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Infecting Images The Aesthetics of Movement in *Rammbock*

Zombie cinema is known not for its intricate character development, but for its visceral affect on the spectator, achieved largely through images of abjection such as rotting corpses feeding upon the living. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Europe breathed new life into the slow-moving, brain-hungry monsters made popular by George A. Romero back in 1968. Employing high-definition technology, lightning-fast jump-cuts, and hyperrealistic depictions of blood and gore, European zombie films such as *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle 2002) and *[Rec]* (Jaume Balaguéro and Paco Plaza 2007) exaggerated the rules that had been faithfully followed by their American ancestors. Zombies came from Great Britain, Spain, and France. The epidemic lacked a German specimen until Marvin Kren's one-hour film, *Rammbock*, hit German television in winter 2010. *Rammbock* is not (that) bloody, not (that) gory, and *prima vista* represents the contrary to the aforementioned European zombie films. While it could be argued that *Rammbock's* lack of extreme gore is due to budgetary constraints or censorship, this essay regards it as an artistic decision that shifts the perspective from the eviscerated body to the eviscerated image; such a shift in perspective strips the zombie narrative to the bone, exposing the cinematic ontology of the zombie as being less about extreme gore than it is about the extreme interaction between the photographic image and the gesturing human form.

Rammbock's plot follows the classics: Berlin is in a state of chaos when a viral outbreak transforms humans into raging zombies. We enter the chaos along with Michael (Michael Fuith), who has just arrived in Berlin with the hope of winning back his ex-girlfriend, Gabi (Anna Graczyk). Within minutes of his arrival, Michael is attacked by an infected handyman and winds up trapped inside Gabi's abandoned apartment with Harper (Theo Trebs), the handyman's apprentice. A television newscast reveals that the vi-

rus spreads through blood and saliva, and that while there is no known cure, ingesting sedatives and/or avoiding strong emotions can inhibit the virus. The hallways and courtyard teem with zombies, and as Michael and Harper grow hungry, they realize their dire situation. When a neighbouring tenant promises them food in exchange for sedatives, the two decide that the elderly woman next door is their best bet and, chased by the infected, they break into her suite. Their mission leads to two revelations: Michael finds Gabi hiding in the attic with her new lover, and, more importantly, Harper discovers that the flash on his camera is a useful weapon against the infected. With Harper in the lead, the survivors "shoot" their way through the building. As the others—consisting of Harper and a young woman—escape to a small boat, Michael, who has been bitten, stands in the courtyard and lets the infection take over as Gabi, who is also infected, runs angrily into his arms.

Though it features a classic zombie narrative, *Rammbock* lacks the action and gore common to the genre, placing focus instead on character development and emotional conflict. This switch in emphasis underscores the eviscerated image over the eviscerated body, drawing attention to the ways in which the human form and the photographic lens interact to shape the appearance of movement in cinema. In order to trigger the switch, *Rammbock* introduces a peculiar new detail into the zombie narrative: one can keep the infection at bay by taking sedative drugs. According to French philosopher Jacques Derrida, such drugs function as *pharmakón*, as medication and poison at the same time ("The Rhetoric of Drugs" n. pag.). This idea lies at the heart of a notable parallelism that *Rammbock* creates in which the pharmacological figuration of sedatives is transposed to the photographic dispositive that the film visualizes. By paralleling sedatives with photography, the film performs a gestural process in which cinematic movement



and photographic standstill, acceleration and deceleration, continuously interrupt one another. *Rammbock's* infected embody this process, their design creating an aporetic tension between the unmoving photographic image and the moving cinematic one. The infected cannot be captured in the regimes of movement or standstill; instead, they perform what I will refer to as *movement*, a gestural state in which standstill and motion simultaneously occur. In this way, *Rammbock* transposes the visceral extremism common to European horror cinema from the corporeal to the pictorial level: splattering images—for example, the human form fragmented by the close-ups and montages created by the camera—materialize into splattered, torn-apart bodies.

