‘Nazi Zombies!’: The Undead in Wartime and the Iconography of Mass Persuasion

Megan Lynn Faragher

Introduction: Lugosi’s Zombie Grip

The most iconic version of the early cinematic zombie comes to us courtesy of the 1932 film *White Zombie*. Starring Bela Lugosi as zombie master Murder Legendre, the film designed a visual lexicon for early cultural discourse of the zombie, but producing a new legendary cinematic monster was no easy task. The press kit for *White Zombie* suggests an institutional self-awareness of the difficulty of the job. To make the zombie a cultural icon, it needed to popularize the zombie’s poses, features, and powers. And the drama was not lacking. Victor Halperin’s iconic zombie master highlighted several physical features which would pave the genre’s path for decades to come. Lugosi’s piercing eyes, building off the actor’s stand-out performance in *Dracula* (released the prior year), were played up by the press staff, who even sent theaters pictures of haunting eyes to post around their lobby, to be ‘mounted in front of a green light;’ the movie posters, also in green, likewise featured Lugosi’s disembodied eyes (cited in Rhodes 2001: 261). A slightly distressing advertisement in the *Los Angeles Times* demonstrates the gaze of the haunting eyes on the female body, highlighting her anatomy and claiming the ‘Zombie Spell’ makes ‘her slave to his will’ (cited in Rhodes: 158). Lugosi’s grip was yet another aspect of the villain’s gestural iconography. The most popular poster of the film emphasizes the role of this ‘zombie grip,’ stating it ‘made her perform his every desire’ (cited in Rhodes: 125). The film, too, dramatizes these gestures with aplomb, demonstrating that – by eyes and hands – Lugosi expresses his dominance over others at will. But these physical

manifestations of power are not interesting because they demonstrate Lugosi's power to physically dominate others; rather, while Lugosi's power is manifested through gestures, the means of his control is purely psychological. By bringing mind-control to the cinema, *White Zombie* continues a lengthy Anglophone fascination with occultist practices like the channeling of spirits and telepathy. As Roger Luckhurst argues, 'The Master of the *zombis*, exercising a demonic hypnotic power over the weak-willed, was fused with a long-established melodramatic narrative about foreign mesmerists and their threat to white women, and therefore to the purity of the race' (Luckhurst 2015: 63–4). Late Victorian occultism, like that featured in Stoker's *Dracula*, transmutes itself in the twentieth century, informed by prevalent discourses of foreign travel, colonial cross-pollination, and Western imperialism.

When looking for the cultural origin of zombies, much attention has turned to the role of the imperialist imaginary. The zombie's infiltration into early cinematic culture directly derives from colonial occupation. William Seabrook's *The Magic Island*, a popular travel book covering the author's journey to Haiti, popularized zombies for a white audience for the first time. Seabrook described the zombie as 'a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life – it is a dead body which is made to walk and act and move as if it were alive' (Seabrook 2016 [1929]: 93). Seabrook's book inspired a series of the popular zombie films of the era, including *White Zombie* and *Ouanga*. The exotic imperial imaginary, triggered by Seabrook's prose, emerged in these films as a means of working through, or even reinforcing, colonial power dynamics. Seeing the early twentieth-century zombie as a direct response to Seabrook's journalism, Luckhurst argues that films like *White Zombie* are set in a 'hallucinated Caribbean,' with the zombie as the 'decomposing poor relation of aristocratic vampires and mummies' (Luckhurst 2015: 7). Books like Seabrook's,

followed by films like *White Zombie*, depicted zombies that, as Edward Comentale and Aaron Jaffe put it, '[stalked] the colonial horizon as the dehumanized refuse of imperial capital' (Comentale and Jaffe 2013: 33).[1] This imperialist genealogy of zombism, as valid as its colonial settings are haunting, have rightfully dominated a majority of scholarship seeks to identify the origin of the Anglophone's anxious obsession with this version of the undead. Even Seabrook, the originator of the zombie trend, saw the undead as a misused labor force, arguing that the 'supposed *zombies*' is, in fact, nothing more than 'poor, ordinary demented human beings, idiots, forced to toil in the fields.' They may be as he calls them, 'unnatural and strange,' 'plodding like brutes, like automatons,' but the cause of their condition is purely socioeconomic (Seabrook 2016 [1929]: 119).

