

# Reconfiguring the contagion: A Girardian reading of the zombie apocalypse as a plea for a politics of weakness

> **Duncan Reyburn**

Senior Lecturer, Department of Visual Arts,  
University of Pretoria, South Africa

[duncan.reyburn@up.ac.za](mailto:duncan.reyburn@up.ac.za)

---

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the mimetic patterns found in a selection of zombie films with reference to the philosophy of René Girard. To begin with, it argues that the zombie apocalypse, rather than only representing a future upheaval of society is also apocalyptic in the literary and theological sense; this it to say that it represents present social conditions by taking a very particular stance on the trajectory of human history. This article describes how the zombie contagion can be read as a symbol of what Girard calls ‘mimetic desire’. Thereafter, it deals with the way in which this contagion of desire, through the hegemony of mimetic undifferentiation, results in the escalation of reciprocal violence in a global society. Finally, it highlights specific plot points in recent zombie cinema that suggest the possibility of curing this reciprocal violence in such a way as to imply the necessity of a politics of weakness.

**Keywords:** Mimetic theory, zombie cinema, zombie apocalypse, mimetic contagion, undifferentiation, René Girard.

## Introduction

In common parlance, *apocalypse* tends to refer primarily to a massive upheaval or catastrophe that could take place at some future date — a tipping point according to which the ideological co-ordinates of human operations would be violently thrown into question (Žižek 2010:x). The terms *apocalypse* and *catastrophe* may be used

in the singular, following Jean-Pierre Dupuy (2013), ‘not to designate a single event’ but instead to indicate ‘a whole system of disruptions, discontinuities, and basic structural changes that are the consequence of exceeding critical thresholds’. In particular, anxieties concerning impending apocalypse tend to be linked to economic crises, environmental cataclysms and technological developments, as well as to rumours of war and other supplementary acts of terrorism (LaRose 2011:172; Stein 2003:509). This understanding of apocalypse as something linked to some traumatic disturbance in the future is the one that is most commonly associated with zombie cinema — a genre that is perpetually obsessing with what seems to be the inevitable unraveling of the social order (Yuen 2012:xiii).

However, to think of the zombie apocalypse only in these terms is to miss how the zombie genre is also apocalyptic in another sense: through poetic imagery and symbolism, it focuses on the unfolding of present social conditions. As its original meaning suggests, *apocalypse* — from the Greek *ἀποκάλυψις*, which means *revelation* — deals with unveiling and unconcealing what is happening right now, in this very moment, by means of a particularly bleak view of all historical unfolding. Apocalypse, which calls the temporally familiar into question through its use of rhetorical defamiliarisation, is a picture of the hypothetical then-and-there as something that should be deciphered as communication about the here-and-now. This suggests that the zombie apocalypse can be viewed as ‘an interpretation of politics in the form of a coded narrative’ (Hamerton-Kelly 2007). The following exploration of this possibility is undertaken within the theoretical framework provided by the French literary critic and philosopher-anthropologist René Girard, and especially considers Girard’s recent turn towards contemporary political issues, especially in his books *Battling to the end* (2010) and *The one by whom scandal comes* (2014).

The connection between zombie cinema and more immanentist view of apocalypse has already been intimated in various visual texts. For instance, the BBC series *In the flesh*, which is replete with religious symbolism, has its protagonist Kieran, a sufferer of PDS (Partially Deceased Syndrome), log into the Undead Liberation Army’s website with the password ‘revelations\_1.18’ — referring to a verse in the biblical book of Revelation that reads ‘I died but I came to life, and now my life is forever’ (Campbell 2013). In Zack Snyder’s *Dawn of the dead* (2004), the song that plays over the opening credits is *The man comes around* by Johnny Cash. This song has a number of apocalyptic overtones in its frequent references to Revelation. Both of the above uses of this biblical text can be interpreted as suggesting the two-fold understanding of apocalypse that I have discussed above. This to say that in addition to references to a possible cataclysmic upheaval of human society in a ‘pornography of resentful violence’ (Hamerton-Kelly 2007), the zombie apocalypse may also be taken as a filmic-literary critique of cultural



FIGURE N° 1



*Dawn of the Dead* promotional poster, 2004.

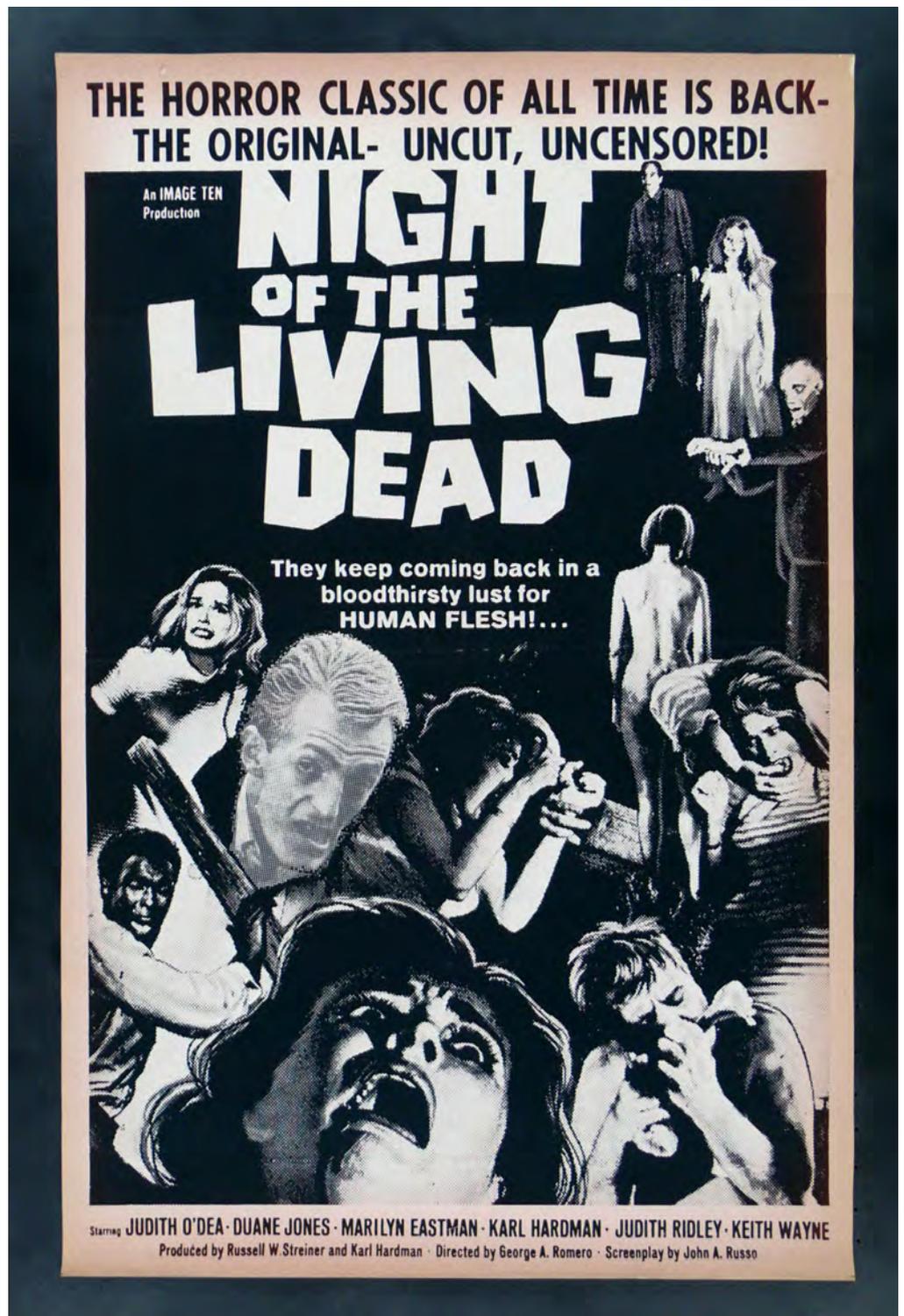


FIGURE **Nº 2**



*Night of the living dead* promotional poster (1958).

and political conditions in the present (Baukham 1993). When both senses of apocalypse are held in tension, the zombie apocalypse may come to be understood as both an injunction and a plea: it commands the captive audience to look critically at parallels between what is happening on screen and in the world, and also implicitly pleads with the audience to adopt a different route, which I call a politics of weakness.

My particular emphasis on the revelatory character of zombie apocalypses is in keeping with the fact that historically 'zombie cinema [has tended to represent] a stylized reaction to the greater cultural consciousness — primarily social and political injustices' (Bishop 2010:15). As an example, George A Romero's seminal zombie film *Night of the living dead* (1968) is often read as a commentary on the race riots, anti Vietnam War demonstrations and other cries of the oppressed that were woven into the cultural tapestry of America in the late 1960s (Bishop 2010:114). Following Romero's lead, a vast number of zombie films are taken to symbolise a slave uprising or proletarian insurrection (Blumberg 2011:64; Bishop 2010:114).

