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3

*Night of the Living Dead: Reappraising an Undead Classic*  
*Stephen Harper* November 1, 2005

     817



## *Introduction*

There has been a veritable outbreak of zombie films in the last few years, from Hollywood blockbusters *Resident Evil* (Anderson, 2002) and *Resident Evil 2: Apocalypse* (Witt, 2004), to British films such as *28 Days Later* (Boyle, 2002) and the zombie spoof *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright, 2004). The release in 2004 of Zack Snyder's remake of George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) attests to the continuing influence and appeal of classic "zombie cinema." While the cinematic concern with the undead predates Romero's films, all of the recent films mentioned above have some connection to Romero (Romero was originally scheduled to write the screenplay for *Resident Evil*, for example, while the recent British films allude frequently to Romero's work). The following essay is an attempt to account for the continuing attraction of Romero's first zombie film, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), nearly forty years after its release.

Shot in black-and-white over seven months on a shoestring budget, *Night of the Living Dead* defined the modern horror movie and influenced a number of international horror directors, especially those working within the horror genre. The film's plot is simple: Barbra and her brother Johnny are attacked when visiting a graveyard to honour the grave of their father. Johnny is attacked and killed by a zombie. Fleeing her attacker, Barbra meets Ben, who is also on the run from the recently reawakened dead. They begin to set up a nearby farmhouse as a fortress and soon discover they are not alone in the house. Two couples have been hiding out in the basement of the house: a young couple, Tom and Judy, and Harry and Helen Cooper, an older married couple with a young daughter who has already been bitten by one of the zombies. When Ben and Harry start arguing over where the safest place in the house is, tensions are created that lead to the downfall of the group. The film ends when Ben is shot by marshals who apparently mistake him for a zombie.

*Night of the Living Dead* was George Romero's first feature film and its title has become almost inseparable from its director's name. This in itself is problematic in that it allows the film's author to overshadow and even determine the film's interpretation. *Night of the Living Dead* certainly encourages auteurist interpretation: Romero both wrote and directed the film and is therefore, like the cinema "greats" Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, or John Ford, an auteur par excellence. But since the film so clearly and insistently engages with its contemporary social and political milieu, we must also try to understand it in its historical context.



First of all, the disturbing power of *Night of the Living Dead* has deep historical and cultural roots that can be uncovered through comparisons with much earlier, European texts. Like Franz Kafka's (1992) classic story of 1914, "Metamorphosis" (which concerns a travelling salesman who is mysteriously transformed into a gigantic insect), *Night of the Living Dead* dramatizes the bewildering and uncanny transformation of human beings into non-human forms. Indeed, like all metamorphosis narratives, the film carries uncomfortable messages about identity — about what it means to be a human being and about the terror of alienation. The film's power to unsettle its audience also derives from its focus on the taboo subject of cannibalism (which it depicts far more graphically than previous zombie films). In the eighteenth century, the English ironist Jonathan Swift (1996) wrote A

*Modest Proposal*, a darkly satirical attack on the privations suffered by the Irish people at the hands of the English in which the author ironically proposed that infants be killed and eaten in order to solve the problem of poverty in Ireland. *Night of the Living Dead* also uses cannibalism as a metaphor for exploitative power relations. Thus, while it deals with a quite different set of social problems, Romero's film can also be seen a sinister satire that exploits an outrageous premise in the interests of social and political critique. My specific concern here, however, is with how the film reflects and negotiates the political and social anxieties of the late 1960s.

I shall discuss *Night of the Living Dead* in relation to the formal categories of genre, structure, and theme, with particular reference to the film's engagement with the politics of race, gender, and violence. While these time-honoured categories are hardly exhaustive of the film's meaning, I hope that exploring them will take us some way towards understanding the film's central concerns and its wider cinematic importance and influence. Some of my wider claims about Romero's ideological vision are unoriginal — the exposition of Romero as a social critic, for example, has been magnificently achieved by Robin Wood (2003), amongst others. Moreover, close readings of the film already exist, most notably the analysis of the film's "textual and structural" aspects first published in the early 1970s by R. H. W. Dillard (1987). Nonetheless, my discussion (I might almost say disinterment and dissection) of the film offers some original contributions to the film's generic, stylistic, and structural analysis and explores some of the reasons for its continuing popularity at a time of renewed cultural and cinematic fascination with zombies.

