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**BLOOD ON WHITE PICKET FENCES:**  
THE AMERICAN DREAM IN GEORGE A. ROMERO'S LIVING DEAD  
NIGHTMARE

A THESIS  
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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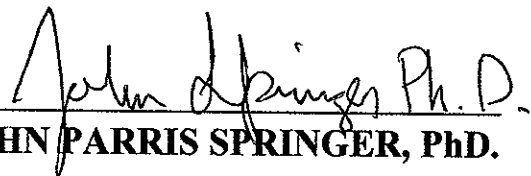
By  
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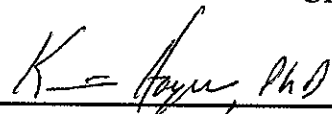
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IN MEMORY OF  
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Table of Contents

Abstract . . . . .2

Introduction: The Living Dead as Political Metaphor . . 3

Chapter 1: Nightmare of the Living Dead . . . . .20

Chapter 2: Home Ownership, Consumerism and the Living  
Dead . . . . . 45

Chapter 3: A Living Dead World . . . . . 71

Chapter 4: The Living Dead and Co-existence . . . . .94

Conclusion . . . . .113

Bibliography & Works Consulted . . . . .117

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA

EDMOND, OKLAHOMA

NAME: Marcus Mallard

TITLE OF THESIS: Blood on White Picket Fences: The American Dream in George A. Romero's Living Dead Nightmare

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Dr. John P. Springer

George A. Romero has been called the "Father of the Modern Zombie Movie." His 1968 classic, *Night of the Living Dead*, sparked an entirely new sub-genre of horror cinema. Along with this new medium of fright came a new way to interpret America. The *Dead* series brings in aspects of the American Dream including racial tensions, home ownership, and consumerism and how survivors must cope with the new menace and each other within an apocalyptic scenario. Each film offers a glimpse into the extra-filmic culture surrounding the films' release allowing the audience to interpret the socio-historical subtext.

Romero's films demonstrate the inability for human cooperation to occur within a disaster scenario, and that this spells as the ultimate end for the status quo. As for the living dead, the shambling masses are the mirror of the human society that is on its knees, operating on an instinctual mode of mass consumption. As the films progress, the living dead become self-aware and move to protect their own society they have taken from the survivors. The American Dream, the fallen society followed, only turned humanity into the living dead, and those that kept with the American Dream after the beginning of the contagion were not capable of surviving within such a hostile environment.

## Introduction

## The Living Dead as Political Metaphor

The living dead films of George A. Romero (*Night of the Living Dead*, 1968; *Dawn of the Dead*, 1978; *Day of the Dead*, 1985; and *Land of the Dead*, 2005) have redefined not only the sub-genre of zombie horror but also the horror genre as a whole. These films offer a world devastated by the reanimation of the recently deceased and use this apocalyptic scenario as a backdrop for an examination of concepts such as American identity, race relations, and the American Dream. The creatures in these films act as a plague on the pre-existing social order and devour any and all pieces of a dying society—eventually creating, in the final film, their own society. Early depictions of these ghouls, in films such as *White Zombie* (1932), are laden with racist and xenophobic connotations with the living dead seen as the embodiment of slavery in the earliest films of zombie cinema.<sup>1</sup> Now, the mythology of the zombie, encompasses fears of mob violence, instability of society, the

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of the zombie alludes to voodoo practices on the island of Haiti, and early films pictured them as black servants with very few whites represented in the bonds of slavery. According to Tony Williams, “apart from Halperin’s films, the rare appearances of white zombies differed from the Haitian counterparts” (13).

inability of humans to cooperate, and, of course, mass infection. This is a vastly different paradigm than the earliest zombie films that drew from the folklore of Voodoo practices, for according to Stephen Harper:

Zombies function as a *lumpenproletariat* of shifting significance, walking symbols of any oppressed social group. This function is derived in part from their origins in the literature and cinema of the twentieth century, in which zombies are synonymous with oppression and slavery. (Harper, "Zombies")

Romero's first film, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), signaled a change in American zombie cinema where the zombies would be transformed into the living dead and would begin to eliminate the previous society one bite at a time.<sup>2</sup>

In the documentary *Zombiemanía* (2008), Romero states that he has a love for the early zombie films such as *White Zombie* (1932) and *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943), and his biggest influence for *Night of the Living Dead* is

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<sup>2</sup> Although a Mexican director, Rafeal Portillo, actually first started showing rotting corpses in 1957 in his 1957 *Aztec Mummy* series, it wasn't until the 1966 Hammer release from the United Kingdom of *The Plague of the Zombies* that most English-speaking moviegoers saw decrepit, decomposing walking dead. (McIntosh 7-8)

Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I am Legend*. Romero, however, was not looking to make a literal adaptation of Matheson's work, yet he did use the concept of a siege tale in order to construct his narrative. He had not seen his creatures as zombies. Romero says:

I had never thought of them as zombies in *Night of the Living Dead*. They were flesh eaters. I didn't want to do vampires . . . the dead aren't staying dead, and when they come back, they're hungry. And they want to eat live flesh. (*Zombieman*)

Romero's zombies, then, were never intended to recreate the image of zombies that had been established well before 1968, bringing the term 'zombie' into question.

'Zombie,' or 'zombi,' is identified as a "soulless corpse said to have been revived by witchcraft; formerly, the name of a snake-deity in voodoo cult of or deriving from West Africa and Haiti" ("Zombie"), and it is this definition that identified the cinematic monster in films such as *White Zombie* and *I Walked with a Zombie* that had provided inspiration for Romero. The term, through cinema, has come to identify a person, living or reanimated, that is "dull, apathetic, or slow-witted" ("Zombie-2"), but it does not allow for the flesh-eating



that has become synonymous with the cinematic representations used and inspired by Romero's depiction of the living dead. The living dead (as I will identify the creatures through this study) are never given clear origins even though both scientific and religious explanations are offered.<sup>3</sup> Resources included in this study, however, would identify the living dead as zombies even though the term does not lend itself to be interpreted as a flesh-eating, representation of plague or apocalypse. The consumption of human flesh and the spreading of the plague through a bite would become synonymous with other filmmakers'<sup>4</sup> interpretation of these creatures, but with Romero's *Dead* series, a similarity between the living dead and other monsters of cinema, vampires or lycanthropes (werewolves), also use the bite as a catalyst for change in their victims. Kim Paffenroth argues that the living dead cannot operate on this level seeing as:

Zombies possess none of the supernatural qualities of other such monsters: they cannot

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<sup>3</sup> Peter, in *Dawn of the Dead*, does allude to the practices of voodoo when he mentions his grandfather saying, "When there's no room in hell, the dead shall walk the earth."

<sup>4</sup> Directors such as Dan O'Bannon, Danny Boyle, and Edgar Wright portrayed flesh eating creatures similar to Romero's in their films *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), *28 Days Later* (2002), and *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), respectively.

fly; they cannot turn into a vapor, bat, or wolf; they are not possessed of superhuman strength; they don't have fangs. As one critic put it, this means that we don't have "admiration" for them the way we often do for more powerful, superhuman monsters. (Paffenroth 8)

As Romero shows in his films, the living dead are a grotesque parody of humanity that eliminates social distinctions within their ranks, and Romero's films are built around this comparison between the living dead and the rest of humanity as they are at war for control of America.

It is the concept of a siege tale that is the most significant attribute of George A. Romero's zombie films. Zombie films before *Night of the Living Dead* did not pit a group of "survivors" against hordes of the living dead. Post-1968, however, the survival scenario has dominated the sub-genre. For Romero's films, there is a sense of hopelessness throughout that is never overcome by the survivors with the exception of *Land of the Dead*.

According to David Pagano:

Zombie films usually represent the catastrophic end of the human *habitus*, and while it is true

that occasionally such an end is narrowly avoided, the contagion of the zombie always at least threatens absolute destruction. (71)

Pagano's examination leads to a common thematic device within the horror genre as a whole: the return to normalcy. Romero's "*Dead* series" does not operate within this schema.<sup>5</sup> Without a return to normalcy, the narrative places emphasis on the interactions between the survivors which exposes how they are both affected by the pre-existing social order and what each character deems as worthy of being retained in this violent world.

Romero's films have become known for their inherent social commentary. Robin Wood, for example, discussing the third film in the series *Day of the Dead*, claims that the *Dead* series is "the most uncompromising radical critique of contemporary America that is possible within the terms and conditions of a popular 'entertainment' cinema" (45). Even with Wood's statement, the amount of work that examines the *Dead* series as a whole is usually included as a part of an auteurist study of Romero as with

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<sup>5</sup> As will be examined further in Chapter 1, *Night of the Living Dead* attempts to return to normalcy, but the complete eradication of the living dead is not seen. Furthermore, the society being overtaken by the walking corpses did not change as can be seen through the death of Ben. The following films begin with the contagion in full force, but the state of normalcy is unchanging through the last three films included in this study.

the work of Tony Williams or Paul R. Gagne.<sup>6</sup> Romero's films are more often examined in compendiums of the zombie sub-genre. Many studies focus on the concept of role reversal, or the "They are Us" dynamic that will be examined in Chapter 2 between the living and the living dead as explained by Tony Williams:

As their human lives were programmed by society, resulting in behavioural patterns becoming 'instinctive' or part of 'human nature', their dead counterparts continue the same form of behaviour. The living and the dead are united by desire and memory. (91)

What results is a comparison of the living and living dead in regards to such things as consumerism and race; however, these examinations of the film do not examine what influences the characters to make their decisions during this perilous time. As we will discover, human society is falling apart in these films as the walking contagion cannot be quelled, and the surviving humans must move from a society that centers on bettering

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<sup>6</sup> Gagne, Paul R. *The Zombies that Ate Pittsburgh: The Films of George A. Romero*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1987; Williams, Tony. *The Cinema of George A. Romero: Knight of the Living Dead*. London: Wallflower Press, 2003.

oneself to one where survival is key. This study, then, will analyze themes of the American Dream as a driving force for the living's attempt to rebuild their society surrounded by the living dead. The following then does not stand to posit an auteurist examination of Romero. Stephen Harper claims that the auteur claim is easy to fall back on because Romero writes, directs, and makes an appearance in each of his films (Harper, "*Night of the Living Dead*"). Yet Robin Wood claims that an auteurist approach to Romero is difficult because:

There is a very marked difference of tone, established by broad differences of format: grainy black-and-white for *Night of the Living Dead*, bright lighting, garish colors, lavish décor for *Dawn of the Dead*, subdued lighting, drab colors, a totally depleted décor for *Day of the Dead*. (45)

Woods' claim looks at the visual style of each film, and even though this approach presents an interesting analysis, the focal points of this study are the socio-cultural themes in regard to the American Dream throughout Romero's *Dead* series, excluding his two most recent film *Diary of the Dead* (2008) and *Survival of the Dead* (2009). *Diary's* exclusion is based on the fact that

the film acts as a genesis story and focuses on different themes that were not explored within the first four films—the advent of the information age and globalization—rather than continuing to look into the American Dream in regards to home ownership, social equality, and consumerism of the living and living dead, respectively.

The difference between Romero's films and those of his followers is that Romero focuses upon the survivors' relationships rather than their fight against the living dead. This is not to say that other zombie films do not pay close attention to the survivors; for example, the close character analyses of Jim in Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) and Shaun in *Shaun of the Dead* (2004). These films follow the characters' journeys as they battle the horde of the living dead. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Romero leaves his characters occupying a single space in order to retain and recreate a society within the walls of their created fortresses, with the exception of *Land of the Dead* (2005) that has many more sequences taking place in the midst of living-dead occupied territory. The strength of Romero's *Dead* series lies in the display of the character's incapacity to trust one another. When attempting to keep a grasp on a crumbling

social order, cooperation is the greatest ally; however, the collapsing society in these films is built on the concepts of individualism, self-preservation, personal gain and the American Dream that will work against the survival of these characters.

The concept of the American Dream became popularized in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as a "rags to riches" story. According to Jim Cullen in his book *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*:

For hundreds of years, American readers and writers have had tireless appetites for tales of poor boys (and, later, girls) who, with nothing but pluck and ingenuity, created financial empires that towered over the national imagination. (Cullen 60)

However, this may not be seen in the films until *Land of the Dead*. This view demonstrates the importance of the individual within the overall context of the American Dream, but it is not categorized as the desire to succeed, but rather to simply obtain wealth. Cullen further points out:

A reckoning with the dream also involves acknowledging another important reality: that beyond an abstract belief in possibility, there

is no *one* American Dream. Instead, there are many American *Dreams*, their appeal simultaneously resting on their variety and their specificity. (Cullen 7)

Cullen's proposition of multiple American Dreams hits on a pivotal point that is relevant to the films of George A. Romero. The survivors in Romero's films attempt to retain ideologies of their former society within their specific moment. Seeing how each of Romero's films was released in a different decade, there is an evolving sense of the American Dream and American identity that is specific to each film's historical moment and to the overall narrative that Romero constructs. The following examination will establish that the overarching concept of the American Dream changes from one film to the next as survivors attempt to hold on to the constructs of their pre-existing social order. Ultimately, the desire to preserve the crumbling society leads to these characters' demise by refusing and delaying the inevitability of becoming one among the masses of the living dead that operate as a large group and unstoppable force. To better understand these ideas, a general knowledge of the *Dead series* must be acquired.

The "Dead Trilogy" Plus One



George A. Romero's body of work stretches across nearly five decades, and he continues to direct more that will terrify audiences. Although Romero is more known for his living dead films (*Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), *Land of the Dead* (2005), and *Diary of the Dead* (2007)), his work includes other films that are not included within the zombie genre of horror. Some of his other films include *There's Always Vanilla* (1971), *The Crazies* (1973), *Martin* (1977), *Creepshow* (1982), *Monkey Shines* (1988), *The Dark Half* (1993), and *Bruiser* (2000); however, these films never met with the same success as his trademark *Dead* series.

