

The Evolution of the Zombie in Popular Culture

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History

Long before Americans sat captivated by “The Walking Dead” on Sunday nights, the creature known as a “zombie” has been evolving. The first appearance of the word “Zombi” occurred in 1697 in a novel entitled “Le Zombi du Grand Perou, ou la comtesse de Cocagne” written by Pierre-Corneille Blessebois. Blessebois was serving as an indentured servant in the colony of Saint Domingue (Haiti.) Blessebois does not clearly define his use of the word Zombi much beyond the idea of an evil spirit. However, we are able to realize from Blessebois’ publication that the Zombi was a very prominent character in Caribbean culture in the late sixteen hundreds. Murphy (2011) argues that Blessebois, as an indentured servant, was able to sympathize with the slaves of Saint Domingue, understanding their worries, troubles, and most importantly, their fears. During his servitude, Blessebois gained the reputation as a sorcerer, most likely practicing what is now known as Voodoo.

Voodoo has long been associated with Haiti and Zombies. Voodoo first made its appearance as early as the 13th century in the culture of the Ewe people of Ghana, Mali, and Mauritania. The Ewe culture aided in the development of the kingdoms of Benin and Dahomey (Peduta, 2010, p. 45). Law (1986) described Dahomey as the most prevailing state on the “Slave Coast” of West Africa. Dahomey served as an international hub for the colonial slave trade. The religion of Voodoo crossed the Atlantic Ocean and entered colonial areas such as Saint Domingue with the slaves. Voodoo had long been a religion of ancestral worship. One of the most prominent Loa, Damballa Weddo, the creator of the world, controlled both life as well as death. Voodoo priests, known as Houngans, would invoke upon Dambella Weddo to care for and commemorate the dead (Peduto, 2010, p. 46.) This intense ancestral worship and celebration of

the deceased unsurprisingly led to the reputation of worshipping the dead, and the rising of the dead evolved from there.

Haitian mythology suggests that a mystifying toxic concentrate transformed men into catatonic, slobbering creatures completely null and void of any moral or spiritual control. These beasts served as continuous labor for their masters. This Zombie creature became a form of punishment. Peduto (2010) explains that Voodoo law stated that people were to be “zombified” as an ultimate punishment for crimes against the community. The Zombie was greatly feared among many slaves and servants. Gandhi (2013) describes the conditions of Haitian slavery as incredibly brutal, among the most brutal in the world. The slaves were often overworked and undernourished. They also suffered from extreme physical punishment. Zombies were not frightening to the slaves of Haiti, however, the process of Zombification was. Haitian slaves believed in Lan Guinee after death which is a return to African away from the horrors of slavery. Suicide was often contemplated opposed to working as slaves, but the fear of dying and becoming an eternal soulless zombie slave prevented many slaves from committing suicide or breaking any other rules (Ganghi, 2010, p. 2.) The act of zombification was actually outlawed in Haiti for a period of time because of the prevalence of Voodoo in Hatian culture. The Zombie finally infiltrated into popular culture in the form of literature and art through oral traditions and superstitions.

Emergence in American Culture

In recent years, the newly Romanized and civilized image of vampires, made popular in such films as “Twilight”, has lost its true monster status. The mindless cannibal known as the zombie has taken its place. “The evolution of Vampire and Zombie narratives reveals their sensitivity to cultural changes” (Tenga, 2013). Zombie folklore can be traced to Africa and Haiti

during slave trade, but since have become a “morbid fascination” and an integral part of our popular culture for a half a century (Nasiruddin, Halabi, Dao, Chen, and Brown, 2013). One of the oldest pieces of literature, “The Epic of Gilgamesh”, mentions what we today refer to as a zombie. The goddess, Ishtar, in a fit of rage, threatens to destroy humanity by reanimating the dead. ‘I shall bring up the dead to consume the living; I shall make the dead outnumber the living’ (Kline, 2012). Although most zombie enthusiasts would argue that the Zombie Genre didn’t exist in our pop culture until the films of the twentieth Century, the inspiration of zombies in cinema can be accredited to the book, *The Magic Island*, written by William Seabrook in 1929. Seabrook took the Haitian folklore and established the role of zombie to monster status (Gandhi, 2013). Some film experts suggest the book, *The Magic Island*, was the basis of the classic film, “White Zombie”, which premiered in 1932. It was the first true zombie movie which featured mysterious figures called, ‘the living dead’ (Bishop, 2006).

