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**Necroculture:  
Fromm's Theory of Necrophilia and Contemporary Cultural Nightmares**

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American horror movie director George Romero died on July 16, 2017. Romero is best known for his series of zombie movies that began in 1968 with the low-budget *Night of the Living Dead*. The film revolved around a farmhouse in rural Pennsylvania, besieged by hordes of flesh-eating undead corpses. The film had a distinctly counter-cultural feel to it. The final scene, in which the black protagonist, emerging from the house having survived the zombie onslaught, is casually shot down by the police, clearly spoke to the brutality and racism of American society. Romero's films continued to have a socially critical dimension. The zombies parading through the shopping mall in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) are widely taken to be a metaphor for mindless consumerism. In *Day of the Dead* (1985), violent and crass military culture is even more threatening than the zombies. *Land of the Dead* (2005) portrays a militarized enclave, walled off from the zombies, but also internally divided between a slum-dwelling majority and a rich minority sequestered in a luxury high-rise. It was released in the same year that Hurricane Katrina exposed the abandonment by the US government and elites of the poorest sections of the working class. The poor, the socially dead, were left alone to face the floodwaters. The US state appeared instead in the form of police and troops sent to shoot looters and the dominant corporate power appeared in the form of paramilitary private security. In the new millennium, in which the violence of neoliberal capitalism – in the form of social exclusion, repression, and war – is nakedly on display, the zombie has become a key image in popular culture. Examples are films like *28 Days Later* (2002) or the ongoing television series *The Walking Dead*, which debuted in 2010 and is entering its eighth season. The zombie apocalypse seems to be a powerful metaphor for the insecurities of contemporary life in an age of financial crisis, permanent war, and inexorably deepening ecological disaster.

Zombie invasions typically augur the end of the world, thereby resonating with contemporary inchoate and pervasive dread in the face of growing social atomization and the spiraling of the world out of control as the inability of capitalist society to regulate itself on a global scale produces mounting disaster (cf. Bauman 2006). Just as the figure of the zombie encapsulates the dehumanization of the individual in a world in which the dead dominates the living, the zombie apocalypse projects the overarching destructive trajectory of an alienated society in which the growing capacity and sophistication of human productivity manifests itself in more sophisticated means for destroying ourselves.



The zombie as metaphor for alienated humanity is especially apparent in Richard Matheson's 1954 short novel *I am Legend*, which established the template for the contemporary zombie genre in film and literature. (Matheson 1995; on the filmic adaptations, see Žižek 2011, pp. 61-64.) The novel was an important inspiration for Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, providing the central motif of a house under siege by masses of risen dead. What is so interesting about Matheson's story is its reflexivity, which operates to undermine the otherness of the living dead. Toward the end of the novel, the protagonist Robert Neville encounters a group of people infected with the plague, but who have not been transformed into vampires. Neville has been killing these infected people as they sleep during the day, a state in which, although they are living human beings, they are indistinguishable from the vampires who attack him at night. They send a woman, Ruth, to spy on him and, at the end of the novel, this new society of the living infected capture him and plan to execute him. He discovers that they regard him as a monster, in the same way that he regards the vampires. The reflexivity of the novel consists in an identification of the living dead with the generalized condition of alienation in which the protagonist is himself deeply immersed and which conditions his character.

Matheson's protagonist is barricaded into a suburban Los Angeles house, which each night is besieged by hordes of vampires. Unlike the romantic vampires of the Dracula-legend, these are shuffling corpses akin to the zombies later portrayed in Romero's movies. Neville's chief desire is for solitude. He cries, "Leave me alone, leave me alone, *leave me alone!*" (Matheson 1995, p. 21; Emphasis in original.) The house cocoons him against a threatening external world, against which he is at war. The vampires call for him to come out of his fortress. Neville, however, knows that what they really want is to drink his blood and kill him. The calls of the vampires are unbearable – he thinks of putting plugs in his ears but "he didn't want to feel that they were forcing him into a shell." (Ibid, p. 19.) Nevertheless, he is retreating into a shell – the house itself. More fundamentally, the shell is his own ego, into which he is withdrawing. His cry "leave me alone" expresses hatred for everything that impinges on the ego.

