

## "They're Us": Representations of Women in George Romero's 'Living Dead' Series

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In the opening scene of George Romero's 1978 film *Martin*, a teenage sexual psychopath kills and drinks the blood of a young woman in her sleeper train compartment during a struggle that is protracted, messy and far from one-sided. Although women are often victims in Romero's films, they are by no means passive ones. Indeed, Romero is seldom in danger of objectivising or pornographising his female characters; on the contrary, Romero's women are typically resourceful and autonomous. This paper analyses some of Romero's representations of women, with particular reference to the four 'living dead' films which Romero made over a period of more than thirty years. These are *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1979), *Day of the Dead* (1985) and the 1990 remake of *Night*. [1] All of these films feature a group of human survivors in an America overrun by zombies. The survivors of *Night* hole up in a house; in *Dawn* the sanctuary is a shopping mall; while in *Day*, the darkest of the films, it is an underground military installation.

Unsurprisingly, these savage and apocalyptic zombie films contain some of Romero's most striking representations of active and even aggressive women. This in itself hints at a feminist approach. While Hollywood films typically eroticize and naturalise male violence and emphasise female passivity, Romero uses his zombies to undermine such assumptions. Romero's female zombies are not only undead but virtually ungendered; for instance, they are responsible for as many acts of violence as their male counterparts. In their apparent immunity to ideologies of gender (except in the outward form of their clothing), Romero's female zombies are excellent vehicles for the subversion of gender roles. The scandalous brutality of these ungendered "female" monsters makes for uncomfortable viewing from a patriarchal perspective, but it crucially prepares the audience for representations of *human* women as active and even violent agents. As a phrase that occurs in both *Dawn of the Dead* and the remake of *Night* has it: 'they're us'. Crucially, however, the moral complexity of Romero's zombies, especially in the sequel films, is mobilised for feminist purposes. By implying that *zombies* are not always or wholly evil, Romero encourages a diverse, heterogeneous conception of *womanhood*.

Gender issues in the living dead films have already received critical attention. Published just after the release of the remake of *Night of the Living Dead*, Barry Keith Grant's excellent paper 'Taking Back *The Night of the Living Dead*' (1990) rightly identifies Romero as an important feminist filmmaker. Grant describes how the heroines of Romero's living dead series, like his zombies, show increasing independence and resourcefulness as the series of films progresses. [2] Here I shall offer some further observations on this important point through my own close reading of these films. My textual focus and my conclusions differ, however, from Grant's. While Grant concentrates on the transformation in the character of Barbra (*sic*) between the 1968 and 1990 versions of *Night of the Living Dead*, my paper's main focus is on *Dawn of the Dead*, a film whose feminist aspects have been too seldom discussed. Moreover, I shall show that Romero manipulates not only images of active women, but also traditional or normative images of women as nurturing and caring, without jeopardising his feminist project. As Grant argues, Romero's "living dead" series is progressive in its increasing emphasis on female activity. This is a point well made; however, I shall argue that Grant's analysis identifies only one strand of Romero's complex feminist iconography.

Before beginning my analysis of the films, I want briefly to raise a theoretical point concerning my use of the term 'representation' and to indicate its relevance to my discussion of the living dead films. From a poststructuralist perspective, the term 'representation' is an unfortunate one. The use of the term has been criticised on the grounds that it implies that all images of women are unmediated reflections of some pre-existing reality rather than constructions of reality (Pollock 1977). For many feminists working in film studies, the plane of semiotically constructed women has been regarded as autonomous from the plane of real women's lives. The rejection of the reflectionist model of representation was important in the 1970s, when images of women were often validated as "good" or "bad" by naïve appeals to an extradiscursive reality. The "semiotic turn" enabled feminist critics to theorize naïve critiques of stereotyping and role models and their Manichean obsession with "good" and "bad" images. Whereas previous feminist critiques of madonna-whore binaries tended to substitute one set of "bad" images with another set of "good" ones, semiotic feminists noted that 'the desire for a positive role model seemed to privilege one type of woman over others and involved rejecting 'more 'feminine' traditional roles' in a way that seemed to collude with male denigration of them' (Geraghty 2000: 369). This point, I argue here, remains pertinent to any contemporary analysis of images of women. Grant's work on Romero, for all its virtues, is underwritten by a binary logic of activity/passivity and emphasises the increasingly active representations of women (which are coded as feminist) at the expense of other types of image. This paper shows how Romero, while never abandoning a feminist framework, presents a range of images of women in both "active" and "passive" roles. **[3]**

