

The Signification of the Zombie

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The Signification of the Zombie: From 1930s American Film to the post-9/11 Rise and Beyond

Introduction

Peter Dendle's article titled "The Zombie as Barometer of Social Anxiety" suggests that the zombie monster seen in films, television, video games, and other types of media are a reflection of the anxieties that the American culture is experiencing at any given moment.

Dendle states that:

Through almost seventy-five years of evolution on the big screen, the zombie can be read as tracking a wide range of cultural, political, and economic anxieties of American society. Born of Haitian folklore and linked from its earliest periods to oppression, the zombie began as a parable of the exploited worker in modern industrial economies and of the exploited native in colonial nations. Through decades marked by concerns over environmental deterioration, political conflict, the growth of consumer-capitalism, and the commoditization of the body implicit in contemporary biomedical science, the creature has served to articulate these and other anxieties in ways that are sometimes light-hearted and witty, sometimes dark and cynical. (45)

The zombie may not *only* measure the amount of stress and anxiety in American society, as Dendle suggests when he uses the term "barometer" in his title. His idea can be taken one step further by applying semiotics and discourse analysis to argue that the actual signification of the zombie has slid from its filmic inception in 1930s America, through the birth of the new zombie in the 1960s, and on to current and even future signification of the zombie both in American literature/media and foreign films.

Roland Barthes has noted that "pictures...are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning all at one stroke, without analyzing or diluting it" (110). The same can be said for the representation of the zombie in films and other forms of visual media. One image of a zombie can ignite meaning in a viewer but this meaning will shift throughout history and will always be

tied into the discourses of power and dominant ideologies at the time of viewing. The zombie seen in the films of the 1930s, such as Victor Haleperin's *White Zombie* (1932), carry a signification of racism and colonialism (especially in regards to the occupation of Haiti by the United States). Between the late 1940s and 1960s, zombie films were few and far between, but those that did surface carried signification tied to nuclear war and fascism. It wasn't until George A. Romero's 1968 classic film *Night of the Living Dead* that the more modern idea of a flesh consuming monster come back from the dead appears. The signification of the zombie between 1968 and the mid-1980s was centered on consumerism (as in 1972's *Dawn of the Dead* and 1985's *Day of the Dead*). The zombie in mass media laid low during the 1990s and rose again with a vengeance after 9/11 to take on yet another signification – psychosocial anxieties and stressors. With films like Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002), Ruben Fleischer's *Zombieland* (2009), and Edgar Wright's *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) the zombie is now tied to ideas of biological outbreaks, terrorism, gangs and violence, as well as more mundane issues like depression and relationships.

Calling upon authors such as Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, I will argue that the signification of the zombie is closely tied to the dominant, hegemonic discourses and ideologies that surround this creature as represented in different eras. This signification is so much more than reflection; it is a re-defining of the creature, making it the most versatile, enduring, and politically and socially useful ever to be found in film or literature.

Significance

To be sure, the topic of the signification of the zombie is important not only to academics who insist on labeling this creature as a symbol of “consumerism run rampant,” but also for the societies that consume the media that is currently being mass produced. Since Robin Wood's

initial statement in his book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* many scholars have lumped all zombies from all eras of film into the consumer, socio-capitalist category, scholars like Kyle Bishop (*American Zombie Gothic: the Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*), Shannon Mader (“Reviving the Dead in Southwestern PA: Zombie Capitalism, the Non-Class and the Decline of the US Steel Industry”), and Annalee Newitz (*Pretend We’re Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture*). Far from being wrong, there is much more to the zombie than placing it in the neat box of consumerism, although the Romero films from the 1970s and 80s would certainly fit into this category. The consumerism theory wouldn’t explain why there was an explosion of zombie films after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, nor why 10 years later, media companies are still producing zombie films, novels, graphic novels, games, etc. at a steady, if not quickening pace. There must be some shifting of signification, of meaning, in order for this cinematic monster to survive for over 75 years. If zombies only stood for capitalism and consumerism, they would have died out years ago, instead of rising from the cinematic dead again and again.

In terms of American society specifically, (since the inception of the zombie film happened in Hollywood, changed dramatically in Pittsburgh, PA, and continues to be a driving force in zombie media) the ability to understand why and how zombies came to cinematic power over the years may help those that do not appreciate zombie cinema, or dismiss it as camp or exploitation, look at them in a new light; perhaps even seeing them as a valid entrance into understanding society as a whole. There are wildly popular television shows like *The Walking Dead* and *Being Human*, popular video games and smart phone apps such as *Dead Island* and *Plants vs. Zombies*. If you are technologically challenged you can try your hand at many different zombie strategy games like *The Walking Dead Board Game*, *Oh No Zombies!*, and

Zombies!!! Let us not forget the slew of zombie films coming out in the next year, including Ruben Fleischer's *Zombieland 2* (2013) and Jonathan Levine's *Warm Bodies* (2012), based on the book of the same name by Isaac Marion, which will mark the beginning of a yet another shift in the signification of the zombie. With all of this media at society's disposal, it would behoove everyone involved to stay abreast of why the zombie is so prevalent in our cultural media, and why the zombie has been able to shift its meaning over almost a century of cinematic iconography.

