

Zombies We Live By **A Greimasian Analysis of *Train to Busan***

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Abstract

Zombies are cultural tropes that, as semiotic devices, convey denotative and connotative meanings revealing ethical, political, and sociological aspects of the society that engendered them. Zombies, which entered the teratological imaginary only in the Twentieth century, are the monsters of choice in today's predicament whereby, as Mark Fisher put it, it seems to be easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. *Train to Busan* is a perfect example of the signifying power of the zombie and of its worldwide adoption. Set in a train escaping a zombie invasion, the struggle of humans against zombies symbolically stands as an invitation of embracing the value of solidarity and cooperation against the effects of capitalist exploitation and environmental degradation.

Keywords

Zombie; *Train to Busan*; Neoliberalism; South Korean society; Environmental pollution.

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1. Introduction

Sometimes dead is better.

Stephen King, *Pet Sematary* (1983)

Zombies are *the* monster for our age (Luckhurst 2015, 167 and Bishop 2015). This claim is advanced so often in the scholarship of the monstrous and the fantastic that it has acquired the veneer of self-evidence (Lauro 2017: viii; and Pool 2018a: 205-230). The articles in this special issue of *Ocula* are further confirmation that the living dead are the creatures that best represent our times. There is a purely quantitative argument supporting this view, as Peter Dendle has shown by surveying all the zombie films produced since the 1930s: with the turn of the twenty-first century, the number of films, novels, and video games has skyrocketed.¹ Zombies have conquered not simply the horror imagination of the various semiospheres of the world—of which fact the analysis of the South Korean *Train to Busan* that follows is confirmation. It has become the metaphor of choice to polemically analyze the predicament of financial capitalism, diplomacy, and democratic liberalism.² If indeed Guillermo del Toro, echoing Stephen King (King 1981), is correct in assessing that horror is «a very political genre», as he put it in an interview with *Time magazine* of September 5, 2011, the zombie is charged with a signifying potential similar to that of the vampire: in the nineteenth century, for instance, the vampire served as metaphor of capital's drive for profit in Karl Marx's *Capital* and of monopoly capital in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*; in the twentieth it stood as symbol of sexual allure and social power in Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire*; and in the twenty-first of the sexually abstinent white *Übermensch* in Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* franchise.³

The zombie, too, was subjected to different metaphorical genealogies: it stood for slavery, as in the folkloric tales of W.B. Seabrook and Manly Wade Wellman (Seabrook 1929; Wellman 1940); of workers' enslavement, as in Victor Halperin's 1932 film *The White Zombie*; of consumerism, as in George A. Romer's 1978 *Dawn of the Living Dead*; of the murderous insanity of I.R.A. terrorists, as in the hit song of the Irish band The Cranberries; or of Islamic terrorism, as in Marc Foster's filmic transposition of Max Brooks' *World War Z* (Brooks 2006). Just like in the case of other monsters, it appears to be difficult to fix a set of ideological meanings associated to the zombie, which begs the following questions: Through what sort of historical development did the zombie acquire such semiotic exuberance? What sort of historical transformations gave the brainless rotting bodies of the living dead the capacity of conveying such a variety of meanings? Why only in the twenty-first century

¹ Peter Dendle, in Dendle 2011, lists about 200 zombie films produced between the 1930s and the year 2000. In Dendle 2012, he counts almost 300 produced only in the decade 2000-2010.

² As in Harman 2010, Drezner 2022, Giroux 2010, Roth 2021, and the essays in Lauro 2017: 103-182.

³ On the changing meaning of vampires, see Beresford 2008, Day 2006, and Groom 2018. On Karl Marx's use of it to explain capital's drive, see Neocleous 2003. See also Rice 1977 and Meyer 2005. On Meyer's conservative views of sexuality, see Ernst 2013.

did the zombie assume such a preponderance within the pantheon of the monstrous imagination? And, more generally, why are monsters endowed with such an affordance of meanings?

