Chapter 1

THE SPECTER OF FAILURE

Political and Professional Disillusionment in George A. Romero's Counterculture Trilogy

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Reflecting on the many symbolic readings of his debut feature, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), George A. Romero stated, "It was 1968, man. *Everybody* had a 'message.' Maybe it crept in, and I think the anger and the attitude and all that's there just because it was 1968."[1] The film's "allegorical moments"[2] situate it as very much a product of a tumultuous era—and yet we cannot deny that, for future generations of filmmakers, the Romero-inspired zombie has continued to serve as a virtual machine for producing allegorical readings. This sheer productivity of the zombie-as-metaphor is, of course, a key reason why that generic figure overshadows so much of Romero's larger body of work.

When describing his later film, *Knightriders* (1981), Romero noted, "[T]he underbelly in all my movies is the longing for a better world, for a higher plane of existence, for people to get together. I'm still singing these songs."[3] Comparing these two quotes about two films that bookend the first half of his feature filmography, what does it mean for Romero to "still [be] singing these songs" in the wake of the so-called "Reagan revolution" rather than the countercultural revolution teased back in 1968? Indeed, Romero had been a

member of Pittsburgh's counterculture milieu since the early 1960s, so it is not difficult to see his comments as waxing nostalgic for a bygone period. In this light, when we consider the first half of Romero's feature-film career (a period spanning from roughly 1968 to 1982), a small handful of films might particularly strike us as generic outliers—not just as non-zombie films but also as exceptions to Romero's career-long association with the horror genre. In this chapter, I will argue that these films—*There's Always Vanilla* (1971), *Jack's Wife* (1972), and *Knightriders*—constitute an unofficial trilogy, thematically united by the spirit of the 1960s youth counterculture, yet also bookend a decade that saw the counterculture's decline into near-irrelevance.

Although critics have previously discussed the counterculture themes in each of these films separately (e.g., Williams, Chambost, Phillips, Aronstein, Umland and Umland), they have seldom been discussed together as a *trilogy*. One possible reason might be the gap of nearly ten years separating *Jack's Wife* from *Knightriders*—but that explanation surely does not hold water when we consider the seventeen-year span of Romero's original zombie trilogy. Rather, by the early 1980s, the youth counterculture had largely vanished from the cultural scene—increasingly reframed by those on the political left (Romero included) as a lost moment of transformative potential and by those on the political right as a chaotic period to avoid resurrecting.[4] Although the zombie mythos that Romero spawned in 1968—that peak year of countercultural activity—has arisen again and again across the decades, the youth counterculture itself seems a dead and buried remnant of a very specific past. Moreover, unlike the conjunction of auteur and genre that has forever associated Romero with the zombie mythos, all three films in his counterculture trilogy were commercial flops. And so it is no surprise that most auteurist appreciations of Romero (especially in the US and UK) would focus so much more on a trilogy that succeeded than one that failed.

So what should we make of the fact that all three of Romero's unsuccessful attempts to develop a career beyond the horror genre also happen to be blatantly focused on counterculture themes? The obvious explanation, of course, is that his iconic debut feature had pigeonholed him as a horror filmmaker, whereas his counterculture-themed films appeared too late to be relevant. But I want to move beyond this simple explanation by thinking about Romero's counterculture trilogy as haunted by the specter of failure on both a thematic and extratextual level. That is, by revisiting how Romero depicts countercultural ideals and disillusionments, this chapter explores how

the industrial and thematic contours of the trilogy can be seen as not only reflections of growing political cynicism but as "self-fulfilling prophecies" of professional frustration.

There's Always Vanilla: Gambling on New Hollywood "Youthpix"

In his reading of so-called "hippie horror" films, Matt Becker argues that *Night of the Living Dead* reflects the sense of despair that grew within the counterculture after 1967, as the cresting wave of New Left politics increasingly gave way to "dropping out" of major causes and "selling out" to capitalism; he points to not only the film's apocalyptic "people-against-people" theme and its shockingly nihilistic ending, but also its intent as a commercially motivated production instead of an explicitly political statement.[5] Yet, as Tom Fallows argues, it is more apt to see *Night of the Living Dead*'s production process (e.g., flexibly shared creative roles and nonhierarchical decision-making) as consistent with the countercultural spirit of communalism and egalitarianism that Romero and his collaborators had been successfully using since the 1963 incorporation of their filmmaking collective, The Latent Image.[6] Even if there may have been an ideological tension between their production of commercials and industrial films versus the anti-capitalist messages in Romero's early films,[7] we might see The Latent Image as an example of the "hip businesses" that allowed some counterculture members to reconcile entrepreneurship with community engagement, creating what David Farber calls "right livelihoods."[8]

In this regard, even if Romero's first feature may have been made and distributed as an exploitation film, it premiered during the first wave of New Hollywood Cinema (1967 to 1970), a crossover period for countercultural themes at the nexus of exploitation fodder and Hollywood releases. Whereas the major studios' attempts to pander to a "hip," countercultural sensibility with films like *Skidoo* (1968) frequently fell flat with audiences, modestly budgeted films made by and for members of the post–World War II generation (or "youthpix," in trade press lingo) often had more success at cultivating a lucratively eager viewership. The New Hollywood filmmakers who cut their teeth at American International Pictures (AIP) are a case in point, especially given the outsized success of *Easy Rider* (1969), which was initially offered to AIP as another biker movie in the cycle begun by *The*

Wild Angels (1966) but was instead picked up for major studio distribution by Columbia Pictures.[9] Ironically, both AIP and Columbia had passed on distributing *Night of the Living Dead* because they objected to its pessimistic ending,[10] but as the major studios attempted to emulate AIP's youth-rebellion films during the 1969 to 1970 season, *Easy Rider*'s own pessimistic ending suddenly seemed more bankable.

