

***The Rezort* (2015): Zombies, Refugees and B Protocols** ***The Rezort* (2015) : zombies, réfugiés et protocoles B**

Emilio Audissino

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Résumé de l'article

The Rezort (Steve Barker, 2015) raconte l'histoire d'un Royaume-Uni post-apocalypse zombie dans lequel les spécimens restants de la population zombie sont utilisés comme attractions au « Rezort », une île de loisirs sur laquelle les humains peuvent faire une expérience de type safari sur le thème des zombies, incluant des tirs impitoyables sur des morts-vivants. Le récit apparemment convenu s'accompagne d'un commentaire social ambitieux. Le film relie directement les zombies – et leur traitement, de l'ordre de l'exploitation et de la persécution – aux réfugiés, reflétant les inquiétudes de l'opinion publique britannique concernant la crise migratoire au moment de sa production. L'article propose une analyse textuelle inspirée des quatre niveaux de signification (référentiel, explicite, implicite, symptomatique) décrits dans *Making Meaning* (1989) de David Bordwell. La dynamique des regards qui se croisent est analysée comme des indices textuels pour la création du sens explicite (les zombies sont aussi des personnes), et le tournant narratif et les références à l'holocauste sont interprétés comme des indices du sens implicite (la crise des réfugiés est similaire à d'autres persécutions historiques). Enfin, les indices du film sont interprétés comme des symptômes de l'imminent Brexit, dont le référendum aurait lieu l'année suivant la sortie du film.

The Rezort (2015): Zombies, Refugees and B Protocols

Emilio Audissino
Linnaeus University (Sweden)

ABSTRACT

The Rezort (Steve Barker, 2015) tells the story of a post-zombie-apocalypse U.K. in which the remaining specimens of the zombie population are employed as attractions at “The Rezort,” a leisure island on which humans can have zombie-theme safari experiences, including remorseless shooting of the undead. The apparently formulaic narrative comes with an ambitious social commentary. The film directly links zombies, and their exploitative and persecutory treatment, to refugees, reflecting the worries of public opinion in the U.K. around the migration crisis at the time of its production. The article offers textual analysis inspired by the four levels of meaning (referential, explicit, implicit, symptomatic) found in David Bordwell’s *Making Meaning* (1989). The eye-match dynamics are analyzed as textual cues for the creation of the explicit meaning (zombies are people too), and the narrative turning point and holocaust references are interpreted as cues to the implicit meaning (the refugee crisis is like previous persecutions in history). Finally, cues in the film are interpreted as symptoms of the impending Brexit, the referendum for which would take place the year after the film’s release.

In the following pages, I conduct textual analysis of the Steve Barker film *The Rezort* (2015). My methodological approach is driven by the tenets of neo-formalism and cognitive film theory.¹ As such, the types of analytical operations I conduct are not original per se, because the intention here is not to offer methodological innovations in film analysis. The scope of the article is two-fold. First, such already-tested methodologies are applied to a European zombie film that has not been studied yet, but which offers intriguing cues for a deeper interpretation, one that reveals a set of meanings highly relevant to today’s debate around migration in Europe.

The article thus aims to provide a novel contribution to the literature on zombies and the socio-political metaphors they incarnate by examining an exemplar that has so far been overlooked. The article's approach is likely to appeal to those interested in the zombie-film genre. Second, the article intersects analysis of the narrative and stylistic levels with interpretation of the thematic level, and in this respect the aim is to show how neo-formalism is not necessarily an approach solely engrossed in the "ars gratia artis" formalistic/aesthetic aspects of cinema but one that is capable of investigating ideological underpinnings as well—despite some misconstrued claims to the contrary.² This latter angle might appeal to those interested in practical demonstrations of film analysis within formal/stylistic methodologies.

A British co-production with Belgium and Spain, *The Rezort* features a rather standard zombie narrative, based on the premise of a viral epidemic, characterized by "fight or flight" and shoot-out storytelling dynamics and formally structured around the "body count" device and splatter/gore set pieces typical of most modern and contemporary horror cinema.³ At the time of its release, one reviewer wrote: "*The Rezort* isn't bad per se, but there's literally nothing to help distinguish it from other like-minded projects. Once the premise has been made clear and the zombies get loose, it is clear that you've seen this movie a thousand times" (Lipsett 2016). The film had only limited distribution: a DVD edition, a release on some national Netflix catalogues (Italy, for example) and appearances in specialized festival circuits (the Edinburgh International Film Festival, Grimmfest International Festival of Fantastic Film and the Toronto After Dark Film Festival). The film is not inaccessible and unattainable, but it was not a box-office hit, nor was it rewarded with praise and accolades from film critics. This might prompt the question as to why one should devote scholarly effort to a film of limited circulation, deemed unoriginal by the critics and not popular with audiences. The answer is that the film's point of interest is how it orchestrates the workings of the narrative, stylistic and thematic levels to offer a topical and provocative socio-political commentary. The film manages to transcend its formulaic plot to offer a more nuanced look at the zombie condition and, more importantly, to top off the narrative with a finale that carries a powerful

“message,” as noted by another reviewer: “*The Rezort* would be nothing without its cultural commentary... The issues pressed by *The Rezort* in relation to activism, social justice and morality are powerful and necessary for all audiences to experience” (Lauer 2017, 24–25). Specifically, the film connects the refugee figure with the zombie figure, presenting strong traces on its thematic level of a very topical issue in British society at the time of production: the European refugee crisis and EU-assigned quotas.

