Ghouls, Hell and Transcendence: The Zombie in Popular Culture from "Night of the Living Dead" to "Shaun of the Dead"

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Ghouls, Hell and Transcendence: the Zombie in Popular Culture

from Night of the Living Dead to Shaun of the Dead

Jasie Stokes

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

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Considering the amount of media created around the zombie and the sustained interest in its role in our society, we can clearly see that a cultural phenomenon is underway, and it is important for us to question this phenomenon in order to gain some understanding of how and why its appeal has stretched so far. The zombie is somehow enthralling, and it is my opinion that this is in part because the zombie is a study of what it means to be human in the postmodern world. My main purpose here is not to ask why zombies are popular or why people are enthralled by horror films of any kind. Instead I wish to investigate what zombies mean to us in our culture and society. A study of this culture offers invaluable insight into our own contemporary Western society and culture, as the zombie provides a physical form, embodying our fears and anxieties into something that is sharable and valuable to an increasing number of people. I examine the zombie’s origins within the American Gothic tradition and explore its role as a barometer for social anxieties, focusing on issues of religion in the second chapter. I step away from the traditional view of zombie origins embedded in the Haitian voodoo practice of zombification and its implied post-colonial issues, and instead focused on the zombie as a Western European and American invention, looking at its folkloric and literary heritage. I also take a new perspective of the zombie and its relation to religion in order to explore the profound way the zombie genre can address contemporary concerns. I finish the study with a chapter devoted to a close reading of the film Shaun of the Dead in order to show how the zombie genre has shifted in tone and purpose in the new millennium. What I hope to accomplish in this study is to facilitate a new perspective of the zombie, its origins, its uses and its role in contemporary culture and society, and I hope to contribute in some small way a deeper understanding of where the zombie came from and what it means to us in the 21st century.

Keywords: horror, popular culture, zombies
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Introduction

Approaching the Undead in Popular Culture

For almost a century the living dead have permeated our cultural consciousness; we find these creatures, most commonly referred to as zombies (but also known as the undead, ghouls, and within the early works simply called those things) in film and in literature, and more recently in popular music, comic books, on the Internet and in video games. While the zombie has maintained its place as one of the most popular cinematic monsters in the history of horror, in the last decade an entire culture has built itself around the zombie. This resurgence of mainstream popularity of what I will call zombie culture includes a remake of George Romero’s cult classic Dawn of the Dead (2004), newly released films by Romero Land of the Dead (2005) and Diary of the Dead (2008), and films which take zombies in new directions, Shaun of the Dead (2004), 28 Days Later (2004), Fido (2007), Dead Snow (2009) and Zombieland (2009). Zombies also appear in very recent popular literature, including Stephen King’s Cell (2006), Max Brooks’ The Zombie Survival Guide (2003) and World War Z: an Oral History of the Zombie War (2006) and the highly popular comic book series The Walking Dead which has been in continuous production for the last five years. In August 2009 the cable network AMC greenlighted the pilot episode of a Walking Dead television series. In the same year, a classic “mash up” between Jane Austen and zombie culture called Pride and Prejudice and Zombies was published and found a place on the New York Times Bestseller list. This work is also set to be adapted into a blockbuster film produced by and starring Natalie Portman. Zombie video games abound and include Burn Zombie Burn! (2009), Dead Island (2009), Dead Rising (2006) and Dead Rising II (2010), Left 4 Dead
(2008), and the Resident Evil series (1996-present), and many of these games have made it to the big screen (most notably Resident Evil, but there are rumors that Left 4 Dead will soon find its place in movie theaters).

Scholarship on the zombie and its role in popular culture has also grown in concordance with the rising interest in zombies, and more and more articles, books, anthologies and websites are devoting their time and words to examining the undead phenomenon. Zombie culture has in fact become so popular that there are staged “zombie walks” in which a group of people agree on a meeting place and time (usually by word of mouth or through Internet communities) and appear dressed as zombies. They follow a planned (a sometimes very loosely planned) route through the city dressed and acting like the walking dead. People from all walks of life, so to speak, participating in this subculture may even find themselves engaged in arguments over the genre’s conventions, discussing perhaps what constitutes a true zombie (slow movement vs. fast movement, dead vs. not quite dead, for example), or the best types of weapons to fend off a zombie attack. We may often find people discussing the minute complexities of zombies as if the creatures existed as a real threat to humans.

Considering the amount of media created around the zombie and the sustained interest in its role in our society, we can clearly see that a cultural phenomenon is underway, and it is important for us to question this phenomenon in order to gain some understanding of how and why its appeal has stretched so far. It is true that the zombie is not as popular in mainstream media as the vampire has been in the last two years of the decade, but the zombie remains relentless, and continues to find its place in our popular culture. The zombie is somehow enthralling, and it is my opinion that this is in part because the zombie is a study of
what it means to be human in the postmodern world. My main purpose here is not to ask why zombies are popular or why people are enthralled by horror films of any kind. Philosophers and social scientists have thoroughly explored the appeal of horror\(^1\), and while I am indebted to their ideas and findings, I wish to investigate instead what zombies *mean* to us in our culture and society. It is clear that zombies are appealing, but what is most fascinating is what zombies tell us about ourselves. A study of this culture offers invaluable insight into our own contemporary Western society and culture, as the zombie provides a physical form, embodying our fears and anxieties into something that is sharable and valuable to an increasing number of people. While zombie films maintain a very basic plot structure, each individual film is imbued with social commentaries; each explores a specific social and cultural fear or anxiety that corresponds to the social context of the film. For this reason I would like to take a thematic approach to the zombie subgenre and explore deeply a few specific instances of zombie culture in order to grapple what zombies have meant to us in the first decade of the 21\(^{st}\) century, and to perhaps understand their role in our future.

Zombie culture is a phenomenon extending over forty years and one which merits a holistic examination as it has shifted in correlation to societal changes. Zombies have accompanied us throughout an era of postmodernism and have morphed as postmodernism gives way into something else (post-postmodernism?). It is possible to see the shift of ideals and values from the end of the 20\(^\text{th}\) century through the first decade of the 21\(^{st}\), and we find that zombie culture since 1968 has undergone a similar shift. Therefore this study will be organized into three major chapters examining the process of that shift, beginning with the

\(^{1}\) *The Philosophy of Horror* by Noel Carroll stands out as one of the most important philosophical works exploring the appeal of the horror genre. James B. Weaver’s and Ron Tamborini’s collection of sociological studies, *Horror Films: Current Research on Audience Preferences and Reactions* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996. 206 pgs), is also an extremely useful tool in understanding the social and even physiological effects of horror films on various audiences.
cult classic *Night of the Living Dead* and proceeding to what I identify as the zombie revival of the 21st century. The first chapter will examine the role of zombies in the 20th century: the origins and conventions of a postmodern horror subgenre, a subgenre which paints a bleak picture of the contemporary state and future of the human race. I will focus my attention on the origins of the contemporary zombie within a literary history, addressing common conflicts of opinion on what zombies are and from where they originate. As I do this I will begin to explore issues of genre, which will come up again as I discuss the shift in convention from the early Romero films to the booming zombie culture in the 21st century, examining closely what that shift represents in our contemporary society.

In Chapter Two I will look even more specifically at how that shift begins to take place; I will examine how zombies comment on our moral and religious values and how those values have changed throughout the 20th century, and even how they continue to change in the 21st century. In the final chapter I look at what zombie culture has become in the 21st century; I examine the shift in conventions and the explosion of zombie culture as a primarily comedic and even uplifting and empowering genre. In this final chapter I will focus my attention primarily on the film *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and use it as a means to explore the current use of comedy in zombie culture. I have chosen *Shaun of the Dead* because it represents a benchmark in 21st century zombie films. It both inspired a zombie revival and showed a new generation how to approach zombies in a completely different way, by making use of both their powerful social and cultural powers as well as their comedic value.

Additionally, throughout the thesis I will address and continually question the overall appeal of the zombie subgenre to the general public and discuss how it remains a means by
which both social criticism and cultural pleasure may be satisfactorily expressed. The first task in this study is to introduce the zombie and his origins and to examine his earliest forms, to consider the undead in folklore and in literature leading up to the iconic *Night of the Living Dead*, and most of all to introduce the conventions we will scrutinize throughout the thesis.
Chapter One

Zombie Origins in the American Gothic Tradition

Before we begin this study on the zombie and its role in popular culture it is important to introduce George A. Romero, the film maker who stands as a touchstone in the history of the modern zombie, the man credited with creating a monster which would forever change our perception of the undead. Romero’s oeuvre consists of films with very little plot and character development. The main structure of each film is a group of people trying to survive one night, or one dawn, or one day, under the relentless attack of the living dead, and yet this simple structure has been more or less maintained for the last forty years. Romero’s first, and possibly most influential film, was Night of the Living Dead, a low budget movie filmed in and around Pittsburgh, PA. Romero and his team were amateur and student filmmakers and didn’t necessarily want to make a horror film, but recognized that more opportunities for distribution existed in the horror genre at the time, and felt it would be a good way to get their production company noticed. The film was based on Romero’s original idea, and he assisted with the script and became the film’s sole director. Soon after its release Night of the Living Dead became a cult classic and played in small and local movie theaters all over the country.¹ The film stands out from other low budget horror movies from the 1950s and 1960s. As Roger Ebert described in a 1968 article about the film:

I don't think the younger kids really knew what hit them. They were used to going to movies, sure, and they'd seen some horror movies before, sure, but this was something else. This was ghouls eating people up -- and you could

¹ Unfortunately for Romero, however, the film was never properly copyrighted and so continues to remain in the public domain today, and neither Romero nor any of his production team has made any money since its release.
actually see what they were eating. This was little girls killing their mothers.

This was being set on fire. Worst of all, even the hero got killed. (Ebert)

Rather than fantastic and poorly made monsters, *Night of the Living Dead* presented what Ebert would call “real terror and dread”, a dark and despairing look at humanity and a gruesome and realistic vision of monster who were, in a way of speaking, us. *Night of the Living Dead* changed the rules, not only for zombie films, but also for horror in general.

Despite its role as one of the most enduring and pervasive monsters in postmodern culture, the zombie does not have a clearly defined history. Some scholars argue that unlike most popular Hollywood monsters, “the zombie remains a primarily nonliterary phenomenon” and that zombies are “one of the few monsters that originate from a non-Gothic, non-European tradition and that have passed directly from folk culture into popular culture” (Bishop 197, McIntosh 1). Kyle Bishop, Shaun McIntosh and others insist that the zombie originates solely from Haitian “voodoo” practices and legends of zombification, a practice which entered the cultural consciousness of the United States through stories developed into films such as *White Zombie* (1932) starring Bela Lugosi and Val Lewton’s *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). The connections are obvious; however, there exists quite a disparate divide between the cannibalistic decaying creatures popular today and the mindless, possessed living humans of these films. There is clearly more to the origin of zombies than these scholars will allow. Perhaps the automaton zombies from the films popular in the 1930s passed from folk culture into pop culture, but the 21st century notion of the undead zombie is indeed more closely related to Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* than Val Lewton’s possessed slave from *I Walked with a Zombie*. 
Shawn McIntosh’s article, “The Evolution of the Zombie: the Monster That Keeps Coming Back” focuses on the voodoo zombie and fails to make the clear connection between this older version of the monster and the contemporary zombie known from Romero’s films. Although he claims that the early zombie films, especially *White Zombie*, touch “on themes that have shown up in a number of zombie movies and subgenre horror movies”, the themes McIntosh discusses are those of possession and the relationship between possessor and the possessed (5). In Romero’s films, however, we rarely find this as a theme. While cannibalism is a form of possession, it is dissimilar to the type of possession focused on in the early zombie films. Although McIntosh does address the “post-Romero” zombie in his article, he does not explore the origins of that zombie. He does address that “even after the traditional zombie largely disappeared from the screen, there was still a strong fascination with the word” and points out that the term was applied to a much larger pool of monsters in the 1950s and 1960s, referring to any fantastic creature disfigured or deformed (7). Although McIntosh recognizes that Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* is the “seminal work that forever transformed how zombies are portrayed” he does not go into much detail on how the film fits within the “evolution” of the zombie, merely mentioning the fact that Romero claimed he derived the story of *Night of the Living Dead* from Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend*. He also vaguely states that Romero’s zombies “derived from several older zombie traditions” but fails to explore what exactly or how. The leap from Haitian zombie to Romero’s zombies may appear logical, but the fact remains that important steps are taken out of the equation, that the contemporary zombies born from *Night of the Living Dead* may actually have a Gothic, European literary origin, an origin that has often been ignored in zombie scholarship.
One piece of zombie pop culture which can shed light on the difference between Haitian zombies and Romero’s ghouls is Max Brooks’ *Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection from the Living Dead*. Although considered a work of fiction and more satirical than scholarly, the *Zombie Survival Guide* is one of the only works on zombies that successfully codifies the conventions of the subgenre. Brooks makes exceptionally good points in the distinction between voodoo zombies and those which may actually pose a cannibalistic threat to humans. Among the distinctions is the important fact that voodoo zombies can be controlled whereas other zombies are autonomous creatures. Not only are the voodoo zombies actual living people, but they remain in the control of a more powerful person. Brooks also points out that voodoo zombies exhibit thought, show emotion, feel pain, can communicate and recognize their surroundings, all traits which are found in the earliest zombie films (22). Voodoo zombies are in fact not monsters at all. They are victims of an outside party, someone who is controlling them for personal gain (see fig. 1). Although the zombie films of the early 1950s and ’60s began to show the creatures as more than just shabbily dressed automatons, some even resembling corpses, they still “more or less followed the traditional model in that they were controlled by a master” (McIntosh 8). The zombies in Romero’s dihetic world cannot be controlled, however, and there is little evidence of a transition from the zombie films even in the 1950s and *The Night of the Living Dead*. The two types of zombies are fundamentally different, and the leap from a creature enslaved to a creature completely independent is interesting at best, but not as helpful in understanding the allure of the undead.
Not only does the zombie have a literary origin, but the undead have existed in some form or another in the same folklore which brought most of the horror tales to the present day movie theatre. In his article, “The Folklore of the Zombie Film” Mikel J. Koven offers an interesting examination of the possible folkloric origins of the modern zombie, although he falls into a similar predicament as McIntosh by conflating the more European zombie of Romero’s design with the Haitian zombie. He even goes so far as to split his article into two different almost unrelated parts, talking first of the European-North American folkloric tradition of the reanimated corpse and then addressing the “ethnographic zombie” of the Haitian tradition. This creates a difficulty for Koven in coming to any kind of cohesive conclusion, since the two types of zombies are not so closely related as some like to think. In the article he explores Stith Thompson’s six volume index Motif-Index of Folk Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Medieaval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends, identifying motifs within the index which resemble and could possibly preclude the zombie. Some of these include “The Dead,” “Ogres,” “Resuscitation by demon’s entering corpse,” “Blood thirsty revenants” and “Corpse bites off woman’s nose” (23). Koven claims that the “‘living corpse’ tradition of the
reanimated dead body has a stronger link to the British and northern European ballad tradition” and that within this ballad tradition the “ghosts” take on a materiality not found in other ghost tales. According to Koven the zombie is most closely related to these “revenants” who come back for the dead for a specific purpose to torment, except for the fact that zombies are a completely random phenomenon. Koven argues that this difference is accounted for in that “the modern cinematic zombie film has a more sociological purpose behind it: that the dead have come back to life for the sins of modernity” (24). Koven also cites Norse mythology: for example, the story which recounts “Viking warriors who kill each other in the day, but are revitalized at night to return and kill each other all over again the next day” (25). The one motif which holds the closest resemblance to zombies is the “cannibal ogre” motif, the same motif of which witches, giants, trolls and wolves are variants. According to Koven and Thompson, the “cannibal ogre” is simply a term for any corporeal being, not a ghost, which torments and eats humans (27). Therefore, if we look at zombies in light of the folkloric index we find that their closest relatives are the witch in “Hansel and Gretel” and the wolf in “Little Red Riding Hood.” What Koven does well in this article is in presenting a possible folkloric history for the zombie by showing us how living corpses and monsters have been devouring humans for ages. The zombie is not a brand new creature but a combination of the “living corpse,” the “ghoul,” and the “cannibal ogre” (27). Furthermore, Koven begs us to ask the question:

recognizing these folk revenants and ogre-like monsters as retributionary figures sent to avenge some kind of particularized wrong within the narrative world of the song or tale, what happens when we apply this notion to those cinematic clambering mobs of the living impaired? (31)
Indeed, perhaps the closest tie to folklore that the zombie possesses is in its social function. Although there is not often a specific plot-driving motive for the dead to walk again and avenge some wrong, there is always an underlying social or cultural problem being addressed in the film, a problem magnified and focused upon by the zombies and how people react to the zombie apocalypse.

