

DVD REVIEW: *Day of the Dead* (1985)

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Day Of The Dead (1985)
101mins
Anchor Bay Entertainment

If you were a wannabe horror film aesthete as I was in the 80s (and still are at thirty-plus, to make it all the more depressing), the only way you could see an unedited, uncensored video copy of George A. Romero's *Day Of The Dead* was from the likes of a wee mom-and-pop video store far and away from the Imperialist Domination of Videotron or Blockbuster. In Calgary my hangout of necessary choice was an unpretentious hole-in-the-wall named Casablanca Video where classics like *The Reanimator* (1985) and *Demons* (1985) were common fare. Recent re-viewings of said titles have, lamentably, proven that not all 80s horror cinema age well. *Day Of The Dead* is another matter. The estranged sibling of *Night Of The Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn Of The Dead* (1978) was a bust when it was released in theatres and drive-ins in the mid-80s, deemed too gloomy (go figure!) by hardcore Romero zombie fans reared on blue-faced zombies in shopping malls and "They're coming to get you, Barbara!" 's. Video gave it new life, infusing it with the sobering, if pan and scan cropped, smack of downbeat anarchy, a scrumpdelicious flavouring of the apocalypse on a Romero Zombie Earth.

On the whole, *Day Of The Dead* is a downer of a walking dead movie. It presents an end of the world in which the human race has been reduced to a small cadre of semi to full-blown nutty scientists and soldiers hunkered down deep in an abandoned Florida storage mine. Zombies now outnumber the humans by four

hundred thousand to one, lifting this stuff to the likes of the Biblical Four Horseman. Zombie horror doesn't get more joyously downbeat than this. (And no, *28 Days Later* does not count as zombie apocalypse... they're diseased, not dead!)

What I love about *Day Of The Dead* is the bleakness; the film's nihilistic heart is exactly what makes it so much more of a scouring existential ride in comparison to its predecessors (*Night Of The Living Dead* certainly isn't a day at the fair but its 60s datedness and exceedingly low-budget unfortunately undercut some of its quite harrowing thematic and narrative punch). In *Day Of The Dead* there is no hand-wringing over the fate of humankind in the event the zombies win because they've already won. With that solemn fact firmly in place, we begin with a four day countdown to apocalypse, with the floodgates to cinematic paranoia, madness and death already ripped off and thrown in the face of the last remaining human holdouts. All of this and I have yet to mention that the definitive DVD package of *Day Of The Dead*, released late last year, has every proverbial bell and whistle for Romero zombie fans.

The Anchor Bay DVD set of *Day Of The Dead* predictably spares nothing and I won't bore you with the exhaustive details, except to say that the packaging alone makes the purchase worthwhile. It unfolds like a piece of Japanese origami, revealing two discs and a miniature legal ruled pad belonging to none other than Dr. M. Logan, a.k.a. Dr. Frankenstein (played so wonderfully by recently deceased Richard Liberty). Inside is a long opinion piece by Michael Felsher, Anchor Bay's webmaster and film information manager,

as well as the fictional “bloodied” notes (“I’m going to need more specimens!”) of Dr. Logan peppered with conceptual drawings of zombies by the film’s design team.

Not too surprisingly, background info abounds in the Behind the Scenes documentary. Romero’s production drawings and ideas for the original and grander \$7 million dollar version of *Day Of The Dead* are displayed. We are told that the budget was necessarily pared down to the grittier \$3-million-dollar mark to ensure a “not-rated” (anything to stave off the snip-happy censoring hounds of Jack Valenti) once the film finally hit screens. *Day Of The Dead* actors Lori Cardille, Joe Pilato and Bub himself, realized by the immeasurable talents of Howard Sherman, are also seen again after all these years, the lot having aged well enough. Savini’s home video movies of the production shoot are also included, comprised mostly of footage of the time-consuming process of applying zombie make-up to actors and the subsequent writhing in pain of said actors as they take the rubber prosthetic makeup off and attempt to leave their real faces intact. There’s even a Wampun Mine promotional video to peruse, which becomes a bit mind-numbing after thirty seconds. Audio commentaries are always a sure bet one way or another and Romero, special effects maestro Tom Savini, Lori Cardille (Sarah) and production designer Cletus Anderson reveal a fair share of entertaining tidbits, such as the employment of the Mister Rogers television crew on the film and the rolling thunder sickness the cast and crew endured as a result of living underground and inhaling lime dust day-in and day-out during the production. You get a sense that they all had fun filming *Day Of The Dead* and that they still enjoy each other’s company all these years later. Good news, considering the fact that Savini’s prop organs and intestines apparently got a tad sour during the shoot, especially when some unknown perpetrator unplugged his make-up department’s refrigerator forcing actor Joe Pilato into partial-dry heaves following the filming of his death-by-zombie demise.

Director Roger Avery’s solo commentary runs a bit like a football game play-by-play. He provides the unqualified, horror-film-geek commentary necessary for a film like this and does it well. Weaned on movies like *Day Of The Dead* while working at Video Archives with a then unknown fellow sales clerk named Quentin Tarantino, Avery provides convincing cinematic comparisons to Romero’s directorial skills, including a suggestion that the opening of the film (a wonderfully realized nightmare dream sequence) is classically Kubrickian. Avery’s *Day Of The Dead* fanaticism gets

the better of him at times, which is also a treat. This is perfectly exemplified when he goes on at length about an allegedly missing scene in the film that sees Dr. Logan rise-up as a freshly-made zombie and reunite with Bub, his trained livingdead pupil. The veracity in his concerted belief that the scene existed and was left on the cutting room floor by Romero however runs into a bit of trouble when he admits that part of his belief in the scene’s existence is based on the fact that it was a recurring dream he had as a young teenager, its genesis the result of a teenybopper late-night frightfest featuring *Day Of The Dead*.

Later in the commentary, Avery also outlines his own contingency plans and zombie doomsday tactics, ones that he would have employed had he been placed underground with the rest of the characters, which include the implementation of fallback perimeter zones and the like. While this certainly provides a kind of adolescent-little boy delight to the whole affair of watching the film again, the delight itself proves miserably fleeting as it is shouldered to one side with his comment that he thinks that the film’s fictional government made a mistake not providing the soldiers of *Day Of The Dead* with prostitutes to keep them happy.

Commentaries and bonus materials aside, the DVD transfer of *Day Of The Dead* itself is superb, perhaps too much so. There is something to be said for grainy, cropped video rentals, foreign to the world and mentality of high-tech digital enhancement, which tend inevitably to work toward eliminating all that delightful grittiness. You don’t want slickness or crispness or clarity for a creature like *Day Of The Dead* where things go bump in the underground night and take a chomp out of your arm. Romero seeks to exploit the underground storage mine set to the fullest, with its flat, antiseptic, fluorescence and haunted-house gloom but the DVD transfer fights it. It seems to take away some of that cadaverous creepiness the film so magically captures both on celluloid and video. That said, technology has its virtues, in its facilitation of clearer perception, for one thing. I must confess that I shudder to think, for instance, of my pre-DVD ignorance of the fact that, yes, that is a rubber chicken being pulled out of the stomach cavity of Captain Rhodes.