

Raising the Dead

Unearthing the Nonliterary Origins of Zombie Cinema



The zombie Karen eats her own father in the most taboo of cannibalistic, incestuous acts in *Night of the Living Dead*.

Abstract: Traditional zombie movies have no direct antecedent in the written word because of the monsters' essentially visual nature; zombies don't think or speak—they simply act. This unique embodiment of horror recalls Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny, which finds itself better suited to filmic representations rather than prose renditions.

Key words: dead; Freud, Sigmund; Romero, George A.; uncanny; voodoo; zombie

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The year 2004 saw the theatrical release of three major zombie movies: *Resident Evil: Apocalypse*, a sequel to a movie based on a video game; *Dawn of the Dead*, a remake of a cult classic from the 1970s; and *Shaun of the Dead*, a sometimes funny, sometimes terrifying re-visioning of an established genre. In addition, dozens of low-budget zombie movies were released directly to video or appeared as made-for-television movies.¹ Zombie cinema is clearly as popular today as it was fifty years ago, but is the genre socially relevant beyond being simply a successful enter-

tainment venture?² Whereas many horror films may be easily dismissed as mindless entertainment or B-reel schlock, the zombie film retains its ability to make audiences think while they shriek. But to understand this much-maligned genre, one must consider its origins and the essential nature of its visual impact.

Although creatures such as vampires and reanimated corpses often have been realized by literary means, the traditional zombie story has no direct antecedent in novels or short fiction. In fact, zombies did not really see the light of day until filmmakers began

he Dead

By KYLE BISHOP

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to dig them out of their graves in the 1930s. The “classic” zombie horror film, which is the focus of this investigation, was pioneered by George A. Romero in the late 1960s and features a veritable plague of reanimated corpses that attack and slaughter the living. The established generic conventions of such movies are relatively simple and remarkably consistent: Ordinary characters in ordinary places are confronted with overwhelmingly extraordinary challenges, namely the unexpected appearance of an aggressive horde of flesh-eating ghouls. Zombie cinema is essentially a

macabre romp—a live-action comic book brought to the big screen both to horrify and entertain.

Much has already been written concerning the more esoteric social commentary offered by zombie movies, but few critics have investigated the unusual origins of these monsters and their horrific stories.³ Although the cinematic popularity of zombies has certainly made the move to video games and graphic novels, the zombie remains a primarily nonliterary phenomenon.⁴ Establishing the folkloric origins of the zombie creature itself will explain this rather singular fact and illustrate its evolution into the more recognizable cinematic horror show developed by Romero. The zombie genre does not exist prior to the film age because of its essentially visual nature; zombies do not think or speak—they simply act, relying on purely physical manifestations of terror. This unique embodiment of horror recalls Sigmund Freud’s concept of the uncanny, a phenomenon that finds itself better suited to filmic representations rather than prose renditions.

Preparing the Potion: Exhuming the Vodoun Zombie⁵

Most classic monsters—from ghosts to vampires to werewolves—have their origins in folklore, and the zombie is no exception. However, whereas those other creatures have cross-cultural mythologies, the zombie remains a purely American monster, born from Vodoun magic and religion. In addition, creatures such as

Dracula passed through a literary tradition on their way to the silver screen, but the zombie did not. Zombie scholar Peter Dendle illustrates this point: Although possessing certain thematic characteristics that tie it to the traditions of classical horror, the zombie is “the only creature to pass directly from folklore to the screen, without first having an established literary tradition” (2–3). This singularity makes an investigation of the anthropological roots of the zombie an essential part of understanding the film genre.

According to anthropologist Wade Davis, the modern English word *zombie* most likely derives from the Kimbundu term *nzúmbe*, which means “ghost” or “spirit of a dead person” (xii). This concept was brought from Africa to Haiti with the slave trade and was translated into the Creole *zōbi*, which was modernized to *zombie*, a word with a number of accepted meanings, from a mindless automaton to an exotic mixed drink. As far as the traditional cinematic monster is concerned, however, the designation of *zombie* is reserved for the cannibalistic walking dead: people brought back to life either to serve or to devour the human race. This definition is tied to the Vodoun religion, a mystical practice that supposedly harbors the magic required to strike people down to a death-like state and revive them later from the grave to become virtually mindless servants—the most subordinate of slaves (Davis 42). But, in reality, zombification is the result of pharmacology, the careful administration of powerful neurotoxins.

