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Zombies From Cultural Origin to Contemporary Uses

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by

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The word zombie and the concept of the walking dead have permeated the cinematic horror landscape since as early as the 1930s. We have the zombie spawned by Haitian Voodoo in *White Zombie* (1932), the first use of "zombie" mythos in cinema. Evolving further we have our toxic waste creatures, possibly rejected from the underworld in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968); here our gaunt friends have quite carnivorous appetites—a shift from the worker drones of *White Zombie.* We still see religious undertones in *28 Days Later* (2002) with an apocalyptic theme, but also much more reliance on a scientific or rational explanation for the zombie. Here the outbreak is caused by a pathogen instead of magic/religion (Voodoo in this case) or more sci-fi characteristics (space probe radiation). There seems always to be a subconscious reflection of the fears of the time, the unknown, the potential, the shadow on the back of the minds of the people which in turn projects onto the zeitgeist. The relevance of the backdrop in which the media is consumed is seen in interpretations and critical analyses of the symbolically rich brain-chompers, mindless drones, and undead fiends throughout the years.

I will approach this thesis as a literature review and explication of three films: *White Zombie, Night of the Living Dead,* and *28 Days Later.* I will take several critical lenses into account for each film, including historical, theological, socio-economic, psychoanalytic, racial, and gendered lenses. These are all contextualized within different times and relevancy, with varying critical receptions as well as varying interpretations that each iteration of the zombie encapsulates. From the *zonbi* as the precursor and inspiration to all zombie media today that drapes the backdrop of the genre in a racial and cultural aspect, to the viral zombie that seems to have swept the common narrative of countless contemporary versions of zombies that drench the current tapestry. There is an ongoing reflection of the environment (and thus a common mindset of a given temporally relevant space) in which each iteration comes about. The placement of a

given iteration of this undead reflects the state of its relationship to the temporally relevant society in which these films are made. I will look at the evolution from the zombie of the 1930s, examine each version, and attempt to locate the zombie of today, and what possibilities the zombie of the future may have to offer.

With this goal set in mind, I will loosely explore a throughline from film to film, and thus what that specific incarnation says about the society in which it was not only formed but consumed. This is not only to consider instances of the zombie in their given temporal space but to acknowledge how contemporary communities evaluate said instances. We must consider the evolution of the zombie as well as the society in which it is interpreted. There are many stages reflected by the three films under lens: the racial connotations and implications of the forced labor of the Haitian citizens that was imposed on them by the West, the rising of consumerist and capitalist culture as well as religious principles and the strain this puts on human interaction, and finally the precipice of it all and how these zombie tenants exist within the modern hivemind and thus the "apocalyptic fantasy" that has become so widespread in contemporary media. These all are predicated factors in how this genre is consumed.

This project will attempt to connect these concepts through the use of preexisting literature on the films, and close readings, all in tandem with these ongoing conversations that occur on the rich memetic symbolism of the zombie and how the zombie is both a reappropriated product of the culture in which it spawns from, as well as a mirrored (albeit dramatically so) image of that very culture. I will attempt to show this throughline from the Westernized version of the Voodoo *zonbi* with ties to servitude, or slavery and bridge the gap to continue on this critique of imperialism and capitalism and how the zombie throughout the years represents the American (or in a broader sense) the Western empire and potential downfalls of it.

White Zombie and its Temporal Relevance and Echoes

The plot is rather simple with a runtime of one hour and nine minutes. We have the object of desire—Madeline (Madge Bellamy)—the fiancé of our seeming force of good, Dr. Bruner (Joseph Cawthorn), who is set against both Murder Legendere (Bela Lugosi) and Charles Beaumont (Robert Frazer). The latter covets Madeline enough to develop a diabolical plan in tandem with Legendere to kill her and then turn her into a zombie who lacks autonomy and free will, thus thwarting the planned marriage between her and her lover. The plan begins to fall apart when the aptly named Murder Legendere finds her fetching enough to keep for himself. This folly comes to a head when the soon-to-be husband, Dr. Bruner, comes to rescue the doomed damsel, save the day, and restore their plans of marriage and love.

There is an inextricable sense of othering throughout zombie media (and the horror genre at large). In *White Zombie* the portrayal of the native people of Haiti, today is regarded as rather problematic. Livia Gershon illustrates this spectacle in her article linking colonialism and the first zombie film:

> From its beginnings in the French slave colony then known as Saint-Domingue, the Haitian zombie legend was intertwined with enslavement. Promotion for *White Zombie* in the US leaned heavily on this connection while also sensationalizing the supposed savagery of Black Haitians. Ad copy promised that the film's depiction of corpses "dug from their graves and put to work as slaves" was based on factual observations by American researchers. Promoters encouraged local exhibitors to hire Black performers to dress in 'tropical garments,' beat tom toms, and yell (Gershon).

