

IT'S A MAN'S WORLD: REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER AND COMPETING  
IDEOLOGIES IN *SHAUN OF THE DEAD*

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IT'S A MAN'S WORLD: REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER AND COMPETING  
IDEOLOGIES IN *SHAUN OF THE DEAD*

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## VITA

Gretchen Stull, daughter of Clarence Stull, Jr. and Donna Reid, and granddaughter of Clarence Stull, Sr. and Shirley Stull, was born March 16, 1982, in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. She graduated from Waynesboro Area Senior High School in 2000. Gretchen then attended Juniata College, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Communication and a minor in Writing in May, 2004. In 2006, Gretchen began her two years of study in the Department of Communication and Journalism at Auburn University. She graduated with a Master of Arts degree in August, 2008.

THESIS ABSTRACT

IT'S A MAN'S WORLD: REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER AND COMPETING  
IDEOLOGIES IN *SHAUN OF THE DEAD*

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This thesis utilizes a gender media studies approach to analyze the 2004 British film *Shaun of the Dead*. Blending several film genres, *Shaun of the Dead* is counted among a small but growing sub-subgenre of film known as romantic zombie comedy or rom-zom-com. Boasting characteristics of multiple film genres, *Shaun of the Dead* is uniquely suited for gender critique. As such, this thesis answers the question, what gender messages does *Shaun of the Dead*, a contemporary British film, communicate to American audiences? Containing all the defining filmic characteristics of the horror genre, with the added cinematic elements of both the zombie horror and romantic comedy subgenres, *Shaun of the Dead* communicates gendered messages about the American sociocultural landscape that hold meaning for American movie-going audiences. Placing

zombies in the ideological position of “Other,” the film depicts the tension and struggle among dominant and competing gender ideologies within the United States. Ultimately, this depiction serves to maintain and repair dominant American ideological values and power structures. Additionally, *Shaun of the Dead* provides a commentary on the prevailing American sociocultural fears of the time period in which it was released, allowing audiences members to confront their shared fears and overcome them onscreen.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	5
The Horror Genre .....	8
Origins and Evolution of the Horror Genre .....	8
Defining the Horror Genre .....	16
The Zombie Subgenre .....	24
Origins and Evolution of the Zombie Subgenre thru the 1940s .....	24
The Reinvention of the Zombie Subgenre .....	28
The Golden Age of the Zombie Film and After .....	30
Current Zombie Cinema .....	33
The Romantic Zombie Comedy .....	36
The Screwball Comedy or Romantic Comedy .....	37
Combining Romantic Comedy ... with Zombies .....	37
Patriarchy and Gender .....	39
Defining Patriarchy and Androcentrism .....	39
The Masculine and the Feminine .....	41
The Valued and Devalued Traits of Patriarchal Society .....	43
The Role of Hegemony .....	44
Literature Review in Summation .....	46

III. METHODOLOGY .....	48
Communication Gender Ideology in Horror Films .....	50
Horror Films and Their Ability to Offer Critique .....	52
Ideological Messages in Horror throughout the Decades .....	56
Ideological Messages of the Zombie Subgenre .....	61
<i>Shaun of the Dead</i> Synopsis .....	67
IV. GENRE AND GENDER ANALYSIS OF <i>SHAUN OF THE DEAD</i> .....	72
Production, Distribution, and Exhibition of <i>Shaun of the Dead</i> .....	74
Situating <i>Shaun of the Dead</i> within the Horror Genre .....	78
Genre and Gender Analysis in Summation .....	100
V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION .....	103
Limitations and Areas for Further Research .....	110
Concluding Remarks .....	111
WORKS CITED .....	112
APPENDIX A: FILMOGRAPHY .....	133
APPENDIX B: <i>SHAUN OF THE DEAD</i> VISUALS .....	138

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A black screen fades in to show a crowded pub. A twenty-something couple sits at a table strewn with empty glasses discussing the state of their failing relationship and the factors leading to the issues between them. The primary problem is the perpetual immaturity and selfish nature of the man, Shaun. The woman, Liz, wants Shaun to change his childish ways and Shaun promises to do so . . . tomorrow. This is a promise that Shaun makes often and yet one on which he never follows through. What Shaun fails to recognize is that his problems, both with Liz and in other areas of his life, are a result of his underdeveloped sense of responsibility and immature nature. Yet in avoiding maturity and manhood, Shaun does far more than alienate his girlfriend; Shaun opposes the dominant construction of manhood. Shaun refuses his predetermined societal role, which must be rectified in order for him to both save his relationship with Liz and fully embrace the patriarchal ideologies of the dominant culture. The consequences associated with accepting or rejecting dominant gender values are communicated throughout *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) in many forms. Through the presentation of Shaun and the other main characters in the film, *Shaun of the Dead* communicates gender messages to contemporary American audiences.

*Shaun of the Dead* is a romantic zombie comedy produced in England in 2004. Blending several film genres, it found both critical acclaim and success with American movie-going audiences. This success raises interesting questions about the messages

communicated in *Shaun of the Dead* and the meaning those messages hold for audience members. What gender messages does *Shaun of the Dead*, a contemporary British romantic zombie comedy, communicate to contemporary American audiences? In order to answer this research question, I first provide a literature review that situates *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) within the boundaries of the horror genre, the zombie subgenre, and the romantic zombie comedy sub-subgenre. This is done through presentation of existing academic literature that explains the history of the horror genre and its subgenres, and an examination of the research that leads to the categorization of *Shaun of the Dead* and other films like it. I also briefly review the tenants of the romantic comedy subgenre that are featured most heavily within *Shaun of the Dead*, rendering the film more than just a horror film even though it fulfills the definition of horror provided by Corrigan and White (2004). The literature review concludes with discussion of patriarchy and gender, defining the terminology that will be used throughout the gender critique of *Shaun of the Dead*.

Following the literature review, I provide a methodology section that details the tools and procedures I use in the study and assessment of my artifact, *Shaun of the Dead*. Using gender studies as my method, the methodology section delves into the history of gender studies, explaining the uses and significance of it as a theoretical framework. I explain the ways in which gender studies is utilized in the analysis of culture, mass communication, and film, outlining the manner in which a gender study of a film is conducted. Applying gender studies to both the horror genre at large and the more specified zombie subgenre, I provide examples of relevant gender studies to further illustrate the methods involved in performing a gender study and analysis, the types of

critiques most often made in reference to film, and the kind of results that can be expected. The methodology section ends with a thorough account of *Shaun of the Dead*, detailing relevant plot information and presenting the sequence of events that transpire within the film.

The analysis section begins with a discussion of the factors leading to the creation of *Shaun of the Dead*. This discussion is followed by commentary describing the success and acclaim the film achieved upon both its British and American releases. After situating *Shaun of the Dead* firmly within the boundaries of the horror genre, I use the tools outlined within the methodology section to analyze and critique the artifact. The remainder of the analysis section is a gender study and analysis of *Shaun of the Dead*. This analysis ultimately answers the research questions by means of an examination of the competing gender ideologies depicted within the film and a critique of the messages that the presentation of these competing ideologies communicates to contemporary American audiences.

Thus, this project is guided by a primary research question, which asks what gender messages does *Shaun of the Dead*, a contemporary British romantic zombie comedy, communicate to contemporary American audiences? This primary research question is elaborated upon by a series of secondary research questions, which pose corresponding inquiries: Who benefits as a result of the gender messages communicated within *Shaun of the Dead*? Who is attributed power and who is marginalized and neglected? Whose power is enhanced, whose is diminished, and what are the implications for American audiences?

As my analysis reveals, I argue that *Shaun of the Dead*, through its depiction of ordinary citizens confronting a full scale zombie invasion, presents audiences with commentary regarding the competing gender ideologies within contemporary American culture. Ultimately, all threats to the dominant patriarchal ideology posed by competing ideologies are neutralized and dominant American ideological values are upheld. Although the film opens with Shaun's unwillingness to embrace his masculine role, by the film's conclusion it is his acceptance of dominant ideological gendered expectations that saves Shaun and Liz; both their relationship and their lives.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

His relationship with Liz disintegrated, Shaun and his best friend, Ed, kneel in an English garden. The two are bent over a decorated metal case of old vinyl records. They flip through the stack of albums quickly, reading the titles aloud and debating over which albums are worth keeping and which albums to toss out. Deciding to keep a majority of the titles, the pair settles on a few albums that are no longer of interest to them, including a Sade record Liz left at Shaun's flat. Shaun and Ed dispose of the unwanted albums in an unusual manner; the unwanted records are thrown Frisbee-style at a pair of approaching zombies in an attempt to incapacitate the undead. This scene is just one of many from the British release *Shaun of the Dead*, a film that blends several film genres, resulting in complex scenes like the one outlined above. With strong elements of horror, romance, and comedy, *Shaun of the Dead* belongs to a diminutive but growing subgenre of the horror genre. In this chapter, I explain the history and subgenres of horror films, focusing specifically on the zombie subgenre and explaining the research that leads to the categorization of multifaceted horror films like *Shaun of the Dead*. I also briefly explore the themes and characteristics of the romantic comedy subgenre of film that are relevant to *Shaun of the Dead* and other romantic zombie comedies.

Since Sophocles first related the horrific tale of Oedipus to astounded listeners centuries ago, horror stories became accepted and prized as popular literary and artistic narrative themes (Corrigan & White, 2004). With the advent of motion pictures in the late

19<sup>th</sup> century, storytellers found a new venue through which to spread their tales of terror to eager audiences. As such, horror is one of cinema's most fundamental genres (Prince, 2004b). Like Westerns, musicals, and gangster movies, horror films enjoyed an early debut in cinematic history, quickly becoming one of the first staples of the medium. Unlike many of these other genres, however, horror managed to maintain a constant cinematic presence since its inception (Crane, 2004; Prince, 2004b). Ross claims that the horror genre is "among the longest-lived of film genres" (1972, p. 1), and it continues to develop today. The endurance of the horror genre inspired scholars to remark on its "peculiar longevity" and question the attraction horror films hold for audience members (Crane, 2004, p. 151). By continually transforming and reinventing itself throughout the decades, the horror genre manages to retain its popularity, attracting audiences with varying degrees of success (Bishop, 2006; Kendrick, 2004; Prince, 2004b). Currently, the horror genre enjoys a good deal of box office success, if not necessarily critical acclaim (Crane, 2004; Greenberg, 2002; Gregson, 2005; Hantke, 2007; Preston, 2006; Prince, 2004b; Timpone, 2004). One particular type of horror film stimulating the renewed interest in the horror genre as a whole is the zombie film (Gregson, 2005).

The zombie film is a subgenre of horror films and contains many of the same narrative elements. Further distinctions are made within the subgenre of zombie films, breaking this subgenre down into smaller, more definite sub-subgenres (Dendle, 2001). *Shaun of the Dead*, a British film released in 2004, falls under the zombie subgenre of horror films. Although it contains elements common to all horror movies, *Shaun of the Dead* also contains elements that set it apart from some of the other zombie films released in recent years. These elements place *Shaun of the Dead* in the very small



sub-sub-subgenre of the romantic zombie comedy (or rom-zom-com). Yet besides being an interesting, enjoyable film, one may ask what gender messages *Shaun of the Dead*, a contemporary British rom-zom-com, communicates to contemporary American audiences? I answer this research question by analyzing the horror genre and zombie subgenre from a gender studies perspective, ascertaining why *Shaun of the Dead* is significant to contemporary American audiences and what it communicates regarding competing gender identities and American ideological fears and anxieties.

In order to examine *Shaun of the Dead* as a text, it is important to understand the subgenre of zombie films that led to its creation, as well as the historical cinematic tradition of the horror genre as a whole. To situate *Shaun of the Dead* as a text within bounds of the horror genre, the zombie subgenre, and the romantic zombie comedy sub-sub-subgenre, we must recognize the elements of each genre and subgenre. Additionally, it is vital to explore the characteristics of the romantic comedy subgenre of film to ascertain a better understanding of the romantic and comedic elements featured within *Shaun of the Dead*, leading to its classification as more than just a horror or even zombie horror film. This literature review thus begins with a brief introduction to the horror genre and its subgenres, focusing specifically on the development of horror throughout cinematic history and the themes indicative of each time period. Next, I provide a similar overview of the zombie subgenre, its origins and evolution, and popular themes and cinematic codes. This is followed with a discussion of the rom-zom-com sub-sub-subgenre. Finally, I close by briefly exploring the romantic comedy subgenre of film as it applies to romantic zombie comedies, like *Shaun of the Dead*.

## The Horror Genre

### *Origins and Evolution of the Horror Genre*

Horror was one of the first genres to emerge as a standard film narrative (Crane, 2004; Prince 2004b). Although early 19<sup>th</sup> century European cinema included elements of the horrific in many films, the films most often attributed as the foundational works of the horror genre were produced in the United States by Universal in the early 1930s, such as *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Mummy* (1932) and *The Black Cat* (1934). These films were created and released as the motion picture industry transitioned from the silent film era to motion pictures with sound (Conrich, 2004; Kinnard, 1995; Prince, 2004b; Tybjerg, 2004). Although some silent films were imbued with elements of horror, scholars argue that the horror genre itself did not develop until Universal's release of *Frankenstein* on November 16, 1931, making it the first film classified under the horror genre (Conrich, 2004; Kinnard, 1995; Tybjerg, 2004). It is impossible to ignore the contributions of early American silent films and European cinema to the horror genre, particularly the German Expressionist film *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, released in 1920). Lauded for both its visual imagery and its use of *mise en scène*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) made a significant impact on cinema worldwide (Roberts, 2004). Yet the designation of horror, and therefore the birthplace of the genre, is attributed to Universal's *Frankenstein* (1931), making it and the films that followed the foundation of the genre (Conrich, 2004; Kinnard, 1995; Tybjerg, 2004).

These early, foundational horror films constitute the period of time known as Classical Horror, sometimes called the Golden Age of Horror (Pinedo, 2004; Prince, 2004b). Since that time, the horror genre underwent a variety of changes in theme,

structure, and content. The focus of the films changed, just as the plots evolved and adapted to suit shifting audience expectations and the time periods in which the films were produced (Diehl, 1996; England, 2006; Kendrick, 2004; Pinedo, 1997; Prince, 2004b). One element of horror films that changed frequently throughout cinematic history is the object of the horror. The Golden Age of Horror is best known for films depicting gothic monsters (like Dracula or Frankenstein's monster) in foreign or exotic lands, and for using a closed narrative structure in which all problems are resolved and normalcy restored by the end of the film (Pinedo, 2004; Prince, 2004b; Wood, 1986). The 1940s and 1950s witnessed a "dramatic upswing in all horror media" (Bishop, 2006, p. 199) and film was no exception, even if the object of horror underwent some changes.

For films produced within the United States, the 1950s saw the departure of the Gothic monsters that pervaded early horror films. In their place, a new kind of monster emerged. By blending common cinematic practices of the horror genre with elements of science fiction, the 1950s "creature feature" was born (Lucanio, 1987; Pinedo, 2004). Creature features of the postwar era, like *The Thing from Another World* (1951), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), and *The Blob* (1958), relocated the action from foreign shores and placed the monster in contemporary American cities and small towns. The science fiction component of creature features heightened the sense of horror by providing the films with logical plausibility, however farfetched or unsound the scientific "reasoning." These films retained a sense of the exotic, however, in that even though the locations were familiar to American audiences, the monsters had prehistoric or extraterrestrial origins (Lucanio, 1987; Pinedo, 2004).

Although the 1950s marked a departure from Gothic monsters for American films, quite the opposite occurred in Great Britain. While Universal and other American studios mass produced horror films in the 1930s and 1940s, Great Britain saw the release of precious few such films during this time (Hutching, 1993). British censorship and then World War II are credited with the lack of British horror films from this time period, although films from other genres, such as the melodrama *Sweeny Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1936), included elements of the grotesque (Hutching, 1993; Richards, 1984). The 1945 film *Dead of Night* is credited as the first significant British horror film, yet it was not until Hammer Films released the commercially successful *The Quatermass Xperiment* (1955) (released in the United States as *The Creeping Unknown*) that British horror became a fully established and successful genre (Hutching, 1993). *The Quatermass Xperiment* (1955), like American creature features of the time, mixed horror with elements of science fiction in order to achieve thrills. It is the 1957 Hammer Film production *The Curse of Frankenstein*, however, that secured the success of Hammer Films and brought world-wide attention to the relatively small company. *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957) was the first in a series of gore-intensive, color remakes of Universal's Gothic classics from the 1930s (Eyles, Adkinson, & Fry, 1984; Heffernan, 2004; Hutching, 1993; Meikle, 1996).

Finding success and acclaim in the mid 1950s, Hammer Films actually began as a family business many years beforehand. Hammer Films formed in 1947, although the history of the company can be traced as far back as 1913, with some form of the film company in existence as early as 1934 (Eyles, Adkinson, & Fry, 1984; Heffernan, 2004). *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957) labeled Hammer Films as "the major re-interpreter of

horror myths from studio-era Hollywood” (Heffernan, 2004). Releasing *Dracula* (1958, billed as *Horror of Dracula* in the United States) the following year, Hammer Films became synonymous with British horror filmmaking and depictions of Gothic monsters throughout the world, launching the careers of famed horror icons Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee. The company released numerous Gothic films in the 1950s and early 1960s, including *The Revenge of Frankenstein* (1958), *The Mummy* (1959), *The Curse of the Werewolf* (1960), and *The Brides of Dracula* (1960). While American audiences largely moved past Gothic horror tales in favor of creature features in the 1950s, British audiences could not get enough of the re-envisioned Gothic horror craze, lead admirably by Hammer Films (Eyles, Adkinson, & Fry, 1984; Heffernan, 2004; Hutching, 1993; Meikle, 1996).

The horror genre underwent dramatic changes again in the 1960s; beginning with the premiere of Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) (Prince, 2004b). With *Psycho* (1960), Hitchcock disrupted the closed narrative structure that called for the restoration of order and return to normalcy that followed the downfall of the easily identifiable monster (Prince, 2004b). No longer were horror films tales of exotic monsters located on foreign shores or even supernatural beings invading American soil. Instead, the monsters became seemingly ordinary people; outwardly average citizens located in the heart of America, making the danger onscreen seem real and more threatening. The change to an open narrative structure denied audiences a sense of closure at the films’ end. The monsters became real, local, not always easy to identify or destroy, and sure to return (Prince, 2004b).

The changes Hitchcock introduced with the creation of *Psycho* (1960), however, were not the only changes to affect films of the horror genre in the 1960s. The 1960s also witnessed the introduction of “mondo movies,” like *Mondo Cane* (1962), *Mondo Balordo* (1964), and *Mondo Bizzaro* (1966). These films depicted bizarre, real-life practices (often faked) from around the world and, as such, also added to the sense of danger existing in real life (Brottman, 2004). Additionally, apocalyptic horror films rose in popularity starting in the late 1960s (Becker, 2006). These films depicted world-wide destruction from which no one was completely safe. The 1960s paved the way for more violent, gory, and unsettling depictions of horror designed to leave audiences members feeling ill at ease even after the films’ end (Kendrick, 2004; Prince, 2004b). According to Kendrick (2004), “gore became the central organizing principle of horror films starting in the 1960s” (p. 154). This trend continued throughout the subsequent decades.

After a slight decline, horror films became big box office draws again in the 1970s, with blockbusters like *The Exorcist* (1973) and *Jaws* (1975) paving the way to financial success (Prince, 2004b). The desire to show more realistic, shocking imagery in horror films continued, as did the practice of using an open narrative structure (Zinoman, 2007). British filmmaking company Hammer Films reached their peak of production in 1971, when they completed and released ten horror films within twelve months (Eyles, Adkinson, & Fry, 1984). In America, slasher films, with their focus on violence and escalating body counts, rose to popularity in the 1970s (Freeland, 2004). These films often presented cast of beautiful and sexualized victims literally torn to shreds at the hands of a sadistic, superior foe. Popular slasher films of the 1970s include *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Black Christmas* (1974), *The Town that Feared Sundown*

(1976), and *Halloween* (1978). Some actors and actresses, like Jamie Lee Curtis, became synonymous with these films, reprising the same archetypal role over and over again.

In the 1980s, the production of horror films continued to climb (Prince, 2004b), even as the genre became somewhat cartoonish due to its preoccupation with multiple sequels and remakes (Zinoman, 2007). Movies like, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), and *Child's Play* (1988) were at the forefront of this trend, drawing crowds with their explicit and intricate depictions of death. The 1978 slasher film, *Halloween*, was also a source of numerous sequels and revisionings throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), and *Child's Play* (1988) all spawned multiple sequels, some eventually combining the infamous movie monsters, like *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003). As the sequelization of these films continued, however, viewers expected that the monster was never really gone, the threat never totally removed, and the plots became increasingly outlandish as each new film sought to outgore the one before it. According to Zinoman (2007), horror films of the 1980s and 1990s depicted “endless sequels about unbelievably clever serial killers slicing up their incredibly dim victims in increasingly preposterous ways” (para. 2). So defined, Zinoman (2007) refers largely to slasher films, as well as the self-conscious parodies of the slasher subgenre, labeled neo-slasher, that appeared in the 1990s. Popular neo-slasher releases include *Scream* (1996), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), and *Urban Legend* (1998), as well as their multiple sequels.

