

# Shaun of the Dead

(2004, Wright, UK)

**Component 1: Varieties of Film & Film-Making (AL)**  
**Component 2: European Film**

**Core Study Areas:**  
**Key Elements of Film Form**  
**Meaning & Response**  
**The Contexts of Film**

**Specialist Study Area:**  
**Narrative**  
**Ideology (AL)**

## Rationale for study

- *Shaun of the Dead* is one of the most successful contemporary British comedies and a film that perfectly encapsulates ideas of post-modern generic hybridity. It rode the wave of a new cycle of zombie films which arguably started with Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (UK 2002). *Shaun of the Dead* is the first cinematic outing for Edgar Wright, Simon Pegg and Nick Frost all of whom have, to varying degrees, forged successful cinematic careers. The film is also the first in what is known informally as *The Cornetto Trilogy*: contemporary set, UK based comedies directed by Wright and featuring the central character pairing of Pegg and Frost.

## STARTING POINTS- Useful Sequences and Timings – Beginnings and Endings

### Beginning

- The shuffling 'slacker generation' is parodied in the title sequence. The audience for the film is presented as an exhausted generation of 'zombies' reared on video games, vapid digital communication and a highly mediated culture whilst made to work with mind-numbing mundanity as further parodied by the ageing 'trolley dolly'. The first close up of Shaun (other than in the pre-credit

sequence), shows him yawning and shuffling like a zombie as he gets up for work.

### End

- Shaun grows-up over the period of the film and is reunited with his girlfriend with whom he ends up sharing a house with. However zombies are now assimilated into every day life and he can't quite bid farewell to his old habits and his old friend, Ed – now a zombie. Thus he keeps him chained in the garden shed like a guilty secret or a bad pet and there Shaun can, on occasion, visit him and still indulge his inner child. Men, it seems, don't really want to grow up.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS – Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

### Cinematography

29:19 & 33:16

- This great use of deep focus framing give us the gory detail associated with the genre and Shaun's shocked reaction to the unstoppable force that these zombies represent. The violence he must now unleash on this particular zombie leads to Shaun's iconic weapon – a quintessentially English cricket bat.

21:43

- A conventionally lit horror scene with a silhouetted character in the mid ground, shot in low key light and framed by smoke or mist. He even howls, groans and staggers but of course Ed and Shaun just think he's a drunk.

07:08 to 08:08

- Wright shoots a one minute, long take and hand-held track to follow Shaun from his home to the shop over the road. The effect of this is to give a certain grandeur and realism to suburbia as well as to introduce a number of incidental local characters whom we also see in a later scene, another long take and hand-held track, that replays Shaun's visit to and

from the shop (24:42 to 26:37). On Shaun's second visit most of the people we first met are either dead or zombies and the street is in chaos: Shaun, needless to say, is oblivious.

- We also learn through briefly glimpsed newspaper headlines and an overheard radio news bulletin of the possible causes of the zombie outbreak: GM crops, a super-flu bug, and a satellite burning up over south east England. These are all tropes for the man-made zombie apocalypse and the enigma is never solved for the spectator.

### Mise-en-Scène

- Shaun and Ed two male 30 somethings trapped in a student inflected adolescence, playing video games, surrounded by sweet wrappers, cans and soft drug paraphernalia.
- At the end of the film we see a more mature Shaun, now living with Liz and happily domesticized.

22:10

- After being dumped by his girlfriend, Liz, and getting drunk down the pub, Shaun and Ed play music until late and revert to their adolescence as symbolised by the reverse baseball caps. This leads to a fractious showdown with their more mature work-drone flatmate.
- A clever and funny matching of mise-en-scène occurs at 53:41 when Shaun's gang runs into Yvonne's gang – all variants of each other. Offering a nod to fans of *Spaced* (Yvonne, an ex-girlfriend of Shaun's, is also Daisy) we also see cameos from major comic talent of the period such as: Matt Lucas, Tamsin Grieg, Reece Shearsmith and Martin Freeman.

