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# Birth of the Living Dead

By Rob Kuhns

Welcome to a night  
of total terror.  
In 1967, a 27 year old  
college drop out from the Bronx  
named George A. Romero directed  
a low budget horror film.  
Night of the Living Dead!  
The film introduced the world  
to a new kind of monster...  
Persons who have recently died  
have been returning to life  
and committing acts of murder.  
...the flesh eating zombie.  
This spawned an entire genre  
of TV shows and movies, novels,  
comic books, video games  
and zombie conventions,  
thriving industries  
to this day.  
But at the time "Night of  
the Living Dead" was made,  
I don't think  
audiences were ready  
for "Night of the Living Dead."  
It spoke to its audience  
in ways few horror films  
had ever done before.  
And I think that's why  
they were drawn to it.  
The first time you  
saw it you realized  
it was making a place for itself  
in a time capsule of some sort.  
No movie had that kind  
of impact at that time.  
It was this tiny  
little movie in Pittsburgh  
that seemed to have no chance.  
And it, you know,  
changed the world.  
It was no big thing, man.  
Who knew that we were ever even  
going to finish this movie.  
It was just like a bunch

of people getting together  
and we were going  
to try to make a movie.  
And none of us knew that it  
was ever going to get finished.  
Let alone become something  
as well-known as it is.  
George Romero started his first  
film production company  
in the city of Pittsburgh  
in 1963.  
He called it, the Latent Image.  
It's a beautiful day  
in this neighborhood  
A beautiful day  
for a neighbor  
Would you be mine  
Could you be mine  
We all weaned into the business  
on Fred Rogers,  
"Mr. Rogers Neighborhood."  
Almost everybody in Pittsburgh  
who works in the biz now  
worked for Fred for a while.  
I have always wanted to have  
a neighbor just like you  
Romero and his partners  
make several short films  
for the children's  
television series,  
including  
"Things that Feel Soft"  
and "Mr. Rogers  
Gets a Tonsillectomy."  
Up in the ceiling were  
some lights I could see.  
And the kind eyes  
of the people  
in the operating room.  
Even though they wore masks,  
I could see their kind eyes.  
Which remains one of the  
scariest movies I've ever done.  
The Latent Image also finds

opportunity in a new industry.  
At the time, you know,  
commercials were live.  
The beer commercials used  
to be the sportscaster.  
Even when you were  
able to drink.  
You were actually able to drink  
beer on camera in a commercial.  
These guys, by the time,  
if you went into extra innings,  
it was like...  
And all of a sudden,  
we come along and say,  
"You know, you can do  
this shit on film, man."  
When you hit a dry spell,  
what's the natural way  
to wet it down?  
Hey honey! How about a beer?  
With a tall, cold Duke.  
Duquesne beer at the time,  
which is no longer.  
Great times, great beer,  
they go together.  
And there's no better beer  
for great times than Iron City.  
Iron's still there.  
Iron! Gimme an Iron!  
And how about that  
Iron City flavor?  
Rich. Robust.  
Delicious.  
I could shoot, I could record,  
I was an editor.  
You know, I wound  
up doing it all.  
So it was all learn by doing.  
I shot more film  
at the Latent Image  
than I've shot over the course  
of all the feature films  
that I've made.  
I mean, because we were

shooting all the time.  
In those days, it was all film.  
So, you had to wait for it  
to come back from the lab.  
There were local labs.  
They were not that reliable.  
You'd put your heart  
into shooting this stuff  
and the guy would  
call up and say,  
"You know what,  
we fucked it up."  
But once the film came back,  
as long as it looked okay man,  
as soon as the film  
walked in the door  
I'd sit there  
until it was edited.  
I'd sit there sometimes  
36, 48 hours, get it done.  
You know I basically  
lived there.  
And I just lived, breathed  
and drank the stuff.  
No thought  
for family or whatever;  
I just was, making movies, man.  
Preview films presents,  
"The Calgon Story."  
We did this thing called,  
"The Calgon Story."  
It was a knock off  
of, "Fantastic Voyage."  
Add the Calgon!  
And it was the biggest  
commercial that we've ever done.  
It's working!  
The grey is gone!  
The fibers are clean!  
Let's get out of here.  
I think I'm in love with you.  
And they wanted 35  
so we sacrificed our profit  
and went out

and bought a 35mm camera.  
We started to think  
that we could actually  
make movies, you know.  
When we finally  
had the equipment  
and we thought we could  
make a movie, I wanted,  
I had this really high minded  
idea to this Bergmanesque  
sort of "Virgin Spring"  
kind of a movie.  
And so I wrote this thing  
about two teenagers  
in the middle ages.  
I mean, boy, talk about reaching  
for the moon, right?  
Romero's search  
for investors for his first  
feature-length screenplay,  
"Whine of the Fawn,"  
ultimately failed.  
Eventually we abandoned  
it and decided to do,  
maybe we should do something  
a little more commercial.  
And, so we decided  
to do a horror flick.  
And I had read a novel  
called, "I am Legend."  
A Richard Matheson novel.  
And it seemed to me that it  
was about revolution underneath.  
But we were also  
very aware of the time,  
you know, and the sort  
of anger of the 60s.  
The year was 1967.  
The U.S. was fighting  
an increasingly unpopular war  
in Vietnam.  
At home in the U.S.,  
despite historic strides made  
during the civil rights era,

rampant racism still ruled.  
After suffering continued  
unchecked discrimination,  
African Americans  
took to the streets.  
Some called it rioting.  
Others called it revolution.  
We stand on the eve  
of a black revolution, brothers.  
Masses of our people  
are in the streets.  
They're fighting tit for tat,  
two for two,  
an eye for an eye  
and a life for a life.  
The summer of '67 was the summer  
of riots in Newark and Detroit.  
And the idea of  
the "American Ghetto"  
really started to take hold  
in the public consciousness  
as a kind of symptom  
of the Civil Rights movement  
whereas in the 50s  
and early 60s  
it would have been  
lunch counters  
and marches in southern  
cities and busses.  
Now, it was about anger.  
There was a good deal  
of sort of anger.  
You know, I think mostly  
that the 60s didn't work.  
You know, we thought  
we had changed the world  
or were part of some  
sort of a reform  
that was going to make  
things better.  
And all of a sudden  
it wasn't any better.  
It wasn't any different.  
Let's get off the street!

