

## **Zombie Literature: Analyzing the Fear of the Unknown through Popular Culture**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper will focus on how the rise in popularity of zombie literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is reflective of a western cultural need to address the fear of the unknown through popular culture. Through the flesh-eating zombie, we enter a parallel world where everything familiar in our communities becomes evil. The genre reflects the fear in Western society of the neighbor who has turned against you, survival in the midst of government collapse, and the monster within. Zombie fantasy literature allows society a venue to deconstruct what is known while dealing with these fears and the unbridled hate of the unthinking zombie through a collective experience using popular culture. What this fantasy subgenre allows, the author will explain, is a monster that embodies an individual human's greatest fears. At times, the zombie reflects the fear of social breakdown; at others, the zombie reflects aging and death. The versatility of this embodiment of fear allows it to be a genre that continues to evolve.

Using the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin on carnival and festive folk humor, the author will discuss how the zombie genre has provided fantasy lovers a deconstructive space to deal with fear, death, and hate in a genre that breaks down what western society has constructed for itself, and also allows readers to rebuild the future without constraint. Zombies, however, always leave room for humanity to hope for life and the future. This popular culture phenomenon goes beyond mere entertainment as it reaches into the heart of viewers and allows them to express their greatest emotions.

**Keywords:** Bakhtin, carnivalesque, zombies, deconstruction, laughter, fear, popular culture

It is common knowledge that zombie fiction has been on the rise for the last several years. The zombie has become infused into many areas of entertainment. From television shows to movies, graphic novels to Young Adult (YA) novels and adult fiction, the many genres of modern literature bow to the popularity of the undead menace. The obvious reasons for this rise in popularity in mainstream popular (pop) culture would be that the zombie story is exciting, it is packed with adventure and action and it is completely fantastical, but, if one looks deeper, then one can see the fundamental need of humanity to deconstruct social understandings, break away from the known and deal with the themes of fear, death and the unknown.

While one could trace the rise of zombie literature, especially zombie films, to their roots in the 1960s and 1970s, this paper is not about how the genre got its start. In fact, the author will not spend much time talking about the roots of the genre, or even many popular origin stories that many iterations of zombie literature holds on to. The zombie is now an “important *cultural* figure because of its powerful role as a multifaceted *allegorical* figure (emphasis in the original, Bishop, 2015). The purpose in this article is to show that there is a human need to deconstruct what we perceive as real and engage and analyze fear on the individual and societal levels.

### **SITUATING ZOMBIES WITHIN RESEARCH IN POPULAR CULTURE**

Extant research on zombie literature in popular culture, whether it is analysis of film, television, or print media, often draws on the voodoo origins of the word zombie and its relation to the evolution on zombies in popular film (Platts (2013), social satire in film, television, and video games (do Vale, 2010, Schott, 2010), zombie walks (Austin, 2015, do Vale, 2010, Orpana, 2011) and simply as allegory representing the various moral and political discourses of the time in which they are made (Nagypal, 2014, Orpana, 2011). Often using Rubinstein & Romero’s (1978) *Dawn of the Dead* as the ultimate example of the zombie as an epicenter of social commentary on rampant American consumerism, research in popular culture and literature about zombies cannot avoid the negative discourses surrounding the zombie as a representation of a decaying culture focused on materialism.

However, to analyze the zombie in popular culture, researchers have to dissect not only the overt discourses represented in texts, but the subversive goals of the writers and directors themselves. In looking at zombie video games, Gareth Schott (2010) speaks to the zombie video game as an agent of potential social change “because of their interactive and transformative qualities” (p. 67). In looking at *Dead Rising* (2006) the author compares the social implications laid out by Rubinstein & Romero of survivors of the zombie apocalypse surviving the new world while trapped in an American shopping mall. In order to analyze the viewer as consumer in a consumer culture, Schott looks at how varying aspects of the game were created to point, sometimes overtly, at the social problem of materialism represented by a shopping mall.

The analysis of the zombie genre cannot be separated from the sociopolitical ideologies that influence it. Nagypal (2014) analyzes three zombie movies in order to understand the utopian hopeful future often included in zombie literature. The films under study here represent distinctly opposite political futures and how existence comes into contact with death represented in the living dead of the zombie (p. 17). The author shows how the zombie genre represents the sometimes contradictory hope of the political divide when thinking of future society.

