

Finding the Zombie within Ourselves

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Imagine death knocking at the door. It may not be a knock, rather an unpleasant grunt along with what sounds like a tedious drag across the lawn, skidding along the grass. The zombie is out to get society, and it's out for good. It is a horrendous creature that is only out for one thing: victims to feed on. Although zombies are simple mindless creatures of the night, they appeal to humans just as much as disease, disaster and the fear of not knowing the unforeseen future. This fascination for zombies comes in many forms, and has captured audiences through different spectrums, such as the media, film, and books. Zombie fascination is a result of humans' desire to be intricately connected with them through the media's influence, becoming afraid when faced with the unknown, leaving us to question ourselves, and finding hope once the apocalypse is over.

To better understand how zombies are a part of our lives and how we can connect with them, we must first understand how zombies were introduced into modern culture. Zombie history can be traced back to the folk cultures originating from West Africa, particularly Haiti. Kennedy (2011), a writer for the *Wall Street Journal*, explains the anthropologist William Brooks' *The Magic Island*. This book details encounters around the 1900s in Haiti, and how zombies were not dragging, undead, grunting corpses, but actually undead slaves working for sugar cane plantations. Brooks writes of his encounter that the creature is "a soulless human corpse . . . is taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life" for the purpose of "setting it dull heavy tasks, and beating it like a dumb beast if it slackens" (as cited in Kennedy, 2001). In those times, zombies were imagined differently, which is understandable considering the time period; the sugar cane plantations were run by Americans. Kennedy goes on to point out that Haitian folklore brought the zombie sensation to the United

States. It was a new kind of monster that beat out the vampire and the werewolf, and had a much more unpredictable tale since it was so new. Kennedy also points out that after Brooks' encounters, film makers soon caught wind of the tales and took the zombies to the big screen with the movie *White Zombie*. The zombie craze in Western culture soon took off and hasn't stopped since.

The zombie and its apocalypse now saturate the worldwide media. With its influences on pop culture, many people fear that the end of the world is near by reading the news. In "Simulating the Zombie Apocalypse in Popular Culture and Media," Hamilton (2013), a professor of English in Chicano/U.S. studies, describes how the media has influenced the ideas of interested viewers. He mentions several crimes that occurred in 2012, in which people committed horrible acts of cannibalism. When media aired these stories, they often used the word "zombie" as a metaphor to describe the behavior of each of the criminals who were accused of similar horrible acts (p. 55). He mentions several cases, such of that of Rudy Eugene, who attacked a homeless man by eating his face. He was shot by the Miami police when he was caught, hunched over, growling and eating away at the man. It was later revealed that he had been under the influence of drugs. Another case was of Alexander Kinuya, who killed his roommate and ate his brain and heart (p. 55). He goes on to say that news media uses the metaphor of the zombie to conceal what is actually going on in the world:

Though all the deployments of zombies and a zombie apocalypse are ultimately simulations of one order or another, those utilized by the news media serve only to mask and obscure the horrors of humanity from itself, while those in film, comics, and television precipitate a confrontation between humanity and its fears, its anxieties, and its depths. (p. 57)

The media uses people's fascination with the zombie to bring in the ratings, by using zombie as a sensationalist metaphor while simultaneously decreasing the seriousness of what has actually happened.

Another way that zombies have influenced people is through comedy or comics. Even the Center for Disease Control (CDC) an organization that delivers awareness of health and human safety nationwide, has used zombies as a metaphor for how to prepare for a real life disaster. The CDC published a comic book by Margaret Silver called *Zombie Preparedness 101: Zombie Pandemic*. In the comic, Tod and Julie watch a news broadcast stating that there is a virus outbreak, and that everyone should stay indoors. The virus is of unknown origin, but people are showing symptoms of slurred speech, slow movement, and violent behaviors, similar to those of a zombie. Tod researches information on what to gather in such a situation. Soon after, the city is in a state of emergency, and everyone that is not infected is to be isolated in their homes until the CDC comes out with a vaccine that prevents the virus from spreading. Later, Tod wakes up, realizing it was all a dream. He is met with a warning on the news that there is a storm, advising people to have a preparedness kit in case an emergency should occur. Using his dream to serve as a lesson, Tod begins to prepare for the natural disaster (Silver, 2015). The main idea of the story is to prepare people in case an emergency should occur, and the comic comes with a list of emergency supplies that should be kept in the home. This comic uses the zombie as the metaphor to create an intentionally funny story to capture a younger audience's interest and to bring awareness to real life emergency situations and preparedness. This shows that the media is not the only outlet that influences our thinking. In times of unknown crisis, society comes to a state of halt, and people start to panic in unknown situations. In this case, the CDC uses our fascination and familiarity with zombies to motivate us to do what we should be doing anyway.