Rather than a product of the early “zombie” films, zombie culture is instead born of creatures which never took on the name “zombie”. Naming is very important in this respect, particularly for the creatures in Romero’s films. The monsters which set forth the conventions of the modern zombie film were called ghouls, creatures, things, and never “zombies”. Despite his argument that zombies are non-literary and “non-Gothic” McIntosh also points out that “Romero has said the story of *Night* was derived from Richard Matheson’s 1954 novel *I Am Legend*” and that he “essentially conflated the zombie with the ghoul, a cannibalistic monster type that never became very popular” (8). This is a questionable statement considering the immensely far reaching popularity of Romero’s ghouls (See Fig. 2). McIntosh also points out that Romero initially called his monsters “ghouls” but that “zombies” became the most accepted term. He fails, however, to explain why, although he does mention that the term zombie was popular in the 1950s to refer to any creature deformed and dysfunctional. It appears that rather than a solid connection between Romero’s ghouls and the zombies of early Hollywood, there is simply a coincidence between the two monsters. Certainly the term “zombie” is derived from the voodoo films and adopted by fans to refer to Romero’s creatures, but the actual monsters are fairly unrelated. We therefore turn to the literary traditions which Romero himself claims as the influence for the zombie genre.
Regardless of the use of the same term and a few similar traits between the different creatures, the contemporary zombie is largely an invention of George A. Romero and is most closely based on the undead found in the novel *I Am Legend* by Richard Matheson. This monster has changed little since Romero’s remarkably successful cult classic, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). The zombie film which sets forth the conventions of the enormously popular genre is far more complicated in its origins than most scholars suggest. Romero’s foundation for his work lies not only in previous “zombie” films, but rather in a rich American Gothic tradition, as well as a literary tradition that goes back to *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. While *I Am Legend* is technically about vampires, the highly formulaic model of the zombie horror film is presented within the work. The basic foundation for this model is a post-apocalyptic scenario in which the survivors are forced to defend themselves against the walking dead that seek to cannibalize them. Often we find an individual who has little need or trust for society and who forges his own way in a new and dark world. When there are groups of people they are almost always pitted against each other and tend to seek for their own personal survival rather than the survival of the group. This model provides a
crucible in which Matheson, Romero and later other artists are able to examine human frailties. Additionally, the legacy left by Edgar Allan Poe and H. P. Lovecraft is not lost on Romero. We find in Poe’s “Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” the one of the first appearances of the “undead”, a man who is neither living nor dead, in American literature.

In his iconic “The Fall of the House of Usher” Poe presents us with an ambiguous instance of the walking dead, one which resembles closely the conventions found in Romero’s œuvre. Although Lovecraft’s “Herbert West--Reanimator” is an obvious parody of Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein*, we find the same sense of ridiculous humor and grotesque revelry in the absurd as we find in almost every zombie work created. As I look at these works in the remaining portion of this chapter I will suggest that zombie culture originates closely from both the American gothic tradition as well as the deeply embedded folkloric past already discussed. We will see how zombies as we know them today have existed in American culture long before the term zombie even entered the English lexicon. Romero would have been familiar with this gothic tradition, and as Kim Paffenroth claims:

Romero uses horror rather more as it is used in the tradition of American Gothic literature, which includes such luminaries as Edgar Allen Poe, Herman Melville, and Flannery O’Connor, where shocking violence and depravity are used to disorient and reorient the audience, disturbing them in order to make some unsettling point, usually a sociological, anthropological, or theological one. (2)

Not only are the actual monsters created from the tradition of the American gothic, but Romero’s very approach to the stories he tells is rooted in a history of disturbing disorientation and reorientation that brings the audience to an awareness of cultural and
sociological failings. Therefore, we see that with its folkloric roots and heavy American
gothic influences, the zombie film takes up the role as a cautionary tale, as a subgenre fit for
a close and disturbing examination of social problems.

**Zombie Conventions: The Legacy of Romero**

Before examining Poe, Lovecraft and Matheson more closely, first it is important to
address the specific conventions and characteristics of zombie films which these early works
affect. Kim Paffenroth helpfully offers a brief list of zombie conventions which we will look
at now. He first lays out the basic plot of the zombie film:

> For some reason, recently dead human beings suddenly start getting up and
> walking around again. They no longer have human minds, however….The
> exact cause for this outbreak is usually left unstated, but is sometimes briefly
> and cryptically described. (2)

The cause of the zombie outbreak is rarely important, however, for the movies are “always
about some small group dealing with the effects, not the causes” (3). Secondly, zombies are
“autonomous beings, not under the control of someone else” (3). This is an important
distinction between the pre-Romero zombies and post-Romero zombies. This also is
demonstrated within the works of Poe, Lovecraft and Matheson as the creatures are wholly
autonomous and not under any kind of spell. The third important characteristic is the idea of
progeneration: “After the initial cause, whatever it is, zombies rapidly increase their numbers
by killing living people, who also become zombies…the zombies’ most preferred method of
attack is to bite their victims” (4). The zombie apocalypse is so encompassing and dangerous
because of this characteristic. Zombies are cannibals. They not only bite their victims, they
“partially eat the living. They thereby resemble the traditional depiction of ghouls, mythical
monsters that hang around crypts and graveyards to eat corpses” (4). Because cannibalism provides no nourishment for the undead creatures Paffenroth claims that it is “added for its symbolism, showing what humans would generate into their more primitive, zombie state” (4). Zombies are furthermore tenacious and will never relent in their attack…but they are fairly easy to kill: most all zombie movies follow Romero’s depiction that a zombie’s brain is what has really been ‘reanimated’ or ‘revived’ and therefore a blow or bullet…to the head will permanently ‘kill’ a zombie” (5).

In Max Brooks’ *The Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection from the Living Dead*, the intricacies of zombie killing are explored. Brooks explains that “arming yourself for a zombie encounter requires careful consideration, a cool head, and a practical analysis of all factors involved” (28). He then details the proper forms, techniques and tools to use when fighting off zombies, maintaining the convention that the only way to kill a zombie is by destroying its brain. We often find in zombie films, such as *Shaun of the Dead*, the problems normal people face in combating zombies, especially when their only weapon at hand may be a very ineffective firearm.

Because zombies are not the most complicated monsters to destroy, much of the suspense in the stories usually centers on how the characters interact with each other. As Paffenroth describes:

Each movie has the suspense, paranoia, and claustrophobia of a movie about a siege, or a lifeboat full of survivors with limited supplies: the besieging army or the sea is a ‘given’ and is not really the enemy, the real enemy is within the
group, with the fear and ignorance that tears them apart and sets them against one another (5).

The group dynamics are essential in zombie films because they demonstrate the consequences of disorder and contention within communities. They criticize the individuality and self-interest of modern living. In an interview from 2008 George Romero explains:

> All of my zombie films have been about the humans. The zombies, they could be anything. They could be an avalanche, they could be a hurricane…. The stories are about how people fail to respond in the proper way.

(Associated Press)

In *Dawn of the Dead*, for example, the zombie invasion acts as a crucible in which the darkest hypocrisies of humanity are revealed. We find in the film a group of four people attempting to escape and finally hiding from the zombie invasion in a shopping mall. As the danger escalates the characters become more alienated from one another and the small society which they have created. Because of greed, selfishness, hatred, and an irrational attachment to “stuff”, the group dynamics become more fatal than the actual zombies.

Similarly, in the film which establishes the zombie subgenre conventions, *Night of the Living Dead*, the selfishness of the characters cause their destruction and downfall. The group dynamics in *Night of the Living Dead* are based around two strangers who hide in an abandoned farm house where they encounter a small family and a young engaged couple hiding in the basement. They soon divide into the “upstairs group”, who argue that the safest place to fight off the zombies is in the upstairs of the house where escape may be possible, and the “downstairs group” who argue that the basement is easier to defend since there is only one way in or out. Through lack of compromise and a difficulty in communication the
community breaks apart and cannot defend itself. Soon, all members are destroyed or become part of the zombie horde.

Another prominent element of zombie films set forth in Romero’s work is an extreme distrust for authority. As Louis Gross describes, “Romero is about the process of removing the terror from the zombie and placing it on the authority figures with guns and machinery at their disposal” (87). In Night of the Living Dead our hero is shot and killed at the end of the film by a group of gun wielding men, a veritable mob sent out to kill and gather up the zombies. Although these men are supposed to represent protectors, they are portrayed as ignorant and power-hungry. Similarly in Dawn of the Dead “the small group battling the zombies consists of gun-crazy paranoiacs, who take real pride and pleasure in blowing the zombies apart” (Gross 87). This convention finds its way into most zombie films, including newer works such as 28 Days Later (2004). Although argued to not be a true zombie movie (because the monsters are not dead, just merely infected with a disease and move fast instead of slowly), the film exemplifies the way in which terror can be deferred from the “monsters” to the authority figures. In 28 Days Later the small group (Jim, Selena, Hannah and her father Frank) fighting off the infected decide to travel to a military base after hearing a radio broadcast detailing its location and claiming the base as a safe place. When they arrive they find the soldiers, whom they expected to trust as protectors, to be more of threat to them than the infected. Not only are the soldiers a threat to their lives, they are also a threat to virtue, freedom and most importantly to truth. Jim finds out that the infection is limited to the British Isles and that they are under quarantine. He also finds out that the soldiers have known this fact and lied to the group, intending to rape Selena and Hannah under the guise of continuing human life. Jim is able to escape from a pair of soldiers taken to execute him,
makes his way back to the compound and frees one of the infected who then infects and kills the soldiers within the compound. He frees Selena and Hannah and the group escape to a small country cottage to wait out the quarantine. The mistrust of authority figures evident in this film echoes the mistrust found in *Night of the Living Dead* and subsequent zombie films.

![Fig. 4](image)

*Fig. 4* The authorities drag the dead body of Ben to the zombie pyre in *Night of the Living Dead*.

Other conventions found in zombie culture include a sense of the carnivalesque, parody, and slapstick humor. As Paffenroth explains, “The most basic kind of humor that zombies bring to the screen is simple slapstick, physical gags based on the zombies’ lack of coordination and intelligence” (14). He attributes this common motif as standing in a “long tradition of laughing at evil, defusing its power and its hold on us through laughter” (15). Not only does it defuse the power of evil, laughter also is life affirming and offers the participants a chance at rejuvenation, and so while the zombie films are dark, frightening and
misanthropic, they also offer a chance to come out of the darkness through a self reflective laughter. This theme of humor and the carnivalesque will be examined even closer in Chapter Three. For now we will turn our attention back to the closest literary origins of the contemporary zombie: Poe, Lovecraft and Matheson.

**Poe’s Undead**

Many of Edgar Allan Poe’s tales deal with the discomfort the living may experience when dealing with death and with the dead. Romero’s films similarly deal with this uncomfortable and ill-defined relationship, especially as that relationship becomes more and more distanced through modern technologies and practices. In the 19th century when death was a common part of everyday life, the western world had a rich and complicated set of mourning rituals that “provided opportunities for the bereaved to express their sorrow in a manner that made the grieving experience easier to endure and to complete, aiding an ultimate return to a more normal way of life” (Jalland 193). From the complicated procedures involved in laying out the body\(^2\) within the family home to the viewing of the body (in which it was customary to kiss and touch the deceased love one), to the set time period for mourning, death in the 19th century centered on personal and community grieving in order to pay clear respect for the dead and to make a full return to normal life (“Mourning and Funeral Usages”). Although these mourning rituals were strictly dictated by custom and fashion and may seem superfluous and even macabre to our modern sensibilities,

\(^2\) “A small pamphlet published in 1910 by two anonymous nurses set out clear, simple instructions for the task of laying out the dead…Immediately after death a handkerchief folded into a three-inch-wide band should be placed under the chin and fastened at the top of the head to keep the mouth closed when rigor mortis set in. The eyelids should be closed with small pads of wet cotton wool…the body should be washed all over with soap and water ‘under a blanket or sheet’, using old linen, which should be burned afterwards. Then the body from the waist to the thighs should be firmly bound with calico about half a yard wide…and a firm packing of cotton wool or clean rags placed in the body’s orifices” (Jalland, 212).
psychologists argue that mourning rituals meet the psychological needs of the bereaved by structuring death within a coherent system of values, whilst also rallying the support of family, friends, and community to comfort the bereaved. (Jalland 193)

Not only did 19th Century Victorian society’s elaborate mourning rituals potentially assist in overcoming bereavement, some scholars have argued that they are evidence of how the Victorians romanticized death. Jalland presents us with this example:

Hearing of the death of a young female friend from consumption, Edgar Allan Poe responded: ‘I would wish all I love to perish of that disease. How glorious! To depart in the heyday of the young life, the heart full of passion, the imagination all fire’ (41).

Death for Poe, and most of the Victorians, was a topic of great interest, and when the deaths are in some way unusual or when the strict sets of rituals were abandoned death became macabre and uncanny. Although the 19th and the 20th century views of death differ dramatically, we find in the works of both Poe and Romero an exploration of the anxiety the living have over death and the dead.

