

**“The Death of Death”:  
A Memorial Retrospective  
on George A. Romero (1940-2017)**

**Edited by Kristopher Woofter**

“Stay scared.”

— George A. Romero

It has been almost ten years since George A. Romero made *Survival of the Dead*, the final film in his series of living dead films, and now his final film. At that time, he had been working on the comics series, *Empire of the Dead* (2014-2015) for Marvel, and, most recently, was seeking funding for a new film, *Road of the Dead*, co-written with Matt Birman, who would direct. Romero made sixteen films in his nearly fifty-year career as an artist of the macabre and satirical. Even *There's Always Vanilla* (1971), despite Romero's attempt to take a career-varying left turn after his game-changing *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), weaves scenes of dread into its social satire.

Though he worked with major studios on four films—*Creepshow* (1982, Warner Bros.), *Monkey Shines* (1988, Orion), *The Dark Half* (1990, Orion), and *Land of the Dead* (2005, Universal)—and on various other unproduced projects, Romero was an independent artist through and through. The work of a visionary is clear in all of his films, from the studio-supported work to hugely influential films like *Night and Dawn of the Dead* (1979), to his professedly most personal work, in films like *Martin* (1977, released 1978) and *Knightriders* (1981). Everywhere in the work of George Romero the spectator finds an artist with an acute sense of the anxieties of modernity; of the fragility of bodies, families and communities; of the terrible exigencies of capitalism and American isolationism, and the struggles of those alienated by both; and of the transgressive power of monsters to reveal uncomfortable truths—through horror, humor and pathos.

George Andrew Romero died on 16 July, 2017 at the age of 77. This retrospective treats all sixteen of the films Romero directed, with a mention of those he scripted. The critical perspectives here vary from the personal to the theoretical. Contributors were encouraged to respond in the way that they felt most appropriate to the film they chose, and to their experience with it. Some

respondents are seasoned Romero scholars and addicts, some are coming to the material via Stephen King or literary antecedents such as Edgar A. Poe and E.C. Comics, and some are coming to Romero's work absolutely fresh. This retrospective honors a visionary who changed the face of horror; but, perhaps more importantly, it hopes to encourage further interest in the diverse work of an important American filmmaker who never stopped seeking new ways to force his audience to experience their moment.

— Kristopher Woofert

## NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD

Writer: George A. Romero, John A. Russo | Producer: Russell Streiner, Karl Hardman | Music: uncredited stock music | Editing: George A. Romero | Cinematography: George A. Romero | Release Date: October, 1968

Now the time has come (Time)  
There's no place to run (Time) [...]  
I've been loved and put aside (Time)  
I've been crushed by the tumbling tide (Time)

— The Chambers Brothers, "Time Has Come Today" (1967)

*Night of the Living Dead* was a film struggling to express the senselessness of its time. In 1968, America faced fallout from both the Vietnam War and the rise of global nuclear armament. After shifting back and forth since 1949, the minute hand of the Doomsday Clock had skipped ahead to an alarming seven minutes to midnight. This was the same year that both Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were assassinated—the latter at the same time, April 4, 1968, that George Romero and Russ Streiner were driving the first print of *Night of the Living Dead* to New York for distribution. *Night* was a film that marked a time of despair in the face of perceived societal collapse. As such, it epitomized "Apocalyptic Horror"—a cinematic dance of death in an absurd world of time run out. On a more personal level, *Night* marked time for me. As I remember, it aired on Chicago television between *Twilight Zone* marathons and Reagan-era emergency broadcast signals each New Year's Day. Having survived another countdown in the cold-war 80s, we watched *Night* from bar stools in the basement—or as the sticker next to the TV dubbed it, "FALL OUT SHELTER"—of our suburban home.

More than thirty years later, I've seen *Night* innumerable times and have taught it through various critical lenses, many of which address the concept of time obliquely or figuratively: the film has been considered an allegory of its time; a *memento mori* (or reminder of fleeting mortal time); and an invitation to explore the different affective dimensions of zombies running—or in *Night's* case walking—according to different clocks. And yet, I find that there is a surprising lack of criticism focusing on the film's formal treatment of time—both as conscious motif and as the product of no-less-compelling continuity errors. What follows is a preliminary attempt to address this lacuna and what I see as the proto-protagonist Barbra's underrepresentation in studies of *Night*. I want to propose that, together, 1) the theme of timekeeping's (failed) protective function and 2) the experience of Barbra's non-linear perception of and orientation in time, form the film's narrative center of gravity. Ultimately, the film bends to Barbra, every clock and character succumbing to her experience of disorderly time.

The weight of time is evident throughout the film, beginning with the opening dialogue in the cemetery. Barbra and her brother Johnny's conversation is almost exclusively devoted to the passage of time, and to a fragile economy of time, money, and memory. In the first words of the film, Barbra situates the action on the first evening of Daylight Savings when she muses, "They ought to make the day the time changes the first day of summer. [...] It's 8 o'clock and it's still light." On this March day, she lingers in the cemetery and luxuriates in the perceived gains of upcoming seasons and extended sunlight. Barbra's desire reveals an initial optimism, a forward-looking attitude that is soon to be reversed through trauma. At the same time, her words preview a filmic preoccupation with the fantasy that keeping time is taking power. For Barbra's is a curiously anthropocentric wish that seasons "ought" to submit to clocks and custom, nature and fate to human control.

Johnny is equally attentive to the time, but for the purpose of calculating time and money lost. After missing an hour of sleep on account of the time change, he has already "blown a Sunday," or, more precisely, "five minutes to put the wreath on the grave and six hours to drive back and forth." Shortly after—when Johnny impersonates the gravely prescient grandfather: "Boy, you'll be damned to hell!"—his obsessive timekeeping takes on new significance. Like the birth and death dates chiseled on gravestones all around him, Johnny's counting reads as protective ritual. In other words, both Johnny's reckoning and Barbra's wish manifest a seeming desire to ward off inexorable fate. In the land of the dead, keeping time acts as charm against mortality and the terrifying eternity beyond the grave.

The cemetery records time fastidiously, protectively, and with a great degree of accuracy. Time there is mostly linear, sequential, and inscribed materially—arranged in rows and safely set in stone. Like the cemetery, the farmhouse where the survivors find themselves sequestered keeps time defensively: measured moments and countdowns seem set to protect. But in the old house in the new world, temporal orientation and time sense alike are, at least at first, hyper-acutely individualized. Ben and Cooper’s antagonistic temporal orientations are relatively straightforward (Cooper, a man of the moment, is oriented toward the present and the individual, while Ben leans toward the future and the collective). Barbra’s relationship to time is more shifting and complex. After leaving the cemetery, the once forward-looking celebrant of hours gained becomes a backward-looking embodiment of time stalled, reversed, and ultimately lost. The film tracks her trauma, and it is largely through her sense of time that spectators and characters alike experience the unwieldy time of *Night*.

Our alignment with Barbra is, of course, most obvious before she meets Ben. When she flees the graveyard, the site of her brother’s murder, dramatic pace increases and time trips as she does. Thunder rolls, lightning flashes. Something is shifting. A series of rapid cuts are punctuated by Barbra’s steadying herself, with increasingly frequency, on a succession of objects: from tombstone, to gas pump, to house siding. As meticulously-timed editing and *mise-en-scène* nightmarishly dilate time, Barbra’s sprint to a nearby door seems deceptively long. We experience, along with Barbra, the temporal illusion of time stalling, which some neuroscientists see as triggered by extreme fear/flight.

In the “safer” space of the farmhouse, and in Ben’s shadow, Barbra comes to reside in the backwardness, “afterwardsness” (*nachträglichkeit*)<sup>1</sup>, and looping-back of trauma-time. Dissociating, she becomes silent, slows down, and (in keeping with a common gothic/horror convention) regresses into a childlike state. Such is clear later when she speechlessly steals precious moments of time in what is otherwise a dire crisis: she fixates on a child’s music box, and she takes time to experience the tactility of lace covering the arms of a sofa. When she does first speak—in a scene Romero and crew shot out of sequence before the graveyard—it is as if no time has passed since the moments preceding her brother’s traumatic death. Rather than simply describe

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<sup>1</sup> [Editor’s Note: For Jean Laplanche’s definition of the Freudian term, see “Notes on Afterwardsness,” *Essays on Otherness*, Translated by John Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1999).]

the past, Barbra dramatically re-enacts it as if happening now: “And, and [Johnny] said, ‘Ooh, it’s late. Why did we start so late?’ And I said, ‘Johnny, if you’d’ve gotten up earlier we wouldn’t *be* late.’” Barbra’s actions are consistent with what Abram Kardiner (following Freud) says of post-traumatic temporality, where the “subject acts as if the original traumatic situation were still in existence and engages in protective devices which failed on the original occasions” (Kardiner, 1941: 82). Notable here is that Barbra’s “protective device” is a conversation about controlling time.

Silenced soon after this, Barbra speaks again only to employ another chrono-protective mechanism. When the Coopers confirm that it is almost 3:00 A.M., Barbra responds, “Oh only 10 minutes more. Better leave soon. It’s ten minutes to three.” She seeks refuge in the safety of clock time, now measured in durations between emergency broadcasts. But once again, time—its passage from night to day, its illusion of measurability—offers a false sense of empowerment. After all, no one will leave the farmhouse. Barbra’s repetition of the time left to them is an uncanny marker of the superficiality of such formal markers of our moments. Thus, what is adumbrated in the cemetery is fully developed here: *Night’s* timekeeping reads as superstitious, compulsive counting, a wish for mastery in the face of helplessness—an empty ritual, so fully human.

In *Night of the Living Dead*, counting down toward the future and recounting the past both promise gains—of sunlight to come, of reclaiming history in the face of loss. But ultimately, subjective time-sense and material clocks alike mock and fail the people they are set to serve. This fact and the film’s deliberate and adept treatment of time’s complexities are best reflected in a series of time-related errors. In *Night*, timepieces and memory aids are everywhere, but in almost every instance—from the calendar on the kitchen wall, to the watch on almost every (male) character’s wrist—time is out of sync. While the film is set in March, the prominently-displayed farmhouse calendar reads “December.”<sup>2</sup> When Barbra and Ben first arrive at the

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<sup>2</sup> In a 1972 interview, unavailable until only recently\*, Romero implies that, since they shot during thirty production days over seven months, continuity was a problem. Yet I’m not satisfied with the notion that the outdated calendar, so prominently placed, is an accident. Nor am I content to see it as merely a marker of the house’s abandonment. After all, while Tom and Judy gravitate toward the “old” house as if it’s unoccupied, upon arrival they find what appears to be the corpse of its female resident.

[\*Editor’s Note: See “George A. Romero Discusses ‘Night of the Living Dead’ in Previously Unavailable 1972 Interview,” conducted by Alex Ben Block, and published by *Variety.com* on

farmhouse, both mantel clock and Ben’s wristwatch read just minutes to midnight. However, hours later, when a live bulletin broadcasts from a nearby Pennsylvania studio, its clearly-displayed clock reads 11:43 Eastern Time (presumably P.M.). Time seems to have stalled, even reversed. Finally, during the last bulletin—broadcast live and at 3:00 A.M.—characters in the dark farmhouse watch reportedly “Just-in!” footage. The fact that it is daylight and the worst of the zombie siege appears to be over suggests that the footage was taken the morning after most of the characters will have died. In other words, for all but Ben (who will barely see dawn), the morning that the group watches on the news that night, a morning reported as recent past, is a future that will never come.

Every so often after I screen *Night of the Living Dead*, a student expresses some variation of a sentiment I used to share: Barbra starts off strong, but disconcertingly recedes into the background where she is mostly valueless. Even Romero seemed to agree, apologizing, “it was wrong” that his female lead turned out “ineffectual”—an outcome he said he tried to make sense of, and make up for, ever since (Romero, 1972 [2017]: n.p.). Of course, Barbra’s loss—of both protagonist status and monochronic time-sense—is understandable in the context of history. Her diminishment can be reckoned as a working-out of contemporaneous social realities affecting women: from the nuclear family home as housewife’s prison, to the feminization of so-called nervous disorders. But Barbra is more than a would-be protagonist and sign of the times. She is an “everyman” crucially embodied as a woman, one braving trauma in what feels like the end of time. Barbra may have shrunken from focus, but in an important sense—her sense of time—she emerges a locus of viewer identification and a potent gothic heroine. Unintentional as it may be, Barbra’s influence is everywhere; her dashed hopes for and subjective experience of trauma-time is exteriorized in the farmhouse’s asynchronous timepieces, in *Night’s* characters, and in the film’s larger land- and time-scape. (Re)Born of a time run amok, there is room for Barbra to grow in *Night* criticism and in the classroom. There is a strong formal basis for her recuperation, and it’s *about* time that we bring Barbra back.<sup>3</sup>

— J.A. Shea

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25 October, 2017. The interview was meant to mark the posthumous installation of Romero’s star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.]

<sup>3</sup> [Editor’s Note: For a parallel recuperation of *Dawn of the Dead’s* Fran, see Lorna Jowett’s piece on that film in this retrospective.]

## THERE'S ALWAYS VANILLA

Writer: Rudolph J. Ricci | Producer: John A. Russo, Russell Streiner | Music: Jim Drake, Steve Gorn, Mike Marracino | Editing: George A. Romero | Cinematography: George A. Romero | Release Date: December, 1971; 11 February, 1972

Until a few days ago, I had not re-viewed Romero's second film for some time. This has less to do with its supposed deficiencies and more to do with my tendency to move on to new things rather than remain in past realms. Re-reading my chapter in *The Cinema of George A. Romero: Knight of the Living Dead* (2003, 2015), I find little, if anything, to add to what I've written, so my remarks here form a retrospective premise.

