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Nightmare on Wall Street: Capitalism and Horror...

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Ghost stories and monster tales might be as old as time but the horror genre itself really only came into being alongside modern capitalism. Beginning with the 18th century gothic novel, and growing to include several distinct sub-genres, horror blends into fantasy, thriller and crime novels at one end and science fiction at the other. It grew up at the same time as modern capitalism expanded across the globe. Recently there's been an explosion of popular vampire and zombie flicks just as the economic boom of the late 2000s collapsed into recession. Is it just a striking co-incidence, or is there a deeper connection between capital and horror?

Two monsters in particular have just about taken over the horror scene in recent years: vampires and zombies. David McNally, author of the book *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires*

and Global Capitalism, calls these creatures a “dialectical duo”, meaning that each articulates something of the most deep-seated fears and anxieties that people experience in capitalist society.

The image of the vampire is, on the face of it at least, quite straightforward – a blood-sucking parasites already have a lot in common with the capitalist class, even before you dress them up in swanky suits and realise that they don’t bother to get up until it’s bloody well just about dinner time. Still, I think we can dig a little deeper into the image, especially once we look at them as a sort of inverted image of the ruling class – they seem to embody some fears commonly spread about by the ruling class itself. It’s suggested sometimes that vampires could be seen as a sort of conservative or reactionary metaphor for immigrants or other minorities – folks with strange accents and bizarre customs out to turn innocent young folk from decent society – and the use of the vampires as a analogy for youth – LGBTI youth in particular in the hit television series *True Blood* is unmissable. But I think we’d be selling vampires short if we stopped at surface analogies. Imitation is the lowest form of art and vampires have several other qualities. They’re shape-shifting creatures that invade the home and attack you in the dead of night. An ever increasing number of commodities and the increasing commodification of leisure time means that the market penetrates deeper and deeper into our lives. In violating the space and time that is supposed to be most our own, vampires embody the anxieties that this engenders in working-class people – of failing, of being cut off from society by not being able to “keep up with the Joneses” - or of having the life’s-blood drained from you in doing so. In this I think they actually have something in common with other monsters such as ghosts, and certain other horror tropes.



If vampires embody aspects of the ruling class, then zombies – their dialectical twin – embody working class anxieties specifically linked to the world of work and labour. Traditionally, the zombie is a labourer – bewitched, devoid of free will, personality, memory and culture. Transported across the Atlantic Ocean to the slave plantations of Haiti, stories of plantations and mills staffed by zombies multiplied as Haitians were subjected to forced labour

during the American occupation of Haiti from 1915-34. From there the zombie trope was spread to the United States and the rest of the world through the medium of popular fiction and films.

The image of the zombie laborer, made into a mindless slave of some other is nightmarishly close to reality for many workers, and especially close to the realities of working class life in developing capitalism. For eight, ten or even twelve hours a day, from the moment a worker clocks in they are subject to another's control. On the factory line all marks that identify us as living individuals are removed; we're told what to do, when to do it, where to do it, how often and how to do it. Our movements are recorded, regulated and repeated endlessly for hours on end. Existing in this undead state for the rest of eternity is the ultimate horror!

The class resonance of the zombie image is visible even in some of its precedents. David McNally posits the monster in Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* as foreshadowing the modern zombie. We're told at the beginning of the novel that Dr. Frankenstein is both an anatomist and a grave robber. At the time Shelly was writing, this conveyed a clear message. A common sentence handed down at the time was "hanging, followed by dissection," and anatomists were known to supplement their studies with bodies robbed from unprotected graves. And it wasn't rich graves that they robbed – the wealthy of the time protected their bodies in stone tombs, secured with iron gates and heavy padlocks – it was the poorly protected graves of the poor. Mary Shelly very deliberately set up *Frankenstein* to reflect the working class's very real fear of dissection.

The dissection image has become a trope of itself of course –it's developed into a distinct sub-genre all of its own, with movies like the *Saw* or *The Human Centipede*. And the whole genre of urban legends that involve waking up in some a bathtub or an abandoned warehouse to find some has sliced you open and stolen your kidney – not to mention the very real trade in body parts that still goes on in parts of the world. All play on the fear that somehow our bodies may come to be not our own, and the fact that not only our bodies, but that everything that we experience – the necessities of life, the products we make, our relationships, even time itself, can be taken from us, carved up and reassembled into some hideous and bizarre form.

The modern zombie however, differs in one key respect that – one that perhaps removes some of the critical charge. If originally zombies were labourers, forced to work in mills or on plantations, or entombed in mines, the modern zombie is nothing more than an insatiable consumer with an appetite for human flesh. Alongside the transformation of the zombie from a labourer into a flesh-eater, there's been a transportation of the scene of horror – from the site of production, to the site of consumption . Zombies now rampage through suburban homes and gardens, gas stations and shopping malls. This change reflects changes in capitalism. The motive forces behind society are more obscured than ever. David McNally, talking about his book, even goes so far as to suggest that the rise of the flesh eating zombie roughly corresponds to the demise of the New Left that dominated the rebellions of the 1960s and the rise of consumption-centred critiques of capitalism – entering popular culture with George Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead*.