Speed: the Jump-cut as Upper

Rammbock primarily depicts situations of confinement and inactivity, but when the action scenes do occur, they follow the convention of accelerated attack that is employed by contemporary European zombie films. This is apparent not only in the accelerated motion of the zombies themselves, but also in the staccato of cinematic cuts and high-speed montage that—similar to the way in which Derrida's *pharmakon* simultaneously hurts and heals—concurrently interrupt movement and hasten action. The speed produced through jump-cuts and montage interrupts the phi effect of film that effaces the gaps between photographic images

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and creates the illusion of motion in 24 frames per second. The furious staccato of fragmented images interrupts *Rammbock's* mise en scène, which otherwise unfolds slowly in much the same way as Romero's zombie films, in which minimalistic cutting creates a slowed-down, "empty temporality" consisting of suspended action (Shaviro 99). The jump-cut aesthetics suggest the camera's ability to fragment motion as well as the human form: a cut interrupts a movement, jumps to an image portraying a single body part, and then jumps again to a blurred action accompanied by a strange scream. Through these cinematic devices *Rammbock's* infected leap from one still image to another in fragments—a body part, a face, a voice. In this way the camera not only devours movement, but also penetrates its object like a surgeon, leaving it dismembered, or splattered.¹

Zombie films expose the crisis of bodies bursting into dysfunction, either visualized via depictions of gore, or transposed to the formal structure of film by employing montage to anticipate the splattered body. *Rammbock* employs fragmented images to metaphorically anticipate the splattered body by exposing a gestural crisis, an abject movement.² The zombie, a living corpse that threatens the structural boundaries of the subject-object relation, is abject in the most radical sense; it is the materialization of a crisis of movement, a visible transgression of what Deleuze calls the sensory-motor link between stimulus and response (311). Disoriented and convulsing uncontrollably, the zombie blasts conventions of movement into an entropy of gestures.

The few scenes in *Rammbock* that feature zombie attacks employ a strategy similar to that of *28 Days Later*, described by Arno Meteling as decreasing the number of images and increasing the number of cuts in order to bestow a staccato-like movement upon the infected (150). *Rammbock's* infected are associated with montage and fast camera movements, their bodies accelerated and fragmented through a staccato of cuts. Conversely, the film's survivors are represented through mise en scène, slow camera movements, and minimal cutting that reflects their lack of mobility in a confined situation. The two modes of representation outlined above align *Rammbock's* infected with

1. See Benjamin, Walter.
2. See Kristeva, Julia.

the photographic image and its survivors with the cinematic one. The decreased number of images and the increased number of cuts employed to portray the infected produce sequences that, although faster, are closer to a series of photographic images.

Static and unmoving, the photographic image is ontologically closer to death than its cinematic counterpart. As André Bazin notes in *Was ist Film?* [*What is Cinema?*], the photograph is the antidote for the passing of time, not accelerating, but mortifying the captured moment; film, on the other hand, performs the (simulated) resurrection of the photographically mortified moment into a series of images, a mummification of time. A metacinematographic effect of zombies is thus to show how film works to resurrect photographic images into a series that simulates movement.

In *Rammbock*, the infected embody a central paradox of the cinematic apparatus: they perform acceleration through interruption. Indeed, their movements are strikingly similar to a series of photos viewed through a magic lantern. In this way, the infected photographically accelerate the cinematic action and return it to the realm of photographic images: the faster they move, the closer they resemble a series of disconnected photographs. In this way the infected represent a breakdown of the aforementioned sensory-motor link between stimulus and response (Deleuze 311). The series of images depicting the infected ceases to represent teleological action, exposing instead a process that destabilizes the very structure of human movement. *Rammbock* screens the breakdown of the sensory-motor link by

substituting it with a multitude of disconnected snapshots, but that breakdown is never completed. At no time does *Rammbock* burst entirely into photographs: it is still a film, but it is infected with photographic images that threaten its mediality. The zombies thus mark a metanarrative in which both media—photography and film—coincide, transforming the coincidence of photographic standstill and cinematic motion into *movement*, a gestural state in which the two simultaneously occur.

