

CONSIDERING BLACKNESS IN GEORGE A. ROMERO'S NIGHT OF THE LIVING
DEAD: AN HISTORICAL EXPLORATION

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in the partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

In

The Department of English

by
Jennifer Whitney Dotson
B.A., Middle Tennessee State University, 2004
August 2006

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Chapter	
1 Introduction.....	1
2 An Overview of the Twentieth Century Zombie in the West.....	12
3 <u>Night of the Living Dead</u>	39
4 Conclusion.....	66
Bibliography.....	69
Filmography.....	72
Vita.....	76

Abstract

When George A. Romero's Night of the Living Dead was released in 1968, the independent black and white zombie film stunned American moviegoers. Having assaulted the audience with a new level of violence-laden gore, Night of the Living Dead received much attention from both popular and critical audiences, with the former rushing to theaters to see the film over and over and the latter almost universally panning the film for its poor taste and gratuitous violence. Since its release, however, Night of the Living Dead has become one of the most written about horror films in American history, with critics praising the film for its ingenuity and reviving the zombie genre and also for its treatment of American sociopolitical issues, including the most critically noted issue—the Vietnam War. Although I agree with those critics who assert that controversy over Vietnam War *is* raised in Night of the Living Dead (as well as are many other sociopolitical issues which are well worth exploring), the Vietnam imagery of the film has been almost exclusively analyzed at the expense of exploring what I believe is another important aspect of Night of the Living Dead— its re-inscription of blackness in the zombie film. By exploring the lineage between blackness and the zombie film, I hope to show that Night of the Living Dead is an important film to the study of blackness on the American screen not only because a black man plays the hero of the film, which was revolutionary in and of itself, but also because the film repositioned the manner in which blackness would be depicted in the American zombie film, moving away from the portrayal of black characters and black culture as exotically dangerous towards a more positive representation.

Introduction

When George A. Romero's Night of The Living Dead was released on October 2nd 1968 in Pittsburgh, critics were stunned, horrified, and disgusted by what they saw on the screen. Beyond a few obscure films then being filmed by exploitation filmmaker Herschel Gordon Lewis, Americans had never seen such violent laden gore on screen.¹ Morally outraged by the film's depiction of cannibalistic zombies who gorge on human body parts as if they were kabobs, incensed critics responded to Night of the Living Dead immediately, arguing the film was unfit for viewing. Two weeks after the film's debut, *Variety* published a review of Night that encompassed the concerns of many critics who spoke out against the film. The review calls the film an "unrelieved orgy of sadism," and encourages the Supreme Court to establish "clear-cut guidelines for the pornography of violence" or else the American public will continue to be exposed to filth such as Night of the Living Dead (6). Roger Ebert, concerned with the effect the film might have on children, wrote an article for *Reader's Digest* in June of 1969 in which he warned parents against allowing their children to see the film. After watching the film in a neighborhood theater, Ebert explained:

I don't think the younger kids really knew what hit them. They'd seen horror movies before, but this was something else. This was ghouls eating people—you could actually see what they were eating. [...] Worst of all, nobody got out alive—even the hero got killed. I felt real terror in the neighborhood theatre. I saw kids who had no sources they could draw on to protect themselves from the dread and fear they felt. (128)

Ebert's provocative review in the conservative *Reader's Digest* practically dared teenagers to see Night of the Living Dead and try to come out of the theater undisturbed.

¹ Mark Spainhower argues, "Herschell Gordon Lewis first charted the perimeters of the newborn territory of gore," while Romero's films "defined their aesthetic standards" (184).

Ebert's review, coupled with the scathing review in *Variety*, had young people venturing to neighborhood theaters in the thousands to go see the little film that had riled up the media.

Much to the surprise of everyone, including the film's producers, audiences were more than willing to be assaulted by the film's new level of gore and violence. While gore itself was nothing new to the screen in 1968, Romero's Night offered a level of gore coupled with gratuitous violence to which most Americans had not been exposed on the big screen. With no MPAA ratings system in place at the time, Romero was free to depict as much blood and guts as he wanted and in any twisted manner that amused him. Romero acknowledges that the gore in the film is gratuitous at times, saying, "I just wanted to make it as gross as I could" (qtd. in Vieira 242). Romero did his best to achieve the gory effects he desired on a limited budget, using Bosco chocolate syrup as fake blood and real animal guts as human innards. In the end, with all the scrimping and saving, the film was made for a mere \$114, 000. Although only initially given a limited release, Night became an overnight success with audiences and helped spark a new trend called "midnight movies"—the late night screening of mostly low-budget independent horror films. While it seemed audiences could not get enough of Night of the Living Dead, critics continued to dismiss the film, including Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* who called Night, "a grainy little movie made by some people in Pittsburgh" (qtd. in Gagne 35).

Night of the Living Dead did not really begin to receive any critical credit in the United States until the film became popular with European critics upon its release there. Paul M. Gagne explains, "Whereas American critics have traditionally passed off

horror films as an embarrassment to the industry, British and French critics have gone to the opposite extreme, analyzing horror films for their social and cultural significance” (36). Once Night was released in Europe, the film was hailed in both British and French newspapers and ultimately went on to become one of the biggest moneymaking films in Europe at the time. The British Film Institute’s highbrow publication *Sight and Sound* even put Night on its annual ten-best films list (McCarty 103). Following the film’s critical and popular success in Europe, American critics were eager to give Night a second look and were much more receptive to the film upon the re-viewing. Ultimately, most critics, including Roger Ebert who rescinded his earlier review of Night, concluded that the film was indeed something very special.

Since the 1970s, Night of the Living Dead has become one of the most written about horror films ever made.² Most horror film critics now regard Night of the Living Dead as *the* film that revived and renewed the zombie genre. Many critics, including Jamie Russell, Paul M. Gagne, and Tony Williams have written extensively on the film’s contribution to the horror genre, particularly highlighting Romero’s new strain of killer zombies and the explosive ending that changed the rules of the modern horror film. According to Jamie Russell, author of *Book of the Dead*, “It was a vision that finally gave the zombie film a credibility it had previously lacked” (70). The biggest critical debate surrounding the film, however, is whether or not the zombies signify returning Vietnam soldiers, a theory many critics have offered. Critics like Jamie Russell argue, “Vietnam is in every frame of Romero’s film” (69). Tony Williams also interprets Night as a film

² For comprehensive reviews of the film, see: *The BFI Companion to Horror; Ghouls Gimmicks, and Gold; The Zombies that Ate Pittsburgh;* and *The Cinema of George A. Romero: Knight of the Living Dead.*

about Vietnam and argues that the last image in the film, a live-action shot of mounds of zombie corpses being engulfed in flames recalls destroying human bodies with “the napalm then used in Vietnam” (30). Other critics like Dennis Fischer, however, insist that reading the zombies as figures of Vietnam is absurd and that the film is valuable for its generic qualities only (638).

Although I agree with those critics who assert issues surrounding the Vietnam War *are* raised in Night of the Living Dead (as well as are many other sociopolitical issues which are well worth exploring), the Vietnam imagery of the film has been almost exclusively analyzed at the expense of exploring what I believe is another important aspect of Night of the Living Dead— its re-inscription of blackness in the zombie film. Certainly many horror film scholars have noted that the character of Ben, the protagonist of Night, is played by a black man, an unusual casting choice for any film at that time, horror or otherwise.³ However, in general they have little to say about the casting move other than simply acknowledging it. The *BFI Companion to Horror*, which offers several pages of analysis of Romero’s undead films, includes only one note about the race of Jones’s character, calling him “the competent black man who gets everyone killed” (176). And while many critics commended Romero for the casting decision, Romero maintains that he simply cast the best man for the job. As Kim Newman argues, “Ben is black, which testifies less to the significance of the film than to its makers’ lack of prejudice in casting their leading man without regarding his race as important” (*Nightmare* 3). Romero has testified again and again that he indeed sees Ben’s blackness as inconsequential to the film. However, intentional statement or not, it is a huge oversight

³ Although African Americans did appear consistently in roles in American films during the 1960s, the role of leading man was virtually always reserved for a white actor.

to ignore the effects Romero's casting choice had on the entire film, and indeed, on the entire undead genre.

Through an historical analysis of the zombie as a figure of horror during the twentieth century, I show how the zombie has, since the beginning of its arrival in the West, been associated with blackness. During the height of the United States occupation of Haiti in the thirties, Hollywood appropriated the zombie as a monster that would confirm and validate American preconceptions about miscegenation and the practice of voodoo by Haitian blacks, whose culture was, in the minds of many Americans, dangerously primitive. Since 1932's White Zombie, black characters have consistently appeared in zombie films, generally playing bit roles as mindless zombie slaves or evil voodoo sorcerers.⁴ American zombie films until the 1960s would use blackness as a sign of exoticism, animalism, or to make a political comment (an invariably negative one) on the ability of blacks, particularly black Haitians, to govern and protect themselves. This pattern of subjection of black characters in American horror films is one that would continue until the 1960s. In the late 1940s, when it seemed the zombie film was on its way out, Hollywood tried to revive the genre by severing the zombie's ties to blackness altogether, which ultimately proved to be an unsuccessful endeavor as interest in zombie films waned towards the end of the 1950s. It was not until George A. Romero's Night of the Living Dead in 1968 that the zombie genre would be renewed. Although perhaps unintentionally, Romero rewrote the entire rules of the genre when he returned blackness to the zombie film. Instead of depicting black characters as mindless zombie slaves, traditional representatives of xenophobia and a supposed black threat in many previous

⁴ In fact, when black characters appeared as monsters at all during horror films in the 1930s and 1940s, they almost always played zombie slaves (Hutchings 110).

American zombie films, Romero re-cast the black character as the hero—a character never before seen in a zombie film. Exploring the lineage between black actors and the zombie film, reveals that Night of the Living Dead is an important film to the study of blackness on the American screen. Night's importance goes beyond a black man playing the hero of the film, which is revolutionary in and of itself and extends to the film's repositioning of blackness in the American zombie film, ultimately rewriting what blackness would mean in the zombie films that would follow Romero's 1968 masterpiece.

W.W. Jacobs's "The Monkey's Paw," written in 1902, offered readers one of the first fictional depictions of a zombie. Technically, however, Jacobs does not offer a depiction of a zombie but rather implies the horrors of coming face to face with one. In "The Monkey's Paw" a middle-aged couple, the Whites, are given the eponymous talisman by a family friend. The friend tells the Whites that the paw, which has been put under a spell by an old Indian fakir, has the power to grant each person who comes to possess it three wishes. The Whites take the paw, although they have been warned by their friend that the paw was created by the fakir to "show that fate ruled people's lives, and that those who interfered with it did so to their horror" (33). With hesitation, they decide to make a sensible first wish—two hundred pounds. That night, while Mr. White sits at the fireplace, he begins to see faces in the flames. The last face he sees is "so horrible and so simian that he gazed at it in amazement" (39). To the Whites' horror, the next day they receive the money after their son is killed in a machinery accident at work. The grief-stricken mother persuades her husband to use the second wish to bring their son back from the dead. After settling in for the night, assuming their wish was not granted,

the Whites hear three knocks on their door. Mrs. White knows her son has come home to her, but Mr. White pleads with her, begging, “For God’s sake don’t let it in” (52). Before Mrs. White can open the door, Mr. White grabs the monkey’s paw and makes his final wish. Mrs. White swings the door open frantically, but the final wish had been granted. The street is deserted.

“The Monkey’s Paw” is a fable that plays an age-old fear (or perhaps age-old hope) that the dead can return to life. Although logically we know death is inevitable, since the beginning of time, humans have been looking for ways to shed this mortal coil. As Leslie Halliwell notes in *The Dead that Walk*, “The body stops, and can be put to no further use. It must be consigned to the scrap heap, like a broken cup or clapped-out car. Yet the human mind is attuned to pleasant optimism, and a doubt still lingers. *Surely a human body is not just a thing*” (emphasis mine, 1). If the body is not just a thing, cannot it then be revived through technology or religion? And if so, what do we call a person who has been resurrected? Although Jacobs does not use the word zombie in his story, his monster is “a corpse reanimated through some form of magic or mad science that returns to ‘life’ without regaining any of its former personality” (Russell 8). While critics like Halliwell disagree with Russell’s definition and relegate the zombie to victims of voodoo or “black magic,”⁵ William Seabrook, noted for introducing the zombie to the Western world, also describes the zombie as “a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by [voodoo] sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life” (93). Although Jacob’s undead monster is revived not through voodoo, because the

⁵ According to Halliwell’s definition of a zombie, Frankenstein would not be considered a zombie because, although she refers to zombies in general as “Frankenstein monsters,” she defines zombies as monsters “created not by science [or technology] but by black magic” (242).

fakir's spell causes the Whites' son to return from the dead as a walking corpse, he is indeed a zombie.

Once a classic story, particularly during the forties and fifties when radio productions made the creepy take especially popular, "The Monkey's Paw" has since fallen out of favor with audiences, both popular and academic. One contributing factor to the decline in interest may be that the story never filmed well because the monster remains hidden. Halliwell, however, argues that Jacob's zombie fable has fallen out of favor because it hits too close to home for readers who live in a world in which bodies are completely destroyed during war. As Halliwell points out, we cannot "apply the principle of resurrection to someone who has been blown up by terrorists or mutilated by atomic war" (7). Even Victor Frankenstein could not resurrect someone whose body had been vaporized by nuclear warfare since there would be no actual body left to zombify.

I'd suggest, however, that given our modern condition in which our bodies are increasingly at risk of being obliterated by war, the zombie fable is more applicable now than ever before. The zombie, more so than monsters such as vampires, wolf men, and mummies, taps into our primordial fears of the body being ravaged: the zombie isn't a pretty monster but rather a gory portrayal of what happens to the body as it decays.

According to *The BFI Companion to Horror*, "zombies, presented without even a whisper of eroticism, [are] far more than the vampire, the monster figure of the apocalypse" (Newman 351). Similarly, Jamie Russell argues that the zombie, which he believes is the ultimate living dead monster, "is a symbol of mankind's most primitive anxiety: the fear of death. Full of a morbid sense of the body's limitations and frailties, the zombie myth is closely bound to our troubled relationship with our own bodies" (8).