2. Monsters as semiotic devices

That monsters convey allegorical and metaphorical meanings is not a discovery of twentieth-century theorists of culture. It was already conceptualized by Aristotle in his *De generatione animalium* and by the author(s) of the *Shanhaijing* (*The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, between the 4th and 3rd century BCE) (Strassberg 2002); by Augustine of Hippo as well as the compilers of the *Konjaku monogatari* (12th century CE). As Isidore of Seville put it, «Prodigies (*prodigium*) are so called, because they ‘speak hereafter’ (*porro dicere*), that is, they predict the future. But omens (*monstrum*) derive their name from admonition (*monitus*), because in giving a sign they indicate (*demonstrare*) something, or else because they instantly show (*monstrare*) what may appear; and this is its proper meaning, even though it has frequently been corrupted by the improper use of writers» (Seville 2006: 244).

The semiotic affordances of monsters are inscribed in their name. The modern English “monster” derives, via the Middle French *monstre*, from the Latin *mōnstrum*, the past participle form of the verb *monēre*, which means to “warn,” “to advise,” “to foretell”. Etymologically, a monster is therefore an entity that gives a warning, usually against something dangerous, scary, something to be avoided, such as a taboo or prohibition, often of transcendental origins. The Latin *mōnstrum*, as Isidore himself noted, has also a strong assonance with another Latin verb, *monstrāre*, which means “to show” to “reveal” (*ibidem*). The noun *mōnstrum* and the verb *mōnstrāre*, “to show”, “to indicate”, have a history of semantic affinity.

If the monster is something that *warns* of an imminent danger, an impurity, or a prohibition, it performs that warning by *showing* something that is not normally seen, by making visible a threat, a danger that is, in normal circumstances, invisible. The monster is then a “manifest warning”, of the same sort of omens and premonitions. This is what all monstrous creatures of mythology, religion, folk beliefs, and imagination have in common: they revealed something that was normally hidden, veiled, disguised, invisible, and by doing so they warned people of some impending danger.⁴

The monster reveals a danger indirectly, via its symbolic mediation. What kind of danger the monster, as *prodigium*, indicates needs to be interpreted from its appearance: the warning that the monster signifies is conveyed through its horrible body, its abject behavior, or the circumstances of its frightful appearance. The monster demands to be seen in order for its signifying potential to function, no matter how indeterminate its shape. The moment it becomes visible, its “warning” becomes effective by triggering a reaction of fear, abjection, and horror. The monster is not the main cause of that dis-

⁴ The understanding of the heuristic category of the monster in terms of a regulative metaphor is implied in the title of this essay, which plays on the title of Lakoff and Johnson’s famous book (Lakoff & Johnson 1980).

order, but its *visible* effect: as an *aliquid quod stat pro aliquo*, the monster operates, in fact, like a sign, insofar as it stands, indexically and symbolically, for the perturbation it warns against. To kill the monster, or simply to survive its wrath, one needs to interpret and properly understand what it stands for: Van Helsing discovers how to kill Dracula by reconstructing his genesis; by targeting promiscuous teenagers, the serial-killer monster of franchises like *Halloween* and *Friday 13th* signals its puritanical warnings; the zombie, produced by a variation of a rabies-like virus (as in *World War Z*), a mutated cordyceps fungus (as in the computer game and TV series *The Last of Us*), or more vaguely industrial pollution (as in *Train to Busan*), can be stopped (hypothetically, since most *zombie* films foresee an apocalyptic end of humanity) only by understanding the causes of its genesis.

Conceiving of the monster in terms of a semiotic device, a meaning-making machine operating within a variety of texts (folktales, novels, films, graphic novels, video games, etc.), rather than in terms of a universal or an archetype, helps explaining the contradiction ostensibly posed by its universality *and* contextual specificity. On the one hand, monsters are ubiquitous. There is no culture that in its history had not imagined monsters, whatever their form, nature, and meanings. Monsters, like family structures, death, the idea of an afterlife, taboos, sexual desires, etc., seem to be one of the anthropological fundamentals of human culture everywhere. And yet, ubiquitous and universal as monsters appear to be, when confronted in ancient texts like the *Gilgamesh* and the *Bible* as well as contemporary ones like *Alien* and *It*, their meaning becomes resolutely specific to those texts and the historical circumstances that produced them. The meanings connoted by their appearance, their actions, or the drive of their impulses can be reconstructed only within the cultural context that created them *or* the socio-cultural circumstances of their consumption—since the meanings of monsters are also, inevitably, historical, as the semantic shifts of the blood sucking vampires from Karl Marx to Stephanie Meyers in the examples above suggested.

