At a time when riots and protests tore up the streets of America, Britain witnessed its own share of social disturbances and divisive political rhetoric as both nations hurtled decisively towards the heady crossroads of the ‘60s. In many ways, George A. Romero represented the devil at that particular crossroads. Romero evoked the fears of an audience grounded in contemporary concerns, crafting horror that seemed all too realistic, and cast a grisly hand across the Atlantic to demonstrate the issues which bound Britain and America.

Understanding how Night of the Living Dead (1968) survived the trip across the pond explains how an inherently American nightmare came to terrify a distinctly British audience. Romero’s film was born of near global turbulence, representing a challenging reinterpretation of what terrified nations, both culturally and politically, at a time when these fears were all too tangible. As American critics derided the gratuitous gore of what was seen as a particularly virulent exploitation movie during a particularly turbulent period, Night of the Living Dead emerged from the shadow of Hammer Studio’s swathe of gothic horror to strike at a Britain which was itself coming to identify the ‘devils’ in its own society.

‘Pornography of Violence’: Differing Critical Reactions
Born of an American nightmare, it was perhaps the reflection of these very fears which evoked the reactionary reviews received by Night of the Living Dead from its home audience. Critics had labelled Night of the Living Dead as ‘demoralising’ during a period following high-profile political assassinations, protests and riots. However, the negative American critical response was largely shaped by the extent to which the distributor, Continental, marketed the film alongside the ‘Blaxploitation’ films of inner city theatre bills, belying any artistic integrity the film might possess in the expectations of the reviewer.

Distribution of Night of the Living Dead was mostly among what were known as ‘nabe houses’ (inner-city theatres appealing only to immediate neighbourhoods), which were in a very real sense the home of exploitation cinema, with horror neatly dovetailing into this definition. This context explains the potency of Roger Ebert’s critical assassination of the film as the ‘pornography of violence’, having been screened in the very home of such exploitative cinema.
In Britain the film was distributed by the Monarch Film Corporation, created by William Gell to support post-war British cinema in 1947. This distributor had a history of releasing political thrillers and mystery tales, having released only one other horror film in 1966. Set in Paris and jokingly referred to as ‘Jacques the Ripper’, *Theatre of Death* (1966) was a fairly ineffectual romp which saw police investigating a string of murders performed by a macabre killer with a thirst for blood.

Christopher Lee’s flitting and ultimately misleading presence in *Theatre of Death* was a typical symptom of British horror’s preoccupation with gothic artifice. The impact of *Night of the Living Dead* in the context of this fare was assured, allowing for critical praise across the Atlantic in the context of a credible studio release. Expectations and audiences formed perhaps the greatest determinant of the differing trans-Atlantic reactions.

After being sporadically toured nationwide in 1969, the film reached London’s West End in 1970. Amongst a tame stable of gothic horror and political thrillers *Night of the Living Dead* was seen by reviewers not, as in Ebert’s case, as a political affront but as an “off-centre shocker”. Romero’s response to political readings was that “It was 1968, man. Everybody had a ‘message.’ I was just making a horror film, and I think the anger and the attitude and all that’s there is just there because it was 1968.” His attitude to the film was largely echoed in the British review by *The Times*, which saw *Night of the Living Dead* as justifying the theory of “cinema as a mirror of the collective unconscious.”

This critical reception created space for the appreciation of the film by a wider audience, free from the dismissal of the American critical fraternity. Indeed, the British response seemed more concerned about guessing whether Romero was unerringly knowing in his savage destruction of society or grossly naive in his “unswerving logic.” Roger Ebert’s outcry merely signposted an American revulsion at the methods of this revolutionary horror; such revulsion was largely absent in a British press more amenable to dissecting the artistic merit of continental new-wave films.

**Fake Blood and Fangs: *Night of the Living Dead* in British Cinematic Context**

In a genre sense *Night of the Living Dead* emerged from the nostalgic camp horror films of the ‘50s as a new form of entertainment described as “splatter movies” and depicting a brand of hyper-realistic violence which shocked the audience and transported horror into the realm of corporealism. The film formed part of a movement which saw horror shift away from “silliness” and “flimsy scripts”, drawing on wartime experience to refine both the message and realism of horror genre films. In Britain, *Night of the Living Dead* played to an audience which had voraciously consumed the works of the Hammer studio, with the mainstay of their output focussing on gothic horror productions—a world apart from grisly realism.
Post-war Frankenstein interpretations by studios such as Hammer, however, demonstrated the shifting focus of modern horror even within the staid British market. There is a stark contrast between Karloff’s “too-innocent” monster and Cushing’s “too-knowing” Frankenstein as the corruption of innocence was supplanted as prime story-arc by an exploration of society’s dark extremes. In The Curse of Frankenstein (1957) Peter Cushing’s dark Baron is far more than a traditional sadist, the Hammer vision of Frankenstein having been forged in the institutionalised sadism of violent global conflict. Perhaps the most famous line in Night of the Living Dead, “They’re coming to get you Barbra!” is ostensibly a Boris Karloff impression - a knowing wink to a variety of horror confined to the past. Although British audiences were becoming familiar with an evolution in horror, Night of the Living Dead still presented a startling leap into the unknown.

This leap can be seen as forming part of a consensus bridge between the attitude that science could help man master his environment to a situation where humanity lies prostrate in the face of natural phenomena. Here, the onslaught of the living dead echoes the destruction wrought by Godzilla: King of the Monsters (1956), in which a natural force awoken by radiation returns to vent its primal fury by tearing down the very auspices of modernity. Having been received well in Britain, the film Gorgo (1961) presented a British take on the Godzilla franchise, and the themes within it were likewise indicative of the film’s significance. The Godzilla franchise had allowed a post-war Japan struggling with the impotency imposed by its pacifistic constitution to justify the use of extreme force in defence of the homeland.

