

### Chapter 3: Political, Psychological, Economic, and Class Based Examination of Popular Culture

In this chapter, I will examine the roll of popular culture and zombie cinema through political, social, psychological, and economic milieus.

#### POPULAR CULTURE AND POLITICS

Many types of films and television programs present implicit or explicit political messages that are embedded within the narrative and provide people with relatable texts in which they can easily communicate (Yenerall, 2013). Yenerall states, “To quote from particular characters, television shows, plays, and movies relates back to the argument that the language of stories that we repeat year after year, decade after decade, can reveal a deeper meaning, drawing upon popular culture material that has become part of our collective memory” (Yenerall, 2014:94). Popular culture creates and perpetuates meaningful frames of reference that people draw upon in their daily lives to communicate ideas to one another.

Lately there have been many discussions across social media platforms about the white walkers of *Game of Thrones* (Benioff and Weiss, 2011-), and what happened to Rick, a main character from *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010-). Both popular texts allow people to express emotions and ideas outside of their daily lives. “We can use a short but illustrative reference from a film or comedian as a means of expressing something more profound or complex, or to provide specific context” (Yenerall, 2014:94). By saying things such as, “We’re going to need a bigger boat,” which is a quote from the movie *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) regardless of the situation, a person can convey the idea that they are in dire straits and do not feel equipped to handle the situation that they are in. Because they are fictional portrayals, they are also able to bring light to serious political matters without fear of reprisals (Gournelos, 2009). Humor has been an unprecedented outlet in this respect with shows such as *The Colbert Report* (Hoskinson, 2005-

2014) and *South Park* (Parker, Stone, and Graden, 1997- ) but other platforms have also contributed. In chapter four, I will argue that zombie films hold a particular place in popular culture due to their low budget status and this includes the ability to draw attention to uncomfortable but important political issues such as consumerism in *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978) and racism in *White Zombie* (Weston and Halperin, 1932).

Zombie films, as a cultural text, gives the audience an unprecedented freedom in that the message is likely interpreted in different ways dependent on the cultural background of the individual audience member (Jackson, 2009). As seen in the previous chapter, zombies are not viewed the same way across cultures. An individual's socialization and cultural understanding affects their individual interpretation of cultural texts. In this way, an individual's *habitus* (skills, habits, and dispositions formed through individual experience) represents the way that group culture and personal history reflect and reproduce the social world through the actions of individuals (Bourdieu, 1990).

An individual's cultural capital contributes to and provides an interpretive lens for the reception of cultural texts. Bourdieu's (1979) concept of cultural capital illustrates the power inherent in various societal attributes. Education, skills, knowledge, and even taste in entertainment can all be considered forms of cultural capital. There is a basic understood consensus among the population that certain attributes can empower one person over another in social situations such as educational pedigree and physical characteristics such as height, symmetry, and physical fitness.

These forms of capital cannot only alter what is considered cultural but can be a powerful reinforcement of cultural ideals. In popular culture, figures that are meant to be powerful are often portrayed as physically large and intimidating. If the character is meant to be perceived as

intelligent, they are often portrayed as physically small. Both stereotypes, large stature equates to power and small stature equates with intelligence, can be illustrated in *The Cabin on the Woods* (Goddard, 2011). The character of Marty, played by Fran Krantz is supposed to be more intelligent and creative than his physically larger costars Chris Hemsworth and Jesse Williams. The actor himself is, in fact, much shorter than the others are but he is also just as muscularly developed. The director made a conscious decision to costume him in baggy clothes to hide the fact that he was as muscular as his larger costars. This decision illustrates an understanding of how cultural capital works in a narrative context to affect audience interpretation and understanding. The audience accepts the character of Marty as believable due to deliberate production and costuming choices (Parrish, 2017).

Art and language, especially as expressed in popular culture, are two ways in which individuals can indirectly express thoughts and feelings but still within the confines of social structure. Within the world of art particularly, the frustration of individual freedom can come up against the notions of social taboo. Repressed desires can form the basis of this cultural creativity and deviance. As Durkheim (1964) points out, deviance is necessary in society for establishing and maintaining social order, deviance permits the expression of discontent with existing norms. Art, particularly zombie art, can be a form of deviance that creates the illusion of social change. Most zombie films revolve around an “us (humans) versus them (zombies)” narrative and in these stories the moral and ethical superiority of the humans over the zombies is highlighted and conflict arises when the humans begin to behave in a manner more consistent with behavior expected of the zombies. The human is either “brought back” to human behavior or is eliminated in the same way zombies are dispatched. Actual change is not brought about but the perception

of change within the zombie art audience provides an important pacifying effect that reinforces the idea that everything is ok and the status quo must be maintained.

