Group 5 Part B) Background

Introduction

The Zombie-themed subculture entertainment has risen in popularity in the recent decade. As of 2007, about 1/3 of all zombie movies ever created were produced after the year 2000 (Dendle, 2007: 45). TV and film shows such as AMC's The Walking Dead, movies such as Zombieland, and video games including Left 4 Dead are currently ongoing. The Walking Dead is on its third season, there are rumors about a Zombieland sequel, and zombies in video games are becoming more predominant in gaming trends.

At the same time, the live-action-role-playing (LARP) game Humans versus Zombies (HvZ) has appeared on colleges campuses across the country. Here at Geneseo, this year marks the forth anniversary of HvZ, having been first established in the fall of 2009.

The subject of this inquiry, however, is not simply the growing popularity of zombies in popular culture, but the role of women as portrayed by both the media described above and the HvZ game. Criticism of zombie media is abundant, but scholarly input on the subject is relatively scarce. For this reason, it is useful to study the issues of gender in sports and action films at large, and then to examine the more specific question of gender in the zombie-related versions of these fields.

History of the Zombie in American Popular Culture

The inception of the zombie in American popular culture occurred as early as the turn of the 20th century, and the role of the zombie has remained relevant through varying states of cultural attitude (Dendle, 2007: 45) can you make this sentence clearer and more straightforward?. The history of the zombie has been variable, and has shifted in meaning and importance throughout the past century. The zombie (or zombi) as a general concept has been traced to West Africa, where the term refers to both good and evil magical entities. However, the American zombie has its roots in the Haitian tradition. Despite some early attempts at legitimate research on Haitian culture, the concept of the zombie pervaded American culture in the early 1900s through sensationalized and ethnocentric accounts of native traditions potentially formulated to further disenfranchise the native populations of occupied Haiti (Dendle, 2007: 45-46). The Haitian zombie is a corpse that has brought back to life and forced to labor in the fields or factories of the greedy or of an evil priest (bokor). This early zombie embodied a disconnection between the individual and his/her consciousness, and the theft of an individual's will in order to profit another--or as Dendle describes, “psychic imperialism” (Dendle, 2007: 48). The zombie was snatched up by the entertainment industry with immediate success, and as the economy rapidly failed in the early 1930s, the zombie became a mechanism of social commentary, examining worker and labor tensions of the Great Depression (Dendle, 2007: 45, 48). Good stuff here but too reliant on a single source so far. Integrate sources don't just summarize them.

This original, American zombie is vastly different from our current conception of the zombie. This transformation occurred over several decades; the critical turning point in the crossover from laboring corpse to feral, canniblalistic corpse is George Romero's 1968 film Night of the Living Dead (Williams, 2012). In a later movie by the same director, Return of the Living Dead (1985), Romero further cements keep tense consistent the characteristics that we associate with zombies in our current perception (Williams, 2012). For example, it was Romero that introduced in Night of the Living Dead the brain targeting method of zombie destruction that is predominant in current zombie media (Dendle, 2007: 51).

Major studio productions of zombie themed media declined in the 1990s, however, the genre had already amassed a large cult following in online fan sites (Dendle, 2007: 53). These online communities participate in intense preparatory forums that discuss defensive methods extending from the advantages of long range weaponry vs. close quarter confrontation to rural fortification strategies. They are also known for organizing survivalist training programs and survival skill honing sessions (Dendle, 2007: 53). links? Even now, in 2012, fans of zombie media have continued to prepare for an imminent zombie apocalypse. In his article for the Tribune Business News, John Williams tells the story of a young man and his partner who have prepared their home with solar panels and have brushed up their Eagle Scout survival skills for just such an occasion (Williams, 2012). But are they really serious? Or is it sort of fantasy play? This needs deeper analysis/ exposition or should be dropped because the source is weak.

