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Title:
Nazi Zombies: Hollywood’s Most Beloved Villain Back from the Dead!

Date:
2025

Citation:
Rosewarne, L. (2025). Nazi Zombies: Hollywood’s Most Beloved Villain Back from the Dead!. Springer Nature Switzerland.

Persistent Link:
https://hdl.handle.net/11343/355725

Nazi Zombies: Hollywood's Most Beloved Villain Back from the Dead!

Lauren Rosewarne

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Abstract

This chapter surveys the Nazi zombie subgenre, presenting an overview of the canon and picking it apart to uncover its drivers, conventions, and appeals. The discussion begins with unpacking the why of this hybrid, notably in light of zombies and Nazis independently being heinous, and thus exploring their diabolical union on screen. This union is often viewed as offensive—contributing, for instance, to the trivialization of the Holocaust—but also uniquely well suited to the horror genre. Not only are Nazis and zombies a perfect screen pairing because of the genre's inclinations towards excess, but also because of some very specific attributes linking the two, notably death and the supernatural. Nazi zombies, however, are a unique presentation distinguished from other undead portrayals on screen in several ways, most notably they are much less likely to appear as mindless drones and instead frequently reference or even independently harbor an agenda. The two agendas underpinning most examples in this subgenre—mad science and super armies—are thus examined, along with the smattering of other more curious motives for undead terror.

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S. Bacon (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of the Zombie*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-24734-7_31-1

Keywords

Zombies · Nazis · Horror · Holocaust · World War II · Genre

Introduction

Nearly a century on from *White Zombie* (1932)—generally considered as the first zombie movie—it is almost taken for granted that this subgenre boasts many different kinds of films: horror, most obviously given the inherently macabre nature of the undead, but also a deluge of hybrid productions: think zombie action films, zombie comedies, and zombie romances. One such hybrid is the zombie Nazi film which fuses the zombie story with characters more commonly associated with history books, war crimes trials, and combat films. Far from being a new kind of production, *King of The Zombies* (1941), followed soon after by its sequel *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943), were the first films with Nazis and zombies together in the one narrative. Decades on and many such examples exist. And just as the zombie subgenre comprises many different types of films, even Nazi zombie films regularly cross genres: *King of The Zombies* and *Revenge of the Zombies* for instance, are both comedy–horror productions which contrast sharply with films like *Horrors of War* (2006) and *Dead Walkers: Rise of the 4th Reich* (2013), which are consciously much darker in tone (albeit sometimes accidentally humorous in light of low production values). The Nazi zombie film in fact, is considered as the "most prolific variation of the Nazi horror subgenre" (Whittall 2020, 171), and certainly there is no shortage of films to draw on in this discussion, spanning the micro-budget *Attack of the Herbals* (2011)—filmmaker Liam Matheson told the *Daily Record*, "Our catering was simple—bring your own sandwiches" (in Millar 2012) —through to *Overlord* (2018) with a reported budget of $38 million (USD) (Mendelson 2018).

This chapter surveys the Nazi zombie subgenre, presenting an overview of the canon and picking it apart to uncover its drivers, conventions, and appeals. The discussion begins with unpacking the why of this hybrid, notably in light of zombies and Nazis independently being heinous, and thus exploring their diabolical union on screen. This union is often viewed as offensive—contributing, for instance, to the trivialization of the Holocaust—but also uniquely well suited to the horror genre. Not only are Nazis and zombies a perfect screen pairing because of the horror genre's inclinations towards excess, but also because of some very specific attributes linking the two, notably death and the supernatural. Nazi zombies, however, are a unique presentation distinguished from other undead portrayals on screen in several ways, most notably they are much less likely to appear as mindless drones and instead frequently reference or even independently harbor an agenda. The two agendas underpinning most examples in this subgenre—mad science and super armies—are thus examined, along with the smattering of other more curious motives for undead terror. Like all genre content, these productions are in dialogue with each other, invariably referencing those films that have gone before and inspiring those that come after. By inhabiting the same small subgenre, sufficient tropes connect

these films to enable a broad overview of their content, as opposed to any necessity for a close textual analysis which, of course, would be a different kind of project.

