

The Opinion Pages | APPRECIATIONS

George Romero's Zombie Apocalypse

By BRENT STAPLES JULY 17, 2017

The visionary horror film director George Romero, who died on Sunday at the age of 77, got the last laugh on critics who sought to bury his black-and-white classic “Night of the Living Dead” when it first stoked America’s nightmares in 1968. Filmed partly by amateurs on a budget that would not suffice as lunch money in today’s Hollywood, the movie founded a genre, introducing the zombies who are now synonymous with the apocalypse and ubiquitous in video games, novels, movies and television shows.

Some critics dismissed the picture as gratuitously ghoulish — and even silly — but it found its audience on the late-night drive-in and grindhouse circuit. Respectability came calling in 1999, when “Night of the Living Dead” was added to the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress, a list that includes revered movies like Alfred Hitchcock’s “North by Northwest,” Robert Altman’s “McCabe and Mrs. Miller” and Elia Kazan’s “East of Eden.”

Mr. Romero must have appreciated this kind of acceptance, belated though it was. One gets the sense from his interviews that he felt himself and his film undervalued and misunderstood. He once noted, for example, that critics had overlooked the camera angles and lighting he had modeled on the work of Orson Welles. He seemed distressed that people did not immediately grasp the social and political subtext he had threaded through the film.

The movie depicts a quarrelsome band of people who barricade themselves inside a rural farmhouse as the dead close in for a meal and a finale that broke Hollywood tradition by leaving none of the protagonists alive. The film is often

credited with introducing the anatomically specific special effects that are so common in horror today.

But for Mr. Romero, these effects were incidental to his broader theme: how mutual contempt and tribal self-interest so often prevent people from banding together in the face of a mortal threat. The flesh-eating dead, at least, come together in mindless self-interest. But the embattled residents of the farmhouse bicker and betray one another even as the darkness closes in. Mr. Romero viewed them as a metaphor for a society so deeply invested in petty enmities that it failed to see it was being swallowed alive.

His other great warning was that evil often resides in the utterly familiar. That point is driven home in the scene in which a young girl is transformed into a zombie and sets about devouring her father and killing her mother.

“What I’m trying to show,” he said, “is how the monster, the evil, is not something lurking in the distance, but something actually inside all of us.”

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