Background: History

The zombie was not a newly created monster made just for films. In fact, the zombie has a very long history that dates back hundreds, if not thousands of years to the African continent where the Vodou religion was born. With the inception of slavery, the practitioners of Vodou were taken across the Atlantic to work in Haitian plantations. It was in Haiti that the zombie began to form more fully, and it was during the occupation of this small country that America became aware of the creature through travel writing. Kyle Bishop, in his book *American Zombie Gothic*, explains that "even though vague and inconsistent zombie references could be found in some nineteenth century travel narratives and non-fiction anthropological texts, it took the publication of William B. Seabrook's sensational travelogue *The Magic Island* in 1929 to bring the zombie out of the misunderstood superstitions of Haiti and into the light of mainstream America" (13). It was passages like this that the film *White Zombie* was based upon:

The zombie...is a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life – it is a dead body which is made to walk and act and move as if it were alive. People who have the power to do this go to a fresh grave, dig up the body before it has had time to rot, galvanize it into movement, and then make of it a servant or slave, occasionally for the commission of some crime, more often simply as a drudge around the habitation or the farm, setting it dull heavy tasks, and beating it like a dumb beast if it slackens. (Seabrook, 93)

The Haitian Vodou zombie is not to be feared. They are docile, compliant creatures whose only purpose is working hard labor to clear a debt for a family member. A person may stand beside this zombie and feel nothing but compassion and pity, the real threat comes from the creator of the creature, for they are the one with all of the power.

It wasn't until the 1960s that a significant shift took place in the zombie film. The shift took place in 1968 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. Romero's film "did away with the puppet master entirely, focusing instead on a massive hoard of zombies that operated more or less independently, driven only by their insatiable hunger...*Night of the Living Dead* established a firm narrative scenario by focusing on a motley group of survivors, led by an unconventional African-American hero named Ben (Duane Jones)..." (Bishop, 14). According to Bishop:

The violence and grotesque images were unprecedented at the time, aiding this low-budget horror film in its function as an allegorical condemnation of the atrocities of Vietnam, violent racism, and the opposition to the civil rights movement. Called "hippie Gothic" by film theorist Joseph Maddrey, *Night of the Living Dead* protested the war by graphically confronting audiences with the horrors of death and dismemberment and by openly criticizing those who use violence to solve their problems. (14)

Romero created a new zombie that hungered for human flesh, traveled in hoards, and violently ripped human beings limb from limb. Of course this was not only a significant change in the meaning (signification) of the zombie, but also an enormous reinvention of the entire make-up of the creature itself - in looks, in actions, and in purpose.

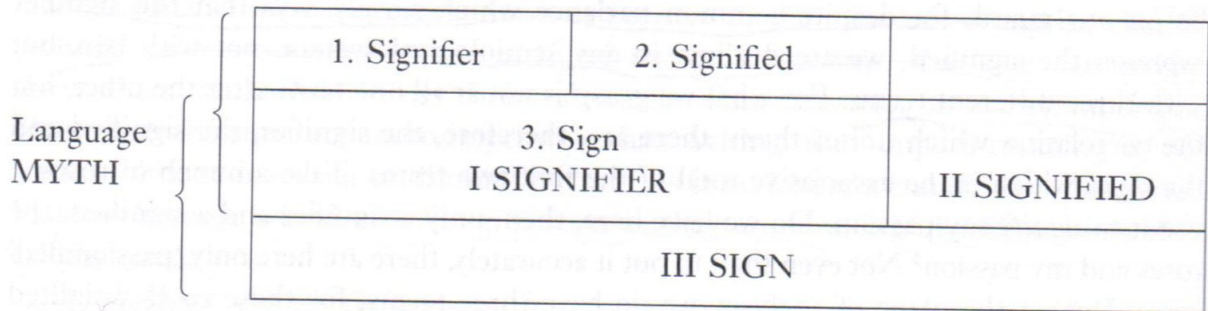
At this point, in 2011, not much has changed regarding the looks, actions, or purpose of the zombie, however the meaning/signification has changed three or four times since 1968 - from a form of protest, to capitalism/consumerism, to psychosocial stressors. The market is flooded with zombie media - books and films especially - so

much so that yet another important shift in signification seems to be on the horizon for this versatile creature, one that mirrors the shift that vampires took in novels like *Interview with a Vampire* by Ann Rice and *Twilight* by Stephanie Meyer.

Background: Theory

There are four theories/theoreticians that are appropriate in regards to making the argument for the signification of the zombie. The first is Roland Barthes and his theory of myth. In the last chapter of his book *Mythologies*, “Myth Today,” Barthes very simply states that “*myth is a type of speech...myth is a system of communication...it is a message*” (109). Barthes goes on to explain that “every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things” (109). An important concept of mythology is that “one can conceive of very ancient myths, but there are no eternal ones; for it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and the death of mythical language. Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things” (110). If myth is a language and it is a type of speech that is chosen by history, then the myth (or type of speech) surrounding the zombie will of course change with societal and historical changes.

Barthes suggests that myth is “constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a *second-order semiological system*” (114).



