

## 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: - DVD Horrors Review: ***Day of the Dead 2: Contagium*** – December 2005

DVD Horrors is a new Thoughts For The Month topic that will focus on horror films made for the DVD and home video markets, and horror films that have been successful primarily upon release to DVD and video. Therefore the majority of the movies I review under this topic heading will probably be low/no budget, non-Hollywood independent films, or foreign titles that don't see theatrical release here in the USA. Prior to this month I have reviewed the following independent horror films: ***Slashers*** (in the November 2002 TFTM column) and ***Beyond Re-Animator*** (in the March 2004 TFTM column). I also reviewed the independent short film comedy ***More Than Friends*** in the December 2004 TFTM column.

My first DVD Horrors review is the 2005 release ***Day of the Dead 2: Contagium***\*. This is a movie I was interested in seeing primarily because of the title. I figured it would be what one might call an "unofficial" sequel to the 1985 George Romero classic ***Day of the Dead***. After watching the film it's safe to say this was not intended as a sequel to that or any other movie. The filmmakers just used the title to attract zombie movie fans like myself. This film instead offers a somewhat unusual take on the zombie genre by focusing on a group of people who progress through a slow transformation into a different sort of zombie than the lumbering masses seen in ***Day of the Dead*** and the two films preceding it in Mr. Romero's classic trilogy. In general I believe the filmmakers were aiming to make the contagion, the fear of infection, and the infection process itself take center stage. Unfortunately this fresh angle is clumsily executed, making ***Day of the Dead 2: Contagium*** an amateurish production that is equal parts predictable, cliché-ridden, perplexing, and, more often than not, tedious to watch.

The story in ***Day of the Dead 2: Contagium*** begins in 1968 in Pennsylvania where a Russian pilot whose plane has crashed is being interrogated about the contents of a

mysterious vial. The pilot opens the vial, becomes infected, and begins to slowly turn into a zombie. Midway through his transformation he bites down on a guard's arm and soon enough the epidemic spreads throughout the facility. The military then come bursting onto the scene and attempt to destroy the marauding zombies before they can spread the infection outside of the compound. Not surprisingly however, someone is able to smuggle one of the mysterious vials outside before being killed by the soldiers. The vial then sits in the woods for thirty-plus years before being discovered by a group of men on the grounds of what is now a mental health facility. The remainder of the movie is set mainly in the mental health facility as a good-hearted doctor, some staff members, and several patients with varying degrees of mental illness find themselves in the same situation that presumably happened back in 1968 where people were exposed to the mysterious viral agent and began slowly transforming into various types of undead zombies.

The opening scenes set in 1968 were actually well-executed, reminding me of something one might see in a bigger-budget Hollywood zombie film. The sequence was also admittedly a bit reminiscent of *Day of the Dead*, with fast-paced action, gunplay and general zombie mayhem. However while the opening was slickly produced, it was this sense of familiarity with other films that made it relatively uninteresting. Following this it was as if the filmmakers switched gears and moved into amateur filmmaking mode. For what seems like forever we follow a group of stereotypical, clichéd, dull horror characters as they are exposed to the virus and (very) slowly begin to transform into zombies. The movie is seen mostly through the eyes of these people as they develop flu-like symptoms, skin rashes and other physical symptoms in the transformation process, which is, as mentioned above, admittedly a bit of a fresh angle. And while the filmmakers should also get points for taking the time to try to develop characters and story before jumping into the inevitable zombie hospital mayhem near the end, it's just too bad these particular characters are so dull and wooden. The good-hearted doctor is probably the most likeable, but even he barely held my attention. And a subplot involving one of the male patients and a female patient named Ana takes the prize for being the most meaningless and forgettable. The whole middle section of the film is supposed to be dramatic and compelling, but just seems like an endless and monotonous lull instead. Perhaps the blame partially falls on the shoulders of the cast, but more likely it is due to bad writing which consistently keeps these characters uttering ridiculous and clichéd dialog, making it difficult to identify with them and their plight.

At the very end the film moves back into over-the-top zombie action with patients and hospital staff transforming into various types of zombie mutations. While the core groups of characters are thinking zombies who are somehow (inexplicably) telepathically linked, we are also given zombies that lumber slowly like Romero's ghouls, as well as zombies who are just basically walking masses of gore and body tissue. This latter group of various grotesque monsters reminded me of films such as *Beyond Re-Animator* where the filmmakers went all out to create bloody and disgusting horror creatures. Unlike in that film however there is no sly humor present and no compelling characters like Dr. Herbert West at the center of the mayhem. Therefore these scenes play like an empty makeup effects show that are at best mildly amusing on occasion.

In addition to the above faults, there were just too many spots in the film where I was scratching my head at the overall silliness of the plot. \*\* For instance, right from the start I had to question why anyone would smuggle a deadly viral contagion out of a research

facility while witnessing the deadly effects of the vial all around them. I also was left perplexed by scenes where dancing lights burst out of the vial after it was opened. Was this supposed to suggest the contagion came from an alien source, or were the filmmakers' just intent on adding CGI effects into their film? And are we supposed to believe nobody noticed or cared when several of the patients began spewing black goop out of their mouths in the middle of the dining room? These were the types of things that left me wondering what the makers of this film were thinking.

Notwithstanding the above criticisms, let me also say that while this movie was certainly no gem, it wasn't bad enough to qualify for my "worst of" list either. As noted earlier, the filmmakers get points for taking a different angle in the telling of their particular zombie tale, and for putting some amount of effort and creativity into the gore effects. There were also a few effectively comedic moments such as the short sequence at the end of the film when the zombies finally got outside the building and started attacking people on the streets. It was hilarious to see people being tackled to the ground and rolling around fighting with the ghouls. A scene involving a mauled camera crew was especially funny. This section of the movie must have been great fun to make, and it's in these all too-short scenes that the movie proves most successful.

One final thing I noticed is that the filmmakers made some nods to George Romero's classic films, such as in setting the opening sequence in 1968 Pennsylvania, which is when and where the original ***Night of the Living Dead*** was made. This and other small touches like it lead me to believe the film was made by people who are horror and zombie movie fans. Whether or not this is true, in the end ***Day of the Dead 2: Contagium*** is a film with a misleading title that will most likely disappoint fans of the George Romero zombie trilogy, and also fans of big-budget Hollywood horror. This independent film has too many faults, and is, in essence, a crazy and misguided attempt at a relatively original take on the zombie movie genre.

\* I'd like to note that when I began typing out this column my word processing program immediately indicated that the word *contagium* wasn't in the online dictionary. This makes me wonder if the filmmakers intentionally made up their own word for the title, or if it was just an oversight and the correct spelling should've been *contagion*.

\*\* Perhaps it's being a bit unfair criticizing the plot element of someone smuggling one of the deadly vials out of the research facility. After all the idea of a character doing something utterly stupid like this in the name of science or scientific curiosity has been used in numerous other films as well.