Fear and Loathing on Our Minds

We see them on our television screens, moaning and reaching for warm flesh to snack on, shambling down the street of a once bustling city. For the past few years, these mindless devourers have reached a level of dominion over the horror film and show industry, but if you’re after a closer examination, you only need to take a look at the people you interact with on a daily basis. Zombies don’t only live inside our media and minds, but in our homes, in our clothes, in our bones. Is this why they are so popular – because we subconsciously recognize ourselves in them, or is there a deeper psychological fear involved? By examining different philosophies on fear and the current conditions of our world, we can reach a fairly accurate understanding of what makes the zombie so fascinating to our current and collective psyche.

In order to understand fear, we have to have a firm hold on what we’re afraid of, and most entrenched fears are of and represented by monsters. The word monster comes from the Latin root *monere*, which means “to warn” and in the past, monsters were exactly that: omens from God (or the gods) that showcased wrath, vice, virtue, or even the accidents of nature (Asma, 13). Monsters nowadays don’t necessarily have a theological or biological meaning behind them, but a moral one, sometimes used as a warning against certain behaviors (Asma, 7). For example, in Romero’s movie *Dawn of the Dead*, the main characters are trapped in a shopping mall with a bunch of zombies, a reflection and commentary on the consumerism of the late 1970s (Manalili). And while we most often think of monsters as non-human, we should also take into account our obsession with serial killers (and who hasn’t at least heard of *The Silence of the Lambs*?) as well as how we think of particular groups as monstrous (Hitler and the Nazis or the Khmer Rouge regime). Monsters such as these can be used to examine how a human being can turn into a creature of darkness and horror.
Knowing how to identify a monster isn’t enough to understand the root of our fear; this is where philosophical theory takes over. Evolution can be used to explain common fears, like of deep, murky water or spiders. If, once upon a time, evolving humans often fell prey to something lurking unseen underneath the surface of the water, the more wary would be most likely to survive and pass their caution on to their offspring (Asma, 3). However, this says nothing about our anxiety concerning creatures that don’t exist, that we have made up entirely.

Noel Carroll, a philosopher of horror, coined the term “category jamming” to explain why we fear certain monsters. He proposed the idea that humans sort the creatures we come across on a regular basis in our minds, and as we get older, this organizational system solidifies. When we encounter something that doesn’t fit into this system, our automatic response is fear tinged with interest. Most often, these monsters have some trait we recognize along with something unfamiliar and gruesome, and because of this, it causes our internal catalogue to slip. This is why we are both attracted and repulsed by horror films and their unpleasantness (Asma, 184).

To cover a wider range of fear, H.P. Lovecraft, author of *The Call of Cthulhu*, presents us with the idea that we feel both fear and awe in regards to the unknown. He calls this “cosmic fear” and about it he says:

“The one test of the really weird is simply this – whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes on the known universe’s utmost rim.”

He suggests that as humans, we all have a built-in awareness of our limited understanding (stronger in some than in others), especially considering the vastness of all that we don’t know.
The sense of exposure and frailness we feel in the face of the unknown is a chief aspect of the fears triggered in us by the horror genre (Asma, 185). In fact, one of the people I interviewed said that the scariest part of a zombie apocalypse would be waiting for one of the monsters to find her. She wouldn’t be able to tell from a hiding place where they were or if they knew where she was, representing our fear of the unknown (Goods). If this is true for a majority of people, it certainly would go far in explaining how we fixate on situations unlikely to be found in the world we know.

A fantastic example of this terror in regards to the unidentified is one of the first promotions for the television series, *The Walking Dead*; Rick, one of the chief characters, wakes from a coma in an empty disaster of a hospital. Confused, he shambles down an empty hallway, much like a zombie, until he encounters a door, upon which the words “Don’t open dead inside” are painted. There’s a moment of sinking fear as you hear moans from the other side and something bumps against the door. You wait, both knowing and unaware of what to expect, until a single hand, cold and dead looking, reaches through the opening between the locked and barred doors. Watching this, we both sit in safety and wait in fear alongside Rick; we know what to expect – having seen zombies in movies before – but are still on edge because we don’t know exactly what is on the other side of the doors. No explanation is given to either us or Rick as to the number of zombies or their nature aside from a single reaching hand. This type of horror plays with the boundaries of what we know and don’t know, causing discomfort with the situation portrayed.

Along similar lines, Martin Heidegger – a German philosopher – presents us with a different theory of our latent anxieties. He suggests that in us exists a type of fear called angst that is formed by our fears of unidentifiable dangers. Normal fear is the result of a threat we can
actually see, but angst has a way of drawing us out of our normal channels of thinking to make us consider who and what we are. As Stephen Asma puts it, “Angst is that unsettling philosophical sense that you and every other thing in the world are just dust in the wind.” (Asma, 186). In regard to monsters, this could account for why we both love and hate them. We seek to find the answers to these questions of our existence, but are only happy with the answers we want to hear. Monsters give us an opportunity and a reason to examine what it is that makes us human, but don’t often give us the chance to see humanity in a good light. If modern monsters are meant to be a reflection of the worst of us, then we can’t be as great as we seem to think we are, especially if the worst is constantly flashing across our television screens (this applies not only to horror films/shows but to the news as well). We love monsters because they show us the shortcomings of others and hate them because they drag our own into the spotlight.

