly observe the ugly transformation of the humankind into beastly mindless creatures. The uninfected, in these films, witness the demise of all social, medical and political systems. Both representations show, among other things, the baseness of human conducts in times of crisis and the (futile) struggle in the face of a sweeping catastrophe. The Rage Virus, thus, is regarded as a simulation for any viral cataclysm as it unveils many of the vices that are so carefully cloaked under the achievements of modernity and civilization. Their vibrant demonstration of contesting human drives, impulses and reactions contribute in showcasing the strong relation between such fictional representations and the factual unfolding of verisimilar social and psychological attitudes during difficult times. Accordingly, the present paper focuses on the exposition of psychological mechanisms, either adaptive or maladaptive, by characters that run the risk of being annihilated in a massive zombie infection. Particularly, the cinematic portrayals exemplify the de-formation and re-formation of personal relationships, during pandemics, under altered conditions. Thus, the subsequent analyses highlight instances of greediness, selfishness, betrayal, fear, courage, sacrifice, hope, morality, bonding, guilt and unscrupulousness, in order to emphasize the films’ successful employment of the zombie infection as a metaphor for real global sanitary crises.

In *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008), Priscilla Wald defines the outbreak narrative as “a formulaic plot” which commonly begins with the emergence of the infection, then its proliferation through “global networks” and eventually “the epidemiological work” which ideally succeeds in containing its spread (Wald, P, 2008, p. 2). Such a line of narration could be found throughout fictional works as well as scientific or journalistic accounts. Hence, it could be argued that the unfolding and resolution of any disease, whether imaginary or real, is a story that is recurrently told. The zombie infection narrative is no exception. Despite its estranged allure, the genre operates within a realm that is still familiar to the reader/viewer/player. In doing so, the works amplify their resonance not only as prominent cultural motifs but also as contributors to sociological reflection (Wensor, R. & Bonys, D, 2016, p.2). In other words, the “zombie” as an anti-human construction mirrors some of the most subtle residues that humankind might have been tricked into believing are extinct. It hence reveals carefully cloaked vices and virtues. Furthermore, in a study of “how viral outbreak films affect the public’s health literacy”, Evie Kendal presents varying perspectives about the utility or harm caused by popular media (2018). It is thus necessary to further examine other popular cases in an attempt to shed light on the intricacies of psychological responses to pandemics both as a fictional and a real experience.

2- Methods

Steven Taylor’s *The Psychology of Pandemics* (2019) is well-acclaimed for its interdisciplinary richness and convenient timing as it was published right before the outbreak of the Covid-19. Its scholarly value, however, reaches way beyond that. The study offers a comprehensive and insightful—though very simplified—view of the interplay between the pandemic as a physical phenomenon and its social and psychological ramifications. The importance of focusing on psychological reactions to the pandemic is related not only to the individual’s immunity but also to the socio-cognitive and behavioral patterns which greatly impact the way pandemics are spread or contained. The work also details several factors that contribute to the overall experience of epidemics throughout history; namely, personality traits, social networks and communication strategies. The vulnerabilities of individuals—and communities—towards anxieties, perceived risks, malfunctioning health systems, etc. are all regarded as significant factors which influence appropriate socio-cognitive behaviors and actions ranging from obsessive fears to seeking quack cures or folk remedies and attitudes towards vaccination.

The present analyses are informed by the different notions that Taylor discusses in order to, first, demonstrate the prominent reactions to pandemics as represented in films and, second, to examine their reinforcement of certain psychological mechanisms which may then serve as adaptive or maladaptive strategies. On more levels than one, *28 Days Later* and *28 Weeks Later* could be

considered as a cinematic simulation of pandemic scenarios aligning with the continuum of viral outbreak narratives.

3- Results and Discussion

A few genres have succeeded in capturing the imagination and invoking contemplation, without embellishment, quite as the zombie outbreak narrative. Leading films *28 Days Later* and *28 Weeks Later*, which are often considered as a unified narrative, transcend mere horror to offer profound insights into the fragility of humanity and the societal structures upon which it relies. These films invite the spectators to ponder on the profound nature of human resilience, the possibility of an enduring morality, and most importantly the metamorphoses of the human psyche under trial.

