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Amidst the recent rash of literary and cinematic works featuring zombies and other anthropophagic monsters, Alejandro Brugués’ film Juan de los Muertos [Juan of the Dead] (2011) and Junot Díaz’s short story “Monstro” (2012) stand out for their inventive combinations of cinematically-inspired horror and Caribbean-inflected humor. A comparison of these two works also reveals compelling arguments for what more effective and ethical responses to disaster might look like through depictions of speculative apocalyptic scenarios. In fact, I contend that Díaz and Brugués’ contributions to the flourishing subgenre of irreverent apocalyptic fiction offer timely appeals for more humane policies and practices that would serve the international community well in any number of real crises being faced today in the Caribbean, where these narratives are set, and beyond.

Díaz’s short story about the outbreak of a mysterious disease on the island of Hispaniola offers an irreverent and provocative critique of ineffective disaster response and profiteering in the face of catastrophe. The story resonates with Díaz’s 2011 essay, “Apocalypse,” in which he attempted “to describe what for me the earthquake revealed – about Haiti, our world, and even our future”. In “Monstro”, Díaz’s unnamed protagonist describes, in retrospect, a world-shattering disaster that began with the appearance of a mysterious illness in Haiti. The disease is nicknamed “La Negrura” (The Darkness) because it resembles a black mold that grows on its “viktims”. The story ends with the narrator and his friends heading toward the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, camera equipment in hand, ready to photograph giant cannibals as the world they knew, or thought they knew, comes to an end.

In Brugués’ film, inspired by the director’s vision of daily life in Cuba, Havana is overrun by the living dead. While they are initially labeled “dissidents” by the Cuban...
government, presumably out of routine, they seem to have made their way to Havana from the U.S. naval base on the other side of the island. The first zombie, wearing an orange Guantánamo Bay prison uniform, appears from under water and attacks the film’s protagonist, Juan, and his friend Lázaro while they are fishing. The flesh-hungry monsters later burst onto the scene in force just as Juan muses about the need for a distraction to deflect attention during a neighborhood meeting of the CDR (Committee for the Defense of the Revolution). The protagonists’ inept and inadequate responses, along with their endeavors to profit from the epidemic, are a major source of humor in the film.

While there is nothing unusual about setting stories of zombies and cannibals in the Caribbean, these works differ significantly from earlier works. As Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and others have demonstrated, such creatures have been a favorite trope for writers and filmmakers for years. Many of these narratives, she argues, “invoke the titillating figure of the zombie as representative of the Afro-Caribbean folk as bogeyman” (Paravisini-Gebert 37). She laments that this trope is widely employed “as proof of the Caribbean folk’s inability to embrace ‘modernity,’ of their incapacity for emancipation and sovereignty” (37). In Díaz’s story and Brugués’ film, however, this kind of appropriation is both challenged and derided in large measure through references to earlier narratives.

The zombies and cannibals in these works resemble others from horror and science fiction genres to a greater extent than those derived more directly from Caribbean tradition and folklore. Díaz and Brugués represent zombification or possession as communicable, whereas Caribbean tradition usually involves individual victims being spiritually “sold” at the hands of a bokor or vodoun initiate. The resulting loss of free will and the subjection to a master is neither communicable nor broadly apocalyptic. In Caribbean folklore the zombie is more often the victim than an aggressor, who must do the master’s bidding and can frequently be liberated from servitude, most often by ingesting salt. As Paravisini-Gebert points out, “In the various Western horror genres the zombie may be a terrorizing, murdering creature, but Haitians do not fear any harm from zombies” (38).

Rather than allegories for slavery, subjection and social death, Díaz’s and Brugués’ creatures are more immediately suggestive of fears about the possible consequences of social ossification and “groupthink,” the rapid spread of deadly viruses or the destructive forces that could be unleashed by environmental or nuclear disasters. In short, both the monsters and the crises depicted in these works owe more to the sensibilities of George Romero’s Night of the Living Dead, Jack Finney’s The Body Snatchers as well as the dark humor of Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg (Shaun of the Dead) and Sam Raimi (Evil Dead), than to Caribbean folklore. This should not be particularly surprising, however, and not only in the work of Díaz, who, while born in the Dominican Republic, grew up in the United States and writes in English, but also in the work of Brugués, who was born in Argentina and raised in Cuba. As Mexican writer and film critic Luis Vaca points out:

Si bien, el cine de zombies no está tan arraigando en la cultura latinoamericana, salvo algunos vagos recuerdos que vienen a mi mente de las épicas batallas de luchadores mexicanos (El Santo o Blue Demon peleando contra alguna suerte de muertos vivientes) es un género que ha pasado sin mayor aspaviento, pero que tiene millones de fanáticos a lo largo de Latinoamérica. Even though the zombie film is not that rooted in Latin American culture, except for some vague memories that come to mind of the Mexican wrestlers’ epic battles
(El Santo or Blue Demon fighting against some kind of living-dead) it is a genre that has not elicited much fuss, but that has millions of fans throughout Latin America.