*Night of the Living Dead* begins Romero's examination of America and the dreams that thrive within the nation. Released in 1968, the issues of racism can be seen through the black protagonist, Ben (Duane Jones), Harry Cooper (Karl Hardman), and the redneck posse at the end of the film. Yet some critics see the film as dealing "centrally with the nuclear family, its oppressiveness, the resentments and frustrations it tries to conceal or repress" (Wood 46). Set in the woods of Pennsylvania, this film details the story of a group of random strangers attempting to fend off masses of the living

dead. *Night of the Living Dead* brings racial tension to the forefront of the narrative that mirrors the extra-filmic social atmosphere through the battle for control between Ben and Harry Cooper (Karl Hardman). *Night of the Living Dead*, bringing attention to how equality and individuality play into the American Dream. The film, however, does not concern itself with other ideals of the American Dream, such as home ownership. The film also makes no direct reference to any of the characters' previous occupations, but it is presumed that they tend to be middle class. However, the group of survivors does attempt to take shelter in a small farmhouse suggesting that the concept of home ownership that is present in the remainder of the *Dead* series does make a slight appearance in this film. In opposition to the subsequent films, however, the group of seven in the farmhouse is not taking shelter for more than one evening; therefore, they are not capable of transforming a quick shelter to long-term fortress.

1978's *Dawn of the Dead* is Romero's critique of American consumer society. Not only do the living dead consume everything in sight but the living also take advantage of the breakdown of social order in order to occupy a shopping mall. The narrative centers on four

survivors—Roger (Scott H. Reiniger), Stephen (David Emge), Fran (Gaylen Ross), and Peter (Ken Foree), and each have been identified socially in regards to their occupations. Their occupations speak to the consumption practices that each member of the group will undertake in the occupation of the mall. This film does introduce the concept of residual memory in the living dead, or an imprint of their living life upon the creatures they have become, that will be explored further in the subsequent films. Peter tells the other survivors, "They're after the place. They don't know why. They just remember . . . remember that they wanna be in here!" This demonstrates that all human beings, both living and living dead, want into the shopping Mecca of the Monroeville mall. We then see the biker gang at the end of the film acting as the metaphorical lower class, along with the living dead, that are not allowed within the secured gates of the shopping mall. With the Monroeville Mall representing the apex of consumer culture of the late 70s, *Dawn of the Dead* is a full on examination of the ideas of consumerism and home ownership as will be explored later.

*Day of the Dead* establishes a distrust of the government, or any authority figure for that matter, more so than Romero's other living dead films. *Day of the Dead*

is the only one of the films that centers solely on a military operation.<sup>7</sup> Set underground, the film is very dark causing it to be dismal in tone. Surrounding this particular group of survivors are all the remnants of their former society: bank statements, court records, and various other odds and ends that equate to monetary (or social) status. With the skeletons of a former world underground and the walking dead above ground, this film never displays a hint of hope for the group of survivors as they succumb to the effects of cabin fever ultimately leading to fissures within the group. During the chaos of human relations, a scientist Dr. Logan (Richard Liberty), although seemingly mentally unstable, proposes that the zombies can be trained or domesticated in order for humanity to retain control of their crumbling society. *Day of the Dead* introduces the living dead as a sign of an ethnic minority that is attempting to find its own existence, yet if the living prove to be dominant, they can enslave the walking dead.

*Land of the Dead* finishes the cycle that Romero began in *Dawn of the Dead* with the idea of the living

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<sup>7</sup> The other films in the *Dead* series focus on everyday individuals with no formal or military training. The exception to this, however, are the characters Peter and Roger in *Dawn of the Dead*.

dead becoming self-aware. We are introduced to two separate societies: one living and one living dead. The two, at this point, do not coexist, for the living have turned into a hunting and gathering society that ravages the living dead's city, which used to be theirs, in order to thrive. The living have yet to regain independence and must dig through the shambles of their former society in order to survive. With that, however, the living have established an apex of consumer society in an apartment complex called Fiddler's Green, and this society operates similarly to a feudal system. As money no longer holds value in the living dead world, the belief in money's power over the individual still controls the living inside Fiddler's Green. The operates on the premise that the living dead have become mostly self-aware and capable of amassing a full attack on a living society. They no longer succumb to the tricks of misdirection that had fooled others in Romero's previous works, and operate as a more dangerous foe to the living because they are no longer functioning purely on instinct. As for the living, the film fully demonstrates the inability of the living to thrive in a land of the living dead and that humanity's only hope is to realize that the attempt to keep a grasp on the former society is flawed, and

coexistence with the living dead is the only manner in which to prolong their actual lives before they die and inevitably become one of the living dead.

The societies that the living attempt to recreate in these apocalyptic scenarios are inspired by what can be identified as the American Dream. This dream is inspired by a sense of equality, capitalism and home ownership. Even though the reconstruction of such a society would produce a sense of security to the living, the post-apocalyptic setting does not allow for the American Dream to thrive as it had before the living dead began devouring flesh.

## Chapter 1

## Nightmare of the Living Dead

The tumultuous 1960s provided a socio-political backdrop for the narrative of *Night of the Living Dead* that would call into question concepts of American identity, and subsequently, this would also affect notions of the American Dream. According to Joseph Maddrey in his book *Nightmares in Red, White, and Blue*, “[*Night of the Living Dead*] conveys the anxieties of life in a time of theological and political uncertainty” (124). Through the protests and the fighting, the dream of equality pronounced itself through the voices of men like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In addition to the call for racial equality, the decade saw a more violent atmosphere in the Vietnam War, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the assassinations of both John F. Kennedy and, his brother, Robert Kennedy. Although the violent aspects of the decade stick out in the current mindset, it is the call for change in the overall American attitude toward national identity and equality that are distinctly representative of the 1960s. *Night of the Living Dead* is aware of this shift in attitudes as it subverts familiar notions of family, society, and race, and because this film does not fit

into the idea of a "rags to riches" framework of the capitalist American Dream, it does call out for an examination of race, family, sex and American culture.

The independent filming style as well as the small budget allotted for *Night of the Living Dead* did not allow for the casting of stars to help push the overall success of the film, yet by casting locals to play a majority of the roles, the film establishes a sense of realism on the screen that only adds to the plausibility of the film.<sup>1</sup> According to R. H. W. Dillard, "the film is, then, the story of everyday people in an ordinary landscape, played by everyday people who are, for the most part, from that ordinary locale" (Dillard 20). Dillard's claim also fits into Tony Williams' examination of the film where:

The film has several reasons to be regarded as a naturalistic horror film. It uses the violent and grotesque imagery of its literary predecessors and fuses it with several of the

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<sup>1</sup> Romero also mentions this in the documentary *Zombiemanía*, where he says that they cast "all our friends, all people from ad agencies, news announcers, people from around Pittsburgh which was where we were." Dillard's article also points out that the only two professional actors in the film are Judith O'Dea (Barbra) and Ben (Duane Jones). Both co-producers, Russell Streiner and Karl Hardman, were cast as Harry Cooper and Johnny, respectively. Furthermore, the posse that makes an appearance at the end of the film is comprised of residents from the local area (Dillard 20).



concerns of 1950s EC Comics such as social malaise and arbitrary violence . . . These dark images from the American cultural underground were often too radical in the Cold War to receive full expression in the Eisenhower era.

(Williams 23)

Of course, *Night of the Living Dead* is the first film in zombie cinema to establish an apocalyptic scenario involving the living dead<sup>2</sup>, and many zombie films (other than the living dead films of George A. Romero), would follow in its footsteps; however, the claustrophobic *mise-en-scene* adds to the realistic nature of this specific scenario of the film creating a similar world for the audience—a world that that the audience must accept in order for verisimilitude to be achieved. As Noel Carroll explains:

The emotional reactions of characters, then, provide a set of instructions or, rather, examples about the way in which the audience is to respond to the monsters in the fiction . . .

This mirroring-effect, moreover, is a key

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<sup>2</sup> Earlier examples of “zombie cinema” centered the narrative on a single locale, and the creatures were typically dead laborers brought back to exact the revenge of a tyrannical member of the aristocracy as in *The Plague of the Zombies* (1966) for example.

feature of the horror genre. For it is not the case for every genre that the audience response is supposed to repeat certain of the elements of the emotional state of characters. (17-18)

*Night of the Living Dead* is the only film of Romero's *Dead* series that was shot in black and white, and it employs cinematic techniques that are similar to the actualities, documentaries and newsreels of early American cinema. The cameras are placed close and within the action of the film, and the shots present a more believable scenario for the audience because it offers up the illusion of also being in the small Pennsylvania farmhouse. The style of *Night of the Living Dead*, then, allows the audience to mimic the emotions of the characters in addition to their "ordinary" appearances. The newsreel style of the film, however, follows the rise in tension in order for the verisimilitude to never be lost. Even with the stylistic ties to newsreel and documentary practices, *Night of the Living Dead* combines a classical representation of time and space and characters; therefore, if the audience does not accept the plausibility of *Night of the Living Dead*, the verisimilitude of the film is disrupted. It can then be proposed that the reactions of the characters are

representative of the audience members if positioned within this scenario. The scenario is relative to the tumultuous feeling surrounding the Vietnam War and Cold War America, and Harper feels that *Night of the Living Dead* must be examined with the conflict as a backdrop for the narrative. According to Harper:

Experiences of Vietnam constitute a common subtext of American cinema from the 1960s onwards . . . 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: American is a dying country as a result of the zombie menace. (Harper, "*Night of the Living Dead*")

As can be seen through the four films, the attempt to hold onto an old society that is dying out will ultimately lead humanity to its end, and if the living are not able to overcome their differences that prevent cooperation, then they will not be able to overcome the living dead. The characters' reaction, however, is survival and the attempts to hold onto a crumbling

culture; however, with the rise of a new social order<sup>3</sup>, specifically the rise of the living dead, the former society must change with it or be devoured.

### Racial Equality

Perhaps the most significant aspect of American national identity under revision in *Night of the Living Dead* is the extension of racial equality to an African-American who becomes the leader of the besieged group. Even though the narrative focuses on the group as a whole, the group can be broken down into a symbolic microcosm of American society. For example, Ben represents the African-American community; Barbra represents women; Tom and Judy are the young generation; Harry Cooper stands as the oppressive authority; and the Coopers, Helen, Harry and Karen, are representative of the disintegration of the American family. In the documentary *Zombieman*, author Max Brooks, known for his humorous fictional work *The Zombie Survival Guide* and apocalyptic novel *World War Z*, comments on the unique nature of having a black man becoming the leader:

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<sup>3</sup> Through the four films examined in this study, Romero posits that the living dead are coming self-aware and creating their own culture. *Night of the Living Dead* shows very little of this evolution of the living dead; however, as the films progress, this becomes a central theme Romero will explore in much greater depth.

Initially, I love zombie movies not just for the horror element but the social commentary. Take zombies out of *Night of the Living Dead* and make it any crisis; you have a black man, in the '60s, becoming the leader, fighting to survive, smacking a white woman, and telling a white man, "I'm the boss." Wow. (*Zombieman*)

Brooks hits on the audience's unfamiliarity with an African-American protagonist amongst six other white people because a black protagonist was not typical of the cinema at the time.<sup>4</sup> In comparison to other zombie films before 1968, black characters were represented as the living dead, and this brought negative connotations of race, possession and slavery. Shawn McIntosh addresses this issue in his view of the early zombie films *Ouanga* (1936) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). He states that the blacks and natives in *Ouanga* were seen as "ignorant and evil" while Val Lewton's production was much more sensitive to the issues of race and colonialism (McIntosh 6). These films, however, do not place a black character in a position of power, and they are seen either as

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<sup>4</sup> David Flint points out that the character Ben's race "would have been significant for 1968 audiences, who were unused to seeing black male leads in films—particularly black male leads who beat up white characters" (Flint 76).

possessions or subjects of a more powerful leader. As seen by Harper, however:

*Night of the Living Dead* is set at a time of racial upheaval and protest in America. Black people had been given faith in the possibility of the betterment of their conditions. With the death of Martin Luther King, however, many people lost this faith and abandoned the idea of peaceful resistance.

(Harper, "*Night of the Living Dead*")

American society began to transition into a more violent historical period, and Romero picked up on the social upheaval that was happening around the country while they were filming.<sup>5</sup> *Night of the Living Dead*, then, brought in a sense of equality on this front by placing Ben in a role where he would be battling for power against a white man, one typically seen as the master, within this small farmhouse.

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<sup>5</sup> Romero says in an interview in the documentary film *Zombieman*, "Amazingly we didn't recognize how political the film was. How...on the surface, how political it was. Because when we were making the film, we were basically living in that farm house and, you know, bullshitting about the overtones, and what was happening in the world: the war, this new funky thing in Vietnam, and riots in the streets all of a sudden." (Romero)

By choosing Duane Jones to portray Ben in the film, Romero was not attempting to make a political stand at the time of filming. According to Romero:

Duane, the lead actor, was an African-American who just happened to be the best actor from among our friends. And so, we just said, "Hey, Duane, would you like to do this?" And we thought we were so cool because we didn't change the script when Duane agreed to do it. The script didn't mention anything: didn't describe him . . . the color of his skin at all. (*Zombieman*)

Only four years before the release of *Night of the Living Dead*, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that began to dissolve the segregation lines in cities across America and began the battle for equal-opportunity employment.<sup>6</sup> Even with such a strong move toward equality, less than half of the white population felt that America was solving racial issues and moving into a fully integrated society. In Jennifer Hochschild's book *Facing up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*, she states, "in the mid-1960s, 30

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<sup>6</sup> Titles II-IV, VI, and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

to 45 percent [of whites] (depending on the year and the wording of the question) felt that the nation was making progress in solving its racial problems" (60). Even though Ben is in a position of power within the film, the racial tension of the time period is not removed from the picture as can be seen with the exchanges between Ben and Harry Cooper. Their power struggle exemplifies the racial tensions that were present during the 1960s even if Romero had not originally intended for those tensions to exist. The dialogue and, more specifically, the exchanges between Ben and Harry in their struggle for control never mention the color of Ben's skin, and this is definitely progressive in terms of representations of equality in film. Kim Paffenroth notes that the social milieu makes it difficult for audiences to not place this examination of race into the film, and that many audience members and critics alike "have asserted that Harry Cooper is a racist or bigot" (Paffenroth 37). Even though the film, in the interactions of the characters, does not offer a solution to the lines drawn by the racial differences, the presence of a strong black protagonist does change the racial status quo. As Romero's story progresses, the living dead overwhelm the living society causing the tables to turn and the living to adapt to a world that



they once controlled. The ending of *Night of the Living Dead* posits an alternate stance displaying images that are referential to hate-mongering groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Aryan Nation—showing that nothing has really changed. Ben's death at the hands of the rag-tag, redneck posse is seen as strange and out-of-place within the contexts of a horror film. As Ben has survived the night, it would appear to be logical that he should go on to relay his story, but the idea of race comes into play and ends Ben's existence. It is suggested that the posse has been killing beings that are different from them, namely the living dead, and Ben appears to them in the distance without knowing he is alive or dead. This implies that the posse holds onto a "shoot first, ask questions later" mentality that designates their judgment. Of course, the implication here is the posse holds onto xenophobic attributes that are akin to the extra-filmic racial tensions of 1960s America. The audience would like to see a survivor from this horrific experience, but as Kim Paffenroth suggests in regards to the redneck posse:

In their role as enforcers and reestablishers of societal order—against the zombie's chaos, the posse's killing of a black man may be meant

to connect him to the zombies as a perceived threat to that order. (38)

Throughout the film, however, the survivors are not fighting for a sense of equality, but survival, and Ben's death at the hand of the redneck posse demonstrates that equality is not an option in a world that is built around survival. The juxtaposition of Ben and his white assassin, however, demonstrates that the current social order wishes to retain control of the Pennsylvania countryside and has not yet been overcome by the menace of the living dead. *Night of the Living Dead* does not contain an answer to racial inequality, for it was never supposed to, considering that the script never originally determined the race of Ben. With Duane Jones' portrayal of Ben, the examination of race is inevitable, but the film also sheds light on the politics of the time period not only with regards to the American family.

