"THINGS ARE GOING TO CHANGE"
Genre Hybridization in Shaun of the Dead

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The first scene in Shaun of the Dead (Wright 2004) hinges on a specific line:

Things are going to change, I promise!

Does it refer to the parameters of the faltering relationship between Shaun and his girlfriend, Liz (K. Ashfield)?

The line can be read in the context of that first scene, as a romantic-comedy and/or within the set of expectations set up by the film’s peritext (poster, trailers, etc.). “Thing” is a long-standing euphemism to refer to monsters in horror movies (cf. The Thing From Another World and its many remakes).

In addition to the near homophonous titles, a musical nod to Dawn of the Dead (Romero 1978) can be heard during the producers’ credits. The promised zombie outbreak will change “things”.

What are these "things"? How do they change?
If we seek to place Shaun of the Dead in the Romero tradition of zombie films, what are the effects of this hybridity on the genre’s structure, themes and subtext?

While the peritext frames the viewers’ expectations in terms of horror primarily, this first scene is explicitly rooted in the conventions of romantic-comedy, or rom-com, with Shaun as its main protagonist.

... is the first thing we hear after the credits. Shaun (S. Pegg) is introduced as the visual and narrative center of the film. This elevated status is confirmed throughout the scene by his role as a focalizer.
This grammar of cuts and movements is specifically used to establish the intimacy between Shaun and his flatmate, Ed (N. Frost). The fast pan later becomes a recurrent visual effect, putting Shaun in contact with his limits and the challenges he faces.

Ed embodies a rom-com archetype, similar to Spike (R. Ifans) in Notting Hill (1999) and Scarlett (C. Coleman) in Four Weddings and a Funeral (1994): an eccentric type whose idiosyncratic ways come to express the drives and impulses the white male hero has been repressing. The kind of embarrassment felt by the protagonist in social circumstances has to be interpreted as an indirect way to acknowledge his own desires. Ed’s inclusion therefore bolsters the rom-com reading of the scene.

Ed’s introduction specifically echoes a pivotal moment in Notting Hill: the scene where William Thacker (h. Grant) seeks guidance from his friends regarding his relationship with Anna Scott (J. Roberts). The last one to speak is Spike, who strongly disapproves of William’s decision to reject Anna, and helps him realize his mistake.

Spike’s entrance into the room signals a reversal of the dynamics of approval of William’s ill-advised decision by a change of camera angle that symbolically reintroduces Spike as part of the space from which excessive rationality had excluded him.
Later in the film, the siege of the Winchester Pub is crucial in reestablishing the complementarity of Shaun and Ed, while confirming the subsidiary status of Dianne and David as mere auxiliaries.

By contrast, Ed successfully assists and advises Shaun, to the point where he briefly replaces him.

The opening scene thus establishes the rom-com by borrowing from notable precursors and setting up some of the commonly found components of the genre.

A white male protagonist, Shaun, who is the main obstacle to his own fulfillment.

A sheltered place where lovers can meet and be protected from daily life (Mather 2006: 122, 169)

A distinct British setting, at a time when the successful cycle of neo-Ealing films of the mid to late nineties had established rom-com as a British specialty.

Yet many of the elements introduced in the first scene are later repurposed in a different genre.

From the prominence of Ed’s abject body (fat, sweaty, and unshaven), which foreshadows the abjectness of the zombie bodies.

I got wood

to the distinctively American and bellicist name of the place, which conjures up an intercultural and intergeneric subtext.

The western and the “siege” films such as The Alamo (1960) and Rio Bravo (1959) are notable influences on the zombie genre.

WINCHESTER TAVERN

Individual trajectories

A love affair

Ed, the abject acolyte

A sheltered place

Promised change

A gun on the wall

Ominous music

ROM COM

ZOMBIE
For the first 20 minutes of the film, this opening scene defines a dominant narrative and a dominant genre.

Rescuing Shaun's relationship with Liz

This dominant narrative frames our reading of the early scenes.

Romero’s "zombie walk" is pastiched by a sleepy Shaun, in his early morning routine.

Meanwhile, horror is relegated to peripheral hints and elements.

In-jokes

Booking a table at Fulci’s* after the Italian horror director

Mutilated remains.

New super-flu scares public! Havoc!

