

The Zombie: a new myth in the making. A political and social metaphor

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Abstract

The zombie is a new myth which appeared in Western imaginary in the twentieth century and which gradually evolved into its present-day version: the apocalyptic zombie. This work aims to review the zombie myth's evolution and to offer some insight into why it is this new version of the myth the one we can find massively today in both artistic and non-artistic discourses.

Keywords: Zombies, myth, Rhetoric, Comparative Literature, social discourse.

1. Introduction

Despite the common prejudice that myths belong to a pre-rational stage of civilisation and that human beings in the twenty-first century cannot believe in myths, the fact is that myths can be widely found in our present-day cultural manifestations. Myths from Greek, Nordic, and Semitic mythologies as well as myths from literature or films can be traced in both high and popular culture today.

This fact leads us to think that myths return once and again because of our yearning to understand human nature and destiny. Regardless of the technological or scientific evolution of a given society, human beings still rely on myths. Thus, when dealing with the same problems human beings have faced for ages, twenty-first century men and women are rediscovering and adapting "old" myths; but also, on the other hand, when facing new experiences, twenty-first century human beings are creating "new" myths to explain and understand those new realities.

Human urge for myths is eternal, and that is due to the fact that, as contemporary theories of myth state, myths are not mere beautiful ancient narratives, but a way of thinking. Even more, as myths are a way of understanding reality, myths can become metaphors and extend their presence to fields and discourses other than literature or art.

Such is the case of the zombie myth, a "new" myth introduced in Western culture in the twentieth century. As any myth, it was updated and adapted; it evolved from what was called the voodoo zombie into today's apocalyptic zombie. This last formulation of the zombie myth is the most successful one, as it is the version which has transcended towards political, social or economic discourses.

The main goal of this article is thus to explore both the birth and evolution of the zombie myth and its ideological significance and metaphorical function in present-day artistic discourses and non-artistic discourses. In order to do so, within the theoretical and methodological framework of both Comparative Literature and Constructivist Rhetoric, we will analyse a corpus consisting on several literature and film works, as well as economic or political texts.

2. Myth within Rhetoric and Comparative Literature

In the twenty-first century, not only the study of myths, but also the very existence of new myths is constantly questioned. This questioning is related to the “traditional” definition of myth: since Plato, myths have been considered false and irrational tales (Vernant 1982, 170), inappropriate for rational and civilised human beings. Nevertheless, modern myth theories defy Plato’s view and argue that human beings are rational creatures, of course, but also symbolic creatures (Eliade 1983). In that sense, myths may be considered the manifestation of human symbolic thought. Thus, myths are inherent to human beings of all times and places, and capable of appearing in any kind of discourses—non artistic discourses included (Molpeceres 2014).

According to modern theories, myths are narratives (Weinrich 1979) we use to explain our surrounding reality and ourselves in a symbolic way (Eliade 1983), as these narratives are systems of symbolic elements—metaphors and symbols (Turbayne 1974). As manifestations of our symbolic mind, myths communicate social ideology to such an extent that they have great impact in social imagination and collective psyche (Molpeceres 2014). In addition, myths can be deconstructed in smaller symbolic units, mythemes (Lévi-Strauss 1979), which change and adapt to different contexts.

In order to undertake the study of modern myths, as we have already stated, we find the combination of Comparative Literature and Constructivist Rhetoric, as a theoretical and analytical framework, entirely appropriated. The study of myths is not unknown to the field of Comparative Literature. In the context of what has been defined as “the new paradigm” in Comparative Literature (Pujante 2006), authors such as Yves Chevrel (1989) or Pierre Brunel (1992) have pointed out the close connection between Comparative Literature and myth studies.

If we consider that the works of art, science, philosophy, or economy occurring in a society reflect to some extent the ideology of that given society (Pujante 2006, 92); following the new paradigm, Comparative Literature should focus, through the comparative analysis of those works, on the study of that society’s underlying ideology (Pujante 2006, 87).

In this way, Comparative Literature becomes a perfect pair with another discipline, History of Ideas, as both study how cultural ideas, concepts or themes evolve through time and are shaped in different times and places. At this point myth comes into play, as those cultural ideas are usually embodied by myths (Molpeceres 2014, 68). Thus, if, according to Jung (1999), myths and archetypes are activated when needed in a particular society, then the study of myths will allow us to discover and understand the fears, worries, desires, and aspirations of that society.

Taking another step in our argumentation, if myths may appear in any kind of discursive construction, we find ourselves in the field of social discourses, and that is the domain of Rhetoric. Particularly relevant to our approach of myth is a perspective in rhetorical studies called Constructivist Rhetoric. The core concept within this perspective is that ideologies and social representations are constructed by our discursive practice as humans; that is, they emerge in the process of being addressed and explained by us in our discourses (Pujante 2016).