The methodological point of thinking of monsters in terms of semiotic devices is quite simple, but it avoids the traps of either universalizing socio-historically specific monsters (usually deriving from a Eurocentric milieu) into ahistorical archetypes or misrecognizing and belittling the important role that monsters play in structuring the ethical, political, and cognitive world of historical societies. As cultural constructs operating like semiotic devices, the logic of the monster is universal; but the semantic and axiological values they embody are irredeemably specific.

3. The Birth of the Zombie

As a particular kind of monster, the zombie participates in the cultural logic of the monstrous and the fantastic since its “invention” in the early twentieth century (Luckhurst 2015: 7). It is in virtue of this codified effect within the cultural encyclopedia that the zombie can be attributed meaningfully to heterogenous fields like political economics, social theory, and finance with hyperbolic effects. And it is on the basis of its integration in the logic of cultur-

al production that historians now use the analysis of monsters (and zombies in particular) as a negative mirror to investigate the organization of common sense, moral tendencies, shared taboos, anxieties, and contradictions within a historical society, as, for instance, in the works of W. Scott Poole.⁵ To properly reconstruct the specific connotations and effects of meaning that the zombie has been designed to convey in different texts, it is fundamental to retrace its genealogy.

The term “zombie” first entered the English language in 1819, when poet Robert Southey in a history of Brazil used *zombi* to refer to the name of a rebel leader, Zumbi, who in turn had taken it from the generic term for “deity” (*nzambi*) in Angolan tongue (Whiteley 2017: 164). In the Bantu languages of Kongo and Kikongo, the terms *nzambi* and *zumbi* refer respectively to “deity” and “fetish”. The use of the term to refer to animated corpses, normally associated to vodou witchcraft, developed within Haitian folklore, where the *zonbi* or *zombi* was a sort of ghoul created by a *bokor* or a *caplata*, respectively a male or female vodou witch, practicing black magic.⁶ The *zombi* were created by these *bokor* or *caplata* as a form of slave labor.⁷

The Haitian zombie, the prototype of the dead being controlled through witchcraft as a form of slave labor, began to infect the American imagination during the U.S. military occupation of Haiti, between 1915-1934. William Seabrook’s 1929 Haiti travelogue, *The Magic Island*, was the first milestone in the zombie’s permeation of American popular culture (Luckhurst 2015, 17-43). Victor Halperin’s *White Zombie*, the first known feature-length zombie film, was released in 1932, on the heels of both Seabrook’s book and a Kenneth Webb’s play produced on Broadway earlier that year, which had likewise been influenced by *The Magic Island*. *White Zombie* starred Bela Lugosi as Murder Legendre, a white Haitian voodoo priest and industrial entrepreneur with an army of zombified corpses under his control, whom he exploits in his sugarcane factory. Fear in *White Zombie* is not fear of zombies and their possible murderous hunger, as in today’s movies, but rather a fear of becoming a zombie. This is a distinguishing feature of films like *White Zombie* or Jacques Tourneur’s 1943 classic *I Walked with a Zombie*, where the fear to be turned into a slave after death is accompanied by racial overtones (Luckhurst 2015: 58-96).

Since its debut within the Western imaginary, the zombie, originating in central African religious cults and beliefs, was connected to slavery and slave-labor. Its presence in the Haitian lore was a remainder of the plantation past of its inhabitants (Davis 1985). As monster, its meanings were multilayered: it stood for Haitian blacks’ fear of returning to a condition of slavery after death; it was the white man’s fear of his past as slave-holders returning to haunt him—a repentance sublimated in the form of a nightmare; but it was also the white man’s fear of being himself (or his wife and lover) turned by vengeful blacks into a zombie slave.

⁵ In particular Pool (2009, 2018a, 2018b, and 2022).

⁶ Carrol F. Coates, “Vodou in Haitian Literature,” in Michel and Bellegarde-Smith 2006: 181-198, and Edmonds and Gonzales 2010: 109-116.

⁷ “Zombie”, n. *Oxford English Dictionary*, September 2023, at <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5732769444>>. Online on November 3, 2024. See Luckhurst (2015, 1-57).