A zombie is literally a walking corpse, and a corpse is the ultimate reflection of death and perhaps the most troubling piece of waste we encounter in our lives. Jonathan Lake Crane argues in *Terror and Everyday Life* that, although a dead body “has nothing to do with what is really human,” once the body is no longer in animation, “it is the most tangible reminder that life has just slipped away” (31). Rather than merely symbolizing or signifying death, as Julia Kristeva argues in *Powers of Horror*, the corpse directly confronts us—“without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show* [us] what [we] permanently thrust aside in order to live” (3). Therefore, as Crane argues, in order for us to survive “the psychic horror” inflicted upon us by contact with the dead, we must “remove the corpse, pack it away so we are not confronted with it” (31). The zombie, however, refuses to be packed away or buried. Whether resurrected through voodoo, technology or other means, the zombie is an even more horrifying reminder of death, more so than any mere corpse because though it decays like a corpse, the body is animated, mimicking and mocking life itself. The zombie is at once both dead and alive, hence the appellation “the living dead.”

In any event, someone looking to exchange his or her mortality for everlasting life would not likely pursue zombification as an option. The zombie, decaying and slow moving, is not a romantic figure. Indeed, Halliwell argues that the zombie is a “striking if basically undramatic figure” (242), and when one hears the word zombie, images of bloody corpses with missing limbs and bad make-up are conjured thanks to poorly made zombie movies of the late seventies and eighties. Recent straight-to-video films like Pot Zombies (2005) in which radioactive marijuana turns teenagers into zombies with the munchies for human flesh and Biker Zombies (2001) in which zombies are portrayed

riding motorcycles and smoking cigarettes have also done their part to mar the zombie's reputation.⁶ Russell acknowledges the zombie's image problem: "There's simply no way of getting around the fact that the zombie, more than any other horror star, has an appalling track record" (8). Although there are countless examples of bad zombie movies, the problem is a deep seed one. The zombie is a modern monster whose lineage is not found in literature. Unlike other monsters, such as Dracula, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Frankenstein's monster, and the Wolf Man, the zombie is a twentieth century villain with no fictitious or folkloric history in the West to loan the zombie myth credence. Given the absence, Hollywood adopted the Haitian figure at the height of horror's popularity in America.

In the 1920s, horror dominated the theatre in both Hollywood and New York, a trend that began following the aftermath of the World War I. Plays like *The Bat* (1920), *The Monster* (1920), and *The Cat and the Canary* (1922) were produced in Hollywood and New York, with the pinnacle of the horror movement on stage being Horace Liverlight's *Dracula* (1927), which grossed nearly two million dollars. Following the successful run of these plays, moviemakers were eager to capitalize on the current horror trend, and movies such as The Phantom of the Opera (1925) and London After Midnight (1927) were terrifying audiences and making their producers rich. According to Phil Hardy, "This theatrical backdrop is of special significance to the Anglo-American tradition of horror. It announced the kind of sensationalism that film-makers would seek to duplicate, and then to further intensify with apparatus and techniques newly available

⁶ For other examples of exploitative straight-to-video zombie films see Zombie! Vs. Mardi Gras (1999), Zombie Night (2003), Zombie Xtreme (2004), and Zombie Planet (2005).

to them” (ix). It was in the midst of this rebirth of horror on the stage that William Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* was released in 1929. Exploring the history of the zombie in the West, beginning with Seabrook’s detailed account, I show how the West, and particularly filmmakers, appropriated the zombie as a figure used to negatively represent blackness. Such negative portrayals would continue onscreen until 1968 when Romero released Night of the Living Dead, the film that would re-vision the trope of blackness in the zombie film.

An Overview of the Twentieth Century Zombie in the West

The honor of formally introducing the West to the zombie belongs to journalist William Seabrook. In 1928, Seabrook ventured to Haiti where many zombie legends were being circulated. In 1929 Seabrook published *The Magic Island*, a study of Haitian voodoo based on his visit. Seabrook noted that while the zombie served as a powerful symbol of fear and misery for the Haitians to whom he spoke, the zombie was also an integral element in the practice of voodoo, the dominant religion of the island.

The root of Caribbean voodoo, or *voudoun*, can be linked to the moment European colonists transported the first slaves to the West Indies from Africa. Indeed, according to Halliwell, both the word *voodoo* and its practice “derive from Haiti, and throughout the twenties there were occasional references in travelers’ tales to voodoo ceremonies performed in that country by the light of the moon” (242). Through disease and violence, the European settlers wiped out the native Indian population. In order to keep the lucrative sugar cane industry running smoothly, the colonizers shipped thousands of West Africans to Haiti to replace the depleting Indian population, many of whom had been working on plantations. Because of this interference with the island’s Indian populations, “Haiti’s indigenous culture was irrevocably altered as the native Indians were systematically replaced by a population of around 70,000 whites and mulattoes who dominated a slave force of half a million Africans” (Russell 11).

Due to the close quarters on the island, African, Indian, and European cultures collided, and as a result, the slaves’ religious beliefs eventually emerged as a melding of African animism and Roman Catholicism—a practice that would come to be known to

the West as voodoo. By the time Hearn visited Haiti in 1928, the banishment of the practice of voodoo was in full effect:

On a number of occasions since the American occupation, when they have participated with the Marines in raiding and burning Voodoo temples, they have been somewhat embarrassed to find among the articles, consigned by their own hands to the flames, holy crucifixes, lithographs of the saints, and statuettes of the Blessed Virgin. (Seabrook 292).

The colonizers also made it against the law to manufacture talismans, bags, packets, and many other items used during voodoo ceremonies (Seabrook 294). In *The Magic Island*, Seabrook describes 409 of the criminal code, which states that all makers of voodoo paraphernalia “shall be punished by from three to six months’ imprisonment by the police court” (294). In addition, the islanders were forbidden to participate in “dances and other practices of whatsoever sort which are of a nature to foster the spirit of fetishism and superstition among the people,” yet Seabrook notes that actual application of the law was usually lax (295). Despite the efforts of the colonizers to outlaw and banish voodoo ceremonies and practices, the religious belief continued to spread and gain popularity throughout the island.

One of the most important concepts in the voodoo religion is the notion that the gods can possess the body during certain rituals. During ceremonies of worship, the voodoo practitioners use music, particularly drums, and dance, in order to woo worshippers into a trance. During the trance-like state a god may descend and take control of the body of one of the worshippers (Russell 11). However, as Russell notes, “In order for a person to be possessed this way, their essential soul has to be removed from the body” (11). According to voodoo, a person has two souls: the *gros-bon-ange*, which means “big good angel” and the *ti-bon-ange*, which is the little angel. The *gros-*

bon-ange is the person's life force, while the *ti-bon-ange* is the "essential soul" that must be cast from the body in order for the god to possess it. The god may then take over the body, and later, when the god leaves the body, the *ti-bon-ange* returns. However, casting the essential soul from the body can be dangerous if done outside a strict voodoo ceremony. For instance, a voodoo sorcerer with malicious intent could separate one's soul from the body outside a worship ceremony, and thus create a zombie.

According to one zombie legend, a voodoo sorcerer may turn someone into a zombie after the sorcerer, usually by using potions and magic, seemingly brings about the victim's death. After the victim appears to have died, the sorcerer captures the person's essential soul during a voodoo ceremony, which must occur on the eve of the burial (Russell 11). The body would then be brought back to life as a zombie, and the sorcerer could then control the zombie, perhaps sending it to work on a plantation on a part of the island where it would not be recognized. However, according to Seabrook, only an actual dead body can be made into a zombie, and people who create zombies do so by digging up freshly buried corpses and galvanizing them into movement. Then the zombie may be used as a servant or slave, or, as Seabrook notes, "occasionally for the commission of some crime, more often simply as a drudge around the habitation or farm, setting it dull heavy tasks, and beating it like a dumb beast if it slackens" (93). Whether created through the method described by Seabrook or Russell, the result is the same—sorcerers exploit zombies for their own personal gain. As Russell explains, for the Haitians whose ancestors "had been captured, shackled and shipped out of Africa to the far-off islands of the Caribbean, dominated by vicious slave masters and forced to work for nothing more than the bare minimum of food" (Russell 11), nothing could be more frightening than the

thought of being turned into a mindless zombie who would be sent to work as a slave on a sugar plantation.

While voodoo is linked to the Caribbean, the etymological origin of the word *zombie* is less clear. Linguists suspect it may come from any or all of the following: the French word *ombres*, which means shadows; the West Indian *jumbie* or ghost; the African Bonda *zumbi* and Kongo *nzambi*, meaning dead spirit. The word could have also derived from the word *zemis*, which was used by the Arawak Indians, Haiti's indigenous people (Russell 11). Seabrook speculated that the word came from the African *fongbé* dialect and is a generic term that encompasses many aspects of the religious life of the Fons, an ethnic group in Dahomey (288). While the linguistic root of *zombie* is not entirely clear, what is known, however, is when the word first appeared in an American publication. In 1889, journalist Lafcadio Hearn wrote an article published originally in *Harper's Magazine* entitled "The Country of the Comers-Back," or *Le pays des revenants*, the nickname for the island of Martinique. Although the term *zombie* was first recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1819, and was frequently heard mentioned by slaves in America's deep South in the latter part of the eighteenth century, it was Hearn's article that became the first widely circulated report of the existence of the living dead (9). Hearn, who had traveled to Martinique to study local customs and folklore, heard tales from the islanders about the living dead, and his article firmly entered the word into the American lexicon.

During Seabrook's time in Haiti, the locals recounted zombie lore and instances of zombie sightings, but one story stood out above all others—the story of Ti Joseph of Colombier, told to him by a man named Polynice. In the spring of 1918, there was an

especially large sugar cane crop in Haiti. The Haitian American Sugar Company (HASCO) offered bonuses to farmers willing to work extra to bring in the large crop. As Seabrook notes, “Soon heads of families and villages from the mountain and the plain came trailing their ragtag little armies, men, women, children, trooping to the registration bureau and thence into the fields” (95). According to the legend, one morning Ti Joseph arrived at work with “a band of ragged creatures who shuffled along behind him, staring dumbly, like people walking in a daze” (Seabrook 95). The other workers instantly recognized the ragged band as a group of zombies, but the HASCO bosses did not seem to care as long as everyone kept working. Ti Joseph and his wife Croyance kept the zombies isolated from the other workers for fear that someone might recognize one of the zombies as a family member. Russell notes, “Even at mealtimes the zombies were kept apart as Croyance fed them a special *bouillie* (stew) at mealtimes without seasoning since salt was the one thing that could free a zombie from the sorcerer’s control” (12).

Until February, during the Fête Dieu holiday season, Ti Joseph’s plan worked: “Each Saturday afternoon, Joseph went to collect the wages for them all, and what division he made was no concern of Hasco, so long as the work went forward” (Seabrook 96). However, Joseph, not wanting to miss out on the Fête Dieu festivities, left the zombies in the charge of Croyance, and he left for Port-au-Prince. Soon, though, Croyance grew bored of tending to the zombies, and she decided to take them into a nearby town to observe a parade. Once there, Croyance felt sorry for the zombies as the crowd feasted on bonbons, oranges, dried herring, biscuits, and cassava bread. Feeling guilty, Croyance bought the zombies some brown sugar candy, which she assumed had not been made with nuts. Much to her surprise, however, the candy contained pistachios,

and once the zombies awoke from their trance, they began marching silently back to their graves in the mountains of Morne-au-Diable. The angered family members of the zombies hired a group of assassins to kill Ti Joseph, who was beheaded and left on the side of the road.

After hearing the tale of Ti Joseph, Seabrook wanted to meet a zombie in the flesh, so Polynice arranged it for him. Seabrook recalls:

My first impression of the three supposed *zombies*, who continued dumbly at work, was that there was something about them unnatural and strange. They were plodding like brutes, like automatons. . . . The eyes were the worst. It was not my imagination. They were in truth like the eyes of a dead man, not blind, but staring, unfocused, unseeing. The whole face, for that matter, was bad enough. It was vacant, as if there was nothing behind it. (101)

After everything he had seen in Haiti, encountering what he believed to be a real zombie was the shock that made him doubt his overwhelmingly scientific logic. Exasperated by the sight of the zombies, Seabrook thought, “Great God, maybe this stuff is really true, and if it is true, it is rather awful, for it upsets everything,” everything being “the natural fixed laws and processes on which all modern human thought and actions are based” (101). Later, however, after the initial shock of seeing the zombies, Seabrook says he calmed down and came to realize that the zombies were “nothing but poor, ordinary demented human beings, idiots, forced to toil in the fields” (102). Later after continuing his research and consulting many doctors on the island, Seabrook theorized that the zombies were not really dead at all but had simply been induced into a trance-like state by some toxic substance. It was not until the 1980s that scientists actually studied zombiism and investigated Seabrook’s suspicions.

As Russell suggests, “Perhaps if the riddle of the living dead had been solved

sooner, the zombie would have never taken root in the imagination of the Western world” (14).⁷ But the myth of the zombie did indeed take root in the West, due in large part to the success of *The Magic Island*. Russell argues, “As the first documented meeting between a white man and a zombie, Seabrook’s description is an important starting point in any attempt to understand the West’s fascination with the living dead” (14). Luckily for Seabrook, *The Magic Island* was published at a time when America’s interest in Haiti was heightened due to US military intervention there. After the success of Seabrook’s best-selling travel book, a play called *Zombie*, based almost entirely on Seabrook’s writing, was produced in Hollywood where horror was currently ruling the stage. It would not be until 1932, however, that the zombie made its debut on the big screen. Although Seabrook had introduced many Americans, and indeed the West, to the zombie, his imaging of the living dead was somewhat opaque. He painted the zombie as neither benevolent nor malevolent but as eerily passive and rather lifeless. Having never seen a zombie, many Americans were no doubt left many wondering exactly what a zombie was, how one moved, and what it looked like. After leaving Haiti, Seabrook himself was not even sure if he believed in the existence of zombies. However problematic Seabrook’s description was, the image of the zombie and its position as a twentieth century monster would be solidified by a series of zombie films beginning with 1932’s White Zombie.

Following the immense popularity of *The Magic Island* and seeking to cash in on

⁷ Published in 1985, The Serpent and the Rainbow is a personal account of one of the first scientific studies of zombisim in Haiti. According to Harvard scientist Wade Davis, while in Haiti, he discovered the neuropharmacological properties of specific plant and animal substances that are used to create zombies. Davis’s ethnopharmacological investigation of zombisim was later adapted for screen, and in 1988 the eponymous film starring Bill Pullman as Wade Davis was released.

the horror trend that was currently ruling the East and West coasts, in 1932 Kenneth Webb began production of a play based on Seabrook's chapter on zombies "Dead Men Working."⁸ Webb, titling his play simply *Zombie*, hoped to ride the coattails of immensely influential and successful films like Frankenstein (1931) and Dracula (1931). Set in Haiti, *Zombie* revolves around two American plantation owners and their exploits with zombies. Unfortunately for Webb, *Zombie* was poorly received and only ran in New York for twenty shows. Although the play was largely a disaster for Webb, it is notable because it set the stage, quite literally, for the first full-on zombie feature film.

