CHAPTER THREE

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"The Limeys are Coming, Barbara, and They're Laughing!"

The Art of the Romeroesque in Shaun of the Dead *and* Dead Set

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You can't make cult films intentionally, it doesn't work.

—Ben Barenholtz, *Midnight Movies*

In 1967, a 27-year-old college dropout named George A. Romero, together with a small group of friends, decided to make *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). The result was a film with a style that parodied *cinèma vèritè*—one that would go on to become a cult classic, and the most influential of a small cabal of low-budget 1970s cult movies that penetrated the dark underside of the American Dream.[1] Romero's genius was not just to reinvent the zombie by bringing the classic Haitian zombie *drone* together with the taboo of cannibalism, but also to politicize it, reinvigorating horror as social critique.[2]

Prior to Romero's re-visioning, horror movies were considered adolescent entertainment, portraying conscious fears of science run amok, alien invasion, nuclear holocaust, and communism. Many of the films, however, relied on a consistent motif—monstrous Otherness that was so huge and so terrifying it was unable to occupy the same conceptual and physical space on screen as its human victims.[3] Romero's zombie brought monster and human together in a singular cadaverous cannibalistic subject, evoking the duality of human nature, and mobilizing audiences' repressed anxieties about late-twentieth-century society.[4] The new zombies were perfect uncanny *dop-*

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pelgängers,[5] mirroring modernity's repressed anxiety regarding human mortality.[6] Contextualized by the failed libertarian goals of Romero's countercultural generation, his uncanny undead also began cannibalizing narrative and thematic conventions.[7]

Night of the Living Dead was shockingly original, destabilizing both filmmaking and film audiences. The new "Romeroesque" style of horror it launched—fully consolidated in *Dawn of the Dead* (1979) and *Day of the Dead* (1985)—exhibited postmodern ironist sensibilities and established a new constellation of tropes: literary naturalism, grotesque realism, and a new-age American gothic. It fluctuated between the cold rigid pessimism of myth and tragedy on one hand, and the adventurous and animistic optimism of folklore and fairy tales on the other.[8] The interplay between these two extremes dissolved any notion of the narrative closure to which audiences had become accustomed. The human characters struggling to survive in *Night* are pitiable victims whose fates are defined by the collapse of life's expected norms. The film ends, for the characters, either in the rigid finitude of death or in the infinitude of undeath—the latter darkly mirroring the lack of narrative closure felt by audiences. Normality disappears in a downward spiral symptomatic of an inability to work through trauma, into a "nonredemptive" narrative of "gluey bottomless horror."[9]

The second film of Romero's Cold War "Dead Trilogy," *Dawn of the Dead*, mixed comic-book fantasy, violence, and parody with horror, pathos, fable, and ridicule.[10] *Dawn*, like *Night*, became a cult classic, and remains the most fondly remembered of Romero's oeuvre. Set in a shopping mall, where zombies and humans are lured by the promise of a paradise that is both temple and fortress,[11] it is narratively and thematically different from *Night*. *Dawn*'s slapstick custard-pie-throwing bikers and bumbling consumer zombies, along with the final escape of two remaining protagonists, brought a subtle hint of redemptive closure to the fledgling genre. *Day of the Dead* (1985) parodied the Cold War's revitalized paranoia, ideological investment in Mutual Assured Destruction, and dysfunctional state institutions in a narrative that vacillated between the ridiculous, the abject, and the sublime.[12] By 1985 Romero's zombies had evolved, appropriating a constellation of affects: sympathy, plaintiveness, regret, avarice, anxiety, desire, and most significantly, humor. Like their human opponents, they flock to occupy the remaining vestiges of a defunct civilization. But, while hubris and desire lead the human survivors to implode in conflict, the zombies are apparently able to live quite peacefully in the absence of human contact.[13]

Romero's passion for horror comics led him to infuse self-parody, ridicule, and comedy into *Dawn* and *Day*, creating the basis for future social

A mall zombie takes a pie in the face in *Dawn of the Dead*.

satires.[14] The Romeroesque inscribed itself into cinematic mainstream as a type of postmodern traumatic narrative that, construed from a post-traumatic perspective, resists any form of closure and harmonization. Within the Romeroesque we are compelled to gleefully repeat the collective trauma that haunts us. Audiences are caught in an endless cycle of narrative irresolution—the "end" either entails the complete destruction of the survivors' humanity, or the false hope of redemption that is created as survivors escape into a twilight we know cannot last.[15]

