

## Endure, Not Cure: *Rammbock* and Pandemic Experience

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Abstract: This work examines the concept of a pandemic in microcosm through a close analysis of the German zombie film *Rammbock* (Marvin Kren, 2010, Germany). Unlike blockbuster zombie films that focus on the size and spread of the contagion, *Rammbock* looks at the individual on the ground, in this case away from the urban centres where assistance and specialist support might be found. Importantly, in this film the virus is harmless until “switched on” through anger or rage. The film is, therefore, about how to avoid activating the virus, which creates interesting links to the present pandemic, where personal responsibility plays a role in limiting contagion and spread of the illness. *Rammbock* also explores the impact of isolation, again offering comparisons to present circumstances where individuals have had to isolate and in so doing have become cut off from assistance and human contact, leading to varying degrees of mental health issues. That *Rammbock*'s version of a pandemic does not focus on the ability of humanity to medically remedy the virus is also relevant to the current situation, where it seems to be a case of endure, not cure.

Keywords: zombie; film; contagion; community; inclusion; exclusion; pandemic;

Over the past 50 years, the zombie film has become a metaphor for cultural debates or sociological concerns, highlighting inequalities, moral panics, or other critiques of social change. As concerns about contagion and responsibility rise in the collective consciousness because of the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020, we can look once again at the zombie genre and consider the ways in which the spectre of viral infection is framed within such narratives and how the genre shines a light upon the human condition and the fragility of the society in which we live.

Many of the public health campaigns conducted in the UK during the Covid-19 pandemic have centred on developing group and individual responsibility in order to create a purposeful and united nation at a time of national and international stress. The pandemic-inspired emphasis on society, community, exclusion, inclusion, sacrifice, and personal responsibility echo themes central to the zombie genre: in the words of Sarah Stone “...moral allegories in which the zombies function as catalysts forcing the surviving humans into

improvised families and communities whose continued existence depends upon ethical adaptation” (2013).

Rather than focusing on well-known zombie blockbusters like George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, which typically depict national or international contagion and apocalyptic devastation, this essay will analyse *Rammbock* (Marvin Kren, 2010), which centers on ordinary characters who represent the majority of people affected by viral outbreaks in the past century.<sup>1</sup> *Rammbock*’s focus on the local, community-driven response of normal people at the onset of an outbreak makes the film an important allegory for the current pandemic. We watch the characters as they attempt to create a survival strategy and coping mechanisms without the assistance of the state and far from urban centres where assistance, specialist support, and other aid might be found. Additionally, the narrative unfolds at the beginning of the outbreak, before the populace has had time to prepare for the apocalypse. *Rammbock* thereby enables spectators to consider the ways in which we might handle the reality of such an outbreak, focussing on the concept of enduring, not curing. In other words, the film asks how people endure a viral threat when there is no cure.

### ***Rammbock* - Changing the Rules**

Zombie movies demonstrate the cause and effect of a pandemic, a sweeping infection that challenges and indeed changes the way in which the society/world functions. The twist is that those infected do not die but rather become the “walking dead”, horror functionaries who spread the virus and thus provide a tangible vision of sickness and death, a literal enemy at the gates of humanity and life as we know it. Most zombie narratives offer the hope of survival through the locating of a safe space or the discovery of a treatment or cure for the

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<sup>1</sup> *Rammbock* (Marvin Kren, 2010) premiered at the Locarno Film Festival in August 2010, with a theatrical release in Germany and Austria in September 2010. The film was exhibited globally at film festivals and through international sales (Blaney 2010). It is available on DVD with English language subtitles.

infection. Additionally, these narratives focus on avoiding infection (not being bitten or having zombie fluids enter the human body) or not becoming 'undead' when death is at hand; in such cases infection/sublimation can be literally fought off. *Rammbock* offers an alternative to the established zombie infection narrative in that the virus lies dormant within the host after infection, and the host has some control over the triggering of the disease and the descent to zombie status. Those bitten can still stave off their potential fate through self-management and with the assistance of others. This small change to the classic trajectory of the zombie virus brings *Rammbock* closer to the contemporary real-world experience of taking action to prevent infection and slow the impact of the virus. Self-management and personal responsibility thereby become key factors in controlling the epidemic.