Ultimately, both Díaz and Brugués combine genre fiction conventions with Caribbean cultural references and gallows humor in a manner that provides ample food for thought on the necessity for coherent, deliberative action in the face of crises.

In this regard, Elaine Scarry’s work on thinking in an emergency is useful in shedding light on how these fictional filmic and literary narratives portray the development of ethical and effective crisis responses. I draw specifically on Scarry’s conclusions about the roles of habit and deliberation as well as the importance of the “right of exit” (66) and commitment to “equality of survival” (52). Like many other fictional survival narratives that imagine how people might react to a potentially apocalyptic disaster, these works present a range of possible responses. More significantly, however, Díaz’s story and Brugués’ film each offer a distinctive critique of widespread national and international disregard for the “right of exit” and commitment to “equality of survival” as well as powerful commentaries on the role of habit and deliberation in ethical and effective responses to crises. In sum, I argue, these works combine elements of horror and humor in ways that present a coherent defense of the “right of exit” and commitment to “equality of survival,” as well as a better understanding of the roles of habit and deliberation in creating more humane policies and practices for responding to emergencies.

Is Juan de los Muertos another “Chupi Chupi”?

Juan de los Muertos (2011) may be the most widely disseminated Cuban film produced in the past 10 years, according to Cuban film critic Joel del Río. It presents a tremendously bloody though overall light-hearted and more comedic than terrifying response to the heretofore unanswered question: What would happen if the city of Havana were besieged by flesh-eating zombies? The protagonist, Juan, and his small band of survivors take on the challenge of responding to the zombie outbreak initially by ignoring it, then by profiting from it, later by fleeing and finally by staying and fighting.

Brugués’ primary interlocutors are unquestionably other filmmakers, rather than the political scientists and emergency preparedness specialists who have also recently offered their own answers to the question of how people would respond to such an epidemic. The tone of Brugués’ film bares more similarity to Sam Raimi’s U.S. horror comedy Evil Dead II (1987) and British zombie comedies such as Edgar Wright’s Shaun of the Dead (2004), than more evidently cerebral films such as Bruce MacDonald’s Canadian film Pontypool (2008) or Robin Campillo’s French film Les revenants (2004). Nevertheless, Juan de los Muertos, whose title playfully evokes both George Romero’s ground-breaking Dawn of the Dead (1978) as well as the more recent Shaun of the Dead (2004), offers plenty of material for reflection.

While the film has generally been received as an outlier in the Cuban film canon, it can also be productively read within the robust national filmmaking tradition. With regard to earlier incursions into the horror comedy genre in Cuba, Juan Padrón’s animated features, Vampiros en La Habana (1985) and Más vampiros en La Habana (2003) are obvious references for Brugués. Additionally, in a gesture to perhaps the most critically acclaimed Cuban film of any period, Juan’s rooftop observations through a telescope overlooking
Havana instantly evoke comparisons with the much less humorous and ultimately immobilized bourgeois character of Sergio from Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1968). In fact, Brugués’ film is most visually effective not for its monsters or other special effects, but for its inspired approach to employing the city of Havana itself as a central character. It is worth noting, however, that where Ian Padrón’s realist drama *Habanastation* (2011) portrays a city that harbors significant social and economic disparities, the subtleties of status and wealth among the city’s residents are largely absent from Brugués’ apocalyptic urban landscape.

*Juan de los Muertos* has already inspired thoughtful responses by several film critics both in Cuba and beyond, as well as considerable commentary on websites such as Cubadebate, Cubaencuentro and DesdeCuba. A significant amount of the commentary on the Cubadebate site revolves around whether or not the film represents an incursion into the territory of gratuitous vulgarity and mindless escapism. Is the film, then, as some posters have suggested, little more than an extended version of “Chupi Chupi,” a recent reggaeton hit that was roundly criticized by Cuban government officials for its vulgarity and base commercialism? While it represents momentum in the direction of projects funded outside ICAIC, the state-run Cuban film industry, that have marketable appeal for both Cuban and non-Cuban audiences, it is neither an entirely commercial mode nor solely derivative of films made in other countries.

One particularly indignant reviewer, Roberto Madrigal, concludes in his essay on Cubaencuentro: “el filme parece decirnos que en Cuba, el futuro pertenece por entero a los cínicos, que no es a los audaces sino a los desfachatados a quienes acompaña la fortuna. Es el alarido cinematográfico de una isla a la deriva” (Madrigal) [the film appears to tell us that in Cuba, the future belongs completely to the cynics, that fortune smiles not on the courageous but on the shameless. It is the cinematographic shriek of an island adrift]. However, cultural critics receptive to the pulse of recent Cuban cultural production, such as Dean Luis Reyes, have noted continuity with earlier trends: *Juan de los Muertos* no está distante de la literatura del sobreviviente desarrollada por algunos de los autores de la generación literaria de la pasada década del noventa conocidos como “novísimos”, y globalizada por las novelas de Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, o del policial del desencanto de Leonardo Padura, al tiempo que bebe de la tradición cultural del choteo. No puede desligarse tampoco de la neo-picaresca cinematográfica inaugurada por Tomás Gutiérrez Alea y Juan Carlos Tabío (Reyes) *Juan of the Dead* isn’t far removed from the survivor literature developed by some of the authors from the literary generation of the nineties, known as “the newest” and globalized through Pedro Juan Gutiérrez’s novels or the disillusioned detective novels by Leonardo Padura, at the same time that it draws on the cultural tradition of choteo. It can’t dissociate itself from the neo-picaresque cinematography introduced by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío either.