### *Reality Bites: Truth, Genre, and Zombies*

Genre, of course, often determines how a text is received by its audience. Given its titular identification as a horror film, we know from the start that *Night of the Living Dead* will present a world in chaos; there is no sense in which the zombie plague is anything other than a catastrophe. In other ways, however, *Night of the Living Dead* complicates many taken-for-granted critical assumptions about genre. Wells (2001: 7-8) suggests that while science fiction primarily concerns the external, and "macrocosmic," horror concerns the internal and the "microcosmic." In other words, the horror genre is concerned with fundamental fears: the primal fear of the unknown and of that which may end life at any moment. Certainly, *Night of the Living Dead* is most immediately concerned with such "inner" fears. Yet the film is also, as we shall see later, replete with references to its contemporary social milieu, severely problematizing the rigid distinction between science fiction and horror suggested above.



The "realism" of *Night of the Living Dead* seems to confound other critical distinctions. In his famous book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Concept* (1975), Tzvetan Todorov distinguished between two types of verisimilitude: *cultural* verisimilitude and *generic* verisimilitude. The first type refers to texts that aim to be "true to life," like police drama; the second refers to texts in which the narrative details are true to the conventions of the genre. Horror texts tend, of course, to fall into the latter category. *Night of the Living Dead* obviously has a generic verisimilitude — while it observes the conventions of the horror genre, it does not, in a literal sense, correspond to any known reality. Yet the film calls into question Todorov's distinction, since it seems entirely feasible that a world in which zombies *did* exist *would be like the one presented*, giving the film — fantastic as it is —

a sense of being “true to life.” The plausibility of the zombie outbreak is reinforced by several textual qualities. For example, television news in 1968 appeared in black and white, which would have given *Night of the Living Dead* a documentary-like feel to the film’s original audiences, at least. This sense of *verité* is also emphasised in the series of gory still photographs that accompany the film’s closing credits and which recall the photojournalism of the Vietnam war. In other words, the film’s gritty, “realistic” mode of address confers upon the film a “cultural verisimilitude”: the audience is asked to believe that the horrific events depicted *could be happening now*.

This point can be further illustrated with reference to another of Todorov’s ideas about genre. Todorov distinguished between three modes of horror: the “uncanny,” the “marvellous” and the “fantastic.” In the uncanny text, the apparently supernatural is finally explained rationally. In the fantastic text, we hesitate between natural and supernatural explanations of events (as in Henry James famous story *The Turn of the Screw*). In the marvellous text, the bizarre events of the story can only be explained by reference to another level of reality. From the first appearance of a zombie in the opening graveyard scene, *Night of the Living Dead* seems to conform to the “marvellous” category. Nonetheless, it is worth emphasizing that Romero makes us believe that *this is happening now* — so the film cannot be seen simply as a “marvellous” text like *Alice in Wonderland*. On the contrary, it asks us to believe that there are rational explanations for the zombie’s existence: we are told, however implausibly, that the zombie phenomenon has been caused by radiation from outer space. Insofar as the film posits a rational explanation for the zombie menace, the film is “uncanny.” Thus, rather than presenting a fantastical “alternative” reality, *Night of the Living Dead* insists on the shocking immediacy of this one.

#### *A Beginning, a Middle, and a Bloody End: Narrative Structure and the “Unities”*

The film’s sense of urgency and immediacy is also a function of its narrative structure. *Night of the Living Dead* can be seen to be complexly structured around a number of classic horror film binary oppositions (such as nature and culture, urban and rural). The essential plot of the film, however, is very simple. *Night of the Living Dead* has a beginning (the graveyard scene), a middle (the defence of the farmhouse) and an end (the tragic shooting of Ben). In this sense, the film — like many Hollywood films — broadly follows a



classical Aristotelian three-act structure. One of the most striking aspects of the film’s structure, however, is its conformity to a central concern of much Renaissance tragedy: namely, that drama should observe the three “unities” of time, place and action. *Night of the Living Dead* takes place in real time (there are no forward jumps or flashbacks), bringing us an hour and a half of a group of people defending themselves from murderous zombies. This temporal continuity is quite unusual in contemporary film. Most narrative films contain cuts and take place over a few days in various locations. *Night of the Living Dead*, however, adheres to all three of the so-called “unities” of classical theatre, which are based (very) loosely on Aristotle’s *Poetics*: the unities of time, place and action. According to the rather rigid strictures of seventeenth-century dramatists like Corneille, tragic drama should not exceed 24 hours, it should not contain multiple plots and it should be set in only one location. According to this model, therefore, drama should be confined to a single action occurring in a single place and unfolding over no longer than a single day. It seems improbable that Romero

was consciously trying to follow this formula himself (and undoubtedly, Romero's decision to delimit his narrative in this way was partly determined by his limited budget). Yet Romero's adherence to these unities is fortuitous, ensuring that its pace does not slacken (indeed, "unrelenting" is a word often employed by the film's critics). In short, the film's uncomplicated narrative structure produces a concentrated, taut drama, uncompromised by digressions or subplots. Like other films that observe (or nearly observe) the unities — Joel Schumacher's *Phone Booth* (2002) is a case in point — the pace is unflagging and the atmosphere intense.