#### The Pennsylvanian Nuclear Family

In this farmhouse besieged by the living dead, Romero offers us an ironic view of the concept of home ownership as a feature of the American Dream that equates it with guarding a quaint existence from outside forces. According to Lois Tyson in *Psychological Politics of the American Dream*, "the American dream is thus a dream of

commodity, and the implied premise is that one's spiritual worth and well-being are directly proportional to the value of the commodities one owns" (5). The survivors, however, do not actually own the house that acts as their fortress. Barbra, then Ben, takes refuge in the house<sup>7</sup> and it is then discovered that five other individuals (Harry Cooper, Helen Cooper, Karen Cooper, Tom and Judy) had come across the house previously and taken refuge in the basement. Because of this, the house as fortress cannot be read into the critique of the American Dream, but it is what the house symbolizes as a "home" that fits into the dreams of the American family. However according to Delores Hayden, "home ownership has not only symbolized a family's social status, but also guaranteed its economic security" (Hayden 55), yet no characters actually own the house that acts as a fortress. The consumerist aspect of ownership is not as prominent a feature in *Night of the Living Dead* as it will be in the later films of the series. For Dillard, the homestead does not function on a metaphoric level,

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<sup>7</sup> When Barbra first discovers the house, it is found to be abandoned. This hits on the urbanization of America that had taken place over the decades before the release of *Night of the Living Dead*. Cities began to be the hub of business as America became a more industrialized nation rather than agricultural. Not only can this be seen in the empty house but also in the distance that Barbra and Johnny had to drive in order to place flowers on their father's grave.

but only in its use as protection. The house, then, only operates in a "simple, daily, practical nature" (Dillard 18) providing protection. The farmhouse should then be emblematic of a family in the sense of a man, his wife, their children and a lovely house, but within the nightmare of the zombie apocalypse, the homestead merely acts as a fortress.

With the house operating on a functional level, the Coopers must stand as the representative of the modern American family, yet they are not the ideal family that is usually associated with white picket fences and the concept of the nuclear family that is all too familiar from '50s American television sitcoms. In contrast:

They are, in brief, a relatively typical modern family, if we are to believe the divorce statistics, living only by negative values, bitter and abrasive toward each other and others, separated from hysteria and violence only by a thin veneer of social necessity.

(Dillard 20)

Dillard's examination of the Cooper family hits on the realization that the American family was beginning to move away from the constructs of the nuclear family—an image that became synonymous with the American Dream.

This familial model is based off of outdated, even for 1968, Victorian notions where the man was the sole provider, yet by the time *Night of the Living Dead* was released, the social landscape had drastically changed. The role of the father was no longer being seen as the sole provider for the family as the mother's role began to shift into an income-based relationship with the family. In many cases, the mother would be the sole provider. According to Dolores Hayden:

. . . while the majority of white male workers have achieved the dream houses in suburbia where their fantasies of proprietorship, authority, and consumption could be acted out, the majority of their spouses have entered the world of paid employment. (49-50)

Romero's American married couple Harry and Helen Cooper mirrored the realistic disintegration of the traditional structure of family and family values. Kim Paffenroth's examination of the married couple's relationship reveals that they have been already been "killing each other for years" (40). The dialogue between Harry and Helen Cooper is extremely telling of their personal, familial relationship. While Harry goes on a tirade about keeping his family in the basement, the other survivors attempt

to board the windows and doors in the house, yet it is Helen's words that enlighten the audience into the specific details of the family's relationship.

Harry: We'll see who's right? We'll see when they come begging me to come let them in down here.

Helen: That's important isn't it—to be right? Everybody else to be wrong?

This short bit of dialogue demonstrates Harry's failing leadership role within the family, and this scenario is mirrored in his struggle for power with Ben. During this same exchange, the two discuss the discovery of a radio upstairs while Harry paces back and forth and responds to his wife vehemently, and Helen ends the conversation in a tone that affirms the notions felt by the audience.

Helen: We may not enjoy living together, but dying together isn't going to solve anything. These people aren't our enemies.

It is Helen's willingness to trust the others that ultimately drives Harry to make an attempt, however poorly, to work toward the common good of all the survivors in the household. Eventually, Harry's pompous attitude and desire to be in control leads to a scuffle

for the rifle with Ben and initiates the end of the American family that is represented within the film. As Harry retreats back into the basement, he meets the reanimated corpse of his daughter, Karen, who kills him, and Helen meets the same demise with the assistance of a garden trowel. Karen's reanimation as one of the living dead brings an end to the idea of the modern family. This may also be read into the death of Barbra—killed by her brother, Johnny, who has become a member of the living dead. The exchange between Johnny and Barbra occurs in the cemetery before Johnny meets his fate while protecting his sister from a stumbling attacker. The tone that Johnny uses to belittle his sister, his attempt at an impersonation of Boris Karloff, is very much reminiscent of young children in the back seat of a car on a road trip.

Johnny's accosting of his sister is adolescent in nature as he utters, "They're coming to get you, Barbra" (perhaps the most famous line in zombie cinema),<sup>8</sup> and his childishness is furthered by his request for candy before the siblings get out of the car. Johnny's incessant pestering and Barbra's attempt to retain her composure in

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<sup>8</sup> This line has appeared in both remakes of the film as well as *Shaun of the Dead* (2004).

a setting that obviously frightens her is followed by his badgering about being out in the country rather than in the city.<sup>9</sup>

Johnny: Five minutes to put a wreath on the grave and six hours to drive back and forth. Mother wants to remember, so we trot two hundred miles into the country; and she stays as home.

This also shadows Johnny's obvious dislike of traditions of his family, and he makes negative remarks concerning the thought of remembrance and the capitalist venture that is recycling grave decorations. Johnny is the first member of the living that the audience sees completely transformed into a member of the living dead, and his metamorphosis relays the severity of the plague of the living dead. By becoming a member of the living dead, Johnny assists in the devouring of the current systems of family and society, and young Karen Cooper also does this when she devours her father and murders her mother. Kim Paffenroth feels that:

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<sup>9</sup> This brings into question the argument of urbanization. Although urbanization plays a large role in the overarching themes in the last three of the films that will be examined in this study, *Night of the Living Dead* makes little mention of this except in this opening scene.



The film implies the deepest denial of the goodness or effectiveness of every facet of human life in general. Every kind of human relationship is ridiculed or negated in the film . . . With Karen killing her parents and Johnny killing his sister Barbra, we have the complete negation of family and biological ties. (40)

Paffenroth's claim furthers the idea that the film subverts such social issues as traditional and patriarchal systems of authority and family, race, and sex. *Night of the Living Dead* does not offer an alternative to the status quo. It merely demonstrates a subversion of current social practices and the inability of American society to control a crisis. As will be seen in the later films, the living dead have not fully taken over the country and do not outnumber the living. *Night of the Living Dead* shows a world that is attempting to keep a firm grip on a society that they have taken care in constructing, but the living dead will eventually devour that as well.

#### Living in a Dead World

At their most basic level, the living dead are a simulacrum of the present society. They shamble across

the Pennsylvania countryside devouring all in their path, yet Romero gives very little screen time to these monsters as much of the drama unfolds from within the farmhouse. The living dead act as the catalyst to help establish the microcosm of society within the house and remain a very powerful threat to the group's survival. With the exception of Ben, all of the characters meet their end at the hands of the living dead, and the living dead's power in numbers is clearly demonstrated—a characteristic heavily relied upon in the following films. In the case of the living dead, they are unified through their individual pursuit, devouring human flesh, simply on instinctual, animalistic reactions, proving to be greater than the living's inability to cooperate and communicate. Yes, the majority of the living survivors in the house do die while the group has pulled together to attempt to escape, but the group soon dissipates after Tom and Judy are caught in the gas tank explosion. The living dead remain persistent regardless of flame; they simply wait for the fire to go out before attacking the house.

Obviously, cooperation is necessary for survival, and the survivors allow their differences to get in the way of the overall benefit for the group. *Night of the*

*Living Dead* begins Romero's critique of the human inability to cooperate and coexist, and "his zombie films, in particular, dramatize failures of human cooperation" (Harper, "Night of the Living Dead"). The living suffer from an inherent fear of each other.<sup>10</sup> In social and economic systems that emphasize individuality and competition, extra people begin to pose a threat to the safety of the individual. Kim Paffenroth, in a discussion of zombie cinema in general, feels that such films parody the staunch individualism that has become known as a contemporary American mentality; a mindset that is suspicious of the government and believes in the possession of multiple firearms. In the event of a zombie uprising, Americans would "all barricade ourselves in our individual houses and start shooting" (Paffenroth 21). This is understandable given that all in the farmhouse are attempting to survive and retain a sense of control in a world where the status quo has been upset; however, the group upstairs, led by Ben, are attempting to face their foe head on rather than waiting for the disaster to pass, ironically, from the safety of the basement. This

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<sup>10</sup> Kim Paffenroth adds that, "Whereas the increased number of people could be regarded as an asset for the survivors, with more people to build fortifications and defend against the undead, the opposite is the case in this film, where each extra person is perceived as a threat" (39).

is also emblematic of the individualistic American tendencies. According to Harper, "Cooper's actions also symbolize the human tendency towards solipsism and isolationism" ("*Night of the Living Dead*"). The inability to cooperate is what ultimately leads to every central character of the film meeting their demise<sup>11</sup>, and it also establishes the living dead as a force that is able to rise above differences and unite for a common goal. The mob formed by the living dead may be able to "live" without a structured, civilized society, but they are capable of forgoing difference in order to achieve a common goal even if it is something as simple as eating.

As can be seen, the living dead can be examined through a number of lenses as they can be symbolic for racial tension, familial disintegration, social turmoil, proletariat uprising, subversion of authority and patriarchal control. When looking at this film from a perspective of psychoanalysis, the recently risen can be seen as the "sublimated aspects of ourselves that we hide

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<sup>11</sup> The exceptions to this are Tom, Judy and Ben. Judy is killed by her own foolishness. She hurls herself out of the front door to help Ben and Tom gas up the truck, and it is her seatbelt that gets stuck causing Tom to have to go back for her rather than assisting Ben with putting out the fire that had erupted around the gas pump. Judy could not let go of her love, and Tom could not leave his behind. Ben, on the other hand, is shot by the posse at the end of the film without any communication between him or the shooting party. This reinforces the examination of subverting the establishment due to Ben's race.

from public view," (Harper, " *Night of the Living Dead*"), or they can be examined under a Marxist lens as the combined forces of the proletariat attempting to devour the bourgeoisie, or, even further, as a machine of the system in which individuality ceases to exist. Harper also posits these interpretations of the living dead:

Perhaps they are to be equated with the Russians—often conceived by Americans at the time as a barbaric throng, intent on destroying (devouring) the American way of life. Perhaps the zombies represent the younger generation of Americans which, as it seemed to many in the late 1960s, wanted to overthrow traditions and replace them with a new social order. (Harper, " *Night of the Living Dead*")

Both of Harper's claims can be seen as relative to the time period in which the film was released as well as the living dead's function within the narrative. The fear of the young generation fits within the critique of the American Dream as the living dead begin to devour the existing culture even though *Night of the Living Dead* does not fully exhibit a new world order in the living dead; it is the later films that inform this interpretation. The living dead may not be a perfect

representation of youth as many within the hoard are already exhibiting signs of decay; however, it is their action of devouring the members of the present society, albeit instinctual and linked to survival, that fully display the removal of the status quo. With the beginning of an uprising, the opposition may not always seem as powerful and the intentions unclear, but over time in the course of the series, the living dead outnumber the living and eventually overtake the land. It is not a mystery that within the reality of *Night of the Living Dead*, all who die will return as a member of the masses, just as Johnny and Karen reanimate to devour their former family members, and this simply adds to the fear inherent in the monsters.

*Night of the Living Dead* ends on a somber note even though the living dead have seemingly been eradicated from the Pennsylvania countryside; however, *Night of the Living Dead* does address a larger area than just the Pennsylvania countryside where the dead are beginning to walk. Because of this, it would be difficult to imagine that an epidemic of this scale could be contained within a single night. The happy Hollywood ending does not occur as the end credits begin to roll over images that only reiterate the lack of cooperation or trust within America

during the 1960s. Looking at Harper's examination of the film:

*Night of the Living Dead* does not offer the happy narrative closure expected of the Hollywood disaster movie. Instead, Romero presents a *tragedy* in which the hero dies, rather than saves the world. Romero's tragic vision is quite unusual in American culture which . . . has been rendered "anti-tragic" by the forces of relativism and voluntarism.

(Harper, "Night of the Living Dead")

With every character within the film meeting the ultimate end, it presents a very negative view of the current social order—a society that would much rather shoot first and ask questions later. As Romero moves his living dead nightmare into another decade, the world continues to progress through urbanization, commercialism, and consumerism, by audiences considering extra-filmic scenarios, and Romero uses these as backdrops for the next chapter in his nightmare, where the contagion seems to be contained at the end of *Night of the Living Dead*, as the number of living dead continue to increase and overtake the living.