The Western gothic tradition had already explored the possibility of reanimating the dead. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was the progenitor of a number of early imaginations of resurrection, as, for instance, Ambrose Bierce's short story "The Death of Halpin Frayser" (Bierce 1891) and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (Poe 1845). The more developed invention of pre-zombie living dead is probably the 1922 serialized novella *Herbert West—Reanimator*, by H.P. Lovecraft (Lovecraft 1922), which told the story of a mad scientist who attempts to revive human corpses with mixed results, and Richard Matheson's 1954 *I Am Legend* (Matheson 1954).

George A. Romero, who acknowledged his debt to Matheson's novella on vampires taking over the world, invented and gave the "living dead" (as he preferred to call them) the shape and characters as we know them today (Luckhurst 2015, 137-166). His 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* set up the template of what would become the modern zombie. Unlike their Haitian predecessors, Romero's zombies are not under the control of some necromancer. They are not, in fact, under anyone's control. The resurrection of this mindless horde has nothing to do with vodou or witchcraft; instead, it is often implied that it is caused by science, specifically, in *Night of the Living Dead*, the radiation from a space probe. The causes of the zombie apocalypse, not always disclosed and thus not a necessary diegetic element of later narratives, followed a variety of permutations: a mutant rhabdovirus, a new infectious disease, a fungus, spores, chemical pollution, etc. Romero's zombies are hungry, and they feast on human flesh, something that was never part of the vodou myth and rather confirms the influence of Matheson's vampiric hordes.

The multiplication of zombie films, novels, graphic novels, and video games from the late twentieth century to the present not only led to the formation of a dedicated subgenre of horror fictions but consolidated the recognizable essential characteristics of the living dead, as well as its acceptable variations. Zombies are brainless and have therefore no volition. Their drive is purely instinctual, mechanic, not the product of decision and agency. Their movements—slow in Romero's tradition or fast as in new instantiations like *World War Z* and *Train to Busan*—and actions have one single objective: eating the flesh of the living (sometimes limited to the healthy ones, as in *World War Z*). Being bitten by a zombie is what reproduces them. The physical appearance of the zombie varies in different texts, but the constant feature that identifies it is a body in a varied stage of decomposition: zombies are nothing more than (slow- or fast-) moving cadavers incessantly compelled to eat living bodies, to the point that the impulse to bite is not motivated by any need or desire to reproduce—contrary to the vampire, an undead monster who sucks the blood of the living but, having full command of its intellectual capacities and memories, can decide when to bite for nourishment or reproduction.

The consolidation and conventionalization of the zombie into a type of monster, denotatively defined by a set of essential and contingent physical and behavioral characteristics, is the condition for the generation of connotative meanings deriving from their diegetic actualizations in different narrative contexts. Being connotation parasitically dependent on denotation

(Barthes 1967: 89-94), the axiological, political, or ideological mobilization of the zombie in today's texts is made possible by its denotational standardization (typification). These connotations range from the most generic criticism of consumerism (as in Romero's 1978 *Dawn of the Living Dead*), where the brainless drive of the zombie is explicitly associated to the enslavement to commodification, to the fate of Israel surrounded (and eventually defeated) by Muslim hordes in the conservative rendition of *World War Z*. The generation of connotative meanings in zombie representations is not necessarily generated by the intention of the author, but rests solely in the semiotic possibility of their functioning within a text (as *intentio operis*, in virtue of the conventionalization of their possible associations within the encyclopedia). Some texts may resist an immediate reduction of the zombie into moral or political values (as in the case of Danny Boyle's 2002 *28 Days Later*, where much of the axiological labor of the text developed upon the actions of the surviving humans towards each other); others may withstand aporetic readings; others still present the zombie merely standing as the end of humanity resulting from global warming, as in *The Rest of Us*;⁸ or zombie can simply stand for their suicidal drive to eat other human, the extinction of whom inevitably signifies the extinction of the zombies themselves, as polemical metaphor for the excesses of neoliberal capitalism (Harman 2010).

The interpretive possibilities of the zombie are numerous once they are put at work in texts reproducing or reflecting different sociohistorical circumstances. They remain nonetheless limited to the core characteristics of zombies: lack of consciousness, and hence agency, and their relentless drive to bite. Also, and no less importantly, zombies are members of those categories of monsters that are generated within the human species: they are not aliens nor distinct species but are rather produced by the degeneration or pathogenic collapse of human beings themselves.

