***Shaun of the Dead* (2004; Directed by Edgar Wright)**

Upon first viewing, *Shaun of the Dead* was a shaggy, witty, mischievous surprise. Edgar Wright’s free-spirited slacker rom-zom-com won points for its humour and for its occasional and admirable dramatic heaviness. Stars Simon Pegg and Nick Frost displayed an onscreen comfort level and comradery that could not be faked and need not be explained (and there’s not much time to explain it or anything else, once the undead show up). As a green filmmaker, Wright boasted an inventive visual flair and an evident facility with repurposing widely-disseminated icons of English culture (cricket bats, corner pubs, the hoary, overdone “stiff upper lip” thing) through the millenial generation’s ironic filters and pop-culture reference points. It was a fun potboiler with a bit of a brain; nothing terribly special, but then I wouldn’t grant that much in the zombie genre ever was (sorry, undead-heads; where you stagger, I cannot follow).

Upon second viewing years after the first, I found that was still fond of the film. But I’m still not overfond, and understood it as a more ramshackle precursor to the sharper, smarter, funnier, and flat-out better *Hot Fuzz* (with which it was being shown in a double-bill with Wright himself in attendance on this particular occasion). The second film in this double-bill was the product of more refined talents and a greater level of intertextual engagement with the particular generic conventions being satirized. It also had more to say about how communities in particular and societies in general are ordered and how the police enable that order (but I’m anticipating my soon-to-run review of *Hot Fuzz*, so I digress). But opening salvo *Shaun of the Dead* is the crowd-pleaser, the widely-embraced cult classic. I found myself asking, “Why?”

Because, really, what does *Shaun of the Dead* ultimately have to say about zombie movies? What does it contribute in the way of commentary and contextualizing on a genre whose superficial visceral thrills are overlaid on a vaunted foundation of social anxieties? Does it truly engage with the genre in a satirical way? Not especially. It deploys many of the generic standbys in a perfectly entertaining manner, sure. It does the things you do in zombie movies, and it does them with technical accomplishment and an edge of humour. But that doesn’t necessarily make it satire.

What the film *is* aiming to satirize is modern consumer capitalism, concerning which it employs imaginative visual style to advance a series of blunt and knee-jerk progressive criticisms. The film’s early, pre-zombie-apocalypse scenes play on the audience’s knowing anticipation of the coming collapse and on the alienated disaffection of modern urban Britain. Wright uses smooth cinematic strokes to liken the detachment of the consumer to the non-sentience of the undead. In a tone no less presumptive for all of its playful artifice, Wright asks us if we’d even notice if everyone around us became a zombie, since the capitalist system has turned each of us into one already.

It’s perhaps silly to expect rich sociological subtext from a whiz-bang action-comedy like this, but Wright’s observations are extremely shallow and pat, and his assumption that we cannot help but agree with him is grating. *Hot Fuzz* has far more to say about the unspoken rules of our societies and still finds room for more action, more jokes, and less thoughtless dissemination of hipster ideology. This latter weakness of Wright’s was on full display in the hubristic commercial failure that was *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, which (whatever its aesthetic merits) was marinated in its subcultural juices for so long that no one unfamiliar with its flavours dared to venture a taste.

And after the obvious boho-pleasing knocks on capitalist society, *Shaun of the Dead* picks up momentum and loses its already-slight satirical edge. It becomes a perfectly enjoyable slice of zany zombie-killing action with engaging character dynamics and regular laughs, sure. But it’s really only just that, and not much else. That should be more than enough, some might argue, but the film’s outsized cult status seems to beg for greater justification. Fun as it is, *Shaun of the Dead* loses some regard for its lazy significations in general and for its lack of satirical focus once the blood starts flying in specific. A good time? Undoubtedly.