Davis is the world's leading authority on the zombification ritual, and as a Harvard University ethnobotanist, he traveled to Haiti in 1985 in search of exotic new medicinal drugs. Davis recorded his weird experiences and botanical research in *The Serpent and the Rainbow*.⁶ According to this primarily anthropological text, a limited number of powerful and unorthodox Vodoun priests, called *bokors*, possess a keen knowledge of natural drugs and sedatives and have created a "zombie powder"—called *coup poudre*—that renders its victims clinically dead (Davis 90). Davis's interest in the drug was purely scientific at first, but he soon realized that zombies are real creatures within the Vodoun religion. The method of creating such a dangerous substance is naturally a closely guarded secret, controlled by the secret societies of Haiti (Davis 260).

Those well versed in the administration of this powder could conceivably create the illusion of raising the dead and, thus, give the zombie legend credibility. The most potent poison included in the *coup poudre* comes from a specific kind of puffer fish, a nerve agent called tetrodotoxin (Davis 134). This drug "induces a state of profound paralysis, marked by complete immobility during which time the border between life and death is not at all certain, even to trained physicians" (Davis 142). All major life functions are paralyzed for an extended period, and those suffering from the effects of the drug run the real risk of being buried alive.⁷ If the powder is too strong or mixed incorrectly, the victim might die immediately—or suffocate slowly in the coffin (Davis 226). Unfortunately, even those victims lucky enough to be rescued from the grave inevitably suffer brain damage from the lack of oxygen; they are understandably sluggish and dimwitted (Davis 21).

These superstitious fears of the walking dead are not limited to Haiti, however; most cultures share a strong psychological response to the concept of death. Bodies of dead friends and family are burned, buried, walled up, or even eaten, but the result is the

same: The corpses are hidden from sight and mind. Although statues, portraits, and photographs are treasured as valued reminders of those now dead, no one really wants to see the face of a loved one slowly rot or be reminded of the brutal realities of mortality; such a confrontation would be frightening, to say the least. In psychoanalytical terms, Freud identifies this fear of the once familiar as the *un-*

itself are all key features of zombie cinema. But the classic zombie movie owes its unique existence to George A. Romero, who Dendle calls the "Shakespeare of zombie cinema" (121). Romero took a rather insipid, two-dimensional creature, married it to an established apocalyptic storyline, and invented an entirely new genre.

Administering the Powder: Creating the Modern Zombie

Unlike the ancient traditions of the vampire and werewolf, the zombie did not enter Western consciousness until around the turn of the twentieth century. According to Dendle, most Americans were only vaguely aware of Haitian Vodou and zombie lore from nineteenth-century Caribbean travel literature (2). Civilized society probably dismissed such concepts as remote superstitions and pagan fantasies until the publication of William Seabrook's travel book *The Magic Island* in 1929, which brought the romantic exoticism—and possible reality—of the zombie to the attention of mainstream audiences (Dendle 2). Shortly thereafter in 1932, Kenneth Webb produced a play called *Zombie* in New York City, and "the creature fell irrevocably under the auspices of the entertainment industry" (Dendle 2).

Hollywood quickly recognized the marketability of the zombie, with the first true zombie movie arriving the same year as Webb's play: Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932). Set in Haiti, Vodou is the central feature of the film, although the tone and style are obviously influenced by Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931). As the white heroes travel across the countryside at night, their coach driver explains the mysterious figures they pass as "the living dead. Corpses taken from their graves and made to work in the sugar mills" (Halperin). These zombies are slow, dimwitted, and lumbering—but not completely mindless; they can follow commands and perform simple tasks. They are not monsters but rather hypnotized slaves who are still alive and can be saved with the death of the Vodoun priest who enslaved them. The true villain in *White*

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heimlich, a complex term that literally means "un-homely" or "un-homey" but is usually translated as "the uncanny." This concept is key to understanding the ability of the zombie to instill fear: Those who should be dead and safely laid to rest have bucked the natural order of things and have returned from the grave.

The anthropological origins of the zombie are important to recognize, but what makes zombie narratives unique to cinema are not the shambling foes themselves but rather the stories they tell. Zombie folklore and Vodoun traditions clearly set the stage for the zombie horror movie as it is known and recognized today; poisoning, premature burial, loss of cognition, slavery, the return of the dead, and death

Zombie is Bela Lugosi's mad *bokor* Murder Legendre, not the pitiful zombies themselves.

