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Box office zeroes in on zombies, with great success

By Barry Caine, STAFF WRITER

PITY the poor zombies.

They seldom speak. Their posture is terrible.

And human tartare is all they can stomach.

No wonder they're cranky.

Zombies get no sympathy and no respect -- except at the box office.

"I like to call them 'undead,'" says Jeremy Bolt, producer of the zombie-driven "Resident Evil" and "Resident Evil: Apocalypse." "I think 'zombie' is a little derogatory, a little dismissive.

"To me, the reason they're frightening is they're neither alive nor dead but in a strange other world."

Bolt feels the pulse of the undead. "Resident Evil: Apocalypse," whose 2002 predecessor earned \$100 million, finished first at the box office a week ago, eating up the opposition.

The low-budget zombie film "28 Days Later" turned into a surprise hit last year.

If the trend continues, the British zombie comedy "Shaun of the Dead" will clog the turnstiles when it opens Friday.

The return of the undead is cyclical, like visits from distant in-laws.

Zombie movies come in waves, capturing the public's fancy, disappearing, then reappearing a few years later.

Whether caused by viruses, such as the current crop, by voodoo, black magic, toxic waste, radiation, alien or atmospheric antics, the mindless, soulless creatures beguile moviegoers and provide a kind of catharsis for their fears and unease.

By identifying with the heroes and their predicament, we can get in touch with some of our hidden emotions and find the strength to move forward, Oakland psychotherapist Birgit Wolz says.

"We intuitively sense that scary movies help us to work through, and possibly overcome, old fears and trauma," she says.

Some trauma stems from the feelings of being unable to keep up with society's frenzied pace.

"It sounds pretentious, but maybe at some level people lose the sense of who they are in our world," producer Bolt says. "Maybe at some level, we all feel we're ... losing our individuality more and more."

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Maybe.

Long, emotionally draining weeks -- or draining relationships -- often turn people into shells of themselves that drag zombie-like to the couch and sit mindlessly in front of the TV.

Don't be ashamed. It happens.

Recognizing aspects of ourselves in zombie films helps us laugh at our foibles, get perspective and kick ourselves where it does the most good.

Bolt suggests George Romero's movies, especially "Night of the Living Dead" and "Dawn of the Dead," continue to be in demand because of the "wonderful kind of existential loneliness" and "social commentary" at their heart.

That heart still beats strongly in video stores.

Other landmark films about the undead include 1932's "White Zombie" with Bela Lugosi and 1943's eerie "I

Walked with a Zombie."

The 1950s saw the rise of zombie-like pod people in sci-fi movies such as "Invasion of the Body Snatchers."

The contemporary rebirth began with Romero's "Night of the Living Dead," a low-budget 1968 cult favorite.

When Charlton Heston showed up in the 1971 zombie picture "The Omega Man," it signaled this horror subgenre had gone mainstream.

Perhaps, as psychotherapist Wolz suggests, the continued popularity stems from the fact that, ironic as it seems, the undead make us feel more alive.

Wolz takes her theory from Ernest Becker's Pulitzer Prize-winning book "The Denial of Death." In it, Becker says "the reason why we do what we do is ultimately because we are utterly terrified of death," Wolz explains. "And everything we do essentially consists of avoiding it."

In these films, the heroes stay alive by avoiding zombies; in other words, by confronting and overcoming death.

People watch zombie movies "because riding the edge of death is somehow, strangely enough, what makes them feel most alive. It is as if life and death are intimately, strongly connected," says Wolz, whose book "E-Motion Picture Magic: A Movie Lover's Guide to Healing and Transformation" is due out in mid-October from Glenbridge Publishing.

"A movie where oozing, flesh-chewing zombies wander the suburbs, looking for nice folks like you and me to bite, and a small group of folks (are) still alive and running from the zombies, we naturally, instinctively root for them to survive," Wolz says.

Horror movies are enjoyable because "they allow us to confront very real and deeply terrifying fears in a safe and protected environment," she says.

The theater's usually safer than walking through some neighborhoods.

"We live in a very, very tense world," says Jim Forsher, assistant professor in communications and director of the broadcast program at California State University, Hayward. "So there's some semblance to reality when you go to films like 'Resident Evil.' They're not that far off from how people's lives are, where neighbors are being shot and people are afraid to walk down streets at night."

Forsher equates the throngs of the undead with people on crack.

"Zombies can't be reasoned with; that's the scariest thing because it's the most real," says Forsher, a filmmaker whose 1984 documentary "Hollywood Ghost Story" showed how Hollywood has dealt with the occult, including zombies.

Movies about the undead function as good date films, Forsher says. They provide an excuse to hold hands and cuddle, not that you need an excuse. And they provide little brain food, so you can move the conversation to personal matters.

Essentially, zombie stories are rather uncomplicated. "How do you kill the dead? That's essentially the plot," Forsher says. "There're very effective because they create a world where you have obviously good people vs. a marching army of the dead."

To make a truly scary zombie film, producer Bolt says you need "a helluva a lot of them and a small number of you, or one in a small space with you and you don't have a gun. The thing I find frightening is they just keep on coming."

And no doubt they will continue to do so.

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