In the interviews I conducted, I asked what the scariest part of a zombie apocalypse would be – not just being in it, but the idea as a whole – most people discussed what they would do if they were actually in that situation. They would be afraid of actual half-dead things shambling towards them (Hutchinson) or having to kill a zombie that used to be human and could be someone you love (Ransom). In fact, the second deepest response to that question was: “You’d be losing a lot of people you cared about all at once. One or two at a time is manageable, but you’d be against the prospect of losing everyone in one swoop.” (Osborne). While everyone I interviewed was part of my generation (which I did find fitting, since my generation is currently the one that trends are geared towards), it is still surprising that each had the nerve and narcissism to assume that they would survive, showing the human need to think of others as monsters and ourselves as martyrs of a cruel existence. Even the most well thought out response was little more than assumptive self-soothing. Jaime Watson told me, “The memories of the life
before would be the worst for me; I’d remember the people in my life and then the fact that
aren’t around anymore. I’d be able to deal with being alone or having to survive in a new,
lawless world, but the memories would probably kill me.”

Their half-witted responses can be applied to Sigmund Freud’s theory on narcissism and
monsters. He begins his proposition with a simple fact: there are forces in the world that
overpower us. Be it weather, gravity or politics, we are – each of us – outmatched. Monsters
then, can act as representations of our frustrations, and just like these forces beyond our control,
they cannot be reasoned with or easily defeated. When the hero of the story is defeated by a
monster, it reinforces this in us, but when the monster is the one defeated, it soothes our fragile,
easily bruised egos and reaffirms our personal power (Asma, 191).

Understanding the minute ways our minds deal with fear is only the first step in the
analysis of what a societal obsession means both to the individual and to the whole. The way the
horror industry cycles is an observable phenomenon, apparent if we look at the most popular
monster of a year or set of years. For example, during 1939, Americans whipped themselves into
a frenzy over the idea of alien invasion, no thanks to Orwell’s *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast.
The first lady of the time, Eleanor Roosevelt, commented on the matter, “A sane people, living in
an atmosphere of fearlessness, does not suddenly become hysterical at the treat of invasion….”
(Genoways, 1). Examining the favored monsters of a certain time can give us insight as to the
way people thought, both about themselves and the world they were living in.

In 1939, what everyone feared most was an invasion from the Axis powers of World War
II, and this fear of invasion from foreign powers continued well into the Cold War, as did the
common fear and fascination with aliens. So the question is: what do we, as a society, fear so
much that we have resorted to an obsession with zombies?
This fixation is actually far from new and has been seen before in multiple re-
generations, but the meaning behind them has never been as plain as the zombies of Romero’s
Night of the Living Dead. Released in 1968, this movie was literally a social commentary on the
chaotic conditions of the time; society was a mess – from the war in Vietnam to rapidly changing
race and women’s roles to fear of communism. Romero meant for the zombies to be a depiction
of all those fears while the apocalyptic scenario was a representation of the turmoil (Manalili).

Fast-forward to our world today and it’s blaringly obvious that we are living in fear,
screaming at us from rooftops and street corners. What’s difficult to pin down is the source of
our anxiety. A young man I questioned said that – in regards to zombies – people are not only
interested in the gruesome aspect of disease and physical decay (going back to Carroll’s category
jamming) but also because humans can be made into zombies, but not the other way around.
Zombies in every rendition are an inescapable force (Osborne). If this is true, what relentless
force do we fear? Quite possibly, it’s the technology we’ve created; currently, it is impossible to
step out of your front door without being confronted by the newest gadgets. People now spend
more time looking at their phones rather than engaging in actual human interaction, pulling out
their connections to social media whenever there is a lull in conversation. In modern zombie
media, the survivors often have to function without technology, showing a desire to return to a
situation where we aren’t tethered to electronic devices. This could also be a representation of
everything that can go wrong with technology (Manalili).

This of course, is the most obvious answer because we can actually see the effects of
technology on our lives – both positive and negative. Underneath our fear of these monsters lies
a latent discomfort and distrust in our society. As in the 1960s, we are questioning the world we
have built for ourselves, but this time, instead of race relations and a major war, we are facing
unreliable politicians, an unstable economy, healthcare debates, seemingly constant wars, and much more. The globe is in a state of upheaval and we are using zombies to explore our uncertain future (Manalili).

Surprisingly however, most of the people I interviewed only thought about this on a surface level and in regards to their own reasons for liking zombies. In response to my question concerning why she thought zombies were currently popular, one girl said she thought everyone was “enticed by how they would turn out, what they would do, and how everything would go” (Ransom). Another just thought it was because zombies are scary and people like to be scared (Goods). Few of them deigned to consider that, as Jennifer Manalili put it, “Like other trends, they evolve to reflect whatever needs to be relinquished from society at that time.”

In light of the movie *Warm Bodies*, we can assume that we’ve found a cure for zombification. In this movie, a zombie becomes human again after falling in love with a human girl. Monsters always become less frightening when you give them human traits – like the ability to love, and now that zombies no longer have us in their gory thrall, we can examine our society’s obsession with clearer focus. While the theory that our fears reflect how we feel about the world around us holds a strong amount of merit and partially contributes to the popularity of zombies, I also believe that the majority of people think how they are told to think. If a few people start to think zombies are the next huge trend, most everyone else will start to change their opinion to agree with them, be part of the “free-thinking” minority. The truth is, we all live like zombies, shuffling from one vague ambition to the next, never thinking about what we want – how we actually want to live and who we want to be. Sadly, few will open their eyes to this. Everyone assumes that they would be a survivor of a zombie apocalypse, not even stopping to think that they would probably be (and are) nothing more than an animated corpse.
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