

The undead: a brief critical glossary

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Abstract

Abject, body horror, close-up, wound, gore, horror, necropolitics, *terrir* and zombie are the entries in this critical glossary imagined from the figure of the undead. Present in popular and media culture, this ambiguous character enable us to relate horror, visual arts and cinema, seen against the sociopolitical background of what the Mexican philosopher Sayak Valencia calls “gore capitalism”. We seek to inquire the relationship between the virtuality of the image – in the neoliberal present agenda, characterized by smooth and luminous surfaces typical of an obscene regime of total circulation and visibility – and the irreducible physicality of the body – translated, in the horror genre and in the zombie trope, through eschatological representations of rotting flesh, violence and death, symptoms synthesized, in part, by the notion of necropolitics. The following text has a fragmentary, experimental form, at times with disparate associations, in order to incorporate the very logic of the analyzed objects.

Keywords: zombie studies; horror; necropolitics; film; contemporary art.

Abject (undead subjectivity)

[...] without makeup or masks, waste and corpses display what I permanently repress in order to live [...] there, I am on the edge of my condition as a living organism [...] until, from loss to loss, nothing remains and my body falls beyond the edge [...] it is death infecting life (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3)¹

By way of an introduction, this essay aims to consider the figure of the undead and the horror genre in the intersections between the visual arts and cinema. To justify the conceptual relevance, the problem must first be approached precisely at the crossroads between the figurative possibilities of recent images (created in high definition with advanced technologies), the violence of contemporary necropolitics, and within the framework of the absolute spoliation

¹ All translations are ours, except where otherwise noted.

of neoliberalism. We shall see that all of the spectacle's prerequisites are satisfied in the form of the unashamedly obscene register, namely, *gore*.

The term necropolitics was formulated by Cameroonian philosopher and political scientist, Achille Mbembe (2016). It seeks to designate the control of mass death as exercised by governments (totalitarian or otherwise) and private militias on a global scale. The concept has its origins in racism, but also allows us to consider other social markers such as class, gender, sexuality and geopolitics. It raises the question of which populations should live and which will be systematically exterminated. The spectacle, as conceived by Guy Debord (1997), is the culture of consumption that attains a totalitarian scope by infiltrating all aspects of an individual's life, and in so doing, makes use of the technologies of manufacturing and the dissemination of images. In the context of neoliberalism, this amounts to the regime of the maximum exploitation of a precarious productive force. In the alarming synthesis proposed by Hardt and Negri (2001, p. 51), "there is nothing, no 'naked life', no external panorama that can be proposed outside this field permeated by money; nothing escapes money. Production and reproduction are dressed in monetary costumes". Having outlined this panorama, we ask ourselves: what type of subjectivity and what modes of resistance are possible? The present reflection is radically fragmentary in character – taking the form of a critical glossary – and operates by way of case studies, whether of artistic works or concepts.

Psychoanalyst Christian Dunker relates the figure of the undead to a certain type of subjectivity characterized as "post-traumatic, whose expression of suffering would be similar to brain injuries, such as aphasia and dementia" (Dunker, 2012, p. 232). It is the subject who must come to terms with the reality of a world fractured by wars, genocides, authoritarianism and the daily normalization of violence. Adopting Walter Benjamin's notion of shock and the "unnamable experience" of violence, Dunker relates that "its literary paradigm is zombies or the living dead, functional beings that automatically repeat an action, incapable of reconstructing the history of the tragedy that befell them." The author continues: "They appear to be beings who have lost their soul and whose suffering appears amidst selective mutism, psychosomatic phenomena and alexithymia (difficulty perceiving feelings and naming them)" (Ibid., p. 232). The concept of "shock" in Walter Benjamin which Dunker employs, surfaces in his essay *Experience and poverty* (Benjamin, 1993), in which Benjamin relates the experience suffered by combatants in the First World War and the inability of these individuals to produce reports on what they had experienced. The essay features a denunciation of widespread violence, followed by the observation that there is "honor" in "confessing our poverty", and the author proceeds to urge the defiant confrontation of this exhaustion provoked by the shock: "[...] you must not imagine that men aspire to new experiences. No, they aspire to free themselves from all experience, they aspire to a world in which they can display their external and internal poverty so purely and so clearly that something

decent can result from it” (Ibid., p. 118).² If, on one hand, Benjamin is betting on the “confession” of the poverty that the body is subjected to under totalitarianism and capitalism, then he also observes that the paradigmatic experience of shock is internalized in artistic work. In other texts (Benjamin, 1994), Benjamin deals with the relationship between art and the shocks and dangers of urban life in the context of modernization: the crowd that brings together private individuals engaged competitively with each other in the market, the class struggle, the bohemian “conspirators”, the anonymous observation of the *flâneur* (“any clue followed by the *flâneur* will lead him to a crime”), the scopophilic regime marked by the phantasmagoria of artificial light, and the accelerated rhythm and constant movement (attributes of the nascent spectacle the author witnessed in the first decades of the 20th century). As a kind of inoculation and mirroring of the saturation of the sensory and cognitive apparatus, art incorporates shock at its formal level.³ The figure of the undead, based on the relationship proposed by Christian Dunker and expanded on in this reflection, is associated with the shock of industrial society and of the nascent spectacle, just as it is today, an effect of the violence practiced by totalitarian regimes and the permanent state of exception described by the concept of necropolitics.⁴ Thus this undead figure, when read as an allegory of violence and the precariousness of the contemporary subject, is an absolutely current theme. It is also transdisciplinary, encountered throughout many layers of popular and media culture, which supports the experimental and hybrid stance of the objects analyzed in this reflection.

Added to this subjectivity fractured by shock is the notion of “abject”, a complete expression of the “confession” demanded by Walter Benjamin. In the literature on horror cinema, it is not uncommon to find the abject mediating the experience of the polymorphous character of the body and reality (Creed, 1993). This experience appears in the form of the monstrous, the uncanny, and in indeterminism and in extreme violence. It is expressed through the use of a pre-symbolic universe, characterized by fluids, substances, formless organic or inorganic materials, which are related to the body, but which do not produce identifications with notions of

² Significantly, Benjamin continues: “[...] they “devoured” everything, “culture” and “men”, and became satiated and exhausted [...] Fatigue is followed by the dream, and it is not uncommon for the dream to compensate for the sadness and discouragement of the day, realizing the entirely simple and absolutely grand existence that cannot be realized during the day, due to lack of strength” (Benjamin, 1993, p. 118).

³ Benjamin explains: “The technique subjected [...] the sensory system to a training of a complex nature. The day came when the film responded to a new and urgent need for stimulation. In the film, perception in the form of shock imposes itself as a formal principle. What determines the rhythm of production on the [factory] conveyor belt underlies the rhythm of receptivity in the film” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 125). We can think of the act of film editing as a clash of heterogeneous elements, and associate the flow of frames with factory production, not only in the rhythm, but also due to operational fragmentation flowing into autonomous but linked units, as also occurs in an assembly line. Later in the same text Benjamin seeks to relate the behavior of the crowd to the automatism and objectification of industrial work: “passers-by behave as if, adapted to automation, they are only able to express themselves automatically. Their behavior is a reaction to shocks” (Ibid., p. 126).

