

Chapter 4: History of Zombie on Film

UNDEAD IN WESTERN CINEMA

Many scholars who have researched zombies argue that there are three distinct eras of the zombie evolution: The Haitian *zombi*, the Romero zombie, and the post 9/11 zombie (Bishop, 2010; Bishop, 2015; Dendle, 2007; McIntosh, 2008; Platts, 2014). These eras are broadly defined by how the zombies are created and then characterized. Each of these eras was can be further refined through the societal anxieties that are represented in the movies.

The Haitian Zombi

The era of the Haitian *zombi* can be epitomized by the movie *White Zombie* (Weston and Halperin, 1932). The scholarly definition of the zombies in this era are characterized by their lack of will, they are essentially controlled by some form of master (Bishop, 2010; Bishop, 2015; Dendle, 2007; McIntosh, 2008; Platts, 2014). In my interpretation, this film represents the Imperial nature of western society on indigenous populations and confronts such topics as racism, colonialism, and gendered norms. The black Haitians in the film are transformed into *zombis* through a potion and are both created and controlled by Murder Legendre, the white sugar mill manager, portrayed by Bela Lugosi. When he attempts to extend this control over the white fiancée of a rival of the owner as well as over the owner himself, he is only partially successful. The white woman, Madeline is completely under his control but the white man Charles can break the spell and kills Murder. The white male *zombi* was able to exert his will and break out of the potion's spell while the black *zombis* are directionless without their master and throw themselves from a cliff (Weston and Halperin, 1932). The casting of Lugosi after his performance of *Dracula* (Browning, 1931) adds an additional layer of complexity. Lugosi was

still in the public consciousness as a powerful undead character of European descent. Another aspect of examination is the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 in which American imperialism led to the subjugation and deaths of hundreds of Haitian people.

This idea of external control extends all the way into the 50's and 60's when societal fears created masters through scientific experimentation and alien races. These masters stood firmly in the secular world rather than in the world of the supernatural (Crane, 1994). Movies such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel, 1956) see the will of people removed via quiet invasion. This story is told via flashback by Dr. Bennell to a psychiatrist named Dr. Hill. Alien spores fall on a small California town. These spores grow into large pods containing a perfect replica of the person closest to it. Memories and personalities of the people are perfectly replicated but the ensuing creature is devoid of all emotion and controlled by the alien race. Dr. Bennell discovers the plot and rushes to escape and spread the word about the impending disaster. When he sounds the alarm he is arrested and sent to the psychiatrist Dr. Hill. His fears are dismissed and he is labeled crazy until Dr. Hill hears of a truck containing massive pods that has overturned on the highway. Dr. Hill then notifies the FBI to block the road and the audience is left to wonder if they were in time (Siegel, 1956). I think that this movie examines the societal fears towards modern science. The world is still one year from the beginnings of practical space exploration through the Russian Sputnik probe which throws the world into a global space race. This forward rush by the scientific community can be summed up within the words of Dr. Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum) from *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993), "Yeah, yeah, but your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could that they didn't stop to think if they should". The mistrust of quickly attained scientific data, fear of the unknown, and our subsequent vulnerability to it is palpable throughout the movie.

This fear is also played out in the form of a doomsday weapon as well as aliens in *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (Wood, 1959). The plot of this film is incomprehensible. The plan did involve a flying saucer landing in a graveyard to utilize a doomsday weapon to animate the world's dead as an army to dominate the Earth. The first to be animated were a vampire named Vampira, her husband, and a large mindless zombie type creature. Aliens had intended to utilize further mindless hordes, controlled by the aliens, to halt Earth production of the superbomb "Solobonite" (Wood, 1959). This bomb was viewed by the aliens as having universe destroying properties. The aliens also controlled an additional doomsday device that could ignite sunlight molecules and destroy the entire universe. The aliens were defeated in the end by a man wielding a hunk of wood (Wood, 1959). The point is not that the movie made any sort of sense but that it represented very real fears that were being manifested at the time. This movie is only one example of a text that examined how the scientific community was dabbling in things beyond their comprehension and that there may be very real world consequences. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 had changed the definition of warfare and the world was still reeling from the consequences of that action. The use of a nuclear device on non-combatants changed how war was perceived globally and reinforced the idea that actions of this type are not to be repeated (Dower, 2010). Doomsday weapons had entered the public sphere of consciousness and would not leave (Halliwell, 1989). The fact remains that these societal fears were played out in a zombie text despite the fact that the zombie itself would play little role in the outcome.