Get the lead out of your ass!  
So I think there was a bit of  
rage, a bit of disappointment.  
So I invented these characters.  
In my mind  
they were just ghouls.  
The dead are  
coming back to life.  
That's the revolution.  
That's the big thing  
that everybody's missing.  
And we just wanted to make  
as ballsy a horror film  
as we could make.  
Romero and nine  
other investors --  
including several partners  
from the Latent Image --  
form a new company  
called, "Image 10."  
They rent an abandoned farmhouse  
for the film's primary location.  
Initially, ten of us  
kicked in 600 bucks,  
it was enough  
to rent the farmhouse,  
buy some film stock,  
and we started to shoot.  
We started to shoot not knowing  
if we were ever  
going to finish.  
Romero is 27 years old.  
We lived on that farmhouse.  
And we had to go out  
to the little stream  
in order to wash off.  
So it was real  
guerilla stuff, you know.  
Talk about dedication.  
And everybody went  
along with this!  
You know, somehow I'd  
say, "Okay, guys."  
It's going to be rough, but,



you know, we'll make a movie."  
And everybody'd say,  
"All right."  
Did that surprise you?  
It did! It did!  
Completely.  
I'd expect people to say,  
"What are you, crazy?"  
George Romero's jobs  
include cinematographer,  
editor, and director.  
I didn't know very much then.  
What's a director  
s'posed to do?  
I dunno!  
Walk over here!  
I think the first time  
you try to do anything,  
especially when you're trying  
to do something new, um,  
you're learning on the job.  
And essentially everything  
that can go wrong will go wrong.  
Whether it's issues  
with cameras or cast members  
who really don't have  
a lot of experience.  
Crew members who don't quite  
know what they're doing.  
I tried to build a clay hand  
and I tried to leave it hollow  
and fill it with blood.  
It looks like shit!  
I mean, it's, it's not great.  
There were very few independents  
being done at that point.  
And here's a guy  
from Pittsburgh, PA,  
who gets an idea for a film,  
manages to raise  
a small amount of money  
and just had  
the courage, the passion,  
the persistence to get it done.

It's really remarkable a film that has become such a classic came out of an environment where everyone was learning on the job. Many in the cast and crew take on multiple jobs to make up for the lack in budget. Russ Streiner's duties include producer and actor. John Russo's include co-screenwriter and zombie. Initially I had written it as a short story. And then I started to adapt it into a screenplay. And then we actually started to have to start to shoot, so Jack Russo took over finishing the screenplay and we collaborated on it after that point. Karl Hardman is producer, make-up artist and actor. Marilyn Eastman is make-up artist and actor. Karl and Marilyn started this audio production company. And so they provided all the audio recording equipment when we made "Night of the Living Dead." They did the zombie make ups and were incredibly energetic and just would do any job that needed to be done. It was a new impetus for people to uh, honestly, to fuck the system, you know? It's like we can do this ourselves. We don't have

to go to Hollywood  
with our little script  
about zombies  
that everybody would  
never have supported.  
It's too freaky, uh,  
they're too busy making  
Charlton Heston epics,  
you know,  
and uh "Mary Poppins."  
Friends, friends of friends  
and colleagues  
comprise the rest of the crew.  
"Night of the Living Dead" was  
very much a collaborative work.  
There was a sense  
of improvisation on the set,  
which I think helps the movie.  
Crews, you know,  
it's where it's at, man.  
I mean, you're reliant  
on all these people.  
And it's the only way  
it happens, ever.  
You don't make the movie,  
you don't make the movie,  
you can't go out  
and make a movie!  
You know, you can't make  
this movie without this guy!  
And look, he's doing it all!  
Look, isn't it,  
that's what it is, man!  
Alright, Vince,  
hit him in the head,  
right between the eyes.  
For many, like investor,  
production director  
and actor Vince Survinski,  
this is their first experience  
with filmmaking.  
Vince Survinski owned  
a roller rink in Pittsburgh  
and said, "Ah, I always

wanted to get into movies."  
Vince was always  
a go-to guy.  
He would get things done.  
We'd all be sitting  
around puzzling,  
"Oh, this is a great farm house,  
but you have to wade  
across a stream  
to get over there."  
So Vince'd say, "Ah, I'll  
build a little bridge."  
And Goddammit,  
with his own hands  
he built this  
little wooden bridge  
that you could actually  
drive a car over.  
Oh, the demolition crew!  
Vince's brother, Reg, and he had  
a partner named Tony Pantanello.  
They used to do fireworks.  
They were not the Zambelli's  
but, you know,  
if you needed some fireworks  
down at your church  
you called these guys.  
They did all  
the pyrotechnical stuff  
and they were hilarious guys,  
I mean, you know.  
Tony would have this cigar  
constantly burning in his mouth  
and he's working  
putting a fuse together  
and he couldn't see very well,  
so he's like this  
and this cigar and I'm like,  
"Tony, you're gonna  
blow your fingers off!"  
They did all the squibs.  
Squibwork and the explosives,  
and all that.  
Actor, lighting person,

and investor Bill Hinzman  
and John Russo both volunteer  
to be set on fire.  
Given no protective clothing  
they simply agree  
to roll on the grass  
if they get hot.  
I think maybe that  
was Reg's suggestion.  
"It starts to feel hot,  
just lie down."  
"Want anything from  
the supply wagon, Kuss?"  
No, we're alright.  
Hey, Kass, put that thing  
all the way into the fire,  
we don't want it  
getting up again!  
Chief, Chief McClelland,  
how's everything going?  
Aw, things aren't going too bad,  
men are taking it pretty good.  
You want to get on the other  
side of the road over there!  
Bill Cardille who was  
a TV personality,  
he came out to be the news guy.  
And he had to interview  
Kuss as the Sheriff.  
So, all those lines,  
the greatest lines in the movie  
were all ad libbed by Kuss.  
Are they slow moving, Chief?  
Yeah, they're dead,  
they're all messed up.  
All that shit was  
completely off the cuff.  
This is Bill Cardille,  
WIIC, TV 11 news.  
Bill Cardille, almost every  
Saturday night he would plug us  
and say there are these  
guys in Pittsburgh  
that are actually

making a horror movie.  
And I'm going to go out  
and I'm going to appear in it.  
So we got a little  
bit of a profile.  
And, because of that profile  
I think people believed  
that we were going to,  
probably more than us,  
that we were actually  
going to finish this movie.  
Yeah, Chief, we're going  
to stay with it  
until we meet up  
with the National Guard.  
- Where'd you get the coffee?  
- One of the volunteers.  
You're doing all the work,  
why don't you take it.  
Bill Cardille came out  
and brought the camera guy  
from Channel 11  
and he brought his gear.  
The helicopter pilot  
for local radio station KQV  
lets Russ Streiner ride  
with him to get aerial shots.  
We called the Police,  
we got real police  
to come out and cooperate.  
I mean, all we had to do  
was call up and say, "Guys!"  
And, you know and they  
brought the vans out  
and the dogs  
and everything else!  
You know, it was amazing  
all the cooperation  
that we used to get.  
I mean, it was incredible.  
Everybody was sort of with us  
because we were trying  
to actually make a movie.  
The dozens of zombies

are played by friends,  
family, local townfolk  
and clients of Romero's  
commercial production company,  
the Latent Image.  
Most of the zombies were people  
we used to work with.  
People that, that  
were giving us jobs.  
Advertising people,  
a couple of news guys.  
A lot of the zombies  
were clients of ours  
from ad agencies.  
Humoring us,  
saying, "Sure, okay.  
I'll come out."  
A woman came out and was willing  
to appear nude from behind.  
I don't know if there's any  
such thing as a bad zombie.  
I mean, I love them all.  
But, you know, you get  
people who come out.  
I mean, if I do anything,  
if I make a gesture,  
if I'm talking  
to twenty zombies  
and they're all looking at me  
saying, "Well, what do I do?"  
"Well, you walk  
over here."  
And if I go like that,  
everybody does that.  
So, pretty much just say,  
"Do whatever you want.  
Do your best zombie, man."  
And you get some  
incredibly creative things.  
One of the investors  
Ross Harris was a meat packer.  
So he brought  
all these entrails,  
so it was pretty rough.

