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Night of the Living Dead Dissects the News: Race, the 1967 Riots, and “Dead Neighbors”

ABSTRACT

George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) began filming in June and July of 1967, the same months that riots were occurring in 164 US cities as African Americans expressed their anger en masse against police brutality. The film challenges the veracity of news coverage of these riots and America’s subsequently violent response by depicting the creation of news in the field and studio, and its reception in the living room, as well as showing film viewers important events that the media fails to cover. This critique permeates the film’s diegetic newscasts and the film’s narrative and anti-racist message.

In June and July of 1967, the evening news was filled with apocalyptic scenes of burning American cities as National Guardsmen with machine guns stood on street corners and tanks entered Detroit. Riots were reported in 164 mostly northern cities, as African Americans expressed their anger against police brutality and a larger culture of racialized suppression, in part through looting and fires.¹ Referring to Black protesters as “terrorists,” a *New York Times*

1 Thomas J. Sugrue, foreword to *Detroit 1967: Origins, Impacts, Legacies*, ed. Joel Stone (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), x. I use the term “riot” here and throughout, which has negative connotations, because the news media overwhelmingly used this term, reflecting a larger discourse of denunciation. For more on term usage, see Ken Coleman, “Rebellion, Revolution, or Riot: The Debate Continues,” in Stone, *Detroit 1967*, 158–164.

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article described police and National Guard spraying machine-gun fire at buildings thought to hold snipers.² NBC reported that US forces were ready to fight “[t]he battle to gain control over Detroit’s rioters.”³ Such prejudicial coverage fomented white Americans’ fears of a race war, and they responded with overt threats of violence. In Newark and Detroit, white vigilantes drove around displaying Confederate flags, machetes, and automatic weapons.⁴ Mike Kalush, a news photographer for Detroit’s WXYZ-TV, captured footage of a white woman driving with a pistol prominently draped over her steering wheel (see Figure 1). “I was scared to death,” he later revealed, “I thought she’d shoot me. She didn’t even hardly look at me. She looked like [she] was in a trance. She was terrified.”⁵ At the same time as racialized violence threatened to overtake America, a group of young filmmakers had just begun living and filming in a dilapidated farmhouse in rural Pennsylvania, and what’s more, they had cast an African American, Duane Jones, to play the film’s hero, Ben. What we now know as George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) was begun during a period of extreme racial upheaval and state-sanctioned violence against African Americans, the effects of which remain present in the film’s newscasts and anti-racist narrative.

In this article, I address *Night of the Living Dead*’s response to two interconnected issues: America’s violent and racist response to the 1967 riots and the news media’s problematic coverage of the events. I first discuss how news coverage of the riots presented African Americans as a marauding force with no clear goals but violence, much like the film’s newscasts present the ghouls. I next address how *Night of the Living Dead*’s newscasts display a canny awareness of how television works, both as a technological apparatus and as an ideological medium. Finally, I show how these intertwined issues of race and television play out in the film’s conception, production, and release, as well as over the course of the film, particularly in the two sequences that depict survivors watching the news and in the movie’s pessimistic conclusion. As I show, these newscasts are key to understanding the film’s anti-racist message and related criticism of television news.

Scholars have analyzed *Night of the Living Dead* through lenses as diverse as gender, theology, and the rhetoric surrounding death.⁶ Although television has not been a particular focus of these exegeses, there have been numerous considerations of the film’s explorations of media. Vivian Sob-

2 Homer Bigart, “Newark Riot Deaths at 21 as Negro Sniping Widens; Hughes May Seek U.S. Aid,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1967, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/national/race/071667race-ra.html>.

3 Malcolm McLaughlin, *The Long Hot Summer of 1967: Urban Rebellion in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 102.

4 Peter Blackmer, “Police Used the Myth of Black Snipers to Justify Brutality in the Long Hot Summer of 1967,” *Timeline*, August 11, 2017, <https://timeline.com/myth-black-snipers-1967-c8602defde13>; and Rev. Daniel W. Aldridge Jr., “The First Time I’ve Ever Seen Justice,” in Stone, *Detroit 1967*, 232.

5 Tim Kiska, *A Newscast for the Masses: The History of Detroit Television News* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 73.

6 See Elizabeth Aiossa, *The Subversive Zombie: Social Protest and Gender in Undead Cinema and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018); Kim Paffenroth, *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero’s Visions of Hell on Earth* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006); and Outi Hakola, *Rhetoric of Modern Death in American Living Dead Films* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).



Figure 1. A white female driver in Detroit prominently displays a pistol during the 1967 riots, in footage from *Detroit Riot* (1967, Courtesy of the Archives of Michigan, RG 91-320).

chack describes the film as presenting media as “negatively, even fatally, influential” since “the public is totally credulous and trusting while the media is electronic, apathetic, and finally immune to private experience.”⁷ Steven Shaviro describes Romero’s ghouls in Deleuzian terms as almost “quintessential media images, since they are vacuous, mimetic replications of the human beings they once were.”⁸ Allan Cameron argues that zombie films, including *Night of the Living Dead*, explore the fraught relationship between living bodies and media by interconnecting the media’s imperfect ability to capture, transmit, and reproduce moments of chance and contingency with the physical, social, and hermeneutical disorder zombies prompt.⁹ As such scholarship shows, the media has been a productive lens for interpreting the film. My focus on television adds to this conversation by drawing connections between the events and newscasts that influenced *Night of the Living Dead* and the film’s critique of news media.

Race has been a common lens for considering the film, and Noël Carroll describes Romero’s original zombie trilogy as “explicitly anti-racist.”¹⁰ Robin Wood responds to Ben’s race by pointing out that “it is not true that his color is arbitrary and without meaning; Romero uses it to signify his difference from the other characters, to set him apart from their norms.”¹¹ Although he

7 Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, 2nd ed. (New York: Ungar, 1987), 90.

8 Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 84.

9 Allan Cameron, “Zombie Media: Transmission, Reproduction, and the Digital Dead,” *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 1 (2012): 68.

10 Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 198.

11 Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan . . . and Beyond*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 103.

doesn't connect the film to the 1967 riots, Stephen Harper claims that the film "clearly and insistently engages with its contemporary social and political milieu" and that "[t]he film's immediate social context further suggests its racial significance."¹² Scholars such as Brigid Cherry have described the film as responding to, and reconfiguring, America's racist past, particularly lynch mobs and the Ku Klux Klan.¹³ But as this article shows, *Night of the Living Dead* is also addressing the contemporaneous racist portrayals of African Americans by the news during the summer of 1967.

Though scholars have mentioned the newscasts within *Night of the Living Dead*, the film's engagement with the news has remained substantially under-explored. In the documentary *Birth of the Living Dead* (Rob Kuhns, 2013), film scholar Sam Pollard describes the diegetic newscasts of armed vigilantes and police as "in sync with the kind of newscasts that I was seeing, my generation was seeing on television. . . . It made me think of the stuff I would see on the television and stuff of the Newark riots, of Watts."¹⁴ For the film's audience, as well as its characters, television is the primary source of information about the catastrophe as a national event. Appearing within a television's boxy frame are scenes that emulate news footage of the 1967 riots, including combative government officials evading reporters' questions and a swaggering sheriff describing his plan to contain the offending horde. *Night of the Living Dead* complicates this type of coverage by depicting the circuit of the news media's construction and reception *within* the film, but it also juxtaposes this examination with events that will not be covered by the news, most notably Ben's death and immolation at the hands of a white posse. Ultimately, the film reveals that what the news fails to show are the experiences of the very same population the news constructs as dangerous: African American men.

NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD AND RACE

Night of the Living Dead depicts the experiences of a group of survivors, all white save one, who hide in a rural farmhouse from the menace of shambling dead neighbors with a desire to consume living flesh. An early shot superimposes the credit "Directed by George A. Romero" over an American flag, making explicit Romero's desire that the film be read as a parable of America. As the film begins, siblings Barbara and Johnny (Judith O'Dea and Russell Streiner) arrive at a cemetery to lay a wreath on their father's grave. The siblings are interrupted by a ghoul who attacks Johnny, while Barbara escapes. She arrives at a remote farmhouse where a group of people attempt to survive the ghouls. These survivors include Ben, a capable African American man; Harry and Helen Cooper (Karl Hardman and Marilyn Eastman), a bickering, white, middle-class couple, and their daughter Karen (Kyra Schon), who was bitten by a ghoul; and Tom and Judy (Keith Wayne and Judith Ridley), a young working-class white couple. Due to a series of errors and mishaps, Ben alone survives the night, only to be shot in the morning

12 Stephen Harper, "Night of the Living Dead: Reappraising an Undead Classic," *Bright Lights Film Journal* 50 (November 1, 2005), <https://brightlightsfilm.com/night-living-dead-reappraising-undead-classic/>.

13 Brigid Cherry, *Horror* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 179.

14 Rob Kuhns, dir., *Birth of the Living Dead* (New York: First Run Features, 2013).

by a posse of white men led by the local sheriff. Beginning with a shot of an American flag, the film ends with a shot of Ben's body burning on a pyre, presenting the broader message that America is in danger of destroying itself through racialized violence.

Night of the Living Dead's interest in the relationships of race, violence, and the news was influenced by preceding televised representations of African Americans. As Sasha Torres persuasively argues, television's handling of race from 1955 to 1965 was crucial in articulating an emerging Black political agency that challenged tropes of Black inferiority and helped give rise to a national sense of Black pride and self-worth.¹⁵ However, many African Americans felt that the civil rights movement, with its emphasis on southern oppression, had overlooked their concerns, particularly regarding police violence. One expression of this discontent occurred on August 12, 1965, when the police arrest of a Black motorist sparked the Watts riots, which resulted in thirty-four deaths and \$35 million in property damage.¹⁶ As historian Thomas Hrach points out, the riots were "the first . . . in which the media coverage became part of the story. While the news media were never directly blamed for the Watts riots, they were clearly culpable."¹⁷ The news media, which had been previously central to the articulation of a positive model of Black agency by depicting African Americans as a community with real grievances, shifted toward negative coverage that depicted African Americans as dangerous. The events of the summer of 1967, though, dwarfed the Watts riots, both in the number of people involved and the magnitude of media coverage.

The 1967 riots began on June 11 after the police shooting of an unarmed African American teen in the back spurred rioting in Tampa.¹⁸ The next day, riots began in Cincinnati after police arrested an African American man for demonstrating against his cousin's arrest. Ultimately, 700 National Guardsmen were called into the city, one person was killed, and 404 people were arrested.¹⁹ In response to national issues of police brutality, and fueled in part by news coverage, riots spread across cities in the eastern third of the nation. In Newark, authorities fired more than 12,000 rounds, 26 people died, and 1,465 people were arrested.²⁰ In Detroit, the National Guard alone fired over 155,000 rounds, and ultimately 43 people were killed and 7,231

15 Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and in Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 13.

16 Thomas J. Hrach, *The Riot Report and the News: How the Kerner Commission Changed Media Coverage of Black America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 11–12. See also Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 3–19.

17 Hrach, *Riot Report*, 12.

18 Jae Jones, "Riots Erupt in Tampa, Florida, After Police Shoot Unarmed Black Teen in the Back (1967)," *Blackthen*, December 23, 2019, <https://blackthen.com/riots-erupt-tampa-fl-police-shoot-unharmmed-black-teen-back-1967/>.

19 Mark Curnutte, "Avondale Riots 50 Years Later: 'It's never been the same,'" *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 10, 2017, <https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2017/06/09/avondale-riots-50-years-later-its-never-been-same/379214001/>.

20 Jessica Mazzola and Karen Yi, "50 Years Ago Newark Burned," *NJ Advance Media*, July 13, 2017, https://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2017/07/what_you_need_to_know_about_the_1967_newark_riots.html.

people were arrested.²¹ Ten times as many African Americans were arrested in Detroit as whites.²² Similar incidents occurred across the United States in large urban areas such as Atlanta, Buffalo, and Milwaukee, as well as small cities such as West Palm Beach, Florida, where rioting followed an attempt by local police to arrest two African American men at a bar; ultimately, 45 people were arrested, and a lumberyard burned down.²³

Television reports largely depicted rioters as dangerous while ignoring the underlying motivation for the riots: police brutality. Interviewing 500 prisoners arrested during the Detroit riots, a government-sponsored study found that the most common motivator for the unrest was police brutality, and prisoners referred to specific instances of beatings and physical violence.²⁴ The police and National Guard were also particularly brutal in their response to the riots. Detroit police executed three unarmed African American men at the Algiers Motel, killed people for looting groceries, and shot fleeing, unarmed African Americans.²⁵ Similar abuses were documented elsewhere; a news article on the Newark riots reports that “[a] lull in the shooting had lasted until early afternoon when the looter was killed instantly by a shotgun blast. The police said he had taken a case of beer from a liquor store and was running across the street with it.”²⁶ In their coverage of the riots, news agencies defaulted to an us-versus-them narrative that construed the United States as both white and at war with urban African Americans. An ABC reporter embedded with the National Guard in Detroit commented that “[t]his is a battle zone. These are troops. It’s like war with one difference: the enemy was captured, and he’ll have his day in court.”²⁷ Reporters often drew parallels with the Vietnam War, and in her recollection of the 1967 riots, Dr. Melba Joyce Boyd writes of watching the riots on television: “Suddenly, we were watching imagery of the Vietnam War juxtaposed with similar scenes of conflict on 12th Street, which became even more bizarre when President Lyndon Johnson sent federal troops and tanks to Detroit and the two settings merged within the surreal world of television.”²⁸ Dr. Boyd’s description is a telling example of how television news conflated the riots with the Vietnam War such that many viewers understood the riots in similarly martial terms.

One contentious debate about *Night of the Living Dead* is the degree to which the film responds to the Vietnam War, if at all. Sumiko Higashi, for instance, claims that the Vietnam War, unmentioned within the film, exists

21 Danielle L. McGuire, “Murder at the Algiers Motel,” in Stone, *Detroit 1967*, 176; and Sugrue, foreword, ix.

22 James H. Lincoln, *The Anatomy of a Riot: A Detroit Judge’s Report* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book, 1968), 130.

23 For footage of the events in West Palm Beach, Florida, see *Civil Disturbance*, July 30, 1967, the State Archives of Florida, <https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/252951>.

24 Manpower Administration, Department of Labor, *The Detroit Riot: A Profile of 500 Prisoners* (Washington, DC, 1968), 9.

25 McGuire, “Murder,” 177, 175.

26 Bigart, “Newark Riot Deaths.”

27 *Detroit Riot*, WXYZ TV-7 documentary, 1967, the Archives of Michigan, RG 91-320, <https://vimeo.com/5337314>.