First, the film operates as an independent cinematic experiment very much in tune with a past era in which free expression with techniques, far removed from the dominant mode of Hollywood institutional representation, were not only permitted but actually welcomed by certain producers and audiences. I read with amazement an early chapter about veteran Warren Oates's return to Louisville in 1946 in Susan Compo's excellent 2009 biography, where he discovered the existence of an early Art Cinema in Louisville, Kentucky, showing films from different countries. Those of us who grew up in the 50s and 60s had the opportunity of exposure to different types of films, whether one lived in New York or elsewhere, as the repertory theatre aspect of BBC TV revealed. *There's Always Vanilla* (1972) is thus a product of its time by a director wishing to escape confinement in a particular genre and wanting to explore the various opportunities of diverse cinematic techniques then available to him. It is a film that has not actually dated, as its themes, relevant to its time and Romero's later work, reveal. Yet, it is also an experiment that is uneven but not as disastrous as its director believed. It utilizes techniques by its ultimate auteur who is director, editor, and cinematographer, some of which will be discarded and others refined in later films within a time in which anything was possible, both in a diverse and eclectic cinema and audience appreciation of the unusual. Without any knowledge of Romero's involvement, the film would still remain an important record of the decline of the 60s optimistic aspirations into the dead-end of conformity and its associated emotional wastelands.

Second, as the reference to Orson Welles's 1938 production *War of the Worlds* in *Diary of the Dead* (2007), as well as "Amberson Hall" in "The Crate" segment of *Creepshow* (1982) and the "Rosebud Silver Mine" in Romero's graphic serialization, "The Death of Death" for *Toe Tags* (2014) reveal, the role

of this innovative predecessor was never far from the director's mind, despite the visual differences between them. Jonathan Rosenbaum correctly recognized that rather than being a Hollywood director, Welles was really an independent film director who just happened to work in Hollywood. The same can be said about Romero, whose Hollywood-dominated involvements became as much a source of frustration to him as to his distinguished predecessor. The popular and misguided image of Welles has many parallels to Romero. Both began with successful films and then supposedly declined afterwards. We now know that Welles was always active as an independent talent after his last fully-fledged Hollywood film *Touch of Evil* (1958). Although Romero gained the backing of Universal for *Land of the Dead* (2005), dissatisfaction with studio inference led him to return to Canada to continue the type of freedom and experimentation he began with *Bruiser* (2000), another underrated and neglected film that needs more attention in this era of corporate cinematic conformity. If *Citizen Kane* (1941) became the stick with which to beat Welles for his supposed failure to maintain his initial success, then the spurious success of *The Walking Dead* (2010-present) formed an unjustified comparison with Romero's achievements and what he wanted to direct in the future.

A Welles-Romero connection forms an interesting subject for future research. Welles theatrical scholar Richard France appears in three of Romero's films: *There's Always Vanilla*, *The Crazies* (1973), and *Dawn of the Dead* (1979). Despite having written two outstanding books on Welles's theatrical achievements (1977, 1990), France remains an outcast figure in the world of Welles scholarship. If *Citizen Kane* allowed Welles to benefit from the collaborative support of those on the set in RKO Studios before he later engaged in more modest and less flamboyant achievements in *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) and *Chimes at Midnight* (1966), Romero began his experimentations with avant-garde techniques in *There's Always Vanilla*. It was his independent version of *Citizen Kane*, where he consciously employed different cinematic techniques. Yet, despite his dissatisfaction with the results, he continued to experiment with independent cinematic techniques in *Jack's Wife* (1973) and *The Crazies* (1973) before moving to his own version of a more creatively innovative type of cinema.

Form always parallels content in the films of both directors, although Romero knew the difference between his production circumstances and those of Welles, operating by independent inspiration (rather than Tarantino's mode of copying). Although different in spirit from Welles's films in terms of form and content, cannot *There's Always Vanilla* be seen as his version of *The*



*Magnificent Ambersons*? Rather than a genteel aristocracy oblivious to the changing times around them, the characters in *Vanilla* refuse to recognize changing times and how they affect their personalities. Can Ray Laine's Chris in *Vanilla* be seen as a post-hippie George Minafer who will not receive his "come-uppance" in *Ambersons*? All the characters are trapped in one way or another by instinctual patterns of behavior that also characterize Romero's zombies. I'm sure these parallels were not in the director's conscious mind. But far from being a failed experiment that deserves to be consigned to oblivion, *Vanilla* is Romero's attempt to explore several contemporary independent cinematic techniques before he would move on to other types of formal techniques and narratives. Robin Wood once stated that one need not see every film by a director but concentrate on the recognized achievements, as F.R. Leavis did with his "Great Tradition." But sometimes, it is necessary to view lesser achievements, understand their flaws, and note elements of potential promise contained within them that will point forward to greater achievements. In retrospect, *Vanilla* is a key example of this.

— Tony Williams

### **SEASON OF THE WITCH (JACK'S WIFE, HUNGRY WIVES)**

Writer: George A. Romero | Producer: Alvin Croft, Nancy Romero | Music: Steve Gorn | Editing: George A. Romero | Cinematography: George A. Romero | Release Date: May, 1972 (New York City); 18 April, 1973

### **BRUISER**

Writer: George A. Romero | Producer: Ben Barenholtz, Peter Grunwald | Music: Donald Rubinstein | Editing: Miume Jan Eramo | Cinematography: Adam Swica | Release Date: 13 February, 2000

In 2009, George A. Romero travelled to Charlotte, NC, for a retrospective of his work, not long after the surprising box office success of 2007's *Diary of the Dead*. Charlotte being near my hometown of Greensboro, I was thrilled to attend. Romero graciously sat for long Q&As after each film, and after a screening of *Season of the Witch*, I had the opportunity to ask, "Would you say that *Bruiser* is the male version of *Season of the Witch*?" Romero leaned forward and looked at me with an amused grin, clearly pleased that I hadn't asked if he liked the "fast" zombies in the *Dawn of the Dead* remake (2004), or if he

considered the “rage virus” in *28 Days Later* (2003) to produce zombies or just really angry people. He laughed and said, “Well, yeah! That sounds about right!” It made me feel really smart.

*Season of the Witch* is actually the third title for a film Romero intended to be called *Jack’s Wife* (1973). (Exploitation distributor Jack H. Harris insisted on naming it *Hungry Wives*, and tried—unsuccessfully—to market it as a soft-core sex film.) The film is about Joan (Jan White), a woman entering middle age, stifled by suburban housewifery, trying to figure out who she is, worrying that she has already lost who she might have been.

*Bruiser* was Romero’s first film since the unhappy studio experience of *The Dark Half*, and the first produced in Canada. Romero produced all of his subsequent work in and around Toronto, where he settled and eventually gained dual-citizenship. *Bruiser* did not find wide distribution, and was released direct-to-video. The plot follows Henry (Jason Flemyng), a man abused, ignored, and put upon by all those around him, as he breaks under the stress of maintaining a bourgeois lifestyle. These two films, both poorly distributed and under-appreciated, are in my view best seen as a double feature, and well worth revisiting.

In both films, the protagonist struggles against the stultifying gender roles prescribed by capitalism,<sup>4</sup> and experiences lucid dreams and visions that express inner frustration and rage. The narratives shift from reality to dream without signaling viewers, aligning them with the protagonists’ point of view, and equivocating on what exactly is real or illusion. In each film, Romero tweaks genre conventions—respectively the melodrama or “woman’s film” and *film noir*<sup>5</sup>—in terms of the particular kinds of social traps reserved for their female and male characters.

*Season of the Witch* is more aptly served by Romero’s original title, *Jack’s Wife*. It begins with a direct homage to the opening dream sequence of Luis Buñuel’s *Belle de jour* (1967). Buñuel opens with an erotic dream in which Parisian housewife Séverine (Catherine Deneuve) fantasizes about being dragged into the woods, whipped and ravished by strangers. Romero twists the fantasy into a representation of domesticated despair. A woman follows a man into the woods. He ignores her, reading a newspaper as he walks and letting branches and brambles whip back into the woman’s face and hair. Eventually, the man rolls up his newspaper, hits the woman on the nose,

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<sup>4</sup> For more on this, see Tony Williams, *The Cinema of George A. Romero: Knight of the Living Dead*, 2nd ed. New York: Columbia UP/Wallflower, 2015, chapters 4 and 13.

<sup>5</sup> I’m indebted to Kristopher Woofert for discussing the films in these generic terms.

clasps a dog collar on her neck, and locks her in a kennel. The woman, Joan (Jan White), is an unhappy homemaker neglected by her titular husband (Bill Thunhurst), a bland workaholic. Joan finds her teenage daughter dismissive and disrespectful, and herself unfulfilled in her boring suburb of Pittsburgh. Consequently, she finds herself drawn to a New Age neighbor who says she is a witch.

Joan subsequently immerses herself in witchcraft and socializes with innocuous counterculture types who speak in empty slogans (“Stay stoned man, it’s all a head thing.”). She tries a conjuring spell first as a means to catalyze an affair while her husband is away, and later as an attempt to summon a spirit. Joan begins to have recurring nightmares of a masked intruder breaking into her home and raping her, and these nightmares and other dream sequences underscore Joan’s feeling of mental atrophy. When Jack returns home from a business trip late one night, Joan shoots and kills him, possibly thinking he is the figure from her dreams. The police decline to file charges, assuming that Joan thought an intruder was breaking into her home. Tony Williams argues that Joan’s interest in witchcraft at first suggests there might be a way out of soul-deadening conformity. But in the end Joan has only placed herself in yet another social trap. The film ends at a cocktail party where people still refer to her as “Jack’s wife.”<sup>6</sup> Williams makes a strong point, especially given that she exchanges a social circle of other bored housewives for a secret coven of witches. The film ends with her still making the rounds at a vapid suburban party. The ultimate failure to transcend here takes on even greater resonance in an era that produced former model-turned-Pulitzer-Prize-winning feminist poet Anne Sexton’s *Transformations* (1971), where fairy tale myths of female entrapment yield only further entrapment and denial. Like the confessional female voice of Sexton’s “Red Riding Hood,” who laments being “[q]uite collected at cocktail parties,” while “in [her] head / [She’s] undergoing open-heart surgery,” Joan also seems to end her journey “remembering / nothing naked and brutal / from that little death, / that little birth, / from [her] going down / and [her] lifting up.”<sup>7</sup>

In *Bruiser*, Henry has spent his life “playing by the rules,” holding on to such archaic values as loyalty, gratitude, and friendship. As with *Season of the Witch*, the home is a prison built by American Dream-style aspirational capitalism. Henry lives with his wife, Janine (Nina Garbiras), and her awful

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<sup>6</sup> See Williams, p. 53-64.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Sexton, “Red Riding Hood,” in *Transformations* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1971), 269, 272.

yippy dog in a half-constructed McMansion in a dusty suburb, surrounded by empty houses and undeveloped lots. Janine, disgusted by his spinelessness, verbally abuses and cuckolds him. Miles Styles (Peter Stormare), Henry's boss at "Bruiser"—a glitzy magazine for the "me" generation—publicly humiliates him and sleeps with Janine. His best friend and financial advisor is embezzling from him and, worse, cheating at tennis. His maid steals the silver. Henry meekly accepts the abuse, though increasingly he finds himself in lucid daydreams of viciously murdering various rude and inconsiderate people who cut in front of him in line or otherwise abuse his dignity.<sup>8</sup> After the party during which Janine cuckolds him, Henry wakes to find that his face has disappeared, replaced by a featureless white mask.<sup>9</sup>

Romero has said in interviews that he was inspired by the look of the mask in Georges Franju's *Les yeux sans visage* (*Eyes Without a Face*) (1960), and adapted it to the idea of losing one's identity in a capitalist, materialist culture. Whether real or another of his lucid dreams, Henry uses his perceived anonymity as cover to murder everyone who wronged him. The film's slow build climaxes with a *Phantom of the Opera/Paradise* set piece featuring a goofy performance by The Misfits<sup>10</sup> and the bloody revenge of the faceless Henry on all the people who did him wrong. Like Joan, though, Henry doesn't escape the cycle. Having gotten away after the massacre of the office holiday party, Henry has a new job delivering mail in an office. He seems happy and carefree.<sup>11</sup> Carefree, that is, until some supervisor gets an attitude. Immediately, the featureless face returns and we are left anticipating a new killing spree.

In keeping with Romero's consistent themes, both films are about social entrapment—here, in the form of traditional gender roles as conditioned by American capitalism and the punishing echoes of Puritanism. The remarkable

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<sup>8</sup> These "daydreams" echo "The Crate" sequence from *Creepshow* (1982), in which Henry (Hal Holbrook) repeatedly imagines his wife, Wilma (Adrienne Barbeau) dying in spectacular ways.

<sup>9</sup> Henry's emasculation may have some resonance in the appropriately named Allan Mann (Jason Beghe) in *Monkey Shines* (1988). See Kristopher Woofter's appreciation in this retrospective for more on this film.

<sup>10</sup> The Michale Graves version, alas.

<sup>11</sup> By way of comparison in another genre, consider the end of Mike Judge's *Office Space* (1999). Peter (Ron Livingston), having nearly been found out in his attempt to embezzle from his company, escapes detection because Milton (Stephen Root) sets the building on fire. Peter then finds more fulfilling work on a construction crew.

similarity of their narrative structure, from the protagonists' outer meekness and inner frustration to their lucid dreaming, suggests that Romero deliberately considered the specific psychological and social damage inherent in these traditional roles. It is probably not incidental that both protagonists' frustrations get sparked at vapid bourgeois dinner parties. These sites of (drunken) social competition both repel and play to the insecurities of Joan and Henry, pushing them to seek means of control. Jack's wife seeks her own identity. She doesn't want to age into sexual obsolescence. Henry has been stepped on or passed over his entire life; his job at "Bruiser," a yuppie lifestyle magazine is an ironic reminder of his own beta-male status. Both characters feel alienated and insignificant, but in attempting to escape as a witch and a killer, respectively, find themselves back in the same cycle of anonymous conformity they sought to escape.

