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FROM THE CLASSICAL *POLIS* TO THE NEOLIBERAL CAMP: MAPPING THE  
BIOPOLITICAL REGIMES OF THE UNDEAD IN *DAWN OF THE DEAD*, *ZOMBI  
2* AND *28 DAYS LATER*

*Introduction*

The aim of this paper is to map the (bio)political conflicts around the undead body that emerged in early postmodern zombie films and to look at a possible contemporary resolution of these conflicts in the genre's currently dominant form. The theoretical starting point of the analysis is the Lacanian psychoanalytic concept of the living dead developed by Slavoj Žižek<sup>1</sup> that links the sublime bodies of the undead, situated outside normative social boundaries, to a revolutionary mode of subjectivity. His model allows to read these films as allegories for popular uprisings against the global neoliberal consensus forming in the late 1970s that stroke a heavy blow at underprivileged populations by advocating the dismantling of the welfare state and the deregulation of the market through an increase of privatization and individual responsibility.<sup>2</sup> At the time of George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and Lucio Fulci's *Zombi 2* (1979) the new status quo is not yet solidified, which is why, I suggest, these films try to locate the problem of the emergent global mass of bodies, deemed superfluous for the entrepreneurial logic of neoliberal production, in the framework of the classical exclusory politics of the city-state threatened by the revolution of the proletariat. It is Fulci's film which takes an ultra-leftist stance here by supporting, with the risk of appearing ridiculous, the political takeover of the world by its underclass zombies while Romero's *Dawn* remains skeptical about the power of the masses, retreating rather to a conservative position of established middle class family values and patriarchy. By contrast, in Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002), a film that has arguably jumpstarted and renewed the zombie genre for the 21<sup>st</sup> century after 9/11,<sup>3</sup> the biopolitical apocalypse, i.e. the Western bourgeois citizen's indistinction from the precarious bodies of displaced Third World masses,<sup>4</sup> is not a threat anymore but an irreversible event of the past which seems to make classical political struggles both on the right and the left pointless. To analyze this shift, I utilize Giorgio Agamben's concept of the camp as the biopolitical paradigm of modernity<sup>5</sup> to

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<sup>1</sup> see Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London:Verso, 1997), 89-90.

<sup>2</sup> see David Harvey, *The Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1-5.

<sup>3</sup> see Kyle Bishop, "Dead Man Still Walking: Explaining the Zombie Renaissance," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 37, no. 1 (2009): 19.

<sup>4</sup> on the analogy between zombies and the displaced masses of late capitalism see Jon Stratton, "Zombie Trouble: Zombie Texts, Bare Life and Displaced People," in *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14 (2011): 265-281

<sup>5</sup> see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998)

demonstrate how in the permanent state of emergency issued in *28 Days Later* because of the zombie-plague, the non-infected human subjects become treated as undead themselves, as bare life in the zone of indistinction they encounter in the refugee camp they seek shelter in. I argue that Boyle even goes a step further in the conclusion of his film presenting a scenario where the successful elimination of the fascist-type prison camp with its sovereign military leader and temporarily fixed boundaries between inside and outside actually leads to the universal extension of the zone of indistinction rather than to its overcoming. With the disappearance of the zombies as exceptions, their status becomes internalized by the film's surviving characters, indicating the successful transformation of their consciousness about their precarity caused by the absence of the state into self-responsibility aligned with the (re)productive purposes of neoliberal governmentality.

#### *The Undead in Psychoanalysis*

Žižek introduces the dimension of the undead as the conceptual space that lies between, what Lacan called, the two deaths of the subject: the real and the symbolic. At first glance, this appears to be the familiar body-mind distinction, real death referring to the biological cession of life while the symbolic to the ritual of mourning; a socially mediated procedure through which one's soul leaves the world, the symbolic community of her people. In this framework, everybody has to die twice in order to maintain the culture's preference of the soul over the body, to show that besides her mere biological life, the person also had a social existence which she will be remembered for by future generations, thereby sustaining the continuity of the symbolic order. From Lacan's perspective, however, the significance of this second death is somewhat different, as his claim that the social is ultimately a symbolic phenomenon means that the dead letter of language (i.e. the automatism of the signifier) stands in for the subject the moment she is born. The fact humans are nonetheless very much alive instead of being soulless automatons is the result of the non-correspondence between the set of signifiers that add up to a certain language (Lacan calls these A, as Other – *Autre* in French) and the meaning they signify. This gap is unbridgeable and leads to the big Other, our social symbolic substance being barred, always lacking in some way, unable to fully cover and deaden the Thing qua life substance, which becomes the source of *jouissance* (enjoyment).<sup>6</sup> For this reason the Lacanian subject is split between her dead (castrated) self in the symbolic order and an unconscious remainder of the uncastrated life substance that escapes every articulation of the Other's desire; this is what Lacan calls *objet a*.<sup>7</sup> Resisting symbolization, it "falls into" the register of the *real*; as Žižek states, it is the "the *object in subject* which is constitutive of the subject".<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 132.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), E 685-695.; Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), 263-277.

