



## Zombie-Themed Outbreak Films and *World War Z* (2013)

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### Abstract

There are many subgenres and a diverse range of creatures in horror cinema. One of these creatures is the Zombie. The Zombie character in cinema has evolved through eras. The Zombie which, in the past, was presented as a creature resurrected after death in horror cinema began to be associated with virii and the apocalypse afterwards. Nowadays, the Zombie in the cinema is beyond the figure of a horror. As a matter of fact, many zombie-themed movies are presented as allegories of apocalypse or as outbreak-themed movies. What is the meaning of the zombies which are the subject of outbreak films? What cultural codes do zombies represent in outbreak-themed films? What does the changes in different adaptations of this myth mean in outbreak-themed movies? Zombies in epidemic films can be likened to slaves that are reprogrammed after a resurrection process. From this point of view, we are to evaluate the movie *World War Z*, and the data obtained is to be interpreted in our conclusion section.

**Keywords:** Zombie; outbreak; horror; *World War Z*; Covid-19



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## Zombie-Themed Outbreak Films and *World War Z* (2013)

### Bariş Tolga Ekinçi

#### Introduction

Fear and anxiety are necessity part of human life. A lot of scientists consider fear to be a substantial part of humanity. Human beings learn and experience fear and anxiety from infancy to adulthood. As a matter of fact, same events and situations create fear in cultures that are not very different from each other. However, fear, from the inception of its existence until today is one of the primary emotions that mankind has been trying to escape from. People have both individual and social fears, especially they do possess a fear death. Fears usually have an individual origin but some fears we experience may be related to the social structure in which we live. In particular, the fears of death, apocalypse, disaster, outbreak, imprisonment and lockdown can be addressed in this context. Based on this idea, the concept of fear is divided into two which are real and surreal fears. Horror films<sup>1</sup> are usually aimed at surreal fears. The basis of surreal fears is the fear of death. Fears such as epidemics and the apocalypse created by human hands can be seen as primary real fears. Such fears are a reflection of one of Freud's most controversial theories which is known as the “Universal Death-Drive”. This theory is based on the desire for self-destruction of the human race which is perceived as an evolutionary error. Especially in recent periods, the increase in outbreaks and catastrophic events adds validity to this tendency (Wood 2002, p.36).

Cinema, as an auditory and visual medium, is one of the important media in which our social fears become reproduced. The theme of horror in cinema can be likened to a fantastic journey to the heart of the societal (Ekinci 2015, p.221). For example, fantastic creatures are one of the most important elements that naturally frighten people in a movie. As a matter of fact, in traditional horror films, the plot mostly begins with a creature or a group of creatures attacking to the order of things as we know it. On the other hand, traditional plots can also develop in various other ways. For example, a series of attacks by a creature or creatures as a group and apocalyptic associations can be given as an example for this assumption (Bordwell and Thompson 2017, p.340).

The origins of horror films are based on Gothic novels of the late nineteenth century's Victorian era. Also, cinematic adaptations of Gothic novels of the early 1900s and the principles of decor and lighting of German Expressionism of the 1920s directly influenced the narrative techniques of this genre in question. In this context, the first film that indirectly penetrates the concept of the walking dead is Robert Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1921). In this film, the depiction of a sleepwalker who is controlled by somebody else takes place (Ekinci, 2015, p.224). After this film, many films which focuses on other myths were produced. Creatures in such films are mostly positioned against the traditional religion and order. As a matter of fact, in cinema

the word “creature” is usually used to describe various imaginary beings such as the djinn, zombies, vampires and werewolves. All these mentioned creatures are known in every culture and the awe felt towards the powers of these creatures is associated with a sense of dread. Many religious leaders and religious institutions claim the religious symbols that were used in creature-themed horror films are an insult to the concept of God. As an example, the cross used to repel vampires, the holy water used to expel demons and djinns, the zezem water or the basing of zombies on the stories of divine apocalypse can be considered within this context (Atayman and Çetinkaya 2016, p.376). Within this framework, zombie films and the theme of the outbreak is to be discussed in this study. Zombie films are constantly repeated in the outbreak films as one of the main indicators of the ideological shift which takes place in our day. What is the meaning of the zombies which are the subject of outbreak films? What cultural codes do zombies represent in outbreak-themed films? What does the changes in different adaptations of this myth mean in outbreak-themed movies? Because the zombies in these movies are not only dead or revenants which were resurrected after their demise. On the contrary, they are the externalised harvest of the repressiveness of the system itself. Zombies in epidemic films can be likened to slaves that are reprogrammed after a resurrection process. From this point of view, we are to evaluate the movie *World War Z*, and the data obtained is to be interpreted in our conclusion section. *World War Z* is essentially not a very recent zombie movie. *The World War Z* movie contains new elements within

its genre. In addition, there are similarities between the events in the Covid pandemic and the story of the movie. Therefore, the film constitutes the sample of the study.

### A General Outlook on Zombie Films

In horror cinema, “Zombie” or “Walking Dead” is used to define people who have risen from their grave after their demise without a soul. Compared to other characters in horror movies, zombies are more rude and primitive. Other film creatures, such as Frankenstein, the Vampire and the Werewolf, have been adapted from Gothic Literature. On the other hand, the concept of zombies, or the walking dead, is based on Haitian folklore. In addition to this, like every mythical character the walking dead also has some distinctive features. The walking dead reflects a form of belief which belongs to the Voodoo Religion prevalent in Haiti (Şimşek 2013, p.29). According to the Voodoo Religion, the person who is resurrected after their death is also under the control of a witch. This form of belief in question has changed its nature especially in popular culture and often in low-budget horror films. This change of nature comes into being as the living dead or, the Zombie. The Zombie is a partially decayed being whose facilities of speech is rather simple, who often repeats the same short sentence, lacking any sense of mind or consciousness with a single purpose of devouring the flesh of the living (Şimşek 2013, p.30).

