

## **Murder Legendre's Dead: How *White Zombie* Challenges Critical Influence and Reinforces Racial Anxieties**

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### **ABSTRACT**

How does a film achieve success with audiences, and what factors influence that success? Victor Halperin's 1932 horror film *White Zombie* was derided by critics at the time of its release, while at the same time attaining financial victory at the box office. As such, *White Zombie* serves as a key source for exploring these critical questions. This analysis of the evolution of *White Zombie*'s reception from the 1930s to the present through the study of archival documents reveals the influential role advertising—specifically advertising that taps into cultural fascinations and anxieties—has over critical reviews. This is found to be especially true within the B-film horror genre, with its tendency to draw a cult following despite its lack of technical mastery, providing a larger commentary on what the public values in horror films. (HL)

**KEYWORDS:** *White Zombie*, Victor Halperin, B-film, horror, zombie, Vodou

What makes a good film? Does a film's success derive from its critical acclaim, its box office numbers, or the intangible quality of its audience's viewing experience? When asking these questions, it is to be noted that what qualifies as a praiseworthy film for critics does not necessarily accord with the criteria for audiences. As such, a more important question, perhaps, is how much influence one of these factors has over another. Victor Halperin's 1932 horror film *White Zombie* serves as a fruitful case study to answer some of these critical questions, which

have yet to be thoroughly interrogated within film history scholarship. More specifically, archival documents surrounding *White Zombie*'s release disclose a great disparity between the film's largely negative critical response and the public's positive reception. What caused this disparity in opinion for America's first zombie film, and has this disparity changed over time? This analysis of the evolution of *White Zombie*'s reception from the 1930s to the present reveals the influential role advertising—specifically advertising that taps into cultural fascinations and anxieties—has over critical reviews, especially within the horror B-film genre. Despite negative critical reviews at the time of its release, the general public received *White Zombie* positively, primarily due to the film's unique advertising, which took advantage of Americans' fascination with Orientalist zombie culture and the supernatural. In the present day, when *White Zombie* is no longer being actively advertised, its recognition has all but disappeared in general public discourse, especially when compared to the famous counterparts of its time, such as *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*—despite the fact that retrospective critical acclaim for the film has grown. This shift thus demonstrates the influential impact of *White Zombie*'s advertising, perhaps providing insight into what audiences value in a horror film.

There are, however, methodological challenges of using archival research to analyze how a film was received at the time of its release. One such challenge is that the opinions of the general public cannot be analyzed directly through archival documents. While box office numbers are beneficial in offering a general picture of the public's relationship to a film, it is also true that just because a person paid to see a movie, it does not mean that they enjoyed it. Similarly, news stories about the film's reception are not infallible, since magazines such as *Variety* were funded by advertising revenue from production studios, and it would therefore be profitable for them to portray a film positively. It is also worth noting that some of the information I analyze regarding the film's reception comes from advertisements, which are tainted with bias to promote the film. Despite these challenges to an entirely objective view of

the film, these documents still serve to provide a general understanding of critics' reception of the film in contrast to that of the public, both in 1932 and now. Moreover, *White Zombie*, being independently produced by Halperin, did not hold as much influence over journalists as films produced by well-known entertainment companies at the time, so issues of bias within these documents are not as prominent in this analysis.<sup>1</sup>

### **Zombies and the 1930s**

One does not often associate flapper-style dresses with a craving for brains. Yet the American zombie was born in the pulp printing houses, where horror literature flourished. Roger Luckhurst in *Zombies: A Cultural History* acknowledges the popularity of these pulp magazines: "The golden era of the pulps was the 1930s, when it is estimated that over 30 million Americans were reading nearly 150 titles per year by the outbreak of the Second World War" (58). While the horrific tales told in these magazines were diverse, much of their themes stemmed from the Gothic tradition of the nineteenth century, which had developed a growing fascination with the reanimated dead. Luckhurst argues that

There were tales of body snatchers who haunted cemeteries for low-rent anatomists. Varney the Vampire launched a penny dreadful serial of unending undead returns. Victorian newspapers obsessed about every true-life incident of premature burial. Many of these recurred in the twentieth-century horror pulps. (60)

One classic example of a story that rose to fame out of this literary culture is H. P. Lovecraft's "Herbert West—Reanimator," published in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*—a tale that serves as one of the first depictions of zombies as reanimated corpses with animalistic temperaments.

