ZOMBIFIED: AMERICA HAS BEEN BITTEN!

ZOMBIE FILMS IN 21ST CENTURY AMERICA

by

Emily A. Mendez

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Departmental Honors in
the Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

May 3, 2013

ZOMBIFIED: AMERICA HAS BEEN BITTEN!

ZOMBIE FILMS IN 21ST CENTURY AMERICA

Project Approved:

Tricia Jenkins, Ph.D.
Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media
(Supervising Professor)

Joan McGettigan, Ph.D.
Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media

Ann George, Ph.D.
Department of English

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Tricia Jenkins, Dr. Joan McGettigan, and Dr. Ann George for their constant support during this project. I know they learned more about zombies than they ever wished to know, but this journey would not have been the same without them. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Jenkins for viewing each of the zombie films I watched during the research for this project, representing her dedication to this project despite all the blood, gore, and moans. Lastly, I cannot have an acknowledgement page for a zombie paper without thanking George A. Romero for his substantial contribution to the zombie subgenre. Without it, zombies would not be what they are today, and I do indeed love the flesh-eating, fear-inducing creatures they have become.

INTRODUCTION

Zombies: they moan, they groan, they shamble, and they eat brains. This is the generic idea of the 21st century zombies that have staggered into the spotlight of many horror films. On the surface, these creatures are non-dimensional and static; they are infected, doomed in their deadened state. However, a closer look at this horror subgenre reveals that zombies have evolved significantly since their integration into American cinema in 1932. Over the past 80 years, the decaying creatures have transformed from slow-moving, robotic slaves to swift, bloodthirsty fiends. Despite a brief decline in zombie film production during the 1990s, zombie movies have remained a staple of American cinema throughout the years. In fact, in the early 2000s, zombie films encountered a massive spike in production, further integrating zombies into American mainstream culture. From movies to television to zombified gatherings and events, zombies now seem to be everywhere. This resurgence calls for a look into American consciousness—what is it about these undead creatures that resonates so clearly with 21st century Americans?

Naturally, zombie films are more than escapist entertainment. Horror movies inherently carry a certain dark voyeuristic pleasure for audiences, but they also reflect specific cultural anxieties and fears that people identify and connect with. Sometimes this heightens the terror for audiences as the horror portrayed reflects certain fears within their own reality. Thus, the surge of zombie production in the early 2000s indicates that Americans have once again discovered something relatable within the zombie film. 21st century America is a place where people are obsessed with their technology, their bodies, and their security, making it the perfect breeding ground for the zombie narrative to get

under the skin of its viewers as it ravages both their post 9/11 anxieties and their deepest technological, biological, and societal fears. This essay will briefly examine the evolution of zombie films and then more thoroughly focus on the zombie resurgence of the 21st century, highlighting the cultural fears and anxieties of Americans that zombie movies have so effectively taken hold of.

THE ZOMBIE EVOLUTION

Over the past 80 years, zombie productions have risen, died, and risen again. This resilience of the zombie subgenre effectively mirrors the durability of the undead. In fact, zombie movies have successfully developed and evolved through the four stages of genre established by film theorists Christian Metz and Henri Focillon. The first stage, or the *experimental* (sometimes called *developmental*) stage, denotes the period of time when filmmakers attempt to establish specific conventions for a genre. Following this, the second or *classical* stage is when the conventions from the experimental stage are firmly established within the genre. Third is the *parodic* stage, which satirizes the established conventions, and fourth is the *revisionist* stage, which reevaluates the classical set of conventions and deploys them in a new, refined way (Metz and Focillon). The evolution of the zombie film is best described by following the development of these four stages.

In his book *American Zombie Gothic*, Kyle William Bishop utilizes a chart outlining the frequency of zombie film production by year (Figure 1.1). In this chart, he has compiled the work of three different scholars to create a rough estimate of the number of zombie movies produced from 1932 to 2008. This chart is useful because it visually expresses zombie production chronologically and, thus, highly emphasizes the wanes and peaks of the zombie subgenre. Bishop has also recorded his interpretation of

the four peaks of genre development for zombie movies (Figure 1.1). However, it is important to note that Bishop fails to clarify the specific time spans of the genre stages. For instance, despite his notation that the classical peak did not occur until the early 1980s, I believe that the classical stage of zombie films actually began back in 1968 with the release of *Night of the Living Dead.* This is because *Night*'s zombies are the creatures that most zombie movies have come to reflect, adapt, or parody. Until this time, zombie movies remained experimental in their approach. Still, the earlier films are important to view as strong precursors to the zombie subgenre's evolution.

Frequency of Zombie Film Production by Year

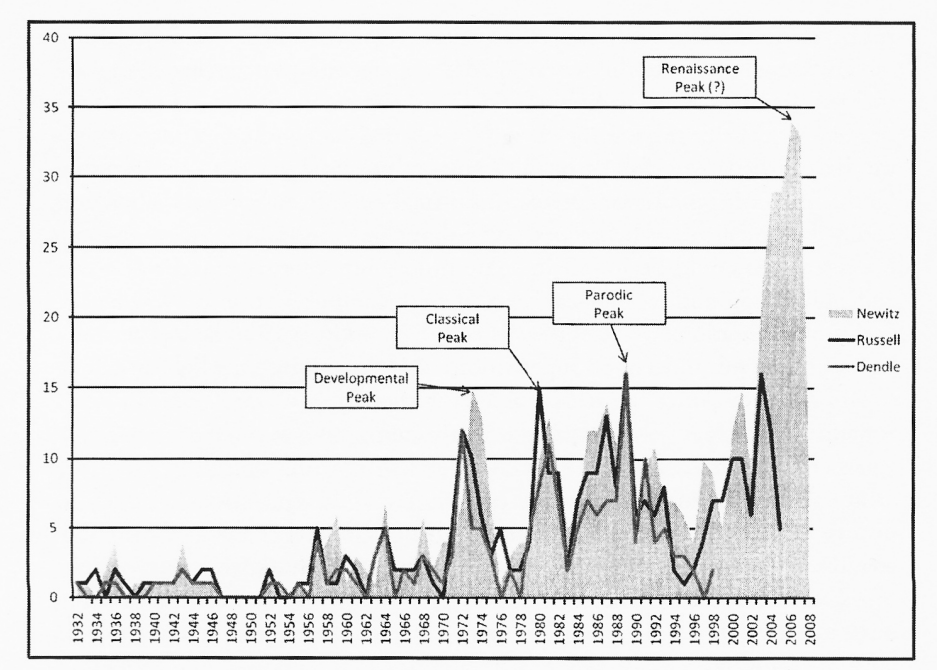

Figure 1.1 "Frequency of Zombie Film Production by Year" from Bishop (14)

In 1932, *White Zombie* introduced the original zombie into film history. The movie opens with distinct marching sounds and tribal music, foreshadowing the robotic yet ceremonial nature of the zombies in the film—zombies barely reminiscent of the modern day zombie. The movie begins with a couple, Madeline Short and Neil Parker, being driven through a small town in order to visit their friend, Charles Beaumont.