Brief shots, overheard information

The American deep space probe Omega

unexpectedly re-entered Earth’s atmosphere.*

"the cause given for the zombie apocalypse in the original Night of the Living Dead"

In particular, zombies appear as metaphors of an alienating lifestyle, as opposed to a threat.

These elements grow increasingly numerous until they threaten to derail the rom-com plot.

Tentative end of the narrative arc

Lizzie doesn't want to see you

It's not the end of the world!
The whole point of the film is that it’s almost as if a horror film has gatecrashed a romantic comedy. It was always important for us to keep those two genres intact and separate. (Palathingal 2004)

Between the 20th and the 30th minute, the film humorously exploits this cognitive gap, allowing the two genres to overlap.

The film does keep the two genres intact during the inception of the zombie phase by dissociating the perception of the viewers and that of the drunk heroes, who remain oblivious to the generic shift.

Until...

Oh, I think she likes you!

She wants a cuddle!

I’ve just come out of a relationship.

...finally an image fully incompatible with the rom-com genre establishes horror as the dominant thread.

Make no attempt to reach loved ones!

Any zombies out there?

Don’t say that!

What?

That!

What?

That, the Z-word, don’t say it!

Why?

Because it’s ridiculous!

The once peripheral elements are then brought to the fore in a typical Romero scene, as the perception of the characters and of the audience coincide again.

The horror genre (and the zombie sub-genre) is not embraced without reservation however. The rom-com is displaced but in no way suppressed.
At this point, the film engages in a re-reading of earlier scenes and lines, which functions as an investigation of the two main genres. Lines, gags and even entire scenes are thus presented twice or more. These repetitions most often straddle the generic divide (30th minute) and are thus presented in a radically changed context: a different situation in the diegesis and a different genre.

They highlight the respective convention of the rom-com and the zombie genres by applying them to recurring situations. These repetitions also emphasize Shaun’s own development by contrast.

In most cases, the zombie genre implies a shift towards a visual realization of verbal violence and conventional phrases, in line with the ideological function of a genre often used to reveal the underside of modern society.

However, the structure of the first half is not strictly reversed. The rom-com may be marginalized, but not to the same extent as the zombie film initially is.
On several occasions, the zombie narrative is explicitly "put on hold" while interpersonal conflicts play out...

*again, a repeated line

Thus, while in the first part of the film, the zombie genre is confined to brief non-sequitur shots and peripheral information...

In the second part, the genre can still be bracketed off, to accommodate rom-com developments, which are provided with virtual but ostensible secluded places, removed from the pressure of the zombie plot.

This imbalance between the two genres is nowhere as evident as in the pay-off to a long-running joke about Shaun’s father-in-law (B.Nighy), which eventually comes to encompass Shaun’s mother as well.

Following the pattern established by the rest of the film, the recurring “he’s not my father” becomes literally true when he is zombified. The personal, dismissive judgment becomes an expression of that central zombie theme: defining humanity (Paffenroth 2006, 10-12).
A more pressing variation on this interrogation occurs when Shaun’s mother is bitten in turn. This signals the appearance of a familiar trope in zombie films. What do you do when a loved one “turns”? When do people cease to be human?

She’s a zombie.

She’s my mum!

She’ll change!

However, this genre-defining moment is once again bracketed off, while the scene brings forward interpersonal relationships: Ed’s role, Liz’s feelings for Shaun, etc. This digression is even acknowledged as such in the sequence.

We’ve got more pressing matters at hand!

In the background, zombies moan...

These rom-com elements derail the questioning about the humanity of Shaun’s mother or lack thereof in order to reconstitute the film’s initial set-up. Ed’s role as Shaun’s abject double, for instance, is underlined again, using the same camera movement as in the pre-credits scene.

The scene then makes explicit the rivalries and jealousies within the group. The zombie-hardened Shaun dispels the threat of his sexual rival, David, and ends up punching him.

That’s what it is about, is it? He just doesn’t like me!

Furthermore, the scene parodies the iconic stand-off in Tarantino’s Reservoir Dogs (1992) with echoes of the Russian roulette scene in The Deer Hunter (Cimino 1978). This visual playfulness undermines any serious questioning about the humanity of the characters. Instead, the whole scene verges on parody: appearances used humorously, with little regard for their previous meaning.