— Will Dodson

## THE CRAZIES

Writer: George A. Romero, Paul McCollough | Producer: A.C. Croft | Music: Jim Drake, Steve Gorn, Mike Marracino | Editing: George A. Romero | Cinematography: George A. Romero | Release Date: 16 March, 1973

George A. Romero's *The Crazies* (1973) offers a challenge to D. H. Lawrence's notion of the essential American soul as "hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer." Lawrence is correct of course, but his examination of American literature leaves out some predominant qualities, like cowardice, stupidity, and easy acquiescence in mob mentality. Romero accounts for all of these in *The Crazies*, one of his most politically adept films, and the one most informed by the U.S. attack on Vietnam, from its destroy-the-village-to-save-it view of state power (a prescient view, to be confirmed in the mid-70s by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, with its evidence of the U.S. population's use as guinea pig for biochemical warfare experiments) to the priest who immolates himself (Jack Zaharia). The priest's suicide takes place in small-town America, the site of the narrative, Romero examining the nation's dark heart where it thrives in blinkered, nonchalant complacency. The film's central device—the release of a biological warfare agent (code-named Trixie) on a town, making people engage in bizarre, violent acts—forces us to decide what in fact propels the violence. Are people descending into barbarism because of the action of the state, external to the lives of the population, or because of entrenched

assumptions of the population itself, finally manifest in policies no longer removed from the provincial, self-satisfied rural existence, which allow the monstrosity of the state so long as it is applied to the external Other? The film continually manifests the power of horror's ambiguity.

Robin Wood noted the film's extraordinary opening, which essentially replicates that of *Night of the Living Dead*; a boy, considerably younger than the one in the earlier film, torments his younger sister. In *Night*, the torment takes place in a cemetery while the sister places a wreath on a family plot. The brother mocks the moment, feeling it a meaningless ritual (he is thoroughly unconcerned with his sister's feelings, and is even contemptuous of sentiment). The family is established, in Romero's first horror film and in its more refined successor, as, in Michael Haneke's words, the primal battleground, the first site of conflict. In *The Crazies*, the wicked game of the little boy is interrupted as the camera observes a shrieking man demolishing the interior of the home, ultimately setting it on fire, an act that sets the film in motion. Later, we observe him in the back of a police car; he is hysterical as he looks back at the burning homestead, not yet aware that his daughter and son are badly injured. (We learn soon after that the little girl has died.) As the story unfolds, one might assume the man is Trixie's first victim. But Romero does more than make us examine the consequences of state violence visited upon *us* rather than *them*. The father's actions might be seen as the logical consequence of family life, the father showing, again in Wood's observation, that the first victim of patriarchy is the patriarch himself. The father destroys everything in sight out of frustration: with marriage (his wife lies dead and bloodied in the marital bed), child-rearing, and wage slavery?

Similarly, the priest's self-immolation, replicating perfectly the famous image of a Buddhist monk on a Saigon street, might be caused by the effect of Trixie, or perhaps outrage at the military's invasion of the church's sanctuary, although it is hard to imagine anyone in this film acting from ideological conviction. His death conveys none of the sense of a person acting out of conviction, which gives the newsreel image of the burning monk a heroic aspect even in its profound horror. Is the priest's madness born of frustration as mass culture announces the "death of God," prophesizing perhaps the exposure of the church's true role as a hideout for active pedophiles?

Paramount in this ambiguity is the case of Kathy (Lynn Lowry), who walks, in a happy daze, into an open field as soldiers close in to eliminate the Trixie victims. Supposing her to be infected, the soldiers debate what they see before cutting her down; the scene suggests the archetypal gang rape, a lone female surrounded by men (albeit clad in bizarre HazMat suits), her only

response a smile, as if to befuddle the males to keep them off balance and away. She is shot down of course, the soldiers not knowing about the other toxin, Kathy's history of incest with her father (Richard Liberty), the primal taboo crucial to patriarchal civilization, condemned yet necessarily sanctioned for the sake of male rule, history's foundational contradiction.

The military culture at the center of America (perhaps more so at this writing than ever) is emphasized by the film's soundtrack, with its incessant martial drums, and "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" as the film's theme. One might say that the music undergirds a generally sarcastic tone, as it accompanies the looting of homes, the destruction of property, the incarceration of citizens, and finally the incineration of the town, but these images return us to Romero's focus not only on what we have done to various populations here and abroad, but to our enjoyment of all things military. Could we, the citizens of this nation, argue otherwise when we insist on "victory parades" (heartily supported by parade-lover Rachel Maddow, the most liberal of all TV commentators) after each imperialist adventure? The film's nominal heroes, David (Will MacMillan) and Clank (Harold Wayne Jones) compete for recognition as foremost local hero, Clank very disturbed at friend David having been a Green Beret, the famed elite murder corps of the Kennedy era, while Clank was a lowly infantryman. Clank is driven crazy by the situation, and by his past defeat at romance (but again, is it Trixie?), his macho pose suddenly ended by an army bullet in the head, as the two heroes watch both the townspeople and the military rip things to shreds. In a pathetic Last Stand, David places his pregnant wife Judy inside a makeshift Alamo made of cinder blocks, less a fort than a trap made of the industrial debris of America. Her own death by gunfire may be attributed to—what? Her witness to the affairs of men makes her the archetype of the woman shunted aside, but she has a complement in the lab technician (Edith Bell) who is ignored by Dr. Watts (Richard France) even as she yells at him, trying to make him aware of the need to share with her his formula; he is too arrogant (manifest throughout the film, making any possible accomplishment by him extremely unlikely) to take the time to give his assistant the cure he has supposedly found before he is trampled to death on the staircase by the mob.

Who are "the crazies"? Obviously America itself, given a population that, through its history, has preferred conflagration to revolution or even reform. It is a nation which at this writing has placed in the White House a manifest lunatic, and a dumb one at that, referred to by his former Secretary of State (a man he never met prior to his appointment), as a "fucking moron." But if this nation is made up of insane idiots, appointing a man who would make a

Millard Fillmore or a James Buchanan seem filled with grace, we must attend to *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, or the works of Wilhelm Reich or Herbert Marcuse. Psychopathology has a pandemic character in America, something George Romero knew throughout his working life, certainly in this 1973 masterpiece.

— Christopher Sharrett

## MARTIN

Writer: George A. Romero | Producer: Richard P. Rubinstein | Music: Donald Rubinstein | Editing: George A. Romero | Cinematography: Michael Gornick | Release Date: 10 May, 1978

Why does George A. Romero mean so much to us?

This question was always difficult to answer during Romero's lifetime, usually because the communities who valued him most—those who knew him personally, fans and practitioners of the horror genre, scholars and critics of horror studies, proponents and historians of American independent film, the people of Pittsburgh and Toronto where he lived and worked—were either preaching to the converted or ignored by the unconvinced. Now that we have lost him, it is more important than ever not just to mourn and celebrate him, but to communicate what makes his work essential and why his legacy matters. I can think of no better place to start than *Martin*.

Romero himself was fond of referring to *Martin* as his personal favorite among all of his films. I think one of the reasons why is that *Martin*, with stunning power and precision, balances the two creative drives that characterize all of Romero's work: the documentary impulse and the fantastic impulse. These two drives express themselves in all of his films to one degree or another, but it is in *Martin* that they harmonize most perfectly and are unmasked not as competing opponents but as interdependent partners. When Romero's vision is at its sharpest, he shows us how documentary ways of seeing and fantastic ways of seeing can combine to reveal more truth about the world around us than either one on its own.

So is *Martin* a vampire movie? Yes, but not just because the young, mentally ill Martin (played with haunting sensitivity by John Amplas) kills his victims and drinks their blood. After all, he has no fangs, no coffin, no fear of mirrors or garlic or crucifixes. This is a vampire film in a deeper, more



disturbing, and more social sense, where it is Martin's surroundings that have been bled dry of economic and emotional vitality. When he arrives from Indianapolis to live with his elderly cousin Cuda in Braddock, Pennsylvania, a decaying rust-belt town outside of Pittsburgh, he finds himself in a community that has already been vampirized. The collapse of the steel mills has wreaked havoc far beyond economic suffering—there is distrust between the older and younger generations, alienation between couples, and desperation among the poor echoed by listless depression among the rich.

Romero captures all of this with a documentarian's expert eye, so much so that Braddock emerges as a character every bit as vivid as the unforgettable Martin himself. In fact, Martin, in his own strange and sick way, may be closer to representing the “new blood” Braddock needs to revive itself than the vampire out to drain life from the town. Although Cuda curses Martin as “nosferatu” and maintains that his inheritance of the “family shame” stems from “the old country” in Italy, Martin is decidedly modern in both his outlook and his methods. He dismisses vampire lore as superstitious “magic,” substitutes hypodermic needles for fangs, masters the use of electronic technologies (the automatic garage-door opener, the telephone), and even dabbles quite successfully in mass media exposure (his calls to a late-night radio show). What's more, Martin works hard—not just as a delivery boy for Cuda's butcher shop and a handyman for Mrs. Santini, but as the closest thing to an amateur therapist that Braddock can muster. Martin speaks very little, but he *listens* carefully and empathically: to his cousin Christina about her struggles with her unreliable boyfriend Arthur and undercutting grandfather Cuda; to the lonely housewife Mrs. Santini who becomes Martin's lover; even to Cuda, whom he hears out to the best of his ability (going so far as to sit through most of an exorcism ritual that Cuda subjects him to) and tries to educate by showing him how he is not the old-world vampire Cuda imagines him to be.

Much of *Martin's* most fantastic imagery is contained within a form commonly associated with documentary realism: black and white film. *Martin* is a color film, but switches to black and white for sequences that function as fantasy/memory flashpoints from Martin's perspective. Much of this black and white imagery could sit comfortably with scenes from classic horror films—the torch-bearing townsfolk, the fair maiden, the stern priest. So when Romero merges the black and white look of documentary with the images of fantastic horror, he alerts us to how *Martin* continually challenges the distinctions we tend to draw between these two registers. Part of the shock of Martin's death at the end of the film—Cuda hammers a stake through his

heart as punishment for a murder Martin did not commit—is that what is supposed to be an image from a classic horror film has now erupted in the real world of Braddock. Romero presents this brutal killing in full color, with no recourse to black and white. The result is devastating on several levels: not only has Martin’s subjectivity been snuffed out, but our ability to separate the “fantastic” from the “real” has been destroyed as thoroughly as Martin’s body.

Romero’s commitment to blurring the borders between documentary realism and fantastic horror, right down to alternating between color and black and white film, recalls the work of one of Romero’s favorite directors: Michael Powell, and *Peeping Tom* in particular. Powell spoke of his own shocking horror film as “a very tender film,” and I think the same could be said of the equally shocking *Martin*. Much of this tenderness comes from the fact, apparent in just about every frame, that *Martin* is a film made by a community about the community. Nearly everyone involved with the production, filmed on a shoestring with a tiny crew on location in Braddock and Pittsburgh, does double and triple duty: special effects maestro Tom Savini also plays Arthur and performs stunts; sound technician Tony Buba, director of important documentaries about Braddock in his own right, has a small acting role, helped to scout locations, and provided access to his mother’s home to play the crucial role of Cuda’s house; Romero himself not only writes, directs, and edits, but plays a young priest with a taste for good wine and an affection for *The Exorcist*. This is no work-for-hire about some faceless place; it is a labor of love that stands as an invaluable portrait of Braddock alongside the documentaries of Buba and photographs of LaToya Ruby Frazier, who brilliantly brings to life an African-American Braddock detectable only at the edges of Romero’s vision here.

Romero means so much to us because he is not an outsider looking in, but someone speaking from inside a world he knows and loves, feeling the anguish within it. He invites us to share that world with him, to embrace his love and anguish about it as our own. To accept that invitation in *Martin*, like all of Romero’s best films, is no easy task—the warmth and empathy is indivisible from the pain and horror. But when we do accept Romero’s invitation, we are ultimately welcomed *and* confronted by the documentary aspects of his vision as much as the fantastic ones. The two are one in *Martin*; it is essential Romero.

— Adam Lowenstein

## DAWN OF THE DEAD

Writer: George A. Romero | Producer: Claudio Argento, Alfredo Cuomo, Richard P. Rubinstein, Donna Siegel | Music: Goblin [as The Goblins], Dario Argento | Editing: George A. Romero | Cinematography: Michael Gornick | Release Date: 1 September, 1978 (Italy); 24 May, 1979 (U.S.A.)

*Dawn of the Dead* is one of the most successful independent films to be made, balancing budget and income, and it frequently appears on lists of Top Horror Films. Without a doubt, *Dawn* is also the forerunner of today's popular zombie apocalypse subgenre. British science fiction writer John Wyndham may have built his career with numerous novels on a similar theme—the most famous being *The Day of the Triffids* (1951)—but Romero's film, following four characters attempting to escape a zombie outbreak that rapidly takes on apocalyptic proportions, made this narrative popular. Michal Zgorzalek describes how Romero's first three zombie films present

a world in which most of the human population dies or is killed by either a deadly virus or its animated victims. He shows what reality would look like if the small percent of survivors had to fight for every bit of food, shelter and munitions. He raises serious questions concerning the state of politics, economics, and culture using the 'plague' as a means of conveying the message. (2016)

In 2018, decades after *Dawn's* initial release, these themes are familiar from movies like *28 Days Later* (2002) to TV series such as *The Walking Dead* (2010-), informing zom-rom-com homages like *Shaun of the Dead* (2004). Its ideology, execution, economic and critical success, as well as its influence, all make *Dawn of the Dead* notable.