After the American invasion of Haiti, the word “Zombie” was first came into prevalence in the American culture, and then all over the world. In this regard, the film *White Zombie* (1932) is considered the ancestor of zombie films as we know of them. Another important zombie movie is Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). On the other hand, in terms of bringing the zombie prophecy back to life in the cinema, George Andrew Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) is considered to be the most important zombie movie (Bishop 2009, p.15). In George Andrew Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, zombies are depicted as people who clumsily prey on their suffering victims. After the film *Night of the Living Dead*, the zombie character was used to depict people who turned into walking dead because of virii. As a matter of fact, *Night of the Living Dead* was put on the screen during the fall of 1968 when the student and workers' riots in Paris took place. It is necessary to read the “zombie horde” depicted by George Andrew Romero as a symptom of the social unrest of this period in question. Zombie films are often read as political statements, and like most science fiction films, they are more about the present than predictions about the future. In the “Hollywood Cinema”<sup>2</sup>, the films of the early seventies bear important clues when it comes to determining the dominant structures of the period. Metaphors representing natural disasters, lack of morals or metaphors which represent the “democratic grumpiness” that the conservatives display during this period have been the main subject of the films (Ekinici 2013, p.216).

The second zombie story of George Andrew Romero, on the other hand, is titled *Dawn of The Dead* (1978). The social unrest of the late 1960s laid the groundwork for Clinton and Blair's third way concessions and the eventual rise of Reagan and Thatcher. As a result, during this period it turned out that the US is a giant mall which has been poorly managed. If a zombie is a creature that lacks a consciousness of its own, it still seems to have consistent control over its overall goals and behaviour. As a matter of fact, according to what is presented in zombie movies; we are all zombies, and only some of us can be more adept at protecting our egos compared to others. The modern zombie is a creature of an uncanny, if not completely impossible, era of horror archetypes born of modernity and oppression. There is no element of “fantastic hesitation” in zombie movies. Zombie films have one obvious and unbreakable basic rule which is, “do not let yourself be bitten by a zombie”. Typically, a single zombie poses little threat. Because it is easy to escape or kill a single zombie (Jeffrey 2014, p.124).

The main conflict between the subject and the zombie, which is decked out as a structural threat, is quite obsessive. Because zombies, in Lacanian or Zizekian terms, reflect the horror of imagining that we are merely a beguiled bag of bones and meat. The living, on the other hand, are fighting for the traditional values of a temporarily deteriorating world and are trying to restore the established order (Jeffrey 2014, p.132). In this context, one of the most important features of



zombie films is that they contain propositions known as “apocalyptic fantasy” or “apocalypticism”. This feature of zombie films also refers to the desire to experience an apocalypse. The most intense area of the subject of this desire is everyday life. Because all of humanity is in a state of complete catastrophe by nature. The definition of zombies which took shape in the *Night of the Living Dead* was later reinforced with zombies intrinsic to human nature and was objectified with a disclosure of a revelation. In this regard, we can also consider that the zombies reproduced in the cinema are a product of the divine protection of the human mind or a divine “grace” (Crook 2018, p.168). Within this framework, one can consider the physical characteristics of the zombies. For example, in zombie films, the walking dead do make meaningless sounds, but other than that, they cannot speak. Zombies usually move around in packs but this movement is rather discordant in its own. Zombies can be likened to homeless people. For zombies do not have a “fixed” place or dwelling in which they are located. Zombies do not have lairs, nests, coffins, castles or caves. They do not have private property. Usually, they stray from one street to another. No matter how much a zombie eats, it continues to feed as long as it can. Because it has an unending appetite. As a matter of fact, zombies also represent raw consumption itself. In many zombie-themed movies, it is imposed that the only way to kill a zombie is to destroy its brain. Because zombies lack a certain mind that makes a person human. The weakest area of a person who does not have a mind of his own is his brain. What is imitated in zombie films is a dangerous dependence between the threat

of stupidity and the possession of reason. For reason is a symbol of existence itself. Zombies do not have a certain attractiveness compared to other mythical creatures, and their external appearance is rather ugly. On the other hand, vampires signify a physical, sexual allure. Werewolves, no matter how terrible they are, are a symbol for masculine power itself. But zombies are rotten, stinking, dead and soulless. In fact, in many zombie movies, they even lack some parts of their bodies. Grotesque is the nature of the zombie. On the other hand, due to its mindlessness, the zombie figure is not malevolent. Because zombies only trigger harm because of their impulse of hunger. In this context, it can also be compared to a rabid animal (Vervaeke and Mastropietro and Miscevic 2017, pp.14-15).

If a person is bitten by a zombie, they become directly infected. Therefore, in zombie films, the most important way to protect yourself from zombies is to maintain personal distance which can be likened to “A kind of social distance principle”. As a matter of fact, social distance is something that distinguishes not only close relationships with people, but also relations with animals and objects. Because the more “in touch” we are with something, the closer and more connected we become to it. In order to ensure the continuity of contact with our environment, our existence on Earth largely depends on contact. The people we are in contact with are more “real” to us. “Losing touch” can destroy our understanding of reality (Vervaeke and Mastropietro and

Miscevic 2017, p.17). In addition to this, in zombie-themed films, the name “zombie” is usually not used directly. As a matter of fact, in many films, expressions such as “walkers”, “dead”, “corpses”, “meat eaters” or “infected” are utilized. The term “zombie” is mostly used by movie fans, filmmakers, theorists, academics, and horror fiction writers. Because the term zombie is a cultural phenomenon. In many zombie movies, it is assumed that no one has ever seen a zombie movie before. For example, when the main heroine sees a vampire in a vampire movie, she immediately prepares a wooden stake or a cross. Similarly, in a werewolf movie, all the characters know that a silver bullet can kill a werewolf. On the other hand, zombies are not supernatural characters. Therefore, information about them is processed throughout the story and is often associated with virii or outbreaks. Because using the term “zombie” directly in movies can create a void so surreal that it cannot be filled in the real world (Vervaeke and Mastropietro and Miscevic 2017, pp.22-23).

