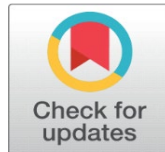


EXPLORATION OF THE ZOMBIE MYTHS FROM VODOO TO UNIVERSAL HORROR: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL EVOLUTION IN SELECT MOVIES

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ABSTRACT

The zombie myth has changed greatly over the decades, from its origins in Haitian Voodoo, where it symbolized spiritual enslavement and colonialism, to its current status as a global icon of terror in popular culture. However, there is little psychological research examining the dynamics of this change. Most research dismisses the role those unconscious anxieties, such as losing one's humanity or identity, have had in the development of the zombie. This paper fills that gap by using psychoanalytic theory to examine how the zombie symbolizes societal anxieties, from its origins in Voodoo to its current status as a global symbol of fears. By connecting its historical and cultural roots to its modern-day representations, this research provides a deeper understanding of how the zombie has become a universal metaphor for human fears.

Keywords: Zombie Mythology, Haitian Vodou Rituals, Psychoanalytic Theories, Cultural Evolution, Underlying Fears

1. INTRODUCTION

Zombies are mostly linked to Halloween parties and horror movies however, their origins are deeply rooted into Haitian history, colonial experience, and the Vodou spiritual tradition. Unlike the flesh eating, monsters of contemporary media, the original zombie idea in Haiti involved individuals who had lost their free will and autonomy, bound to a powerful source known as a bokor. This belief is emerged in the 17th century when enslaved Africans were forcibly brought to Haiti to labour on sugar plantations under dehumanizing and oppressive conditions. In these conditions, the zombie was a worse fate than death a life of endless servitude, where even death did not provide a way out of bondage. The power of this fear was said to

be strong enough to deter many enslaved individuals from suicide, as the threat of zombification would lead them to a life of endless servitude.

In Vodou ceremonies, it was thought that bokors employed herbs, powders, and ritual magic to create a zombie condition in individuals. Some of the concoctions were prepared with tetrodotoxin, a lethal neurotoxin derived from pufferfish, which could produce symptoms such as paralysis, confusion, and shallow breathing, leading witnesses to think that the individual had perished. Originally originating in Haitian Vodou, zombies were thought to be people who had been revived by a bokor (sorcerer) to act as mindless slaves who had lost their free choice and individuality. Deep psychic and spiritual anxieties related to slavery, identity loss, and helplessness in facing instances of injustice were mirrored in this myth. The zombie myth was rewritten to fit various socioeconomic worries as it spread into Western society. While retaining aspects of Haitian heritage, early films like *White Zombie* (1932) focused on themes of exploitation and supremacy for Western viewers. The emphasis gradually changed from mystical power to more general concerns about losing one's own autonomy. George A. Romero's 1968 novel *Night of the Living Dead* was a significant turning point by redefining zombies as flesh-eating monsters without a supernatural background. In this new portrayal, the zombie came to represent the breakdown of civilization, reflecting the social unrest of the 1960s, including civil rights movements, Cold War paranoia, and a growing distrust of authority. By the 21st century, zombies had changed once more, this time standing for anxieties about environmental catastrophes, pandemics, and technology failure. They were presented as swift-moving, virus-spreading dangers in movies like *World War Z* (2013) and *28 Days Later* (2002), which mirrored contemporary worries about worldwide breakouts and the vulnerability of social institutions. The pervasiveness of zombie-themed media, ranging from video games to television shows like *The Walking Dead*, further cemented zombies as adaptable cultural icons that keep changing to reflect modern anxieties.

According to psychoanalysis, the zombie awakens irrational fears of loneliness, identity loss, and the transience of society. The picture of zombies as blank beings with primordial urges that symbolize the disintegration of the conscious self applies Freudian concepts, such as the resurgence of the suppressed. According to Jungian philosophy, the zombie represents the repressed, hidden aspects of the mind, or the shadow self. The reason for zombies' enduring appeal is their ability to capture humanity's deepest anxieties, evolving to suit the problems of all ages. It is clear from the zombies' journey from Haitian Vodou to the global media that zombies are more than just fiction; they are powerful symbols that help cultures cope with shifting psychological and cultural issues.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The zombie myth has also profoundly changed, from its origins in Haitian Vodou to becoming a characteristic feature of global horror media culture. Researchers have interpreted this development through a variety of lenses, highlighting its socio-political, cultural, and psychological associations. Specifically, anthropological study, such as Wade Davis's influential work *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985), explores the convergence of neurotoxins and religious rituals around Haitian zombification ceremonies, in which zombies symbolized spiritual captivity and the psychology of slavery. This early representation expressed fears of loss of control under colonialism. With the advent of Western film's adoption of the zombie myth, movies like *White Zombie* (1932) introduced an audience to domination- and exploitation-based narratives. However, George A. Romero's *Night*