## Chapter 2

## Home Ownership, Consumerism, and the Living Dead

*Dawn of the Dead* (1978), although released ten years after the black-and-white *Night of the Living Dead*, is a continuation of the same epidemic that swept the Pennsylvania countryside. The beginning of this sequel shows that the menace of the living dead could not be contained. The beginning sequences of the film show that society has not yet fully collapsed (as it will in the later films). *Dawn of the Dead*, also, does not use a rural setting except for a scene that shows a rag-tag band of rednecks and military personnel on a hunt for the creatures in the backwoods of Pennsylvania; the overall sequence is chilling as every person is armed with at least one firearm, and beer seems to be flowing too freely for these men and women to operate deadly weapons. This sequence also implies a connection between this group hunting the living dead and the posse in the end of *Night of the Living Dead*. With this movement from the rural setting, Romero brings in the idea of urbanization with a new set of survivors (Fran, Peter, Roger and Stephen) to face the rotting masses. The narrative details their struggle against the living dead within an urban setting in the beginning of the film and moves into



the Mecca of consumer culture of the 1970s—the shopping mall.

Where *Night of the Living Dead* examines the socio-political atmosphere of the 1960s, *Dawn of the Dead* openly satirizes the consumer culture of the 1970s that had introduced large shopping centers where consumers could obtain all necessities, and some not-so-necessary items, in one centralized, convenient location. Romero comments on the consumer culture of the 1970s in regards to the Monroeville mall where much of the principle photography took place:

Stores of every type offer gaudy displays of consumer items. . . . at either end of the concourse like the main altars at each end of a cathedral stand the mammoth two story department stores, great symbols of a consumer society. The images are all too familiar, but in their present state they appear as an archeological discovery revealing the gods and customs of a civilization now gone. (Gagne 87)

Romero appears to be aware of the consumerist aspect of the film. And although this attack on American consumerism lies at the heart of the film, the concept of the American Dream clearly affects the group of survivors

in their actions of obtaining and securing a consumer's paradise. Diegetically, the American Dream has dissipated as humanity has realized the living dead are not just a menace, but truly a threat to their civilization and livelihood. Yet, the extra-filmic world provides a backdrop for examination of consumerism, urbanization and zoning practices. The survivors appear to be much more urbanized as opposed to the characters in *Night of the Living Dead* mainly due to the revelation of their professions; whereas, Fran (Gaylen Ross) and Stephen (David Emge) are employed as a "technician at a Philadelphia television station" (Gagne 86) and a traffic helicopter pilot, respectively, and Peter (Ken Foree) and Roger (Scott H. Reiniger) work for the city as members of the SWAT team. The importance of occupation is mirrored in the living dead as well, where:

Zombie nurses, nuns, insurance salesman, softball players, and so on all gravitate toward the mall to stagger through the main concourse, clumsily ride the escalators, shuffle across the skating rink, and drag toasters around behind them, staring longingly through the store windows at the film's human protagonists. (Gagne 87)

The actions of the living dead, then, mimic that of the human characters that indulge in their consumerist inclinations. Along with living in an urbanized area, the concept of ownership, specifically of a home, inspires consumer choices, and it can be seen as the mall transforms from a fortress, into an apartment, and finally is seen as a treasure-trove by the biker militia at the end of the film. Even though *Night of the Living Dead* indirectly critiqued the idea of racism, it is difficult to remove ideological concerns of race from the film, and the living dead are eradicated from the capitalist Mecca. Surrounded by goods and a desire to protect what they have acquired, consumerism affects the survivors on multiple levels: one, it leads them, the living dead, and other survivors to a space where there is an abundance of necessities; two, consumer habits create a hierarchy of those allowed in the shopping mall; and three, the living consumers become mere consumables for the growing army of the living dead. In addition to the social-cultural aspects of the film, *Dawn of the Dead* was released during a time of just as much political tension as the first film in the series. According to Kim Paffenroth, the film was released within a historical moment that included a fuel crisis, "grinding urban

poverty, abortion on demand (Roe v. Wade having been decided in 1973), and a Cold War and racism still shimmering and sickening our society" (46). Examining the film through the lens of home ownership and racial segregation, the film does address issues including urban poverty and racism, but the undertones of abortion, the fuel problem and the Cold War are not as nearly as prevalent within the narrative.<sup>1</sup> The most significant of these latter three comes in the guise of Fran being pregnant, and the other three male survivors discuss what should be done with the unborn child to which Fran asserts her desire to be included within the group.

Fran: I'm sorry you found out I'm pregnant,  
because I don't want any of you to treat  
me differently than you'd treat another  
guy.

. . .

Fran: And I want to know what's going on. And I  
want something to say about the plans.  
There's four of us, ok?

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<sup>1</sup> I state that abortion is an undertone in *Dawn of the Dead* because there is very little time dedicated to the conflict that Fran's pregnancy brings to the group. Even though this speaks to the power of the Women's Movement and the power of Fran. She demands not only for inclusion within the group but also to not be seen as den mother. Ironically, however, Fran is shown later in the film cooking dinner for the group and herself.

Fran, as the only female, occupies a position of sexual disadvantage to the rest of the group of survivors, yet her assertion here calls for equality that Romero's previous heroine, Barbra, failed to do. She also tells the men that she will not play "den mother" to the group, refusing to take on the stereotypical role of the housewife even though she still cooks and acts as caretaker.<sup>2</sup> With the changing times, the group tries to keep the members on equal footing as Fran learns to fly the helicopter and fire a gun while Stephen and Peter assist Roger at various points in the film, and in some

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<sup>2</sup> In an interview conducted by Paul R. Gagne for his book, *The Zombies that Ate Pittsburgh: The Films of George A. Romero*, Gaylen Ross, who portrayed Fran in *Dawn of the Dead*, talks about her experience in the role in coming to terms with her strong feminine character: "The audience reaction to Fran is really interesting,' actress Gaylen Ross comments. 'Whenever I've seen it, especially when it first opened, it was like they weren't with me for the first part of the film. They didn't know if I was a drag: I wasn't fun and cool like the guys, you know? They were having a real good time, and I was saying 'What are you *doing*?' It was George's idea that there had to be a rational voice saying that playing in shopping malls isn't the best thing in the world. Then as soon as I'm armed, shooting zombies off the roof of the mall, there was this very strong reaction—'All *right!* She's one of the guys; she's cool.' And then they were with me all the way. But I almost had to prove myself" (90). She picks up on an interesting examination of the female role within the film that has been brought up by many critics in regards to Romero's portrayal of women in his *Dead* series; though, this study does not primarily focus on these issues, they are still very important. According to Gagne's examinations of the *Dead* series, "*Night's* Barbra is a product of the sixties, existing in a state of limbo on the outskirts of women's liberation; while she is not the traditional horror-movie screamer of the fifties, she can do little more than slip into a state of zombielike catatonia when confronted with the threat of the living dead. In striking contrast, Sarah, *Day of the Dead's* female lead, is a woman of the eighties; a natural leader. *Dawn's* seventies heroine, Fran, is somewhere in between—pregnant and untrained, but a survivor" (90).

cases, the men embrace the consumerist fantasy long before Fran. The three act like children on a sugar rush grabbing items and goods that are not necessarily needed for survival. In one of the grocery stores in the mall, the three men compare their manhood to one another by finding the biggest piece of bread. It is not until much later in the film that Fran begins to participate in these consumerist fantasies. Even though the survivors do overindulge upon consumer goods, the main objective of the survivors against the hordes of the living dead is to obtain a place to survive and secure it from any other unwanted occupants, living or living dead. The passing of time and the continuing threat of the living dead lengthens their stay in the shopping mall, and in response, the survivors attempt to make a "home" in what was thought to be a temporary shelter.

#### Lovely Condominiums on the Upper East Staircase

The survivors may maintain control of the mall, but they do not own any bit of shopping center. When it was first procured as a place of refuge, the four were not expecting to spend an extended amount of time in the makeshift fortress. As time passed, however, they attempted to make it much more habitable than simply cold floors and drab walls. Each member of the group had their

own private living space, and living, kitchen and dining rooms were created in order to maintain a sense of comfort during distressed times. This is not to say that the storeroom the group occupied was a home, but it was the closest thing to a home that could be attained given the pandemic that is the living dead. With the former society hanging on by a thread, the meaning of a home has changed from a comfortable abode to a place for survival, not to mention that the values of material possessions have changed as well. In the scene entitled "Life as Usual" on the Special Edition DVD, Stephen proposes to Fran in what seems to be an elegant restaurant setting. Of course, there is an attempt here from the survivors to reestablish some remnant of their former life; however, the sequence is juxtaposed with a cut to Peter drinking champagne in one of the mall's fake garden areas where they had buried the body of Roger. As for the proposal from Stephen to Fran, the scene attempts to hold on to a life they could have possessed before the rise of the living dead. The two sit down to an elegant dinner in a manner that would benefit a proposal scene in a romance film, yet the falsehood of this usually beautiful moment is apparent in the awkward manner in which Stephen proposes. The audience never witnesses his proposal

because a scene with Peter drinking champagne is spliced into the sequence. When the audience returns to the couple, Stephen is simply holding the rings. Fran ultimately rejects Stephen's proposal by declaring "it wouldn't be real." Fran recognizes the falsehood of a union of matrimony under the circumstances due to no legally binding document or religious ceremony. Beyond this, Fran has also come to terms with the insignificance of the wedding bands that would have had some financial value before the collapse of their society. This does show, however, that at least Stephen is attempting to come to terms with the new living arrangements by holding onto practices deemed important by the collapsed society. The desire to hold on to such values is echoed in the creation of the new homestead for the four survivors located in the serpentine hallways of the storage area of the mall.

Within the mall's flashy inner-façade, the four survivors have "a shopping utopia for themselves, a place where they can temporarily ignore the threat of zombies" (Harper, "Zombies"). Before they can fully appreciate their situation, they first have to establish a residence and rid it of all unwelcome pests, executing a seemingly well-thought out plan for barricading the doors with



delivery trucks. Once the entrances are secured from intruders from the outer world, the survivors "then cooperate in ethnically cleansing their haven from zombies like a successful religious group purging their sanctuary from heretics" (Williams 92). After their newly acquired residence is secured, the four make use of the consumables that are now at their fingertips. They begin building their oasis at the top of the stairs in the back storage areas located in the mall. Even though the lack of an economic structure has devalued the almighty dollar, the material nature of the former society places inherent value on specific objects; thusly "the upstairs storeroom they initially use as their base headquarters [is turned] into an affluent-looking, penthouse-style apartment" (Williams 92). Now, that the mall is representative of the gated community that is usually reserved for the social elite. The trucks barricading the mall entrance serve as a deterrent for any further unwanted occupants, living or living dead.

Ideally, a home is a place for peace and solace—a place to raise a family without outside threats upon the sanctity of the home. In Dolores Hayden's work *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing,*

*Work and Family*, she illustrates the importance of home ownership in regards to social identification:

In industrial societies, humans retain a strong desire to own a piece of land, a house, and meaningful household objects in order to communicate, to themselves and to others, just who they are and how they wish to be treated.

(98)

Throughout the film, however, broadcasts are made warning citizens of the dangers of barricading and defending their homes. The survivors, on the other hand, have abandoned their homes and created a shelter which functions as living quarters. The benefit for them lies in their found shelter—a shopping mall. The seemingly endless supply of goods and material items feeds the consumerist fantasies that members of the living might have had before the rise of the living dead. The survivors, thusly, indulge in consumerist fantasies of high-class living and possession. Even in the early sequences within the mall, the group of survivors resembles a family of sorts in an attempt to make a home out of their consumer fortress. Peter and Fran, although

not romantically entangled in the narrative<sup>3</sup>, are representative of the parents due to their calm demeanor displayed when faced with the chance to indulge in consumerism.<sup>4</sup> Both Stephen and Roger act impulsively, and dangerously, when placed within this shopping utopia, making them unfit to be rational in the given situation, and "after Roger's death . . . their consumerist bliss turns from childish greed and glee to a more somber kind of middle-aged boredom and resignation" (Paffenroth 58) in suburbia. At this point, the remaining three survivors have become complacent in their faux existence due to immersion into consumerist fantasies; however, they never stop preparing for the inevitable. For example, Stephen and Fran are seen practicing marksmanship on mannequins prior to Stephen's failed proposal. Even though they prepare to defend their consumerist fortress, they have

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<sup>3</sup> According to Kim Paffenroth, "the forbidden love on screen in 1978 and even in the early twenty-first century is the depiction of heterosexual romance, love and sex between blacks and whites, especially between a black man and a white woman. And that is precisely where *Dawn of the Dead* leaves us, with a black man and a white woman flying off into the dawn of a new life together" (63)

<sup>4</sup> Peter and Fran, however, are not completely able to shun the enjoyment of the mall by fulfilling consumerist fantasies. Fran, as Stephen Harper points out, "makes herself up, she absent-mindedly toys with a pistol, indicating her implication of the film's system of commodity fetishism. In short, despite her earlier warnings to the men, Fran becomes a cultural dummy" (Harper, "Zombies"). Peter, as explained by Williams, indulges in the consumerist fantasy, but he remains aware of the dire situation and growing masses of the living dead outside the walls of the Monroeville Mall. (Williams 90-91).

become zombie-like in their practices of consumption. Their previous occupations never allowed them to over-indulge themselves with material possessions, and when placed within such a situation, they over-indulge to the point of overstimulation and desensitization. Perhaps the best example of this is the scene in the arcade. The survivors have already been hoarding goods and material possessions from other stores in the mall, and they begin to entertain themselves with a few games in the arcade. Their vacant expressions among the visual and aural stimuli are not enough to satisfy the desire to consume. As they continue to consume in order to accommodate their living area with exorbitant luxuries that are gaudy given their survival situation, the survivors, all middle-class, over-indulge and create a grotesque community within the Monroeville mall, separated from all outside nuisances.

Although social prejudices excluded minorities from owning a home, the survivors both subvert and embrace these prejudices by occupying a multi-racial fortress and setting up a barrier to keep unwanted beings, living and living dead, out. In this case, the living dead represent the lower classes that were excluded both from home ownership and participation among privileged social

classes. The living dead, and other living nuisances, are the unwanted to the survivors in the Monroeville mall, and while executing a mass destruction and removal of the living dead from the concourse; Fran, Peter, Roger and Stephen are capable of eliminating present threats and delaying further ones. Adams explains that the debate regarding access to luxury properties, such as the mall appears, has existed at municipal, state and national levels. He continues, "At each level, an in-group sets about using its power to keep others out. At the national level the debate centers on immigration policy" (522).<sup>5</sup> Even though the survivors are attempting to survive, they still actively participate in consumerist fantasies of the fallen, previous society. Protection from the living dead, however, is not the only objective the survivors face; they must also protect their newly acquired fortress and social status, from other living humans that desire to be included within the same social class. Other members of the living may not partake in the consumerist fantasies that the four survivors within the mall participate, but the need, and inherent desire, for more still exists among them.

