

Anesthetic Zombanol: The Horror Effect in the Fabrication of Evil as a Representation of the Other in Movies Based on a True Story

Anestésico Zombanol: O Efeito do Horror na Fabricação do Mal como uma Representação do Outro em Filmes Baseados em Fatos Reais

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ABSTRACT: This article approaches the claim of truth in the representation of zombies and elements of the Haitian folklore recreated in the American imaginary as a way to reinforce the evil Other through the fictionalization of historical accounts in movies under the umbrella label “Based on a True Story”. The movies in question are *White Zombie* (1932) and *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988) which claim to be based on factual accounts reported in the non-fiction books respectively *The Magic Island*, by William B. Seabrook, and *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, by Wade Davis, as a technique to amplify the horror effect in their viewers, and thus, resulting in the reinforcement of that very representation of the evil Other in the mainstream culture.

KEYWORDS: representation; zombies; horror movies; based on a true story.

RESUMO: Este artigo aborda a afirmação de verdade na representação dos zumbis e elementos do folclore haitiano recriados no imaginário dos Estados Unidos da América como um reforço do Outro como mal através da ficcionalização de relatos históricos em filmes sob o rótulo “baseado em fatos reais”. Os filmes em questão são *Zumbi Branco* (1932) e *A Maldição dos Mortos Vivos* (1988) que afirmam ser baseados em relatos factuais de livros de não-ficção, respectivamente *A Ilha da Magia*, de William B. Seabrook, e *A Serpente e o Arco-Íris*, de Wade Davis, como uma técnica para ampliar o efeito do horror em seus espectadores e, assim, resultando no reforço da representação do Outro como mal na cultura dominante.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Representação; zumbis; filmes de horror; baseado em fatos reais.

Off-screen, the fabrication of evil by imperialist ambitions is used to construct fear as fuel for the maintenance of power over Others depicted as the embodiment of the threatening, the savage, the uncivilized, the monster, or the terrorist in a way that the extermination of their lives, culture, or their rights as human beings is justifiable. And it is through fear that the populace, under

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protection of those in power, legitimizes it, supporting the subjection of that evil Other and accepting their destruction in the name of the order, safety, protection, well-being, and, of course, God. The evil factory targets its enemies and creates discursive practices that will be validated and legitimized by institutions which regulate and control the conduct of the people under their offered protection. On the screen, the film industry can play the role of reproducing paradigms that perpetuate the representations of this Other as evil and throw them into the mainstream culture, turning its audience into scared supporters who learn that this Other evil must be restrained, tamed, or destroyed. This article aims to discuss the label “based on a true story” used explicitly or disguised in the American horror movies *White Zombie* and *The Serpent and the Rainbow* to claim the truthfulness of their stories as a way to magnify the horror effect on their audiences, resulting in the reinforcement of the imagetic representation of the evil Other and the maintenance of the American imperialist power. The article is divided into four parts to encompass its arguments. First, I introduce the source texts for the movies in discussion as factual accounts that are intertextual and entered mainstream culture as master texts; second, I discuss the works under the label “based on a true story”; third, I present the horror effect created through the use of the label; fourth and last, I discuss the reinforcement the movies bring to their audiences and its consequences in the real world.

Both American horror movies in question are fictionalizations of two factual accounts which also presented themselves as truthful narratives of real experiences in Haiti: *Magic Island* by William Buehler Seabrook, published in 1929, and *The Serpent and the Rainbow* by Wade Davis, published in 1985. The reason why I chose to deal with these two movies so distant in time – *White Zombie* is from 1932 and *The Serpent and the Rainbow* from 1988 –, is that the latter acts as a complement to the former.¹ Another reason is that both non-fictional books function as a kind of source texts for the fictionalizations created

¹ For the practicality of reference of the works in the text, I will use the following abbreviations: MI (for the non-fiction book *Magic Island*); WZ (for the movie *White Zombie*); BSR (for the non-fiction book *The Serpent and the Rainbow*); and MSR (for the movie *The Serpent and the Rainbow*).

from them in order to support and boost the horror effect on their audiences, resulting in a subversive representation of the Other.