It is also instructive to consider the structure of the film in relation to the conventions of classic Hollywood narratives. As Todorov implies, narratives tend to begin with a state of equilibrium that is disrupted, and then return to a state of "equilibrium" at the end. In many 1980s horror films, for instance, the initially harmonious family unit is disrupted and eventually reunited at the end of the film. As the case of 1980s horror cinema suggests, this simple narrative structure has often been used to reinforce conservative ideologies by transforming disharmony into order (for a basic introduction to some of the issues involved here, see Strinati, 2000: 34-39). However, this narrative structure does not necessarily lead to ideological conservatism; as Robin Wood points out, classical narrative moves towards the restoration of an order, but that *nature* of this order is open to question and revision:

“ If classical narrative moves toward the restoration of an order, must this be the patriarchal status quo? Is this tendency not due to the constraints imposed by our culture rather than to constraints inherent within the narrative itself? Does the possibility not exist of narrative moving toward the establishment of a different order, or, quite simply, toward irreparable and irreversible breakdown (which would leave the reader/viewer the options of despair or the task of imagining alternatives)? (Wood, 2003: 220)

Wood's comments are highly relevant to the conclusion of *Night of the Living Dead*. On a purely formal level, the "equilibrium" model describes the structure of the film; Romero, however, gives this narrative structure a twist, undermining the apparent "return to order" at the end of the film. On a superficial level, narrative equilibrium is restored in the final scene by the state troopers who, in keeping with their usual diegetic function in thriller and horror film, reinstate order and authority. Yet the audience knows that this apparent "order" has been achieved at the cost of Ben's life and has involved a heinous violation of social justice. In this sense, *Night of the Living Dead* anticipates the pessimistic horror cinema of the 1970s, in which legitimate authority is seen to be impotent in the face of evil (Crane, 2002: 169). Yet, while despair is one possible response to such endings, the shocking bathos of *Night of the Living Dead* challenges the audience to imagine more positive alternative endings.

## *Apocalypse Then: Romero's Catastrophic Vision in Context*

*Night of the Living Dead* is a film about apocalypse. American films are very often apocalypse or disaster movies, and there are many theories about why this is so. The cultural critic Slavoj Žižek (2002a) points out that Americans have a deep psychological attachment to images of catastrophe. This constant anxiety about catastrophe shows just how concerned America is about radical social change and indicates, he argues, just how concerned America is to preserve the *status quo*.

While many mainstream American films concern some kind of catastrophe, however, *Night of the Living Dead* does not offer the happy narrative closure expected of the Hollywood disaster movie. Instead, Romero's presents a *tragedy* in which the hero dies, rather than saves the world. Romero's tragic vision is quite unusual in an American culture which, according to the critic Terry Eagleton (2003), has been rendered "anti-tragic" by the forces of relativism and voluntarism. This tragic vision has a political colouring in *Night of the Living Dead*. Indeed, Romero's film can be seen as the artistic counterpart of Raymond Williams' argument, in his *Modern Tragedy* (1966), that tragedy consists not simply in the deaths of great leaders, but in the heroic and pointless destruction of "ordinary" people in their struggles for democracy.



Whereas Slavoj Žižek's theories about catastrophe grow out of his analysis of American responses to the terror attacks of 11 September 2001, *Night of the Living Dead* must be understood in relation to the impact of Vietnam on American consciousness in the 1960s. Experiences of Vietnam constitute a common subtext of American cinema from the 1960s onwards. Near the beginning of *Night of the Living Dead*, in a shot of Johnny and Barbra's car entering the graveyard, we see a fluttering American flag in the foreground. The symbolism of the flag becomes clear as the film progresses: America is a dying country as a result of the zombie menace, and the flag represents the meaninglessness and deadliness of patriotism. In the post-war period, Leftist critics often pointed out the almost religious hold of patriotism in the Western world and the dangerous fervour with which patriotic ideology was upheld. Writing in the 1950s, the psychoanalyst and humanist cultural critic Erich Fromm, for example, pointed out that attacking the flag of one's country would be an unspeakable act of sacrilege; even extreme racist and militarist views, he continued, would not be regarded with such great hostility as anti-patriotic ones (Fromm, 1963: 59). The savagery of the anti-Communist McCarthy hearings of the mid-1950s certainly vindicated Fromm's observation. However, by the late 1960s such patriotic hegemony had been significantly contested and undermined. Romero's film emerged at a time of strong public disapproval of the American military involvement in Vietnam, during which criticisms of patriotism — while deeply offensive to the American establishment — were becoming commonplace.

