Want to Understand a Generation? Look No Further Than Its Zombie Movies

Zombies (probably) aren’t real. They’re metaphors. From their roots in Haitian folklore to their current incarnations as victims of a worldwide virus, zombies have for decades reflected the social anxieties of each generation. In every case, for better or worse, the undead have defied their limited cognitive abilities to tell us something beyond, “Uuuunnnngggnn...”

Their latest message, of course, lies in World War Z — the Brad Pitt vehicle that elevates the zombie outbreak metaphor to a global level. The flick threw a lot of walking-dead heritage under the bus, but that doesn’t mean it won’t have a place in the ongoing evolution of zombie lore. It’s simply taking the idea of zombies as a surrogate for social anxieties in a new direction — in this case predominantly xenophobia and fears of viral outbreaks. This continues a long and distinguished history of zombie themes standing in for au courant topics like slave rebellion, communism, über-capitalism, technophobia, and
globalization. However, how zombie tales—and their fans—deal with these issues has proven as problematic as, well, the problems themselves. (Like, for example, the production of [zombie ex-girlfriend shooting targets].)

Perhaps the most iconic notion of the zombie was defined in 1968 with George Romero’s Night of the Living Dead, which turned the terrifying yet ultimately harmless zombies of the first half of the 20th century into a mindless, brain-eating nightmare that most certainly would wipe out the human race. It set humanity — in deeply tumultuous times — against an ominous, dystopian backdrop that offered no solutions and presented death as random and senseless. It even ended with the passing of its hero.

That was par for the course.

“Zombie movies all used to end, in that era, with that feeling of incredibly bleak hopelessness,” says Sarah Juliet Lauro, a zombie scholar currently teaching English and film at Clemson University.

(Spoiler warning: Minor spoilers for World War Z follow in the text below.)

Lauro, whose dissertation and collected works (including Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Posthuman and “A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism”) deal with the history of the zombie myth, says Romero’s iconic zombie trope was overturned in 2002 in yet another genre revolution through director Danny Boyle’s 28 Days Later. The movie, which imagined a quicker, more brutal version of the monster, focused on symbolic post-9/11 fears of terrorism and reassigned blame for the zombie apocalypse on a highly transmutable, 21st-century virus. That shift was “a signal moment in the zombie narrative,” Lauro says, that transformed it from a story of hopelessness and extinction to a story of survival — or at least the possibility for it.

“[28 Days Later] opened the gate to all the ways the post-millennium movies seem to end on a happier note,” she adds.

World War Z was no exception, with its focus on survivalism and the idea there was a cure to be discovered and a future to be won. But another significant thematic shift took place, from the fantasy-horror of its predecessors to a more logical End of Days concept — one where the zombies could easily stand in for realistic modern threats. As Wired’s Angela Watercutter wrote, that reality softened the zombie narrative so that “it could’ve just as
easily been about another kind of outbreak and been just as poignant.”

“We weren’t trying to be like another movie,” visual effects supervisor Scott Farrar recently told Wired about the painstaking modeling of the movie’s “infected.” “We were trying to be like, ‘What would be real? What would be the science behind it if this were real?’”

One of those elements of “real”-ness in World War Z is the overarching theme of how the populace worldwide would respond to a zombie outbreak, instead of focusing on a small group of survivors. The film follows one man—Pitt’s Gerry Lane (more on him later)—but the bigger picture is one of how thousands upon thousands of humans are squaring off against just as many undead. And as zombie scholars and everyday fans have made clear, there’s an element of populism to the evolution of zombie media’s focus on hope found within teamwork in the genre.

“The survivalist narrative has made the zombie more attractive to a wider swathe of people, certainly, in this country,” says Lauro, who currently studies shared off-screen fan experiences like zombie 5ks. “There’s a shift from it being about a destructive world structure to being about, ‘What can we do to live within that reality and survive it?’ That’s probably because of the War on Terror, this endless war, endless threat. There’s no end in sight. ‘This is how we’re going to have to think from now on.’”

That survivalist model, though, has also permitted the reestablishment of traditional social structures, within those groups, upon the ashes of civilization. AMC’s The Walking Dead, like many recent zombie iterations where survivalism is the driving force in the characters’ success, has received criticism for its characters’ organization into a hierarchical society increasingly dominated by straight, white patriarchs, even after a tabula rasa like a zombie apocalypse gives the group license to start from scratch.

Pitt’s World War Z, despite its avoidance of the group narrative and backdrop of us-against-them goes even further and actually reinforces that criticism by restructuring itself as a great white hero epic – and simply removing the necessity for the group at all. It’s a trope that has plagued science fiction and dystopian models in general since their inception, but has only recently begun to manifest in the zombie world, as the subgenre has accumulated renewed mainstream popularity.