In 1931, brothers Victor and Edward Halperin produced and directed White Zombie, the first film to feature Seabrook's version of the living dead.⁹ Set in Haiti and using *The Magic Island* as its point of reference, Russell calls White Zombie "a cleverly packaged piece of sensationalism, sex and the living dead" (21). The casting of the villain, zombie master Murder Legendre, was tricky. As independent filmmakers, the Halperins did not have the clout or the backing of a large studio, which is why "the brothers decided to try and find a recognizable star to ensure some degree of box office return on their investment" (Russell 20). Luckily for the Halperin brothers, Bela Lugosi¹⁰ fresh off the set of the highly successful Dracula, accepted the part of Legendre. In order

⁸ Rather than buying the rights to "Dead Men Working," Webb realized "he could filch Seabrook's zombie chapter and dramatize it without paying a single cent since it was reputedly based on fact" (Russell 19).

⁹ The screenplay was written by Garnett Weston and based on his story "Salt Is Not For Slaves," which was influenced heavily by *The Magic Island* (Russell 20).

¹⁰ Lugosi, notorious for accepting virtually any role offered to him, accepted the part for a mere eight hundred dollars and was only on the set for eleven days (Russell 22).

to rouse public interest, before the film was released distributor United Artists announced that the film was fact-based and drew on research done by American scholars. United Artists also held a series of promotional events for the film, including public screenings, and “By the time the film opened in July 1932, the living dead had finally arrived as a twentieth century monster” (Russell 22-23). Indeed, the image and definition of the zombie as a twentieth century monster is largely founded upon White Zombie¹¹. The film, released three years after Seabrook raised more questions than answers in *The Magic Island*, gave moviegoers some of the answers they had been seeking regarding the Haitian zombie. Following White Zombie and until the 1950s, when America traded in horror for science fiction, Hollywood’s zombie films, following the lead of White Zombie, would depict blackness in very specific ways: to signal exoticism, to serve the *mise-en-scene*, and occasionally as comic relief.

For most of its viewers, White Zombie was their first introduction to the walking dead. By the time the film was released in 1932, the United States was finalizing its occupation of Haiti, and the public’s interest in the island was at its pinnacle. No doubt the film’s narrative of a young white woman being kidnapped by black Haitians appealed to an ethnocentric audience who wanted to believe the island, and the Caribbean in general, was ruled by wild primitives and needed to be rescued by the United States. As well, the film reveals the most overt coding of blackness in early American zombie films is the use of blackness to signal exoticism as a combination of mystery and danger, with

¹¹ The film is considered a cult classic by many horror film critics because of its surreal, hazy atmosphere, which Halliwell suspects had more to do with “slack editing, bad acting, and an insufficiency in plot” than with the style and technique of the Halperins (243).

the films depicting the clash between white and black cultures. Russell notes, “By ignoring the reality of Haiti’s former independence prior to the American occupation of 1915-1934, the film argues that the island’s culture is only a few steps removed from outright savagery” (24). If we assume Legendre symbolizes the power hungry Europeans who enslaved the Haitians, then Neil and Bruner, who bring order to the island through American strength and Christianity, are the film’s saviors. Unsurprisingly, the film was a huge hit with audiences, although it was not well received by critics, most of whom disliked it immensely.¹² Three years after White Zombie, George Terwilliger’s Ouanga (1935) became the second film to feature zombies, and it too depicted the Caribbean as savagely exotic. The film, set on Paradise Island, a fictional stand in for Haiti, depicts the Caribbean as a primitive locale ruled by witchery and madness. Russell argues, “Ouanga suggests that the black population’s belief that they can govern themselves is dangerously mistaken” (28). According to the film’s subtext, if order is to be restored on Paradise Island, it must be at the hands of white Americans.

Similar to White Zombie (1931) and Ouanga, Jacques Tourneur’s I Walked with a Zombie (1943) also revolved around a cultural clash between white America and black superstition. However, unlike other films depicting this clash, I Walked with a Zombie, set in the West Indies, makes the cultural conflict an axis for the narrative. Russell argues that the film, by toying with the notion of the zombie as a figure in a constant state of liminality always between life and death, turns the zombie into “a metaphor of the limits

¹² Russell notes, “It didn’t matter that the critics hated the film; audiences loved the dark and moody setting, Lugosi’s voodoo sorcerer and, of course, the zombies” (22). Indeed, the film did very well at the box office. Although the Halperins produced the film for a mere \$62,000, the film recouped many times its own cost by grossing over eight million dollars at the box office (Russell 21).

of (white, western) knowledge” (46). Indeed, while previous films used zombies as representations of the primitive Caribbean Otherness, the living dead in I Walked with a Zombie are frightening not because they represent a culture we should be suspicious and afraid of, but because their existence cannot be explained by Western logic. Russell argues the film suggests that if “First World science can’t explain Third World superstition then perhaps white Westerner’s belief in their [*sic*] superiority is simply self-delusion” (46). It seems to me, however, that rather than denying Western logic, the real message of White Zombie was that black Haitians, as devotees of voodoo, were a dangerously primitive culture that, without American intervention, was doomed.¹³ While critics have honed in on the zombie film’s depiction of Haiti, and the Caribbean in general, as dangerously exotic and incapable of stability without white intervention, one of the most obvious yet least critically analyzed generic codes present in the American zombie film is the assignment of black actors to two very specific roles.

In most American zombie films until the sixties, black actors played zombie extras who existed largely in the background.¹⁴ White Zombie’s Murder Legendre is a European plantation owner who, having discovered the secrets of voodoo, employs a

¹³ According to Russell, I Walked with a Zombie “single-handedly thrust the living dead into the canon of critically acclaimed cinema” (42). I Walked with a Zombie is a significant contribution to the zombie genre because “it returned to the voodoo-fixated anthropology of Seabrook’s work” (Russell 42). Before filming began, Lewton and his staff did extensive research on voodoo in hopes of giving the zombie a more serious treatment than had been seen in recent ventures such as the Karloff films The Walking Dead (1935) and The Man They Could Not Hang (1939) and films like The Ghost Breakers, which appropriated the zombie for comic uses (Russell 42).

¹⁴ According to Lindsay Patterson, between 1924-1927 black actors filled over seventeen thousand extra parts, with the peak year being 1928 during which ten thousand black extra parts were filled. No extra, besides the Chinese actor, was paid more than the African American (xiii).

horde of black and mulatto zombie slaves and a couple of white zombies as well. The Haitian zombies, played by black extras, though great in number, are not central characters in the storyline. There is no lead black zombie or group of black zombies who are prominently featured in the film. Rather, the black zombies exist mostly for scare tactics. The black zombies work at Legendre's sugar mill, while the white zombies, who include a pirate and a scholar, do not engage in physical labor.¹⁵

I Walked with a Zombie (1943) too is set in the West Indies and features a black zombie who, like the undead in White Zombie, looms in the background seemingly to scare the white Americans who encounter him.¹⁶ Set on the island of St. Sebastian in the West Indies, young Betsy, an American nurse, has gone to take care of Jessica, the sick wife of a plantation owner who has seemingly been hypnotized into a zombie-like trance by a voodoo sorcerer. In an attempt to save her patient, Betsy attempts to take Jessica to a voodoo ceremony at the island's *houmfort*—a voodoo church. After traveling through the cane fields, Jessica and Betsy encounter their first real zombie, Carrefour, played by African American actor Darby Jones, who is guarding the church. Although Carrefour is a menacing presence, in the end, he is not really dangerous and only appears briefly. Ultimately Carrefour acts mostly as a cipher throughout the film, doing the bidding of his white slave master, American Mrs. Rand, the real monster of the film.

Halliwell suspects the reason for subjection of black actors to the background in

¹⁵ At Legendre's sugar mill, his zombie workers are segregated much in the same manner as black slaves would have been during the French reign over Haiti—the black zombies toil away in the fields while the mulatto zombies supervise.

¹⁶ The film was described by producer Val Lewton as “Jane Eyre in the tropics” (qtd. in Halliwell 245).

zombie films is because directors realized Haitian zombies, unlike vampires, wolf men, or other monsters who actively kill and hunt human victims, are monsters by default and therefore rather boring figures. Halliwell argues, “[The zombie’s] actions are like those of a black mummy, but he doesn’t have behind him the thrill of Egyptian romance, nor is he obsessed by the urge to kill or the love of a departed one. He merely does what he is told.” (242). Others, like Russell, however, argue that although slow moving, clumsy, and rarely seen, “the zombies [of early American films] were memorable creations” (22). Russell even argues that the living dead in White Zombie somehow “managed to survive being upstaged by Lugosi’s hammy villain” (22). Still, it is hard to deny the Halperins’ black zombies are as little more than background characters lurking in the shadows. Rather than featuring living dead as the central characters, the Halperins simply appropriated black Haitian zombies to serve as part of the *mise-en-scene* in order to add a sense of doom and eeriness to the setting. This tactic of using blackness as part of the background terror in zombie films would be continued until the sixties.

When the black actor was not reduced to playing the exotic extra zombie slave, he played the dumb sidekick to a white hero. In films using this black/white formula, the jokes are often at the expense of the African American sidekick and are consistently race-based. Such a pairing was utilized in Paramount’s 1940 horror comedy The Ghost Breakers in which Willie Best, playing a valet, was paired with Bob Hope who played popular radio host Larry Lawrence. Willie Best, nicknamed Sleep ’n Eat’ had a successful career as an actor, appearing in some twenty-five pictures in the 1930s alone including Two in Revolt (1936), Murder on a Bridle Path (1936), and Super Sleuth (1937). Clearly Best had forged a successful career path for himself in Hollywood, but

the expense of self-deprecation and being on the receiving end of not only wisecracks but, more often than not, wisecracks based on race. Bogle insists Best is part of a group of “coon figures who picked up Fetchit’s¹⁷ mantle and by borrowing, stealing, or elaborating on his techniques were able to find employment at a time when he was on his way out” (71). Indeed, Best, whose tall, lanky physical appearance was similar to Fetchit’s, “specialized in dense, dim-witted characters who walked about half awake, half asleep” (Bogle 71). Perhaps Best, armed with the talent of playing characters who walk around in a mindless stupor, would have been better suited to play the black zombie of the film rather than one half of a black/white odd couple.

It is Noble Johnson,¹⁸ however, who plays the role of The Ghost Breakers’ black zombie. Although only on the screen for seconds, Johnson’s portrayal of the living dead offered audiences one of the only truly scary moments in the entire film. Overall, though, The Ghost Breakers is comically driven, and quite often the filmmakers target blackness to achieve their jokes. In one scene, there is an electrical power failure, and Best’s character, trembling in fear, is reprimanded by Hope, who comments to another

¹⁷ A popular actor, Fetchit became the first black millionaire, earning up to ten thousand dollars a week during his thirteen years on film (Murray 17-18).

¹⁸ Noble Johnson, a successful actor, founded the independent black film company Lincoln Picture Company. The company was one of the first black independent film companies ever founded in the United States. Johnson’s performance marks an important milestone in zombie cinema because the zombie actually looks dead, as opposed to zombies in the Halperins’ films, which although pale, looked otherwise normal. According to Russell, “In comparison [to earlier films], the zombie in The Ghost Breakers appears to have spent the last few decades decomposing in the ground” (33). As special effects and make-up techniques improved, filmmakers continued to depict zombies as more and more grotesque. The pinnacle of zombie gore is arguably Romero’s Dawn of the Dead, whose special effects make-up was done by gore master Tom Savini (1978).

character, “He always sees the darkest side of everything. He was born during an eclipse.” Later, when the power is still out, Hope tells Best, “You look like a blackout in a blackout. If this keeps up, I’m going to have to paint you white.”¹⁹ Like the extra black zombie, the black sidekick in the zombie film exists largely to play to white humor or fear. The black zombie is used to give white women a quick but harmless scare or be scapegoat for white men, as in I Walked with a Zombie (1943). Occasionally blackness in the zombie film would be used as a comic device. However, the reality is that most black actors cast in zombie films played roles as extras, and when playing the living dead, blacks would be separated from their white counterparts, not only by the roles they would play but also by the ways in which they would become zombified.

White Zombie (1932) established a distinction between white and black zombies that would continue in such films as The Walking Dead (1936) The Ghost Breakers (1940) and King of the Zombies (1941). In White Zombie, Haitian voodoo practices, which require the victim be dead before being zombified, are only used on black zombies. Whites, on the other hand, are zombified through other means, such as a poisoned drink, a tactic Legendre employs on his white victims in White Zombie. Regardless of the method used, whites never die before being zombified. According to Tony Williams, British zombie films employed this racial stratification as well. Williams notes, “The zombie in an episode of Dr. Terror’s House of Horrors (1964) is clearly black and dead while the humans controlled by alien invaders in Quatermass II (1957) are white” (13). Because whites never actually die before being zombified, they always

¹⁹ Bogle calls The Ghost Breakers a “typical Best film” in which Best’s character is “the butt of crude racial jokes” (72).

recover once the threat is removed. Indeed the white heroine in White Zombie remains unscathed at the end of the film after recovering from a zombie trance, while the black zombies, even when Legendre dies, remain in their undead conditions.

For example, Jessica, the white zombie in I Walked with a Zombie (1943), is clearly not dead and had never been presumed dead. The film, however, does not state explicitly whether Jessica is a victim of voodoo or if she is suffering from a rare form of fever. Since she never dies, there is hope for recovery. The zombie films that adopted these racial codes seemed to be suggesting that only a black body would ever be so defiled as to be turned into a walking corpse. While the black zombie would be depicted as a decaying and disgusting animal, the white zombie usually remained in bed looking pale but pristine in all white dressing gowns. This kind of message about the black body was not unusual in American films at the time.

Bride of Frankenstein (1935), James's Whale's sequel to his immensely popular Frankenstein (1931), offers one of the earliest depictions of the living dead who has been ascribed qualities associated with blackness. When Bride of Frankenstein was released racism was as much a problem on screen as off. More important for my analysis, this social frame explains why "Bride of Frankenstein's monster takes on new significance, as a creature marked not only by an undifferentiated 'otherness' but also specifically by behavioral and visual codes associated with Blackness" (Young par. 30). Although the monster is not visually black, his behavior is encoded with black stereotypes. The monster runs around the town like a feral animal, scaring white women and accidentally killing young white girls. Not only does the monster's behavior embody black male stereotypes but his physicality is based on racist stereotypes as well. The monster is large

and clad entirely in black and moves awkwardly, looking very much like Reddick's observed subhuman and feral black. The monster's face was also coded racially, and as make-up artist Jack Pierce explains, the face was designed "to give the monster a primitive, Neanderthal appearance," which he achieved by molding "the brow of the eyes in a pronounced ape-like ridge of bone" (Young par. 31). This kind of racial coding was not uncommon to the era. Another enormously popular film of the era, King Kong (1933), applied many of the same racist stereotypes to its monster to make it more animal-like and less like its white victims. Indeed Young argues that "delinquency, criminality, inferiority, subhumanity: these attributes fully converge in Bride of Frankenstein's monster" (par. 30). These characteristics, combined with the racially coded appearance make Frankenstein's monster the embodiment of the black male as feral animal stereotype that Reddick describes.

