

## **The Walking Dead: *Zombie's* Celluloid Community**

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A postmodern novel about zombies, but not the traditional Hollywood variety, *Zombie* by Mike Wilson Reginato, takes place in an unidentified country at an unspecified time.<sup>1</sup> The premise of the novel is the end of the world as witnessed and survived by an agglomeration of children and adolescents in a “plastic” suburb modeled on film images of suburbia in the U.S. Through the perspective of key characters, the novel offers an extreme allegory of the alienation of youth within a global system of manufactured signs. The failure of traditional forms of community creates a dystopia, one founded on and through a virtual and global exchange of images. In “Situating Knowledges: Latin American Readings of Postmodernism,” Laura García-Moreno states that postmodernism renounces the claim to utopian projects and directionality “in favor of indeterminacy and multiplicity.” It transcends “notions of nationalism and the nation” and “highlight[s] hybridity, textuality, and ambivalence” (64). In this essay, I intend to explore how Wilson’s novel erases borders and inserts itself within the complex flow of images of a global market, especially but not exclusively film images. Similar to the

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the characters have anglicized names. Andrea goes by the nickname Andy, Fischer goes by her last name, the character I choose to think of as the main character is James whose “Trekkie” father named him for Capt. James T. Kirk of *Star Trek*, and Frosty is the name another character adopts. On the other hand, Ricardo Martínez in “*Zombie: Los Rolling Stones y la Bomba de Neutrones*” identifies the suburb, La Avellana, in Wilson’s novel with La Dehesa, a suburb of Santiago, Chile. The reference to the pre-cordillera suggests that Chile is a possible setting. “Pareciera ser como que el Apocalipsis ha venido a derribar el muro que en Chile se estableció con claridad desde 1973 y que tan poéticamente ilustraba la escena final de *Machuca*, cuando Infante vuelve a la toma y ve que ya no existe, que se la han llevado muy lejos” (Martínez). Although James’s description of the suburb seems to preclude that its setting is in the U.S., it’s impossible to state for a fact exactly where the story occurs (Wilson 16). The indeterminate nature of setting occurs frequently in fantasy and science fiction works. In the case of Wilson’s novel, it also underscores the de-centering of the postmodern within a global economy where borders between nations disappear or are irrelevant. *Zombie's* adolescents, one could say, don’t live in any “real” world in a geopolitical sense but rather inhabit a virtual reality fashioned through the products of their remembered community.

concept of “virtual reality” as described by Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez in the preface to their collection of stories titled *McOndo*, Wilson’s novel is about the virtual realities that the global market creates and that among adolescent societies, in particular, have supplanted other more traditional bonds of community.

**Postmodernism in Latin America. McOndo’s “cultura bastarda” and virtual reality.**

Jean-François Lyotard defines the postmodern as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (509). Horacio Machín also acknowledges the loss of confidence in these metanarratives, but he goes on to suggest that this does not make representation itself impossible: “Lo que pasa en lo posmoderno es que se ha aprendido...que la representación de la totalidad es imposible y entonces ...Ya no es necesario” (9). The result is that there is a shift away from metanarratives toward limited, partial narratives, narratives that focus on experiences of individuals. As Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez explain in “La presentación del país McOndo,” their preface to the 1996 short story collection *McOndo*, “El gran tema de la identidad latinoamericana (¿quiénes somos?) pareció dejar paso al tema de la identidad personal (¿quién soy?). Los cuentos de *McOndo* se centran en realidades individuales y privadas” (Fuguet and Gómez, Presentación 13).

Whether from Mexico, Argentina, or Chile, the young writers of *McOndo* identify themselves first and foremost as citizens of a postmodern and global world: “escriben en español, pero no se sienten representantes de alguna ideología ni siquiera de sus propios países. Aun así, son intrínsecamente hispanoamericanos. Tienen ese prisma, esa forma de situarse en el mundo” (Fuguet and Gómez 16). They eat at McDonalds, surf the internet, sing the lyrics to songs in English and Spanish, and wear t-shirts with images of Che

Guevara and Buffy the Vampire Slayer. McOndo is no less marvelous, in the sense that Alejo Carpentier suggested, than García-Márquez's magical-real Macondo. "Nuestro país McOndo es más grande, sobrepoblado y lleno de contaminación, con autopistas, metro, TV-Cable y barriadas. En McOndo hay McDonald's, computador[e]s Mac y condominios, amén de hoteles cinco estrellas construidos con dinero lavado y malls gigantescos" (15). According to García-Moreno, postmodernism's "cognitive shift" is associated with the end of "philosophical foundationalism." The subsequent "epistemological uncertainty" leads to the proliferation of legitimate knowledges and a "'softening' of traditional boundaries between high culture, mass culture, and vernacular culture; and with the intensification of cultural crossings between the first and the third world [Yúdice et al.]" (63-4). The consequent "cultura bastarda," as Fuguet and Gómez term it, is the product of neoliberalism, the constant flow of global products and images, and the melting of barriers between the high and the low:

Para nosotros, el Chapulín Colorado, Ricky Martin, Selena, Julio Iglesias y las telenovelas (o culebrones) son tan latinoamericanos como el candombe o el vallenato. . . . Temerle a la cultura bastarda es negar nuestro propio mestizaje. Latinoamérica es el teatro Colón de Buenos Aires y Machu Pic[c]hu, "Siempre en Domingo" y Magneto, Soda Stereo y Verónica Castro, Lucho Gatica, Gardel y Cantinflas, el Festival de Viña y el Festival de Cine de la Habana, es Puig y Cortázar, Onetti y Corín Tellado, la revista *Vuelta* y los tabloides sensacionalistas.

