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Film Review: Pride+Prejudice+Zombies

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FILM REVIEW

Pride + Prejudice + Zombies, directed by Burr Steers, screenplay by Burr Steers, Lionsgate, 107 minutes, English

Spring 2016 saw the release of the film *Pride + Prejudice + Zombies* (2016, Burr Steers). It is, entirely as the title suggests, a version of the Jane Austen novel with zombies. The original concept came from an editor at Quirk Books, a small publishing house based in Philadelphia, who contracted television writer Seth Grahame-Smith to realise the idea. The book was published in April 2009 and very quickly made it onto the *New York Times* bestseller list. By June the same year, it had been optioned by Hollywood production company Lionsgate, though it would be another seven years before the project was finally completed.

Grahame-Smith's approach was an interpolation of zombies into *Pride and Prejudice* (first published in 1813) rather than a complete rewrite; indeed, he remained largely faithful to Austen – at least in terms of plot, character and dialogue. However, he did shift the background of the story to an alternative nineteenth-century England that is on its knees after a plague, imported from the colonies alongside spices and silks, causes those infected to hunger for the brains of the living. The Bennet sisters, along with most of their aristocratic peers, have enjoyed extensive weapons training courtesy of their doting father (though in China rather than in Japan, the more fashionable destination among the upper classes), while their mother remains fixated on finding a good matrimonial match for her girls

For many, first encountering the notion of zombies in the genteel literary world of Jane Austen is at least an irritation, if not an outrage; nonetheless, the novel and its film adaptation raise many interesting questions, for they bring together some very popular narrative tropes in one package – combining the nostalgic, and indeed romantic, appeal of Jane Austen with the gory rise of the zombie. This is a palimpsest of a text which demonstrates the complexity of a contemporary culture phenomenon – one that is intended to be playful, but at the same time contains the tendrils of a very affect-laden anxiety about the apocalypse.

Although Austen was only modestly successful in her own lifetime, her work rose steadily in estimation throughout the nineteenth century before being cemented into the literary canon by cultural critic F. R. Leavis in 1948; but from the mid twentieth century onwards, largely due to the success of screen adaptations, her popularity has grown exponentially.

This is demonstrated by the sheer diversity of the film adaptations, which range far beyond the more obviously faithful – often playing with the Jane Austen world. Some transfer the story to another culture, such as *Bride and Prejudice* (2004, Gurinder Chadha) which takes place in India; or to another time, such as the online web series *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, which began in 2012 as a contemporary vlog-style web series. Others explore the biography of the author, such as *Becoming Jane* (2007, Julian Jarrold); play out the fantasy of being immersed in the past, such as *Lost in Austen* (2008, ITV) and *Austenland* (2013, Jerusha Hess); still others extend the narrative world, such as *Death Comes to Pemberley* (2013, BBC sequel based on the P.D. James novel of the same name).

Fan activity around Austen is equally imaginative. From more traditional print media such as magazine *Jane Austen's Regency World* (published from Bath, of course!) to the web, there is evidence of many kinds of participation. There are numerous websites, for example – such as *Republic of Pemberley*, where fan fiction is a popular way of engaging with Austen's stories. There are organised trips to England and role plays of all kinds, from traditional balls in stately homes and castles to more prosaic social gatherings. Parody and hybridity have also been explored in the YouTube film *Jane Austen's Fight Club* (2010, Emily Janice Card

and Keith Paugh) and *The Real Housewives of Jane Austen* (2012, PlayingwFireFilms). In fact, Jane Austen is a twenty-first-century transmedia success story.

The ubiquity of this activity has led fans to refer to an 'Austenverse' – a field of activity that is based on, plays with, intersects and extends the story world created by the Austen novels. The many adaptations for film and television form part of this; but what is interesting, and why the term Austenverse encompasses more than just the novels, is that, some time ago, the adaptations began to refer and rely as much upon other adaptations as they did upon the 'original' texts. Some texts have been adapted so often and with such gusto that it is easier to regard such works as a kind of jazz variation on a theme. For example, one has only to chart the wide reuse of the 'wet shirt scene' invented by Andrew Davies for his 1995 BBC adaptation, which saw Darcy (Colin Firth) encounter Lizzie Bennet (Jennifer Ehle) after an impromptu dip in a pond, then recreated memorably and quite consciously in 2008's *Lost in Austen* among others. In the context of considering *Pride + Prejudice + Zombies*, it does raise the question of a corresponding 'zombieverse'.

