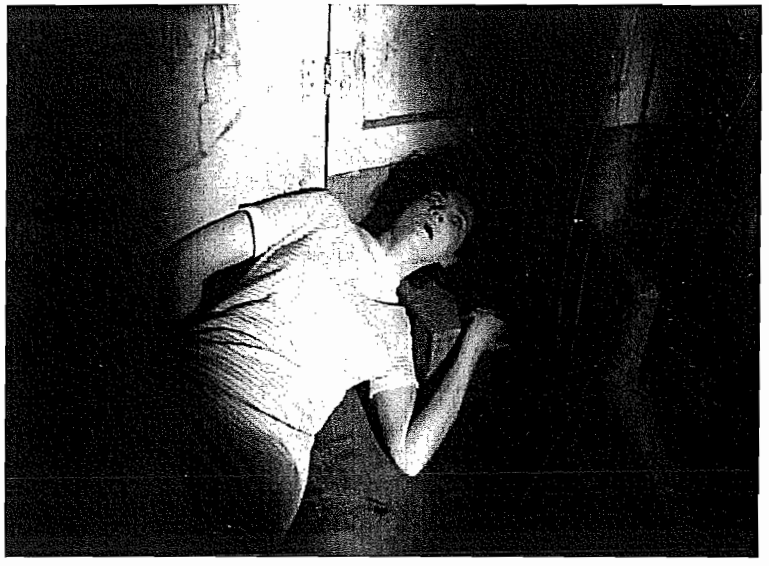

Night of the Living Dead

Ben Hervey

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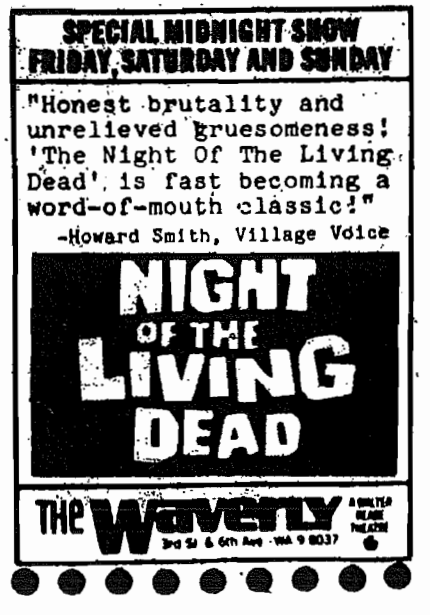
Night of the Living Dead

Midnight Mass

It's a few minutes to midnight, any weekend in the summer of 1971. New York's Waverly Cinema is packed, and *Night of the Living Dead* is about to begin. Some chatter nervously: it's their first time watching a film that has been called the most terrifying ever made. But many of those waiting have seen *Night* many times, and know half the lines by heart: it has shown every Friday, Saturday and Sunday, only at midnight, since May. *Night* played at the Waverly for twenty-five weeks, then, after long, overlapping midnight runs at two other Manhattan cinemas, it returned, for fifty-five. The Waverly wasn't quite the first place to revive *Night* at midnight, but it was home, the perfect spot for the cult to take root. The hippie musical *Hair*, then still in its first Broadway run, name-checked it as a bohemian meeting place.[1]



It was just round the corner from Washington Square, at the heart of Greenwich Village: then still a hub of the protest folk music scene, of gay liberation, avant-garde literature, the anti-war movement and the counterculture generally. The Waverly was three blocks from New York University. It was fifteen

minutes' stroll from the site of Timothy Leary's LSD (League of Spiritual Discovery) Center, and barely ten from the Weather Underground safe house where three militant radicals blew themselves up in 1970, preparing to bomb a US Army dance. Greenwich Village was world-famous, synonymous with hip, intellectual, politicised youth.

The Waverly set the tone as *Night*'s midnight revival spread across America and Europe, and ran and ran through the 1970s. That the audiences were mostly young goes almost without saying: a 1968 MPAA survey found that viewers between sixteen and twenty-four accounted for half of the American box office, and far more for shocking, family-unfriendly films like *Night*. But the midnight movie phenomenon *celebrated* youth and rebellion: it was about staying up past bedtime, roaming the streets while regular citizens slept, and, usually, about defying good taste. Some films had been marginalised or vilified by the mainstream media. Those that played longest were often prized for transgressions and abnormality, like *Freaks* (1932) and *Pink Flamingos* (1972) (whose cannibal feast pays tribute to *Night*), or for anti-Establishment politics, like the anti-war freak-out *King of Hearts* (1966).

Night popularised midnight screenings but didn't start them. In the 1950s, midnight horror movies had been popular at Halloween; and through the 1960s, art houses occasionally showed underground films by the likes of Andy Warhol and Kenneth Anger after the regular programming. But the first feature to enjoy an extended, midnight-only run was Jodorowsky's lurid symbolist Western *El Topo* (1970), which opened at the Elgin, in New York's Chelsea, on 1 January 1971. The idea of the midnight 'cult' took shape with *El Topo*: the 'bearded and be-jeaned set' came ritually, week after week, memorising the lines and bringing new 'initiates'. *The Village Voice* called it 'Midnight Mass at the Elgin'; the fans were 'Jodorowsky's witnesses'. The cult grew by word-of-mouth: advertising was limited to a small box in the *Voice* (the Waverly did the same for *Night*). Drugs were used. The repeated viewings were all about 'getting' *El Topo*, interpreting its metaphors. Long conversations in cafés afterwards were part of the experience.

Night lacks *El Topo*'s metaphysical pretensions and overtly psychedelic visuals, but it was a surprisingly logical follow-up. It combined earlier midnight movie traditions and audiences: a horror movie that was also seen as an art film. Like *El Topo*, *Night* was a genre piece that bent its genre out of shape; both films were gory, broke taboos. Both, despite fantasy elements, felt shockingly '*real*', 'totally convincing': *El Topo*'s freakish actors were actually deformed; the underground press relished Jodorowsky's claim that he 'really raped' a girl for one scene. Both films were made outside Hollywood and the 'system'. And, like *El Topo*, *Night* was perceived to demand analysis, to work beneath the surface. Word had spread that it was an important, meaningful film, an urgent coded message on the state of America.[2]

I want to recapture *Night*'s significance for those early audiences: the ones who discovered it in the late 1960s, and the ones who made it a weekly ritual through the 1970s.

The Image Ten

Making an artistic statement was the last thing on the minds of George Romero and John Russo when they sat brooding in Samreny's Restaurant, Pittsburgh, in January 1967. They and a few friends had struggled for years to get into the movies, and had already dabbled in unconventional film-making. In 1960, they shot an experimental portmanteau comedy, *Expostulations*, but ran out of money in post-production; more recently, they had failed to launch *Whine of the Fawn*, a Bergman-esque drama about medieval religious conflicts. Romero had tried longest and hardest: he shot his first films at fourteen, and spent the summer before college, 1957, assisting on Hollywood sets. Since 1963, he, Russo and some friends had operated their own Pittsburgh-based advertising company, Latent Image, and were gradually getting known for leftfield, low-budget innovation. But Latent Image was always intended as a bridge to features. So over provolone sandwiches they resolved to make one for $6,000, with ten investors kicking in $600 apiece. This time

they'd play it safe with an exploitation picture. Their unpretentious working title: *Monster Flick*.

Assembling the rest of the 'Image Ten' was easy, and all provided services too. Four were Romero and Russo's partners at Latent Image, including Russ Streiner, who produced, and Vince Survinski, production director. Karl Hardman and Marilyn Eastman worked in advertising elsewhere, and handled *Night*'s music and sound.

After several false starts, Romero showed up with half a story inspired by *I Am Legend* (1954), Richard Matheson's novel about the last human in a world of vampires. Romero preferred to show the beginning of the undead's takeover. The novel had already been filmed in Italy as *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), starring Vincent Price, and prefigured key details of *Night*: slow-moving hordes, hands grasping through boarded windows, an infected child on her deathbed, mounds of burning corpses – plus the protagonist dies. *Last Man* deserves more recognition, but lacks the qualities that made *Night* a hit: its rawness, brutality and grinding naturalism; its assault on taboos and cherished values; its queasy black humour and its topicality.