The crux of the narrative stems from a Westernized and adulterated version of Voodoo practices to the point where it was not only marketed as a spectacle but portrayed like one for the sake of entertainment and novelty, rather than represented as a sacred religion or practice. The film has been read as a commentary on the United States-occupied Haiti of the time. It reflects the social structure of the said occupation. It is impossible to consider today's zombie without realizing its Haitian Voodoo (and further) West African spawning. Take *White Zombie* as a launching point for the U.S. cinematic creature. A story where a Voodoo sorcerer zombifies a collection of underlings—one of which includes the love interest for both our protagonist and antagonist. A situation where autonomy is lost, and spirit is captured. The body becomes an empty vessel and a tool for the nefarious Murder Legendere's purpose. The religious root here is a bastardized version of its source, westernized and imperialized. It would be remiss not to consider the connotations of slavery as it is depicted in the film. While the setting is outside of the States, the implication of the film coming from the U.S. comports it into a Western lens.

The film was adapted from a novel named *The Magic Island* (1929) written by William Seabrook. The author was an explorer and journalist who could be to thank (or blame) for the Westernized reappropriation of the Haitian *zonbi*. It's important to note a few key distinctions between the proto-westernized zombie of *White Zombie* and the more contemporary Romero zombies that we have all grown to know. The original cinematic zombies consist of the witchcraft/Haitian root where some priest or sorcerer reanimates the dead back as a lifeless/soulless husk as we see in the 1932 film. An important distinction to keep in mind regarding the spawn of the Western zombie is that they did not hunger for the flesh of the living at this point. They were merely worker drones as we see with Bela Lugosi's character and how he employs the help of zombies to tend his sugar plantation and to abide by his bidding. It is this

dynamic between plantation owner and forced laborers that we see reflected by the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934.

To understand the orientation of *White Zombie* and its Western context, we must consider a few things regarding the origin of the Haitian *zonbi* and its connection to the U.S. occupation of Haiti that took place during the film's release in 1932. Connie Nugent draws these parallels in their medical article titled *The Undead in Culture and Science*:

> This film reflected the social structure of the time. The occupation emphasized the class differences among the white and [biracial] elite and the black workers. In his article on *White Zombie*, Tony Williams pointed out that "black zombie slavery in the film thus represents a macabre version of the forced labor system which the US inflicted on the Haitian population in 1918" (Nugent).

In 1915, Haiti's then President, Jean Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, was assassinated. Because Haiti was eyed by U.S. interests for a strategically placed naval base, Woodrow Wilson occupied/invaded the island nation to create stability and deter the country from resorting to anarchy post-assassination. Said occupation/invasion lasted from 1915 to 1934. The history of U.S. imperial interests in Haiti stems from the strategic and economic benefits of controlling the West Indies. This interest existed before the 1915 assassination; however, this is when the U.S. fully capitalized on the instability, inserting their military onto the land, and deterring foreign control. Before the 1915 assassination, the U.S. attempted to further emancipate Haiti from the rule/need/influence of other governments by granting a loan in hopes of allowing them to pay off international debts. This attempt at control failed as the debt sum was too large, coupled with the internal instability that had been bubbling for quite some time. Between 1911 and 1915 alone, seven Haitian presidents were assassinated, while both France and Germany rivaled the U.S. for

control over the island nation. After this instability came to a head with the assassination of Sam, the U.S. put troops on the ground to protect assets, as well as curb the thoughts of a German Invasion (U.S. Invasion and Occupation of Haiti, 1915–34).

These imperialist endeavors are all a backdrop to rising powers and conflict that were heightened by the start of the First World War. To further contextualize the film, we must acknowledge William Seabrook's *The Magic Island.* Seabrook, often recognized as a disgraced explorer or journalist in current media, made his name traveling to "exotic" lands and immersing himself in the culture that he would later write about. Some of his pieces include the topics of occultism, witchcraft, and cannibalism—as well as a memoir about his time spent in an asylum due to his alcohol addiction—among other musings. His ultimate contribution to Western society, however, was the adoption of the Americanized Zombie—stemming heavily from *The Magic Island*, which would later be a large influence on *White Zombie*. Some of the topics within Seabrook's experience in Haiti were comprised of his outside perspective of the Voodoo religion. Concepts such as soul transference and resurrection would be key factors in his retelling, as he took part in several rituals conducted by the local Haitians. Seabrook defined his interpretation of the zombie as "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" (Kee). It was partially due to Seabrook's account that led to the entwined subconscious relation of Haiti, Voodoo, and the zombie. Kee even goes on to clarify that:

> Seabrook's account didn't tell the full story. He told of bodies enslaved, but he made no mention of subjugated souls or spirits. Within Vodou belief, there are zombis of the body, which are what Seabrook described, and *zombie astral,* or zombis of the spirit. Even with

> these two designations, there are discrepancies and ambiguities. As the folklorists Hans-W. Ackermann and Jeanine Gauthier note, 'Both the zombi of the body and the zombi of the soul include many sub-types classified either according to their origin or to the mode of zombification'; in addition, 'folktales do not always make clear distinctions between the two main types of zombi.' Ackermann and Gauthier's research suggests that expectations of finding zombis of the body—or, more to the point, zombis that correspond better to the popular American understanding of the zombie may often color the presentation of the zombi as it exists in Haitian belief, even in academic circles (Kee).

This is to say that the introduction of the Haitian *zonbi* as it is represented in not only Seabrook's narrative but also the Westernized zombie that we have come to know today, is an inherently reductionist take that stems from a cultural novelty. In other words, it is an almost fetishization of not only a culture but of a religion outside the core of any Western belief system. The big takeaway from *White Zombie* is its cultural significance and thus cultural implication which it prints itself. With virtually every piece of Western zombie narrative we know today, *White Zombie* is the axiom.

Romero's Flesh-Hungry Capitalists

Night of the Living Dead (NotLD) also has a simple plot and a runtime of one hour and 36 minutes. The film is drenched in a black-and-white filter, opening with siblings Barbara and Johnny putting a cross-shaped wreath on a grave. Within the first 10 minutes we are already in for a treat as we see our first slow-moving undead creature, limping toward Barbara (they are indeed "Coming to get you, Barbara"). From here the siblings are separated, Johnny is assumed dead, while Barbara makes her way to an abandoned farmhouse to shelter. Here she is met by our acting hero Ben (Duane Jones), who begins to fortify the farmhouse by grabbing tools and wood

planks from the house's interior. At this point, Barbara is in an almost catatonic state given the shock of losing her brother and the creature that she has just encountered. It is revealed more survivors have taken refuge in the cellar of said farmhouse. The ragtag team works together, and fights amongst themselves (particularly between Ben and Harry Cooper, the other would-be patriarch). There are tinges of the outside world and how this disaster unfolds through radio and television (à la Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds*). The cellar survivors begin the erosion of the farmhouse as Mr. and Mrs. Cooper's child (Karen) turns into a zombie. Thus begins the breakdown of the Edenic farmhouse, as it is compromised from the inside. Ben meets his fate of being shot by the raiding party (or the government and a sense of order) while Barbara's fate is never revealed within this installation. It is worth noting that in later installations of the intellectual property (via comic) Barbara is turned into a zombie.

Romero's quintessential entry into the evolution of our zombie, as seen in *NotLD*, acts as a cornerstone in the further reappropriation from the Voodoo zombies to not just an Americanized zombie, but a zombie acting as a critique of American society. Specifically, the relations shared from individual to individual, and how systems and bureaucracies that deem normalcy break down and become contingent on the further erosion of human interaction. This is the first iteration of the soulless husk that hungers for yes, you guessed it… *brrrraaaaaaaaiiiiins*—or more accurately, the flesh of their (ex) fellow human. In their piece "Zombies! They're Us!" Crooke points out "that Romero intended the zombie, in context, to be a sophisticated socio-moral critique of socio-political ills and of the state of humanity responsible for them. For example, *Night of the Living Dead* consciously critiques individualism and its disintegration of society, the family unit, and the ability to communicate" (Crooke).

The explanation for the outbreak in *NotLD* is important as the zombies spawned from the radiation fallout of a space probe, which we can surmise based on the television and radio broadcasts being a link to the world outside the sanctuary of the farmhouse. Riffing off "radiation", one can come to the word nuclear. Given the time this was released (1968) and the connotations this can have for the nuclear family of the 50s (which had heightened senses of consumerism, religion, and the American dream) there can be an inference of the nuclear family and thus its breakdown that takes place. However normalcy returns throughout the completion of the film.

We will continue to come back to this breakdown of society and humanity—and further this "disintegration" of not only the slim fabric in which we all live but of the fragile relationships within humanity and society alike. Be these relations small or large—there is a sense of interconnectivity that we all operate on. This genre begs to question the foundation that all humanity is based on. This breakdown of preestablished promises of a good life through American values is most robustly represented through the brutalization committed to and against a human once full of life and therefore the sonder that said individual life begs. I see this largely as the breakdown of the promised *American Dream* of yesteryears—by that very same thing, the *American Dream*—achieved only through large interconnected systems that not only revolve around capitalism but that are molded by said system that promises these lofty ideals, goals, and ways of life. The achievements attained by few—promised to all—are only delivered to those having the prerequisites, of course, being the ability to devour a fellow human. I jest but the point remains.