In his aloneness, however, Neville is surrounded by numerous material objects, which function as his allies. We are introduced to his stove, his movie projector, and the stereo system which he turns up in order to shut out the calls of the vampires. These he keeps running with a generator. He has a car, which he tends. In a dead world, the car is aliveness: "one roaring sound in the great stillness." The engine "coughed into life and... [he] felt the car pulsing under him." (Matheson 1995, pp. 35 and 72.)

He uses the car, for example, to drive to Sears to stock up on DIY tools. Such sorties outside of the protective cocoon of the house are aimed primarily at grabbing supplies, and he quickly retreats back behind his defenses, his sense of security bolstered by his possessions. He has a stock of whiskey and cigarettes, a well-stocked pantry, a refrigerator with frozen foods, and even a washing machine. But he is obsessed by scarcity and entropy. Entering a store, "the smell of rotted food filled his nostrils.. the heavy smell of decay setting his teeth on edge." (Ibid., p. 26.) In a world without life, nothing is replenished. Things only diminish and deteriorate, so they must be appropriated, stockpiled and guarded.

Neville identifies himself with material things – his house, his car, his commodities. These objects are extensions of his ego: as such, they do not threaten his ego. What is so threatening



and tormenting about the vampires is not their deadness, but their residual aliveness. The female vampires strike "vile postures in order to entice him out of the house (...) posing like lewd puppets" (ibid., p. 19). He struggles against his desire to have sex with the female corpses. The dread of necrophilia runs through the story. His own aliveness, the "craving of his flesh," (ibid.) is in this way a threat from within.

Neville's necrophiliac desires express his residual aliveness conflated with his loathing for aliveness. He loathes the desires rooted in his own body and loathes the bodies that he desires. By arousing his desires, the women "insult" him and threaten to swallow him: two female vampires approach him with "their white arms spread to enfold him." (Ibid., pp. 19 and 47.) Bodies and desires threaten the security of his ego. But turning away from aliveness means turning toward death. His necrophiliac attraction to the female vampires expresses *both* his revulsion at aliveness and his attraction to what is dead.

Set in contrast to these bad women, the lewd, whorish vampires, there is the fetishized virtuous woman – his wife, whose name *Virginia*, conveys chasteness. She is first introduced in the novel as a mother: he wishes he could have buried his daughter next to her mother, Virginia. He sobs her name "like a lost, frightened child" (ibid., p. 47). He has enshrined his wife's body in a crypt, which he periodically visits for solace. As he enters, he finds a male body "curled up on the cold floor" – a sleeping vampire. This sight fills Neville with "rage" and he hurls the body out of the sanctuary. The fetus-like posture of the intruding body suggests that this body is an interloper in the crypt-womb that Neville has created for himself – the womb of a death-mother.

His wife is an ambivalent figure. He sanctified her dead body. But she is also a threat since she was the first vampire he encountered (cf. ibid., p. 149). The crypt-shrine functions to keep her in. By idealizing her, he neutralizes the existential threat that she also represents. In this way, he can imagine the threatening monstrous feminine as being entirely in those *bad*, unchaste women, the lewd vampires who surround his house and attempt to seduce him at night. But, just as he is drawn to the female vampires, he is drawn to his wife's dead body: "He kept seeing himself entering the crypt, lifting the coffin lid." (Ibid., p. 68.)

In contrast with Neville's desire for the vampires and for his wife's dead body, when he met a living woman, Ruth, he "felt no physical desire" (ibid., p. 135). Indeed, catching sight of her naked thigh, "Far from being attracted, he felt irritated. It was a typical feminine gesture, he thought, and artificial movement." What is alive appears to him "artificial" or unreal. His feeling toward Ruth is primarily suspicion and fear, tinged with aggression. His urge to "investigate" her is comingled with the desire to "kill her and burn her." (Ibid., pp. 140-141.) She might be one of *them*. How can he know that he is pure? He tries to test her blood, to make sure that she is not a carrier of the bacterium that he has by now associated with vampirism. Sure enough, she is contaminated and has been lying to him. At the end of the novel, Neville faces execution and possible torment at the hands of the living infected. Ruth gives him a pill that will allow him an easy death. In this moment, she takes on the role of a mother. He is powerless and in her hands, but she is a death-giving mother who expresses her love for him by killing him.