The Role of Genre

In a chapter that repeatedly references World War II and, more specifically Nazis, it is important to present a clear acknowledgement from the outset that the focus here is on fiction: Nazis may be real and wretched, but zombies are make-believe. More so than just fiction, the films discussed in this chapter are specifically from the horror genre. While, as noted, they might be horror hybrids, these films are not docudramas and thus the role for history is quite limited. As Brian E. Crim in *Planet Auschwitz Holocaust Representation in Science Fiction and Horror Film and Television* notes, "American films featuring Nazi zombies are understandably frivolous and disinterested in history" (Crim 2020, 86). Author and critic John Martin makes a similar point in the documentary *Fascism on a Thread: The Strange Story of Nazisploitation Cinema* (2019) contending "there's no redeeming social value, there's no attempt to put the Holocaust in any sort of perspective or for us to draw any kind of moral conclusions from it, it's just about girls being abused in a concentration camp." While Martin was specifically discussing the Nazisploitation film *Love Camp 7* (1969), his commentary is also relevant to much of the Nazi zombie content discussed in this chapter.

Most films discussed in this chapter have little connection to lived history and thus the events of World War II are primarily only relevant as a backdrop (as in films like *Horrors of War* [2006] and *Zombie Massacre 2: Reich of the Dead* [2015]), aesthetically as illustrated by the widespread use of Swastika imagery and disintegrating Nazi uniforms, or via the very loose harnessing of some of the Nazi atrocities such as science experiments. Such superficial reference to history however, is not the case for all films from this subgenre: Sven Jüngerkes and Christine Wienand (2012) for instance, posit that *Død Snø* (*Dead Snow*) (2009) does attempt to grapple with Norway's complicated history with Nazism. This example, however, is a rarity, and despite the Jüngerkes and Wienand analysis, *Død Snø* (*Dead Snow*) could equally be casually enjoyed by those without any knowledge of Norway's stance during World War II. Most films from this subgenre scarcely deal with Nazism beyond it being a known evil. In fact, in some examples, the Nazi storyline appears to be mostly an afterthought. In Cynthia J. Miller's work on the subgenre, Joe Reed—who wrote and directed *Night of the Zombies* (1981)—is quoted identifying just how late the Nazi aspect came in his project. Reed's original vision was a Japanese zombie narrative but he soon discovered that flying the cast and crew to Japan proved to be cost prohibitive and thus another setting was chosen:

> My travel agent said 'Could they be Nazi zombies instead? I've got a deal here for Germany' and so, we went to Germany and did Nazi zombies (in Miller 2011, 145).

That *Night of the Zombies* ended up as a Nazi zombie film—as opposed to a Japanese Imperial Army zombie film—came down to something as seemingly irrelevant to storytelling as travel costs.

Miller makes the point that Nazis in this subgenre exist as caricatures rather than historic or political figures, and rarely do these films harness historic, political, or ideological ideas:

> For these filmmakers, Nazis are kitsch—Saturday matinee villains—archetypes—caricatures deliberately adopted for their evocative familiarity, as well as the sorts of easily recognized symbols, paraphernalia, and iconography… (Miller 2011, 144).

The depiction of Nazis in cursory, superficial, or even sanitized ways has been widely disparaged. An obvious example of this is the criticism surrounding the sitcom *Hogan's Heroes* (1965–1971) which was set in the fictitious Stalag 13 Prisoner of War camp. As analyzed by Robert Shandley:

> Insofar as World War II serves as less a historical and more a fantastical backdrop to *Hogan's Heroes*, the Holocaust is a bit like an apparition that haunts the series without ever allowing itself to be seen (Shandley 2011, 50).

Some of the films made by Mel Brooks—notably his World War II comedies *The Producers* (1967) or *To Be or Not to Be* (1983)—have been similarly critiqued. When asked about his controversial subject matter choices, Brooks commented:

> I do it to remind the world. But it's not the Holocaust. I can't make fun of the Holocaust. It's too large, too heartbreaking. You can't really deal with it, it's too earth-shattering. But I do use Hitler and Nazis and the guys who perpetrated the outrage. I make fun of them, showing what brutes and pigs they were (in Stratton 2018, 247).

Many of the presentations discussed in this chapter could be viewed similarly: Nazis as brutes and pigs is, afterall, the primary way they are framed in the Nazi zombie genre. These characters are portrayed as villains and their inclusion centers primarily on their evil. These are not characters who are multidimensional, nor are these works morality plays.

