HOW ZOMBIE FILMS REVEAL THE TRUE DANGERS OF COVID-19

Like the Living Dead, a Virus Can Overwhelm Powerful States, Ruin Economies—and Reveal Our Best and Worst Selves

Three days before Halloween, people in Kyiv, Ukraine dress up as Zombies and participate in a 'Zombie Walk.' Courtesy of Efrem Lukatsky/Associated Press (http://www.apimages.com/metadata/Index/Ukraine-Halloween/323dc256a2f24ba08c734f409b4398c3/66/0).

by JAMES DER DERIAN and PHILLIP GARA | APRIL 5, 2020

Sydney

On any given day at the University of Sydney in Australia, Chinese visitors spill out of tour buses to make their way up the hill to the main Quadrangle, an elegant Gothic Revival structure of sandstone, leaded glass windows, and whimsical gargoyles. Enamored with *Harry Potter*, the

Now the Quad is a ghost town, depopulated by the novel coronavirus, making it easy to spot the girl taking a selfie. She stands out in her solitude but also by her garb: black Doc Martens, black jeans, black t-shirt, accessorized by black N95 mask. When she turns there is a jolt of déjà vu, a psychic stutter-step like the glitch in the matrix (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfEuxRDYiyc) that signals something bad is about to go down. On her shirt front is a meme that loops from WWII to "The Walking Dead" to the eternal now, of life and death in the time of coronavirus. It reads: "Keep Calm and Get Behind the Guy with the Crossbow."

In a few short weeks, the happy tourists and playful necromancy of wizards and witches have been displaced by the necropolitics of the zombie (https://muse.jhu.edu/article/39984/pdf? casa_token=z_jPDS6S9NgAAAAA:ba_21T7scQ5YBElaFZFp72A_arprzInqRWWQAYbOT2q6Gye6z-XWrgAsVnwXz-oTvSxO_u122mb1), in which the power of death and life, the ultimate prerogative of the sovereign state, has been seriously challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Zombies and SARS-CoV-2, the virus behind the COVID-19 disease, have a close if fitful relationship. Both zombies and the virus are the living dead, in the sense that they acquire vitality only after they find and infect a host (https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/are-viruses-alive-2004/). First encounters with them are marked by denial and complacency, which rapidly escalate into panic and fear of the other. Seeking individual security at the cost of the collective good, the most dangerous of enemies is created: our worst possible selves, ready to do whatever is necessary to survive.

The zombie clearly has something to teach us about the virus. The zombie film holds up a mirror to realities we'd prefer to bury, reflecting deep-rooted racism (*Night of the Living Dead*), superficial life-styles (*Dawn of the Dead*), environmental degradation (*World War Z*), and totalitarian eugenics (*Overlord*).

But in our post-truth era (https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2019/07/19/post-truth-author-lee-mcintyre/personalities/in-the-green-room/), in which story and world have become increasingly difficult to distinguish, the boundary between zombie zeitgeist and collective unconscious has become equally attenuated. This moment is captured in Jim Jarmusch's 2019 film, *The Dead Don't Die*, by the call-and-response between Officer Ronnie Peterson, played dead-pan by Adam Driver, and his partner, Cliff Robertson, played zombie-pan by Bill Murray. "This is all gonna' end badly," says Ronnie. "How can you be so sure?" asks Cliff. Because, says Ronnie, "I read the script."

Characters in a zombie film know they are in an authored story. But do we? Have we lost our ability, our will, to ascertain fact from fiction? In the world of COVID-19, in the theater of security that pretends to be the real story, the fourth wall between author and audience—eroded by media disinformation, political confabulation and wishful thinking—has collapsed, and so too our best

defense against the contagion (https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMc2004973): a credible script directed by competent leadership with sufficient resources to flatten the curve of the pandemic.

