

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: ***Beyond Re-Animator*** - Dr. Herbert West returns to the screen! – March 2004

For those not familiar with the ***Re-Animator*** film series, the movies follow the horrific adventures of one Doctor Herbert West, played by genre favorite Jeffrey Combs. The good (mad?) doctor is on a never-ending quest to bring life to the dead. The original ***Re-Animator*** was based on a short story by writer H.P. Lovecraft called *Dr. Herbert West: Re-Animator*. The first film came out in 1985 and was followed in 1990 by the sequel ***Bride Of Re-Animator***. Now, after a long wait, we finally have the 2003 release ***Beyond Re-Animator***. While this movie doesn't quite compare to the original cult classic, it is in my opinion slightly better than the second entry in the series, and well worth watching.

Like ***Bride Of Re-Animator***, this third entry in the series was directed by Brian Yuzna. (The first film was directed by Stuart Gordon). The story starts with a young boy witnessing his sister being killed by one of Dr. West's experiments gone wrong. He also witnesses Dr. West's subsequent arrest and finds a syringe of the Doctor's reanimation fluid left behind. Needless to say this traumatic event has a profound impact on the kid's life. Following this pre-credit sequence we pick up thirteen years later with Dr. West incarcerated in a prison which is run by the somewhat sadistic Warden Brando. A new young doctor soon arrives at the prison as does a beautiful female reporter working on a story about the warden and the facility. After an incident with one of the inmates we find out that the young doctor is the kid from the opening scene. It seems the death of his sister drove him to pursue a career in medicine in the hopes of saving people. And more specifically, he wants to work with Dr. Herbert West. After injecting the dead inmate with the syringe of re-agent (which the kid held onto all those years) the two begin making up more fluid in secret. We also learn that through his continuing research (done secretly on rats in prison) Dr. West has identified an electrical phenomenon which is discharged

from the brain at the moment of death, and could be the missing link in his experiments. In other words, he may have discovered what some might call the soul.

While this movie is not without flaws, the picture has a lot going for it. First, for those who like their horror on the visceral side with nothing held back, ***Beyond Re-Animator*** is just the ticket. From the aforementioned out-of-control prisoner chomping down on the arm of a prison guard before being subdued, to several other characters dying violently and being subsequently re-animated, to a rat's electrical "soul" being transferred into one of the reanimated characters, to a bloody prison riot towards the end of the film, this movie is a non-stop whirlwind of madness and carnage. Gore fans will not be disappointed as limbs, innards, and (of course) blood is strewn about everywhere throughout the proceedings. (One character also foams at the mouth through much of the film, which also serves to make things even more disgusting.) This is all in keeping with the style of the first film, which had a bloody and exciting finale as well. These excesses are also matched by a sufficient amount of nudity and sex. Exploitation fans should not be disappointed by an extended topless scene, although I must say it still doesn't match the memorable Barbara Crampton nude scene from the first film. And while you would think that the prison setting would naturally make the proceedings dark and serious, the movie still manages to have many fun, lighter moments. For example, after one junkie prisoner injects himself with too much reanimation fluid his innards explode out from his stomach. Moments later he pops up as a gore-covered skeleton asking Dr. West for more drugs, to which West deadpans "I'd say you've had enough". These moments serve to keep things entertaining while being scattered about the film sparsely enough so as to never take the movie into the realm of outright camp. Put simply, this is a crazy, fun movie that should please hardcore genre fans at every turn.

Another interesting thing about the picture is how despite the new setting, the same basic structure from the first film is quickly and effortlessly set up. In the original ***Re-Animator*** Dr. West began working with a young doctor (Dr. Dan Cain, played by Bruce Abbott) who had a loving and devoted girlfriend. This created a tense situation because the young doctor became torn between his devotion to West and discovering the life and death secrets they were searching for, and his feelings for his girlfriend, whom West only saw as an obstacle in their path. Here young doctor Howard Phillips meets the beautiful female reporter at the same time he meets Dr. West, and quickly the same situation is set up. There is always a sense of dread because you know the girlfriend is in great danger, and that she will eventually become involved in West's experiments. And you also know that her boyfriend somehow won't or can't keep her away from the danger, and that eventually her only chance for survival will depend on the reanimation fluid. This triangle serves as good drama here just as it did in the first film.

A final strong point in this movie is the ever reliable Jeffrey Combs. While everyone in the film is generally good, it's Jeffrey Combs that really makes the movie worth watching. The actor makes Dr. Herbert West such an eccentric character that you never know whether to root for him or not. Comb's odd mannerisms and deadpan delivery are just plain entertaining to watch. I could go on and on describing him, but suffice it to say I really couldn't imagine anyone else in the role. Jeffrey Combs definitely falls into the category of great eccentric actors along with such luminaries as Crispin Glover, Jack Nicholson, and my personal favorite Christopher Walken.

As I stated previously, this movie is not without some flaws. I'd like to note however that most of the things I found wrong with the picture are only flaws as compared to the first

film in the franchise. First, I had a general overall feeling that most of the carnage and mayhem didn't have much point to it. As much as I enjoyed watching, it was really just spectacle. Put another way, while the action and mayhem were entertaining, the story surrounding it just wasn't as compelling as in Dr. West's first adventure. This probably had something to do with the cold and harsh (but still interesting) prison setting.

Secondly, I didn't feel as connected to the supporting characters here as I did in the original *Re-Animator*. While I liked Jason Barry as Dr. Howard Phillips, there just wasn't as strong of a connection between him and Dr. West like there was with Bruce Abbott's Dr. Cain from the previous movies. This is probably due to how fast the situation is set up once Dr. Phillips arrives at the prison and also the quick pace of the movie in general. Howard is more or less just there to get Dr. West the supplies he needs, whereas Dan Cain played a more integral role in helping West progress with his initial research. As things got progressively worse, Dr. Cain became more and more tormented, especially when his loving girlfriend was dragged into the situation. Here Dr. Phillips only reconsiders what he and Dr. West are doing towards the end of the film, as his new reporter girlfriend becomes endangered. Put simply, I identified more with Dr. Cain and Megan Halsey (Dr. Cain's girlfriend) in the first film.

Despite the above criticisms I really enjoyed this movie, and recommend it, primarily because it's just crazy fun. As stated earlier Jeffrey Combs is always worth watching, and the over-the-top finale is quite good and continues the tradition of the *Re-Animator* film series. It's also worth mentioning that this ending gives us yet another similarity between this film and the original *Re-Animator*. In the first film we were introduced to a character named Dr. Carl Hill (David Gale), who eventually became a disembodied head and proved to be a worthy adversary for Dr. West. Near the end of this movie a character is also decapitated and the head also comes to life. I'm sure the similarity was intentional, although it is uncertain whether this person will be seen again, as this sequence could very well have just been a hallucination by one of the main characters. I suppose we'll just have to wait for the next sequel to find out.