28 Melba Joyce Boyd, “The Problem Was the Police,” in Stone, *Detroit 1967*, 168.

as an “absent presence.”²⁹ Similarly, Jamie Russell argues that “Vietnam lurks in every frame of Romero’s film.”³⁰ During the filming and editing of *Night of the Living Dead*, news media’s coverage of the war primarily emphasized the inevitability of an American victory in Vietnam. It wasn’t until after the Tet Offensive in February of 1968 that broader social opinions about the Vietnam War began to shift.³¹ The film evokes this later disillusionment through language and imagery that is actually drawn from the news media’s coverage of the riots. Rather than claiming that the film is responding to the Vietnam War, it seems more precise to claim that Image Ten, the movie’s production company, was drawing on, and criticizing, the news media’s representation of the 1967 riots and its conjoining of an American crisis with the Vietnam War. Much as reporters defaulted to a language of warfare, the news anchor in *Night of the Living Dead* declares that “[a]ll law enforcement agencies, and the military, have been ordered to search out and destroy the marauding ghouls.” Here, as during the 1967 riots, police and military have joined forces. Additionally, as Ben Hervey points out, the phrase “search and destroy” was often used in news coverage of Vietnam.³² Perhaps even more interesting is the term “marauding,” with its implications of plundering and the violent acquisition of property.³³ Although the film’s ghouls appear completely uninterested in material possessions, the term “marauding” evokes the media’s coverage of, and television viewers’ fear of, looting during the riots. We find in this sentence evocations of the news media’s conjoining of Vietnam with the 1967 riots. It is in this mediated manner, filtered first through the news and then in the film’s own representations of the news, that Vietnam functions as a presence in *Night of the Living Dead*.

To challenge the news media’s racialized discourse, the film emphasizes that the undead cannibals are members of the same community as the survivors. Romero describes the ghouls as dead neighbors, claiming that “I never thought of them as zombies. . . . People started to write about *Night of the Living Dead* and called them zombies. I said, ‘Wow, maybe they are.’ To me, they were dead neighbors.”³⁴ Considering the ghouls as “dead neighbors” challenges any simple narrative about violence in America by prompting viewers to consider what turned these neighbors into such a threatening force. Here the film’s criticism of American racism is subtle; by showing the experiences of an armed Black protagonist attempting to survive both the white ghouls and the white survivor Harry, and ultimately being killed by a white posse, the film inverts the news media’s vilification of African Americans. Addition-

29 Sumiko Higashi, “*Night of the Living Dead*: A Horror Film about the Horrors of the Vietnam Era,” in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 181.

30 Jamie Russell, *Book of the Dead: The Complete History of Zombie Cinema* (London: Titan Books, 2014), 69.

31 Hrach, *Riot Report*, 7; and McLaughlin, *Long Hot Summer*, 102–103.

32 Ben Hervey, *Night of the Living Dead* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 97.

33 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, “maraud, v.,” accessed January 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/113916>.

34 Peter Keough and George A. Romero, “Interview with George Romero,” in *George A. Romero: Interviews*, ed. Tony Williams (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 172.

ally, Ben's death leads viewers to conclude that the anger expressed in the riots was a justified response to systemic racism and police oppression. For although the film mentions "space radiation" as a (contested) cause for the ghouls, within the broader context of the 1967 riots, *Night of the Living Dead* functions as an indictment of problematic news reporting practices that align with state-sanctioned racialized repression.

To that end, Romero's reluctance to describe the ghouls as zombies may be a challenge to earlier films that overtly represented zombies as racist tropes. *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932), for instance, features a white man saving a white woman from Afro-Caribbean zombies, and subsequent films such as *Ouanga* (George Terwilliger, 1935), *King of the Zombies* (Jean Yarbrough, 1941), and *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943) continued these racist narratives. In *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death*, Sarah Julie Lauro connects these films to ways that the transatlantic slave trade continues to haunt America's social imaginary.³⁵ Describing zombies as embodying a form of "living death," Lauro argues that zombies dramatize a racialized form of (non)existence stuck between enslavement and rebellion, life and death, though never fully belonging to either category.³⁶ Discussing the zombie myth more broadly, Lauro writes that "one might say that rather than resurrection, which is equated with complete liberation, the incarnation of living death in the zombie represents revolutions that have not completely succeeded."³⁷ This description of zombies as the remainders of failed revolutions situated between enslavement and rebellion, life and death, sounds much like the news' dehumanization of the rioters, even as the riots were ongoing. Although Lauro acknowledges that *Night of the Living Dead* contains "palpable subtexts of both slavery and revolution," she criticizes the film as an Americanization of the Haitian zombie myth.³⁸ I would argue, however, that Romero and members of Image Ten realized that the news was depicting rioters in terms similar to zombies and sought to critique this racist coverage in *Night of the Living Dead*.

NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD AND THE NEWS

As I show, the scenes in *Night of the Living Dead* that focus on television are important for understanding the film's handling of race. Central to my argument are the ways that the film mobilizes the differences between audiences' viewing expectations for television and film, particularly horror films. During scenes that involve televised newscasts, *Night of the Living Dead* utilizes televisual modes of presentation, though elsewhere the film employs highly cinematic modes of representation. Juxtaposing these differing visual styles develops the film's criticism of television news as well as the film's anti-racist message. What's more, the film strategically utilizes concepts later identified within television studies and addresses the media's problematic relationship with race.

35 Sarah Julie Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 11, 86.

36 Lauro, 7.

37 Lauro, 7.

38 Lauro, 97.

The film's black-and-white palette helps advance its criticism of television news. The film was shot in monochrome film stock, which was cheaper than color film and has the effect of making the film feel more like the news. In 1968, 94.6 percent of American homes had a television set, of which three-quarters were black-and-white.³⁹ To audiences in 1968, the onscreen actions would have visually evoked the newscasts they were seeing at home. This televisual feel was further strengthened by *Night of the Living Dead* being filmed in the older Academy ratio of 1.37:1, a format that looks much closer to television's ratio of 1.33:1 than to other films of the time.⁴⁰ Thus, while movies in the late 1960s were largely shown in widescreen and in color, *Night of the Living Dead* cleverly turns budgetary restrictions into an opportunity to evoke and critique television news.

In its onscreen newscasts, *Night of the Living Dead* emulates the news by utilizing fewer cuts and presenting objects in a flattened two-dimensional style. Overall, the film utilizes a high number of cuts (nearly 1,100) and so many angled shots that Hervey describes the film's editing and camera angles as imparting "a schizophrenic style."⁴¹ Scenes that focus on the television, however, have very few cuts: three in the first newscast and eight in the second. This approach lends to the newscasts a feeling that events are supplied unedited to the viewer. Additionally, while *Night of the Living Dead* utilizes angled shots to depict objects from diverse angles, its newscasts present objects in a straight-on fashion, since news reporting places more emphasis on informing audiences than representing objects in space.⁴² In response to *Night of the Living Dead*'s highly cinematic style, which is even more pronounced in scenes surrounding the newscasts, this stable televisual style makes what is shown feel dependable. In *Gospel of the Living Dead*, Kim Paffenroth describes the film's shots of the television as belying "a false sense of stability and security. While the people are shot at disorienting and frightening angles, the television set and the newscasts on it are always shown in perfect symmetry and evenness, implying their solidity and trustworthiness, even while every piece of information and advice spewing out of the television turns out to be fatally in error."⁴³ Like many of the film's viewers, the survivors in the film may believe that the news presents trustworthy information, but these authentic-looking newscasts turn out to have disastrous consequences.