After a two-decade hiatus that saw the collapse of communism, the end of the Cold War, and the beginning of the War on Terror, Romero returned, in 2004, to the massively popular genre of post-apocalyptic satire that he had single-handedly crafted decades before.[16] It was a genre landscape populated by innumerable Romero aficionados, all paying homage to his visual style, thematic content, and parodic approach. During Romero's two-decade absence, the inherently self-referential essence of Romeroesque horror fostered a distinct zombie-comedy subgenre. Today, zom-coms mirthfully question the motives, efficacy, and durability of state, corporate, media, and social institutions. From shopping malls to social media, Romero's zombies, mobilized by an occult and emblematic revolutionary ethic, continue to captivate and amuse on a global scale.[17] No cultural product

seems safe from cannibalism by the Romeroesque, including zom-coms made for British TV and cinema. Edgar Wright's *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) uses Romero's trademark blend of mythic tragedy and fantasy adventure to trace the title character's journey—by way of a zombie outbreak—from an unsatisfying present to the false dawn of a (seemingly) better future. Charlie Brooker's TV miniseries *Dead Set* (2008), on the other hand, mixes the downward narrative spiral of Romero's *Night* with the politicized zombies of *Dawn* and *Day* in a savage dissection of reality-TV conventions and media-age consumerism. The gulf between Wright's lighthearted gruesomeness and Brooker's pitch-black satire suggests the flexibility of Romeroesque zombies as a tool for comic social commentary.[18]

> *Shaun of the Dead* *was possibly my favorite zombie film that wasn't made by me!*
>
> —George A. Romero, in *Doc of the Dead*

Set in Finsbury Park, London, *Shaun* follows the daily travails of a 29-year-old TV salesman and electronics shop employee as he tries to exert some control over his life and relationships. Questioning his lot in life, Shaun is encouraged by his housemate and sidekick Ed not to ruminate over things, but to spend his time playing video games, smoking, and drinking in their local pub, the Winchester Tavern. While this state of affairs suits Ed, Shaun is aware that to everyone else in his life he appears as a "nobody," in a nobody job, earning nobody money. Troubled by his awareness of his own under-

They're British, they're all messed up—Saturday morning in Finsbury Park, London. The opening credits of *Shaun of the Dead.*

achievement and societal displacement, he is made to feel insecure by junior staff at work and hopelessly inadequate by his mother, stepfather, and second housemate, the relentlessly sober Pete. Shaun is also all too aware that he has to change if he is to keep his girlfriend, Liz, who is eager for a more secure and rewarding relationship.

The opening sequence introduces Shaun and his gang of friends (minus Pete) who at "last orders" are drinking at the Winchester (again), questioning Shaun's unhealthy attachment to Ed, and analyzing Shaun's relationship with his mother and Liz. Liz's friend Dave, a university lecturer, asks, "Are you ashamed by your mom, Shaun?" This comes seconds after Liz remarks that she sounds like Shaun's mother, nagging him to change and to do more exciting things than drinking with Ed.

Shaun and Ed seem inseparable, to the point that Shaun refers to himself and Ed collectively.[19] Ed never seems to leave the downstairs couch, smoking pot and playing video games—something Shaun would very much like to do. We see him moan and lurch, zombie-like, into Ed's domain and begin to play, only to be reminded by Ed that he has work that morning.[20] Shaun exists in limbo within his own home, spending his life in diplomatic negotiations between Ed and the sober-but-volatile Pete. Pete is either upstairs or at work, and only appears downstairs to angrily remonstrate with Shaun, and threaten Ed. He is eager to blame Shaun for Ed's behavior: "The front door is open *again* . . . I can't live like this . . . you want to live like an animal go and live in the shed you thick fuck . . . *sort your fucking life out . . .* " Shaun unsuccessfully pleads with Ed to humor Pete and pull his weight around the house, to which Ed responds, "I ain't doing nuffin' for that prick."

Shaun's world soon goes even further awry, however, and after a long night at the Winchester he finds himself single, hung over, and surrounded by the shambling hordes of the zombie apocalypse that has just begun. Freed from the disapproval of Pete—who was bitten the night before and is now zombified—he seizes the moment, steals Pete's car, and embarks with Ed on a fantasy adventure across London. Taking cricket bat in hand, he resolves to collect his mother, round up Liz and her friends, and go to the Winchester for a nice cold pint until everything blows over.

Ed remains true to himself throughout the adventure, remonstrating with Shaun to let Liz go—"Fuck her . . . you got your pint, you got your pig-snacks, what more do you want?"—and directing vulgar sexual innuendos towards Shaun's mother. Ed's *pièce de résistance* is to impersonate film star Clyde the Orangutan and suggest that tomorrow they keep on drinking. Despite his boorishness, however, Ed demonstrates a social savvy that has a direct influence on both Shaun and the world they live in. His superficial, vulgar

readings of people and situations are so often correct that he seems to be surreptitiously directing the events of the film. By the climax, however, Shaun has not only survived the zombie apocalypse but gained the confidence to be (modestly) independent of his friend. Having killed the zombified versions of both his mother and Pete, and made peace with his now-zombified stepfather (before leaving him locked in his prized Jaguar), he has resolved his neuroses and freed himself of those who fueled them. Having learned to regulate his relationship with the zombified (and thus more pliant) Ed, he is now free to have a successful romance with Liz—the only one who, in the end, he was able to save.

