

## Romantic Zombies: What Their Representation in Film Means for Racism

Emily Murphy

In cinematic history the representation of zombies began in 1968 with George Romero's film *Night of the Living Dead* (Barber 1). In Romero's film, zombies are depicted as brain-dead, flesh eating monsters. Since Romero's time, zombies have begun to infiltrate the romantic comedy film genre. Films such as *Pretty Dead* (2013), *Zombie Prom* (2006), *Warm Bodies* (2013) and *I Am Legend* (2007) have used zombies as romanticized bodies in their plot lines. The shift from brain-dead corpses to possible romantic leads initiates a change from racism and othering to acceptance and tolerance. Films that incorporate zombies through a romantic lens challenge the original use of zombies in America. This challenge motivates audiences to see humanity in a body that has been traditionally separated or discriminated against.

The cinematic pieces *Pretty Dead*, *Zombie Prom*, *Warm Bodies* and *I Am Legend* provide examples of the ways zombies represent racism. These films challenge preconceived arguments of what zombies represent such as societal collapse (Bishop, Barber), the internet and social media (Klosterman), capitalism and consumerism (Barber, Klosterman) and fears of human mortality (Tenga and Zimmerman). *Zombie Prom*, *Warm Bodies* and *I Am Legend* present representations of zombies in America that challenge their original use. The films portray zombies with humanity and provide a new argument about the possibility of erasing racism in society. These films fit into the categories of zombie films and romantic comedies. *Pretty Dead* does not fit into the romantic comedy genre; however, the film is referenced to provide relevant parallels to the film *Warm Bodies* and the process of humanization.

Although Romero's 1968 film, *Night of the Living Dead*, was the first cinematic piece to incorporate zombies, Romero was not the creator of the monster. Zombies can be traced back to

early Vodoun religious stories and practices (Bishop 197). In Haiti where Vodoun is practiced, priests in the religion have knowledge of a natural powder called “coup powder” (Bishop 197). The powder is also known as “zombie powder” (Bishop 197). It can be used on its victims to induce a state close to death (Bishop 198). The victims become paralyzed, immobile, unspeaking and appear physically dead (Bishop 198). This creates an illusion of zombification when the victims eventually come to. It’s as though they are rising up from the dead (Bishop 198). These practices were performed by priests as well as later threatened by slave owners in an effort to assert control over the community. Zombification terrified the Haitian people and thus kept them controlled.

Haitian people were exposed to these rituals and were fearful of becoming one of the undead forced to do work for those that enslaved them (Murphy 49). Shortly after Haiti became an independent republic from the French, Americans began taking Haitian people as slaves for their plantations (Murphy 50). Haitian people were bought and forced into slavery where they lost their humanity by being forced into mindless work (Murphy 49). The fear of becoming a zombie had manifested into their actual lives. Slaves were now mindless workers who had no control over their actions. Despite feeling as though they had lost their humanity, slaves still had the ability to think on their own. Slave owners who feared disobedience would use the Haitian slaves’ fear of zombies to maintain control over them (Murphy 52). Owners would threaten their slaves with zombification. They would insist that they knew of a priest or priestess that had the ability to turn the disobedient slaves into zombies if they refused to comply with their master’s wishes (Murphy 52). The threat of actually becoming undead and stripped of the little humanity they had left, kept slaves from revolting against their masters despite their numerical advantage (Murphy 52). Slavery and racial inequality in America was perpetuated by threatening slaves with zombification. The original use of zombie representation in America involved the manipulation of those who were a racial minority to keep them in a marginalized position.

Slavery and the marginalization of African Americans in America was preserved through racist beliefs of white supremacy. Fears of miscegenation were the result of racism and the belief that white skin was superior and desired. Miscegenation is defined as two people of different races breeding and producing offspring of mixed races (Tehrani). Zombie films such as *Warm Bodies* and *Zombie Prom* showcase incidences of miscegenation in action. Zombies occupy a middle ground between life and death as interracial relationships occupy a middle ground between two different races (Kee 177). The replication of zombies can represent a parallel to the reproduction of interracial couples (Kee 177). The reproduction of zombies can't be controlled and thus threatens society's stability, much like reproduction of mixed race couples threatens the stability of a predominately white society (Kee 178). Miscegenation fears stem from internalized racism that "black" bodies would taint the white lineage.