As a horror film, *Night of the Living Dead* is well positioned to critique television, since television and horror films often perform different social func-

39 Cobbett Steinberg, *TV Facts* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1980), 142.

40 Threatened by the rising popularity of television, in the mid-1950s Hollywood moved away from the boxy Academy ratio to wider screen formats such as CinemaScope, with its rectangular ratio of up to 2.66:1, as a means of luring audiences out of their living room for greater widescreen spectacles. David Stump, *Digital Cinematography: Fundamentals, Tools, Techniques, and Workflows* (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2014), 135. See also John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

41 Hervey, *Night*, 13, 38.

42 Mary Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, ed. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan (New York: Routledge, 2006), 253.

43 Paffenroth, *Gospel*, 36.

tions. Whereas television produces and naturalizes social order, many horror films seek to disrupt social order. Journalism scholar Daniel Hallin describes television news as supplying “‘packages for consciousness’—frameworks for interpreting and cues for reacting to social and political reality.”⁴⁴ On the other hand, Robin Wood argues that horror films, in contrast, are popular because they allow for the expression of desires society represses.⁴⁵ Fueled by their explorations of taboos, horror films have the capacity to imagine alternatives beyond societal norms. *Night of the Living Dead* engages with these dichotomies of reinforcing and disrupting social order through its juxtaposition of newscasts and cinematic horrors.

Much of television’s strength as an ideological medium derives from the viewer’s sense that what they are watching is being simultaneously recorded, transmitted, and received in the living room. In her influential 1983 article “The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology,” Jane Feuer identifies this feeling of simultaneity as television’s ontology of “liveness,” since television equates being “live” with being “real,” as if television supplies reality unmediated. This feeling of liveness means viewers are inclined to believe that what gets represented is reality, as opposed to a mediated version of reality.⁴⁶ We encounter television’s feeling of liveness in *Night of the Living Dead* via the frantic activity that fills the television station background. Telephones are ringing, a woman is energetically typing, and people bustle around. For the film’s viewer, there is the potential realization that, while these broadcasts look authentic, they are actually fictional, further undermining the feeling that what appears live is also real.

Responding to the terrifying events that surround them, the survivors look to television for guidance, but what they encounter is not the usual daily programming but newscasting that emphasizes its persistent coverage. Midway through describing how victims are being devoured, the news anchor is handed a sheet of paper and declares to the viewer, “I think we have some late word, just arriving, and we interrupt to bring this to you.” The news anchor uses the language of direct address, as if he and his viewers, unified by their shock, have an immediate shared connection. “It’s hard for us here to believe what we are reporting to you,” he declares, “but it does seem to be a fact.” Words like “us,” “we,” and “you” emphasize the alleged authenticity and immediacy of this newscast. Through such direct address, and an emphasis on ongoing coverage during an emergency, these newscasts depict what Mary Ann Doane identifies in “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe” as television’s fraught relationship with catastrophe.⁴⁷ Doane argues that catastrophe represents television’s utter limit of signification by reasserting a focus on death that society—and by extension television—seeks to suppress.⁴⁸ Simultaneously, the persistent coverage and language of direct address used

44 Daniel Hallin, *We Keep America on Top of the World: Television Journalism and the Public Sphere* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 90.

45 Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan . . . and Beyond*, 69–84, 103.

46 Jane Feuer, “The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology,” in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983), 13.

47 Doane, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe,” 251–264.

48 Doane, 258.

during periods of catastrophe strengthen television's feeling of liveness.⁴⁹ In imitating news coverage of the 1967 riots, *Night of the Living Dead* highlights this particularly persuasive form of newscasting, and the survivors are persuaded by the news, even to the point that, as I discuss below, Barbara conflates the news with escape.

Whereas television news evokes a feeling of liveness, cinema presents events that viewers perceive as having already occurred. Events can be absorbed but never altered because the cinema viewer cannot affect the actions onscreen. Stanley Cavell describes the movie viewer's helplessness as "mechanically assured," writing that "I [the viewer] am present not at something happening, which I must confirm, but at something that has happened, which I absorb (like a memory)."⁵⁰ The Image Ten filmmakers play with this feeling of memory throughout *Night of the Living Dead*, for instance in the lingering shock viewers feel after each survivor is killed, a feeling that reaches a crescendo with Ben's death. Overall, the film utilizes differences between the viewer's experiences of television and cinema to critique the news, since film viewers are shown traumatic events that challenge the news' claims of representing reality.

BACKGROUND AND PREPRODUCTION OF NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD

Over the course of his filmmaking career, Romero was consistently interested in, and critical of, news media. Discussing his films in an interview, Romero claims that "[g]enerally, media behavior is atrocious" because "the media has a tendency to exacerbate situations."⁵¹ He was also concerned with viewers' inclination to uncritically accept the news media's narratives.⁵² Notably, Romero cast himself in roles that highlight the tumultuousness of the news' creation. For instance, in *Night of the Living Dead* he plays news reporter Don Quinn, who tries unsuccessfully to get answers out of an evasive group of government representatives. Similarly, in the opening scenes of *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), Romero appears as a director at a news studio's control panel. "Who the hell is on camera 2, a blind man?" he yells amid the station's panicked disarray, implying that behind the news camera one might actually find a blind directing intelligence. Here, as throughout his oeuvre, Romero displays a wariness about the news media's ability to adequately represent events.

Romero's interest in, and knowledge of, television can be traced back to 1962, when he opened the South Pittsburgh production studio Latent Image with Russell Streiner and John Russo.⁵³ As Romero explains, "We were the first company that was doing film-form commercials, and for a long time, we were the only game in town. That's where I got the technical side of my expe-

49 Doane, 258.

50 Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 26.

51 Tony Williams, Christine Romero, and George A. Romero, "An Interview with George and Christine Romero [2000]," in Williams, *George A. Romero: Interviews*, 140.

52 Peter Keough and George A. Romero, "Turn Me On, 'Dead' Man [2008]," in Williams, *George A. Romero: Interviews*, 165.

53 J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 119.

rience.”⁵⁴ Over the next ten years, Latent Image made industrial films and commercials for local and network television stations, including commercials for beer, detergent, and political campaigns, including Richard Nixon’s.⁵⁵

Having struggled to break into feature films for years, in January 1967, Romero and his partners at Latent Image, as well as six other friends, each invested \$600 as seed money, and Image Ten, Inc. was formed to make a horror film, originally titled *Monster Flick*.⁵⁶ Production took place from June to December of 1967, with about thirty days of actual filming, since Romero and crew had to frequently return to Pittsburgh to, as Romero puts it, “do a pickle commercial or something, which was distressing.”⁵⁷ Notably, the film’s investors were also familiar with the local television and film industry. Karl Hardman and Marilyn Eastman, who played Harry and Helen Cooper, were the president and vice president of a company that made industrial films. In addition to both of them acting in the film, selecting the music, recording live sound effects, and doing makeup and wardrobe, Hardman also supplied the news studio in the film, and his daughter, Kyra Schon, played the undead Karen Cooper.⁵⁸ That *Night of the Living Dead* is so well crafted displays the skill and technical proficiency members of Image Ten had derived from years of crafting television commercials and industrial films.

