

The Limits of Safety

Deconstructing the Notion of Shelter in Cinema

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Abstract

There are moments in history where what is considered to be stable and safe starts to lose its protection value. There are events and social phenomena that lead to phobias and fears; architecture and urban design have to provide answers to this inquietude. This paper seeks to follow the succession of four major urban and architectural phenomena and the way they are connected with various fears. Starting from the house, particularly the '60s suburban residence; moving into the '70s with the commercial malls that are marketed as earthly paradises; and ending with the concept of the gated city/community, which today presents itself as the safest place to stay, the paper links these phenomena with social changes and a demonization of anything that is different. The main guideline for this paper is the way these shelters appear in horror films, and, more specifically, George A. Romero's '*... of the Dead*' series, better known as the zombie films. By examining their simple structure (people under attack, fortifying themselves into an edifice) and making the connection to the historic and social context, the paper unconverts the parallels and allegories hidden in the films. Apart from the link with the relevant social structures, the paper tries to connect the films with urban and architectural policies; spatial proposals that respond to the eternal and instinctive quest for shelter. In his films Romero aims to reveal the danger these shelters conceal and the traps we create for ourselves every time we try to define the limits of safety. In the last 50 years, and especially in the last decade, fear has been a basic instrument of control, and as result there has been a huge change in our relationship to public and urban space, as the issue of safety becomes more important. As symbols of a whole society slowly fail, we try to fortify our spaces; craving order and security, we build walls and try to mark our safe space, excluding the other, the stranger, the different. Romero's deconstruction of these shelters alerts us to the fact that the real danger is not always outside the walls.

Introduction

Every generation has its own fears. A series of phobias and the need for security influence

our behaviour and our reactions to the world, resulting in spatial changes. Afraid of possible 'attacks', we transform our space as we look for a shelter or a fortress, altering the limits of the private and the public realm. Before the end of the modern era, urban planning and architectural practices seemed to have the time to come up with answers to everyday fears¹. But since the '60s we have been at the epicentre of a constant crisis², which has become more and more obvious in recent months. Even now urban design and architecture attempt to respond to this inquietude and a Form Follows Fear logic arises.

This paper uses the horror film genre in order to follow such changes in the limits of safety. Cinematic fears don't come on their own, the narration and the cinematic elements go beyond simple shocks, and they address the spectator's fearful memories and social truths³. More specifically, I refer to George Romero's '*... of the Dead*' series⁴ and the way the director plays on supernatural fears that are based on social realities. These five movies work as an ongoing scenario, placed in a new era, starting from the raging '60s and reaching up to the present. The basic plot is the same every time – a group of people running away from carnivorous zombies – though there are some changes that link the films directly to their time. Changes can be detected in four fields:

The composition of the group of people;

The image of the zombies;

The space where the action takes place;

The manner in which this space is filmed.

Romero's analysts usually keep to the social dimension and rarely mention the spatial relations⁵. While one can spot a series of demonizations of various groups of people (the obstacles for the harmony promised by politicians and advertisers), the most interesting element is the way Romero incorporates architectural and urban phenomena that characterize the occidental urban landscape: from the idealized suburbs of the '60s and the earthly paradises of shopping and entertainment malls, to underground shelters from a possible

nuclear attack and the gated communities that impose their presence after the '90s. Romero's films deconstruct these artificial shelters, demonstrating their inability to actually protect from the real dangers.

By placing Romero's movies in their historical background and following the parallel urban and architectural practices I try to sense the relation between fear and space. A series of phenomena that radically change the image of the city, as they attract the urban public that has started demonizing, apart from the various minorities (in a great variety of discriminations), the city itself.

The Attack on the House

In 1968 a low-budget film entitled *The Night of the Living Dead* was released; four decades later the cinematographer entered the list of the most important directors⁶. These were the days of John Kennedy's assassination, the end of the new utopias, the reign of conspiracy theories and McCarthy's black lists, which underlined the danger of a pure America 'turning red'. At the beginning of the Vietnam War the government and the army was called into question. In addition, the struggles for racial rights and the assassination of Martin Luther King pushed the dispute to the limits⁷.