Another famous zombie tale from the time is Robert E. Howard's "Pigeons from Hell," in which the term "zombie" is contrasted with a female equivalent, the "zuvembie."

Apart from their fascination with the undead, these first zombie tales also have in common the use of "far-flung, exotic settings and Orientalist coloring. The stories were suffused with paranoia about foreign menace and fears of invasion or subversion" (Luckhurst 61). In 1930s America, racism flourished with the rise of the "Yellow Peril" from China and the "Red Scare" of immigrants from Eastern Europe. Lynchings continued without consequence in the South and the Ku Klux Klan thrived, all during America's occupation of Haiti from 1915-1934. Following this discourse,

pulp fiction often reflected back these racial anxieties, seeking populist approval. . . . In the *Weird Tales* roster, Lovecraft and Howard were pathological racists. . . . These pulp writers wrote hypnotic race fantasies, dripping with the weird menaces threatening to undo the last scions of white manhood in a delirium of miscegenation and monstrosity. (Luckhurst 63)

*White Zombie* was not ignorant of the racism embedded in 1930s zombie culture, and played a part in reinforcing this discourse, most notably through its advertising campaign. As Jennifer Fay describes in her analysis of *White Zombie*,

To draw audiences to the theater, exhibitors were encouraged to "hire several negroes" to beat "tom toms" while adorned in "tropical garments." "Every once in a while have them cut loose with a couple of blood-curdling yells. Be sure they simulate the Negro rhythms as heard in the first reel of the picture." (84)

Moreover, “displays inside the theater teased filmgoers with supposed artifacts of magic: armed with these props—including handcuffs and a magic wand—they too might create a ‘white zombie’ of their own” (84). *White Zombie*’s theatrical trailer similarly taps into this Orientalist fascination, opening with: “From Haiti, land of the Voodoo, comes the most infamous cult of all” (“Trailer–White Zombie”). By characterizing Vodou as a practice associated with cultism, the trailer portrays Haitian culture as sinister, with motivations to evangelize and consume innocent white Americans under its hypnotic spell—a reverse form of colonization. An extreme close-up of Béla Lugosi’s glowing eyes follows this line, his notably bushy, exoticized eyebrows filling the top of the frame. Throughout the trailer, the darkness of the Haitian landscape is contrasted with Madge Bellamy’s white silhouette, exaggerated by the black and white color scheme. The end of the trailer emphasizes this contrast of black and white in stating, “Never eyes so evil, never powers so potent, never magic so black” (“Trailer–White Zombie”). This statement firmly associates Blackness—in the sense of magic as well as race—with evil. By contrasting black magic with Bellamy’s whiteness, *White Zombie*’s trailer creates appeal by capitalizing on American anxieties of being consumed by the cultures that they have similarly oppressed.

As such, *White Zombie*’s interactive and Orientalist advertising campaign served to perpetuate “the prevailing stereotypes of the ‘backwards’ natives and western imperialist superiority” that were especially heightened at the time of America’s occupation of Haiti (Garland 276). This racialization and exoticization of black bodies for the sake of entertainment was not new, yet *White Zombie* tapped into this bizarre mix of admiration and fear in innovative ways to promote interest and curiosity in the general public. As Fay describes, “Aspiring to penetrate local everyday American life with the signifiers of voodoo, *White Zombie*’s advertising campaign, initiated after seventeen years of a controversial occupation, staged a Haitian invasion of a different order” (84). *White Zombie*’s ability to exploit the white American

public's combination of racism and fascination with the 'other' therefore reasonably played a key role in its success.