In fact, part of the film’s appeal may be that it knowingly incorporates “todos los estereotipos de Cuba como símbolo global, privilegiando la burla de la idiosincrasia hiperbólica del cubano, como también la legitimación del carácter resistente que nos ha tocado asumir ante toda clase de cataclismos de la Historia” (Reyes) [“all the stereotypes of Cuba as a global symbol, privileging the mocking of Cubans’ hyperbolic idiosyncrasy, as well as the legitimation of the resistant character we [Cubans] have had to assume in the face of History’s many cataclysms”]. This strategy of employing recognizable stereotypes for comedic effect, however, may instead serve to irritate and exasperate viewers and critics, such as Pavel López Guerra:
Aun persiguiéndose el bosquejo de una cubanidad «de cómic», esta queda traicionada con las alusiones a la obsesión del nativo por el ron, «la yuma» o el sexo promiscuo. No es que el recurso resulte absolutamente desacertado, solo que debió trabajarse más a fondo para lograr transitar por la delgada línea que separa el subrayado del esquema, del enfoque que lo cuestiona con látigo o sorna.

Even while attempting to sketch a Cubanness “from the comics,” this is betrayed by allusions to the native obsession for rum, foreign women or promiscuous sex. It is not that this device is completely misguided, only that it should have been further elaborated in order to successfully walk the fine line that separates emphasizing the preconception from an approach that questions it with criticism or sarcasm.

Much of the humor in Juan de los Muertos, like that of the animated film Vampiros en La Habana before it, does indeed rely on vulgarity and negative stereotypes related to sex, race and gender. It is not particularly surprising, therefore, that the secondary characters, a diminutive transvestite who goes by the name of La China and her sidekick El Primo, a massive Afro-Cuban bodybuilder who faints at the sight of blood, contribute little to the narrative’s overall progression and are both zombified long before the film ends. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the film presents a thought-provoking proposal for disaster response that offers a critique of contemporary societies’ inadequate commitment to equal opportunity for survival.

While there are certain superficial similarities, then, between the raunchiness of the reggaeton song, which was removed from consideration for awards shortly after it was officially criticized, and the often vulgar and stereotypical sensibility of Juan de los Muertos, they clearly function on distinct orders of complexity, with Juan de los Muertos eliciting a much wider range of public debate and interpretation. Unlike the majority of recent Cuban feature-length fiction films, which, according to Cuban film critics Marta Díaz and Joel del Río suffer from “el más chato realismo” [the most pedestrian realism], betraying not only their characters’ identities and conflicts, but also the films’ resolutions, messages and objectives right from the beginning (107), Juan de los Muertos has kept viewers debating long after the credits have rolled. While some critics, including Edgar Soberón Torchía, have dismissed it as trash, others, such as Pedro Armando Junco, interpret it as a nationalist appeal to “resolver nuestras dificultades por nosotros mismos” [resolve our difficulties by ourselves]. When Brugués himself was asked if his film, which is regularly either lauded or derided for being the first Cuban zombie movie, is yet another comedy that asks Cubans to laugh at their problems, he hinted at a more specific target of ridicule—the responses rather than the problems themselves (Izquierdo). The film won the audience award at the 33rd Havana Film Festival (Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano) in December 2011, as well as audience awards at Leeds, Fantasporto, and the Miami International Film Festival. It enjoyed limited theatrical releases in Spain, Germany, the United Kingdom and Cuba and promises to gain many additional viewers when it is distributed more widely.

Díaz’s New World Apocalypse: Oscar Wao, The Cannibal Remix?

While Díaz worked on an apocalyptic novel provisionally entitled Dark America for years, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2007), winner of the Pulitzer Prize and his only published novel to date, deals more evidently with the history of the Dominican Republic and the New World than their possible futures. Far from a departure from previous
concerns, however, “Monstro,” published only two years after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, also continues exploring the idea of the fukú or curse on the New World that began with Columbus’ arrival. Commenting on Oscar Wao in an interview with fellow writer Edwidge Danticat, Díaz asserted: “the real issue in the book is not whether or not one can vanquish the fukú–but whether or not one can even see it. Acknowledge its existence at a collective level. To be a true witness to who we are as a people and to what has happened to us” (3). “Monstro” deals directly with the aporia surrounding the history of the New World and Hispaniola in particular.