In that vein, the aim of Constructivist Rhetoric is to discover, through discursive analysis, the writer's underlying ideology in a given text. This discourse analysis is based on the close examination of textual lexicon and structures, and particular attention is given to metaphors and other rhetorical figures, as they are one of the most persuasive instruments in order to transmit ideology (Goatly 2017).

Persuasion is related to myths. Since we understand and explain reality through narratives and myths, myths can convey social ideology. Besides, myths are made of interwoven symbolic elements (the mythemes), which can be used as metaphors in social discourses. The more mythical elements or metaphors used in a discourse, the more persuasive that discourse will be, as myths appeal to our unconscious cognitive frames (Molpeceres 2014, 86).

As can be appreciated, both the existence of new myths and their study are completely justified if we take into account modern conceptions of myth. In addition to this, a framework combining Comparative Literature and Constructivist Rhetoric highlights the connection between myths and deep social and ideological structures. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to study the presence of myths in both artistic works and social discourses.

3. The Zombie Myth

After what has been said, one could consider the zombie as a new myth. Pierre Brunel (1999) has already considered it as such by including the zombie in his *Dictionnaire des Mythes d'Aujourd'hui*. Nevertheless, in the following section of this article, we will explore the zombie bearing in mind the modern definition of myth already discussed. We will therefore consider the evolution of this myth through three stages (voodoo zombie, pulp zombie, and apocalyptic zombie), and will try to explain this evolution as well as the zombie myth's different mythemes and their meaning.

3.1. The Voodoo Zombie

The earliest written trail of the word "zombie" dates from 1765, from a French text describing Africa (Gras 2010, 16). Nevertheless, according to Brunel (1999, 889), the term comes from Antillean Creole language and appears in France in 1832; a century later the word was considered of common usage in French. In the same vein, the term seems to have been introduced in English language in the early nineteenth century (ODE 2003, 2052).

The first cultural context of the zombie myth is located clearly outside the boundaries of Western civilization (Haiti), and related to voodoo and to the Bocor character, the voodoo sorcerer (Gras 2010, 19). The Haitian zombie myth entered American public consciousness in the late 1920s and early 1930s, after the United

States Marines invaded Haiti in 1915 (Shanks 2014, 2). After the invasion, American soldiers, expatriates, and missionaries gradually returned home bringing with them “tales of strange voodoo ceremonies and mysterious bokors and even rumors of zombies” (Shanks 2014, 3).

The most famous example of those narrations—and key piece in the introduction of the voodoo zombie myth in Western imaginary—was explorer William Seabrook’s work *The Magic Island* (1929). In the best-known chapter of the book, “Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields”, Seabrook stated that he had found in Haiti a folklore tale which “sounded exclusively local—the *zombie*” (2016, 93). According to Seabrook, the zombie was:

a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life [...] a servant or slave, occasionally for the commission of some crime, more often simply as a drudge around the habitation of the farm, setting it dull heavy tasks, and beating it like a dumb beast if it slackens. (Seabrook 2016, 93)

In that chapter, Polynice, Haitian farmer and Seabrook’s confidant, argued that, far from superstition, zombies were in fact very real:

They exist to an extent that you whites do not dream of, though evidences are everywhere under your eyes. [...] At this very moment, in the moonlight, there are *zombies* working on this island [...] we know about them, but we do not dare to interfere so long as our own dead are left unmolested. (Seabrook 2016, 94)

In fact, Polynice himself led Seabrook to a group of zombies working on a cane field, and what Seabrook saw impacted him profoundly: hieratic figures, speechless people of void eyes working under the orders of their keeper, a young black woman named Lamercie (2016, 102). Yet, for Seabrook, this phenomenon was not related to magic, but to drugs: “zombies were nothing but poor, ordinary demented human beings, idiots, forced to toil in the fields” (2016, 102) in a state of lethargic coma after the administration of drugs (2016, 103).

In her seminal work about Haitian folklore, *Tell My Horse* (1938), anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston explained the process of zombification:

Maybe a plantation owner has come to the Bocor to “buy” some laborers, or perhaps an enemy wants the utmost in revenge. He makes an agreement with the Bocor to do the work. After the proper ceremony, the Bocor [...] rides after dark to the house of the victim. There he places his lips to the crack of the door and sucks out the soul of the victim and rides off in all speed. Soon the victim falls ill [...] and in a few hours is dead. The Bocor [...] is in the cemetery but does not approach the party [...] At midnight he will return for his victim.

[The victim is] given a drop of a liquid, the formula for which is most secret. After that the victim is a Zombie. He will work ferociously and tirelessly without consciousness of his surroundings and conditions and without memory of his former state. (Hurston 1995, 458-459)

Notwithstanding, after meeting herself a real zombified woman named Felicia Felix-Mentor, Hurston (1995, 470) rejected the possibility of magic, and considered zombies the result of a process in which the Bocor used drugs to induce an apparent death and then, after the burial of the false dead, the Bocor woke the victim and submitted him/her to his will.

