The Reanimation of the Zombie Genre

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The myth of the zombie is almost as old as humanity itself. For as long as we’ve been familiar with our own mortality, we’ve been inventing tales of our deceased brethren rising from the grave, horrifying and disgusting the living with their grotesque appearance. In “Epic of Gilgamesh,” the ancient Babylonian epic poem widely regarded as the world’s first great work of literature, the goddess Ishtar threatens to “bring up the dead to eat the living.”

But they’ve never just been about fear of death. Over millennia, zombies have been used to explore fears of everything from racism to excessive consumerism to nihilistic hedonism. In film, however, the power of the zombie seems to be flickering out.

However, the genre is finding new life on television, where it’s being taken far beyond its original roots.

The modern zombie seems to have its roots in nineteenth century Haitian folklore. There, zombies were believed to be mindless slaves reanimated by bokor, voodoo priests with the power of necromancy. The zombies were then used to perform menial labor. In this sense, the modern zombie was born of the horrors of Haitian colonialism, and served as a grim reminder of the cruel injustices suffered by Haitian slaves.

“Haitian slaves believed that dying would release them back to lan guinée, literally Guinea, or Africa in general, a kind of afterlife where they could be free,” explains Mike Mariani in an article for The Atlantic entitled, “From Haitian Slavery to ‘The Walking Dead’: The Forgotten History of the Zombie.” “Though suicide was common among slaves, those who took their own lives wouldn’t be allowed to return to lan guinée. Instead, they’d be condemned to skulk the Hispaniola plantations for eternity, an undead slave at once denied their own bodies and yet trapped inside them—a soulless zombie.”

The Haitian zombie myth first gained mainstream exposure in America with the release of the film “White Zombie” in 1932. In the movie, a wealthy Haitian plantation owner falls in love with an American woman who’s visiting Haiti to marry her fiancé. He enlists the help of a voodoo sorcerer, played by the legendary Bela Lugosi, to turn the woman into a zombie and make her his slave. The movie, like the original Haitian myth, serves as an allegory for suppression and exploitation of the Haitian slaves on the plantations.

It wasn’t until 1967, though, that the contemporary zombie— the shambling, virus-borne, flesh-eating one— became a pop cultural staple. The first feature film to introduce what we’ve come to recognize as the classic “zombie” was George A. Romero’s “Night of the Living Dead.” (Interestingly enough, though, the word “zombie” is never actually used in the film. Instead, the monsters are referred to as “ghouls.”)
The ghouls in “Night of the Living Dead,” like those in “White Zombie,” were also used allegorically, to reflect the American political climate of the 60’s. During that time, Americans were beginning to lose faith in their government and military (largely due to the utter catastrophe that was the Vietnam War), all while the threat of nuclear annihilation was hanging over their heads. In “Night,” we see those fears come to fruition when the government proves to be utterly powerless to combat the ghouls, and when the few survivors resort to bunkering themselves in their basement. The film also reflected inflamed race relations. George A. Romero purposely cast an African-American man as the protagonist, and he is ultimately rewarded for his heroism by being gunned down by the government at the end.

Ending Scene from Night of the Living Dead HERE. During the credits, we see a series of graphic, grisly photos of the film’s survivors shooting, stabbing and mutilating other humans in the name of survival.

For audiences at the time, “Night” hit dangerously close to home. “It was grim and unflinching, showing average citizens, played by average people, eating the arms and intestines of their fellow townsfolk,” describes Baffler columnist A.S. Hannah, in a piece entitled “Now Streaming: The Plague Years.” “Romero drove home this central point—that a zombie-infested America differed from the status quo only in degree, not in kind—by ending his film with realistic-looking fake news photos depicting his characters’ banal atrocities.”

Romero’s 1978 followup, “Dawn of the Dead,” was a gorier outing that reflected our disillusionment with consumer culture. The film takes place in a zombie-infested shopping mall, and features plenty of shots of the writhing, undead hordes wandering from shop to shop and pressing themselves up against the glass, just to hammer the point home. Romero’s cinematography showed this morbid spectacle as something a lot like a typical Black Friday.
“‘Dawn of the Dead’ is pretty much about the end of the baby boomers’ dream,” says Max Brooks, author of “The Zombie Survival Guide” and “World War Z.” “It’s about that sort of retreat when the 1960s turned into the 1970s and when idealism just turned into rampant consumerism. …I think it’s sort of like the anti- Easy Rider.”

What Romero realized is how versatile and malleable the figure of the zombie really is. Its existence as a not-quite-human abomination let it stand in for whomever we feared and resented at any historical moment.