Of course, *Night of the Living Dead* had proven financially successful in the more limited market that exploitation films typically called home.[11] It was successful enough to pave the way for the production of Romero's follow-up film, *There's Always Vanilla*, a more calculated attempt to ride that crossover potential by emulating *The Graduate* (1967) and *Goodbye, Columbus* (1969), two romantic comedies that had recently proved successful for Avco-Embassy and Paramount.[12] The fact that Avco-Embassy had previously specialized in distributing exploitation films before becoming a Paramount-backed production company must have made The Latent Image's gamble on a counterculture-themed romantic comedy seem a safe enough bet, especially amid similar dramedies about the travails of white, college-aged nonconformists (such as *Changes* [1969], *Hail, Hero!* [1969], *Hi, Mom!* [1970], and *The Magic Garden of Stanley Sweetheart* [1970], among others). After all, at the time *There's Always Vanilla* went into production in 1970, even the major studios were releasing a short-lived cycle of films about college campus uprisings (such as *Getting Straight*, *RPM*, *The Strawberry Statement*, and *Zabriskie Point* [all 1970]), which framed their narratives as "not about social dissent but about [the] crises of individual identity and male coming of age" that *The Graduate* had profitably delved into.[13]

There's Always Vanilla originated as a short script by Latent Image partner Rudolph Ricci, intended to showcase the acting skills of Ray Laine (who plays Chris). But as Ricci and Romero began expanding the script to feature length, Romero fought for more creative control, including making the story dark. Ricci quit the project mid-production, so Romero patched together the narrative by adding Chris's short monologues to the camera, reminiscing about his failed romance.[14] In my estimation, *Vanilla* bears a larger debt to *Goodbye, Columbus* than to *The Graduate*, which is important in understanding how Romero and Ricci attempted to position their film in the marketplace.

Goodbye, Columbus's protagonist Neil (Richard Benjamin) is an Army veteran who falls in love with Brenda (Ali MacGraw), the daughter of a *nouveau riche* Jewish family who nevertheless looks down on Neil, a working-class Jew

who is content working in a public library instead of aspiring to a middle-class profession. By contrast, in *There's Always Vanilla*, Chris is a Vietnam veteran who drifts back to Pittsburgh, where he falls in love with Lynn (Judith Ridley), an aspiring actor with a famous father. Whereas Neil's sarcastic skepticism about joining middle-class conformity recalls Ben (Dustin Hoffman) in *The Graduate*, Romero depicts Chris as already part of the counterculture through his bohemian lifestyle as a gigging studio musician and his casual attitudes toward sex and drugs. In both films, Neil and Chris begin their respective relationships by teasing Brenda and Lynn over a body part the female characters are insecure about, and later, Romero blatantly imitates the imagery and editing of *Goodbye, Columbus*'s lighthearted montage of Neil and Brenda getting to know each other in the park. Both films also center on the couples' ultimate incompatibility, with both Brenda and Lynn pressuring Neil and Chris to get real occupations. Meanwhile, both films conclude with a sex-related subplot; in *Goodbye, Columbus*, Brenda accidentally leaves her diaphragm where her parents can find it, leading to fears of banishment, whereas in *There's Always Vanilla*, Lynn seeks an illegal abortion after Chris refuses to start a family with her.

For Tony Williams, Romero's 1971 film depicts two lovers whose skepticism about conformity and commercialism seemingly aligns them with countercultural values but who still fall back on social illusions inherited from mass media and their parents' values—from Lynn's eventual decision to give up acting and become a housewife to Chris's retreat home, where his father Roger (Roger McGovern) counsels him that "there's always vanilla" (as in a "straight" life to fall back on). Williams concludes that their inability to reconcile romance with an alternative lifestyle reflects the late counterculture's inability to truly transform a patriarchal-capitalist society.[15]

