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But this was exactly what the hip New Yorkers wanted to hear. Almost the first thing they asked Romero was whether the police and riflemen were ‘authentic or ... actors’: ‘They all look intent. Real rednecks.’ There’s contempt here, not just for the characters, but for the performers, who are assumed to be barely acting. Romero doesn’t quite play along – after all, these ‘rednecks’ did him a favour, but his replies are subtly patronising: ‘they were all happy to have guns in their hands. We had quite an arsenal.’ Second-run reviews latched onto the posse’s ‘authenticity’. Ironically, knowledge of the police’s cooperation made these scenes seem more rebellious, and Romero’s claim to have barely directed made them register as a more deliberate political statement, a point where metaphorical fantasy confronts a barely filtered reality. They became a prank played on unwitting hicks and Establishment figures (‘the police and city fathers’, as Romero put it), an authentic glimpse of the enemy in the wild.



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These vérité posse scenes shift *Night*'s meanings. We may not quite identify with the ghouls but almost everyone agreed that the forces of law and order were worse: deader, scarier, crueller, more ridiculous. Whether or not the rising dead represent revolution, these men are the counterrevolution.

#### From that shot ...

That there is a holocaust coming I have no doubt at all ... reaction to Dr King's murder has been unanimous: the war has begun. ... From that shot, from that blood, America will be painted red.

Eldridge Cleaver, 'Requiem for Nonviolence' (1968)<sup>118</sup>

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Police dogs in *Night* ... and in Birmingham, Alabama, May, 1963. Photo: Bill Hudson

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trigger-happy, all-white confederacy of cops and conservative-looking country folk. They'd seen groups like this on the news, cracking heads at civil rights marches. Those dogs look like the ones that Birmingham police loosed on defenceless schoolchildren during 1963's anti-segregation demonstrations. In 1964, three civil rights workers were murdered in Mississippi by Klan members, a mix of good old boys and local cops. After six weeks of speculative headlines, their corpses surfaced alongside several black men never reported missing: the tip of the iceberg, presumably. It wouldn't have surprised Romero, who grew up reading EC stories about policemen colluding with lynch mobs. The *Night* remake plays up the subtext: the posse hangs the ghouls from tree branches, like the 'strange fruit' in Billie Holiday's song. Nineteen sixties audiences didn't need nudging: as our black hero huddles in the cellar, hearing dogs and sirens, their instinct would have been that he's hiding from the lynch mob, not the ghouls.

Ben unbars the door and explores upstairs. Daylight has drained the farmhouse's atmosphere. It's trashed and deserted: the ghouls' house-warming party has disbanded. Outside, the posse finishes off the last stragglers, and one of the men hears movement indoors. We see Ben from the posse's perspective, warily approaching the window, rifle cocked: he doesn't look like a ghoul. But a redneck takes aim: it's Vince, the one who smirked at the 'cookout' joke. The sheriff leans in to help, Vince fires ...

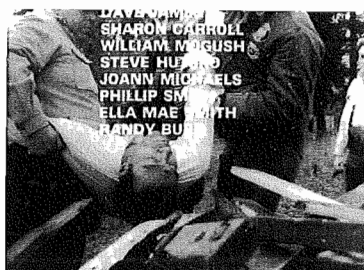
And suddenly Ben is dead. Most reviews spoiled this final irony, and second-run viewers probably knew what was coming – but foreknowledge isn't enough to soften the shock's sledgehammer abruptness. Ben's death hits harder because so little is made of it. There's no music, and the sound effects are understated. A seven-frame close-up shows the bullet knock Ben out of frame, and there's a one-second medium shot of his lifeless body hitting the floor. That's it: there's no drawn-out death scene, no blaze of glory for this hero. It couldn't be further from the lingering, cathartic, beautiful shoot-outs that claim the outlaw protagonists of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch* (1969). Sobchack wrote that those films' slow-motion



'kindly stylized death for us; it created nobility from senselessness, it choreographed a dance out of blood and death, it gave meaning and import to our mortal twitchings'.<sup>119</sup> Ben's death is the opposite: as viciously instantaneous as an assassination on live television, with no slow-mo replay to help us understand. 'Good shot,' says Sheriff McClelland. He sounds bored as he intones the film's cruelly banal final line: 'OK, he's dead. Let's go get him. That's another one for the fire.'