Following the same vein but almost fifty years later, ethnobotanist and anthropologist Wade Davies (1985, 187) explained in his work *The Serpent and the Rainbow* the nature of the drugs used by the Bocor in the zombification process—tetradotoxin and *datura stramonium*.

After what has been said, a clear image of the first version of the zombie myth can be drawn. Its main mythemes would be a) the concept of the “living dead”, a corpse brought back to life; b) voodoo and a magic sorcerer; c) non-Western cultural context; d) the lack of free will of the zombie, as it is a “brainless being”; e) slavery and otherness; f) corpses that, far from being corrupted, are fit for hard labour.

As can be appreciated, the voodoo zombie is neither a narrative about human beings fearing death, nor a tale of aggressive flesh-eaters. Quite on the contrary, the voodoo zombie is a myth about abuse of power, oppression and loss of individuality.

Particularly insightful is the influence of Seabrook’s *Magic Island* in popular literature and film history. On one hand, it inspired some pulp fiction stories; as we shall see. On the other hand, Seabrook’s work was also the source for the first zombie film, *White Zombie*, directed by Victor Halperin in 1932, and classic film *I Walked with a Zombie*, directed by Jacques Tourneur in 1943—thanks to journalist Inez Wallace’s articles, inspired by Seabrook’s work (Palacios 2010, 30-33).

The zombie’s success may be proved by the fact that between 1932 and 1943 another eight films on zombies or other “living dead” were produced (Moscardó 2009, 10-20). Some of these films followed the model of the voodoo zombie, but others mixed the myth with different traditions rooted on fantasy, horror or science fiction.

Notwithstanding, the two films mentioned (*White Zombie*, and *I Walked with a Zombie*) are the most remarkable pieces among zombie films of that period. Both films are worth commenting, as they are an example of why the zombie myth resonated with American psyche. Both stories are located in the Antilles and feature zombified strong black men working as slaves, but also, and this is a novelty, zombified white women—the Bocor’s or the plantation owner’s love interests.

Thus, it is not only that Americans saw their own colonialist anxieties and racial tensions projected in the zombie myth (Shanks 2014, 2), but also the fact that the myth: represents the potential for a reversal of the racial status quo and the loss of white privileged. It presents the reader or viewer with the possibility of the enslaver becoming the enslaved; it exploits the subconscious fears and anxieties inherent in a society stratified by race and gender and it threatens to undermine that social hierarchy. (Shanks 2014, 4-5)

3.2. The Pulp Zombie

Between the voodoo zombie and the present-day version of the myth, the apocalyptic zombie, there is a middle step, “the pulp zombie” (Palacios 2010, 167-197).

After Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie*, the figures of zombie films increased steadily—twenty-six zombie films were produced between 1943 and 1968 (Moscardó 2009, 20-39). Furthermore, the presence of zombies in popular literature was massive in the late 1920s, early 1930s and 1940s, when zombies reigned in American pulp fiction (Palacios 2010, 171); but a decade later, in the 1950s, pulp literature began to decline. Nevertheless, the zombie myth found an even most successful medium in comic books (Palacios 2010, 184), particularly in Entertainment Comic (EC) series such as *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Vault of Horror*, or *The Haunt of Fear*.

At this stage of the myth's development, the changes in its structure were continued and reinforced: on the one hand, the zombie was mixed with other creatures and turned into a rabid and hungry monster; on the other hand, mythemes as the non-Western cultural context, the voodoo magic, or the figure of the Bocor were gradually substituted by other options.

Let us take, for instance, a panoramic view on some pulp zombie tales published between the late 1920s and 1940s. Some of the first pulp zombie tales adhered to the original myth, as "Jumbee" (1926), written before the publication of Seabrooks' work, or Seabury Quinn's "The Corpse-Master" (1929), the first zombie short story directly inspired by Seabrook (Shanks 2014, 7). Other pulp stories featured modified versions of the myth, as "The House in the Magnolias" (1932), by August Derleth and Mark Schorer, or "The Song of the Slaves" (1940), by Manly Wade Wellman.

"The Song of the Slaves" is particularly interesting, as it differs greatly from the model. The story takes place on a slave boat sailing from Africa to Charleston, and the main character is a slave trafficker whose slaves threaten him with coming back from death as zombies and kill him (which they actually do). "Though you carry me away in chains, I am free when I die. Back will I come to bewitch and kill you" (Wellman 2014, 354).

Other examples of pulp stories differ from the voodoo model even more: in "The Dead Who Walk" (1931), by Ray Cummings, or "The Man Who Loved a Zombie" (1939), by Russell Gray, we find ourselves in idyllic American towns, idyllic, at least, until their dead residents come out of their graves.