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<sup>5</sup> Immigration becomes a more prominent issue in Romero's 2005 release *Land of the Dead*.

The Slums, Racial Tension and the Bikers

Although the four survivors are central to the narrative, and this study, other living characters within the film also struggle to survive. The bikers in the film, in opposition to the four main survivors, act as a band of looters, hoarding items that possessed monetary or material worth. Their actions are understood in that they act as a band of gatherers, moving from one place to another gathering necessities for survival. However, the bikers are also a destructive band that have no regard for other survivors of the pandemic and are the result of the state of martial law. This group adapts to their dire situation, and they do not attempt to gain or maintain possession of a location for the purpose of defense, furthering the notion that the ideas of home ownership that are prevalent in an extra-filmic world cannot function within the film. With the ideologies of the human race being eradicated (or more appropriately, devoured), a home no longer becomes a place of residence, but a place for protection, or in a worst case scenario, a tomb. The police-raid sequence near the beginning of the film allows the audience to see that even through an event like the living dead, racial tensions are still a battle that some members of humanity have to come to

terms with. These can be seen through the gruff character of Officer Wooley.<sup>6</sup> Wooley's racial slurs only align him with bigotry and ignorance. In opposition to *Night of the Living Dead* where racial tension was thick, yet implied, Wooley boisterously verbalizes his racist ideas:

WOOLEY: I'll blow all their asses off . . .  
 Low-life bastards. . . Blow all their  
 little low-life Puerto Rican and nigger  
 asses right off.

Such racial slurs and his uncontrollable actions, entering the complex shooting living and living dead based on race, only solidify his bigotry. Ironically, it is one of the living, a black member of the SWAT team, that kills Wooley before more unnecessary deaths occur. The shooter is identified later on in the basement as Peter, who, due to this act, embodies the same subversion as Ben in *Night of the Living Dead*. This scene also demonstrates a still-surviving desire to possess a home and an enjoyment of wealth. The apartment complex raided in this sequence is implicated as low-income housing, which has yet to comply with city ordinances to dispose of their dead properly in order to slow the increase of

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<sup>6</sup> This scene also introduces Peter and Roger. Peter is responsible for Wooly's death because of Wooly's maniacal behavior within the apartment complex.

members of the living dead. Wooley expresses his distaste for the low-income housing by comparing it to his middle-class earnings. As Wooley so aptly puts it, "How the hell come we stick these low-lifes in these big ass fancy hotels anyway? Shit man. This' better than I got." Within these couple of lines of dialogue we can see his racist and ignorant point of view and that he equates residence to social standing and this is clearly important to the individual. Returning to the work of John S. Adams:

The insecurity of the American middle class about their social and economic status probably accounts for a large part of their opposition to low-income housing in their midst . . . Housing is about wealth and status and power. (Adams 524)

Wooley obviously believes that housing is a symbol of social status, and he chooses to act out his beliefs in a violent manner against those he feels have gained more than he is worth. Wooley's actions may be his attempt to protect his middle-class life, but they are actions that are racist and not beneficial to the survival of the human race. Because of his rampage, more members of the living dead could be created, adding to their numbers. Following the opening sequence in the television studio,



this sets up the film's examination of racial tension as well as the importance of material possessions. Stephen Harper's interpretation shows that:

It could be argued that the scene provides an interpretive context for the rest of the film. As well as introducing some hackneyed horror principles (the foul-mouthed policeman pays for his irascibility with his life), the scene invites the audience to consider zombiedom as a condition associated with both racial oppression and social abjection and, therefore, sanctions socio-political interpretations of the film as a whole. (Harper, "Zombies, Malls, and the Consumerism Debate")

Harper's examination, here, can also be applied to the later *ethnic cleansing* of the Monroeville mall enacted by the four protagonists of the film. The raid sequence, however, does not address additional issues concerning consumerism, yet another group of humans provide a parallel to this scene with the biker invasion of the mall.

Wooley's actions toward the minority groups in the apartment complex are not so different from the biker's raid of the Monroeville Mall at the end of the film.

Wooley and the biker's envy the possessions of the minority group and the four protagonists, respectively. In opposition to the bikers, Wooley does not voice a request to share the goods as do the bikers via CB radio to the survivors in the mall. The mall, once again, appears as a symbol of consumerism. The bikers are fully aware of the amount of "loot" they would come to possess if they were able to gain access to the mall. Their superior numbers put them in a position to overthrow the current occupants, the four survivors, of the mall by breaking through the barricades of delivery trucks. The survivors, mainly Peter and Stephen, understood the importance of retaining possession of the mall and "want to hold on to the mall as long as possible and defend it from outsiders" (Williams 92-93). The bikers, then, attempt to take the mall by force breaking through the "gates" that the survivors had constructed in order to keep the dregs away. Contact is made, however, from the bikers to the four survivors inside the mall, and to no avail, the elite survivors (more so Stephen than Peter or Fran) are not willing to give up their acquired possessions. This continues the theme of the human

inability to come together for a single cause that Romero began in *Night of the Living Dead*.<sup>7</sup> In opposition to this, “the prevailing relationships between people in *Dawn of the Dead* are venal, nasty, predatory, and destructive, all in the name of self-defense and self-preservation” (Paffenroth 65). Although groups of survivors have the common enemy of the living dead, they are not able to combine their forces in order to defeat the shambling corpses. As Kim Paffenroth notes on this, “here humans seem instinctively to arm themselves for prospective sieges and firefights with other humans, rather than primarily prepare for the more immediate threat of the undead” (66). At the very heart of it all, though, is a desire to obtain material goods regardless of whether or not they still have value within a new social order. The need to consume drives the desire for home ownership and material items, and this is something that extends into the realm of the living dead. According to Tony Williams’ analysis of the film:

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<sup>7</sup> Kim Paffenroth points out the parallels between the bikers in *Dawn of the Dead* and *Night of the Living Dead*: “the bikers are the more blatant and extreme example of violence between humans, but they are hardly unique. As the end of *Night of the Living Dead* indicates, roving posses of zombie hunters pose just as great a threat to other human beings, especially dark-skinned human beings in the United States, as do deliberately destructive vandals and the ever-present undead (66).

Both humans and zombies have equal desires towards control of the mall. They both act on an instinctual level of existence, involving consumption, possessiveness and violence, signifiers of an old, dead society which still exercises its hold upon both the living and the living dead. (94)

The living and the living dead then want desperately to hang on to the vestiges of their former lives, and this allows for interesting parallels to be drawn between the two.

#### They Are Us

The connections between the humans and the living dead are chilling in the sense that both are the same creature, not so much in actions as in appearance. In the most basic sense, humans go to a mall to consume material goods, and the living dead go to the mall to consume the humans—the ultimate consumer. The creatures, however, have graduated from their black-and-white predecessors not only due to the use of color in the film but also in the sense that the walking dead hordes are beginning to demonstrate their ability to retain memory. Paffenroth asserts that “the zombies in this film are simply more

human than in the previous film, and, though far less intelligent than those in the later installments" (68). Paffenroth's examination shows that the living dead keep the fears inherent in the creature of *Night of the Living Dead*; however, the first film in the series does not fully come to terms with each human potentially transforming into a shambling corpse, for only Johnny and Karen Cooper are the only two that transform into the living dead. *Night of the Living Dead* introduces the concept that the living dead are merely creatures acting on pure instinct—survival, if you will, but the masses of walking corpses are becoming more difficult to separate from the living society. The ending of the SWAT team sequence in the beginning of the film brings Peter and Roger together in the basement where the risen corpses of the formerly living are being kept by their loved ones. Before executing the imprisoned living dead, Peter and Roger are met by a priest that affirms the difficulty of disposing of former loved ones. Peter recognizes the religious belief system, as he will address later on in the film<sup>8</sup>: "They still believe there's respect in dying."

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<sup>8</sup> Peter makes his knowledge of religion quite apparent when he discusses his grandfather's practice of voodoo and the statement "When there's no more room in Hell, the dead will walk the Earth."

The priest affirms the importance of religion and the practices of their dying society:

Priest: Many have died on these streets in the last weeks. In the basement of this building you will find them. I have given them the last rites. Now, you do what you will. You are stronger than us, but soon, I think, they be stronger than you. When the dead walk, senores, we must stop the killing, or we lose the war.

The priest's last statement introduces the concept, to the series, that humanity must not fight among itself otherwise the living dead will outnumber and overtake mankind. Later on in the film it is Peter that recognizes the similarities between the humans and the living dead while they are cleaning the mall when he says, "They're us. That's all;" however, it is an exchange between Stephen and Fran when they first arrive at the Monroeville mall that ties in the concepts of residual memory, consumerism and the parallels between humanity and the living dead:

Fran: What are they doing? Why do they come here?

Stephen: Some kind of instinct. Memory, of what they used to do. This was an important place in their lives.

The exchange between these two survivors introduces the idea of residual memory and the "They are us" paradigm that will become more important in the later films of the series (Loudermilk 92; Paffenroth 56; Williams 86). The critique of consumerism then comes alive with this comparison.

The living dead act as the ultimate consumer in that they uncontrollably consume the flesh of their victims and the social order of humanity, and at the same time, the living dead also embody similar characteristics as their human counterparts. In Loudermilk's examination of the film, he points out that:

Reflecting America's habitual waste of goods and resources, *Dawn's* emergency broadcast scientist claims that the reason why great numbers of the cannibalized reanimate as body-functional zombies is because the living dead eat only 5 percent of their living victim's bodies. A zombie rarely finishes his plate when nearby other sources of meat glisten and scent the air to distract zombie desire. (89)

The actions of the living dead, as described by Loudermilk, mimic the consumerist practices of over-indulgence and wasteful consumption, resulting in desensitization. This correlates the mirroring effect of the living dead into humanity. There are many instances within the mall where the four survivors become alienated due to their over-indulgence: Fran skating in the ice rink with a lost expression on her face, the three men staring blankly at video games in the arcade, and the somber dinner scene in the lavish penthouse they created. Each of these scenes signifies the control that material possessions hold over humanity, and the living dead. For Stephen Harper, "*Dawn of the Dead* may be seen as a modernist critique of the alienating effects of the consumption-led, post-Fordist society which, according to many commentators, developed throughout the 1970s" (Harper, "Zombies, Malls, and the Consumeris Debate"). The mass consumption, on the part of the humans, is an action based social practices from their dying society, and the living and living dead alike still operate within the context of this society, as it has not completely been overrun by the living dead contagion.

In *Dawn of the Dead*, and not again until *Land of the Dead*, the living dead, as a whole, attempt to reenact



their former lives. Romero carefully focuses on the ghouls in a manner where they can be identified according to their clothing, and this signifies that many of them were from the same social class as their living counterparts within the mall. This reinforces the consumerist actions for both groups where "they both act on an instinctual level of existence, involving consumption, possessiveness and violence, signifiers of an old, dead society" (Williams 94). In this case, *Dawn of the Dead* posits that the living are extremely similar to the living dead, relaying a sense of hopelessness through an inevitable scenario.

The next film in the series, *Day of the Dead* (1985), departs from the critique of consumerism and examines a world where humanity is clearly outnumbered and forced to go underground in a protected bunker. Even though the creatures operate on residual memory from their former existence, the living dead become more "human" and, therefore, more dangerous to the safety of all mankind.

## Chapter 3

## A Living Dead World

Set five years after the beginning of the apocalyptic nightmare of *Night of the Living Dead*, *Day of the Dead* continues the destruction of the social order so much so that the living dead have outnumbered humanity. The film is a dark and claustrophobic examination of the failure of the pre-existing society and its ideals. At this juncture, however, Romero begins to explore a world where the living dead have become the dominant force on American soil, and he did so in such a heavy-handed manner that many of the farcical attributes of the rotting creatures so prevalent in *Dawn of the Dead* are left behind for an examination of the remnants of human society as represented by the occupants of the underground fortress. As Jamie Russell claims in *Book of the Dead: The Complete History of Zombie Cinema*, "Day proves once and for all that the real horror in this world isn't the returning dead, but the inhumanity of the living and the inherent rottenness of contemporary society" (145). Russell's examination echoes what has been seen in the previous two installments of the *Dead* series; the old society's ideologies are ultimately

dangerous for the existence of humanity given the apocalyptic climate that has consumed America.

The final version of *Day of the Dead* differed greatly from the original storyline that Romero had envisioned. His unpublished story, titled "Anubis," began with *Night of the Living Dead* and would develop the rise of the living dead into a fully self-aware society, outnumbering humanity through intangible odds.<sup>1</sup> The society that comes to fruition, however, would not instill sovereignty to the living dead due to tyrannical humans attempting to control the living dead for their own megalomaniacal intentions; although, none of this makes it into the films. Paul R. Gagne's explanation of Romero's original script reveals that:

The treatment took the zombie *revolution* to a point where the living dead have basically replaced humanity and have gained enough of a rudimentary intelligence to be able to perform a few basic tasks. At the same time an elite, dictatorial politburo of humans has found that

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<sup>1</sup> Paul R. Gagne's *The Zombies that Ate Pittsburgh: The Films of George A. Romero* and Tony Williams' *Cinema of George Romero: Knight of the Living Dead* provide a detailed explication of the original storyline from the original script as well as what was kept for the filmed version. Romero rewrote the script because the budget for his original idea was too high.

the zombies can be *trained*, and are exploiting them as slaves. (147)

Instead of fully revealing the evolution of the living dead in this film, as he does in *Land of the Dead* (2005), Romero only begins to expand the concept of residual memory that he had barely touched on in *Dawn of the Dead*. Returning to Gagne's examination:

On the thematic level, the original version of *Day of the Dead* reaches the heart of Romero's allegory about what happens when an incoming, revolutionary society replaces an existing social order: in essence, *nothing changes*. The zombies are the new masses, but they serve the same master. (148)<sup>2</sup>

Romero would achieve the depiction of the self-aware living dead hordes in *Land of the Dead*, but *Day* shows the beginning of this movement for the living dead.

