Fear Rises from the Dead:
A Sociological Analysis of Contemporary Zombie Films as Mirrors of Social Fears

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores three contemporary zombie films, *28 Days Later* (2002), *Land of the Dead* (2005), and *Zombieland* (2009), released between the years 2000 and 2010, and provides a sociological analysis of the fears in the films and their relation to the social fears present in North American society during that time period.

What we consume in entertainment is directly related to what we believe, fear, and love in our current social existence. Thus, this paper argues that the rise in popularity of zombie films, and zombies in general, is directly connected to our fears and anxieties as a culture, and that the decade 2000-2010 was one of particularly heightened social fears and apocalyptic anxieties. The theories used in this research demonstrate the cycle where our cultural beliefs and values inform our daily fears and understandings of the world, which are then represented in our entertainment and re-interpreted in our consumption of it. The films are dissected using the theories of film critic Sigfried Kracauer, political economist C.B. MacPherson, and film theorist Kirsten Moana Thompson and a process of qualitative content analysis to identify, analyze, and connect the fears in the films with those in the social climate of the decade studied. This paper argues that the drastic increase in popularity of the zombie at the turn of the millennium directly reflects major fears in the decade: of pandemics, of untrustworthy authority, and of the total collapse of social order. We need to pay special attention to our forms of entertainment, as they speak volumes about the social climate in any particular epoch in our history. We may use what we learn in future research and social analysis.

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DEDICATION

For the writers:

Stop whispering, start shouting. Tear it down. Stay loud.

And for Dori:

You matter.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction: 2000-2010 - A Decade of Dread

Recently, a friend sent me a link to a website with a map of the world. You enter in your address, and the website provides you with an up-to-date list of emergency services, shelters, and locations to procure food and survival gear. This is not so one may be prepared for a natural disaster or terrorist attack. This is specifically to survive the coming zombie apocalypse. Indeed, even the Centre for Disease Control in the United States has sent out news releases on how to prepare for a zombie outbreak (CDC, 2012). Tongue and cheek though it may be, the underlying fascination is the same. Zombies are everywhere.

And yet, how did an obscure monster rooted in Haitian mythology and depicted in black and white horror films, stumble its way into the mass consciousness of today's popular culture? And further, why do zombies, and the threat of social collapse they bring with them, continue to appear in every corner of our culture: in movies, television, books, graphic novels, clothing, children's toys and even government-funded organizations such as the CDC? At the time of writing, the television show *The Walking Dead* on cable network AMC, the first ever prime time television show dealing exclusively with life after a zombie plague has infected America, is pulling in ratings that rival those of more traditional prime time sitcoms. The sheer number of zombie-related products is overwhelming, and the consumption of these products shows no signs of slowing down. What is it about these mindless, cannibalistic monsters that demands our attention?

While some might write off zombies as a mere entertainment fad, our love affair with the undead is in fact related directly to the social environment in which we live, and

in particular to the social fears and anxieties we experience as a society. Indeed, the last ten years has seen more zombie films made than in any other decade since their introduction to North American society. But perhaps what draws our attention to these films is not so much the zombies, but the situations the zombies create – the total collapse of our society and way of life. It is nearly impossible for the audience not to put themselves in that scenario, and to relate their own fears through the experience of film. And this is the key connection between our current social culture of fear, and the increasing number of zombies that invades every facet of popular culture. The importance of film in our society should not be overlooked, as an analysis of our connection to popular culture and the entertainment industry is imperative in understanding our current social climate. What we consume in entertainment is directly related to what we believe, fear, and love in our current existence. Thus, the rise in popularity of zombie films, and zombies in general, is directly connected to our fears and anxieties as a culture. No strangers to the spotlight, zombies have gone through waves of popularity in the past, and frequently appeared in popular culture at times of social upheaval and fear. The past decade, 2000-2010, was a particularly anxiety-ridden decade, and one which saw a massive outpouring of zombie films and general increase in popularity of the undead monster [1]. I argue that the connection between the rise in public consciousness of the zombie during that particular time period can be directly linked to the extreme levels of social fear and anxiety felt by North American society.

These complex and layered issues are explored here in an examination of three zombie films from the last decade: *28 Days Later* (2002), *Land of the Dead* (2005), and

[1] See chart on p.34 in *Ch. 3 – Finding the Fear: Methods of qualitative film analysis*

Zombieland (2009). The films are examined from a social perspective, connecting the fears within the films to the larger fears faced by North American society during that time period. To understand the prevalence of zombies, however, first one must understand the power of fear in a social environment, and why 2000-2010 was a particularly fearful decade.

1.1 Understanding Fear: Why 2000-2012?

"No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear."

Edmund Burke (1756)

Fear is not a new social phenomenon. Anxiety and dread present themselves whenever individuals and communities are faced with threats to their livelihood, their families, and their survival. Fear in itself is not a new area of study, but when one seeks out the sources of fear in a cultural setting, mixed with historical and social factors and reactions of a particular era, a truly unique area of research presents itself. Indeed, for this research, it was the most recent past of North American history that echoed so heavily with social fear and dread.

This is not a shocking statement to anyone who has lived through the past decade. We live in a time when everything, from disasters to local crime sprees to global pandemics, is presented to us through the media as signs of impending chaos, and perhaps total destruction. As terrified as we are of these looming threats, we are also curious. Could we survive? How would we? And how do we protect ourselves against

these growing threats to our survival? Strangely ironic, this growing sense of cultural dread exists in a society that has, in fact, never been safer. Yet, our fear of "worst-case scenarios" has also never been greater (Siegel, 2005:15). Altheide and Michalowski (1999:479) agree, noting, "Indeed, many observers have wondered how it is possible for a comparatively healthy and safe population to perceive themselves to be so at risk."

The fear of constant risks is thanks in no small part to a culture that is dependent on entertainment as both sources of leisure activity and of daily news, particularly when both are big business. Perhaps the key difference between our most recent past and generations before is our response to perceived threats to ourselves and our society. As Altheide and Michalowski (1999:481) note, "Fear has become a staple of popular culture, ranging from fun to dread. Americans trade on fear. News agencies report it, produce entertainment messages (other than news), and promote it; police and other formal agencies of social control market it. And audiences watch it, read it, and according to numerous mass entertainment spokespersons, demand it." They argue that fear becomes attached to various issues and topics in the public realm, and continues to travel through these discussions, in whatever medium, over time (491), a relatively easy feat when current technology allows information to reach mass audiences on a global level faster than any other time in recorded history (Altheide and Michalowski, 1999:491).

The consequences of this instant dissemination of information are frequently related to how quickly the information can be used not only to cause anxiety, but also to control those feeling the terror. Siegel (2005:146) argues the constant threat of impending chaos is used to further political ambitions, stating, "Make people afraid, make people

feel they need you to protect them, and they allow you free rein with your agenda." This is echoed by Altheide and Michalowski (1999:500), who note,

> Words are powerful when they become symbolic frames that direct discursive practices. In an era when information is packaged and manufactured, when popular culture is driven by entertainment formats, and when agents work to transform risks into fear with state-sponsored solutions, the social and the cultural are one. Fear is constructed and it is real. The entertainment inspired frame is embodied in the emotions and justice of everyday life.

This also harkens back to Montesquieu (1794:25) who wrote that despotism, the most reviled form of government, arises from an insufficient division of power in government. In times of elevated social fears, such as in the post-9/11 era, the American government weakened the division of powers set out in its treaties, agreements, and constitution, allowing it to react unilaterally, and against the rights of its own citizens in the interest of national security. The palpable fear in North America immediately following 9/11 enabled the US government to behave despotically on its own soil, engaging in wars and counter-terrorism, acts that, in times of peace, would have seemed totally irrational. Montesquieu claims that despotism arises from our collective fear of the unknown. Fears of the apocalypse, social collapse, viral outbreak, and terrorism, then, cause us to place our faith in our leaders, a faith approaching religious fervor in some cases. Only they can conquer our fears, in exchange for the power to rule and the trust of the citizenry. The 2000s were fraught with economic, political, and social turmoil. A situation that elevated social anxieties and enabled governments to take drastic and extreme measures that would have otherwise been politically suicidal. In the climate of the day, however, fear and anxiety gave rise to consent.

This is ironic, notes Glassner (1999:xviii), as many serious problems in North America are social issues that remain relatively ignored, regardless of the part they play in the more widely recognized public fears, such as poverty, which "correlates strongly with child abuse, crime and drug abuse." Thus, fear becomes an emotionally-driven, cultural response to social events, and one which runs deeply through the core of our understanding of the world in which we live.

The decade 2000-2010 stands out as a particularly notable decade, not simply for the increase in fear and anxiety in North American society, but also for the sheer number of disasters that led to such social emotions. The decade, which began with the fear of the Y2K bug, and was quickly defined by the attacks of September 11, 2001, did not improve as the years went on. Global pandemic threats of SARS and the H1N1 flu virus, the devastation from Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the social and political implications which followed, international disasters such as the Boxing Day Tsunami in 2004, which affected much of South Asia, a growing unease with military occupation in Iraq and the 'War on Terror,' a growing social divide over social values such as gay marriage, and the massive financial collapse of 2008 all contributed to constant unease and anxiety in the public sphere. As Sewer (2009:30) notes, "Bookended by 9/11 at the start and a financial wipeout at the end, the first 10 years of this century will likely go down as the most dispiriting and disillusioning decade Americans have lived through in the post-World War II era." Glassner (1999:xxvi) notes the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas who found that while every society faces different risks, and differing interpretations of those risks, the particular dangers seen as most threatening in a society are chosen because they either "offend the basic moral principles of the society or because they enable criticism of

disliked groups and institutions." Thus, terror attacks by foreign invaders, the collapse of the institution of the family by the movement to legalize gay marriage, or the overall collapse of the economic market are just evidence of the validity of Douglas' theory in the last decade.

But what happens if any of these catastrophes come to pass? Will we survive? And if we do survive all of these catastrophes, would our existence have a point? These thoughts, curious as they are, are also terrifying. Some social theorists contend that film offers a relatively safe venue in which to explore these fears. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow (2010:12) argues, "Fantasy serves as a controlled space in which to contemplate the worst, to experience the accompanying emotions, and then return to the comforting routine of ordinary life." We go with friends, we eat junk food, and escape for a couple of hours into a make-believe world. We might understand the implied analogy to our daily lives, and perhaps even learn a lesson or two. But upon our exit, we are free to walk away from the experience and the thoughts it presented, if we so choose. Perhaps this is what makes apocalyptic themes in film so appealing. They suggest a devastated world, one that we are fearful of every day, but have not yet had to experience. We may emotionally experience a myriad of possibilities attendant upon such a social collapse while viewing a movie, but we are left to our own devices once we exit the theatre. But fear is a powerful emotion, and our film experience may force us to ask further questions when faced with real peril in our daily lives. Indeed, notes Wuthnow (2010:2) "We imagine the worst – death, the death of our children, the destruction of our way of life. Would we be able to withstand the suffering? Would our cherished institutions fail? Would chaos erupt?" Certainly not every film makes us consider these

questions, but one genre of film continues to have an emotional impact on North American film audiences, and how they consider the world in which they live. Indeed, no film truly showcases the sheer chaos of total social collapse and a terrifying, monstrous threat to our very existence quite like the zombie movie.

1.2 The Power of the Undead: Zombies as the Ultimate Social Monster

"Horror stories, whether about vampires, ghouls, or flesh-eating zombies, always seem to reflect some aspect of the tellers' own social lives, some terrifying potential, in the way they are accustomed to interact with each other, that they do not wish to acknowledge or confront, but also cannot help but talk about."

David Graeber (2011)

Why are zombies so interesting? Zombies are surprisingly complicated creatures. They have the innate ability to embody so much within a film, while also providing nothing more than a backdrop for the living to face their fears. Indeed, note Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry (2008:86) authors of "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism," the zombie is everywhere, and as such "The ubiquity of the metaphor suggests the zombie's continued cultural currency." Zombies have a long history in North American popular culture of scaring their audiences while simultaneously carrying with them fears relevant to the time period in which they appeared on screen. Though not every zombie film has made social commentary its main objective, the waves in zombie popularity overall point to a particular connection between the monsters and the audiences of that time. Zombies have continued to remain relevant, as they also seem to bring out the most powerful cultural insecurities of any

given moment, as Glassner (1999:208) notes: "The success of a scare depends not only on how well it is expressed but also … on how well it expresses deeper cultural anxieties."

The past decade is not the only time the zombie has been a star in popular culture. In 1929 writer and adventurer William Seabrook published *The Magic Island*, a detailed account of his adventures and experiences in Haiti. Among other things, Seabrook's book became a national bestseller, telling tales of his explorations in Haiti, and specifically detailing stories of voodoo and zombies (Pulliam, 2010: 2).While this was not the first entry of the zombie into North American culture, it was certainly the most powerful. But America was ready for monsters. Roaring successes of film adaptations of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* indicated the public's desire to visit more monsters in their entertainment (Russell, 2006:19). When 1932's *White Zombie* hit the screens, starring horror icon Bela Lugosi, the impact was ferocious, and its success spawned countless zombie films in its wake. But it was not simply the introduction of a new monster that caused such interest from the American public. Indeed, the story, which took place in Haiti and featured Lugosi as a mad doctor character who keeps zombie slaves working on his plantation, had powerful connections to the changing tides in American society. As Russell notes,

> The American horror boom of the 1930s was, as so many film historians have pointed out, intimately tied to the economic bust of 29 October 1929 when the Wall Street crash wiped millions of dollars off US share prices in the space of just a few hours. If the international effects of the dollar's sudden collapse were spectacular, the domestic upheaval it produced was devastating. Millions of ordinary Americans found themselves unemployed and queuing in the breadlines as their savings and investments were wiped out overnight. The Roaring Twenties had roared themselves hoarse and the economic hangover that followed would

bring nothing but misery and destitution (2006:22).

Thus, a monster suddenly appeared who bore a striking resemblance to those shuffling along the streets of America in soup lines, what Russell (2006:23) calls "an economic zombification of terrifying proportions." This new monster also resonated with racial and political tensions related to US-military occupied Haiti, as the kidnapping of the white character of Madeleine and the presentation of a backwards nation full of exotic, primitive people ruled by atavistic religions and beliefs spoke to the ongoing fascination and terror the American public had with Haiti (Russell, 2006:24).

Seabrook's work thrust the zombie into the popular culture limelight, and the zombie has continued to shine and fade, in different forms, ever since. Their most prominent revival came during the Cold War era with fears of invading Communists and mutant monsters hitting the movie screens in big hits such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *It Came From Beneath the Sea* (1955). In 1968, George A. Romero released what would become the quintessential zombie film, *Night of the Living Dead*. While not entirely original, Romero's film popularized many new zombie mythologies, such as killing them by destroying the brain, and portraying them as cannibalistic monsters (McIntosh, 2008:8, 9). As Russell (2006:69, 71) notes, "Romero's debut pulled no punches in its representation of a nation falling apart on every level." Indeed, in the midst of a growing discontent with the war in Vietnam, and rife with themes of lack of faith in authority structures, and the collapse of the family and vivid confrontations of 'us vs. them,' Romero tapped into a culture that was questioning its motives, actions, and future direction.

While the zombie evolved in many forms, and in other cultures, as an important horror staple in countless B horror films, it once again became the centre of attention before the turn of the new millennium. The release of the video game *Resident Evil* in 1996 spawned a massive resurgence of zombie popularity and the new genre of "survival horror" was quickly born, including not only video games, but also the zombie films which almost immediately followed, including a franchise of movie adaptations of the video game itself (Russell, 2006:171). Richard Hand (2004:117) defined the element of survival horror in these new games as one in which "the players lead an individual character through an uncanny narrative and hostile environment where the odds are weighed decidedly against the avatar." This revival in the zombie's popularity, however, became much more than simply a demand for a new style of gaming experience. The Umbrella Corporation is the evil at the centre of the *Resident Evil* universe, harkening back to Romero's critical social commentary in his first three *Dead* films. This time, a conglomerate pharmaceutical company, with connections to the military industrial complex and biological warfare, is the all-powerful enemy (Hand, 2004:130). This theme of mistrust of military expenditures by government-funded corporations is a prominent one in many horror and disaster films of the last decade, particularly zombie movies, only one of many social anxieties that became major themes in zombie films between 2000 and 2010.

The zombie's emergence in this decade echoes its popularity in times past, always present in eras full of social anxiety and fearful events. As these events challenged the structured existence of society, so too did the zombie represent a sharp challenge to the

order of the world, a monster which, like all good monsters, was a disturbance "of the natural order" (Carroll, 1987:52).

This new era of zombie popularity has been delineated in the preceding chapter. Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical considerations of the project, and the three theories used in combination with the film analysis to provide social context to the findings. The theories studied are Siegfried Kracauer's discussion of film as representative of social environments, C.B. MacPherson's theory of possessive individualism, and finally Kirsten Moana Thompson's concept of millennial dread. Chapter 3 contains the methodological discussion of how the films were selected, analyzed, and dissected within the theoretical outlined. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 discuss the films in depth: *28 Days Later*, *Land of the Dead*, and *Zombieland*, respectively. Finally, Chapter 7 provides concluding thoughts and discussion on the connection between our fears and the walking dead, arguing that the popularity of these modern zombie films is not a fluke, but rather an intricate response by North American mainstream popular culture, reflecting our current climate of fear and social anxiety. As Russell (2006:192) muses,

> The spectre of several millennial anxieties from SARS to terrorism, hangs over many of these films. The fact that the redux version of *Dawn of the Dead* concentrates on a group of heroes led by emergency service workers – a nurse, a policeman, and (at a push) a couple of security guards – seems rather significant in the post-9/11 world, as does most of the recent zombie films' interest in viral outbreaks and diseases. As the West braces itself for another terrorist 'spectacular,' could the zombie be read as a response to our current anxieties about this increasingly dangerous world?

