

# REANIMATING THE DEAD

A global group of artists descend upon the original *Night of the Living Dead* for an unprecedented visual feast

ARTICLE BY BRYAN WHITE

In October of 1968, the Fulton Theater in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania premiered *Night of the Living Dead*, which served as the flash point for an entirely new horror film paradigm. Iconic director, George A. Romero, armed with \$114,000 and 35mm black-and-white film stock, single handedly managed to bridge the gap between the schlocky antics of any given b-movie matinee and the high atmospheric of a major studio production, such as its contemporary, Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby*. Though strapped to low-budget status upon release, when it ran as the backing picture to *Dr. Who and the Daleks*, *Night of the Living Dead* managed to find its audience, turn a healthy profit, and rise through the ranks to cult classic and beyond. In 1999, the Library of Congress added Romero's film to the National Film Registry, deeming it "historically, culturally or aesthetically important" among such pictures as *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Star Wars*.

There was a problem, however. *Night of the Living Dead*'s distributor in 1968, the Walter Reade Organization, dropped the ball by way of spectacular incompetence. Romero's picture carried the title *Night of the Flesh Eaters*, when Reade acquired the movie for distribution, but upon release, it went to theaters with the title that we now recognize. Problems occurred when Reade failed to attach a copyright notice to the prints, and *Night of the Living Dead* lapsed into the public domain immediately, treating the Walter Reade Organization to the delicious millions of box office dollars the film would generate and entitling Romero and his production company, Image Ten, to nothing.

Thanks to *Night of the Living Dead*'s public domain status, anyone, who felt so inclined, could (and did) broadcast the movie on late night television and afternoon creature features, contributing to the picture's popularity among horror fans. Being in the public domain, however, came with a menu of unfortunate side effects. Dozens of video distributors released the film on bargain basement home video and DVD, and in 1986, the Hal Roach Company took it upon themselves to colorize the film. In 1991, Jive Ass Video wiped the soundtrack and redubbed the film, (ala Woody Allen's *What's Up Tiger Lilly*) and released it under the title *Night of the Day of the Dawn of the Son of the Bride of the Return of the Revenge of the Terror of the Attack of the Evil, Mutant, Alien, Flesh Eating, Hellbound, Zombified Living Dead Part 2: In Shocking 2-D!* To further twist the knife, original co-writer, John Russo, went back to the drawing board, shot new footage and gave the film the *Episode 1* treatment in the form of the universally panned 30th Anniversary Edition.

Who says exploiting copyright law has to be a bad thing? By this point, George Romero has experienced tremendous success as a filmmaker, carving his name in the history of horror with his uncompromising method and genuinely horrifying vision. The tragic story of *Night of the Living Dead*'s heinous treatment at the hands of its distributor is an unfortunate blip in the history of Romero's career. It's just so sad that no one could think of anything interesting to do with the public domain status apart from release dozens of poor quality, dollar DVDs—until now.

In May of 2008, word began to circulate about an animated version of the zombie classic. The project was open to all, and carried three simple rules: The animation you submit had to be original works by you, the artist; the submitted animation must match the original film's soundtrack; and, the animation must be in black and white. Through the following months, deadlines were met, trailers made their way out to the internet, and a brand new frantic reimagining of Romero's classic horror movie began to take form. It became clear over the project's evolution that this would wind up less a new version of an old horror movie, and more like an art project the likes of which had never been seen before.



Tagging an animated version of *Night of the Living Dead* "reanimated" is a no brainer, but for project curator, Mike Schneider, it goes even deeper than that. "I found this old film book at this flea market," Schneider begins, "and I saw the word reanimation and the way they defined it was bringing new life to a piece of media through the hands of artists. They did this through rotoscoping, where you take a piece of film and you trace over it to make animation quick and cheap—but there's a beauty to seeing each artists' individual interpretation. When you hear the word reanimation, you can't help but think of zombies." Thus began Mike Schneider's journey.

*Night of the Living Dead: Reanimated* began, actually, as a reanimated version of the classic Vincent Price vehicle, *The Last Man On Earth*, adapted from Richard Matheson's novella, *I Am Legend*. Schneider locked himself in, much like Robert Morgan, surrounding himself with horror movies, with the intent to bring a new vision to an old film. "I figured it at



about twenty years worth of work," Schneider explains, "I popped it [*Night of the Living Dead*] in and heard that line, 'There's not going to be five or ten! There's going to be twenty, thirty, maybe even a hundred of those things!'" The film's twitchy basement blowhard, Harry Cooper, caused Mike to reevaluate his entire idea and put it up against one of George Romero's own social observations made with *Night of the Living Dead*. "Artists aren't the holdouts, we're the avant-garde. We're the people invading. We're the others."