Closely related to concerns about the consequences of militarism (and about Vietnam in particular) are fears about the potential for Western society to be devastated by nuclear holocaust. The wretched condition of Romero's zombies resounds with popular fantasies about the aftermath of a nuclear attack on America — a widespread anxiety underpinning American post-war cinema (other films attesting to this fear include Franklin J. Schaffner's *Planet of the Apes*, which was also released in 1968). The film may also represent another type of apocalypse: that of religious doomsday. Many fundamentalist Christians in America and elsewhere believe that the dead shall be raised to life on "the last day":

“ Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable. . . (King James Version, 1 Corinthians 15:51-52)

Romero's zombies, according to this interpretation, might be seen as the resurrected on Judgement Day: indeed, like their biblical counterparts, they are mute.

Clearly, it is possible to read many versions of apocalypse into the film. Perhaps the zombies represent, in Freudian terms, the “return of the repressed” — those sublimated aspects of ourselves that we hide from public view. Perhaps they are to be equated with the Russians — often conceived by Americans at the time as a barbaric throng, intent on destroying (devouring) the American way of life. Perhaps the zombies represent the younger generation of Americans which, as it seemed to many in the late 1960s, wanted to overthrow traditions and replace them with a new social order. Or perhaps, from a more recent perspective, the zombies could



be seen to represent the homeless, AIDS sufferers, drug users, or any other marginalized group (Tom Savini's 1990 remake of the film makes the drug-user metaphor explicit). Clearly, some of these interpretations may have been intended by Romero, while others were not: but all of them are valid. It is true that the film does offer a kind of B-movie scientific explanation of what is happening: radiation from outer space. However, Romero does not posit this “explanation” as the only correct interpretation of the apocalypse; instead, he prefers to let the audience determine the meaning of his metaphor. Horror films are, to borrow a term from the Italian theorist Umberto Eco, “open works,” texts that allow a high degree of interpretative ambiguity. Eco argues that such texts are the most appropriate type of text in our own time, because they reflect the sense of disorder and discontinuity that are such marked features of the modern world (Eco, 1989). In every era, the *Night of the Living Dead* audience will attach its own meanings to the zombies. Romero is more interested in allowing his metaphor to work subtly yet powerfully at the heart of his film. Romero's primary interest is not in providing a detailed explanation of the disaster that has befallen America, so much as in analysing the human response to it.

### *Communication, Alienation, and Isolation*

*Night of the Living Dead* constitutes a dramatic appeal for communication and cooperation in the face of paranoia and violence. Romero's interest in communication resembles that of the British dramatist Harold Pinter. Like Pinter, Romero explores interpersonal communication through dialogue, focusing on the ways in which our preconceptions of others make us suspicious and even hostile towards them, and the lies we tell to ourselves and to others. As with Pinter, the dialogue demands scrupulous attention. Careful listeners will have noticed that when Barbra first speaks to Ben, she is not entirely honest about her relationship with Johnny: she tells him that she was “with Johnny,” implying that Johnny is her partner. This suggests Barbra's uncertainty regarding the intentions of her interlocutor, perhaps because he is a man, perhaps because he is black? Barbra also misleadingly talks about her brother as if he were still alive, even though the audience knows that he is dead. Barbra's denial of her brother's death can be understood as an unconscious psychological survival

strategy. The character of Harry Cooper, however, tells lies deliberately in order to cover his cowardice. Early in the film he tells Barbra and Ben that when he was in the basement, he hadn't heard the others enter the house; later, however, he lets slip that he had, in fact, heard the commotion above.

The film also raises questions about the role of the media and the role of mass communication. The media is omnipresent. Early in the film, there is a lengthy scene in which Ben and Barbra don't speak, but listen to the radio — a fairly fruitless activity adumbrating Romero's concern in his later films with the banality of media culture (Blake, 2002: 157-61). Later on, a television is discovered upstairs in the house and is fought over by Ben and Harry Cooper. There is irony here: Ben and Harry fight over the only means of communication with the outside world, but are unable to communicate with each other. Through such ironies, the film incessantly poses the question: who is the enemy? At first it seems obvious that it is the zombies; later, however, as the paranoid human beings fight among themselves, the distinction between human beings and zombies becomes blurred. The point is reinforced by Žižek: "The division friend/enemy is never just a recognition of factual difference. The enemy is by definition always (up to a point) invisible: it cannot be directly recognized because it looks like one of us." (Žižek, 2002b: 5). In the final scene of the film, the difficulty of enemy recognition is horrifically exemplified when Ben is shot dead after he is misrecognised (seemingly) as a zombie (a scene which to an American audience in the 1960s must surely have resonated with the murder of the black rights leader Martin Luther King).