Another pulp short story which contributed to the evolution of the zombie myth is "Herbert West—Reanimator," written in 1922 by H. P. Lovecraft. The story deals with a doctor, West, obsessed with overcoming death artificially (Lovecraft 2005, 24). West creates an "animating solution" which works successfully in animals. Nevertheless, when used in humans, the solution appears to be less effective, and West's "experiments" come back turned into horrific and violent creatures. As West learns that the "fresher" the corpse the more mentally capable the creature, he even kills a man in order to reanimate him. In the end, the most intelligent of West's creatures leads the others, rabid savages, to take revenge on their creator, whom they slaughter and eviscerate.

There are some elements of this story which will be incorporated to the zombie myth: in the first place, the classic science fiction motif of the Mad Doctor—which is related to the myth of Faust. The origin of the zombie is now, therefore, science instead

of magic; but a sort of “illegitimate” science, as we are talking about practices that go beyond natural laws (and are somehow punished).

On the other hand, the “creatures” that come to life do not resemble full human nature anymore, but are described as rabid animals and blood lusting monsters—“the nauseous eyes, the voiceless simianism, and the daemoniac savagery” (Lovecraft 2005, 34). We deal in this case with a paradigmatic change: the “zombie” is no longer a being deserving pity, but a creature to be afraid of. The real menace is not the Bocor, but the abominable creature, which now is both a bloody killer and a flesh-eater (Lovecraft 2005, 33).

Notwithstanding this, *Herbert West–Reanimator’s* creatures do in fact share some motives with the original zombie, two, in particular: the emphasis on the “revivification of the dead”, and the lack of will of the reanimated creature. Let us remember that only the last one of West’s reanimated beings seems to be intelligent, yet the others act “less like men than like unthinkable automata guided by the [...] leader” (2005, 53).

But let us now move to the 1950s, when pulp fiction success decreases and zombies are transferred to comic books. In this decade a science fiction classic novel is published, *I am Legend* (1954), by John Matheson, a work whose influence on the zombie myth’s transformation is undisputable (Palacios 2010, 181). *I am Legend* is set on a post-apocalyptic world in which the main character, Robert Neville, is the last man on earth. All human beings (but Neville) have been infected by a bacterium and, after death, they had come back to life as vampires (Matheson 2010, 146).

Even though Neville survives by killing all infected creatures he finds on his way, the fact is that we have two very different kinds of “creatures” in *I am Legend*. On the one hand, the vampires, and, on the other hand, those infected but alive, that is, actual living people which in turn will become vampires once they are dead.

The first “creatures”, the vampires, present mythemes belonging to both the vampire myth and the voodoo zombie myth: as vampires, they need blood, hate garlic, stay away of daylight, and are killed by wooden stakes. As zombies, they seem sort of brainless—“Their brains are impaired, they exist for only one purpose” (2010, 171)—and moved by survival instinct—“There was no union among them. Their need was their only motivation” (2010, 13).

Besides of the living dead of *I am Legend*, another two narrative elements of Matheson’s work will be incorporated to the future apocalyptic zombie. First, the concept of the “horde”, which will be key element in George A. Romero’s zombies—Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* is clearly influenced by Matheson (Palacios 2010, 330). Second, the apocalyptic setting, the collapse of Neville’s civilisation.

3.3. The Apocalyptic Zombie

After pulp zombie glorious days in the 1930s and 1940s, and despite the zombie’s allure in the comics of the 1950s, zombies seemed to fade into some cultural obscurity for two decades, until George A. Romero’s film *Night of the Living Dead* made its debut in 1968 (Shanks 2014, 2).

After that transitional state (the pulp zombie stage), in which the Zombie myth was reconfigured, we find a new kind of zombie in Romero. In fact, Romero is said to have reinvented the concept, creating a new archetypal monster (Palacios 2010, 330). This new creature assimilates the living dead concept with elements from different monsters and genres (Palacios 2010, 331): the radiation as the origin of the plague, from apocalyptic science fiction; the loss of individual identity, from alien films; the zombie's visual aesthetic, from EC comics; the contagion trope, from vampire lore; the flesh-eater nature, from the ghoul, and the brainless condition, from the voodoo zombie.

It is worth noting that in *Night of the Living Dead* the word zombie is never mentioned—the creatures are referred to as “ghouls.” As Romero (2016, xix) explains:

We never thought of the creatures in our film as “zombies” because, like everyone else at the time, we believed “zombies” to be those bug-eyed, soulless beings that wandered the fields in Haiti. Our monsters were flesh-eating corpses acting on their own, not commanded by a sorcerer, and they were ordinary people, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker. In that sense, I guess we *did* create the modern “zombie”. But we never used the word. In my second film, *Dawn of the Dead*, after much had been written about *Night*, I did use the word, eagerly and gratefully.

But *Night of the Living Dead* not only features the new zombie model, it also introduces other new mythemes into the myth. Due to some sort of radioactive contamination from a space probe, the recent dead are coming back to life in a rural town of Pennsylvania, and behave as brainless flesh-eaters. Running away from the “ghouls,” a group of very heterogeneous people are trapped in a rural farmhouse sieged by the dead. In a short period of time, they fight among themselves, the dead enter the house and devour all of them but one.

