

The Last Man on Earth

Italy/USA | 1964 | 86 minutes

Credits

Director	Ubaldo Ragona/Sidney Salkow
Screenplay	William F. Leicester, Logan Swanson, Ubaldo Ragona, Furio M. Monetti (novel "I Am Legend" by Richard Matheson)
Photography	Franco Delli Colli
Music	Paul Sawtell, Bert Shefter

Cast

Dr. Robert Morgan	Vincent Price
Ruth Collins	Franca Bettoia
Virginia Morgan	Emma Danieli
Ben Cortman	Giacomo Rossi-Stuart

In Brief

I'm not sure why this film is as underrated as it is. This is an amazing, depressing and in many ways brilliant film based on the Richard Matheson classic novel "I Am Legend". Vincent Price effectively conveys the terror and despair of being the last living man on an Earth that is now overrun with vampires and/or zombies. The depiction of Price's day to day bleak existence is a moving and powerful thing to behold and the continual menace of the hordes of zombies is creepy in the same way as was later depicted in "Night of the Living Dead". In fact, as noted by others here, one can not watch the scenes where the zombies lay siege to Price's boarded up house and attack his car without recognizing how close these scenes would later be copied by George Romero in his classic zombie films. If you are a fan of horror film history or just looking for a classic and unique film with an interesting story, track down this lost gem.

<http://www.imdb.com>

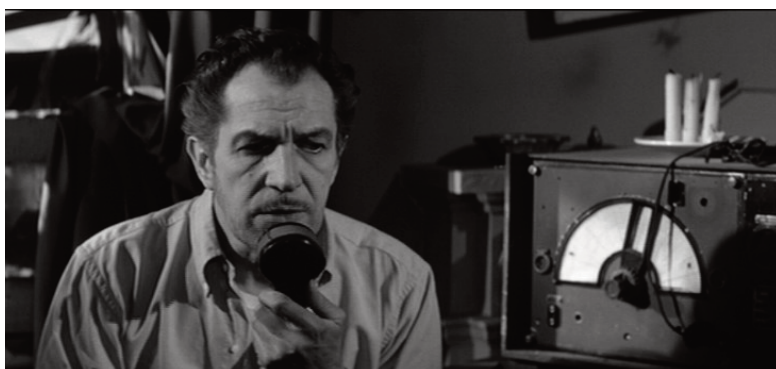
A solitary man wakes up in the morning and, shuffling about as if he is doing his normal, daily custom, he gets dressed, has some breakfast, opens his front door, and pulls a wreath of garlic and a broken mirror from his windows. "I'll need to replace these," a voiceover says routinely. He walks out his front door. We notice various corpses lying about the lawn and driveway. He goes to his garage and turns on a machine that allows him to carve homemade stakes. "Another day," the voiceover mutters in a bored tone.

How's that for an attention-grabbing opening? But wait; it gets better:

Guided by this voiceover, we proceed to watch this strange man throughout his day. As the title implies, his city is totally empty and rundown, save for him and corpses scattered here and there. He checks his radio to see if anyone will answer his frequency. They do not, because there is no one left to answer. He drives his car to a grocery store and mirror shop to replace his house decorations. He picks corpses up off the road, drives stakes through their hearts, and throws them into a gigantic, burning pit on the edge of town. Just before nightfall, he drives back to his house, places the garlic and mirror on the windows again ("They are allergic to garlic and hate to look at their reflection," he explains), and settles himself down with a meal and a nice jazz piece on his phonograph.

That's when the hammering and knocking starts on his door. "Morgan, we're coming for you!" ghoulish voices shout. The man, Morgan, is repulsed but not terrified. "It's the same thing every night," the voiceover says sadly. Outside, pale, scruffy men and woman slowly bang on the door, calling Morgan's name longingly. They are the living dead, and they are hungry for his blood.

Since this was the pre-Romero era of horror movies, the film (and the book that it is based on, *I Am Legend* by Richard Matheson) calls these unique creatures "vampires," or at least some version of them as created by an unspecified virus that turns its victims into the shuffling, malevolent dead. In the post-Romero era, we refer to these creatures as "zombies," and can consider the creatures in *The Last Man on Earth* as thus.