Romero himself has emphasised that his zombie films, in particular, dramatize failures of human co-operation. Cooper's initial intention is to board up his family in the basement and thus isolate them. In historical terms, this impulse is understandable. During the cold war, the instinct to hide in the basement was the response of many people to the threat of a nuclear attack (the Cooper family are the "nuclear" family in every sense). But Cooper's actions also symbolize the human tendency towards solipsism and isolationism. There are echoes of this selfish impulse in contemporary American separatist militia and other isolationist groups, who often believe that they can escape what they perceive as the madness of the world around them by sequestering themselves in the forests or mountains. Even in the "mainstream" of Western societies, we find similar attitudes that are bound up with an individualistic, bourgeois mode of existence — isolated from the local community and living alongside others without ever communicating with them. Romero's message is therefore implicitly a call for co-operation: if we allow the world fall apart around us, Romero implies, the destruction will sooner or later destroy our own lives.

Again, this message needs to be located in a historical context. In post-war America, and in the West in general, many middle class people were starting to live more prosperous, but more isolated lives; however, the apparent ease and security of such lives carried dangers of alienation: a safe home quickly becomes prison-like. In the 1960s and 1970s progressive criticism of the bourgeois conception of the family reached its height. As the anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote at the end of her life:

“ Nobody has ever before asked the nuclear family to live all by itself in a box the way we do. With no relatives, no support, we've put it in an impossible situation. (Margaret Mead, *New Realities*, June 1978)

In the film, the collapse of the bourgeois domestic family is symbolised when Karen Cooper becomes a zombie and kills her parents. Thus the ending of *Night of the Living Dead* contrasts quite markedly with the more conservative endings of many horror films, where the restoration of family values is seen as the answer to social problems.

### “Beat ’em or burn ’em”: Race and Power

To those unfamiliar the zombie movie genre, it might seem hard to see how a film like *Night of the Living Dead* could be regarded as a political film. However, the film is one of the most important cultural records of its era. Romero himself has explicitly commented that the film is a document of contemporary social changes. We don't have to take the director's word for this, since the film's political themes are hardly hidden from the audience.



But why should a film about zombies be considered as a film about race? One reason lies in Romero's selection of zombies as the film's monsters of choice. Why zombies, as opposed to vampires or dragons or giant beetles? It is important to remember the zombie's origin in the voodoo tradition in Haiti (indeed, the phenomenon is taken so seriously in Haiti that the country's Penal Code considers making someone into a zombie as a form of murder). According to the belief, Haitian zombies lack free will and perhaps souls. They become zombified by a “bokor” (sorcerer) through spell or potion, and are afterwards used as slaves. It is this connection with slavery that allows us to equate zombies with people of colour. This is not an entirely new conception. Two years before Romero's film, for example, the link between zombies and slaves had been used in John Gilling's British zombie film for the Hammer Studios, *The Plague of the Zombies* (1966). Set in a Cornwall, an evil squire uses black magic to turn his villagers into zombies and exploit their labour in his dangerously unsafe tin mine. Thus the zombie is a metaphor for, in Gilling's film, the exploited working class, and in Romero's film for the oppressed racial minorities of America.

The film's immediate social context further suggests its racial significance. *Night of the Living Dead* is set at a time of racial upheaval and protest in America. Black people had been given faith in the possibility of the betterment of their conditions. With the death of Martin Luther King, however, many people lost this faith and abandoned the idea of peaceful resistance. White and black militant groups like the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam, and the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nation sprang up (mentioning these groups together does not, incidentally, imply a moral equivalence between them). To many people, it seemed as though there might be a race war in America. Conservative, reactionary discussions of this possibility often focused — as they sometimes do today — on the possibility that “we” might soon be outnumbered by “them.” The line in *Night of the Living Dead* “we don't know how many of them there are” highlights this racist concern with numbers and the fear of being outnumbered or “swamped.” This fear was not restricted to America; 1968 was also the year of British Conservative MP Enoch Powell's notorious “Rivers of Blood” speech, which predicted bloody racial conflict in the United Kingdom Powell was duly sacked for his comments by the party leader Edward Heath.

Of course, *Night of the Living Dead* is not the only film of its time to deal with issues of race. In *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?* (1967) Sidney Poitier played a black man engaged to a white woman; the

film details the reactions of each partner's family to the interracial marriage. In that film, however, racial issues were dealt with in a quite explicit way — they were the focus of the film. In *Night of the Living Dead*, on the other hand, racial tensions are not explicitly mentioned, making them, paradoxically, all the more evident. By casting a black man as a hero, Romero, the independent filmmaker, implicitly rejected the values of Hollywood, which at that time typically eschewed black heroes. In recent years, we have become accustomed to visible minorities playing the “virtuous” characters in films (in fact, some critics now believe that this has in itself become another form of racist misrepresentation: after all, if visible minorities are always the “good guys,” doesn't this imply a lack of confidence in portraying them as fully-rounded human beings?). In 1968, however, the novelty of a black hero was striking.