### Editing

- Wright loves a montage of banal activities, such as making a cup of tea and buttering some toast (04:50 – 04:54) as well as dramatic ones, loading and firing the Winchester's gun – with 'shells not bullets' – a verbal nod to the impact of USA films on Wright and Pegg who wrote the film. Sound stings and rapidly edited images with accompanying crash zooms or whip pans also add drama to the everyday as well as giving a dynamism to edits across scenes.
- A montage of three hypothetical attempts to rescue Liz (Shaun's recent ex) each with a different outcome are played out from 35:34.
- As Shaun flicks aimlessly through the TV channels the random snatches of dialogue and

image construct a witty summary of events before a News Flash from a real news presenter finally enables Shaun to realise the gravity of events. (26:47 - L to R: Morrisey gig – "Panic on the streets of London"; Football – "serious attacks on"; animal documentary – "eaten alive.")

### Sound

- Non-diegetic electronic sound stings are used throughout the film to disguise edits and transfer energy to the following scene as well as to create comic juxtapositions.
- The use of diegetic music in The Winchester pub via a juke box playing on random provides further hilarity as Liz, Ed and Shaun attack a zombie barman with pool cues; their actions in time to the music. The upbeat Queen song *Don't Stop Me Now* is of course ironic as is the song that ends the film, *You're My Best Friend*.
- The sound designers, Woodhead and Mudford, referenced Italian zombie films in their original score and used sound cues from Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

### Representations

*Ethnicity, gender, age*

- The ethnic representations are all virtually of white southerners – give or take a few tokenistic zombies. The representation of age is focussed on the twenty-something experience and gender is again largely filtered through the male view – Shaun and Ed's primarily. Shaun's girlfriend does however emerge triumphant having domesticated and matured her partner – their eventual equality has been achieved through his journey not hers.

*Contemporary Suburban England*

- The film was shot largely on location in the London suburbs of Crouch End, Muswell Hill, Finsbury Park and East Finchley. The everyday therefore permeates the film, such as the many scenes shot in The Winchester pub – a typical back-street Victorian boozier. Also of note is the suburban and British flavour to so many of the deaths; aside from the cricket bat and spade referenced above we have the attempted dispatching of zombies with kitchen implements, darts, a swing ball, a child's plastic chair, a jukebox and of course LP's. The first gun is fired at 01:10:42 and even that is accidental – although

not for long. This is all revisionist as the genre, which is American in origin, is gun heavy (see below for other zombie film marketing). In the UK our garden sheds, it seems, will be where we'll find the means to protect ourselves from the apocalypse – at least until the army arrives with their submachine guns as we witness in the closing scenes of the film.

- Aside from the montage of brain-dead workers in the credit sequence, this image, of Shaun's juvenile and disaffected colleagues, dressed like school children, speaks volumes about the alienating effect of his work. Our zombie nation may start at home on video games and in front of the TV but the workplace completes the brain numbing process.

### Aesthetics

#### Music

- The film starts with Ghost Town as a non-diegetic element and then becomes diegetic when we arrive in the first scene at The Winchester pub adding to the film's realism.

#### Sound

- Throughout the first twenty minutes, as Shaun's emotional world collapses around him due to his failed relationships with his Mum and girlfriend, the landscape around him gradually descends into aural and visual chaos as the world at large becomes a zombie playground. Distant sirens can be heard ratcheting up the sense of panic.

#### Gore

- Gore and Zombie films are joined at the 'soon-to-be-graphically-extracted hip'! And there are some essential visual tropes that any self-respecting zombie film maker needs to homage. Wright does not disappoint. Three obvious ones from *Shaun of the Dead* spring to mind.
- Firstly there is the 'initial dispatching scene' whereby characters learn how to stop for good, a lone zombie or two. This very funny and gory scene occurs in Shaun and Ed's back garden as they dispense with their first two zombies. After some inept attempts to decapitate them with kitchen utensils and LP's, they select a spade and cricket bat and bash in brains. (See 'cinematography' above).
- The second incident involves a horde of zombies bursting into a previously safe haven by sheer weight of numbers. This occurs in The Winchester as evidenced by this exterior shot of the zombie horde

massing outside the pub. (01:09:33)

- A final classic scene is the gory dismemberment of a human by the zombie horde. David faces that grisly fate (see above: 01:19:20) – his entrails extracted before his disbelieving eyes. This scene references the antagonist's demise in Romero's, *Day of the Dead* (1985).

## CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

### Social

- This film can be read as a satire of modern life in the UK. (See below in 'Ideology' and above.) It is also a cult film as evidenced by its transgressive material, its quotable script, its stylish, fast paced filming and editing and finally the ubiquity of merchandising still very much available. The film's success led to 2 more indirect sequels from similar production, directing and acting teams: *Hot Fuzz* (2007) and *The World's End* (2013).
- The film's antecedents in terms of character dynamics for Pegg and Frost and directing/editing style from Wright can also be traced back to the hit Channel 4 sit-com *Spaced* (1999 to 2001). *Spaced* was a kind of 'anti-Friends' of 2 series and 14 episodes and it was written by Pegg and Jessica Stevenson who plays Yvonne in *Shaun of The Dead*. The influential 'Art' episode was Series 1, Episode 3.

### Historical

- The film is a homage to George Romero's zombie genre cycle. Most obviously this is found in the film's title *Shaun of the Dead* – an obvious reference to Romero's, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978, USA). 2004 also saw the release of Zack Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead* which came out in the USA in March, 6 months prior to *Shaun of the Dead*'s USA release.

### Political

- The film has an anarchic tone. Although the government, in the form of the military, does eventually save the day – individuals need to cooperate first.

### Technological

- Wright's 'kinetic style of filmmaking' involves numerous crash zooms and whip pans as well as a hectic editing pace. His work is clearly influenced by the digital revolution.

### Institutional

- Distributed by *Universal* it was also the first film to come out of Nira Park's *Big Talk Productions* (formed in 1995) the company behind sit-coms *Spaced* and *Black Books* and all the subsequent films of the *Cornetto Trilogy*. Other significant production companies were the UK's Working *Title Films* and *Studio Canal*. So despite its modest \$6 million budget the film emerged from established Film and TV heavyweights with a pedigree of cult talent already successful on TV. The final worldwide BO was \$30 million.
- Some controversy surrounds the 15 certificate rating given it by the BBFC. There is plenty of gore and brutal violence, 70 plus uses of the f-word and at (01:59) the C\*\*\* word. However the film's comic context helped it reach a 15+ audience.

### SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - NARRATIVE AND IDEOLOGY - STARTING POINTS - Narrative

- The film has a linear narrative arc and focusses on the maturation of Shaun. The film is presented from Shaun's perspective and we meet his mum, step-dad, girlfriends and best friend, Ed. The first scene in *The Winchester* wittily encapsulates the dynamics at play in Shaun's life: his girlfriend wants more of commitment and quality time; Ed is just a foul-mouthed kid lurking in Shaun's shadow; David and Dianne are sanctimonious friends posing

as the perfect couple – intellectual and arty. Essentially a suburban action horror movie featuring grisly violence, speeding cars and fast-paced action there is also a sweet centre to the film as evidenced by the moving death scenes of Shaun's mum, his dad and Ed.

### STARTING POINTS - Ideology

- The film is clearly post-modern – using intertextual references to cultural artefacts, music, TV shows and genre films to produce 'knowing' humour. This can be seen even in the film's gestation in an episode of *Spaced* called 'Art' where Pegg, having over-played the video game *Resident Evil 2*, hallucinates his part in the zombie apocalypse.
- The major revisionist element is the suburbanisation of the zombie film from a UK perspective. The final scenes of briefly glimpsed TV shows and news footage from 6 months later (01:27:51) illustrate how we mediate the apocalypse, 'Z-Day', and appropriate the zombies for our entertainment and employment. The 'walking dead' are now cast in game shows and recruited for the service industry: zombies, it seems, are us all along.