Humanness is an essential concept that must be analyzed when looking at zombie literature, and writing also shows how the universal fear of the other cannot be separated from the genre. Simone do Vale (2010) while examining the cultural phenomenon of “zombie walks” describes the social fears of “towering menaces like terrorists, ecologic and economic disasters, HIV, bird flu, swine flu, and young Marilyn Manson fans going postal” as universal discourses tackled by zombie literature (p. 198). However, the author concludes

by sharing how zombie walks “could be understood as a carnivalization of fear” that allows like-minded individuals to gather together and express their power to resist that fear (p. 199). Resistance to dominant society, thus, becomes another focus of zombie literature.

Additionally, Platts (2013) insists that research in zombies must be looked at as representations of valuable cultural objects (p. 547). In looking at the history of the genre and the various cultures and individuals who influenced and developed it, the author found that zombies were a prime site of study in sociology for researchers to examine both social anxieties and cultural fear. He states that “[w]hat nearly all understandings and depictions of popular culture zombies have in common is a flexible creature designed to evoke our macabre fascination and whose likeness adapts to contemporaneous tumult, concerns about manmade and natural disasters, conflicts and wars, and crime and violence” (p. 550). These fears, essentially, are universal to most cultures and most time periods, and must be examined, analyzed, and dealt with at the societal level in order for society to dream of a better future.

### **USING BAKHTIN’S CARNIVALESQUE AS A THEORETICAL FRAME**

While Bakhtin’s carnival has been used in analyzing zombies in popular culture before (see Austin, 2015, do vale, 2010, Nagypal, 2014, Orpana, 2011), much of the connection has to do with Bakhtin’s “treatment of the body” (Austin, 2015, Orpana, 2011, p. 255) and less to do with zombie literature as a tool for social deconstruction argued here. The zombie is the perfect political representation of the modern human. Orpana (2011), while examining zombie walks in particular, explains that “The simplicity of the zombie trope makes it a useful vehicle for political allegory and cultural critique; however, the flexibility and diversity of the genre make uncovering the latent psycho-social trauma that lends horrific energy to these [zombie] films a difficult task” (p. 253). While Orpana focuses much on Bakhtin’s theory on grotesque realism as a part of carnival to understand and analyze zombie walks as vehicles of social commentary, in contrast, here the focus is on a societal level of dealing with the fear of the unknown by having a carnivalesque hope.

Fantasy literature, specifically zombie fantasy literature, allows western culture to deal with our deepest and darkest fears. Zombie literature provides an escape, a space to deal with our greatest fears and a space to consider how we, individually and as a culture, might fare if the worst thing imaginable came to be. For some, zombie literature merely represents the fear of the unknown and the question of survival in a dark and hostile world. Others deal with the fear and hatred of the “other” that lives down the street from them or in a faraway land. The themes tying all of these cases together are the emotions of fear and hatred. What if the world was really out to get us? What if the government no longer existed or we were left to fend for ourselves without the protections of our modern society? The truth is that many consumers of zombie literature hold on to the question of “what if?” and then the focus becomes how will we respond? While fear, violence and the deconstruction of social norms are often in the forefront of zombie literature, an underlying theme of hope, survival, and salvation coexists in zombie literature that shows that even in the darkest of days humanity has hope for a better and different future.

To understand zombie literature from an analytical standpoint, two concepts from Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) work *Rabelais and His World* will be used as a lens to discover why zombie pop culture provides such a valuable space for westerners to explore their deepest fears. In particular, Bakhtin’s writings on carnival show the value and potential of zombie literature as escapism, and also Bakhtin’s writings on medieval folk humor and laughter show the reasoning behind why the zombie is such a valuable tool for overcoming that fear. Literature is the perfect space to engage in these concepts because “From a social perspective, language also works as a unifying force among the individuals of a group. Bakhtin argues that only through the interaction with others may our consciousness as beings arise” (Sempere, 2014, p.51). Thus, zombie literature is a social

tool for deconstructing the social fabric of the culture we live in.

At its root, the zombie apocalypse is impossible. However, whether it is a virus outbreak or a biochemical weapon attack that starts it, there is just enough “that’s possible” to make the genre a perfect place to deal with humanity’s great hope to start all over from scratch. The fears of an individual bleed into the fears of society as a whole, and as the anxiety rises culture needs a place to deal with the emotions that individuals face every day. The Greeks sought community catharsis through their festivals and plays, medieval Europeans in feudal states also dealt with the fear of the unknown through folk literature and plays. Modern society does the same.

Bakhtin writes extensively on how carnival was used in many cultures and in many different ways to allow people to step away from normal life, break down and deconstruct society and escape all the pressures that come with that. What carnival provided was a freedom from social constructions that were not felt during the rest of the year. According to Bakhtin (1984), “They [carnival festivals] were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (p. 9). What this freedom from normal life provided was “...gay diversion...’ so that foolishness, which is our second nature and seems to be inherent in man might freely spend itself at least once a year” (p. 75). Society needed a break from itself, and this was a break from the formality associated with medieval life, a life of rules both from the church and from the government.