### **"They're Coming To Get You": *Night of the Living Dead* and Patriarchal Aggression**

It makes chronological sense to begin an analysis of images of women in the living dead films with Romero's earliest zombie movie, *Night of the Living Dead*. Compared to their counterparts in Romero's later zombie films, the female characters of *Night* are largely passive. Once inside the house and safely in the care of the film's black hero, Ben (Duane Jones), Barbra (Judith O'Dea) is quickly reduced to helpless catatonia. Barbra sits on the living room sofa for almost the entire duration of the film, until she is finally moved to action at the sight of Helen Cooper (Marilyn Eastman) being attacked by zombies. In fact, Barbra is both infantilised (she toys with a musical box while Ben boards up the house) and identified with household items (such as the linen tablecloth and the embroidered arm of the sofa which she obsessively strokes). In other words, while the males act, the women - Barbra in particular - draw comfort from domestic goods (similar behaviour is observable in *Dawn of the Dead*, where Fran (Gaylen Ross), unsettled by the chaos surrounding her, fingers the collar of an expensive and unnecessary fur coat; in all of these cases, Romero's women are identified with the sensuous and tactile rather than the cerebral). There is also an imbalance in the types of role adopted by each sex in *Night*: Helen and Judy (Judith Ridley) undertake the 'women's work' of caring for the injured Karen Cooper (Kyra Schon), while the men set about the more pressing business of boarding up the house against the undead. Although Helen Cooper is relatively active and resistant to the orders of her bullying husband Harry (Karl Hardman) and although Barbra eventually attempts to rescue Helen in a belated gesture of sisterhood, the women in the film generally constitute a kind of backdrop, their feelings and actions largely dependent on the more capable men.

The passivity of the women in *Night* is problematic for some feminist critics. Gregory A. Waller notes that Barbra's character 'would seem to support certain sexist assumptions about female passivity, irrationality, and emotional vulnerability' (Waller 1986: 283). However, concerns about the film's anti-feminism are unfounded on a number of counts. Can Barbra - who is in shock after the death of her brother - be blamed for her passivity? Might it not be argued that her silent submissiveness is an inevitable reaction to Harry Cooper's aggression? After all, the patriarchal domination of the house is unremitting. Barbra, in particular, is subjected to relentless abuse by the film's male characters, a pattern established early in the film by Johnny's (Russell Steiner) incessant taunting of his sister. Johnny's Karloffian posturing and mocking intonation of "they're coming to get you, Barbra" playfully foreshadows the aggression of all of the men at various points in the film. The patriarchal desire to contain and control women is represented primarily by Cooper, who unilaterally decides to "coup up" his family in the basement of the house. But even such an amiable character as Tom (Keith Wayne) seems unable to credit any of the women with much ability to help the survivors' cause: 'we'd all be a lot better off', he tells Harry and Ben, 'if *all three of us* were working together' (my italics).

*Night of the Living Dead*, then, need not be problematic from a feminist perspective, as might be inferred from Waller's judgement or even from Grant's article. Concentrated in the authoritarian personality of Cooper, the despotism of the male characters is more than sufficient to excuse the film's women for their inactivity and fearfulness. Although it lacks the powerful heroines of its sequels, *Night* is a feminist film; but this owes more to the film's critique of patriarchal attitudes than to its "positive" representations of active women. Moreover, Romero's images of female inaction are so pervasive and hackneyed (Judy Rose's dizzy vacillations, for example, are stereotypically feminine histrionics) that *Night* might be read as a satirical comment on traditional representations of women in horror cinema.

### **Monsters and Mothers: *Dawn of the Dead* and the Nurturing Woman**

This ironic interpretation is consistent with the mood of Romero's later zombie films. The heroines of *Night's* sequels - *Dawn of the Dead* and *Day of the Dead* - are active agents who oppose patriarchy both implicitly and explicitly. *Night of the Living Dead* began with Johnny's taunting of his sister; both of the sequels, on the other hand, foreground their female leads by opening with scenes that frame the heroine alone.