As can be appreciated, in addition to the “new” kind of creature, the plot of *Night of the Living Dead* features a new origin for the zombie (science, a trope to be more widely developed in following films). In addition to this, we have another new mytheme: the conflict between survivors, that is, human beings which are struggling to survive, but in the process they display the most abusive and sociopathic behaviour (Palacios 2010, 333).

Two more mythemes should be considered in addition to those already discussed (they do not appear clearly in *Night of the Living Dead*, but will become key elements in Romero's following films): the contagion/virus element and the concept of the zombie horde, which entails the apocalyptic setting.

Monsters usually act as symbolic projections of our frustrations (Asma 2009, 191), and if we consider Romero's six zombie films (the *Living Dead* series), it becomes clear that they are symbolic transcriptions of the failure of the American Dream (Pérez Ochando 2013, 36).

Romero is pessimistic about the “virtues” of civilization and uses his films as a vehicle for his critical point of view. If we consider *Night of the Living Dead*, released six months after the assassination of Martin Luther King, we can see how, at the end of the movie, Ben, the sole survivor and an African American character, is killed not by

zombies, but “by a posse of white, redneck, good-ole-bous” (Romero 2016, xix), which reminds of the Ku Klux Klan and civil militia’s lynching (Pérez Ochando 2013, 46).

Since the times of the voodoo zombie, one of the most important functions of the myth was to expose the ways of racial oppression. Romero reaffirmed this connection and set the problem in the context of American racial tensions.

On another level, in his second zombie film, Romero explored the possibilities of other social and political meanings of the myth. Thus, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) deals with the ill effects of capitalism, in particular obsessive consumerism. The image of the zombie horde in the shopping centre speaks for itself. Yet an even more disturbing situation is that of the living ones in the zombie apocalypse, seeking refuge in the shopping centre, enjoying hedonistically all goods available and forgetting that the dead are at the gates.

In Romero’s zombie film of 1985, *Day of the Dead*, what is left of the United States government and military force is hidden in a fortified military base, in which scientists (including Dr. Logan, a Mad Scientist) are experimenting with zombies in order to find a cure for the zombie menace. As expected, the film shows how inhuman human beings can be, with strong emphasis on how power devours the real monsters: barbaric military forces, fanatics, and political institutions (Pérez Ochando 2013, 73).

A further step is taken in *Land of the Dead*, Romero’s fourth zombie film, released in 2005 and focused on class inequality: American social class system is threatened by a horde of zombie “proletariat”. The plot is set in Pittsburgh, where a society based on a sort of caste system has been created. Outside the city, the zombies await their moment and begin to show signs of intelligence, particularly Big Daddy, an African American zombie and former petrol station attendant. It will be Big Daddy the one to lead the blue-collar army of living dead into battle.

In the film it seems clear that the zombie attack is in some way a class revolution. Poor people survive the assault and as they are fleeing the city the zombie horde leaves them alone. The wealthy (and white) ruling classes, on the other hand, are massacred.

Let us remember that the zombie is a metaphor for otherness, be it based on race (the voodoo zombie), gender (*White Zombie*) or social class. In *Land of the Dead* the zombie horde represents the oppressed masses, the victims of wild capitalism; the most terrifying menace for the economical and political elites (Pérez Ochando 2010, 122).

Less political and social implications can be found in *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and *Survival of the Dead* (2009), films featuring the classic conflicts between survivors, and the depiction of human beings as much more destructive creatures than zombies.

After *Night of the Living Dead*, fascination with zombies continued through the 1970s and early 1980s and faded somewhat in the 1990s (Shanks 2014, 1). It is also worth noting that in 1980s the voodoo zombie reappears thanks to Wade Davies’s novel, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985), and to Wes Craven’s film of the same name, premiered in 1988. Thus, both versions of the myth coexisted in the same decade with similar success. In literature, several novels following the voodoo model were

published in this decade, but, at the same time, other creatures were filling the space the zombie had once occupied (Palacios 2010, 348-349).

Notwithstanding, the zombie myth re-emerges stronger at the turn of the millennium (Shanks 2014, 1). According to Moscardó (2009, 3-5), between 1968 and 1999, 140 zombie films were premiered; in the years between 2000 and 2009, nearly 140 zombie films were produced, including well-known films such as *Resident Evil* (2002); *28 Days Later* (2002) and *28 Weeks Later* (2007); Zack Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead* (2004); Canadian zombie satire *Fido* (2005); Robert Rodríguez's *Planet Terror* (2007); *I am Legend* (2007); or *Zombieland* (2009).