> *You would fuck a fisherman's dog if there was a Heat cover in it.*
>
> —Patrick the producer, *Dead Set*

The comic possibilities of a zombie apocalypse were also apparent to British satirist Charlie Brooker, whose television shows have become known for their acerbic wit and surreal and profane pessimism. His *Weekly Wipe* series is well known for its homages to Romero,[21] and Brooker's fans welcomed his decision to make a satirical zombie miniseries based on, and filmed on the set of, the *Big Brother* reality TV show. *Big Brother*, in which a group of contestants are confined to a house under 24-hour surveillance and vote to evict one of their number at the end of each episode, was ready-made for a Romeroesque satire. Brooker took full advantage, imagining the show unfolding as a zombie apocalypse raged outside the house. He put his trademark cynicism into overdrive in order to comment on a format he had already pilloried as uncouth. The result, titled *Dead Set*, was a behind-the-scenes comedic *vèritè* that portrayed reality TV as a shockingly obscene form of entertainment.[22]

Along with the actors playing the *Big Brother* houseguests and production crew, *Dead Set* features stars from past seasons of *Big Brother* in cameo roles, along with TV personalities such as Davina McCall, host of the British edition of *Big Brother*. The (fictional) *Big Brother* housemates represent a cross-section of young British society, all of whom are filmed constantly while subjected to humiliation and the threat of possible death-by-eviction, in the hope they will behave in a suitably indecorous way. The production crew is a collection of runners and gofers—sycophantic, browbeaten, and neurotic—under the dominion of producer Patrick Goad, who berates contestants, crew, and audience alike and treats them all like contemptible idiots. Goad spouts a continual diatribe of obscenities and vulgar commands. He has pet

names for each contestant, such as "fucking-spastic" or "sour-flaps," and refers to his staff as "minions." It soon becomes clear that Goad recognizes the show's unacknowledged, grotesque appeal to viewers, and does everything in his power to cater to it.

Dead Set begins on a *Big Brother* eviction night as the zombie apocalypse is breaking out. As waves of zombies swamp Britain, the screams from outside the house are interpreted by crew and cast alike as screams of adulation and excitement from the live audience. Brooker's undead are not Romero's shambling, comedic type, but the snarling sprinting variety popularized by post-9/11 films like *28 Days Later*. Civil disorder spreads across Britain, threatening *Big Brother*'s live prime-time broadcast and prompting the producer, Patrick, to remark: "One fucking estate on fire in Newcastle and a couple policemen killed in Liverpool . . . Stockwell, Cardiff, Portsmouth all bolloxed. If this gets much worse we are going to get bumped in favor of a news update! Why do people riot anyway? It's not the '80s, they've got distractions. They should stay in and watch telly."

The opening conversation between two of the housemates, Pippa and Joplin, sets the tone, and establishes Brooker's own anxiety as an independent journalist and satirist who has become a mainstream TV personality. Joplin—the oldest and most insightful of the housemates, who is castigated by fellow housemates and crew as "boring Gollum"—ruminates on the nature and purpose of reality TV as being a "big fat arrow that points away from the problem." He then informs Pippa, a fellow housemate who is painting her toenails, that he decided to participate in the show to engage with reality TV to change it from within." Pippa replies to this self-revelation by asking, "Do toes have bones in them?"

As the apocalypse unfolds, crew runner Kelly Povell emerges as the hero. Determined to save herself and as many housemates as she can, she embarks on a mission to locate Riq Rahman, her boyfriend and fellow runner. Viewers, meanwhile, watch the darkly comic spectacle that ensues as the zombie threat worsens. The housemates express disbelief at their situation, convinced that the apocalypse is a publicity stunt, while Patrick sacrifices those around him in order to stay alive—even pushing a wheelchair-bound staff member into an oncoming zombie so he can hide in the disabled toilet stall. Viewers are left with the horrifying realization that, if Britain survives, it will be repopulated by offspring of the cast and remaining crew of *Big Brother*.

Dead Set ends in a self-referential feedback loop as Kelly, in a futile attempt to rescue the last remaining unbitten housemate, bursts forth from the safety of the Diary Room into a mass of undead. The viewer is left with the closing shots of a zombified Kelly staring into the live-feed cameras of

"Break with the group and the group breaks you!" Patrick is tied up in the toilet, awaiting execution by the contestants he berates.

Big Brother, her image televised and projected onto the multiple screens in an electronics shop in a shopping mall, where it is stared at myopically by a now-docile and victorious throng of the undead.