The non-fictional accounts are travelogues purporting journalistic status of the author's explorations and experiences in Haiti. However, they have different purposes. Seabrook was a journalist and adventurer whose account reports his experiences with Haitian vodou² and witchcraft rituals, witness to drinking blood, soul transference, resurrection and the zombie. In more recent times, his narrative is considered sensationalist:

I learned from Louis that we white strangers in this twentieth-century city, with our electric lights and motor cars, bridge games and cocktail parties, were surrounded by another world invisible, a world of marvels, miracles, and wonders – a world in which the dead rose from their graves and walked, in which a man lay dying within shouting distance of my own house and from no mortal illness but because an old woman out in Léogane sat slowly unwinding the thread wrapped round a wooden doll made in his image; a world in which trees and beasts talked for those whose ears were attuned, in which gods spoke from burning bushes, as on Sinai, and sometimes still walked bodily incarnate as in Eden's garden. (SEABROOK, 1929, p. 12.)

This sample depicts the boundaries traced between two different worlds: the modern, rich, scientific empire from the supernatural, mystic, deadly, backward country of Haiti. It also depicts a mysterious and spooky tone that resembles Dracula's advice for Jonathan Harker not to leave his room after having seen strange things in the castle. It is not by chance that the title of his non-fiction book is appealing and these creepy descriptions with a supernatural atmosphere found in his account of Haiti certainly contributed for the American fantasy of Haiti as a mystic, superstitious, sensual, unearthly, uncivilized, and demoniac place at the time. Seabrooks also gained credit as responsible for introducing the word "zombie"³ and its significance in America, a monster he

² According to Wade Davis (1985, p.41) anthropologists have attempted to avoid the word "voodoo" due to its stereotype of fantasy of black magic and sorcery by using a range of terms, such as *vodu*, *vodun*, *vodum*, *vodoun*. In this article, I will use the word "Vodou" because it is the most commonly used to refer to the religion in Haiti; and "Voodoo" for the American representations of Haitian vodou.

³ The spelling of the word "zombie" also has variations. "Zombie" was the popularized spelling in American English; other writers, such as Wade Davis, prefer the spelling "zombi" because, according to him, the word probably comes from the Kongo word "nzambi", which more or less means "spirit of a dead person" (DAVIS, 1985, p. 42). In this article, I will keep the American

introduced as “sounding exclusively local” (SEABROOK, 1929, p. 93). His depiction of the Haiti zombie also influenced the first wave of Hollywood movies of the genre in shaping its imagetic representation:

My first impression of the three supposed zombies, who continued dumbly at work, was that there was something about them unnatural and strange. They were plodding like brutes, like automatons. Without stooping down, I could not fully see their faces, which were bent expressionless over their work. Polynice touched one of them on the shoulder, motioned him to get up. Obediently, like an animal, he slowly stood erect – and what I saw then, coupled with what I had heard previously, or despite it, came as a rather sickening shock. The eyes were the worst. It was not my imagination. They were in truth like the eyes of a dead man, not blind, but staring, unfocused, unseeing. The whole face, for that matter, was bad enough. It was vacant, as if there was nothing behind it. It seemed not only expressionless, but incapable of expression. (SEABROOK, 1929, p. 101.)

After recovering from “mental panic”, Seabrook did not believe his eyes:

I had seen so much previously in Haiti that was outside ordinary normal experience that for the flash of a second I had a sickening, almost panicky lapse in which I thought, or rather felt, “Great God, maybe this stuff is really true, and if it is true, it is rather awful, for it upsets everything.” By “everything” I meant the natural fixed laws and processes on which all modern human thought and actions are based. [...] But I have seen enough. [...] the zombies were nothing but poor, ordinary demented human beings, idiots, forced to toil in the fields. (SEABROOK, 1929, p. 102.)