Romero finishes us off with a stylistic shock: the image freezes. The last sequence, as the men drag Ben out with meat hooks and burn him, is shown in stills, as wrenching as the freeze-frame that ends *Les Quatre cents coups* (1959). The film-makers printed the shots through cheesecloth to make them coarse and grainy, like newsprint. If we're used to *Night*'s evening news look by now, these shots drive home the ending's truthfulness, its real-world associations – which are above all racial.

Duane Jones said that it was his idea for the posse to shoot Ben, and that he rejected other endings that 'would have read wrong racially', such as Barbara rescuing him: '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.'<sup>120</sup>



The ending is more shocking for feeling somehow inevitable: that a black man who has become a leader should be gunned down by, as McGuinness put it, his ‘natural enemies, Pittsburgh cops and rednecks’. These weathered stills of grimly purposeful men in rural clothes could be archive shots of a 1920s public lynching, or they could be more disturbingly up to date.

By *Night's* release, one association had become inescapable. Romero and Streiner heard about the King assassination on their car radio as they drove the first print of *Night* into New York, seeking a distributor. Their first thought was that Ben's death would make *Night* unreleasable,<sup>121</sup> but Romero now thinks that the coincidence was crucial to its commercial success: ‘people latched on to the film because they thought that, “Jeez, this is amazingly today”’.<sup>122</sup> Of course, the link with King was unforeseen, but other black leaders had been assassinated before Jones suggested the ending, notably Medgar Evers in 1963 and Malcolm X in 1965, besides lower-profile lynchings. Little wonder that the black audience

with whom Streiner watched on opening night responded to the ending's truthfulness: ‘You could hear murmurings of, “Well, you know, they had to kill him off!” and “Whitey had to get him anyway.” “He bought it from the Man.”’<sup>123</sup> It proved almost equally meaningful for politicised white audiences, for whom the civil rights struggle was intertwined with broader progressive ideals. It's this ending more than anything else that made political interpretations inevitable. The *Cahiers* review said that it forces us to acknowledge ‘le vrai sujet du film qui n'est évidemment pas les morts-vivants, mais bien le racisme’.

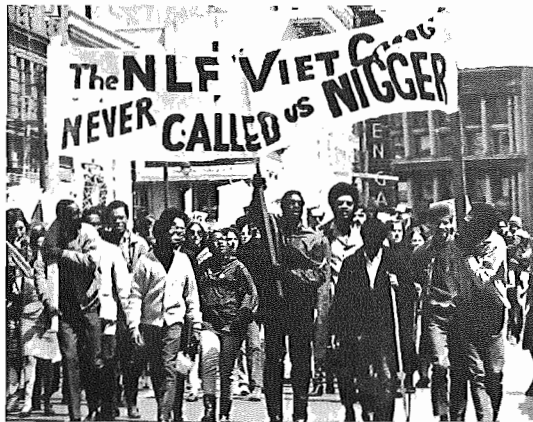
The filmed ending is far more racially charged than the scripted version, in which McClelland regrets the mistake: ‘It's too bad ... an accident ... the only one we had all night.’ There are no meat hooks, no bonfire. The film omits that line, even though the posse should realise that Ben was no walking corpse: fresh blood pumps through his white shirt when they jab the hooks in. The implication: the white killers know their black victim was alive, and don't regret it.

The meat hooks also evoke Vietnam: American soldiers dragged enemy corpses with wire rather than touch them.<sup>124</sup> Aptly, that helicopter noise surges back as the men tug Ben out, along with a military crackle of walky-talkies. To contemporary audiences, it would have seemed natural for these associations to spark off racial ones.



The lynching of Will Brown outside the Omaha Courthouse, Nebraska, 1919





A 1967 protest march.  
Photo: Flax Hermes

Black leaders opposed the war, partly because of the disproportionate number of black men drafted, assigned to the front line and killed in action, and partly because they saw the Vietnamese as, to quote the 1966 Black Panther Platform, 'people of color ... who, like black people, are being victimised by the white racist government of America'.<sup>125</sup> That's the impression we get as Ben is laid on the bonfire next to that first cemetery ghoul: they're united by common enemies, the cops and rednecks, the counterrevolution.