The trope of the zombie master, or mistress, fell away from the genre in the post-war era, but only recently have scholars begun attending to the transformation of zombies from the fields to the cities, from the jungles of Haiti to the streets of New York. After their liberation from imperialist outposts, zombies presumably seamlessly sidled into their positions as undead symbols of a putrefied Anthropocene, a 'perfect allegory for the inner logic of capitalism, and a testament to an age of an uncanny post-humanity (Shaviro 2011: 84).[2] However, a focus on the zombie's evolution in World War II cinema reveals a curious nodal point in the zombie's transformation. As the following review of wartime zombie films will demonstrate, while the tropes of white resistance to zombification remain, these clichés are supplemented and nuanced by visions of what *kinds* of whiteness can resist zombie masters. As Nazi zombie masters sought mental domination over armies of the undead in hopes of arming the Aryan nation-state, anti-fascist zombie films reprised and nuanced which subjects might resist the mental powers of authoritarian masters; those capable of resistance, as I will show, propagandize the value of white

American subjectivity. In so doing, these films likewise reinforce prevalent, and problematic, theories about America's preternatural resistance to fascism's appeal.

Seabrook, Hurston, and the Colonial Zombie

When Zora Neale Hurston published *Tell My Horse* (1938) about her travels in Haiti, the public had already been primed by the images of Lugosi's tightening grip and penetrating eyes. The book stages the first photograph of a zombie; Barbara Ladd calls it 'a restaging of the zombie, so beloved by Hollywood in the thirties, by and for a black woman's voice' (Ladd 2007: 121). The photograph of Felicia Felix-Mentor, taken in 1936, accompanies Hurston's description of zombism, which she depicts as both a result of exploited workers and, just perhaps, an allusion produced by inducing the 'semblance of death' through use of 'some drug known to few' (Hurston 2008 [1938]: 196). Whereas cinematic zombies of the 1930s had sensationalized the zombie presence on plantations, Hurston deliberately notes the role of exploited labor in zombie lore. Taking one example, she argues that zombies were awakened from death 'because somebody required his body as a beast of burden. In his natural state he could never be hired to work with his hands, so he was made into a Zombie because they wanted his services as a laborer' (182). Further intellectualizing the phenomenon that Seabrook had so sensationalized, Hurston wonders 'why these dead folk have not been allowed to remain in their graves?' before answering her own question, noting 'any corpse not too old to work would' be a good choice for a potential zombie (182). As Ladd argues, 'the degeneracy that was taken by whites as the sign of the incapacity of the black mind or the sign of a flaw in the black soul is rewritten as a horror of exploitation' (123). Joan Dayan additionally argues that the zombie's soulless identity produces a blank slate for the imagination of white exploiters; emptying 'the husk of the human [. . .] of

substance – nothing more than a thing – the human possessed can satisfy needs and impulses, can open up to a plentitude possible only because of the ultimate nonidentity of the spirit and the spirit-possessed' (Dayan 1995: 72).

As both Seabrook and Hurston demonstrate, the earliest zombies come to represent a troubled colonial history. Comentale and Jaffe have referred to this form of zombie as the 'historical zombie,' tied to the 'folkloric legacy of slavery that naturally asserts that some forms of labor are worse than death' (Comentale and Jaffe 2013: 37). *White Zombie* testifies to the prevalence of the historical zombie in its earliest cinematic representations. In the film, Lugosi is introduced as a plantation owner who has used his zombie mastery to provide an army of undead laborers. Fellow plantation owner Charles Beaumont observes the power of Lugosi's curse firsthand when watching the workers mechanically operating a sugar mill. Mindlessly dumping cane into the mill, Beaumont witnesses with muted horror as one zombie trips and falls into the mill, only to be ground in the mill, operated by zombies below who remain completely unphased by this inhuman sacrifice. The zombies remain entirely under control of the master, whose occult powers spread a mystical haze over the brutality of colonial exploitation — a convenient exculpation of the colonist's role in the brutal conditions of plantation life. In awe of Lugosi's mental mastery over his zombie hordes, Beaumont arranges for Lugosi to apply his powers to romance; having invited Madeline and her fiancée Neil to his plantation to stage their wedding, Charles plots to have Lugosi mesmerize Madeline to make her his love-slave.

Though Charles is eventually unsatisfied with the zombified Madeline, who makes for a dispassionate, aloof zombie lover, *White Zombie*'s romantic plot reveals the discomforting confrontation between zombism and whiteness; the voodoo powers of zombie masters came with an implicit threat of their application to white bodies, particularly the bodies of white women,

stoking racial anxieties around miscegenation. This was evinced by a proposed United Artist catch line for *White Zombie*: 'They knew that this was taking place among the blacks, but when this fiend practiced in on a white girl [. . .] all hell broke loose' (cited in Rhodes 46). The possibility that Madeline might succumb to Lugosi's spell not only threatened her, but also all white bodies. In the end, Madeline is freed from her zombie master, able to be reclaimed by her fiancée, and the zombie hoards are destroyed; the threat of dominance of white women by voodoo sorcery is abated. But, as *White Zombie* suggests, if zombism reclaims such power over black bodies, it was not too far afield to imagine this power being turned against the dominant white communities who attempted to use this power to reinforce violent racialized domination. As Jennifer Fay argues, *White Zombie* and its press materials 'trade[d] on the lurid mixture of xenophobia, exoticism, and sexual slavery' and 'offers a fantasy of the cultural and psychological effects' of America's occupation in Haiti (Fay 2008: 84; 83).