During the drive, they encounter a mysterious man, Murder Legendre, who is accompanied by a horde of men. At the sight of these men, the driver screams, "Zombie!" and quickly leaves the scene. When Neil confronts him about his odd behavior toward these men, the driver explains, "They are not men, monsieur, they are dead bodies. Zombies, the living dead. Corpses that are taken from the grave." The driver soon adds that these men are forced to work at Legendre's sugar mill. Using voodoo magic, Murder Legendre controls the corpses to complete his every will. They walk slowly and with blank expressions. Their clothes are not matted like contemporary zombies nor are their bodies decomposing. Instead, the "zombies" appear and act as human robots. This is emphasized in a scene at Legendre's sugar mill when one of the zombie workers falls into a spinning wheel and is crushed while the other workers continue without a second glance. In his essay "The Evolution of the Zombie," Shawn McInstosh notes that *White Zombie*'s storyline directly corresponds with Haitian folklore, which has a fascination with possession (2). In fact, the zombies in *White Zombie* are "spirit zombies," beings that are controlled by a *bokor*, or voodoo priest (McIntosh 3). These zombies have ingested poison created by an evil shaman—a poison that kills the soul but not the body, leaving an undead being that is easily controlled by its master. In *White Zombie*'s case, Legendre is the bokor who controls the undead. Film analyst Michael Richardson notes that spirit zombies spawn from the idea of slavery (123). The corpses are literal slaves. Because of this, an underlying sympathy is felt toward these zombies. They are not the true evil. Legendre is. By the end of the film, *he* is the evil mastermind that the protagonists must defeat.

After the release of *White Zombie*, zombie movies continued to deal with this theme of enslavement. In the 1930s and 1940s, movies such as *Ouanga* (1936), *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943), and *Voodoo Man* (1944) featured zombies that were controlled by a master (McIntosh 5). In the 1950s and 1960s, however, the evil shamans became less prominent as aliens began to step into the role of reanimating the dead, which is seen in both *Invisible Invaders* (1959) and *The Earth Dies Screaming* (1964) (Bishop 13). It was not until 1966 that zombies experienced a substantial cinematic change. In *The Plague of the Zombies* (1966), the zombies were still controlled by a master, but there was a major difference from previous zombie films: the zombies were visibly decaying. Before this, the zombies were known as undead beings, but they had only been shabbily dressed and slow moving (McIntosh 8). *The Plague* had finally visually emphasized their death, paving the way for the next (and most substantial) step in zombie history. The film zombie was finally ready to break free of his chains.

The idea of zombies as a secondary evil was not greatly refuted until 1968 when George A. Romero released *Night of the Living Dead*. In this film, Romero introduced zombies as the primary evil and subsequently ushered in the classical stage of zombie movies. Although the zombies in *Night* remain human in form, they are no longer men. Instead they are creatures of the night, driven by the sole desire to feed on the living. Romero had finally given the audience a reason to fear zombies. There was no further use for a bokor. Instead, these creatures functioned independently through the impulse to feed. Because of this, audiences did not sympathize with zombies as they did in *White Zombie*. Instead of being created by an evil shaman, the zombies in *Night* are created by the radiation of a fallen satellite. Because of this outbreak, people in the film are told to seek

shelter in churches, schools, and government buildings. The protagonists of the film, however, find refuge in an abandoned farmhouse. These characters are a mix of strangers that had never met before the attack. Still, they board up the windows and grab any makeshift weapon they can find to fight the zombies. Thus, the modern zombie narrative was formed: A small group of strangers teams up to fight mindless, flesh-eating creatures created from some mysterious irregularity, and they will fight until they are bitten, eaten, or victorious. With this new approach toward the zombie narrative, *Night* was extremely popular at the time of its release. Despite negative critic reviews, audiences flocked to the film (Maddrey 124). Its violence and shocking cinematic gore were revolutionary for the time. Zombies had never before been so horrific (Bishop 14). Also, *Night* was released during the Civil Rights era and the Vietnam War, so it fed off of the tension America was experiencing. Audiences were clearly able to associate with the struggle of characters facing an unknown "other." After *Night*'s release, zombie movies continued to feature the slow moving, flesh-eating creatures featured in the production. Without Romero's original "zombie formula," zombies today would be a different beast entirely.

According to the online Britannica Encyclopedia, the term "zombie" means an "undead creature frequently featured in works of horror fiction and film" ("Zombie" 1). Appropriately enough, the word "zombie" has become synonymous with the creatures seen in Romero's film. This term, however, has grown quite broad with the large variety of zombies that have spawned from *Night*. These zombies, though dangerous in numbers, are slow and non-threatening when singled out. The zombies that appeared in movies following *Night* remained similar in form, furthering the classical stage of zombie cinema. Movies such as *Return of the Evil Dead* (1973), *Corpse Eaters* (1974), *Dawn of the Dead*

(1978), and *Zombie* (1979) utilized Romero's original zombie formula, emphasizing the horror of the slow moving undead and furthering the pre-formed conventions of the zombie subgenre.