Both sequels present a complex set of images of 'woman', a complexity mirrored in these films' representations of zombies. In *Dawn*, the zombies in the shopping mall are more differentiated than their predecessors in *Night*. They are dressed in a variety of distinctive styles and represent various social groups: there are rednecks, businessmen, softball players and nuns. And they seem to be capable of a certain degree of individuality and complexity. [4] Although they amply prove their deadliness, the zombies of *Dawn* are also pathetically ineffectual, which enables them to be treated as comic stooges (the bikers who invade the mall at the end of the film throw custard pies in their faces). Thus the zombies of *Dawn* are both passive and active, pathetic and aggressive. In presenting the zombies more complexly here, Romero invites a more nuanced understanding of zombie-human relations than that required in *Night of the Living Dead* - an understanding that seems more likely to be reached by the film's heroine, Fran than by her childish aggressive male companions.

In this section I want to focus on the character of Fran, particularly in relation to Barry Keith Grant's discussion of her role. In many respects, Fran closely resembles Judy, the heroine of *The Crazies* (aka *Code Name: Trixie*), a movie that Romero made in 1973 and which shares many characteristics with *Dawn*.<sup>[5]</sup> Both Fran and Judy are strong, professional women. Moreover, both Fran and Judy are pregnant from the outset of their respective films (as we shall see, Romero uses images of motherhood in several of his films in order to signal the life-giving potential and nurturing capacity of women in the face of male destruction). From the beginning, then, Fran is characterised as both a professional and a mother.

Grant's emphasis is on Fran as a paramilitary professional. He points out that Fran conforms to a code of professionalism of the kind that is necessary for survival in the films of Howard Hawks or in Romero's own urban update of Arthurian myth, *Knightriders* (1981).<sup>[6]</sup> It is not hard to find evidence to support Grant's claim. Fran's professionalism is highlighted at the beginning of the film, when we see her in her role as director of a television studio. Once inside the shopping centre, she helps the men to defend and secure the mall, qualities which characterise her as a spiky feminist heroine. Unlike Barbra in *Night*, she is consummately articulate and aware of the men's sexist assumptions about her. 'I'd have made you all coffee and breakfast,' she tells the men darkly when they first arrive at the mall, 'but I guess I don't have my pots and pans'.

Fran's professionalism is particularly remarkable given her isolation from the world of the men. She spends much of her time on her own, while the men set about colonising the mall. In one scene, the three men sit in a room discussing the possibility of Fran having an abortion. Fran sits in an adjacent room with her back against the wall, from where she is able to overhear Peter (Ken Foree) asking Stephen (David Emge) if *he* wants "to get rid of it". Here masculine disciplinary control is exercised not only over women's social roles (as in *Night*), but also over the female body. As *Dawn* progresses, it becomes evident that the respect Fran earns from the men will have to be hard-won and will involve her overcoming male oppression to demand her fair share of the decision-making.

Fran does succeed in asserting her autonomy in the film. A number of factors, however, complicate the apparently straightforward feminist view of Fran as active, sometimes violent agent. First, the identification of Fran with Judy, the pregnant nurse in *The Crazies*, suggests Fran's strong capacity for the traditionally feminine virtues of charity and sympathy. Fran's nurturing disposition is emphasised in several scenes that function as 'feminine' digressions from the scenes of macho action. In one scene, for example, Fran administers painkillers to the dying Roger (Scott Reiniger) and mops his fevered brow. Perhaps the most striking evidence of Fran's nurturing disposition, however, occurs as the men set out about 'cleaning up' the mall (that is, zestfully obliterating the zombies within it). Against a counterpoint of gunfire, Fran and a zombie dressed in a softball kit sit cross-legged on the ground gazing at each other through a store window. This short scene shows how much care Romero often takes to position his actors in space: Fran's mute face-to-face communication with 'softball zombie' contrasts sharply with the earlier scene in which, with her back to the wall, she overhears the men talking about the possibility of her having an abortion.

The power of this scene is further heightened by 'softball zombie's' infant-like demeanour. Several details suggest that Fran identifies this zombie with her own unborn child. First, the scene occurs shortly before a number of scenes foregrounding Fran's pregnancy, such as her graphically depicted morning sickness. More strikingly, as he takes his place on the floor opposite Fran, 'softball zombie' gradually emerges from beneath the cloak of a female zombie in

what seems to be coded as a symbolic birth. Equally suggestive of infancy is the peculiar whining noise that seems to emanate from this zombie as he sits watching Fran. Indeed, the uncoordinated helplessness of the zombies throughout *Dawn* makes them appear childlike: as Steven Shaviro comments, the 'continual hungry wailing' of Romero's zombies 'emerges as an obsessive leitmotif of suspended and ungratified desire' (Shaviro 1993: 84). 'Softball zombie' resembles nothing so much as a crying baby staring into its mother's eyes; or more precisely, identifying itself with its (m)other through the "mirror" of the store window.