Six thousand dollars was not nearly enough, and the Image Ten eventually found additional investors. But they economised resourcefully. After months spent scouring Pittsburgh's environs, they rented an Evans City farmhouse: it was due to be bulldozed,

Undead hordes, boarded windows: *The Last Man on Earth* (1964)

The Evans City farmhouse

so they could do as much damage as they wanted. (As it happened, the boarded-up farmhouse stood for years to come, crowded with dummy ghouls and corpses, fodder for local kids' nightmares.) They lived there during the shoot, partly to guard the equipment. There was no running water, so they bathed in the creek and carried buckets from the spring. They slept on army surplus cots; after Romero's tore, he used the floor. But they usually only managed a few hours' sleep anyway: they filmed around their day-jobs, on weekends, holidays and by night.

Eight of the Image Ten appeared in the film, some in major roles: Streiner played Johnny, Hardman and Eastman were the Coopers. The remaining cast were mainly friends, colleagues, clients and local volunteers. Only Judith O'Dea (Barbara[3]) and Duane Jones (Ben) were even part-time professional actors, and neither had done a feature. The special effects were strictly DIY, with clay for rotting flesh and ping-pong ball eyes; the blood was Bosco chocolate syrup. (Romero worried that it would show up brown when *Night* was colourised for video.) The film-makers were so set on wringing 'production value' from anything to hand that they wrote in Barbara's car crash because Streiner's mother had dented her car shopping. This determination extended to dangerous stunts: Russo set himself on fire for the Molotov cocktail scene. The same recklessness energised post-production:

Streiner got their final mix and sound-lock for free by beating the lab boss at a double-or-nothing chess game.

Night was shot mostly in sequence, which helps to explain why its intensity and bleakness build throughout – and perhaps why its subtexts emerge more in later scenes. The story continued to form during shooting: Romero only half-scripted it before they started. Russo helped write the remainder, and others threw in ideas. The same applied on set: everyone helped with make-up, lighting, set-dressing. At this distance, it's impossible to disentangle who did what or had which idea, so I will speak of 'the Image Ten' or 'the film-makers' when a decision wasn't clearly Romero's. Indeed, Romero wasn't even chosen to direct until pre-production was well under way. Nonetheless, *Night* is his film more than anyone else's, and he ended up doing more than most 'auteurs'. Besides conceiving the story, co-scripting and directing, he handled all of the camerawork and editing, acted (briefly), designed make-up and lighting effects and had final say on music and sound.

He took his time. The Image Ten's situation was highly unusual: they made *Night* without a deadline and owned their equipment.

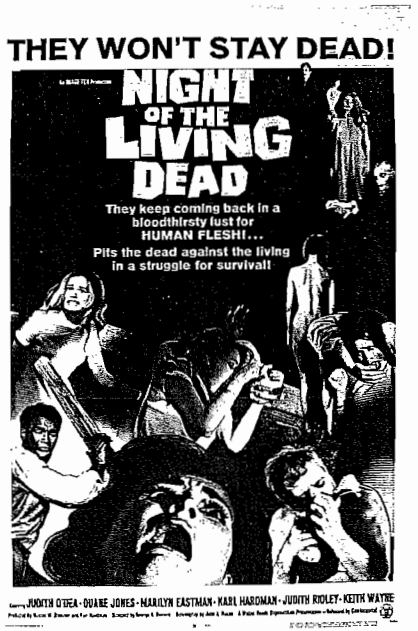
Ordinary effects: note the tub of Bosco chocolate syrup

Everyone worked without counting the hours, especially Romero, a notorious perfectionist, who reportedly put in twenty-four-hour days editing. He cultivated a remarkably labour-intensive style. In ninety-six minutes, *Night* contains nearly eleven hundred cuts: very brisk by contemporary Hollywood standards, but almost surreal for a palpably micro-budgeted film. Much of *Night*'s unique feel comes from this bewildering collision of low-budget resources and high-budget man-hours. It's the same with the music: it's all public domain stuff, from library discs, but Hardman and Eastman synchronised it better than most custom-written scores.

Shooting lasted nine months, post-production five. The finished product didn't quite meet Hollywood standards of transparent professionalism. *Night* has some minor rough edges, like continuity and screen direction lapses, which I won't dwell on, because they don't hurt it. It also has arguably major ones, like the limitations of the camera and actors, on which I will dwell, because I think they enhance the film's effect. But *Night* was a real movie, made by unknowns in Pittsburgh of all places, without studio help, for $114,000 (half deferred until after release). And it was taken seriously and became an international hit. Besides *Night*'s vast artistic significance, it was a shake-up for the industry, a blow to Hollywood supremacy and a lasting inspiration for regional and independent film-makers: without it, Quentin Tarantino says, 'you probably wouldn't have Steven Soderbergh'.[4]

From the drive-ins to MOMA

Rumour has it that *Night* remains, by tickets sold, the most successful independent film, and near the top for the horror genre: it stayed in theatrical distribution for almost a decade, and has never lapsed from print on video. We will never know. The Image Ten waited in vain for documentation and royalties from *Night*'s revival shows and foreign runs. They sued the distributor, Continental, but the case limped on for years inconclusively, until Continental's parent company, the Walter Reade Organization, filed



for bankruptcy. The rights reverted to the film-makers in time for the home video boom, but they faced another hitch. *Night* changed titles twice after completion: it was *Night of Anubis*, then *Night of the Flesh Eaters*, until the producers of *The Flesh Eaters* threatened legal action. In the hurry to substitute the final title card, the copyright declaration was omitted, and *Night* entered the public domain: bootlegs (usually from 16mm prints) are ubiquitous. But it's not just the figures: even the broad contours of *Night*'s release have become shrouded in myth. It's worth a moment to set the record at least relatively straight.

The Image Ten rightly regretted signing with Continental, but the move may have helped *Night*'s cult appeal. The other interested distributors were Columbia and American International Pictures (AIP). With Columbia's logo spliced on front, *Night* would have lost some underground mystique. AIP, past the glory days of Corman's Poe series, were increasingly regarded as conservative hacks: *inter/VIEW*, whose praise proved crucial in making *Night* hip, meanwhile ran articles on 'The Decline of AIP'. Besides, AIP demanded a happy ending, and *Night*'s refusal to compromise is at the heart of its success. Continental accepted *Night* almost unchanged: they wanted a little less talk and more gore. They weren't scared by controversy: they had already released films that had been

refused Production Code seals and condemned by the Legion of Decency. And their attachment left *Night*'s cultural standing valuably ambiguous: they had distributed horror and sci-fi, but were better known for serious imports like *Room at the Top* (1959); Walter Reade also owned a successful art-house chain.[5]

Continental's art-house sensibilities probably made them more receptive to *Night*, but they didn't understand what they had. They toured twelve prints around the drive-in and exploitation circuit with *Dr Who and the Daleks* (1965), preceded by hackneyed ads promising '$50,000 if you die of fright!'. Yet *Night* performed excellently, breaking records at many venues. The National Association of Theater Owners selected it as 'exploitation picture of the month'.

Reviews were mixed. In the *New York Times*, Vincent Canby dismissed *Night* as a 'grainy little movie' with 'nonprofessional actors', a 'wobbly camera' and 'hollow' sound. Continental's penny-pinching was partly to blame: *Night*'s negative is beautifully lit, with sharp detail and contrast, but their slipshod prints, as Lee Beaupre complained in *Variety*, resembled '20-year-old Army stock'. Like Canby, Beaupre lambasted *Night* for 'amateurism of the first order', but that was the least of it:

Until the Supreme Court establishes clear-cut guidelines for the pornography of violence, 'Night of the Living Dead' will serve quite nicely as an outer-limit definition by example. In a mere 90 minutes, this horror film (pun intended) casts serious aspersions on the integrity and social responsibility of its Pittsburgh-based makers, distrib Walter Reade, the film industry as a whole and exhibs who book the pic, as well as raising doubts about the future of the regional cinema movement and about the moral health of filmgoers who cheerfully opt for this unrelieved orgy of sadism.

Robert Ebert watched the film at a Saturday matinee packed with young children. *Night*'s violence and bleakness left them stunned and weeping:

they'd seen some horror movies before, sure, but this was something else. This was ghouls eating people up – and you could actually see what they were eating. This was little girls killing their mothers. ... Worst of all, even the hero got killed.

Ebert has been mocked for his write-up, but it was an attack on negligent exhibitors and parents, not on *Night*. Anyway, it was great publicity: *Reader's Digest* reprinted it and made *Night* notorious. Other notices were favourable – the *Film and Television Daily* called *Night* a 'gem', with 'all the earmarks of a "sleeper"' – but they treated it simply as an effective shocker.[6] That changed in late 1969, when Continental reissued *Night* with *Slaves* (1969). Herbert Biberman's ante-bellum drama about cruel white plantation owners and noble black slaves had underwhelmed *Variety* but delighted European intellectuals: *Positif* gave it half an issue.