⁴ Benjamin’s narrative is only part of the story. Consideration must also be given to kidnapping, body fragmentation and total violence as effects of the dynamics of race/coloniality of power as Denise Ferreira da Silva warns (Ferreira da Silva, 2019). The term necropolitics seeks to include, albeit insufficiently, this racial tension.

personality, structure (here read structured, intact body) and binary oppositions. A celebrated text on the abject is *Powers of Horror*, by Julia Kristeva (1982). In the introduction the author defines the abject as the threat of an “exorbitant exteriority or interiority”, which is excessively “close”, yet which cannot be “assimilated”, “tolerated”, or even named, as these are not “definable objects.” The abject opposes both self-evident meaning and the autonomous “I”, since it inhabits a zone that is at once familiar, yet entirely strange: “at the limit of non-existence [insofar as there is no recognition] and hallucination, a reality that, should I become aware of, annihilates me.” Kristeva suggests that the abject produces a violent instability of identifications. According to Hal Foster (2017, p. 148), “the crucial ambiguity in Kristeva lies in her shifting between the operation of *abjecting* and the condition of being *abject*”.⁵ In early development, in order to separate from the dominion of the maternal body, fused as it is with this body and its fluids, the baby must reject it. There may be an inability to carry out this separation, a failure in the struggle for autonomy. Autonomy itself (in psychoanalytic terms, the ego) is then evacuated, “abjected”, turning into an empty void. This process occurs in identification (imitation) with that which lies at the threshold in relation to the body, that which is evacuated, undifferentiated from this link with the mother and her fluids. These two moments are instances in which the subject position is potentially disturbed. Abjecting is a necessary resource in the coming-to-be of a subject, while being abject means being dead, undifferentiated, identified with the material reality of the corpse, in a logic applicable both to the individual and the social body. We settle, therefore, on a characterization of the abject as a territory of ambivalences, as something which destabilizes notions of identity, system and order through a certain deviation in the limits between the vital and the inert, the familiar and radical estrangement, protection and the threat of dissolution (Battle, 1987).⁶ The paradigm of the undead (the subject as a living corpse) thus produces a contamination, a frustration of the ability to separate, contrast, differentiate. Much like a phobic object, it is not possible to sublimate or fetishize a strangeness that has not yet been encoded in language, since this is the unreserved manifestation of a primordial horror.

Body horror

Watching horror is an experience that can bring us closer to the limits of sentience, of sensorial liminality, of what it means to be in a state of ‘becoming meat’ (Aldana Reyes, 2012, p. 71).

⁵In a footnote on the same page, the author adds: “To be abject is to be incapable of abjection, and to be completely incapable of abjection is to be dead, which makes the corpse the ultimate (non) subject of abjection.” Regarding the abject, he also notes: “a category of (non) being, defined by Julia Kristeva as neither subject nor object, but rather prior to being the first (before [the baby’s] total separation from the mother) or after becoming object (as a corpse surrendered to the state of object)” (Foster, 2017, p. 143).

⁶ For Bataille, the corpse must be removed from view to protect the living from their constant fear of the loss of their discontinuous being, their individuality, in a fusion with this undifferentiated homogeneity, which is death.

In Linda Williams' conception, *body horror* consists of the "spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion", which produces a "sense of over-involvement" in these same sensations and emotions (Williams, 1991, p. 4-5).⁷ So, if on one hand, horror deals with the experience of the body transformed into an image – in its entirety or in parts, scaled up on the cinema screen so as to engulf the spectator – then it also concerns a type of event that exacerbates the body's experiences of physicality. According to Williams, "body genres" arise in genres deemed sensationalist or exploitation, such as pornography, melodrama and horror, in addition to musicals and comedy. Their representations are "displays of primal, even infantile emotions, and [...] narratives that seem circular and repetitive" (Ibid., p. 3). Their most evident figurations relate to violence, explicit sex and crying, along with images of bodily fluids, such as blood, sperm, saliva and tears, to name just a few. *Body genres* are often understood as "gratuitous", but Williams opposes this definition. She oscillates between seeing body horror both as mimicry realized by the viewer of what happens in the film's narrative, and at the same time, as a release, so to speak, for repressive structures of perversion and castration (Laplanche; Pontalis, 2001, p. 341-344; 72-76) – the shift of sexual release from genital means to non-genital means (fetish), and a return to the traumatic moment of the discovery of sexual difference, in a binary account which invites critical attention today. Both in mimicry, as in fetishism and trauma, a simultaneously narrow and dissociated relationship develops between image and body, violence and pleasure, dismembered or shapeless bodies, wounds, shocks, monsters, etc., while a morbid eroticism is also present in the excessive release of sensations and emotions that affect the body.

Xavier Aldana Reyes also considers the idea of a mimicry that the viewer performs of the shocks and emotions suffered by characters in horror films. The author proposes body horror as a "cinematic moment" (Aldana Reyes, 2016, p. 3) produced by contagion, somatically, when the viewer's body makes "visceral contact" with the images, particularly in explicit scenes of violence, bodily mutilation and torture. Aldana Reyes (2016, p. 14) reminds us that the term horror derives from the Latin *horreo*, referring to a fright that causes the body to respond with goosebumps,⁸ establishing a relationship of intrinsic physicality with the experience of the horror narrative. The author goes on: "[...] bodily affections are legitimated

⁷ See also the essays in *Body Horror* (1986), edited by *Screen*. Of note here is the essay by Philip Brophy, who states that there was an interest, from the 1960s and 1970s, in the "destruction of the body" and in the "physical discomfort" this causes in the viewer (Brophy, 1986, p. 8), more than in the feeling of the fear of death manipulated by horror films. Another iconic text published on this subject is Barbara Creed's article, *Horror and the monstrous-feminine: an imaginary abjection*, in which the author begins from the notion of the abject elaborated by Julia Kristeva and develops the idea of the feminine as a threat to an essentially patriarchal symbolic order. Creed, however, denounces the horror film as something that ends up 'purifying' the spectator's relationship with the abject, leaving patriarchal categories untouched (Creed, 1986).

⁸ Linda Badley had previously suggested this somatization in the infinitive form of the Latin verb, *horrere*. She explains: "At its simplest, it [the horror film] delivers a frisson that originates as a somatic response. *horror* comes from *horror*, which refers to the "bristling of the hair on the nape of the neck" [...] The phenomenon has been taken to its logical conclusion in images of the body that evoke the greatest possible physical response." (Badley, 1995, p. 11).

as ‘movements of passion’ and not as objects in need of decoding”; “intensity [...] is characterised by its non-linear rupture of the linear progress of life: it disturbs the present state of the body [...] Affect is intensive and involuntary, and therefore response is always prior to the moment of conscious decision” (Ibid., p. 56-58).

This *somatization* is of particular interest in our reflection. Firstly, for allowing the perceptual experience to be recoded in terms of a phenomenology of the extreme, based on hyper-intensity and threat. Secondly, due to the loss of any ontological limit between image and body. Linda Williams (2008), for instance, helps us think about the cinematic phenomenon of the dilution of the limits between image and body, not in the sense of total mimicry, but of an active, dynamic interplay between perception, self-awareness and self-alienation.⁹ Aldana Reyes (2016, p. 8) goes on to affirm that “somatic responses [...] produced by the startle effect return us to our lived body and to a form of self-awareness that is embodied and organic”.^[OBJ] Any phenomenological emancipatory meaning, such as the one insinuated in the author’s text, must be viewed with suspicion. Such a saturation of cognition should not be understood in terms of its ability to restore the notion of an integral body, and, consequently, of autonomous subjectivity. Excess contributes precisely to the dismantling of the body as we know it, and, ultimately, to the alienation of the notion of personality and the subject. At this stage, it is worth recalling that Aldana Reyes (2012, p. 20) also proposes a distinction between a type of disenchanting horror, in which the body is victimized and represented as the material limit of existence, and a body horror linked to the multiple possibilities for anatomical redefinitions of the body (as polymorphic and monstrous, in the case of David Cronenberg’s films). Picking up on this polymorphic character of the body, Kelly Hurley illustrates the precise meaning of what we seek to affirm above, when we refuse to restore the phenomenological integrity of the body:

The narrative told by body horror again and again is of a human subject dismantled and demolished: a human body whose integrity is violated, a human identity whose boundaries are breached from all sides [...] Here I am concerned less with the reputed postmodern fragmentation of human identity than with its reconfiguration through the pluralization and confusion of bodily forms (Hurley, 1995, p. 205).