Life in suburbia is peaceful. The cities are over-crowded and start degenerating while modern-movement zoning attempts to order space and people. In 1950 the suburban population surpasses downtown, after a successful effort on the part of the government and the real estate industry to move crowds outside the cities⁸. The WASP family rediscovers nature and finds its perfect neighbours, away from the immigrants and the contaminating urban streets. Isolated houses in big residential areas offer a simplified and peaceful way of life away from the boiling centres.⁹

It's no surprise, then, that the seven heroes of *The Night* run for cover into an isolated suburban house at the edge of the city. Seven people shut themselves up in this house in order to be protected from the dead who have come back to life with cannibalistic intentions. The characters are based on stereotypes: the helpless girl; the young American couple representing hope; the American family that rejects all the others and is afraid of anyone different – zombie or not; and finally Ben, the rational guy who is faced with fear because of his colour. Ben is the actual hero of Romero's film. He manages to stay alive, but he remains a pre-defined enemy and is shot by the authorities. The possible 'happy ending' of the menace being over is thwarted by people's prejudices¹⁰.

Prejudices and fears are further reinforced

by the iconization of the living-dead. The zombies' image is not grotesque; on the contrary, they wear everyday clothes and look like normal human beings. Basically they are our transformed neighbours and relatives, and the distinction between friend and enemy is really blurred¹¹. Additionally, the fact that there is nearly no effort to scientifically or supernaturally explain their apparition underlines the feeling that the enemy is not 'out there'. We are the enemy.

Initially, the hut does provide protection, especially for as long as it remains lit, but even if it is successful in keeping the zombies out, it cannot protect the protagonists from themselves; the ones inside. The seven of them irrationally suspect each other and the dream house is turned into a cage, which only temporarily excludes external danger. Romero edits with short shots, continuous changes of perspective, and a rapid, sharp rhythm, disorientating the viewer. The camera is consistently set at a strange angle, which shocks the viewer and at the same time demonstrates how difficult it is for the protagonists to move within the house's narrow limits. Moreover, these angles leave no space for the hypothetical viewer, destabilising simultaneously the universe inside and outside the frame. By contrast, the shots of the TV are symmetrical and calm, transmitting a sense of comfort and credibility, even if it relays false information¹².

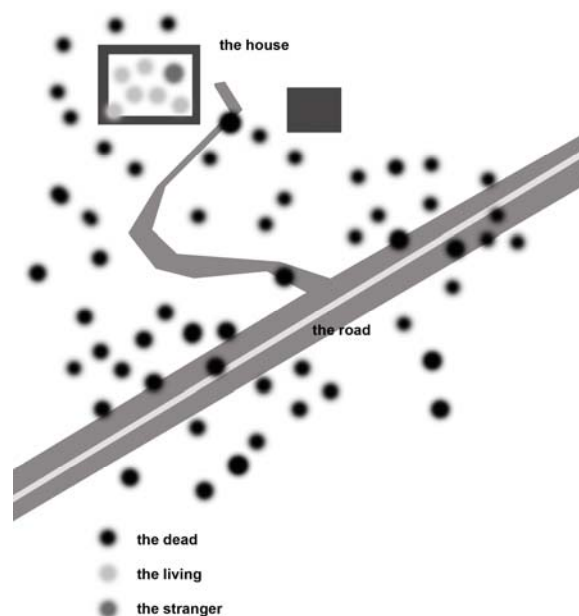


Fig 1: Representation of the spatial relations in *The Night of the Living Dead*.

When the lights go out, the dead attack, and the heroes, having spent so much time on sealing their space, have no escape routes. Just as the LA fire department's reports that underline, most of the houses

in LA don't have the automatic unlocking mechanism demanded by law, which results in a series of fires that burn whole families, trapped by their own security systems¹³.