That was all real stuff,  
real intestines,  
real livers, cow livers.  
We wanted to push the envelope,  
let's see what  
we can do with this.  
Just bring out buckets of stuff  
and... I'm telling you, boy,  
people that come to be zombies  
they're really dedicated.  
They'll dig into that  
stuff and chew on it  
and I'm going, "Oy!"  
You'll never get me to do that!  
That's guts!  
It's guts!  
When I was gonna show it,  
I'm thinking to myself  
they're probably just gonna say,  
"That sucked Mr. Chris."  
Or whatever it may be.  
And sure enough, it was the--  
it was the complete opposite.  
It's amazing the impact  
that this movie made,  
that this guy made--  
you know, with no budget.  
How it still was important  
and how it still resonates  
with everyone who watches it.  
When they were dead, they, um,  
they were acting  
like with no muscles,  
they had like, to stay.  
What's the name of that?  
What's the name of that?  
Starts with "R."  
- Riga...  
- Who said it?  
The whole curriculum I have with  
the kids is where they learn  
literacy through the process  
of making movies.  
Rigor mortis.



Say it again.  
Rigor mortis.  
Say it again.  
Rigor mortis.  
And what happens with that?  
Christopher Cruz teaches his  
literacy through film program  
in the Bronx, New York.  
George Romero  
grew up in the Bronx  
before moving to Pittsburgh.  
And it was the old days  
of the Sharks and the Jets.  
And people, most people  
thought I was Italian  
so I got away, I think  
I got away with my hide,  
the Golden Guineas  
left me alone,  
until they found  
out I was Spanish.  
Then I was a Shark, you know.  
I was never really  
into any of that stuff.  
I just wanted to make movies.  
This movie to me  
what's so gorgeous,  
even the way it starts,  
just that road,  
and there are different ways  
to make horror films,  
what I enjoy about this  
is that right away,  
the music is very disturbing  
and telegraphs that you're  
going to get into something  
that's going to be scary.  
But then, you know,  
they go to a graveyard,  
and they have their little  
dialogue about the length  
of the trip and they got  
started late and so on.  
They ought to make

the day the time changes  
the first day of summer.

What?

Well, it's 8 o'clock  
and it's still light.

A lot of good the extra  
day light does us.

We've still got  
a 3 hour drive back.

We're not going to be home  
until after midnight.

So it's mundane you know,  
there's a mundanity to it  
and that is um, I think  
a very modern approach.

It even came following  
a bunch of low budget films  
that basically, like  
white girls in bikinis  
being chased by guys  
wearing shag carpeting  
being kind of monster.

Before "Night," audiences  
of horror were accustomed  
to space aliens,  
radioactive mutations  
and traditional  
gothic monsters.

And by not doing  
that kind of stuff,  
by making it just  
as real as possible,  
it became this  
whole other thing.

It's not even  
a haunted cemetery,  
it looks like a big open place  
where they can park their car  
and they can go to the grave  
and it'll be fine.

It's still spooky, the music  
is indicating something to come  
but it's essentially  
a day in the life episode

of these characters.  
Boy, you used to really  
be scared here.  
Johnny!  
You're still afraid!  
It's to me one of the first sort  
of post-modern horror movies  
in that it is  
commenting on itself.  
They're coming  
to get you, Barbara!  
That's what's so brilliant  
about that famous line,  
"They're coming  
to get you, Barbara!"  
is that he's commenting  
on a horror movie.  
They're coming for you!  
Look, there comes  
one of them now!  
Now, of course,  
years later we have "Scream"  
and other films like that,  
and they're self-reflexive,  
but in this obnoxious  
nudge-nudge, wink-wink way,  
where it's like the audience,  
well we've seen all this before  
let's make fun  
of the characters.  
That's not how it  
functions in this movie.  
It functions  
as two people, you know  
the brother is kind of teasing  
and scare the sister,  
and then when it comes true,  
to me this is absolutely  
stunningly awesome.  
Johnny!  
Help me!  
The horror just  
came out of nowhere.  
It just kind of shocked you.

It scared me to death.  
It disorients you just right  
from the beginning of the movie;  
you're being told that places  
that shouldn't be very scary  
are actually going  
to be really scary.  
Situations where  
you should feel safe,  
you're not going to feel safe.  
The new horror comes  
stumbling towards them  
which is the zombie.  
He really reinvents the zombie  
and the zombie becomes one  
of the great new monsters.  
The image of the zombie  
in the cemetery  
is a key image that we  
all felt was so iconic  
and we patterned our  
zombies for the series  
"The Walking Dead"  
after that zombie.  
We patterned both in terms  
of its kind of gait,  
his speed.  
Not only is it creepy,  
but it just seems  
like it's unrelenting  
and it's not going to stop.  
Before "Night of  
the Living Dead,"  
there were movies like  
"I Walk with a Zombie,"  
they were this sort  
of tribal character.  
Very different.  
Now, arguably, the zombie is  
as important as the werewolf.  
But right below the vampire  
is probably the most  
important horror monster  
in the history of scary movies.

All these zombies  
all go back to Romero.  
There's no movie director that's  
responsible for the vampire.  
There's no movie director that's  
responsible for Frankenstein.  
There's no movie director that's  
responsible for the werewolf.  
There's people who've  
made key movies of that.  
But, those are much  
older characters,  
which have this kind  
of literary pedigree.  
And while there have been  
undead and zombies, et cetera,  
what we know of as a zombie,  
the kind of the it's alive  
moment of it, was 1968,  
George Romero in "Night of  
the Living Dead" in Pittsburgh.  
Dead face!  
Hold it.  
Don't smile.  
Smiling is your enemy.  
Follow the sound guys!  
What are George Romero's  
rules of zombies?  
Aria.  
That zombies,  
they, they walk slow.  
They drag their feet  
when they're walking.  
Jared, what else?  
And they don't smile or laugh.  
They don't smile or laugh.  
When they're human,  
the way they die  
is the way they're going  
to stay when they're zombies  
until they turn into dust.  
What is the purpose  
of a zombie?  
Aria.

They like to eat people.  
They don't live  
to do anything else.  
They just like to eat  
and eat and eat.  
You guys remember what  
I said, the need to feed?  
Remember?  
Say it again.  
The need to feed!  
Say it again.  
The need to feed!  
Again.  
The need to feed!  
That is it!  
To me there's something, um,  
definitive and classical  
about the terror  
and the simplicity.  
It's not overblown.  
She gets in the car,  
what do you do?  
You undo the clutch.  
She goes and she blows it  
and runs into the tree!  
I mean, oh my God!  
Every shot does feel  
iconic at this point.  
And I'm speaking of these  
first 10 minutes.  
Every shot is iconic.  
It doesn't feel storyboarded.  
Everything feels organically,  
like it's organically unfolding.  
She sees the lonely house  
in the distance  
and that's sort  
of another iconic shot.  
This to me is one of the great  
sequences in any movie.  
Duane Jones,  
a classically trained actor,  
played the role  
of Ben, the hero.

One of the things amazing  
to me when I saw it this time,  
and it really blew my mind,  
was the fact that no one  
reacts to Duane Jones,  
or the character  
as a black man.  
It's alright.  
There really wasn't  
an audition.  
Uh, you know, we never  
auditioned Duane.  
He was just a beautifully  
impressive guy.  
He was a really  
beautiful person, too.  
The script wasn't written,  
the character wasn't described  
as white, black,  
yellow, red, or anything.  
And we thought we were  
doing the right thing  
by not changing the script  
when we decided to use Duane.  
Here is a white woman,  
very pale, blonde woman,  
who runs into a house  
and is rescued by a black man.  
And there's no reaction!  
There's a pump out here that's  
locked, is there a key?  
She's out of it, she's scared,  
she's frightened,  
but not of him.  
Which in 1968, as strange  
as it seems, was still something  
that the average audience  
really would have noticed.  
It would have registered to them  
as something different.  
It felt like such a modern  
movie in that obviously  
it was never remarked  
upon that he was black.

