
Borenstein began by discussing the zombie’s place in contemporary American culture. Its origins are Haitian, but “like most products of black culture in America, it has been whitewashed, only this time to an extreme, deathly pallor.” In George Romero’s films, the zombie was transformed into a collective menace, and it became (among other things) a metaphor for consumerism. According to Borenstein, “the figure of the zombie demands that we reexamine our ideas of knowledge and selfhood.”

Zombie narratives are less widespread in Russia than in the West – Borenstein argues that the “postsocialist zombie is less an imaginary creature than a state of mind.” Russian discourse focuses on “zombification” rather than “zombies”: where “Western zombies are the threat of the Other… the Russian anxiety is different: the zombie will become you.” Russian zombification is concerned with the relationship between mass media and audience – the danger is that the viewer’s mind may become colonized. This “brainwashing” narrative suggests that “no one has any faith in the population’s ability to evaluate media messages.” At the same time, it propagates an idea of one’s own independence: “I am not zombified, because I can perceive the zombification of others.”

Borenstein traces the zombification narrative back to the beginning of the Soviet Union. The Marxist subject, he argues, “is not a closed-off, integral self.” This idea was re-appropriated by the West in the 1950s, when the concept of brainwashing entered popular discourse. In films like The Manchurian Candidate and Invasion of the Body Snatchers, the utopian idea of the malleable Marxist self was transformed into its “demonic inversion,” which fed into Western anti-communist anxiety. Following the 60s counterculture movement, however, the brainwashing meme jumped from the USSR to new religious movements (NRMs). It was in this “anti-cult” context that zombification entered mainstream Russian discourse in the early 1990s, in connection with a movement called the Great White Brotherhood, led by Maria Devi Christos. The zombification meme was also disseminated in post-Soviet conspiracy novels (in which mind-control, often KGB-derived, was a popular trope) and particularly in the works of Victor Pelevin, who wrote a 1994 essay on the topic (“Zombificatsiia”).

Borenstein claims that critics of today’s Russian media “posit an imaginary Russian media consumer,” an apathetic “post-Soviet couch potato whose gullibility helps the regime ruin the country.” In such discourse, the source of zombification is believed to be television, or the “zomboiashchik” (roughly equivalent to the “boob tube”). In recent years, a Russian YouTube celebrity who calls himself “Astakhov Sergii” has become the face of the zombified subject. Astakhov refers
to himself as an “invalid” – some viewers have speculated that he may be schizophrenic. Two directors (Anatoly Ulyanov and Oleg Mavromatti) have released documentaries about Astakhov, in which they suggest that he is a stand-in or limit case representing the average Russian television viewer. Borenstein contends that this is insulting to both Astakhov, who is “completely deprived of agency,” and the “Russian ‘patriotic’ viewer,” who is “implicitly being called an idiot.”

According to Borenstein, accusations of zombification are a way of undermining political discourse: “rather than evaluating speech according to its worth, its sincerity, and its effects, speech can be entirely dismissed – speech becomes excess.” Furthermore, the use of Astakhov as a representative of the zombification model suggests one of its inadequacies: it assumes that political beliefs “are the product of rational [rather than emotional] thought, and that intolerable political beliefs are founded in faulty rationality.” To Borenstein, the important question is not “who is zombified?” but rather “who is employing the message of zombification?” The best way to resist zombification, then, is simply by not believing in it.

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