The Romero Zombie

The second era is commonly referred to as the Romero zombie. In his 1968 classic movie, *Night of the Living Dead*, George Romero reinvented the idea of the zombie. Though

originally referred to as “ghouls” the creatures became the template on which zombies would be defined for many years to come. They were categorized by their slow, shambling gait, cannibalistic tendencies, and the appearance of reanimated humans in various states of decay. This movie also introduced the idea that the reanimated corpse could only be finally defeated through damage to or destruction of the brain as well as using fire. The story follows seven people led by different circumstances to a Pennsylvania farm house where they would ultimately be trapped and six of them devoured. The almost all white group of men, women, and a child, is led by Ben, a black man. Ben takes charge and organizes the barricading of the windows and doors. One by one the others fall to the horde until Ben alone is left to defend the cellar not only from the horde but from his former groupmates who had died and become a part of the reanimated horde. He alone survives the night only to be shot in the head by a white posse as he emerged from the farmhouse weakened and disoriented. The posse had been out exterminating the dead with rifles from a distance and never bothered to check if Ben was human or undead. The movie ends with a series of still photographs in which Ben’s body is thrown onto the flaming pile of undead corpses while “hunters’ celebrate. The movie also utilizes a new concept for American films, that of the hero dying (Romero, 1968).

This movie is a powerful critique of the understanding of how black men were perceived in American society at the time (Duchaney, 2015). The character Ben was afforded a wise and brave leadership role in stark contrast to token black character role that was prevalent in Hollywood at the time (Fain, 2015). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 had recently desegregated public facilities such as movie theaters and criminalized racial discrimination in education and employment. This was followed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which was intended to remove barriers from black voters through such devices as the abolition of literacy requirements. The

most significant event of 1968 was the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who had led peaceful protests and marches for years, and was considered the face of the Black Civil Rights Movement.

The cause of the dead rising from their graves and acting out mindless cannibalistic behaviors is briefly referenced in the film by a scientist on television who believes the cause is space radiation from a returned space probe from Venus. The idea that the undead were acting for a single purpose without the need for an overlord or director is a stark difference from the Haitian model of control by another being. This movie serves as an example of the idea that there are dangers of the unknown, that the rapid expansion of scientific frontiers may yield dangers for which people are not prepared. The themes of this movie also represent the global nature of scientific endeavor and the helplessness of any individual country to avoid suffering the consequences of the mistakes of other nations. In 1967 the Soviet probe Venera 4 entered Venus atmosphere to take readings of its composition (NASA, 2017). The similarity to the probe in *Night of the Living Dead* is striking. This parallel seems to have fed on the tension of the space race that was being played out between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Night of the Living Dead also had to compete with the 6 o'clock news for the horror crown. The Vietnam War dominated all news media with visions of senseless horror to which the American people had now become accustomed. Such as the Mỹ Lai Massacre, which was the largest massacre of non-combatants by US ground forces in the 20th century, in which between 347 and 504 Vietnamese non-combatant men, women, children and infants were brutalized and slaughtered (Rozman, 2010). The evening news influenced Romero's film style to a grittier documentary feel rather than the classic horror film which more than likely added to the unease of the viewers (Duchaney, 2015). Duchaney's larger argument is that technology is humanity's

defense against fear and the unknown and that the manipulation of technology has become a ubiquitous source of anxiety in American horror films.

The timing of the release of *Night of the Living Dead* had other consequences. It was released for general audiences in October of 1968, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating system was not passed until November of 1968. This means that younger audiences had unprecedented access to adult content such as graphic violence, sex, and language deemed inappropriate. Previous films had been subject to the Hays Code (1930-1968) which was subjective, confusing, and all but abandoned by the 1960's. The MPAA film rating system was designed to rate a film's suitability for particular audiences through content analysis. The content analyzed were such things as nudity, sexual situations, inappropriate language, drug use, and violence (2013). In 1968 the guideline designated access for general audiences (G), mature audiences (M), restricted audiences (R), and no audience members under 16 (X) (2013). These designations have gone through multiple iterations until 1990 when they ended up in their current incarnation as G, PG, PG-13, R, and NC-17(2013).