Barthes gives the following description of the above chart:

It can be seen that in myth there are two semiological systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other: a linguistic system, the language (or the modes of representation which are assimilated to it), which I shall call the *language-object*, because it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system; and myth itself, which I shall call *metalanguage*, because it is a second language, *in which* one speaks about the first. (115)

Mythology, as a type of speech, brings about a second layer of meaning, where semiotics take care of the first layer of meaning - signifier (symbol) → medium of conveyance ← signified (meaning) all work together to create the sign. Myth goes one step further and, taking a sociological/historical approach, gives another layer of meaning, which will be especially useful in the signification of the zombie. Barthes uses the term signification, instead of sign, in his discussion of mythology and explains that “signification is the myth itself, just as the Saussurean sign is the word (or more accurately the concrete unit)” (121).

The second theorist discusses myth as it relates to the western film. In his article “The Structure of Myth & the Structure of the Western Film,” Will Wright defines myth as a “communication from a society to its members: the social concepts and attitudes determined by the history and institutions of a society are communicated to its members through myth” (270). Again, in the form of the different zombie movies over the past 75 years, there is a high concentration of communication from society to its members - from anti-war sentiments, to the problems with consumerism and capitalism, to the psycho-social stressors felt after the attacks of

9/11 and beyond. Wright also explains that a myth “must be heard (or viewed) and interpreted correctly; this means that myth must have a structure, like the grammar of language, that is used and understood automatically and through which meaning is communicated” (270) - the basic question for this paper being, “What is a zombie?” Kim Paffenroth describes the basic characteristics of zombies laid out in George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, the first “modern” zombie film:

- 1) For some reason, recently dead human begins suddenly starting getting up and walking around again. They no longer have human minds, however.
- 2) Zombies are autonomous beings, not under the control of someone else.
- 3) After the initial cause, whatever it is, zombies rapidly increase their numbers by killing living people, who then also become zombies.
- 4) Zombies partially eat the living, leaving the rest of the person intact to become a zombie, get up, and attack and kill more people, who then likewise become zombies.
- 5) Zombies are tenacious and will never relent in their attack, but they are fairly easy to kill.
- 6) Perhaps because individually zombies are not too threatening, the suspense in zombie movies comes more from how the human characters interact. (2-5)

However, the position of this paper argues that the answer to this varies with every era as each shift in meaning occurs. The current films that contain zombies are fairly easy to identify, however older zombie films containing the Haitian vodou zombie may not be easily recognized without the titles (*White Zombie* or *I Walked with a Zombie* - even then they are probably confused with the more violent form of the creature) or the background and history of the film. The shift seemingly happened too long ago for any societal member to recall the structure and have the ability to understand automatically. Perhaps, as the shifting continues, what are thought of as zombies *now* will not be recognizable by future generations who automatically understand a new myth, a new structure, a new signification.

Michel Foucault’s writings on power and discourse are especially important in regards to

the signification of the zombie because of its close ties to politics and society. To Foucault, and theorists like him, the term discourse “refers not to language or social interaction but to relatively well-bounded areas of social knowledge” (McHoul and Grace, 31). It is important to remember that the meaning of discourse for Foucault is very different from the general term of discourse that most Americans use, which has to do with a discussion between two or more people. According to Foucault’s position, “in any given historical period we can write, speak or think about a given social object or practice...only in certain specific ways and not in others. ‘A discourse’ would then be *whatever* constrains – but also enables – writing, speaking and thinking within such specific historical limits” (McHoul and Grace, 31). Discourse theory explains that what we are able to say about a certain body of knowledge is just as important as what we are not able to say. According to the theory put forth by Foucault “discourse is not just a form of representation; it is a *material condition* (or set of conditions) which enables and constrains the socially productive ‘imagination’” (McHoul and Grace, 31). If zombies were *only* a form of representation, then this paper would not be necessary, instead the discourse surrounding zombies as seen in films and other types of media are part of the *material condition*, they enable and restrict the social imagination, they are part of the concrete world which we, as a society, take place in every day, and which might explain the shifting and sliding of the signification of the zombie.

Using the ideas derived from Barthes, Williams, and Foucault, the zombie will no longer be seen as merely a reflection of socio-political anxieties, but a concrete embodiment of these anxieties whose actual meaning has changed throughout the last 75 years.

Analysis

As stated earlier, zombie films can not be lumped into one single, homogeneous category.

The discourse that surrounds them is varied and distinct, but overlapping and intersecting – the zombie seen in today’s films was certainly built upon the meaning that the zombie encompassed in the films before it. Foucault, in a discussion of authors and books in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* explains that a book (or in our case a film) is “caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network...the unity of the book, even in the sense of a group of relations, cannot be regarded as identical in each case. The book is not simply the object that one holds in one’s hands; and it cannot remain within the little parallelepiped that contains it: its unity is variable and relative” (25-26). The zombie can not be seen as unified or identical in every case, however the films are nodes within a large network of other zombie films, horror films, and films in general.

In 1932, Victor Halperin’s *White Zombie* was released in American theaters across the nation. The film was based on travel writings by various authors who spent time in Haiti studying the culture, religion, and politics of the area. The most prominent of these writers was William Seabrook whose book *The Magic Island* captured the imagination of screenwriters and producers alike. Seabrook describes his encounter with a Haitian zombie in the following passage:

Obediently, like an animal, he slowly stood erect – and what I saw then, coupled with what I heard previously, or despite it, came as a rather sickening shock. The eyes were the worst. It was not my imagination. They were in truth like the eyes of a dead man, not blind, but staring unfocused, unseeing. The whole face, for that matter, was bad enough. It was vacant, as if there were nothing behind it. It seemed not only expressionless, but also incapable of expression. (Seabrook, 101)

It was no wonder that American audiences flocked to the theaters to get a visual glimpse of the Haitian “other.”

Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism*, states that Orientalism “was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted a binary opposition between the familiar (Europe, the

West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')" (Loomba, 45). The definition of Orientalism, which is closely tied to Colonial Theory, helps to further the idea of the "other." Othering relies heavily on opposites— us vs. them, East vs. West, black vs. white, zombie vs. human.

White Zombie has an intricate system of othering with zombies at the bottom of the scale. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" presents the colonial hierarchy originally outlined by Ranajit Guha as the following:

- 1) Dominant foreign groups
- 2) Dominant indigenous groups
- 3) Dominant indigenous groups at the regional and local levels
- 4) "People" – the demographic difference between the total population and all those whom we have described as elite. (25)

Spivak also explains that there is a fifth level she believes should be added Guha's original list which would include women and slaves. Kyle Bishop takes Spivak's outline and goes one step further by presenting a sixth level where the zombies dwell (71). With the zombies situated at the lowest point in society, zombification would become the ultimate human fear.

The political and social climate of America in the 1930s was not a welcome one. Many citizens were unemployed and living in poverty, segregation was still the order of the day, and violent attacks on African Americans in the South were, sadly, seen as commonplace. However, there was a fascination among the white, elite population with the "other," with the exotic which is what *White Zombie* in 1932 and Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* in 1942 delivered. These films portrayed white, bourgeois humans in strange lands filled with native people and superstitions they don't fully understand, as well as the surrender of a beautiful woman to the religious power of vodou (therefore "othering" the beautiful white woman). When white American audiences went to see this film they not only experienced a sense of fear, but

their sense of adventure and curiosity were piqued as well.

The signification of the zombie creature portrayed in the films of the 1930s and 1940s carried a meaning of colonialism, racism, and fear of the “other.” In the concrete, material world of this era, when a person viewed a zombie on the screen, the immediate meaning would occur to them and the discourse that not only surrounds the zombie, but the discourse that surrounds racism, the “other,” and colonialism. As Bishop explains “not only is the zombie a fundamentally *American* creation, but it is also perhaps the most unique member of the monster pantheon; that is, although creatures such as ghosts, werewolves, vampires, and reanimated corpses were also born in the depths of folk tradition, the zombie is the only supernatural foe to have almost entirely skipped an initial literary manifestation...” (13) The cinematic zombie is an American creation, based on the sensationalism of travel literature, and placed directly on the screen with little to no literary mediation and development. *White Zombie* and *I Walked with a Zombie* created the genre of the zombie film however the signification took a drastic turn in 1968.

The zombie laid low during the happy-go-lucky era of the 1950s and early 1960s, but in 1968 an unknown director in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania would re-create the zombie as society knew it. Bishop explains that “just when the cinematic zombie seemed destined to be relegated to campy parodies and low-profile cameos, a new kind of zombie was born, one both infectious and cannibalistic, with the release of *Night of the Living Dead*” (13). George A. Romero’s classic, low-budget, but surprisingly well made zombie film changed the meaning of the zombie significantly, especially in societal terms. Roland Barthes explains that “myth has an imperative, buttonholing character: stemming from an historical concept, directly springing from contingency...it is *I* whom it has come to seek. It is turned towards me, I am subjected to its

intentional force, it summons me to receive its expansive ambiguity” (124). Audiences would have looked at this film and recognized something familiar about it, mainly automatons raised from the dead. But Romero changed the entire angle of the zombie to be a more vicious and violent creature than before. The question becomes, how did *Night of the Living Dead* come to be classified as a zombie film? The meaning of the zombie had to shift in order for this to happen.

The meaning of the zombie shifted from a mindless creature that was raised from the dead to perform tasks of hard labor to pay off a debt, to a creature that still rises from the dead, but now craves human flesh, is not controlled by anyone or anything, and can infect a human in a single bite. This shift happened, as mentioned above, during the Vietnam War when violent images were plastered all over the nightly news. It made sense to use a familiar monster (the zombie), change the actions and goals of the zombie, so that it will interpellate audiences all over the country.

The signification of the film shifted as well to a protest of the violence and stupidity of war. Even though the film was shot in black and white, there was a significant amount of gore, blood, and missing limbs throughout. *Night* also dealt with a family that had to kill their small child after she infects another human that is holding up in the house – many people may have been able to relate to this due to the war killing off so many young men. The meaning of *Night* became wrapped up with political protest, the pure nonsense of violence and war, and the loss of family and friends who were told they were fighting to protect the United States. Will Wright in his discussion on Western films explains that “myth depends on simple and recognizable meanings which reinforce rather than challenge social understanding” (272) – in the year 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* was able to deliver just that to an overwhelmed American society.

Ten years after *Night*, Romero released one of the most important films in the zombie cannon – *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). According to IMDb, this film has grossed more than \$55 million worldwide, the total budget being a mere \$650,000. *Dawn* is studied and written about more often than any other zombie film. According to Kyle Bishop, Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* “acts as a scathing cultural allegory” that lampoons “capitalism and rampant consumerism” (15). This is the film that truly defined and solidified the entire zombie genre. Many scholars tried to anchor the meaning of the zombie as a whole by making the generalizing statement that zombies, because of their unrelenting hunger and pursuit of food, *are* consumers gone wild. Robin Wood, in his book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* seems to be the first to make this claim.