*Rammbock's* protagonist is Michael (Michael Fuith), who visits Berlin from Vienna to try to win back his ex-girlfriend Gabi (Anka Graczyk), the returning of her keys providing a last chance for a face-to-face meeting. Finding Gabi strangely absent from her apartment, Michael is attacked by a plumber (Arno Koker) working there. The plumber's visible transformation shows the catalyst for zombification; he battles a rusted fitting, becoming increasingly angry until he is transformed into a zombie. Michael then forms an alliance of necessity with the plumber's apprentice Harper (Theo Trebs), and the two work together to survive, find safety, and perhaps escape the apartment building. It is important to note that the film does not depict the zombie as a creature raised from the dead, but rather as a manifestation of a viral contagion that has been triggered by the extreme emotions of the host. Initially, this 'trigger' is not understood, but as the protagonist and the audience learn more about the virus, it becomes clear that such triggering can be avoided through careful management of the host's emotional state. In other words, although infection is caused by the traditional bite or fluid transfer that is part of zombie lore, in this film, management of the contagion is possible, which distinguishes *Rammbock* from other such narratives. The

element of personal responsibility in *Rambo*, therefore, supports Roger Luckhurst's description of the ways "Enlightenment thinkers" theorised communicable sickness:

They sought first natural-scientific explanations for illnesses, and then social ones for their spread. "Contagion" long referred as much to rumours and dreads as to the disease itself, and it was believed that fear and ideas could kill as much as the mysterious agents carrying the illness. (2015:179-180)

The rumours and dread aroused by the contagion in *Rambo* find ready comparison in the current coronavirus pandemic. Due to the lack of information and transparency from medical authorities and, particularly, governments, many have felt fearful and uninformed about transmission and treatment.

*Rambo* also explores the ways in which isolation and an inability to reach out to others can affect a person, again offering comparisons to real-world circumstances where individuals have needed to isolate and in so doing have become cut off from assistance and even from human contact, leading to varying degrees of mental health issues during their enforced separation from the wider world. That this version of a pandemic does not focus on the ability of humanity to medically remedy the virus is also meaningful, and links strongly to the wider experience of the general public in times of contagion where it is a case of endure not cure. This humanises the elements of horror within the film and also creates a clearer link to the actual experiences of non-specialists when dealing with a viral/transmittable illness where common sense and judgement/action take the place of medical training, knowledge or specialist response.

### **Society and community**

Society and community are central themes for the zombie narrative in general and are especially important to *Rambo*. Indeed, the zombie genre has long provided commentary

on society's mores, the most influential of these being director George Romero's work which has focussed conversation upon the impact of capitalism, self-absorption and consumerism prevalent within society. Zombie horror movies have warned humanity of the price to pay for experimentation and the devaluing of other species and yet infections continue to be identified with the worst-case scenario being a pandemic of the scope and longevity of HIV/AIDS, or possibly Covid-19.

The zombie crisis enables the questioning of societal rules that maintain stability while placing the characters into situations where such rules must be bent or broken, challenging assumptions about group behaviour in the absence of regulations. Interestingly the zombie realm mirrors real-world pandemics where we see behaviours contrary to the norms of social responsibility and adherence to a "common good". In real and fictional worlds, scarcity becomes the driving force for disintegration. In humanity's reaction to a crisis without simple solutions, a virus without cure, we are forced to confront our true nature. The pressure of such unusual situations offers insights into our willingness to follow or break society's expectations, to build or destroy as we find it necessary.

*Rambock's* characters learn about the virus through news reports and hearsay or gossip across the courtyard. A patchy news report identifies the nature of the sickness, with guidance offered in the form of generalities about remaining inside and self-medicating to lower emotional responses where possible. The authorities' expectation that people will simply cope is an especially interesting aspect of *Rambock*, given that it is set at the *beginning* of an outbreak, showing how the characters experience their first encounters and particularly the limited information and leadership delivered to the populace via the media. As Gina Kolata notes (about the 1918 flu outbreak): "Few public officials anticipated the disaster and almost no members of the public did. The outbreak, in fact, was preceded by soothing words from medical authorities with a sort of band-played-on bravado" (2005: 19).

Community formation (or disintegration) is central to zombie films. Group formation can be based on family or a 'family' created by the need to construct a survival network. This happens in *Rambo* when the protagonist Michael creates new alliances and friendships in the apartment block and attempts to reignite and retain old relationships, in this case with his ex-girlfriend Gabi. Michael's relationship, or lack thereof, with Gabi and his belief in its importance bookends and drives this film, highlighting the importance of this theme.