Again, zombies reassert themselves voraciously at the end of the scene, breaking the windows and entering the “sheltered place.” Nevertheless, the key moment of the genre is subverted both on a formal and thematic level.
These observations should lead us to re-examine Pegg’s claim that in *Shaun of the Dead*, the zombies and the romantic comedy - those two emblematic genres of the Blair years in British cinema* - are kept "intact and separate." As we have demonstrated, the two genres do intersect and interact, in spite of the ostensible chronological division.

On the one hand, the revival of horror, with the subgenres of the survival / postapocalyptic film, sometimes in combination with the zombie film, was becoming a prominent part of the British production, with landmark titles like *28 Days Later* (Boyle 2002) and - admittedly after the release of *Shaun of the Dead* - *The Zombie Diaries* (Bartlett 2007), *28 Weeks Later* (Frasnadillo 2007) and *The Dead Outside* (Mullaney 2008), to name a few (see Blake (2008, 161-185.) for more on “New Labour New Horrors”). On the other hand, the continuation of the trend of the romantic comedy that really got started with *Four Weddings and a Funeral* in 1994 was to last well into the 2000s.

In terms of structure, the zombie apocalypse can be subsumed into the variety of disruptive events to be found in the earlier Ealing comedies (anecdotally, *Shaun* was filmed in part at the Ealing studios).

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**Initial situation:**
- familiar order
- conventions
- bachelors

**Disruption**

[forced isolation in *Passport to Pimlico* (Cornelius 1949)]

[Alcohol in *Whisky Galore* (Mackendrick 1949)]

**Revealing personalities, allowing repressed drives to come out.**

**Conclusion:**
- Partial restoration*
- Happy couple

[**Yet**]

As in *The Ladykillers* (Mackendrick 1955), the disruption may leave lasting traces.

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The opposite is not true, as romance is noticeably absent from zombie films. *Welcome to Zombieland* (Fleischer 2009), *Warm Bodies* (Levine 2013), and *Fido* (Currie 2006) are notable exceptions, which can be seen as generic hybrids.

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The zombie genre is thus euphemized. As we have seen, key scenes of the film, among which its conclusion, are affected by this process.

**THE END**

"Things are going to change" was the promise of the opening scene. To what extent is this verified?

Liz and Shaun (and Ed to a certain extent) are left alive, which maintains a compatibility with the scenario described above.

Ed, as well as the other surviving zombies, is tamed, domesticated. Regressive pulsions and abjection are thus contained.

While Ed in chains may recall Bub in *Day of the Dead* (Romero 1985), he is not there to be studied, but to be played with. In *Shaun*, zombies need to be taught proper manners (Shaun chides him when Ed tries to bite). There is little to be learnt from them.
A repeated shot - at the very beginning of the film (post-credits) and at its very end - encapsulates this movement in which "things" have not changed radically, but all the regressive and potentially asocial drives have been vanquished, banished to the shed along with Ed (this was itself foreshadowed in the first part of the film - at 23:00).

The very idea of safety which pervades the later scene is never an option in zombie films: even in 28 Weeks Later, the film begins with the illusion that London has been cleared of the zombie threat, and every viewer in their right mind knows that it is not likely to last.

It is probably in this context that the avoidance of the "z-"word" by the protagonists makes sense: by repeating this joke several times in the film, Edgar Wright teasingly (and jokingly) inscribes in his film something like a structure of denial.

While Romero chooses not to use the word "zombie" in his original trilogy, apart from a brief mention in Dawn of the Dead, Wright - and Pegg acknowledge it but have their protagonists reject the very notion.

In the end, denial is the name of the game Shaun of the Dead invites its spectator to play, whereas it can be argued that the point of every zombie movie in the Romero mold is to favor the emergence of the real. This may be due to the comic slant introduced by parody - exacerbating an element only present intermittently in Romero's films - or to the hybrid status of a text which relies so much on the conventions of romantic comedy, i.e. a genre of repression and denial. Pegg's claim that the film was meant to keep the two genres "intact and separate" is disproved by the many examples of interferences or blurring of boundaries throughout the film.

The combination of a fundamentally escapist genre with a profoundly realist one results in an unstable hybrid, eventually assimilable into the romantic-comedy structure rather than into the zombie genre. The playful use of references and in-jokes creates an imbalance in favor of a genre which always hinges on self-parody and self-awareness. The result is a film which pays its respects to the zombie tradition and its imagery but radically disproves any subversive undertones it may retain by situating it into a structure which favors a restored order rather than the radical "change" hinted at during the pre-credits scene.

References