

BOXOFFICEPROPHETS

Dawn of the Dead: Ultimate Edition

By Chris Hyde

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Just a short time ago, this space declared Criterion's Videodrome package the best DVD release of the year thus far. Then came the Dawn.

If there is a single, seminal zombie epic in the annals of celluloid, it is surely George Romero's 1978 movie Dawn of the Dead. No film before or since has so effectively made the dead come to life for audiences all around the globe, and its balanced mix of tension and satire results in a nearly perfect film. In recent years, there's been a spate of zombie flicks that have either hit international screens or are on their

shambling way — the Australian picture *Undead*, Danny Boyle's digitally-shot piece *28 Days Later* and its British comic companion *Shaun of the Dead* (probably the most faithful in spirit to Romero's film of all these) the German *One by One*, an Irish outing titled *Dead Meat* — not to mention American megaplex offerings such as the *Resident Evil* films and the mainstream remake of the classic under discussion here. Yet this zombie renaissance has failed to produce anything that even approaches the brilliant masterpiece that is the original *Dawn*, as this is not simply one of the great horror movies of the '70s but one of the best American films of its time.

By this point, it would seem that many readers should already be cognizant of the plot details of Romero's work, and so we're going to abandon some of the trademark circumspection with which this column generally approaches the finer points of story. (Translation: if you haven't seen this one yet, here be spoilers). The film opens on utter chaos, with a television station doing emergency broadcasts about the horrible situation that has befallen the world as the dead arise to munch on the living. We're introduced quickly to a pair of the members of the quartet who will form the core group for the film: an employee of the broadcaster (Gaylen Ross) and her chopper flying boyfriend (David Emge). Soon after, the other two individuals that we will come to know so well are brought to the fore: a stolid military man named Peter (Ken Foree) and Roger, a more rambunctious blond soldier (Scott H. Reiniger). This small band of people all pile into the flyboy's helicopter and light out into the sky, hopeful of finding some place to garner respite from the hordes of undead who now populate the once friendly landscape.

Unfortunately, once this crew gets an eye-in-the-sky perspective of the Pittsburgh area they realize that it's going to be difficult to find a place to hide. Their suburban world has become peopled with flesh-eating zombies who are being hunted by rednecks and soldiers, and there truly seems no place to hole up — until they happen upon a proto-mall that might somehow offer safe harbor. Landing on the roof of this capitalist emporium, the group eventually tumbles to the idea that this may in fact be the perfect place to go to ground, and they then set about clearing the area of its many zombies.

This is, of course, not an uneventful task; but the four do eventually manage to seal themselves off from the outside world, even though poor Roger ends up with a bite or two in the process. At first, their hermetically zombie-free environment seems just like the fulfillment of the ultimate consumerist fantasy as they run rampant among the goods; they're able to pluck pretty much whatever they wish from the burgeoning shelves of this well-stocked mall. But it doesn't take very long for the malaise to set in, and the twin conditions of boredom and dissatisfaction raise their ugly heads right quickly for the remaining members of the group. Yet we never do get a chance to see just how this ennui might ultimately play out with our cast of survivors, as soon enough our heroes find their sanctuary besieged by a leather clad pack of bikers who invade their territory and let the zombies back in. The upshot of this happenstance is that another friend is lost to the hordes of undead, and the two people who then remain are forced to flee to a fate unknown in their fuel-short helicopter.

Romero's film is a true tour-de-force, running a gamut of styles from tense thriller to gross out gore film to ironic take on the vagaries of consumer culture. To be sure, the metaphors here are neither subtle nor

restrained; the director's over-the-top satire on a culture that is eating itself from the inside out is certainly obvious enough. But Dawn of the Dead is so character driven that the story carries off these criticisms without ever becoming strident or shrill, and with Romero's creative control nearly complete, the project blossoms into greatness. While there's no selling short the contributions of the excellent cast and accompanying crew (the special effects by Tom Savini being especially noteworthy) there's no doubt that it's the auteur job of the filmmaker in charge that stamps this one as a masterwork. Also, though the contributions of Romero the writer and director are undoubtedly paramount to the film's success, there's no overlooking his amazing job of editing that gives the outing its fast-paced narrative drive and is the bedrock of the film's success.

Long hailed as one of the premiere horror films ever made, it has been left to the folks at Anchor Bay to bring Dawn of the Dead into its digital form. This release has been some time coming, as it was supposed to have been done by last Halloween — but now that it has finally manifested itself in the marketplace we can happily report that the wait for the Ultimate Edition has been well worth it. The four-disc package contains just about everything a zombieophile could ever hope for: three different versions of the film that each have their own commentaries, two documentaries, home movies taken on the film's set, a visual tour of the mall where Dawn took place, plus profuse amounts of material like stills, posters, TV and radio spots and the like. What it all amounts to is an incredibly complete tribute to Romero's most sparkling gem; a bloody, balls to the wall tribute to zombiedom's finest cinematic endeavor.

There's far too much included in this set to even cover adequately in a brief review such as this one, but a cursory overview should reveal just how well Anchor Bay has done in creating this set. The three versions of the film contained here give an interesting perspective, especially if all you've seen previously is the theatrical cut. Though there isn't anything in the alternate extended or European versions to shake Romero's correct contention that the 124-minute version is best, these other edits offer two interestingly different ways to see the film. The longer version has all sorts of different shots and edits, though perhaps the most jarring difference is the excess of library music which makes the soundtrack far inferior to the more Goblin-dominated score of the final release. Alternatively, Dario Argento's edit is shorter and more grim than Romero's vision of the apocalypse; this cut takes out some of the ironies and makes Dawn much more of a flat out horror pic.

As for the multitudinous collection of extras on this Ultimate Edition, all one can really say about these is: wow. The three commentaries all have their charms as well as their flaws, but overall they provide entertainment and information enough to make each worth a listen. There's inevitably some crossover of information with the recent documentary (The Dead Will Walk) that's on the fourth disc in the set, but that's a minor quibble as the duplication of data isn't anywhere near complete. But perhaps the most interesting thing about this particular documentary is the contemporary interviews with people like The Nurse Zombie and the Screwdriver Zombie et cetera; apparently, the Hare Krishna zombie was the only biggie that they couldn't track down! The fourth disc also includes an even more interesting historic look at Dawn, however, as Roy Frumkes' excellent Document of the Dead is also tacked on. This one has profuse amounts of footage that were filmed during the shoot at the mall, and provides an invaluable behind the

scenes gander at how the production took place. The simple inclusion of this film alone would make the release of this Ultimate Edition a milestone — it's a fascinating piece of work whose historic value should be unquestioned.

Phew. Well, we've come this far and yet everything still hasn't been covered. It'd probably take another 500 words to properly laud all that remains — there's super 8 home movies from the set with commentary by the zombie who helped shoot them, a ten minute tour of the Monroeville mall with star Ken Foree, a promo commercial from the shopping center itself and more trailers, photos, bios and other assorted promotional stuff than you can even imagine. It should also be noted that the visual and audio qualities of near everything on the set are excellent; the extended rough cut is of course a bit shoddier in quality due to its source, but even its mono track sounds just fine. If there's anything at all that I might wish that this box set had that it does not is the sort of essay booklet seen in the Videodrome release, but with everything that's here instead it'd sure be absurd to term this any sort of oversight. All in all, this is a massive and devoted collection that represents the definitive DVD release of one of the great horror films of all time — not to mention that you can score it for under 40 bucks. So if for some strange reason you've been holding back from adding this release to your horror library, the suggestion here is that you wait no longer. I promise you that it doesn't bite.



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