Agamben Infected

The idea of *movement* is similar, though not identical, to Giorgio Agamben's concept of gesture as described in "Notes on Gesture" (58-60). In the essay, Agamben refers to Marcus Terentius Varro's *De lingua latina* [*On the Latin Language*] in order to differentiate the gesture from two other forms of "doing," which Varro refers to as *agere* and *facere*. *Facere* means to produce something, like a piece of art. A playwright produces a play, but he does not perform it. *Agere* means to accomplish the performance of something—for example, the play is performed (*agitur*) by ac-

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tors. Both modes of doing are essentially teleological, for they aim to accomplish something (i.e. writing the play or performing it). A third mode of doing is the gesture, which involves neither producing nor performing something, but carrying and sustaining it instead. With reference to Aristotle, Agamben concludes that *facere* is a means to an end, whereas *agere* is a pure purpose without means. Contrary to *agere* and *facere*, the gesture neither answers a purpose, nor is it a purpose in itself: it is a means without a purpose. The gesture is the exposition of pure mediality, a sustained hesitation separating the body from *agere* and *facere*.

Agamben claims that every image, whether it be cinematic or photographic, is essentially gestural, because every image is caught in a double bind, concurrently mortified and dynamic. On the one hand, images expose the erasure of the (conventional concept of) gesture, that is to say, the mortification of the object. On the other hand, they keep up the idea of movement, the desire to be liberated from being frozen in time. Within this very tension, the gesture sustains the impossible sphere between movement (dynamis) and standstill (mortification). It is a mode of doing without transcendence, which exposes mediality as such. With this idea of gesture in mind, one can argue that photography longs for cinema, just as cinema longs for photography.

If *Rammbock* depicts the continuous breakdown of the sensory-motor link but never completes it, **movement** can be regarded as the sustained exposition and repetition of that breakdown: neither moving nor standing still; not entirely mortified photograph nor completely mobile film; neither producing nor performing something, but carrying and sustaining its aporia. The infected, caught between cinematic and photographic image, are carriers of the virus of **movement**.

Because the corridors and courtyard are unsafe, *Rammbock*'s survivors are confined to their apartments. The film's narrative is seemingly constructed with the aim of overcoming the gestural existence—to slow down the infected and to accelerate the survivors; however, this attempted recovery is nothing but a variation of **movement**. The process of recovery begins with Michael and Harper breaking into the elderly woman's apartment with a battering ram. Walls signify isolation, not only the urban social phenomenon, but also the situation of being safe but stuck and separated from each other. With its isolated units, the film's apartment complex signifies both security and confinement. With regard to the latter, the act of breaking through the building's walls might initially seem to represent movement and freedom; however, the attempted action is far from being *agere*. Michael and Harper create the battering ram (*facere*) and break through the wall (*agere*) only to find themselves surrounded by zombies and forced into a deeper state of cap-



tivity, their failure to fully realize their goals negating their attempts at doing. The survivors do not actually break out of the building; instead, they encourage their interrupted migration through it, accompanied by a horde of infected. In this example, *agere* and *facere* achieve nothing but **movement**. Like a drug, the battering ram works only for a moment, and is soon replaced by other objects that stimulate the action and sedate the infected, and vice versa.

Shooting

Rammbock's opening credits reveal photographs of Michael and Gabi happy together; later, in Gabi's apartment, Michael melancholically contemplates these photos on his digital camera. Still further along in the film, Harper photographs Michael as he poses next to their homemade battering ram. In this way photography is introduced as a culturally significant medium of anamnesis as well as a surrogate to fill the void created by severe loss. Loss materializes in Michael's broken relationship with Gabi. The happy couple depicted in the photos on his digital camera no longer exists outside of the virtual, pictorial realm; thus it is fitting that Michael and Gabi are only truly reunited when they are both infected and thereby transposed back into the gestural realm. The scene of their reunion, presented through a sequence of reduced cuts, is peculiar: Michael embraces Gabi; she epileptically moves her arms and punches against his back;



Michael's slow movements and Gabi's fast ones collide as they push against one another, replacing their broken relationship with **movement**. Their embrace emblematically exposes the gap between action and purpose, frozen into an undead sculpture: it doesn't reunite the living couple, but doubles the gesture of photography as a sustained and exposed attempt to rebuild a relationship. In paralleling the images of Michael and Gabi in a happy relationship with their final, undead reunion, *Rammbock* has the couple perform the paradox of being frozen and accelerated at the same time. By the film's end, Michael and Gabi at last become the **moving** series of photographs in which they were introduced during the opening credits.

