ABSTRACT

A fascination with the undead has become increasingly present in the collective American conscience, with a clear growth in zombie-related entertainment, literature, and experiential events. Modern American culture is exhibiting a level of zombie popularity which has not been seen since the late 60s and early 70s. While zombie celebrity continues to expand, there is little data to explain its origins or the reasons behind its sudden resurgence in the present day. This study seeks to fill that void through the use of interviews with individuals ranging from laymen only slightly involved in zombie culture to those who have been professionally involved for many years. The study has, in turn, yielded an unusual trend, which links the rise in zombie culture to both macro-oriented events such as war and political and economic unrest and micro-oriented emotions such as personal dissatisfaction with life. A growing perception of society as being too consumer based and homogeneous has also added to and given a counter-cultural flare to this movement, with recent developments in mass media distribution – video games, movies, etc. – granting it a wider and more consistently exposed audience. The larger implications of this seem to be a unique view into the American subconscious, especially during troubling times, where individuals seek an escape from a morbid and disillusioning reality through association with and participation in a morbid unreality.
Introduction

“So do you wanna be a zombie or civilian or what?” asked John Simmons, makeup artist at the Atlanta Zombie Apocalypse. “Zombie,” I replied definitively. “Do you mind if I ask you some questions?” “No problem,” he said. I took out my notebook. “Why do you think zombie culture has been growing so much lately?” I inquired. Instead of hearing a reply to my question, I received Simmons’ own personal zombie apocalypse survival plan. When I attempted to open my mouth and interject, he demanded that I sit still so as not to ruin the wet silicone makeup he had just plastered all over my face. I reluctantly waited until everything had completely dried before posing my question once again.

Zombie culture is sweeping the nation. From literature to movies, the genre has experienced unprecedented growth in recent years. The contemporary obsession over the dead and “undead”, while slightly disconcerting, is nonetheless fascinating. This is especially true in Atlanta, where the influx of haunted houses, zombie parades, and horror film festivals has earned it the nickname “Zombie Capital of the World” (Brown 2011). The last time zombie culture received this level of attention was in the 1960s and 1970s, spurred on by the surprising success of George Romero’s Night of the Living Dead (Laderman 2003). So why is it achieving such widespread popularity once again? This paper seeks to uncover the reasons behind the recent resurgence in zombie culture in the United States.

Methods

In order to explore this issue, numerous interviews were conducted. Interviewees were contacted via online forums, networking, or direct means i.e. email, phone, etc. The interviewees were all Atlanta residents, ranging from college students to those over 50 and possessing various degrees of involvement in the zombie community. They included:

- Haunted house director and actor trainer
- Haunted house actors
- Atlanta Zombie Walk conductor // horror cinema productions director // set worker for the T.V. series The Walking Dead
- Host of zombie movie and T.V. show viewings
- Zombie actor for The Walking Dead
- Several other lay people who considered themselves to be members of the zombie community

The interviewees were asked to discuss how they were introduced to zombie culture, their involvement in the zombie community, and their opinions regarding its popularity. Depending on responses, further questions regarding media, work, and personal experiences were also posed.

In order to fully immerse myself in zombie culture, I volunteered as a zombie actress in the Atlanta Zombie Apocalypse, a local haunted house and apocalyptic survival show.

Note: Some names referred to in this paper have been changed or omitted for privacy reasons.

A Brief History of Zombies

Zombies are creatures of mysticism and superstition. The notion of such beings has been around for hundreds of years, with possible roots in Tibetan folklore (Gothóni 2010) and Haitian Voodoo (Cussans 2004). Literature depicting zombie-like creatures includes classics such as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and Robert Louis Stevenson’s The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The first book introducing the actual term “zombie” into the mainstream American vernacular is cited by Time magazine as being The Magic Island, William Seabrook’s 1929 tale of Haitian “zombis” (Harcourt 1940). With the dawn of the film industry came numerous horror movies influenced by zombie notions, beginning as early as 1932 (Roberts 2006). It was not until 1968, however, that zombies in the modern sense stepped onto the stage with the release of George Romero’s horror movie Night of the Living Dead. The small but wildly successful film was inspired in part by the 1954 fiction I am Legend, written by Richard Matheson (Cornelius 2011). I am Legend, though technically about a group of humans-turned-vampires, is considered to have founded the concept of the “zombie apocalypse” (Clasen 2010). The first T.V. series entirely centered on zombies is The Walking Dead, an AMC series which began filming in Atlanta in 2010 (Porter 2010).