Night of the Living Dead was only half-scripted when filming began, which allowed the ongoing riots and their aftermath to influence the film.⁵⁹ In response to an interviewer’s claim that “*Night of the Living Dead* is very much a film of its time,” Romero responded, “Oh sure. That was in our minds the whole time. That’s where it all came from. I mean the sixties is King and Kennedy and all that anger. That was always in our thinking.”⁶⁰ While Romero and his co-creators were responding to the anger of the time, both Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated *after* the film had been completed and before it was picked up for distribution.⁶¹ Consequently, the anger Romero alludes to was expressed in the 1967 riots. We can find support for this interpretation in the differences in where the dead come back to life in the original script versus the filmed version. In the original script, a news report notes that unrest that began in the “Midwestern section of the

54 Dan Yakir and George A. Romero, “Morning Becomes Romero [1977],” in Williams, *George A. Romero: Interviews*, 52.

55 Hoberman and Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, 119.

56 Hervey, *Night*, 9–10.

57 Alex Ben Block and George A. Romero, “Filming *Night of the Living Dead*: An Interview with Director George Romero [1972],” in Williams, *George A. Romero: Interviews*, 12; and Sam Nicotero and George A. Romero, “Romero: An Interview with the Director of *Night of the Living Dead* [1973],” in Williams, *George A. Romero: Interviews*, 22–23.

58 Neil Fawcett, “Interview with Karl Hardman and Marilyn Eastman,” *Homepage of the Dead*, October 1997, https://www.homepageofthedead.com/films/night/interviews_1.html.

59 John Russo, who shares screenwriting credit with Romero, finished the script during the film’s shooting. Hervey, *Night*, 12.

60 Dennis Fischer and George A. Romero, “George Romero on *Bruiser*, Development Hell, and Other Sundry Matters [1999],” in Williams, *George A. Romero: Interviews*, 130.

61 King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, the same day Romero finished editing the film, while Robert Kennedy was shot on June 5, 1968. Keough and Romero, “Turn Me On, ‘Dead’ Man [2008],” 171.

country is indeed spread across the nation, and is in fact world-wide.”⁶² In the film, however, the news anchor declares that “[t]he wave of murder which is sweeping the eastern third of the nation is being committed by creatures who feast upon the flesh of their victims.” Notably, this “wave of murder,” rather than being a global phenomenon, overlaps with actual riot locations.⁶³

Casting Duane Jones as Ben also had a significant effect on the film, and Jones’s input helped develop the film’s anti-racist message. In 1967, Jones was an accomplished actor, and during the shooting of the film, he was pursuing a master’s degree in communications at New York University.⁶⁴ Ben was originally written as a truck driver, but Jones upgraded the character’s dialogue and brought a gravitas and depth that challenges the brutish stereotypes cinema too often presents of African American men. Jones stated in an interview that “[i]t never occurred to me that I was hired *because* I was black. But it did occur to me that because I was black it would give a different historic element to the film.”⁶⁵ Race is never explicitly mentioned in *Night of the Living Dead*, but, to quote Romero, “because the character is played by an African American, you almost don’t notice anything else. We didn’t realize that. Duane did. Duane was aware of it, and he was concerned about it.”⁶⁶ Jones’s awareness of the film’s racial implications can be felt not only in his portrayal of Ben but also in his contributions to the film’s broader anti-racist subtext. For example, the film’s ending, in which Ben is killed by the white sheriff’s posse, was Jones’s idea. As Jones explained, “The couple of endings that were alternately being discussed would have read wrong racially. . . . I convinced George that the black community would rather see me dead than saved, after all that had gone on, in a corny and symbolically confusing way.”⁶⁷ Jones’s argument that Black viewers would find Ben’s survival “symbolically confusing” speaks to the film’s knowing engagement with the intertwined issues of racialized oppression and police violence that fueled the riots.

THE FIRST NEWS REPORT IN *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD*

The two diegetic newscasts in *Night of the Living Dead*, and the scenes that bracket them, are crucial for understanding the film’s criticism of news coverage of the riots, since the film emulates actual news coverage of the riots, though with ghouls replacing villainized African Americans. These newscasts are also key for understanding the largely unspoken racial antagonism between Ben and Harry Cooper, and the pessimistic anti-racist climax of

62 George A. Romero and John A. Russo, *Night of the Living Dead* (script, 1968), 42.

63 Of course, while the riots were primarily an urban phenomenon, the film takes place in a rural setting, perhaps symbolically bringing to fruition white news consumers’ fears that rioting would spread beyond the cities.

64 David L. Moody, *The Complexity and Progression of Black Representation in Film and Television* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 41. Jones later headed Antioch College’s literature department and served as executive director of the Black Theater Alliance, among many other achievements.

65 Tim Ferrante, “A Farewell to Duane Jones,” *Fangoria* 80 (February 1989): 15–16, [https://issuu.com/fangoriafans/docs/fangoria__080__i__madman_\(original_emphasis\)](https://issuu.com/fangoriafans/docs/fangoria__080__i__madman_(original_emphasis)).

66 Mandalit Del Barco, “George Romero, Creator of ‘Night of the Living Dead,’ Dies at 77,” *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/2017/07/17/537754596/george-romero-creator-of-night-of-the-living-dead-dies-at-77>.

67 Ferrante, “Farewell,” 16.



Figure 2. Ben turns on the television while carrying a rifle, in *Night of the Living Dead* (Continental Distributing, 1968).

the film. To that end, whereas the first newscast introduces the questionable palliative of a hegemonic social order, by drawing connections between the civil rights movement and the 1967 riots, the second newscast makes explicit how this social order has historically depended on the violent suppression of African Americans.

The first newscast occurs fifty-five minutes into the film, at the beginning of the third of the film's four acts. The survivors, having gathered together in the farmhouse's living room, represent a diverse range of American identities, including working-class Tom and Judy, the white-collar Coopers, the ingénue Barbara, and the film's hero, Ben, about whom little is known beyond his gender and race. The television first appears as Ben carries it into the living room with a rifle balanced upon it, a visual pairing that returns throughout the film (see Figure 2). As Ben fiddles at setting up the TV, Harry fumes. He points his finger at Barbara, sitting dazed on the couch, and, as if to assert his dominance, declares, "You better watch this and try to understand what's going on!" The film cuts to a shot of Ben looking up from plugging in the television and back to Harry, who declares, "I don't want anyone's life on my hands!" Ben takes umbrage and tells Harry that if he's going to be upstairs, he must take orders from Ben and that includes leaving Barbara alone. Harry's declarations here make a mockery of many television news viewers. Not only does Harry demonstrate his conviction that the news will supply an explanation for something as bizarre as the dead returning to life,



Figure 3. In *Night of the Living Dead*'s apocalyptic living room, the television, placed before a boarded-up window, takes center stage (Continental Distributing, 1968).

he also implies that this explanation should absolve him from any responsibility for the living. Perhaps Harry's belief in the absolving power of television comes from having his own perspective validated by the overwhelmingly white male representatives on the television. Indeed, everyone shown on the television in *Night of the Living Dead* is a white man, except for a white female typist in the background of the news studio. Ben's anger, however, functions as a challenge to Harry's biases.

Notably, in this living room, the television is placed before, and figuratively replaces, the windows (see Figure 3). Immediately before this scene, Harry declares, "Man, they talk about these windows. I can't see a damn thing! There could be fifteen million of those things out there, that's how much good these windows are." However, Harry's interest in the windows dissipates once the television arrives. A similar series of events occurs the second time the television is turned on. Peering through the boarded-up windows, Ben and Harry watch the monsters outside until Ben turns on the television; again, the survivors gather around the television. This repeated relationship between boarded-up windows and television extends, and complicates, long-standing considerations of televisions as "windows to the world." As Lynn Spiegel has shown, television and windows have had a complex association; television is often compared to windows, but while windows blur the distinctions between indoors and outdoors, as well as public and private spaces, television constructs the home as a wholly private space by delivering the public world

into the living room.⁶⁸ An important effect of television's mediation between these public and private realms is that television comes to construct how we imagine our community. Much as the white male-dominated news failed to understand the motivations of rioters, the news in the film fails to explain the cause of the ghoul. Furthermore, over the course of the film, viewers witness how the news delivers to the survivors a false and doomed sense of social order. In this filmic parable of America, the boarded-up windows may bolster the feeling of the living room as a private space, but this distinction, and the sense of social order that comes along with it, will be overturned by the film's end. Not only will the barriers themselves be destroyed, but Ben will be killed by a bullet shot through a window. His death will reveal how the narrative of social order that the television delivers depends on the violent erasure of Black lives.