After denial and dithering by world leaders, most consistently President Trump—it's "going to be fine" (February 10), "under control" (February 24), "going to disappear" (February 28), "going to go away" (March 12), and "opened up and just raring to go by Easter" (March 25)—we've been handed a series of script rewrites, ranging from ad hoc denial to aspirational planning to the ultimate power in politics, all-out war. President Macron of France fired the first salvo ("We are at war (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/16/world/europe/coronavirus-france-macron-travel-ban.html)"), which was escalated by U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres ("The world is at war with the virus (https://www.rte.ie/news/world/2020/0319/1124205-un-chief-global-recession-of-record-dimensions-likely/)"), traduced by U.S. President Trump with tropes first WWII ("This is our big war (https://time.com/5806657/donald-trump-coronavirus-war-china/)") and then the Global War on Terror ("nothing would be worse than declaring victory before the victory is won (https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/03/29/coronavirus-response-updates-pelosi-fauci/2935369001/)"), and invoked for permanent state of emergency in Hungary ("war-like state (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/hungary-jail-for-coronavirus-misinformation-viktor-orban)").

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When the war of spectacle morphs into the spectacle of war, dangerous new specters emerge. In Carl von Clausewitz's 1832 book, *On War*, the Prussian military strategist noted how "war gives to things exaggerated dimensions and unnatural appearance," a warning taken up today by people like Dr. Anthony Fauci, who compares the current situation to "the fog of war." To illustrate his point, Clausewitz likened war to the interactive nature of language, noting how war "has its own grammar, but not its own logic." Clausewitz died long before geopolitical conflict gave way to a "full-spectrum battlespace (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Full-spectrum_dominance)," in which language is weaponized (https://www.likewarbook.com/) as an instrument of an infowar let loose like a virus by those more self-interested in the control than the well-being of a population.

What does it mean, if language is a virus (*pace* William Burroughs (https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/oct/05/william-s-burroughs-virus-xss-kindle-hackers)) *and* the coronavirus is a language? For a start, we must decipher the mathematic (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/science/ai-versus-the-coronavirus.html) and genetic

affective languages of war and disease, how dread, fear and panic force-multiply the *effective* impact of both, not only to sicken and kill but to crash economies, threaten civil liberties, and estrange whole populations.

Los Angeles

Driving on the vacant Los Angeles highways triggers a different kind of déjà vu to films like *Children of Men* or *District 9*—with a tracking shot of COVID-19 freeway messages (https://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2020/03/14/covid-19-less-is-more-more-than-700-freeway-signs-go-up-to-remind-public-to-practice-social-distancing/), ready.gov *Zombieland*-themed (https://www.ready.gov/zombieland-psa) earthquake preparedness billboards, and countless homeless encampments. In March, ominous grindhouse opening scenes played out on TV—spring breaker super-spreaders, anti-science authoritarians, toilet paper hoarders, gun stockpilers (https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/19/business/coronavirus-gun-sales/index.html), crashing circuit breakers, rippling layoffs, border rushes, xenophobia, vaccine panics (https://www.sltrib.com/news/2020/03/21/university-utah-experts/), and sparse data on the spread (https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/03/why-coronavirus-testing-us-so-delayed/607954/). With reality finally settling in (https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-outbreak-03-29-20-intl-hnk/index.html) for President Trump—"I have seen things that I've never seen before. I mean I've seen them, but I've seen them on television and faraway lands, never in my country,"—the film has become all too real.

