

# The Crazies

USA | 1973 | 103 minutes

## Credits

Director	George A. Romero
Screenplay	Paul McCollough George A. Romero
Photography	S. William Hinzman
Music	Bruce Roberts

## Cast

Judy	Lane Carroll
David	Will MacMillan
Clank	Harold Wayne Jones
Col. Peckem	Lloyd Hollar

## In Brief

In Evans City, a plane crashes on the hill releasing for six days in the water the bacteriological weapon Trixie that affects only human beings. The army under the command of Colonel Peckemseals seals off the town to contain the virus and there is no antidote for the victims that are doomed to die or become incurably mad. The pregnant nurse Judy, her husband David, their friend Clank, their new acquaintance Artie and his daughter Kathy tries to cross the border of the town, but the escapees are hunted by the army. Meanwhile, the scientist Dr. Ralston Watts researches blood samples trying to find the cure for the disease.



If the main highway of George Romero's career is the Dead trilogy, then he's also gone down a few interesting side roads. These have sometimes resulted in his best work, as in the superb Martin as well as leading him into a couple of dead ends, notably the hopelessly confused The Dark Half. The Crazies from 1973 is generally in the former category; a visceral and grimly intelligent horror movie which is full of Romero's typical interests and has a more explicit political angle than most of his other films. Little seen on first release, it's become a major cult movie and its lasting influence can be seen on a number of other movies, including last years British success 28 Days Later.

The film takes off from a fairly standard science fiction situation. An experimental biological weapon is accidentally released upon a small town in Pittsburgh, resulting in a mass outbreak of 'craziness', irrational behaviour which ranges from benign puzzlement to homicidal rage - or sometimes both at once. A group of civilians, frightened of both their infected neighbours and the increasingly unstable soldiers brought in to fight the outbreak, run to an isolated house in the country where they barricade themselves and wait. Exactly what they are waiting for isn't something they can entirely explain but it's some kind of deliverance which will bring an end to the crisis. Meanwhile, efforts to find an antidote to the virus are complicated by excessive military zeal and the sheer numbers of people who have become infected.

This basic situation has a number of antecedents. The SF monster movies of the 1950s frequently begin with a scientific incident of some kind impacting on the surrounding environment - at that time, it was usually nuclear in origin, for obvious social reasons. Immediately prior to the film's production, Robert Wise's The Andromeda Strain begins with a space capsule crashing down to earth in a small town containing a virus which kills virtually all the populace. In that film, the focus remains firmly on the scientific efforts to find a cure for the disease in an isolated laboratory situation. In The Crazies this is broadened into a study of the interrelationships between the victims, the survivors, the military and the scientists and the canvas, while still limited, is bigger than anything Romero had attempted before. This renders it both more ambitious and less frightening than Night of the Living Dead, a film which Romero frequently references in this one. More ambitious in that a whole community is involved as well as an isolated social group and less frightening in that the sheer intensity of Night is lacking. However, Romero's unsettling vision of society in crisis, which he began to explore in Night and continued to study until Day of the Dead in 1985, is as clear in The Crazies as it ever has been. It's a grim, blackly ironic view in which expectations are stood on their heads and the distinction between 'us' and 'the other' is deliberately blurred. In Night the shambling zombies seemed somehow less threatening than the redneck idiots who ran around shooting them. This is compounded in The Crazies by the decision to make the army - white suited, masked and dehumanised - far more of a danger than the 'crazies' themselves, who are sidelined after the first half hour. The group of survivors who build a fragile alliance in the rural retreat are constantly on the run from these trigger-happy soldiers and even the scientists are at risk of being killed by the men who are meant to be protecting them. The social order has broken down in microcosm and there isn't much idea of what could possibly be set up to replace it. The army seems powerless to control itself, let alone anyone else, and the survivors are too busy running and becoming paranoid to have more long term objectives. There is a definite social agenda here on Romero's part. Although the Vietnam War officially ended in 1973, the wounds were still fresh and when the operation in this town is called "a police action", it's obviously a reference to that other police action which resulted in America tearing itself apart. Scenes of the Crazies being 'controlled' at gunpoint are uncomfortably close to real events at Kent State in 1970 and Romero happily confesses that he took news pictures from Vietnam as a reference point for certain scenes.

