

Zombie Film Scholarship: A Review of the Literature

s are the shambling undead creatures that attack in hordes and
terror into the hearts of moviegoers with their mindless aggres-
sion. Monsters on the big screen fascinate American audiences and
are as much as representations of cultural fears and reflections of pub-
lic perceptions, and they have done so since they first shuffled into the-
atres. The walking dead first haunted cinemas in 1932 with the release
of *The Zombie* and have gone through cycles of popularity both at
the box office and in scholarly debate. Without a doubt, the height of

zombie scholarship began in the mid-2000s with only shallow mentions made in horror analyses before then. Only the English discipline gave the zombie credit as a subject worthy of study. As author and English professor Kyle Bishop wrote in 2010, "The zombie phenomenon has yet to be plumbed to its depths by the academic and literary markets."¹ Although significant zombie research has only surfaced in the 2000s, a valiant effort is currently being made to explore zombie symbolism and its historical and cultural context across non-traditional scholarly fields, such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, and philosophy.

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Zombies, as creatures that waver between living and dead, necessarily bring forth questions on the nature of being and thus also fall into the realm of philosophy as seen in *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: New Life for the Undead* published in 2010 and edited by Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammed, professors of philosophy and English, respectively. Philosophers in the study of zombies seek to answer such questions as, is it better to be undead or dead? Richard Greene argues that since death is a state of non-existence and Undeath is at least a primal existence, the question comes down to the classic "to be, or not to be?" For him, Undeath is the only option for a state of being, since death is non-existence. Existence in any form is inherently better than utterly ceasing to be.¹⁶ Greene's philosophy colleague, William Larkin, counters that zombies are driven to actions seen as evil and mindless, both states that humans do not usually choose. He cites how zombie films repeatedly depict survivors who ask their friends and family to kill them should it appear that they will turn into zombies, so desperate are they to avoid Undeath.¹⁷ Simon Clark, a writer with a master's degree in Fine Arts, discusses morality in relation to zom-

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The message to take away from zombie scholarship is that what it represents is evolutionary and infinitely debatable, but the victory for zombie studies is that zombies are being studied at all. After decades of being underrepresented in horror scholarship, zombies are finally getting their due as a cultural icon, complete with varying opinions and interpretations. Scholarly debate proves that the zombie is a valid resource for understanding American culture and worthy of the enthusiastic pursuit of interdepartmental scholarship. As shown within the scholarly works above, the debate over the meaning of the living dead is quite lively, indeed.

Notes

1. Kyle William Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 7.
...
16. Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammed, eds., *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: New Life for the Undead* (Chicago: Open Court, 2010), 13.
17. Greene and Mohammed, *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy*, 20.
18. Greene and Mohammed, *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy*, 208.

Carroll begins by establishing a context for her discussion and then focuses on her topic, the scholarship of zombies in film. In her review, she discusses the history of zombie scholarship in general and then in psychology, social trends, fiction, and, in this excerpt, philosophy. A history major, she follows Chicago style; in addition to the notes, she included a bibliography listing all her sources, including the two noted here.