Poe’s story “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” centers on a man who was hypnotized before death and remains in hypnosis after he dies; and therefore sets forth the center paradox of all zombie stories the moment Valdemar speaks from the dead, saying “Yes;—no;—I have been sleeping—and now—now I am dead” (413). For Roland Barthes “these words have ‘inexhaustible richness’: ‘There is here a true hapax of narrative grammar, a staging of words impossible as such: I am dead’” (Ware 474). The words “I am dead” ought not ever to be heard literally, and the idea that a human being can speak them in such a
realistic and scientific setting sets the standard for the grotesque realism of the modern zombie film. Furthermore, the words which the dead man spoke “were not from the lips of the sufferer”; they were not words spoken of breath and life, but instead were “absolutely bursting from the tongue” (414). His words came from the physical body, not from the mind. We can therefore call the Valdemar a member of the “undead”, a man who is clearly no longer living but whose deceased body is animated, suspended in a perpetual death.

While the zombies in Romero’s films do not speak they are a walking paradox, both dead and living, not in a supernatural ethereal way that ghosts walk the earth, but in a manner which emphasizes the physical body and not the mind or spirit. Like Poe, Romero divorces the body from the mind completely, and as the body is reduced to appetite it behaves as a cannibalistic ghoul. Interestingly, George Romero adapted “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” to film as part of the Two Evil Eyes project done by him and Dario Argento.

Argento chose “The Black Cat” as the second episode of the film and remarks in an article about Romero’s choice, “It’s the only zombie story Poe ever wrote….It’s funny that George ended up doing that” (quoted in Jones 36). In the film, Romero takes the premise of the story to a new level, imbuing it with more of a plot and actually having Valdemar move and walk around like a zombie in his hypnotic interstitial state.

Another work by Poe which precludes the prevalent image of the walking dead in modern culture is “The Fall of the House of Usher.” We find in this tale a body which has not been placed in a tomb, nor is it given the proper funeral rites and is therefore not a permanent death. The fear of being buried alive is another theme often found in Poe’s works and presents with an interstitial existence similar to that of the zombie, not dead and yet no
longer truly living. The following passage is the instant in which the Ushers, brother and sister, die in each other’s arms after the sister had in affect raised herself from the dead:

As if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell—the huge antique panels to which the speaker pointed, threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws. It was the work of the rushing gust—but then without those doors there did stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold—then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated. (216)

The slow moving figure, wrapped in a shroud, blood stained and moaning, falling upon the living and taking his life is an image we will see again and again in the zombie subgenre.

While Usher’s sister, Madeline, is technically alive she has also, because of her medical condition, been declared dead, enshrouded and buried, and the moment of her return is not as a living person, it is as a walking corpse seeking the life of her brother. In Romero’s Night of the Living Dead a similar dynamic between brother and sister takes place as Johnny returns from the dead to take the life of his sister. Like Madeline, Johnny breaks through the door to an aghast and stunned Barbara who surrenders to his deadly embrace. We find in both instances social and literal boundaries which give meaning to our world impiously
disregarded as the dead return to take the lives of their siblings in an almost incestuous embrace.

**Lovecraft’s Walking Dead**

In Lovecraft’s “Herbert West—Reanimator” exists a similar story of the dead being raised to life, and we see the divorce of the physical from the mental or spiritual aspect of life. In addition to this we find the sense of ridiculous and grotesque humor which establishes itself as a key convention in modern zombie films. Written as a serial tale for the magazine *Home Brew*, Lovecraft’s “Herbert West—Reanimator” is usually dismissed by most scholars because of its ridiculous, repetitive and some say even poorly written style. However, we see instead a purposeful sense of humor and over-the-top disturbing hilarity which parodies the conventional gothic tale of the time.

One of the problems scholars have with the story is the consistently needless recapitulations of the plot at the beginning of each serial installation. S. T. Joshi argues that “Herbert West” is “structurally weak in its need to recapitulate the plot of the preceding episode in every successive segment” (93). The recaps, however, add a sense of the absurd as they attempt to summarize in a few sentences what the narrator had previously described as excessively frightening moments. In the fourth installation, for instance, the narrator describes his previous experiences in a few phrases: “One thing had uttered a nerve-shattering scream; another had risen violently, beaten us both to unconsciousness, and run amuck in a shocking way before it could be placed behind asylum bars…” (40). These rushed recaps disrupt the reader, draw her or his attention to the truly ridiculous nature of the events, and as a result undermine the horrific effect which a writer of weird tales would try to achieve. Rather than attributing these features to poor writing on Lovecraft’s part, we see
that they obtain a more humorous effect, one which would be appropriate for a magazine which placed “risqué limericks…as fillers at the end of some episodes” of Lovecraft’s stories (Joshi 92).

Zombies are inherently comedic and parodic while paradoxically they maintain their horrific state of monstrosity. In reference to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque and grotesque realism, Linda Badley emphasizes, “the grotesque body is laughing, anarchic, joyously ambivalent, transgressing the modern canon that closes off and abjects: all is open, protruding, secreting, decomposing, eating and being eaten” (39). Zombies, especially those found in “Herbert West”, exemplify Bakhtin’s idea of grotesque realism as they transgress the most basic boundary between life and death. As zombies in general transgress this boundary and create ridiculous laughter, death is faced and defeated by laughter. Bakhtin argues that grotesque realism is “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (19). Furthermore, grotesque parodies “degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh” (Bakhtin 20). As parodies of human beings, zombies reveal the most base and terrifying aspects of humanity, yet they also expose the human body as ridiculous and absurd. According to Linda Badley, “even in otherwise bleak splatter epics such as Day of the Dead, they are ridiculous, disgusting, pathetic and absurd—at the same time and for the same reasons that they are horrifying” (35). In an age when the Hollywood monster has long since been replaced by madmen and serial killers, the zombie remains an integral part of horror film because of its humorous qualities.

Lovecraft’s ridiculous and grotesque monstrosities in “Herbert West” lay out the foundation of the modern zombie subgenre. In each segment of the tale the dead are brought
to life unsuccessfully, yet the mad West continues to push forward trying variations of his serum. In the second installment the reanimated dead man attacks the living; however, “it had not left behind all that it had attacked, for sometimes it had been hungry” (33). We see here the cannibalistic characteristic of the modern zombie. Furthermore, the description of the walking, crazed dead man clearly resembles our popular notion of the zombie:

A few persons had half seen it in the dark, and said it was white and like a malformed ape or anthropomorphic fiend. … For it had been a man. This much was clear despite the nauseous eyes, the voiceless simianism, and the daemoniac savagery” (33, 34).

Perhaps Lovecraft sought out to make these creatures truly frightening, but they verge so far from his usual cosmic monsters that it tends to be difficult to take them seriously. The fact that these creatures are ridiculous and that the situations surrounding them are comical is also a preview to how zombie films will play out in the future. According to Kim Paffenroth, “the most basic kind of humor that zombies bring to the screen is…based on the zombies’ lack of coordination and intelligence” and zombie films are filled with the monsters “bumping into things, knocking each other over,…taking various pratfalls, and accidentally electrocuting or decapitating themselves” (14). Herbert West’s corpses beating their “head against the wall of a padded cell,” acting “less like men than like unthinkable automata” and finally seeking out West and tearing him limb from limb are all extremely grotesque features. However, because of the almost lighthearted and highly ridiculous manner in which the narrator describes these characteristics, it is difficult to not find them absurd and almost comical, far removed from Lovecraft’s usual sense of dread and cosmic fear. Despite the dark, pessimistic view of humanity which zombie culture almost always expresses, a sense of
humor pervades zombie film and literature, and zombies differ primarily from other monsters in the fact that “they are their own comic relief” (Paffenroth 14). Viewers recognize in Romero’s films the same sense of ridiculousness which Lovecraft imbues within his tale of ghouls rising from the dead and feasting on human beings.

**I Am Legend and the Undead**

According to Gregory Waller, the zombie is a direct descendent of vampires and a member of the large family of the “undead.” Waller is one of the few zombie scholars who make the connection between zombies and vampires, between Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, and argues that Romero’s works are simply a continuation of the vampire myth:

> Richard Matheson…identifies one major context for *I Am Legend* (1954) by having his protagonist actually read *Dracula* in search of information and inspiration…. *I Am Legend*, in turn, is the direct antecedent and the “inspiration” for George A. Romero’s apocalyptic horror film, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), which depicts the undead as flesh-eating zombies rather than bloodthirsty vampires.

Thus, *I Am Legend* becomes the clearly marked link between *Dracula* and *Night of the Living Dead*. Despite the drastic differences in conventions between the zombie subgenre and the vampire subgenre, the creatures are in essence the same: an undead threat to the living. This theme is not only found in vampire literature, but also within works of art and folklore found throughout history. Some of the themes we find in both Matheson’s story and Romero’s film are appetite and consumption, an exploration of social habits and patterns, and the conflict
between traditional Judeo-Christian religion and scientific secularism, a theme explored at length in Chapter Two.

Although *Night of the Living Dead* is only one day in a world overrun by the living dead while *I Am Legend* takes place over several years, the basic premise remains the same. *Night of the Living Dead* simply takes the possible first moments of Matheson’s post-apocalyptic world, the moments of the apocalypse, and shows how one man almost survived the onslaught of the undead, a man who would have become the Robert Neville figure if he had only the undead to contend with. But the lead character, Ben, was up against more than the living dead, he also had to face and overcome the living. If left to himself, like Robert Neville, Ben would likely have survived. Furthermore, while the creatures in *I Am Legend* are described as vampires, their behavior, appearance and form of generation are more closely related to the apocalyptic stories that Romero tells in his zombie films. In the novel Robert Neville is the only human being not left undead after an apocalyptic atomic world war, while surrounding his house every night are the remains of humanity trying to break in to consume his blood. In this story the vampires lose their traditional mystique, their sexual attractiveness and evil allure. No longer are they singular creatures roaming the night unknown and unseen; now they are monsters completely exposed and extremely physical in nature. In fact, the entire novel focuses on the body: Neville’s bodily needs and the physicality of the vampires. Additionally, Matheson treats the creatures at times with the same physical ridiculousness that we find in “Herbert West” and later in the Romero films.

One of the conventions in zombie culture is ridiculous and grotesque humor; we see this early on in Lovecraft’s “Herbert West—Reanimator” and is clearly evident in *I Am Legend*. Grotesque and carnivalesque humor is useful in these works because they
demonstrate the grotesque absurdity of life and death, and especially of the human body. When Neville sees his old friend Ben Cortman stalking around his house as an undead one evening,

in the moonlight, he suddenly realized who Cortman reminded him of. The idea made his chest shudder with repressed laughter and he turned away as the shaking reached his shoulders.

My God—*Oliver Hardy!* Those old two-reelers he’d looked at with his projector….That was who Ben Cortman was—a hideously malignant Oliver Hardy buffeted and long-suffering.

My God, it was hilarious! (67).

We find here a parody of humanity: the ridiculous buffoon, lumbering about, knocking into things, forever tenacious. In fact, it is this tenacity of the undead which renders them both absurdly hilarious and horrifying. This unfaltering tenacity we see as well in “Herbert West—Reanimator” when West’s first undead creature spends sixteen years searching out West, combining forces with his other creatures, and finally “they all sprang at him and tore him to pieces before my eyes, bearing fragments away into that subterranean vault of fabulous abominations” (54). Romero’s zombies are equally tenacious: never stopping, never sleeping, always striving to fill the physical need of consumption.

**Conclusion**

Zombie culture addresses numerous social anxieties and brings the awareness of death, life and the physicality of both back to modern man. As part of the American gothic tradition, zombie culture shocks and disorients, not only with disturbing and frightening creatures, but also with hilarious and ridiculous instances involving those creatures. Scholars
who argue that zombie culture originates solely from the traditional Haitian zombie fail to recognize the deeply rich history of George Romero’s ghoul in American literature. Not only is Romero’s use of horror, as Paffenroth claims, part of American gothic tradition, “where shocking violence and depravity are used to disorient and reorient the audience, disturbing them in order to make some unsettling point” but we also see early manifestations of actual zombies in works by Poe, Lovecraft and Matheson. The walking dead found in these works may not match up exactly with Romero’s ghouls, but the resemblances are uncanny. In each work we see the dead violating strict boundaries between life and death, as well as social boundaries and taboos such as cannibalism; the physicality of these living dead are emphasized tremendously as well as the absurdity and ridiculousness of this physicality. We cannot ignore this rich history if we are to understand how and why zombies function the way they have throughout the last forty years in our society: as both a means of confronting death and human frailties and dispelling fears with laughter.
Chapter Two

The Zombie Apocalypse: Desecration and Revelation in Zombie Culture

I opened this study with a chapter on the possible origins of zombie culture and how the elements and conventions of zombie films speak to our fears and concerns on both an individual and communal level. I will now turn my attention to a more specific concern evident in zombie culture: religion and the changing notion of the sacred in a world which is currently undergoing a dramatic shift into secularism. Although the issue of religion is not a theme one might immediately think of when one watches a zombie movie, it is nevertheless a key component to zombie culture. Recent scholarship has shown that the horror genre provides an excellent arena for the discussion of God and religion. In his article “The Sanctification of Fear” film scholar Bryan Stone states that “from the earliest Faustian dramas to vampire legends and accounts of demon-possession to more recent apocalyptic nightmares, horror films have tended to rely heavily on religious themes, symbols, rituals, persons and places” (4). We see this evident also in the modern horror genre which often uses religious imagery as a crucial tool in addressing the concept of evil and moral corruptibility in contemporary society. In some cases we find that the use of religion in horror films may provide us with clues as to how Western society views religion itself. In his extensive study of religion in the horror genre, Sacred Terror, religion scholar Douglas E. Cowan argues that religiously oriented cinema horror remains a significant material disclosure of deeply embedded cultural fears of the supernatural and an equally entrenched
ambivalence about the place and power of religion in society as the principal means of negotiating those fears. (10)

In other words, horror films that utilize religious elements act as a barometer for society’s current views and responses to religion. Additionally, not only do religiously oriented horror films reveal society’s concerns with current views of religion, scholars tend to argue that the horror genre in general often takes a conservative and moralistic stance as it demonstrates the consequences of not adhering to the status quo, a status quo informed in the West by a primarily Judeo-Christian tradition. As Cowan states, “what scares us reveals important aspects of who we are, both as individuals and a society”, and in a society which has a long history of religious thought and belief, we find a curious mix of fear and nostalgia for our religious past as well as fear and uncertainty for our secularized future (11).