While the spectrum of Nazi depictions have been subjected to concerns regarding Holocaust trivialization (Doneson 1996), Nazisploitation productions have specifically been called out for this. Given their cheap production values and the exaggerated tropes they rely upon, such films have frequently been lamented as uniquely problematic. As film scholar Russ Hunter commented in the aforementioned *Fascism on a Thread* (2019) documentary, "the Nazisploitation film is really seen as being the lowest of the low brow. Because it combines Nazism and alludes to what are some of the worst atrocities in history with entertainment." Arguably the cheaper and nastier the content—of which Nazi zombie content almost always is—the more exploitative it can be condemned as.

While *Nazisploitation* often refers to Nazi-themed sexploitation films where both sexualization and sexual abuse play key roles (think the aforementioned *Love Camp*

[1969], along with films like *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* [1975]), the term has also been used as an umbrella that covers popular entertainment media which uses Nazism—be it the ideology or, more commonly, the iconography and aesthetics—as part of its high concept. As demonstrated by the title of Magilow, Bridges and Lugt's anthology *Nazisploitation!: The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture* (2012), the label has been extended to include a range of non-sexploitation productions, including the zombie films focused on in this chapter. In fact, some scholars have explicitly considered the Nazi zombie film as a "subgenre within Nazisploitation" (Jüngerkes and Wienand 2012, 238). In this discussion I focus on those "low-brow" films which are often graphic, boundary-pushing, frequently cheap, enormously exaggerated, and regularly dealing with material considered inappropriate for the mainstream. It should be noted that many early examples of such productions were born during an era where producing and profiting from such material was challenging and thus these films were often outsider and independent productions; as Alexander Fedorov observes in a discussion of Soviet Nazisploitation cinema:

> For quite a long time strict censorship bans—both in the West and in the USSR—did not allow the creators of films on the Nazi topic to turn this kind of media texts into a commercial product, naturalistically emphasizing the scenes of violence and sex (Fedorov 2018, 53).

Of course, the very reason why the Holocaust was so shocking and continues to remain not only traumatic but as a source of ongoing tension as related to how it is discussed and depicted, is why the idea of Nazi zombies continue to be such an attractive proposition for filmmakers and for audiences.

The Why of the Mash-Up

As screen characters, both zombies and Nazis have individually terrifying filmographies. Zombie films like *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), and more recent productions like *REC* (2007), *Busanhaeng* (*Train to Busan*) (2016), and *The Wailing* (2016), appear on many scariest films of all time lists. Nazis, similarly, have long served as "Hollywood's most beloved villain" (Strzelczyk 2000, 94), and regularly appear on lists of films considered as the most disturbing: think titles like the *Idi I smotri* (*Come and See*) (1985), *The Devil's Rock* (2011), and *Ghosts of War* (2020).

To bring Nazis and zombies together, therefore, can be seen as unnecessary, over the top and a little like gilding the lily. When these characters are independently terrifying, is there really any need to go further? In a *Guardian* review of *Overlord* (2018) for instance, critic Steve Rose asks this question, posing: "When you're making a war movie, do you really need extra horror? The new JJ Abrams-produced *Overlord* thinks so" (Rose 2018). Arguably nothing is truly "needed" when it comes to film, but as Kobi Kabalek observes in a discussion of Nazi zombies, "new kinds of scary monsters and super creeps are always in need" (Kabalek 2014). Horror is renowned for regularly going much further than is necessary. It is afterall, a genre built upon taking things that are scary and making them terrifying, and making

things that are disgusting completely revolting—all the while doing it with lashings of excess. A selling point for Nazi zombie films is, as James J. Ward notes, the presentation of a horrific "worst-case scenario" (Ward 2012, 108). Dead Nazis being reanimated in zombie form certainly fits this worst-case scenario description. Horror is known for being over-the-top, and for pushing concepts and audience reactions to the limit. Afterall, the draw of the genre is exposure to sensory stimuli that are far beyond normal daily sensations. Horror audiences regularly actively seek out the unnecessary, the disproportionate, the proverbial gilded lily. Nazi zombie content is part of this story; something Tommy Wirkola, who directed *Død Snø* (*Dead Snow*) (2009), commented on:

> a Nazi is the perfect movie-villain, no doubt about it. If you combine that with one of the other type of cool "villains"—zombies—then you have the ultimate bad guy. I mean, what is more evil than a zombie? A NAZI ZOMBIE! (in Miller 2011, 144)