To those closely following (https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691163703/theories-of-international-politics-and-zombies) the zombie genre or pandemic preparedness exercises for the past decade, the COVID-19 pandemic would not be a *Black Swan* (https://www.npr.org/2020/03/24/820601571/all-of-this-panic-could-have-been-prevented-author-max-brooks-on-covid-19) or even an unmanageable crisis. Many elements of current events mimic the scenario (https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/china-barred-my-dystopian-novel-about-how-its-system-enables-epidemics/2020/02/27/cc0446f0-58e5-11ea-9000-f3cffee23036_story.html) that plays out in Max Brooks' novel *World War Z* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_Z)—about a zombie apocalypse that the author based on desktop models and field exercises prompted by the 2003 SARS outbreak. The book, in turn, has been used by the CDC (https://www.cdc.gov/cpr/zombie/index.htm?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcpr%2Fzombies.htm), Naval War College (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nGG5E04c0g), and the U.S. Army (https://www.theverge.com/2013/4/12/4217692/army-recruits-zombie-novelist-max-brooks-troops-disaster-preparation) to update its own unconventional threat training exercises. From the Trump administration's denial (https://www.wired.com/story/coronavirus-interview-larry-brilliant-smallpox-epidemiologist/), unpreparedness (https://www.npr.org/2018/10/02/653607732/michael-lewis-trumps-approach-to-government-shows-neglect-and-misunderstanding), and self-destructive isolationism (https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-18/virus-pandemic-

exercise-got-one-thing-wrong-the-u-s-response) to the Chinese government's Chernobyl-like (https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/18/chernobyl-like-response-by-china-means-worst-is-yet-to-come-for-coronavirus-raymond-james-says.html) initial censoring of reports (https://www.vox.com/2020/2/10/21124881/coronavirus-outbreak-china-li-wenliang-world-health-organization) on the COVID-19 outbreak, the similarities are uncanny. These avoidable missteps incubated a containable crisis and should be a sealed indictment for all the guilty parties who will try, once again, to hide behind the sorry excuse, 'if we had only known then what we know now.'

In our film *Project Z: The Final Global Event* (http://www.bullfrogfilms.com/catalog/pz.html) zombies helped us understand (https://fold.cm/read/Project_Z/learning-from-zombies-JhLiQmJW) a wave of national security failures in the face of similar complex, globally interconnected events—from an illusory faith in high-tech warfare in Iraq (https://www.amazon.com/Virtuous-War-Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network-James-Derian/dp/0415772397) to climate disasters, economic meltdowns, viral movements, cyberwar, and pandemics. A borderless zombie contagion revealed the gaps in our post-cold war defenses. Instead of good guys versus bad guys, a zombie threat—like the virus—forces us to contend with complex systems (https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/03/what-really-doomed-americas-coronavirus-response/608596/), feedback loops (http://openhumanitiespress.org/feedback/film/norberts-nightmares-on-zombie-wars-with-a-nod-to-cybernetics/), quantum phase shifts (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10357718.2013.822465?journalCode=caji20&), tipping points (https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/nov/27/climate-emergency-world-may-have-crossed-tipping-points), and non-linear conflicts (https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2017/03/29/cyber-age-demands-new-understanding-war-wed-better-hurry/ideas/nexus/) that confound predictive models (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/25/uk-coronavirus-policy-scientific-dominic-cummings).

Despite what should have been clear lessons from these experiences, recent events reveal just how fragile systems still are in the face of emerging forms of risk. The volatile panic (https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/19/some-on-wall-street-think-coronavirus-fears-must-worsen-for-stocks-to-bottom.html) on Wall Street—accelerated by high-speed trading (https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-are-markets-so-volatile-its-not-just-the-coronavirus-11584393165?redirect=amp#click=https://t.co/9tKm6B9zK5) and amplified by hazardous corporate management (https://medium.com/incerto/corporate-socialism-the-government-is-bailing-out-investors-managers-not-you-3b31a67bff4a)—teetered on the brink of a self-fulfilling, mutually self-destructive cascade, adding layers of crisis to the pandemic response. Similarly, retrograde national security prioritization—like the Trump administration's disbanding of the National Security Council's pandemic research (https://www.outsidethebeltway.com/bolton-dismantles-white-house-global-health-security-team/) directorate and trade war induced cut of the CDC's China pandemic detection team (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-cdc-exclusiv/exclusive-u-s-slashed-cdc-staff-inside-china-prior-to-coronavirus-outbreak-idUSKBN21C3N5)—haunt us today.