4. Global Zombie: The Case of *Train to Busan*

Originating predominantly within an Anglophone multimediac semi-sphere, zombies became a global phenomenon in the twenty-first century (Luckhurst 2015: 167-198). Transplanted in the contexts of Japan, South Korea, or China, the zombie maintained the denotative characteristics it acquired in novels and films since Romero's reinvention, acquiring, however, connotative content (moral, political, or ideological) specific to the societies it now invaded. If not properly the first South Korean zombie film, the blockbuster *Busanhaeng (Train to Busan)*, directed by Yeon Sang-ho from an original screenplay of Park Joo-suk, became the forerunner of a successful series of Korean films, animated movies, graphic novels, video games, and novels on the living dead that have multiplied since its world premiere at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival.

The plot follows in sequential order the descent of South Korean society into anarchy after a zombie outbreak. The main story unfolds within the

⁸ On themes of climatic catastrophe in horror fiction, see Giuliani (2021: 29-82).

controlled environment of a high-speed train bound to Busan, in the south of the peninsula, while broadcasts reporting the nation-wide extent of the catastrophe are given in *débrayages* of news flashes from TV screens within the train. The film centers on the struggles of a small group of characters that fight to escape from zombies wreaking havoc within the cars of the KXT 101 express train. The enclosed setting of the train, doubling in a smaller scale events occurring everywhere in Korea, is itself a sort of *débrayage* that turns it into a microcosm of the larger society. There we find the main characters of the story, who rather than three-dimensional individuals are portrayed as stereotypical representations of members of different social classes within the larger Korean society. Seok-woo, fund manager of a financial company that is later discovered responsible of the chemical outbreak behind the zombie plague, is accompanying his daughter Su-an to her mother, whom he has divorced and who lives in Busan. A muscular and uncouth blue-collar worker named Sang-hwa travels with his pregnant wife Seong-kyeong. Yong-guk and his girlfriend cheerleader Jin-hee are the sole survivors of a high school baseball team soon turned into monsters by a zombified girl. There is also a ruthlessly self-centered business executive, Yon-suk, and a homeless man who takes refuge in the train: they represent the two extremes of the Korean class system. Finally, we follow the fate of two elderly sisters, Jong-gil and In-gil, of a train attendant, and of the train conductor—these latter ones symbolically representing state institutions—this association would be immediate for the Korean viewer, who knows that the Korean National Railway is a state company under the Transport Ministry. Through a succession of narrow escapes and nerve-wrenching fights to the final denouement of the sole two survivors, Su-an and Seong-kyeong, walking exhausted towards the safe haven of Busan, the plot unfolds by setting up a series of oppositions, the homology of which affords an interpretive framework that supports the connotative axiological values given to the zombie.

The fundamental opposition upon which the entire plot is structured places “humans” and “zombies” as contraries within a Greimasian square, confronting each other as representing, respectively, victims and offenders, hunted and hunter, eaten and eater, etc., through an imaginative variety of narrative isotopies typical of the horror genre. As contraries, the confrontations of “humans” and “zombies” put into motion a series of correlated oppositions, each depending, as hyponyms, on the fundamental one. For instance, there is the contrary relation of the rationality of the surviving humans against the instinctual frenzy of the living dead: the human protagonists succeed in their withstanding the mindless and disordered attacks of the zombies by relying on strategy, planning, and cunning. Even during the most brutal confrontations between humans and zombies, the violence of the former is always organized, planned, communal, often relying on improvised weapons and defensive measures, while the zombies behave erratically like chaotic hordes.

The contrary relation of agency (of humans) vs. drive (the non-agency of zombies) subsumes, in turns, other sets of conflicting correlations. One opposes cooperation and chaos: the cooperative actions of the humans, centered especially on the actions and ingenuity of Sang-hwa and Seok-woo, confront

the inchoate activities of the masses of zombies, incapable of working together, each moved by its own individual drive to gnaw. Within the group of human survivors, the film builds other two sets of corollary oppositions: one between citizens of lower and upper classes, the other between women and men.