The zombie is not a new figure in popular culture, but unlike many other monsters, zombies do not arise from the folklore of medieval Europe – nor from Romantic and Victorian literature, such as the vampire or Frankenstein's monster; but rather, if one is looking for origins, from Haitian folklore. According to one writer, the 'zombie myth enters western consciousness primarily as a result of the US occupation of Haiti from 1915–1934' (Boon in Scott, 2007, p. 35) through the publication of stories such as William Seabrook's *Magic Island* (1929), which began 'to draw the American public's attention away from the Old World and toward the New, specifically the island of Haiti' (Bishop, 2008, p. 141). However, the zombie that inhabits popular culture in 2016 does not owe much to this Haitian background, and, in fact, did not exist before George Romero's ground-breaking film *Night of the Living Dead* was released in 1968.

Prior to *Night of the Living Dead*, the few zombies that had appeared in film – such as *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932) or *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943) – were like their Haitian antecedents, which Halliwell described as 'dead people who are revived, more or less intact, to serve the purposes of the living' (Halliwell, 1986, p. 242). They are raised by black magic to become the mindless slave of the magician who creates them; in reality, the 'monster' of these films is not the zombie but its master – but, as Halliwell went on to note, 'George A. Romero changed all that' (Halliwell, 1986, p. 248). In *Night of the Living Dead*, the dead rise up to consume the living, with little in the way of explanation but certainly no mention of magicians. Since Romero, films featuring zombies are a new genre: the zombie is perhaps one of the few genuinely twentieth-century monsters.

To generalise, the narrative tends to centre around a small band of humans trying to survive a zombie onslaught in a variety of locations – but in vain, as these mass outbreaks are highly contagious. To be bitten is inevitably to turn into a zombie, eventually. The infected have no will of their own, being intent upon devouring the living; their main characteristic is their relentless hunger. All escape is temporary, for the genre is also marked by the nihilism of its endings – as zombies overwhelm the survivors, everyone dies. It is apocalyptic.

Nearly 50 years later, zombies are more popular than ever. In 2012, America's *TV Guide* noted that the 'zombie apocalypse has upended the entire television business. AMC's *The Walking Dead* is now the No. 1 entertainment series on TV among adults 18–49 – a landmark accomplishment for a cable show' (tvguide.com). *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010 – ongoing) is a globally popular series, based on an equally popular graphic novel series (2003 – ongoing). Spin-off series *Fear the Walking Dead* broke records of its own in summer 2015 and there is now a second series in production. There has also been a British series, *In the Flesh* (2013, BBC); a French series, *The Returned* (2012–15, Canal+); a blockbuster movie *World War Z* (Marc

Forster, 2013), based on the bestselling novel by Max Brooks, with a sequel in production due for release in 2017; and *Maggie* (2015, Henry Hobson), to name but a few highlights. However, as with Austen, the zombie phenomenon extends beyond simple consumption to enthusiastic participation. There are zombie walks and runs (where participants are 'encouraged' along by zombie attacks) across the globe, including cities as culturally diverse as Singapore, Stockholm, Toronto and Sydney.

Understanding the Austenverse and the zombieverse as successful transmediatised phenomena makes the blending of the two seem less unorthodox than at first glance. *Pride + Prejudice + Zombies* offers the viewer a heterogeneous diegesis; though this was once thought of as a way of jolting viewers out of their suspension of disbelief (Wollen, 1972), contemporary audiences are much more practiced in accommodating such things – even taking ludic pleasure in the intersections of previously discrete story worlds. In this terrain, zombies at Pemberley are as acceptable as Batman and Superman coexisting in the same story. As Barthes put it in 1973, 'any text is an intertext: other texts are present in it, at varying levels, in more or less recognisable forms: the texts of the previous and surrounding culture. Any text is a new tissue of past citations' (Barthes in Young, 1981, p. 39) and in the era of Web 2.0, intertextuality is the natural state.

What makes *Pride + Prejudice + Zombies* particularly complex is that intertextuality in this case does not just mean resituating the Bennet sisters as zombie killers. As already described, the film follows in the practice of referring to other *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations (including a shot of Darcy [Sam Riley] diving into a pond just as Colin Firth did back in 1995) while also referencing the post-Romero zombie canon, though it also – as any good genre should – introduces some new ideas.

The zombies themselves in *Pride + Prejudice + Zombies* are not necessarily mindless – at least, not initially. The cause is presented as a highly infectious disease that makes the person infected hungry for brains, and consuming a human brain causes the disease to accelerate. However, if the infected resist the hunger and eat animal brains instead, they keep their wits and their personality. Part of the background story, which is new for both the Austenverse and the zombieverse, is the idea that zombies can organise themselves. The audience is offered the possibility of zombies with agency and a specific grudge against humanity – a fairly new evolution of the trope, only hinted at in Romero's own *Land of the Dead* (2005) but followed through in *Warm Bodies* (2013, Jonathan Levine).