At this point I would also like to posit that the horror genre is innately religious, given the fact that as an inheritor of Romanticism “with its emphasis on emotion and mystery” horror functions as a “reaction to Enlightenment rationalism” (Wainer 60). Like the Romantic and the Gothic the modern horror genre often deals with themes of the supernatural, of forces outside our scientific understanding of the world, and acts as a genre that frequently questions rationalism and emphasizes the emotional. Furthermore, as a product of Western society, and as an emotional and anti-rational genre, horror is fittingly connected with Christian religion and therefore utilizes Christian imagery and dogma as a common and familiar means of expressing emotional and fear-inducing themes. As Alex Wainer points out, not all “horror stories [are] a type of narrative Christian apologetics, but by their very nature they [contain] a questioning of a purely rational, materialist world-view” (60). It is no
wonder then that horror films often contain religious imagery and elements. However, as Wainer emphasizes,

    Rarely, if ever, in the standard horror film is an authentic form of Judaism or Christianity shown in practice. Authentic religious depiction is absent partly because these narratives function aesthetically on a symbolic level: a crucifix symbolizes the victory of Christ over the devil and hell…a symbolic approach attempts to say something resembling biblical truth or warning. (65)

Therefore, according to Wainer, while it seems almost natural for horror films to utilize the mystic and emotional elements of Christian religion, such as crucifixion imagery, the stigmata and demon possessions, these films use them primarily as an emotional catalyst rather than providing an authentic rendering of Christian beliefs or practices. Instead the imagery exists on a symbolic level, on a level in which most viewers, Christian or not, may be able to recognize and experience an intense emotion, even if that emotion is based on a limited and cursory understanding of Christianity. For Wainer the “symbolic” is a step away from true religion, and therefore the religious imagery within horror films is corrupted. However, religious experience is primarily based on the symbolic as well as emotional responses, which leaves us to question whether or not religious elements found in horror films might actually provide viewers with a religious, spiritual or transcendent experience, especially as rampant secularization in our culture has left a religious vacuum, an issue which we will discuss in greater detail below.

Because of its possibly inherent religious orientation the horror genre plays an important role as a tool in understanding how society’s view of religion has morphed and changed over the last century. Bryan Stone argues that rather than functioning on a
“symbolic level” that the use of Christian imagery in horror film is a type of half-hearted and cheapened attempt to elicit emotions and has lessened the effectiveness of religion in the genre. He echoes Wainer in arguing that “rarely have films treated religious faith on its own terms or explored religious values and motivations with much depth and complexity” and that as society continues to grow increasingly secular most “quasi-religious” elements in horror films will lose their “symbolic” function and fail to reach its audiences on a deeper level (2). He furthermore argues,

Horror films frequently construct evil…even if unconsciously, within familiar religious coordinates -- and in the West that has meant specifically Christian coordinates. With the disintegration of Christendom, however, these coordinates are increasingly losing their hold on the popular imagination. (3)

Stone claims that horror films and literature have in the past utilized religious elements appropriately in order to speak to the fears and concerns of a community, “such as sin and redemption, life after death, the struggle between evil and good, or the presence of the supernatural” but that as society changes and becomes more secular, religious themes lose their impact and necessity. He seems to ignore the fact that Christendom may still exist in the cultural makeup and memory of Western society, despite the overall rejection of these traditions. While I understand how he sees religiously oriented horror films lose the impact they may have once had on our Western culture and how religious imagery has become more hackneyed and trite in contemporary horror films, religion is still an issue which the horror genre successfully addresses, whether or not explicit religious imagery is used. Stone continues:
our most basic understandings of self, community and cosmos have undergone enormous alteration during the past century. To the extent that a Judeo-Christian worldview clings to more traditional notions of self, community, and cosmos, the rejection of these more traditional notions raises serious questions about whether a Western religious worldview can be sustained and, if so, what that might look like. (4)

The fact that explicit religious imagery is losing its impact on audiences within the horror genre, as Stone argues, does not mean that religion is abandoned as a theme. Instead even irreligious films may address religious concerns, not despite of but precisely for the fact that they do not rely on religious imagery to shock or scare.

It is my purpose here to examine how the contemporary zombie subgenre addresses the same questions that Stone asks and gives us possible answers as to what a Western religious worldview may in fact look like in the future. The zombie subgenre treats religion on a dramatically different level than many horror subgenres; it is especially notable for its lack of religious images and its few references to God and functions instead as a reflection of the current rejection of more traditional Judeo-Christian worldviews. By exploring a subgenre of horror that does not utilize overt Christian religious imagery to elicit emotional responses, we find a valuable means for discussing the consequences of Western culture’s contemporary view of religion (notably traditional Judeo-Christian religions) and tendency towards secularism. In this chapter I will focus on the works of George A. Romero, the veritable father of the modern zombie film, and examine his contribution to how the subgenre addresses religious concerns.
Unlike many of the “classic” films in the horror genre there is no evil force, no
demon or unclean spirit, to combat in Romero’s films and as an extension most of the
subgenre. This is because there is no God in Romero’s zombie world, and consequently
there is no way to reinforce traditional Christian values, such as chastity, trust in authority,
and faith in the triumph of good over evil, values that the horror genre so often champions.
Romero’s films instead criticize contemporary society as a whole, demonstrating the possible
and likely consequences of a culture where communities break down and suffer as a result of
increasing secularism. While the subgenre has evolved over the years to encompass a more
forgiving and positive view of the world, Romero’s initial and classic films, such as Night of
the Living Dead, Dawn of the Dead, and Day of the Dead, paint a bleak picture of the
consequences of secularization, of the void which exists as a result of the loss of the cultural
function of religion. An examination of the multiple religious elements, or apparent lack
thereof, within Romero’s works will demonstrate how the genre addresses contemporary
societal concerns regarding what is truly sacred on both a communal and individual level.
We will find that within Romero’s diagetic world the sacred does not and cannot exist and
that this world is not only our possible future but also a reflection of Western society’s
current religious crisis.

As the epitome of the zombie genre, the films of George A. Romero are what scholar
David Pagano has called “meta-apocalyptic”, that is,

Although they enact a prophetic attempt to claim a true perspective on the
present by looking back from the conclusion of history, they emphatically,
violeently, and gleefully refrain from separating inside and outside, space and
time, in the fashion of the apocalyptic prophet. (74)
Although perhaps somewhat problematic, Pagano’s definition of “meta-apocalyptic” is helpful in understanding the way Romero’s films criticize the current state of affairs in Western society. “Meta-apocalyptic” zombie films are prophetic, and Romero’s films especially deal with the end of the world and society as we know it. However, these films are not apocalyptic in the same sense that the Bible is apocalyptic. They do not prophesy the end of world as ushering a new era of peace ruled by God as many Christians believe. Rather than the degradation of humanity leading to a punishment by a just and vengeful Being, humans are left alone to propagate their own destruction. Romero’s films cast a grim light on the future of humanity by showing directly how our current society might respond to a crisis on the scale of a zombie invasion. Rather than prophesying of a future time separated from the present, outside of space and time as we understand it, Romero focuses on, and critiques harshly, the irredeemable present world by projecting its future destruction as a consequence of its depravity. No outside Being initiates or is in control of the end of the world in anyway. Humanity destroys itself and no God exists to offer hope for redemption. As a “meta-apocalyptic” genre the defeat of God and religion merely reflects what the filmmakers feel is already happening to our society. Unlike most horror films, there is no place for God in a world suffering a zombie invasion. God represents and is the embodiment of order, hope, and community. In a world where the basic boundaries of existence are broken down, where there is no hope for a glorious resurrection or reincarnation and where communities have no communal practice of ritual or even a sense of cooperation and the “common good”, God cannot exist and religion is impotent in defeating the monster.

The Western world is traditionally and historically a religious world. For hundreds of years Christianity was the primary axis of religious thought and to question it meant to
threaten not only the church but also the way of life and world view of the entire community. Furthermore, the concept of a secular lifestyle completely dissociated with a religious holidays, rituals and practices was not often, if ever, considered acceptable by any authority. In his work *The Denial of Death* Ernest Becker addresses the psychological importance of religion in developing a healthy form of repressing the universal fear of death. He asserts that “religion solves the problem of death…gives the possibility of heroic victory in freedom and solves the problem of human dignity at its highest level” (203). Furthermore, religion is important to individuals and communities because it “alone gives hope, because it holds open the dimension of the unknown and the unknowable” and “takes one’s very creatureliness, one’s insignificance, and makes it a condition of hope” (203, 204). Rather than the grim chance of disappearing into nothingness at the moment of death, religion offers humanity a chance to continue, to not actually die at all. Religion assists individuals and communities in asserting their importance in the universe, what Becker refers to as a sense of cosmic specialness and what he argues is necessary to maintain mental health. As Western society grows more and more secularized and sees the concept of religion as a “great ideal foolishness,” a vacuum is left where once stood a sense of Christian tradition, faith, and ritual (203). Filling the void left by religious tradition and ritual is one of contemporary Western society’s greatest dilemmas. According to Becker “religion is an experience and not merely a set of intellectual concepts to meditate on; it has to be lived” (203) Therefore, as traditional religion fades from everyday life, it leaves an experiential void, and the alternatives are possibly not as beneficial as the traditional experience. As Becker asserts, “modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing” (284). Entertainment, drugs, alcohol, shopping are, according to Becker, means
by which modern humanity attempts to fill the experiential religious void in a society that no longer values on a large scale the rites and experiences of religion.

The lack of explicit religious imagery in most zombie films and the often implicit and subtle discussion of religion presents us with what may seem to be a more applicable and useful genre of horror for a more secularized world, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century. An alternative to the hackneyed Christian symbols is demonstrated as religion plays a highly important yet quite subtle role in the very first contemporary zombie film, setting up a conflict between religious piety and secular cynicism. *Night of the Living Dead* was produced and released in 1968, a tumultuous year in western society as the Vietnam War raged on and as civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and presidential hopeful Robert Kennedy were both assassinated. As Hoberman and Rosenbaum describe in their *Midnight Movies*, 1968 has been called “the most violent year in American history since the end of the Civil War” (Quoted in Gross 85). Furthermore, religion began to take a harsh blow as the “death of God theology” started to take hold. As religious scholar Ronald Flowers states, “Particularly because of the advances of science and technology, increasing numbers of people found that the problems of mankind were being solved by humans…the death of God theology was thought by its advocates to be a theology suited for this kind of age” (18). Flowers describes the “God is dead theology” as follows:

The traditional ways of thinking and speaking about God are obsolete and meaningless. Since modern people work in the realm of empirical verification, as secular/scientific humans, God has become dead to us because there is no way to verify empirically a supernatural, miraculous deity. Furthermore, language about God has no meaning because language must refer to
experience. Modern, scientific, secular people really do not experience the transcendent. If we say we do, we are just remembering the bygone days of another theological era. Consequently all “God talk” is meaningless and has to be abandoned. (19)

Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* is a product of its times, a product of the same events which sparked this radical change in theology, and we see within all of his films the overriding idea that God is dead and that true religion can no longer exist as a result. Instead religions are primarily cultural tradition rather than social necessity. As Flowers points out, the “media widely popularized this theological phenomenon” which reached its zenith “when *Time*, in the issue for 8 April 1966 (its issue for Easter week), had a completely black cover emblazoned with the scarlet words, ‘Is God Dead?’” and “since there was so much media coverage of the death of God concept, few people were unaware of it” (20). I am not saying that *Night of the Living Dead* is a direct response to this theological phenomenon, but that as secularization swept across the United States in the Sixties it passed through and affected the lives of most of its citizens and therefore the creative works produced at this time. The possible consequences of this religious crisis are felt in the art and media produced at this time and are especially addressed in Romero’s film as he projects a meta-apocalyptic vision of secularized Western society.

In the opening scene of the film *Night of the Living Dead* a brother and sister drive over 200 miles to place a wreath on the grave of their dead father. The sister, Barbara, kneels respectfully to situate the flowers, referring to this event as a yearly ritual, while her brother, Johnny, derides her, mocks her and complains about traveling so far just to put flowers on a grave. As Gregory Waller describes, “following the wishes of her mother, Barbara shows
respect for her dead father by making this yearly pilgrimage and by kneeling and praying at
his grave, an act that is at once a cultural, religious and familial ritual” and not only does
Johnny mock the ritual but also her piety and churchgoing habits (281). As his taunting and
teasing increase a stumbling figure appears in the background moving towards them slowly.
“They’re coming to get you, Barbara” Johnny teases as the figure moves closer, and as
Barbara sheepishly tries to walk past the man he attacks her. Her brother attempts to fight
the man off but instead is killed brutally. Barbara runs from the cemetery and manages to
survive the onslaught of the walking dead throughout the movie until finally taken and killed
by the zombie version of Johnny. In the first scene we see two worlds collide between
brother and sister. Barbara attempts to maintain a sense of sacredness and ritual concerning
her father’s grave, while Johnny finds the idea of ritual to be old fashioned, ridiculous and a
waste of time.

The fact that Johnny’s behavior is immediately followed by his demise reflects the
more contemporary trend of horror films to punish those who overstep the boundaries society
has set forth. John Lyden claims that horror films “feature sacrificial victims who tend to be
(at least in recent movies) sexually active teenagers. In this sense,” he argues, “they are
‘guilty’ of actions deemed sinful by parents though not really by the young audiences that see
such films” (92). Although definitely not engaging in any type of sexual transgression, we
could see Johnny’s disrespect towards ritual as a type of transgression against the sacred, and
he is soon duly punished as a result. However, just as sexual activity is no longer deemed as
sinful by society as it might have once been, disrespect towards the dead and the rituals of
mourning is certainly not something for which our society is too concerned. Yet, as Lyden
argues within the realm of slasher horror films, “it can be suggested that audiences identify
with these victims because they feel they deserve punishment for their own sexual ‘sins’ and they experience catharsis through witnessing their destruction” (93). Similarly, we can see Johnny’s punishment for his acts of disrespect towards the dead as a symbolic punishment for not only our contemporary society’s commercialization and commodification of death, but also its attitude towards the sacred in general.

While Johnny’s symbolic punishment in Night of the Living Dead may reflect back on the possible feelings of guilt of the audience, Barbara’s fate is far more telling of the shifting role religion plays in horror films and how that reflects back on to the way a secularized society views the sacred. As Waller points out:

> Although Barbara has been mocked and frightened by her brother, she survives only because Johnny comes to her aid. Traditional rituals offer her no protection, her veneration of the dead is pointless and it makes no difference whether she demonstrates Christian faith. (282)

Although Johnny is punished for his impiety, at the same time Barbara’s faith is not enough to save her from her fate. In fact, she is rendered almost completely powerless throughout the movie, moving or hardly moving in an almost catatonic state, and comes to an ironic demise when the undead Johnny comes back for her. Waller discusses how the lack of religious imagery within the film demonstrates Barbara’s lack of power and the lack of practical power which contemporary society views faith as possessing. While she is faithful, that faith gives her no tools to fight off the undead as it might have in a story about vampires. As Waller suggests, in a different story of the living and the undead (perhaps a story written or at least set in another century) she might have found herself involved in a holy
 crusade, but in *Night of the Living Dead* stake and cross are of no use at all, and Barbara’s faith only seems to make her awakening to her dilemma that much more crude and catastrophic. (283).