Almost immediately following Schneider's shift, he had a dozen artists ready to contribute: "I came up with the idea, switched the entire model, knocked everything off my desk, and then, by the end of the day, there were already artists attached." Schneider hit the social networking site Deviant Art, and sought out artists that had posted art related to the Romero cycle of zombie movies, as well as a general search of zombie-related art. "I think there were 180,000 results or some ridiculous number like that," Mike explains, "I posted through Craig's List, I posted through Facebook, I actually went as far as joining dating sites and creating profiles as the project. How many zombies do you need to make a zombie movie?"

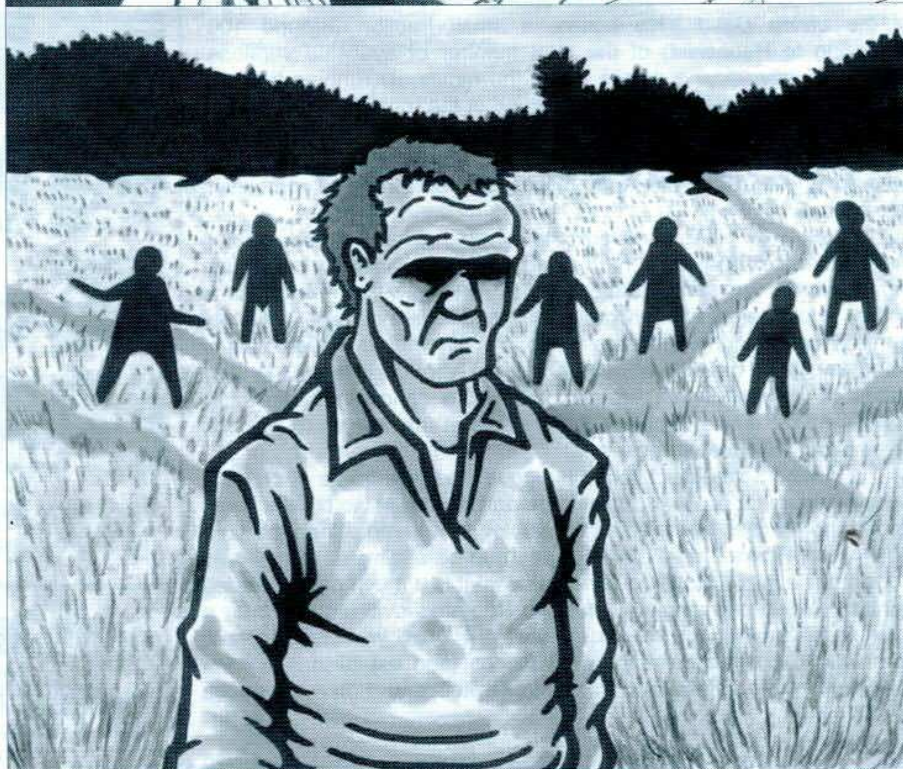


It didn't take long for *Reanimated* to catch on. Schneider's leveraging of social networking sites and the resultant wave of support stemming from horror blogs act as a case study of the power of social media to cultivate new approaches to collaborative filmmaking and art projects. A horde of artists came and went, contributing hours of hard work, supporting the project, and spreading this viral concept without the opportunity to meet one another. *Night of the Living Dead: Reanimated* didn't stop with artists, either. The project attracted the work of musicians, who turned in original compositions, as well as translators, who brought the copy of *Reanimated*'s website ([www.notldr.com](http://www.notldr.com)) to seven languages, opening the door to even more contributors. The ultimate product, which has over one hundred artists contributing, is a wildly kaleidoscopic collision of creativity built on the foundation of Schneider's idea. Over the course of eighteen months, their enthusiasm came to life, represented by traditional line art, abstract impressions of the original film, puppets, dolls, manga, claymation and machinima (repurposing video game sets and models to tell a story) to name just a few.

What do you do with the completed project, though? "Since it was a community project, we wanted to let the community decide where it went," Mike explains, "We screened at schools. Some teachers used it in their classes and used it to teach art. One teacher from Tennessee called it the Rosetta Stone of visual culture . . . We also showed at NYU and Yale, as well as dive bars and strip clubs." But apart from some unconventional screenings, not to mention a whole host of relevant horror film festivals and special theatrical engagements, Schneider, once again, engaged the internet and brought *Night of the Living Dead: Reanimated* to the larger viewing public in entirely new ways. "We showed it at the Facebook comic con and the Phantasmagoria Theater in Second Life. People dressed up their avatars as zombies and sat down in the space and watched the movie." To cap off his wildly divergent marketing campaign, Mike brought *Reanimated* to the community of horror hosts, landing a featured spot with the internet's first horror host, the legendary Count Gore De Vol, in December of 2009. "We've got Dr. Zoid, Victor Von Scary, Son of Ghoul, Karlos Borloff, Nigel Honeybone, Wolfman Mac, Mr. Lobo, Undead Johnny, Ormon Grimsby, and numerous other horror hosts lined up. All good artwork needs a frame . . . and our community is lucky enough to have them."