It is often associated with the end of the world, the end of human civilization or a series of abnormal events and the apocalypse created by human hands. The identification of the apocalypse as a synonym for destruction is most often based on religious texts. In a similar way, there is also a myth in religious texts that people who die in the apocalypse are to be revived and a reincarnated. Almost all outbreak-themed zombie stories are like depictions of the apocalypse: the end of the world is there, order has been turned upside down; there is an environment of mayhem, and the

dead are walking the Earth. In this context, it can be argued that zombies present a distorted or skewed sense of apocalypse (Vervaeke and Mastropietro and Miscevic 2017, p.27).

More than 600 zombie-themed films have been made since the year 1920. But more than half of these belong to the last 10 years. As a matter of fact, there are two important zombie trends in Hollywood cinema since 2000. The first one occurred in the early 2000s and the other one in 2008. George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* was remade in 2004 and *Zombieland* of 2009, became the highest-grossing zombie film to date. This is the box office record was surpassed in 2013 by *Warm Bodies* and then by *World War Z*. In a similar way, zombies are also a popular myth for the television audience. Until 2015, there were three television series based on the zombie theme: *Z Nation* (Netflix) *iZombie* (CW) and *The Walking Dead* (AMC). As a matter of fact, zombie films have crossed the boundaries of the horror genre. While early zombie films were firmly rooted in horror tropes, more recent interpretations have immersed themselves in action, comedy and romance, becoming a widespread cultural symbol. In cinema and television, the theme of zombies, epidemics and the apocalypse has evolved into an endless and constantly changing new subgenre: consumerism, poverty, hunger, political dystopia, environmental degradation, apocalypse and the epidemic become masqued by the grotesqueness of the zombie. In this regard, it can be considered

that the new zombie phenomenon represents the crises and global outbreaks in the modern Western Civilization (Vervaeke and Mastropietro and Miscevic 2017, pp.3-4).

### Zombies in the Context of Outbreak-Themed Films

Outbreaks, the origins of which are as old as the first human communities living in groups, are one of the greatest fears of modern society. During the history of mankind, millions of people have lost their lives to outbreaks and major civilizations and empires have collapsed after them. For example, in the most devastating outbreak in history, which came into being in 1918 and was named “Spanish Flu”, more than a fifth of the world's population was infected and about a 100 million people died. The emergence of outbreaks has often been associated with certain groups or countries. For example, the plague epidemic that ravaged the world in the XIV. Century was called the “Black Death” and it was perceived as a disease produced by minority groups such as Jews and Muslims. In this way, belonging to another religion or being from another country has been shown to be a form of disease in itself.<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, outbreaks are usually assumed to belong to a religious, regional or national community. In this context, it can be argued that otherness and orientalist policies are also a disease or outbreaks in themselves (Höglund 2017, pp.5-6). Another imposed phenomenon is aimed directly at individuals. As an example, the reason for the rapid spread of the virus is most often associated with the mistakes or ignorance of

individuals: i.e., people not washing their hands, contacting virus-infected surfaces being in the same environment with people who cough or sneeze, and maintaining close contact with other people. For various reasons, when the state does not take the necessary measures in a timely fashion, this usually becomes highlighted in outbreaks (Aşıkılıoğlu and Işık 2020, pp.354-355).

Considering that outbreaks affect the whole world, we can see that this theme is popular in cinema. As a matter of fact, films are cultural products that historically reproduce outbreaks and their disturbing reality. There are many films in the history of cinema which share this context. For example, in *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1935, William Dieterle), the efforts of Louis Pasteur on pasteurization and vaccination of sheep against anthrax are discussed. However, the film also highlighted the reactions caused by the revolutionary ideas of Louis Pasteur at that time. Another outbreak film is one which focuses on Ehrlich's struggle against both syphilis and the established order, titled *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940, William Dieterle). In a similar form, *Robert Koch*, (1939, Hans Steinhoff) produced by Nazi Germany, also serves as a form of autobiography. In the film, the figure of authority, represented by Emil Jannings, reflects the realities of Nazi propaganda. In *Docteur Laennec* (1949, Maurice Roche), the fight against tuberculosis is also discussed. Memories of the great flu epidemic of 1918 and the plague epidemics of the Middle Ages often make up the stories of the first films made on the theme of the outbreak. For example,

*Influenza 1918* (1998) is a documentary film focusing on the month-to-month spread of the great flu epidemic. In a similar form, *Gypsy Fury (Singoalla)* (1949, Christian Jacques) is a horror film connected with the “black death” outbreaks. In *Arrowsmith* (1931, John Ford), a multi-award-winning film based on the novel of the same name by Sinclair Lewis, the main character's struggles to cure the plague are described. Another film based on a famous novel is a 1939 film called *The Citadel* (1939, King Vidor). The film depicts an idealistic doctor who is hellbent on fighting tuberculosis in a mining town (Pappas and Seitaridis and Akritidis and Tsianos 2021, p.940).