While racial issues are not explicitly foregrounded in the film, the dialogue makes continual reference to the ways in which racial minorities have been treated in the past in America:

“ Chief, if I were surrounded by say six or eight of these things, would I stand a chance?

Well, if you had a gun, shoot 'em in the head. If you didn't, get a torch and burn 'em, they go up pretty easy. Beat 'em or burn 'em.

The redneck hostility of this language here is reflected in later films about racial hatred in America, such as Alan Parker's 1988 film *Mississippi Burning*. Finally, the way in which the zombies are hung from trees in the final scenes of the film inevitably invokes the racist lynchings of America's past.

### *Men, Women, and Tablecloths: Gender Stereotypes*

The film also contains a deeply committed exploration of gender roles. Throughout the film, only the men seem to be effective in combating the zombies. While Ben and the other men are active, Barbra is catatonic. Once inside the house and safely in the care of the film's black hero, Ben, Barbra is quickly reduced to helpless catatonia. She sits on the living room sofa for almost the entire duration of the film, until she is finally moved to action at the sight of Helen Cooper being attacked by zombies. In fact, Barbra is both infantilised (while Ben boards up the house, she toys with a musical box, suggesting that she is “regressing,” in the Freudian sense) and identified with household items, such as the linen tablecloth and the embroidered arm of the sofa which she obsessively strokes. In other words, while the men act, the women — Barbra in particular — draw comfort from domestic goods. There is also an imbalance in the types of *role* adopted by each sex. Helen and Judy undertake the “women's work” of caring for the injured Karen Cooper, while the men set about the more pressing business of boarding up the house against the undead. Although Helen Cooper is relatively active (and resistant to the orders of her bullying husband Harry) and although Barbra eventually attempts to rescue Helen in a belated gesture of sisterhood, the women in the film generally constitute a kind of backdrop, their feelings and actions largely dependent on the more capable males.

The passivity of the women in *Night* is problematic for some feminist critics. Gregory A. Waller, for example, notes that Barbra's character “would seem to support certain sexist assumptions about



female passivity, irrationality, and emotional vulnerability” (1986: 283). This stereotype of the catatonic blonde was common in the cinema of the 1960s. It can be seen, for example, in Roman Polanski’s *Repulsion* (1964), which is widely described as a study of feminine repression and insanity. In *Repulsion*, Carol (Catherine Deneuve) is accosted by various more-or-less lecherous or downright vicious men, eventually suffering from frightening hallucinations and becoming a murderer. However horrifying her acts may be, it is difficult to hold her responsible for her actions (she is clearly extremely mentally disturbed); on the contrary, the film forces us to consider the impact on women of patriarchal oppression. There is a risk here of using patriarchal oppression to explain away all problematic representations of women; yet when that context is clear in the filmic text, it can excuse representations of women that might in other contexts seem sexist. Indeed, just as Carol’s violence is at least partially understandable as a response to her oppression (and not simply her *repression*), we can excuse the extreme passivity of the women in *Night of the Living Dead* on the grounds that they are not only intimidated by the men (or, at least, by some of the men), but also conditioned to act as passive domestic drudges.

Moreover, if we consider Barbra’s attitude towards Ben, there is a sense in which Romero’s presentation of women is progressive. In many films about race, women are presented as completely non-racist; indeed, their non-complicity with racist sentiments accords all too neatly with stereotypes of feminine perfection. However, Barbra’s clear mistrust of Ben — she positions the knife on the fridge ambiguously, so that the audience is unsure whether she wishes to use it against the zombies or against Ben — suggests that, for all her docile domesticity, she has been affected by the racism of the world outside (Lightning, 2000). Barbra, after all, is not perfect.

### *Violence: from the “Gratuitous” to the Metaphorical*

British film director Nicholas Roeg once quipped that “there are three lovely critical expressions ... pretentious, gratuitous and profound, none of which I truly understand.” Roeg’s remark indicates that film critics often reach for such expressions as summary (yet unexplained) insults. Indeed, while few critics are concerned, it appears, about the filmic representation of gratuitous love or gratuitous friendship, many critics express anxiety about so-called “gratuitous” violence.