The physical body of the zombie typically collects all sorts of dirt, gore and human tissue, which rub off on it from the different places it has been and the contacts it has had—emerging from the soil of a graveyard; shuffling through the muddy countryside; rapaciously feasting on the entrails of some unlucky mortal. Similarly, the symbolic body of the zombie has accrued, along with its history, a variety of connotations that has rubbed off from the diverse socio-cultural anxieties of the production and reception contexts—racial prejudices, colonial remorse, Cold-War red scare, atomic bomb paranoia, depersonalizing mass consumerism, AIDS/Ebola/SARS/COVID-19 epidemics, techno/scientific hubris, the demise of neo-liberalism, etc.⁴ The specific monster that appears in the literature or the arts of a historical period is typically the mirror of that specific epoch. Monsters are “meaning machines” (Halberstam 1995, 21) and consequently horror films can be a telling barometer of the society that produced them. In *The Rezort*, the zombie figure becomes a metaphor of British anxieties and fears in the mid-2010s.

This by-product of meaning, this mirroring of the fears and drives of a society through elements in a narrative, has been called by David Bordwell, after Louis Althusser, “symptomatic meaning” (Bordwell 1989, 8–9). Bordwell categorizes four types of meaning that can be found in film. The first two can be seen as belonging to the denotative first order of signification and are called “referential meaning” (we recognize elements from the real world and from the historical context to which the film’s fictional setting refers, as well as the socio-cultural context at the time of the film’s production) and “explicit meaning” (we comprehend the characters’ feelings, motivations and desires, the cause/effect chain connecting the events, the correct temporal order and the obvious “message” produced by the film). While these two involve “comprehension,” the latter

two have more to do with “interpretation”: they can be ascribed to the connotative second order of signification, are less evident, and require interpretive effort. They are called the “implicit meaning” (the “message” or “teaching” that the narration deliberately and consciously intends to deliver) and the “symptomatic meaning.” This latter is the level of meaning which requires the strongest effort of interpretation because it is about unearthing in the text the “symptoms” of the ideology of the society which generated the film. Being also an ideological product of its time, a film reflects, often not deliberately and in a not fully aware manner, the socio-cultural climate of its time. While implicit meanings are purposely created by filmmakers, symptomatic meanings are the spontaneous emergence of traces of the ideological discourses that circulated in the context of production, much like the spontaneous emergence of symptoms of one underlying disease. Through an analysis of the narrative and stylistic levels, I interpret the film’s themes by applying these four categories of meaning. When assessing the symptomatic meaning, I submit that one can detect symptoms that prefigure the impending Brexit, which would be triggered by a referendum a year following the film’s release.

Referential Meaning: *Jurassic Park* and *Westworld with Zombies*, in England

Set in the U.K. in contemporary times, the film opens with a montage of newscasts which provides us with background information. We recognize the geographical setting thanks to the views of London and to the accents of the newscaster and interviewees. The montage gives us the information we need to reconstruct the story world. Seven years earlier the world saw a massive pandemic of the Chromosyndrome-A virus that first killed people and then caused them to rise again as undead. The death toll reached two billion casualties. The English setting and the viral infection are, at this point, reminiscent of *28 Days After* (Danny Boyle, 2002)—including running zombies rather than the classic shuffling Romero types. Humanity has since managed to smother the infection and recover civilization, even by means of the ruthlessly blunt implementation of the “Brimstone Protocol,” which consisted of burning to the ground the most infected areas, regardless of any potential collateral damage.

The opening newscast montage centres on a newsflash which reports an alarming accident that happened in a luxury theme park called The Rezort.⁵ Taking advantage of the remnant undead from the “zombie war” that had been confined to a secluded island, a shrewd entrepreneur, Valerie Wilton, bought said island and opened a safari park-cum-luxury resort. There, humans could shoot down the rotting monsters, for fun but also to release their anger for the past zombification of a dear one, thus processing the loss through random retaliation. At this point, the film clearly presents itself as a variation on *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993, adapted from the Michael Crichton novel of the same name)—a safari experience displaying a collection of “monsters” gathered on a remote island—and *Westworld* (Michael Crichton, 1973)—a park in which people pay to let their violent impulses loose and guiltlessly abuse or kill as many lifelike robots as they wish. As in both these Michael Crichton stories here referenced, the security systems of the hyper-technological theme park eventually fail and the attractions turn against the visitors. Indeed at the end of the film zombies have broken loose on The Rezort compound and the Brimstone Protocol has to be launched once again to destroy any form of life on the island. At the end of the opening montage, a young woman (seemingly a left-wing activist) criticizes the irresponsible deployment of such a mass-murder procedure, which is instead defended by a (right-wing?) man.