This extends to Romero's self-reflexive critique of The Latent Image's commercial endeavors, as represented by the ongoing production of a "Bold Gold" beer commercial within the film. The Latent Image team, in fact, had won an award back in 1964 for a Duke Beer commercial, so the fact that various members of the company cameo in these scenes is surely no coincidence.[16] Although cast as a spokesmodel, Lynn tells the commercial's director Dorian (Richard Ricci) that she thinks advertising is a lie that intrudes on people's lives, to which he offers the Marshall McLuhanesque response that ads provide people with brief utopian moments so the "communication people" will save the world by "building bridges between people." Yet Lynn's take on advertising

is soon borne out in a very New Hollywood-inspired sequence in which Romero increasingly interrupts a tender nude scene between Chris and Lynn with a flash-forward to Lynn on the set of the commercial, where her nudity is now exploited to sell beer. Romero includes a brief flash of his own name on the clapperboard in this scene, suggesting his discomfort with The Latent Image's work-for-hire, as does the fact that we see the finished commercial playing on TV during the final scene of Lynn with her new family (fig. 1.1). The ad's narration, "There's always a little more life available to the man who thinks bold, acts bold," ironically recalls the previous scene of Roger telling Chris that "there's always vanilla," especially in light of how Roger is not a loyal family man but rather a sleazy womanizer. Moreover, the film-within-the-film scenes of the Bold Gold production recall similar scenes of TV commercials being filmed in *The Trip* (1967), one of Roger Corman's other formative contributions to AIP's counterculture cycle, in which a disillusioned commercial director (Peter Fonda)—representing Corman himself—takes LSD in order to help reevaluate his personal and professional life.[17]

As Fallows notes, Romero increasingly asserted his authorship during the production of *There's Always Vanilla*, using *Night of the Living Dead*'s financial success as leverage, and he thus turned away from the countercultural ethos of The Latent Image's nonhierarchical, collaborative working methods at a moment when the first wave of New Hollywood cinema promoted the figure of the homegrown US auteur.[18] So when Chris, in his opening monologue, compares his failed romance with "The Ultimate Machine"—a guerilla art installation that earns divisive comments from various passersby about its countercultural intent—we might also interpret the machine's initial appearance during the film's opening credits as symbolizing Romero's failing relationship with his past collaborators as he branched out on his own.

Indeed, by the film's end, Chris has not only walked out on Lynn but also on a middle-class job at an ad agency where his "square" bosses asked him to use his experience as a Vietnam veteran to help recruit young men into the army. Just before he quits, Chris looks out the window and sees "The Ultimate Machine" on the sidewalk below. Given that Chris has already compared the machine to his relationship with Lynn (as if implying that people get lost when searching for too many different answers), the machine's reappearance at this narrative moment suggests how Romero himself may have been chafing at the idea of a professional career rooted in churning out exploitative scenes of sex and violence.

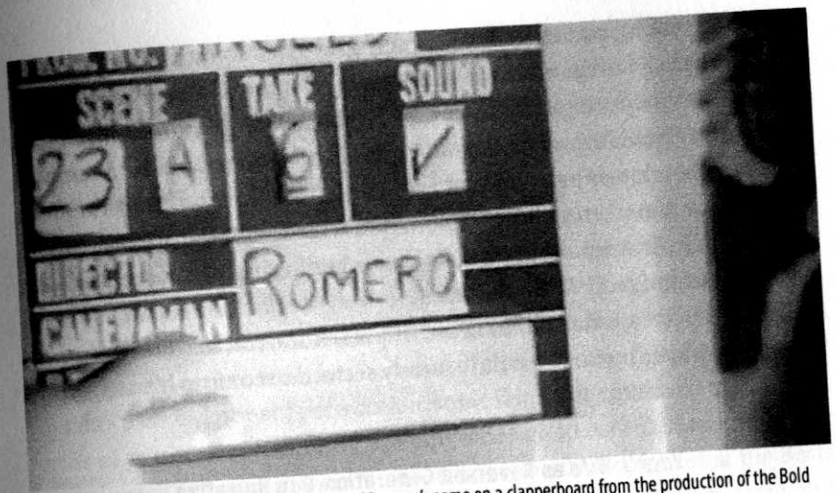

Fig. 1.1. *There's Always Vanilla*: Intrusive flash cut of Romero's name on a clapperboard from the production of the Bold Gold beer commercial.

Although completed in 1971, *There's Always Vanilla* did not find major studio distribution and remained shelved until Cambist Films, a company specializing in sexploitation films, picked it up in 1972. The previous year, Cambist had hired John G. Avildsen to direct the sex comedy *Cry Uncle!* (1971) following the success of Avildsen's *Joe* (1970) for Cannon Films.[19] *Joe*'s generation-gap narrative had been initially marketed to a youth audience, but its story about a bigoted blue-collar worker (Peter Boyle) and a white-collar executive (Dennis Patrick) striking an unlikely friendship through their shared hatred of the youth counterculture also struck a chord with Nixon-era reactionaries.[20] Perhaps it is no surprise that Cambist hoped *There's Always Vanilla* would be the box-office hit that *Joe* had been for Cannon, given that Romero's subplot about Roger's use of his son's counterculture connections for access to sex and drugs strongly echoes how *Joe*'s middle-aged protagonists infiltrate a hippie pad and experiment with cannabis and free love.