A modern, rich, and scientific empire does not believe in superstitions. However, it can profit from them. Nonetheless, it was not before 1982 that a group of scientists decided to study the secrets of that superstition deeply. Harvard professor Richard Evans Schultes, from the Department of Anthropology, Dr. Nathan S. Kline, psychiatrist who studied the actions of drugs on the mind, and his colleague, Professor Heinz Lehman, the head of psychiatry and psychopharmacology at McGill University raised funds to send the explorer and ethnographer Wade Davis to Haiti in order to find vodou sorcerers and discover the formula of the zombi poison and antidote, observe their preparation and document their use. Wade Davis holds degrees in anthropology, biology and

popular spelling “zombie” to describe the representation of the undead, and “zombi” when addressing Wade Davis’ account.

was a Ph.D. student of ethnobotany at that time, all from Harvard University and according to his account (DAVIS, 1985), since 1961 Professor Heinz Lehman had been investigating systematically all the accounts of zombification⁴ in Haiti with the help of his former student Lamarque Douyon, a Haitian and Canadian-trained psychiatrist who was the director of the “Centre de Psychiatrie et Neurologie in Port-au-Prince”. Both believed that zombies were real and existed in Haiti, but instead of corpses raised from the dead, they believe those “zombies” were victims of some kind of drug which made them look like dead, then buried and dug up after a few hours to be reanimated, presenting some kind of brain damage though. However, they did not have any scientific proof nor documentation on their theory. They did not have it until the case of Clairvius Narcisse came to public and called BBC attention which filmed a short documentary based on his story in 1981. Clairvius Narcisse was declared dead in 1962 by two physicians: one American and the other Haitian at the American-directed philanthropic institution, Albert Schweitzer Hospital at Deschapelles in the Artibonite Valley. But eighteen years later, Narcisse returned to his village and introduced himself to his sister by his boyhood nickname, a name that only the family knew and was only used in their childhood. According to him, he was sold to a bokor by his brother and he became a victim of zombification due to the fact that he had abandoned his children and refused to share the land with his brother who was also an heir. After the zombie master, who kept the zombies as slaves under the “zombie poison” effect, died, Narcisse scaped from the plantation, and only returned to his village after knowing his brother had died. All of this story, including Narcisse’s death certificate, were documented by BBC and certified by specialists of the Scotland Yard. That documentation was decisive for the Harvard scientists’ investigation on the zombie poison.

In chapter two of Wade Davis’ account, titled as “The Frontier of Death”, he reports that the purpose of scientists was “to find a new drug which could be used as an artificial hibernation and made patients insensible to pain, and paralyzed; and another which harmlessly returned him to normal consciousness,

⁴ “Zombification” here refers to the Haitian folklore, that is, the belief that a dead person is taken from the grave and reanimated by means of magic made by a sorcerer called bokor to work as a servant or slave.

and revolutionized modern surgery” (DAVIS, 1985, p. 32). After hearing the scientists’ purpose, Wade Davis interrupted them to complement “revolutionize modern surgery” by adding: “And make somebody a lot of money” (DAVIS, 1985, p. 32) to which Professor Lehman insisted saying it was “for the sake of medical science”. At this point, it is clear the difference and complementarity of the two accounts about Haiti. While Seabrook’s non-fiction book reported his way into occultism and depictions of the mysteries of Haiti, even if in a sensationalist fashion, he presented events he had experienced or witnessed, but did not have a reasoning explanation; Wade Davis’ account complements Seabrook’s bringing scientific credibility. Nonetheless, although Wade Davis’ account tried to present a more respectful narrative of Haiti religion and beliefs, at the same time he discredited them under the light of scientific explanations of its mysteries for the purpose of medical science. According to his account (DAVIS, 1985), the Haitian vodou practitioners believe that the zombie powder just killed the victim and it was the sorcerer’s magic that raised the dead like a zombie as a kind of punishment for something the person did against the law and order of the community. To create a zombi, the bokor captures the victim’s *ti bon ange*⁵ and stores it in a jar. However, Davis’ research presented tetrodotoxin⁶ as the result for the cases of zombiism, but that was discredited by some scholars due to some inconsistencies in Davis’ conclusion and his method of investigation.

Besides this complementarity of both accounts, my purpose on bringing them to the discussion is that both books are classified as non-fiction books that purport to be factual accounts in which one presents scientific proof for the other, validating them as evidence of the truth. But how can this truth claim be validated? Foucault, in *Power/Knowledge* states:

“Truth” is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. “Truth” is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it

⁵ One of the two aspects of the vodoun soul said to be responsible for creating a person’s character, willpower, and individuality (DAVIS, 1985, p. 305).

