

The Girl with all the Gifts, Colm McCarthy (2016), as Post-Horror – Post-Apocalyptic, Post-Modern and Post- Romero, Zombie Film



HUBERT LE BOISSELIER

Univ. Polytechnique des Hauts-de-France, F-59313 Valenciennes, France

Abstract: David Church's definition of post-horror as a sub-genre which is characterized by "formal minimalism" (Church, 2021: 13) and which downplays action scenes as well as explicit horror and gore, seems to exclude *de facto* the most corporeal and grotesque sub-genre in horror production, namely zombie fiction. However, as *The Girl with all the Gifts* (Colm McCarthy, 2016) shows, post-horror's concern for "family dramas about grief, mourning and monstrous reproduction" (Church, 2021: 13), probably contributes to bridging the gap between the two sub-genres. In addition to this, the alleged explicitness and conventional narrative of zombie fiction, such as they can be noticed in McCarthy's film, might be questioned if ever these stylistic traits are analyzed as manifestations of the grotesque. My contention is that Bakhtin's ideation of grotesque realism and of the carnivalesque, allows the viewer to perceive the ambivalence of the sub-genre's conventions and figures. *The Girl with all the Gifts'* grotesque and carnivalesque aesthetics and discourse, that can also be related to the eco-critical approach of genre film, thereby inscribes zombie fiction and the zombie figure within the realm Church explores, that of modern, self-aware, subversive and ambivalent horror.

Keywords: Zombie; Carnavalesque; Grotesque; Mikhaïl Bakhtin; Post-Horror; Ecocriticism

Résumé : Dans sa réflexion sur le sous-genre qu'il nomme « *post-horror* », David Church propose une définition de ce phénomène récent dans laquelle il met en avant le minimalisme formel (Church, 2021 : 13) tout en écartant ce qui s'apparente à la violence et au *gore*. De toute évidence, la figure du zombie ne peut qu'être exclue, ne

peut que se placer à la marge de ce cadre générique. Pourtant, *The Girl with all the Gifts* (Colm McCarthy, 2016), en mettant en scène ce que Church appelle la reproduction familiale et monstrueuse du deuil (Church, 2021 : 13), contribue à nourrir une forme de porosité des frontières entre ce cycle décrit par Church, que la critique nomme parfois « *elevated horror* » et la tradition du *gore* / grotesque incarnée par la fiction zombie dont le film de McCarthy est une formulation. Ma proposition consistera à montrer que le concept de carnivalesque développé par Bakhtine permet de mettre en valeur l’ambivalence du film zombie et dans le même mouvement, de situer *The Girl with all the Gifts* ainsi que la fiction zombie en général, dans un espace esthétique où se développe un discours éco-critique et subversif, méta-filmique et ambivalent, qui n’est pas si éloigné de celui du « *post-horror* ».

Mots-clés : Zombie, carnivalesque, grotesque, Mikhaïl Bakhtine, *post-horror*, écocritique

Introduction

My purpose in this article is to posit that Colm McCarthy’s *The Girl with all the Gifts*, a post-apocalyptic zombie film, namely the most corporeal and grotesque sub-genre in horror production, could qualify for a place in the “post-horror” or “elevated horror” cycle, whose stylistic, narrative and thematic traits have more in common with art films than with mainstream horror. In other words, I will strive to reconcile two domains of horror whose aesthetics seem to represent two opposing poles of the genre. To this end, I will draw on Mikhaïl Bakhtin’s reflection on and ideation of the carnivalesque and grotesque realism. Indeed, the two notions are particularly suitable conceptual instruments for studying the evolution and dynamics of the genre, and for emphasizing the ambivalence of themes and figures belonging to horror.

Although he is tackling a new sub-genre that could be expected to be restrictive, given the various labels that have been associated with it (“elevated”, “smart”, “indie”, “prestige” or “post-horror”), David Church’s definition is anything but narrow and limited. By choosing the term “post-horror”, Church suggests that this current cycle of horror films does not actually break with generic precedents but has built “a stylistic approach that attempts to both contain and move beyond” past horror tradition (Church, 2021: 37-8). His focus is first on the influence of art film and art horror modernist stylistic features upon “post-horror” aesthetics. The current cycle stands out from more conventional production via what he calls “formal minimalism” (Church, 2021: 11) which culminates in open endings “as (an) extension of narrative ambiguity” (Church, 2021: 19): the implicitness of post-horror dread conveys a sense of fantastic hesitation which can be opposed to the manifestations of monstrosity or gore

characteristic of mainstream horror films. "Formal minimalism" implies that films generally eschew "jump scares, frenetic editing, and energetic and/or handheld cinematography in favor of cold and distanced shot framing, longer-than-average shot durations, slow camera movements, and stately narrative pacing" (Church, 2021: 11), and most often downplay gore moments by way of a distanced visual style. Church completes this description which is essentially based on formal traits by insisting on the cycle's concern for "negative affects", mainly "family dramas about grief, mourning and monstrous reproduction" as well as for the sociopolitical context (Church, 2021: 13). If the ideological elements connect post-horror to generic tradition, their crucial difference lies in the cinematography which characterizes the current cycle, making it reminiscent of *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968) or *Don't Look Now* (1973) to name a few examples bearing the same characteristics, or of the narrative strategies found in Jacques Tourneur's famous RKO fantastic films.

Church goes on to devise a table whose aim is to organize the corpus of post-horror's films into two categories: on the one hand, the primary texts, displaying the minimalist qualities "for most of their duration", and on the other hand, the secondary list in which films share the same stylistic traits as the core texts while at the same time or eventually, showing "action-oriented pacing [...] or uncharacteristically violent scenes" (Church, 2021: 15). His approach is more nuanced than this dichotomy may suggest at first glance: he describes "these subdivisions [...] as potentially fluid", thus allowing the table to remain scalable and open to films that do not comply with every single major prescription Church has formulated.