Zombies are scary because of their inherent defiance of the natural order. These are characters who literally rise from the dead. Not only do they buck conventions related to death being an "end," but their resurrected forms also evades standard efforts to kill an enemy: because zombies are already dead—albeit reanimated—"killing" them to thwart their malice is often difficult if not regularly impossible. Nazis provide a different kind of terror. Unlike the fictional character of the zombie, Nazis are real-life monsters who are responsible for some of history's most brutal treatment of human beings. Unlike zombies that exist as fictional bogeymen, the Nazi atrocities are well-documented. If an objective in a horror film is to make the horrific characters as petrifying as possible, then drawing on some of history's most notorious villains is a shortcut way to achieve this. Imagery such as the swastika works to evoke fear and loathing and serves to remind us of some of the most significant carnage committed in human history. The inclusion of a Nazi character in a horror film thus works to ratchet up the awfulness, the horror, and to notably flag that this is not just a standard horror film villain: this is one of history's most terrifying figures *compounded* with the supernatural, ungovernable monster of the zombie.

Beyond simply both being scary, there are some specific thematic reasons that Nazis and zombies make for a suitably frightening union on screen: both have links to death and the supernatural, as explored in the next sections.

Death and the Supernatural

Under Hitler's regime, the "Final Solution" —the abbreviation of what was more formally known as "Final Solution to the Jewish Question" —referred to the policy of exterminating Jews in Europe. The inextricable link between Nazis and the mass murder means the on-screen coupling of Nazis and zombies makes a kind of sense: in real life Nazis are responsible for the death of millions of people, and zombies in movies have similarly gnashed and gnawed their way through millions of victims.

When a Nazi is presented in a film, the character embodies all the evil that audiences know were committed during World War II and thus serves to predict the screen atrocities yet to come. When a zombie is depicted in cinema, the character similarly serves to remind viewers of all the butchery inflicted by this filmic monster and to forewarn of what the current film will entail.

While reflecting deaths and foreshadowing more brutality is the common screen role for both Nazis and zombies, the two are further linked by having close ties to the supernatural. The horror genre provides a perfect vehicle for the supernatural to be scoped being not only unencumbered by burdens of historic accuracy, but regularly ravenous for content that actively *deviates* from the natural order.

While contemporary zombie films offer a range of different explanations for zombification—a virus, for instance, in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), tainted tea in *Attack of the Herbals* (2011), a chemical leak in *Busanhaeng* (*Train to Busan*) (2016), or a fungus as in *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016)—the origins of the zombie archetype actually lie in Haitian folklore where zombification is a result of voodoo magic. While voodoo themes are identifiable in zombie films more broadly, within the Nazi zombie subgenre, zombification is only rarely explained by voodoo: the voodoo-themes in *King of The Zombies* (1941) for instance, are an anomaly. While historically, Nazis may have very little connection to voodoo specifically, they nonetheless do have strong ties to other forms of mystical and magical thinking and such ideas are reflected—and also portrayed—in film in a range of ways. The word "evil" for instance, is frequently used to describe the atrocities committed by Nazis. While in common parlance the word is often used as a euphemism for bad, there is also the definition more closely aligned with Christianity and the idea that evil is the power bestowed by Satan. While the occult origins of Nazism is widely discussed by scholars (Goodrick-Clarke 1992; François 2023), some work in fact, makes the more specific case that the evils of Nazism had a Satanic basis (Gordin 1939, Spence 1940, Kurlander 2017). While understanding the underpinnings of the ideologies that Hitler and the Nazis used to justify their brutality is beyond the scope of this chapter, the idea that there was something *supernaturally* bad at play has some precedence: be it grounded in actual inspirational ideology or more so in attempts to make sense of the incomprehensible.