The fourth issue of (fellow Pittsburgher) Andy Warhol's new magazine, *inter/VIEW*, reviewed *Night twice*, alongside a substantial Romero interview, and named it in several best-of-year lists. Reviewer George Abagnalo, later a Warhol scriptwriter, perhaps did more than anyone else to turn the critical tide:

Frequently an artistic film containing nudity will play the nudie theatre circuit. Cinema-sophisticates see it at an art house and understand and appreciate it, while voyeurs see it on 42nd Street and don't care what it's really about.

Night's gore 'made it eligible for 42nd Street', he argued, but it was time to recognise 'the work of art it really is': 'It should open at an art house and run for at least a month, because it is a work of art.' Richard McGuinness took up the cause in the last *Village Voice* of the 1960s (dated Christmas day, 1969), nagging New York's Museum of Modern Art to show it. Elliott Stein, who reviewed *Night* for *Sight and Sound* in early 1970, was more proactive. He dragged MOMA curators Adrienne Mancia and Larry Kardish eleven blocks downtown to watch the film in an authentic 42nd Street fleapit, its natural habitat.[7] *Night* was still packing those grindhouses when MOMA announced its screening. It was held the following June, in a season showcasing new auteurs. Romero, still visibly surprised, took questions from a standing-room-only crowd.[8]

Night's improving critical fortunes emboldened Continental to release it internationally that spring. According to Rex Reed, it was translated into twenty-five languages. British prints were cripplingly censored, but *Night* drew huge crowds in France, Spain and Italy. Madrid's largest cinema reportedly ran it for eighteen months, and it was re-released to French cinemas as recently as 2006. European critics, doubtless apprised of American developments (some quoted *inter/VIEW*), received it warmly. Highbrow publications like *Sight and Sound* and *Positif* were particularly effusive, but even most newspaper critics judged it a terrifying, intelligent, meaningful film.

Night and the intellectuals

ROMERO I wrote Night ... as a short story, which strangely enough was an allegorical thing, but then when we did the film, the allegory went out. But not entirely ...

ARTHUR The Europeans picked up on the allegory.

Andy Warhol's Interview, 1973[9]

As *Night* became a cult, its original release was mythologised. Arthur Rubine, Romero's press agent and formerly director of

Walter Reade, tagged along for Romero's second encounter with the renamed *Andy Warhol's Interview* and reshuffled history. Since then the received wisdom, which even Romero repeats, is that *Night* 'was basically discovered by the French'. The first American release did only decent business, and all the critics hated it. But the Europeans understood: *Sight and Sound* and *Cahiers du cinéma* 'went ape'. Rex Reed supposedly read about *Night* in *Cahiers*, or even watched it among Parisian cinephiles, and brought word back home – and so to the *Slaves* re-release, *inter/VIEW*, MOMA, Stateside recognition and packed midnight shows. Not so: Serge Daney's *Cahiers* review was surprisingly negative, and Reed didn't read it, let alone see *Night* in Paris (anyway, he didn't mention *Night* in print until the Waverly revival began). Even Elliott Stein was a New Yorker, albeit one who lived mainly in Paris as a *Financial Times* correspondent. Americans, notably Warhol's crowd, 'discovered' *Night* first.[10]

The myth sidesteps one of the most significant aspects of *Night*'s progress: it was rehabilitated as 'art' while still drawing exploitation crowds at grindhouses and drive-ins. As Abagnalo acknowledged, it was relatively common for art-house fare by Bergman or Warhol to play grindhouses too if it showed some skin. But it was new, at least in America, for a film to cross over so rapidly the other way. *Night* probably did as much to dismantle cultural hierarchies as Leslie Fiedler and Susan Sontag. Its simultaneous highbrow/lowbrow status set the tone for 1970s midnight screenings, where Cocteau rubbed shoulders with Ed Wood, Junior.

But the myth's popularity says a lot about how cult audiences wanted to perceive *Night*. Rubine, who also handled publicity for films by Fellini, Malle and Truffaut, cannily presented it almost as a daring European import. He knew that even (or especially) in the States, *Night* found its core audience among those who were sceptical of the American mainstream, politically and culturally. It became a badge of honour that *Night* had been spurned by Hollywood's cronies at *Variety*, the family-values middlebrows at

Reader's Digest. As for Canby, he slated *El Topo*. *Night*'s cult boomed at a time when ads for Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970) and Andy Warhol's novel *a* trumpeted damning reviews from mainstream organs like the *New York Times*. *Night*'s supposedly blanket first-run rejection by straight American philistines perfectly complemented its outsider status: its tiny budget, regional origins and untutored style. The Image Ten did their own thing; naturally the Establishment didn't like it.

Rubine's version exaggerated a nonetheless fundamental truth: that *Night*'s intellectual rehabilitation preceded and informed its peak of popularity. Second-run viewers turned up expecting *Night* to be 'more terrifying than Hitchcock's "Psycho"!', but also *art*, a statement. Programme notes were distributed at some campus screenings, quoting *Sight and Sound* and academic journals. Midnight crowds watched through the prism of intellectuals' responses.

I'll refer throughout to what contemporary critics saw in *Night*. Almost all praised its self-aware subversion of generic cliché, and its uncompromising, unrelieved brutality and bleakness, particularly its shock ending. Many linked these qualities with *Night*'s gritty, raw texture: for second-run reviewers, the non-professional feel that Canby scorned actually enhanced *Night*'s genre-defying realism.

The monochrome was key. Following a decade of Hammer and AIP Gothics in widescreen and Technicolor, *Night* was almost the last horror film to be released in old-fashioned Academy ratio black and white. But its visual plainness ironically made it feel *more* contemporary: it became a gimmick in itself. Colour was already the norm, but film-makers sometimes preferred black and white for grim social realism or true stories, like *In Cold Blood* (1967) and *The Battle of Algiers* (1966): it tapped authenticity from decades of black-and-white newsreels, documentaries and television news broadcasts. Says Romero: 'In those days the news was in black-and-white. Black-and-white was the medium. It was much more realistic back then.'[11]

Usually a recklessly honest interviewee, he got carried away and told *inter/VIEW* that he used it 'by choice. We could have had the budget for color.' Word spread. (Sixteen-millimetre colour *was* mooted partway through production, but immediately rejected: it would have meant extensive reshoots, and everyone worried that the 35mm blow-up would render the picture quality unreleasable.[12])

Second-run reviewers loved the monochrome, the 'wobbly' camera, the TV-shaped frame. Perhaps even Continental's dingy prints helped *Night*'s reappraisal. Critics differed over how much credit they gave the film-makers: Europeans were generally quicker to recognise Romero's craftsmanship, while some early American reviews treated it rather patronisingly, almost as naive folk art. Pauline Kael, who judged *Night* 'one of the most gruesomely terrifying films ever made', backhandedly enthused about its 'flat' acting and 'grainy, banal seriousness': 'there's no art to transmute the ghoulishness'.[13] But all agreed that *Night*'s rawness made it more frightening and convincing. It complemented the drab, middle-of-nowhere locations, the store-bought clothes, the authentically unglamorous Pittsburghers: *au fait* with Warhol and Pasolini, highbrow critics mostly saw *Night*'s non-professional actors as a plus. This wasn't Hollywood gloss: it felt *real*. Many used words like 'documentary' and 'newsreel' to describe *Night*'s style: it helped connect the film to contemporary realities.

Rubine is partly right: European journals did more to 'discover' *Night* as a topical, political film. For Richard McGuinness, in *The Village Voice*, what set *Night* apart was its reduction of the horror genre to its cruel, nihilistic core, remorselessly purging every extraneous cliché, frill, comfort and 'metaphysic-implying obfuscation'. McGuinness's approach recalls 1960s criticism on pop art and minimalism. *Night* was art by dint of single-minded purity: a horror film as austerely definitive, as flatly iconic as Warhol's silkscreens of Marilyn, soup tins ... and race riots. Similar concerns

underlie the *inter/VIEW* coverage. Both magazines acknowledged the significance of the posse scenes and Ben's death, but didn't probe *Night*'s politics much further.

Stein's *Sight and Sound* review established themes that have dominated discussion ever since: racism, the breakdown of the American family, and the resurgence of political conservatism. He subtly invoked Vietnam: 'Who are these ghouls, who are these saviours, all of them so horrifying, so convincing, who mow down, *defoliate* and gobble up everything in their path?' (my emphasis). It's a fittingly iconoclastic review. Stein was friendly with fellow ex-pat William Burroughs and had just co-written and performed in Antony Balch's lurid erotic horror film *Secrets of Sex* (1970).

