

Romancing the Undead: Exploring the Success of Romance in Zombie Films through Warm Bodies

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Abstract

Over time, the zombie film has evolved from a horror film, which sought only to give audiences a sense of psychological tension and a sense of horror, to a film that combines action, comedy, sci-fi, romance and other genres to bring audiences constant surprises. Although there are many instances where elements of the romance genre are incorporated into zombie films, such as “One of the two people in love is infected by a zombie, the other one often has to choose whether to kill the other one or not”, these types of romance scenes are constantly played out, but there are very few films that combine romance as the main genre with zombie elements. Warm Bodies was the first to do so, and it received critical acclaim and inspired many later works. This essay will explore the success of the romance genre in relation to the zombie genre by analyzing the characteristics of the characters, music, lines and make-up effects of Warm Bodies.

Keyword : Romance, Thriller, Zombie film, Graft, Humanoid

1. Introduction

From 1932 with White Zombie to 1968 with George A. Romero's Night of the Living Dead, the Western zombie film was synonymous with the Horror or Thriller genre, with horror images and a frightening atmosphere to achieve a frightening effect as its main objective. In the 1980s and 1990s, American films such as Re-Animator and Brain Dead, attempted to marry comedy as the main genre with zombie films, but the films as a whole were still aimed at providing sensory stimulation and were not acceptable to a significant number of viewers, even making some of them feel physically uncomfortable. Moreover, these genres are a passive incorporation rather than an active grafting. It was only after 2000 that the huge success of genre grafting began to be seen in the West, with the continued release of such films as Warm Bodies, Zombie Land and World War Z.

Interestingly, in the mid-1980s, Hong Kong vampire films, which can be considered a type of zombie

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film, instead achieved an earlier success story of the comedy genre grafted onto zombie films. Beginning with *Mr. Vampire* in 1986, Lam Ching-ying grafted comedy onto the Chinese zombie, creating a novel style that made the film's unique zombie portrayal more exaggerated and funny, making a far-reaching zombie film. However, it was the recurrence of such genre elements and formulae in later zombie films that caused aesthetic fatigue among audiences, so if no new elements were added, then the zombie film would no longer bring freshness to the audience, and it would slowly recede from the stage of history [1]. Hong Kong zombie films declined rapidly and have not taken off since.

In 2016, the Korean film *Train to Busan* was creating a new wave of zombie film crazes around the world. While most South Korean zombie films are more serious in style, always addressing the human failings, social contradictions and class differences in disasters, in recent years a number of comedy-based zombie films or TV serial have been produced, such as *The Odd Family : Zombie On Sale* in 2019 and TV serial *Happiness* in 2021.

After 2000, Japanese productions such as *Dead Man Inferno* and *I Am a Hero* became popular. With small investments and the aesthetic orientation of the manga crowd or Otaku swaying Japanese zombie films, Zombie films in Japan fell into the conservative route of manga and game adaptations, failing to explore the bigger picture as Korean zombie films did. During the long-term development of the period, Japanese zombie films, on the other hand, have favoured the use of comedic elements to directly deconstruct the shell of horror and excitement that the zombie genre is supposed to create, having fun playing with genre elements, and the dichotomy between human and foreign objects has been dissolved and blurred in several works [2]. In 2017, a small budget film, *One Cut of The Dead*, became the dark horse of the year, achieving huge box office success and high praise, a film that achieved innovation in genre graft by using comedy as its main genre, a black comedy of humour in the guise of a zombie film, so to speak.

Warm Bodies was released in 2013, occupies a unique place in the history of zombie cinema. *Warm Bodies* deliberately avoids this commonplace narrative model by subverting traditional ideas with a play of energy and an orgy of images, and by abandoning grand narratives and constructing a 'new social order' for the zombie film genre by banishing traditional political and moral discourses [3]. It has completed the grafting of romance as the main genre to the zombie film, and for the first time, the audience can see zombies fall in love with humans, and for the first time, they can enjoy watching a zombie film like a romance film. At the same time, the narrative, characterization and use of music were all unique, distinguishing it from all previous zombie films, and later zombie romance films such as *Life After Beth* and *The Odd Family: Zombie On Sale* can all be found in *Warm Bodies*, these works

maintain some of the horror and gore elements of the zombie films, but keep them within reasonable limits, allowing the zombie films to reach a larger audience.