The Safety of Consumption

During the decade that separated *The Night* from *The Dawn of the Dead*, the background dramatically changed. Hippies, student movements, anti-war protests, a constant distrust of the authorities: the world needs something to believe in. The answer is the products. The working class doesn't stop at quantity, it needs quality of life. Consumption was the best way to control a society whose fundamental principles were fading. The anti-racial, feminist and queer movements call traditional principles into question, but they never attack product acquaintance¹⁴.

Despite the shops for basic needs that already existed in the outlying suburbs, the luxury products remained downtown. Big shopping malls and department-stores came as an answer, following the industrial revolution's demand for mass production, mass distribution and mass consumption. While the idea derives from the Parisian arcades, the new shopping malls target consumption and close their doors to the urban fabric. When technology allows - thanks to the air-conditioning systems - openings to the outside disappear¹⁵. The huge commercial spaces seem to replace public space and, at the same time, they are full of exclusion signs, preventing the entrance of the 'stranger'. In the big malls the visitor emerges in an earthly paradise, detached from any prior urban experience; a place where he won't have to face the annoying 'other', where entertainment and shopping are protected and abundant. Access is not out of charge and always controlled¹⁶.

In the second film Romero makes it clear that we are the enemy, opening with a city conquered by zombies. He shows zombies of every age, social, and financial group, zombies that become more and more repulsive and graphic. In the first scenes, the policemen are still unable to distinguish the new threat (the dead) from the usual scapegoats (the immigrants).¹⁷ After surviving a few attacks, two policemen and two reporters leave on a helicopter heading away from the decaying city. They arrive in a shopping mall, where some zombies are walking around. "It's an instinct, a memory. They just keep doing what they used to," mentions one of the characters. Instantly they lock the doors, secure a part of the edifice, and start to explore their paradise, full of products, forgetting the rest of the world.

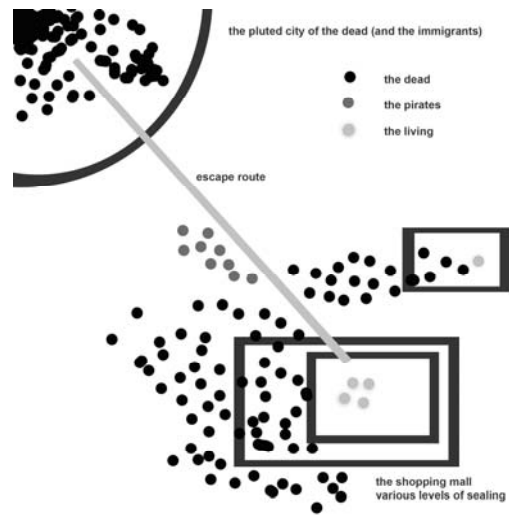


Fig 2: The various traps in *The Dawn of the Dead*.

Romero films the mall in a completely different way than the suburban house. His shots are open and the cameras elevated, emphasising the size of the building. The close-ups are limited to the people and the numerous doors that simultaneously protect and remain possible passages for the enemy. Despite their size, which gives the protagonists some freedom of movement, the space of the mall is beyond the human scale and seems uncontrollable.

Once again, destruction is caused by people themselves. As a group of 'street-pirates' run to the mall for cover, and the four heroes prepare for a fight, to protect their 'property'. The pirates break in and the zombies follow. Apart from the gory images, what really shocks here are the scenes with the zombies walking around, which are all too similar to a standard Saturday morning in the mall: people wandering around, concentrating wherever there is some sort of attraction. The consumption society shows its cannibalistic tendencies and the last two survivors escape by helicopter, without knowing where to go or how much fuel they have.

Underground Shelters and Invisible Fears

Fear was not that obvious in the '80s. In *The Day of the Dead* (1985) Romero's zombies personify the invisible fears of a cold-war nuclear attack and of sexually transmitted diseases (especially AIDS)¹⁸. The zombies' image, so similar to Hiroshima photos and the polluted blood mythology, sketch the parallelism. The humans are divided into scientists (hope for a cure), soldiers (the promised order), and a couple of citizens lost in the power games¹⁹.