of the Living Dead (1968) transformed the genre, redefining zombies as flesh-eating monsters and recontextualizing their symbolic significance in terms of breakdown of society and dehumanization. Romero's imagery strongly engaged cultural concerns with race, violence, and breakdown of social structures.

Psychologically, zombies are a fertile subject for analysis in Freudian and Jungian theoretical frameworks. Freudian theory such as the "return of the repressed" accounts for why zombies are so appealing to the audience, as they hold built-in fears and the fragmentation of the conscious self. Alternatively, Jungian accounts interpret zombies as the embodiment of the shadow self, symbolizing humanity's darker nature and existential fears of self-disintegration and societal collapse. In contemporary media, zombies have evolved as a symbol of global anxieties over pandemics, ecological catastrophes, and technological dangers. Movies such as *28 Days Later* (2002) and *World War Z* (2013) portray zombies as fast, virus-infected beings, representing anxieties over contagion and societal collapse. Television series such as *The Walking Dead* and several zombie-themed video games highlight the versatility of zombies as a symbol of modern-day survival and the disintegration of social norms. Thus, zombies are more than mere mindless monsters; they are a significant mirror to social and psychological issues that constantly evolve and resonate with audiences of successive generations.

3. RESEARCH GAP

The cultural and historical background of zombies has been extensively studied, but little is known about their psychoanalytic and psychological elements. The majority of literature deals with sociopolitical issues, such the zombie's imperialist beginnings and societal falls, but it skips over how these creatures represent deep-seated anxieties that come from inside people's heads. Ancient anxieties of losing one's identity, independence, and even humanity are symbolized by zombies. The empty existence of zombies and their ravenous taste for flesh give rise to chilling concepts of repressed and the eerie, which are essential to psychoanalytic thought. Analysis of how zombies are psychological manifestations of ingrained anxieties is very lacking. In a civilization that is becoming more and more homogeneous and controlled by technology, the fear of turning into a soulless machine devoid of personality and reason strikes a deep chord. Additionally, the zombie's ravenous appetite might be seen as a representation of societal instability and unbridled yearning. Through a psychoanalytic lens, these elements require a more thorough and focused investigation.

Furthermore, there is a wealth of research on the zombie's cultural origins in Haitian Vodou as representations of oppression and dominance, but relatively less attention has been paid to how their portrayal has evolved into global metaphors for modern anxieties. In contemporary media, the shift from sluggish, menacing zombies to swift, virus-spreading zombies represents anxieties about pandemics, natural catastrophes, and technology failure. Their continued use as symbols in video games, movies, and literature shows how adaptable they are to shifting societal concerns. Through an analysis of these developments through a psychoanalytic and psychological lens, the current study seeks to fill gaps in existing academic literature. It offers more illumination of how zombies represent suppressed fears regarding the breakdown of identity and the breakdown of society. This is central to comprehending the basis of the long-standing popularity of the zombie myth in different cultural and historical contexts in modern society.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research paper is of significant value as it offers a new perspective to the evolution of the zombie mythos. While there is a wide body of scholarship that has tackled the socio-cultural and historical aspects of zombies, this research adopts a different tack by focusing on their psychological and psychoanalytic associations, thus enhancing our understanding of their symbolical meaning. Through the analysis of motifs such as identity disintegration, repression, and the uncanny, the paper draws out the manner in which zombies are powerful metaphors for the fundamental human fears and unresolved anxieties. The psychoanalytic theory created within the paper sheds important light on the persistence of zombies as main symbols within popular culture. Through a consideration of their relation to unconscious anxiety, the research facilitates greater understanding of how societies and individuals cope with existential issues, including the loss of autonomy, individuality, and humanity. The theory contributes to existing media, psychology, and cultural studies discourses. In addition, this research enriches academic discourse by presenting a multidisciplinary approach integrating anthropology, psychoanalysis, and cultural theory. The research challenges scholars and audiences to see the zombie not only as a mindless monster but as a complex symbol reflecting humanity's deepest fears and shifting anxieties

5. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study looks at the zombie myth's beginnings and current applicability. It looks at how zombies first appeared in Haitian Vodou and how they are portrayed in contemporary media and movies, showing how their significance has changed over time. In order to show how zombies reflect common human worries, the study also looks at the psychological components of them, including themes of suppressed phobias, identity crises, and the uneasy emotions they evoke. It also looks at how, from colonial dominance to contemporary anxieties about pandemics, ecological disasters, and technological advancement, zombies have reflected society's anxieties across time. This study sheds light on why zombies continue to embody society's shifting concerns and fears by tracing their historical roots to their contemporary manifestation.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative method to analyse the evolution of zombie representations across different historical periods and their significance across different eras. The emphasis is on the analysis of seminal zombie films to reveal the underlying meanings in their stories and how they mirror society's fears and anxieties. The research focuses on four seminal zombie films: *White Zombie* (1932), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *28 Days Later* (2002), and *World War Z* (2013). These films were selected because they were instrumental in shaping the zombie genre and illustrating the evolution of society's concerns over time. To conduct the analysis, the research employs concepts derived from psychoanalytic theory. Freudian concepts, including repression (the suppression of unwanted feelings) and the return of the repressed (the sudden return of those feelings), form the basis of understanding the underlying fears symbolized by zombies. The research also employs Jung's "shadow self" (the darker aspect of human nature) to understand how zombies symbolize aspects of our psyche that are usually overlooked. Historical and cultural analysis also informs the understanding of how these fears

evolve over time. The research compares the depiction of zombies across different temporal and cultural contexts. It analyses how early films that featured zombies reflected concerns regarding colonialism and religious domination, while contemporary films reflect concerns regarding pandemics, technological threats, and social collapse. This comparative analysis illustrates that zombies always adapt to reflect the evolving anxieties and concerns of humankind.

7. ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY

The zombie idea has undergone extreme transformations throughout history, symbolizing varied societal, cultural, and psychological anxieties. Zombies drew their origins initially from Haitian Vodou rituals, representing those who were spiritually bound and deprived of their liberty. These early ideas about zombies were associated with the suffering of slavery and colonial domination, symbolizing a fundamental fear of losing self-sufficiency and being reduced to an instrument of another's wishes.

When the zombie legend crossed into the Western world, it began to develop, and in particular, through cinema. The first of these was *White Zombie* (1932), which maintained the zombies as a managed force but added a component of Western fears of foreign cultures. The movie was symptomatic of cultural invasion and racial anxieties and spoke to fears about the maintenance of social order.

The imagery of zombies experienced a profound change with the opening of George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968. The movie marked a watershed, changing zombies from compliant monsters into unstoppable flesh-consuming creatures that lacked consciousness or purpose beyond destruction. Such a shift reflected the chaotic social environment of the 1960s, with their civil rights activism, anti-war protests, and pervasive distrust of government authorities. The unstoppable hordes of zombies came to symbolize fears over the breakdown of society and the collapse of entrenched institutions.

Psychologically, zombies came to symbolize more profound terrors. In Freudian terms, zombies can be understood as the "return of the repressed," and thus they stand for primal urges and instincts that society attempts to repress. Their lack of awareness and insatiable hunger demonstrate a breakdown of rational thought, so they are frightening not only because of their brutality but because of what they illustrate about how easily human logic can break down. Jungian thought complements this vision with the postulate that zombies embody the "shadow self" the more undesirable portion of human psyche individuals attempt to deny. Zombie activity mirrors these concerns for the loss of personhood and capitulation to detrimental instincts.