Especially since the 1950s, the number of horror films on the theme of outbreaks and disasters has gradually increased. Various events, such as the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and the cold war, for example, have become the basis for such films. However, various events such as the manufacturing of WMD's that emerged as a result of scientific developments, the use of nuclear energy as a weapon and the popularisation of human-made disasters compared to a religious apocalypse are also important factors (Aşıklioğlu and Işık 2020, p.344). Epidemic-themed films have continued until the early fifties when the Oscar-winning *Panic in the Streets* (1950), which presented a successful solution to an epidemic is produced. With the sending of satellites into space by America and Russia, dangerous microbes from outer space became the main theme in outbreak films (for example, a deadly alien fungus returns to earth on a satellite in *Space Master X-7* (1957) and in *The Angry Red Planet* (1959), the astronauts return

to Earth accompanied by a dangerous infection). Although such fears may seem like a fantasy nowadays, until 1970, the Apollo astronauts were quarantined for up to three weeks after their return to Earth. Between 1960 and 1970, a lot of outbreak-themed films based on space were produced. Some of them are as follows: *Beyond the Time Barrier* (1960), *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) and *The Omega Man* (1971) (Pappas and Seitaridis and Akritidis and Tsianos 2021, pp.940-941).

Cinema always needs villains, and the attack of a terrorist group in possession of biological weapons has often been of interest in cinema. For example, in *Twelve Monkeys* (1995, Terry Gilliam), we see a group of terrorists named “The Army of Twelve Monkeys”. The terrorists, who have environmental concerns spread an unknown virus in 1996 and this results in the death of 5 billion people. In *The Omega Man* (1971, Boris Sagal) Charlton Heston plays the sole survivor of a biological world war because he received an experimental vaccine. In *Code Name Trixie* (1973, George Andrew Romero), the subject is the accidental release of a biological weapon to the water supply of a small town. The virus is named “*Trixie*” and it affects people in various ways. Focusing on Japanese biological warfare experiments conducted in a Chinese prisoner-of-war camp during the Second World War, *Hei Tai Yang 731* (1988, Mou Tun-fei), on the other hand, has a historical foundation. Another epidemic film is *Winds of Terror* (2001, Robert Mandel) in which bioterrorists



use a deadly virus in order to destroy humanity.<sup>4</sup> The film was broadcast on television a few months before the anthrax outbreak of 2001 (Pappas and Seitaridis and Akritidis and Tsianos 2021, pp.941-942).

Since the 2000s, interest in outbreaks did increase in everyday life and in traditional media. Therefore, the interest of cinema in outbreaks has also increased, and an increasing number of hybrid films were produced: For example, in many outbreak-themed films, the virus infects a victim, this person becomes ill, shows various symptoms, and then the disease becomes an outbreak. After the infection becomes an outbreak, the solution becomes more difficult to achieve and the heroes have to go on a dangerous journey to find a solution (Aşıklioğlu and Işık 2020, p.354). For example, in the blockbuster film by Francis Lawrence, which tells the story of an outbreak of a man-made zombifying virus in New York, *I Am Legend* (2007), the scientists are blamed for the epidemic (the fictional “KV virus”, which is the result of the transformation of measles into cancer treatment). In this regard, epidemic films and zombie films begun to merge and a hybrid genre has started to emerge. For example, in zombie-themed films, the emergence of the zombie virus and its spread on a global scale are developing at the same stages. In zombie films, victims do not have consciousness. On the other hand, in traditional epidemic films, the victims have a certain consciousness until their last moments. As a matter of fact, the only element that perpetuates the fear of zombies in zombie-themed epidemic movies is the state of

unconsciousness. As we see patients in pain in both traditional outbreak films and zombie-themed outbreak narratives, their deaths are also included in the film as well. The outbreak causes a great deal of confusion, in which the society panics, becomes afraid and tries to escape the situation anxiously. This situation is at the climax of the zombie-themed epidemic films.

The horror tradition of the Hollywood cinema between 2000 and 2011 has evolved into movies about the day of salvation, global outbreaks and zombie-themed apocalypse movies. Without a doubt, profit-oriented policies and ideological goals of a “higher mind” are present in this orientation. Instead of creatures that get their powers from nature in horror cinema, zombie-themed films that came into being as a result of an accident in a research laboratory have begun to emerge. In such films, there has been a great destruction of the rituals and institutions of modern society, or the social structure undergoes changes that are irreversible. Elements such as zombies that surround the whole world or global alienation are influential in the story structures of outbreak films of the new era. For example, a virus destroys a significant part of humanity and imprisons the rest in their own houses. Now you can no longer properly experience work, play and free-time activities. Will scientists be able to develop a vaccine that will ensure normalization? Or will the ruling class let humanity down once again? For many of us, these questions not only affect the current reality, but they are also centered at the heart of almost all outbreak movies ever made.

Unfortunately, governments and scientists may very well be unprepared for a global pandemic. But filmmakers and cinema audiences are familiar with this situation from the media. For example, some series and popular motion pictures released on Netflix can be considered in this context. These are as follows: *Contagion*, *The Stand*, *Cabin Fever*, *28 Days Later*, *Carriers*, *Outbreak*, *The Flu*, *Infection*, *The Bay*, *The Last Days*, *Dawn of the Dead*, *Rabid*, *World War Z* and *Cargo* etc. (Sconce 2014, p.127). For example, in Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011), a hyperreal story is presented to the audience. The story of *Contagion* and the beginning, development and ending of the COVID-19 pandemic are almost identical. Is the story of *Contagion* a reflection of the magnificent insight of the screenwriters? Or is it a success of a higher mind to carve reality out of a scenario? These questions may very well be posed.<sup>5</sup> In a similar way, the most important epidemic and apocalyptic film ever made: *Twelve Monkeys* is also another important example in this respect. As a matter of fact, if the outbreak mostly affects the elderly, those with underlying health problems and poor people who cannot access health services, this is not seen as a problem in outbreak films for it is thought that these people deserve to be infected. In epidemic films, no meaning is attached to a vaccine or a magic needle that heals all diseases along with the virus itself. As it is constantly repeated in *Twelve Monkeys*, the only thing that matters is time. And time is money (Kord 2021, pp.1-2). Today, apocalyptic stories that are similar to *Twelve Monkeys* began to become reality thanks to capitalist anxieties. Anthrax, an acute, infectious disease which can be