<sup>8</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 180.

What we normally call a living human being is a product of a balanced interaction between a symbolic role and its fantasmatic support covering over a remainder of *jouissance*. When this relation is disturbed in a way that one element overpowers the other, we end up with a subject who is not properly alive anymore but not fully dead either. There are two possible ways, Žižek suggests, this can happen: “For a human being to be ‘dead while alive’ is to be colonized by the ‘dead’ symbolic order; to be ‘alive while dead’ is to give body to the remainder of Life-Substance which has escaped the symbolic colonization (*lamella*).”<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, there are two different versions of the living dead possible in psychoanalysis. While the category “dead while alive” identifies the living dead in a more metaphorical sense prior to someone’s biological death—for instance as the state of being brainwashed by ruling ideologies—it is the term “alive while dead” that refers to the various figures of the undead in horror fiction. Since to be alive in the everyday sense one already had to be partially dead (castrated) in the symbolic order, when this mortified (symbolic) element of life is negated, instead of the subject’s death, we find her transformed into a living dead who, paradoxically, is more alive than the living themselves. In *this* fantasmatic figure of the undead, not limited by the symbolic order, the obscene immortality of the libido manifests itself as death drive, as a “blind, indestructible insistence” of life cutting across biological cycles of life and death.<sup>10</sup>

This framework allows us to see the symbolic rituals surrounding death differently. Biological death can be regarded seen in relation to the symbolic order as a negation of castration, the subject’s escape from the big Other, almost like an act of impoliteness where through the insisting presence of the dead body, the lack, the impotence of the symbolic order is uncovered. The function of a burying ritual as well as of the process of mourning is then to cover up this gap again. Or to put it differently, the unruly dead subject has to be disciplined and put to death again, properly this time, registering her discontinued existence in the big Other. In what follows I will show the different political implications of Žižek’s two concepts of the undead in the films of Romero, Fulci, and Boyle, suggesting that they depict the contemporary neoliberal subject as suspended between her two deaths, losing her previous balance in the welfare state.

#### *Dawn of the Dead and the Undead Body Politic*

*Dawn of the Dead* is a post-apocalyptic survivalist horror film where we follow a small group of people running away from an urban zombie epidemic towards a possibly not yet infected countryside only to end up barricading themselves inside a shopping mall halfway through their journey. One of the most interesting aspects of the film is its depiction of different human factions with two ultimately incompatible forms of resistance to the living dead. In one group there are the film’s four main characters: a narcissistic TV star, a trigger happy young soldier, a middle-aged policeman standing for the voice of reason, and a pregnant journalist, the woman whose life the three men are all eager to protect.

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<sup>9</sup> Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 89.

<sup>10</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 62.

They are the ones trying to survive at any cost, looking for a zombie-free spot using their helicopter. By contrast, the outbreak of the disease motivates another, larger group of people to organize hunting parties, mass zombie killings which Romero stages in a way to resemble the lynching of black slaves that America's white population used to perform as a holiday pastime during the antebellum era. In one early scene the killings are shown as a picnic, local communities taking a trip to the countryside to eat and drink together while shooting zombies as the main festivity, turning their massacre into a collective spectacle. These two groups represent two different notions of the political in Agamben's sense of the term; the first evokes the classical distinction between bare life (*zoé*, life in the biological sense) and political life (*bios*), trying to rebuild the city and its exterior, while the group of redneck zombie hunters already exist in a modern biopolitical space, in a zone of indistinction where "the realm of bare life [...] begins to coincide with the political realm".<sup>11</sup> According to Agamben, while in the classical Greek polis *bios*, the space of political institutions, was clearly separated from *zoé*, the space of the household, our modern democracy aims to liberate bare life, trying to politicize exactly the element that was the sign of subjection in the classical political model.<sup>12</sup> This project for Agamben is an impossible one since every politics necessarily involves a founding decision on what is going to be political and what is not; a sovereign choice made in the state of exception where the rule of law is temporarily suspended. In modern democracy, the need to liberate bare life *as such*, thus, also meets with the structural necessity of delineating *what kind of* bare life will be considered political, that is, worth living, and what kind of bare life will the sovereign have to let die. This is why the modern biopolitics of life turns out to be thanatopolitics, constantly making decisions about death, redrawing again and again the unstable boundary between life worth living and life void of value.<sup>13</sup>