Chapter 2 - *"It's only a movie…"*: Understanding the Theoretical Connection between Film and Society

Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland (2002:4,5) note that the process of studying films is aided by using theories to analyze them as it provides a deeper level of interpretation: "The aim of theory is to construct different conceptual perspectives on a film, each informed by a specific set of values. A biased or value-laden theory not only is inescapable, but is also the condition of knowledge, and of applying methods that guide analysis." Thus, certain aspects of the film become visible through a particular theoretical perspective. While certain film theorists, such as Elsaesser and Buckland, do provide a useful starting point for framing the medium within a social context, they do not offer the lens of social and political thought that guides the in-depth social examination needed for this research. The films are subjected to qualitative content analysis, using three theoretical orientations to guide the research questions. Each theory is first explored to determine its separate contribution to the analysis. Subsequently the theories are integrated in an effort to combine their separate insights to enhance the research undertaken here.

2.1 Understanding film as representative of our social environment – Siegfried Kracauer

Film has been analyzed and dissected in its many forms by theorists in many disciplines of study. Imager, language and subtext, all these and more have been deconstructed in some way to explain the inner power which cinema seems to hold over

our imaginations. The medium has also been interpreted from an outside perspective, analyzed as a commodity and a business which both defines and is defined by the rules of the economic institutions it inhabits (Casetti, 1999:114-5). But perhaps most important to this study is the way in which film has been examined as a representative of the social environment which surrounds it, reflecting fears, joys, fantasies, and often social and political ideological positions. As film theorist Sigfried Kracauer (2004:5,6) argues:

> The films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than other artistic media for two reasons: First, films are never the product of an individual… second, films address themselves, and appeal, to the anonymous multitude. Popular films – or, to be more precise, popular screen motifs – can therefore be supposed to satisfy existing mass desires…To be sure, American audiences receive what Hollywood wants them to want; but in the long run public desires determine the nature of Hollywood films.

This appears to be a concise, and perhaps simplistic statement, as no system as intricately connected to our lives as the entertainment world can ever be summed up so succinctly. Kracauer's theory, however, stands on firm ground upon further analysis. Film theorist Francesco Casetti (1999:125, author's emphasis) agrees that the film process is of a *collective* nature, making the art a "*social testimony.*" Films involve many minds and social experiences, coming together to write, direct, act, and ultimately create a form of art that involves many different interpretations of an idea, interpretations which are all affected by the social experiences of those creating the product. Kracauer also does not specifically speak of a "fixed" identity or mentality of a nation, but instead focuses on what he refers to as the "collective dispositions" – beliefs, ideas, social understandings that exist within a nation (or, for the purposes of this study, a social environment such as

North America, or the Western entertainment world) during a particular era. Kracauer focused his study on the social and political development of Germany as reflected through the nation's films, arguing that the "fears and hopes" of a people, and the choices which they will subsequently make within their society based on these emotions, may be seen and understood through such entertainment (Kracauer, 2004:8). His assertions are both timely and relevant in our current social climate, and to this study.

Kracauer (2004:5-7) argues that while many aspects of popular entertainment, such as best-selling books or magazines, reflect deeper layers of a culture's collective consciousness, layers that reflect "psychological dispositions" rather than explicitly stated beliefs, the very process of creation and presentation of film provides for an all-encompassing inclusiveness, and thus a more overt path into a population's consciousness. He explains that the reason for film's ability to reflect commonly held social ideas is that in its production, it "suppress[es] individual peculiarities in favor of traits common to many people," as a function of the collective nature of the filmmaking process. The viewer observes and identifies with the "visible hieroglyphs," cues and hints of human social experiences in screen interactions that are often invisible in our daily lives, but are displayed on film as a telling example of social characteristics of the culture in which the film was created. This example of social life, then, places the expanse and far-reaching horizon of film in the position of a culture's unconscious (Casetti, 1999:125).

Kracauer's theory can be criticized, however, since his examination of the connection between historical events and social themes as reflected by film may seem simplistic in nature, as noted by Casetti (1999:127). Kracauer has been criticized for

separating the concept of film as reflection of the social from other aspects of film theory, particularly that of film as a machine which runs according to certain rules, aesthetic criteria of a particular period, or the process of production, and a certain outcome (financial success). Here, then, the assumption becomes that perhaps Kracauer's theory is incomplete, since it does not fully examine the wider "organism" of the institution of film (Casetti, 1999:131).

While one can certainly see the validity of this criticism, it is also possible to argue that "outside" elements, such as economic and aesthetic features, may also in themselves be reflections of the social period of a film, depending on what themes are popular, or how the economic environment may affect the public's ability to go to the movies in the first place, or which films are chosen for production in an expensive business. Kracauer's presentation of film as a method through which to examine society is an invitation for social scientists to explore their own culture in a new way. Indeed, it is the simplicity of Kracauer's theory that allows for much opportunity and depth of exploration when diving into social film analysis. Simply stated, "[Film] is a mirror of society, ready to reflect its most secret components and its subtlest tensions" (Casetti, 1999:127). And this main theme of Kracauer's theory is one of the guiding focal points for the theoretical parameters of this present work.

2.2 A Culture of Fear – C.B. MacPherson

Where did our process of fear, as a society, begin? How does fear continue to motivate our actions today? Much has been written on the fear of crime, increased security measures, terrorist threat levels, and the general xenophobic atmosphere that

exists within North American culture. But can we effectively define the root from which these feelings stem? As complex as this subject may be, an approach examining our roots of fear through systems which most intimately teach us social values should be considered. For this, C.B. MacPherson and his concept of possessive individualism proves useful[2].

MacPherson considers how certain views on property and ownership have come to shape the ideology of individualism. Individuals are owners of their own skills, and subsequently of that which they have acquired through using those skills. The possessive aspect of this theory, then, comes from the view of individuals not only as owners of their skills, but also as those who do not owe the society for them: "The human essence is freedom from dependence, on the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession"(MacPherson, 1962:3). Freedom and independence, then, are directly related to one's being an individual in control and in charge of one's own skills, and subsequently one's success. Thus, this concept of ownership "….draws upon an understanding of property as private and exclusive, entailing the right of owners to exclude others and to use or dispose of their property as they choose" (Carens, 1993:2). MacPherson argues that possessive individualism rejects a focus on any other purpose in an individual's life other than consumption. And, in the Marxian tradition, he argues that such a process of existence naturally excludes those who cannot sell enough of their labour to acquire property beyond their skills (3). Thus, our economic system encourages competition and individual focus on acquisition as the path to purpose and fulfillment, a

[2] For the initial idea to use MacPherson's work, I must credit Evan V. McIntyre (2008) and his excellent MA thesis, *Vicious Strangers: Television, Ideology and the Discourse of Fear.* Regina, SK: University of Regina.

value system deeply entrenched in the roots of our modern society. Consider just how deeply these values of competition and individual success run in our social environment. We first learn to separate ourselves from others through our earliest socialization process, particularly through structures that are based on competition. Our education system is arguably the most influential tool of socialization, enforcing social values in all citizens, particularly the values that match and support a competitive, capitalist economy.

If we value competition over solidarity, and so through our very socialization learn to challenge others for our "rightful" place (whatever we consider to be a rightful place for ourselves), then we learn to see all our fellow citizens as the complete opposite of that: competitors and potential threats in every regard. Indeed, as Marx noted: "The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life" (1913:11). Through this process, we learn to function solely as an individual, not as a member of a community. Separation and fragmentation occurs within society, setting the stage for isolation, suspicion, and of course, fear. It becomes natural to fear others, both in our daily lives, and the ultimate Other is the individual or group which is posited to be in direct competition to, and hence threatening, our own happiness.

Lauro and Embry (2008:88,89) present an explanation for the zombie as an enduring social monster, and frightening purveyor of basic human fears, which also provides an effective example of MacPherson's theory in connection to zombies and their representation of social fears. Lauro and Embry make the connection between the psychological and the social world, noting that we feel most afraid when we are threatened by something outside of ourselves, that in the world which we cannot control

such as pandemics or war, or collapsing social institutions which create chaos and disaster. However, they also argue that the true fear embodied by zombies is of losing one's self, both in the sense of our individuality and also in the very permanent sense of our mortality. The zombie, then, physically embodies our fear of death (a returned corpse come to destroy us), but does so while lacking a consciousness, a self. Thus, the individualism into which we are so thoroughly socialized, and which becomes so fiercely protected and ingrained in us through our capitalist culture, as the theory of possessive individualism suggests, is confronted by a monster which threatens to remove our ability to compete and succeed above all others. This loss of individualism, note Lauro and Embry, is what makes the threat of the zombie so terrifying, the "fear that one will, in losing one's consciousness, become a part of the monstrous horde."

Capitalism has always been a source of conflict and instability, but in this past decade, when the volatility of a fiercely competitive market led to economic crisis mixed with continual social and political upheaval, these concepts became firmly sealed in the popular unconsciousness. Though the financial collapse in the United States in 2008 came as a terrifying shock for millions of Americans, many financial analysts saw the repercussions of the country's increasingly unstable economic system approaching long before it happened. According to economist Elizabeth Warren, by 2001 the conventional idea that those filing for bankruptcy are the over-spenders and poor creditors, or the "chronically poor," was no longer overwhelmingly true (if it ever was). Instead, the new bankrupt class was composed of middle-class families, "average Americans," a cross section of those who uphold and strive to adhere to social norms, values and expectations. Indeed, notes Warren (2002:118), "they are our nearby neighbours."

The concept of neighbours, of 'everyday, good American citizens,' is one that carries significant importance, particular when evaluating the overall culture of fear in a society. Much of American popular culture is dominated by the long held myth of middle America and its good citizens, who have worked hard, paid their debts, and lived the quintessential American dream of having a home, a job, and a family. As Warren notes, homeowners in particular are "widely regarded as the solid core of any community, the people who can be counted on to pay taxes, vote, pick up litter, and support schools." Thus, these citizens play the social role of core community members, adhering to standards and expectations that signal "solid middle-class values and accomplishments"(Warren, 2002:137,143). What happens when they lose their jobs, and subsequently their homes?

This image of the normal, happy, middle-class American citizen is one always seen as safe and desirable, truly the American dream fulfilled. But as millions of Americans found out near the end of the decade, when the bottom drops out, when you go bankrupt, you lose your place as a member of society. You are not a consumer, you are not a homeowner, you have no job. You are reduced to nothing more than a human being fighting to survive. The drive to compete in the work force has now gone beyond satisfying the desire for material consumption. It is now a matter of basic survival. In such an environment, all you have left to sell is your labour, but with a collapsing economy, your labour may no longer be needed. After all, as film writer Mervyn Nicholson (2011: 44) notes, the job of capital is to create an environment of fear and fierce competition.

> [C]apital will go to any lengths to get what it wants, and cares nothing about the suffering of the working class upon which it feeds. When unimpeded by democratic hindrances, capital commits cruelties that amount to unspeakable and terrifying atrocities: a fact regularly ignored. Indeed, capital and its media encourage fear, especially fear that divides the working class and pits one group against another – and against nature itself.

Though the effects of a competitive, capitalist system have long been studied and understood throughout history, it is the combination of this decade's particular cocktail of social trauma, massive financial collapse, and subsequent devastation of the lives of those considered to be middle-class America, that makes MacPherson's concept of particular relevance. Competition for survival comes hand in hand with such a market, as Nicholson (2011:44) notes, as "…finding ways to keep people separated from each other and thinking crazy thoughts is a full-time responsibility for capital." For those whose lives were devastated by the financial crash, and the other far-reaching events of the decade, daily survival became more important than ever. The fight to survive in a bleak future in so many of the decade's zombie films, then, must have begun in many ways to seem less fictional, and far more realistic to many.

With this theoretical framework in mind, we can now approach the films in this study with the understanding that fear does not arise simply out of increased media stories on crime, but from a larger, much more complex social and political context which shapes our conception of others and the outside world. Within each film we observe the collapse of society and its structures of order, as the fear and competition among the surviving humans remain. Even with hordes of zombies threatening death and destruction, human groups of survivors challenge and fight each other, placing no more

trust in fellow human beings who are strangers than they do the living dead. Ironically, the zombies themselves could also be seen as a general society, competing with the living for space and resources.

2.3 A Decade of Fear: Kirsten Moana Thompson and *Millennial Dread*

"[T]hese social anxieties, fears, and ambivalence about global catastrophe, which I call apocalyptic dread, took explicit narrative form in American cinema of the late nineties and continued into the first years of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, this dread was a new manifestation of a long-standing American apocalyptic tradition. A blend of providential and messianic elements in Puritan Calvinism, this tradition first became apparent in the science-fiction cinema of the cold-war, re-emerged in the seventies with separate cycles of science-fiction and demonic films, gained further prominence under a turn to social conservatism under Reagan in the eighties, and reached a hysterical peak in the nineties in a cycle of horror, disaster, and science-fiction films explicitly focused on the approaching millennium. After 9/11, this dread took new forms with anxieties about the rise of Islamic Fundamentalism and terrorism from within."

Kirsten Moana Thompson (2005)

The final theoretical concept that will be applied to this research is Kirsten Moana Thompson's (1998:10) concept of *millennial dread*, which she defines as,

> [T]hat fear and anxiety of the future specifically located in the years immediately preceding the turn of the twentieth century and focused on the magical and overdetermined figure of the year 2000. Moreover such dread also encompasses a theological philosophy of Armageddon and the dread of the eschatos, or end of the world.

In the 20th Century, Thompson points to two world wars, the second of course leading to major, traumatic historical occurrences: the Holocaust and the bombing of Hiroshima

and Nagasaki. Thompson (2007:7,8,14,24,3) also includes in this discussion political and social traumas such as the Civil Rights movement and the Watergate scandal, both of which left the American public with a continual state of doubt, alienation, and paranoia. Most important to the concept of apocalyptic dread, however, is the increased shift to conservative fundamentalist religions, widening social and cultural divisions over challenges to past traditional values, particularly in the social and political battle for gay rights and same-sex marriage. This link recalls the fact that while apocalyptic thinking has its roots in many ancient forms of religion, particularly Christianity, many modern religious leaders today, and certainly private citizens, believe in a nearing doomsday in the face of what seems to be a shattering of social structures and order. Apocalyptic thinking, argues Thompson, has come out of the political and cultural impetus of Christian fundamentalism in recent decades. In her study, she examines films from both before and after the new millennium, analyzing each piece for a representation of millennial dread. Thompson's theory gives special attention to the family, and the trauma that can emerge through that which the family unit has repressed, as vengeance for the wrongs that they have perpetrated on themselves and others. This concept also functions when discussing the zombie as wreaking vengeance upon a society that has run afoul of its self.

The aspect of Thompson's theory which most concerns and aids this present research, however, is the concept of millennial dread wherein major films became representative of cultural fears, particularly the dread of the year 2000. As this work focuses on the years 2000-2010 as a decade of fear, Thompson's concept is applied more liberally with regard to the entire decade as one of uncertainty and dread. A decade which

began with panic over the Y2K bug, and which will barely be over in time for the end of the world which is set to take place in 2012, could not be more aptly described.

While Hollywood has long been obsessed with disaster and end-of-the-world films, the nineties saw a huge increase of disaster and apocalyptic films, using contemporary apocalyptic fears such as global warming as the main event. Thompson notes that 56 disaster movies were released in the nineties, 14 of which were released in 1997 alone. Once the millennium passed without any doomsday disasters, the events of September 11, 2001 became the new focus for apocalyptic dread, with fears of terrorism and terrorist attacks taking the centre stage in the cultural landscape (Thompson, 2007:12,25). Films which came after 9/11 properly followed suit.

Millennial dread, then, is descriptive of the last decade as it was plagued by apocalyptic thinking with the Y2K Bug, fear and paranoia after 9/11, mistrust in government and authority figures, global pandemics, a sharp cultural division over issues such as the traditional family vs. gay marriage, the economic collapse of the middle class, and of course the approaching apocalypse prophesied for December 21, 2012. We may have survived the dawning of the year 2000, but the dread itself continues.

Though each of the above theories could easily stand on its own in the cultural analysis, the incorporation of all three concepts into this research paradigm allows them to build upon and inform one another, creating a more holistic view of film. Together they form a glimpse into the intricate and often complicated ways in which our society

comes to talk about itself and its fears, and the influence upon those fears by our social environment.

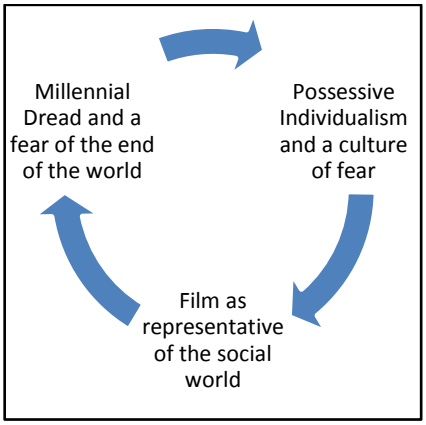

Figure 1 – The three theories inform and shape each other

The above image (Figure 1) suggests the ongoing connection between society and our selves. If we are indeed raised to be fearful and suspicious of others as a form of competition, as MacPherson suggests, then it does not seem so unlikely that we may be subconsciously harbouring a terror of all those we may perceive as threats to our happiness and our right to pursue it. As both an art form and a popular form of entertainment, film also can become an outlet for these fears. Scenarios, both mundane and fantastic, are created for our pleasure, transporting film-goers to a world not always so different from their own, regardless of how outlandish a monster or exciting a disaster may be presented. Even the most bizarre tales of science fiction must, in some way, be informed by the filmmaker's own experiences and ideas, themes which are instilled in them from birth, as happens to every citizen of the social world as they are socialized within their cultural environment. And what is more prevalent in our own socialization process than the teaching of fears? We learn not only to fear others, but to fear, for

example, the collapse of our family unit; thus taking on the values often created from such fears, instilled from childhood, in order to keep it safe throughout our adult lives. When great social movements sweep through our worlds, challenging long-held beliefs and values, the reactions are never subdued. It is not surprising that our social environments and emotions are on edge in instances of terrorism, global pandemics, and ongoing, heated public debate over long-held, family values such as the concept of traditional marriage. Still, it is not the outcome of these movements that is of interest here, but rather how we react to and see these fears unfold in our lives and are subsequently mirrored in our entertainment.