One of oldest stereotypes of black animalism—the black rapist—has been depicted on American screens since the first moving pictures were shown in theaters across the country.²⁰ However, by the 1930s, the Production Code restricted filmmakers from depicting rape on screen. Rather than depicting black actors as rapists, films in the thirties hid their black sexual predators inside monsters like Frankenstein and King Kong, the giant male gorilla that stalks the blonde, fragile Fay Wray. During one scene in Bride of Frankenstein, the monster enters the room of Elizabeth, the white heroine, on the eve of her wedding night and pins her in a corner from where she screams hysterically. The other people in the house break into her room and find her lying on the floor whimpering, and her dress is disheveled. As Young makes clear, "Although the monster's crime is

²⁰ The representation of black men as rapists had been present on screen since the beginning when Gus raped a white girl and was hung in The Birth of a Nation.

officially the penetration of the room, not the woman, his actions are framed precisely according to the stereotype of interracial rape” (par. 38). Indeed the scene closely mimics scenes from early films, like The Birth of a Nation, in which black men are depicted as rapists—the black male traps a white girl, she screams, the camera cuts away, and her family finds her moaning on the floor with clothes obviously disturbed. The depiction of a “black” zombie harassing a white woman is a scene that would play out again and again in films like White Zombie (1932) and I Walked with a Zombie (1943). Although neither Bride nor other zombie films of the period depicted a black zombie raping a white woman, the images were close enough.²¹ As Young observes, “By the 1930s, the myth of the Black rapist so permeated Hollywood film that the explicit representation of rape [...] was not required in order for its ideological threat to be registered (7). Through cloaked by science fiction, audiences would have no trouble interpreting the new representations of the black male rapist.

Perhaps the virility with which the black male rapist stereotype persisted was due in large part to the deep seeded and widespread white fear of miscegenation. For example, Quanga stars Fredi Washington as Klili, a avaricious mulatta plantation owner out for revenge after her white American neighbor, Adam, refuses her advances because of his love for New York socialite, Eve. The film makes clear that Klili’s lust for Adam, a white man, is inappropriate. In one scene, after being rebuffed by Adam, Klili begins to scream at Adam in a rage, saying, “Don’t draw away from me as though I were a black wench in your fields,” only to have him tell her, “The barrier of blood that’s between us

²¹ After the many protests from groups such as the NAACP over The Birth of a Nation, Hollywood could not get away with depictions of black characters as straight up villains and therefore cloaked them in horror and science fiction films like Frankenstein and King Kong (Bogle 13-14).

can't be overcome." After sending Eve the eponymous voodoo charm that puts her into a coma, Klili sends a gang of black zombies to kidnap her so that she may be sacrificed to the voodoo gods. Klili is stopped, however, before the sacrifice can ensue by her black servant LaStrange, played by white actor Sheldon Leonard, who tries to convince her she is confused by her mixed blood lines. LaStrange tries to explain to Klili that she is wrong for loving a white man, saying, "Your white skin doesn't change what's inside you! You're black! You belong to us." Considering America's involvement in Haiti at the time of the film's release, it is clear that the film addresses many of the concerns Americans had about Haiti, including white fear of the licentious black female and miscegenation, whether it be due to consensual sex or rape.

Frankenstein and the other sexually menacing black zombies were merely stand-ins for a common cultural image, one that dated back to the end of the Civil War when thousands of black men were fraudulently charged with rape and, as a result, were victims of lynching. Bride of Frankenstein, as well as its prequel, deals with the racial issue of lynching, a natural progression from the rapist imagery. In both films, Frankenstein's monster is depicted as a victim who is repeatedly on the run from a raging crowd of townspeople wishing to murder him. While the first film ends with the monster fleeing from a mob with ravenous dogs and blazing torches, Bride takes the lynching image even further with a scene in which a violent gang of men hangs the monster in a tree. Here, the film's imagery is "so shockingly reminiscent" of lynching that the film "radically rewrites boundaries between the 'fantasy' of horror film and the 'realism' of other cinematic genres" (Young par. 32). Perhaps because Bride of Frankenstein carries with it specific horror conventions, unlike films in which a 'realistic' setting would limit

content, the film could depict a more visually stunning and terrifying lynching scene than could a film trying to represent reality. The representation of the black male being hung and burned for his sexual lust of a white woman, though shrouded in science fiction, was no doubt subconsciously (if not consciously) satisfying for white audience members who still held on to the antiquated stereotypes.²²

Despite the financial success of American zombie films such as White Zombie²³, The Ghost Breakers (1940), and I Walked with a Zombie (1943), most film companies were not eager to produce zombie films. According to Russell, “Most of the Hollywood establishment regarded the zombie as little more than a ragged upstart, a one-hit wonder that was vaguely downmarket” (27). Lacking the literary lineage of Dracula or Frankenstein’s monster, screenwriters were not sure what to do with the zombie and took liberties with its Caribbean heritage, to the point of cutting it out entirely. For example, in zombie-themed The Walking Dead (1936) Boris Karloff plays a man who is executed after being wrongly accused of a crime. Karloff comes back from the dead as a zombie bent on revenge against the men who framed him. Karloff also starred in two other zombie films—The Ghoul (1933) and Man They Could Not Hang (1939)—both of which stripped the zombie of its Caribbean heritage. Unlike White Zombie, which addresses racial tensions, the Karloff films took the zombie and turned it into just another monster with no cultural legacy. This process of severing ties between the zombie and

²² Over thirty years later, Romero would also depict the burning of a black male body, only rather than depicting the destruction of the *monster*, Romero’s *hero* is burned by a posse of rednecks. Although Romero denies any racial significance to the scene, the depiction was inarguably very similar to a real-life lynching.

²³ In 1936, the Halperin Brothers produced an unofficial sequel to White Zombie called The Revolt of the Zombies, which is set in Cambodia, which, like Haiti, had been affected by French colonialism. Unfortunately, the film was not a box office success.

Haiti is similar to the process of forced assimilation millions of African slaves experienced in the West once they had been forced from their respective homelands. Hollywood producers, however, were not concerned with maintaining any cultural integrity in their zombie films. Like the European slave drivers, they simply wanted to make money and appropriated the black Haitian folk figure in a quest to do so. However, by the end of the forties, the zombie genre, and indeed the horror genre in general was quickly losing the popularity battle against a new foe—the science fiction film.

In the fifties, science fiction had surpassed horror in popularity in Hollywood, and Gothic monsters such as vampires, werewolves, and mummies were traded in for giant insects, killer vegetables, and alien invaders. After the influx of poorly constructed zombie-themed films in the 1950s failed at the box office, most Hollywood producers abandoned the zombie altogether. When it seemed the living dead were indeed a dying breed in Hollywood, the zombie film was given a new life abroad. As a result of Hollywood's cold shoulder, the zombie was relocated and began to flourish in other countries, particularly in Great Britain and Mexico. British films like Doctor Blood's Coffin (1960) and The Earth Dies Screaming (1964), although low budget, helped the zombie genre gain popularity in Great Britain during a horror revival there in the 1960s. Hammer Studios, the leading producer of horror films in Great Britain, released a zombie film in 1966 called The Plague of the Zombies. Although the film is perhaps not well known, having been overshadowed by more successful Hammer endeavors, it is notable for giving the zombie an international stage.

Plague of the Zombies is set in nineteenth century Cornwall, where an English squire is controlling a large group of zombie slaves who work in his mine. The film,

originally titled The Zombie, was first announced in 1963. In the original treatment, the film opens in Haiti over a card game where a young Englishman has been caught cheating. Trying to escape, the man runs into the jungle where he accidentally happens upon a voodoo ceremony in progress and discovers the secret of turning someone into a zombie. The young man returns to Cornwall, where he learns he has inherited his father's estate. He fires his father's staff and replaces them with Haitians. Not long after the Haitians begin working at the estate, the village begins to be ravished by a mysterious plague, which the locals argue is being spread by the Haitian servants—a plot that, like many American zombie films of the 1930s and late 1940s, was full of racial implications. In actuality, it is the squire and his servants who are murdering the villagers and using their knowledge of voodoo in order to bring the victims back from the dead as zombie slaves.

The Zombie suffered from several pre-production problems and was ultimately delayed as Hammer concentrated on other film developments. In 1965, however, screenwriter Peter Bryan and director John Gilling began work on the film once more. Bryan revamped the screenplay and made several revisions to the original script. During the rewriting of the script, the racial implications surrounding voodoo and black Haitians, an aspect nearly always present in the American zombie films of the thirties and forties, was removed in favor of commenting on white class relations, specifically between the working class and aristocrats. In the final version of the film, renamed The Plague of the Zombies, the Haitian setting has been completely removed. The plot hinges on the squire's abuse of his position of power, which ultimately leads to the detriment of the entire village. Although the basic premise of the newer version is the same and the

element of voodoo is still present, the conflict in the film is no longer racial but rather a conflict of class.

In The Plague of the Zombies, and other British zombie films of the period, much like the American zombie films of the fifties, the ties between the zombie and the Caribbean were completely severed. The Plague of the Zombies is set entirely in the British countryside, a change in location that would be typical of British zombie films during this period. By using a local setting, the horror was transferred onto working class whites. Rather than projecting horror onto black Haitians, as the early American zombie films did, The Plague of the Zombies and other British films of the sixties turned the locals into the monsters, a shift that would be important to the later redevelopment of the entire genre by Romero. Halliwell argues that the film, which she calls “a very good, and very frightening piece of work,” may well have been an influence for the zombie revival of the late 1970s, the decade during which “the lunacy grew even wilder” and the craze for zombie films seemed to reach its peak” (248). However, while The Plague of the Zombies may have been a starting point for renewing the genre, not until Night of the Living Dead did the current zombie film explosion really begin.

While the British added their own spin to the zombie film, Mexico also embraced the genre and produced several films in the early sixties, beginning with The Curse of the Doll People²⁴ in 1960. Directed by Benito Alazraki, the film returns the zombie to Haiti, and the plot revolves around a voodoo priest who puts a hex on some unfortunate

²⁴ It is interesting to note that The Curse of the Doll People offers one of the first depictions of a zombie with any real power—in this case the power to control dolls who will murder at his command. In the early American films and even British zombie films of the sixties, zombies were still completely subordinate and had no free will of their own, a stark contrast to Romero’s zombies, whose sole intent is to attack and eat humans.

Mexican tourists who accidentally witness a secret voodoo ceremony. The doll people of the title are murderous animated dolls controlled by one of the priest's zombie slaves. Following The Curse of the Doll People, Alazraki produced a series of zombie films featuring masked wrestler and popular film star El Santo, who battles armies of the walking dead in films like Invasion of the Zombies (1961), Santo and Blue Demon Against the Monsters (1961), and Santo and Blue Demon in the Land of the Dead (1968).

Other Mexican filmmakers, eager to cash in on a booming trend, followed Santo's lead, producing several zombie films towards the end of the decade. Dr. Satan vs. Black Magic (1967), which Russell calls "by far the best of the bunch," features a magician named Dr. Satan who "proves he's a real swinger by hanging out with zombie girls dressed in miniskirts and boob-enhancing sweaters" (60). 1968's Isle of the Snake People, set on a South Pacific Island, starred an aging Boris Karloff, who "hoped to create zombies but all he really produced were snores" (Russell 60). According to Russell, "Given the dubious quality of these later Mexican entries, it's clear that the Santo series was probably the country's biggest contribution to living dead cinema" (60). However, the Mexican zombie films of the sixties, including the Santo series, are not politically minded, and unlike the early American undead films, they are seemingly devoid of any racial subtexts, instead relying on campy horror effects and humor to entertain the audience.

Having been shunned in the United States, the zombie film seemed to flourish in other countries such as Mexico and Great Britain. According to Russell, "In America, the zombie had become a poor relation, ignored by the mainstream and trampled over by the exploitation circuit" (64). Indeed, American zombie films spent most of the 1960s trying

to reclaim their position in the horror film industry. However, because the zombie had been dislocated from its Caribbean heritage in American films during the fifties and replaced by atomic monsters, the racial dynamic of the genre had seemingly been abandoned completely. Ultimately, American zombie films in the early part of the sixties were unimpressive ventures, and according to Russell “the majority of American zombie films during [the sixties] were marginal genre entries that had little to offer anyone except perhaps the most undiscerning horror fans” (64). Although the zombie had been a recurring monster on the American screen since 1928’s White Zombie, it seemed that many filmmakers had little regard for the zombie mythology. Films like The Horror of Party Beach (1963) and Ed Wood’s Orgy of the Dead (1965), which feature atomic sea monster zombies and stripteasing female zombies, made a mockery of the living dead. Rather than seriously scary, by the 1960s, the zombie was mostly a joke.²⁵ With campy exploitation pictures like this, it seemed that American filmmakers wanted to turn the zombie into something a comic figure. In The Astro-Zombies (1967) a mad scientist, seeking to create Frankenstein-esque monsters, ends up with a monster that is more funny than scary. Russell notes:

Rather than the superhuman all-purpose man-machine expected, the fruit of his labour turns out to be a solar-powered zombie with an electrically-driven synthetic heart, a stainless steel mesh stomach, a plastic pancreas, and the brain of a psychopath (since that was the only one available at the time!). (65)

With weak offerings like The Astro-Zombies, the American zombie film appeared to be on the verge of extinction. However, an independent filmmaker named George A.

²⁵ Take Teenage Zombies (1959), for example, in which some teenagers who have gone water skiing are taken capture on a deserted island by an ape-like creature who delivers them to a mad doctor. The doctor has created a nerve gas that turns humans into zombies who she uses as her slaves in her attempts to conquer the world.

Romero was about to give moviegoers a zombie film unlike any they had ever seen, a politically charged film that would ultimately revive and reinvent the genre and ensure that, for good or bad, the zombie would continue living on the American screen.