The protagonist (played by African American actor Duane Jones) is the only minority in the cast and is subsequently killed for being mistaken as a zombie by the raiding party (we can

view the raiding party as the order to the chaos of the outbreak.) With normalcy taking hold yet again in the form of systemic order and governance, the chaos is snuffed out rather quickly compared to other films within this apocalyptic genre. This Romero film is significant to the evolution of the zombie because of the uprooting and relocation of the undead from their Haitian roots (and thus Voodoo implication) to Western society. It also holds significance because this is the first instance in cinema where we see a more modern zombie that eats flesh. The symbolism becomes rich and plentiful. Part of my purpose with this paper is to focus on the capitalist critique—a play on a dog-eat-dog world, or human-eat-human rather. I will also cover a psychoanalytic, gendered, and racial reading of not only weaponry but also religious iconography that we see represented by both the burial rituals and theologically potent symbols such as the cross which the whole film is contextualized. Fire also becomes a theologically rich symbol, prevalent in *NotLD* and *28 Days Later*.

From the psychoanalytic perspective, let us look at the phallic objects of power that both Barbara and Ben access during the fortifications and defenses of the farmhouse. We first see Ben wielding a tire iron as a weapon: phallic, masculine, and relevant to traditional gender roles (which at the time are still operating on the binary). We can deduce that Ben is a strong masculine character who wields a traditionally masculine object. Thus, the gendered connotations are that Ben not only abides by the traditional expectations of gender but that the symbol of power reinforces the effect that the reappropriated tire iron has. It transcends its intended purpose within its traditionally masculine predisposition from a tool that one can work on a car with, to a tool that decimates the skulls of the undead. Juxtapose this object with Barbara's initial weapon (a butcher knife) and we see a commentary on gender roles. One tool is meant for the traditionally masculine feat of working with automobiles (albeit reappropriated in

this context), all the while Barbara retains her traditional gender role as her weapon originates from the kitchen (a reductive take on feminine power). Along with commentary on gender identity, we must consider the hero of the story represented as a Black man. Two marginalized groups take over as protagonists in this narrative. The Romero zombie flick is no stranger to the Black hero, but often we will find that it empowers marginalized groups.

Going further with these psychoanalytic objects of power, Ben goes from tire iron to hammer (needed to fortify the farmhouse), to the ultimate form of psychoanalytic masculinity, the rifle. This very rifle acts as a totem of the patriarch. How Mr. Cooper covets said totem reinforces this idea, as the two are at odds in the power struggle of survival tactics. The farmhouse and thus the patriarchal force is dictated by who possesses the ultimate object of power. It is also important to consider the racial implications for Ben; especially side-by-side with Mr. Cooper. This power struggle put next to the era of the civil rights movement (which takes place from 1954 to 1968) illustrates the racial tensions, and how that is reflected but also critiqued in Romero's first zombie film.

Ben is the established hero of the story: a powerful entity who retains the helm of the ship (or the farmhouse in this case). He is unwavering and always sure in his decisions, only to be challenged by Mr. Cooper later in the film. One of the reasons Ben becomes such an interesting protagonist and hero is his sense of marginalized identity. While he maintains his status of de facto hero throughout the film (until his murder) he still operates true to Romero's thumbprint of marginalized identities. These identities often make huge impacts on the survivability of a situation. Therefore, Ben transcends the racial prejudice of the time and becomes what everyone needs. How does Ben's racial identity relate to the zombie genre compared to *White Zombie*? It can be seen as a progression into what the genre represents today. A necessary reappropriation

that recontextualizes the defunct narrative of *White Zombie*, into progression. While yes, the gender binary represented throughout the film is proven wanting, the racial progression from *White Zombie* to *NotLD,* takes not just strides, but leaps and bounds.

28 Days Later and the Rapid Evolution of Genre, Zombie, and the Dissolution of Society

With this narrative, we have a runtime of one hour and 53 minutes. It could be described as a "hero's journey," where the group of protagonists begin in one place, only to head to the mecca of humanity, or promised humanity rather, as per a radio message. We see this commonly used trope throughout Romero's films—a TV message—a radio broadcast—a beacon of hope, normalcy, and humanity. *28 Days Later* addresses the cause of the widespread zombification, explicitly and immediately, compared to past installments of the genre. A primate research lab is overrun by eco-terrorists, whose goal is to free primates that have incidentally been administered the "Rage virus." Some posit this could be a mutated form of the rabies virus, but regardless, these chimps have it in them and are subsequently freed by an extremist group. From here the virus spreads extraordinarily fast. Compared to the films mentioned above, the decimation takes a tenfold pace. Hence the title, it merely takes 28 days for the entire world systems—be it capitalist, imperialist, bureaucratic—all established laws of humanity—all the large moving cogs are put to a halt, by the massive implosion that takes place due to this overtly virulent pathogen.