The Photo Camera as Downer

Healing the wound of loss is not the only application of photography. In order to continue the process of endless recovery, the sequences following the battering ram scene reintroduce the photographic dispositive. The logic of the infection contains the possibility to prevent the virus from breaking out by ingesting sedatives. In an interesting parallel to the medical sedatives, the digital photo camera is applied to achieve similar effects. Let us return to the scene in the elderly woman's apartment, in which Harper discovers that the infected are hurt by the flash of his digital camera (later we learn that the infected's retinas are highly sensitive and easy to injure). A flash released from the camera forces the zombified woman to momentarily back away and mute her epileptic motions. Followed by the other survivors, Harper uses his camera to shoot his way through the raging mob and "flash" the building's infected inhabitants out into

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the courtyard, closing the door behind them. Thus the survivors regain the possibility to move, albeit only for a brief moment, as the courtyard is full of zombies just waiting for another opportunity to attack.

In contrast with the rest of the film, which is relatively well lit, *Rammbock*'s final showdown occurs in the black of night. Infected but doing his best to suppress it with sedatives, Michael sets up the other two survivors—Harper and a young woman—with a bicycle and trailer covered in a professional photographer's flashlight devices. As the courtyard door opens, the flashlights go off, cutting through the darkness in blinding blasts like a stroboscope. There is no lighting in this scene other than the ephemeral flashes emanating from the rigged bicycle as Harper and the young woman shoot their way through the infected mob. Successful "shots" are immediately followed by other attacks. The aesthetics of the sequence shows a coincidence of what *Rammbock* had in stores throughout: the possibility to transform into **movement**. What was previously suggested in the flickering cuts of the zombie attacks is now powerfully expressed through the flash-cut darkness. The sequence clearly depicts the infected as a series of disconnected pho-

tographic images. The darkness that surrounds them signifies the gaps between the cadres of the film and cuts down successful cinematic motion to movement. The jump-cuts that previously brought the infected close to photography are, in *Rammbock's* final sequence, completely exchanged with photographic images.

Breaking the Frames: *Rammbock* Reread

The acts of taking photos and breaking through the elderly woman's wall achieve the same results: they not only provide a way out for the survivors, but also a way in for the infected. Simultaneously exit and entrance, sedative and stimulant, and encouraging the medium of film while returning it to its origins in photography, the traces of the photographic dispositive in *Rammbock* are structurally identical with the ontology of its zombies. The infected are depicted as undecidedly moving between photography and



film, sedation and stimulation, inside and outside; they are accelerated by interruption and stimulated by sedation. The film thereby extracts the gesturally sustained breakdown of the sensory-motor link and employs the infected as its origin, emblem, and ateleological *telos*.

The finale, in which Harper and the young woman escape on the bicycle, concentrates the events of the film up to that point. The survivors are confined to an apartment

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complex and courtyard whose architecture resembles a Roman gladiator arena. While many of the zombie attacks occur in the building's hallways and suites, a good many can also be witnessed through the windows of the apartments facing the courtyard, with the windows framing the events in the same way as a theatre's proscenium arch. The distant position of the spectators as they watch the events of the courtyard self-reflexively mirrors the way in which an audience watches a film, the detached point of view providing a metaphor for the cinematic distance between film and viewer. From this distant perspective, the movement of *Rammbock's* infected appears to be relatively natural, as they are depicted in a linear fashion as opposed to through a series of jump-cuts.