The opening of the film offers the viewer past memories of Michael, the world that he and Gabi shared, and the love/loss that drives Michael onwards within the narrative. At the beginning of the film these images, stills of a past reality, speak of the loss of a relationship and explain Michael's visit to Gabi, his final effort to salvage his connection to her. The photographs show their history together and underscore a connection now lost. For as Susan Sontag says, "like every mass art form, photography is not practiced by most people as an art. It is mainly a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power" (1979: 8). Sontag's analysis of the power of the photograph resonates widely within *Rambo* and within societies' use of the visual image to both celebrate and memorialise. The use of these stills, snapshots of Michael's and Gabi's life and love together, offers an important visual connection to our understanding of loss in a wider sociological sense, "Those ghostly traces, photographs," Sontag continues "supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives" (Ibid: 9). Indeed, in crisis situations, where people are victims of a disaster, pictures still stand as the means by which to identify, find, or mourn those lost, "an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure" (Ibid: 9). This is certainly Michael's experience as he looks through images on Gabi's phone, searching for a link to their past and possibly her present. At *Rambo's* close we see that Gabi and Michael do not escape the effects of the virus and so succumb to the infection. The images opening the film therefore act as a remembrance, as the couple are

reunited in death. On one hand they are no longer human and so are “lost,” but as zombies, the couple are together again—the closing images show them in an everlasting embrace. In the Western media, similar images have been presented for those lost to Covid-19, those who succumbed to the Ebola outbreaks of 2016 and 2018 and those who died in the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. Ewan Kirkland refers to such images as “*memento mori*...reflecting upon their subject’s mortality...an image which will withstand the ravages of time...” (2020: 101). The view of a lost past evoked in *Rambock*’s use of still images is strangely poignant, reflecting the memories of life “before” the pandemic.

The film also emphasises the need for self-care and the responsibility individuals have to care for the sick when an outbreak occurs, again offering present-day real-world parallels. In the film, resources like food and medicine are scarce and must be purchased or bargained, laying the foundation for alliances and antagonisms. Altruism and necessity make strange bedfellows in fiction as they do in the real world. The enforced confinement and inability to fully prepare for what becomes a lockdown in *Rambock* creates tensions and alliances between people who would not normally have interacted with each other. Initially, hunger and other physical or pharmaceutical needs create affiliations between characters. However, self-preservation is at the centre of these coalitions, and wariness eventually overtakes trust.

### **Exclusion and inclusion**

In addition to questioning the idea of community, the zombie film creates a tension between being “apart” and “a part”. Concepts of exclusion and inclusion are central to the genre in general and to *Rambock* specifically. Group membership offers safety and access to scarce resources. The human desire for social interaction facilitates viral contagion; proximity, therefore, becomes a major concern. Co-operation and mutual assistance are necessary for survival, but this togetherness brings its own dangers. Nevertheless, we must act individually

for the good of the whole even when circumstances are not ideal, with associations formed out of necessity. *Rambock* shows a series of carefully separated private and public spaces, from which the characters are able to include or exclude others, whether physically, intellectually or emotionally. When communications systems break down in the film, only those in the apartment complex are available as resources for Michael to plan his survival. The physical world therefore offers both threat and hope.

As the contagion worsens, rules must be established to ensure separation from those “outside” the selected circle in order to minimize potential exposure. If the ideal of “community” is fundamentally inclusion, the sharing of resources and safe spaces to ensure longevity and protection in a pandemic, the community is rapidly forced to emphasise exclusion. The need to maintain a safe space leads to protecting territory, resources, and individuals, rather than helping others. To survive, the uninfected must distance themselves from the infected; as Rogers notes, “The abject threatens life and therefore must be ‘radically excluded’ from the place of the living subject” (Rogers 2008: 128). By excluding those who have succumbed to the virus, those who remain in the community stay human and so survive, although they may become the danger within. Such exclusion renders potential carriers, those wounded but not bitten, outside of the safe space and any established groups. This is illustrated in the sequence where Michael evades an attack by exiting into the attic rooms of the building. By moving into this hidden section of the apartment block, Michael discovers Gabi and Kai (Sebastian Achilles), who are sitting out the virus in seclusion. This secret space excludes everyone except them, and so Michael’s status as an outsider, Gabi’s ex-boyfriend, is emphasized by Kai’s presence. For Michael, the threat from outside is replaced by the threat Gabi and Kai’s relationship poses to him. Michael’s accidental incursion into this protected space reveals both the potential for inclusion alongside the reality of fear and exclusion. Gabi’s initial happiness and surprise at seeing Michael indicates the possibility of



his remaining in this secure location. However, this initial welcome changes to panic when the wound on Michael's arm is observed and the couple forcibly eject Michael from the safety of the attic and into the hinterland of the rooftop, the finality of which is underscored when the hatch bangs shut, cutting him off from the safety below. Michael's eviction therefore affords him a literal and metaphorical perspective on the situation below from his rooftop perch. Michael now sees that the scale of the epidemic is beyond his or anyone else's control, and the sight of Berlin in flames viewed from the outskirts of the city serves as a visual reminder that all norms have been suspended. The scene also confirms for Michael that the situation he faces is not an anomaly but is taking place as far as he can see—and beyond. *Rambock* thus emphasizes the feelings of segregation and loneliness that result from a pandemic. Michael's placement on the roof also works to offer a glimpse of the micro ramifications of his enforced segregation. Michael does not belong in this place; he is an outsider to Gabi's new life and will not regain what he was lost.

