The proletariat zombie revolution - Cameron Weed

Extract from a film theory thesis on the role of the zombies in George Romero's Land of the Dead.

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,” wrote Karl Marx in The Communist Manifesto (126). Written in 1848, The Communist Manifesto was Marx’s reaction to the rising viability of capitalism. Theorizing an increasing societal divide between the bourgeoisie, the upper class, and the proletariat, the lower class, as a consequence of the increasing rights to capital and ownership, Marx called for the removal of the bourgeoisie by means of a proletariat revolution. While a zombie attack suspends the advantage of money, capital, or economic class, Marx’s revolutionary ideology and Communist dogma informs George A. Romero’s zombies in Land of the Dead. Stephen Harper argues that throughout all of Romero’s zombie films, “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” (8).

Land of the Dead is a distinctive film in the Romero zombie series because it has the widest scope1. Taking place well after the zombie apocalypse established in his previous films, humanity has failed to eradicate the zombie threat and grasps at the final scraps of civilization in one of the last human cities, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Widening the scope from the typical small group of survivors to an entire city, Romero pushes his allegories beyond microcosmic representation. While this does cause a loss of the
intimacy and character development that defined Romero’s previous zombie films, it also allows for the depiction of large-scale revolution. The zombie threat grows in proportion to the number of survivors: surrounding the city is the eponymous land of the dead in which millions of zombies shuffle around freely.

Because of their irrepressible numbers and lack of representation, the zombies in Land of the Dead epitomize the disenfranchised proletariat. Despite being the “monster”of the film, the zombies are bound by their circumstances and instincts. As viewed from the perspective of those in power, they are incapable of individuality. Zombies are the proletariat mass, anonymous and threateningly prolific. Yet, continually distracted by the“sky flowers” (fireworks) of the invading human forces, the zombies remain an underestimated foe. In fact, like the proletariat mass described by Marx, the zombies’ latent power remains limited until developing a political consciousness to their situation, “the weapons with which the bourgeoisie conquered feudalism are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself” (130).

Ostensibly, zombies are an ineffective enemy unless amassed in a large group. They are powerful by virtue of their numbers and unified drives— which in Romero’s zombie films, the still living rarely have either. Steve Beard acknowledges this aspect of the zombie by writing that “individually, [zombies] are slow, stumbling and weak. Collectively, they are a rampaging mob of clawing hands and gnashing teeth” (30). Once the zombies in Land of the Dead finally develop an aversion to “sky flowers” they gain the consciousness to unite and overthrow their oppressor, in this case, a bourgeoisie of the still living. Ignoring typical schisms of age, sex, race, and occupation, the zombies typify Marx’s ideal communists who “have no interests separate from the proletariat in general” (135).

Herein lies the key fundamental difference between Land of the Dead and all of Romero’s previous zombie films. Instead of the immediate drive to consume human flesh, the zombies in the film organize seeking sociopolitical dominance. Having already presupposed in Day of the Dead that zombies do not need to consume living flesh for survival, the zombies in Land of the Dead willfully transpose their instinctual desire to devour for the collective desire to revolt against the oppressive still living. Accordingly, the zombies in the film become radical revolutionaries justified in their violence; their characteristic manner of attack, hands and teeth, is replaced by more complex and efficient weapons. In Land of the Dead, the zombies unintentionally carry out the definitive goals outlined by Marx for the proletariat uprising: to organize on a class basis, overthrow the oppressive bourgeois, and establish the proletariat as the central political power (136).

To bring about the desired revolution, the zombies must first break into the human stronghold. Despite being protected on all sides by either rivers or wide stretches of electric fences, humanity lives in a state of tenuous safety. Run with dictatorial despotism by Paul Kaufman (played with malicious panache by Dennis Hopper) from his monolithic tower named Fiddler’s Green—an architectural cross between the World Trade Center and the Time Warner Center—the city is set up in a feudal system of class
stratification: the rich live in the luxurious Fiddler’s Green while the rest cram into dilapidated slums surrounding the tower.

