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MONSTERS EVERYWHERE

The Zombies, the Land, Memory, and Philippine Colonization in Carlo Ledesma's *Outside* (2024)

ABSTRACT

This article thinks through the seemingly “unnecessary” role of the zombie in the first Filipino zombie movie, *Outside* (2024), directed by Carlo Ledesma. I examine how trauma is presented in relation to the hacienda and the plantation land, and discuss the lasting trauma Spanish, American, and Japanese colonization has had on the Philippines. Drawing from Maximo Ramos’ exploration of Filipino *aswang* and Neferti Tadiar’s methodology examining the “insignificant,” I discuss parallels between the zombies and the hacienda and how they force Francis (the patriarch) to retreat inward and face the trauma he tries to repress. I argue that the zombie and the hacienda represent the horror of trauma inside and outside the home, and haunt both humans and the environment.

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In 2024, Netflix released director Carlo Ledesma's *Outside*, an original film that takes place during a zombie apocalypse in Negros Occidental, a province in the Western Visayas region of the Philippines. The film follows the Abel family as they escape the zombie outbreak in the city and travel to the countryside where the patriarch, Francis, resides in his childhood home, a hacienda plantation in sugar bowl central Negros Occidental. Once there, the film slowly unearths the childhood trauma Francis associates with his home and the damage it has done to him, and then ultimately to his family. The Abels, even before fleeing to the hacienda, are not a happy family. Francis' wife Iris is miserable, her relationship with Francis is tense, and their two sons, Joshua, the oldest, and Lucas, the youngest, are caught in the middle. As it turns out, Iris had cheated on Francis with his older brother Diego, with whom Francis already had a brother complex because of the childhood abuse and neglect Francis endured. Joshua, it is also revealed, is Diego's son. With zombies roaming around outside the hacienda plantation, the real horror of the film is revealed to be the consequences of distrust and intergenerational trauma, resulting in Francis' spiral into madness and ultimate death.

Outside is marketed as the first Filipino zombie movie, yet many viewers of the film critique its zombie element as unnecessary. Filipino film reviewer Joe Balinbin notes that the film "loses touch with what makes the zombie category resonate in the first place," acknowledging that the film tries to do something different but feels that it is "a walking

corpse; shambling without a pulse.”¹ The zombies also seem to just be a marketing strategy to bring in an audience. Ledesma explains, “Probably, they’ll watch it *kasi mahilig sila sa zombie films* [“because they’re fond of zombie films.”] But when they watch it, I hope they realize that this is really a movie about the monsters in all of us. . .”² The role of the zombies in the film, therefore, is to represent the monsters inside everyone. However, I cannot help but think that there has to be more to the zombies than that. They seem so insignificant to the plot, yet they are still there driving the zombie apocalypse nonetheless.

While zombies today in the West are depicted as mindless reanimated corpses attacking humans to eat their brains, their origin is attributed to Haiti and Haitian Vodun. Zombies were originally called “zombi,” but because of America’s Occupation of Haiti, the zombi was eventually introduced to America after 1915 and became a sensationalized Hollywood monster called a “zombie.” Similarly, the Negros region in the Philippines, where the film *Outside* takes place, was originally called “Buglas,” which means “cut off” in the local dialect. But, when the Spanish colonizers came, they named the place “Negros” because of the Indigenous people’s dark skin.³ Zombies, therefore, are colonized monsters. *Outside* employing colonized monsters to ambiently roam about the land of the Philippines, a country that itself has been colonized

¹ Joe Balinbin, “Outside—Film Review,” Sinegang, October 30, 2024, <https://www.sinegang.ph/filmreviews/outside-jb>

² Nathalie Tomada, “The Anatomy of the Pinoy Zombie, According to Director Carlo Ledesma,” *Philstar*, October 20, 2024, www.philstar.com/entertainment/2024/10/20/2393933/anatomy-pinoy-zombie-according-director-carlo-ledesma

³ “The History & Geography,” *Negros Occidental Provincial Government*, accessed November 11, 2025, www.negros-occ.gov.ph/the-history-geography/

for centuries, thus emphasizes histories of colonization as the backdrop of the film.

Through examining the zombie figure in both the Western imaginary and a Filipino context, I argue that the film interweaves trauma through the zombie figure to make legible the dangerous effects of repression because what is being repressed comes back again and again until confronted. The zombies, in their insignificance, point to the haunting specter that is trauma—trauma intergenerationally and trauma from colonization. The zombie figure, being hybrid in and of itself, acts as a Western ghost and a Filipino ghouel haunting the narrative and the land, making legible to international and domestic audiences the postcolonial aftereffects of colonization on the land, culture, and people. The zombie reminds the audience of a repressed colonial past and brings that past to light in the present. *Outside* recognizes how greatly the Philippines has been impacted by centuries of colonization, a policy that still seeks to haunt country and the world, with a reminder of colonial history and what forgetting it can do.

Monsters West and Aswang Southeast

Hailed as the first Filipino zombie movie, *Outside* raises questions such as why did it take so long for the Philippines to make a zombie movie, and why bring Western zombies to the Philippines at all when the country has its own set of monsters to depict in cinema. To contextualize the zombie figure newly introduced in Filipino media, I will begin by discussing the comparison of Western and Filipino monsters and their underlying relationship to colonialism. In the West, monsters in culture and media offer a space “where society can safely represent and address

anxieties of its time.”⁴ In the twenty-first century especially, monsters in media gained popularity because they represent “collective social anxieties over resisting and embracing change,” and can “be read as a response to rapidly changing cultural, social, political, economic, and moral landscape.”⁵

In the Philippines, both Joseph Casibual and Raul Pertierra similarly agree, writing that *aswang* (an umbrella term for Filipino monsters) “has to be a creature or a monster that somewhat represents our anxieties and fears relative to the issues of our society” and allow Filipinos to “communicate and express the states of fear, anxiety or apprehension felt during times of personal or communal stress.”⁶ According to Maximo Ramos, the *aswang* concept can be understood and identified within a European tradition as creatures such as vampires, “self-segmenting viscera sucker,” weredogs (werewolves), witches, and ghouls.⁷ This means that *aswang*, to Filipinos, refers to “the physical traits, habitat, or activities of [those] types of mythical beings, and sometimes also of other mythical entities like demon, dwarf, and elf.”⁸ Kathleen Nadeau additionally explains how Spanish colonization changed so many things about early Filipino society, including conceptions of *aswang* themselves, claiming that the Spanish vilified

⁴ Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui, *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 1.

⁵ Ibid., 1–2.

⁶ Joseph Casibual, “Of Women and Monsters: A Case Study of Philippine Creature Urban Legends,” *Southeastern Philippines Journal of Research and Development* 27, no. 2 (2022): 24–25; and Raul Pertierra, “Viscera-Suckers and Female Sociality: The Philippine Asuang,” *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 31, no. 3 (1983): 323.

⁷ Maximo Ramos, “The Aswang Syncretism in Philippine Folklore,” *Western Folklore* 28, no. 4 (1969): 238–248.

⁸ Maximo Ramos, 238.

female shamans and called them witches, who are “colloquially referred to as *aswang*.”⁹ Spanish colonization, then, altered Filipino cultural memory and ideologies toward *aswang*, women, and shamans by subjecting them to, as Aleida Assmann puts it, “a transgenerational framework . . . on an institutional level, within a deliberate policy of remembering and forgetting” dependent on “personal decisions and selections, on institutions and media” that thus vilifies them.¹⁰ *Aswang*, therefore, are colonized monsters, much like zombies themselves, making it easier for scholars to compare the two.