Figure 1 – Michael watches Berlin from afar.

*Rambock* is about isolation, even when one is part of a group, and privileges small deeds over dramatic actions. *Rambock* seeks to represent the pandemic experience of the “little” people, those members of society who are at the mercy of events and must deal with them as best they can without special abilities or resources. As a result, *Rambock* speaks more directly to the experiences of people affected in the real world by such outbreaks than do larger-scale zombie films. In both *Rambock* and the real world the ability to forecast and predict have been removed, and there is mainly the present with which to contend. Without a clear end in sight people must “make do.” Of course a zombie outbreak may seem more severe than the current pandemic, but similarities can be seen in terms of the powerlessness

experienced by the general public as they become caught in the midst of an invisible threat outside overall control.

### **Sacrifice and personal responsibility**

Our final consideration is sacrifice and personal responsibility. In *Rambo*, the zombie-driven text provides a space through which to consider and critique society. Horror films allow directors to extend such issues to almost absurdist conclusions: the worst possible circumstances lead to the worst human behaviour. As Jen Webb and Samuel Byrard have noted: “The homology between humans and zombies is... one very solid reason for their enduring appeal and fascination: we humans are arrested by ourselves and by that of which we are capable” (2017: 122).

Of course, the worst circumstances may also give rise to the best aspects of humanity, like altruism and generosity. Scott Bader-Saye identifies “[...] three noble actions we should offer even though they may be counterintuitive in a culture of fear: hospitality, peace-making, and generosity” (Garrett 2017a: 167-168). With these “noble actions” in mind, we can see that *Rambo* also offers a more positive understanding of human behaviour in the midst of societal breakdown. In addition to stockpiling, fistfights, and other behavioural excesses that may spread the infection, *Rambo* shows altruism and sacrifice.

*Rambo*'s version of viral contagion may be seen as a reality-driven depiction of a pandemic, a strange thing to say about a zombie movie. It has a lot to offer about the human condition and what humanity is capable of in extreme conditions, when responsibility for getting infected and spreading that infection lies with the general public. As Garrett notes “Sadly, even though no zombies walk our earth, these stories are so popular with us because they reflect some of the ways we have reacted to our own perceived menaces” (2017a: 130). In *Rambo*, the concept of individual responsibility and ability to cope, or not, becomes a

central preoccupation of the film, underscoring that “Zombie plagues erupt as chaos both social and personal, a trespass of science that affects the individual as well as the communal body” (Luckhurst 2015: 122). *Rambock*’s micro-community is reshaped and redefined as the film progresses.

*Rambock*’s human characters are given some agency in their own fate: they can turn into a zombie, exit the world at a time of their own choosing, or stay and fight. As in the present pandemic, the film’s authorities tell people to stay inside and not leave the safety of the home in order to slow the rate of contagion. Not until late in the film is the triggering mechanism for the transformation to zombie understood. However, the way to obtain the required anxiety-reducing drugs is not shared with the public; people have to find the drugs themselves if they need it. This virus, like Covid-19, has suddenly appeared with no government plan in place to tackle it.

The film’s characters improvise homemade methods of protection; instead of cottage industry production of facemasks and visors, *Rambock*’s humans fashion homemade weapons and wear rubber gloves to reduce the chance of infection from bites. They must “make do” without the support of the authorities. Just as there are today online tips about how to make a mask or sanitizer at home, in *Rambock*, Harper creates projectiles from forks and a slingshot weapon from cookware. In this low budget world of creative weaponry, the camera, which has served earlier in the film as the technology of remembrance, becomes a form of protection. The camera’s flash is discovered to temporarily disorient those who have succumbed to the sickness, thereby embodying Sontag’s notion of the camera as “sublimation of the gun” (14).

Figure 2 – Improvised weapons, making do.

The importance of sacrifice and personal responsibility are most obvious in the film's approach to suicide and death. In three notable instances, characters undertake actions that will result in their own deaths. First is the death of Manni (Carsten Behrendt), a silent character who is only observed from a distance. Second are the deaths of Klaus (Steffen Münster) and his infected wife, which remove a threat to Michael. Last, we have Michael's own decision to join Gabi at film's end. As an audience we can only imagine each character's thoughts and motivations for their actions. However, what is clear is that the film's concept of death evolves, moving away from the visceral dispatching of zombies to something more thoughtful and humanistic.