Zombie films use love and desire to comment on society and culture in various ways, often reflecting social issues and values through the lens of the undead. This tradition traced back to *White Zombie* in 1932 to *Warm Bodies* in 2013 [4]. Zombie films often explore themes of romance, desire, and sexuality, as seen in recent movies and television series [5, 6]. These films and books use the undead as a metaphor for various emotions and social issues. Movies that adopt a romantic perspective on zombies disrupt the conventional portrayal of zombies in American culture. This disruption prompts audiences to perceive humanity within a figure traditionally isolated or marginalized. Thus, the objective of this paper is to examine the reasons why the romance genre in the zombie films gained such an abrupt success among the audiences by analyzing the characteristics of the characters, music, lines and make-up effects of *Warm Bodies*.

2. The grafted zombie elements in the romance genre in *Warm Bodies*

2.1 Species difference that engages the audience's instinctual hunting mindset

For a long time, zombies have been regarded as a symbol of evil, brainless and brutality. This impression has been successfully made into a stereotype since George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968. So much so that when a zombie appears on screen, no matter what zombies have done, even if they are just standing there, people are conditioned to want to shoot it dead. The relationship of Humans and zombies are like God and Satan, inherently enemies, and humans are always on the side of justice, and take on the main perspective of the zombie film narrative. In *Warm Bodies*, the love that should happen between humans is a surprise when it happens to a zombie who has been declared 'dead'.

The contradictions in *Warm Bodies*, based on the differences between species, are a paradoxical structure that has been proven countless times to be easy for the audience to empathize with. For example, in *King Kong*, the female protagonist Ann is so frightened that she faints when confronted by a giant ape. When these kinds of contradictions are used properly, they are destined to make a production successful. In *Wall.E*, for example, Wall.E and Eve, their love path grams overcome not only class differences but also, to some extent, species differences, because Wall.E seems so clumsy and ancient in comparison to Eve, who has superior intelligence. The conflict between Judy, the rabbit officer, and Nick, the fox, is also based on the natural conflict of 'species' in *Zootopia*, where the world of the cartoon is synonymous with thievery and treachery. There is no doubt that these

productions were a great success.

2.2 Zombie image innovation boosts interspecies acceptance

When the film was released in Taiwan, it was titled ‘The Zombie Is So Handsome’, which was a break from the stereotypical image of the zombie, whose basic image was established in Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead*- slow to move, dull-eyed and biting. Later generations of filmmakers never seem to have intended to improve on the image of the zombie, instead going further and further into the pursuit of gore and excitement or horror and repulsiveness. The horror or disgusting of the zombie image grew from one film to the next until the 1990s, when *Brain Dead* pushed the disgusting level of the zombie image to its peak as shown in [Fig. 1].



[Fig. 1] The Posters of Brain Dead and Warm Bodies

Warm Bodies was preceded by the *Twilight* series from 2008 to 2012, which received mixed reviews, but the handsome adaptation of the traditional vampire image and the bonding between humans and vampires certainly contributed to the success of *Warm Bodies*. But *Twilight* cannot be considered to be a classic and landmark application of the romance genre to the zombie genre, because while both creatures- zombies and vampire share the stereotypes of evil and bloodthirstiness, but they are not the same, the two are different organisms.

Innovation in genre films is a delicate matter, as it is necessary to follow the general rules of the genre to avoid breaking the audience's expectations, but at the same time not to repeat the same old routines, but to try to give the audience a new sensory experience. This ‘dance in shackles’ determines

the difficulty of the genre's success and tests the aesthetic and business acumen of the producers [7]. Handsome men and beautiful women has been a recipe for success in the romance genre, but *Warm Bodies* has to face the problem of reproductive isolation between species in order to create a new experience. It is very important that the human and zombie figures behave in a way that is acceptable to the audience. If a beautiful woman were to make out with a bloodied, mutilated and deranged zombie alien, it would easily fall into the category of Cult Film. Therefore, love between 'human-like' characters requires that the characters be as close as possible to each other, even if they share the same spirit and values. In *Avatar*, for example, almost all of the emotional scenes between the three-metre tall Na'vi princess and the human hero are between the *Avatar*, who is exactly the same as her.