The narration backs up to ten days earlier, focusing on the personal story of Melanie. From the plane of the general audience provided by the newscast montage—which is rendered even more global by the presence of multi-language clips from newscasts from all over the world—the narration then moves to the private plane. We learn that Melanie lost her father during the “zombie war”—and possibly all her relatives. She has long been in therapy to cope with the trauma. During one of the sessions, she is given a leaflet about The Rezort; some, apparently, found therapeutic solace in that form of shoot-out vendetta. Eventually, but reluctantly, she decides to give it a try, and travels to the island with her fiancé Lewis. Melanie will get caught in the disastrous breakdown of the security systems and, with another six people, she will have to fight for her life and find a way to leave the island before the Brimstone Protocol hits the place.

Explicit Meaning: Sympathy for the Zombie

Has Melanie managed to fulfil her therapeutic vengeance by spending time in *The Rezort*? Not quite. Of her six-person party, she is the only one who never shoots down a single zombie. The protagonist of the narrative, she is also the vantage point from which we viewers experience events and through which our emotional response to the undead is built and then gradually modified. In film, empathy (or lack thereof) between characters and viewers can be powerfully shaped out of visual cues and dialogue lines, and ranges from “recognition” (viewers identify a character as an agent in the narrative, unlike the anonymous extras in the background), to “alignment” (viewers are placed in a position from which they can share the characters’ point of view, optical and/or emotional, and understand their motivations and drives, thus getting attached to them and developing a curiosity for the outcome of their quest), to “allegiance” (through character introspection, we are led to share their moral values and, potentially, root for their success) (Smith 2022, 81–85).⁶ Melanie is presented from the outset as the principal character. After the opening newscast montage, we cut by contrast to Melanie, sitting alone in a meeting space in the aftermath (we understand) of a group therapy session: we start to *recognize* her as the leading character. Then, we are given access not only to her optical viewpoint (we read *The Rezort* leaflet as she reads it) but also to her inner anguish (we are shown that she is in therapy; she suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; she is struggling to move on after the loss of her beloved father): we are *aligned* with her and her feelings. As the narrative progresses, we are also prompted to build an *allegiance* with her, as she increasingly proves to be the most reliable, unselfish and sympathetic person of the group: she is the only one who notices the refugee girl in the waiting room and warmly smiles at her; when one of the group members is discovered to be the unintentional perpetrator of the security-system sabotage, she controls her anger and does not take impulsive retaliation but says, “we are not gonna leave you behind.” The alignment (we perceive through her) and the allegiance (we root for her) that the narration establishes between us as viewers and Melanie is the means through which our own view of the zombies is, vicariously, gradually transformed as Melanie transforms hers.

One of the most powerful devices for providing access to a character's inner life and thus for creating an empathetic bond between them and the viewer is to show their eyes, specifically in a close-up shot.⁷ The centrality of the eyes as gateways of interpersonal connections has a well-documented history in Western culture. The eyes are the "window of the soul," it is said; for the Christian world "The light of the body is the eye" (Matthew 6:22 [King James Bible]); for the Pagan world, in Cicero's words, "Ut imago est animi vultus, sic indices oculi" [as the face is the image of the soul, so the eyes are its interpreters] (*Orator*, XVIII). Eye contact is indeed a privileged device to create a connection between two characters, or between one leading character (acting as the viewer's proxy) and some other character in the narrative, or even between one character and us, the film viewers, when the direction of the character's eyes is such that it approaches or directly establishes a straight gaze into the camera. Melanie's empathetic understanding of the zombies grows out of her encounters with the zombies' eyes.

On The Rezort island, the first step for any new group of guests is to take a training session at the shooting range, firing at cardboard targets on which a stylized caricature of a zombie is printed. The purpose of the training session, more than to familiarize guests with guns, is to psychologically condition them into seeing zombies as mere targets, not as (former) human beings and (somewhat) living creatures. The aim is to remove any residual empathy one might have. Indeed, Melanie fires her gun at the cardboard zombie and enjoys it—"It's actually pretty cool!" she comments. To reinforce the conditioning process, during the inaugural party the CEO, Valerie Wilton, welcomes the new batch of guests with a speech aimed at catering to the lower instincts: "Why are you here?" she rhetorically asks, and the bystanders accordingly reply with The Rezort's battle cry, "Vengeance, baby, vengeance!" Then, a female zombie is brought onstage, in chains, to be displayed like prey or a trophy. People react with applause and taunts. This second step of the conditioning is based on the presentation of the zombie as an animal to shoot at during the safari-like expeditions and also to stress the zombies' responsibility for the death of two billion people. Loud music and fireworks open the party, with the guests enthusiastically cheering: their conditioning is complete. Two characters seem

to be at odds with the celebrations, though: Melanie and the female zombie. Both look around, disoriented and apprehensive; they feel out of place, and this shared discomfort seems to connect them.

