

Zombies and Replicants, The Choreography of Human Dignity: Hollywood's "Blade Runner 2049" and "World War Z"

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The acceptance of violence in cinema today has become the norm. In almost every genre of cinema (even in comedies [Kick Ass] and musicals [Sweeney Todd]) today extreme violence can crop up at some point during the movie. Some film genres are based on violence: horror, war, westerns, crime, terror.

This is especially true of science fiction and zombie movies where 'replicants' (androids/robots) are executed ('retired') and zombies are mowed down with machine guns. And because replicants (Blade Runner 2049) and zombies (World War Z) are not 'human' then the representation of any form of violence can be used to 'take them out'. In both films the replicants and zombies are in revolt globally. If we were to argue that both films were symbolic representations of contemporary global issues then we could explain this depiction of the revolting masses as symbolic of elite anxieties regarding the ever growing masses of slum dwellers and refugees in the world today.

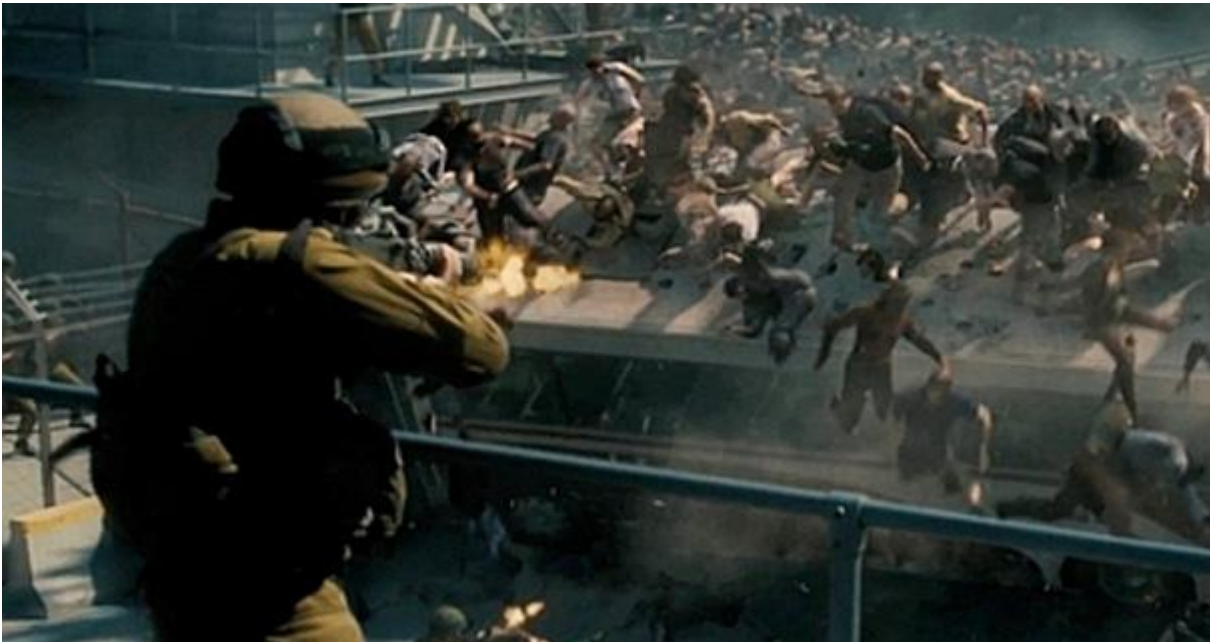
It is believed that 863 [million](#) people live in [slums](#) and around 65 million people live in [refugee camps](#). We live in a global system which has created these problems but is not able to resolve them. Moreover, these numbers are constantly increasing and no state or international organisation has been able to reverse the figures, hence the anxiety.

In [Blade Runner 2049](#) the fear is that the replicants could start reproducing themselves and overrun the planet and in [World War Z](#) masses of zombies have already started to take over the world. In both films the overriding concern is how to stop them. In Blade Runner 2049 a replicant's child must be found and destroyed and in World War Z the discovery is made that inoculation with a pathogen causes the zombies to ignore the humans.