For Hurley, the horror film and especially *body horror*, makes it possible “to effect a spectacular visual staging of bodily ambiguation [...] a speculative narrative that sets out new economies of identification and desire” (Ibid., p. 205). It then consists of the

spectacle of the human body defamiliarized, rendered other. Body horror seeks to inspire revulsion – and in its own way, pleasure – through representations of quasi-human figures whose effect/affect is produced by their abjection, their ambiguation, their impossible embodiments are liminal entities, occupying both

⁹ It is worth noting that Linda Badley, like Williams, compares horror with pornography and melodrama to emphasize The cinematic moment of shock or obscene, seen as “the spectacle of effects [that] momentarily arrested the plot” (Badley, 1995, p. 8). She also insists on horror as “somatic” and “physiological”, affecting the body directly without the protection of language (Ibid., p. 10-11).

terms (or rather, existing in the slash between them) of the opposition human/non-human (Ibid., p. 203).¹⁰

This unthought, ambivalent body is placed beyond the definitions produced by “dominant ideologies” and “formations based on sexual difference and identity”, in favor of a bodily economy and the desire in favor of an economy of the body and of desire that privileges “indetermination”, the fluctuation of the senses (Ibid., p. 208, 211, 213). Thus, through body horror we gain access to horror’s potential to produce reflexive reactions in the viewer, with the abject serving as mediator in an unnameable, pre-symbolic universe averse to categorical limits. Added to this is the phenomenon of the skin and the polymorphic character of the body “turned other”, reminding us that the body is also a machine for producing meanings, a provisional envelope, the surface of representations where signs circulate and distortions, instabilities and changes of place occur (Halberstam, 1995, p. 163).¹¹

Close-up

There is a certain obscenity in the close-up. Akin to peering through a keyhole, a telescope or microscope, the close-up implies a desire to see beyond what the eye and distance allow. It denotes a scopic pleasure, a penetration into surfaces. The close-up can be understood as the enlargement of a detail that lends greater realism, veracity, to a scene. This descriptive documentary resource is intended to allow for more objective access to visible data. Its pornographic nature is related to the authoritarianism of the image of the spectacle (Debord, 1997), or with the ideology of total visibility indicated by Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 130-131),¹² or even the “frenzy of the visible” conceptualized by Linda Williams (1989): a scopophilic excitement, the act of seeing without reservations. In fact, it is worth highlighting the relationship Williams sees between fetishism and the “money shot” of the American porn industry of the 1970s. Money shot is the term that defines the close-up of the ejaculating penis,

¹⁰ Elsewhere, Linda Badley, a researcher also interested in Gothic literature and its relationship with horror films, tells us: “In my view, horror has become a fantastic “body language” for our culture in which a person’s self-concept has been increasingly constituted in images of the body. In the ongoing crisis of identity in which the gendered, binary subject of Eurocentric bourgeois patriarchy (in particular, the Freudian psychoanalytical model of the self) is undergoing deconstruction, horror joined with other discourses of the body to provide a language for imagining the self in transformation, re-gendered, ungendered, and regenerated, or even as an absence or a lack” (Badley, 1995, p. 3; see also p. 25-31).

¹¹ Halberstam states: “Skin is at once the most fragile of boundaries and the most stable of signifiers; it is the site of entry for the vampire, the signifier of race for the nineteenth-century monster. Skin is precisely what does not fit; Frankenstein sutures his monster’s ugly flesh together by binding it in a yellow skin, too tight and too thick. When, in the modern horror movie, terror rises to the surface, the surface itself becomes a complex web of pleasure and danger; the surface rises to the surface, the surface becomes Leatherface, becomes Demme’s Buffalo Bill, and everything that rises must converge” (Halberstam, 1995, p. 163).

¹² Baudrillard elucidates: “Obscenity begins precisely when there is no more spectacle, no more scene, when all becomes transparency and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication [...] It is no longer [...] the traditional obscenity of what is hidden, repressed, forbidden or obscure; on the contrary, it is the obscenity of the visible [...] of what no longer has any secret, of what dissolves completely in information and communication” (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 130-131).

taken as visual-material evidence of sexual satisfaction (from a perspective broadly understood to be patriarchal). The all-powerful character of the close-up associated with the penis imposes a cut, a cliché (and therefore, reified) image, the alienation of this member from its context and the bodies that create this context, including the very body to which the, now gigantic, penis once belonged to. The following analysis of works relates to the omnipotence of the patriarchal close-up, at times endorsing it, at others opposing it.

The close-up representation of the corpse or injured body, particularly common in zombie films, along with scenes of cannibalism, decomposing skin and bodies, and visible entrails, undoubtedly offends the omnipotence of the noise-free readability of the ejaculating erect penis. But what happens when these elements are juxtaposed, as in *L.A. Zombie* (2010), by Bruce LaBruce? The close-ups of the first explicit sex scene emphasize the undead character's expressions of pleasure and the thrusting of his erect penis. The grimaces of pleasure correspond with the terrifying makeup, the sharp aggressive teeth and the blood spilling from the mouth (blood drool). The erect penis, a sign of the virility of the male body, is, in turn, gigantic and deformed, and penetrates the cavity of a wound in the chest of the corpse of a man, the victim of a car accident. Penetration restores the corpse's heartbeat, and the abnormally big heart, covered in hairs, lies outside the body. The heart is seen to beat (once again, irrigating and contracting) in response to the thrusting of the sexual member. In this sequence, there is a short circuit in the relationship between image, sound and narrative, as they seem to contradict each other. Two images are captured at the same time: the dead/bruised body and sex. The incongruity of the corporate-motivational New Age soundtrack imposes yet a third register that cushions both the shock of necrophilia and the sexual excitement. The money shot, when it comes, boasts an ironic morbidity: the monster's erect and deformed member ejaculates a dark red liquid resembling blood onto the satisfied face of the resurrected corpse.

Meanwhile in *Boca-seca* [Dry mouth] (2021), by Felipe Abdala, we observe a highly original use of the close-up structured into their performance. Although this work does not sit comfortably in the horror genre, or deal explicitly with the zombie trope, aspects such as the body-image relationship, alienation, devourment and a physical, reflexive affectation of the viewer are pertinent to this reflection. The physical action takes place in a space painted entirely green, functioning as a chroma-key, to be mixed and broadcast live on YouTube.¹³ Chroma-key is an audiovisual resource used to produce a transparent surface on which another still or moving image is to be superimposed. The tool is designed to result in the disappearance of one or more surfaces. In the context of the exhibition space in which Abdala's action takes place, one can speak of a fetishization of space. This is a camouflage, a disguise. In the live video broadcast,

¹³ See links to the work: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSVMZjl7i9Q>; and for the exhibition: <http://www.habito-habitante.com.br/>. Accessed on: May 2nd. 2023.