The four main characters—Francine and Stephen, employees of a TV station reporting on the outbreak, plus Peter and Roger, police officers whose SWAT team is tasked with forcibly evacuating people from their homes—escape by helicopter and after several close calls with zombies while refuelling, take refuge in a shopping mall. This setting is what makes the film so memorable, and much has been made of its critique of consumerism and foreshadowing of the conspicuous consumption of the 1980s (see Loudermilk, 2002, for instance). The Monroeville Mall, where *Dawn* was filmed, was one of the first and largest mega-malls in the United States, offering multiple forms of pleasurable consumption in a single location. Thus it was an ideal setting for

the film's critique of consumerism, environment, and social structures. The piped-in jingles, bland Muzak and coy advertising heard in the mall stand in stark contrast to the arguments and chaotic "debates" at the TV station where Fran and Stephen worked, and these continue on the emergency TV broadcasts seen by the survivors for a large part of *Dawn*. But this is not what I am struck by as I watch the film in 2018.

I imagine that the things that draw my attention would not be important for many people watching the film. I find myself focusing on particular things. Not the zombies, their constant threat. Not the fighting to escape them. Not their spectacular deaths, nor their often laughable—indeed, slapstick-inspired—actions in the mall. (Walking without awareness of their surroundings, for example, more than one stumbles over the upper-level railings, or into the pools of the obligatory fountains.) Not the carnivalesque uproar of invading, then possessing a shopping mall free from social regulation. This time around, I notice things about Francine (Fran). Admittedly I notice these things because I am a scholar of media, a fan of horror, and a feminist. The things I notice are so pressing that they derail what I might have written here. They clamour for my attention, so I bring them to the attention of others here instead of offering a more traditional academic analysis.

I notice how Fran only survives initially because of her relationship with Stephen and the skills of all three men. An assertive, professional woman, Fran realises early on that her position as the only female survivor in the group is bound to be a source of tension, and this comes through in subtle ways in Gaylen Ross's layered performance. In the helicopter she speaks and moves as little as possible. When they stop to refuel, and the men each engage in some kind of action (checking fuel levels, looking in the small office, shooting zombies) Fran follows Stephen, saying nothing while the men call to each other. She avoids drawing attention, keeping her head down and her face turned away. Once at the mall, she demands to do the same things as the others, and learn some of their skills—including being taught to fly the helicopter by Stephen—and this may ensure her survival in the future none of them really want to face. Yet even when she learns to shoot and fight zombies, she knows that she is not treated the same way as the men treat each other.

I notice how often Fran says nothing while the male characters speak. How the men ignore her when she advocates leaving the mall. She is the only protagonist who consistently sees the mall as a threat rather than an aid to survival. To her, the mall may well be a familiar trap rather than a reassuring pleasure: "You're so hypnotized by this place, all of you.... It's so bright and

neatly wrapped you don't see that it's a prison too." Fran's desire to move on rather than to stay is only one thing that sets her apart from the men. They, after all, have not had to spend their lives maintaining a "bright and neatly wrapped" performance that most men are hypnotized by and cannot see beyond.

I notice how Fran ends up taking on domestic chores, despite her self-conscious sarcasm about doing so. None of the other characters seem to notice this. Moreover, while Fran's subtle protests show her awareness of inequities between her and the men, in the interest of maintaining a semblance of order she carries out domestic duties efficiently and thoroughly, if not enthusiastically.

I notice how aware she seems to be of the artificiality of now-redundant social structures and activities the men cling to. All four, once "safe" in the mall, fill in time as best they can, with distractions and increasingly meaningless activities. "Robbing" the safe, putting on make-up, eating luxury foods, practicing a tennis stroke, and watching TV are all meaningless because the context that gave them meaning no longer exists. Despair dawns slowly, making this a surprisingly long horror film.

I notice how the three men discuss Fran's pregnancy and potential abortion in her absence. How the meaning of her relationship with lover Stephen fades: heteronormativity and the myths of romance seem ridiculous now the social structures that supported and perpetuated them are gone. When Stephen proposes to Fran over dinner, she refuses, telling him it isn't real. In some senses it never was.

I notice how much more willing she is to recognise the reality of their current situation, right from the start. How alone Fran is with only men for company in the majority of the story. How seldom her pregnancy is mentioned. That she is not only female but pregnant sets her apart further, perhaps as Jennifer Krukowski argues, because it ties her firmly to reality as it is, rather than fantasy, escapism, and reality as it was before the zombies, or when they first entered the mall: "Francine's pregnancy forces her more than anyone else to physically experience the passage of time and consider her future, no matter how uncertain it may be" (2016: n.p.).

I notice how being a woman has prepared Fran for all of this. How being a woman has prepared her to survive in a climate of threat and violence. How being a woman has prepared her to continue in the face of despair. How being a woman has prepared her to keep moving, even with very little fuel.

Gathering information and reading about *Dawn* before and after re-watching the film, I notice other things. How Fran, despite being the first and

last main character on screen, is still described in some plot summaries as “Stephen’s girlfriend.” How by far the majority of “memorable quotes” that come up as online search results are from male characters, not from Fran. How the actor playing Fran, Gaylen Ross, is almost always named last of the four main cast members even when the names are not listed in alphabetical order. I notice these things *because* her character in the film so clearly—to me, at least—critiques these kinds of social inequalities.

I am sure I also notice many of these things because it is early 2018 and inequalities in the film industry are starting to become highly visible.

Finally, because I am a feminist killjoy who has learned to cherish victories, I notice that Gaylen Ross is now a successful director, writer, and editor of documentary films.

— Lorna Jowett

## **KNIGHTRIDERS**

Writer: George A. Romero | Producer: Richard P. Rubinstein | Music: Oscar Brown, Jr., Donald Rubinstein | Editing: Pascale Buba, George A. Romero | Cinematography: Michael Gornick | Release Date: 10 April, 1981

Romero’s passion project, a film about a troupe of performing knights on motorcycles and their travelling community of craftspeople and misfits, *Knightriders* is, on the surface, hard to square with the medieval romantic tradition that inspires its characters and its director. In his 1981 review in *Cineaste*, Ed Sikov expressed frustration with the symbolic level of the film: “The allegorical format of the film suggests much more than it delivers, and only if one is willing to give Romero the benefit of the metaphorical doubt does *Knightriders* succeed” (Sikov, 1981: 33). But like J.R.R. Tolkien, whose work was so often reduced to allegory by both critics and fans, Romero might be described as an author who recognizes the flexibility of myth and legend and turns them to his own modern uses. While Billy and his motorcycle-mounted knights harken back to the legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, the reference is knowingly loose and self-aware; the characters even laugh at how they differ from their legendary namesakes.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The Black Knight, played by Tom Savini, has named himself Sir Morgan, and is gently mocked for not knowing that Morgan was a woman in the legends. Merlin, played by iconic

Romero's use of medieval legend is neither ironic nor a statement of desire for a long-gone past. It is a way to locate value within community, against a backdrop of decay. But the community is ephemeral, an idyll that must ultimately fade. The bubble of idealism created by Ed Harris's King Billy can't hold up under the pressure of its modern American context; as such, it is a way for Romero to highlight and mock the failure of his country to live up to its own ideals. Yet the way Romero uses mythical elements in the film reveals a profound optimism. The idyll *is* unsustainable; that is its nature. Like Camelot, like romance, like the hero's quest—its worth lies in the way it provides inspiration for life and community in the real world. What remains when the idyll dissolves is storytelling. The world continues, but as we viewers sit in our modern mead hall, gathered around the flickering fire of the movie screen, Romero communicates in *Knightriders* what he described as “the underbelly in all my movies ... the longing for a better world, a higher plane of existence, for people to get together.” Despite, or perhaps because of, the apparent acceleration of societal decay, Romero was “still singing those songs” (quoted in Yakir 1981: 70).

The fictional Knightriders troupe gives us (and its fictional audience, if they will see it) a vision of an alternative society, separate and functioning by its own code of ethics based on openness, acceptance, fairness, and nobility of speech and action. In this micro-society gay love is not only celebrated by the community but sanctioned by the king, women can express their excellence in non-traditional spheres, and race is not a barrier to inclusion or achievement. This society is unique because the code they live by is rarely seen on film—even today—let alone experienced in the kinds of rural communities the troupe passes through on their Pennsylvania tour. Romero said that he got the idea for this modern Arthurian community from the Society for Creative Anachronism (Romero, 2013: n.p.).<sup>13</sup> The film makes it clear that the troupe's society is an anachronism, threatened by external and internal forces that may yet tear it apart, but it is also creative, flexible, transformative and redemptive, and as such it is in a continual process of evolution. The secret and appeal of the Arthurian world is that its codes and values promise stability, not in stasis but via a process of transformation and continuity through death and rebirth. Ephemerality is Camelot's very nature—it is an idyll. Similarly, while there

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storyteller-performer Brother Blue, maintains that magic and omens aren't real, and that he can't see into the future, despite Billy's faith in him.

<sup>13</sup> Founded by science-fiction writer Poul Anderson in 1966. See their website: <http://www.sca.org/>.

may have been a real, historical King Arthur, the figure who comes down to us in legend is a metonym for kingship itself, a malleable metaphor for the ideal leader, useful only because it responds to the needs of its audience. By giving us a flawed and conflicted King Billy—a figure self-consciously mimetic of a mythical ideal—Romero suggests that leadership, at least in the late twentieth century, is a process of choosing ideals, then questioning, trying, failing, examining—establishing and continually re-establishing a reason to adhere to a framework of values that can serve the community, not coerce, manipulate, or enslave them. When a young boy asks for his autograph, Billy is taken aback. When he argues with Linet, his partner/queen, he articulates not what he is, but what he is not: “Jim Jones, or Charles Manson, or The Great Wallenda.” What he is not is idealism as madness and hubris that leads to violence. Nor is he simply a daredevil act, even if “sucker-headed American driftwood” can’t tell the difference. Billy’s dilemma is how to lead a community based on values and ideals without falling off the high wire—into brainwashing and violence on one side, or celebrity on the other. Romero’s portrait of Billy is at least in part an examination of leadership for a post-Nixon, post-Vietnam America, a world where leaders will never go unquestioned again, and where certainty of purpose is exposed as a dangerous lie.<sup>14</sup>

It’s as obvious to viewers as it is to his community that all is not well with King Billy. From the opening of the film he is weakened, both physically and spiritually. He is trying to uphold, live by and lead by a code of values and ideals that inspires his friends and followers, but the society he has built on those values is disintegrating. When Billy shouts “I’m not trying to be a hero! I’m fighting the dragon!” it’s clear that the dragon will win. But if Billy holds to the motto of his travelling show, “Fight or Yelde,” yielding—to a dragon of commercialism, greed, and stupidity at least—is impossible. Billy’s wounded shoulder may be an oblique reference to the Fisher King, whose wound (usually in the thigh or groin) is a *figura* of the waning or sterility of the kingdom, and indeed the Camelot Billy has built seems to have come to an impasse. But Billy’s wound is also clearly the archetypal Unhealable Wound, as Joseph Campbell (1949) explains it, suffered by the hero early in his journey or quest and carried forever, through transformation and into apotheosis. It is a real wound with real consequences, but it is also a symbol of the sacrifice made by the hero for the ideals he strives to realize through his quest: a

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<sup>14</sup> In this way, he becomes something like the logical extension of Ben in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968).



sacrifice of health, wholeness, and innocence or purity. Despite his protestation that he doesn't want to be a hero, Billy appears to be at the end of a quest to create a new world. Now comes the hard part: becoming Master of Two Worlds—reconciling the Magical World with the crude reality of the Known World.

Romero's film is darkly critical of the America exemplified in the Pennsylvania audiences for whom the troupe performs: an America of excess, gluttony, ignorance and violence. (Stephen King's cameo as a stupid and emasculated spectator is a comic caricature of the larger, morally deficient forces that surround and impinge on the troupe's world.) The larger society assails Camelot, in the forms of a corrupt police officer, a Hollywood-style talent scout, and a tabloid journalist and photographer, offering temptations that Billy sees as obstacles to be resisted and overcome on the way to the ultimate boon: a world apart, where codes of honor are enough to sustain and bind a community together. But despite Billy's refusal to compromise, the outside continually makes its way in: Thuggish riders from town show up on their motorcycles and threaten chaos; Morgan and a faction of knights leave the troupe to make big money in a Vegas-style version of the show. When infighting results in a woman spectator being seriously injured by a runaway motorcycle, it really feels like the beginning of the end. The membrane between the micro- and macro-, the ideal and the real, has grown porous. The bubble required for a Camelot to exist is bursting.

The wounded king recognizes this. Though increasingly even his most loyal friends and followers doubt him, he stubbornly continues to fight the forces that threaten his community, and all the while his physical wound worsens. The symbolism seems clear: stasis is sterile, and something must be sacrificed for change to occur. But Romero uses the archetypal wound in his own way, with the introduction of an even more ancient symbol. When Billy chooses to enter the tournament despite his worsening wound and fight the unknown rider whose armour features the device of a Black Bird, the king interprets the appearance of this knight as his undoing, the fulfillment of an omen he has seen in dreams. But the symbolic import of the raven in Indigenous storytelling and ritual is change and transformation, not simple death. In the contest, Billy's wound is initially portrayed as an essential weakness. He falls when walking over to his fallen opponent, and his blood runs down the sword he uses to demand that the Black Bird rider yield. But Billy's weakness is not fatal to his kingship; on the contrary, rather than rising up as a challenger to his throne, the Black Bird rider recognizes his strength, yields, and becomes his acolyte. This enigmatic character, a harbinger of

transformation, will accompany Billy to the world that lies beyond his kingship and be present at his death at the end of the film.

As so often happens, the one who creates the new world is too wounded, or is simply unequipped, to sustain and reconcile that world with the outside. In the end Billy recognizes this, and his reign ends peacefully. The coronation scene is one of redemption and acceptance, a promise of rebirth and continuity of the kingship and the kingdom.