From this launching point, we find Jim (Cillian Murphy) coming out of a coma only to find a desolate zombified world. There are parallels to be made between this premise and the graphic novel *The Walking Dead* (which was released in 2003, merely one year after *28 Days Later*), where the main character also comes out of a coma at the start of the series. Jim

encounters two survivors of the freshly desolate new world, who take him under their wings. Selena (Naomi Harris) and Mark (Noah Huntley) act as his sherpas in this afterbirth-fresh world, only for Mark to be bitten and thus infected. From here Selena does not hesitate to kill Mark—or what Mark used to be—immediately so. Selena, knowing that it takes mere seconds for one to turn from human to a Rage virus-riddled infected, eliminates the threat immediately, with a machete no less. Jim and Selena go on to follow Christmas lights hung on a balcony of a high-rise apartment—a beacon of human life (interesting to think of Christmas when considering the religious connotations). The apartment is inhabited by a father and a daughter: Frank (Brendan Glisan) and Hannah (Megan Burns).

The journey begins here: the father-daughter party must make its way to a safe zone as announced through a radio broadcast. There are moments of extreme palate cleansing that occur while they are in the countryside—rural—uninhabited—devoid of other humans (I'm hesitant to say, fellow humans). When they do finally reach the checkpoint, Frank is infected by a drop of tainted blood to the eye, where he is consequently killed by the military that has taken that outpost as a beacon. The radio signal was put in place by said military unit (or what's left of it) in their attempt to collect women survivors for the "troop's morale." The climax comes when Jim is set to be executed by the military troop yet survives and goes on to save Selena and Hannah. The film ends with Selena, Hannah, and Jim all living a seemingly happy life in a little rural cottage, where they signal a plane for contact.

28 Days Later, could be seen as an othering of humans and nature, where the virus and thus its original hosts represent nature. The "Rage virus" is manufactured and subsequently released, a nod to human's need to control and tame the natural world—a feat that is doomed to fail. This sense of othering is blatant when comparing zombies to humans—them, and us—the

natural and the synthesized. But beyond that, we have an othering of the individual to the collective; a problem that is explored when considering the military unit as a leftover sense of normalcy and governance, and the wellbeing of the protagonists. This is a facet to consider within the breakdown of society and thus humanity we see within *NotLD. 28 Days Later* is a cornerstone of the virus narrative and is regarded amongst zombie scholars as one of the first films that takes the explanation of zombification in a scarily real scientific direction. Doubly so when one considers the recent pandemic that the entire world has endured and continues to see the effects of. There are elements of humans acting in discordance with nature (as the virus is said to be humanmade or at least human-controlled in the film). This still fits in with the tangent of the post-nuclear family and can be seen as the culmination of imperialists' ways and a consequence of industrialization: where humans try to control nature only for nature to bite back (pun intended). This also illustrates the apocalypse as humankind's own doing. The culmination of the evolution of the zombie where responsibility for a post-industrialized world is to be accounted for.

Why does this newer—more real— iteration of the zombie seem to appeal to such a wide modern audience? Echeverría-Domingo posits in their piece "28 Days Later and the Digital Epidemic" that:

> It is precisely Boyle's addition of the virus—and the genre's subsequent embracing of it—that provides zombies with significations that resonate with contemporary audiences. The virus, both in its symptomatic bodily manifestation (the diseased zombie) and its invisible nature (the microscopic pathogen), connects the gore physicality (…) with the intangible quality of our new virtual reality (Echeverría-Domingo).

Echeverría-Domingo goes on to tie in the virtual virality of contemporary society with the literal virality of the pathogen within *28 Days Later.* These newer, faster, stronger, scarier zombies reflect the world in terms of its pacing, the interconnectedness of systems, and the viral nature beckoned by technology. One might think in a post-COVID world, general audiences would be turned off from this genre, however, apocalyptic fantasy is rife within the hivemind. In a world filled with apathy, a workforce without proper compensation in tandem with rising prices of groceries, rent, and virtually every facet of living—the apocalyptic fantasy acts as a form of escapism. I remember when *The Walking Dead* aired for the first time on Halloween back in 2010. That feeling of isolation that Rick must have had waking up from his coma—it was visceral—it left a little pit in your stomach. There are no laws, no societal expectations, no people—well, not people exactly—but even that came with a sense of fantasy—a world with no interconnected systems—it was something primal.

