

Written by Mike Schulz

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THE HILLS HAVE EYES

The setup for *The Hills Have Eyes* – Alexandre Aja’s remake of Wes Craven’s 1977 horror classic, with Craven himself on board as a producer – couldn’t be simpler. A vacationing family, headed for California, stops for gas at a filling station near an abandoned nuclear-testing site in New Mexico. The station’s gnarled and suspiciously friendly attendant guides them to a shortcut. The shortcut is a trap, set by the attendant and a family of horribly mutated, not-entirely-inhuman cannibals. And from there on, the plot boils down to three words: Us Against Them.

A pretty standard premise – like many entries in the horror genre, *The Hills Have Eyes* doesn’t have a story so much as an *excuse*

– and as the setup nearly demands, Aja’s film is gory and disturbing, and manipulative as all get-out. It is also – so far, and by a considerable margin – the best movie of 2006.

Recently, we’ve experienced a glut of ’70s horror remakes – *Dawn of the Dead*, *The Amityville Horror*, *When a Stranger Calls*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*

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– and there can be no doubt that we're due for more. (Cameron Bright's agent is probably *salivating* for an *Omen* revamp.) But until Alexandre Aja, the only filmmaker who approached the '70s *spirit* in his horror flicks has been Rob Zombie, whose *House of 1000 Corpses* and *The Devil's Rejects* linger in the memory the way that many of the '70s genre classics do – as low-rent, aggressive, edgy, and unpredictable. Yet popular though they may be – and *Dawn of the Dead* is a pretty terrific movie besides – our current spate of horror remakes feels bland to the point of pointlessness, which I suppose shouldn't be surprising; from a money-making standpoint, the movies don't *require* a lot of personality, or even any good scares, as producers have all but ensured a profit with the films' *titles*.

The great thrill of *The Hills Have Eyes* isn't that it scares the hell out of you. It's that it does so by giving its horror material a fresh re-imagining while honoring the spirit of its '70s original; Aja's film may seem a "standard" Hollywood update – with technical savvy disguised as improvement – but it has the relentless, gut-wrenching fervor of early Tobe Hooper.

Hills tells you it won't be playing by modern-day expectations within its first minutes, during a funny-creepy opening-credits montage and our subsequent introduction to the Family in Peril, where we realize a baby is among the seven potential victims. Uh oh, we think. A baby? Placing an infant in jeopardy feels like a decidedly un-P.C. choice in the best way – though a cheap trick, it's a *smart* cheap trick, as it gives an audience an immediate rooting interest in the characters' safety – and it sets up the film's mood of queasy anxiety, which most current remakes don't come close to matching; it's been a long while since I've been honestly *unsettled* at a horror movie.

That infant, though, becomes key to the movie's success. We honestly *care* about the Family in Peril, and this is due not to the characters being rich and detailed – the figures in Aja's and Gregory Levasseur's script are as generic as any in the genre – but due to the

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actors

being rich and detailed. When was the last time you saw a horror movie and wanted to talk about the

performances

? (Aside from wanting to say, "They sucked.") But

The Hills Have Eyes

may be the most consistently well-acted horror movie the genre has provided in years. Ted Levine and Kathleen Quinlan, as the clan parents, Aaron Stanford and Vinessa Shaw, as the baby's parents, and Emilie de Ravin and Dan Byrd as the youngest siblings – all of them lend such nuance and heartfelt sincerity to their stock characters that it catches you off-guard, and when they suffer,

you

suffer; empathy, as

The Hills Have Eyes

well understands, gives horror movies their heft.

But without scares, empathy doesn't mean much in a horror film, and directorially, Aja proves both technically accomplished and wickedly clever; the movie isn't just frightening but *witty*. The jolts come at unexpected times and the more elongated scare sequences are remarkably well-sustained; a scene of Byrd looking for his character's dog unfurls with agonizing intensity. Yet Aja also reveals a sharp, mordant sense of humor, and once our heroes – who, by this point, we are dying to see prevail – start finally retaliating against the monsters, the film detonates a cathartic barrage of gruesomeness and humor; when one of the film's characters – earlier revealed to be a pacifist Democrat – shoved a miniature American flag through a mutant's brain, the appalling viscera of the killing matched the appalling inventiveness of the joke perfectly, and I wanted to applaud.

The Hills Have Eyes

only

seems

like another run-of-the-mill Hollywood bastardization. It's actually the smartest 2006 film entertainment out there.



THE LIBERTINE

Radioactive Blast: "The Hills Have Eyes," "The Libertine," "Failure to Launch," and "Ultraviolet"

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"You will not like me," Johnny Depp pronounces at the beginning of *The Libertine*. Actually, we do. It's the *mo*
vie

we're not crazy about. Though Laurence Dunmore's historical drama – a 17th Century examination of poet and scoundrel John Wilmot, adapted from Stephen Jeffrey's play – revels in its squalor and perversion (complete with John Malkovich as an expectedly eccentric Charles II),

The Libertine

never quite works because you don't necessarily

buy

it; the rhythms have a stage-bound archness that works against the striving-for-naturalism visual approach. The film feels phony, and dramatically inert, but Samantha Morton, with her eerie focus, helps enormously, as does Rosamund Pike as Wilton's livid wife. And, of course, there's Johnny Depp, whose commitment here is inspiring; he gives a strong, evil-from-the-inside-out performance, and only sugarcoats it when the material forces him to. (Wilton's jokey scenes with his manservant, sniggeringly named Allcock, suggest a syphilitic Arthur and Hobson.) In

The Libertine

, Depp plays a bastard and does it so well that you're hard-pressed

not

to like him, opinions of the film itself notwithstanding.



FAILURE TO LAUNCH

Just how noxious, charm-free, and desperately unfunny is the Matthew McConaughey/Sarah Jessica Parker romantic comedy *Failure to Launch*? Remember *Gigli*? Justin Bartha played Affleck's and J. Lo's mentally challenged kidnapee in that. Well, he's in this movie, too. And, through no fault of his own, he actually comes off worse

here

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