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**THE ZOMBIE MEDIA MONSTER AND ITS  
EVOLUTION AS A SIGN AND HISTORICAL ALLEGORY**

A Thesis in

Media Studies

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the evolution of the Zombie character as a signifier, and its role in allegorically commenting on societal. The Zombie is a character that popular culture has been fascinated with in the current, as well as historical, media landscape. Making its film debut with *White Zombie* (1932), this “monster” derived from non-Gothic Afro-Caribbean roots was difficult at first for Western society to understand. There was an attempt in early Zombie depictions to control or Westernize this creature into a Gothic mold readily understood by audiences of the day. Other media monsters, like Dracula or Frankenstein, were understood and controlled more easily because of their Gothic and literary bases. Conversely, the Zombie’s base was unknown due to the lack of correct knowledge of Haitian culture and religion. These mysterious origins, as well as the highly controlled nature in which the Zombie was introduced, set up a universal malleable semiotic signifier that even today has the ability to shift and change to fit whatever genre or societal issue that becomes prevalent at a given time. Acting as a form of “Historical Allegory,” the Zombie can be read in many different ways at various times in oppositional and counter-hegemonic ways. Many of the Zombie signifying traits that these allegories depend upon were solidified in the Romero films. This is not to say that universally the Zombie is ideologically confrontational. Eras like the “Zombie spoof cycle” in the 1980’s certainly resisted against this counter-hegemonic type of depiction, opting instead for a more controlled and commodified version. However the importance of this postmodern spoof Zombie was that it emptied the undead signifier of meaning and eventually enabled the Zombie sign to spread out to many divergent cultural areas. Across the long and eclectic time that the Zombie has been a staple of media, this creature has proven able to be applied to any situation and any cultural text, making the Zombie signifier uniquely capable of ideologically addressing historically contingent societal issues.

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## **Introduction**

Walking down the campus road, I could not help but look over my shoulder every few seconds. I knew that they were hunting me and that scanning every possible nook and crevice, staying one step ahead of them, was my only chance of survival. The apocalypse had broken out a month or so before and since then my everyday life had not been the same. I felt completely exposed every time I was outdoors and was sure that I stuck out like a sore thumb as one of the last of my kind on this college campus. I was a human and they were not. I am no longer in control of my life, as they have been chasing me for weeks now. As the number of human beings has dwindled, their numbers inherently have grown. As I exit my classroom building, I think I catch a glimpse of one and step back inside quickly. If I was going to make it to my next building I needed to make a run for it. Bracing myself and taking a deep breath, I dive out onto the asphalt only to have my fears confirmed. I am being chased by a Zombie. They lay siege to the classroom building I run into, now it is only a matter of time until I am turned. With only eight humans left and over a hundred Zombies it is amazing I have lasted this long. When they turn me into a Zombie, suddenly the seven other humans who have helped me survive for so long immediately begin to look very appetizing. I am now the hunter.

As ridiculous a fictional plot as this sounds, it is the true account of my experience in the college campus game “HvZ” or “Humans vs. Zombies.” A bi-annual Urban Gaming Club staple that pits regular students against one another in a giant “world as playground” version of tag. This popular game (played on many campuses around the country) uses the Zombie apocalypse as its structure, showing how far this horror subgenre monster has evolved, and how it has worked its way into popular culture as a

semiotic system able to be dispersed and applied everywhere. It would seem that the many different depictions of the Zombie creature in popular culture, from the movies to campus games over the years, have little to do with its Voodoo Afro-Caribbean origins, but it has become an undead signifier applicable to any situation because of these origins.

It is helpful to examine this horror monster in a genre framework as well, because of its varied and sometimes complex different versions and traits. What we think of as a Zombie changes all the time. It is difficult to find a common semiotic definition of what signifies a Zombie, and this is partly due to its shrouded and mysterious origin in the Afro-Caribbean Voodoo tradition. Most of the existing media studies and film theory written about the Zombie creature focuses on the study of George A. Romero's *Living Dead* series. The first film of this series, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), is discussed as revolutionary in its changing of the horror landscape, and specifically the Zombie creature because of its departure from the early Voodoo Zombie films. At many similar junctures the Zombie depictions change and move in markedly different directions than previous iterations. At first glance the flesh eating living dead of Romero's films, the spoof cycle that the Zombie went through in the 1980's and early 90's, the spreading of this creature to new and wild realms (much like HvZ), and the speeding up of Zombies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are so wildly different and at times revolutionary that tying them all to a shared semiotic definition would be difficult. However, if the Zombie is to be classified within its own horror subgenre, then it is important to follow in a general genre theory framework and establish some "semantic and syntactic" (Altman) structures that have emerged over the years.

Before establishing the rules of this Zombie horror subgenre, it will be helpful to posit why this creature is so important within our media landscape. This monster has been a sustainable staple within the horror genre since its first film debut in 1932 with *White Zombie*. The Zombie's ability to continue throughout the decades of media changes points to its importance. Horror in general has the ability to speak to societal concerns in ways that other genres cannot. It appeals to the primal emotion of fear, which places it in a very different vein than other genres such as western. By holding our fascination with the fearful parts of our lives horror can "gain attractive power by thematically developing concerns of especial appropriateness for the period in which they were made" (Carroll 159).

It will be necessary within each studied instance of Zombie media depictions to analyze the textual elements that speak allegorically to the specific societal issues at each given historical moment and how this furthers the undead sign that is the Zombie. This will help ground each evolution of the sign in its own time period. Special attention will be paid to the "semantic semiotic characteristics" and the "syntactic thematic" element of differing kinds of social control within each media text, which will put these Zombie sign iterations into genre as well as allegorical context.

As a subgenre of horror, the Zombie film has the added dimension of change and constant evolution/adaptation. The Zombie has evolved from its Voodoo origins to a solidified media object used allegorically in the era of Romero's films. It moved into a postmodern iteration where the semiotic Zombie signs were emptied of their signification, and it has subsequently spread out into other media forms. Finally to the current trend of an evolved creature with a semiotic code that can be applied to nearly



any situation. All of these changes make the Zombie an ideal horror monster to speak to the varied historical ruptures and societal concerns that occur in different time periods. In this way, the Zombie is the embodiment of what Ismail Xavier discussed as a “Historical Allegory,” in that they can adapt at different key historical junctures to symbolize “an encompassing view of history presented in a condensed way” and “ can intervene in cultural and political debates” (361). Because of its uncertain and mysterious non-Western origin, the Zombie functions as a universally malleable “utility tool” that has stood in and addressed many diverse social ruptures. The Zombie has become a monster that exemplifies an important site of biting satirical social commentary films. That is not to say that the Zombie media depictions are always overtly political and counter-hegemonic but only that this malleable monster has the capacity to be an effective historical allegory for key societal issues and preoccupations that arise.

To understand the nature of the Zombie, one must contemplate the various semiotic tendencies throughout the diverse media depictions. What signifies a Zombie, and what a Zombie signifies, in both its common traits as well as its divergent traits? This would be what Rick Altman distinguishes as the basic components or the “semantic” aspects of the genre. For the Zombie subgenre these building blocks can be difficult to ascertain given the Zombie’s changing nature, but it still will be helpful to describe some general traits of the Zombie creature before we examine their historical morphology. In its 1930’s early film iterations the Zombie was based loosely on the Haitian Voodoo Zombie and as such was depicted as being possessed by a priest. They walked slow and steadily with blank stares and no verbal expression. They could be brought out of the trance if the priest was destroyed. By the late 1950’s and early 1960’s there were traces

of change in these characteristics, such as these creature's source of possession changing to alien forces or unknown origins as well as an increase in their bodily decomposition, both of which were present in *Invisible Invaders* (1959). In 1968, George A. Romero made *Night of the Living Dead* which solidified for some time the Zombie as a non-verbal, unthinking, slow moving, but shambling creature whose only desire is to feed off the flesh of the living. The cause of the Zombies was unspecified and humans became these creatures simply by dying (bites from these Zombies accelerates the process). The only way to kill these creatures was to destroy the brain. In the Romero films, one also sees the signifying practice of depicting apocalyptic "endings," a feature absent in the earlier Voodoo Zombie films<sup>1</sup>. In the 1980's, these solidified semiotic "rules" were bent for aesthetic and comedic purposes. In this era, Zombies gained voices at times, raised their cognitive skills, sometimes changed their desire to eating solely brains, and at times could not be killed. In its recent iterations, the Zombie has reverted mostly to the signifying traits of the Romero era creatures, except they move fast and are malevolent rather than merely hungry. Understanding the Zombie entails understanding the evolution of its semiotic differences over time.

Along with the semantic similarities of this subgenre described above, like the changing of a person from human being to a malevolent creature, there are also syntactic similarities, which are the themes and preoccupations making up the "explanatory power" of a genre (Altman 220). These syntactic similarities relate to the plot and themes that are constantly revisited, not the speed these creatures moves at. For the Zombie, it is the theme of control that defines this syntactic element. Control is an overarching important notion to the Zombie media in both its origins and its various iterations. Haitian Voodoo

provided the original cultural basis of this monster and its relationship with control. There was an early attempt to Westernize and exercise control over the media depictions of the Zombie, which infused this subgenre with a foundation and obsession with this notion of control. This preoccupation with control takes multiple forms in different historical contexts, such as the loss of hegemonic control in society, the fear of being controlled by external forces, the loss of control of the masses, and importantly the eventual loss of control of one's own body related to Western ideals such as personhood and freedom of individuality. Recently, it manifests as a lack of faith in the ability of government and scientific forces to control modern society. Even with the extremely varied and sometimes apparently revolutionary Zombie creatures there is still an overarching thematic syntactic framework within which this subgenre has developed.

With this application of control, the Romero's *Living Dead* series might appear revolutionary compared to all Zombie depictions prior, but viewed through this framework this set of films becomes more evolutionary. Though the agent of control for the Zombie may change over time from Voodoo priests, to the Western Hollywood standards, to the uncertainty of Romero's possible radiation, the concept of control is constant. The Zombie eventually fell victim to a spoof cycle in the 1980's, but even this era mirrored the origin of the monster and its preoccupation with control. In its spoof cycle of the 1980's, the control was the media's attempts at controlling this newly familiar creature as well as its audience's reception towards it. After the 1980's spoof cycle, the Zombie spread to wildly different areas giving the appearance of being uncontrollable but these new areas appeared to exert more control over this monster than ever before in new media outlets such as video games. Consumers of this new Zombie

media at times could control the survivors and zombies alike. Then after a brief static period in the late 1990's, the *Zombie* made another "revolutionary" change by simply stepping faster than before and running, but in the end this served to open up a set of films that exemplified a theme of evolution as well as an obsessive look at the lack of control in modern society.

When the historical evolution of the undead signifier is examined, along with specific texts within the *Zombie* media landscape, the theme of control appears again and again. This control coupled with the universal malleable nature of this creature enhances its ability to be an effective site for historical allegories. Looking at this important subgenre horror monster as having a semantic semiotic base to draw from and a syntactic thematic foundation that makes it so effective at satirical social commentary, it will be easier to understand how one creature is able to address so many societal concerns. Understanding the *Zombie* is important both because of its pervasive popularity in current and historical media but also because of its effectiveness at allegorically exposing key historical ruptures. It is especially effective because this allegorical content moves past the "literary allegory" that is read into a film afterwards, and instead focuses on the historically grounded and contingent *Xavier* allegory. This allegorical content might address varying societal issues but they are all coalesced around the theme of social control and the ways that control is manifested. *Zombie* films follow this theme of social commentary, and to understand the inherent ability of the *Zombie* to accomplish this feat so often can help viewers better appreciate this trans-media monster.

## **Section 1 – Zombie Creature’s Voodoo Origins**

The origins of the Zombie’s morphology, as well as the semiotic semantic traits and syntactic thematic elements, trace back to Voodoo culture, which imparted the beginnings of this media monster. Looking at the Zombie character of today, these creatures are a far cry from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century media origins of the Zombie. The desires, traits, origins, and activities of Zombies in the current state of the horror subgenre barely resemble its Voodoo Afro-Caribbean ancestor. However, there are many important foundational semiotic traits and themes of this creature in media that have been remarkably durable over the decades. Semiotically, Zombies are “undead,” they historically walk slow, they often moan as well as have little to no high end brain function, and they are usually dangerous to be around. Thematically, these monsters exhibit notions of community and individuality, blurred distinctions of life and death, and most notably the importance and preoccupation with concepts of control, loss of control, and fear of being controlled. These themes continue to permeate these creatures even today. These themes of control were born out of desire to fit this mysterious Haitian creature into an easier to understand Western Gothic mold. Characters like Dracula and Frankenstein were more widely accepted in a shorter period of time, and unlike these other Gothic creatures, the Zombie did not have clearly defined and established “rules” in early films. Separating itself from the other monsters of its day, the mysterious origin and changeable nature of the Zombie character eased its way into our culture in a way that solidified it as a site for effective allegories for years to come.

The term “Zombie” has its origins in the words ndzumbi, meaning “cadaver of the deceased” in the Mitsogho tribe of West African Gabon, and nzambi, meaning “spirit of a

dead person” in the African Kongo (McIntosh 2). These terms may be derived from their African heritage but it is only when they are filtered and used in the Haitian rituals of what we know as Voodoo that western culture took notice. This term “Voodoo” is a pointed one in that it can illuminate a few aspects of the Zombie and its cultural origins. Westerners use the word “Voodoo” when referring to the Haitian religion that is based on the West African faiths of Fon and Ewe in which the spirits or “loa” are revered. This is not a term used by the Haitian people themselves to describe their religion. As this is a “closed system of belief” (Davis 11), there is a strong Insider-Outsider mentality in which the outsiders can never be a part of, or understand. To the Haitian natives, the word “voodoo” itself literally means god or spirit and “from their point of view, refers to a specific event, a dance ritual during which the spirits arrive to mount and possess the believer” (Davis 11-12).

The term Voodoo is important not only in its links to possession of a human being but also the strict Insider-Outsider nature of the word. Westerners use it to represent a rich and varied religion, latching onto the concepts of possession and Zombies, and the Haitian natives are happy to allow them this delusion. Significantly, once one becomes an Insider in the Voodoo religion becoming an Outsider would be considered a fate worse than death. Passed down as folklore stories, the Zombie was used as a powerful deterrent against violating social norms. The fear of being turned into one by a priest, known as a “Bokor,” was a type of social control, much like Foucault’s use of the “panopticon.” For these peasants of Voodoo villages, hearsay about zombification was more common than actual documented instances. This is where the Zombie link is illuminated, because when a person in Haitian culture is zombified by a Bokor they become a different Outsider and

so more than death “Haitian peasants greatly fear being removed from ‘the many’ and becoming ‘the one’” (McIntosh 3). Today however, there is a complete reversal of many of these issues latent in the Zombie subgenre where the fear is becoming one of the many and losing individuality. Though individuality and community have remained an important theme throughout the evolution of the Zombie film, its treatment is different across cultures, but there is a shared sense of fear in “*becoming* a Zombie rather than meeting the monster itself” (Koven 30).

Given the ways in which the term Voodoo itself has been changed to fit Western ideals, it is no surprise that the Zombie media creature would follow a similar metamorphosis as it moved from oral tradition to screen culture. Emerging from folklore backgrounds, the Zombie is “one of few monsters that originate from a non-Gothic, non-European tradition” (McIntosh 1). The news reports of the Zombie originated from the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915-1934. This colonial background for the emergence of the Zombie is important in understanding these early Zombie films and subsequently the iterations that followed. Popularized by William Seabrook’s travelogue *The Magic Island* in 1929, the West was fascinated with this strange new culture and creature because it was unlike anything they had encountered before. In a reversal of the current Zombie iterations and expansions, film was not the first way in which the media adopted this creature. Many pulp novel stories arose of possession and spirit zombies (known in Haitian as a zombie jardin) resembling ghosts more than anything, as well as the travelogue listed above, which sparked the 1929 stage play “Zombie.” This play was extremely popular and so influential that the producer Webb later sued the Halpern Brothers for their film *White Zombie* (1932) because of its plot similarities. The Halpern

Brothers eventually won the case and *White Zombie* is still widely believed to be the very first Zombie film.

