

2016 Exemplary Award Winner (ENWR106)

Nicole Marquez

### Zombieland: A Post-Apocalyptic Nightmare or Adulthood Reality?

In the film *Zombieland* (2009), directed by Ruben Fleischer, a young, anxious man known to the audience as Columbus – because of his hometown/ destination of Columbus, Ohio – encounters a man named Tallahassee and two sisters, Wichita and Little Rock. The group has their ups and downs and eventually becomes what Columbus identifies as his “family”. While the film appears to be a mere zombie flick about good guys kicking zombie ass while trying to find somewhere to go in a post-apocalyptic world, *Zombieland* actually offers a notable look into the way that society is on a quest for a sense of simplistic innocence that perhaps is only possible to experience as children – deeming our quest pointless since aging and mortality are inevitable. The zombie, having no regards for human life and being “hateful and violent”, as described by Columbus, is itself a representation of what we can become as adults. We are left on our own to fend off the terrors of the real world with no direction, in recovery of complicated parental relationships and a lost childhood. As children we create monsters out of the unknown (which is plenty when we are so young and full of blissful ignorance). As adults, we fear the monsters we know to be real. We fear the things that we’ve already witnessed to be possibilities. Yes, we fear death and things still unknown to us as adults; however, more damaging, we fear losing loved ones, relationships or the lack of, not being loved in return, being alone, and finding ourselves in “Zombieland.” The film, *Zombieland*, reveals the way that growth into adulthood can desensitize us or inflict so much fear to the

point of mental instability. As a result of anxieties, as adults we lack the capability or fear the development of legitimate relationships that would enhance our lives. By exploring the effects of our experiences into adulthood on the way we currently approach relationships, we can better understand the disruptions that hinder healthy relationships, ultimately beginning to move towards repairing them.

Tallahassee's unreasonable search for a Twinkie reveals the desire that adults have to find a sense of child-like innocence or something that provides comfort and stability in an otherwise stress-inducing world. It is obvious that each character is searching for a safe haven free of zombies: Wichita and Little Rock want to reach Pacific Play Land; Columbus wants to reach Ohio; Tallahassee wants to find a Twinkie. However, less obvious is the way that this desperate search is one that adults living in a stressful, ever changing world can relate to. When analyzing Tallahassee's quest, Columbus says himself, "Something about a Twinkie reminded him of a time not so long ago when things were simple and not so fucking psychotic. It was like if he got a taste of that comforting childhood treat, the world would become innocent again and everything would return to normal" (Zombieland). Columbus identifies Tallahassee's quest for a Twinkie as more than just a search for a tasty treat, but a search for supposed normalcy. Adulthood comes with numerous responsibilities including, but not limited to paying bills, supporting a family, maintaining a job that pays enough, etc. With all the stress that comes with taking care of even basic financial responsibilities necessary to keep living, it is not a mystery as to why adults have this desire to "return" back to a possibly idealized childhood where the weight of gathering basic needs was not in their hands. According to CBS News, "Financial worries served as a significant source of stress for 64 percent of adults in 2014, ranking higher

than three other major sources of stress: work (60 percent), family responsibilities (47 percent), and health concerns (46 percent)” (Thompson 1). The increase in stress sources, as mentioned, that come with adulthood not only create this unreasonable search for “normalcy” in a world where true stability is relatively unheard of, but it also goes on to affect our physical and mental health. Whether the childhood we wish to refer back to is an idealized one or not, we tend to hold on to it as the last times we had simplicity that was attainable and sources of comfort surrounding us rather than sources of stress.

While childhood may hold valid memories of comfort and stability, Columbus’s limited relationship with his parents in the film explores the vital role that healthy parental relationships during all stages of growth have on assuring a healthy transition into adulthood and how the failure to have this key healthy relationship makes for an anxiety prone adult regardless of any other childhood factors. Throughout the film, Columbus identifies his relationship with his parents as one that is barely present or even non-existent. Once news of his hometown’s destruction reaches him, rather than being devastated, Columbus said, “I’m not sure what’s more tragic, that my family is gone or the realization that I never had much of a family to begin with” (Zombieland). Through his words, we see that Columbus had been aware his whole life lacked something vital to us as a society – the presence of the “nuclear family”. When viewing the term as referring to a loving, supportive parent/ child family unit then it is still something deemed necessary and desirably for healthy growth. Columbus seems desensitized from feeling any sort of attachment to his parents by the time he hears the news of their probable death. His parents’ lack of affection and presence throughout his young life had led to this desensitization and perhaps left room for the development of anxieties and

phobias that plague him throughout the film. A study on the impact of parenting on development states, “Developmental studies link optimal parenting with less frequent problems in children in a range of domains, including mental and physical health, substance abuse, and academic achievement” (Sandler 164). As discussed, optimal parenting has an effect of the development and healthy growth into adulthood and the absence of such can result in a dramatic hindering of healthy development and can lead to the forming of mental disorders that can become crippling and can affect every aspect of one’s adult life.