Nobody said anything about it  
the way they did  
in other movies.  
And keep in mind,  
this was a time  
when there was  
a hugely popular TV show,  
"The Andy Griffith Show,"  
taking place in the south,  
and there were  
no black people in it.  
So that to have  
this mainstream culture  
refuse to acknowledge  
any kind of black catalyst  
and to have it there  
and not be remarked upon,  
it really felt  
like a brand new day.  
I don't think anyone had ever  
seen anything like that,  
in the 60s.  
Chiz Schultz produced  
television specials  
starring Harry Belafonte  
in the late 1960s.  
We had Petula Clark  
who was the top  
British singer at the time.  
And they had a number together.  
And at one point toward the end  
Harry links arms with Petula  
and they sing the final verse.  
And we finished  
dress rehearsal.  
And the man in charge of  
advertising for Chrysler said,  
"Belafonte cannot  
touch Petula Clark."  
And we were sort of in shock.  
And Belafonte said, "I'm not  
sure I understood you."  
He said, "There will be  
no touching of Miss Clark."



Remember, we have to sell cars in the South."  
And Harry said,  
"Give me just a minute."  
And he called  
the president of Chrysler.  
And he said, "You should know I'm calling a press conference in 10 minutes to say that Chrysler will not allow me to touch Petula Clark."  
We went into air time.  
The taping.  
Harry and Petula linked arms.  
But that was not unusual.  
That was the atmosphere at the time.  
We were only a year past "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" which had made its entire subject the shockingness of inter-racial marriage.  
Mom, this is John.  
Doc, Doc, Doctor Prentiss.  
I'm so pleased to meet you.  
I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs. Drayton.  
"Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," was criticized for taking pains not to offend white moviegoers and for being out of touch with the racial storms of 1967.  
And it never occurred to me that I might fall in love with a Negro!  
Of Sidney Poitier's character, H. Rap Brown said:  
This kind of criticism wasn't new to Poitier.  
I remember watching Sidney Poitier in the Stanley Kramer film,

"The Defiant Ones."  
And, uh, it was him  
and Tony Curtis  
playing these two convicts  
who escape from the chain gang,  
and near the very  
end of the film,  
they're trying to get  
to this rail road, right?  
But Tony can't  
hold on, he can't,  
the train's moving too fast.  
So instead of Sidney  
lets Tony drop,  
Sidney falls off, too.  
And then you see  
the last scene,  
and Sidney's cradling  
Tony Curtis in his arms,  
and he starts  
singing this song.  
If I ever do see his face once  
more, he never get home again  
Cradling Tony, you know,  
as the law enforcement people  
come down on them.  
And I remember  
thinking back then  
when I was 15, 16 years old,  
Sidney, you crazy, man?  
Let that white man go.  
Save yourself, you know.  
Because it was like,  
he was always becoming, at,  
by that time, he was becoming  
sort of like this, this savior.  
African American heroes  
in the mid-60s in movies  
were allowed  
to be really smart,  
they weren't necessary  
allowed to be aggressive  
or strong or tough.  
I mean, Poitier started

to break that barrier  
in "In the Heat of the Night,"  
but the most he could do  
was slap a white man  
in the face  
after he is slapped in the face  
by that white man.  
Poitier played a detective  
who in this scene  
dared to interrogate  
a rich white man.  
You saw it.  
I saw it.  
The slap was  
an electric moment in 1967.  
Then all of a sudden  
Duane Jones is like the lead,  
basically in  
an all-white film.  
But he comes across as a very  
strong, focused character.  
Duane was very upset whenever  
he had to do anything violent.  
He's a, you know, very  
sensitive kind of a guy.  
And what's a really  
telling scene  
is when he slaps the women.  
It's even more intense  
than when Sidney  
hits what's-his-name  
in "In the Heat of the Night."  
He really slapped her.  
Particularly, "I'm going  
to slap a white woman"  
and shoot a white guy.  
"And uh, I'm going  
to be in trouble!"  
And then when  
he shoots the guy!  
You know, he shoots the guy!  
I said, "This is a bold  
black man for 1967!"  
Very bold.

You would never put  
"Night of the Living Dead"  
on the spectrum  
of blaxploitation  
and black power movies  
that started to happen  
in the late 60s and early 70s,  
but in a way,  
you know, it really,  
it precedes "Shaft,"  
it precedes "Superfly,"  
it precedes all those movies  
where the African American  
main character  
was suddenly  
no longer accommodationist  
and exceptional and polite.  
He's black.  
He's brutal.  
He's boss.  
But, you know,  
tough and empowered.  
And of course we discussed it,  
and Duane, as I said,  
was the most sensitive  
among us to the racial issue  
and how some of that  
stuff might resonate.  
We said, "Well, wait,  
it was in the script  
before the guy  
was black."  
And, but he was saying, "Well  
yeah, but he is black now!"  
And so you have  
to think about that.  
And as I said,  
I've in recent years  
come to the thought that maybe  
we should have explored  
the racial issue a little bit.  
We thought we were being really  
hip by not changing the script.  
I think it's also

what made the movie  
feel like it belonged  
to another generation.  
That sense of not  
wringing its hands  
and having to talk,  
stop for a moment,  
they're all being pilloried  
by zombies and saying,  
"You know, Ben,  
when I was a boy,  
we had a colored maid  
and she never worked  
as hard as you  
did for us."  
I mean, by not having  
a scene like that,  
it felt exciting and new.  
It truly did.  
Hold it!  
Don't shoot!  
We're from town.  
A radio!  
One great thing about  
"Night of the Living Dead"  
is that it doesn't resort  
to the cliché of like,  
well, everybody would put  
aside their differences  
in the face of such  
a big threat.  
How long you guys  
been down there?  
I could've used  
some help up here.  
That's the cellar.  
It's the safest place.  
Which is this hokey thing  
that horror movies  
and sci fi movies still do.  
That no matter, you know,  
how much you may differ  
in real life, all that's  
going to get cast aside

because you have  
to fight the monster  
or fight the alien or whatever.  
The cellar.  
The cellar, there's  
only one door, right?  
Just one door, that's  
all we have to protect.  
Tom and I fixed it so it locks  
and boards from the inside.  
But up here, all these windows?  
Why, we'd never know where  
they were going to hit us next!  
You got a point,  
Mr. Cooper.  
But down in the cellar,  
there's no place to run to.  
Romero actually suggests that,  
nope, it's going to be embedded  
even in the way  
you choose to fight,  
even in where  
you choose to hide.  
But the cellar is  
the strongest place.  
The cellar is a death trap.  
Who you are in real life  
is going to absolutely affect  
how you treat this threat  
and how you see this threat.  
You put people in this  
incredibly extreme circumstance  
and, you know, what kind  
of society do they create?  
And that's the heart  
of "Night of the Living Dead."  
You two do whatever you like.  
I'm going back down  
into the cellar  
and you better decide!  
Because I'm going  
to board up that door  
and I'm not going to unlock it  
again no matter what happens!

