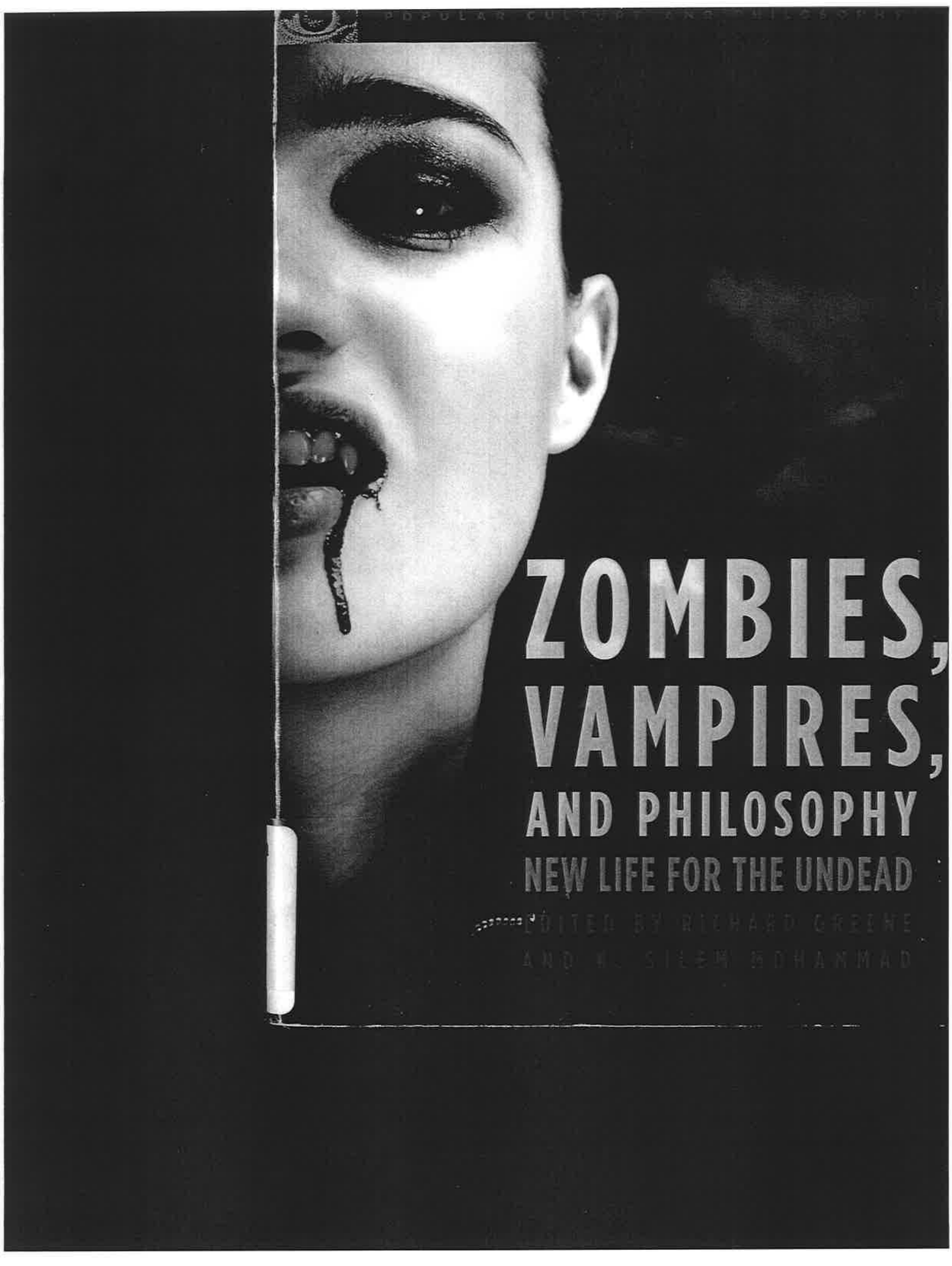

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When There's No More Room in Hell, the Dead Will Shop the Earth: Romero and Aristotle on Zombies, Happiness, and Consumption

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The flesh-eating zombies of George A. Romero's *Dead* films turn stomachs—sometimes by twisting them right out of mangled bodies. Like vampires, they're creatures of hunger, human beings who've returned from the dead to feed on the living. Yet unlike those Undead whose razor-sharp fangs complement their razor-sharp refinement, Romero's zombies (un-)live not in some foggy Transylvania, but in an all-too-contemporary America. They have nasty table manners and are bad conversationalists. They are the *mindless* Undead, living corpses who'll surround you *en masse* in search of a warm meal. And that hurts.

