

Night of the Living Dead

(George A. Romero, 1968)

Component 1, Section A: Hollywood 1930–1990

Core study areas:

- **Key elements of film form**
- **Meaning and response: aesthetics and representations**
- **Contexts**

Specialist study areas: *Auteur*

Rationale for study: *Night of the Living Dead* is a classic of the horror genre, single-handedly inventing the modern ‘zombie’ sub-genre. It also has profound social relevance, critiquing American social relations, Cold War paranoia and racial violence. It was also one of the first American films to feature a black hero. In 1999, it was admitted into the Library of Congress Film Registry as a film that was “culturally, historically or aesthetically significant.”

STARTING POINTS – Useful sequences and timings:

‘A visit to the cemetery’ 0:01:41 – 0:06:51

“You can be boss down there, I’m the boss up here!” 0:39:54 – 0:47:50

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 – STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography

- Romero regularly uses canted shots to give the film an askew feeling, reflecting the intense fear of the characters. He was influenced by Hitchcock’s use of these angles in *Psycho* (1960) to create unease amongst the audience.
- The TV news segments imitate the conventions of 1960s reportage, a mixture of mid-shot pieces to camera and on-location, handheld camera (e.g. walking alongside the scientists and general in Washington). This lends the narrative a feeling of immediacy and realism.

Mise-en-scène

- The film begins in a cemetery, a typical location for gothic horror films like *Dracula* (Browning, 1931). The action quickly moves to a modern house, suggesting that the events are taking place in a contemporary setting.
- One of the themes of the film is the collapse of the traditional ‘nuclear’ family. The house location starts as a place of safety for the survivors, though by the end it feels more like a prison. The way Barbra clings to the tablecloth and strokes the sofa suggest her longing for a now destroyed domestic stability.
- The make-up effects used for the ‘zombies’ are extremely realistic. At first, the ghouls are just very pale, and could easily be mistaken for humans. But after the TV news announces the dead are rising, the make-up becomes more grotesque, making clear that these are living corpses.

Editing

- When the survivors find the TV, the film's narrative cuts between the action inside the house and, via the news broadcasts, the bigger picture of what is going on around America. This device is used due to budgetary restraints, but the fact this a nationwide disaster also intensifies the feeling of claustrophobia inside the house; there is literally nowhere to run to escape the horror.
- Unusually for films of the time, there are no narrative jumps forward or flashbacks. This makes the events feel that they are happening in 'real time', which adds to the verisimilitude (i.e. the 'feeling of reality').

Sound

- A ragtag group of bickering survivors is now an established convention of the zombie/survivalist horror sub-genre (most notably in the TV show *The Walking Dead*). The dialogue between the survivors also illustrates the power struggle between Ben and Henry, the optimism of the younger characters and the dysfunctional Cooper family. These elements help elevate *Night of the Living Dead* from a very scary horror film to a critique of American society.

Performance

- The characters all behave in a realistic fashion, considering the bizarre circumstances they find themselves in. Though Ben is the most heroic character, he seems as terrified as the others, only more capable and intelligent. There is no over-the-top acting or valiant behaviour, which again adds to the verisimilitude and, consequently, the audience's fear.



Image by AA Film Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 – STARTING POINTS: Meaning and response

Representations

- *Night of the Living Dead* is widely acknowledged as a film that critiques American society. The survivors in the house seem like a microcosm of dysfunctional social relations. The most resourceful character, Ben, is viewed with distrust by the others, presumably due to his race (though this is never verbalised). Henry Cooper represents a form of 1960s 'toxic' masculinity, trying to seize a leadership role merely because he is white and male. The Coopers symbolise the collapse of the 'nuclear' family: the parents are unhappily married and are unable to protect their daughter, who finally turns into a monster and kills them.
- In the shocking denouement, all possibility of hope is destroyed. Initially, it seems the armed state troopers will restore order by systematically killing the living dead. This would follow the traditional horror movie narrative, where the monsters are defeated, and equilibrium is restored. However, the tragic murder of the hero suggests the real threat – especially to a black man at this time – is not the undead, but US law enforcement. This is a scathing comment on the way the American authorities were attacking the civil rights movement. To note: 1968, the year of the film's release, was also the year Martin Luther King was assassinated.
- There are many theories about what the hordes of living dead symbolise – from the Soviet threat, to fears of 'contagious' homosexuality or even personifications of insatiable American consumerism. You could do some research into some of these theories and discuss with others what you think zombies represent and why they have been so resonant with audiences since Romero's film.

Aesthetics

- The black and white, handheld camera and low budget gives the film a realistic aesthetic and replicates the *cinema vérité* or 'direct cinema' documentary film movement of the 1960s.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 – STARTING POINTS: Contexts

Social / Political

- The 1960s and 1970s in the USA were a time of social and political upheaval. The patriotic idealism (reinforced by the Allied victory in WWII) was disrupted by a number of social factors. The Civil Rights Movement and the youth-led counter-culture – including anti-Vietnam War protests and the fight for women’s and LGBTQ rights – were seen by many as a genuine threat to the fabric of American society. You should consider how Romero personifies these conflicting ideologies with the characters in the film.

Cultural

- The still images in the end credits are reminiscent of the shocking photojournalism that documented the atrocities being committed in Vietnam (particularly the piling and burning of bodies). With news media daily displaying violence both abroad and in the US (especially the clashes between police and civil right or anti-war demonstrators), the images in *Night of the Living Dead* would have discomfiting resonance for audiences at the time.

Institutional

- The film cost only \$114,000 to produce. Because of the explicit gore, it initially struggled to find a distributor. Five years later, it had grossed \$12 million in the US, and \$20 million globally, making it one of the most financially successful films of all time. This proved to bigger studios that films with subversive and shocking material could be good financial investments.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA – *Auteur*: Starting points

- George A. Romero qualifies as an *auteur* filmmaker in many ways. In a fifty-year long career, he only ever made one major studio film. The rest were low budget independent films that enabled him to maintain complete creative control of the material. Even as his budgets and crew sizes became larger, he continued to write and direct, as well as often producing and

editing. This enabled him to offer subversive critiques of American society and fulfil what critic Stephen Hunter called “the oppositional potential of popular cinema”. Because many of his films feature protagonists who are marginalised or eccentric, he has also been described as “champion of the unrepresented”.

- Look at some of the plot summaries of other titles in Romero’s filmography. Consider how their plots and central characters challenge mainstream society.

KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS:

A visit to the cemetery – 1:41 – 6:51

- Cemeteries and other ‘places of the dead’ have been a conventional location of the horror genre since it’s beginning (think of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*). How does Romero clearly establish this film is set in the 20th century?
- Consider the cemetery sign and Johnny’s dialogue. How does this indicate a cynical and disrespectful attitude towards the dead? What other traditional social institutions does Johnny appear cynical about?
- Foreshadowing is another convention of the horror genre. Even before the ghouls attack Judy, what other hints are there that something terrible is about to happen?
- As the car drives through the cemetery, the props of US flags are clearly displayed. Why do you think Romero did this? How does this indicate this horror film is also a social commentary?
- Consider the use of camera and sound before and during the attack. How do they convey a sense of unease and terror?
- With his cynical attitude and his teasing of Barbra, Johnny seems like a ‘deserving victim’, another convention of the horror genre. Compare him to the other human characters later in the film. Which characters seem undeserving of their fates? What effect does this lack of moral judgement impact on the audience?