



**Bishop, Kyle William.**

*American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*

Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010. Pp. vii + 239. Paper. \$35.00.

Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Kyle William Bishop is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at Southern Utah University, Cedar City, UT. *American Zombie Gothic* (hereafter *AZG*) is a revised version of Bishop's 2009 University of Arizona doctoral dissertation, "Dead Man Still Walking: A Critical Investigation into the Rise and Fall . . . and Rise of Zombie Cinema," written under the supervision of Susan White. Portions of this book have appeared in slightly different forms in various academic journals such as *The Journal of Popular Film and Television*, *The Journal of American Culture*, and *The Journal of Popular Culture*.

In *AZG* Bishop traces the evolution of zombies in popular culture from their folkloric origins in West Indian travel narratives to their appearance on the silver screen in the 1930s to their reinvention by George A. Romero in his cult classic *Night of the Living Dead* (1964). Bishop locates the zombie (esp. the zombie *invasion*) narrative within the Gothic literary tradition, a tradition that serves a cultural function in expressing (or critiquing) the mindset of the society in which it is rooted, e.g., films like *Godzilla* (1954) and *Them!* (1954) came after the US used nuclear weapons at the end of World War II; *Invaders from Mars* (1953) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1954) were inspired by the threat of Communism; etc. So it is with this understanding of the role that Gothic plays in society that Bishop suggests:

The fundamental generic conventions of Gothic fiction in general and zombie cinema in particular make the subgenre the most likely and appropriate vehicle

with which to explore America's post-9/11 cultural consciousness. [...] Because the aftereffects of war, terrorism, and natural disasters so closely resemble the scenarios depicted by zombie cinema, such images of death and destruction have all the more power to shock and terrify a population that has become otherwise jaded to more traditional horror films. (11-12)

Bishop spends the early part of the first chapter detailing the folkloric and ideological origins of the "voodoo zombie." The zombie is unique in that it doesn't have a widespread mythic origin such as vampires or werewolves which can be found in the myths of various cultures around the world. The "Hollywood zombie," as Bishop calls it, doesn't have a forerunner in the Gothic literary tradition either. Before the vampire or Frankenstein's Monster appeared in the movies they could be found in the pages of the classic novels from Bram Stoker and Mary Shelley. The zombie on the other hand was the product of local folklore, which Bishop distinguishes from myth (in that the natives believed the zombies to be a [potential] reality), that was carried to America in William B. Seabrook's 1929 travelogue *The Magic Island*. According to Bishop the zombie is a "monster of the Americas." (38 cf. 12)

The first and second chapters discuss the colonial and post-colonial fears depicted in the zombie films of the 1930s and 40s. Originally the word "zombie" was used in Haiti to refer to the victim of voodoo magic. This is the zombie that is depicted in early films like Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932) and Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). Bishop sees these early "inherently racist" zombie narratives as "reveal[ing] imperialist anxieties associated with colonialism and slavery." (13) He suggests that these films "terrified Western viewers with the thing they likely dreaded most at that time: slave uprisings and reverse colonization." (13) "[T]he zombie is a folkloristic manifestation of a colonial or postcolonial society's greatest fear: subjugation, marginalization, and enslavement." (59) Bishop suggests that zombies are a "metaphorical manifestation of the Hegelian master/slave relationship" and that the "central horrific feature [of these films] is therefore the loss of autonomy and control—having one's will stripped to become a slave of a native (i.e., black), pagan authority." (69)

The third chapter offers a psychoanalytical interpretation of George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* using Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny" (*Das Unheimliche*) as a point of departure to highlight the "uncanny similarity between the familiar [*Heimlich*] and unfamiliar [*Umheimlich*]." (95) Bishop shows how with Romero's films the "true monster threatening civilization [is] humanity itself" (95) rather than the voodoo priest of earlier films. The fourth chapter turns to Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and its scathing critique of 1970s American consumer culture where Bishop notes that whereas *Night of the Living Dead* somewhat inverts the master/slave dialectic present in the voodoo-based zombie movies, *Dawn of the Dead*

reestablishes the old system, although, in this case, the master is animalistic instinct and subconscious drive, not vindictive and plotting voodoo priests.” (139)

The fifth chapter details the fall and rise of the zombie subgenre. From the amplified fears of the 30s and 40s to the social criticism of the 60s and 70s, zombie films devolved into little more than intense depictions of sex and violence (esp. in Italian films) and parody (epitomized in Michael Jackson’s 1983 music video for “Thriller”) in the 80s and 90s. For his part Romero tried to offer some commentary on the Cold War in his 1985 *Day of the Dead* but the movie was a financial failure because of the direction zombie films were already headed. Audiences wanted more kitsch and less commentary. The serious zombie was kept alive in the 90s in video games and graphic novels but it wouldn’t be revitalized in film until after the tragic events of September 11. This “zombie renaissance” was led by Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later* (2002) and Paul W.S. Anderson’s *Resident Evil* (2002) and would usher in Romero’s return to the big screen with *Land of the Dead* (2005), a film in which the zombies are more human than ever, as Bishop says, “[b]y adjusting the very nature of the creature he had originally created, Romero presents viewers with zombies in the revolutionary role of sympathetic protagonists.” (191)

*AZG* is a fascinating book and has much to commend it. To start, Bishop details the zombie’s history with a scholar’s deftness, which is highly informative and entertaining. Secondly, he vividly describes the films under consideration with the assumption that his audience hasn’t seen them, which is extremely helpful for the zombie novice. Thirdly, the various analytic approaches Bishop makes use of are nothing short of awe-striking. To employ Freud in a psychoanalysis of *Night of the Living Dead* is breathtakingly original and surprisingly compelling; but beyond this Bishop shows an attention to the cinematographic features of these films which are expected to garner a certain viewer response (this is nowhere more apparent than in chapter 4). And finally, Bishop is a scholar—make no mistake about it—but he’s a fan first and foremost and this comes out on every page of the book.

There are a few small shortcomings in this volume that I’d be remiss not to mention. The most insignificant shortcoming is the typographical errors that appear scattered throughout the volume. Most of these will probably be passed over by the casual reader (as they clearly were by the proofreader!). A more serious concern is that Bishop sometimes repeats himself unnecessarily. I understand the importance of reinforcing key points but this book could probably have been trimmed by about 10 pages by a stricter editor. The last problem is an interpretive one that is now commonplace but has been corrected by Romero himself. Bishop says, “Of special significance, of course, is Ben’s race,” (119) and again, “[o]f course, coming on the heels of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, and in light of abundant lynchings and racially motivated murders, Ben’s eventual death at the hands of a white posse becomes a scathing condemnation of unchecked violence and social injustice in 1968 America.” (120) In

point of fact, a white man was originally cast in the role of Ben, but Duane Jones later replaced him because he was the best candidate for the part (see *The Rough Guide to Horror Movies* [London: Rough Guides, 2005], 118, which says “Romero has repeatedly said there was no racial implication in casting Jones.”). These minor criticisms aside, I found *AZG* a highly informative and fun read, and those interested in zombie literature and film will certainly do well to read it.