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## Zombie Cinema: Virtual Control for Angst Ridden Audiences

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### Cover Page Footnote

William D. Prystauk is an award-winning screenwriter, film producer, horror podcaster (The Last Knock on iTunes), and teacher in higher education. His novel, Bloodletting, has been adapted from his script, which won Second Place at the Screenwriters Showcase Screenplay Contest. Currently, he is an Assistant Professor of English at Kutztown University.

**Zombie Cinema:  
Virtual Control for Angst Ridden Audiences**

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In 2009, the horror/comedy, *Zombieland* did so well at the box office that many bloggers, critics, and reporters wrote about the fascination with one of horror's most beloved subgenres. Four years later, the family-friendly walking dead apocalypse feature, *World War Z*, grossed over \$500 million, making more money internationally than any other zombie film in history. Once again, more articles about why we love zombie films reigned supreme. Though most reviewers cite an over-populated world full of disease, terrorism, and economic crisis as the reason for people rushing to theatres, few focus on the real reason we venture into darkened movie houses. Zombie cinema serves as an outlet for those who wish to take control of their lives in the face of the aforementioned calamities. Since we cannot seem to gain a footing with bills and schedules, while fearing for our economic and healthcare futures, what better way to fight back

than imagine being on the screen to fend off an opponent. Where the world is many shades of gray, zombie films are black-and-white: kill or be killed, which also brings western audiences a virtual rite of passage where we can imagine proving ourselves to be a man or a woman that can stand on his or her own.

Around 2007, thrillers based on the Iraq and Afghan Wars, such as *In the Valley of Elah*, *Lions for Lambs*, and *Redacted*, failed miserably at theatres nationwide. *US News* reporter Jay Tolson asked the most poignant question: “So why aren’t people attracted to films that generally support their dissatisfaction? The simple answer is that Americans don’t want to think about the subject.... The success of Vietnam War movies may shed some light on the current flops. The most obvious thing about hits like *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) is that they came out after the war.” Those suffering from financial woes, from paranoia about terrorism, from fear of plagues and disease, and from the anxiety of war, would not pay to see a film about the same subject matter because it would bring no form of escapism or peace of mind, and therefore no release from the emotional burden. Granted, one should instead consider the counterphobe, those who wish to face their fears head on, where the “pleasure of the release of the tension that is created by seeking the danger is sought over and over again, in a sort of addictive process” (Langner 159). This addictive process manifests for those who indulge in zombie movies. Roughly 400 have been produced since

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2000, with more on the way. However, the one distinction this undead subgenre has over other horror fare is that audiences watch *the same* zombie film repeatedly.

For most of zombie cinema, the premise of each movie is the same: zombies rise and humans fight to survive. Albeit, movies such as *Fido* (Canada, 2006) approach a post-zombie apocalypse in 1950's era America, while *Zombies Anonymous* (2006) looks at finding one's zombie-place in a human-centric world, among a handful of others of alternative zombie ilk. Otherwise, since George A. Romero's genre-busting film, 1968's *Night Of The Living Dead*, where zombies were brought about by means other than Hollywood's traditional story of Haitian-based Voodoo (where a priest/priestess created a slave by forcing the dead to rise from their resting place), he has freed zombies to feast on the living instead of doing our bidding. This cinematic zombie, who acts more like a traditional ghoul, has remained virtually unchanged. Variations exist, from Romero's shambling zombies to the sprinters of *28 Days Later* (UK, 2002). Zombies can come to fruition through a virus, supernatural means, radiation, or from something delivered to the Earth from outer space. Zombies are either undead, or the living (as in *28 Days Later* and 2008's Canadian feature *Pontypool*), though one's faculties are completely lost. The only thing that remains is a voracious hunger for living flesh.

In these films, the zombies have become a mindless majority, a collective without a leadership caste. Humans run, scream, or make noise as they

scurry about, and the zombies attack as if they are Mother Nature's T-cells out to converge on something that does not belong. Knowing what humanity has done to the natural world via pollution, war, and waste in the guise of progress, a zombie apocalypse would be akin to humanity's comeuppance – a punishment due to the destruction we have wielded as a species. It makes one wonder if the zombies are actually the heroes, while the surviving band of humans, the evil leftover of civilization, is the thing which must be annihilated. "...Zombies act as the outlet for our frustrations with these potential calamities. Pollution has ruined the planet and created zombies? Show pollution who's boss by killing the byproduct!" (Houlette). In the end, zombies are the pest in the eyes of human arrogance and their "unnatural" existence must be dispatched.