As the world entered the atomic age following World War II, the American horror film gave way to films with modern monsters born out of technology, and the monsters of the classic horror period in Hollywood, such as vampires, werewolves, and ghosts fell out of favor. According to Phil Hardy in The Aurum Film Encyclopedia, “By the end of the forties, science fiction replaced horror as fears of Armageddon supplanted the far less palpable fears the horror film traded in” (x). In the fifties, science-fiction films provided audiences with monsters like giant ants, alien invaders, and dinosaurs, monsters that echoed their fears of nuclear war and extra-terrestrial invasion. The shift from gothic monsters to more modern ones nearly ended the career of the zombie as a Hollywood movie monster. According to many horror film critics, including Russell, the zombie films of the late forties and fifties, including Scared Stiff (1945), Voodoo Island (1957), and Plan 9 from Outer Space (1959), were the worst films to feature the living dead. In the twenty years after the release of I Walked with a Zombie, zombies, particularly zombies of the Haitian variety, merely served as background ghouls. Clearly, Hollywood film producers were having trouble deciding what to do with the zombie. Indeed, Halliwell notes that “native zombies figured only in the cheapest of potboilers such as Valley of the Zombies [1946] and The Zombies of Mora Tau [1957], neither of which has lingered in the memory of film buffs” (248). These films, by taking the zombie out of its native Caribbean location and placing it in an atomic American setting, signaled in the genre that moved the focus away from issues such as voodoo, race, and colonization and

towards issues of brainwashing, nuclear disaster, and invasion. Following the failed zombie films of the fifties, it seemed the zombie was destined to be relegated to the sidelines for many years. However, the fifties marked a transitional period for the walking dead. After the zombie had been stripped of its Caribbean lineage and transplanted into a more modern location during this decade of transition, the zombie films of the fifties forged a path for George A. Romero's masterwork Night of the Living Dead.

Night of the Living Dead

Born in 1940 to parents who had immigrated to the United States from Spain, George A. Romero grew up in the Bronx, the setting for his first ever 8mm film—The Man from the Meteor. A huge fan of E.C. horror comics, fourteen-year-old Romero was arrested during his directorial debut for throwing a flaming dummy from the top of a rooftop, and since that day, Romero says he knew he wanted to be in the movie business (Gagne 1). In 1957, Romero enrolled at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, now known as Carnegie-Mellon University, where he studied commercial art for five years before he dropped out of school without receiving a degree. In 1963, Romero, along with a group of his college friends, formed Latent Image, a production company located in the south side of Pittsburgh (Gagne 21). Between 1965 and 1967, Latent Image produced several industrial films and commercials, although their ultimate goal was to produce a feature film. The idea of making a horror film emerged from a discussion between the Latent Image owners during lunch (Gagne 21). Paul Gagne, who has interviewed Romero and several of the Latent Image co-owners, including Russ Streiner and John Russo, says the group's decision to make a horror film was purely commercial and Romero and company were advised by friends in the movie business that an exploitation picture would have a better chance of being sold. Gagne explains, "A low-budget horror film is simply more marketable than a low-budget art film" (23). Streiner admits that neither he, nor Romero, nor any of the other investors were excited about the idea of doing a horror film:

Well, let's face it, we're dealing with a fantasy premise, but deep down inside, we were all serious filmmakers and somewhat disappointed that we had to resort to horror for our first film. I mean, everyone would like to do the great American film, but we found ourselves making a horror film. Once we adapted to that for openers, we then tried to make the best, most realistic horror film that we could on the money we had available. (qtd. in Newman *Nightmare* 5)

Despite their concerns, disappointment, and lack of funding, the friends formed a group called Image Ten and forged ahead with their first feature film project.

Once Romero and his Image Ten partners scraped up enough money—\$19,000—from their own pockets and from local investors, they began gathering the materials they would need to shoot the film (Gagne 31). Although black and white films were unusual in 1968, the producers agreed that shooting the film on black and white 33mm film stock was their best option—not because of any aesthetic considerations, a common misconception about Romero’s intent—because it was the cheapest film stock available at the time. According to Mark A. Vieira, “With the exception of Morituri, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf, and In Cold Blood, every major studio release since 1965 had been in color” (241). Despite the fact that the producers knew black and white was no longer popular with audiences, considering their financial situation, black and white seemed their most logical option.

The idea for the film came from a short story Romero had written while in college called “Anubis,” which would also be the initial title of the film project. Romero’s zombie tale was inspired by Richard Matheson’s short story “I Am Legend,” which is about the last human being living on an Earth plagued by zombie-like vampires. According to Romero, “Anubis” is an allegory about what happens when a new society—in this case hordes of the living dead hungry for human flesh—replaces the old order (Gagne 24). “Anubis” had three basic parts, and these three parts would ultimately become the scripts for the next three Romero zombie films. However, according to Gagne:

There was no anticipation or talk of doing a trilogy of film in 1967, when Romero

took the first part of “Anubis” and began adding detail to turn it into a screenplay; The trilogy didn’t become official until Romero began writing Dawn of the Dead in 1976. (25)

The basic premise of the story is that the dead come back to life for one purpose only: to eat the living. According to the rules Romero established, if anyone is attacked by the zombies, he or she will die and become one of the living dead. The only way to kill a zombie is to destroy its brain, either by fire, bullet, or some other means. This vision of the cannibalistic zombie was new and had never been depicted before in a film, although it shared some features of classic movie monsters. As William Paul explains:

Romero’s living dead are not entirely non-traditional, in that that they seem a rough combination of zombie, werewolf, and vampire: they exist in a nether world between life and death like zombies, they devour like werewolves, and they communicate their ‘disease’ by biting like vampires. (263)

However, former zombies had been depicted as weak, subordinated figures who were slow moving and virtually harmless aside from looking creepy. Romero’s zombie, though not necessarily stronger or faster, would not be revived by voodoo and would definitely have a will of its own. Romero envisioned the zombie as a monster that, although nearly impotent when fighting alone, is dangerous and explosive when hunting in a pack.

Romero presented these basic ideas to investors, who, although they liked the premise, had one major concern—the story provided no explanation for the resurrection of the dead. Although the explanation provided by the film links the zombification to high-level radiation from the disintegration of a returning Venus probe, this idea was not present in the original script and was later added to satisfy the investors. According to John Russo:

At the time, every film we went to see in that genre had an explanation. We finally decided to give them one, even though we would rather have had various

explanations attempted on the television, on the radio, by scientists, maybe religious fanatics, whatever. (Gagne 27)

James F. Iaccino argues, “Perhaps Romero wanted to convey the point that human suffering and pain are simply the ‘great mysteries of life.’ No one is responsible for their occurrence; the fact of their being is merely part of the reality we must face each day in order to endure” (153). In fact, several scenes in which various reasons for the return of the dead were offered on the television and radio were filmed but later cut during the editing process, leaving only the Venus probe as a possible cause, although even that explanation is offered without any certainty. As Romero explains, “The radiation [explanation] survived [...] but it has nothing to do with anything” (Gagne 27).

The producers, opting again to save as much money as possible, rented an abandoned farmhouse in Evans City, Pennsylvania and shot all of the scenes there.²⁶ Once the location for the shoot and the film stock had been secured, filming could begin as soon as the filmmakers could agree on who should direct the film. Rudy Ricci, one of the original investors, seemed the obvious choice because he had experience working with actors at the Pittsburgh Playhouse. Initially the filmmakers decided Ricci would not only direct but also star as the protagonist Ben. The investors eventually came to realize, however, that since Romero had written the story as well as the screenplay and had gained directing experience by working as a cinematographer and an editor for Latent’s productions, he should direct.

Once Romero had been appointed director, casting for the film began immediately. The scenario of the film, which recalls Hitchcock’s The Birds, involves

²⁶ The house was conveniently located right outside of Pittsburgh and only cost the filmmakers four hundred dollars a month (Gagne 29).

seven people trapped inside a boarded-up farmhouse trying to survive the night while battling the walking dead, who include their neighbors, friends, and even family members, all of whom are trying to eat them. Co-producers Streiner and Hardman each took roles, with Streiner playing Johnny and Hardman playing Harry Cooper. Judith O'Dea, one of two professional actors in the film, was cast to play Barbara. Although Ricci was initially selected to play Ben, auditions were held for the part anyway. African American theater actor Duane Jones auditioned against many actors, including Ricci, and everyone, including Ricci himself, agreed that Jones was the best actor for the job. While such a casting decision was certainly provocative in 1968, Romero maintains that there were no racial implications in the casting of Duane Jones as Ben. Romero insists he simply cast the best actor he could get at the time. In fact, according to Romero, Ben's character was not even named in the first half of the original script but instead referred to as "Truck Driver." Russo explains, "The way we say it was that he was not very bright, but was very resourceful. A big, strong, crude truck driver who was very resourceful" (Gagne 38). After casting Jones, Romero made a conscious effort not to acknowledge the fact that Jones was black, and he did not revise the original character sketch, beyond cutting out some hokey dialogue (Gagne 38).

Filming of Night of the Living Dead²⁷ began in June 1967 and took place over a series of weekends with the crew sometimes working for twenty-four hours at a time (Gagne 38). The filmmakers scrimped and saved in any manner they could. Over two hundred and fifty extras were cast as zombies, including several Latent Image clients and

²⁷ The title was initially Night of the Flesh Eaters, which was then changed to Night of Anubis only to be finally changed to Night of the Living Dead, which was deemed a more salable title by the distribution company.

locals from Evans City. For blood they used chocolate Bosco syrup, which, interestingly enough, was quite convincing in black and white. In order to create the image of decaying flesh and injuries on the zombies, they used morticians' wax. One of the zombie extras owned a meat shop, and he gave Romero pounds and pounds of meat and innards, which were substituted for human guts. In fact, in the film, during scenes in which zombies convincingly eat human intestines and body parts, they are actually eating, not just pretending to eat, animals parts from the butcher shop. Even the ending of the film, a montage of still shots that recall Vietnam and the Watts riots, was designed to save money. According to Russo, "We were trying to come up with an effective ending that would also save some shooting days, so we shot those stills, and they were printed through cheesecloth to give them that grainy look" (qtd. in Gagne 34). It was an aesthetic choice that would be emulated often in horror films of the 1970s, including The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974).

Post production of the film finished in March of 1968, and as soon as the film was ready for distribution, Romero and Streiner packed a finished print of the film into a car and drove to New York on April 4, 1968, the eve of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. According to Streiner, he and Romero felt the film was doomed: "We figured, 'Oh great, everything else has gone wrong up to this point, and here we show up with a film with a black cat playing the lead and probably every theater in the country is going to be burned down within two days'" (qtd. in Gagne 34). Still, Romero and Streiner attempted to sell the film to several distributors. Columbia Pictures, not interested in purchasing a black and white film, turned them down, while American-International Pictures and several other distributors told Romero the film would not be marketable

unless the ending was made happier. Romero refused to change the ending, and after hiring a producer's distribution representative, several independent distribution centers made offers on the film. Romero and the Image Ten group signed a deal with Continental Films, a branch of the Walter Meade Organization. The first screening of the film for the distributors happened on June 5th, the morning after Robert Kennedy had been assassinated. After getting a first glimpse at their newly purchased film, the distributor representatives were not pleased. A Reade press agent was quoted as saying, "You can imagine how much we were into it. When Ben hit the guy in the head with a tire iron over and over again, well, at that point, we just said, 'Fuck this. Who wants to sit through this.'" (qtd. in Gagne 24).

Although disgusted by the film's violence, Reade and Continental figured they could make money from the film by releasing it to the drive-in circuit and neighborhood theaters. Well aware that in Philadelphia the film would be shown in downtown movie palaces located in the inner city, which served predominately African American audiences, the Walter Reade Organization and Continental attempted to court the African American market, a tactic asserted by Reade throughout the sixties. By 1967, according to a study by Variety, African American moviegoers made up thirty percent of first-run movie patronage although they only accounted for less than fifteen percent of the total population (Hefferman 204). Considering Night is a horror film featuring a black lead character, Reade and Continental had reason to believe they might earn money from the film. As Kevin Hefferman explains, "Horror films were very popular with African American audiences. In fact, on the rare occasions when theaters in African American neighborhoods in Philadelphia played a film's first run, it was often for mass openings of

horror combinations” (207).

The film was more suited to such a filmic pairing than the distributors knew. Hefferman argues that Night “shared both generic traits and marketing elements with horror and science fiction genre films of the fifties and the low-budget-race-themed topical dramas of its time” (219). Both audiences and critics would later praise the film for its treatment of many sociopolitical issues, including race relations. Continental had had success in the past with billing a horror film alongside a blaxploitation film; they paired Black Like Me (1964), a topical film about race relations, with The Hands of Orlac (1961), starring Mel Ferrer as a concert pianist who goes on a killing spree after receiving a hand transplant from a convicted murderer (Hefferman 206).²⁸ Ultimately, Night of the Living Dead was a huge success for the Walter Reade Organization. If the ratio between ticket sales and the cost of film production are compared, it is clear that Night of the Living, a rare independent box office success, was one of the most lucrative American films of the sixties.

In the opening scene of Night of the Living Dead, Romero introduces two codes that dominate the rest of the film and that arguably influenced a generation of horror filmmakers. The film begins on a stretch of lonely highway one Sunday evening. At the urging of their mother, Barbara (Judith O’Dea) and her brother Johnny (Streiner) are driving to a remote cemetery, a traditional gothic site of horror, to pay respects at the grave of their father. After a long drive, Johnny is irritable and annoyed with having to participate in a custom he considers pointless. When the siblings arrive at the cemetery,

²⁸ The Walter Reade Organization later re-released Night of the Living Dead in 1970 after the film had received some success in Europe. Reade released Night on the American theater circuit as the bottom of a double-fill that featured the topical film Slaves starring Dionne Warwick and Ossie Davis (1969).

Johnny begins to tease Barbara. Clearly, the graveyard is not meant to be a site of horror but rather an ordinary, mundane one. Once inside the cemetery, Johnny makes several sacrilegious remarks, for which Barbara condemns him vehemently. While looking for their father's grave, the pair encounters a man who is moving toward them rather awkwardly, as if intoxicated. Johnny tries to scare Barbara by telling her the man is a graveyard ghoul coming to attack her. He taunts her with a silly Boris Karloff impression, calling out, "He's coming to get you, Barbara!" By mocking Karloff, considered in some circles the greatest gothic horror actors of all time, Romero mocks the older traditions in horror cinema. According to Crane:

Johnny's bit signals an end to nostalgic veneration for earlier horror presentations. The emotions that Karloff evoked, as well as the way in which he used special effects and makeup, belong to a dead tradition. Karloff is forgettable; his presence is invoked purely as comic device. (12)

By making a joke of the one of the most famous, most respected gothic horror actors of all time, Romero set the tone for the rest of the film and unknowingly inscribed a code for the next two decades of horror in the United States: No longer would horror be rooted in the gothic or scientific world but rather in modern, every day life. Peter Hutchings agrees that the Karloff impression signaled the end of one era in horror and the beginning of another: "The message could not be clearer. The old horror was either dying or dead; a new horror was about to be born" (107). Although Barbara begins to be frightened by Johnny's comments, he is relentless. Little do they know that the man moving toward them really is a murderous ghoul. Only minutes into the film, Romero gives audiences their first glimpse of the modern zombie. Although still slow and stiff like its predecessor, the modern zombie moves with a purpose—to attack and eat living humans—although this concept is not immediately explained and viewers are left in

suspense.