A number of similar, if unremarkable, zombie films were made over the next few years—for example, *Revolt of the Zombies* (1936), *King of the Zombies* (1941), and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943)—but their rather prosaic view of the undead would change gradually over the next few decades with the help of EC Comics. The 1940s and '50s saw a dramatic upswing in all horror media, most notably the publication of *Tales from the Crypt* in 1950. According to book columnist and comic aficionado Digby Diehl, "Horror comics of the 1950s appealed to teens and young adults who were trying to cope with the aftermath of even greater terrors—Nazi death camps and the explosion of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (28). Terror had become a tangible part of daily life, and these early graphic novels brazenly presented images of rotting corpses, stumbling zombies, and gory violence. Film scholar Paul Wells claims the young Romero would have been directly influenced by such comics (82), for a predominately visual narrative format can be seen in his zombie movies, in which the action is presented through a series of carefully framed and largely silent images. Romero confirms this connection himself in a documentary by Roy Frumke, referring to the filming of *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) as "making a comic book."

Romero was likely influenced by popular horror films of the 1950s as well, especially those featuring end-of-the-world scenarios. According to Frumke, Romero's earliest film influence was Christian Nyby's *The Thing from Another World* (1951). This science fiction movie, based on the short story "Who Goes There?" by John W. Campbell, Jr., features a small group of isolated survivors who must fight off a mysterious foe that can take any form and exists only to kill.

Film scholar Robin Wood offers another connection, claiming the most obvious antecedent to Romero's zombies to be the pod-people in Don

Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), based on Jack Finney's 1955 novel (126). This unsettling story posits another view of the apocalypse, in which one's best friends and family members become threatening monsters. The film's ending departs from that of the novel, clearly illustrating the paranoia rampant in cold war America. Horror expert Stephen King writes how critics read Siegel's film as an allegory about "the witch-hunt atmosphere that accompanied the McCarthy hearings," although Siegel claimed it was really about the "Red Menace" itself (308). Either way, fear of the Other was clearly rampant on both sides of the political spectrum.

Romero established and codified the zombie horror genre in 1968 with *Night of the Living Dead*. The screenplay was based on Romero's own short story "Night of Anubis," a tale of isolation and supernatural peril that borrowed heavily from Richard Matheson's 1954 novella *I Am Legend* (Martin). Matheson's story features hordes of vampires who rampantly infect and replace the world's population. Richard Neville is essentially the

last man on earth, and he must garrison himself inside his home each night to escape the hungry fangs of the vampiric infestation. During his struggle to survive, Neville must fortify his house, scavenge for food and supplies, and kill the monsters his friends and family have become. All of these fundamental plot elements are found in Romero's series of zombie movies and have become firm protocols of the genre.

The situation faced by Matheson's Neville is also seen in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), based on the 1952 short story by Daphne du Maurier. Film scholar R. H. W. Dillard considers this film the artistic predecessor to Romero's *Night*, pointing out how "in both films, a group of people are besieged by an apparently harmless and ordinary world gone berserk, struggle to defend themselves against the danger, and struggle to maintain their rationality and their values at the same time" (26). *The Birds* explicitly presents the idea of the apocalypse; in fact, the Bodega Bay town drunk warns the protagonists that it is the "end of the world." The birds are an



Here's Johnny! The one-time protagonist becomes the uncanny monster that kills Barbara in *Night of the Living Dead*.

unstoppable collective, and the movie's heroes must board themselves up in a house against their relentless onslaught.

The essential motifs and tropes of the classic zombie movie have some thematic and stylistic roots in Haitian travel narratives and the zombie films of the 1930s and '40s, specifically the exoticism of Vodoun zombie folklore, and early horror and science fiction cinema, particularly the end-of-the-world scenario. In addition, the paranoia narratives of the cold war 1950s and '60s would have given Romero some core ideas about his general plot structure, but it was his own imagination and invention that united the zombie legend with these popular stories of the primal struggle for survival. Although such movies as *White Zombie* were first, Dendle points out that "Romero liberated the zombie from the shackles of a master, and invested his zombies not with a function . . . but rather a drive" (6). With the creation of *Night of the Living Dead*, Romero decisively established the structure of the classical zombie movie, and many directors have since followed his lead and conformed to the criteria of the new genre.