My stance is that *The Girl with all the Gifts* combines conventional generic traits such as a series of violent and gore scenes or a post-apocalyptic narrative inspired by the tradition of the sub-genre, with more contemplative and restrained filming, as well as a sub-text enhancing "familial traumas" and "the negative affects" that Church considers as essential to post-horror. In that respect, not only can Colm McCarthy's film be included in Church's secondary list of peripheral texts, but it could also be termed post-Romerian precisely because, in its own particular way, it moves beyond past horror tradition. My contention is finally to suggest that gore and grotesque horror, particularly the zombie sub-genre as it has been developing since the beginning of the 21st century, might be considered as a new stage in the history of horror film, a new wave that, for all its explicitness, is as subversive, as self-reflexive and as innovative as the current post-horror film wave.

The Girl with all the Gifts as post-apocalyptic and eco-critical zombie virus film

The Girl with all the Gifts undoubtedly belongs to the post-apocalyptic-zombie-virus sub-genre. Although the “z” word is never used, the creatures have many of the characteristics of the zombie(s) developed by George Romero or his followers, and the narrative reproduces most of the sub-genre’s conventions. William Kyle Bishop provides a very useful definition of the zombie fiction that can be expanded so as to describe McCarthy’s film: “the apocalyptic invasion of our world by hordes of cannibalistic contagious, and animated corpses” (Bishop, 2010: 19).

The film starts in a military compound surrounded by hordes of “hungries” after the outbreak of a fungal infection¹ that has wiped out the greater part of the human population. The first part takes place in this military and research compound where a group of children are kept in containment and raised because they possess a variant of the disease: as they were still in the womb during the outbreak and did not succumb, they are considered as a special breed of the “hungries” and used for experiment by Dr Caldwell’s team of surgeons and researchers who want to find a cure for the disease. Several elements in this description are obviously related to the genre. The uncontrolled disease, the returning corpses, the collusion between the military and a crew of scientists, all these elements are conventional components of the sub-genre. The military compound can even be seen as the extension or the reinterpretation of the Gothic haunted house or castle in which unholy practices – medical and scientific experiments – are led by some mad and inhuman scientist, which would relate the film not only to the Gothic tradition but also to Romero’s reformulations of the trope. I equally agree with Bishop’s remark that the zombie subgenre, “must also be viewed as part of the Gothic tradition”, not only because it adapts Gothic spaces but also because zombies manifest “the predominant anxieties of their times [...] anxieties usually repressed or ignored” (Bishop, 2010: 25). This analysis obviously takes into account Romero’s tradition of societal satire that has become a convention of the sub-genre, exposing the responsibility of humans and human society in their own destruction. McCarthy’s film does explore this trend in the first part of the film as well as in the second. However, the natural cause given for the end of the world also echoes the current eco-anxiety and relates *The Girl with all the Gifts* to the wave of eco-critic and eco-gothic cinema.

1. The fungal infection is the *Ophiocordyceps Unilateralis*, a genus growing on insects, especially on ants, and called the zombie-ant disease. It results in the alteration of the host’s behavioral pattern and eventually in its death.

The fungal infection that has been destroying mankind, differs from the chemical, man-made compounds that have started the plague in most of the previous zombie fictions. The *cordyceps* is a living organism spreading an infection often called “the zombie-ant fungus” and originating from the ecosystem. As such it can be interpreted as a metaphor of “the fear of an impending environmental catastrophe” (Smith & Hughes, 2013: 6) that would be initiated by a vengeful ecosystem. As the action is moving from the military compound to a natural environment before exploring London, which is invaded by plant and dominated by a huge tree literally bearing the poisoned fruit of the zombie virus, the film is shifting from the concept of Gothic-like haunted castle to that of “nature as haunted house” (*Ibid.*, 2013: 9). If Romeroian zombie fiction probably involved an eco-critic sub-text, Mc Carthy’s film explicitly creates zombies which may appear as a “monstrous version of nature” (*Ibid.*, 2013: 11).

London: Fiction and reality

The second part of the film starts after the compound has been overrun by the hungries. If the first part echoes the structure of the siege film as it had been developed by Romero in his first zombie trilogy, the second part takes up the motif of the escaping group of survivors in search of a safe place. Mélanie, the main protagonist and the gifted girl of the film title; Ms Justineau, her and the other children hungries’ school mistress; Dr. Caldwell, Sergeant Parks and another soldier, Kieran Gallagher, all set off towards London where they find shelter in an abandoned hospital. This part of the film, which takes place in London, reveals two singular aspects of McCarthy’s take on zombie fiction: the first concerns the way the town is shown and the uncanniness of the views of London; the second is related to the status of Mélanie in the group of survivors.

