



**When we buy without thinking, motivated perhaps by a super-low price, lust, or naked appetite, we are guilty of Zombie Consumerism. But the parallels to sustainability and Zombies don't have to die there.**

From gorefests (Grindhouse), to classic literature mash-ups (Pride and Prejudice and Zombies), to freeway sign hacks (“Warning Zombies Ahead”), it’s clear that Zombies represent something culturally current. And acquiring Zombie culture as a lens provides a deeper look at our relationship with sustainability.

For example, George Romero’s Zombie movie Night of the Living Dead (1968) has been classically read as a commentary on race-relations. The movie’s African American hero is seemingly (and finally) mistaken (by a white redneck) for a member of the undead in the movie’s final scene. In 1978 Romero returned with part two of the ultimate Zombie trilogy with Dawn of the Dead. True to his intent to shoot a Zombie film every decade that would reflect modern culture, in Dawn Romero keeps pace with our ever-changing American psychographics by turning his blade to consumerism. This late seventies flirt with consumerism is a perfect place to begin a Zombie dialogue about sustainability.

In Dawn, a band of heroes hide out in a mall, gorging themselves on free food as the Zombies pound at the doors. There are scenes of mass consumption as the survivors play with a pastoral sense of American bounty – everything at their fingertips to consume for free. And the Zombies? They want in on it too. The thinly veiled undercurrent of the move is revealed as two main characters ponder why thousands of Zombies are stumbling around the mall parking lot, looking for ways to get in:

[Fran and Stephen are observing from the roof of the mall] Francine: *“What are they doing? Why do they come here?”*

Stephen: *“Some kind of instinct. Memory, of what they used to do. This was an important place in their lives.”*

Later, Peter says *“They’re after the place. They don’t know why, they just remember. Remember that they want to be in here.”*

Shopping is in the Zombie’s blood. As in the current sustainability movement, the “mall as hope” is a clear tope in Dawn. Almost gleefully, one survivor yells to others “we’re going to the mall!” as the escape from the undead.

The visual metaphor of Zombies consuming their way through endless isles of low-priced, but culturally-costly (Save money. Live better at the expense of others.) goods without concern for impact, save their own desire, is not a stretch. Spending time at any low-cost, big box retailer in the pre-dawn hours, and Romero look like a sustainability prophet. (Interesting overlap: you can find 69 different super cheap Zombie-related items for sale at WalMart.com.)

**Romero was pointing out that shopping malls are important cultural spaces.** From coming of age films (Clueless, Mallrats) to chase and fight scenes (Blues Brothers, Terminator 2) the mall is an important social space that pushes forward many plots. Compare the malls in the original Dawn (1978) to its remake in 2004, and there is little structural difference, aside from new versions of old brands and anchor stores. The malls, the shoppers, and the Zombies (aside from speed) haven't changed much in 30 years. But culture change takes time...or apocalypse. Both work, one faster than the other. (A quick side note on Zombie dexterity: It has been argued that the theatrical shift from slow moving Zombies to fleet-footed gymnastic Zombies as in 28 Days Later and the Dawn 2004 remake is a reaction to the digital age and speed of computers, or to continue the analogy, computer viruses).

In the movie, the mall serves cross-purposes – to feed the consumptive hunger of the unthinking Zombie and as a haven for the living. The irony is easily spotted as the survivors go binge looting and consume nearly everything in the mall and must find a new place and new source of food (or become a food source). To the survivors, it is at once the luxury of a shopping spree and a prison. In the original, as men are filling wheelbarrows with appliances, Francine says of the mall, “Stephen, I’m afraid. You’re hypnotized by this place. All of you! You don’t see that it’s not a sanctuary, it’s a prison! Let’s just take what we need and get out of here!” Inside the mall it is un-conscious consumerism. Outside the mall it is just un-conscious. Consumerism in Dawn’s mall is just as liberating as in today’s shopping escapism – it numbs the pain. And if shopping can be painted as part of the solution to climate crisis, then by all means, keep calm and carry on shopping. It is escapism and delusion (isn’t that a good description of most inauthentic communication too?). All of this of course is wrapped up in the sustainability strategy of **“shopping our way out of climate crisis.”**

Ultimately, in Dawn, leaving the mall or not having access to a mall is synonymous with death. (No sprawl. No life. Know sprawl. Know life.) So when Zombies attack, I hope to be a victim of sprawl and have a Wal-Mart within running distance. Of course the point Romero is making is that the difference between the mall-dwelling survivors and the mall-thirsty undead is blurry at best. In Romero’s view, we are them. They are us. But who creates whom?

Moreover to the comparison, in pop culture (as opposed to authentic Haitian anthropology), most Zombies have a common origin: man’s hubris creates some kind of virus or environmental accident that (1) makes the dead undead; or (2) makes the living undead. Either way, man makes Zombies. As in climate crisis, we are the makers of our own demise. In Bio Zombie (1998), director Wilson Yip’s take on Romero’s Dawn of the Dead set in Hong Kong, the Zombies are created by sodas tainted with Iraqi bio-weapons (Note: the film is from 1998, not 2008). Control of the environment is a familiar theme in Zombie movies as it is in sustainability. Bioengineering, genetically modified food, cloning and now god-like climate engineering and Zombies all seem to stem from the same master. **Why inconvenience culture with sustainable actions when you can engineer the science around it?**

Even the Zombie taste-buds can be used in this lens. The consumption of brains is an apt metaphor for both the movies and the dumbing down of America through advertising – think about Hulu’s playful ad campaign owning up to its role in culture. But really, hunger is about appetite. And as in the modern sustainability movement, Zombie Consumerism is about appetite for more. **Not better. Just more.**

Zombies reproduce through consumption of the living, which serves as a nearly endless supply of brother and sister Zombies. Consider earth’s current human population explosion as a metaphoric never-ending supply of both brains and new Zombies. As one character in the original Dawn says when warning survivors of the process: “It gets up and kills. The people it kill get up and kill.” It’s a never-ending supply of both consumables and consumers (a capitalist dream). But, of course, the perishable items (bread and bullets) in the mall run out. And when they do, survivors need to make very difficult choices. Where’s the next mall? What place do we pillage next? An island, perhaps?

**As today and in the Zombie world, sustainability and survival are interchangeable. When the resources for survival run out and the malls have been picked clean, then we will reach for sustainability as a final solution.**

**OR WE WILL EAT BRAINS.**