

GOTHIC

Directed by Ken Russell
(1986) Vestron Video Blu-ray

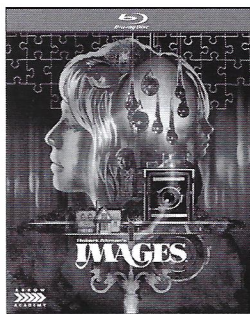
So many avid readers and viewers of all things Frankenstein would have loved to have been the proverbial fly on the wall during the storied summer of 1816 in which five highly romanticized friends and lovers gathered in Switzerland and pronounced "We shall each write a ghost story." Unsurprisingly, there have been numerous attempts to capture the evening in question on stage and screen; ranging from the genteel, mannered prologue of James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* through the lush 'arthouse' drama of 1988's *Haunted Summer*. For the 1986 release *Gothic*, screenwriter Stephen Volk (*The Kiss*, *The Guardian*) supplied a thoroughly researched meditation that drew heavily from the true life experience of Mary Wollstonecraft (the teenager had already suffered the traumas of stillbirth and infant mortality before her marriage to Percy Shelley; and these ordeals are widely accepted as the root of her legendary tale of a creator unable to come to terms with his own creation). Of course, when Volk's first produced script finally hit the silver screen, it also contained a sequence featuring an animated suit of armor boasting a huge, thorn-like phallic protrusion upon which a hapless female is promptly—oh, did I forget to mention that Ken Russell signed on as director? Volk didn't exactly have "lock up the kids and blindfold your granny" in mind for *Gothic*, but that's exactly what one of the kinder reviews (*People Magazine*) suggested.

For his newest unfettered celebration of literary creativity, Russell was blessed with a quintet of performers equally skilled and uninhibited. As Lord Byron, gleeful host of the event ("As long as you are under my roof you will play my games!") we have top-billed Gabriel Byrne; and Julian (*Warlock*) Sands takes on the role of the enthusiastic Shelley. The late Natasha Richardson shares the spotlight as Mary, while the cast is rounded out by Myriam Cyr as Mary's half-sister (and Byron's current 'significant other') Claire and Timothy Spall as the nervous Dr. Polidori. There's (literal) electricity in the air and Shelley's already prancing naked on the rooftop during a storm before the real festivities begin. Laudanum is the hallucinogen of choice; labels such as "gay" and "bi" scarcely apply in an orgy of "free love," and while the sadomasochistic interplay between Byron and Claire might just be a game, it's no laughing matter when Polidori preys on Byron's vampiric phobia with a plateful of live leeches on rice.

As incoherent as the narrative may seem upon description, *Gothic* effectively conveys how desperately the participants attempt to deploy their creative imaginations (chemically-enhanced or not) to deal with their deep-rooted fears, all of them stemming from the most basic functions of human anatomy and sexuality. Some are interpreted grotesquely and fantastically (the aforementioned suit of armor provides one of the first major jolts, but Claire's command to look her in the "eyes" also tends to get one of the biggest audience reactions), while poor Mary is reminded of her personal loss and emptiness in unflinching, unrelieved terms. Byron's collection of life-size automatons (actually costumed actors) adds to the disorientation, and an extra level of cacophony is provided by a superb score by Thomas Dolby ("She Blinded Me With Science"). After all of this, the sad tale of the fates of the participants almost comes as a pleasant relief when it's delivered by the calming voice of a modern-day tour guide . . .

The lack of conventional monsters, the extreme imagery and the undeniably downbeat subject matter quickly took its toll on contemporary audiences: after its brief theatrical release via Vestron Pictures, *Gothic* then became the "Do Not Rent This Movie" pick of local video stores when employees wearied of the complaints they tended to receive when customers did just that. (Russell, of course, merely carried on; next turning his sights to Oscar Wilde in *Salome's Last Dance* and then delighting his seasoned fans with his wild and crazy take on Bram Stoker's *The Lair of the White Worm*.) Years later, in an apparent copyright glitch to rival that of *Night of the Living Dead* itself, *Gothic* abruptly found itself on the "presumed public domain" list and quickly became a staple of budget VHS tapes and 50-film DVD collections, increasing its exposure but scarcely benefiting its producers. But now that the film is far more widely accepted (by Russell fans and literary history aficionados alike) in the twenty-first century, the new Vestron Blu-ray Collector's Series edition aims to right previous wrongs with a rendition that effortlessly blows away all of the previous dupes with a fully restored 1:85:1 image and 2.0 DTS-HD stereo sound. Alas, while Ken Russell himself lived to record his own feature commentary for the company's previous release of *The Lair of the White Worm*, no such track exists for *Gothic*, so his widow Lisi Russell does the honors with the assistance of historian Matthew Melia. A second feature track offers isolated excerpts from Dolby's score with intermittent commentary by the composer himself. In additional supplements we're given generous interviews with actor Julian Sands, screenwriter Volk and director of photography Mike Southon (a long-time Ken Russell fan for whom this was a dream project). A theatrical trailer, a TV spot and a stills gallery round out the extras.