Performing the Ritual: Explaining Zombies' Cinematic Singularity

Zombies do not exist in a vacuum, nor did they spring forth fully grown from the head of Romero. In addition to being derived from mythology, legend, and the imagination, zombies also have close ties to other, more literary monsters. They belong to a diverse class of creatures that cross the metaphysical line between life and death, where a strong sense of the uncanny inspires unease and fear. But whereas ghosts, vampires, and golems have been a part of storytelling for thousands of years, the zombie is a relatively modern invention. Their lack of emotional depth, their inability to express or act on human desires, and their primarily visual nature make zombies ill suited for the written word; zombies thrive best on screen.

Freud defines the abstract concept of the uncanny as "that species of the

frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (124). He further points out how "this uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something . . . estranged from [the psyche] only through being repressed" (147). The

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true manifestation of this fear occurs, therefore, when a repressed familiarity (such as death) returns in a disturbing, physical way (such as a corpse); the familiar (*heimlich*) becomes the unfamiliar or uncanny (*unheimlich*) (Freud 148). Of course, this concept applies to monsters other than zombies as well. As Dillard points out, "the idea of the dead's return to a kind of life is no new idea; it is present in all the ancient tales of vampires and ghouls and zombies, and it has been no stranger to films. . . . All of these tales and films spring from that ancient fear of the dead" (20–21). Dead bodies are not only a breeding ground for disease but also a reminder to the living of their own mortality. For such reasons, creatures that apparently have overcome

the debilitating effects of the grave are treated with revulsion and fear—especially when said creatures are hostile, violent, and ambulatory.

Freud also claims that ". . . to many people the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts" (148). Therefore, it is no surprise that those supernatural creatures able to defy the powers of death are usually at the heart of horror narratives and stories. Perhaps the oldest campfire tale is the ghost story: What is more uncanny than someone returning from the grave to wreak havoc on the living? Ghosts have a firmly established tradition, both orally and literarily, from Homer to Dante to Shakespeare to Dickens. But ghosts are merely spirits, consciousnesses that lack physical form; zombies belong to a much more specific phylum: the corporeal monster. Such unnatural terrors include vampires (demons who constantly cheat death by preying on the living), golems (unnatural creatures reassembled and brought back to life through the means of science), and zombies (mindless automatons fueled by purely animalistic passions).⁸

However, when one considers the literary origins of these beasts (specifically in novels and short fiction), the zombie is virtually missing in action. Why are vampires and other supernatural creatures prevalent in horror stories and gothic literature but not the traditional zombie?

It is the essentially *human* behavior that explains the success of such fiends in nineteenth-century literature, and the vampire is the most prolific of these. Although undead, Bram Stoker's archetypal Count acts as though still alive, using his immortality to pursue rather carnal desires. Dracula is mysterious, cunning, and seductive, using his piercing stare and eloquent tongue to beguile young women and readers alike. He appears both attractive and familiar by wearing the guise of youth and vitality, but Dracula is fundamentally an uncanny symbol of mortality. Not only is he decidedly inhuman—he lacks a reflection, which is regarded as a manifestation of the

soul (Stoker 31)—he also represents the reality of death itself with his drinking of innocent blood, his propensity to murder women and small children, and his habit of sleeping in the grave.

Similarly, Victor Frankenstein's intriguing monster possesses essentially human qualities that make him such a complex literary character; he thinks and feels and speaks with great passion. Contrary to most screen adaptations, Frankenstein's creature is not frightening by himself—he is in fact quite sympathetic and humane. His unnatural state makes him essentially uncanny: He is a collection of dead body parts and stitchery, a creature brought back to life through science, not the supernatural. However, although Dracula and Frankenstein's monster are both fine examples of the uncanny, neither of these classic monsters is technically a zombie; a vampire lives a conscious, basically human existence, and Frankenstein's creature is flesh made living and mortal once more.

In contrast to these monsters, the zombie is completely and thoroughly dead—it is essentially a walking corpse.⁹ Zombies are not uncanny because of their humanistic qualities; they are uncanny because they are, in essence, a grotesque metaphor for humanity itself. Like the vampire, the zombie rises from the grave to feed off the living. Like the golem, the zombie has the form of someone familiar, yet monstrous. But the zombie is a much different creature from these established monsters: It does not think or act on reasonable motives—it is purely a creature of blind instinct. The zombie does not recognize individuals or discriminate in its quarry. Zombies have no speech or consciousness—they do not talk to their victims or speculate about their existence; they are essentially superficial, two-dimensional creatures.¹⁰

Because zombies do not speak, all of their intentions and activities are manifested solely through physical action. In other words, because of this sensual limitation, zombies must be watched. Their primary actions are

visceral and violent: They claw, rend, smash, and gnaw. In addition, post-1960s zombie movies are most noteworthy not for violence or horror but for the gore (Dendle 6). Decapitations, disembowelings, and acts of cannibalism are particularly effective on the screen, especially if the audience does not have time to look away. Moreover, the recognition of former heroes as dangerous zombies realizes an uncanny effect, eliciting an instantaneous shock on the part of the film characters and the audience members alike.