As Barbara clumsily approaches the man, he begins to attack her. At this point, all the audience knows is that a man who appears to be drunk has assaulted Barbara. It is not clear that the man, although shabbily dressed and stumbling, had previously been dead. The audience may assume the man wants to commit a sexual or violent act against her or is attempting to rob her. The man does not appear to be strong and does not make any threatening sounds or noises. When Johnny attempts to rescue her, the zombie pushes him head first into a gravestone—a blow that kills him. According to former horror codes, the audience would expect Johnny to be killed due to his lack of respect for the dead, but Barbara, who was opposed to Johnny's caustic remarks, should be safe from harm. Later we learn Barbara approached the man because she wanted to apologize in case he overheard any of Johnny's teasing remarks about him. So while Johnny's death initially seems to be operating within the traditional moral coding of a horror film, in comparison to the terrors Barbara must endure, Johnny's punishment is light. Later in the film, after being barricaded all night long in a house with strangers who are fighting off the living dead, Barbara is killed—it is the zombified Johnny who pulls Barbara into the crowd of ravenous zombies as she is trying to help her housemates escape harm. Even though both Johnny and Barbara try to save others, they are not rewarded for their efforts but instead are killed, a new coding which would ensure that altruism would no longer be so sweetly rewarded in horror films as it had been in the past. As Crane puts it, "The good then receive no special dispensation; they will be endlessly tormented with the cowardly, the weak, and the wise" (12). This message would be further reinforced by the dramatic conclusion.

Barbara, unsure from whom or what she is fleeing, finds refuge in an isolated farmhouse; from this point on in the film, she will remain nearly comatose and largely incoherent. Barbara hides in the house alone until Ben (Duane Jones) also comes into the house to hide after his truck has run out of gas. Jones enters the film thirteen minutes in, and from that moment, is the focus of the entire film, the one human in which audiences trust and the only one who seems capable of leading the group. Mark Clark, who offers virtually the only analysis of Jones's performance in detail in his book Smirk, Sneer and Scream observes that "Jones moves with urgency and acute awareness of his surroundings. His actions are efficient, determined and carefully thought-out" (161). Ben kills some of the zombies who are lurking outside then comes back in and begins immediately going to work, trying to secure the house by boarding up windows and doors, while Barbara sits listlessly on the couch. Ben tells her, "I know you're afraid. I'm afraid too, but we have to try to board the house up together." Ben is compassionate with Barbara, although at one point, he punches her in the face when she becomes dangerously hysterical and tries to go outside to search for her brother. However, later we see Ben check on her before continuing to check the upstairs for dead bodies or attackers, which informs us that he hit her out of necessity. When he finds a rotting corpse upstairs, he quickly covers it with a sheet and warns Barbara not to look at it, diverting her away from the gore. Again, we see that Ben is considerate and caring and is a character motivated by admirable intentions.

Jones's Ben is a noble and intelligent character, and as Nelson George notes, "Like Poitier and St. Jacques, Jones projects an urbane, upwardly mobile attitude in his idealized role as the ever resourceful black survivor" (7). However, unlike many of the

characters Poitier played, Jones's character is full-bodied and much more than just a replica of what white Hollywood considered to be a "good black man." Originally envisioned by Romero as a slightly ignorant hard-working truck driver, Ben is a normal guy who, unlike the "good black man" stereotype, played often by Poitier, does not have an unbelievably self-sacrificing drive. Like the others in the house, he wants to survive and is willing to work with the group to accomplish this. Although he is the protagonist of the film and the most intelligent member of the group, Ben is, after all just a person, and he ends up making bad decisions, including getting into a masculine territory battle that negatively affect the lives of everyone in the house. Indeed, before the film ends, Ben will succumb to the violence and chaos around him, an act that will firmly establish him as an anti-hero.

As Ben and Barbara sit alone together in the still house, Ben recounts to Barbara his first encounter with the attackers at Beekman's diner. According to Ben, a large group of the walking dead surrounded the diner and attacked stunned patrons relentlessly. Although Ben appears to be recounting the nightmare to Barbara, as he grows solemn and gazes intently at nothing in particular, it seems he is trying to exorcise the memory by repeating it out loud. As his voice grows softer, Ben pauses: "I can still hear the man screaming [...]." He continues to relate the carnage to his companion who is likely remembering her own violent encounter. Fighting the urge to breakdown and bravely holding back tears, Ben describes running through a crowd of zombies in his truck. He says, "They scattered through the air, like bugs [...]." This humanizing moment of confession is one of the most touching in the film due to Jones's subtle yet intense acting, and immediately the audience understands just how afraid Ben really is, despite his

composure when boarding up the house and tending to Barbara. Clark argues, “Jones must have recognized it was vital to the success of the film that audiences identify with his character, and his delicate handling of this scene—overtly emotional but never maudlin—is simply riveting” (161). Indeed, it is necessary for audiences to closely identify with Ben at this point because by the end of the film, he will be pushed to commit an act of violence that will challenge their conception of a hero. Williams has argued that the scene at the diner could be interpreted as depicting the African American experience post-Civil War and notes that the “narrative evokes African American experience of post-Reconstruction days in the American South” (26). The tale Ben describes is horrifying indeed and troublingly reminiscent of mob violence during Reconstruction, and it is also a scene that recalls the 1960s riots in the U.S., which many had not only witnessed in person and on television but thousands had also been personally involved. From the many Vietnam riots to the Watts Riots of 1965, Americans had been watching humans chase, murder, and mutilate other humans, grotesque depictions of violence not very unlike the one described by Ben.

After making a lot of noise trying to board up the house, Ben rouses the other characters who had been hiding in the cellar, including Cooper (Karl Hardman), his wife Helen (Marilyn Eastman) and daughter Karen (Kyra Schon), and the sweet young couple Tom (Keith Wayne) and Judy (Judith Riley). Ben and Cooper are immediately suspicious of one another and begin quarrelling. From this moment on, Ben, an African American working-class truck driver, goes to battle against Cooper, an arrogant white businessman and ultimate symbol of American patriarchy. Ben asks Cooper why he and the others did not come upstairs sooner and help him with reinforcing the house. First Cooper says they

did not hear anyone and then later contradicts himself, saying it sounded like the house was being destroyed. Ben, frustrated by Cooper's lies, begins arguing with Cooper about where the group should hide. While Cooper insists the cellar is the safest place, Ben rages: "The cellar is a deathtrap!" Clark argues such a statement is rife with symbolic meaning:

It's a shadowy reflection of the inter-racial and inter-generational conflicts raging throughout the country at the time, as people of different ages and points of view argued vehemently about how to resolve the many crises they faced, in a world gone crazy. (163)

While such an interpretation seems a bit of a stretch, Clark's assertion is not without merit. Cooper is a bigot who refuses to help Ben board up the house, even when his own wife refuses to stand by him. We learn that Cooper's daughter has been bitten by one of the living dead and is ill. Rather than attempt to get help for his daughter, Cooper would rather hide in the cellar and cower. Ben becomes extremely angry at this point and continues his verbal battle against Cooper. Although Cooper never uses any racial slurs against Ben, the argument seems to have racial undertones, what with a white man with a family fighting against a young black man who is traveling alone, a character who had typically been suspect in American films. According to Clark, "Jones excels during these heated exchanges with Hardman, not because he is a black actor, but because he is a gifted actor, one who is unafraid to call upon his own experience for emotional fuel" (163). Although race is never directly addressed in the argument, the vehemence with which Ben debates and opposes Cooper resonates throughout the entire scene. The scene, without the black/white dynamic between Jones and Cooper, would undoubtedly have been less powerful. A white actor could not have brought to the scene nearly as much tension. Clark asserts:

[Jones's] ethnicity gives him a different and, in this context, more explosive vein of emotions to mine. How often had white men referred to the educated, erudite Jones as 'boy' or 'nigger'? How often had he, like so many other African Americans, been forced to use the 'colored' restroom or been refused service in a restaurant? How many Harry Coopers had Jones known in his lifetime? (163)

Although some critics, such as Dennis Fischer insist that "the arguments between the characters are not racially motivated" and argue that such interpretations are "a lot of nonsense," (635) it is hard to ignore what is literally depicted on the screen: an emotionally tense, utterly masculine battle between a forty-something white man and a young black man just trying to make it out alive. Finally, after listening to the two men argue for several minutes, it becomes clear that the group does not trust Cooper, who has been proven a liar and a coward. Ben, the most composed and capable member of the group (who also has a rifle), emerges as the reluctant leader of the rag-tag bunch of humans holed up inside the farmhouse. Unlike Cooper, it is clear from the worn-out look on Ben's face that he does not desire control or leadership but simply wants to survive. Unfortunately, most of Ben's plans fail miserably, which further establishes Ben as an anti-hero.

As the characters continue to bicker amongst themselves, a news report comes on the television. According to the reporter, there is a massive outbreak of "murders being committed in the Eastern third of the nation." Although the resurrection of the dead is half-heartedly blamed on radiation from a Venus probe, no one, including the media, knows anything for certain except that the living dead are murdering the living. Although the group does not understand why the undead have returned, they do know how to destroy them: "Beat 'em or burn 'em. They go up pretty easy." Unlike the monsters of gothic horror and science fiction film in the forties and fifties, the monsters in Night are

slow, generally weak, and move awkwardly. Some zombies are even missing limbs and have bowels falling out of their bodies. Although they do use simple tools like rocks and sticks to pound on the walls of the house, the zombies are basically defenseless when not in large groups. However, when a pack of zombies is on the hunt, they can become quite dangerous. Following films like The Plague of the Zombies (1966), with Night Romero turned the locals into the monsters. No longer were the enemies creations of science or creatures from another planet. The monsters were neighbors, friends, relatives, and even children. Night helped establish the trend in turning Us into the monsters. According to Crane, “In earlier horror eras, the monster could be conquered with science, engineering, and a group effort by good men. Until Night of the Living Dead [...] the majority of monsters were enemies who helped men gain confidence in their ability to control and understand the world” (11). In Night, however, as the characters discover, the monsters cannot be destroyed with technology, engineering, or even community effort. As Johnny explains to the group, only when the brain is destroyed does a zombie die, and even then, there are seemingly hundreds more to replace the ones who are killed. The human efforts against the sluggish zombie hordes ultimately seem to be in vain. When it is clear the group must act immediately or die, Ben banishes Cooper to the cellar, telling him, “You can be the boss down there. I’m boss up here.”

After sending Cooper and his family to the basement, the gang discovers a key to a gas pump outside. At Ben’s suggestion, he, Tom, and Judy venture to the tank in order to refuel Ben’s truck. They believe if they can only get some fuel, they can flee to another town where perhaps the national guard has set up refuge as mentioned on the television. Unfortunately, during the attempt to get the gas, the plan is foiled, and everything goes

wrong for the group. During this scene, Romero violates a major horror convention. According to Williams, “Although some horror films did contain leading characters who never survived into the final reel, convention often demanded that the future of humanity continue in the form of two young lovers” (22). However, Night’s young couple becomes barbeque meat for the zombies when the truck catches fire from one of the torches being used to ward off the undead. Not only did Ben’s plan result in the death of two members of the group, but the truck was also destroyed in the exploit. However, there is no time for Ben to lament his poor decision as the walking dead quickly close in on him. Using his torch, he wards them off and runs towards the house where Cooper attempts to lock him out. Ben manages to get inside, however, by kicking in the door. Cooper does immediately help Ben board up the door, but such an act is only out of self-preservation.

Shoving Cooper into a chair, Ben screams, veins popping and sweat dripping: “I ought to drag you out there and feed you to those things!” Although he easily could have and would probably have enjoyed doing so, Ben does not act against Cooper but instead selflessly offers to carry Cooper’s sick child a few miles to their abandoned car. However, unbeknownst to Cooper, Ben, and Barbara, Karen has already died in the cellar and has murdered her mother with a garden spade. Before the men get a chance to check on the girl and her mother, the zombies, who have gathered in numbers quietly outside, begin to attack the house. Barbara, trying to help Ben, ends up in the middle of a zombie horde, and, ironically, it is her zombie brother Johnny who pulls her away to her death. Cooper steals Ben’s rifle and makes a run for the basement. This is the moment in which Ben completely snaps and gives in to the chaos surrounding him. In a fit of fury, Ben grabs the rifle back from Cooper and shoots him in the stomach. As Cooper falls to the

floor, a faint grin spreads across Ben's face. Any relief or satisfaction he feels from killing Cooper, however, does not last as the zombies pile into the house. As Ben turns towards the door, preparing to flee, he turns back to the body of Cooper. The look on his face, full of wide-eyed pain, says everything about how he feels about the act he has just committed. Clark argues, "This look reassures us of what we already know—that before all this started, Ben never imagined he was capable of killing anyone" (164). This look of self-recognition encapsulates one of the major themes of Night. While the cannibalism of the living dead is truly disturbing, what is even more horrifying than the zombies is the way human beings treat one another. Unable to overcome fear, jealousy, and pride, the humans in the house never succeed in forming a cohesive, functioning unit. Ben, dejected, retreats ironically to Cooper's cellar as the last place of refuge in a house swarming with the walking dead.

Ben spends the night in the cellar, and when the sun rises, it appears the zombies have dispersed. A posse of gun-toting rednecks approaches the house, and as Ben emerges from the dark cellar as the lone survivor of the night, a gunman shoots him point blank in the middle of the forehead. Such a nihilistic ending was unbelievable to audiences who were used to seeing the hero conquer the monster, no matter what. It seemed unfairly ironic that Ben, after surviving the zombie attacks against all odds, is killed by a human. To complicate matters, although Spainhower argues that Ben "is mistaken for a zombie" by the posse (183), Romero seems to be at least suggesting that it was not an accident after all. Following Ben's death are the final scenes of the film: still frames of Ben's body being dragged by meat hooks to a pile of bodies that are lighted on fire, a scene all too reminiscent of lynchings, during which the dead bodies of African

Americans would often be mutilated and burned. Considering that many who initially saw the film were African Americans, such a conclusion would not be a giant leap. Nevertheless, Ben was not supposed to die. If past horror films taught audiences anything, it is that the hero never dies. The beat-up, broken down, nearly dead protagonist is supposed to recover during the climax of the film and defeat the monsters. However, by the end of Night, the audience must decide who the real monsters are.