One of Romero's favourite themes is the way in which an isolated group of people react to being confined together while escaping from outside threat. The farmhouse in Night, the mall in Day and the underground bunker in Day all lead to a forced confinement which itself turns into as much of a problem as the supposed external crisis. In The Crazies the small group of people in the rural house are brought together by an abortive army operation to bring them back to the town and they begin by pulling together and succeeding in fighting off the immediate threat. But they gradually become more irritated with each other and, inevitably, paranoid about which

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of them might actually be harbouring the virus. As ever, men who like guns tend to be bad news - violent, unstable, unreliable - while men who are friends with women are more reassuring. However, parent and child relationships almost always collapse; literally in Night where the girl kills her mother and figuratively here when the father's subconscious incestuous desires for his daughter suddenly break out with shocking results. His overprotectiveness towards her initially expresses itself in a rant about how young people today are all out of control and, in a classic Romero touch of uncertainty, we're not sure whether this is a symptom of an incubating 'crazy' or just a repressed neurosis finally breaking out in a stressful situation. There's a nice ambivalence to this situation where we can't really pin down a hero and we eventually choose the least threatening of the men - volunteer fireman David (MacMillan) - by default. Using this, Romero sets up a devastating ending in which David's genuinely well-meaning attempts to protect his pregnant girlfriend Judy (Carroll) lead to disaster.

Another favourite Romero occupation is the failure of authority. There are numerous scenes in The Crazies of various authority figures discussing the situation but they don't actually achieve very much apart from ruining the scientific efforts to find a cure and causing a lot more destruction than they prevent. There's a lot of black comedy here. The group of politicians discussing the options, one of them eager to drop a nuclear bomb on the town and have done with it, are an amusingly cynical bunch = "If we have to press the button we just say the weapon... went off..." - but their loftiness in the face of disaster is presented as reprehensible. As I mentioned earlier, the grunts in the biological warfare suits are (literally) faceless and barely human, threatening and brutal. This is, along with Day of the Dead,

Romero's most bitterly pessimistic film in which the people in charge simply can't keep a hold of the situation and resort to the crudest possible methods of control. The political agenda is obvious and must have been positively radical back in 1973 - established authority is collapsing and can only be maintained by brute force. I don't think the film is necessarily anti-military, but it is certainly anti-establishment. Some of the best jokes are at the expense of authority - one moment in which the soldiers encounter a sweet little old lady is priceless. The jet-black humour is generally grim and often more ironic than funny. The fate of the humanitarian Dr Walls is especially despairing.

Although filmed on a low budget - around \$270,000 - The Crazies looks surprisingly lavish. This is partly achieved through brilliant marshaling of very limited resources and partly through location filming in Evans City Pennsylvania. This gives it an undertow of realism which adds a great deal to a fairly slim story. Romero films at a fast pace, faster even than Night, and events pile on top of each other with a breathless sense of immediacy. The suspense remains high throughout with some imaginative crosscutting between the various groups of people and a few clever editing tricks. Particularly good is a scene in which the issue of a command to Dr Walls is intercut with his later response to it. The acting is highly variable but generally acceptable and sometimes very good. Lane Carroll is very touching as Judy, creating a believable character whose lively insolence is eventually broken down until she's confined to a cinder block cage. Some of the other actors have a couple of good moments and the image of a crazed Lynn Lowry happily dancing towards the soldiers who simply want to kill her is extraordinarily poetic. Romero's decision to cast a black actor as the embittered coordinator of the operation - Lloyd Hollar as Col. Peckem - is particularly interesting in the light of the fate of Duane Jones at the end of Night and the prominent black characters in the two other Dead movies. The fact that his race is never mentioned - despite some concerns from the less enlightened members of the Evans City community - is another impressive facet of the film, especially considering the time it was made.

Surprisingly, The Crazies is not a particularly violent film. Don't get me wrong - if you like bloodletting then there is plenty here to satisfy you. But there are few of the lingering shots of carnage that featured in the Dead films and much of the brutality is shown in passing and then cut away from. Oddly, this makes it more unsettling, possibly because it's matter-of-fact and less obviously trading on its special effects.

It's a little ragged around the edges and some of the ambitions aren't entirely released, but overall The Crazies is a very effective movie. It has a broader scope than Night and the developing interest in character which is evident here eventually led to the extraordinary Martin, still Romero's best film in my opinion. Fans of the director's Zombie movies will find plenty to interest them here and people who enjoy independent films which are keen to deliver a well aimed kick to the underbelly of the establishment will probably love it.

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