Currently, horror films enjoy significant financial success at the box office, even if fans, critics, and scholars question their creative value (Beale, 2004; Greenberg, 2002; Gregson, 2005; Hantke, 2007; Humphries, 2002; Phillips, 2006; Preston, 2006; Timpone,

2004; Zinoman, 2007). One factor linking many contemporary films of the horror genre is the emphasis on extreme depictions of violence and gore (Crane, 2004; Kendrick, 2004; Prince, 2004b; Zinoman, 2007). According to Kendrick (2004),

Whereas previously the details of violence in horror films had been largely hinted at and suggested just outside the cinematic frame, modern horror films have moved it front and center, turning decapitations, disembowelments, stabbings, burnings, maulings, and other assorted visual atrocities into one of the genre's chief draws. (p. 153)

Films such as *Hostel* and *Hostel II* (2005; 2007), the four *Saw* films (2004; 2005; 2006; 2007), *28 Days Later* (2002) and its sequel *28 Weeks Later* (2007), and the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) not only claim depictions of excessive carnage and brutality as their main attraction, but found box office success as a result (Gregson, 2005; Preston, 2006; Zinoman, 2007).

While the term “splatter film” or “splatter cinema” (coined by George Romero in reference to his 1978 film *Dawn of the Dead*) has been used in relation to those horror films that concentrate specifically on intense and prolonged images of extreme gore and graphic violence (McCarty, 1984), a new subgenre of film heavily influenced by the splatter film has arisen in recent years. By combining the depictions of excessive violence and gore with sexually suggestive imagery onscreen, the “torture porn” subgenre of horror films was born. Films of the torture porn subgenre, also called “gorno” (a mixture of the words “gore” and “porno”), present highly sexualized violence as their primary selling point (Boucher, 2007). They are labeled torture porn for their graphic depictions of nudity, torture, mutilation, and sadism. This label has negative connotations and was



first used by film critic David Edelstein in his review of *Hostel* (2005). Since that time, many other films, including *Saw* (2004) and its sequels, *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), *Wolf Creek* (2005), *Turistas* (2006), and *Captivity* (2007) have also been classified under the subgenre torture porn (Edelstein, 2006; Skenazy, 2007). Films of this subgenre have proven wildly profitable, even as they are criticized for their content (Kinsella, 2007; La Monica, 2007; Murray, 2007).

Not all modern horror films follow this model of excessively graphic violence and gore. Films like *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *The Others* (2001), and *Signs* (2002) communicate horror more subtly, relying on mood rather than bloodshed and body count to convey the sense of horror to audiences (Crane, 2004; Freeland, 2004). Yet these films are the exception rather than the rule and the majority of new horror films rely on increasingly bloody visuals to scare and shock audiences. It is because of this trend that Prince (2004b) argues “horror films today...are more disturbing than those produced in earlier periods” (p. 3). This is because contemporary horror films concentrate more strongly on prolonged, detailed visual depictions of gore than those films produced in previous decades.

Thus, the horror genre is very different today than it was in 1931. Audiences watched the source of horror change throughout the decades, moving from the gothic monster on foreign shores, to the extraterrestrial in American backyards, to the indistinguishable and virtually unstoppable psychopath who lives next door. Horror films largely lost their closure. A film's source of terror is no longer extinguished at the film's end, but instead placed temporarily on hold until another sequel or remake revives the seemingly unstoppable monster and locates a new host of victims. The cinematic body

count continues to rise with the depictions of torture and death ever more detailed and extreme. With the codes of cinematic horror so constantly in flux, it is difficult to establish one agreed upon definition of horror. As such, it is necessary to trace the implications of the changing source of horror in films of this genre. In the following section, I introduce the theories used to analyze films of the horror genre, specifically the theories addressing horror derived from monsters, the elements of horror, and horror as the cultural reflection of a society's collective nightmare. So doing, I locate a definition of the horror genre against which the subgenres of horror can be analyzed.

### *Defining the Horror Genre*

The conventions of the horror genre are continually under debate. As with any genre, this is due to that fact that genre boundaries are permeable and open to interpretation (Tudor, 1989). According to Tudor (1989),

a genre is flexible, open to variable understanding by different users at different times and in different contexts. Thus while most people have ideas about what might generally constitute a horror movie...they might very well disagree about the classification of specific films. (p. 6)

Easily overlapping with other film genres, such as science fiction, drama, and even comedy, the horror genre's ability to merge with other film forms contributes both to its versatility and its difficulty in being definitively categorized (Corrigan & White, 2004; Dendle, 2001; Hantke, 2007; Pinedo, 2004; Prince, 2004b). Called "the genre of grotesque mayhem, occult freaks, and implacable serial killers" (Crane, 2004, p. 150), a wide variety of films fall under the mantle of horror. The elements of a film that lead to its designation as a horror film, however, must arise from a combination of both the

horrific elements located within the film and audience reaction to these elements. A host of scholars provide arguments detailing their theories of what elements categorize a film as a horror film.

One popular theory locates the source of horror, and therefore the designation of a horror film, within the monster. Carroll (1990) asserts that the horror genre is defined by the presence of monsters who “breach the norms of ontological propriety” (p. 16); further elaborating that audience fear is a defining feature of a horror film. As such, any film that provokes fear in the audience may be considered a horror film, whether or not it is intended or marketed as such (Carroll, 1999). Carroll further places the definition of horror on the monster and audience fear in relation to the monster; the term monster defined as any being that violates the accepted standards of what it means to be intrinsically human (1990, 1999). Audiences recognize the monster within a film and feel fear as a result, thus rendering the film a horror film.

Critics observe that Carroll’s (1990) definition, with its emphasis on the monster as the distinguishing feature of the horror genre, is too limited in scope and provides an inadequate framework for fully accounting for the genre (Freeland, 2000; Hills, 2003; Jancovich, 1992; Picart & Frank, 2004; Schneider, 2004). Additionally, Carroll (1990) provides no definition of what it means to be human. By defining the monster as that which violates human standards, without articulating what these standards are, Carroll’s theory fails to provide the tools for identifying which human standards are transgressed in a monstrous way. Furthermore, Carroll’s (1999) overt focus on audience emotion places the role of defining horror in the hands of viewers. By Carroll’s own assertion (1990, 1999), the audience definition of fear is derived from the depiction of a monster, yet the

term monster is used so ambiguously that individual audience members must decide for themselves whether or not a being is actually monstrous. This ambiguity removes the definition of horror from the attributes of the films themselves and leaves it open for individual interpretation based on the viewer's sense of what makes a being less than human. Grodal (1997) similarly defines horror on the basis of the monster, arguing that the monster's ability to elicit certain fearful emotions from audience members determines whether or not a film is a horror film. While this research provides useful information, it is not suited for the type of analysis I conduct within this project.

Freeland stresses that the defining characteristic of the horror genre is its presentation of evil and the ways in which humans struggle with and against that evil (2000, 2004). This type of analysis focuses on defining what constitutes something as "evil," then discerning how humans interact with it. Do the humans struggle against the evil, learn to live with it, or give in to it, thus becoming evil themselves? This method of defining the horror genre is problematic. Judging horror on the basis of evil is difficult because this term is also ambiguous. Even if a common definition of evil is determined, the horror genre is not alone in its depiction of evil and human interactions with it. Dramas, comedies, westerns, and even musicals portray various forms of evil and depict the variety of ways in which humans can engage, resist, or succumb to evil. Hence, defining horror solely on the basis of evil would render nearly every film a horror film.

Some argue that the primary purpose of horror films is to frighten viewers, allowing audience members to experience fear in a secure environment (Dickstein, 1980; Gregson, 2005). This theory is based in psychology and media effects research. In accordance with this theory, horror films allow individuals an opportunity to experience

their greatest fears in a secure, neutral place, thus lessening the overall source of fear. Once the fear is experienced, individuals are afforded the opportunity to confront and work through their fear. Although this is interesting on an individual basis, this project is concerned with societal fears, not individual fear. Fear is derived and experienced differently depending upon person, culture, and situation, so, under this definition, horror creators could not be sure that what they intend to induce fear will actually be effective. As such, this definition places the designation of horror solely in the hands of the audience and concentrates on the individual interpretation and experience of fear rather than the societal implications.

Yet another definition of horror with an established academic foothold derives from the writings of noted horror theorist Wood (1979, 1984, 1986). Using a psychoanalytic approach, Wood defines horror films as a “collective nightmare” (1984, p. 174). According to Wood,

The true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its re-emergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter of terror, and the happy ending (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression. (1986, p. 75)

Based in psychology, Wood’s approach deals heavily with repression and the collective unconscious. Wood believes that in order for a society to maintain a dominant set of ideological and institutional structures, certain aspects of that society (the aspects that threaten dominant belief systems) must be systematically repressed. The monster of horror films, then, is an unconscious manifestation of the repressed fears of a society. The monster represents the deviant systems of belief that threaten the dominant societal

ideologies. If a happy ending exists in horror films, it comes with the destruction of the monster. The monster's destruction symbolizes the continued repression of threatening or counter ideologies. Horror films, therefore, uphold the dominant ideology by systematically depicting threats and conquering those threats (in the form of the monster) (Schneider, 2004; Wood, 1979, 1986).

While many theorists, including Engall (2002), England (2006), and Schneider (2004) triumph Wood as one of the foremost authorities of the horror genre, Wood's discussion of horror concentrates too heavily on psychoanalyses. The psychoanalytic approach places emphasis on the individual, the unconscious, and the acts of repression and reaction formation, instead of on the cultural implications of film. Thus, Wood positions the monster as an unconscious manifestation of individual resistance to competing or counter ideologies. The monster does not represent the permeating fears of an entire society, only the worries of individual members of a society. Concentrating on repression and restoration of repression in the wake of the monster, Wood is interested in the suppressed fears held in the mind of the individual, not the collected fears of the larger society. By conflating these individual fears and applying them to the population at large, the assumption is in place that all members of a society uphold the same ideological systems and, as a result, fear the destruction of those systems, rejoicing when the systems are upheld. It is an inside-out method of looking at fear, where fear of ideological threat begins within the individual unconscious and is then applied to the population at large. Adversely, for this project it would be more beneficial to consider an

outside-in method of analyzing fear, where fear arises from the society itself, not the individual unconscious, and then allows individual societal members to confront the fear (in the guise of the monster) in the safe environment provided by film.

Rejecting Wood, some theorists argue instead for a model of understanding and critiquing the horror genre that draws from a social perspective rather than a psychoanalytic one (Prince, 2004a; Tudor, 1989). Prince (2004a) views film as a social manifestation and not simply a site of repression or projection for the unconscious mind. As human beings are social animals, existing within a social order, and films are a product of society, horror films must be approached from a social, culturally-based perspective in order to understand the significance and meaning they hold for viewers (societal members) at a given time (Prince, 2004a). As such, the definition of horror used for the purposes of this project hails from a socially-based perspective.

One socially-based definition of horror comes from Corrigan and White (2004), who argue that there are several fundamental elements of horror. First, horror films must include a character or characters who have some kind of deformity, whether physical, psychological, or spiritual. Often, one or more of these deformities reside within a single character. Deformities are not restricted to the monster or villain in a horror film. Any character, protagonist or antagonist, may have one or more deformities. The deformities may be external and instantly recognizable, such as Freddy's horrific burns in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), or the deformities may be internal and hidden from sight. Examples of internal deformities include Norman Bates' psychological deformity that led to his homicidal activities in *Psycho* (1960) and Regan MacNeil's spiritual deformity that manifests itself in the form of demonic possession in *The Exorcist* (1973).

Secondly, the narrative of the horror film must be built around or include the essential elements of surprise, suspense, and shock (Corrigan & White, 2004). Through use of surprise, suspense, and shock, horror films heighten the sense of fear experienced by audience members. Often, suspense is built through use of film soundtrack, the music slowly rising to crescendo as the danger draws ever closer to the protagonist. The shock may be derived from increasingly graphic depictions of gore, as well as from the unexpected. Surprise, likewise, may result from visualization of the unexpected. This occurs when a character transgresses beyond predictable activity, as in *The Ring* (2002), when the antagonist physically crawls out of a film playing on the television to attack and murder unsuspecting victims. Another example may include the many instances in which a monster appears behind the protagonist, seemingly from out of nowhere. This convention is especially popular in slasher films.

Finally, the visual depiction of horror films must maintain a balance, moving between the anxious dread of not seeing and the true horror of seeing; keeping the audience in a state of suspended fear, dread, and disgust (Corrigan & White, 2004). In order to retain their ability to frighten, horror films cannot focus too long on the monster. If the monster is clearly seen and analyzed, it will lose its mystery and therefore some of its ability to inspire fear. It is more frightening to allow the audience to use their imagination, to show just enough of the monster (the object of horror) to induce fear, which is derived from the monster's abilities and/or unpredictable nature. This is the true horror of seeing and knowing the monster's capabilities. It is important to allow only a cursory glance at the monster before turning the camera away, focusing instead on the plight of the protagonists as they attempt to save themselves. This is the anxious dread of



not seeing; waiting to see what becomes of the protagonists and whether or not their efforts to save themselves are in vain. Not only will this break heighten the monster's ability to stimulate fear, it may prompt audience members to identify with the protagonists, heightening the audience's own sense of fear as they enter into a symbiotic relationship with the characters onscreen.

Corrigan and White's (2004) definition is useful because it focuses on the film as text, the label "horror" arising from the combination of horrific elements featured within the film and audience reaction to these particular elements. Additionally, Corrigan and White (2004) offer a more clearly defined framework than other theorists, whose perspectives are too broad in scope or distinguish weak boundaries between the horror genre and others genres, making it difficult to discern where one genre ends and another begins. Thus, Corrigan and White's (2004) three-part definition of what characterizes a film as a part of the cinematic horror genre is the definition that will be utilized in this project and around which rom-zom-coms will be analyzed.

Regardless of the many changes the horror genre underwent since its inception with the birth of talkies in the early 1930s, it continues to find commercial success and mixed reviews with modern audiences (Bishop, 2006; Crane, 2004; Kendrick, 2004; Prince, 2004b; Ross, 1972). One factor that keeps the horror genre current is its ability to blend with other film genres and styles (Prince, 2004b), continually reinventing itself while still maintaining the most basic elements of the genre. One subgenre of the horror film garnering a great deal of success in recent years, contributing to the current overall success of the horror genre, is the zombie film (Beale, 2004; Gregson, 2005; Sutherland, 2006). Fueled by such films as Zack Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004),

*Resident Evil* and its two sequels (2002; 2004; 2007), *28 Days Later* and its sequel (2002; 2007), and rom-zom-com *Shaun of the Dead*, zombie films continue to fare well at the North American box office (Beale, 2004; Bishop, 2006; Gregson, 2005).

### The Zombie Subgenre

#### *Origins and Evolution of the Zombie Subgenre through the 1940s*

Before exploring the evolution of the zombie through cinema, it is important to trace the beginning of the zombie mythos. In contemporary culture, the term zombie serves as a synonym for any individual who works or acts as a mindless slave (Bishop, 2006; Halliwell, 1986). This definition does not apply to the zombies of the horror genre. According to Dendle (2001), there is no one definition of the word zombie that can be applied to all thusly-called monsters billed within all noted zombie films; the monsters themselves simply differ too much from film to film. A widely accepted definition characterizes cinematic zombies as deceased individuals revived or brought back to a functional state. Zombies are not living people, but reanimated corpses who retain a certain degree of mobility and functionality, if not drive and desire, after death (Bishop, 2006; Crane, 1994; Dendle, 2001; Gregson, 2005; Potter, 2007; Wright, 1986). Depending upon the film, zombies are presented as more or less in tact. Sometimes zombies appear only slightly gaunt and pale as a result of their demise and incomplete resurrection. Other times, zombies appear in an advanced state of decay, bearing only slight resemblance to the visage they boasted in life (Dendle, 2001; Halliwell, 1986). Regardless of the manner in which these undead monsters are portrayed onscreen, the

zombie mythos originated in African and Haitian folklore and, as such, any study of zombieism must start there (Dendle, 2001; Halliwell, 1986; Maio, 2007; Sutherland, 2006).

It did not take long for the myth of zombies to move from Haitian oral tradition to motion picture. Adapted from the Kimbundo word *nzumbe*, the term zombie originated in Africa and transported via the slave trade to the island nation of Haiti. The occult religion of voodoo, from which the practice of creating zombies derives, took root in Haiti and gained in popularity (Brooks, 2003; Sutherland, 2006; Walz., 2006; Wright, 1986). Once established in Haiti, news of voodoo practices and zombieism began to travel. As early as the 1920s, references to voodoo ceremonies that resulted in zombification appeared in travelers' guides (Bishop, 2006; Dendle, 2001; Halliwell, 1986). In 1929, William Seabrook released a travel guide entitled *The Magic Island*, in which he claimed to have witnessed the dead being revived. This book sparked international interest, resulting in a 1932 New York stage production titled, simply, *Zombie*. The play caught the attention of Hollywood producers and in the summer of 1932 the first zombie film, *White Zombie*, premiered (Dendle, 2001; Halliwell, 1986; Wright, 1986). Starring horror icon Bela Lugosi, this "rock-bottom-budgeter" (Halliwell, 1986, p. 242) became a box office sensation, recouping many times its own cost of production (Dendle, 2001; Halliwell, 1986). Thus, the zombie film was born.

The rapid succession of the zombie myth from Haitian folklore to travelogue account to stage production to major motion picture places zombies in a category all their own. Zombies are the only movie monsters to pass from folklore to the big screen without first establishing a staunch literary tradition (Bishop, 2006; Dendle, 2001; Maio,

2007). Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, and werewolves all have a recognized European literary tradition from whence they hail (Bishop, 2006; Dendle, 2001). Zombies not only lack the literary tradition of these other famous monsters, but they are also the only classical Hollywood monsters not of European decent (Dendle, 2001).

The swift transition from oral folklore to silver screen was possible because zombies are creatures that require visual depiction. Largely portrayed as unthinking, unfeeling monsters, zombies are better adapted to onscreen illustration than literary elucidation (Bishop, 2006). As Bishop (2006) explains, "the zombie genre does not exist prior to the film age because of its essentially visual nature; zombies do not think or speak—they simply act, relying on purely physical manifestations of terror" (p. 197). According to Bishop (2006), zombies do not have the depth or range of other monsters. Lacking introspection and higher thought, maintaining only the most basic of muscle functions, it is difficult to write about zombies because their physical nature is more apt to visual depiction than written description. "Because zombies do not speak, all of their intentions and activities are manifested solely through physical action. In other words, because of this sensual limitation, zombies must be watched" (Bishop, 2006, p. 201). Film thus became the perfect medium for widespread dissemination of the zombie myth.

Despite the visual nature of zombies, the subgenre first encountered problems shortly after its cinematic debut. *White Zombie* (1932) brought zombies to national attention and sparked additional zombie-centered films that struggled, with little success, throughout the subsequent decades (Brooks, 2003; Dendle, 2001; Halliwell, 1986). Throughout Hollywood's Golden Age of Horror, the 1930s and 1940s, few zombie movies were created (Dendle, 2001; Halliwell, 1986; Prince, 2004b). Even Universal, the

bastion of horror production, bypassed films featuring zombies (Halliwell, 1986). The zombies that were included in horror films during this time generally adopted the role of background figure, used to enhance the menace of a more fearsome human villain or to act as the minions of a superior vampire villain. The zombies of early Hollywood had the potential to be violent and deadly, but they seldom posed any genuine threat to a horror film's protagonists (Dendle, 2001).

The zombies of Hollywood's Golden Age of Horror were far different in both action and appearance than the zombies with whom modern movie-going audiences are familiar (Dendle, 2001). Early zombies were robotic in movement. When walking in a group, their movements were completely synchronized. If they possessed the ability to speak, they spoke only in monotone. Early film zombies appeared gaunt and pale, but were otherwise bodily intact. Furthermore, these zombies did not have any overriding passion or drive that guided their actions. The zombies of early horror films were not consumed by an unquenchable desire for human flesh; they were not consumed by any desire at all and it is this lack of passion and purpose that is credited with their initial ability to induce fear in movie-going audiences. Early film zombies were completely devoid of humanity and, in that way, similar in nature to the Haitian myths that bore them. Contemporary zombie films have strayed from both the Haitian origins of the myth and these early filmic depictions (Dendle, 2001; Gregson, 2005; Maio, 2007). After several decades of struggle, the zombie subgenre was reinvented in the 1950s and early 1960s.