Just before he dies, Billy rides past a sign for Gettysburg, where Lincoln in his Address exhorted a people on the brink of violent dissolution to dedicate themselves to maintaining the ideals upon which their nation was founded. That sign may hint at an analogy: that America itself is an idyll, a dream that cannot last, or can only last through a process of continual renewal through re-dedication to ideals. On a much smaller scale, as a reflection upon community-building, idealism, and leadership, *Knightriders* can be read as an analogy for the creation of art, particularly film, in modern American society. It offers a glimpse into the Romero-centered creative process that we see realized on film. The making of the film involved the creation of a community based on a vision: a functional mini-society with Romero at its head, and the reification of Romero's vision as its purpose. Sadly, but perhaps inevitably, *Knightriders* met with public indifference upon its release. Like the court of Billy the King, the film may have been an idyll, ultimately unsustainable in the larger world to which it holds up an alternative, but no less beautiful and true for all that.

— R. Million

## **CREEPSHOW**

Writer: Stephen King | Producer: Richard P. Rubinstein | Music: John Harrison | Editing: George A. Romero, Pascale Buba, Paul Hirsch, Michael Spolan | Cinematography: Michael Gornick | Release Date: 12 November, 1982

A number of proposed George Romero/Stephen King projects were in development over the years (notably *The Stand* and *Pet Semetary*), but *Creepshow* is the only full collaboration between the men that *Fangoria* referred to as the “bearded behemoths of fright” (Wiater, 1982: 28). King gave his approval for later projects like *Creepshow 2* (1987), which Romero scripted, and *The Dark*

*Half* (1993) but was not directly involved, making *Creepshow* the sole example of Romero directing from a Stephen King script.

King had offered Romero and his producing partner Richard P. Rubenstein the rights to any of his available books, and they initially chose *The Stand*. King's apocalyptic epic was clearly going to require significant capital to film it. Since at this point Romero had never handled a large budget and King had not yet had a screenplay produced, *Creepshow* was developed as a calling card for investors, to prove that a Romero film from a King script could be a box office hit. United Film Distributors gave \$8 million to finance the film, which was picked up by Warner Brothers at Cannes in May 1982. Warners released the film in the US in November, where it made a modest \$20 million. This wasn't enough to attract investors, so *The Stand* remained in development hell for another decade, but *Creepshow* remains nevertheless a significant film for both King and Romero. For King it provided the opportunity to have creative control after his experience with *The Shining* (1980), and for Romero it represented his first foray into the horror mainstream. While Robin Wood argued that the film managed to combine 'the worst of Romero with the worst of King ... empty tales in which nasty people do nasty things to other nasty people' (1986: 191), what the film actually offers is something far more sophisticated. It is well documented that the idea came from King and Romero's shared love of E.C. Comics, but at the heart of the film, wrapped in E.C.'s tradition of the morality tale, is the two men's shared respect for blue-collar America. King is famous for writing identifiable, down-to-earth characters that entice the reader into the story world before disrupting it with the monstrous, while Romero's films prior to *Creepshow* were similarly rooted in the industrial heartland of his native Pittsburgh. Despite the bigger budget, and the presence of name actors such as Hal Holbrook and E.G. Marshall, Romero still shot the film in Pittsburgh, and used many local friends in the production. John Amplas, star of *Martin*, is under Tom Savini's corpse makeup in the first section of the film, "Father's Day," while Romero's regular cinematographer, Michael Gornick, provides the visuals.

King and Romero's working-class roots manifest in *Creepshow* by presenting, for the most part, anti-capitalist cautionary tales of a greedy, amoral elite. In "Father's Day" the wealthy, dyspeptic family of murdered bootlegger Nathan Grantham are terrorised by Nathan's risen corpse; in "Something to Tide you Over" a video-obsessed cuckold who drowns his wife and her lover is visited by their bloated corpses; in "They're Creeping up on You" corporate raider Upson Pratt's antiseptic apartment is overrun by cockroaches (as indeed is he), and in "The Crate," the longest of the five

stories, a hen-pecked college professor calmly feeds his boorish wife to a creature found in a packing crate under some stairs. The exception is “The Lonesome Death of Jordy Verrill,” a comical take on H.P. Lovecraft’s 1927 story “The Colour Out of Space,” (via King’s own literary reworking of Lovecraft, the short story “Weeds,” published in *Cavalier* in 1976). It features King himself as a wide-eyed hick turned into a plant by a meteor that lands on his farm. Despite King’s exaggerated performance, Jordy is given genuine moments of pathos, such as taking a bath to relieve his itching skin, even though he knows it will speed his demise because, as he points out, ‘I’m a goner already...ain’t I,’ and subsequently trying to kill himself with a shotgun, pleading ‘Let my luck be in. Just. This. Once.’ In comparison to the other characters in the film, such moments make him the most sympathetic victim, and while his fate is sealed when he is seduced by the lure of the money the meteor may bring him, it is needed to pay off a bank loan. Living alone on a run-down farm, Jordy is a victim of capitalism as much as of the meteor itself. More than just showing a fondness for 50s comics, *Creepshow* represents King and Romero’s shared distaste for greed, wealth and consumerism.

What also distinguishes *Creepshow* is that Romero is able to control and harness the comic excesses of King’s screenplay. One of the things seldom discussed about King’s writings is how funny they often are, and combined with King’s love of low-budget, trashy horror films, the results in some of his scripts are problematic. Often when King is given freedom in a screenplay to mix horror and comedy, as in the case of the self-directed *Maximum Overdrive* (1986) or Mick Garris’ *Sleepwalkers* (1992), the gags overwhelm the horror, resulting in a film that seems incongruently silly. Despite encouraging King to play Verrill like Wile E. Coyote, in *Creepshow* Romero deftly handles King’s tonal shifts, for example the contrast of the ludicrous foul-mouthed braying of Adrienne Barbeau’s monstrous Billie and the violence of her demise at the hands of “Fluffy,” the thing in the crate. By embracing the excesses of Tom Savini’s gloopy make up effects Romero delivers the kind of horror visuals seen in *Dawn of the Dead*, but here they are filtered through Romero’s loving homage to the luridly colourful and baroque visual style of E.C, and King’s take on the comics’ strong moral tone and subversive humour, which, as Bernice M. Murphy points out, undercut ‘the supposedly wholesome “family values”’ of the 1950s (2016: 135) with what King calls the ‘immortal E.C. Chuckle: Heh, Heh!’ that reassured readers it was all in good fun (1981: 37). Billed on the poster as ‘the most fun you’ll ever have being scared’, *Creepshow* is not only a significant entry in the cycle of horror films from the early 80s, including John Landis’ *American Werewolf in London* (1981) and Joe Dante’s *The*

*Howling* (1982) which successfully combined laughs and frights in equal measure, it is also arguably the only time that King's humour has been satisfactorily realised on screen.

One could argue that, like *The Dead Zone* (1983) for David Cronenberg, *Creepshow* represented a shift for Romero towards the mainstream. Unlike his previous, more challenging films—challenging through being low budget, gory, nihilistic, experimental, or more overtly political—this collaboration with the world's most popular horror writer afforded Romero access to a broader multiplex audience. But in contrast to many of Romero's studio-based projects, *The Dark Half* in particular, his experience on *Creepshow* was positive. While the film may not have launched Romero as a mainstream horror auteur, or King as a viable adaptor of his own work—nor did it get *The Stand* off the ground—it remains one of the most satisfying King films, because it is the only adaptation that truly represents a collaboration between this master of horror literature and a genuine master of the horror film.

— Simon Brown

## DAY OF THE DEAD

Writer: George A. Romero | Producer: Richard P. Rubinstein | Music: John Harrison | Editing: Pascale Buba | Cinematography: Michael Gornick | Release Date: 19 July, 1985

As Caetlin Benson-Allott rightly argued shortly after his death, George A. Romero's films should be remembered for "their innovative blend of genre pleasures and subversive politics" (2017, n.p.). Regarding the latter trait, much critical focus on Romero takes up his subversive critiques of consumerism, though less has been written about Romero's equally incendiary approach to representing how technologies and time periods structure human modes of behavior and ways of feeling. At a surface narrative level, the characters in *Day of the Dead* may be neatly separated into two camps: those who respond to fear as a license to kill and those who ask that science, planning, and the possibility of a medical breakthrough supersede short-order panic. However, since these opposing perspectives occur as a response to the same set of circumstances as in all of the first three *Dead* films, we would be remiss to invest too heavily in the particular circumstances of any individual film. I argue that *Day of the Dead* may be understood as one of Romero's most self-reflective works, particularly concerning how technological and economic limitations impact critical and scholarly perceptions of his own filmmaking.

The dialectic of *Day of the Dead*, with a band of unhinged military personnel opposing a rational cadre of people from various backgrounds, indirectly invokes the writings of Marshall McLuhan, whose 1964 book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* articulates a medium-based argument for comprehending the effects of technological advancement. In McLuhan's work, General David Sarnoff is pinpointed as getting the equation wrong; it is not the way technology is used that determines its value, as Sarnoff argues, but that technologies have the ability to transform a given society and alter processes of thought (1994: 11). The militarism in *Day of the Dead*, which is given a gruff and impatient presence by both Rhodes (Joe Pilato) and Steel (Gary Howard Klar), suggests McLuhan was correct: behavior becomes hard-wired in the brain after a certain point, producing in both men a suspicion of logic and a dogmatic allegiance to violent force as the solution to having one's back against the wall, whether literally or metaphorically.

More cutting still, Romero conceives these group dynamics in relation to media and cultural taste, particularly through Bub (Howard Sherman), a zombie whose status as the guinea pig for Dr. Logan's (Matthew Liberty) experiments indirectly brings him into contact with a defining technology of the 1980s and also with contrasting forms of art—namely, a Walkman, a paperback copy of Stephen King's *'Salem's Lot*, and Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> symphony. These artifacts, all assembled by Dr. Logan, comprise a range of cultural significance that has no immediate linkage, other than that we might affiliate King's literature with pop culture (the mass market paperback copy seems to beg for this association) and Beethoven's symphonies with high art. However, the fact that Bub listens to Beethoven on a Walkman—at the time, Sony's cutting-edge, portable cassette player—troubles the simple categorization of any artwork or media device as having a particular class orientation. That Romero directs *Day of the Dead* after *Creepshow* (1982), written by King, makes the allusion to *'Salem's Lot* surely a wink to knowing viewers, but also something more: it's an acknowledgement of Romero's cinema challenging its simplistic relegation to a particular taste category. We can think here of how those viewers who might be invested in King or Romero for their liberal use of gore are arguably more sophisticated in their genuine search for meaningful affect than the callow resistance of cultural gatekeepers who balk at films about zombies, and even the horror genre as a whole, as being capable of meaningful social commentary.<sup>15</sup> Romero does not shy away from the genre's

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<sup>15</sup> See Kenneth Turan's article, "Why This Film Critic Gave Up on Horror Movies" (*Los Angeles Times*, 13 October, 2017) for evidence that this form of thinking persists to this day.

ability to foreground its tactile investment in bodily destruction, meaning that *Day of the Dead's* politics cannot be considered without also reckoning with the performative spectacle of Tom Savini's makeup and special effects work.

Perhaps it is because Romero doesn't use disjunctive editing and more playful allusions to film history that his reputation among scholars has kept him squarely within the realm of revered genre filmmakers. Not all writing has done so; Tony Williams makes note of the abandoned movie theater in the film's opening sequence, named "The Edison," which he relates to Thomas Edison, creator of the Kinetoscope, who used the mechanism "to promote conservative ideological illusions an images of conspicuous consumption rather than other more socially relevant concerns such as awakening audience consciousness" (2003: 133). For Williams, this recognition signals cinema's redundancy and inability to induce cultural change—an outcome he connects to the final title card of Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1968), which concludes by announcing "Fin du Cinéma." I would add that *Day of the Dead* shares narrative overlap with Godard's lesser-known *Les Carabineers* (1963), in which a fantasy scenario involving broken promises by a domineering military results in the execution of its two poverty-stricken protagonists, who've fought on the promise of riches and cultural purpose. A later dream sequence in *Day of the Dead* experienced by rationalist-pacifist character Sarah (Lori Cardille) features surrealist imagery of threatening hands thrusting out of a cinderblock wall that evokes Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965), and the Val Lewton-produced, Mark Robson-directed *Bedlam* (1946)—both horror films that conjure a hybrid stew of avant-garde visual experimentation and horror genre excess. Much like Chris Dumas (2012) has argued that it is just as helpful to view Brian De Palma's career through the oeuvre of Godard as that of Hitchcock, closer attention needs to be given to Romero's relationship to the paragons of art cinema. Yet, despite the useful value such study would produce, we should avoid designating Romero as any specific kind of filmmaker, particularly because he himself worked against any singular designation throughout his career. *Day of the Dead* summates Romero's own artistic pursuits and points to the failings of a critical body incapable (or unwilling—it's not so clear) of peering inside to find what lies beneath its rotting epidermis.

— Clayton Dillard

## **MONKEY SHINES: AN EXPERIMENT IN FEAR**

Writer: George A. Romero | Producer: Charles Evans, Peter Grunwald |  
Music: David Shire | Editing: Pascale Buba | Cinematography: James A.  
Contner | Release Date: 29 July, 1988

## **THE DARK HALF**

Writer: George A. Romero | Producer: Declan Baldwin, Christine Forrest-  
Romero, George A. Romero | Music: Christopher Young | Editing: Pascale  
Buba | Cinematography: Tony Pierce-Roberts | Completed March 1991;  
Release Date: 23 April, 1993

“One of the things that makes art a force to be reckoned with even by those  
who don’t care for it is the regularity with which myth swallows truth.”