Kee asserts that the use of white females within zombie films has two functions that connect to fears of miscegenation. One function is to invoke fears about the loss of white innocence through (black) zombies (180). The other function is for the female to fall in love with the zombie (Kee 180). The latter is something seen in films like *Warm Bodies* and *Zombie Prom*. The undead suitors are representations of the "other" that face prejudice and discrimination from the living humans on the outside. R in the movie *Warm Bodies* can't fit into the zombie or human realm of his world, but once he begins to be more human by acting like one, Julie falls in love with him. In this way, R is being cured of his otherness to assimilate and then be accepted. Zombies are only accepted by the society once they act more like living humans (Jones 3). In the film *Zombie Prom*, a zombie boy named Johnny Warner is denied reentry into a school when he becomes undead. Characters such as Miss Strict and Eddie Flagrante argue over Johnny's reentry into the school. Eddie Flagrante insists that the discrimination of Johnny infringes on his civil rights. This argument over Johnny's rights resembles the arguments made during the Civil Rights movement and therefore connects the zombie with "blackness" (Kee 181). Prior

to the Civil Rights movement, racism in America kept schools segregated. By keeping the zombie-boy out of classes, the film demonstrates the connection between zombies and racism in America.

The humans in the films *Zombie Prom* and *Warm Bodies* experience dissonance regarding the zombie-boys and struggle to locate their humanity. Characters like Miss Strict and Julie's father in *Warm Bodies* need to negotiate the zombie's place within their realities before dissolving their dissonance. The humans perceive Johnny and R as being dead. When Johnny arrives at the school un-dead and looking to re-enroll, the human population is unsettled. R faces a similar reaction when he arrives at the human community with Julie. Freud developed a concept that explains why the humans in these films would be unwilling to accept their zombie-boys. Freud coined his concept the uncanny or the unfamiliar (Bishop 197). The concept refers to the fear of seeing something that was once familiar in a not familiar way (Bishop 198). Zombies represent once familiar characters or loved ones that have resurrected and become unfamiliar. The unfamiliar nature of the zombies creates fear and dissonance in those who perceive them to be laid to rest.

The terrifying nature of zombies in films stems from their familiar bodies but unfamiliar actions. They look like humans or people that the characters or the audience recognizes as previously alive; however, they behave in a way that is unknown to humans. They consume flesh and continue walking after their bodies have perished. Seeing the dead walk among the living is what becomes the unfamiliar (Bishop 198). In Romero's film *Night of the Living Dead*, Bishop indicates that the characters are faced with death and inner turmoil when they face zombified versions of people they once knew (201). Barbara's death in the film can be used as an example of the uncanny nature of zombies. Barbara is rendered useless when a zombified version of her brother comes to her. The familiar nature of her brother causes her to hesitate and she is then killed by her unfamiliar zombified brother (Bishop 204). Bishop asserts, "The horror of the zombie movie comes from recognizing the human in the monster...there is nothing to do about it but destroy what is

left" (204). Bishop is stating that zombies physically resemble human beings but once they lose all their human-like qualities such as conscious thought, sympathy or individuality, they are no longer humans. Instead, they are monsters who lack the sense of humanity that people have and therefore they are horrifying and must be disposed of.

Eventually in the end of both films, the zombie-boys gain their rights and are accepted by the human population. The process of humanizing the zombie-boys convinces the human population that although the zombie-boys are different, they have similarities to humans. The same process of humanization can be used to combat racism. The films argue that once bodies can be seen as having similarities, the differences can be overlooked. A similar phenomenon occurs in the alternate ending of *I Am Legend*. *I Am Legend* is a film set in New York City post-apocalypse (2007). One lone scientist in New York City must survive amongst the living dead. In the case of *I Am Legend*, the monsters are a cross breed of zombies and vampires (2007). The main character spends a large amount of his time kidnapping the zombie-vampires one at a time to experiment on them. The main character is trying to find the cure for what he perceives to be, their illness. The scientist makes the mistake of capturing the loved one of the head of the group of zombie-vampires. This sparks a war between the zombie-vampires and the scientist.

