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Rhetoric of the Sixties
Semester Paper
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The Social Observations of Race Within *The Night of the Living Dead*

Horror films, especially independent black and white movies, weren't always accepted in their day, and yet, *Night of the living Dead* has become a cult classic. To this day it is discussed at every level from the casual movie watcher to university professors speaking about the social critiques that horror movies possess. Director and screenwriter George Romano continues to be one of the people at the forefront of horror movies and the social critiques that accompany them. Proof lies in the fact that not only *Night of the Living Dead*, but also *Dawn of the Dead* have been remade, both of which are Romano classics.

Night of the Living Dead does an amazing job showing many of the messages of the "new left" movement of the 1960s. The movie comes in response to the environment that the society was setting up saying that the current dominant system was not acceptable. People were demanding individuality and equity for everyone. While there are many different arguments that are made in the 1968 black and white version of *Night of the Living Dead*, I will focus on the racism critique.

Night of the Living Dead has two different levels of the racism arguments-- actual actions that Romano takes while preparing for the movie and the sub textual ones that are made inside the movie. Although those arguments aren't explicitly made, they are strong enough to see a connection and make the arguments for why Romano dislikes the racism that is in society.

On the action level, there is one thing that Romano's does in casting that fights against racism. *Night of the Living Dead* is the first eventual main stream movie (*Night* does eventually get picked up by a mainstream movie distribution) to cast a black person as the lead when the

role doesn't demand that it be a black person (Russell). This does something extraordinary as it makes the point that people acting are all the same and that black people can not only be amazing actors, but they should and can be cast for lead roles. This is an important thing because if Romano hadn't cast a black for the lead character then the sub textual arguments wouldn't have been able to be made. Romano made a conscious choice to put a black person as the lead character so that those critiques could be made.

On the sub textual level is the script and the way things are acted out conveying arguments against racism. There are several different patterns that seem to be working in the movie. The first is the idea of light and dark. The second is the hierarchy of the house and the third is the fight for authority.

Let's focus on the first idea, the idea of light and dark. This concept is introduced when Ben (the black lead character) originally appears in the movie. He comes to the house in a truck. The headlights shine directly into the house where the lead female character (Barbara) is having an emotional breakdown. She is in turmoil because while at the cemetery with her brother he is attacked by a zombie and turns into a one of the living dead. So although she is having an emotional breakdown, Ben shines the light from the truck into the window. Ben enters and quickly does things to get things under control. The first thing that Ben does to prove that he is a savior, is find her some shoes, because she lost her shoes when she was running from zombies. He also protects her from the one remaining zombie that is left in the house by killing it. He also turns on the lights in the upstairs of the house when he finds the fuse box. Ben then begins to board up and turn the house into a fortress to resist the living dead that are surrounding the house. These actions prove that Ben is a savior and that the light that came first associates that light with the good that our savior brings.

The other part of the light/dark, good/evil display in the movie is the interaction between the upstairs/actual living area of the house and the basement of the house (Russell). The basement of the house is an obvious storage area and therefore it was extremely dark, whereas the upstairs was lit. This again focuses on the dichotomy between light and dark in the movie. The light is the area which isn't a death trap. There are at least areas in which you can leave and run from the zombies. The basement, which is dark, is a death trap. There is only one entrance and only one way out, so if the zombies were to get into the house then there would be no way for the people in the basement to save themselves. The basement is also where the other main characters originally appear. This is where Tom, Judy and the Cooper family have hidden themselves.

This original location is very important as, the darkness from this location becomes associated with discrimination. All the characters from here are wearing a much darker based costumes; whereas Ben and Barbra are in light colored clothes. The other point of significance is the fact that outside of the house there are a mindless group of white individuals who start to look like a lynch mob outside. This gives Ben a hard situation to deal with as he is incapable of doing much without fearing and heading straight into hoards of darkness. This is a critique of the way that racism has affected every black person's life. The argument Romano makes in the movie is that racism disabled the options/freedoms/liberties that every person in the United States is supposed to have. Just like the Jim Crow Laws and segregation disabled possibilities for black persons.

When looking at the hierarchy of the house, it becomes obvious that there was a priority to what the best area of the house was and what area should be used for protection. The upstairs seemed to be the optimal place for protection (Jancovich). First of all it had light. And as

described above, that was part of being good. Part of the reason that the upstairs was good is because there is food, light, water, a gun for protection and an escape route. There occurred a major battle for the house over the basement. When Harry Cooper originally comes out of the basement he immediately sees the value of the house, not to mention there was a radio in which he could keep him apprised of what was going on outside the house. Harry Cooper tries to take control and be the authority of the house. Ben would have none of it. This begins a battle for authority that gets quite heated. Harry Cooper shows that he truly values the upstairs when he locks Ben out of the house as Ben, Tom and Judy try to refuel the only vehicle near the house so that they could make it to the emergency rescue point. Harry's plot was to let Ben die after seeing Tom and Judy die. Both Tom and Judy are white, which in Harry's mind means that everyone of value outside the house has been killed. It becomes apparent to Harry that he could lock Ben out of the house and let him be killed by zombies because then he would be in charge of the entire house and the basement. He would no longer have a challenge to his authority. This is blatantly clear as Harry didn't begin to lock the door and was in fact guarding the house until Tom and Judy died. This is important to the argument that the main idea behind racism is to fear the other races having authority. This is obviously what Harry Cooper is doing because, Ben has the gun, has the authority, and control of the upper part of the house. Romano's argument seems to be that because of the jealousy and fear of others having authority, people do things like trying to make someone die, disabling them or just quite simply to keeping someone oppressed.

Under the third argument there are many different ways in which Harry Cooper tries to undermine Ben's authority, not only with statements meant to undermine Ben but also actions. The first argument Harry has with Ben is over which area of the house would be the best to defend. Harry's logic was to try to get everyone downstairs so that Harry could be in charge, and

that he could control everything. Ben wouldn't let Harry take the supplies and the necessities that are needed for survival so they could stay in the basement for an extended period of time. This means that by keeping the food, and the necessities Ben made sure the upstairs portion of the house is the most important place.

The second time Harry tries to undermine Ben is when Harry demanded that the white women watch the television and look for information, because the black man isn't capable of such acknowledgement of what the TV had been saying and what it said should be done. This statement is directly made just so that the people will see that Harry thinks that Ben is an idiot. Harry uses his ethos and puts it on the line in order to lower the credibility of Ben.

The Third time, which might have just been a murder attempt is when Harry gets the gun from Ben and points it at him. If it wasn't for Ben's courage/bravery/stupidity to get the gun back then Harry would've taken all of the authority of the house and the basement, and possibly would've killed Ben.

You can see what Romano thinks of this blatant racism. He shows Ben beating the holy hell out of Harry once Ben has re-entered the house after being locked out. The constant racism and battle for authority that underlies racism ultimately leads to fighting and people tearing each other apart.

While the movie is one of my favorite movies, I feel that it's attacks against racism aren't going to be received by most of the audience. Although I said in the introduction that the movie is watched by everyone from casual movie watchers to university professors, I believe that most people just see *Night of the Living Dead* as just another horror movie. Proof of this lies in the fact that during the remakes of Romano's classic films, the social critiques that underlie the movies are not as obvious or present at all. So unless one is looking for the social observations

and critiques that Romano makes in his horror classics, one might easily pass these movies by as just another zombie movie.

Works Cited

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