> *I think, that the feeling of something uncanny is directly attached to the figure of the Sand-Man, that is, to the idea of being robbed of one's eyes . . . Uncertainty whether an object is living or inanimate is quite irrelevant in connection with this other, more striking instance of uncanniness.*
>
> —Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*

Cinema and psychoanalysis were born of the same era, and by the early half of the twentieth century psychoanalysis had a symbiotic relationship with films and filmmaking in the United States. Freud's mapping of the self—super-ego, ego, id—along with psychoanalysis's focus on jokes, dreams, slips of the tongue, humor, vulgarity, and the uncanny in popular and folkloric narratives was readily embraced by bohemians and intellectuals as a progressive way of understanding the world.[23] In the genre of horror, the concept of the uncanny was readily utilized; however for Freud, the uncanny was a problematic concept that coalesced with three other psychic phenomena—dreams, slips of the tongue, and humor—into what he considered to be a road into the uncon-

scious. Freud's term for the concept, *unheimlich*, is a negation of the German word *heimlich* (meaning homely, cozy, intimate, secure) and thus suggests its opposite. *Heimlich* also, however, encompasses the concepts of being hidden away, secretive, and concealed from the outside world—by extension then, what is hidden may be threatening, fearful, occult, dismal, or ghastly—that is, uncanny.[24] This is the point at which the *unheimlich* creates anxiety—the point of negation.[25] What is homely and restful can, in a sublime instant, reveal itself to be uncanny, creating a moment of disjuncture that separates comedy and horror, laughter and nightmare, and what is ridiculously funny from what is abjectly terrifying.[26] Freud obsessed over the uncanny, as it signified a central "knot" of universal human experience, a dimension that haunts humanity in close unity with societal change and insecurity.[27]

By the 1960s, mainstream U.S. filmmaking was turning its back on psychoanalysis and losing sight of a powerful dimension of Freudian theory: its intimate relationship with the down-to-earth, comical worldview of Yiddish humor.[28] Brimming over with burlesque, irony, satire, and farce, Yiddish humor has, in more contemporary times, been understood as deriving its characteristics from a complex constellation of ethnic identity, socioeconomics, and cultural history, but when Freud first formulated his theories of humor, prevailing cultural perceptions of Jewish self-deprecation had a strong influence on his notions. For Freud, Yiddish humor embodied self-disparagement—a comic strategy frequently documented in many culturally subordinate minority groups—deploying humor against members of their own group, rather than risk the consequences of focusing humor on the group in power. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Freud interpreted Yiddish humor as a playful subversion of the pretentions of the powerful, the wealthy, and the elite,[29] and symptomatic of the lure of prohibition, which drives desire for what is censured. Laughter, in this view, is an explosive *yarp* of bodily pleasure in nonsensical defiance of the economics of repression.[30] Informed by popular perceptions that linked Jewish humor to "dirty jokes," Freud posited that such humor creates a surge of psychological energy that would ordinarily be expended in censoring childish associations between words and meanings.[31] Freud located Jewish jokes and humor within the realm of folk wisdom, arguing that they communicate a shared pleasure in instinctual life's ingenuity in defending itself from stifling self-reproach.[32] Jewish humor, he argued, drew on generations of cultural experience as a subordinate people, demonstrating a comic insight into human vanity and social inequity.[33] "Incidentally, I do not know," Freud wrote, "whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character."[34]

Freud's observations on the functioning of Jewish humor underpinned his reading of folkloric fables as an instinctive and unconscious form of wish fulfillment that had the ability to lift the mask of social relations, exposing hypocrisy and the exercise of power and discipline. Wealth, abundance, and gratitude were, for the underclass, worthy of laughter when they massaged the vanity of the elites.[35] Freud's writings on humor abound with popular Jewish caricatures—opportunistic matchmakers, eager to attest to the problems in others' relationships; stubborn bachelors; intellectual down-and-outs; lucky-but-egotistical millionaires, and the faithful gullible underclass—whose conscious actions lead to unintended discoveries about unconscious everyday social relations.[36]

> *Can I get any of you cunts a drink?*
>
> —Ed's opening line, *Shaun of the Dead*

Freud's theories of psychoanalysis highlight the power of humor to communicate critical perspectives on cultural mechanics, while expressing solidarity with the underclass.[37] Jewish witticisms commonly begin with a thinly veiled statement of aggression. This aggression is often sudden and shocking, but can be quickly turned inward toward the subject himself in such a way that the identities of aggressor and victim, and the boundaries between them, are subverted and confused.[38] The result is a playful, if not wholly authentic, subversion of agitator/victim roles. The real aim of this display of aggression turned self-criticism is an unconscious desire to win the approval of the interlocutor—a wish to fully regain one's dignity.[39]

Writing during the social upheavals of the 1960s, British anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer expressed concern that as British social rituals were progressively displaced by modernity, the traditional British fear of expressing emotions and the mechanics of class consciousness would become the dominant psychic motif of Britishness.[40] Today, the notion that we exist in a post-ideological era in which our major redemptive ideological fantasies have ceased to function is built on the idea that those fantasies have been replaced by a crippling cynicism. That cynicism, we tell ourselves, is the elementary gesture of a new form of ideology: one that we call "post-ideological," on the strength of a false belief that we can separate ourselves from, exist outside of, and objectively comment on, ideology itself.[41] Both *Shaun* and *Dead Set* offer a redoubling of Romero's self-parodying style and ethic, and both utilize the Romeroesque to focus on the social, financial, and familial conditions and mores of a new generation of British "twenty-somethings," who are apparently ideologically unaware.