As these three concepts merge together, they demonstrate the cycle in which our cultural beliefs and values inform our daily fears and understandings of the world around us, which are then represented in our entertainment and re-interpreted in our consumption of it. To understand that our views, beliefs, and fears of the world are as influenced by our entertainment world as they influence it, is to understand the deeper, intricate and often chaotic connection we have to how we see the world, and ourselves. It is with this understanding that we may begin to explore how such theories can inform an effective and in-depth analysis of the films studied.

Chapter 3 - Finding the Fear: Methods of Qualitative Social Film Analysis

"In the many ways it has been deployed in Western popular culture, however, the zombie has slowly been transformed. It has come to signify something much more complex than just the fear of death. Growing out of a wide range of cultural anxieties – from American imperialism to domestic racial tensions, depression era fears about unemployment, Cold War paranoia about brainwashing, post-1960s political disenfranchisement and AIDS era body horror – the zombie has become … a potent symbol of the apocalypse. It's a monster whose appearance always threatens to challenge mankind's faith in the order of the universe."

Jamie Russell (2006)

Since its emergence onto the screen and into the imaginations of North American citizens, the zombie has always carried with it some deeper representation, some hidden meaning, whether conscious or not, that provides a clue about many of our deepest desires and fears. The zombie's legacy may well be that it was never just a zombie, but a vessel of social movements, political discussions, and fear. Arthur Asa Berger's (1980:5) rationale for the social study of film echoes this concept, as he notes: "The purpose of analysis or criticism, as far as I am concerned, is to understand – in the most profound sense of the term – a film and to be able to relate it to the society which it reflects – and sometimes affects." Thus, a research design that examines the zombie film within society must be one that allows for the exploration of the fears represented within the films' various levels, both conscious and unconscious, and with a mindset open to observe just how deeply our social environment can be affected by film.

3.1 Approaches to Critical Film Analysis

In order to effectively examine the representations of social fears in zombie films over the past ten years, qualitative content analysis, and in particular what Bruce L. Berg

(2007:308) refers to as "latent content analysis," was used in order to explore the deeper "structural meaning conveyed by the message." The purpose of this research is not to look for universal laws, but rather for a heightened understanding of the social climate of the last decade, using a genre of film as a lens onto that era. Researchers cannot, however, completely separate themselves from the environment they are studying, particularly the culture from which one derives meaning. It is crucial, however, for researchers to understand the context of social actions or movements, as social actors attribute meaning based on the context of social situations (Ozanne and Hudson, 1988:510). Thus, the purpose of research such as this is not to find a universal law or truth, but an understanding of a particular situation; one that is explored through a socially constructed activity, the research process (Willis et. al, 2007:96, 111).

Content analysis is an umbrella term, and thus there is no one correct way to examine and analyze any form of text. Research designs using content analysis as a method can range from quantitative counts of specified words and/or themes, to analysis of advertisements and the language used in connection with imagery, and the subtext within the presentation of those ideas. However, several theorists have suggested ways in which film may be more deeply explored and dissected for latent meaning. Benshoff and Griffin (2004:15,16,18) argue that films are a product of the environment in which they are produced, and as such, they are cultural artefacts. These cultural artefacts are first *encoded* by the text's creators where they place their own conscious beliefs, meanings and ideologies. They may also unconsciously add further ideological beliefs within the story and images they create. How certain characters are represented, stylistic choices such as lighting or lack thereof, moral lessons, etc., all add to the encoding process in the

creation of a film. These messages and ideals are not always consciously added to a text; however, what is considered good entertainment is in and of itself representative of certain cultural ideologies. Filmmakers are as shaped by their cultural surroundings as their expected audience. A film is also *decoded* by the receiver of the text, in this case the film viewer, based on her own cultural socialization. This is how meaning is made and understood within a text. Cultural artefacts, then, always "reflect in some way the conditions of their production and reception."

We proceed on the assumptions, then, that film is a form of text, and both a direct and indirect reflection of our assumptions and experiences which lead to our creation of meaning in viewing film. Audiences will actively engage in their own "meaning-making," adding to the construction of their understanding of reality, and of themselves, based on what they see on the screen (Gilpatric, 2010:735). This also reminds researchers that any analysis or assumptions derived from dissecting a creative text form such as film are always subject to their own meanings and subjectivities. Berger (1980:11) reminds anyone diving into the task of analyzing films to heed the warning provided by John Godfrey Saxe's poem, *The Blind Men and The Elephant*, wherein several blind men touch various parts of an elephant, but each decides that the elephant was exclusively like the part he touched, and none was able to piece together the whole concept of the creature. Thus, Berger concludes, we must see film as something which is only one part of society, situated squarely within it, and therefore requiring several different points of analysis and understanding.

In a similar fashion, Joseph M. Boggs (1978:247) suggests another form of social film analysis, which he calls the *humanistic approach*. This process suggests analyzing a

film based on how effectively it communicates an idea of "intellectual, moral, social or cultural importance," and thus challenges viewers to think, or perhaps even act, differently based on their experience while viewing the film. As such, aspects of a film such as the acting, sound and editing, for example, must be judged on how well they convey the film's overall message.

3.2 Research Design

From the theoretical framework of the previous chapter, and the discussion of film analysis above, a research design was devised for this investigation. This research is approached with the intent of examining each film through an interpretivist perspective, looking to the *social and historical context* of the past decade and treating it as its own epoch. The premise is that 2000-2010 was an era when certain social fears were heightened, and these fears directly influenced many films. Comparisons to zombie films of other eras, then, are not made or examined.

The coding and final analysis of the selected films are guided by the theoretical framework, expressed in the following questions: why have zombies become so popular in the last decade? Why have zombie films in particular made such a resurgence in popularity? And what can this change in popular culture tell us about ourselves as a society? These questions, and further questions which arose in the effort to answer them, influenced the direction of this research, as analyzing the films which have brought zombies back into the spotlight has led to answers as to why the films, and zombies themselves, have become pop culture superstars.

It is important to note, however, that this research is rooted in my own subjectivity. I am affected by, and in turn affect my social surroundings. While I am no different from the average filmgoer, my sociological background affords me the ability to recognize the relationship between what I see onscreen, and what it says about the society from which it emerged. My focus of analysis, however, does not change the fact that I too will create and interpret meanings based on my understanding of my social experiences. Thus, I locate myself as a member of the social environment directly affected by the films in question. My goal is to uncover one possible set of explanations of social phenomena surrounding the resurgence in popularity of zombie films. This is accomplished through the process discussed next.

3.3 Film Selection Criteria

The films chosen for this study had to meet some specific requirements to be included. First, as the research is focused on the past decade, the films had to have been made and released between the years 2000 and 2010. Secondly, the films had to have been features with major releases within North America. This meant that a film had to be released by a major film studio. A major studio release represents two things: one, there would be access to the mainstream filmgoing public (more money spent in advertising, wider release through many theatres, etc.); and two, a major studio release would suggest, on some level, a demand from the filmgoing public for such a feature film, or a belief that spending money creating, releasing and advertising a film would net enough income to justify the financial risk. As Benshoff and Griffin (2004:45) note: “In corporate Hollywood today, billions of dollars are at stake, and Hollywood films rarely seek to

make radical aesthetic innovations or challenge pre-existing ideas." Finally, the films had to be reasonably spaced apart in release throughout the decade so that any possible shifts in patterns and representations of fears over the ten year period could be examined.

It is important to qualify the definition of "zombie" for the purpose of identifying what is, in fact, a zombie movie. This research uses the definition of a zombie as "a relentlessly aggressive human or reanimated human corpse driven by a biological infection" (Zombie Research Society, 2007). Based on these criteria, then, the three films selected were: *28 Days Later* (2002), directed by Danny Boyle; *Land of the Dead* (2005), directed by George A. Romero; and *Zombieland* (2009), directed by Ruben Fleischer. While both *Land of the Dead* and *Zombieland* are clearly part of the zombie film world, some might question the inclusion of the film *28 Days Later* in the zombie genre. It has never been specifically described as a zombie film by the film's director, Danny Boyle (Russell, 2006:179), and does not follow the traditional course of zombie mythology. However, based on the criteria above, and a dedicated fan following, the creatures in the film have come to be considered zombies, and thus the film is included in this research.

3.4 The Fears

One must locate oneself in any research project, and acknowledge this position, particularly when developing research questions. When deciding which fears to specifically locate and code within the films, there was a delicate balance between cultural assumptions on my part as researcher, and allowing the films to tell their own stories.

First, general fears that seemed to be present in North American popular culture, primarily through how they were presented in mainstream news reporting, television and film, were identified. These media directly reflect a general sense of emotional consensus in some way or another in North American culture, or at least one part of a social 'feeling' in a particular era. General fears included *disease/pandemic situations* (such as the H1N1 virus, SARS, biological warfare, etc.); *mistrust of authority/loss of public safety* (terrorist attacks, most notably 9/11, chaotic and apocalyptic public emergencies, and the political and social responses to the War on Terror)*;* and an overall *breakdown of traditional values, culture and social structure/order* (for example, the breakdown of the traditional family through the ongoing battle to legalize gay marriage, and the severe economic crash in the United States in 2008). While these fears were present in both specific and more general instances in all the films in this study, other fears not initially noted at the beginning of the research presented themselves throughout each film, often in ways that intertwined thematically with the first set of fears. As such, each film also became its own case study, as other fears appeared briefly, but strongly enough to be noted in the final analysis of each movie. Overall, each film was undertaken as its own representation of that particular time in the last decade, and thus would inevitably approach many subjects in its own way.

3.5 Coding

Qualitative content analysis is very subjective. While a certain form of coding must be used in order to properly look for repeated representations of the fears identified previously, the ways in which these fears are coded are much more flexible. Characters in

a film could specifically mention one of the fears within the scope of the study, but the presentation of an authority figure in a negative way (an army sergeant gone mad, for example, as is seen in *28 Days Later*) could also count as a loss of trust in public authority figures. A zombie who belongs to a visible minority group, then, such as African American, could also be counted as an example of tension between racial groups, but this would have to be analyzed through the context of any interaction between the zombie and other characters in the film. Further questions arise. Is this zombie a constant threat? Or does s/he become subject to destruction by White characters? As Berger (1980:15) suggests, we must remember our own cultural understandings and constructed meanings, which aid us in making such judgments when analyzing a text or film. Thus, every researcher must concede defeat in some regard in providing any form of totally objective analysis, particularly when analyzing an example of popular culture. For this particular research, the coding of the suggested fears was noted each time it appeared or was mentioned onscreen, either through the spoken words of the characters, or as a visual representation. Then, an overall analysis of the fears within the film was undertaken by looking at the major movements in the plot and the importance of the characters involved. Frequently, the fears in question followed the main characters in their discussion and their interactions with both the living and the undead.

Since this research sought to explore a particular period of time (2000-2010), the movies were selected for their positions at the beginning, middle and end of the decade. This was done in order to see if any patterns or shifts in the representations of fear within zombie films changed over time. And indeed, they did. *28 Days Later* was a horror film, full of suspense, gore and terrifying sequences. *Land of the Dead*, however, focused less

on evoking a sense of funhouse thrills and more on the explorations of the characters and communities which had arisen after the collapse of modern society with the zombie uprising. *Zombieland* was primarily a comedy, with some "jump-out" surprise moments instead of a traditional horror film approach, and focused instead on how the characters come to recognize and understand the revision of their traditional social roles.

These changes represent two shifts in our perception of zombies. First, on a larger scale, zombies have become an understood and accepted part of popular culture, particularly over the last decade. As the chart below illustrates (Figure 2), the production of zombie films increased at the beginning of the new millennium in 2000, and then ramped up dramatically half way through the decade, indicating once again the increased demand for zombies in the entertainment world. The chart does not account for the increase in additional forms of pop culture presence of zombies, such as comics, novels, and television shows. Moreover, as the decade progressed, zombies seemed to no longer be the focal point of the film. The zombies shifted to a catalytic function and away from being major characters. As an 'accepted' monster in pop culture, zombies and their mythology became more familiar and thus there was less need to explain their existence, or crucial mythological points such as how to destroy them. This suggests that perhaps since audiences became more comfortable with zombies' overall 'existence,' they were less likely to be shocked or moved by them alone. It seems that over ten years we have become very close to our undead friends on the big screen, more comfortable with and knowledgeable about the zombie as a movie monster, and thus filmmakers were able to approach it in a comedic fashion as the decade wore on.

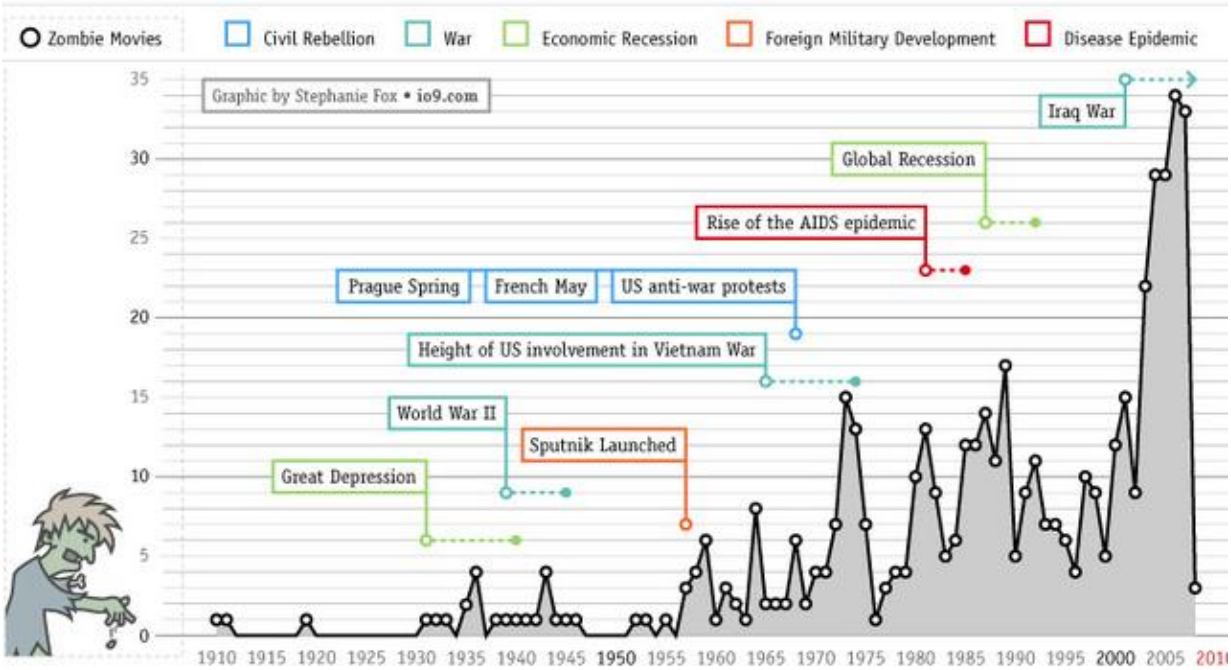

Figure 2 - The increase of zombie films after the year 2000 (Source: io9.com)

Chapter 4 - A Decade of Fear Begins: War, Disease and Mistrust in *28 Days Later* (2002)

"At this writing, of course, as apocalyptic horrors of biological warfare, contagion, and terrorism have become all too real and war once again appears to be perpetual, zombies have returned with a vengeance and in a range of mutated forms. They speak for the cultural moment – expressing paranoia, alienation and a sense of ever-present threat. In mainstream films such as Resident Evil, 28 Days Later, and the remake of Dawn of the Dead, and in contrast to Shaun [of the Dead], zombies are virulent, fast, and deadly serious."

Linda Badley (2008)

28 Days Later, the first film in this study, effectively tapped into "millennial fears about biological warfare, chemical attacks and viral outbreaks," (Russell, 2006:179). Released in 2002, the story's content resonated with the mainstream movie-going public on a grand scale. Though never classified as a zombie movie specifically by its director Danny Boyle, the monsters in the film are human, though devoid of any characteristics that we may define as human. The movie was filmed before, during and after the events of September 11, 2001, and though the film does not speak directly to the attacks on the Twin Towers, the terror felt by the characters in the film, after the effects of a totally destructive force which changes the way in which they view the world forever, is visceral.

No longer just a plot in a science-fiction movie, biological warfare and global terrorism/wars have become a part of our social vernacular in North America, thanks in no small part to 9/11. With heightened fears of terror attacks at "home," political administrations fed the fear with an immediate "War on Terror" and a colour-coded threat level system that reminded every (North) American that the possibility of attack was

always around the corner. The total decimation of London after the outbreak of the rage virus in the film eerily recalls the media footage that ran constantly in the hours and days after the attacks of September 11: quiet, debris-filled streets, and in particular the public notice board covered with home-made missing persons reports. These images were shot before the attack and were not intentional nods to 9/11, but are effective evocations of any filmgoer's memories (Boyle, 2002).

When protagonist Jim awakens from a month-long coma in an abandoned hospital and wanders alone through the vacant streets of a usually bustling metropolis, the post-disaster feeling of the shots leaves the viewer terrified at the sudden disappearance of social activity. Many visual 'clues' are included to constantly suggest apocalypse and total desolation, (Boyle, 2002). Even though the audience is vaguely aware that some form of virus has broken out, we are left essentially as clueless as Jim when he awakes in his deathly quiet hospital room. Still, given the emptiness of a building that is traditionally bustling with activity, it is clear he immediately senses there is a greater danger behind this halt of activity. Jim calmly packs supplies from the hospital's broken vending machines. He knows that on some level, something is greatly wrong and he will need them. However, the unhealthy nature of these "supplies" (pop and candy) also suggests the shocking level of unpreparedness of citizens to deal with the total collapse of social order. As Jim walks through the streets of London, he screams "Hello!" repeatedly, searching for humans in a deserted metropolis. In the face of what is obviously the abrupt end of everyday life as he knows it, he gathers discarded bills of money, adding them to his survival pack. In the face of social destruction, the evidence of our deeply entrenched competitive values of survival are seen, challenged and eventually shattered through the

character of Jim. Though initially unable to believe the absence of social order and a governing body, he is more than excited to discover a rogue band of soldiers that have secured a safe zone. The soldiers, however, become as threatening to his survival as the zombies.