Likewise, Gorgo allowed British audiences to revel in the raw force of their own country. Much as in Night of the Living Dead, however, the conclusion to these events is ominous. Massive destruction is not reconciled with a happy ending, but rather a subsidence, as the monster Gorgo returns to the sea with its mother Ogra after destroying London’s picture-postcard skyline. The removal of a sentimentally contrived escape for Britain is likewise indicative of an increasing trend of questioning messages in mainstream cinema, with Night of the Living Dead fitting neatly into this narrative.

Oblique references in Night of the Living Dead to a satellite returning from Venus being shot down by government agencies lays the blame for events squarely at the door of institutional ineptitude. This failure of officialdom is a trend echoed from The Quatermass Xperiment (1954), with a similar satellite plot-line, and a similarly culpable scientific ambition at the root of the disaster. In Godzilla, Gorgo and The Quatermass Xperiment it is institutional hubris which brings about the emergence of monstrousness, much as in Night of the Living Dead where monstrousness, triggered by the scientific ambition of patriarchal authority, acts as the most extreme erosion of contemporary ‘modern’ values.

Monsters Among Us: Finding the ‘Devils’ in British Society
On 4 April 1968, the day Romero drove to New York City looking to find a distributor for his
film, Martin Luther King was shot. An idea of the underlying tensions of that period of time can be extrapolated from Romero’s comment that after King’s assassination he felt the film was doomed: “here we show up with a film with a black cat playing the lead and probably every theatre in the country is going to be burned down within two days.”

Likewise, in Britain Enoch Powell was to place himself at the head of a movement brought together by the shared concern that immigration might swamp Britain and create race problems as in America, proving that 1968 in Britain as well had a reactionary echo in intolerance. Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech invoked the Tiber “foaming with much blood” and the warning that, even as America witnessed alacritous race riots, Britain was “heaping up its own funeral pyre.” Even more disturbing was the contemporary support which Powell received, with London Dockers singing about an idealised ‘White Christmas’ in 1968.

Powell’s rhetoric, coming from a Conservative Member of Parliament, had legitimised prejudice and hostility amongst a working class still mired in a poverty which was meant to have been removed by Labour’s ‘promised land’. The violent shift in the tone of racial politics was juxtaposed with the incredible violence of Night of the Living Dead in an effort to shock and entertain an audience already accustomed to a climate of dissent. In Britain, as in America, the racial overtones of the films were both recent and relevant.

Zombies had, in turn, been depicted as a revenant proletariat in Plague of the Zombies (1966) in which an evil squire resurrects the dead to work in an extremely dangerous tin mine. Directed by John Gilling of Hammer Studios, Plague crystallised the most pertinent British interpretation of the zombie horror phenomenon. The traditional British preoccupation with class consciousness meant that exploitation was a mainstay of the working class. Even as Powell’s speech had ramped up racial tension, it was voiced in line with class concerns – with workers claiming not to be ‘racialists’ but class-warriors. Working class youths, however, did not have the benefit of such political grandstanding.

Fear was never far from post-war political dialogue, and the invisible enemy of a wave of immigrants left room enough to suspect the young. The British establishment had been actively combating youth movements throughout the ‘60s, as the backlash amongst ‘moral guardians’ found the devils to people its nightmare in the flower of British youth. This suburban nightmare painted a country which had lost its authority and political sway to off-the-shelf culprits in either ‘youth’ or ‘immigrants’. In truth, a generation had fallen between the cracks in traditional visions of ‘Britishness’ and eschewed co-option into a tired model of citizenship.

Nevertheless, Mods, Parkers, Skinheads and Crombies were all working class groups which attempted to reclaim an identity from an increasingly alienating parent culture. Night of the
*Living Dead* presented just such a recognisable yet alien subculture reclaiming a society from which it had quite literally been excluded by death. Ultimately, British responses to the spectre of the mob were conditioned by an appreciation of class which quickly identified the exploited masses whilst drawing on an increasing suspicion of all things ‘alien’.

*Night of the Living Dead* maintained an intellectual undercurrent which provided challenges to the established consensus, reflecting the milieu of both its production and release. The film’s success was in part due to the fact that the horror it evoked from the audience was grounded in their appreciation of the issues it broached.

Locating the vocabulary of dynamic change within a catastrophic situation intensified the sense of urgency and tension in the film, blending cannibals with commies as Romero used a broad palette of fears to terrify his audience. That the titular Living Dead were depicted as human monsters is part of the film’s potent formula, as the fear of the crowd which sprang up from riots and activism helped echo the perceived danger of a country tearing itself apart. Making monsters human likewise collapsed the division between normality and horror. Within the context of horror presented to British cinema audiences, *Night of the Living Dead* had a stark and shocking message which chimed with the tumult and aggression of the day. Despite being born of American fears, the British release found its own relevancy in highlighting fears of an identity sacrificed to subcultural groups.

As the ‘60s came to an end, so too did years of cozy consensus, with bloody riots marking the painful labor of a newly conceived modern Britain in which visible minorities and turbulent youths became the popular demons of a government in waiting under Mrs Thatcher. *Night of the Living Dead*, the most seminal of American nightmares, captured the mood of Britain at a turning point as she moved away from post-war visions of prosperity towards the start of a very long and very British nightmare.

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