*Night of the Living Dead* is a violent film, although by contemporary Hollywood standards, the number of violent acts is actually rather low. This violence is problematic — not because violence is always or inherently problematic, but because its representation has become problematic in Western society for a number of cultural reasons. Some elements of British audiences, for example, have adopted a critical attitude towards film violence by the campaigns of Mary Whitehouse’s *Viewer’s and Listener’s Association* and other right wing pressure groups. Their arguments often assume (rather questionably) that fiction should depict only those things which we wish to see in real life and (equally questionably) that the fictional representation of violent acts leads to violent behaviour. These arguments have a long history, however. In the Renaissance, for example, violence violated the rules of “decorum” (i.e. violence was “unseemly”). Violent incidents in plays, for example, were merely reported rather than enacted on stage. Until fairly recently, violence was not often depicted in art. Even early horror films, such as *Nosferatu* (1919), did not depict violent acts to the same extent as

*Night of the Living Dead*. In relation to film, in particular, regulation and censorship of movies through the Hays Production Code made film violence rare until the 1960s.

However, such rules about the representation of violence were made to be broken: even in the Renaissance, dramatists like Shakespeare sometimes violated the “rules” of decorum by depicting violence in their plays (in *King Lear*, for example, Cornwall blinds Gloucester onstage). In relation to film, the decline of the Hollywood studio system in the late 1950s led to the abandonment of the Production Code, allowing films to be released with a minimum of censorship. But is there any justification for dramatic depictions of violence? If we are concerned with the representation of power relations in society, then the answer is surely yes. In his book *Understanding Popular Culture*, John Fiske writes:

“ It is not violence per se that characterises popular culture, but only that violence whose structure makes it into a metaphor for the distribution of power in society. (Fiske, 1989: 137)

According to Fiske, then, violence is a metaphor for inequitable (and presumably unjust) power relations in society. It is important, however, to understand this point in historical context. Violence became more commonly depicted in films and on television in the late 1960s, during a socially turbulent period when social hierarchies were being challenged. To many people, the violence of the later 1960s and 1970s seemed arbitrary. In 1966 a twenty-five-year old part-time graduate student in architectural engineering positioned himself in an observation tower on the Austin campus of the University of Texas, shooting forty-four people, and killing fourteen of them. In their book *Images of Madness*, the critics Fleming and Manvell write:



“ It was but one of a number of multiple murders that came at a time when mass violence appeared to be erupting throughout America and was coming to be accepted as commonplace. It was this arbitrary and violent quality in murder that became the subject of two box-office successes of the period, *Bonnie and Clyde*(1967) and *In Cold Blood* (1968) (Fleming and Manvell, 1985: 103)

Indeed, from the late 1960s, police series became more fast-paced and violent, while so-called “spaghetti Westerns” challenged the conventional bloodlessness of conventional Westerns by showing the gory reality of violence. Spaghetti Westerns also challenged the enduring Western myth that the strong and the virtuous will prevail; instead they showed that even the good get hurt — a message reinforced in *Night of the Living Dead*. Yet these representations of violence cannot simply be seen as “arbitrary” or “gratuitous.” As Alan Clarke writes about the violent police dramas of the 1970s: “much of the violence was completely gratuitous unless it was seen as the necessary background to the war against crime which the police were fighting. This more explicit portrayal had gained a symbolic value” (Clarke, 1986: 220).

In light of the above comments by Fiske and Clarke, the violence in Romero's film can be viewed as metaphorical — it stands for the interracial violence of 1960s America and for the horrors of the Vietnam war that were so shockingly revealed on American television screens in the late 1960s. In a certain sense, then, the violence of the film may be seen as “realistic”; that is, it reflects and comments upon the violence of the period in which the film was made. Violence is a theme Romero has worked with in all of his zombie films in order to highlight current social injustices. Indeed there is in the film a sense of documentary-like verisimilitude, especially in the grainy photographic images of the zombie cull at the end of the film, which recall contemporary photographs of the carnage in Vietnam.

What is interesting is the way in which our attitudes towards violence change throughout the film. After a while we become inured to the shock of seeing the zombies being killed. As the film progresses, the zombies become an undifferentiated mass — as enemies so easily become. As the violence increases, we begin to lose our sense that the zombies are in any way human and tend to become (to use a cliché) “desensitised” to the violence we see (recalling Joseph Stalin's chilling observation that “A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic”). However, Romero never allows us to feel fully comfortable with this — and the ending of the film offers the stark admonition that in our zeal to eradicate our enemies, we risk destroying ourselves.