Moreover, zombie cinema deals in an allegorical fashion with other issues such as disquiet about violence, global terror, immigration, and the influence of consumerism and mass media (Bishop 2010:207; Paffenroth 2010:18). These broad issues indicate that zombie cinema needs to be theorised about not only in terms of obvious socio-political imagery but should also be tackled at the level of the very contagion that underpins the construction of every zombie narrative. When this is done, the zombie apocalypse may be recognised as being structurally homologous to the apocalyptic picture described by Girard.

The parallel between the zombie apocalypse and the Girardian view of apocalypse is complemented by the fact that what Kyle Bishop (2010:11) calls the 'zombie renaissance' — a phrase describing the increasing popularity of the zombie genre over the last decade or so, something also noted by Arnold Blumberg (2011:64) — and the Girardian 're-examination of the foundations of modern politics' both stem from the 'brute facts' of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (Hamerton-Kelly 2007). That is, both are, in different ways, attempts to understand the nature and consequences of human desire against the scenography of war. With this in mind, the focus of this article is primarily on three core elements of a Girardian reading of the zombie apocalypse. Firstly, it sketches how the zombie contagion can be understood as a symbol of mimetic desire. Secondly, it deals with the manner in which this contagion, through the spreading of undifferentiation, results in the escalation of reciprocal violence. And, finally, it discusses two recent narratives that have tried to propose possible "cures" to this reciprocal violence in such a way as to imply the necessity of a politics of weakness.

## The (mimetic) zombie contagion

In *Warm bodies* (2013), an unconventionally self-aware zombie named R explains that he has a ‘hard time piecing together how [the] whole [zombie] apocalypse thing happened’ (Levine 2013). He therefore speculates that it ‘could have been chemical warfare or an airborne virus or a radioactive outbreak monkey’ (Levine 2013). Each possibility seems to directly relate to the way that human beings have tampered with nature. Here, *Warm bodies* refers to a few possible contagions that have become tropes within the zombie genre. For instance, the mention of the apocalypse stemming from chemical warfare and/or an airborne virus may be referencing Romero’s *The crazies* (1973) and Breck Eisner’s remake of that film (2010), and the seemingly outlandish ‘outbreak monkey’ is a definite reference to Danny Boyle’s *28 days later* (2002), which is the post-9/11 film that is typically credited for reviving an interest in the zombie genre. Nevertheless, in *Warm bodies*, R reaches the conclusion that ultimately it does not matter how the zombie contagion spread; what matters, insofar as his decaying brain is able to discern, is its inevitable consequences. However, this judgment ought to be read as deeply ironic. In fact, as noted especially in *World War Z* (Forster 2013), the origin of the contagion is of tremendous importance, not only for understanding the structure of zombie narratives but also for understanding why zombie cinema has become such an important cultural phenomenon in recent years.

A clue to the significance of the origin of the contagion is provided in Ruben Fleischer’s *Zombieland* (2009), in which are told by its narrator Columbus that the contagion started in Garland, Texas when ‘Patient Zero took a bite out of a contaminated burger at a Gas-’n’-Gulp’ which in turn caused things to go from ‘bad to total shit-storm’. Here, the origin of the zombie contagion and its mushrooming circulation are linked very emphatically to fast food and thus also to American consumer culture. That *Zombieland* can be read as a parody of that culture should not be overlooked; this seemingly flippant reference to fast food is in fact a means for exaggerating the consumptive impetus of American capitalism. Thus, the origin of the zombie contagion is implied to share the same semiotic matrix as rapid consumption. Such an overt reference to consumerism is a popular zombie cinema trope, most commonly alluded to by images of colonised spaces that have now been abandoned or simply left to ruin (Cocarla 2011:117; Paffenroth 2010:18; Patterson 2011:229). Such spaces, like the deserted malls of Romero’s *Dawn of the dead* (1978) and Zack Snyder’s remake of that film (2004), the parking lots of *Shawn of the dead*, the empty highways of *Zombieland* and the run-down airport of *Warm bodies*, to name only a few examples, are powerful metaphors.



FIGURE N° 3

*The crazies* promotional poster, 1973.



FIGURE N° 4



28 days later promotional poster, 2002.

They indicate that human attempts to control the world through their constructions of language, media and other forms of design are ultimately at the mercy of something that, while potentially conveyed through discourse, is also somehow beyond discourse.

Perhaps, therefore, the most fascinating hypothesis concerning the spread of the zombie contagion is found in Bruce McDonald's independently produced, low-budget film *Pontypool* (2009), which has the zombie virus disseminate through the English language instead of by blood (Blumberg 2011:67). Language and blood both represent life, although whereas the former stresses biological life, the latter emphasises social life. Thus, in *Pontypool*, the core impetus of the zombie apocalypse is made far more explicit than is typical in zombie cinema: the contagion does not simply signify a physical event — a war, terrorist attack or ecological catastrophe — but instead symbolises human relations *per se*, which are 'an unending exercise in mutual imitation — the essence of which is perfectly captured by a not wholly transparent word, reciprocity' (Girard 2014). McDonald (2008) describes the viral process in *Pontypool* as follows:

There are three stages to this virus. [In the] first stage ... you might begin to repeat a word. Something gets stuck. And usually it's words that are terms of endearment like *sweetheart* or *honey*. [In the] second stage ... your language becomes scrambled and you can't express yourself properly. [In the] third stage you become so distraught at your condition that the only way out of the situation you feel, as an infected person, is to try and chew your way through the mouth of another person.

Whether or not this explanation is plausible is beside the point, since its purpose is to indicate that the zombie contagion and the consequent collapse of representative significance are closely linked. There are two specific things about this process that point to the appropriateness of a Girardian reading of the zombie apocalypse. The first is the fact that victims are somewhat unconscious of what is happening to them, and the second is that the degeneration of these victims into meaninglessness and inhumanity stems from mindless repetition — a copy and paste approach to language and its implicit ideologies. Distraughtness and violence arise, therefore, not from too much variation or difference but from too much similarity.

Through Girard's (1966:35) philosophy, which operates as a continuous critique of Cartesian solipsism, we discover that one of the greatest lies of modernity is the 'romantic lie' that proclaims a truly autonomous self. Contrary to this lie, the truth is that '[w]e are not autonomous, self-sufficient individuals, but rather beings that are formed through the imitation of models, especially with regard to desire'

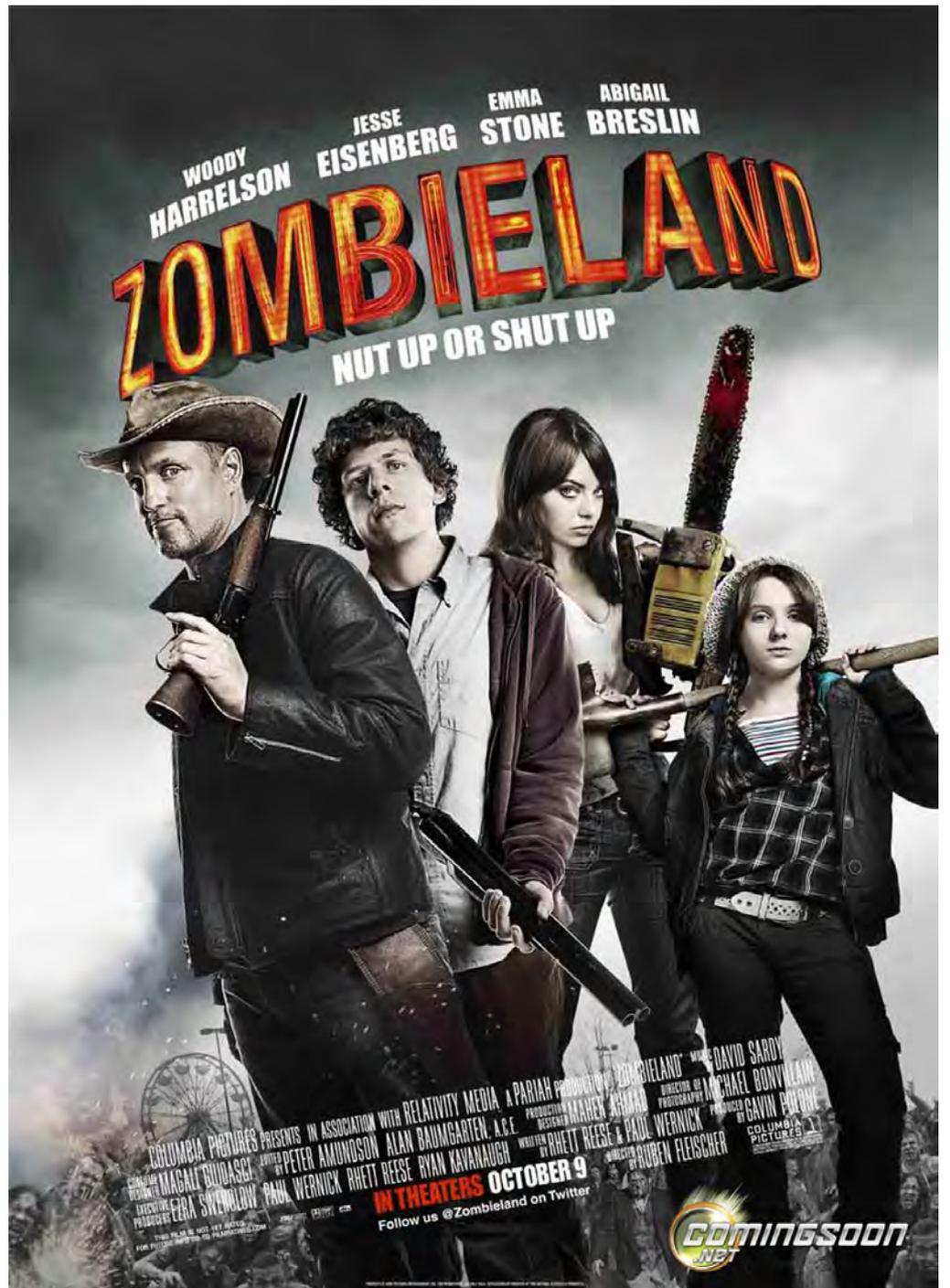


FIGURE N° 5

Zombieland promotional poster, 2009.



