

Jeff Kirkendall's Thoughts For The Month Column

Thoughts, Opinions, Reviews, Commentary & More!

Hello and Welcome! My name is Jeff Kirkendall and I'm an independent filmmaker and actor from the Upstate New York area. This is the section of the Very Scary Productions website where I write about topics related to independent filmmaking, digital video production, acting, movies in general, horror movies in particular, my own indie movies, as well as anything and everything related or in between.

I decided to create this commentary page because I find that I often come across things that either interest me, excite me, intrigue me, or maybe just bug me. Any topic related to movies and cinema is fair game, from the most mainstream to the most controversial. For example I'll often read about movie projects that I have a strong interest in or opinion on, for one reason or another. This page gives me a forum to discuss these things. It's all about discussion and furthering understanding of our pop culture. Anyone who has feedback concerning what I have to say here, feel free to contact me (see the contact link at <http://www.veryscaryproductions.com/>).

I'd also like to point out that the following is just my opinion, and everyone is free to agree or disagree with what I have to say. Enjoy, and to all the Indies out there: Keep on Filming!

SUBJECT: Movie Review - ***Dawn of the Dead (2004)*** - Does the remake cut it? – April 2004

Over several of my past columns I've given my thoughts on remakes of classic horror films, and I've also reviewed some of these remakes. For those tired of reading about the topic I apologize. However this does seem to be a significant trend as of late, and since George Romero's 1978 zombie movie is considered such a horror classic by so many people (including myself), I felt compelled to write about the new film. With any luck this will be the last big remake for awhile (not likely), and this will be the last such review I'll write for awhile. That having been said, let's discuss the ***new Dawn of the Dead***.

The plot of ***Dawn of the Dead (2004)*** is very similar to the 1978 version. For the unfamiliar, the basic story concerns a small group of people trying to survive a zombie epidemic. It seems the dead are coming to life around the world and attacking and killing people, who then also rise and continue the killing. A group of survivors in an American town make their way to a suburban shopping mall, where they spend most of the movie trying to keep the zombies out.

Let me start by saying that this remake had a lot of good things in it. The movie had solid performances throughout, some clever dialog, some good action sequences, and some horrific and gory moments. For fans of the 1978 version, it also featured cameos from such luminaries as makeup effects wizard Tom Savini and actor Ken Foree. Put simply, the remake provided a lot of fun entertainment. However, unfortunately, the movie was pulled down by uneven pacing, lack of drama or characters I cared about, and gore scenes that were (as stated above) good, but still nothing special when compared to those in George Romero's version. Let's take a look at each of these issues in turn.

When I say this movie had uneven pacing, what I'm referring to is an overall feeling of a "start and stop" quality to the proceedings. With the exception of the exciting opening sequence where we meet a nurse named Ana (Sarah Polley), and we see the catastrophe unfolding around her, things just seem scattershot throughout the film. It's something that's difficult to verbalize, but I distinctly remember several times beginning to get interested in some character or plot point, only to have the film quickly switch focus to something else. One example of this would be the story of Andre (Mekhi Phifer) and his pregnant girlfriend. After the group is in the mall there is a conversation between Andre and cop Kenneth (Ving Rhames), where Andre talks about wanting his unborn child to have a better life than he had. This is obviously the scene that is supposed to get the audience to care about Andre and his girlfriend. While there is nothing wrong with this scene (with the exception of it being a bit heavy-handed), not much else is done with this couple until we see the birth of the child. Numerous other characters are treated in the same way, which ties in with my next criticism about the movie having an overall lack of drama or characters I cared about. My guess is that the filmmakers wanted to give us a bigger group of central characters (than in the original version), so there would be more humans that could potentially be turned into zombies. However, I feel this just resulted in the audience knowing and caring less about each person. Although I suppose this could be forgiven somewhat considering that the emphasis was more on action and loud explosions, it's hard for me to ignore the fact that I remember some of the zombie "characters" in George Romero's movie more vividly than I do any of the lead human characters in this remake. Now let's discuss the visceral effects in the film.

There were enough visceral moments in this movie to please most gore hounds, and for the casual or more mainstream viewer the carnage should pack quite an impact. The opening scene in particular had some great moments, and there were also some nice shots later in the film where zombies were destroyed in various gruesome ways. I don't really have anything to knock about the makeup effects; however I wasn't blown away by them either. But this is because the effects sequences in the original version are just so memorable. Unlike in the remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, where the blood and gore was a distinct difference from the (mostly bloodless) original version, here there really isn't room for improvement. While I think it's pointless to dwell solely on which movie had more carnage, I do believe that this film was more violent (in an action movie sort of way), while the original had more gore in it. (Some of those seventies movies just can't be beat in terms of gross-out images that we'll probably never see in theatres again).

So, given the above criticisms, I really can't say this was a great movie. While I found myself laughing at some of the clever dialog, and while I was definitely caught up in many of the action scenes with the new, speedier zombies, I wasn't captivated by the movie as a whole. That sense of unevenness - the feeling that the movie never established any rhythm - just didn't go away throughout the entire running time. The film basically just felt like a typical loud Hollywood action picture with a lot more blood and gore than we're used to seeing in the action genre. In fairness this may be due somewhat to my adoration for the original version, and a preconceived notion of how a remake should unfold. I kept hoping to feel a connection and intimacy with the characters like in Romero's movie, but this never happened. People unfamiliar with the first film may like the picture better because the action sequences and high gore content make things seem very cutting-edge and extreme. In fact, as of this writing, the remake has pulled in big opening weekend receipts, even managing to knock Mel Gibson's

movie ***The Passion of the Christ*** from the #1 perch at the box office. As with all these recent remakes, this can be looked on as a mixed blessing. When horror movies succeed financially it helps the genre in that more horror films will inevitably be made. Of course on the other side of the coin this most likely also means that studios will be quick to produce more remakes rather than focusing on original material. If nothing else hopefully this remake will have the positive effect of moving people to go back and take a look at George Romero's classic 1978 zombie epic.