ZOMBIES IN THE TIME OF EBOLA

The news gets scarier every day.
Maybe we need horror movies now more than ever.

BY DAVID EDELSTEIN

So many demons are feeding on us. Just in the last few weeks, a potential plague has arrived on our shores. Hooded murderers materialize on our screens, sawing off the heads of bound captives. Cameras—some attached to hovering drones—scrutinize our comings, goings, and stayings. Electronic screens hypnotize children into inertia. Sociopathic vigilantes set upon African-Americans. Reactionary males portray unmarried females and mothers with careers as a danger to families, threatening, behind internet masks, to rape and disembowel the women who displease them. Seas rise, species die, the Earth is poised to punish humanity for its arrogance. We can't push this stuff into our unconscious. There isn't enough room. And it won't stay buried. We know that soon enough there will be blood—and gore—and all the other things you can find right now in an average horror movie.

The question hangs: Why would any intelligent person who is already horrified by the news of the day want to watch horror movies?

The answer is that, unlike earnest, realistic films with Good Housekeeping Seals of approval, horror movies—with their sadism, unapologetic sensationalism, lack of nuance, and avid gratification of pathological impulses—offer sharper, more acute versions of our worst-case scenarios, brilliant metaphors for what haunts us:

_Somebody's stalking—and eager to torture—us._ The most successful horror series of all time, the neo plus ultra of torture porn, is _Saw._ (Ten years old, it's getting a one-week Halloween theatrical rerelease.) Its torturer/executioner, Jigsaw (Tobin Bell), presents himself as an all-seeing moral avenger. Does he conjure up fears of fundamentalist terrorism or a torturing totalitarian government? Both, actually.

Terminally ill, festering, glued to video screens that let him watch every wrecking contortion of his victims, he punishes decadent, lazy Americans who take their precious lives for granted—by, say, abusing drugs. In settings of industrial decay amid raw sewage, they awake to find themselves in Rube Goldberg contraptions, forced to choose between their lives and others'. The game is rigged, and few "players" win. The thing is, though, our sympathies are muddled, the moral equations unsolvable. Just because we empathize with victims who are being slowly flayed/shredded/disemboweled, it doesn't mean we like them—some are even disciples of Jigsaw's who've lost their own compasses. So we identify with both the tortured and the torturer—and groove on the general nihilism.

_The devil is technologically savvy._ He or his representatives can be anywhere and everywhere. They can also screw with our technology, as in _Oculus_, in which nothing we see on monitors is necessarily real. The NSA could take a page from Old Scratch—or, for that matter, Jigsaw.

_Our technology doesn't help us._ In fact, it makes things worse. Video in _The Ring_ and its successors is a great demon-deliverer—it softens us up. On a stylistic level, the subjective camerawork of _The Blair Witch Project_ and its many descendants—among them _Paranormal Activity_—takes away our peripheral vision and radically constrains our perspective. Listening to bumps in the night and crackles in the woods, spotting vague shadows amid trees or at the end of dark corridors, we're reminded that nothing is scarier than nothing. Vérité documentary realism is the new gothic: It makes you doubt the efficacy of even the best investigative journalism.

_Zombies are awful, but people might be worse._ Plague-bearing zombies—marauding Ebola carriers?—remain the harbingers of social collapse, forcing
humans to become survivalists and create new, crude hierarchies of power. Right-wingers can view them as alien invaders (seal the Mexican border?) who require a paramilitary response, as they are not just infectious but also great fun to shoot, bludgeon, and decapitate. Liberals like George Romero, who, in Night of the Living Dead, invented the modern zombie cannibal, reserve their truest horror for that paramilitary impulse and even cast zombies in the role of the disenfranchised underclass. Satirists like the Brits Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg in Shaun of the Dead use zombies to illuminate a species of English middle-class complacency. Zombies are very versatile: You can project on them what you will.

Home—representing both our actual houses (private property!) and America—can’t protect us. Here is 9/11 in its purest form. In The Strangers, You’re Next, and especially Michael Haneke’s English-language version of Funny Games, American upper-middle-class families learn that safety is an illusion. (Haneke punishes moviegoers, too, for assuming the victims will have their revenge.)

The invaders can be us, too. In the decidedly left-wing The Purge, suburban home-security mogul Ethan Hawke—who got rich keeping the upper-middle-class safe from the underclass—gets an ironic comeuppance when he’s compelled to protect a black man from a mob of men and women permitted to hunt humans one night a year. (This national ritual of killing is supposed to be cathartic, but catharsis is an old-fashioned concept that has never taken. Any species that needs this much catharsis must have an endless reservoir of poison.)

Turistus and Eli Roth’s Hostel demonstrate how the rest of the world does not like Americans, in the first case by har-