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Vampires and Zombies as Critical Public Pedagogy: Using Horror for Critical Adult Education and HRD Instruction

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Keywords: popular culture, horror, critical pedagogy, zombies, consumerism

Abstract: This paper explores the connections among the increasing popularity of Zombie and Vampire films, and the current economic crisis, multi-national corporate abuses, over-consumption, consumerism, and environmental degradation and their effects on adult learners.

As I write this paper, the governor of Wisconsin, Scott Walker, is forcing state employees to relinquish their rights to collective bargaining, while wielding large contributions from the conglomerate-inheriting, billionaire Koch brothers (Lipton, 2011) for political cover in order to give $1.8 billion in tax cuts to multi-national corporations; the governor of Michigan, Rick Snyder, is pushing a bill that would allow him to take control of any town struggling under his draconian cuts in state funding and, after firing the elected officials, to turn the town’s governance over to a corporation of his choosing (Maddow, March 8, 2011); and the governor of Florida, Rick Scott, is cutting the state’s education budget by $1.7 billion (yes, BILLION) in order to give $1.6 billion in tax cuts to corporations and property owners (Maddow, March 7, 2011). Moreover, for each of the past two years, high-level employees of Wall Street banks and security firms have made record salaries ($135 billion in 2010)—the 25 largest Wall Street firms boasted revenues at all-time-highs—while most U.S. workers continue suffering through a deep recession caused by those same Wall Street traders (Luccetti & Grocer, 2011). These governors are heartily supported by the very politicians who insisted that the Obama administration could not cap Wall Street salaries, limit their executive “compensation packages” or deflate their golden parachutes until after they repaid the taxpayer loans handed out in 2007 and 2008. Clearly, assaults on working people in the U.S. are coming from both government and “capital,” and the divide between the very rich and the increasing number of working poor is growing dramatically. This is not a sudden development. The erosion of worker’s rights and democratic principles has been a steadily-expanding, monstrous reality since the 1980s, when Reaganomics and its accompanying deregulation began to devour the rights and safeguards that protected workers and, simultaneously, to feed corporate gluttony. Interestingly, this state of affairs is accompanied by an escalating popularity of films and television shows featuring instinctually compelled, survival-driven Zombies and power-hungry, blood-thirsty, megalomaniacal Vampires.

Background and Purpose

While the decline of democracy in advance of corporate oligarchy is not a new phenomenon in the U.S., it has, like a viral epidemic, passed beyond the stages of arrival and introduction and has progressed, by spreading and mutating, inexorably toward the encoded states of widespread establishment and persistence. Adult educators are recognizing its impact on their student populations. From basic education settings to human resource development (HRD) environments, the unregulated (and inequitable) markets are affecting adult learners’ ability to
find meaningful work. A society based primarily on the pursuit of capital produces “workers [that] are exploited and dominated by the owners of production,” and that are overwhelmed by the alien and hostile world of objects that such a society necessitates (Brookfield, 2005, p. 155). Moreover, “a major purpose of life under capitalism is to consume the commodities we produce, yet the experience of compulsive consumption is itself alienating” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 165).

Just as Zombies are driven by the disgusting need to consume increasing amounts of human flesh—a need never satiated—workers are driven to consume the offspring of their own creativity and are mesmerized by our consumer society into craving more and more products of labor in order to support and sustain an inequitable system where “creativity, artistic expression, and personal fulfillment are equated with consuming more and more things” (p. 165). Workers become the Zombies of global capitalism which is “best served by large populations that equate living with consuming” (p. 160). This might help explain the spike in Zombie films over the past few years (Newitz, 2010; Wilson, 2009). Clearly, workers are feeling the effects of a culture consumed by a mounting need to consume for survival. The undercurrents of dissatisfaction with the excesses of unregulated capitalism will surely be reflected in popular culture. And for people living in a consumer culture—where they must consume their own humanity (the products of their day-to-day existence) in order to survive—it’s a virtual no-brainer that we should consider the Zombies Among Us.