Throughout history, society has encountered unknown situations that have made people to go into a panic and sometimes act irrationally. That feeling of the end of humanity can sometimes be scary. In the early 1900s, the world came to a panic when it encountered the Spanish Flu pandemic. Claiming around 500 million lives, this flu brought fear and panic throughout the world, so much so, the world's governments had to step in and put restrictions on citizens to try and prevent the spread (Center for Disease Control [CDC], 2018). According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services. (2016), the flu was an unexpected crisis that hit suddenly. Businesses as well as schools were shut down. Even though many countries approved the shutting down of businesses, the United States was not as agreeable to these circumstances. Many people feared that the shutdown of businesses and schools could cause more problems, such as unemployment, which can lead to economic depression. Public health officials took authoritative measures to see that the individuals that were infected were isolated. As the body count rose, funerals were being held outdoors to prevent infection. The media was flooded with ways to cure the infections, though most so-called cures didn't help ("Influenza Strikes," para. #). The government took over to prevent panic, but often intruded on people's social rights, especially those who were in isolation. If the zombie apocalypse were to occur, in the form of infections or other means, many societies would act irrationally, often because they do not have proper answers. Zombies intensify this unknown fear. The fear of not knowing what it would be like to become undead.

Another event that caused people to act irrationally, were the cases of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s. Medical technology had advanced far since the Spanish flu, but people were still in fear of what HIV/AIDS would bring, and tended to isolate and blame a group for causing the problem. In the early 1980s, AIDS was an unknown disease that was mainly confined to the gay

community, suggesting that the disease could only be spread among homosexual people.

Barnhart (2014), a psychologist from Walden University, discusses how the stigma of HIV/AIDS from those times have not changed much today, and much of it has to do with not having the right education about the disease, or not having it at all. In the '80s, people often thought that the disease only came from those that were homosexuals or drug addicts and for those that had it was form of punishment from God (Barnhart, 2014). Due to a lack of knowledge, and rise of the infections, people would often panic. She goes on to say that although there have been medical advancements in the research on AIDS, psychologically, people are still far behind, hurting those who still live with the disease. She writes that, "It is with education and perseverance that we as a society have come as far as we have, medically as well as psychologically; however, we still have a long way to go" (Barnhart, 2014). People often feel fear when it comes to the unknown because there is no quick counter response when faced with it. Often, people can't respond to the unknown, because there is no logical explanation. Although we know that zombies are just fictional characters that devour our brains with imagination, history has illustrated just how much of zombies we actually can be.

With society having fears of the unknown, and media's influence, it is no surprise that these predicaments can lead people to question human society as a whole when faced with the zombie apocalypse. If the end of the world were to come, there is no doubt that people will be left to decide whether to embrace what is coming or to become savages, caring about their own survival without any empathy for their neighbor. The hit AMC TV show *The Walking Dead* brings the idea of zombies back to reality by using them as a tool to create a better story about survival. Every character is faced with circumstances that leaves them questioning who they are as a person, the question being that what makes people alive. An example of this is in season 1

episode six, where the protagonist Rick and his gang end up at the CDC in hopes of finding safety and answers to the question of how the apocalypse came about. In the episode, Dr. Jenner is in the facility, and explains to Rick the biological aspects of the undead brain. He then goes on to reveal that everyone is infected with the disease but does not turn in to a zombie until the infection takes hold, either by being bitten or just dying (Ferland, 2010). This gives a definite answer: upon death, everyone will be turned into a zombie. At that point, it is made clear that people are much closer to being zombies than people. It is difficult to define what it means to live, but in the TV show, many of them struggle to survive in hopes of actually living once it is over. Not only do characters have to kill and survive, they also have to question whether to trust the living as well. Friendships and loyalties are often left as unanswered questions and people are always in constant fear of losing a loved one or being killed by one. With that in mind, nobody can say how one will react when faced with a real life catastrophe. Watching shows such as this one can leave society to picture how they would react but uncertain how much of a savage or human they would be. Zombies can question our humanity as well as bring fear and anxiety within them; that ultimately can be a good or bad.