we see a general/open shot that remains fixed throughout the action and lasts for around twenty minutes. None of Abdala's body parts are impacted by the effect of chroma-key, in other words, we can say that his body resists this fetishization, the disappearance imposed on the surrounding space. As such, we see a general shot that emphasizes the difference between the scale of the body and the wider space of the room, and a closed shot that magnifies the details of the action, a mouth that threatens to devour the architecture, the image, and Abdala's own body. In the video we see Abdala biting off two corners of the sides of the panels from a flattened, front-on perspective. 'Their hands rest on the surface they are biting into and their fingernails are of a saturated orange color. In the dynamic between the open plan and the close-up, images arise that consume each other. The roughness of the contact between the teeth and the wall plaster, the speed of the action, the groping hands, the orange nails, the biting, spitting, teeth, lips, drooling, etc., point to the eschatological presence of a living organism which affects us reflexively. This is further augmented through the sound captured by the lapel microphone which picks up the noise of the action and the friction between body and clothing. In the image, bite marks gradually break down the edges, and the whiteness of the drywall appears as vertical lines of irregular thickness below the layer of green paint. These lines act like a kind of fault, a glitch in the transmitted image; a fault that cannot be reversed as it can only expand. The close-up in *Boca Seca*, works on the scope for intensifying the phenomenological experience of the body. At the same time, it appears to comment on the phantasmagoria of images by means of an economy that corresponds with capitalism and its power to devour. This work stages an unresolvable interplay between the fetishization (alienation) and affirmation of the living body, since, throughout the performance, we witness a complete body threatening to be devoured by the gigantic image of one of its fragments. Finally, it is worth mentioning that in his as-yet-unpublished Master's Dissertation (2023), Felipe Abdala links some of his works to the artist Lygia Clark's "organic line". Indeed, we observe the cut edges of the wall as resulting from vitalistic gestures – mouthing, biting, chewing and spitting. We also observe that these cuts produce irreparable damage to the surface of the image, a penetration which, to paraphrase Suely Rolnik (1999, n.p), 'extracts three-dimensionality from the two-dimensional plane'. We feel the roughness of the bites and the irregularity of the white lines as waves of reflex sensations, and we are pedagogically summoned to chew on this wall together. However, unlike the redemptive optimistic character promised by the vitality of bodily experience – and by participatory art – the vitality offered in *Boca Seca* arises from the constant threat of being dismembered. The desire to build is brought up to date by the will to destroy.

Wound

In a brief essay by David Lapoujade (2002), *O corpo que não aguenta mais* (The body that can't take it any longer), the philosopher seeks to characterize 'base' gestures – among

which include crawling, mutilating oneself, twisting oneself, and being overwhelmed by tiredness – as gestures of the internalization of external forces that exert pressure on the body. The locus of pain, the place where the body is most vulnerable, sick, and visibly wounded, is where the body encounters its greatest resistance. The point at which the body, in a combination of terror and ironic laughter, appears irreducible: it cannot go beyond this. It is raw flesh, raw matter that can no longer be subdued by discipline and healing. It is the body's revenge: its point of greatest resistance. The upright posture is pulled down by gravity, which may come from a physical force or indeed political, economic and social coercion. The deformed, dismembered parts, still animated and warm, exude blood, pus and excrement, demonstrating their own irreducible materiality. An anti-subject without any concession to identity/personality. Playing dead is not the same as being dead.

The wound interrupts the continuity of the skin's surface (in the same way, the "poor" image interrupts the limitless, obscene circulation of the smooth neoliberal image). As we have seen, the skin is the surface on which signs and ambiguities circulate, but in confrontation with the regime of total visibility, whereas the wound is the monstrous, that which tears at the surface. The wound is the point of contact between the fragmented, violated body, and the body of the viewer, in a kind of phenomenology of the physical limits, a kind of somatic complicity. In its non-utopian formulation, the wound bears the marks of today's necropolitical regime, as described by Achille Mbembe:

In other cases, where physical amputation replaces immediate death, cutting off limbs paves the way for the implementation of methods of incision, ablation and excision that also target bones. The vestiges of this demiurgical surgery persist for a long time, in the form of living human configurations, but whose physical integrity has been substituted by pieces, fragments, folds, even immense wounds that struggle to close. Its function is to keep before the eyes of the victim – and those around them – the morbid spectacle of dissection (Mbembe, 2016, p. 142).

Gore

The gratification of the contemporary Horror film is based upon tension, fear, anxiety, sadism and masochism – a disposition that is overall both tasteless and morbid. The pleasure of the text is, in fact, getting the shit scared out of you – and loving it; an exchange mediated by adrenalin (Brophy, 1986, p. 5).

A generic definition of the term *gore* emphasizes the explicitness of representing the material reality of the injured body, relegating it to the level of fluids, wounds, viscera and all types of extreme violence against the body (Hutchings, 2008, p. 147-148).¹⁴ However, attention

¹⁴ Hutchings tells us: "For some, the graphic display of bodily fluids, mutilation and evisceration involves an appeal to degraded and base elements in the human character. For horror theorists and critics, however, the genre's gore effects relate more to a fascination with the body and its workings, a fascination that is marginalized or suppressed

must also be paid to the *excessive descriptiveness*, to that which exceeds, through hyper-definition and exaggeration, the merely descriptive function of language, as this gives access to a synesthetic and contradictory field, where, in the case of horror films, nauseating elements are juxtaposed with morbid eroticism. “The enjoyment of always seeing more than meets the eye” (Huang, 2007, p. 100),¹⁵ that is, reaching beyond representation through a phenomenology of threat and hyper-intensity. The horror narrative stands in a symmetrical relationship to the morbid excitement inherent in capitalism itself, in its unbridled desire for satisfaction, mastery and the consumption of everything that exists.¹⁶ Fragmentation, the dismemberment of bodies, the monstrous, sensationalist violence, are inseparable features of contemporary experience, based, in the Global South, on what Sayak Valencia has brilliantly termed “gore capitalism”. For the Mexican philosopher, the term *gore* qualifies a violent strain of capitalism practiced in developing countries as a form of economic and social legitimization of groups linked to organized crime – hence the author’s use of the term “necroempowerment”. It consists, in effect, and in response to the fallacy of globalization, of a struggle for autonomy and a (predominantly masculinist) self-affirmation which encompasses human trafficking, murder, and overt demonstrations of violence against the bodies of adversaries. Gore capitalism is the

systematically uncontrolled and contradictory dimension of the neoliberal project. A product of economic polarizations, of the bombardment of information/advertising that creates and reinforces the hyperconsumerist identity and its counterpart: an increasingly scarce population with purchasing power capable of satisfying the desire for consumption (Valencia, 2010, p. 19).¹⁷

As is clear, the author notes the totalitarian and contradictory dimension of the phenomenon, and also its character: “by preserving the parodical and grotesque feature of the spilling of blood and viscera that, for being so absurd and unjustified, seems unreal, affected, artificial” (Ibid., p. 23).¹⁸ One could say that capitalism supplies a kind of “perverse superego”

in other, more decorous areas of our culture. In addition, horror fans often seem more interested in appreciating the makeup techniques that produce the gore effects than they are in just witnessing moments of nastiness; for these fans at least there is an aesthetic of gore at work in horror cinema.” (Hutchings, 2008, p. 147-148).

¹⁵ The complete quotation is: “Through their disruption of the everyday world, the explosion of our previous assumptions about normality, reality and unreality, violence against the body and the social or moral order, etc., postmodern horror films offer the audience the impossible satisfaction of the death drive, *the enjoyment of always seeing more than meets the eye*, seeing beyond the cinematic images and yet repeating them from the beginning all over again” (our italics).

¹⁶ Elsewhere, we affirm: “It is clear here, following David Harvey (2008), that the space of capitalism, from the mid-1970s onwards, produces immense communicability and flow of markets and capital at a global level, with fast turnaround time. The homogenization and universalization presupposed there are “perverse” – in the words of Milton Santos (2006), critical geographer of globalization – because they are just discursive effects of a totalitarian process that produces, at all times, subjective fractures, as well as territorial, cultural, affective, laboral, etc.” (Pera, 2022, p. 474).