Researchers and practitioners in the fields of adult education and HRD often rely on traditional curricular materials and a prescribed body of academic “knowledge” for teaching, evaluating, and training adults—presuming a coherent body of prior knowledge, assumptions, and experiences among their students enabling them to effectively connect to those materials. Of course, our experience reveals such reliance is misplaced—the reality being something altogether different. Yet within the arena of science fiction and horror, diverse individuals often share an enthusiastic, unifying space called fandom. It is in this shared social space that holistic meaning-making and transformational learning may be given succor. Many of these spaces are created
online in social networking sites and, as such, frequently become sites of “new relationships and identity formation” (Subrahmanyam, et al., 2008, p. 421).

Cunningham (2004, p. 228) notes that educators, “act as though individuals have no debt to their social group—but where do individuals find their culture, their values, their ethics, their meaning in life if it is not from their group?” She goes on to stress that ignoring an individual’s culture promotes a “myth of individualism” and perpetuates a focus on workplace learning with “buzzwords” and trends such as “portability” and “high-performance culture” (p. 229). This type of objective, rational language may increase adults’ feelings of alienation. For Fromm (1956), when “a living human being ceases to be an end in himself [sic] and becomes the means for the economic interests of another man [sic], or himself, or of an impersonal giant, the economic machine” (p. 93), that person becomes alienated, dissatisfied, and robot-like. Schor (1992) describes this worker as the “homo economicus” or economic man, whose most important trait is that he can never be satiated. In order to maintain that subjugation of workers, they are convinced by our consumer culture that they must consume voraciously, yet they remain unfulfilled. Like the dilemma posed by attempting to live democratically in a capitalist consumer culture, many adult education and HRD practices based on helping adults become more marketable or better employees actually reduce learning to an act of survival and a means to more consumption rather than a lifelong practice of creative fulfillment, helping others and contributing to humanity. The focus is on individual achievement (i.e. the ability to buy more and more stuff), despite the effect on the environment and people. This act of individual survival as learning is a common theme in science fiction and horror fiction, films and comics. This paper provides an overview of possible insights from zombie and vampire lore and integrates those interpretations with the area of critical adult education and critical HRD. I also explore innovative and alternative ways of framing adult learning and critical reflection with today’s ever expanding horror fandom.

**Horror Media as Critical Adult Education and Workforce Pedagogy**

Bierema (2000) posits that “HRD theory and practice have historically aligned with corporate interests, oftentimes at the expense of workers with less clout and power” (p. 282). And Cunningham (2004) points out that, “there is no permanent rapprochement until those in HRD engage in critical pedagogy in the workplace as should their colleagues in academe” (p. 236). Since the “owner of capital uses other men [sic] for the purpose of his [sic] own profit” (Fromm, 1956, p. 93), there can be no sense of community between the two and no sense of personal creative fulfillment for the worker. This disconnect may be reflected in the more fringe popular cultural movements, since mainstream popular culture seeks to undergird the corporate structures that create and promote it.

Adult educators and HRD instructors in the post-Enron/WorldCom/Bush/Sub-Prime era have an ethical responsibility to “educate workers on globalism... and what is going on in labor movements in other countries” (Cunningham, 2004, p. 237). Taking up Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) argument that in a classed society, the battle for workers’ rights is fought in the realm of ideology and propaganda, some critical adult educators insist that there is a dialectical relationship between ideological change and material change in both society and the workplace. We are witnessing almost unprecedented material change in much of the Western world and especially in the US. I posit that it is the informal learning from popular culture that often shapes individual ideologies and identities, especially when pre-learned values and beliefs seem to have failed. Popular culture, while overwhelmingly corporate-serving and hegemonic, provides
opportunities for both subversive production of counter-hegemonic artifacts and counter-hegemonic negotiated audience interpretations of hegemonic representations. Specifically here, I explore counter-hegemonic representations in the popular cultural artifacts of two icons of horror—Zombies and Vampires.

