CONNECT!ONS Med!aLit moments

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In This Issue…

Theme: Monsters and Media Literacy

Media literacy education and scholarship helps teachers and students understand why audience reactions to images flickering across a screen matters, and the resurgence of zombies in popular media is a good case in point. The number of both studio and independent zombie movies has been on a steady rise since 2002. In 2007, two zombie films were screened at the Sundance Film Festival. Why the increased attention? As Kyle Bishop writes, "The twenty-first-century zombie movies are no different from their historical antecedents, but society has changed markedly since the World Trade Center towers were destroyed. Scenes depicting deserted metropolitan streets, abandoned human corpses and gangs of lawless vigilantes have become more common than ever, appearing on the nightly news as often as on the movie screen" ("Dead Man Still Walking," p. 18).

Zombie films point to borderless threats such as terrorism and climate change which challenge the ability of nation states to respond to them. In a sense, citizens are left alone to confront their own anxieties, and for this reason, critical attention to audiences of this genre has become more relevant than ever.

At a past Director's Guild event, Wes Craven, who directed three of the "Nightmare on Elm Street" films, was asked why audiences continue to flock to horror movies. Craven replied, "They go because they're already scared. These movies give them a beginning, middle and end to their fear." In the classroom, teachers and students need access to tools which can help them discuss the fears which this genre can evoke with an awareness of the nature of the media in which these unsettling images appear.

With the advent of 1980s 'slasher' franchises such as "Halloween," "Friday the 13th" and "Nightmare on Elm Street," horror films seemed to become a hyper-violent extension of the action film genre, and teachers tended to avoid them for their graphic violence. The fact that they appeared to provide teen audiences with the temporary thrill of a roller coaster ride in an amusement park made them even more suspect. Since then the genre has become much broader, and scholarship in the field has made it more difficult for educators to ignore For example, in one chapter of his 2010 book *The God Tube: Uncovering the Hidden Spiritual Message in Pop Culture*, James Lawler finds echoes of Immanuel Kant's philosophical views on the nature of duty and self-sacrifice in "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" (WB Network, 1996-2003). While vampires obey the natural laws of survival, Buffy's felt sense of duty to make the world a safer place reflects "freedom and independence from the mechanism of nature" (quoted p. 64). Pop culture treatments of the supernatural such as "Buffy" are immensely appealing to students. As the essays in Lawler's book demonstrate, they can be ideal texts for media literacy education.

In addition, changing trends in popular representations of vampires have stretched the boundaries of the horror/fantasy genre and made it more readily adaptable for classroom instruction. In 1975, Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* introduced the character of Louis,

a vampire given to doubts about the moral worth of his existence, to a wide readership. Today, popular media, from the “Twilight” films to TV series such as “The Vampire Diaries” and “Being Human” feature vampires who must address a wide range of moral and ethical dilemmas. All of these offer rich opportunities for reflection on the human (and vampire) condition.

In this issue of *Connections*, we discuss the protean nature of the horror/fantasy genre, illuminate the valuable role which these texts can play in the media literacy classroom, and offer strategies for instruction. In our research section, we analytically dissect the zombie as archetype, metaphor, and allegorical figure, and explain its relevance to media literacy education. In our second research article, we offer suggestions for encouraging students to explore multiple perspectives and for helping them develop awareness of themselves as media audiences. We also offer suggestions to help them become reflective, literate producers. Our resources section includes a wide variety of listings, from psychological studies to fictional oral histories. And in the MediaLit Moment, your students will learn how to become sophisticated social critics even as they scare the living daylights out of their audiences.

Research Highlights

I, Zombie

In "Pedagogy of the Living Dead: Using Students' Prior Knowledge to Explore Perspective," high school teacher Allan Nail tells the story of how he was able to engage students in a productive examination of zombies in literature and film. In searching for sources of inspiration for this unit, Nail recalls a previous unit he taught on James Twitchell's *Adcult USA: The Triumph of Advertising in American Culture.* One of Twitchell's major premises is that advertising has become a language we use to experience the world. From his point of view, we all learn to "read" the world through the advertisements that are ubiquitous to our culture. Nail underscored this point for students with activities which elicited their prior knowledge of advertising.