The film also echoes many contemporary social anxieties such as global terrorism, biological warfare, and a complete lack of faith in authority structures'(government, military, etc.) ability to deal with these issues and other pressing problems. These themes evoke government stumbles in the real world when dealing with global health pandemics such as SARS, AIDS and ever-growing flu threats. As we entered the period Thompson (2007) refers to as *Millennial Dread* at the turn of the millennium, these and other fears have continued to be heightened as our global environment, news networks and capitalist culture have reinforced this constant anxiety. To this end, the film also looks at fears surrounding racial tensions, and the increased levels of rage and violent interactions in our modern society. Finally, as is the case in all three films in this study, *Days* also looks closely at family structures and social survival, particularly in the creation of the survival group – the main group of characters which band together to survive throughout the film.

4.1 Film Synopsis and Concept

The film follows a small group of survivors as they make their way through an apocalyptic Britain. Engulfed by a fast-spreading and infectious rage virus, the zombies in *28 Days Later* are violent, brutal in their attacks, and devastatingly fast. Their origins

in the film, however, begin with what we presume to be animal activists breaking into a laboratory to free chimps that are being experimented upon. What they discover are apes attached to machines, forced to watch footage of violent human actions. A lone scientist discovers the activists, but begs them to leave the animals as they are, for the effects of what has been done to them have not yet been measured. The scientist explains that the animals have been infected with rage, insisting, "In order to cure, you must first understand!*"* More concerned with the animals than the experiment, one activist breaks open a cage, only to have the chimp inside violently attack her. The last shot we see is her eyes changing on her snarling face. The screen goes black, and simply states, "28 days later…".

Then we meet the main character Jim, still unconscious. As we later find out, Jim was in a coma in the hospital due to a serious bike accident, and has been unconscious for the entire 28 days since the infection was released. Alone, walking through a trashed and deserted hospital, to the trashed and deserted streets of London, Jim tries to grab floating money and add it to the bag of pop cans he grabbed from the hospital. The silence is broken, however, when a group of crazed people, who Jim later learns are the "infected," spewing blood and running at full speed, try to attack him. He is saved by Selena and another survivor, Mark, whom Selena later kills when he is bitten by an infected. Travelling together for survival, Jim and Selena eventually take refuge in the apartment of Frank and his daughter, Hannah, after yet another close call with infected zombies. Eventually, Jim, Selena, Frank and Hannah, now a family-like survival group, attempt to leave London to find the military sanctuary promised on a recorded radio broadcast.

The third act of the film introduces characters that may be nearly as frightening as the infected humans, a band of soldiers and their dedicated leader. Though this may seem like a perfect safe haven, they are led by Major West, a traditional and authoritarian leader who believes the answer to infection lies in having women procreate for the future, a fate to which Selena and Hannah have been unknowingly consigned. Chaos and disorder arise when Jim is almost killed for trying to escape with Selena and Hannah to save them from being assaulted by the soldiers. While our survival group does break away from the sprawling mansion where the military outpost has been set up, they do so at peril and barely get out with their lives. The film ends with Jim, Selena and Hannah living in a small farmhouse, sewing together giant letters that read "HELLO" spread along the hillside, waving at a jet of unknown origins overhead.

4.2 Viral Infections and Pandemic Diseases

In his study of archetypal characters in classic horror films, Randy Loren Rasmussen (1998:229,236,238) argues that the 'classic' horror film monsters are frequently victims of "human experimentation and exploitation," many of which include zombies. As it stands today, many modern monsters, and in particular zombies, are still created at the hands of human experiment. Mad doctors, however, are now replaced by secret government science labs. The zombies in *Days* are no different. As Rasmussen notes, many of these classic monsters are the result of human experiments, and though morality seems to be of greater concern in more classic horror tales (a mad scientist attempting to tamper with the rules of nature, and thus, offending God), more modern

tales seemed concerned with a secular morality: the abuse of science and power. When God *is* introduced, it is as a side note, simply one possible answer, not a meta-explanation for the zombies. For the zombies in *Days*, the case is no different. Consider the intentions from two sides at the beginning of the film: presumably well-meaning scientists are working to uncover the source of rage in order to understand, and ultimately control it, while the animal rights activists are trying to release the apes from further testing and pain. Human intervention on both sides leads to dreadful consequences. The events set in motion in the plot of the film display adequate proof that "under the wrong circumstances, *anyone* can become a monster" (Rasmussen, 1998:231). Martin Rogers (2008:121-122) notes that our dual fear and fascination with science has continued from the golden age of science fiction to our current scientific breakthroughs. Rogers argues that zombie films are quite often "motivated by anxieties over science and technology," the cause of a zombie outbreak erupting "as chaos both social and personal, a trespass of the science that affects the individual as well as the communal body."

This film presents a new image of terror as the infected humans are immediately taken over by the virus upon infection, running at full speed to attack and consume their human victims, spewing hideous vomit and blood from their dying bodies. The violence and speed with which humans in the film are infected with the rage virus also recalls public scares of the SARS threat, with people wearing masks in public places and reports of many not travelling, or even leaving their homes. The 2009 outbreak of the H1N1 ("Swine Flu") pandemic also succeeded in upping fears of the flu bug to global terror levels. Local health agencies released newsletters detailing "survival kits" that should be in every home, and were to include food, water, medication, and other necessities in the

event that one couldn't leave one's home due to extreme pandemic conditions. The level of fear in our current global climate of communicable diseases, deadly flu bugs and perhaps even biological warfare that would use diseases as weapons, is continuously high, making the fear of infection in the film feel all too real.

The first half of the film is full of references to and discussions of "infection." The characters do not have an explanation for the violent illness much past understanding that it is "something in the blood," as Selena mentions to Jim on their first meeting. In fact, almost every discussion surrounding the concept of "infection," or the horror that has flowed from it, is one marked by confusion, anger, fear or simple misunderstandings as to the source, or the end result. This is perhaps one of the many reasons the zombie is so prevalent a monster in current popular culture. The infection becomes the focus of every character's mind, as they must consider their safety and survival in the midst of infected zombies.

When Jim takes Selena and Mark to his parent's house to see if they are still alive, he discovers their bodies dead in their bed. They have committed suicide by taking pills with wine. They hold a picture of Jim as small child, with writing on the back that begs him never to "wake up" from his coma. For his parents, and one assumes many, many other citizens, death by suicide was a more reasonable choice than living in a world of chaos and fear created by the infection. Later on, Mark describes losing his family to the infection, and the mass hysteria which followed the initial outbreak, as they tried to buy their way on to a plane, even though money had already lost all meaning. People are trampled, he loses his sister in the chaos, and manages to escape only by climbing on other bodies, suddenly spotting his father whose face has become contorted with rage. He

has been infected. Here, a crucial image of fear is presented in the film, one that echoes Jim walking along through the streets of London. A fast-spreading disease has completely crippled society, leading to mass panic and immeasurable death and destruction. Not long after recounting this experience, an infected zombie breaks through the window of the house and attacks Mark. Selena immediately dispatches the zombie with her machete, and turns on Mark, demanding to know if he was bitten. They both look at the gaping wound in Mark's arm and she immediately kills him too, even as he begs for his life. Selena then corners Jim, demanding to know if he was bitten, or if any of the blood got in his mouth. Jim is understandably panicked, unable to process the chaos around him. In this new world, one decimated by an infectious disease, chaos reigns and survival demands the destruction of those who are infected.

Even when Jim, Selena, Frank and Hannah are far out of the terrifying urban landscape and in the beautiful countryside, having a picnic as if a normal family on a weekend outing, they are forever changed. As they observe a group of horses running free through a field, Hannah asks her father if they are infected. Even in the midst of a beautiful and peaceful moment, she must first assess her world, and wonder if she is safe. Fear overtakes the thought process in a world taken over by panic. These scenes in the film effectively present examples of fear, chaos and panic in the face of disease, infection and the destruction of social order in a deadly pandemic. The characters have learned to distrust every person who may appear infected, and also any animal. Thus, almost every mention of infection or disease within the film is done so through a lens of fear and confusion. There is an all too real analogy here with public confusion and fear in the representation of pandemic diseases in the media, but most particularly through hysterical

news stories regarding outbreaks such as the SARS infection or H1N1 virus throughout the decade.

Another possibility is the connection of the film to the AIDS epidemic. The infection in the film is transferred by blood or other bodily fluids, and the infection is fast-spreading and devastating, much like HIV/AIDS (Froula, 2010, 198). Particularly poignant, however, are the supposed insane ramblings of one of the soldiers, chained up in the basement for questioning Major West, along with Jim, who has tried to save Selena and Hannah from their fate of becoming sexual slaves. The soldier insists that the virus has not spread across the ocean. How could it spread across water, he asks? He then paints a vivid picture, stating that the rest of the world is sitting down to eat dinner and watch *The Simpsons*, waiting to see how long it will take for the infected of Britain to die out. He says,

> Starting the world again when the rest of the fucking world hasn't even stopped! Just imagine! Just think about it! How could infection cross the oceans? How could it cross the mountains and rivers? They stopped it! And right now tvs are playing and planes are flying in the sky and the rest of the world is continuing on as fucking normal! Think … actually think about it. What would you do with a diseased little island? They quarantined us! There's no infection – just people killing people!

When Jim later sees an airplane fly high above the military compound, it brings up the possibility that the crazed soldier was telling the truth. For Jim, notes Froula (2010:204), the airplane "is both a confirmation of his government's lies about the infection spreading throughout the world and a hopeful sign that … there is an orderly world that could rescue him and his friends…". Still, regardless of what future Jim's

sighting of the plane may bring, it rings strikingly true of the approach the rest of the world may have to isolated land masses, such as Africa, where the AIDS infection rate has long been at pandemic proportions. Are we, too, waiting to see how long it will take for Africa to die out? When Jim is introduced to "Mailer," a Black soldier who has been infected and is chained up outside the military compound by Major West, he tells Jim that Mailer will teach them how long it takes the infection to kill the human body it inhabits. The Black man in chains, infected and left to die by his White commander, is a chilling image, one that recalls all too real moments in both historical and modern day society. African Americans in particular have faced a long history of medical and scientific horror at the hands of White society. The Tuskegee Syphilis study which took place in Alabama from 1932 to 1972 is one such example. Hundreds of African Americans were involved in the study, the purpose of which was to observe the progress of the disease if left untreated. Tuskegee is a frequently cited case when discussing ethics in scientific studies involving human beings, as patients entering the study were never treated for the disease, but instead told they were receiving free medical care for other illnesses, or "bad blood," a frequent term in the area for many issues, including but not limited to syphilis. The participants were never told they were subjects of a medical study (Brandt, 1978: 24). This study, among many others, "…has come to symbolize racism in medicine, misconduct in human research, the arrogance of physicians, and government abuse of Black people" (Gamble, 1997:1773). Thus, the connection between a mistrust of authority, racial tensions and a fear of infectious diseases grows within the film to reflect the real world of the filmgoers.

4.3 Mistrust of Authority and Structural Breakdown

"It was inevitable that the fear of control would manifest itself in the movies because the movies, an instrument of mass culture, would inevitably have to deal with the fears of the masses … Film is a medium rife with ambivalence: to purvey is not to analyze. That means film is ripe for horror, because horror is the expression of ambivalence: we do not know the cause of what is going wrong, for we are the cause of what is going wrong."

E. M. Jones (2000)

When Jim and Selena seek refuge in Frank and Hannah's apartment, Frank shares with them a repeating radio message from a military outpost in the English countryside, far outside the urban sprawl of London, promising a "cure" for the infection. Though Selena, who has been ruthless in ensuring her own survival since the first day of infection, has her reservations about the ability of the government to control the situation, Jim is still hopeful that the old social structures may still yet offer support. Frank, a generation older, also believes in the promise of the message, if only for the survival of the next generation represented by his teenaged daughter, Hannah.

The promise of structure and authority brings out anxieties in each of the characters, suggesting that the devastation of the infection is not the beginning of such feelings towards government. Jim's hopefulness does not rest so much on his belief in and support of government authority, but derives from his fear at the total lack of any governing authority. When Jim is first rescued by Selena, he insists that there "must" be a government, and maybe those in power would perhaps be hiding in a bunker somewhere. For Jim, the idea that the structure of a governing authority has been completely decimated is perhaps as terrifying as the infected beings themselves. The promise later on of a military bunker means some comforts of the "old" world may still exist. It is a feeble

hope, but a hope nonetheless. Selena, on the other hand, saw the total collapse of social order in the 28 days since infection, unlike Jim who spent it in a coma. Selena's mistrust of any authority figure, and her complete disbelief that any form of authority will be able to repair the current devastation, seem to run deep. Selena echoes the fearful and competitive nature of the capitalist spirit, and continuously presents a fear of trusting anyone else for her survival. The fact that Selena is both Black[3] and female, a combination that marks her as lower social status than Jim, might also suggest a lifetime of distrust of government authority. Frank, the eldest of the group, has the most experience with government authority, which may suggest why he is not so much hopeful as willing to search for the one structure which may still offer answers, whatever they may be. Hannah, then, is perhaps the representative of the new generation of youth, focused on entertainment and hardly concerned with politics and their implications. She is only concerned with leaving her London flat, perhaps to fulfill a dream of independence she had not yet been able to experience due to the infection.

Public mistrust of government is certainly nothing new, but in the last decade we saw a massive uprising, particularly among the young, against George W. Bush's administration in the United States. As the War on Terror dragged on and the illusion of national pride was slowly swallowed up by growing death tolls of soldiers stationed overseas, private mistrust of government became public. And it seemed that social systems practically halted under the threat of SARS, H1N1, and an ineffective stop to the rampant AIDS crisis. We should also recall the national outcry at the disastrous outcome

[3] I use the term "Black" not as a homogeneous, racial descriptor, but to avoid making the assumption that Selena is solely of African descent. This term is also used to explain how this character is simply marked as 'Other,' non-white.

of FEMA's failed attempts at emergency response during the crisis following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005. The film frequently suggests that our current political, economic and military structures are perhaps no longer effective in maintaining social order, and resonates with the viewing public given recent events in the real world.

The film's military presence also reminds the viewer of the old, patriarchal social structures which still seek to subvert new forms of authority, even in the face of a totally collapsed society. As the men try to look forward they attempt to sexually overpower Selena and Hannah so that humanity might have a future. Insists Major Henry West to Jim after an uncomfortable dinner with clearly insane military men, "I promised them a future, I promised them women." The women, though necessary for a future, are still seen as nothing more than a tool to gain control of the current chaos. Selena's mistrust, then, was the most accurate of the group's emotions. Thus, if the first half of the film looks at the open chaos and vicious survivalism which became necessary in the face of infection, the second half presents a new horror: human beings gone mad with hopeless power in a crumbling social order.

The survivors first encounter the soldiers at the barricade when Frank is gunned down after he is infected. The next scene is, quite literally, bleak and nearly silent. A convoy of military vehicles drive into the woods, all filled with soldiers in full gear, including gas masks. Jim, Selena and Hannah sit, appearing grief stricken due to the loss of Frank, but also looking visibly defeated. They very clearly do not appear to fit in with the rest of the convoy, and as such appear almost as prisoners of war. They arrive at a grand estate, a mansion that harkens to another time, and a nod in some ways to traditional authority in the UK, as the mansion suggest feudal imagery, with Major West

as a lord of the manor. Interestingly, the house also reminds one of a grand colonial plantation in the southern United States during the days of slavery. Though the grounds the house sits on are beautiful, the mansion is shot in a foreboding fashion, towering over all the characters in the scene. Perhaps as a hint, the same technique is used to introduce the character of Major West, the leader of the military troop.

All the representations which follow this initial introduction present West as cool, calm and starkly serious. One scene shows him seated in an elegant chair, overlooking the expansive grounds of the mansion, like a member of the nobility overseeing his property. He is a leader, and clearly a respected one. When he is not around, however, the soldiers are frivolous and immature, as witnessed by Jim when he watches them drive their car around another soldier in circles in the yard. If West is the leader, the men are half-crazed, almost brainless followers. West dresses in full uniform for dinner, but his men are in disarray, singing and pounding the table in the dark dining room only to quieten upon West's entrance. It is here too that we see even the appearance of the mansion beginning to change. What was bleak before is quite dark and depressing now, a night time suggestion that chaos and danger, as evidenced by the wild nature of the soldiers, may be on its way.

There is one voice of potential reason amongst these men, however. Sergeant, Farrell clearly opposes the rule of Major West, acknowledging his authority only in the most basic sense of military etiquette. Over dinner, Farrell suggests that perhaps human beings and their social structures are not as normal or natural as we may assume: "If you look at the whole life of the planet, we, you know, man, have only been around for a few blinks of an eye. So if the infection wipes us all out, that is a return to normality." He is,

of course, ridiculed by the other men, and called the "New Age Sergeant" by West. Farrell's speech and the subsequent reaction, however, indicate two important facts. First, it is clear that he is the only other soldier to match the intelligence and level of speech of the Major, thus presenting a real threat to West's traditional rule. And secondly, West's labelling of him as "New Age" is an attempt to devalue his argument by equating it as unscientific and thus baseless in its message. In this fashion, West, maintains the power held by traditional authority figures, even in the face of a crumbling system and rising challenges.

