Asleep In Dead Spaces
Watching Dave Dyment’s Watching Night of the Living Dead

"Kill the brain and you kill the ghoul," announces the police chief towards the end of George Romero’s Night of the Living Dead. The chief brags to a TV crew about having killed nineteen zombies: “beat em or burn em” he declares, chillingly evoking the real-life violence faced by Black America both today and in 1968, the year of the film's original release.

Dave Dyment’s Watching Night of the Living Dead reconstructs George Romero’s original film in its entirety, with soundtrack intact, expanding and contracting layers of diegetic space by intercutting into the original segments from other films in which characters are either watching Night of the Living Dead, or ignoring it. Dyment incorporates additional footage of the film being used in a variety of cultural contexts, such as musicians performing with NOTLD playing in the background.

Reasons for the film's ubiquity as a cultural artefact are manifold; long considered a metaphorically rife and cutting criticism of race relations in the United States, and of American culture in general, it is also the original genre zombie movie against which all subsequent zombie movies have been modelled and measured. The film has additionally long been in the public domain, and so has been a go-to for other artists and filmmakers when a scene or backdrop is desired for their own work. As a result, NOTLD has appeared over and over again in Western popular and underground cultures since its 1968 release.

In Dyment’s version, as a car pulls into a drive at the film's start, a woman settles in on a couch to watch the action unfold in a different space. We see a Sony television screen and the title credits. Her action echoes my own, having just sat down on a couch in the gallery to view a screen, and as a result I remain aware of these three spaces of action and inaction throughout my viewing experience. A series of other domestic spaces are introduced as the title sequence unfolds; a man dozes to the intro and we collectively join him to enter into the sleep space of cinema.
We move from domestic spaces into other kinds—a hospital room, a space ship, a movie theatre, an insane asylum—as the plot of the film unravels, one in which a young white couple (Barbara and Johnny) are accosted by zombies and end up holed up in a house with a group of other people. We are continuously reminded that we're in a pure imaginative space.

The edits are precise, preserving the film's linearity and replicating images in size and scale when cutting from the its original contexts to the once-removed viewing spaces of other films. Sometimes size and scale are preserved even as the context of the two (original and once-removed) diegetic spaces switch back and forth. Here the world is temporarily reinvented with Night of the Living Dead as its sun, and everything else revolves sleepily, as its emotional fabric of fear and anxiety becoming the central connecting force.

Some viewers are paying attention to the horror unfolding, and some are not, which in itself holds the heavy metaphorical weight of a society in chaos, in emergency, crisis, and decline. Reflecting our real-life moment, the viewers who seem to be watching NOTLD are sometimes impervious to the crisis at hand. A security guard watches with his visage of boredom. Other viewers exhibit variations of fear, interest, disinterest, thrill and amusement—in reaction to the same unfolding sequences. NOTLD's characters meanwhile navigate their world of entrapment—from exterior to interior, sinking ever farther away.

Sound is the only stable form of diegesis that remains consistent throughout the running time. It also sometimes invades the viewers' spaces, as when a girl sleepily watching from a couch starts when the sound of a phone being slammed down surprises her. The deafness and blindness of the human participants is underlined through this careful editing, as when a seemingly blind woman turns on the tv followed by Barbara anxiously asking over and over "What's happening? What's happening?"

The only sighted person, the only person who seems to know what is happening and have a plan is the black character of Ben. The original film has been frequently analysed as an allegory of race politics in the United States, and although it sometimes runs dangerously close to the "magical negro" trope, it also unravels as an intense critique of racism and anti-black ideology in the U.S.. Close to the beginning of Ben's encounter with the other characters, he tries to explain to Barbara, "We have to work together. You have to help me," as he attempts to secure the house. She just stares blankly at him in a daze, and instead becomes mesmerized by a small music box, an idiotic distraction. She is asleep. The metaphor rests uneasily: idiotic distractions are the focus while the world crumbles around us. We are asleep.