Of course, shocking images can be conveyed quite effectively in writing

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as well. In Stoker's *Dracula*, the somewhat feckless Jonathan Harker methodically documents a horrific confrontation with the Count:

I raised the lid, and laid it back against the well; and then I saw something which filled my very soul with horror. There lay the Count, but looking as if his youth had been half renewed, for the white hair and moustache were changed to dark iron-grey; the cheeks were fuller, and the white skin seemed ruby-red underneath; the mouth was redder than ever, for on the lips were gouts of

fresh blood, which trickled from the corners of the mouth and ran over the chin and neck. Even the deep, burning eyes seemed set amongst swollen flesh, for the lids and pouches underneath were bloated. It seemed as if the whole awful creature were simply gorged with blood; he lay like a filthy leech, exhausted with his repletion. (53)

Stoker presents quite a visage, but the diachronic nature of prose forces him to describe one aspect of the Count at a time. This gradual, paratactic unfolding of visual detail must necessarily diminish the ultimate shock; it takes time for the audience to read it. Because humans process visual images synchronically, literary texts present an unrealistic form of perception. The cinematic representation is much closer to reality, showing the entire view simultaneously.

Aspects of the film zombie may be recognizable in other classic monsters, but no traditionally literary tale conforms to the genre as it has been so firmly established by Romero. Although they were once human, zombies have no real connection to humanity aside from their physical form; they are the ultimate foreign Other. They do not think, speak, or act on passionate or conscious desires as do the monsters found in novels or short fiction—a zombie's essentially silent and shallow nature makes it a fundamentally visual creature instead. The primitive characteristics of these ghouls make them ideal cinematic monsters.

Raising the Dead: Understanding the Romero Formula

The classic zombie story pioneered by Romero, and recognized in so many horror movies since, has a number of specific characteristics that distinguish it from other tales of the supernatural. Zombie movies are always set at the apparent end of the world, where devastating events have rendered the human race all but helpless. Yet, the primary details in Romero's films are in essence bland and ordinary, implying that such extraordinary events could happen to anyone, anywhere, at any time. Zombies confront

audiences with stark horror and graphic violence, using the seemingly familiar to present the most unnatural and frightening. A detailed look at the prototypical zombie film—*Night of the Living Dead*—will best illustrate these defining cinematic features and help show the limitations of print.

Night of the Living Dead is presented on a very pessimistic stage: that of the apocalypse. A strange phenomenon overcomes society, resulting in a literal hell on earth where the dead walk and no one is safe. A space probe has returned from Venus, bearing some kind of unknown radiation. For some unexplained reason, this extraterrestrial fallout causes all recently dead humans to rise and attack the living—no Vodoun rituals here. The ghouls feed on human flesh in blatant disregard of society's cannibalism taboo, and those thus killed are infected as if by a blood-borne virus and soon rise themselves, assuming there is enough flesh remaining for the corpse to become mobile. The dead

are mechanical juggernauts, and those left struggling to survive are forced to adopt a much more primordial stance—it is kill or be killed, and average folks are quickly transformed into desperate vigilantes.

Society's infrastructure begins to break down, especially those systems associated with the government and technology. Law enforcement is depicted as incompetent and backwater (the local sheriff is a stereotyped yokel with a "shoot first" attitude), so people must fend for themselves instead. The media do what they can, broadcasting tidbits of helpful information and advice by way of radio and television, but the outlook is fundamentally grim: Hide if you can, fight if you have to. In the end, the rigid structure of society proves little help; human survivors are left to their own devices with no real hope of rescue or support. Motley groups are forced into hiding, holing up in safe houses of some kind where they barricade themselves and wait in vain for the trouble to pass.