It was not until the mid-1980s that a newer outlook on the decaying creatures was introduced. In "The Evolution of the Zombie: The Monster That Keeps Coming Back," film theorist Shawn McIntosh considers zombies to have hit mainstream culture specifically in 1983. It was during this year that Michael Jackson's "Thriller" music video featured a horde of zombies dancing Jackson's definitive "Thriller" routine (McIntosh 11). The sight of these zombies dancing on-screen opened the floor for zombie parody. Movies such as *The Return of the Living Dead (1985)*, *Re-Animator* (1985), and *Braindead* (1992) followed. These movies spotlighted heavy gore mixed with slapstick comedy. In her essay "Zombie Splatter Comedy from Dawn to Shaun," Linda Badley explains, "In the mid-1980s, the zombie craze attracted a younger generation of innovative, self-taught indie filmmakers inspired by Romero's production model and fascinated with splatter technology, resulting in a regressive, extremely physical, relatively unironic version of horror carnivalesque" (43). The zombies in these films were not meant to frighten—they were meant to entertain. For example, in *The Return of the Living Dead*, the zombies initially seem more threatening than *Night of the Living Dead*'s zombies because they acquire both speed and reasoning skills. Yet, it soon becomes clear that *Return*'s inherent parodic nature keeps the movie from becoming frightening. In fact, the zombies moan, "Brains!" as they chase their victims, and they even create a strategy that involves using an ambulance transceiver to request extra paramedics to their location in order to eat them. This is parodic because the zombies, in a sense, create a "trap" for

humans. They no longer shuffle outside of a boarded home, hoping for a human to walk toward them. Instead, they are able to call ahead and order a meal at their own convenience. In this fashion, zombie films reached their parodic peak in the late 1980s (Figure 1.1). During this time, however, serious zombie films hit a major decline in production. Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985) failed in the box office, and zombie budgets began to plummet (Bishop 15). Zombies had lost their knack. Because of the parodies, they were no longer scary. Along with this, comedy would not allow serious depictions of cultural anxieties and fears. Therefore, people could no longer connect with certain aspects of zombie films. Eventually the zombie parodic peak disappeared and zombie production disappeared with it. While about 75 zombie films were produced in the 1980s, only around 44 zombie movies were made in the 1990s ("Zombie Movie List"). It seemed as if zombies had nowhere else to go. They had already staggered through their developmental, classical, and parodic stages. Audiences had seen it all. By the late 1980s, zombies were also competing with the gore-filled narratives of Freddy Kreuger and Jason Voorhees (McIntosh 11). The hobbling, moaning, decaying creatures with severely depleted IQs failed to make the cut.

Fortunately for zombie lovers, during the 1990s zombies did not remain totally dormant. In fact, video games kept the zombie culture "alive" (McIntosh 11). The release of the *Resident Evil* game in 1996 was a big step for zombies, providing gamers with a first-person shooting experience in which they were able to fight zombies while venturing through intricate plotlines. Along with this, zombies became ideal video game enemies (Krzywinska 153, 155). Because zombies are infectious and visually revolting, the players are easily distinguished as morally righteous in their duty of annihilating zombies

during gameplay. Therefore, players effortlessly shoot, cut, punch, kick, and slash zombies as they raise their zombie slayer status and become heroes in their cyber world. In this way, zombie video games stepped in for the absent zombie films and reminded people that zombies could provide a strong sense of satisfaction after all.

THE ZOMBIE RENAISSANCE

In the early 2000s, zombie movies rose again in true undead fashion. It was during this time that these creatures revisited their more serious roots. Bishop credits Danny Boyle for starting the "zombie renaissance" with his release of *28 Days Later* in 2002 (16). The budget for *28 Days Later* was $8 million, but the film soon grossed $82 million worldwide (Bishop 17). In the same year, Paul W.S. Anderson's *Resident Evil* (2002) was released. This movie—based on the video game—would soon become a franchise of five total films by 2012. In his compilation of zombie movie releases, Bishop indicates a sharp spike in zombie film production in the mid-2000s (Figure 1.1). Also, according to the Zombie Reporting Center website, there were over 91 zombie films released between 2002 and 2007 alone ("Zombie Movie List"). As Bishop says, "The 21st century has clearly been experiencing a zombie renaissance" (18).

In *28 Days Later*, Boyle effectively established the revisionist stage of zombie films. The zombies featured in these films were faster than earlier zombies—in fact, they run faster than most humans. These creatures not only became more threatening to protagonists but also more frightening to audience members. In *28 Days Later*, the zombies are infected with "rage." Similarly, the zombies in *Resident Evil*, *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), and *The Crazies* (2010) prove to be more terrifying than the zombies found in *Night of the Living Dead*. They are able to swarm protagonists quickly and efficiently.

The zombies seen in *Dawn* are also able to adapt and evolve. For instance, a zombie with no legs swings on overhead pipes with his arms in order to attack his victims. In *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007), people are infected at a high rate with the T-virus (the virus that causes the body to decompose into a zombie state) and they become "super zombies," equipped with both speed and rage. Furthering this, in *The Crazies*, the zombies retain most of their human characteristics (including speech and reasoning skill). They remain plagued, however, by a vehement obsession with murder. Thus, they become inhumane killing machines with a full range of motion and thinking skills. From this, it is clear that as the zombie subgenre grew, zombies grew with it. The creatures evolved and became more refined, actively seeking to define themselves as greater threats to the American public.

After their re-introduction to mainstream cinema in 2002, zombies began to infect other parts of American culture as well. Since its release in 2010, AMC's *The Walking Dead* has broken many records in cable television. The television program follows a group of survivors during the zombie apocalypse, and as of March 2012, it was the number one drama series in basic cable history with men between the ages of 18 and 34. Also, the show's season two finale had nine million viewers (Harnick). This demonstrates a clear fascination with zombies outside of the movie scene. Similarly, in an almost surreal event directly related to this growing zombie fascination, the Center for Disease Control released a statement to *The Huffington Post* on May 31, 2012, stating that the "CDC does not know of a virus or condition that would reanimate the dead (or one that would present zombie-like symptoms)" (Campbell). Due to several cases of cannibalistic crimes during that time, this statement was released to quell the American public's fear

that an actual zombie outbreak was imminent. The fact that the CDC had to deny the existence of a fictional horror epidemic is perhaps one of the strongest indicators that the zombie survival story has dragged its way into Americans' consciousness.