⁶ Potent neurotoxin found in puffer fish and various other animals that blocks the conduction of nerve signals by completely stopping the movement of sodium ions into cells (DAVIS, 1985, p. 305).

induces and which extend it. A “regime” of truth. (FOUCAULT, 1980, p. 133.)

Both writers (Seabrook and Davis) and Harvard scientists occupy discursive positions as authorities who draw credibility to the body of knowledge that creates a scientific discourse regulated by the institution they represent. In this way, the publishing houses, which published the writers’ non-fictional books purporting journalistic status, and Harvard University, which legitimized them scientifically, regulate and normalize those practices in a way that both accounts were internalized as truth and incorporated by society.

Both MI and BSR accounts serve as documented evidence of the truth that the movies will bring under the umbrella tag “based on a true story” to strengthen the horror effect in their audiences, even when the tag is implicit. *White Zombie* is an independent movie produced by Edward Halperin and directed by his brother Victor Halperin in 1932 and it is considered the first in the zombie genre. To pinpoint the main parts of the plot, it starts with the couple Madeleine Short and her fiancé Neil Parker arriving in Haiti to get married. They are lodged at the house of Neil’s friend Charles Beaumont, who is a wealthy plantation owner and French banker. He offered his mansion as the wedding location and Neil a job at one of his bank offices in New York. As Beaumont is in love with Madeleine, he plans to separate her from Neil. Then, he goes to meet Murder Legendre, who is a white voodoo bokor and a sugar plantation company owner, played by Béla Lugosi, and asks him to separate them. Murder Legendre tells Beaumont that the only way is to transform her into a zombie to which he hesitates but ends up accepting. Later, Beaumont adds the zombie powder on some roses and gives them to Madeleine, who smells them and starts feeling the effects of the poison, dying at her wedding ceremony. Murder Legendre, who also was interested in Madeleine, revived her as a zombie and attempts to zombify Beaumont. With the help of Dr. Bruner, the missionary who would perform the wedding ceremony, Neil finds out that maybe Madeleine is not dead, but just in a comatose state under the zombie powder effect. At the end of the movie, Murder Legendre is killed by Beaumont, who frees himself from the poison effect, but also dies after falling from the fortress. Then, the couple is reunited in a happy ending. The movie did not use the label “based on a true story” as a truth claim because this

movie label only became popular in the early 1990's. Instead, the fictionalization relies on the factual accounts documented in *Magic Island* under Seabrook's journalistic aura. Actually, WZ does not even carry Seabrook's name in its credits. The truth claim in WZ comes from the publicity posters of the movie in the theaters and from elements in the book MI noticeably used in the movie.

Americans were not totally unfamiliar with the Haiti folklore due to the first US occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934:

During their stay in Haiti, many U.S. soldiers and their families had been disturbed not only by the violence but also by the locals' late-night vodou practices. When they returned to the United States, they brought back stories of rituals, potions, and the reanimation of dead subjects; the highly exaggerated tales were devoured by curious Americans, who eventually adjusted the spelling of vodou and zombi into the now common (and more phonetic) voodoo and zombie. (KAY, 2008, p. 3.)

Nonetheless, publicity posters for WZ brought explanations about the new monster in case of unsuspecting moviegoers. Besides their purpose of advertisement, which was also placed in local newspapers, WZ publicity poster functioned as evidence of historical facts depicted in MI as a way to not only draw attention to the movie, but also to intensify the horror in the audience. The publicity posters⁷ were created by the movie distributor United Artists and they varied according to the city and theater. Some of them explained what a zombie was and where it came from; some used catchphrases such as: "they are real; based on the legend of the living dead of Haiti; voodoo practices in the island of mystery; the weirdest love story in 2000 years", and others says in capital letters: "Actual extract from the penal code of Haiti" followed by the citation of the article 246 of the Haiti criminal code from 1883.⁸ Here there is another proof that WZ was based on *Magic Island* because not only the publicity posters, but also the movie used a mis-cited article as 249 instead of 246 from Seabrook's *Magic Island*. It reads:

⁷ The posters mentioned in this article can be easily found on "The Bela Lugosi Blog", available at: <https://beladraculalugosi.wordpress.com/1932-white-zombie>. Accessed on June 4, 2022.

