



“THOSE THINGS” AND “YOU PEOPLE”

Issues of Racism in Zombie Cinema

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Judith Halberstam claims that “it would be very difficult in a horror film to show and punish racism simultaneously,” but this essay contends that zombie films show racism through their representation of African American characters and the ways zombies function as racial “others” who exemplify the non-normative and inhuman (*Skin Shows* 4). Zombie films also link the colonized racial “other” to the colonized white female in interesting ways. The extermination of zombies in cinema represents racism, racial profiling, racial violence, and racial self-hatred and links racism with sexism. At times, zombie cinema may also punish the culturally normative “we or us” for seeking violence against the racialized or feminized “them.”

Cinematic zombies evoke fear in part because zombies can be anyone. Spouse, sibling, co-worker, friend, priest, cop, Mayor, President, girl next door—anyone in a zombie film can be altered and “turned” in no time at all. Those that haven’t been turned are slowly being outnumbered, becoming the minority, becoming non-normative themselves. Audiences have eagerly consumed films about zombies since their first appearance in *White Zombie*, a 1932 horror film starring Bela Legosi.

Subsequent zombie films such as Jacques Tourneur's 1943 *I Walked with A Zombie*, George A. Romero's 1968 cult classic *Night of the Living Dead*, and even Wes Craven's 1988 *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, continued to shape the genre by adding unique elements. The website http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_zombie_films lists the dozens of zombie films made in America and abroad over the last eight decades and attests to the genre's continuing popularity.

As defined in early zombie films, a zombie is a person who is killed and brought back to life by magical means, typically in a Haitian Voodoo culture.¹ These living dead exist in a state of non-awareness when they return to society, mute, and typically in service to the *houngan*, the Voodoo priest. In these films, zombies are literally slaves, are often seen as natives, and most horribly (to earlier audiences) are often ambiguously innocent white women victimized on the threshold of marriage when they are "turned" into zombies.

The American zombie films of the 1930's and 1940's are "early entries in Hollywood's formulation of a spectral Haiti"; such films transmute the Haitian people and their political struggle into a simple tale about a white woman as a victim in a terrible plot (Paravisini-Gebert 56). Both *White Zombie* and *I Walked with A Zombie* feature white women out of their element in a foreign land, stricken by a mysterious ailment that strips them of motive, free will, and identity. As they are turned into submissive and easy-to-manipulate dolls, their men must vanquish the dark forces and evil villains that have transformed them into a frighteningly passive feminine ideal. Additionally, the threatened sexuality of these doll-like women allows for the eradication and punishment of a number of racially identified zombies. The dark-bearded and Eastern European-identified

¹ Voodoo (in English, Vodoo) is the state religion of Haiti (along with Roman Catholicism). It is a creolized religion formed by African groups enslaved and brought to Haiti (originally, the colonized Saint Domingue in the 17th and 18th centuries). The word *Voodoo* means spirit or deity. "Voodoo." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/632819/Voodoo>. July 17, 2010

actor Bela Lugosi plays “Murder” Legendre in *White Zombie*, while a blonde Madge Bellamy plays Madeline, the titular White Zombie, who is saved and snapped out of her trance by her heroic husband-to-be.

White Zombie suggests a continuation of colonialist treatment of the island inhabitants—they function as secondary citizens who actively serve the white characters (even those that aren’t zombies). White women living in a foreign, “primitive” land are depicted as especially susceptible to zombification and loss of identity and position. The European “Murder” Legendre takes his zombie slaves with him to Haiti and uses them as a free labor force in his sugar mill. He also creates zombies for others in exchange for money or favors. Madeline Short meets a missionary, Neil Parker (John Harron) on the boat to Haiti, and quickly becomes engaged to marry him. However, coveting Madeleine for himself, a wealthy plantation owner Charles Beaumont (Robert Frazer) hires Legendre to slip her a potion on her wedding day, causing her apparent death and burial after which she is retrieved from the grave and “revived” as a zombie.