In *Dawn of the Dead*, the classical political model of the city is applied by the four leading characters when they occupy a shopping mall full of zombies. Their plan is to clear the building, barricade the entrances, and make a space for themselves safely separated from the external threat. Despite their classical aspirations, however, their project is already overdetermined by biopolitical concerns since the aim of their actions, much like the aim of the mall as an institution, is to preserve their biological lives and to survive through enjoying the fruits of consumerism. The real question is, then, how are their lives nonetheless separated from the living dead whom they discover wandering around in the shopping center resembling mindless consumers? The key difference is that in the eyes of the protagonists, the zombies can't consume/enjoy "properly". As one of the characters points out, they are drawn to the mall because they used to have good memories about it back when they were human, but now it's just a reflex, a remainder of social conditioning that they are left with after their consciousness is gone. For this reason, Romero's zombies, rather than being bereft of symbolic substance resemble what Žižek called "dead while alive" subjects who are fully colonized by the dead symbolic order. In the eyes of the people inside, the zombies are not human precisely because they take the

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<sup>11</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 8-9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

symbolic law (the injunction to consume in this case) all too literally; they are trying too hard, unable to enjoy the heaven surrounding them. They resemble psychotics in the Lacanian sense, people for whom the phallus as the signifier of castration is foreclosed, not effective, making them unable to discern the lack in the big Other that would allow for a critical distance from symbolic norms.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, the four main characters perform their superiority through an ironic denigration of middle class consumption rituals of the post-war era; they *pretend* to be shoppers, *mock* the installations of commodities, act *as if* they were on a date in the mall, etc.

Such a binary, although it masquerades as the critique of suburban bourgeois culture, betrays both a neoconservative and a neoliberal politics. On the one hand, the living dead stand for the horror of a fully realized democratic promise inherent in the blindly equalizing ideal of consumerism, for the conservative fear that the American welfare state would overturn established social hierarchies. On the other hand, this taking refuge in one's inner resistance to ideological state apparatuses can be seen here also as the founding gesture of a neoliberal ideology that splits the population in two parts, into rational citizens capable of responsibly taking care of themselves in the absence of the state and social security, and mindless zombies who lack the capacity to do so and who thus stand for a biopolitical excess of precarious bodies useless for the new paradigm of capitalist production. Accordingly, the neoliberal-neoconservative project of the four protagonists entails the neutralization of the threat of a universal zone of indistinction by recreating the binaries of the classical *polis* through the mockery of the biopolitical situation which nonetheless keeps unconsciously controlling their lives. The human equals ironic consumer versus zombie equals mindless consumer distinction is their attempt to resuscitate the ancient opposition between citizen and slave, but this binary remains fragile, which is apparent in the way it ends up being redoubled along gendered lines *within* the group of the four survivors as Romero makes Fran, the pregnant woman regress into the stereotypical mindless female consumer who cannot quite elevate herself to the ironic reflexivity of the men in her company.<sup>15</sup>

As a return of the repressed biopolitical truth of their situation, the temporary idyll of the survivors is soon disturbed by a group of bikers who invade the mall with the obvious intention to loot and rape. They let the zombies back inside to have their fun with them—another example where the middle class family values of the place collapse into their obscene underside further enriching the semantic depth of the word picnic. If the political effort of the four survivors was an attempt to create a city with safe boundaries, the new arrivals turn this space into what Agamben calls the camp, realizing this biopolitical paradigm of modernity<sup>16</sup> by putting *everyone* in the zone of indistinction between *bios* and *zoe* where the limit between life worth and not worth living has to be redrawn

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<sup>14</sup> Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 79.