### *The Reinvention of the Zombie Subgenre*

Zombies received a new life in the horror films of the 1950s and early 1960s (Bishop, 2006; Dendle, 2001; Halliwell, 1986). During this time period, the term zombie was used to describe monsters of many forms, ranging from reanimated corpses to autonomous robots to alien creatures (Dendle, 2001). Then two films premiered in the mid to late 1960s that changed the direction of zombie cinema entirely, leading inevitably to the filmic depiction of zombies with which modern audiences are most familiar. The first film was the British release *Plague of the Zombies* (1966), in which the zombies revert back to earlier definitions of the term; they were reanimated corpses and not otherworldly creatures. In appearance, however, these zombies were nothing like their filmic predecessors. The monsters in *Plague of the Zombies* (1966) were decaying monstrosities, visibly rotting cadavers with malicious intents. This representation was a far cry from the gaunt, fierce-looking-but-ultimately-controlled servants of the early zombie films and it paved the way for the decaying image of the undead that pervades modern zombie horror (Dendle, 2001; Halliwell, 1986).

The second film to rejuvenate the zombie subgenre is the American release *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). This film was directed by George Romero, who has since (and as a result) become synonymous with zombie films (Beale, 2004; Engall, 2002; Halliwell, 1986; Sutherland, 2006). Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) was the first film in which zombies were imbued with motivations of their own (Dendle, 2001; Wright, 1986). In early films, zombies were depicted as subservient creatures under the command of an intelligent, and generally human though sometimes vampire, master. Having no will or drive of their own, these early zombies were relegated to the role of

servant. *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) changed this portrayal. Romero's zombies had a will and a drive of their own. They gained a desire and a purpose. Romero took zombies out of the background and placed them in the forefront of the action (Bishop, 2006; Dendle, 2001; Halliwell, 1986). Instead of portraying zombies as robotic beings who existed only to serve a master, they became, as Dendle (2001) asserts, "gluttonous organisms demanding representation in the food chain" (p. 6). Their driving force was to indiscriminately consume as much human flesh as possible (Dendle, 2001; Wright, 1986).

In addition to providing zombies with a purpose, Romero also provided his zombies with their first real limitation; a means of destruction. In early films, zombies were sometimes depicted as turning on and killing their villainous masters, proving them to be controllable to a point but ultimately dangerous and generally unstoppable (Halliwell, 1986). Starting with *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), a new code was situated within zombie films. For the first time, zombies had a weakness; the head. To neutralize a zombie it became necessary to either destroy the head or deactivate the brain core (Bishop, 2006; Brooks, 2003; Dendle, 2001; Halliwell, 1986).

*Night of the Living Dead* (1968) was so influential in molding a new generation of zombie movies that it was inducted into the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress in 1999 (Beale, 2004; Becker, 2006). As was consistent with other horror films and subgenres of the 1960s, Romero's zombie film presented a world in which the monsters were, or at least had been, average citizens and not otherworldly creatures (Becker, 2006; Prince, 2004b). In addition to following this trend of 1960s horror, Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) also introduced new cinematic codes into the

zombie subgenre that have become almost standardized throughout subsequent films. The world presented within *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and many post-Romero zombie films is bland, ordinary, and utterly familiar to audiences. Yet this setting, common as it may seem, provides the background for extraordinary and horrific events, throwing average citizens into bizarre and often deadly situations.

Zombie films since *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) imply to audiences that such unexpected and ghastly events can happen to anyone, anywhere, at any time (Bishop, 2006; Dillard, 1987). The heroes of zombie films since the late 1960s are generally ordinary men and women forced to take action against the undead hordes, heightening the sense of the familiar made alien (Bishop, 2006; Dillard, 1987; Pegg, 2004). Further assaulting audience sensibilities, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) provided exhaustive depictions not just of violence and horror, but of extreme gore as well. Romero's attention to gore was influential, becoming a significant element of many zombie films since (Bishop, 2006; Dendle, 2001). Romero's landmark film ushered in a new age of zombie cinema that would come to be known as the Golden Age of the zombie film (Dendle, 2001).

#### *The Golden Age of the Zombie Film and After*

Quickly becoming a cult classic, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) sparked the "Romero paradigm" and the "classical period of zombie invasions"; 1968 through 1983 (Dendle, 2001, p.7). Between the years of 1969 and 1977, more than 30 zombie movies were produced in Europe and North America. The popularity of the genre began to diminish around 1975, only to receive another boom when Romero released his second zombie film, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). Following *Dawn of the Dead*, the zombie



industry entered a period of mass production. Between 1979 and 1989, an average of six zombie films were released each year. These films differed in one fundamental way from the first wave of zombie films that followed *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Many of the zombie films that followed *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) did not focus on small groups of ordinary citizens fighting off a localized zombie threat. Instead, the post-*Dawn of the Dead* (1978) zombie films showed a world on the verge of apocalypse, quickly headed towards Armageddon (Dendle, 2001).

The zombie films that most notably depicted this theme of utter world chaos and the lingering threat of human obliteration were the zombie films produced in Italy, particularly those of the 1970s and 1980s. Highly influenced by the work of George Romero, Italian zombie cinema in many ways mimics the films of Romero and other American filmmakers (Totaro, 2003). Even so, it is not without its own cinematic codes and conventions. Lucio Fulci's *Zombie Flesh-Eaters* (1979) is perhaps the most widely known Italian zombie film, and it features a world on the verge of collapse (Dendle, 2001). The film was released as *Zombi 2*, in an attempt to capitalize on the success of Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), which was released in Italy as *Zombi* (Dendle, 2001; Totaro, 2003).

Despite its blatant attempts to deceive audiences and piggyback on the popularity of Romero's film, *Zombie Flesh-Eaters* (1979) differs in some significant ways from *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). Where *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) is infused with black humor and a comedic tone, *Zombie Flesh-Eaters* (1979) remains somber and serious to the point

of nihilism (Dendle, 2001; Totaro, 2003). *Zombie Flesh-Eaters* (1979) establishes many of the cinematic codes that become standardized through future Italian zombie films.

According to Totaro (2003), these codes include,

a pulsating soundtrack that establishes dread and drives the film's rhythm; extreme levels of viscerality (through both violence and grotesque imagery); the mixture of zombies in a Third World setting...; an unresolved or open-ended conclusion; and a philosophical bleakness which can be best described by the motto, 'Nobody gets out of here alive.' (p. 162)

Italian zombie cinema, despite its extensive borrowings from American zombie cinema, is responsible for some of the most stylistic and mimicked zombie films in existence (Totaro, 2003). Examples of these films include Fulci's zombie trilogy: *City of Hell* (1980, also called *Gates of Hell*), *The Beyond* (1981), and *The House by the Cemetery* (1981). Adding to the popularity of Italian zombie cinema is the fact that it was thriving while American zombie cinema was experiencing a creative and popular lull (Dendle, 2001). American zombie films following *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) were largely disappointing until the release of John Carpenter's *The Fog* in 1980, after which depictions of gore seemed more prevalent than ever (Halliwell, 1986).

Zombie films underwent more changes in the 1980s and 1990s. In the mid-1980s, zombie films entered into a "spoof cycle" (Dendle, 2001, p. 8), starting with the Michael Jackson music video *Thriller* (1983). Romero released his third zombie film, *Day of the Dead*, in 1985. With its slow pace, however, it was outshined by fast-paced zombie films like *Re-Animator* (1985) and *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), which offered a greater depiction of gore, more frequent shocks, and a self-mocking tone that cautioned the

audience not to take the events portrayed onscreen too seriously. The zombie spoof-cycle passed quickly and by the early 1990s many filmmakers were again creating serious zombie films that dealt with themes of invasion and global apocalypse. Zombie themes also began cropping up in other pop culture locations, such as television shows like *The Simpsons* third Halloween special *Treehouse of Horror III* (1992) and the *South Park* first-season Halloween episode entitled *Pink Eye* (1997) (Dendle, 2001).

#### *Current Zombie Cinema*

Currently, zombie films enjoy commercial success, adding to the success of the horror industry at large (Beale, 2004; Bishop, 2006; Gregson, 2005; Sutherland, 2006). Within the last several years, a number of remakes of older, well known zombie films have been released. These remakes include updated versions of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) and *The Fog* (2005). Popular zombie video games have spawned corresponding movies, like *Doom* (2005), *Silent Hill* (2006), *Resident Evil* (2002) and its sequels *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004) and *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007). In 2005, Romero returned to theaters with a fourth zombie film, *Land of the Dead* (2005). He quickly followed *Land of the Dead* (2005) with a fifth zombie film; the 2007 release *Diary of the Dead*. Three years prior to *Diary of the Dead* (2007), Rogue Pictures found success with a Romero-homage, the rom-zom-com *Shaun of the Dead* (Beale, 2004; Bishop, 2006; Gregson, 2005). Overall, these zombie films have proven successful, *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) grossing \$27 million its opening weekend and independent feature *28 Days Later* (2002) grossing over \$80 million in worldwide distribution within a year of its release (Gregson, 2005).

Most contemporary depictions of zombies follow the model established in the 1960s. Graphic depictions of violence and gore are central to modern zombie films. The main characters generally start off as average citizens confronted with a living nightmare of hellish proportions, forcing them to act in self-defense as a means of survival. The world presented is an ordinary, contemporary setting that quickly descends into turmoil, the zombies bringing with them the threat of global apocalypse and human extinction. Visually, the zombies themselves are rotting cadavers in advanced stages of putrefaction, lumbering menacingly forward on their unending and indiscriminant quest for human flesh. The only way to destroy these post-human monstrosities is by destroying their central nervous system, located within the head (Bishop, 2006; Brooks, 2003; Brooks, 2006; Dendle, 2001; Halliwell, 1986; Pegg, 2004).

Corrigan and White's (2004) typology is useful for analyzing zombie films within the horror aesthetic. In brief, zombie films are imbued with the same defining elements as other horror subgenres. They contain characters suffering from some kind of deformity. The zombies are physically deformed, their skin rotting off their bones, but they also suffer from spiritual deformities. As members of the living dead, in most films zombies no longer possess a soul or any essence of humanity. This spiritual deformity sends them on a quest to breach the realm of the taboo and consume human flesh. Often within zombie films, the zombies are not the only characters suffering from a deformity. The stress and fear inflicted upon the living characters can bring out the worst aspects of human nature, resulting in the depiction of further spiritual and psychological deformities as living humans struggle to battle both one another and the undead.

In accordance with the second facet of Corrigan and White's (2004) definition, the narrative of zombie films include elements of surprise, suspense, and shock. Rarely are filmic zombies depicted as fast moving. Their slow, lumbering pace and vocalized moaning should make it easy for humans to detect and escape them. As a result, many of the scares in zombie films are derived from zombies making an unexpected appearance, coming out of hiding dangerously close to a protagonist, or swarming in numbers that are nearly impossible to avoid. The feeling that danger lurks just outside the camera frame adds elements of suspense and surprise to the zombie subgenre. The visual depictions of gore and violence are often shocking.

These elements of surprise, suspense, and shock lend themselves to the final aspect of Corrigan and White's (2004) definition as well, keeping a balance between the seen and the unseen. The audience is assaulted with graphic images of the zombies and the destruction they are capable of rendering, but then kept in suspense waiting for the zombies to make another appearance onscreen. This interplay between what is shown and what is purposely not shown leaves the audiences in an ongoing state of fear, dread, and disgust (Corrigan & White, 2004; Dendle, 2001).

Zombie films, by definition, fit well within the horror genre, including all of the elements Corrigan and White (2004) insist horror films must have. The zombie subgenre of the horror genre is also adapting to audience expectations and desires, blending with other genres and branching out in different directions. The zombie subgenre, as a result, is breaking into smaller sub-subgenres (Dendle, 2001). Films of the zombie subgenre have blended readily with the action genre and the drama genre, adopting elements of both of these other genres while still maintaining the basic elements of the horror genre

outlined by Corrigan and White (2004). Zombie action films, zombie dramas, and zombie thrillers are popular with audiences, as are zombie comedies (Beale, 2004; Bishop, 2006; Dendle, 2001; Gregson, 2005). Many of these zombie sub-subgenres can be broken down even further. One sub-subgenre of the zombie film to emerge in recent years, a sub-subgenre of the overall horror genre, is the romantic zombie comedy.

### The Romantic Zombie Comedy

The romantic zombie comedy is an identified sub-subgenre of the zombie film, often referred to as rom-zom-com (Cox, 2004; Puig, 2004; Schwarzbaum, 2004; Thomson, 2004). The blending of romance, comedy, and the zombie myth results in “an unlikely combination” (Dendle, 2001, p. 10). Regardless, it is a sub-subgenre of horror finding success with moviegoers in recent decades (Beale, 2004; Bishop, 2006; Dendle, 2001; Gregson, 2005). Emerging as a film form in the late 1980s, this specialized subgenre encompasses a handful of theatrical releases, including *Deadly Friend* (1986), *I Was a Teenage Zombie* (1987), *My Boyfriend's Back* (1993), *Return of the Living Dead Part III* (1993), *Dead Alive* (also called *Braindead*, 1992) and, more recently, *Shaun of the Dead*, *Boy Eats Girl* (2005), *Slither* (2006), *Fido* (2006), and *Planet Terror* (2007) (Bishop, 2006; Dendle, 2001; Elder, 2004). In addition to providing audiences with the same basic elements as zombie films, however, rom-zom-coms are unique in offering audiences a mix of humor and romance as well. This humor and romance is added to the zombie horror courtesy of film elements borrowed from the romantic comedy subgenre of film.

### *The Screwball Comedy or Romantic Comedy*

Romantic comedies, also called screwball comedies, are an established subgenre of the comedy genre (Leach, 1977; Schatz, 1981; Shumway, 1995). Films of this subgenre are marked by their style and theme. According to Shumway (1995), romantic comedies “derive their identity from their concern with love and courtship” (p. 381). More specifically, the romantic comedy subgenre is identified by the style of humor incorporated into the films and the narrative patterns utilized (Sadoul, 1972; Schatz, 1981). These narrative patterns depict sexual confrontation and courtship, often complicated by the socioeconomic positions of the main characters, and from these conflicts derives the humor. Thus, the comedic elements in romantic comedies come from the narrative displacement of the romance; the situations that arise between a couple, conspiring to keep the couple apart (Shumway, 1995). Often, these situations result from ideological conflicts, such as conflicts of race, gender, and/or socioeconomic class (Leach, 1977; Schatz, 1981; Shumway, 1995).

### *Combining Romantic Comedy . . . with Zombies*

With the additional elements of zombie horror, rom-zom-coms derive their humor from more than simply the romantic conflicts transpiring between characters, although these conflicts do provide humor as well and, like romantic comedies, often rely on ideological conflicts of race, gender, and socioeconomic class. Within rom-zom-coms, the humor may be found in the human struggle against the zombies. Dendle (2001) asserts that zombies are “the ideal straight men” (p. 10) because of their generally serious, emotionless nature. As a result, humor often comes at the zombies’ expense. For example, their deaths (or destructions) may be comical due to the protagonists’ choice of

weaponry. Because zombies are only truly vulnerable at the head, they can sustain a great deal of physical damage and still pose a threat to protagonists. This causes protagonists to think creatively when arming themselves against the zombie invaders. In *Shaun of the Dead*, human characters use random items, including records, darts, a toaster, a tennis ball, and a cricket bat, to battle the zombies. These objects are humorous as weapons because, in using them against the zombies, the characters are comically violating their standard uses, turning seemingly innocuous objects into items of destruction.

Since rom-zom-coms are a combination of the romantic comedy subgenre and the zombie horror subgenre, humor also results from the romantic complications presented within the films. While ideological issues of race, gender, and socioeconomic class are still used to introduce tension into the romantic relationships of characters, the zombies also provide a large and generally violent problem for rom-zom-com couples to confront and overcome. Within rom-zom-coms, couples not only deal with their clashing ideological values, but also with the extra threat that they may not make it through the zombie invasion alive. This added external pressure can inspire characters to act in odd, foolish, and ultimately humorous ways to secure, resecure, and/or protect the object of their affection. Romance may spark between human protagonists as they resist the zombie hordes, as in *Dead Alive* (1992), *Shaun of the Dead*, *Slither* (2006), and *Planet Terror* (2007). Or, the romance may actually exist between a human and his or her zombified counterpart, as in *Deadly Friend* (1986), *I Was a Teenage Zombie* (1987), *My Boyfriend's Back* (1993), *Return of the Living Dead Part III* (1993), *Boy Eats Girl* (2005), and *Fido* (2006). Obviously, the latter formula would call for a slight separation



from the common zombie codes that render all zombies unthinking, unfeeling monsters who feed mercilessly, remembering nothing of their former lives or relationships.

Like their forbearers, the zombie comedy or “zombedies” (Bishop, 2006, p. 205), rom-zom-coms resist certain aspects of the contemporary model of zombie films established by *Plague of the Zombies* (1966), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). Rom-zom-coms take liberties with established filmic zombie codes, emphasizing the funny and/or absurd over or in tandem with the horrific (Bishop, 2006; Dendle, 2001). They also concentrate on the romantic relationships and sexual tensions existing between characters. Some rom-zom-coms feature zombies who speak normally and with self-composure. The zombies of these films may remember their pre-zombie lives and relationships and want to maintain these previous human contacts at the expense of their desire to feed on human flesh. In some instances, the zombies of rom-zom-coms may be aware of their slow transition from living to living dead (Bishop, 2006; Dendle, 2001). Rom-zom-coms do not have to defy the familiar codes set forth in groundbreaking zombie films, but they are often able to do so to great effect without leaving the realm of the horror genre. In defying some of the standard conventions of their genre, rom-zom-coms subtly deliver commentary on cultural fears and competing gender ideologies in a way that more conventional zombie and horror films do not.

### Patriarchy and Gender

#### *Defining Patriarchy and Androcentrism*

The battle of the sexes that plays out in films of the romantic comedy and rom-zom-com subgenres derives much of its humor from cultural definitions of gender and conventional understandings of what it means to be male and female in contemporary

society. Modern Western society, for all the advances it has undergone, is still a patriarchy (Bem, 1993; Millett, 1969; Rich, 1976; Wood, 2005). Patriarchy, in its most simplified sense, means “rule by fathers” (Wood, 2005, p. 29). In other words, patriarchy is a male-centered system of governing and rule (Bem, 1993; Millett, 1969; Rich, 1976; Wood, 2005). Millett (1969) clearly establishes the connection between patriarchal rule and the United States, saying,

Our society, like all other historical civilizations, is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office, and finance - in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands.

(p. 34-35)

As such, patriarchal societies, like the United States, are societies in which the ideology, practices, and structures of the society are created by and for the benefit of men (Bem, 1993; Millett, 1969; Rich, 1976; Wood, 2005). This does not necessarily mean that, under a patriarchal system, women have no power. It does mean, however, that any power allotted to women in general is allotted by the patriarchal system; power being finite and the patriarchy being in possession of that power. It also means that the power bestowed upon women by the patriarchy can be removed at any time and for any reason (Rich, 1976).

In an ideological sense, patriarchy supports several general beliefs regarding the differences between men and women. The first of these beliefs is that men and women are fundamentally different in terms of both psychology and sexuality. The second belief argues that men, by the mere fact of being male, are inherently superior to women. The

third belief asserts that both of the first two beliefs, the essential differences existing between men and women and the superiority of men over women, are natural, legitimate, and right (Bem, 1993; Wood 2005).

Closely tied to the concept of patriarchy is the concept of androcentrism.

Androcentrism, or male-centeredness, is similar to patriarchy, but differs in a slight yet significant way. Androcentric societies, like the United States, do not simply tout the belief that men are superior to women. Although patriarchy is founded upon the belief of male superiority, androcentrism is more firmly entrenched into the ideological fabric of a society by legitimizing that superiority. Androcentric societies support the idea that both the defining features of the term “male” and the factors comprising the male experience are the neutral standard upon which all human experience can be judged. Thus, males are normal, and females, with their differing definitions and experiences, are a sex-specific deviation from the standard for normal human life that has been set by and based upon the male experience (Bem, 1993). This is a problematic distinction that not only favors males as superior to females, but also defines males as human and females as “Other” (Bem, 1993; de Beauvoir, 1952). The distinction of male as normal and female as abnormal “Other” are conferred upon men and women based upon social definitions of sex and gender.

#### *The Masculine and the Feminine - Gender as a Manifestation of Patriarchy*

It is nearly impossible to define gender without first defining sex, because the two terms are often used synonymously in contemporary society although they have specific, unrelated meanings (Wood, 2005). The term “sex” is a biological term; an individual’s sex, therefore, biologically determined by chromosome patterns, internal sex organs, and

external genitalia. Because of its linkages to biology, an individual's biological sex generally remains stable throughout the course of his or her life. There are, of course, exceptions; some individuals opting to undergo sex change operations and hormone therapy to change their sex. Without these medical measures, however, biological sex tends to remain stable (Wood, 2005).