Reverting to Jim's coma, we see a brief montage of the virus' effects on society including a barren landscape of the Houses of Parliament. After Jim wakes, he sees a nice cool refreshing Pepsi lying next to dilapidated vending machines sitting atop a slurry of rotten slop: expired food and beverages from said vending machines. He guzzles the syrupy elixir from the dented can. We even see a return of Pepsi later in the film! "Pepsi or Lilt?" The quote represents the classic illusion of choice in a modern consumerist market. It is reappropriated to where autonomy is reduced to the decision that allows one's survival, instead of which product is preferred. It's a little tongue-in-cheek jab that makes the concept of illusion of choice, laughable and defunct. The branding almost seems too intentional—is it a Pepsi advertisement, or a commentary on a doomed world post-industrialization and the far-reaching effects and consequences of capitalism?

To continue this critique of capitalism the film may offer; there is a lovely scene once the heroes and protagonists have begun their journey. They find an untouched supermarket; with bright fluorescent lights that offer a piercing juxtaposition of much of the film's filter. There are untainted products on the shelves, all for their taking. No currency is needed—the very antithesis of a capitalist system (albeit utopian). The music that plays during this shopping montage is jovial (with hints of melancholy or nostalgia), like a pop song if it was elevator music. This scene is one of the very few that displays the group's genuine happiness. Between the chaos, these palate cleansers are necessary when the viewer is being bombarded by apocalyptic themes of death, brutalization, and the end of the world. Let's also not forget another quintessential Romero film*, Dawn of the Dead* (1978), which takes place inside a shopping mall. In the remake (2004), we see this commentary on consumerism in yet another iconic montage, where the systems fail, and the palate cleanse is to consume without repercussion (much like a zombie?).

With Jim's isolation, there is the same sense of gut butterflies as with Rick Grimes on Halloween night all those years ago. The shots used are comprised of several canted angles. Oftentimes they are used to bring about a sense of unease, or disorientation in the viewer. Several shots look like they could be out of a Hitchcock film. They fit right in with Boyle's cinema. The themes and motifs within the score are reminiscent of *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), yet another motion picture that feels like a punch in the stomach to watch. The haunting strings set the tone of the desolate world. From Barbara's first encounter with a zombie in the cemetery, we have Jim's first interaction which happens not only in a church but with a zombified priest. Within the film, God is indeed dead, and the wall tagged with "the end is extremely fucking nigh" seems to be an understatement. Critically viewing the church scene, we could deduce that the church might represent another system or institution that has been eroded by the virality of (to localize a

point of this paper) the inherent greed that systems such as capitalism and imperialism, and their effect on the breakdown of society from the microscopic level (individual to individual, pathogen, germ, etc.) to the macroscopic (systems, institutions, the interconnected inevitability of the worlds fragile status quo).

After the church scene, is where Jim is rescued. The weapon used to save Jim from the zombies is a Molotov cocktail. We also see the potent symbol of fire in *NotLD.* The broadcasts exclaim that fire or cremation is one of the surefire (pun intended) ways to destroy the creatures. Fire could be interpreted a million ways, however, the significance of this throughline from film to film lies in burial rituals and thus the religious connotations of properly disposing of the dead. There are two factors I'd like to bring up regarding religious burial traditions: 1) In the Judeo-Christian faith, cremation has fallen in and out of favor depending on the time and place, due to the possibility of the body resurrecting—much like Christ within the faith's beliefs. 2) Hinduism is the religion that is most associated with cremation, as their beliefs see the body as a vessel. After one dies, that vessel has no function or purpose anymore.

With both of these religious practices in mind, is Boyle's zombie resurrected as a sort of antichrist figure where Jim could be the Christlike figure (as he is also resurrected from his coma), or do we follow the throughline of contemporaneous virality and the interconnectedness and immediacy the modern age not only requires but begs? Considering the film as a self-contained entity, the religious symbolism and iconography are too prevalent to ignore. At least this is what contextualizes the rest of the film.

Considering Romero's Black hero that is prevalent throughout his trilogy, it would be remiss not to mention Selena as the Black hero of Boyle's film. While she is powerful and self-sufficient (as she is the one who initially saves Jim) she also falls victim to the reductive

traditional gendered role of a damsel in distress. Because she falls in this more traditional gender role, can we consider this a commentary on the prescribed role, or does it reinforce said role? We must also consider the soldiers within the film that have set up what is essentially a trap for any poor unassuming soul that reaches their checkpoint. These soldiers represent normalcy, governance, and the old ways, veiled through a false beacon of hope. They are the government, they are the system, they are the order. They are also ultra-adulterated. A team of bumbling idiots led by a sociopath, who has a goal of collecting women for sexual gratification. Yet further commentary on corrupt systems that we all currently interact with and are a part of.

