

World War Z: Race, Gender and Geopolitics

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Brad Pitt's new film, World War Z is the latest in the recently emerging genre of Zombie films and movies to hit the big screen. The anticipation of this movie stems from the recent popularity of TV shows and movies such as the Walking Dead, I am Legend, Shaun of the Dead, Zombieland and many others.

A common theme in these movies is the documentation of the human experience when confronted with a zombie apocalypse or the emergence of a dangerous virus in the human population that causes the dead to rise and attempt to eat the living. Some, like Shaun of the Dead and Zombieland, take a humorous look at the experience while others, such as the Walking Dead, examine how real people make decisions under the most dire and horrific circumstances in an attempt to force the viewer into the psychology of these lose-lose situations. World War Z takes a serious look at the zombie apocalypse scenario. Yet it seems to do so while simultaneously reinforcing a white male, American, and militaristic view of society through images whose political undertones can hardly be mistaken.

To begin, the entire optics of the movie is from the point of view of Gerry (Brad Pitt). As the zombie apocalypse engulfs Manhattan it is Gerry who is able to get his family from the city and who keeps his family together and safe by calming his over-emotional daughter who is suffering from an asthma attack. Gerry then makes contact with a high ranking official in the United Nations who informs Gerry that he is needed to understand and help solve the crisis that is causing entire cities throughout the world to be "lost". Gerry is portrayed as an American who, in efforts to save the dying "wretched of the earth", has seen "some of the worst environments" and so is able to use his unique perception into conflict and violence to determine what the origins of the zombie outbreak are and to report back to the officials at the UN and presumably, the U.S. government who are in need of this intelligence to defeat the devastating pandemic.

The movie utilizes the mainstream American common sense of American foreign policy progressivity portrays Gerry's work with the UN as in "some of the worst environments" and then lists Sri Lanka. The obvious erasure here is that the "worst" environments for humanitarian catastrophes in the last two decades have been in environments of US and UN activity. It is assumed that the viewer is unaware of the US role in fomenting Paul Kagame's rise to power in Rwanda that eventually led to civil war, or the US economic sanctions regime in Iraq that left around 500,000 Iraqi civilians dead due to malnutrition and untreated water, or the subsequent atrocities committed by Iraqi militias and paramilitaries supported by the US during the "sectarian war" phase of the Iraq conflict.

The acceptance of these common sense notions could simply be written off as unimportant and unrecognized by most people. It is significant to the way in which Gerry is passionately sought due to the perceived value his experience holds for a senior UN official. A helicopter is sent to the roof of an apartment building in New York for his family while millions of untold

others perish and are left to their own devices. Additionally, throughout the movie soldiers die defending and protecting Gerry to secure his life and, so we are led to believe, securing his unique ability to problem-solve and figure out the true source of the virus. Gerry and his survival are completely accepted as natural and deserved in this movie, with little self-reflection from anyone on the privilege that Gerry receives due to his unquestioned credibility for his humanitarian past.

Gerry's role occupies the stereotypical burdened white man forced to do right by honor and dignity. He first bristles at the notion of helping the UN find the source of the disease, but is then called to duty by a General who warns him of his family's impending dismissal from the ship due to the fact that non-essential personnel will not be saved. Gerry complies fully with this and submits himself to performing the task that only he apparently can complete.

Gerry's dutifulness is clearly illustrated when he is contrasted with Harvard doctor, Dr. Fassbach. Dr. Fassbach is played by Elyas Gabel, a British actor who has a dark complexion and who comes off as brash and intelligent, but un-savvy, naïve and cowardly in the face of danger. In an exchange with Fassbach, Gerry warns him to not be afraid due to the bravery and courage of the soldiers protecting them. Once on-site, it is immediately demonstrated how poorly Fassbach is prepared for a dangerous mission and how cool under fire Gerry remains when Fassbach confronts zombies exiting a plane in South Korea and subsequently trips and shoots himself. Gerry is left standing the sober, military-respecting white male with calm courage and the fortitude to survive and solve a crisis in an environment where formal training and education no longer help.

The role of Gerry's wife is also of interest in reinforcing Gerry's role as the patriarch. It is Gerry who is the sole reason for the family's survival as it is his expertise that leads the UN to save his and his family's lives during the collapse of civilization. Meanwhile his wife maintains the role of an overemotional woman, dependent on her husband's wisdom for survival. In one scene her emotion is shown for its true destructiveness when she becomes too emotional, missing Gerry, and decides to call him. It just so happens that when she does there are zombies in the area and, zombies being zombies, they are immediately attracted to the noise and a few soldiers end up dying while protecting Gerry as a result. Here the movie demonstrates the destructiveness of human sentiments such as missing a loved one or the urge to communicate with them. By linking death to the actions of an overemotional woman, the movie portrays these sentiments as destructive to human survival, while throughout the entire movie pointing to Gerry's rationality and conflict-savvy as an aspect of human behavior that promotes survival.

The last moment of intrigue for the social critic during this movie was the portrayal of Israel. In the movie, it is discovered that Israel is the state that has avoided the catastrophe. When Gerry goes to Israel he questions a government minister as to why Israel knew to complete its closure of its borders in the months before the zombie apocalypse. The official informs him that it is a Jewish cultural tradition of deliberation that states in a room full of ten people, when nine of them agree on something it is the duty of the 10th person to disagree. This cultural trait is shown to be the reason why relative peace exists behind Israel's many walls.

This cultural trait of savvy and protective intellect is reinforced when contrasted with Arab behavior within the confines of the walls. As Gerry tours the camp, a group of Arabs begin singing what is portrayed as an Arab folk song. This singing gradually becomes louder and

louder, and begins to attract zombies outside of the wall. The singing eventually works the zombies into such a frenzy that, in one of the most visually captivating scenes in the movie, they begin scaling one another and begin to make it over the wall. This results in the overrun of the camp and Israel itself. The symbolism here is hard to miss as once again Israeli tolerance of Arab ways leads to their annihilation. In addition, the unsophisticated and unwise Arabs who chose to celebrate and sing are the reason for the Jewish state's erasure. This ultimately preserves the myth that a large part of the problem with peace in the Middle East is the nature of those who live there and who are not Israeli.

Ultimately, World War Z is typical of many Hollywood movies in that it reproduces the common sense of masculinity, white-superiority, and contains a pro-Israel (and pro-US support for Israel) slant. It is not an unusual movie in this regard. However, its existence within the zombie genre and the anticipation for its release provides a disturbing trend for those who wish to see social change and critical examination of US foreign policy, gender roles, and racial patterns of life. It reinforces the dominant common sense and can serve as a naturalization of existing power structures, both social and geopolitical, the very ones that billions of people on the Earth wish to overthrow.

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