It was not only the subjugation of white women by mysterious swarthy Europeans with occultist voodoo powers that caused alarm, as early zombie films also depicted non-white zombie masters capable of using their power over white bodies. For example, the 1936 film *Ouagna* (or *Love Wango*), Freddi Washington plays a light-skinned zombie master and plantation owner Clelie. The film, which also draws from Seabrook's reporting on voodoo curses in Haiti, follows Clelie's efforts to reclaim her former lover Adam, who has left her for a white woman (Rhodes 2001: 179). In a tearful exchange on the boat to Haiti, Clelie begs Adam to overlook the 'barrier of blood' that has separated them, while Adam remains committed to leaving his dalliance with the Haitian zombie-mistress in the past (*Ouanga*). Empowered by an amulet gifted her in a voodoo ceremony at the film's start, Clelie seeks revenge by using her powers to raise the dead and imprison her love-rival, Eve. A troop of white men eventually come to Eve's aid,

while Clelie is undermined by a scorned Haitian suitor, who turns her powers against her, leading her to her death. The conclusion of the film, with a liberated Eve and a dead Clelie, contends that zombification is not race-neutral. White bodies, particularly white women's bodies, might temporarily fall subject to the zombie master's powers, but inevitably these victims escape their mental domination, reestablishing the implicit resilience of the white mind from the control of non-white bodies**.**

In the Anglophone imagination, zombism has thus been continually conjoined with questions of racial purity and dedicated to the reinforcement of white dominance over non-white bodies. In all that follows from these early zombie films, the racialized subtext cannot be stressed too highly. But it is for this reason, I want to argue, that the subsequent depictions of zombies as representative of changing geopolitical landscape and rising authoritarianism become even more interesting. While the colonial subtexts of zombie films remain throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s, zombies also extended their metaphorical reach, increasingly allegorizing mass culture and the persuasion of the crowd. As much as zombism demonstrated a reification of racial tensions, it also dovetailed conveniently with concurrent discourses around the public mind, and the zombie master became a convenient stand-in for the charismatic demagogue, able to brainwash the masses into mindless compliance. The convergence of these two readings of the zombie and their masters lead to new, complex, and troubling ramifications for the racial politics of zombification. As authoritarians adapted tropes of racial purity in widespread propaganda campaigns, zombie films attempting to engage in anti-Nazi propaganda utilized popularized zombie tropes to reinforce Western dominance.

The Zombie Shuffle: Revolt of the Zombies

The convergence of the zombie master with the authoritarian leader led, inexorably, to the depiction of zombie masses as a possible military force, capable of utter subservience and inestimable physical dominance over opposing geopolitical forces. Victor Halperin's follow-up to *White Zombie,* titled *Revolt of the Zombies* marks the start of the transformation I am suggesting, as the occult power of the zombie master starts its slow infiltration into global geopolitics.[3] The film begins with a meeting of military generals, having just discovered the existence of a Cambodian formula for mastery over the dead, alluded to in the film's opening scroll, which records the 'strange' discovery of the French Cambodian regiment on the Franco-Austrian front during World War I.

After conferencing with a Cambodian priest, Allied powers fear the release of this formula would provide any rival power 'armies of supermen,' controlled by telepathy from afar and used as military weapons (*Revolt of the Zombies*). After this meeting, Armand Loque is contemplating the possibility of zombie armies with Clifford Grayson. The latter seems skeptical, while the former pushes Grayson to concede to some version of zombie control. 'Do you believe in mental telepathy?' he asks. Grayson is ambivalent, pushing Armand to rail in favor of the reality of telepathic control: 'Well science does! It's an established fact.' he declares. Armand pushes Grayson to extend a belief in telepathic control to a belief in zombies: 'Okay, I'll buy your tribal mental telegraphists,' Grayson finally concedes, 'but I'll not buy your robots!' (*Revolt of the Zombies*). While earlier films like *Ouanga* and *White Zombie* place zombification purely within the realms of the occult, *Revolt of the Zombies* reframes the Cambodian zombie formula in the context of scientific discourses of telepathy and mind-control. In so doing, the film slowly initiates a discursive shift that emphasizes the zombie's import as a resurgent political concern for populations across the globe, not just in the recesses of the Haitian jungle.