However, while many scholars try to conceptualize *aswang* from, or within, a Western context, Andrew Hock Sook Ng cautions against comparing Asian monsters to Western ones. The comparison reduces Asian monsters “to a mere assortment of generic attributes [which] may be a useful approach for identifying other undead entities, but only if the attributes of the latter are also understood against their respective cultural-historical contexts.”¹¹ Without analyzing the monster with respect to the cultural-historical context, “an undead Asian entity can be recognized only if it is recalibrated into a [monster such as a] vampire, invariably erasing the former’s native specificity.”¹²

Imposing Western monster attributes to an Asian one forces a redesign to fit the Western label rather than allowing Asian monsters to

⁹ Kathleen Nadeau, “Aswang and Other Kinds of Witches: A Comparative Analysis,” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 39, no. 3/4 (2011): 255.

¹⁰ Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 6.

¹¹ Andrew Hock Soon Ng, “A Typological Inquiry into Asian Undead Beings, or, Why There Are No Vampires in the East,” *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 10, no. 2 (2021):224.

¹² Ng, 224.

be as they are within their country and culture's contexts.¹³ Logically, the reverse would be true as well. While scholar Maximo Ramos leans toward comparing Filipino monsters to Western ones, Carlo Ledesma's *Outside* does the reverse, fitting and redesigning a Western monster to fit the Filipino label. Rather than completely erasing the zombie's Western traits, though, homage is paid to the cultural dominance of the zombie in the West, and the cultural dominance of Filipino folklore monsters is instead brushed aside in favor of using Western zombies with a Filipino twist. Still, the zombie's Haitian origins are overlooked. The zombies in *Outside*, in being reduced to "generic attributes" of Western zombie traits and uniquely Filipino traits, thus simplifies and colonizes zombies again, and cultural memory of what zombies and *aswang* are like begins to become subject to "ongoing negotiation, cross-reference, and borrowing," as Michael Rothberg, in discussing multidirectional memory, explains.¹⁴

One "generic attribute" of Western zombie traits borrowed in *Outside*, besides their appearance, is their representation of cultural anxieties of contagion and environmental degradation. The zombie outbreak in the film is implied to have come from an infection through the water, which Ledesma makes especially clear in an interview.¹⁵ The "generic attribute" of Filipino traits the zombies are borrowing are doing "a lot of smelling" and "a lot of hearing," smelling being a big part of Filipino culture when greeting loved ones and hearing are important in a culture known for its loud and boisterous speech.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid., 225.

¹⁴ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 22.

¹⁵ Tomada.

¹⁶ Ibid.



Another element of twenty-first century monsters that *Outside* follows is the position of humans as the monsters, and the monsters as sympathetic. To do this, Ledesma had the zombies say the last thing they said before they got bitten and died. His logic is that “because usually, in most zombie films, they’re not talking anymore, *mas monsters nasila* . . . These creatures still have a glimmer of humanity in them” [“*they’re more monstrous now*”].¹⁷ The audience sees this most poignantly toward the beginning of the film when the first zombie the film introduces is Francis’ mother who says sorry, an apologetic word resulting in the apology receiver likely sympathizing and forgiving the apologizer.¹⁸ The ability to speak and even apologize brings “a glimmer of humanity” to Francis’ mother, even after realizing in the next apology that she was a zombie all along. By giving zombies the ability to use language, speech, and Filipino traits speaks to “the ways abject and unliveable bodies do not simply lose intelligibility but also continue to be haunted by creative possibilities,” which in turn speaks to the way the past and memory are often renegotiated by colonization and the present.¹⁹

Similarly, while the creative choice of turning Western monsters Filipino is in the marketing and financial interest of the film, the juxtaposition of Western zombie traits and *Outside*’s zombie traits emphasizes the complex colonial relationships attached to the zombie figure as well as the Philippines, and the Philippines’ relationship to the West—the cultural memories of colonization being negotiated through

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Outside*, directed by Carlo Ledesma (Philippines: Black Cap Pictures, 2024), Netflix.

¹⁹ David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, eds, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 8.

the tension of the zombies as backdrops to the larger film that does not focus on them.

Transforming zombies from a purely Western to a more Filipino context is reminiscent of the American film industry rebranding the Haitian zombi to Western zombies. On the one hand, the zombies in *Outside* are thus colonized once more by a different country, but on the other hand, the continued colonization of zombies adds another layer of significance to the backdrop of colonization in the film.

The figure of the zombie in *Outside*, though, in being attributed different traits from different cultures, is a hybrid. Its hybridity signals that its relationship to colonization is far more complex than just a colonized figure that represents colonization. In its complexity being pushed to the background and repressed, the zombies in the film raise attention to themselves, and are thus an element of the film unable to remain truly in the background, repressed and forgotten.

The Philippines, Western colonization, and monsters are all deeply intertwined. Monsters are intertwined with Filipino culture, unlike in the West where monsters are sensationalized as scary outsiders. Filipino monsters, Ramos explains, “still circumscribe the lives of peasants and city-dwellers alike,” even despite *aswang* and other folklore creatures often being forgotten due to colonizers introducing Christianity as the dominant practice.²⁰ Filipino *aswang* additionally express anxieties more ephemerally “such as the presence of an unusual animal or insect, the experience of a peculiar noise, smell, taste or sight” unlike in the West, where anxieties give rise to big monsters.²¹ As Assmann writes, “Every medium opens up its own access to cultural

²⁰ Maximo Ramos, “Belief in Ghouls in Contemporary Philippine Society,” *Western Folklore* 27, no. 3 (1968): 184.

²¹ Pertierra, 323.



memory,” including sensory mediums from the environment around oneself.²² The attention to sensory experiences is attention to noticing environmental differences that could be due to an *aswang*’s presence. Both the environment, such as the land, and Filipino culture are therefore intertwined with *aswang*, unlike the outsider relationship monsters have in the West. Present day Filipino land, culture, and *aswang* are all intertwined with colonialism historically, but those connections are brought to the forefront culturally through the introduction of zombies, which are colonized monsters from a colonial country (Haiti), to a colonized country (the Philippines) that then changes the Western brand of zombies, which in itself highlights the relationship between zombies and colonization, and the Philippines and colonization.

In addition, introducing zombies to the Philippines starkly intertwines monsters to *aswang*, land, and colonization. While there is a distinction between Western monsters and Filipino *aswang*, which Ledesma bridges by hybridizing the Western zombie to become more Filipino, introducing Filipino zombies shed light on colonial history, representations, and attitudes underlying the zombie’s sensationalization. The constant negotiating and renegotiating of what zombies are, and how the Philippines receives and interacts with monsters culturally, speaks to the larger tension within the film of attention to renegotiate, reduce, and repress memory. In the zombies and Francis’ trauma being used to speak to this tension around memory and colonization, *Outside* echoes Erica L. Johnson and Éloïse Brezault’s claim that “memory continues to be the battleground of [the] cultural identity” of the Philippines, as well as Maurice Halbwachs’ argument that “. . . all

²² Assmann, 11.

personal memory is deeply embedded in the material and cultural life of the social groups to which we belong.”²³

Repressing Daddy Issues and Issues Embodying Daddy

The center of the intergenerational family trauma in the film is Francis, yet it is his father that is at the center of Francis’ trauma and, therefore, the story. The conflict in the film revolves around Francis’ trauma from his abusive father, leading to his own abusive behaviors toward his family in the present of the film due to his “Daddy issues,” a colloquial term often used in popular culture to refer to the psychological and emotional patterns and outcomes adults have resulting from their poor relationship, oftentimes due to abuse, with their father, the “Daddy” figure. Throughout the film, memories of his father and Francis’ abuse flash in juxtaposition to Francis’ present, of him ultimately abusing his family. His trauma manifests in his relationships with his family, and with the land he grew up on and where he is now settled. Within that trauma, there is also a tension between Francis repressing his traumatic memories and embodying the behaviors of what traumatized him. Whether Francis realizes what he is doing or not, the trauma he experienced embodies itself in him as the violence of the abuse is “so overwhelming that its memory is disconnected by consciousness,” which Francis tries to disconnect with his repression, thus making it “inaccessibly stored within the body.”²⁴ Because it is now embodied in

²³ Erica L. Johnson and Éloïse Brezault, eds, *Memory as Colonial Capital: Cross-Cultural Encounters in French and English* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 2; and Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 8.