Since zombies are only reactionary to a human presence, where they rely on a base level of instinct in lieu of thoughtful determination, zombies are not "evil" since their intent is only to consume. As clinical mental health counselor Thomas Conklin says, "Zombies are a potent representation of 'devolved' mankind. It's important to understand that zombies are not evil; they have no moral agency. Zombies have no 'rights,' inalienable or otherwise ..." Feral and hungry, zombies march on as a neutral force that is so numb and removed, they do not even fight each other for food, but do their best to obtain even the slightest bit of a living person. If enough of that human victim remains intact, that person will rise as one of many of the

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mindless horde, ready to feast on their former band of surviving cohorts.

What worse punishment for a surviving human than to see a loved one, friend, even an acquaintance, now one of the living dead? Ana (Sarah Polley) experiences this in 2004's *Dawn of the Dead* remake. Her beloved husband suddenly becomes a flesh-craving zombie. He has become the "other," which Robin Wood described as something to be rejected or annihilated, or something to be rendered safe and subsequently assimilated (65). But there is no cure for zombism, making re-assimilation into the species an impossibility (this does occur in the dramatic and intelligent film, 2013's *The Returned*, but only before the person converts in entirety). In *Fido* and a few other alternative films, zombies are either rendered safe or kept at bay through rejection, as in Romero's *Land of the Dead* (Canada/France/USA, 2005), but the norm is annihilation: in order for humans to survive, zombies must be destroyed. Ana, suddenly thrust into a brave new world she cannot begin to contemplate, escapes her spouse, though her rejection leaves him to be annihilated by another. Adding to Ana's fear is the realization that her zombified husband failed to recognize her on even a remote level. In that moment, Ana is as lost as her husband.

In the bulk of zombie films, destruction of the undead enemy is paramount, and each film becomes a sort of video game where humans pick off one monster after another in order to live another day. This is most prevalent in the French film *La Horde*

(2009), where cops and criminals alike go floor by floor (or game level by game level) in an apartment building to terminate every zombie in their path in order to make it safely to the ground floor. In this case, the criminals and police work together, regardless of their hatred for each other. However, both hate the new rules in effect since the zombie outbreak, which is anarchy because officers want to preserve the established order, while criminals want to exploit it. With the chaos of a zombie uprising, both groups must fight as one to protect personal and professional interests. Once again, war makes for strange bedfellows.

Other than destruction of human lives, there are many positive notions to consider when evaluating the usefulness of a zombie uprising, such as the negative trappings of the social world evaporating almost instantaneously. In a zombie apocalypse, the social pitfalls we have created and maintained fall by the wayside: color, ethnicity, gender, age, body type, sexual orientation, class, and organized religious preference. As zombies present themselves as a collective force, a cognitive free colony, so must humanity consider itself a collective and come together as a “thinking” force to be reckoned with. In Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, Duane Jones plays the first black lead in a horror movie. Though refreshing to audiences, the presence of his character, Ben, to the rest of those taking refuge in the farmhouse, is of little concern. Not once does bigotry or even the mention of color come into play. The only ones challenging Ben are those who disagree with what proves to be logical advice when

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facing the zombie menace. In the 1990 remake, Tony Todd returns as Ben, but Patricia Tallman plays Barbara. In the original, Barbra (Judith O'Dea) lost her nerve, became nearly catatonic, and ultimately lost her life to the zombie legion. Yet, just twenty-two years later, the character's submissiveness has turned about in stellar fashion, with a strong woman ready to fight for herself – and she will not go gently into that zombified night.

To add to conflict, surviving members from a zombie onslaught usually rile each other, which creates added suspense in the films, but once those petulant types are either rejected, annihilated, or assimilated, the group moves on in a more unified, and hopefully triumphant fashion. In the blogging world of popular culture, a GroupThink article claims that we all want a zombie apocalypse because “stripping existence down to food, shelter, transportation and defined role in a group has a certain appeal...you get to focus on the best way to stay alive, period. It's black and white ...” Such a world could pose a relief for many people. Simplification would free the mind and keep one focused on the basics of survival. Additionally, due to the zombie outbreak, the article claims that “we get a free license to give in to our violent tendencies, as long as we direct them toward zombie-killing.” William Houlette, former president of Kutztown University's Human versus Zombie chapter, says, “Zombies used to be people, but they aren't. Often characters feel that they're doing the zombie a favor by killing it, granting it peace somehow.” This mission of mercy, a *coup de grâce*

for the undead, would help surviving humans remain less squeamish about delivering headshots to any zombie. The enemy does not count and must be removed because there is no place in the world for such an uncanny anomaly. Zombies are not men, women, or children. They have no conscience or recollection. They are no longer family, lovers, or friends. One cannot kill what is already dead. To say that someone “killed” a zombie is nonsensical, which means the actions of the human are ultimately innocuous. However, this does not mean a surviving human in such a movie will not have a hard time confronting zombies they once knew as people.