This statement, of course, is not the only sign of the public's growing fascination with zombies. In July 2012, Mark Siwak announced his plans for a potential zombie theme park in Detroit ("Zombie Apocalypse Theme Park"). During the same month, the Zombie Voodoo Fest hit Texas—deploying zombie beauty contests, a battle of the bands, and a zombie survival run (Shannon). On a more technological note, a current website called "Map of the Dead" allows its users to enter their address and see their best chance of survival during a zombie apocalypse. The website highlights nearby "danger zones" as well as practical pit stops including the local gun store, grocery store, hospital, church, and liquor store—to name a few (Herbert). If this isn't enough for the zombie enthusiast, Opticsplanet.com has the Z.E.R.O. (Zombie Extermination, Research, and Operations) kit up for grabs. This kit comes stocked with weapons, weapon accessories, weapon cases, tools, gear, and lab equipment grouped together and available for the reasonable price of $24,000. The website assures its buyers that the items will be shipped "before the zombie apocalypse" ("Z.E.R.O"). These zombie-related items are a few of the many things available for the avid zombie fan. They are evidence of zombie relevance in American culture today, clearly developing from the zombie cinematic resurgence of the 2000s. But the question remains: *why* have zombies made such a strong comeback in the 21st century?

THE ZOMBIE APPEAL

Voyeurism, 9/11, and the Zombie Apocalypse

It cannot be ignored that experiencing a horror movie results in a certain voyeurism—people like being scared. However, there is more to the zombie film than just the visual spectacle of reanimated, decaying bodies attacking entire cities. For instance, within two hours, zombie viewers are able to cuddle on a couch, snack on popcorn and soda, and watch their entire world disintegrate before their eyes. During this time, they are able to imagine the demise of their own political, environmental, and psychological boundaries, and move beyond the static nature of their daily experience (Manjikian 7). This is because so many zombie movies are inherently tied to apocalyptic narratives. Both deal with the disintegration of societal norms and the implication of new modes of life that invite viewers to think of their current problems being washed away by an unstoppable threat. Audiences can visualize what they would do in this type of situation. *What would happen if zombies really did exist? What would America be like without a structured society?*

Indeed, one of the main enticements of an apocalyptic world is that there are technically no rules. In *Zombieland* (2009), characters named Tallahassee and Columbus stop at an abandoned gift shop while traveling with two other survivors: Wichita and Little Rock. At this point in the film, these four characters have a great deal of anxiety due to the fallen state of their world. In order to relieve this tension, they completely destroy the store's display items. They break snow globes, knock over bead stands, and push over shelves stocked with pottery. Clearly, this behavior is acceptable during the zombie apocalypse—the storeowner is likely dead or undead—and it allows the

characters to have a moment of emotional release. Just as in anything new, audience members enjoy watching the development of this new society. An apocalyptic world is so different from the ordered society that audience members are used to. It is interesting to see chaos employed in a world with no police, no rules, and few humans. Still, zombie narratives cater to more than just pure viscerality. There are strong cultural anxieties and fears that they depict and reflect.

Undoubtedly, the resurgence of zombie apocalyptic narratives stems from the attacks of September 11, 2001, which could be said to be the greatest source of American fear and anxiety during the 21st century. On 9/11, Americans experienced sheer terror in the face of societal collapse. In both New York City and Washington, D.C., streets were lifeless, rubble covered the dust-stained ground, and people cowered under anything they could find for protection. In other parts of the country, airline travel ceased, and shops and restaurants remained empty for days, as people wondered whether their hometowns would be targeted next. Americans now understood what it was like to be attacked on their home front, and they immediately developed a new set of anxieties and fears. Among these was a strong sense of apocalyptic dread (Thompson 25) that, more specifically, stemmed from the fear of nuclear terrorist attacks and civilian-directed violence (as opposed to violence aimed solely at military personnel). People no longer felt safe on their walk to the supermarket or while sleeping in their beds. During these times, a strong mistrust toward strangers was heightened. Fear of biological warfare intensified the week after 9/11 when letters filled with anthrax were mailed to both U.S. senators and media outlets, reinforcing the idea that neither our government nor places of employment were safe. Americans had acquired a strong fear of a threatening "other"

invading their world and ravaging their everyday lives. Inherently, this is what zombies do: they infect a society and overtake it by force. Because of this, zombies became the perfect incoming threat for Americans to view on screen.

For the first time in over a decade, Americans could closely identify with the fears and anxieties reflected in zombie films. Using Boyle's concept of the "new" zombie, producers could now effectively unleash zombies into the public, bidding the ungodly creatures to gorge themselves on these anxieties, while simultaneously helping viewers cope with their fears by showcasing heroes successfully navigating through their new environment. Indeed, it is clear in zombie movies that the characters who survive are the ones that are able to adapt. They pull the trigger when necessary, take refuge in practical places, and never drop their guard. The rest get eaten. For example, in *28 Days Later*, Jim has awoken from a coma 28 days into the zombie infestation of London. The hospital is completely abandoned, so no one can tell him what has happened. He walks the empty streets of his town, passing souvenirs and piles of money that litter the street. Jim, unaware of the new unimportance of monetary gain, quickly stuffs the abandoned money into a grocery sack. He is still in the mindset of the pre-apocalyptic world while the other citizens of the town have adapted—leaving the paper money behind. Eventually, Jim learns that this is a foolish thing to focus on. His city no longer exists. Raging zombies are around every corner, waiting to rip him and any other living being to pieces. Although money is now abundant, it is also irrelevant. This is a strong theme found in zombie movies: along with the pleasure of abundance comes an inevitable pain. In another scene from *28 Days Later*, Jim and his fellow survivors take a trip to an abandoned grocery store. They ride around the store with grocery carts, filling their

baskets with imperishable goods. One character named Frank even pulls several bottles of expensive alcohol off the shelves, eventually placing his credit card on an empty checkout stand in jest, leaving it behind. He has no use for it in the zombie world. This scene is pleasurable in the sense that the characters can have anything in the store for free, but this moment does not go without tinges of dark pain. Most of the fruit is rotten, and Selena reminds the rest of the group that they cannot take anything that they have to cook. There are strings attached to the characters' freedom. This is also visible in *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004) when Alice has woken from a coma. She leaves the hospital, entering the city streets and witnessing the chaotic aftermath of the zombie outbreak. Before she goes further, however, she finds a store that is filled with weapons and clothing, from which she can take as much as she likes. Along with this infinite material gain, however, is the knowledge that she has a great battle to fight. She must face both the undead horde and the evil government facility that have plagued her town. Because of this, the free merchandise does not seem as exciting.