Furthermore, when Barbara finds Ben, an irreligious man, he is the one that wields the most power in the situation while she remains literally immovable. This suggests how contemporary society finds religion to have no real, practical or useful purpose except for affecting the minds of the believers as it clearly does Barbara. Just as Flowers states, “Now that humans were able to give up their immature dependence on a transcendent God, they were able to solve their own problems” (19). Unlike traditional gothic tales about the undead as vampires who must abide by religious rules, “in their struggle for survival the living in Romero’s film cannot rely on garlic, mirrors, or religious talismans for protection” (Waller 276). In a world void of hope the tools of religion are powerless. Romero does, however, reveal the false security of those who rely on their own abilities and on modern technological advances. As previously discussed, Johnny with his mocking of the sacred was immediately punished, and even the intelligent Ben cannot save himself at the end of the film. He hides in the cellar and makes it until morning whereupon he hears gunshots outside. Thinking he is saved, Ben goes back upstairs, looks out the window and is shot in the head by one of the zombie hunters. The closing credits roll over still images of them dragging his body away with meat hooks.

In 1968 Roger Ebert wrote a reaction piece to a screening of the newly released film *Night of the Living Dead*. The piece is not a review, and shouldn’t be taken as such, but simply a commentary on the audience’s reaction to the film. Ebert was first bothered and then appalled by the apparent young age of the audience, and his piece focuses on the lack of
parent involvement in the obviously poor choice these seven and eight year olds made in seeing *Night of the Living Dead*. As he looked around the theater at the audience and their reactions he noted “I felt real terror in that neighborhood theater last Saturday afternoon. I saw kids who had no resources they could draw upon to protect themselves from the dread and fear they felt.” This was before the MPAA rating system had been established, and the thought of a theater full of little children seeing films like *Saw II* is unfathomable to us today, and while *Night of the Living Dead* may seem like an innocent zombie movie, it does in fact create a sense of utter dread, and not just in an audience of the children. Ebert points out that “at that age, kids take the events on the screen seriously, and they identify fiercely with the hero. When the hero is killed, that's not an unhappy ending but a tragic one: Nobody got out alive. It's just over, that's all” (Ebert). In this film one of the most poignant and painful moments is when the Ben, the apparent hero, is shot and killed, for no clear reason and with no warning. A small glimmer of hope existed when Ben woke up the next morning, and that glimmer of hope was then shattered with the shot that kills Ben only a moment later.

**Death as Commodity**

As Western society has grown more secular, abandoning its religious traditions, so has our relationship with the dead become more secular, more commercialized, and less sacred. Zombie films reflect this lack of sacredness as the desecrated human body cannibalizes the living. As Linda Badley observes, "once intimately connected with the life of the community, death became separated from life by medical technology, which confined it to the hospital and the funeral home” (22). Not only have we removed death from the parlor and the community and confined to the hospital and funeral home, we have found ways to commercialize and commoditize the dead. Even ‘mom and pop’ funeral homes are
being bought out by large franchise corporations, and the additional costs and hidden fees of funeral services create added amounts of stress and suffering on the bereaved families. According to the National Funeral Directors Association the average cost of a funeral is $6500, which does not include burial or cemetery costs, and often funerals can reach upwards of $10,000 in costs\(^1\). Additionally, there are catalogues and websites dedicated to personalized and highly expensive coffins and urns, such as the Star Trek Casket, “inspired by the popular ‘Photon Torpedo’ design seen in STAR TREK II: The Wrath of Khan” and the Precious Moments Casket which retails for $4550.\(^2\) Rather than a rite accompanied by careful ritual, death is now in the 20\(^{th}\) century a very profitable industry, pulling in over $11 billion a year in revenue.\(^3\) Furthermore, we have become far more removed from death than any other people at any other time in history. Thanks to advances in technology and medicine, death is not a daily fact in most people’s lives. Few rarely see a dead body and when they do it is embalmed and painted to look rosy cheeked and living.

Zombie films take the hidden bodies and place them directly in front of the audience, bridging the disconnect between daily life and the reality of death, a disconnect bolstered by the funeral industry and the attempt to keep dead substance out of living space at all costs. As Stone claims, zombie films such as Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* and the myriad of films like it provide

the new body language, the iconography, the communal rituals…for disposing of bodies that had been quietly kept out of sight, removed hygienically from the public eye, whose decaying flesh had been covered with leftover sacred deodorants but never buried” (29).

\(^1\) [http://www.nfda.org/nfdafactsheets.php](http://www.nfda.org/nfdafactsheets.php)
\(^2\) [http://www.eternalimage.net](http://www.eternalimage.net)
\(^3\) [http://www.nfda.org/nfdafactsheets.php](http://www.nfda.org/nfdafactsheets.php)
Romero brings back into the living world the reality of death and addresses the religious void left by secularization. While the zombie world cannot contain the sacred because it lacks hope and communal order, the act of watching zombie films offers a chance to reconnect with the fact of death as it replaces lost communal rituals surrounding death, rituals which once allowed the mourners to face the reality of death head on. Furthermore, the manner of disposal of the bodies in Night of the Living Dead demonstrates Romero’s criticism of the way we currently treat our dead. As the film ends, the closing credits roll over still frames of men entering the house to dispose of the bodies, once zombies but effectively killed by the authorities. The still frames feature close-ups of meat hooks, implying the types of methods now used to dispose of the no longer sacred dead. We also see in this film and other Romero films including Dawn of the Dead, Day of the Dead and Diary of the Dead the lack of respect for the dead further criticized as zombies are hunted for sport and people gain great pleasure in using the dead as target practice. These are sickening moments and serve to show the Romero’s grim “meta-apocalyptic” view of western society.

Not only does the current funeral industry dispose of bodies quickly, efficiently and hygienically it also attempts to offer the bereaved family a safe clean environment, often resembling a church but usually unaffiliated with any religion, to mourn their dead. Despite the fact that we are less connected to our dead, the mourning process is still extremely important to maintain personal and community health and people cling to sometimes vague religious traditions to assist in mourning. However, “zombies dehumanize humans by eliminating their chance to experience normal feelings of grief, mortality, or sacredness, and forcing them to substitute callous, unthinking, reflexive violence” (Paffenroth 13). In zombie
films the bereaved cannot afford to treat the deceased with care or respect for as Kim Paffenroth describes:

The fact that a loved one who dies will immediately rise up and try to kill you means that the normal rites and ceremonies of funerals, saying goodbye, grieving and ‘moving on’ must be discarded, or much more horrifically, replaced with a new expedient of shooting the loved one between the eyes, followed by unceremoniously setting the body on fire. (13)

This demonstrates again how even the most basic sense of the sacred is denied the people existing in a world of zombies, a world which has pushed religion completely aside. As tension escalates within the small groups set up in zombie films one person almost always turns into a zombie and must be destroyed by another member of the group, usually a close friend or family member. As Paffenroth describes:

Humans need to feel the sacredness of a human corpse, but if that corpse is suddenly a great physical danger, such feelings must be ignored. That does not mean that the feelings will conveniently go away; they will just go deeper down into a person and probably fester.” (13)

Romero places his characters in an improbable but horrific situation and asks his viewers to consider their own actions if placed in similar circumstances. Just as people often resort to cannibalizing the remains of a loved one in times of emergency, Romero asks his audience to consider the possibility of resorting to destroying the body of the loved one for self preservation, a feat made more difficult by the fact that the body is animated and resembles the living body. This is an issue that he explores extensively in *Dawn of the Dead* and again more recently in *Diary of the Dead*. In each film there is a scene where an apartment
building is stormed by the “authorities” killing zombies. In *Dawn of the Dead* they are there because the people are hording their dead, which are now zombies, and this is seen as a threat. They are sent in to put the zombies away and punish the people keeping them there. In most recent of Romero’s films, *Diary of the Dead*, however, when the authorities find that an old couple has hid their dead zombified children, the men kill the old couple as they cry “But they’re family!” Many of the people in these films couldn’t make the choice to “kill” their family members, and those who do are rarely better off. In *Dawn of the Dead* one of the main characters, Peter, is forced to shoot his new best friend in the head before he turns into a zombie. He musters up the courage, proving that can make the difficult decision to prolong his life, but the pitiful act forces the audience to consider if life preservation is worth the price of this psychologically destroying act.

**Corrupted Symbols as Symbols of Corruption**

The monster and primary image of the zombie film is the dead body, an image which is essentially abject and therefore has the potential to be truly horrifying because it is not completely “other”. As Paffenroth states, “a human corpse is considered simultaneously both gruesome and sacred by any normal human being, because it is both still human, and yet no longer human; it cannot be treated like a piece of trash, but also it should not be kept around” (8). Zombies therefore are a further corruption of something already existing in an ambiguous state. They are dead bodies; they are us, monsters created not in some unknown corner of the universe but from our most intimate of wastes. The corpse is other, but not completely because it remains part of us. In this sense it is truly abject, no longer subject but not entirely an object. As Julia Kristeva describes in her *Powers of Horror*: 
The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (4)

Kristeva is discussing here the abject as being something which is part of the subject but at the same time rejected by the subject, such vomit or feces, but when it comes to a corpse both the object rejected and the subject are one in the same. Within zombie films, the monster is supremely abject because it is both us and not us; it represents the abject body seen without God and outside of science. Furthermore, the zombie apocalypse is literally death infecting life. Yet the zombie body is also seen in a heightened state of threat and uncanniness because of its role as a monster. In the zombie genre the corpse literally engulfs us as living humans. The image engulfs the vision of the audience; the zombies engulf the universe of the film and the lives of the characters. The dead body, the corpse “the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything” and in nowhere but zombie films is this more true (3). As the literal borders of the body begin to break down because of decomposition and brutal cannibalism the world falls apart and order turns into chaos.

The idea that the borders of the body reflect the borders that keep order in the universe is addressed by Mary Douglas in her anthropological study, Purity and Danger. According to Douglas, holiness is equated with wholeness, with a sense of order and the power to maintain that order. The sacred, the holy, may not necessarily be perfect in and of itself, but it represents the ordered universe and the ability to gain some feeling of control over the cosmos. Dirt, Douglas argues, is therefore simply “matter out of place,” anything
which is “likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications” (36). In a very similar vein, Kristeva argues that “it is not the lack of cleanness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” (4). The zombie body is abject, horrific and disgusting not only because its literal borders (skin) are broken down, but also because it represents the dissolution of sacred sense of individual, social and cosmic order. The cinematic world overcome by zombies reflects this dissolution of order as smaller communities are unable to recreate any form of communal ritual, cooperation or understanding and soon begin to fall apart. As holiness and sacredness is created by a community seeking control and order we find that in the zombie world holiness and the sacred cannot exist, despite the lip service some characters may give to religion. In the rare instance of a zombie film showing communal cooperation and communication the sense of the sacredness is restored within the community alongside the restoration of order. For example, the comedy zombie film *Shaun of the Dead*, which we will focus more on in the next chapter, adheres very closely to the conventions of the genre with the exception of a noted amount of cooperation among the members of the community. When conflicts arise in the film the ability for the characters to recognize their connection as a community and to remember the communal rituals which they share they are able to communicate and overcome the problems. Although the film lacks any religious references or imagery, the relationships between the characters are rendered highly sacred within their community. This film may seem like an anomaly within the zombie subgenre because as previously stated, faith, hope and order cannot exist within the zombie world. Yet we find at the conclusion of the film that this is not the zombie infested world found in Romero’s films. Order is restored in *Shaun of the Dead* as the zombie invasion is eventually and fully contained. This demonstrates a hopefulness not seen
in other zombie films, showing that order can exist within a community that lacks specific religious ties because the community sees itself and the human relationships within it as sacred.

Despite the lack of religious imagery within zombie films, the zombie world itself is implicitly religious, or at least we can consider it to be a world where theological concerns are addressed. As Kim Paffenroth claims, zombie movies “are especially suited to presenting theological ideas of human nature and human destiny because of the nature of zombies and the threat they pose” (22). This threat, according to Paffenroth, is the “situation in which all humans are quickly reduced to …a shadowy, trapped, borderline existence that resembles hell” (22). The fact that there is no God and no sense of the sacred is because the zombie world borrows “consciously or unconsciously” from Dante’s *Inferno*, where God is so far removed from the inhabitants there that they cannot even comprehend the idea of Him. Not only do these images resemble the idea of hell, but they also hearken to the imagery found in the *Inferno*: wandering, lost souls who are extremely grounded and damned in their physicality, who engage in cannibalism and whose bodies fall apart out of their control. According to Paffenroth, “zombies fulfill the worst potentialities of humans to create a hellish kingdom on earth of endless, sterile repetitions and boredom” (13). Dante takes great pains to demonstrate the sterility, the boredom and meaningless repetition of Hell and that particular imagery is echoed throughout the genre as the both the living and the dead are driven in hopelessness. Such are the words posted on the gates of the Inferno, “Lascati ogni speranze chi’ntrata”—abandon all hope ye who enter. Similarly, within zombie films the hope of religion breaks down as the boundaries and order of society turn into chaos,
reflecting the lack of hope and the problems this creates within contemporary culture as religion fades in popularity.

Although there are no crosses, priests, churches, or other various Christian religious symbols overtly desecrated within zombie films like is often the case in many popular classic horror films, the zombie body itself is a parodied symbol of sacred Christian beliefs and practices: the zombie apocalypse is an unholy resurrection; the monsters feed on human flesh thus taking part in an unholy communion. Furthermore, a decaying corpse is an image which is essentially abject and therefore has the potential to be truly horrifying. As Kim Paffenroth states, “a human corpse is considered simultaneously both gruesome and sacred by any normal human being, because it is both still human, and yet no longer human; it cannot be treated like a piece of trash, but also it should not be kept around” (8). Zombies therefore are a further corruption of something already existing in an ambiguous and disturbing state. Not only do zombies represent humanity’s worst potentialities, they also “straddle the line between living and dead in a perverted version of the Christian idea of bodily resurrection” and thus diminishing “the human character’s ability to deal with mortality, which is already a deep enough psychological strain for most of us” (Paffenroth 12). The promise of resurrection is no longer reassuring in the world where zombies are a reality. Rather than rising from the grave in glory and happiness, resurrection now means endless boredom. Religion no longer plays a role in the afterlife as the “living dead do not require satanic cunning or superhuman strength to achieve their ends, and their simulacrum of immortality holds no promise of pleasure or privilege, just work and more work” (Waller 280). As Gregory Waller points out, the zombies are not necessarily evil creatures; they are not created or influenced by a dark power. Satan plays no role in the creation or control of
the undead, and no visible other worldly power is at play because true religion and the sacred cannot exist in a world void of hope, in a hell on earth.