used as a biological weapon and the drug “bath salts” which results in addicts killing people brutally in the US, SARS, H1N1 and finally, COVID-19 can be interpreted as such (Filho 2020, p.254). In any case, the only response for the maintenance of order, security and self-defence is the brutal execution of the “infected”. As a matter of fact, the outbreak news about coronavirus which emerged in the beginning of 2020<sup>6</sup> resemble a zombie story. For example, in the ending of the *Night of the Living Dead* the protagonist of the film Ben (Duane Jones) is the sole survivor of the quarantine, and although he does not look like a zombie; a militia member executes him by shooting him from a far. Ben’s death can be seen as a reflection of the colonialism of America and Europe and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. According to Loza; “This racist image of black brutishness was immortalized in D. W. Griffith’s 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation*, which was inspired by Thomas Dixon’s white supremacist novel, *The Clansman* (1905)” (2017, p.114). Similarly, while a horror movie scenario was unfolding during the COVID-19 crisis, the Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte warned that anyone who violated the quarantine in the country would be shot (Lúcio 2020, p.255). In a rapid way, many social media users compared the deserted Atlanta highway shot of the promo of *The Walking Dead* (2010) with a photo taken in the same area afterwards the restricting orders of COVID-19. Among the many zombie movie tropes that emerged during the pandemic, this comparison reveals how quarantine has decisively changed the

urban landscape (Lúcio 2020, p.257). Similar story structures can be observed in the entire series of the *Resident Evil* saga which contains six movies.<sup>7</sup>

### The Zombie Outbreak and *World War Z* Movie

The idea that zombification is the result of a disease spread from animals, and the end of the world is going to be a result of virii was first revealed in the movie *28 Days Later* (2002, Danny Boyle). In the film, some activists<sup>8</sup> enter an animal laboratory and release a chimpanzee infected with an experimental virus named “*Rage*”. In the film, a chimpanzee bites the person who released him, and thus the outbreak begins. The story of the film is set in England. Jim, who works as a courier, was stuck in a coma for 28 days after an accident and woke up in a deserted hospital. Throughout the film, the struggle of Jim and his friends against the zombies is described.<sup>9</sup> In the film, zombies act like wild animals and they attack people who are not infected. In the film, the zombie virus is transmitted through blood, breath, coughing and saliva. *28 Days Later* and *Train to Busan* (2016) which bring the discussion to the present day films have consolidated the role of outbreaks in our imagination and the concept of quarantine as a space built to separate “us” and “them”. The relationship between zombies and outbreaks has quickly become a powerful metaphor in popular culture, especially as a result of socio-economic events in 2008. Especially the themes, “zombie infection” and “zombie outbreak” begun to be seen as popular in video games<sup>10</sup>. In addition to this, *National Geographic* has published an article claiming that a zombie or a “rage

virus” can emerge out of a hybrid of a rabies or avian flu virus (Lynteris 2020, p.101). However, in 2011, a Zombie Preparedness Campaign has been organized by the *CDC* Office for Public Health Preparedness and Response, and posters showing a zombie staring out the window were designed. These posters stated: “Don't Be a Zombie, Be Prepared”. These posters were followed by “Zombie survival kits” and a two-part graphic novel, “Preparedness 101: Zombie Pandemic.” A lot of people have viewed the *CDC*'s website because of the zombie campaign, and therefore the website had temporarily crashed. And just two years after the *CDC*'s Zombie Preparation Campaign *World War Z* (2013) was released. Two books have inspired the movie *World War Z*. The first of these books is the book “The Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection from the Living Dead (2003)” by Max Brooks and the other is the book “World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War (2006)”. In “The Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection from the Living Dead”, Max Brooks focuses on the inevitability of the outbreak. For example, even if the epidemic is to be contained, it is emphasized that the virus may reappear at any time. As such, Max Brooks states in his first book that the zombies that caused the epidemic are not the same as the Haitian Voodoo zombies. According to Max Brooks, viral zombies are much more dangerous compared to the zombies from the Afro-Caribbean tradition who are drugged and placed in a coffin. This zombie proposition of Max Brooks reveals the secret hidden by the social. Although this book is

classified as a humour book, in fact it is far from humorous. Indeed, in the first book, it is emphasized that only a resourceful group of people who are confident and do not hesitate to commit brutal violence against the enemy can survive (Baldwin 2007, pp.413-414). The second book can be compared to a book of memoirs about the zombie outbreak. In “World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War (2006)”, it is stated that the virus emerged in China and the reason for its spread is the mass distrust of nations towards each other. As a matter of fact, in the second book, zombies are depicted as a global phenomenon: Zombies are embodied reflections of fears caused by global distrust (Baldwin 2007, p.415). “World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War” is divided into five parts: Warnings, Blame, The Great Panic, Turning the Tide and Good Byes.