⁸ The correct article from the Haiti Criminal Code is article 246, according to the information posted in the Library of Congress by Barbara Bavis (2014).

Article 249. Also shall be qualified as attempted murder the employment which may be made against any person of substances which, without causing actual death, produce a lethargic coma more or less prolonged. If, after the administering of such substances, the person has been buried, the act shall be considered murder no matter what result follows. (SEABROOK, 1929, p. 103.)

Some movie scenes are clearly fictionalized recreations from Seabrook's account, which helped sustain the horror in the movie for its journalistic credibility at that time, even with the same dose of sensationalism and stereotypes. For instance, the representation of the zombies described in *Magic Island* looking like brute automatons and obedient animals working in a sugar cane company. Also, the opening scene in WZ shows the protagonist couple, Neil Parker and Madeline Short, in a carriage at night and suddenly having to stop because of a burial taking place in the middle of the road:

Neil Parker: Looks like a burial.

Madeline Short: In the road? Driver, what is it?

Coach Driver: It's a funeral, Mademoiselle. They are afraid of the men who steal dead bodies. So, they dig the grave in the middle of the road where people pass all the time.

Neil Parker: Well, that's a cheerful introduction for you to our West Indies. (WHITE, 1932, scene 1'33".)

Although this movie scene construction was based on Seabrook's description of evidence to the "evil practices" described by his Haitian friend, Polynice, it was reduced to an atmosphere of mystery for the audience.

Why, so often, do you see a tomb or grave set close beside a busy road or footpath where people are always passing? It is to assure the poor unhappy dead such protection as we can. I will take you in the morning to see the grave of my brother, who was killed in the way you know. It is over there on the little ridge which you can see clearly now in the moonlight, open space all round it, close beside the trail which everybody passes going to and from Grande Source. (SEABROOK, 1932, p. 94.)

WZ is incorporated with elements of previous successful movies of the time, as Gary D. Rhodes (2001) says, following the same blueprint of the first cycle of horror movies⁹ of the early thirties in which the villain disrupts the social

⁹ Early horror movies in the thirties: *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1932), *The Mummy* (1932), and *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932).

norm and threatens the hero and his heroine, but at the end of the movie all the evil is dispelled and those causing disruption are destroyed, or imprisoned; then order is restored and the couple stay together in a happy ending. Another element used to boost the horror effect is the actor Béla Lugosi, who was Hungarian and quite famous due to his success as Count Dracula in the 1931 movie. Lugosi, who was interestingly a foreigner until receiving American citizenship in 1931, became an icon of the “evil eyes” (RHODES, 2001) that mesmerized helpless heroines and because of the character Dracula, he was imbued of a persona associated to something terrifying and evil. And this was explored in the advertisement of the movie by showing his name as Béla Dracula Lugosi. In this way, even if the label “based on a true story” or a variation of it is not stated in the movie, the truth claim is there, explored by the publicity posters and depictions from Seabrook’s account that provoked the audience’s curiosity to the new monster and fear with the attempt to create a blurred line between fiction and reality where the possibility of something similar, even imaginative, could happen to them; the US was facing the Great Depression and was occupying Haiti at that very moment in time.

Ahead in time, the 1988 movie *The Serpent and the Rainbow* would bring a different aesthetic, but still a problematic one in its construction of horror. The movie was directed by Wes Craven and its fictionalization goes on with Wade Davis’ account of his scientific investigation of the zombie powder ingredients in 1985 Haiti. In the movie, Wade Davis becomes Dr. Dennis Alan (played by Bill Pullman), who gets to Haiti during Jean-Claude Duvalier, known as Baby Doc,¹⁰ dictatorship to discover the zombie poison secrets for a pharmaceutical company in order to create an anesthetic drug that would be sold under the trade name “Zombanol”. The movie presents liberties with Davis’ account. One of them is the fact that Dr. Alan is tortured by Captain Dargent Peytraud in a wooden chair,

¹⁰ Jean-Claude Duvalier, known as Baby Doc, was a dictator in Haiti from 1971 to 1986, when he was deposed. He succeeded his father François Duvalier, known as Papa Doc, who was elected president in 1957 and re-elected in 1961. However, in 1964 he declared himself President for Life, and remained in power to his death in 1971. His nickname “Doc” was because he was a doctor. He was also interested in Vodou.