When Armand declares, emphatically, that telepathy has been sanctioned by science, he draws on a prevalent consciousness of telepathy as a scientific field, supported, or at least humored, by many group psychologists in the first decades of the twentieth century. As early as 1895, Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd* introduced readers to the notion of group identity as a pseudo-hypnotic state. For Le Bon, members of the crowd are susceptible to a kind of contagion, which he likens to a type of hypnosis, with 'the activity of the brain being paralysed,' 'all feelings and thoughts [. . .] bent in the direction determined by the hypnotizer' (Le Bon 1897: 11). While British social psychologist William McDougall was more circumspect, he, too, saw the potential of groups to be susceptible to a form of telepathy: 'if direct telepathic communication of emotion is possible,' he argued, '[. . .] it may be expected to produce its most striking results among members of a crowd' (McDougall 1927 [1920]: 29). As late as 1941, even Freud still contemplated the possibilities of telepathic communication. While a skeptic, he admitted, 'It no longer seems possible to keep away from the study of what are known as 'occult' phenomena' (Freud 1955 [1927]: 177). Le Bon, Freud, and McDougall testify to the emergence of telepathy as a dominant cultural force in the first decades of the twentieth century.

When Clifford Grayson accedes to the reality of hypnosis but rejects the possibility of automatism and zombism, he secures the boundary between the occultist phenomenon associated with foreign otherness and the pseudo-scientific discourses increasingly popularized in the West. But much like the protection of white female bodies from zombie masters, the privileging of telepathy as a pseudo-science omits its very real occultist origins. Faddish Victorian occultism provided a new means for understanding the crowd; as Allison Winter writes, '[w]hen people were united into a single body [. . .] they lost their power of independent judgment' (Winter 2000: 331–2). While Victorians pulled from non-Western traditions in visualizing the mechanics

of group psychology and persuasion, scientific discourse incorporated similar ideas, taking seriously these once mocked and vilified practices. As scientific discourse incorporated spiritualist practice, Clifford Grayson's resistance to the notion of zombie armies suggests the implicit threat the comingling of the two discourses posed for mass political movements. For Grayson, an acquiescence to the occult phenomenon cannot, and must not, be secularized or transformed into armies of militaristic automata. Zombies must not be deracinated from their colonist roots to be let loose on the West. Not yet, anyway.

Revolt of the Zombies dramatizes the possibility of zombie armies, which might be weaponized to the benefit of non-Allied powers as tools of mass persuasion. Like Grayson, the film is careful to avoid stoking fears of a foreign zombie invasion. Armand, who evangelizes the power of the telepathic control over the hoards, locates the mythologized Cambodian zombie formula. As an Anglophone scholar, though, Armand does not use his powers to destroy his nation. After finding himself in possession of the zombie formula, Armand uses it for private vengeance, not geopolitical domination. He *does* manage to zombify his white military superiors for a time, but Armand is no Nazi. Like Clelie and Charles Beaumont before him, he uses the powers to gain a romantic, not military victory. In hopes of wooing his beloved Claire Duval, he mesmerizes his military superiors and convinces them to send that troublesome Grayson to a faraway post so he can have Duval to himself. He also zombifies the Cambodian army, but only to maintain his control over the local community. But, like Charles Beaumont, his efforts to charm his love interest backfire. Claire continues to spurn him, angered at his abuse of power. Seeing his disadvantage, Armand demonstrates his commitment with a gallant gesture; he releases the Cambodian armies and his military superiors from his telepathic control. While he hopes this will win over Claire, it ultimately backfires spectacularly. Angered that they have been

controlled and manipulated against their will, the Cambodians storm Armand's home, tearing down the door and murdering him. His newly liberated military superiors reflect on the dead scientist's hubris. The final line 'What the gods destroy, they first make mad,' does not emphasize the danger of zombism or occult phenomenon as much as it emphasizes the psychological components of zombie mastery that undermined Armand in the end (*Revolt of the Zombies*).

Revolt of the Zombies shares with its predecessors *White Zombie* and *Ouanga* the trope of the zombie master: the leader augmented by occult telepathic powers and capable of controlling others through the power of the mind alone. In doing so, these films alluded to popularized versions of group psychology, which often looked to telepathic and spiritualist causes to explain the irrational behavior of the crowd. And though contemporary zombies are fueled by nothing but a preternatural desire for brains, the now neglected role of the zombie master, beginning with Bela Lugosi's Murder Legendre, was primed to allegorize the rise of demagoguery and authoritarianism in the 1930s and the susceptibility of crowds to political manipulation. As Armand's control over the Cambodian armies demonstrate, the tools of the zombie master were applicable to geopolitics, even if Armand's wistful romantic streak limited him from using his skills to their fullest potential; were the zombie master's power be fully applied to political ends, as subsequent iterations of the zombie master would demonstrate, the defeat of zombies and their master would come to signify more than simply the re-establishment of white supremacy.