The zombies in *Dawn* “represent, on the metaphorical level, the whole dead weight of patriarchal consumer capitalism” (Wood, 118). Humans and zombies alike are “contaminated and motivated by consumer greed, which the zombies simply carry to its logical conclusion by consuming people” (Wood, 118). Although this idea most certainly holds true for *Dawn of the Dead* – that zombies are consumers, capitalists, greedy, etc. – it is more difficult to translate this idea on to other, more current zombie films as some scholars have tried to do. This meaning can not be applied to *Day of the Dead* (1985), *Land of the Dead* (2005), Ruben Fleischer’s *Zombieland* (2009) or even the 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead* directed by Zack Snyder. The consumer/capitalist meaning is actually quite unique to the original *Dawn of the Dead* with all three groups – the four survivors, the motorcycle group, and the zombies – taking full advantage of their surroundings – a shopping mall (which was a relatively new structure in the 1960s).

Early in the film, there is a montage shot of the four survivors going “shopping” in the large department store, trying on fancy clothes, taking expensive sporting equipment, and tasting expensive food with no thought of waste or worry that they may soon run out if they can not

leave for a while. In fact, during this montage, there is a shot of the two SWAT team members stealing money from the bank at the mall - they smile daringly into the camera as they do so. This shot is the height of the definition of consumerism gone wild. The survivors are living in a land where food, clothing and shelter are scarce, yet they have all of these at their disposal and are squandering it away. They are also living in a new land where paper money and coins mean absolutely *nothing*, yet they hoard it away, “just in case,” as if in a few days the apocalypse will blow over and the money they have tucked under their mattress will let them live the easy life. This short moment of the film would have called to audiences in a mythic way, angering them with their gluttonous consumerism. Shannon Mader explains that for “Southwestern Pennsylvania, 1979 was the year in which the U.S. Steel Corporation, the nation’s largest steelmaker and 15th largest manufacturer at the time, announced that it would be closing 16 plants in eighteen states and laying off 13,000 workers” (70). Mader continues to say that to the “communities affected, the scaling back of the U.S. Steel was seen in almost apocalyptic terms: ‘What we are experiencing in cities like Youngstown and Pittsburgh and Gary is nothing short of economic genocide, a job extermination program’” (70). The meaning of the zombie could not be any clearer to the audiences viewing this film in 1978 America.

Almost seven years later, Romero released *Day of the Dead* which did not do as well as *Dawn of the Dead* at the box office, or in the hearts of scholars. In fact, it could be argued that *Day of the Dead* was a precursor to the post-9/11 zombie films that we have seen over the past 10 years; unfortunately it ended up in the wrong era. 1985 was the beginning of the end of the Cold War which officially began on September 2, 1945 (the date the Japanese formally surrendered thus marking the end of World War II) and ending on December 26, 1991 (the date of the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union) (www.coldwarveterans.com). America was also

experiencing a financial and economic boom; the nation was in love with consumerism. Bishop explains that *Day of the Dead* clearly addressed Cold War fears and paranoia, however he quotes Joseph Maddrey hypothesizing that “audiences in the carefree, consumer-friendly 1980s apparently did not feel the need for such a serious examination of personal and societal values” (15). Again, though, we return to the myth, the calling of the audience with the language and meaning the film conveys. This myth/meaning may have been interpreted correctly, however in a society that has no worries, why would they want to start now? *Day of the Dead*, which takes place in a military bunker deep underground, begins to play with signification. Yes, this film carries a meaning of Cold War anxieties and paranoia, but it also sets up the structure for future films that deal with post-9/11 psychosocial and societal stressors. There is also the glimmer of the shift that is only now taking place, and that is empathy for the zombie as shown through Bud, the zombie that Dr. Fisher is trying to train, like a pet of some sort. The film is brilliant in its creation of meaning in regards to war and fear of other humans however it was released at a time when the nation was not ready or willing to be interpellated by the meaning.

The zombie laid low in cinema between 1985 and 2001, with only a few comedic zombie films being released during that time. But, after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001, American society entered the golden age of the zombie.

Bishop explains the “zombie renaissance” in the following passage:

Scenes depicting deserted metropolitan streets, abandoned human corpses, and gangs of lawless vigilantes have become more common than ever, appearing on the nightly news as often as on the movie screen. Because of the aftereffects of war, terrorism, and natural disasters so closely resemble the scenarios depicted by zombie cinema, such images of death and destruction have all the more power to shock and terrify a population that has become otherwise jaded to more traditional horror films. The most telling barometer of this modern age, therefore, is to be found not in the romanticized undead protagonists of vampire melodramas such as Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* series (2005-2008) or with the nihilistic sadists torturing victims in the latest *Saw* movie (2004 -), but in the unstoppable hoards

of the zombie invasion narrative. That is why many now speak, and speak correctly, of a current ‘zombie renaissance.’ (12)

To put it simply, there has been a massive explosion of zombie media since September 11, 2001 and the production of this type of media does not seem to be slowing down, nor do the images of war, natural disasters, economic crises, murder rates, drug dealers, etc. that we see on our televisions every night. The question then becomes, what does the zombie *mean* to us during this turbulent time and how does it interpellate viewers?