Manni is a character defined by his outward appearance. He never speaks and is only tolerated because of his perceived physical strength. His presence at his window is one of corporeal menace, his self-presentation underscoring stereotypes of toxic masculinity, his attire, tattoos, and size all symbolising an aggressor. His presence at his window observing yet not participating, also suggests the strong loner, who has no desire or physical need to be a part of group action. Manni thus represents a nominal collective, one built on casual proximity and passing knowledge, rather than on mutual need. The denizens of the apartment block don't know his name, and only his nearby neighbour is familiar enough with him to call for his initial assistance. Manni's inclusion in the wider conversation illustrates the degrees of separation actualised by the apartment block residents; his strength is needed, but only to close the exterior gate to the shared courtyard of the apartment block, excluding those who have succumbed to the virus and now pose a threat. Manni's inaction confirms his self-interest, and the physical threat he poses is underscored by the information that Manni has been bitten, revealed after it is understood how the virus is triggered. After this, Manni is only perceived as a threat. As he stands in his window staring aggressively at Michael in the opposite block, will he have the self-control to avoid triggering the virus through his anxiety?

Figure 3 – Manni.

Later on, however, such a negative interpretation of Manni proves incorrect as he decides to end his own life. His sacrifice is moving and poignant, underscoring how little this ad hoc community, thrown together by circumstance, actually knows and understands him. Manni's lack of engagement is not based in antagonism but in hopelessness and ennui. Given that Manni never speaks, the reasons behind his decision to hang himself are purely speculative. Nevertheless, as Garrett attests, "Suicide has to be acknowledged as one of the moral choices open to people in the post-apocalyptic world of zombie stories" (2017a: 89). Did Manni understand the havoc he might create were he to succumb to the virus? Or was he simply depressed by the overall situation? Nevertheless, Manni's suicide demonstrates one of *Rambock's* central moral concerns: the possibility of removing oneself from becoming a danger to others.

The difficulty of moral decision-making in a pandemic is, however, best illustrated through Klaus. After his wife succumbs to the virus and attacks Michael, Klaus decides to kill her and himself. Their final embrace, with which Klaus carries them both over the balcony to their deaths, underscores the sacrifices and sense of personal responsibility needed when a population must endure without cure. Klaus' attempts to keep his wife comfortably sedated is a situation familiar to caregivers looking after the dying or critically ill. In *Rambock*, Klaus' choice to end both their lives can be seen as a release, as well as a sacrifice for the greater good.

As noted above, Michael's obsession with Gabi frames this film, and its end allows Harper and Anita (Emily Cox) to escape and Michael and Gabi to reunite. Gabi's emergence into the courtyard as a zombie finally offers Michael the opportunity to be with her forever. His decision not to take drugs to calm himself but rather, to give in to his overwhelming feelings for her, sacrificing his humanity to be with her as a zombie, reveals the extent of his

obsession. Michael's choice is, however, ultimately a selfish act, although it enables Harper and Anita's escape. Michael's future is unusual in this genre in that he has a choice and chooses to become a zombie out of perceived self-interest. As he holds Gabi in an everlasting embrace as he finally becomes fully infected, her attempts to break away are futile, and his desire is finally sated. Succumbing to the infection emerges as an intimate and inclusive act at the film's close.

In *Rambo* the threat of a zombie "rage" virus becomes the backdrop to more human experiences and dramas, obsessions and altruism, and the situations engendered by the outbreak become opportunities to observe both the best and worst aspects of humanity. The themes of society, community, exclusion, inclusion, sacrifice, and personal responsibility all find a place within the narrative and may be linked to experiences of real-world viral contagions. The presence of a virus which allows the carrier some control over the outcome of the disease offers opportunities to consider how people behave when they are able to act for the common good, even without a clear sense of when or if a cure will be found. *Rambo's* focus on the experiences of a small group caught up in a pandemic offers realistic relationships with which to compare the experiences of the general public in the current pandemic. Where zombie films traditionally offer an established apocalyptic dystopia, *Rambo* places its characters at the very beginning of the outbreak, before anyone fully understands what is happening. By focusing on the first days of a pandemic *Rambo* constructs a contagion that can neither be contained nor controlled, its human victims forced to improvise as best they can. The concept of "endure, not cure" is central to the film, creating an oddly realistic version of a viral outbreak, even though the "virus" is zombies. In a world where we are encouraged to believe in the ability of those in power to manage such global events, *Rambo* emphasizes that ordinary people must ultimately find their own path to survival.



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