

American horror film director George Romero (1940–2017)

Including a conversation with film historian Tony Williams

By David Walsh
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George Romero, American director of numerous horror and other films, died July 16 in Toronto. His manager, Chris Roe, explained in a statement that the filmmaker, 77, passed away in his sleep, “following a brief but aggressive battle with lung cancer.”

Romero is best known for *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *The Crazies* (1973), *Martin* (1978), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Creepshow* (1982), *Day of the Dead* (1985), *Monkey Shines* (1988), *The Dark Half* (1993), *Bruiser* (2000) and *Land of the Dead* (2005).

In my view, ultimately, Romero will be remembered as an intriguing, non-conformist, generally anti-establishment, but minor figure. He made six zombie films, and that was far too many. The buckets of blood, cannibalism and other awfulness, all too graphically and convincingly represented for my taste, regularly got in the way of the more important concerns.

Apparently, Romero also wanted to extract himself from this blind alley, but was unable to. No doubt, the difficulties of several politically reactionary decades and the changed economics of the “blockbuster” era in Hollywood damaged and limited his career. Nonetheless, one is obliged to judge a filmmaker by what he created, not by what he would have liked to create.

There are some very striking images in Romero’s work. Perhaps the most memorable, which remains in one’s brain nearly half a century later, is the opening sequence of *Night of the Living Dead*, shot some 25 miles north of Pittsburgh—on weekends—between June and December 1967.

A brother and sister, Barbra and Johnny (Judy O’Dea and Russell Streiner) have driven several hours to lay a wreath on their father’s grave in a rural Pennsylvania cemetery. The first words we see, on a sign, are “Cemetery Entrance.” A fluttering American flag is one of the first prominent images.

Johnny, some sort of “pen-pusher” as indicated by his outfit, is selfish and complaining. A male figure, at first out of focus, appears in the distance in the cemetery. Johnny reminds Barbra how he used to frighten her as a child. The bizarrely staggering figure eventually crosses Barbra’s path and attacks her. Johnny intervenes, but is knocked down and hits his head on a gravestone.

There is unquestionably a compelling and *socially metaphorical* element to this encounter between Johnny, a smirking, self-satisfied middle-class American, and something monstrous, one of the many “dead” from that decade, who comes out of the grave and proves to be terrifyingly still with us. ... Then mayhem, with certain anti-racist and anti-militarist overtones, ensues.

The film, shot for \$114,000, had a considerable impact when it

opened in October 1968. The fact that a black actor played a leading role (Romero always insisted that Duane Jones had simply given the best audition), in the wake of the inner city rebellions of the mid-1960s and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., was one of its striking features. But, more generally, *Night of the Living Dead*, with its above-mentioned opening in a graveyard scattered with American flags, appeared in the midst of an extremely convulsive era and, in some oblique manner, gave expression to the apparently endless horror and violence.

Romero told an interviewer in 2008, referring to the final moments of the film, “And we were all ’60s people, and we were angry that peace and love didn’t work, and the world looked like it was in a little worse shape. The Vietnam War, the riots in the streets, the frustration, etc. So I just wanted the end of that film to look like newsreel footage.”

One film historian argues that Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* and Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, coming in the midst of events that “shattered America’s optimistic political and social climate ... ushered in the modern era of the horror film.”

The difficulty, in my view, is that Romero, for a variety of reasons, never went much beyond this initial strong intuition and, indeed, became stuck in the rut of making blood-filled, relatively formulaic works.

The Dark Half and *Monkey Shines* are interesting and eerie films. *Bruiser*, which focuses on a ghastly “lifestyle” magazine and its equally ghastly publisher (Peter Stormare), is also well worth watching.

Martin has an important and suggestive setting, Braddock, Pennsylvania, a steel town in the midst of decline at the time of shooting, but I think it is severely damaged by the unsympathetic lead character—a psychotic young man who thinks he’s a vampire—and the generally misanthropic psychological ambience. Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter*, also released in 1978 and also set in a steel town, for all its peculiar and occasionally even reactionary features, is a far more telling work, in my opinion.

In any event, I spoke to Tony Williams, professor at Southern Illinois University and the author of *The Cinema of George A. Romero: Knight of the Living Dead* (second edition, 2015, Wallflower Press), about the deceased director. I explained at the outset that we were going to disagree about Romero’s overall significance, but I would be interested to hear what he had to say. This is our conversation.

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David Walsh: Could you say something about George Romero's background and film career?

Tony Williams: George was born in New York City in 1940. His father was Cuban, his mother was Lithuanian American. He went through the normal childhood and adolescent phase of being interested in movies. He watched the films of the great classical Hollywood system when it was still viable. He arrived at the point of wanting to make films himself.