The very concept of a Nazi zombie, of course, is a supernatural idea: this character clearly defies science and the laws of nature. Within narratives other supernatural ideas are also alluded to, albeit in a limited fashion. In *Le lac des morts vivants* (*Zombie Lake*) (1981) for example, magic seems to be at play via an amulet given by a German soldier, Karl (Pierre-Marie Escourrou), to a woman in the village (Nadine Pascal). The necklace is implied to have special powers connected to resurrection. In *Blood Creek* (2009), the occult interests of the Nazis are conveyed through Richard (Michael Fassbender), a Nazi preoccupied with a runestone believed to have the power of resurrection. *Død Snø* (*Dead Snow*) (2009) also references the supernatural through its use of Easter as the backdrop—the very time in the Christian calendar that commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ—as the time that German soldiers reanimate as zombies to terrorize a group of students. While Nazis do not defy science or the laws of nature—afterall their

real-life crimes are very well documented—certainly their crimes defy the laws of morality and humanity and the language used to describe them frequently mirrors how we might describe other supernatural entities: as Gregory Claeys observes in a discussion on Auschwitz: "The Germans, indeed, were often called monsters, even, as individuals, 'a monster conscious of his monstrosity'" (Claeys 2016, 208). Scholars point to the use of such language as a means to dehumanize via use of descriptors associated with superhuman creatures such as demons, monsters, and Satan (as contrasted to the dehumanization that the Nazis did to people including the Jews, likening them to *subhuman* creatures like animals [Bar-Tal 1989]). Viewing Nazis as monstrous is well-established; taking this idea further and framing them on screen as *actual* monsters feels less like a stretch and almost like a predictable progression for the genre.

The supernatural can, however, also be viewed as playing a more symbolic role in Nazi zombie films where the idea is not only about physical resurrection of Nazis, but about the rebirth of Nazi ideology. As Lester D. Friedman observes in his discussion of Nazi horror:

> the films represented a persistent fear not only that the Nazis have survived but that, under the right circumstances, it could all happen again… [C]haracters in these films personify the endurance of the Nazi philosophy in our own time (Friedman 2004, 268).

While the intricacies of Nazi ideology generally are not a central feature of these films, certain aspects are indeed highlighted. In *Nazis at the Center of the Earth* (2012) for instance, a group of present-day researchers in Antarctica are kidnapped by Nazi zombies led by the infamous Nazi doctor, Dr. Josef Mengele (Christoper H. Johnson), albeit in zombie form. On discovering that one of the visiting scientists, Aaron Blechman (Andre Tenerelli), is a Jew, Mengele promptly murders him. While in this example, one of the drivers of Nazi orthodoxy—Jewish extermination—is portrayed explicitly, in most instances the focus is on the broader objective of simply restoring the Reich. In the same film for instance, Hitler lives on, with his head having been saved and implanted onto a large robot body. While of course, this is a story of resurrection conveyed through a kind of Frankenstein's monster display, it is also an example where Nazi ideology is presented as physically contained within the brain of one person. The same idea is at the heart of the unsubtly titled *They Saved Hitler's Brain* (1968), where Hitler's head is in a jar awaiting the technology to revive him along with his slain army. Such narratives, of course, can be likened to those centered on cloning Hitler (Bridges 2012), where—as in the presentations discussed in this section—Nazi ideology is inextricably linked to Adolf Hitler as a person, and more specifically his flesh. A variation of this idea is apparent in *The Frozen Dead* (1966). Doctor Norberg (Dana Andrews) works at the behest of the Nazis to resurrect corpses in order to restore the Reich. While he manages to "awaken" multiple corpses, it proves to be a struggle to have them functional: "To revive a body, I've done that. But to revive a brain…" he laments. The brain part of course, is crucial: a restored Reich not only needs mindless drones but notably so drones that are willing to fight for a particular ideology. While these concepts seem

both a bit silly and extreme, they also have relevance to established real-life military tactics. Common in contemporary discussions of conflict for instance, is the notion of "cutting off the head" of a regime. The idea here is a literal *and* a figurative one, with the head symbolizing the source of ideology.

While this section has focused on the supernatural link between Nazis and zombies, a point Elizabeth Bridges makes in her work on clone-themed Nazisploitaion films is that this is not, in fact, the source of most Nazi monster displays: "As is often the case with zombies, scientific means, not supernatural ones, produce the new Nazis or revive old ones" (Bridges 2012, 78). As discussed in the following sections, science does play a central role in these films; stronger in fact, than the supernatural, albeit generally only articulated with as much detail as the examples explored in this section.