¹⁷ In the original: “dimensión sistemáticamente descontrolada y contradictoria del proyecto neoliberal. Producto de polarizaciones económicas, el bombardeo informativo/ publicitario que crea y afianza la identidad hiperconsumista y su contraparte: la cada vez más escasa población con poder adquisitivo que satisface el deseo de consumo”.

¹⁸ In the original: “por conservar el elemento paródico y grotesco del derramamiento de sangre y vísceras que, de tan absurdo e injustificado, parece irreal, efectista, artificial”. Mark Steven is categorical when comparing capitalism to the gore genre, highlighting its critical capacity, its erotic character and its revolutionary ideological vocation:

that, “knowing of the subject’s *jouissance*, commands him to enjoy” (Huang, 2007, p. 94). Anxiety here, “is not produced by a lack, loss or uncertainty, it is not the anguish of losing something [...] On the contrary, it is the anguish of gaining too much of something, of a presence too close to the object” (Dolar, 2018, p. 183). The horror film understands how to internalize this in its form by producing and manipulating the anguish arising from a diffuse or direct threat, by making use of phobic objects, by giving form to violence. That which threatens to annihilate the subject, in its autonomy and at its limits, erupts as the symptom of this content of violence and death, of the unfettered desire and of arousal. A symptom that is typical of consumerism, of the sadism of necropolitical regimes of exception, the discourses of arms and coups, and of the stigmatization and persecution of marginalized social sectors, to name just a few examples. It appears in the form of an excessive description which, as stated, forces us to perceive more than the image itself seems to show (Dunker, 2002).¹⁹ This description, however, also situates a referent that resists abstraction in the capitalist system of circulation (communication, financial market). Or, as one researcher remarks:

gore [...] responds to the vicissitudes of value, the invariable condition for capitalist accumulation. Gore emphasizes the materiality of bodies and brains, of the human substance within an economy made seemingly abstract because it has become financial but which is nevertheless dependent upon labour as the sole source of value (Steven, 2017, p. 34).

Horror²⁰

The question of how to internalize elements of cinematographic horror in an artistic form without falling prey to mere illustration, requires, first and foremost, that horror should not be

“One of the well-grounded clichés about modern liberalism pertains to its stance of nonviolence; that it endorses a toothless progressivism and shuns any sort of armed struggle; that, from its standpoint, to resist oppression through violent means makes you an oppressor too. Splatter promotes the opposite worldview. It reminds us that capitalism is already violent, that under capitalism violence is ambient and systematic, and that capitalism will only yield through greater and different violence” (Steven, 2017, p. 18). And he continues: “Splatter is about the joy of the kill. As a very basic rule of distinction, if a film relishes gore more than tension it is likely splatter” (Ibid., p. 19). Por fim: “Splatter is neither conservative nor apolitical. It is politically committed and its commitment tends toward the anti-capitalist left” (Ibid., p. 23). “Gore” and “splatter” appear interchangeably in the author’s text.

¹⁹ Here is Christian Dunker’s psychoanalytic notion of “*jouissance*”: “*Jouissance* is characterized by an excessive intensity (beyond satisfaction), of repetitive duration, with an anticipated certainty (made eternal in the imagination). *Jouissance* also corresponds to an experience of absolute proximity, with a tendency to be prolonged inertially (fecundity) and to be impure in nature, by combining indiscernible affects (pleasure and horror, for example). Furthermore, it is halfway between a positive magnitude (pleasure) and a negative magnitude (pain)” (Dunker, 2002, p. 49-50). Later on (Ibid., p. 55), Dunker will remind us of the relationship between psychic *jouissance* and economic surplus value, a value that is placed for exchange and not for use, which always exceeds and alienates the subject, advancing the terms we have used for thinking about the mechanisms of gore in the context of capitalism.

²⁰ We are often faced with the expectation of differentiating the terms “horror” and “terror”. In the bibliography consulted, this more rigorous differentiation occurs only in Noël Carroll, who relates the term “terror” to fictions “that achieve their frightening effects by exploring psychological phenomena, which are, after all, all too human” (Carroll, 1990, p. 15). While the concept of “horror” is linked to the monster, both to its supernatural character, its hybrid nature and the feeling of repulsion it produces (Ibid., p. 12-41). Robin Wood (Wood; Grant, 2018) shifts between the terms terror and horror, and Mark Jancovich (2002), despite insinuating a differentiation, does not make it rigorously.

treated as a stable genre. As such, it must be explored in its contingency, situated spatially and temporally in relation to other disciplinary fields and references, however diffuse they may be. This demands verifying whether the constitutive processes of the works provoke moments of ambiguity and disobedience capable of challenging the illusions of totality displayed by self-absorbed means and narrative clichés, in order to expand into broader networks of meaning; this is a matter of checking to see if violence (tension, pressure, shock, fracture, etc.) is present in the most elementary articulations – or disarticulations – throughout the production process. Even though elements such as scatology, excess, monstrosity, disgust, pain, suspense, velocity, torture, murder, bodily deformation, amputation, exposed entrails, corpses and all manner of waste and impurities, can be seen as terrifying (an essentialist assumption), it is essential to test whether they actually yield complex operations in the formal and contextual arrangements, or if they persist as mere phenomena on the surface of signs; if they crave a disintegration of the structure of reality – and the form itself – in order to make it unrecognizable. They may simply present a terrifying face to the voyeur who, rather than gladly watching reality crumbling away beneath their feet, longs to suffer symbolically only to be reassured of that reality afterwards in a compensatory logic that borders on the sublime.²¹

Produced as a photographic moving image, the horror film is capable of using the relationship of verisimilitude both to mirror “reality” – establishing a realistic space-time, and to introduce dissonant heterogeneous elements into it. In other words, once the illusion has been produced, “reality” is overturned, shattered, made implausible and horrifying (Jancovich, 2002; Benschhoff, 1997, p. 6). As we have seen, the image of gore, in its descriptive excess, takes this verisimilitude to its limit. However, many critics tend to hold the monster responsible for this task of destabilization. One influential author highlights a “basic, simple and obvious formula for the horror film: normality is threatened by the monster” (Wood; Grant, 2018, p. 83). The monster is the other of “normality”, a substitute for the repressed content within patriarchal society.²² Another

²¹ Rosalind Krauss draws attention to operations of formal disaggregation carried out at the level of signifiers (the very materials and processes of the formalization of artistic works), in order to break away from formal hierarchies and conventions, organizational structures, expectations of verticality, monumentality, totality, in short, stable ways of producing representations, in favor of operations of dispersion, falling and lack, operations in which the notion of form itself is called into question (KRAUSS; BOIS, 2000). Film critic Robin Wood also offers an illustration of what is meant here as an “internalization” of horror into the artistic form. In his analysis of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), Wood makes the subtle observation that the “fundamental meaning of horror”, which pulses within the film, “is intimately allied to the sense of absurdity” (Wood; Grant, 2018, p. 101). Here, the absurdity of the narrative can only intensify, never recede, and in turn becomes closely associated with a sense of nihilistic despair. Such sensations certainly result from the narrative chain, but they are also produced by more elementary signifiers such as the asphyxiating orange light of the sunset, the very incidence, in the images, of *lens flares*, reminding us that the horror occurs in the open, the silence and the empty vastness of the territory, interrupted by the sound of the electric saw and by isolated individuals, without any hope of rescue, fleeing to survive. Wood also offers a sociological interpretation in his text when he seeks to relate capitalism to the cannibalism practiced by Leatherface’s family, which treats human beings as mere objects of unrepressed lethal erotic satisfaction. It should be noted that this is a family of butchers. As for the sublime, see *Gothic*, de Fred Botting (2005, p. 25-28).