The vampires may be understood as the projection of Neville's own destructiveness. To the



new society of the living infected, he is a source of terror. In that way, he is like a vampire. Neville takes satisfaction in their awe of his destructiveness: "I am legend." (Ibid., p. 170.) Matheson's novel can be read as a meditation on alienated life in the capitalist cash nexus, in which one encounters other human beings in the dead form of money and commodities. That aggression and destructiveness are corollaries of a condition of alienation is a fundamental insight of the social psychology of Erich Fromm, founded on his interpretation and integration of the ideas of Freud and Marx (especially Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*). The root of destructiveness, Fromm argues, is thwarted life. Since freedom is the essential quality of human species being, the crushing of freedom represents also the thwarting of human potentiality and the deadening of the human being. As the passion for living is denied, the passion for what is dead and non-living takes its place. This passion for death and destruction does not have to manifest itself in overt violence. People who are non-violent in their own lives may express destructiveness by fervently supporting their government's wars. Destructiveness can take the form of an immersion in the media culture of spectacular violence. Destructiveness can also, Fromm argues, involve simply the turning away from life and living beings toward non-living objects. The culture of consumerism with its fetishistic fascination in objects, its degradation of human relationships and the natural world is both a manifestation of alienation and an outlet for the destructive passions that alienation generates.

Fromm develops from Marx's early writings a theory of positive freedom (cf. Fromm 1961b, p. 38). Fromm's understanding of the human being starts from a notion of man as "the freak of the universe" (Fromm 1973a, p. 225; see also Fromm 1955a, pp. 23-24). While emerging within nature and as part of nature, as self-aware beings under-determined by instinct, human beings transcend nature. Fromm writes, "Man is the only animal who does not feel at home in nature, who can feel evicted from paradise, the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem that he has to solve and from which he cannot escape." (Fromm 1973a, p. 225.) This conception of humanity meshes with Marx's notion that man's essential nature unfolds in a historical process (cf. Fromm 1961b, p. 26). Fromm suggests that the historical task that humanity poses for itself is to move from negative to positive freedom. The human being is initially confronted by their condition of freedom from the instinctual determinations of nature (cf. Fromm 1941a, p. 31). So freedom is initially experienced in negative form. This is true of the human individual who begins life in a state of union with the mother and, over time, achieves separation in order to become an independent individual. (Cf. *ibid.*, p. 24.) But Fromm emphasizes that, by itself, negative freedom is hard to live with. It opens up possibility, but this, in itself, may be bewildering if one does not have a sense of which, from the array of possibilities, to choose. The price of negative freedom is also aloneness. Separation of the individual "may result in an isolation that has the quality of desolation and creates intense anxiety and insecurity" (*ibid.*, p. 30).

The dialectic of freedom and security can only be resolved by moving toward a higher state of union that is capable of preserving and fostering the independence of the individual. The primary bond of humanity to nature, or of the individual to mother, cannot be restored. Instead, Fromm argues that the realization of positive freedom requires societal development toward a form of solidarity that is capable of supporting and enriching the freedom of the individual. (Fromm 1941a, p. 35; see also Fromm 1955a, p. 25-26.) The problem of the "lag" between



negative and positive freedom becomes particularly acute in modern capitalist society, which has released the individual to an unprecedented degree from ties of traditional authority, religion, family, and traditional forms of community, and which makes negative freedom (expressed especially in the freedom to transact on the market) into a core value (cf. Fromm 1941a, p. 104). While set free from traditional bonds, individuals find themselves stuck in a state of alienation in which their potential for growth and creativity is blocked (cf. *ibid.*, p. 268; see also p. 120). Under these conditions, freedom produces feelings of insecurity and isolation, spurring what Fromm calls the 'escape from freedom' in attempts to renew primary ties through symbols of 'blood and soil' or attachment to the nation as 'motherland,' attempts to divest oneself of troubling independence by submitting to authority, and the impulse to destroy spontaneity, freedom, and life. These attachments and destructive passions are expressions of a regressive solution to the problem of freedom, rooted in the ambivalence of the human condition. Fromm writes, "We are never free from two conflicting tendencies: one to emerge from the womb, from the animal form of existence into a more human existence, from bondage to freedom; another, to return to the womb, to nature, to certainty and security." (Fromm 1955a, p. 27.)