There's a scene where the military cook is preparing a feast for the new guests and every piece of food comes from cans, except for the eggs. One of the soldiers remarks: "The eggs are off," both matter-of-factly and disgustedly. The only palatable food source is finite and from cans. This is to suggest that this way of life—how this small leftover military is living, is indeed not sustainable. Thinking about order and chaos and how all these symbols within Boyle's film can be superimposed over today's society as a commentary of unsustainable practice which is spawned by systems in place in tandem with the ever-fragile interconnectedness of it all; our fragmented military represents the doomed-to-fail nature of bureaucracy—a system which every major government is molded by. There are light years of red tape in every direction; this overturning of normalcy was merely a matter of time, based on the unsustainability of the overly complex balancing act: modernity. This sentiment is directly stated by a soldier at the dinner table. Pessimistic and broken the soldier says "If you look at the whole life of the planet…we, you know… man has only been around for a few blinks of an eye. So, if the infection wipes us out, that is a return to normality."

Conclusions

What about the zombie today? The last film we discussed came out in 2002, what about different types of zombies and different cultural outputs of zombie narratives today? An important factor as stated prior, is both temporal and spatial relevance—how a tapestry colors a reading of a zombie narrative. It is not just tropes and archetypes in this medium that are rapidly evolving, but the very genre itself. We now have a further evolution of a genre as the "Zomedy" into the culture, with films such as *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), or *Zombieland* (2009). These drastic evolutions all stem from the reappropriation of an off-color rendition of a foreign culture. Today it has such a wealth of possible discourse and conversation that colors culture and current events. There is an infinite well of material to superimpose on top of the world with the zombie narrative alone. We see further evolutions from the viral zombie to the fungal zombie with *The Last of Us* (2013), which started as a video game and was later adapted into a show. We have genre, modality, narrative, and trope: all these things that are spawned by the genre as an ever-changing and continuously forming reflection based on the society that creates and interprets these stories.

The zombie genre is not simple; it is not cut and dry. It comes from a complex multidisciplinary history that begs us to dig further into truth. The cinematic zombie origins require peeling back the complex layers—it requires one's due diligence in realizing axioms and thus where current zombie media is spawned from. Critically consuming media becomes a necessity when considering any narrative that has made its way into the common zeitgeist. From the Haitian Voodoo roots to the flesh-hungry capitalist critique, to the culmination and thus the spawning of the zombie renaissance—I must remember the zombie from its cultural origins, but

also remember, that reappropriation of narrative will never stop taking place. When a narrative is released into the world, it will forever have echoes based on the audience.

Barthes' theory within "The Death of the Author" can be a beautiful thing, with a given stipulation and thus responsibility in interpretation. With this theoretical viewpoint, art, literature, film, and music become a part of a larger conversation once it is released into the wild. The re-creation of text or work is a conversation that the interpreter has with a creator. It is inherently and inescapably subjective—although shared subjectivities can exist within these re-creations of texts or works. The reappropriation of a zombie iteration seen through the years defines what subclass of the genre it exists in. Some iterations take and borrow from prior incarnations; all to culminate with shared themes and ideologies that this rich memetic symbol spawns. The zombie, and any mythic archetype, is an ever-dynamic creature that will never stop evolving based on the environmental pressures that dictate how its DNA mutates.

Annotated Bibliography

Nugent, Connie, et al. “The undead in culture and science.” *Baylor University Medical Center Proceedings*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2018, pp. 244–249, https://doi.org/10.1080/08998280.2018.1441216.

Within this journal, Nugent takes the reader through the origins of the undead across mediums beyond just film. It explores scientific explanations of the cultural phenomenon of zombies as spawned by the voodoo religion and the undead throughout mythology and folklore. The article goes on to exclaim the importance of zombification as culturally, religiously, and scientifically significant. This article helps tie in the broad significance of zombies across different disciplines and provides scientific explanations for the zombification process. The fact that this article is from a medical journal potentially adds an ethos aspect to the zombie, as well as planting it more realistically.

Crooke, James R. "Zombies! "They're Us!"." *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, vol. 30 no. 3, 2018, p. 165-177. *Project MUSE* muse.jhu.edu/article/716140.