²² The critic mentioned here, Robin Wood, would further state: “I use “normality” here in a strictly non evaluative sense to mean simply “conformity to the dominant social norms”: one must firmly resist the common tendency to treat the word as if it were more or less synonymous with ‘health’” (Wood; Grant, 2018, p. 83). In this 1978 text, we find a very objective list of what Wood identifies as this repressed content: other people (assuming that a capitalist

frequently cited author sees the figure of the monster as a nonsensical entity which evades categorization and instills ambivalence (inside-outside, undead, human-non-human, etc.), lending the monster an “impure” character. “Transgression”, “violation”, “contradiction”, “interstitial”, and “ambiguity” are other terms used by the author. This impurity, associated with elements such as rot, the dead body, disease, maggots, and other creepy crawlies, triggers emotions of horror and repulsion (Carroll, 1990).²³ The classic reference here would undoubtedly have to be Frankenstein’s monster, the result of a composite of heterogeneous body parts. The author does not shy away from outlining a historical interpretation of the phenomenon of horror fiction in which Gothic literature expressed an internal critique of Enlightenment rationalism. Elsewhere, the abject character of the monster and the status of impurity is also related to the “monstrous-feminine” (Creed, 1986; 1993).²⁴ This form of the abject, as we have seen, appears as a kind of continuous ritual of exclusion that “guarantees that the subject can affirm its place in relation to the symbolic order” (Creed, 1993, p. 9). That is, in the “separation of the human and the non-human; of the fully constituted and the partially formed subject” (Creed, 1993, p. 8).²⁵ A moment like this is “too horrible to watch [and] puts the viewer in direct contact with ‘the place of death’ and the collapse of all systems of meaning” (Aldana Reyes, 2012, p. 37).²⁶ Let us also remember that the term “*queer*” has been identified with the monstrous and with horror, as investigated by some authors:

society is essentially formed by competitors and the notion of private property), women, the proletariat, other cultures, ethnicities within a culture, alternative ideologies and political systems, deviations from sexual norms (in the face of: patriarchal, heterosexual regime, sex for reproductive purposes, nuclear family, libido with a finalist function directed at work), children.

²³ Noël Carroll tells us: “Within the context of the horror narrative, the monsters are identified as impure and unclean. They are putrid or moldering things, or they hail from oozing places, or they are made of dead or rotting flesh, or chemical waste, or are associated with vermin, disease, or crawling things. They are not only quite dangerous but they also make one’s skin creep. Characters [in a movie] regard them not only with fear but with loathing, with a combination of terror and disgust” (Carroll, 1990, p. 23). As for impurity, Carroll characterizes it as a “[...] conflict between two or more standing cultural categories. Thus, it should come as no surprise that many of the most basic structures for representing horrific creatures are combinatory in nature [...] On the simplest physical level, this often entails the construction of creatures that transgress categorical distinctions such as inside/outside, living/dead, insect/ human, flesh/machine, and so on” (Ibid., p. 43).

²⁴ In a rough summary, it can be said that, on the one hand, the author will review the psychoanalytic theory of castration and propose an inversion of the notion that the woman threatens for being the castrated other. From her perspective, the threat comes from women as potentially castrating the patriarchal subject. There is an image of motherhood (unless I am mistaken, which is not essentialist, as it is not marked by the gender difference that characterizes the theory of castration) examined by the author that would represent a “totalizing and oceanic mother [...] that invokes anxiety [the threat] in the subject. of merger and dissolution” (Creed, 1993, p. 20). Creed concludes that “[a]s this desire to return to merge occurs after differentiation, that is after the subject has developed as separate, autonomous self, it is experienced as a form of psychic death” (Ibid., p. 28). And she adds: “In contrast with the conventional viewing structures working within other variants of the classic text, the horror film does not work to encourage the spectator to identify continually with the narrative action. Instead, images on the screen challenge the viewer to run the risk of continuing to look [...] Strategies of identification are temporarily broken and pleasure in looking is transformed into pain as the spectator is punished for his/her voyeuristic desires” (Ibid., p. 28).

²⁵ Creed’s perspective is based on Kristeva’s definitions of the abject. This ritual quality is also emphasized by Benshoff: “For spectators of all types, the experience of watching a horror film or monster movie might be understood as similar to that of the Carnival as it has been theorized by Bakhtin, wherein the conventions of normality are ritualistically overturned within a prescribed period of time in order to celebrate the lure of the deviant. Halloween functions similarly, allowing otherwise “normal” people the pleasures of drag, or monstrosity, for a brief but exhilarating experience.” (Benshoff, 1997, p. 13).

²⁶ Barbara Creed goes further: “the concept of a border is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film; that which crosses or threatens to cross the ‘border’ is abject. Although the specific nature of the border

[...] queerness disrupts narrative equilibrium and sets in motion a questioning of the status quo [...] the nature of reality itself [...] Queer suggests death over life by focusing on non-procreative sexual behaviors, making it especially suited to a genre which takes sex and death as central thematic concerns (Benshoff, 1997, p. 5).²⁷

Undead

Undead (2022) consisted of an action, lasting approximately three hours, with some brief intervals, during which a performer, characterized as a zombie, performs a sequence of movements drawn from films, games, music videos, and other audiovisual references typical of the genre. The movements were marked by their combinatorial randomness and apparent discontinuity: walking, standing (standing still or shaking the body slightly), lying down (simulating *rigor mortis*, or experiencing sudden spasms), “grabbing” (with arms stretched out in front of the body), biting, dancing (in reference to Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*, 1984), babbling meaningless sounds, laughing, screaming, and moaning with pleasure and pain, among others. The performer was asked not to make visual contact with the audience and was given complete autonomy to improvise, and in particular, to develop relationships with certain spatial elements such as the furniture, openings in the structure of the building, doors, steps, etc. All decisions were intended to come across as reflexive, more or less like contingent responses, without ever being directly reactive. To this end, the rhythms of the actions were intended to favor the character’s self-absorption. This led, therefore, to an ambivalent image, at times almost entirely alienated, while also occasionally responding to the surrounding social field. This self-absorption granted the performer a constant presence as a thing/body in movement. The action took place on a sunny Saturday afternoon in the center of the city of São Paulo in a space that functions both as an artists’ studio and gallery. The undead figure was framed by a space that functions as a showcase for artistic works and people. Prosthetics and makeup resulted in a bruised body, with wounds on the arms, torso, neck and head. The makeup was applied in collaboration with professionals who work as drag queens and cosplayers, imbued with an exaggerated, yet convincing, theatricality aimed at stimulating a mixture of interest and repulsion. Particular attention was given to the treatment of the eyes – one was completely sealed by prosthesis, the other partially obstructed by a white contact lens – which actually forced the performer into a relative detachment, interfering physiologically with the speed, making it more difficult to monitor their own body and its movements, and perceive the space and the people present.

changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same - to being about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability” (Creed, 1993, p. 10-11).

²⁷ The author continues: “By “queer,” I mean to use the word both in its everyday connotations (“questionable . . . suspicious . . . strange .”) and also as how it has been theorized in recent years within academia and social politics. This latter “queer” is not only what differs “in some odd way from what is usual or normal,” but ultimately is what opposes the binary definitions and proscriptions of a patriarchal heterosexism. Queer can be a narrative moment, or a performance or stance which negates the oppressive binarisms of the dominant hegemony” (Benshoff, 1997, p. 4).



Renato Pera, *Morto-vivo* [Undead], 2022, Performance. Performer: Manuel Fabrício. Makeup: Kira and Taline Bonazzi. Costume design: Taline Bonazzi. Photo: Paulo Pereira / Teia Documenta.