When compared to sex, gender is a far more complex concept. Whereas sex is usually biologically determined, gender has no such connection to biology. Gender is a social symbolic construction, influenced by the society in which an individual lives and changing over time (Wood, 2005). According to Wood (2005),

The term *gender* refers to identities, roles, activities, feelings, and so forth that society associates with being male or female and that we as individuals learn and either internalize or challenge. (p. 19)

So stated, biological sex is largely constant and is expressed through the terms "male" and "female." Conversely, gender is constructed, socially and symbolically, within a society. It varies from culture to culture, over time within a given culture, and in response to interactions with members of the opposite gender (Western society recognizes only two genders). Gender is expressed through the terms "masculine" and "feminine," each term referencing a host of socially defined traits. While individuals are born male or female, they learn to be masculine and/or feminine, adopting or rejecting the gendered traits their particular society attributes to each biological sex (Bem, 1993; Wood, 2005).

Within a society or culture, gender definitions function to categorize individuals. Males are expected to be masculine, accepting the traits associated with the social construction of masculinity, and females are expected to be feminine, accepting the most

often dichotomous traits associated with the social construction of femininity. Although the traits associated with masculinity and femininity have adjusted some over the past several decades in order to adapt to changing social movements, they have remained largely constant. Males are expected to be ambitious, competitive, independent, rational, strong, successful, and always emotionally under control (Bem, 1993; Kimmel, 2000a, 2000b; Wood, 2005). Under the patriarchal system, men are the owners and purveyors of power; masculine men the most powerful of all in a system which values men and masculine characteristics. In contrast, females are expected to be physically beautiful, emotionally expressive, timid, deferential, nurturing, mindful of others' feelings, and concerned with caring for children and maintaining the home (Bem, 1993; Wood, 2005). Females are devalued by the patriarchal system, marginalized, "Othered," and ultimately denied power (Bem, 1993; de Beauvoir, 1952; Wood, 2005). Failure for males or females to accept these predetermined social roles is met with disdain and criticism, as failure to adhere to prescribed gender roles provides a challenge to the dominant patriarchal ideology. Challenges to the dominant patriarchal ideology are not easily entertained and are met with a variety of responses, ranging from ostracism to violence.

#### *The Valued and Devalued Traits of Patriarchal Society*

Unsurprisingly, patriarchal systems most value the traits and characteristics that are socially defined as masculine and attributed to males. These traits include but are not limited to power, ambition, strength, independence, leadership, dominance, success, rationality, security, competition, and lacking emotionality (Bem, 1993; Kimbrell, 1995; Wood, 2005). Adversely, the dominant patriarchal ideology devalues and marginalizes females and the characteristics attributed to femininity. These devalued feminine traits

have a dichotomous relationship with the prized masculine traits. They encompass but are not limited to powerlessness, weakness, dependence, submission, and emotionality (Bem, 1993; Wood, 2005).

It is important to note that not all females have these feminine characteristics, just as not all males boast the prized masculine characteristics. It is possible to be a masculinely gendered female, a femininely gendered male, or to fall somewhere in between these two supposedly polar definitions of gender. Under a patriarchal system, however, any individual who claims a gender identity apart from the one the dominant ideology prescribes on the basis of biological sex presents a challenge to the dominant patriarchal ideology. These challenges threaten the dominant ideology and are not tolerated (Bem, 1993; Wood, 2005). As such, it is not merely females and feminine characteristics that are devalued, but also any individual who challenges the dominant constructions of manhood and masculinity proffered by the dominant ideology. This includes homosexuals, transgendered individuals, and anyone, male or female, who refuses their socially expected gender identity in favor of a more fluid and personal gender identity.

### *The Role of Hegemony*

While the patriarchal ideology is the dominant gender ideology in American culture (and indeed Western culture at large), it is not all powerful. In fact, if the patriarchy had to rely on sheer force to remain dominant, it would easily be toppled; it devalues more members of the society than it values. Because of this, the dominant

patriarchal ideology depends upon the tacit agreement and cooperation of the very groups it devalues in order to function and remain in power. This is done through the process of hegemony (Artz & Murphy, 2000; Bem, 1993; Wood, 2005).

The concept of hegemony was first introduced by Gramsci, writing primarily in the 1920s and 1930s. Since Gramsci's original writings, the concept has been adopted and expounded upon by a host of critical and cultural theorists (Artz & Murphy, 2000). The definition of hegemony used for the purposes of this paper comes from Artz and Murphy (2000). Hegemony is "the process of moral, philosophical, and political leadership that a social group attains only with the active consent of other important social groups" (Artz & Murphy, 2000, p. 1). Hegemony is the act of willful self-oppression. A dominant group may hold leadership and power within a society, but without the active consent of the subjugated and marginalized groups they do not have hegemonic power. When a marginalized or subjugated group (such as women or minorities) willingly hold to a system of beliefs or engage in certain practices that are not in their own benefit or best interest, simply because they believe they receive some tangible benefit as a result, these groups are acting hegemonically (Artz & Murphy, 2000).

The dominant patriarchal ideology relies on hegemony to remain in power. Hegemony is achieved by the dominant ideology incorporating some material interest of oppressed groups into the social relationships of the population. So doing, the oppressed groups may believe that the dominant ideology, though flawed, is operating in the best interests of everyone. These oppressed groups then support the dominant ideology, which has legitimated and naturalized itself within the culture. Without the support of the devalued groups, those at the bottom of the societal hierarchy, the hierarchy could not

exist. Therefore hegemony is necessary to the existence of the dominant patriarchal ideology (Artz & Murphy, 2000). This is why oppressed groups, including women, uphold systems and behaviors that are not in their best interests. Those individuals who refuse to enter into hegemonic complacency with the dominant ideology are viewed as a threat and the dominant ideology works to neutralize them in some manner.

In order to maintain the hegemony of a patriarchal, androcentric society, members of that society must uphold these dominant ideologies. Their everyday behaviors and attitudes must communicate - and thus perpetuate - androcentrism. Failure to do so threatens the dominant ideology by suggesting alternative ideologies of being. Hence, males must communicate masculinity and females must communicate femininity. It is particularly crucial that males must enact masculinity. In a sociocultural milieu that grants males higher status, they must embrace, communicate, and perpetuate their power. From an ideological perspective, a male who fails to accept his authority is a traitor, not only to himself, but to the ideology as a whole.

#### Literature Review in Summation

Horror narratives have titillated listeners and conveyed societal morals and fears for centuries. Motion pictures have provided yet another avenue for the dissemination of horrific tales, the cinematic horror genre appearing early in film history and continuing to find success even today. More than just providing frightening material to viewers, however, horror films can provide a cultural critique, pointing to the cultural fears and anxieties shared by members of a society. One such horror film is the British release *Shaun of the Dead*. The aim of this project is to ascertain the significance of *Shaun of the Dead*, why it is successful among contemporary American audiences, and what



ideological messages it communicates in relation to culturally-shared anxieties. In order to properly situate and examine *Shaun of the Dead* as a text, however, it is necessary to understand the different filmic traditions from which *Shaun of the Dead* developed.

This literature review provides a brief introduction to the horror genre and its subgenres, focusing specifically on the development of horror throughout cinematic history and the themes indicative of each time period. Afterward, I provide a similar overview of the zombie subgenre, its origins and evolution, and popular themes and cinematic codes, as well as a discussion of the rom-zom-com sub-sub-subgenre. Finally, the chapter concludes with an explanation of patriarchal ideology. This literature review furnishes a foundation for a gendered analysis of *Shaun of the Dead*. As I demonstrate, zombie films are well-suited for gender critique. Zombie films are imbued with subtext that goes to the heart of what frightens us as a society. Also, zombie films are interesting and enjoyable to watch. What gender messages does *Shaun of the Dead*, a contemporary British rom-zom-com, communicate to contemporary American audiences? This is the question I will answer in this thesis. As Yuzna (2002), a director of several zombie films, comments on the subgenre as a whole,

It is straight, unapologetic, unpretentious horror; horror that's not all gussied up in mainstream drag looking for respectability; horror that goes straight for your eyeballs—with a long wooden splinter. (p. 25)

With descriptions such as this, the zombie subgenre provides a wealth of material to be analyzed.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

When last we saw Shaun, he and Ed were throwing vinyl records and decapitating zombies. Finally recognizing the hordes of zombies overtaking his city, Shaun embarks on a quest to save his loved ones from the zombie hoards. With Ed in tow, Shaun gathers his mother, stepfather, ex-girlfriend Liz, and Liz's two flatmates, David and Dianne. Together, the small band of survivors set out across London via car. Their destination is Shaun and Ed's favorite pub, The Winchester. Because The Winchester represents familiarity and routine to Shaun, he believes they can safely hide out there for the duration of the zombie attack. Unfortunately, Shaun's stepfather Phillip, bitten previous to the rescue attempt, dies on the way to the pub. Phillip's reanimation occurs inside the escape vehicle, forcing Shaun and the others to abandon the car and continue through London on foot. Hoping to avoid as many zombies as possible, Shaun takes a "short cut," leading his group through the backyards of one of London's residential districts. This short cut, however, is free from neither zombies nor danger (Park & Wright, 2004).

A bathrobe clad zombie attacks Shaun and his friends as they cut through a series of backyards on their way to the pub. Shaun is forced to impale the zombie with a long metal pole, pinning it to a tree. While the zombie continues to moan menacingly in the background, Shaun and his band of survivors argue about the dire state in which they find themselves. Liz bickers with David about Shaun's plan for saving them, prompting Dianne to comment that they are stuck together no matter the circumstances and they

“aren’t going to get anywhere by moaning” (Park & Wright, 2004). This comment, combined with the zombie’s moans, gives Shaun an idea; in order to escape the zombies, Shaun and his friends must pretend to be zombies. Dianne, a struggling actress, quickly breaks down the zombie movements and moaning, coaxing everyone to practice their zombie characters before walking out into the swarms of undead ex-Londoners. Shaun takes charge of the situation, flawlessly imitating the undead and pushing Ed to take the matter more seriously. Annoyed at Shaun’s goading, Ed snaps, “who died and made you fucking king of the zombies?” (Park & Wright, 2004).

Although this question is posed of an individual character, it can easily be asked of the film at large. While the popularity of *Shaun of the Dead* did not make it the “king” of all zombie movies, the success and critical acclaim of this particular rom-zom-com is remarkable and worth thorough examination. *Shaun of the Dead*, despite being a British release, was largely successful with American audiences (Bowles, 2004; Variety Box Office, 2004a; Variety Box Office, 2004b; Variety Box Office, 2004c; Variety Box Office, 2004d). Through blending elements of zombie horror, romance, and comedy, it has found a receptive audience among United States movie goers. Using gender studies as my methodological tool, I analyze *Shaun of the Dead*. The present chapter explains gender media studies and how I use it to answer the research question: What gender messages does *Shaun of the Dead*, a contemporary British rom-zom-com, communicate to contemporary American audiences? Utilizing a gender media studies framework, I analyze the history of the horror genre and zombie subgenre, eventually applying the framework to *Shaun of the Dead*.

## Communicating Gender Ideology in Horror Films

Communication is a social symbolic process. It is through this process that a society works to produce, maintain, repair, and transform its shared reality (Carey, 1989). Communication, then, is inseparable from culture because it is through the act of communication that culture is established, preserved, restored, and altered over time (Carey, 1989). Thus, communicative acts are observed and analyzed within the context of the culture that produces them. Meaning is created, reproduced, and altered according to the prevailing (or preferred) cultural practices and products of the society in question (Carey, 1989; Treichler & Wartella, 1986). By observing the communication patterns and interactions of a group or society, scholars learn about the competing ideologies that exist within a society between the dominant and marginalized groups, including the competing gender ideologies and the tensions that exist between patriarchy and alternative gender ideologies. As asserted by Wood (2005)

A culture consists of structures and practices that reflect and uphold a particular social order by legitimizing certain values, expectations, meanings, and patterns of behavior. Because gender is central to cultural life, a given society's views of gender are reflected in and promoted by a range of social structures and practices.

(p. 28)

One way in which these cultural messages of gender are communicated and observed is through the mass media, specifically film.

Gender studies arises out of the critical tradition. Concerned with issues of gendered power, oppression, and privilege, the critical tradition focuses on the ideological systems and power structures that dominate a given society. Gender studies

observes, analyzes, and critiques the tensions that exist between competing ideologies and the power struggles between masculinity and femininity (Hall, 1985, 2000; Littlejohn & Foss, 2005; Treichler & Wartella, 1986). Gender film studies concentrates specifically on those mediated structures through which a gendered ideology that favors males is communicated, in this case the media being film. By uncovering the power structures that perpetuate gendered domination and oppression, gender scholars believe marginalized members can resist the existing power structures, attempting to emancipate themselves from oppression. As such, gender media scholars view the field of research as a method of resisting and acting out against dominant groups and the unbalanced, biased power systems they uphold (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005).

Media is important to study in relation to gender because the media are a significant way through which gender messages are communicated (Bem, 1993; Littlejohn & Foss, 2005; Wood, 2005). Gender is learned, not innate. Gender messages are communicated through many vehicles, not the least of which is media. Films, radio, television, and even magazine advertisements send specific messages about how males and females are expected to act, look, dress, and behave. When individuals of a society consume mediated representations of gender, they must choose to either accept or reject those messages; accepting a culturally agreed upon gender identity or thwarting it (Bem, 1993; Wood, 2005).

In order to conduct a gender film analysis, it is necessary to choose a cultural artifact with the assumption that it communicates a message about the culture in which it is produced and the culture to which it is marketed. That being said, there are no clear step-by-step guidelines for conducting a gender study. As with most critical

methodologies, a theoretical framework is applied and used as the guideline for making interpretations. Thus, with a solid grounding in the knowledge that media texts communicate ideological messages that reinforce the hegemonic interests of the dominant gendered ideologies, and grounded in the gender theories explained in the literature review, I turn a critical eye toward identifying and interpreting those messages in *Shaun of the Dead*. Guided by my primary research question, I will answer what gender messages *Shaun of the Dead*, a contemporary British rom-zom-com, communicates to contemporary American audiences? In addition to my primary research question, I will also answer a series of secondary research questions: Who benefits as a result of the gender messages communicated within this artifact? Who is attributed power and who is marginalized and neglected? Whose power is enhanced, whose is diminished, and what are the implications for American audiences?

#### *Horror Films and Their Ability to Offer Critique*

The present study of the rom-zom-com falls within a larger body of critical and cultural research of horror films. Nachbar and Lause (1992) argue that popular culture works as a mirror of the culture or cultures producing and consuming it, granting insight into the dominant and competing ideologies of a given culture and time period. As cinema is an important vehicle of popular culture, it is a significant communicator of these cultural messages.

[A film] is significant not because we find its plot clever and exciting and its stars attractive or repellent but because of *why* we find the plot compelling and *why* we agree with the rewards and punishments meted out to the characters. (Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p. 5)

As such, horror films are studied as a cultural text holding meaning for the cultures that manufacture and subsequently devour them. This meaning is derived from analysis of the messages communicated within the body of the film, messages that represent aspects of the cultures from which the films are produced and to which they are marketed, conveying information about the time, people, places, and competing ideologies of the society depicted on film and from which the film itself has arisen (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, Nachbar & Lause, 1992).

One reason the horror genre is free to offer commentary on cultural matters, including competing gender ideologies, is because of the disrespected nature of the genre as a whole. Unlike dramas, documentaries, and period pieces, horror films are generally not expected to meet high industry or critical standards for content and production. They are not expected to tackle weighty subjects central to the core of human emotion and interaction. Certainly, they are not expected to break ground by exploring universal themes of sociocultural significance. Horror films are not often taken as high art; nor are they generally the recipients of industry awards or great praise (Ansen, 2006; Greenberg, 2002; Wood, 1979). Instead, horror films are largely dismissed as trivial entertainment and pop culture run amuck. It is because of this easy dismissal that the horror genre finds the freedom to craft cultural messages that are denied to other, more “respectable” film genres (Ansen, 2006; Brottman, 2004; Dargis, 2005; Wood, 1979). Ansen (2006) argues that horror movies are able to enter the realms of taboo social territory more easily than other film genres because the debased nature of the horror genre leaves viewers expecting nothing more than for horror to push the boundaries of social acceptance and propriety.

There is a misinformed social expectation that horror films are simply meant to shock and appall; that they provide no greater service than an instantaneous, visceral experience and a few surface level chills and thrills. In this quest to provide ever more shocking and horrifying material, then, it is expected that horror will transcend boundaries that other genres may not approach for fear of hurting their reputation as a serious film form. Because of these expectations, horror has its leave to tackle subjects considered too base or crass to be addressed by the more sophisticated film forms, and it does (Ansen, 2006; Brottman, 2004; Dargis, 2005; Wood, 1979 . Says Ansen (2006),

If the social drama is our superego, then the horror movie is our id, our wild, unruly inner adolescent. Sometimes it spews vile unspeakable rot and sometimes it utters uncomfortable truths that the grown-ups aren't allowed to say. (p. 62)

At times horror films are every bit as base and unrefined as expectations would have them be, and at other times the horror genre hits on a topic that actually resonates with audiences on a deep sociocultural and/or personal level. Either way, it is because the average audience member does not expect horror films to do anything more than provide a shallow, entertainment-orientated experience that horror films are at leave to push boundaries and slip into the realm of sociocultural taboo. In pushing these social boundaries, sometimes the horror genre offers up filmic garbage and sometimes it happens upon a theme so central to our societal self-perceptions that the film can resonate far more with audiences than films of other, more esteemed genres (Ansen, 2006).

The greater degree of creative freedom granted to horror films makes them valuable as cultural artifacts. Allowed to engage in social commentary that may be denied to other, more lauded film genres, the horror genre conveys messages that go to the heart



of cultural struggles and tensions transpiring within a given society, such as the tensions existing between the dominant patriarchal ideology and the competing gender ideologies that struggle to gain power. Methodologically, this makes horror films a hotbed of ideological messages. It is the critic's job to analyze these texts for the messages they hold about the society, time period, and people who produce and consume these horror films.

Horror films communicate social and ideological messages relevant to a particular time period or historical moment (Prince, 2004b). It is valuable to analyze films of the horror genre in relation to the time periods in which they were produced and the messages they communicate about those times (Nachbar & Lause, 1992; Prince, 2004b). It is also possible to draw conclusions, based on the cultural climate of a given time period and the content and style of the horror movies produced during that time, as to the greatest cultural anxieties facing a society within a historical moment (Prince, 2004b; Tudor, 1989). On a sociocultural level, conflicting ideologies within a society are depicted, in some form, through the representation of monsters in that society's horror films. Therefore, in studying the horror films of a society in relation to the time period in which those films were produced, it is possible to glean information regarding the ideological tensions of the people existing during that time. With this in mind, I analyze *Shaun of the Dead*, a contemporary rom-zom-com. Through careful analysis, I will discern what gender messages this film communicates about the time period in which it was produced. I also distinguish what gender messages *Shaun of the Dead*, a contemporary British film, communicates to the contemporary American audiences who consume it.

### *Ideological Messages in Horror throughout the Decades*

From the Golden Age of Horror until today, horror films underwent many changes in theme and content. These changes in many ways represent the ideological changes occurring in the American cultural climate. Ideological concerns found their place on the silver screen, monsters standing in as a metaphor for threats to dominant ideological values. As our cultural fears altered and changed throughout the decades, so too did the nature of the monster. The monster, in all of its guises, communicates the ideological fear of the “Other,” as well as prescriptions for conquering the “Other.”

The gothic monsters of the Golden Age of Horror production were located outside of the United States, generally in Europe (Pinedo, 2004; Prince, 2004b; Wood, 1986). This trend lasted through the 1940s. The Golden Age of Horror occurred after World War I, lasting through World War II. This was a time of upheaval in American society. American soldiers fought a foreign evil, an “Other” who was located on foreign shores, just like the protagonists in the horror films of this time period fought foreign monsters in foreign countries (Skal, 2004). The growing power of foreign oppressors threatened the dominant ideology of United States supremacy and was depicted and confronted onscreen. Therefore, while German troops slowly conquered much of Europe, a filmic Dracula terrorized and conquered an unsuspecting countryside, slowly drawing innocent victims into his lair and draining them of life. As the horrors of war shattered the innocence of many, movie going audiences viewed a foreign monster who preyed on the weak and innocent, exploiting naivety for his own evil designs. Americans feared this abuse of innocence and the idea of a dictator who could place so little value on the sanctity of freedom, individualism, and democracy. Cinematically, the competing

ideologies of democracy versus totalitarianism were personified in monster who shared many of the same characteristics as the foreign leaders covered in the newspaper each evening. The movie monsters became stand-ins for the monsters terrorizing a “safe” world in which “American values” were threatened. Conquering the monster offered solace and reaffirmed the notion that dominant American ideological values would triumph in the end.

After 1945, the American people found themselves in a different global situation with a new set of sociocultural anxieties. As a result, the monsters of American horror films changed. The United States and communist Russia were locked in a different kind of war, a Cold War, and the world held its breath as these two superpowers fought for the top position. Fear that the United States and Russia would declare nuclear war was prevalent and found representation at the cinema. In the realm of horror films, creature features gained in popularity. These films placed the monster, and therefore the danger, on American soil, just as suspected Communists were assumed to be infiltrating dominant governmental cultural and educational institutions. Within creature feature, the creatures themselves retained a sense of the exotic, in a real sense representing the threat posed from a foreign country, but the danger was no longer located outside of the United States (Lucanio, 1987; Pinedo, 2004). The “Other” was now in the United States.