Dinner is interrupted by sirens sounding and the men rush out to defend the mansion against incoming infected zombies. It is now completely dark outside, with rain falling quite heavily. The soldiers shoot and revel in the bloodbath, while Jim, Selena and Hannah watch in silence from inside the house. When the soldiers return, drunk with bloodlust and celebrating the carnage they have created, they corner Selena, taking her machete and insisting she will be "taken care of" now. One soldier then uses her machete to imitate the size of his penis, effectively taking her source of power and subverting it to mean male masculinity and virility. A fight breaks out as Jim attacks the soldier, only to have Farrell, apparently no longer able to tolerate wild and depraved behaviour, join the melee to save Jim. Major West arrives to break it up, but whispers to one soldier to "slow down." The tension between him and Farrell is palpable, and Farrell only leaves to follow a direct order to clean the bodies from the grounds. Once again he is respectful, albeit barely, of West, and only because of the respect owed to his rank. Once again, the darkness of the scene is foreboding, and Major West then separates Jim from the women

in order to explain to him the “cure to infection” which had been promised to the survivors.

This separation from the women becomes symbolic as Major West explains to Jim that he has promised his soldiers women. Jim is shocked as West explains, “What do nine men have to do but wait to die themselves? Women mean a future.” West speaks with a matter of fact voice, but once again he invokes a traditional form of authority. He seeks to maintain control of a chaotic world, retaining the traditional power structures of patriarchy, particularly when it comes to the position of women as necessary only for what their bodies can provide. Major West, then, becomes a representation of the old power structures, fighting to maintain control and power.

The concepts of family and traditional values, and their subsequent breakdown, are also tied to the representation of traditional authority in this film, particularly as a new family is formed as a means of survival. Though survival groups are formed in all three films in this study, they more closely parallel family structures in this film and *Zombieland.* In *Days*, Jim has lost his family, but meets two more father figures along his journey of survival (Boyle, 2012). In Frank, Jim finds a caring, traditional father, who helps him to pick out proper liquor in the grocery store (a bizarre moment of normalcy in a chaotic time) and whom Jim calls “Dad” when Frank awakens him from a bad dream. Likewise, Frank takes on the role of wise elder, leading this family to what he believes will be a safe haven. His breakdown when they arrive at the military blockade, then, reflects his denial and refusal to believe that the authority he believed in has let him down. As he wanders the blockade, he tries to attack a crow screaming at him, and blood

from an infected body falls in his eye. Soldiers do arrive, but only in time to kill him. Frank is devastated that he has not led his daughter and his new-found family to safety.

Major West also appears as a father figure to Jim, but one of a much more strict and traditional nature. Though he tries to guide Jim to his ideal of a stable and continued future, Jim ultimately rebels, challenging his authority both outside the mansion back at the blockade, and inside when he releases Mailer and kills some of West's soldiers. These father figures, then, reflect not only Jim's journey toward freeing himself from traditional authority figures, but also the audience's acceptance that traditional patriarchal and family/social structures may not be the best answer for survival when they crash and burn in times of chaos. Innovation and social evolution, becoming almost one of the infected in Jim's case, is the only way to survive.

The climax of the film is one of chaos for the characters, and also for the viewer. Once Mailer has broken into the mansion and begins attacking the soldiers, the scene cuts are quick and frantic, with lights going on and off, and a loud rainstorm and musical soundtrack, all disorienting for the viewer. Slowly, the ranks of authority break down as the soldiers are infected and scour the house for their former friends and allies. Even Selena is convinced her allies are no more when Jim violently kills the soldier holding her hostage. But when he makes a joke, she embraces him, knowing that through the rage, it is still him. Though touching, it also reminds the viewer how easily we might slip through the veil of acceptable social behaviour into total, chaotic, enraged instinct.

In the final scene at the mansion, Jim, Selena and Hannah escape to their car, only to find Major West sitting in the back seat. "*You've killed my* boys," he states, almost as a

heart-broken father, the fruits of his labour to maintain control shattered. He critically wounds Jim by shooting him, but Hannah jumps in the car and reverses it to the mansion, where Mailer is waiting. Smashing through the rear windshield, Mailer grabs West and begins to devour him. It is a scene of justice, and Mailer stands in the doorway of the mansion, screaming outwards as our heroes drive away, crashing through the gate to escape.

4.4 Racial Tensions

The fear of race, and of the Other, was present in both this film and in *Land of the Dead*. Iris Marion Young (1990:59) discusses the process by which the Other is created as cultural imperialism, which "involves the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm." As the dominant cultural group holds the power of knowledge and dissemination, their position as the cultural and social norm allows them the power to 'construct the differences,' leading to the labelling, and alienation of certain groups as the Other. In *Days*, racial tensions surface around two characters: Selena and Mailer, a Black zombie chained up outside the soldiers' mansion. Selena is presented as strong, smart, and almost cold in her methods to survive. A strong female character, Selena is calm and decisive, an independent woman unafraid to travel alone and kill anyone around her who has been infected by the zombies. Even in the face of her own impending sexual assault, she is determined to maintain control of her body by drugging herself and Hannah so that they will not be as emotionally affected by what will happen to them. Her choice to remove her consciousness is a symbol of her

acceptance of the reality, and her ability to still find some form of control over her situation, even when one of the soldiers tells Jim, “I’m gonna have the black one, and I’m gonna make her squeal,” effectively reducing her to nothing more than her racialized body and its sexual appeal.

Another character, Mailer, aptly reflects racial tensions within the film, both recalling the horrors of the US-UK slave trade (Rodgers, 2008:202), and serving as usurper of traditional, dominant White power later on in the film. Mailer is a zombie, a Black soldier who has been chained up outside the mansion’s walls. It is interesting to note that Mailer is outside of the mansion, in the light, while the soldiers inhabit the darkness inside the building. When Major West introduces Jim to Mailer, he tells him, “The idea was to learn something about infection, have him teach me.” “And has he?” asks Jim. “In a way. He’s telling me he’ll never bake bread, plant crops, raise livestock. He’s telling me he’s futureless. And eventually, he’ll tell me how long the infected take to starve to death.” In this exchange West is describing the labour that Mailer will never again do, reducing his worth to nothing more than the labour he can accomplish. Black, held down with chains around his neck and put on display as the subject - the “Queen’s subject, the medical subject, and subjected to violence” - the character of Mailer vividly represents the origins of the Haitian zombie mythology, and the slave trade (Lauro and Embry, 2008:107). In this respect, Selena, who uses a machete as a weapon of protection, also harkens back to the imagery of Haitian zombie folklore, and also the Haitian slave rebellion. Lauro and Embry also note the replay of Haiti’s slave rebellion when Mailer is set loose by Jim, and turns to attack his captors within the mansion. As Russell (2006:12) notes, “For a population whose ancestors had been captured, shackled and shipped out of

Africa to the far off islands of the Caribbean, dominated by vicious slave masters and forced to work for nothing more than the bare minimum of food to keep them strong enough to live another day, the zombie symbolized the ultimate horror." An eternity spent slaving away after death was a terrifying notion, particularly for a nation that had only recently "succeeded in throwing off the imperial shackles of its European oppressors." Indeed, the scene in which Mailer attacks and viciously devours and infects the soldiers, is one of gory visuals. Mailer does not attack Jim, who breaks his chains. But upon the soldiers who have kept him captive, Mailer exacts a violent, terrifying revenge, invoking imagery not unlike those written about during the slave uprising in Haiti. As C.L.R. James (1963:88) notes in his history of the Haitian slave rebellion,

> The slaves destroyed tirelessly. Like the peasants in the Jacquerie or the Luddite wreckers, they were seeking their salvation in the most obvious way, the destruction of what they knew was the cause of their suffering; and if they destroyed much it was because they had suffered much. They knew that as long as these plantations stood their lot would be to labour on them until they dropped. The only thing was to destroy them. From their masters they had known rape, torture, degradation, and, at the slightest provocation, death. They returned in kind. For two centuries the higher civilisation had shown them that power was used for wreaking your will on those whom you controlled. Now that they held power they did as they had been taught.

When Mailer takes his final victim, Major West himself, he stands in the mansion's open doorway and screams outward. It could be read as a cry of victory, of pain, or of rage. Perhaps it is a mixture of all three, evoking the Haiti slave rebellion and the rage of the oppressed.

4.5 Rage

The film also deals extensively with the concept of rage and the prevalence of violence in human life. The theme of infection, and the social fear of pandemic diseases, is neatly aligned with a virus which infects us with extreme, violent, all-consuming rage. The first moments of the film inundate us with violent scenes of real human actions: riots, hangings, mass beatings, dead bodies. When we see the actions of the "infected" later on throughout the movie, we see little difference between these violent images and the infected humans. When Jim returns to the mansion, having escaped outside the walls where he was meant to be executed, he appears as one of the infected, ghastly pale, covered in blood, missing his shirt. He moves with speed and the purpose of destruction, as the infected do. Jim also does not recoil from brutally killing the other soldiers once chaos erupts within the mansion. While this act is perhaps in part to protect his new family, and exact vengeance on those who would have hurt them, there is also a layer of deep anger in Jim against those he trusted to protect him and his band of survivors. Jim's execution of the last soldier by gouging out his eyes is not a gratuitous act, but one of extreme violence and brutality. His trust and faith in the old systems of power have been shattered, and perhaps the eye-gouging is symbolic in his wish to no longer see the world through old eyes and ideology.

This concept of rage also brings us back to the theory of possessive individualism. As Russell notes (2006:180), "Employing the infected as a metaphor for the breakdown of the social structures governing our behaviour towards one another, the film suggests that anger – "rage" itself – has become the defining emotional response in late capitalist societies." Once again we are reminded of MacPherson's suggestion that we are

constantly focused on our individual gain as humans, and in the infected zombies of *28 Days Later*, that rugged individualism has escalated to severe, violent competition with, and ultimately the consumption of, those we view as a threat. Thus, the zombies in this film, and in general, blur "the boundary between life and death by pitting us against ourselves and by confronting us with the abject corpse we will all one day become, whether we benefit from empire, suffer under its rule, or both," (Froula, 2010:196).

28 Days Later is a multifaceted film which presents many fears that are relevant in both popular culture and the everyday lives of many North Americans. The zombies in this film, engulfed in rage, present a terrifying prospect for humanity left unchecked. The issue of power gone mad, racial tensions allowing for violence, and the total destruction of society at the hands of human scientific advancement, all suggest a deep fear of who we are as a society, and where we are allowing ourselves to evolve. As Lauro and Embry (2008:107) state, "The 'monsters' in these pictures are not the resurrected dead, though they are people who have lost their rational senses." The question of human advancement and a manifestation of these fears are addressed next.

Chapter 5 - In the Centre of the Storm: Race, Class, and a War on Terror in *Land of the Dead* (2005)

"*What was threatened before in Romero's series has finally come to pass: the living are now more like monsters than the living dead*."

Jamie Russell (2006)

Well-timed in the middle of the decade, *Land of the Dead* (2005) effectively presents many of the fears and emotions that seemed prevalent in the social environment at that time. Set long after zombies have become the majority of the global population, the film provides a representation of the growing divide between the classes in American society, with a minority enjoying affluence and a majority of people barely able to make ends meet. Set in a large, unnamed American city, the zombie outbreak has long since evolved into a part of daily life. A large population of people have taken refuge in an organized and barricaded city, surrounded by an electric fence on three sides and a river on the other. Inside the city, however, there are still many walls and barriers. The majority of citizens, who are not living and working in the army barracks, live in absolute squalor in the city streets, while a select number of citizens live in a high rise tower known as Fiddler's Green. Green is run by Kaufman, the film's villain, who not only controls the tower and the whole city's resources, but also the decision concerning who may or may not live in the tower. Playing the role of capitalist oligarch, Kaufman also represents White patriarchal power structures which did not work before and, as the film reveals, continue to degrade humanity's best efforts to reinvent itself. Kaufman's daily decisions, such as denying a Latino male entry into the tower, or continually supplying his citizens with distractions in the form of drugs, prostitution and a decaying night life

for the lower class, and shopping and fine dining for those in the tower, demonstrates the extent of his efforts to maintain control over the masses. The film's critique of the effects of class division, and a populace dominated by the greed for material gain and a greater fear of losing them, is painfully clear.

What makes this film important for study is the way it connects with the current social environment, noting the disillusionment with government and military powers, as well as the obvious unrest of US citizens plagued by financial woes and total disconnection from the wealthy and powerful. Even with a society that has completely collapsed, there are some in the film who would maintain the old order of capitalist society. The movie then presents pointed criticism of class divisions, and the abuse of power in a crisis. As in all of Romero's previous zombie films, the destruction of outdated structures becomes the only way for humanity to survive. Romero does not offer a solution, however, only that the current structures must be abolished. By portraying the zombies as almost equals to the small band of heroes who escape the collapse of the barricaded city, the film almost excuses their consumption of the upper class citizens they attack. And by allowing the zombies to remain in the now destroyed city at the end of the film, the band of heroes is also allowed to survive and carry on. Kaufman, his yes men, and the citizens of Fiddler's Green, however, victims of their own ignorance and denial, must fall to the zombie uprising in order for real change to begin.

5.1 Film Synopsis and Concept

While the opening credits of the film portray the early stages of the zombie outbreak, the plot begins with the simple words on the screen: “Some time later…”. The viewer is not given a date or place, except the assumption that the events are taking place throughout America. We are also not told how long ago the initial zombie outbreak took place, but as the film suggests, enough time has passed that the characters we encounter are no longer surprised by the zombies, or in some cases even scared of them anymore. Arguably, years have gone by since the collapse of American society due to the zombie outbreak. The film begins in a small town in what appears to be middle America, with zombies going about their daily activities: a zombie couple strolling hand-in-hand, a zombie quartet smashing their instruments on the band stand, and one zombie, Big Daddy, a gas station attendant who seems almost heartbroken when he cannot pump gas. The zombies are, for all intents and purposes, everyday citizens going about their business. The peaceful existence of the zombies is destroyed, however, when a large group of humans roar into town on motorbikes and in large, fortified army vehicles, killing zombies at random after using fireworks to distract them, and raiding the town’s shops for supplies. One of the raiders, the film’s protagonist, Riley, notices that the zombies are acting differently. They seem to be more aware of what’s going on around them than in previous encounters. This proves to be true when Big Daddy tries to help his fellow zombies focus on the humans doing the killing, and in anguish over their deaths, grabs a gun from a raider speeding away on a motorbike. He puts the gun over his shoulder and begins walking in the direction of the departing raiding party. The other zombies inexplicably begin to follow Big Daddy toward a looming tower far in the

distance. As the zombies journey toward the city, Big Daddy begins to show them how to use other weapons. They are learning, and are preparing for an uprising.

The raiding party returns home, which is part of a large city, fenced off on three sides and a river on the fourth. The fences are guarded by soldiers and military posts. There is a further division inside the city. The streets are separated from the large tower that caught Big Daddy's eye from so far away: Fiddler's Green. A large, skyscraper building, fully lit and populated, Fiddler's Green is an upper-class living space, far removed from the dirty streets which are lined with trash and homeless citizens. The tower houses restaurants and a shopping centre. The streets have trashy clubs which provide nude women, drinks and drugs, and zombies in several exploitative positions, such as chained up for photos or fighting each other in pathetic gladiator-style battles over stray animals, and sometimes even people. One of these people is Slack, a prostitute saved by Riley when she is thrown into a zombie cage fight. We learn later on that she was thrown in the cage because she angered someone "up there," meaning the man who controls Fiddler's Green, Kaufman.

Also part of the raiding group is Cholo, a Hispanic man who seems to care for no one but himself. He puts others in danger to further his own desires on raiding trips, which we learn is the price to become a part of the community at Fiddler's Green. When Cholo is rejected by Kaufman, he steals the massive zombie hunting vehicle, Dead Reckoning, and threatens to destroy Fiddler's Green if he's not given money and allowed to escape the city. This causes Kaufman to bring in Riley, Cholo's former crew member, forcing him to find Cholo and return Dead Reckoning. Riley agrees, in exchange for a car

to drive away when the job is done, and for his friends, his sidekick Charlie and Slack to join him.

Meanwhile, the zombies have arrived at the city limits, attracted by the tall Fiddler's Green tower, the only building with lights anywhere. They walk through the river, one of the boundaries meant to keep the city safe. They emerge at the military personnel outposts on the outskirts of the city, and the soldiers are overrun since their fences have been destroyed by Cholo and his crew. The zombies make their way to Fiddler's Green, and smash their way into the tower. The people in the tower are uninformed and unprepared, and many are consumed in the attack. Those who escape reach the electric fence that surrounds the rest of the city, which has not been disabled by the fleeing soldiers. The citizens of Fiddler's Green are trapped between the fences and the zombies, and are killed. Later on, Kaufman is deserted by his servant and killed in his own very expensive Lincoln Towncar by Big Daddy, who fills the car with gasoline from a gas pump nearby, and sets it on fire with a flaming can.

The citizens of the streets, however, manage to survive the invasion, marching to take over what's left of Fiddler's Green. Riley and his survival group, however, opt to travel North to Canada. The invading zombies march in the distance to take over some other part of the city, but no longer seem to pose any threat. In the end, it seems as if they march towards coexistence.

5.2 9/11 and the War on Terror

The main fear explored in *Land* is a multi-layered and complicated issue, 9/11 and the War on Terror. The terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, left an indelible mark on the lives of North Americans. Indeed, if one instance could be used to define this decade's fears, 9/11 and the subsequent social fallout would be the most visceral example. As would be expected, the reaction to such a brutal attack on American soil was one of fear, anger, and rage. These attacks not only shook the sense of safety most Americans felt, but arguably forever changed the lives of Americans, defining in many ways an entire generation. And for those who had gone through the fears of Y2K, biological warfare, and pandemics, a massive attack on American soil such as this only supported the rationale for living in fear of the Other. It was no surprise either that mass public support for going to war after the attacks was easily and quickly given. As McSweeney (2010:113) notes,

> In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, America found itself living in a culture of fear which revolved around the phrase 'War on Terror' itself. The cultivation of the culture of fear proved beneficial for the Bush administration in gaining support from Congress, which would have been severely hampered without the symbolic links that the administration drew between 9/11 and Iraq. Bush propelled through the 2004 elections by portraying himself as head of a nation at war. All the time this sense of fear was political currency. (2010:113)

As McSweeney suggests, the climate of fear justified extreme measures in leadership and administrative action in the United States after 9/11. In much the same way, Kaufman in *Land* took advantage of public fear and disorganization after the zombie outbreak and built an empire upon it.