Although the tendency seems to decrease in the 2010s, several examples of the zombie myth's pervasive presence may be mentioned: some instalments of the *Resident Evil* phenomenon (which includes videogames, films, novels, and comics); *The Walking Dead* television programme (2013), based on the graphic novel created by writer Robert Kirkman and artist Tony Moore (2003-); the film *World War Z* (2013), based on the novel written by Max Brooks (2006), also author of *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003); romantic zombie film *Warm Bodies* (2013), based on Isaac Marion's novel (2012); *Pride, Prejudice and Zombies* (2016), based on Seth Grahame-Smith's 2009 graphic novel; *The Girl with All the Gifts*, based on M. R. Carey's novel (2014); or South Korean film *The Train to Busan* (2016).

Particularly worth noting is the non-English speaking European contribution to the zombie myth in the last two decades, with films such as French production *La Horde* (2009), German *Rammbock* (2010), Norwegian *Dead Snow* (2009) and *Dead Snow 2* (2014), or Spanish *REC* (2007) and *REC2* (2009); and zombie literature, such as Italian anthologies *Spaghetti zombie* (2015) and *Cronache dalla Resistenza* vol. 1 (2013) and vol. 2 (2015); or, in Spain, zombie sagas such as *Apocalipsis Z* (2008-2010), written by Manel Loureiro, and *Los Caminantes* (2009-2016), by Carlos Sisi.

4. The Apocalyptic Zombie as Socio-political Statement

It can be inferred from the previous section that the apocalyptic zombie seems to be the most successful version of the myth: in the last two decades this version has been not only present in mainstream popular culture, but also in non-artistic discourses, as we shall see.

In addition to this, zombie genre is so pervasive that even literary classics such as Cervantes's *Don Quixote* or Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* have been zombified (and turned into *Quijote Z* and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*); and the limits between fiction and reality have been broken when, in several cities, fans of zombie culture, disguised as zombies, celebrate "World Zombie Day" and organise "Zombie walks."

The key to understand the apocalyptic zombie phenomenon is to explore the sociological meaning of each one of the mythemes merging in this version of the myth. One of the new mythemes at the core of the apocalyptic zombie is the origin of the zombie plague. In that sense, magic has been replaced by science, and the virus is the most used trope to explain the existence of zombies. Whether the result of an experiment

gone awry (*28 days after*), or a biological high-tech warfare out of control (*Resident Evil*), the virus mytheme, Weinstock reminds (2016, 286), clearly reflects “contemporary anxieties concerning both germ warfare and pandemics such as AIDS, the Ebola virus, Bird Flu, and Swine Flue,” not to mention the extended paranoia about “corporate greed or government manipulation” (2016, 284).

An even worst scenario is that in which the virus is some sort of Mother Nature’s doing: an angry Mother Nature “regulating” life on earth and eliminating the most parasitic specie of all, us. If we consider the graphic novel *The Walking Dead*, it can be appreciated that animals do not suffer the “zombie’s disease” (Kirkman 2003, vol. 1, no. 1, 2). Furthermore, after the zombie outbreak, nature seems reinvigorated: thus, the main character of Spanish zombie novel *Apocalipsis Z* is surprised by how strongly plants and vegetation are reclaiming the empty city (Loureiro 2013, 282).

Another mytheme to consider is the “living dead” nature of zombies. This mytheme has been consistently maintained through the different stages of the evolution of the myth; and although in some modern examples it has disappeared, as in *28 Days Later* or *28 Weeks Later*, it can be widely found in most of the narratives of the apocalyptic zombie.

Our all-time obsession with revenants reflects the alluring but nevertheless repressed narcissistic desire for everlasting life (Asma 2009, 317, note 18). In addition to this, the zombie distinguishes itself from other revenants, as the vampire, in its aesthetic appearance (Palacios 2010, 12); thus, the dismembered, putrid, and decayed body of the zombie adds to our desire for everlasting life, our fear of aging and losing our youthful beauty (Fernández Gonzalo 2011, 48).

The zombie differs from the vampire not only in its appearance, but also in a fundamental element: while the vampire is a myth about maintaining individual identity after death, the zombie, on the other hand, is a myth about depersonalisation. When becoming a zombie, the person is reduced to a follower, a mere piece within the zombie mass, the horde. In this vein, Pérez Ochando reminds us that (2013, 119) zombie life after death is terrifying as we are afraid of uniformity, of identity loss. Furthermore, to our globalisation anxieties, we must add the fear of mass control, as the zombie is a brainless being unable to understand, explain or judge the surrounding world (Fernández Gonzalo 2010, 18). In the end, let us not forget it, the brainless being trope of the zombie myth is the only mytheme shared by all three versions of the myth.

As the zombie mind is null and void, it is the zombie body the one guiding the monster. The body, that old enemy of Western Cartesian thought, is the one in control, reminding us, humans, how material and physical our very nature is. Along with the body, the ravenous instinct, as the zombie is motivated not by the desire of power or wealth, but by hunger. A pointless hunger (if we consider the fact that no food can nourish the zombie) which reminds us of the compulsive and mindless consumerism of the living (Pérez Ochando 2013, 90).