In the film's first televised news report, the survivors, as well as the film's viewers, encounter a discourse of confusion and denunciation that recalls the news media's descriptions of the 1967 riots. The anchorman, played by actual news anchor Charles Craig (who wrote his own copy), declares that "[i]nitial reports, incredible as they may seem, are not the result of mass hysteria. . . . The wave of murder which is sweeping the eastern third of the nation is being committed by creatures who feast upon the flesh of their victims."⁶⁹ This phrasing of "mass hysteria" and a "wave of murder" echoes earlier radio reports about "ordinary-looking people" who were actually "assassins" and "murder-happy characters." It also recalls actual newscast descriptions of the riots and rioters. Described as a "spontaneous uprising," reporters often struggled to articulate the cause of the riots, declaring, for instance, that "it doesn't make any sense at all."⁷⁰ However, those in charge, such as Governor Richard J. Hughes of New Jersey, were quick to denounce rioters as a "vicious criminal element."⁷¹ Hughes also described the riots as "a criminal insurrection by people who say they hate the white man but who really hate America."⁷² The film's usage of phrases like "wave of murder" and "murder-happy characters" escalates the rhetoric of denunciation that surrounded the riots.

Much like how the National Guard was called into cities during the 1967 riots, in this first newscast, viewers encounter an American cataclysm in which armed National Guardsmen are identified as offering protection, though as their barbarity during the riots proved, it is worth questioning this protection.⁷³ Continuing with his new report, the anchorman provides information that will ultimately have disastrous consequences for the survivors, announcing, "When this emergency first began, radio and television was

68 Lynn Spigel, "The Home Theater," in *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 99–135; see also Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

69 Hervey, *Night*, 73.

70 Bigart, "Newark Riot Deaths at 21"; and *Detroit Riot*, WXYZ TV-7 documentary.

71 Bigart, "Newark Riot Deaths at 21."

72 Bigart.

73 As McLaughlin points out, "[I]n Newark and Detroit, in July 1967, the worst of the bloodshed was caused by poorly trained and ill-disciplined National Guardsmen and state police officers, some of whom deliberately lashed out in retribution against black communities." McLaughlin, *Long Hot Summer*, 154.

advising people to stay inside behind locked doors for safety. Well, that situation has now changed. We're able to report a definite course of action for you. Civil defense machinery has been organized to provide rescue stations with food, shelter, medical treatment, and protection by armed National Guardsmen." Pursuing this "definite course of action," the survivors decide to refuel Ben's truck and escape to the nearest rescue station in Willard. Harry argues against leaving the house, pointing out that they are outnumbered and have a sick child; however, the other characters decide to follow the news anchor's advice. Their plans go awry, and Judy and Tom are immolated while trying to gas up the truck.

The anchorman identifies this newscast as a national, as opposed to local, newscast insofar as he instructs viewers to "[s]tay tuned for broadcasting stations in your local area for this list of rescue stations." Locations near Pittsburgh are immediately displayed on the bottom of the screen. This superimposed list of rescue stations suggests that although the newscast appears to be live, it is actually a prerecorded broadcast supplied to stations, which then overlaid local information over the national news anchor's delivery. As viewers, we can see how this newscast is quite mediated and has been edited before being broadcast, challenging television's feeling of liveness. We also encounter here how, much as news coverage of the 1967 riots interconnected diverse local instances into a larger national crisis, the news is able to unify the local and national into one hegemonic social order.

In addition to providing information that turns out to have disastrous consequences, this first newscast also includes a walking interview with scientists and a military general who have just left a meeting with the president. Much like the superimposed list of local rescue stations undermines television's sense of liveness, this interview is clearly prerecorded, since it occurs during the day but it is night at the house. The interview is filmed in Washington, DC, with the United States Capitol visible in the background, as field reporter Don Quinn (Romero) attempts to get answers.⁷⁴ One of the scientists claims that there is "a definite connection" between an irradiated Venus probe destroyed by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the dead rising. A military general disagrees with the scientist, and Quinn asks the general, "In other words, it's the military's viewpoint that the radiation is not the cause of the mutation?" to which the general replies, "I can't speak for the entire military at this time, gentlemen. I must disagree with these gentlemen presently, until we, uh, until this is irrefutably proved." The authority of the scientists is challenged by these competing claims, and the surly general exudes an air of combativeness. This news segment displays a government in disarray, and the evasiveness of these figures undermines any comforting belief in the government, or the government's response to the ongoing catastrophe.

This segment bears a striking resemblance to news reports during the summer of 1967, in which commentators struggled to offer explanations for the riots. For instance, in one televised interview, Cyrus Vance, special assistant to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and President Johnson's repre-

74 Hervey, *Night*, 75.

sentative in Detroit, consistently evades reporters' questions and brusquely walks off before the reporters are finished. Asked "Where will the meeting be held?" Vance replied, "I don't know." Asked "What circumstances will it take to send the troops in to Detroit?" he further equivocated, "Well, we'll have to wait and see what happens." When a reporter queried, "Are there some general lines or criteria you'll be considering?" Vance replied, "I'm not prepared to say at this point."⁷⁵ Appearing on television as a government representative unwilling to provide definite answers, or to clarify the government's response to the ongoing crisis, Vance created a precedent for the evasive authority figures in *Night of the Living Dead*.

Following Don Quinn's field report, the film's news broadcast cuts back to the studio where the anchorman discusses the declaration of martial law, a reference that would have reminded viewers in 1968 of similar declarations in Newark and other cities the previous year. The news anchor then interviews Dr. Grimes, a specialist in physiological research. Dr. Grimes describes a cadaver with its limbs amputated coming back to life before recommending that viewers cremate dead bodies before they return to life. He advises, "The bereaved will have to forgo the dubious comforts that a funeral service will give. They're just dead flesh, and dangerous." Dr. Grimes ascribes to these dead neighbors a sense of agency that emphasizes their liminal status between life and death as well as a declaration of danger that evokes the news' descriptions of rioters.

THE SECOND NEWS REPORT IN *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD*

Whereas the first newscast supplies the questionable palliative of a hegemonic social order, a comfort that is quickly challenged with Tom and Judy's immolation, the second newscast visually remixes news coverage of the recent riots with news coverage of the civil rights movement to show how this social order remains dependent on the violent suppression of African Americans. After scenes of the ghouls fighting over and feasting on flesh and intestines, the second newscast is introduced as Helen comes up from the basement, rubs her temples, and asks, "Isn't it three o'clock yet? There's supposed to be another broadcast at three o'clock." "Ten minutes," Harry notes, to which a dazed Barbara replies, "Oh, only ten more minutes. We don't have very long to wait. We can leave. Well, we better leave soon. It's ten minutes to three." Here the survivors rely on the news and its sense of liveness for comfort to such a degree that Barbara conflates the news with escape from the ghouls that surround them.