Initial commentary on “Monstro” has generally emphasized the similarities in the writing style, including the English and Spanish code-switching and playful disregard for maintaining distinctions between literary and colloquial registers. Several readers have also pointed to similarities between the voice of the here unnamed narrator and that of Yunior in Díaz’s earlier work. For examples, Clifford Garstang notes “The voice seems typical for Díaz—sort of a post-apocalyptic Yunior.” Despite some criticism to the effect that this story appears unfinished, it does present a cogent narrative of irresponsible, inept, fatally and terrifyingly inadequate reactions to emergency situations.

One commentator complains that nothing actually happens in the story and the “main character never even interacts with this craziness” (Riccio). However, I would argue, the contrast between the narrator’s privileged group of wealthy friends who are sheltered by their “Dome” subscriptions, and the vulnerable inhabitants of the relocation camps outside Port-au-Prince, effectively draws attention to the impact of social and economic inequality in this case on inhabitants of the same island.

Díaz’s narrator reflects several times on the multiple warning signs that went unheeded or overlooked by those with the power to respond to the disaster effectively. He points to the knowledge, expertise and perceptiveness of those less powerful, but better positioned to understand the problem, as lost opportunities to address the epidemic before it worsened.

Both Díaz and Brugués mercilessly ridicule their characters’ attempts to profit from other people’s problems, or to avoid crises by hiding or ignoring what is happening all around them. Díaz’s text is particularly critical of the larger economic motives behind international disaster response, or lack thereof: “And since it was just poor Haitian types getting fucked up—no real margin in that. Once the initial bulla died down, only a couple of underfunded teams stayed on” (107). Instead of merely lamenting the inaction or incoherent action of the many groups and individuals with privilege (or “priv” in Díaz’s words) who ignore the collective scream of disaster or respond only with violence, he highlights the coherent actions of those who never stop fighting for survival. Those who respond most coherently and most effectively to the crisis in this story are the Haitian scientists and doctors and their collaborators on the ground.

Interpretations of these works as dangerous pop culture pabulum or disturbingly cynical social satires on how people, both individually and as groups, often respond inadequately and unethically in the face of catastrophe or other serious problems, are overly reductive. Instead, I argue that Díaz and Brugués’ respective uses of familiar genre conventions and tropes along with caustic humor in fact provide provocative social commentary on effective and ethical crisis response.
Reacting to Crises: Immobilization, Incoherent and Coherent Responses

22 In *Thinking in an Emergency* (2011), Elaine Scarry’s contribution to Amnesty International’s new Global Ethics series, Scarry outlines three possible outcomes in responding to an emergency: immobilization, incoherent action and coherent action (79). Drawing on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, as well as a range of more recent work on the topic, she argues that the only effective emergency response, coherent action, requires both deliberation and habit. In contrast to those who argue that in an emergency one must act first and think later, Scarry holds that deliberation and quick response should not be considered mutually exclusive. The goal of deliberative thinking, after all, is to make decisions about what to do or not to do. Far from an impediment to action, then, deliberation helps enable coherent responses to crises. Similarly, following Aristotle, Scarry argues that habit, which is often maligned for its ability to desensitize and encourage reliance on acquired behaviors rather than innovative thinking, is in point of fact frequently a crucial component to effective emergency responses.

23 The emergency responses portrayed in these speculative narratives run the gamut delineated by Scarry from immobilization to incoherent and coherent responses. In “Monstro” the narrator and his privileged Dominican friends ignore the crisis and go on with their lives as if nothing were happening until the border is sealed. In *Juan de los Muertos*, the protagonists decide not to tell anyone about the zombified Guantánamo Bay prisoner they harpoon while fishing and instead go about their lives as if nothing had happened. After their initial inaction, Juan and his friends later attempt an unsuccessful exorcism before finding more effective ways to use a crucifix, oar, baseball bat, slingshot and any number of other adaptable tools through trial and error. Among Juan’s friends, Lázaro is most noteworthy for his incoherent responses. Not only does he lack discipline and the ability to control a harpoon, he purposely kills the living in scenes that have given more than one viewer reason for concern. However, as the director explains in an interview, the character of Lázaro is “such a mess” (Guillen) and not a heroic figure in the film. Instead, his actions illustrate some of the potential dangers of forgoing the necessary training and deliberative thinking that can foster coherent responses to crisis situations. His inadvertent harpooning of Pastor Jones, the English-speaking missionary with a plan to resolve the crisis, reaffirms Lázaro’s inadequate preparation for responding effectively to the crisis while underlining the need for a coherent Cuban rather than foreign solution to the disaster.