The next day, Melanie happens to see two security officers dragging that same female zombie back to her cage. The zombie turns her head to Melanie, and eye contact is established. For a few seconds, the two women look into each other's eyes, and Melanie (and the viewer) can glimpse a glint of despair in the zombie's eyes, like a silent cry for help. Moments later, safari cars take the guests from the residential section to the hunting grounds. As she leaves the gates, Melanie looks to her side from the car window. Her eyes, again, meet those of the female zombie, locked in her cage, like an animal in a zoo. The zombie's eyes betray a profound sadness. The group arrives at a hilltop outpost looking down on a valley crawling with zombies: this is the site for long-range shooting. Melanie gets ready to hit her first target. She points the viewfinder and takes aim at a female. Melanie hesitates to pull the trigger. Suddenly, the zombie raises her eyes, in an optical point-of-view shot that makes the zombie's eyes connect with Melanie's but also with ours. Just as the previous female zombie was made to emerge from the unspecified mass by means of eye contact, here the narration makes another zombie "recognizable" from the indistinct multitude through the same device. And both are female, thus making the empathetic connection even stronger: the chained zombie or the safari-target zombie could have been Melanie. She lowers the rifle, unable to press the trigger: "She looked at me," she explains to Lewis.

If the eye-contact strategy does not suffice, the narration strengthens our alignment/allegiance with Melanie through dialogue as well. In a conversation with another visitor, Sadie—who is later revealed to be an activist for the rights of the undead—Melanie's inner conflicts are fully laid out. After correctly guessing that Melanie is there to pursue a form of therapy, Sadie sarcastically comments, "Kill to get well," to which Melanie responds with an embarrassed smile. Sadie continues, "They are just us, you know?" and from Melanie's previous interactions with the undead we are led to think that she basically agrees. But she replies, "Still, I hate them," and tells Sadie that her beloved father—"he was a good man, a kind man"—was infected and that she saw him turn into a monster.

Then Melanie asks: “Where do you think it goes? When they come back... That goodness in people. What do you think happens to it?” Sadie replies: “Maybe it doesn’t go anywhere. Or maybe... I don’t know... It lives on in you.” Melanie’s question reveals her concern: these “things” used to be people; what if they still are, somehow? Maybe the goodness is not completely gone. Either way, Sadie’s answer confirms Melanie’s position on the issue: if the goodness is still there, in some measure and in some way, it is wrong to use zombies as shooting targets; but even if it is not still there, the goodness has to live on *in us*, and shooting at them as an act of random vengeance is not a sign of goodness; rather, it would make human behaviour actually similar to the mindless violence of the zombies. Either way, killing zombies for fun is ethically wrong.

This is openly acknowledged in the last act, when Melanie confronts Valerie, the CEO, after finding out the vile secret behind The Rezort’s operations: “I’m not one of them,” Valerie reassures Melanie, to which Melanie replies, “You’re an animal... You are worse than they are.” Through Melanie’s experience, the narration has shown us that, as disgusting as zombies can be, humans can be even more so. This empathetic evolution also mirrors the complex layering of connotations with which zombies have been charged throughout cinema history and the shifting attitude towards them. The opening montage shows them as rampaging, deadly attackers through shocking combat-film-styled snippets, in the manner of Romero’s early cannibalistic and infectious undead—as in the precursor *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968). Then, the hordes of zombies seen aimlessly shuffling in the long-range shooting field remind us of the depersonalized masses in *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1978). This is a reference to another recurrent Romerian thematic association, which “fastens its attention on the deadening effects of rampant consumerism” (McAllister 2017, 74). The criticism is aimed at capitalism, which “appears like a zombie-making virus” and at consumerism, which “renders individuals into zombies without empathy, for instance, for those who labour in sweatshops to produce the cheap goods we consume” (Lauro 2017a, 105). Zombies are compelled to consume brains in the same way that people are compelled to consume goods: “Romero is deeply critical of mass-consumer society, and the shopping zombie is a

powerful allegorical figure” (Bailey 2013, 96).⁸ This theme is most famously depicted in the zombie horde besieging the mall in *Dawn of the Dead*, which visually reminds us of consumers pushing at the entrances of shopping centres at times of annual sales. Instead of extending this Romerian topic—we humans are like zombies—*The Rezort* instead concentrates on creating a theme from another topic that is also present in Romero’s cinema: zombies are like humans. The encounters with the chained female undead introduce a humanization of the zombie, seen not as a brainless killing and infecting machine but as a creature with some remnants of conscience and feelings—like Bub the chained domesticated zombie in *Day of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1985), a theme reprised and further developed in *Land of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 2005). The final realization that humans are not really better than zombies—or perhaps are even worse—and the depiction of zombies as marginalized underdogs and the real victims tap into more recent trends of presenting sympathetic zombie characters, such as *Warm Bodies* (Jonathan Levine, 2013) and the TV show *iZombie* (Diane Ruggiero and Rob Thomas, 2015-2019).⁹ These more recent narratives “can be thought of as fundamentally posthuman” (MacFarlane 2020, 125) and update zombie/human associations by replacing “the Romero zombies’ metaphorical connections with voracious consumerism and mindless labour under industrial capital with metonymic associations with the spectrality of neo-liberal capital, the isolation of neo-liberal subjectivity and the vertiginous flow of information and identity in networked culture” (125-26).¹⁰ *The Rezort* thus also constitutes a condensed recapitulation of the principal zombie representations/symbolizations in film history.