The film *World War Z* in the context of the story, is slightly different from the original story of Max Brooks (Reyburn 2017, p.45). In *World War Z*, that is, if it is read as a novel of world systems, we can conclude that rather than aiming at the best possible society, only the worst possible society can prevent a greater evil. On the other hand, it is also possible to see the zombie apocalypse as an allegory of the incipient dangers, weaknesses or contradictions of the established order. Otherisation, as in most other zombie films, is also a prominent theme in *World War Z*. For example, the opening sequence of the film can be considered in this context. In the opening sequence of *World War Z*, the situations of people and animals in everyday life, environmental

disasters, the deterioration of the ecosystem, erosion in the health system, apocalyptic scenarios and the filming of the World Health Organization are delivered in the form of a news announcement. These shots, created in the form of a news announcement, are accompanied by a voice-over. In the text of the voice over, the topics are about avian flu and outbreaks: For example, words such as outbreak, infection and social distancing can be heard. Thus, the causes of the apocalypse, the outbreak and the zombie virus created by human hands, which is the main theme of the film, are highlighted at the beginning of the film. In the first scene after the opening sequence of the film, a picture of a happy American family is created in which Gerry Lane (Brad Pitt), his wife Karin Lane (Mireille Enos) and their children are talking in their bed. On the other hand, in the first dialogue of this scene, Karin Lane looks at her children and says: “Here come the creatures! You must be hungry. What'd you like to eat?” In this first scene of the film, a reference to the creatures and their eating impulse is made. As a matter of fact, in the continuation of this scene, a connection to the shots where they were having breakfast in the kitchen is established. Later in the film, while Gerry Lane and his family are traveling in traffic, suddenly a police bike breaks the left rear-view mirror of their car and then the chaos begins. The rearview mirror is actually a metaphor in the movie. In traffic, drivers see cars coming from their left, right and rear thanks to the rearview mirror. In the absence of rear-view mirrors, an accident is inevitable. With



the help of this metaphor, it is established in the film that the system will deteriorate and become abnormal. As a matter of fact, after this incident, an atmosphere of chaos and disorganization erupts in the traffic.

In the film, the zombie virus is expressed as a rabies virus that started in Taiwan and then spread all over the world. The most important element that attracts attention in the film is that zombies are much more ferocious and faster than zombies in traditional zombie movies. In *World War Z*, zombies move almost as if they are running, they move swiftly like a wild animal, and people who are bitten turn into zombies in seconds. However, in traditional zombie movies, zombies move slowly like drunkards and it takes hours or days for people who are bitten to turn into them. On the other hand, in *World War Z* the zombie virus affects the whole world alarmingly quickly.

In the film, during the zombie outbreak, people flock to supermarkets and shop in a state of panic. For consumption, as a requirement of the capitalist system, increases even more during outbreaks. Throughout the film, announcements are made on the radio and on television to people to stay in their homes and not to leave unless they need to: “Some kind of shutdown or a ban on going out.” When the zombie outbreak reaches Philadelphia, Gerry Lane's former colleague and current friend, UN Assistant Secretary-General Thierry Umoni, rescues Gerry Lane and his family and brings them to a US navy ship. In the film, Gerry Lane was able to place his family on a safe

ship because he was a former government official. For it is easier for those who are close to the established order and the system to survive in outbreaks, apocalypses and natural disasters. In the film, scientists who are considering developing a vaccine compare the virus to a zombie virus. Although the word zombie is not pronounced in traditional zombie movies; in *World War Z* the phrases “zombie virus” and “zombies” are highlighted a lot. Instead of vampires, the carrier of the viral pandemic in contemporary epidemic films, come to life in the characters of “zombies”, who are proletarian revolutionary variants of vampires. Zombies can be compared to vampires in that they feed on the human race to which they used to belong. In a similar way, zombies also evoke the lower and middle class in an ideological context. In zombie movies, a society in which everyone is armed and on guard is presented. Therefore, outbreak-themed zombie films often tell the stories of people trying to survive and soldiers or people with guns killing the infected instead of scientists trying to find a cure. Therefore, in such films, the only solution for the re-establishing of global health, or at least for the immediate survival of humanity, is a military one (Höglund 2017, pp.7-8).

In the film, Gerry Lane is involved as a former war crimes investigator in the state's operation to stop the outbreak. Gerry Lane's task is to go to a prison where a zombie virus has appeared and conduct research with a scientist. In *World War Z* the presence of biopolitical power

held by military scientific structure is also confirmed. For example, in the film, this understanding of the virus is emphasized by the humorous statement of a Harvard virologist on a military plane: “Mother Nature is a serial killer.” This understanding is basically a proposition of a Darwinist understanding of life. Survival is a goal rather than a reality of life. In *World War Z*'s Philadelphia attack scene, zombies also hunt down potential carriers and bite them. Thus, they transmit the virus. The zombie virus, which is independent of any external reference or socio-ecological context, is an embodiment of the true face of the capitalist system. In the Covid-19 pandemic however, what the system teaches individuals is that they can survive if they confine themselves (Lynteris 2020, pp.113-114).

In the film, Gerry Lane is present in a lot of places in order to continue research. One of these places is Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, it appears that the Israeli government found out about the outbreak in advanced and closed the city down by erecting high walls around it. However even these high walls were not able to stop the zombies. In *World War Z* and in other zombie-themed outbreak films, zombies characterize dangerous outsiders who can trespass and pollute the community, and therefore play a role in its destruction: The “Liberation Walls of Jerusalem” being inadequate to protect people from external dangers is a form of this. As a matter of fact, a mountain of hundreds of zombies easily crossed these walls in the film. In the ideological context, the film presents countries such as Israel and North Korea<sup>11</sup> from a more rigid perspective.

World War Z appears in the guise of a medicalized tale that underscored the beneficence of alliances that were forged between UN investigators and Israelis as they fight off zombies. It could also be viewed as an allegorical tale that could counter allegations that Israel's security wall is actually an "apartheid" wall. Alterity and monstrosity are used to hide the hegemonic forces that put the "security" wall up there in the first place. The film invites viewers to think of the wall as some assemblage or edifice that just might help with the autoimmunity of Zionist Israelis, who use settlements or movement of capitals or walls to ward off the monstrous "other" (Ghabra and Hasian 2020, p.12).

