

Consumer Culture, Zombie Apocalypse, and our Downfall

by Lena Malmstrom

“When there’s no more room in Hell, the dead will walk the earth.” Many may remember this phrase from the 1978 movie *Dawn of the Dead* by George Romero. As its 45th anniversary creeps up on us on February 16, we remember some of the iconic movie’s main themes and takeaways, such as consumerism, value, and moral corruption. We consider how we as Americans are affected, and how various ideas from a zombie apocalyptic movie can actually apply in today’s day and age.

The first idea we consider is how quickly consumerism spreads. As Americans, we find joy and pleasure in constantly acquiring goods and services in ever-increasing amounts. This idea is prevalent in the beginning of the movie. We first see Miguel, one of the news anchors, talking with Dr. Foster, a scientist during the early stages of the undead apocalypse, about this new invasion, as the newsroom broke out into complete and utter chaos. Minutes later, we see Miguel, as well as the other newscasters, in their zombie form, pale, purple, hungry for human flesh. As the movie progresses, viewers are able to understand that one can quickly turn into a zombie when he/she is bitten by one. Romero may have gone to show and connect the rapid spread of the apocalypse to American consumption.

In addition to consumerism in general, we move on to the next point of the movie Romero was wanting his audience to consider: how obsessed Americans are with worth, even in a world where the ideas of worth and cost do not exist. We can see this towards the middle and ending of the movie, where the zombies are taking over and roaming the mall. Romero may have done this to show that excessive consumption turns us into hoarders. This is also apparent in the scenes where Roger and Peter take advantage of the situation and start stocking up on the materialistic goods they find at the stores. The room they are hiding in starts filling up with more and more boxes.

This brings up the next question and point: who are we actually deeming heroes in this movie? Naturally, we look down on the individuals who were already zombies, as well as those who quickly turned into one, as they were the most “easily influenced.” We have the thought that these people are so easily controlled, but not the four main characters. We consider them to be the protagonists of the film. However, the people we see as the heroes become more and more infatuated with the material goods surrounding them. After the officers rid of the bodies of the zombies within the mall, they, along with Stephen and Frannie, become decked out in fur coats and shiny jewelry. Despite the fact that the group is in complete danger, they go out of their way to succumb to consumerism and look nice.

We can also see this in the scene where Stephen tries to comfort distressed Frannie by telling her of all the terrific goods he, Officer Peter, and Officer Roger found at the mall, and how she has so many valuable items at home. He tells her: "You should see all the great stuff we got, Frannie," he says, continuing, "All kinds of stuff. This place is terrific. It really is, it's perfect. All kinds of things. We've really got it made here, Frannie." Throughout the movie, we start to think what would we do if they were at an empty mall surrounded by all these items, free for us to take, where value does not play a factor.

The idea of America's obsession with consumerism also ties in with the events that were occurring during the year that this movie came out, which were the Vietnam War, the Anti-War Movement and the End of the Civil Rights Movement. Viewers come to realize that the zombies in the film are stand-ins for racism, unhinged militarism, and moral corruption. This is shown in the beginning of the show, when the officers are on their shooting rampage before discovering the first zombie. One of the commanders, Officer Wooley, goes absolutely crazy and ends up targeting Puerto Ricans, shouting slurs. He kills innocent people, and eventually gets himself killed as well. One of the main characters, Officer Roger, also lets his ego and euphoria get the best of him after wiping out dozens of zombies, in which his partner, Officer Peter tells him to pull himself together. Regardless, Roger ends up shifting into his zombie form after being bitten by one, and is killed by the hands of his own comrade. Like consumerism, this surge of energy and joy Americans feel after carrying out acts of violence can end up harming in the end, and lead us to our downfall.

The last point of the movie Romero may have been trying to push onto his audience was the idea of female empowerment. We may consider the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, in which women sought equal rights and opportunities and greater personal freedom by marching, lobbying, and protesting. We can see her ambition in the beginning of the movie where she kills the supers. She says "I killed 'em. They're out of date." When the station manager questions her actions, she replies: "Are you willing to murder people by sending them out to stations that have closed down?" Towards the end of the movie, we can also see that Frannie is the first one to realize how they've become completely sucked in by their consumerist instincts, and that this will eventually lead to their downfall. She tells Stephen: "I'm afraid. You're hypnotized by this place. All of you! You don't see that it's not a sanctuary, it's a prison! Let's just take what we need and get out of here!" Lastly, towards the middle of the film, we remember that Frannie was determined to learn how to fly the helicopter, and because of this, she was able to rescue both herself and Peter from the zombie-infested mall. Unlike Roger and her partner Stephen, she and Peter were able to save themselves from their own downfall.