The Evolution of Protagonist-Zombie Interactions in American Zombie Cinema: A Mirror of Evolving Race Relations Between White and Black America

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**Introduction**

Just like the ever-growing horde in which the zombie travels, the popularity of the zombie in American culture has skyrocketed since its arrival in William Seabrook's 1929 book, *The Magic Island*.¹ From the appearance of Nielsen-chart topping TV shows like AMC’s *The Walking Dead*, to critically acclaimed movies such as *28 Days Later*, to zombie apocalypse themed 5k runs, it is evident that our fascination with the zombie is growing—and shows no signs of stopping anytime soon.² For perspective, the number of zombie books published annually has quadrupled over the past decade.³ In 2013, the television ratings for *The Walking Dead* beat all other competitors airing in the same time slot—including *Sunday Night Football*.⁴ Furthermore, the amount of JSTOR scholarly articles based on zombies published in the past decade is more than five times the amount of journals published in the decade before.⁵

The zombie, as well as other popular aspects of a culture's entertainment forms, can be used as a "barometer for measuring an era's cultural anxieties."⁶ When examining the zombie in American culture through the lens of the Cultural Studies movement, one can see that the zombie is a manifestation of white America's fear of its black citizens. The zombie, (which “originated” in Africa)⁷ is similar to a human, but has less intelligence, a carnal mentality, and poses a danger to society. These same characteristics were also assigned to African-Americans, but have declined over time as America became more tolerant and accepting.⁸

Using the knowledge that the American zombie is a possible representation of black America, one can dissect zombie-based forms of entertainment in order to analyze white America's attitudes towards its black citizens. While effective in theory, analyzing the progression of zombie entertainment as a whole is potentially too broad of a topic. In this research paper, I will be scrutinizing, specifically, zombie cinema, and the chronological
progression of the *interactions* between protagonist and zombie—in order examine the evolution of the *relationship* between white and black America.

**Protagonist-Zombie Interactions Pre-Civil Rights Movement**

(1932-1964)

The concept of the zombie has its roots in West African culture and folklore, but the semi-dead creature known as the "zombi," in West African culture differs greatly from the rabid, flesh-eating zombie seen in today's entertainment.\(^9\) The West African *zombi* was essentially a soulless slave, doomed to serve his master for eternity.\(^{10}\) Theoretically, it was a manifestation originating from the indigenous peoples' fear of living out their days in enslavement, during the age of New World slavery.\(^{11}\) The concept of the *zombi* "crossed" the Atlantic ocean through the oral tradition essential to slave culture.\(^{12,13}\) Even after slavery was abolished, the concept of the *zombi* persisted because of marginalized groups’ fear of colonialism.\(^{14}\) The *zombi* ultimately came to represent a combination of the slave doomed to work for eternity, and a country's people doomed to support a colonizer.\(^{15}\)

In 1929, William Seabrook's book, *The Magic Island*, introduced the *zombi* to mainstream American culture.\(^{16}\) *The Magic Island* detailed Seabrook's travels and experiences in Haiti, but most importantly described the *zombi* to the white American public.\(^{17,18}\) Seabrook described the *zombi* as a "soulless human corpse" often made to be a "servant or slave" by its white master.\(^{19}\) The *zombi* was "clearly associated with the belief system of people of African descent," and consequently the American zombie became associated with African-Americans.\(^{20}\)

*The Magic Island* happened to be released shortly after a period of African-American racial protesting and rioting, which stemmed from the stoning of a black Chicago teenager, and the police department’s subsequent refusal to arrest the white perpetrator.\(^{21}\) This time period in
the early 20’s, known as the “Red Summer,” marked a period of racial unrest between white and black America, in which both sides incurred heavy casualties from violence against each other. The rise of the zombie during the race riot filled 1920's, specifically as a representation of African-Americans, held great appeal to white America for several reasons. The fact that the zombie was mindless and perpetually controlled by a white master insinuated that African-Americans, although legally freed from slavery, would still continue to work mindlessly for their white counterparts. Thus, it was essentially a continuation of slavery. Furthermore, the zombie described in Seabrook's book could not harm the white protagonists by its own volition because the zombie was at the beck and call of its (white) master.