24 Inaction and incoherent responses are not limited to those of individuals in these works. In “Monstro” the international community is generally irresponsible until the potential for the crisis to spread beyond Haiti becomes clear. In *Juan*, the Cuban government misidentifies the threat as dissidents rather than the living dead, enabling life to go on as usual until a protest against the dissidents at the iconic Plaza de la Revolución proves to be a fatal misstep as zombie hordes attack the exposed protestors. Government officials also force the film’s male protagonists to strip and conscript them into service to fight the zombie outbreak. However, this proves to be a counterproductive measure as well since the living are handcuffed together in a vehicle along with zombies, dramatically decreasing the ability of the survivors to defend themselves. Nevertheless, Juan and his team develop survival skills by adapting the self-defense measures they had already
learned and the tools they have available. Similarly, the character of Dr. DeGraff in "Monstro" uses her training and expertise to continue studying the mysterious disease even when most of her international counterparts have abandoned the task.

In contrast to *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and other recent works in this vein that have been read as expressions of fears about difference and immigration, these works counter xenophobic zombie narratives and ultimately advocate transnational rather than solely national or individual self-preservation as shared goals. In fact, while Shaun is a rather gentle and sympathetic protagonist, Juan is morally suspect to say the least in this Cuban spin on the zombie comedy genre made popular by the 2004 British film. Significantly, however, Juan distances itself from the humorous resolution in *Shaun* where the walking dead are harnessed by the living for their benefit. *Shaun* ends with a reincorporation of the living dead into the economy of work and leisure, including relationships. The military reimposes order and the living citizens profit from the dead as labor, entertainment, and companionship.

Juan, unlike Shaun, has little innocence though more leadership potential by the time zombies attack. He already recognizes the difficulty of distinguishing right from wrong and of making ethical decisions, even before the dead rise. Shaun, on the other hand, agonizes over taking any non-habitual action at all. Juan has no illusions that he will recover the woman who left him and wastes little time worrying about others beyond his immediate circle of friends. He focuses on honing effective self-preservation skills and turns them into a lucrative business opportunity to boot. Shaun also ultimately benefits from the zombie outbreak: he keeps his zombified best friend chained in the shed where he is always available as a gaming partner, but no longer an obstacle to establishing a heterosexual relationship, an alternate routine that replaces almost but not quite completely, the previous homosocial bond.

Similarly, Díaz’s narrator is a self-proclaimed shallow, aspiring womanizer whose main goals in life seem to be chasing girls and taking it easy. However, in *Shaun of the Dead* the initial fear and ethical uncertainty about how to deal with the undead are replaced by a return to the same habits of self-contained navel-gazing, now buttressed through the use of the undead for entertainment and free labor. The Other is normalized as no longer threatening or powerful in its own right, but as harnessable labor. The no-longer human becomes a joke or a pet rather than an active threat, so the film ultimately takes the bite out of the undead by domesticating them. While important work is being done by Jon Stratton and others on how the recent interest in all things zombie resonates with Giorgio Agamben’s work on bare life and the extension of the state of exception, here I focus my attention on the ways Díaz and Brugués’ work can be read in conjunction with Scarry’s work to appeal for more humane policies and practices in both national and international crisis situations.

Alex Sanchez, a researcher with the Council on Hemispheric Affairs based in Washington, D.C., apparently whimsically moved by the current zombie craze, proposes an “analysis [that] will consider the fictional scenario of what would happen if zombies appeared specifically in Latin America” (Sanchez). His thought experiment, or what he terms a “crossover” analysis “between academic research and fictional situations involving zombies” inspired by Daniel Drezner’s *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*, concludes as follows:

> the widespread availability of weapons and the very existence of so many criminal groups, combined with a decreased value of life would mean, ironically enough,
that the inhabitants facing a zombie-apocalypse in Latin America might actually have a fighting chance at survival” (Sanchez).

Sanchez here reinscribes the very demeaning logic he purports to diagnose by suggesting that Latin Americans value life less than people living in other regions and that they would therefore be less hesitant to use deadly violence and hence more likely to survive. Similarly, in Michael Guillen’s otherwise insightful interview, he appears to fall back on a received notion of a supposedly distinctive Latino acceptance of death: “Brugges inflects his Havana-set homage to predecessors Dawn of the Dead (1978) and Shaun of the Dead (2004) with regional affects that make it a welcome and culturally distinct addition to an already ubiquitous genre. What sets it apart is its wry sociopolitical tone and an everyday acceptance of Death that is uniquely Latino” (emphasis mine).

Both Díaz and Brugués’ works, in contrast to such assumptions and Sanchez’s overly glib conclusions about the chances for survival in the event of a zombie attack or outbreak in Latin America, squarely point to the lack of disaster preparedness not just in the Caribbean, where the scenarios are set, but more broadly. Rather than resignedly accepting death or devaluing human life, they suggest ways of living and acting in a more just and humane world by encouraging readers and viewers to think about how to respond to emergencies. These works draw on zombie and cannibal tropes to call for renewed attention to the value of life and struggles for survival. As Díaz noted even before publishing “Monstro”, “the metaphors that genres have established (mostly off the back of our experiences as people of color: the eternal other) can be reclaimed and subverted and expanded in useful ways that help clarify and immediate-ize our own histories, if only for ourselves” (Danticat 4).