As we slowly move from domestic to public spaces the film is seen playing in the background in a television broadcast as a woman speaks to the camera. NOTLD appears as the backdrop to a live score being performed in a large theatre. Christiane from Christiane F. enters another theatre, and movie attendees in costume attend in yet another cinema. Couples squabble, friends carry out conversations. A series of paired movie-watchers enact various relationships—moving together warmly, moving apart awkwardly.
As zombies eat human flesh in the original, a parallel violence begins to creep into the viewing spaces: a woman is tied up with tape over her mouth, a man holds a knife to another woman's throat with their backs to the television. Characters' actions are mirrored: Barbara lying prone while a viewer does the same; a girl cradles a gun while Ben prepares a rifle; characters smoke in both spaces. The result is a disorienting repeating process of alignment and disjunction; actions are connected and disconnected; we're in the same reality but not, things make sense and they don't. Our own living rooms, Watching Night of the Living Dead suggests, are in no way immune to this reality, and therefore not immune to this violence.

And yet the film shows over and over people turning their backs. A couple makes out. A frightened little boy watches in pajamas and alarmed elementary school kids watch from their classroom, but at the same time a bemused viewer blandly watches the on screen panic of the characters' escape attempt with the truck. People talk on the phone while the movie plays in the background.

Inevitably, screens are depicted within screens. An LG screen with a webcam on top conspicuously looks back at me, the third-removed viewer. Half-way into the film the characters struggle to get a radio, then a television working. Their distance from the world, and our own, is stifling. Technological mediation, manifesting a seeming chance for survival, is also the casement for the inaction and paralysis that seems to permeate everything.

Various movie theatre facades announce the movie title on their marquis' and it seems that all of America is watching, and doing nothing. The white men in NOTLD continue to battle "We'll see who's right" insists Harry, and his partner Helen drily asks if that's the most important thing. Viewers smoke weed, viewers watch from a cemetery as the sick child, Karen, now a zombie, attacks and kills her own mother. Barbara is attacked by the zombie version of her own brother; we are all, the film seems to suggest, turning on ourselves. It's in these scenes that the viewers' mass complacency becomes most affecting.

Police and dogs finally arrive while sleeping viewers doze on with remotes in their hands. And finally, in the climactic moment of NOTLD we are in another living room, but something is distinctly different: a man eats flesh in front of the television screen. From this space we watch the screen as Ben is shot dead by police through the window as he seeks his escape, believing the danger has passed. The distancing of this climactic moment is hugely disturbing, removing the viewer of Watching Night of the Living Dead one step from the original film’s ultimate act of violence and erasure, while simultaneously placing another violence (the eating of flesh) directly into the audience’s living room. Viewers shut off their tvs, switch off the lights, and everything burns.

Watching Night of the Living Dead does some excellent work as referential art, allowing the concepts of the original work to breathe, even amplifying some, while adding avenues to reconsider context and thereby expand conceptual potential in an entirely new work—in this case one that repositions a connection between complacency and violence, and gently implores us to wake tf up.

Irene Bindi
Dave Dyment is a Toronto-based artist whose practice includes audio, video, photography, performance, writing and curating, and the production of artists’ books and multiples. His work – often labour-intensive and requiring years to complete – is primarily interested in the ways that cultural value is accrued. He mines pop culture for shared associations and alternate meanings, investigating the language and grammar of music, cinema, television and literature, in order to arrive at a kind a folk taxonomy of a shared popular vocabulary.

Dyment’s work has exhibited across the country, as well as New York City, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, London, and Dublin, and sits in many private and corporate collections, and in the libraries of the AGO and National Gallery of Canada. Examples of his work can be seen at www.davedyment.com or heard on the YYYZ Anthology Aural Cultures or the Art Metropole disk New Life After Fire, a collaboration with Lee Ranaldo of Sonic Youth. He is represented by MKG127

Irene Bindi is a visual artist who uses variations of collage and sound in projects that use structural and material elements of experimental cinema. She alters and physically reconstructs moving and photographic images using paper. In parallel practice she has performed a number of noise projects under her name and in collaborations including Double Hook, Deaf Squab, and Blind Squab. She has an MA in Film Studies from York University and is Production Editor at ARP Books.

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121-100 Arthur Street
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R3B1H3

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