

00:00:00

EERIE HEAVY ECHO

I can't imagine a deader shot to start a movie about the undead, a shot more drained of life, urgency, and momentum. The black-and-white photography will carve like a knife later, but here it's gray-and-gray, a dreary murk familiar to anyone who grew up in middle America. This shot was filmed in November 1967 on vertiginous Franklin Road outside Evans City, Pennsylvania, seven hundred miles due east—only one degree of latitude lower—from my hometown of Fairfield, Iowa.

From this shot, the two towns might as well be one: a dirt road (today paved) winding along a nondescript hill, a fungal growth of timber (today knotty woods), fence posts and telephone poles planted at apparent random, and a couple houses in the distance, the sort of dilapidated rural homes I knew so well as a kid. Lawns sun-fried and acid-burned by dog piss. The guilty dogs bony, skulking, and leashless. Vehicle carcasses besmirching driveways.

In other words, a trap—I knew it even back then. Such traps tended to relax briefly after high school graduation, your best opportunity of escape, or else you might never. Even us escapees never truly got away. Our towns ghost about in our nightmares, and the only exorcisms available are movies like this.

“It is an ordinary dusk of normal quiet and shadow.” That's how this shot is described in *Night of the Living Dead's* screenplay. It's accurate. It's also ugly. Given the eye and instincts of the film's twenty-seven-year-old director, George A. Romero, I'm tempted to say the ugliness is on purpose. Actually, I'll just say it: It's on purpose. That it's also the widest shot in the whole movie provides us a user manual on how to interpret the rest of the film. *Night* is going to begin *wide* in every sense of the word—broad, banal, boring—before paring down its picture of America like a butcher.

By the film's final shot, there will be nothing left but bones.

Injecting caffeine into this oatmeal opening is a musical track. It begins with the film's fade-in, if not a shade before. It's really good. All the music in the movie is really good, and more surprising when you learn that it came from a can. Romero and his cohort cashed in every favor possible to shoot their flick for \$60,000 and finish it at a total of \$114,000 (breaking down at \$14,000 for preproduction, \$20,000 for actors, \$60,000 for production, \$20,000 for postproduction). It's a steal for a 35mm feature even in the 1960s. Sadly, their considerable artist circle did not include a composer who happened to have their own orchestra.

The score is instead drawn from prepurchased library cues, the old-timey version of the musical stingers that come prepackaged with today's video-editing software. Back in 1997, when editing a 16mm student film at the University of Iowa, I used library cues drawn from dozens of 33¹/₃ albums in nondescript yellow sleeves. There was no artifice to the track titles; they used pure description to assist the search efforts of radio producers and industrial filmmakers. But there were diamonds in all that rough; I still recall the winsome tune of a needle drop with the vapid title of "Guitar Melody."

The song we hear over *Night's* first shot is "Eerie Heavy Echo." Thanks to Jim Cirronella's herculean efforts in reconstructing the film's soundtrack for a 2010 album called *They Won't Stay Dead!*, we know a hell of a lot more about the film's music than we used to. This cue, also known as L-1204 (the "L" stands for "Light"), attributed to Spencer Moore at least a decade before *Night*, came from the Capitol Library Services Hi-"Q" Series (which, the center label of each LP assures us, can be played using "either standard or microgroove stylus"). I use "attributed" on purpose: Some of the Capitol "composers" were the producers who owned or commissioned the cues.

Scot W. Holton, producer of the film's first (if only partial) soundtrack release on Varèse Sarabande in 1982, notes that, if you perk up your ears (and, I'll add, lower your standards), you'll hear several of *Night's* cues in forgotten drive-in fare like *The Hideous Sun Demon* (1958), *Terror from the Year 5,000* (1958), and *Teenagers from Outer Space* (1959). Once you're deep into this shit, hearing a *Night* cue in a different film sparks a similar glee to spotting an actor doing a bit part before they were famous.

"Eerie Heavy Echo" begins with eleven notes blasted in syncopation by strings and brass before trailing off into what, I admit, can only be described as an eerie heavy echo. Listened to apart from the film, the track evokes aliens with big plastic heads struggling in ungainly foam suits. Romero was arguably the first director to pair this sort of sci-fi warbling with a visual image too dull for a "Visit Evans City" postcard.

"If the boogie man had a ghetto-blasta," Romero writes in the Varèse Sarabande liner notes, "this was the stuff he'd boogie to."

The effect of *that* music plus *this* image is magic. It's also a microcosm of the film writ large: mundanity tweaked just enough to be unsettling. A car appears on the dirt road at 00:01, unless you're watching a shitty copy of the film, which you probably are, considering that *Night* has been released on home media over *one thousand times*, according to Geoff Turner, who monitors this data for his *Night of the Living Tapes* project. Turner tracks about \$1,000 worth of

Night physical media bought each month on eBay, from Blu-ray, DVD, and VHS to the esoteric formats of LaserDisc, Betamax, Video8, PC CD-ROM, Video 2000, VHD, Betacam SP, and Super 8. (As a kid, I found an 8mm copy at a local secondhand store called the Bargain Box, six 8mm reels inside a wilted box that puzzlingly featured no zombies, only crude sketches of stars like John Wayne and Bette Davis.)

As Romero scholar Adam Charles Hart writes, “*Night* is very possibly the most watched horror film ever made.” Which means you might not notice the car until 00:06. If that’s the case, buy a better copy. Ideally, the 2018 Criterion edition, pristinely restored by the Museum of Modern Art and the George Lucas Family Foundation.

The car in question is a brand-new two-door 1967 Pontiac LeMans, linden green in actuality with black vinyl roof and interiors. The bland vehicle fits right into the weaponized bland-ness of the image. The LeMans takes its sweet-ass time crawling along Franklin Road. The shot lasts thirty-six seconds, making it the single longest take in the film. It’s interminable. Brilliant, too. With “Eerie Heavy Echo” along for the ride, the LeMans’s slow progress is chilling in the way a stray dog walking toward you is chilling.

In America, few things are more ominous than an unknown car rolling your way. It very well might contain news of a death, if not death itself. No one knows this like country folk, who see vehicles approach from miles off by clouds of dirt-road dust. If one defines “country” by Hollywood standards (i.e., not L.A. or New York), *Night* is our most famous country blockbuster. It wasn’t made by a “system.” It was made by flesh-and-blood outsiders, an unmitigated piece of Americana.

The film *is* America. For better and for worse.