Similarly, the revolutionary horror films of the 1960s, with their open narrative structure and placement of evil in the ordinary and the mundane, quickly replaced the creature features. As the American people grew even more fearful of the ideological threat represented by the USSR, China, and other Communist nations, American horror movies became more realistic, incorporating elements of science fiction to give the films

plausibility and refusing to grant narrative closure (Becker, 2006; Prince, 2004b). The 1960s saw the reinvention of the horror genre, with horror films becoming more graphic in their portrayals of violence, the monsters taking the form of ordinary citizens, the events placed on American soil, and the open-narrative structure removing the complete sense of closure from the films' end (Prince, 2004b). Apocalyptic horror films rose in popularity during this time period (Becker, 2006).

The late 1960s and early 1970s were a time of sociocultural and political upheaval in the United States. The Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, racial tensions, political assassinations, and the counter culture movement were just a few of the events battering the nation, causing a great deal of ideological uncertainty as many of the basic tenants of the dominant power structure were seriously challenged (Becker, 2006; Bem, 1993; Wood, 1984). The same time period that bore witness to this drastic upheaval of American norms and ideals also witnessed a radical change in the horror film format. Socioculturally, dominant groups and ideologies (such as patriarchal family structures, Christianity, and economic and political hierarchies) were threatened by marginalized groups and their competing ideologies, particularly women, African-Americans, and "hippies". These threats were depicted cinematically. Horror films suddenly became more realistic, the monsters became harder to recognize, and narrative closure was denied, making the danger seem ongoing. The world appeared to be on the verge of chaos, threats looming from every direction, and horror films of the time capitalized on that sense of escalating fear and helplessness (Ballon & Leszcz, 2007; Becker, 2006; Tudor, 1989).

As the dominant ideologies that privileged and naturalized a white, middle class male power structure came under increasing attack during the 1960s, the tensions caused by the ideological conflict found expression in horror films. Since the 1960s, as threats to “American values” escalated from both within and without, the horror cinema similarly communicated greater and more detailed depictions of extreme violence and gore than the horror films of previous decades (Crane, 2004; Kendrick, 2004; Prince, 2004b; Zinoman, 2007). This move to ever-increasing depictions of the atrocious is understandable (Ballon & Leszcz, 2007; Kracauer, 1947; Picart & Frank, 2004; Tudor, 1989; Turley & Derdeyn, 1990; Zinoman, 2007). Contemporary audiences who live in a society plagued by terrorist alerts and pictures of the War on Terror featured on the nightly news may be attracted to ever more graphic, gory, torture-filled films like *Saw* (2004) and *Hostel* (2005) (Prince, 2004b; Zinoman, 2007). Similarly, the nightly news is filled with warning stories of the dangers pervading American society. This fear is not limited to the War on Terror. There is cyanide in the Tylenol, anthrax in the mail, human appendages in fast food chili, and toxins in the pet food coming from China. Babysitters abuse children, priests molest alter boys, and illegal aliens “steal” American jobs. American citizens reside in a culture of fear, with media outlets waiting for the next disaster, scandal, or atrocity to distribute over the wire services (Glassner, 1999).

Ideologically, this culture of fear serves the dominant power structures of the United States. Media outlets are a tool of dominant societal groups, broadcasting fear inspiring messages for the purpose of creating and maintaining the culture of fear. We are taught to fear that which is different, different being defined as “Other” by the dominant ideology and therefore frightening because it represents competing ideologies and the

threats they pose to dominant values. This media-constructed use of the monstrous “Other” to induce fear is nowhere more evident than in the depiction of Columbine killers Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (Hoerl, 2002). As Hoerl (2002) argues, in the wake of the Columbine school massacre, media outlets portrayed Harris and Klebold in monstrous terms, defining these two boys as “Other.” So defined, these boys were removed from the realm of average suburban teenagers and presented as dangerous and uncontrollable. They were described as an anomaly, their violent actions used to communicate the message that it is not the dominant American ideological systems that are flawed and harming us, but rather the few uncontrollable “Others” who place us all in danger. Therefore, the dominant ideology is not only equally under attack from such anomalous figures as Harris and Klebold, but it is also the only hope we have of eventually overcoming these threats and saving the rest of the population. The “Other” becomes a necessary scapegoat for the problems found within the dominant ideology (Hoerl, 2002).

By manufacturing fear of competing ideologies, the dominant ideologies maintain their position of power at the top of the American sociocultural hierarchy. We are told what to fear and then assured that we will be protected from these competing ideological threats as long as we support the dominant ideology. As America’s culture of fear becomes more pervasive and the dominant powers face more threats from both internal and external sources, the dominant ideological structures must constantly work to maintain, repair, or transform themselves (Carey, 1989). Modern horror films communicate this process. Understanding the current culture of fear and the way it is reflected within the violent, gore-filled images of contemporary horror cinema is vital to the analysis of my artifact, *Shaun of the Dead*.

### *Ideological Messages of the Zombie Subgenre*

Of all the subgenres of the horror film, zombie films are perhaps best suited for providing a social commentary and supplying audiences with a locale in which to address ideological conflicts (Potter, 2007). Maio (2007) remarks on the versatility of zombie films in making a cultural critique, saying,

[A] common component of cinematic zombie fables over the last seventy-five years or so is their penchant for allegory. Zombie plots have been used to comment upon everything from the exploitation of the working class to the perils of pollution to the existential isolation of modern man [sic] to the brain-numbing dangers of a consumer culture. (p. 192)

Zombies, alone or in groups, represent the voiceless, unheralded automatons of a society. Mostly emotionless, opinionless, and robotic in nature, they are suited for allegory and cultural comparison due to their status as “Other” (Bishop, 2006; Dendle, 2001; Maio, 2007; Potter, 2007). They are technically human, but lack humanity. Zombies represent the lowest common denominator of humanity, providing merely the canvas of what could be, and once was but no longer is, life (Dendle, 2001). They exist at the bottom of the sociocultural hierarchy. As such, the struggles of any underappreciated, debased, or disenfranchised group are easily transferred onto the slouching shoulders of the cinematic zombie.

Although zombies are lauded as purveyors of cultural criticism (Bishop, 2006; Dendle, 2001; Maio, 2007; Potter, 2007), there is no detailed scholarly cultural study devoted to zombie cinema. There are cultural studies of the horror genre at large, but the zombie and rom-zom-com subgenres are ignored apart from popular press articles and

non-academic critique. Although there is no shortage of cultural critique or literature where zombie films are concerned, these critiques arise from the realm of popular culture rather than the academy. Many popular press authors feel secure in making overt cultural connections between zombies and marginalized, disenfranchised societal groups, using zombies as a stand in for the “Other” and oppressed (Barker, 1997; Beale, 2004; Becker, 2006; Engall, 2002; Potter, 2007; Wright, 2005). With the absence of academic scholarship on this topic, I turn to the realm of popular press for further illustration of the variety of cultural critiques arising from zombie cinema.

*Night of the Living Dead* (1968) is credited with a variety of cultural critiques. One such critique focuses on the demise of the American middle-class and the corruption of the nuclear family (Bishop, 2006; Dendle, 2001), which is explicit in the depiction of Harry and Helen Cooper and their daughter, Karen. Bitten by one of the undead, young Karen falls ill and eventually dies, becoming a zombie. Upon her reanimation, she turns on her parents, eating her father and then murdering and eating her mother as well (Streiner, Hardman, & Romero, 1968). These acts of violence directed at parental figures by their child challenges the dominant ideological value of the perfect suburban family consisting of married, heterosexual parents and obedient children. Similarly, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) comments on American society’s overdependence on modern media and the breakdown of interpersonal communication (Barker, 1997; Engall, 2002). When the band of survivors congregate in the farm house that is the setting of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), they do not understand the type of danger facing them. Television and radio reports fail to provide the information the survivors need to protect themselves, yet instead of trusting their instincts and their own experiences with the zombies, the



survivors rely upon the advice and partial information of televised experts. Thus, the film challenges the dominant ideological belief in the value of modern media and technology.

Finally, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) addresses ideological tension regarding race and violence (Beale, 2004; Bishop, 2006). The protagonist of the film, Ben, is an African-American man and only person to actually survive the zombie invasion and emerge alive the following morning. He does not, however, survive the film. Upon exiting the security of his hiding place, Ben is shot and killed by a posse of men who “mistake” him for a zombie (Streiner, Hardman, & Romero, 1968). In a society that favors whiteness, Ben may be interpreted as a threat to the ideology of white supremacy. Despite the fact that Ben alone is best equipped to survive the attack, he is still killed at the hands of a posse of white individuals organized with the purpose of making America safe.

*Night of the Living Dead* (1968) debuted in the same decade that witnessed the Civil Rights movement, the rise of the Black Panthers, and a host of violent race riots, including the Watts and Detroit riots. Ideologically, the prevailing power structures that placed whiteness at the top of the sociocultural hierarchy were under attack by competing ideologies boasting the power and potential of non-whites. Within *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), Ben represents those competing ideological threats. Ben is killed because he provides as much a threat to the dominant ideology through his status as a strong African-American male as the zombies provide by being members of the living dead. Both threats are neutralized in the same manner; a shot to the head and burning of the corpses. The dominant ideology must be maintained.

Ten years after *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) communicated a more blatant commentary on contemporary American consumer culture and the commodification of humanity (Beale, 2004; Dendle, 2001; Potter, 2007; Zinoman, 2007). In this film, a band of four survivors hide out in a shopping mall while zombies roam the streets. Within the context of the film, the shopping mall is a seemingly safe place because it literally provides all of the supplies the survivors feel they need to exist (Argento, Rubinstein, & Romero, 1978). Figuratively, the shopping mall and its perceived safety represent the dominant value of consumerism that pervades American society. Thus, the film communicates an ideological message that challenges the alleged safety found in consumerist values.

Both *Dead of Night* (1974) and *Homecoming* (2005), a zombie-centered episode of Showtime's *Masters of Horror* series, boast strong anti-war themes. *Dead of Night* (1974) focuses on main character Andy, a soldier who died in the Vietnam War but who returns home to the United States as a member of the walking dead. Once home, he encounters the familiarity of family and friends who are forced to deal with the changes that have taken place in Andy (Clark, James, Trent, & Clark, 1974). Likewise, *Homecoming* (2005) presents a group of undead American soldiers returned from the war in Iraq. These soldiers return with the purpose of voting out the administration who sent them to war and thus to their untimely deaths (Ansen, 2006; Dante, 2005). Both of these films confront the dominant ideological values of patriotism and honorable fighting. Members of the armed forces are revered in American culture as the ultimate heroes; the true patriots willing to fight for truth, justice, and the American way of life. It is considered an honor to serve and die for the greater good of the country and its values.

Both *Dead of Night* (1974) and *Homecoming* (2005) confront these notions, questioning the legitimacy of a governmental administration that knowingly sends its citizen to their deaths. This confrontation challenges the principles of the dominant ideology that favors the ideas of patriotism, war, and self-sacrifice, and the power structures these values promote and protect.

Romero's fourth zombie film, *Land of the Dead* (2005), also boasts antiwar, anti-consumerist culture commentary, defying the values of the dominant ideological systems in much the same manner as the previously mentioned films. In *Land of the Dead* (2005), Romero's challenge to favored ideological structures is also presented through the strict division of groups within the film. There is as much of a divide between the wealthy people in power and the poor people who lack power and access as there is a divide between the living and the undead (Ansen, 2006; Beale, 2004; Canton, Goldmann, Grunwald, & Romero, 2005). This depiction of inter-group tension illustrates the tensions that exist between competing ideological systems within the sociocultural landscape of modern America. Quoted by Beale (2004), Romero insists he made a conscious effort to make *Land of the Dead* (2005) resonant with themes familiar to post-9/11 audiences still dealing with the fear of terrorism. So doing, Romero provides commentary on the sociocultural hierarchies that exist within the United States and the tensions existing between dominant and marginalized groups as they fight for dominance and representation.

*Diary of the Dead* (2007), Romero's fifth and most recent zombie film, confronts similar ideological themes of power and oppression as his prior films. Like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Cloverfield* (2008), *Diary of the Dead* (2007) relies on

subjective camera presentation; the entire film is seen from the point-of-view (POV) of the camera and Jason, the man behind the camera, who is experiencing the events of the film and capturing those events as best he can. Using this unique presentation style to give the film a more documentary feel, Romero again explores ideological themes including American overdependence on technology, the breakdown of the nuclear family, and the loss of meaningful communication (Englehardt, Grunwald, Katz, Spigel, & Romero, 2007).

These are a few examples that point to the many ways in which zombie films may make a sociocultural commentary, illustrating the tensions that exist between competing ideologies. None of these films, however, fit the mold of the rom-zom-com, falling instead into other zombie film subgenres. Rom-zom-coms like *Shaun of the Dead* also provide social commentary. By incorporating elements of the romantic comedy subgenre into their narrative structures, rom-zom-coms present a unique commentary of America's sociocultural landscape, especially when applied to dominant and competing gender ideologies, and offer an interesting take on contemporary cultural fears. *Shaun of the Dead* is a successful rom-zom-com that communicates ideology-laden gender messages to contemporary American audiences. In order to analyze and then critique these messages, it is essential to first provide a synopsis of *Shaun of the Dead*, outlining the plotline and chronicling the series of events that occur within the film.

As these critiques demonstrate, horror and zombie films may be read as messages that communicate ideological tensions within the United States. Using Carey's language, the films symbolically perpetuate or attempt to transform shared realities regarding

family structures, economic values, militarism, race, and technological overdependence. The present study contributes to this body of research by interrogating the gender messages communicated in *Shaun of the Dead*.

Specifically, I will look for character representations that either perpetuate or challenge patriarchal definitions of gender, with specific attention to the ways in which masculine characteristics are privileged. Drawing on the research of Artz and Murphy (2000), Bem (1993), Kimbrell (1995), and Wood (2005), I will look for the symbolic ways in which masculinity is communicated through leadership, strength, rationality, dominance, and independence. Are there male characters who personify these privileged masculine traits? Conversely, are there male characters who do not manifest these masculine traits? Having identified male characters who either succeed or fail in the privileged masculine role, I will analyze the ways in which the characters may function hegemonically. Building on the work of Artz and Murphy (2000), Bem (1993), Kimbrell (1995), and Wood (2005), I will explain how characters may be used as ideological communicators, transmitting messages regarding gendered values.

#### *Shaun of the Dead* Synopsis

*Shaun of the Dead* focuses on title character Shaun Riley, a twenty-nine year old, underachieving electronics store employee and devoted slacker living an unexciting life in North London. Both a neglectful son and boyfriend, Shaun prefers playing video games and downing pints with his buddy Ed at The Winchester to spending time with his mother and long-suffering girlfriend Liz. Indeed, Shaun is so self-involved that he barely notices his girlfriend's unhappiness, or the fact that the people around him, including his flatmate Pete, are slowly turning into zombies. It takes both Liz leaving him and a

zombie attacking him in his own garden for Shaun to withdraw from his stupor and realize what is happening in the world around him. Deciding to take control of his life and win Liz back, Shaun prepares to battle the zombified citizens of London.

Armed with a cricket bat and a garden shovel, Shaun and Ed dismiss the advice of newscasters and take to the streets in an ill-fated plan to rescue Shaun's mother, kill his infected step-father, save Liz, and retire happily to The Winchester for a pint while riding out the zombie attack that newscasters labeled Z-day. Unsurprisingly the plan goes awry. Shaun's mother, Barbara, refuses to abandon her husband, Shaun's despised step-father Phillip. Liz is still angry with Shaun and will only leave with him if her flatmates David and Dianne can come along also. The assembled crew does not make it very far before Phillip, bitten prior to the rescue attempt, becomes the first to die and return quickly to unlife as a zombie. Relying on the zombie conventions established in *Plague of the Zombies* (1966) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), the zombies of *Shaun of the Dead* do not retain emotion after their transformation. Once zombified, they attack anyone, even former loved ones, in their unquenchable desire to feed. This presents a large problem for Shaun and the gang, who must not only get away from zombie-Phillip, but also make their way through a London teeming with zombies in order to arrive at The Winchester and perceived safety. The trip across London on foot proves interesting, with the group encountering old friends and a multitude of the undead. The journey includes petty bickering between Shaun and David, Ed's bungling ineptitude, and Barbara getting accidentally bitten, a fact she does not reveal until far later in the film.

Once at The Winchester, Shaun and crew must find a way inside. When a verbal spat with Ed betrays their existence to the zombies, Shaun dashes off in an attempt to

lead the zombies away from Liz and the others, giving them time to work out a way to get safely inside the locked pub. Shaun's absence brings tensions among the small group to a boiling point that Shaun's reappearance a while later does not fully diminish. Stuck inside the zombie-surrounded pub, the weary group realizes that they are not much better off than they were beforehand. Matters get worse when the zombies realize the location of Shaun and the gang and attempt to enter The Winchester to feed on the occupants. Tensions within the group finally explode when Barbara dies, only to return moments later as a zombie. Forced to shoot his own mother, Shaun lashes out at David. In a fit of anger, David pulls a gun on Shaun. Facing the outrage of the rest of the group, David announces his plans to exit The Winchester. Moments later, David is devoured as hungry zombies crash through the window by which David stands. Dianne runs after him, straight into the midst of the zombies, using one of David's disembodied legs to strike at the undead. With only Shaun, Liz, and Ed left, all hell breaks loose and The Winchester floods with zombies.

While Shaun and Liz fight for their lives, clueless slacker Ed enters into a childish wrestling match with former flatmate Pete. Completely oblivious, Ed does not realize that Pete is a zombie. Before Shaun can react, Ed is severely bitten. Shaun, Liz, and Ed finally manage to escape to the basement of The Winchester, only to find themselves trapped within it while a sea of undead desperately try to attack from above. All hope seems lost. A reconciled Shaun and Liz say their goodbyes to one another amidst a dying Ed's sarcastic commentary. Liz asks Shaun to use one of their last two bullets to kill her before turning the weapon on himself; Ed assures the pair that he does not mind being eaten. Deciding to have one last cigarette before shooting Liz and committing suicide, Shaun

inadvertently discovers the exit. Forced to leave Ed behind, Liz and Shaun say goodbye to their friend and emerge back onto the zombie-infested street, ready to do battle. They are saved, however, when Shaun's friend Yvonne arrives in the nick of time with the British armed forces. The armed forces incapacitate the undead and take Shaun and Liz to safety.

Six months later, Shaun and Liz are shown living happily together while television newscasts report on the incidents of Z-Day. Many of the zombies who remained in one piece after Z-Day, now called the "mobile deceased," have been gathered and placed into entry-level positions within the service industry. Retaining only their most basic motor functions, the mobile deceased seem perfect for these mindless jobs. Other zombies are exploited for consumer amusement and reality TV ratings. A zombified Ed, on the other hand, resides in the tool shed behind Shaun and Liz's flat. Kept there and visited often by Shaun, Ed wastes the day away playing video games, just as he did while living (Park & Wright, 2004). This summary of *Shaun of the Dead* provides the most pertinent plot information and describes the sequence of events that unfold within the film. For additional summaries, please see Berardinelli (2004), Cox (2004), Ebert (2004), Elley (2004), Holden (2004), Hornaday (2004), Kehr (2004), Lane (2004), Meyer (2004), Muller (2004), Puig (2004), Rozen (2004), Schwarzbaum (2004), Terrell (2004), Thomson (2004), and Travers (2004).

As a film, *Shaun of the Dead* operates on several levels. Although it fits the definition of a horror film as described by Corrigan and White (2004), it also has strong elements of both romance and comedy inherent in its plot. Rather than detracting from the overall sense of horror, these romantic and comedic elements blend with the horrific



elements to result in a film that can only be classified as a sub-subgenre of the horror genre; the rom-zom-com. Moreover, *Shaun of the Dead*, despite its British origins, has found success among United States moviegoers. Because it blends three genres of film so competently, and because it found success with American audiences in addition to audiences in Britain, *Shaun of the Dead* is the sociocultural artifact I chose for cultural analysis. What gender messages does *Shaun of the Dead*, a contemporary British rom-zom-com, communicate to contemporary American audiences? This is the question I answer through gender study and analysis of the artifact.

#### CHAPTER 4: GENRE AND GENDER ANALYSIS OF *SHAUN OF THE DEAD*

When last we left Shaun, he and his small band of survivors were attempting to cross London on foot, hoping to reach their favorite pub, The Winchester, and perceived safety. Tensions within the small group come to the surface, causing arguments to break out among various group members. This arguing fragments the group. By the time they actually reach The Winchester, David and Shaun are obviously clashing. Even Shaun and Ed fight in front of The Winchester as the group struggles to get inside, drawing the zombies' attentions and forcing Shaun to use himself as a diversion to lead the zombies away so the rest of the group can enter the pub unimpeded (Park & Wright, 2004).

