

Why **Zombies** Are K.A.



John's Worldly Ramblings

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Why **Zombies** are K.A.

To Ben. You should have lived.

And to Barbara. They are still coming to get you.

-ZA Recht



Like so many things in life, I can trace my fascination and interest in zombies back to my childhood. I think a lot of people's first exposure to zombies is probably someone clomping around like Frankenstein's monster with their arms outstretched and moaning, "Brains... *Brains!*" That's not my first memory. No, I must have been ten or eleven when I saw George Romero's "Dawn of the Dead" (1978).

That's the one to start on.

But back in those early days of VHS tapes commonly being priced at \$60 and higher, and there simply not being many zombie movies to choose from, it wasn't until the remake of "Night of the Living Dead" (1990) came on cable a couple years later that I saw my next zombie movie.

(Incidentally I believe the often-imitated moan for “brains” comes from the 1985 movie “The Return of the Living Dead” which is a comedy-zombie flick. I haven’t seen it, at least not yet.)

Aside from those two movies, my zombie exposure prior to 2002 was almost nonexistent (except of course for the classic “Simpsons” “Treehouse of Horror III” segment “Dial ‘Z’ for Zombies”). I was never all that into, or all that good at, video games (case in point: “Call of Duty”), so I missed the “Resident Evil” series that started churning out very popular games in 1996. Nope, it wasn’t until “28 Days Later” came out in 2002 that things started changing.



Technically, or rather, generically speaking, the infected in “28 Days Later” aren’t actually zombies; they’re... well, they’re infected. As in, they’re infected with the “Rage” virus. True zombies (and we’ll ignore voodoo zombies because I never found those zombies interesting) are reanimated corpses, thus explaining the slow shamble they exhibit. Not only are zombies slow and dead, but they can only be killed by destroying their brain. In “28 Days Later” the infected were not dead, they ran, and they could be put down like any other person. They weren’t zombies, but they were zombie-esque. Close enough for ninety percent of the population.

“28 Days Later” was a slick horror film that got a lot of attention. Like I said, it’s



not actually a zombie film, but it’s close enough, and because Hollywood likes to think lighting strikes as often as they want it to, zombie films started becoming more and more common. (Again, let me take a

moment to say zombie movies never went away, but from the period between 1990 and 2002 I think every zombie movie made was a B-movie, straight-to-video, or both.)

“Shaun of the Dead” came out in 2004 and, strangely enough, I couldn’t find anyone who was willing to see it in the theater. I remember going to Best Buy right before Christmas that year to buy it. After a few viewings it surpassed “Gladiator” as my favorite movie. I’ve screened or lent it to several friends. I have found the appeal of it is *almost* universal. I say it’s my favorite movie, but paradoxically, it’s not my favorite zombie movie. No, that title belongs to “Dawn of the Dead.”

Why would that be?

Why, indeed. Maybe it has to do with “Dawn” being the first zombie movie I saw, and it being so well done, it stuck with me. All others, try as they might, simply aren’t as good or powerful.

“SotD” is hilarious and brilliantly written; everything that happens in the first twenty minutes happens again throughout the rest of the movie so perfectly, I still find parallels I’ve missed after twenty-some viewings. You even get a few good scares in it. I believe there’s room for humor in the zombie genre for movies like “SotD,” “Fido” and “Zombieland” (which blurred comedy and horror just as well as “Sotd”), despite how many *purists* feel. I’ll even allow for fast zombies on occasion – I guess I am liberal.



Despite the rise in the popularity of zombie movies, it’s still a mainly an underground phenomenon. Check this out: the “Dawn of the Dead” remake in 2004 was made for \$28 million; “Zombieland” was made for \$23.6 million: George Romero’s “Land of the Dead” was made for a mere \$15 million. These are low budgets, friends. I get worried about the upcoming “World War Z,” based on Max Brooks’ excellent book of the same name that was written in the oral history vein like Mark Baker’s *Nam*. It promises to be a big budget extravaganza; it’s still being rewritten by a revolving door of writers, and directors are coming and going from the project. I just don’t have good feelings about so many fingers in the same pie.

Now, back to why zombies kick ass. I've come to the conclusion that "no explanation" is scarier. Sometimes a movie will trip over itself to explain how a zombie outbreak occurred. Usually it's explained as a virus that mutated or was passed from an animal; sometimes it's cosmic dust from Venus or a comet. The problem with explaining where zombies come from is that it not only demystifies them, but it is a rationalization of an irrational, made-up fantasy being. It takes some of the fun out of it because the explanation makes it seem even faker. I liken it to learning how magicians' tricks work. It *was* fun, not it's just lame and everyday.

Often you follow an everyday person in a zombie flick who has no idea what's going on and you share his ignorance. That's part of the fun. In the original "Dawn of the Dead" it was cops and a couple news station employees, in "28 Days Later" it was a bicycle courier you followed. And in "Shaun of the Dead," Shaun worked at an electronics store and Ed "sold a bit of weed." No one had any real answers and that made what was going on darker, scarier, and more real.

Slow is scarier than fast. As I said, I think there's room for sprinting zombies, but my preference is for the slow, shambling ones. It makes more sense that they are slow and uncoordinated, and it's more frightening. The original Terminator ran, but not at the end when the suspense was at its highest. Jason Voorhies didn't run; he just kept coming after you. The unhurried manner gives a great contrast to someone running away, especially when it's all for naught. It's the same principal for zombies except that zombies are not really villains. They're no more villains than the bear was in "The Edge," or the ocean was in "The Perfect Storm."

Zombies don't care. They're driven by the desire to feed on living flesh. They don't do it with malice; it's usually portrayed as a predator taking down prey, almost done with innocence. But that's all they do. They are the antithesis of community, capitalism, order, and even greed. They're pure instinct, as noted in at least one movie. It's an appealing and refreshing counterpoint to the other undead creatures, vampires,

who are often portrayed like shallow teenage girls sitting around a gothic mansion on chaise lounges sipping from Bishop Don Magic Juan-like goblets. Zombies don't have nice hair or clothes.

A frequent side effect of a zombie outbreak is the breakdown of society, whether it is on a global or smaller scale. End-of-the-world stories, stories about an apocalypse



or an Earth turned to a wasteland have always been interesting to me. You often get these with zombies. An outbreak gets so out of control that soon there are more zombies than living people.

Someone trying to survive alone, maybe traveling across country to get to a safe refuge that may or may not exist, perhaps encountering pockets of other survivors who may or may not welcome him, all the while attempting to avoid and/or dispatching the undead is loaded with limitless potential.

The real genius zombie stories aren't actually about zombies at all. Zombies are only a plot device, a catalyst. Good stories are about people.

John

The picture on the cover page is from "28 Weeks Later" and features Robert Carlyle in the foreground. Carlyle is an amazing actor.