The fifth entry in the Screen Gems franchise, RESIDENT EVIL: AFTERLIFE, is hitting DVD & Blu-ray this coming Tuesday. For those of you who need a refresher on the previous movie, here are Michael Gingold’s thoughts on EXTINCTION.

Quite a bit has been written recently about the current superiority of horror video games to the fright fare that has been turning up in theaters. The likes of BIOTOXIC, the argument goes, deliver far fresher and more unsettling experiences than the tired/derivative scare tactics on view on bigger screens, and that’s hard to dispute—but it doesn’t take into account the essential difference in the way the two media are experienced. Video games are subjective experiences, in which the player directly confronts, and is acted upon by, the frightening environments, creatures and mayhem in question. With all due respect to those who painstakingly create these scenarios and monsters, it seems to me that filmmakers who plow the same territory have a tougher job. Movies are an objective experience, which the viewer enters as an observer, not a participant—requiring the establishing of characters with whom the audience can identify first, and through them feel the fear generated by whatever the threat happens to be.

All of this is a roundabout way of getting to one of the reasons why RESIDENT EVIL: EXTINCTION is the latest in the long string of features that fail to deliver the fear factor of their video-game inspirations. The people on view in this franchise’s third entry are so sketchy and underdeveloped that, with the slight exception of heroine Alice (played once again by Milla Jovovich), we never get to know them, and thus there are nothing but the most banal scares to be had. The other major problem is that from start to finish, we’ve seen this all before—if not in the previous EVIL films, then in DAY OF THE DEAD, THE ROAD WARRIOR and THE BIRDS. Think the George Miller/Mel Gibson classic with undead flesheaters instead of Mohawked bikers, with the addition of a setpiece in which killer ravens attack and without the tension and surprise, and you’ve got this movie.

But since the form requires a synopsis: The T-Virus has now spread across the Earth, decimating not only sentient life but apparently all vegetation as well, turning the American continent into a vast desert. Traversing the sandy expanses is Alice, who, after a run-in with some sadistic creeps and their pet zombie dogs, winds up in the company of a convoy led by

Claire Redfield (Ali Larter), driving their armored vehicles through the wasteland. The group also consists of Alice’s old acquaintances Carlos (Oded Fehr) and L.J. (Mike Epps), plus newcomers K-Mart (Spencer Locke) and nurse Betty (Ashanti), just to cover those who are actually introduced by name. Meanwhile, down in a subterranean Umbrella Corporation facility, experiments with Alice’s blood are being performed by Dr. Isaacs (Iain Glen), who has been making a string of Alice clones and attempting to domesticate the ghouls, and who you know is really bad by the way he straightens his tie after sacrificing a couple of underlings to his undead subjects.

The rest is a series of been-there, seen-that setpieces from which director Russell Mulcahy doesn’t wring much in the way of genuine excitement. Mostly, the feeling generated by the human-zombie clashes is that if you’ve seen one ghoul blasted in the head, you’ve seen them all, but at least all the running, jumping, shooting and slashing gave the cast a good physical workout, since their acting muscles are hardly taxed. There are tearful goodbyes between people who have barely shared more than one previous scene together, logical loopholes (Alice has now acquired intense telekinetic abilities, but either never thinks or never bothers to use them in a couple of appropriate situations), shots of a nude Jovovich arranged in just the right poses to hide her naughty bits and plenty of generic, functional dialogue. “Let’s get out of here!” is said twice within a minute or two during one major setpiece—though when a zombie villain intones “You can’t kill me” at one point, he doesn’t have the courtesy to follow it up with the inevitable “I’m already dead!”

It’s tempting to say that Paul W.S. Anderson, who directed the first EVIL and scripted all three, has run out of ideas by this point, but the last shot of EXTINCTION proves that isn’t so. It’s a neat visual, one that suggests a pretty cool new direction for a fourth film, should that come to pass. Too bad Anderson didn’t come up with anything nearly as interesting for the rest of this one.

{jcomments on}