In the third film the limits of safety subvert spatial relations. The dead walk in the cities and the living hide in underground shelters, the security plan in case of nuclear attack. Space is tightly sealed; there are no windows and the cinematography underlines the claustrophobic atmosphere: constant close ups, people surrounded by walls, and an anaemic lighting trap the heroes, who very soon end up killing each other before the zombies even invade. The third film still stands as a weak link: neither of the phobias described were really recognizable; nor was the shelter familiar enough for the deconstruction to really have any destabilising effect²⁰.

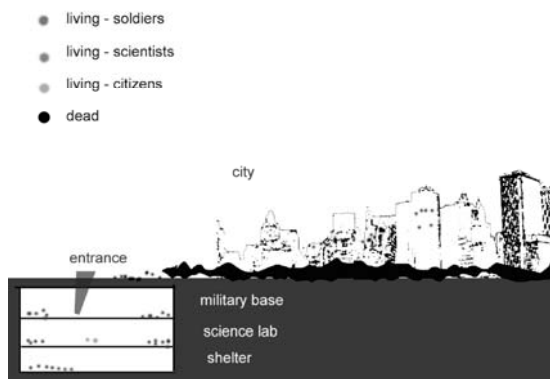


Fig 3: The underground shelter of the living, the daylight for the dead in *The Day of the Dead*.

Crisis and Gates

Twenty years later we arrive in the era of perpetual crisis, everything is doubted, but the capitalist system knows how to take advantage. There is no pre- or post-crash period, we just close our eyes and think of our personal bliss, leading a life in debit, while inequalities become more intense²¹; inequalities that lead to further insecurity and more and more people craving protection from a world ready to explode. From the fortified houses and malls we move to the fortified communities and cities. The technological evolution permits expansion of the controlled spaces, while New Urbanism offers the necessary theoretical background²². The upper and middle classes demand more protection from the decaying city streets, they only feel safe inside their properties and they avoid any place that is lacking order. Today, three out of four people in the USA want to live in a gated community, and the phenomenon is expanding globally.²³

This is probably the reason why Mr. Kauffman, in *The Land of the Dead* (2005), is able to earn a fortune by selling the notion of security in a zombie-ruled world. He builds a tower, fences off a large area and invites anyone who can pay into his ideal community. Around the tower, but still inside the fence, live a great number of people who serve the

upper classes and dream of a place in Fiddler's Green's heaven, willing to suffer in order to be able to reside inside the gates.

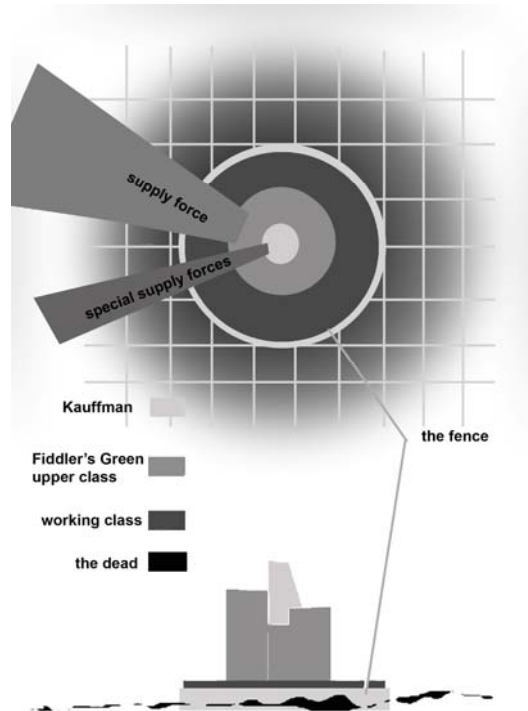


Fig 4: The gated communities of *The Land of the Dead*.