Similarly, the protagonists in *Dawn of the Dead* are not overly enthused about the large amount of free merchandise that surrounds them in the mall they occupy during the zombie apocalypse. Although once intrigued by the substantial amount of goods filling the surrounding stores, they eventually decide to flee the mall, only taking items that aid in their escape. This produces an irony that Americans cannot ignore—the mere thought of being able to travel around an abandoned mall and pick out any item for free is exhilarating. Yet this serves no purpose during the zombie apocalypse. Consumerism is such a large part of society that Americans cannot begin to understand a world where baseball bats and lead pipes are more valuable than credit cards. In their book *Horror*

After 9/11, Aviva Briefel and Sam Miller note that after 9/11, President Bush established shopping as a form of patriotic resistance to the attacks (142). A country where humans could still shop certainly had nothing to fear. Therefore in zombie films, the deployment of consumerism gone awry is quite daunting. It is alarming to think of money losing its value while stores and capitalism are abandoned. Characters in this type of society must live with the knowledge that the ammo, the processed food, and the clothing will eventually run out. The bottom line is that the world will be forever changed. This is why consumerism is highlighted as so meaningless in *Dawn of the Dead* and other zombie films. In the wake of the zombie apocalypse, money has no meaning. Ironically, however, the zombies that are featured in *Dawn* fail to adopt these new modes of thought and make one last trip to the mall. They swarm the outside of the structure, waiting at the glass doors to enter the building. This provides a strong social commentary—even when undead, people cannot fight their subconscious need to shop.

Finally, with the spread of infection and the loss of society comes the forfeit of familiarities. The characters in zombie films have to leave behind their previous lives, homes, and families in most cases. At the beginning of *Dawn of the Dead*, Ana is lying in bed with her husband, sleeping on what should be the beginning of a normal day. Soon, however, a zombie child enters the couple's bedroom and attacks Ana's husband, killing him. Ana is forced to flee her home, eventually finding shelter inside the nearby mall with other survivors. This is a literal representation of what people experience in zombie films. They are forced to leave their homes, their families, their "normal." Each character in a zombie film must let go of his or her former life in order to function within the zombified society. Those who do not accept this fate are inevitably going to die. For

example, in *Zombieland* Wichita and Little Rock travel to the amusement park they went to as children in order to find some comfort during the zombie apocalypse. The lights from the park, however, immediately attract a large horde of zombies, and the girls almost die because of this. The zombies do not allow for a nostalgic visit to an amusement park. Instead, amusement parks will never be safe again. This is, in fact, the key fear of a fallen society: people must give up their normality. For Americans, the thought of giving up everything to an unstoppable threat is terrifying. "The Land of the Free" should be just that: free. Yet zombies and terrorists alike tell people otherwise.

A Fear of Biological Epidemics

Modern day America is not only afraid of terrorism and its ensuing societal collapse, but it is also terrified of sickness and super-viruses unabated by antibiotics. Over the past few years there have been widespread panics over viral infections such as the Bird Flu, Swine Flu, and, most recently, the West Nile Virus. The spread of West Nile strongly parallels the transmission of the zombie virus: a literal bite transmits both infections. Once a person is infected, he or she must fight for survival. Because of West Nile, people have been forced to stay in their homes while the government sprays in attempts to kill the mosquito population. Similarly, characters in zombie films avoid the beasts by staying hidden. They board up their homes, apartments, and basements as best as they can—hoping that the boards and sheer willpower will keep the evil creatures at bay. This is seen in *Night of the Living Dead* with a farmhouse, *Dawn of the Dead* with a mall, and *28 Days Later* with a mansion. In each of these movies, characters use buildings to their advantage, actively fighting the zombie threat. Still, there is never a 100% guarantee that the creatures will be avoided. People still get infected. This is what

is so frightening about the zombie virus: As soon as it infects one person, no one is safe. This parallels with another viral outbreak that was recognized as a global threat in 2003: SARS, or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome. According to the CDC, this air-borne disease spread primarily through person-to-person contact. During the 2003 outbreak 8,098 people were infected worldwide and 774 of the infected died ("Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome"). This threat strongly parallels the idea behind zombie outbreaks. Both viruses highlight human interaction as a means to spread a potentially deadly infection. In *Resident Evil*, the Red Queen (a supercomputer that has taken over an underground facility plagued by zombies) explains this fear of human contact perfectly: "Just one bite, one scratch from these creatures is sufficient, and then, you become one of them."

The fear of biological epidemics is evident in both *28 Days Later* and *The Crazies*. In *28 Days Later*, Jim finds refuge with Selena and Mark—two people that have successfully learned how to survive during the zombie apocalypse. One night, the trio ventures to Jim's parents' home in order to see what happened to his family. Although his family is found dead, Jim, Selena, and Mark decide to stay in the home for the night. Jim, lacking the proper instruction for zombie protocol, lights a candle during the middle of the night and is surprised when a raging zombie jumps through the window to attack him. Reflexively, Mark and Selena quickly aid Jim. They dispose of the threat, but Selena notices that something is wrong with Mark—he has a cut in his arm, and the blood from the infected zombie has fallen into the gaping wound. In an incredibly gruesome scene, Selena does not hesitate to cut Mark into pieces with her machete. Before this, it is clear that Mark and Selena have been traveling together for a while (earlier in the film, they

work as a team to save Jim from a group zombies). Therefore, Selena's slaying of Mark initially seems savage and unnecessary. She explains to Jim, however, that Mark would have changed instantly. It does not take long for this virus to spread—overtaking the human body with rage. Such is the tone in *28 Days Later*: the virus is quick and unforgiving. Any person infected with the disease changes instantaneously. This amplifies the fear of sickness and disease: these people have no chance to be cured. There are no second chances. No antivirus. Just death.