Now, I think McNally may have a point here, but I would suggest that the modern zombie is not without critical charge. Firstly, it would be very right to fear becoming nothing more than a consumer. And I don't think that zombies have been removed from the realm of production entirely. There's a whole series of recent zombie flicks that locate the production of zombies in the most high-tech scientific or even government facilities: *28 Days Later*, *Resident Evil*, *The Chernobyl Diaries* and my new-found personal favorite, *Crawlspace*. Beyond even that, there is a whole genus of modern zombies that were developed exclusively for military use: in the era of high-tech warfare waged by robot drones, zombies have been weaponised.

There is one further horror trope that deserves to be examined in detail – the ghost story. Often co-occurring with them are witches and demons. These delightful ghouls that have filled ream upon ream of horror novels and have haunted our television sets and movie theatres for decades have something in common with both vampires and zombies, but also articulate a third deeply disturbing theme of life in capitalist society. Like vampires, they prey on fears of being violated, of having your own self – your personality and even yourself – intruded upon in some deeply upsetting way. Ghosts and demons penetrate into the most intimate spaces in our lives – I've not done an actual tally but I suspect the most frequently haunted place, at least in the movies – is the bedroom. Narratives of possession and bewitchment also play on the themes of loss of the self common to zombie stories.

But in ghost stories something else happens. Not only do we lose control of our own bodies, but inanimate objects acquire a motive force of their own. The lightshade begins to swing. Doors swing open only to slam shut. Bowls and cutlery pick 'themselves' up from the tables and selves and are hurled around the room by unseen forces. Heavy furniture is picked up and dashed against the wall like matchsticks. Shadows appear out of the darkest corners, and may even take on the power of speech. This, I would suggest, is a direct representation of a world where social interaction is mediated not directly, but by objects in the form of marketable commodities. At the heart of capitalist society is a productive process that transfers our own life-force and motive power to inanimate objects. Think of what Karl Marx says in *Capital* about the way we experience society: "not as social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things." The poltergeist is the ultimate in capitalist horror!

Take a look at the storyline in one of the movie *Insidious*. It's the story of a haunting – except that in *Insidious*, it's not a building but one of the actual *characters* that is haunted. A young boy named Dalton falls from a ladder and slips deep into a coma. Returned to his family, but still asleep, various entities begin using Dalton as a channel through which to interact with the world of the living. As increasingly malevolent entities begin haunting the family, they call on the services of a psychic, who informs them that Dalton off into the land of "the further," a world of tormented ghosts, who aim is to possess him and finally and totally.

For workers this kind of story is not a nightmare – it’s a reality every day when we go to work. Capitalist production literally sucks the life from us, rendering us exhausted and tired at the same time as giving life an animation to objects in our place. Capitalism constantly encroaches in on us demanding more and more of our space, our time and our lives. Workers are under constant threat of being possessed – not by ghosts or demons of course, but by capitalists. Beyond the ways that horrific imagery speaks deeply to our experience of capitalism, there is perhaps a deeper reason for the enduring success of the genre. Horror might actually be not be totally banishable from modern rationality. Traditionally, Marxists have held a position similar to enlightenment-era rationalists, that the belief in ghosts and monsters is essentially superstitious – and that both belief in monsters and fear of monsters will gradually disappear as society becomes more rational. Science will sweep away superstition in other words.

However, a minority of Marxists have always deviated from established wisdom. Some – named as “Gothic Marxists” by the British socialist and fantasy writer China Meivelle – have suggested that monsters are not simply products of unknowing, or irrationality – but are deeply imbedded into modern rationality itself. The more of the world we can explain, “the more the inevitably disavowed dreadful becomes more and more abstract and unknowable, and thereby more supernatural.” The closer we draw that which we cannot explain – and the more unreal it and fantastic it becomes, all at the same time. Nightmares and reality are not true opposites, but are actually two sides of the same coin. Horror relies on this for its effect. Speaking on the subject, China Meivelle quotes the British Communist Christopher Claudwell, who edited a book of ghost stories as Christopher St. John Sprigg shortly before his death as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War:

“It may seem at first illogical that the uncanny story should be a modern development when it is precisely in modern times that supernatural apparitions and miraculous interventions are treated with the greatest scepticism. But in fact the one follow the other as effect follows cause... If you believe whole heartedly and simply in vampires, ghosts and werewolves as do primitive folk, they are as real people to you as your next door neighbour...”

The writer of a ghost story should be a rational man, otherwise he cannot build up the matter of fact framework that which so horrifyingly shattered by the incursion of the impossible. Any credulity would make his readers sceptical from the start and he would underestimate the amount of preliminary mining and sapping of their confidence in the rational which it is necessary to undertake before he shows his hand ...”

So horrifyingly shattered by the incursion of the impossible. Christopher Claudwell is suggesting here that modern rationality is a necessary precursor to the horror genre... it’s imbedded in the way as modern people think and construct our world. It’s also descriptive of the shattering of *social* constructions that takes place in revolution... so, while I’m sure that there’s a cure for the monsters created by capitalism, maybe horror itself will be with us for sometime yet... and maybe this is not such a bad thing.