The town is filmed via a series of long-distance shots and vertical views on the deserted streets and buildings. Such a presentation of London or of any town after the zombie apocalypse, is a motif of the sub-genre: one of the most spectacular and innovating occurrences of the motif can be seen in Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later* (2002) at the beginning of the film.² As Colm McCarthy explains, some of the views of the town where the survivors take shelter, were shot in Pripjat (Wiseman, 2016),

2. The protagonist is seen awakening in an empty hospital where the first clues of disorder can be perceived. He then walks in the streets of London: the town is deserted by humans and the signs of the apocalypse become obvious. Similar scenes of chaos having overcome a city are equally shown in the opening sequence of *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (Alexander Witt, 2004), or *Land of the Dead* (George Romero, 2005) and *Welcome to Zombieland* (Ruben Fleisher, 2009), to name but a few in the sub-genre.

which is an abandoned city in northern Ukraine. Pripyat is located three kilometers from Chernobyl and was evacuated after the explosion of the Nuclear Power Plant in 1986. The director’s choice is manifestly significant. The shots taken in Pripjat enable the director to emphasize one of the themes of zombie fiction, namely the self-destructiveness of human activity, whether one thinks of the unchecked ambitions of science or of the ceaseless wars waged by human beings. Seeing the ruins of the town, one might also refer to the drone views of Aleppo wiped out by Russian bombings, views that circulated the Internet and photos that appeared in the media in 2016. The choice of Ukraine as the place where the sequence is shot, in the context of annexation of Crimea in March 2014, as well as in that of the invasion of the country by the Federation of Russia in 2022, takes on a meaning that probably exceeds McCarthy’s intentions when the views were made, and yet, it is as if they were the expression of a prospective past, in which past, present and future collide, giving these images an uncanny permanence. As a consequence, we might see the views of London as echoes of past and future disasters that fell – will fall – upon humanity and at the same time as illustrations of the current state of human relations and activity: the collision of the Chernobyl returning images with the present views of Aleppo, the uncanniness of the co-existence between past destruction and chaos yet to come in Ukraine – and to a certain extent with all the haunting views showing towns like Baghdad or New York disfigured by bombings or covered in ashes, illustrates in a tragic way, the state of human civilization. Although no interview of Colm McCarthy confirms this analysis, it seems to me that his film, his own version of the zombie fiction, by providing the viewer with haunting images of death and destruction, perpetuates the Romerian satirical stance while at the same time reactivating the design by delving into contemporary issues and recent conflicts.

Mélanie as “resisting” zombie



The second remark concerning the second part of the film, is related to Mélanie’s status. As the group of survivors are discovering the streets of London, they become aware that the place is surrounded by hungries: therefore, they need to rely on Mélanie for food and in order to help them avoid the creatures. Zombie fiction conventionally describes a society whose structures have broken down, and usually investigates the issue of human extinction. The post-apocalyptic sub-genre relates the efforts of a surviving group of humans to overcome the chaos which coincides with the end of civilization as we know it and the invasion of the world by zombies who finally replace the humans. *The Girl with all the Gifts* fits this pattern of replacement and reversals in a very radical way.

Indeed, while the first scenes show the zombie children in a state of utter subjugation, treated like prisoners and eventually guinea pigs, on the contrary, the second part of the film inverts the hierarchy as the last survivors depend upon Mélanie’s readiness to help them find a way out of London. This reversal of roles and of the characters’ status, can be related to the carnival sense of the world in which, as Bakhtin explains, the official world and the laws of society are parodied, debunked, and subverted so that another conception of the world and of mankind might prevail (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 1984: 5). The institutions as embodied by Caldwell, Justineau and Parks – respectively science, education, and the military – are either questioned or at least redirected to serve the development of the new breed of zombie children. In that respect, there is an explicit reversal of hierarchies and status between, on the one hand, the first sequence of the film in which the zombie children are seen attending a class, tied to their wheelchair and their heads strapped back, and on the other hand, the last sequence, which shows a school session involving Ms Justineau as schoolmistress, locked inside a mobile laboratory, and a group of hybrid children, freely attending the class outside the vehicle. The denouement not only confirms the overthrow of institutions but also gives a positive view of what should be understood as their replacement by another structure and the extinction of humankind as it has been so far. To a certain extent, Colm McCarthy’s zombies, and particularly zombie children, are the offspring of those that David Roche called “the resisting bodies” (Roche, 2011: 8).

In his account of the two stages in the history and ideology of zombie fiction, David Roche shows that the figure as constructed by Romero, asserts itself as a resisting body that represents struggle against oppression and repression. In the context of a sub-genre that can be understood as describing the uprising of the destitute and the return of the repressed of Western culture and history, *Night of the Living Dead* presents, Roche suggests, “a negative view of the restoration of order” (Roche, 2011: 8). If the film’s sequels, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985) do not introduce the same pattern, since the group of human survivors do not restore order or even manage to reach a stable situation, their escape illustrates the incapacity of human society to resist the invasion of the zombie. The focus has shifted from a critical comment on the fundamental violence of the state apparatus (Roche, 2011: 9), to the helpless and self-destructive attempts on the part of the institution’s agents to restore order, their efforts turning out to precisely illustrate their helplessness and violence, and eventually the arbitrary nature of the power they stand for. Similarly, the resolutions of both *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and *Survival of the Dead* (2009), Romero’s last zombie films, acknowledge the failure of the humans to withstand the ordeal their civilization is confronted to: the survivors in *Diary of the Dead* have no other choice but to lock themselves

up in a vault; those who survive the feud in *Survival of the Dead*, leave the island to return to the mainland which has been invaded by the zombies. The case of *Land of the Dead* (2005) is at the same time different and more complex. After helping the human resistance and the zombie rebellion to bring down the plutocratic regime led by Kaufman, Riley and his companions set off for Canada where they hope to find a better situation. The specificity of *Land of the Dead* is that the film enhances the humanization of the zombies who are seen rebelling against the government, using tools as weapons and displaying their ability to direct their anger against the very symbol of injustice, oppression, and violence: in other words, they are zombies with a class consciousness.

The Girl with all the Gifts as post-Romero zombie fiction

The Girl with all the Gifts represents zombies that continue the reflection introduced by Romero about the future of humanity, and the capacity of human beings to curb their self-destructive tendencies. The transition between Romero's zombie fiction and Mc Carthy's film may be embodied by Big Daddy in *Land of the Dead*. This character stands for resistance to oppression: he takes up arms against a tyrant and brings down the world that Kaufman has built. In many ways, Mélanie takes after Big Daddy as I will try to show.