Source: Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. “Military regimes and the Duvaliers”. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available on: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Haiti/Military-regimes-and-the-Duvaliers>
Accessed on June 3, 2022.

which resembles an electric chair. Peytraud tried to make him a victim of zombification, but the process was not completed because a zombie (playing Clairvius Narcisse from the BBC real case documentary) saved him from the grave. The movie opens with the label “inspired by a true story” in a black screen to a suspenseful soundtrack. “Inspired by a true story” label is a variation tag among many others under the umbrella “based on a true story”, such as “this is a true story”, “based on true events”, “inspired by true events” so used by movies. Establishing a comparison between the movie and Wade Davis’ account, it seems that the director’s choice for using “inspired by” instead of “based on” was just a subtle way to say that he had more liberties with the account he was inspired by, protecting himself behind the fictional aura. The director also kept the same title of the factual account. So, this compensates his choice for “inspired by” without losing the reinforcement of the truth claim of the factual account in the story he created for the screen or the horror effects. However, without being acquainted with Wade Davis’ account, the audience would believe the story on screen and then experience horror more intensely. According to Thomas Leitch (2007, p. 282), “films that claim to be based on a true story are always strategic or generic rather than historical or existential; they are not historical records but fictionalized reenactments of historical events.” In the case of the MSR, the possibility of being buried alive and being transformed into a zombie is something proven to be real by means of pharmacology discovered by the ethnobotanist and strategically subverted for a horror story. Unlike WZ, whose truth claim relies on a journalistic account status, but strategically kept under the supernatural and mystery, the MSR is under an aura of scientific authority that reveals the supernatural process of zombification as a result of pharmacology, but kept as a secret at service of the dictatorship maintenance. According to Wade Davis’ account, “In Haiti, the fear is not of being harmed by zombies; it is fear of becoming one. [...] For the vodounist the creation of a zombi is essentially a magical process” (DAVIS, 1985, p. 207). As Vodou practitioners believe in the immortality of spirit, they feared becoming a slave for the eternity. Thus, as Kyle Bishop (2010, p. 52) states “the threat of zombification in Haiti acts as a powerful controlling force applied by various agents in society to exert control and maintain stability across political, social, and economic strata.” And this amalgam of scientific

explanations for the zombification process and the mysteries of vodou religion, kept under brutal dictatorship, are recreated in Wes Craven's horror movie.

The MSR is set during Jean-Claude Duvalier's (a.k.a. Baby Doc) dictatorship (1971-1986) and it constructs its horror by using the factual account of pharmacological zombification intertwined with dictatorship whose leader keeps his power under black magic voodoo practices. However, the amplified effect of horror is constructed by the appeal that the tag "inspired by a true story" creates from the very moment the movie starts to the end when it brings a note of the scientific discoveries under study in the US: "The zombie powder and its active ingredient, tetrodotoxin, is currently under intensive scientific study both in Europe and the United States. To this date the process by which it works remains a mystery" (THE SERPENT, 1988). And also, with the disclaimer which, although it says the persons and events portrayed in the movie are fictitious, it reinforces the scientific investigation by a Harvard trained ethnobotanist and anthropologist who returned to the United States with rare powders under study in the US and Switzerland as a real element to boost the horror effect.