While these new types of crisis expose hidden social vulnerabilities—like economic insecurity (https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/03/13/coronavirus-makes-it-impossible-to-ignore-the-economic-insecurity-built-into-our-labor-market/), poor healthcare infrastructure (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/19/health/coronavirus-masks-shortage.html), fragile supply chains (https://www.wsj.com/articles/grocers-stopped-stockpiling-food-then-came-coronavirus-11584982605)—they provide us with opportunities to become more resilient in the long term. In the shadow of COVID-19, we are seeing an enormous wave of innovation at a collective level. On Twitter, a chorus of epidemiologists (https://twitter.com/cmyeaton), social scientists (https://twitter.com/zeynep), statisticians (https://twitter.com/COVID19Tracking), complexity researchers (https://twitter.com/endCOVID19), and doctors on the front lines (https://getusppe.org/) have stepped up to fill the void of an official response, and to push governments to respond to alarming viral growth rates. Who would have ever predicted that #flattenthecurve could become a trending hashtag? Or that the exponential impacts (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/science/coronavirus-math-mitigation-distancing.html) of small everyday safety precautions (https://twitter.com/maxbrooksauthor/status/1239624352305303552?s=20) would become part of our cultural lexicon (https://gen.medium.com/coronavirus-is-making-me-believe-in-the-power-of-the-internet-again-a48151e0f0d0)?

In businesses across the world we've seen adaptation, with agile companies and p2p communities coming in to produce supplies where market forces and government planning has failed. As researchers race to create a vaccine in record time, new rapid response (https://www.nature.com/articles/d41587-020-00005-z) approaches like mRNA synthesis (https://www.statnews.com/2020/03/09/coronavirus-scientists-play-legos-with-proteins-to-build-next-gen-vaccine/) are emerging to combat fast-moving viral diseases. Perhaps we can draw hope in their similarity to defense preparedness exercises modeled on a zombie threat. Just as the CDC, NAVY and U.S. Army use zombie simulations to plan for viral security threats, these novel therapeutics use a synthetic virus expression to build needed antibodies.

The Interwar

Some might try to write off the trials of the past few months as just another "500-year flood." Bewildered and failing (https://newrepublic.com/article/157118/trump-xi-jinping-america-china-blame-coronavirus-pandemic) in the face of a global epidemic, nationalist leaders will also try to fortify anti-globalization (https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/12/coronavirus-killing-globalization-nationalism-protectionism-trump/) agendas, expanding surveillance (https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75) and eroding democratic rights (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/31/coronavirus-is-a-chance-for-authoritarian-leaders-to-tighten-their-grip). But in our globally interconnected and tribally fragmented world, there will be more local incidents, networked accidents and emergent threats that cascade into planetary crises with no single-state solutions.

GET MORE ZÓCALO

Thanks to early border closures and widespread testing, along with a solid healthcare system and deep-state capacity, it appears COVID-19 is about to peak in Sydney, while the growth curve is, alarmingly, just beginning in Los Angeles and sure to worsen in the mega-cities of the global south. The moment evokes the coming "interpandemic period (https://www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/influenza/en/WHO_CDS_CSR_GIP_2005_5.pdf)" that epidemiologists use to strengthen preparedness before the next virus, as well as an "interwar (https://www.e-ir.info/2016/08/05/interview-james-der-derian/)" when the international community has a fleeting chance to realize a lasting peace rather than a temporary truce.

Our response is to read the message coded in the coronavirus and zombie film as a warning (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/19/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-outbreak.html) that must be heeded, irrespective of nation, party or religion. If we continue to degrade the ecosystem, heat up the planet, impinge on the wild habitus, impugn scientific knowledge, weaponize language, neglect failing infrastructure, ignore growing inequality and place our trust in leaders who have not earned it, we might well be writing the script for the final global event; in which case, the zombies are us.

Project Z: The Final Global Event is available to watch at OVID.TV (https://www.ovid.tv/details/_5203537914001).