The Zombie monsters in these early films embody one characteristic that has continued to be important to this horror subgenre even today, the blurred distinction between life and death. For the Zombie, this binary opposition can be traced back to Haitian culture and the theories on how Zombies are “created.” Zombie folklore includes the death of a person and the raising of that person later for possession purposes. Early Western theories of this process ranged from true witchcraft to a poison that gave the appearance of death for a short while, much like the end plan in *Romeo and Juliet*. Research into this pseudo-death was made popular later in the book and subsequent film *Serpent and the Rainbow* (book 1985, film 1988) in which Wade Davis, an anthropologist and ethno botanist, explored the different neurotoxins that could make this process possible. He landed on the conclusion that a mixture of ingredients such as tetrodotoxin (puffer fish) and a deep cultural belief could create someone who went from near death to believing that they were a Zombie, calling it “psychological and cultural foundations of a chemical event” (Davis 265). Though later discounted, Davis’ work would have been an improvement on the clouded and blurred explanations of life and death in the Zombie beginnings. This initial confusion led to many strange contradictions and discontinuity early on in this horror subgenre.

In these early Zombie films, the main confusion about the Haitian origins lies in the films’ explanation of how one becomes a Zombie. The origins of these creatures from actual Haitian culture were ignored or misunderstood, replaced with inconsistency in early Zombie films. Most of these early films claim that to become a Zombie one must



die and be resurrected, but many times these same films feature a white woman possessed who has never died. In *White Zombie*, it is a Voodoo priest who performs the possession and in *King of the Zombies* (1941) it is explained by “hypnotism” with the Zombification nonetheless taking hold. This theme of confusion, due to the Zombie’s mysterious origin, persists in moments when a character dies and no one is sure if they will rise again, and even in the definitions and titles of the creatures like “living dead” and “undead.”

The durable impact of this different folklore origin on the non-Gothic, non-European Zombie monster can be seen in the film *White Zombie*, and continuing through many early Zombie films. In these films, there is a progression from Western media trying to exert control over the traits/definitions of the confusing and unfamiliar Zombie, to an eventual ceding of this control and a criticism of the very colonialism that produced the Zombie film monster. These films marked the beginnings of a subgenre where the Zombie, because of its universal malleable nature, is able to sustain itself over time as a historically contingent allegory exploiting the “way in which a film can intervene in cultural and political debates” (Xavier 361). These early films focus on societal ruptures pertaining to the main theme of the Zombie, control and the fear of losing it. They came about at a time of great turmoil in the U.S. in terms of both war and isolationist politics. The control in these early films comes across as a control (or fear of losing control) of the outside threats of war and mysterious Other cultures that were occupied by the U.S. The early Zombie monster is one of perfectly controlled nature. Whoever is possessed displays purposeful and intentional movements and actions brought on by the possessor. They are exploited slaves who are “not worried about long hours” (*White Zombie*, 1932) and whose only desires are those of their masters. These early Zombie films allegorically

speak to the relationship the occupying country has in a colonial landscape, with its inherent preoccupation with control of a culturally different “Other.”

Themes of control in the early *Zombie* films become evident when viewing the texts themselves, even the first one *White Zombie*. In this film, the *Zombie* is controlled through possession by a white priest standing in as the West's control of a mysterious unknown culture that is easier to symbolically colonize than understand. The first three shots of *White Zombie* (not to mention the title's implications of white Western control) sum up a great deal of its relationship to the *Zombie*'s beginnings. The film opens in a wide, non-descript shot of a Voodoo ceremony with credits superimposed over it. The shot is literally stamping the West onto this ritual. With the title words and wide blurry nature of the shot, there is no way to see any faces or specifics pointing to a fear of the anonymous collective identity. After a brief establishing shot of an approaching carriage, *White Zombie* cuts to a close-up of the two very white protagonists. This initial close up of these two characters, solidifies whom we identify with as they literally drive through the exotic Voodoo ritual. This dynamic is reminiscent of what Shohat and Stam call a “substitution of cultural identity” (16). Our initial identification as audience members with the Haitian natives, the first characters we see, is replaced by the closer shot of the white Westerners. The narrative has been taken over and is now being told from “the colonizer's perspective” (Shohat and Stam 109). (This beginning stands in well for the first *Zombie* film ever made, trying very hard to fit the character into the same mold that monsters like *Dracula*, and *Frankenstein* were in at the time). The role of the villain Voodoo priest, or Bokor, in *White Zombie* is played by none other than *Dracula* himself, Bela Lugosi. This casting choice points to an attempt to force this folklore character into

a mold that audiences were used to. The mise-en-scène sticks to the Gothic tropes and semiotic traits with its “castle-on-the-hill,” which looms over the village with vultures hovering around it. Many scenes are set within this castle and looking at the interior combined with the characters’ dress this film could easily be mistaken for any number of Gothic inspired films of its day. This could be seen as a horror subgenre just using tropes from other films temporarily until it finds its own voice, but the origin of the Zombie monster tells a different story. The use of Gothic conventions in early Zombie films is an attempt to control the mysterious and confusing Outsider source of the creature by Westernizing it.

This attempt at controlling the Zombie character is echoed through the various themes within the film itself. Edward Lowry and Richard deCordova argue that the horror of *White Zombie* is produced through the use of superimposed and highly unusual camera techniques that put the audience, as well as the characters within the film, under the spell of Bela Lugosi’s villain, Legendre (173), a casting choice that again indexes the Gothic Dracula. This assessment appears to be accurate, as Legendre many times literally looks directly at the camera, an uncommon technique in Hollywood cinema, and in turn at the audience when he is controlling his victims and we are treated to extreme close-ups of his actions such as his hands clasped together. Taking this argument a step further, the entire film is not only concerned with these horror-producing techniques but also in controlling every aspect of the Zombie monster, even the agent possessing it. The link between the character Legendre and the title characters of such films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), *Dr. Mabuse*, *The Gambler* (1922), and *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933), are illuminating in discussing the early control of the Zombie film subgenre. These films

depict their villains as criminals by proxy who control people to do their bidding. This character type was very popular in this early cinema time period and inspired many sequels, such as *Dr. Mabuse* as well as look-alike versions, all the way into the 1960's and 70's. Much like Siegfried Kracauer's thoughts on *Dr. Caligari* specifically, these films can be seen as legitimizing this control of others from a distance. Instead of modeling Legendre after the native Haitian priests, *White Zombie* tries to control the somnambulist depiction by making him a "phantom magician" like Dr. Caligari (Kracauer 160). Though Legendre does not physically resemble his somnambulist predecessors, he embodies the same type of European mysterious possessor role. In *White Zombie* this depiction ignores the native Haitian as a viable character type and draws on familiar Western somnambulist conventions. This Western control of the early *Zombie* films was common, and allegorically speaks to the relationship the U.S. had with Outsiders exemplified through the Neutrality Acts, to be discussed in detail later.

This control dynamic is explained well in *White Zombie* by looking at the triangle of control that is set up in a strange three part wipe-shot as Neil, the husband of possessed Madeleine, approaches Legendre's castle. Beginning with a shot of the castle in the top of the frame, it wipes a shot of Madeleine in the middle-left portion of the frame, finally it wipes Neil in the lower right of the frame. This sets up the control triangle of *White Zombie* with the castle (representing Legendre) controlling Madeleine and her controlling Neil. The film suggests that though this Voodoo (non-Western) curse is strong, it is no match for good old-fashioned Western filmic love. Madeleine temporarily breaks Legendre's hold and remembers Neil even though "No one ever remembers anything when they are like that" (*White Zombie*). Though sloppier (Neil stumbles to Madeleine

while Zombies move purposefully), the pull of love conquers the unknown and strange Voodoo ritual. This is typical of Zombie media to use body movement to signify various levels of control. For example in the current Zombie films the trend is to significantly speed up these monsters pointing to a loss of control on the part of their human victims.

*White Zombie* was made in an era when the U.S. was increasingly practicing non-interventionism because of the costly toll of World War I. Due to fear of increasingly hostile Fascist powers, the U.S. pulled back from anything that would lead them into conflict. This eventually led to congress passing the Neutrality Acts in the 1930's, which put embargos on the trade and sale of arms and war materials to warring countries. It makes sense that films such as *White Zombie* made during this isolationist era allegorically point to the desire to be insulated from mysterious Outsiders. Rather than take a strange Voodoo monster at face value, *White Zombie* instead changes and controls this monster in a Westernized fashion insulating audiences from the outside origins and influences. As the U.S. increasingly sought to aid countries like France and Great Britain, the Neutrality Acts added concessions allowing "cash and carry" war material transactions with warring nations. This slow progression of the desire to help allied countries manifested itself in Zombie films, as a move from the Westernization of the monster to an acceptance of its Haitian Voodoo heritage.

The anxiety over control of this monster as a surrogate for control over society continued in such films as *King of the Zombies* (1941), but as stated above by this time it became increasingly more difficult to Westernize the Zombie character because of new attitudes about the U.S. involvement in foreign affairs. *King of the Zombies* deals with a crash landing by two U.S. army officers on a Caribbean island run by Dr. Sangre, a

European aristocrat. The two officers, Mac and James, along with their valet Jeff, are in search of a lost Admiral. The mise-en-scène of this film is significant in that the structure of Dr. Sangre's house is set up in a way that plays right into the West's attempts at controlling the Zombie. Unlike *White Zombie*, there is a breaking away from the Gothic semiotic convention of the castle looming on the hill. In *King of the Zombies*, the house is covered in foliage and located right in the middle of the jungle. The home decorations include skulls, ritual masks, and Voodoo artifacts. But hidden beneath all the island décor is a stone Gothic staircase adorned with candlestick sconces on the wall, which leads to Dr. Sangre's secret Zombie and Voodoo lair. With tracking shots following characters down into this area throughout the film, this setup evokes a feeling of the ever-closing in of the native world and an increasingly futile attempt on the part of the West to cloister the Zombie all to itself. Following in the footsteps of *White Zombie*, the island is controlled by the European world with Dr. Sangre leading the Voodoo ceremonies, but in this film these rituals cannot be completed without the help of many natives including Tahama, the high priestess.

This inclusion of Haitian native marks a push for more open treatment of cultures different from the ones the West was comfortable with. As it turns out, Dr. Sangre is really German and working for the Nazis to get secrets out of the captured Admiral Wainwright with the help of Voodoo to loosen his tongue. With the Nazis painted as the ones conducting the rituals and hiding the Zombies in the basement, the film reads as an allegory of moving toward a more open society against the alternative of fascist collective control at a time in history when the Neutrality Acts themselves were being replaced by intervention in these conflicts. The two officers' valet, Jeff, stands in well for

this burgeoning openness. Dr. Sangre attempts many times to force Jeff metaphorically and literally down into the basement because he is a Black servant, while the American officers constantly try to allow him to stay up above with them. There is, however, still a heavy amount of Othering in this film, putting Voodoo in league with Nazis. This confusing grey area of progression, with some groups moving forward and some being Othered, gives *King of the Zombies* a transitional feel in the evolving themes of early Zombie films.

As the Zombie film evolved, they were increasingly critical of the West in terms of its colonialism though still in some ways hindered and obsessed with controlling the Zombie monster. According to Annalee Newitz, the film *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943) is “about the way Non-Western belief systems begin to challenge the hegemony of white ruling class” (105). This film emerges at a time when WWII was ending and this hegemonic challenge speaks allegorically to the increase of an American public’s willingness to accept other ways of thinking. Seeing the Nazis and their destruction of literal Others, the Zombie and its Voodoo stand in for the symbolic Other that American society is now more apt to side with. The opening shot of *I Walked With a Zombie* has the main protagonist Betsy walking on a beach with a tall Zombie. A monologue from Betsy accompanies this shot, describing this walk on the beach as occurring after the events of the film. This monologue and peaceful walking alongside a monster from a future perspective tells the audience from the start that the main character will eventually accept and tolerate the Voodoo ways. The film itself has a much different mise-en-scène than previous Zombie films, in that it is set in a jungle-like plantation, not a castle and the control of the characters lies in the hands of the natives, not the white masters. There are

diegetic drumbeats that dominate the scenes at the white owned plantation to the point that it is impossible to ignore the presence of the Voodoo village or “Home fort.” The Haitian Voodoo origins in this film are almost fully integrated, allegorically signifying a coming to terms with the value of this culture and the post-colonial Western desire to grant rights to others in the face of the World War II Fascist alternative.

The Zombie subgenre had evolved to a point where “black voodoo priests gain the power to turn white women into zombies” (Newitz 90). Before the isolationist era, the U.S. tried to Westernize this monster by giving the possession control to a Western Gothic character like Legosi. Now in the 1943 context of World War II, the power is shifted to the actual natives in these films, standing in for 1940’s Western society’s guilt over their colonial rule. The particular white woman possessed in *I Walked With a Zombie* is Jessica, the wife of the plantation owner Wesley, who suffers from what is originally thought to be “tropical fever” that burns out her spinal cord, and leaves her catatonic. The medical explanation of a fever places in this film an initial distrust of Voodoo and its power over “rational” thinking. We eventually learn that this catatonic state is really a zombification brought on as punishment for a love triangle, serving to validate the natives’ power and allegorically speaks to the fallacy of Western control over the colonial Other. There are still various attempts at Western control of this film and its monsters in the form of Wesley’s mother, Mrs. Rand, who is revealed to have initiated Jessica’s zombification. She also has some power over the Voodoo tribe by intellectually tricking them into believing in Western medicine as well as her ability to verbally stop a Zombie from abducting Jessica, but overall the Houngan (village priest) proves to have ultimate power. As the third member of the love triangle Paul, Wesley’s brother, states



“they have charms that can draw a man halfway round the world.” This is echoed by the perfect example of an early film Zombie when the Houngan “calls” Jessica. He pulls her with a doll of her likeness, to the very drumbeats that haunt the plantation. They are in complete control of Jessica and her movements are purposeful and determined. Finally taking control of Paul, the Houngan forces him to murder Jessica and kill himself in the ocean. Whatever Western control over this monster that was exercised in films like *White Zombie* had mostly disappeared, as *I Walked With a Zombie* becomes a historical allegory for a post WWII America starting to see the error of colonial oppression. There is even a moment when Betsy, desperate for Jessica’s cure, takes a literal and metaphorical “journey” into the Home Fort. She crosses over into their world where no modern medicine can help. The Zombie becomes the perfect allegorical monster to speak to these societal concerns as “communities murdered by colonialism can linger on half-alive, and refuse to leave the living remainder alone” (Newitz 91).

Originating from the Afro-Caribbean folklore as it did, the Zombie character brought with it issues that had not been dealt before within the horror landscape. Derived from non-literature predecessors, the Zombie was harder to define and with the strict Insider-Outsider mentality of the Haitian Voodoo culture, the process of adapting this creature to our media became even more difficult. The early attempt to force this folklore foundation into European and Gothic settings and narrative tropes did not last long as the natives of these films literally began taking over the plots and control of the characters within, and the Zombie simply broke out of these Gothic narrative forms.