The enslaved zombies in films like *White Zombie* and *I Walked With A Zombie* represent a variation of the Victorian “angel in the household” concept, transforming Western women into easy-to-manipulate, silent, and completely obedient slaves. Early zombie films underscore the moral/sexual peril of innocent and beautiful white women, who must be saved and returned to their rightful place at the European male’s side. Ironically, women’s non-zombie lives as white women do not seem very different from their zombified state, considering that Madeline doesn’t say much when the curse is lifted, and only the faintest glimmer of life and recognition comes into her face after Legendre and Beaumont perish over the edge of a cliff.

In contrast to the intense concern about the white woman’s enslavement, the kidnapping and indenture of native people (non-Westerners) through zombification is usually not represented as an injustice, nor is it important if they are re-

turned to their natural state. Film critics such as Kyle Bishop (*The Sub-Subaltern Monster*) criticize the portrayal of race and the Western bias in early zombie films: “Instead of enlightening western audiences about the cultural realities of Haiti, *White Zombie* merely exploits rumors of voodoo practices and paganism” (Bishop, 151). While Bishop recognizes its cultural significance as the first talkie horror film, as well as the first film to feature the notion of zombies, he emphasizes the film’s “racial dichotomies [which] are only enforced by portraying whites as universally righteous and casting blacks as potentially wicked” (Bishop, 151).

Presenting a much less racist interpretation of zombies is Jacques Tourneur’s 1943 film *I Walked with a Zombie*. Loosely based on Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), it shares several plot points and themes: a young woman moves into a household to care for a member of the family, meets and falls in love with a charming but mysterious master of the house, and discovers a wife with a secret and disturbing ailment. However, *White Zombie* focuses chiefly on Madeleine’s zombification, whereas *I Walked with a Zombie* depicts a more pervasive culture of zombified women, white and native. Canadian nurse Betsy is summoned to care for Jessica Howard, who has been catatonic for some time. Arriving at a sugar plantation on Saint Sebastian, a Caribbean island, Betsy finds herself caught up in family warfare between brothers who are rivals for Jessica’s love. After the doctor calls Jessica “a beautiful zombie,” Betsy attempts to “cure” Jessica. Zombification is eventually revealed as punishment for a cheating wife, administered by the husband’s mother, Mrs. Rand, who has also been administering medical advice to the locals, descended from African slaves, under the guise of a voodoo identity. The matriarchal Mrs. Rand benignly manipulates the natives, their beliefs and traditions, by hiding Western medical traditions with native indigenous beliefs. However, she also invokes the curse of zombification to create a completely obedient, submissive and “un-dead” daughter-in-law. Lacking the rescue of the white woman in *White Zombie* and later zombie films, *I Walked with a Zombie* of-

fers no cure for the zombie condition. Jessica eventually perishes, along with Wesley, punished for their adulterous and near-incestuous love, a punishment that comes, it is suggested, at the hands of the *Sabreur*, a voodoo priest.

Emphasizing that the Voodoo curse is invoked not by a native, but a wealthy white woman, driven by her desire to keep the nuclear family intact, Gwenda Young interprets the film's subtext as "an interesting meditation on the power struggle between blacks and whites in a post-colonial society" (Young, 107). Young overstates her case when she argues that the film is a celebration of black difference. Instead, while recognizing distinct differences between races, *I Walked with a Zombie* merely re-attributes traits previously seen in non-whites to a less likely source, namely a wealthy, educated white woman, well-versed in proper, reason-based English science and medicine. Indeed, Mrs. Rand, widow of a missionary, seems to be the polar opposite of the foreign, racially identified male priest from *White Zombie*.