The compliant nature of the zombie reinforced the idea of the African-American as a helpless creature dependent on its white master—directly contrasting the African-Americans of the current time period, who were actively uprising against inequality and racism. Ultimately, the zombie's inability to turn against its master appealed to white America's wishes for a docile African-American workforce that would not resent and seek revenge for previous enslavement and current subjugation.

*White Zombie* (1932)

*The Magic Island*, which was adapted into a film titled *White Zombie*, would set the tone for pre-civil rights movement zombie cinema. In *White Zombie*, the main antagonist is an Eastern-European voodoo *bokor* (Haitian word for “shaman”) who controls a horde of Haitian zombies. The *bokor* "zombifies" a white banker's fiancé, Madeleine, so that he can command and steal Madeleine to be his wife. The zombies in this film, who are almost all black, play the role
of minions who pose little threat to the protagonist banker and his wife. The primary role of these black zombies is to serve as an emotionless workforce at the shaman's sugar factory. While these black zombies show obvious ties to a slave workforce, what is most interesting about *White Zombie*, is that the film focuses more upon the zombified Madeleine—the "white zombie" from which the film derives its title, than it does on the mindless workers.

While Madeleine, in her zombified state, is the "object of pity," the shaman's zombies are viewed with aspects of "fascination," "horror," and even slight humor. The zombies are unintelligent and "cartoonish," characteristics which are epitomized when the zombies pitifully walk off of a cliff when their master's spell is broken.

![Figure 1](image-url)

Figure 1. The pitiful zombies tumble off of a cliff when their *bokor*’s spell is broken, in Victor Halperin’s *White Zombie* (United Artists, 1932)

While the zombie-slaves could represent white America's wish for a return to African-Americans as a docile workforce (under the control of their white masters), *White Zombie* has much more to say about race relations than an attitude of nostalgia. The comical attempt of the zombies to harm the banker, during which the banker simply sidesteps the oncoming zombie horde as they topple off a cliff, demonstrates a belief that although there were race riots and
uprisings, that the black population as a whole, did not truly pose a great threat to white America.

Ultimately, the most important protagonist-zombie interaction in *White Zombie* is simply the fact that Madeleine *is* a zombie. Arguably, the primary fear in this film does not come from the pitiful native zombie-slaves, but the white voodoo *bokor*, who embodies the fear of becoming a zombie. The fact that *White Zombie* was "fueled" by the fear of becoming a zombie, and not the zombie itself, provides an effective lens for race relations in the early 1930s. The fear of becoming a zombie is a possible manifestation of white America's fear during the Great Depression that poverty would force them "down" to the same lifestyle or profession as the majority of the Black population at the time, who were near slave-like sharecroppers. Furthermore, the fact that the zombie-slaves simply died after the curse was broken, compared to Madeleine's return to her previous non-zombie state, could demonstrate a hopeful message for white viewers: regardless of the poverty at the time, African-Americans will perpetually be subordinate, whereas white-America will face hardship, but ultimately prevail.

*I Walked with a Zombie* (1943)

The film, *I Walked with a Zombie*, is very similar to *White Zombie*: both films are set in the Caribbean, center around trying to cure a female “white zombie,” and involve indigenous zombie hordes controlled by a *bokor*. But there is one crucial difference between the films—in *I Walked with a Zombie*, the *bokor* is Black.33

*I Walked with a Zombie* was the most critically acclaimed in a string of pre-Civil Rights movement zombie movies, including *Ouanga* (1935), *Revolt of the Zombies* (1936), *King of the Zombies* (1941), *Voodoo Island* (1957), and *Zombies of Mora Tau* (1957), in which viewers saw the emergence of the non-white *bokor*, instead of the white *bokor* characteristic of *The Magic*
Island and White Zombie. I Walked with a Zombie and similar films’ display of a Black bokor, represented a turning point in the evolution of zombie cinema in which directors began to explore the concept of zombies (symbols for Black America) rising up against white protagonists. I Walked with a Zombie was essentially the most important of the films which explored a concept even more terrifying to white viewers than zombification: Black resistance.