Colm McCarthy's version of the zombie figure is complex. They are called hungries, they prey on human beings whom they devour and tear to pieces; they were contaminated by a fungus that has spread across the country and the world; they can be extremely fast-running or particularly slow and apathetic; the zombie children are very gracefully called "abortions" by the soldiers: as a matter of fact, they cannot be labeled definitively. The circumstances of the children's birth are particularly striking: they were contaminated when they were still in the womb and although their mother did not survive, they managed to "eat their way out of the womb", as Dr Caldwell explains. This most shocking description corresponds to Caldwell's vision of the zombie children that she considers exclusively as matter, as flesh for her experiments. They are indeed feral and ruthless creatures, not very different from previous zombies except for their capacity to devise clever traps for their prey, namely for human beings. And yet, the final sequence shows them as prepared for improvement through education and learning, which can be accepted as yet another step towards civilization. Both the adult and the child zombies are evolutions, or alternative figures of the Romerian zombie: the adults because of their duality – either fast or slow – and the children because

of their intelligence and skillfulness. But of course, Mélanie embodies the most remarkable metamorphosis of the zombie figure. I will emphasize one particular trait in the character that is related to the subject of filiation. Indeed, like the other zombie children, Mélanie probably “ate her way out of her mother’s womb”. And yet, her relation to monstrosity / humanity differs from that of the other children.

Filiation and family trauma

The particular relationship between Mélanie and Miss Justineau is probably one of more than mutual interest: right from the beginning of the film, during the first class sessions, Mélanie is shown drinking in each and every word Justineau is saying and, conversely, the schoolmistress is seen taking pleasure and pride in the girl’s clever contribution to the class. What seems at first to be mutual admiration rapidly turns into affection and attraction. Their bond, based on reciprocal care, develops throughout the film and shapes into what can be interpreted as a mother / daughter relationship. Their affectionate relationship is perceptible not only through their exchanges and way of gazing at each other, it is equally conveyed in a delicate and allegorical way by the story Mélanie has written and reads aloud to the whole class and Ms. Justineau. It tells the story of a beautiful woman who is attacked by an “abortion” but who is rescued by a little girl who eventually stays with her. The meaning of the allegory is clear: it is meant to express the girl’s attachment to Justineau and to produce a picture of herself as transcending her status as a zombie. By picturing herself as a little girl and not as a hungry, Mélanie takes the first step towards her humanization. Moreover, she produces a tale whose proleptic dimension will soon appear, as she will indeed save Justineau from the hungries during the attack of the compound, and from the zombie children (the so-called abortions) in London. This simple story is of great significance: it should be understood as foundational, not only in the relation between Mélanie and Justineau but also as a text out of which an alternative to the current world and mankind is to be invented. Mélanie’s tale sounds like a foundational myth that I interpret as the first step towards an alternative culture and civilization.

The film draws emphasis on a mother / daughter relationship between the two characters which develops in a context that must be described. Mélanie’s story is one of loss and grief, one of violence and oppression: whatever her instincts and hunger might imply, she is also characterized as a child and an orphan and so are the other zombie children. This means that the subject of the family and of filiation is at the core of the

film. This subject is addressed in a particularly subtle and daring way. First, the filial love between the two characters is of an unusual type since they do not belong to the same family. In a way, the characters have chosen each other. The film thus presents a family nucleus composed of two strangers, a family cell that will expand in the denouement, to include other strangers, namely the zombie children living in London. McCarthy thus deconstructs the traditional conception of the family and delivers a reflection upon family trauma. To a certain extent, the solution to the loss and grief, the violence and oppression that Mélanie had to suffer from, is not to be found in the shelter of the traditional home but in the company of a chosen tribe. Suggesting that the bond between Mélanie and Justineau could originate in the tale written and told by the girl, might be stretching the meaning slightly too far – and yet, one is tempted to think that the renewed family nucleus and eventually the renewed society that emerges in the end, could be founded on a myth enhancing care. Anyhow, the introduction of a family and, in a way, a psychological plot in the context of zombie fiction implies a genuine reformulation of the sub-genre, particularly considering that the plot involves two characters who belong to two different species, a zombie hybrid and a human.

McCarthy’s film transcends the dichotomy between human and non-human, completes the humanization of the zombie figure that had been initiated by Romero and consecrates the emergence of an alternative being who is both a human and a zombie. While Romero’s zombie fiction questioned the capacity for surviving human beings to recreate a cohesive mankind, *The Girl with all the Gifts* shows a new generation zombie paving the way for an alternative human / zombie hybrid species.

The carnivalesque reversal of hierarchies



The overthrow of society and reversal of hierarchies I have evoked concerning *The Girl with all the Gifts* seems to be the staple of most Romerian or post-Romerian zombie films. However, it seems that McCarthy’s film goes a step further by taking the humanization and the resisting capacity of the zombies to the next level in terms of ideology as well. One particular trope may substantiate this statement: it is one of the primary acts of carnival, namely the *crowning / decrowning* ritual which, as Bakhtin explains, “determined a special *decrowning* type of structure for artistic images and whole works” (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 1984: 126). What seems to me of particular interest in this structure, is that it has survived in literature and the visual arts as form, as imagery, “imparting symbolic depth and ambivalence to the corresponding plots and plot situations” (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*,

1984: 125). The *crowning / decrowning* ritual, involving the celebration and crowning of the carnival fool / king, followed by his *decrowning*, debasing and even beating and (symbolical) dismembering, has not been transposed as such in the arts but has been returning in many an occurrence of parody or eccentric discourse, whenever a work has relied on “paired images” (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 1984: 126) to subvert the “official life, monolithically serious and gloomy” and celebrate “the life of the carnival square, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter” (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 1984: 129). Several sequences and images taken from *The Girl with all the Gifts* follow this specifically carnivalesque structure: this is the case of the sequence situated in London as the survivors have become aware that zombie children are around, ready to prey on them.

