

INTRODUCTION

This book aims to introduce the reader to the films of George A. Romero along the lines of the Wallflower Press *Directors' Cuts* series. By concentrating upon the features Romero has directed it will analyse them in the light of the social and historical circumstances affecting cinema from the late 1960s to the present day. However, this book differs from many of its predecessors in attempting to outline some relevant, but neglected, cultural and literary factors influencing the work of this director. As my previous studies concerning the American family horror film and the work of Larry Cohen have revealed, no cinematic work can really be understood apart from significant aspects of a highly influential national cultural tradition. Such features often operate as salient unconscious factors influencing the work of any innovative director. Until recently, Romero had not directed a film since *The Dark Half* (1993); his relative inactivity resulted from a deliberate policy of withdrawal from the dehumanising conservatism infecting the film industry since the Reagan era. However, I wish to argue that the specific nature of his work is not entirely comprehensible because of what Robin Wood has elsewhere described as those powerful radical elements rooted in the Vietnam/Watergate syndrome of disillusionment, protest and subversion (1986: 133, 189–91) which evaporated during the 1980s. Romero's films have always been characterised by a lack of false optimism, a willingness to look objectively at the hard facts of reality, and a recognition that any victories may be tentative (or even unlikely) in grim situations. Rather than seeing his work as entirely symptomatic of a specific era, I would argue that its particular vision is more appropriately related to certain neglected factors in the American cultural tradition such as the apparently outdated tradition of literary naturalism. Although naturalism is one of those 'master narratives' supposedly rendered obsolescent by fashionable late-capitalistic discourses such as postmodernism, it is relevant to an era hysterically attempting to forget important

historical lessons. Although naturalism has suffered from its associations with Emile Zola's dogmatic theories expressed in his essay 'The Experimental Novel', the author's fiction often operates in a creatively different and dynamic manner, which refutes any attempts to classify it into conveniently rigid theoretical parameters. Zola's work was not just influential in Europe but also America. It stimulated not only diverse American literary explorations by writers such as Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London and Frank Norris, but also achievements in early silent and sound cinema. The movement includes such diverse works as *Greed* (1924), *The Salvation Hunters* (1925) and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1989).

The American cultural tradition developed its own version of naturalism. It also recognised the diversity of a movement where aspects of the grotesque and fantasy appeared within its terrain. Gothic features also characterised certain works of European and American naturalism. They developed in specific literary and cinematic incarnations during the later years of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century. Literary features characteristic of 'New American Gothic' also appear in films as diverse as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Wise Blood* (1979), the fiction of Stephen King, as well as another neglected cultural phenomenon relevant to both past and present American cinema – the comic strip.

During the 1950s, Romero was influenced by the visual style of EC Comics. Although castigated by conservative forces, McCarthy-era hysteria and academic experts such as psychiatrist Dr Frederic Wertham, who claimed to find a link between comic books and juvenile delinquency in *The Seduction of the Innocents* (1954), these examples of 'trash culture' were often more visually and thematically subversive of institutional values than the politically motivated work of those unfortunate victims of the witch hunt. Such visual features have always influenced Romero's work; they appear explicitly in *Creepshow* (1982). Although the film is not one of the director's major achievements, it by no means deserves the comparison made by Robin Wood with British Amicus horror films of the 1970s involving 'the same pointlessness, the same moral squalor: nasty people doing nasty things to other nasty people' (1986: 191). Despite its appropriations by an artistically bankrupt and decadently redundant Hollywood system, the role of the comic strip as a purveyor of serious messages, particularly in historically repressive eras such as the 1950s, still needs serious re-evaluation as an alternative mode of expression.

The sub-title of this book, 'Knight of the Living Dead', accidentally occurred before my realisation of its use in Tom Allen's article on the director. But it is not entirely coincidental or gimmicky. Romero's best work has always operated as a wake-up call to those dominated by a materialistic culture that promises life but actually delivers a living-dead philosophy. As Wood notes, Romero's zombies differ little from their living counterparts who are programmed into consumerist products of a decadent, late-capitalist civilisation and need desperate re-awakening before they supplement the former's ranks. The title of Ibsen's play *When We Dead Awaken* also operates as an unconscious, but relevant, parallel to the situations encountered by Romero's characters. Like all key artists, Romero never makes the message overtly didactic; but it exists within the text for those willing to discover it. His vision directly opposes those debased Hollywood values of the last twenty years. Rather than capitulate to market

forces, Romero has decided to maintain his independence as an outsider by articulating an eloquent silence which is also oppositional in nature. This study thus attempts to trace the source of the director's oppositional directions. Previous studies of his work by R. H. W. Dillard and Gregory Waller relate Romero to the traditions of the classical horror film. Steven Shaviro sees the zombie films as a critique of the capitalist logic of production as well as noticing Romero's debt to the EC Comics tradition of the 1950s. Steve Beard regards the zombies as an allegorical representation of 'the disenfranchised underclass of the material world' and 'a projection of post-modern capitalism's worst anxieties about itself' (1993: 30). However, the films of George Romero deal with other issues also and should not be limited to zombies. As we shall see, they owe much to the tradition of literary naturalism derived from the work of Zola which entered the American mainstream and developed accordingly. Romero's films represent an intuitive appropriation of a discourse which has often been denied and rejected by the status quo. Although the director has never read Zola, his films intuitively reflect themes which originally appeared in the French writer's work and which infiltrated the American appropriation of naturalism in both literature and film. Artists are often influenced by relevant discourses, whether consciously or not. This book thus attempts to place George Romero within a particular cultural context and argues for seeing his work against a much broader background, rather than limiting him to the creator of the modern cinematic zombie.

Chapter one, 'A Director and his Traditions', is an extensive account of Romero in relation to relevant cultural, historical and industrial influences affecting his films. Chapter two examines his creative breakthrough as a director in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Chapter three reveals connections his recently released 'lost' film, *There's Always Vanilla* (1972), has to the concerns of his so-called 'horror' movies. Chapters four and five relate Romero's two neglected 1973 independent commercial films, *Jack's Wife* and *The Crazies*, to the developing conservative climate of Nixon's America. Chapter six investigates the relationship of *Martin* (1977) to both traditional Gothic fantasy and the New American Gothic explorations of writers such as Stephen King. Chapter seven examines the second part of his zombie trilogy, *Dawn of the Dead*, while chapter eight interrogates *Knightriders* (1981) as a dark allegory of compromise and contamination affecting both Romero and his fellow Americans confronting developing Reaganite cultural hegemony. Chapter nine examines *Creepshow* in terms of its relationship to naturalism and EC Comics influences. Chapter ten investigates the final part of his zombie trilogy, *Day of the Dead* (1985) and the cultural and industrial reasons for its neglect. Chapters eleven and twelve examine the unjustly neglected *Monkey Shines* (1988), his contribution to the Dario Argento production *Two Evil Eyes*, and *The Dark Half* (both 1990). The book concludes with an examination of his most recent film, *Bruiser* (2000), in terms of Romero's overall career.