THE GREY was a modest theatrical hit, despite a protractedly bleak tone and a plot that can reasonably be summarized as “men hopelessly fight nature.” It’s an odd beast, a movie (just out on DVD and Blu-ray from Universal) that struggles to explore the human condition between exciting-but-implausible action sequences; it’s not horror, but contains genuine scares, mostly due to a predatory wolf pack with a habit of leaping into frame unexpectedly.

The film continued Liam Neeson’s evolution into a bankable movie star, as the Oscar-nominated actor’s taciturn embodiments of physical capability have made him an action hero well into his 50s. More tellingly, it was another left turn by writer/director Joe Carnahan, a difficult filmmaker to categorize. Clearly, the man likes making mainstream movies (his gritty NARC was just a potboiler whodunit elevated by execution), but his choices always tend to create quirky, even risky contradictions, for better or worse. Even Carnahan’s ridiculously entertaining adaptation of THE A-TEAM sometimes felt like a middle finger extended at feature-length.

With THE GREY, Carnahan explicitly delivers a message about fighting for your life that all survival movies have made implicitly. Despite every apparent effort, he fails to make that message profound or unique. What he does deliver is a harrowing movie full of entirely convincing performances, less convincing CGI and some truly artful moments of suspense and surprise, capped off with an ending that is legitimately ballsy, if only given how much Carnahan must have known it would polarize the audience.

In the Blu-ray’s 2.40:1 transfer, THE GREY is visually amazing when focused on the punishing wilderness locations (Too hot? Just watching this movie will take your temperature down a few degrees), and looks stark and immediate when focused on our human characters. There’s a lot of noise in the night scenes, which enforces an authentic quality; THE GREY doesn’t feel produced, it feels captured on the fly. You just wish that same authenticity extended to the visual FX. While KNB’s practical work is strong as always, the vividness of the high-definition transfer unfortunately highlights the inconsistent CGI. For every truly menacing moment with a

digital wolf (and there are a few breathtakingly creepy ones) there are also a handful of bad composite shots.

The bonus features on the discs are limited to a commentary and deleted scenes—one with a polar bear that most likely got cut because the real bear 1) makes the wolves look that much worse by comparison and 2) appears limited to the actions of a trained bear (also, no matter how familiar you are with the intense aggression levels of polar bears, the sight of them is just way too damn cute). Other cut bits involve extraneous and apparently improvised comic moments, and more strong dramatic work by the solid cast, especially Frank Grillo and an unrecognizable Dermot Mulroney. Those scenes are all compelling, but very close to what remained in the release.

Far more involving is the commentary, on which editors Roger Barton and Jason Hellmann join a husky-voiced Carnahan to drink Scotch-on-the-rocks and talk fondly over the film. All three are thorough with information, covering the filming conditions, difficulties on set and in post and reactions from specific audiences, but mostly they express their admiration for the work they’ve created. Their chatter feels less like self-congratulation and more like relief and pride; it’s clear that all three believed deeply in the project and worked very hard to see it to fruition. The commentary sometimes veers into self-aggrandization, but more often sounds like a chance for the trio to kick back and enjoy a sense of closure. Carnahan himself is forthright and sardonic, giving even his compliments an edge. He doesn’t explain the movie but does describe what he finds compelling about it, including a comment that “the ending might piss people off, but it’s also the reason they’ll talk about the film for years to come.”

The ending, like the whole movie, is gutsy and effective without really being insightful or powerful, but sometimes gutsy is enough. The movie and the disc are all of a piece; there’s just not enough here to be a must-own or extraordinary, yet it’s far too intriguing to dismiss outright.

MOVIE: 💀💀💀💀

DISC PACKAGE: 💀💀💀💀