The rest of the city is left to the dead, but no matter how much money there is inside the gates, all the products come from outside. The production is transferred into the 'Third World', and special groups go out to find goods for the upper class. In this decaying world the zombies seem to evolve; mechanically they start imitating life, stopping what they do only to find food. The allegory is clear: the zombies are repressed humans that eventually take the guns. Mr Kauffman sounds like George Bush, and the heroes represent various social stereotypes. As the living lose their identity in a virtual world, the dead gain a leader. Big Daddy is another black figure, who subverts the upper class's peace of mind and leads his own kind towards the tower. The zombie image returns to the more human-like form of the first film. The zombies symbolize a group that has been demonized and neglected, but still struggles for its right to exist.

While the tower's look is a cinematic 'clin d'oeil' to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, it refers directly to the gated communities, especially the TV spots that advertise Fiddler's Green, which are all too similar to the way the Disney Corporation promoted life in Celebration City. "The special charm of an American family town"²⁴ Cameras are omnipresent in the area and there are various levels of accessibility. The strongest architectural elements remain the security

doors, barriers and barb wires. One shot into the control room shows fragments of the whole city; a fragmented vision that cannot give a view of the ensemble, leaving vulnerable points. Outside the walls, the dark shots emphasise that the land of the dead is limitless, in contrast to the luxurious cage populated by the humans. A group of people chooses to live in an enclave, ignores the rest of the world, feeling protected by what it watches on the screens. Inhabiting turns into luxury, the game of the market goes on until the crisis comes knocking at the door. Away from the filthy and dangerous city the dream house is put on the market.

Epilogue: What really scares us?

The Diary of the Dead (2008) is the dreaded conclusion to all the previous escapes: the quest is endless and every new shelter proves to be insufficient. Spaces, even if hermetically sealed, remain penetrable. Nothing is fireproof as various collectivities are formed and reformed; continuously creating an 'other', a dreadful stranger who becomes the scapegoat for every failure of the utopian premise, an external intruder who pollutes our order and peacefulness²⁵.

The quest for the homely is a need, turned into a trap by our inability to see beyond what is promoted as safe. Such a choice in the horror movies seems so naive, but in reality we seem to always come back to the same strategy, considering the private realm as our only shield. We keep reacting in an additive way: we go from safety helmets to CCTV and panic rooms²⁶, trying to exclude anyone who might be different and might therefore disturb our idealized world. Even when we design public spaces the notion of control and limitation of access is a priority. Thankfully one does also see examples of new public spaces that attract crowds without excluding others²⁷; spaces that should be further examined.

In a way this constant construction and de-construction of shelters and fortresses is a medium to expand the need for a new safer place. The homely is being criticised by a number of architects and theorists, the same way that Romero faces it as a death trap. Foucault's heterotopias and Lefebvre's call for the right to the city tried in various ways to describe other places, often through gendered approaches and identities overlooked by modernism. Still, few architects tried to reconsider the structures of the fundamental building volumes of modernity²⁸. Practices that have been rejected return under a new guise; as happened with the shopping malls of the '70s, which today concentrate on entertainment value to support commercial uses.

No matter how many walls we tried to build there will always be places of a possible meeting with this 'scary' other, and Mr. Kauffman's sterilized citizens will never be able to even imagine the next outbreak. The right to the city must be inclusive. It's not about showing compassion to those outside of the walls; it's the belief that exclusive and sterilized cities lead to massive social stereotypes and a series of fragile and fearful spaces, citizens and communities.

Without being documents, movies can be a live documentation of space. They can show how space was conceived or they can try to deconstruct various spatial stereotypes. Phenomena that have been observed in previous decades have global influence, and as they return we are still unprepared to face them, still looking for the notion of safety, but not actual solutions.

The ... of the *Dead* series represents a cinematic challenge to this situation. The remakes of the first five films²⁹ may have transferred the plot to our times but, despite the forty-year period in which they were made, neither the storylines nor the locations needed to be radically updated in order to address the new public.