Similarly, in *The Crazies*, a small town's water supply is infected with a strange toxin that turns the townspeople into mindless "zombies." What is most striking about these zombies is the appearance of thick, dark veins that have overtaken their skin as a result of the infection. This is a visual representation of the virus taking hold of their body. It has ravaged their blood, turning it dark black. Their red blood cells have been depleted and killed with the toxin. They are no longer human. Instead, they have become something "other"—seeking to kill until they themselves are killed. The way in which these people are infected is something that every American deals with—a central water supply. The idea of being infected through one of life's necessities is unsettling more than the monsters themselves. This virus does not discriminate against whom it contaminates. It merely attacks, multiplying as more and more zombies are bred. This leaves the victims helpless, mirroring the feeling many Americans have when it comes to a direct attack on America's health. Like the anthrax letters and various flu viruses, Americans fear the infliction of biological attacks that they cannot control.

In her book *Plagues, Apocalypses and Bug-Eyed Monsters*, Heather Urbanski describes people's pervasive obsession with health: "Our constant drive to extend life and

cure diseases, to 'fix' whatever may be wrong with us, has the potential to lead us down some unpleasant paths" (60). Despite the advancement of medicine over the years, America still lacks the ability to cure everything. Cancer and AIDS are among two well-known diseases still deeply affecting American citizens today. In a world where technology is so advanced, it is frightening to contract something that cannot be cured. When infected with the zombie virus, characters lose all control of their body—they are forced to degenerate. Inherently, the zombie virus is a plague. It is a threat to human existence because as the zombie virus spreads, humanity dies. At the same time, there are many potential epidemics that are not spread without first being created, and they cannot be created without an engineer. This is another fear that zombie films express when it comes to biological epidemics and biological warfare: we fear the evil intent of scientists and corporations. The more experimentation that occurs, the more opportunity people have for discovering something that is potentially harmful. This translates not only to the T-virus made by a bio-tech company in *Resident Evil* and the virus that is spread through the water supply in *The Crazies*, but also to the virus created in a scientific lab in *28 Days Later*. Just as the Umbrella Corporation's corruption is feared in *Resident Evil*, Americans are often concerned about the morality of scientists and corporations in America today. An example of this is the public backlash in 2012 that occurred as a result of the scientific manufacturing of the H5N1 virus, or bird flu, where scientists were experimenting with a strand of the virus that could be passed through person-to-person contact ("No End to Complications"). In an editorial titled "An Engineered Doomsday," *The New York Times* addressed this event by saying, "We nearly always champion unfettered scientific research and open publication of the results. In this case it looks like

the research should never have been undertaken because the potential harm is so catastrophic and the potential benefits from studying the virus so speculative" ("An Engineered Doomsday"). This highlights the common reaction to the manufacturing of biological weapons: *why is the creation of something inherently catastrophic worth the risk?* Similarly, in an online article from 2004, Michael Scherer addresses the American government's push for biodefense research. He notes that many people were feeling anxious after the announcement that nearly $10 billion would be budgeted toward biological weapon projects. He says, "With poor oversight, government-funded scientists could actually be paving the way for the next generation of killer germs—and given the explosion of research, there is no way to keep track of what is being done" (Scherer). The possibility of devastating viral outbreaks seems to draw a line that medicine and science should not cross. And when it does cross this line, the public, which usually clings so strongly to science and technology, quickly retreats. As Scherer notes, it is impossible to keep all research organized and under tabs. With a super virus in existence, no one can truly feel safe because no one can be trusted.

Even if a virus is made for protection and defense purposes, there is always the fear of a potential terrorist attack using the virus against us. This is similar to the distrust felt toward most humans in zombie movies. Due to a high infection risk and the lack of societal structure, protagonists cannot risk trusting anyone, even the government. This is seen in *28 Days Later* when Jim, Selena, and Hannah find refuge at a military bunker that is maintained by a group of men. Soon after their welcome, it is evident that the military men will not allow Hannah and Selena to leave the establishment. The leader has previously promised his men that when given the chance, he would give them women.

Zombie movies emphasize that other human beings can be just as dangerous as the infection. Similarly, 9/11 highlighted this theme of mistrust, reminding people that they might not truly know the person living next door. After this time, everyone was under suspicion. Anyone could potentially be the cause for a viral outbreak or physical attack. Therefore, the threat of an uncontainable virus at the hands of an unstable person remains inherently frightening to the American population because, after all, if a raging epidemic were to attack the United States, America would never be the same.

A Fear of Technological Reliance

From communication to transportation to entertainment, America is constantly updating and advancing the modern world. Yet, there comes a point where the advancement of technology makes Americans wary. How much more can technology grow before it starts to completely take over? In a world where self-checkout is replacing grocery store clerks, online shopping is trumping walk-in stores, and social media sites are making face-to-face interaction a thing of the past, technology is beginning to infiltrate the majority of American life. People text instead of call, email instead of write, and play online instead of outside. This reliance on computers leads to a frightening concept for many Americans: the overuse of technology is slowly phasing out human interaction and personal growth. Urbanski notes, "Dependence on information technology can cause personal isolation and social breakdowns" (44), and this is yet another fear addressed in contemporary zombie films.

In *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), this disconnection from human interaction is evident. In the movie, both Shaun and his best friend Ed are typical everyday slackers. They focus most of their energy on hanging out at the local pub and playing video games.

This causes a lot of strain on Shaun's other relationships and on his job because he mentally checks out from many aspects of life. Similarly, on the day of the zombie apocalypse, Shaun strolls down his street completely unaware of the surrounding zombie threat. He has decided to take a trip to his local convenience store, passing a variety of zombies along the way. Because the zombies are slow and dim-witted, they fail to reach Shaun during his stroll. Instead, they slowly mill around the street in the background of the frame, but Shaun does not recognize that anything is wrong. He remains disconnected from the real world (unless beer or video games are involved, he does not really care). He even slips on some blood that covers the floor of the convenience store, but does not pay attention. This is one of many examples found throughout the film that deploys a strong social satire. *Shaun* deeply hints at the fact that every day behavior in the Western world is already reminiscent of the zombie apocalypse—people are so caught up in their own technological world that they fail to recognize the people around them. Therefore, Shaun sees no problem on his walk to the convenience store because it seems like any other day. The zombies appear human enough, and Shaun is too disconnected from society to notice.