While there is a heavy dose of theological analysis in this article, it touches on a giant cornerstone in the zombie genre: the flesh-eating type is spawned through Romero’s first film. Crooke opens their argument with the statement that the use of zombies in pop culture “intends to ‘hone our senses’ to what is true, evil, and ugly—that is, to human aberrations by externalizing, magnifying, reflecting, and signposting true humanness or lack thereof.” This line of thinking goes hand in hand with the commentary on the Romero zombie being a memetic representation of a capitalist society. The “human” (or

inhuman) “depravity” that is reflected by the symbol of the zombie would be interesting to read into the cause of the outbreak. In all three films the zombification is essentially caused by human doing, the capitalist critique would be interesting when juxtaposed with humanity's role in the spreading of zombies for each instance.

Echeverría-Domingo, Julia. "The Rise of the Outbreak Genre: *28 Days Later* and the Digital Epidemic." *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, vol. 44 no. 3, 2018, p. 49-66. *Project MUSE*, https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2018.0008.

This article plants the importance of *28 Days Later* as one of the forerunners for the virus narrative, using the term “zombie renaissance.” It also exclaims that zombies are essentially “repositories of circumstantial anxieties.” Echeverría acknowledges the fact that there are countless readings of the creature throughout the years, and argues that it is the “addition of the virus—and the genre's subsequent embracing of it—that provides zombies with significations that resonate with contemporary audiences.” The article is a good transition point from working with less contemporary films such as *Night of the Living Dead* and *White Zombie*.

Halperin, Victor, director. *White Zombie*.

This film kicks off the beginning of zombies in Western culture and film in general. Today it is regarded as problematic considering the depictions of other cultures throughout the film, however, it anchors the evolution from *zonbi* to zombie and sets the premise for the undead in modern cinema. While I still need to sit down and watch the

film, I'm not sure how much time I want to spend analyzing something that is more relevant historically and contextually from a sort of proto zombie perspective.

Romero, George A., director. *Night of the Living Dead*. 1968.

This Romero film is significant because of the uprooting and relocation of the undead to the West. It also holds significance because this is the first instance in film where we see a more traditional zombie that eats flesh. The symbolism becomes rich and plentiful. To my purposes I would like to focus in on the capitalist critique—a play on a dog-eat-dog world, or man-eat-man rather. The explanation for the outbreak here is important as the zombies were spawned from radiation fallout of a space probe. Riffing off radiation, one can come to phrase nuclear. Given the time this was released (1968) and the play off the nuclear family of the 50s, which had heightened senses of consumerism and religion, I will attempt to show this throughline from the Westernized version of the voodoo *zonbi* with ties to servitude, or slavery as McCallister might say, bridge the gap to continue on this imperialist critique and how the zombie throughout the years represents the American empire and potential fall of it.

Boyle, Danny, director. *28 Days Later*. 2002.

28 Days Later is a cornerstone of the virus narrative and is talked about amongst zombie scholars as one of the first films that takes the explanation of zombification in a more scientific direction. The film is from the U.K. (where it takes place) so this could be a hurdle in the throughline I've discussed. There are elements of nature and man acting in discordance with nature (as the virus is said to be manmade in the film). This still fits in with the tangent of the post-nuclear family and can be seen as the culmination of Western

imperialists' ways and a consequence of industrialization. Man trying to control nature only for nature to bite back. This also would be a way of incorporating the apocalypse as mankind's own doing and thus cap off the thesis and the evolution of the zombie as a reflection of humanity stemming from the U.S. history of slavery to the post-industrial age, to the downfall of our delicate systems in place.

"U.S. Invasion and Occupation of Haiti, 1915–34." *U.S. Department of State*, U.S. Department of State, history.state.gov/milestones/1914-1920/haiti#:~:text=Following%20the%20assassination%20of%20the,This%20occupation%20continued%20until%201934. Accessed 19 May 2024.

This is a critical historical context of *White Zombie.* The entirety of the cinematic zombie is built upon this complex history and Seabrooks's reappropriation of source material (the Voodoo religion). Starting with the axiom of the modern zombie, I felt to double down on historical context as this foundation influenced everything zombie film that came out after it. Again, I will use this article as setting the base, for the cinematic zombie that we have all come to grow and love.

Gershon, L. (2022, October 31). *Colonialism birthed the zombie movie* . JSTOR Daily. https://daily.jstor.org/colonialism-birthed-the-zombie-movie/

This article was a great jumping-off point for the historical contextualization of *White Zombie.* It is succinct and to the point when tying together the colonial implications of the film coming from a time when the U.S. had occupied Haiti. It

also ties in with this concept of fetishization of foreign cultures used as a sort of shock and awe when being consumed by the West at the time. The intention in using this article is to tie together both racial and historical context of the spawning of the first incarnation of the cinematic zombie.