The zombie figure is also reconnected in the film—through a reference by Sadie to the original etymology of the word “zombie”—to its pre-Romerian Haitian origins and the initial connotation it carried: zombies as a symptom of Westerners’ anxieties about slavery and colonial domination. In the Haiti-influenced first period of its fictional life, the zombie was not a biohazard carrier or a threatening flesh eater but an enslaved victim of some voodoo *bokor* (priest), as in *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932). Sadie explains that “African tribes once called their soul ‘nzambi,’ but then when they were transported to Haiti as slaves, their soul became ‘zombi,’

meaning ‘all freewill gone.’”¹¹ This seemingly passing reference to the Haitian origin of the word also anticipates the plot twist in the final act. Through the use of cinematic devices (mostly eye-line matches) which seek to show the individual and human side of zombies, the narration seems to suggest that if we looked into the refugees’ eyes instead of avoiding eye contact, as we often do when we want to remain non-committal, we may realize that they are not a nameless mass but that each and every one of them is an individual human being, like us.

Implicit Meaning: Zombies, Refugees... Holocaust?

If the film’s explicit meaning is that humans, when devoid of empathy, can be more beastly than a zombie and that if we establish eye contact we can recognize individuals within the nameless masses, the implicit meaning is unexpectedly provocative for what could have looked like a run-of-the-mill zombie film. In the final act, the last surviving members of the group rush through the maze of passageways and floors of the main control centre. The countdown to the activation of the Brimstone Protocol is running out, and they must reach the docks before they end up incinerated. They eventually arrive in a large space with fenced cattle runs. The group walks through the serpentine route, wondering what the use of it could be. At the end, they find a dark corridor. When they enter it, a system of heated coils all over the walls turns on, resembling the inside of a huge toaster. “What is happening here? Cattle runs? Ovens?” asks Lewis, bewildered. The answer is behind the next door. When the survivors open it, they find themselves in the facilities of the Hope 4 U humanitarian organization. They realize that The Rezort Inc. has been feeding the demand for zombies of its theme park by infecting refugees “saved” by the complicit NGO. This revelation had been prepared throughout the film by a set of clues.

The montage that opened the film mentioned the refugee crisis that was caused by the “zombie war,” and also mentioned that a Hope 4 U camp was on the premises of The Rezort island. “All our shufflers date back to the war,” says one of the island’s guides to the new guests. But in a previous conversation, we hear an enthusiastic guest reporting that a franchise is being planned, and The Rezort is about to open new sites. How can a limited batch of undead—the

remnants of the past war—be sufficient to supply both the increasingly successful Park Number 1 and the prospective branches as well? We are also told that the older the zombie, the slower it moves; but some of the zombies we see walk rather fast, and some even run. In the first act, we are also given the set-up device that will provide the revelatory payoff in the final act. Having arrived in a lounge, waiting for the ferry to the island, Melanie takes notice of a little girl holding a blue teddy bear, watching from behind a partly screened glass wall. Melanie and the girl exchange smiles, until the girl's mother, speaking to her in Arabic, takes the girl back to some tents in the distance. Outside of the luxury lounge is a Hope 4 U refugee camp, conveniently hidden from the eyes of arriving guests so as not to upset their carefree holiday fun. That scene might have seemed, at first sight, a visual representation of geopolitical and social injustice with, on the one hand, people who are wealthy and mainly worried about which luxury resort to spend their money on, and, on the other hand, people worried about the lack of even a basic livelihood. But the encounter of the refugee girl is actually the device, together with the cattle runs and the “ovens,” which paves the way to the final revelation. Melanie realizes the shocking truth when, in the final act, she again meets the little girl in the Hope 4 U facilities: the girl with the blue teddy bear is now a zombie.

Refugees are taken to the island's camp, transformed into the park's attractions, and from the Hope 4 U facilities channelled into the park through the cattle runs—after having undergone the ageing treatment in the “ovens.” If to these elements—the camps, cattle runs and ovens, the little girl (singled out through a visually striking item) as the emblem of the tragedy—we add the shooting of zombies for fun, then we find an outstanding set of hints pointing to *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993). In Spielberg's Holocaust drama, all the dehumanizing processes to which the Jews are subjected are detailed. We see them brought to the concentration camps in cattle wagons, and the high chimneys of the ovens constantly emitting smoke from the unrelenting burning of corpses. We see Nazi lieutenant Amon Goeth casually shooting prisoners for fun from the window of his quarters. Most notably, we have the same revelatory device. The complacent businessman Oskar Schindler fully realizes the abysmal perversity of the Nazi operations when he

sees the corpse of a little girl with a red coat brought to the cremation pyre, the same girl he had seen alive a short time earlier. (To make her more noticeable and for emblematic contrast, the little girl's red coat keeps its colour within the black-and-white cinematography.) By making a reference to one of the most atrocious crimes that Western civilization has perpetrated—a reference also to the most inhuman Final Solution devised to get rid of human beings perceived to be the cause of a nation's problems—the narration intends to shock and wake us up to the “humanitarian disaster” (as the reporter calls it in the film's opening) that is taking place before our eyes, and to expose the mix of indifference and fear to which African and Middle Eastern refugees give rise.