This sequence can be divided in two phases and takes place in what probably used to be a shopping centre. Gallagher ventures out of their refuge to look for food supplies. His attention is drawn to a trail of food cans leading to a supermarket whose metal shutters are half-opened. The soldier crawls under the shutters, leaving his gun outside. Once inside, he discovers enough food to provide for the whole group: he enjoys the discovery and tastes some of the things he had probably not eaten for long. Then, the viewer understands that the character has fallen into a trap: he has been lured inside the shop by a pack of hungry / zombie children who attack and kill, disembowel, and dismember him. What is striking in this scene, is that it can be understood as an intertextual reference to the zombie apocalypse fiction trope originating in *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978) and showing the survivors who, having sought refuge in a mall, indulge in unrestricted consumption of what they can find there. The same motif occurs in *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002) and *Welcome to Zombieland* (Ruben Fleischer, 2009), or in *The Dead Don’t Die* (Jim Jarmusch, 2019). It is often interpreted to emphasize the survivors’ dependence upon consumption and an attempt “to recreate the old order of consumer society” (Roche, 2011: 10). Of course, in McCarthy’s film, the emphasis is laid more explicitly on the irony coming from the fact that the trap has been devised by a pack of animal-like and paradoxically childlike creatures. Consequently, the metatextual dimension of the situation, appealing to the genre fan as well as to the perceptive academic, is combined with a *crowning / decrowning* structure fraught with irony and cruelty. The carnivalesque nature of the scene, its potential playfulness, is reinforced by the fact that, because it involves children, it could be related to a game of hide-and-seek which of course would end up with the death of one of the participants.

The second phase of the sequence starts when Gallagher’s companions, looking for the soldier, discover his corpse. In turn, they are

surrounded by the pack of feral hungries that Mélanie chooses to confront. The scene takes place in front of the supermarket where Gallagher is lying dead. The place is designed like a square on which the children’s and Mélanie’s bands face each other in two semi-circles. This sequence shows the struggle between Mélanie and the leader of the zombie children pack, the two being surrounded and observed as if by an audience. In a way, the open space before the supermarket resembles both a theatrical stage and the carnival square on which the carnivalesque acts are performed: the sequence belongs both to drama and carnival.

The outcome of the confrontation is no less important than the performance of the two fighters or the meaning of this fight. Mélanie eventually defeats and kills the other zombie child so that what could be seen as a ritualized school fight between two rival bands (considering the age of the contenders) once again turns out to be a barbaric and lethal feud. The director shoots the sequence as if it was a performance and a game. First because the two groups of onlookers are shown in turn as if there were two mirroring performance spaces merging at times when the two fighters deliver their blows. The two opponents walk in circles; they grunt and roar as if they were animals. It might be useful to note that it is the first time Mélanie has been heard roaring, not speaking, from which we may infer either that she is one of them or that she is using the other zombie child’s language, thus mimicking him. To a certain extent, Mélanie is playing a role, so as to defeat her opponent and frighten the pack of zombie children away. But there is another position at stake in this situation: she is also performing a role for the benefit of her companions, to impress them and claim the leading role in their group. This interpretation is confirmed by the ensuing events of the film: Mélanie will also contest the authority of Dr Caldwell and Sergeant Parks before making the most tragic decision of the film, namely eradicating the remaining human beings by setting fire to the tree and liberating the spores that will contaminate the survivors. This sequence is therefore both a ritualized struggle between potential leaders of a tribe or pack, and a performance intended by Mélanie to assert her control and power over her own group.

In an article tackling the sub-genre of post-apocalyptic fiction, Renner remarks that apocalyptic narratives such as *The Walking Dead* allow “ordinary folks” (ordinary and non-heroic characters) to “assert an agency that one lacks in the real world” (Renner, 2012: 206). If this remark can be considered relevant as far as many – most of – zombie narratives, the situation is slightly different in *The Girl with all the Gifts*: indeed, the film does not focalize on an ordinary human being whose courage is emphasized but instead on a female zombie. Mélanie is thus the main and very singular agent of a double reversal: not only does she reverse the world hierarchy, but she also reverses the generic hierarchy

that is found in zombie fiction, between human and inhuman. The *crowning / decrowning* structure is undeniably at work here: the reversal of hierarchies is made explicit, and the renewal of power and authority appears as a positive evolution despite the death that is associated with it. As a characteristically carnivalesque act, a performance in which death and renewal merge, the fight enhances the ambivalence of the situation and of the whole plot involving Mélanie. This sequence introduces carnivalesque imagery whose effect is to reconfigure zombie fiction based on dialogism, hence the constant hesitation between mourning and rejoicing, the insistence on "the very process of replaceability", "the image of constructive death" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 1984: 125).

The tree of death and renewal

One crucial sequence of the film, in fact what could be considered as its climax, both in terms of the narrative and of imagery, epitomizes this paradox. As they are exploring the streets of London, the group of escapees / survivors discover a huge tree, a formidable and marvelous-looking plant on which a multitude of pods have grown. Dr Caldwell explains that these pods contain the same type of spores that contaminated and killed the greater part of humanity, and adds that, would these pods open and liberate their spores, the remaining humans could be completely eradicated. The monstrous tree and lethal spores reactivate the figure of the vengeful natural world as menace to mankind that McCarthy (re)introduces in the sub-genre whose ecocritical dimension is thus (re)emphasized. If ecocriticism seeks "a synthesis of environmental and social concerns" and if its subject is "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human" (Garrard, 2012: 4-5), then *The Girl with all the Gifts* takes a clear stand on the necessity to shift "from a human-centred to a nature-centred system of values" (Garrard, 2012: 24). That shift is conveyed by Mélanie's short-lived dilemma as she finally decides to set fire to the tree and therefore cause the spores to diffuse and suppress mankind.