Turning away from the barricaded window he was looking through, Ben bends down with rifle in hand and turns on the TV. Again, the television is filmed at a ninety-degree angle. The anchorman returns, and after describing how the radiation continues to rise, he introduces a prerecorded segment, declaring that "[o]ur news cameras have just returned from covering such a search and destroy operation against the ghouls, this one conducted by Sheriff Conan McClelland in Butler County, Pennsylvania. So now let's go to that film report." Over images of rural white men with guns, the anchor-

⁷⁵ *Detroit Riot*, WXYZ TV-7 documentary.



Figure 4. The posse in *Night of the Living Dead* (Continental Distributing, 1968).

man's voice explains that “[a]ll law enforcement agencies, and the military, have been organized to search out and destroy the marauding ghouls” (see Figure 4). As noted earlier, the phrase “search and destroy” echoes reporting on Vietnam; however, the term “marauding” associates this crisis with news coverage of the 1967 riots.

By 1968, audiences were primed by the news to associate scenes of police activity—such as the posse shown in *Night of the Living Dead*'s second news report—with racial discord. As the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, popularly called the Kerner Report, notes, “As the summer of 1967 progressed, we think Americans often began to associate more or less neutral sights and sounds (like a squad car with flashing red lights, a burning building, a suspect in police custody) with racial disorders, so that the appearance of any particular item, itself hardly inflammatory, set off a whole sequence of association with riot events.”⁷⁶ The commission, which President Johnson tasked with discovering the causes of the riots, was particularly critical of the fact that “[t]elevision newscasts during the periods of actual disorder in 1967 tended to emphasize law enforcement activities, thereby overshadowing underlying grievances and tensions.”⁷⁷ They suggested that viewers received a skewed understanding of the riots that unfairly criminal-

76 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, “The News Media and the Disorders,” in *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, ed. Darnell M. Hunt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27.

77 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 30.



Figure 5. An example of the type of newscasts Americans were witnessing in 1967. Note that the white man at right is not wearing a police uniform yet has a pistol tucked into his waistband, in *Civil Disturbance* (1967, Courtesy of the State Archives of Florida).

ized the aggrieved rioters (see Figure 5). *Night of the Living Dead* draws on this conditioned response, but its inclusion of armed rural men also invokes earlier white challenges to southern desegregation.⁷⁸ Romero made this connection explicit in an interview when, while discussing the posse scenes, he declared, “I wanted that stuff to look [like] newsreels, everything from the race riots in the South to police coming out with dogs. I wanted it to look like all-American crisis footage.”⁷⁹ In other words, the film’s posse is a remixing of diverse American histories of racial oppression, including white resistance to desegregation and more recent responses to the 1967 riots. This effect is further emphasized by the film’s use of actual uniformed policemen, and many of the posse members were off-duty police carrying their own weapons.⁸⁰

In this news report, Bill Cardille, a Pittsburgh reporter playing himself in the film, next appears onscreen interviewing Sheriff Conan McClelland

78 For more on televisual representations of white challenges to southern desegregation, see Sasha Torres’s *Black, White, and in Color* and Allison Graham’s *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

79 George Romero, interview with Tim Robey, “George A Romero: Why I Don’t Like The Walking Dead,” *The Telegraph*, November 8, 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/10436738/George-A-Romero-Why-I-dont-like-The-Walking-Dead.html>.

80 Block and Romero, “Filming,” 13.

(George Kosana).⁸¹ McClelland bears a striking resemblance to the Birmingham, Alabama commissioner of public safety Eugene “Bull” Connor, best known for ordering the police to use dogs and fire hoses against civil rights activists during his suppression of the May 1963 demonstrations led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Not only are the names Conan McClelland and Bull Connor similar, but the fictional sheriff also wears a short-brimmed straw hat that looks almost exactly like the straw hat Bull Connor famously wore.⁸² In the interview, Cardille asks, “Chief, do you think we’ll be able to defeat these things?” to which the sheriff responds, “Well, we killed nineteen of them today right in this area. Those last three we caught trying to claw their way into an abandoned shed. They must have thought somebody was in there. There wasn’t though.” In calling the ghouls “them,” and in describing the ghouls in animalistic terms, the sheriff displays how he has dehumanized the ghouls, similar to the police’s dehumanization of the African American community.⁸³

NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD MOVES BEYOND THE TELEVISION SCREEN

Soon after Cardille signs off, the power in the house cuts out, and the television and the lights go dark. The television, despite its questionable advice, had supplied the survivors with a feeling of order and liveness that had helped unify them against the chaotic threats of the undead.⁸⁴ Without the television to hold their attention, the survivors increasingly turn on one another. As Harry begins scheming to get Ben’s rifle, the unspoken racial tension between them comes to a head. In a scene shot from a dizzying array of angles, Ben drops the rifle while bolstering a window’s fortifications; Harry grabs the rifle and points it at Ben. They fight, and Ben shoots Harry, who stumbles into the basement and dies, only to be eaten by his daughter, who has become a ghoul. Helen goes to the basement and is killed by her daughter, and Barbara is pulled outside by her brother, also now a ghoul. Only Ben survives, and after retreating to the basement, he shoots the resurrected Coopers in the head.

In Ben’s initial shooting of Harry, viewers encounter a Black man shooting a white man, evoking in microcosm the fears of a racial uprising that gripped the nation in 1967. However, Ben’s shooting of Harry feels justified since Harry had just threatened Ben with the rifle. This exchange builds on and critiques news coverage of the riots that, instead of acknowledging

81 Cardille, who also hosted the local Pittsburgh late-night horror and sci-fi movie program *Chiller Theatre* (WPXI, 1963–1984), signs off at the end of the segment using his actual name. As Romero explains, “He would talk about us on the air a lot, and I think he had a lot to do with our ability to ultimately raise money and finish the movie. Simply because he would talk about us to his audience. It gave us that extra bit of credibility. Plus he came out and was in the film—and brought the news guys from the station and some valuable props that we couldn’t afford!” Paul Gagne and George A. Romero, “George Romero on Directing *Day of the Dead* [1985],” in Williams, *George A. Romero: Interviews*, 103.

82 William Nunnellely, *Bull Connor* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 153.

83 See McGuire, “Murder,” 173–183.

84 As Feuer notes, “Television, in its liveness, its immediacy, its reality, can create families where none exist.” Feuer, “Concept of Live Television,” 20.

that rioters had real grievances, falsely claimed that “militant blacks” had fomented the discord. As Casandra E. Ulbrich points out in her discussion of the media’s framing of the riots, “‘Negroes’ were often described as the aggressors. Whether they were portrayed as rioters, looters, or snipers, one thing that was presented as fact was that most were black. Whites were often described as the victims of the uprising, with black aggression being focused on white business owners as the main target. One particular group emerged as an opportune scapegoat: the ‘militant blacks.’”⁸⁵ Ben’s shooting of Harry challenges this narrative. Although Ben might be misconstrued as a militant, in fact he is defending his life. Whereas the news presented white business owners as the victims of Black aggression, *Night of the Living Dead* subverts this narrative by showing Harry’s threats of violence tormenting Ben to such a degree that Ben’s shooting of Harry feels justified.

The film then shows the house being overrun with ghouls before cutting to calm exterior shots of the house and the sun rising. The sounds of birds chirping in the background seem to announce that the long night is over. After armed posse members are shown crossing a field, dogs are seen exiting police vehicles, again invoking Bull Connor’s violent response to the 1963 Birmingham protests. There is, though, a sort of calm lyricism as the camera moves beyond the claustrophobic confines of the house. The armed forces we learned about on the news have arrived, and perhaps rescue is at hand for Ben.