European or Gothic characters like Dracula had literary reference guides, which gave their narratives a form of stability. Over time, Dracula has been called a “handsome

gentleman” and a “master seducer” as well as being “beyond the pale of middle class values” (Whalen 100). Coming from “aristocratic origins” (Fry and Craig 272), he exudes a certain feel in his actions, desires, and traits. There must however be a distinction made between a vampire and Dracula. A vampire is more of a general term and is certainly related to the Zombie in this respect but Dracula is a singular character with definite traits and personality. For instance the vampires in media, such as their depiction in the television series *Angel*, have changed over time but Dracula himself is not as malleable. As such it is much easier to control a character like Dracula with clear, definable origins and actions. This opened characters like Dracula, Frankenstein, and the Wolfman to spoof cycles where these monsters were put into films such as *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948) or *Billy the Kid versus Dracula* (1966). Much like a comedic impersonation of a very famous person, it is easy to select and exaggerate certain traits into a spoof when the subject is well known and defined. Speaking specifically about Dracula, Gregory Waller suggests that these spoofs “all defang the aristocratic vampire and suggest in one fashion or another that the undead pose no threat to the modern world” (233). These recognizable monsters are not without their allegorical power, but it becomes more difficult to be an effective site for allegorically commenting on society when they are so easy to spoof. It is not that the Zombie has completely avoided its own spoof cycle, as will be discussed later in terms of Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* (1983) and *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), but that this monster resisted becoming spoof for so long precisely because it was so unstable. The origin and the very nature of the Zombie monster set itself up to become a successful historically contingent, ever changing allegory.

A Zombie in today's definition can mean a lot of different things, but when this wave of Afro-Caribbean based monsters hit the film media world in the 1930's it meant a person possessed and completely controlled by a Voodoo priest. The cloudy and varied nature of the Zombie's origin (is it a spirit Zombie, called *jardin*, or a body raised from the dead, called *corps cadavre*), created an uncertain foundation from which there was little filmmakers could be certain came directly from the Haitian culture. There were early attempts to Westernize and create Gothic Zombies but in the end it was the very malleable "utility tool" nature of these characters that kept them from becoming another monster cliché for so long. The fact that Dracula and Frankenstein are single monsters with clearly defined traits make them much easier to emulate, spoof, and boil down to a set of base characteristics. While the idea that Zombies could be anyone at any time and have no single character embodiment makes them a perfect changeable monster. This changing nature and unclear origin created a shared syntactic theme of control, both in the monster itself and in its thematic base, that the Zombie sign continues to draw from today. This created powerful historical allegories, such as the above illustrated *I Walked With a Zombie* standing in for America's post WWII willingness to accept different cultures. There have been vast changes at times, such as George A. Romero's *Living Dead* series and his seminal first film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), but though these new Zombies had new desires, traits and characteristics they maintained a connection to their shared cultural beginnings of a creature born of control and uncertainty. In fact these new revolutionized Zombies exemplify what makes this monster so important. America in 1968 was a vastly different cultural landscape than the 1930's and 40's and the Zombie was able to change with the times to create a more effective historical allegory

Transitioning from these early Zombie films, there was a period of time where the semiotic semantic traits of this screen monster were in flux and uncertain. After the original attempts to Westernize and control this mysterious folklore based creature eventually failed, the Zombie did not have a stable base of signifying traits to match its syntactic theme of control. Certain films retained some traits of the early Voodoo monster while others changed nearly all of them. By the time Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* was released in 1968, the Zombie was ready to have its traits solidified to match its foundational theme of control.

## Section 2 – The Romero Revolution?

Discussion of George A. Romero and his film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) usually centers on its revolutionary nature and how it caused a ripple effect that changed the horror landscape and Zombies forever. Though there is some truth to these statements, *Night* and Romero's films that followed like *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985) still drew from the same semiotic well of the Voodoo zombies, yet the development was more evolutionary than revolutionary. With films leading up to *Night* edging the Zombie in new directions and Romero's Zombie films being heavily concerned with control issues, specifically the dominant hegemony's loss of total control, early Zombie films and their origin helped shape Romero, who in turn shaped nearly every Zombie film thereafter.

The world had changed in many significant ways between 1931 and 1968, creating a need for a different kind of monster if this subgenre was to continue to be such a successful allegorical site. In the 1930's and 40's the U.S. was undergoing a negotiation with the outside world, through its isolationist mentality followed by the joining and fighting in World War II. By the late 1960's, the concentration of societal issues was focused on the external threat of the Cold War and the internal threat of Civil Rights and Feminism. Changes in the societal focus influenced shifts in the Zombie character, and these changes helped to stave off the spoof cycle that had plagued so many film monsters before. This changing allegorical content continued through the years that Romero made his original *Living Dead* trilogy, as each film addressed its own historically important time and issues. This can even be seen in the historical allegorically significant content found in the respective endings of each of these three films.

It is important to note exactly what changed for the *Zombie* in Romero's *Night*, as it had such far-reaching influence. In many ways, Romero codified the semiotic features of this generic monster. Romero's "ghouls", *Night* never uses the word *Zombie*, went from individually and deliberately controlled humans by a Voodoo possessor, to a mass of people who shortly after their death began to shuffle and stumble towards living humans in search of fresh human flesh to consume. This stumbling points again to movement being many times key to understanding the *Zombie* in each set of their semiotic iterations and rules. Humans bitten by these living dead become fatally and irreversibly sick with no cure, and their impending death causes them to become one of the creatures. The creatures have little to no high brain functions and are without reason, speech, complex motor skills, memories, or emotions. The only way to kill these creatures, later dubbed *Zombies*, is destroying their brain. Many other cinematic monsters have singular weaknesses, such as a stake through the heart or a silver bullet, but the *Zombie* relies on the destruction of the brain, pointing to the importance of intelligence as a societal marker of distinction. Romero's *Night* is called revolutionary for these new *Zombie* characteristics, the graphic violence and decay used to portray them, and the hopeless apocalyptic nature all of which evolve from the same semiotic traits of earlier *Zombie* films.

They are evolutions, because many of the characteristics and traits of Romero's "ghouls" were influenced in some way from earlier films within this horror subgenre. For instance, the film *Invisible Invaders* (1959), in which aliens inhabit human corpses in an attempt to take over our world, embodies many of the same semiotic traits as *Night*. These possessed dead have grey faces and slow movements, and are portrayed as

“soaking up gunfire as they advance” (Dendle 91). *Night* also alludes, though very briefly and not certain enough, to an extra terrestrial source of the living dead in the form of an “Explorer satellite shot to Venus... carrying a mysterious high level radiation with it.” In this historical era, the allegorical connection to the Cold War external Russian threat and overall fear of nuclear ramifications are evident within these films. Then in 1966, *Plague of the Zombies* was released and though it relied on the older Haitian Voodoo Zombies, it also progressed this subgenre by depicting the living dead in various states of decay and decomposition with skin peeling and falling off. These creatures also stumble and stagger in a manner very unlike the purposeful and almost robotic movements of classic Voodoo Zombies.

Another pre-*Night* film, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1955), is helpful for discussing the Zombie syntactic foundation of control, with the idea that though this film does not deal directly with the living dead it uses many of the same themes and tropes. Much like a “cousin” of the Zombie subgenre, its similarities can help in understanding the development of *Night* and its related films. In fact there is an allusion to *Invasion* within *Night* itself. In *Invasion*, there are many mentions of the entire pod people phenomenon being a result of “mass hysteria,” in *Night* a news broadcast specifically states “these reports, as incredible as they seem, are not the results of mass hysteria.” *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is about an alien invasion in the form of pods grown from “seeds drifting in space” that replicate and control human beings when they sleep. Much has been theorized about this film being an allegory for the communist red scare in that the replaced humans have “no need for love” and “have no emotions” in a world “where everyone is the same.” With the horror genre at times looked down upon, this allegorical

theorizing helps one to read the Zombie subgenre better; if only to open up the possibility of understanding these types of films as having deeper meaning. Some of the other characteristics evident in *Invasion* that permeate the Zombie subgenre, are the internal threats coming from one's own family and friends, as well as the apocalyptic theme represented as an external threat that has dominated post-Romero Zombie media. By placing the final transition of human to alien in the sleep mechanism, the signification is one of hopelessness as it is something all humans must do and is a particularly vulnerable activity. The first pod person we see transforming embodies this vulnerable relationship. There is a close up shot of the pod becoming a character named Jack, and the real Jack is far in the background with the back of his head facing the camera. You do not need to be in close proximity to a pod for it to take you over and you probably will have no idea it's happening. The ending of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* pulls punches a bit, in that there is a last second appearance of order being restored but the damage has been done thematically and allegorically. When the main character Miles looks directly into the camera in a close up shot near the end saying, "They're here already, you're next!" he has opened the door for the home-based apocalyptic horror films that speak *directly* to the audience in historically allegorical ways that "usually rise from controversies" (Xavier 333-34).

Emerging from an era of societal controversies with external as well as internal turmoil, and focused through Zombie conventions, is a film and set of films that has been heralded and theorized about on subjects as far ranging as Feminism, race relations, and even socio-economic terms. These theories are at times well founded, but much like the early Zombie films there is an overarching theme of control. In each of the Romero



original trilogy, the hegemonic dominant order's fear of losing control of society in the dominant theme. As stated by Noel Carroll, "in certain historical circumstances...the horror genre is capable of incorporating or assimilating general social anxieties into its iconography of fear and distress" (207). Each film in this trilogy makes a distinct allegorical contribution to its particular historical time period. *Night* addresses social dynamics particularly in the form of gender and race roles, *Dawn* is critical of controlling one's life through consumerism mentality, and *Day* addresses the issue of subverting masculine power ingrained in the 1980's.

Looking first at *Night of the Living Dead*, the historical allegory in this film is in regards to social upheaval at the time with gender and racial power structures. Importantly, the main threats in Romero's films are both internal and external. *Night of the Living Dead* came at a very tumultuous time in American history with the Civil Rights movement in full swing (it was also the year that Martin Luther King was shot), Second Wave Feminism on the rise, and the strong protest over the Vietnam War. *Night* has influenced countless theoretical writings and though the subject matter of these writings is varied, there are connections between them. What all of these theories and thoughts on this film have in common is the anxiety about displacement of the dominant group that is now forced to share its world and power. Throughout a great deal of this film the displaced dominant person is Harry Cooper, wife of Helen and father of Karen, the white middle class patriarch of the nuclear family in *Night*. Richard Dillard believes that the "essential quality of the film's setting and of its characters is their ordinary nature" (17), and it is the ordinary monsters attacking ordinary homes and people, as well as the lack of solution that creates deep fear in this film. This idea is made manifest

through Harry, who loses control of his symbolic home. In the plot of the film, there is no character that actually lives in the home that is being attacked, but Harry and his family (along with the two teenagers Tom and Judy) are already present in the house in the beginning of the film. When the main characters Barbara and Ben arrive, Harry and his family appear as the symbolic owners of this ordinary structure. This nuclear family has boarded themselves up in the basement (the very foundation of the home) because Harry believes it is the safest place.

This sets up a dynamic where Harry faces an allegorical attack on his symbolic home both from an external Zombie threat as well as internal threat to his hegemonic domination. Externally the house is invaded by the unclean, unintelligent (read lower class) masses of Zombies, which allegorically stand in for the anxiety over impending overseas threat of the Cold War communist masses. Inside the home, Harry is challenged by internal threats to his power by both a powerful black male Ben and a questioning wife Helen. Women and blacks in this era were two societal groups pushing for more power and these issues come across allegorically in the internal conflicts Harry faces in *Night*. By the end of the film, Harry and his wife are killed from within this home by their own daughter who becomes a Zombie, allegorically standing in for fear of the destruction of middle class home and family values. This external and internal threat is an important extension of the early Voodoo issue of Insider/Outsider culture. Indeed, the Insider/Outsider distinction would prove to be an important syntactic theme throughout many of the Zombie iterations. Many times throughout the Romero films, a common idea occurs of the Zombie as “Outsider” who cannot be permitted to come in contact with the group of “Insiders” for risk of contamination.

By looking closer at the relationship between Ben, the intelligent black hero of *Night*, and Harry the distinct power struggle that escalates throughout the film illuminates Harry's allegorical position as the displaced hegemonic leader. As stated earlier, Harry believes that staying in the basement is the best chance for survival, while Ben believes the upstairs gives them the best chance to escape if necessary calling the basement a "deathtrap." Placing this film in its historical context, this power struggle is no doubt a racially charged one even if the characters never openly acknowledge it. Richard Dyer in theorizing about Whiteness in *Night* states that, "whiteness and death are equated, both are further associated with the USA" (60). Dyer focuses on the appearance of the Zombies and their standing in for the "spectre of white loss of control," but he concentrates on the White's control of their bodies (63). What this reading fails to mention is this explosive power struggle over control amongst the humans inside the house where Ben says, "Get the hell down in the cellar. You can be the boss down there, I'm boss up here." Ben cannot be ignored as a stand out example of an intelligent and heroic black leader where "it is not true that his color is arbitrary and without meaning; Romero uses it to signify his difference from the other characters" (Wood 103). In a time when the Civil Rights movement was scoring victories for equality in America, *Night* can allegorically be seen as the White middle class man feeling the pressure of impending loss of hegemonic control in society and his impotence in dealing with social unrest. This pressure results in the retreating to the very foundation of the home and a nod to "simpler" times when this hegemonic leader was "king of his castle." This relationship is punctuated in a succession of shots during a key information scene in which the group is watching a news broadcast. Harry is dominated in the frame by Ben in close up with the

resident dominant patriarch portrayed as small and diminutive in the background. This is followed by a cut to the very same shot relationship with his wife Helen. These symbolic shot relationships manifest themselves throughout the film with Ben and Helen questioning and winning battles.

Racial challenges to White control are not the only issue. Patriarchy is also on trial here. Barry Keith Grant has written about the rise of the Feminist voice and power in Romero's *Dead* series in which the females within the narratives of *Night, Dawn, Day*, and the *Night* remake (1990) slowly begin to develop more powerful roles. He speculates, "Romero's vision almost from the beginning has been his generally positive treatment of women, even a striking empathy with them" (67). This theory is certainly well thought out, as there is an incremental increase in each of the first three *Dead* installments. In *Night*, Barbara is catatonic throughout most of the film. In *Dawn*, Fran is attacked and becomes silent for only a bit, eventually taking power with statements like, "I'm not going to be den mother to you guys" and "I want to learn how to fly that helicopter." Finally in *Day*, Sarah is the certain and determined leader who challenges the leadership of the alpha military male. There are no doubt stronger females as these films progress but what most theorists, Grant included, concentrate on in *Night of the Living Dead* is the catatonic Barbara. But there is also evidence of strong feminine roles in this film in the form of the previously discussed Helen, wife of Harry, who challenges and criticizes Harry at nearly every turn. She dominates Harry in the sequence of shots discussed earlier, and in being critical of his basement plan says, "we may not enjoy living together, but dying together isn't going to solve anything." Harry's loss of control in this instance threatens his very idea of survival. These increasingly strong feminine characters set

against their dominant masculine counterparts emphasizes this allegory of fear on the part of hegemonic power of losing complete control over society.

While *Night* is about challenges to social order and control in the form of civil rights and feminism, *Dawn of the Dead* makes its issue one of ideology and the control of consumer spaces. *Dawn of the Dead* is an important example of an allegorical text in that the subject matter is one that appears to be obvious in its symbolism. Setting the sequel to *Night* in a shopping mall has inspired audiences and theorists alike to remark on the “zombies as consumers” connection. Robin Wood argues that the Zombies “represent, on a metaphorical level, the whole dead weight of patriarchal consumer capitalism” (105). The issue becomes the simplicity and obviousness of these consumer theories. It is not that they are not present within this text; there are just some deeper layers that need exploring. The Zombie is inherently the model consumer with its insatiable hunger and no apparent need for the materials it consumes (a Zombie with no stomach will crave flesh just as much as an intact one), but in *Dawn* there is a certain incompatibility with their mall surroundings that cannot be ignored. When Stephen, Peter, Roger, and Fran arrive at the mall they first bring it back up to “working order” by turning on lights, escalators, even the fountains and muzak. What follows is a montage of Zombies stumbling down escalators, falling into the fountains, clutching money in a confused manner, and allusions to the Zombies’ similarities with mannequins. The Zombies are not the model consumers in modern capitalistic society because they cannot even function in that society. As Steven Shapiro states, the one big difference between the Zombies and the living is that Zombies are “ultimately not susceptible to advertising suggestions” (92). Their model consumer nature is not based on a need or care about clothes, cars, or any

other items, but instead on a circuit of desire that cannot be fulfilled with material things. Zombies are not an affluent consumer group with discerning taste and they threaten to destroy the very fabric of consumer society by literally eating the buying public.