The inextricable link between zombies and social commentary made the genre unexpectedly well-suited for comic horror. The 2004 film “Shaun of the Dead” is a prime example. “Shaun,” set in the UK, stars an irresponsible slacker with no ambition, who’s too wrapped up in his tedious daily routine to notice that the dead are rising all around him. In this sense, the film exists as a darkly humorous send-up of “lad culture,” a trend among British youth defined by hedonism, nihilism, and the lack of any clearly defined identity or purpose.
“His biggest concerns in life are his job, his nights at the pub, and his record collection,” describes Brice Haberger, in a review for Juneauempire.com. “It's not that he doesn't care about those around him, his girl and his mom. He's just too busy doing nothing to realize anything is wrong.”

From era to era, the zombie film has served as an encapsulation of contemporary sociopolitical trends, playing off the fears, concerns and struggles of its audience. But due to the way the international film market has changed, this kind of format isn’t quite as feasible anymore. Brooks explains that, due to the nature of the international market, film writers don’t have the liberty to write complex, nuanced dialogue and develop their characters fully.

“Two thirds of all of Hollywood’s profits come from overseas,” he says. “So, therefore, Hollywood movies have to have very simplistic dialogue, because that way it can be more easily translatable... the simplistic childish dialogue is more easily translated into Hindi or Russian or Mandarin Chinese.”

Because of this, zombies in film don’t embody the horror that they used to; if anything, the zombie apocalypse has been romanticized. Zombie films like “Warm Bodies” and “Zombieland” feature awkward, ineffectual protagonists who finally get the opportunity to be the hero and win the girl in the face of the living dead. In the early 2010s, says Hannah, “Nonthreatening zom-coms showed young viewers how the opposite sex was really not that scary, that being in a couple was still the most important thing, and that dystopias gave nerds an unprecedented chance to prove they could get the girl or boy.”

And while the social media-saturated millennial generation is just as ripe for satire as those before, film is no longer where it’s being explored. Contemporary zombie films that exist as little more than novelties, attracting audiences with bizarre comedic gimmicks. The twist in 2014’s “Zombeavers” is that the virus is spread by beavers, and in this year’s “Cooties,” starring Elijah Wood, the virus only affects elementary school children. The “Dead Snow” series gives
us Nazi zombies, which aren’t even a wholly original concept (sorry, “Dead Snow,” but Call of Duty 5 kind of beat you to the punch).

It seems that filmmakers have forgotten what made zombies so compelling in the first place. Instead of using the zombies to uncover horrifying truths about the ways we live, they’re using them to tell us exactly what we want to hear; namely, that a zombie apocalypse would be a thrilling adventure that ends with characters standing heroically above lifeless bodies, with a few tragic deaths sprinkled in to give the situation just the right amount of pathos.

Furthermore, zombie comedies have taken a turn into the brainless (pun intended). The message inadvertently conveyed in “Shaun of the Dead” was that zombies were inherently funny, and that the genre itself was ripe for mockery, hence the influx of mindless entries in the genre, like Cooties and “Zombeavers” (look! The zombies are beavers now!).

Brooks believes the zombie genre has become too profitable for its own good, prompting dozens of amateur filmmakers to try to capitalize on its popularity without understanding its original appeal.

“I think zombies are lucrative, and I think there’s a lot of people who would not have thought of zombies, who would not have come to them, if not for money,” he says. “That’s why a lot of people are doing it. [As] with any craze, there comes a point where people forget why they’re sort of crazy about something. And then they just think, ‘Well, that’s what other people like.’”

As a result, the zombie films of today are far more ephemeral. While “Dawn of the Dead” is an enduring classic in the horror genre, “Cooties” is unlikely to have anywhere near the same level of staying power. It’s a novelty, meant to be watched once, laughed at, and then forgotten.

There’s nothing wrong with a mindless zombie romp, and not every zombie film has to be an enduring period piece with complex sociopolitical underpinnings. But it seems like every generation has had a quintessential zombie piece to call their own. Shouldn’t millennials have theirs?

The answer, surprisingly, is that they do, but they’re watching it on a far smaller screen. With all the artificial restrictions on commercial filmmakers, zombie writers had no choice but to reanimate the genre in another medium; one undergoing its own rebirth.

And thus, AMC’s “The Walking Dead” rose from the depths, horrifying and delighting TV watchers everywhere. The first cable show in television history to rank #1 among the 18-49 aged demographic, the show has received high praise for its strong characterization, gripping plot and omnipresent suspense. It has drawn in legions of loyal fans, including those who weren’t previously fans of the zombie genre, and it’s taken it places it’s never been before. Unlike most of its notable predecessors, “Walking” doesn’t exist as a blistering critique of contemporary society. There’s social commentary, to be sure, but it’s broader and more timeless,
accommodating themes that aren’t particularly relevant to any specific generation. One large overarching theme in the show is its deconstruction of “rugged individualism.” Most characters who try to go it alone end up paying with their lives, and it is only through measured cooperation and division of labor that the humans continue to survive.