Because of the massive amount of zombie media available for analysis between 2001 and 2011, this paper will only concentrate on larger films to describe the meaning associated with the zombies of this era. 2002 saw the release of Danny Boyle’s revisionist film *28 Days Later*, “a terrifying vision of the apocalypse in which a man wakes from a coma to find London abandoned and full of decaying corpses” (16). Although there is much debate surrounding the meaning of the monsters in this film because of their speed, ferocity, and the fact that they are not technically dead, *28 Days Later* is constantly classified and listed as a zombie film because it interpellates and fulfills the meaning that audiences are seeking from such films – or as Roland Barthes would say, it puts audiences “in the presence” of social anxieties. In post-9/11 society the myth has to do with psycho-social stressors like war, famine, poverty, gangs, natural disasters, biological threats, depression, relationships with others, etc. The main characters find each other amongst the ruins on London and come to depend and trust one another, however when they leave the city and enter a military base, the soldiers very quickly become more threatening than the creatures in the forest. This is, yet again, another common myth applied to post-9/11 films, the probability that in the post-apocalyptic world you can not trust those you would have trusted before, i.e. the military.

Two years later, the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* was released. Although the group of

survivors are still stuck inside of a mall, the group is much bigger, much more varied in occupation, economic status, and age. There is also not the consumer/capitalist angle that the original took; instead the myth has to do with distrust of the fellow human beings in the mall. There is a wealthy man who treats everyone poorly, there is an African-American cop who does not trust a young African-American man who has a criminal past, the security guards (who are there to protect the mall and the people in it) lock the survivors up over night and have the only guns in the group. The psychosocial stressor that interpellates the audience is relationships with strangers, in other words, who can you trust? If you watch and listen to the nightly news, the simple answer is no one. Viewers of this film will immediately recognize the meaning of these films as a comment on our distant relations with other people, however many will agree that not many strangers can be trusted. In the remake of *Dawn of the Dead*, it isn't until the wholly distrustful people are turned into zombies (because after all, if you are that far gone from humanity you might as well be a zombie) that the remaining survivors are able to fortify a bus found in the parking garage and make a run for it.

A more recent example of a zombie film that signifies psychosocial stressors is Ruben Fleischer's *Zombieland* from 2009. Although mostly a gore-filled comedy, this film very adroitly interpellates the audience using the above stressors through the interactions of the survivors, as well as the zombies. *Zombieland* follows four survivors, all of which had trouble integrating into society before the zombie apocalypse happened. Columbus (Jesse Eisenberg) is a teenage shut-in at college who shies away from relationships and human contact in general. Tallahassee (Woody Harrelson) is what seems to be an ex-stay at home dad who is on a mission to kill every zombie on earth to avenge the death of his son. Wichita (Emma Stone) and Little Rock (Abigail Breslin) are con artists; they are incredibly smart, seriously dangerous, and trust

no one. During the course of *Zombieland* the four characters come together and after quite a few antics, finally begin to trust one another. In this film the zombies almost seem secondary to the problems the characters face with one another, like a small bump in the road to discovering trust and a family that all four of them lost or never had. As the four of them are driving down the deserted highway towards the fictional Pacific Playland arguing loudly, Columbus yells, “Hey, for fuck's sake, enough already! We are being chased by ravenous freaks. Like we don't have enough problems. Oh, they stole my hummer. Oh, we have trust issues. Well get over it! We can't just fucking drive down the road playing I Spy or some shit for two hours like four normal-ass Americans?” Columbus is trying to grasp on to some sense of normalcy, which would interpellate audiences who, too, find themselves trying to grasp some sense of normalcy in a world that seems to have been turned upside down - politically, economically, and socially.

Quite obviously, *Zombieland* is a comedy and it may be a good idea at this point to bring up an article written by Margo Collins and Elson Bond in which they address the comedic zombie. They argue that the comedic zombie resists the traditional categories of zombies “which is exactly what makes him (or her) funny; he can be a slow-moving zombie who thinks. This kind of zombie comedy most often appears when individualism reasserts itself – sometimes on the part of the human fighters, but more commonly in the zombies themselves” (203). Although an excellent point for some movies, *Zombieland* thoroughly contradicts this idea. It is only when the distinct individuals find each other and form a group and a bond, and are able to give up some of their individuality that the comedy in the zombie film works. One of the last zombies that Columbus fights in the film is dressed like a clown (funny, right?) and his narrative voiceover exclaims, “Look at this fucking clown. Of course, it had to be a clown. No, it had to be a clown. And it had to be Wichita for me to finally understand that some rules are made to be

broken. Time to nut up or shut up. Fuck this clown.” The comedic aspect and narration comes about because Columbus is willing to put aside his individuality (by setting aside Rule #17, “Don’t be a hero.”) in order to save Wichita and Little Rock.

Roland Barthes explains that “*myth hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not to make disappear. There is no latency of the concept in relation to the form: there is no need of an unconscious in order to explain myth” (121). *Zombieland*, as in all of the above mentioned films, does not hide the myth/signification. There may be some distortion, but viewers are able to recognize the myth and meaning laid before them in the zombie film. Perhaps in the post-9/11 zombie film there are in fact two myths/significations occurring. The zombie creature itself signifies the psychosocial stressors that society faces today. Those humans that give in to the fear, paranoia, and distrust are destined to become zombie-like, or to put it more succinctly and in cinematic terms, actual zombies. Those that push back the fear, paranoia, and distrust to make meaningful relationships with other survivors will over-come the psychosocial stressor, the apocalypse and avoid eventual zombification.