It is fitting that British contemporary filmmakers redoubled the parody of the Romeroesque to produce new-age comic anti-heroes for a post-ideological zombie apocalypse. In a new age, where cynicism has become the standard riposte of hegemony as it appropriates for itself the very satirical and sarcastic elements traditionally used to undermine its narratives of power, laughter may indeed be the safest, if not only, respite for a new generation of the disillusioned. For Wright and Brooker, the end of the Cold War and the victory of capitalism seem to have changed nothing—even if we follow Romero's lead in keeping an ironic distance from incessant injunctions to consume, we still keep doing so. For us the uncanny doppelgänger is not the zombie (returned from the grave to trouble our ideas about the boundaries of life and death), but repressed ideology (returned from the past to trouble our belief that we exist in a post-ideological age). Post-ideology is a new zombie for a new age, a fetishistic ideology that excels in its denial of itself.

The traditional agents of Jewish humor, the focal points of our laughter, are now well-accepted archetypes. The *nebbish schlemiel*—the self-critical loser, the awkward innocent—carries within a sense of failure, and reflects an ambivalent unity of pride and cynicism.[42] These qualities ultimately shape the character's sense of identity as the subject of a larger imposing Otherness, the power of which is so compelling that our only recourse is to laugh.[43]

Freudian influences are evident in both the characters and the spaces of *Shaun*. Shaun is ego, trying to rationalize and balance the injunctions of Pete, the superego, and the vulgar desires of the id, Ed. Pete is either at work, asleep, or in the shower preparing for work; Ed resides downstairs in perpetual relaxation and enjoyment; and Shaun hovers anxiously betwixt them. Before the zombie apocalypse, many of the scenes are shaped, and the thematic underpinnings of the narrative are established, by the dialectical relationship of these three characters. Things are gradually made more dynamic with the introduction of Shaun's dysfunctional parental relationships, and his love for Liz, who comes with attached baggage in the form of the jealous David and well-meaning Dianne. The actual zombies, who enter the story via the zombification of Pete, only serve to highlight the ridiculousness of Shaun's self-imposed predicament.

Like the Romeroesque closure in *Day of the Dead*, there is a happy, if mordant, ending, as Shaun revitalizes his sense of self and regains a degree of agency in the world. The status quo is restored as society appropriates the zombie for itself in the very naming of the event as Z-Day. The new Shaun is pretty much the old Shaun, but by passing through Z-Day he has experienced a Romeroesque apocalypse in miniature, taming his instinctual fantasies while retaining an [un]healthy dose of post-ideological cynicism. Having

found a new, stable balance in his life, Shaun splits his time between playing with his zombified id, Ed (who now is, indeed, living in the shed like a fucking animal), and playing at his relationship with Liz, whose desires he has learned to acknowledge and indulge. Like the tragic hero Oedipus, Shaun is cast out of society and becomes the "uncanniest" of characters, destined to return via the making of his own history.[44]

> *I've seen this hundreds of times. Break with the group and the group breaks you! . . .*
> See ya losers!

—Patrick, episode 5, *Dead Set*

While not as overtly apparent as it is in *Shaun,* the traditional influence of psychoanalysis on the Romeroesque is also redoubled in *Dead Set.* The human condition of a subject split between freedom and necessity not only produces an endless cycle of alternating pathologies of melancholia and neuroses but can, instead, produce a dark, sardonic, and wicked humor.[45] This humor is ultimately directed at notions of our own mortality, and the tension between free ethical action and the fateful repetitive actions that underpin everyday relationships.[46] The classic Yiddish archetypes that commodify humor with ideological awareness are essentially uncanny fools—a mixture of perversity and simplicity, of wisdom and stupidity, of familiarity and strangeness, of vulgarity and exactitude—who have an innate ability to speak the truth to power while often remaining mute, or refusing to engage in polite civility.[47] Arguably, in *Dead Set* all these traits are collapsed into the cast, crew, and the undead.

Freud's topology of the psyche is as present in *Dead Set* as it is in *Shaun.* Kelly, the crew runner who sees rationality and intelligence as the solution to the crisis, is ego; Patrick is super-ego, viewing the housemates as commodities to provide enjoyment for the viewers. The housemates, with their unrepressed urges and desires and their lack of decorum, along with the rapacious undead, collectively represent the id, and the house—a space in which the id is given free rein—attracts both the television viewer and the zombie horde to itself.[48] Unfortunately for the cast, avoiding death at the hands of the undead is as impossible as fully embracing the excesses on offer in the *Big Brother* house while simultaneously avoiding eviction. If *Shaun*'s undead are reminiscent of Romero's shambling cannibals in their satirizing of contemporary consumer and slacker culture,[49] those of *Dead Set* can be seen as an uncanny ideological bent that has no interest in the presentation of difference as viable commodity. *Dead Set*'s undead kill and consume every-