Notwithstanding, a variation on the mytheme deserves to be commented: some contemporary zombie narratives feature intelligent zombies. Romero’s Bub (the docile zombie used in laboratory research in *Day of the Zombie*), or Big Daddy (the zombie

leader of *Land of the Dead*) were the first examples. To them can be added “R”, main character of the zombie romance *Warm Bodies*, novel in which zombies gradually recover themselves mentally and physically, some years after the zombie outbreak.

A particular case is Kieren, main character of British zombie television series *In the Flesh* (2013-2014). After a cure for the zombie disease has been discovered, former zombies, now “Partially Deceased Syndrome” sufferers, are integrating into society. Taking to the extreme the zombie’s “otherness” already discussed, Kieren and other “cured” zombies are harassed and threatened by their neighbours, and, in such a way, *In the Flesh* is a clear metaphor of race, gender or class discrimination.

Another zombie mytheme aimed at social criticism is the fact that the zombie apocalypse means the collapse of capitalism. This implies not only that survivors must forget the old capitalist ways and opt for subsistence economy (as it can be appreciated in the first volume of *The Walking Dead*), but also that they may find their long-established rights (or privileges) at a stake, as we see in *World War Z*:

America was a segregated workforce, and in many cases, that segregation contained a cultural element. A great many of our instructors were first-generation immigrants. These were the people who knew how to take care of themselves [...] It was crucial that these people teach the rest of us to break from our comfortable, disposable consumer lifestyle even though their labor had allowed us to maintain that lifestyle in the first place. Yes, there was racism, but there was also classism. You’re a high-powered corporate attorney. [...] The more work you do, the more money you make, the more peons you hire to free you up to make more money. That’s the way the world works. But one day it doesn’t. [...] And suddenly that peon is your teacher, maybe even your boss. For some, this was scarier than the living dead. (Brooks 2007, 175)

This is another sample of the subversive power of the zombie apocalypse, along with the scenario discussed in Romero’s *Land of the Dead*.

One last mytheme to be considered is the already mentioned “group of survivors” in the apocalyptic zombie narrative. Concerning this issue, Robert Kirkman, writer of *The Walking Dead*, declared in the first volume of the series that “Good zombie movies show us how messed up we are, they make us question our station in society... and our society’s station in the world” (2003, vol. 1, no.1). Hence the fact that, for Kirkman, human characters are more important than zombies, as he is interested on exploring “how people deal with extreme situations and how these events CHANGE them” (2003, vol. 1, no.1).

In that sense, Kirkman opposes two kind of human groups, on the one hand, the group led by the series main character, former sheriff deputy Rick Grimes, a “democratic” group in which civilized rules remain; and, on the other hand, those groups led by the hero’s great antagonists, which are not the zombies, but abusive leaders such as “The Governor” or Negan, both depicted as violent dictators that keep their “families” alive in exchange of total submission.

5. The Zombie Myth in Social Discourses

Thus far, we have explored the zombie myth taking into account its presence and evolution in artistic discourses. We are now poised to approach the myth in a very different medium, social discourses.

In a previous section of this article (section 2), it was stated that myths are complex symbolic systems formed by mythemes, which may function as potential metaphors to be used in any kind of discourse.

Let us consider, for instance, the zombie myth in the scientific field. In 2013, researchers in New Mexico announced they had created “zombie cells,” namely “near-perfect replicas of mammalian cells that can perform many of the same functions despite the fact that they’re not actually alive” (Freeman 2013). In this case, the mytheme of the zombie myth underlying the metaphoric relation is that of the “living dead” nature.

Another example, now within medical discourse, has to do with American CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). In 2011, CDC launched a “zombie” campaign urging American citizens to be prepared in case of an emergency:

There are all kinds of emergencies out there that we can prepare for. Take a zombie apocalypse for example. That’s right, I said z-o-m-b-i-e a-p-o-c-a-l-y-p-s-e. You may laugh now, but when it happens you’ll be happy you read this, and hey, maybe you’ll even learn a thing or two about how to prepare for a *real* emergency. (Kahn 2011)

For the occasion, several posters featuring zombies were issued, and even a graphic novel entitled *Preparedness 101: Zombie Pandemic*. Obviously, the zombie mytheme used here as a metaphor is the virus mytheme, along with the apocalypse mytheme.

Let us change subject and focus on another different discourse, this time computer science discourse, where the term “zombie” is used in computer security. In that sense, a “zombie machine” is a computer infected by a “bot”, a type of malware “that allows an attacker to take control over an affected computer. [...] Since a bot infected computer does the bidding of its master, many people refer to these victim machines as “zombies” (Norton, s.d.). As can be seen, in this case the metaphorical relation is based both on the zombie virus/infection mytheme and on the “brainless nature” mytheme (which entails control over the zombie).