<sup>15</sup> See Stephen Harper, "Zombies, Malls, and the Consumerism Debate: George Romero's Dawn of the Dead" in *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture* 1, no. 2 (2002)

<sup>16</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 123.

constantly.<sup>17</sup> Since the value of life here is based directly on a particular form of bare life, biological facticity starts to coincide with the law.<sup>18</sup> In the film, the gang of bikers construct themselves as a superior race (their leader is appropriately wearing an SS helmet), which they constantly have to prove not simply by killing zombies but by mocking and humiliating them, showing that their agenda is not the destruction but the realization of the what the mall's more "civilized" previous inhabitants misrecognized as a *polis* but now cannot but appear as the always already biopolitical camp. From the perspective of the four survivors, on the other hand, the looters are like the zombies themselves, consuming mindlessly, excessively, which is the reason why they cannot have a proper (ironic) political identity and have to prove that they are humans through direct biopolitical violence over and over again. It's worth noting the class dimensions of this conflict as the bikers represent a part of the population that is normally excluded from the space of the mall, which is centered on middle class family values, something the four survivors also draw upon while protecting the morals of the pregnant female in their group. The bikers, in a carnivalesque subversion of these values, kill the zombies and the bourgeois survivors as a result of the same biopolitical decision to negate their common symbolic substance, their social conditioning that connects them, the now undead *bios* of the former welfare/consumer society that remains effective even after the neoliberal apocalypse, unconsciously driving zombies and humans alike to its most utopian manifestation to date: the shopping mall.

If the bikers qualify, then, as "alive while dead" in the Žižekian sense embodying the excess of *jouissance* that breaks free once the symbolic law is suspended, it is the four protagonists who really fit the category "dead while alive", unable to let go of an empty political framework long after its demise. The zombies, by contrast, occupy a place in-between; they are doubly signified and as such they collapse the two extremes into each other, embodying the hidden biopolitical truth of both human positions. Appropriately, in the end, both factions are overpowered by hordes of the living dead, and only two of them manage to escape: the policeman and the pregnant TV producer. By saving only them, Romero himself makes a biopolitical decision on whose life is worth living in the guise of the conservative hope to recreate and repopulate the classical polis somewhere else, somewhere safe.

#### *The Grotesque Bodies of Bare Life in Zombi 2*

Upon discovering the irredeemably biopolitical (i.e. undead) nature of the contemporary world in the end, Romero's heroes opted for keeping the neoliberal-neoconservative dream alive by excluding the disturbing dimension of *jouissance* entirely from their lives by flying away from the mall to build a new utopian undead ("dead while alive") body *politic* where the survival of the asexual couple can serve a purely instrumental purpose.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, Lucio Fulci's 1979 *Zombi 2* takes the opposite position by celebrating the visceral ("alive

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>19</sup> Romero confronts the viewer with the necessary failure and inherently fascistic nature of such utopia in the sequel, *Day of the Dead* (1985).

while dead”) dimension of the zombie takeover and the revolutionary potential of the libidinal apocalypse.<sup>20</sup> The film is set on a tropical island where a mysterious plague is causing the dead to come back to life and feed on the living. Among the main characters there is a seemingly benevolent white doctor living among the natives trying to find the cure for the disease, and a group of journalists from New York looking for cover story material. The postcolonial setting divides the human factions primarily along racial lines corresponding also to the geographical and class opposition between the white professionals from Manhattan and the voodoo believer inhabitants of the small island in the Antilles who are the first victims of the zombie virus. The situation soon escalates when centuries old carcasses of Spanish conquistadors start to climb out of their graves; it becomes obvious that small group of survivors doesn’t have a chance of overcoming the infection. Although a few of them escape the island on a boat back to New York, it’s already too late: an army of zombies is marching on the Brooklyn Bridge to take over Manhattan. What is peculiar about this film, as opposed to its American predecessor, is how it makes the living dead the real heroes of the story; in a way the narrative about the survivors’ hopeless fight to contain the undead is just an alibi for Fulci to show in great detail his human subjects’ transformation into what Mikhail Bakhtin called grotesque bodies, subjects who, in Žižekian terms, are “alive while dead.”