Latinoamérica es, irremediablemente, MTV Latina...es Televisa,  
 es Miami, son las repúblicas bananeras, y Borges y el Comandante  
 Marcos y la CNN en español y el Nata y Mercosur y la deuda  
 externa y, por supuesto, Vargas Llosa. (15)

Many critics within Latin American cultural practice (Yúdice, Brunner, Zavala) speak of an uneasy fit of postmodernism in societies in which temporalities of the modern and pre-modern coexist with the globalization that goes hand in hand with postmodernist discourse (García-Moreno 64). Brunner speaks of the impact of globalization as “an international market of messages [that] ‘penetrates’ the local framework of culture on all sides and in unexpected ways, leading to an implosion of the consumed/ produced/ reproduced meanings and subsequent deficiencies of identity” (41). These messages acquire idiosyncratic and new meanings within different cultural contexts. “What results from this...is a de-centering, a deconstruction, of Western culture...a meaning out of place, taken out of context, a graft onto another culture” (Brunner 41).

Dealing with the situation of hybridity as a fact of life, Beatriz Sarlo contends that products of globalization become the medium through which personal identity constructs itself and is constructed: “Frente a una realidad inestable y fragmentada, en proceso de metamorfosis velocísimas, los objetos son un ancla” (31).<sup>2</sup> Participation in and consumption of global products becomes the one stable basis for individual identity when other structures and bases have lost their effectiveness. “Cuando [ni]...los viejos lazos de comunidad, ni las relaciones modernas de sociedad pueden ofrecer una base de

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<sup>2</sup> Brunner’s metaphor of grafting does not escape the problems of binary opposition. On the other hand, Beatriz Sarlo’s analysis of globalization and its effects recognizes the porous nature of borders and focuses on how the products of globalization permeate cultures on the local stage. Her approach avoids the evocation of colonial imperialism in favor of the concept of hybridity.

identificación ni un fundamento suficiente a los valores, allí está el mercado, un espacio universal y libre... Los objetos son... nuestros íconos porque pueden crear una comunidad imaginaria” (Sarlo 29). Sharing the products of the market creates a virtual community of consumers who “encuentran en los medios una cultura donde cada cual cree identificar sus gustos y deseos . . . este consumo imaginario reforma los modos en que los sectores populares se relacionan con su propia experiencia” (Sarlo 109).

According to Beatriz Sarlo, Hollywood movies and television have been powerful agents in the creation of new imaginary communities within the global market because “[l]os puntos de referencia son universales... no requieren que sus intérpretes estén afincados en ninguna cultura previa o distinta de la del mercado. Así produce una cultura extraterritorial” (20). The screen reflects and constitutes the subject in the postmodern, global situation. Consumers of images imitate and identify with the visual product: “la televisión no puede sino proponer una cultura de espejo, donde todos pueden reconocerse...Mimética y ultrarrealista, la televisión construye a su público para poder reflejarlo, y lo refleja para poder construirlo” (Sarlo 84). According to Sarlo, this visual culture—referring in particular to television—creates communities of individuals who avoid human interaction in favor of participation within a virtual community of shared images: “la televisión promete comunidades imaginarias y en ellas viven quienes hoy son escépticos sobre la posibilidad de fundar o fortalecer otras comunidades” (82). Global products migrate so that individuals don’t have to. They erase borders: “la televisión no reconoce fronteras: allí su fuerza” (Sarlo 102). The world comes into contact via the transmission of images and through the consumption of products. These products offer a

virtual connection within postmodern instability where individuals are defined by their relationship to objects rather than to other individuals.

### **Mike Wilson and *Zombie*: Science Fiction and Movie Memory**

*Zombie* by Mike Wilson is the story of a handful of adolescents who survive what appears to be a nuclear holocaust. The Argentine-U.S. author invites an eclectic response to his novel when his character James speaks of the past in terms of images and plots derived straight from TV and films. Movies are more than a pastime for James.<sup>3</sup> They constitute a version of the past that allows him to put aside what has truly been lost to him. Ceci, his sister, and he keep their parents' room closed off from the rest of the house as a memorial. James rarely breaches the door to his father's study where he has returned the collection of comic books his father had passed on to him as a sign of his son's rite of passage. Once the bombs drop, James no longer returns to memories as much as he relives the plots of his favorite film experiences. *The Goonies*, *E.T.*, *Star Trek*, and *The Lord of the Rings* are the substance and material of his "virtual" past. Not only does he refer to them continually throughout the novel, but these are the "memories" he recounts to Fischer, a young girl whose own past is erased by the repercussive blast of the explosion that ended their world. Fischer regains consciousness in the post-life, the period of the novel, within the realm and time of the survivors. As the only true daughter of the holocaust, Fischer knows that her situation is unique. Her best friend,