In his apocalyptic zombie masterpiece, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), Romero hints that the Undead are around us, as close as the local shopping mall. Doubt it? Go and you'll see them, shuffling down the aisles, staring vacantly into space, consuming without end. At Christmastime, you'll find them pressed against store windows, hell-bent on hot bargains.

In depicting zombies as the ultimate consumers, Romero satirizes consumerism—the search for happiness through material acquisition. Although consumerism's rise as an unofficial secular religion began after World War II and reached its apex in the "I shop, therefore I am" yuppie culture of the 1980s, human beings have long been acquisitive animals. Indeed, it's striking that Romero's sly criticisms of consumerism echo certain argu-

ments offered nearly two thousand years ago by the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.).

At first blush, Aristotle might seem an odd guide to elucidate the character of our contemporary zombification. After all, the philosopher whom Dante called "the master of those who know" lived and thought long before the advent of shopping malls, global market economies, and the sort of large-scale manufacturing that made mass consumption a viable possibility. And nowhere does Aristotle ever mention creatures like "zombies" or "the living dead." While some spurious pseudo-Aristotelian works offer reports of iron-eating mice, you won't find any commentary about flesh-eating corpses.

Despite the historical distance that separates Romero from Aristotle, though, we can still imagine the two sharing a Cinnabon at the local food court. Like Romero, Aristotle isn't above providing gross-out descriptions of cannibalistic mayhem. For instance, in the fifth chapter of Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*—Aristotle's major treatise on ethics—the philosopher serves up some memorably gag-inducing accounts of "bestial" vice so far beyond the pale that it seems simply to fall outside the boundaries of humanity. In these odd pages, Aristotle introduces us to feral women who devour unborn fetuses, Black Sea tribes who sacrifice babies and munch on raw human flesh, and mad slaves who feast on other people's livers.

Okay, so maybe this bestiary would be more at home in the low-rent gore-shockers of some of Romero's Italian imitators—think Lucio Fulci or Joe D'Amato—but the point remains: Aristotle finds a philosophical role for the disgusting if it can help clarify the nature of the human good. And even if the ancient agora is no match for the modern mall, reading Aristotle can help us understand the motivations and desires that Romero's zombies share with today's devotees of consumerism. It can also help us get clear about why a life organized around material acquisition might constitute the sort of "living death" that Romero suggests.

"Let's Go Shopping First!": We Are the Zombies

In Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*—unlike Zack Snyder's 2004 remake, which I won't discuss—a zombie plague has been ravaging the world for years. With the ranks of the living dead steadily swelling, and with humanity's petty squabbles only making things worse, society faces imminent meltdown and collapse. Fleeing Philadelphia, a quartet of survivors hole up in an abandoned but fully stocked shopping mall in suburban Pittsburgh. Although the foursome initially plan only a short stay, they end up remaining once they discover all the mall has to offer. The chirpy Muzak notwithstanding, everything they could ever want seems to be there for the taking—and all under one roof.

Seizing the mall for themselves, the survivors pick off the zombies who continue to stagger down its cold white corridors. Having sealed off the entrances, the quartet set out to shop till they drop. They try on clothes, watches, hats, rings, cosmetics, coats; they load up on candy, cheeses, salamis, coffees, spices. One of the survivors, Peter, says it all when he breaks out in a big grin and holds up a giant loaf of bread: "*Mangia!*"

Eat!

Consume.