Gender Roles in Action Film/Television

Gender roles in action films have definitively changed over the years. Jeffrey Brown notes in his article "Gender and the Action Heroine: Hardbodies and the 'Point of No Return" that the 1990s saw a drastic change in the roles of women. Women were suddenly placed “at the center of these traditionally male-only films” (Brown 1996: 53). This is in contrast to the 80s portrayal of women in action films, where “women are present only to be rescued or to confirm the heterosexuality of the hero” (Brown 1996: 53) correct this throughout. Brown argues, however, that this does not necessarily indicate a change in gender roles, but instead represents women as becoming "symbolically male" (53). He continues to state that "a person is not born a man or a woman but rather becomes one" (54). This statement leads to one of the general arguments in the article: that is, the "hardbody" action heroine (Brown uses the examples of Ripley from Aliens and Sarah Connors from Terminator 2) is a woman who exhibits masculine behavior that is separated from a female identity. This, as Brown emphasizes, is because the identification of these behaviors as masculine comes from the popular press. Thus "from a feminist perspective, the popular press's perception of action heroines as masculine is not as much a recognition of gender as performative as it is a limiting of legitimate, alternative female identities" (56). Interesting observation

The first American zombie movies acted as a platform to address emerging social issues regarding gender during the Great Depression (Dendle, 2007: 48). Women in these initial zombie films were consistently depicted as suppressed by the domineering male that has risen her from the dead--often as a wife-like figure that would have been unwilling in her natural state. Yet, these female characters often display a sense of capacity that is absent in other male, zombie characters. In the movie White Zombie (1932) the lead male character, Beaumont, "zombifies" Madeline in order to obtain her love. However, Madeline still retains her love for her fiance and therefore maintains some of her human capacities (Dendle, 2007: 48). However, as the concept of the zombie has changed, so has the role and discussion of gender issues within these films. Modern zombie cinema takes a very different course.

While scholarly criticism of films such as Zombieland prove elusive, a blogger provided some criticism that illustrates how gender roles operate within the film. The critic describes the film as "a big-budget Hollywood venture that champions conservative patriarchal values" (ALWL 2012). The argument rests in an examination of the main characters in the film, and the representation of the female characters (two out of the four). One of these characters is a young girl, the other her older sister. The male narrator (also one of the main characters) first describes "Wichita," the older sister, as "another marriageable woman to bring home to the folks" (Zombieland 2009). This concept is perpetuated, as the blogger points out, by the group dynamic of the main characters: the couple (the narrator and Wichita), the father figure, and the little girl. AMC's The Walking Dead is no better. For example, in episode ten of the second season, Lori, the wife of the group's leader, chastises another female character Andrea for "playing" with guns, rather than helping the other women cook and clean (AMC The Walking Dead 2010:1). The focus on patriarchal gender roles drawn into the family dynamic portrayed by both the film and the television series incontrovertibly avoids the complicated issues of female gender identities brought up by Brown.

Gender Roles in Sports (focus on college-age, as in HvZ)
The gender differences evident in sports, especially collegiate sports, may cast light on the game of Humans versus Zombies, as an athletic activity. Jo Ann M. Buysse and Melissa Sheridan Embser-Herbert focus on such issues in their article entitled "Constructions of Gender in Sport: An Analysis of Intercollegiate Media Guide Cover.” They write, "Male athletes are portrayed by the popular media in terms of their physicality, muscularity, and superiority, while female athletes are feminized and their achievements as athletes are often trivialized" (Buysse and Embser-Herbert 2004: 68). They go on to state, “the reality of women athletes as strong, skilled, competent competitors is masked by media representations that depict them as good enough to compete against other women but never as good as the top men in the same sport" (68).

Good start. Keep working on sources and try to integrate them more if you can. There may be a few too many direct quotes here, although they are generally good ones.

Disappointing that the group did not edit this after my comments in October.

Scholarly Sources

Brown, Jeffrey A.


Buysse, Jo Ann M. and Melissa Sheridan Embser-Herbert


Dendle, Peter.


Other Sources

Williams, John.


“greatshakes”


Zombieland

2009 Fleischer, Ruben Director. Film.

The Walking Dead