The Last Man on Earth preceded *Night of the Living Dead* by five years, and it pretty much served as its template. It is to Romero's first zombie film what Akira Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress* is to George Lucas's original *Star Wars*: The fountain in which their inspiration came. Romero freely admits that his film was a direct rip-off of Matheson's novel; I would be a little less harsh in my description and say that Romero merely expanded the author's ideas with deviations so completely original that *Night* is expelled from being labeled a true "rip-off." Romero would go onto lean less heavily on his source material and create his own, fully unique apocalyptic vision in his opus *Dawn of the Dead*

Vincent Price: Icon of Horror

**DO YOU DARE IMAGINE WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE TO BE
...THE LAST MAN ON EARTH...OR THE LAST WOMAN?**

Alive among the lifeless...alone among the crawling creatures
of evil that make the night hideous with their inhuman craving!



CO-STARRING FRANCA BETTOIA · EMMA DANIELI · GIACOMO ROSSI-STUART · SIDNEY SALKOW · ROBERT L. LIPPERT
From the novel "I AM A LEGEND" by
Screenplay by LOGAN SWANSON · WILLIAM F. LEICESTER · RICHARD MATHESON · AN AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL PICTURE

(arguably the greatest zombie film ever made, and if you disagree, you're probably wrong); in the meantime, *The Last Man on Earth* doesn't make his *Night of the Living Dead* any less powerful, but it does render it perhaps a little less original.

The influences, in fact, are obvious from the first frames of the picture and continue into its conclusion: The gritty black and white, the grain, the low-budget documentary-style of filmmaking, the social commentary about the fear of the Red Scare (it's no coincidence that the virus comes from Europe and that Americans are terrified that it is going to sweep into their country and pollute them), the hungry undead trying to break into a barricaded house, a grim ending that reeks of pessimism and desolation. Even the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead* look and sound like the ghouls of *The Last Man on Earth* (sans the verbal taunting).

Such similarities couldn't stay hidden forever: *The Last Man on Earth* has been rediscovered and is generally now correctly considered as the first modern zombie film ("modern" meaning a deviation from the Haitian origins of zombies and the use of the term as a flesh-eating ghoul as established by Romero). If Romero ultimately gave us a tighter, more confident film with a clearer purpose and more terrifying ghouls, it cannot be denied that he owes the basic plot threads and images of *Night of the Living Dead* to this B-thriller.

Its influence notwithstanding, how does *The Last Man on Earth* hold up today? Surprisingly well. Directors Sidney Salkow and Ubaldo Ragona and star Vincent Price (giving a poignant, straightforward performance) are able to conjure up some genuine chills here, mainly in the use of stark, black-and-white images and the underlining mood of the piece. The most haunting images include those of shrouded bodies being tossed into a blazing pit and Price's sulking face as he plays jazz and tries to muffle out the sound of the moaning dead outside. The film could have been an over-the-top camp piece, but its makers are able to make most of it play very subtly, slowly getting

under our skin as Morgan's despair and madness eventually overtakes him.

Also, the ending contains a very interesting twist that, of course, I will not give away—I will only say that it at first seems to rival Romero's own bleak ending, but in retrospect, I don't think that it is entirely without hope. It only carefully robs Morgan of that hope and gives it to some much unexpected late-in-the-game players.

The reason that Romero's film instantly became a classic while this film fell into obscurity is mainly due to Romero's superior and cleverer storytelling skills: In his stripped-down plot, explanations are kept to a bare minimum as the human characters attempt to survive again each other and the dead. Ultimately, the important, more clear use of social subtexts, both in the story and in the zombies themselves, keep *Night* several notches above its B-grade competition. Romero was also unafraid to push the boundaries of censorship, implementing images of cannibalism that even this gritty Italian production wouldn't dare to attempt. All the gore, of course, was part of the commentary that society was eating itself alive, and the film therefore worked on multiple levels. In *The Last Man on Earth*, the commentary is present, but it seems like a footnote, and perhaps too much time is spent explaining the phenomenon (the voiceovers quickly get tiresome) with too little action happening.

Nevertheless, there are plenty of good things to be seen here, and the film deserves recognition if for no other reason than its contribution to issuing in a new era of horror film. Shock-wise, it is tame by today's standards (and it was probably tame by its own era's standards), but it still conjures up plenty of simple, offbeat chills that both compliments Romero well and stands on its own as a bleak vision of a fully-realized apocalyptic world. If the upcoming *Land of the Dead* is truly the purported final chapter in Romero's *Dead* saga, *The Last Man on Earth* works an effective prologue to the series.

Film as Art: Danel Griffith's Guide to Cinema, <http://uashome.alaska.edu/~dfgriffin/>

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Vincent Price: Icon of Horror