Once inside The Winchester, Shaun and his friends are surrounded by zombies and running out of options. The illusion of safety is gone and they realize that they are trapped. Tensions among the group boil over. Some of the group members are injured; some have already died. Time is running out. As the zombies begin to break their way into the pub, Shaun rallies the group for one final stand. Brandishing their only gun, Shaun quickly devises a plan for them to collectively use the gun to ward off the zombie threat. When asked how multiple people can use one gun, Shaun responds by saying, "As Bertrand Russell once said, 'The only thing that will redeem mankind is cooperation.' I think we can all appreciate the relevance of that now" (Park & Wright, 2004). Surprised by the philosophical nature of the comment, Liz approaches Shaun and asks if he read the quote on a beer mat. Somewhat grudgingly, Shaun confirms her suspicion. Impressed that

he is trying to take a positive, proactive stance about the situation, Liz promises not to mention her discovery to the others (Park & Wright, 2004). Shaun, it seems, is finally becoming a man.

Scenes such as this communicate ideology-laden gender messages to American audiences. In this scene, we see Shaun accepting the proactive roles and responsibilities associated with the dominant construction of masculinity. Even though he may not be properly equipped for this role, resorting to inspirational quotes found on beer mats in order to convince his friends to join together, he embraces the traits associated with masculinity as their only hopes for surviving the attack. Socioculturally, Shaun's acceptance of the dominant ideological roles and responsibilities expected of him represent the importance of conformity to the dominant ideology. In many ways, this scene naturalizes the dominant patriarchal ideology, as though Shaun's maleness is a predetermined state that inherently predisposes him to attributed masculine traits such as rationality, leadership, assertiveness, and violence. Shaun's conformity is rewarded in the sense that Liz finally respects him. The message is communicated that compliance with dominant ideological beliefs is not only in a society's best interest, but also well rewarded. Through scenes like this, *Shaun of the Dead* communicates ideological messages to contemporary American audiences. In this chapter, I analyze these gender messages and their meanings communicated in *Shaun of the Dead*. This analysis begins with a discussion of the origins of *Shaun of the Dead*, its production, distribution, and exhibition.

### Production, Distribution, and Exhibition of *Shaun of the Dead*

Called the “sometimes funny, sometimes terrifying re-visioning of an established genre” (Bishop, 2006, p. 196), *Shaun of the Dead* is the creation of co-writers Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg. Both Wright and Pegg serve double duty on the film; Wright as director and Pegg as title character Shaun (Ebert, 2004; Holden, 2004; Lane, 2004; Meyer, 2004; Muller, 2004; Rozen, 2004; Schwarzbaum, 2004). The script for *Shaun of the Dead* arose in part as a result of an episode of the British sitcom *Spaced* (1999), which was also created by Wright and Pegg. Foreshadowing his *Shaun of the Dead* character, *Spaced* (1999) starred Pegg as an underachieving, twenty-something Londoner who desired only to spend his days playing video games. In one episode, Pegg’s character finds himself trapped inside a video game, forced to battle the zombies within it (Elley, 2004; Hornaday, 2004; Lawson, 2004; Thomson, 2004). Though certainly encouraged by and drawing insight from this episode of *Spaced* (1999), the underlying inspiration for *Shaun of the Dead* has deeper origins.

Director Wright has been eagerly forthcoming about his love of classic zombie cinema; a love he shares with Pegg (Wright, 2005). Calling *Shaun of the Dead* his “bloody Valentine to George [Romero]” (p. 43), Wright admits that in many ways *Shaun of the Dead* is meant to pay homage to Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), hence the playful title of the film (Berardinelli, 2004; Lawson, 2004; Muller, 2004; Rozen, 2004; Thomson, 2004; Travers, 2004; Wright, 2005). Wright views *Shaun of the Dead* as a companion piece of sorts, one functioning within the world of zombie horror created by Romero (Kehr, 2004). Says Wright in an interview with Kehr (2004),

The original inspiration was to do an American zombie movie. And one of the reasons the film is called *Shaun of the Dead* is because we wanted it to be seen almost like a companion film - that is, if *Dawn of the Dead* [1978] is happening in Pittsburgh, this is what's happening in North London. We had a joke when we were pitching - if *Dawn of the Dead* [1978] was like *Hamlet* [1969], then *Shaun* was the *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* [1980] in terms of the story of the bit players. The epidemic has nothing to do with Shaun and it's not his job to save the day, because he's just an electrical shop salesman. So it's just him getting through. (para. 5)

Acknowledging this creative debt owed to Romero and his films, Wright and Pegg also utilized other mediated depictions of zombies in the creation of *Shaun of the Dead*.

Heavily inspired by the cinematic work of Romero and their own zombie-themed episode of *Spaced* (1999), Wright and Pegg also turned video games in the creation of their film. Wright argues that CAPCOM's *Resident Evil* video game captures the spirit of Romero's zombie classics better than any other depiction of zombieism he has encountered in recent years (Wright, 2005). Drawing heavily from these sources, Wright and Pegg crafted a zombie film that incorporates both comedy and romance, while still remaining true to the horror genre that inspired it.

*Shaun of the Dead* was released in Great Britain on April 9, 2004, where it became "a runaway hit" (Kehr, 2004, para 1). Finding success and acclaim in Britain (Kehr, 2004; Meyer, 2004), the film made its way across the Atlantic, opening in the United States a few months later. Premiering on September 24, 2004, *Shaun of the Dead* performed well at the American box office, opening on 607 screens nationwide and

earning \$3.3 million its opening weekend (Bowles, 2004; Variety Box Office, 2004a). The film received a greater number of engagements in the corresponding weeks, eventually peaking at 675 engagements nationwide (Variety Box Office, 2004b; Variety Box Office, 2004c). By the first weekend of November 2004, just over a month after its United States debut, *Shaun of the Dead* grossed over \$13 million domestically and over \$27 million worldwide (Variety Box Office, 2004d).

In addition to box office success, *Shaun of the Dead* received immediate praise from professional film critics and other horror specialists (LaPorte, 2004). Horror novelist Stephen King said *Shaun of the Dead* is “destined to be a cult classic” (Appendix B, p. 139; LaPorte, 2004, p. 5). Peter Jackson, director of *Dead Alive* (1992), called it “the most entertaining film I have seen all year” (Appendix B, p. 139; LaPorte, 2004, p. 5). Even Romero, the acclaimed ruler of “zombiedom” (Sutherland, 2006, p. 59) and a hero of Wright and Pegg, called the send up of his classic zombie films “an absolute blast!” (Appendix B, p. 138; LaPorte, 2004, p. 5).

Among professional film critics, praise for *Shaun of the Dead* was equally high. The film received positive reviews from respected critical sources including *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Daily Herald*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Daily News*, *The New York Post*, *The New York Times*, *People*, Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and *Rolling Stone* (Crix’ Picks, 2004). Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* said the film “keeps the blood and the laughs gushing” (Appendix B, p. 139). *Shaun of the Dead* has been called “ghoulishly hilarious” (Maio, 2007, p. 192), “remarkably fresh and inventive” (Meyer, 2004, para. 1), and “a subversive mixture of grandly scaled horror-movie carnage and low-key comedy” (Kehr, 2004, para. 1). This is important because

although *Shaun of the Dead* contains elements of both romance and comedy, placing within the rom-zom-com subgenre, it is very much a horror film and a popular one at that. Although a British release, *Shaun of the Dead* found success with American audiences as well.

The motivating factors behind the creation of *Shaun of the Dead*, as well as its popularity and critical success, hold ideological significance for American audiences. American horror fans are familiar with the works of Romero and the fictitious worlds Romero created within his own zombie films. In emulating Romero, Wright, by his own admission, created an “American zombie movie” (Kehr, 2004, para 5). So doing, Wright recycled many of the same ideological themes Romero introduced in his own films; themes of direct familiarity and significance to American audiences. *Shaun of the Dead*, through its allusions to the American zombie films of Romero, communicates ideological messages concerned with the dominant and competing groups of a society. The popularity of *Shaun of the Dead*, not to mention its critical success, indicates that the film found a foothold with American audiences. For American audiences to receive it so readily confirms that the messages communicated within the film, although British in origin, resonate with the American audiences consuming them. These messages, concerned with the tensions and struggles occurring between dominant and competing ideologies, are indicative of the American sociocultural landscape and therefore convey ideological meaning to American audiences.

The success of *Shaun of the Dead* also indicates the stance the film takes regarding America’s dominant ideologies. Since film is one of the mediated tools through which the dominant values and mores of a society are communicated, it is often used in

the best interests of the dominant ideology, meant to uphold the dominant power structures and convey dominant modes of thought. It stands to reason, therefore, that if a film were to go against the dominant ideology or offer up a considerable threat, it would be rejected by the members of that society who are committed to supporting the dominant ideology, even if they do so hegemonically. Since *Shaun of the Dead* was readily accepted by American movie-going audiences, it is assumed that the film functions in support of the dominant ideologies of American society. In the following analysis I will demonstrate the ways in which *Shaun of the Dead* does just that.

#### Situating *Shaun of the Dead* within the Horror Genre

The popularity of *Shaun of the Dead* may be due, in part, to its resonance among United States audiences. As Berardinelli (2004) suggests, the film functions as “a societal commentary” (para. 1). It is the purpose of this cultural analysis to derive the meaning of this societal commentary to audiences within the United States. What gender messages does *Shaun of the Dead*, a contemporary British rom-zom-com, communicate to contemporary American audiences? To answer this research question, it is necessary to situate *Shaun of the Dead* within the boundaries of the horror genre and then analyze the ideological messages it communicates. Revisiting Corrigan and White’s (2004) definition of horror, all films falling under the genre must have three basic elements. First, the film must boast a character or characters suffering from some kind of physical, psychological, or spiritual deformity. Secondly, the narrative of the film must be built around and/or include the elements of surprise, suspense, and shock. Finally, the film needs to present a visual depiction that works to strike a balance between the seen and the unseen, keeping audiences in a suspended state of fear, dread, and disgust (Corrigan & White, 2004). In



addition to its featured elements of romance and comedy, *Shaun of the Dead* is characteristically a horror film, bearing all of the elements proposed by Corrigan and White (2004). The first of the elements presented by Corrigan and White (2004), the necessity of a physical, psychological, or spiritual deformity, is evident within multiple characters in *Shaun of the Dead*.

In *Shaun of the Dead*, many of the character deformities are physical, external, and instantly recognizable. Most notably, the film's zombies suffer from varying degrees of physical deformity. The majority of the films' zombies are slowly falling apart, missing limbs and hobbling along as best they can despite broken bones and torn flesh. These physical deformities are horrifying to audiences not simply because of their visual stimulation, but also because of what they represent. The zombies' haggard, deformed appearances heighten the sense of horror by presenting both the other characters and the film audience with appalling imagery of the decay the human body can sustain. Despite the technological advances of modern society and the various inventions, alarms, alerts, and safeguards put in place to keep us physically safe, the human body is fragile. Technology does not equate with physical safety. While artificial hearts and lungs keep humans alive in spite of organ malfunction and "miracle" drugs cure a host of fatal diseases, human engineered levees fail with devastating consequences, the most technically sophisticated military does not defeat the enemy, and even minor flaws doom multi-million dollar space shuttles. These are all examples of technology designed with the purpose of safety and security in mind and the ways in which that technology either succeeds or fails to protect us.

The deformities found in *Shaun of the Dead* are not all physical and external in nature; some of the deformities are internal and hidden from sight. Zombies represent a spiritual deformity as well. The zombies have completely lost their humanity. Seemingly soulless, the undead turn on anyone, even one-time friends and family members, in their pursuit of human flesh. The living characters continue to care for their loved ones even after those loved ones have joined the undead. This caring hinders the living characters because they want to treat their undead family and friends with love and respect, even though the zombified loved one bears no memory of the other characters and will attempt to feed if given the chance.

So how does one deal with a former loved one who now threatens one's life? In contemporary America's current "culture of fear" (Glassner, 1999), zombies represent the fear that life can change quickly and without warning; that the real monsters are the average people encountered in everyday life, whose gender ideologies may challenge the dominant masculine mindset. No matter how "normal" a person may seem, it is unwise to trust anyone because it is impossible to know what internal deformities a person may be hiding, impossible to guess whether that person is an ideological monster. Zombies are a visual depiction of the sociocultural fear that true evil resides within the average citizen and under certain circumstances anyone can change into a monster, capable of atrocious ideological acts of destruction and deserving of fear.

This sociocultural fear of the danger existing in spiritual deformity, the menace lurking in the ordinary and mundane, speaks to deeper issues of ideology and power. Many citizens hold to the notion that America is a nation in which "all men [sic] are created equal". This mythology assumes a level playing field for all American citizens, as

well as a common set of experiences and values regardless of gender. In reality, however, the patriarchal foundation on which the United States is built asserts that men are more highly valued than women; masculinity more prized than femininity. Thus, spiritual deformity resides in both the zombies and in the male characters who fail to embrace their masculinity and provide the safety and protection against zombies. This failure is frightening on an ideological level because it communicates a threat to the American way of life by challenging dominant gender definitions.

The spiritual deformities manifested by the zombies in *Shaun of the Dead* communicate a threat to dominant American ideological values by questioning our security within the United States. The Oklahoma City bombing, the Columbine shootings, and the D.C. sniper attacks are all examples of situations in which seemingly ordinary American citizens wrought terror and destruction on an unsuspecting American public. The perpetrators of these events were not monsters in a physical sense, but instead carried internal deformities that led them to act out in destructive ways. Likewise, zombies are spiritually deformed beings. They are humans stripped of their humanity; not necessarily evil, but rather driven to violence. In *Shaun of the Dead* the zombies are not alien creatures who arrive from out of nowhere to cause mayhem. All of the zombies depicted in the film are originally introduced as the common people Shaun encounters in his everyday routine. A boy playing soccer in the street, a homeless man begging for change, and the owner of the local bar all become zombies Shaun has to fight and incapacitate in order to survive.

As such, the spiritual deformities of zombified beings represent the seemingly innocuous individual who engages in acts of terror and destruction, and the

powerlessness American audiences feel in the face of these unanticipated acts from people who initially appear to be ordinary citizens. The tenuous American sense of safety is grounded firmly in the dominant ideological values of fairness, equality, security, and justice, yet none of these core beliefs actually make America a safer place from either external or internal threats. Cinematically, zombies represent the failure of these dominant values to provide the populace with security. The purveyors of the dominant ideology still champion these values in the interest of maintaining the prevailing power structures. Therefore, the zombies become a sociocultural scapegoat, a filmic manifestation of the much-feared “Other.” As long as the zombies and the competing ideologies they represent can be easily identified as the threats making America an unsafe place, then the dominant values of justice and security are upheld as the values that will eventually save us from sociocultural threats to the American way of life. This message is communicated most strongly in films that show the protagonist(s) overcoming and surviving the zombie threat. Yet, spiritual deformities are not the only internal defect plaguing characters within *Shaun of the Dead*. Psychological deformities and the threats they symbolize are also present within the film.

Recognizing and responding to the ideological threats symbolized by the zombies requires leadership, maturity, and a strong sense of responsibility, traits that are defined as masculine by the androcentric culture in which we live (Bem, 1993; Kimbrell, 1995; Wood, 2005). One of the comedic elements of *Shaun of the Dead* is the fact that although Shaun and Ed are adults, they cannot break out of their childish habits. Instead, the pair remains psychologically stunted, perpetually juvenile and immature. Ed spends his days playing video games and smoking pot. Shaun is employed at a dead end job where he

receives no respect. He spends his off time playing games with Ed and hanging out at The Winchester. Both men shirk responsibility and have no direction or purpose in their lives (Park & Wright, 2004). This childishness and immaturity communicates a clear message to American audiences about the value of independence and the importance of transitioning from boyhood to manhood.

Within the dominant ideology of American society, independence is a critically important aspect of communicating masculinity. Boys are expected to leave childhood behind and become men; manhood being the dominant position of power in a patriarchy like the United States. Refusing this role is, in essence, a refusal of power and therefore a challenge to the dominant ideological system that celebrates both masculinity and the power attributed it (Bem, 1993; Kimbrell, 1995; Wood, 2005). Shaun must overcome his psychological deformities in order to survive the zombie attack. Initially, Shaun avoids adulthood as best he can. He clings to his childhood friend Ed, using Ed as an excuse for his own childishness. Shaun does not have a career, but a meaningless job where he works with a group of teenagers who have no respect for him. He does not follow through on the promises he makes to his mother, Liz, or Pete. Shaun assumes no adult responsibility, demonstrating his desire to cling to his psychological deformities, remaining happily psychologically stunted.

To save his life, however, Shaun must change his ways and accept his predetermined role as an adult male. He must leave his sedentary lifestyle behind and take a more active stance, confronting the dangers facing him first hand. He must take control of his heterosexual relationship, securing the power from Liz and becoming the head of the household. He must also sever ties with the family unit that keeps him in a

prolonged state of boyhood, namely his mother, stepfather, and brother-figure Ed. While the transition is not an easy one for Shaun, his survival and the maintenance of the dominant ideology depends upon it.

Only by accepting the dominant ideological values of independence is Shaun able to overcome his childish ways, enter manhood, and survive the zombie invasion. Symbolically, the message communicated to American audiences is one of individual triumph and the power associated with masculinity. In this way, *Shaun of the Dead* perpetuates the dominant ideology of masculinity. The film communicates the message that in order to be a successful adult male a man must leave home and assume independence, particularly by severing ties with the family unit (including close childhood friends) who may contribute to prolonged boyhood, Shaun must create a new family unit with himself as the head (Bem, 1993; Kimbrell, 1995; Wood, 2005). Since the service industry jobs are given to zombies in the aftermath of the zombie invasion, it is obvious that Shaun must find a new, more adult means of supporting himself and, the assumption goes, Liz. During the invasion, Shaun rekindles his relationship with Liz because he proves himself capable of developing a plan of action, however flawed, and executing it with more than just himself in mind. This proactive stance in the face of danger and eagerness to protect the supposedly weaker female are masculine traits illustrating Shaun's further ventures into manhood.

On a cultural level, Shaun's entrance into manhood upholds the dominant patriarchal ideology that prizes masculinity, reinforcing and legitimizing existing American power structures that place men in a dominant social position and women in an

inferior social position. As the film clearly reveals, everyone wins when Shaun accepts his prescribed role; Shaun and Liz survive and find happiness in establishing the “perfect” life.

*Shaun of the Dead* lends itself easily to a cultural analysis of gender. Blending elements of the romantic comedy subgenre with zombie horror to become a rom-zom-com, *Shaun of the Dead*, like all romantic comedies, derives some of its humor from the romantic conflicts and complications of the two main characters, Shaun and Liz.

Describing romantic comedies as a battle of the sexes, Leach (1977) asserts “the sexual warfare [within romantic comedies] involves a struggle for dominance, usually with the woman asserting an authority which society denies her” (p. 78). This is evident within *Shaun of the Dead*. Liz wants Shaun to grow up, claiming his immaturity and lack of responsibility as her reasons for leaving him. Within their relationship, Liz takes the dominant role because Shaun fails to fulfill it. This role frustrates her. Ideologically, the dominant roles within a patriarchal society, like the United States, are reserved for men. Although women can sometimes hold power and dominance, this is seen as a challenge to the patriarchal system rather than an accepted or common occurrence. The strength and power of femininity, of matriarchy, represents a competing ideology and a threat to the dominant patriarchal ideology of the United States. As such, this threat must be counteracted in order for the dominant patriarchal ideology to remain intact. Liz’s frustration and dissatisfaction communicates the message that she is displeased with the dominant role Shaun’s immaturity forces on her. Ideologically, her individual frustration

communicates the larger societal message that women are not meant to hold dominance and power; positions of powers are reserved for men and it is not only unnatural for men to refuse these roles, but refusal will lead to strife and unhappiness.

On an ideological level, the humor derived from Shaun and Liz's romance, like the humor in all romantic comedies, also comes from the interplay of these two main characters as they fight for dominance. Socioculturally, the dominant patriarchal values of the society assert that Liz, being female, is not meant to hold dominant power within the relationship. The power in the relationship is reserved for the male, Shaun. Having the power and responsibility thrust upon her is humorous to American audiences because, on an ideological level, it is counter to the understood values and structures of the dominant patriarchal ideology. That Liz spends a good deal of the film arguing with Shaun to grow up and accept responsibility is also humorous. So doing, Liz is asserting her dominance in the relationship, arguing that Shaun should listen to her and accept her point of view. Yet, she is arguing that Shaun mature and take control of his life and the relationship. Liz is asserting her dominance in an attempt to make Shaun accept the dominant role in the relationship, thereby hegemonically subjugating herself.