Diabolical Experimentation

Part of the horrific legacy of Nazis in World War II is their interest in science. Their medical research programs regularly involved non-consenting humans being subjected to unethical, unregulated, painful, and frequently deadly experiments. Of particular relevance to this discussion is some of their very specific life–death experiments. In *Doctors from Hell: The Horrific Account of Nazi Experiments on Humans* (2005), Vivien Spitz documents a range of horrific Nazi science projects: from the deadly freezing experiments designed to treat soldiers who had been exposed to harsh conditions, through to prisoners being forcibly injected with everything from pus to diseases like malaria and typhus. Sinister doctors undertaking unorthodox experiments is, of course, a trope apparent in a range of horror films such as *Les yeux sans visage* (*Eyes Without a Face*) (1960), *Rakkî sukai daiamondo* (*Lucky Sky Diamond*) (1990), *American Mary* (2012), *Tusk* (2015), and *A Cure for Wellness* (2016). Certainly for directors of Nazi zombie films specifically, inspiration was indeed drawn from these real-life Nazi experiments. Cynthia J. Miller quotes Mark Makilaakso who directed *War of the Dead* (2011), and who identified his own interests in these experiments:

> I was interested about the true stories of Hitler's science experiences during WWII and it was just too damn good an idea to use the Nazis doing secret tests to create the perfect human being but ending up with Zombies and killing everybody (in Miller 2011, 141).

Such ideas are harnessed in Nazi zombie narratives whereby mad Nazi scientists conduct experiments that lead—either by design or accident—to the creation of zombies. While Nazi zombie films are generally not also medical horror films, in some instances the horror is indeed derived specifically from unorthodox science. In the aforementioned *Nazis at the Center of the Earth* (2012) for instance, the Nazi zombies sustained themselves for over 70 years by taking the skin and organs from those they kidnap: the film includes brutal scenes of people having skin ripped from their bodies and their brains snatched from their skulls.

While there is no evidence that real-life Nazis were experimenting with creating zombies, nevertheless, because of their well-documented disturbed thinking on a number of other scientific subjects, it does not really feel like a stretch for filmmakers to posit that perhaps they did dabble in this area; something historian Noah Charney explores in an article for *Salon*:

> The idea that the Nazis looked into the possibility of raising the dead might sound like an outtake from an Indiana Jones movie. But this is only because those plots were inspired by real, but little-known, facts. The Nazis did, in fact, have teams of researchers hunting for supernatural treasures, religious relics and entrances to a magical land of telepathic faeries and giants… (Charney 2015).

Further, as discussed later in this chapter, in light of their real-life preoccupation with military dominance, the idea of a having a super undead army would undoubtedly have been desirable. As Charney writes—when addressing whether Nazis really undertook experiments of this kind— "even asking the question may sound preposterous, a world of people believe that such a program was in the works—and knowing what facts we do about Nazi research and beliefs, this concept is entirely plausible" (Charney 2015). Certainly as illustrated by the films discussed in this chapter, zombification is widely presented as connected to Nazi science.

In *Attack of the Herbals* (2011), two men in contemporary Scotland find a crate washed ashore in a fishing village. Inside is a tea that is not only highly addictive but which turns people into zombies. While the zombies in the film are not Nazis—rather, the Scottish locals become zombies after drinking the tea—the tea itself in fact came from a Nazi experiment conducted in World War II, designed to bring soldiers back to life. While in *Attack of the Herbals* the tea is used out of context for humorous effect, in other films the experiments have more nefarious intent within the narrative.

In an early such example, *Creature with the Atomic Brain* (1955), a mad Nazi scientist revives corpses and implants them with chips that enable them to be controlled by radio. While it is a Nazi scientist who creates this technology, the motive is less to do with political ideology and instead is connected to a vengeance-seeking gangster. In other examples, the objective is indeed more ideological. In *Hell Hunters* (1987) for instance, a Nazi scientist develops a serum—extracted from spider venom—that turns people into fascist zombies. In *Overlord* (2018), a serum is used to create Nazi super soldiers, albeit with gross deformities. The found-footage horror film *Frankenstein's Army* (2013), sees a descendent of Victor Frankenstein reanimating Nazis to form them into a human–machine superior army: in one instance, one of the so-called "zombots" is a reanimated Nazi with knives for hands. In *Malnazidos* (*Valley of the Dead*) (2022), zombies—created by a Nazi experiment—somehow get involved in the Spanish civil war.

