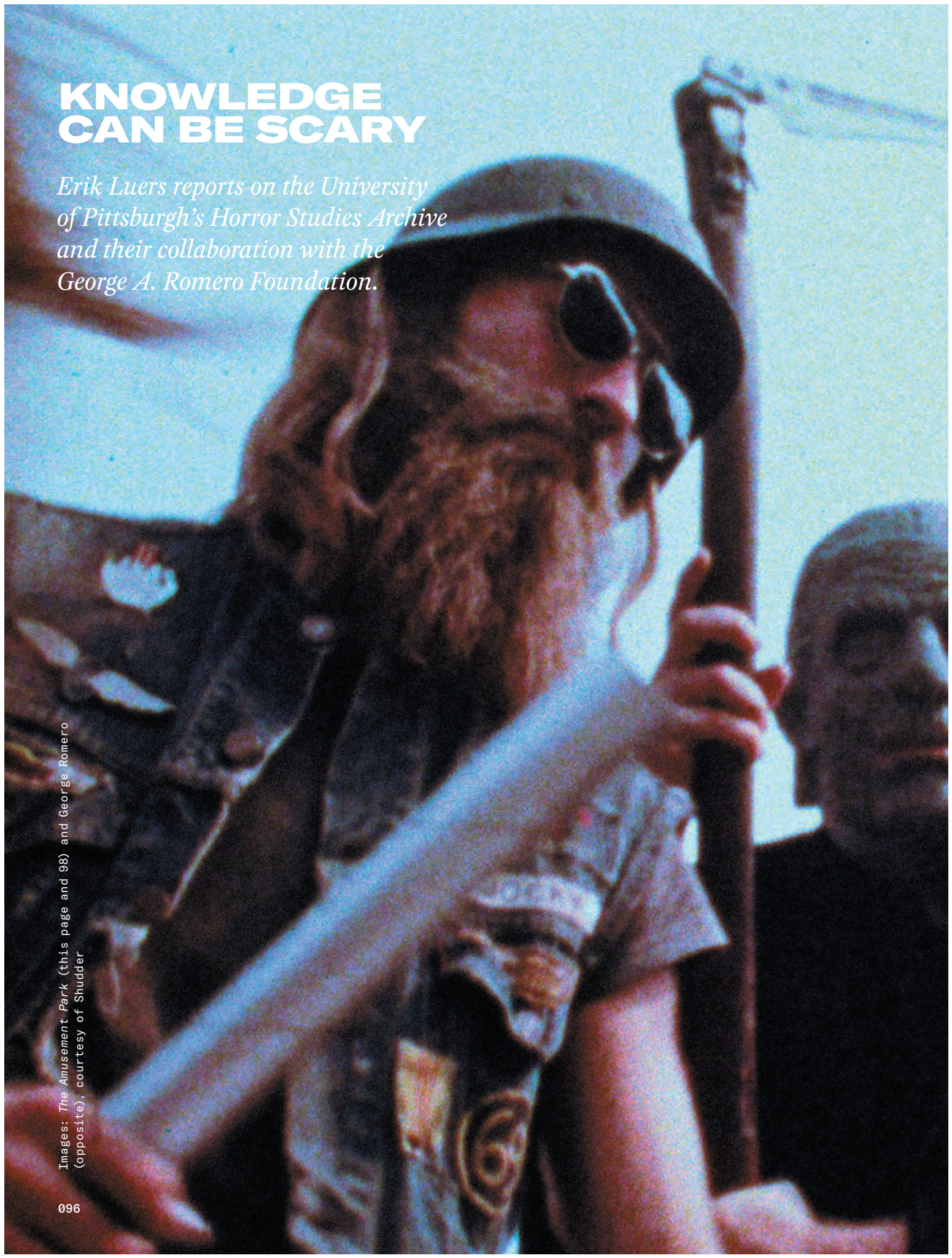


KNOWLEDGE CAN BE SCARY

Erik Luers reports on the University of Pittsburgh's Horror Studies Archive and their collaboration with the George A. Romero Foundation.



Images: *The Amusement Park* (this page and 98) and George Romero (opposite), courtesy of Shudder

No North American city is more synonymous with Bronx-born George Romero than Pittsburgh. A trip to the nearby Monroeville Mall (the setting of Romero's 1978 satirical screed on mass consumerism, *Dawn of the Dead*) brings you face-to-face with the horror director himself—a bronze bust of Romero's head greets shoppers outside Dick's Sporting Goods.

When the filmmaker unexpectedly passed away in 2017, he was at work on his newest sequel, *Road of the Dead*, in Toronto. News of his death from lung cancer prompted online tributes from the film community, not that Romero would have encouraged any public-facing praise: "I had asked him once when we were playing Scrabble when he was sick, what he thought his legacy would be or how he thought people would remember him," Suzanne Desrocher-Romero, widow of the late filmmaker, recalls. "He responded, 'Meh, nobody cares.' Those words freaked me out. I couldn't believe it."

While a 50th anniversary celebration of *Night of the Living Dead*—titled "Romero Lives!"—had been planned for 2018 by University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) film and media studies professor, Adam Lowenstein, Romero's death altered those plans until his wife offered to attend in his place. "When Suze is in the room, she's essentially bringing George into the room with her," Lowenstein recalls, "and it energizes everyone. The event then became something much bigger and citywide."