As Gerry Lane realizes in the movie, it's too late to build walls now. Therefore, the only way to protect people from a zombie invasion is to find out the origin of the "zombie virus" and develop a vaccine. Infecting people with another virus is the only way to become invisible to zombies. In the film, Gerry Lane arrives at a facility of the World Health Organization after a plane crash, there, he finds a measure against the zombie virus. Zombies attack and infect only healthy people who are free of any diseases. They do not attack people who have a terminal disease or those with reduced immunity because they cannot detect them. As a matter of fact, this also

presents a contradiction related to these outbreaks. Because in outbreaks that affect the whole world, the elderly and those with chronic diseases, who are usually seen as the weakest link, are depicted as victims. On the other hand, in *World War Z* the opposite happens and the real truth becomes masqued within the story.

In the film, after a cause has been determined for the condition of the zombies, and then the lines between the zombie and the story are blurred, the question, “What disease is the root of your evil?” imposes itself. As a matter of fact, this worldview is not indifferent to evil or exclusionary. Because there is more evil in the real world, and degeneracy is ingrained within us. For this reason, in zombie movies, zombies first function as mirrors that reveal our sins and perversions. For these dystopian, antecedent reason, there is also an externalised search for salvation in zombie films. On the other hand, many zombie movies end unresolved. Indeed, contrary to redemptive concepts, grand finales consist of blatantly incorrect results and/or delayed results. There is no salvation or solution in the stories of such films (Crook 2018, p.170). In *World War Z* the ending of the movie was also indetermined and a second film was planned to be shot as a sequel but this was later canceled. In the end of *World War Z*, a vaccine against the zombie virus is developed thanks to the efforts of Gerry Lane and the outbreak is temporarily halted. When we think about the fact that a sequel was planned for *World War Z* and a lot of video games have been

developed about *it*, one can assume that zombie-themed outbreak movies are to continue. As a matter of fact, the film ends with the emphasis, “Our war has just begun.”

In films such as *World War Z*, the desperate attempts of refugee migrants to escape war and social turmoil by crossing national borders are emphasized much more strongly. As a matter of fact, zombie-themed epidemic films also contain many ideological codes within themselves. Because, paradoxically, direct political transformations can only occur through migrations, refugee movements, diseases and even death. These ideological messages can be defined in various forms in different examples of the genre. Thus, the national and linguistic codes presented in the films may exceed the current boundaries (Höglund 2017, p.10).

The portrayal of the zombies as a heaving undifferentiated mass of dangerous border-crossers with potential to take over a city if they gain access mirrors and directly calls up metaphors and images used to describe and depict refugee arrivals. The scenes of an infected mass breaching the new border wall directly references (and willfully exaggerates) the usually placeless images of masses of refugees and migrants in transit, at sea or climbing over the top of border fences (Crofts and Vogl 2019, p.35).

As Crofts and Vogl stated, there has been a refugee crisis since 2015. Masses of people, primarily Syrians, are constantly flocking to Syria from Turkey, from Serbia and Croatia to

Hungary and from Hungary to Austria. “Key to the characterization of refugees as zombies is the transgression of borders. Zombies, as deidentified and displaced masses, who collectively disregard and cross borders to find ‘new life’, are a privileged monster in contemporary society” (Crofts and Vogl 2019, p.50).

Many zombie-themed epidemic films are a form of dystopian fiction focusing on the lives of survivors. The subject of these films can often be an outbreak of diseases, engineered viruses, and extraterrestrial transmission. The outbreak is also a common cause of the fear of an apocalypse, and since the mid-twentieth century this has included the “zombie apocalypse” (a mixture of contagion narrative and supernatural terror) (Cardin 2017, p.129).

The security state imposed by capitalism produces individuals who invest in capitalism, prepared for the next outbreak yet epidemics have no end. Vaccinations should be repeated constantly, and people should be willing to get vaccinated. In epidemic-themed zombie films, the resilience of the nuclear family has a central formation. Because the nuclear family is shown as the only element that can restore social and political order. As such, in one of the first shots of *World War Z*, Gerry Lane's daughter asks: “What is martial law?” Gerry Lane replies that “Martial Law is like the rules of a house but those rules in question apply for everyone.” It is emphasized that (mandatory) gender roles in the dominant structure are roles that are inherently constituent. *World War Z* is an example of apocalyptic films that reinforce the idea that when all

forms of civilization have disappeared, survival is possible only through the work of traditional nuclear families: an adult, male-female pair trying to protect children (Jusue 2017, p.9).

## Conclusion

Creatures that dominate a particular culture or period present an unusual perspective on certain fears and anxieties that characterize that historical moment in question. For example, in George Andrew Romero's cult classic *Night of the Living Dead*, the zombie species began to be more evident. The farmhouse, which is a microcosm of American society in the film, is a quarantine area where George Andrew Romero depicts the “sociopolitical history of the era”. In a similar form, *World War Z* and many outbreak-themed zombie films shot afterwards represent a radical transformation of society or a certain kind of “new way of life”: Digitalization and a form of quarantine. In this regard, the Covid-19 pandemic is a convergence or rupture of everyday life in the capitalist order: it is also not surprising that it was created as a “quarantine project”. During the epidemic, the internet and digital technologies have been our only window into the world where we can experience our everyday lives. In early December 2020, despite the interventions, more than 1.5 million people lost their lives in the Covid-19 pandemic and social life was shaken to its core. Boundaries in everyday life, fear of virii and miscommunication have become a way of life in themselves. In this regard, it can be argued that there is a connection between George Andrew



Romero's, *Night of the Living Dead* and *World War Z*. On the other hand, zombies as a metaphor *World War Z* also emphasize the political and economic situation in the United States, demographic changes, the breaking of traditional gender roles, government conspiracies, laboratory-made viruses, and outbreaks.