The social microcosm of the train is composed of types rather than complex individuals. Their behavior is stereotyped to facilitate easy recognition: the self-centered fund manager (Seok-woo), the ruthless corporate executive (Yon-suk) and the group of first-class passengers he leads, representing South Korean upper classes, confront the uncouth but courageous Sang-hwa, the disoriented but generous sisters (Jong-gil and In-gil), the self-abnegating train staff, and the meek homeless man, all members of the lower working-classes. Class distinction is emphasized not only topographically by the position the characters occupy within the train (first and second classes), but also in the different dressing codes: the formal and expensive suits of Seok-woo and Yon-suk contrast the flamboyantly colored and unsophisticated clothes of Sang-hwa, the unfashionable and worn-out garments of the two old sisters, the simple, cheap dress of Seong-kyeong, etc. Language further marks the opposition of upper and lower classes: the formal speech and polished diction of Seok-woo opposed the vulgarity of Sang-hwa and the simple, dialectal intonation of the two sisters—Korean, a language with a complex stratification of plain, formal, and honorific forms, mediates and precisely maps the class positionality of all characters in the film. Also subsumed within this class system is the oppositional relation of women and men: the former weak and defenseless, the latter heroically resisting the advance of the zombie hordes, this opposition seems initially to reproduce the man-centered, patrilinear organization of Korean society, further confirming the established social order. Yet, only the two female protagonists of the story survive, the young Su-an and the pregnant Seong-kyeong, both of whom had distinguished themselves throughout the story by repeatedly defending the duty of solidarity and cooperation to the instinct of self-preservation.

The interlocking of these sets of oppositions, homologically reproducing the fundamental contrary relation of humans vs. zombie, constitutes the basic structure of signification upon which the axiological message of the film is built. In the semiotic squares that the story of *Train to Busan* sets up, it is the intermediate role of the two managers, Seok-woo and Yon-suk, that plays the most important role in pushing forth the narrative. In fact, within the structurally homological oppositions of “zombie vs. humans”, “instinctual drive vs. rational strategy”, and “individual interest vs. solidary cooperation” highlighted above, the disposition of both Seok-woo and Yon-suk is that of attending only to themselves—that is, caring only for their individual salvation (in line with the logic of their professions as managerial elites). The cardinal point where their intermediate role (and hence their implication with both spheres of zombies and humans) is disclosed occurs in a dialogue between Seok-woo and his daughter Su-an at the beginning of the outbreak: Seok-woo, criticizing Su-an’s disposition to help other people (she had given up her seat to help one of the two elderly sisters), tells her that «you didn’t have to do that, to be so good. At a time like this, only watch out for yourself» (34:42). The ideal

of self-centeredness and self-advantage, the principle that guided Seok-woo's entire career, is also the instinctual drive behind all actions of the executive Yon-suk, who not only refuses to succor other people in distress but is ready to sacrifice anybody to assure his own survival. Metonymically, the self-interest of these two character-types is taken to be the value system of their profession, which, within the axiological system of the film, is implied to be structurally homologous to the blind drive of the zombie.

As the story unfolds, Seok-woo and Yon-suk, who at the beginning occupied the contrary positions of upper class vs. lower class, joins forces against the zombie hoard. Seok-woo's redemption turns him into one of the leaders of a group of survivors and the symbol of interclass solidarity through his collaboration with Sang-hwa. His transformation from self-serving individualist to self-abnegating defender of cooperation and group solidarity, leading to the final salvation of Su-an and Seong-kyeong, reinforces the axiological homology of humans: zombies = solidarity: self-interest. In contrast, Yon-suk pursues only his own salvation, his deeds placing him in contrast with other humans. His self-interest is so intense, so ruthless, and so armful to other humans that it appears to be an irrational drive, as irrational as the gnawing drive of the zombies, thus positioning him, within the fundamental semiotic square of "humans vs. zombies," in the intermediate position of implication with both: he is human, but he behaves like a zombie.

It is in virtue of this series of an interlocked system of contrary relations subsumed under the paradigmatic "humans vs. zombies"—that is, "rational vs. instinctual", "solidary cooperation vs. self-interest", "upper class vs. lower class" (more precisely, financial capital vs. productive labor), "male vs. female", etc.)—that the semiotic labor of the zombie acquires its axiological value.