Such a state of the human body for Bakhtin should be opposed to the notion of the body in the classical sense which distinguishes clear boundaries separating it from other subjects and objects in the world, a body that has an individual soul and a rational consciousness expressed symbolically through the clarity of the eyes.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, the grotesque body has its center in the lower bodily stratum, emphasizing an inner excess of the intestines that protrude out of it, undoing the body’s clear separation from the material world, turning their relation into a fluid, constant exchange and interaction.<sup>22</sup> In Lacanian terms, while in the classical body the real of *jouissance* is kept under control by the symbolic, in the grotesque body it is released to fuel the immortal (death) drive of the libido. Perhaps the best illustration of the grotesque in *Zombi 2* is the conquistadors’ coming back to life; the carcasses are very slowly climbing out of their graves, barely distinguishable from their natural surroundings, from the humid earth they are rising from crawling with wild life (they even have worms hanging from their eye sockets). While the eye as the mirror of the soul is in the center of the classical model, the grotesque according to Bakhtin focuses instead on the gaping mouth, making us look into the sublime abyss of the body itself (into the real of its *jouissance*) without its rational, symbolic limits.<sup>23</sup> Fulci ties these two tropes—that of the void and the intestinal (libidinal) excess—together in the

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<sup>20</sup> Curiously, Fulci’s *Zombi 2* is the unofficial “sequel” of George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*, meaning that the producers tried to exploit the success of the American film (distributed as *Zombi* in Italy) by calling Fulci’s film *Zombi 2*. See Brad O’Brien, “Vita, Amore, e Morte – and Lots of Gore: The Italian Zombie Film,” in *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead*, ed. S. McIntosh and M. Leverette (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 57.

<sup>21</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “The Grotesque Image of the Body and its Sources” in *Rabelais and His World* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 320-321.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

recurring motive of his films where a person transforming into a zombie throws up blood and internal organs while she is losing her eyesight (the eyes often pop out). In Bakhtin's grotesque universe, this is a sign of fecundity, the same way as "devouring, swallowing and tearing to pieces" simultaneously stands for birth, the proliferation of life through bodily metamorphosis.<sup>24</sup> The zombie is thus a double symbol in this film; a harbinger of death but precisely through killing it also gives immortal life. Its body is grotesque because in it death coincides with birth as opposed to the classical body for which death is only death.<sup>25</sup> For Fulci, the living dead transform the whole body of humanity in a grotesque apocalypse, putting an end to civilization as we know it while promising its reconfiguration with the help of an unconstrained manifestation of the death drive.

As Bakhtin argues, "the grotesque conception of the body is interwoven not only with the cosmic but also with the social, utopian, and the historic theme, and above all with the theme of change of epochs and the renewal of culture".<sup>26</sup> It is possible to read the postcolonial others' turning into living dead and marching in New York City as a revolution of the global precarious masses, a carnivalesque suspension and subversion of the biopolitical hierarchies of neoliberalism that shows how "each man belongs to the immortal people who create history".<sup>27</sup> This is not without its comic undertones, as in the notorious final scene of *Zombi 2* where while the living dead are crossing the Brooklyn Bridge, it is clearly visible that the traffic of cars just a few meters below them goes on uninterrupted. Instead of simply reading this as another case of sloppiness that Italian trash films are known for, I suggest to take it as a rather appropriate demonstration of the zombies' invisibility in the normative symbolic, of the fact that they stand for subjects who are void of any symbolic substance that would identify them for/locate them in the big Other. As Žižek notes, these figures of substanceless subjectivity are whom Marx calls the proletariat.<sup>28</sup> When they become visible in Fulci's film as the obscene excess disturbing a smooth historical shift to the neoliberal consensus, they have a paralyzing effect on humans; with their blind gaze being void of any consciousness and reason, they stand for the insistence of life beyond the horizon of meaning which they seek to overthrow by enacting what can be called in Walter Benjamin's terms "divine violence".<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 331.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 321-322.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 325.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 367.; on the figure of the zombie as the proletariat of cinematic monsters see Jamie Russell, *Book of the Dead: The Complete History of Zombie Cinema* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 7.

<sup>28</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 10.

<sup>29</sup> as Žižek puts it: "When those outside the structured social field strike "blindly," demanding AND enacting immediate justice/vengeance, this is 'divine violence'" - Slavoj Žižek, "Robespierre or the 'Divine Violence' of Terror" in *Žižek Presents Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*, ed. J. Ducange (New York: Verso, 2007), x.; see also Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1*, ed. M. Bullock and M.W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 236-252.