In contrast with Freud's notion of the death instinct, Fromm treats destructive aggression as a passion deriving from the human attempt to find meaning in their existence (cf. Fromm 1941a, pp. 180-181). For example, sadism and masochism within authoritarian relationships express a symbiotic impulse to overcome the separateness of individual from world or other by controlling or being controlled, swallowing or being swallowed by the other. (Cf. Fromm 1941a, pp. 140-177, esp. p. 157; Fromm 1973a, p. 233.) The authoritarian personality is frequently masochistic in relation to superiors and sadistic in relation to those inferior to them in the social or organizational hierarchy. For these people, control and submission are reactions against the spontaneity and freedom that they find threatening. Destructiveness, or the passion to destroy life, is rooted in the attempt to "escape the feeling of my own powerlessness in comparison with the world outside of myself by destroying it" (Fromm 1941a, p. 177). "Destructiveness," Fromm writes, "*is the outcome of unlived life*. Those individual and social conditions that make for suppression of life produce the passion for destruction" (*ibid.*, pp. 181-182; emphasis in original).

In later work, Fromm posited two opposing passions: *biophilia* or the love of life and *necrophilia* or love of death. These, he argued, accounted for the duality in human nature that Freud represented under the notion of the death instinct, or Thanatos, and the life instinct or Eros. (Cf. Fromm 1964a, pp. 48-51.) Instead of biologically rooted instincts, Fromm saw these as twin passions deriving from the way in which humans deal with their essential existential condition of negative freedom as biologically under-determined beings. Do they turn away from freedom and individuation seeking to destroy independence through symbiotic fusion in domination and submission, or through the destruction of what is outside the self? Or, are they able to embrace and develop their freedom in higher forms of solidarity with other human beings? Biophilia is a tendency to preserve life, but also "to integrate and to unite" (*ibid.*, p. 45) The biophilous person "sees the whole rather than only the parts (...). He wants to mold and to influence by love, reason, and example; not by force." (Fromm 1973a, p. 365.) Biophilia is therefore intimately linked with the development toward positive freedom, a freedom that is



compatible with, and develops through, solidarity: "If love for life is to develop, there must be freedom 'to'; freedom to create and to construct, to wonder and to venture." (Fromm 1964a, p. 52.) In contrast, necrophilia derives from the stunting of the development toward positive freedom, and from a reaction against a negative freedom that has become unlivable.

Fromm argues that the necrophiliac character is frequently associated with what he calls "malignant incestuousness" (Fromm 1973a, pp. 363-365). In his analysis of incest, Fromm departs from Freud's theory of the Oedipus Complex. Instead of sexual desire, he regards the child's intense affective tie to the mother as more fundamentally related to the existential problem of separateness, resulting from the fact that the individual emerges as independent from a primary state of union with the mother. The child develops an independent existence but "psychologically he continues an 'intrauterine' life in some respects and to some degree." Since separateness emerges only gradually, Fromm argues, the bond to the mother is a fundamental problem of human development. The emergence of self-consciousness as an independent being separate from the mother is therefore a difficult psychological struggle that for every human being is experienced in some way as a loss. (On gender differences, see Chodorow 1978.) In normal development, the child breaks from a conception of mother as a "quasi-intrauterine" home and begins to see the mother as a separate human being for whom he feels warm affection (Fromm 1973a, pp. 361-363). While incestuous attachment to mother is usually resolved around puberty, it can last throughout life in the form of neurosis. Fromm suggests that a more 'malign' type of incestuous fixation develops in children who "never develop warm, erotic, and later, sexual feelings toward mother." For these children, the mother never emerges as a person, and therefore the incestuous bond is never resolved. She remains an intrauterine home, experienced in symbolic terms rather than as a real person: "For them mother is a symbol: a phantom rather than a real person. She is a symbol of earth, of home, of blood, of race, of nation, of the deepest ground from which life emerges and to which it returns. But she is also the symbol of chaos and death; she is not the life-giving mother, but the death-giving mother; her embrace is death, her womb is a tomb." (ibid., p. 363.) Malignant incestuousness involves a fantasy of mother as death, and the yearning for union with death. Fromm raises the possibility that this "incestuous attraction to death" is "one of the earliest roots, if not *the* root, of necrophilia" (ibid., p. 364).