²⁴ Assmann, 12.

his body, his “physically stored [memories] express [themselves] through symptoms,” such as his own violence.²⁵

The film’s cold open sets the tone for the rest of the film and foreshadows the ultimate struggle in the plot—Francis is living his life only for his happiness to be intruded upon and interrupted by his father. The cold open starts with a TV, in what seems to be Francis’ childhood living room because of the framed family photo showing him and his family when he was a child, playing an old video recording of Francis and Iris’ wedding with Brian Nhiru’s song “Would You Still Love Me?” in the background. After a few happy scenes, the video zooms in, focuses on Francis’ face, and pauses while the lyric “Would You Still Love Me?” turns more and more out of tune until the video stops, becoming static instead. For a few seconds, the only thing the audience sees and hears is the static. Right before the cold open ends, though, the screen turns black, and there is a brief moment when the audience sees Francis’ father in the static, before the title sequence opens to a field and the plot of the film begins (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Francis’ father in the television static. Source: *Outside*, directed by Carlo Ledesma (2024).²⁶

²⁵ Assmann, 12.

The lyric “Would you still love me?” being the last thing the audience hears before the static, separating Francis’ zoomed in face with later his father’s face, parallels both men and their relationships.²⁷ If Francis and his father are set parallel, will Iris still love him? Will Francis’ father still love him? And will Francis still love his father? Through these parallels, the strength of love between relationships stemming from Francis’ relationship with his father is set up to be explored through the rest of the film. Additionally, being set between the past of Francis and Iris’ wedding and the present after the title sequence—where Francis and his family are driving away and to something—emphasizes Francis’ father’s presence. That presence is emphasized, even if it is obscured but still visible for less than a second. The brief moment when the audience can see him shapes him as an apparition that has reared its head. Like a ghost, he is there, even if he is not physically there, and even if Francis is trying to repress him.

The audience sees Francis literally repressing the painful memories of his past every time they come up when he brushes the past off as quickly as possible. Once Francis and his family arrive at his childhood hacienda home, the camera closeup of Francis’ face shows he is disheveled. The scene is silent. Just Francis’ breathing, so hard that his shoulders are visibly rising and falling, can be heard; he is sweaty, and his eyes are wide with fear. The camera then turns to Iris, who does not look sweaty or concerned, and her breathing is even. The audience is not privy to why Francis looks so afraid; his wife does not ask and Francis does not bring it up, pushing on instead and going into the home. When he later goes to the basement to check the generator, the audience starts

²⁶ *Outside* (00:01:38).

²⁷ *Ibid.*



to understand the feelings Francis associates with the hacienda. Assmann explains, referencing Heiner Müller, “Memory always needs a stimulus, and . . . a shock.”²⁸ That shock is the generator. It is not something loud and shocking, though, because here again, the film is silent. Francis does not say anything and neither does Iris. Instead, the camera pans to a wooden wall with a blanket, a pillow, and a school backpack resting against the side. On the wood, the audience sees doodles, all of which contain images of a man with white hair and an angry face grabbing a child, stepping on a child, and instructing someone to shoot a child with a gun.²⁹ The shock that stimulates Francis’ memory is silent because it has always been there, out in the open, and is not something that has been introduced for the first time. From this, the audience can infer that this is the sort of abusive relationship Francis had with his father, and that the sleeping set up of a mat and blanket in that basement was where Francis would often be sent as punishment. Despite Francis and Iris seeing all of this, neither brings it up, and Iris closes the door behind them; Francis’ traumatic past, defined by his relationship with his father, is repressed behind a closed door. Yet, despite being shut behind closed doors, his place of trauma contains a generator that keeps the house and his family running. Francis’ trauma and his father are the generator that keeps the plot running.

Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis define trauma as an “event in the subject’s life defined by its intensity by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and longlasting effects that

²⁸ Assmann, 9.

²⁹ *Outside*, directed by Carlo Ledesma.

it brings about in the psychical organisation.”³⁰ Kelly Hurley, building on Laplanche and Pontalis, explains that trauma makes the subject powerless to the resulting distress, and that “trauma is a kind of infernal mechanism that cannot be stopped themselves (nightmares, hallucinations, psychosomatic illnesses, stress-induced illnesses) become in their turn instruments and agents of further trauma.”³¹ Additionally, Eng and Kazanjian discuss trauma in relationship to loss, explaining that loss “names what is apprehended by discourses and practices of mourning... [and] trauma.”³² They continue, “new collective politics of mourning might emerge from the Catastrophe . . . ruptures of experience, witnessing, history, and truth are, indeed, a starting point for . . . transformation.”³³ Francis “loses” his past by leaving but also “loses” any possible good relationship he could have had with his father (and the rest of his family), only to return to a traumatic place of his past—his return “shocks” his body to create physical symptoms of sweat and heavy breathing, and triggers his memories of trauma. The generator, then, in a room furthest inside the house, becomes central to Francis’ trauma—unable to repress his trauma, he puts it onto his family.

Nowhere in these beginning scenes of Francis and Iris’ wedding video playing, and them going to the basement to get the generator running, does the film show the zombie apocalypse affecting the world. At least, not in a horrific way one would expect from a zombie apocalypse horror film. The zombies drive the worldbuilding: Francis kills a zombie

³⁰ Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), 465.

³¹ Kelly Hurley, “Trauma and Horror: Anguish and Transfiguration,” *English Language Notes* 59, no. 2 (2021): 1.

³² Eng and Kazanjian, 2.

³³ *Ibid.*, 4.

while investigating the inside of his house and finds a dead zombie in the caretaker's shack, but the focus is on Francis, his family, and his past. It is this insignificance, though, that mirrors how hard Francis is trying to ignore his past and move beyond it. This effort is shown through how he handles the zombies. The zombie that he kills inside of the house is his mother. At first, though, the audience and Francis cannot tell that his mother is a zombie—she is standing upright, albeit very disheveled and bloodied, and her hair, because of how she is resting her head against the wall, is covering her face. She even speaks—she says, “sorry” (see figure 2).

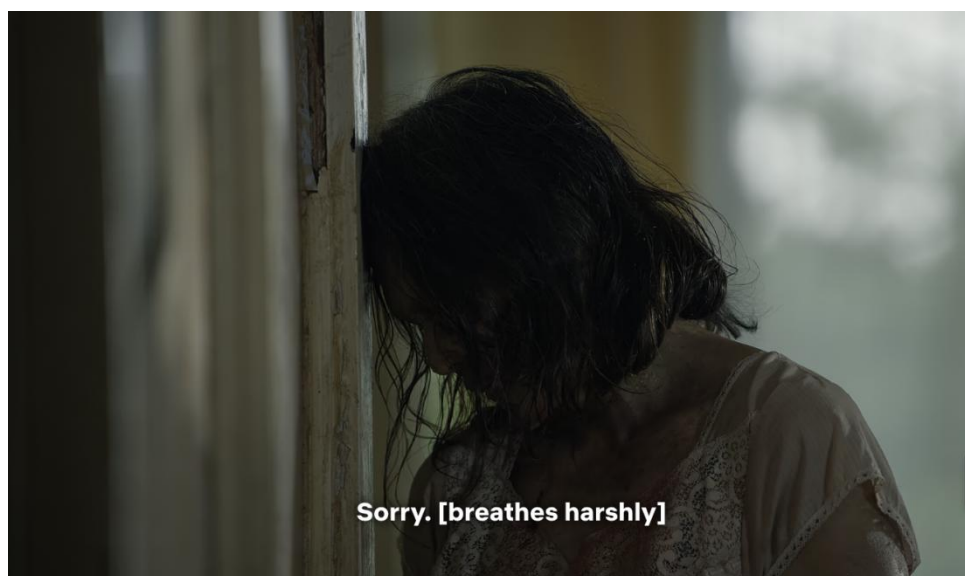


Figure 2. Francis' mother standing upright and saying sorry. Source: *Outside* (2024) directed by Carlo Ledesma.³⁴

After her apology, the audience hears her breathe shakily, but when she turns her head, the audience sees that her eyes are black and there is blood all over her mouth. She apologizes again and turns toward Francis.