King of the Zombies: **The Arrival of the Fascist Zombie**

Revolt of the Zombies introduces the cinematic allusion to zombies as potential participants in an organized, national army of the undead.[4] And this transformation of the zombie from weapon of

war to Nazi menace becomes more concrete in the 1941 film *King of the Zombies*, which troublingly merged the racialized tropes of voodoo with allusions to the rising fascist threat. In the film, three travelers, including an American pilot, crash-land their plane in the Caribbean. The troop of marooned travelers, including pilot James McCarthy (played by Dick Purcell), friend Bill Summers (played by John Archer), and valet Jefferson Jackson (played by Mantan Moreland), find shelter at the home of the seemingly eccentric Dr. Miklos Sangre. Jackson, staging a compelling comic performance, attempts to warn McCarthy and Summers, having seen and heard evidence of zombies at Sangre's home. Like the black valet, the white travelers ignore Jackson's warnings. Meanwhile, sojourning across the island, they discover another American plane that has similarly crashed, with no signs of the missing pilot. Eventually, following the leads provided by Jackson, Summers uncovers that Sangre is a foreign operative weaponizing the powers of local voodoo to become a zombie master in control of their comrade McCarthy. The missing US Admiral is also found – a captive of Dr. Sangre – who is hypnotized in order to relinquish American military secrets to the Germans.

They find the missing Admiral as an unwitting participant in a voodoo ceremony in Sangre's cellar. Drawing from the gender dynamics of earlier zombie films, the body of white women remains a vital conduit for occultist power. In a climactic scene, Wainwright, in a zombified trance, kneels on the stone floor, across from Sangre's secretary Barbara. Sangre, festooned with a tribal headdress, is flanked by a voodoo priest named Mumbo, similarly adorned by a full tribal garb (Image One). Reinforcing the importance of the white female body as a traditional conduit for occultist powers, Barbara ventriloquizes Wainwright's voice, channeling his thoughts at the command of Sangre. Under his mask, Sangre is heard querying Barbara, with a highly accentuated German accent: 'Admiral Wainwright! Vat were your orders?'

Barbara begins to successfully channel Wainwright, muttering 'To go…to go…' before Mumbo interrupts the ceremony, intuiting that 'unbelievers' – Summers, and Jackson – are in the room. This intrusion will invariably precipitate Sangre's dramatic downfall (*King of the Zombies*).

Image One: Miklos Sangre (at podium) heads ritual to extract information from Admiral Wainwright through Barbara in *King of the Zombies* (1941).

In merging the fascist menace with the zombie scourge, *King of the Zombies* transforms the cinematic zombie's relationship to its master. Before analyzing the stunning conclusion of *King of the Zombies*, I want to quickly return, for purpose of comparison, to the canonical vision of the zombie-master relationship put forward in *White Zombie*. Here, we find control of the zombies entirely in the mind of the master and when Lugosi's character is knocked senseless by Dr. Bruner in the final scene of the film, the zombies are uncontrolled. Without their master, they are devoid of all ideological motivation, and wander off a cliff, with the sole exception of Madeline, who seems inexplicably (though conveniently for the romantic plot) immune from this symptomatic wandering.[5] In the earliest renditions of the zombie hordes, the destruction of the zombie master simply unmoors susceptible subjects from all forms of control. However, as

anticipated in *Revolt of the Zombies*, zombies establish their own identities separate from their masters. When Armand relinquishes his power, the Cambodian zombies are not hapless wanderers. Rather, they are enraged victims of political manipulation, and the murder of their zombie master symbolizes their return to psychological autonomy.

King of the Zombies carries on the protean trend towards what I'm calling ideological zombification, whereby zombies – both mastered and unmastered – come to contain ideological content of their own – presenting themselves as armies anchored by sociopolitical motivations.[6] When the two Americans interrupt his ritual, Sangre orders the army of zombies, including Admiral Wainwright and McCarthy, to attack Summers and Jackson. Summers pleads with the zombified McCarthy, pleading with him: 'It's Bill. Bill Summers! Your pal!' (*King of the Zombies*). The appeal to ideological comradery successfully supersedes the authority of Sangre, and McCarthy turns on his master, slowly marching him into a pit of fire. Summers's nationalistic, chummy appeal decouples the zombie from his master, producing an ideological *volte-face*; it is not only McCarthy who turns on Sangre, but all the zombies, who follow the lead of their American compatriot. *King of the Zombies* identifies the master as akin to the totalitarian dictator who, using voodoo power to control his zombified army, can be undermined not by physical, but by ideological counterstrategy, harnessed by those subjects who embody white, liberal, democratic ideals. The ability for zombie to break free of their brainwashing rests in a preternatural disposition towards democratic ideals.