Considering the dynamic between the group in the house and the nihilistic ending, Romero certainly seems to be suggesting that the real danger to the human race is humans themselves, not the zombies. If only the living could work together, it seems that the zombies would be easy to control. But the living can't work together. Instead they "attempt to devour each other in an ironically metaphorical version of the outside assault by their living dead opponents" (Williams 31). Indeed, the dead appear more united than the living in terms of their concentrated focus upon a specific aim. Although the ending itself, with its nihilistic outlook, is disturbing, without Jones's excellent performance, audiences would not have been nearly as affected. Although most critics simply acknowledge Ben as "the black man who dies at the end," as Clark argues, "Ben isn't merely 'a black man,' but a fully sketched human being with which audiences strongly identify. His death at the end of the film is powerful only because Jones has created such a believable and likeable character" (164). Indeed the intensely powerful ending of Night of the Living Dead (1968), in conjunction with the disturbing final scenes of Rosemary's Baby (1968) and Psycho (1960), helped establish new codes for constructing a horror film—codes that would ensure an awful demise of the human protagonists. According to the codes established by Night, all collective action will fail and knowledge and

experience are ultimately worthless tools. Newman argues, “Fifteen years after Ben got shot, the unhappy ending was a commonplace” (*Nightmare 4*).

While drive-in audiences embraced Night, the immediate critical reaction to the film was overwhelmingly negative, with most critics panning the film for its over-the-top gore. As Romero explains:

There was no MPAA censor’s office or local censor board any more so you didn’t have that panel of experts that were issuing dictates and reviewing films, saying, ‘You can leave this in, but you have to take that out. But there was this unwritten law which said you had to be polite and just show the shadow and not show the knife entering flesh. (qtd. in Vieira 242)

Romero, however, refused to be polite, and Vieira argues, “From then on, the horror film, oozing gore from every sprocket hole, was something different” (242). Romero’s ploy was a simple one that can be traced back to the earliest days of exploitation filmmaking—all he needed to do was deliver a product that could be sold. Many began to see, however, that there was more to the film than first appeared. Hanke argues, “Audiences believed they were being so affected by unflinching scenes of zombies eating their victims, when, in fact, the unsettling feeling owed much more to the ideas the film contained” (238). Indeed, the image of a zombie eating the brains of a human being is disturbing, but the images of a daughter stabbing her mother to death and eating her father are much more shocking because the very idea of such acts occurring is provocative. Despite, or perhaps because of, such disturbing imagery, the film became a huge cult success with audiences in the United States and even began to receive critical acclaim in Europe. Once the film gained momentum abroad, American critics rushed to give the film a second look. Kim Newman explains, “When it became a cult success, the

film journals were full of critics acknowledging qualities they'd missed on first viewing" (*Nightmare 1*).

Considering that Night was released during the year of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, and the year Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, among the new interpretations of the film were suggestions that the zombies represented everything from the silent majority to corpses returning from Vietnam to African Americans. Iaccino argues, "The ability of the monsters to bring their victims into the same undead state suggests the impotence and lack of control that many people felt at this time" (151). Critics also noted that Romero had succeeded in making the ordinary horrible by turning humans into monsters. The film was also praised for its modern local setting. Hanke argues, "While the farm setting is almost certainly the result of the film's budgetary limits, it serves the film's thematic implications as a symbol of the mid-American heartland values that are crumbling around the characters" (238). Indeed, Romero succeeded in turning the American backyard into the scene of mass murder and cannibalism. According to R.H.W. Dillard, "The essential quality of the film's setting and of its characters is their ordinary nature" (28). Upon re-viewing the film, critics overwhelmingly praised Night, claiming it was a powerful vehicle of social commentary. Richard Hand argues that Night "provides layers of satirical and social comment that reflect the concerns of late 1960s U.S. society more than most films of the period, "horror or otherwise" (129).

Indeed, it would be impossible for one to overlook the political issues addressed in the film such as the Vietnam War and the dissolution of the nuclear family. One also cannot ignore that Duane Jones's performance as Ben marked a turning point for black

characters in the zombie film and indeed in the horror film in general, a genre in which most black actors were cast as zombie slaves. Gagne believes the film is ripe with racial symbolism and argues that in 1968 the film “was a metaphor for the black experience in America, particularly when the black man is killed by the white posse at the film’s end” (37). Considering that Night was released in 1968, when racial tension and anger was mounting, it is hard to deny the idea that the film, and especially the film’s ending, could be a metaphor for the black experience in the United States. Romero does acknowledge that perhaps subconsciously he was influenced by the racial climate of the era: “It was 1968, man. Everybody had a ‘message.’ Maybe it crept in. I was just making a horror film, and I think the anger and the attitude and all that’s there is just there because it was 1968” (qtd. in Gagne 38). In the end, the discussion of whether or not the film intentionally addresses racial issues is not as relevant to the discussion of the historical significance of Night as are two other aspects of the film: firstly, the simple fact that Duane Jones, a black actor, was given a lead role in a horror film as a hero, and secondly that his performance was highly effective.

Ben, the smartest and most resourceful character in a house full of white people, was someone his younger African American audience could appreciate. In the 1960s, the heroes of science fiction and horror were invariably white. One of the biggest films of the sixties, Planet of the Apes (1968), which was released the same year as Night of the Living Dead, featured Charlton Heston fighting in a future American overrun by big black apes, monkeys, and gorillas. This kind of white/black dynamic did not sit well with many black filmgoers. In his book Blackface: Reflections, Nelson George, includes Night in a timeline of films that represent the range of black participation in American films

during his movie-going lifetime. George says that in an era in which films like Planet of the Apes seemed to ask black people if they were “Negro or monkey,” (7) Night of the Living Dead’s Ben provided a positive alternative to the white men with which they were supposed to identify. George recalls that he and his friends cheered at the end when Heston’s character discovered the Statue of Liberty and realized he had been on Earth all along, just many years in the future where The United States was ruled by apes. George says, “Maybe if there was some sense that black folks were still alive in the future, my peers would have cut Heston more slack. But unlike the politically correct sci-fi of the nineties, issues of black inclusion weren’t on Hollywood’s mind back in 1968” (12). Unlike most science fiction and horror films of the period, Night gave black audiences a hero Duane Jones.

The last aspect critics mention about Night is the acting, and that is because most have panned the acting of the entire cast, with only few critics acknowledging Duane Jones’s performance as the best of the film.²⁹ As Clark notes, “Despite all the verbiage devoted to the movie, it’s virtually impossible to find a critique that mentions Jones by name and examines his performance in detail” (164). Clark, who argues that Jones’s performance is impeccable throughout the film, believes that Jones’s “role as a hero, albeit a compromised hero, might be seen as quietly working to dispel some of the Otherness associated with the black male in earlier American horror films” (113). This is particularly true for zombie films, which nearly always featured black males as Haitian slaves and never heroes. Clark insists, however, that “the provocative casting of a black male in a prominent role is not really explored (or exploited) by the film” (113). Indeed

²⁹ For the most comprehensive review of Jones’s performance in Night, see Mark Clark’s *Smirk, Sneer and Scream: Great Acting in Horror Cinema*.

as Romero has explained, he cast Duane Jones without consideration of his blackness. According to Romero, “Perhaps Night of the Living Dead is the first film to have a black man playing the lead role regardless of, rather than because of, his color” (38). Nevertheless, the very fact that Ben *is* black cannot be denied (or ignored), and as Mark Clark argues, “Even if you accept that Russo and Romero didn’t envision the socio-political possibilities of this casting choice, you must think that Jones himself did” (160).

Jones, a professional actor, was devoted to African American theater companies throughout the sixties and seventies. Jones later became an English professor and served as director of the Maguire Theater at the Old Westbury campus of New York State University. He also served as artistic director at the Richard Allen Center in New York City (Clark 161). As Clark argues:

Obviously Jones was well-educated and politically astute. How could such a man not understand that his performance could make a subtle yet powerful statement? Jones brings to the role nuances that no white actor could have, enriching both his character and the film as a whole. (161).

Following his role in Night, Jones appeared in Bill Gunn’s Ganja and Hess in 1970.³⁰ Although Duane Jones never achieved a sustained career as an actor, his performances in Ganja and Hess and Night of the Living Dead leave him with an honorable legacy. Hardman, co-producer of Night, says that Jones was very intelligent and somewhat introverted, and, according to a friend of Clark’s who worked with Jones in New York, Jones became visibly uncomfortable whenever anyone mentioned Night of the Living

³⁰ Ganja and Hess, ostensibly about vampirism, deals with real life issues faced by African Americans as well as sex and spiritualism. Jones stars as Dr. Hess Green, a vampire and wealthy scholar in Nigeria. The film, though not well known because it has been frequently recut and retitled, was a quiet success for Jones. Critic James Monaco is noted for saying, “If Sweetback is Native Son, then Ganja and Hess is Invisible Man.” Monaco also insists that Ganja and Hess was “the most complicated, intriguing, subtle, sophisticated, and passionate” black film of the seventies (qtd. in George 52).

Dead. Perhaps Jones, like Ben, was a reluctant hero. Jones committed suicide July of 1988 at age 50 (Clark 160).

Although Night of the Living Dead was one of the most popular horror films of the sixties in the United States, Romero and the other filmmakers never received the monetary compensation they deserved for their hard work and success. In 1968 when Continental changed the film's title card, which previously read Night of the Anubis, to read Night of the Living Dead, they forgot to include a copyright notice, and the film passed into the public domain after Continental went bankrupt in the 1970s.

Unfortunately for the original investors, this meant that the film could and would be sold and plagiarized without their consent and that they would see none of the profits.

According to Hefferman, "By the mid-eighties dozens of video catalogs were offering cheap 16mm transfers of the film, with the original filmmakers receiving no royalties from these sales" (219). Night was also blatantly plagiarized by films like The Return of the Living Dead, which was released in 1985, the same year Day of the Dead, the third³¹ in Romero's zombie quartet to be released. Ironically, it was The Return of the Living Dead, the copycat, not Romero's own Day of the Dead that was successful with audiences.

By the late eighties, the film's copyright was finally established in court, but that did not help the original filmmakers recoup any of their losses from the years before. In an attempt to compensate the original investors, Romero convinced makeup artist Tom Savini, who had worked with Romero on Dawn and Day and several other films, to

³¹ The second film in Romero's zombie quartet is Dawn of the Dead (1978), while 2005's Land of the Dead was the fourth, and perhaps final, zombie film directed by Romero.

remake Night in 1990. Savini's interpretation is respectable. His film faithfully retells the story of the original, and the story is enhanced by better special effects, better make-up, and better cinematography. Though Savini does not rewrite the script, he did make two major changes in his version. The heroine, rather than being a comatose, frightened woman, is a strong redhead who carries a gun. The other notable difference is that Savini takes the racial metaphors even further. Rather than using a still photograph montage for the ending as Romero did, Savini continues the story after Ben is shot, and several depictions of racial tension are outright overt, such as the scene in which a group of rednecks hang zombies in trees and use them as target practice. The film, although not critically acclaimed, was a hit with Romero fans all over the world who thought Savini's effort was honorable.³²

In hindsight, although the copyrighting problem was a nightmare situation for the original investors of the film, perhaps it was fortunate for audiences that Night was so shamelessly distributed and so often emulated. Romero so significantly changed the landscape of the zombie film that after Ben's heroics and the new strain of zombies, voodoo was cast out of the genre, and black actors no longer played the zombie slaves of white masters. Post-Night zombie films completely discarded class between white and black zombies. After 1968, voodoo virtually vanished from the living dead genre altogether, and zombiedom, no longer solely enslaving blacks, was open to all ethnicities and races. Interestingly enough, not a single zombie in Night of the Living Dead is played by a black actor—they're all white. Romero had reversed the all-black zombie coding early American films had insisted upon. Rather than depicting voodoo-cursed

³² Although not a box office phenomenon like its predecessor, Savini's remake was successful in video stores throughout the United States.

black zombies attacking whites, Romero portrays white zombies inexplicably attacking both whites and blacks, therefore dismantling the stereotype of the menacing black zombie used for background effects and erasing voodoo from the genre.

Conclusion

Some have called George A. Romero's Night of the Living Dead the best horror film of all time, and certainly its impact on American horror films has not gone unnoticed by critics. Spainhower argues, "For sheer, unrelenting terror the film remains unparalleled," and that "its nightmare imagery retains the ability to appall an audience" (182). Indeed, the film was like nothing moviegoers had ever seen and re-ignited the zombie genre in ways Romero never imagined. Hardy argues, "Night of the Living Dead marked the death of the vampire and the arrival of the zombie as the central figure of the horror film" (128). Night of the Living Dead, along with Psycho (1960) and Rosemary's Baby (1968), helped usher in a new guard of horror by sweeping away Gothic traditions and trappings and trading them in for a more modern and realistic aesthetic. According to Kim Newman, "[Romero] brought horror home to the heartland and encouraged a flourishing generation of hand-to-mouth horror auteurs in the 70s" (*Nightmare* 14). Not only did Romero practically invent a genre—films featuring the cannibalistic dead—and help usher in a new age of horror in Hollywood, but also with Night of the Living Dead, repositioned the role black characters play in the zombie film. Following Night, black characters were no longer subjected to playing mindless zombie slaves to white zombie masters but rather were positioned alongside both whites and blacks, who together would fight against the undead who were people of all races, religions, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds.

Although in Romero's later zombie films—Dawn of the Dead (1978) and Day of the Dead (1985)—racial issues are not as prominent, with Romero focusing more on consumerism and feminist issues, Romero still maintained the casting of black actors in

the lead of both films, with both characters being similar to Ben in Night of the Living Dead. Both characters are two of the smartest and most humane in the entire film, and both characters also live until the end of the film. With 2004's Land of the Dead, Romero's final (?) addition to his walking dead quartet, Romero again cast a black actor in the lead role, but this time with a twist—instead of casting the black actor as a hero, Romero casts him as the head zombie who leads an army of the marching dead against the few remaining humans who have holed themselves up a walled city, the last bastion of human life. Romero once again used a subtle hand to offer audiences a smart, witty horror film that addresses sociopolitical issues, including race and economics. Romero also cast strong black characters in other non-zombie horror films he directed such as 1973's The Crazies, which features Lloyd Hollar as Col. Peckham, a character very reminiscent of Night's Ben.