I Walked with a Zombie centers around Betsy, a nurse, who is sent to a Caribbean Island to care for a sugar plantation owner’s wife, Jessica. Over the course of the film, Betsy realizes that Jessica’s “tropical fever” mirrors the symptoms of zombification. In a desperate attempt to cure Jessica, Betsy resorts to bringing Jessica to a voodoo houngan (zombie priest) in hopes that the houngan can “unzombify” her. Ultimately going against Betsy’s wishes, the houngan and native zombies decide to claim Jessica as one of their own. The houngan then uses a voodoo doll, representative of Jessica, to attempt to will her to his bidding. Betsy rescues the houngan-controlled Jessica from the houngan’s initial attempt to capture her. Nevertheless, the movie concludes with parallel scenes in which the houngan stabs the voodoo doll, while the plantation owner’s jealous brother stabs and kills Jessica. The climax of the film flipped racial hierarchy in pre-Civil Rights movement America on its head: “the black ‘inferiors’ had reduced their white masters to dolls, taking life from them as they please.”

I Walked with a Zombie caused viewers to ponder the frightening thought: “are the white characters ‘merely another tool in the hands of the powerful houngan?’” Furthermore, do the black natives ultimately control “the will and destiny of the whites” on the island? In I Walked with a Zombie, the viewer's fear is no longer derived simply from the fear of becoming a zombie, the fear now encompasses non-whites commanding immense power, and furthermore, the ability of the non-whites to inflict this immense power against their white counterparts.
emergence of the Black honguan and the zombies’ ability to go against the wishes of the white protagonist was a theoretical manifestation of white America’s realization that black America would fight back against inequality and subjugation.

Figure 2. A powerful still shows the native zombies carrying Jessica’s lifeless body back to her estate—an old plantation, in I Walked with a Zombie (RKO Radio Pictures, 1943)\textsuperscript{41}

Ultimately, the rise of the Black bokor, or in this case houngan, could represent the rise of leaders in the Black community who were advocating for equality. The houngan, a zombie priest, and his followers, have clear ties to the black reverend and his black congregation. Church was an aspect of Black culture which unified communities of African-Americans across the nation. The fear of the Black zombie priest and his Black zombie followers was likely an indication of white America’s fear that the Black Church was planting the seeds necessary for black America to topple American racial hierarchy. White America’s fear of the black church was conceivable, as the black church was the “dominant institution” in the Black community, and its membership “provided individuals a frame for receiving the message and meaning” of protesting for equality\textsuperscript{42}
While the fear of the *houngan* represented the fear of the black church’s power, the fact that the fear was still directed at the leader of the zombies, instead of the zombies themselves, demonstrated that in the time before the Civil Rights movement, the leaders of black America were the ones who truly posed a threat to white hierarchy, not black America as a whole. *I Walked with a Zombie*, as well as other pre-Civil Rights movement films ultimately demonstrate that zombies were “little more than exotic set dressing, frightening in their lumbering movements and dull stares, but never really constituting a moral threat to the film’s protagonists.” The true fear was still derived from the one who *creates* the zombies. Likewise, it would not be until the era of the Civil Rights Movement that the black community itself, not just its leadership figures, would be portrayed as fear inducing in cinematic representations of zombies.

However, before the Civil Rights movement occurred, World War II dawned upon America. The attention of America’s citizens proceeded to shift from domestic issues of black-white racial tension to international issues of national security. Consequently, the black native zombie and its representation of the threat to white-America’s racial hierarchy held less appeal to moviegoers. During this time period, the “walking dead were not enough to sustain a feature [film],” so studios opted to use “zombies as subplots in larger stories.” These films, such as *King of the Zombies* (1941), *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943), *Zombies of the Stratosphere* (1952), and *Creature with the Atomic Brain* (1955), involved nazi zombies, “Nazi-ploitation,” “nazi spies, mad doctors, mobsters, and ridiculous schemes to take over the world.” More importantly, they were near devoid of any representation of African-Americans as zombies. However, with the advent of the Civil Rights movement, the concept of the zombie as a representation of black America would not only resurface, but also flourish.