The scientist doesn't realize that despite the differences he sees between himself and the zombie-vampires, they have quite a few similarities. The scientist and the audience are shown in the alternate ending that the main zombie-vampire is in love with the one the scientist was experimenting on for a cure. He was willing to sacrifice his life to save the one he loved. The scientist sees the love the two have for each other and decides to let her go back to the zombie-vampire group. The head zombie-vampire leaves the scientist alive. This act shows the scientist that the zombie-vampires have more humanistic characteristics than he originally thought. He realizes that he is the bad guy in their story. The zombie-vampires show empathy and mercy to the scientist even though he had killed several of their kind

through his experimentation. This action shows the scientist that they are each trying to live their own lives and they did not wish to be “cured.” The zombie-vampires act as the other or “black” body in this cinematic piece while, the scientist is a parallel to white bodies. The film’s argument is that there is acceptance once there is understanding, acknowledgment of similarities and an exchange of perspectives. The two parties were upset with each other because they did not understand the other’s perspective and life experience. However, once the common-ground of love was established, the two parties were able to accept each other for their differences in life experiences. *Warm Bodies*, *I Am Legend* and *Zombie Prom* are examples of the notion that the acceptance of the zombies demonstrate the loss of prejudice and discrimination (Kee 182). *Warm Bodies*, *I Am Legend* and *Zombie Prom* show that the breakdown of racism and the acceptance of the “other” and thus make it possible to see zombies in a romantic position.

As argued in the films, the breakdown of racism is connected to the ability to find similarities within the body that one has a prejudice against. In the case of zombies, this similarity equates to being more human-like. The ability to find the humanity in a zombie can result in the zombie’s acceptance into human life. An analysis done by Steve Jones on the movie *Pretty Dead* provides an argument regarding what makes a zombie different from a human. *Pretty Dead* is a movie that uses the narration of the main character Regina in an effort to show the changes within a character’s mindset while they are in the process of losing their humanity (Jones 1). This use of narration is employed by filmmakers to show a character’s transitional changes in relation to physical form, mental state and how the character fits into society (Jones 1). Although the movie *Pretty Dead* differs from the movie *Warm Bodies* because it’s a transitional narrative that shows a character’s metamorphosis from a human to a zombie rather than from a zombie to a human, the arguments made by Jones applies to *Warm Bodies* when observed in the opposite direction. One of the most important signs that a human is turning into a zombie is the moment when said human begins to attack their loved ones (Jones 2). Jones indicates, “Eventually,

Regina loses control. Her romantic attachment to Ryan is replaced by her desire for his flesh. Although both types of desire reach their fullest expression carnally – human love-making or zombie flesh-eating – the former signifies Regina’s recognizably human sociality, while the latter denotes Regina’s movement into zom-being” (2). Jones argues that the lack of recognition of a loved one or the inability to control one’s actions around someone who invokes a romantic connection within them and thus results in harm against them, demonstrates a movement in the direction of zombification. Eventually, Regina kills her fiancé Ryan. The action of killing her loved one becomes a turning point for Regina’s humanity and initiates her transformation into being “pretty dead” (Jones 3). Her consciousness and decision-making skills keep her more on the side of humanity. A defining factor of being human is the state of mental consciousness in which the brain is functioning and alive (Jones 4).

Much like Regina’s loss of control over eating her loved one signifies her zombification, R’s ability to control his desire for flesh when he encounters Julie in the movie *Warm Bodies* signifies his humanization. According to Jones’s argument, once Regina loses consciousness and control over harming the person she loves most, she loses her humanity and becomes “pretty dead.” This applies to R’s character but in the opposite way. R is able to be seen as more human once he has a conscious brain and makes the decision to save Julie instead of eating her because he has feelings for her. Clear signifiers of humanity are the presence of consciousness and the ability to feel an emotional or sexual connection to another being (Jones 3). So if one becomes less human by losing conscious thoughts, than the reverse is true and one can become more human by gaining conscious thoughts.