### *Conclusion: Night of the Living Dead — An Undead Classic?*

Presenting, as I have done, Romero as a social critic, incurs a risk of underestimating his wry wit. While the tone of the film is sombre (there is more humour in the film's sequel *Dawn of the Dead*), there are also many strongly humorous elements. Often there is a kind of cartoonish quality, for example, about some of the characters. Frustrated by his own incompetence, Cooper does exactly what Moe from the Three Stooges would have done: he complains and lashes out angrily at those around him, blaming them for his own inability to function. In a sense, therefore, Cooper is a stereotypical buffoon, infuriatingly impervious to criticism in a way that leavens his (to borrow a phrase from Theodore Adorno) “authoritarian” personality. There are also elements of black humour in the names of the characters. Mr Cooper, significantly, wants to “coup” his family up in the basement; Ben's name, meaning “good” in Latin, is consistent with his role as the moral touchstone of the film. Despite this humour, however, *Night of the Living Dead*, as I shall argue more strongly below, remains a deeply serious film in terms of its social import.



To some extent, the continuing power of Romero's film can be seen in terms of its subsequent cinematic influence. *Night of the Living Dead* draws on Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), especially in its film craft: the use of shadow and camera angles. But it in turn has influenced many other films, most notably the opening sequence of Salva's *Jeeper's Creepers* (2001), which draws on both *Night of the Living Dead* (particularly in the scene in which a brother and a sister argue in a car on a winding, deserted road) and the film adaptation of Stephen King's *Children of the Corn* (1978) (in which a couple listen to fundamentalist radio stations as they drive through the rural environment). The boarding up of the farmhouse has precursors in Western films, such as John Huston's *The Unforgiven* (1960), from which the settlers fight off the marauding Indians (intriguingly, *The Unforgiven's* hero is also called Ben) and is often been repeated, as in M. Night Shayamalan's *Signs* (2002). The image of zombies climbing in through windows to devour human flesh, meanwhile, has become a pop culture icon, referenced in such disparate places as John Carpenter's seminal film *Assault on Precinct 13*

(1976), or the more recent British films such as *28 Days Later* (2002). To invoke some even more populist contexts, the names of popular music bands, the video for Michael Jackson's "Thriller," the best-selling Playstation game series "Resident Evil" and the television comedy series *Father Ted* have all drawn on Romero's iconography. After forty years, the diffuse and all-pervasive influence of *Night of the Living Dead* makes it difficult precisely to assess its overall cultural impact.

Indeed, as so often in intertextual borrowing of this kind, the original atmosphere and satirical spirit of the film has proved less enduring than the dominant image of the lumbering zombie made famous by Romero. It might be argued that while many films contain iconographical references to *Night of the Living Dead*, the oppositional and ironic power of Romero's original vision is seldom achieved. One brief example may help to illustrate this point. The ending of *Night of the Living Dead* is reprised in Eli Roth's film *Cabin Fever* (2002), a film about a group of teenagers assailed by a hideous virus, one of whom — Jeff, played by Joey Kern — escapes by isolating himself from his friends, earning the contempt of his fellows (and of the audience). When this surviving member emerges from the shack shouting "I made it!," he is shot by the police, who mistake him as a virus-carrier. The brutal irony of this final scene clearly invites comparison with the ending of *Night of the Living Dead*; yet the audience's contempt for Jeff's isolationism ensures that we feel a certain satisfaction, rather than outrage, at the young man's death. Moreover, unlike Romero's ending, this ending restores and legitimises the authority of the police.

Turning to the films mentioned at the start of this essay, it can be seen that while several of the recent zombie films that make reference to *Night of the Living Dead* may have interesting qualities, their ideological implications differ markedly from those of Romero's film. The *Resident Evil* films (Anderson, 2002; Witt, 2004) are marred by their treatment of women as sexual spectacles, while the comic parody of *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) seems hollow, as there is never a sense of menace or of any human value being at stake. Perhaps *28 Days Later* (2002) and Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) are the most intriguing of these films, although their gender politics are suspect (Harper, 2005). There are, of course, dangers in designating *Night of the Living Dead*, or any film, as a "great" or "seminal" film, whose lofty social conscience recent zombie cinema has basely traduced. Nevertheless, none of the recent spawn of zombie films offers the ambiguity, artistry, and radical import of Romero's film. *Night of the Living Dead* (and, indeed, its worthy sequels) reminds us of something that the recent outbreak of zombie films may have caused us to forget: the oppositional potential of popular culture. In this sense, the film is an undead classic that can still tell us something about who we are — and warn us about what we might turn into.



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— **Stephen Harper**

Stephen Harper is Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at the University of Portsmouth, UK. His principal research interests are in media representations of health and gender issues. He has also authored several articles, and edited books, on horror cinema.

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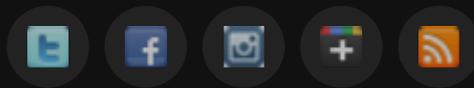
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