**Protagonist-Zombie Interactions During the Civil Rights Movement**
(1954-1968)

The era of the Civil Rights Movement encompassed the peak of tensions between white and black America. During the Civil Rights Movement, black America rebelled against the system of racial hierarchy that had persisted in America, protesting for an end to racial segregation and discrimination. White America’s fear of a black uprising had become a reality. “Just when the cinematic zombie seemed destined to be relegated to campy parodies and low-profile cameos, a new kind of zombie was born” during the Civil Rights Movement, “one [a zombie] both infectious and cannibalistic, with the release of Night of the Living Dead (1964).”

Night of the Living Dead (1968)

Director George Romero’s Night of the Living Dead revolutionized zombie cinema, and its characteristics have “become the industry standard ever since” Six key differences separate Night of the Living Dead from its cinematic predecessors: (1) Romero “freed” the zombie of its master and ties to Haitian voodoo; (2) the zombies far outnumbered the human protagonists; (3) the zombies feasted on human flesh; (4) the zombie condition is contagious; (5) the main protagonist/hero is black while the zombie horde is white; (6) zombies bring about the apocalypse. These revolutionary cinematic characteristics and survival-based plot of Night of the Living Dead would ultimately lead Night of the Living Dead to become one of the most effective cinematic lenses used for examining white-black race relations during the Civil Rights Movement.

In Night of the Living Dead, Romero forewent the love triangles, voodoo rituals, and zombie puppeteers characteristic of previous zombie movies, and opted for a simple but ultimately powerful plot, in which a small group of survivors are boarded up in a house and
attempt to ward off a white zombie horde. Before even delving into the zombies themselves, it is important to address one of the most startling zombie-protagonist interactions in *Night of the Living Dead*: the existence of a black protagonist, instead of a black zombie characteristic of past zombie films. Not only was the protagonist, Ben, African-American, but he did not play into the negative tropes presented by Civil Rights era Blaxploitation films—virtually the only type of movie where a black actor could have a lead role. In *Night of the Living Dead*, Ben is the main hero, who undertakes the task of killing the *white* zombie horde. Ben fends off the white zombie horde, but is ultimately killed by police who mistake him for a zombie, in a scene that is eerily reminiscent of a lynching, and has definite parallels to the assassination of Martin Luther King that occurred the same year the film was released.

Scene after scene of Ben, an African-American, slaying white zombies, would have had a startling effect on white viewers at the time. This effect would only be accentuated by the condescending way in which Ben speaks to the white characters in the film, the most powerful example occurring when Ben barks at Harry Cooper, “if you’re stupid enough to go die in that trap [the basement] that’s your business. However, I am not stupid enough to follow you. It is tough for [your] kid that her old man is so stupid. Now get the hell down in the cellar...I’m the boss up here.” Ultimately, Romero’s depiction of an African-American, who was not afraid to take action against other white characters, whether it be the actual fending off of the white zombies, the killing off of the white family that becomes “zombified” by a bite from their infected daughter, the execution-style killing of Cooper, or the punching of the emotional and hysterical Barbara, made massive statements about the changing racial climate in America. In his review of *Night of the Living Dead*, revered movie critic Roger Ebert described how the theatre “was pretty quiet” and the “mood of the audience began to change” when the “Negro has
to kill the [white] little girl...and then her father.”58 Renowned zombie expert, Kyle Bishop, writes, “In the midst of the social upheavals of the Civil Rights movement, Ben manifests the fear of many white Americans: that black men would become socially impertinent and come to threaten the safety of white women.”59

A white moviegoer, who identifies with the white zombie horde, would be horrified by the implications of a black man putting bullets in the white zombies’ heads. On the other hand, another white moviegoer, who identifies with the survivors in general, would be horrified by implications of a growing zombie horde, just like the growing population of black America, overrunning the survivors and bringing about the apocalypse. In this way, *Night of the Living Dead* derives its source of fear not only from the implications of an authoritative black protagonist, but also from the implication that zombies, a representation of black America, could overrun society.