### Critical reviews (1930s)

While film critics of the 1930s largely responded negatively to *White Zombie*, first it is important to acknowledge the positive reviews so that we may narrow down where critics perceived the film went wrong. To begin, *The Film Daily* reported that *White Zombie* "rates with the best of this type of film . . . Bela Lugosi is very impressive and makes the picture worthwhile" (Rhodes 266). While "this type of film" remains undefined in this statement, their mention of Lugosi points to his famous association with other horror films, including *Dracula* of the previous year. Critic Frank Coleman in *Corsair* makes this association more explicit, stating,

*White Zombie* is another *Dracula* only more so. It has a more ghoulish atmosphere. It haunts more graveyards and opens more coffins. . . . The picture is well directed and smooth throughout. . . . For those who like their entertainment nerve racking, *White Zombie* will fill the bill. (2)

Though the praise is not as high, *Harrison's Reports* similarly wrote, "[The film] is certainly not up to the standards of *Dracula* or *Frankenstein*, but the types of audience that go for horror pictures will enjoy it" (Rhodes 267). Despite the somewhat backhanded nature of this review, the compliment to its appeal to horror fans remains, and it turned out to be fairly accurate. Examining these generally positive reviews, it is immediately clear that *White Zombie*'s small success with critics was largely due to its casting of Béla Lugosi as zombie master Murder Legendre. In this way, the few positive reviews *White Zombie* received were not due to its

technical or artistic merits, but rather to the influential power of its star—a characteristic that was likely also an attractive feature for the general public.

The negative critical attention *White Zombie* received was greater in both number as well as the scale of condemnation. Some critics, such as those from *Commonweal*, provided no concrete reasoning for their dislike of the film, simply stating that the film was “interesting only in measure of its complete failure” (Rhodes 267). Similarly, in *Vanity Fair*’s “Worst Movie of 1932” article, Pare Lorentz wrote about a “terrific deadlock with *Blonde Venus* holding a slight lead over *White Zombie*, *Bring ‘Em Back Alive*, and *Murders in the Rue Morgue*” (Rhodes 268). Others offered more detailed commentary beyond simply calling it a failure. Most critical reviews focused on the poor silent era-style acting, stilted dialogue, and over-the-top storyline. For example, *The Cinema News and Property Gazette* claimed the film was for the “less sophisticated,” and that the “exaggerated treatment of the subject achieves reverse effect to thrill or conviction” (Rhodes 163). This note regarding the film’s exaggerated characteristics is written many times over, from Thornton Delehaney of the *New York Evening Post* stating, “The story tries to out-Frankenstein *Frankenstein*, and so earnest is it in its attempt to be thrilling that it overreaches its mark all along the line and resolves into an unintentional and often hilarious comedy,” to Irene Thirer of the *New York Daily News* who contends: “Many fantastic and eerie scenes are evolved, but most of them border on ludicrous” (Rhodes 265-66). These comments all critique the film’s plot—which is largely based on Orientalist constructions of Haitian Vodou practices—as too ludicrous to be believable or scary. A critic from *Motion Picture Reviews* expands on this notion, arguing, “While the weird superstitions of the natives of Haiti offer real basis for a story of the powers of the witch doctors, this tale is only fantastic and unbelievable, like the creation of a crazed brain” (Women’s University Club 10). This statement reveals that while the curious appeal of Haiti’s Vodou was enough to attract and please average filmgoers, critics generally felt that the film went too far, exaggerating this aspect at the expense

of a sophisticated plot. Yet despite the critics' overwhelming distaste for *White Zombie's* storytelling, the audience, on the other hand, did not necessarily attend the film for a sophisticated plot.

### **Audience response (1930s)**

As stated previously, it is more difficult to determine the quality of *White Zombie's* 1932 audience's response to the film, since such opinions have not been recorded or preserved. Instead, we must rely on box office numbers, news stories, and advertisements to gauge a general understanding of how the public received the film. In terms of monetary success, Luckhurst claims, "*White Zombie* made a twenty-fold return on the initial investment [of \$100,000]" (76). In addition to this accomplishment, *White Zombie* is also reported to have sold a record 16,728 tickets its first weekend on its initial release in August, and the popularity of the film facilitated Victor Halperin's contract with Paramount Studios (Rhodes 162, 266). Hal Horne from the *Film Daily Yearbook* reports on the film's theatrical advertising campaign performed outside a local theatre, claiming, "By actual clocking during one noon hour, it was observed that more than 14,608 people stopped to witness the playlet put on for their benefit. Needless to say the picture ran for three weeks and turned in top-notch grosses" (674). Eddie Hitchcock from the *Motion Picture Herald* similarly comments on crowds around the theatre on Broadway, and even mentions the discrepancy between the general public's response with that of critics: "Most surprising of all is the fact that it has served to upset accepted precepts concerning newspaper reviews. *White Zombie* drew mediocre newspaper comment on its New York opening, and in spite of it packed them in from the very beginning" (66).