In the late 1960s, taking the idea of the undead and adding a dash of vampires to create the flesh-eating shambling living dead, a young director named George A. Romero made the zombie films with which contemporary audiences are most familiar. In *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), a young woman is assaulted in a graveyard by a zombie and flees to a seemingly abandoned farmhouse. Soon, she is joined by Ben, played by Dr. Duane Jones (a former English professor), the first African American to be cast in a lead role in a horror film. Additionally, Duane Jones was the first black actor to be cast in a role that wasn't specifically written for a black actor and character (<http://www.imdb.com>). Romero's casting of African American characters in positions of power continues throughout the majority of his subsequent ". . . of the Dead" films. Ben proves to be a leader, doing his best to ensure the survival of the others that end up in the farmhouse with him. In a strange turn of events, he survives the night, while everyone else is killed during the night. Redneck vigilantes mistake him for a zombie (or *ghoul* as they're called in the film) and shoot up the farm-

house, killing him. It may be a simple case of mistaken identity, but it also seems to serve as a punishment for taking a leadership role that he didn't deserve, as well as sustaining a friendship with a white woman.

Night of the Living Dead shows the character Ben as heroic, capable, and a natural leader, thus making a strong political commentary in a landmark decade of American civil rights, the 1960s. In strong contrast to *White Zombie*, Romero's film does not present whites as universally righteous in the least, black characters are rarely vilified, and Ben is an unexpected protagonist and hero. Stephen Harper in *Reappraising an Undead Classic*, comments on Romero's implicit political message in his famous film: "To many people, it seemed as though there might be a race war in America" (<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/50/night.htm>). The use of zombies to signify this political message certainly is no accident. With its origins firmly rooted in Haitian voodoo, the zombie and the act of zombification are inherently foreign and frightening concepts to whites, as Harper acknowledges: "Conservative, reactionary discussions of this possibility often focused—as they sometimes do today—on the possibility that 'we' might soon be outnumbered by 'them'" (<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/50/night.htm>). Even in Romero's early films, zombies outnumber non-zombies by a fairly large number, contrasting "Voodoo zombie" films, where "us" outnumbered "them." However, the soulless nature of those earlier cinematic zombies is in some ways more frightening, coupled with the notion that their state was man-made and premeditated, a trait absent in Romero zombie films.

The "us" versus "them" theme is paralleled within the story by pairing Ben with Barbara in *Night of the Living Dead*. While they are not shown to have any relationship other than both sharing a house during a zombie siege, they are the first two persons the audience sees enter the farmhouse, and they share a considerable amount of screen time together. For the 1960s, this "interracial couple" was controversial, and an oft-discussed aspect of the film in four decades of film criticism,

including Kevin Heffernan's *Inner-City Exhibition and the Genre Film*:

Many critics have praised *Night of the Living Dead* for introducing a particularly sophisticated form of bleak social commentary into the low-budget horror film . . . [Romero positions] the crowd of zombies amassed among the flames outside the farmhouse that shelters the interracial duo of Ben and Barbara. Ben remarks, "There's bound to be a lot *more* of them as soon as they find out about *us*." (Heffernan, 67)

Not only does the zombie represent the "other" of normal humans, it also represents societal norms, closing in on the socially unacceptable "relationship."

Romero's 1978 sequel, *Dawn of the Dead*, carries many of the same themes as its predecessor, expanding on the mythos of the zombies (although it appears that none of Romero's movies explicitly call them "zombies," preferring "ghouls" or "those things," and occasionally colloquial derogatory nicknames like "stanches"). This film shows that any dead body will turn into a zombie, and a zombie bite will simply speed up the death and inevitable "turning." *Dawn of the Dead's* main character is again an African-American man, a SWAT team officer named Peter (Ken Foree), who is accompanied by another officer, a much shorter white cop named Richard (Scott Reiniger), and they are joined with two television studio employees who steal the station's traffic helicopter to escape. They eventually end up in a large mall, where nearly all of the survivors are killed by zombies. Peter survives to the very end (accompanied by Francine, played by Gaylen Ross, the television station worker, who is also pregnant), similar to *Night of the Living Dead*, complete with the mixed pairing of a black man and a white woman. Peter almost sacrifices himself to allow her to escape, but eventually fights his way out and gets into the helicopter with her.