In fact, the more significant and allegorically sound characters to focus on are the survivors and not the Zombie inhabitants of the mall, consistent with the idea that Romero's films are both about internal threats and the external Zombies themselves. Their need to "restore" the mall to its working order and rid every single Zombie from inside points to a need to reclaim an economic sphere that consumers were accustomed to occupying. This is also the recurrence of the Insider/Outsider theme in Romero's films, manifest here by the control of this economic space. The incompatibility of the Zombies in the suburban middle class mall world represents the fear of invasion by a non-consumption based group in society poised to take this sphere away from symbolic yuppie suburbanites. The actual Zombies in the film run the gamut of clothing and dress that signifies a complete spectrum of classes and as such *Dawn* speaks more to consumption than class.

Most importantly, the survivors are made to look ridiculous and frivolous in their attempts to recapture previous consumption based lives. Consumerism is a kind of loss of control and it is only when the survivors "get comfortable" do they lose this control of the mall space. In one shot Fran applies lipstick in a mirror while bathed in soft candlelight and as she lets out a sigh, the idea of this futility of trying to control ones life through consumerism is evident. Perched at the top of the mall in the security offices that they outfit to look like interior design catalogues, the survivors turn on escalators and block passageways to emphasize the Zombies as non-consumers, or "Outsiders." Near the

beginning of the mall occupation a Zombie gets past the barrier to a department store, the territory the survivors shop in, and what follows is Peter kicking the Zombie to the ground and an extremely low angle shot from the Zombie point of view as Peter shoots him in the head. The consumers, or “Insiders,” of the mall have been established and in a line that shortly follows, the only thing left to say is, “Who the hell cares, let’s go shopping.” This relationship is emphasized, like *Night*, with another “Outsider” external threat the survivors must face while at the mall, the invasion of a biker gang, which is thought of as a traditionally non-productive societal group. Allegorically there is an ambiguous dialogue about the frivolous nature of society and people’s attempts to control their lives through material consumption.

Turning to *Day of the Dead*, this film provides for an important example of the dynamic discussed here of how allegories arise from “confrontations related to struggles for hegemony” as an “expression of social crisis” (Xavier 360). Robin Wood fleshes out the relationship of this film to its historical context well in saying that “*Dawn* was fully compatible with certain progressive aspects of its time, the period of great radical movements” but that “*Day* represents an uncompromising hostile response to the 80’s, both to the Reaganite era and to the cinema it produced” (287). The masculinity and conformity inherent in 1980’s Hollywood cinema’s Stallone and Schwarzenegger action films, comes under direct attack in *Day of the Dead*. The relationship between Sarah, very much a leader in the underground military bunker, and Captain Rhodes, the arrogant alpha male, is one that feels on equal footing for most of the film. This relationship, symbolic of science versus brawn, is developed throughout *Day* in the multiple “meetings” that are held amongst the survivors where Sarah is shot low standing up with

an eye line towards a sitting Captain Rhodes. In each meeting, Rhodes stands to exert his power and finally it takes a threat of gun violence to reverse this symbolic dynamic. Science, aligned with a more feminine nature, is attempting to domesticate the Zombies and teach them to behave while the masculine military wants to just “shoot the mothers in the head.” The ultimate resolution to this control struggle ends with only science living in the form of Sarah, John (the pilot) and McDermott (the technician) on an island, which creates a perfect example of the counter-hegemonic allegory. In the 1980’s, America saw the results of an empowered woman and the fear on the behalf of the dominant masculine group of eventually losing all control over society. One issue that will be discussed at length in the next section will be the influence the beginning of the Zombie’s “spoof cycle” had on films like *Day of the Dead*, which came about after this cycle had begun.

The endings of the *Living Dead* films prove to be very important for their historically allegorical contexts, but to understand the end there is a significant dynamic of the beginning that must be explored, that being the source of the living dead. There are implicit references to the source of this apocalypse, but at no point in any of the *Dead* series is there a definitive cause and effect relationship that explains the Zombie apocalypse. The early Voodoo Zombie films had confusion latent in their Zombie creation explanations and the Romero films are no different. There are allusions in *Night* news broadcasts about an explosion of a highly radioactive satellite, but it is delivered by bumbling and bickering government officials so this information is far from definitive. “Frequently described as a plague; it takes the form of a mass contagion, without any discernible point of origin” (Shaviro 95), but possibly even more disconcerting is that every one of the humans inhabiting Romero’s apocalyptic world already has the



contagion in them, with no hope of ridding their bodies of it. News reports discuss that the “recently deceased” are coming back to life regardless of the cause of death. When they die if someone is not around to shoot them in the head, they will become a Zombie. With no real way to combat something with no definitive source, coupled with idea that anyone dying for any reason will become a living dead, heightens hopelessness in these films.

*Day of the Dead* ends in a way that is very familiar to viewers of this horror subgenre in our modern media landscape. A few survivors are able to make it through the onslaught of the Zombie apocalypse and have escaped (possibly only temporarily) by helicopter to a safe island. One of the most significant aspects of this ending “is that there is nothing we can do that will make any difference at all” (Dillard 28) as the characters may have made it to their island of safety but they can never return to the destroyed society. It is a futile and hopeless gesture being that every one of the survivors is an eventual Zombie themselves. Robin Wood calls this film the “woman’s nightmare” and suggests that this ending refers to Sarah’s attempt to “abandon any attempt to save American civilization, which the film characterizes as a waste of time” (292). The “Insider” concerns are all that matter here and this necessitates a cutting off from “Outsider” concerns. This abandoning refers to the individual nature of the victories characters exert on the Zombies within these texts, in that as a single human or a small group of humans they can have no real control or effect on the outcome or destiny of humanity but they can create an individual space of survival. Allegorically this “save yourself” mentality points to the selfish nature of the “me generation” in the 1980’s, and

the idea that even if one cannot control everyone's destiny, they surely will control their own.

Much like *Day of the Dead*, *Night* and *Dawn* deal with this apocalyptic ending but in different ways, pointing to different allegorical ruptures within society at the times they were made. *Night's* tumultuous ending speaks to the conflict ridden 1960's and *Dawn's* hopeful ending speaks to the optimistic late 1970's. In *Night*, Harry feels the impending loss of control from the lower class Zombies outside the house, Ben the black intelligent hero inside the house, and the women of his life within his own family. In Romero's films, a great deal of the tension created is from the relationships and struggles between the living humans trying to survive, but the catalyst for all of these events is the unending horde of the living dead. The Zombies may not be strong individually, in fact they are quite ineffective, but their strength and terrifying nature comes from their unrelenting, unstoppable nature and their sheer numbers. Harry, much like many alpha White males in Romero's films, feels a constant and never-ending "closing in" of the threat to his control and power. Significantly and ironically in *Night*, the restoration of order includes both the basement being revealed as actually the safest place to hide, and further it is not the government but the vigilante militia redneck group that succeeds in wiping out the Zombies. Instead of the heroic and intelligent Ben providing the logical strategy, the "insecure, egotistical coward offers the best plan for survival" (Waller 286). But Ben's use of this plan in the end does not result in his survival but instead his murder by the redneck Zombie hunters, showing neither side to be in the right and creating a scenario where "*Night of the Living Dead* is a *politically ambivalent* film with simultaneous and contradictory political attitudes and ideas" (Becker 43). In the era of

uncertainty surrounding the Vietnam War, *Night*'s mixed message ending stands in for the America of 1968 with "multiple endings of *Night*, each changing the way we saw the last one" (Waller 331). Allegorically this points to a historical era of transition and change, which may have been unwelcome change for the dominant white patriarchal society who felt a power shift in race and gender relations.

Like *Day*, *Dawn* ends with survivors using a helicopter to get away from a bad Zombie situation. Unlike *Day*, which has given up on mankind completely, *Dawn* is slightly more optimistic, in that it sends Fran and Peter off into the morning light and leaves the question of their survival open. Left up to the audience to ponder, these two fly with little gas to destinations unknown. The optimism lies in the pairing of the black leader of the group and the newly empowered woman who is piloting the helicopter, as well as the freedom exerted through the escape from the consumer space of mall. The last shot we see of the helicopter is on the mall rooftop from the Zombies' point of view watching them "ride off into the sunset" (sunrise in this case). Significantly, all three of Romero's original trilogy place emphasis on the helicopter and use shots of the "chaos" down below. This creates a feeling of control by an omnipotent or God-like perspective looking down on the world's decay, and in this film specifically it is a form of control and optimism on the part of the characters of their current situation. This cautious optimism alludes to an America that is "fully compatible with certain progressive aspects" (Wood 287) of *Dawn* and ready to accept the new world even if it does challenge the control of the hegemonic status quo. This is markedly different from most apocalyptic horror films, in that it contains hope without explanation of where hope will come from. Apocalypse for the dominant societal group in this film is thunderous, but

this is “perhaps the first horror film to suggest – albeit very tentatively – the possibility of moving beyond apocalypse” (Wood 107).

The Romero film era served to codify the semiotic traits and rules of the Zombie, while still relying on the syntactic thematic elements of control and the Insider/Outsider dynamic. Once the rules and traits of the Zombie were solidified they could be spoofed and stripped of their effective allegorical status. What followed was an iteration of the Zombie that followed postmodern logic instead of historically situated allegorical logic. The Zombie as a sign and signification was emptied of meaning and the agent of control in the postmodern era that followed became the media makers looking to exploit and control audiences with aesthetic gore and pastiche.

### Section 3 – Postmodernism and the Zombie Spoof Cycle

Even though *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) never mentions the word Zombies, relying instead on the term “ghouls” and the title living dead, the audiences knew what to call them. Semiotically related to their early film counterparts, they were dead creatures without high brain functions, moving slow with a singular purpose. The subgenre latched onto the Romero style, and this new form of Zombie took hold. This 1960’s changeover from Voodoo staved off the spoof cycle that had run rampant on so many other film monsters. Yet this reprieve would not last forever, as this creature in the 1980’s became increasingly postmodern in its playful pastiche of older iterations. Jameson describes this postmodern intertextual turn as an end to the “sense of the unique and personal, the end of the distinctive individual brushstroke” (492). This loss of completely unique artistic works serves to then sever the “meaning” from the text for the more aware audiences who were feeling a “waning of affect” towards texts that they had become so familiar with. Instead of artistic meaning these new self-referential texts had to rely on the playful use of multiple sources to attract these aware audiences resulting in aesthetics replacing artistic meaning. Loss of meaning and affect for the audience becomes important for a horror subgenre that up until this point had been so effective at allegorically addressing historically important issues. In this subgenre the postmodern occurred because after a while the Zombie became solidified in its semiotic traits and significations.

Much like Dracula and Frankenstein, there was now a more concrete set of semiotic characteristics to draw from and exploit in the representations of the Zombie. The Romero inspired Zombie was slow, shambling, ate human flesh, and had low brain function. This codifying of semiotic traits happened not only because of the popularity of

these films, but also because of the consistency throughout *Night* and its sequels.

Whereas in early Zombie films, there were fluid significations of what made a Zombie and how it functioned, once Romero decided on a semiotic trait and characteristic he stuck with it throughout subsequent films. Even though it could not be reduced down to a single character, once the Zombie became consistent and familiar enough it could be commodified more easily and co-opted into other stories. Now the Zombies occupied their very own “spoof” era, which did not have the bite of satire but instead was a pastiche of its former self.

Marked by such beginnings as *Zombi 2* (1979) and *Thriller* (1985), there are two distinct themes in which the Zombie could be spoofed and commodified, the areas of gore filled violence and comedic abstraction. In a post-*Dawn of the Dead* (1978) world, the Zombie took on these new forms and thematic elements not to evolve into a more effective allegorical site, as *Night* did, but instead to exploit the commodity power of this newly familiar creature. With tons of blood and guts taking the place of social commentary and Zombie punch lines eating away at counter-hegemonic symbolism, this monster became symptomatic of the postmodern aesthetic landscape. In fact this era of Zombie films adheres more to what Guy Debord posed as the “spectacle,” which is “both the result and the goal” (8) and “aims at nothing other than itself” (10). These postmodern Zombie films embody this spectacle logic because not only do they lack the overtly allegorical features of the previous films, but they also avoid the addressing of social issues. These films derive cultural value from the aesthetic and by avoiding the overt ideological allegory they avoid alienating sectors of their audience. This makes *Day of the Dead*'s resistant anti-masculine appearance in this media landscape all the more

courageous and significant. Within this new commodified creature, the control drawn from the semiotic significations of the Zombie origins is more of a control of the audience by manipulating the “rules” of the Zombie and the directions and themes the creature undertakes.

The rules of the Romero Zombie traits and characteristics had been more or less solidified through the 1970’s. These signifying elements included craving human flesh, a similar weakness in the destruction of the creature by a blow to the head, bites from the creature being fatal, and slow shambling movements. Yet, once these rules were solid the ability to copy and exploit these monsters in a playful postmodern landscape became extremely easy. This spoof cycle’s Zombie exploitation is not a parody, but instead exemplifies what Jameson calls pastiche, a “neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives” (493). What is left is a shell of previous Zombie iterations whose existence is aimed at drawing audiences in and controlling them, which took the allegorical power away from the Zombie creature. One of the first ways in which the Zombie was aestheticized was through the use of extreme gore within the Italian cycle of blood filled Zombie horror films. Starting with the film *Zombi 2* directed by Lucio Fulci, which attempts to draw audiences in through the base of success of previous Zombie films even with the title itself. *Zombi 2* may have a number on the end of the title, but it is the first in its series. The number 2 was placed on the end because in Italy Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* was released under the title *Zombie*, and the filmmakers wanted to play with and exploit the success of that film even though *Zombi 2* has nothing at all to do with the plot or characters of *Dawn*<sup>2</sup>. As it will be shown, there is a lot of title

bending in this iteration of the Zombie horror film subgenre and, in general, it is in place to draw in audiences.

*Zombi 2*, despite the differences, does draw on the *Living Dead* series in certain important areas of Zombie semiotic characteristics and traits such as their weakness and desires. This, however, is done in a way that is never explained in the film. In fact, like many Zombie films of this time period there is an economy of plot exercised by assuming an already present base of Zombie knowledge. This points to the idea that as a subgenre it follows the genre convention that “depends on the *cumulative* effect of the film’s often repeated situations” (Altman 25). As exemplified in the very first two shots of the film, a corpse covered in a sheet slowly begins to rise with no discernable background when suddenly a gun goes off and a bloody hole appears in the corpse’s head. *Zombi 2* cuts to a silhouetted man holding a gun who says, “The boat can leave now, tell the crew” cutting then directly to the title screen. The film does not reveal the events of this scene until 54:50 in, but it does not matter because the audience does not need to know who this man is or how the corpse rose, they already know about Zombies.

The plot of *Zombi 2* revolves around a daughter searching for her father on a cursed Caribbean island. With the Romero style Zombies in place this film attempts to mix in the Voodoo origins as the actual source of these creatures even though they act nothing like the Haitian Zombies of old. It is clear that this film is not concerned with continuity, explanations, or accuracy, but instead only with the spectacular gore that fills the screen. This is symptomatic of the postmodern withdrawal from meaning and instead moves towards a more “aesthetic innovation and experimentation” (Jameson 485). When the corpses begin to rise from their graves in masses they are accompanied by four



hundred year old Spanish conquistador living dead. They may be centuries old, but for the gross out factor they still have rotting flesh and worms coming out of their eyes. Logic is not paramount in this realm of postmodern play, because if it aesthetically works, that is all that matters. The agent of control in this film is the spectacle, the gore, and the aesthetic move away from the ideological allegory. There are many shots in *Zombi 2* that emphasize this gore concentrated dynamic, such as when a group of survivors encounter a *Zombie* eating a woman. There is a sequence of extreme close-ups of the onlooker's eyes, inter-cut with very fast indistinguishable moments of gore. Then after the tension of this moment is built up enough, loud music pierces in coupled with long extended shots of the *Zombie* gore. In general, any film that depicts an underwater battle between a *Zombie* and a shark is not concerned with anything other than using its gore soaked frames to exploit and control the audiences into consuming this commodified monster<sup>3</sup>.