Since Night, Romero's undead films have sparked legions of imitators and outright plagiarisms such as Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things (1972), Night of the Comet (1984), and Return of the Living Dead (1985), and Romero's effect on American horror cinema is comprehensive, with directors such as Wes Craven, David Cronenberg, and even John Waters paying homage to his zombie films. Romero's influence also spread in Europe, especially with Italians, particularly Dario Argento, who took kindly to the zombie genre. Newman argues that without Night, "Italian exploitation would have withered" (*Nightmare* 234). Recent zombie films like 28 Days Later (2002) and Resident Evil (2002) have taken casting cues from Romero, casting African Americans in leading roles playing strong, smart characters. Although Resident Evil has no discernable racial subtexts, Danny Boyle's 28 Days Later surely merits some further

investigation, considering that there is a infectious simian theme running throughout the entire film, the lead zombie is played by a black actor, and another lead, the heroine of the film, is played by a black female, a casting move even Romero never made.

Although some critics, like Joseph Maddrey, compare Romero to the likes of T.S. Eliot because he believes Night “conveys the anxieties of life in a time of theological and political uncertainty” (124), others, like William Schoell, argue that the only worthwhile aspects of Romero’s dead films are their contributions to the horror genre, and he insists that the film offers little, if any, symbolic value. Schoell argues, “Some critics and fans discuss Romero and his ‘dead’ movies as if he were Fellini and his pictures on par with La Dolce Vita. Rather than imbuing them with dubious symbolism, Romero’s films should simply be taken as entertaining, (usually) well edited action/gore pictures” (109). I believe, however, Night of the Living Dead has relevance beyond its generic associations, and by denying the film any symbolic interpretation and simply labeling the it a good “gore picture” we are ignoring the significance the films, particularly Night, play in the history of the depiction of African Americans on screen. Ultimately, Night of the Living Dead was one of the most politically charged films of the sixties, a film that portrayed a black man as a hero in a genre that had previously used the black man as a prop and symbol of dangerous exoticism. With Night, Romero re-visioned the trope of blackness in the zombie film. Distributed heavily to African American audiences, Night transformed the landscape of the genre; rather than exploiting and degrading blackness, following Night of the Living Dead, the zombie film had the potential to offer positive representations of blackness, a portrayal of which the genre had been devoid.

Bibliography

- Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York: Continuum, 2002.
- Clark, Mark. *Smirk, Sneer and Scream: Great Acting in Horror Cinema*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2004.
- Crane, Jonathan Lake. *Terror and Everyday Life: Singular Moments in the History of the Horror Film*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994.
- Dillard, R. H. W. "Night of the Living Dead: It's Not Like Just a Wind That's Passing Through." *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film*. Ed. Gregory A. Waller. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1987. 14-29.
- Ebert, Roger. "Just Another Horror Movie—Or Is It?" *Reader's Digest*. June 1969: 128.
- Fischer, Dennis. *Horror Film Directors, 1931-1990*. Jefferson: McFarland, 1991.
- Gagne, Paul R. *The Zombies that Ate Pittsburgh: The Films of George A. Romero*. New York: Dodd, 1987.
- George, Nelson. *Blackface: Reflections on African-Americans and the Movies*. New York: Cooper Square: 2002.
- Halliwell, Leslie. *The Dead that Walk: Dracula, Frankenstein, the Mummy and Other Favorite Movie Monsters*. London: Grafton, 1986.
- Hand, Richard J. "Survival Horror and the Resident Evil Franchise." *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear*. Ed. Steffen Hantke. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2004.
- Hanke, Ken. *A Critical Guide to Horror Film Series*. New York: Garland, 1991.
- Hardy, Phil, Tom Milne, and Paul Willemen, eds. *The Aurum Film Encyclopedia*. Vol. 3. London: Aurum, 1985.
- Hearn, Lafcadio. "The Country of the Comers-Back." *Zombie! Stories of the Walking Dead*. Ed. Peter Haining. London: W. H. Allen, 1985. 54-70.
- Heffernan, Kevin. *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953-1968*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.
- Hutchings, Peter. *The Horror Film*. Inside Film Ser. Harlow: Pearson, 2004.
- Iaccino, James F. *Psychological Reflections on Cinematic Terror: Jungian Archetypes in*

- Horror Films*. Westport: Praeger, 1994.
- Jacobs, W.W. "The Monkey's Paw." *The Lady of the Barge*. New York: Dodd, 1920. 29-53.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982.
- Maddrey, Joseph. *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2004.
- McCarty, John. *The Modern Horror Film: 50 Contemporary Classics from "The Curse of Frankenstein" to "The Lair of the White Worm"*. New York: Citadel, 1990.
- Murray, James P. *To Find an Image: Black Films from Uncle Tom to Super Fly*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973.
- Newman, Kim, ed. *The BFI Companion to Horror*. Film Studies Ser. London: Cassell, 1996.
- . *Nightmare Movies: A Critical History of Horror Film, 1968-1988*. London: Bloomsbury, 1988.
- Patterson, Lindsay, ed. *Black Films and Film-Makers: A Comprehensive Anthology from Stereotype to Superhero*. New York: Dodd, 1975.
- Paul, William. *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy*. Film and Culture Ser. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.
- Reddick, Lawrence. "Of Motion Pictures." *Black Films and Film-Makers: A Comprehensive Anthology from Stereotype to Superhero*. Ed. Lindsay Patterson. New York: Dodd, 1975. 4.
- "Review of Night of the Living Dead." *Variety*. 19 Oct. 1968: 6.
- Russell, Jamie. *Book of the Dead: The Complete History of Zombie Cinema*. Surrey, England: FAB, 2005.
- Schoell, William. *Stay out of the Shower: 25 Years of Shocker Films Beginning with Psycho*. New York: Dembner, 1985.
- Seabrook, William. *The Magic Island*. New York: Harcourt, 1929.
- Spainhower, Mark. "Wizard of Gore" *Re/Search #10: Incredibly Strange Films*. Eds. Andrea Juno and V. Vale. San Francisco: Re/Search, 1986.
- Vieira, Mark A. *Hollywood Horror: from Gothic to Cosmic*. New York: Harry N.

Abrams, 2003.

Williams, Tony. *The Cinema of George A. Romero: Knight of the Living Dead*.
Directors' Cut Ser. London: Wallflower Press, 2003.

Young, Elizabeth. "Here Comes the Bride: Wedding, Gender, and Race in Bride of
Frankenstein." *Feminist Studies* 17.3 (1991): 52 pars. Academic Search Premier.
EBSCOhost. LSU Libraries. 23 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.lsu.edu/lib>>.

Filmography

- 28 Days Later. Dir. Danny Boyle. Perf. Naomie Harris, and Cillian Murphy. 20th Century Fox, 2003.
- The Astro-Zombies. Dir. Ted V. Mikels. Perf. John Carradine and Wendell Corey. Image Entertainment, 1969.
- Biker Zombies. Dir. Todd Brunswick. Perf. Tyrus Woodson and Jillian Buckshaw. Spectrum Entertain, 2001.
- The Birds. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. Tippi Hedren and Rod Taylor. Universal, 1961.
- Black Like Me. Dir. Carl Lerner. Perf. James Whitmore and Sorrell Brooke. Rhino/Wea, 1964.
- Bride of Frankenstein. Dir. James Whale. Perf. Colin Clive and Boris Karloff. Universal, 1935.
- The Birth of a Nation. Dir. D.W. Griffith. Perf. Lillian Gish and Mae Marsh. Epoch, 1915.
- Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things. Dir. Bob Clark. Perf. Alan Ormsby and Valerie Mamches. Vci/Ffi, 1972.
- The Crazies. Dir. George A. Romero. Perf. Lane Carroll and Will MacMillan. Anchor Bay, 1973.
- The Curse of the Doll People. Dir. Benito Alazraki. Perf. Ramón Gay and Elvira Quintana. Azteca, 1961.
- Dawn of the Dead. Dir. George A. Romero. Perf. David Emge and Ken Foree. Anchor Bay, 1979.
- Day of the Dead. Dir. George A. Romero. Perf. Lori Cardille and Terry Alexander. Laurel, 1985.
- Doctor Blood's Coffin. Dir. Sidney J. Furie. Perf. Kieron Moore and Hazel Court. Alpha Video, 1961.
- Dr. Satan Vs. Black Magic. Dir. Rogelio A. Gonzalez. Perf. Joaquin Cordero and Noe Murayama. Azteca, 1968.
- Dracula. Dir. Tod Browning. Perf. Bela Lugosi and Helen Chandler. MCA, 1931.
- The Earth Dies Screaming. Dir. Terence Fisher. Perf. Virginia Field and William

Parker. Lippert, 1965.

Frankenstein. Dir. James Whale. Perf. Colin Clive and Boris Karloff. Universal, 1931.

Ganja and Hess. Dir. Bill Gunn. Perf. Duane Jones and Marlene Clark. Image, 1973.

The Ghost Breakers. Dir. Perf. Bob Hope and Darby Jones. Paramount, 1940.

The Ghoul. Dir. T. Hayes Hunter. Perf. Boris Karloff and Cedric Hardwick. Gaumont, 1933.

The Hands of Orlac. Dir. Edmond T. Gréville. Perf. Mel Ferrer and Christopher Lee. Riviera, 1961.

The Horror of Party Beach. Dir. Del Tenney. Perf. John Scott and Alice Lyon. Dark Sky, 1964.

Invasion of the Zombies. Dir. Benito Alazraki. Perf. Santo and Lorena Velázquez. Azteca, 1962.

Isle of the Snake People. Dir. Juan Ibáñez. Perf. Boris Karloff and Julissa. Retro, 1971.

I Walked with a Zombie. Dir. Jacques Tourneur. Perf. Frances Dee and James Ellison. Turner Home, 1943.

King Kong. Dir. Merian C. Cooper. Perf. Faye Wray and Robert Armstrong. RKO, 1933.

King of the Zombies. Dir. Jean Yarbrough. Perf. Dick Purcell and Joan Woodbury. Alpha, 1941.

Land of the Dead. Dir. George A. Romero. Perf. Simon Baker and John Leguizamo. MCA, 2005.

London After Midnight. Dir. Tod Browning. Perf. Lon Chaney and Marceline Day. MGM, 1927.

The Man They Could Not Hang. Dir. Nick Grinde. Perf. Boris Karloff and Lora Gray. Columbia, 1939.

Murder on a Bridle Path. Dirs. Edward Killy and William Hamilton . Perf. James Gleeson and Willie Best. RKO, 1936.

Night of the Comet. Dir. Thom Eberhardt. Perf. Robert Beltran and Catherine Mary Stuart. Goodtimes, 1984.

Night of the Living Dead. Dir. George A. Romero. Perf. Duane Jones and Judith

O'Dea. Walter Reade, 1968.

Ouanga. Dir. George Terwilliger. Perf. Philip Brandon and Fredi Washington. Turner, 1936.

Orgy of the Dead. Dir. Stephen C. Apostolof. Perf. Criswell and Fawn Silver. Astra, 1965.

Phantom of the Opera. Dir. Rupert Julian. Perf. Lon Chaney and Mary Philbin. Universal, 1925.

Plan 9 from Outer Space. Dir. Edward D. Wood. Perf. Gregory Walcott and Mona McKinnon. Reynolds, 1959.

Planet of the Apes. Dir. Franklin J. Schaffner. Perf. Charlton Heston and Roddy McDowell. 20th Century Fox, 1968.

The Plague of the Zombies. Dir. John Gilling. Perf. Diane Clare and André Morell. Hammer, 1966.

Pot Zombies. Dir. Justin Powers. Perf. Starla Anderson, and Amy Brown. Fringe, 2005.

Psycho. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. Janet Leigh and Anthony Perkins. MCA, 1960.

Resident Evil. Dir. Paul W.S. Anderson. Perf. Milla Jovovich, and Michelle Rodriguez. Constantin, 2002.

The Return of the Living Dead. Dir. Dan O'Bannon. Perf. Clu Gulager and James Karen. Hemdale, 1985.

Revolt of the Zombies. Dir. Victor Halperin. Perf. Dean Jagger and Dorothy Stone. Halperin Productions, 1936.

Rosemary's Baby. Dir. Roman Polanski. Perf. John Cassavetes and Mia Farrow. William Castle, 1968.

Santo and Blue Demon Against the Monsters. Dir. Gilberto Martínez Solares. Perf. Santo and Alejandro Cruz. Azteca, 1970.

Santo and Blue Demon in the Land of the Dead. Dir. Gilberto Martínez Solares. Perf. Santo and Alejandro Cruz. Azteca, 1969.

Scared Stiff. Dir. Frank McDonald. Perf. Jack Haley and Ann Savage. Pine-Thomas, 1952.

Slaves. Dir. Herbert J. Biberman. Perf. Ossie Davis and Dionne Warwick. Walter Reade,

1969.

Super Sleuth. Dir. Benjamin Stoloff. Perf. Jack Oakie and Ann Sothorn. RKO, 1937.

Two in Revolt. Dir. Glenn Tryon. Perf. John Arledge and Louise Latimer. RKO, 1936.

Voodoo Island. Dir. Reginald Le Borg. Perf. Boris Karloff and Beverly Tyler. MGM, 1957.

Teenage Zombies. Dir. Jerry Warren. Perf. Don Sullivan and Katherine Victor. GBM, 1959.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. Dir. Tobe Hooper. Perf. Marilyn Burn and Allen Danziger. Vortex, 1974.

The Walking Dead. Dir. Michael Curtiz. Perf. Boris Karloff and Ricardo Cortez. Warner, 1936.

White Zombie. Dir. Victor Halperin. Perf. Bela Lugosi and Madge Bellamy. RKO, 1932.

Zombie Night. Dir. David J. Francis. Perf. Danny Ticknovich and Sandra Segovic. Maverick, 2003.

Zombie Planet. Dir. George Banilla. Perf. Frank Farhat and Rebecca Minton. Tempe, 2004.

Zombie! Vs. Mardi Gras. Dirs. Karl DeMolay and Will Frank. Perf. Hanz Dalken and Matt James. Carnavale Productions, 2000.

Zombie Xtreme. Dir. Julián Lara. Perf. Julián Lara and Calamator. Unreleased, 2004.

Vita

Jennifer Whitney Dotson was born and raised in Belvidere, Tennessee, where she lived for eighteen years before attending Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, in 2000. In the summer of 2004 she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English with a minor in sociology. Since 2004, Jennifer has been in Baton Rouge where for the past two years she has been studying African American literature and film as well as folklore and publishing at Louisiana State University. She hopes to one day write some books and live in a farmhouse in the foothills of Tennessee.