*28 Days Later and the Neoliberal Camp of the Undead*

Romero and Fulci thus provide two politically antagonistic approaches to the zombie apocalypse as an allegory for popular uprising at the dawn of a global neoliberal order: while the former problematizes the plague as a threat to the established class and gender hierarchies of post-war American society, the latter affirms the undead proletariat's grotesque takeover of the world. Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later*, the movie that arguably revitalized the genre in 2002, differs from both of the above films first and foremost in its abandonment of the overt revolutionary thematic. Unlike its predecessors, this film is already fully biopolitical, deconstructing any idea of a bounded city where classical inclusions and exclusions could be strengthened or subverted, exchanging it for a universalized paradigm of the Agambenian camp without an outside, for a space more appropriate for capitalism in its current global stage lacking external limits.

*28 Days Later* is also a story about a handful of survivors, this time of a massive virus infection that turns most of the UK's population into raging human-animals. After escaping the zombie infested London to find the source of a radio signal somewhere in the countryside promising food, shelter, and the company of others, three of them make it to an army base run by a dozen male soldiers planning to rebuild civilization with the help of military discipline and some women serving as breeding stock. The group of three, two young women and a young man, Jim, soon have to realize that after the zombie infested London they are yet again trapped in a biopolitical camp, this time with a distinctive fascist flavor where their bodies are fully exposed to the sovereign power of the military tribe. The soldiers in their obsession with murder, torture, and rape are clear descendants of the bikers of *Dawn of the Dead*;<sup>30</sup> they are wild animals just like the zombies themselves in the eyes of the three main characters who despise this time not so much their uncivilized, unreflexive consumer habits but their all too direct exercise of thanatopolitics without its comforting liberal multicultural mediation they were used to as citizens of London. The obscene practices of the military camp return to them the repressed and distanced neoimperial violence of the post-9/11 world that the people of Britain have become—willingly or unwillingly—complicit in.<sup>31</sup> The zombies targeted by the proud white soldiers in *28 Days Later* stand pointedly for the threat of a racial and cultural Other in a 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain waging its war on terror while simultaneously being threatened by a flood of immigrants. The living dead in the film are infected with a form of rabies, spreading incredibly fast; they are also capable of running unlike their sluggish predecessors. For these reasons, their separation from the healthy follows more overtly biopolitical lines, centered on the problem of reproduction, where the terror of zombies multiplying without any limit is opposed to the controlled reproduction of the healthy population. In the end, the soldiers here come to represent a synthesis of the two human factions from *Dawn of the Dead*;

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<sup>30</sup> They are even more closely related to the soldiers in Romero's later *Day of the Dead*, a film which Boyle creatively appropriates for the second half of his film.

<sup>31</sup> on the reading of *28 Days Later* as an allegory of the "War on Terror" see Anna Froula, "Prolepsis and the 'War on Terror': Zombie Pathology and the Culture of Fear in *28 Days Later...*" in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the War on Terror* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 195-208.

their coldly rational and “responsible” concern for reproduction is coupled with a tendency towards uncontrollable outbursts of rage, as if to occupy a place of indistinction between the subject as “alive while dead” and “dead while alive”.

Becoming such a hybrid subject is also the trajectory of the protagonist’s character development. When the two women are about to involuntarily fulfill their reproductive role, Jim resists and tries to save them, for which he is sentenced to death by the camp’s leader. A couple of soldiers take him outside to the zombie infested area where he manages to escape leaving his executioners thinking he is left to certain death. Lying on the ground barely alive, he sees an airplane flying by – a sure sign that there is still an organized state out there, only an indifferent one. This event gives him the opportunity to literally take law into his own hands, to act as sovereign in the place of exception to the camp and make decisions about the life and death of others who are in it. He turns into a killing machine, a raging animal much like the zombies themselves, and attacks the military base to kill all the soldiers and save the two women from forced impregnation. When he is done with the slaughter, his body covered in blood, he nonetheless seems to turn back to human: after a momentary hesitation whether or not he should strike the women as well with his machete, he offers his helping hand instead.