French and British intellectuals pounced on these subtexts. In *Positif*, Ado Kyrou described the posse: 'the lynchers, the witch-hunters ... let off steam by shooting the monsters that they have spawned ... it's less dangerous than Vietnam and just as exciting'. Kyrou considered *Night* 'un film politique', thinly disguised as a (very effective) horror movie: he, Stein, Daney and even mainstream European reviewers read the whole film as an allegory, not just the ending. Their response was not entirely surprising. Many influential French *cinéphiles* seemed to like nothing better than exhilaratingly violent, all-American pop culture that could also be read as a critique of American malaise: witness *Cahiers*' raptures over *Kiss Me, Deadly* (1955). Yet Vincent Canby, obviously piqued, singled out Stein's *Night* review in a *New York Times* think-piece decrying film criticism's new decadence: the dismaying eagerness, even among Anglophone writers, to find profound meanings in offensive trash. If anything, the currents of change ran deeper than Canby realised. Those reviews paved the way for full-blown interpretive articles and academic criticism, which began, courtesy of Dillard and Robin Wood, with *Night*'s midnight shows still in theatres. And more grassroots, anecdotal fanzine pieces on *Night* and its audiences show that metaphor-hunting was very much part of the experience even for paying customers.[14]

1968

It was 1968, man. *Everybody* had a message.

George Romero[15]

Political readings were almost inevitable. *Night* was released in an infamous year for the United States, when tensions that had built over several years erupted in fire and blood: 1968 unreeled like one long horror film, without logic, explanation or happy ending. The shocks kicked off in January with the Tet Offensive, a surprise North Vietnamese and Vietcong attack on over one hundred South Vietnamese towns and cities. Tet brought unprecedentedly disturbing images to primetime television, most notoriously South Vietnam's chief of police offhandedly shooting a suspected Vietcong captive point blank: 'Shoot'em in the head,' as *Night*'s posse-leader says. American presence in Vietnam escalated sharply through 1967, and when news of Tet broke, the Joint Chiefs of Staff demanded 206,000 more men. As 1968 began, America's young were likelier than ever to be drafted, and the war looked even more dangerous, futile and sickening than before. In March, frenzied American troops massacred over three hundred civilians, mostly women and children, at My Lai. The army managed to cover it up until November 1969, proving themselves conmen as well as butchers.

Meanwhile, schisms back home seemed to teeter near civil war. Anti-war and anti-Establishment activity reached a desperate pitch. Fifty thousand demonstrators had marched on the Pentagon in October 1967. Through March and April of 1968, student protestors occupied buildings at Columbia University. The police removed

Photo: Eddie Adams, 1968

them violently. That spring, it felt like a repressive crackdown had begun. Progressive figures, notably Martin Luther King and anti-war presidential nominee candidate Robert Kennedy, were assassinated in still-mysterious circumstances. King's death sparked bloody race riots throughout America, even worse than those that hit over a hundred cities in 1967, while the Image Ten shot *Night*. Black leaders renounced non-violent protest. Five weeks before *Night* premiered, the Chicago police gassed and billy-clubbed peaceful demonstrators outside the 1968 Democratic Convention. By November, it seemed like the warmongers had won: Nixon was elected president by what he called America's 'Silent Majority' of patriotic conservatives.

Before *Night* opened at the Waverly, America had watched the 1960s' gory death throes. Hippie ideals were irremediably tarnished when Manson family commune members were convicted of the Tate–LaBianca murders. The Beatles-fixated longhairs stabbed their victims dozens of times each and cut an eight-month foetus from Sharon Tate's womb: an orgy of bodily destruction more crazed than *Night*'s cannibal feast. In May 1970, following America's invasion of Cambodia, the National Guard opened fire on protestors at Kent State University, killing four and wounding nine. Several were shot in the back. Ten days later, the police fired on students at Jackson State University. Suddenly, peace protestors had to be willing to risk their *lives*.

The morning after the Robert Kennedy assassination, his speechwriter Arthur Schlesinger broadcast his thoughts on America: 'We are today the most frightening people on the planet.' Little wonder, then, that young viewers responded to a brutally violent horror film set

Outside the 1968 Democratic Convention: a government-appointed commission called it a 'police riot'

here and now, which scrapped the genre's foreign or alien threats and pitted Americans against Americans. Little wonder that its moral ambiguity felt true to them, its refusal to idolise heroes or demonise monsters, or to rejoice when order and normality prevail.

The accidental classic?

A lot of the critics have jumped off the deep end in likening the ghouls to the silent majority and finding all sorts of implications that none of us ever intended. I think George wants to encourage that kind of thinking on the part of some critics. But I'd rather tell them they're full of shit.

John Russo, 1975[16]

INTERVIEW Was that a formula with the black hero?
ROMERO It was an accident. The whole movie was an accident.[17]

The turbulent late 1960s mostly found Hollywood at its fluffiest and most escapist. Vietnam was off limits, except for John Wayne, who made *The Green Berets* (1968) with Lyndon Johnson's blessing and massive Defense Department assistance. The result was as morally uncomplicated as, the producer told *Variety*, 'Cowboys and Indians. ... The Americans are the good guys and the Viet Cong are the bad guys.'[18] Hollywood's racial message films were barely less trite and anachronistic. Young and politically engaged viewers must have been desperate to see films that grappled with their era's turmoil, or at least acknowledged it – and preferably without contrived preachiness and moral uplift. Did that desperation make them read too much into *Night*?

Russo and other Image Ten members said so back then, but their remarks should be seen in perspective. They were understandably disgruntled that the same cinephiles who interpreted *Night* also championed Romero as 'auteur' and marginalised his collaborators. Early interviews find Romero rather taken aback by highbrow responses and experimenting with his own opinions, but I don't believe that he has merely played along with critics, as Russo suggests. It's likelier that Romero simply saw more in *Night* than Russo did, and that his understanding grew in retrospect – hardly unusual. It *was* more his creation than anyone else's, and he has developed its themes in excellent, thoughtful work, particularly his sequels *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), *Land of the Dead* (2005) and *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and his 1970s films, such as *Martin* (1977) and *The Crazies* (1973). The other Image Ten members have mostly dropped out of features. Russo has remained more active, notably with *Midnight* (1981) and latterly with the likes of *Santa Claws* (1996) ('His SLAY BELLS are ringing!'). His novel *Return of the Living Dead* spawned Dan O'Bannon's popular 1985 film adaptation and a parallel series of *Night* sequels. Even Russo's better work, though, aspires to little more than straight-ahead scares and chuckles, and his butchered twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Night*, with its inane substitute music and newly shot footage, travesties everything that makes the original special.

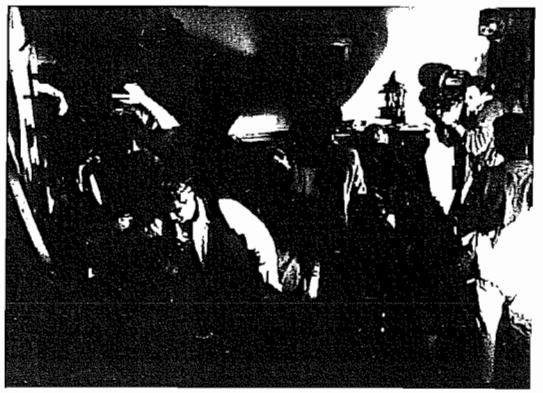
But Romero's 'accident' remark, flippant and exaggerated as it was, warrants serious consideration. Some elements that excited critics *were* fortuitous: that Ben is black, for example, and the ghouls and posse all white. Key factors of the 'vérité' style were budget-imposed: the real locations, unknown cast and monochrome. Before I 'jump off the deep end' myself, I need to clarify and justify my approach.

First, *Night* is not merely the product of its film-makers' intentions, even if we pretend that they all shared the same ones. *Night*, even more than most films, is what it has become: that includes 'accidents', improvisations and even critics' interpretations, which have so conditioned viewing as to become almost inextricable. And, as I've said, a large part of my goal is to recreate what *Night* meant to viewers then. What I won't attempt is to force it into a single, coherent allegory (the ghouls mean this, *ergo* Ben means that and the posse means the other): futile when the film-makers clearly didn't structure it as one.