Shades of the war and of racism mingle as the men douse Ben in gasoline and light him. After hanging, one of the commonest methods of lynching black men was burning them alive. And in 1963, Americans were stunned when a Buddhist monk, Thích Quảng Đức, burned himself in Saigon to protest the US-installed Diệm government. Romero mimicked the famous pictures in *The Crazies*, when a priest burns himself to protest martial law. Before *Night's* midnight runs waned, television viewers had seen napalm turn Vietnamese children into running fireballs.

The credits have been rolling since the men produced their meat hooks, over the film's most devastating moments. *Night* has eschewed comedy, romance, all relief, and now not even the end titles allow the audience any let-up, any chance to recover before the lights come up.



Malcolm Browne's photos of Thích Quảng Đức rapidly became iconic



El Topo encouraged midnight crowds to hunt for real-world connections



*The Crazies* (1973)

Abagnalo described hardened 42nd Street audiences leaving in shock: 'Some people laugh when the film ends, but not because it is funny or badly done. They laugh because they can't believe what they have seen. Some leave silently, looking as though they're about to vomit.' Like McClelland's final line, the superimposition of the credits feels appallingly blasé, as if the unjust killing of a black man is too commonplace to linger over, nothing that warrants a sentimental Hollywood fanfare. But by not editorialising or coercing us into caring, the sequence gains tremendously in emotional power: we recoil from the deadness on the posse's faces, the neutrality of the music and credits. The credits end and for a moment we cut back to action, long enough to watch flame engulf Ben's body. Our hero is not only dead but obliterated. There will be no record of his struggle, no burial or memorial, no hope of justice.

#### 'The world didn't change'

Everyone dies: it's a fundamental truth, but no horror film had ended this way before. *Night* faces the nightmare realisation against which Romero's generation struggled in those duck-and-cover drills: they could follow all the rules, do everything their television said, but they would still die, doomed by the madness of leaders, scientists and generals. And furthermore, they'd *all* die, collectively and unceremoniously: mingled in unrecognisable heaps of flesh and ash. That final bonfire makes us angry at the rednecks, but leaves us too with the sharper sting of meaninglessness, the absurdity of a world that may go up in smoke *'without any warning!'*

But for the Image Ten, *Night's* ending was also more immediately relevant. They refused to change it even when it meant sacrificing a live distribution prospect, AIP. 'Given the anger of the times,' says Romero, 'if we'd ended it any other way, it would have been hard for us to hold our heads up'<sup>126</sup>: 'I think we really were pissed off that the '60s didn't work, that the world didn't change.'<sup>127</sup> If that's how things looked while they shot in 1967, the Summer of Love, they became far bleaker before *Night* reopened at the Waverly.

*Night* headed a long run of despairing late 1960s and early 1970s film endings, in which protagonists die and ideals fail not in a pitched battle or blaze of glory, but after the fact, anti-climactically. As Captain America tells Billy in *Easy Rider*, some while before passing hillbillies shoot them for a moment's fun: 'We blew it.'

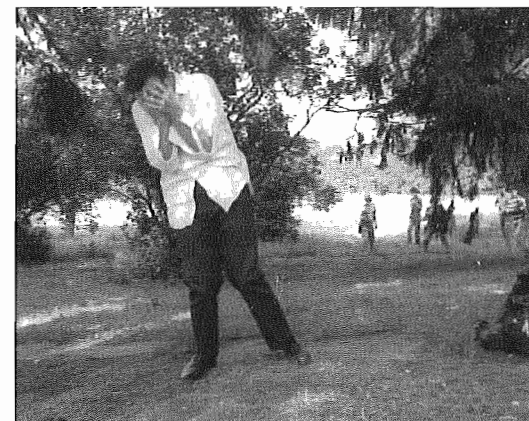
How *does Night* end, anyway? Romero now insists we know that those Search and Destroy teams won't succeed: 'There's this new society coming.' Well, maybe: the last news broadcast announces that radiation levels are still rising. But it's easier to take that line three sequels on, and there's no evidence that contemporary viewers responded that way. By the end, the ghouls seem powerless, as if dawn itself has dispelled the night's magic. The bacchanal is over. The emotional wrench of that 'everyone dies' ending includes the ghouls, because all of *Night's* frail characters have souls, even them; and we see ourselves in all of them. Romero's comments probably say more about how he *wishes Night* had ended. And that's the bigger question here: how we *want* it to end. Would it feel less bleak if we *knew* that McClelland's men had overcome the threat, that 'the world didn't change'?