In this era the *Zombie* is a commodified monster, as opposed to its previous iterations in which it was an effective site for socially conscious allegories. This commodification is a significant concept because it lends itself to thoughts and theories about consumerism and capitalism in a postmodern landscape. As discussed earlier, much has been theorized in the realm of *Dawn of the Dead*'s portrayal of *Zombie* as consumer. Though looking carefully it is hard to completely justify them as the "ultimate consumer," it is easy to see how they can stand in for the "duped masses" in our modern consumer society, being that they are at the mall even though they have no real "need" to be. Drawing again from the semiotic origin of the *Zombie*, this creature has always in some fashion "followed" something or someone whether it be a Voodoo priest possessor

or their never ending desire for flesh. In 1983, the Michael Jackson video *Thriller* used many of the postmodern play techniques, such as a bending of the familiar Zombie semiotic rules and bits of self-referencing/intertextuality. These techniques were used to create a music video designed to draw in and control audiences to the beat of a pop song, while at the same time pointing to the idea of Zombie as “duped consumer.”

This entire video is set up in a fashion to create maximum shock and “gotcha” moments that never amount to any meaning or reality. Describing the video’s plot is difficult because of its multi-layered story, as it is a girl’s dream of her and her boyfriend seeing a movie, which stars the girl and her boyfriend. This complex plot is also layered with different monsters for whatever fits each situation. In the movie within the video, Michael Jackson becomes a werewolf-like beast (more of a cat) with yellow eyes and all the normal culturally recognized Wolfman characteristics. Even the mise-en-scène of the movie within the video is intertextual, with 1950’s dress and automobiles evoking old horror classics, as well as the first shot’s striking resemblance to the first shot of *Night of the Living Dead*’s approaching car. Vincent Price even does the narration, which indexes the older Hollywood horror films and their norms. When the characters leave the movie theatre they pass a graveyard and after a classic Zombies rising from the grave scene, Michael becomes one of the Zombies. Not because they bit him, or because he was infected in some way, but just to exploit the image of superstar Michael Jackson as a Zombie. Having been brought up in the spotlight since childhood, Michael Jackson understands the way that his image whether in the video or in his star persona hold weight no matter where he goes. This means Michael can play with that image, in this case as a Zombie, to elicit shock and to draw audiences in.

*Thriller* exemplifies postmodern logic, it is symptomatic instead of allegorical. Immediately after Michael changes into a Zombie, he leads the entire group of undead in a highly coordinated and skilled dance number, a feature of many pop music videos at the time. This opens up to a number of readings, including the idea that at this point in Michael's fame fans will "follow" him even to the grave, and also that artists of time period were copying his popular style. Michael changes back and forth from human to Zombie whenever it is convenient for the plot, and eventually these creatures chase the girl into an abandoned house. The ensuing shots, which are instantly recognized from films like *Night*, build up a great amount of tension with hands breaking through walls and an increasing closing in of the frame. This culminates in the girl surrounded by Zombies and a prolonged close up of the horde moving in. But this is all in place just to elicit gasps from the audience, as the next cut reveals it was all a dream and Michael is no longer a Zombie. Michael takes her hand and leads her out of the room, but wait now he is the Werewolf creature again because he turns to the camera with glowing yellow eyes. This back and forth between Zombie Michael and normal Michael, as well as Wolfman and Zombies points to a desire only to playfully control the audience's reactions, not to create a logical, cohesive plot and "depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces" (Jameson 490). This idea of playful postmodernism is hammered home by the freeze frame at the end of *Thriller* with Michael looking directly at the audience with his yellow eyes. In the end the joke has been on the audience, not the characters in the music video.

This blending of tongue in cheek joking and bending of the established Zombie rules and conventions was a common trope in the postmodern pastiche filled 1980's and early 90's, which moved away from the allegorical towards the post-ideological

spectacle. No two sets of films practiced these techniques as much as the *Return of the Living Dead* series and the *Evil Dead* series. Zombie traits had been popularized and familiar, and as such were able to be toyed with and shaped so that these films could control the audience's reactions and reception. In both sets of films the Zombies (called Deadites in *Evil Dead*) are no longer able to be killed by destroying the brain and are able to speak and talk as if they were still alive. There was not yet a solidified semiotic code to commodify the Zombie films before the 1960's. Once these codes became consistent the reaction in the postmodern era was a playful pastiche era that dealt in aesthetics, not historical allegories.

*Return of the Living Dead* (1985) relies on a great deal of intertextuality even in its explanation of where the Zombies come from. In the *Return* diegesis George Romero tried to make a film about the true story of a chemical spill of "254 trioxide" and was told he would be sued if he did, and so instead he changed the details and made *Night of the Living Dead*. The real star of the *Return* films are the Zombies themselves, as their decomposition and relative gore is raised as each film progresses. These creatures that are reanimated by the chemical (which appears in part to be airborne) do not die from practically anything. Shoot them in the head, decapitate them, they will continue to come after their one desire, which is now for "Brains!" instead of just living flesh. These changes are in place to ensure the maximum amount of gore and blood for aesthetic purposes, as it would not be convenient for the Zombies to die quickly and bloodlessly. This is very different from the earlier Zombie iterations in which there is an emphasis on allegorical content. This particular instance would have been allegorically fruitful because of this era's emphasis on blood, which has been theorized on as an important

element of our society. Michel Foucault's work on blood is important in this instance to understand the deep meaning that is attached to this bodily fluid. He stated that "blood was a reality with a symbolic function" (147), and it still is today. This was even truer during this 1980's postmodern era, with issues such as AIDS prevalent and fresh in societies minds. Instead of using this emphasis on blood and gore in the postmodern Zombie films as allegorical, these elements instead are simply aesthetic. Hands that have been cut off still claw and heads that are decapitated still plead for brains. Zombies and their gore are so entrenched as the star of the film, that it is not until two of the main characters begin to turn into these creatures that they are treated to lots of close-ups. The gore-as-star is symptomatic of aesthetic postmodernism and the logic of the spectacle where the aesthetics are the main focus of this film. This unstoppable Zombie star creates the feel of hopelessness, but not in the way *Night* did because not only does it not matter how many Zombies are killed, there is no way to actually kill them. The semiotic traits were familiar and consistent in Romero, so they can be changed in the postmodern era to fit any situation. In *Return*, even when techniques are discovered that work to kill the creatures it only creates more Zombies, such as when one Zombie is cremated an entire cemetery is reanimated from the ensuing rain, and when a bomb is dropped on the city by the government at the end of the film the dust cloud just spreads the trioxide.

Decisions about the traits of Zombies in *Return* are made for comedic and controlling purposes, not allegorical. The Zombies in *Return* crave brains because it "makes the pain go away" even though their speech and actions signify they have brains already. This could point to a valuing of the higher cognition that the prior Zombie iterations did not have and an allegorical "voice" given to the socially dominated masses,

but within this postmodern playful landscape what this provides for is comedic control over the narrative. With the ability to speak there can be lines such as “come back Tina, you forgot to let me eat your brains!” In this series, even the casting toys with the audience in a controlling way. Two main characters that are turned into *Zombies* in the first film are cast in the second film again only to suffer the same fate with no mention of the discontinuity. Stylistically this is backed up by a massive amount of redundant dialogue and questions asked over and over, all adding up to the feeling that the plot and characters are in place to exploit the familiarity and popularity of the *Zombie* to attract and control the audience.

Many of these same features and tropes are used in the *Evil Dead* films, another series of the same time period and cycle. These films come across as an even more blatant standardized product, in their manipulation of plot and semiotic characteristics. This series also uses the plot device of it being nearly impossible to kill the creatures saying that it takes “dismemberment” to stop them. Stylistically, *Evil Dead* (1981) uses jerky camera movements and a lot of fast monster point of view shots to draw attention to itself. This can also be seen as a pastiche of genres, as these filmic techniques index the Action film genre and incorporate them into the Horror tropes of the point-of-view subjective monster perspective. There is little seamless editing and when the Deadites bowl over trees from their point of view there is a clear message sent to the audience that this film knows everyone is in on their jokes already. *Evil Dead* embraces this audience familiarity to the extreme, because when *Evil Dead 2* (1987) was made audiences wanted to see more of the main protagonist Ash fight the Deadites, and so for all intents and purposes, they just remade the first film. Much like *Zombi 2* was not a sequel but a stand-

alone film, so is *Evil Dead 2* not a sequel as well. By simply upping the production values, adding more gore, and making Ash more of a caricature the filmmakers of *Evil Dead 2* simply wanted to use the surface level aesthetics to control the audiences by giving them exactly what they wanted. This disregard for continuity is echoed in the capability of the Deadites to change back into humans when it is convenient to the plot and Ash's ability to "shake off" his possession that comes and goes. Sometimes swallowing an eye does not make one a Deadite, and sometimes characters turn for no reason. All pointing to the employment of these characteristics and plotlines not for any allegorical or counter-hegemonic reason, but instead just for the effect it will have on the audience's reception. The semiotic traits are malleable because they were so codified earlier and the agents of control in these films are not ideologically allegory driven, but instead aesthetically audience driven.

There was *Zombi 2*, which relied on nearly pure gore (as well as the fake title) to draw its audiences in, while *Return of the Living Dead* and *Evil Dead* used a combination of gore and comedy, but it would seem that until a straight comedy was made in the realm of *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948) the Zombie had avoided the most blatant forms of postmodern pastiche. Eventually however, even the living dead were not immune with films such as *I Was a Teenage Zombie* (1987) and *My Boyfriend's Back* (1993), the latter of which is a romantic comedy.

Everything in *My Boyfriend's Back* is done with a postmodern wink at the audience, as even the title is just there for its double meaning and cute pop culture 50's reference. In this film the song of the same title by "The Angels" never appears, and the boy who dies and comes back as a Zombie to pursue his one true love is not her

boyfriend until well after he returns from the grave. The mise-en-scène of this film is entirely set up to reference the 1950's with the polka dot dresses, bouffant hair, brightly pastel colored suburban décor, and close ups of pies cooling on windowsills. This is not the only media within the Zombie spoof cycle that evokes the 1950's mise-en-scène. *Dead Alive* (1992), the movie within the video in *Thriller* mentioned above, as well as a video game discussed at length later entitled *Stubbs the Zombie: Rebel Without a Pulse* (2005), all use this technique. The message signified by using the 1950's motif is one of not only self-referencing earlier horror films, but also of priming the audience not to take the film's events so seriously. If audiences are engaged through ideologically charged allegories, such as those in earlier *Zombie* films, the result might be an alienating of certain portions of that audience, and so instead these films embraced the detached ironic postmodern subjectivity. This reliance on surface level ironic detachment is important in *My Boyfriend's Back*, because without it lines such as "the reason I called is our son Johnny died the other day and I was wondering if you could take a look at him" would be difficult to swallow. Filled with nods to earlier *Zombie* films, the very first time Johnny the *Zombie* rises from the grave it is portrayed much like the menacing scary versions of the same creature with ominous music and a slowing tracking shot from behind Johnny as he approaches what looks like a victim. Much like *Thriller*, this is just for effect and really Johnny just wants to talk with the gravedigger. In fact, Johnny is completely the same as he was when he was alive, except that he is falling apart and must eat people to survive until the Prom. Linda Badley states that "Zombies tend to be stooges – they specialize in stumbling incoherence, sick jokes, and the splatter film equivalent of taking pies in the face" and that all of this is "hilarious as it had been horrifying" (35), but in *My*



*Boyfriend's Back* hilarity is used for the opposite purpose. Instead of horrifying the world, this Zombie must teach the town to accept him as he is, and only then can he get a second chance at love. There is a hint of an allegorical message near the end of the film, where there is some 1950's mixed race relationship tension evoked by the father of Johnny's girlfriend, but this becomes muddled within lines like "did you by any chance murder a boy in school today?"

This is not to say that all films of this spoof cycle were devoid of all socially conscious content. In fact, many aspects of these new postmodern Zombies have their moments, but they tended to lack the allegorical power embraced by the earlier Zombie iterations. There are examples however during this spoof cycle of an attempt to harness this allegorical power within the new postmodern set of conventions and characteristics, such as *Dellamorte Dellamore* (or *Cemetery Man*) (1994). Coming near the end of the official spoof cycle, this film in many ways stands in for and comments on the entire pastiche era. Playing off of the many rule bending, gore for gore sake, comedic films *Cemetery Man* emphasizes these traits to expose the spoof cycle state of the subgenre. Francesco Dellamorte is the graveyard caretaker who has a problem with the dead rising again on the "7<sup>th</sup> night after their death," and he must re-kill them by shooting them in the head. This "epidemic," as he calls it, is not treated as serious, but instead treated as an extra part of his job that should at least pay overtime. There is even a shot of Dellamorte from the exterior of his cottage with him framed in the window, talking to his friend on the phone, while he shoots Zombie after Zombie who are just lining up at his front door. The Zombie rules are malleable, as corpses sometimes rise well before the seven-day timetable and sometimes well after. All of this comedy and rules bending is not for

nothing, as this film begins to comment on the entire postmodern era of spectacle by placing a static hold on the main character Dellamorte. He encounters three versions of the same woman, simply cannot claim any crime he commits even mass amounts of homicides, and runs through the same conversations over and over with his assistant Gnaghi. As the film nears its end, all of these elements begin to be tied together in an allegorical statement about not only the static nature of the Zombie horror subgenre, but also life itself within a provincial world. Dellamorte and Gnaghi attempt to leave their village only to come to a massive drop-off from the highway to a body of water, encountering the fact that the “rest of the world doesn’t exist” and that they are doomed to repeat their purgatory-like existence. Multiple shots are repeated throughout the film, such as characters being framed with angel tombstones behind them evoking the religious element further. Dellamorte is repeatedly called “engineer” in the film even though he is a caretaker who never even finished high school. This fluid identity is emphasized when Dellamorte and Gnaghi literally switch roles and manners of speech at the highway drop-off. The last shot of the film pulls out from this drop-off revealing the scene trapped in a snow globe, furthering the static allegory of both life and the Zombie in the era.

Looking through the spoof cycle of the Zombie in the 1980’s and early 1990’s, there is a loss of conscious allegorical indexicality that was inherent in so many of the earlier films and portrayals. This postmodern turn away from meaning towards bending of the established semiotic rules, knowing winks to the audience and their expectations, as well as the use of gore and comedy for shock and spectacle value, only fits well within the syntactic themes of the Zombie character because they were in place to control the audience’s expectations and receptions. If there was one signature shot within nearly

every one of these films it was a point of view shot “through the eyes” of the Zombie. In *Evil Dead*, *Zombi 2*, *Cemetery Man*, even *My Boyfriend’s Back*, we are given the worldview of the Zombie itself, signifying that these films embraced this character and had become very familiar with it. Audiences were no longer given monsters that could represent a symbolic “history presented in a condensed way” (Xavier 361) standing in and speaking to the societal ruptures, but instead were given a self-referential shell of itself symptomatic of the postmodern landscape. This was an era where an ending sequence of a film called *Demons* (1985) included the hero protagonist riding up and down the aisles of a movie theatre on a motorcycle, slicing up Zombie-like creatures with a samurai sword he took from a knight, to the tune of heavy rock music. The Zombie spoof era created a “fragmentation...to the point where the norm itself is eclipsed” (Jameson 493) and this kind of pastiche of recognizable elements served to reduce the Zombie to a punch line, which makes films like *Cemetery Man* and especially *Day of the Dead* stand out as different and courageously resistant.

If the Zombie is considered a resilient media monster, it in part is due to its transcending this postmodern era, and incorporating these elements within its diffusion across new media outlets. The Zombie scratched and clawed its way out of the aesthetic postmodern pastiche era to emerge on the other side as a trans-medium, diffuse monster able to be applied to nearly any situation. These new trans-medium iterations of the Zombie draw their semantic semiotic characteristics and their reliance on the syntactic social control themes from their film predecessors.