In comparison to its predecessors, *Day of the Dead* is very dismal and grim, more so than the bleak *Night of the Living Dead* and the sometimes-comical critique of

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<sup>2</sup> Gagne's reference to the original script alludes to a social order that is similar to the atmosphere of martial law that can be seen in the previous installments in the *Dead* series. In the original script of *Day of the Dead*, some of the living were attempting to amass armies of the living dead in order to retain control of the hellish landscape.

consumer culture that was *Dawn of the Dead*. According to Kim Paffenroth:

The result was a very small, claustrophobic film, more reminiscent in look and feel, at least, of the first *Night of the Living Dead*, than it was *Dawn of the Dead*. Despite its title, *Day of the Dead* takes place almost entirely in the dark. The tone, too, had abandoned the playfulness of *Dawn of the Dead* and returned to the oppressive grimness, depravity, and madness of the first film. (71)

The film pits civilian scientists against the tyrannical representation of the military—Captain Rhodes (Joseph Pilato). Rhodes heads the military side of a scientific operation that has been set in an underground Florida bunker that is “akin to the farmhouse in *Night of the Living Dead*” (Gagne 151). The scientists, Sarah (Lori Cardille), Dr. Ted Fisher (John Amplas), and Dr. Logan (Richard Liberty), are attempting to discover what caused the plague that had brought the formerly deceased back to life. Dr. Logan, nicknamed “Frankenstein” by the soldiers, works in secret to train the living dead as though they were children. Through his work he produces a “star pupil,” Bub (Howard Sherman). In addition to the

soldiers and the scientists, two other members of the group, John (Terry Alexander) and William McDermott (Jarlath Conroy), are in charge of communications and transportation—via helicopter.<sup>3</sup> John and McDermott represent the only alternative to the tension that builds in the underground facility. They choose to live in a *luxurious island resort* that consists of a mobile home, a backdrop painted to resemble a beach scene, and a kiddie pool. Because of this, *Day of the Dead's* use of the American Dream operates around its failure, for as it can be seen in the previous films, the concept of the American Dream itself seems distant, even non-existent. The dreams of equality, family and home ownership are symptoms of the old, dying society, and the only dream these individuals could possess in the film's bleak setting is that of survival. Jamie Russell's examination also proposes that since the first two films "exposed the rotten underbelly of twentieth-century America, *Day of the Dead* fantasises the possibility of an alternative, one that's born out of the destruction of the established order" (147). The living dead, however, begin to become

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<sup>3</sup> This carries over another connection to *Dawn of the Dead*. Although there are no similar characters, the concept of flight as a means of escape expresses the limits that this apocalyptic scenario places on the survivors due to the diminishing luxury of fuel.

more self-aware, clearly outnumber the living, and provide a grim, decaying face of fear to any that stand in front of the hoards.

### Science and Military

As representatives of the decay of the former, human society, the soldiers and scientists demonstrate the importance of the individual within the context of the barren wasteland in which they reside and the American Dream as it was seen in the previous films. In comparison to *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Day of the Dead* obtains many similarities in tone, setting and characterization that were lost in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). *Night* and *Day* both provide settings that are dark and claustrophobic—a Pennsylvania farmhouse and an underground storage facility, respectively. The tone in both films is dark with no real sense of hope. In *Night*, this is embellished by the implied racial tension that exists between Harry Cooper and Ben, causing a split between the survivors. This is mimicked in *Day* through the barrage of racial slurs used by Captain Rhodes' cronies, and the group is clearly divided between the scientists, the military and helicopter pilots. The group is never able to unite to help with the efforts of the

scientific team to discover a cure for the living dead ailment. Also, like *Night*:

The human survivors never unite to defeat the zombies. They are constantly at each other's throats and attempt to devour each other in an ironically metaphorical version of the outside assault by their living dead opponents.

(Williams 22)

*Day of the Dead* also eliminates any examination of a familial system that could be seen in both of the previous films. Ultimately, the American Dream has fallen, and the survivors are simply trying to survive in a living dead world perhaps with the exceptions of John and Sarah. The best manner to explore this chaotic atmosphere is to examine the individual factions within the facility.

The military regimen, composed of Captain Rhodes, Miguel (Anthony Dileo, Jr.); Steel (Gary Howard Klar); Rickles (Ralph Marrero); Pvt. Miller (Phillip G. Kellams); Pvt. Torrez (Taso N. Stavrakis); and Pvt. Johnson (Greg Nicotero), provide protection and collect samples, or members of the living dead, for the experiments conducted by the science team. Each of the soldiers is rambunctious, vile, and almost as demented as



Captain Rhodes. Rickles and Steel, the two soldiers acting as Rhodes' right-hand men, embody racism, sexism and pure machismo and misogyny in their reactions to Miguel, Sarah and other soldiers, respectively. With such a negative representation, it is easy to agree with Kim Paffenroth's analysis of the soldier's deaths:

We have several sadistic human characters whose death seem much more deserved and less inevitable or random. Unlike the deaths of Roger and Steve, Steel and especially Rhodes appear to get what they deserve, and probably could have avoided their fate if they had not been such violent racists. (81)

This does not mean that the military side of the operation is entirely responsible for the tension between the factions. The science team, headed by Dr. Logan, was created in order to find a cure for the plague of the living dead, but their efforts have yet to produce any effective results. Of course, as will be examined later, Dr. Logan realizes that the answer is not the cure, but domestication and control. The heated arguments that take place in the underground fortress involve the lack of understanding between the two factions, and their lines of separation draw them further from the common goal of

defeating the living dead. The interaction between Captain Rhodes and Sarah represent the two polarizations of the tension within the group. Rhodes is representative of the "violently mad military mind" (Williams 135), and his megalomaniacal attitude is reinforced by the numerous times that he firmly states that "I'm runnin' this monkey farm!" In comparison to Sarah, Rhodes acts in a manner that would not be expected of a trained military official, acting purely on emotion rather than with rationality and a calm demeanor that would establish a sense of order in a world of chaos. Sarah attempts to take the role as the voice of reason as she is constantly begging other members of the team, military and civilian, to pull together. McDermott, in opposition to Sarah's request for civility, mentions that, "We're all pulling in different directions . . . People got different ideas concerning what they want out of life." In the most basic sense, *Day of the Dead* returns to the concept of individuality that began in *Night of the Living Dead*, and the importance put on individuality drives Sarah to produce a cure for the plague as she seems to be the only scientist still attempting to find a solution to the living dead problem. Her persistent requests for cooperation embody sentiments that all of the members of

the group should follow in order to prolong survival; however, it is the group's inability to come to a mutual cooperation that drives them further apart. Due to the separation between the factions, Rhodes' megalomania drives him to slaughter Dr. Logan, although this can be seen as deserved because of Logan's individual pursuits in *training* the living dead, and the potential sacrifice of Sarah and McDermott, as Rhodes sends them into the uncharted regions of the underground cave system. Sarah realizes that the situation in the underground facility has surpassed the breaking point with Rhodes and his men hunting down the scientists, and she flees for her own survival. She finds herself allied with John and McDermott, and the three attempt to escape the chaotic atmosphere that Rhodes' overwhelming desire to control has caused.

There is never a hint of compromise between the soldiers and the scientists through the entirety of the narrative. Both of the previous films also looked at the idea of familial constructs<sup>4</sup>, but this does not exist within the narrative of *Day of the Dead*. The film's only

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<sup>4</sup> The Coopers in *Night of the Living Dead* act as a nuclear family, while the group of survivors in *Dawn of the Dead* represent a familial system after Roger becomes injured and must be pushed around in a wheelbarrow.

attempt at a family structure, the relationship between Sarah and the soldier Miguel, is incapable of functioning within this dysfunctional environment, but this is even a stretch because they are barely a couple. In one sequence, Sarah kicks Miguel out of her sleeping quarters, and while walking the halls afterwards, she stumbles into the middle of a brawl between the soldiers. Tensions are high due to the situation, and the underground facilities only add to the sense of isolation and the inevitable effects of "cabin fever." The relationship between Miguel and Sarah has much more in common with *Dawn of the Dead's* Stephen and Fran than they do the Coopers from 1968; however, Sarah and Miguel live in a much more violent world, and their relationship mimics this world. In fact, the only tenderness offered up by Sarah comes in the form of protection by administering sedatives to Miguel, and this emasculates him enough that he lashes out due to his increased tension levels. Lori Cardille, who portrays Sarah, sees the character as:

'an exaggerated woman of the eighties,' and [an] independent, natural leader with enough guts to say, chop her lover's arm off if it means survival. 'It's a nice fantasy—I think

it's what we'd all like to be in some way. One of the more interesting things about Sarah, though, is the fact that she's always pushing her emotions aside, because the only way to survive in the film's environment is to suppress a lot of feelings.' (Gagne 156)

Sarah struggles on multiple levels in an attempt to make sense of this chaotic world. Her work drives her to find a cure, although we very rarely see her working in the lab. She also acts as the only voice of reason to both the megalomaniacal forces of Dr. Logan and Captain Rhodes. In addition to this, she must also come to terms with the complete dissolution of the world that existed not too long ago. With the inevitability of the living dead coming into the underground bunker, other options for humanity must remain and are explicated by John and Dr. Logan.

#### John and the Promised Land

The character of John, the only African-American in the cast (in this case, of Caribbean descent), takes on a semi-religious role in his explication of the "promised land" to Sarah. Within the narrative, John brings a mention of God's punishments that hearkens to Peter's

remarks on voodoo in *Dawn of the Dead*.<sup>5</sup> According to Paul Gagne, John represents “the greatest hope for human survival” (152). John hints at this “hope” seeing as he is the only person capable of flying the helicopter, providing the only true means of escape, and perhaps purification, from the hellish underground nightmare. This is also mirrored in his abode in the facility, aptly nicknamed “The Ritz”. He and McDermott live outside of the bunker in the storage area of the underground facility amongst all of the remnants and records of the former civilization giving them an outsider status. John looks at this storage area<sup>6</sup> as a horrible representation of a former society that fuels his distaste for what everything contained in this facility represents. This setting, as explained by Tony Williams, “is brilliant; if the Monroeville shopping mall is a temple to the consumer society Romero pokes fun at in *Dawn of the Dead*, then this is its tomb” (155). John acknowledges that

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<sup>5</sup> “In *Day of the Dead*, however, Romero returns to the zombie’s cultural heritage establishing John as a link to the Caribbean and also as the chief explicator of the apocalypse—something that his biblical christian name hints at (Russell 145).

<sup>6</sup> The underground facility, located in Pennsylvania is actually used as a storage facility, acting as a depository of sorts. According to Tony Williams, “Actively mined until just after World War II, the eerie, charcoal-gray labyrinth is now used as a storage facility for everything from recreational vehicles (boats, golf carts, and Winnebagos) to surplus powdered milk and feature-film negatives (including that of *Gone with the Wind*)” (Williams 155).

civilization before the rise of the living dead was very concerned with keeping records of things that are not that important for the survival of humanity. John points out (as it is worth quoting in full):

“Man, they got the books and records of the top companies. They got the defense department budget down here. And they got the negatives for all your favorite movies. They got microfilm with tax returns and newspaper stories. They got immigration records, census reports, and they got official accounts of all wars and plane crashes . . . and volcano eruptions and earthquakes and fires and floods—and all the other disasters that interrupted the flow of things . . . in the good old U.S. of A. Now, what does it matter, Sarah darling? We ever gonna give a shit? We ever gonna see it all?”

His awareness of the uselessness of such records given the current situation shows that John has come to terms with the living dead overtaking America, and he tells Sarah that if they ever get out of this, they should start anew and not allow anyone to ever dig these records up. His distaste for the items in the storage facility

can be seen as he offers a solution later in this sequence, taking place in his personal, simulated utopia (created by an island backdrop, lawn chairs and a children's pool). John's realization, however, does point at the consumerist and capitalist nature of the American Dream when he mentions the records of credit card companies being held in storage as well. The collapsed society still worked on an idea of false wealth, in the guise of credit, where Logemann explains, "many Americans came to regard credit as a means of ensuring democratic access to the American dream" (525-626). John recognizes the problems that these systems of revolving credit have caused, and the records contained in the underground facility are dismal reminders of this financial system. Even though survival in a world that is being overrun by the living dead seems primary, John exhibits a desire to ignore the world that existed before the living dead rose because the current situation may be punishment from God. John's analysis of the holdings in the storage facility suggests that a new society should not hold on to such records. He finishes his *sermon* to Sarah thusly, "We could start over, start fresh, get some babies. And teach 'em, Sarah, teach 'em to never come over here and dig these records out." Sarah, then, begins to move in the



direction of rejecting her previous attempts at curing the plague of the living dead and accepts alternatives to the old society, namely her fleeing with John and McDermott. Perhaps what is most chilling is that the records that have been stored are only those that point to disasters, financial statuses, and entertainment. Kim Paffenroth explains that John, while discussing the contents of the storage facility, does not mention any great pieces of humanity or culture including Literature, Art, Film, or Philosophy:

John does not mention, and the storage facility apparently does not contain, great works of art, literature, philosophy, or religion, but just a vast amount of useless information and chronicles of human suffering from either man-made depredations in war or from natural disasters. (86)

John never mentions why such items are excluded from the bunker, and this seems a little strange. Literature, Philosophy, Religion and Art all seem like items that attempt to capture the human spirit and show achievements of man that are not measured monetarily. It would seem that if the living dead were overcome, items that possess, in some capacity, a glimpse of humanity would be

far more treasured than the records that sit in the bunker and collect dust.

John's desire for a safe-haven from the living and living dead is not unwarranted, and this utopian escape seems like a wonderful place that would be free of martial law as well as any living dead menace. It would be a place, away from this apocalyptic world, where the American Dream could actually thrive. The problems, of the living dead in their case, will remain if they ever decide to return from this escape. In the final sequences of the film, Sarah, John and McDermott have escaped from the fate that Rhodes and his men had laid out, but a quick-cut catapults the narrative from the three attempting to get into a helicopter to an island beach. Before the three are shown on the island (Sarah awakening from her third nightmare,<sup>7</sup> John fishing in the ocean, and McDermott relaxing on the shore), the three are attempting to commandeer the helicopter to mount an escape, but a member of the living dead springs out of the cabin of the chopper to overtake Sarah, begging the

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<sup>7</sup> Sarah's first nightmare opens the film. She is seen in a completely white room, laying against the wall (mimicking Fran dreaming in the television station in *Dawn of the Dead*) and staring at a calendar that displays the month of October and field full of pumpkins. As she peers closer at the calendar, zombified arms break through a wall and reach out toward her, awaking her in the backseat of the helicopter.

question as to whether this was Sarah's nightmare. It can be argued that the paradise showing the three in the final shots of the film is merely a utopian perception as the three meet their ultimate fate. Earlier in the film when John, McDermott, Miguel and Sarah return from an expedition in the helicopter, they ask the soldiers to fill the gas tank up during the night so as to not arouse the living dead outside the fences anymore, but the audience actually never sees the helicopter being refueled, leaving the possibility that it had never occurred. Because of this, the ending shown in the film remains ambiguous. This possibility, then, can lead to the assumption that there is no escape from the living dead, and the proposed "happy ending" is nullified for a much more grim realization that the world occupied by the living dead is the only other option besides the individualistic social order that barely remains.