Shane M. Dallmann



IMAGES

Directed by Robert Altman
(1972) Arrow Video Blu-ray

Widely-regarded as secondary Robert Altman, or perhaps as just an interesting avant garde experiment by an auteur best known for painstaking naturalism, *Images* (1972) has slowly been gathering fans over the years, and I suspect that this respectful, sometimes reverential Blu-ray release from Arrow will attract even more adherents. Altman had a strong inclination to deflate, or at least unpack, every genre he dabbled in, but *Images* actually seems determined to disturb us, fulfilling the prime directive of a horror film, and while some may insist on calling this a thriller, there are enough screams, violence, and jump scares on hand to justify filing it on the shelf near *Psycho*, Polanski's *Repulsion*, and other psychological horror classics.

The film centers around Cathryn, a children's author who feels herself slipping mentally and emotionally, especially after receiving a series of strange calls suggesting that her husband Hugh (René Auberjonois) is having an affair. Hugh agrees to take Cathryn away to their country cottage, where they can relax and visit with friends, but Cathryn's problems only deepen after they arrive, as a series of violent visions and enigmatic experiences leave her questioning what is real and what is not. Altman does a fine job of keeping the audience off-kilter right along with Cathryn, without letting the whole thing deteriorate into a hallucinogenic stew. Susannah York anchors the picture with a haunting performance, underplaying her character's dissolving psyche and resorting to histrionics only sparingly, maintaining a poised exterior much of the time. As Cathryn completes an internal transition from fragmented insecurity to a terrifying moral certainty, York's characterization maintains the tight consistency of a normally composed individual who has utterly lost her way.

Auberjonois provides a more grounded counterpoint to the roiling Cathryn, evolving from an object of suspicion to an apparently well-meaning, but somewhat clueless spouse who loves his wife but has no idea what she's on about. An Altman ensemble regular before moving into a long television career, Auberjonois went on to develop a sort of prissy, martinet character actor persona that served him well for many years. There is little of that here, however. Hugh is a bit disconnected and can certainly be abrupt with his wife, but as we begin to understand what he himself is struggling with over the course of the picture, he begins to earn our sympathy. Altman does everything he can, subtly, to maintain an undercurrent of disorientation.

The main characters are all named after the actors playing the other main characters. The picture was shot on glorious location near Ireland's 400-foot Powerscourt Waterfall, but in the dead of winter, so the landscape's magic seems depleted, dimmed, but ever-present. The characters never mention where they are geographically, drive U.S.-configured cars, and refuse to mollify us with even one Irish accent. Avoiding the temptation to compose "sunny Ireland" shots, Vilmos Zsigmond's cinematography shies away from depicting the landscape as anything but beautifully foreboding and lends layer after layer of visual and psychological depth to the picture's shadowy, firelit interiors.

Not surprisingly, Arrow Video gives *Images* a first-class presentation with this Blu-ray release, beginning with a 4k scan of the original camera negative and a comprehensive digital restoration. The intentionally under-lit, desaturated image is well treated here, yielding plenty of natural detail without pumping up the sharpness or brightness inappropriately. The LPCM Mono English track also does its job just fine.

The quality of the disc's extras really brings home the care that Arrow put into this package. *Diabolique Magazine's* Sam Deighan and Kat Ellinger provide an engaging commentary track, dissecting *Images'* status as a genre picture and examining its place in Altman's oeuvre. Altman himself discusses the picture and how it came to be in a 24-minute archival interview piece and provides his own commentary track for selected scenes from the film, which, thankfully, can be accessed all together as a standalone feature, rather the fast-forward/back-it-up process required by other selected scenes commentaries. One of the most straightforward film auteurs of all time, Altman is more than happy to explain why he made specific choices and what this or that is supposed to mean. Elsewhere on the disk, genre film historian Stephen Thrower appears in his own 32-minute segment to discuss and analyze the picture, and former child actress Cathryn Harrison, who plays the character Susannah (note the names), stops in for a 6-minute reminiscence. The first pressing also includes an insert booklet with an essay by Sight & Sound contributor Carmen Gray and more comments from Altman.

Chris Herzog