Stratified economically, the still living obviously continues to uphold the capitalist holdings of cash money in a post-apocalyptic civilization when the logical priority should be tangible and functional items. In attempting to recreate the normality of their previous civilization, humanity not only represses the zombies in Land of the Dead, but also some of their own because they“[have] left no other tie twixt man and man but naked self-interest and callous cash payment” (Marx 127). This further class differentiation allows for a representation of all the class levels theorized by Marx.

First and foremost, in Land of the Dead the bourgeoisie is exemplified by the tyrannical Kaufman, who views all humans as replaceable and everything else as an asset with a set monetary value—he is capitalism personified. Kaufman runs the entire city from a penthouse in Fiddler's Green—the apotheosis of capitalism and materialism—a building he allegedly didn't build but "took over." Owning every aspect of production, Kaufman filters down vices such as drugs, alcohol, and prostitution to the population of the slums, keeping them placated and complacent to his fascistic domination and the
surrounding zombie threat. Those who do challenge him are either promptly imprisoned or murdered by his personal military force. In short, Kaufman is the ruling class and the military, maintaining absolute dominance over the city.

Because Kaufman is arguably the sole representation of the bourgeoisie, the rest of still living, including those in Fiddler's Green and the slums, properly fit into Marx's maligned description of the lower-middle-class:[They] struggle against the bourgeoisie to save from extinction their position as sections of the middle class. They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative. And what is more, they are reactionary, because they try to turn back the wheel of history. Should they ever be revolutionary, they are so from fear of being forced down into the ranks of the proletariat, thus defending not their present but their future interests, and thus abandoning their own standpoint to adopt that of the proletariat.(133—134)

Despite marked economic divides, particularly for those outside of Fiddler's Green, the surviving humans choose to ignore their oppressive conditions and the zombie threat by either indulging in mind-numbing vices or consumer frivolities. Apathy-inducing coping measures as a way to ignore an external threat has always been an important thematic motif in Romero's zombie films—like the upper-middle-class mall life in Dawn of the Dead or the trailer park back porch (albeit, underground) life in Day of the Dead—but especially so in Land of the Dead.

The listless supplication of the lower-class humans stands in stark contrast to the zombies knowingly overcoming the distracting effects of"sky flowers." By representing the slow devolution of the still living from survival into indifference and complacency, humans lose their individuality and self-awareness,becoming zombies themselves. Like the lower-middle-class proposed by Marx, it isn't until the proletariat zombies surround them that the still living regain their self-efficacy by defending themselves or joining the proletariat mass.

As there must be to facilitate a revolution, there are notable exceptions to these class demarcations, namely the lead human protagonist Riley Denbo (Simon Baker). Riley is a rational and helpful Everyman—a rare find in Romero's zombie films—who leads a group of marauders on continual raids outside the city in order to supply the needs of the people, particularly the wealthy. Riley, however, is set apart from the other lower-middle-class inhabitants of the city because he acknowledges the evolving zombies.Romero highlights this by introducing the audience to Riley as he spies on a group of
zombies, noting that, "They used to be us. [They're] learning how to be us again."While continuing Romero's "they're us" motif, Riley also recognizes the rapidly disappearing distance between the still living and undead.

Since Riley is the only character in the film who understands that the zombies are changing, his decision not to kill the remaining zombies at the end of the film, combined with his persistent desire

to leave the city and active dislike of Kaufman, makes him more representative of the zombie proletariat than the passive lower-middle-class.In telling contrast to Riley is cocky fellow marauder Cholo DeMora (played with slimy precision by John Leguizamo). Despite Cholo "taking out [Kaufman's]garbage"—the dead bodies of Kaufman's opponents—Kaufman denies him residence in Fiddler's Green.

Seeking revenge, Cholo steals Dead Reckoning, a monstrous fortified truck, threatening to do a "jihad" on Fiddler's Green with Dead Reckoning's weapons system if Kaufman doesn't pay him money, to which Kaufman responds, "We do not negotiate with terrorists!"—an obvious reference to post-9/11 politics. Cholo, unlike Riley, is concerned only with his own individual well-being and regards the zombie mass as "stinkers." Ironically, Cholo is the only primary human character in Land of the Dead who is later reanimated as a zombie.