Renato Pera, *Morto-vivo* [Undead], 2022, Performance. Performer: Manuel Fabrício. Makeup: Kira and Taline Bonazzi. Costume design: Taline Bonazzi. Photo: Paulo Pereira / Teia Documenta.

The dramatization of violence is clearly a subject of interest to the work, among many possible readings. But the action yields diverse significations without fixing on any single one, in such a way that it mirrors the fragmentation of the performance itself and the ambivalence of the character's behavior. Simultaneously, meanings circulate that relate to wounds, pain, aphasia, comedy, eroticism, morbidity, spectacularism, precariousness, etc. In the sense sought in the timeframe of the action, there was an emphasis on its dissociative quality – in terms of participation and alienation. While it was possible to activate the image of “bare life”,²⁸ there was also room to parody the indifference of the artistic environment (a spearhead of economic capitalization, and symbolic of narratives and counter-narratives) and the blend of eroticism (half-naked athletic body, moaning, whispering) and morbidity (bruises, bleeding, the stiffness of a corpse etc.). As a performance that leaves no traces, *Undead* bets on the provisional and precarious combination of prosthetic objects, whose effectiveness occurs both in the present moment of the action, and in the latency/anguish of the void left behind at the end, which in turn, creates a tension typical of both horror narratives and states of exception.

Necropolitics

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of exception’ in which we live is in fact the general rule (Benjamin, 1993, p. 226).

Shot (think here of the patriarchal paramilitary groups commonly featured in zombie films, and in the Brazilian civilian protests of the extreme right calling for the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, or for military intervention, during Jair Bolsonaro's government):

[...] the collapse of formal political institutions under the pressure of violence tends to lead to the formation of militia economies. War machines (in this case, militias or rebel movements) quickly become highly organized predatory mechanisms that tax territories and the populations that occupy them and are based on a variety of transnational networks and diasporas that provide them with material and financial [and human] support (Mbembe, 2016, p. 141).

Reverse-shot (think of hordes of zombies):

²⁸ Wesley da Silva Costa, when considering Giorgio Agamben's concept of “bare life” in his doctoral thesis, says that “human rights, which took ‘man as such’ as their ideal, collapsed when held up against real men who had lost all relational characteristics of citizenship, revealed as pure human existence. This occurred due to the proximity between the rights of man and those relating to citizenship and nationality. Only nationals could be citizens. Those who were not nationals did not fully enjoy the guarantees and protection of institutions, being ‘regulated’ by ‘some law of exception until, or unless, they were completely assimilated and divorced from their origin’” (Costa, 2021, p. 89). Here one can perceive a contradiction between the capture, by biopower, of the bare life - that is, this figure that seeks to describe something such as the natural human body, sheer existence as a biological human. Biopower, in turn, is identified with citizenship which is a political-legal figure produced by the idea of the Nation-State. The universality presupposed by the notion of citizenship excludes the bare life, now identified with other extralegal / extranational factors, such as race, for example, and is then subjected to the field of exception. Here, we have the production of difference (subject x non-subject) as the actual mechanism of exception.

[...] As a political category, populations are then decomposed in rebels, child-soldiers, victims or refugees, civilians incapacitated by mutilation or simply massacred in the style of ancient sacrifices, while the “survivors”, following a terrible exodus, are confined to camps and states of exception (Ibid., 141).

The necropolitical regime – a term coined by Achille Mbembe – is based on the extrapolation of biopolitics as proposed by Michel Foucault and its acute inversion. Biopolitics classifies bodies and populations according to biophysical and cultural (racist) markers, controlling them by way of confinement, concealment, extermination or pedagogical rehabilitation, in order to be reinserted in the social body as normal, sane, or docile. In biopolitics, discipline seeks to establish itself universally based on institutions historically linked to the homogenizing forms of Nation-State, policies of racial and ethnic eugenics, and urban planning, among other institutions – or, as Mbembe argues, the “sovereignty” of the State (the self-granted use of war, force and the law), aims to produce an autonomy based on reinforcing the fantasy of a homogenous identity. In the necropolitical regime, by contrast, control of death is aimed at absolute violence towards the “enemy” and its complete extermination as a measure of economic rationality. What makes this anti-institutional is that it also meets the demands of groups who may or may not be associated with the State, hand in hand with globalization. This type of terror is nomadic in form, technologically advanced, silent, simultaneous, vertical (from the satellite to the subterranean, or submarine), anonymous and remote. Such a regime consists in the general diffusion of a state of exception (in which the universality of the law is denied). It results in individuals and populations without any status as political subjects or without citizenship, brought together or dispersed according to the interests of groups in power. Mbembe concludes:

[...] I have proposed the notion of necropolitics and necropower to explain the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, firearms are implanted in the interest of the maximum destruction of people and the creation of “worlds of death,” new and unique forms of social existence, in which vast populations are submitted to living conditions which give them the *status* of “living dead.” (Ibid., p. 146).

Terrir

We have already mentioned in passing that some of the somatic responses provoked by horror films often resemble comedy. However, it is also worth emphasizing that impurity – the abject – is a feature of both horror and humor (Carroll, 1999). Contradictory impulses such as laughter and fear bear similarities to jokes, to the uncanny, to forms of returning (repetition) and disguise (symptom). Noël Carroll reminds us that humor is based on “incongruity”, that is, the convergence of “disparate or contrasting ideas and concepts”, aiming at “the transgression of standing accepted concepts, categories, norms, and expectations of common place expectations” (Ibid., p. 153-154). This is manifested in a range of forms that include the pun, the double act (dolls,

marionettes, lookalikes, caricatures, for example), the allegory, and the clown, which the author compares directly with the figure of the monster. In examining a possible etymology of the word “clown”, Carroll relates it to other terms such as “clod”, “clot” and “lump” to designate amorphous materials with no clear boundaries, and connote impurity (Ibid., p. 155).

Terrir, this singularly Brazilian concept formed by *terror* (horror) and *rir* (to laugh), seeks to define a type of slapstick comedy brimming with blood, guts, sex, humiliation, precariousness and humor, seen in an unforgiving tropical light. The concept appears in the cultural debate of Tropicalism.²⁹ But for us, it acquires analytical value that allows us to approach the experimental production of so-called marginal cinema, such as the films and extra-filmic actions of José Mojica Marins. This is not a neologism intended to accommodate the comedy-horror genre, since there is no compensatory balance between horror’s anguish and laughter’s decompression. Decompression is not possible: *terrify* is the collision of mockery, hedonism and horror. Or, as we hear at a certain point in *O Bandido da Luz Vermelha* [The Red Light Bandit] (Rogério Sganzerla, 1968): “when there’s nothing left to do, we spoil and ruin everything”.³⁰

Zombie

The zombie, they say, is a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life – it is a dead body which is made to walk and act and move as if it were alive (Seabrook, 1929 apud Kee, 2011, p. 13).

In this critical glossary, a fragmentary method was developed that corresponds in form to the subject analyzed, operating through case studies and the formation of non-totalizing constellations of meaning. The relevance of the undead figure has been emphasized, framed by the shock produced by the spectacle and by the regime of exception described by necropolitics and synthesized in gore capitalism. Walter Benjamin’s plea for the victimized subject of modernity to ‘confess’ his poverty stands out. We sought to associate this “confession” with the idea of the abject, as a state in which the subject is the very expression of this poverty: objectified, outside of history, turned into remnants, living dead. There was an

²⁹ Probably appropriated from comic books by film critic Nelson Motta, in an article published in the newspaper *The Globe*, following the release of the film *The mummy’s secret* (1982), by Ivan Cardoso. Cardoso repeatedly tried to identify the concept with his own work. The term appears on film advertising posters, autobiographies and in *A marca do terrir* (2005), an audiovisual work by the filmmaker that compiles sketches made on Super 8 in the 1970s. See Motta, 1982, p. 32. Another example comes from Décio Pignatari, when placing Ivan Cardoso’s cinema in relation to the military dictatorship (1964-1985): “ideological amorality that affronted an authoritarian ethic rolling over the surface of the country’s social life... Sinister Ivan [Cardoso]: while enjoying his *terrir* film, delivers us to the terror of a time that tears the skin from us” (Pignatari; Cardoso, 2008, p. 16).