Andrea/Andy, tries to trigger Fischer's memories. Without these shared memories, Andy

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<sup>3</sup> Mike Wilson Reginato, like his novel, challenges the imposition of borders. Born in Argentina, Wilson lived a significant part of his life in the U.S., earning his Ph.D. in Romance Studies at Cornell University. He currently holds a position as a professor at the Pontificia Universidad Católica in Chile. At the PUC site online, Wilson's areas of expertise are listed as "[L]a novela gráfica, representaciones de la ciudad post-humana, identidad y espacio, la ciencia ficción del Cono Sur." *Zombie* is his second novel, the first, *El púñil*, was published by Editorial Forja in 2008. Forthcoming is *Rockabilly*, his third novel (Alfaguara 2011).

feels as if a portion of her own memory has been emptied and her life destabilized. Their closeness no longer has a foundation. However, James establishes a new relationship for and with Fischer by supplying virtual memories retrieved from the celluloid history of their childhood. “James no intenta resucitar mi vida de antes para hacer de mí una muerta viviente. No. Él me crea memorias apócrifas, memorias nuevas para que tenga algo que recordar” (45).<sup>4</sup>

One of the film stories James offers Fischer to fill the gap of her own memories is the story of *E.T.* (Dir. Steven Spielberg, 1982). He inserts Fischer into the film narrative, treating the film as if it were a home movie of real events that happened to them rather than to the fictional characters. James tells her that she was present when they discovered the extraterrestrial and recounts how they hid the creature from the military who wanted to experiment on him. “Cierro los ojos y lo escucho adaptar películas...y se transforman en recuerdos míos” (46). These images from “mundos de celuloide” protect Fischer from ghosts that haunt her. They provide connections in a world of chaos and alienation. The choice of *E.T.* evokes the theme of Wilson’s novel, for it allegorizes an extreme situation of alienation as experienced by the adolescents. The extraterrestrial is safe in the middle-class suburb, as long as he can pass. That is, he has to mimic human behavior and blend in with the status quo. What better metaphor for the alienation of youth in this novel and

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<sup>4</sup> The relationship between several characters and the past, as well the connections with trauma and mourning, is a subject that requires a separate article. James and Fischer supplant memories of real events in which they were actors with film memories of which they were spectators. Only towards the end of the novel does Fischer retrieve a memory of her mother (98) and James shares his memory of their first meeting with a dying Andy (115). Frosty remembers, but the memories of the past belong to a previous self. Frosty traces a line of connection only to the messianic doomsday events that marked his grandmother’s childhood and which he assumes in his new identity as his own destiny. As such he sees himself in mythic rather than psychologically individual terms.

what better evocation of suburbia as a fantasy—a consoling fantasy, but a fantasy nonetheless?<sup>5</sup>

The fantasy and science fiction movies James tells Fischer are the fairy tales of his generation. The character does not allude to horror films or the “end of the world” movies.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it’s because James was too young when the bombs came to have seen the doomsday movies which were geared for an older audience. Or perhaps it’s because James chooses to return to the comforting and innocent moments of the past that *Gremlins*, *E. T.*, and *The Goonies* offer rather than those images of horror and destruction—hopeless images—that work as cautionary tales in films that focus on doomsday scenarios. These images have become too real. Another explanation is that those plastic, fabricated experiences of film that James clings to are not unlike the actual life (now lost) that James recalls as part of suburban culture. Living “la felicidad plástica” is the memory his childhood has bequeathed James. The suburb of an unnamed Capital, near a mountain range is no more real than the movies it imitates. “Es de esos vecindarios que simulan los suburbios de las películas norteamericanas; Mc-mansiones de dos o tres pisos, calles con nombres de fantasía, jardines delanteros amplios, niños enfermizos andando en triciclos rojos y mascotas con pedigrí que cagan sobre césped importado” (16).

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<sup>5</sup> James takes refuge in film memory not only to fabricate an imaginary past among him and his friends but also as the filter through which he understands his present. When he witnesses Ceci, his sister, eagerly take the meth crystals Frosty baits her with, he sees her as Golem in *The Lord of the Rings* (Wilson 55). Allusion to Tolkien’s trilogy—which similar to the Star Wars trilogy and other epic accounts—ultimately ends in the triumph of the heroes over the dark forces. Such correlations offer a buffer, an imaginary consolation and hope.

<sup>6</sup> Wilson’s novel refers to the horror genre as well as science fiction and fantasy. The visual culture chosen by the individual characters represents the world as they see it and defines who and how they are. The characters tend to follow, as if their actions and emotions were already scripted, the particular narratives toward which they have gravitated. Through these allusions to film, TV, graphic novels, comics, and music, the reader identifies and recognizes significant aspects of each of the characters.