“The majority of zombie films aren’t solo hero pieces,” explains Kyle Bishop, an American
literature professor at Southern Utah University and the author of *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture.* “Even though *The Walking Dead* has Rick, Rick is often wrong, and he often needs help. Even with *Night of the Living Dead,* the hero is flawed. He makes bad choices. Traditionally speaking, the zombie narrative’s whole point is that an individual can’t survive. It has to be a group, a collective, and even then, odds are, they’re gonna die.”

Bishop says that Max Brooks’ *World War Z* source novel’s stressing of multiracial, international cooperation – the group survival that Lauro identifies as a post-apocalyptic equalizer – was among the many elements that were downplayed in Pitt’s complicated film.

“The movie made some token efforts to maintain [the book’s presentation] of an apocalypse as a global problem with a global solution,” says Bishop. “A lot of the secondary expert characters were surprisingly multicultural for a Hollywood film ... but where it does slip – and I don’t think this is a conscious commentary as much as a result of the fact that the producer is also the star – is that this clearly became Brad Pitt’s movie. They’re playing on the idea that he’s an international jetsetter, he goes to third-world countries, he makes a difference ... so as a result, it does end up being the lone white American male who saves the rest of the world.”

That shift towards a lone-white-man-triumphing-against-the-hordes mentality goes against the dominant manifestations of zombie fandom, where often fans want to be join zombies swarms rather than be lone-wolf heroes. As Lauro explains, the group mentality that has proven successful in the past is the one fans share.

“The zombie ‘ethos’ has expanded into these kinds of live performances – zombie walks, zombie runs, humans-versus-zombie tag on college campuses,” says Lauro. “[The new millennium is] where zombies pivoted from being a tool of lamentation about a society we’re stuck in to being a way of imagining our own mastery [as a group] over the worst.”

The expression of zombie fandom can, however, also have a dark side, one that has grown increasingly public as zombie media has gained traction in the pop cultural lexicon. Similar to the controversies surrounding the rise of first-person crime-spree games like *Grand Theft Auto,* questions about the zombie genre allowing fans to fulfill hate fantasies in *questionably racist parts of video game franchises like Resident Evil* have been raised. Those concerns resurfaced recently when news went viral that a shooting range dummy
company was manufacturing misogynist and racist “zombie” caricatures.

The ability to see an adversary as an “other” – in this case, the “the reanimated corpse is not your ex-girlfriend anymore; that person is already dead” narrative – is a strong metaphor provided by zombie hordes, a trope that has already had a long complicated history of symbolism, from its origins of racist imperialism in the 1930s and its later use to represent the classist idea of a capitalism-dominated proletariat. The more realistic apocalypse scenarios in movies struggle to be, the more likely people are to consider them seriously.

“[Here in Utah] I know people in my neighborhood who have 60 or 70 different forms of firearms,” says Bishop, whose doctoral work examined the problematic origins of the zombie’s popularity. “I say to them, ‘You can’t possibly hunt with all those.’ And they say, ‘No, these are to protect us, when they come.’ There really is a culture of survivalism that’s tied to violence.”

This certainly isn’t to say World War Z or any of these movies or shows condone or encourage violence. Instead, it’s their loyalty to archetypal narratives – especially one that eschews the group survival model in favor of a lone hero – as well as their ever-stronger march towards realism over fantasy that must be constantly examined, whether it’s the zombie apocalypse or a futuristic robot society.

And, yes, though often fraught with issues of causation, even more explicit troubles could manifest from the idea that the individual has an essential duty (and innate ability) to triumph over the herd.

“The problem is, when we start redefining people as the other so prevalently... constant dissociation between fantasy and reality can cloud judgment,” says Bishop. “I’m waiting for this, with trepidation, where we get a murder case where someone uses a zombie defense. Someone’s going to say ‘They were acting erratically and coming at me aggressively, and I thought maybe they were on bath salts, or meth,’ but might also say, ‘I honestly thought my house was being attacked by zombies so I just started shooting.’ I think that is a real risk.”

Some could even use the zombie narrative to “dramatize their own survival against immigrants,” Lauro says, adding. “You can see it in survival groups, what the zombie targets they use look like.” However she warns that focusing too much on that moves
away from other relevant messages inherent in the kind of zombie flicks we like to make and consume.

“You don’t want to give those people power,” she says, “because they wrest the zombie metaphor away from people who use it to talk about important social issues like capitalism, corporations, [and] disease.”