Romero followed up *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) with *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) *Day of the Dead* (1985) and subsequent remakes. The template of the zombie remained the same throughout all his endeavors but the social issue being critiqued changed with each film. *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968) examined the role of racism in America. *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978) sees the characters barricading themselves in a suburban shopping mall critiquing of consumerism. *Day of the Dead* (Romero, 1985) examines a world overrun by zombies with small pockets of humanity remaining. These pockets are represented by military bases in which the zombies are being studied to find a way to stop or reverse the reanimation process. In this instance, the practices used by the scientists are slow by army standards and the

military takes control of the process and everything falls apart. The themes in this film are a critique of military practices, and again, misunderstanding of scientific principles. The scientific method cannot “prove” anything it can support or not support an argument and I believe that that lack of definitiveness causes confusion for the average lay person.

Though Romero set the standard many other zombie films were created at this time, though none really include the social critique that Romero’s work does. Hollywood had grabbed onto the idea of the Romero zombie and churned out poorly received film after poorly received film but without Romero’s social message of cultural critique embedded within the narrative. Some of these movies are *Oasis of the Zombies* (Franco, 1982), an early, less successful version of *Dead Snow* (Wirkola, 2009) set in the desert where zombie Nazis protect a treasure. Another is *Zombie Nightmare* (Bravman, 1986) in which a man is killed and reanimated by a voodoo lady to exact his revenge. Finally, *Toxic Zombies* (McCann, 1980) in which drug plantations are sprayed with an experimental chemical that turns the peaceful growers into zombie cannibals. I believe that due to this string of poorly conceived movies with little social substance the zombie soon fell out of favor in Hollywood.

The Post 9/11 Zombie

The zombie saw an unprecedented revival with the post 9/11 model. According to some estimates, more than one-third of all zombie films to have ever been released, have been since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (Bishop 2008). These zombies could be fast or slow and for the first time were referred to as “infected”. The movie *28 Days Later* (Boyle, 2002) changed not only how people became zombie but how a person behaved once they became one. The story begins with animal activists freeing a chimpanzee from a medical lab that was infected with a “rage virus”. One of the activists gets bit and immediately transforms and attacks her group

members. 28 days later a young man named Jim wakes up from a coma in a deserted hospital. He knows nothing of what has happened to the world as he wanders deserted streets trying to figure it out. The audience partakes of his journey of discovery as they only know what he does, which isn't much. Hints of global devastation are evident through discarded newspapers with various locations worldwide. Jim discovers and is chased by a fast group of zombies and is rescued by a couple of survivors, Mark and Selena. During the escape Mark is bitten and Selena immediately and brutally kills him. She tells Jim that the virus is transmitted through blood or saliva and "turns" people within 10 to 20 seconds. This speed and efficiency is a massive departure from previous zombie models. Jim and Selena meet up with Frank and his daughter Hannah and escape to the country to find the place that is broadcasting via radio that they have the "cure for the infection". When a drop of infected blood drips in Frank's eye he immediately demands that everyone get away from him and is shot by an army unit that arrives fortuitously on the scene. The army unit is the one that has been broadcasting the message but was not what Jim and the girls expected. Their solution was to collect as many women as they could, let the world go, and repopulate the world with their captives. Jim is slated for execution but escapes, frees some captive zombies within the army compound, and kills the commander of the unit. He is shot in the process of the escape and the screen goes black. 28 days later he awakes again, this time in a farm house, and again without any sign of infection. He and the girls have established the remote house as a safe home with defenses and large signs requesting assistance. It turns out that the virus causes the zombies' metabolisms to increase to the point that they must consume flesh constantly to survive, and with no meat to speak of, they are rapidly dying off.

The zombie state is directly linked to an infectious virus in this film, for the first time. This reflects societal fears of disease spread via globalization and the inability of the military to

protect citizens. Our current 24-hour news cycle is rife with reports of people boarding planes and crossing borders with TB, Ebola, H1N1 or now the Zika virus. The CDC (2015) reports that global infection rates of the Ebola virus skyrocketed from 53 in 2012 to 28,652 in 2014 (Figure 3). Prior to that the number of infected had never surpassed 603, which occurred during the first outbreak in 1976.