Zombies didn't remain in films. They also became trendy in video games, literature, and television, reinforcing their position in popular culture. The success of shows such as *The Walking Dead* demonstrates the use of zombies to address survival, community, and questions of morality. Zombies in these narratives are secondary to what people struggle with in attempting to hold on to their humanity in a world that lacks morality.

What makes the zombie myth so powerful is its ability to reflect different societal fears throughout history. In the past, zombies symbolized fears about colonial oppression and loss of control. Today, they represent concerns about pandemics, environmental disasters, and technological threats. This flexibility keeps them relevant as symbols of humanity's deepest fears.

Zombies also tap into psychological fears. They force us to confront existential questions about what it means to be human and what happens when we lose our sense of self and rationality. As technology continues to blur the line between humans and machines, and as environmental challenges threaten our way of life, zombies remain a strong metaphor for humanity's struggle to maintain individuality and reason.

Psychologically, zombies started to symbolize deeper terrors. In Freudian psychology, zombies can be interpreted as the "return of the repressed," and thus they symbolize primal urges and instincts that society attempts to repress. Their lack of awareness and voracious appetites symbolize a failure of rational mental faculties, and thus they are frightening not only because of their violence but because of what they symbolize about how easily human reasoning can collapse. Jungian psychology contributes to that vision with the speculation that zombies symbolize the "shadow self" the undesirable part of human psyche people attempt to repress. Zombie activity mirrors these fears for loss of personhood and submission to destructive instincts.

Zombies have solidified their position in popular culture by spreading beyond their origins in movies and appearing in video games, literature, and television. The popularity of television programs like *The Walking Dead* is a perfect illustration of how zombies are used as a means of investigating themes of morality, community, and survival. In these tales, zombies serve as a background for the profound hardships humans face while trying to maintain their humanity in a morally reprehensible society. The zombie legend's power lies in its ability to capture a range of societal anxieties at various historical junctures. Historically, zombies have represented fears of colonialism and loss of sovereignty. In modern society, they represent fears of pandemics, environmental disasters, and technology threats. This ability to adapt guarantees their ongoing relevance as metaphors for humanity's deepest fears.

Zombies also speak to psychological anxieties. They compel individuals to grapple with existential issues regarding what it is to be human and the implications of losing one's self and rationality. As technology continues to confuse and blur the distinction between man and machine, and as environmental catastrophes threaten our very existence, zombies are a powerful metaphor for humanity's quest to hold on to individuality and reason.

8. CONCLUSION

From its origins in Haitian Vodou, where it symbolized religious subordination, the zombie concept has undergone tremendous change. Today, it is a potent metaphor that encompasses a variety of social, cultural, and psychological worries in modern media. This development demonstrates how zombies keep evolving and adjusting to the shifting anxieties of civilization. At first, zombies represented a destiny worse than death—the loss of one's sense of self and individuality—and the psychological traumas brought about by slavery and colonialism. As this idea spread throughout Western culture, early films like *White Zombie* took use of anxieties about cultural invasion and outside dominance. Subsequently, George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* reinterpreted the zombie as a flesh-eating monster symbolizing chaos, social collapse, and the collapse of social order amidst the chaos of the 1960s.

More psychologically speaking, zombies have also come to represent suppressed anxieties about losing humanity, identity, and control. According to

Freudian and Jungian philosophy, zombies are fascinating because they represent suppressed impulses, instincts, and the darker sides of ourselves that we try to hide. In the twenty-first century, zombies underwent yet another adaptation, adopting the anxieties of the globe over environmental catastrophes, pandemics, and technological threats. The extremely mobile, virus-infected zombies in films like World War Z and 28 Days Later play on people's anxieties about disease outbreaks and the end of the world. The continued popularity of zombie-themed television shows like The Walking Dead, video games, and literature indicates that zombies remain a popular way for people to examine survival, morality, and human resiliency.

The zombie's survival can be explained by their ability to adapt and remain over the years. They have reflected humanity's worst fears, from the historical perspective of colonialism to the current fears of global issues and the fragility of civilization. By looking at zombies from psychological and cultural perspectives, this study has proven that they are more than just senseless creatures. Instead, they are powerful symbols that enable us to grasp individual vulnerabilities and shared challenges. Further, it is clear that zombies are going to continue to appear in our stories in the future.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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