5. Conclusions: Zombies as Agents of Doom

In this apocalyptic tale of end times, the zombies play again the role of main agent of mayhem. Like in other films of this subgenre, they threaten from within the very survival of the human species. The anthropogenic cause of the zombie outbreak, in turn, suggests that the moral of the film is that humans are the main threat of their own extinction. Nothing is really new, then: *Train to Busan* follows the template established by George A. Romero in twentieth-century hits like *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Living Dead*. The political and ethical implications of Yeon Sang-ho's film are reinforced by the systems of allegorical oppositions. Zombies, as monsters, stand denotatively in contrast to humanity and to the set of values—rationality, cooperation, solidarity, equality, etc.—that the film assumes to be characteristic of human nature via a system of homologous oppositions. At a connotative level, zombies stand therefore for the ruthless, instinctual, rabid drive to individual self-satisfaction and self-interest—values that the film associates to the characters of the financial elites via the opposition between Seok-woo and Yon-suk, who confronts each other in a deadly final duel at the end of the story.

The historical context of *Train to Busan*'s release in 2016 gives further legibility to its political message. The first half of the 2010s were in fact marked by

a series of corruption scandals that had eroded the confidence of Korean citizens in state institutions and their imbrication with the financial sector: from a series of illegal surveillance incidents in 2010 and the attempt to manipulate public opinion by the National Intelligence Service leading to the electoral victory of Park Geun-hye (the daughter of the Cold War dictator Park Chung-hee) as president of the Republic of Korea in 2012; from the sinking in 2014 of the MV Sewol resulting in 304 casualties, caused by poor maintenance and expense cuts; to the mounting accusations of corruption and collusion with the business world of President Park in 2015 and 2016; without mentioning the numerous incidents of pollution and environmental degradation that accompanied the rapid economic growth of South Korea after the financial crisis of 1997. In *Train to Busan*, the causal link of the zombie outbreak with the Korean state and the leading financial leaders is evident since the first scenes of the film, alluding to a “new” pollution incident. And it is constantly reinforced in the many instances when the train assistants always submit to the desires of Yon-suk, suggesting the subjugation of state institutions (metonymically represented by the train staff) to the needs of the financial elites (embodied by Yon-suk and the passengers in the first-class car refusing to assist the other group of survivors). It is also explicitly confirmed when Seok-woo learns from one of his collaborators that the company he oversees is probably responsible for the zombie outbreak.

Train to Busan mobilizes the zombie monster to convey political meanings that seem to align with Romero’s progressive ideology: the individualist logic of neoliberalism—the zombies appear to contend—has turned humans into brainless machines driven only by the logic of the system; self-interest is not only dehumanizing, but actually preventing people from having real agency; the exasperated individualism of today’s society creates only divisions, and prevents what is essential to human society, i.e., solidarity, cooperation, mutual aid (see, for instance, Wilson 2020: 54-65; Newitz 2006; Clark’s and Murray’s essays in Greene and Mohammad 2010: 197-220; and Lutz 2010). These were the accusations voiced against the neoliberal state of Park Geun-hye, who compromised the common goods for the prosperity of corporate South Korea (Catsoulis 2016).

And yet, like in the case of all tropes, the meaning-making machine of the zombie in *Train to Busan* is subjected to other possible readings, not necessarily contradictory to its ostensibly liberal agenda. For instance, the fact that the last bastion against the zombies is a small enclave in Busan: it cannot be by chance that during the Korean War Busan was also the enclave where the South Korean army and their US allied retreated during the North Korean invasion (operation Pokpung) in June 1950: in the historical imaginary of postwar South Korea, Busan stands as the name of last resistance against the invasion; it stands also as the encirclement of the south by the “invading hordes” of North Korean communists.⁹ This last connotation, generated by the historical memory of the war associated with the place name Busan, is evident enough in the mind of any Korean viewer of the film, and it can pos-

⁹ On the Korean war, see Cumings (2010: 1-35).

sibly generate a series of associated meanings potentially contradictory to the overarching progressive tone of the film.

Fuzzy, or, better, multilayered as its connotative meanings may be in *Train to Busan*, the brainless zombie relentlessly and without hesitation craves for more bites. The lack of real agency behind its perpetual movements is what continues to frighten twenty-first century viewers. Busan stands as the last hope for human society: but whether the train gets there, or whether there is still something there worth getting at, it is not yet sure. Maybe that is why the zombie is the real monster for this era. If Mark Fisher was right, echoing Fredric Jameson, in suggesting that today «it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism» (Fisher 2009: ch.1), then maybe the zombie, the perfect metaphor of capital's drive to self-reproduction, indeed tests the limits of our imagination of a different future.

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