Some parts of the movie  
almost play like Beckett.  
You know, that sense  
of what happens  
when you trap people together  
and they just have  
to deal with themselves.  
And that sense of anticipation  
and knowing that  
there's no place to go.  
Then slowly there's  
cracks in the crevices  
and the hands  
start coming through,  
and they're trying  
to get the hands out.  
And he shoots the guy  
a couple of times.  
The guy won't die until  
he shoots them in the head.  
To kill them you need  
to chop off their heads.  
Or what?  
Or just shoot them  
in the brain.  
Because the way they  
work is by the brain.  
Usually you have  
to throw fire so that,  
so that you can save  
yourself or someone else.  
Then, they see the news report.  
It's on!  
It's on!  
We've never had the budgets  
to really explore  
that this is  
a worldwide phenomenon.  
We did it mostly with media.  
What they were hearing  
on the radio and on the TV.  
Otherwise it was  
all the farmhouse.  
The wave of murder

which is sweeping  
the Eastern third of the nation  
is being committed by creatures  
who feast upon the flesh  
of their victims.  
Chuck Craig was  
an actual newsman.  
The guy that has most  
of the airtime in the movie.  
First eyewitness accounts  
of this grisly development  
came from people who were  
understandably frightened,  
and almost incoherent.  
Wrote his own copy.  
Read the script and we sat  
around and we bullshat  
about the concept  
of what was going on.  
It's hard for us here to believe  
what we're reporting to you,  
but it does seem to be a fact.  
That stuff has a ring  
of authenticity about it  
because Chuck did it himself.  
The kind of low key realism  
of those broadcasts  
of those newsrooms  
absolutely is intended  
to situate the movie  
in reality.  
That sort of unfiltered  
sense of nobody's  
spinning the news,  
just reporting it.  
It's saying that if this  
were happening in your town,  
this is what your newscasts  
would look like.  
Major contact came  
in a pre-dawn attack...  
I think the newscasts  
that were created  
for "Night of the Living Dead"



are in sync with the kind  
of newscasts that I was seeing,  
my generation was seeing  
on television, when we used  
to watch Morley Safer  
out in Vietnam  
in the bush and stuff.  
Vietnam was America's  
first televised war.  
And while the networks  
systematically  
downplayed the bloodshed,  
viewers, for the first  
time in TV history,  
got glimpses of what  
war was really like.  
I think the news coverage  
of the Vietnam war was unlike  
news coverage from ever before.  
I remember just  
the amount of dead.  
All law enforcement agencies  
and the military  
have been organized  
to search out  
and destroy  
the marauding ghouls.  
Particularly, when you  
saw the vigilantes  
get prepared and stuff.  
It made me think of  
the stuff I would see  
on the television and stuff  
of the Newark riots, of Watts.  
This was all happening, man.  
You saw National Guard  
on the street,  
you saw looting and stuff.  
So it all was very  
reminiscent of that stuff.  
I mean, it was obviously  
of those times.  
I grew up in Detroit in 1967  
and I remember that summer

being terrified.  
There's a famous story about  
a house in my neighborhood that,  
somebody was hanging  
out in their house.  
There were a bunch of,  
you know, National Guardsmen,  
which was teenagers  
with guns who'd probably  
been jacked up on coffee  
and up for two days in a row.  
There was a guy lighting  
a cigarette hiding out  
in an attic, they thought  
somebody fired a gun,  
and hundreds of rounds  
of ammunition were  
expended on this house.  
That this guy wasn't killed  
was a complete miracle.  
I mean, they shot  
the house up so much,  
it almost took  
the top of it off.  
And so to see that  
stuff in a movie.  
And also to see that stuff in  
a movie with a black guy in it.  
It was like a welt of social  
consciousness in filmmaking.  
There were so many  
things I don't think  
anybody could ever do again.  
In other words, you feel that  
the radiation on the Venus Probe  
was enough to cause  
these mutations?  
There was a very high  
degree of radiation.  
Just a minute.  
I'm not sure that  
that's certain at all.  
Big traditional institutions,  
whether it's the government or

the army or network television  
are utterly unable  
to be counted upon,  
not only counted  
upon to stop it  
but counted upon  
even to explain it.  
Um, so, there's this  
great sense of just,  
and this is very 1968,  
great sense of the complete  
ineffectuality  
of any institution that  
purveys itself to you  
as being trustworthy.  
I must disagree with these  
gentlemen presently  
until this is  
irrefutably proved.  
Everything is being  
done that can be done.  
I think there's one other big  
departure from convention,  
specifically from horror  
convention, which is that  
if that movie had been  
made 10 years earlier  
or even 5 years earlier,  
there would've been,  
like, a voodoo potion...  
Combining voodoo witchery  
with the most advanced  
of medical sciences.  
Or a curse, or an evil  
professor, or an incantation.  
Genius or madman?  
Romero sort of tosses  
that all aside.  
You don't ever get an official  
confirmed explanation  
of what's happening.  
God changed the rules.  
That's the only explanation  
that I, that I need.

No more room in hell.  
You can see what it is,  
you can't see why it is.  
It's so indeterminate that  
you can't protect yourself.  
And you're not given  
anything of why it is  
that would make you more  
comfortable watching it.  
And it doesn't matter to me.  
It's happening.  
And probably, at least  
in my mythology,  
it's some sort  
of permanent condition.  
I don't know. Unless we  
redeem ourselves somehow.  
Stay tuned to the broadcasting  
station in your local area  
for this list  
of rescue stations.  
Maybe we can get to the safe  
shelter, get gas in the car.  
Look for the name of the rescue  
station nearest you  
and make your way to that  
location as soon as possible.  
So we have that truck.  
If we can get some gas  
we can get out of here.  
This is great  
story logic, you know,  
great plot unfolding  
and great story logic.  
There's a key on here  
that's labeled  
for the gas pump out back.  
So they said, "We have  
the key," right?  
After we get the gas  
and get back into the house,  
then we'll worry about getting  
everybody into the truck.  
So then they create

this diversion  
with the Molotov cocktails.  
And you see, I remember  
this, right?  
Duane and the guy run out,  
get in the car.  
The girl now, she panics,  
she doesn't want  
to be without the boyfriend.  
She runs and jumps  
in the car, right?  
They get to the gas tank.  
Come on!  
This key won't work.  
Duane, pow!  
Shoots the look off.  
Watch the torch!  
So they've had the problem with  
the gasoline's soaking the car.  
I hate it when that happens.  
Um, but they're aware,  
they need to get out of that  
frickin' truck.  
So they're getting out  
and then she says,  
"Oh, my sweater's stuck!"  
Come on, come on!  
My jacket's caught.  
And you're like,  
"Your sweater's stuck?  
What, that's it!"  
Boom.  
It's understanding how  
to portray the little,  
the little things that can go  
wrong that really can screw you  
in this sort of scary  
environment,  
giving it an incredibly  
timeless and special quality.  
And they start  
devouring the meat.  
But then you see that  
they're growing in force!