#### Section 4 – Renaissance of Meaning and the Spread of the Zombie

The progression of the Zombie subgenre has not transcended the spoof cycle, but instead incorporated this portrayal of the Zombie in amongst a multitude of others. In fact what the spoof cycle did is open up this undead signifier to be used in a variety of diverse media for a variety of different allegorical purposes. The Zombie sign in many ways spread out from the fracture point of the end of the spoof cycle proper. One event that marked this “viral” spread beginning is the release of the seminal Zombie video game *Resident Evil* (1996), which served to almost single-handedly inspire a slew of copycat games following the same survival concept. Theorist Shawn McIntosh believes that “Zombies were saved again from triviality in popular culture and made frightening again, this time by video games” (11), but in some ways it is a lot more complex than this causal relationship. The spoof cycle that existed prior to *Resident Evil*'s release set up the situation where the Zombie was open to be used in non traditional horror ways, so it is no surprise that the Zombie could then be used in non-traditional media. Yes the Zombie was now “frightening again” compared to its postmodern playful era, but it was also still silly and gore filled at times and now the Zombie had spread to all kinds of divergent realms such as comic books, college campus role playing games, even philosophy departments. What did not change in all of these new Zombie iterations is the continuation of the reliance on syntactic themes of control drawn from the semiotic significations of the Zombie. While the spoof cycle was focused on control of the audience's reactions and reception of the exploited spectacle Zombie, the new expansions in many ways are concerned with the audiences taking back some control through their use of the Zombie within interactive media. In a subgenre that deals with many

apocalyptic themes, this attempt to regain control comes at a time when there is a strong sense of uncertainty about the future of society and of one's identity within.

With this spread of Zombie semiotics occurring right after an era characterized by postmodernism, the assertion can be made that once the Zombie went through its spoof cycle, it was able to become even more polysemic. In this way, the spreading out of the Zombie sign can be seen as an extension of the postmodern era, only with the renaissance of allegorical meaning in addition. This polysemic tendency of the Zombie was fostered for audiences because there were so many media outlets that adopted this creature. With this spread out viewers had greater access to Zombie texts and were exposed to the different readings within the Zombie media, speaking allegorically to various societal issues. This polysemy is an important step for audiences to gain control of the Zombie after a postmodern era where they had none. Reflecting on Stuart Hall's thoughts on polysemy, theorist Michaela Meyer states that when "audiences devise alternative readings of rhetorical messages" this can be "used to reclaim power for the audience" (519). With the meaning defused into so many different forms and iterations, the Zombie could now be used to deal with many different issues by many different people. Control had been given back to the audiences.

In this era, video games became an important site for reclaiming a sense of control and allegorical power of the Zombie. Looking at the dependence on control that the Zombie subgenre embodies in relation to the video game medium, it is important to understand the ways video games differ from film in terms of both genre and interaction theories. McLuhan stated that the "medium is the message" and that the specific content being transmitted was "a matter of indifference" (108). Though this argument goes

against many of the textual analyses used here, it is helpful in thinking about the different subjectivity that is created when playing video games instead of watching films. Video games differ first and foremost by their interface with audiences. Without delving into the issues of passive and active audiences, an argument can be made that video games at the very least provide for some control and malleability of the course of events within the game narrative on the part of the player. This control over the narrative is still funneled through the game design, and as such might be more of an illusion of control, but this dynamic still helps to further the Zombie as a newly interactive sign. In fact, it is said that “interactivity, is an essential part of every game’s structure and a more appropriate way of examining and defining video game genres” (Wolf 194), and in the Zombie subgenre this structure becomes extremely important in defining the way video games fit into the control laden historical origins of this monster. The interactivity is also important in genre defining because subject matter and themes sometimes confuse the issue. For instance, if a “puzzle” genre game used a horror background and narrative it would still be considered a “puzzle” game. For the *Resident Evil* series of video games the notion of the “lone-survivor” as well as various game play aspects put the player into a world gone out of control in which the main character exists to rectify. This becomes important in an era where audiences of Zombie media needed to take back control, illusion or not, denied of them in the postmodern era.

*Resident Evil* is released into a societal environment where people began to experience more and more technological advances, while at the same time experienced “cultural fears about the loss of autonomy” (Krzywinska 153). The mid 1990’s would also mark a time period when society had become familiar with the AIDS virus, but saw

no progress yet in the curing of this disease, as well as the advent of disease “scares” like the Ebola virus and Mad Cow disease. Medical diseases would certainly point more towards a private anxiety over the control of one’s own body. This disease anxiety, coupled with advances in scientific technology such as cloning (“Dolly” the sheep was “created” this same year), points to a discrepancy of an ambitious science community who may or may not be able to handle the current climate of threats. With news broadcasts filled with sensational reports of Oklahoma City and World Trade Center bombings, it is no wonder the early to mid 1990’s were an uncertain and tumultuous time. The perfect allegorical monster complete with new scientific origins is paired then with the interactive video game environment, to speak to the societal issue of the loss of control of the self in ways that would be more difficult on other mediums.

Video game theorist Krzywinska states, that “Zombies are well suited to the medium of the video game” because they are slow moving creatures, which makes for a nice beginning learning curve for any new gamer, and this creature “invites the player to blow them away without guilt” (Krzywinska 153). The Zombie is also extremely well suited for the reclaiming of audience power and agency of control that had been absent in the postmodern spoof cycle. *Resident Evil* took the horrific film style Zombie and put them in front of players with a gun. The player can now begin to feel comfortable in an environment that is completely out of control in most film depictions, and eventually the player accrues “a sense of control of the gameworld and its horrors” (Krzywinska 155). *Resident Evil* follows this theme up stylistically by placing the main character in a “third person” framework, which means that during play the controllable character is always completely in view. This paired with “static camera” views throughout the game (looking

much like security cameras on a wall), give *Resident Evil* the feel of controlling a character in an environment that appears static and uncontrollable. One significant reversal that occurs in this “survival horror” environment is that in the discussions about many Zombie films the idea of hopelessness in the face of insurmountable odds comes up. No matter how many Zombies are killed, the characters cannot affect any difference because they are facing a literal endless horde. In the video game worlds like *Resident Evil* the roles are reversed, in that the player may very well die in the course of playing but it only takes a push of a button to restart the level again. In this sense, the player has an “endless horde” of game protagonists on his side, which gives them a sense of even more control over the gaming world.

Finally, the plot of *Resident Evil* deals well with this theme of control in an apt historically allegorical way. The distrust in the scientific community to handle current threats, as well as the co-opting of vast realms of society by large corporations, is dealt with in the *Resident Evil* series. The “Umbrella Corporation” is a multi-national conglomerate that deals in biological weaponry, but one of their ambitious creations the “T-virus” breaks loose. The virus turns human beings and animals into Zombies as well as creates some progressively grotesque creatures. The authorities, in the form of the “S.T.A.R.S.” team, are sent in to fix this mess but they uncover a corrupt government conspiracy and inability on the part of Umbrella to control this virus. The series goes from an isolated incident at a mansion in the first *Resident Evil*, to an epic outbreak in the sequels, making this video game series an allegorical statement about the lack of trust in modern science and corporations to control threats as well as their own ambitions.



Much like the films of previous *Zombie* iterations, the video games speak to different issues within the historically contingent framework in which they are produced and released. *Resident Evil* addresses the mistrust of science and the fear of outbreaks, while other games speak to completely different issues. In this fast paced world, issues and problems change at accelerated frequencies, and the *Zombie* in its new post spoof cycle “spread” is able to use its universal malleable nature to address this multitude of concerns. Different games deal with different apocalyptic worlds within the narratives, which points to different ruptures being dealt with. As stated earlier, these different apocalypses also embody different modes of interaction between the player and the game. According to game theorist Mark Wolf, these game genres operate “beginning with the interaction required by the game’s primary objective” (194). As discussed above, the application of this concept can be useful for many *Zombie* based video games like *Resident Evil* and its countless copies, but even more useful when this interaction varies strongly from the standard survival horror interface. Two examples, *Stubbs the Zombie: Rebel Without a Pulse* (2005) and *Touch the Dead* (2007), are important in their sharp divergence from the standard *Zombie* video game both in interactivity and underlying allegorical message. Both share the desire on the part of the player to move beyond the fear-based horrific game model, to get close to and possibly even understand these monsters.

In *Stubbs the Zombie: Rebel Without a Pulse*, the tagline of this game “Be the *Zombie*” can stand in for the unprecedented proximity the player has with this monster, matching well with the attitude and style of this interactive landscape. Instead of running from and killing *Zombies* in an attempt to survive, this game puts the player in control of

Stubbs the Zombie who is this game's protagonist. The player interacts with nearly every aspect of being this undead creature from eating human brains (creating more Zombies), to hurling Stubb's own internal organs like they are bombs. This immersion into the body and "mind" of Stubbs creates identification between the player and this particular Zombie's motive. Going back to Wolf's theory on video game objectives, this game's primary objective goes against many of the goals in other Zombie games such as the restoration of order and the preservation of human life. This game uses a 1950's mise-en-scène style complete with matching soundtrack, which sounds reminiscent of this same element used for pastiche in the postmodern era Zombie, but *Stubbs* reclaims meaning from this dynamic by using it to place an emphasis on overturning some very strongly held national themes of idyllic small town America and the perfect American dream.

Made at a time when much of America had grown tired of current foreign policies in regards to the War in Iraq as well as terrorist attacks, this game begins to sound like an allegory for the backlash against these conflicts. Much like previous Zombie iterations, such as early films and the Romero films, this diffusion era reclaimed the syntactic thematic element of the distinction between Insider/Outsider. In *Stubbs*, this element manifests as an allegory about the fallacy of imposing American (Western) views on outsiders. Stubbs, very much an outsider in this "perfect" town, is even called a terrorist at one point as he invades and spreads his Zombie plague. As the player's primary objective is to "Be the Zombie," as well as the town officials looking like closed-minded morons, this game's audience is meant to identify with Stubb's cause. The literal and figurative control of Stubb's on the part of the player is quite different from the themes of

other Zombie media, but this comes across as still a reclaiming of control on the part of the audience who increasingly has less control over the future of society and themselves.

*Touch the Dead*'s take on the interaction the player has with the Zombie characters is also wildly different. Released on the Nintendo DS system, it relies heavily on a stylus touch screen that players use in various ways. In this particular game, players must use the stylus to "touch the dead," which acts like the aiming of a gun. Sure the actual plot of the game moves back towards killing these creatures, but the game's interactivity and primary objective focus on getting closer to the Zombie by touching them. This game has a structure known as a "rail shooter" in which players have no control over the movements of their character other than the aiming and the shooting. Normally seen as a rigid video game format, this touching twist on the popular "rail shooter" structure is an attempt to literally break the mold of this game's confining non-movement, as players have an enhanced amount of control over where and when to shoot these Zombies.

The video game media is not the only place that the Zombie character broke the semiotic trait mold and spread out to consumer culture. In fact, the Zombie has made its way into many divergent and unexpected cultural areas in recent times. Having gotten past the postmodern era, the Zombie was free to work its way into other media areas and consumer goods, from action figures commenting on corporate drudgery, to an immersive college campus game intended to make the world a playground, and even the comic book medium. The Zombie in these new areas is very different from the early, Romero, and postmodern film eras but is still preoccupied with aspects of control and in these cases is commenting on the loss of control for the citizens of modern society.

“Corporate Zombies” are a brand of action figures designed to comment on corporate America. These figures are fully poseable, have green tinted skin with visible wounds, and their eyes are blood red. With their mouths in a scowl, these Corporate Zombies have the ability to “lose” any of their limbs as well as their head, making them the perfect decomposing living dead creature. What makes them satirically different is that they are dressed in suits and dresses ready to take on the corporate ladder (even if their legs fall off). Implicit in these figures is the assumption about what turned them into Zombies and even without the name of this particular brand of figure, a division called “The Cubes” referring to their block heads and where they work, the message is clear that to work in the corporate world means becoming a soulless Zombie. This attack represents a dig, but also recognition of the loss of autonomy or control that accompanies many of these cubicle positions. It should be noted, that this comment on corporate culture is somewhat contained in the idea that it is still a shameless commodity.

If the Corporate Zombies speak to the notion of desperately wanting to break out from a controlled existence, then the game “Humans vs. Zombies” fulfills that wish. This college campus immersive game, commonly referred to as HvZ, puts students in the roles of both Human and Zombie and has them act out a full-fledged apocalypse. Starting with one student designated as the first Zombie and all the rest as humans, the game becomes a campus wide enhanced version of “tag” whereby one touch from a Zombie turns the Human into one of them. The game lasts for weeks and becomes a consuming endeavor in which Humans spend a great deal of time looking over their shoulder. Players are designated by brightly colored bands they wear on their arms and heads, which being that they are recognizable from great distances ends up a declaration of players’ difference

amongst other students and a point of pride for the organization's members. The organization that puts this game on is called the Urban Gaming Club and HvZ is played on numerous campuses across America. The goal of this game is to create a "world as playground" environment in which players spend less time in front of mediated entertainment such as televisions and computers and more time outside entertaining themselves and making friends. Ironically, this flagship game of the Urban Gaming Club is designed in a way that actually keeps its players apart, subverting part of its socialization goal. In fact by becoming a Zombie in HvZ a player actually gains more control over their time on campus (no more hiding in the Library), and brings you back in contact with other members of the club. In this instance becoming a Zombie is the only way to fully realize the club goals of socialization outside of a media saturated environment.

These college campuses that host HvZ might not be the only areas around them that are discussing the world of the Zombie, as a version of this creature has invaded University Philosophy departments. Known as a "philosophical Zombie," this version of the undead is used in arguments against concepts like behaviorism. The concept is of an exact replica of a person in every physical way, where their experiences and actions match that person completely, but the only difference is that they lack any consciousness (Kirk). The practical example given is a cook who was charged with cruelty to animals for grilling prawns live, but was acquitted because despite the prawn's "screams" there was no proof they actually felt pain. Robert Kirk and Thomas Nagel first thought up this concept in the 1970's, but it gained a great deal more popularity in 1996 when David Chalmers developed the notion of an entire Zombie world. Knowing that this did not

become popular until after the Zombie in media went through its spoof cycle, points to the idea that only when the Zombie semiotic traits were diffused could it be opened up to such vastly different applications.

As the Zombie character spread out to so many odd areas of the cultural landscape, the comic book medium became an important site for this diffusion because of its week-to-week, page-by-page diffusion. The comic book industry may currently inspire a large amount of big budget Hollywood blockbusters, but in general the actual comic books and graphic novels are still much more of an underground medium. This is evidenced by the most successful graphic novel of 2007 *Naruto* only selling 80,000 copies, while the year's best selling book *A Thousand Splendid Suns* sold 1.5 million copies (Keegan 57-8). With its weekly release schedule, somewhat underground status, and importance in the lives of its faithful readers, comic books give off the feel of "news from the front" especially when viewing some of the apocalyptic scenarios depicted in Zombie comic books. Much like the rest of the Zombie portrayals during this "spread," these Zombies cover a vast amount of styles and allegorical thematic content, from the lack of self-control amongst the super hero Zombies in *Marvel Zombies* (2005 – present), to the attempt to control the apocalypse by carving out a new separate life in *The Walking Dead* (2003 – present). This allegorical Zombie content now mingles in the pages of characters that readers had grown to love over decades, and in a medium that creates ardent fans.

