Written by Samuel Zimmerman
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Quite recently, a blog went up on FANGORIA taking a handful of legendary horror directors to task for essentially riding the waves of their legacy and failing to continuously and contemporarily put out excellent work. No doubt, it's an interesting theory worth debating and investigating. However, in my eyes, its author made one fatal mistake (and no, it wasn't that confrontational opening line—although that was slightly devoid of taste). Nick sought to claim that Wes Craven neither is, nor ever was, great. I'm under the belief that no matter how you feel about many of his films, that's simply a falsehood. So with seven weeks until the filmmaker's latest, MY SOUL TO TAKE, hits theaters, I've decided to look at one of his movies a week (excluding the landmarks like LAST HOUSE, NIGHTMARE and SCREAM) to showcase that even during misfires and his lesser praised works, Craven displays talent, chops and incredible imagination (see last week's entry). Read on for week two: my examination of his made-for-television CHILLER.

I had taken a bit of a gamble on this week's piece, choosing a film I was wholly unfamiliar with in Craven's oeuvre. I hoped it wouldn't be one I came out hating on the other side, failing to see the positives of his contribution to, especially considering it's a film made specifically for television and one he isn't credited with writing. CHILLER is another probe of the potential horrors of our own technological and scientific progression as a society and especially how that may interfere with the natural or spiritual course of things. In the film, wealthy company man Miles Creighton (THE WARRIORS' Michael Beck) is the victim of a terrible accident. and due to the lack of sufficient medical procedures at the time, is unable to be revived. Miles' mother, sick with grief, opts to cryogenically freeze her son until a time when medicine has caught up to his ailment. Ten years later, when a malfunction causes Miles' chamber to thaw out, Doctors Stricklin and Collier are successfully able to return the man to the land of the living, albeit as we come to find out, without his soul.

I've owned a very low-quality pan and scan version of the film for many years now, so when it was time to actually see CHILLER, it was initially hard to settle into the film. Through no fault of the filmmakers, it was visually dark, the audio was often muddled and the colors were certainly not as they were meant to be. When revisiting something of a more ridiculous nature, all of these qualities can add to the fun, but CHILLER is a bit of a serious and subdued thriller, which makes the traits of a god-awful transfer more of a hindrance. Beck's creepfest of a performance amongst other strong points, though, helps one look past the home video release's detriments.

Miles quickly returns to and reassumes his position as the head of the family company, however, his conscience and moral standings seem to have stayed in the frozen chamber. He reneges on the company's longstanding charitable donations, kills his dog (who, of course, very much senses something's wrong with the undead Miles from the beginning), fires and murders his father's best friend who had kept the business afloat and profitable, and physically and sexually assaults one of his employees.

While it's obvious Craven was working within the confines of television (limited budget, what he could and couldn't show), you could see why he'd be taken with J.D. Feigelson's script, namely its keeping in line with Craven's interest in some sort of social commentary and indictment of rich, upper class, suburban living. One doesn't have to dig incredibly deep to see the subtext of a man with no soul running a faceless, corporate entity, shunning family and loved ones, refuting god and the church, all in favor of selfish and sadistic desires. Almost every negative aspect of a greed-laden mid-'80s yuppie/privileged child is addressed in the film. Doing anything in favor of a profit? Check. Backstabbing and betraying those who've stood by you? Check. Offering a female employee a higher paying and more powerful position, but only after violently and sexually demeaning her, plus treating her like an object? Check.

But not only does Craven touch on the practices of such a person, but the environment that enables them. Miles' mother, Marion (Beatrice Straight of POLTERGEIST) is a woman full of denial and blinded by her perfect son returning to her. In fact, it seems everyone else can sense something is wrong with the boy—most prominently, Stacey (POPCORN and THE STEPFATHER's lovely Jill Schoelen) who had become sort of an adopted daughter to Marion after Miles' death, but didn't necessarily grow up in the exclusive lifestyle. And when Reverend Penny (a nice appearance from GOODFELLAS' Paul Sorvino) tries to intervene, Miles literally runs him and his spirituality over.

Aside from what's underneath, however, does CHILLER work as a film? Yes and no. It's not incredible in any sense, and I definitely won't look back on it as fondly as THE PEOPLE UNDER THE STAIRS, but it's solid at times, most often thanks to the eerie atmosphere Craven creates around Miles. The character is almost a supernatural precursor to Patrick Bateman and the director's photography of him (specifically by the fire, watching, ready to pounce on Stacey) coupled with Beck's acting is highly effective. The supporting cast all put in strong work as well, except for Straight who at times comes off a bit too melodramatic and almost a caricature of a wealthy mother. But then again, that might've been what she was going for. CHILLER doesn't and didn't break any new ground, and the scares are better when they're subtle and performance-based rather than the often telegraphed "jump" shocks, but its synthy score and high points definitely make it worthy of discovery. I just hope there'll be an opportunity for a better looking CHILLER than what's available on the market now.

You can read the blog that incited my seven week response right here , as well as check out my initial idea and drop me suggestions for what Craven films you'd like to see me tackle here
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