FIGURE N° 6



*Dawn of the dead* promotional poster, 1978.

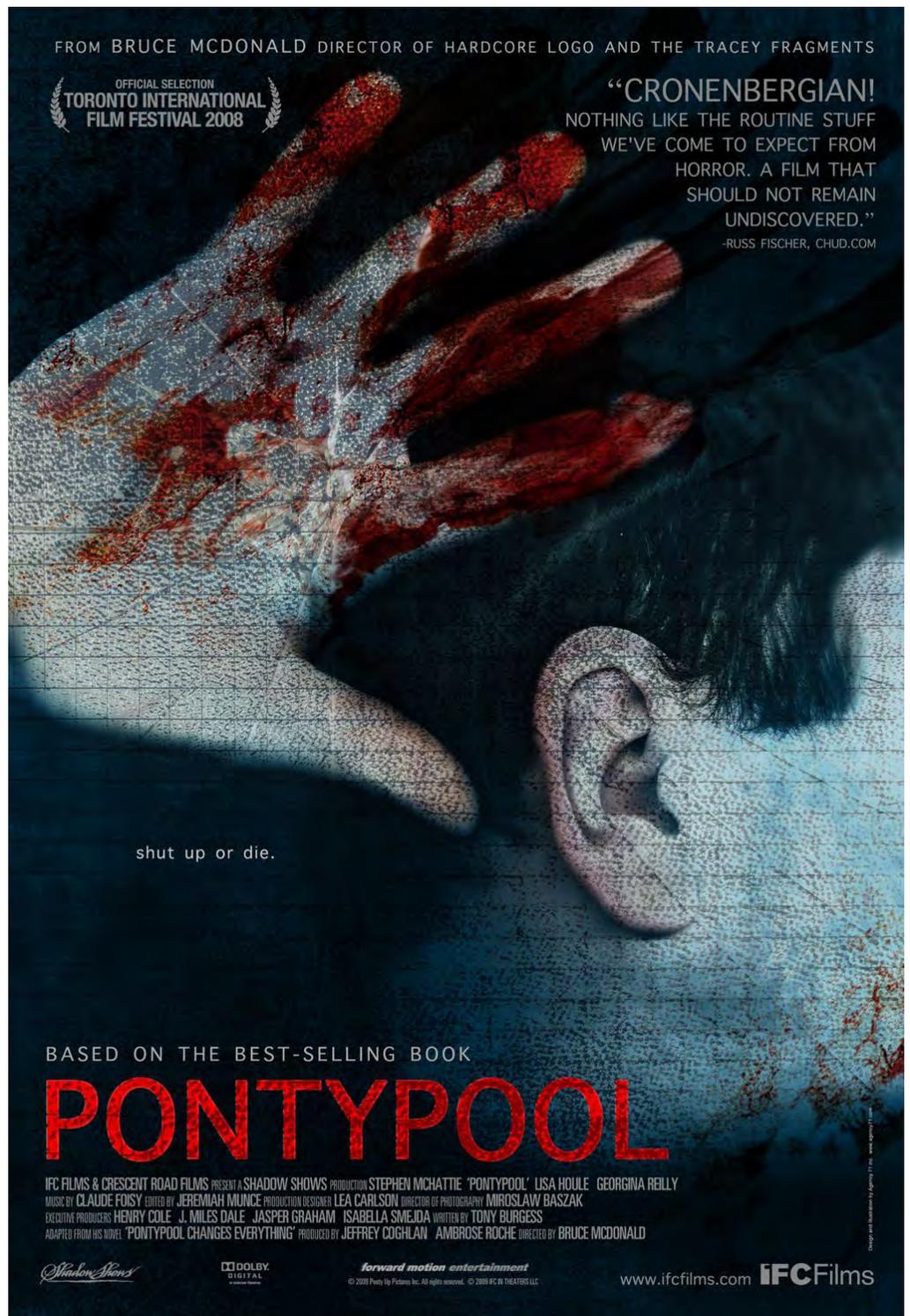


FIGURE N° 7



Pontypool promotional poster ('Shut up or die'), 2009.

(Palaver 2013:2). Even in merely beholding a thing we are being changed by it. Thus, '[m]imetic theory contradicts the thesis of human autonomy. It tends to relativize the very possibility of introspection: going into oneself always means finding the other, the mediator, the person who orientates my desires without my being aware of it' (Chantre & Girard 2010). In *Pontypool*, this idea is encapsulated by the fact that the whole drama of the zombie apocalypse is reported about from within an isolated radio station that is based in the small Canadian town of Pontypool. Here, the mediation that is meant to inform and assist the public in their navigation of the traumatic social landscape, and especially the breaking news of the zombie apocalypse, becomes the very medium by which the virus is more widely disseminated. This unconscious spreading of the virus in *Pontypool* is homologous to Girard's observation that desires are not self-generated but are in fact the desires of the other. All desire is mimetic (Girard 2001:8-9; Girard 2014). This is to say that human beings are 'formed fundamentally by their mutually mimetic relations' (Palaver 2013:36). This is not to proclaim that the choices or the free will of the individual are utterly eradicated, as in a closed, deterministic system. Indeed, this relativisation of the will of individuals is a means for stressing the importance of choosing rightly when real choices are available: our freedom may be restricted but it is certainly not irrelevant. Human choice is simply limited to the choice of whom to imitate, or, as in the philosophy of Simone Weil, what to pay attention to. That the self always desires through some form of mediation remains inevitable.

There is paradox at the heart of Girard's philosophy concerning desire: those who are unaware that they are bound to the imitation of the desires of others tend, rather proudly, to view themselves as autonomous; however, those who are aware that they are bound to the imitation of the desires of others tend to be more individuated. Awareness, which is acquired in humility, is therefore the key to breaking down and exposing the romantic lie of the autonomous self in order to allow individuation (Girard 1966:35; Reyburn 2014:161). Without this awareness, what is left is the law of undifferentiation, whereby distinctions between the self and the other are blurred or even completely effaced. Girard (1977:54) points out that the 'end of distinctions means the triumph of the strong over the weak, the pitting of father against son — the end of human justice, which is here unexpectedly defined in terms of "differences" among individuals'. Again, the Girardian perspective complements a central theme in much of zombie cinema: there is a great deal of injustice in the world, but the solution to such injustice cannot be predicated upon the eradication of all hierarchies and differences (Chantre & Girard 2010; Girard 2014; Vials 2011:41). Rather, justice must be predicated upon differentiation.



FIGURE N° 8



Shaun of the dead promotional poster, 2004.

Zombies are very pertinent examples of the law of undifferentiation, for that which would indicate individuality has almost utterly vanished. They may look like people but they act in ways that point to an absolute loss of personhood. Blind repetitions, as in the unthinking linguistic repetitions of the infected in *Pontypool*, lead to the erasure of identity (McDonald 2009). In the introductory sequence of Edgar Wright's *Shawn of the dead* (2004), we are given a snapshot of what this might look like even in a world entirely devoid of actual zombies: an elderly man pushes a trolley, a number of women working at check-out counters in a supermarket scan groceries in unison, businessmen all take out their cellphones at the same time to look at the small screen in front of them, and a gang of teenagers, all wearing hoodies, bob their heads unanimously to an irritating soundtrack of electronic music. In each brief shot, the individual is obliterated in favour of a larger, impersonal system — a system that is usually maintained by some form of technology. All that is left is a pattern, which means that the tasks that the people are doing are shown to have more weight than their own humanity.

*Shawn of the dead* is, of course, simultaneously a parody of and homage to Romero's *Dawn of the dead* (1978). Whereas the latter was created in an American setting, the former was created in a British context. Therefore, while Romero has his characters take refuge in a shopping mall (the ultimate flattener of individuality — a depersonalised space of consumer procedures), Wright has his characters hide out in a pub, which may be read as a symbol of banality and mindlessness). The key to understanding these different settings is mimetic desire: all human gathering is a direct result of this imitation of the other. Accordingly, while the primary reading of Romero's *Dawn of the dead* as a critique of consumerism is certainly appropriate, it ought to be understood foremost as a critique of the reign of undifferentiation that underpins all consumerist mechanisms.