Both malignant incestuousness and necrophilia seek release from an unbearable individual separateness through the dissolution of self and world in death. Incestuousness, sado-masochism, and necrophilia are linked as regressive solutions to the problem of human existence and as expressions of the fear of freedom. Incestuousness, like sado-masochism, represents a desire for symbiosis, and in that sense a flight from separateness and independence. This flight from independence can be satisfied in group-identification which symbolically substitutes for the mother. If unable to develop as an independent individual, a person may persist in "symbolic dependence on mother (and on symbolic substitutes, such as soil, nature, god, the nation, a bureaucracy)." (Fromm 1973a, p. 232; Fromm 1955a, pp. 38, 41.) This kind of symbolic substitution for mother is an important aspect of the appeal of nationalism and fascism. The inability to develop as an independent individual in the world can also manifest itself in narcissism in which the individual "becomes the world, and loves the world by 'loving' himself" or by necrophiliac destructiveness in which the individual seeks to resolve the prob-



lem of the relationship between self and world by destroying the world." (Ibid., p. 233.)

Matheson's *I am Legend* instantiates many of these aspects of destructiveness analyzed by Fromm. Neville exemplifies the syndrome of the alienated human being trapped in a condition of negative freedom that is unbearable. The more zealously he guards his terrain of non-interference by others, the more he makes the rest of the world and its inhabitants into nothing but a threat. With no possibility of empathy, love or union with others, they are rendered into dead things – vampires. Neville retreats into the narcissistic shell of his ego, represented by his boarded-up house. At the same time, withdrawal from the world is a regressive retreat from individualism back to the womb of his death-mother (his deceased wife Virginia). Or, he attempts to destroy the threatening other, in destructive rampages. While he kills and destroys, he also wants to die and is attracted to death. In these ways, Matheson's novel can be read as an exploration of destructiveness and its relation to an alienated individualism that is unbearable.

Neville's recoil from life is represented also in his obsession with hoarding material goods and maintaining his consumer durables and technological gadgets. His fascination with non-living objects seems akin to his fascination with organic death and decay. Fromm likewise suggests an affinity between the necrophilous turning away from life and the fascination with non-living objects: money, commodities, and technologies. (Cf. Fromm 1973a, p. 342.) This turning away from life toward dead objects is an expression of alienation in Marx's sense and Fromm's conception of the conflict between biophilia and necrophilia is closely linked to his interpretation of Marx. Fromm writes that "Perhaps the most decisive question in Marx's psychology is whether a man, class, or society is motivated by the affinity to life or to death." (Fromm 1968h, p. 72.) Capitalism encourages an orientation toward *having*, in which the self is identified with the accumulation of objects. In the having mode, Fromm writes, "My property constitutes myself and my identity." (Fromm 1976a, p. 63.) This identification of the self with objects is directly related to the general condition of alienation as the domination of life by its dead products. As the ability of individuals to express their life and to develop meaningful living relationships is crushed within inhuman system of capitalism, people turn to the substitutions offered. The objects churned out by alienated production seem themselves to bear life and to contain the promise of restoring what is otherwise absent.