Carnival was a form of popular culture at the time that was needed to take place so that society could step away from what was known and analyze the unknown fears and the unknown hopes that existed for everyone. Zombie literature as a form of popular culture is important because “...popular culture texts [can be used] as a space in which to contest racialized, gendered, and universalized experiences” (Alvermann, 2011, p.544). There is a cultural desire to engage with pop culture, and society uses pop culture to analyze social constructions and provide a foundation for change in the future. It is not reserved for only those belonging to certain fandoms. Young and old can engage with zombie literature to individually and collaboratively deal with the complex emotions in their lives. In building this deconstructive foundation through zombie literature, it must be noted that “Bakhtin explains how artistic events are first of all responses to previous events, but all the same, they demand further responses in the future” (Sempere, 2014, p. 40). The rise in popularity in zombie literature is evidence of this deconstructive space continuing to be needed year after year.

Bakhtin wrote of carnival as a deconstructive force. Sempere (2014) uses Bakhtin to engage with his work as a foundational deconstructive voice; he says that “Deconstruction is a mode of reading whose main concern is to highlight the inheritance, the traces of a particular reading of a text” (p. 31). Writing on the carnivalesque feast of the fools, Bakhtin shows this deconstructive inheritance when he wrote that annually “Nearly all the rituals of the feast of the fools are a grotesque degradation of various church rituals and symbols and their transfer to the material bodily level: gluttony and drunken orgies on the altar table, indecent gestures, disrobing” (pp. 74-75). These are deconstructions of everything ritualistic in medieval life. The connections to the undead zombie and the zombie apocalypse here are obvious. A breakdown of society and the power of the church and government are represented by man’s darkest devolution into the unthinking monster. The zombie has an insatiable appetite for his former friends and neighbors; it is man in his most grotesque form.

Connected to this idea would be the rituals of travesties, uncrownings, and thrashings where “Abuse is death, it is former youth transformed into old age, the living body turned into a corpse” (p. 197). Carnival deconstructed the fears of death and aging according to the social constructions at the time. Zombie literature is a modern tool for this because “Each new act of reading diverges from the previous one because each new reading may stand for a deconstruction of other previous acts of reading” (Sempere, 2014, p. 51). Individuals reengage with the themes of aging and death through serial reading and viewing of zombie literature in order to continually deconstruct the forces of society around them. This is why carnival was held every year. One participation in carnival or engagement with a zombie text does not “solve” these fears for an individual.

Death is celebrated in carnival as inevitable which the zombie genre makes quite obvious. It is this fear of the unknown associated with death that surrounds carnival that shows the value to society of letting go of those emotions. Then, as a studied text, "...people's uses of popular culture texts can inform the large social, political, and economic structures governing their lives" (Alvermann, 2011, p. 564). Zombie literature, in this sense, would transcend the individual viewer's experience and become an agent of shared emotion with all others who engage with it, and then it can be used as a tool for social criticism and hope at the societal level.

## **FLATTENING THE HIERARCHIES WITH ZOMBIE LITERATURE**

Many pop culture texts like zombie fiction are often seen as mindless entertainment without social capital. Alvermann (2012) writes that "The perception that low culture is synonymous with popular culture is based on the supposition that audiences lack agency in interpreting messages embedded in media... (p. 218). Deconstructionism, on the other hand, thinks that agency is available to all. For example, the zombie is a manifestation of death. The inherent fear of death is made physical in the zombie, giving a direction for our emotions that makes them easier to deal with. All viewers of zombie literature engage with personal and social constructions of death and dying.

What zombie literature does for readers and viewers is that it takes away all that we know and trust to be true. It is not the creation of a place of fear, but a place where one can step away from life and look at it from the outside. This is mirrored when Bakhtin stressed how carnival provided a "...complete liberation from the seriousness of life" (p. 247). It flattened the differences between man and man, and man and woman because "In the world of carnival all hierarchies are canceled. All castes and ages are equal" (p. 251). Lastly, "The authority of the official realm of Church and state is suspended, with all its norms and values. The world is permitted to emerge from its routine" (p. 259). This is a key point when looking at zombie literature as a deconstructive force. The individual must exist in a stripped and deconstructed society where he owes no one any explanation; the way of the world must be brought closer and all the rules, laws, and understandings of the world must be swept away in this apocalyptic event. It is in this space that humanity deals with its fundamental fears of the unknown, death, hatred and chaos.