The next post 9/11 zombie movie is *Resident Evil* (Anderson, 2002). Based on a popular video game the zombies in *Resident Evil* are not only fast but they are also powerful and mutated into grotesque shapes. In this instance the zombies are created by the Umbrella Corporation, by a super soldier T-virus that had been released by a saboteur in the company's underground complex. The AI computer controlling the complex, named the Red Queen, seals all of the employees in and kills them. The employees reanimate and attack the group that came to see why communication with the facility had been lost. The group, led by Alice, are killed off one by one as they try to determine exactly what happened. Alice is the lone survivor who wakes in a deserted hospital with no memory of how she got there. Outside, the streets of Raccoon City are deserted as well. This text examines the fear of multinational corporations and their subsequent control over the lives of average people.

Beyond the virus created by a private corporation, this text is also interesting in that the hero is a woman. She is not a damsel in distress but a strong woman who throughout the story rescues herself and others. Female heroes become a dominant theme in post 9/11 zombie texts, noticeably those that cross platforms such as video games and comic books, but further examination is outside the scope of this thesis. In *Planet Terror* (Rodriguez, 2007), a stripper named Cherry becomes the heroine of the piece. Her leg is torn off in a zombie attack only to be

replaced by a wooden leg and finally a minigun which she uses to defend her group from invading humans and zombies alike.

World War Z (Forster, 2013) is unique within the genre in that it was a major studio investment. The film is based loosely on the book *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* by Max Brooks (2006). The book was written through a narrator as a series of the transcribed interviews of many people while the film followed the exploits of a single character played by Brad Pitt. In the movie there is a virus outbreak of unknown origins that causes people to turn into zombies within 12 seconds of being exposed to blood or saliva of the infected. Brad Pitt plays retired UN investigator Gerry who escapes a metropolitan area with his wife and children to be rescued by a UN contact and flown to a waiting battleship. Gerry is drafted into finding the origin and a cure for the virus under threat of his family being sent away from the battleship to an unsafe refugee camp. He travels the globe seeing how the virus has affected different cultures and those cultures' solutions to the immediate problem. The zombies are fast, mindless, and driven to consume. There is a scene in which they literally pile on top of each other to scale the wall that had been erected around Jerusalem. The failed battle to protect a city considered sacred by the three major world religions is very impactful in that it is implied that faith will not save humanity. He finally makes it to a World Health Organization (WHO) office in Wales where he injects himself with other deadly viruses which make him unpalatable to the zombies. He is then reunited with his family in a refugee camp. This text examines the distrust of government and its inability to handle global situations as well as examines the fear of a global contagion. *World War Z* is the highest grossing zombie film of all time. The historical pop culture context in which this film was produced found the zombie genre popular across multiple

platforms of entertainment and because of that I believe that the director could examine themes and topics that the general audience would find distasteful and still be a commercial success.

UNDEAD IN WESTERN TELEVISION

Television has played the role of rebroadcasting horror movies and served as a platform for low budget films that may not have enjoyed theatrical release. Beginning in the 1950's with Vampira, scores of late-night horror movie hosts/hostesses have introduced and commented on these movies, adding an additional layer of content and entertainment. This also prompted cult followings for both the hosts/hostesses and the films that they showed and introduced new audiences to films that they otherwise may not have seen.

The undead in western television, not as rebroadcasted films, seems to have begun in the realm of children's programming, though not necessarily exclusively children's programming. Some may consider series such as *The Addams Family* (Levy, 1964-1966) and *The Munsters* (Haas and Liebmann, 1964-1966) an early foray into the world of the undead. I will agree that Lily, Herman, and Grandpa Munster are all undead, I do not believe that they can be considered zombies. Lily and Grandpa are better classified as vampires. While Herman is a reanimated corpse he possesses a will, a mind, a profound gentleness, regular employment, and is in total control of himself. Within *The Addams Family* (Levy, 1964-1966) the only characters that could be considered undead could be Lurch, and Thing, but as neither are fully explained I cannot definitively identify them as such. Arguments could be made for Uncle Fester ranking among the undead due to his almost superhuman ability not to be harmed by explosives and electricity, but that is an investigation that lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