When that distance is erased, movement becomes movement. As soon as the survivors try to escape, the distance between them and the infected decreases. In the sequence in which Harper and Michael break through the elderly woman's wall, the infected literally break through a screen—Michael and Harper try to stop the resulting hole with an entertainment centre—and attempt to follow the two men into the kitchen. Michael and Harper close the kitchen door, but that only slows the infected, who peer at them angrily through the two small glass windows comprising the upper half of the door. As long as an intact screen existed, Michael and Harper were safe, their possibility to move secured. With the destruction of the screen and the door's glass windows, the image becomes terrifyingly tactile, visibly disrupting the *mise en scène*. Seen through the windows in the door, the infected resemble framed photographs, thereby referring to the film's photographic origin. When the infected break through those frames and into the kitchen, the photographic image literally breaks through the fluid surface of the moving image.

One can see an even larger frame in the structure of the apartment complex itself, which surrounds the courtyard on all sides. In this giant frame, *Rammbock's* finale becomes a metaphor for breaking the frame of cinema itself. The infected approach Harper and the young woman in flashes, the strobing lights attached to their bicycle simultaneously

interrupting and impelling the attacks. Tearing the skin of the film apart, the photographic dispositive is again stimulant and sedative, a metaphor for movement that results in a burst of terrifyingly circular corrections. Combining the pharmacological effects of its employed objects (two key examples include the battering ram and the photographic camera) with its narrative structure and topic, *Rammbock* develops a performative dimension. Breaking the frame in *Rammbock* means to spill photographic images like blood; trying to heal the damaged body of the film with sedating photography only makes it worse.

Coda: Photographarmakón, Towards a Politics of Movement

Throughout the film, the use of the photographic camera produces a cycle of relief and severe withdrawal that creates in its user the urge to permanently recharge his medical—or medial, as the case may be—pharmacy. To battle *Rammbock's* infected with photography is to fight gesture with gesture, and rupture with rupture. On the one hand, photographic images hasten and disrupt the cinematic phi effect (as a stimulant), while on the other hand, paralleled with sedative medication, they are required to cure the accelerated excess of images. *Rammbock's* survivors attempt to calm the film's formal structure by injecting photography into its already photographically ruptured aesthetics. One witnesses the results in the finale, as Harper and the young woman race through the darkness on the rigged bicycle, their many flashlights simultaneously interrupting the attacks of the infected as well as the continuous motion of the film itself. The sequence instructs us that breaking a frame and trying to repair it only produces a multitude of other frames, a visible series of photographs. These static images splatter the moving, cinematic image and cause movement, exposing the uneasy state in which film and photography coexist.

Rammbock confronts us with the terror of this state while simultaneously exploring its liberating effects. Liberation, as Nietzsche describes it, is only possible through terrible pain. It is through this understanding of liberation that movement emerges as a political concept, the painful exposition of the aporetic space—the simultaneously therapeutic and toxic space of the *pharmakón*—in which one is faced with the impossible decision of which regime will succeed. While the survivors fight against movement, inevitably approaching what they aim to keep away, the bodies of the infected, trapped in movement, concentrate the survivors' struggle and cause it to continue indefinitely. The bodies of the infected represent movement as a perpetual struggle

against the metaphysics of clear oppositions such as action and inaction, stimulation and sedation, and cinema and photography. Torn between these oppositions, their bodies outline the politics of the subject as essentially ateleological. These bodies that are in movement against themselves present an interesting political philosophy. The metaphysics of the opposition of photography and film that becomes associated with the opposition of the infected and the survivor is continuously undermined throughout the film by the pharmacological technique of photography. This disrupted metaphysics establishes a continuous liberation of the body from its either dead (photographic) or living (filmic) figuration into undead movement, not entirely destroying the opposition but infecting each pole of it with its opposite. It prevents each of them from becoming hegemonic and installs movement as the aporetic simultaneity of identity and difference. Movement—the visible aspect of the infection—is stronger than order, not to be captured and only to be indefinitely performed. Although *Rammbock* looks like a finalized narrative, and although Harper and the young woman escape in a boat at the end, the history of zombie films assures us that there is always a sequel, and thus the cycle continues.

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