

PRODUCING THE AMERICAN ZOMBIE FILM: A SOCIOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING
OF THE GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF A GENRE

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Abstract

This dissertation integrates three literatures in the sociological epistemology of culture to historiographically document the evolution of zombie cinema from its cinematic genesis in *White Zombie* (1932) to its pyrrhic institutionalization in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). Hitherto, a majority of scholars interested in zombie films, explicitly or implicitly, employ variations of societal reflection orientations to unsheathe the walking dead as “barometer[s] of cultural anxiety” (Dendle 2007: 45). At their best these approaches demonstrate how diachronic constructs of zombies draw from extant cultural anxieties in order to reflect them back to audiences who often seek symbolic resolutions for those concerns. However, this knowledge is gained at the elision of examining both the culture industries responsible for the creation of all cinematic fare (cf. Peterson and Anand 2004) and the internal cultural ecology of zombies that affords rampant re-imaginings of the creatures (cf. Kaufman 2004).

This project, then, explores the convergence of reflectionist understandings, production approaches, and endogenous accounts in the evolution of zombie cinema from ‘white’ zombies to ‘night’ zombies by developing three sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1954): opportunity space, transition capacity, and endogenous genre ecology. While applied zombie films, the concepts – in their integration of three disparate research traditions – are general in orientation and therefore contribute to the corpus of sociology.