One of the most poignant scenes of this seemingly obligatory element comes in *Dawn of the Dead*. Kenneth (Ving Rhames) does not hesitate to remove anything that is not human with his shotgun. Yet he develops a friendship with someone who later turns. Kenneth pauses for a moment to say, “Sorry, brother” then fires into his friend’s head. He destroys the face of his friend as if to erase the notion that he was once human, someone with a family and a future. In the same film, Ana comes up against a former member of the group who had been one of the petulant personas that could not be assimilated into the new tribe. Once this individual becomes a zombie, Ana takes pride in killing the newly undead beast. In real life, she could never pull the trigger to kill someone she despised, but once an individual becomes a zombie, there’s nothing to discuss, determine, or debate. Author and video game expert Dan Birlaw says that the real

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fascination of a zombie apocalypse is: “Being a survivor, playing the odds, making your own rules. You don’t have to report to some stupid job every day; in fact, if your boss or someone else you hate is bitten, you may have an opportunity to bash their smelly head in.” At first blush, this may seem cold, even wrong, but zombie films allow us to indulge in the fantasy of taking control of our lives – and for many, it may be for the first time in a long while:

People are now zombies, and you have to kill them before they kill you. So it doesn’t really matter what you do to them, because they’re not people anymore .... Take out all your frustrations in all the ways you ever dreamed, it doesn’t matter anymore. No one’s going to stop you from killing a monster, even if it used to be a person .... the economy has crashed not just once, but a few times; people who’ve worked extremely hard their entire lives are now out of jobs; everyone’s getting paid half or less of what they used to; people have invested their life savings into homes that are now more valuable as scrap. Perhaps swinging on a guy’s head with a cricket bat is starting to sound like a good way to blow off some steam. But the only problem is, you’re talking about a person. So you need something that’s not a person, but a kind of rudimentary semi-person with no intelligence. (Birlew)

Zombie films thus represent a freedom we are not used to having. We can truly be the authors of our

own lives and move forward as we wish to meet our basic needs. We can take any car we desire to ride into the night, raid a gun store for what we need, hit a retail shop for clean attire, hook up a generator to a mansion to find respite, and empty shelves at any supermarket. The zombie film allows us a much needed virtual break where we can imagine taking charge in the face of disaster – or at least die trying.

For many, the fantasy of taking control in a world that always seems to be out of control is worth the cost of a movie ticket. “We are more interested in the zombie at times when as a culture we feel disempowered. And the facts are there that, when we are experiencing economic crises, the vast population is feeling disempowered. ... Either playing dead themselves ... or watching a show like ‘The Walking Dead’ provides a great variety of outlets for people” (Sharps). This element of disempowerment may have been the driving force behind the “zombie mobs” of 2003, protesters which “escalated in popularity along with the war in Iraq” (Sharps). These groups thought of themselves as being non-human due to lack of consideration by bureaucratic powers, so they dressed as zombies and shambled along – with signs, of course.

By 2014, zombies have come into fashion with zombie walks, zombie 3k and 5k races, generic zombie fighting merchandise in T-shirts and auto decals, Humans versus Zombie tournaments on college campuses, adult zombie response teams, and over 125 video games. Zombies are as ingrained in popular culture as if they had indeed spread like a virus.

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A need to take control of one's life stems from the overwhelming sense of obligation one may have. Besides keeping a job (or jobs) and paying bills, there may be dance recitals or baseball practices, and a life that moves along a schedule from wake-up until wind down. People have become imprisoned in their own lives, working for money that has less value than even a decade or two ago. What better way to prove one's self than imagining being a survivor on screen? Besides the growing popularity of zombie runs, where runners and joggers must dodge zombies in an obstacle course, San Diego's Comic Con did one better in 2013.