*White Zombie* honed in on this inconsistency in its favor within its print advertising. For instance, an advertisement published in *Variety* wrote, "In the case of *White Zombie* at the Rivoli, the local critics almost without exception gave it a weak rating. And what happened?"



They are piling ‘em [sic] in at every performance” (6). Later, the same advertisement provides a humorous anecdote:

When we caught the picture the opening day, two girls sat alongside us. They were intelligent girls, as their whispered remarks proved. “What a macabre situation!” “But it’s intriguing,” said the other. . . . Now, girls who can talk like that are not dumb. They know what they like. And so these two sat bent forward with taut nerves, and when it was all over, they relaxed with sighs of complete satisfaction. They had been thoroughly entertained. (6)

In these instances, *White Zombie*’s advertisements appeal to the masses and the average viewer, ridiculing the critics as out-of-touch, which, according to the box office numbers, is a relatively correct assertion. The anecdote even responds to *The Cinema News and Property Gazette*’s claim that the film is for the “less sophisticated,” as it insists that the girls—representing the general public—are “not dumb” and “know what they like.”

So why was there such a discrepancy between the critics and the public in their impression of this film? The advertisement provides one possible explanation. The critics, who largely concentrate on the film’s script and plot, have forgotten to take into account horror’s function (especially in its youth) as a source of entertainment and shock—characteristics that do not require a sophisticated or complicated plotline or stellar acting. In fact, *White Zombie* fits quite snugly into the B-film category, a genre traditionally ignored or derided by critics but loved by audiences. The B-film—named as such to identify films intended for distribution on the B-side of a double feature—arose in 1920s in Hollywood at the end of the silent era, when studios began producing low-budget films with a greater emphasis on quantity rather than quality in order to derive maximum value from their facilities and staff in between larger, more

profitable productions (Finler 41-42). These types of films had two characteristics in common: they were rarely advertised, and were often ignored by critics, causing the majority of them to gain little public attention. *White Zombie*, though, was treated differently, with an elaborate advertising campaign and greater attention from critics, both factors likely contributing to its popularity with the public. In this way, critics' attempts to dissuade the public from seeing the film may have actually assisted with its success, developing a "bad movie" appeal that drew audience curiosity.

This theory is further supported by contemporary analyses of B-film charm. A century after the invention of B-films, academics such as Steve Richards still find themselves asking why they enjoy "bad movies" so much. Richards admits that he never gave his interest in B-films much thought, since "tastes are so instinctive and subjective. . . . Why, for instance, do some people like the colour red and others the colour blue?" (18). It is fair to assume that this experience is consistent for the majority of film audiences, including those of *White Zombie*. Yet, Richards acknowledges, there appears to be more to B-film appeal than simply taste, due to the undying fandoms that have arisen out of cult films such as *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1957), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and *The Room* (2003), to name a few. Richards posits a few reasons for the draw of B-films, including the "So Bad It's Good" phenomenon where the filmmakers may be described as "lovably inept," the sense of escape into absurdism that they offer, and their association with the underground or taboo (18). All of these characteristics can be applied to *White Zombie*, with its over-the-top acting, exotic locale, and exploration of a perverted version of Haitian Vodou and black magic.

Though the popularity of low budget B-horror films did not peak until the 1950s, Béla Lugosi was known for his association with these types of films, so audiences would have expected *White Zombie*'s lack of budget or art house film standards. In light of this, we may assume that American viewers were drawn to the film precisely because of its B-film charm.

As such, the claim by critics that the film was only for the “less sophisticated” or simple minded reveals their perceived superiority over the masses, and in turn their ignorance regarding what the general American public values in a horror film. Whether it is the duty of critics to keep the interest of the masses in mind or not is beyond this analysis, but it nevertheless serves as one possible explanation for why they were wrong in their condemnation of *White Zombie*.