body, exhibiting an indifference to difference. Quite simply, like the gaze of the camera in *Big Brother*, everyone is a zero-sum universalized commodity. There are no differences; ideology gazes at everyone from a point at which the subject cannot see *it*. This gaze is exemplified at the end of *Dead Set* as a zombified Kelly is transfixed by a closed-circuit TV camera that, in turn, fixates the gazes of a myriad undead. In Brooker's take on post-ideology, the gaze no longer represents enjoyment by the viewing subject, but the autonomous object-gaze of the Big Other—the hegemonic ideology. If not openly humorous, the finale of *Dead Set* is acidulously ironic: Patrick, the obscene manager of this new form of enjoyment, can be simultaneously positioned as super-ego and uncanny fool, since he is repeatedly found to be the repository of some innate wisdom, and the only member of the group to actually successfully die. Kelly, the only real moral and ethical character on the set, seemingly chooses suicide by throwing herself into a horde of zombies. In fact, however, the only way to free herself from the medium's hegemonic gaze, is to become uncanniness—that is, is to become *it*, and to look at herself from outside of her own body.[50]

In *Shaun* and *Dead Set*, the Romeroesque is used to parody post-ideology but, by engaging with the media's form, utilizes humor to question the fantasies that underpin our ideological investment in our everyday reality. Zom-coms should not be read as post-apocalyptic narratives of dystopian social realism, but as a redoubling of post-ideological cynicism. The humorous traits and flaws in our zom-com characters allow us to assess not just how they behave, but what we believe. The redoubling of the Romeroesque in *Shaun* and *Dead Set* creates anew the oscillation of ideological self-awareness between tragic myths and amusing fables that address our modern questions of infinitude in new and insightful ways. Similar to *Night of the Living Dead* and the literature of tragedy, there is no happy ending, or indeed survival, for the characters in *Dead Set*. There is no "working through" or making of history as there is for *Shaun*. Tragedy is not a warning of an avoidable dilemma; it is affirmation of a tragic human finitude—there is only the unending existence of the trauma of zombification and unquenched desire.

While the Romeroesque closure of *Shaun of the Dead* is far closer to that of *Day of the Living Dead*, its parallel to the cautionary model of fable is also uncannily cannibalized; there is no happy unification of ego, superego, and id as there is in so many folkloric tales. We are left wondering how long Shaun's happiness will last if, like Oedipus, he has to voluntarily blind himself to his nature. It is, in short, often in the process of ostracism and the accompanying unconscious desire to be accepted that the baseless absurdity of hegemonic rules and prohibitions becomes apparent. In laughter we glimpse the truth,

that what we hold to be sublime can simultaneously be the very excrement we wish to escape.

Our flawed comic anti-heroes, fighting a revolutionary and uncanny undead, are really engaged in a conflict with their own Britishness, and by doing so overcome the limits of representation inherent in tragedy. Romeroesque comic anti-heroes may in fact be better suited to our notions of post-ideology than flawed tragic heroes are in addressing our repressed anxiety regarding human finitude. The laughter evoked by the undead is itself an uncanny form of infinitude, and suggests a comic acknowledgement of our fate, rather than authentic tragic insistence. In doing so, it vocalizes the laughable inauthenticity of post-ideological injunctions. Given that mythic tragedy heroes, by definition, retain a sense of dignity throughout their travails, the solidarity of laughter shared with our post-ideological heroes is perhaps the only thing we have left.

Notes

1. The release of *Night* was a watershed moment, auguring the growing resistance to the daily realities of the late 1960s. *Night* paved the way for a cabal of seven films: *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *El Topo* (1970), *The Harder They Come* (1973), *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and *Eraserhead* (1977), which became known as the classic Midnight Movies. See *Midnight Movies*.

2. Russell, *Book of the Dead*, 64–72, and Loudermilk, "Eating 'Dawn' in the Dark." John Carpenter considers that Romero did not only reinvent horror as a politicaly subversive genre but actually made indipendent filmaking a credible and concrete form of media. Without Romero's *Night* independent filmmnaking as well as the horror genre as we understand it today would simply not exist. See Fallows and Owen, *The Pocket Essential George A. Romero*, 12–13.

3. This was both due to technical limits of filmmaking and conceptual limits of visualising monstrous Otherness. See Brougher, "Art and Nuclear Culture."