The film next cuts to the location of Cardille’s earlier televised interview with Sheriff McClelland, though now in a representational film style that emphasizes with equal attention Cardille, the sheriff, and Cardille’s cameraman, Steve (see Figure 6). Order seems to have been restored; as the sheriff informs Cardille, “We should be wrapped here in about three or four more hours, and we’ll probably get into Willard then. I guess you can go over there and meet the National Guard.” Much like reporters during the riots, Cardille’s reports emphasize the perspectives of the police and National Guard. After the sheriff walks off, cameraman Steve tells Cardille, “I’m going to check in with the office and see what’s happening,” to which Cardille replies, looking heroically into the distance, “All right, Steve. Tell them that we’re going to stay with it and everything appears to be under control.” Representatives of both the police and news media claim that the danger has passed and that social order has been reasserted, a claim Ben’s subsequent death will challenge.

Cameraman Steve has thus far remained unseen by the film viewer, since the view from Steve’s camera was shown earlier on the news. Here, cameraman and camera are displayed to the film’s audience, making visible the previously hidden tools of the news’ creation. This *mise-en-scène* also constructs an important visual comparison between the camera on the cameraman’s shoulder on the left and the rifle on the sheriff’s shoulder on the right. The idea of a camera as being similar to a gun has long been commented upon, most famously by Susan Sontag, who claims that although “[t]he camera/gun does not kill . . . [t]o photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as

85 Casandra E. Ulbrich, “The Shift in Media Framing,” in Stone, *Detroit 1967*, 283.



Figure 6. Cameraman Steve, Bill Cardille, and Sheriff Conan McClelland, in *Night of the Living Dead* (Continental Distributing, 1968).

they never see themselves.”⁸⁶ Extending Sontag’s insights in his discussion of “the weaponized gaze,” Roger Stahl notes that “[t]he gun-camera does not deliver a picture of events so much as it comprises an event itself that structures the subject with its built-in politics.”⁸⁷ Attributing to the gun-camera its own process of political framing helps us better understand the bias present in coverage of the 1967 riots. That the news environment was dominated by white men helps explain why news coverage failed to acknowledge the state-sanctioned violence against African Americans that motivated the riots.⁸⁸ In this scene, the visual metaphor of news camera and gun also extends and completes the film’s earlier visual pairings of television and gun. When Ben first carries the television into the living room he is balancing a rifle on it, and the rifle is visually prominent both times Ben turns on the television (see Figure 2).⁸⁹ *Night of the Living Dead* constructs a complex visual metaphor that interconnects news camera, rifle, and television. By first visually pairing liv-

86 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 13.

Donna Haraway also discusses the film camera and gun as having an ambiguous relationship wrapped up with manhood and domination. Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 43.

87 Roger Stahl, *Through the Crosshairs: War, Visual Culture, and the Weaponized Gaze* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 13.

88 As Stahl points out, the gun-camera also entails “a regime of disappearance,” in which “the camera becomes an accomplice to the act of killing by hiding the body. Stahl, *Through the Crosshairs*, 13–14.

89 The second time Ben turns on the television, the rifle is in his left hand.

ing room television and rifle, and then extending this relationship to include the camera, the film suggests that the news, in its circuit from production to consumption, can be as dangerous as a rifle, the very thing that kills Ben. Film viewers are invited to interconnect these visual pairings and by extension come to understand the news as dangerous.

As the posse progresses toward Willard, slaughtering ghouls, Ben hears the shooting, leaves the basement, and reenters the house. In a scene that evokes the figure of the Black sniper, Ben is framed by a destroyed window with his rifle held up. Hearing a noise in the house, a posse member aims his rifle while the sheriff advises him to “hit him in the head, right between the eyes.” Though it remains ambiguous, the sheriff’s instructions to shoot “right between the eyes” complicates the death that follows, since if the posse member can aim “right between the eyes,” then presumably he can also see a Black man holding a rifle. Thus far, the ghouls have displayed only the most rudimentary of tool usage, and none have been shown holding a gun.

The posse member fires, and the film cuts to Ben falling on the floor. “Good shot!” the sheriff exclaims, and turning to the posse declares, “Okay, he’s dead. Let’s go get him. That’s another one for the fire.” The viewers’ earlier sense of having escaped the danger of the ghouls is overturned, replaced with a feeling of outrage. If, as Cardille declared, “everything appears to be under control,” then this control is not safety but unwarranted, state-sanctioned violence. Despite the audience’s identification with Ben as the film’s protagonist, we encounter the police shooting an African American man, and an armed one at that. It is within this disjunction between viewers’ expectations for Ben and the death we see onscreen that the film’s critique of America’s response to the 1967 riots is strongest, since it uses the viewers’ feelings of outrage at Ben’s death to challenge the cultural narrative of the dangerous Black man. Furthermore, as cinema viewers we understand that these murderous events will not make it onto the news, since Cardille and cameraman Steve will be interviewing the National Guard next.

To represent the aftermath of Ben’s death, the film transitions from motion pictures to still images that emphasize viewers’ feelings of helplessness. The camera pans over grainy photographs of posse members with meat hooks dragging Ben’s body to a wood pile and setting him, and other carcasses, on fire. As Caetlin Benson-Allott points out in her discussion of this scene, “[T]he stills wrench the spectator from her established place in the cinematic apparatus to awaken her to the movie’s political allegory.”⁹⁰ By transitioning from moving representation to still images, the film questions its own ability to depict the mutilation of Ben’s dead body.⁹¹ Much as the film has challenged the news’ claims of representing “reality,” we see here a self-aware caution about cinema itself. As these final scenes prove, cinema cannot solve or absolve the failures of the news. Rather, viewers must think critically about the information they are shown, since if the film’s concluding bonfire

90 Caetlin Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 35.

91 Benson-Allott, 36.

is any indication, America's continued pursuit of an us-versus-them mentality, particularly regarding race, may end in conflagration.

CONCLUSION

As I have shown, the newscasts in *Night of the Living Dead* are important for understanding the film's critique of news media's coverage of the 1967 riots. The familiarity of Image Ten members with television, as well as the film being shot in monochrome, meant that *Night of the Living Dead* was able to visually evoke news coverage of the riots. Furthermore, the film displays a canny awareness of television's power as an ideological medium, including television's feeling of liveness. Ultimately, the film both evokes and subverts the news while also showing what news coverage of the 1967 riots failed to show: the experiences of African Americans. Ben's outrageous death at the hands of the posse challenges news coverage of the riots by exposing the sort of state-sanctioned violence that fueled, and was present throughout, the 1967 riots. As the film was being finished, white America was gripped by fear, and after the riots, gun sales shot up in Detroit, and Federal Bureau of Investigations director J. Edgar Hoover established the COINTELPRO-BLACK HATE program to disrupt the actions of Black nationalists.⁹² *Night of the Living Dead* transforms these fears of a potential race war to fears of being overrun by ghouls and, in doing so, shows how America's fears have been constructed and dispersed by the news.

Fifty-odd years later, Romero and Image Ten's message remains a powerful testament to the dangers of bias in the news. That critical discussions of *Night of the Living Dead* have failed to attend to the riots' influence for so long reveals film scholars' own tendencies to hew too closely to the dominant historical narrative. Revisiting and reconsidering how current events find their way into film offers new models for recontextualizing films and their relations to the social realities they respond to. Today, following the proliferation of "fake news" and the discussions about race in America that Black Lives Matter has fostered, this message is as relevant as ever: we must consider who is constructing the narratives we interpret as real and attend to what remains underrepresented.

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92 William Winkel, "In the Uprising's Wake: Reaction in the White Community," in Stone, *Detroit 1967*, 266; and McLaughlin, *Long Hot Summer*, 155.