Throughout the course of *Shaun of the Dead*, the zombies themselves become a direct metaphor that warns against the fading of a society in which humans actively engage with one another (Pifer 165). For instance, the zombies in *Shaun* are greatly reminiscent of Romero's zombies: slow and dim-witted. They greatly contrast the threatening zombies of *28 Days Later* and *Resident Evil*. Because of this, it becomes clear that *Shaun's* zombies are slow for a reason—they are human laziness incarnate. Therefore, *Shaun* deploys the use of parody to comment on the deadening effects of technology (Pifer 165). By the end of the film, Shaun's best friend Ed has become a

zombie. This change, however, does not truly affect Ed's life. Shaun merely chains Ed up in the backyard cellar, where Ed plays video games and remains dormant. This is almost exactly how Ed behaves at the beginning of the film when he is still human: lazy and video game-obsessed. Similarly, there is a moment in *Shaun* where the characters pretend to be zombies in order to safely reach their local pub. They easily fall into their roles of the undead—moaning and shuffling their way through the crowd. Furthering this, a couple times in the film, Shaun stumbles out of bed, shuffling and moaning much like the zombies. The film uses these scenes to liken humans to the zombie condition. It reminds the audience that humans are already one-step away from being zombies. This plays with the historical fear that humans are already part monster (Booker 154). When bitten, the monster takes control of every ounce of humanity that remains. No longer can the body love, nor think, nor feel. Instead, it is lost forever—soulless and unsalvageable. Unfortunately, according to *Shaun*, people are already acquiring such traits, one text at a time.

THE ZOMBIE METAPHOR

The zombie film is a conveyor of American consciousness. "We have come to expect that a monster is never just a monster, but rather a metaphor that translates real anxieties into more or less palatable forms" (Briefel, Miller 4). As people watch zombie films, they connect with certain aspects throughout the course of the narrative. Some people are legitimately scared from the "monster under your bed" aspect. There is no getting around the fact that zombies are creepy. With their rotting skin, missing body parts, and horrible table manners, these are not the most charming of creatures. Still, people love zombies. They dress as them for Halloween, they buy zombie shirts and

mugs and figurines, they invest in zombie-preparedness kits (*just in case*), and they crave the release of new zombie films. This current obsession with zombies is unquestionably linked with the cultural relevance that zombie movies share with the 21st century audience. A fascination with a decaying creature does not sweep an entire nation without a reason. In fact, Americans like zombies because, all in all, they find a remnant of truth in the survival narrative. Whether they identify with the struggling protagonist, the drooling zombie, or both, they can relate with the material, allowing zombies to rip into the consciousness of 21st century Americans. Currently, zombies are still sweeping across media outlets. According to *The Hollywood Reporter*, the midseason finale of *The Walking Dead* season 3 scored 10.5 million viewers (Goldberg). Similarly, there are several upcoming zombie movies scheduled for release in 2013, including *World War Z* (2013), *Warm Bodies* (2013), and a rumored sequel of *Zombieland*. Therefore, for now, it seems like the undead will continue to have something to offer the living as the infection continues to spread—one American at a time.

REFERENCES

28 Days Later. Dir. Danny Boyle. Perf. Cillian Murphy, Naomie Harris, Brendan Gleeson, and Megan Burns. 20th Century Fox, 2004. DVD.

Badley, Linda. "Zombie Splatter Comedy from Dawn to Shaun: Cannibal Carnivalesque." *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead*. Ed. Shawn McIntosh and Marc Leverette. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2008. Print.

Bishop, Kyle William. *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland &, 2010. Print.

Booker, M. Keith. *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001. Print.

Braindead. Dir. Peter Jackson. Perf. Timothy Balme, Diana Peñalver and Ian Watkin. WingNut Films, 1992. DVD.

Briefel, Aviva, and Sam J. Miller. *Horror after 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror*. Austin: University of Texas, 2011. Print.

Campbell, Andy. "Zombie Apocalypse: CDC Denies Existence Of Zombies Despite Cannibal Incidents." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 01 June 2012. Web. 16 Oct. 2012. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/01/cdc-denies-zombies-existence_n_1562141.html?view=screen>.

Corpse Eaters. Dir. Donald R. Passmore and Klaus Vetter. Perf. Michael Hopkins, Ed LeBreton and Terry London. Maniac Productions, 1974.

The Crazies. Dir. Breck Eisner. Perf. Timothy Olyphant and Radha Mitchell. Overture Films, 2010. DVD.

Day of the Dead. Dir. George A. Romero. Perf. Lori Cardille and Terry Alexander. Dead Films Inc., 1985. DVD.

Dawn of the Dead. Dir. George A. Romero. Perf. David Emge, Ken Foree and Scott H. Reiniger. Laurel Group, 1978. DVD.

Dawn of the Dead. Dir. Zack Snyder. Perf. Sarah Polley, Ving Rhames, and Jake Weber. Universal Pictures, 2004. DVD.

The Earth Dies Screaming. Dir. Terence Fisher. Perf. Willard Parker, Virginia Field and Dennis Price. Lippert Films, 1964.

"An Engineered Doomsday." The New York Times. 08 Jan. 2012. The New York Times. 01 Feb. 2013 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/08/opinion/sunday/an-engineered-doomsday.html?_r=0>.

Focillon, Henri. *The Life of Forms in Art*. New York: Zone Books, 1989. Print.

Goldberg, Lesley. "'Walking Dead' Season 3 Midseason Finale Scores Whopping 10.5 Million Viewers." *The Hollywood Reporter*. Hollywoodreporter.com, 3 Dec. 2012. Web. 8 Dec. 2012. <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/walking-dead-season-3-midseason-finale-ratings-396675>.

Harnick, Chris. "'The Walking Dead' Ratings: Season 2 Finale Shatters Records." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 19 Mar. 2012. Web. 16 Oct. 2012. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/19/the-walking-dead-ratings-season-2-finale_n_1365010.html?view=screen>.

Herbert, Geoff. "'Map of the Dead' Shows How to Survive a Zombie Apocalypse in Syracuse and CNY." *Syracuse.com*. The Post Standard, 12 Apr. 2012. Web. 16

Oct. 2012.<http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2012/04/zombies_attack_ map_ of_dead_syracuse_new_york.html>.

I Walked With a Zombie. Dir. Jacques Tourneur. Perf. Frances Dee, Tom Conway and James Ellison. RKO Radio Pictures, 1943.