That said, I do not believe that critics and audiences merely dreamed up *Night*'s subtexts. There were accidental factors, but the

film, even the script, formed with those factors in place. Saddled with black and white, Romero shot and cut to enhance the rough, spontaneous, almost documentary feel. 'We make a living making a glass of beer look like heaven,' he explained: 'Maybe that's why we went as far the other way as we did.' He deliberately chose unsuitable, over-grainy stock for some scenes.[19] Even the television news broadcasts were written in with the black and white in place, and inevitably brought home the 'newsreel' style of the rest.

Newsreel style doesn't necessarily entail newsreel relevance. But Romero has always said that he shot the posse scenes and the ending with politics consciously in mind; and for Jones, the whole film was always political. Some details, we'll see, were clearly meant to be topical, like the 'Search and Destroy' segment. Romero's position now, which even Russo and the others seem to have accepted, is that even though they did not intend *Night* as one big statement, politics was always on their minds. Romero says that he originally conceived the story as an allegory, and they went on interpreting it during the shoot: 'We lived in that farmhouse. ... And we sat around and we talked a lot about the themes that were in the film, the disintegration of the family unit and the idea of revolution and all that stuff.'[20] But *Night*'s implications hit audiences more powerfully for not being laboured over: they're genuine subtexts. If the film had been constructed as a



vehicle for political rhetoric, it would have turned out flat, obvious and inflexible: not just rooted in its era, but shackled to it.

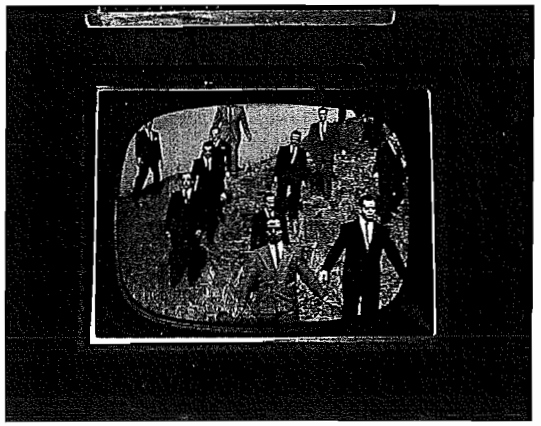
Finally, there's one fundamental issue on which everyone agreed from the start: realism. As Streiner put it: 'deep down inside we were all serious filmmakers and somewhat disappointed because we had to resort to horror'. They resolved, at least, to make *Night* 'real and true' (Russo's words), to give it an honesty lacking from other 'monster flicks'.[21] Can realism ever be ideologically detached, self-contained, let alone in the late 1960s? Consider what was 'real and true' for the Image Ten: untrustworthy television news broadcasts, a military–governmental conspiracy to keep dangerous secrets from the public, the failure of good intentions, a murdered black hero. *Night*'s realism reflects a specific worldview: late 1960s liberalism souring into cynicism. Romero says that he and his fellow film-makers were 'part of that liberal gang – hippies who didn't want to grow up'.[22] He had dropped out of college to lead a bohemian, nocturnal, pot-smoking life,[23] and like most of his collaborators he was still on the trustworthy side of thirty. *Night* was something new: a genre film made by politically engaged young people without the older generation looking over their shoulder, whether Hollywood studio bosses or the equally conservative businessmen who ran Hammer and AIP.

'Scenes we'd like to see'

Mad Magazine ran a regular feature through the 1960s and 1970s, 'Scenes we'd like to see': the hero chickens out and leaves the damsel tied to the tracks; the Joker kills Robin across town while Batman changes a flat; the lion eats Dorothy. *Mad* deflated movie clichés with harsh realities: people can turn cowardly and sneaky or make mistakes; accidents happen. *Night* does the same.[24] In pursuit of authenticity and truth, it debunked everything that had served to vanquish evil in prior 'monster flicks': individual heroism, teamwork, science, knowledge, religion, love, the family, the media, the army and the government. Panic, selfishness and power struggles tear the would-be heroes apart before the ghouls do. We never quite find out

what is going on. And everyone dies, usually ingloriously, even by accident. Much has been made, and rightly, of how disturbing these transgressions are, but, as *Mad*'s title points out, we *want* to see them: they are also liberatingly honest and even funny.

Where did the Image Ten find the clichés they upturned? Although everyone now files *Night* under horror, contemporary critics more often saw it in the context of apocalyptic sci-fi, naming titles from the 1950s and early 1960s. The Image Ten's initial Monster Flick concept was a 1950s sci-fi pastiche that took the aliens' side against ridiculous 'authority figures' like 'Sheriff Suck'. In some ways, that's not *so* far from the film they made. They grew up on 1950s sci-fi. Romero's first juvenile short was *The Man from the Meteor*. Russo claims that 'as a kid' he saw 'just about every' monster and sci-fi film of the 1950s and early 1960s,[25] and while it's possible to identify films with specific similarities (*Day the World Ended* [1955], *Invisible Invaders* [1959], *Panic in Year Zero!* [1962]), *Night* feels like the product of watching *all* of them, as if it's moulded from the generic mulch they left in the mind: experiments gone wrong, radiation from outer space, dead-eyed humans stripped of individuality, conferences between soldiers and scientists, well-behaved young lovers, bald patriarchs, TV bulletins, windowless



Invisible Invaders (1959)

basements, survivalist strategising, the end of the world. *Night* even looks and sounds 1950s. It's in Academy ratio black and white, like most 1950s sci-fi. Some of *Night*'s decades-old library music had shown up in 1950s schlock like *Teenagers from Outer Space* (1959) and *The Hideous Sun Demon* (1959). Many elements of *Night* were familiar, but its originality comes partly from twisting the familiar into something radically new, subverting and inverting the expectations it sets up. It's a jarring mix of nostalgia and iconoclasm.

And perhaps that mix is also what *Night*'s audiences felt when they looked back at the 1950s: these were their childhood years too, and must naturally have evoked at least *some* fond nostalgia. But they also represented everything that the rebellious younger generation wanted to interrogate, upturn, transcend and escape. The term 'fifties' has an almost intrinsically mythological ring when applied to America, partly because it usually denotes a way of life and set of attitudes that overhung the decade, but more because it conjures an idealised image of domestic life: a collage of grinning suburban tableaux from sitcoms, leisure magazines and home appliance adverts, beguiling but phoney and stifling. The 1962 Port Huron Statement, generally considered the opening shot of student radicalism, starts by evoking an idealised America 'when we were kids', then punctures that cosy nostalgia: 'the hypocrisy of American ideals was discovered ... we began to sense that what we had originally seen as the American Golden Age was actually the decline of an era'.[26] I want to argue that, besides its relevance to 1960s issues like Vietnam, *Night*'s sceptical engagement with 1950s myths and iconography proved perversely crucial in making it feel so contemporary.

Night connects back to the core theme of Gothic literature and film: the enlightened present's struggle to overcome a barbarous past, whether in the form of feudal despots and Catholic inquisitors or centuries-old vampires and living mummies. But which represents the past in *Night*: the resurrected dead, or the normality that they threaten to tear apart?

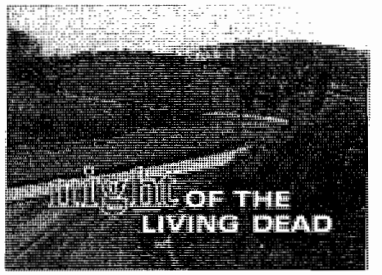
Nostalgia and iconoclasm: when a film becomes a cult, when fans watch it ten and twenty times, it is inevitably no longer just about the shock of the new, but also the pleasures of the familiar. Transgression, killing the past, becomes a ritual.

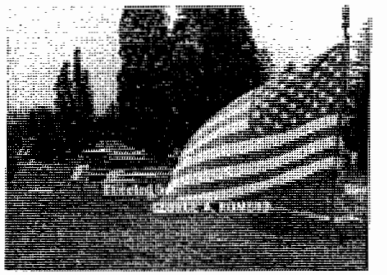
The clock strikes twelve, the curtains part ...

'You used to really be scared here'

Fade up to a deep-focus shot of a winding country road, static as a painting. A car rounds the furthest bend, half a mile distant, snaking our way. *Night* will become inexorably more claustrophobic, squeezing its characters into smaller spaces (a house, a few boarded-up rooms, a windowless basement) and sweatier, more frantically edited close-ups. So it makes sense to start at the opposite extreme, with the film's most languid, expansive landscape shot, almost agoraphobic in its sense of remoteness. Nudging forty seconds, this is also (bar the television broadcasts) *Night*'s longest unbroken take. It leaves room for the loneliness to sink in. The car leaves two straggling houses far behind and, in the slow montage that follows, no possible destination looms, not a living soul: just muddy slopes, bare trees and lopsided pylons dwindling to the vanishing point: deepest nowhere. As the title comes up, 'living dead' seems apt to describe the half-life evoked by this Middle American wilderness. At last a ravaged signpost marks the cemetery; it looks full of bullet holes, foreshadowing the violence to come.