³⁴ *Outside*, directed by Carlo Ledesma (00:09:34).

Francis hesitates, indicating that he is coming to terms with his mother—someone from his past is right there in front of him. Her body breaks in half as she tries to move to him, but she persists and drags her upper body toward him, trying to get to him, all while apologizing (see figure 3).



Figure 3. Francis' mother split in half. Source: *Outside* (2024) directed by Carlo Ledesma.³⁵

Francis backs away, but his mother crawls faster at him until he is backed up against a piano, cannot move anymore, and ends up shooting her to stop her. The screen immediately fades to the next scene where Francis is burying his now completely dead mother.³⁶

On the level of a zombie movie, Francis' backing away and shooting to kill her is an act of survival. Within the larger context of the film, though, Francis' actions represent his fear of, and desire to repress

³⁵ Ibid., (00:10:38).

³⁶ Ibid.

and do away with, his past by killing someone (his mother) from his past (when he was abused, but she did not stop the abuse). As a zombie, her monster body, which embodies the past, “incorporates fear . . . giving [it] life and an uncanny independence.”³⁷ His zombified mother exists independently of his past but uncannily, she still evokes Francis’ fear of his past. Despite Francis killing her, though, his past still persists through the rest of the film, but the thing or body embodying his past changes form as he tries to get rid of, and repress, one embodiment after the other. This tension Francis stands at the center of—between the past and present, and the ghost of his past being embodied physically in the present through his zombified mother (as well as through the hacienda and the generator)—mirrors David L. Eng and David Kazanjian’s discussion of Walter Benjamin’s version of historical materialism in relation to other historical materialists. In their book *Loss*, they write, “reliving an era is to bring the past to memory. It is to induce actively a tension between the past and the present, between the dead and the living.”³⁸ Despite how Francis managed to kill (or even re-kill) his zombified mother, there is no resolution and calm for Francis as the past still remains in the present, and that tension will continue to haunt the narrative, but in different forms. Eng and Kazanjian continue, “the past is neither fixed nor complete” because, referencing Sigmund Freud’s melancholia and Walter Benjamin, by “engaging in ‘countless separate struggles’ with loss, melancholia might be said to constitute . . . an ongoing and open relationship with the past—bringing its ghosts and specters, its flaring and fleeting images, into the present.”³⁹ As Jeffrey

³⁷ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.

³⁸ Eng and Kazanjian, 1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

Jerome Cohen explains, the monster, or the “ghosts and specters,” as Eng and Kazanjian call them, always escape by “turn[ing] immaterial and vanish[ing]” only to “reappear someplace” or in something “else.”⁴⁰ In this moment with his zombie mother, the monster appears as his mother but later on, it appears as the generator in the basement, and so on and so forth until it appears as Francis himself.

Much like the long-held belief that repressing something leads to what is being repressed coming back on even stronger, Francis, too, is unable to completely keep his past away from him because he begins to embody his past more and more until he ultimately becomes what he fears. The parallels between Francis and his father are stark from the beginning. Francis is a father with two sons, but instead of treating his oldest son well like his father did with Diego, Francis treats his youngest son well and his oldest poorly, which the audience learns, because Diego is Joshua’s biological father. Francis exists as the patriarch of his household, trying to raise his sons on the same hacienda his father raised him in. He even ends up locking his youngest son (and his wife) in the basement to protect them from, as he claims, the zombies outside. But the most direct connection between Francis becoming his abusive father is at the beginning of the film when he is inspecting the house. He finds his father dead, and takes his bloodied Rolex watch, still ticking but no longer has moving hands, from his wrist.⁴¹ The watch symbolizes Francis’ past continuing to stay with him in his present. Regardless of the point in time, the audience and Francis do not know what time it is because time has paused, yet the memories and the plot continue to persist. With no physical indicator of duration because the hands stopped

⁴⁰ Cohen, 4.

⁴¹ *Outside*, directed by Carlo Ledesma.



moving, there is no indication of progression between when Francis' father had the watch, to when Francis took the watch. As such, the traumatic relationship between Francis and his father remains stuck the way it always has been, always at the back of Francis' mind and never progressing in any way into the future. Stuck in the same time—and Francis being the patriarch to a family similar to the one he grew up with—Francis' father and Francis become the same.

At the end of the film, it is clear how Francis has become the monstrous past he has been repressing. In the basement, Lucas tricks Francis to lower his guard long enough for Iris to stab him so that she and Lucas can escape. Before Iris stabs him, Lucas exclaims, "Sorry!" This, plus Iris' attack leaving Francis locked in the basement, triggers Francis back to his childhood when he was locked in the basement and screamed apologies to his father. On the floor now, as Iris and Lucas run away, Francis sees his father and backs away; the film flashes between Francis' frightened and vulnerable state, his childhood doodles on the wooden wall by the generator, and his father yelling at him in the exact way we see his father through the static of the TV at the very beginning of the film. These moments flash while Francis yells, "Pa! I'm sorry! I'm sorry."⁴² Like his youngest son, a projection of himself who is also the youngest son, apologizing to him, Francis—whose mind is in his childhood—is apologizing to his father, the cycle of trauma echoing in these apologies. Here, Francis' father has physically come back to haunt him. Francis' efforts to repress him and his past have been subverted, and his past (or, his monsters) are now fully confronting him.

But, Iris' screams—she's under a zombie attack—shakes Francis from this confrontation, allowing him to successfully escape from the

⁴² Ibid.

monster—his past—again. Francis finds that Lucas has been bitten by a zombie. Here, the monster quickly returns because Lucas stands at the threshold of becoming a zombie monster. In this moment in the film, the monster takes the form of Francis' child, Lucas, at least partially, because Lucas is at the threshold of becoming a monster but has not been zombified yet. As Cohen writes, "Monsters are our children," in that, no matter how far away the monster is pushed or repressed, they always return, asking why they were created."⁴³ Upon seeing Lucas about to become a monster, Francis must come to terms with the monster he is repressing, but he is unable to. Instead, he sits against the wall, hugging his knees, once again looking terrified and vulnerable. The monster escapes again as Iris cuts Lucas' arm off, striking the blade down seven times before it completely falls off, preventing the zombification from spreading to the rest of his body. Francis is witness to how difficult it is to cut off the monster. The non-diegetic sound plays louder than Iris and Lucas' cries, and a high pitched ringing fills the theater; in this moment, the world becomes silent to Francis and he finally has the headspace to turn inward and question why the monster was created and whether or not he wants to keep running away from it.⁴⁴ Only through seeing someone else try to get rid of the monster, instead of doing it himself, does he realize how much damage repressing the monster causes him and his family. This realization instigates his acceptance to finally confront the monster and to try to right his wrongs.

He attempts to right his wrongs by trying to bring Joshua, who had run away, back to the family. Francis runs to the bridge between the farmlands and the mountain, hoping to find his eldest son there, and

⁴³ Cohen, 20.