While Kaufman is clearly intended to be a Bush-type character, he is also multi-faceted. Kaufman is used as a power figure, not only as a president, but also as a metaphorical image of the capitalist power system that governs North American society. Though most of the world in the film has, presumably, fallen to the zombies, Kaufman has maintained a structure of the old world, pitting classes against each other. The film spends much of its time metaphorically criticizing the Bush Administration and the United States' War on Terror. With Kaufman uttering the now-famous Bushism "We don't negotiate with terrorists," it's hard not to see the obvious connection, one which Romero jokes as an intentionally obvious one (Romero, 2005). This obvious analogy is taken a step further with Cholo uttering, "I'm gonna do a jihad on his ass," using the Islamic term of struggle as a religious duty to describe how he will enact revenge on Kaufman for betraying him, therefore taking the place of the Other in America's war on terror – Islamic Fundamentalists. The film presents then the two opposing forces: the super power nation state, and the Other, the terrorist challenging that power.

While Kaufman and his band of 'yes men' refuse to bow to Cholo's threats, they do however, waste precious resources battling against Cholo's terrorist threat, all in the name of maintaining power and control. When the zombies do eventually force their way into the realm of the upper class, no one is prepared for the attack. Those who have bought into Kaufman's maintenance of the old social order have been living within the confines of a literal glass tower, a "physical and psychological landmark" eerily similar to that of the Twin Towers (McSweeney, 2010:110), surrounded by consumerism and luxury, as if the threat of zombies and total chaos did not exist beyond the walls. Russell (2006:190) likens the panicked citizens running through the streets outside of Fiddler's

Green after the attack as "a visual analogue of the footage of commuters in New York fleeing the collapsing World Trade Center." Kaufman, however, seems perfectly prepared to abandon his citizens and move himself, and whoever else he approves of, to a new location to rebuild, noting in a rather poignant speech to a Fiddler's Green board member who protests leaving the people of Fiddler's Green unarmed:

> A day may come when you earn yourself some responsibilities. But right now the responsibilities are mine, they're all mine. It was my ingenuity that took an old world and made it into something new. I put up the fences to make it safe, I hired the soldiers and paid for their training. I kept the people off the streets by giving them games and vices, which cost me money, but I spent it because the responsibility is mine. Now, do you understand the meaning of the word responsibility? We have to do what we have to do.

Here Kaufman aptly describes the ways in which he distracts the citizens of Fiddler's Green with luxuries, and the people of the city streets with addiction and vice, to allow him to act and build his empire as he pleases. Kaufman did not so much take an "old world" and make it new, but instead rebuilt the old world in a new situation, reviving old systems of capitalism and social control through fear. At the film's end it is difficult not to side with the zombies in the face of such total denial on a grand, social scale.

Though the film's zombies do carry out a violent uprising, the film does not present the zombies as the "terrorist threat within," as many disaster movies of the last decade have done (see the 2005 adaption of *War of the Worlds*, wherein the classic story from H.G. Wells is re-invented with the invading aliens rising up from below the Earth's surface, lying in wait to attack the world instead of flying in for an invasion). If anything,

the zombies are instead the lowest class of global citizen, killed at random with no afterthought, while the nearby towns and sleepy neighbourhoods they inhabit surrounding the barricaded city are continually pillaged by Kaufman's hunting teams for more resources. In a world so used to their presence, the zombies have become a mindless threat to be disregarded in the face of real problems, such as finding enough food. But then something odd happens. The zombies begin to develop some semblance of consciousness, or at least enough to be slightly disturbed when a fellow zombie is killed, and to vaguely recall what they did before they became the walking dead. Most importantly, however, they are able to organize themselves to walk to the guarded city, and infiltrate the surrounding river. It seems, then, that the zombies are less the terrorist threat, and more reminiscent of a peasant uprising (or, perhaps a slave uprising, as the lead zombie is played by a large, powerful Black man), fighting to claim the right to exist alongside everyone else.

While Kaufman is clearly the villain, Cholo is not presented as a clear hero in this tale, even though he is directly challenging Kaufman's empire. Even the independent hero Riley chooses to ignore the looming revolution in the streets (led also by Irishman Mulligan), leaving the film with no power heroes or good winning over evil, as much of the War on Terror which followed the attacks of 9/11 purported itself to be. The heroes that do emerge are all flawed, seeking nothing more than safety or real freedom for only themselves. These heroes are presented in the characters of Slack and Charlie, Riley's loyal and mentally challenged sharp shooter sidekick. The film seems to suggest that since neither the power nation nor the terrorists are heroes, and that the revolution in the streets may be fruitless, the best chance for survival may be the path taken by Riley and

his survival group: to seek freedom elsewhere. Though they do perform some heroic acts throughout the film, they are never presented as heroes. Instead, the film provides an analogy to America during the War on Terror, but reminds the viewer that perhaps no true heroes emerge in battles for power, and truly in the end it is the citizens, surrounded by a social environment of fear, who suffer.

5.3 Power, Social Control, and Class Division

The film itself takes place after a catastrophe (the emergence of the zombies), but for many, particularly those living within the confines of the barricaded city, and especially those in the safety of Kaufman's Fiddler's Green, the immediate zombie threat has long passed. For the city's most wealthy residents their safety has been contained in their high class tower. Indeed, they are more fearful of losing their luxurious way of life to the citizens of the streets than of the zombies. The film presents a division so frank it is almost humorous for the film viewer. Soldiers patrol both the entry into the city, and Fiddler's Green itself. The tower is bright and clean, with expensive shops, food courts with black tie servers, and happy people. In contrast, the streets below, and the citizens who live there, are dirty, dark, and full of many forms of unseemly behaviour. But as campy and obvious as the division between the classes may be, the film poses the on-screen dichotomy not only to relieve the audience from the film's looming zombie uprising, but also to painstakingly remind the viewer of the dangers of extravagant ignorance. Upper class residents visit the streets occasionally, enjoying the depraved activities of the less fortunate, or having their pictures taken with chained zombies in seedy nightclubs only to return to the safety of their elegant, classy tower (McSweeney,

2010:113). They live off the dangerous work of the town's citizens, and it seems they reap all the rewards. They are living in luxury in the "grand old style," presumably the elegant and luxurious time before the zombies when the upper class could exist without concern or fear. As a repeating voice over which echoes throughout Fiddler's Green suggests, the citizens there can go about their daily lives knowing that while an outside threat exists, they do not have to come into contact with it, nor do they have to worry about their safety. The irony, then, that emerges at the climax of the film when the citizens of Fiddler's Green try to escape the invading zombies and meet the electric fences, is captured in Riley's statement that "what was built to keep people safe is going to trap them." They are ignorant of the world around them, and have blindly allowed Kaufman to set up a system of power and class division, the downfall of which the citizens of Fiddler's Green pay for with their lives.

The rich citizens of Fiddler's Green are only part of the larger construction of social power and control in the film. Romero paints a picture of colonialism and scavenging in the opening scene of the raid on Uniontown, where we meet Big Daddy and the other zombies. When the zombies first appear in the present story line, they are almost peaceful, milling about in their "community," simply existing. When the raiders invade Uniontown and kill many of the zombies, Riley notes that the attack is more like a "massacre" than a battle, beginning the transformation on screen of the zombies from mindless monsters to creatures that are different. They seem more aware of what is going on around them, creatures who are somehow trying to relive the daily routines they had while alive, and even mourning the death of others, like Big Daddy in the first attack. When the raiders enter Uniontown, they are a military-like force invading a seemingly

“weaker opponent.” The zombies are no match for the guns and vehicles the invaders have as they imitate America’s role as “global policemen” by using force to take the resources of those who cannot defend themselves. These actions ultimately trigger the events of the rest of the film as they inspire the zombies to rise up against their violent invaders (McSweeney, 2010:110).

McSweeney’s concept of the zombies as portrayed initially as a minimal threat is indeed an intriguing one. At one time, presumably, they were a global threat, wreaking chaos on all populations as the opening credits of the film suggest. But Kaufman has created a space wherein the zombies are at bay, and the public is unaware of the catastrophe that will soon befall them. Kaufman is a true pioneer of the capitalist ethic: he has profited off the fear of his Fiddler’s Green citizens (a first world allegory) and the resources of other, marginalized groups (the zombies, third world). Somewhere in the middle the working class of the streets struggle just to survive, they themselves perhaps less afraid of the zombies, but still victims of Kaufman’s government of fear. While many years have passed since the initial zombie outbreak, it would seem that with no humans to feed on, the zombies have become somewhat peaceful, existing in their mindless state in the towns surrounding the city, victims of slaughter whenever Kaufman’s henchmen return for supplies. It is an interesting concept to see the zombies in a sympathetic light, particularly when they are responsible for much of the destruction of American society within the film. However, the film is careful not to paint the zombies, or the middle classes of the city for that matter, as victims of their own making. Rather, they are victims of the overarching structure which has trapped them into submission for the sake of survival. The zombies are not initially aware that they are

killed for sport, and the people of the city's streets are simply trying to survive in a place that is presumably safer than the world outside the fences. This system of safety, of course, is built on a system of over-consumption, inequality, and dominance. As David Pagano (2008:75) notes, "The film's central irony is always that, however bad the zombie plague may be, it is only the logical extension of whatever corruption, ignorance, fear, or greed already exist among the living in America today. Hence, Romero as prophet, or perhaps cynic: seeing an irredeemable world, he projects its destruction as an inevitable consequence of its own depravity."

5.4 Racial Fears and the Threat of the Other

Issues of race and fear of the racialized Other are addressed in this film, though less succinctly than in *28 Days Later*. Instead, race becomes an extension of the discussion of corrupt power and authority – how White, upper class men dominate the American capitalist system. This is demonstrated most directly through the characters of Big Daddy and Cholo.

Big Daddy, the leader of the zombie uprising, is a large, imposing African American man, who Russell (2006:189) likens to a "zombiefied Black Panther, a civil rights revolutionary who leads the living dead underclass on a riot against the establishment." McSweeney (2010:109)notes that with a name like "Uniontown," and the zombies portrayed as coming from small town, lower and middle class America, the film critiques the myth of a classless society full of opportunity. Dressed in the literally blue

collar uniform of a gas station attendant, Big Daddy's status as a visible minority is only one piece of the class/race puzzle in *Land*.

Cholo's ethnicity is also put into play in the film, with Kaufman denying him entry into Fiddler's Green, noting he is the "wrong kind" of person for the building. We are not sure, however, if it is because Cholos is Hispanic, or simply a working class man who handles Kaufman's dirty work, which often involves removing living people from the confines of the city, presumably those who get in Kaufman's way. Though Kaufman later refers to Cholo as a Spic, overall his racial identity seems connected to his class status, echoing perhaps the social reality of modern America. When we first meet Kaufman when Cholo goes to his penthouse apartment at the top of Fiddler's Green, Cholo pours him a glass of champagne taken from the raid on Uniontown. While Kaufman insists that Cholo does not need to serve him, once Cholo gives him the glass he casually takes it to the kitchen and pours the contents into a champagne flute instead, subtly hinting that Cholo is lacking the knowledge of class etiquette to be a part of Kaufman's world (Romero, 2005). Either for his ethnicity or his class status, or perhaps both, Cholo is denied entry into Fiddler's Green.

Cholo is desperate to fit in, and his rejection fuels his "terrorist" attempts on Fiddler's Green. Big Daddy and the zombies are desperate to live in peace without slaughter, to simply exist. The denial of this leads to their actions and the zombie uprising. Though both Cholo and Big Daddy choose to retaliate with violent actions, the film seems to ask who the real terrorists are – Cholo, or the zombies, or both? Or is it perhaps, as Russell (2006:190,192) suggests, "Kaufman and his cronies, who've brought this situation upon themselves as a result of their inhumane treatment of both the living

and the ghouls?" Russell notes the multi-faceted role played by the zombies, as they take on the position of native subjects to a colonial force, but also as symbolic of a class uprising and the "mass destruction of the First World."

Through the connections of class uprisings, as well as the distinctive differences between the classes, the film challenges the viewer to see both racial and class inequalities (McSweeney, 2010:110). Once again we are reminded of MacPherson's discussions on possessive individualism, and the ways in which class separation feeds fear and drives citizens to compete against one another for freedom, luxuries and, in the case of the citizens of Fiddler's Green, a position of power which was supposed to offer them more safety than the citizens living on the streets.

At the film's conclusion the power structure has crumbled, the upper class has been consumed by the zombies, and the residents of the streets have taken over Fiddler's Green. Riley's revolutionary friend Mulligan says to him, "Why don't you stick around, we'll turn this place into what we always wanted it to be." Riley replies with, "Then what will we turn into?" His friend just smiles, and provides what is perhaps the most honest assessment of the future of the people in the post-zombie apocalypse, and now post-Kaufman world: "We'll see, won't we?" This statement rings true for many of the characters in the film. None are certain where they are going, or what they will find when they get there. All they know is where they are is no longer working, a point that has consistently been made throughout the film. Throughout the obvious commentary on the state, and perhaps fated collapse, of the American capitalist empire, there lies a deeper suggestion, one that seems to come from a place of apocalyptic nihilism. We cannot

continue on as we have gone before; indeed, as Pagano (2008:71) notes of Romero's message, perhaps "the world must end in order for there to be any future for the world."

Though the various challenges to power and the existing social structures within this film may succeed in demolishing those social structures, not all of them seek to fix them. Though Riley's revolutionary friends may hope to turn Fiddler's Green and the city into a new space for all to exist peacefully, the audience is left with the haunting image of a teenage boy holding a rifle, standing and observing the people of the streets as they move into the tower. Will peace exist if these weapons are still used by those taking power, or will a new power structure fall into place, perhaps no better than the last? Similarly, the zombies, still led by Big Daddy, move in the distance to another part of the city, searching for their own place of belonging. When one of Riley's survival group members tries to shoot the zombies in the distance, Riley stops her, noting "They're just looking for a place to go – same as us." As is seen throughout the film, Riley is simply uninterested in the revolution bubbling in the streets of the city, and is instead focusing all of his time and resources on securing a vehicle to escape the city (Russell, 2006:186).

At the end, he chooses not to stay, but instead hopes to go somewhere where there are few or no people, looking perhaps for a place where the old world has not been reassembled in Kaufman's manner. The group ultimately decides to head north to Canada, presuming there to be fewer people, or at least more open spaces where few people are likely to be found. The move to Canada also suggests a change in political climate in light of the film's statements on the George W. Bush Administration and the American military response to 9/11. A throwback, in many ways, to the army deserters fleeing north of the border at the height of the draft during the Vietnam war. Though

current readers may note that the Canadian political climate has shifted to a more conservative government in recent times, and thus makes the escape to a climate of political and social freedom perhaps a bit moot, as David Pagano (2008:80) hoped for, the migration north is more symbolic than accurate in its portrayal.

> In *Land*, the immigration to Canada underneath ironically placed fireworks is an obvious nod toward many citizens' despair over George W. Bush's America. Yet in the context of his zombie films, it strikingly promises no determinate home toward which the protagonists might be safely retiring. The emphasis is on movement rather than destination.

In the middle of the decade, America is stuck. The War on Terror is ongoing, and as the decade continues on, citizens struggle to make the most of their situations in a crumbling empire that is ceasing to work. The structures in place are no longer serving their needs, and the morals and values of citizens are changing. What we used to find scary is slowly changing, though the fear of the Other still exists. The film ends on a note far less bleak than previous Romero films, but it still does not provide a solution. While McSweeney (2010:115) suggests that in this ending "there is always open space in which to find freedom," it doesn't necessarily suggest hope. All that the characters in *Land* can hope to find is freedom from the archaic structures of capitalist control over their existence. It seems that rather than rebuild with their friends, they will instead seek out a new system, a new way of living. There is no attempt by these survivors to tear down the old structures. Instead, they simply walk the other way, leaving the ruins of the city behind them, and any future for it will be unknown to them. It is not the revolution the people of the streets have planned; however, is this in its own way revolutionary? Are the

survivors truly taking a brave step forward into a new social world? One could argue that such an image is less a political statement, since the survivors do not stay with the revolutionaries taking over the city, or try to rebuild a new system in place of the oppressive one they have helped to shatter. Is this image a statement of political and revolutionary aspiration? Or, is it simply a holdover from the "riding off into the sunset" mode of Western filmmaking?

This ending leaves the viewer with these and more questions. But the most pertinent perhaps is what will this group of survivors find on their journey? The social structures have collapsed, the revolution may be happening but they are not a part of it, and the last structures of society have broken down. How does humanity rebuild in the face of crumbling social values and structures? It is the analysis of *Zombieland*, the final film in this research, that may answer that question and the discussion of where we, as a society, may be heading.

Chapter 6 - Brave New World: Surviving the Destruction of Traditional Society in *Zombieland* (2009)

"The media acts to reinforce our material experiences of changing family structures, and decreasing community. Together, these symbolic and material influences constitute a fearful culture where we are mistrustful of fellow human beings, uncertain about the future, and subject to free-floating anxiety. The family unit is where this culture of fear is perhaps most visible as the relationship between adults and children is seemingly more fraught than ever. Child rearing is no longer a shared social responsibility, but is confined to the immediate family, while strangers are viewed with a mistrust that comes easily."