— Stephen King, *Danse Macabre*, 1981: 62

The late-1980s/early-1990s period saw George A. Romero turn to literary sources for two studio-backed films, *Monkey Shines* and *The Dark Half*, and the independent *Two Evil Eyes* (1990), a co-project with Dario Argento that drew its material from the stories of Edgar Allan Poe (discussed in Carl H. Sederholm’s entry just below). Michael Stewart’s relatively unknown pulpy novel of the same title provided the material for *Monkey Shines*, while the best-selling *The Dark Half* offered Romero the chance to partner once again with Stephen King after the moderate success of 1982’s *Creepshow*. *Monkey Shines* and *The Dark Half* bear striking similarities, beyond Romero’s creative struggles with the financially unstable Orion Pictures on both films. When asked about what was, at that point, an uncharacteristic turn to literary sources for his material for the two films, Romero commented, “What appealed to me was the Jekyll and Hyde aspect of it” (Romero, 2014). Both *Monkey Shines* and *The Dark Half* are psychological (and unabashedly psychoanalytical) character studies where nonhuman animals and natural forces (monkeys, birds, storms) stand as metaphors for pent-up dread, anger, and desire. The consensus seems to be that studio interference and creative differences compromised these films. To whatever degree this is true, I read the films as companion pieces on another level in their high-Gothic explorations of the darkest, most primal parts of the psyche.

*Monkey Shines* (the title refers to the slang word connoting playful pranks and trickery) is an odd sort of love story between quadriplegic protagonist



Allan Mann (Jason Beghe, in an underrated performance) and Ella, the monkey that has been trained to assist him. Paralyzed in an accident while jogging, Allan's early scenes pit him against his own home—now outfitted with all sorts of gadgets—as he struggles to perform everyday tasks that were once second-nature. Wheelchair-bound Allan laments his having become “Robby the Robot,” the Halloween costume he never got to have. Soon after returning home, he tries to hang himself.

Enter Ella, who will bring a certain “humanity” to the otherwise mechanized mundanity of Allan's life. Through this uncommon helper comes also the film's mad-science angle, Ella having been genetically engineered not only to be as intelligent as any human, but also inadvertently to have attained the ability to enter into their thoughts in a sort of osmosis. Monkey and man gradually collapse together, Ella becoming a partner to Allan, and an extension of his psyche—tapped into his unconscious, enacting his primitive impulses. This connection is handled strikingly in extensive tracking shots that mimic the point of view of Ella as she skitters across nighttime lawns, up trees, and into attic windows to do the bidding of Allan's most violent repressed desires, including killing off his officious mother. The smeared edges of the frame in these shots narrow the visual field, suggesting the blurred peripheral “tunnel” vision of both Allan and the monkey, a filmic figuration of amoral single-mindedness.

Roger Ebert argued at the time of *Monkey Shines*' release, that the film “simply contains too much,” referring mostly to its multiple subplots and a closing act that Ebert sees as careening off the rails. But where Ebert sees fat to be trimmed—“Somewhere within this movie's two hours or so is hidden an absolutely spellbinding 90-minute thriller,” he wrote in 1988—I would argue there is excess to be savored. Beyond the aforementioned “monkey-cam,” the film is deftly edited,<sup>16</sup> creating a comically sadistic performance from monkey Ella (her chirps, squeals and taunts voiced by Fred Welker, more familiar as the voice of “Fred” from *Scooby-Doo*) that could have garnered a supporting-actor Oscar nod. Other supporting characters—and performances—in the film teeter gleefully on the brink of parody in their own manifestations of pent-up desires. Allan's overbearing mother (Joyce Van Patten) sees Allan's plight as a chance to force her total control upon him, becoming jealous of his

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<sup>16</sup> Extended post-production work on *Monkey Shines* kept Romero from directing *Pet Sematary* (Mary Lambert, 1989), a film whose script (by Stephen King) Romero had a major role in shaping. See Dennis Fischer, “George Romero vs. Hollywood,” *Cinefantastique*, Volume 19, no. 3 (1989): 36-37; or Tony Williams, *George A. Romero: Interviews*, edited by Tony Williams (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011): 109.

new girlfriend, Melanie, and soaping up his naked body in a creepy bathing scene that is key to the film's focus on uncanny interdependence. Allan's homecare nurse (Christine Forrest) is a pinched and uptight spinster whose pet parakeet tries to peck out Allan's eyes. And his insufferably arrogant and condescending surgeon comments to his female surgical nurse during Allan's spinal surgery, "this ass is hairier than yours." The film's mad scientist is Allan's drug-addicted, genius friend, Geoffrey Fisher (John Pankow), whose sociopathy and comical lack of ethics puts him somewhere between Victor Frankenstein and Herbert West.

From all of these excesses, to the dynamic relationship between Allan and Ella, which can go from heartbreakingly sweet to viciously cruel, *Monkey Shines* becomes a kind of explosion of desire and frustration in relationships that plays out fantastically in the film's phantasmagorical final act. Occurring in a powerless house during a thunderstorm, with Allan and Ella in a pitched battle of wits, the scene is not only stunningly performed by its human and nonhuman animal actors, but is also an impressive cinematic performance. Romero takes the claustrophobic Old Dark House formula and plays it to the hilt. Ella continually cuts the power, rendering the domestic space more obstacle than aid, its deep shadows illuminated only by periodic flashes of lightning. Later, having killed both Mother by electrocuting her (fittingly) in the bathtub, and Geoffrey with one of his own poisoned syringes, Ella tries to set the unconscious, rain-soaked girlfriend, Melanie, on fire. Unsuccessful, Ella begins to poke the flesh of Melanie's face with another of Geoffrey's poisoned syringes in a series of graphic extreme close-ups, while Allan struggles to draw her away. In a move that underscores the film's bizarre love connection between man and monkey, Allan finally distracts Ella by playing Peggy Lee's "That's All" ("I can only give you love that lasts forever") and cooing "hold me, baby," just before tearing out her neck with his teeth. The paralleling of visceral violence and cinematic panache in such scenes is what primarily distinguishes *Monkey Shines* from Romero's decidedly more measured approach in *The Dark Half*, his next effort for Orion.

If *The Dark Half* is the less potent of this odd duo, it is still interesting as an attempt to recapture *Monkey Shines*' gleefully sadistic descent into psychic darkness, now played out on a larger canvass. As Simon Brown notes in his discussion of *Creepshow* in this retrospective, Romero would have preferred to adapt King's apocalyptic epic, *The Stand* (published in 1978); however, budgetary limitations shifted the property to King's logistically more modest, autobiographical exploration of his own pseudonymous double, Richard Bachman. Published in 1989, *The Dark Half* is something of a rewrite of *Misery*

(published in 1988), another take on the writer struggling to escape the constraints of a fictional persona that has taken on a life of its own. Romero's film would come out in 1993, after the success of Rob Reiner's 1990 film adaptation of *Misery*. The fact that Reiner's chamber piece did so well, garnering an Oscar for star Kathy Bates, would make for an encouraging production context to take on *The Dark Half*, with its tight focus on character psychology, and Oscar-winning star Timothy Hutton on board.

The "Jekyll and Hyde" here are writer Thad Beaumont (Hutton), and his more famous alter-ego, George Stark (also Hutton). While Beaumont's leanings are literary, he has created a bestselling series of violent, pulpy novels under the Stark pseudonym. And the strangely literalized dichotomy doesn't end here. In the film's early flashback scenes, we learn that surgery as a child revealed Beaumont to have a subsumed twin manifesting physically as an eyeball on the surface of his brain. Beaumont and his wife, Liz, (Amy Madigan) have twin boys. Liz is openly critical of Beaumont's uncharacteristically severe, abusive personality when he writes as Stark. When a fan attempts to extort money from Beaumont under threat of revealing his identity as Stark, Beaumont and his agents decide to reveal the Beaumont-Stark connection as a publicity stunt, even holding a mock-burial as a photo-op—an event that triggers a supernatural Beaumont-Stark split that will dominate the rest of the film.

When the blackmailer jabs Beaumont with, "Maybe you'll put me in a book someday," Beaumont's Stark-like response is "Oh, I will, and I'll make you suffer, till you die." Just before this, Beaumont has likened the writing process to a kind of repressed primal state: "The writer," he says to a group of students, "has to let that inner being out of its locker" or else the work will be "a pack of lies." Here, the writing process is linked to the same kind of psychic outlet monkey Ella provides for Allan's pent-up frustrations in *Monkey Shines*. The conceit here also echoes Stephen King's frequent arguments about the cathartic draw of horror in *Danse Macabre* (1981) and "Why We Crave Horror Movies" (published in *Playboy*, 1981). "Killing off Stark" becomes about as easy as killing off the dark part of oneself. The Jekyll/Hyde idea comes fully alive here, and Stark will literally reappear (always accompanied or announced by flocks of birds) to do the bidding of Beaumont's most violent desires, just as Ella will manifest in physical form the desires and anger of Allan.

Of the two films discussed here, *The Dark Half* suffers more from production difficulties and mindless interventions by a studio that was going down the tubes. Timothy Hutton's method-style devotion to the character of George Stark left Romero and the rest of the cast reeling and struggling to get

things done. Orion filed for chapter 11 bankruptcy during the production, halted production for a time, then restarted it. Having screened an unfinished film for dissatisfied preview audiences, Orion decided to scrap Romero's planned finale, replacing it with a rushed effects sequence that Romero calls "garbage" (Romero, 2014). It would be the last film Romero would make in Pittsburgh.

It is difficult not to cite this period in Romero's career as a turning point. The box office receipts for both *Monkey Shines* and *The Dark Half* came in well under the films' production costs. Orion would dissolve by 1995. And Romero's next film would come a full seven years after *The Dark Half*, with the independently produced *Bruiser*, an effort that received only a video release. But these two films, particularly *Monkey Shines*, are more than interesting failures. They carry forward the themes of hopelessness, alienation and masculine rage that Romero would continue to explore in *Bruiser*, and they are the last of this kind of character-driven film before the director's later aesthetic shift to essayistic cultural critique for his return to the land(s) of the dead.

— Kristopher Woofter

## **TWO EVIL EYES: "The Facts in the Case of Mr. Valdemar"**

Writer: George A. Romero | Producer: Claudio Argento, Dario Argento, Achille Manzotti | Music: Pino Donaggio | Editing: Pascale Buba | Cinematography: Peter Reniers | Release Date: 25 January, 1990 (Italy)

*Two Evil Eyes*, George Romero and Dario Argento's tribute to Edgar Allan Poe, borrows its title from Poe's description, in "The Tell-Tale Heart," of an old man's filmy and ugly "Evil Eye" (317). In the story, the narrator explains that he killed the old man, not for money or revenge, but because of the horrific impact of the eye itself. "Whenever it fell upon me," the narrator explains, "my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever" (317). As is common in Poe, the evil eye may be understood by metonymy as a motive or explanation that is impossible to grasp. In "The Black Cat," Poe linked this elusive explanation to the "spirit of perverseness" or a drive in someone to perform "a vile or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should *not*" (350). Poe elsewhere called this feeling "The Imp of the Perverse" because it captures the all-too-human condition of

resolving the paradox that lies between wanting and wavering or acting and shrinking through unfortunate, irrational, or violent actions. In “The Black Cat,” Poe describes this perverseness as “this unfathomable longing of the soul to *vex itself*” (350).

*Two Evil Eyes* pays homage to Poe by demonstrating just how common—and human—such obsessions and actions really are. Argento’s film, “The Black Cat,” is an intertextual whirlwind, a cinematic love letter to Poe’s tales that is bombastic, visceral, and poetic. Romero’s “The Facts in the Case of Mr. Valdemar,” by contrast, is naturalistic and subdued both in tone and color. Viewers who were expecting the stark landscapes of *Night of the Living Dead* or the outrageous gore of *Dawn of the Dead* were largely disappointed. Romero likewise struggled with bringing his vision to life, both because Argento rejected the idea of a modern adaptation of *The Masque of the Red Death* with Donald Sutherland as Prospero, and also because Romero did not want to follow too closely Argento’s own decision to draw on multiple motifs taken from Poe’s tales. However, in deciding to adapt “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” Romero had to fill out Poe’s minimalist tale of a mesmerist hypnotizing a dying body with narrative elements that would better suit a filmic adaptation. Although Romero’s decision to develop a plot involving adultery, greed, and revenge (and hypnotized corpses) seems far from Poe’s original story, it is nevertheless consistent with the themes Romero developed in *Creepshow* (1982) and his script for *Creepshow 2* (1987). Both films explicitly consider the ways bad behavior may lead to ironic, comic, and over-the-top ends.

Despite his ambitions to give Poe a contemporary twist, Romero struggled to bring the tale to life. He admitted to *Cinefantastique* that his screenplay was “lazy,” mostly because he never developed a strong sense of what it should actually accomplish (Szebin, 1990: 43). In Romero’s words, “Valdemar” was “inspired by a Poe idea” but was never “very Poe-like” in its execution (1990: 43). He was wrong. “Valdemar” dwells on the same strange and uncanny divide between life and death that fascinated Poe, that space when the dead become the undead and the living abandon all reason and understanding. In Romero’s film, death is not only something to avoid, it is also an ironic inconvenience, particularly when a scheme to defraud the living means hiding his hypnotized and undead corpse in a freezer. If death is inconvenient, it is also uncertain. Though decayed and frozen, Ernest Valdemar (Bingo O’Malley) escapes his freezer-prison and terrorizes his wife Jessica (Adrienne Barbeau) and her lover, Dr. Robert Hoffman (Ramy Zada) as they try to escape with Valdemar’s money. Like so much of Romero’s work, “Valdemar”

also satirizes human behavior for the ways it puts ambition, sex, and money above everything else, as if death were neither unpredictable nor inevitable. Just like the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the characters in “Valdemar” labor toward fixed, myopic goals without understanding precisely what they’re doing—or why. Like Poe, Romero understood that human beings may willingly give everything for schemes that will ultimately hurt them—and they do so without any more compelling reason than that they can. Although Romero’s additions to “Valdemar” may seem better suited for primetime television than a scary midnight movie, they explore the human psyche in ways that resonate with Poe’s general interest in understanding criminal actions through powers of detection, or ratiocination. Instead of unpacking the mystery sequentially, however, Romero simply has a police detective (Tom Atkins) suggest that “sick stuff always turns out to be rich people,” as if there’s no question exactly what’s to blame: money. The film’s closing shot strengthens this point: the blood dripping on piles of money reinforces Romero’s argument that human perverseness usually stems from some combination of lust, greed, and power.