After some reflection, Nail decided to take a similar approach with zombie fiction. What did students know about Greek and Roman mythology? With the right prompts, students discovered that they knew quite a lot. And what about zombies and other monsters? The same result was obtained. Even students who had never seen a film or read a book about zombies could explain many of the basic attributes of these fictional creatures. Nail explained to students that all this knowledge was a ". . . .pop-cultural twist on Jung's notion of the collective unconscious—information that we share as a culture, even if we are unaware of how we know it" (p.50). With a little more discussion and analysis, students were ready to engage in sustained inquiry regarding the social implications of these archetypes in the media texts in which they appeared.

There's another direction to take with Nail's work, however. The creatures created by popular media don't simply exist as "information that we share." Who created that information, and for what purpose? Nail reached for Twitchell's *Adcult* as a sort of intellectual sounding board as he drafted his unit, but he would have done well to include it in the zombie unit itself. Students may use the language of advertising, but if they do so without an awareness of the fact that this language is constructed, it may also use them. Advertising actively constructs a reality and worldview for us that defines us as consumers. Similarly, the creatures created by popular media don't just populate our cultural unconscious. They also have the power to colonize it.

The film "Resident Evil" provides a good example. Viewers encounter a clear critique of corporate power in the fictional Umbrella Corporation. It is the largest corporation in the United States. The viral epidemic that created the zombie apocalypse is essentially the result of a secret Umbrella experiment gone awry. Yet "Resident Evil" itself is a multi-media franchise that includes five live action films, three CGI films, and nearly two dozen video games. With "Resident Evil," zombies have not only captured the imagination of young adult viewers and players, but have also captured them as a market. This irony is not likely to be completely lost on teen audiences, but any 'pedagogy of the living dead' should allow adequate time for reflection and open dialogue on these issues.

Speaking metaphorically, it's easy to establish a connection between zombies and media audiences. Zombies are mindless consumers. When audiences fail to ask questions about the media they use, they may become mindless consumers, too. But there's something about zombies that is also quite literal, that moves beyond both myth and metaphor. The zombie is also an allegorical figure who haunts our common past.

Zombie-ism originated in Haiti, from tales of voodoo sorcerers, or *bokor*, who resurrected the recently dead and ordered them to do their bidding, including working the fields. As anthropologist Joan Dayan explains, "Born out of the experience of slavery and the sea passage from Africa to the New World, the zombie tells the story of colonization: the reduction of human into thing for the ends of capital. For the Haitian no fate is to be more feared" (qtd. Stratton, "Zombie Trouble," p.270). The zombie puts us in mind of our ancestors. Were they the colonists? The colonized? Both?

One of the fascinating things about audience response to zombies in the last decade is that discussing and detailing preparations for a possible zombie apocalypse has become a common pastime for adults as well as children. In one blog post from May 2011, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control compared preparations one might make for a zombie invasion with the preparations one should make for other emergencies. It seems likely that these preparations reflect a latent awareness that "zombies are us." In any case, the next time you find yourself teaching material which includes the walking dead, it is worthwhile to ask: Who exploits? Who is exploited? Are we either of those things?

Speaking of Horror

One important reason why horror texts can be a valuable media literacy resource is that they offer students a privileged glimpse into the life of characters who are somehow "other." In Allan Nail's "Pedagogy of the Living Dead," mentioned in our last article, the author assigned his students Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I Am Legend* to help them explore multiple perspectives. *I Am Legend* is the first fictional work that popularized the concept of a worldwide apocalypse due to disease. Conveniently, vampirism is the primary symptom of this plague. As a matter of survival, the main character, Robert Neville, becomes a fearless vampire hunter. By the end of the novel, Neville is captured by a contingent of vampires who are building a new society. In prison, he learns that he will be publicly executed. Neville had thought of himself as the lone survivor of a "normal" human culture, but when he is brought out for execution, he sees the fearful reactions of the vampire crowd, and realizes that--to them--he is the creature which had for so long ruthlessly hunted and killed their own. He has become a legend to them.