Mike Wilson's novel fits within a long cinematic history of doomsday scenarios in which the human race faces mass destruction ranging from the cold war nuclear threat to ecological or viral Armageddon. Images such as those in the 1983 *The Day After* (Dir. Nicholas Meyer), which televised simulacra of mushroom clouds in the heart of the Midwest, or the ineluctable and inevitable slow deaths of a small, isolated community in California in *Testament* (Dir. Lynne Littman, 1983) coincide in unique ways with Wilson's novel. A more recent example, *The Road* (Dir. John Hillcoat, 2009) presents a bleak, ash-covered landscape of a dead planet, a landscape similar to Wilson's depiction of "El Pozo," the site of the Capital devastated by the missiles.<sup>7</sup> The film based on the Cormac McCarthy novel of the same name confronts its audience with the stark entropy of society as a father and young son travel on foot across barren landscapes, hiding from marauding bands of cannibals, heading toward the sea, as if life itself were on a doomed return to its place of origins only to expire there at the completion of the full circle.

### **Movie Monsters: Reflections in a Fun-House Mirror.**

The best science fiction is always about the here and now, even as it projects the most incredible and distant future or the most fantastical alternative universe. "Abundaban rumores de que podría ocurrir algo esa noche, pero hacía años que se decían cosas así y no pasaba nada," says James, the central consciousness in Wilson's novel. Even in the face of mass destruction, we seem incapable of living constantly in the grip of fear. As James explains, "habíamos aprendido a vivir con la paranoia, seguir con nuestras rutinas, lidiar con los rumores como una vez se había hecho con el calentamiento

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<sup>7</sup> Díaz Oliva begins his review of *Zombie* with a connection to the scenario of *The Road* (Dir. John Hillcoat, 2009). Although he notes many other film references in the novel, Díaz Oliva contends that Wilson's narrative is more closely connected to graphic novels than to film. While I don't contest the indebtedness of Wilson's vision to the graphic novel, these are only one of several media texts that the novel engages.

global” (65). The use of “se había hecho” with respect to global warming is worth remarking. One threat succumbs to subsequent threats. The abrogation of global warming to a yet more distant past than the fear of the unexplained violence situates the novel in an uncertain future. Could the bombs be a response to the growing incidence of terrorism instead of a throwback to the cold war? Does it matter? The processes involved are similar, the threat as grave, and the destruction as apocalyptic. “El procedimiento ya era rutina: protegerse bajo algún mueble sólido, como una mesa o una cama, evitar los espacios elevados y alejarse de las ventanas. Claro, eran medidas placebo, no servirían de nada” (66). The normalization of fear becomes society’s response: “Estábamos acostumbrados a las alertas” (66).

Films like *On the Beach* (Dir. Stanley Kramer, 1959), *The Day After*, *The Road*, and *Testament* attempt to counteract the anesthesia that living under a constant threat creates by imagining for us the unimaginable. They serve as cautionary tales through a realistic playing out of the worst case scenario. They imagine for us the scenario that we find unimaginable. They posit the task of mourning before deaths have even taken place. They are also about society or human nature as much as they are about global destruction.

However, there is another vein within cinematic culture that Wilson’s novel directly evokes through its very title—the zombie movie. The zombie movie is genealogically as indebted to the monster film as it is to films of the end of the world or to the cold war fear of nuclear annihilation. Only one of the films mentioned in the novel is of this variety—George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (Dir. Romero, 1978)<sup>8</sup>—and it is not James who alludes to it but Frosty, the character in the novel who comes closest to

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<sup>8</sup> Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* was remade by Zack Snyder in 2004. The script of the 2004 remake was written by James Gunn. Credits for the 2004 script do allude to the original screenplay by Romero.

the monstrous (41). Disfigured in an explosion in his meth lab, Frosty has a melted face. At one point in the novel he refers to it as a mask of dead flesh (77), evoking slasher films based on serial killers. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Dir. Tobe Hooper, 1974; remake in 2003, Dir. Marcus Nispel) and *Halloween* (Dir. John Carpenter, 1978)—not to mention *The Silence of the Lambs* (Dir. Jonathan Demme, 1991) et al.—come to mind. Frosty, whose original name we never know, sees himself in terms of Cthulhu, one of the Ancient Ones from stories penned by H. P. Lovecraft. Meth transforms the adolescent into horror (59). Later in the novel, James searches through his father’s old comics and finds one based on the Lovecraft horror stories. Within the graphic novel, James discovers a black crater which evokes the epicenter of the bombed site where the Capital once sprawled. Another page shows a figure in the center of this crater, a figure covered in soot and ash, whose face has melted (80-1). James cannot process the full meaning of the reality that surrounds him. He must filter it through the images and products that once gave texture to his world. The graphic novel—functioning like Sarlo’s screen—takes on the power of prophesy as James sees his present reflected in its illustrations and story. Sarlo’s comments on film images and their power over the imagination are played out in Frosty’s metamorphosis into the monster of his virtual community and in James’s recognition of Frosty’s role in the fragmented society of the only world left to him.