Zombies have infiltrated comic books, music, and...
The first zombie walk was staged in Toronto, Canada, but has since spread to numerous other cities around the world. The walks are commonly associated with fundraisers, film festivals, or political statements. (Colley 2007). Zombie culture is believed to have last peaked in popularity in the 1960s and 1970s (Laderman 2003).

Bringing the Undead to Life

There is no doubt that visual media has played a substantial role in the expansion of zombie culture. White Zombie is widely regarded as the first zombie movie ever made (Roberts 2006). The 1932 film does not portray zombies in the modern sense, however - the zombies more closely follow the traditional Haitian Voodoo interpretation. In this rendering, the undead are slaves with human masters. George Romero’s Night of the Living Dead was the first movie to depict the contemporary image of zombies (Smith 2008).

The movie industry was vital in disseminating zombie culture. The success of Night of the Living Dead spurred Romero to create several sequels and inspired numerous additional zombie movies, increasing the ubiquity of zombie culture (Smith 2008). Recent technological advancements have served to further this trend even more. Easy access to computers, video cameras, and other electronics allows virtually anyone in this day and age to generate a movie. Luke Godfrey is the man behind the The Atlanta Horror Fest, Splatter Cinema, and Gorehound Productions. He also works on the set of The Walking Dead. If anybody knows about zombies, especially in the media, it’s him. According to Godfrey, for those just beginning to get their feet wet in the movie industry, horror is a popular genre of choice:

“I run a horror film festival, and you wouldn’t believe the number of zombie movie submissions we receive. It’s not surprising really, horror is the easiest genre of movies to make. Zombies especially, I mean just slap on a little makeup and you’re done. Plus you don’t need much of a story line, just things to scare the audience. That’s why most movie directors start their careers making horror films.”

All the interviewees acknowledged the recent influx of apocalyptic movies, especially those relating to zombies. The large film database of this particular brand of movie has vastly increased the general population’s exposure to zombie ideas.

The TV industry has also done its part to amplify the infiltration of zombie culture into everyday life. This is especially true in Atlanta, where the filming of shows such as The Walking Dead has made dealing with zombies almost commonplace. Even regular residents of the city are sitting up and taking notice:

“When shows like The Walking Dead start filming here (though I think the real seed for it was Zombieland being shot here first) the people who live here get this awesome sense of involvement. Suddenly it’s all anyone can talk about. You know, “they closed down the interstate because of zombies” is one of the things most people will only ever hear someone legitimately saying in Atlanta. When something so interesting as the undead becomes such a huge talking point its going to become a big deal anywhere.”

This excitement about zombie culture extends...
beyond just a simple fascination with the undead. The expression of such a culture itself is for many people both a source of entertainment and a basis for unification.

The World-Wide Dead

The Internet has also played a critical part in allowing widespread distribution of zombie ideals. All the interviewees admitted to having engaged in some form of online zombie-themed activities, including:

- Watching movies // T.V. shows
- Reading books // blogs // articles
- Writing blogs // articles
- Participating in forums
- Organizing and/or promoting and/or finding out about events

The prominence of the Internet in propagating zombie culture is especially evident in the younger generations who have grown up in the information age. A common talking point amongst these individuals is what one would do if a zombie apocalypse were to actually take place. Several of the interviews I conducted, while beginning with responses to my specific questions, wound up evolving into discussions about personal tactics for escaping, fighting, and defeating zombies. When interviewees were asked why they put so much thought into surviving a zombie apocalypse, one Internet blogger responded:

“My favorite zombie-related game has always been Left 4 Dead, the first game of the series. The premise is that you are one of four survivors – Francis, Bill, Zoey, and Louis. The game is also online-oriented so that you have to deal with real people with all their little idiosyncrasies. It really serves to authenticate the whole experience. On top of that, you can also play on the zombie side, giving you a taste of what it’s like to be one of the undead pitched against the humans. It’s pretty interesting because most people really like to play on the zombie rather than the human side.”

Several others expressed similar feelings of community and solidarity. The rise of the Internet has served to not only make zombie culture more widespread but to bring those interested in zombie culture closer together.