In *Warm Bodies*, the characterization of R is very successful, as he is handsome and although his face is pale, he is not limbless and full of blood. This gives him a new look, and makes the audience admire him as a handsome man, which further enhances the audience's feelings. Although R is just as dull as the traditional zombie figure, he is not unconscious. The audience can feel a human spirit in his eyes. This emphasis on the eyes as shown in [Fig. 1] is evident in the film, where the first shot of him is a large close-up of his eyes. This zooming in on parts of the body gives us a different sense of meaning [8].

2.3 Tender R and Samurai Julie

Female audience have always been the main group of romance films, and a perfect male persona is an important factor in capturing the female audience. In romance films, male characters generally have an affable image, a gentle personality, a considerate character, full of a sense of justice and a desire to protect the weak. Even if these qualities are not present in the male protagonist at the beginning, the male protagonist is always going in this direction for a change. These elements are reflected in R's character. For example, R has a passion for life and love within him and treats Julie with great tenderness. He will always keep an appropriate distance from Julie and will restrain his impulses and emotions so that she does not feel uncomfortable. R will protect Julie from the other walkers and watch over his assistant like a real boyfriend, but at the same time, like a high school student who has just fallen in love, R is always by Julie's side, sharing his most precious, His slightly goofy image and the way he shrugs his shoulders at every turn adds to his cuteness and innocence.

R falls in love with this samurai girl the moment she fires her gun. The skinny R seems weaker in front of her. This flip-flopping of the sexes is very appealing to the audience in a society where women are awakening and gender equality is in vogue. Of course, Julie is not a perfect strong woman

either, as she is initially terrified of R, and then shows her softer, sexier side once her guard is completely down.

3. The plots and romance behavior logic in Warm Bodies

3.1 Redemption in Warm Bodies

Warm Bodies follows the story of R, a zombie who starts to regain his humanity after encountering Julie, a living human. Their unlikely connection sparks a series of events that challenge the traditional boundaries between the living and the undead. As R's feelings grow, he begins to change, triggering a chain reaction that could potentially alter the fate of both zombies and humans in a post-apocalyptic world. The romance genre spans around 2,497 seconds within the film. The entire main feature comprises 5,490 seconds. Therefore, the romance genre accounts for approximately 45.48% of the total film duration.

With the same use of dark humour, Warm Bodies is unique in its own way. Unlike Shaun of the Dead and Zombie Land, the main character in this film becomes a zombie and focuses on the inner emotional level of the characters [9]. In the past zombie genre, the zombies would only grunt from their throats when they were quiet, or make a horrific roar when they were running. But in the film, R has two systems of speech, the first being his inner monologue, which is so rich and interesting that the audience hear the inner thoughts of the zombie for the first time including R's view of himself and his relationship with the world. R's second language system is that he can speak a word or two and can communicate in a very basic way. Language is the main means of expressing human thought, and the addition of linguistic functions greatly enhances our acceptance of R as a positive figure and a human being.

After Night of the Living Dead, film makers have continued to adapt zombie traits to create new ones, such as zombies with no heartbeat, or a virus or worm that takes control of their brain, which in turn controls their body, or they do not breathe, much less have body heat, and so on. In this film, R, like all his fellow walkers, their hearts have stopped beating and they are dead silent, but a wave of change is creeping in. Redemption in Warm Bodies, on the other hand, focuses mainly on self-redemption, i.e. redemption through the pursuit of human recovery. When R meets Julie, his heart beats for the first time. As shown in [Fig. 2], all the living dead find themselves changed, their hearts beating for the first time. The viewers experience the humanoid transformation of the zombies and learn that the zombies are evolving like humans, and that the species barrier is dissolving. The inter species

love is more acceptable to the audience.