Figure 3. Ben punches Harry Cooper after Harry attempts to lock him out of the house in *Night of the Living Dead* (Market Square Productions, 1968)60

Romero’s take on the zombie, which relinquished its master, preyed on human flesh, grew through infection, and brought about the apocalypse, was inadvertently a perfect symbol for white-America’s views of Black America during the civil rights movement. One of the first fear-inducing characteristics of the “Romero zombie” was its lack of a master. The “Romero zombie” was autonomous and acted on upon its desire to prey upon flesh. Kyle Bishop writes
that by “freeing” the zombies from their masters, Romero inverted the “master/slave dialectic present in the voodoo zombie films” made before the Civil Rights movement. In Night of the Living Dead, the zombies “symbolize a slave or even proletarian revolution.” These zombies “turn on those who could be seen as their one time oppressors; after all, the living humans get to enjoy life while the dead have no access to such pleasures.” Similarly black America was revolting against their oppressors, vying for access to the “pleasure” of racial equality. Night of the Living Dead ultimately preyed upon white viewers’ most paramount fear at the time...the fact that white America was literally witnessing the ultimate slave revolution -- the Civil Rights Movement.

In addition to the lack of a master, the threat of the zombie to infect others only added more horror to the zombies of Night of the Living Dead. White America’s association of black America with zombies, was only strengthened by the new association of zombies with viruses and infection. In the late 50’s and early 60’s, in a period termed “White flight,” many white Americans moved from the racially mixed urban cities, to the predominantly white suburbs in an attempt to distance themselves from the poverty-stricken, disease-ridden ghettos—where the majority of black America resided. The correlation between black America, and the virus carrying zombie served to further justify the belief that black Americans were not white America’s social and racial equals.

The contagious nature of the zombie of the zombie horde also drew parallels to miscegenation and the subsequent threat of African-Americans to “poison” a white bloodline. As academic Robert Smith writes, “zombie outbreaks are portrayed as a struggle to keep our bodies and by extension our identities… safe from contact with dangerous, or tainted, blood.” At the time African-Americans were categorized by the “one drop of blood rule,” wherein a person
with a single drop of “Black blood” was African-American.\textsuperscript{66} Hitler had notoriously argued that, “classes vanish, classes alter themselves, the destinies of men undergo changes, but something always remains...the blood...it is in a racial sense the soul.”\textsuperscript{67} Therefore, the bite of the zombie represents the tainting of purity, and subsequently the threat of black America to contaminate whiteness itself—exactly what the Jim Crow laws strove to prevent.\textsuperscript{68}

![Figure 4. The Cooper family tends to their infected daughter in the basement of the house, in Night of the Living Dead (Market Square Productions, 1968)](image)

Furthermore, In Night of the Living Dead, the infectious zombies become so rampantly spread that the protagonists can no longer run and hide from them; the apocalypse has arrived. The protagonists must either kill or be killed. Similarly, during the Civil Rights movement, white America could no longer ignore the spread of ideals, protests, and laws that threatened the traditional racial hierarchy that had persisted for centuries; some members of white America felt that they had to either fight against these progressive ideals or see the apocalypse of their society.

In addition to the autonomous, virus-carrying nature of the zombies in Night of the Living Dead, was the zombies’ hunger for flesh. The taboo of cannibalism, combined with the aspect of contagion made for a horrifying creature. The likeness of the Romero zombie to African-
Americans presented the simple, but powerful implication that African-Americans presented a direct threat to white America-- a desire to devour and transform white America.