The implicit meaning that emerges here links the zombie figure to the refugee crisis, one of the most pressing issues in European policy at the time and a major preoccupation of public opinion, shrewdly inflated by populist political parties (Fetzer 2012; Wodak 2015). Typical xenophobic/anti-migration discourses were: migrants take work from the native-born (migrants *cannibalize* the job market and hence deprive the native-born of their livelihood, the way zombies eat people alive); migrants carry disease (they are highly infectious, as zombies are); and migrants import different customs and cultures (they are liable to turn the native-born into them, as zombies turn people into zombies). The cannibalism typically attached to the zombie also strengthens this figure's ties to migrants and foreigners. In ancient Greece, Barbarians (*barbaroi*, those who “gibber,” who cannot speak the Greek language) were depicted as cannibals to stress their uncivilized customs. “The cannibalistic act remains the index of savage otherness to Western civilization” (Luckhurst 2015, 55), and cannibalism itself is a fabrication of the supremacist colonial discourse (56). As early as the 1920s, when the zombie gradually started entering pulp magazines, fictional stories already betrayed a high degree of xenophobia and invasion paranoia, “anxiety about reverse colonization and fantasies of race revenge” (63). Today, it is easy to propagandistically present migrants and refugees as the modern barbarians at our gates, and the artfully alarming discourses of the anti-migration front can be seen as a modern form of the old “cannibals/barbarians narrative.” Given this rich racial/colonial

background, the zombie figure is particularly fitting to represent the migrant/refugee.

Migration can take diverse forms, and a distinction should be made at least between economic migrants, who relocate in search of job opportunities, and refugees, who are forced to leave their home countries because of persecution, natural disaster or war: “refugee displacement is involuntary and often temporary, whereas most migrants choose their destination and duration in the host economy, unless contracted specifically for temporary work” (Taylor et. al. 2016, 7449). *The Rezort* addresses the refugee issue more than it does economic migration. Refugees have been largely of Islamic religion, and anti-migration propaganda has teamed up with anti-Islamic propaganda to construct an image of the Islamic refugee as particularly dangerous—as happened in the U.K. with the artful conflation of Syrian refugees and potential terrorists (Abbas 2020). Besides metaphorically evoking that debate—refugees as terrorists/refugees as zombies—the reference to Islam in the film provides a further nexus connecting the refugee crisis (the refugee holocaust) and zombie persecution (the zombie holocaust) with *the Holocaust*. Interestingly, the word “*Muselmann*,” German for “Muslim,” was employed in the Nazi death camps to indicate those prisoners on the verge of death, half-dead already: “Since ‘Muslim’ derives from the Arabic meaning ‘submission to God,’ it was presumably evoked by prisoners as a slang term for resignation to fate... They were described as ‘giant skeletons.’ ... feral, with shining eyes, obsessed with food, driven beyond all taboos by hunger, even to eat corpses” (Luckhurst 2015, 114). *Muselmanns* were like zombies, and the stereotypical, feared refugee is a Muslim (Betz 2013). The allusion to Nazi camps which can be traced in the film finds a further element of support in this use of “*Muselmann*” in concentration camps, thereby strengthening the conceptual link between zombies, refugees and persecution.¹² Under the Nazi regime, Jews were blamed for the problems of the German nation, feared and loathed because the propaganda discourses described them as dangerous people (for example, in the made-up *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*); yet, at the same time, their workforce was exploited under slave-like conditions (in the camps) or at discriminatory cheap salaries (outside of the camps). Zombies on *The Rezort* island are feared and loathed,

but at the same time they are exploited economically. Nationalists and supremacists fear and loathe the migrants, but there is a consistent shadow economy which exploits migrants—human trafficking or prostitution (Candia and Garreffa 2011); cheap unregistered labour (Carchedi 2014); and educated migrants forced to accept menial low-paid jobs (Fullin and Reyneri 2011; Trevena 2013), for example.

How should the refugee problem be solved? The film does not go as far as to suggest a solution, of course, other than a sort of provocative almost Jonathan Swift-like “modest proposal”: as Swift had sarcastically submitted that the issue of Irish poverty could be solved by having the Irish sell their own children as food to wealthy (English) people, so here refugees are economically exploited as “cannon fodder” for the amusement and anger therapy of the English. While the film denounces the indifference and inhumanity with which zombies (refugees) are mostly treated, an interesting nuance is also introduced. Sadie is revealed to be an activist of the Living 2 association, whose vocation is to defend the rights of the undead. She arrived on the island with a mission: to sneak into the control room and steal evidence on a USB drive to expose The Rezort. Unbeknownst to her, the device she was given was also designed to upload a virus onto the system. It is Sadie’s action, though unintentional, that causes the death of many guests (hers included) and the activation of the Brimstone Protocol. This storyline (the damage produced by a naive activist) can be interpreted as a reference to the debate surrounding the NGOs which rescue migrants in the Mediterranean Sea. Accusations have been made about NGOs working too independently, thus unintentionally helping human traffickers or terrorist organizations as well when accepting people without a preliminary screening or proper protocols (Robinson 2014).¹³ The Sadie storyline seems to be a way to inject some ambiguity into an argument that might have seemed otherwise too Manichean: refugees are all good, Westerners all bad; activists are all heroes, non-activists uncaring hypocrites.