Unfortunately, the market for these "youthpix" had significantly contracted by 1971, so *There's Always Vanilla* appeared slightly too late, and in too limited a distribution, to make the desired splash. Of course, films with countercultural appeal could still prove profitable, but typically, those few that did rarely received crossover distribution by major companies; the 1973 reissue of *Billy Jack* (1971), for instance, would prove that countercultural audiences still existed, albeit reachable through less traditional distribution strategies.[21]

Rather, hip young audiences increasingly gravitated to the midnight movie circuit, where a reissue of *Night of the Living Dead* was already developing a cult audience, paving the way for midnight-movie specialist Libra Films to later distribute Romero's *Martin* (1977). Meanwhile, Cambist attempted to recoup their losses in a different way by retitling *There's Always Vanilla* as *The Affair* and marketing it as sexploitation—the same strategy that Jack H. Harris Enterprises would use a year later when trying to salvage Romero's subsequent film, *Jack's Wife*. If *There's Always Vanilla*'s critique of commercially motivated spectacle had been, in part, Romero's self-critique of his previous work, its box-office failure merely seemed to confirm his misgivings.

Jack's Wife as Reversed Generation-Gap Narrative

Because *Jack's Wife* is centered on a suburban housewife whose life spirals downward as she begins dabbling in witchcraft, the 1972 film is often described as a horror film, but it arguably occupies as much (if not more) generic territory with other counterculture films. After all, it does not feature a straightforward "horror" sequence (a nightmare about a monstrous masked intruder within her home) until nearly halfway through its duration, and more of its overall runtime is devoted to generation-gap themes. Rather than the "hip," disjunctive editing that runs throughout *There's Always Vanilla* as a marker of its youthful style, Romero instead saves these techniques for the nightmare sequences in *Jack's Wife*, notably in the film's opening, which conveys Joan's sense of entrapment as a middle-class suburban housewife and mother. But while *Vanilla*'s young protagonists try (and fail) to escape their socially prescribed roles through alternative ways of living, Joan experiments (for better or worse) with esoteric religion and extramarital sex as attempts to reclaim her independence.[22]

If *There's Always Vanilla* bears notable similarities to *Goodbye, Columbus*, *Jack's Wife* leans more heavily on the influence of *The Graduate*. But if *The Graduate* depicts Ben as a sympathetic protagonist and Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft) as the predatory older woman, *Jack's Wife* largely inverts these roles, not unlike the reversed generation gap narrative in *Joe*. In both *The Graduate* and *Jack's Wife*, a bored, sexually frustrated housewife begins an affair with a precocious postgraduate, but in the 1972 film, Joan gains our sympathy because her whole life seems preplanned for her, much like Ben

at the start of *The Graduate*. Meanwhile, the younger man, Greg, is a cocky and sexually aggressive hipster who is already sleeping with Joan's daughter, Nikki (Joedda McClain). The fact that Ray Laine plays Greg—in a virtual reprise of his character from *There's Always Vanilla*—merely helps cement the connection between Romero's two films.

Romero has described *Jack's Wife* as his attempt at a "women's lib" film,[23] and significant shades of Betty Friedan's path-breaking book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) come through in Romero's critique of the repressive gender roles available for women within middle-class domesticity. Moreover, much as second-wave feminists "reclaimed" the witch as a figure representing women's past and present persecution, some feminists embraced matriarchal forms of spirituality such as Wicca and other goddess-based religions (see Janice Loreck's chapter in this volume for more on this topic). From the Beats to the hippies, the youth counterculture had explored various Eastern and esoteric belief systems—hence Joan's ease in finding magical spell ingredients at a hippie-run organic food store, a scene set to Donovan's 1966 song "Season of the Witch." So even as the film depicts witchcraft as a quotidian part of the counterculture milieu, the related subplot about her affair with Greg evinces a more feminist ethos. Part of second-wave feminism's late-1960s divergence from the larger counterculture centered on how men had so often used the rhetoric of "free love" and "sexual liberation" to justify easy access to casual sex and had paid far less attention to sexual fulfillment on women's terms (see Gerhard; Lemke-Santagelo). *Jack's Wife* takes up this idea by first depicting Joan's sexual frustration when she overhears Greg and Nikki having sex in the next room and then Greg's callous indifference when Nikki runs away from home.

Confronting him in his empty college classroom, Joan is taken aback by Greg's nonchalant attitude toward casual sex. He replies, "Come on, don't give me that shocked routine, lady. I mean, isn't that the image you have of all us kids? I'm just living up to the image." As Joan's temper flares, Greg sarcastically asserts that "that's the way things are today," repeatedly calling her "Mrs. Robinson" as he teases her that he is now sexually available if she is interested. Although Joan soon makes a love spell and takes him up on his offer of casual sex, it is never confirmed whether the spell had any magical effect or if it was simply because she phoned him. In any case, Greg repeats his sarcastic allusion to "Mrs. Robinson" even after they begin the affair when she begs him not to mock her interest in witchcraft—to which

he replies that she is just saying, "[T]he devil made me do it" as a "cop-out" for following her sexual desires.