During the post-9/11 American zombie explosion, there have also been a slew of European zombie films hitting theaters. Films like *Dead Snow* (2009) from Norway and *Evil* (2005) from Greece involve myth, interpellation, and signification as well. The major shifting and sliding in meaning of the zombie from American films to European films has to do with history/folklore that is specific to each country. *Dead Snow* interpellates audiences through the use of zombie Nazis searching for their gold, knowing full well that Norwegian viewers would recall that Norway was occupied by Nazis during World War II and have only recently been able to culturally define themselves as Norwegian. *Evil* interpellates Greek viewers by showing the survivors being overwhelmed by zombies in shot after shot. Historically, the meaning of the

zombies would be directly tied to the entry of Greece into the euro in 2002, falsifying financial documents and having the entire Euro-zone come down upon them, and eventually the beginning of the financial crisis that only came to a head this year. The meaning of the European zombie/zombie film differs radically from the meaning of the American zombie/zombie film. Filmmakers, however, have been able to successfully appropriate the cinematic zombie to make meanings that will interpellate audiences and re-define the American zombie for European consumption.

In the year 2011, there is yet another shift in meaning beginning to take place for the zombie - this meaning having to do with empathy and sympathy for this rabid creature. The shift had signs of happening when, in 2007, a low-budget, little acknowledged film appeared called *Wasting Away*, better known by its strange DVD title, *Aaaah! Zombies!* The film, in a new twist, follows the point of view of the zombies, instead of the survivors. Viewers get to know the characters, empathize with them, and root for them instead of the humans who seem to be ruthlessly killing them. This film did not go to theaters, but went straight to DVD and television precisely because viewers could not easily understand, grasp, or make sense of the meaning that was being displayed through this admittedly hokey, but fun film. The zombies in the film can talk to one another and physically look like human beings, however from the outside point of view all they do is moan and grunt and look like they are rotting from the inside out. This film, however lacking in significance, was a tiny glimmer of a major shift in meaning for the zombie.

The new meaning of the zombie, the new myth of the zombie, will be something radically different than the previous meanings all tied to war and economy and politics. The new meaning of the zombie will imply something freeing about no longer being autonomous, having no worries or care, and having no need for a job or money; your one and only purpose is to kill

and eat humans. Oddly, too, this shift seems to be taking place in literature and slowly making its way onto the big screen. *Warm Bodies* by Isaac Marion follows the story of R who, after eating the brain of some unwitting boy, ingests his memories and falls in love with his victim's girlfriend. Their strange courtship and consequent romance has the ability to change everything - not only in the human world, but the zombie world as well. This best-selling book actually seems to mark the shifting of the meaning of the zombie; in fact it may even be the definitive pivotal point for the flesh-eating creature. The zombie, in this regard, seems to be going the way of the vampire (*Twilight*, *Interview with a Vampire*) in regards to a shifting in meaning of the zombie and the myth and discourse surrounding this creature. *Warm Bodies* is set to become a film, being released in 2012, which may affect the future meaning through this incredible re-invention. R, the main character in Marion's book, allows the reader a small glimpse of beauty in the follow passage:

Now here is an oddity. A question for the zombie philosophers. What does it mean that my past is a fog but my present is brilliant, bursting with sound and color? Since I became Dead I've recorded new memories with the fidelity of an old cassette deck, faint and muffled and ultimately forgettable. But I can recall every hour of the last few days in vivid detail, and the thought of losing a single one horrifies me. Where am I getting this focus? This clarity? I can trace a solid line from the moment I met Julie all the way to now, lying next to her in this sepulchral bedroom, and despite the millions of past moments I've lost or tossed away like highway trash, I know with a lockjawed certainty I'll remember this one for the rest of my life. (91)

If, through the point of view of the zombie, society can catch a glimpse of something freeing, relaxing, and even beautiful, perhaps the shift could continue even further to encompass other novels that display the same meaning and may, one day, fall under the category of zombie media.

In David Moody's novel *Dog Blood*, the Hater virus has spread throughout England, and perhaps the world, splitting the world into the Changed (those who feel the urge and need to kill)

and the Unchanged (those who must kill the Changed to survive). The main character, Danny McCoyne, is Changed. He has killed his father-in-law and his two sons and is now looking for his daughter, Ellis, who is changed as well. This glorious dystopian novel, displays, through Danny's thoughts, how he would much rather be Changed – a strong, physically fit force to be reckon with – than Unchanged – a weak, cowering sheep. Danny explains that the Unchanged “hold on to the people that used to matter to them in the vain and pointless hope they'll somehow be cured or change again. But how can we be cured? We're not the ones who are sick” (Moody, 22).