Eventually, he found himself in Pittsburgh where he did industrial documentaries and adverts for television. One weekend he got together with a group of friends to begin filming a horror movie at the time when you could still make low-budget horror movies. Over many weekends, he and other people got together and filmed *Night of the Living Dead*, which became a runaway success.

After *Night of the Living Dead*, George definitely did not want to be pigeon-holed as a horror film maker, and the second film, *There's Always Vanilla* (1971), a comedy, which I think he unjustly disparaged, was about the '60s generation's selling out and the beginning of yuppie materialism infecting the American landscape.

He went on to do *The Crazies*, about the American military covering up one of their mistakes in which the population gets contaminated by a military biological weapon.

In 1978 Romero directed *Martin*, about a disturbed youth who thinks he is a vampire. By this time Romero had entered into a productive creative relationship with Richard Rubinstein and Laurel Entertainment. Rubinstein was responsible for the production of *Martin*, *Dawn of the Dead*, *Knightriders* (1981), *Creep show* and *Day of the Dead*.

After the success of *Dawn of the Dead*, George wanted to do a different type of film. *Knight riders* was very much his allegory about the problems of being an independent filmmaker in a very commercialized American film system.

Creep show, with Stephen King, was an homage to the EC Comics of the 1950s and the very radical naturalism that went into them. Those comics dealt with various taboo subjects that were excluded from the official cultural discourse.

Eventually, the association with Rubinstein soured because he wanted George to be much more in the mainstream. Urged by director John Carpenter to go to Hollywood, Romero went on to direct two interesting films, *Monkey Shines* and *The Dark Half*.

George was very much in the wilderness between 1993 and 2000. He got in touch with a Canadian producer and brought out *Bruiser*, which became one of his favorite films. It's a film about the destruction of human beings within the cold, calculating American way of life and the distortion of the human personality, which is part and parcel of the zombie films—if you take away the zombies and the gore.

Universal enticed Romero to do *Land of the Dead* in 2005, which is not a bad film, but George got very irritated at the interference by the executives. He decided to relocate to Toronto and made the last two zombie films there, *Diary of the Dead* [2007] and *Survival of the Dead* [2009].

I do know that George was in poor health for the last five years of his life. He was a heavy smoker. He tried to give it up, but when I last saw him in Chicago he was smoking again.

As a human being, he was very mild-mannered, humorous and modest.

DW: Why did he gravitate to the horror genre to begin with?

TW: In the 1960s and 1970s, if you wanted to start off making a

low-budget film, the horror genre was very popular. You could make a film on a shoestring budget, get a producer interested and have it distributed. Of course, the distribution of independent films on a commercial basis was much easier in the 1970s than it became in the 1980s and onward.

DW: I remember the impact of *Night of the Living Dead*, a disturbing film. The opening scene in the cemetery stays with you. Among other things, it speaks to the historical moment.

TW: Yes, because the mood of that era would percolate into George's films. He was never an analytic director. He was an intuitive director. For example, casting a black actor in a lead role was not a politically conscious decision, but it was very much an indirect reflection of the mood of the times.

DW: What were Romero's views on the Vietnam War and so forth?

TW: George was very much in the counter-cultural tradition of America. He was against the Vietnam War, he was against the American repressive system which we live under and which has taken on much worse manifestations now than were apparent at that particular time. He was a very radical-thinking person.

DW: As part of a final question, which expresses some of my concerns, let me quote a passage from your book on page 103: "*Dawn of the Dead* is definitely violent film. It develops the premises of *Night of the Living Dead* by using gory, spectacular formal features which often distract audiences from recognising the important messages embedded within the film's text. Some audience members often act little differently from fictional characters ... in allowing themselves to be carried away by a deadly world of masculine aggressiveness in cheering the visual spectacle of gore and slaughter. But by doing so, they lose sight of *Dawn of the Dead*'s more important concepts."

If the political message can be that easily lost or missed, how effective is it? Isn't it pandering, rather than criticizing? If audience members simply cheer on the violence, isn't the filmmaker to blame for creating an atmosphere in which they can "lose sight of" the "more important concepts"?

TW: This is not a new question. You could level the same criticism at classic Hollywood films too. It depends on who is in the audience and a director or writer aiming the work at the more critically aware viewer or reader. One critic years ago said that one of the problems with Vietnam War films being used for radical purposes was that people got carried away by the explosions and the fighting and the action. But these are constituent elements of the form.

On one level, the films may be mindless entertainment. But that level conflicts with an alternative message running through the work that contradicts the exploitative mechanism used in a particular genre.

DW: We're going to have to agree to disagree on this, but I appreciate your time.

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