Despite how repellent he is, Greg's accusation is very close to Romero's own take on Joan, whom Romero describes as refusing to recognize the extent of her existing autonomy and instead continuing to assert her victimhood as a sort of false consciousness.[24] That pessimistic take leads Tony Williams to describe the film's circular narrative as Joan simply swapping one form of oppression for another rather than truly liberating herself.[25] The film ends, for example, with Joan accidentally shooting her husband (Bill Thunhurst) after mistaking him for a monstrous intruder—but even after his death, Joan's neighbors still refer to her as merely "Jack's wife." Moreover, these scenes are intercut with Joan's initiation into a coven, where a red rope around her neck alludes back to the opening nightmare sequence in which her psychiatrist and husband treated her like a leashed dog. Christophe Chambost, however, offers a more optimistic reading of the film, since Joan and the other witches have nevertheless reconstructed their traditional social identities by creating enough adaptive space to survive as a sort of occult underground within the patriarchal suburbs.[26]

This very qualified sense of transformation is, perhaps, where Greg's cynicism and Romero's feminism seem to overlap. Indeed, the counterculture's growing sense of political disillusionment was fueled by suspicions that having the will to change the world was not enough to produce meaningful change; take, for instance, the October 1967 March on the Pentagon, which was touted as a collective attempt to "exorcize" and physically "levitate" the home of the US war machine.[27] Indeed, an early scene in *Jack's Wife* centers on whether magical practices like witchcraft or voodoo are true examples of exerting one's will upon others or whether such practices produce little more than psychosomatic effects in believers. To demonstrate his skepticism of the supernatural, Greg offers Joan's older friend Shirley (Ann Muffly) a cigarette he claims is filled with cannabis (fig. 1.2). Now believing herself to be stoned instead of simply drunk, Shirley begins confessing her fears about aging, goaded on by Greg's desire to humiliate a "silly, flapped-out old lady" who is "exactly what makes this country ugly." Greg's countercultural hostility to the older, more conservative generation is apparent here, but perhaps so, too, is Romero's opinion that anyone who consistently paints herself as an "Establishment victim" will fail to break free of society's mind games.

Fig. 1.2. *Jack's Wife*: Generation-gap conflicts flare as Greg taunts Shirley's suggestibility while Joan attempts to intervene.

Moreover, when Greg acidly refers to Joan as "Mrs. Robinson," the allusion to *The Graduate* suggests Romero's own resentment over how *There's Always Vanilla* seemingly missed the New Hollywood/youthpix crossover moment for which it was intended. For as much as Greg sarcastically remarks that he's just "living to the image" that others have of him, *Jack's Wife* represents Romero doubling down on his attempt to make a countercultural "message" film, albeit hedging his bet by couching its generation-gap narrative and feminist message within some trappings of the horror genre. However, despite this concession to the horror thrills that had proved so successful with *Night of the Living Dead*, *Jack's Wife* was to be Romero's second flop in a row. Consequently, Russ Steiner and John Russo, Romero's original partners in The Latent Image, left the company, and Romero's next film, *The Crazies* (1973), found him retreating into genre material intended for the exploitation market. When it, too, underperformed, Romero brought aboard a new producer, Richard Rubinstein, and rebranded The Latent Image as Laurel Entertainment, a move that Fallows describes as Romero intentionally distancing himself from his previous failures.[28]

Knightriders: The Counterculture as Reagan-Era Anachronism

Flash-forward to *Knightriders*, a film whose countercultural vibe feels almost as anachronistic in 1981 as the Arthurian troupe at its center. When Sam Arkoff, president of AIP, passed on Romero's idea for a gritty, realistic retelling of the King Arthur legend, Romero joked that Arkoff would probably produce it if the knights were on motorcycles set to rock music. Although this was a sarcastic dig at AIP's early biker films like *The Wild Angels*, Romero soon came around to the concept by framing them as medieval reenactors like the Society for Creative Anachronism.[29] After *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) became a box-office hit, Romero did what he had previously done with *There's Always Vanilla*: that is, he attempted to leverage the zombie film's success in order to expand into other creative directions, but unfortunately, with similarly dismal results. Romero and others have blamed *Knightriders*' box-office failure on a number of factors: its long runtime, the distributor's timid release pattern, and competition from the major studio release *Excalibur* (1981).[30] But I would argue that the film's return to Romero's counterculture themes was what made it seem so out of sync during the early Reagan years.

At first glance, *Knightriders* has no shortage of elements familiar from earlier counterculture films, such as its romanticized depiction of the troupe as a demographically diverse group of communards living close to nature, as well as the animosity they face from local police and townspeople. Several of the supporting characters, such as Bagman (Don Berry) and Merlin (Brother Blue), are explicitly identified as former hippies/activists, and they remain among the troupe's most loyal adherents to King Billy's (Ed Harris) vision of ideological purity. Moreover, the film's countercultural themes come into sharp focus during the troupe's fireside debates about adhering to a noble idea of impoverished bohemianism versus yielding to pragmatic concerns by signing the show with well-connected promoters.