The Hate virus opens the character's eyes to a new world which then shows the griminess, mundanity, and constriction of the old world. The Hate virus is freedom from money and jobs – it strips the carrier of pleasantries and manners, leaving only raw, open-nerved emotions. Societies the world over have been so overwhelmed with pointless jobs, economic hardships, unemployment, etc. this novel may interpellate those who yearn for some freedom from everyday life. This does not mean an escape by any measure, however a complete freeing of humanity in general so that there would be two sides to deal with (Changed and Unchanged) instead of the many sides we deal with today (Democrats, Republicans, United Nations, NATO, NAFTA, etc.). After Danny is captured by a group of the Unchanged, he has the following thought:

Have I forgotten what Joseph Mallon is and what his people did (and are still doing) to my kind? They're the reason all of this happened. If it wasn't for them we wouldn't have had to kill and my family would still be together. We had to kill them for protection. This whole war has been fought in self-defense...that's the only reason. They made us do it” (Moody, 156).

At this moment in the novel the reader definitely empathizes with Danny's sentiments. The reader wants to see him live, they want to see him find his daughter, they want the Unchanged to

pay for what they've done, and most of all, they yearn to have the freedom that Danny has throughout most of the novel.

To go out on a very thin limb, the question may eventually become, what *is* a zombie? The meaning, as I've demonstrated, has changed through the past eight decades in film and a new shift in meaning is happening in the literary world. The shifting may become so severe in the next few decades that the flesh-eating fiend audiences love to hate will no longer be recognizable. The zombie, in a sense is a loss of individuality, but more recent literature and films seem to argue that it is a kind of re-claiming of humanity, the ultimate evolutionary post-human. Tony Vigorito, a little known, but beautifully articulate writer displays just such a beautiful post-humanity in his novel *Just a Couple of Days*. The novel, which displays a type of utopian apocalypse, includes a loss of consciousness, memory, and language, a return to the group and loss of individuality, and freedom from the mundane details of every day life.

Professor Blip Korterly, the protagonist of the novel, somehow gets wrapped up in a government research project to develop a powerful biological weapon. Unfortunately (or fortunately) for humanity, there is a leak, turning everyone who is not hunkered down in the government bunker to regress (or progress?) to the state described in the paragraph above. Korterly tries to fend off the virus for as long as possible, even sealing himself up in his house for months on end, until he finally makes the conscious decision to succumb to the virus. He describes his moment of clarity in the beautifully lyric last chapter of the novel:

Who did we think we were anyway? We who whispered lies about our lives. We who wanted what others held, and held what others needed. We were the desperate and lonely of life. We were the weary, the wicked, the wrong. We were our own whip. We were the cranky monkeys, the cantankerous pipsqueaks whose deeds of disgrace sullied our own race. But as I look out the window – hold on – as I *open* the window, I see nothing of this past in the humans before me. Edenic smiles define every face. Indeed, smiles gulf the entirety of every person. Posture literalizes perfection, movement describes grace, bodies radiate

health, and there is no ugliness anywhere. Poetry is personified. These are the prelapsarian people, and every individual shines with a supreme and indefatigable confidence of being, attitude of beautitude. (381)

Although, obviously, the author is not describing the flesh-eating zombies of modern films, or even the autonomous laborer of the films from the 1930s, there is a type of zombification happening – there is a loss of individuality, a freedom from the superficial world and a new ability to experience the material world in a whole new way.

Conclusion

Roland Barthes in an effort to discuss the reading and deciphering of myths creates three different types of reading in which he confirms that the third type of reading is the only way to receive a myth. The reader can not focus on the empty signifier or the full signifier, rather, Barthes explains:

...if I focus on the mythical signifier as on an inextricable whole make of meaning and form, I receive an ambiguous signification: I respond to the constituting mechanism of myth, to its own dynamics, I become a reader of myths. The saluting Negro is no longer an example or a symbol, still less an alibi: he is the very *presence* of French imperialism. (128)

The presence is the most important idea in the passage above. The “saluting Negro” is not an example or a symbol; it is the *presence* of imperialism. Much the same can be said of the zombie throughout the eight decades of cinematic exploits.

In the films of the 1930s and 1940s, the zombie was the very presence of racism, colonialism, and the “other.” The war time zombie films are the very presence of nuclear war. The zombies in the *Night of the Living Dead* are the very presence of anti-war and anti-violence sentiments. The zombies in *Dawn of the Dead* are the very presence of consumerism and capitalism gone wild. The zombies of post-9/11 cinema are the very presence of psychosocial stressor, including war, crime, natural disasters, biological threats, and many more. What the

future holds for the zombie is as yet unclear, but as hypothesized above the zombie seems to be in the process of yet another shift in meaning. The zombie may become the very presences of freedom from mundane life, the stepping away from individualism and re-discovering humanity (or post-humanity), or, in simpler terms, the very presence of empathy and sympathy for others.

Dendle concludes his article by stating that “there has always been a strong existential component to the zombie figure, but it has become, in recent years, increasingly nihilistic. It is the sign of an over-leisurely society lacking in broader spiritual or communal purpose, left to the impulses of its unchecked power and its desires for consumption” (54). Not only does Dendle address the change in meaning of the zombies over the years in a roundabout way, he also seems to affirm the future of zombie media as a whole when he alludes to society lacking in spiritual or *communal* purpose. The zombie is, after all, more communal than humans – they do not choose to segregate themselves. As survivors learn very quickly, where there is one zombie there are usually others. The zombie has a long and exciting undead existence ahead of it. Its versatility as a creature will allow meaning to shift and slide, and the myth and discourse surrounding them to develop.

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