4. Russell, *Book of the Dead*, 64–71.

5. The most prominent concept to adorn the notion of Romero's zombie, and indeed the undead in horror generally, is the Freudian psychoanalytic concept of the uncanny—that what is familiar can at the same instant be unfamiliar, and thus be sublime and excremental at the same instant. Romero's zombies indeed exude the affects of the sublime and the excremental contemporaneously. It is pertinent to mention the theme of the "double" as integral to the evolution of the concept of the uncanny. Freud considered the "double" to be an important part of the ego's defence mechanism and accounts for mans' fascination with his reflection, shadows, guardian spirits—an energetic denial of the powerful inevitability of death. This idea of "immortal soul" is the same desire that motivated the ancient Egyptians to the making of art in the lasting images of their dead. However, Freud considered that once

this desire had moved on from archaic man to modernity the double takes on a new aspect—from being an assurance of immortality the double becomes the harbinger of death and self-destruction. See Freud, *The Uncanny*, and Dolar, "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night."

6. In Romero's undead, death itself becomes uncanny—familiar, yet unfamiliar—a way of raising the trauma of subjective death into the light of a narrative of fantasy in order to keep it repressed. For Freud, denial of death had serious connotations: we surround ourselves with the fantasy narratives of death but then have no way of imagining our own deaths other than as spectators who survive it. As a result, Freud argued, on a psychic level the totality of the human unconscious could be convinced of its own immortality (see Rutherford, *Zombies*, 39–45, 88–89). It is worth noting here that in psychoanalysis the unconscious conceptualization of infinitude can induce a deep perturbation, trauma, and neuroses. For an interesting interpretation in film criticism see Ẑiẑek, *Pervert's Guide to Cinema*.

7. See Williams, *Cinema of George A. Romero*, 1–20, and *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue*.

8. Myths and fairy tales answer the eternal questions about what life is really like and the reality of the human condition. However, myths offer binary and definitive answers, while fables and fairy tales offer animistic modes of storytelling that help narrativize one's own experiences of the world in the form of a self-reflective worldview that conforms to one's own time and context. Myths also have a rigid finality and usually tragic narrative closure; fables, on the other hand, have a subtle finitude that is optimistic, happy, and open-ended. For an interesting Freudian analysis of the interplay of psychic and narrative tropes employed by both myth and fable, see Bettelheim, *Uses of Enchantment*, 35–41, 47–53). For an anthropological perspective, see Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*.

9. Paffenroth, *Gospel of the Living Dead*.

10. Romero was heavily influenced by horror comics during the 1950s. Not only is this evident in his visual style of storyboarding and editing but also thematically. Although the horror comics of the 1950s were viciously criticized, during the McCarthy era, by conservatives who claimed links between juvenile delinquency and comic book "trash-culture," they were more visually and thematically subversive of institutional values than mainstream critical media. Romero's explicit homage to EC Comics and the horror genre they created can be seen in *Creepshow* (1982). See Williams, *Cinema of George A. Romero*, 2–3, 17–23, 29–30, 83–98, 114–18, 120–27.

11. Loudermilk, "Eating 'Dawn' in the Dark."

12. Romero considers *Day* to be his personal favorite and the most technically accomplished zombie film of his oeuvre. This author agrees. For insightful interviews with Romero about his films, see Williams, *George A. Romero: Interviews*. For works that have unique insight into the production processes specific to Romero and that are written by fans who starred as extras in *Day*, see Gagne, *Zombies that Ate Pittsburgh*, especially 147–91, and Karr, *The Making of George A. Romero's Day of the Dead*.

13. Whether slow, shambling zombies in the Romero mold, or fast, sprinting zombies of the new era of films, zombies share a particular revolutionary ethic. Once humanity is absent they appear to all get along—they don't do 'isms'; race and gender are of no import; it is as if they espouse a particularly inverted form of indifference to difference: "Become dead the same as us and we will be indifferent to your differences." For a discussion of the evolution of contemporary zombies in a post-9/11 world, where the zombie has had to grapple with its own familiarity, see Bishop, "Dead Man Still Walking," For a full discussion that traces the ideological roots of the zombie to Haitian operations of social repression, and then details its evolution within an ideological apparatus by which the zombie can be seen as both symbolic of hegemonic and subersive ideological negations, see Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic*, particularly 52–72 and (for discussion of the evolution of the zombie as subject) 158–96.

14. Romero has again returned to the Romeroesque; however this time he has returned to its very roots by authoring a comic book series, *Empire of the Dead*, that parodies the origins of his undead as influenced by the uncanny vampires in Matheson's 1954 masterpiece, *I Am Legend*. Romero's comic series unfolds in epic fantasy style with a three-way conflict between zombies, humans, and vampires. See Williams, *Cinema of George A. Romero*.

15. Robert Kirkman, author and creator of *The Walking Dead*, is vocal about the anxiety-inducing nature of the narrative non-closure of Romero's films. Stating that the one and only thing he hates about zombie films is the ending, his ultimate goal for the *Walking Dead* graphic novel was to produce a narrative that never ended. Arguably this is an unconscious confirmation of the power and thrall of the Romeroesque; however, it is worth noting that *The Walking Dead* lacks any apparent capacity for inherent self-ridicule in the mold of the Romeroesque, and thus lacks self-awareness of its origins as an ideological construct in and of itself. Viewed through the lens of the Romeroesque it could be argued to take itself too seriously (see Kirkman, et al., *The Walking Dead: Book 1*, 304). For an interesting insight into the workings of postmodern traumatic literature in a psychoanalytic context, see Ruti, *Singularity of Being*, 52–53 and 124–26.