The typical assumption that comes from a landscape of undifferentiation may be that what we have here, to use a musical metaphor, is harmony. However, harmony is predicated upon difference; without difference, all that is left is monotony. Girard argues that it is precisely the unification of desires that results in conflict. Two sets of hands reach, not quite simultaneously, for the same thing; and, when there is not enough of that one thing to go around, the result is discord. For instance, zombies, as those robbed of their distinctiveness and thus also their humanity, “want” the life of human beings. However, it turns out that human beings, for obvious reasons, want to keep their lives. Survival, as we are told by the poster of Romero's *Survival of the dead* (2009), is not only for the living. Two sets of hands reach for the life of the human being; the struggle must result in the eradication of one of the combatants. Nevertheless, the ghoulish undead can only partially

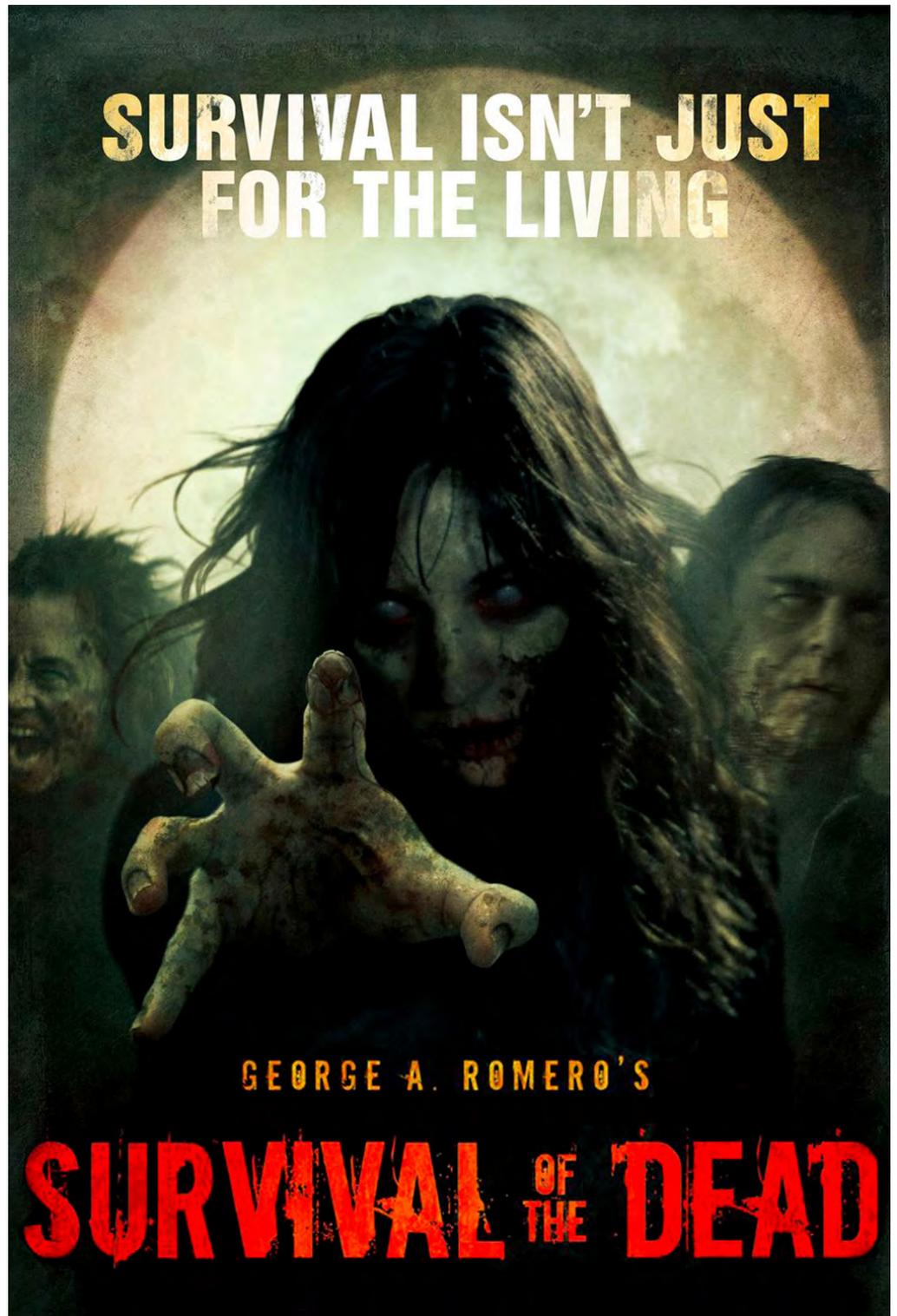


FIGURE N°9



*Survival of the dead* promotional poster, 2009.

imitate the life of human beings, even while they desire the whole being of human beings. Their “desire” is akin to ‘metaphysical desire,’ which Girard (1966:55, 67, 73, 75) claims is the basis of all desire: it is the desire for the very being of the other and not just for a few peripheral qualities that the other happens to possess.

This metaphysical desire is performed through the way that zombies instinctively and unconsciously seek to devour human beings. Zombies act in a way that radically reverses a Levinasian ethics, which hinges upon the appeal-command of the face-to-face encounter with the other (Morgan 2011:10). The zombie cannot see the face of the other, and the result is an insatiable hunger to consume the entire being of the other. Whether they are devoured or not, the victims are reduced to being dust specks in the desert landscape of undifferentiation: if they are devoured, they die; if they are merely bitten, they become the undead — that is, death in another guise. Even the people who are perpetually running from the undead have their existences defined in relation to death.

From the perspective of mimetic theory, there is ultimately no difference between the undead and the dead, for they are all just bodies without souls, brains without minds, flesh without spirit. However, the mimetic contagion always spreads farther, endlessly proliferating like the zombie plague. Initially, zombies and humans may be somewhat easy to tell apart, but various narratives, from Romero’s zombie films to more recent films like *World War Z* (2013), indicate that the contagion will not stop until all distinctions have been flattened, or a cure or inoculation has been located (Forster 2013). This conflictual state of emergency is what Girard (1977:55) refers to as the ‘sacrificial crisis’: a ‘crisis of distinctions’. This crisis is marked by a process of desymbolisation: as in *Pontypool*, meaning itself is nihilistically thrown into question and then thrown out completely (McDonald 2009).

## The escalation of reciprocal violence

Having argued that the zombie apocalypse can be read as a coded narrative that concerns cultural and political conditions, I have thus far stressed the importance of understanding the zombie contagion, which finds parallels in the real-world phenomena of AIDS, SARS, bird flu and even the H1N1 Pandemic of 2009 (Boluk & Lenz 2011:6), which are structurally homologous to the mimetic contagion. With this in mind, it is easy to understand the resulting escalation of violence. What may begin as a duel between two persons can soon become a war between two political entities, for, as German military theorist Carl von Clausewitz (in Chantre & Girard 2010) notes, ‘[w]ar is nothing but a duel on a larger scale’. What may

begin as a quarrel between two people — friends or rivals, or both — escalates as others participate in the mimetic rivalry between them. Nevertheless, the real fuel for this rivalry will always ultimately be the rivalry itself. In Girard's analysis, the object of desire soon disappears from relevance as parties from both sides of the duel imitate the one's desire to inflict harm on the other. As can be expected, this leads to an increase of violence, which is the same thing as an escalation of false differences at the expense of real differences. Thus, the fundamental unity of the shared desire is rendered almost inescapable; in this, violent reciprocity and undifferentiation are found to be the very same thing. Structural symmetry becomes the mark of this escalation of violence from both sides (Girard 1977:5). The 'more the antagonists desire to become different from each other, the more they become identical' (Girard 2002:22). Girard suggests that 'humans are identical in both their desires and hatreds, and never so close to reconciliation as when they are at war' (Chantre & Girard 2010). In a sense, mimesis ensures that the common ground or locus of consubstantiality required for persuasion and reconciliation has already been established.

It is typical in the average zombie apocalypse to find that the human subjects are utterly outnumbered by the zombies, which conveys the impression that what is human is always in danger of being eradicated by the mimetic dispersion of undifferentiation. However, when it comes to the duel between humans and zombies, it is difficult to see how they are in any significant way different from each other. Zombies annihilate humans and humans, when given the chance, annihilate zombies. Often, as we find in Romero's films, or *World War Z* or even in so-called zombedies (zombie comedies) like *Zombieland* and *Warm bodies*, people will often treat each other with a kind of indifference or hatred that mirrors the hostility of zombies. Through mimetic theory, humans are generally found to be not all that dissimilar from the monstrous undead. This undifferentiation is the very nature of war, as Weil (2002:171) notes: 'There are far more conflicts than there are differences. The most violent struggles often divide people who think exactly, or almost exactly, the same thing. Our age is very fertile in paradoxes of this kind'.