It is, however, worth noting how the idea of Camelot plays in here alongside the phenomenon of Renaissance fairs as incubators for the 1960s counterculture. In the wake of the November 1963 Kennedy assassination, Jackie Kennedy began alluding to the 1960 Broadway musical *Camelot* to describe the Kennedy White House as an idyllic "Camelot" era, shattered by the national trauma heralding the decade's further turmoil. Although the musical had premiered in 1960, by the time Hollywood brought it to the screen in 1967, its story of King Arthur (Richard Harris) fending off challenges from his

usurper son Mordred (David Hemmings) felt out of touch with the national mood. As Susan Aronstein argues, the film's message of blaming rebellious youth for the fall of Camelot was an unpopular one in the same year that films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Graduate* profitably tapped into the younger generation's frustration with the status quo.[31]

Nevertheless, romanticized ideas about the medieval era held a particular fascination for the young generation in other ways. Rachel Lee Rubin explains that the very first Renaissance Pleasure Faire was held in 1963 as a fundraiser for a counterculture radio station based in Laurel Canyon, the heart of California's folk-music scene. The ubiquitous folk music and "fancy" period costumes at Renaissance fairs increasingly influenced countercultural trends in music and attire. The *Faire Free Press*, a mimeographed publication distributed at the fairs, also evolved into the *Los Angeles Free Press*, the area's most significant underground newspaper. Associations between Renaissance fairs and the counterculture became so widespread that, by the late 1960s, local authorities increasingly denied them operating permits, describing the fairs as little more than "hippie happenings" promoting communism, homosexuality, and drug use. By 1972, Renaissance fairs attempted to shed this image by rebranding themselves as "educational" living history events, though it is no coincidence that this family-friendly rebranding happened when the fairs consolidated into a profit-motivated, nationally touring circuit[32]—precisely the kind of capitalist cooptation that *Knightriders* rails against.

These traits led Robin Wood to disparage *Knightriders* as "another *Alice's Restaurant* [1969], ten years too late . . . the typical liberal US movie, with something nice to say about every minority group, some pious platitudes about the corrupting power of commercialism, and a lament for the failure of a counterculture that couldn't possibly succeed."[33] Coming from one of Romero's earliest critical champions, Wood's dismissal of the film as insufficiently radical may seem surprising, but it is arguably rooted in Wood's skepticism toward Camelot, built as a world where romantic idealism and skilled labor provide a home for everyone willing to live by Billy's code of chivalry. After all, the film's central conflict asks whether "selling out" to the entertainment industry is actually a bigger threat than rigid adherence to one man's cult-like vision. As Billy himself observes, the "sucker-headed American driftwood . . . can't tell the difference between me and Jim Jones, or Charles Manson, or the Great Wallenda . . . [or] Evel Knievel." That confusion, it seems, even extended to some of the film's critics!

In press interviews, Romero repeatedly declared that his characters were "athletes, not Hell's Angels," even if some in the industry might see it as a vehicular mayhem movie like *Death Race 2000* (1975), *Cannonball* (1976), or *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977).[34] After all, the exploitation film market had shifted from biker films to car crash films after the early 1970s, and the poster design for *Knightriders* even evokes the posters for postapocalyptic-themed sports movies like *Rollerball* (1975), *Death Race 2000*, and *Deathsport* (1978). Given these various intertexts (both intended and not), I disagree with Fallows's assessment that *Knightriders* "abandoned genre completely,"[35] especially if we consider that, by the late 1960s, counterculture-themed youthpix had also become a recognizable genre in their own right. Indeed, multiple reviewers[36] recognized those connections, and critical comparisons to *Easy Rider* were far more numerous than references to earlier biker movies. After all, the troupe's depiction as noble outsiders living by their own code differentiates them from the unwanted intrusions of the idiotic, hedonistic bikers represented by both the chaotic gang in *Dawn of the Dead* and the boorish townies who challenge the Knightriders. Even when Morgan (Tom Savini) and his followers leave in search of commercial success, it is their discomfort with wild, rock 'n' roll excesses—those elements that would be right at home in a typical biker movie—that eventually leads them back to King Billy.

Hence, *Knightriders* has been described as a "mature revision" of *Easy Rider* by trading a pair of white male outlaws for a more inclusive community of benign nonconformists.[37] For instance, in *Easy Rider*, Wyatt is repeatedly tempted to join a quiet, communal lifestyle, but the pursuit of money and thrills leads him down a road to nowhere. In *Knightriders*, however, Billy's death in a collision with a semi-truck, shortly after ceding his crown to Morgan, does not necessarily spell the end for the troupe. Rather than simply a lament over the counterculture's failure, *Knightriders* ends on a cautiously optimistic note. I find it closer to Joan's qualified sense of self-transformation at the end of *Jack's Wife* than, say, *Martin*'s (John Amplas) abruptly violent demise when his mythic vampire fantasy is shattered at Cuda's (Lincoln Maazel) hands. The troupe may well continue to face both internal and external threats to its long-term survival, but that was true of most intentional communities arising from or inspired by the 1960s counterculture.[38]