Along similar lines, critics of *White Zombie* also failed to consider the growing cultural interest in zombies in the 1930s in America—an interest that *White Zombie* strategically targeted and exploited within their advertising campaign. An advertisement for *White Zombie* in *Variety* acknowledges this misstep: “Here is a feature that possesses elements that the critics seemed to entirely overlook; it is based on the Supernatural, on Superstition, and the Mob is swayed by Superstition, while most of the Intelligentsia are interested in the Supernatural, so *White Zombie* starts off with a basic appeal that intrigues practically everybody” (6). In this statement, the advertisement posits that the supernatural and superstition are subjects of interest for both the average citizen and the highly cultured individual, again breaking the binary presented previously by critics.

What *White Zombie* does not acknowledge in this statement is its association of the supernatural with the racialized “other”—in this case the people of Haiti—as a popular trope of pulp fiction in the 1920s and 1930s, from which the film pulls inspiration. An article from the *Madera Tribute* recognizes the appeal of this aspect of the film:

[*White Zombie*] deals with a subject which heretofore has been little short of superstition . . . [the] occult practices in remote sections of Haiti where Zombies, or dead bodies, are dug from their graves and, by a process of sorcery, re-animated and put to work in the fields and mills as slaves. Whether or not you believe what you see in this picture, you will be enthralled by its presentation. (3)

The film's premise and plot thus may not be entirely believable to American audiences since it originates from "a belief of primitive Haitians," yet it remains "vastly intriguing" for its ability to shock and disturb (Coleman 2). These reports also reinforce the racist boundary between the "primitive Haitians" who believe in Vodou and the American audiences who only watch the film as a source of entertainment, to be "enthralled." *The New York State Exhibitor* mentions the role of the film's advertising in perpetuating this stereotype and attracting audiences, stating, "Yet the ads, playing up the unique angle of this picture brought out crowds the like of which has not been seen on Broadway in years" (15). In this way, *White Zombie's* incorporation of racist stereotypes was not simply one aspect that attracted White American audiences, but rather a driving force.

This embrace of racist tropes in Hollywood films inspired by pulp fiction of the 1920s and 1930s only grew in popularity long after *White Zombie's* release, especially within the B-film category. For example, 1943 brought *I Walked with a Zombie*, which mimicked many aspects of *White Zombie's* portrayal of Haitian Vodou, and has since been described as "an unqualified horror masterpiece" ("I Walked with a Zombie Reviews"). These stereotypes and tropes exploded with the arrival of the 1960s and 1970s, which ushered in a new age of the B-film: exploitation and, most notably, blaxploitation films. While exploitation films are characterized by their exaggerated and often vulgar subject matter for the sake of shock value, blaxploitation films apply this model to films predominately featuring Black actors but often written and produced by non-Black people, leading to the perpetuation of racial stereotypes for the sake of audience attraction and financial gain. According to Novotny Lawrence and Gerald R. Butters Jr., these stereotypes and racial aesthetics inevitably influenced other aspects of popular culture, including fashion, music, and television. Lawrence and Butters specifically reference how after the release of the gangster pic *Super Fly* (1972), "teenagers began styling

their hair and dressing like the film's protagonist, Youngblood Priest (Ron O'Neal), right down to the Ankh that he wore around his neck, which he used to snort cocaine" (746). As such, the spectacle of blaxploitation films had real-world influence, as Black teens began consuming and embodying the fetishistic images of themselves that they were presented with in B-film cinema. This fetishism of perverted Black culture can be traced back to forty years prior, with audience members playing with "tom toms" outside of theatres to experience "black magic" for themselves before entering the theatre to see *White Zombie*. Reflecting on this progression, *White Zombie's* adherence to the racist tropes present in the emerging B-film genre with its use of Black bodies and appropriation of Haitian culture within both its advertising and subject matter clearly influenced Americans' positive response to the film—as well as reinforced preconceived racial stereotypes of "primitive" Haitian spirituality—despite the fact that critics condemned it for some of the very same characteristics.