But, most the most horrifying aspect of the “Romero zombie” was the emergence of the trend in which the zombie horde brings about the apocalypse. In *Night of the Living Dead*, unlike films which preceded it, the zombie horde became the “majority” and the humans became the “minority.” The protagonists were no longer just humans… they were now “survivors.” As Bishop writes, “the zombies constitute more than just a rebellion; in Romero’s world, they are also the new social order.”70 White movie viewers were presented with the insinuation that the Civil Rights movement was the arrival of the American apocalypse. The issue of black America could no longer be ignored--a new social order, black America, would rise up and cause white America to become the minority. As such, the kill or be killed attitude seen in *Night of the Living Dead*, could be seen in the vehement resistance of white America to the changes brought about by the Civil Rights Movement.

Ultimately, *Night of the Living Dead* would come to represent the fear of white America during the Civil Rights movement-- the rise and revolution of black America. Furthermore, *Night of the Living Dead* would address the implications of the Civil Rights movement -- the “apocalypse” of white America. In the end, *Night of the Living Dead* revolutionized the zombie movie genre and provided a powerful lens for viewing the white-black racial climate during the Civil Rights movement.

**Protagonist-Zombie Interactions After the Civil Rights Movement**

*(1968-Present)*

Although racial tensions between white and black America still exist today, in the post-Civil Rights movement decades, those tensions declined from their peak during the 60’s.71 The
decline in racial tensions between white and black America, and shift of America towards more progressive racial attitudes, would be exhibited by the zombie cinema produced in the time period after the Civil Rights movement. The zombie movie genre would “see” the emergence of zombies with personalities, and even the new subgenre of the zombie romantic comedy, in which the protagonist is in a romantic relationship with a zombie.  

_Day of the Dead_ (1985)

George Romero’s film, _Day of the Dead_, was instrumental in bringing about the “sympathetic zombie,” zombies with personality and emotions, to the Silver Screen. The plot of _Day of the Dead_ revolves around a small group of scientists, soldiers, and helicopter pilots, who are trapped in an underground bunker during a zombie apocalypse. The scientists, chiefly Dr. Logan, are experimenting on captured zombies in order to find a cure for the zombie infection. Arguably the most important character in the film is Dr. Logan’s zombie research subject, Bub.  

Bub’s introduction in the film, simultaneously introduced America to the concept of the sympathetic zombie. Dr. Logan has a parental-like relationship with Bub, rewarding him with music when he does something good and admonishing him with words such as “sit their in the dark and think about what you’ve done,” when Bub “acts out.” When Bub is punished he reacts with anger, thrashing around the chain that binds him to the wall in Dr. Logan’s lab. When presented with some common household items, Bub demonstrates his memory of how to shave, read a book, and even dial a telephone. When prompted, Bub even goes so far as to gurgle into the telephone, “hello, Aunt Alicia.” When Dr. Logan introduces Captain Rhodes to Bub, the human-like zombie immediately salutes the Captain. Dr. Logan nods, “he used to be a Marine,”
but Captain Rhodes refuses to salute back. “Rhodes is instantly offended; he sees Bub’s humanity and grows defensive at the increasingly blurred lines between human and inhuman.”

Bub’s human-like characteristics and Captain Rhodes adverse reaction to meeting Bub, could parallel white America’s realization, brought about by the newly integrated America, that black and white America were truly not that different. The same blurring of the differences between white and black America is epitomized when Dr. Logan remarks, “they [zombies] are us.”