Take your pick. All manner of regional screening is taking on *Night of the Living Dead: Reanimated*, but how can the larger public get their hands on this? Given the iffy copyright status of Romero's original picture, Schneider intends to give this labor of love away for free on the Internet. When the final picture becomes available, *Reanimated* will become available across public bit torrent trackers at no cost to the viewer; but, let's say you side with the traditional means of distribution, and you just have to have a hard copy, professionally authored on a DVD with package art, the feature, commentary and extras. That's where Rob Hauschild and his boutique DVD label, Wild Eye Releasing, come into play.

"I had seen a small write-up for it on the *Fatally Yours* website. I'm reading about it, and it was completely fascinating. I'm thinking, 'Why hasn't anyone thought of this before?'" Rob continues, "I'm always looking out for new things, so I contacted Mike."





Hauschild and Schneider discussed abstractions, ranging from the importance of the original Romero feature to the latest in remix culture. It didn't take long for a plan to form. Schneider laid out a series of conditions in order for the project to be released by Wild Eye Releasing, a label known for reissuing obscure grindhouse pictures, as well as a range of subversive new exploitation movies. The film had to be released with a Creative Commons License that allows the film to be freely distributed. It cannot be used for commercial purposes, full credit must be given to all artists, and it cannot be altered. And most importantly, it could not be sold for a profit. "They're very intense terms. Other business owners might say insane terms," Rob says. "This isn't a financial opportunity for Wild Eye. It's actually an opportunity to be a part of something completely outside what other companies are doing with titles. We can be involved in that same non-profit creative commons level. It's a way to say, 'Hey! Wild Eye is doing something cool,' as opposed to, 'Give us your fourteen dollars.' The exposure is worth more to us than the two or three dollars we might make on a sale."

Small labels, such as Wild Eye, are facing a frightening decline these days. Sales of DVDs are slimming considerably. "Everyone's predicting in two years that DVD is going to be gone, or possibly five years, or, 'oh, you have six months to live.'" The fact that Hauschild and Wild Eye agreed to Mike Schneider's strictly not for profit release plan, speaks volumes about their faith in the final product. "[*Reanimated*] plays out almost like a radio drama with a museum gallery going by your eyes. It changed the whole *Night of the Living Dead* experience for me," Rob finishes.

Incentive will be the driving force behind the Wild Eye Releasing DVD of *Night of the Living Dead: Reanimated*. While it will be true that you can simply download a DVD image to burn, the Wild Eye release will offer the entire special edition treatment, where the online version will be nothing more than the feature. Wild Eye is planning on a pair of audio commentaries: one, a track with Mike Schneider, Peter Gutierrez, and Rob Hauschild being joined by horror fiction writer Jonathan Maberry; and, the other, (at the time of this writing), with "a couple of interesting people that we're still trying to lock down. It will be more from an art world perspective," Rob says. "There are shorts on this, comic books, call-in commentaries from some of the artists. We did a coloring contest of frames from the film, people who submitted those are on there."

Wild Eye's release of *Reanimated* promises to be an overwhelming package that explores the entire process of remixing a feature film, but also explores the cultural impact of *Night of the Living Dead*. Hauschild, himself, a massive fan of the original picture, has contributed a ten-minute short film showcasing his collection of *Night of the Living Dead* VHS boxes, a small fraction (around 100, according to Hauschild) of the total number of available versions. They list wildly varying details about the movie, its running time, its plot, wherein some even spoil the ending of the movie! Also on board is *Zombie Encounter*, a recording of the panel from one of the first screenings of *Reanimated*, where horror authors, such as Jonathan Maberry and Dr. Kim Paffenroth, discuss zombie films and zombies in pop culture.

It's tough to pinpoint where the zombie craze started gaining momentum, but it's just as hard to argue that the majority of zombie movies harbor any sort of true originality. Anyone with a few thousand dollars and a large enough group of friends, willing to be splashed with red food coloring and Karo Syrup, can film their own *Dawn of the Dead* knockoff; but, it's a true renegade who challenges the lazy habits of fantasy filmmakers and the entire concept of the wildly popular horror movie remake—the only genre that seems to see box office success in that arena.

Mike Schneider hitched his good idea to a horde of creative people hungry for an opportunity to be part of something big and new, and in the process has created something that is more than the sum of its parts. From a high level it appears to be a remake of a classic horror movie, but a closer look reveals that it is a much more detailed reinterpretation of a single movie, and Romero's own metaphor for a new order devouring the old order. *Night of the Living Dead: Reanimated* challenges many conventions, and establishes a case for new media being utilized to create, revitalize and market a piece of old media.



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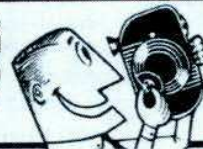
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