⁴⁴ *Outside*, directed by Carlo Ledesma.

when he finds him sitting on top of a car, Francis rushes over to him. His gait is uneven and he is bloodied and disheveled because of everything that just happened, but he moves toward Joshua with determination. His breathing is heavy because of his run, and all he can manage to get out is, “Joshua . . . Josh . . . Josh . . .”⁴⁵ To Joshua, seeing him for the first time in a few days, Francis looks like he has become a monster—a zombie. His assumption is not wrong because while Francis has not actually become a zombie, his struggle with himself and his past turned him into the monster he had been trying to repress. Recognizing Francis as a zombie elucidates the truth—Francis has been a monster all along. Frightened, Joshua shoots him, but then feels bad and rushes to Francis’ fallen body saying, “Pa, sorry! Sorry, Papa!”⁴⁶ Being shot, Francis once again realizes that he has been the monster all along. The cycle of intergenerational daddy issues trauma echoes, but instead of the father harming the son, the son has harmed the father. Even though Joshua is not Francis’ biological son, the cycle breaks when Francis reaches out to gently hold Joshua’s face in his hand and recognizes Joshua as his son by uttering his last word, “Anak” [“*my child*”]. Francis is no longer running from the monster; he confronts it through his acceptance. Finally, the monster and Francis cease.

Colonizers Haunting the Land that Haunts (Back)

Zombies paralleling traumatic memories are not the only figures haunting the Abel family and the film, though. The land plays a significant role in the film besides serving as the setting, as places can “confirm and preserve memories across phases of cultural forgetting.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Assmann, 12.

The setting is fairly contained; it is either inside the house, outside the house, or at the bridge that leads to the mountains. Because of the land, though, Francis is able to give Lucas sugarcane and provide uncontaminated water for his family. The zombies are what keep the Abel family contained to the hacienda and, therefore, keep the setting contained there, with the exception of the bridge that is obstructed by zombies that then drive them back to the hacienda. In general, the zombies are also what drives the humans in *Outside* away from the cities and toward more rural areas like the farmlands and the mountains. As Cohen puts it, “The monster prevents mobility . . . delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some [monster].”⁴⁸ Because the zombie monsters’ looming presence lurking around the land rather than being a constant physical presence, I argue that not only is the narrative being haunted by Francis’ past, but by the land’s past with colonization as well.

Regardless of the type of world, zombie apocalypse or not, the constant is the film’s setting in the Philippines, which has a history of centuries of colonization. Referring to Francis’ childhood’s land, a hacienda represents Spanish colonization’s pervasive impact on the land and culture. The hacienda, additionally, surrounded by fields of sugarcane intimates its setting in Negros Occidental, a province central to the sugarcane industry in the Philippines because of its integration with the American market during American colonization until the early 1970s.⁴⁹ The mountains, as well, near the Abel hacienda are reminiscent of Japanese occupation. Because of Negros Occidental’s sugarbowl

⁴⁸ Cohen, 12.

⁴⁹ Filomeno V. Aguilar, “The Fulcrum of Structure–Agency: History and Sociology of Sugar Haciendas in Colonial Negros,” *Philippine Sociological Review* 61, no. 1 (2013): 89.



status, the sugar mills there were of primary interest to the Japanese. During Japanese occupation, following America's colonization, Japanese soldiers occupied farm houses near the mountains to establish their patrol bases and to store their supplies.⁵⁰ The Filipino guerrillas, the Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapon (Hukbalahap, for short), whose headquarters were in the mountains near the Japanese farmhouse bases, would burn anything they believed could be used by the Japanese (while the Japanese did the same), including burning haciendas.⁵¹ After the Japanese surrendered at the end of the Second World War, Hukbalahap changed their name to Hukbong Mapagpalayang Bayan (HMB), but were since renamed Bagong Hukbong Bayan (NPA) in 1969.⁵² The bridge in *Outside*, with zombified military personnel repeating, "Pass, please," evokes Japanese attempts to keep the Hukbalahap contained in the mountains during the Second World War, down to the present day when some Philippine military checkpoints target Communist New People's Army (NPA) members. In the film, those in the mountains are said to be safe and free from the zombies, and have a lot of resources to help them survive. The safe haven being in the mountains mirrors the NPA, in that they take to the mountains to "free themselves," the poor, and the working-class people from capitalism and the torment of the fascist puppet Marcos regime's election in 2022. The NPA taking to the

⁵⁰ Josefina Dalupan Hofileña, "Life in the Occupied Zone: One Negros Planter's Experience of War," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27, no. 1 (1996): 86.

⁵¹ "Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapon" translates to *The People's Army Against the Japanese*; Hofileña, 83–86.

⁵² Alfredo B. Saulo, *Communism in the Philippines: An Introduction* (Quezon City: Ateneo Publications Office, 1969), 55; Jose Maria Sison, *Foundation for Resuming the Philippine Revolution: Selected Writings, 1968 to 1972* (Quezon City: Aklat Ng Bayan, Inc, 2013), 96; and "Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan" translates to *People's Army of Liberation*; "Bagong Hukbong Bayan" translates to *The New People's Army*.

mountains is a similar tactic to Hukbalahap keeping their headquarters in the mountains as a safe space away from Japanese occupation.⁵³

Audiences aware of history can see these parallels and recognize the colonial history attached to the setting in the film, leaving them wondering why the film is set in a hacienda in Negros Occidental, a province in the Western Visayas region of the Philippines. Much like the zombies in the film, the location does not seem to have a great significance to the progression of the plot because the only specific location terms the audience hears are just “hacienda” or “bukid” [“*mountain*”]. Being contained to just the hacienda, and the checkpoint at the foothill of the mountain, forces the audience to think about those places in particular, emphasizing those two places rather than offering other locations in the Philippines that may be more of tourist interest to an international audience.

The hacienda itself is a product of Spanish colonization. Beyond the term “hacienda” being of Spanish origin and not local Filipino dialect, the hacienda system represents “colonial agriculture” in “the Spanish Philippines.”⁵⁴ This is true in Negros specifically, at the end of the 1800s, when the hacendero (the sugar planter class) was established and welcomed U.S. rule.⁵⁵ Many of the Spanish hacenderos were people struggling against the Babaylanes, a Philippine nationalist and patriotic movement of anti-hacendero farm laborers.⁵⁶ The Filipino hacenderos, though, took advantage of the struggle between the Spanish and the

⁵³ Sison, 235.

⁵⁴ Filomeno V. Aguilar, “Sugar Planter-State Relations and Labour Processes in Colonial Philippine Haciendas,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 22, no. 1 (1994): 53. (They are called Filipino dialects, but are really more like languages).

⁵⁵ Aguilar, “The Fulcrum of Structure-Agency,” 91.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 95–112.



Babaylan movement and asserted dominance, and then gained support from the American colonial state.⁵⁷

Knowing this history adds another layer to Francis and his family. His father owning the hacienda makes him a hacendero, which then links him and his descendants to the Spanish colonial system and the support of the American colonial state. The hacienda in *Outside* being a background ambient setting, not addressing or even really going into that history, situates itself as “normal.” The existence and system of haciendas that continue to persist in post-colonial Philippines, is a physical symbol of the country’s long-running history of colonization, and demonstrates how deeply intertwined colonization is with the culture and lifestyles.

Haciendas represented as being “normal” or even feeling “natural” evoke feelings of belonging. Rina Garcia Chua writes, “The concept of ‘belonging’ to one land is also a reification of patriarchal colonial conquest; that despite the attachment to a particular place as feeling ‘natural,’ there is the occupation of that space which is dependent upon historical contingencies.”⁵⁸ Neferti Tadiar similarly expresses that idea when discussing “fromness” in relation to alien space and home.⁵⁹ Place, which is associated with the security of belonging, expresses “fromness,” which can be thought of when moving from home to a new and different alien space. Applied to the film, the audience can see resonances of the hacienda’s colonial history and the family trauma. The movement of Iris, Joshua, and Lucas from the city—

⁵⁷ Ibid., 112–113.

⁵⁸ Rina Garcia Chua, “A Steering to Homes, or Toward a Migratory Consciousness in Ecocriticism,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Ecocriticism* (2023): 115.