Alluding to *Dawn of the Dead* locates Frosty within the horror tradition and encourages the reader to recall filmic images of the zombie.<sup>9</sup> Conceptually, the

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<sup>9</sup> Although eventually most of the characters become “zombies,” Frosty is most closely linked to a concept of the monstrous. He conforms to several fundamental characteristics that Jeffrey Jerome Cohen sets out in his “Monster Culture (Seven Theses).” In particular, Cohen asserts that the monster is the product of the culture in which it has arisen and manifests in its form a crisis of identification and categorization. It is significant that we never know Frosty’s original name and that the features of his face have also been

adolescents who survive the initial attack are similar to the zombie in that they have, in some way, already died. For example, Fischer fell to the bottom of an empty swimming pool to revive without memories, Frosty survives the explosion of his meth lab, but all the adolescents and children that found themselves in La Avellana at the time of the attack have survived what is apparently the end of the world. “[N]o somos más que un gemido...” says Fischer just before she walks into El Pozo to join the truly dead (Wilson 90). The five years since the initial destruction has been an inverted life, a life in death:

Asumimos que estamos solos, que el mundo se ha acabado y que nosotros somos un error. Pienso que somos zombies. No del tipo que antes se veían en las pantallas del Savoy, pero de una categoría más trágica y patética. Sobrevivimos al fin del mundo. Suena raro decirlo. Se supone que no hay nada que exista más allá del fin del mundo, por eso se llama fin. Persistir en un planeta muerto es algo poco natural... como lo es ser un zombie. (Wilson 16).

In short, to survive the end of life is to be a zombie—an entity whose existence is a contravention of nature itself, an entity that imitates human life but is no longer human.

We might want to explore the significance of Wilson’s choice of Romero’s second film in the director’s zombie trilogy rather than the first movie, *Night of the Living Dead*, or older film versions in which zombies are the monster such as *White Zombie* (Dir. Victor Halperin, 1932) or *I Walked With A Zombie* (Dir. Jacques Tourneur, 1943) as the prototype of the zombie for this novel. As an elaborate metaphor for consumer society, *Dawn of the Dead* coincides with the empty values of the plastic

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erased by the accident in the meth lab. As such, his monstrosity represents the uncertainty of identity within the postmodern condition.

happiness James describes as the nature of suburbia.<sup>10</sup> Just as Romero portrays his zombie shoppers in a sly blend of humor and horror, the walking dead are the sickness at the root of contemporary life where objects have value and humans are automatons trapped by an animal reflex to return to the mall.<sup>11</sup>

In *Zombie*, the post life constructed by the adolescent and child survivors—similar to the microcosm of the postwar in *The Lord of the Flies*—reproduces and perpetuates the same societal ills that existed before the end.<sup>12</sup> The post-Holocaust society the adolescents construct in the suburb includes those who always lived there and the “huérfanos” who found their way to La Avellana and survived. As James recounts the organization of material goods in the aftermath of the attack, the same hierarchy of class reasserts itself:

Al comienzo, durante los primeros meses, no se marcó una  
diferencia entre los vecinos y los que venían de afuera, pero

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<sup>10</sup> Martínez refers to various definitions of zombie in his article on Wilson’s novel. “¿Qué son los zombies? Susan Sontag (1974) nos responde que es el ‘verdadero modelo del hombre tecnocrático’, y Fred Botting en su artículo para *A Companion to Science Fiction* (Seed 2005), agrega que la ‘alienación y la deshumanización parecen ser las condiciones clave’. . . . Creo que fue el cognitivista David Chalmers quien primero se refirió a los zombies filosóficos. De acuerdo con la *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science* de Wiley (2005): ‘Los zombies son seres idénticos a los humanos tanto en su textura física como en su constitución interna y en su comportamiento, aunque carecen de experiencia consciente cualitativa o de estados mentales.’” Martínez concludes that a combination of definitions from Sontag and Chalmers best approximates the idea of zombie in the Wilson novel.

<sup>11</sup> In a scene from the Romero film, several survivors take refuge in a local mall surrounded by the walking dead who continue to ride the escalators and wander the shops. When one of the survivors asks, “What are they doing? Why do they come here?” another responds, “Some kind of instinct, memory, what they used to do. This was an important place in their lives.” The satire is obvious. The statement can certainly be read backwards to remark on the zombie-like mindset of the consumer whose appetites, like Romero’s monsters, are never sated.

<sup>12</sup> The filmed version of William Golding’s novel of the same title, *The Lord of the Flies*, begins with a montage of scenes in the opening credits that range between children in class at public school and stills of the war over Britain. The fact that the novel and film arise from the trauma of post-war Britain strengthens the tie between the allegory of violence in the children’s society on the island and that of society at large. Whether the story is as fantastic as zombies shopping in the U.S. Midwest or as naturalistic as the society created by the children adrift and without adult guidance on a desert island, these stories are about us. They focus on the specific ills that their creators see at the heart of contemporary society. Golding suggests that society is fraught by innate tendencies toward hierarchy and violence.

cuando los alimentos y otras necesidades básicas comenzaron a escasear, la tensión entre ambos grupos se hizo evidente. Hubo un par de incidentes que terminaron de manera violenta. Después de los saqueos, el concilio de La Avellana tomó la decisión de exiliar a los huérfanos, alegando que eran un peligro para la integridad del suburbio. Formaron cuatro campamentos en el bosque y desde entonces se han quedado ahí. . . . Mi hermana se molesta conmigo. Dice que no me debería mezclar con *esa gente sucia*. (Wilson 30)

Similar to *The Lord of the Flies*, Wilson's novel replays, in miniature, the history of human society, including disputes over resources, class divisions, a basic form of government, borders and concepts of territory, as well as violence and crime. The zombie hordes at the shopping center in Romero's film are not different in kind from their former living selves; they are just writ larger.