Most early examples of zombies in western television can be best considered as guest villains. Many of these appearances, especially those in children's media are that of almost

comic figures. Zombies in comedy have become a growing sub-genre but are not at this time the direction of this thesis. Seemingly endless episodes of *Scooby Doo* (Barbera and Hanna, 1969-1970) promised zombies but always turned out to be a villain in a mask. The villain in a mask trope held true until *Scooby Doo on Zombie Island* (Aoyama, Fukushima, Stenstrum, 1998) in which two women lure Scooby and the gang to an island in a bayou near New Orleans. The story unfolds that the women have been luring people to the island for hundreds of years and, using voodoo, drain their victim's life force to extend their own lives. The women themselves are the creators of the zombies and not zombies themselves. The interesting part of this is that the zombies in this case rise from their resting places to warn Scooby and the gang of their impending fate. The zombies, though frightening, are benevolent figures.

The Simpsons (Brooks, Groening, and Simon, 1989-) frequently feature zombies in a few of their annual Halloween episodes dubbed Treehouse of Horror. *Goosebumps* (Stine, 1992-1997), a children's series of books each of which were subsequently used in the television series of the same name, frequently featured zombies as scary guest villains. In this instance the zombies were always portrayed as something to fear. Some adult programming also invited zombies to be the scare of the week. They appear in a few episodes of *The X-Files* (Carter, 1993-), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon, 1996-2003), *South Park* (Parker, Stone, and Graden, 1997-), *Angel* (Greenwalt and Whedon, 1999-2004), *Supernatural* (Kripke, 2005-), and *American Horror Story* (Murphy and Falchuk, 2011-). All of these instances embody the classic Romero zombie, slow, mindless, and hungry for human flesh. Though their appearances are sporadic it is interesting to note that their very appearance belies the fact that they have entered the American consciousness as something to fear. Zombies were able to appear in a recognizable form without any sort of explanation.

It wasn't till the turn of the century that zombies really began to be able to hold their own as the primary vehicle on a television series. The turn of the century also sees the shift from Romero zombie, shambling, mindless, and cannibalistic, to that of the post 9/11 zombie in which the main difference is that the zombies are defined as being "infected". *Zombie Hunters: City of the Dead* (Devaney, 2007-), *Ugly Americans* (Clark and Stern, 2010-2012), *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010-), *Helix* (Porsandeh, 2014-2015), *Z Nation* (Engler and Schaefer, 2014-), *iZombie* (Ruggiero and Thomas, 2015-), *Santa Clarita Diet* (Fresco, 2017-), and *Fear the Walking Dead* (Erickson and Kirkman, 2015-) all feature zombies that have been infected with some sort of virus transmitted through saliva from a bite, ingestion of infected blood, or even in some cases from scratches. Interestingly in the series *The Walking Dead* the zombies are never referred to as zombies, they are called things such as: "walkers", "roamers", "biters", "ghouls", and "geeks" (Darabont, 2010-).

EXAMINATION OF THE ROLE MOVIES AND TELEVISION EMBODY AS A FORM OF POPULAR CULTURE

Pop culture is an integral part of American culture and this relationship will be examined through the selective historical example of cinema and television in the United States. The United States represents an amalgamation of various cultural backgrounds that I feel will provide a comprehensive overview of. The comparison of specific differing cultural traditions will be reserved for a later date. This examination could also be done for other forms of popular culture texts such as music, art, theater, radio, social media, and sporting events. I have specifically chosen the audio-visual platforms of film and television for their unique storytelling properties as well as a consistent and well documented history. Other textual forms may produce different findings and could be examined at a later date. This particular examination will be further

divided into three separate topics: history of the movie theater with historical context, history of television with historical context, as well as the historical context of the zombie texts presented in each platform.

Movie Theaters

The movie theater has long been a part of American culture and throughout the twentieth century the theater has emblemized changes in the very structure of society (Sutherland and Feltey, 2013). By 1922, 4,000 new movie theaters had been built in the United States (Starker 1989). These theaters were located in residential areas creating something that was not “other” but had become an integral part of daily life as the “neighborhood theater” (Sutherland et al, 2013). Everyone could attend the movie theater and escape into fantastical stories, and through this, celluloid became the great mirror of society.

Movie theaters, as a public institution, reflected the ideas and thoughts of the time, especially through the content of racial, ethnic, sex, gender, and class based themes in the films shown as well as through the treatment of the people who attended those shows. Until the latter part of the twentieth century, the policy of racial segregation was enforced at movie theaters by time, by section, by entrance, and by neighborhood (Sutherland et al, 2013). In many places this included not only those who were African American but also those who were of Asian and Mexican descent as well.