Possibly no direction that the Zombie "virus" spread to is more odd than looking at a "Zombie-Spider-Man" or "Zombie-Hulk." All of Marvel's beloved super heroes and super villains get their turn at becoming the living dead in the limited series *Marvel*

*Zombies*. The main struggle within these comic book issues is the self-control that these super heroes can no longer exercise, which is quite a departure considering “most super heroes exhibit certain universal traits, including strong moral ideals, a willingness to confront and battle evil in the world” (Pawuk 1). *Marvel Zombies* spends most of its time going against these ideals, as the heroes literally “pick the earth clean” and eat every human being on the planet. They are an unstoppable force, as they retain their super powers even as *Zombies*. The dialogue used plays out in a constant discussion of where their next meal will come from and lamenting about their consumption of their own loved ones and friends. This self-loathing at their terrible acts is contrasted by a graphic reliance on showing this very gore and destruction in detail, as entire pages are devoted to multiple close-up panels of the heroes eating their victims. There are even many panels with the superheroes in their individually iconic poses, but in their newly decomposing horrific forms. Many graphic novels and comic books have horrific heroes, but “despite how they may appear on the outside, their hearts are still pure and good” (Pawuk 359). In this case, these Marvel heroes have the appearance of the loveable icons, but now cannot control themselves enough to not eat all of the humans on the planet. In a modern world where the media is saturated with attacks that can come from any place at any time or from any source, *Marvel Zombies* speaks allegorically to the societal rupture of a lack of faith in the heroes of the world to protect its citizens from threats. In fact, as these heroes are the enforcers of the law many times, this can stand in for the damage one’s own government and officials can cause<sup>4</sup>. The good intentions of these *Zombie* heroes cannot stop them from literally destroying their own world due to no self-control. The disillusionment with the people who are in charge of protecting a society is a powerful

allegorical message that is only solidified in *Marvel Zombies* because of how long these characters have stood as heroes in our culture.

A more traditional look at Zombie semiotics in play within the comic book realm is the series known as *The Walking Dead* in which the Zombie apocalypse takes the form of the Romero style living dead, and a small band of survivors' attempts to avoid this plague. If the *Marvel Zombies* series speaks to a lack of faith in the government and heroes in charge, then *The Walking Dead* allegorically stands in for the lack of faith in the entire social structural system. The survivors' leader Rick leads the band of humans in search, not of officials to rescue them, but of a place where they can escape civilization. Any portrayal of authority figures outside of the small group is disastrous, with the government's initial attempts to save people by sending them to cities ending in massacres, and the new "mayor" of a town Rick encounters being a sadistic murderer and rapist. Rick and the survivors decide with no way to control the Zombie plague or reverse it, the only option is to cut themselves off and start a new society. Even their attempts to find a new home become a biting commentary on modern society. The first place that the group finds to live is an upper class gated community, which they felt would be "safe" but soon learn is infested with Zombies. The very next place they try is a prison, which they end up cleaning out and staying in. The juxtaposition of these two "havens" comments on the figurative prison that modern life provides with its walling off from neighbors and friends. This allegorical "modern life as prison" message is backed up stylistically with the choice to tell the entire series in black and white panels and in an extremely graphically realistic nature. This "gritty" realism, and the bleakness of the



black and white, make the character's decision to abandon the society they can no longer control all the more poignant.

With all of these divergent portrayals of the Zombie character after the postmodern era, the living dead were now able to diffuse and spread with their semiotic traits to nearly any cultural and media role. After being emptied of meaning in the postmodern era, the Zombie was able to explode in its exchangeability and applicability. This semiotic virus spread to the video game landscape where the interactivity of the games themselves gave some control back, taken away in the 1980's and early 90's, to the audiences of this subgenre. It also spread into campus games and satirical action figures that comment on the lack of control in modern society. It even spread to the graphic novel and comic book realm, with its lack of faith in the very structures and authorities in charge of society itself (an apt allegory for a generally underground medium). In this era characterized by diffusion into popular culture, the Zombie and its audience reclaimed the syntactic thematic element of control as an allegorical comment. What becomes clear is that in the world of multiple and simultaneous issues and threats that exist, the Zombie is now able to perform multiple and simultaneous allegorical roles and identities. Whatever power this living dead creature lost in the postmodern spoof cycle, it gained back in its spreading out into so many different realms. What happened after this diffusion was a trend for the Zombie to not only become applicable to various cultural situations, but also to evolve to meet the shifting allegorical needs of a fast changing society.

## Section 5 – Evolutionary Speed

The spread of the Zombie “virus” of cultural influence does not mean that there are no current dominant trends within this undead sign. Beginning in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Zombie took on a semiotic trait that created an evolutionary trend stretching throughout current films. The Zombie simply sped up. The film *28 Days Later* (2002) depicted Zombies as fast running, still alive, “Infected” creatures that were vicious and malicious. Much like *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), this film was more of an evolution than a revolution because of film predecessors that varied the speed of the Zombies, like *The Dead Hate the Living* (2000) or even the *Return of the Living Dead* series. Even with these semi-speedy predecessors, the effect of the *28 Days Later* speed on the Zombie subgenre landscape was still widespread. With various levels of satirical effectiveness, Zombies became a mix of extreme violence and increased agility even stretching to *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) the remake of the Romero film. Some of the films such as *Resident Evil* (2002) and *Land of the Dead* (2005) were locked into the slow Zombies, so they instead “evolved” in different ways such as mutations and intelligence. In fact, this evolution even spread to the earlier cycle of comedic Zombies. With slow moving Zombies, *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) evolved by fulfilling a true satirical parody that the spoof cycle had such trouble with. Bucking against the speedy vicious Zombie trend, *Shaun* accomplishes the perfect mix of Zombie traits and allegorical messages, and in many ways this was made possible by the Zombie creatures evolving past the older slow moving style.

*28 Days Later* embodies an evolutionary style with Zombie semiotic traits adapting to fit a world that is itself much faster than ever before, and the other Zombie

films of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century followed this evolutionary logic. This points again to the Zombie's ability to use its universal malleable nature to adapt to the different societal ruptures occurring at different historical junctures. In this instance, much had changed within society in a post-9/11 world, and it is only natural that the *Zombie* would follow suit. Many of the same issues of the *Zombie* shared syntactic themes are dealt with across this set of films such as the loss of control and the inability to control an Insider/Outsider threat, but the literal speed with which these issues were dealt with changed drastically. The *Zombie* becomes a newly formed allegory for everything from the fear of an uncontrolled disease contagion, to the inability to control individual attacks from terrorists. At a time when people are expected to multi-task, make decisions in the blink of an eye, and are told to fear the sudden unknown threat, this sped up individualized *Zombie* threat is a great historical fit. Yet again the *Zombie* becomes the perfect vehicle of "history presented in a condensed way," in the way it can so effectively "intervene in cultural and political debates" (Xavier 361).

The semiotic changes of the *Zombie* creature in *28 Days Later* (2002) have a lot to do with labels attached to them as well as the significance of their new actions, desires, and traits. This film has many similarities with Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* in its ripple effect on the subgenre, evolution of the *Zombie*, and paradoxically the absence of the term *Zombie*. *28 Days Later*'s trailer claims that the film "reinvents *Zombie* horror," but instead uses the word "Infected" in the actual film to describe the creatures. As stated earlier in discussion of Foucault, this concentration on the fear of blood as a verifiable sign of being an "Infected" is reminiscent of the diffusion era and its theme of private anxiety. Much like the word "ghouls" in *Night* this avoidance of the term *Zombie* does

nothing to stop the comparisons. Even further, *28 Days Later* cannot use the Zombie synonym “living dead,” because the creatures are still living breathing human beings who just happen to have an incurable disease. They are rendered Zombie-like in their actions and mental capacity, but they are symbolically dead in their semiotic similarities to previous Zombie iterations. Another distinction to include is the desire of the Infected. Like Zombies, the Infected still attack uninfected humans, but their goal is not to consume the flesh of the living. They instead only want to infect others, and once they have accomplished this goal and spread their virus they move on to their next victim. The infection itself is called the “rage virus,” and the Infected carry the name well as they viciously attack their victims and bite, claw, and even vomit blood onto them to accomplish the spread. The change in desire and the lexical difference connoted by “rage,” could even be seen as influenced by the video game *Zombie* that had become so popular in the late 1990’s, as the Infected act more like creatures who are adversaries of the film protagonists instead of just hungry monsters. All of these semiotic changes are significant in terms of the allegorical messages of private anxiety about one’s body, and the speed/individuality of threats, but none are more important to these films than the speed of the Infected.

With the advent of evolving Zombie semiotic traits, the syntactic themes in this era of control and the Insider/Outsider distinction flourished, allegorically addressing the loss of control in an ever-changing, ever-threatening society. Technological advances not only shift day-to-day, but they also demand people are more connected and more productive at every turn. This can lead to a loss of control of one’s own private space as cell phones and the Internet make the private instantly public. In this era, there are also

constant news reports about threats that “Outsider” countries pose in the form of highly individualized terrorist attacks and possible nuclear armament. These allegorical syntactic themes of the loss of control and the fear of the “Outsider” become manifest in this era of Zombie films through the semiotic evolutions these creatures take on.

The protagonist of this *28 Days Later*, a man named Jim, awakens from a coma into a world already completely taken over by these creatures. Significantly, in the first few minutes of his journey through the city it is completely deserted. The post-apocalyptic mise-en-scène of long expansive shots of empty streets strewn with massive amounts of papers serves to heighten the tension of the impending threat the audience knows is coming. In Jim’s first encounter with a group of Infected, the speed of the creatures is immediately highlighted. Entering a church and dominated in shots by religious iconography and apocalyptic messages, Jim stands atop the church balcony as they first attack him. The sound of their speed is literally heard before it is seen in a static shot from Jim’s point of view in which he is looking at a door. The off-screen sound of someone bounding up the stairs towards him puts the audience in the shoes of Jim, with his frozen reaction to a creature that should not have the speed or the upward mobility and agility to perform the auditory feat behind the door.

Though this giant step in Zombie evolution is a natural progression of this undead sign, in many ways there were predecessors in terms of some of the movements and certainly their viciousness. Many Zombie films depict a slow approach to the victims followed by a burst of energy when they close in. Also many spoof films, in their disregard for the previous “rules” of the Zombie, had these creatures running around in various levels of agility and strength. But these creatures had not been allowed to adopt a

fast moving physical nature in a truly horrific setting prior to 2002 because this evolutionary step would not have fit as well historically. The faster Zombie fit better into the historical time period after 2002 because there was such an increase in the speed of society and the news media keeping people constantly aware of potential terrorist threats.

In fact, this speed allegorically speaks well to the speed at which decisions are expected in this historical era. The protagonists in these films must react to faster Zombie threats, much like we as a society must react to faster demands without as much time for deliberative thought and discussions. These protagonists are shown plotting and debating strategies for survival while the Infected simply act on them, pointing to an allegory for the press of time turning everyone into Zombies. Allegorically, fear replaces patriotism as the central topic in discourse of the nation. These creatures' new speed did not come about sooner because they did not fit in as well as they did with the issues of 2002.

Because *28 Days Later* was made in a year that was not far removed from the very significant events of 9/11, it becomes obvious to draw some parallels in the significance of the Infected's movements. Previously, the Zombie was a creature that was easily handled in an individual nature and only in their vast numbers and relentless nature did the danger truly exist, but with the addition of a fast, agile, and vicious Zombie the threat is much more individualized. Characters in *28 Days Later* must fear every single Infected, and as such it is nearly impossible to completely defend against or control a threat that could come at any time from any direction. This allegorically points to the fear of the more menacing individualized nature of terrorist attacks, and the lack of any way to effectively control, predict, or stop these attacks. Another area of change that no doubt has significance in this post-9/11 world is the fear of contagion and the control of

outbreaks. Again playing on the idea that a threat can come at anytime and anywhere, changing the creatures to “Infected,” and emphasizing the quick spreading capabilities of the virus, the message is allegorically related to the SARS outbreaks, biological attacks such as anthrax, and even technologies like “dirty bombs”<sup>5</sup>.

The shot choice in *28 Days Later* speaks to a lot of these allegorical issues of societal speed, and individualized private threats. This film contains panoramic shots of the group of survivors traveling on completely empty roads, showing the speed of a virus in that no one even had time to try and flee and cause traffic jams. There is also the description by a survivor named Mark of an outbreak in a train station, which is told through a close up shot of his face with a completely black background. This non-descript background and telling emphasizes that the attack could have happened to anyone. There is even a shot from the point of view of a drop of blood itself, again as a verifiable sign of fear, as it infects someone all adding up to the private “Insider” anxiety over disease contagion and lack of ability to control these “Outsider” individual threats.

After this film, there was now a semiotic evolved Zombie monster that had an effect on the Zombie film that was widespread and immediate, but not entirely universal. Instead of every *Zombie* creature after *28 Days Later* running around viciously infecting humans, the evolution of the *Zombie* sign was the aspect that was latched onto the most. There were of course copycats of this new set of traits and motions, but many other films choose to adopt the spirit of *28 Days Later* in the way it advanced and evolved the creatures themselves whether it be in areas of intelligence, mutations, or controlling the virus itself. The *Zombie* became adaptable to whatever the specific situation required, and in turn embodied the very universal malleable nature that had been so important to

the monster in many key junctures. Some of these decisions to evolve the Zombie fit well into the allegorical power of the creature, like the use of mutations in the *Resident Evil* trilogy to address control of scientific advancements in society, while others figuratively “slowed down” the Zombie and reduced its effectiveness in addressing social ruptures, like the decision to speed up the Zombies in the remake of Romero’s *Dawn* simply for shock value.

It would be logical for a remake of the widely popular socially satirical *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) to stick to the Romero style Zombies of its namesake, but instead *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) adopts the speed and viciousness of this new Zombie evolution. The change in many ways appears forced within the film, and uses this new creature to create more blood and gore much like the spoof cycle Zombies. In this film, the agent of control shifts back to the aesthetic audience controlling concerns of the spectacle and this film loses its capacity to allegorize society. Even the title is in place to attract audiences familiar with the Romero original as this remake of a sequel disregards the existence of the original *Night*. There is a disconnect created by keeping one foot planted in the past with the Romero title and setting, while attempting to advance the Zombie in the form of the fast and agile evolved creature. The mall effectively created a situation in the original *Dawn* that made a powerful commentary on consumerism, but in this new remake the message is lost. In fact this speaks to the very nature of the Zombie that can adapt itself to historically contingent ruptures, as this attempt to bring elements wholesale into a different historical time proved to be difficult and ineffective.

*Dawn of the Dead* (2004), being a remake, had a reason to hold onto the same slower-style Zombies, but chooses not to do so. Other films, however, ended up retaining



their slower Zombies and evolving them in different ways according to their specific needs. *Resident Evil* becomes a significant example of this dynamic because the video game series and the first film adaptation were released before the ripple effect of *28 Days Later*. So when the sequels to *Resident Evil* were made and fast-evolved Zombies were popular, this film series had already committed to the slower style. Instead *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004) and *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007) evolved in the form of creature mutations with increasingly stronger and more grotesque iterations. In many ways these creature evolutions, such as the nearly indestructible “Nemesis” creature from the second film, get their origin from the video game series, but as the plot of the film series diverges from the games the emphasis is on the evolution of the Zombie itself. These films even evolve their main protagonist Alice who is cloned and honed as a perfect genetically enhanced weapon. She is “bonded” with the Zombie source, the T-Virus, and as such is an evolution of the Zombie that not only retains her humanity but also becomes a highflying acrobatic super hero. The third film, *Extinction*, emphasizes this evolutionary process in a sequence at the beginning of the film, which depicts one Alice version being killed in a testing facility. As her body is carried outside she is thrown in a ditch and a long low tracking shot follows showing all the other dead Alice failed versions. The shot ends by pulling back to reveal a close up of an on-looking Zombie. The connection between the dead Alice versions and the living dead is clear, and this shot shows how long the evolutionary process can take. The final result of the *Resident Evil* trilogy is an evolution of an entire army of Alices shown with a sprawling long shot of a vast amount of pods incubating new versions, with the original Alice at the helm of control. The result for the white male hegemonic heads of the Umbrella Corporation watching from a board

meeting is a declaration by Alice that she will seek them out for revenge. The agent of syntactic control in these films is the virus itself, and its breaking out and evolving allegorically speaks to the loss of faith in government or science to control the world around them. Like many Zombie films before, the hegemony must fear an army of the undead attacking them, but this time it is a much more powerful evolved army.