### Contemporary response

Knowing how much influence the prevailing racism of the 1930s had on the general public's response to *White Zombie*, it is necessary to compare contemporary responses to the film, now that the film's advertising no longer has the leverage that it did at the time of its release. First, it is noteworthy that *White Zombie* has lost popularity with contemporary audiences, especially when compared to its horrific counterparts: *White Zombie* only has 6,808 reviews (58% positive) on Rotten Tomatoes, while *Dracula* has 44,619 (81% positive) and *Frankenstein* has 41,492 (87% positive) ones. Nonetheless, *White Zombie's* reputation among contemporary critics appears to have improved. On Rotten Tomatoes, critic John Biefuss asserts, "It leads the viewer inside a fairy tale, not a slaughterhouse; it's expressionistic, not extreme. It affirms the power of the gesture, the shadow, the shudder. In other words: Who needs blood-red cannibalism when you've got a black-and-white Bela Lugosi?" Similarly, critic

Sean Axmaker writes, “The divinely satanic-looking Bela Lugosi sinks his teeth into his best role since *Dracula*, a languorous hypnotist and voodoo master who dominates the film with his assured bearing and cruel control.” While these reviews are undeniably positive, they fall into the same pattern as the reviews from the 1930s in their concentration on Béla Lugosi over the film itself. It is also worth noting that, as of 2019, there are almost as many negative critical reviews on Rotten Tomatoes for the film as there are positive ones.

It is even more revealing to witness the number of negative contemporary reviews of the film by the general public on various online platforms. For instance, Devon Bott on Rotten Tomatoes insists, “Apart from it’s [sic] notoriety as the first ‘zombie movie’ there isn’t much reason to watch this. It’s rather dull and uninteresting by today’s standards.” A similar critique of the film’s plot can be found on IMDB:

The sets, the creaky acting, and even the plot (with zombies) is all canned horror stuff. What made *Dracula* work was partly that it was first, and that the story is so classic. Here we have a more routine series of events with some familiar necessities—the innocent woman becoming a zombie, the innocent man trying to find a way out of the mess, and Lugosi and the knowing and powerful man behind all the evil. (Secondtake)

This review notably critiques the film’s plot in ways similar to the critics of the 1930s, though this time through a retrospective lens with greater knowledge of how the horror has evolved—resonating with another comment on a version of the film posted on YouTube, “It’s hard to believe this was scary in the old days.” While my analysis of the 1930s critical reviews of *White Zombie* reveals that not everyone in the “old days” considered the film to be scary, this comment points to larger social changes in America’s collective anxieties—in the twenty-first century, the film’s concentration on the Orientalist “other” to attract popular appeal has lost its touch. In

fact, whether much of the general public found the film to be scary at all is worth questioning—even the girls within the film’s own advertisement “relaxed with sighs of complete satisfaction” by the end of the film, not screamed in terror. This question, though speculative, reveals the key role the film’s advertising campaign had on its success—perhaps *White Zombie* was not popular with the box office because it was a terrifying horror film, but because its advertising appealed to the B-film charm, as well as the dominant racist discourse of the time. As such, *White Zombie*’s fall from grace in the eyes of the public makes sense, as the public’s opinion is no longer as influenced by the film’s advertising, targeted to a specific time and place.

### Conclusion

Is *White Zombie* a good film? The answer depends on whom—and when—you ask. But despite the film’s history—beginning with critical failure and popular appeal, only for that appeal to quickly fade, now residing but in the minds of a specific sect of horror fans—it nevertheless challenged many preconceived notions of how much influence critics have over the public’s perception of a film. As the *Motion Picture Herald* observes, “Most surprising of all is the fact that it has served to upset accepted precepts concerning newspaper reviews. *White Zombie* drew mediocre newspaper comment on its New York opening, and in spite of it packed them in from the very beginning” (Hitchcock 66). As this analysis reveals, it was instead the film’s unique advertising campaign that drew the crowds, and specifically its ability to tap into America’s prominent cultural anxieties and reinforce racial stereotypes for the sake of entertainment. With this in mind, one may inquire how this film would be advertised in the present day to meet contemporary social anxieties and horror standards. Despite the fact that these obvious forms of racism would likely not be celebrated within the general American public, the most pertinent question to ask may not be what would change, but rather what would remain the same?

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This analysis draws and depends on the archival documents available online, and it is a legitimate question why certain documents have been preserved over others. Throughout my research I have been acutely aware of the probability of missing documents that may provide a more complete narrative, yet this fact does not negate the value of this inquiry.

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