This lack of difference is shown particularly with the invention, in *28 days later*, of fast zombies (Boyle 2002). In more traditional zombie cinema like Romero's *Dead* films, zombies are slow, lumbering and ungainly; they overcome human beings by sheer force of numbers rather than any kind of agility. However, more recent films, including Snyder's *Dawn of the dead* (2004) and Francis Lawrence's *I am legend* (2007), depict zombies that are just as animated as human beings. In fact, their hunger for the being of people may even be regarded as more forceful and possessive than the human will to survive. This perspective is sobering when it



FIGURE N° 10



*I am legend* promotional poster, 2007.

comes to unraveling the meaning of acts of terror like Kamikaze attacks, suicide bombings, as well as other forms of undifferentiating physical combat, where the will of the individual to live is overridden by the will of the collective. In *World War Z*, for instance, digitally animated zombies swarm in and around human colonies, thus showing zombies to have a demonic sense of purpose and urgency (Forster 2013). However, they remain unconscious, perpetually chained to their own collective violence. These zombies, and their human opponents, are like leaves caught in the hurricane of the mimetic contagion.

With reference to the structures of religious rituals in archaic societies and in ancient mythology, Girard (1977:82, 85) puts forward the idea that the escalating, swarming mimetic battle between two enemies may be overcome at the expense of a victim or scapegoat. This victimage mechanism, as the foundation of all archaic societies and religions, occurs when all the hatred and vengeance of opposing communities is arbitrarily directed towards a clear minority, usually a minority of one (Girard 2001:53). Since the desires of opponents are in fact very close, if not identical, it takes almost no force to redirect their hateful intentions onto a scapegoat. Surprisingly, though, it is in the very hostility of the act of killing the victim that peace is restored, proving that people 'are only capable of reconciling their differences at the expense of a third party. The best [that people] can hope for in their quest for nonviolence is the unanimity-minus-one of the surrogate victim' (Girard 1977:273). This slaughter of a surrogate victim, which is re-enacted through myth and a ritual sacrifice directed at the gods, establishes real difference once again: mimetic violence has had its outlet, and in its wake the multifarious concerns of individual people re-emerge. False differences are then set aside so that real differences are able to take their place once again. Consequently, the peace that has been won is often deemed miraculous, and this in turn leads to the veneration of the victim as a god.

A question therefore arises: Would including a sacrificial victim of this kind end the mimetic violence of a zombie apocalypse? In keeping with the general trend of contemporary zombie cinema, as opposed to the earlier voodoo-inspired zombie cinema that began with Victor Halperin's *White zombie* (1932), the answer seems to be in the negative. While there may be exceptions to this rule, as is intimated in the video game *The last of us* (2013), this general lack of an appeal to the victimage mechanism is remarkably resonant with a Girardian apocalypticism (Straley & Druckmann 2013). In Girard's view, for the victimage mechanism or any other ritual sacrifice that mimics the structure of the victimage mechanism to have the desired effect, its true character needs to remain obscure. The resulting peace would '[emanate] from an innerworldly misinterpretation of the victimage mechanism'



FIGURE **N° 11**



*White zombie* promotional poster, 1932.



FIGURE N° 12



*Cabin in the woods* promotional poster, 2012.

(Palaver 2013:154). This is to say that if the scapegoating is to be constructive the audience should not perceive the sacrifice for the violent murder that it is, but should instead see it as a means by which the “gods” are appeased. In the end, though, these so-called gods, like the computer generated gods in Drew Goddard’s *Cabin in the woods* (2012), a film that first introduces mimetic struggle by means of a zombie attack, are merely imagined projections of the rage of the mob.

The violence of the sacrifice — and we would do well to remember that it is violence that is the ‘essence of the act’ of sacrifice — works as catharsis only when the bystanders are oblivious of their complicity in it (Girard 1977:86; Warren 2013:84). However, Girard contends that we live in a world that has had the victimage mechanism exposed by the anthropology presented in the Christian gospels (Girard 2001:1). Contrary to the narrative of paganism, the death of Christ, as it is narrated in the New Testament, brings about a great reversal, whereby the narrative takes sides with the victim rather than the mob (Girard 2001:2). Additionally, the scapegoat is revealed as a victim rather than as a criminal. He therefore does not die a deserved death but is in fact unjustly lynched. He is shown, against typical myths and rituals, to be an arbitrarily chosen figure that falls prey to the tempest of the mimetic contagion. With the unjust brutality of the lynch mob exposed, it becomes patently clear that no god demanded or legitimated the sacrifice of the victim in this way. Thus, there is no path open to the crowd to defer responsibility. The victim is innocent and there is not even a divine mandate to be blamed for the actions of the crowd. Prior to this great reversal or tergiversation, the violence of sacrifice would have been a generative force that resulted in the creation of cultures and societal order. Difference would have been restored. However, with the system of the violent sacred unmasked, violence remains degenerative. This is to say that it no longer brings about any kind of stabilising unity to the mimetic swarm.

It is in the light of this perpetual trend towards escalating and degenerative violence that the continuation of the typical zombie apocalypse ought to be read. The fact that there is no respite and no chance of a sacrificial hiatus but only myriad escalating casualties demonstrates that the politics of war needs to be undermined by something other than a monotonous, mimetic retaliation. Instead of mimicking the pagan structure of scapegoating violence, a far more daring subversion is called for. This is the politics of weakness that I discuss below.

## The zombie apocalypse as a plea for a politics of weakness

In the archetypal storyline involving a zombie apocalypse, as Todd Kendrick (2008) notes, the main threat does not emanate from zombies but instead has its origins 'within the group of survivors. Death comes either from betrayal, poor organization or panic'. In the quintessential zombie movie, those authorities who may have been able to stop the spread of the contagion act too indecisively and too slowly to succeed. I mentioned above that when the victim is revealed as innocent — that is, as arbitrarily chosen by mass mimesis — the legitimating framework according to which such scapegoating occurs is thereby cast into doubt. Thus, we find another clear parallel between the zombie apocalypse and the Girardian view of apocalypse: both insist that, ultimately, the responsibility for the plague falls on individual people who have made the choice, whether consciously or unconsciously, to step under the rule of the contagion. There is really no room for neutrality here, for failing to choose a side is tantamount to choosing to side with the escalating force of the contagion. Nevertheless, while what it looks like to side with the contagion is obvious from zombie films, the structure of the alternative may be somewhat less obvious.

*Warm bodies* presents one picture of this alternative (Levine 2013). In this film, the zombie contagion continues to proliferate until its protagonist R, in a fit of zombie rage, attacks and kills a young soldier named Perry and thereafter eats his brain. These actions are, for obvious reasons, irredeemable. However, in the mythology of *Warm bodies*, when zombies eat the brains of humans, they experience their memories, hopes and emotions. This is to say that they are able to feel, if only for a fleeting moment, what it is like to be human again. And it is in his experience of Perry's mind that R learns that Perry is in love with Julie. This experience of love is what causes R to properly see the face of Julie, who, unaware of the terrible fate of her boyfriend, is nearby fighting for her life. It is this event, then, that brings about a reversal of mimetic desire. Previously, R had been completely taken up in the undifferentiated mimetic struggle of zombiekind versus humankind but in tasting this love for Julie he transcends the law of undifferentiation. He sees her unique selfhood within the world and he wants to love her in her uniqueness rather than devour or conquer her as an anonymous body. He also simultaneously wants to escape the prison of his own zombie nature. The force of this subjective transformation, this revelation of the shocking otherness of the other, is enough to cause his dead heart to beat again.