However, this terrifying scene is filmed in such a way that Mélanie's gesture cannot be interpreted as a murderous act: the beauty of the fire and of the burning spores is enhanced rather than the dreadful consequences of the act. The spores are shown diffusing and filling the night sky with sparkles of light like fireworks. It might sound like an overstatement to describe the scene as festive, and yet, it is obviously reminiscent of the fireworks that illuminate the sky in the festive denouement of *Land of the dead*. In Romero's film, fireworks are used by the human survivors to catch the zombies' attention and hypnotize them until they realize that the creatures have stopped being deceived. This theme is one of the signs

of the evolution in the zombies, a sign of their growing awareness and intelligence. At the end of the film, Riley has his crew discharge fireworks: they dispose of tools or weapons that have become useless and at the same time, they celebrate the victory of the zombies over Kaufman, the tyrant, which enables the survivors of the apocalypse, both zombies and humans, to contemplate a new dawn: hence the festive dimension of the fireworks.

The intertext comprises a reformulation which is precisely the expression of McCarthy’s vision of zombie fiction. Mélanie’s gesture might not convey the idea of a celebration, but if it is undeniably destructive, if it is obviously “a world-altering catastrophe” (Renner, 2012: 204), Mélanie’s gesture does not correspond to what Renner calls “a meaningless apocalypse” (*Ibid.*: 205), nor can it be characterized as redemptive, at least not in the religious sense of the word. In fact, it should be understood as an act of renewal of the world: her purpose is made clear in the last sequence where the zombie children are shown attending a class and thus appear as the future of the world. The director therefore puts to the fore what, in Romero’s film, was inchoate: zombie fiction relates the destruction / self-destruction of human society and the emergence of an alternative (human / living-dead) being to populate the earth. What is particularly striking is that this denouement is not seen as negative: on the contrary, once again, the last sequence is particularly joyful and full of promise. McCarthy reverses the paradox that David Roche perceives when commenting the ending of *Night of the Living Dead*: if Romero’s film presented “a negative view of the restoration of order”, *The Girl with All the Gifts* presents a positive view of the extension of disorder. McCarthy’s film even seems to forbid any possible return to the world before its *decrowning* and carnivalization.

Mélanie’s gesture and the denouement of *The Girl with All the Gifts*, link the film as well as zombie fiction in general, to the spirit of carnival, “the festival of all-annihilating and all-renewing time”. The images of the burning tree and spores convey “the pathos of shifts and changes, of death and renewal” (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 1984: 124) which is the very core of the carnival sense of the world. Zombie fiction and the zombie figure could be interpreted as the reemergence and the manifestations of carnivalesque figures, themes and imagery which are basically ambivalent in that “they unite within themselves both poles of change and crisis: birth and death [...], blessing and curse” (*Ibid.*: 126). To a certain extent, McCarthy’s film pushes the logic of (Romerian) zombie fiction to its limit, to its necessary and tragic end, and in addition to this, he creates a zombie which / who enables the popular horror figure and genre to be renewed. The film completes the humanization of the monster: Mélanie comes after Bud and Big Daddy, as the embodiment of the missing link between the hordes of hungries and the next generation of human

zombie species. Her acts and gestures, her fundamental ambivalence, make her a post-modern and post-Romero character who sheds a light on the nature of the zombie figure and at the same time conveys a contemporary message concerning identity. Mélanie is a “resisting body” not only because she chooses to reverse hierarchies and to bring down the world that was oppressing her, but also because, as a character and horror figure, she stands for resistance to monological truth: she embodies creative ambivalence.

The trope of the mask: Identity and ambivalence



Shortly after escaping the military compound, the group of survivors must deal with the presence of Mélanie whom all of them, except Ms. Justineau, consider as a threat to their safety. The girl is made to wear a mask that was designed to make the hungries harmless since it covers their mouths. The obvious practical purpose of the device does not suppress the carnivalesque meaning of the mask in general, all the more so as its being transparent complexifies its impact on the film’s imagery.

The girl wears the mask whenever she is with the other survivors but every time she leaves them, she can take it off: this is what she does when being entrusted with the exploration of the neighborhood in search for supplies. This exploration is the opportunity for her to discover the world outside the military compound: she is shown enjoying this discovery with a childlike delight and a sense of wonder, as if she was being reborn into the world. Of course, she needs to satisfy her hunger, which she does by chasing and eating a stray cat. The fact that she has forsaken to prey on human beings probably serves to mitigate what remains a cruel act and the sequence mostly emphasizes the positive, non-feral aspects of the character. After eating the cat, she puts the mask back on, and this is when the transparency of the mask becomes significant: Mélanie’s mouth can still be seen, stained with the animal’s blood. The whole ambivalence of the character is comprised in this paradoxical and grotesque image. Indeed, if the mask was meant to protect Mélanie’s environment from her hunger, it has obviously failed to do so; if it was designed to neutralize her, she has managed to make it ineffective; if it was meant to annihilate her character, nullify her identity, it turns out that it only succeeded in reinforcing her complexity and ambivalence. To a certain extent, she has reappropriated the mask to be able at the same time to indulge in her instinctive needs and to comply, falsely and playfully, with the other survivors’ demands. The element of manipulation and play, the carnivalesque aspect of the sequence, cannot be denied: it expresses “the joy of change and

reincarnation [...], metamorphosis, the violation of natural boundaries” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, 1984: 40). Mélanie uses the mask to play a role and at the same time free herself from the demands and the oppression of the world of the humans. The liberating dimension of carnival is conveyed by Mélanie’s reappropriation of a device meant to contain her, which she changes into a carnivalesque mask. The sequence represents the degradation of authority and the liberation of the character from oppression, the two aspects being completed by a process of regeneration that is conveyed by Mélanie’s delight in discovering the world, and which is characteristic of grotesque imagery as well as of grotesque ideology.