Obvious antecedents to George Romero’s zombies are the pod-people in Don Siegel’s, “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” (EOTBS), in 1956 (Kline, 2012). This film offers another view of the apocalypse, where one’s family and friends become horrifying creatures. This film perceptibly demonstrates the paranoia epidemic of the Cold War immediately after WWII (Kline, 2012). Stephen King, author of contemporary horror, compares Siegel’s film, “EOTBS”, to an allegory about the witch-hunt atmosphere that accompanied the McCarthy hearings (Bishop, 2006). It wasn’t until George Romero’s 1968 film, “Night of the Living Dead”, that the zombie genre gained cultural significance. Romero, who has been dubbed, ‘Shakespeare of Zombie Cinema’, created zombies with an insatiable hunger for human flesh and united them to an “established apocalyptic storyline” (Bishop, 2006). Romero reflected the terror of the 1960s, which was the Vietnam War, when making “Night of the Living Dead”. He also tapped into the

fear of “the other” which symbolized nonconformity and the Civil Rights Movement (Bishop, 2006.). In the last decade, there has been a resurgence of zombie culture due in part to zombie-themed video games, movies, and comic books. EC Comics published horror graphic novels in the 1950s, which featured, “rotting corpses of stumbling zombies”. These comics appealed to young people who were trying deal with the aftermath of Nazi death camps and the bombing of Japan, during WWII (Bishop, 2006). Traumatic events such as World War II triggered discernible shifts in how society viewed the future. According to literary scholar, Angela Vidergar, ‘the nuclear warfare aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, negatively changed our viewpoint of the world’ (Bishop, 2006).

In 2003, Robert Kirkman launched a new Graphic Novel, “The Walking Dead”, which was successfully made into a television show on AMC in 2010. The show, which has become an overnight sensation, chronicles a group of post-apocalypse survivors, led by the show’s main character, Rick Grimes. Fans of the “Walking Dead”, ascribes the show’s appeal in its ability to tell the human side of the story. Zombies, aka ‘Walkers’ in the show, are definitely a force to be reckoned with, however, the show’s tag line from season three, “Fight The Dead, Fear The Living” resonates throughout each season (Hurd, 2010). The humans become the significant threat as Characters are forced to make decisions, and do unspeakable things, just to survive. Metaphorically, this classic creature embodies a number of our greatest fear, the fear that deep down, we may be little more than animals, concerned only with our own appetites (Bishop, 2006). AMC’s “The Walking Dead”, highlights the darker side of human nature. By the shows’ fifth season, the characters have encountered ‘walkers’, child rapists, a sadistic Governor, and a group of cannibals. Through their desperate attempts to stay alive, they have almost become as violent and unreasonable as the zombies themselves. There is a pivotal moment in the show

when the character, Rick declares to the group, “We are the Walking Dead” (Hurd, 2010). Shows like this as well as other zombie-themed media, encompass the audience with storylines of fear, destruction, hopelessness, and death. These illustrations of demise and ruin are reflective of society’s anxiety, paranoia and response to the violent world around us (Platts, 2013).

There is sufficient evidence supporting our obsession with the undead. What remains is why we have such appetites for these grotesque, man-eating creatures in post-apocalyptic environments. Zombies are creepy physical manifestations of terror. They relentlessly come after their victims; violently clawing, scratching and gnashing their teeth. They scare us because we don’t want to be eaten by one, and because of the possibility of becoming one our self. Zombies represent fears associated with the loss of identity (Platts, 2013). They remind us of our own certain death. “Zombies are not uncanny because of their humanistic qualities; they are uncanny because they are, in essence, a grotesque metaphor for humanity itself” (Bishop, 2006). The popularity of various zombie-themed media in our culture is symptomatic of societal fears. Movies such as “World War Z”, based on the novel by Max Brooks, exploit our fear of ‘infected’ zombies on a global scale (Nasiruddin, et al., 2013). With such threats as terrorism, Ebola outbreaks, and natural disasters, zombie storylines reveal how quickly our bodies, homes and our countries can be raided (Tenga, 2013). According to Horror film critic, James Ursini, a key element in fear is recognizing something familiar in the unfamiliar; something appealing and at the same time repulsive (Bishop, 2006). In our everyday life, it’s like riding by a car wreck and knowing we should not slow down to look, but our weird curiosity forces us to. We fear the zombies and at the same time we are fascinated by them. We fear the notion of societal breakdowns of infrastructures such as the government, law enforcement and technology. At the same time, we fantasize the thought of living by our own rules of survival. While we are