But after their Hickory Farms and J.C. Penney orgy, the quartet grow finally and unshakably *bored*. The mall, despite its endless supply of material goods, ultimately fails to confer happiness. The survivors soon kill their time playing records on high-end stereo systems, getting sloshed on gin, skating aimlessly at the mall rink, gambling with worthless piles of cash lifted from the mall bank. Their life degenerates into glitzy despair, until they show all the vitality of the zombies in the outside parking lot. From behind her deluxe '70s vintage fondue kit, Fran asks, "What have we done to ourselves?"

Romero is fairly explicit about the parallels between the living and the Undead. In one scene, the survivors—absurdly overdressed in fancy furs—survey their maximum-security consumer utopia. While the groaning hordes of zombies try to claw their way back into the mall, the survivors wonder what drives them.

> **Peter:** They're after the place. They don't know why. They just remember. Remember that they want to be in here.
> **Stephen:** What the hell are they?
> **Peter:** They're us. That's all.

As the hero and moral center of the film, Peter isn't just speaking about himself and the other survivors in the mall. He's

speaking about *us* the viewers as well, consumers in our own right, viewers tempted by the fantasy of unlimited access to a mall full of stuff. And presumably, he's speaking for Romero as well. Yet Peter's words also have a sense of implied criticism. By equating "us" with the walking dead outside the mall, Peter hints that we the living might not be so much better off than the zombies.

"I Don't Want to Be Walking Around Like *That*!": Living versus Living Well

So what might we consumers have in common with the living dead? Why might we both have ceaseless desires to *consume things*?

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book V, Chapter 1, Aristotle calls the overreaching desire for the goods of fortune *pleonexia*. In ancient Greek, the word *pleonexia* literally means "the disposition to have more," but carries the sense of "graspingness," of "grabbing for extra when you have your share." In *Politics*, Book I, Chapter 9, Aristotle tries to explain *pleonexia* by reference to people's unlimited desire for sheer survival: "The cause of this disposition is being serious about living, but not living well. Now with their desire for living extending into infinity, so too they desire without limit the things productive of living." In other words, *pleonexia* is motivated by an excessive desire to hold on to life. By taking more than their fill of the goods of fortune—which Aristotle identifies in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book V, Chapter 2 as honor, wealth, security, and the like—those who "grasp" seek to keep at bay the inescapable bad fortune with which death confronts us. To this extent, the grasping differ from those whom Peter says "still believe there's respect in dying."[1]

In *Dawn*, graspingness is probably best personified by Stephen (a.k.a. "Flyboy"), the well-meaning, but tragically flawed, proto-yuppie who convinces his girlfriend Fran to take off with him in a stolen TV news chopper. When she expresses ethical reservations, he interrupts with an appeal to the ultimate,

[1] My discussion of plexonia and mortality has benefitted from Thomas W. Smith, *Revaluing Ethics: Aristotle's Dialectical Pedagogy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), pp. 136–140.

brute value of sheer self-preservation: "We've got to survive, Fran. Somebody's got to survive." Later on at the mall, Stephen rhapsodizes to Fran about his virgin "shopping trip" with Peter and Roger. "You should see all the great stuff we got, Frannie," he says. "All kinds of stuff! This place is terrific. It really is. It's perfect. All kinds of things. We've really got it made here." Thus, when an outlaw biker gang invades the mall toward the end of the film—"We don't like people who don't share!" yells their leader—it's Stephen who takes to his rifle and fires the first shots in a final battle to defend his spoils. "It's ours," he mutters. "We took it. It's ours."

One of the great mysteries of Romero's zombie films is just *why* the dead return. In the first, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), newscasters speculate that radiation from a returning Venus space probe is somehow involved. In *Dawn*, there's some chat about a virus, and at one point, Peter proposes that hell is full, but no one *really* knows. No answer is ever settled upon.

