Written by Michael Gingold
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The RESIDENT EVIL movies have never been strong on story, but in its latest chapter, the series has abandoned all pretense of plot completely—which, if nothing else, at least makes it a sort of *ne plus ultra* of video-game flicks. RESIDENT EVIL: RETRIBUTION doesn’t have scenes, it has levels.

Like most of the RESIDENT EVILs, RETRIBUTION opens with a pulse-quickening setpiece offering the promise that this will be the sequel that truly ups the franchise’s game, only to give way to a series of loud and busy but rote action setpieces. There’s also an early recap of the previous films’ events for those coming in late, before we find heroine Alice (Milla Jovovich) living in unfamiliar suburban bliss with a husband and young daughter Becky, played by Aryana Engineer, last seen as the little sister of the ORPHAN. Becky is deaf, for no particular narrative reason (though Engineer is hearing-impaired in real-life), and she and Alice speak perfectly clearly with each other so that their sign-language exchanges don’t have to be subtitled. Anyway, pretty soon they’re being threatened by rampaging zombies/infected humans, and are rescued by original EVIL returnee Rain (Michelle Rodriguez)—or at least, a less-competent variation who drives through the ghoul-ridden streets with her car windows open. And just when you think you’re heading into a new twist on the formula…

We find Alice back in the bowels of the Umbrella Corporation. The evil, T-virus-creating firm thinks it has what it calls “the Alice Project” where they want her, but a computer-security breach allows her to escape, providing her with some hot new fighting togs in the process. From there, the film consists solely of Alice making her way through a series of staging areas in the company of a constantly growing and shrinking number of allies, battling assorted creatures, while a strike team led by Leon S. Kennedy (Johann Urb) does the same trying to rescue her, and she’s tracked by the turned-to-evil Jill Valentine (Sienna Guillory) and her goon squad. Some of the faces are new (Urb, Li Bingbing as Ada Wong), while a number of others

return from the earlier films (Rodriguez, Boris Kodjoe, Colin Salmon, Shawn Roberts), but their reappearances have little impact because nobody here has a character to play. Almost all of their dialogue (including Jovovich’s) consists of expositional lines like “We need to cross two more test environments to escape” and old standbys like “Time is running out!”

As our heroines and heroes fight and die their way through replications of Tokyo, New York City, Russia, etc., writer/director Paul W.S. Anderson at least provides a little more visual variety than in past EVIL sequels. There’s an arresting image every 15 minutes or so (the smoke from a burning house staining the ceiling of the suburban environment, a spiraling conveyor belt of clones) and he makes effective use of the sharply lensed 3D here and there, creating a few neat, depthy environments and goosing us with bullets, blades and zombie mouth-tentacles in our faces. But they’re fleeting pleasures as Anderson hurries us along to the next confrontation, creating a superficial sense of pace but little in the way of true rooting interest. An energetic score by tomandandy tries hard to keep the excitement going, but it’s hard to be invested in the mayhem when all involved are ciphers; the only one to show a spark of personality is COSMOPOLIS’ Kevin Durand as one of Kennedy’s soldiers.

Even the attempt to humanize Alice via her maternal bonding with Becky doesn’t come to much, since their relationship is just as surface-level as everything else in RESIDENT EVIL: RETRIBUTION, and its payoff won’t surprise anyone who’s seen ALIENS (still the unmatched model for this kind of film). But perhaps the most disappointing thing about this entry is, for all the effort clearly put into its production, how little it advances the series, feeling like a placeholder to mark time until the next installment. The movie comes to its close with nothing really having changed—just Alice having gone through a few more strenuous experiences and a bunch more people having been introduced and killed (and no retribution that I could detect having been achieved). As usual, Anderson throws us a big, spectacular final shot to keep the fans hopeful for the next installment, here suggesting that it might be titled PRESIDENT EVIL. “This is the beginning of the end,” someone says just before the credits roll. Don’t bet on it.