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"They All Run Like Scared Little Rabbits": The Vegan Ethos of Rob Zombie's *House of 1000 Corpses*

By Mike Thorn

In the third act of writer-director Rob Zombie's cinematic debut, *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003), the sadistic Otis B. Driftwood (Bill Moseley) forces his victims to wear rabbit costumes for a round of lethal roleplay. Simulating a hunting scenario, Otis tauntingly chants, "run, rabbit, run," realizing his fantasies of capturing and executing his human prey "like animals." This scene represents one of many pointed human-animal images in the work of longtime outspoken vegan advocate Rob Zombie, but to date there is a surprising absence of critical scholarship addressing how his films represent his vegan ethos. From *House of 1000 Corpses* and its Southern Gothic sequels, *The Devil's Rejects* (2005) and *3 from Hell* (2019), to the 2007-2009 *Halloween* remake duology and beyond, Zombie consistently employs horror cinema's innate sensory and tonal excesses to convey an anti-human-exceptionalist, anti-corporatist vegan ethos. Zombie's films often subject human characters to the kinds of real-world cruelty that are routinely enacted by humans on animals in the colonialist, corporatist U.S.A., invoking everything from hellish industrial factory farms to the wearing of animal flesh as leather. This retrospective review contextualizes the cinematic foundations of Zombie's veganism through his debut feature, *House of 1000 Corpses*. It argues that *Corpses* uses horror's Grand Guignol, shock rock-tinted extremity to allegorize exploitative systems of violence undergirding American society, wherein more-than-human animals are often so radically objectified that they are deprived of subjecthood.

Rob Zombie's veganism informs his artistic vision as a musician and a filmmaker. In a 2021 *GQ* interview, Zombie states that "we're all brainwashed from the moment we're born that all the cows are happy and the pigs are happy and everybody's so happy and it's all 'Old McDonald Had a Farm.'" He then describes the moment this cultural myth was shattered for him, when he saw a documentary depicting the "brutal and disgusting" conditions of factory farming (Zombie 2021) (in a 2019 interview with *Revolver*, Zombie identifies this documentary as *The Animals Film* [1981]). Zombie alludes here to fixations that pervade and define his filmography: namely, engagements with American propagandistic mythology ("Old McDonald Had a Farm") and the horrific truths muzzled by that mythology (the systematic exploitation, torture, and mass killing of more-than-human animals). Relevant here is that Zombie ties his disgust to American institutions and American

mythmaking; in his 2019 *Revolver* interview, he specifically labels Burger King and Dunkin' Donuts as "horrible, multi-death corporations" (Zombie 2019). Interestingly, both the *GQ* and *Revolver* articles connect Zombie's statements to his musicianship; the *GQ* piece credits the director's belief that veganism is "metal," and the *Revolver* piece connects veganism to a "punk" ethos. Laura Wiebe Taylor also draws links between Zombie's musical and cinematic impulses. She argues that the director's use of popular rock music in particular is intrinsic to his films' sociopolitical critiques: "Zombie's use of popular music in his horror films produces not so much a counter-narrative as an alternate reading that resists conservatism rather than affirming it. By relentlessly pairing extreme brutality with popular—often beloved—tunes from the (primarily) American past, Zombie exposes the violence that lies embedded in American history and society" (236). David Greven similarly identifies countercultural impulses in Zombie's films, noting that "Zombie establishes the horror cinema as a domain of social critique" (192). These analyses bear out in *House of 1000 Corpses*, a feverishly paced surreal nightmare soundtracked with industrial and classic rock (including original tracks by Zombie), but the impact of Zombie's veganism on his cinematic sensibility remains largely unexplored. *House of 1000 Corpses* initiates the director's cinematic vegan allegory, incorporating elements of punk-rock ethos, heavy metal aesthetics, and horror's excesses to advance the filmmaker's critique of America's systemic animal exploitation and its entrenched denial of related atrocities.

Set in 1977, *House of 1000 Corpses* follows two urban couples driving through rural Texas in search of cultural ephemera and tourist attractions to populate a book they're writing on roadside attractions. The couples stop at Captain Spaulding's Fried Chicken and Gasoline, an establishment attached to the Museum of Monsters and Madmen, where they meet the comically menacing Spaulding (Sid Haig), whose grease-painted face invokes American horror symbols both real and imaginary, from real-life serial killer John Wayne Gacy to Stephen King's Pennywise to the corporate mascot Ronald McDonald (the latter reference inherent in his hot dog t-shirt). Spaulding's inked body also invokes the myths of American cinema: John Wayne's face is tattooed on his forearm and the *Love/Hate* tattoos on his knuckles invoke Robert Mitchum in *The Night of the Hunter* (1955). Spaulding leads the couples through his Murder Ride, a perverse carnival attraction devoted to notorious serial killers, where he tells them the legend of Dr. Satan, "murderer, torturer, but most of all, master surgeon." Invoking the kinds of horrific laboratory experiments routinely imposed on animals, Spaulding informs the couples that Dr. Satan, aka Mr. Quale, "was an intern at the Willows County Mental Hospital, nicknamed Weeping Willows for the never-ending cries of pain. Through primitive brain surgery, Mr. Quale believed that he could create a race of superhumans from the mentally ill." The tourists drive off in search of the legendary tree where Quale was unsuccessfully hanged; they pick up a young hitchhiker named Baby (Sheri Moon Zombie), who claims to live only a few miles away. A hidden figure covertly shoots at their vehicle,

causing a stall that the couples mistake for a blown-out tire. Baby and her half-brother Rufus (Robert Allen Mukes) take the quartet to their family's house under the guise of helping them secure a tow truck. Steadily escalating psychological and physical torture soon ensues.