The use of violence to destroy the replicants and zombies is depicted in very graphic scenes. We are being familiarised with regular violent scenes of 'people' being killed with machine guns, shot point blank in the head, knifed in the heart or executed on the spot. We do not question the morality of such actions because they are 'androids', 'robots', 'zombies', etc. However, when such behaviour is shown in films where humans are depicted, do we question it? Do we think about issues of human dignity, justice before the law, the Geneva Conventions, the abolition of capital punishment? Are we becoming like the mob who shouts 'take him out'?

In film-making the movement of actors before the camera is called 'blocking'. This comes from [theatre](#) where small blocks were used to work out the positions of each actor on stage.

[Blocking](#) means working out the details of each actor's moves during filming of each scene. Actors must learn the choreography of hand to hand combat (slaps and punches) and how to work with a gun to look authentic and realistic. The huge increase in realistic violent scenes in cinema has had its physical toll on actors accruing injuries in combat scenes, an increase in stunt actors and ever more realistic computer graphics.



World War Z

On a symbolic level the human body is becoming more objectified as a dehumanised punch bag, while on a philosophical level there is a move away from humanism to an apocalyptic 'posthuman' view. We are becoming less and less shocked at the sight of torture, pumping blood, bones sticking out, severed limbs, massive gashes in the body, knife wounds and multiple bleeding bullet holes.

It wasn't always like this. In the 1930s Hollywood adopted the self-imposed [Hays Code](#) (officially the Motion Picture Production Code) which set out guidelines on what could be depicted in films. While the code covered many aspects of society especially in relation to crime, nudity and religion, it also recommended that 'special care be exercised in the manner in which the following subjects are treated' such as: 'Arson', 'The use of firearms', 'Brutality and possible gruesomeness', 'Technique of committing murder by whatever method', 'Actual hangings or electrocutions as legal punishment for crime' and 'Rape or attempted rape'.

While some may laugh at the prudery and censorship of cinema during those times (which had been rejected by the early 1960s), others see a more human era when violence was implied rather than graphically depicted.



Kick Ass

The issues at stake here though are not the problems of censorship or prudery but the depiction and role of violence in cinema. Cui bono? In society who benefits from the constant portrayal of interhuman and internecine violence in the movies? Cinema has a mass popular base and therefore will influence attitudes in society as people watch and discuss films they see in theatres and on television. Cinema is also extremely costly to make and therefore its content is highly constrained by the type of subject matter elites wish to be viewed. It is often said that the director gets first cut and the producers determine the rest.

It is also known that elites foment controversy to keep the people fighting with each other as a form of divide and rule. By recycling controversies in different forms again and again elites create as many divisions as possible that prevent people uniting as one, and, more importantly, uniting against them. In cinema we constantly see people individually and in groups at each others throats arguing and fighting or facing each other off in various types of gun battles..

Fortunately, cinema also has a tradition of film making which revolves around working class unity and solidarity. This comes down to individual writers and directors with a social consciousness who over the years have made films that explored the lives and struggles of ordinary people. Filmmakers themselves are aware of the potential for decline of a film industry without a code of ethics, where anything goes. In recent years the president of the Union of Cinematographers of Russia, film director Nikita Mikhalkov, initiated the creation of an [ethics](#) charter for the film industry there. The code would be a voluntary, self-regulation of the industry. It is interesting to note that in the United States the Golden Age of Hollywood coincided with the time of the Hays Code.

In the discussion about violence in the cinema part of the debate revolves around just and unjust violence. However, one may ask if the depiction of extreme violence in the revenge of the oppressed is reason enough for the acceptability of its portrayal? Even here the dignity of the human being implies that the ethical imperative is to move away from the horror of extreme violence for the possibility of the creation of a genuinely civilised future.

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