Leanne Franklin and John Cromby (2009)

The final film analyzed in this thesis, *Zombieland* (2009), was chosen because it makes a fitting end to this research. In meeting the standards of the study, it is the most recently released film of the three, rounding out the timeline in which to examine the changing representations and reactions to zombies in mainstream North American film. Unlike the first two films, however, *Zombieland* is a comedy, which sharply changes both the feeling and message within the film, and how the messages within it may be perceived.

Instead of dealing directly with specific fears, *Zombieland* looks to the larger structures and rules that govern our lives, and how the fear of living without these structural systems may be more detrimental to our survival than being open to change. In the end, it is not the zombies which will consume us, but our own refusal to change our society. In many ways, the film leaves the viewer, and the scientist, with more questions than answers. But the few answers that are provided leave humbling thoughts for consideration.

Zombieland suggests we eschew the rules, bury the collapsed social structures, and leave the old world behind. Our fears, much like the ones North American society has faced in the last decade, have slowly become a part of everyday life, and certainly, in many cases, a part of our humor and entertainment. Zombies are now mainstream members of popular culture. And as the decade progressed, their presence in our everyday lives and society made them less terrifying, and perhaps more enjoyable for growing legions of fans. As such, the zombies in *Zombieland* are the perfect example of our fears at the end of the decade: visible, real, and yet only part of the problem. In particular, the main character in the film, Columbus, helps the viewer to realize we have a choice: to let the fears engulf us, or to embrace them and make the social changes necessary to alleviate them.

This film acknowledges zombies as the catalyst of the storyline, but not the source of the drama. As in *28 Days Later* and *Land of the Dead*, zombies are the means by which the everyday world is shattered. They provide an effective starting point for the evolution of the characters and their actions. The film was also released near the end of the decade, therefore making it an appropriate book end for this study, and an effective stage in the measurement of the evolution of zombies as cultural icons and the changing social fears in the studied time period.

6.1 Film Synopsis and Concept

"It's been two months since patient zero took a bite of a contaminated burger at a Gas and Go…Remember mad cow disease? Well mad cow became mad person."

Columbus

The movie follows the journey of Columbus, a young man named after his home city, like all the characters in the film, travelling from his college dorm room in Austin, Texas, to find his family in Columbus, Ohio. Columbus provides the film's narration, giving insight into his anxieties and fears. Columbus has survived a zombie plague by following a strict set of survival rules he himself has developed and which are frequently displayed onscreen in large, animated sentences. The movie is peppered with highlights such as these, inviting the audience in on the joke, and explaining much of the characters' stories through comedic and emotional flashbacks.

On a highway not far from Austin, Columbus encounters another survivor – a tall, tough looking man, driving a black SUV, who insists on introducing himself only by the city he's from – Tallahassee. He agrees to allow Columbus to travel a short way with him as he tries to reach his family in Ohio. When they stop at a grocery store some time later, they encounter two young women: Wichita and her little sister, Little Rock. Claiming that Little Rock has been bitten by a zombie and that they both wish to end her life, Wichita tricks Tallahassee into giving her his gun, allowing them to rob the men of their guns, supplies and vehicle. Tallahassee and Columbus wander through a nearby town and manage to find another vehicle, conveniently another SUV loaded with more guns. As they travel forward, they discover that the women's escape is shortlived, as their vehicle has broken down on the side of the road. However, the women still manage to trick the men into getting into their SUV. Finally, though, the four survivors begrudgingly decide to travel together peacefully (upon Columbus' insistence) and soon develop a bond. They venture towards California, in search of an amusement park called Pacific Playland, which is rumoured to be free of zombies.

On a side trip to Hollywood, the group wanders into the now-deserted celebrity neighbourhoods to sleep in the mansion that once belonged to actor Bill Murray, a hero of Tallahassee's. In a small cameo, Bill Murray, playing himself, turns out to be alive and happily occupying his home. (A series of unfortunate events, however, lead Columbus to accidentally shoot and kill Murray, mistaking him for a zombie.) That evening, the four form an even closer bond as they learn that Tallahassee lost his young son to the zombies, explaining his deep hatred for them and total joy in killing them. While Tallahassee spends time teaching Little Rock how to shoot, Columbus and Wichita almost kiss, a moment which frightens Wichita so greatly that she and Little Rock leave early the next day, fearing attachment to these survivors. Columbus has come to realize the value in these human connections, however, and convinces Tallahassee to join him in following the women.

When they arrive at Pacific Playland, they find that the park has become infested with zombies attracted to the lights and sounds from Wichita and Little Rock turning on all the rides. In the end, Columbus decides to break one of his rules – #17 – Don't be a hero – and saves the women from the zombies. The film ends with the four survivors, now a new family, driving off from the park, in search of a fresh Twinkie for Tallahassee.

6.2 Survival Against the Other

"I survive because I play it safe and follow the rules – my rules."

Columbus

The opening scene in *Zombieland* provides a glimpse of a waving American flag while an electric guitar plays a distorted version of the Star Spangled Banner. The camera

pans out, and suddenly a zombified Secret Service agent is chasing down a camera person in front of the White House. We then hear a voiceover from the main character, Columbus, the first of many inner monologues to be heard throughout the film: "I wish I could tell you that this was still America…but you can't have a country without people, and there are no people here. No, this is now the United States of Zombieland." This opening scene, showing specifically a symbol of national pride, identity and normalcy, now totally demolished, echoes what Thompson (2007:129) refers to as "spatial dread," places which "bear the traces of repressed personal or national traumas." The national trauma of the zombie outbreak leads us to the repressed fears of Columbus, which connect back to MacPherson's theory of possessive individualism: the fear of others in connection with one's own survival, since possessive individualism always precludes solidarity. Thus, the hesitation of Columbus to trust others in the wake of total zombie destruction seems particularly relevant after a national trauma such as 9/11. In a study conducted after September 11, researchers comparing survey results from before and after the event found that the values of American teenagers shifted in response to 9/11, with safety and security moving up in importance, replacing previously high values such as self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment, which decreased by three importance rankings, on average (Murphy et al, 2006:416). This shift in priorities is echoed in the main character and narrator of the film, Columbus.

A self-stated loner, Columbus is a young college student, alone and set on survival. The viewer learns that the only reason he has survived thus far is his list of rules, some of which include:

#1: Cardio – ("The first ones to go were the fatties.")

#2: Double tap – (Referring to always shooting a zombie twice, and making sure they are dead.)
#3: Beware of bathrooms ("It's like they can smell us at our most vulnerable.")

It becomes apparent very quickly that Columbus lives in a constant state of anxiety, one which seemed to exist before he ever encountered a world full of zombies. His fear, then, extends beyond just a fear of the unknown Other, and instead extends to the entire world around him. Columbus notes early on that those who survived the initial uprising were those who could act alone in a crisis, stating "You had to focus on your own survival," and cut any emotional ties when it came to others, zombies or otherwise. Again, the fight for survival means the rejection of solidarity or group cohesion, and the fight for survival does not include helping others along the way.

These phobic, paranoid tendencies, however, are not new in Columbus' personality. He confides in one of his monologues, "I avoided people like zombies before they were zombies," and that, "When you're afraid of everything that's out there, you quit going out there." A flashback to his first encounter with a zombie reveals that he frequently isolated himself from the world, with no close family or friends. He is alone inside his dorm room, playing computer games, when a young woman frantically knocks on his door. He lets her in when he finds out it is "406," a woman who lives down the hall whom he finds extremely attractive. She is crying and scared, and so Columbus does his best to comfort her as she recounts her run in with a homeless person on her way home who tried to bite her. They both fall asleep on the couch, but a short time later, he wakes up to see 406 snarling and growling at him, looking sickly and disturbed. He does not know it yet, but she has become a zombie. A chase ensues, and soon Columbus realizes that this young woman he had idealized is now set on attacking and eating him.

Their fight ends with Columbus hitting her in the head with the top of his toilet tank, as his voice over notes, "You see? You just can't trust anyone. The first time I let a girl into my life and she tries to eat me." As he remembers the story, he refers to her as 406; he never connected with her enough to find out her real name, even as she opened up to him.

The lack of real names is a theme in the film, a method used by the characters to protect themselves from any emotional involvement should they have to make any difficult decisions for their own survival. When Columbus and Tallahassee are tricked out of their guns and vehicle by sisters Wichita and Little Rock, Wichita plainly explains to the guys, "Better you make the mistake of trusting us than us making the mistake of trusting you."

Unlike many other modern zombie films, the four characters are the only living humans we meet in the story (aside from the surprise cameo of Bill Murray), creating a sense of loneliness for the characters as they travel across the United States from Texas to California. The film gives some hint of the battles and competition for survival that ensued upon the initial zombie outbreak. After Tallahassee and Columbus have their vehicle stolen by the women, they wander through a small town, where the signs cover many of the business windows on the main street, and hang in the square, stating "Stand against the horde!" or "Citizens against infection!" The viewer is not given a story or explanation of these signs, and their importance or meaning is either lost on the characters, or they have been seen so much before by the characters that they no longer have an effect. Perhaps this is an anti-political statement, reminiscent in many ways of the same questions left to the viewer at the end of *Land of the Dead.* The signs do, however, suggest that, in this small American town at least, community members sought

to fight the zombies, and saw them as an invading force in their lives and community. Indeed, noting themselves as "citizens" signifies the importance of their identification with their town, state, and perhaps even their country, while standing against the horde. This brings to mind proud citizens bent on fighting those who would challenge their way of life.

The theme of isolation and loneliness is also exemplified in the presentation of the settings throughout the film, scenes that allude to the frontier myth so often found in American cinema. Whether alone, as pairs, or finally as a group of four, the characters are frequently shown travelling through long expanses of highway next to wide, open fields, or through empty towns and parking lots. In a country of millions of people, and presumably now millions of zombies, the main characters are often shown alone in deserted areas, where no other survivors, or even many zombies, seem to be. Thus, the lands which they cross, specifically the southwestern US, suggest a wild, open landscape full of dangers to be conquered: the wild, zombie west. This western theme is also seen in the character of Tallahassee, himself a caricature of the classic American hero figure. A Southern man wearing mostly leather, a cowboy hat, and driving a large SUV, he prides himself on how creatively and violently he can kill zombies. Tallahassee is, in a sense, the John Wayne character for the western frontier setting of the film. He is a reckless, wild, hard drinking man fuelled by hatred for the zombies, set on survival by destroying as many as possible. Though he is the complete opposite of Columbus in every way, they slowly bond as Columbus learns to step up and embrace his masculinity, or as Tallahassee encourages, "Nut up or shut up," and eventually breaks many of his rules. Tallahassee even inspires a new rule to be added to Columbus' list, #32 "Enjoy the little

things," after Tallahassee blows off steam by firing guns into the air. The more that Tallahassee breaks the rules and proceeds in this wild, cowboy-like fashion, the more Columbus bonds with him. Ironically, it is through the mentality of a lone frontier hero that Columbus begins to shake his self-imposed emotional and physical isolation, and focus on the survival of those around him, instead of just his own. This fear of the world and a desperate need to compete for survival becomes crucial in the plot, and aids to more clearly demonstrate the second fear in the film, and the connection between the two which ultimately shapes the film's progress and the conclusion of this study.

6.3 The Destruction of Social Order and Traditional Values

"I could tell she knew what I was feeling. We were all orphans in zombieland."

Columbus

The second, and most important fear in this film, and perhaps the entire study, is that of the destruction of social morals, values, and our sense of order. Once again, Columbus personifies this fear in his obsessive need to follow and adhere to his list of rules. They appear throughout the movie, often comically timed, presented to make light of his desperate need to cling to order and practicality. Columbus seems hardly disturbed by the new world of zombies, but instead becomes horrified if his rules aren't followed, either by himself or someone else.

Columbus' rules, however, are not the only collapse of social order relevant to the film. Even as he encounters Tallahassee, who is later revealed to have lost his son to the

zombies, and sisters Little Rock and Wichita, and slowly forms a bond with this new survival group, his basic instinct is to fight against creating new ties with these people. As he decides to seek his family in Columbus, Ohio, he does so out of a sense of duty rather than a deep desire to see those he loves. When he is told by Wichita that Columbus, Ohio, has in fact burnt to the ground with no survivors, he seems almost reactionless, and uncertain of his emotions, noting: "I'm not sure what's more tragic – that my family is gone, or the realization that I never really had much of a family to begin with. Either way I can't pretend that whatever I'm looking for I'll find by going home. I have no home." This realization echoes part of a larger sentiment in many facets of American culture, as the traditional family unit fades from modern life and is replaced by new configurations, and no one particular "family pattern" exists to which most of society adheres or aspires (Stacey, 2003:7).

And yet, even though Columbus has not yet accepted his survival group as his family, he still draws on his traditional, social understanding of a 'normal' family unit and insists on doing 'normal' things with them, showing his annoyance at their bickering in the car and yelling: "We can't just drive down the road playing 'I-spy' for four hours like normal-ass Americans?!" In the end, he decides to stay with the group, partially because he has nowhere else to go, but also because it has become obvious he has feelings for Wichita. Romantic feelings for Columbus are also interesting to observe as he has a very idealized concept of love and a traditional family life, perhaps because he never truly had one, and wanted desperately to do something normal and acceptable – find a girl, fall in love, and bring her home to meet his family. But, he notes, "since my

folks are a couple of paranoid shut ins like me, maybe [a girl] could bring me home to her folks." Indeed, perhaps he might find a functional, normal family to fit in with.

According to Thompson (2007:16,3), the 1990s saw an increase in the trend of families at the forefront of horror films, wherein "social anxieties about change became figured through narratives in which the family was under attack, whether from monsters, aliens, or diabolical children." Thompson also notes that the films in her case studies specifically examine the familial trauma that exist within her film selections, noting importantly that in all her case studies,

> [A] monstrous figure, the uncanny double of what the family has repressed, emerges and threatens apocalyptic vengeance because of the specific crimes for which the family is responsible…But apocalyptic dread's guiding tropes of cataclysmic violence, prophetic revelation, and radical transformation do not exhaust themselves in the familial narratives evident in my case studies; they also link the familial to the public sphere by pointing to broader historical fragmentation and change.

Thus, the zombies, who have shattered the long-held traditions of our society, have become emblematic of the changing social tides wherein traditional family spheres have fragmented, allowing for new family shapes and processes to emerge. This evolution is not without conflict, however, including a fight from those unwilling to allow change to come, particularly the character of Columbus. The change does slowly come, however, and as the survival group travels further, they begin to realize they are having fun together, and several scenes are shown of them in the SUV, arguing, joking, talking, and acting very much like a family. While Columbus still tries to enforce the rules of the road (particularly while Tallahassee and Wichita attempt to teach Little Rock to drive), he also

allows himself to be open to a break in his rules, and perhaps his perceptions of himself as better off as a loner, by undoing his seatbelt and noting, “it’s kind of freeing.”

But there is no scene as particularly intriguing and exploratory of the concept of social values than that which takes place at Kemo Sabe’s, a roadside gift shop set up to resemble an old trading post, complete with a billboard noting, “We wantum your wampum!”. After killing the zombified shop owner (a middle aged, white man dressed in western gear), they begin to explore the store, which is filled with the sounds of traditional powwow music, and contains both Native American art and more traditional, tourist giftware items such as snow globes, post cards, cowboy hats, and even sombreros. By accident, Columbus knocks an item to the ground and breaks it. He looks up, horrified at having done so. After all, in any regular store in a zombie-free time, one would assume the well-known “you break it, you bought it” rule in North American consumer culture is in place. But here, there are no consequences. Instead, Tallahassee pushes another piece off its shelf and breaks it. Suddenly, with smiles on their faces, the four survivors begin to smash and demolish as much as possible, creating a beautiful chaos which is captured in slow motion to upbeat music.

This scene provides a fun, momentary escape for both the survivors onscreen, and the audience taking it in. There are several levels of complexity, however, that are present as well. Consider first the setting. A “roadside stop”, which proudly displays a giant statue of a Native American man in traditional clothing, similar to a giant cigar store Indian statue, outside the building, which is made to look like an old log cabin trading post. While traveling, our survivors have happened upon a roadside attraction, something outside of the major, modern urban centres they have lived in and passed through. This

setting is further complicated by the apparent owner, a white man selling Native American art work and traditional items. Thus, the “Indian-ness” of the items in the store is made clear, but it is a white man selling them for a profit, taking over in the presentation of the culture. Though perhaps not an usual sight in many parts of the United States, or at least one that is not unusual enough to be remarked upon by the characters in the film, it is one that harkens back to a history of colonizers acquiring art, tools and often sacred items from Native American nations and selling them for a profit in similar trading posts where many were forced to trade and sell such items for little in return. A history of displaying “artifacts” and traditional items in trading posts as rare pieces of an old or “dying” culture is one that has followed us to the present day in museums and history texts. The setting for this scene, then, is one which is loaded with layers of historical and social contextual meaning.

The setting, however, is only part of the story. If we are to examine this scene within the context of the overall theme of the film - dismantling social structures and ways of thinking - what is to be said about the destruction of this store and the items within it? The destruction is not merely as simple as four white people dismantling images of Native American culture – images and artifacts only, not people – to blow off steam in the middle of a crisis situation. The argument could be made, perhaps, that they do not even register what they are destroying. The meaning, much like the people, is rendered invisible. Further, one could assume that the director thought nothing more of the scene than how entertaining it may be for the viewer, or how it would move the story along. In fact, none of the above analysis or suggestions of theme are discussed in the director’s commentary. This is problematic, particularly when one considers one of the

final shots of the group about to leave the store, with Little Rock wearing a large, traditional head dress, as they all smile at the destruction they have caused. The viewer is witnessing four colonizers destroying a representation of Native American culture, appropriating what they want and leaving the rest without suffering any consequences for their actions.