mortified at the thought of defending our lives against zombies and other humans, we are intrigued by the ‘what if’ scenarios that confront our moral compass. The Zombie Genre in pop culture provides an outlet to explore the atrocious environment of a post-apocalyptic world (Platts, 2013). The Zombie Genre serves as a powerful metaphor for social anxieties. As long as we have turmoil in our world, zombies will continue to rise from the grave, and rise in popularity in our culture.



Figure 1: Scene from “Night of the Living Dead” (1968). The earliest portrayed zombies were not grotesque, just walking bodies. Source: www.drafthouse.com



Figure 2: Scene from “The Walking Dead” (2013). Zombies are now portrayed in a very outlandish manner, displaying blood, guts, and gore. Source: www.forbes.com

Zombies in Different Culture Regions

Another important difference in how zombies are portrayed is how they are viewed in different cultural regions. In the United States, zombies are looked at with terror, and usually have synonymous traits as a dog with rabies. American society views threats from a zombie as similar to threats from a rabid dog; aggressive, soul-less, and an open mouth ready for feeding time. The Zombie Apocalypse in the United States is an idea that zombies are going to eventually take over society and slowly but surely infect every living individual that is left on the planet. Some Americans even go as far as to plan for survival when the zombies attack, making shelters and stock-piling essential goods or ammunition for defense. Although this may seem extreme, it is not rare. Many Americans see zombies as a very real and intense threat. These “doomsday preppers” devote a massive amount of time, money, and resources to planning for their survival if an apocalyptic Zombie event should occur.

In other countries, the Zombie phenomenon is often used for other purposes. For example, Hall (2011) proposes that Zombie films produced in other culture regions are often designed to depict real life situations or institutions. The British film “28 Days Later,” the issues associated with capitalism is intertwined including the origins of capitalism. The Japanese film, “Wild Zero,” serves as a representation of Japanese capitalism and its relationship with the economies of other Asian nations.

Zombies are so popular that they have even caused conflict between nations. A big controversy took place between Israelis and Arabs over the production of *World War Z*, which hit the big screen in 2013. “One of the most improbable plotlines of the film is that Israelis and Palestinians are fighting on the same side.” (Heller, 2013) Arabs were angry because they felt that the video portrayed Israel too positively. The Israeli military was portrayed in a positive

light, contrary to popular belief of the Arabs. The film shows Israeli and Palestinian powers fighting together for the same goal, which is nothing like reality. However, Israelis say that this positive portrayal of the Israeli military was not at the expense of Arabs. Israeli society may have been portrayed positively, but citizens do not feel as though Arab culture was portrayed negatively. They feel as though the two are unrelated when it comes to the zombie movie.

Conclusion

Many Americans spend Sunday nights captivated by the actions of Rick and his crew fighting to survive on “The Walking Dead”. What most people fail to realize is that Zombies have a vast history dating back to the West African kingdom of Dahomey and the slaves that originated from that area. The aftermath of World War II, left our society shell-shocked and brought up ‘a disturbing realization about our human capacity for violence’ (Bishop, 2006). Zombies today serve as a reflection of people’s fears and anxieties. People become transfixed on Zombies because they feed our need for fear and fascination while at the same time providing a way to explore an apocalyptic scenario without leaving the comfort of our home. The Zombie genre was created in response to the violence in our world and serves as an outlet to deal with society’s feelings of hopelessness and despair and at the same time, Zombies remind us how good we actually have it. Zombies even have a great impact on other nations and areas besides the United States, including political, social, and economic influences. Our appetite for zombies has caused an up swell in Zombie media. These grotesque creatures have become a part of our culture and do not seem to be going anywhere anytime soon.

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