Openly indebted to Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *House of 1000 Corpses* features a narrative of folkloric simplicity. Rick Kelley points out that *Chain Saw* is "[h]eld up as 'the ultimate pro-vegetarian film' and a mainstay of think-pieces featuring 'films with hidden activist agendas' ever since" and that "the subtext of Tobe Hooper's horror classic is already so well-established that 'subtext' seems something of a misnomer. Ask Hooper himself: 'It's a film about meat'" (2019, 90).[1] Hooper personally endorsed *House of 1000 Corpses* as "one hell of a great horror movie" (*House of 1000 Corpses* DVD), and Zombie describes *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as a "perfect film" (*Movieweb*), but the films' shared vegan positions have not yet been examined. *House of 1000 Corpses* foregrounds the ubiquitous presence of animal agriculture and meat retail at the outset, responding to an unthinkably mammoth industry with devastating consequences. As with the depiction of *Massacre*'s disenfranchised slaughterhouse worker family, *House of 1000 Corpses*' representation of the Firefly clan traffics in American Gothic "urban" and "rural" archetypes, perpetuating a trope that Carol J. Clover calls "urbanoia"; Clover identifies ideological problems endemic to this narrative convention, in that it labels the "redneck" as "a kind of universal blame figure, the 'someone else' held responsible for all manner of American social ills," and further that it casts a confrontation "in almost Darwinian terms, of the civilized with the primitive" (2015 131, 135). Zombie is not entirely exempt from participating in this classist narrative, but he signals awareness of the vexing trope when Spaulding challenges the urbanites for "exoticizing" their rural subjects of curiosity. Affecting a stereotypical accent, Spaulding presses: "Y'all think us folk from the country's real funny-like, don'tcha? Yeah, well, saddle up the mule, Ma! Slide me some grits! I's got to get me some edjication." David Church (2015) argues that Zombie "shares his characters' hostility towards bourgeois society's ironic disparagement of white, rural, working-class culture" and that the director evokes "pastiche as a form of 'cultural cannibalism' upon the garbage cast off from dominant capitalist consumption" (197); Mark Bernard similarly asserts that "the middle-class victims of *Corpses* are depicted as callous and wilfully not conscious of the fact that their entertainment and amusement are predicated upon class stratification" (2014, 129). Zombie's film thus invokes sweeping colonialist American imagery to situate the Firefly family as representatives of broader national symbols and power structures, not simply caricatures of a socially otherized community. Linnie Blake reads *House of 1000 Corpses* as "a radical challenge

[1] Dru Jeffries astutely examines *The Texas Chain Saw*'s vegan imagery in his essay, included in this special issue, "'Oh, you'd probably like it if you didn't know what was in it': Carnism, Cannibalism, and Repression in Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974)."

proffered to the post-9/11 ideology of identity promulgated by the neoconservative right" and argues that "in their repudiation of the models of national identity promulgated by both the neocons and their liberal opponents, [Zombie's] monstrous backwoodsmen show themselves to be no more accessible to cultural assimilation or homogenization than they were in the historic past, this being a highly political critique of the nation-state and its modes of political organization and representation in times of national crisis" (2011, 191). The film thus implicates the colonial American project writ large, which Zombie targets in his thinly allegorized imagery invoking the systemic, industrialized, normalized cruelty leveled at more-than-human animals. Zombie quickly establishes a vision of omnipresent American colonial violence that is both systemic and punishingly unilateral, dispersed among white rural and urban subjects.

It is no coincidence that the crane shot first depicting Captain Spaulding's Museum of Monsters and Madmen sign also reveals a statue of a cleaver-wielding man whose apron reads Otto's Meat Pies, behind whom stands a Fried Chicken and Gasoline sign. The latter connects the meat industry with the fossil fuel industry within colonial America's ecocidal structures. In their comprehensive moral critique of industrial animal farming, John Rossi and Samuel A. Garner note that "[a]nimal agriculture contributes anywhere from 18 to 51% of global anthropogenic greenhouse gas … emissions" (491) and a 2021 *Climatic Change* report states that "[h]umans have significantly perturbed the energy balance of the climate system mainly not only by extracting and burning fossil fuels but also through land use changes and halocarbon usage. Agriculture and waste treatment also release nitrous oxide and methane to the atmosphere, and both are strong greenhouse gases" (Bruhwiler et al. 2). *House of 1000 Corpses* quickly extends its scrutiny of these hierarchical and ecocidal social structures to the Fireflys' hermetic world of horror with a snippet of radio playing in the urbanite tourists' car: "The US Department of Agriculture is checking whether state meat and poultry inspectors are good enough to allow the product to go on sale nationally," the talk show host commentates, while one of the urbanites, Jerry, gawks at photographs of Manson girls. Given Zombie's public admiration of Hooper, this radio snippet might be another nod to the latter filmmaker—in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, the Sawyer family wins a local contest prize for their chili, which is secretly made of human meat. Considering the proximity to the Fireflys' dwelling, the radio interview suggests something similarly disturbing about the gas station-adjoining fried chicken establishment. This detail subtly foregrounds the hidden horrors underlying meat production, a potential for sickness arising from the raising, slaughtering, and preparation of chicken—the Gothic return of the repressed emerging from a violent system of food production.