**Conclusion: A Zombie Apocalypse**

Zombie films reflect the dilemma of a religious vacuum created by the secularization of Western society in many ways. The subgenre is known to address the problems of consumerism, of human vices and immorality; it focuses on the depravity of the contemporary world as a warning against that depravity. We find in zombie films a world where faith, hope and, consequently, religion do not and cannot exist. Not all films in the genre fit within these parameters, however. While Romero’s films offer no chance for redemption, some recent films such as *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and *28 Days Later* (2004) make room for community, charity and hope, and, unlike Romero’s films, in each case the zombie apocalypse is not permanent and is put to some sort of end. In these a reworked and redefined set of values may then be reinforced as communities again begin to form bonds through common beliefs, cooperation and hope.

The difference between Romero’s films and the more recent hopeful zombie films is the diegetic construction of the film. Romero presents a “meta-apocalyptic” world, a world that is exactly as our own but placed in a crisis situation. This world is grounded in a realistic depiction of our current society and focuses on many flaws, one of which is the growing secularism of Western culture. In the diegetic world of *Shaun of the Dead* and *28 Days Later* we are presented with a possible future, a reflection of our current society but not necessarily a prediction, an Apocalypse. The difference between these worlds is the fact that in Romero’s films there is no end to the zombie invasion while in the other two films we find a conclusion, a possible place for redemption, while in Romero’s films there simply cannot
be any kind of redemption, or hope for redemption in any way. The imagery of a hopeless Inferno devoid of God therefore becomes more appropriate to this world except perhaps for the fact that in Dante’s hell existed *contrapasso*, a perfect judgment and punishment of the dead appropriate to their crimes. However, inside the Inferno the damned have only a vague recollection of their judgment from a higher authority; their extreme temporality and physicality prevented them from knowing their Judge. Similarly God cannot exist for the characters in zombie films, and the mention of God is often given as a vague recollection of a time when religion had true power in the world.

As previously discussed, hope, community, and order stand as essential components of the sacred and in world of a zombie apocalypse no hope exists because of the abject nature of resurrection, community breaks down and order can never be restored or even imagined. Rather than attempting to fill the void of religion Romero and other filmmakers instead demonstrate the true hellishness of a world incapable of containing the sacred in any way, a world of utter and complete hopelessness. They create a prophetic warning of what lies ahead as a direct result of our current depravity and lack of faith. However, there are zombie films such as *Shaun of the Dead* that seek to demonstrate not only the possible consequences of our current depravities but also to show us our potential for communal order and our ability to hope even in a secularized world. Furthermore, zombie films allow audiences to reconnect to the image of death, an image which often hides behind the immaculate and hygienic world of modern medical and funeral technology, and so while portraying a world without the possibility of religion the films also provided an alternative to communal rituals surrounding death. As religious imagery and themes within the horror genre fail to connect with a secularized society, zombie films offer an opportunity for audiences to witness the
possible consequences of that secularization and in some cases actually restore a sense of sacredness within a community.
Chapter Three

Zombies for a New Millennium: Cinematic Transcendence in Shaun of the Dead

In the previous chapter we discussed the zombie subgenre as a meta-apocalyptic form that depicts a projected degeneration of humankind as a result of the lack of moral values in contemporary society. George Romero’s films are indeed harsh and unforgiving condemnations of postmodern living. However, as the zombie subgenre evolved and shifted into the new millennium, much of the cynicism found in Romero’s works began to fade and a new, more forgiving, zombie film emerged. While still remaining a barometer for social issues, the current trend for zombie films is now a focus on hope and laughter rather than hell and no longer condemns society to a dark and apocalyptic end. The film that marks this new trend is Shaun of the Dead (2004), a work aptly described by its creators as a “rom-zom-com”—a romantic zombie comedy. This chapter will focus on the role Shaun of the Dead has played in altering the zombie subgenre and breathing new life into zombie culture in the 21st century.

I will discuss Shaun of the Dead largely in terms of cinematic transcendence, and so it is important to note exactly what I mean by this phrase. Transcendence indicates a heightened state of being, an emotional, spiritual, intellectual or psychological removal from one world and into another, a world which is grounded in the experiential world but is also wholly other. Transcendence means to surmount daily life, surpass quotidian existence and experience a heightened understanding of one’s existence and one’s surroundings. Most often transcendent experiences are considered spiritual experiences for those involved because they feel unfettered by the body; they forget the body and feel releavingly

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disconnected from the harsh, painful or boring reality of their existence. Those transcendent/spiritual experiences also may increase a sense of altruism and charity or a sense of unity within a community or with a particular belief in deity. Often the arts, and in this case more specifically film, offer an opportunity for an audience to experience a heightened sense of reality as the viewer grasps onto a particular emotion, idea or truth. The idea of cinematic transcendence was developed by scholar and filmmaker Paul Schrader and is best understood as an opportunity, through narrative structure and corresponding cinematic elements, for an audience to not only witness the spiritual, emotional or psychological transcendence of characters but to also partake in a similar transcendent movement as a result of their experience with the film. I will examine how Shaun of the Dead’s use of cinematic transcendence has pushed zombie culture to break away from the cynicism of Romero’s bleak and hopeless zombie tradition and to focus on the rehabilitation of broken individuals and communities.

As we focus on contemporary zombie culture we must examine the influences and history behind Shaun of the Dead. Not only is Shaun a product of Romero’s legacy, it is also a response to the works that followed Romero’s initial cult successes. The last of Romero’s zombie trilogy, Day of the Dead was produced in 1985, two years after Michael Jackson’s release of Thriller, a work that pushed zombies from a cult interest into mainstream pop culture and marked a significant change in the zombie subgenre. Zombie films and zombie culture were now more self-reflective and parodic than ever before. Despite its larger budget, Romero’s film was a flop; instead the interest in zombies had turned to spoofs and grotesque zombie comedies. As Linda Badley claims, “by the mid-1980s, zombie cinema had very nearly lost its political-satirical edge” (Zombie Splatter 41). Romero himself explains
that the 1980s marked “a different time. The beginning of prosperity. The major crises
seemed…over, and everybody was just dancing” (quoted in Badley 41). In the more
prosperous years of the Reagan era, Romero’s bleak prophesy of our future no longer
adequately reflected society’s fears. What replaced Romero’s satirical humor was, according
to Linda Badley, an “increasingly grotesque (but finally targetless) body humor in the 1980’s
films” such as Dan O’Bannon’s Return of the Living Dead (1985), Stuart Gorden’s Re-
Animator (1985), an adaptation of H.P. Lovecrafts “Herbert West—Reanimator,” Peter
Jackson’s Dead Alive (Braindead) (1992) and Sam Raimi’s Evil Dead series (1981, 1987,
1993) (Zombie Splatter 47). These films take the grotesque nature of the zombie to the
extreme level and either abandon or spoof the conventions set forth in Romero’s works, often
resulting in an overly visceral, blood and guts, slapstick romp. People still loved zombies,
but they were no longer symbols of what human beings could become; they were now simply
a grotesque addition to the hedonistic party that marked the spirit of the 1980s.

The grotesque so evident within these films is not without its social benefits,
however. Grotesque imagery within the realm of comedy is nothing new. The zombie films
of the 1980s merely revive the traditional use of the grotesque which Mikhail Bakhtin
theorizes in his Rebelais and His World as a positive, even regenerative, element of the
carnivalesque found in literature and art. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque image of the
body is usually “unfinished and open,” a body which “is not separated from the world by
clearly defined boundaries” (21). Zombies are the embodiment of this unfinished and open
body whose clearly defined boundaries no longer exist. We find the living dead walking
around with limbs missing, lacerated skin and spilled internal organs. Because physical
boundaries such as the human skin break apart and blur, social boundaries are also allowed to
blur. For Bakhtin this means an undermining of authority and clearly stated social hierarchies, and in zombie films this reflects the freedom and carefree nature of Reagan-era prosperity. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque is naturally incomplete; it represents a liminal phase, a place of becoming, where the rules of society are broken down and rebuilt. It is a place of death, of rebirth, and most importantly a place where the body and the physical world rule over the abstract and ideal. Despite the horrific depictions of gore in 1980s-era zombie films, they offer a liminal space between death and life for audiences to experience a wide range of emotions, not the least of which is humor and laughter.

The zombie films in the 1980s were first and foremost pleasurable in their grotesque and comedic depictions of gore and blood, unlike Romero’s films that focused so much on the horrible things human beings can do to each other. Zombie films gained their ticket to mainstream culture when they began to parody the genre and offer audiences comic relief. It is interesting to note here how people can find such grotesque images in horror films so fascinating and enjoyable. In their sociological study, “Horror’s Effect on Social Perceptions and Behaviors” Ron Tamborini and Kristin Salomonson explore the emotional and physical effect media, and in specifically in this study, fictional horror, can have over an audience. They conclude that violent horror can promote “aggressive primes” which can then turn into aggressive behavior. However, they point out that other factors, internal and social regulators, go into to mediating those primes and thus actual aggressive behavior is unlikely. Their point, however, is in showing that horror film recreates the fight or flight instinct that people feel under extreme duress. They explain:

When taking into account features of today’s graphic horror, it is difficult to miss the excitatory capacity typical of the genre’s content and form. Not only
are the images arousing by their nature, but they are magnified by media’s ability to focus our attention on details of violence often overlooked. The facial expressions of characters’ pain in combination with circumstances producing their suffering have an enormous potential to arouse. With film’s technical capability to present electrifying life-like presentations of people caught in circumstances of preposterous violence, the impact of exposure to modern horrid fiction can be an exhilarating emotional experience”

(Tamborini and Salomonson 189)

This “exhilarating emotional experience” is heightened by the shocking and ridiculously grotesque humor in films such as 
*Evil Dead II*, in which the film’s violence is undermined by cartoonish facial expressions and ridiculous amounts of blood. As Tamborini and Salomonson point out, “most horrid fiction is preposterous in its nature,” and the zombie films of the 1980s present us with an extreme level of preposterousness.

The grotesqueness of Reagan-era zombie culture fell through to a particularly dry spell for zombie films in the following decade. As Linda Badley explains:

by the early 1990s, with the advent of digital video graphics, the mainstreaming of horror, and a backlash against the explicit gore of the previous decade, the zombie splatter comedy cycle was over for the time being (Zombie Splatter 46).

The zombie still lingered in popular culture, however, as the video game *Resident Evil*, released in 1996, grew in popularity. Subsequent sequels to the game finally led to a film version released in 2002. In 1999 a television show on BBC2 called *Spaced* opened an episode with a dream sequence featuring the *Resident Evil* zombies coming out of the screen
and attacking one of the lead characters of the show. This moment was the inspiration for filmmakers Edgar Wright, the director of *Spaced*, and Simon Pegg, a writer and star of the show, to write and produce their own zombie film: *Shaun of the Dead*, a film which would cause another great shift to occur in zombie culture.

**A Post-Postmodern Zombie Film**

Although *Shaun of the Dead* is a product of a long history of zombie and horror films, it stands out from among them as a uniquely important addition to zombie culture, an addition which takes the zombie to new levels of both seriousness and comedy. It is a film which is keenly aware of its history and of its place within the evolution of zombie culture; it embraces zombie conventions, and yet its tone and meaning are dramatically different from Romero’s and from the zombie “splatter” films of the 1980s. Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg are first and foremost fans of the genre. They have a vast knowledge of the history of film and of zombie and horror films in particular. Furthermore, they genuinely love and admire Romero’s work and sought to emulate and maintain the zombie conventions that his films set forth. As Simon Pegg describes:

> We utterly embraced George's take on the zombie…. Because the zombie that people know and love has evolved a lot over the years -- you've got "Return of the Living Dead," where they can speak and they don't die no matter *what* you do; you've got the recent slew of films, where they're sort of running around like overcaffeinated teenagers; and then you've got George's zombie, which is kind of a little mix of everything -- you've got the voodoo zombie mixed up with a bit of vampirism with a bit of werewolf [via] the infected bite…. That's
the interpretation we really love, because it's just so weird and spooky. (Russell, “Interview”) This type of devotion to the genre and care for the conventions is part of what makes up cinematic transcendence. The film utilizes what we can understand as the “cinema of charity” in that the filmmakers not only have deep and profound respect for the characters and their community but also the zombie genre itself.

Dean Duncan describes charitable cinema as a spiritual expression in film marked more than anything by its attitude, toward cinematic subjects and spectators alike. This attitude is courteous, compassionate, generous and sympathetic. These are films made with love” (7). There is no doubt in my mind that Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright adore the subject matter, the characters within their film and the genre as a whole. For instance, in the DVD commentary and in interviews the two speak of Romero with enthusiasm and awe, and this is played out in Shaun of the Dead with the myriad references and nods to Romero’s work. Not only is the tone of the film respectful and courteous, the portrayal of Shaun and his relationship with his family and friends is done with sympathy and compassion. At one point of the film Shaun’s stepfather is bitten by a zombie and lay, bleeding to death, in the car as the characters try to escape to a safe place. We have seen previously in the film Shaun’s dislike and distrust for his stepfather, but at this moment, at his deathbed, Shaun and his stepdad reconcile their differences. In his last moments Shaun’s stepfather tells him that he loved him and that he has always tried his hardest to be the best dad he could be. In a film that could easily have caught itself up in parody and slapstick gore, a moment of quiet and tenderness is expressed (Fig. 1). Wright and Pegg allow the characters to explore their humanity and do so with dignity and respect. This is why I feel as if the film is not parodic
or cynical in the way many postmodern works tend to be. Unlike Romero, who is both uncharitable and condemning towards his characters and spectators, Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg are fans, fans of the genre, fans of Romero, fans of humanity, their characters and their audience. This shines through the film and offers the transcendent opportunity to the audience, an opportunity denied in Romero’s works.

Fig. 1 Shaun’s reconciles with his stepfather just before he dies of a zombie bite.

While Shaun utilizes comedy in a way unlike its zombie predecessors, the concept of a comedic zombie film is not entirely new. Most scholars in fact argue that there is something inherently humorous as well as parodic about zombies in any film. Linda Badley claims that the first modern zombie film, Night of the Living Dead, “began as a parody with Johnny’s Boris Karloff imitation, ‘I’m coming to get your Barbara’—followed by the first zombie’s equally Karloffian monster walk” (49). Shaun of the Dead in turn uses the line from Night of the Living Dead, “We’re coming to get you, Barbara” but there is no indication that the line is meant to ridicule George Romero’s film. It is simply a subtle nod to Romero, not a gag or a joke.¹ Furthermore, while the film is grounded in a history of parody and comedy, unlike most zombie films it does not use zombie slapstick as comic relief. In fact

¹ In fact, when Pegg and Wright first talked to Romero about the film they asked him if he had picked up on the Night of the Living Dead reference, referring specifically to the line “We’re coming to get you Barbara.” Romero had not noticed the reference.
director Edgar Wright specifically avoided the zombie prat falls typically found in George Romero’s films; its comedy and humor are based, rather, on verbal wit and incongruity surrounding events and characters. As Simon Pegg explains:

The film that most inspired us was *American Werewolf in London* -- because it really does manage to combine the two genres, never to the detriment of either one. In *Return of the Living Dead*, the horror is funny. Same with [Peter Jackson’s] *Braindead*, which we absolutely adore. Whereas in *American Werewolf*, there is horror and comedy, and never the twain shall meet. All the horror is extremely scary and all the comedy is extremely funny -- but never at the expense of the other one. (Russell, “Interview”)

While calling on past films, *Shaun* moves away from the zombie spoofs so popular in the 1980s. Furthermore, the film’s physical humor is darkly absurd at times, but does not rely on the comical nature of zombies as previous films had. Therefore, we can look at *Shaun of the Dead* as a post-postmodern film: it is keenly aware of itself and the genre within which it fits, is parodic in nature but not cynical in approach, and it utilizes the grotesque for its restorative functions.

