

"ZOMBIE" 2-Disc Ultimate Edition (DVD/Blu-ray Review)

Written by Scooter McCrae

Tuesday, 25 October 2011 08:32



Like the shadow of a decaying hand reaching out for me that I cannot run away from, Lucio Fulci's most infamous and undying classic about the hungry dead, ZOMBIE, is once more before me on the autopsy table for a thorough dissection. I suppose it is appropriate that once every couple of years, this particular film seemingly rises from the dead and forces me to take another in-depth look at it – yet somehow I'm always left with the feeling that what I think has been my ultimate review for the title in the latest technology du jour (from laserdisc to DVD and now Blu-Ray) turns out to be, in fact, my penultimate review.

I suppose it's a good thing I love the film as much as I do, or I'd be getting sick of it by now.

Sporting the immortal ad campaign "We Are Going To Eat You!" combined with the poster image of the ultimate nightmarishly rotten corpse head looking about ready to take a bite out of you, made for a pretty indelible branding experience that would be impossible to replicate in today's far more conservative movie poster environment. Everything about ZOMBIE is just so blessedly *wrong* in our modern world that I like to think that it will always have a special place in the hearts of fandom, as it seems just as vital now as when it first came out.

It will never be mistaken for anything other than what it is: a gut punch to good taste and proper movie manners made by talented people who knew exactly what they were doing.

The previous DVD releases came in 2005 – to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the film's initial unleashing upon an unsuspecting U.S. audience – by two competing DVD companies. How much has the world changed since the Blue Underground vs. Shriek Show dual-release of ZOMBIE controversy a few years back?

Well for one thing, the film has become more deeply entrenched in the public consciousness since the airing of a Windows 7 ad back in mid-2010 that featured an excerpt from the zombie attacking the shark scene in a humorous context. It makes me look forward to seeing how the mainstream media finds a way to recontextualize classic moments from other movies that we love to sell us things.

Perhaps Marilyn Burns screaming her head off at the family table towards the end of TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE can be similarly reconfigured into an Arby's advertisement sometime soon?

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It still amazes me what a difference 20 years can make towards mainstream acceptance of the transgressive films so many of us grew up with. I'll never forget the first time I saw a ridiculously large and sharpened wooden splinter puncture a screaming woman's eyeball in stark close-up for the first time. At the tender age of 14, it was like seeing Peter O'Toole blow out the match that shock-cuts to the desert landscape in *LAWRENCE OF ARABIA* or the primitive ape descendant of *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY* tossing that bone into the air that transforms into a space station. I literally felt the shape of what cinema meant to me curve around my head and spin me in place. It was nauseating and exhilarating and completely energizing. It made me want to watch movies that showed me things I'd never actually want to experience in real life. It made me realize that the dream machine was also capable of, and could be equally sublime at opening a window into humanities shared nightmares that needed to be explored in art. I'm always happy to take another look at it and write about the experience.



So let me start with my complaints about the video transfer, which I'm once again going to take to task since it has all the same problems, to my eye, that the previous releases had – some scenes have been color timed *too damn bright*. Should I be comparing a brand new state-of-the-art Hi-Def transfer to my 20+ years old standard-definition Japanese laserdisc? Well, to be fair, I'm ecstatic to see the restoration work that's been done to remove the scratches, dirt and even some bad frame damage that had been on most releases since the 2005 DVD restorations came along and removed a thick layer of grunge from the image. But the main problem that I have is that some of the overly brightened scenes reduce the scare-power of Sergio Salvati's expert cinematography by removing the dark shadows and presenting a much flatter looking image.

Not to jump ahead to the supplements just quite yet, but in his interview on the second disc Salvati himself talks about the intentionally "ugly" lighting and deep shadows he used in the zombie scenes to create suspense and discomfort. Based on those comments, it seems obvious to me that he was not consulted about any of the recent transfers we've been handed down because I think he would vehemently disapprove of what's been wrought upon his images here. Most especially in the scene just before Olga Karlatos has her eye pierced with a splinter, the shots fluctuate between lighting that could almost be flat daylight and then suddenly we have dark shadows – and the brightness does the wonderful make-up effect no favors.

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Likewise, the scene where our intrepid adventurers go back to Dr. Menard's house to find a group of zombies chowing-down on the remains of Ms. Karlatos is severely cheapened by the flatness of the lighting that whoever supervised this transfer decided to dial-up. Some technicians simply do not understand that just because something is visible on the camera negative does not mean that it's meant to be brightened up and pulled from the darkness to be made into a vulgar display where darkened mystery was the original intention. I'm sad to say that in many ways, despite the far crappier quality of the image, I much prefer watching my old laserdisc – not because I am a grindhouse purist who demands to see print damage to feel like I'm getting the most out of my genre movie-watching, but because the film source from which that older transfer was taken was a theatrical release print and I believe it is much closer to the filmmakers original visual intentions.

So there you have it. My perhaps Quixotic take on the subject. I suspect most consumers will not care or even take notice of this issue, but I'd say it's almost about as criminal an act of digital neglect as the re-color timing of HALLOWEEN that caused some controversy a few years back amongst the hardcore fans of that classic film (not to place that blame here, as that was Anchor Bay and not a Blue Underground release). And if I'm totally wrong about my feelings here, I'd be more than happy to receive an e-mail from Sergio Salvati telling me he's seen and approves of this transfer, as it says that he personally supervised it on the Blue Underground website.