The Roles of Habit and Deliberative Thinking in Emergency Response

As Scarry and others have demonstrated, habit can be both deadening and sensitizing and as such it is alternately portrayed as either destructive and counterproductive or useful and necessary in the context of responding to crises in both works. Habit becomes constitutive not only of the main characters’ responses to crises in both works, but also to the responses of governments, militaries, scientists, aid workers and others. The incoherent responses to crises portrayed in these works are particularly suggestive in that they encourage us to question our own capacity to respond effectively to potentially devastating diseases, nuclear catastrophes or other major disasters that have occurred in the past or might occur in the future as well as the ineffective or in some cases counterproductive responses to existing medical, social, ecological and economic problems. The negative habits and lack of deliberation exhibited in these works can be read as a tongue-in-cheek commentary on both our past and current failures to deal coherently, quickly and humanely with crises.

While the combination of certain habits, deliberative thinking and ingenuity is presented positively in both works, a major key to survival seems to be a quick exit. For those unlucky enough not to be able to escape, whether it be due to border closings, quarantines, military conscription, or any number of other reasons, emergency thinking becomes a survival skill that must be quickly honed and constantly refined. The trope of the unsuspecting heroes who confront danger not because they have an emergency plan,
but because they are unlucky enough to find themselves in danger’s path, is present in both works. Díaz’s Dr. Noni DeGraff, a Haitian epidemiologist investigating the illness, has the presence of mind to close one eye during the attack, sacrificing her sight for understanding through a glimpse of the crisis: “Dr. DeGraff took the precaution of keeping one eye shut, just, you know, in case things got Sodom and Gomorrah. Which promptly they did” (117). Brugués’ motley crew of survivors, like Díaz’s character Alex, is decidedly less self-sacrificing. They attack zombies for financial gain rather than science, understanding or altruism, while Alex plans to gain fame by photographing the crisis in Haiti.

In both works deliberative thinking leads to action rather than endless debate whereas lack of deliberation often leads to worsening situations. The absence of deliberation, which according to Scarry “is directed to how, not whether, to diminish the injury” (78), and communication more generally is detrimental to survival efforts. In both “Monstro” and Juan, confronting the crisis appears at first to be little more than an exercise in futility as the survivors are isolated, outnumbered, underprepared and often simply overwhelmed by the “infected”. The main characters head into, instead of away from, the maelstrom with no other tools besides photographic equipment, a desire for fame and adventure and a sense of entitlement in the case of Díaz’s characters. In the final scene of Brugués’ film, Juan is armed only with an oar and a stubborn refusal to leave his homeland.

Nevertheless, the responses to emergency depicted in these two works demonstrate the value of both emergency preparation and training as well as deliberative reasoning and cooperation. These scenarios, which seem to leave little space for any hope of a return to a prelapsarian world, present grotesque exaggerations of, rather than rupture with, current medical and economic predicaments in the region. The crises that may at first appear to fatally disrupt the established social order and economic systems in fact serve to extend existing problems in the direction of totalized violence.

The Right of Exit and Freedom of Movement

Both Brugués and Díaz employ speculative fiction to expose the inherent violence in revoking or eliminating the right of exit or freedom of movement across and within borders. Border violence in the form of border closings, forced deportations, exit and entry restrictions, while admittedly more mundane than a zombie apocalypse or outbreak of giant cannibals, permeates the larger social and political contexts of these works. The right of exit, which Scarry affirms is “a right that has, for more than two thousand years, been recognized as essential to liberty” (66), is markedly absent in both works. This most familiar of restrictions imposed through departments of immigration, border control and even the requirement of exit papers, popularly known as the tarjeta blanca [white card] in the Cuban context, is arguably just as vital to understanding the need for deliberative thinking to inform emergency responses.

Restrictions on freedom of movement, not only for those living in or traveling to Cuba, but also for many living in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, are underscored in these works. While the absence of the legal freedom for citizens to leave without government permission is apparent in the Cuban context, Díaz’s story reveals the asymmetrical border restrictions between Haiti, the Dominican Republic and the United States. This is salient here because, in practical terms, as Seyla Benhabib has noted, the moral claim to
the right of exit must be understood to include not only the freedom to leave one country (or a part of a country), but also the freedom to enter another (or another part of that same country).

37 The right of exit is stated explicitly in article 13 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
(2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

38 However, following Benhabib, this formulation of the right of exit is incomplete since it remains silent on the practical obstacle of admission elsewhere. In today’s world, Benhabib argues, “There is a fundamental human right to exit only if there is also a fundamental human right to admittance” (173).