If we are the zombies in *Dawn of the Dead*, the young protagonists in Wilson's novel stand in for the youth cultures of a global society. *Zombie* is about aimless youths under the spectrum of despair and drugs, youths who live in a plastic, virtual world in which adults are irrelevant or missing. During the launch of the novel at Librería ¿Qué Leo? Patio Bellavista in Santiago, Chile, May 6, 2010, Mike Wilson remarks on the recent appearance of methamphetamines in Latin America.<sup>13</sup> Andy describes the effects of the crystals, using the horror film motif: "Mi percepción había estado invernando, no experimentaba lo que existía en mi entorno, había estado deambulando por la realidad

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<sup>13</sup> The launch of the novel is available online at <http://www.tauzero.org/2010/05/lo-que-viene-zombie-de-mike-wilson/>. It can also be found on *YouTube*. Mike Wilson's blog also has links to a number of reviews and articles on his second novel, *Zombie*. Apparently "Last Citizen" is one of Wilson's avatars. See <http://lastcitizen.blogspot.com/> and <http://lastcitizen3.blogspot.com/>.

como un zombie” (34). Fischer, too, eventually takes the drug. As the snow begins to fall—an ominous evocation of radioactivity fallout as well as the figurative coming of winter or death—Fischer reports her own transformation in similar terms. The snowflakes “[s]e acercan, ahora son insectos blancos, diminutas bestias glaciales. Me cubren la mano izquierda, comienzan a excavar, a deslizarse bajo mi piel, veo cómo avanzan por mi brazo, dejan un rastro, estelas largas de hielo oscuro, como las venas negras de un zombie” (75). The sensation of insects under the skin comes up repeatedly in the novel as a symptom of the drug. Eventually the symptoms of the drug’s influence are undistinguishable from signs of the transformation from human to zombie. Those who have become addicted suffer a bodily and mental deterioration that likens them to the living dead. “Se ven demacrados, pálidos, muchos han perdido dientes, algunos se han arrancado el cabello, todos modelan rasguños en sus rostros y brazos. Sus cuerpos están encorvados, parecen cadáveres, tienen las cuencas negras, los ojos muertos. *Zombies, pienso*” (99-100). But the drug and the addiction hasten a transformation that has already taken place among these characters. One by one the characters descend to the epicenter of the holocaust to join the truly dead. As the last survivor of the post-apocalyptic world makes her way through the ash to the vortex, Fischer recalls a story of a girl who wakes in a mausoleum and sets off to walk home only to find that everyone is gone and the towns and cities are all deserted. Eventually, besieged by a hunger that knows no bounds, she lies down on the asphalt and understands that she should never have abandoned her tomb. Fischer recognizes herself as the zombie girl of the story (120-21).

## The Celluloid Life

The celluloid life is a mode of seeing and of being in the world. Of all the characters in the novel, James is pivotal. The novel begins with his memory of the catastrophe. However, it is Fischer whose perspective brings the novel to a close. She has the final word, but she suggests that James was the only one who perhaps understood “lo que verdaderamente éramos” (122). James is the sole character who walks into the zone of El Pozo without having succumbed to drugs, without seeking his own obliteration, but rather motivated to reach out to the lost ones—Andy and Fischer—who have gone before him. His is a chosen death in full awareness. Ironically he is also the character who, from the beginning, sees the world through the filter of a celluloid reality.<sup>14</sup>

The novel begins with a description, not unlike the beginning of a film script: “Una cuadro tranquila. Medianoche. Se supone que mañana temprano comienzan las clases, sin embargo hay un niño que no duerme” (Wilson 9). The child who is not sleeping is James. The narration in third person underscores the narrative distance between the figurative eye of the camera that observes and the object of the gaze—James, himself. The child climbs down the tree outside his window and rushes to the top of a nearby hill. There he sits, as if he were still in his living room in front of a TV screen, and watches the bombs fall. “El niño admira las líneas que trazan por el cielo, es un descenso parabólico, sincronizado, patriótico. Contempla el horizonte ardiente, la manera en que la temperatura distorsiona el aire. . . . Sonríe” (9-10). The verbs of perceptions—admirar,

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<sup>14</sup> It’s possible that James’s insistence on seeing what is happening around him through film and his use of film narratives to console those around him, such as Fischer, are a conscious acceptance and propagation of a shared fantasy. It recalls perhaps the philosophical and existential position of the priest in Unamuno’s novela, *San Manuel Bueno, mártir*. In Unamuno’s novela, the priest of the title has lost faith in God and in the dogma of the Catholic Church, but he knowingly continues to perform the sacraments for those who depend on him and the faith he represents in spite of his skepticism and the sacrilege this represents.



contemplar, distorcionar—underscore the boy’s role as a spectator of the event. The adjectives to describe the trajectory of the bombs, too, are ones that suggest a contemplation that is devoid of the appropriate reaction—fear or horror. Clearly the child in this episode is a spectator of the event as if the event were not distinct from a film or a TV program.