No complaints from me on the audio side of things, with the usual assortment of sonic overkill allowing you to choose between 6.1 DTS-ES, 5.1 Dolby Digital Surround EX or the original English or Italian mono tracks. Dialogue and sound effects are loud and clear in all the mixes and Fabio Frizzi's score always sounds great. Subtitle options include English, English SDH, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Deutsch, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Thai for those keeping count (what, no Hopi?). Listening to the Italian track with English subs here is not the revelation that HOUSE BY THE CEMETARY was, although there are a few surprising differences (most especially the radio broadcast at the climax).

It is unbelievable to imagine, but this Blue Underground Blu-Ray is packed with supplements, yet manages to duplicate only one thing that was previously released – the informative commentary of lead actor Ian McCulloch and moderator Jason Slater. Otherwise, we have an entire second disc of interview featurettes—shot in hi-def—that runs longer than the main feature (around an hour and 43 minutes of new material, to be exact), all of which was specially conducted for this two-disc Ultimate Edition release.

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Going through this treasure trove of interviews, I'll talk about them in their order of appearance on disc two of the set. First up is "Zombie Wasteland", a 22 minute featurette that has interviews with stars Richard Johnson, Ian McCulloch and Al Cliver, as well as the stuntman/performer who portrayed the iconic throat-biting zombie featured prominently on the disc cover (as well as the famous U.S. poster), Ottaviano Dell'Acqua.

All of these gentlemen have interesting stories to tell, as well as the standard different points of view on their working relationships and experiences of dealing with Lucio Fulci (one begins to suspect that there had to be more than one of him), as no two people seem to have the same story of what he was like on-set. The most interesting revelation comes from Al Cliver—which seems backed-up by the stories of the other participants—that all of the actors get along better now than they did during the actual shooting of the movie.

Obviously a labor of love put together by Michael Felsher of Red Shirt Pictures, the interviews were shot during a convention (this gathering of the actors once again made possible by Mike Baronas of Paura Productions), and Mr. Felsher finds a way to re-stage a famous moment from ZOMBIE using the means at his disposal that would have given Maestro Fulci an amused and approving chuckle.

"Flesh Eaters on Film" (10 minutes) is an interview with prolific producer Fabrizio De Angelis who has a lot of interesting things to say about the economics of making low-budget genre films back in the early 1980's, and the importance to the money people of a reliable producer in attracting funding during that period (above even who the director or the stars of film were).

The situation that lead to Elisa Briganti being credited with the ZOMBIE screenplay instead of Fulci's writing cohort of this period, Dardano Sacchetti, is one of the more fascinating (and surprisingly personal stories) relayed in "Deadtime Stories", a 14 segment that also has some revealing words about how the production came about in the first place, since Sacchetti's involvement with the project began before Fulci was even brought on-board.

The interviews with the people behind the production begin with "World of the Dead" (16 minutes), sporting interviews with Lucio's great cinematographer of this period, Sergio Salvati, and production and costume designer Walter Patriarca. Both men shed some light onto how the overall look of the film was achieved, with Patriarca in particular coming across as a very articulate and imaginative person with a very deep sense of artistic expression. As I mentioned earlier, many of Salvati's comments about the deep darkness of the shadows in his lighting choices back-up my thoughts on this video transfer being a bit too bright for my tastes in certain scenes, but I'll leave it at that for now.

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The fantastic make-up effects crew who provided the groundbreaking grotesque ghouls for the film are given ample time to tell their tales in "Zombi Italiano", a 17 minute discussion of the pre-digital make-up creations that have fueled the nightmares of many a viewer for over 30 years now. Giannetto De Rossi, Maurizio Trani and Gino De Rossi go back-and-forth, often in overlapping style, discussing how the famous eyeball scene began almost as a compromise and how, in the process of creating something from a half-completed effect, became what it has become today. It's also fascinating to hear about the sculpting techniques involving clay and latex to create the unique, one-of-a-kind zombie make-ups – each one an individually crafted work of art.

Amusingly, music maestro Fabio Frizzi talks more about the use of silence and sound effects to create tension and surprise in ZOMBIE; practically discounting his own famous theme music until the very end in the brief "Notes on a Headstone" (7 minutes). While I certainly agree that there is some imaginative sound design in the movie, Frizzi's music is the engine that keeps the titular zombies chugging along with style, and I wish he'd talked a bit more about his creative process and compositional techniques.

It's great to hear Lucio's daughter Antonella reminisce about her father's work in general in "All in the Family" (6 minutes). Placing this featurette towards the end of the cycle was a good choice, as it's refreshing to hear her take on everything, as what she says often incorporates a little piece of what someone said here with what someone else said there and gives a more rounded portrait of the man based on the opinions presented by Fulci's collaborators.

Finally, one of genre cinema's current favorite practitioners Guillermo del Toro, effuses about ZOMBIE for nearly 10 minutes in "Zombie Lover", and it's sure to put a grin a mile wide on every fanboy's face. His knowledge and enthusiasm are absolutely infectious to behold – even when describing someone else's movie and the tropes of the horror film, his knowledge and his interpretation of the history behind it are a joy to behold and a mini-education in how to be a great fan and a talented practitioner of the art. Del Toro also provides a brief but spirited intro to the film itself (which one has the option of watching or not watching before the movie begins).

Whew! Okay, you're tired of reading and my fingers are bleeding from typing. To be clear, despite my bitching and moaning about the "modernization" of the transfer, this is still an excellent package put together with lots of love for one of the movies that had a profound effect upon my life, so to say that I highly recommend it is obviously an understatement. I'm looking

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forward to reviewing ZOMBIE again in five years (with the correct color timing....) when the holographic release hits the streets, even if I have to do it with undead fingers from beyond the grave.

MOVIE: 🧟🧟🧟

PACKAGE: 🧟🧟🧟