39 Both Díaz and Brugués use science fiction and horror to satirize and, in the process, defamiliarize these situations. They bring fresh attention to the daily violence and lack of mobility that are the direct result of widespread disregard of the right of exit. While the lack of the right of exit depicted by Brugués and Díaz in both the Cuban and Haitian contexts (and in the Dominican context to a lesser degree) may seem less striking than the immediacy of hordes of attacking zombies and giant cannibals, the lack of the right of exit in fact proscribes the possibility of a viable exit strategy in both cases. There is no coherent humanitarian response to the crises in either a national or international context because there are no provisions for evacuation or relocation. Closed refugee camps in Haiti, sealed borders, medical quarantine, international disregard, and a U.S. military attack on the affected area in Díaz’s story, and forced work camps in Cuba and international isolation in Brugués’ film, read less as futuristic flights of fancy than as evocations of past and in some cases present social conditions.

40 The absence of the right of exit in both works is highlighted even further through the vulnerability of migrants. In both Díaz and Brugués’ works the figure of the teenage immigrant who has returned to visit family is forced to extend his or her stay due to the crises. Díaz’s luckless narrator bemoans being “left behind” in the Dominican Republic when the borders were sealed because he had chosen to continue chasing women in Santo Domingo rather than join his mother in Miami. Juan’s daughter Camila in Juan de los Muertos has returned to Cuba from Spain where she had been living with her mother and found herself stuck in La Habana with her father and his friends when the crisis unfolded. While Díaz’s unnamed narrator decides to follow his friend Alex, along with their mutual friend and his love interest Mysty, into Haiti to photograph the crisis at the end of the story, Camila decides to take her chances at sea ostensibly with the goal of reaching Miami along with Lázaro, his son Vladi “California,” and a young boy saved from his zombified father (played by veteran actor Luis Alberto García) by Juan in a final gesture of heroism that highlights how he has developed his rough and tumble survival skills into a coherent and socially conscious response to the crisis.
Conclusion: To Stay and Fight or the Commitment to Equality of Survival

Fatalistic, derivative and cynical as they may at first appear, both works in fact provide serious social critique and ask us to reconsider how we respond to crises. Like Díaz’s “too-cool-for-school” privileged Dominicans or Mysty’s self-protective hostility, these works use outrageousness and unsettling repetition of stereotypes and biases to draw attention to the ways we respond to emergencies, and ultimately to others. When we respond without deliberative reflection and ethical habits, we forgo processes that could provide great social benefits both nationally and internationally.

This reading of Díaz’s story and Brugués’ film can be productively contrasted with Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg’s film *Shaun of the Dead* and Alex Sanchez’s essay “Latin America and the Zombie Factor” as examples of works in which the instrumentalization of monster narratives renders appeals to ethical crisis response unintelligible or inaudible through deceptively violent representations of the Other as less than human or non-human and therefore more disposable. Through this analysis and counterpoint with xenophobic zombie narratives, I hope to have highlighted Díaz and Brugués’ contributions to expanding the conceptual reach of zombies and cannibals beyond the realms of both traditional Caribbean folklore and the recent resurgence of interest in zombies in contemporary film and literature.

Both works undermine cynical and defeatist attitudes towards regional and global social issues, including the devaluation of human life by dignifying the choice to stay and fight for survival in the face of crisis rather than doing nothing, profiting, or leaving. These works mordantly criticize the shallow, selfish and cynical responses, or lack of responses, to catastrophe that are their protagonists’ initial impulses. However, through habit and deliberative thinking, we see the development of responses in both works that counter these humorous but ultimately sterile reactions that can be fruitfully understood through the lens of Scarry’s work on thinking in an emergency.

The generally, though not entirely, sympathetic protagonists represent the common man (not the “New Man”) who struggles to find direction and purpose. While Díaz’s narrator reflects on his less than heroic motives for staying in the D.R. and heading towards, rather than away from the crisis, a secondary character, the female Haitian scientist Dr. DeGraff, epitomizes the kind of coherent, trained response to crisis that Scarry advocates in *Thinking in an Emergency*. Likewise, by the end of *Juan de los Muertos*, what is left of Juan’s bumbling makeshift team finally has enough training, experience and deliberative capability to join forces and form a coherent response to the crisis.

Instead of interpreting these hypothetical apocalypses as confirmations of a cynical attitude towards death, I read these works as creative attempts to laugh in the face of tragedy by taking it to the extreme level that shocks the viewer or reader out of complacency about the absurdity of the sometimes all too familiar. Sanchez and Guillen’s conclusions about the devaluation of human life and attitudes towards death are overly simplistic and, I would argue, play into stereotypes about disregard for others when in fact both Díaz and Brugués’ creative fictions suggest that survival is intimately connected to concern for others. Although the crises may originate elsewhere (in the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base in *Juan de los Muertos*) or be accelerated by foreign intervention (through
yet another U.S. military invasion of Haiti in “Monstro”), both works emphasize the need to find effective ways to respond to crises that go beyond lamenting or assigning blame.