In the end, *28 Days Later* seems to effectively deconstruct both Fulci’s Bakhtinian enthusiasm for the grotesque apocalypse and Romero’s nostalgia for the separate spheres of the classical *polis*. Jim’s final identification with the undead is neither the negation of all symbolic substance in the name of bare life,<sup>32</sup> nor simply a strategy to safeguard the politics of the old world separate from the “merely” biological. It can be understood rather as his successful integration of biopolitics into the logic of neoliberal governmentality where the disturbing mass of precarious bodies is not an exception to an economically productive population anymore, but represents rather the new norm of the social where zombification is revealed as an efficient “technology of the self” that helps to develop responsible subjects who learn to provide for themselves in the absence of the state and social institutions.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, the denouement of the film suggests that an identification of the biopolitical zone of indistinction with the space of neoliberalism may be premature, and the category of the *autonomous* zombie subject, as an allegory for late capitalism’s new entrepreneurial self, may in fact be the name of a new privilege. These last scenes add to the surreal, dreamlike tone that marks Jim’s impossibly harmonious synthesis between human and zombie, classical and grotesque body by showing the three survivors in peaceful hillside cottage, the women sewing together some linen while he is recovering from his injuries. Boyle, however, doesn’t seem to share Romero’s stance about the moral superiority of the

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<sup>32</sup> The fact that his transformation is triggered by the sight of an airplane shows that even in his rage, he imagines the big Other, the social-symbolic order „watching him” while he is acting as a responsible neoliberal citizen, taking care of his own problems.

<sup>33</sup> I rely here on Thomas Lemke’s reading of Foucault in Thomas Lemke, “‘The Birth of Bio-Politics’ – Michel Foucault’s Lecture at the Collège de France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality,” *Economy and Society* 30, no. 2 (2001): 190-207.

survivors. The images of the cottage bear an unsettling ambiguity; for a moment the viewer can see it as a conservative utopia of patriarchal domesticity, two women doing housework while the male head of the family is resting. Also, the sheets they are preparing to make up letters on the grass for signaling airplanes read HELL at first, and only when Jim wakes up and appears outside do the three of them together add the last letter O to the message. This momentarily visible SOS signal is addressed to the former (welfare) state, to the big Other that the neoliberal turn rendered inoperative. No wonder that an airplane only appears when through the man's intervention the meaning of the message is changed to its exact opposite, from "Get us out of here!" to "Look at us, we're fine, we have solved all our problems alone!". This ambiguity points towards the ominous possibility that while the male hero may have successfully eliminated his undead opponents through his phallic-sovereign act allowing him to productively appropriate their death drive for his new autonomous neoliberal self, for the woman under his care, the womb remains a biopolitical space outside their control even after the zombies are gone.<sup>34</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The three films analyzed here depict the intensification of modernity's biopolitical tendencies facilitated by the global neoliberal turn in the late 70s. The two early films, *Dawn of the Dead* and *Zombi 2* incorporate this theme of a clash between the old and the new social order (the post-war welfare state and its neoliberal dismantling) into their narrative spatially, mapping it as the struggle between a neoconservative/neoliberal fantasy of a city state with strictly policed boundaries and the excluded masses threatening to overflow it, to turn it into a biopolitical camp that zombifies everyone. The two directors have different political stakes in this conflict; while Fulci welcomes the leftist (universalist, equalizing) impulse of the grotesque apocalypse of precarious masses, endorsing the radical negativity of those who are "alive while dead", Romero remains hopeful/nostalgic about the symbolic framework of the classical *polis* that excludes bare life from its interior to keep it "dead while alive", emptied of libidinal excess. By contrast, the wager of Boyle's *28 Days Later* is that the two alternate utopias of the former films—the elitist project of neoliberalism/neoconservatism and the revolutionary space of a universal biopolitical zone of indistinction—in fact coincide in today's global capitalism that has no outside anymore. In this new hybrid space, one becomes sovereign by passing through, like Jim does, the precarious state of a zombie, except when one thereby gains his autonomy, he doesn't enter the collective space of his equals like Fulci's creatures do but finds himself alone in a brutally hierarchical universe fighting for survival with everyone else in the neoliberal camp.

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<sup>34</sup> On the notion of the womb as a biopolitical zone of indistinction see Ruth A. Miller, "Woman and the Political Norm" in *The Limits of Bodily Integrity, Abortion, Adultery and Rape Legislation in Comparative Perspective* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006), 149-173.

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