3.1. *28 Days Later: From Outbreak to Rescue*

The rage virus which turns everyone who is infected into a blood-thirsty zombie is caused by an “accident” in which a group of animal-rights activists attack a laboratory. The incident provokes the spread of the virus and 28 days later, the entire city of London—much like the entire world, is deserted. A young Jim wakes up, from coma, in an empty hospital to find the whole city evacuated of its inhabitants while zombie troops foray the streets in search of blood and brains. The quick shift in place and time, from laboratory to street and from the emergence to the proliferation of the virus, captures a sense of the unstoppable infection which, once triggered, spreads like wildfire (or rather like a cough in the air).

Sweeping images of roads, boulevards and stores that are totally empty except for trash, cans, and money, which eventually turned to be a very useless good, signal the beginning of a race for survival. As Jim wanders the streets in silence, the strangest sense of calamity is evoked. A similar feeling is conjured with the idea of the quarantine as a preemptive method to slow the spread of the virus in places where it reached. The banality—and almost reluctance—with which such scene is pictured exemplifies the loneliness and even lifelessness which is prevalent during the outbreak of an infectious disease. Such an image underpins a significant social response to the outbreak. For some, irritability and stress are unavoidable as long as the epidemic is in an ongoing state even if they are—relatively—away from it. Thus, vulnerability to emotional distress in such situations, Taylor contends, is related to “the proneness” of a person to experience negative emotions “in response to stressors” or “aversive stimuli” such as negative news or the infection of a relative, etc (Taylor, S, 2019, p. 40).

Another prominent response is revealed during the encounter between Jim and Selena and the father and his daughter (Mark and Hannah). Their attempt to establish some sort of bonding between the uninfected is based less on trust and more on an understanding of the necessity to keep

together. Such communion is founded on a shared desire ease some of the burden of desperately struggling to find a solution to their—almost hopeless—entanglement. This need for connection is a typical behavioral response which many people seek during the containment phase. The attempt to maintain interactional pathways—either literally or figuratively—during the pandemic, despite measures of social distancing, is justified by their need for communication. Individuals, who were previously too accustomed to vibrant social lives, are forced to be content with their own company. Such solitude for some, of course, comes with the increasing menaces of anxieties and depression. Consequently, they feel mentally and emotionally more vulnerable which would in turn effect their perception of symptoms and health-related stimuli (Taylor, S, 2019, p. 51). On an extreme scale, others may even minimize the risks of contagion, and underestimate the disease's threat or a completely deny its existence as a mere conspiracy just to sustain tangible human connection because it maintain a feeling of safety (even if it is a fake one). The urge for bounding with the uninfected, however, is not stable since it wavers depending on the changing phases of the outbreak and the mutations/proximity of contagion. In the film, for instance, Mark is shot instantly when it is confirmed that he caught the virus. Therefore, within such a sickly setting connection and interaction are meticulously conditioned by safety.

A less obvious response but one which is deeply realistic is depicted in the group's journey towards a military blockade that promises sanctity, protection and cure. Throughout their search for a solution, survivors take many risks without carefully considering the fatal consequences that might ensue. Their unrealistic optimism leads them to irrational decisions and irresponsible behaviors which put them into more danger. The military group seems to have hidden intentions behind their propaganda of finding a cure. Irrationally, many individuals fall prey to such falsified news. They either seek remedies that are offered from unscientific sources or try out ineffective—sometimes harmful—methods to prevent or treat the disease. This as Taylors indicates is related to a psychological pattern of behavior that is historically noted during such times. He explains that people are motivated to seek folk remedies, quackery cures and superstition because of “imitation, conformity, desperation, and indiscriminate reliance on authority figures” (Taylor, S, 2019, p. 30). After their successful escape from such a vicious trap, Jim and the others find a safe haven on the suburbs until the restoration of normalcy. 28 days later, the survivors are rescued as the virus' threat is subdued.

In short, the responses of the uninfected in the film are common reactions to pandemics. They range from negative to positive ones revealing underlying psychological dynamics that condition their socio-behavioral attitudes. Thus, such an outbreak narrative can be regarded as moderately effective in showcasing the various transformations brought by a pandemic.

3.2. *28 Weeks Later*: From Outbreak to Defeat

In *28 Weeks Later*, London seems to have gained back its safety as a large portion of the virus-infected region has been declared safe, and the evacuated are returning home (to secure zones). Life is resuming normalcy after a ravaging virus which left neither the city nor the countryside untouched by the zombie's lethal danger. Nevertheless, due to a siblings' break of the protocol the pandemic is reignited. Tammy and Andy venture back to their parents' house (in an unsafe zone) searching for old souvenirs and inadvertently find out that their mother is still alive and uninfected. However, it turns out that she is. This launches back the rage virus in an excessive power and speed.