However, the film does revert to an ending that is consistent with the traditional zombieverse. Things appear to be coming to a close with the traditional double wedding – in keeping with the Austenverse; but there is a final mid-credit sequence that reveals the zombie hordes, led by an angry Wickham (Jack Huston), thundering towards Rosings and the happy couples, thus reinstating the nihilistic ending so typical of zombie films. This is a change from Seth Grahame-Smith's novel, which ends quite demurely in marital bliss, with even a possible cure for the disease on the horizon. As an already intertextual appropriation, the story had to be further reworked in order to craft it appropriately for the screen – a translation of a translation, if you will – with the distinct possibility that it might have disintegrated entirely under the pressure, which goes some way to explaining the seven-year stint in 'development hell'. Steers was the fourth director attached to the film, with at least as many writers searching for the right balance; and although Natalie Portman remained as a producer, scheduling conflicts meant she stepped down as the star. Even a popular culture mash-up is not immune from the vagaries of the adaptation process.

However, this is a Jungian journal, so what can a Jungian perspective bring to bear upon the phenomenon? Cartmell, in her book dedicated solely to *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations, attempts to answer the question of why we seem to have a 'seemingly insatiable cultural

need for so many versions of the same story' (Cartmell, 2010, p. 126). This is a very good question, which pertains to apocalypse and zombies every bit as much as to *Pride and Prejudice*.

Ortiz-Hill (1994/2004, pp. 3–4) suggests a way of understanding this imaginative hinterland of contemporary culture, which contains these 'unreal' obsessions and fantasies, as true of the Austenverse as it is of the zombieverse.

Just as the Australian aborigines speak of a 'dreamtime' parallel to ordinary, mundane reality, I take the geography of apocalypse to be a real and vivid territory running alongside or beneath the day to dayness of our lives. We live, in effect, in two worlds – in the foreground our daily preoccupations and activities; and behind that, a fantastic landscape of terror or ecstasy.

For some time now, science fiction, horror and disaster movies have been presenting us with image after spectacular image of the end of the world as we know it – whether it be through disease, natural disaster (volcanoes, asteroids), ecological meltdown, or invasion. Without drifting into a discussion about which is a subset of what, it is fair to say that the zombieverse can encompass all forms of apocalypse – even, it seems, bursting into the warm nostalgia of the Austenverse. The landscape of the imagination (perhaps the term 'cultural unconscious' could be employed here) is lively, unruly, often dystopian and messy; some audiences at least seem to accept crossovers, hybrids and alternate universes, and are prepared to imagine the unimaginable, even the extinction of our species.

I have already proposed that this film brings together two popular imaginal spaces in contemporary culture; however, I would like to finish by suggesting that the popularity of the *Pride + Prejudice + Zombies* phenomenon might lie in the combination of the Austenverse and the zombieverse, which gives space for a third trope.

The Bennet sisters are all brave and strong, good fighters, which in this narrative gives them an element of independence that Lizzie (Lily James) especially is quite unwilling to give up for the sake of marriage. Towards the end of the film, there are rescues a-plenty, but while Darcy does rescue Lydia from Wickham, Lizzie then rescues Darcy. Even sweet Jane (Bella Heathcote) leaps to the physical defence of a rather limp Bingley (Douglas Booth). Part of the pleasure in watching the film is seeing the Bennet sisters break out of demure prettiness to hack off some limbs. Ultimately, this may be the key to this hybrid narrative's success. Lizzie and Jane are not just feisty conversationalists and freethinkers. They are robust rescuers of their men. The rise of the heroine with agency and her own story to tell is a growing trope in film and television, and one that audiences seem ready for. The screening I attended included some very distinct groups of young women who laughed the loudest. The fans discussing the film on the *Republic of Pemberley* site seem to have taken to the film as a giggle and as another fan said elsewhere, as 'a long-time fan of Jane Austen and Elizabeth Bennett I thoroughly enjoyed this adaptation of the story. I loved the book as well but to see Elizabeth and her sisters KICKING *** [sic] was just great fun' (fandango.com, 2016).

In the end, the appeal at the heart of this strange hybrid phenomenon is neither Austen nor the zombie apocalypse, but the Bennet sisters, combining their pretty dresses with killer instincts, taking charge of themselves and riding out to save their men. As the poster for the film says, 'Bloody lovely'.

Notes on contributor

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