While both works are critical of individuals, governments, aid organizations and other groups that either ignore disasters or intervene without the necessary knowledge, experience and deliberative decision making to make effective and ethical choices, they are even more critical of our failures to learn from our own mistakes. As Díaz noted in 2011, a little over a year after the earthquake in Haiti, “the world has looked away. It has failed to learn the lesson of the apocalypse of Haiti” (“Apocalypse”). If apocalypse also means revelation, then “they are also opportunities: chances for us to see ourselves, to take responsibility for what we see, to change” (“Apocalypse”). In this sense, both Juan de los Muertos and “Monstro” offer us opportunities to see, to take responsibility and to change.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. The specifically Caribbean humor in these works is most notable in Brugués’ use of Cuban choteo and Díaz’s adaptation of the popular Dominican tradition known as dar cuerda. Brugués’ use of choteo (a kind of irreverent humor analyzed by Jorge Mañach in his 1955 essay “Indagación del choteo”) has already been identified by Cuban film critics Joel del Río and Dean Luis Reyes.

2. This disease, which Díaz’s narrator describes as “the joke of the year” (107), evokes the fukú or curse of white supremacist ideology. The legacy of colorism and anti-Haitianism are apparent in the initial reactions on the Dominican side of the border: “You couldn’t display a blemish or catch some sun on the street without the jokes starting. Someone would point to a spot on your arm and say, Diablo, haitiano, que te pasó?”(107).

3. According to Brugués, “Juan in many ways is a parable about living through the past 50+ years of revolution in Cuba. Cubans see Havana deteriorating but they just keep on living. So many people leave but I’ve always said, “Why would you leave? If you really like it, stay and fight for it”” (Guillen).

4. Juan de los Muertos is a coproduction of the Spanish company Zanfoña Producciones and Producciones de la 5ta Avenida, a Cuban-based company registered in Bolivia. The film also received additional support from Latinofusión, Canal Sur, Televisión Española, la Junta de Andalucía, Ibermedia, Cinergia and the Cuban Film Institute, ICAIC (el Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficas).
5. If considering methods for surviving a zombie outbreak seems a hopelessly frivolous or hackneyed conceit, consider the recent work on this very topic by, among others, political scientist Daniel Drezner, author of International Politics and Zombies (2011), the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) and Alex Sanchez, researcher for the Washington D.C. based Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) and author of “Latin America and the Zombie Factor.”

6. Brugués makes this concern for the city explicit in his director’s statement for this film: “Por otro lado, quiero fotografiar una Habana preciosa, la Habana que yo amo. Una Habana por la cual uno arriesgaría su vida y por la cual vale la pena luchar” [In addition, I want to photograph a beautiful Havana, the Havana that I love. A Havana for which someone would risk his or her life and for which it is worth fighting].

7. For an overview of the criticisms, see María Córdova’s “La vulgaridad en nuestra música: ¿una elección del “pueblo cubano”?”

8. In fact, Pavel López Guerra concludes that Brugués’ film unintentionally marginalizes the Other through its “complaciencia con el orden de cosas que lo condena a esa ‘esquina’ espacial, económica y cultural” [complacency with the order of things that condemns it [the Other] to that spacial, economic and cultural “corner”].

9. According to Jorge Molina, who plays Lázaro in the film and is an accomplished director of independent films in his own right, the film was inexplicably removed from the main movie theaters in Havana in early June 2012 despite continued ticket sales.

10. Brugués’ first feature-length film as screen writer and director, Personal Belongings (2006), was a drama rather than a “genre” work, although he has also maintained a long-term interest in speculative genres.

11. Similarly, Édgar Soberón Torchía complains about Juan de los Muertos: “Aquí no pasa nada: ni ejército, ni fuerza aérea ni ministerio alguno […] no pude evitar experimentar la sensación de que con Juan of the Dead, el cine cubano tocó fondo” [Nothing happens here: no army, no air force, no governmental departments whatsoever […] I couldn’t avoid feeling that Cuban cinema hit bottom with “Juan of the Dead”]. In contrast, I argue that both works present inaction rather critically as an inadequate and unethical response to disaster.

12. For a recent example, see Jon Stratton’s essay in which he persuasively argues that “in many of the recent zombie texts, the zombie threat can be read in terms of the fear of many members of western countries about being overwhelmed by displaced people” (266).

13. As Seyla Benhabib has noted, “This fundamental right of exit and entry is a moral claim and not a legal right” (172).

14. Brugués commented on his portrayal of the relationship between Camila and her father Juan in a recent interview: “sometimes in Cuba when things are difficult, families grow apart and some go to live outside of Cuba and that’s a tough decision for them to make, so I wanted to explore that a little bit” (Conterio).

ABSTRACTS

these two works highlight the importance of training and habit, deliberative thinking, the right of exit and commitment to equality of survival in emergency preparation and response. Díaz and Brugués’ contributions to the flourishing subgenre of irreverent apocalyptic fiction offer timely appeals for more humane policies and practices that would serve the international community well in any number of actual crises being faced today in the Caribbean and beyond.

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