So, earlier Duane says  
only 8 or 10 zombies  
becomes 16 zombies,  
then 20 zombies.  
It grows and grows.  
Once you saw the violence,  
once you saw the extent  
they were gonna go  
to show the gore,  
the audience at the time said,  
"Well, if they're gonna show"  
a kid chomping on her father,  
and they're gonna show it  
in this detail, you know,  
"what else are they  
gonna show me?"  
And that's terrifying.  
This film and the structure,  
the morality,  
who lives and who dies is  
not based on whether you're  
a good person, whether you  
work hard or fight hard.  
I mean a child killing  
her mother, that is the violence  
that we're experiencing  
in that scene,  
more so than someone being  
attacked by a trowel.  
That scene is just devastating  
because the mother  
is very adoring.  
That remains one of the most  
shocking things I've ever seen.  
And I'll tell you what, it's  
not because you see the gore.  
What's beautiful is the sound.  
The knife never  
touches the flesh.  
And when they break  
through in that last scene,  
the girl's trying to stop 'em.  
And they break in.  
And the brother with the glove?

No, get out!

No!

No, no!

When Barbara gets it  
from her own brother,  
this irony is so profoundly,  
it's disturbing,  
and once again,  
it's not deserved.

When you play with  
the expectations  
of the classic structure,  
and then you defy them  
and the wrong person  
gets killed.

This is what's upsetting,  
that's what haunts,  
that's what creates  
a feeling of dread.

I mean, we've lost  
various of our heroes  
along the way,  
but Ben is still at it,  
and there's that scene when  
he has to go into the basement.

I mean, he's fought  
this whole time about  
not going down there,  
or that it's a last resort.

And when you realize that's  
what he's going to do.

It's just an incredibly  
horrific shot of all the zombies  
just busting in, they've  
broken through the membrane.

In the time that "Night  
of the Living Dead" came out,  
you don't feel safe  
in your home anymore.

You know, it's--

There are things  
that are overtaking us  
over which we have no control  
and there's that fear

and I think that the zombie apocalypse takes inspiration from that fear and it's why audiences connect with it in a way that is not quite obvious on the surface but is really in the subtext. It's an unsettling element of the movie that the people who seem most likely to be able to thwart this incursion of the living dead look like a lynch mob. The resonance for people who would have spent the last 10 years watching white southerners vow to prevent the desegregation of schools, for instance, um, it would've been really pretty clear. And dogs in "Night of the Living Dead," there's a very specific cultural resonance. You know, black men being chased by dogs is one of the ugliest images of the civil rights movement, and was very much part of the national visual vocabulary of any moviegoer, other than a very little kid, who would have gone to see this movie. And again, it connects to this, this idea that it's not as simple as the good guys vs. the undead. There are the good guys, the not good guys, and the living dead.



They seem to be getting  
a certain amount of pleasure  
out of putting down these  
monsters and being able  
to go out and hunt people  
and lynch people.  
They seem really real to me.  
They felt real, those guys.  
I wasn't sure they were actors.  
It's a really interesting,  
squirmy political aspect  
of the movie that's  
intentionally unsettling.  
I think Romero wants you to feel  
uncomfortable with the fact  
that the so called victors  
at the end of the movie  
are exactly the kind of people  
you're inclined not to root for.  
You! Drag that on out of here  
and throw it on the fire.  
Nothing down here.  
Alright, go ahead  
and give him a hand.  
Let's go check out the house.  
There's something there.  
I heard a noise.  
Alright Vince,  
hit him in the head.  
Right between the eyes.  
Good shot.  
That was the ironic ending.  
He refuses to go downstairs,  
finally he survives  
by going downstairs,  
then when he comes back up  
he gets gunned down.  
'Cause he's mistaken  
for one of the living dead.  
Okay, he's dead.  
Let's go get him.  
That's another one  
for the fire.  
So, yeah, that ending was there

before we ever cast Duane.  
And that was  
the only time for me,  
I, I put a racial thing to it.  
You know, like, they saw him,  
he didn't yell out,  
he was a black man,  
and they shot him.  
My favorite scene was when,  
probably when  
the African man got shot,  
when he wasn't even a zombie.  
I thought they should know  
if he's a zombie or not,  
because if they knew he was  
a zombie, they would have,  
the zombie would have  
attacked them already  
and walked toward them.  
But all he did was stand  
up and they just shot him.  
A lot of people talked  
about that as a lynching  
and saw a political  
thread in it.  
I think it's more of a shock  
in terms of the way it violates  
your sense of narrative  
expectation than,  
uh, politically.  
When our protagonist does get  
shot, utterly arbitrarily,  
I think that's way  
beyond a racist issue,  
that's Romero just  
speaking from the times  
about a bleakness that  
the culture was suffering.  
If he had survived,  
it would have been dishonest.  
I mean, even as a kid  
and I was, you know,  
propping my eyes open  
with toothpicks

trying to sleep a couple  
of nights after.  
It felt like that was the most  
honest thing to do.  
You know, it's a tradition  
in films that you can escape.  
There's always the idea  
you can escape.  
You might leave your past if  
you were involved with the mob,  
you would leave and you'd  
have a new beginning.  
It's a tradition all  
the way back to Homer!  
The new beginning.  
You go home  
and you start again.  
You refresh  
and you start again.  
But, of course,  
the apocalyptic filmmakers  
take that away from you.  
No.  
Tomorrow may not come  
the way you're planning on it.  
You may not have  
another chance.  
The only reason to do  
the fantasy film  
or the horror film  
is to sort of upset the order,  
upset the balance of things.  
And it seems to me, seemed to me  
that the formula was always  
to restore order, you know?  
Put it back the way it was,  
which seems, you know,  
counterproductive to what  
you're doing initially.  
And, which is why it  
made sense to me to have,  
you know, "Night  
of the Living Dead"  
have this sort of tragic

and ironic ending.  
The credits roll seconds  
after Ben's death.  
It's shockingly blas  
and detached.  
It's as businesslike  
as anything else in the film.  
It may be the most emotionless  
horror film of all time.  
If it had been Sidney Poitier  
in the movie,  
he would have done that thing  
and wave to everybody,  
thrown his trench coat  
over his shoulder,  
and walked off  
into the distance  
as the haunting love theme  
by Loulou piped into theaters  
reminding us of the feat  
he accomplished.  
Um, and you know, that's,  
it just felt so right.  
It was the thing that was  
probably more exciting  
to everybody, when I  
finally called the people  
who did see it,  
"Wasn't it great  
that he does everything  
and then gets shot?  
Not only gets shot,  
but right in the head!  
So it's not like  
you miss it."  
It's completely terrifying  
and the perfect ending.  
Randy, light these  
torches over here.  
You really offered no comforts  
to the audience at all.  
No. But there's always  
the refreshment stand!  
Principal photography for

"Night of the Living Dead"  
wrapped in November of 1967.  
As Romero edited, the search  
for investors continued.  
And at first people  
had no faith that we could  
actually make a movie.  
And it was only  
when we were able  
to actually show some dailies  
and people saw that lips  
were in sync  
with the sound, um,  
and they were able to say,  
"It looks like a movie!"  
And we'd say, "That's what  
we're trying to tell ya!  
One of these days it's gonna  
grow up to be a movie!"  
And, uh, you know,  
so money dribbled in,  
over the course  
of several months.  
And we were never certain  
that we were ever  
going to get enough  
to finish it.  
We didn't have money  
for the sound mix.  
So Russ Streiner  
challenged the guy  
who owns the lab  
to a chess match,  
and at stake was the sound mix.  
And Russ beat the guy!  
And won the sound mix!  
So this was the kind of shit  
that we were going through, man.  
In January, 1968,  
Vietnamese Revolutionary Forces  
mounted a coordinated attack  
on over 100 South Vietnamese  
cities and towns, including  
the U.S. Embassy in Saigon.