Carter and Howell (1998) insist that the study of cultural artifacts is “one of the many lenses available to help understand and interpret issues of workplace learning” (p. 85). Horror films, books and comics often present workplace learning as sites where adults expand their imaginations to assimilate new experiences, design self-directed learning activities to improve their performance, and undergo perspective transformation (often represented as physical transformation) as the dénouement.

**Zombies as Workers Who Become the Ultimate Consumers**

Vampires, who suck human lifeblood, and Zombies who eat human flesh are gaining in popularity with adult consumers. I posit that the explosion of free market ideology over the past decade is the reason for the increase in adult horror fans. The global market demands individualistic thinking and an insatiable appetite for consumer goods. Critical scholars from a variety of disciplines point out that, since the planet has finite resources, this way of life is unsustainable. Eventually, some workers will rebel as they continue to realize fewer and fewer goods from their labors (as, perhaps, we are beginning to see in the Middle East). Others will succumb to mindless consumption. Similarly, Zombie films invariably depict a Zombie Apocalypse. The Zombie Apocalypse unfolds in a world where Zombies have overrun all national governments and individuals are left to survive in small pockets of civilization. Those individuals inevitably realize that they cannot survive unless they work together as communities of practice. Therefore, civilization and society is redefined and will now be determined by those survivors—the workers who fight will prevail and the flesh-eating automatons who stay the course will rot with their desire to consume. These latter begin to feed on the rich, breaking down the walls surrounding their gated communities and their McMansions. In George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*, for example, a procession of Zombies trudge to a huge shopping mall to feed on the fat flesh of capitalist consumers. Consumers are literally consumed by mindless former humans. Horror films are spaces in which there is an “absolute blurring of boundaries between good and evil, real and unreal. …Institutions are questioned and the master status of the universal (read male, white, moneyed, heterosexual) subject deteriorates” (Piñedo, p. 31). After all, Marx explained that “Capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks” (Marx, 1967, p. 233). Once sucked dead, labor wants revenge. Likewise, the Zombies in films are often working class stiffs (pardon the pun) who have totally succumbed to capitalist hegemony and become the ultimate consumers. They band together into a collective, create a cultural commons (Bowers, 2005), and work together to break through barriers to their consumption of living flesh and continue to survive. So do the surviving still-humans. Each group survives by finding others with a common interest in survival. Bowers explains a cultural commons as “local traditions of knowledge and patterns of mutual support that enabled communities to be relatively self-sufficient” (p. 3). These cultural commons are “dependent upon the environmental commons” (p. 3). After the Zombie Apocalypse, survival by dedicating oneself to trading one’s efforts (work) for tokens (money) used for ever-increasing individual consumption is no longer environmentally feasible. Each group, undead zombies and living humans, must discover and attach themselves to the cultural
commons to which they best belong and renounce individualism and materialism in a world of diminishing resources.

**Vampires as the Capitalist Ideal**

Vampires, on the other hand, often represent the wealthy capitalist elite. The incomprehensible success of Stephanie Meyers’ *Twilight* series both in books and in movies, and the popularity of Charlaine Harris’ Sookie Stackhouse series in print and as HBO’s popular series, *True Blood*, indicates that vampire lore is no longer simply the guilty pleasure of brooding Victorianists and the rebellious reading material of white, middle-class fanboys. Adults of all races, cultures and types have developed an insatiable desire for Vampire voyeurism. And Vampires are always well-to-do, posh and aristocratic. They are the opportunistic blood-suckers who always cash-in on other people’s misery. They are also incredibly seductive. Vampires are very individualistic and are surrounded by sycophantic servants hoping to be rewarded with a share of the takings. Of course, the crumbs fed them by the aristocratic Vampires serves only to whet the appetite, feeding their greed and desire for more, while famishing their humanity. Vampires and their sycophants are not in the least interested in building a community for the betterment of local culture and bioregion, much less survival. They are confident that they will live—and rule by wealth—forever.