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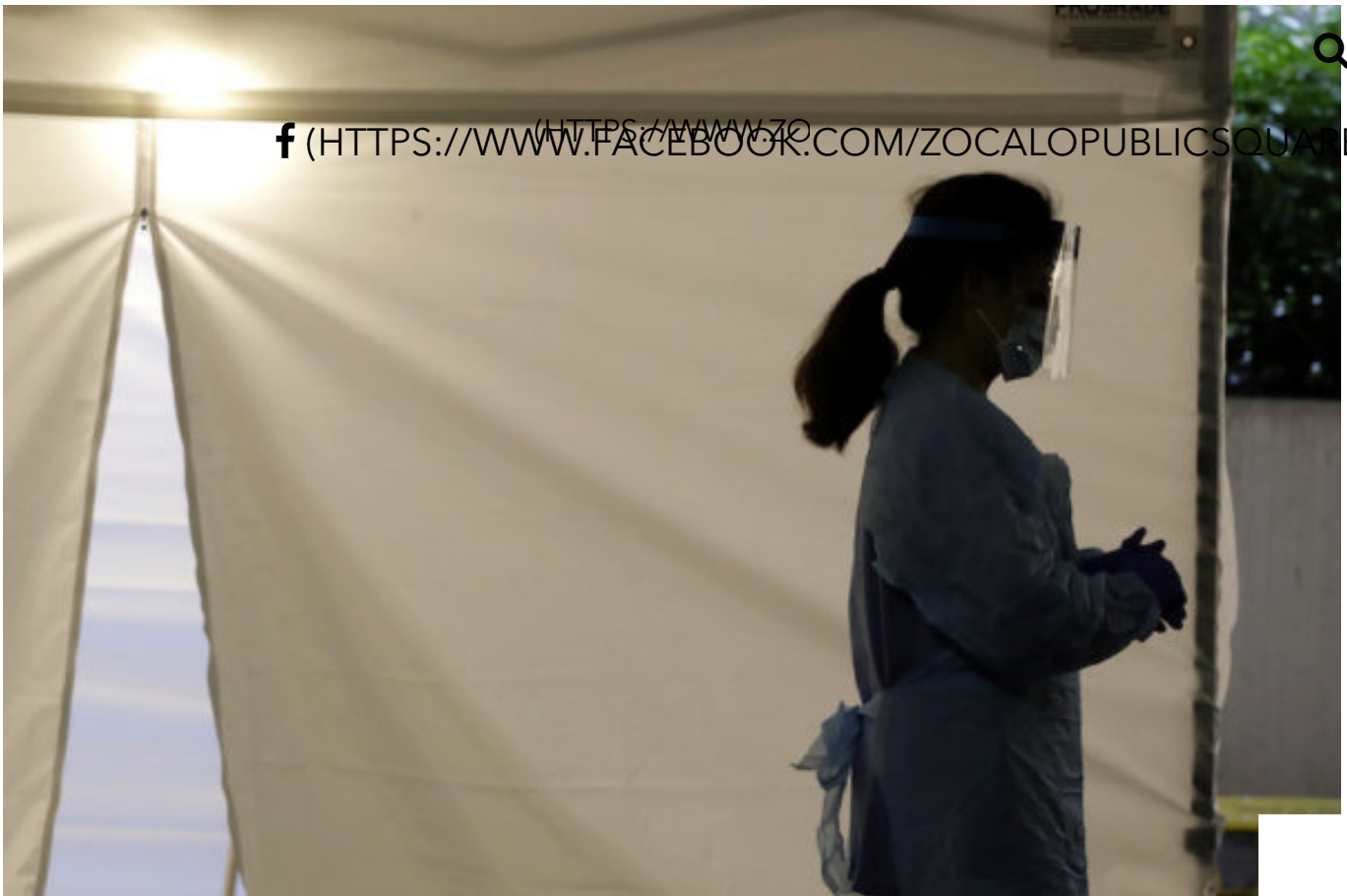
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