Thus, a film like *King of Zombies* (1941) marks the culmination of the zombie's transformation from a psychological to an ideological being. In this film, more than others, the magical power of the zombie master represents the power of the authoritarian propagandist and explains away the appeal of fascism to the masses. But allegorizing the demagogue's control

over the population through the zombie-master dynamic, it should be noted, has troubling consequences. Obscuring the power of populism, anti-Semitism, and racism amidst the occultist haze of zombification, the real causes of fascism's frightening appeal in Europe remains dangerously opaque. While telepathy had appealed to scientists and paralleled the cinematic representation of the early zombie, forms of mental control and brainwashing had become prevalent in discourses explaining fascist ideology. After the war, Hannah Arendt argued that, faced with the 'disquieting' reality of totalitarianism's support from the masses, many 'refuse to recognize it,' instead comforting themselves by, as she puts it, 'believing in the magic of propaganda and brainwashing' (Arendt 1951: xxiii). Belief in the power of authoritarian brainwashing reinforced the myth of Allied ideological resistance to fascism that we know very well to be categorically false – we need only to reference the America First Committee or the British Union of Fascists to make this point clear. But the inherent occultism of traditional zombie lore – the frequent citations of voodoo and the allusions to telepathic control which conveniently aligned with dominant theories of Western social psychology – provide a convenient model from which to reify this national myth of ideological fascist resistance. In staging a battle between the power of the fascist-aligned zombie master and the American freedom-fighter, *King of the Zombies* aids in the construction of several myths around politics of the 1930s and 1940s. Certainly, as Arendt suggests, the theory of fascist brainwashing was born of the psychological theories that equated mass mobilization and activism with a kind of telepathically inflected brainwashing, garnished at the hands of an overpowering master. Inevitably such discourse removes agency from citizens as political agents. But the converse is also true. Those resistant to the demagogue's call – like McCarthy – have a nationalized (or even racialized) immunity to fascism's appeal. This re-appropriation of the zombie trope thus becomes

a means of reifying American supremacy, just as the zombies of *White Zombie* were reinforced and justified white supremacy in the decade prior.

Revenge of the Zombies **(1943): Zombies and the Nazi Science**

The cinematic zombie of the 1930s and 1940s, inflected by the rising tensions in Europe, becomes a convenient vessel for anti-Nazi propaganda during the war. Frightening, but with enough ironic detachment from reality to produce effervescent moments of humor, the zombie narrative avoided some of the didacticism of more overt cinematic propaganda of the decade. As zombies became more ideologically reflective of wartime concerns, they also lost much of their original occultist roots. Just as scientific discourse appropriated telepathic theorems, the cultural restaging of the zombie took on an increasingly secular tenor, repressing its roots in Haitian lore. Even in *King of the Zombies* we find the propaganda value of zombism increasingly secularized, deracinated from colonial occultism and newly deployed in the context of war. The disjuncture of the German voice bellowing from the African mask in the film's climax testifies to the lack of authentic spiritualism tied to zombie lore. This is likewise emphasized in *Revolt of the Zombies.* While the zombie formula is located outside the West, it is discoverable as a *formula*, able to be utilized by any knowledgeable scientist to empower themselves using rational methods.

The final film under discussion, *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943), is a critical exemplar of the ideologically inflected zombie film. It also marked the firm establishment of a genre. While *White Zombie* lacked technical brilliance, it was the also the first zombie film to teach audiences what zombies were (Dengle 2001: 148–9). Free from explaining zombism through its occultist roots, later films were free to follow the paths that had emerged in interwar zombie films. One of these threads viewed the trope of the zombie master as an allegory for demagoguery, and anti-

zombie forces as akin to Allied forces. This is true for *Revenge of the Zombies*, where the film follows an ominously and tellingly-named doctor – Dr. Max Heinrich Von Altermann. The doctor, played by actor John Carradine, is — perhaps unsurprisingly — a secret Nazi operative. The plot bares striking similarities to *King of the Zombies*; the writer of the former came in as a co-writer on this slightly altered reprisal. Like Dr. Sangre in *King of the Zombies*, this film's doctor discovers a way of creating unstoppable armies of the undead in his laboratory through modern chemistry. And while the film is set in the middle of Louisiana swampland and adopts tropes of the non-white zombified body, Altermann's zombism has no ties to voodoo or occult practices. Maintaining the optics of the plantation zombie film, *Revenge of the Zombies* presents an entirely new theory of the zombie and the zombie-master relationship.