Most people are familiar with the Dracula stories, first told by Bram Stoker in 1897. Based on an actual wealthy and cruel Romanian ruler, Vlad III Dracul, who impaled his 100,000 victims on sharp poles in the mid-1400s, Stoker’s Dracula was a viscount, living in a castle in Transylvania, who fed upon those within his realm. Today’s vampire stories run along a similar vein (puns are inevitable). For this short paper, I will discuss one recent incarnation of the vampire myth, *Moonlight*, a TV series on the Sci-Fi Channel voted the 2008 People’s Choice Award winner for Favorite New TV Drama. It seems appropriate to look at *Moonlight* since 2008 was the year that found us in the deepest economic recession since the Great Depression. The vampire in this series is a kind-hearted private investigator, Mick St. John, who solves murders and watches out for a beautiful, blond TV reporter, Beth Turner. On the surface, the monster has turned into a good guy. He is, of course, sexy and intense, well-to-do, and lives on human blood. However, he does not bite his victims. He buys his nutritional needs from his best friend, Josef Kostan, a more ancient vampire who has amassed a vast wealth in the financial world, lives in today’s equivalent of a castle overlooking Las Angeles, and feeds on humans. He also milks some of the blood to sell to his best friend, St. John. So while Mick St. John appears to be philanthropic, he is callously blind to the fact that his friend supplies him with blood from human victims. As they sit near the pool overlooking Hollywood, with fellow vampire stock traders working nearby (adding to Kostan’s obscene wealth) and drink the blood of young women, the audience is supposed to be sympathetic to them because St. John, the hero, occasionally does something nice for the one woman he’s obsessed with. Likewise, when Bill Gates sets up a foundation to help fix what he says is wrong with education, people ignore the fact that Microsoft is a monopoly that sucks the life force from myriad smaller companies and their hopeful creators.

Despite the People’s Choice Award, *Moonlight* lasted only one season. It was then awarded the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Films award for the Best Television Series Released on DVD in 2009. But it was followed by a variety of other vampire revivals on television and film. The aristocratic, elitist, seductive Vampire (almost always white, male, well-built, and irresistible) remains a constant in popular culture—and his perpetual
popularity should remind us that the wealthy, whose riches endure because inheritance is so meagerly taxed and the bloodlines must continue, still feed upon the poor and middle class.

Implications for Adult Education and Human Resource Development
A consumer society, with an economy based almost solely on mass consumption of goods, benefits the wealthy and alienates everyone else. As Newitz (2006) observes, many subplots of horror movies can be interpreted as narratives of the human condition as it might exist when workers feel helpless in a poorly organized and poorly managed, exploitive work environment. These horror films represent:

Serial killers, whose murders are reenactments of conditions under which they must labor, and zombies who cannot rest because colonialism has consigned them to a horrifying halfway point between life and death. Mad doctors experiment on themselves to escape the mental alienation of professional jobs and cyborgs struggle to depopulate their corporate-controlled minds. (Newitz, 2006, p. 182)

Analyzing the messages in these films may help adult educators and HRD professionals to understand and to teach complicated critical and postmodern adult learning theories and critical cultural analysis. YouTube offers almost unlimited clips that can be used in class to illustrate the effects of the misnomered “free-market” on workers.

Tisdell and Thompson (2005) argue that “because adult learners are large consumers of entertainment media, critical media studies/literacy have a role to play in adult education. It is especially relevant in teaching about diversity and equity” (p. 425). Vampires are in vogue. Zombies are huge. Adult educators and HRD professionals sometimes must choose a part to play: Van Helsing or Renfield? As Newitz (2006) effectively argues, horror movies represent the horrors of unregulated capitalism’s most egregious crimes against humanity and the inevitable retribution of the laborers. These lessons learned from culture are not checked when workers punch the time-clock and students enter the classroom. And popular horror narratives can expose systemic bias, uncover capitalistic exploitation, and promote social justice agendas. Those narratives can be used in effective critical pedagogical practices in university adult education and HRD classrooms, adult basic education, and even as part of an organization’s responsibility to its workforce, to its clientele, and to the community at large. And few students will complain of boredom.

References