Jones insists that another defining characteristic of humanity is the desire to make social bonds and connections to other human beings (5). Jones describes Regina’s actions by stating, “Regina’s efforts to resist turning into a zombie are expressed as attempts to maintain her established notion of human sociality. For example, Regina declares, ‘I don’t want to hurt people anymore...so I stay away from them’” (5). Jones is arguing that Re-

gina is clinging to the ideas of humanity that insist that human connections are important aspects of socialization and social norms play a large part in what is and what is not permissible in society. In this case, Regina recognizes that it is not socially permissible to hurt others and she therefore stays away from them. She is still clinging to social norms and ideas regarding socialization. However, later in the film Regina is responsible for killing her fiancé Ryan. Regina indicates that this act of social connection deviance was the moment that she died (Jones 7). Once social bonds and the desire to retain said social bonds are broken, the movement towards zombification becomes evident.

Jones's argument can be applied to *Warm Bodies*. While Regina becomes less human by losing social connections, R becomes more human by gaining social connections. Throughout the film R is seen to make connections with his fellow zombie friend M as well as his love connections to the human Julie. Once R has these social connections and follows social norms by saving Julie's life, R can be seen as more human than zombie. He communicates and protects the people that he has made social connections to. Later on in the film, R and the other zombies begin to rejoin society and begin talking and interacting with the humans in Julie's compound. Once the zombies make these social connections and follow the social norms established within the compound, the humans are able to recognize the zombies as being human and therefore accept their presence. Making social bonds and having friends is a very human act that is not seen to occur within zombies (Jones 7).

The movie *Warm Bodies* is a film that provides a new perspective on the zombie genre. Unlike most other conventional zombie films, *Warm Bodies* is a film that uses a zombie as the narrator. The audience follows R the zombie throughout the film. The audience observes his struggle with being a zombie and his desire to retain his humanity. The film has a strange way of invoking sympathetic feelings from the audience for a zombie. The film's ability to change the views of an audience accustomed to viewing zombies with disgust and distrust, is a great feat. *Warm Bodies* accomplishes this task of taking the



unfamiliar and making it familiar through the use of mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing and sound. The director of the film employs certain strategies in an effort to establish a relationship between the audience and the character R.

An example of how the film *Warm Bodies* turns R into a likeable character is provided by the opening scene of the film. The camera is focused just on R's eyes and the narration of R's voice is played in the background in combination with some relaxing music. The audience hears R's inner dialogue and at first it's hard to tell that R is even a zombie.

What am I doing with my life? I'm so pale. I should get out more. I should eat better. My posture is terrible. I should stand up straighter. People would respect me more if I stood up straighter. What's wrong with me? I just want to connect. Why can't I connect with people? Oh, right, it's because I'm dead. I shouldn't be so hard on myself. I mean, we're all dead. This girl is dead. That guy is dead. That guy in the corner is definitely dead. Jesus these guys look awful. (*Warm Bodies*)

R's full form isn't shown until he reaches the end of his monologue stating that he's dead and then the camera pans out to show the audience that R is a zombie and the place that he is walking through is an abandoned airport filled with other zombies. Later on in the scene the narration points out other specific zombies and R discusses what job he imagines they had when they were alive. The audience is shown each zombie he mentions dressed for their job and some like the janitor and security guard still performing their duties. This makes each zombie an individual. Instead of being a horde of zombies, the zombies are singled out which makes them easier to empathize with.

One reason that zombies aren't accepted and empathized with as being human is that they aren't individualized like other classic monsters are (Klosterman). Traditionally, zombies are all the same and represent the general brainless masses and aren't individualized. They are always the same (Klosterman). The zombies can begin to be seen more like a hu-

man once they are seen as individuals instead of a general mass. The zombie narrator R can be seen as something other than a mindless zombie because he is shown as an individual when he expresses his inner thoughts to the audience through his narration and monologues. By hearing his thoughts and watching his actions, he is singled out; he has a story.