#### Dr. Logan and His "Star Pupil"

In opposition to the other films in Romero's *Dead* series, *Day of the Dead* is the first to individualize a member of the living dead. Bub, Dr. Logan's "star pupil," was kept separate from the other specimens because of his good behavior; whereas, the masses of the living dead would simply devour any human within their grasp; Bub has

been conditioned, through tests of residual memory, to no longer desire this consumption of human flesh, but this feeds into Dr. Logan's fantastic interpretation of the plague of the living dead. Although it would appear that Logan recognizes the necessity of the intermingling of humanity and the living dead, his visions are one of control and slavery of the lower life forms. The themes of race and class are displayed through Logan's work as he proves that the zombies can be controlled as long as they are rewarded for their efforts, driving him to slaughter humans to provide sustenance for his *Pavlovian pupil*. The actions taken by Logan are disturbing because "Logan takes the next logical step and moves on from the butchery of zombies who look like people to the actual butchery of real people" (Paffenroth 83), which leads to his murder at the hands of Rhodes and his remaining soldiers. His misguided efforts, however, do not yield empty results through his "star pupil" Bub.

Romero's vision of a post-apocalyptic America only begins to appear in this film. In the previous installments, the living dead could be contained and, to some extent, controlled, but they were only seen as remnants of the former society in *Dawn*. Dr. Logan, however, views the living dead as a force that can

ultimately be trained and controlled. Logan's work demonstrates the purely instinctual actions (a fact that Dr. Logan proves by removing vital organs from a reanimated corpse and studying the decay of the brain) to consume all living flesh in sight. It is through Bub, however, that the living dead have the capacity to be more than mindless masses feasting upon the living. Through Bub, Logan's ideas of utilizing the living dead becomes more of a legitimate possibility because "Bub shows himself capable of moral improvement, shuffling off at the end, apparently no longer interested in killing or eating humans" (Paffenroth 89-90).<sup>8</sup> Even though Bub appears to no longer desire to eat human flesh, he demonstrates an evolved demeanor that has the ability to process human emotions such as sadness and a sense of revenge.<sup>9</sup> His interaction with Dr. Logan and Captain Rhodes make this evident. Bub no longer sees "Logan as a prospective meal and actually shows a puppylike affection for his 'master'" (Gagne 152); whereas, the exchange between Rhodes and Bub is much more ominous in the salute

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<sup>8</sup> After Bub shoots Captain Rhodes, he shambles into the distance and allows the other masses of the living dead to feed their desires by feasting on Rhodes' body.

<sup>9</sup> Bub finds the dead body of Dr. Logan and is capable of identifying the murderer. Bub, then, grabs a pistol with which he later kills Captain Rhodes in an act of revenge. After shooting Rhodes, Bub salutes him once again, mimicking their earlier exchange.

sequence. While Logan is testing Bub's ability to process memory, Rhodes barges in to the room to examine "Frankenstein's" research. Recognizing the uniform of Rhodes, Bub salutes Rhodes, but the gesture is not reciprocated.

Logan: He was in the military. Return the salute and see what he does.

Rhodes: You want me to salute that pile of walking pus? Salute my ass.

Logan: Your ignorance is exceeded only by your charm, captain

After this exchange, Logan hands Bub an unloaded gun to which he cocks it, points it at Rhodes and pulls the trigger. According to Paul Gagne:

Bub's interaction with Rhodes is the trilogy's most vivid example of Romero's monster/victim reversals. Bub becomes increasingly more sympathetic and *human* than the sadistic Rhodes as his dormant soul is reawakened. (152)

The character Bub is a precursor to Big Daddy in *Land of the Dead* that exhibits the same abilities without the promise of reward, demonstrating that this evolution is natural. Furthermore, the next film in the *Dead* series

contains the living dead army that has completely overrun the American landscape.

As the inevitable replacement for humanity, the living dead, once again, are more unified not only in regards to their goal but also in appearance. Take into consideration, the events of this film occur five years after *Dawn*, and Sarah even notices early on that the masses are becoming more intelligent, yet not nearly as *advanced* as Bub. The living dead have seemingly become their own society in the beginning of *Day*, as they have overtaken major cities and removed any remnants of humanity from them; however, the living dead have not created a new society. They have gained control of this city, but they are still simply acting on an instinctual level. The opening sequence shows John, Sarah, Miguel and McDermott exploring a vacant city in Florida. The city's streets are empty, money blows around freely and the living dead and alligators alike shuffle through the remnants of the once thriving human city. The living dead have become the dominant species, and within their masses, individuality, a remnant of the American Dream, is lost. The only noticeable differences amongst the living dead is the clothing they wear, and that is even becoming hardly identifiable, making them a unified force

in every sense of the word. Looking at Tony Williams' work:

The advanced process of decay exhibited by the zombies in this film blurs every distinguishing boundary between male and female, black and white, adult and child. Everyone becomes instinctually consumerist and conformist representing an advertising executive's desired world. But they, ironically, achieve this goal in death rather than life. (136)

Although they are not nearly as advanced as Bub, the rest of the living dead possess the same ability to process memory, and it is their sheer masses that help in their overthrow of the existing human order.

Through *Day of the Dead*, the living dead have slowly been overtaking the earth, but it is the last chapter of Romero's tetralogy that shows the full realization of a world controlled by the living dead. *Land of the Dead* returns to the consumerist critiques of the American Dream and a critique of social order as humanity attempts to hold on to anything they have left.



## Chapter 4

## The Living Dead and Co-existence

Twenty years after *Day of the Dead*, Romero returned from other cinematic ventures to the story of the living dead that he began in 1968. *Land of the Dead* picks up several years after the living dead arose and began feeding upon living flesh. America has been completely overtaken by the menace of the plague-ridden foe, and humanity has been forced into enclosed encampments miles away from former, living cities that are now occupied by the shambling masses. With *Land of the Dead*, Romero explores the darker side of the American Dream through corruption and greed and unpacks complex class systems, including an elitist faction; lower classes; and the living dead contingency. The living dead, in this film more so than the previous installments, have become unified with a purpose: survival. The role reversal here, as the living have been attempting to survive in all of the films, shows the living dead attempting to protect their livelihood. This examination of the living dead comes early on in the film during a raid on the once-living city of Uniontown. Big Daddy (Eugene Clark), *Land of the Dead's* next step up the evolutionary ladder from Bub, has developed the intelligence to ignore the

distractions the living use in order for them to raid Uniontown and also leads an army of the living dead, demonstrating the knowledge to operate basic tools and weapons, and withstand the instinctual urges to devour living flesh.

*Land of the Dead* differs from the other movies in Romero's *Dead* series in a number of ways. First, and foremost, this film ends on a light-hearted note comparable to happy Hollywood endings of the hero riding off into the sunset; whereas, the other three films end with a sense of shock or ambiguity.<sup>1</sup> *Land of the Dead* presents a hero's journey through two characters: Big Daddy and Riley (Simon Baker). Big Daddy leads an army of the living dead in opposition to the living forces that raid his *home* for food and material goods. We see Big Daddy's realization that other living dead are being executed by the living, and his compassion for his living dead brethren may be disturbing to the audience. His connection with the other living dead begs the audience for empathy, or even sympathy. As for the journey of

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<sup>1</sup> *Night* ended with Ben being shot and disturbing black and white images shown behind the credits that echoed the tumultuous backdrop of Vietnam and the Civil Rights era; *Dawn* ended with Peter and Fran riding off in a helicopter that has low fuel ending the film on an ominous tone; and *Day* ends ambiguously with Sarah's dream of the living dead and waking up on a beach

Riley, he is stuck in the evil world of Kaufman (Dennis Hopper) and trying to escape to a better life. Riley, in opposition to many of the other leading men in the *Dead* series, seems to be incorruptible. He does not attempt to struggle for power (like Ben, Harry Cooper and Captain Rhodes), for he is already a strong, trustworthy leader; he is not overtaken with material possessions (as were Stephen, Roger and Peter) because he desires to escape Kaufman's corrupt world of Fiddler's Green. *Land of the Dead* also delivers a clear, living antagonist through Kaufman.

Kaufman is the power in this new living society. He feeds his own megalomaniacal tendencies through political corruption and the almighty dollar. He ensures everyone knows that he is responsible for the safety of Fiddler's Green; however, by keeping the living safe from the living dead menace, Kaufman establishes a tyrannical hold on this new society. His actions reinforce the separation of social classes, and he uses his influence to control all of the inhabitants of his proposed safe haven. As great as protection from the living dead may sound, Kaufman's society is not self-sufficient, and it requires pillaging and foraging the former human township—Uniontown, now a town completely inhabited by the living

dead. Kaufman controls the society, the military and the influx of goods from the foraging missions into Uniontown. Within the fenced-in sanctuary, the Fiddler's Green apartment complex houses the wealthy and amenities that feed their luxurious lifestyles, yet the poor are left outside to fend for themselves in a seemingly lawless world controlled by run-of-the mill gangsters, gambling and various other vices. Kaufman retains control over his *promised land* by instilling a campaign of fear. If he had not put up fences, enlisted an army and arranged for goods and supplies, then there would be no place for the living to call *home*. Kim Paffenroth's analysis explains Kaufman's use of fear of the living dead in order to retain his power:

Kaufman sees how 'good' life can be in a zombie-infested world, for not only does it remove all restraints on him, but it also lets him set up a hellish society based on his values of greed, envy, vice and cruelty. We see this when he explains his own version of 'civic duty' at one point. According to him, he has a great and noble 'responsibility' for his fellow citizens, because he 'kept people off the streets by giving them games and vices.' (126)

It is the rejection of Kaufman's new society that leads Riley, the protagonist, to find a way out of Fiddler's Green to a place where neither Kaufman or the living dead reign over their respective worlds.

#### Kaufman and the Gates of Fiddler's Green

Fiddler's Green boasts elegant living surrounded by luxurious shopping inside this safe haven of post-apocalyptic America. This beautiful complex, however, is reserved for the ultra-elite within Kaufman's society. Much like its predecessor, "Fiddler's Green [is] a more luxurious take on the shopping mall enclave from *Dawn of the Dead*" (Russell 189). For the shopping mall as symbol of the consumer culture of the 1970s, this society operates as "the most recent incarnation of the American Dream . . . a dream of the West Coast—of instant fame and fortune achieved with minimal effort" (Maddrey 5). It seems unlikely that at this point in the apocalypse of the living dead that material possessions, or money, would hold any significant value, yet Kaufman has the capability of keeping prosperity highly valued in his system of segregation and depravity. Kaufman uses humanity's vices to control the living masses that assemble in shanties outside of his luxurious apartment complex, and smaller-scale versions of Kaufman organize

sporting events that place both living and the living dead in a fight for their life.<sup>2</sup> These sporting spectacles capture the debauchery that Kaufman has established, through the importance of vices, within his gates of Fiddler's Green. Jamie Russell's examination of Kaufman displays the man's extortion of those that looked to him for protection:

Kaufman claims to have been the architect of the city's fortification—a walled community protected on two sides by water—and he's using the current situation to profit from the misery of the impoverished survivors who're sheltering under his wing. (186)

Other critics have even brought in a more Biblical description of Kaufman in a comparison to Satan (Paffenroth 127). He firmly holds onto this idea of self-preservation, regardless of cost, within Fiddler's Green that is inflated by racist tendencies as he refers to Cholo as "Spic" on more than one occasion, and he tells Big Daddy, African-America leader of the living dead, that he "has no right" while the "stenches" (a derogatory

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<sup>2</sup> This particular idea was parodied in both the manga (1999) and the film version (2005) of *Tokyo Zombie*. Living participants would battle the living dead in order to achieve fame and fortune, yet those that battled the living dead in Romero's film were battling for their lives and sheer spectacle.

term from the living dead used throughout the film) are overrunning Fiddler's Green.

First and foremost, an identifiable middle class does not occupy Fiddler's Green. It could be argued that the dregs that surround the lavish penthouse complex could be seen as the middle class; whereas, the living dead are representative of the lowest class within the social order established by Kaufman. In this case then, the social hierarchy would start at the top with Kaufman, move to the elite that occupy Fiddler's Green, the working class, then the living dead. The disturbing piece of the social puzzle here occupies the void between the elite and the working class. In the film, the working class is beyond the state of poverty. Kim Paffenroth's analysis compares Fiddler's Green to the Monroville Mall from *Dawn of the Dead*, and how each fortress acts as a deterrent from unwanted bodies, living or living dead. The difference between the two is that Fiddler's Green is "made more horrible and wretched by its opulence, and by the fact that it is not just zombies and biker gangs that are kept out, but sick and starving children" (Paffenroth 126-127). The villainous Kaufman controls every facet of Fiddler's Green. He is much like a feudal lord controlling the production of goods and services, and he

awards himself first choice of everything in his domain. He controls distribution of food, medicine, drugs, sex, and gambling. The society that Kaufman has built around Fiddler's Green is based on control. Slack (Asia Argento), Romero's heroine for *Land of the Dead*, explains Kaufman's controlling nature to Riley for the loss of his newly purchased car:

Slack: It wasn't the little man. It was the big man. The man upstairs. He's got his fingers in everything down here. If you can drink it, shoot it up, fuck it, or gamble on it, it belongs to him. He's just seein' that we get a few cheap kicks so we don't go thinkin' too hard about why he's eating steak and the rest of us are lucky to get the bones.

Slack's reference to the "man upstairs" alludes to the messianic-complex Kaufman has gained as a result of his megalomaniacal actions and his creation of Fiddler's Green.

Fiddler's Green is a dystopian version of downtown or suburban American where work and efforts would be rewarded through luxury and relaxation. As corrupt as this city behind a fence has become, Kaufman's city is



still providing protection from the initial threat of the living dead. It then represents a better alternative than facing the hordes of the living dead on the outside of the fences. These fences, then, act in much the same manner to the living dead that security-code operated doors work for apartment complexes. The work of John S. Adams demonstrates that American zoning practices function in much the same manner, as do the electrified fences surrounding Fiddler's Green:

Zoning laws restricted property uses supposedly to control nuisances . . . [or] protecting the family-oriented residential neighborhood from uses that threatened the quality and attractiveness of neighborhood surroundings.