[Fig. 2] The Scenes of Romance in Warm Bodies and The Odd Family

In 2016, in another Korean film *The Odd Family: Zombie On Sale*, the protagonist Jong-Bi is a typical humanized zombie who is slow and incoherent, but so handsome that one of the female protagonists falls in love with him. The film has also received good reviews.

3.2 Innovative zombie-world adaptation defies romance cliches

The romance genre takes place when the main character R falls in love with Julie at first sight during a shoot-out with a mix of action genres, which is already at the 11th minute of the film, and it is interesting to note that the tone of the romance has not been established until this love affair takes place, before this, the film exists more as a sci-ficomedey. It presents a normal world laced with psychic themes, a world where everything is beautiful and down-to-earth, no scares, no jaws, no indiscriminate killing, almost a quiet and peaceful picture [10]. A basic rhythm suitable for the unfolding of the romance genre is established for this film.

In romance films, the stage of getting to know each other between the main characters is an important part of the development of the plot. Known in the play as the previous history, the main characters get to know each other's past in various ways, thus achieving important tasks such as enriching character traits and laying down ambiguities. However, in the case of zombies, they cannot speak, and even if they do, they cannot display a great deal of information to form an effective communication. In the world of *Warm Bodies*, a cleverly designed and interesting set-up is that a zombie can possess the memories of a victim by eating his/her brain, and R happens to kill Julie's ex-boyfriend, and after eating his brain, Julie's past comes back to him, completing his previous history of Julie. In this way, Julie does not need to talk, R knows her character, her upbringing and life circumstances and the damage she has suffered, and R knows what to do next and how he is going to

make his choice. R's upbringing and previous history is more of a monologue from his mind.

This innovative twist on the underlying logic of the zombie world is very successful, and the audience is treated to an advanced and refreshing way of understanding and communicating with each other, making the production even more 'fresh'.

3.3 The surprising choice-musical genre

Generally speaking, the music for romance films tends to be beautiful, soothing, melancholic, serene and sweet. Symphonic, jazz, blues and other styles are the soul mates of romance music. This film, however, is a bold choice of rock music. Rock music represents passion, impulsiveness and energy, an ironic misalignment with the decadent, sluggish and dull zombie image, and a hint of R's raging heart.

The film is a romance, and most of the rock music used in this film is classic from the last century such as *Missing you* by John Waite and *Hungry Heart* by Bruce Springsteen. This makes the choice of music both popular and youthful.

4. Conclusions

Over time, the evolution of zombie films has been remarkable, transcending the confines of pure horror to embrace a blend of genres including action, comedy, sci-fi, and romance, delivering audiences constant surprises. Despite numerous instances of romance interwoven into zombie narratives, films predominantly centered on romance alongside zombie elements remain scarce. *Warm Bodies* stands as a pioneering work, receiving critical acclaim and inspiring subsequent creations. This paper aimed to seek to dissect the success of merging romance with the zombie genre, scrutinizing the characters, music, dialogue, and makeup effects in *Warm Bodies*.

The triumph of grafting the romance genre onto zombie films primarily resides in maintaining a delicate equilibrium between horror-thriller elements and romantic comedy. Overemphasizing the thriller aspects might alienate the romance audience. The humanoid transformation of the central character emerges as a pivotal tool, aligning with the success patterns observed in prior romance films. While not every romantic comedy will venture into interspecies romance, it is evident that grafting the Rom-com genre onto the zombie narrative can wield significant impact. The future promises more innovative romantic zombie films, each pushing boundaries and embracing new creative avenues.

One limitation of the paper could be its focus solely on *Warm Bodies* as the primary case study. While it provides comprehensive insights into the success of merging romance with the zombie genre

through this film, a broader exploration involving a comparative analysis with other similar works might enrich the discussion further. Additionally, the paper could benefit from a more extensive examination of audience reception and critical analysis beyond the scope of *Warm Bodies* to provide a more comprehensive view of the genre's reception and impact.

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