It was called the Tet Offensive  
and it brought  
some of the most disturbing  
images to date  
to prime time television.  
For many, the war  
seemed more dangerous  
and pointless than ever.  
Still, it would  
continue until 1975.  
President Lyndon B. Johnson  
seemed better at facing facts  
when it came  
to domestic policy.  
He commissioned a study  
to investigate the causes  
of the nation's race riots.  
An unflinching wake-up call,  
the Kerner Commission Report  
warned that,  
Regarding the ghetto,

**it stated:**

And while "black militancy"  
may have added fuel  
to the riots,  
the primary cause was:  
We are moving toward two  
societies, separate and unequal  
and if something isn't  
done to stop this  
in a very determined manner  
things can really get worse.  
A few days later  
"Night of the Living Dead"  
was finally completed.  
Image 10 still needed  
a distributor for the film.  
With the hope of finding  
one in New York City,  
Romero and Streiner  
pick up the first finished  
print from the lab.  
Threw it in the trunk

of the car.  
Finished answer print,  
drove it to New York  
to see if anybody  
wanted to show it.  
And Russ and I are  
driving to New York  
and we hear on the radio  
that Martin Luther King  
had been assassinated.  
And you know, of course we  
have this sort of angry film  
that, you know, has  
this 60s stuff in it,  
we had a black lead,  
Duane, and, you know...  
Several distributors  
considered the film.  
It did not ignite  
a bidding war.  
I think Romero was working  
against all kinds of prejudices  
against what he  
was trying to do.  
A, if you've never made a film,  
you can't make a film.  
You've got to have a whole  
succession of films  
in order to make a film.  
Uh, I think he was working  
against the fact of you have  
to have millions of dollars  
to make a feature film.  
Well, you don't.  
The movie only cost \$114,000.  
Um, that's a very,  
very low budget now.  
It was also a very,  
very low budget then.  
I think in '67,  
the average studio movie  
probably cost about three  
or 3.5 million dollars.  
So \$114,000 is nothing.

The movie's in black  
and white at a moment  
when just about  
everything in movies  
had switched over to color.  
A black and white movie  
in 1968 was less playable.  
Theaters were less  
interested in booking it.  
Um, of course he was working  
with a cast of unknowns.  
That adds up to a very tough  
set of circumstances,  
especially when you're  
effectively rebooting a genre  
that hasn't done much  
for the last several years.  
Columbia, I think, was  
the first place we went to  
and they actually held  
it for a little while  
and it looked as if they were  
really seriously thinking  
about releasing it.  
Columbia turned it down.  
American International Pictures,  
known for low budget biker,  
psychedelic, and Roger Corman's  
Edgar Allan Poe movies,  
said they'd release it,  
but under one condition.  
They wanted to change  
the ending and they said,  
"It's just too dark,"  
and, you know, so,  
we boldly said, "Fuggetaboutit!  
This is our movie!"  
And we walked, and we never  
got the time of day  
from anybody else for a while.  
And we finally hired, someone  
recommended a sales agent,  
um, you know, somebody  
who's business it is



to go and, you know,  
try to find distribution.  
And so we hired this  
guy and he took it,  
and eventually got  
a deal with Walter Reade.  
"Night of the Living Dead"  
was first released in theaters  
and drive-ins  
on October 2nd, 1968.  
When we first saw  
"Night of the Living Dead"  
we went to a drive in  
to watch it.  
It was the first time we said,  
"It really is a movie,  
isn't it?"  
'Cause we were able  
to go to the drive in  
and buy some dogs and some  
popcorn, check out  
"Night of the Living Dead."  
"Night of the Living Dead"  
in New York was treated  
as a grindhouse movie,  
and it was booked  
as a grindhouse movie.  
It played on the New Amsterdam  
theater on 42nd Street,  
which was like a 7th run,  
a bad theater.  
New York's 42nd Street  
was the epicenter  
of the grindhouse circuit.  
These are all exploitation films  
that have no artistic ambition.  
You can't escape the shock.  
I'm going to give you the time  
of your life, baby.  
That have no political meaning.  
That are--are probably  
morally bankrupt.  
I'm going to kill you!  
Night...

"Night of the Living Dead"  
honestly was the kind of movie  
that critics mostly dismissed.  
...of the Living Dead.  
It was in a very  
disreputable genre.  
Horror was a dirty business  
right next to porn,  
uh, in terms of how the movies were  
made, how they were financed,  
where they were shown  
in drive ins.  
Variety called  
"Night of the Living Dead" an:

**which:**

Anyone who did review it  
reviewed it in that way.  
You know, sort of  
really angrily.  
It was dismissed in  
the New York Times, um,  
in a tiny, tiny review  
by Vincent Canby.  
Canby's 3 sentence  
review began with:  
He writes in this tone  
that he can't really believe  
that he's been dispatched to  
have to write about this thing,  
and probably had to go  
spend a miserable day  
at the New Amsterdam theater on  
42nd Street sitting through it.  
Along with  
the grindhouse circuit,  
"Night" was booked  
for afternoon matinees.  
Throughout the 60s,  
horror movies,  
fan magazines and toys were  
marketed primarily to children.  
You'll cringe in terror  
when you see our

Screaming Mee Mee Show.

In 1968, parents felt safe  
dropping their kids off  
for an afternoon  
of "horror."

Their most recent experience  
would have been something  
like the Roger Corman,  
Vincent Price,  
Edgar Allen Poe adaptations,  
which were fun and they  
were even a little scary,  
but they were basically  
horror movies  
which you could  
almost take kids to.

So, here comes

"Night of the Living Dead."

I can't imagine what children,  
by the time you get to  
the, the sort of flesh feast  
where they're eating,  
whatever they're eating.

And this naked, uh, zombie  
staggering toward the house.

You were like, way out  
of the realm of anything  
that had happened in horror.  
Critic Roger Ebert attended  
one of these matinees.

He wrote

in the Chicago Sun-Times:

It was so many people  
running out of the theater  
in the hallway of the movies,  
that was the first movie

I ever seen people  
running out the movie.

I remember the girl  
that was in front of us,  
she put the coat over her head  
and was running out, falling.

The name of the theater  
was called, "Adams."

It was in Newark, NJ,  
downtown Newark.  
I had to be 10, my oldest  
brother had to be 11,  
and he cried worse than all  
of us, and my younger brother,  
it didn't bother him.  
As of today,  
he likes scary movies.  
I might have been 13...  
12, 13?  
The drive in movie was  
the Whitestone Drive In  
in the Bronx.  
The part where the little girl,  
she's, like, eating the father.  
That was, like,  
really horrible!  
It took me a long time  
to get to sleep at night.  
And when the lights was  
off it was hard for us.  
You know, I remember  
a few times I wet the bed  
because I was scared to get  
up to go to the bathroom  
because I always thought that  
the "Night of the Living Dead"  
was in the other room.  
You feel so, like, "Oh, my God,  
they're coming..."  
They're going to come  
to get me and eat me up!"  
An abridged version  
of Roger Ebert's review  
was published nationwide  
in Reader's Digest magazine.  
In spite of this warning to  
parents, the film did so well  
that the National  
Association of Theater Owners  
selected it as their  
"Exploitation picture  
of the month."

