

# Zombies, hippies and vietnam: night of the living dead as a political film



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Often horror movies can tell more about a culture than the movies chosen as classics. The Friday the 13th series reflected the prudish “return to family values” of the 1980s where teenagers who engage in premarital sex are killed. The last decade has seen a glut of “torture porn” movies that overtly reflect the worries about the excesses on the war on terror. This method of reflecting on the culture is readily apparent in the release and success of Night of the Living Dead when it was released in October 1968. The late 1960s was a chaotic time in American life. Presidents Johnson’s Great Society and civil rights achievements were overshadowed by the continuing involvement in the Vietnam War. The paisley colored tie-dyed dreams of 1967 gave way to the cynicism of 1968. By October of 1968, Americans had lost their faith in the ability of the American troops in the wake of the Tet Offensive; Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King had been murdered and the Manson family had changed the image of hippies from harmless eccentrics to very dangerous outsiders. At any moment, nameless faceless hordes were liable to destroy you.

Night of the Living Dead begins with a scene between siblings in which the brother begins scaring his sister by repeating the words “they’re coming for you, Barbra!” At this point, it’s a joke. Barbra does not take it as a joke and she is very frightened, but Johnny as the older brother feels like he is free to make the joke because he is secure in his paternalistic power. As far as Johnny is concerned, the threat of outside violence is simply a lark. He is similar to Americans who believed that the U. S. is the most powerful nation in the world and can act like the international police officer. After all, the U. S. won WWII without civilian casualties and it managed to stop the

advancement of North Korea into the rest of Korea. With the Tet Offensive, the U. S. public's faith in its hegemony was shaken. When Johnny is attacked by the first zombie and his head is bashed in, he reflects the arrogance of American politicians laid low by international forces that they cannot possibly understand or deal with in the traditional sense. Johnny is every American soldier who signed up for the Vietnam war thinking that he needed to get involved fast else he would "miss it" only to learn that it was much more dangerous than he realized.

The majority of the movie takes place in a cabin where people are trying to fight against the zombies who are coming. The zombies cannot be reasoned with. They are not vulnerable to negotiation. They are simply there to kill and eat. While the people try to fight for their lives, the radio and the television programs are giving information about the zombies that may or may not be truthful. Meanwhile the people who are fighting the zombies turn on each other and fight over resources. When Harry locks Ben out to contend with the zombies, it bespeaks a racial dynamic that is still very prominent in America where black men do not have the same value as white people. When Harry locks Ben out, one wonders if Harry would have done the same thing to the other white members of the party.

Meanwhile, one of the most horrifying scenes is when the little girl Karen finally succumbs to the zombie bite and becomes a zombie herself. She kills her mother without even thinking. This kind of mass conformity with a deadly consequence is reflected in historical accounts of Nazi children turning in their parents, but also reflects the fear that many people had of their children growing up and turning against every value.

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Finally, the last scene is a return to normalcy. The rednecks are out in force killing zombies. The last survivor of the cabin is Ben. Without even checking to make sure that he is a zombie, they shoot him and go back to the mop up operation. Unlike zombie movies that would build upon the Romero template, *Night of the Living Dead* ends with the end of the zombie invasion. However, this restoration of order is an order that is not necessarily one that people want or need. The zombies have destroyed the social order and the new social order is a much nastier one. When one considers how the 1960s began with hope in civil rights and American hegemony and ended with a country immersed in war where conservatives and liberals had radicalized to the point where they had become angrier and less likely to cooperate.