In a recent conversation, Sister Rose Pacatte, FSP, who directs the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Culver City, California, offered these reflections on the Other in horror and science fiction: "These creatures are us, they're some aspect of us that's acting in this other universe. Or they're among us, but we don't see them. These stories allow us to enter into these

ethical and moral scenarios, interpersonally, in the community, and by extension in the broader world. In 'Super 8,' an alien is captured by the government, but all it wants to do is to go back home. We see the reactions, the role of government. It's a science fiction story, but it's loaded with parallels. It's a metaphor for how we treat each other. . . . It's also a literary structure for film, a story paradigm with a purpose. Any TV program or film which can talk about these kinds of things that matter. . .can be used to create a dialogic, communicative moment with students."

Discussing students' motivations for watching horror films and their responses to them is also a worthwhile endeavor. First of all, you may not be able or willing to show clips from horror films which are graphic, disturbing, or carry a rating beyond PG-13. But you can always discuss students' reactions to them in class, especially if they are the ones initiating the conversation.

Second, those motivations and reactions will be many and varied. At times students will feel the same need for catharsis which theater audiences have experienced since ancient times. Other reactions may be more complex. Horror films are popular because they plunge audiences into worlds which differ radically from their everyday reality. They're wild. They're unpredictable. Audience reactions to horror can be unpredictable as well. Horror films can bring one to an excited or aroused state, and in psychological terms, that excitement may be transferred to a variety of affective responses, from enjoyment and humor to anger, aggression, and dysphoric (or despairing) empathy (Johnston, "Adolescent Motivations for Viewing Graphic Horror," p.529). In other words, students may approach horror texts from a number of different emotional perspectives, and these are worth exploring.

While most 21st century horror boasts state-of-the-art effects, takes place in contemporary settings and features equally contemporary family relationships, it's still essentially a conservative genre. Gender stereotypes of male killers and female victims are still common, and deserve to be problematized in the classroom. By the same token, horror texts can lead to productive conversations on the nature of good and evil. A recent American Public Media interview with Diane Winston, Knight Chair of Media and Religion at the USC Annenberg School for Communication, features a well-considered discussion of religious and moral themes in current television series such as "The Walking Dead" and "Dexter." (You can visit our resources section for a link to a podcast recording of this interview).

Finally, you may wish to give students the opportunity to write some fan fiction or mount their own media productions. A recent article in *Writer* magazine proclaims: "Zombie novels are putting authors on the bestseller lists. Zombie fiction is helping authors—pros and first-timers alike—break through into the mainstream, genre and young adult markets. Since 2002, living-dead enthusiasm has spread like a pandemic, and there is no end in sight. You don't even have to like zombies to get a career boost from them" (Maberry, "Go on. Bring a zombie to life," p.22) While publishers and film producers are capitalizing on creature fiction, young adults have the same body of expert knowledge on the undead at their disposal that

adults do, and their voices certainly deserve to be heard. Moreover, as the opening paragraphs of this article attest, the horror/fantasy genre is a perfect platform for social commentary, and it's a great venue for students to learn how to consciously frame values and points of view in the media they produce.

CML News

The Consortium for Media Literacy is now a project of Social and Environmental Entrepreneurs (SEE). Donations to the Consortium for the advancement of media literacy research can be made directly to SEE.

CONSORTIUM for MEDIA LITERACY

Uniting for Development

About Us…

The Consortium for Media Literacy addresses the role of global media through the advocacy, research and design of media literacy education for youth, educators and parents.

The Consortium focuses on K-12 grade youth and their parents and communities. The research efforts include nutrition and health education, body image/sexuality, safety and responsibility in media by consumers and creators of products. The Consortium is building a body of research, interventions and communication that demonstrate scientifically that media literacy is an effective intervention strategy in addressing critical issues for youth.

www.consortiumformedialiteracy.org

Resources for Media Literacy

Teaching Tip: Know your vampires, zombies, and other monsters. Take time to read the books, or watch the hit movies and television shows that your students find so appealing. Pay attention to this growing genre and carefully screen clips for classroom use.

Resources for Monsters and Media Literacy

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Bishop, Kyle. "Dead Man Still Walking: Explaining the Zombie Renaissance." *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 37.1 (2009): 16-25.