By the end of *Shaun of the Dead*, Liz and Shaun reconcile their relationship. While their actual roles and routines within the relationship have not changed (Shaun still looks to Liz to make decisions for them and Liz complies), the definition of these roles has. In adopting the masculine traits necessary to overcome the zombie invasion, Shaun defined himself as the dominant power holder in their relationship. Even though his daily actions have not undergone a significant change, his lack of decision-making is now viewed as a manly inattention to insignificant details. Liz, still making the decisions for



the couple, is no longer viewed as the dominant member of the relationship. Instead, she is now defined as a helper and companion to her dominant male partner. Not only does this portrayal of domestic bliss uphold the dominant value of heterosexuality, it communicates deeper ideological messages about the construction of gender.

Liz's willing acceptance of Shaun's new role as the dominant male communicates the hegemonic message that men are not only meant to adopt roles of power and dominance, but that women desire them to do so. The message is communicated that patriarchy is beneficial for and desired by both sexes. Thus, patriarchy is naturalized and legitimized. Any threats to patriarchy, competing ideologies that suggest female dominance or an equal distribution of power, are labeled unnatural. With all the threats facing American culture, it seems necessary, then, that men adopt the dominant roles in society to protect us from harm. If the dominant values of patriarchy are coming under attack by competing ideologies, then who will protect us, as a country, from the dangers threatening to overtake us? Patriarchy and the dominant values of the androcentric society must be upheld in order to protect the country, as a whole, from the dangers existing in the ordinary, everyday world. In this way, *Shaun of the Dead* communicates ideological messages about gender and the importance of adhering to gender roles on a societal level.

Not only do the women in *Shaun of the Dead* hegemonically support the dominant masculine power structures, but male characters chastise other male characters for adopting feminine characteristics. After Liz breaks up with Shaun, he still includes her in his plan for escaping the zombies. When Ed asks why Shaun is still thinking about Liz, Shaun replies, "Because I love her." Ed responds to this announcement by saying,

“All right, gay” (Park & Wright, 2004). Even though Shaun laments the loss of his heterosexual relationship, his willingness to share his emotions is seen as a feminine characteristic. Since men are expected to be masculine and powerful, this femininity is a threat and must be counteracted. Ed does this by calling into question Shaun’s manhood by insinuating that his emotionality makes him homosexual, homosexuality being a competing and disfavored sexuality. As long as Shaun is willing to display overtly feminine traits, he is somehow less than a man. The message communicated is that for the dominant patriarchal power structures to remain intact, masculine traits are the only acceptable traits that can be displayed. Feminine traits, like compassion and love, are weaker and therefore make the country more vulnerable to attack should we exhibit them on a sociocultural level.

Shaun is also able to establish himself as a man by both reconciling and then cutting ties with his family. He finally accepts his stepfather Phillip in the moments before Phillip’s death, putting Shaun at peace with the only father figure he has known. This reconciliation shows audiences that Shaun is growing out of boyhood. He is able to reunite with his estranged father figure and then move beyond that to replace Phillip as the dominant, alpha male; an important step in the transition from boyhood to manhood.

Cutting ties with his mother is less easy for Shaun. Shaun finally makes good on his promise of flowers, symbolically showing that he now respects the mother figure and the gift of life that she represents. To become a man, though, he must also cut this maternal tie. Shaun does so by shooting and incapacitating his mother after she turns into

a zombie. In killing the maternal figure, Shaun symbolically removes his strongest connection to boyhood, showing audiences that he has fully made the arduous transition into the individualistic rights and responsibilities of manhood.

To American audiences, Shaun's journey reaffirms dominant notions of manhood as an authoritative, respected, and ultimately desired position within the existing sociocultural power structure. Furthermore, by embracing his masculinity, Shaun symbolically communicates the importance of American society embracing its masculinity; adopting and utilizing culturally associated masculine traits. Recalling the numerous threats, both internal and external, that are facing the United States, the adoption of these masculine characteristics seem necessary and desired should we hope to protect ourselves and the prevailing power structures of the country. These traits include, but are not limited to, leadership, strength, independence, aggression, dominance, and rationality (Bem, 1993; Kimbrell, 1995; Wood, 2005) and can be used to combat the threats facing the dominant ideological power structures and belief systems of American culture.

Unlike Shaun, Ed is unable to make the transition from boyhood to manhood. This inability to right his psychological deformities leads to Ed's inevitable death and unlife, symbolically communicating to American audiences the importance of manhood and the consequences associated with challenging or rejecting the dominant values of a society. In refusing to accept manhood and its ideologically allocated power, Ed sets himself at odds with the dominant ideology, defining himself as "Other" and making himself expendable. He is a threat to the dominant values of masculinity. If allowed to survive, he would communicate a contradictory message to American audiences, one that

challenges the dominant structures of the country by showing a happily surviving person who is able to flourish outside of the values the dominant culture. This depiction could inspire others to question the values of the dominant culture, possibly even shunning them as did Ed. The threat being too great, both Ed and the competing ideologies he represents (slovenliness, entertainment over hard work, easy money, etc.) must be neutralized.

Ed's expendability also communicates another ideological message to American audiences. If America, as a country, finds itself unable to adopt the masculine characteristics "needed" to combat the ideological threats facing the country, then it too may find itself expendable as competing ideologies battle dominant ideological values for supremacy. Too many such threats could lead to a shift in existing power structures, which is frightening to those in power.

Similar to Ed, David also dies due to his inability to enter the adult realm of manhood and individual responsibility. David's cowardice, a distinctly unmasculine trait, proves to be his downfall. David claims to be a pacifist and uses this excuse as his reasoning for not stepping in to assist Shaun when Shaun is attacked by a zombie. The consequences of this action are that Shaun is attacked and nearly bitten, while Liz and Dianne, the females, rush to help him. David's cowardice forces the women in the group to adopt masculine traits (action, violence) to help Shaun. David is not really a pacifist, and abandons this claim when he and Shaun get into a physical altercation. Provoked by David's constant goading, Shaun punches him in the mouth. When David falls to the floor, he grabs the rifle and points it at Shaun, prepared to shoot. It is obvious that David's pacifism is nothing more than an excuse used to relieve him of the physical,

masculine responsibility of dispatching the zombies. Ideologically, David supports competing ideologies, posing a threat to dominant power structures. The message communicated through David's claim of pacifism is one of cowardice and action; if the United States wishes to overcome the threats facing it, then as a country we must act. Pacifism will not dispose of the ideological threats confronting us, only action and violent action at that.

Through the characters of Shaun, Ed and David, the message sent to American audiences is clear; the transition from boyhood to manhood is a difficult one, but it is the only acceptable state in which a contemporary American man can exist. Moreover, the traits culturally regarded as "masculine" are vital to the survival of American society at large and the American way of life. Failure to embrace the rights of masculinity, both on an individual and cultural level, will be punished with death in a literal or figurative sense.

Overall, the physical, spiritual, and psychological deformities presented within *Shaun of the Dead* communicate a threat to the dominant gendered values of American society. The characters' deformities combine to place that character into the marginalized category of "Other." This designation takes place because the deformities, by definition, are an aberration, transgressing the norms of expectation and differentiating deformed individuals from all other members of a society. Both within the context of *Shaun of the Dead* and within the larger context of American society, the "Other" is seen as a danger. The "Other" presents an ongoing threat to dominant ideological structures and must be marginalized, neutralized, or even killed in the interest of removing that threat.

In a larger sense the “Other” represents an attack on the dominant gendered ideology as a whole. In order for the United States to exist as sociocultural, political, and economics hierarchies, there must be an unequal distribution of power. If power were equally distributed, there would be no hierarchy because no one group would have any more or less power than any other group. Power is finite, and the point of having power is to keep that power, even at the expense of other people and groups. The “Other” represents any marginalized societal group. The “Other” is at the low end of the power structure, disadvantaged and disenfranchised. Debased as they are, however, the “Other” is a necessary component of the American power structure. The “Other” is the base upon which the rest of the power structure is built. If the “Other” did not exist, then the powerful in the society would have no one to wield that power over, and the power would therefore be diminished.

While the “Other” is necessary in order for the dominant ideology to function, it is compulsory that the “Other” be kept in place and deprived of power or access to power for the dominant ideology to function. The moment the “Other” starts to gain power or act in a manner overtly threatening to the dominant ideology, the “Other” becomes expendable; their service to the dominant ideology not worth the threat they pose. As such, the deformed individuals in *Shaun of the Dead* communicate a dichotomous message to contemporary American audiences. Essentially, the message states that although the “Other” is necessary, it is also a potential threat to dominant ideological values and must be kept in check. Thus, according to *Shaun of the Dead*, individuals who

fail to maintain a belief in the leadership, protection, and security offered by strong, independent, masculine leaders, dooms the entire populace to spiritual and physical death.

In connection with Corrigan and White's (2004) second element of the horror genre, the narrative of *Shaun of the Dead* includes elements of surprise, suspense, and shock. Surprise, within the film, often results from the visual depiction of the unexpected. There are a number of moments in *Shaun of the Dead* in which people, both living and undead, pop up unexpectedly. One repeated example of this comes from Shaun's flatmate, Pete. Pete surprises Shaun several times, both while living and after death, by appearing behind him without warning. Twice Shaun does not realize that Pete stands directly behind him until catching Pete's reflection in a mirror. The first time, Pete is alive. He surprises Shaun because he wants to discuss evicting Ed. Ed's slovenliness offends Pete, who is a hardworking, ambitious man. The second time, Pete is a zombie (Park & Wright, 2004). Having died and zombified in the shower, zombie-Pete's surprising transition and appearance directly behind Shaun communicates the potential for fear in the commonplace and unexpected.

Much like the element of surprise, suspense is also built into the plot. Throughout the film, visual imagery gives Shaun glimpses of the chaos slowly claiming the world by way of a zombie epidemic. However, Shaun does not notice the warning signs around him. He flips through the television news programs without listening to their reports. He does not see the bloody handprint on the convenience store door as he retrieves his ice cream, or realize that the people outside the pub are not a happy couple making out, but rather a zombie devouring the neck of a living person. He does not take the time to really

look at the figure walking towards him with arms outstretched, assuming it is a beggar asking for money rather than a zombie seeking a meal (Park & Wright, 2004). Although Shaun does not see the signs in front of him, the audience does. Suspense is generated by the audience realizing what is occurring in the film before the actual characters do, and subsequently fearing for the safety of those characters, wondering when they will finally realize the truth of their situation and act to protect themselves.

Similarly, suspense is also included in other ways throughout the course of the narrative, even after the characters realize that the dead have taken to the streets. As Shaun and his assembled group of family and friends travel across London, they are under constant threat of detection from the zombies. Once inside The Winchester, this threat increases (Park & Wright, 2004). Further suspense comes from wondering whether or not the group will be discovered. Once members of the group start dying off (which is at times shocking), the suspense is derived from wondering whether or not any of the group will make it out of the ordeal alive and, if so, how they will manage to do so.

In addition to the elements of surprise and suspense, *Shaun of the Dead* also contains the necessary element of shock. A shocking element within the film is the number of Shaun's friends and family members who are attacked and bitten, either dying or becoming zombies themselves. As Shaun comments to Liz after she asks him to shoot her, "You know, I don't think I've got it in me to shoot my flatmate, my mum, and my girlfriend all in the same night" (Park & Wright, 2004). Shaun has to kill or incapacitate a number of people he cares about throughout the course of the film. His mother, stepfather, Pete, and Ed are all bitten within the film, and Shaun is left with the difficult and emotionally trying decision of dealing with them. David is violently ripped apart by



zombies and Dianne, in unthinking rage, rushes into the zombie mass to exact vengeance. Shaun is unable to stop either of these events (Park & Wright, 2004). These moments of intense emotion, superimposed over moments of humorous violence and complete absurdity, are shocking in their presentation, drawing forth emotions that seem out of place with the rest of the film. These people are the protagonists, yet even this favored position within the film is unable to save them. The vulnerability of every character within *Shaun of the Dead* further upholds the culture of fear and the belief that everyone is in danger of the “Other.” It also reinforces the importance of the dominant power structures, which are in place to protect us from the “Other” and to keep competing ideologies at bay.

Furthermore, the scenes depicting Shaun confronting and dispatching zombified loved ones also work to reinforce the dominant patriarchal ideology. Femininity and its associated characteristics are devalued by the power structures that favor masculinity. Feminine characteristics include such values as compassion, nurturing, and being other oriented (Wood, 2005). Shaun must confront these feminine characteristics whenever he first encounters a zombified loved one. The emotions and affection he feels towards his mother, stepfather, and flatmates causes him confusion when he meets them after their transition from life to undeath. This confusion prevents him from acting immediately to neutralize the threat these one-time loved ones present. Shaun’s compassion and care towards his loved ones, even after they become zombies, is characteristically feminine. Furthermore, the care and compassion places Shaun and the rest of his companions in jeopardy, exposing them to a zombie threat even if that threat comes in the visage of a former ally. It is only after he abandons these feminine characteristics that Shaun is able

to dispose of his zombified loved ones for the safety of himself and the rest of the uninfected. The message communicated to American audiences is clear; feminine characteristics such as compassion and nurturing are illogical and will only be a hindrance in times of threat and trouble. As such, in order for American society to overcome the threats it faces from competing ideologies and value systems, it is necessary for America to reject feminine characteristics in favor of masculine characteristics. In this way the dominant ideology is upheld and the myth of masculine superiority is sustained.

The element of shock is also interwoven with the comedic elements of *Shaun of the Dead*. A dry, satiric rom-zom-com, the humorous moments are interlaced with moments of extreme violence and gore. The interplay between comedy and horror is at times shocking; the gore-filled imagery perhaps rendered more graphic because it is preceded and often followed by laughter. An example of this is when Shaun and Ed first knowingly battle with zombies. The pair argue over which records to throw Frisbee-style at the approaching zombies in an attempt to decapitate them. Records are thrown haphazardly, some slicing into the zombies, some missing them entirely, with Shaun and Ed's running commentary providing the soundtrack. The gory imagery is entwined with humor, making the gore and violence more shocking because it is depicted in such a lighthearted and humorous manner. This is especially true when Shaun and Ed resolve the matter by abandoning the records entirely and instead bludgeon the zombies into submission using a cricket bat and a garden shovel. Blood splatters everywhere, covering both Shaun and Ed as the two beat the zombies over and over again. The zombies are off frame, keeping audience members from seeing the actual blows, but the sight of Shaun

and Ed swinging their weapons combined with the sounds of the zombies getting hit and their diminishing moaning keep the audience informed as events transpire (Park & Wright, 2004). The scene is shocking because it lasts so long and, although funny, ends in an extreme moment of violence at the hands of the protagonists.

On an ideological level, this shocking scene upholds and reinforces the dominant patriarchal values of contemporary American culture. Shaun and Ed, the protagonists of this film, are lazy, immature men prone to inactivity. When confronting the zombies, however, both men become active. In taking up arms against the zombies, whether those arms are a record collection, shovel, or cricket bat, Shaun and Ed demonstrate the masculine traits of violence and aggression (Wood, 2005). This violence and aggression is necessary in order for the pair to subdue the zombie threat and return safely to their flat. The message communicated through this scene is that, culturally, for the current power structures to remain in place and the dominant ideology to be upheld, American society as a whole must adopt the esteemed masculine traits of violence and aggression. These traits should then be used to confront and overthrow threats that come in the form of marginalized groups and competing ideologies. Only by confronting threats to the dominant ideology with aggression and violence can the dominant ideological values be upheld and perpetuated.

Finally, in conjunction with Corrigan and White's (2004) third element of the horror genre, *Shaun of the Dead* is able to balance what is seen on film and what goes unseen in order to manipulate viewer emotions, eliciting fear, dread, and disgust. Fear, dread, and disgust are derived, in one way, from prolonged, unrelenting shots of gore. An example of this includes footage of David as he is literally ripped apart, his legs and arms

torn from his body as hungry zombies tear through his abdominal cavity to feed on his intestines (Park & Wright, 2004). On a sociocultural level, this violent attack on David's person is his punishment for resisting the dominant constructions of manhood and the associated responsibilities. The message communicated to American society expresses the dangers of resisting compliance to any of the dominant sociocultural values, showing the price of disobedience.

Within the film, gore-filled images such as David's murder are positioned next to images in which the danger is obviously present just beyond the frame of the film; felt but unseen. An example of this comes early in the film, before Shaun realizes London is in the midst of a zombie attack. Absorbed in his own thoughts, Shaun walks to a nearby store for some snacks. On the way, he passes destroyed vehicles, people fleeing for their lives, and even zombies without ever noticing the significance of what he's failing to see. Inside the convenience store, Shaun opens a refrigerator door, failing to notice the bloody handprints it bears, then steps away and slips on something that the audience can only assume is blood (Park & Wright, 2004). Although the blood on the floor is not seen, just as the remains of the store owner are not seen, it is obvious that both linger just outside of the camera frame. As stated previously, scenes such as this one work to validate the culture of fear and the prevalence of danger in modern life. Subsequently, the importance of dominant societal power structures are reinforced; these structures devised to protect us from competing ideological threats and danger

The dread and fear of what is not seen is increased due to Shaun's ignorance and inattention. Another example comes in the form of the television programs that Shaun and Ed continually surf. News reports chronicling the zombie attack are available, but

Shaun and Ed always flip through them, missing the message as they channel surf, completely oblivious. The truth of what is occurring is always present, just not brought into direct focus (Park & Wright, 2004). This keeps both Shaun and Ed (who are completely ignorant) and the audience members (who realize something is wrong) suspended in a state of fear, dread, and disgust, moving between dread of not seeing and the horror of having their fears visually confirmed.

*Shaun of the Dead* contains the three basic elements of horror, making it characteristically a horror film (Corrigan & White, 2004; Park & Wright, 2004). Furthermore, by aligning itself with many of the codes and traditions established in classic zombie films like *Plague of the Zombies* (1966), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Shaun of the Dead* has also proven itself a prototypical example of a film falling under the zombie subgenre of the horror genre. Additionally, the film contains elements of the romantic comedy subgenre that set it apart from many other horror and even zombie horror films, placing it in the specialized sub-subgenre, romantic zombie comedy or rom-zom-com. *Shaun of the Dead* operates on a number of levels, cinematically and culturally. Combining so many elements of different genres affords *Shaun of the Dead* the ability to operate within the realm of the horror genre, while simultaneously spoofing the genre. It is able to make a statement about the culturally shared ideological fears of modern society, without getting bogged down in social commentary. *Shaun of the Dead* is able to remain upbeat and fast-paced, despite the heavy cultural topics it tackles. While the visual horror is blatant and unremitting, the

ideological implications of the film are played out in the subtext. That *Shaun of the Dead* can operate on so many levels is what led to its choice as a representative text for analysis.

### *Genre and Gender Analysis in Summation*

This project situates *Shaun of the Dead*, a contemporary British rom-zom-com, as a representative cultural artifact for analysis and discussion. Throughout this project, a primary research question drives the analysis and critique: What gender messages does *Shaun of the Dead* communicate to American audiences? This question is answered within this chapter by way of gender analysis and critique. After defining the film as a member of the horror genre, zombie subgenre, and rom-zom-com sub-subgenre, as well as discussing its incorporated elements of romantic comedy, I conduct a gender study of *Shaun of the Dead*. Through this gender study, the ideological messages *Shaun of the Dead* communicates to American audiences are discerned.

*Shaun of the Dead* communicates strong messages regarding dominant gender ideologies with the sociocultural landscape of the United States. Through its depiction of gender, *Shaun of the Dead* reinforces the prevailing power structures within the United States. When these power structures are confronted by counter and competing ideologies, represented within the film by way of the zombie attack, the structures work to maintain and repair themselves. They also work to neutralize the threats facing them, violently if necessary. The zombies, a physical manifestation of the marginalized “Other,” are violently subjugated by the purveyors of the dominant ideology, sending a twofold message. First, any threat the “Other” exerts will be squelched violently and without remorse. Secondly, the dominant structures of the United States are not only willing to

resort to violence to remain in power, but they cannot be overcome. It is pointless, therefore, for any competing ideology or group to attempt overthrowing the dominant structures that are in place; the attempt will be neutralized and the competing ideology either further marginalized or destroyed altogether.

Additionally, *Shaun of the Dead* provides a commentary on prevailing American sociocultural fears. Like other films of the horror genre, the monster in *Shaun of the Dead*, on a sociocultural level, is a cinematic representation of the collective ideological fears facing American society at large. The zombies represent the dangers lurking in the commonplace and mundane; the potential for evil and destruction among average citizens and even friends. In America's current culture of fear, citizens do see danger hiding in the world around them. From the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, to the schoolyard massacres featured on the news far too often, contemporary America seems a dangerous place. This feeling of danger is furthered by media outlets who concentrate on the most violent and tragic stories, sensationalizing tragedy in the name of ratings. Since many of the threats facing the American people seem to originate from within the American population, it is natural that a zombie film, like *Shaun of the Dead*, would resonate with American audiences.