Perhaps *pleonexia* plays a role. To desire living without limit is to desire immortality, or in ancient Greek, to be *athanatos*. But one might be *a-thanatos*—literally, without death, deathless—in at least two ways. On one hand, one could be immortal by living like the gods to whom Aristotle alludes in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, Chapter 7, the divinities who spend eternity in the exalted contemplation of the cosmic order. On the other hand, one might be immortal simply by continuing to metabolize, simply by *surviving*, even if the resulting survival left much to be desired. To be without death in this sense might count simply as *not* being dead, or as being *un-dead*. So maybe one "explanation" for the dead's return to life is that their graspingness *in* life—rooted in their unlimited desire *for* life—knows no bounds. From beyond the grave, they grasp for more living, even if such survival fails to count as living *well*. As Stephen speculates, the walking dead haunt the mall out of "a kind of instinct . . . memory . . . what they used to do." As the Undead, the zombies continue to act on the desires that governed them during their lives. It's not surprising, then, that once the walking dead have turned him into dinner, it's the now-lurching, Undead Stephen who leads the zombie army upstairs into the protagonists' makeshift penthouse.

"Attention All Shoppers: If You Have a Sweet Tooth, We Have a Treat for You!": The Limits of Hedonism

Even if both zombies and consumers are driven by graspingness, why join Romero in thinking that consumerism should turn us into zombies? Or, to put it another way, why should *Dawn*'s hard-shopping quartet zombify *themselves* through unlimited acquisition?

Once again, Aristotle offers a clue. Immediately following the *Politics* passage quoted earlier, he argues that the unlimited desire to consume for the sake of *mere* living typically assumes a certain picture of *good* living. In his trademark crabbed Greek, Aristotle writes, "And as much as they aim at living well, they seek after bodily enjoyments, so that since these also seem to find their source in acquisitions, all focus is on obtaining wealth." In other words, those who grasp after material goodies are prone to identify the good life with a life of enjoyment, a life devoted to the kind of pleasure that we can procure through consumption. (In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book V, Chapter 2, Aristotle calls such gratification "the pleasure from gain.") In fact, so far as such a pleasure-focused life promises to be free of suffering, it might seem to offer the same insulation against fate that mere living does (see Smith, Revaluing Ethics, pp. 142–46).

It's fitting, then, that Romero's original screenplay for *Dawn* describes the mall's "bright store fronts, with their displays of goods designed to attract shoppers to the sweet life the items pretend to represent." Romero's use of the term "sweet life" is revealing. In ancient Greek, the word "sweet" translates as *hêdus*, which also means "pleasant." *Hêdus* is the word from which we get the English "hedonistic." The sweet life that Romero thinks the mall advertises, we might guess, is a hedonistic life—a life of enjoyment like the one Aristotle talks about. But given what happens to his gang of four, Romero seems skeptical about the sweetness of this life. It wouldn't seem to be so sweet after all.

In Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle examines the sweet life as a model for good living, or what he calls "happiness" (*eudaimonia*). When Aristotle talks about "happiness," though, he doesn't do so in a narrowly "psychological" way.

He's not using "happiness" the way I might if I were to say, "I was so happy when I found a limited first edition Japanese pressing of Goblin's *Dawn of the Dead* soundtrack!" Our modern notion of happiness usually refers to a transitory elevated mood or feeling. Aristotle, by contrast, is speaking about something like the *best possible life* for human beings, the life in which human beings *flourish* most, the life in which they most fully *shine forth* as the kinds of beings they are.

To see what Aristotle's driving at, consider plants and animals. While neither can be "happy" in any strict sense, they can still live better or worse *as* plants or animals. The best life for a spider plant will be the life in which it flourishes most as a spider plant, blossoming forth with sturdy green shoots and photosynthesizing without a hitch. The best life for a bulldog will be the one in which she flourishes most as a bulldog, with all the barking, tail wagging, slobbering, and eating that should entail. In turn, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* searches for the best mode of life for human beings. Aristotle wants to spell out the features of a life in which the highest capacities of human nature most fully come to light.

Although he ultimately rejects the life of enjoyment as a model of happiness, Aristotle tries to give it a fair hearing in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapter 5. After all, he notes, this is the life in which most people—"and the most vulgar"—think that happiness consists. Even if he's a bit snobbish here, Aristotle doesn't think common opinion about the life of enjoyment is totally wrong or crazy. Surely, we'd all agree pleasure should have *some* place in happiness. No doubt we're tempted by the lives of those who possess the material resources to enjoy whatever sensual indulgences they wish. If we're honest with ourselves, part of us is probably tempted to say, "*That*'s the life!" Aristotle considers the life of Sardanapallus, a mythical Assyrian king who spent his palace days eating, drinking, and loving. In *Dawn of the Dead*, we might think of Roger, who finds the mall's master keys and quips, "Keys to the kingdom."