Of course, such a scenario is not necessarily limited to zombie movies: Slasher films and alien-invasion pics often have a similar modus operandi. However, whereas those movies feature either an unrealistic cast of vivacious eye candy, computer-savvy geniuses, or stylized superheroes, zombie cinema pursues the hapless adventures of bland, ordinary (*heimlich*) citizens.¹¹ As *Night* opens, a rather plain, average young woman and her equally pedestrian brother are traveling to visit the grave of their father in rural Pennsylvania. While they are paying their respects and praying at the gravesite, an innocuous gentleman can be seen shuffling across the background of the frame. Johnny begins to tease his sister about her childish fear of cemeteries, and he uses the passing stranger to feed the fire: "They're coming to get you, Barbara!" he taunts, forcing his sister's disgusted retreat. As Barbara embarrassingly approaches the man to apologize, the unthinkable happens—he is out to get her! Although the zom-



The farmhouse becomes a makeshift fortress under the zombie assault.

bie looks like a normal human being (albeit a bit pasty), he attacks Barbara with wanton savagery and kills her ill-fated brother when Johnny tries to intervene.

In the grand tradition of most horror films, Barbara runs away, stumbling and tripping her way to the car. The zombie begins its methodical, if rather slow, pursuit, its every movement highlighted by lightning flashes and dramatic camera angles. Although she makes it to the car, Barbara is thwarted in her escape: The keys are still in Johnny's pocket. Another footrace ensues, and Barbara makes it to the relative safety of a farmhouse. Granted, the former occupants are already dead and partially eaten, but at least her friend from the cemetery is locked outside. Enter Ben, another survivor who has come to the farmhouse in search of refuge and hopefully some gasoline for his truck. At this point, the zombie film establishes another of its defining characteristics: hiding out.

The literal *heimlich* nature of the house quickly becomes something far more *unheimlich*. The farmhouse symbolizes the comforting idea that one's home is a place of security, but this place does not belong to either Barbara or Ben—it is a foreign, unfamiliar environment, and they are indeed strangers in a strange land. Barbara unsettlingly discovers the masticated corpses of the house's former occupants, and Ben must defend her from some zombies that have likewise broken in. Out of desperate necessity, Ben immediately begins a radical home renovation, quickly converting the farmhouse into a fortress. He incapacitates the zombies, tosses the bodies outside, and starts boarding up the doors and windows. Barbara can do little more than sit and stare, bemoaning the loss of her brother in a catatonic state. Although the home continues to possess its physical sense of security, it has lost its power to provide any psychological comfort.

That the seemingly harmless and ordinary would prove to be so life threatening is one of the fundamental precepts of the zombie formula. In addi-

tion to the slow-moving ghouls and the common farmhouse, the film's protagonists never become anything spectacular—Barbara is a simple girl, traumatized by the brutal slaying of her brother; Ben is a workaday “everyman”; and the Coopers, soon found hiding in the cellar, are an average middle-class family. This link to normalcy is emphasized by Dillard, who describes the essentially mundane nature of *Night* as “the story of everyday people in an ordinary landscape,

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played by everyday people who are, for the most part, from that ordinary locale” (20). In his afterword to the graphic novel *Miles Behind Us*, a zombie story told in another primarily visual medium, Simon Pegg points out that the protagonists of zombie movies are not superheroes or professional monster slayers such as Van Helsing—they are common, average folk forced to “step up” and defend themselves.

However, the ordinary by itself is not threatening—it also needs to be rendered as the fundamentally *unfamiliar*. In his introduction to *Horror Film Reader*, James Ursini writes, “Horror is based on recognizing in the unfamiliar something familiar, something attractive even as it is repulsive.

... The best horror films are those that evoke that feeling of the uncanny in us most strongly” (5). Ursini refers here to Freud's sense of the uncanny as something that has been repressed (148). This makes the “familiar unfamiliar” (the *heimlich unheimlich*) even more terrifying, for the familiar and recognizable are wrought into the foreign and uncanny. This perspective on the monster is most apropos the zombie movie, in which the threat is not only manifested as a hostile undead human but likely a hostile undead human the victim recognizes as a former intimate.