After Riley reacquires Dead Reckoning, the stranded Cholo gets bitten by a zombie. Deliberately choosing not to kill himself, Cholo decides he "wants to see how the other half lives." This is important because when Cholo becomes a zombie, his personal desire for revenge is absorbed into the zombie desire for dominance, and he exacts his revenge with zombie-like destructiveness. Consequently, Cholo is a prime example of the still living as the lower-middle-class: even when forcibly transformed into a member of the proletariat, he alters the zombies' shared revolutionary goal for his own personal purposes.

Despite the stratified class system within the still living, it is the humans' collective oppression, exploitation, and massacre of zombies that cause the zombie horde to revolt. Led by Big Daddy (Eugene Clark)2, the lead zombie who early on displays a capacity for communication, rational thought, and the manipulation of tools (most importantly, a machine gun), the unified zombie horde lumbers toward the city. Quickly infiltrating the city walls, the zombies rampage through the streets on their way toward Fiddler's Green as Kaufman impotently watches from above3.

Their collective movement and efficiency in overthrowing the bourgeoisie contrasts with the complacent
inhabitants of the city, further accentuating the Marxist idea that the proletariat is the only truly revolutionary class (133). Hence the zombies, because of their violence, are the heroes of Land of the Dead because they are the catalyst of necessary change. Romero thereupon completely violates our expectations for the horror genre by suggesting that zombies are not only physically but ideologically stronger: "they" are actually superior to "us".4

This exchange in power is crucial to the understanding of Land of the Dead. While the uniformity of zombies has always been a derisive counterpoint to the petty bickering of humanity, it isn't until Land of the Dead that zombies effectively differentiate themselves as superior to the still living. As Wood asserts, the zombies in Romero's films are politically progressive not only because they are symbolic
representations of the oppressed, but because they also elicit sympathy, indicting a society that exploits them ("An Introduction" 188—191). While Wood writes specifically about Romero's earlier work, the zombies in Land of the Dead do not diverge from, but rather intensify his argument. Not only do they blatantly expose the flaws in humanity and the cracks in society, but they hold humanity accountable.

It is we, the still living, who are the true monsters, not the zombies. This thematic motif is essential in
each of Romero's zombie films—for example, the petty infighting in Night of the Living Dead, the motorcycle marauders in Dawn of the Dead, and the military in Day of the Dead—but only in contrast to the truly superior zombies in Land of the Dead is it most explicit: in a bid to survive, humankind will inevitably turn on itself, disregarding societal cooperation for individual self-preservation.

However, Riley, the proletariat zombie counterpart, is again a notable exception. While he does strive for solitude outside the city, he cannot morally stop himself from helping others—Romero emphasizes this by Riley's persistent impulse to save people, particularly his allies Charlie Houk (Robert Joy) and Slack (Asia Argento). It is interesting to note that besides being allied with Riley, both characters also represent a sect of the disenfranchised class: Charlie is a man with mental disabilities and facial
disfigurements and Slack is a woman who is prostituted and over-sexualized.

Compounded with Riley's desire "for a world where there's no fences" and protecting people in harm's way, the three consequently become active participants in the dissolution of Kaufman's bourgeoisie reign whether they realize it or not. Nowhere is this more apparent then when they race back to the city in Dead Reckoning to save whomever they can. Finding that the zombies have essentially taken over because the still living were trapped by their own defensive structures, Riley destroys the remaining electric fences. This act openly aligns him with the zombie masses' first revolutionary act of destroying the barriers surrounding the city.

By tearing down the walls of the city both Riley and the zombies achieve the Communist goal of "the abolition of bourgeois property" (Marx 136). Marx wrote that the bourgeoisie purposely agglomerated the population from the rural to the urban as a means of centralizing their power, production, and property (129). The film echoes this conviction: the still living congregated specifically in the remnants of Pittsburgh because Kaufman built protective barricades around it. Kaufman's actions, however, were not out of generosity but of financial gain and the aforementioned centralization. So when Riley and the zombie horde tear down the barriers surrounding the city, they are, in effect, leveling the urban/rural and bourgeoisie/proletariat divide. But the zombies actually go one step further than Riley by physically breaking through the glass walls of Fiddler's Green.