Such truth claims can hide a more persuasive intentionality. Thomas Leitch (2007) brings interesting claims raised from the implicit or explicit use of the label "based on a true story". For him (LEITCH, 2007, p. 286), claims such as: don't blame us; isn't this sad/inspiring/heroic? are implied claims that "muster truth claims as a support for stories that might well have trouble standing on their own without them" since the use of "the category of the true story as a privileged master text justifies the film claims to certain kinds of authority — ideally by placing them beyond question." The movies *White Zombie* and *The Serpent and the Rainbow* set their premise in non-fictional accounts as truth claims used like source texts that create the aura of authority to the movies and thus boost the horror effect. However, there is an implied claim in both movies that unveils the persuasion in them: isn't it terrifying that these true events can happen to you too? For Edward Said (1993, p. xii) "nations are narrations and stories are at the heart of what explores and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history." That implied claim musters audiences to perpetuate the construct of the evil Other as a master text that the

movies in question did not destroy, but helped fabricate and keep stereotypes of the Haitian people, folklore and religion in the name of the horror effect.

If, in the US, the 1930's were a scenario of the Great Depression and the Jim Crow laws, the late 1980's was of an economic revival, massive investments in military training and weapons, and the end of the "Evil Empire" decade under Ronald Reagan's administration.¹¹ Thus, although playing with Haitian colonial issues, both movies produced different aesthetics for different audiences that in the end are invited to support American Empire status quo. In WZ, as the character Murder Legendre, played by Béla Lugosi, is a white voodoo master who owns a sugar mill and plantation and makes use of the process of zombification to create zombie slaves; "he represents a hybridized form of capitalism" (BISHOP, 2010, p. 76). This hybridization alludes to the Haitian-American sugar company, HASCO, based in Haiti from 1912 to 1987 which paid "low wages and gives steady work" (SEABROOK, 1929, p. 95). In this way, WZ intertwines the white voodoo master and the Great Depression in times of Jim Crow laws and US military occupation in Haiti. Agreeing with Gyllian Phillips' argument which states that

the central anxiety in Halperin's film, *White Zombie*, is revealed by its title: zombies are one thing, but a white zombie is a sign of horror. Like "white trash" or "white slavery", the term "white zombie" implies the violation of a racial norm. That is, white audiences of zombie pop culture in the 1930s might reasonably expect black zombies to be the norm, thanks to Seabrook's *Magic Island*. (PHILLIPS, 2011, p. 28.)

On the other hand, it was neither possible to speak of zombie pop culture in the 1930s, since the new monster was inaugurating the silver screen and the movie distribution had to invest in publicity posters to explain the zombie concept to the general audience, nor to blame Seabrook's *Magic Island* for the racist bias the audience might have. American audiences were subjects already formed by racial segregation and the very place of the blacks and whites imposed by society.

¹¹ Ronald Reagan was president of the United States from 1981 to 1989. According to Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018, p. 92), "Beginning with Ronald Reagan in 1980, the GOP embraced the Christian Right and adopted increasingly pro-evangelical positions, including opposition to abortion, support for school prayer, and, later, opposition to gay marriage." In March 8, 1983, he gave a speech to the National Association of Evangelicals where he introduced his concept of "evil empire" as a reference to the former Soviet Union (REAGAN, 1983).

Magic Island was just another stereotypical and sensationalist contribution for the maintenance of the American status quo. The point is that Murder Legendre is a signifier of horror by means of the metonymy Béla Dracula Lugosi which was bolstered by true claims of factual accounts used for publicity, let alone the pun in his name, “Murder”. It is these claims, associated with the fact the villain is white, that break the boundaries between black and white people’s positions, opening the possibility for not only black people, but also for white moviegoers to be transformed into cheap zombie slaves in times of a high rate of unemployment and economic crisis.¹² So, WZ subverted factual accounts pertaining to Haitian culture, folklore and people in the name of the horror effect to achieve the successful formula from the horror movie cycle of the early thirties.