The most interesting aspect of this second "of the Dead" film is the "grayface" makeup all the zombie extras wear. In an

early scene, as the SWAT team raids a tenement building recently overrun with ghouls, the residents, almost exclusively African American, are “zombified,” becoming a unified shade of gray, immediately distinguishing them from their prior “living” racial appearance through the change in the very color of their skin. Zombification is the ultimate unifier, bringing whites and blacks together in a fight against the undead “Other.” The zombie population increases daily, and with it, the zombies’ cannibalism. This non-normative “zombie race” begins to take over, becoming the majority, and seeks to absorb and consume the normative survivors.

The first major zombie-killing spree scene resembles classic Blaxploitation action films of the 1970s. Peter is clearly the largest, most intimidating, and most brutal officer on the force. He is called upon to help quell the rising zombie masses, mowing them down indiscriminately. Peter, a large, powerful black man, is modeled in the style of other black action heroes such as Shaft. He finds himself in the “us” category, with the building full of the recently dead immediately becoming the undead “them.” Unlike *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead* features a much higher gore factor, as well as an increased amount of violence against zombies.

In an extra nod to the absorption of other races into this new zombie race, nearly every time a zombie is shot by one of the survivors, the audience sees them shooting directly at the camera, placing the audience in the position of the zombie hordes. A constant battle rages as audience members choose a side to root for and identify with. The survivors are still recognizably human, while the zombies are immediately identified as monstrous. Judith Halberstam argues in *Skin Shows*, that “monstrosity in postmodern horror films finds its place in what Baudrillard has called the obscenity of ‘immediate visibility,’” with monsters clearly and immediately identifiable (Halberstam 1). However, their sheer numbers, blank and unified racial identification, as well as the first-person perspective shots of the zombies being killed, put the audience literally in their shoes, only at the time of their deaths.

Wes Craven's 1988's *The Serpent and the Rainbow* returns the zombie film to its Haitian origins, based on a non-fiction book written by Wade Davis, a Harvard ethnobotanist. Invoking the Haitian origins of zombies, Bill Pullman plays Dennis Alan, an ethnobotanist who gets wrapped up in Haitian politics, medicine, and mysticism when he's sent to investigate cases of zombification. A medicine can be made that places people in a death-like state, and when they're revived with the use of a second drug, they enter a suggestive state, with no true will of their own. Unlike films like *White Zombie*, no white women are zombified. Instead, Craven's narrative investigates a documented case of zombification in a Haitian citizen, Christophe, who has been "dead" for seven years, but is wandering aimlessly throughout Haiti. He is the only zombie that is reported to be able to talk, and Alan has several run-ins with the government and a *bokor*, or Voodoo priest. He is eventually zombified himself, though he is dug up and saved by Christophe.

Investigators of zombie states show courage and a stable identity. Betsy in *I Walked with a Zombie* is seen as a having a stable identity trusted by others. She is able to lead animals, when she shows a maid how to properly lead a horse, and to navigate her zombie charge Jessica Holland through a long journey to the *hounfort*. In *Serpent and the Rainbow*, the audience strongly identifies with the courageous and steady Alan, though he is clearly out of place in Haiti, and not exactly welcome in that environment. He continues to insert himself into Haitian politics and situations, attempting to harvest their zombie medication for a large pharmaceutical company for use as an anesthetic. He triumphs over the *bokor* in a very real battle for his soul, though he long suffers hallucinations and terrible visions for his troubles.

George Romero released his sixth zombie film in 2005, titled *Land of the Dead*, and it features commentary on and representations of the class system, consumerism, and again, issues of race. In the setting of the film, the zombie apocalypse took place some time ago, and a small band of survivors has

congregated in part of a city, walled off and protected by rivers. The rich live in a large skyscraper called Fiddler's Green, while the rest of the people live in relative poverty. The zombies begin to develop a sense of rudimentary intelligence, which threatens the way of life of the survivors. The evident caste system, as well as the sense of unease that came with the education of slaves, leads to a zombie uprising by the leader of the zombies, a large African American man named "Big Daddy." A gas station owner in life, he begins to perform simple tasks, such as trying to fill up cars. He eventually rallies the other zombies, teaches them to use their tools as weapons (a butcher is still clinging to his cleaver, for example), and they mount an assault on Fiddler's Green. This intelligent activity, no matter how simple, is a clear and immediate threat to the survival of the normative humans.

