Zombie Nation
21st century and its not so hidden fear of epidemics

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You might not have noticed, but zombies have changed recently. In their Haitian origin, zombies are understood as undead and non-conscious human beings, which were turned into this state by priests of the vodun. They have no will of their own anymore and are said to have been used for hard work in farming and for other purposes.\(^1\) In Europe, the closest concept to zombies would be revenants, dead and mostly buried people, who cannot find peace as something brings them to anger. They also have parallels with vampires, but this would lead too far into the pandaemonium of historic concepts.

Recently, the meaning of the term “zombie” turned into something else. In 1995, the story of a haemorrhagic fever that struck an American small-town, told in Wolfgang Petersen’s movie “Outbreak”, tried its best to appear as realistic as possible. In the following years, cinematic movies, TV-shows as well as the uprising streaming-programmes, online- and computer-games and boardgames containing the zombie-theme became quite common. Why is “Outbreak” to be mentioned here? Because – and here lies the change – zombies became infectious. The undead of the vodun could not transmit their state, and so couldn’t the revenants of old Europe (again, vampires left alone). “Outbreak” contains no zombies yet, but it marks a new stage of dealing with a creeping upcoming fear in an increasingly globalized world. It mirrors the growing consciousness of new threats to come. In the following years, the unsettling fear of “something outside there to come” got mixed with the picture of the zombie.\(^2\) In the 14\(^{th}\) century, Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio described the plague in Florence, and how the victims’ bodies rotted in the streets: “And not few were, who by day or night died in the public streets; ... so that one, who would walk by, especially in the morning, could have seen a countless number of bodies ...\(^3\) While the horror of the 14\(^{th}\) century consisted in the piles of the deceased in the streets, ‘plague 2.0’ at the beginning of the 21\(^{st}\) century is fueled by the imagination that the literally incarnated epidemic would follow the living in slow, shuffling but unstoppable steps. And, not to forget, turn humanity into an apocalyptic mob, unconscious, dull and due to its lack of intelligence, doomed to become extinct. Societies worldwide participate in broadcast and streaming-programmes such as “The Walking Dead”\(^4\) or even “Game of Thrones”.\(^5\) The latter shows even two types of zombies: One type, the army of the night king, created by magic, the other, consisting of the carriers of greyscale, a disease which turns patients progressively to malevolent zombie-like creatures.

Behind the nerdy concept of all the zombies that recently overran homes worldwide stands the mentioned and not so hidden fear of a great epidemic outbreak. The concepts which can be found when dissecting the ‘zombies 2.0’ are interesting: How imagines world’s society at the beginning of the 21\(^{st}\) century the dealings with an epidemic of this scale? Also, what does society expect? In “I am Legend”, the trigger for the zombie-apocalypse, which killed 5.4 billion people, is a new vaccine against cancer, which mutated and turned humans into zombies. Left all alone in New York, virologist doctor Robert
Neville is doing research to find a cure - spoiler: He dies but finds one. In “Warm Bodies”, zombies progressively loose their human character, but until a certain stage can be healed – spoiler: in a non-pharmacological way. In “World War Z”, the zombies and their virus - spoiler - are finally tricked: It is found that they only infect healthy humans. By infecting mankind with another infection, which is curable and serves as a temporary shield, further infections are avoided. The youngest example here to mention is Jim Jarmusch’s “The Dead Don’t Die”, where ‘zombieism’ is rather a cipher for the apathetic and indifferent state of societies facing global changes like climate change, wars, species extinction etc.6 Still - spoiler- the inhabitants of the calm and friendly small-town all find their end by zombies, unbelievingly and until the end kind of indifferently.

Within all these portrayals lies criticism towards modern science and medicine as well as warnings about e. g. worldwide travelling or climate change. The zombie genre transports great scepticism about modern medicine: Zombies are no longer human beings, no patients, stricken by an illness, instead they turn into evil and disgusting plague-material, worth not a second of thought about a cure. They cannot be therapied and turned into humans again, therefore they must be destroyed. And if they can turned into humans again - in the given example of “Warm Bodies” - the cure is not a pharmaceutical product or vaccine. Within this lies a deep doubt on modern medicine.

So, what about all this? 21st century pop-culture shows that there is something going on: Fear of ‘epidemic X’, the ‘Great Plague 2.0’, the apocalypse, but it is wrapped in nerdy presentations, if even accompanied by bitter criticism towards modern medicine and society. The doubts, which build the core of zombie- and also environmental thrillers (such as e. g. “The Day After Tomorrow”7) can be distilled into the questions “Can medicine save us all?”, “Will we have to change our behaviour and how?” and “How long will it take to find vaccines or cures, if a new epidemic strikes the world?” In his book “Unprepared”, U. S. -sociologist Andrew Lakoff addresses the issue of global health in a time of emergency.8 The great Ebola-outbreak in 2014 taught disturbing facts: Where most of the people felt safe, knowing that they live in the post-Koch microbiological era, Ebola showed, how long it takes to provide e. g. vaccines which have passed through the required stages of testing and which are available in great amounts.

Are zombies and Ebola a too fearful and too catchy linkage to evolve thoughts about 21st centuries’ attitude towards great epidemics? Maybe - but, at least, also the U. S. - American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) share this approach: On the institution’s website, a section called “Zombie Preparedness“ provides information about how to arrange things for an upcoming potential catastrophe.9 Again, the zombie-apocalypse stands for the unleashing of ‘epidemic X’.

Epidemics of the 21st century are therefore the biggest cliffhanger at the moment: When will they strike? Will we be prepared? In an odd and semi-conscious way, just as Jarmusch depicts it in his recent work, society doubts its dealings, its institutions, its beliefs in medicine and pharmacy and senses - or yet fears – ‘something’ upcoming.
2 Other works to be named would be Danny Boyle’s “28 Days Later” (UK 2002), Paul W. S. Anderson’s “Resident Evil”-Series (D/UK/FRA, from 2002), Richard Matheson’s “I am Legend” (USA 2007), which depicts a worldwide zombie-pandemic, or Jonathan Levine’s “Warm Bodies” (USA 2013), which, by the way, is one of the few zombie-movies in which zombies remain patients and the thought of a healing instead of total destruction of the “biologic mass” lingers throughout the plot. Furthermore Mark Foster’s „World War Z“ (USA 2013), in which also a worldwide pandemic is going on.
5 Game of Thrones, 8 seasons, production: David BENIOFF/Daniel Brett WEISS (USA 2011-19).
6 Jim Jarmusch, „The Dead Don’t Die“ (USA 2019).
7 Roland Emmerich, „The Day After Tomorrow“ (USA 2004).