Language choice can be a form of self-expression but still operates within a set standard of social norms. It is a basic form of communication that has been formed through socialization, as a culture Americans have been socialized by the very word zombie from a remarkably young age, as you have read in the background chapter addressing the history of television zombies. In essence, language itself reinforces this system. People use words to describe things and to enact change in their own social world. Some examples of this can be the embracing of the formerly pejorative term “queer” by the gay, lesbian, and trans community and the by the active choice of the term African-American over other labels such as colored or negro by the black community.

Marcuse (1964) states that radical social change and human emancipation is not possible under the current historical economic and social system. The technology that has enabled the capitalist system to thrive and expand is the very technology that will keep it as the dominant system through the unfreedom of freedom. This can be explained as choice is an illusion if all options are presented within the confines of a system. Politics, media, and business are irrevocably linked in maintenance of the status quo. Art and language also add to the illusion of freedom of choice but offer a form of indirect expression of dissatisfaction with the status quo, in this case, through the production of popular culture.

The technical apparatus that controls society expands in a completely rational way (Marcuse, 1964). Therefore, individuals, regardless of their socio-economic status begin to satisfy themselves with material comforts, which can be popular culture artifacts. These material comforts are a product of the capitalist system to which the individuals actually contributed. Many factors within the system socialize these individuals into the belief that these particular

products are a necessary part of life. The necessity and finally the ability to question said “necessity” of these products affects all aspects of the society through a totalitarian social integration. These products also in turn help develop a system under which people did not have to think, use their imagination, or reason and they invariably lost the ability to do so. We find that zombies are utilized as archetypes to represent societal anxieties. These mental processes are required agents of social transformation. This mirrors the evolution of the zombie narrative as a safe expression of social anxieties. As we see in *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978) the capitalist narrative is played out in a shopping mall in which several zombies can be seen dragging products along with them. Zombies are essentially portrayed as mindless consumers attempting to invade a temple of acquisitions. I believe this is a statement by the director of consumer culture.

In Marcuse's (1964) mind we have become Mills' (1967) “cheerful robots,” more interested in maintaining the status quo than questioning the social structure, which seems to be a direct link to zombie culture and its sensitivity to specific cultural changes. Without this ability to think critically about the system’s underlying controlling attributes, it is impossible to imagine any system that is radically different, creating a circle of reinforcement for the current system. There are many factors as to why critical analysis of the current system is cloaked. Through the understanding of the historical context of zombie texts in the various eras, I believe social problems and anxieties can be revealed and understood.

#### UNDERSTANDING CLASS AND POPULAR CULTURE

Any examination of popular culture is problematic in that there is no single understood definition of the term. To examine popular culture especially in the case of zombie texts, we must ask ourselves not only “what is popular culture?”, but also “who uses popular culture?”,

and “how is popular culture used?”. This section is meant to build upon the examination of relevant zombie texts as an illustrative example of popular culture in the American social setting as well as historical cultural roots of undead in global folklore laid out in chapter two.

Wendy Griswold (2012) describes the evolution of how the concepts of culture and society have been perceived over time. Griswold’s ultimate definition of culture utilizes the cultural diamond schema, which illustrates the various relationships between the social world, the cultural object, the creator, and the receiver. She also utilizes Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) concepts of cultural capital to expand the boundaries of the definition beyond objects and practices to the realm of power distribution in society. Her detailed description leads me to think that we have not yet reached the pinnacle of this discussion and that the reciprocal effect that culture and society have on each other may yet be further defined especially due to the ever-changing nature of entertainment types and access. Mintzberg (2015) has created a model in which the private, public, and plural (or social) sectors must remain in balance while constantly influencing and being influenced by the other two.

## PSYCHOLOGY OF POPULAR CULTURE

Philosophers have long examined the role that individual emotions play in defining who we are as humans. Hegel defines our basic reality as “being awake” or an intentional consciousness (Stern, 2012). He differentiates our “spirit” from our mind and further from the body. Humans experience, gather, and interpret information through all of these channels and the result is directed in different ways. He posits that moods are the way in which humans react to the way the world reflects our own subjectivity, creating a link between the individual and society. Hegel examines emotions as a subjective thing that is understood as an objective thing that requires external manifestation. Simply put, our emotions need an easily defined face that is

recognizable on a collective level. This external manifestation can take many forms, in this case I argue that the manifestation is a shared understanding of popular culture texts, in this case, zombies are the physical manifestations of fear.