The physical form of the zombie is its most striking and frightening aspect: It was once—quite recently—a living person. The one-time protagonists of the movie become its eventual antagonists; thus, the characters cannot fully trust each other. As Dillard points out, “The living people are dangerous to each other . . . because they are potentially living dead should they die” (22). *Night* introduces its audience to a number of diverse characters, but these so-called heroes, when infected, rapidly become the most savage and threatening of villains. This stark manifestation of the uncanny is chillingly illustrated when poor Johnny returns near the end of the picture as a zombie, “still wearing his driving gloves and clutching for his sister with the idiotic, implacable single-mindedness of the hungry dead” (King 134). His deceptive familiarity is what ultimately leads Barbara to her doom—she hesitates at the sight of her brother, failing to recognize the dangers of his zombification until it is too late.

This terrifying prospect is shown even more graphically when the young Karen Cooper feasts on her own parents. As the battle with the swarming zombies rages upstairs, Karen dies from a zombie bite and succumbs to the effects of the radiation. She then gnaws hungrily on her dead father's arm and brutally attacks her mother with a trowel. Helen Cooper does little more than allow herself to be butchered; shock at seeing her daughter turned into a zombie and a binding sense of love and com-

passion render her impotent. When Ben eventually retreats to the perceived safety of the cellar, he is forced to kill the zombie versions of the entire Cooper family. Such a visceral shock works so well in a cinematic medium because the audience instantly recognizes the former protagonists in their zombified forms and can intimately relate to the horrified reactions of the survivors.

Finally, the zombie monster is ultimately terrifying because in it one sees one's self. Pegg discusses the essential function of the zombie: "Metaphorically, this classic creature embodies a number of our greatest fears. Most obviously, it is our own death, personified. The physical manifestation of that thing we fear the most. More subtly, the zombie represents a number of our deeper insecurities. The fear that deep down, we may be little more than animals, concerned only with appetite." In a very real sense, *Night* is the story about humanity's struggle to retain its sense of humanity. Ben and the others fight the zombies just to stay alive, but they also clash among themselves. Although he remains uninfected by the zombie plague, Ben's civility suffers and crumbles under the stress of the siege: He strikes Barbara for being hysterical, beats Mr. Cooper for disagreeing with his plans, and eventually shoots and kills Mr. Cooper. Ben is almost as violent and irrational as the zombies themselves, although he is the closest thing the movie has to a real hero.

Because anyone can potentially become a zombie, these films deal unabashedly with human taboos, murder, and cannibalism, which Dillard proposes have much to do with the genre's success (15). The dead are not allowed to rest in peace: Barbara's attempt to honor the resting place of one relative turns into a nightmare in which she vainly combats the remains of another dead relative. Ben becomes a kind of avenging angel, bashing, chopping, and shooting people—he is not only forced to disrespect the sanctity of the dead, but he also becomes a type of mass murderer. The cannibalism taboo is the one broached most

blatantly. After dying in an explosion, the bodies of Tom and Judy are mercilessly devoured by the gathered zombies, and Romero pulls no punches in showing charred flesh, ropy intestines, and closely gnawed bones. Karen's cannibalistic act even borders on incest, consuming the very flesh that originally gave her life.

Night, as with the zombie movies to follow, fulfills its generic promises with a great deal of gore and violence. This is a major reason film is so successful in telling the zombie story—blood, guts, and gore can be shown instantly with graphic detail. Humans have their intestines ripped out, zombies are cheerfully hunted and butchered, and mad doctors perform unspeakable acts on the reanimated corpses of their former associates. The synchronic nature of cinema allows these shocking images to be suddenly and thoroughly unleashed on the viewing public, resulting in the expected gleeful revulsion.

The horror of the zombie movie comes from recognizing the human in the monster; the terror of the zombie movie comes from knowing there is nothing to do about it but destroy what is left; the fun comes from watching the genre continue to develop. Although zombies are technically dead, their cinematic genre is a living, breathing entity that continues to grow and evolve. Zombie-themed video games have spawned such films as *Resident Evil* (2002), and the genre's popularity and longevity have resulted in remakes of both *Dawn of the Dead* and the forthcoming *Day of the Dead* (2006). But the genre is also constantly reinventing itself with revisionist films such as *Shaun of the Dead* and Romero's own *Land of the Dead* (2005).¹² Such overwhelming contemporary evidence firmly establishes zombie cinema as a valued member of genre studies.

NOTES

1. Some lesser known 2004 titles include *Return of the Living Dead 4* and *5*, *Zombie Honeymoon*, *Dead and Breakfast*, *Zombie Planet*, *Hide and Creep*, and *Zombie Xtreme*, just to name a few of the more provocative titles.