*Shaun of the Dead* is not a typical romantic comedy, yet it is also not a typical bleak and condemning zombie film, nor is it a spoof on zombie movies, nor is its humor darkly ironic like many postmodern works tend to be. The film is categorically none of those things, yet it enshrines all of them as influential antecedents. *Shaun of the Dead* is a hybrid of forms, traditions and texts. The film uses comedy and humor to focus on personal self improvement in a world gone mad, and rather than criticizing social ills, attempting to bring
to light our hypocrisies and fears, it instead demonstrates how one person can overcome the problems of an already hyperaware postmodern society. As Simon Pegg explains,

The great thing about zombies is that they're ever-changing -- because they're basically us. They can be employed to represent any facet of our development or social standing. If in *Dawn of the Dead* they're the consuming masses, literally, in *Shaun of the Dead* they're the apathy of living in a big city and how it can swallow you up. When the zombies come, it *literally* swallows you up. (Russell, “Interview”).

In *Shaun of the Dead* Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright express their concern with the apathy and identity crisis evident in postmodernity. They recognize that the zombie film has a tradition of questioning current social problems, and while Romero criticized social injustices and rampant consumerism, Pegg and Wright focus on the toll postmodernity takes on the individual and on the community.

As *Shaun of the Dead* adheres closely to both zombie and romantic comedy conventions it utilizes especially the symbolic power of zombies. Most zombie films concentrate on a particular societal ill or fear which the monsters ultimately represent. At the height of the Cold War zombies were created by radiation in *Night of the Living Dead*. In *Dawn of the Dead* the zombie invasion represented the rise in consumerism. In *Shaun of the Dead* the zombies are symbols of postmodernity itself. Ihab Hassan, a postmodern theorist, calls postmodernity a “global crisis of identity” a crisis “of personal and cultural values seemingly without parallel in history”. He furthermore claims that “a specter is haunting Europe *and* the world—the specter of identity” (5). The zombies in *Shaun of the Dead* are symbolic of postmodernity’s global identity crisis, the literal specters of identity. They also
perform a very distinct function as a form of disparity, an element essential in cinematic transcendence. We will now turn our attention more fully to the film and examine closely how cinematic transcendence functions as the filmmakers address one man’s crisis of identity and how his road to transcendence and reformation offers a similar experience to the audience.

The Steps to Transcendence

Wright and Pegg divide *Shaun of the Dead* into three distinct acts, the first of which introduces the relationships between the characters and the problems which Shaun is facing in his personal life. The following two acts demonstrate Shaun’s upward movement toward reformation and personal transcendence. While on this road to personal and communal reformation, the zombies function symbolically as a representation of the protagonist’s psychological state, rather than a universal symbol of social anxieties. The conventions of the genre lend themselves to an inward exploration of a particular person, rather than make a universal social commentary. This is important within a cinematic transcendence model because within the individual’s transcendent experience lies the opportunity for the outside world (the audience, his own community) to experience a similar transcendent moment.

For Paul Schrader cinematic transcendence is created through three particular steps. The first is the depiction of the everyday, of life in its most boring and quotidian moments, what Schrader describes as “a meticulous representation of the dull, banal commonplaces of everyday living” (39). The main purpose of setting up a film with the initial focus on the everyday is so that it may be undermined later by disparity. Disparity is defined as “an actual or potential disunity between man and his environment which culminates in a decisive action” (Schrader 42). This disparity is “a growing crack in the dull surface of everyday
reality” wherein the viewer watches on screen “agonizing human feelings and experiences” (Schrader 43). The intense emotions of disparity lead to a decisive action which “demands commitment” and forces the characters to move forward toward stasis (Schrader 48). Stasis is a “frozen view of life which does not resolve the disparity but transcends it” (Schrader 49). Stasis is not a resolution of disparity, and we find in Shaun of the Dead that the disparity created by the zombies is never resolved by Shaun’s decisive action. Instead he achieves transcendence in a moment of stasis, after all of his attempts fail to resolve the disparity.

As we examine the first act of the film we see how Wright and Pegg emphasize the everyday. Shaun of the Dead begins as many romantic comedies do. Shaun, the little man, is down and out, feeling like a loser and lacking the practical means to resolve his problems (Fig. 2). Any indication that this film is a zombie movie is completely absent in the first scene. Instead, the film begins with an awkward conversation between our protagonist Shaun and his girlfriend Liz about the state of their relationship. Rather than taking place over dinner or in the privacy of a home, they have this discussion in a busy pub, the Winchester, surrounded by their nosy and bickering friends: Ed, Diane and David. Ed is Shaun’s best friend and sidekick, although he functions more as a leech on Shaun’s easy-going nature. He is jobless and lazy, living with Shaun rent-free for years. Diane and David are a couple; they are teachers like Liz and do not generally get along well with Shaun, especially David who had been in love with Liz when they were still in school. The dynamic between the members of the group is full of tension. Diane, David and Liz generally don’t like Ed who is crass and crude, but Shaun insists on having him always around. Shaun and David don’t get along well, but Liz also insists on her friends being ever present. This causes obvious tension between Shaun and Liz as they try to work out their relationship issues while
being bombarded by their friends’ opinions. Clearly the issue is not only between Shaun and Liz, but between all members of their small community.

Fig. 2

Shaun and Liz appear distant as they discuss her frustration over their relationship, which she feels has been reduced to habitual outings to the same pub night after night. She hasn’t met his mother yet, whom he rarely sees anyway, and the two spend little time alone, as evidenced by their friends inserting their respective opinions of the situation throughout the conversation. Shaun has come to an impasse: his world is crumbling before him while outside we soon see the world succumbing to a zombie invasion. This initial scene can be considered to fall in line with Paul Schrader’s model of cinematic transcendence and his notion of the “everyday” which is the “surface of reality” that “eliminates the obvious emotional constructs but tacitly posits a rational one: that the world is predictable, ordered, cold” (70). The first scene takes place in a bar and the audience encounters an everyday reality, one which is sad of course, but not out of this world in any way. The camera angles in this scene are level, the shots are medium range, and the audience has no sense of anything amiss, other than, of course, the crumbling relationships set before them.
After the director establishes the everyday within the film, disparity begins to show itself. Paul Schrader argues that “disparity undermines the rational construct” of a film (70). Disparity is an interruption of the everyday and enters the world of *Shaun* when the zombies become apparent. For the audience and their privileged perspective outside the world of the film, disparity is evident in the opening sequence and subsequent scenes. We find in the very beginning of the film, for instance, the title sequence showing a series of shots in which people (all of whom we will see turn into zombies throughout the film) exhibit in their daily routines the traits associated with the living dead: vacant eyes, slacked jaws, hunched shoulders, slow, mindless and repetitive movements. In these early moments of the film the everyday is interrupted by references to other zombie films. We see characters moving about in their daily life but do it in a way that recalls the movements of zombies, thus undermining the “rational construct” of their lives.

![Image](image.png)

Fig. 3 The already zombie-like cashiers move mindlessly through their mundane lives.

For Shaun disparity comes much later in the film when his everyday life is disrupted by the physical presence of zombies. According to Schrader, “disparity injects a ‘human density’ into the unfeeling everyday, an unnatural density which grows and grows until, at a moment of decisive action, it reveals itself to be a spiritual density” (70). The zombies
themselves, therefore, are not the disparity but merely a representation, a symbol, of the spiritual density which is revealed throughout the film. The zombie is a symbol of Shaun’s postmodern life as a zombie. When the zombies attack this symbolizes his identity crisis. The extras on the street and busses in the following scenes also exhibit the traits of zombies, and it is difficult for the audience to determine whether or not they actually are the living dead. Furthermore, the choreographed movements of the “zombies” in the title sequence are executed in the film in an almost lighthearted manner as the sequence of shots is set to a bouncy tune, reminiscent of grocery store “musak” (Fig. 3). These people are already zombies, reduced to that state by postmodern suburban living. Their identities have vanished and they lack the means of recovering them; they are lost souls in a world of postmodern kitsch and meaninglessness. This opening sequence, despite the happy music playing in the background and the overt reference to zombified lives, is a continuation of the everyday and invites into the film the sense of abundance which is to follow throughout most of the film up until the climactic scene of sparcity in which Shaun finally experiences his own transcendent moment.

As I mention above, the struggle of identity is focused on the main character of the film, Shaun, as he comes to terms with his own zombie-like existence. This is signaled as the opening credits close with pair of slow moving feet entering the shot and a moaning sound which grows louder as the feet come closer to the camera (Fig. 4). This parodic and humorous imagery is not only an example of the disparity we find in Shaun’s world, it also calls to mind the slow, stiff walking of zombies (and is an actual nod to the ending credits of George Romero’s *Day of the Dead*), but as the camera pans up and focuses on Shaun’s face, the moan is a yawn, and his movements are explained by his disheveled appearance and
sleepy eyes. For those viewers familiar with zombie films, this conventional parodying leads to a humorous incongruity of expectations as they discover that Shaun is not an actual zombie. But as his day progresses into mindless routines, a dead-end job at an electronics store, and a habitual neglect of important relationships, we see that Shaun has also lost his identity to his postmodern suburban existence. Once a hip, cynical and skeptical young man, Shaun is now in his thirties and living a meaningless life; he must find a way to restore a sense of truth and trust to his life and relationships in order for him to continue living in his world. The zombie invasion which surrounds him throughout the film provides the opportunity to achieve some kind of reconciliation with postmodernity.

In zombie films the cause of the invasion is not often made entirely clear and continues to be a complete mystery in *Shaun of the Dead*. Furthermore, the zombie imagery is obvious to the audience, who is ideally familiar with the history of zombie culture like Wright and Pegg, but remains unseen by the characters, who are too wrapped up in their postmodern lives to notice anything going on around them, until well into the film. Rather than meeting the characters caught up in the middle of the invasion, confused, scared and
already in survival mode, like we would see in a Romero film, we instead find the characters trying to deal with the dramatic problems of everyday living. We find that the parodic, dramatic irony of the first few scenes continues as the audience picks up on clues of the zombie invasion, the disparity, which the protagonist fails to see. Shaun and his friends are so caught up in their petty problems that they ignore the bigger picture. Things continue to fall apart around Shaun as he forgets a promise to break with the normal routine and make reservations for a night out with his girlfriend. After another confrontation with Liz, again with David and Diane in the same room, she officially breaks up with him. The flowers he tries to give to Liz were originally bought for his mother; he throws them away in exasperation after the break up, an act which demonstrates his other failing relationships with his mother and step-father. The zombie invasion is little more than background noise at this point, and the focus of both the characters and the audience is entirely on Shaun and his problems.

In addition to the homage-like style of the parody, and unlike most horror parody, *Shaun of the Dead* does not draw attention to the genre conventions to criticize them or render them ridiculous or silly. Instead it draws attention to the conventions to utilize them in unfolding a story about a man changing his life and healing his broken relationships. One of the most significant zombie film conventions parodied in the film is the small group dynamics which often demonstrate the intolerance, lack of trust and selfishness of humanity. Several confrontations take place in the film, but unlike most zombie films, these confrontations almost always produce positive effects. Similar to Romero films, within each act of the film the climactic moment takes place with a confrontation between the characters. The outcomes of these confrontations differ dramatically in *Shaun of the Dead*, however.
The first act ends after Shaun and Ed spend a night drinking at the Winchester, and upon returning home wake up their roommate Pete who has been bitten by a zombie, and in frustration with their childish actions, and he loses his temper with them. In a Romero zombie film this type of confrontation is likely to end in unforgivable actions that demonstrate the intolerance and unkindness of humans in a high stress situation. In this case, however, Pete tells Shaun to straighten out his life, words which Shaun takes to heart. Before passing out in the kitchen he writes a to-do list on the whiteboard on the fridge: “Get Liz back. Go round to mum’s. Sort life out.” The next two acts follow Shaun’s plan in spite of, or perhaps because of the zombie invasion. Shaun recognizes that he needs to change his life, but without an impetus, like the zombies, it seems unlikely that he would put in the time and effort to accomplish his three goals. In fact, when he wakes up the next morning he sees the list he wrote down, looks dejected and rather than actively decide how to sort his life out, he instead wanders over to the grocery store to buy a soda and an ice cream. He has not yet reached his moment of decisive action because the disparity which the audience views around him is still invisible to Shaun. Despite Shaun’s climactic realization of his habitual and self-defeating existence, he remains oblivious to the zombies until he and Ed literally encounter one in their backyard. This is the moment that disparity, which has been evident to the audience from the beginning of the film, finally becomes apparent to Shaun himself. As Schrader states, disparity is “an actual or potential disunity between man and his environment which culminates in a decisive action” and in the second act of the film we find what has been a potential disunity become a very actual and apparent disunity between Shaun and his environment, a disunity which leads to an extremely important moment of decisive action (71).
As previously mentioned, Shaun wakes in the second act to the to-do list on the fridge which he scribbled the night before. A creature of habit, he takes the exact same route to the shop which we saw in act one, and again remains oblivious to the fact that the people he usually walks past day by day without actually looking at had now turned into zombies. This is a moment of repetition, of doubling. Doubling, according to Schrader, is “an overemphasis of the everyday, to create disparity” (71). Shaun has taken this route before; he takes it every day, and the audience is seeing the exact same tracking shot as before, but this time with some extreme amounts of disparity. The shot tracks Shaun from the house, across the street, down another street, past several people and to the shop. This time, however, all the people (which are placed almost exactly to where they were before in the doubled shot) are zombies. Edgar Wright describes this moment of filming:

As we were location scouting, I remember the cameraman said something to me, in a slightly cynical way: "Oh, a long walk like that is just shoe-leather" -- meaning it's just boring. And so, kind of prompted by his gibe, I decided to put in so many background details -- the jogger who runs past twice, the open door with the phone ringing, the sound of the dog -- in that shot, there's like 15 "Where's Waldo?" gags. Simon and I also went down on a Sunday morning before we started filming and rehearsed the whole thing. So if you watch it again, not only is the shot exactly the same, but Simon is doing exactly the same thing in both shots -- when he slips on the curb, but also every scratch and yawn and sniff and shrug is all choreographed. I'm glad it holds the attention. (Russell, “Interview”)
Because the two scenes are filmed in such a meticulous, choreographed way in order to match up exactly, the disparity between them is even more evident to the audience. This doubling effect occurs frequently as the second act, the act in which disparity is most evident, repeats several scenes of the first act. In this particular scene, while in the shop, Shaun fails to notice the blood-stained glass cooler door as he grabs a soda and nearly slips, on what the audience can only assume is a puddle of blood, as he turns and makes his way to the cash counter (see fig. 4). He fails to see the cashier slowly moving towards him from the back of the store as a zombie, leaves his change on the counter and walks out of the shop. When he returns home he flips through the news channels, and as he did in the first act he doesn’t spend enough time on one channel to actually listen to what is happening. His thoughts are elsewhere, perhaps on the night before, perhaps trying to determine how he could possibly straighten things out at this point in his life.