Zombies 360

The first zombie video game was released in 1984. Titled Zombie Zombie, players were dropped into a post-apocalyptic city “overrun with the walking dead” armed with just an air rifle (Shaw 2010). Despite the popularity of this and subsequent games, the video game industry often does not get much credit when it comes to encouraging zombie and apocalyptic ideas. In fact, none of the interviewees initially mentioned utilizing video games as part of their zombie involvement or exposure. It was not until specific questions regarding video games were posed that almost all of them admitted to playing such zombie-related games (Resident Evil being the most popular). Just like the Internet, this trend was especially prevalent in the younger generations who had grown up alongside the rise of the video game industry. One such young adult described his experiences:

“I love thinking about how I would escape, who would I have in my party (no one), what weapons I would use. I think the zombie community embraces these real situations and we are all here to celebrate and collaborate and for just a couple moments bond over it.”

What was perhaps most interesting was this youth’s suggestion that people tend to identify with the zombie more than the human coalition in this digital world. I found similar forms of “zombie-identification” in other aspects of this undead culture.

Zombienomics

During times of economic stress and high levels of economic mistrust, the number of zombie movies have shown growth (Perman 2011). More than one third of those interviewed directly connected their own personal financial situation with the rise in zombie culture, expressing frustration in large part with the current job market. When posed deeper questions as to why this connection exists, however, no one could offer an explanation that was specific to economic hardships. The link between the two was, for the most part, attributed to contemporary American unrest and mentality regarding consumerism, and seems to be generally accepted by those in the zombie community as well as outside economists. In a strange and amusing twist, some economists are even claiming that zombies might help “save the economy”, as the new found popularity of the zombie industry pumps millions of dollars into the economy (Coates 2011). Though this is quite a ludicrous suggestion, it does speak volumes about the value people have assigned to the industry.

Blood, Guts, Gore, and War

It can arguably be stated that the closest thing we have to a zombie apocalypse in this day and age is modern warfare. Once again, technology takes the spotlight as being one of the foremost proponents for augmenting access to information about current affairs, including war. Bringing
this back to the topic at hand, it’s been shown that, in the past, the number of zombie movies released spikes in the years following war (Newitz 2008). Why might this be?

Recent technological advances have made exposure to war and gore more widespread than ever.

Technological developments have allowed everyday people to be transported via photo, and especially video, into once inacessible situations such as war. Such experiences have had the effect of making war “more real” for those not actively participating in or residing near areas being ravaged by war. With the average American’s increased awareness of the carnage of war came a rise in violent movies displaying such carnage. According to Godfrey:

“The last time zombie culture was this big was during the Vietnam war. It was around the time Night of the Living Dead was released. Images of the war had begun to surface and gore was present in our lives like it never was before. People were being exposed to it in enormous levels. Some of the things people were being shown were simply terrifying.”

It’s no secret that media outlets have become gorier than ever nowadays. This exposure is one reason so many have embraced the zombie culture with open arms, especially in the period during and following a war. Seeing someone bloodily taken down by an army is no longer a foreign concept but one that even those of who don’t grow up in a war-torn environment can relate to. The Vietnam War was particularly influential due to the social unrest sweeping the nation at that time - “major protests...the tragic killing of student protesters at Kent State University” (Laderman 2003). In recent years, the culprit seems to be the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the war in Iraq (Newitz 2008). In fact, Jonathan Maberry, a well-known zombie fiction writer, claimed that, “50 percent of all zombie movies were made after [the terrorist attacks of] 9/11” (La Salle 2011). This number is of course an estimate, but the enormous number of zombie movies being released in recent years is a fact that cannot be denied.

Pick Your Poison

From sudden viral outbreaks to political instability, it seems everything in our world has the potential to kill us. Everyday life has always held undercurrents of this impending sense of doom, but the national and worldwide unrest of late has brought these emotions to the forefront. One zombie actor jokingly said:

“If the world was going to end I would prefer it be a Zombie apocalypse versus global warming, nuclear fallout, meteor, etc... At least you have the opportunity to fight back!”

Such effects illustrate the helplessness many citizens feel about the current state of affairs. If someone were to launch a nuclear missile in your direction tomorrow, there would be little you could do about it. But a zombie apocalypse is different. It’s every man for himself. If you have a plan, you can retaliate as you see fit, and you don’t need to depend on higher-ups. As one interviewee put it:

“Zombies aren’t just for hipsters. Even the conservatives like zombies. I know it sounds strange but it’s true. Because they know they can get out their weapons and defend themselves and no one can tell them otherwise. Even if they do think the idea of an actual zombie apocalypse is silly, it’s something that they can identify with.”