However, carnival was not just a place to strip away the official and to indulge in whatever fancies may exist (although there is an element of this); carnival was a place for hope. With this realization that carnival and zombie literature are more than just a glorification of fear and death, we can apply Bakhtin who would insist that in the midst of death and uncertainty there is hope. Many zombie stories contain this element of hope. Without it, there is little reason for characters to try to survive. There must be salvation, hope or a safe zone without zombies to hold on to. From death comes life, and "Carnival... did liber-ate human consciousness and permit a new outlook, but at the same time it implied no nihilism; it had a positive character because it disclosed the abundant material principle, change and becoming, the irresistible triumph of the new immortal people" (p. 274). This cycle was included in all of Bakhtin's writings on carnival. Death and rebirth are paired, as are fear and hope. It is the continued survival in the face of overwhelming and unexplainable odds in the zombie story that keeps readers and viewers connected in that same way. As an individual person engages with zombie literature, all of their experiences, both good and bad, engage with what is transpiring in the text. Viewers live through the experiences of the characters in zombie literature and this gives them a critical disposition to everything they are reading or watching. In turn, they apply this new critical lens to the social world around them.

These pairings of fear and hope are inevitable. Humanity clings to this because, as Bakhtin writes, "The victory of the future is ensured by the people's immortality. The birth of the new, of the greater and the better, is as indispensable and as inevitable as the death of the old" (p. 256). Zombie literature, like carnival,

allows society to experience the full range of human emotion and deal with the fears associated with life and death and walk away with renewed hope. Morrell (2007), speaking of pop culture as a deconstructive tool in the classroom, writes that “Popular culture can help students deconstruct dominant narratives and contend with oppressive practices in hopes of achieving a more egalitarian and inclusive society” (p. 72). Ultimately, through the cathartic expressions of fear and hope, zombie literature allows viewers to analyze the world around them and also empowers them to affect change. It is in this hope where “In the whole of the world and of the people there is no room for fear. For fear can only enter a part that has been separated from the whole, the dying link torn from the link that is born. The whole of the people and of the world is triumphantly gay and fearless” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 256). Zombie literature always contains the element of hope and triumph. Whether it is as simple as escaping the undead horde in a character’s town, finding a group of survivors to call family or reaching that place of safety, the future, although uncertain, remains hopeful. This is the essence of deconstructive thought.

Zombie literature does provide modern society with a carnivalesque escape. The world as we know it ends, and the survivors are left to deal with a new world that is hostile, but popular culture allows for “... the expression of universal human values, namely the desire and struggle for freedom from tyranny and oppression” (Morrell, 2007, p.73). The modern unknown fears of terrorism, violence, and death are manifest in the zombie. Fear, as a tangible entity in this genre, can be dealt with through pop culture in ways that fear in normal life cannot. Bakhtin writes that “Fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter” (p. 47). The ultimate defeat of fear is to laugh at it or trivialize it, but fear is a universal human emotion and the dealing of it in order to have hope for the future is also universal. Harari would add that popular culture should be used “...not in order to predict the future, but to free yourself of the past and imagine alternative destinies” (2017, p. 65). The zombie apocalypse takes everything that society knows and destroys it. Just like the flattening of hierarchies during carnival, all people become equal in the eyes of the bloodthirsty zombie.

The undercurrent theme of hope that is often included in zombie literature is rooted in this concept of laughter over fear. Individuals participating in carnival must laugh in the face of the grotesque, in the face of seriousness, and the formality of the Church and of the government. “Thus carnival is the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter” which breaks participants away from the known, deconstructs that which limits society and gives space to deal with the unknown (p. 9). Zombie literature, if applied to this idea, is a part of western society continuing to deal with an ever changing world, and the fears that are associated with those changes.

There are many positives to the use of laughter as a tool for victory over fear in Bakhtin’s writings on medieval life and carnival. In particular, “It was the victory of laughter over fear that most impressed medieval man” (p.90). Laughter at fear allows readers of zombie literature and consumers of zombie pop culture to deconstruct the known and have a chance to see beyond the horror in front of them to begin to see the potential for hope in a hopeless world. Bakhtin adds that “It was the defeat of divine and human power, of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death, hell and all that is more terrifying than earth itself. Through this victory laughter clarified man’s consciousness and gave him a new outlook on life” (p. 91). Often, deconstructionism includes this element of seeing the world through new, different and better eyes. It is through this new outlook that characters are driven to pursue salvation, to reach the zombie-free Promised Land and to continue to survive and to build a new, better future. The viewer then sees the world in a new way.