This film shows the true scope of the population of zombies, depicting a world where there are clearly more undead than living wandering the earth. Within their city sanctuary, captured zombies are also used as entertainment (in a paintball game, where two zombies are chained to a wall), as well as a photo opportunity (where one can pose near a restrained zombie), and zombie fights, similar to dogfighting (where a zombie is released in a steel cage with an animal, and occasionally, a human, for the entertainment of the survivors). A small group of mercenaries are trying to earn themselves a better position by hunting zombies for the city's mayor of sorts, Paul Kaufman (played by Dennis Hopper). Eventually, the zombies breach the city, and many of the survivors fall to their own delusions and hubris. Their invasion of the city restores a more natural state, however, by forcibly ousting the rich from the poor. In this case, the less wealthy individuals are more apt to survive in a straight battle with the zombies. It stands to reason that given the opportunity, the zombies would continue to evolve and increase in intelligence. In addition to learning how to use simple tools again, they also begin to form a basic society, where a clear leader directs the others on where they need to go and what they need to do. Again, Romero places an

African-American actor (Eugene Clark) in a position of power. Unlike the previous films, this great leader works for the “other side.” By this point, humans have become non-normative, clinging desperately to hopes, but inevitably, zombies have them outnumbered.

By placing African-American actors in “hero” type roles, in obvious and symbolic positions of power, George A. Romero challenges negative stereotypes of black Americans. In a remake of *Dawn of the Dead*, directed by Zack Snyder in 2004, Ving Rhames plays a police officer as well, taking leadership positions and surviving through the end of the film. African-Americans have always played important roles in Romero’s zombie films, perhaps to compensate for the extremely unfair treatment they received in the original zombie films. In Romero’s zombie universe, anyone can turn, and once they do, they cease having authentic identities or human traits. There’s literally no hope for salvation once they turn, unlike the original voodoo zombies. Under pure Voodoo zombie curses, there is always some sense that the victim can be restored to an original, authentic self. In Romero-style zombies, destruction of the brain is the only way to stop the zombies, and there is absolutely no chance they will be restored to true human form.

In 2009, American audiences were treated to a somewhat different take on the zombie invasion. *Zombieland*’s director Ruben Fleischer presents a world that has been overrun almost entirely by zombies. With only five normative human characters that the audience encounters, seemingly everyone in the entire country, if not the entire planet, has been turned into a zombie. All of the characters are Caucasian, with few racial identities assigned to the various zombies. However, *Zombieland* with its majority zombie population is a comedy film, with the characters disregarding the fact that they’re outnumbered over a billion to one, continuing their quest to survive. The drive for self-preservation dominates contemporary zombie films, representing the minority normative humans’ fight to the death to regain their normativity, even after it’s been lost.

The zombies are presented as violent, stupid, and everywhere. The survivors are presented as plucky, somewhat smart, and just as violent and bloodthirsty as their zombie counterparts.

Zombieland continues the relevance of the zombie genre over the past forty years, providing a contemporary spin on zombies by linking zombies to viral infection (a strain of mad cow disease), which rapidly turns into a global pandemic. Given that no other survivors are seen or hinted at, aside from the primary characters (and a memorable celebrity cameo), *Zombieland* presents the struggle between “us and them” at its most extreme. However, the situation is far from hopeless, and may be seen through its exaggeration of typical zombie themes as a parody of previous zombie films, while maintaining the same level of gore. In conclusion, representations of race in zombie films change over the course of cinema history, and can be best understood in the multiple cultural and cinematic contexts that shape those representations.

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