Many critics, past and present, have also read *Knightriders* as an autobiographical allegory for Romero's regional independence from the mainstream Hollywood studios at a time when he had amassed a cult reputation of his own. Some read Billy as a self-aggrandizing symbol of Romero's uncorrupted, auteurist vision and his desire for veneration.[39] Others saw Billy's demise as indicative of Romero's ambivalence about his growing reputation as an auteur, with Billy's excesses serving as Romero's self-criticism of his own stubborn idealism.[40] However, *Knightriders* was coproduced by United Artists at a time when Richard Rubinstein was already working behind the scenes to secure a financial partnership between Laurel and Warner Bros. Hence, Fallows argues that the troupe itself might represent Romero's nostalgia for the more egalitarian working methods of The Latent Image, whereas Morgan's interest in material pursuits over spiritual ones would represent Rubinstein's focus on the financial bottom line. According to this reading, then, Billy's dogmatic refusal to compromise suggests Romero's desire to recontextualize himself as a countercultural auteur at a moment when Laurel was already flirting with the Hollywood studios.[41]

If Romero had built his career by creating a mythos in his zombie films, his efforts to deconstruct popular myths in films like *Jack's Wife*, *Martin*, and *Knightriders* often proved less popular with audiences.[42] Indeed, Stephen King's cameo as one of the slovenly, bloodthirsty spectators in *Knightriders* hints at Romero's growing frustration with the public's resistance to follow him beyond the gory excesses of the horror genre (fig. 1.3). Likewise, Billy wants to believe in the supernatural power of "destiny," but Merlin tells him that probability is more likely leading him toward his demise[43]—a conversation that ironically foreshadows how Billy's fate represents another self-fulfilling prophecy of professional failure for Romero. Produced shortly after United Artists' financially disastrous investment in *Heaven's Gate* (1980), *Knightriders*' box-office flop seemed further evidence that New Hollywood auteurism needed to be reined in, and consequently, as Fallows notes, Romero was given far less creative and budgetary control on subsequent films. For the remainder of his career, he would be consigned to the horror genre, starting, ironically, with the Stephen King adaptation, *Creepshow* (1982).[44] Even *Jack's Wife* was rechristened as a horror film when reissued on home video as "*Season of the Witch*" the very same year that *Knightriders* flopped—yet another stake through the heart of Romero's counterculture trilogy.

By contrast, the fact that Hollywood retold the Arthurian legend as a grandiose, high-concept affair in *Excalibur* only months before *Knightriders* was released suggests how far the national mood had shifted since the 1967 film adaptation of *Camelot*. With Ronald Reagan swept into the presidency

on promises of a return to traditional values and neoliberal economics, the counterculture now served as little more than a straw person in the New Right's resurgent "culture wars." Meanwhile, mainstream Hollywood movies turned back toward traditional genre conventions and reassuringly clear-cut moral oppositions, shifting away from the antiheroes and flawed protagonists (like King Billy) who populated New Hollywood cinema.[45]

Nevertheless, several critics have argued that Billy's personal conservatism and delusional commitment to an "authoritarian utopia" make him seem uncomfortably reminiscent of Reagan and his followers, especially the so-called "Reagan Democrats" who gave up their former leftist ideals and elected a reactionary demagogue.[46] For example, *Knightriders* was compared to the previous year's Clint Eastwood film, *Bronco Billy* (1980), another film about an overzealous Billy (Eastwood) leading a ragtag band of touring anachronists. But even if Eastwood's band of outsiders might all be ex-convicts who have reinvented themselves as performers in a failing Wild West show, *his* Billy rails against Vietnam deserters, entitled women, and unpatriotic citizens—the very sort of outcasts who populate Romero's film. Eastwood's Billy also ends the film unambiguously victorious: reuniting with his love interest, financially reviving the show, and telling the kids in the show's audience to embrace clean health, good morals, and deference to parental authority—a much clearer endorsement of Reaganite values than the bittersweet ending of *Knightriders*. After all, as Ray St. Louis, a longtime performer in Renaissance fairs, recalled, "To many, the Renaissance festivals looked like a good place to hide and ride out the eighties and Ronald Reagan."[47]

In this regard, the melancholic conclusion of George Romero's counterculture trilogy may, indeed, long for an era when radical social transformation still seemed possible—a nostalgia that many others of his generation also held—but his repeated failures to "sing those songs" in a generic language that audiences wanted to hear testifies to Romero's uniquely interwoven experiences of political and professional disillusionment. Emulating several cycles from the heady early years of New Hollywood cinema, *There's Always Vanilla* represents a mistimed and somewhat derivative attempt to capitalize on youthpix about unconventional romance and rebellion against "adult" responsibilities. By contrast, *Jack's Wife* suggests Romero's measured attempt to recalibrate generational anxieties by nesting them within more specific contexts: the reformist strand of second-wave feminism and the generic territory of the occult film. Neither film, however, resonated strongly with a

Fig. 1.3. *Knightriders*: Stephen King's cameo as the slovenly "Hoagie Man" presages Romero's future horror collaborations.

counterculturally minded audience—not least because of each one's delayed and limited distribution strategy. Although Romero tried to parlay *Dawn of the Dead*'s success into a ready-made audience for *Knightriders*, viewers at the opposite end of the so-called "'Me' Decade" largely dismissed his nostalgic paean to communal outsiderhood as either an overwrought pipe dream or a dangerous ode to fanaticism. As a director so closely associated with the horror genre (and the zombie subgenre in particular), Romero's early and mid-career efforts to attire his countercultural principles in different generic guises repeatedly ran up against wary distributors and less-than-enthused audiences. As the political mood of the sixties increasingly became seen as a thing of the past, so, too, did Romero's hopes to expand his storytelling opportunities in the generation to come.