Sartre refers to emotion as a form of existence of consciousness (1962). All things are instruments that work in a complex interplay that define our world, but emotions are not necessarily consciously subject to specific things. A person may react to what they perceive as a threat unconsciously by flinching or shouting. By extension, this could apply to an image or sound that can be perceived as threatening or frightening. From where does that unconscious reaction come from then?

Geertz (1973) argues that conscious perception is the act of recognition of symbols. Symbols can be thought of as external sources of information that allow for the interpretation of social and psychological processes (Strati, 2000). Through the manifestation of socio-psychological tensions in symbolic form we have come to perceive thought as a public rather than a private activity. Popular culture symbols are created and are given value and meaning through interaction and understanding within specific cultures.

Evolutionary theorists Barkow, Tooby, and Cosmides (2001:9) suggest, “Humans have evolved specialized cognitive machinery that allows us to enter and participate in imagined worlds.” As a result, humans engage in not only pretend or imaginative play but they are also able to interact with media texts in a meaningful way. Since the primary feature of evolutionary theory is on how evolution has shaped humans over time, it only makes sense that this would include how culture has emerged out of that evolved state. How people deal with social ancestral problems or situations in the modern world can be addressed by how we engage with cultural artifacts, in this case, how horror films are viewed. Horror films concentrate on evoking fear in

the audience. Fear is one of the primal reactions that have helped humans adapt and survive over time. The ability to experience fear without being in any actual danger may function to help people recognize physical, social, and emotional dangers (Yenerall, 2013). The stories themselves allow people to not only experience problems or conflicts but to also evaluate the scripted solutions that may or may not be effective (Gournelos, 2009; Grodal, 2009). I believe that zombie texts represent a combination of reflection of collective and individual fears as well as a way for collectives and individual people to work through those fears.

Popular culture texts can then become a connection to this unconscious “reservoir of the experiences of human species” using stories, symbols, and metaphors (Jung, 1948). Through the filmmakers, these texts act as reflections of shared understandings, expressions of beliefs, norms and values, and guidelines to influence social behavior. Zombies represent human fear as the manifestation of our aversion to the archetypal other and the nagging doubt that they and we are the same.

As will be described in chapter four, we have seen that one of the defining features of cinematic zombies is the lack of conscious thought or intuitive function (Kline, 2012). Zombies occupy what is known as the “uncanny valley” (Mori, 2012). This is defined as the point at which something that is not human appears human enough to cause revulsion in humans. Though Mori related this idea to robots, it can just as easily be applied to zombies. Utilizing the theory of pathogen avoidance, MacDorman, Green, Ho, and Koch, (2009) illustrate that uncanny stimuli may activate a cognitive mechanism that elicits an avoidance response towards potential sources of pathogens. "The more human an organism looks, the stronger the aversion to its defects, because (1) defects indicate disease, (2) more human-looking organisms are more closely related to human beings genetically, and (3) the probability of contracting disease-causing bacteria,



viruses, and other parasites increases with genetic similarity" (MacDorman et al, 2009:696).

Hence, the fear of both zombies and disease have deep psychological roots which can be easily recognized within the post 9/11 zombies when zombies were first referred to as "infected".

## POPULAR CULTURE AND ECONOMICS

Americans spend a considerable amount of money on entertainment. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics conducts the yearly Consumer Expenditure Survey to determine the precise impact that entertainment has on the average American household. Between the years, 1984 and 2014 Americans spent an average of 4.09% to 5.26% of their total income after taxes on what they determined to be entertainment (Figure 2). Interesting to note that the lowest year was not in 2008 when America experienced the financial crisis or even the following year. 2008 turned out to be a spike in estimated entertainment spending followed by a small dip in 2009. The lowest estimated expenditure was in 2006, which precedes the Writer's Guild Strike of 2007. This survey, though useful, has room for improvement. On the survey, the U.S. Government includes items in the description of "entertainment" such as pets, that are not necessarily relevant to popular culture studies.

Zombie films hold a unique place in the Hollywood hierarchy. Due to the idea that zombies are generally considered "low class" they are rarely afforded a big budget and thus can afford to be more experimental and explore themes and topics not available to large budget movies (Platts, 2014). People are able to explore real societal problems through the lens of the zombie context; as long as the zombie is present, people can still be comfortable in the real world. *Zombieland* (Fleischer, 2009) grossed \$75.5 million at the box office but cost only \$23 million to make. In essence, zombie films can be big money makers. The entire zombie genre is estimated to be over \$5 billion USD per year since at least 2011 (Ogg, 2011). That is a

substantial amount for any budget especially the small ones allowed for zombie films. The rare exception was *World War Z* (Forster, 2013) which grossed over \$202 million in theaters with a production cost of \$190 million.

