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 Review by [Rohit Rao](#) | posted July 19, 2012 | [E-mail the Author](#)

THE MOVIE:

Given its level of polish and purpose, I wouldn't have been surprised if **Headspace** had been created by a genre veteran. Acknowledging that it was the directorial debut of a hungry, young filmmaker makes it downright impressive. In 2005, Andrew van den Houten, backed by an immensely talented cast and crew, unleashed his little horror movie on an unsuspecting audience. It earned some well-deserved [praise](#) back then and this *director's cut* release simply reaffirms that.

The entire film is driven by the character of Alex Borden (Christopher Denham) since it's his noggin that the title is referring to. It's fair to say that *he's seen some things*. If you want proof, just take a look at his childhood. After watching his mom (Sean Young) go batshit crazy and his dad (Larry Fessenden) putting her down with extreme prejudice, it's a wonder that Alex grew up to be a semi-normal functioning member of society. Sure, he sulks about and sometimes hangs around outside his friends' apartment watching them have sex (Yaaay! Gratuitous nudity!) but other than that he's totally normal.

Things quickly change when he encounters an intense stranger (Erick Kastel) in the park. All they do is play a quick game of chess but the effects linger. Suddenly, Alex is filled with knowledge...a scary amount of it. He knows things that he has no business knowing and feels his faculties expanding beyond his control. A fainting spell lands Alex in the care of doctors played by Dee Wallace Stone and William Atherton but their inability to help him soon places him on the couch of a psychologist played by Olivia Hussey. Then things get worse; a lot worse. Weird monsters with gnarly claws start showing up and killing people that Alex has come in contact with. He will have to find a way to keep the monsters at bay if he plans on staying sane (and alive).

It's a bit strange to call this film cerebral after watching monster claws erupting from a dude's belly and ripping his face off, but that's exactly what it is. That's not to say that the flashes of gore on display aren't impressive. The effects by Jamie Kelman are over the top and heightened (in an 80s way) without turning schlocky. It's just that the proceedings feel so grounded and authentic thanks to a riveting central performance by Denham that the traditional horror elements seem more like garnish than a main course. It must have been nerve-racking for the filmmakers to pin their hopes on a newcomer but Denham finds the correct tone for his character and builds upon it with panache.

Of course this isn't a one man show so it helps that Denham is surrounded by solid performers (including a ton of scene-stealing stars). Fessenden and Sean Young provide the perfect hook with their opening struggle while pros like Atherton, Stone, Hussey and Udo Kier inject a fair bit of charisma into their scenes. With that said, the other standout performance (besides Denham) belongs to Kastel as the enigmatic chess player. He is amazingly intense but believable in what turns out to be a key role.

Andrew van den Houten working closely with cinematographer William Miller (who also shares credit for production and the screenplay), develops a dreamy look for the film on what must have been a very modest budget. The only area where the film truly suffers is in its pacing. After working overtime to cultivate a strong atmosphere of dread, the climax becomes a mish-mash of creature effects and ambiguous plot turns. This is not to say that the film is undone as a result. I just think that spacing out some of the reveals could have led to a stronger finish. Altogether, this is still a compelling example of a thinking man's creature feature played in minor key.

THE DVD:

Video:

The film was presented in a 1.78:1 aspect ratio with anamorphic enhancement. Other than a bit of shimmer due to aliasing and the occasional soft shot, the film looks quite good. Black levels are respectable as shadow detail remains solid throughout. The colors are intentionally a bit muted but skew towards a natural palette. The creature effects

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and shots of gore are well integrated with none of the visual *seams* being glaringly obvious. This is an above average presentation for the material at hand.

Audio:

The audio was presented in a 5.1 Dolby Digital mix with optional English SDH subtitles. The surround mix does justice to the varied and interesting score by Ryan Shore. Skittering beats give way to fluid piano-driven pieces that split the difference between eerie and pretty. The rear surrounds are also given plenty to do with the ominous sounds of nature in the opening scenes. Creaking floorboards and squishy gore effects carry equal weight here. The only negative is that the dialogue is mixed a bit low in certain scenes. While noticeable, it is never annoying enough to become a major issue.

Extras:

While sharing most of its extras with the earlier release, this director's cut DVD includes a few new features that help distinguish it. I'll try to indicate them as they come up. We kick things off with a pair of **Audio Commentaries**. The first is with director Andrew van den Houten and cinematographer / producer William Miller while the second one features composer Ryan Shore, editor Elwaldo Baptiste and FX artist Jamie Kelman. Both tracks are informative in their own way but the one with van den Houten and Miller seems to be a bit more energetic. Every participant discusses the challenges of working on an independently financed film with a tight budget. Fortunately there isn't any bitterness to be found as they all seem to relish the opportunity to exercise their creativity and control.

Next up, we have **Fractured Skulls: The Making of Headspace** (26:32), a fairly extensive featurette that gives us interviews with much of the cast and crew during the production of the film which is described as being more thriller than horror. Jamie Kelman provides an inside look at the special effects while Ryan Shore discusses the creation of a layered score for the film. Much praise is heaped upon the cast as director van den Houten entertains with his impression of Udo Kier.

Headspace Revisited (21:54) is a brand new featurette that gives us an entertaining one-on-one discussion between Andrew van den Houten and Christopher Denham as they look back at the film they created roughly 8 years ago. While nostalgic and warm, neither participant pulls any punches in describing the often grueling process of filming on a shoestring budget. Besides covering the ins and outs of Headspace, they both discuss other major projects they have been involved in since then (with Denham appearing in *Shutter Island* and van den Houten's busy production schedule).

Deleted, Extended and Alternate Scenes (18:56) gives us a mix of material that eventually hit the cutting room floor. With that said, at least a few of the scenes could have been left in the film without hurting it one bit. There is an early scene with Alex and the doctors discussing his cranial fracture that helps put the film's title into a very creepy perspective. Another scene featuring a chess game helps shed some light on the enigma that is Kastel's character. While an alternate ending is also included, I'm glad it was left off in favor of the one the film currently features.

A **Makeup FX Photo Journey** (1:53) gives us a peek at Jamie Kelman's handiwork while **Auditions** (new to this release) shows Denham and Kastel building their characters from the ground up. While Denham's final portrayal matches his audition closely, it is interesting to note how much Kastel diverged from his initial approach to his character. The auditions also hint at scenes from the script that never made it into the film. A **Trailer** (2:06) closes things out.

Included with the previous release but missing in this one are a score-only audio track, a short featurette dedicated to the creature effects, a few extra deleted scenes, a mini-movie called Dirty Looks, a photo gallery and talent bios. While that may seem like a lot, I contend that the Headspace Revisited featurette and Audition footage make up for their omission.

FINAL THOUGHTS:

Indie horror films are often hampered by their limited budgets. Director Andrew van den Houten smartly side-steps this major roadblock by building his film around a rock-solid central performance by newcomer (at the time) Christopher Denham. Additionally, the dreamy atmosphere and slow-burn approach to the subject matter simply give the creature effects more oomph whenever they pop up on screen. **Highly Recommended.**

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