The nature of this opening segment in the novel is ambiguous. Is it a dream? A line such as “El apagón llega con puntualidad” gives us the eerie sensation of precognition. Later we will realize that the alerts have announced that a possible attack will occur around midnight. The mode of narration likens the episode to a film that is being watched rather than an event that is being observed. At the center of the novel—one could say the “epicenter” of the story—is a retelling of the initial episode, this time without the distancing of the cinematic mode. However, in this case, it is clearly identified as a dream. James narrates in the first person the events of that evening beginning with his parents’ departure. Ironically, the parents are on their way to see a movie. “Me puse a ver tele, estaban dando *Gremlins*” (66). The relationship between the character and the event is mediated through the specular metaphor of film. Suddenly, the dream shifts from James watching the television to James, on the top of the hill, waiting for the bombs to fall: “estoy en la colina sentado sobre la roca blanca, esperando la llegada del Holocausto” (66). From one spectacle, James passes to another. The scene viewed from the top of the hill plays out as if it were on another screen, one of monstrous proportions.

A trailer for the novel also foregrounds the metaphor of film and visualization. It begins with a panoramic sweep over a hillside to an aerial view of a valley with houses

all set out, one more or less like the another.<sup>15</sup> Bright lights streak across the landscape, and the screen goes white. Then dark spots sizzle as if the tape of an 8mm film were melting. This happens so fast that it's almost invisible. An eye fills the screen. This last image is taken directly from the cover of the Alfaguara Chile edition of the novel. One can see images of the previous shots of the valley and houses replaying in the young girl's eye as if it were a camera lens or the eye of a projector. The girl's eye becomes, for the viewer of the trailer, another screen. Fischer describes the entity at the epicenter of El Pozo in similar terms:

Sus pupilas muertas proyectan imágenes que penetran mis ojos y rebotan en mi cráneo. Las secuencias parpadean en mi mente como una película deteriorada y tiritona. Veo imágenes del Holocausto, aterrantes y sublimes, siniestramente bellas en sus actos destructivos.” (98)

According to Ricardo Martínez, the post-apocalyptic world these characters have inherited from their parents is a “mundo espectacularizado de la ficción de la literatura, el cine y los cómics.” This is never more apparent than toward the end of the novel when James enters the site of the devastation but imagines himself instead as a diminutive creature in the graphic version of the H. P. Lovecraft story. The “real” world dissolves around him. “Disuelve el suburbio, tumba el bosque y transgrede el límite de El Pozo. . . . Soy un punto diminuto en la viñeta debajo del escritorio de papá, un naufrago aislado en un universo de hollín negro” (Wilson 117). Just as Fischer sees herself as the “niña

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<sup>15</sup> The trailer is available on youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eL9DnaDBo5g>.

zombie” from a story James has told her, James is absorbed into one of the comics stored in his father’s study.

### **Ashes and Untied Shoestrings**

It’s impossible to read *Zombie* without thinking of the legacy of images from the historical record. Among these I would cite nuclear tests in New Mexico and Nevada—mushroom clouds—as well as footage of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima. James describes the detonation of the last missile as a brilliance that illuminates the night “como si fuese el mediodía, un día blanco y enceguedor” (117). The cold-war images of nuclear attack accrue only to the first event that initiates the narrative and the final event that closes it. Between the detonation of the first bombs and that of the last one, the survivors carry on in their zombie-like existence. The imagery surrounding the post-death existences of the adolescents and children arises not only from film and graphic novels. One can trace the imagery to the historical record of the death camps of Nazi Germany and the genocide of that historical Holocaust. The cadaverous aspect of those who disappear in El Pozo recall newsreel and still photo depictions of the skeletal survivors of Auschwitz and Dachau. The ash-covered landscape—“Solamente ceniza negra, apocalíptica y muerta” (88)—metonymically evokes the evidence of gas chambers, ovens, and chimneys. Just as the work of death camps was death, the ash that covers the zone of destruction are the bodies of the dead, “. . .los restos pulverizados de la Capital . . . sus habitantes cremados y estructuras incineradas” (108). When the survivors can no longer bear living the trauma of mass destruction, existing as “memento mori” for the dead, they remove their shoes, leaving the laces untied, and step over the line between the woods and into El Pozo. “Vi los huesos carbonizados de mis padres, extremidades

asomándose entre las cenizas, el anillo de mi madre incrustado en una garra negra, los dientes calavéricos estirándose en una sonrisa oscura” (34). With reverence and awe, they walk upon the dead. “Me pregunto de quién será el hollín que me mancha los pies” (108). The shoes left behind by those who disappear remind us, too, of the objects gathered from the concentration camp prisoners as they, like their objects, were sorted and channeled through the machinery of the final solution.