While of course, the presence of Nazis in a film means that the plot has at least some connective tissue to history and politics, it is equally worth briefly spotlighting that such films can also be viewed—akin to the deluge of similar sci-fi themed horror—as about science and scientists out of control. One of the most quoted lines

from *Jurassic Park* (1993) is Dr. Ian Malcolm's (Jeff Goldblum) remark, "Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether they could, they didn't stop to think if they should." This idea of science existing separate from ethics and morality is, of course, an undercurrent of many science-themed/technophobia horror films, invariably involving a "mad scientist" caricature who has cooked up something in a laboratory that threatens humanity. As Crim observes in *Planet Auschwitz*, in many respects these "the plot is as old as the horror genre itself—mad scientist unleashes evil on an unsuspecting world" (Crim 2020, 85). When a mad scientist character has Nazi leanings, the possible horrific outcomes increase exponentially.

Of course, as is the case for almost all Nazi zombie films where the reanimation is explained by science, the practicalities of the technology are rarely articulated: as Bridges observes, "Typically, the scientific basis for producing zombies is a minor focus, while the real interest for horror viewers lies in zombie mayhem rather than scientific accuracy" (Bridges 2012, 79). Therefore, while science is a recurrent theme, much like the Nazism, it's role is perfunctory at best.

As alluded to throughout this section, a recurrent driver for the scientific experiments undertaken in these films is the creation of zombies to populate a Nazi super army.

The Drive for Military Dominance

Fiction offers many opportunities to rewrite history. The loss of the Nazis in World War II for instance, provides a prime opportunity for this. While, in real life, the Nazis were conducting experiments designed to improve their military capacities and endurance, within narratives, such experiments repeatedly manifest in attempts to create zombie super soldiers. In *Overlord* (2018) for example, the SS commander, Captain Wafner (Pilou Asbæk), discusses his Nazi zombie army and comments, "The thousand-year Reich needs thousand-year soldiers." An army of the undead—and thus the unkillable—is presented as a means to secure a Nazi victory, alternatively as a means to reactivate the Reich in the aftermath.

From the earliest example from this subgenre, the rationale for zombies is connected to military objectives. *King of The Zombies* (1941) for instance, centers around a creepy doctor with a German accent, Dr. Miklos Sangre (Henry Victor), who has imprisoned an American general with the intent to extract state secrets. In the film's sequel, *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943), the idea of harnessing zombies for military strategy is ratcheted up substantially. In the film, another Nazi doctor, Max Heinrich von Altermann (John Carradine), specifically articulates a yen to create an army of super soldiers:

> I am prepared to supply my country with a new army, numbering as many thousands as are required… An army that will not need to be fed, that cannot be stopped by bullets, that is, in fact, invincible... Against an army of zombies, no armies could stand. Why, even blown half to bits—undaunted by fire and gas—zombies would fight on so long as the brain cells which receive and execute commands still remain intact.

Here, not only does Altermann highlight the obvious selling points of, as he terms it, an "army of the living dead," but also establishes a template for mad scientific experiments and the very specific military logic of creating a super army. In *Frozen Dead* (1966), the attempt to resurrect the Reich involves dead Nazi soldiers being cryogenically preserved in different places around the world with the intention of resurrecting them into an army when the technology has sufficiently advanced. In *Puppet Master III: Toulon's Revenge* (1991), André Toulon (Guy Rolfe) is a puppeteer with special reanimating skills. He is kidnapped by a Nazi scientist with the intent of being forced to create a super army of Nazi zombies. In *Shock Waves* (1977), the plot centers on an exiled SS commander who created the Death Corps: an army of unstoppable, unkillable zombie soldiers. In *Overlord* (2018), American soldiers discover that a Nazi research facility has created super-strength Nazi zombie soldiers. The same premise is apparent in the *Outpost* trilogy (2008, 2012, 2013), whereby a Reanimation Machine is constructed to resurrect dead Nazis to create an invincible army with superhuman strength and stamina and the ability to heal after injury. In *Horrors of War* (2006), World War II is coming to a close and the fear of loss sees the Nazis resort to extreme measures: the use of zombies as well as werewolves. In *Dead Walkers: Rise of the 4th Reich* (2013), the Nazis have used the time since World War II to wage a comeback: their plan is an army of undead soldiers. In *Operation Nazi Zombies* (2003) initially the zombie army had been a Nazi idea, but the American CIA decided to replicate the experiment, to predictably disastrous effect. In *Zombie Isle* (2014), it is the 1970s and a professor takes a group of students to a supposedly uninhabited island not found on any maps: in fact the island is populated by zombies who are the creation of a Nazi mad scientist. Similar ideas are at play in *Deep Fear* (2022): in the early 1990s in Paris, a group of students visit the catacombs. One part of the catacombs not present on any maps is inhabited by a zombie Nazi soldier. A variation on the same idea is *Zombie Massacre 2: Reich of the Dead* (2015) where, during World War II, the Nazis turn the prisoners of the camps into zombie soldiers; much like what transpires in *Hell Hunters* (1987).

