

# CHAPTER 1

## ZOMBIE

### What Are We Talking About?

For nearly a century, zombies have served as an archetype of the fear of the return of the dead. They represent as much the incarnation of *post mortem* physical alterations as the fear of the misdiagnosis of death (a false declaration of death with an unjustified burial).

In the Western mindset, they have served as an outlet for the harshest of anxieties and fantasies, and sometimes also the most harebrained. First limited to the geographic area of the Caribbean, zombies quickly become a cut-and-paste of the vampire myth, and spread widely throughout the continent of North America. This fact is evidenced by the abundance of films and television series featuring the phenomenon of zombies, especially from the American film industry, including *I walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943), *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968), which constructs itself as a parable of the evils of America, the saga *Resident Evil*, and the television series *The Walking Dead* (five seasons in all, and a worldwide success), etc.

But these monstrous beings, in fact, have nothing to do with the real zombie that comes from Haitian Vodou. If anything, they represent a sort of realization of the medieval myth of the decayed ghost (the “putrid revenant”). These are living-dead that come out of the Earth, continue their decomposition above ground, and change humans into zombies through



a bite or simple contact. In order to survive, they sometimes must eat brains and suck blood. It is as if zombification were a communicable disease, a type of modern allegory for the ancestral fear of the Plague.

The term zombie takes on three meanings that are quite similar to each other. The first, which is no longer accepted, refers to children who died without being baptized whose souls have been captured in order to bring good luck.<sup>1</sup> The second corresponds to a ghostly spirit which, flying away from the corpse at the moment of death, moves around detached from the body like a wandering soul. It can appear either in human form or it can be without a specific form, like a moving cloud. Finally, the last type—and the most commonly accepted—is the individual to whom a poison was given that put him in a cataleptic state. They pass him off as dead, and then he is buried before being exhumed from the cemetery two or three days later in order to turn him into a zombie.

With a perspective that is both forensic and anthropological, I found it interesting to go back to the source. Why does Haiti, this island in the Caribbean, inscribe itself within the collective imagination as the historical land of zombies? To what do zombies correspond? Can they be summed up as the simple victims of an animal poison? Are they nothing but a literary creation picked up by the film industry? Do they play a social, moral, or political role? In the 1980s, the work of Wade Davis, a North American ethnobotanist, cleared the way for this subject by identifying a molecule implicated in zombification. But is this research continuing to move forward? Will the medical and scientific study of new cases of zombies enable us to know more about the process of their “creation”?

I thus left to conduct an anthropological investigation of the traces of these beings who are between two worlds. It is an anthropological investigation between life and death.

# CHAPTER 2

## **WHITE ZOMBIE**

The Air Caraïbes aircraft has been in flight for several hours and must set itself roughly vertical to the Azores. In the darkness, the passengers sleep peacefully. Some snore while sleeping off their little bottles of coconut punch. Others try their luck with the flight attendants. I make the most of the situation by turning on my computer to watch the film *White Zombie* for the one hundredth time. It is an old black-and-white film (1932) that marks one of the first appearances of Bela Lugosi.

This film—the first cinematographic work to dramatize zombies—opens with a horse-drawn carriage on a country road winding through the middle of a sugarcane field at night. The carriage is transporting two Westerners who have just landed at Port-au-Prince. On the road, they stumble across a funeral ceremony. Peasants, weeping, are burying one of their own in the very middle of the road.

“We’d call it a burial. . . .

—On the road? . . . What’s going on?

—It’s a funeral, Miss. They fear grave robbers, so they dig graves in the middle of the road where there is a lot of traffic . . .,” the coach driver explains (he is a Haitian with a strong Creole accent).

Emerging at that moment from a cemetery and the adjoining plantations are men dressed in rags with a glassy look and a rolling gait. Moving

at breakneck speed, the horse-drawn carriage begins to flee the arrival of the zombies.

“You could have killed us driving at such speeds!

—Worse, Sir, we could have been captured!

—By whom? The men whom we ran into?

—They aren't men, sir. They're dead bodies. . . . Zombies. Living-dead. Corpses stolen from graves and made to work in the sugar mills and the fields at night.”

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