The film ushers in its anti-nationalist allegory when Spaulding wears a star-spangled Uncle Sam hat for the Murder Ride, thereby fusing Americana with atrocity. The Fireflys' house, where vividly vegan images of horror ensue, is an overload of cultural signifiers: classic Hollywood film posters, antique dolls,

Halloween lighting and decorations, and (most pertinent here) an assortment of bones and taxidermal animal heads—a pop collage of cruelty and revelry. The film's episodes of violence close the gap between human and more-than-human animals, viscerally illustrating the fallacy of speciesism that Peter Singer identifies in his seminal animal rights book, *Animal Liberation* (1975); Singer pivots from an emphasis on anthropocentric "reason" to instead emphasize sentient beings' capacity to suffer. Zombie places human characters in the horrific circumstances routinely inhabited by more-than-human animals to demonstrate the inherent barbarity of industrial torture and exploitation. The Fireflys keep several cheerleaders caged in an animal pen among a mess of animal bones. Police discover a woman's nude body bound in the trunk of the Fireflys' car, with the words *TREAT* and *TRICK* carved into her flesh. As the camera pans over the corpse, Otis's home video voice-over plays: "People come, people go, but how many ever really stop to take a look at the underbelly of the beast?" he asks. "I make them stop, and I make them look. Hope you like what you see!" These words call to mind Zombie's discovery of the horror underlying America's myth-shrouded meat industry, the words *TRICK* and *TREAT* invoking Halloween candies, so often containing hidden animal products, not only dairy but gelatin made from boiled animal skin, tendons, and ligaments. Later, Zombie prominently frames the American flag behind Otis and Baby as they torture Bill (Rainn Wilson) with a razor and an axe. This nationalist iconography lingers when the Fireflys reveal Bill's defiled body to his friends: his preserved torso fused to a large fish's tail, displayed on a fruit-bedded tray like a perverse culinary delicacy. Zombie symbolizes the "underbelly of the beast" with a labyrinthine, bone-lined web of chambers beneath the Fireflys' property, where Denise encounters Dr. Satan performing a lobotomy on a visibly conscious human subject, gesturing to the kinds of torturous animal experiments Singer details in *Animal Liberation*. The film closes with Denise crawling out of the Fireflys' hellish lair into the summer sunlight. Delirious and wounded, she waves down a vehicle, but it turns out to be piloted by Spaulding, whose shirt boasts a juicy hamburger and the slogan, *EAT ME!* Otis pops up from the backseat to descend on Denise, and the film cuts to the recaptured woman awash in the red light of Dr. Satan's experiment chamber.

House of 1000 Corpses ends with a devilishly coy question mark after "THE END", promising the potential sequels that eventually come to fruition as *The Devil's Rejects* and *3 from Hell* while also pointing to the ongoing violence endemic to the American myths it skewers. Rob Zombie's directorial debut sets the foundation for a vegan politics that undergirds much of the filmmaker's oeuvre. Consider, for example, the reckoning with violence against animals in his 2007 *Halloween* remake, or the scene in *Halloween II* (2009) that crosscuts between Michael Myers disemboweling a cow and Sheriff Lee Brackett (Brad Dourif) gorging on meat pizza to disgust his vegetarian daughter, or the dank, industrial maze of *31* (2016), wherein trained killers stalk and kill captives for the amusement of aristocratic spectators. *House* builds the foundation for a cinematic oeuvre informed both by the director's

veganism and shock rocker status. The film provides a useful introduction to his engagement with excess as a meaning-making cinematic device, specifically as pertains to vegan allegory. That is, Zombie's debut feature deliberately applies horror's excessive imagery and genre reflexivity to render explicit its animal liberationist ethos, positioning human animals in the objectified roles routinely filled by more-than-human animals under the late-capitalism of colonial America.

Mike Thorn is a fiction writer and scholar. He is the author of *Shelter for the Damned*, *Darkest Hours*, and *Peel Back and See*. His essays and articles have been published in *American Gothic Studies*, *The Weird: A Companion*, *American Twilight: The Cinema of Tobe Hooper*, *Thinking Horror: A Journal of Horror Philosophy*, *The Film Stage*, and elsewhere. He co-hosts the writing-themed *Craftwork* podcast with Miriam Richer, and he is currently editing a book on Peter Straub. He holds his PhD in English from the University of New Brunswick.

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