The *Walking Dead: Escape* event proved to be a very popular (and profitable) venue: "\$75 to be a survivor, \$80 to be a zombie, and \$20 to spectate," says Cory Brin, a self-proclaimed Halloween enthusiast, "Zombie King", and writer. Cory played the role of human survivor, along with countless others, in a roughly forty-five minute obstacle course to test the mettle of participants. No crossbows, shotguns, or axes here, just fast feet, creativity, and a quick mind to avoid a touch, and subsequent infection, from one of the undead. "There are challenges such as chain-link fences and wooden pyramids that you have to climb over, broken down cars and hospital gurneys that you have to navigate around, several different areas that you have to crawl under, all while trying to avoid the 100 or so zombies that are awaiting to try and turn you to their side" (Brin). People paid their entrance fee not only to avoid becoming infected

early on or simply to survive half way through the venture: They wanted to win. “I had pharaonic expectations of myself. In my head, I saw myself summersaulting under the reach of walkers and army-sliding through the tunnels. I would see every single ghoul well before I had to make a move and deftly dash by. I wanted to be the guy that all of the people at the end would cheer on to glorious victory as I was the sole survivor emerging from the physical crucible to tell the tale.” But something else nagged at him: “I thought I’d be the one to go out of my way to help others. The more that survives, the better.” Ultimately, Brin did help other human survivors in the game and finished unscathed. He came out victorious to fight on, or in this case, run on. Later, Brin said:

I feel that the event was certainly a rite of passage for anyone who thinks that they can survive in a zombie setting. It certainly will test your raw ability to survive in the midst of pure chaos. While it doesn’t test long-range survival abilities such as procuring food, and shelter, and what not, when the zero hour is upon you, it helps give you an actual sense of what the real thing would be like. I think if you’re a true zombie fan, it’s the perfect rite of passage to get a real sense of what it’s like. It will also open to your eyes about all of the things you have to think about. (Facebook)

In Tanzania, to prove their worth, young Maasai men must kill a lion (“Facing the Lion”). The Tukunu tribe of the Amazon has menstruating

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women endure seclusion in a hut before a celebration (Delaney). In Kenya, recently circumcised young people of the Okiyks must remain with same-sex elders for a long period to learn the secrets of the world (DeMello 64). The Japanese indulge in a “Coming of Age Day” for all twenty-year-olds. In the United States, and in the West in general, rites of passage have been delegated to one’s first beer, the acquisition of a credit card, or the earning of a driver’s license. The lack of a rite of passage in western culture has resulted in an emotional gap for the adult. There is no community-wide celebration for passing a test of masculinity or femininity, and no way for the young man or woman to prove their value in a contest. Zombie cinema, however, has become a virtual outlet where young men and women can imagine themselves taking charge of a horrific situation to cement their worth as a person.

In the United States, many Latin Americans celebrate Quinceañera, a coming out party for fifteen-year-old girls. People of the Jewish faith may welcome in young adults with a bar mitzvah or a bat mitzvah. A family may even take their son or daughter out into the woods to bag their first deer during hunting season. Other cultures finding a home in the United States also celebrate their own initiation into adulthood, but all of these, including the aforementioned, are familial in nature. Even in western European nations, a village-wide rite of passage no longer exists. Therefore, some young men and women join the military to compensate in an effort to prove themselves as worthy adults,

though recruitment is down because “For every 100 Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans, 11 to 20 of them will have PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)” (Castillo).

According to the *Army Times*, enlistment is low due to a lack of military promotion from parents, teachers, and other authority figures. In addition, teenage obesity, students going directly to college, and “the multiple deployments required over the past decade for many service members raise concerns in service-aged youths that this high operating tempo will continue” (Maze). Without joining the military, there is little for young people to do that will sufficiently certify their validation into adulthood. In his critical paper for his Master of Fine Arts program at Wilkes University, Kaylie Jones Books’ senior editor, Justin Kassab states:

I only recently discovered the allure of zombies, back in undergraduate school, when a video game offered a special mode called *Nazi Zombies*. This was the spark that lit my personal fuse to my generation’s collective discontent. At that time, we felt lied to and deceived, because all through life we were told if you work hard, get good grades, and go to college, you will be rewarded with a good job. As graduation loomed and we all looked out at a jobless future, a world in which we could make ourselves useful and worthwhile by killing zombies looked far better than the reality we were facing. (1)

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Like William Houlette and Cory Brin, Justin Kassab is a child of Generation Y. In a recent article, Paul Harvey, a University of New Hampshire professor and Generation Y expert, discusses the group: "... a great source of frustration for people with a strong sense of entitlement is unmet expectations. They often feel entitled to a level of respect and rewards that aren't in line with their actual ability and effort levels, and so they might not get the level of respect and rewards they are expecting" ("Why Generation Y"). If this is true, then Generation Y can find some solace at the theatre and imagine themselves on-screen, finally taking control and winning against a tangible threat they can ultimately conquer.