In a review of the film *Warm Bodies* Richard Roeper gives credit to the movie's ability to make a zombie relatable. Roeper claims, "the kid knows he's a zombie and doesn't deny his hunger for living human flesh — but there are still traces of a real person inside." The critic acknowledges that the movie makes it obvious that R is a zombie but still gives him human qualities in the way that he collects items and keeps them in an old airplane, talks to his friend named M, and listens to music (Roeper). These human-like activities make R stand out as an individual as well as make him more familiar. The human characters also follow the audience in the ability to see the zombies are more than flesh-eating corpses. Once the human population is exposed to the zombies like R and M, they begin to accept them and fight alongside them. R, M and the other zombies in the film begin to regain their humanity when love causes their hearts to beat again. The zombies move toward the side of humanity and thus the audience and the human characters can begin to empathize and connect with them. The zombies move beyond the idea of the uncanny and become familiar in this way. They have human-like qualities such as thought, feelings and they even attempt at speech while talking to other zombies. Because of their familiar nature, the zombies are no longer scary. The main female lead, Julie, follows this claim. When Julie first meets R the zombie, she is afraid because he represents the unfamiliar walking dead corpse. She even witnesses him follow his animalistic nature when he kills and eats some of her companions. However, once he is made familiar by showing his human qualities and thoughts, she is no longer afraid of him. The argument made in *Warm Bodies* about the ability for a zombie to be humanized and accepted is a parallel to the ability for all bodies to find similarities within different looking bodies and thus find acceptance. The film asserts that once common hu-

manity can be established, the process of acceptance can begin.

New zombie cinematic pieces like *Warm Bodies*, *Zombie Prom*, and *I Am Legend*, have contributed to a new argument for zombie films. The zombies in these movies show signs of human-like characteristics such as thoughts, feelings and the ability to make social connections to other characters in the film. The films enable the humans in their stories to look past their differences and accept zombies as who they are. This is a parallel to disintegrating racism through finding common ground between individuals. Humans in these cinematic pieces move beyond their dissonance, fears of miscegenation and discrimination towards zombies to coexist peacefully. These films argue that the same can be done for humans of different backgrounds and different colored skin. If we can all locate the humanity within each other, we can learn that we're all human and should be treated as such.

*Note: This essay was composed in Dr. Caroline Hovanec's AWR 201 class.*

## Works Cited

- Barber, Nicholas. "Why Are Zombies Still So Popular?" *BBC*. 2014. Web.
- Bishop, Kyle. "Raising the Dead." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 33.4 (2006): 196-205. 2010. Web.
- I Am Legend*. Dir. Francis Lawrence. Warner Bros., 2007. DVD.
- Jones, Steve, and Shaka McGlotten. "Pretty, Dead: Sociosexuality, Rationality and the Transition into Zom-Being." *Zombies and Sexuality: Essays on Desire and the Living Dead*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2014. 180-198. Print.
- Kee, Chera. "Good Girls Don't Date Dead Boys: Toying with Miscegenation in Zombie Films." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 42.4 (2014): 176-85. Web.
- Klosterman, Chuck. "My Zombie, Myself: Why Modern Life Feels Rather Undead." *New York Times*. 2010.
- Murphy, Kieran M. "White Zombie." *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 15.1 (2011): 47-55. Web.

Platts, Todd. "Locating Zombies in the Sociology of Popular Culture." *Sociology Compass* 7.10.1111 (2013): 547-60. John Wiley & Sons. Web.

*Pretty Dead*. Dir. Benjamin Wilkins. Gravitas, 2014. DVD.

Roeper R. "Warm Bodies." RogerEbert.com. 2013.

Tehrani, Sara. "Class and Race." *Intro to Sociology*. Tampa. 2015. Lecture.

Tenga, Angela, and Elizabeth Zimmerman. "Vampire Gentleman and Zombie Beasts: A Rendering of True Monstrosity." *Gothic Studies* 15.1 (2013): 76-87. Web.

*Warm Bodies*. Dir. Johnathan Levine. Summit, 2013. DVD.

*Zombie Prom*. Dir. Vince Marcello. 2006. *Youtube.com*. Web.