The scene in which the zombies crash through the glass of Fiddler's Green is particularly provocative. Significantly, some zombies utilize tools of labor as their means of liberation, emphasizing Marx's ideas of bourgeois production being turned against themselves (130). Big Daddy explicitly exemplifies Marx at least twice. Despite knowing how to shoot a gun, Big Daddy chooses other labor-associated tools to execute his objectives. So, as the zombies approach Fiddler's Green, Big Daddy takes a jackhammer from the street, eventually using it to pound through the glass walls of Fiddler's Green dividing the bourgeois from the proletariat. After successfully breaking into Fiddler's Green, Big Daddy traps the escaping Kaufman in his luxury car. Employing gasoline from a nearby gas pump—the mechanism of Big Daddy's previous trade—he causes the car to explode with Kaufman trapped inside, sending the last of the ruling class up in flames.

Ultimately, the zombies succeed—they overthrow the bourgeoisie and rise to the dominant class. Intriguingly, despite the chaotic nature of their uprising, they appear to have killed only Kaufman, his military force, and some of the inhabitants of Fiddler's Green. Although there are some initial scenes of zombies rampaging through the slums, Romero centers the carnage around the military and citizens of Fiddler's Green, not on the poorer citizens. This serves two distinct narrative functions: it re-emphasizes that even the poorer humans are still not part of the revolutionary proletariat class because they hide while the zombies overthrow the bourgeoisie and it sets up the ambiguous ending. With the zombies apparently leaving some humans to survive, Romero, for the first time, introduces the possibility of coexistence. After blowing up the electric fence, Riley meets with the leader of the surviving humans and a staunch opponent of Kaufman, Mulligan (Bruce McFee), for a short but critical conversation:

Mulligan: "Why don't you stick around? We could turn this place into what we always wanted it to be."
Riley: "Maybe. Then what will we turn into?"
Mulligan: "We'll see, won't we?"

This brief exchange encapsulates the ambiguity with which the film ends. Riley, the zombie proletariat counterpart, chooses not to kill Big Daddy and his followers because he recognizes "they're just looking for a place to go. Same as us." In contrast, the combative, lower-middle-class Mulligan and his shotgun-toting gang walk off-screen cocking their guns giving no indication of cohabitation with the zombies, which is reminiscent of the end of Night of the Living Dead where a self-described "posse" of rednecks roams the Pennsylvanian countryside shooting everything that moves right between the eyes. By bookending both the beginning and end of his zombie narrative cycle with humanities' persistent antagonistic tendencies towards zombies, Romero establishes his ultimate pessimism towards his metaphorical ideal of true equality between the haves and have-nots. So despite Riley driving off winningly into the sunset in Dead Reckoning, there is the implication that humanity's oppressive nature against the zombies will persist.

1. It should be noted that Land of the Dead features many narrative elements that Romero's original Day of the Dead script initially included until having to be rewritten due to budgetary constraints, namely
the idea of a cognizant group of combative zombies only hinted at by Bub (Howard Sherman).

2. Big Daddy is an inspired continuance of Romero's strong black leading characters because, unlike Ben (Duane Jones) from Night of the Living Dead and Peter (Ken Foree) from Dawn of the Dead,
Big Daddy is the leader of a zombie mass. The band of organized black male survivors in Diary of the Dead slightly resembles Big Daddy, but without the singularly defined leadership or breadth that Big Daddy maintains.

3. The scene is evocative of Dawn of the Dead, with Kaufman indignantly stating the zombies "have no right" to enter the city much like Stephen (David Emge) regards the motorcycle gang invading the mall.

4. Harper notes that Bub suggests this shift at the end of Day of the Dead when he kills Captain Rhodes (Joseph Pilato), "an act motivated by human revenge rather than animal instinct" (7)