The images showing Mélanie’s blood-stained mouth behind the transparent mask condense the playful and grotesque dimension of the zombie figure in general, and the irreducibility of Mélanie’s character in particular. McCarthy introduces the grotesque dimension of the character in this sequence by using the comic element, the irony that emerges from the diversion by Mélanie of the device / mask. But the grotesque is of course equally related to what Bakhtin calls the “material bodily principle” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, 1984: 18) which is conveyed by the gory dimension of the sequence. Its fully assumed and self-reflexive gore element enables the director to insist on the duality of the character: she is both a hungry, a new generation zombie, a playful child, a developing human being, and a self-conscious horror figure. Gore is not emphasized for the sake of gore itself but to convey the complexity of the character and enhance the essential ambivalence of the zombie figure. The explicitness becomes an asset of gore whose aesthetics thus complies with the requirements of post-horror fiction. The singular gore / grotesque aesthetics of the film inscribes Mélanie’s humanization in the continuity of the traditional zombie while at the same time renewing its conventions.

Grotesque imagery: Ideology and aesthetics

Like other figures of the horror genre, zombies have contributed to developing a critical vision on society’s flaws and on contemporary crisis, whether in the 1960s or the years 2000. And yet, I would suggest that the zombie figure, more than any other, carries a transhistorical vision of man’s condition in addition to the spirit of present time because of its grotesque dimension.

Bakhtin’s study defines two moments in the history of grotesque imagery: first, the archaic phase of the grotesque, which developed in the Antiquity and in which the imagery of archaic grotesque was related to

“cyclical time [...] natural and biological life”. This conception of time and of change, of the succession of seasons and of time and death, was broadened to include social and historical change: grotesque imagery, because of its vision of time as metamorphosis and because of its ambivalence, became the means of conveying “an awareness of history and historic change which appeared during the Renaissance” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, 1984: 24). Despite this distinction, there seems to be a common point between the two phases, and this distinction is also one of the main characteristics of the grotesque: it is the expression of “the crisis of change” (*Ibid.*: 50). McCarthy’s zombie conveys precisely the awareness of history that Bakhtin describes as one decisive characteristic of the carnivalesque. *The Girl with all the Gifts* depicts the world during a crucial transformation, and a group of characters as they are confronted to major choices. Zombie fiction in general and McCarthy’s film in particular, build their narrative upon the tension that structures grotesque imagery and thus present “a phenomenon in transformation” (*Ibid.*: 27).

The second aspect of the grotesque that emerges in zombie fiction, particularly in Romero’s films and even more explicitly in *The Girl with all the Gifts*, is the perspective and even the representation of another world: “the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life”. In other words, the grotesque dimension of the zombie figure is what makes it subversive: not only does it oppose and debunk “the apparent (false) unity of the indisputable and stable” (*Ibid.*: 48) but the ambivalent laughter which structures the grotesque imagery, regenerates the world whose values have been reversed and brought down.

The aesthetics of the grotesque is shaped by the dynamics of difference: Bakhtin defines it as “the merry negation of uniformity and similarity”, adding that the grotesque “rejects conformity to oneself” (*Ibid.*: 39). The sequence of the mask is an obvious illustration of this dynamic, this tension between identity and difference, between the conventional figure of the zombie and its reformulation in the character of Mélanie, between the zombie as deadly creature and as humanizing / humanized being. The constant reformulation of identity, Mélanie’s, the zombies’, and a constant reformulation of the genre.

Another evidence of Mélanie’s complexity comes from the title of the film, *The Girl with all the Gifts*, which refers to the Greek myth of Pandora. In this tradition, Pandora is said to have opened a jar, “Pandora’s box”, releasing all the evils of humanity. The myth can be understood as explaining the origin of evil on earth and is to be related to the biblical character of Eve, and to the lineage of female figures who, in Western tradition, have been associated with evil and accused of having caused death and chaos in the world. To a certain extent, Mélanie plays the part of Pandora, that is,

if we consider that she is the one who causes the complete annihilation of the remaining humans. But at the same time, she cannot be seen as the one who is at the origin of the fungal infection, which makes a first difference with the myth. The second difference lies in the way her gesture is shown by the director and perceived by the viewer: as I have stated, the denouement of the film shows a world that has been destroyed and regenerated thanks to Mélanie’s decision – in other words, it is a positive denouement pointing the way to the renewal of mankind. Therefore, the ideology of the myth has been reversed: the female character is not responsible for the evil on earth but, on the contrary, for ushering a new dawn.

The myth of Pandora is also referred to during one of Ms. Justineau’s classes, which shows how important it is to the understanding of Mélanie as a character and as a zombie figure. First, it contributes to building the complicity between the schoolmistress and her pupil, and it is relating them in terms of their gender: they share the opprobrium to which such female myths as Pandora, Eve and Circe (the enchantress / witch and loving / jealous female character best-known for her part in the Odyssey, is also mentioned by Ms. Justineau in one of her classes) condemn women; however, they also succeed in reversing the meaning of these myths, thus deconstructing the figure of the evil-doing female that has dominated Western culture and representation for thousands of years. Secondly, the reference to Pandora and the deconstruction of the myth, enables McCarthy to create one of the first zombie figures who embodies such a crucial contemporary issue as the cause of women and such a progressive value as the deconstruction of female representation and identity.