(521)

Kaufman's haven may not operate on notions of "family-oriented" relationships within the fences, but the living protected by the fences believe they are being kept safe from the living dead, but not from the corrupt system that Kaufman has installed. These citizens live in a world constructed out of the bigotry and racism of a corrupt leader, yet only a few look for an escape to a better world.

Riley, Cholo and Desire for a Better Life

In opposition to the previous films, the idea of a better life, or "Promised Land,"<sup>3</sup> is much more distant and ambiguous, especially in the case of Riley. Riley, along with Charlie, has grown tired of Kaufman's skewed version of utopia. He searches for a different answer to the problem of a world where the living dead clearly outnumber the living, but he also desires to escape from the depraved Fiddler's Green and the rest of its inhabitants. Even though Riley is clearly disgusted with the debauchery of Fiddler's Green, it is made evident that Kaufman values Riley, as the captain of *Dead Reckoning*, and every measure will be taken so he does not leave the Green, including having his car stolen and being kept in a holding cell.<sup>4</sup> Riley is released only for the benefit of Kaufman. Cholo, as an attempt at blackmail, steals Kaufman's battle-car, *Dead Reckoning*, and Riley is asked to procure the stolen vehicle for another chance at leaving Fiddler's Green. Despite his connection to Kaufman's corrupt regime, Riley stands out as the unambiguous hero, and this differs greatly from

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<sup>3</sup> The term promised land, here, is used as an allusion to John in *Day of the Dead*.

<sup>4</sup> Riley had secured a vehicle from "the short man"—Chihuahua (Phil Fondacaro), a night-club operator that hosts the living versus living dead fights. Riley hired a mechanic to work on the car before he leaves his post as captain of *Dead Reckoning*, but the vehicle is stolen, presumably by Kaufman's men, before Riley can escape Fiddler's Green.

the previous installments of *Dead* series. In the previous chapters, the heroes were ambiguous, and their fates were unclear. In comparison, Riley rides off into the sunset with *Dead Reckoning* in pursuit of a place where there are no people—living or living dead. On numerous occasions, Riley demonstrates a kind heart toward not only the living but also the living dead. According to Kim Paffenroth, “it is Riley and Big Daddy who are the real heroes of the story—one human, one zombie—precisely because they rise above the sinfulness of either living or undead zombies” (129). As Riley seeks to distance himself from the evil of Fiddler’s Green, Cholo seeks to embrace the corruption that Kaufman has created inside the gated city.

No other character has embodied the American Dream of fame and fortune more so in Romero’s *Dead* series than has Cholo. He subscribes to the empty existence that Fiddler’s Green offers. In addition to the foraging team of *Dead Reckoning*, Cholo would take, and do, a little extra on the side to provide the finer things for Kaufman in order to get a chance to live in the luxurious

apartments. Cholo hoped that his removal of "garbage"<sup>5</sup> would secure his place within the hallowed halls of Fiddler's Green. Cholo, being completely aware of Kaufman's bigotry, still desired the social status that is symbolized by residence in the upscale apartments, but it is his race that keeps him from this dream.

Kaufman: I'm sorry, Mister DeMora, but there's  
a very long waiting list.

Cholo: How long?

Kaufman: This is an extremely desirable  
location. Space is limited.

Cholo: You mean restricted.

. . .

Cholo: ... You are going to let me in. You know  
why? Because I know what goes on  
around here. How many of your fucking  
"members" know what's in that garbage  
I take out for you?

Cholo's belief in the ideas of wealth and social status are central to his self-worth within the society. As explained by Kim Paffenroth, "Cholo claims that without money, he would be just like the zombies—a useless,

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<sup>5</sup> Cholo worked as a hit man for Kaufman and would eliminate and dispose of any threat to Kaufman's society.

worthless, nameless subhuman" (129). Despite his plans to become rich, he eventually enacts his revenge upon Kaufman, but as a member of the living dead. Both Cholo and Kaufman meet the ultimate fate as Big Daddy destroys both of them with a flaming gas can, proving that Fiddler's Green may not have been as safe as originally anticipated. Big Daddy's actions, here, demonstrate his advanced level of thinking in comparison to other living dead, and it is through him that the living dead are truly forming their own society.

#### Big Daddy and the Living Dead

The opening sequence of the film occurs in a town outside of Fiddler's Green, Uniontown—a town completely dead. The living crew of *Dead Reckoning* has come to salvage the town for supplies and necessities, but the living dead that now occupy Uniontown are exhibiting signs of their former lives (more so than in any other film in the *Dead* series). Riley, as does Peter and Stephen in *Dawn of the Dead* and Sarah and Dr. Logan in *Day of the Dead*, notices that the living dead "used to be us." As the camera pans, "stenches" can be seen attempting to play instruments under a gazebo, walking hand-in-hand through the park, and Big Daddy is seen attempting to fill up an imaginary car at the gas pump.

These feats are much more impressive than Bub's ability to use a firearm in *Day of the Dead*. Big Daddy, a black zombie, relies more on memory rather than the Pavlovian training that Dr. Logan practices with Bub, and this makes Big Daddy a more formidable foe for the living. James Russell discusses Big Daddy's place in the *Dead* series:

While the previous three films in the series featured a black hero who was alive, *Land of the Dead* is the first to feature a black hero who is already dead. Big Daddy (Eugene Clark) is a distant cousin not only of Bub, the zombie with a brain from *Day of the Dead*, but also Ben, Peter and John in the earlier films. (189)

In comparison to other black characters, however, Big Daddy possesses the capability of amassing hordes of the living dead in order to conduct an assault on the living and Fiddler's Green. He draws sympathy early on in the film because he is not indifferent to the looting of Uniontown. He notices that the living are killing his brethren, and his actions and leadership arouse dormant abilities in the other "stanches." He teaches the other members of his society, albeit roughly, how to use tools including a butcher's knife and firearms. As the living

dead have become more intelligent, they mount an offensive upon the living members of Fiddler's Green in order to protect themselves and, of course, feed upon living flesh.

Big Daddy's actions here appear to be predetermined. He assesses that the living come from Fiddler's Green after following the road that brought Dead Reckoning and the other looters into the city of Uniontown. Along the way to Fiddler's Green, Big Daddy acts "like a zombified Black Panther, a civil rights revolutionary who leads this living dead underclass on a riot against the Establishment" (Russell 189). Even though the living dead still feast upon the living, they are not simply feeding for the sake of feeding, to fulfill this inherent desire to consume flesh. With Big Daddy leading the horde, the living dead appear to have a directive, a purpose. It must be understood, however, the other living dead did not function on the higher level that Big Daddy exhibits, and it is only with his leadership that the offensive on Fiddler's Green would have even been a possibility.

Unfortunately, there is no explanation, within the film, as to why Big Daddy has become much more self-aware than the rest of his living dead counterparts. The only explanation offered in the film is the concept of

residual memory that is brought up in *Day of the Dead* through Bub, but even Bub had to have the influence of Dr. Logan in order to achieve simple tasks of recognition. It was only through the training that Bub was able to perform menial memory exercises, and this is just one living dead, not an entire horde. Recalling the opening sequence in *Uniontown*, the living dead all exhibit signs of residual memory as the band attempts to play instruments in the gazebo, the young couple walks hand-in-hand, and Big Daddy uses the fuel pump. When the living come into *Uniontown* to loot the remaining goods and supplies, what results is a bloodbath. In Kim Paffenroth's analysis, "the violence done to the zombies not only seems mindless and grotesque, but downright cruel, as the zombies pose no threat and really are minding their own business" (130). His analysis would go on further to say that the living dead in *Uniontown* have achieved a peaceful community where they exist in unity, and they only attack when provoked by the living. This may seem like a stretch, but perhaps the living dead are capable of adapting. In *Night*, the living dead were simply flesh-eaters, and with the release of *Dawn*, the living dead began to go to places stored in their memory—remember, the mall was already swarming with the rotting



corpses before the four survivors stumbled upon it. Even in *Day*, Sarah addresses the learning capabilities of the living dead while trying to capture them for Dr. Logan's experiments. Perhaps, that is part of the terror inherent in these monsters, is that they learn to adapt much like the living. The phrase, "They are us," uttered by Peter in *Dawn of the Dead*, only makes the fear of these creatures much more terrifying. Even though their ability to learn can be seen in brief moments throughout the series, there does not seem to be an explanation for Big Daddy's ability to lead the living dead, or have more of a control of his appetite.

The destruction of Fiddler's Green at the hands of the living dead symbolizes the fall of the pre-living dead world and Kaufman's corrupt regime, and now, the remaining inhabitants of Fiddler's Green, mainly a group led by Mulligan; Riley's crew; and the living dead led by Big Daddy will begin to exist in a world where the living and living dead can coexist, but probably not within close contact. Big Daddy leads his living dead army, presumably, back to Uniontown after they have destroyed and eaten the people of Fiddler's Green, and Riley says, "All they want is somewhere to go. Same as us." In comparison to the living dead in *Dawn* or *Day*, they do not

stick around a certain place, such as the mall or the bunker, looking for food. As far as the audience can see, the living dead resided peacefully in Uniontown, and it was only the living's interference that led to the uprising originated by Big Daddy. In looking at zombie cinema as a whole and the character of Big Daddy, "Romero rewires the zombie genre's rich racial history, styling his ghouls as an oppressed minority rising up against the fascist dictatorship of Kaufman's Fiddler's Green" (Russell 190). The living dead, however, do not mount this offensive in order to gain access to the luxuries of Fiddler's Green. It is enacted for what seems like a sense of revenge, a chance of peace in Uniontown, and, of course, some living flesh for the hordes. *Land of the Dead* ends on the most optimistic note of the series as Big Daddy leads his living dead army off into the sunset, and Riley, with *Dead Reckoning*, does the same.

Ending the tetralogy of Romero's *Dead* series, *Land of the Dead* brought an optimism that had been non-existent in the series. Perhaps, the living and living dead are capable of coexisting and maintaining peace between the two worlds. As these films spanned out over nearly forty years, the living dead have attempted to devour living flesh, and the living have tried to survive

the nightmare. Ultimately, the concept of the American Dream that each set of survivors uses to construct their own post-apocalyptic scenario is turned on its head because of the living's inability to transcend old hatreds and hostilities in an attempt to create a better civilization for humanity. Although, Romero shows the inevitability of every living person becoming part of the living dead, the desire to survive surpasses any other appeal or ideal that could be faced by either side.

## Conclusion

## The American Dream in a Living Dead World

At the very heart of Romero's *Dead* series a battle for survival is apparent. From Barbra's first battle with what appears to be a shambling man in a graveyard to Big Daddy leading an army of the living dead, survival has been central to both the living and the living dead. Perhaps, the living are those that desire to survive, for as far as the films show, the living dead, as a whole, have become like a vicious animal that does not want to be bothered. Yet, once it is disturbed, the living dead are capable of wiping out civilization. The living dead are a relentless force that the living simply cannot overcome. Their power in numbers is fierce and unforgiving, and there is no pre-meditation as to what could become their meal. If living flesh is close, it seems as though that is the special for the evening. But what does this dark picture of American culture say? Critics, including Tony Williams and Stephen Harper examine these films in regards to consumerism in America; whereas, others, such as Kim Paffenroth, examine religious aspects in regards to sin, penance and salvation. My claim, however, is the living dead can be seen as a decrepit mirror of humanity as they begin to

act and operate like the living in a very basic sense. It can go without saying that the living dead already resemble their living counterparts, and that caused trouble for many survivors including the minorities pent-up in the apartment complex in the beginning of *Dawn of the Dead*. The survivors of the living dead still are much more complex than the walking contagion.

The living cannot escape from a mindset to protect the individual. Each of the films examined the individual's struggle with the apocalypse of the living dead. Some battled for control over others (Ben, Harry Cooper, Captain Rhodes and Kaufman); some tried to keep chaos from lashing out among the survivors (Fran and Sarah); some enacted fantastic scenarios of consumerism given their ability to do so (Peter, Stephen, Roger and Fran); and others were simply lost (Barbra). Each of the films of Romero's tetralogy deals with the multi-faceted nature of the American Dream, including equality, fame, fortune, family and home ownership, even though they appear to take a back burner to survival. The films, as a whole body of work, demonstrate the failure of the American Dream within an apocalyptic scenario. Even Riley, Romero's most unambiguous hero, desired to save his own skin and escape to a world away from the living

dead and the corruption of Fiddler's Green. Paffenroth's analysis explains that

Many of the human characters are more petty, predatory, and selfish than any zombie could be, for their intellect does not undo or diminish such bad characteristics, it only enables the humans to act on such urges with greater cunning subtlety, and effectiveness.

(12)

This helps us see why the American Dream is detrimental to survival. In the most basic sense, the American Dream is an individualistic desire, for no *dream* can be the same. The American Dream changes on an individual basis, and it is a selfish desire. Because so many hold onto the desire to live an *ideal existence*—for John, an island; for Riley, a place away from corruption; for Captain Rhodes, a place without the living dead; for Ben, a place where he could be on equal footing—the survivors could never come to an agreement on which world would be better. Kaufman constructs an elegant community, but operates a depraved society. Dr. Logan wants to live and coexist with the living dead while Sarah wants to cure the plague. As it can be seen, each character wants to construct a new world, but because of their opposition to

each other's ideas, their small microcosm disintegrates, implodes, and the living dead are there to pick up the pieces. With the exception of Riley, the crew of *Dead Reckoning*, and the four survivors from *Dawn of the Dead*, most of the characters are incapable of overcoming their differences and working together during a time where survival is most important. In his humorous work *The Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection from the Living Dead*, Max Brooks sums this up quite effectively: "But no matter what happens to the surviving humans, there will always be the walking dead" (157). The living dead act as the leftover remnants of the former society. They are the end result of the American Dream, of a fallen society. If humanity cannot overcome differences of race, class, sex or creed, then the living dead remain to be the only other answer.

The end of each film, with the exception of *Night of the Living Dead*, shows that the living dead will always be there regardless of humanity's battle for survival. Each living person will ultimately become part of the living dead, that is, except for those shot in the head, to existentially devour the previous society. It is a chilling realization that "They are us," and it is one that the living must come to terms with.

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