The zombies of *Shaun of the Dead* start the film as average citizens. Their unsolicited change from average citizen to monster communicates strong ideological messages about the dangers of the average and "normal" to the American people, who have already been taught to fear the threatening potential of the commonplace and mundane. In perpetuating masculinity and the power associated with it, *Shaun of the Dead* communicates this ideology as the antidote to the threat of the "Other," whether

that Other takes the form of a person (zombie, terrorist, pedophile, etc.) or an ideology. Embracing androcentrism and patriarchy, according to *Shaun of the Dead*, saves us and destroys the “Other.”



## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A black screen fades in to show a television display. On the television a series of programs are flipped through randomly. The first channel advertises an exploitative infotainment program called *Zombies From Hell*. The next station features a news show, the topic of the program “Remembering Z-Day.” These two programs are followed in quick succession by a series of channels featuring eclectic programming, including an interview with the official news anchor of Z-Day, a band talking about their charity work with the organization Zombaid, a news program detailing how zombies are perfect for the service industry, a game show similar to Most Extreme Elimination Challenge (MXC) that exploits zombies for viewer amusement, and a daytime talk show presenting a woman still in love with her zombified husband (Park & Wright, 2004).

While the television continues to broadcast in the background, Shaun slowly trudges into the room, yawning and stretching before flopping down on the couch, just as he did in the beginning of the film. Rather than sitting next to Ed, however, Shaun now joins Liz on the couch. Liz, it turns out, is the person who has been channel surfing. Six months have passed since the zombie attacks of Z-Day and life is slowly returning to normal (Park & Wright, 2004). Normal, for Shaun, means a return to many of his previous routines. Surprisingly, Liz is no longer bothered by the routine. By proactively forming a plan and working to ensure that both he and Liz survived the zombie attack, Shaun finally accepted the responsibilities associated with the dominant construction of

manhood. By giving in to an ideology that prizes masculinity and the traits attributed to it, Shaun accepts his predetermined societal role. This acceptance eliminates the challenge Shaun initially presented to the existing ideological power structures and, as a result, is rewarded. Liz is appeased, viewing Shaun as a mature, adult individual, even if his physical actions have not undergone a drastic change. In addition to pleasing Liz and resecuring a heterosexual relationship with her, Shaun survives the zombie attack to which many others fall prey. Shaun proves that he can accept responsibility and be proactive when the situation calls for it, and that acceptance ushers him in to the realm of adult responsibility and action as dictated by the dominant patriarchal ideology. Many other characters are not so fortunate.

Thus ends *Shaun of the Dead*, but what was learned throughout the course of the film? What gender messages were communicated to American audiences? *Shaun of the Dead* communicates symbolic messages that maintain and repair the dominant gender ideology of American society. The film presents members of dominant societal groups (such as Shaun and Ed) hoping to ignore their predetermined societal roles and the responsibilities and benefits associated with those roles. It depicts members of marginalized groups (such as Liz and Dianne) who are happily entrenched in their societal roles, working to maintain a dominant power structure that ignores them and their needs. Finally, the film depicts the “Other” (zombies) as symbols of competing ideologies who fight against the dominant structures for power and representation. In each case, the dominant values and power structures of American society are upheld.

Within *Shaun of the Dead*, gender identity is represented in a variety of ways, but each representation upholds the dominant ideological values and gendered ideology of

American society. Shaun conforms, accepts his masculine role, and is rewarded handsomely. Not only does he survive the horrific events of Z-Day, but he also resecures the heterosexual relationship he desires with Liz and gains the respect and admiration attributed to adult males he previously lacked. Ed fails to conform and his punishment is absolute. After spending his life in the pursuit of pleasure, avoiding work and responsibility, Ed is zombified. Although he is not destroyed or placed in the service industry like so many other zombies, he no longer has the freedom to choose how to spend his time. The powers of higher reasoning have been taken from him, placing his (after)life entirely in the hands of Shaun, who has accepted his societal role. The zombies and the threats they represent are neutralized, violently in some cases. Those zombies who are not eradicated during Z-Day are placed into the service industry. The ideological message communicated is that threats to the dominant ideology will either meet with violent resistance and oppression or will be subsumed, those leading the challenge ushered back into a subjugated position within the sociocultural hierarchy of the United States. Regardless of the method, the ideological message communicated is the same; safety resides in the dominant gendered values and power structures of American society. Attempts to resist or thwart those structures are dangerous. The dominant patriarchal ideology should be maintained, whatever the costs.

The zombie threat depicted within the film represents competing ideological systems that threaten the dominant ideological structures and values of American society. For the sociocultural protection of the androcentric ideology, the threat these zombies represent must be neutralized. Within *Shaun of the Dead* the zombies are either destroyed or tellingly converted into a new working class and placed at the very bottom of the

sociocultural hierarchy. The zombification of characters reinforces dominant gender and class values by showing the negative consequences of resisting the dominant ideologies of contemporary American culture. In a society built on gender and economic power, the zombies lose all access to both. Their zombification depicts the full extent of the threat they represent as members of competing ideologies, but then that threat is neutralized entirely. The zombies are placed into service industry positions. The characters who try to avoid responsibility and hard work become mindless members of the same marginalized workforce they tried to avoid. As service industry workers, they provide the base upon which the dominant power structures of the society are fashioned. These characters, once zombified and forced into the service industry, no longer represent a threat. Their subjugation is complete and the message is clear - challenging the dominant ideology means losing power.

Those characters who submitted to the dominant values of hard work and industry, the man pushing carts, the cashiers, and the transit users, provide a different sociocultural commentary. These people are not an overt threat to the dominant power structures, because they are already working to uphold those structures. However, this work dehumanizes them. When comparing the facial expression these characters have as living beings at the beginning of the film to the expressions they wear as zombies, it is obvious that, despite zombification, not much about these characters has changed. The message communicated through these depictions is contradictory; it shows that these people, in serving the dominant ideologies of the society, have already been marginalized and devalued to the point of zombification. Although these characters do not pose a willful threat, they are the “Othered” population of the society; the marginalized base

upon which the rest of the society is built. To keep the dominant power structures in place, these people are disenfranchised and disregarded by those in power. Yet although these characters hegemonically accept their subjugated roles within the society, they still have the potential to act out and become a threat. This potential for action poses a threat to the dominant ideology that has to be counteracted.

While marginalized groups are necessary for a society to exist, they are also problematic to those who wish to maintain their power. Disenfranchised to the point of zombification, it is unsurprising that the majority of the service industry workers become actual zombies. This process depicts their potential for acting about against dominant power structures and their possible threat. Like the young characters referenced above, however, this threat has to be neutralized in the interest of upholding dominant power structures. The threat posed by zombified service industry workers is defused in the same manner as the threat posed by the younger characters; once zombified, the characters are either placed back in to service industry positions or exterminated. The dominant ideology and the prevailing power structures of American society are upheld.

Whether the zombies survive Z-Day and are placed into service industry positions, or are destroyed in the interest of protecting the uninfected (i.e., dominant ideologies), the same ideological messages are communicated to American audiences. American citizens are warned not to challenge the dominant ideological values and power structures of American society. Such threats are not taken lightly and, if the film is to be believed, are always eradicated in favor of maintaining and repairing the dominant ideology. Basically, the neutralization of the zombie threat, on a sociocultural level,

communicates to audiences the importance of upholding the dominant ideology by defusing or eradicating the threats posed by competing ideologies and marginalized groups.

In conjunction with answering the primary research question, *Shaun of the Dead* also provides answers for the secondary research questions. Who benefits as a result of the gender messages communicated within this artifact? Who is attributed power and who is marginalized and neglected? Whose power is enhanced, whose is diminished, and what are the implications for American audiences? The dominant groups and ideologies within American society benefit most strongly. Whiteness, maleness and masculinity, and heterosexuality are all exalted positions within America's sociocultural landscape. Members of the upper classes are not only favored, but held in higher esteem than members of the middle class. Members of the lower classes are disfavored, marginalized and ignored by the very power structures they hegemonically work to uphold. Members of these benefited groups are also attributed power. This power comes at the expense of the "Other," those groups and ideologies who are neglected and subjugated.

Who are these "Others," the groups and ideologies that are marginalized and neglected? They are the minorities, who are not granted the same favor as white citizens. They are women, suppressed under patriarchal rule. They are the homosexual, bisexual, and transgendered, labeled as unnatural and therefore wrong. They are the members of the lower classes, toiling in support of a society that disregards them and their needs. They are the silent members of the population, unseen and unheard, their concerns not considered. The marginalized "Other" are the disenfranchised groups upon which the existing power structures are built. They are necessary, but also feared. As much as they

are needed in order for the dominant ideology and structures to function, they also have the power to threaten these structures, perhaps even damage them irrevocably. Because of this potential power, the “Other” must be kept in check for the good of American society at large. Yet the dominant ideology does not forcefully subdue all members of these marginalized groups. Many work hegemonically to subdue themselves, maintaining and repairing the dominant ideology at their own expense.

The ideological conflicts regarding gender, race, class, and security within *Shaun of the Dead* are all resolved in a manner that favors the dominant ideology, dominant groups, and the established power structures. Competing ideologies and the threats they offer are presented, then systematically disposed. We currently exist in a culture of fear. American citizens are taught to fear the world around us, the very culture in which we live, and the people who live with us. By fearing the commonplace, the mundane, and the everyday, we are told that the only hope we have for surviving our fears and the threats facing us is to trust in and maintain the dominant structures and the security they can offer. Although this trust seems misplaced, it is touted as our last, best hope for safety and security. Those who align themselves with this system of belief hegemonically work to maintain the dominant ideology, their potential threat removed. Those who do not align themselves with these beliefs, refusing to hegemonically work in support of a system that ignores the needs of the “Other,” are neutralized; their threat dissolved in another manner. As such, the dominant ideology is maintained both hegemonically and by force, all bases being covered.

## Limitations and Areas for Further Research

Although this project reveals interesting ideological messages, it was limited in some significant ways. The key limitation faced is the shortage of academic research material in regards to zombie cinema in specific. While the overall horror genre boasts a great deal of academic literature and discourse, literature on zombie films comprises a sadly neglected area of academic study. Much of the literature on zombies I located was produced by popular press authors. While popular press authors eagerly utilize zombies in the interest of providing a cultural critique, academia has remained largely silent. Although the observations these popular press authors provide are as fascinating as they are useful, I would like to see more academic research on the subject. Future academic research should be conducted into the zombie subgenre of film. This subgenre has existed for decades and is still finding successful contemporary cinematic representation, rendering it ideal for academic critique. Future research could also be performed within the field of gender studies and, to a greater degree, cultural studies at large, concentrating specifically on zombie cinema and the various ideological messages communicated through the cinematic representations of the walking dead.

In my study, I detail the history of the horror genre and zombie subgenre, as well as briefly touching upon the romantic comedy subgenre, in order to define and critique *Shaun of the Dead*. Although the romantic comedy subgenre is an established and recognized subgenre of film, I believe that future gender studies of rom-zom-coms like *Shaun of the Dead* would benefit from a more in-depth evaluation of the comedy genre as a whole. By tracing the history of the comedy genre, as well as the cinematic themes and codes that lead to the development of the romantic comedy subgenre, I believe a more



detailed critique of rom-zom-coms could be performed. As such, a greater understanding of the themes and codes indicative of this unique sub-subgenre of the horror genre could be achieved.

Finally, this study concentrated solely on the analysis of one artifact, *Shaun of the Dead*. Although I am satisfied with the scope of my project, I feel that future researchers could learn more about the rom-zom-com subgenre through use of comparative analysis. Having analyzed *Shaun of the Dead*, I am curious as to how other rom-zom-coms would fair under similar critique. Are the filmic elements I discovered in *Shaun of the Dead* representative of the rom-zom-com subgenre of film, or is *Shaun of the Dead* unique in the gender commentary it provides? Comparing two or more films of this subgenre and analyzing the messages communicated through each film would serve in mapping the themes and elements particular to this subgenre of film.

#### Concluding Remarks

Zombie films, while enjoyable to watch, provide a sociocultural commentary unique to this particular subgenre of film. When blended with other film genres and subgenres, such as the romantic comedy subgenre, this ability to communicate significant ideological messages is enhanced. Zombies, after all, begin each film as average citizens, and end each film as the monster upon which we hinge the greatest collective fears of our society. Under the weight of such an ideological burden, it's no wonder they lumber along slowly, following their baser desires. Or, as Dianne describes their facial appearances in *Shaun of the Dead*, "it's vacant, with a hint of sadness. Like a drunk who's lost a bet" (Park & Wright, 2004)

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## APPENDIX A: FILMOGRAPHY

- 28 Days Later* (D. Boyle, 2002)
- 28 Weeks Later* (J. C. Fresnadillo, 2007)
- Beyond, The* (L. Fulci, 1981)
- Black Cat, The* (E. G. Ulmer, 1934)
- Black Christmas* (B. Clark, 1974)
- Blair Witch Project, The* (D. Myrick & E. Sanchez, 1999)
- Blob, The* (I. S. Yeaworth, 1958)
- Boys Eats Girl* (S. Bradley, 2005)
- Brides of Dracula, The* (T. Fisher, 1960)
- Captivity* (R. Joffé , 2007)
- Child's Play* (T. Holland, 1988)
- City of Hell* (L. Fulci, 1980)
- Cloverfield* (M. Reeves, 2008)
- Creeping Unknown, The* (see *The Quatermass Xperiment*, 1955)
- Curse of Frankenstein, The* (T. Fisher, 1957)
- Curse of the Werewolf, The* (T. Fisher, 1960)
- Das Cabinet Des Dr. Caligari* (R. Wiene, 1920)
- Dawn of the Dead* (G. A. Romero, 1978)
- Dawn of the Dead* (Z. Synder, 2004)

*Day of the Dead* (G. A. Romero, 1985)

*Dead Alive* (P. Jackson, 1992)

*Dead of Night* (A. Cavalcanti & C. Crichton, 1945)

*Dead of Night* (B. Clark, 1974)

*Deadly Friend* (W. Craven, 1986)

*Devil's Rejects, The* (R. Zombie, 2005)

*Diary of the Dead* (G. A. Romero, 2007)

*Doom* (A. Bartkowiak, 2005)

*Dracula* (T. Browning, 1931)

*Dracula* (T. Fisher, 1958)

*Exorcist, The* (W. Friedkin, 1973)

*Fido* (A. Currie, 2006)

*Fog, The* (J. Carpenter, 1980)

*Fog, The* (R. Wainwright, 2005)

*Frankenstein* (J. Whale, 1931)

*Freddy vs. Jason* (R. Yu, 2003)

*Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (S. S. Cunningham, 1980)

*Gates of Hell* (see *City of Hell*, 1980)

*Halloween* (J. Carpenter, 1978)

*Hamlet* (T. Richardson, 1969)

*Horror of Dracula* (see *Dracula*, 1958)

*Hostel* (E. Roth, 2005)

*Hostel: Part II* (E. Roth, 2007)



*House by the Cemetery, The* (L. Fulci, 1981)

*I Know What You Did Last Summer* (J. Gillespie, 1997)

*I Was A Teenage Zombie* (J. E. Michalakis, 1987)

*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (D. Siegel, 1956)

*Jaws* (S. Spielberg, 1975)

*Land of the Dead* (G. A. Romero, 2005)

*Mondo Balordo* (R. B. Montero, 1964)

*Mondo Bizarre* (L. Frost, 1966)

*Mondo Cane* (P. Cavara & G. Jacopetti, 1962)

*Mummy, The* (K. Freund, 1932)

*Mummy, The* (T. Fisher, 1959)

*My Boyfriend's Back* (B. Balaban, 1993)

*Night of the Living Dead* (G. A. Romero, 1968)

*Nightmare on Elm Street, A* (W. Craven, 1984)

*Others, The* (A. Amenábar, 2001)

*Plague of the Zombies* (J. Gilling, 1966)

*Planet Terror* (R. Rodriguez, 2007)

*Psycho* (A. Hitchcock, 1960)

*Quatermass Xperiment, The* (V. Guest, 1955)

*Re-Animator* (S. Gordon, 1985)

*Resident Evil* (P. W. S. Anderson, 2002)

*Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (A. Witt, 2004)

*Resident Evil: Extinction* (R. Mulcahly, 2007)

*Return of the Living Dead, The* (D. O'Bannon, 1985)

*Return of the Living Dead III, The* (B. Yuzna, 1993)

*Revenge of Frankenstein, The* (T. Fisher, 1958)

*Ring, The* (G. Verbinski, 2002)

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (T. Stoppard, 1990)

*Saw* (J. Wan, 2004)

*Saw II* (D. L. Bousman, 2005)

*Saw III* (D. L. Bousman, 2006)

*Saw IV* (D. L. Bousman, 2007)

*Scream* (W. Craven, 1996)

*Shaun of the Dead* (E. Wright, 2004)

*Signs* (M. N. Shyamalan, 2002)

*Silent Hill* (C. Gans, 2006)

*Sixth Sense, The* (M. N. Shyamalan, 1999)

*Slither* (J. Gunn, 2006)

*Sweeny Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (G. King, 1936)

*Texas Chainsaw Massacre, The* (T. Hooper, 1974)

*Thing from Another World, The* (C. Nyby, 1951)

*Town that Feared Sundown, The* (C. B. Pierce, 1976)

*Turistas* (J. Stockwell, 2006)

*Urban Legend* (J. Banks, 1998)

*White Zombie* (V. Halperin, 1932)

*Wolf Creek* (G. Mclean, 2005)

*Zombi* (see *Dawn of the Dead*, 1978)

*Zombi 2* (see *Zombie Flesh-Eaters*, 1979)

*Zombie Flesh-Eaters* (L. Fulci, 1979)

APPENDIX B: *SHAUN OF THE DEAD* VISUALS



Official *Shaun of the Dead* Movie Poster

# ROGUE PICTURES

**"THE MOST ENTERTAINING FILM I HAVE SEEN ALL YEAR."**  
 — Peter Jackson (Producer/Director, *The Lord Of The Rings* Trilogy)

**"KEEPS THE BLOOD AND THE LAUGHS GUSHING."**  
 — Peter Travers, *Rolling Stone*

Get ready for a gut-busting, bone-mashing good time in the hilarious horror comedy, *Shaun of the Dead*.

There comes a day in every man's life when he has to get off the couch... and kill some zombies. When flesh-eating zombies are on the hunt for a bite to eat, it's up to slacker Shaun (Simon Pegg) and his best pal (Nick Frost) to save their friends and family from becoming the next entrée. Satisfy your bloodthirsty appetite with the movie that masters of horror and film critics alike are hailing as the funniest and scariest movie of the year. Novelist Stephen King gushes "it's a 10 on the fun meter and destined to be a cult classic" and *Newsweek* calls *Shaun of the Dead* "a bloody hoot!" It's a screamingly hilarious zomedy that will have you dying with laughter.

SHAUN OF THE DEAD  
 DVD 25521  
 UNIVERSAL STUDIOS HOME VIDEO  
 PROOF OF PURCHASE

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### SPECIAL FEATURES

- **MISSING BITS:** Outrageous outtakes and all-NEW deleted scenes not shown in theaters
- **RAW MEAT:** NEVER-BEFORE-SEEN casting tapes, Simon Pegg's video diary and special effects comparisons
- **TV BITS:** Includes an interview with Coldplay

**PLUS UN-CENSORED COMMENTARY** with the cast and crew, a zombie photo gallery, Zomb-O-Meter (zombie trivia) and more hilarious special features

SPECIAL FEATURES NOT RATED



ROGUE PICTURES, STUDIOCANAL AND WORKING TITLE FILMS PRESENT A MTV PRODUCTION IN ASSOCIATION WITH BIG TALK PRODUCTIONS. "SHAUN OF THE DEAD" SIMON PEGG, KATE ASHFIELD, LUCY DAVIS, NICK FROST, DYLAN MORAN, BILL NIGHY, PENELOPE WILTON, COSTUME DESIGNER JINA JAY, MUSIC BY DANIEL MUIRHEAD AND PETE WOODHEAD, PRODUCED BY DONALDO VASCONCELLOS, EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS ANNE HARRINGE, PRODUCED BY MARCUS ROWLAND, WRITTEN BY CHRIS DICKENS, DIRECTED BY EDGAR WRIGHT. CASTING BY DAVID M. DUNLAP, EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS TIM DEYAN, ERIG FELLNER, NATASHA WHARTON, JAMES WILSON, ALISON OWEN, PRODUCED BY SIMON PEGG AND EDGAR WRIGHT, PRODUCED BY NIRA PARK, WRITTEN BY EDGAR WRIGHT. A UNIVERSAL RELEASE. © 2004 Universal Studios.

R ZOMBIE VIOLENCE, CORE AND LANGUAGE
STUDIOCANAL
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FOCUS FEATURES
ROGUE PICTURES

www.shaunofthedeatmovie.com www.universalstudios.com/home Available in Widescreen Only.

Languages: English, Español, Français Dolby Digital 5.1 | Captions: English | Subtitles: Español, Français | Anamorphic Widescreen 2.35:1 | 1 Hr. 40 Mins.

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