16. Throughout his works Romero's zombies evolved, parodying and destabilizing his own conventions, growing to question the conditions—unfettered warfare, global capitalism, and voyeuristic modern technology—that organize social, cultural, and familial relations in the twenty-first century.

17. See Flint, *Zombie Holocaust*, and Kay, *Zombie Movies*.

18. Romero ironically feels that the popularity of zombies in contemporary pop culture is driven more by games from within pop culture than it has been by films as a mainstream cultural artifact. See Robey, "George A. Romero: Why I Don't Like The Walking Dead."

For the Romeroesque's influence on video games—in particular the *Call of Duty* franchise—see Webley, "The Supernatural, Nazi Zombies, and the Play Instinct." Also relevant are: Flint, *Zombie Holocaust*, 169–77; Vuckovic, *Zombies!*, 142–50; Backe and Aarseth, "Ludic Zombies;" Krzywinska, "Zombies in Gamespace;" and Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic*.

19. As in, "we split up with Liz tonight!"

20. He came to a party several years before—and is still there. However, in reminding Shaun that he has "work this morning" we are reminded that Ed's persistent presence in the house perhaps has some form of function for Shaun.

21. It is arguable that Brooker's writing style is in and of itself Romeroesque. From the use of music from *Dawn* in its appeals to somnambulistic viewers, to its overt commentary on and castigation of the British public's indiscriminate cannibalistic consumption of what he considers vapid television, Brooker's *Wipe* (and *Black Mirror*) series are well respected for their self-ridicule and self-parodying nature as they lampoon themselves for being a product of the very media they deride.

22. In interview on the set of the production Brooker remarked, "TV should scare people, should terrify people . . . I hope kids stay up late and watch this and come away traumatized, and then fucking kill each other. In 15 years' time there's fewer fucking human beings in this rotting world . . . Why do I always say things like that? . . . What is the matter with me? . . . I don't mean it!" (*Dead Set*, DVD extras).

23. Liu, "Psychoanalysis, Popular and Unpopular."

24. Dolar, ""I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night.'"

25. A properly Freudian way to consider the uncanny is actually as a negation of a negation—in and of itself a downward spiral of negativity. This is an essential Hegelian reading of dialectical negation, where each negation carries an inscribed trace on the underside of its meaning of the prior negation.

26. This is what has prompted many cultural theorists to argue that the Romeroesque zombie is at the same time an object of comedy and horror and pity and envy. See, for example, Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, 335–36.

27. Freud's repeated returns to the uncanny, however, did little to actually solidify a working theory of how these unique and codependent phenomena function as a human constellation of psychic affects, or how they coalesce in clinical praxis. As Dolar writes, we are left with an phenomena that is little more than a prolegomenon to the psychic functioning of the uncanny, and its relation to our slips, jokes, and the dreams that speak of the foundations of our daily lives, our ideologies, and ultimately the "kingdom of sense" that most of us choose to exist in. Dolar, "'I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night.'"

28. Liu, "Psychoanalysis, Popular and Unpopular."

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Jewish folkloric humor evolves around themes of earthiness and stubborn plebian pride, where personal acts of goodwill and praiseworthy ventures reveal the existence of fundamental flaws. Ibid.

36. Ibid., 220.

37. Liu, "Psychoanalysis, Popular and Unpopular," 221.
38. Wright, "'Why Would You Do That Larry?'"
39. Abrami, *Psychoanalyzing Jewish Humor*.
40. See Gorer, *Exploring English Character*. It would seem that, given the vitriolic critiques of his work, Gorer was in fact unconsciously proved correct in his assertions. See, for example, "Book Reviews," *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 6 (October 1009), http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/aa.1956.58.6.02a00290/pdf. See also Rutherford, *Zombies*, 90.
41. Žîẑek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 28–31.
42. Wright, "On Jewish Humor."
43. Critchley, *Ethics—Politics—Subjectivity*, 224.
44. It is worth noting that in traditional Greek thought the basic trait of human essence is translated by German philosophy as "uncanniest"; as in, to be the "uncanniest one,"—the innate human drive to cast oneself out of history, out of the homely. See Critchley, *Ethics—Politics—Subjectivity*, 222.
45. Critchley, *Ethics—Politics—Subjectivity*, 224–25.
46. Ibid., 228.
47. Ibid., 231.
48. In homage to *Dawn of the Dead*, Joplin suggests that zombies are attracted to the house because "this place used to be like a church to them," prompting another housemate, Marky, to retort: "Perhaps they can just smell bullshit." Brooker, *Dead Set*.
49. Watt, "Zombie Psychology," 59–89.
50. Žîẑek, *Absolute Recoil*, 215–16.

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