Night's credit sequence is oddly haunting, conjuring the mundane terrors of loneliness and isolation that underpin the film's more visceral scares. Seemingly, it caught Kubrick's eye. *The Shining*'s (1980) credits are *Night* souped-up: the winding, tree-lined road to nowhere; the lonely car; the familiar music made strange by electronics. Hardman and Eastman often used simple, judicious studio effects to make *Night*'s stock music their own: speed changes, feedback loops. Here the effect is subtle, lulling and oneiric, like an audio equivalent of the focus shimmers that cue flashback scenes. This isn't quite the 1950s, but a hazy dream of them: Romero called





Night's music 'the scoring heard in nightmares conjured by yesterday's matinees'.[27] It's just right to bring out the old-timiness of that TV-shaped, black-and-white picture. Nervous apprehension probably mingled with disarming cosiness as midnight audiences settled into these credits, as if snuggling up for a late-night *Twilight Zone* rerun.

Romero's director credit appears over the Stars and Stripes, fluttering above the headstones – and waving goodbye to the vague, timeless Middle European settings of the Universal–Hammer Gothic tradition. *Night* is about America; even Romero's apocalyptic sequels never mention events elsewhere.

The car pulls up and Barbara looks out: 'They ought to make the day the time changes the first day of summer.' Her words peg this for high spring. In fact, the graveyard opening was the last scene to be shot, in dreariest November. The deciduous trees are bare and skeletal, and the actors barely dared breathe lest the mist register on camera. *Night*'s very first line, then, is a continuity goof, but no one laughs. The peripheral, accidental surrealism of this dead spring suits the film's bleak tone, and this scene's emerging not-quite-rightness: the actors who don't seem like actors, the un-cinematic locale. This is no foggy, cross-festooned Gothic mock-up: it's the Evans City Cemetery in Butler County, Pennsylvania, so drably ordinary that, says Russo, people 'from dozens of different towns' 'swear they recognize it as their hometown cemetery'.[28]

For Johnny, it's just a place of mundane bother. He and Barbara are making their annual drive from Pittsburgh (a six-hour round trip,

Romero vetted them. Just think how different the whole film would feel if one of them happened to be black – or even had long hair. Very little of the sequence was scripted, and Romero told *inter/VIEW*: 'for most of the footage I really didn't have to do much of anything. I ran around with the cameras.'

But this was exactly what the hip New Yorkers wanted to hear. Almost the first thing they asked Romero was whether the police and riflemen were 'authentic or … actors': 'They all look intent. Real rednecks.' There's contempt here, not just for the characters, but for the performers, who are assumed to be barely acting. Romero doesn't quite play along – after all, these 'rednecks' did him a favour, but his replies are subtly patronising: 'they were all happy to have guns in their hands. We had quite an arsenal.' Second-run reviews latched onto the posse's 'authenticity'. Ironically, knowledge of the police's cooperation made these scenes seem more rebellious, and Romero's claim to have barely directed made them register as a more deliberate political statement, a point where metaphorical fantasy confronts a barely filtered reality. They became a prank played on unwitting hicks and Establishment figures ('the police and city fathers', as Romero put it), an authentic glimpse of the enemy in the wild.

By then Wexler had staged *Medium Cool*'s (1969) finale amid the real police brutality of the Democratic Convention (one cop hurled tear gas at the camera), and Hopper had shot part of *Easy Rider* (1969) in a still-segregated Louisiana café. He persuaded the actual sheriff and his cronies to improvise, and filmed until they had let all their homophobia and racism hang out. They gawp and snigger at the longhairs, unaware that in cinemas the tables would be turned. Like them, *Night*'s posse became a zoological specimen, a freak show for the freaks.

These vérité posse scenes shift *Night*'s meanings. We may not quite identify with the ghouls but almost everyone agreed that the forces of law and order were worse: deader, scarier, crueller, more ridiculous. Whether or not the rising dead represent revolution, these men are the counterrevolution.

From that shot …

That there is a holocaust coming I have no doubt at all … reaction to Dr King's murder has been unanimous: the war has begun. … From that shot, from that blood, America will be painted red.

Eldridge Cleaver, 'Requiem for Nonviolence' (1968)[118]

Significantly, the *inter/VIEW* writers, and many others, called the ghoul-hunters 'rednecks', though Pittsburgh is hardly the Deep South: the slur was practically synonymous with 'racist'. And racism, above all, inevitably came to mind when 1960s audiences watched this

Police dogs in *Night* … and in Birmingham, Alabama, May, 1963. Photo: Bill Hudson

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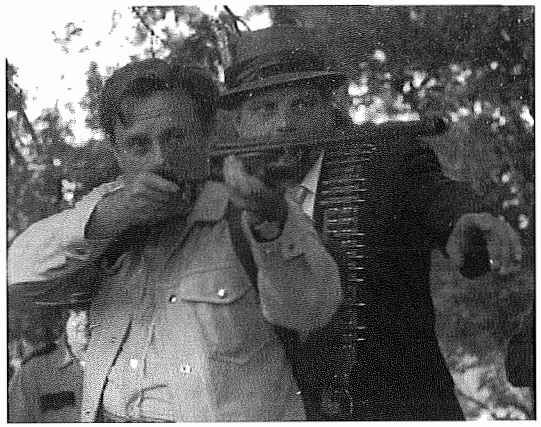
trigger-happy, all-white confederacy of cops and conservative-looking country folk. They'd seen groups like this on the news, cracking heads at civil rights marches. Those dogs look like the ones that Birmingham police loosed on defenceless schoolchildren during 1963's anti-segregation demonstrations. In 1964, three civil rights workers were murdered in Mississippi by Klan members, a mix of good old boys and local cops. After six weeks of speculative headlines, their corpses surfaced alongside several black men never reported missing: the tip of the iceberg, presumably. It wouldn't have surprised Romero, who grew up reading EC stories about policemen colluding with lynch mobs. The *Night* remake plays up the subtext: the posse hangs the ghouls from tree branches, like the 'strange fruit' in Billie Holiday's song. Nineteen sixties audiences didn't need nudging: as our black hero huddles in the cellar, hearing dogs and sirens, their instinct would have been that he's hiding from the lynch mob, not the ghouls.

Ben unbars the door and explores upstairs. Daylight has drained the farmhouse's atmosphere. It's trashed and deserted: the ghouls' house-warming party has disbanded. Outside, the posse finishes off the last stragglers, and one of the men hears movement indoors. We see Ben from the posse's perspective, warily approaching the window, rifle cocked: he doesn't look like a ghoul. But a redneck takes aim: it's Vince, the one who smirked at the 'cookout' joke. The sheriff leans in to help, Vince fires ...

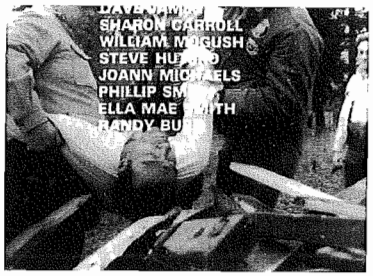
And suddenly Ben is dead. Most reviews spoiled this final irony, and second-run viewers probably knew what was coming – but foreknowledge isn't enough to soften the shock's sledgehammer abruptness. Ben's death hits harder because so little is made of it. There's no music, and the sound effects are understated. A seven-frame close-up shows the bullet knock Ben out of frame, and there's a one-second medium shot of his lifeless body hitting the floor. That's it: there's no drawn-out death scene, no blaze of glory for this hero. It couldn't be further from the lingering, cathartic, beautiful shoot-outs that claim the outlaw protagonists of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch* (1969). Sobchack wrote that those films' slow-motion

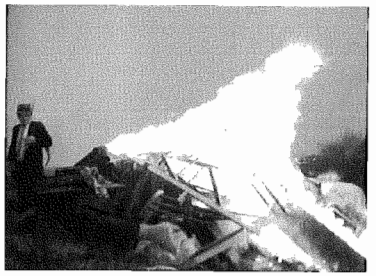


'kindly stylized death for us; it created nobility from senselessness, it choreographed a dance out of blood and death, it gave meaning and import to our mortal twitchings'.[119] Ben's death is the opposite: as viciously instantaneous as an assassination on live television, with no slow-mo replay to help us understand. 'Good shot,' says Sheriff McClelland. He sounds bored as he intones the film's cruelly banal final line: 'OK, he's dead. Let's go get him. That's another one for the fire.'