A very significant reaction to pandemic regulation is exemplified by the teenaged siblings. Their non-adherence to the quarantine restrictions and to measures of social distancing is depicted as an individual act which threatens the safety of the whole city (and by extension the whole world). Such non-adherence is also exemplary of the non-conformity and even resistance to governmental policies which many people regard with uncertainty and skepticism. Similarly, their father Don takes the risk of visiting his asymptomatic wife in hospital, assuming she is totally healthy, yet he ends up zombified. Later on, he spreads the infection to his own children who were considered genetically immune. Such a sequence of infections that ensue after breaking laws that are medically and politically imposed reveals the overpowering consequences of emotional vulnerability. The mother is infected, in the first place, because she is driven by an overriding sympathy towards a child who is chased by zombies. The children deep longing for their old memories convinces them that the journey entailed no threats. The father visits the mother because he is too carried away by his feeling of guilt for having shamelessly abandoned during a zombie attack. Thus, such behaviors could be seen as emotionally induced. They are equally the result of an inadequate risk communication since the uninfected must be in proper understanding of the actual menaces involved in discarding methods of managing the pandemic.

Another recurrent response is tightly related to the doctor as a central figure in a global health emergency. The epidemiologist is often portrayed in outbreak narratives as either a hero who saves humanity or as the villain who puts humanity's fate at stake. In *28 Weeks Later*, Scarlet is the U.S. medical officer who struggles to rescue the siblings hoping that they could be the key to find a cure. She stands in stark contrast with the other medical practitioners who are excessively driven by a scholarly—and perhaps egoistic—ambition that they lose sight of the devastating consequences of their deeds. Uncertainties towards medical recommendations and skepticism towards government policies might be often linked to actual experiences as well as popularized representations of authority figures (medical or political) as incompetent or unethical. Thus, cooperation is slowed down and sometimes resisted due to a lack of trust. Taylor notes that such a socio-psychological

state is also the outcome of media networks which spread rumors and inauthentic information causing mass panic, inciting individuals to riot or boycott vaccines (Taylor, S, 2019, p. 70).

The closing scene reveals yet another significant moment in the formula of the outbreak narrative. The film ends with the irreversible and invincible triumph of the zombies who reach Paris after having invaded London. The struggle for survival and the hope for a resolution turn out to be futile as the pandemic spreads further and the illusion of a remedy eventually fades away with the siblings' infection. In many ways the narrative turns apocalyptic and suggests with an extent of pessimism that zombies or zombie-like creatures will exterminate the human existence on earth. Such a fearful notion is symptomatic of the existential trauma which is associated with pandemics. Fears about the fate of humanity and anxiety about the future tend to become more pressing and intimidating in the face of global crises. They even emotionally paralyze certain individuals who are too heavily burdened with an entire "imaginary archive" of speculative scenarios.

In short, the narrative demonstrates various maladaptive responses to the outbreak emphasizing the complexity of the pandemic not only as a medical dilemma but also as socio-psychological phenomenon. Lying bare such intricate instances of greed, fear and irrationality provides the audience with an anticipatory look into the transformations of the human psyche. Highlighting such a perspective contributes in deciphering the anti-utopian appeal of such genre and emphasizing its relevance to the present.

4- Conclusion

The cinematic narratives of the zombie genre serve as vivid portrayals that establish a metaphorical connection between the extreme realms of human imagination and the harsh realities of the present world. Through their depiction of survival instincts, societal breakdown, and the metamorphosing effects of pandemics on both infected and uninfected individuals. *28 Days Later* and *28 Weeks Later* offer a simulation of pandemic scenarios suggesting that a progress which took centuries to be done could be undone in a few days. Images of the race for sustenance and food, the struggle for survival, the haunting silence of deserted cities and no-more-tranquil suburbs, are reinforced through detailed representations of psychological responses and social behaviors arising in the face of the zombie as an existential threat. The analyses emphasize the relevance of the narratives in providing examples of adaptive and maladaptive responses to the outbreak. Thus, they compel their audience to ponder on the horrors that are depicted on screen not as mere fictional musings but are potentially instructive in nurturing more understanding about the human nature and its profound transformation under pressure. As such, these works and others.

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