2. According to the Internet Movie Database, *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* grossed \$50 million domestically (with an estimated \$50 million budget), *Dawn of the Dead* grossed \$59 million (with a \$28 million budget), and *Shaun of the Dead* grossed \$13 million (with a \$4 million budget). Like most horror films, zombie movies are considered safe commodities and are usually quite profitable.

3. Romero's zombie films are rife with symbolism and social commentary: *Night of the Living Dead* is often read as a metaphor for both the horrors of the Vietnam War and the civil inequality and unrest of the 1960s, *Dawn of the Dead* is seen as a critique of consumer culture, and *Day of the Dead* is viewed as a pessimistic look at the cold war. See Dillard's "Night of the Living Dead: It's Not Like Just a Wind That's Passing Through" and Wells's *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch* for discussions on the political and social statements in *Night of the Living Dead*; see Wood's "Neglected Nightmares" and Skal's *The Monster Show* for discussions on the role of consumerism in *Dawn of the Dead*.

4. Zombies are featured prominently in horror video games series such as *Doom*, *Resident Evil*, and *Silent Hill*; a number of popular zombie graphic novels also exist, particularly *The Walking Dead* series by Robert Kirkman, *George A. Romero's Dawn of the Dead* by Steve Niles, and *Remains*, also by Niles. It is curious to note that aside from some occasional cameos on Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *Angel* (1999–2004), the "zombie story" has never been produced as a television series.

5. According to Wade Davis, although the term *voodoo* is more common and familiar to Westerners, *Vodoun* (also rendered *Vodun* or *Voudou*) is more accurately used by anthropologists when referring to the actual religion of Africa and Haiti (xi).

6. Davis's scientific text was quickly adapted by Wes Craven into a more mainstream horror movie in 1988. Although the first half of the film is somewhat loyal to Davis's actual experiences, Craven quickly departs from the anthropological sphere and presents a much more supernatural, violent, and spectacular version of Haiti.

7. Premature burial does have an established tradition in both fact and fiction. Edgar Allan Poe was particularly enamored with the subject, and Freud suggests that the idea of being buried alive would be the ultimate realization of the *unheimlich* (150)—a conscious confrontation with the inevitability of death.

8. The mummy might be considered a subclass of zombie; however, unlike its mindless cousins, a mummy is usually

brought back to life by a curse, operates by itself, does not infect its victims or reproduce, single-mindedly pursues a specific task, shows some intelligence and possibly even speech, and eventually returns to its slumber.

9. It should be noted that many so-called zombie films fail to feature true zombies at all. Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* films (1981 and 1987) deal with demonic possession, and the much-lauded *28 Days Later* (2002) from Danny Boyle is about living, breathing humans who have been infected by a deadly virus.

10. Zombie comedy movies (zombodies?) blatantly disregard Romero's model, attempting to negotiate the protocols of the genre to emphasize the corny over the uncanny. In such films as *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), *I Was a Teenage Zombie* (1987), and *Braindead* (1992), the zombies speak with surprising loquaciousness and have clear memories of their former lives and relationships, and infected protagonists are eerily aware of their slow transition to the undead.

Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985) could also be considered somewhat problematic because of the introduction of a quasi-domesticated zombie named Bub. A crazed scientist attempts to train Bub like a caged animal, using a reward system to encourage good behavior. However, even though Bub seems to recall some of his former life—he can answer a phone, flash a salute, and even brandish a pistol—his actions never escalate beyond primitive imitation. Furthermore, Bub never regains the power of speech; like other zombies, he is limited to grunts and occasional roars of outrage. In the end, Bub's supply of "zombie treats" runs out, and he quickly joins the rampaging masses of his less-sympathetic kin. The experiment is a total failure, and Bub remains what he is: a mindless zombie.

11. Stephen Spielberg's 2005 version of *War of the Worlds* is a notable exception. Although it embraces the spectacular conventions of the alien-invasion picture, it tells the story in a decidedly mundane way, focusing on average citizens in rural locations—exactly like the classic zombie movie.

12. Romero departs completely from this established genre staple in his 2005 *Land of the Dead*, a revisionist film that is more an indication of Romero selling out than it is a milestone of the genre's development. He proposes the possible evolution of zombies over time, showing the development of rudimentary vocal communication (still grunts only, no speech), the ability to handle firearms, and a primitive form of compassion for their own kind. Unfortunately, a zombie's brain would actually get worse as it rots over time, so such cerebral evolution makes no sense, even in a fantastic horror film.

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