Revenge of the Zombie's plot follows several friends and family of Lila, the now-dead wife of Dr. Altermann. With Lila nominally dead, Lila's brother, colleague, and servant visit Dr. Altermann in Louisiana with the goal of paying their respects for their newly deceased loved one. However, they quickly find that the corpse frequently absents itself from its coffin, and eventually uncover a Nazi plot and the undead Lila. Like in *King of the Zombies*, the servant gets wind of the zombie scourge in the home; he is disbelieved. However, in a critical scene, Altermann has a surreptitious meeting with a German intermediary, revealing to the audience the secret fascist subplot of the film. Altermann works to persuade his partner of his radical theory to help the Nazi state. Altermann brags: 'I am prepared to supply my country with a new army, numbering as many thousands as are required: an army that will not need to be fed, that cannot be stopped by bullets, that is, in fact, invincible' (*Revenge of the Zombies*). The visitor incredulously asks, 'An army of robots or automatons?' – a question with a tone of similar incredulity to *Revolt of the Zombie's* Grayson in his exchange with Armand. Altermann

dramatically retorts: 'An army of the living dead.' With the shadows of his lab equipment cast behind him, we see the zombie menace fully appropriated into the discourse of the scientist, as Altermann, wearing his lab coat and fully immersed in a world of scientific accoutrement, testifies to the fully secularized nature of zombism.

One remnant of *White Zombie* remains relevant in the ideological zombie vision presented in *Revenge of the Zombies:* the vitality of white women's bodies as a conduit for male autocratic authority. Altermann's recently deceased American wife Lila becomes the doctor's most prized evidence of his success. In his meeting with his fascist colleague, he calls in Lila as a testimony to the effectiveness of his zombie formula. It is notable that while *King of the Zombies* features the female body as but a psychic medium appropriating male power, Lila's becomes more substantive and threatening; she is the cornerstone of a plot to achieve Nazi dominance. The subjectification of white American ideology to the Nazi menace has finally come to the screen as a possibility. After Lila refuses to politely acknowledge his colleague, Altermann declares 'My wife does not answer your greeting because she's dead.' His colleague then goes to kiss her hand, only to stand back, shocked at its chill. Still desirous of proving her undead state, he pulls out a gun in order to 'prove it [. . .] beyond a doubt,' shooting her several times, while she remains standing and unphased. The ideological import of Lila's zombification is described forthwith, as Altermann states 'What greater destiny for my wife to achieve than to service me, and through me, our country' (*Revenge of the Zombies*). Choosing to depict female body as representation of the purity of the nation – which began as early as *White Zombie* – remains an active metaphor in Altermann's estimation. But it arrives here with a difference, as the symbolic power of white womanhood is no longer a weapon of the protagonist, but of the fascist villain.

She has become a weapon of the Nazi state, no longer a representation of white supremacy in league against non-white bodies.

But just as the female body becomes more threatening through its allegorical tie to the Nazi state, the film stages an obligatory resistance of Allied subjectivity to authoritarian control. Altermann's American wife may acquiesce to the traditions of feminine courtesy – the giving of the hand – but would she be able to respond to the Nazi heel kick? Or, to alter the Plathism: does every white woman love her fascist zombie master? In the end, this does not seem the case. Altermann, his face transfixed by the power of his own zombie mastery, describes the zombie armies he hopes to market to his German leaders once he brings Lila to his homeland: 'Even blown have to bits, undaunted by fire and gas, zombies would fight on as long as the brain cells that receive and execute commands still remained intact.' But here, Lila bucks out. Moaning, 'No…No!' The demonstration falls to bits, Altermann crossing the room to confront Lila: 'What's this? Your brain working independently works independently from mine. Go back' (*Revenge of the Zombies*). She does, submitting to his commands again, but with a wry smile of disobedience on her face (Image Two).

Image Two: Lila's smile captures her sardonic resistance to Nazi-scientist husband Altermann in *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943).

As zombification moved from the occultist periphery to the scientific center in a film like *Revenge of the Zombies*, the particular psychological and mechanical means by which leaders control the masses come into sharper focus. But, more importantly perhaps, the individual's 'suggestibility' – to use Gustave Le Bon's phrase – to a zombie master's control becomes more precarious, evinced in this failed demonstration (Le Bon 1897: 10). In the end, Lila refuses to follow orders. She finds allies amongst her fellow zombies, becoming their formal leader and conspiring with the other undead to unseat Altermann, using her zombie strength to drown him in a Louisiana swamp, releasing zombies from his spell but killing herself in the process, perhaps penance for an unwise choice in husbands. In the film, Lila never takes on the ragtag look of her fellow zombies; she maintains the purity of her white dress until the moment she sinks into the morass of the muck with Altermann, a strong symbol of female sacrifice for the benefit of the

sovereign democracies - an allegory for the female body forfeited at the behest of national freedom.