With the character of Mélanie, the filmmaker also tackles the issue of ethnicity. Karen J. Renner’s analysis of *The Girl with all the Gifts* underlines the racial and sexual dimensions of the novel, in which “Mélanie’s zombie appetites repeatedly function as a metaphor for sexual desire” (Renner, 2021: 172). The novel also introduces a racial subtext concentrating on Justineau as racial other and objectified center of the white characters’ desire (*Ibid.*: 179). Colm McCarthy’s adaptation of the novel includes reshaping not only the relationships between Mélanie and Justineau, but also their appearance. Mélanie is turned into a black character whereas middle-aged black Justineau is transformed into a young white woman. Renner argues that the reversal of races leads to a shift in the interpretations of the film, “revealing the important role that race plays in the novel” (*Ibid.*: 180). My view is that this reversal shows how important race is in the history of zombie fiction as a whole: in many ways, Mélanie takes her place in the lineage of Black characters that appear in zombie fiction as witnesses of the changing time or as genuine symbols of issues related to the black community and its history: one may think of the succession of

black characters represented in Romero's films who personified different aspects of the black problem in the context and in the history of the USA, a series of figures that are characterized by their growing self-awareness and assertiveness.

However, I think that Mélanie's ethnicity is more complex than it seems. In M. R. Carey's novel, in the very first paragraph, the author explains the meaning of her name, the etymology of "Mélanie": it means "the black girl". He goes on to indicate that Mélanie's skin "is actually very fair" and that her name was given to her arbitrarily (Carey, 2014: 1). McCarthy's choice to cast a black skinned actress for the role of Mélanie is significant: by giving the role of the oppressed, then the resisting and finally the revolting body to a black actress, the director takes a stand on issues of resistance related to the black community. Mélanie takes on the role of the defender of the cause of women and of the blacks. The film thus broadens and complexifies the symbolical meaning of the zombie figure. And yet, an ambiguity remains as to the way Mélanie's ethnicity should be addressed: indeed, she is "the black girl" while at the same time, in the novel, her skin is fair; she is played by a black-skinned actress, but the character identifies with cultural types that are not directly related to the black cause. In fact, she is linked to and, to a certain extent, springs from multiple fictional references: the black characters from Romero's zombie fiction, the mythical types I have mentioned and of course Mélanie's self-representation in the little girl who saves the beautiful woman from the "abortion" in the tale she has written. For all her relations with current issues and the contemporary world, Mélanie is equally a fictional character and as such a vessel for multiple and ambivalent meanings.

The figure is made all the more complex as, I insist, Mélanie is a zombie: she is not a human being or at least not a conventional human being as culture and history have sought to define it. Therefore, I would say that Mélanie represents resistance to any attempt at defining, at *essentializing* human beings. She is human and not exactly one – she is a daughter and not completely one – she is a figure of queer desire in the novel and at the same time, the film seems to minimize this aspect of the character; she is a young woman but not only, she is Romerian and even more so, she is modern and she is ancient – and the list could be extended: the cumulative dimension of this series of words or of labels, partakes of the grotesque imagery associated with the film, with the character and more generally with zombies. The character of Mélanie illustrates in an explicit way, what characterizes zombies in general inasmuch as they embody "the crisis of change" and "the phenomenon in transformation", or, to use Bakhtin's phrases, the crisis of the subject, and the truth in transformation – and vice versa.

Conclusion

The specificity of *The Girl with all the Gifts* lies in its capacity to inscribe the film in the post-horror cycle's agenda since it carries similar thematic, reflexive and epistemic traits, while at the same time providing a formulation of the most corporeal, the less art-film-compatible, the most grotesque of all the horror figures. Although formal minimalism or narrative ambiguity and the aesthetics of the grotesque sound irreconcilable, McCarthy manages to bridge the gap between these two conceptions of cinematography and to depict man's self-destructive tendencies and tackle contemporary concerns such as man's relation with a planet that is on the brink of disaster as well as issues related to gender and ethnicity.

However, I would like to suggest that the film goes further than – or does something different from – bringing together two visions of the horror film. *The Girl with all the Gifts* both perpetuates the Romerian gore and satirical stance, but it also reformulates and renews our contemporary perception of the grotesque. The grotesque dimension of McCarthy's film does not only produce a critical and satirical vision of the world, as it is the case in Romero's films and in many horror films.

According to Bakhtin, grotesque realism, which characterizes the tradition of the carnivalesque, both destroys *and* recreates, annihilates *and* renews the object or the subject it addresses. *The Girl with all the Gifts* fosters a pessimistic vision of our society and our world, but it also renews the way the genre handles the fate and the perspectives of our world. The visual and ideological ambivalence created by grotesque imagery and the carnivalesque, which are particularly obvious in post-2000 zombie fiction and in the zombie figure, precisely because the sub-genre lays the stress on comic reversals, comic corporeality and the capacity of ambivalent laughter to produce an alternative discourse on the world, contributes to a renewal of the sub-genre's perspective on history as well as on the contemporary world. By relying on ambivalence and the creation of a modern epistemic hesitation, *The Girl with all the gifts* is a particularly obvious example of zombie fiction's capacity to produce what Bakhtin calls a "creative ambivalence". If I could venture on a generalization, I would suggest that post-2000 zombie fiction represents a new cycle of horror, straddling the line between traditional mainstream horror and the post-horror cycle, and characterized by this renewal of the horror grotesque.

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