The positive identification of Fran and 'softball zombie' is not unusual in the horror genre, although it is more pronounced here than in most horror films. Traditionally in horror films, the woman's look at the monster constitutes a horrific reflection of (and on) the woman's own monstrosity. But the horror of this look is made possible only by an awareness of similarity. As Linda Williams puts it:

The female look - a look given preeminent position in the horror film - shares the male fear of the monster's freakishness, but also recognises the sense in which this freakishness is similar to her own difference. For she too has been constituted as an exhibitionist-object by the desiring look of the male... The strange sympathy and affinity that often develops between the monster and the girl may thus be less an expression of sexual desire (as in *King Kong*, *Beauty and the Beast*) and more a flash of sympathetic identification (Williams 1996: 20-1).

The monstrous image of woman in the horror film serves to reinforce the woman's abjection and otherness in the eyes of patriarchy. Thus, when Fran and 'softball zombie' stare ruefully, rather than fearfully, at each other through the glass window of the store, their coequal exchange of gazes emphasises their solidarity. Indeed, while she may also be an active agent in the film, the pregnant Fran empathises with the infantile helplessness of the zombies in a way that the film's male characters would find impossible.

How is one to interpret this unusually pronounced example of female/monster identification? It might be tempting to regard Fran's empathy with 'softball zombie' as an essentialising stereotype of nurturing passivity, which leads to the recuperation of Fran's caring nature for male approbation. According to this reading, Romero could be seen to have slipped into an essentialising mode of feminism - albeit one which was widespread among the cultural feminists of the 1970s - by revalorising the traditional, nurturing role of Woman. Romero's depiction of Fran, it might be argued, temporarily reduces her to her biological role as mother. However, only an idealist feminism, hopelessly indifferent to narrative context, could regard Romero's use of this maternal image as reactionary. Romero's film *demand*s empathy for the hapless, not-responsible ghouls, making Fran's response a very proper one. 'You have to be sympathetic with the creatures', remarked Romero in an interview, 'because they ain't doin' nothin'' (Yakir 1979: 62). Fran's empathy with 'softball zombie' therefore demonstrates her commendable sensitivity. This representation of the female heroine as sympathetic and nurturing contrasts markedly with the more "active" images of women discussed by Grant. While Romero depicts women as active agents, he also mobilises the traditional notion of the nurturing woman for feminist purposes.

Later in the film, Romero offers a quite different image of Fran. Bewitched by the soporific magic of the mall, she increasingly falls into stereotypically feminine patterns of behaviour. In another distinctly Lacanian scene, Fran pampers and perfumes herself in front of a mirror. Various techniques are used in this mirror

scene to signal that Fran identifies with the sleek image in front of her. As she applies her lipstick, she adopts the vacant gaze of the stereotypical female consumer who sees in the department store dummy an image of her objectivised, commodified self. Fran in this scene becomes a human zombie, no more alive than the conspicuous mannequin heads on which the camera mockingly alights in a series of objective shots. In this sense, the mirror scene is a formal counterpoint to the scene in which Fran and 'softball zombie' stare at each other through the glass window. While Fran's gaze in the earlier scene was an inclusive gesture of identification, her preening in the mirror is, in Romero's view at least, dangerously solipsistic and deadening, recalling Naomi Wolf's provocative description of the cosmetically obsessed woman as a 'walking corpse' (1991: 142). Indeed, the very next scene depicts both Fran and Stephen moving stiffly and wearily, as though they have become actual zombies.

Fran's increasingly lifeless behaviour contrasts starkly with her spirited demeanour earlier in the film. The mirror scene draws on the stereotype of the weak-willed woman succumbing to the seductive charms of consumer glitz. In this way, Romero makes use of the patriarchal, Eliotesque reproach of lovely woman stooping to folly. From a conservative or crude Marxist perspective, Fran's narcissism can be seen as a sinful 'fall from grace' of the kind that patriarchies typically demand and condemn. This concern that women may be morally imperilled and/or politically neutralised by the snares of mass consumption recalls the Frankfurt School's inflexible critique of false consciousness. With each flutter of the eyelash, each lipsticked pout, Fran colludes with a manipulative fashion industry and vainly ignores the reality of her oppression. Romero refrains, however, from criticising Fran for her participation in the makeup ritual and focuses instead on the social pressures that work to turn intelligent women into consuming mannequins. In the very next scene we see Fran in a domestic role, preparing a meal for Peter and Stephen in what appears to be a mock-up of a bourgeois kitchen-diner: despite her earlier feminist quip, it seems that Fran finds her pots and pans after all. Fran's rapid transposition from boudoir to kitchen implies that the pleasures of consumerism will not in themselves liberate women from their traditional domestic roles.