*Night's* influence is a book in itself; indeed, Kim Newman claimed that *Nightmare Movies*, his overview of modern horror, was 'entirely' about Romero's influence.<sup>128</sup> But perhaps this, above all, is what makes it a turning point. Horror stages confrontations between normality and the monstrous, and most pre-*Night* films are ultimately, at least ostensibly, about overcoming death and monstrosity. From *Night* on, horror more often asserts that nothing will save us, that death and failure are insuperable. More crucially, *Night's* ending makes inescapably clear that we do not want to see normality restored: normality itself is monstrous; a brutal, painful repression. Romero says that for him 'the most important thing' about horror and sci-fi is 'to not restore order': to leave the world as we know it in bloody shreds. 'Which is really why we are doing this in the first place. We don't want things the way they are or we wouldn't be trying to shock you into an alternative place.'<sup>129</sup>

*Night's* pleasures come not from restoring normality, but from dismembering it. Perhaps it inverted the horror genre; more likely (as Romero seems to imply) it uncovered what much of it was. Always, more covertly, about. The only pre-*Night* horror film to enjoy anything approaching its midnight longevity was *Freaks*, reinterpreted in the 1960s as a counterculture film. The self-styled 'freaks' in the audience cheered on the real ones as they vengefully mutilated a bigoted, materialistic 'normal' woman into one of their own: monstrosity, difference won. *Night* was initially sometimes double-billed with *Freaks*, but ended up supplanting it, as at New York's Bijou in 1971: perhaps because its bleaker conclusion rang truer as the years passed.

*Night's* generic redefinition is inextricably bound up with its historical moment. If the 1960s were a Hammer film, the counterculture idealists would be the monsters: abruptly transformed and possessed, the causers of chaos and enemies of normality. By 1971, *Night's* ending must have felt agonisingly prophetic. A few stragglers held out, feeble as those last ghouls, but normality had won. It felt more openly oppressive than ever, more repellent for having glimpsed 'an alternative place'. A resurrected 1950s Commie-basher was in the White House: a politician who had announced his retirement in 1962, on the eve of what we really call 'the sixties'. The government's riflemen had rolled in like McClelland's posse to crush dissent. Youth culture's soul had departed leaving only its clothes and records behind, and a new decade dawned, more nakedly materialistic and self-involved even than the 1950s, dissipating the 1960s' idealism into a cynicism and sense of powerlessness that have yet to lift.

*Night* would be a masterpiece even if we could somehow watch it in a vacuum, as 'just' a horror film. Despite decades of imitations, it remains as suspenseful, haunting and disturbingly credible as ever. Its shocks and ambiguities hit us too deeply to ever be quite assimilated. But a cult, a weekly midnight mass, must also touch its audience's sense of group identity. Perhaps *Night* reassured regular



viewers that even if the world of their naive childhood years had won, they didn't have to buy into its illusions again. They could gather while the victors slept to express their disbelief, their separateness. *Night* became a ritual, an anti-credo, which confronted cosy childhood myths with disillusionment and destructive fury. The end credits music is 1950s sci-fi at its dreamiest, but walky-talkies and helicopter noise gradually drown it. They're the sounds of the lynch mob, of Vietnam: the brutal realities of enforcing normality. *Night*, finally, turns those Cold War monster flicks upside down: everything that should save us hurts us; every cherished institution is discredited and bloodied; and normality itself is unveiled as the greatest horror of all. Sometimes only the truth is powerful enough to distract us. And if we don't like how this night ends, we'll just go back to the beginning, to relive the chaos.

We're back at the Waverly, any weekend in 1972. The clock strikes twelve, the curtains part ...