A very interesting use of the zombie metaphor can be found in economy. In 2011, the *Global Minotaur: America, Europe and the Future of the Global Economy*, written by economist and former Minister of Finance for Greece, Yanis Varoufakis, was published.

Explaining the 2008 financial crash, Varoufakis (2013, 190-191) uses the term “zombie bank,” that is, a bank collapsed but brought back to “life” by national banks or governments:

In a typical zombie-movie setting, the un-dead banks drew massive strength from our state system and then immediately turned against it! Both in America and in Europe, politicians are quaking in terror of the very banks which, only yesterday, they had saved. (2013, 165)

There are three different zombie mythemes here: the virus, the “living dead” nature of the zombie, and the rabid hunger of the monster (dead banks turning against nations and “devouring” them).

A particular use of the zombie metaphor in American media is related to what has been called the “Prepper” movement (a group of individuals getting prepared for the capitalist system collapse). In an interview with *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Joel Skousen, American “survivalist” author, explains how to be prepared in case the apocalypse happens. One of his advices is to run away from the big cities, as they are “infested with unoccupied zombies” (Duclos 2007). Skousen equates financial collapse to zombie apocalypse, and, again, we find the conception of the zombie as a threatening “other” subverting the economic and political system.

This connection is intensified if we consider the way immigrants are depicted in the media. For instance, Gutiérrez Sanz (2017) has pointed that Spanish journalists usually describe immigrants with lexicon belonging to the zombie lore. Thus, the metaphorical construction of the immigrant and the metaphorical construction of the zombie is the same: horde, infection, hunger, rabid instinct, etc.

In the same vein, in an interview with *Forbes*, Jared Krushner, Donald Trump’s son-in-law, admitted one crucial strategy in Trump’s campaign: to “map voter universes [...] identifying shows popular with specific voter blocks in specific regions” (Bertoni 2016). Through the data, they discovered that, depending on their native state, many of *The Walking Dead* viewers were people worried about immigration (Bertoni 2016), maybe because of the metaphorical connection between zombies and immigrants.

One last usage of the zombie myth worth mentioning is the presence of zombie-related metaphors in political discourses, particularly in the 2012 United States presidential election. In 2011 a private e-mail with an image of Barack Obama depicted as a zombie (Zombama) shot in the head was released by Virginia Republican Party. It said: “We are going to vanquish the zombies with clear thinking conservative principles and a truckload of Republican candy...” (Kumar 2011).

Clearly, the Republican party was comparing Obama’s followers with brainless zombies. This was not a new metaphor, as in 2010 Jason Mattera, conservative activist and author, had published *Obama Zombies. How the Liberal Machine Brainwashed my Generation*.

The Democrats stroke back and metaphorically defined Romney as a zombie as well. During the campaign, many Facebook accounts were open with a “Zombie Romney” in their profiles, including one in which the republican candidate was depicted as a brain-eater zombie about to devour a baby.¹

A subtler attempt was Josh Whedon’s YouTube video about “Zomney.” In this video, Whedon, film director and Obama supporter, explains the future Republican Zombie Apocalypse, while he is storing canned foods:

Romney is ready to make the deep rollbacks to health care, education, social services, and reproductive rights that will guarantee poverty, unemployment, overpopulation, disease, rioting—all crucial elements in

creating a nightmare zombie wasteland. But it's his commitment to ungoverned corporate privilege that will nosedive this economy into true insolvency and chaos. The kind of chaos you can't buy back: Money is only so much paper to the undead. The one percent will no longer be the very rich—it will be the very fast... [...] If Mitt takes office, sooner or later the zombies will come for all of us. (Whedon 2012)

6. Conclusions

At the beginning of this article, the necessity of defending the existence of new myths and their study was stated. Taking as the starting point a modern definition of the myth, along with the consideration of myths within the fields of Comparative Literature and Constructivist Rhetoric, it is evident that new myths are possible and that their study is of the utmost importance, as myths embody cultural ideas and convey social ideology.

As a myth, the zombie was introduced in Western imaginary in the twentieth century, but since then it has evolved apace. In each one of its three versions, the zombie's mythemes are related to profound social and psychological concepts, from otherness to economic collapse, from rabid consumerism to social revolution. Furthermore, the present-day version of the myth, the apocalyptic zombie, seems to particularly resonate with our unconscious minds. That is due to the fact that this myth, unlike any other, reflects our society. It is hardly surprising, then, that this persuasive myth is pervasive not only in artistic works, but also in very different social discourses.²

Notes

1. This Facebook account can be found in: https://www.facebook.com/Mitt-Romney-is-a-Zombie-277149302345992/?h_c_ref=SEARCH&fref=nf [Last accessed 15 September 2017].
2. This article is part of the “Constructivist Rhetoric: Identity Discourses” project (RECDID), financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competition and European FEDER Funds (FFI2013-40934R, Period 2014-2017). URL: www.recdid.blogs.uva.es

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