Conclusions: Brexit Symptoms?

What I have presented here is film analysis for a film journal and, as a film scholar, I do not have the pretence—nor the competence

or the vocation—to develop an articulate and complex geopolitical analysis. Suffice it to say that, within my area of specialism, I wish, at the conclusion of this analysis and interpretation of *The Rezort*, to point out some indicators of the U.K.’s zeitgeist at the time of the film’s production. Going back to the question “How can the problem be solved?,” this British film seems not only to reflect its time in the form of the feelings of fear and indifference to which the zombie/refugee figure gives rise, but also, symptomatically, to prefigure Brexit, which would be approved in a vote one year after the film’s release. This seems to me to be an exemplary instance of the symptomatic meaning as intended by Bordwell: the presence in the film text of traces of the subtended ideologies which inform the socio-historical background of the film’s production, traces of which the filmmakers are typically oblivious. Since Brexit had not yet happened, one might rule out an intention on the filmmakers’ part to directly thematize Brexit. Yet, the symptoms that would lead to it can be detected, in a way not dissimilar to how Siegfried Kracauer detected in Weimar cinema of the 1920s the adumbration of Germany’s drastic change of regime in the following decade (Kracauer 2004).

A widespread concern in the U.K. was about economic migrants from other EU countries—in particular Eastern Europe, with “Polish plumbers,” for example, becoming an antonomastic for the entire category, and others elsewhere in Europe (Noyes 2018)—whose status as EU citizens allowed them to circulate freely within the union and potentially saturate national job markets. “Free movement within the EU ... [had] become, and has remained, the key issue in relation to Brexit” (Outhwaite 2019, 94), yet refugees also had capital weight in the Brexit decision. In an analysis of the Brexit campaign debate, “the most striking finding ... is the way that the refugee crisis and Brexit are shown to be interlinked. While on the face of it these are two distinct issues, there is a very clear and often explicit association of the two throughout this debate” (Goodman and Narang 2019, 1168). As previously mentioned with respect to the conflation of Syrian refugees and terrorists, refugees added to the economic threat of EU migrants the bigger threat of a stronger socio-cultural, and potentially hostile, Otherness. The U.K. showed resistance to the refugee-resettlement quotas set out by the EU (Peers 2015; McDermott and Vasagar 2015), and already in 2005

it proposed “a fixed quota on the number of asylum seekers that the United Kingdom would accept, and even suggested removing its obligations under the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees in order to do this” (Partos and Bale 2015, 178). Post-Brexit analyses confirmed that a preponderant number of “Leave” voters chose to divorce the EU because of a fear of mass immigration (Bulman 2017; Harding 2017), a sentiment inflated by newspapers like *The Daily Mirror* (see, for instance, Slack, Drury and Stevens 2016). To neutralize the (perceived) threat of mass migration, the U.K. chose a drastic solution: to isolate itself and leave the EU.

The Brimstone Protocol in the film (the B Protocol) is uncannily evocative of the actual B Protocol enforced in the U.K., the “Brexit Protocol.” In this sense, the island on which *The Rezort* is located is an image of the U.K. itself, an island that nuked itself, making itself more isolated, enacting a drastic solution that provided public opinion with an immediate impression of an effective problem-solving tactic, but that strategically is likely to have a long-term collateral impact on the lives of many, as analysts were already predicting right after the referendum (Dhingra et al. 2016; Kierzenkowski et al. 2016).¹⁴ From this perspective, the debate shown in the opening montage between the woman criticizing the B Protocol and the man defending it acquires Brexit overtones too: “Dropping bombs on hundreds of innocent people?” she says. “Young lady,” he replies, “You get gangrene in your foot, you sacrifice your whole leg to save the rest... That’s why the people are behind us. Because the people understand that a sharp knife cuts quick.” Replace “dropping bombs on hundreds of innocent people” with “leaving the EU” and the dialogue would still make sense, sounding like an excerpt from a Brexit TV debate.

The film’s explicit meaning communicates that zombies “are just us,” and that humans do not really act in a better manner. Its implicit meaning creates a link between the persecutory treatment of zombies with the persecutory treatment of refugees by means of references to the Holocaust. The film also reflects the concerns of, specifically, the U.K. over the refugee crisis and the heated debate around it. At its deeper level, the symptomatic meaning, the film even seems to prefigure the drastic solution of the “Brexit Protocol,” which would be launched the following year. It also seems