Fromm suggests that the hoarding orientation fostered by capitalism is an interest in dead things that derives from and expresses the inner deadness of alienation. The hoarding character fostered by capitalism has been understood classically in psychoanalysis as expressing anal-ity, rooted in repression in early child-rearing and expressing an obsessive interest in possession and control. Freud argued that gold and money were symbolic substitutions for feces, and miserly hoarding has been understood psychoanalytically as a key expression of anal libido. Fromm, however, proposes that the anal character is more closely related to what Freud called the death instinct, and to what Fromm himself understands as necrophilia: "we deal here with persons who have a deep interest in and affinity to feces as part of their general affinity to all that is not alive." (Fromm 1973a, p. 462; see also Fromm 1964a, pp. 54-55.) Fromm suggests that it is this interest in what is not alive that is expressed most fundamentally in the hoarding of money and material things that is characteristic of the personality structure fostered within



capitalism: "In the having mode, there is no alive relationship between me and what I have. It and I have become things (...). The relationship is one of deadness, not aliveness." (Fromm 1976a, pp. 63-64.) In this way, the having mode epitomizes the deadness that arises within capitalism's alienation of human beings from themselves, each other, and the world.

Fromm acknowledged that the capitalist personality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was different from the ascetic hoarding personality of the nineteenth-century entrepreneur. However, the new hedonistic ethic of consumer capitalism did not supplant but rather complemented the asceticism of work and accumulation (cf. *ibid.*, p. 4). Consumer culture and more sophisticated modes of bureaucratic organization in the mid-twentieth century took alienation deeper to the core of the self, producing what Fromm calls the "marketing orientation" in which the individual relates to themselves as a commodity. (Cf. Fromm 1955a, p. 141-142.)

The 'hedonism' of consumer culture is very far from being an expression of aliveness. Rather, as Fromm argued, the commodification of enjoyment reduces experience to increasingly simple stimuli: "What is stimulated are such drives as sexual desire, greed, sadism, destructiveness, narcissism: these stimuli are mediated through movies, television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the commodity market" (Fromm 1973a, pp. 240-241). Today, we could add the internet to this list. Beneath the appearance of hedonistic enjoyment, Fromm insightfully observed, is a pervasive and chronic boredom, often mingled with depression (cf. Fromm 1973a, pp. 242-251, esp. pp. 248-249 for unconscious or masked depression). The bored, alienated individual is drawn to the stimuli of consumer culture which promise escape from boredom but cannot deliver this except fleetingly. Fromm notes that bored person often seeks stimuli in "reports of crimes, fatal accidents, and other scenes of bloodshed and cruelty that are the staple diet fed to the public by press, radio, and television" (*ibid.*, p. 248). It is striking to what extent the media culture to which people turn to alleviate boredom is a culture of sadistic-necrophiliac fascination and enjoyment of violence, mutilation, and death. In addition to the movie audience's passive enjoyment of acts of sadism and, often sexualized, violence, there is also the promise of more active participation in violence through video-games, a key theme of which is the mayhem of gun-violence and mutilated or exploding bodies. The apocalypticism of contemporary culture, with the end of civilization as a key theme in movie and television, may be less an expression of foreboding than of attraction to total annihilation, a desire for an external deadness to mirror people's inner worlds. Fromm himself suggested that the population's passive acceptance of the nuclear arms buildup that threatened their own survival and that of their children and grandchildren could only be understood if we considered that "*people are not afraid of total destruction because they do not love life; or because they are indifferent to life, or even because many are attracted to death.*" (Fromm 1964a, p. 56; emphases in original.)

The zombie movie genre, with its gratuitous violence, draws on this attraction to death. But it also gives vent to deep contemporary anxieties and articulates a repressed awareness of the alienated and destructive character of contemporary capitalist society. The routines and rituals of everyday life repress awareness of the horrific qualities of contemporary reality. But the horrific aspects of capitalist social reality can be partially recognized in, but also safely displaced onto the fictional image of the zombie. Matheson's original novel, *I Am Legend*, makes



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evident how the zombie functions as a metaphorical representation of the necroculture of capitalism, a culture oriented toward the hoarding of non-living things at the expense of the degradation of human life and of the natural world.

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