It was playing at, like,  
in the Drive-In circuit  
and it wasn't the first  
run film in the bill,  
it was the last film,  
so consequently it was on late  
when everyone was  
asleep in the car.  
Elvis Mitchell first saw "Night"  
when he was 10 years old  
at a drive-in  
in Detroit.  
The sheer excitement  
of seeing a movie like that,  
as terrifying as it was,  
it felt like it belonged to you.  
You know, it felt like this  
generational shift  
in filmmaking.  
If there had been more  
resources devoted to the movie,  
and more consideration,  
and if it wasn't like  
run and gun filmmaking,  
if it wasn't like hearing  
Public Enemy for the first time,  
or for my parent's generation  
seeing Elvis Presley  
for the first time.  
It's just that kind of, oh,  
my God, that electricity.  
In 1969, Walter Reade  
re-released "Night"  
on a new double bill.  
They played it  
with "Slaves?"  
I mean, I couldn't  
believe that.  
You know? What?  
"Slaves"  
and "Night of the Living Dead?"  
How does that connect?  
But it was at this  
double-feature

where George Abagnolo,  
critic for Andy Warhol's  
ultra-hip "Interview" magazine,  
saw "Night."

**He wrote:**

And when the film got  
to Europe in 1970,  
the prestigious French film  
journal, "Positif," called it:  
Of course, the moment  
that stuff starts happening  
then everybody over here says,  
"Well, maybe I should  
take a look at this."

A bunch of people jumped  
on the bandwagon, Rex Reed,  
and all that.

And Roger did a Mea Culpa  
and said he didn't  
understand it.

Roger Ebert would later write:  
The Museum of Modern Art  
in New York played "Night"  
to a standing-room-only crowd.

The film would  
eventually become part  
of its permanent collection.  
But, uh, then that whole  
copyright issue came up  
and that was the end of that.  
When Romero and Streiner were  
shopping their film around,  
its original title was,  
"The Night of the Flesh Eaters."

And we put the little  
copyright bug,  
the c with circle around it,  
on the title.

It was over  
a live action picture,  
of one of the early shots  
of the car in the cemetery.  
And when they put

the new title on,  
which was their title,  
"Night of the Living Dead,"  
the copyright thing came off.  
And they never noticed  
that there wasn't one,  
and that's the way it is.  
And people all around  
the world said,  
"Wait, there's no copyright  
on this movie anymore!"  
So, basically,  
it became public domain.  
Stupid mistake!  
Image 10 received no royalties  
for the huge ticket  
sales in Europe.  
Their attempt to sue  
the distributor ended  
when Walter Reade  
filed for bankruptcy.  
Pirated copies of "Night"  
played worldwide.  
It's impossible to know  
how much money it's made.  
End the war!  
End the war!  
End the war!  
As the war grinded  
on into the 1970s,  
so did  
"Night of the Living Dead,"  
its midnight shows making it  
a cult institution.  
You want to own it,  
you want it to belong to you.  
Uh, you want to believe  
there's a part of pop culture  
that still kind of comes  
through the back door,  
that isn't heralded  
and isn't having all of its fun  
taken out of it  
before it gets to you.

Um, and that's one  
of the things that  
that movie really had.  
And for a long time.  
And as history unfolded,  
events seemed to vindicate,  
time and again, "Night's"  
suspicion of authority  
and unmitigated bleakness.  
All these things made  
you think, "Oh, my God."  
I'm not alone!"  
Finally, you almost feel  
like Ben, there are other,  
there are like-minded people,  
there's this cult  
of other people  
out there like me,  
or people who know how  
to fold this into a movie.  
You wanted,  
you wanted to see that.  
For the British Film Institute's  
"Sight and Sound,"  
Elliot Stein wrote:  
You know, 1968 was a moment  
when everybody was reading  
political messages  
into every film  
and I think it  
is a political movie.  
And one reason that "Night of  
the Living Dead" works so well  
is because everyone in America  
thought some version  
of this country  
is going to hell.  
The lunatics are taking over.  
Conservative, older people  
thought that, and progressive,  
young people thought that that  
had been true for a long time.  
And on that political front,  
the movie plays perfectly



to both audiences.  
"Night of the Living Dead"  
metaphorically, in a funny way,  
were all these fears rising  
up and coming at them.  
And they weren't coming  
at heroes or wealthy people,  
they were coming  
at the common American.  
I mean, the young woman  
who plays the lead.  
The couple who's in the house.  
They're just that average  
working class American.  
And here were these  
fearful things coming  
to not only kill them  
but to eat them!  
So, it fulfilled I think a kind  
of pervasive fear that existed  
in the country at the time  
among normal working people.  
There was a sense of chaos  
and sense of tension, you know,  
in the American fabric,  
you know,  
which means things  
were going to change.  
So I think that what  
Romero was doing  
with "Night of the Living Dead"  
sort of points to you know,  
this unraveling.  
It's the unraveling of  
everything we like to believe  
is our comfort zone  
and our safety.  
"Night of the Living Dead's"  
cynicism and ferocious intensity  
was reflected in many  
of the films that followed  
in the 1970s.  
Like "Night," these films  
shattered all the things

that kept us safe  
in traditional Hollywood movies.  
Heroism.  
Teamwork.  
Science.  
Young love.  
The patriarchal family.  
The media.  
The government.  
And the police and military.  
There's really a fragility  
to our society,  
and then you realize well  
in fact I must guard it,  
I must be vigilant.  
And then you get in to why  
horror stories can actually have  
a positive, uh,  
message if you will,  
a positive effect

**which is to say:**

Here is a cautionary tale.  
Do not take anything  
for granted.  
Because one day a zombie might  
wander up, and you may make fun  
of the person who's afraid  
but they could be right,  
and then things might  
go from bad to worse.  
They're coming  
to get you, Barbara!  
And you've got "Zombie  
Number One" Bill Hinzman.  
Started it all 40 years ago.  
My role in "Night  
of the Living Dead"  
was the "graveyard zombie."  
And the graveyard zombie scene  
was the last scene that was shot  
and throughout the film,  
I was a crewmember, of course,  
and an investor in the film,

and throughout the film  
I was jumping in to fill  
a part as a zombie.  
I was tall, skinny,  
and had an old suit, uh,  
so, it was pretty appropriate.  
But anyway, when the time came  
to film the final scene  
George says, "You really  
look good as a zombie",  
do you want to do  
the graveyard zombie?"  
I said, "Yeah, sure."  
You know, sometimes,  
I really do blush, I think,  
under the make-up, you know,  
because it's really kind  
of embarrassing.  
I, I'm sure you've heard  
the stories of actors  
are always afraid  
they're gonna get discovered  
that they don't have  
any talent or anything.  
And, it's like,  
sometimes I feel that way.  
I'm a little embarrassed  
sometimes because, you know,  
every Sunday night I got  
to take the damn garbage out,  
and on the way out I'll go,  
"I'm a legend!"  
What the hell am I taking  
the damn garbage out for?  
"Why aren't I rich?"  
But that's, that's life!  
But it's so much fun  
to do these things.  
You know, just, especially if  
I'm depressed about something.  
My wife kicks me out  
every once in a while  
and says, "Go to one  
of those events."

Get your ego built  
back up again."

"Okay."

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