Later in the twentieth century changes in film content, and themes reflected cultural and societal changes such as the civil rights movement and women’s emancipation. Movie theaters were no longer located in neighborhoods but in commercial areas. This changed the relationship people had with entertainment, separating it from daily life. Movie going became more of a commercial endeavor and less of a family event. Between 2005 and 2014 movie ticket sales in

the U.S. and Canada soared into the billions (Figure 4). The peak in 2009, when America was reeling with the effects of the 2008 economic crisis movie ticket sales reached 1.42 billion. North America seems to have developed a relationship with movies that they now represented an escape from the trials of everyday life.

This perceived change in relationship went hand in hand with innovation and the rise of personal forms of entertainment. The television as a form of entertainment control came first, bringing the stories into our very living rooms. With the invention of recording and playback devices such as the VCR and Betamax people began to take more control of how and when they spent their leisure time.

Television

The official commercial start date for television broadcasting in the United States was in 1941, many years after movie theaters had been established (Steinberg, 1980). In 1950 only 9% of U.S. households had televisions, but by 1951 that percentage had more than doubled to 23.5% (Figure 5). This growth continued at an astounding rate and by the end of the 1950's, 85.9% of American households had a television set. 1978 saw 98% saturation (Steinberg, 1980).

In 1948 there was a limit of 3 channels that could be sent via Community Access Television or Community Antenna Television (CATV) (Selnow and Gilbert, 1993). By the end of the 1950's some markets had as many as 12 channels available.

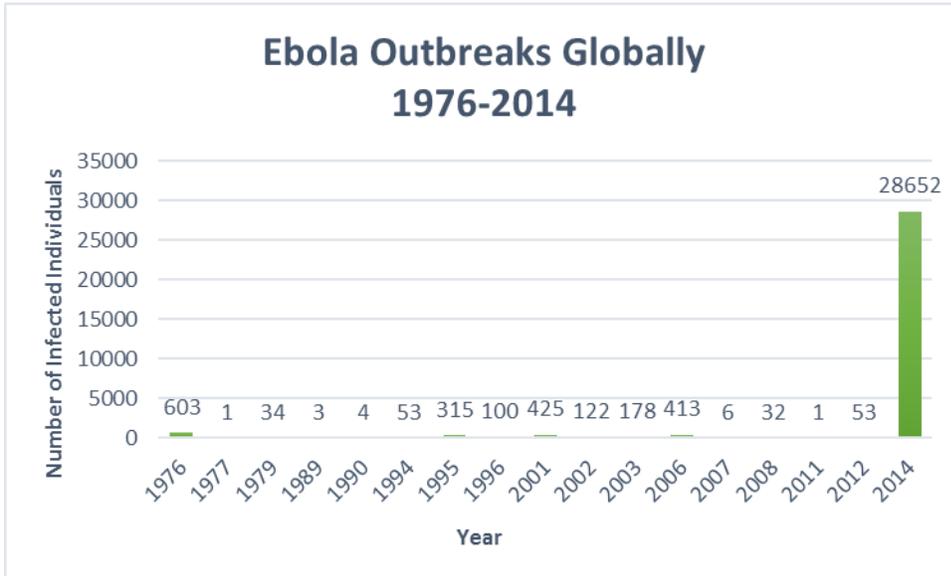
In 1959 television's ubiquity had become a source of derision. The term "idiot box" had entered the American lexicon as a derogatory phrase for the content and the quality of people who watched (2010). This represented a push back of higher forms of entertainment and the lack

of legitimacy afforded to television. Though television represented American mass culture it had not been viewed as a social good (Newman and Levine, 2012).

Today, cable tv is being augmented and replaced by streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime (Figure 6). Netflix has a commanding 53% of the market, according to Strategy Analytics, ahead of Amazon Prime Video (25%) and Hulu (13%) (2016). Many of the texts offered for streaming include network zombie series such as *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010-) and *iZombie* (Ruggiero et.al, 2015-) as well as original content such as Netflix's *Santa Clarita Diet* (Fresco, 2017-) and Hulu's *Freakish* (Szymkowski, 2016-). The changing landscape of entertainment and the public's relationship with it remains a complex puzzle. To maintain their profit margins, television networks have reacted to streaming services by promoting more fantastical texts such as AMC's *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010-) and HBO's *Game of Thrones* (Benioff and Weiss, 2011-).