³⁰ When dealing with marginal cinema, the historian and film critic Fernão Ramos tells us: “The mockery and the ridicule affect the fabric of the image and the film itself is affected: scratched negatives, dirty photography... editing edges appearing, continuity errors, carelessness in production, etc.” (Ramos, 1987, p. 43). Fernão Ramos also associates the abject directly with the strategies of Brazilian marginal cinema.

insistence, therefore, on strategies linked to the horror genre, in particular those present in cinema, namely, body horror, the close-up, the monstrous, gore and *terror*, in order to consider the possibilities of aggression towards a certain structuring of “normal” reality, towards the body, and the instability of the notion of form itself.

By way of conclusion, it is worth insisting that the pertinence of the undead character is attested by the intense crossover between different cultural and mediatic worlds – films, series, video games, comics, literature, theater, visual arts and academia (Bishop, 2015). In cinema, the genre moves from an initial period in which zombies were associated with enslaved or semi-enslaved labor, to referring explicitly to the trance states of Afro-Caribbean religions, with emphasis on Haiti. The undead were described as abject beings, stripped of their own motor control and psychic will, in response to the anxieties of slave-owning white supremacists, clinging to their dominance and frightened by the possibility of revolt and economic bankruptcy in a temporal arc that runs from the Haitian Revolution to the first half of the 20th century, both in the USA and in Europe (Moreman et al, 2011).³¹ These echos of colonialism, however, stretched into the 1980s and beyond, in films like *Zombie Holocaust* (Marimo Girolami, 1980) and *Zombie 2* (Lucio Fulci, 1979), among many others that make use of isolated tropical islands, non-white zombie characters, or zombie terrorists (*World War Z*, Marc Forster, 2013). As an exception, attention is drawn to *Sugar Hill* (Paul Maslansky, 1974), a film that revises racial stereotypes, and more recently, in the context of Latin America, political satires such as *Juan de los Muertos* [John of the Dead] (Alejandro Brugués, 2011), *Halley* (Sebastian Hoffman, 2013) and the brilliant *Sinfonia da necrópole* [Symphony of the Necropolis] (Juliana Rojas, 2008). In the latter film, in addition to the sociological and allegorical thematization of underdevelopment, the notion of cinematographic genre itself is challenged by mixing horror, musicals, comedy, romance and pop culture, to form an almost artisanal and “poor” cinema, à la José Mojica Marins. In terms of accommodating the figure of the undead in the context of middle class America and consumerist culture in general – as anonymous, generic and massified individuals – there appears to be consensus among critics that the films *Night of the living dead* (1968) and *Dawn of the dead* (1978) by George A. Romero, are landmarks. Racial tension is, as we know, sustained by the black protagonists in both films, but the undead come to be characterized as objectified cannibals, repeating mechanical actions that, and it is worth noting, they had already been repeating before entering a zombified state. In *Dawn* they inhabit a shopping center. George A. Romero also lays the foundations for thinking about the role of (white supremacist) paramilitary

³¹ Among the literary texts covered in the chapters of this book, we highlight “The Unknown Painter” (published in the newspaper *The Alton Telegraph*, em 1838) e “Last of the Caribs: A Romance of Martinique” (*The Decatur*, Illinois, 1879), to name just two examples, or *The Magic Island* (William Seabrook, 1929), and films such as *White Zombie*, *Revolt of the Zombies* (Victor Halperin, 1932 e 1936), *Income* (George Terwilliger, 1936) e *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943). It is also worth mentioning the ethnographic study *Tell my Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (Zora Neale Hurston, 1938), the latter written by a writer of Afro-American descent.

organizations (*Night of the Living Dead*), and later on (from *Dawn of the Dead*) decidedly militarized militia that will go on to be repeated countless times in subsequent films and series. This is no small feat, as these militias are as fundamental to securing a certain stabilization of the zombie genre as the undead themselves. Zombies became supporting actors in the existential drama of these militias which almost always represents a patriarchal structure, disputing territorial control of human and natural resources, weapons and narcotics, and the right to act as vigilants. But returning to the zombified consumerist characters that inhabit shopping malls, it could be said that such tension leads us directly to our neoliberal present of an indebted and precarious population, as has been stated: “Zombies too are now a major descriptor of a certain class of economic agents, like unprofitable ones who continue to function economically on the basis of perpetual borrowing and ever inventive financing and re-financing arrangements” (Datta; MacDonald, 2011, p. 80). In this economy there is a generalized instrumentalization and objectification of life (reification), a phenomenology based on “living within your means-to-an-end” (Ibid., p. 82). Signs of life are expropriated from individuals and then transformed into symbolic commodities, signs and effects – libido, sexuality, success, friendships, soul, freedom, autonomy, citizenship, identity, etc. – only to be sold back to individuals (Ibid., p. 86).³² If we were to take the video game as a paradigm of participation – in art, but also in social participation – we have, on the one hand, the somatic condition referred to previously of a bombardment of sensory stimuli (“realistic” images and sounds, narrative focused on the characters’ personal and interpersonal conflicts, abject bodies, speed, repeated failure and violence, real-time action, subjective points of view, vibratory controls, etc.) (BISHOP, 2015, p. 136)³³ and, on the other, we see the notion of individual agency transformed into mere feedback within a closed and overdetermined system (O’Brien, 2020).

Yet, even if this is the critical background in which we seek to place the figure of the undead, the problem of the irrefutable definition of what an undead individual is – in contrast, for example, with other monsters – is not relevant here. Defining it in essentialist terms would not allow us to deal with its ambivalence and some of its messianic qualities (let’s not forget Benjamin’s exhortation). Faced with the bright lights and high definition of screens. the immaterial circulation of financial capital, the putrefied flesh, its textures, the viscosity of the

³² Taking Baudrillard’s concept of “sign-commodity”, the authors will say: “[...] the stuff of the souls we *have* (collective representations) are already “for sale” and hence when we consume commodity-signs the production of our social life is subsumed to capital. Hence, no return to a “live” outside of capital is possible. What we lose in work is got through the consumption of commodified collective representations, allowing us to get “a life.” Elsewhere they speak of “reflexive sovereignty”, a fallacious appearance of sovereignty and unrestricted success, in the face of an economy that imposes widespread fracture and precariousness. This illusion, in turn, generates economic assets, as it presents subjects as attractive for future social, professional investments, etc. (Datta; MacDonald, 2011, p. 87).

³³ It remains to be said that in the gameplay structure there is a dissociation between the control of the subjective “gaze” of the characters and the control of the “camera” that reveals the environment. Anguish - and horror - is certainly an effect of narrative and sensory abuse, as much as it is the result of this dizzying dissociation that intensifies with speed and saturation.

bodily fluids, and the blood-colored exposed entrails, we are led to reflect on the limits of the material condition of the bare life outside of history, on the bankruptcy of language seen as a metonymy of the rational-functionalist system, on non-sexual reproduction, on the alleged autonomy of subjectivity and identity, and on the body seen beyond its “normal” anatomical conformity. All of these, in short, are attributes that lend ambivalence, relevance, and vigor to the figure of the undead.

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