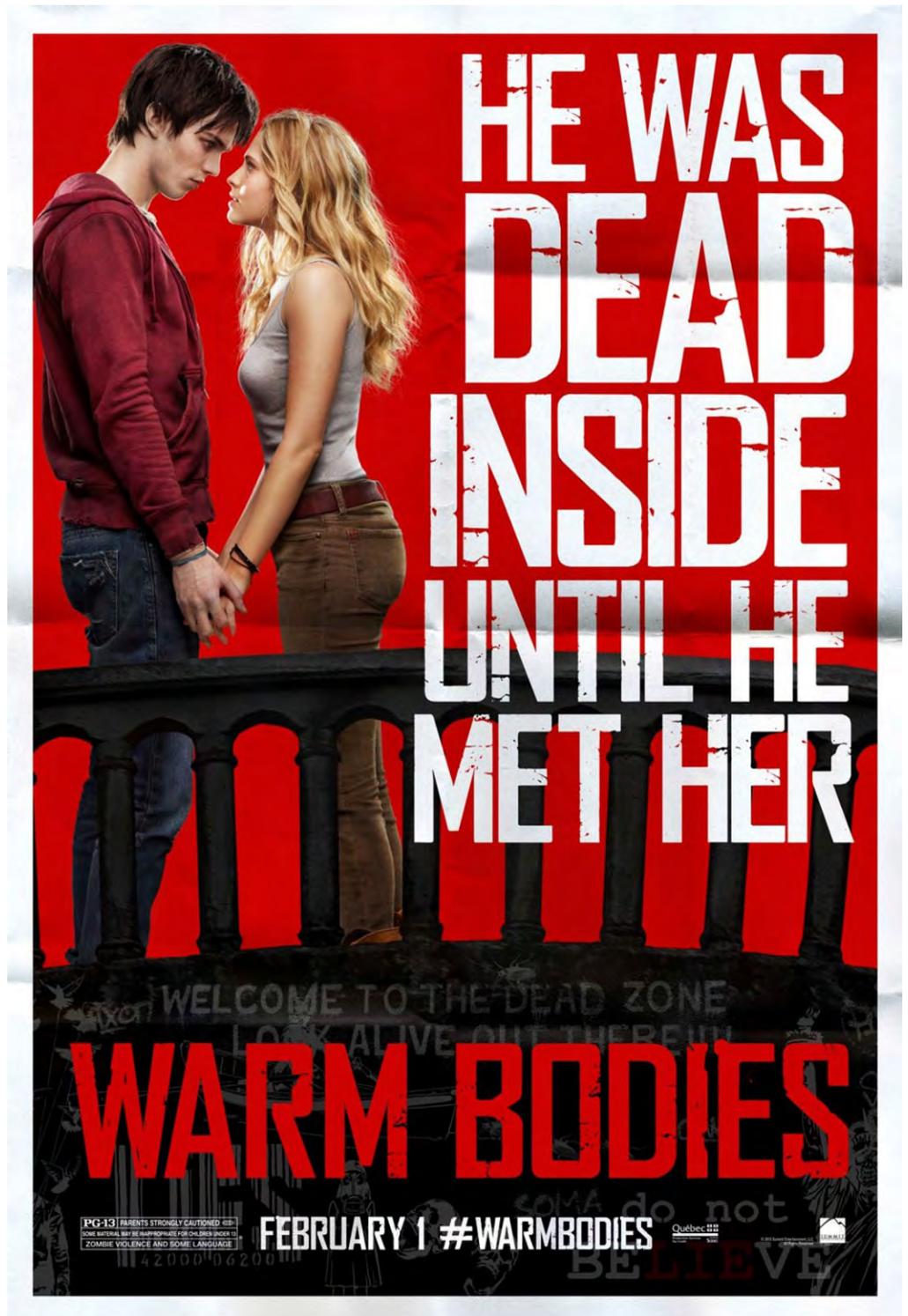


FIGURE N° 13



*Warm bodies* promotional poster, 2013.



FIGURE N° 14



*World War Z* promotional poster, 2013.

This occurrence may be regarded as a politics of weakness and thus as a suitable alternative to the politics of war for two primary reasons, the first being the obviousness with which the desire may be comprehended as mimetic: R realises, as much as a mindless zombie can and with a pang of remorse, that he is looking at the world with Perry's eyes and mind and not his own. The politics of weakness begins with a humble surrender to the perspective of the individual other. This means recognising that the other ought not to be apprehended merely as a conduit for the proliferation of the desire of the mob. Here, a politics of weakness begins with empathy. It is this very empathy — this laying down of the controlling myth of the autonomous self — that brings about the collapse of the myth of the autonomous self (Girard 1966:35).

The second reason that this may be deemed a politics of weakness is because this empathy threatens to expose R to the violence of the mob. After all, by adopting the desire of the other, R has stepped outside of the security of the zombie collective and therefore faces the possibility of persecution and even total eradication — a second death of sorts. Stepping against mimetic violence certainly does not preclude the possibility of falling victim to that violence. Indeed, it is in this stepping out that the individual becomes more vulnerable to that violence, as is even clearer in the example of *World War Z* discussed below. But, this stepping out also has other consequences. R's empathy with Perry opens him up to the possibility of loving Julie. This love, as an intimate vulnerability to the sheer alterity of the other, turns out to be a weakness that is stronger than the strength of the mimetic contagion. Additionally, love may be deemed an irrevocably divisive act, perhaps even an act of resistance. It creates a strict separation between the self and the other in order to demand the paradoxical harmony of unity in the very midst of difference. This is reflected in GK Chesterton's (1986:33) idea that '[l]ove desires personality; therefore love desires division'. It is significant that R's first act after becoming aware of his mimetic desire is to speak the name of the other — 'Julie' — and thus set her apart as an individual (Levine 2013). In his newfound love this distinctive other becomes the new mimetic contagion — a transcendent contagion for what seems to be a metaphysical problem. Following this, the other zombies, through R, desire to find love as well. Here, a transcendent ideal becomes the chief cure for nondifferentiation. As intimated above, it is in recognising the individuality of the other that the self also becomes individuated.

*World War Z* also argues for a politics of weakness but in an alternative fashion to *Warm bodies*. Its protagonist Gerry Lane, after searching the world over for the origin of the zombie viral outbreak, comes up with a theory concerning how people might be protected from it (Forster 2013). He has noticed that there are certain people that

the zombies completely ignore: the injured or the terminally ill; that is, the weak. The reason given for this is an evolutionary one: the virus “recognises” (quite miraculously and contrary to a completely physicalist worldview) that these people would be unsuitable hosts for any viral reproduction. When Gerry is cornered by a zombie in a World Health Organization (WHO) pathogen lab, he tests his own theory by injecting himself with a deadly but treatable virus. The zombie consequently ignores him, as do the other zombies that he encounters when returning to the main wing of the WHO. Therefore, by adopting the state of one about to die rather than the stance of one desperate to keep his own life, Gerry escapes death itself.

Here, death is no longer opposed, as it is according to the law of the contagion, but is accepted. Gerry, in a sense, loses his desire to cling to the desire of the other, and therefore lives. This event reveals something of Gerry’s courage, which embraces a paradoxical combination noted by Chesterton (1986:297): his courage involves both ‘a strong desire to live’ and a ‘strong willingness to die’. He is thus able to affirm the value of his own being in the face of that which would negate his being (Tillich 2000:3). This courage reveals that a politics of weakness cannot be equated with mere resignation or defeatism. Death may still be disdained, but it is no longer feared as something that would devalue being. Thus, a Girardian reading of this moment in *World War Z* would suggest that it is not power that allows escape, but a very specific kind of weakness. Weakness, perhaps in its sheer unobtrusiveness and unattractiveness, spares Gerry from being bent to the will of the undifferentiated zombie crowd. A reversal is performed whereby the weak are proved to be the real victors — it is not strength that conquers, but vulnerability. It is vital to notice here that Gerry does this alone, as a single human being, completely differentiated from the crowd.

A final example of this politics of weakness is found in *Pontypool*. I have already noted that the contagion in this film is spread through the English language — the very language that Girard suggests, as the chief marker of globalisation, is the main language of mimetic desire today (Chantre & Girard 2010). Towards the end of *Pontypool*, Grant Mazzy realises that defeating the contagion must require ‘disinfecting’ the words by which the contagion is spread. This epiphany hits him the moment he witnesses his friend and colleague Sydney get the word ‘kill’ lodged in her understanding after killing a diseased girl in self-defense (McDonald 2008). Veronica Belafi (2012:4-5) describes how Mazzy then ‘encourages [Sydney] to “move things around” in her own understanding’ in order to ‘assert her autonomy over the virus in the same way a disc jockey might manipulate a record, sliding or scratching the sounds he transmits’. Steen Christiansen (2010:7) notes that Mazzy ‘cures Sydney from the language virus by de-semanticizing the meaning of words’.

Mazzy agitatedly ‘forces “kill” into disparate signifying molds in his effort to inoculate Sydney’s contracted word’ (Belafi 2012:5). The word *kill* starts to take on new meanings: ‘*Kill* isn’t *kill*. *Kill* is *blue*. *Kill* is *wonderful*. *Kill* is *loving*. *Kill* is *baby*. *Kill* is *Monet’s Garden*. *Kill* is *beautiful morning*. *Kill* is *everything-you-ever-wanted*. *Kill* is *kiss*. *Kill* is *kiss*! Is that it?’ (McDonald 2008). Thus, in Sydney’s mind, a word that embodies mimetic violence comes to refer only to reciprocal love. In the moment that this shift in meaning occurs, she tells Mazzy to ‘kill [her]’. Belafi (2012:5) notes that ‘the two immediately embrace, as the subject (kiss) and its signifier (kill) become locked into a new relationship, one exclusively shared within this couple’s linguistic community’. Here, we have a similar mimetic reordering to what I noted above with regard to *Warm bodies*: There is Mazzy’s empathy with Sydney, coupled with his profound recognition of her humanity; then, there is his humility, unveiled in his willingness to set himself aside for the sake of another; and finally there is his love, which is found in the connection established between himself and Sydney. There is courage here too, which is demonstrated in Mazzy’s willingness to rethink the paradigm according to which he thinks, and also in his willingness to stick with someone in trouble rather than trying to escape with his own life. He thus affirms his own being even in the face of that which would negate it.