Nevertheless, fact that Bub has human-like characteristics is not the most important protagonist-zombie interaction in the film. Even more important, is the fact that Bub’s human-like characteristics lead him to be seen as a protagonist, and the soldiers, who eventually threaten a forceful takeover of the bunker, are seen as antagonists. In this instance, roles are reversed; the zombie represents the hero, and the human is a villain. Captain Rhodes, who comes to find that Dr. Logan has been feeding his “experimental subjects” the soldiers who died during the process of securing the bunker, begins to kill the scientists. While the zombies are villainized for killing humans, Captain Rhodes becomes the ultimate villain when he kills another human. Captain Rhodes becomes the main antagonist because he does not kill another human out of
uncontrollable primal instinct, like a zombie, but simply his own volition. In this way, Captain Rhodes demonstrates that, in *Day of the Dead*, “the humans are not necessarily humane,” while Bub demonstrates that “neither are the zombies necessarily monstrous.” The same “civil behavior” that Dr. Logan says “distinguishes us from lower forms” and allows us to “go about things in an orderly fashion without attacking each other like beasts in the wild,” is seen the “zombified” Bub… but lacking in Captain Rhodes. Consequently, Romero causes “audience identification with the very monsters he had formerly taught them to fear.” In historical context, the shift from audience identification with the protagonist could represent the growing attitude that the actions perpetrated against black America, were what was truly monstrous, not black America itself. More importantly, the “sympathetic zombie” as well as the villainous Captain Rhodes were manifestations of the growing negative attitude towards discrimination faced by black America.

*After Day of the Dead* opened the door for zombies to have human characteristics, movie studios would run with the concept, establishing a previously unfathomable movie genre… the Zombie Romantic-Comedy. In this new genre, the zombie-protagonist romantic relationship would come to represent the rise of the black-white interracial relationship in America. Arguably the first zombie romantic-comedy was the 1993 film *My Boyfriend’s Back. Boyfriend’s Back* (1993)

In the film, *My Boyfriend’s Back*, high-school student Johnny Dingle tries to impress his classmate and crush, Missy McCloud, by saving her from a staged robbery. During the staged robbery, Johnny is accidentally shot. With his dying wish, Johnny asks Missy to senior prom. She accepts and Johnny passes away. However, in a shocking turn of events, Johnny rises from the dead the day after his funeral as a pasty zombie, still intent on taking Missy to prom.
Throughout the film Johnny competes with the school’s most popular student, Buck, for Missy’s affection, and the chance to attend prom with her. All the while, Johnny battles discrimination from both his classmates and townspeople who disapprove of the human-zombie relationship that he and Missy embody. The relationship between a zombie, which had African roots, and a white woman, has obvious ties to an interracial relationship. As Chera Kee writes in her paper on zombies and miscegenation, zombies themselves, “are visual/performative displays of miscegenation--of the mixing of black and white cultures in an enslaved body.” Up until anti-miscegenation laws were abolished in the late 1960’s, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPA) Production Code explicitly stated, that miscegenation in film was forbidden. Consequently, the zombie rom-com would become a medium to address attitudes towards miscegenation. Evidently, the most significant protagonist-zombie interaction in *My Boyfriend’s Back* is the relationship between the “zombified” Johnny and Missy.

Figure 6. A group of gun-toting men arrive at Johnny’s house to threaten or kill him, in *My Boyfriend’s Back* (Buena Vista Pictures 1993)

The miscegenous symbolism is crystal clear in *My Boyfriend’s Back*. The small town is initially shocked at the relationship, as demonstrated by a man exclaiming, “By god! If it ain’t a
zombie out with a living woman!" The shock eventually becomes open hostility towards Johnny and his relationship with Missy. Johnny is pelted with remarks that resemble the derogatory epithets hurled at African-Americans. When one of the football players catches Johnny and Missy kissing in the library, he snarls, “Come here, you stinkin’ dead ya-hoo toucher!” and chases him away. A towns person even spits at Johnny in the street, “We don’t like your kind!” The most prominent representation of racism occurs when a group of men, touting shotguns and rifles, show up to Johnny’s house with the intent to threaten or even kill him—clearly reminiscent of the lynch mobs of the past.

While the townspeople are presented as antagonists, the stereotypically, preppy, attractive, and popular Buck is presented as the primary villain. Buck is Missy’s other love interest, who seeks to woo Missy away from Johnny. Buck, who is not a zombie, comes to represent the white male, who is competing with the black male, for the white female’s heart. As Kee writes, “in films such as My Boyfriend’s Back.... the white woman’s love for an undead male not only speaks to the fears of miscegenation hinted at in...[zombie] films, but it also speaks to a conscious choice. These women could choose a living male, but they choose the zombie instead.” In this way, My Boyfriend’s Back still plays upon the fear that the white woman will choose a black male over a white female.