Another proposition imposed in *World War Z* is that caution should be exercised against foreigners and refugees, and that measures such as closing borders for security purposes should be applied mandatorily. Indeed, most of the people who are safe in the film are very cautious about refugees and are distant from the outside world. Both in the Covid-19 pandemic and *World War Z* the imposed requirement of “social distancing and quarantine” is a consequence of capitalism. Similarly, today many European countries have imposed a similar sanction on refugees fleeing the Syrian Civil War and closed their borders. In *World War Z* cultural codes such as the importance of military authority, the sense of trust in political authority, and the importance of the nuclear family are seen as the only keys to salvation. Therefore, it is also obvious that the rise of the zombie theme in popular culture is a reflection of the urge to make us think about epidemics. As a matter of fact, the capitalist discourse of the 21st century is the heteronormative structure and the structures of the traditional nuclear family.

There are new trending movies in zombie-themed box office movies: such as *Army of the Dead* (2021), *Little Monsters* (2019), *Night Eats the World* (2018). On the other hand, *World War*

Z differs from such films. First of all, *World War Z* differs from such Hollywood blockbusters in the context of the story. Because the story of *World War Z* is based on real life and social structure. As a matter of fact, *World War Z* can be re-evaluated in the context of the epidemic theme in the cinema formed after the Pandemic.

In the new world, where such stories are imagined, a militarized microstate which is formed after the outbreak or after the apocalypse is imposed. Although minorities, refugees, or Eastern and Far Eastern societies are identified as the source of the severe plague that is transforming society in pandemic-themed zombie films, no alternative thought is given any value. Without a regard that whether the infection stems from terrorists from Asia or by the existence of modern state itself, each individual is represented as soldiers standing on guard. While outbreaks have greatly changed the ways of living of the world, those affected by the outbreaks are undergoing an even more dramatic change. In this context, *World War Z* and other outbreak-themed zombie films can be read as a conscious reflection of the deep fears reproduced by the capitalist order.

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## ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> George Melies' *Le manoir du diable* (1896) is considered as the first horror movie. The film uses bats, castles, trolls, ghosts and the Devil, which are known as the elements of Gothic horror.

<sup>2</sup> The American mainstream cinema named "Hollywood", is one of the most ideologically-fueled cinemas due to the close relations it has established with global conglomerates and circles of interest.

<sup>3</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic, or the coronavirus pandemic originated on December 1, 2019 in Wuhan, the capital of the Hubei region of China. Many European countries, especially the US, have blamed China and Asians for the Covid-19 pandemic.

<sup>4</sup> The forerunner of all films of this genre is *The Andromeda Strain* (1971, Robert Wise). The film is based on a novel by Michael Crichton.

<sup>5</sup> The film is about an outbreak of a virus that is transmitted from bats to humans which is transmitted by breathing and contact. The film links this outbreak to the Far East. The epidemic ends only with the discovery of the vaccine. In the film concepts such as antivaxxers, the quarantine project, the role and efforts of governments shed light on our own time.

<sup>6</sup> The first case occurred in Wuhan, China in the last days of 2019. At first it was thought that the disease was pneumonia. Chinese authorities first reported that on December 31, 2019, 41 people in the Chinese city of Wuhan (Pop: 11 million) came down with a pneumonia-like disease. But later it became clear that this disease is not because of a virus that causes pneumonia, rather it is caused by a new virus.

<sup>7</sup> In the narratives of *Resident Evil*, the epidemic in Raccoon City and the subsequent post-apocalyptic world are symbolized. It is explained that the city should be destroyed with nuclear bombs in order to separate the sick from the healthy in quarantine. From the end of the 1990s to the new millennium, zombie narratives tell us how an outbreak led to the collapse of technological modernity and transnational capitalism on a global scale (Lúcio 2020, pp.253-254). For detailed information, see. Ekinci,

Barış Tolga. (2015). "Fears of Society: Zombie Films and an Analysis of Resident Evil Series", *Global Media Journal TR Edition*, 6 (11), pp.220-239.

<sup>8</sup> The activists which organize an attack in the laboratory in order to save the animals in the beginning of *28 Days Later* is a reference to the actions of the ALF (Animal Liberation Front). Nowadays, only memories remain of ALF and their actions, and a small number of known members are imprisoned.

<sup>9</sup> The first episode of the popular TV series, *The Walking Dead* (2010) and the beginning of *28 Days Later* are almost identical.

<sup>10</sup> See a detailed review: Akser, M. (2020) "Küreselleşme Korkusunun Vücut Bulması; Salgın Hastalık Filmleri", *Panorama, Çevrimiçi Yayın*, 3 Mayıs. <https://www.uikpanorama.com/blog/2020/05/04/kuresellesme-korkusunun-vucut-bulmasi-salgin-hastalik-filmleri/>

<sup>11</sup> "Hertzberg, of *The New Yorker*, wondered whether those who visited their local cinemplex concluded that the nation-states that were willing to employ harsh policies were the ones that were best prepared to deal with the zombie apocalypse. Will foreign filmgoers "conclude that the filmmakers (are) saying that Kim Jong-up and Benjamin Netanyahu are the wisest leaders in the world," with Kim a little bit wiser because "he's uncontaminated by humanitarian sentiments," or would potential audiences end up interpreting one of the film's messages to be that "the only thing wrong with the existing wall is that it's not sealed tight enough?" (Ghabra and Hasian 2020, p.6).