This solution to the zombie contagion in *Pontypool* is, however, somewhat undermined by the conclusion. On seeing that his attempt to cure Sydney has worked, Mazzy sees an opportunity to help others by means of a radio broadcast. He is not yet absolutely certain of what he did to save Sydney from the virus but he knows that he has no time to lose and must therefore try to do whatever he can. Thus, without thinking too much, Mazzy broadcasts various attempts to disinfect words: He utters a self-contradictory plea to ‘Stop understanding me’, attempts to redefine words (*‘kill is kiss’*, *‘laughter is walking’*, *‘yellow is crowded’*), and insists upon establishing strange, random juxtapositions in a nonsensical chain of signifiers (*‘savage, sausage, tomorrow, ceiling’*, etc.) (McDonald 2008). None of these attempts seem to make any difference to the world outside. In fact, Mazzy’s ramblings only manage to convince the authorities that he himself has been infected by the virus (Christiansen 2010:7). Finally, towards the end of his broadcast he admits: ‘We were never making sense’. Rather, as Belafi (2012:5) notes, ‘sense was making them’. The final failure of his attempt to disseminate the cure rests on Mazzy’s failure to understand that the primary cure does not reside in language itself but is found instead in the mimetic desire that is extrinsic to language. Girard (2014) himself notes that ‘[l]anguage — “discourse,” as it is known today — is much less important than current fashion would have it’. By staying with Sydney even when it looks as if she will be consumed by the zombie contagion,

Mazzy presents a mimetic model by which she can overcome the desire of the impersonal, violent other and connect with the personal other. It is impossible to translate a politics of weakness into a medium that is by its nature aimed at the affirming mass mimesis.

Unfortunately, there are also factors in *Warm bodies* and *World War Z* that undermine a politics of weakness in that both narratives lead right back into the cycle of mimetic violence that the proposed cures attempt to transcend. *Warm bodies*, for instance, provides a segment of the story in which zombies and humans start working together to kill what are called ‘bonies’ — zombies that have given up all hope and therefore have no hope of redemption (Levine 2013). This scapegoating of the bonies seems to perpetuate the very same sacred violence that precedes it. While it is true that this violence is depicted as being somewhat retributive, ultimately it has a negative scapegoating function rather than a positively judicial one.

Then, in *World War Z*, Gerry’s insight into the power of weakness is soon used as a weapon: a vaccine is developed that causes humans to get sick enough to not be targeted by zombies, but well enough to keep on living. And this allows humans to decide to wage a very strong offensive on the zombies, even though the vaccine opens the possibility of having human beings find a cure for the zombies. Gerry claims towards the end of the story: ‘This isn’t the end. Not even close. Our war has just begun’ (Forster 2013). The precise target of the war may well eventually be the zombie contagion but the film itself alludes to zombies and not the contagion being deemed the primary enemy. Human beings, in this particular apocalyptic vision, are therefore ultimately not freed from mimetic violence. They remain just as rivalrous and murderous as those zombies that they have been fleeing from. One may argue, of course, that zombies, as animated corpses, are merely mechanical objects, which means that any apparent violence directed against them should be read in the same way as one would read the action of kicking against a wall. This overly literal interpretation, however, misses the symbolic dimension of zombie cinema. Traditionally, plagues and floods have been taken as metaphors for mimetic violence (Palaver 2013:160), and zombie apocalypses, in my view, are simply contemporary extensions of these metaphors.

## Conclusion

In the light of the above examples, and in looking at a few others, one can deduce four possible responses to the zombie apocalypse, each of which highlights a facet of Girard’s discussions on apocalypse. The first, which happens to be one

permutation of a politics of war, is a widespread acceptance of the inevitability and unstoppable of the violent mimetic contagion. Zombie cinema tends to revel in this particular response. In this, hell overflows to become a literal place on earth, where the logistics of the contagion are completely unmanageable: 'the dead rise as zombies, those attacked by zombies become zombies, and even humans killed by other humans become zombies' (Bishop 2010:114, 161).

The second response to the zombie apocalypse is to try and curb the violence. This response, as taken up in *Zombi 2*, *I am legend* and also in *World War Z*, presents the idea that the mimetic contagion can only be managed rather than completely cured (Bishop 2010:107; Fulci 1979; Forster 2013; Lawrence 2007). In Girard's (1977:23, 30) view, archaic religion, societal laws against taboos, as well as the contemporary judicial system, are all attempts to curb the mimetic contagion. Nevertheless, the management of the contagion is not the same as curing it (Girard 1977:31).

The third response to the zombie apocalypse attempts to transcend the first two responses, but inevitably falls back into a politics of war by ossifying the role of the scapegoat. As James Warren (2013:312) claims, 'the victim as *such* has now come into its own as an *absolute, universal value*' (emphasis in original). Moreover, Warren (2013:312) writes that '[t]he contemporary world is alive, like no other civilization in history, to the issue of victimization. We advocate for the rights of victims, we search out victims, we try to outdo one another in saving victims. We see victims everywhere, even in the animal and vegetable kingdoms'. This absolutisation of the victim can be found, for instance, in Wright's *Shaun of the dead*, Andrew Currie's *Fido* (2006) and Grace Lee's *American zombie* (2007), which 'ask probing questions about the plight and even rights of the infected walking dead' (Bishop 2010:204; Wright 2004). Wright's film even introduces the notion of zombie domestication. As a consequence, the absolute victim can become an excuse to victimise others. This legitimisation therefore falls prey to the romantic lie that argues for the autonomous self and its distinctive lust for power. The logic of this response advocates siding with the victim only in order to continue the spread of the hegemony of mimetic violence.

Finally, there is the response that I call a politics of weakness, which refuses to participate in the violent mimetic contagion in any way, even at the risk of persecution. This generally untapped politics of weakness, which is rooted in empathy, humility, love, courage and vulnerability, is the implicit plea of the zombie apocalypse. This may be claimed when following Robert Hamerton-Kelly's (2007) observation that 'apocalypse' ought to 'emphatically [use] the principle of moral responsibility to interpret its trajectory'. The principle of the exposure of the



FIGURE **N° 15**

*Zombi 2* promotional poster, 1979.



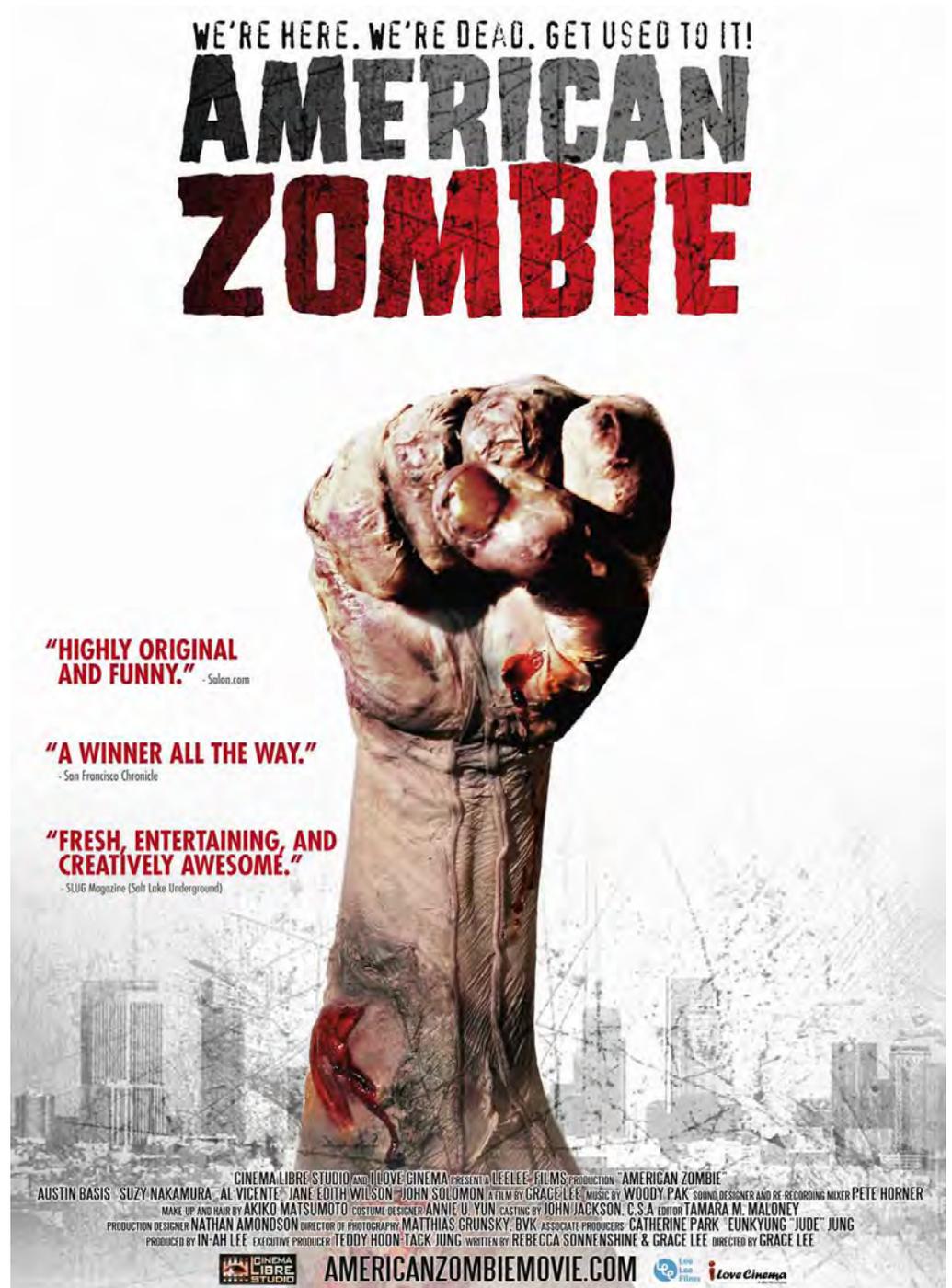


FIGURE N° 17



American zombie promotional poster, 2007.

victimhood mechanism, as well as the responsibility of the individuals in the mob, is rooted in this very idea: when we become aware of the truth of the lynch mob, we have two options: embrace compassion, which understands the fullest scope of the apocalyptic genre, or embrace collapse, disintegration and catastrophe. The choice put forward to the one who witnesses the zombie apocalypse is therefore between being consumed by the contagion or stepping out against it. In both cases, the individual is unable to escape responsibility.