In Abigail Whittall's discussion of *Død Snø* (*Dead Snow*) (2009) and the *Outpost* (2008, 2012, 2013) trilogy, the point is made that while the zombies "use their teeth, they continue to use their army-issued weapons as well," with the effect being that while the monsters are zombie-like in appearance they are "not mindless in the way that zombies often are" (Whittall 2020, 172). Jüngerkes and Wienand make the same point about *Død Snø* (*Dead Snow*) (2009): "they appear to exercise free will, their actions follow a structure, and they seem to communicate, if only with each other" (Jüngerkes and Wienand 2012, 250). Seemingly, by virtue of them being *Nazi* zombies—as opposed to the unaffiliated zombies we see elsewhere in cinema—they can buck many of the character's common attributes such as mindlessness, poor communication, and even fast movement. Crim makes this point in *Planet Auschwitz*: "Nazi zombies are intentional in their violence, demonstrably evil, organized, led either by a zombified commander or malevolent humans still loyal to the defeated ideology, and militarized" (Crim 2020, 83).

While, as discussed in the Introduction, most of these films are not very historical or political, nonetheless the films discussed in this section do hinge some of their

terror to the possibility of a Nazi resurgence; as Daniel H. Magilow terms it in *Nazisploitation!* they introduce "the prospect of a Nazi afterlife" (Magilow 2012, 13): that through the mad science and zombification, Nazism can be resurrected. While of course, it is a trope in horror for the dead to not really be dead, nonetheless obviously there is also an additional element of horror in the idea of reviving a political ideology that led to the deaths of literally millions of people.

Other Motives

Aside from the scientific experiments and the creation of super armies, several other motives—with varying levels of plausibility—are presented to explain the actions of these Nazi zombies. The fact that the zombies in the films discussed in this chapter are *Nazis*—that a film bothers to give them any kind of group affiliation—presents the possibility of motive: they are Nazis so of course they are evil and inherent evil is why they commit horrific acts.

In *Puppet Master III: Toulon's Revenge* (1991), while the zombies are intended to be part of a super army, in practice, André uses his reanimation powers to avenge the death of his wife. Revenge simillary plays a role in *Hard Rock Zombies* (1985), a film that features both Nazis and zombies, albeit not quite Nazi zombies: the rock band at the center of the narrative are killed by the Nazi town counsel and thus the band—in zombie form—take their revenge against their Nazi assailants. In *Le lac des morts vivants* (*Zombie Lake*) (1981), motive centers, seemingly on one of the zombies, Karl, protecting his young mortal daughter who still resides in the village. In *Night of the Zombies* (1981)—also known as *The Chilling*—the zombies want to unleash on the world Gamma-693—the chemical weapon that turned them into zombies—as revenge against the living. In *Oasis of the Zombies* (1982), the zombies are from the Afrika Korps, presumably modeled on the actual German soldiers sent to North Africa during World War II. In the film, the zombies seem compelled to continue their occupation of the area and also to guard the stash of Nazi gold. Similar ideas are at play in *Død Snø* (*Dead Snow*) whereby part of the Nazi zombie soldiers' motives appears to be reclaiming gold that they had stored in the cabin. These examples offer audiences a little more than a "restore the Reich" motive as a driver, utilizing two motives common in storytelling across all genres: revenge and greed.

Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed the Nazi zombie subgenre, identifying and examining some of the key themes that unite the presentations, as well as exploring some of the tensions underpinning the films. While using history as a prompt but very rarely as any kind of actual source material, these films take the villains responsible for some of the world's worst atrocities and manages to make them even scarier and more diabolical by connecting them to one of horror's perennial villains: zombies. As testified by many movies that comprise this genre, filmmakers continue to find

inspiration in uniting two evils, and, seemingly, audience appetite for such films continues to be unrelenting.

Competing Interest Declaration The author(s) has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.

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