Notes

1. Qtd. in Gagne, *The Zombies*, 38.
2. Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation*, 2–3.
3. Qtd. in Yakir, "Knight," 71.
4. Schulman, *The Seventies*, 14–20, 117, 241–46.
5. Becker, "Point of Little Hope," 43, 50–52.
6. Fallows, *George*, 28–34.
7. Fallows, *George*, 38.
8. Farber, "Building," 3.
9. Nystrom, *Hard Hats*, 21–28; Lewis, *Road Trip*, 41–51, 111–14.

10. Fallows, *George*, 34–36.
11. Heffernan, *Ghouls*, 204–14.
12. Yakir, "Knight," 71; Fallows, *George*, 39–41.
13. Bodroghkozy, "Reel Revolutionaries," 39–42.
14. Williams, *Knight*, 39.
15. Williams, *Knight*, 38–43, 51.
16. Fallows, *George*, 29.
17. Heffernan, "No Parents."
18. Fallows, *George*, 40.
19. Fallows, "More," 89; Fallows, *George*, 46.
20. Nystrom, *Hard Hats*, 31–35.
21. Wyatt, "From Roadshowing," 74–75.
22. Williams, *Knight*, 51–52, 61.
23. Qtd. in Keough, "Interview," 177.
24. "The fact is that every forward motion in the film is caused by [Joan] . . . yet she perceives the world as making everything happen to her. In fact, she can't do any of it without being able to say, 'The Devil made me do it!' which at once is the plight of womanhood, or any minority . . . it's very hard to perceive yourself as the cause of something that might make it better" (Romero, qtd. in Gagne, *The Zombies*, 49).
25. Williams, *Knight*, 61–64.
26. Chambost, "Trouble Every Day," 131, 133, 137.
27. Becker, "Point of Little Hope," 46.
28. Fallows, *George*, 45, 47, 51, 56–57.
29. Gagne, *The Zombies*, 103; Yakir, "Knight," 71–72; Seligson, "George Romero," 84.
30. Gagne, *The Zombies*, 117–19.
31. Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights*, 82, 89–91.
32. Rubin, *Well Met*, 28, 42–44, 49–51, 57, 67, 72–73.
33. Wood, *Hollywood*, 168–69.
34. Yakir, "Knight," 69, 71; Seligson, "George Romero," 84. Romero did, however, hire car movie veteran Hal Needham's company Stunts Unlimited for the jousting scenes.
35. Fallows, *George*, 83.
36. See, for instance, Corliss, "Lights!," 54.
37. Umland and Umland, *Use of Arthurian Legend*, 154–55.
38. Also see Gagne, *The Zombies*, 108; Williams, *Knight*, 106–8, 119; Blanch, "Romero's Knightriders," 66; Phillips, 70–71; Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights*, 141–42; Harty, 105.
39. Gagne, *The Zombies*, 108; Harvey, "Overdose," 31.
40. Sikov, 32; Blanch, "Romero's Knightriders," 64; Williams, *George*, 106–19.
41. Fallows, *George*, 99, 101, 102–4.
42. Phillips, *Dark Directions*, 59.
43. Williams, *Knight*, 111, 113–14.
44. Fallows, *George*, 109, 118–20, 124.
45. Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights*, 118, 121, 134, 142–43.
46. Harvey, "Overdose," 31; Phillips, *Dark Directions*, 67–68.
47. Qtd. in Rubin, *Well Met*, 76.

Chapter 2

FROM PITTSBURGH TO PENNSYLTUCKY

Romero's Pennsylvania Through the Lens of Critical Regionalism

Julie Assouly

In *The Crazies* (1973), sequences of militia resistance to government coercion are accompanied throughout the film by military drumming, recalling the Keystone State's revolutionary past. If the military trope is omnipresent in Romero's films, soldiers are never the solution to the domestic outbreaks either in this film or in the original *Living Dead* trilogy; resistance (to government and zombies alike) prevails and takes on the form of small groups. The Evans City battlefield, where civilians die from both US army fire and the toxic spillage of "Trixie" (a fictional Agent Orange?), could evoke the contemporary Vietnam War, and the film has repeatedly been analyzed in this light.[1] But militia resistance is ingrained in the state's historical and cultural identity, and the combination of green prairies with nineteenth-century military music forcefully conjures up images of the American Revolution. It is also interesting to underline that the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant was built in 1969, adding the threat of nuclear contagion to the Pennsylvania fantasy world that Romero helped re-create; as a matter of fact, the movie anticipates the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island of 1979 by only six years.

The three original *Living Dead* films equally dwell on Pennsylvania's topography and its social and cultural history. *Night of the Living Dead* (1969) has