In this sense, Fran's mirror-gazing reflects the therapeutic individualism of the New Times discourse of the 1970s and 80s, in which "changing oneself was the one remaining way held out to American women to improve their lot" (Faludi 1991: 337). Romero seems to react against this solipsistic impulse towards individual gratification. Indeed, the 'mirror scene' constitutes a radical critique of the patriarchal structures which seek to substitute narcissism for female political consciousness. Although it has found recent expression in the work of Wolf and others, this critique has its roots in the radical feminism of the 1970s, during which the work of Germaine Greer and others was centrally concerned with the glamour industry's objectivisation of women. As Mary Daly wrote at the time, 'patriarchy has stolen our cosmos and returned it in the form of *Cosmopolitan* magazine and cosmetics' (Daly 1978: 5). This stridently anti-consumerist feminism is no longer in critical favour, of course, especially among postmodern feminists, who might prefer to see women's make-up rituals as 'liberating' or 'self-expressive'. However, Romero's more radical perspective on cosmetic 'indulgence' is more typical of the time. However, Romero is condemning not Fran's individual 'fall from grace', but the male-constructed image with which Fran comes dangerously close to identifying - an image intimately connected with the zombiedom of domestic drudgery.

*Dawn of Dead*, then, presents a multi-faceted heroine. Fran is not only, as Grant claims, a professional, but also a nurturing and maternal figure; and even - albeit temporarily - a brainless cultural dupe of the fashion industry. From a feminist

perspective, *Dawn* is therefore a more complex film than has hitherto been allowed, since it critically examines the many possible images of femininity available to American women in the 1970s.

### **“Motorised Instinct”: Women in *Day of the Dead* and the Remake of *Night***

In *Day of the Dead* (1985), Romero’s presentation of zombies again directly parallels that of his female heroine, the scientist Sara (Lori Cardille). Peter’s insight, in *Dawn of the Dead*, that ‘they’re us’ is given a feminist gloss in *Day*. Here Romero cleverly parallels the introduction of his most intrepid heroine to date with the first stirrings of zombie consciousness. If the zombies of *Dawn* were undergoing Lacan’s mirror stage, *Day of the Dead* features one precocious zombie (Bub, played by Sherman Howard) who, through scientific intervention, becomes morally and functionally fully adult, even to the extent of acquiring language. Indeed, the *coup-de-grace* in Bub’s moral development is his development of artistic appreciation. Initially, Bub - whose name is a childlike monosyllable - is little more than an infant (etymologically, one without speech), but by the end of the film he is reading a Stephen King novel and learning to talk. And finally, by exercising his moral volition in the killing the sadistic Captain Rhodes (Josef Pilato) - an act motivated by human revenge rather than animal instinct - he becomes a fully responsible adult. Thus *Day* represents one of ‘them’ as being morally equal - in some instances superior - to ‘us’.

*Day of the Dead* goes beyond establishing the common humanity of human beings and zombies, however, by consistently drawing parallels between the nature of zombies and the nature of women. Central to this project is the scene in which Professor Logan (Richard Liberty), the wiry-haired scientist, explains his hair-brained research on the zombie corpses to his incredulous colleague, Sara - a scene which works ‘as a hilarious send-up of both behaviourist disciplinary procedures and 1950s ‘mad scientist’ movies’ (Shaviro 1993: 94). ‘What happened to this one?’, asks Sara, glancing at a zombie corpse on the floor of Logan’s laboratory. ‘It was too unruly’, explains the professor absent-mindedly, ‘I had to destroy it’. Professor Logan’s objective is to ‘condition and control’ these unruly creatures, just as Captain Rhodes seeks to control (both professionally and sexually) the ungovernable Sara. Just as Bub’s prodigious achievements undermine the belief that the zombies are merely - to use the words of the TV commentator in *Dawn* - ‘motorised instinct’, Sara’s courageous actions enable her to transcend her objectivisation by the men. Indeed, the formulation ‘motorised instinct’ invokes the traditional, Augustinian view of women as soulless ‘things’ (a word often applied in *Dawn* and *Day* to describe the zombies). Sara’s courage and intelligence challenge this traditional patriarchal figuration of women as natural creatures of the earth.