Romero finishes us off with a stylistic shock: the image freezes. The last sequence, as the men drag Ben out with meat hooks and burn him, is shown in stills, as wrenching as the freeze-frame that ends *Les Quatre cents coups* (1959). The film-makers printed the shots through cheesecloth to make them coarse and grainy, like newsprint. If we're used to *Night*'s evening news look by now, these shots drive home the ending's truthfulness, its real-world associations – which are above all racial.

Duane Jones said that it was his idea for the posse to shoot Ben, and that he rejected other endings that 'would have read wrong racially', such as Barbara rescuing him: 'I convinced George that the black community would rather see me dead than saved, after all that had gone on, in a corny and symbolically confusing way.'[120]





The ending is more shocking for feeling somehow inevitable: that a black man who has become a leader should be gunned down by, as McGuinness put it, his 'natural enemies, Pittsburgh cops and rednecks'. These weathered stills of grimly purposeful men in rural clothes could be archive shots of a 1920s public lynching, or they could be more disturbingly up to date.

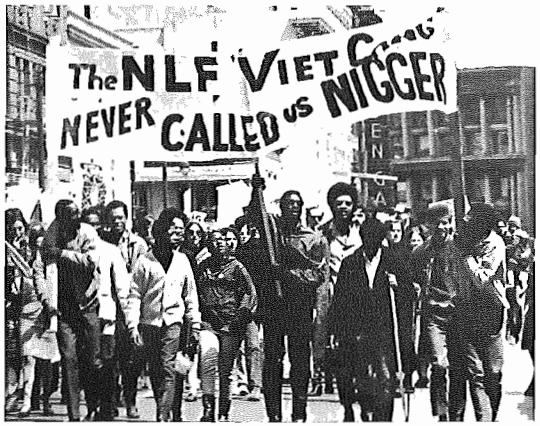
By *Night*'s release, one association had become inescapable. Romero and Streiner heard about the King assassination on their car radio as they drove the first print of *Night* into New York, seeking a distributor. Their first thought was that Ben's death would make *Night* unreleasable,[121] but Romero now thinks that the coincidence was crucial to its commercial success: 'people latched on to the film because they thought that, "Jeez, this is amazingly today"'.[122] Of course, the link with King was unforeseen, but other black leaders had been assassinated before Jones suggested the ending, notably Medgar Evers in 1963 and Malcolm X in 1965, besides lower-profile lynchings. Little wonder that the black audience

with whom Streiner watched on opening night responded to the ending's truthfulness: 'You could hear murmurings of, "Well, you know, they had to kill him off!" and "Whitey had to get him anyway." "He bought it from the Man."'[123] It proved almost equally meaningful for politicised white audiences, for whom the civil rights struggle was intertwined with broader progressive ideals. It's this ending more than anything else that made political interpretations inevitable. The *Cahiers* review said that it forces us to acknowledge 'le vrai sujet du film qui n'est évidemment pas les morts-vivants, mais bien le racisme'.

The filmed ending is far more racially charged than the scripted version, in which McClelland regrets the mistake: 'It's too bad … an accident … the only one we had all night.' There are no meat hooks, no bonfire. The film omits that line, even though the posse should realise that Ben was no walking corpse: fresh blood pumps through his white shirt when they jab the hooks in. The implication: the white killers know their black victim was alive, and don't regret it.

The meat hooks also evoke Vietnam: American soldiers dragged enemy corpses with wire rather than touch them.[124] Aptly, that helicopter noise surges back as the men tug Ben out, along with a military crackle of walky-talkies. To contemporary audiences, it would have seemed natural for these associations to spark off racial ones.

The lynching of Will Brown outside the Omaha Courthouse, Nebraska, 1919

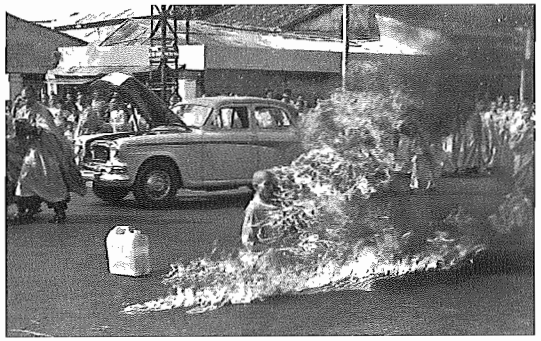


A 1967 protest march. Photo: Flax Hermes

Black leaders opposed the war, partly because of the disproportionate number of black men drafted, assigned to the front line and killed in action, and partly because they saw the Vietnamese as, to quote the 1966 Black Panther Platform, 'people of color ... who, like black people, are being victimised by the white racist government of America'.[125] That's the impression we get as Ben is laid on the bonfire next to that first cemetery ghoul: they're united by common enemies, the cops and rednecks, the counterrevolution.

Shades of the war and of racism mingle as the men douse Ben in gasoline and light him. After hanging, one of the commonest methods of lynching black men was burning them alive. And in 1963, Americans were stunned when a Buddhist monk, Thích Quảng Đức, burned himself in Saigon to protest the US-installed Diệm government. Romero mimicked the famous pictures in *The Crazies*, when a priest burns himself to protest martial law. Before *Night*'s midnight runs waned, television viewers had seen napalm turn Vietnamese children into running fireballs.

The credits have been rolling since the men produced their meat hooks, over the film's most devastating moments. *Night* has eschewed comedy, romance, all relief, and now not even the end titles allow the audience any let-up, any chance to recover before the lights come up.



Malcolm Browne's photos of Thích Quảng Đức rapidly became iconic

El Topo encouraged midnight crowds to hunt for real-world connections

The Crazies (1973)

Abagnalo described hardened 42nd Street audiences leaving in shock: 'Some people laugh when the film ends, but not because it is funny or badly done. They laugh because they can't believe what they have seen. Some leave silently, looking as though they're about to vomit.' Like McClelland's final line, the superimposition of the credits feels appallingly blasé, as if the unjust killing of a black man is too commonplace to linger over, nothing that warrants a sentimental Hollywood fanfare. But by not editorialising or coercing us into caring, the sequence gains tremendously in emotional power: we recoil from the deadness on the posse's faces, the neutrality of the music and credits. The credits end and for a moment we cut back to action, long enough to watch flame engulf Ben's body. Our hero is not only dead but obliterated. There will be no record of his struggle, no burial or memorial, no hope of justice.

'The world didn't change'

Everyone dies: it's a fundamental truth, but no horror film had ended this way before. *Night* faces the nightmare realisation against which Romero's generation struggled in those duck-and-cover drills: they could follow all the rules, do everything their television said, but they would still die, doomed by the madness of leaders, scientists and generals. And furthermore, they'd *all* die, collectively and unceremoniously: mingled in unrecognisable heaps of flesh and ash. That final bonfire makes us angry at the rednecks, but leaves us too with the sharper sting of meaninglessness, the absurdity of a world that may go up in smoke '*without any warning!*'

But for the Image Ten, *Night*'s ending was also more immediately relevant. They refused to change it even when it meant sacrificing a live distribution prospect, AIP. 'Given the anger of the times,' says Romero, 'if we'd ended it any other way, it would have been hard for us to hold our heads up'[126]: 'I think we really were pissed off that the '60s didn't work, that the world didn't change.'[127] If that's how things looked while they shot in 1967, the Summer of Love, they became far bleaker before *Night* reopened at the Waverly.

Night headed a long run of despairing late 1960s and early 1970s film endings, in which protagonists die and ideals fail not in a pitched battle or blaze of glory, but after the fact, anti-climactically. As Captain America tells Billy in *Easy Rider*, some while before passing hillbillies shoot them for a moment's fun: 'We blew it.'

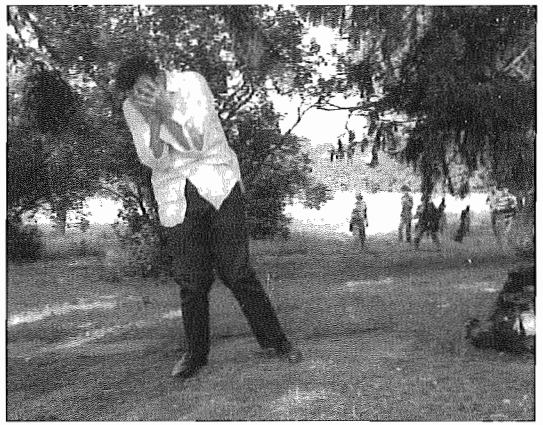
How *does Night* end, anyway? Romero now insists we know that those Search and Destroy teams won't succeed: 'There's this new society coming.' Well, maybe: the last news broadcast announces that radiation levels are still rising. But it's easier to take that line three sequels on, and there's no evidence that contemporary viewers responded that way. By the end, the ghouls seem powerless, as if dawn itself has dispelled the night's magic. The bacchanal is over. The emotional wrench of that 'everyone dies' ending includes the ghouls, because all of *Night*'s frail characters have souls, even them; and we see ourselves in all of them. Romero's comments probably say more about how he *wishes Night* had ended. And that's the bigger question here: how we *want* it to end. Would it feel less bleak if we *knew* that McClelland's men had overcome the threat, that 'the world didn't change'?