To take a step away, essentially, the reader or viewer of zombie pop culture looks at the horrifying grotesque form of the zombie and has two options. One is to have absolute fear, which we see often, and the other is to laugh in the face of fear and defeat it. In carnival, “The acute awareness of victory over fear is an

essential element of medieval laughter” (p. 91). The medieval carnival participant broke down the hierarchies that surrounded them and laughed in the face of social constructions. In many ways, the zombie apocalypse in literature provides this same space. The inefficient government, the annoying neighbor, homeowners associations, the boss at work and the policeman giving out a speeding ticket, all turn into comic form as zombies. They are slow, stupid, and easy to defeat one-on-one. In essence, “The people play with terror and laugh at it; the awe-some becomes a ‘comic monster’” (p. 91). The great importance of this is seen in Bakhtin’s writing as he says, “This is why festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts” (p. 92). Absolute freedom comes to participants in carnival and in zombie pop culture. All that restricts is swept away and humanity is left with only its base needs to the forefront: food, water and shelter. Then, after all is deconstructed, the future can begin to be built anew.

In this apocalyptic world, anything is possible. Bakhtin stresses that there is so much more to the tearing down that carnival provides, the rebirth must not be forgotten. What better way to find new life than laughter at what makes one fearful? This does not mean that fear no longer exists. In fact, “Victory over fear is not its abstract elimination; it is a simultaneous uncrowning and renewal, a gay transformation. Hell has burst and has poured forth abundance” (p. 91). This process cannot be overlooked. One must realize that “It is impossible to determine where the defeat of fear will end and where joyous recreation will begin” (p. 91). Therefore in zombie literature, as in carnival, character and reader alike must continue forward with the hope of new life and salvation. The fear of the unknown is unmasked in the zombie and can be dealt with just as “Medieval laughter, when it triumphed over the fear inspired by the mystery of the world and by power, boldly unveiled the truth about both” (p. 92). It is in this laughter where the social constructions of western society are laid bare, and a new hope can emerge to guide the future.

## **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this analysis was to show how zombie literature is a deconstructive power, and the theme of the fear of the unknown as well as the hanging onto of hope in zombie pop culture is representative of Mikhail Bakhtin’s writing on carnival and medieval folk laughter. In essence, zombie literature provides for its viewers a carnivalesque escape and deconstruction of the reality of their daily lives. It is used by viewers to deal with their deepest, darkest fears about society, and allows them to reach the freedom that Bakhtin writes of, one that is a “...second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 9). Zombie literature breaks the hierarchies and constraints that western society has constructed for itself. These constructions include politics, fear of the other, and materialism that causes neighbor to distrust neighbor. Viewers escape these constructions and find hope in a “what if we could change it all” new world represented in the zombie apocalypse.

The comic zombie with its shambling gait and drunken inability to function as a normal human creates a caricature of human life that is a tool for laughter to defeat the fears that viewers have and allows them to build something new. Bakhtin writes that individuals laugh at the manifestations of their fears to defeat them which describe how we can now see the role of a zombie in modern literature (p. 91). Zombie literature allows westerners the chance to step away from the social constructions of their lives, and allows them to consider the possibility of how life could be different, how they would react or survive if their worst fears came true and to mentally prepare for the unknown future that haunts them.

One must not forget the second half of the purpose of carnival that Bakhtin insists his readers remember. One must remember that in carnival, from chaos becomes a new world (p. 91). Carnival does not exist just to bring down and flatten those things that separate us; carnival provides rebirth and rejuvenation of culture,

society and the individual. This is the power of zombie literature. Viewers can experience their own fears of the unknown through the experience of watching the fear associated with the zombie apocalypse, and the hope often granted to survivor's shows viewers that there is a chance for more and to always strive for better things and have hope for the future.

Viewers of zombie literature get to put all of their fears into the manifestation of the zombie. It is in the heart pounding fear of that unknown violence and hatred that causes viewers to panic in their seats. One sees that it must be impossible to survive such a horrific life in an undead world. Yet, viewers hope through every character that they meet. It is easy to see themselves in the survivors of any zombie book or movie. Viewers question themselves on every decision made for survival. Would they make the same choice? Do they see the danger that the characters do not see? Viewers, more importantly, get to experience the same joy and hope that the characters do as they make a new world when society has been completely deconstructed, and by escaping the reaching clutches of the undead. It is in this experience of hope that a carnivalesque rebirth happens, leaving viewers with a chance to see life through new eyes.

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