In merging the tropes of the historical zombie into the milieu of wartime concerns, what I'm calling the ideological zombie – the missing critical nodal point between Seabrook and Romero – comes into focus. Wartime zombie films appropriate many elements of *White Zombie*: the role of the zombie master, the important role of white women's bodies, even the rural and isolated settings. Preserving these features, steeped in racialized history as they were, these films affirmed the solidity of this new zombie genre. They also retained a standard formula that audiences could consume easily, and which filmmakers could reproduce just as easily. But wartime versions of the zombie film also changed the symbolic resonance of these elements, weaponizing them against fascism. And, ironically, as wartime zombie films appropriated early zombie tropes, which originated in racist American anxieties about miscegenation and slavery, they did so in order to theorize an inherent resistance to fascist ideology, somehow embodied in the American subject. Forcibly repressing the racist origins of zombie iconography, zombies become used as a demonstration of the supremacy of a certain sub-genre of whiteness, producing a firm boundary between American racial politics and those of the Third Reich. As a form of soft propaganda, films like *Revenge of the Zombies* and *Revolt of the Zombies* mythologized American ideological immunity to the power of fascist authoritarian 'brainwashing,' even as they concurrently appealed to fears of non-white bodies and non-Western cultures.

Notes

[1] Seabrook's role in popularizing the zombie phenomenon is well-recognized (Rhodes 30; Comentale and Jaffe 32). Seabrook, according to Rhodes, was even cited (though uncredited) in the *White Zombie* pressbook (31).

[2] The difference between P-zombies, or philosophical zombies and historical zombies (H-zombies) lies in the fact that the former exhibit 'mere surface without mind' (Comentale and Jaffe 42). While the outward behaviors of the two might be nearly identical, the former lacks any form of consciousness (34).

[3] Ironically, the trademark over 'zombies' left the Halperins in legal troubling, having to pay legal damages to Amusement Securities corporation, who 'appeared to own the word "zombie" in the 1930s' (Luckhurst 86).

[4] Roger Luckhurst notes the visual impact of the 'implacable zombie army' presented in *Revolt of the Zombies*, suggesting it as a precursor of the postwar zombie. He argues that, partly inspired by holocaust, the 'zombie mass' becomes a 'trace' of the 'continued cultural obsession with Nazi zombies' (115). This is very true, though while Luckhurst looks to contemporary films – *Outpost* (2008), *Dead Snow* (2009) or *Shock Waves* (1977), I see the precursor of this in the B-films of the 1930s and 1940s.

[5] Roger Luckhurst marks the allusion between the cliff-walking zombies in *White Zombie* and the Citadel in Haiti, where King Christophe marked a band of soldiers off the edge of its cliff (83).

[6] This is to build another category of zombification on top of the 'H-zombie' and 'P-zombies' identified by Aaron Jaffe and Edward Comentale.

Works Cited

Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Harcourt, 1951.

Dayan, Joan. *Haiti, History, and the Gods*. University of California Press, 1995.

Dengle, Peter. *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia*,. McFarland, 2001.

Fay, Jennifer. '*White Zombie*, Black Baghdad.' *CR: The New Centennial Review*. vol. 8, no. 1, 2008. 81–101.

Freud, Sigmund. 'Psychoanalysis and Telepathy' (1921), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII*, ed. James Strachey. Hogarth Press, 1955, pp. 175–195.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*. (1938). Harper Perennial, 2008.

Jaffe, Aaron and Edward P. Comentale, 'Introduction: The Zombie Research Center FAQ,' *The Year's Work at the Zombie Research Center*, eds. Aaron Jaffe and Edward P. Comentale. Indiana University Press, 2013, pp. 1–59.

King of the Zombies. Directed by Jean Yarbrough, performances by Dick Purcell, Henry Victor, and Joan Woodbury, Monogram Pictures, 1941.

Ladd, Barbara. *Resisting History: Gender, Modernity, and Authorship in William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, and Eudora Welty*. Louisiana State University Press, 2007.

Le Bon, Gustave. *The Crowd*. Macmillan, 1897.

Love Ouanga. Directed by George Terwilliger, performances by Freddi Washingon and Philip Brandon, George Terwillinger Productions, 1936.

Luckhurst, Roger. *Zombies: A Cultural History*. Reaktion Books, 2015.

McDougall, William. *The Group Mind*. (1920). Cambridge University Press, 1927.

Revenge of the Zombies. Directed by Steve Sekely, performances by John Carradine, Gale Storm, and Robert Lowery, Monogram Pictures, 1943.

Revolt of the Zombies. Directed by Victor Halperin, performances by Dorothy Stone, Dean Jagger, and Robert Noland, Victor & Edward Halperin Productions, 1936.

Rhodes, Gary D. *White Zombie: Anatomy of a Horror Film.* McFarland, 2001.

Seabrook, William. *The Magic Island*. (1929). Dover, 2016

Shaviro, Steven. *The Cinematic Body*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Winter, Alison. *Mesmerized : Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain.* Chicago: Univ Of Chicago Press, 2000.