In the late 1980’s, the economic context was different. The US empire was strong again. But what about the mindset? The movie *The Serpent and the Rainbow* repeats the *White Zombie* horror premise bringing this time a white, cultured, and Harvard PhD male student to experience zombification and fight against the Black voodoo master Captain Peytraud. Even if Dr. Alan knows about the ingredients of the zombie powder, the movie keeps the mystery of vodou religion going, but in a way that reinforces, beyond stereotypically, the Haitian vodou and its practitioners as something evil that must be destroyed. And the evil ends when Dr. Alan finally kills Peytraud, freeing the imprisoned souls of zombified people from the jars. It coincides with the news of the Duvaliers fleeing from Haiti and Haitians celebrating freedom. Here the director joins two factual accounts: Wade Davis’ scientific discoveries of the zombie powder in 1985 with Jean-Claude Duvalier’s deposition in 1986 and Seabrook’s *Magic Island*. Allegorically, it is the white American Dr. Alan who frees Haiti from all the evil and darkness bringing the light of democracy and science. The movie foreshadows the second occupation in Haiti by the United States from 1994 to 1997 under the discourse that it was in order to establish peace and restore democracy.¹³ The first one was from 1915 to 1934 due to economic interests.

The movies *White Zombie* and *The Serpent and the Rainbow* reinforces the imagetic representation of the evil Other for the maintenance of American

¹² According to Smiley (1983, p. 488), the unemployment rate in 1932 was 23,6%.

¹³ According to Ann Crawford-Roberts (s./d.).

imperialism through the label “based on a true story” as a strategy to bolster the horror effect in their audiences. The label “based on a true story” and its umbrella tags, hidden or not, helped reinforce and perpetuate negative imagetic representations on Haiti and its people, culture and customs in the name of boosting the horror effect, marketing, or other hidden interests, such as the dehumanization of the Other by socioeconomic and political interests whose implications can be reflected in the support for war and anti-immigration laws by some members of society, for example. The fabrication of the evil Other creates discourses that can be fixed in mainstream culture and form subjects who will support tyranny in the name of God, in the name of science, as Doctor Heinz Lehman said to justify the money coming from the zombie powder research, or even the title of one of Wade Davis’ chapters from his account called “The Frontier of Death”, or *Magic Island* by Seabrook; discursive practices that that will be legitimized to regulate and normalize those practices as truth, justifying then the demonization and destruction of the Other. Especially because the movie label “based on a true story” lures the audience into stories where the boundaries of what is fictional and what is real are erased by the appeal of truth claim in such fictional works. And this echoes in the real world. On January 13, 2010, Reverend Pat Robertson spoke in his TV program “The 700 club” aired at CBN,¹⁴ his media network, soon after Haiti was devastated by an earthquake that killed possibly half a million people,¹⁵ reproducing his evil speech against the Other and tagging the label “based on a true story” in his hatred speech disguised as a call for prayer and help:

And, you know, Kristi, something happened a long time ago in Haiti, and people might not want to talk about it. They were under the heel of the French. You know, Napoleon III and whatever. And they got together and swore a pact to the devil. They said, “We will serve you if you will get us free from the French.” *True story*¹⁶. And so, the devil said, “OK, it's a deal.” And they kicked the French out. You know, the Haitians revolted and got themselves free. But ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after the other. Desperately poor. That island of Hispaniola is one island. It's cut down the middle. On the one side

¹⁴ CBN stands for Christian Broadcasting Network. A large media company operating in television, radio, and social media whose owner is the Rev. Pat Robertson.

¹⁵ According to CBS News. Available on: <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/pat-robertson-controversies/3/>. Accessed on June 4, 2022.

¹⁶ Emphasis added.

is Haiti; on the other side is the Dominican Republic. Dominican Republic is prosperous, healthy, full of resorts, et cetera. Haiti is in desperate poverty. Same island. They need to have and we need to pray for them a great turning to God.¹⁷

In conclusion, this text does not aim at repeating the “evil speech” by demonizing the United States of America, which is a great nation with great people, but to expose issues behind the strategic label “based on a true story” and its umbrellas that help create, keep, or throw constructs of Otherness to mainstream culture worldwide that can be twisted intentionally or not, entertainingly or ideologically to support hatred speeches and wars against that “evil Other”, contributing to the perpetuation of this representation.

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¹⁷ Rev. Pat Robertson. Transcription from the TV program “The 700 club”. Available on: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DN_goSKPCaM. Accessed on June 4, 2022.

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[Artigo recebido em 25 de agosto de 2023 e aceito em 22 de janeiro de 2024.]