

Sample Essay 2

This analysis essay was written by Jayla Marshall, a student in a first-year Interdisciplinary Studies course on popular culture.

Zombies as Perpetuators of Mass Production and Consumption

What are Zombies? Amy Wilentz tells us that a Zombie is a perpetual slave. In African religions, she notes, a Zombie was a person who had their soul stolen to be manipulated and controlled. To become a Zombie was a terrifying prospect to those of the Voodoo religion not just because you became a slave, but also because you could not enter into the afterlife as a Zombie. In Voodoo religion, Baron Samedi, the lord of the cemetery, had to dig your grave and then escort you to it (Wilentz). If you were a Zombie, Baron could not allow you to pass into the afterlife. When the French invaded Haiti and forced the Haitians to become slaves, it was said that the slave drivers used Zombification as a tool to scare the slaves into cooperation, and the only way for a person to be returned their soul as a Zombie was to eat salt (Wilentz).

This essay began with a love for Zombies and a rubber brain. My object(s) of discussion are any sort of Zombie-themed brain product.

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As Wilentz indicates, brains don't have much to do with the historical origin of Zombies, so where does the association come from? In fact, "brrraaiinnss" are a huge part of Zombie Culture today, and the modern Zombie seems to have a proclivity to eating brains. The Zombie Research Society enlightened me as to where 'brain eating' came from ("What Zombies Don't Eat"). It came from the *Return of the Living Dead* film series, a collection of spoof movies from the 80s and 90s, which depicted a Zombie always craving brains. I have never seen any of this series, but there must have been something memorable about this brain craving Zombie to create such a powerful image of Zombies today. My essay will argue that Zombies are perpetuators of mass production and consumption.

To better understand the topic at hand, we must look away from Zombies for a moment and look at the theories of Karl Marx and his ideas of "Means" and "Modes". John Storey explains this: "Marx argues that each significant period in history is constructed around a particular 'mode of production': that is, the way in which the society is organized to produce the material necessities of life..." (59). In short, Marx is referring to the tools and aspects in a society that produce ideas or products. Storey defines what each mode of production creates: modes produce ways in which we gain necessities of life, social relationships

between workers and controllers of production, and social institutions like Schools or Churches (59-60). We can split these up into 'base' and 'superstructure' to see how they influence each other. The base consists of the first two creations of production: ways we gain necessities and social relationships in the work place. The superstructure consists of the last creation of production: social institutions including cultural ones. The base and superstructure both influence each other; much like a ball, with the base on the bottom half of the ball and the superstructure on the top. Whichever way the ball rolls it is causing the other half to move as well. According to Storey, these modes are connected with the means, or the tools in which these necessities are produced. Marx believed that a society's cultural and social shape as well as its future development depended on that society's mode of production. What, then, does this say about our society?

Zombie Culture is self-perpetuating because its Means and Modes of Production re-create an image of "Zombification" in its mass consumption. Zombies are a virus which usually causes a massive plague, just like its culture on a large scale does. K.W. Bishop describes the irony of mindlessness in his essay on consumer ideology: "Having been essentially brainwashed by capitalist ideology, they cannot see the shattered world around them in any terms other than those of

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possession and consumption.” He says this about the characters in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) as they flee to a mall for safety. I think this says a lot about our culture as capitalists. We are so accustomed to ‘possession and consumption’ that many of us would most likely flee to a mall for safety in a global disaster. It is ironic that we seem to fall back on something disposable and material when we ourselves are disposable and material; like Zombies are.

The means used to create products, like my rubber brain, are often manufacturers in China or other cheap labor industries. This can also be seen as voluntary slavery, where the workers have no other choice than to work for very little remuneration. This also reflects back onto Zombie origins, where Haitian and African religions warned of becoming a Zombie; an eternal slave. Storey notes that, “the dominant class... [has] control over the means of production... [and] control over the means of intellectual production” (61); this means that Zombie Culture is being controlled by dominant powers and enforcing what it wants to enforce onto us as consumers. Jean and John Comaroff also describe Zombies as a reflection of class struggle that has been manipulated by the dominant powers.

What do the dominant forces want to enforce on us? I will now look at two major suppliers of Zombie paraphernalia: Spencer’s Gift

and Spirit Halloween. These products range from Zombie Kits to Zombie brain purses and even Zombie baby props. Conveniently Spencer's bought out Spirit Halloween in 1999, so they are essentially the same company. It states on the Spirit Halloween website that they were "founded out of the observation of a trend on the verge of explosion" ("About Us"), but what trend are they referring to? There was an opportunity to sell products, like Zombie merchandise, when they started to become popular. This may have been partly due to more horror and Zombie movies being released in the 70s and early 80s, before Spirit Halloween was founded in 1983. Spencer's also bought Spirit Halloween after a boom of continuing Zombie releases and horror films. It seems that this company took the popularity in Halloween and Zombie Culture and enforced it back into our popular culture on a large scale. It is interesting to note that these dominant superstructures have taken an image from pop culture that can reflect its own relations between base and superstructure and marketed it back into pop culture.

With Spencer's and Spirit Halloween's wide range of products, it was interesting to find their position on "Social Responsibility" on their website(s). They both state: "Spirit Halloween [Spencer's] abhors the practice of human trafficking and slavery and applauds efforts being

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made globally to eliminate this practice. Spirit Halloween [Spencer's] requires all of its suppliers to be compliant with all local and national laws governing slavery and human trafficking in countries in which they do business," ("Social Responsibility"). The fact that products, like my rubber brain, are being exploited from our own imagination then re-created using means similar to slavery is almost sickening, in my opinion. I think that there can be something said in what they do not say on their website.

These companies' means of production perpetuate Zombie Culture through cheap labor and mass production. Is "Made in China" bad for business? One thing that is completely left out of both the Spencer's and Spirit Halloween websites is the "Made in China" label. None of their products state where they are made, but a quick search on Google or Amazon can confirm that many of them are indeed mass-produced in China. What is so bad about this, that they feel the need to hide it from us? Jean and John Comaroff describe this labor as, "cheaper, less assertive, less taxed, more feminized, [and] less protected by states and unions..." in short, it is inhumane ("Alien-Nation"). It is the silences that tell us there is something very bad about cheap labor, it is close to slavery, but not quite enough to be considered the same. Therefore, it is okay to exploit cheap labor, but not to advertise it. This is one way

in which Zombie Culture perpetuates its means of Production; by exploiting cheap labor for silly rubber brains and knick-knacks.

There is still something special about *Zombies* in our popular culture. When George A. Romero released *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968, there was a screw-up and the copyright information was excluded from the title. This meant that *Zombies* in our typical sense were in the public domain upon release of this movie (“Zombies Panel”, YouTube). They came from the public’s imagination throughout years and years of re-makes, re-imaginings, and different takes on the same idea. *Zombie Culture* belongs solely to popular culture. This makes *Zombies* unique in a way that almost no other movie monsters are and a huge asset for companies to sell. I can relate to brain-eating *Zombies* as they perpetuate capitalism in a profound way, but also mass culture itself. *Zombies* are a metaphor for capitalism by representing mass consumption of brains and flesh. *Zombies* also reflect the relation between base and superstructure through the institutions that reproduce *Zombie Culture*. I still love *Zombie Culture*, but I feel guilty for what it now represents to me and its metaphor for capitalism. No matter how you look at it, *Zombie Culture* perpetuates itself through produced and consumed goods and us ‘consuming’ it.

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