Johnston, Deirdre D. "Adolescents' Motivations for Viewing Graphic Horror." *Human Communication Research* 21.4 (1995): 522-552.

Lawler, Robert. *The God Tube: Uncovering the Hidden Spiritual Message in Pop Culture*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2010.

Maberry, Jonathan. "Go on. Bring a Zombie to Life." *Writer* 123.10 (2010): 22-24.

Nail, Allan. "Pedagogy of the Living Dead: Using Students' Prior Knowledge to Explore Perspective." *English Journal* 98.6 (2009): 49-55.

Stratton, Jon. "Zombie Trouble: Zombie Texts, Bare Life and Displaced People." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14.3 (2011): 265-281.

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Preparedness 101: Zombie Apoclaypse." Public Health Matters Blog, 16 May 2011. Accessed 20 January 2012 http://blogs.cdc.gov/publichealthmatters/2011/05/preparedness-101-zombie-apocalypse/

RECOMMENDED

Common Sense Media (http://www.commonsensemedia.org)
Sometimes film reviews are essential to choosing media for the classroom. The Common Sense Media site features searchable reviews of films and other media, including horror films. Thinking of reaching for "Zombieland"? Well, how about Sam Raimi's "Drag Me to Hell," which carries a PG-13 rating and a clear message about personal integrity?

"Monsters We Love: TV's Pop Culture Theodicy."
http://being.publicradio.org/programs/2011/monsters-we-love/
In December 2011, Krista Tippett of American Public Media's radio program "On Being" interviewed Diane Winston, Knight Chair of Media and Religion at the USC Annenberg School of Communication. Winston has much to say about religious themes and symbolism on AMC's "The Walking Dead," and also discusses provocative questions about good and evil posed on series such as "Dexter" and "Breaking Bad."

Drezner, Daniel W. "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Zombies." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 57.24 (2011): B13-B14.
Drezner, a political scientist at Tufts University, uses a zombie apocalypse as a hypothetical scenario from which to assess the ability of standard international-relations paradigms to analyze global threats to security. He discovers that they don't work very well. The good news is that zombies make a great focal point for multidisciplinary scholarship. What's more, students can actually use their knowledge of zombies to analyze differing theories of international relations.

Edwards, Kim. "Moribundity, Mundanity and Modernity: 'Shaun of the Dead.'" *Screen Education* No. 50 (2008): 99-103
Witty, insightful analysis of zombie comedy "Shaun of the Dead" (2004). Edwards argues that London after the zombie invasion doesn't look all that different than the way it did before.

Bode, Lisa. "Transitional Tastes: Teen Girls and Genre in the Critical Reception of *Twilight*." *Continuum*, 24.5 (2010): 707-719
Good media literacy educators make a point of respecting students' points of view. Bode takes reviewers to task for constructing particular teen audiences to support their opinions of *Twilight*. Another possible option for reviewers? Remember what it was like to be an adolescent and incorporate both adolescent and adult points of view into the review.

Jarvis, Christine. "School is Hell: Gendered Fears in Teenage Horror." *Educational Studies* 27.3 (2001): 257-267.
Jarvis conducts an insightful content analysis of the role of school locations in horror films and television programs. Social and academic anxieties, especially for female characters, are magnified in these settings.

Nolan, Justin M., and Gery W. Ryan. "Fear and Loathing at the Cineplex: Gender Differences in Descriptions and Perceptions of Slasher Films." *Sex Roles* 42, No. 1-2 (2000): 39-56.
According to the authors, horror movies may evoke particular fears in male viewers which female viewers don't feel as intensely.

Webb, Jen, and Sam Byrnand. "Some Kind of Virus: The Zombie as Body and as Trope." *Body and Society* 14.2 (2008): 83-98.
Explores the zombie phenomenon from a variety of theoretical perspectives--sociological, philosophical, psychoanalytic, and more.

Beck, Bernard. "Fearless Vampire Kissers: Bloodsuckers We Love in *Twilight*, *True Blood* and Others." *Multicultural Perspectives* 13.2 (2011): 90-92
Good discussion on using popular media in the horror/fantasy genre to address social questions about the Other.