⁵⁹ Neferti Tadiar, *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 106.



with which they have a sense of familiarity and belonging because that is their home—to the unfamiliar hacienda takes them into an alien space. For Iris and Joshua specifically, their desire to go to the mountains, an alien space for them on its own, becomes a space of belonging and familiarity because of the people who are there—other people from the city such as Diego and Joshua’s girlfriend. For Francis, though, since he grew up in the hacienda and is now back there, he experiences familiarity through knowing the layout of the land and belonging through his family being there with him, but because the occupants are him and his family—and not him and his parents and Diego—the house still has an uncanny presence, making it alien in the sense that he can occupy the space and make the land his own. In one sense, he is conquering this alien land and making it his own, now that he is older and is the patriarch of the family. By making it his own, he gives himself the right to belong. His sense of “belonging” to that land—it feels “natural” in a way—is exhibited when he guides his family around the house. For example, when Joshua sees a shack from the window on the second story balcony, he looks to Francis and says, “Pa! Baka may mahanap pa po tayo ro’n” [“Dad! Maybe we can find something over there”]. The camera zooms in on Francis’ face as he looks at the shack, expressionless, which is set in contrast to Joshua’s face, who looks both concerned yet determined to help.⁶⁰ From Francis’ face, the audience can tell the space is familiar to him—he knows what is there; whereas based on Joshua’s conjecture of something possibly being useful there for them, he does not. Francis was drawn to bring his family back to the hacienda, not just because he himself grew up there and wants his wife and kids to see his childhood home, but because he has another agenda—knowing that his

⁶⁰ *Outside*, directed by Carlo Ledesma.

parents were probably dead, Francis would be able to reclaim the house as his own and become the patriarch of that house. It is his own way of reclaiming the space over his childhood memories haunting the land.

While some audience members may recognize history walking with the present setting of the film, many of the audience, international and domestic, may not know the colonial history attached to the hacienda, the mountains, and the checkpoint. Integrating colonial systems and symbols without recognizing and acknowledging the colonial past silences it, “or sometimes even implicitly reproduce[s]” it.⁶¹ This loss of memory or erasure of history, or “colonial amnesia,” is a repression of colonial history that, parallel to Francis repressing his past, leads to unintended damage.

Much of the damage related to repressing colonial history is prevalent today in the rampant fascism dominating the Filipino government—but I digress. While some audience members may not be aware of the Philippines’ colonial history, they are still able to get a sense of it in the small details in the film. Some of these details include Lucas’ toy soldier that seems to be his only possession from before the zombie apocalypse, Lucas’ delight upon meeting a soldier who came to the hacienda seeking refuge, and the militarization of the bridge with its checkpoint, military personnel, and barbed wire. The greatness of the military’s power, and its sensationalizing is an ideology that is reproduced and taught to children. Regardless of the audience’s awareness of Filipino history, *Outside* contains its characters and its audience in those two locations while the plot progresses, all while the

⁶¹ Carsten Stahn, “Confronting Colonial Amnesia: Towards New Relational Engagement with Colonial Injustice and Cultural Colonial Objects,” *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 18, no. 4 (2020): 794.

zombies and the specifics of the location just serve as ambient and unfocused background tension.

What is more in focus for the audience and the characters than the land, though, are the usable products on the land. If it was not already obvious to the audience that the major crop of the area is sugarcane, the film specifically points it out when Francis gives Lucas a sugarcane and calls it “Candy hacienda-style.”⁶² Calling the sugarcane “candy” separates the sugarcane from its history of exploitation, which also serves as Francis’ attempt to repress the trauma he experienced on that land. Additionally, referring to sugarcane as “candy” rather than the Tagalog/Bisaya word for sugarcane “tubo” points to how central the English language has become in the Philippines after American colonization. Being able to live off the land and eat something that evokes a sense of pre-apocalypse normalcy, though, is on par for a zombie apocalypse. The return to pre-apocalypse normalcy, amidst an apocalypse, points to the question of what is normal. Sugarcane as “candy” and relying on the English language as “normal” is set in an uncanny juxtaposition to an abnormal setting (an apocalypse) and a country that, before American colonization, did not have English as an official language. While on the one hand, trying to maintain a sense of “normalcy” in an apocalypse is used to lift spirits, on the other hand, set against the apocalypse itself evokes a sense that something is also wrong. This uncanny juxtaposition focuses on things that may be “normal” in the present but may actually be covering up something more unsettling behind it.

The deeper into the film the audience watches, the more it sees the significance of space and place, as Francis starts boarding up the

⁶² *Outside*, directed by Carlo Ledesma.



windows and walls, driving his family to stay inside, and only inside out of his paranoia. Toward the climax of the movie, realizing Joshua has left, Francis kills the soldier Lucas wanted to help, knocks Iris and Lucas out, and then locks them inside the basement, boarding up any exit points with planks of wood, and leaving his wife and youngest son trapped deep inside the bowels of the hacienda.⁶³ When thinking about place and space, this scene represents restricted freedom and movement and, in a critique of Catholicism in the Philippines, a forced confession. The difference between place and space, according to Yi-Fu Tuan, is that when considering place as security, space is more like movement, which is therefore freedom.⁶⁴ The hacienda being a place that teeters the line between feelings of security and insecurity also teeters the line between being a space that allows movement yet also restricts it. The hacienda holding bad memories for Francis makes it a place of insecurity for him, which drives him to occupy the land himself while using it as a safe haven from the zombies to try to gain security within the place. The hacienda is also a space that allows for the freedom of movement—it is a large plot of land that has a road to access both the city and the mountains, yet it is also restrictive in that Francis' insecurities driving him mad turns the safe haven into a place of insecurity, which forces his family inside.

Francis' memories are so intertwined with the hacienda that he and the hacienda become one. In Francis trying to keep his family inside of the house by order of his patriarchal domination and occupation, he simultaneously is trying to keep his family from leaving him. The only way he can possibly do this is by keeping them inside the house so that

⁶³ *Outside*, directed by Carlo Ledesma.

⁶⁴ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 12.

he can try to protect them both from the zombies and from outside influences that might make them unloyal to him. This connection between Francis and the hacienda is most poignant when Iris and Lucas are trapped in the basement. Narrow streaks of light filter through gaps in between the planks of wood covering one of the windows, and shine right at the generator.⁶⁵ The generator is the heart of the house that makes all of the small pleasures like air conditioning and television run, rich pleasures Francis wanted to provide for his family. Yet, the generator is haunted by the memories of young Francis being locked in the basement with the generator. Both the place and the generator's haunting evoke Francis' memories directly and Iris' indirectly. Vincente L. Rafael explains, “. . . remembering-as-haunting . . . entail[s] the appropriation of what comes before oneself (in both temporal and spatial senses). [There] are ways, therefore, of localizing what is outside of one.”⁶⁶ The hacienda and Francis are deeply connected and have embodied each other through remembering, which haunts both Francis and his family. Yet, in focusing on how intertwined and connected Francis and the hacienda are, the audience is also able to see Francis' positionality in relation to his present and past relationships with the hacienda.

Additionally, Francis forcing himself and his family inward, not just into a house but also inward mentally, is reminiscent of confession, a Catholic practice introduced to the Philippines through Spanish colonization. Sony Bolton writes “. . . the colonial power of the ritual of confession—which presumes to know and hollow out the native

⁶⁵ *Outside*, directed by Carlo Ledesma.

