

You can't go home again: George Romero's *Diary of the Dead*

Hiram Lee
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With *Diary of the Dead*, director George Romero has returned to the start of the zombie plague which first took shape in his *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and grew in intensity through *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985), until the world was almost completely overrun by zombies in his overlooked *Land of the Dead* (2005).

Romero has returned to the start of his famous epic/epidemic not merely to “reboot” his series in the way so many mainstream film franchises have done lately but because he is, in this film, particularly interested in the way the media covers the emergence of a disaster and the way various institutions serve or fail people during such an event. While his film is successful in parts, and many of his other *Dead* films have something to offer, *Diary of the Dead* is ultimately an unsatisfying contribution.

The work starts promisingly, however, as we first see the raw footage, uploaded to the Internet by a news team's cameraman, of the first corpses returning to life. The complete footage, we're told, was never broadcast. The truth was kept from viewers. It was, however, downloaded by the main characters of our film, a group of film students working for their classmate/director Jason Creed (Joshua Close).

We meet the characters on the set of a student film where we learn that Jason has always wanted to be a documentary filmmaker but has instead chosen to make a horror movie for his senior project. “There's always an audience” for horror, he tells his crew. During shooting of his low-budget mummy movie, in which Romero is no doubt having some fun at the expense of the mostly dreadful crop of horror films out there today, the crew begins to hear reports of the dead “waking up” and attacking the living.

Presented with the chance to document something important, Jason abandons his horror movie to shoot a new film about these bizarre events, which he will call *The Death of Death*. That film, we are told, was finished by his girlfriend Debra (Michelle Morgan), another film student, who provides voice-over narration for some sections of the work. The film we watch is that film—Jason's film—left for us by Debra.

While Jason is preoccupied with filming, the primary concern of the rest of the group is to pile into their camper and head for “home,” here representing a sentimentalized kind of normalcy

which existed before the global disaster of zombies. Their journey will lead them from one nightmare scenario to the next.

While traveling in their camper, the students turn on a television, catching a glimpse of a news report. The broadcast is reassuring, declaring, “We expect things to return to normal very soon,” and adding that “the President continues to monitor the situation from his ranch.” It's just one in a series of broadcasts that attempt to portray the widespread disaster as a series of isolated events soon to be resolved by the proper authorities.

This is a significant change from the earlier *Dead* films in which small groups of characters are isolated—in a farmhouse in the first film, a shopping mall in the second, a military bunker in the third—turning to the news for information on the outside world and the extent to which the zombie plague has grown. Here the media—and it could not be any other way for a movie made in these times—is a source of misinformation. The characters are on the road here, not isolated in one location. They see with their own eyes the extent of the disaster and the reality confronting them.

This is one of the most effective elements of *Diary of the Dead*, the disparity between what the characters, and by extension the viewers, see and what the news media reports. It is, in many ways, more unsettling than the scares and “gags” found throughout the film.

While the media is the central focus of Romero's film, the director, clearly affected by Hurricane Katrina and the numerous other natural disasters worsened by their social components, has set out to show the extent to which virtually *all* the institutions alleged to exist to aid human beings have failed them.

As the students' camper approaches the scene of an accident on the side of the road, a police officer approaches them, but not to help; he has changed into a zombie and attacks them. The most religious among the students, Mary, who clutches her rosary as she drives their enormous vehicle, finds no solace in her religion and eventually makes a suicide attempt. A hospital, where the students go for help, is completely deserted save for a doctor and nurse, both zombies, who also attack them. The National Guard only robs them of their supplies at gunpoint. Even the isolation afforded them by a large mansion in the

countryside, repeatedly referred to as a “fortress,” cannot protect them long.

Romero has brought out a horrifying truth. Millions of people all over the world, when confronted by immense disasters, have nowhere to turn. Each stop in their search for help is a dead end. Romero, whatever one thinks of the final results, is one of the only fiction filmmakers to tackle such vital material.

While his criticism of the mainstream media and the absence of important and reliable social institutions provides some of the more powerful moments in the film, another conflict involving Jason’s decision to document the group’s journey never quite comes off.

Jason is repeatedly criticized for attempting to interview his friends or film them as they go through their difficult circumstances. The characters are no doubt expressing, for Romero, a disgust with the mainstream media’s intrusive and sensational investigations into the personal grief of everyday people. But is it so beyond belief that an aspiring documentarian would want to keep an account of this unprecedented disaster? Surely someone needs to make a record of it.

One of Debra’s voice-overs asks why “we” are so interested in people’s misfortune, why “we” crane our necks to observe the wreckage of two cars by the side of the road. This attempt to ascribe a rotten kind of voyeurism to Jason’s pursuit, and to human nature in general, is one of the weakest elements of the film.

Romero has shown himself to be deeply skeptical, if not suspicious, of anyone who attempts or claims to pursue “the truth” in their work, as his character Jason does. If his doubts about the mainstream media are severe, his doubts about alternative sources of information are even more so. In an interview with cinemablend.com, speaking about the Internet and “bloggers” in particular, the filmmaker commented: “I don’t know about this, but I’d almost rather be unknowingly manipulated, at least if the information is being managed, than just be subject to this absolute confusion that just turns into noise. It bothers me. I wish that it was truthful but it’s not because people are not truthful. They weren’t truthful when they ran the three networks and not necessarily everybody’s being truthful now.”

When asked if he wasn’t “implying that there’s no reliable source of news anywhere, ever,” Romero added, “I don’t think there is.”

In a movie in which criticism of the media and technology is the central theme, it’s significant that one of two sources of genuine help the students find is an Amish man who provides them with shelter long enough for them to make repairs on their camper. Isn’t it ironic, the director seems to be saying, with all this technology at their disposal, it takes an Amish man to help these young students on their way? One wonders if the director is not also guilty of wanting to go “home,” to simpler times.

The only other source of help for the students is a group of

black militants who, armed and holed up in a warehouse, offer them, most reluctantly, some essential supplies. They tell them: “We got the power. For the first time in our lives, we got the power. ‘Cause everybody else left—all the folks without suntans.” Romero, like so many others, was clearly horrified and outraged by the Hurricane Katrina disaster which affected most severely a predominately black population in New Orleans. These scenes, which express some of Romero’s outrage at innocent people being left to fend for themselves, also fail to grasp the social implications of that disaster. To treat the matter primarily in terms of race is to obscure the more fundamental questions at hand.

Moving towards the end of their odyssey, the students will find “home” another dead end. They will have to keep moving. A wealthy friend’s country estate—a “fortress” complete with a secure “panic room”—will be their last stop and hope of finding sanctuary.

Debra, having suffered through impossible calamities, will eventually decide to take part in the completion of Jason’s movie. She makes an addition, at the end of the film, which can’t go unmentioned here. Debra includes footage, found on the Internet by Jason, of two hunters using zombies for target practice. The images are disturbing.

Over this footage, Debra poses the question, “Are we worth saving? You tell me.” These rather misanthropic lines suggest that Romero’s chief criticism is of a universal “human nature” which is either rotten or all too easily capable of becoming so. This message, hinted at in other parts of the film, and spoken loud and clear in its final moments, is ultimately what undoes the work. While Romero takes up some important themes in *Diary of the Dead*, their proper exploration is, regrettably, beyond his abilities.



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