The zombies, which are protagonist characters, are much like people that live in the real world. Humans can relate to these characters because they are also going through these feelings on a day to day basis. Many people struggle with emotional stress. Only in fictional stories such as *The Walking Dead* do authors connect with people's emotions and develop a comparison to what people go through today.

It is important to know that the idea of zombies and eating flesh is not what is compelling to the masses. Who would want to say that eating flesh is fun? The real ideas are the emotions that arise when watching ghastly gore horror movies. Without a doubt, every person experiences

different feelings when it comes to watching scary movies and the way that they interpret them. In an interview conducted by Ebert, a well-known film critic and a Pulitzer Prize winner, he discusses the ideas behind horror films with the man dubbed as the king of zombies, George A Romero. In the interview, Ebert (1979) asked Romero if there was a message behind the movie *Dawn of the Dead*. Romero stated,

Well, yes [. . .]. You can say the movie is an observation about materialism, and so forth, and what have you really said? The point is that people come out of the film having experienced some very extreme emotions, and it's up to them to interpret what happened. Watching horror movies lets people explore with emotions. The feelings of being scared can be exciting yet intimidating at the same time. Zombies on the big or the little screen bring forth these emotions and serve as metaphors for the unthinking masses without the consequences of being eaten or devoured by the brainless wonderers of the night.

Zombies have the inability to feel. Frequently people feel the same way through having a boring daily work routine, an unhappy marriage, or an overall sense of sadness. Either way, zombie movies and TV shows often let the viewer imagine themselves in the character's shoes. This imagination is often an escape from reality and even the thought of killing undead corpses is more compelling than a day in the office. Nevertheless, zombies and the apocalypse are a better plan than the current destructive society of today.

Often it has been wondered what the end of the world will be like once the killing of zombies has ceased. Death is certain with everyone, but surviving a zombie apocalypse can be fresh start to a new beginning. There wouldn't be any more debt, obligations other than taking care of families, and the only thing left is hope for a better life after death. In a TedTalk, Geijer, an author as well as an expert in surviving the zombie apocalypse, discusses how to survive a

zombie attack, but it is not the kind of zombie apocalyptic crisis one might think. He talks about actual disasters and how to overcome crisis or end of the world phenomena. Geijer (2016) first discusses how he realized his new class caught the interest of hundreds of people, he began to dig deeper in the ideas of an apocalyptic crisis. He states, “There was a thirst in our society for discussing the end of the world, with or without zombies” (Geijer, 2016). Society has a growing interest in the end of the world, primarily because people feel that that time is coming close. Geijer goes on to say that not only is the interest in zombies and the apocalypse about surviving, but also about hope that comes after having survived. Now people feel that they are the zombies that carry on with their lives, day in and day out, in a routine fashion without being able to reach their full potential. He goes on to say if the end of the world did come, people would have a “clean slate, a fresh start” and after it is all over, there is a hope; a hope that makes it important to survive (Geijer, 2016). The thought of having hope following a crisis is what is important. Starting new means that all previous mistakes taken are no longer an issue and people can move on with a clear conscious. It is important to realize that having hope after an apocalypse is a start to a new found happiness.

Zombies will always be a part of people’s lives. Aside from the great films and the growing million-dollar industry, it is important to dig deeper in the apocalypse phenomena and find a zombie within ourselves. Humans can easily go from acting irrational out of fear, making society question who we are and what it means to be alive. Despite all these emotions, there is a sense of hope for a new beginning out of the root of madness we are faced with today. We as a society should embrace the apocalypse, because after all, we are already living in it.

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