If Poe and Romero share an interest in the reasons behind bad behavior, they also share an obsession with death and dying. Poe famously explored death’s powers and limitations in ways that transformed some of the worst human fears into compelling metaphysical questions. In tales such as “The Premature Burial,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “Ligeia,” as well as “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” Poe confined characters to tombs, coffins, or bedrooms so he could consider what happens in those final moments. But Poe never resolved the problem. Instead, he made it worse by introducing baffling situations in which characters experience premature burial, will themselves back to life, or, stranger still, suggest that life somehow maintains a connection to an already-decaying corpse. Through all this, Poe established a significant means through which his successors could likewise explore the strange boundary between life and death.

Romero explored similar territory most famously in films such as *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead*. Instead of confining the dead, Romero has them shamble about in search of some kind of purpose or meaning. Finding nothing, the dead usually fall back into uncanny echoes of basic human activities. In that light, Romero’s undead are typically read as parodies of the often-mindless ways humans behave as they search for food, shelter, companionship, and possessions. So relentless are these drives that the dead just keep pressing forward, desperate to belong to everyday existence. Romero’s films typically lend themselves to parodic or political readings, even

though they are also deeply metaphysical reflections on the nature of death. Posters for *Night of the Living Dead* capture the strangeness of this problem by declaring that the dead “won’t stay dead!” Such bodies reflect Poe’s own anxieties that some bodies exist without meaning, just mindless entities that shamble without purpose. *Dawn of the Dead* amplified this theme with the famous tagline, “When there’s no more room in HELL the dead will walk the EARTH,” suggesting that when there is no difference between notions of damnation or mortality, only the most basic needs matter.

In “Valdemar,” Romero further complicates the problem of the restless corpse by having both Valdemar and Hoffman’s body cling to life not only through hypnotism but also through the powers of the mysterious “Others” who take control of their bodies so they can use them as a means of returning to earth. Death becomes an embodied but passive existence, in which the powers of mind or will do not matter. In a concluding sequence, the “Others” appear in Dr. Hoffman’s room and murder him with the device he used to hypnotize Valdemar (and that helps him sleep at night), thereby transforming his body into an undead corpse, unable to will itself awake and unable to die through natural means. Unfortunately, Romero never develops the larger significance of these mysterious “Others,” but he told *Cinefantastique* that they were references to H.P. Lovecraft’s work—and to the cosmicism it implies. Even if undeveloped, the connection to Lovecraft is apt in that it allows Romero to transform human events into cosmic questions. In life, characters like Valdemar, Hoffman, and Jessica are greedy and miserable, but they quickly discover that things rarely operate according to human ambition and that their own bodies may not even be subject to their every whim. In the end, Jessica dies by Valdemar’s possessed hands, but Valdemar and Hoffman are reduced to an even worse fate—a trapped existence in which they must plead for the one thing nobody can really give them: a peaceful (and permanent) death.

— Carl H. Sederholm

## LAND OF THE DEAD

Writer: George A. Romero | Producer: Mark Cantaon, Bernie Goldmann, Peter Grunwald | Music: Reinhold Heil, Johnny Klimek | Editing: Michael Doherty | Cinematography: Mirosław Baszak | Release Date: 24 June, 2005 (Universal)

*Land of the Dead* marked the return of George A. Romero to the zombie film after a period of twenty years, receiving a standing ovation after the screening of an extract at the Cannes Film Festival, critical plaudits, and a respectable box office intake of \$46 million. Romero's high-profile return to zombies was facilitated by a number of industrial and cultural factors. First, the early 2000s saw a renewed interest in the genre, in part through the growing popularity of zombie videogames in the 1990s, followed by a series of successful zombie action films, beginning with *Resident Evil* (Paul W.S. Anderson, 2002) and *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002). These films offered a new approach, rethinking the zombie for twenty-first century audiences as a form of genetically engineered virus, the result of modern medicine and corporate capitalism. They were followed in 2004 by two films that knowingly acknowledged Romero's influence: Zach Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead*, which features an early scene of destruction at a gas station seemingly inspired by the events protagonist Ben describes to Barbara in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968); and the British zombie rom-com *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright), a loving homage to Romero's film, relocating Romero's zombie apocalypse to contemporary London. The combined commercial and critical success of these films launched the zombie film into the mainstream and allowed the genre created by Romero to come full circle by paving the way for Romero to bring his zombies back to the big screen in his own way, albeit produced by Universal Studios and with a budget of \$18 million, his largest budget for any of his *Dead* films.

The second factor that fuelled Romero's return was the American post-9/11 political climate, with the launch of the War on Terror, the Iraq war, and the re-election of George W. Bush in 2004, all of which meant that George Romero had something to say. As he has often explained, it is the allegorical potential of the zombie that fuels his commitment to the genre, explaining the zombie film is

the place where I can show most how I see the world. My own way of saying, "Hey guys, here I am, and this is what I am thinking!" The political dimension of these films is what's important to me. They may not be "political" films like Michael Moore's ... but I don't think I am going to be invited to the White House anytime soon (quoted in D'Agnolo-Vallan, 2005: 152).

While the script was written in the late 1990s and then shelved for a few years, it was the highly volatile political climate that encouraged Romero to



update the script to speak to his contemporary concerns, producing, arguably, the most overtly political of his *Dead* films. As he explains, he “tried to set up a little depiction of what America is like today” (quoted in D’Agnolo-Vallan, 2005: 153), openly declaring that the film is an allegory for the Bush administration (Romero 2005). This allegory manifests in the film’s evocation of a post-zombie apocalypse society, built around a stratified and class-based community of survivors. In this world, a minority of the population live in comfort and wealth in the high-rise apartment complex Fiddler’s Green, behind layers of security protecting them from the underclasses as well as the undead, while the rest of the population live in poverty, squalor, and on the front lines, with comparatively minimal protection from zombie attack. This society is run by the corporate CEO Kauffman (Dennis Hopper), based, according to Romero, on the then-Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld (2005). Kauffman exploits the wealthy by offering them security and protection from the harsh realities of the “real world” while also exploiting the poor by fostering a culture of black market crime, gambling, and sexual slavery.

In an overt evocation of the film’s post-9/11 context, Kauffman’s corporate stronghold, Fiddler’s Green, comes under attack first by a disgruntled henchman who threatens to blow up the tower if Kauffman does not pay him what he is owed, leading to Kauffman stating—in candid Bush-like fashion— “we don’t negotiate with terrorists.” Second, the city is attacked by an army of the undead as revenge for the regular and brutal violence inflicted on them by the living. Leading the army is Big Daddy (Eugene Clark), an African American gas station attendant who literalizes Romero’s notion of the zombie as blue-collar worker. Building upon Romero’s first example of an ‘evolved’ zombie, Bub in *Day of the Dead* (1985), Big Daddy is the instigator of revolution, pushing the undead into action against their aggressors. In this new society, it is the living who are repeatedly shown being cruel and torturing the undead. The military hang the zombies upside down, pin bullseyes on their chests and use them for target practice, while gambling merchants stage the zombie equivalent of dog fights in which spectators bet on who will survive. Finally, others taunt the undead by chaining them up so that the living can pay to have their photo taken with them, in mock-horror fashion. The repeated callous and exploitative treatment of the undead, alongside open displays of cruelty, calls to mind now infamous images and stories of torture and abuse of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison in 2004. By evoking these disturbing images and unconscionable behaviours, the living are presented as being complicit in the cruel and humiliating treatment of the undead, and therefore

equally accountable for the seeming downfall of Fiddler's Green. Thus, the evolved zombie from *Day* to *Land of the Dead* is utilized by Romero to resituate the narrative away from the gradual extinction of humanity to its moral and ethical degeneration.

This representation of Big Daddy positions the film as a significant bridge between Romero's earlier zombie films, in which zombies are increasingly rendered sympathetic and human in the face of the violent nature of humanity, and the twenty-first century growth of the first-person zombie narrative in films as diverse as *Fido* (Andrew Currie, 2006), *Colin* (Mark Price, 2008), and *Warm Bodies* (Jonathan Levine, 2013). Big Daddy's awakening from his undead stupor, in which he cyclically repeats familiar behaviour, is in response to the violence committed against his brethren by the living. His anguished scream as he stares at the looming tower of Fiddler's Green before leading the undead to march upon the city is the battle cry of revolution and marks one of Romero's most politicized images. Furthermore, as he emerges from the river that surrounds Fiddler's Green he is presented as Moses figure seemingly emerging out of the Red Sea, leading his followers to Canaan, or in the film's case Canada, as both the undead and the surviving humans look for sanctuary across the border. In slave history Canaan was code along the underground railway for Canada and so this imagery uses an apocalyptic future to evoke a violent past.

Alongside the film's overt allegorical meaning and politicised message, Romero continues to take pleasure in the aesthetic excesses of the zombie film, with *Land of the Dead* featuring lashings of blood, gore and decomposing undead. This film features the creative talents of special make-up effects artist Greg Nicotero, who pushed the prosthetic and animatronic depictions of the decomposing dead to new heights in this film, setting an aesthetic tone for his work on *The Walking Dead* (AMC 2010-present) and showing that Romero continues to lead the way in the genre's explorations of the human body at its most compromised. In this manner the film deliberately draws parallels between the decaying zombie body and the fragmentation and degeneration of society, reminding us that in horror, thrills and political meaning go hand in hand. The inclusion of the old black and white Universal logo at the start of the film drives this home, positioning *Land of the Dead* within a legacy of classic horror while the film's overt political themes bring the zombie film up-to-date with a vengeance.

— Stacey Abbott

## DIARY OF THE DEAD

Writer: George A. Romero | Producer: George A. Romero, Peter Grunwald, Sam Englehardt, Artur Spigel, Dan Fireman, John Harrison, Ara Katz | Music: Norman Orenstein | Editing: Michael Doherty | Cinematography: Adam Swica | Release Date: 8 September, 2007 (Toronto International Film Festival); 22 February, 2008 (U.S.A.)

George Romero made his first appearance in my young mind when I was a student in history. Not that we had not been introduced before—he being the beloved horror master that he is, and I a devoted horror fan—but the Romero zombie epiphany came to me a little later in life when my political engagement became more established. Any Romero zombie film could answer any critical question I was asked. How to address capitalism and consumerism? *Dawn of the Dead* (my DVD, bought in Belgium, was called “Zombie”) and *Land of the Dead*. How to talk about racism? *Night of the Living Dead*. What about military ineffectiveness? *Day of the Dead*. And the list goes on: How to talk about human cruelty? The fragile structures of society? The collapsing ideals of the U.S.? Any “of the dead” installment comes in handy to help your political engagement.

But is it just political? It appears that Romero’s body of work sometimes underscores different moments in a person’s life, each addressing a certain preoccupation of a specific time. That is what happened with my second viewing of *Diary of the Dead*. Re-watching the film recently, what struck me was less the obvious political implications about media and human nature than the questions surrounding the images made and used by the characters. The extensive use of found footage, from different sources and combined, lit up my archivist’s eyes to question their archival and somewhat historical qualities. Who shot them? When and why? How are they presented to us? What do they represent? Are they the sheer accumulation of chance or carefully chosen and assembled by the characters?

Shot first-hand by film student Jason Creed (Josh Close) and members of his horror film crew, the footage is finished after Jason’s death and presented by narrator Debra (Michelle Morgan) as a documentary about the rise of the dead, entitled *The Death of Death*. Edited several times along the way as they attempt an escape from the chaos, Deborah and Josh’s film presents images shot by different digital cameras handled by several people, along with a mix of news clips downloaded from the internet and security surveillance footage. The associations encouraged by the editing of these mixed sources urges

critical reflections on information, representation, memory, and, more broadly, the archive.

The film opens with what would likely have been the beginning of Jason's documentary: a segment of never-officially-broadcast footage of the onset of this seeming epidemic, filmed by a news crew. A dreadful image shows dead bodies coming back to life and aggressively attacking a rescue team, tearing their flesh apart with their hungry mouths. The urge to film the shocking, then-isolated incident is palpable through the behavior of the cameraman, who zooms past the talking-head journalist to capture the scene of carnage beyond. The same cameraman is also the one who releases this controversial footage to the internet. He concludes, in front of the camera, with his bloodied colleagues in his arms: "This can't be fucking happening!" They have not merely filmed an accident. They have documented the onset of a disaster.

From this point in the narrative, as Robin Wood (2008) points out, the film is built as a road trip in five steps that evolves through different perspectives. Each step of their journey brings the characters the false promise of rest and safety. And, as the group's hope crumbles, the images themselves shift slightly, bearing a darker and more chaotic tone, while adapting to the new dramatic states. The first change happens when Jason goes from filming a fiction to filming reality, after his student-horror-film crew has acknowledged that something is happening while listening to a radio broadcast. At that moment, Jason's crew is filming a horror scene with a bandaged mummy slowly chasing a girl through the woods, but the news cuts through their horror illusion with a horrific reality. After their departure from the filming location, the film adopts a more classic documentary style. Jason looks for objectivity and exhaustiveness, filming everybody and everything obsessively. In doing so, he unnerves his friends. He answers their protests by citing the future use of his archival footage: "If it turns out to be a big thing, I just want to record it." He also directly addresses the camera, describing methodically the events, and asking questions of the people around him—making them part of his document. But when the remaining members of the film crew arrive at their last stop, their friend Ridley's (Philip Riccio) house, Jason is caught at his own game, openly staging his own footage. Ironically, Jason's pursuit will lead him to finishing the classic horror scene that was interrupted earlier in the film, this time with a real zombie/mummy pursuing Tracy (Amy Lalonde). While Jason breaks with his initial impartiality, the surveillance cameras of the house then became the bearer of a certain authenticity in the story. For the audience, this new point of view reinforces the angst of the situation: the symbolic eye of Big Brother is now the one you have to trust to tell the story.