But can happiness really be reduced to a life of enjoyment through consumption? Like Romero, Aristotle thinks not. He dismisses the life spent in the pursuit of pleasure as "fit for cattle." Aristotle's not just being a prig here: he really means it. As he argues a few chapters later, such a sensation-focused life might

actually do the trick for horses, oxen, and other animals, which lack capacities for reason and which flourish by living in accord with their sensitive capacities. But such a life cannot fit the bill for human beings, organisms best defined by their capacities for practical and theoretical reason.

To put the point another way, Aristotle thinks the life of enjoyment gets its priorities wrong. Neither the unlimited pursuit of stuff, nor its use in a life devoted to bodily enjoyment, grants sufficient weight to our key capacities. At best, a life of enjoyment treats these capacities as purely instrumental means for getting more stuff and more bodily pleasure. Like the flesh-eaters who always fall for Peter and Roger's diversionary tactics—mindlessly following their tap-tap-tapping against store windows—those devoted to enjoyment through consumption ultimately get tugged around by whatever pleasures and wayward distractions come their way. So described, the life of enjoyment is not one somebody can truly *lead*. And since it leads to the atrophy of those capacities that most fully manifest our humanity, Aristotle believes that it can't fully satisfy us. As the path to frustration taken by *Dawn*'s characters, it proves a kind of living death.

"Hey, Let's Get the Stuff We Need!": Putting the Mall in Its Place

That's not to say that Aristotle thinks material goods and sensual pleasure have no place in the best human life. As he argues in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapter 8, we need material goods because they provide the equipment necessary for performing those noble and virtuous actions that best display our rational capacities at work. If we lack these goods, the happiness we obtain through our virtuous activity is apt to be stunted and deformed. Moreover, sensual pleasure can and should be enjoyed in a happy life—temperately, in a virtuous manner guided by practical wisdom. So even if he challenges the goodness of unbridled acquisitiveness, Aristotle defends some forms of consumption after all, provided that they stay within reasonable limits. In *Politics* Book I, Chapter 9, he insists that these limits are set by the good life itself. Acquisition that supports such a life is beneficial; acquisition that hinders it is bad.

Likewise, we go astray if we see Romero as a cranky scold in high Puritan mode, tsk-tsking us for being enticed by the daydream of living in a shopping mall. Romero's satire of consumerism, while sometimes savage, is never nihilistic, never merely cynical. More than anything, Romero's treatment of this life is melancholic. Although the zombies horrify us, they are sad creatures, lost souls condemned to wander the mall in search of an elusive satisfaction.

While he's clear that the mall encourages a false view of the good life to the extent that it encourages passive consumerism, Romero doesn't necessarily reject the mall completely. Although the mall misleads us by identifying the good life with "gadget-oriented affluence" (as Romero's script calls it), the mall at least offers temporary sanctuary for the film's main heroes, Peter and Fran. For Romero, then, the mall is at least instrumentally valuable as a place where you can get useful goods—and surely, *that* value is nothing to scoff at. Ultimately, however, Peter and Fran have to leave the mall at *Dawn*'s conclusion if they're going to preserve any of their humanity. As their helicopter ascends the shopping center teeming once more with zombies, Peter asks how much fuel is left. "Not much," Fran says. The film ends on an ambiguous note: while the dawn sun brings with it the prospect of a happier day, even if Peter and Fran have to face it empty-handed, these last survivors ultimately have no place to go. To the extent that a life of unlimited means has blinded them to the ends that make a life worth living, it has left them without a clear destination.[2]

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[2] For helpful comments, I'd like to thank Marissa Walsh, Christian Bauman, and the editors of this volume. For a more in-depth (though somewhat technical!) discussion of Aristotle's views about the value of "external" goods, see John M. Cooper, "Aristotle on the Goods of Fortune," in his *Reason and Emotion: Essays on Ancient Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). Translations in this chapter are my own.