⁶⁶ Vincente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 12.



claiming to divine their mind better than they—would indeed prompt auto disciplinary self-examination.”⁶⁷ When Francis comes to feed Iris and Lucas after trapping them in the basement, he is dressed in the military outfit of the military person he had killed in front of his family. He does this to comfort Lucas with a sense of familiarity by dressing like the army doll Lucas always carries around, but was not given to him when Lucas got thrown in the basement. Francis also brought meat for them to eat, which confuses Iris because there is no source of meat. The meat presumably came from a dog that Francis had killed and then cooked. He tries to convince Iris and Lucas to eat it despite Iris saying “no” and holding Lucas closer to her. Francis holds a piece of meat on a knife and makes the offering to them. Iris and Lucas still refuse, so he gets mad and says, “Alam n’yo ba, no’ong bata ako . . . No’ong bata ako, kapag hindi ko naubos ‘yung pagkain, talang magagalit sa ‘kin ang daddy ko. Dumating dito, tatanggihan n’yo? Ang suwerte n’yo naman” (“*Did you know, when I was a kid . . . when I was a kid, if I didn’t finish the food, my dad would get really mad at me. And now here, you refuse? You’re so lucky [to be able to refuse]*”). Iris then gets up, crying, goes to him and confesses, “Tama ka. Wala nang nahihintay sa ‘kin sa labas. Gusto ko na dito. Francis, kailangan kita” (“*You’re right. There’s no one waiting for me outside. I want to be here. Francis, I need you*”).⁶⁸ This scene emulates the Catholic practice of confession, although forced, by Francis compelling Iris and Lucas to go inside both their minds, leaving them alone to just their thoughts. Forcing them into the basement for confession also forces them to go inside him and his mind—his memories of his past

⁶⁷ Sony Coráñez Bolton, *Crip Colony: Mestizaje, US Imperialism, and the Queer Politics of Disability in the Philippines* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), 3.

⁶⁸ *Outside*, directed by Carlo Ledesma.

when he got locked in the basement haunt him, leaving him stuck in, in trauma time. He puts them on a “time out” in the hope that they will realize where he is coming from and do as he says. He is the father (literally Lucas’ father but also the father as in the priest), waiting for their (specifically Iris’) confession, and even offering them a body to eat, holding out the meat to them so he can feed them the body directly to their mouths.

Ultimately, Iris does confess, but because it was a forced confession, both physically and by guilt, it came with a caveat. She plays into Francis’ insecurities about her having cheated in the past, and him thinking that she wanted to go to the mountain to reunite with his brother. She admits that there is no one waiting “sa ‘kin sa labas”—there is no one waiting specifically for her, specifically outside of the hacienda and outside of Francis. She admits that she needs him.⁶⁹ Iris revokes her desire to go outside, to go to an outside space where there is the freedom she wants. To escape, she hides the knife Francis threw under her shoe so that she could stab him and escape to freedom with Lucas. Similarly, Chua writes that “When forced in Western isolation and contemplation, the Filipino migrant becomes a presence that demands space—one that is not anymore conflated within the blur of movement or the statistics on a GDP chart.”⁷⁰ Iris and Lucas were forced into isolation in the basement, to be left to their own thoughts, and so now, Iris and Lucas, migrants in the sense that they moved from their home to an alien land, demand space, which conflates with freedom. The space they want is space that does not restrict their freedom to move about where they please, and one that is not conflated with “statistics on a GDP

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Chua, 114.



chart,” reminding the audience again of the history of the plantation land as one haunted by economic exploitation and colonization.

The colonial amnesia and repression that the film works against, in its nod to history and spaces of colonization, work hand in hand with monstrosity. An element of a monster is that they “police the borders of the possible.”⁷¹ One border in *Outside* is the bridge at the foothills of the mountain. The bridge acts as a border between their zombie apocalypse reality of having to watch out for zombies who might attack them, and having resources run out, and the possibility of escaping to a safe haven in the mountains where they will be protected from zombies, among other human survivors, like Joshua’s girlfriend and Diego. Literally, the bridge is being policed by zombie monsters in that when Iris tries to cut the barbed wires from the barrier blocking their path, a zombified military man rises from behind some sacks and wheezes, “Pass, please.”⁷² Historically, the bridge, as a checkpoint, is a border between the colonial farm system in the Philippines and “freedom” in the mountains where the NPA and its previous iterations, all of whom believed in liberation from colonial occupants and their ideologies, reside. The monsters policing the bridge are the Filipino military members policing the checkpoint, limiting who, and/or what, can get through.

Symbolically, the bridge is a border between the Abel family staying with Francis under his patriarchal control, and going to the mountains to possibly be with Diego, Iris’ lover, with whom she cheated on Francis. The monster patrolling that border is Francis. Francis is insecure knowing that Iris cheated on him with his brother, whom he

⁷¹ Cohen, 12.

⁷² *Outside*, directed by Carlo Ledesma.

already had a brother complex with because Diego was treated better than him when they were children. He, therefore, believes that if Iris and Joshua were to go to the mountains, Iris would leave him for Diego. To prevent that, he patrols that bridge border. He does this by dissuading the family from trying to go to the mountain, instead saying that they had everything they needed in the hacienda, adding, “It’s better for us here. Safe.” Still, Iris convinces Francis to still try to move the family to the mountain, but before they reach the bridge, Francis learns that Diego is in the mountain, realizing that a motivation Iris might have for bringing the family there is to leave him and be with Diego. After getting attacked by zombies at the bridge, Francis takes the family back home and becomes adamant and more paranoid about keeping his family away from the mountain—away from a possible future where Iris leaves him for Diego.⁷³

Keeping his family away from the mountain mirrors Francis’ further repression of any possibility of reconnecting with his past that he cannot reclaim for himself (as he cannot reclaim a human being). Similarly, the Filipino military and government’s efforts to control access to the NPA, and the Japanese occupiers controlling the Hukbala-hap’s and Filipino farmworkers and land owners’ access to the now-Japanese-occupied farms and haciendas, suppress Filipino decolonization and liberation from colonization. The monsters in these cases are the beings patrolling and stopping others from entering a possible future those beings do not want to come to fruition. The method they use to stop people from crossing the border to those possible futures is suppression, be it through repressing the past in Francis’ case or inducing colonial amnesia.

⁷³ Ibid.



Thus, I argue that the land and the zombies are hauntological figures because these different monsters are patrolling—and needing to patrol—these same borders. Hauntology, Jacques Derrida explains, in relation to *Hamlet*, is “Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time*, makes of it also a *last time*. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history.”⁷⁴ In other words, something is hauntological if something, like an event, interrupts the flow of history, exposing history in the process, and comes back anew. Happenings in the past that have ended in the present begin, again and again, by returning to the present, again and again, in different forms. About the future, though, Mark Fisher explains in relation to hauntological music that, “The future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production.”⁷⁵

The present, therefore, is haunted by both the past and the future. Through this framework, the colonized land in *Outside* acts as a hauntological figure in the present to both the Abel family in the film and the audience watching the film. The bridge, for instance, a part of the land and a border, haunts the Abel family and the audience through the histories attached to it, and through the potential future that is being blocked by the monsters patrolling the bridge. The past haunting the bridge for Francis is intertwined with the future that is similarly haunting him and the bridge; Francis knows that Diego is up ahead in a possible future, which triggers memories of his past watching Diego being treated better than him and Iris cheating on him with Diego. For

⁷⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (Routledge Classics, 2006), 10.

⁷⁵ Mark Fisher, “What Is Hauntology?” *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012): 16.

the audience, the past is from history—American and Japanese occupiers colonizing the country and occupying land by the mountains is tied to the bridge as a boundary between the colonizers and the Hukbalahap and the NPA hiding in the mountains, from where they are fighting the colonizers who are trying to stifle a possible future of decolonizing the Philippines. Knowing the history, and being aware of its attachments to the land, opens the audience's eyes to the land's colonial past haunting the bridge in the present. Being aware that the colonizers were trying to stifle the original land's inhabitants from creating a possible decolonial future opens the audience's eyes to possible futures of the land—both the past and present of the land—that haunts the present bridge. The colonial amnesia and the suppression of those possible futures is an attempt to suppress the future that the hauntological figure (in this case, the land), through its haunting, is trying to illuminate. Despite this suppression, as Cohen argues, "The repressed . . . like Freud himself, always seems to return."⁷⁶ The future being rejected in favor of staying stuck in the past is not forever repressed, though, because that which is repressed always comes back and forces the one stuck in time to confront the past and move on.