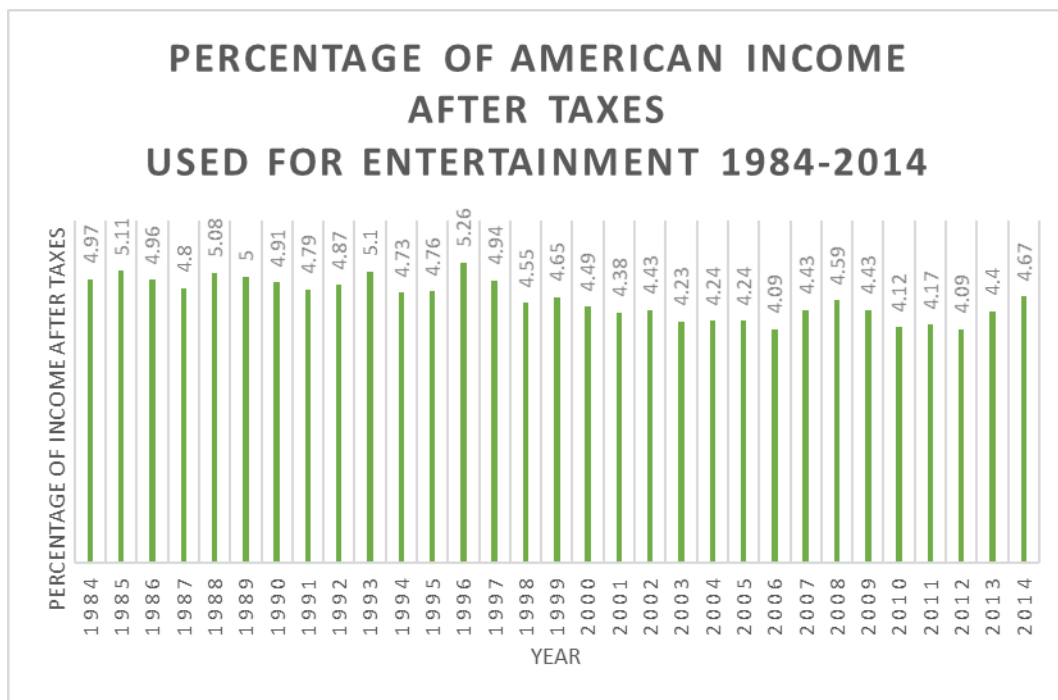
Zombie texts appear in a variety of platforms. The popularity of the zombie has expanded from the milieu of the low budget film to so much more. The number of zombie books published annually had quadrupled in the past decade (Drezner, 2011). The video game franchise *Resident Evil* (Mikami and Fujiwara, 1996-) has sold over 71 million units worldwide with a total revenue of \$5,592 million (adjusted to 2016 U.S. dollar) (Capcom, 2016). The video games have spawned comic books, novels, live action and animated films, as well as countless fan products such as t-shirts, action figures, table top games, and bobble heads. The live action film series in the Resident Evil franchise entered the Guinness Book of World Records as the highest grossing film series to be based on a video game, bringing in over \$915 million (U.S. dollars) worldwide (2012).

In another example of zombie economic viability, *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010-) appears across multiple platforms such as comic books, graphic novels, novels, video games, web series, and tabletop games. The popularity of *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010-) can be easily measured through viewership. 15.5 million viewers tuned in for the season three midseason finale, and 17.29 million viewers watched the season five premiere (St. John, 2014). These figures illustrate that the series has become the most-watched basic cable drama broadcast in history. In 2013, AMC earned over \$8 million (U.S.D.) in advertising revenue per episode for *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010-) (Ghahremani, 2013). Despite this, the lead actor in the hour-long series, Andrew Lincoln, earns only \$90,000 (U.S.D.) per episode (St. John, 2016). Compare this to the three lead actors on the half hour show *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre and

Prady, 2007), who each earn over \$1 million (U.S.D.) per episode (St. John, 2016). Each actor in the shorter series earns as much for one episode as the lead in *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010-) earns for an entire year. This not only illustrates how lucrative the zombie genre is for the production companies, but also may lend some understanding as to the ubiquity of zombies across multiple platforms due to the low production costs.

The popularity and economic benefits of zombies are clear. Despite the inundation of the zombie genre across multiple platforms, for the purpose of this study, I will concentrate primarily on the visual platform of film.

Figure 2



Data Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Expenditure Survey

Percentage derived from Income after taxes and total spent on Entertainment