Movie theaters and television have established themselves as two of the dominant forms through which popular culture is produced and received. "The phrase 'mass culture' usually needs to be understood as an apocalyptic idea, behind which lies a concern for the preservation of civilization as a whole" (Brantlinger, 1983). Zombie texts lend themselves perfectly to this understanding and the content produced was widely dependent on the historical context of the time.

Figure 3



Data Source: CDC

Figure 4

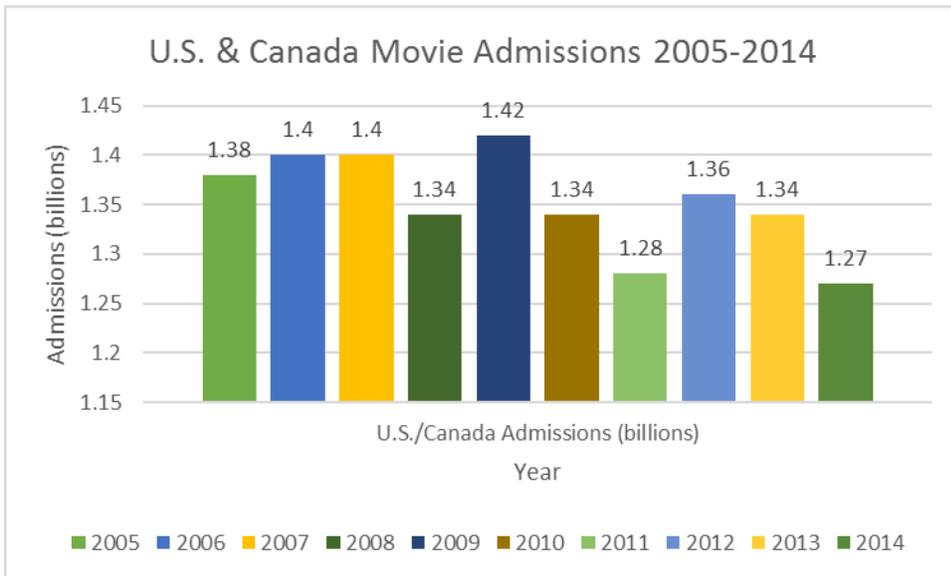


Figure 5

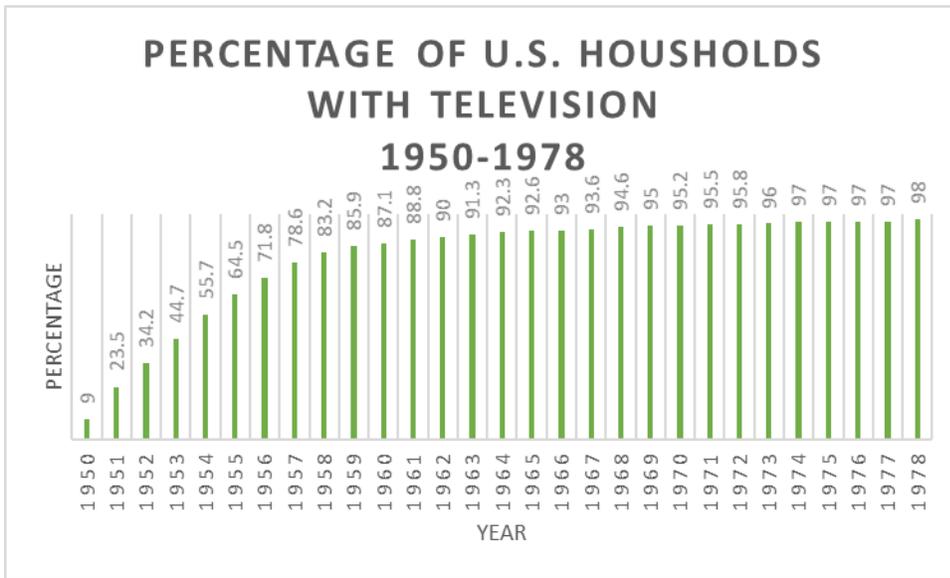


Figure 6