![Fig. 4 Shaun remains oblivious to the zombie apocalypse.](image)

The moment of Shaun’s decisive action occurs when he discovers a zombie in his own garden. This comes almost exactly half way into the film and is the answer to Shaun’s personal crisis. Shaun and Ed assume at first that the zombie in their backyard is a drunken girl. As she attempts to attack them, Shaun pushes her away with enough force to send her
tumbling back across the lawn to land on a short pole which impales her (see fig. 5). This is the precise moment that the disparity becomes apparent to Shaun. Shaun and Ed stand stunned by the accident, and when the girl stands up they realize something much worse than they could imagine is occurring. Shaun finally begins to break out of his own world and starts paying attention to the world and crisis surrounding him. Shaun and Ed return to the house, leaving the zombie pawing at the window. The news report quotes almost every single Romero film as it informs the characters that the only way to kill the creatures is by “removing the head or destroying the brain.” At this point a zombie walks into the house; Shaun and Ed try to fight him off, and Ed finally hits him hard enough with an ash tray to take him down (see fig. 6). In this moment we see Ed markedly changed by what he has done, and Shaun is shocked out of his complacency. This is the moment of decisive action that changes Shaun’s path from self destruction to transcendence. They decide to take care of the zombies in the back yard, finding a shovel and cricket bat in the shed and using them to bludgeon the zombies. Shaun has finally taken the action needed to push him to
reformation, and this action will lead him and the audience to stasis and finally to transcendence.

![Image](image.png)

**Fig. 6** The moment of decisive action for both Shaun and Ed.

Within the third act we see the consequence of Shaun’s decisive action. One significant characteristic of zombie films is the fact that the protagonists are usually non-heroic. And while Shaun takes on the role of a hero, he does not possess the kind of heroic qualities that will actually save the people he loves. In zombie films these non-heroic characters are forced into a survival situation, often with strangers, which none are properly equipped to handle, and where personalities ultimately clash. The third act of *Shaun of the Dead* utilizes these conventions in a way that questions the ultimate outcome of the experience. After killing the zombies in the back yard Shaun determines that he and Ed find Liz and his mother and take them to a safe place. Ed insists that they can’t stay at the house and will only go to a place with which he is familiar, comfortable, can smoke, and where he knows where the exits are. Shaun immediately thinks of the pub, the Winchester. He convinces himself, and later Diane, David and Liz, that this is the safest place to be. Yet it is an obvious mistake to pass up Liz’s fortress-like apartment to go to the very conspicuous, public place covered on three sides with large windows. Shaun chooses this place because he
and Ed are comfortable there; he gives in to habit, despite the fact that his girlfriend broke up with him because he failed to break the habit of frequenting the Winchester. The decision to go to the Winchester, as well as how Shaun’s relationship with Ed plays out in the film, reflects how Shaun allows his other people to influence his decisions, as a child would, instead of maturely making his own choices. Ed makes the stipulation that he will only go to place that is familiar and where he can smoke, and rather than thinking of the overall good of the group, Shaun gives in to Ed’s concerns first. The consequences of Shaun’s poor decision are felt when the group finally makes it to the pub. The Winchester is extremely vulnerable, not fortress-like in anyway, and succumbs to the zombies within minutes after the group makes their presence known. Of the six characters which fight their way to the pub, only Shaun and Liz make it out alive. Clearly Shaun’s decisive action holds no bearing over the disparity in the film. It does, however, still lead to stasis and transcendence.

The transcendence that exists in *Shaun* is partially concerned with the strengthening of human relationships. Contention ultimately arises between individuals in zombie films, and as the tension escalates eventually one from the group will turn into a zombie and will have to be destroyed by another member of the group, usually a close friend or family member. The most poignant moment of the film adheres to this convention, and yet has a far different outcome than films such as *Dawn of the Dead*. As Paffenroth explains in his book *Gospel of the Living Dead*:

> The fact that a loved one who dies will immediately rise up and try to kill you means that the normal rites and ceremonies of funerals, saying goodbye, grieving and ‘moving on’ must be discarded, or, much more horribly,
Shaun is faced with this decision in the third act as the danger and tension of the situation escalates when Shaun’s mother dies from a zombie bite, and David insists that they shoot her before she wakes up again. Shaun, who has had no time to mourn, screams at David, “Don’t point a gun at my mum!” Dianne and Ed jump into the melee, each pointing a broken bottle at Shaun and David respectively. Soon we see that there is more to this situation as Shaun sobs, “That’s what this is about. He just doesn’t like me. He’s always hated me and now he wants to shoot my mum.” Shaun finally says what has been hinted at throughout the film: David has always been in love with Liz and never liked Shaun. David’s girlfriend Dianne has come to terms with David’s feelings for Liz and asks him why he can’t do the same. Unlike in Romero’s films, this particular crisis does not bring out the worst in the characters; it instead provides the opportunity for them to engage in honest dialogue with one another, a dialogue which becomes cathartic and healing. Even though the characters are placed in intense circumstances, before the zombies break into the Winchester the characters apologize to one another, and rather than relationships destroyed, they are restored.

In a highly transcendent moment for Shaun, at the very end of the film, he, Ed and Liz find a trap door and lower themselves into the cellar of the Winchester. This is the moment of stasis which the abundance of gore and emotion has led to, the moment of true transcendence for both Shaun and the audience. The final confrontation takes place here, not between Shaun and the zombies, but between Shaun and himself. Compared with the rest of the film, the cellar presents the audience where abundance turns into stasis. The place is dark, quiet and still. It is the first chance for him to actually communicate with Liz one on
one. They discuss what to do with the last two shot gun shells, considering suicide. Shaun, with tears in his eyes says that he can’t bring himself to do it. He then discovers a way out of the cellar, says goodbye to Ed, and decides to keep fighting with Liz. The exit is a lift which takes Shaun and Liz up to street level. Shaun literally transcends into a higher world as he is taken up out of the ground, but at the same time this is a spiritual transcendence, the realization that he has become a hero. As Shaun is lifted out of the depths of his mind, he steps out into the street as a new man, prepared to take on life. At this instant soldiers appear in armored trucks and plow down the zombies. The invasion is over, and Shaun’s transformation is complete.

The film’s coda is a scene of Shaun and Liz, back in Shaun’s house now newly decorated and filled with sunlight. Shaun is watching television again, and we see on the news how the zombie invasion was contained and how society adapts to a world in which this sort of thing could actually occur. Shaun and Liz are enjoying a cup of tea and casually talking about their plans for the day. It is clear that their relationship is restored and strengthened through their experiences; they communicate effectively and both appear to be happy and at peace with their lives. We also find that Shaun has not abandoned Ed. When Liz announces that she will be going to the shop, Shaun asks her if he can go out to the garden and she hesitantly concedes. In the backyard shed Shaun has zombie-Ed chained up where he sits and plays videogames, not much different from the living Ed. This las scene represents the healthy state of mind which Shaun now enjoys as a healthy individual who can now maintain healthy relationships within his community.

As I argued in the previous chapter, the diehard, strictly conventional Romero film allows no transcendent power and no redemptive qualities in its frightening and bleak world.
His works are examples of what I would like to call “inverse transcedence”. Indeed, rather than lifting the viewer into another realm of consciousness, Romero’s zombie world grinds the viewer downward into the physical, into the reality of death, of mortality, of decay and of corruption. His films drag the viewer into a cold, silent and empty world, a world without individual identity, community or any sense of the sacred, of justice or of peace. It is useful, however, to understand the manifestation and effects of inverse transcedence in order to see how \textit{Shaun of the Dead}, which fits nicely within the zombie genre, steps away from the demoralizing and dark world of the zombie film. As we move from the inversely transcedent zombie film to discover where transcedence lies within the genre we gain a greater understanding of how \textit{Shaun} functions within the zombie genre but also straddles genres and can be considered a comedy, even a romantic comedy. Returning a moment to Mikhail Bakhtin we understand that “in the system of grotesque imagery death and renewal are inseparable in life as a whole, and life as a whole can inspire fear least of all” (51). Zombie films present systems of grotesque imagery, and we can therefore expect to find some aspect of renewal within the presented death. While the Reagan-era zombie films relied heavily on laughter as a means of renewal, \textit{Shaun of the Dead} moves a step further and uses fear and the grotesque to present a literal renewal experience for the lead character as he discovers his identity in the wake of the zombie invasion.
Conclusion

The Heritage of *Shaun of the Dead* in Contemporary Zombie Culture

What I have hoped to accomplish in this study is to facilitate a new perspective of the zombie, its origins, its uses and its role in contemporary culture and society, and I hope to contribute in some small way a deeper understanding of where the zombie came from and what it means to us in the 21st century. I have examined the zombie’s origins within the American Gothic tradition and explored its role as a barometer for social anxieties, focusing on issues of religion in the second chapter. I have stepped away from the traditional view of zombie origins embedded in the Haitian voodoo practice of zombification and its implied post-colonial issues, and instead focused on the zombie as a Western European and American invention, looking at its folkloric and literary heritage. I also chose to take a new perspective of the zombie and its relation to religion in order to explore the profound way the zombie genre can address contemporary concerns.

I finished the study with a chapter devoted to a close reading of the film *Shaun of the Dead* in order to show how the zombie genre has shifted in tone and purpose in the new millennium. In the last six years since *Shaun’s* release zombie comedies have made a veritable resurgence into popular culture. We could even call this a zombie renaissance of sorts. Before *Shaun of the Dead* the most popular zombie films released in the new decade were *Resident Evil* (2002), the film based on the popular video game, and *28 Days Later* (2002), which most zombie aficionados would argue is not actually a zombie film. George Romero had not released a zombie film since 1985’s *Day of the Dead* and it is difficult to find serious zombie works in the 1990s apart from Peter Jackson’s *Braindead/Dead Alive*
(1992) and Tom Savini’s remake of Night of the Living Dead (1990). Despite the drop in interest and in actual zombie films, the zombie still managed to play a large role in our social and cultural memory. Most people knew what zombies were, often associating them, for better or worse, with the ridiculous monsters moaning “braaaainnnzzz” from the 1985 slapstick zombie film Return of the Living Dead. After Shaun of the Dead’s release in 2004, Western culture became again intrigued by zombies, and often echoed the nostalgic tone of the film. When Pegg and Wright put nostalgia to the big screen it brought back those latent memories of zombies and people once more became excited with the genre.

*Shaun of the Dead* popularized the zombie subgenre in a way that hadn’t been seen since the 1970s and 1980s. Unfortunately, however, many of the recent zombie films fall into the grotesque and slapstick comedy of the genre from the 1980s, totally missing the thoughtful and transcendent approach which *Shaun* takes. Small and independent production companies have released hundreds of direct-to-video zombie films in the last ten years, with titles such as Zombie Strippers, Dead and Deader and Gay of the Dead. In 2007 Robert Rodriguez directed a short film as part of the *Grindhouse* project with Quinton Terintino called “Planet Terror” in which people contract a disease that makes them return from the dead with numerous pustules and sores that grow so infected that when they are killed again they explode. These films are more reminiscent of Dead Alive, Return of the Living Dead and Italian zombie films from the 1970s than they are with *Shaun of the Dead*.

The tone of most of the films and books with larger budgets and wider distribution, however, has remained hopeful. We find in films such as Zombieland (2009) an unlikely hero rising to the occasion, getting the girl he loves and defeating the zombies. Even George Romero took a cue from Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright when he returned to the zombie
genre in 2004 for the film *Land of the Dead*. This film stands out from his others because for the first time he deviates from his own formula, using likable characters, a very distinct villain and hero, and also even humanizes the zombies. Rather than simply showing us how dark and depraved we are as humans, Romero instead provides a slight hope for our future, even if that future means we are all undead. Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright even had a small cameo in the film, probably as a gesture of gratitude for the men who brought the zombie back into mainstream culture. In 2008, however, Romero returned to his old formula for his independently released film *Diary of the Dead*. In many ways *Diary of the Dead* is more like *Dawn of the Dead* than *Shaun*. Produced on a small budget with no known actors, the film is dark, the characters are unlikable, forgettable and extremely irritating, and although a few escape the zombie horde in the end, we know they will probably not last long in a world now taken over by the undead. Even this film, as a throwback to the very formulaic zombie films of the past, appears to have a tone of nostalgia as Romero seeks to rediscover what was truly frightening about his cult classics, *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead*.

The legacy which *Shaun of the Dead* gave to the new generation of zombie filmmakers is the ability to take the zombie subgenre seriously again; to utilize zombies for their extremely powerful ability to address social anxieties and concerns. I quoted Simon Pegg earlier in the study, and would like to emphasize his statement:

> The great thing about zombies is that they're ever-changing -- because they're basically us. They can be employed to represent any facet of our development or social standing. If in "Dawn of the Dead," they're the consuming masses, literally, in "Shaun of the Dead" they're the apathy of living in a big city and
how it can swallow you up. When the zombies come, it literally swallows you up. (Russell, “Interview”).

Pegg and Wright understand the zombie’s power and use it to describe and explore a contemporary social and cultural issue, the apathy associated with postmodern living. They also utilize its comedic value to help create a film which would take the viewer on a transcendent journey. I have shown throughout this study the mutability of zombies. They are constantly changing to fit our needs, to fit the world in which we lived. While there is a basic formula for zombie films, there are no rules. Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright showed the world again how useful the zombie is in exploring “our development or social standing.”

While most zombie films after Shaun of the Dead fail to match their model exactly, it is unreasonable for us to demand them to do so. Instead of judging the films for not living up to Romero’s or Shaun’s standards, we instead must embrace the ingenuity and inventiveness that now mark the zombie genre. There is nothing wrong with being utterly horrified by the zombie, or with laughing at his buffoonery. In both cases the zombie is humanity; it is a warning of what we could become and it is a reflection of what we already are. Ultimately zombies are us, and so will continue to live along side us in all forms of media and culture, and the more we recognize how powerful the zombie figure can be, the more we may understand ourselves and the world in which we live.
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