Nevertheless, In My Boyfriend’s Back, the viewer is rooting for the teenage couple’s love to triumph over the closed-minded townspeople and students. Viewer identification with the non-traditional couple, who inadvertently are a metaphor for miscegenation, demonstrates America’s growing view that romantic relationships between black and white America were acceptable.
Undeniably, both American zombie cinema, and the white-black race relations it portrays, have evolved since the early twentieth century. Early zombie cinema portrayed zombies as a controlled, docile workforce, and the viewers’ fear was derived from becoming a zombie, rather than the zombie itself. Likewise, before the Civil Rights movement, white America viewed black America as a subservient workforce that did not truly pose a threat to the system of racial hierarchy. With the dawn of the Civil Rights movement, zombies became the horrifying, autonomous, cannibalistic, apocalypse-causing creatures that we know today. Comparably, during the Civil Rights movement, black America revolted against systematic oppression, bringing about the apocalypse of American racial segregation and legalized discrimination. Following the Civil Rights movement, zombies “gained” personality, and even were portrayed in romantic relationships with humans. The progressive change in the zombie film genre would mirror the increase of progressive views regarding race occurring after the Civil Rights Movement.

In the 2012 short comedic sketch “White Zombies,” (whose title is a nod to the first zombie film, White Zombie) the evolution of zombie cinema comes full circle. The sketch

Figure 7. The pasty zombie, Johnny, dances with his human prom date, Missy in My Boyfriend’s Back (Buena Vista Pictures, 1993)
consists of two black protagonists attempting to survive a zombie apocalypse. Faced with an oncoming zombie horde, the pair decide that they must run through the horde in order to make it to the safe haven of the sheriff's station. Dramatic music plays as they scamper through the horde, until they realize that the zombies are actually avoiding them. When the protagonists approach a car with two zombies inside, the zombies hastily lock the car door. With a look of disgust, one of the protagonists exclaims, “These are some racist mother-fucking zombies!” When the pair come across a zombie “family”, the mother and father pull their daughter away from the black protagonists. One laments, “They seriously wouldn’t let her eat us!”

![Figure 8. A white zombie couple shrinks away one of the black protagonists, in Key & Peele’s “White Zombies” (Comedy Central 2012)](image)

Afterwards, another black character is introduced, who declares, “These racist zombies are leaving us alone. Come on, we're having a party!” The camera pans to a backyard full of black, zombie apocalypse survivors, who are drinking beer, listening to Funk, and having a barbeque. The final scene ends with a lone white zombie attempting to hoist himself over the fence in an attempt to ironically, escape the party. When observed within the context of this research paper, “White Zombies,” ultimately makes the powerful statement that even though
zombie cinema and race relations have both evolved over time, that racism still exists, and will likely persist--even into the apocalypse itself.
Notes


5. Ibid.


11. Moreman and Rushton, Race, Oppression and the Zombie, 3.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 4.


15. Moreman and Rushton, Race, Oppression and the Zombie, 5.


18. Ibid., 10.


23. Ibid.


25. Ibid., 20.


30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 191.

32. Ibid.


37. Ibid., 83–85.


40. Ibid., 93.

41. Ibid.


43. Tourneur, *I Walked with a Zombie*.


55. Ibid., 478.


61. Romero, *Night of the Living Dead*.


63. Ibid., 114.


69. Ibid., 78.

70. Romero, *Night of the Living Dead*.


79. Ibid.


81. Romero, *Day of the Dead*.

82. Ibid.


84. Ibid., 160.


89. Gerry Canavan, “‘We Are the Walking Dead’: Race, Time, and Survival in Zombie Narrative,” *Extrapolation (pre-2012)* 51, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 433.


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Ibid., 478.


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