Night's influence is a book in itself; indeed, Kim Newman claimed that *Nightmare Movies*, his overview of modern horror, was 'entirely' about Romero's influence.[128] But perhaps this, above all, is what makes it a turning point. Horror stages confrontations between normality and the monstrous, and most pre-*Night* films are ultimately, at least ostensibly, about overcoming death and monstrosity. From *Night* on, horror more often asserts that nothing will save us, that death and failure are insuperable. More crucially, *Night*'s ending makes inescapably clear that we do not want to see normality restored: normality itself is monstrous; a brutal, painful repression. Romero says that for him 'the most important thing' about horror and sci-fi is 'to not restore order': to leave the world as we know it in bloody shreds. 'Which is really why we are doing this in the first place. We don't want things the way they are or we wouldn't be trying to shock you into an alternative place.'[129]

Night's pleasures come not from restoring normality, but from dismembering it. Perhaps it inverted the horror genre; more likely (as Romero seems to imply) it uncovered what much of it was always, more covertly, about. The only pre-*Night* horror film to enjoy anything approaching its midnight longevity was *Freaks*, reinterpreted in the 1960s as a counterculture film. The self-styled 'freaks' in the audience cheered on the real ones as they vengefully mutilated a bigoted, materialistic 'normal' woman into one of their own: monstrosity, difference won. *Night* was initially sometimes double-billed with *Freaks*, but ended up supplanting it, as at New York's Bijou in 1971: perhaps because its bleaker conclusion rang truer as the years passed.

Night's generic redefinition is inextricably bound up with its historical moment. If the 1960s were a Hammer film, the counterculture idealists would be the monsters: abruptly transformed and possessed, the causers of chaos and enemies of normality. By 1971, *Night*'s ending must have felt agonisingly prophetic. A few stragglers held out, feeble as those last ghouls, but normality had won. It felt more openly oppressive than ever, more repellent for having glimpsed 'an alternative place'. A resurrected 1950s Commie-basher was in the White House: a politician who had announced his retirement in 1962, on the eve of what we really call 'the sixties'. The government's riflemen had rolled in like McClelland's posse to crush dissent. Youth culture's soul had departed leaving only its clothes and records behind, and a new decade dawned, more nakedly materialistic and self-involved even than the 1950s, dissipating the 1960s' idealism into a cynicism and sense of powerlessness that have yet to lift.

Night would be a masterpiece even if we could somehow watch it in a vacuum, as 'just' a horror film. Despite decades of imitations, it remains as suspenseful, haunting and disturbingly credible as ever. Its shocks and ambiguities hit us too deeply to ever be quite assimilated. But a cult, a weekly midnight mass, must also touch its audience's sense of group identity. Perhaps *Night* reassured regular



viewers that even if the world of their naive childhood years had won, they didn't have to buy into its illusions again. They could gather while the victors slept to express their disbelief, their separateness. *Night* became a ritual, an anti-credo, which confronted cosy childhood myths with disillusionment and destructive fury. The end credits music is 1950s sci-fi at its dreamiest, but walky-talkies and helicopter noise gradually drown it. They're the sounds of the lynch mob, of Vietnam: the brutal realities of enforcing normality. *Night*, finally, turns those Cold War monster flicks upside down: everything that should save us hurts us; every cherished institution is discredited and bloodied; and normality itself is unveiled as the greatest horror of all. Sometimes only the truth is powerful enough to distract us. And if we don't like how this night ends, we'll just go back to the beginning, to relive the chaos.

We're back at the Waverly, any weekend in 1972. The clock strikes twelve, the curtains part …

Notes

1 In the song 'Frank Mills'.
2 J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Da Capo, 1991); Glenn O'Brien, 'Midnight Mass at the Elgin', *The Village Voice*, 25 March 1971; Pauline Kael, 'El Poto-Head Comics', *New Yorker*, 20 November 1971; Stuart Samuels, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Macmillan, 1983); El *Topo file*, BFI library.
3 Misprinted as 'Barbra' in the credits; the screenplay uses 'Barbara'.
4 Tarantino quote from James Marriott, *Horror Films* (London: Virgin, 2004), p. 110. Production information from John Russo, *The Complete Night of the Living Dead Filmbook* (New York: Harmony Books, 1985) and Paul Gagne, *The Zombies that Ate Pittsburgh* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1987).
5 For more on Continental and *Night*: Kevin Heffernan, *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953–1968* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 202–19.
6 *New York Times*, 5 December 1968; *Daily Variety*, 15 October 1968; *Chicago Sun-Times*, 6 January 1969, reprinted *Reader's Digest*, June 1969; *Film and Television Daily*, 21 October 1968.
7 Author's conversation with Elliott Stein, September 2007.
8 *inter/VIEW* vol. 1 no. 4 (undated, 1969); *The Village Voice*, 25 December 1969; on Romero at MOMA, Ronald Borst in Jan Van Genechten (ed.), *Fandom's Film Gallery 2: Night of the Living Dead* (Belgium: self-published, 1976), pp. 81–90.
9 Fran Lebowitz, Pat Hackett and Ronnie Cutrone, 'George Romero from night of the living dead to the crazies', *Andy Warhol's Interview* no. 31 (April 1973), pp. 30–1, 45.
10 Romero interviewed by Sean Axmaker, October 2005, <www.greencine.com/article?action=view&articleID=246>; *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 219 (April 1970); *New York Daily News*, 7 May 1971; author's correspondence with Rex Reed, 2006.
11 Interviewed in Adam Simon's superb documentary *The American Nightmare* (2000).
12 Romero, Russo, Hardman, Eastman, commentary track, *Night of the Living Dead* Millennium Edition DVD (Elite Entertainment, undated).
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15 Gagne, *The Zombies that Ate Pittsburgh*, p. 38.
16 Gary Anthony Surmacz, 'Anatomy of a Horror Film' (a round-table with Russo, Hardman and Streiner), *Cinefantastique* vol. 4 no. 1 (Spring 1975), pp. 14–27: p. 16.
17 Lebowitz *et al.*, 'George Romero', p. 30.
18 Julian Smith, *Looking Away: Hollywood and Vietnam* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), pp. 126–35: p. 129.
19 Alex Block, 'Filming "Night of the Living Dead"' (Romero interview), *Filmmakers Newsletter* vol. 5 no. 3 (January 1972), pp. 19–24: p. 20.
20 greencine.com interview.

21 Surmacz, 'Anatomy of a Horror Film', p. 16; Gagne, *The Zombies that Ate Pittsburgh*, p. 38.
22 Gina McIntyre, 'Chill Factor', *Hollywood Reporter*, 31 October 2000, pp. 16–18: p. 16.
23 Gagne, *The Zombies that Ate Pittsburgh*, pp. 15–16.
24 Thanks to Kim Newman for this comparison.
25 Russo, *Complete Night of the Living Dead Filmbook*, pp. 23, 29–30, 41.
26 Reprinted in Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines, *"Takin' it to the Streets": A Sixties Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 51–61: pp. 51–2.
27 From his liner notes for the *Night* soundtrack album (Varèse Sarabande Records).
28 Russo, *Complete Night of the Living Dead Filmbook*, p. 53.
29 Gagne, *The Zombies that Ate Pittsburgh*, p. 9.
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32 See, e.g., Michael Pye in *The Scotsman*, 1 September 1970; *inter/VIEW* vol.1 no. 4 (1969), p. 22.
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47 See shooting script (included on Elite DVD); Jason Paul Collum, *Assault of the Killer B's* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), p. 4.
48 Elite DVD liner notes.
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76 Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, pp. 102–4.
77 Gagne, *The Zombies that Ate Pittsburgh*, p. 11.
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101 Scorsese's commentary track, *Tales of Hoffmann* DVD.
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103 Lebowitz *et al.*, 'George Romero', p. 31.
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