The Philippines, a country that has a past history of centuries of colonization, can be said to be stuck in time. Its lineage of fascist governmental dictators remains in the past (and present), following the practices and ideologies of the country's colonizers and refusing to consider a future of moving the country in a direction not marred by corruption and exploitation of its land and its people. The government's focus on Philippine excellence via Western (American) standards encourages colonial amnesia of the colonization that ravaged the land

⁷⁶ Cohen, 16.



and exploited its labor and peoples. But the land remembers and the monsters, the ghosts, come back.

While the repressed past and future are monsters that come back to haunt the present, the postcolonial effects on the Philippines and its government are also shown to be monstrous to its people through zombie imperialism. Jodi Byrd defines zombie imperialism as “the current manifestation of a liberal democratic colonialism that locates biopower at the intersection of life, death, law, and lawlessness.”⁷⁷ On the one hand, the use of zombies in *Outside* work as ambient background to remind the audience that the setting is in a zombie apocalypse, and as a reminder to Francis of the past he is trying to repress through the zombies being sympathetic in their ability to say the last words they spoke before they became a zombie. On the other hand, the zombies in *Outside*, in the Western sensationalized Hollywood sense, still present anxieties (of trying to stay alive and not die by getting eaten by a zombie), and revolve around death (being undead). Byrd references Achille Mbembe and explains that with necropolitics, “death belongs to more racialized and gendered multitudes and killing becomes ‘precisely targeted.’”⁷⁸ The Philippines being subject to Spanish and then American imperialism has turned the Philippines and its government into a zombie, and the zombies and the land in *Outside* being ambient background that nods to its colonial history, point to such zombification.

Conclusion: Monsters Are Everywhere, Whether You See Them Or Not

Outside as a zombie movie is apt for highlighting colonization, as it depicts a country whose Native peoples practiced magic that was then

⁷⁷ Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 228.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 228.

demonized upon the arrival of the Spanish, and then the Americans. The colonizers also went about demonizing a creature from Haiti, a country that was also colonized by Spain, and whose peoples also practiced magic that was suppressed once American colonizers arrived. The connection is even more poignant when considering the anti-Black racism both places and peoples experienced. These connections shed light on the biopolitics and necropolitics involved with Western imperialism in island/ archipelagic countries and their dark-skinned peoples. Zombies, then, as a hybrid between life and death, work to underscore the intersection of the zombie imperialist countries' biopower and necropolitics that results in zombified countries and peoples.⁷⁹

Like the land haunting the film and its audience in *Outside*, zombies haunt the people and the land. Its existence is a reminder of what was done unto it. Slavoj Žižek writes, "For a human being to be 'dead while alive' is to be colonized by the 'dead' symbolic order."⁸⁰ To be a zombie—a dead human alive or the undead—is to be colonized by meanings that are "dead" and technically should no longer exist. To become a zombie (country), then, is to be affected by colonization and its ideologies, ontologies, and epistemologies despite being postcolonial. The affect of colonization is "the wound, the disfiguration/distortion, inflicted upon the body," or, the country, "when the body is colonized by the symbolic order."⁸¹ The body of a zombie in its wounds, in its inscriptions of disfiguration and distortion on its body, shows colonization for all viewing the zombie body to see. Brooke Neely and

⁷⁹ Sarah Juliet Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 9; and Jodi Byrd, 228.

⁸⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 121.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 123.



Michelle Samura, referencing Howard Winant, similarly explain, “. . . there are long-standing historical roots of the race-space connection in the process of imperialism . . . racializing bodies and groups has always been linked to the theft of land and the control of space.”⁸² The zombie body and a body of land are linked to the colonization that exploited and stole from both bodies in trying to control the space of the body. Space, though, “*potentially*” has “social agency in the same way in which *things* potentially have social agency . . . space’s agency—its meaning, effectiveness, and potential uses . . . is released by the activities of people. Alone it is inert. It is activated, given meaning, texture and substance, by human agency.”⁸³ The zombie, potentially through its haunting, gives meaning to the space it haunts and to itself in the zombie’s relationship to humans.

When Francis finds his father’s body, the audience sees that his father died a human and not a zombie. He wears plain clothes, but he wears a Rolex watch, a symbol of status and wealth. As the patriarch of the hacienda, Francis’ father has a direct link to colonization, benefitting from the Spanish economic structure of the hacienda system, and from the wealth generated from extracting sugarcane from the land by being a hacienda for America’s sugar market. Colonization is not inscribed all over his body, as he is one with the colonization. The camera, though, zooms in on his arm and hand, showing pronounced veins and a bite ripped off his wrist. As a Filipino, regardless of his status, Francis’ father was still affected by colonization, but he had the power to decide how he wanted to die—he presumably shot himself to die as a human rather than as a zombie. He refused to be zombified and, thus, refused to let the

⁸² Brooke Neely and Michelle Samura, “Social Geographies of Race: Connecting Race and Space,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 11, (2011): 1934.

⁸³ Caroline Knowledges, *Race and Social Analysis* (London: Sage).

effects of being colonized show on his body, trying to participate in the colonial amnesia. The body, therefore, is integral to conceptualizations of zombies and zombification, as the body is what makes legible its monstrosity, and presents a map and a symbol of colonization's inscription on it. While colonization may kill and make dead a body (of any sort) to replace the body with its own symbolic order, it leaves a wound making legible its presence from the past and future in the present. The dead body, then, is alive, through its presence as a symbol, and works to continue haunting the past, present, and future through its body, a land and landscape of colonial wounds.

Netflix film *Outside* (2024) directed by Carlo Ledesma sheds light on the Philippines' history of colonization, and its aftereffects on its people and land through trauma by its use of a zombie apocalypse in a country that has never really engaged with the zombie monster before in media. Using zombies, a Western monster colonized from Haitian vodun with a Filipino twist, signals the relationship zombies, the Philippines, and *aswang* have with colonization—together and individually. In minimizing the role of the zombies, though, despite its sensationalization and history, in favor of focusing on the effects of intergenerational trauma and repression on Francis and the Abel family, the film shows that what is repressed will come back again and again until it is confronted in a more interpersonal way that the audience can better understand. The audience sees this with Francis' reaction to the generator in the basement, triggering memories of being abused by his father, his reaction to seeing his mother zombified, and then how he brushes off any emotions he has after killing her, his pleasure at giving Lucas sugarcane from the hacienda despite his own traumatic history with the place, his strained relationship with his son Joshua, and even his actions, reactions, and reasons for putting Iris and Lucas in the

basement. Each of these monstrous acts, all of which serve as Francis desperately trying to repress his past that still haunts his present, belie both the psychological and emotional distress he experienced from his father leading to his current daddy issues, and the way the past so pervasively exists so intertwined in everyone and everything everywhere. The parallels between Francis and monstrosity, and the references of normalized colonization on the land, point to the postcolonial effects on the Philippines and its people and culture still prevalent today, despite being “post”colonial. The role of the zombies, then, in being minimalized, shows the minimalized recognition of colonization’s affect on the corruption and state of the Philippines today.

The monster is not just the zombies, Francis, trauma, the past, repression, and colonization. The monster is everywhere and everything that is being repressed through colonial amnesia. The destruction of colonization on a land and body should “never be normalized or minimalized as simple change,” as Philip Deloria writes.⁸⁴ The destruction is bigger and much more all-encompassing. This is why to remember is to haunt, and to be reminded is to be haunted.

Note on the Author

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⁸⁴ Philip J. Deloria, “Places like Houses, Banks, and Continents: An Appreciative Reply to the Presidential Address,” *American Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2006): 27.



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at UCR, they have co-organized reviving and running the Eaton Conference on Speculative Fiction.