For all of her determination to understand the zombies and find a solution to the zombie plague, Sara, like the zombies she uses in her experiments, is objectivised throughout *Day*. She is perceived by the military men as a plaything to be abused and manipulated. ‘You’re exciting the lady’ leers the boorish soldier Steele at one of his colleagues as the team attempts to round up zombies for scientific experimentation. Steele’s reference to Sara’s excitability implies that Sara’s sexual instincts are as easily stirred as the electrically stimulated zombie limbs in Professor Logan’s grisly laboratory. Needless to say, the more Sara is objectivised, the more she becomes an active agent. In fact, *Day* reverses the traditional gender roles of *Night of the Living Dead*. In the earlier film, the male defends the female(s), whereas in *Day*, Sara acts as protector for her emotionally shattered partner Miguel. In this sense, Sara’s role is complex - although she is

the strongest woman of the trilogy, she also acts in a caring, stereotypically motherly fashion towards her partner.

As Grant has demonstrated, this 'strong woman' theme is taken to extremes in the presentation of Barbra in the 1990 remake of *Night of the Living Dead*. In the film's opening scene, Barbra - a mousy bespectacled woman - appears as something of a 'mother's girl'. Indeed, in the film's opening scene she and her brother drive to a cemetery in order to pay respects - at the behest of their mother - at their father's grave. As they drive, her brother insensitively teases her about being unduly attached to a mother who had consistently restricted Barbra's movements. 'When was the last time you had a date?', he asks her rhetorically. This conversation, which is not present in the original version of *Night*, adumbrates the film's explicitly feminist ethos. Indeed, the Barbra of the remake becomes that emblematic figure of 1990s feminist cinema, a short-haired 'hardbody', who strips for action early in the film, swapping her conservative skirt and blouse and for a vest top and a pair of trousers. In this version, it is only Barbra who is clear-headed enough to figure out the escape solution: namely, carefully walking in between the zombies rather than following Ben's well-intentioned but ultimately disastrous tactic of trying to fill the car with gasoline.

Significant feminist twists (not all of which are noted in Grant's article) are also given to the other female characters. Whereas in the original *Night*, the women take orders, the women of the remake solve disputes and reject male authority. In the original version both Judy Rose and (to a lesser extent) Helen Cooper are primarily passive, and are shown in traditional 'feminine' roles, taking turns, for example, in tending to the stricken Karen Cooper. Helen, the most assertive of the women in the original, becomes even more so, disobeying her oafish husband to help the others defend the house. Even more striking is the transformation wrought on Judy Rose. In the original film she is almost invisible and remarkable only for her giddiness, which causes the deaths of her boyfriend Tom and herself. In the 1990 version, however, she intervenes effectively between the squabbling men - a role identical to Tom's in the original film. In the house, at least, the women appear to have regained a significant degree of autonomy.

Whereas the women seem to have won significant battles in the "home", the final scenes of the remake of *Night* serve to intensify the film's focus on the dominance of patriarchy in the wider world. As Barbra finally escapes from the house, she navigates her way cautiously through numerous zombies. Although she is evidently disgusted by all of them, she responds with particular intensity to one zombie in particular - a female zombie clutching a zombie baby. As she stares at this grotesque *pieta*, her face expresses horror and pity. To Barbra, the zombie mother shockingly reinforces the animal necessity of procreation to the survival of the species - a repellent enough prospect in this brutally patriarchal society. To the sequel-conscious audience, meanwhile, the image is a repulsive reminder of the pregnant Fran in *Dawn of the Dead*, except that Fran's vital power is here replaced by an image of sterility. Indeed, the zombie mother symbolises the termination of female (re-)productive potential. It is grimly fitting that Barbra, who starts the film fettered by the strict sexual governance of a domineering mother, ends it confronted with a hideous spectacle of annihilated womanhood.

