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Media and Society

Historical and sociological themes within *Night of the Living Dead & Dawn of the Dead*.

Zombie films have recently been the popular trend within Hollywood movies and American culture throughout the past decade. With such recent hits like *28 Days Later* (2002), *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *Zombie Land* (2009), *The Resident Evil franchise* (2002-2015) and the popular TV series *The Walking Dead* (2010-??); audiences are continuously fascinated by hip, modern zombie pop-culture. And yet this trend wouldn't have even gotten started if it wasn't for George A. Romero, a young experimental filmmaker who created two horror classics which ultimately defined an entire new sub-genre.

Romero's midnight movie classic *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) was shot on a shoe-string budget, grainy black and white, and was a film which originally generated a large amount of controversy for its violence and gore; ultimately changing the way people looked at censorship and the recent regulation of the MPAA code. It wasn't about ten years later until Romero decided to direct a sequel to his original cult classic titled *Dawn of the dead* (1978). Instead of retreading the same old elements like most sequels tend to do, Romero took the zombie concept a step further and made *Dawn of the Dead* a satirical black comedy and a brilliant exploration on American consumer society. Each film had its individual sociological and historical themes that Romero felt the need to explore within that decade when the film was

released. I want to explore such themes and put them each into their own personal context with the help from the readings by Stephen Harper.

*Night of the Living Dead* when originally released in 1968 horrified audiences because of its frightening exploration with alienation, cannibalism and identity along with its relenting and shocking violence and gore. And yet what probably frightened audiences the most was the simple question the film seemed to pose: Who is the true enemy? *Night of the Living Dead* was released in 1969 which was the end of a bleak decade of great political violence and drastic culture changes, and so many of the visual aesthetics that Romero used seemed to reinforce the public's current personal feelings and emotions. *Night of the Living Dead* was given a grainy documentary black and white feel, along with the television news and the disturbing still photographs that appeared in the credit sequence of the film; all such visual elements would immediately take audiences back to the gritty and disturbing photojournalism reality of the Vietnam War.

The film also shows an incredible amount of pessimism and despair, most famously with the shocking and depressing ending which tragically kills off the heroic main character, with him not saving the world and ultimately having evil conquer over good. These aesthetics that Romero used throughout the movie represented the public's heightened feelings of doubt and paranoia of their very own governments at the time.

“Near the beginning of *Night of the Living Dead*, in a shot of Johnny and Barbra's car entering the graveyard, we see a fluttering American flag in the foreground. The symbolism of the flag becomes clear as the film progresses: America is a dying

country as a result of the zombie menace, and the flag represents the meaninglessness and deadliness of patriotism” (Harper 6).

Race is also a major sociological theme within *Night of the Living Dead* as the zombies represent various racial metaphors of the oppressed racial minorities in America during the 1960’s. The film was released during a tense race war in America, as the assassination of African-American leaders like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, several racial protests and upheavals were breaking out all throughout the country and the frightening creation of various black and white militant groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Panthers were attracting a large following.

Romero courageously decided to cast a black man as the strong, intelligent and rational hero in *Night of the Living Dead* as it went completely against the norm of Hollywood, because at that time there weren’t any black leading characters within mainstream American movies. The protagonist’s accidental and preventable death by the red-neck towns-people at the end of the film not only immediately brings to mind the racial tensions between black and whites at the time of the 60’s but also of the many unarmed young black youths shot for no reason whatsoever continuously occurring today. (The riots that recently happened all because of the unjust Ferguson trial outcome had ironically occurred while I was writing this paper!)

When Romero decided to make *Dawn of the Dead* 10 years later, he came to the creative decision to make it less a gothic horror film and more a satirical black comedy. This time instead of a frightening cabin in the woods, Romero used the dramatic environment of the shopping mall which helped create the radical corporate, anti-consumerist, capitalistic themes which really are the elements that make *Dawn of the Dead* such a memorable movie. The sudden popularity of

the shopping mall was at its peak within with American culture during the 70's, and Romero's exploration of the mall ultimately became a reoccurring interest in various later films as well. "The shopping mall remains a cultural fascination in capitalist countries, while in cinema; malls have become a staple location for smart-ass teen movies" (Harper 5).

Unlike Romero's original zombie cult classic, *Dawn of the Dead* has several delightful moments of genuine joy and comedy, especially during a sequence that involves the survivors going on an enjoyable shopping spree. They casually ignore the threat of the zombies inside the mall all the while lightheartedly rampaging through the mall and gleefully looting money, clothes, toys, videogames and guns. This ironic fantasy of rampant and chaotic materialism and instant consumerist gratification immediately brings to mind the behavior people represent when attending numerous Black Friday sales. "Romero certainly recognized the dramatic potential of the mall, which may be regarded as both the corporate capitalism and a potential site of resistance to the forces that regulate consumerism" (Harper 4).

What Stephen Harper seems to be suggesting within his articles of both *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead* is essentially a historical and sociological set of 'place'. *Night of the Living Dead's* place was through tense racial battles that were continuously occurring inside the country with the progression of the Civil Rights movement and outside the country, with our upsetting involvement in Vietnam. With *Dawn of the Dead* our historical importance of place is within the Capitalistic world of the shopping mall, which becomes the perfect location to fulfill all American's greedy pleasures and consumer satisfactions. In *Dawn of the Dead* Peter explains to the rest of the survivors the very reason (or the only one they could come up with) why the zombies continuously want to get inside the mall. "It's not us they're after, it's the place. They remember that they want to be here."