These images of a world incinerated and of the remains of the dead (the ash, the abandoned shoes) participate in a global exchange and flow of images and narratives that include, but are not limited to, the Holocaust of Nazi Germany. They also evoke a history of violence within Latin America. Testimony of state sponsored terrorism is no less pertinent to the narrative in Wilson’s novel than stories of the Holocaust of WWII. These images penetrate the “local framework of culture” and acquire idiosyncratic meanings as they combine with those from the historical record of Latin America (Brunner 41). On the local level, the abandoned shoes trigger other associations for the reader of Wilson’s novel. “Como acto final, colgaron las zapatillas de Ana de los cables telefónicos que corren sobre la calle. Líneas muertas, sin señal... ahora exhiben seis pares” (37). One can’t help but recall the photographic evidence and the testimony of survivors of the 1968 massacre in Mexico City as recorded by Elena Poniatowska in *La noche de Tlatelolco*. Piles of abandoned shoes in the muddy Plaza de las Tres Culturas metonymically stand in as evidence of lost generation (201, 212-13).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The student movement in Mexico arose in the 1960s. Oct 2, 1968 the government opened fire on students, civilians, and bystanders in the Plaza of the Three Cultures (Tlatelolco) and killing many of those peacefully assembled. Poniatowska’s testimonial documents the rise of the movement and the massacre through eyewitness accounts. “Quizá la visión más sobrecogedora fue la de numerosos zapatos ensangrentados que se desparramaban en el área, como mudos testigos de la desaparición de sus dueños” (Poniatowska 201).

Evoking more recent historical events in Latin America, Wilson's narrative refers to the adolescents (Emma, Ana) who are swallowed up by the ashen pit that is El Pozo as "disappeared." This particular word "disappeared" is indelibly linked to victims of political dictatorships, specifically those of the Southern Cone in the late 70s and early 80s, who were kidnapped, tortured, and killed.<sup>17</sup> What is remarkable in the narrative is the connection to the task of mourning that it suggests through this imagery. In addition, the novel inserts the historical record of Latin America within the global framework. As such, it adds these events to the flow of images that we all share and makes these stories our stories.

After the Holocaust, in post-World War II Europe, the attempt to recover and document, through historical investigation and testimonies, the fate of the victims of Hitler's policies of extermination resists the anonymity of mass murder and the obliteration of historical and individual memory. A similar task has and is being carried out in countries such as Chile and Argentina, where families try to recover the remains and to learn the fate of those who fell victim to the dictatorships of the late twentieth century. In Wilson's novel, the shoes that remain behind are more than evidence of death. In contrast to the historical record, the novel affords us a way to initiate, if not complete, the process of mourning. The victims of the annihilation of the world are individuals whose identity is known. The shoes are not generic markers. Each pair is described as particular to the person who wore them:

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<sup>17</sup> References to the Dirty War of Argentina, the disappearances under Pinochet in Chile are certainly as appropriate as those to the Final Solution in Germany. Other political references can be inferred in the novel. For example, in the theme of the zombie, one can see an allusion to Papa Doc in Haiti and Trujillo in the Dominican Republic.

Se aferra a un par de zapatillas blancas, las acaricia distraídamente  
como si fuesen un par de conejitos mansos.

--¿Sabes de quién son?

Extiende el índice y traza cuatro letras en la ceniza. C E C I.

(88-9)

Songs, brand name products, television, films, graphic novels, as well as images from the historical record function as intertexts within Wilson's novel. Frosty sings the lyrics of "Paint It Black" as he attacks Andy. The disappeared are recognized by the brand of shoe they leave behind. Gonzalo Navajas reminds us that literature, film, and music become objects within the flow of products, and as such the distinction between high and low culture becomes irrelevant. "La obra aparece ahora como un objeto de consumo rápido y no especialmente singularizado dentro del mercado de innumerables objetos que son fácilmente accesibles a todo el mundo" (27). The post-apocalyptic world of *Zombie* is constructed as an accumulation of objects that have lost their place in the flow of capital and as such have lost much of their original significance. In the minimal world of the survivors, these products take on idiosyncratic meanings. The adolescent characters cling to the virtual community based on the products they used to consume and still remember instead of building a community on their new experiences and the memory of their own experiences and of their loved ones. The fabricated "virtual" memories of a dead culture colonize their imaginations, become their memories, and construct their identities. Just as in the case of George Romero's mall overrun by zombies, the products that shape the culture of these adolescents are the detritus of a dead world. They no longer exist within a flow of a constantly changing market. They also

intrude between these survivors and the memory of their own dead and the process of mourning these require.

In the end, the story affords us some consolation. Like the zombie girl in the story Fischer remembers, these characters return to the grave. Figuratively, one can see this not as defeat or despair but as the recognition of the imperative to complete the task of mourning. As James, Andy, and Fischer follow the disappeared into the zone of ash, they recover their own individuality and a connection that transcends the alienation that they have lived all their lives and which is more blatantly obvious in the aftermath of global destruction. James cradles Andy as she dies and shares with her a memory that she thought was forever lost to her. The amnesiac Fischer also recovers a memory of her mother. James follows his loved ones to certain death, not because he chooses death but rather because he chooses to be connected to another human being rather than live like a zombie in a celluloid world.

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