Adam Weinstein, a Gen Y enraged by much of the aforementioned *The Huffington Post* article, responded: "... this economy, this financial system that establishes complete social and political control over us, that conditions us to believe that we don't deserve basic shelter and clothing and food and education and existence-sustaining medical care unless we throw our lives into vassalage and hope, pray, that the lords don't fuck with our retirements or our coverages." This coincides with Harvey's remarks. Though both Harvey and Weinstein may come from different approaches, the result is the same: a need for control in an environment that does not offer such a venue. "Introduce the apocalypse and notions of upward mobility go out the window. Who has time to worry about recapturing their wasted potential (should I have gone for the MBA after all?) when doing battle with

the undead?” (Henderson). The rat race is over, though for Generation Y, many feel as if they never had a chance out of the starting gate, though they do get a chance to defeat something virtual when combatting zombies in theatres, through live events like zombie runs, or at home on an Xbox, bringing them that sense of fulfillment sorely lacking in the real world.

Another Generation Y student, Kutztown University mathematics graduate and self-proclaimed geek, Jessica Mayer, also loves zombie movies. She likes to witness “how people react in impossible situations (with their) survival instincts” (Mayer). “A zombie apocalypse is be all, end all,” and allows movie viewers to ask, “What would I do?” (Mayer). In the 1990s, University of Parma (Italy) neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti found that brain cells in monkeys fire when they not only watch an activity, but when they perform that activity as well. Rizzolatti labeled them “mirror neurons”, and humans have the same capabilities (Ramsland). According to Ramsland, this means, “brain cells start processing sensory information when a monkey perceives an action that it can perform.” In regard to the number one horror show on television, *The Walking Dead*, Ramsland states: “So, when Rick watches people-turned-zombies growl and snap at him, our brains create a mental simulation so we can emotionally hook in: we experience his confusion, fear, and horror almost as if we were there.” Moreover, Lisa Cron’s book, *Wired for Story*, reveals that: “... our brain casts us as ‘the protagonist’ and then edits our experience

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with cinema-like precision, creating logical interrelations, mapping connections between memories, ideas, and events for future reference.” Cron reinforces her postulation: “As counterintuitive as it may sound, a story is not about the plot or even what happens in it. Stories are about how we, rather than the world around us, change. They grab us only when they allow us to experience how it would feel to navigate the plot. Thus story, as we’ll see throughout, is an internal journey.”

All people, whether part of the disillusioned Generation Y or not, are willing to indulge in zombie culture immersion. Kerri Gardi, director of Kutztown University’s Career Development Center, brought her staff and their families to a zombie mud run to fight together. The staff is comprised of two Generation Y graduate students, and three older women representing Baby Boomers and Generation X. Gardi says: “Zombies are popular because we get a chance to take control of our lives. My husband wants a zombie apocalypse for a day to see if he can do it – take out a zombie. Even my son said he’ll do it with a bow and arrow.” The zombie mud run served as both a team building exercise as well as a fun-filled family outing.

Lovers of zombie cinema indulge in movie after movie, with roughly the same premise, to become that surviving protagonist. To move forward in a suddenly clear cut, black-and-white world where they can finally take charge of their own lives. Where they can survive a rite of passage to prove themselves. This virtual experience is the driving

force behind the release of zombie films, far more so than the worries of the world that plague us. Zombie cinema allows audiences to find meaning, purpose, and a means to an end, where the “real world” often leaves us frightened, confused, and angry. The economy collapsed in 2008, and signs of a recovery have proven miniscule at best, and what we have now may be the “new normal.” If this is true, the wave of zombie films will only continue. Mindless zombies will rise in motion pictures, and from our cushioned seats we will revel in watching others continue to fight them, to do their best to rule their own lives and protect other humans in their midst. We will do so as long as we suffer in reality, and as long as zombies prove to be undead targets for our angst. Until the next monster comes along, of course.

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