Zombies provide us with a lovable villain to hate. In the wake of what often feels like certain calamity, they ironically provide us with a stable source of hope.

Riding the Wave

It is important to note that zombies are not the only villains present in popular culture. Matthew Clover, a haunted house actor and manager, acknowledges the considerable role zombies currently play within the horror genre, but also recognizes a bigger trend sweeping the nation:

“It’s not just zombies, but the supernatural. Period. Look around, it really is everywhere now. You’ve got vampires and werewolves in every other book and T.V. show, there’s like seven Frankenstein flicks being made, The Walking Dead is the most popular show on T.V., etc... You can’t avoid it, and when it’s so out there the people who were already into it but not talking about it are going to come out of the woodwork on top of the new fans it gathers.”

To an extent, zombies are simply riding the wave of the mainstream horror obsession. Vampires are zombies’ usual competitors, and have gained celebrity due to the recent inundation of vampire literature (Meloni 2007). Regardless, almost every interviewee, including those who were involved with the whole horror genre and not just zombies specifically, was adamant that there was something intrinsically distinct about zombies. When asked what this was, their answers, while
Zombies are not the only ones enjoying the spotlight - vampire literature has also seen a steep rise in popularity during recent years. "We are all zombies of some sort..."

Late one Saturday night, I found myself sitting across the table from Luke Godfrey, one of the most well known individuals in the Atlanta zombie community. As I fiercely bounced questions at him, I had the growing feeling that I was repeating myself, going around in circles. I think he sensed it too. He stopped me, saying, “Amanda, let me ask you a question.” I waited. “Why do zombies go to the same places over and over again?” Not sure if this was a trick question, I chose not to reply. “Because they’re mindless drones”, he answered. “They go to the same places over and over from force of habit.” I nodded. “Now,” he continued, “why do you go to work every day? Why do you always pay your bills on the first of the month? Why do you stop at the same coffee shop every morning to buy the same thing? And why are so many people content to remain trapped in the same old routine, even when they realize that they aren’t happy?”

Godfrey was trying to express a fundamental truth about zombies - we can easily relate to them. This is true now more than ever. Political unrest in the world is growing, and with it, our feelings of helplessness. Economic distress and an inability to conquer our dependence on consumerism have resulted in general annoyance with our monotonous lives. And, of course, the infiltration of the media into our everyday lives has allowed zombie ideas that feed off these factors to grow and spread. People are simultaneously embracing zombie culture while fearing the implications of the answers to the questions it raises about our lives. “We are all zombies of some sort,” Simmons sighed, finally answering me. “That’s why we’re so entranced by them. The government or whoever is in charge can take, give, do what it wants, and at the end of the day, what can we really do about it? We’ll just go on living our lives. Mindlessly. Like zombies.”

“Oh the ... Humanity?”

So what makes zombies so fundamentally different from other horror creatures? Knowing the origins of zombie folklore demonstrates just how much the culture has evolved since it first entered the United States. It is no longer steeped in mysticism or restricted to a spiritual realm. As one zombie movie viewing host said:

“Now I think movies and zombie culture has developed into something different, the movies are more human driven and it’s more about the humanity of the situation. ‘What if this happened and what would you do to survive, are these people, are they monsters?’ It takes something and puts it in terms we can all relate to which is why we love it so much.”

Zombies, as we understand them today, parallel us and represent us. We fear zombies because we are afraid of becoming like them. While these concerns are always present, they become even more prominent during times of war and economic hardships, when our eyes are opened to bloody destruction and our dependence on consumerism. We are scared of undergoing that transformation or, worse, realizing that we have already become “monsters”. In addition, zombies challenge us to consider what it means to be human and what it means to be dead, a topic which we tend to shy away from.

Amanda Fernandes is a senior double-majoring in Anthropology & Human Biology and Neuroscience & Behavioral Biology. She is President of the Emory Neuroscience Association and a long-time participant of Volunteer Emory. Her research interests include ancient art and literature, the Mediterranean, and cultural beauty/fashion. Her hobbies include sewing, swing dancing, and writing mystery novels. After graduation, Amanda plans to travel, work, and eventually pursue a career as an archaeologist.
References