The final act of the film hands this power of documenting the crisis to Debra, the last-filmmaker-standing. The tone that she has given to the documentary all along reveals itself not to be solely a “diary” but something of a greater purpose. As an ultimate statement, Debra finally divulges the reasons why she has kept filming and editing after Jason’s death: it is not only to keep Jason’s personal project and memory alive (to ensure the “death of [his] death”), as originally suggested, but to create a historical record “for the remaining people, when it’s over.” It is here that the film most clearly crystallizes around the archive. Jason has been documenting an unfolding catastrophe: through his camera he is trying to make sense of the chaos around him. But Debra does something different. She possesses the will to preserve and give access to these images. She projects these images into the future, giving them purpose. “Images are used for seeing the time which comes” (Didi-Huberman, 2014: 26); they give us the ability to reveal the present and guess some of the future, all while navigating the past. Debra is actively aware of her role in building an archive of some sort. “If it does not happen on camera, it is not real” is the phrase repeated by Debra and other characters in the film, some (like Debra) ironically, some not. The fact that Debra ultimately trusts the images she records, edits, and preserves suggests that she, too, believes that if a trace of these images is not kept, there may be nothing left for a hypothetical future.

Once again, with *Diary of the Dead*, Romero has fed my current passion relating to images and archives. The diversity and complexity of his films allow for a dialogue with people and society that can be constantly renewed. It is also why there are so many more conversations that could be mined from this curious film: its constant strong political stance or its incredible tongue-in-cheek humor. For me, the film inspires thoughts about what constitutes an archive and how people interpret images as being archival in certain situations. But also, how they are, like the characters of *Diary*, compelled to add to this archive as a way to anchor themselves in the present, in the very moment of their disastrous situation. All that and even more... But the rest is left to you: what is Romero talking to you about these days?

— Annaëlle Winand

## SURVIVAL OF THE DEAD

Writer: George A. Romero | Producer: George A. Romero, Peter Grunwald, Paula Devonshire | Music: Robert Carli | Editing: Michael Doherty | Cinematography: Adam Swica | Release Date: 9 September, 2009 (Venice Film Festival); 30 April, 2010 (U.S.A., Video-on-Demand)

There is a short scene at the midway point of George A. Romero's *Survival of the Dead* (2009) that is one of the most sublime moments of the filmmaker's career. Upon arriving at Plum Island, a group of survivors—in conflict because they have been shot at by unknown gunmen—are suddenly disrupted by an oncoming horse, ridden with uncanny poise by a young woman. The horse gallops ceremoniously toward the camera, jumps over a fence, and fades away in the distance. “She is beautiful!” exclaims one of the survivors. Another, O'Flynn (Kenneth Welsh) responds: “She's dead! She's my daughter”! This remarkable moment of cinematic poetry recalls the image of a horse galloping through the ruins of WWI Paris with its mane on fire in Georges Franju's *Thomas the Impostor* (*Thomas l'imposteur*, 1965).<sup>17</sup> In the Franju film, the moment speaks to the painful ravages of war on a global scale. In the Romero film, the moment speaks to the ravages of conflict in the micro-dynamics of the patriarchal family. For Franju, the suffering horse embodies human cruelty, and recalls the shocking brutality of a white stallion collapsing to its knees in the abattoir after it has been put to death in Franju's surrealist documentary, *The Blood of the Beasts* (*Le sang des bêtes*, 1949). For Romero, the figure of the living dead daughter on horseback embodies the cruelty of a world trapped in a perpetual family feud. I am reminded of the moment near the end of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), where a young girl, now a “ghoul,” brutally stabs her mother to death with a trowel in the basement of an abandoned house. These images of cinematic sublimity in Franju and Romero's cinema are both beautiful and terrible, speaking to collective anxieties that see little distinction between the cruelties of wars, abattoirs, and the patriarchal family.

The image of the galloping zombie in *Survival of the Dead* is fleeting, yet it embodies all of Romero's career as a filmmaker—especially the Romero who made six zombie films. *Night of the living Dead* does not use the word “zombie” to refer to its living dead. According to Romero, they were “just my

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<sup>17</sup> Based on a novel by Jean Cocteau, and scripted by Franju, Michel Worms, and Jean Cocteau.

dead neighbours” walking around (Klawans, 2018). The zombie is always “us” in Romero’s universe, and in our contemporary moment of rising xenophobic populism and fascism, we need Romero’s careful ethical concern for the Other more than ever. The bleak coda of *Diary of the Dead* (2007), where rednecks amuse themselves by shooting the head off a zombie hung from a tree by her hair, asks us to think about the ultimate question for Romero: “Are we worth saving?” These are the same rednecks who also gunned down our hero Ben (Duane Jones) at the end of *Night*, in one of the bleakest and most disarming endings in the history of cinema.<sup>18</sup>

*Survival of the Dead* is a magnificent (final) film, at least in part because it finds Romero working out what constitutes “us” on a canvas that previously had been less explicit in his work: the western. Both Romero and John Carpenter have said that they wanted to make classic westerns, but their pedigree in the horror genre made securing studio financing impossible. *Dawn of the Dead* has its motorcycle outlaws invading the “safe-haven” of its sequestered society of survivors like a Western posse, and *Knightriders* (1981) is a film about horses on wheels, and arguably as much a western as it is a revisiting of Arthurian legendry. But *Survival* wears its genre pedigree more explicitly. Thematically based on William Wyler’s *The Big Country* (1958), *Survival* centers on families feuding over land—a central conceit of the western, so often focused on protecting or taking or crossing land. Land is to the western as the monster is to horror. The influence of the Wyler film, shot in the Technicolor widescreen process, comes also in terms of a sense of grandeur. Romero shot *Survival* in 2.35:1 widescreen; the only other film shot in this format in his canon is *Land of the Dead*, also a subversive post-9/11 western about a posse on the vehicle called the Reckoning attempting to survive in a world of lawlessness. His move from Pittsburgh to Toronto and opportunities to work with producer Peter Grunwald on smaller budgets, allowed Romero to have carte blanche on his late projects, something he did not have with Universal Studios on *Land of the Dead*, his largest-budgeted zombie film at \$15 million. *Diary* and *Survival*, Romero’s first two films shot in digital, operate on

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<sup>18</sup> I would add that the scene is an example of the “Grand-Guignolesque.” The Grand-Guignol theatre’s great playwright Andre de Lorde’s endings were famously dark, pessimistic, and littered with corpses. The bleak ending in Frank Darabont’s *The Mist* (2007), for example, restages the ending of “La Dernière torture” (André de Lorde et Eugène Morel, 1904), which is also a play about individuals sequestered (in an embassy) that will show up much later in the domestic corrals of Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963) and Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*. Romero’s influence is often attributed to *I Am Legend* (1954) by Richard Matheson, another work whose hero retreats into the domestic.

their own terms—the former rebooting *Night* for the age of social media, and the latter openly nostalgic for the western’s wide vistas and liminal frontiers. *Diary* and *Survival* thus function like episode 2a and 2b, rather than 5 and 6, in his zombie canon.

I was very moved by Romero’s daughter Tina’s mention of her father on his deathbed listening to the score of John Ford’s *The Quiet Man* (1952), composed by Victor Young. While the scope of the film is influenced by Wyler, *Survival*’s heart is with Ford, the Irish Catholic auteur of western cinema. The feud between *Survival*’s two Irish families, the Muldoons and O’Flynnns, is the ideal setting for Romero to make his final statement about the oppressiveness of patriarchal land and social structures. The parodic over-performed Irish accents of these two family heads eschew realism, and rather seem to function as homage to Ford. As with the division in *Night* between Ben and Harry Cooper, *Survival*’s feud is basic: O’Flynn (Richard Fitzpatrick) believes zombies should be killed on the spot while Muldoon believes that they should be kept and corralled (though neither adheres to their respective ideologies). Romero, like Ford, focuses on everyday working-class military people with an emphasis on comedic elements, something he did so well in *Dawn of the Dead*. But the aspect that really strikes me is *Survival*’s use of an anti-hero as the main character. For example, the focus here is (surprisingly) on Sarge (Alan Van Sprang), the leader of the paramilitary group who robs the protagonists’ Winnebago in *Diary*. Unlike the more thoughtful paramilitary Peter (Ken Foree) in *Dawn of the Dead*, who refuses to take part in the culture of death, the antiheroic Sarge is atypical in Romero’s work. The unsympathetic Sarge is much more like Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) in John Ford’s greatest film, *The Searchers* (1956), as both characters operate outside the parameters of conventional narrative identification with a hero.

Romero is being very un-Romero with his use of an anti-hero, as much of the enjoyment of *Night of the Living Dead* certainly resides in identification with the outsider Ben, who seems to arrive at the farmhouse out of nowhere. Sarge, like Ethan Edwards, is more akin to the redneck/militaristic gun-toting characters Romero has always critiqued in his films. In this apocalyptic context these figures are ones who tend to rise to the surface. *Survival*’s complicated alignment of perspective with an unsavoury character may be why the film sits so uneasily with some Romero fans. In *The Searchers* in the 1950s, Ford highlights the raging racism of Ethan Edwards, whose inability to come into the home, to “civilization,” in the film’s iconic last shot sits uncomfortably with audiences then and now. Sarge, a disgruntled serviceman, tells his buddy Kenny (Eric Woolfe), “It sucks! We never should have signed up for this



shit,” pointing to the complexity of operating in a situation where failing oppressive systems, like patriarchy and capitalism, have socialized post-apocalyptic survivors in the terms of survival of the fittest. Sarge is like the unnamed biker played by Tom Savini in the satirical *Dawn*, a person who operates on the level of survival at any cost, because the context supplies few avenues for ethical behaviour. Savini also brings some comedic elements to *Dawn*, doing his own stunts and performing some of the gore gags like chopping off zombie heads. In *Survival*, Romero balances his focus on the anti-hero Sarge with comedy. Ford’s westerns, too, are infused with comedic moments, often parodying the drinking culture of military men on the frontier. In *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1950), the narrative of the film seems to stop for a Buster Keatonesque moment where the soldiers attempt to corral Sgt. Quincannon (Victor McLaglen) for drinking on duty. In *Survival of the Dead*, the comedy functions in a self-parodic commentary on the central attraction moment of the zombie-film: the kills. The zombies are killed humorously, often using some CGI to accentuate the gleeful excessiveness of the gag that has been overdone ad nauseum within the zombie subgenre.

Romero’s *Survival of the Dead* examines how the ongoing feud between the Muldoons and O’Flynn’s is the cause of the death of Sarge’s “infantry”—Kenny, Tomboy (Athena Karkanis), Francisco (as Stefano Di Matteo)—who are the usual Romero mix of working-class characters (two of them Hispanic). After O’Flynn states that the living-dead woman on the horse is his daughter Jane (Kathleen Munroe), he adds, “Mother of God, on ‘me’ own property! All of this used to be mine.” The statement of lost property, at least implicitly, includes his daughter. As in the western, the horse offers freedom and mobility across a merciless landscape. Thus, the power of the undead Jane riding the range functions in this context as an escape from patriarchal structures. The “ghouls,” however, who once could feast only on human flesh in Romero’s earlier films, have now (possibly) taught themselves to feast on horse meat. If the horse is classically associated with freedom in the western, in Romero’s world where zombies are championed, the eating of the horse is paradoxically a zombie victory. In the final shot of *Survival of the Dead*—and of Romero’s career—the patriarchal figures, both now zombies, attempt to shoot themselves under the moonlight, but their guns are empty. While those who were the victims of patriarchal and capitalist structures find some freedom in their undeath, the patriarchal figureheads are comically and excessively stuck on repeat of the Ben/Harry conflict in *Night*. While Romero fans expected more films from the *maestro*, in *Survival* his final image was a hybrid and

satirical one. This seems very appropriate in that it showed an artist not content to settle down.

— Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare

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## MARGINALIA

### **TALES FROM THE DARKSIDE (TV Series)**

Creator: George A. Romero | Producer: George A. Romero, Richard P. Rubinstein, Jerry Golod | 29 October, 1983 (Pilot), and 30 September 1984 – 24 July, 1988 | Romero wrote four episodes of the series: “Trick or Treat” (Pilot), “The Devil’s Advocate,” “The Circus,” and “Baker’s Dozen.”

### **CREEPSHOW 2**

Writer: George A. Romero | Director: Michael Gornick | Producer: David Ball | Music: Les Reed, Rick Wakeman | Editing: Peter Weatherley | Cinematography: Richard Hart, Tom Hurwitz | Release Date: 1 May, 1987

### **TALES FROM THE DARKSIDE: THE MOVIE: “Cat from Hell” segment**

Writer: George A. Romero | Director: John Harrison | Producer: Mitchell Galin, Richard P. Rubinstein | Music: Chaz Jankel, “Cat from Hell” segment | Editing: Harry B. Miller III | Cinematography: Robert Draper | Release Date: 4 May, 1990

### **NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD (Remake)**

Writer: George A. Romero | Director: Tom Savini | Producer: Ami Artzi | Music: Paul McCollough | Editing: Tom Dubensky | Cinematography: Frank Prinzi | Release Date: 19 October, 1990

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