'Warm Bodies': A ZomRomCom Discourse on Counterinsurgency

https://www.e-ir.info/2015/07/13/warm-bodies-a-zomromcom-discourse-on-counterinsurgency/

KRISTINA PASKO, JUL 13 2015

This piece analyses the zombie film *Warm Bodies* (2013), in which a romance between two members of clashing cultures — human and zombie — serves as a cultural representation of the U.S. military's counterinsurgency strategies in the Middle East.

According to Raphael S. Cohen, counterinsurgency is a "competition with the insurgent for the right to win the hearts, minds, and acquiescence of the population," and has traditionally been recognized to require precise military action to eradicate the insurgents and a softer approach to influence the transformable local population, including economic support, reconstruction, propaganda, and diplomacy. Why consider zombies in the context of this recent large-scale military conflict? The answer partly relates to the discourse surrounding the use of the infamous "shock and awe" campaign in Baghdad to "affect the will, perception, and understanding of the adversary." A 1996 publication sponsored by the Department of Defense concerning "shock and awe" includes repeated references to the "impotence" or "paralysis" of the adversary and specifically refers to images of the "*comatose and glazed expressions of survivors* of the great bombardments of World War I" — descriptions that suit the behaviour of post-apocalyptic zombies.

Warm Bodies opens in an abandoned airport, suggesting the after-effects of a maelstrom of overwhelming violence. This is where the zombies "live." Some type of shock (if not necessarily awe) has debilitated this population. Reconstruction is impossible; the zombies lack the skills, ability, or interest, similar to the "disenfranchised men . . . now without jobs or income, unsure of their future in the new Iraq, and embittered" at the United States and who become a source of potential recruits for the insurgency. Like the Iraqi population after the U.S.-led bombardment and occupation, this undead polity is thus incapable of any resistance; instead their only motivation for action is the consumption of human flesh. The zombies are thus a population that displaced *in situ*. One of these zombies is R, the Shakespearean "Romeo" figure and narrator. R is unique among the zombies; he collects knick-knacks like vinyl records, suggesting some connection to a living and fully sentient past. It is unclear what makes R different from his zombified peers except that he is young and clearly looking to transform his pitiful existence.

A source of anxiety among the zombies is the group of "Bonies" with whom they share the airport; these are the extremist zombies – barbaric and beyond the capacity for change. While the "zombies" are creatures capable of pity, the Bonies are monsters who have lost any trace of humanity and will attack and eat anything with a beating heart. Enter the humans, who we learn fear and loathe both the Bonies and the zombies, treating each with same level of contempt and violently dispatching them with the same level of malice and violence. Much like an occupying army at a secured military base, the humans have consolidated within a walled city centre highly reminiscent of the U.S. "Green Zone" in Baghdad, a heavily securitised space surrounded by numerous armed checkpoints and a wall of reinforced and blast-proof concrete slabs. The humans are led by a military leader, General Grigio (John Malkovich).

Throughout the film, the human characters point out that Grigio will shoot zombies in the head without hesitation, recalling the classic military perspective that views the battlefield a zone "devoid of civilians" where firepower should be brought to bear . . . without hesitation." Under this influence, a group of young people – including Grigio's daughter Julie (Teresa Palmer), a clear reference to Shakespeare's doomed Juliet, and her boyfriend – is sent out from the

base to search for medicine. There is little to indicate that they have been trained for the mission, aside from their deeply ingrained tendency to shoot on sight any undead, recalling criticism that U.S. forces rely too heavily on technology and logistics, and are "generally ignorant of cultures beyond their borders."

In the ensuing clash of cultures, R and a group of other zombies have left their airport to hunt for food, resulting in extreme violence when the two groups come in contact. However, R (Romeo) spies Julie (Juliet), precipitating a comic-tragic, love-at-first-sight moment. The melee leaves most of the humans dead, including Julie's boyfriend. When R eats some of Perry's brains his narration explains that he is able to take on some of the victim's memories, while also making him feel "more human." This conceit helps explains his decision to protect Julie from the other zombies, which in turn allows the two to spend a few days together, actualizing the strategies advocated in General Stanley McChrystal's 2009 military guidance urging a change in the military's role and actions in Afghanistan: "Changing our mindset. We need to think and act *very* differently to be successful."

- "Embrace the people . . . and bring them on the team."
- "Live and train together, plan and operate together."
- "Focus 95% of your time building relationships with [the Afghan people]."

R and Julie's interaction provokes substantive cultural exchange across the hitherto impassable divide between dead and undead. Julie realizes that the zombies are not the monsters she had been led to believe, and R realizes he can avoid his "programming" to eat Julie. Moreover, the interaction allows R to reembrace certain aspects of his humanity, particularly a partial recovery of speech and "human" manners. Ultimately, Julie is successful in bringing him "on the team." Arguably, R already has established human potential through his exposure to popular music and the other cultural artefacts he has collected in his airplane lair; importantly, the love-at-first-sight moment comes *before* he eats the brains, not after. R's interest in human culture, along with his empathy-laden interaction with Julie, facilitate his connection with humanity.

Although it is unclear that introducing Western culture aids in the winning of hearts and minds, it is still a part of the discourse of war and nation-branding, and was an important part of the early efforts of the U.S. government in the most recent Iraq War and previous conflicts. Arguably, R's airplane of artefacts provides a pop-culture referent for the "successful outcome" of decades of Western cultural diplomacy conducted by organisations like the United States Information Agency, British Council, and Goethe Institute. This interest in human culture, together with Julie and R's person-to-person diplomacy (or, as R calls it, a "date") proves effective: when the zombies witness Julie and R holding hands, it triggers a symbolic and morphological change of heart among them. Conversely, the (extremist) Bonies become more violent, turning their aggression on the zombies. Similar to Al Qaeda or other nihilist groups like ISIS, the Bonies punish those who are discovered to aid the enemy even more violently than the "infidel Others" in their midst. As R explains, "Julie and I were giving the others hope, and I guess the Bonies didn't like that." The zombies choose to fight alongside the humans (geopolitically realising something that the Iraq War could not), and together they eradicate the Bonies. Projecting the notion that "hearts and minds" matter more than battlefield success, the humans (Americans) conquer by other means. Once the Bonies are eliminated, the humans are able to fully "educate" and "cure" the zombie hordes (importantly, a final montage includes zombies learning to play baseball, the U.S. national pastime), and — in classic Hollywood form — R and Julie live happily ever after.

Warm Bodies is not your typical human-zombie romance (or ZomRomCom); rather, as part of the intertextual discourse between popular culture and the realities/projections of warfare, it offers a means of understanding counterinsurgency strategies, as well as a critique of such strategies.

About the author:

Kristina Pasko is a candidate in the English M.A. program at Rutgers University-Newark and is interested in how popular culture can assist in interpreting and understanding canonical literature.