Invisible Invaders. Dir. Edward L. Cahn. Perf. John Agar, Jean Byron and Philip Tonge. Robert E. Kent Productions, 1959.

Krzywinska, Tanya. "Zombies in Game Space: Form, Context, and Meaning in Zombie-Based Video Games." *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead*. Ed. Shawn McIntosh and Marc Leverette. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2008. Print.

Maddrey, Joseph. *Nightmares in Red, White, and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004. Print.

Manjikian, Mary. *Apocalypse and Post-politics: The Romance of the End*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012. Print.

Metz, Christian. *Language and Cinema*. Mouton: The Hague, 1974. Print.

McIntosh, Shawn. "The Evolution of the Zombie: The Monster That Keeps Coming Back." *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead*. Ed. Shawn McIntosh and Marc Leverette. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2008. Print.

Night of the Living Dead. Dir. George A. Romero. By George A. Romero, George A. Romero, and John Russo. Perf. Duane Jones, Judith O'Dea, Marilyn Eastman, and Karl Hardman. Continental Distributing, Inc., 1968. DVD.

"No End to Complications." The Economist. 21 Jan. 2012. The Economist Newspaper. 01 Feb. 2013 <http://www.economist.com/blogs/babbage/2012/01/flu-research-and-biological-warfare>.

Ouanga. Dir. George Terwilliger. Perf. Fredi Washington and Philip Brandon. George Terwilliger Productions, 1936.

Pifer, Lynn. "Slacker Bites Back: Shaun of the Dead Finds New Life for Deadbeats" Ed. Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro. *Better off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*. Bronx: Fordham UP, 2011. Print.

The Plague of the Zombies. Dir. John Gilling. Perf. André Morell, Diane Clare and Brook Williams. 20th Century Fox, 1966.

Re-Animator. Dir. Stuart Gordon. Perf. Jeffrey Combs and Bruce Abbott. Empire Pictures, 1985. DVD.

Resident Evil. Dir. Paul W.S. Anderson. Perf. Milla Jovovich, Michelle Rodriguez, Eric Mabius, and James Purefoy. Screen Gems, 2002. DVD.

Resident Evil: Apocalypse. Dir. Alexander Witt. Perf. Milla Jovovich, Sienna Guillory, and Oded Fehr. Screen Gems, 2004. DVD.

Resident Evil: Extinction. Dir. Russell Mulcahy. Perf. Milla Jovovich, Ali Larter, and Oded Fehr. Screen Gems, 2007. DVD

Return of the Evil Dead. Dir. Amando De Ossorio. Perf. Tony Kendall, Fernando Sancho and Esperanza Roy. Ancla Century Films, 1973.

The Return of the Living Dead. Dir. Dan O'Bannon. Perf. Clu Gulager, James Karen, Thom Mathews, and Don Calfa. Orion Pictures Corporation, 1985. DVD.

Richardson, Michael. *Otherness in Hollywood Cinema*. New York: Continuum, 2010. Print.

"Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 02 July 2012. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 01 Feb. 2013 <http://www.cdc.gov/sars/about/faq.html>

Scherer, Michael. "The Next Worst Thing." Mother Jones. Mar.-Apr. 2004. 01 Feb. 2013 <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2004/03/next-worst-thing>.

Shannon, James. "Support Your Local Zombie." *The Examiner*. The Examiner, 7 June 2012. Web. 16 Oct. 2012. <http://theexaminer.com/features/entertainment/support-your-local-zombie>.

Shaun of the Dead. Dir. Edgar Wright. Perf. Simon Pegg and Nick Frost. Rogue Pictures, 2004. DVD.

Thompson, Kirsten Moana. *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium*. Albany: State University of New York, 2007. Print.

Urbanski, Heather. *Plagues, Apocalypses and Bug-eyed Monsters: How Speculative Fiction Shows Us Our Nightmares*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland &, 2007. Print.

Voodoo Man. Dir. William Beaudine. Perf. Bela Lugosi, John Carradine and George Zucco. Monogram Pictures, 1944.

Warm Bodies. Dir. Jonathan Levine. Perf. Nicholas Hoult, Teresa Palmer and John Malkovich. Summit Entertainment, 2013.

World War Z. Dir. Marc Forster. Perf. Brad Pitt, Mireille Enos and David Morse. Paramount Pictures, 2013.

White Zombie. Dir. Victor Halperin. Perf. Bela Lugosi and Madge Bellamy. United Artists Corp., 1932. DVD.

"Z.E.R.O. (Zombie Extermination, Research and Operations) Kit by OpticsPlanet." *OpticsPlanet.com*. OpticsPlanet.com. Web. 16 Oct. 2012. <http://www.opticsplanet.com/zero-zombie-kit.html>.

Zombie. Dir. Lucio Fulci. Perf. Tisa Farrow, Ian McCulloch and Richard Johnson. Variety Film Production, 1979.

"Zombie (fictional Creature)." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d. Web. 16 Oct. 2012. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1879735/zombie>.

"Zombie Apocalypse Theme Park Could Take Over Abandoned Neighborhood In Detroit." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 02 July 2012. Web. 16 Oct. 2012. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/02/zombie-apocalaypse-detroit-theme- park_n_1644298.html?view=screen>.

"Zombie Movie List by Date." *Zombie Reporting Center*. Web. 16 Oct. 2012. <http://www.zombiereportingcenter.com/zombie-movie-database/zombie-movie-list-by- date/>.

Zombieland. Dir. Ruben Fleischer. Perf. Jesse Eisenberg, Woody Harrelson, Emma Stone, and Abigail Breslin. Columbia Pictures, 2009. DVD.

ABSTRACT

This research followed the evolution of the zombie film, highlighting its origins and creeping into the surge of zombie film production in the 21st century. Furthering this, I asked why zombies have become so popular today and subsequently examined the reasoning behind this skyrocket of zombie production in the early 2000s. I determined that zombies have effectively crept into Americans' consciousness because of several events that have occurred in the 21st century, including 9/11, biological epidemics, and an increase in technological reliance. Each of these things has allowed Americans to identify with the thematic material in zombie films more highly than ever before. In order to reinforce this concept, I paired specific examples from 21st century zombie films with scholarly sources, ultimately explaining that zombie movies are going to be around for quite some time.