With the backing of Pitt and local politicians, the event featured an anniversary screening of *Night of the Living Dead* and lectures and moderated panels where passionate fans and collaborators came together to break down their work on Romero's extensive filmography. Afterward, Lowenstein and Desrocher-Romero began contemplating a way to honor the filmmaker's legacy year-round. "I hired a lawyer, got a 501(c)(3) going and followed the forward momentum," Desrocher-Romero remembers. The George A. Romero Foundation (GARF) was born and, soon after, an official partnering with Pitt, which agreed to permanently house Romero's vast collection within its University Library System, the acquisition a founding archive for the world's very first Horror Studies Working Group.

The partnering of GARF and Pitt felt destined, not least because *Night of the Living Dead* star Duane Jones was an alumnus of the university. (He was posthumously honored with the Foundation's Pioneer Award last year.) Romero's collection is organized in nine categories: scripts, production materials, publicity materials, promotional materials, legal documents, correspondence, photographs, moving image media and props and realia. Everything from various screenplay drafts to behind-the-scenes stills and a foam replica of Ella the Monkey (the leading primate in Romero's 1988 feature *Monkey Shines*) are included.

While the Horror Studies Archive was founded with the acquisition of Romero's collection, it has since grown to include the work of other artists, including horror poet Linda Addison, horror author Kathe Koja and writer-director (and Romero collaborator) John Russo. Lowenstein, who oversees the program for the University, sees the Working Group as the umbrella over a number of different initiatives in film theory and production. "Historically, [Pitt] has been a 'film studies only' program," Lowenstein says. The school had "an external partnership with the now-defunct legendary cooperative Pittsburgh Filmmakers, where students could take production courses for paid credit with filmmaking faculty. It was a wonderful relationship that lasted for many years, but after several financial difficulties, Pittsburgh Filmmakers shut down in 2019, and Pitt had to bring all film production courses in house in a sudden and unexpected way." While all camera equipment, now provided by Pitt, is primarily digital, most of the faculty has expertise in traditional analog film production, owing to their involvement with Pittsburgh Filmmakers.

With the Romero archive now available to them, some students have taken to creating documentaries, such as *Making the Romero Documentary: Horror in a Pandemic* and *A Tribute to Duane Jones*, that incorporate their findings. An online event featuring a discussion of the student film *George Romero & Pittsburgh: The Early Years*

was held in March via the recently launched GARF Network, a streaming platform whose virtual events have further cemented the Foundation's equal commitment to educational resources and horror fandom. Other recent virtual events have included anniversary reunions of the talent responsible for werewolf cult favorite *The Howling* and the Canadian slasher *My Bloody Valentine*. An IndieCollect restoration and streaming release of *The Amusement Park*, Romero's 1973 long-unseen film commissioned by the Lutheran Society, has further helped raise the Foundation's profile, and more restorations of early Romero works are forthcoming.

Undergraduates can get involved by applying to the University of Pittsburgh's film and media studies major. The department grounds its film studies and production tracks in horror. A more advanced course of study is available via a specialized track, "Horror Genre As a Social Force" Scholar Community at the University Honors College. As made evident by Romero's films and the countless directors he inspired, horror can be as much social commentary as it is gorefest. One needn't stretch too hard to note the similarities between Duane Jones's character in *Night of the Living Dead* and Daniel Kaluuya's in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*. On the day of Romero's passing, Peele even tweeted out a photo of Jones, rifle in hand, with the caption "Romero started it." Recent guest lecturers have included Sonia Lupher, known for Cut-Throat Women, an inclusive database of women working in horror film production around the world, while guest speakers like the creators of the 1995 Black-led anthology *Tales from the Hood* (from Pittsburgh native Rusty Cundieff) have participated in virtual Q&As.

For future plans, establishing a George A. Romero Horror Studies Center housed at the University of Pittsburgh is paramount. As a "mul-

tidisciplinary academic center dedicated solely to horror studies," the website says, the Center will provide a hub for the "long-standing interest among undergraduate students of producing low-budget horror films by offering workshops with visiting filmmakers and developing Pitt's connections with horror-associated production companies for possible internship and post-graduation employment opportunities." The Center will also establish a major and a minor in horror studies, while providing fellowships and scholarships to filmmakers from underserved communities.

While both GARF and Pitt seek to honor the late filmmaker, students are encouraged to forge their own creative path. "We're not trying to grow other George Romeros," foundation president Desrocher-Romero makes clear. "We're trying to grow and cultivate artists who see things differently than others. Otherwise, they will get lost in the corporate bullshit! It's hard enough finding the money to make the things you *want* to make. It's a difficult business."

Difficult, indeed. In the years since Romero's death, the world has seen unprecedented attacks on democracy, the furthering of the wealth gap and the proliferation of global health crises. The rise of social justice movements advocating for equal rights has led some to revisit Romero's films for notes on a way forward. "He's almost more relevant now than he was when he was alive, certainly in the last few years," Desrocher-Romero agrees. "He used to use that expression, 'I can't even get arrested,' as he had ideas and scripts that he would pitch, only to be told, 'We love you, George, but,' and nothing would come of it. Now, people are speaking about George and about his work and who he was as an artist more than ever. So, I think we're doing our job."

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