

Every Dog Has Its Day

By June Pulliam

Fido, Andrew Currie, Dir., 2006

The first decade of the 21st century has seen a wealth of zombie films and novels, which take what was once a flat character and use it as a fertile metaphor for the human condition. Specifically, in comic films, zombies are existential foils to humans who can, if they will only leave their set routine, make meaning in their lives. Such is the case of Shaun and Elvis and John F. Kennedy in *Shaun of the Dead* and *Bubba Ho-Tep*.

Fido is another of these comic zombie films with an existential bent. But unlike *Shaun of the Dead* and *Bubba Ho-Tep*, it is also concerned with contemporary political realities, particularly, the state of exception that George Bush and company have placed the country in via the war on terror. In a parallel world, after radiation from outer space reached Earth and reanimated the dead, the Greatest Generation fought zombies in the Zombie War instead of the Axis in World War II. Ten years after the war was won by millions of brave soldiers, with the help of the mercenary ZomCom corporation, the western world is full of happy, smiling families in safe suburban homes that are chock full of chrome and primary colored consumer products. Now, in a generic 1950s Northern America, ZomCom controls everything, promising “a better life through containment.”

The film begins with a grainy black and white news short, apparently shot just after the Zombie War, showing how in peacetime, ZomCom is putting up fences around idyllic towns to contain the zombie menace and making some of the fresher and more malleable of the undead into an affordable pool of manual laborers who can mow the lawns, cook the meals and even care for the children of the leisured middle class. Similar to *Shaun of the Dead* and *Bubba Ho-Tep*, *Fido* questions who is the *real* zombie: the living with their monotonous daily existence and fear of being different from the neighbors, or the zombies, who lack this fear? In *Shaun of the Dead*, zombies are redundant since it is difficult to tell the difference between the undead and the glassy-eyed living who shuffle their way through mindless jobs to dull nights at the pub. But the zombies in *Fido* are different from the living in that they are capable of delighting in every moment rather than dreading the future.

Because *Fido* is set in a mythical 1950s that was supposedly a Golden Age of family life, the principal characters are part of a nuclear family. Bill Robinson, the family patriarch, is obsessed with "death," not with the fear of dying but the fear of *not* dying. Death in this universe represents retirement—that reward after a life of alienated labor where you can finally pursue leisure activities. For the post-Zombie War generation, retirement is literally death. ZomCom has monopolized death, which is now a luxury reserved for those who can pay for a funeral complete with a head coffin that ensures the body cannot reanimate. Because the radiation from outer space can never be contained, everyone who

dies will instantly turn into a zombie unless the brain is destroyed. Those unable to afford a funeral will have a ZomCom collar clapped around the neck the moment the heart stops beating making them easier to control and less bitey. The newly created zombies are whisked away to ZomCom headquarters to become undead slaves, either performing repetitive labor in one of ZomCom's factories or sold into the home Mr. and Mrs. Consumer as the latest modern convenience who can occasionally run amok and bite if not properly restrained.

Predictably, ZomCom's promise of "a better life through containment" is a hollow one. Almost immediately, we see discontent in paradise. Bill is such a slave to middle class conformity that he cannot simply enjoy living with his beautiful wife Helen and his precocious son Timmy. Instead, he eternally complains about having to make funeral payments for the whole family and never has the time, or the desire, to play with his son. He doesn't even notice until the middle of the film that his wife is five month's pregnant.

Timmy too is not content, and his behavior threatens to expose the family as "different" which could have deadly consequences in this world. When Mr. Bottoms, a ZomCom executive, comes to speak to his grade school class, Timmy has the temerity to ask if the dead who were buried before the war, who have now presumably been affected by the radiation, can feel pain. Timmy's query is particularly provoking since it questions the very principal on which ZomCom is founded—that the undead are fundamentally different from the living and that they lack any human feelings. We discover that this premise is faulty when Timmy forges a friendship with his family's new zombie. A lonely Timmy tries to play catch with the Robinson zombie, who isn't sufficiently coordinated to catch the ball, but who will play fetch, after a fashion, similar to a pet dog. Nevertheless, Timmy is charmed by the zombie's attempt to play, and so he does something unthinkable—he *names* the family zombie, conferring upon him a humanity he was stripped of when ZomCom fitted him with a collar. Timmy christens his zombie Fido due to his ability to play fetch like a good dog, but the etymology of the name—Latin for "I am faithful"—is even more fitting given the relationship he will have with Timmy, eventually saving him from danger the way that Lassie always managed to save her Timmy.

Predictably, Fido endears himself to both Timmy and his mother Helen since he enjoys spending time with the family, whereas Bill would rather play golf with people he hates. Helen makes Fido even more human by giving him some of Bill's clothes to wear in place of his grey ZomCom jumpsuit. In a scene where Fido frolics with Helen and Timmy while washing the car, it is clear that he is replacing an increasingly more absent Bill in this family structure. But of course, Fido gets into trouble when he is off of his leash in the park. When Fido's collar malfunctions, he takes a bite out of Mrs. Henderson, the Robinson's elderly and unpleasant neighbor. Fearing that he will get in trouble for letting his zombie off of his leash, Timmy whisks Fido home and cleans him up. Later he returns to the park to dispatch and bury Mrs. Henderson, who has now died and become a zombie due to Fido's bite.

But of course, a ten year old boy is not very good at covering up a homicide: Mrs. Henderson's body is found buried in a flower bed, and her husband is accused of having an illegal funeral in order to avoid compensating the ZomCom corporation for what would otherwise be their valuable property. It is at this moment in the film that we begin to realize that this parallel universe, fifty years distant from our own, is nevertheless frighteningly similar to contemporary political reality. Mr. Henderson receives no trial. Instead, the word of Mr. Bottoms, regional director of ZomCom, is sufficient to convict Mr. Henderson of the crime of having an illegal funeral. Mr. Henderson's punishment is swift—he is sent to the Wild Zone, that place outside of the city, on the other side of the fence, where the zombies run free, and his property is confiscated by ZomCom. The existence of the Wild Zone means that prisons are no longer necessary in this world. Those facilities are now used to house the elderly in an institutional setting so that they can safely be collared the moment their hearts stop beating.

But eventually Fido is removed from the Robinson home, not because he was a “very bad dog” when he was off of his leash, but because Bill Robinson is threatened by his wife's increasing attachment to Fido, which is coupled with her subtle rebellion against his domestic authority, and so Fido is whisked away by ZomCom ostensibly so that the family can avoid liability for anymore of his unpredictable behavior. But of course, Timmy will locate Fido and the villain will be vanquished in the film's denouement.

Before the film concludes, we learn how the zombie itself is necessary to the maintenance of the social order as administered by ZomCom. Presumably, enough bullets could have been manufactured to round up and exterminate most of the undead. However, the presence of the zombie threat means that people are willing to adhere to their assigned roles and accept their diminished freedoms which are supposedly for the security of all. And those who ask too many questions receive the summary justice of the Wild Zone. Not surprisingly, the zombie inhabitants of the Wild Zone are costumed to look a bit like hippies, that “future” threat to the existing social order in this parallel 1950s. In this way, *Fido* is similar to more recent serious zombie films such as *28 Days Later*, *28 Weeks Later* and *Land of the Dead* which also examine how a terror threat (or zombie threat) is manipulated by the powerful in order to create a state of exception that justifies the indefinite suspension of civil liberties until such a time when the sovereign, the general, the president, or even the decider, whose powers have been greatly augmented by the state of exception, decides to restore those liberties.

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