But a secondary level of context also lends an interesting and contradictory interpretation to the scene. The story's focus on the disregard of rules and structures may instead suggest a destruction of old ways of thinking about the past, and the present. The survivors are in many ways destroying a historical representation of Native American people – a culture and the people themselves as historic artifacts and stuck in the past – one which has continued to serve as the only mainstream representation for many North Americans (they destroy two white mannequins, one wearing traditional clothing, and one wearing cowboy attire). Amanda J. Cobb (2003:216) describes Native American people as being "conceptually trapped" in the past by many Americans: "Because so many films portray American Indians as a 'vanishing' or 'dying race,' too many Americans have come to believe that Native Americans do not exist today, or that if they do, they must look and behave like stereotypically represented warriors or shamans to be 'real'." Thus, if we are to eschew our current, cultural ways of thinking, this may mean that we must also deconstruct the images we hold of Native Americans, which includes viewing them, much like the "artifacts" in the store, as pieces of the past, and without a place in the modern world. They are therefore destroying a prop of Native American identity, not a real identity in itself. With this in consideration, then, a destruction of this

stereotypical and colonial representation of Native Americans fits hand in hand with the push in the film to leave old-world rules behind.

As the survivors reinvent the traditional structure of the family, they also begin to disregard old societal values, including how we value other people and cultures. It is important to understand that both our values and our ways of looking at the world are ingrained in us through the social values we learn, including how we value other cultures. The survivors may be seen as destroying a culture and its traditions, but perhaps it is how we view that culture and what we assume to be traditional about it that needs to be re-evaluated. Much like the zombiefied shop owner, our survival cannot continue to be based on appropriating and profiting from the stolen identity of others. However, one cannot also presume to conclude that such destruction, by four white characters, in itself is any better than leaving the old stereotypes stand where they are. Perhaps it is not for the characters in the scene to say which is best, but for the people who are poorly represented by the artifacts in the shop and noticeably absent from the scene, the Native Americans themselves, to choose the path of their future in this new world; a choice that belongs to them alone.

Finally, this scene also provides a fitting analogy of the destruction of consumer culture and capitalist competition, as discussed by MacPherson. Here, Columbus accepts the disregard of traditional social values, such as shoplifting, destroying the property of others and ignoring the rules of consumer culture. As this non-traditional family/survivor group navigates their way through a world without any familiar social structures or rules, they have also symbolically smashed the capitalist consumer culture which not only dictates many of our morals, but also much of our social order. As Columbus becomes

closer to his newly adopted family, he feels less inclined to function as a lone entity, competing for survival, but to work together with those around him for the good of the whole. Thus, the survival group begins to represent the dismissal of competitive capitalist culture, the existence of possessive individualism and the desire to compete against one's fellow citizens for consumption and personal advancement. With the smashing of a store that not only signaled archaic representations and stereotypical thinking of Native American people, but also the overall destruction of consumerism, Columbus and the survival group have begun to disengage their minds from the structures which have been ingrained in them by a culture that no longer exists. But the only hint to what this moment may mean to the characters comes from Columbus: "Tallahassee's right. You gotta enjoy the little things, even if that means destroying a whole lot of little things."

A final value held by the survivors seems to be that of innocence, and a return to life the way it was. The journey to Pacific Playland by Wichita and Little Rock is nothing more than the promise of something good and pure, childhood fun. But it also harkens to the frontier myth again, where the search for a new world full of promise is at the core of any journey. Wichita explains to Columbus that even before the zombie outbreak, growing up was hard for Little Rock, and for her to simply experience a piece of a 'normal' childhood would be a gift the older sister would be so proud to give. But when the zombies attack the amusement park, it becomes obvious that things are never going to be the way they were. These four characters are not only forced to rely on each other, but also to let go of any previous conception they had of how they were expected to live their lives. Tallahassee fulfills a rather epic cowboy moment as he sets himself out as bait for the horde of zombies in order to allow Columbus to break his own rule and save the

women, who, for the first time in the film and one assumes in their lives, are the ones who need rescuing. In a serious film, Tallahassee would not have survived the zombie shoot out. He would most likely, as the Western hero, have sacrificed himself to save the innocents. But *Zombieland* is not a serious film – it is a comedy. And because it is a comedy, they all get to survive, and leave heroic sacrifice to the films of their country's past. Their survival, however, is only due to their having chosen to love and accept each other as their new family, and let go of the old world rules which can no longer govern them, or this new America. Their search for a simple reminder of their past becomes the climax of the film, where they accept as permanent and irreversible the change in their world, and themselves.

One of the final lines in *Zombieland* comes from Columbus, noting that Tallahassee, Wichita and Little Rock, his survival group, were no longer just strangers, but "…the closest to something I'd always wanted but never really had – a family. I trusted them and they trusted me." With this realization, he goes on to note "And even though life would never be simple or innocent again, as [Tallahassee] savoured that spongy yellow log of cream, we had hope, we had each other. And without other people, well, you may as well be a zombie." This realization, however, only comes to him after he has accepted the total collapse of social order. He has tried to do the right thing, what is expected in a crisis, by seeking out his own biological family, uncomfortable with them as he might be, but in the end, this new family will be his human connection, and ultimately why he survives.

Perhaps most interesting of all is that there is a parallel between the collapse of social order, and the rules, values and morals which are embedded in our system, and Columbus' own struggle with that established social order. He has developed a set of rules to keep himself alive during the ensuing zombie threat, and yet these rules leave him isolated, terrified, and alone. It is not until he meets what will be his new family that he is finally forced to let go of his rules, and allow an unconventional human connection to develop, one which goes directly against his traditional views on rules, family, and his own personal survival.

Thus, if we have faced fears of biological warfare and pandemic diseases, as in *28 Days Later*, and terrorist threats along with a distrust of authority and the old guard, as in *Land of the Dead*, it does seem reasonable that by the end of the decade, we are forced to abandon all the rules, structures and previous moralities, such as the concept of the family, in order to survive our ever-changing lives in this society. Thompson (2007:2) notes Constance Penley's assertion that while we can perhaps imagine a better future, we cannot yet perceive of ways in which to create a better future, or the political strategies and movements needed to make such changes, and thus, "science fiction films repeatedly replay resistance to alien invasions in the form of romanticized messiahs or small guerrilla groups, rather than through systemic political change." Further, consider how zombie films have changed over the years in this study, from serious horror films to light hearted comedies. Why has the value of a traditionally evil monster suddenly shifted to a more fun, enjoyable monster? Are we no longer scared of zombies? Or is it something else? Has this shift to comedic figures come to signify a total saturation of the creature itself in pop culture, and therefore emptied of its symbolic importance? Perhaps it is too

soon to answer those questions. But at the end of a decade characterized by fear and social and moral breakdown, what choice do we have but to eschew the old rules and challenge the social, economic and social political systems that have failed us.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion: Looking Back, Trudging Forward - Zombies and Fear as Knowledge for the Future

"Zombie movies are always about The End. Full of literal images of death, the genre taunts us with a vision of the permanent full stop that awaits us all as bodies decay and the mind switches off. It's the genre's most enduring quality."

Jamie Russell (2006)

2000-2010 will be a decade remembered in history not just for catastrophic disasters such September 11, 2001, but for the changing tides in social reality. While the everyday experience of living with fear is nothing new, much of the Western world has become more directly connected to the media. Almost no one was left unplugged in the world of social media and instant, electronic global connection as the decade ended. But as we remain connected to the news and reports of more terrorist plots, viral outbreaks and growing social movements to challenge our traditional way of social life, we escape further into the world of reality television, social networks, and as always, the fantasy of film. In the past decade, zombie films, and the zombie itself, have become a staple in the filmgoer's life, presenting not only a temporary reprieve from the grind of our daily lives, but also a safe environment in which to explore our most terrifying thoughts and deepest desires for social change. At the end of the decade, zombies emerged not only as a film favourite, but also as a staple character in pop culture. They are everywhere, and as with everything we do not understand, the more we learn, reproduce and explore, the less we are afraid. Zombies have, in many ways, become a safe way in which to explore the most terrifying of our fears – the total collapse of life as we know it.

By late in the decade, the War on Terror lost most of its power over the general public, as attention was distracted by financial disaster in the US economy in 2008. More reports of viral outbreaks continued, but were overshadowed by the financial collapse. Suddenly, the destruction of our social world seemed imminent. It was no longer zombies which terrified the public, but the very real prospect of losing one's job, home, and future savings. Perhaps this is why zombies became such a cultural staple. The threat of the undead was not so far off from millions flocking to claim unemployment, inhabit tent cities, and eventually participate in massive public protests against financial corruption. This of course is not a new pattern in our society, and as C. Wright Mills (2000:225) reminds us, any time period under scrutiny must be examined in context of human history in general. Patterns in social life do not simply emerge out of nowhere.

The horror film boom of the 1930s, and specifically the zombie's entrance, was due in no small part to the stock market crash and the chaotic economic and social aftershocks that followed. Horror was no longer simply onstage or in the movies, but in the everyday lives of Americans. The images of slaving, zombie workers in 1932's smash hit, *White Zombie*, starring Bela Lugosi, echoed strongly with the public, as zombies made their way into the tired minds of terrified Americans. As Jamie Russell (2006:23) notes, it wasn't just the film's heroine who was forced to suffer as an unwilling, zombie slave to the powers that be: "Everyone faced the awful possibility of joining the shuffling, blank-faced down-and-outs waiting in line for bread and soup, an economic zombiefication of terrifying proportions." The zombie's arrival was perfectly timed then, and throughout film history, the monster has continued to make an appearance when social unrest and change are most frighteningly visceral. This is a unique monster, one

which can embody so many ideas and concepts, from our fear of death to a class uprising, to a mindless horde competing with humanity for basic survival. Zombies can become that which we fear both outside of ourselves and within. The zombies represented in the films in this study are no different. What has changed, or perhaps shifted in our minds, is how we view the zombie, and ourselves, in the structure of our society. Now, the zombie is rarely the primary enemy, the thing to fear, or to fear becoming. The primary terror is what happens *after* the zombies arrive, and where we, and the world we live in, will be left.

To this end, one of the most interesting patterns revealed in this study was the zombie's position shifting from the horrific to the comedic. This is not to say that zombies suddenly became treated as comedy objects only, or ceased to be scary in the movies studied. Instead, the members of the survival groups were the ones to change in their reactions to the zombies, and filmmaking itself reflected this change. From terrifying, jump out scenes in *28 Days Later* to hilarious "Zombie Kill of the Week" moments in *Zombieland*, the films seem to reflect the changing attitudes towards zombies in pop culture. When anything saturates the market, and the minds of consumers, it loses any initial shock or sensational value it may have had. When zombies become popular on children's clothing, market saturation seems complete. And yet, the popularity of the zombie continues. Thus, this shift in public perception may have less to do with fear of the zombies, and more to do with an acceptance of a world full of constant fear and safety threats, a visual representation, however fantastic, of the public's general feeling of doubt about their own safety. Megan Sutherland (2007:66) notes that "…moviegoers subject to life under the constant anxiety of the Orange-Level alert – where our self-proclaimed

leaders gleefully remind us that brainwashed terrorists will strike at any moment – might identify with characters besieged by zombies on all sides." Perhaps this is why the comedy in films like *Zombieland*, and other zombie comedies later in the decade, became so popular. Suddenly, audiences could not only identify the feeling of living with fear, but also the ability to laugh off the scariest moments.

The theories which have shaped the initial research design have demonstrated how a holistic view of film and society and the interconnection between the two is necessary in understanding the power of movies and their texts in a culture driven by entertainment. Kracauer argued that film was a collective experience in both its creation and its interpretation, and that the fears and hopes of a population are always present in the entertainment consumed by the public. Macpherson's theories of possessive individualism echo throughout the films as the characters often choose their own survival over building community or challenging corrupt social structures. The films echoed much of what MacPherson has theorized, namely a narrow focus on ourselves and our gains, the separation and isolation from other members of our society in order to further those gains and the global, economic system which has made the simple act of existence one of brutal competition. The threat of losing these hard-earned gains becomes no more heightened than in times of fear and strife, and the turn of the millennium certainly qualified as an uneasy period in the minds of many. As Thompson notes, the 2000s were a decade that were typified by uncertainty and dread, and as the years moved on, it was a decade that was plagued with apocalyptic thinking and fear. Each of these theories separately provide a fascinating approach to the films in this study, but it is when they are

used together that they offer a complex and in-depth mode by which to understand the power of popular film in a troubling time.

However, there is still an air of openness in all the films at their end. All of the survival groups in the three films escape death either by zombies or dangerous humans, at least for the time being, and drive off, presumably to a new life with new ways of thinking and living. Like so many protagonists in classic Western cinema, the heroes drive off into the sunset at the end of the films, leaving viewers with some sense of hope, but no real conclusion to the stories. It is an old, iconic image, but one which frequently suggests some kind of hopeful outcome for the hero. There is a sublime ignorance in this that could either be a simple film device for a conclusion, or an appeal to the audience. What is clear is that the survivors' desire to leave the scene of chaos and start anew reigns supreme in their decision making process. They do not rise up to challenge the old decaying systems, but seek to flee social life *en masse*. Is this a call to anarchy? Or simply for survival? Are we meant to challenge the social systems, or leave them to fall as they inevitably must?

The only clear direction here is survival, and reinvention of how we perceive our social lives and how we ultimately live. If these social systems must inevitably collapse, there seems to be a message of hope in all three films, but only if we are prepared to abandon all social constructions. As Lauro and Embry (2008:107-108) aptly note: "When the Haitian slave took up arms, he was rejecting his status as object and claiming the position of the subject; thus, to overcome imperialism, the individual had to assert himself as having agency. Here, in an era where global capitalism forecloses all attempts to withdraw from the system, the only option is to shut down the system, and the

individual with it." Thus, our agency is still important, but instead of directly challenging the system, most of the survivors in these films choose to simply leave and seek out a better existence. Whether these escapist endings are anti-political in their essence, suggesting that in the end possessive individualism and oppressive social structures will always triumph, or that solidarity in abandonment of these antiquated systems is the only way to truly overcome a competitive, capitalist existence, is still open to interpretation and continuing debate.

All three films also centre on a small group of survivors who are trying to negotiate the new world through a now-extinct social network. In two out of the three films in this study, the survival group leaves on their own to seek survival and a new way of life (*Land* and *Zombieland*, the two films from later in the decade). They are not challenging the old order, nor are they trying to change it. Their ending could be seen as nihilistic, or perhaps an acceptance of the belief that standing up to the powers that be is politically and socially useless, even suicidal. Or perhaps, seeing how authority is presented as totally corrupt and outdated in the first two films, and pretty much non-existent in the third, it may be that trying to change an old system has become a useless endeavour, and thus new ways of existing need to be explored.

In the final analysis, what can be said of zombies and fear, film and society? What seems most interesting is to note how the zombie continues to thrive as a pop culture icon, a superstar and the subject of endless books, television shows, and ongoing films with no end in sight. And though the zombie occasionally transforms from a frightful monster to an almost comedic character, the desire to explore a world overrun by zombies continues to saturate the pop culture market, and no amount of products, ranging from the

fascinating to the ridiculous, seems able to satisfy public appetites. It may be that zombies will once again fall back into B-film obscurity, making way for other monsters with other stories to tell. But for now, we show no lack of interest in zombies, or perhaps more importantly, their ability to reduce our cherished social structures to absolute rubble. If film has become our safe place to explore our deepest desires and darkest of emotions, then perhaps we still have much in our hearts and minds to explore in a search for answers. Alternatively we may simply find we are not the only ones who fear a total collapse of all which we have come to believe about ourselves and our world. In that, zombies will continue to be the most willing of catalysts, providing a plethora of social and personal critiques yet to be written. Russell (2006:225) provides a thoughtful conclusion:

> Imperialism, racial anxiety and fears about brainwashing have all had their part to play in the zombie's evolution and popularity. Ultimately, though, these walking corpses are always symbols of death, parodies of the supposed finality of the body and the promised everlasting life of the soul. Zombie movies make us confront our fears about death and dying – fears that normally stay hidden in a culture where, to quote Woody Allen, the majority of us aren't afraid of death – we just don't want to be there when it happens.

For some, taking a horror movie icon as the subject for serious academic work may seem a rather fruitless endeavour. But this work is not simply about the zombies. As any thoughtful filmgoer knows, the real story is always about the living. There is a fine line separating humans from other animals, a line which consists of millions of years of

evolution, certainly, but one which also balances tenuously with drives that refuse to leave our genetic make up. And one of the most basic, and powerful, of drives, is fear. After all, is our survival "instinct" really anything more than a simple fear of death, of the unknown? Burying one's head in the sand in the wake of hopeless political despotism and social unrest is no different from+ the simple ecstasy experienced by the escapism of watching a movie. We use these escapist tools often – books, movies, television, sports – never stopping to ask what they provide for us. But the answer is always escape. The world we live in is terrifying. The past decade alone has demonstrated that our social structures, the same ones that we depend on daily to keep us civil and our animal tendencies at bay, are shaky at best and capable of total destruction while we watch ourselves helplessly fall with them. Government, the education system, laws, the economy, all of these structures are made with our hands with the intent to support us and maintain a society free of chaos and destruction. And yet, we watch them crumble and shake and the cracked foundations begin to show. Suddenly, our world may no longer seem so secure. Is it any wonder that all too often ordinary citizens are overcome by fear, paralyzed at the thought of total chaos and the end of society, the end of the world? Why then do we seek out the same destructive themes in our entertainment?

The answer to that will always be hope. For in the dark of a movie theatre we sit either with our friends, or, even if we are alone, with other citizens of the same nation, or of the same world. We experience the fear together, we experience the emotions together. And if we allow ourselves the opportunity for escape, perhaps in turn we may also seek out what resonates so deeply in each one of us as we tune in to the next episode of *The Walking Dead*, desperate to cheer for the survivors, hoping that they may find a way to

beat the odds. And if it is fear that guides us to seek out these apocalyptic themes in our escapism, then perhaps too it is hope, not just for the characters in the films, but for all of us to slowly pull our heads out of the sand, and explore the most vulnerable aspects of ourselves – our humanity.

To study zombies is to study how humankind will work together through fear and hope to either survive the future, or repeat the past. There is no more worthy academic pursuit.

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