Columbus’s paranoid mental state reveals the possible effects that unhealthy relationships and experiences can have on our mental health and overall view of life as adults and as a society as a whole. He creates the list as a guideline to survival in the post-apocalyptic world, but the creation of the list itself reveals the paranoia that has been inflicted in him long before the coming of the apocalypse. Some of the rules are, “fasten your seatbelts”, “limber up”, and “travel light”. They may seem like simple rules; however, these rules reveal messages that we are told as a society frequently. We are told to live cautiously and we will be okay. We are told to exercise and we will be healthy. We are told to not carry too much emotional baggage and we will not end up alone. However, just like the rules in *Zombieland* don’t assure survival, the rules we are told as adults do not always follow through the way we’d expect them too. Columbus’s character reveals the anxiety, fears, and phobias inflicted in us as adults as ways to cope and “get by”. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, “anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the U.S., affecting 40 million adults in the United States age 18 and older, or 18% of the population” (Facts and Statistics). This national epidemic is a direct result of the failed experiences and relationships we face during

our growth into adulthood and further on. Columbus believes he can find an order to the art of survival, but as all of us know in the adult world there is no straightforward textbook on surviving physically and emotionally. We can create an illusion of a system to follow, but still cannot always find stability. As a result we end up with anxieties and phobias because we fear that we are not living life the way we should when in reality we have little control over the way life works.

Each of the main characters' reluctance to join together reveals the impact that the development of these anxieties can have on the relationships we face as adults. As previously mentioned, the development of mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and even trust issues as a result of failed parental relationships and bad experiences can all accumulate and severely hinder growth in current relationships. In the film, Wichita refuses to trust the men when they first meet and only finds comfort in the familial bond she has with Little Rock. Tallahassee allowed Columbus to join him, but did not even want to know his name stating, "no names – stops us from getting to familiar" (Zombieland). When Columbus encounters Wichita, even though she appeared to be a possible love interest, he felt the need to recite Rule #22, "When in doubt, know your way out" (Zombieland). When looking at the circumstances individually, they may appear reasonable hesitations, but in the bigger picture they reveals insecurities and anxieties that are setting back the character's growth and social development. Just as these characteristics and views on relationships set back the characters' growth and further adds to their isolation, they are very present in our own world and harm our willingness and even our actual ability in developing significant relationships. These trust issues, fear of abandonment, and commitment issues all are very real factors that plague the life of Americans

every day. Not only do they build on the stress that we carry, but they isolate us further by pushing us away from new potential friendships and romantic relationships. Until we can begin to find the sources of these harmful tendencies, they will continue to eat away at the chances that we have to build lasting, healthy relationships.

The film *Zombieland* (2009) reveals a look into the way that we are battling more than external sources on our quest for survival; we are battling the monsters in our heads that prevent us from living to our full extent. While it may seem that we face each situation as they come, the reality is that the way that we face situations, and more specifically relationships, is a result of all that we have faced prior to said opportunity. These experiences begin when we are children. They begin with the easiness we faced as children and the relationships we had with our parents. While we may romanticize our childhoods to be filled with comfort and unconditional love, it is vital to our current mental health and, as a result, our current views towards relationships that we honestly evaluate the experiences we have been through and what we gained from them. The development of anxieties, phobias, and isolation tendencies may very well stem from the first encounters we had when facing relationships and dealing with stress earlier in life than we had thought. In a nation with growing stress and isolation rates, we must go back to the beginning in order to secure a healthy view on relationships and their developing as adults. According to Justin Worland, writing for *Time* magazine, “research shows that relationships can improve health in a variety of ways, by helping us manage stress, improving the functioning of the immune system and giving meaning to people’s lives”. While we may not feel the desire to track back to where our insecurities and social anxieties started, it is necessary in order to develop healthy views on the way we approach relationships and social

interactions as adults. Although life is uncontrollable at times and down-right hectic, one thing that we can control is the effort we put into to our self-growth. Perhaps, "Zombieland" is not just a scary, adult place where isolation and danger are ever-present, but a place where we put ourselves for lack of trying.

## Works Cited

"Facts and Statistics." Anxiety and Depression Association of America. ADAA, Sept. 2014.

Web. 4 May 2016.

Sandler, Irwin, et al. "Long-Term Effects of Parenting-Focused Preventive Interventions to Promote Resilience of Children and Adolescents." *Child Development Perspectives* 9.3 (2015): 164-171. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 5 May 2016.

Thompson, Dennis. "The Biggest Cause of Stress in America Today." CBSNews. N.p., 5 Feb. 2015. Web. 3 May 2016.

Worland, Justin. "Why Loneliness Might Be the Next Big Public Health Issue." Time. Time<sup>®</sup>, 18 Mar. 2015. Web. 30 Apr. 2016.

Zombieland. Dir. Ruben Fleischer. Columbia Pictures, 2009. Film.