Notes

- 1 Nan Ellin, 'Shelter from the Storm or Form Follows Fear and Vice Versa', in Nan Ellin (ed) *Architecture of Fear*, Princeton: Architectural Press, 1997, pp 13-47.
- 2 Brian Massumi, 'An introduction to fear, everywhere you want to be', in Brian Massumi (ed) *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, The University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp 3-38.
- 3 Giannis Deliolanis, Πολιτική του τρόμου, αμερικάνικο σινεμά τρόμου και προπαγάνδα του 21ο αιώνα, Athens: Futura, 2007.
- 4 The ... of the *Dead* series consists of five films with the living dead directed and written by George Romero: *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968, co-written with John A. Russo), *Dawn of the Dead* (1979), *Day of the Dead* (1985), *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2008).
- 5 For example Stephen Harper, 'Night of the Living Dead: Reappraising an Undead Classic', *Bright light films journal*, Is. 50, www.brightlightsfilm.com/50/night.htm (accessed 10 January 2009), 2005 and Robert K. Lightning, 'Interracial Tensions in *Night of the Living Dead*', *CineAction* 53, 2000, pp 22-29.
- 6 Mpampis Aktsoglou.
- 7 Massumi, 1993.
- 8 Larry R. Ford, *Cities And Buildings: Skid Rows and Suburbs*,

- Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994.
- 9 Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.
 - 10 Lightning, 2000.
 - 11 R.H.W. Dillard, 'Night of the Living Dead: It's Not Like Just a Wind that's Passing Through', *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film*, Gregory Waller, ed., Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987, pp 14-29.
 - 12 Dillard, 1987.
 - 13 Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear*. Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster, London: Picador, 1999.
 - 14 Massumi, 1993.
 - 15 Ford, 1994.
 - 16 Davis, 1999.
 - 17 Daniel Griffin, 'Dawn of the Dead', *Film as art: Griffin's Guide to Cinema*, <http://uashome.alaska.edu/~jndfg20/website/dawnofthedead.htm> (accessed 12 December 2008), 2003a.
 - 18 Massumi, 1993.
 - 19 Daniel Griffin, 'Day of the Dead', *Film as art: Griffin's Guide to Cinema*, <http://uashome.alaska.edu/~dfgriffin/website/dayofthedead.htm> (accessed 12 December 2008), 2003b.
 - 20 Griffin, 2003b.
 - 21 Massumi, 1993.
 - 22 Davis, 1999.
 - 23 Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism Where All of Life Is a Paid-For Experience*, The Putnam Publishing Group, 2000.
 - 24 "There used to be a place where all the neighbours said hello to each other in the calm summer evening. Where the children chased fireflies. Where the cradling in the front porch offered an escape from everyday troubles, where the cinema showed cartoons on Saturdays. Where the grocery delivered things to your home. Do you remember that place? Maybe from your childhood or just from stories. It has its own charm. That special magic of an American family town. If you build a house in Celebration, you build something much more than a house on a lot. You build a community." Rifkin, 2000: 217.
 - 25 Ioannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, Athens: Psychogios, 1999.
 - 26 Bert de Muynck, 'The Prosthetic Paradox', *Fear and Space: The View of young designers in the Netherlands*, NAI Press, Rotterdam, 2004, pp 8-18.
 - 27 Maria Veltcheva, 'Paris, Berlin, Rome. L'intériorisation de l'extérieur', *Urbanisme*, no346, janvier/février 2006, Paris : France éditions, 2006, pp 54-55.
 - 28 Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2000.
 - 29 *Night of the Living Dead* (1991, directed by Tom Savini, written by John A. Russo, George A. Romero, U.S.A., 92'), *Dawn of the Dead* (2004, directed by Zack Snyder written by James Gunn, USA, Japan, France, 101') and *Day of the Dead* (2008, directed by Steve Miner, written by Jeffrey Reddick, USA, 86').

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