to prefigure how ineffectual this solution would prove to be: in the closing shot of the film we see swimming zombies emerging from the sea; they survived the nuking of The Resort island. Destructive measures were useless to address the problem. The Brimstone Protocol did not work; it was just a drastic and simplistic response unfit to address a complex problem. Recent surveys relate that public opinion in the U.K. is now showing signs of people having second thoughts about Brexit, and after Brexit the bifurcation between those who still approve and those who now regret it has been steadily increasing, with 56% “regretting” and 32% “approving” in November 2022 (Statista 2023). A poll done in January 2023 resulted in 65% of respondents now supporting a new referendum to rejoin the EU (Blackhurst 2023). The U.K. has not enjoyed the advantages promised by Brexit campaigners; instead, people now “believe the economy, the U.K.’s global influence and the ability to control [their] own borders have all got worse” (Devlin 2023). The job market has suffered because of a shortage of workers, with an estimated shortfall of more than 300,000 units according to Think-Tank (Foster 2023), with Brexit having contributed, along with the COVID-19 pandemic, to exacerbate conditions (Francis-Devine & Buchanan 2023). Some businesspeople who had supported Brexit have claimed that the “U.K.’s current immigration policy was crippling economic growth” (Jack 2022). As in the film, Leavers might have thought “that a sharp knife cuts quick,” but more and more people are now seemingly realizing that maybe the “sharp knife” cut too much and too quickly, and more and more Leavers are becoming Regretters (Drinkwater and Jennings 2022). *The Resort*, on the symptomatic level, seems to have foreseen the simplistically drastic nature and the ineffectual results of such “B Protocols” in the long run.

NOTES

1. The principal texts delineating the neo-formalist approach are Thompson 1981; Bordwell 1985; and Thompson 1988. For a summary, see Audissino 2017.
2. For example, Robert Stam is one of those who see neo-formalism as necessarily ahistorical and, consequently, socio-politically uncommitted, unlike Stam’s own works in postcolonial film studies (2000, 198–200). A more balanced assessment of neo-formalism is in Thomson-Jones 2008 (134–37).
3. On the body count, especially in the slasher, see Conrich 2009.
4. The academic literature on zombies is vast, to the point that there is a series called “Zombie Studies” published by McFarland. For a concise but comprehensive

introduction to the zombie phenomenon and its socio-cultural connotations, see Luckhurst 2015 and Lauro 2017b.

5. The name of the compound—and the film’s title—aptly tinges the word “resort” with the now-infamous zombie emblem “Z”: *World War Z* (Marc Forster, 2013), *Z Nation* (Craig Engler and Karl Schaefer, 2014–2018) and the “Team Z” in *iZombie* (Diane Ruggiero and Rob Thomas, 2015–2019), but it had been used as early as 1937, in Theodore Roscoe’s serial stories *Z is for Zombie*.
6. Summaries of the major theories on empathy in film can be found in Plantinga 2008, Coplan 2008 and Rushton and Bettinson 2010 (156-76).
7. On the empathetic power of close-ups, see Plantinga 1999.
8. The Romero metaphor of “zombism = consumerism” is widely discussed and is the focus of Harper 2002, for example.
9. For a historical survey of zombie cinema and the polymorphous meanings of the zombie figure, see Russell 2014.
10. The post-human condition—the existential negotiation of human, non-human and technology in contemporary advanced societies and the potential alienation of individuals—and the zombie figure as its metaphor are explored in Christie and Lauro 2011.
11. This is, actually, a fictional simplification of the origin of the word. For a discussion of the many hypotheses around the word’s etymology, see Luckhurst 2015 (14).
12. In *World War Z* (Mark Forster, 2013) zombies are also identified with Muslims. See Luckhurst 2015 (185-86).
13. A code of rules was introduced in 2017 to address this problem in the Mediterranean area (Anonymous 2017; MII 2017), raising some controversy, on the other hand, with respect to potential detrimental limitations to the rescue capabilities of NGOs (Camilli 2017).
14. A British government dossier even emerged which analyzed the worst-case “apocalyptic” scenarios that Brexit could engender, including food and medicine shortage due to the abrupt reintroduction of paralyzing customs procedures for the imports (Ratcliffe 2018), and an old Cold War protocol designed to move the Queen and the Royal Family to a safe location in case of an imminent nuclear menace was updated to cope with potential unrest caused by the effects of a no-deal hard Brexit (Herszenhorn 2019).

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RÉSUMÉ

***The Rezort* (2015): zombies, réfugiés et protocoles B**

Emilio Audissino

The Rezort (Steve Barker, 2015) raconte l'histoire d'un Royaume-Uni post-apocalypse zombie dans lequel les spécimens restants de la population zombie sont utilisés comme attractions au «Rezort», une île de loisirs sur laquelle les humains peuvent faire une expérience de type safari sur le thème des zombies, incluant des tirs impitoyables sur des morts-vivants. Le récit apparemment convenu s'accompagne d'un commentaire social ambitieux. Le film relie directement les zombies – et leur traitement, de l'ordre de l'exploitation et de la persécution – aux réfugiés, reflétant les inquiétudes de l'opinion publique britannique concernant la crise migratoire au moment de sa production. L'article propose une analyse textuelle inspirée des quatre niveaux de signification (référentiel, explicite, implicite, symptomatique) décrits dans *Making Meaning* (1989) de David Bordwell. La dynamique des regards qui se croisent est analysée comme des indices textuels pour la création du sens explicite (les zombies sont aussi des personnes), et le tournant narratif et les références à l'holocauste sont interprétés comme des indices du sens implicite (la crise des réfugiés est similaire à d'autres persécutions historiques). Enfin, les indices du film sont interprétés comme des symptômes de l'imminent Brexit, dont le référendum aurait lieu l'année suivant la sortie du film.