

# The history of zombies

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



DKC English 1101 Dr. SP May 30, 2012 Research Paper: The History of Zombies and Film Zombies now have come to be a movie genre all of their own. Fast-paced monster movies about the dead coming back to life have moved into new and scarier directions. Analyzing the progression of zombie culture and its impact on movies reveals the complete transformation of the monster. In order to captivate ever changing audiences, it seems as if film directors are continuously reinventing the zombie. In addition, the realistic natures of these films help to establish and maintain a fear of zombies by paralleling their occurrence with situations that could actually occur in "real life," such as a governmental catastrophe like biological warfare. Movie producers have long since realized that connecting the creation of zombies with real events in history is entertaining for people. The first zombie movie, *White Zombie* starring Bela Lugosi, was made in 1932. This movie was loosely based on the Haitian Voodoo myths about witchdoctors or "Bokors" who made people appear like zombies by drugging them. The film was about a man, who had a broken heart and wanted help from a "Bokor" to bait the love of his life, but everything went wrong, and she turns into a zombie. Movies similar to this continued until the 1960s. These zombie movies were definitely interesting, but they lacked events people could relate to such as ones occurring in their native cultures. The iconic zombie movie, *Night of the Living Dead* produced by George A Romero, entirely changed everyone's perception of zombies. Romero credits the new breed of zombie he created to Richard Matheson's novel "I Am Legend." The novel was about a disease that swept through the human race changing them into vampires and leaving one surviving man. These zombies had evolved a great deal from the

ones before them. They were not drugged by witchdoctors anymore. Now, they were infected by a disease which was only given to another human by a bite from a zombie. New standards for zombie culture were created during this era, and its influence can still be seen today. In fact, “ Bokors” were never discussed again in relation to zombies. Really, the events we see in zombie movies today are scientific experiments or science errors gone terribly wrong which intern creates zombies. The illness is always extremely contagious if an individual is bitten. In addition, death of a zombie only comes through decapitation or destroying of its brain. With all the new changes, a standard form of zombies was ultimately revised. There are several qualities of the new zombie, which Romero so emphatically pioneered. First, zombies are resurrected for no apparent reason at all. Second, zombies only come back to feed-off people that are still alive, or the zombies only want to eat people’s brains. Thirdly, zombies cannot possess any superpowers that were intertwined with legends or curses. People don’t fear the zombie, but rather only the idea of biohazard outbreaks. Hundreds of movies have now been made using the concept of fear that Romero established. About ten years after Night of the Living Dead the zombie culture revolutionized again with the sequel Dawn of the Dead. Instead of dealing with a handful of people, now larger outbreaks occur all over the world. Also, in addition to fear, comedy is introduced in an almost satirical way like one can see in Shawn of the Dead. To determine how zombie movies are compared to reality, a definition is needed to clarify the comparison. Reality is the state or quality of being real or the resemblance to what is real. In today’s entertainment world, primetime television is

comprised of reality shows, and it seems that filmmakers have found a way to translate that into their films. Since these types of television shows are so heavily produced, making a zombie film that can be related to a real life situation appeals to modern audiences and is predicted success for the zombie film industry. A great example of reality applied to zombie films occurs in Quarantine 2. This movie depicts a real life situation in which the police put a residential building in quarantine in Los Angeles. The film begins by showing flight attendants Jenny and Paula of a particular airline, Trans Sky Air, welcoming the passengers of flight TS Air 318 from Los Angeles to Kansas City with Captain. A passenger brings a cage of hamsters as a carry on but is then advised by a female flight attendant that because they don't fit overhead, they will have to be placed below in cargo hold. In the midst of their discussion, one hamster bites the fingertip of the obese passenger Ralph. This is how the epidemic begins aboard the flight. The infected passenger becomes enraged and they cannot contain him, so the plan has to land (Carvalho). This brief plot description shows how this film can easily mimic reality. It is this viewer's opinion that the filmmakers did an excellent job of producing fear based on the likelihood of this event occurring in real life. Quarantine situations are not a new occurrence for the United States. In "A Short History of Quarantine," Peter Tysons says that in 1916 "when an epidemic of poliomyelitis strikes New York residents, authorities begin forcibly separating children from their parents and placing them in quarantine." By November the epidemic had run its course, but not before "killing more than 2,300 mostly young New Yorkers" (Tyson). These examples can give one an idea of exactly what type of things would take

place if there was a viral outbreak of a disease. This example also calls into question the validity of quarantine. The cases shown in movies as well as those found during research exhibit that people are infected when they are not initially quarantined. Because people have an awareness of historical quarantines, zombie outbreaks that weren't quarantined are very realistic. Many of the zombie films produced in the last ten years have shown that the government is in some way responsible for the creation of zombies. In the well-known film *28 Days Later*, there is an outbreak of a viral medical disease. This disease was discovered when individuals tried to free chimpanzees from a medical research lab. Unfortunately, these chimps had already been infected with the virus, so when the young woman went to set one free, it attacks her and shortly thereafter she becomes "enraged." Although, this research was not initially government induced, the government was brought in to help contain the virus. One may think things of this nature cannot happen, but history shows that medical testing of this sort has occurred and often, the government has been the agency to do the research. In the "Historical Background of the US Biowarfare Program," Eugene Thacker demonstrates that with respect to its biological testing, the government does not care about the value of human lives. The government will make many sacrifices to contain a disease. "From 1932-45, Unit 731 conducted a series of biological tests on Chinese prisoners and civilians, including intentional infection with a range of diseases, and the release of experimental plague bombs. It is estimated that some 10,000 people died from Unit 731 experiments." These individuals were not all criminals; some were regular people that died for a cause that they knew nothing about.

Although tests of this sort have helped to improve biowarfare, the responsibility of human preservation should be well thought out before testing. The fear in society today of incidents like this occurring is what in turn creates an interest in zombie films with these topics. In summary, we are fascinated by zombies because zombies parallel our fear of biological disasters. The rapid change of their appearance and mindset also keeps one on the edge of their seat to see what happens next. The directors of zombie movies have evolved this genre to not only have comedy but also give light on bio warfare, quarantines and other disasters. This concept in the movies gives us in-depth understanding that things of this nature could occur. As our fears change, the zombie genre will change to reflect.

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