



## Issue 12: Book Reviews

### The Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's Visions of Hell on Earth

By Kim Paffenroth

Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007. ISBN: 978-1-93279-265-2 (pbk). 175 pp. £16.99

A Review by Steffen Hantke, Sogang University, Seoul, South Korea

Kim Paffenroth's *Gospel of the Living Dead* is a thematic study of George Romero's four *Living Dead* films -- *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), and *Land of the Dead* (2005), as well as Zack Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004). Given the importance of this cinematic cycle in American horror cinema, this is hardly a surprising project. What is surprising, however, is the book's place of publishing -- Baylor University Press -- and the author's institutional affiliation -- he is a professor of Religious Studies. Both indicate that the book and its author operate somewhere and somehow in relation to a Christian agenda. The book's goals are twofold -- to provide a basic introduction to the cycle of films by, and associated with, George Romero, and to read the moral and social issues in the films, which is where the author's Christian agenda enters the picture. At first glance, one may suspect that primary texts and critical agenda require considerable effort to be made to fit. Instinctively, one might say, the approach feels extraneous to the films, an odd superimposition, a contrivance. What new insights could such an approach possibly produce with such a body of work?

To begin with, Paffenroth's book is part of a larger movement of critical assessments of horror auteurs in recent years, which includes, among others, Ian Conrich's and David Woods' collection of essays on John Carpenter (*The Cinema of John Carpenter*, Wallflower Press, 2005), William Beard's massive study of the films of David Cronenberg (*The Artist as Monster*, University of Toronto Press, 2001), or Tony Williams' *The Cinema of George Romero* (Wallflower Press, 2003). Dismissed in the 1970s and '80s as mere provocateurs working below the radar of serious cultural engagement, directors like Romero have not just endured, but have gained in status and have achieved comfortable degrees of canonization. Revered, referenced, and remade, films by these idiosyncratic directors of 1970s and '80s neo-horror are now recognized not only for the innovations they brought to the genre, but as an integral part of American cinema.

With undisguised affection for his topic, Paffenroth subscribes to this canonical assumption about Romero. Though he acknowledges that his zombie films are too violent, disgusting, and politically radical ever to become popular with American mainstream audiences, he is nonetheless framing them as examples of artistically conscious social and political critique. As much as he cautions the conservative, perhaps conservatively Christian, segment of his readership about the graphic nature

of the films, he continues to insist on their cultural value and lasting relevance.

With this readership in mind, the book presumes little or no knowledge of Romero's *Living Dead* films on the part of its audience. The considerable body of scholarship on the horror film in general and on the zombie film and Romero's work in particular, is relegated to the extensive textual and bibliographic notes, where it functions as second, more theoretically informed tier of the book's larger argument, available to more academically minded readers, but not essential for the broader audience. A lengthy synopsis at the beginning of each of the five chapters introduces the films' plots and characters. Each synopsis is followed by an analysis section, which, in turn, is followed by a brief conclusion, both of which provide discussion on the films' significance.

Paffenroth's analysis is a straightforward reading of the films in terms of their social and moral content, some of which is cast in theological terms whenever it seems appropriate. Some comments on individual shots or scenes aside, there is little discussion of technique or style or the medium of cinema itself as contributing to the films' meaning. Instead, the discussion focuses almost exclusively on plot and character, with a special emphasis on what the films have to say about communities, the mechanics of their internal functioning, and the individual and collective values that make it possible.

The terms in which Paffenroth examines the films' moral content tend to be so abstract as to be ahistorical and essentialist. This is not to say that Paffenroth is not aware of historical contexts; brief comments about the specific conditions under which the films were made demonstrate that the deemphasizing of historical context is simply a result of relying on essentialist notions like "human nature" or "original sin" without questioning these notions as to their own status as ideological constructs (i.e. as concepts that, in themselves, depend on historical context for their validity). Readers might like or dislike this critical approach, but nobody can fault Paffenroth for inconsistency.

Paffenroth's frame of reference for Romero's work is, for the most part, the moral universe described by Dante, to whose *Divine Comedy* the argument frequently returns for analogies and elucidation. This choice signals a readiness on Paffenroth's part, which he often acknowledges explicitly, to recast the religious terms of his analysis in secular terms. It is true that the exegesis depends heavily on Christian concepts of original sin, redemption, and faith; also, there is a larger narrative running through all five chapters in which Paffenroth emphasizes a move on Romero's part from grim desperation in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) to a sense of reconciliation and hope in *Land of the Dead* (2005) -- a reading that might be inspired less by a change in Romero and more by a predilection in Paffenroth. Still, this opening up of the argument from a Christian to a secular perspective, and vice versa, is more than just a grudging concession to an audience not limited to Christian readers. Though not exactly a fan of Romero's work, Paffenroth is an admirer of its critical stance, its ability to ask tough question to its American audiences, and its potential for politicizing its audiences and granting them, ultimately, a sense of catharsis. Though his admiration sometimes manifests itself in a personal excitement that exceeds the common level permissible in academic film criticism, the seriousness with which he treats Romero's moral, social, and political is genuine, contagious, and thus difficult to dismiss.

Overall, the book's appeal is mostly to those coming fresh to Romero's work, or those opposed to it on grounds of surface morality. For these readers, Paffenroth makes a convincing case that

graphic violence and distasteful subject matter does not equal depravity. Hence, his book might broaden Romero's audience and move his films more firmly into the cultural mainstream, a mainstream in which, at least in the U.S., Christian beliefs and value judgments do play an important role. For those readers unfamiliar with a Christian approach to horror film, the book provides a test case of their own boundaries and belief systems. Since a Christian approach, by and large, constitutes a sideline in academic film criticism, it may sometimes create a sense of cognitive and rhetorical friction for readers immersed in the secular mainstream of academic film criticism. But for those same readers, it also provides a unique new angle from which to review these films about which so much has already been written. As such, the book is neither a radical break from existing scholarship -- for that, the foundational research in the notes is too thorough and conscientious; nor is it a breakthrough into a rich, new vein of inquiry. Intelligently and sympathetically argued, it is what all scholarship on a canonical topic can aim for -- a small yet valuable addition to the already existing state of research. With this in mind, *Gospel of the Living Dead* is a book well worth reading.

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