One obvious film that could not adopt the new brand of fast Zombies was *Land of the Dead* (2005), which was a Romero directed addition to the *Living Dead* series.

Competing in this semiotic changed Zombie landscape, there was a need to expand on an evolutionary aspect of these creatures. For *Land*, this was in the area of intelligence.

Romero's *Living Dead* series had always been interested in exploring the notion of latent intelligence buried within the living dead, and the idea that it could be used to control the monsters. *Night* depicted a flash of this intelligence when a Zombie uses a rock as a tool.

*Dawn* discusses at length the memories driving the creatures to the mall as well as showing one Zombie's attempt to use a gun comically. *Day* fully explores the notion of training the living dead to be complacent and calm. *Land* takes the evolutionary trend in this era's Zombie films and fully realizes its potential by depicting these creatures

progressing in a true Darwinian sense. The Zombies begin to be able to use weapons, develop slight reasoning, and even use leadership and strategic dynamics. The opening credits is a montage of time lapse shots of the living dead decomposing and uses snippets of monologue that give exposition from the other films in the series, which is something that none of the other films in the series did at all. This opening sequence sets this film up as a sum of its previous parts, and it emphasizes the importance of the passage of time.

The survivors of *Land* use fireworks to mesmerize and distract these creatures while they

get supplies from the various towns, but eventually a charismatic Zombie leader<sup>6</sup> convinces them to ignore the bright flashes and concentrate on their attack. This evolution of the Zombie, specifically the ignoring of the fireworks, speak once again as an allegory of the fear on the behalf of the hegemonic dominant rule of being displaced by progressing groups. This represents the same issues that Romero's series has been concerned with for so long, but now in this newly evolved Zombie landscape the way they are dealt with has changed significantly. The displacement of hegemony is more literal, instead of the symbolic versions, such as in *Night*. The "mayor" of the Zombie sieged city, who runs an exclusive luxurious apartment building, exclaims that invading Zombies "have no right" to enter his world. In *Land*, this dynamic addresses both the syntactic control theme and the Insider/Outsider distinction with the loss of hegemonic control and the strict borders and boundaries put between Zombies and survivors of this film.

*Land of the Dead* exemplifies an evolutionary trend in these films, the advancement of the monster to the point where they themselves can control their Zombie affliction. In *Resident Evil*, the army of Alices have bonded and controlled their virus; in *Land* the Zombies have taken control of their plight by advancing and embracing their knowledge and capacities. This dynamic is also present in *Planet Terror* (2007), where the ones infected with this particular Zombie plague learn to chemically suppress the affliction. This Zombie disease mutates and literally destroys the human body it inhabits, but by breathing in a controlled amount of the chemical "DC2" that originally gave them the disease the process can be temporarily reversed and controlled. Army officers who were infected by "DC2" end up accidentally spreading this gas, "also known as project

terror,” to a surrounding community creating grotesque Zombie like creatures still hungry for the flesh of the living. These creatures evolve much like *Resident Evil*, with prolonged exposure to “DC2” creating mutations like bulging appendages and grotesque liquids spewing from their bodies. The extreme and impossible physics of this film’s blood match this grotesque theme, with gallons flying in the air where there should be drops, and gunshots causing explosions of red mist. Unlike the postmodern era of Zombie films in which the significance of blood is unrealized, this film embraces the idea that “blood is as much discursive as it is chemical or biological; blood *signifies*” (Fox 4). The flying blood is allegorically contrasted to the theme of modern disease control in *Planet Terror*. As discussed before in the *Zombie* video games, there is an element of mistrust in science to eliminate and control diseases that still linger on like AIDS. Within this theme it is the way the army officers are able to reverse these mutations that truly embody this preoccupation with control and the evolutionary spirit of *28 Days Later*. As they begin to mutate, they simply breathe in the chemical that made them *Zombies* and the mutations and disease disappear temporarily. By embracing the disease itself (breathing it in constantly), the *Planet Terror* *Zombies* are able to move past the mutations to the level of control over the affliction, pointing to societies desire to do the same with real diseases.

Not only are many of the creatures in *Planet Terror* evolved in their ability to control themselves, but this film also uses its form to suggest that it is a sum of all the evolutions within this subgenre. As part of a double feature entitled *Grindhouse* (2007) intended to be playful in evoking the B-movie exploitation films of the 1970’s, *Planet Terror* does everything it can to expand on this theme. The film stock is scratched and destroyed, and the “coming attractions” and intertitles evoke the feel of this time period.

This is not done simply to exploit this world of B-movies, as it also serves to literally bond *Planet Terror* with the film itself. The action on the screen has a direct effect on the film stock and its ability to “hold” the events on the screen. There are film scratches throughout *Planet Terror*, but when events like explosions happen they become pronounced and extreme. In fact, during the film’s only sex scene the film progressively gets more and more flimsy and destroyed until suddenly a title card appears “scene missing.” The film itself could not contain its contents, and when it cuts back to the action there is a significant ellipsis of time. This bond between the film itself and the plot of *Planet Terror* speaks to the intertextuality of the films it has evolved from.

Perhaps one of the strangest manifestations of this era’s use of the Zombie creature is through a film that appears on the outset to be harkening back to an older version. Its title, *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), speaks volumes about where the material is derived from, uses the *Living Dead* series style Zombies down to the last detail with their slow shambling gait, hunger for flesh of the living, and vulnerability to death by a blow to the head. Evolutionary and significant is that *Shaun* achieves what the spoof cycle of the 1980’s and early 90’s had so much trouble in doing, that being the creation of a true socially satirical parody. It is the spirit of evolution that allows this film to move past the pastiche and allegorically powerless tropes of the spoof. Once the Zombie itself had moved onto faster fiercer traits, the slower older style was now open for parody. *Shaun* couples its intertextuality and self-referencing with a biting social commentary about the current state of society and its citizens. This film is allegorically speaking to the numbing and controlling of society through media, and it uses the parody of classic Romero semiotic traits to achieve this thematic control allegory. From an early shot of the lead

protagonist Shaun, in which the camera pans from his shuffling feet up to his twisted and contorted face emitting a yawning moan, the message that we are the living dead is clear.

This allegorical message is certainly overt throughout the film, in its use of blank stares at video game screens and the aforementioned yawning moan, but what makes this parody so effective is the way it is backed up in many subtle ways. In writing about this film's origin as a skit on a sitcom series, theorist Linda Badley states that the "Zombies simply provide the circumstances that the protagonists cluelessly and belatedly find themselves in" (48), but this is missing the important connection that these said protagonists have with the Zombies themselves. The key word "belatedly" refers to the length of time it takes Shaun and his best friend Ed to realize that the Zombie apocalypse has begun, which they do not recognize until 28 minutes in. The *mise-en-scène* within these 28 minutes re-enforces the message that we are the Zombies, with its constant news reports, screams, and sirens that can be heard in the background. Shaun and Ed do not notice these things, or sufficiently care about them, because this Zombie world is no different for them. There is a tracking shot of Shaun walking to the corner store before the full Zombie outbreak, and another tracking shot of him going afterwards, and they are completely matched in the visuals, motion, and events other than the replacement of a Zombie controlled world. The experience is the same because this is an ordinary day in the life of Shaun. He already lives in the world of the living dead. It is only when Shaun wakes up from his brain dead mediated lifestyle that he can take charge and fight off the horde of Zombies to save his girlfriend. In the end, nothing much changes except Shaun's ability to step out of his media numbing existence every once in awhile. He still plays video games with his best friend Ed, only now Ed just happens to be a Zombie. Though

he was really one all along. Importantly though Ed is forced to occupy an “Outsider” role now in Shaun’s world, as he now lives in Shaun’s tool shed.

What has evolved in *Shaun of the Dead* is not the semiotic traits and characteristics of the Zombies themselves, but instead the ability to make a true satirical parody. In fact, it is the use of this established semiotic system of codes that makes the parody so effective. *Shaun* uses intertextuality lines pulled straight from *Night of the Living Dead* in which Ed tells Shaun’s mother “We’re coming to get you Barbara!” and references *28 Days Later* in a news report that states “initial claims that the virus was caused by rage infected monkeys have now been dismissed as bollocks.” The references are coupled with a biting social satire, and this pairing mark *Shaun of the Dead* as an exceptionally effective parody. The difference between this kind of intertextuality and the pastiche that was typical of the postmodern era Zombie films is important. Instead of using this self-referential material simply for aesthetic purposes or to control audiences, *Shaun of the Dead* allegorizes the societal ruptures caused by the uniformity, conformity and technological dependence in the modern era. This allegory and parody dynamic is exemplified in the opening credit sequence, where there are various wide shots of slow moving people with blank stares on their faces going about everyday tasks. These wide shots show the uniform motions the crowds exhibit, as they check their cell phones and buy groceries. There is also an exceptional example of the allegory of modern conformity when Shaun enacts a plan to save his friends and family, which involves acting just like the Zombies to blend in. As they amble through the crowd of living dead, the group mimics movements and sounds of Zombies, pointing to the idea that sometimes to survive in modern society one is forced to conform to the crowd in mannerisms and

speech to avoid reprisal. These additional elements of satirical commentary elevate *Shaun of the Dead* from the postmodern pastiche of 1980's Zombie film spoofs to the biting parody it is.

With *28 Days Later* there is a progression of the Zombies' semiotic actions and characteristics, evolving this monster. Zombies had exhibited many of the same movements throughout the different iterations within this horror subgenre, but this progression much like *Night of the Living Dead* created exceptional results. The Zombies that followed latched onto this new evolutionary spirit, helping to inspire newly evolved allegories addressing many important historically contingent issues, like the speed of modern society and the anxiety over individualized private threats. One common theme in these films and evolutions is the embrace and control of being a Zombie itself. This was seen in the area of intelligence in *Land of the Dead*'s Zombies who learned to adapt. It was also seen in the genetic mutations of *Resident Evil* with Alice's newly created army. It was seen in the suppression of the disease itself in *Planet Terror* with the breathable reversal gas. It was even seen in the ability to finally parody this monster in *Shaun of the Dead* where we are the Zombies. These semiotic changes were the result of their allegorical fit into the historical era they were created in, which led to stronger links to the recurrent Zombie syntactic themes of control and the distinction between Insider/Outsider. The Zombies in *28 Days Later* were able to effect quite a semiotic and thematic change in this horror subgenre just by "taking the next step" in evolution a little faster than before.



## Conclusion

As illustrated by my experience with *Humans vs. Zombies*, one does not have to look far to see significant and diverse places the Zombie creature has moved to. In the spring of 2009, a book was released entitled *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. By looking at the title, it seems like this book will be a remake of the Jane Austen classic, but instead it is simply the addition of Zombie scenes into the canonized text. The authors listed on the cover of the book are Seth Grahame-Smith who wrote the Zombie text and Jane Austen. The Zombie can be applied to any situation and any media outlet. The broad applicability is why the Zombie exists in diverse genres, like the comedic *Shaun of the Dead* next to the horrific *28 Days Later*. The genre is now less important than the undead sign itself, which transgresses generic constraints. This was not always the case, but has resulted from the many different iterations the Zombie has gone through over time.

In the beginning, this monster was the actual Haitian Voodoo creature, used as a deterrent for peasants who feared being turned into one. Then the Zombie creature was discovered by the West's occupation of Haiti, but because of the Insider/Outsider mentality of the Voodoo culture a lot of misconceptions came with this discovery. In the early Zombie films this confusion and attempts to Westernize this monster infused the Zombie with syntactic themes of control, and created a media object that could not be contained. As these films developed, there was a lot of fluidity in their semiotic traits until Romero's *Living Dead* series, which codified these characteristics and helped the Zombie become an effective historical allegory site addressing such issues as civil rights and the Vietnam War. Once these traits were familiar and consistent, the Zombie went through a postmodern transformation where the semiotic significations were emptied of

meaning, and the allegorical power was replaced with the playful spectacle of aesthetics. This emptying of sign meaning resulted in an era where the Zombie exploded into many mediums outside of film, and with this diffusion the monster and its audience were able to reclaim the meaning and control that was emptied and taken away in the postmodern era. Finally, this diffused Zombie began a trend of evolution, which manifested itself because of changing issues such as societal speed and expectations, as well as increased awareness of individualized private threats. The semiotic traits evolved because the issues had evolved, and the Zombie had again become a site for effective historical allegories.

The Zombie is an extremely important character, if only because it has had so many changes in what signifies it and what it signifies. There are certainly aspects of this horror creature that have been relatively static, such as dealing with distinctions between life and death, human beings taken over by some force that makes them act in a subhuman way, but in general one of the only constants has been change. What is important is the development of certain overarching syntactic thematic elements and shared semiotic traits that can tie these varied iterations of this monster together. The concept of control as a theme in its many uses is a thread that is woven into the very fabric of the Zombie throughout all of its evolutions. Whether this is the fear of being controlled by an outside force, the fear of losing control in society, or the lack of faith that the authorities in charge of one's wellbeing are able to control threats and ambitions. This evolution through the Zombie's many decades is not only preoccupied with control, but also the distinction between Insider/Outsider and the fear of letting in the unknown. The Zombie sign is able to take these themes and weave them into the universally malleable semiotic nature of this creature, opening the Zombie up to being an extremely

effective site for addressing key historical societal ruptures in the form of a “historical allegory” (Xavier, 2004) that can adapt to changing concerns.

What the future holds for this undead sign is unclear, but what signifies a Zombie today very well may not signify one in ten years. Changes in the Zombie semiotic traits and characteristics will come about as a reaction to new societal issues. It is possible to see an emerging trend of “first person accounts” in this apocalyptic subject matter. Films like *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and *Quarantine* (2007) both follow the handheld camera footage from survivors format. Video games like *Dead Rising* (2006) put you in control of a news reporter who is documenting, through photographs you as the player take, a Zombie outbreak at a mall of all places<sup>7</sup>. Books, *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003) and *World War Z* (2006), by Max Brooks chronicle the first hand stories and strategies of how to survive the “inevitable” Zombie outbreak. With elements in all of these texts of mistrust in official government sources, this new trend could be allegorically commenting on emerging elements of our society, like the 24-hour news cycle and its embedded journalists. All of these personal Zombie accounts would then be an allegory for a taking control over the way historical events are documented. With the blogging, twittering, and YouTube focused society, the personal history aspect of the Zombie subgenre fits right in. The Zombie might also slip into another postmodern aesthetics costume, shedding its power to speak allegorically to social issues. Indeed, with films like *Zombie Strippers!* (2008), such a trajectory is easy to imagine. It is more likely that because the Zombie was able to be spread to so many different mediums and address so many different concerns, that the Zombie symptomatic of postmodernism and the Zombie that allegorically addresses social issues can now shamle side by side.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> These “endings” usually involved the band of survivors throughout the film making one last stand or push towards safety from the Zombies. Success in finding safety seems to vary depending on what the film is allegorically speaking to at that time.

<sup>2</sup> Even more confusing, the American version of *Zombi 2* (1979) is just called *Zombie* and both versions skip to *Zombi 3* (1988) for the next film in the series.

<sup>3</sup> These controlling techniques worked, as many of these films of this era doubled and at times tripled their production costs at the box office (imdb.com).

<sup>4</sup> Within the super hero Zombies, Iron Man has served as Secretary of Defense (*Iron Man* vol.3 #55, 2002), and Captain America at one time was even President of the United States (*Marvel Comics: What If?* #26, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> Also known as a Radiological Dispersion Device, a “dirty bomb” is a makeshift ordinary explosive coupled with radioactive material that is designed to spread contaminates across the intended area.

<sup>6</sup> It is no surprise that this charismatic leader, who develops this evolutionary intelligence first, is a Black Zombie filling out Romero’s continuous use of strong Black characters.

<sup>7</sup> There is a disclaimer on the *Dead Rising* box that denies any relation of the game’s plot to George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), but the similarities are hard to deny.

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