Rugged individualism has been endemic to American society since our country was founded. In fact, seven years before “Walking” aired, Max Brooks’ “Zombie Survival Guide” pointed out how foolhardy this conceit would be in a zombie apocalypse. “In Western - particularly American - culture, there is the myth of the individual superbeing. One man or woman, well-armed and highly skilled, with nerves of steel, can conquer the world. In truth, anyone believing this should simply strip naked, holler for the undead, then lie down on a silver platter.”

“Walking,” with its long-form serial drama format, has the ability to show viewers the detailed consequences of following this philosophy to its logical conclusion.

Independent zombie filmmaker Nathan Sorrentino adds that the medium of television allows “Walking” writers more creative freedom. “TV has the extended character development,” he says. “I’m really heavily into film, but over the past few years, I’ve realized that were I ever offered the opportunity to do either film or TV, I think I’d actually lean towards television.”

Due to the nature of its format as an ongoing serial drama, “Walking” has the liberty to explore universal truths of the human condition, showing us is that the compelling nature of the zombie doesn’t have to rely on its cultural immediacy the way “Night of the Living Dead” did. Take, for instance, how the show treats the subject of race. “Night” ended with a sharp jab at
racial prejudice in America, with the fate of the black protagonist suggesting that even in an apocalyptic scenario, white supremacy will still reign supreme. By contrast, “Walking” takes place in a classless post-racial utopia where individuals are judged by the quality of their survival skills, and not by the color of their skin.

This is best exemplified by the show’s main protagonist, Rick Grimes, an ex-police officer from the Deep South who serves as the defacto leader (and often the moral epicenter) of his team. In an era of police brutality and heightened racial tension, it seems unthinkable to appoint a grizzled white southern sheriff as the benevolent (albeit flawed) leader of a group of survivors, especially one that includes several people of color. But Grimes has all of his authority and status stripped away when the zombies (called “walkers” on the show) attack, and he has to earn the privilege of leading the team by showing exactly what he’s capable of. Grimes isn’t valued for who he was, but for who he is. Rarely have we seen a popular zombie work that so blithely disregards modern prejudices.

But the malleable nature of the zombie is precisely why “Walking” has the liberty to do so. Zombies, in and of themselves, are powerful figures. They’re the shambling remains of all the people we knew and loved, with all of the traits that made them who they are removed, rendering them a homogenous, mindless drove of feeders. That, and one bite or scratch is all that separates us from becoming one of them.

In a 2000 documentary entitled “The American Nightmare,” George A. Romero himself sums it up beautifully. “What are zombies? Us. We know we’re gonna die, right? So we’re the living dead.”

Brooks points out that, because they’re so inherently compelling, they can be used to tell any kind of story you want. “Zombies are anything,” he says. “If you want to do just a simple, dumb adventure story, you can do that. But if you want to make something deep that says something about where you are, then you can do that too.”

But what “Walking” has shown us is that the zombie is capable of showing us not only who we are, but who we can be. Carol Peletier, a member of the original Atlanta faction put together by Grimes, is empowered in the walker apocalypse. She becomes an asset to the team by increasing her proficiency with weapons and her knowledge of first aid, and works up the courage to stand up to her abusive husband, Ed. Furthermore, she loses both Ed and her daughter, Sophia, but as the episodes go on, forms a deep familial bond with the other survivors.

But not everyone changes in a positive way. The monstrous Philip Blake, also known as The Governor, becomes a violent, power-crazed sociopath who massacres most of his camp by the end of Season 3. Unlike Carol, he doesn’t appear until that season, and most of his backstory is revealed via exposition.

The format of television facilitates both forms of development, allowing watchers to observe changes that happen over the long term and the short term. The Walking Dead gives its
viewers the ability to see a zombie apocalypse affect the lives of our protagonists over months, even years, while getting snapshots of the lives of others (like that of the Governor) along the way. Never before have audiences received such a detailed, complex and ever-evolving portrait of a zombie apocalypse.

From episode to episode, viewers can continually ask themselves how they would fit into the portrait. Would they be driven to sociopathy, like the Governor? Would they fight doggedly to retain their moral compass, like Rick Grimes? Would they adapt and become more resilient, like Carol?

Plenty of horror fans have wondered, at one point or another, how well they would fare in a real zombie apocalypse. Now, thanks to the continuing development and world building of “The Walking Dead,” they can imagine it vividly.

And regardless of what they see themselves doing, they can take solace in the fact that, in the eyes of Grimes, nobody is irredeemable. “We’ve all done the worst kinds of things just to stay alive,” he says. “But we can still come back. We’re not too far gone. We get to come back.”