It is this responsibility, then, that is the ultimate focus of this Girardian interpretation of the zombie apocalypse. As is evident throughout the above argument, at every turn of the mimetic structure — the advent or discovery of the plague, the escalation of mimetic violence and the search and discovery of the cure that is a politics of weakness — the individual's role in the apocalypse is stressed. Apocalypse tends to carry with it the idea that there will be some final judgment at the end of history, whereby the battle between good and evil will be settled by some authoritarian divine agency (Collins, McGinn & Stein 2003:ix). However, through the above Girardian exploration of apocalypse, it becomes clear that such a judgment is one that is settled incarnationally, internally and immediately with regard to individuals who wrestle with the impetus of mass contagion. This does not mean the total or absolute displacement of some divine agency but instead locates this agency within the flesh and blood contingencies of human experience. This is to say that the judgment is not something that is only yet-to-come, as would be the case in the commonplace view of apocalypse, but is instead something that is taking place or has already taken place, first with regard to the manner in which the victimhood of victims has been exposed, but also with regard to the manner in which individuals respond to this revelation. The force of the politics of weakness, in demythologising the mimetic contagion, is therefore found in its epistemological claims: '*Now we know*,' Žižek writes with regard to this Girardian apocalypse, and therefore we 'can no longer pretend that we don't' (in Gunjević & Žižek 2012:64, emphasis in original).

# REFERENCES

- Baukham, R. 1993. *The theology of the book of Revelation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University. E-book.
- Blumberg, AT. 2011. Aim for the head! The zombie as an intellectual monster, in *Braaaaiinnss! From academics to zombies*, edited by R Smith. Ottawa: University of Ottawa:61-70.
- Belafi, V. 2012. Retroviral, retroquoting in *Pontypool changes everything*. [O]. Available: [http://cms-dev.ubishops.ca/fileadmin/bishops\\_documents/queuc/files/2012-QUEUC-Conference-Proceedings.pdf#page=11](http://cms-dev.ubishops.ca/fileadmin/bishops_documents/queuc/files/2012-QUEUC-Conference-Proceedings.pdf#page=11)  
Accessed: 2 July 2014.
- Bishop, KW. 2010. *American zombie gothic: the rise and fall (and rise) of the walking dead in popular culture*. London: McFarland.
- Boluk, S & Lenz, W (eds). 2011. *Generation zombie: essays on the living dead in modern culture*. Jefferson: McFarland.
- Boluk, S & Lenz, W. 2011. Introduction: Generation Z, the age of apocalypse, in *Generation zombie: essays on the living dead in modern culture*, edited by S Boluk & W Lenz. Jefferson: McFarland:1-17.
- Boyle, D (dir). 2002. *28 days later*. [Film]. 20th Century Fox.
- Campbell, J (dir). 2013. *In the flesh*. [Television series]. BBC Three.
- Chantre, B & Girard, R. 2010. *Battling to the end*. Translated by M Baker. East Lansing: Michigan State University. E-book.
- Chesterton, GK. 1986. *Collected works, Volume 1: Heretics, Orthodoxy, The Blatchford controversies*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986.
- Cocarla, S. 2011. Becoming zombie grrrls on and off screen, in *From academics to zombies*, edited by R Smith. Ottawa: University of Ottawa.
- Collins, JJ, McGinn, B & Stein, SJ (eds). 2003. *The Continuum history of apocalypticism*. London: Continuum.
- Collins, JJ, McGinn, B and Stein, SJ. 2003. Introduction, in *The Continuum history of Apocalypticism*, edited by JJ Collins, B McGinn & SJ Stein. London: Continuum:ix-xv.

- Christiansen, S. 2010. Speaking the undead: uncanny aurality in *Pontypool*. *Cinephile* 6(2):4-8.
- Currie, A (dir). 2006. *Fido*. [Film]. British Columbia.
- Eisner, B (dir). 2010. *The crazies*. [Film].
- Fleischer, R (dir). 2009. *Zombieland*. [Film]. Columbia.
- Forster, M (dir). 2013. *World War Z*. [Film]. Skydance.
- Fulci, L (dir). 1979. *Zombi 2*. [Film]. Variety Film.
- Girard, R. 1966. *Deceit, desire and the novel*. Translated by Y Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University.
- Girard, R. 1977. *Violence and the sacred*. London: Continuum.
- Girard, R. 2001. *I see Satan fall like lightning*. Translated by JG Williams. New York: Orbis.
- Girard, R. 2014. *The one by whom scandal comes*. Translated by MB DeBevoise. East Lansing: Michigan State University. E-book.
- Goddard, D (dir). 2012. *Cabin in the woods*. [Film]. Mutant Enemy.
- Gunjvić, B & Žižek, S. 2012. *God in pain*. London: Verso.
- Halperin, V (dir). 1932. *White zombie*. [Film]. Edward Halperin.
- Hamerton-Kelly, R (ed.). 2007. *Politics and apocalypse*. East Lansing: Michigan State University. E-book.
- Kendrick, T. 2008. Surviving a zombie apocalypse. [O]. Available: <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/27770863/#.U61b8Y2Syl0>  
Accessed: 27 June 2014.
- LaRose, N. 2011. Zombies in 'A deep, dark ocean of history': Danny Boyle's infected and John Wyndam's triffids as metaphors of postwar Britain, in *Generation zombie: essays on the living dead in modern culture*, edited by S Boluk & W Lenz. Jefferson: McFarland:165-181.
- Lawrence, F (dir). 2007. *I am legend*. [Film]. Warner Brothers.
- Lee, G (dir). 2007. *American zombie*. [Film]. Lee Lee Films.
- Levine, J (dir). 2013. *Warm bodies*. [Film]. Madeville.

- Morgan, ML. 2011. *The Cambridge introduction to Emmanuel Levinas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- McDonald, B. 2008. *Pontypool's infected*. [O]. Available: <http://www.shocktillyoudrop.com/news/7454-mcdonald-describes-pontypools-infected/>  
Accessed: 16 November 2013.
- McDonald, B (dir). 2009. *Pontypool*. [Film]. Ponty Up.
- Paffenroth, K. 2010. Apocalyptic images and prophetic function in zombie films, in *Reel revelations: Apocalypse and film*, edited by L Quinby & J Walliss. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix:18-26..
- Palaver, W. 2013. *René Girard's mimetic theory*. East Lansing: Michigan State University.
- Patterson, N. 2011. Becoming zombie grrrls on and off screen, in *Braaaaaiiiiinnss! From academics to zombies*, edited by R Smith. Ottawa: University of Ottawa:225-248.
- Quinby, L & Walliss, J (eds). 2010. *Reel revelations: apocalypse and film*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix.
- Reyburn, D. 2014. Subversive joy and positive reciprocity: A Chestertonian-Girardian dialogue. *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture* 21(1):157-174.
- Romero, GA (dir). 1968. *Night of the living dead*. [Film]. Laurel Group.
- Romero, GA (dir). 1973. *The crazies*. [Film]. Cambist.
- Romero, GA (dir). 1978. *Dawn of the dead*. [Film]. Laurel Group.
- Romero, GA (dir). 2009. *Survival of the dead*. [Film]. Romero-Grunwald.
- Smith, R (ed). 2011. *From academics to zombies*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa.
- Stein, SJ. 2003. Apocalypticism outside the mainstream in the United States, in *The Continuum history of apocalypticism*, edited by JJ Collins, B McGinn, & SJ Stein. London: Continuum:493-515.
- Straley, B & Druckmann, B (dirs). 2013. *The last of us*. [Video game]. Naughty Dog.
- Tillich, P. 2000. *The courage to be*. London: Yale Nota Bene.

- Vials, C. 2011. The origin of the zombie in American radio and film: B-horror, US empire and the politics of disavowal, in *Generation zombie: Essays on the living dead in modern culture*, edited by S Boluk & W Lenz. Jefferson: McFarland:41-53.
- Warren, J. 2013. *Compassion or apocalypse*. Winchester: Christian Alternative.
- Weil, S. 2002. *Oppression and liberty*. Translated by A Will and J Petri. London: Routledge.
- Wright, E (dir). 2004. *Shawn of the dead*. [Film]. Universal.
- Yuen, W (ed). 2012. *The walking dead and philosophy*. Chicago: Open Court.
- Yuen, W. 2012. Philosophy for the dead, in *The walking dead and philosophy*, edited by W Yuen. Chicago: Open Court.
- Žižek, S. 2010. *Living in the end times*. London: Verso.