Throughout the living dead movies, the refrain 'they're us' acknowledges not only the commonality of zombies with all human beings, but also, and more specifically, the identification of zombies with exploited groups of human beings. In the remake of *Night*, the phrase 'they're us' is uttered by Barbra as she watches the rednecks using zombies as a shooting gallery. On the one hand, the comment identifies the rednecks as, in a negative moral sense, zombies (as Grant

notes, one of these men even appears at first to be an actual zombie). At the same time, 'they're us', uttered between two scenes of grotesque patriarchal brutality, invites a specifically feminist interpretation. It encourages the audience to consider not the conventional horror link between monstrosity and femininity, but the identity between the oppression of zombies and the oppression of women. Zombies are articulated with other categories of difference: given the film's concern with race and the semiotic explosion of the film's final scenes, the gallows upon which the rednecks have lynched some zombies before shooting at them recall the racist lynchings of America's past. In general terms, then, Romero's zombies in the remake of *Night*, are not, as they were in the original version, simply the enemies of human beings; instead, they have become free-floating signifiers of sexual and racial oppression.<sup>[7]</sup>

Rather than bringing the living dead series to an optimistic conclusion, then, the remake of *Night of the Living Dead* ends with an apocalyptic vision of the limitations of feminism - or at least the limitations of any feminism that restricts its remit to individual emancipation. Although Barbra is granted the privilege of terminating Mr Cooper's despicable life, she nevertheless ends the film surrounded by a hundred Mr Coopers, all seeking to recuperate the film's heroine for patriarchy. Romero's decision to end the remake of *Night* in this way necessarily constitutes a statement about the condition of contemporary feminism. While Romero's women have gained in self-confidence throughout the living dead films, this is not seen as sufficient to ensure the triumph of feminist values. The film's apocalyptic ending dramatises the limitations of the teleological feminist analytics that sees the history of feminism as a series of gains or advances within a narrative of progress. Robyn Wiegman has recently described how apocalyptic narratives of feminism constitute an implicit critique of the failure of the progressive feminist 'movement' as the metanarrative of feminist "progress" breaks on the rocks of postmodernism. What Wiegman calls 'apocalyptic narration' signals the end of the line for teleological feminism. Apocalyptic narratives, Wiegman argues, must 'be read as a strategic counter to, indeed a prototypical form of punishment for, contemporary feminism's failure to reproduce itself within the protocols of a properly maternal history' (Wiegman 2000: 821). In this sense, Romero's zombie mother stands for the failure and termination of feminisms that simply co-opt masculine values of activity. The brutal ending of the film invokes a radical theme that Romero had been emphasising since the original version of *Night*: namely, that the emancipation of individual women means little so long as patriarchal structures remain untransformed.

### **Conclusion: Woman Beyond the Binaries**

I want to end by summarising some of the foregoing points and by drawing some general conclusions about the applicability of feminist theory to the study of cinematic representations of women. Grant assumes that the representation of women in the living dead series as increasingly active is inherently feminist. Romero's films, it is implied, affirm the dignity and strength of women by representing them in "positive" cultural roles and by overturning the traditional binaries of passive and active, foolish and intelligent. Of course, certain feminisms might object to Romero's transformation of *Night's* dormant female characters, either because this project devalues women's traditional roles, or because it simply reverses and therefore reinforces essentialist binary divisions. But the living dead films do not replace one traditional, sexist and essentialising definition of "woman" with an equally essentialising "positive" one - a charge sometimes levelled against cultural feminists. On the contrary, Romero de-essentialises

femininity, not only by insisting on the *agency* of women, but also by revalorising women's nurturing and caring capacities. To adopt the terminology of a certain feminist analytics, Romero's depictions of women involve both *assimilation* (of traditionally male roles) and *recognition* (of the value of traditional 'feminine' traits). In this way, Romero avoids the simplistic assumption that active (stereotypically masculine) representations of women are *always* feminist, while passive ones are *always* anti-feminist. This is an important conclusion, not least because of the tendency of certain media and film commentators - including, one might argue, Grant in discussion of *Night* and its remake - to imply that only gun-toting hardbodies are credible as feminist images.