News and Reviews:

Sister Rose Pacatte. "The Book of Eli: Prophecy or High Octane Action Flick?" *National Catholic Reporter* online. Blog post, 15 January 2010. Accessed 20 January 2012 http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/book-eli-prophecy-or-high-octane-action-flick
The Hughes brothers' "The Book of Eli" is one of the most recent (and perhaps successful) films to explore religious themes in a post-apocalyptic setting. Sister Rose Pacatte offers this nuanced review.

Stanley, Alessandra. "The Undead are Undaunted and Unruly." *New York Times*, Late Edition (East Coast), 29 October 2010: C1.
Review of AMC's "The Walking Dead" provides good interpretive survey of both zombie and vampire subgenres.

Klosterman, Chuck. "My Zombie, Myself: Why Modern Life Feels Rather Undead." *New York Times*, Late Edition (East Coast), 5 December 2010: AR1.
Personal, highly metaphorical and sometimes lyrical exploration of the zombie phenomenon.

Zombie Fiction:

Whitehead, Colson. *Zone One*. New York: Doubleday, 2011.
A literary novelist decides to enter the zombie fray. Many severed heads, but even more frequent digressions on our nostalgic longing for certainty in an uncertain world.

Grahame-Smith, Seth. *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2009.
"Can Elizabeth Bennett vanquish the spawn of Satan? And overcome the social prejudices of the class-conscious landed gentry?" (from book description).

Brooks, Max. *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*. New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2006.
Using oral historian Studs Terkel's *The Good War* as a source of inspiration, the author positions himself as a fictional agent of a United Nations commission gathering first-person accounts of the zombie apocalypse and the human-zombie conflict which followed. An international group of interviewees contribute to the reader's understanding of the religious, geo-political and environmental aftermath of the Zombie War. Not only has *World War Z* been produced in audio book format featuring the voices of Alan Alda and other A-list actors, a film version starring Brad Pitt is due to be released on the appropriately apocalyptic date of December 21, 2012.

Med!aLit Moments

DIY Zombie Apocalypse

A single film, George Romero's "Night of the Living Dead," with its legions of 'undead' mass murderers, has created one of the most enduring archetypes in pop culture history. Since then, all of us have become familiar with the attributes of the modern zombie--blank stares, a slow, jerky gait, subsistence on an all-protein diet. Zombies are also a trope or figure of speech. "Ted, you really shouldn't be working those ten hour days. You look like a zombie!" Most importantly, zombies are tropes with a social significance. They come in packs and herds, and they raise the question, why are they so mindless, and what are they following?

The answers which film producers have given to that question have been very different. Released in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, "Night of the Living Dead" has been dubbed "hippie horror" for its apparent commentary on the terrors of a war without purpose. In 2004, "Shaun of the Dead" featured many characters in "dead-end" jobs who seem little changed by their transformation into zombies. In this MediaLit Moment, your students will be able to unleash their social imagination as they answer the 'zombie question' for themselves.

Have students write their own version of the zombie apocalypse

AHA!: When I write about the future zombie invasion, I'm saying something about the kind of world we live in now!

Key Question #4 for Producers: Have I clearly and consistently framed values, lifestyles and points of view in my content?

Core Concept #4: Media have embedded values and points of view.

Key Question #2 for Producers: Does my message reflect understanding in format, creativity and technology?

Core Concept #2: Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.

Grade Level: 5-12

Materials: paper, pencil, imagination

Activity: Discuss the social implications of zombie film and fiction with students in the way it's been introduced above. Perhaps the single best example to give students is the Resident Evil series. It's not just a video game. The Umbrella Corporation featured in the movie and video games treated all its employees as expendable—and they all became zombies as a result.

Present sample clips, or excerpts from novels and/or graphic novels if you wish.

Ask, what kind of people in the world seem like zombies to them now? Why?

Next, ask students to use their answers as inspiration (and perhaps as characters for) for the zombie apocalypse story they are about to write. Students can sketch out apocalyptic scenarios instead, but these should be detailed enough to "flesh out" their social commentary. Assign students to work in pairs or groups as you wish.

Once students have completed the openings for their stories, compare, discuss and enjoy the variety of social worlds they've created.