Like Grant, I do not wish 'simply to validate another male director for classic auteurism' (1990: 74). As well as contributing to a reconsideration of Romero's reputation as a feminist filmmaker, I want to emphasise that progressive gender politics in the horror film are not simply achieved by multiplying images of women who "kick ass". Potentially progressive hardbodies are easily fetishized and hypersexualised for the pleasure of male audiences. In this sense, the recent crop of Hollywood films featuring extremely strong and dangerous heroines - such as *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) or the Romero-esque *Resident Evil* (2002) - are hardly feminist texts. Although a recent film like Paul Anderson's *Resident Evil* contains numerous references to the *maestro*, Romero's approach to gender politics is rather different to Anderson's. Since each of the living dead films engages with historically specific feminist currents, Romero's representations of women - as mother, as scientist or even as cultural dupe - vary from film to film. While Romero invents increasingly active female characters, his films also show women as more capable (and even more worthy) of survival than men, owing to their capacity for empathetic response. In this sense, Romero's zombie series denies easy recourse to talk of "stereotypes" and "role models". To recall Geraghty's warning, "the desire for a positive role model seem[s] to privilege one type of woman over others and involved rejecting 'more 'feminine' traditional roles' in a way that seemed to collude with male denigration of them" (Geraghty 2000: 369). Far from refusing to use them, Romero harnesses traditional, as well as "positive" and "active" images of women to his feminist purpose. In describing Romero's heroines in these terms, I am not seeking to present my own interpretations as the only or correct readings of Romero's texts; fan discussions of the films, for example, may yield very different conclusions to mine.<sup>[8]</sup> Rather, I am joining feminist critics such as Rosi Braidotti (1994) and Elizabeth Hills (1999) in questioning the ability of binary categories of gender to comprehend the fluidity and diversity of images of women.<sup>[9]</sup>

## NOTES

[1] In discussing this last film, I follow Grant (1990) in treating it as a film by Romero (who wrote the screenplay), even although it was directed by special effects guru Tom Savini. [back](#)

[2] Unfortunately, Grant's article repeatedly refers to *Dawn of the Dead* as *Day of the Dead*, an unfortunate slip in an article part of whose aim is to compare the two films. [back](#)

[3] While there is not space to discuss the issue fully here, the term "woman" is itself, of course, problematic. In the past twenty years, feminist theory has taught us to use the term 'woman' cautiously. Teresa de Lauretis, in her

influential essay 'Upping the Anti (*sic*) in Feminist Theory', disavows essentialising theories of woman's nature as well as the post-structuralist idealism that would eradicate the category of 'woman' altogether (de Lauretis 1995: 314-5; see also Downs 1993). Like de Lauretis, I want to steer a course in this essay between the Scylla of essentialism and the Charybdis of nominalism. I begin from a concept of woman that is neither the absolutely unified, universal and prediscursive subject of some versions of cultural feminism, nor the empty signifier of post-structuralism. I am sympathetic to de Lauretis's characterisation of woman as a political positionality, a 'female-embodied social subject' whose constitution and modes of existence must be articulated with 'other significant socio-cultural divisions and representations' (de Lauretis 1995: 319). This is a profitable position to take in this paper, since Romero's living dead films consistently bind gender into other categories of difference, most notably race. [back](#)

[4] In one of the film's subplots, a zombie dressed as a Hare Krishna separates from his fellows to seek out and attack Fran, who has been left behind in the upper rooms of the mall while the men conquer the consumer paradise below. In ascending the stairs to attack Fran, the Hare Krishna zombie might be said acting in accordance with a remembered habit of 'following his own path', which is here expressed physically in his turning away from the mass of zombies to seek his sustenance in a 'higher' place. Of course, this zombie's apparent individuality is only automatic and residual behaviour (unlike that of Bub, the 'zombie with a soul' in *Day of the Dead*, which is learned *after* death). However, as both Wood (1986) and Grant (1990) argue, we see in *Dawn* the stirrings of a more complex conception of zombiedom. [back](#)

[5] Both films, for example, contain a mixture of rational and hot-headed characters. *The Crazies* follows the flight of a band of survivors from a virus-struck city to a remote hideaway, which, like the mall in *Dawn*, contains 'all kinds of goodies'. [back](#)

[6] Many other details in Hawks's films find echoes in Romero. In *The Thing*, for example, the frantic boarding up of the door to exclude the monster resembles the defensive actions of the survivors in *Night*. [back](#)

[7] For a lucid analysis of 'interracial tensions' in *Night of the Living Dead*, see Lightning (2000). [back](#)

[8] It might be noted here that there is very little comment in the fan culture surrounding the film, at least as it is represented on the Internet, about Romero's presentation of women or gender. The discussion of Romero's feminism remains restricted to academic discourse, at least for the time being. [back](#)

[9] Hills, in particular, advances a broadly Deleuzian critique of the essentialising binarism which she sees in traditional psychoanalytical approaches to horror heroines. [back](#)

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