

## KISS OF THE TARANTULA

Directed by Chris Munger  
(1976) VCI Blu-ray/DVD combo

In what may be the greatest one-hit wonder of the cinematic world (most of the cast never appeared in another film)—*Kiss of the Tarantula* is a sluggish revenge flick that crept around the drive-in circuits of the mid-to-late 1970s. And from the distinct lack of action, suspense and worthwhile direction, it's no wonder couples found other things to do under the stars besides sit through this.

The film introduces us to young Susan (tenderly played by Rebecca Eddins, real-life daughter of Beverly Eddins, who plays the wife and mother), and her dysfunctional family. Her father John Bradley (Herman Wallner) is overly protective of his daughter since mother Martha (Eddins) constantly belittles Susan about her peculiar fascination with spiders. Then, there's Uncle Walter (Eric Mason—real name: Ernesto Macias, *Scream*, *Blacula*, *Scream* (1974); *Grave of the Vampire* (1972), a local detective with lecherous designs on Susan.

Following mother's heart attack—aided by one of Susan's eight-legged friends, the film jumps ahead to a twenty-something Susan (Suzanne Ling) who spends her days wandering aimlessly through the woods near the family mortuary fawning over her collection of tarantulas in the basement—her only real friends.

When two rambunctious couples try to steal a coffin from the funeral home as a prank, Susan intervenes, only to be pawed at and harassed. One of the yokels torments and squashes a tarantula, so Susan follows the couples to the drive-in. She unleashes a half-dozen of her spiders on the troublemakers inside a VW Beetle (the film's best remembered scene). Later, when another local confronts Susan about her involvement in the drive-in deaths, her pets summarily dispatch him while he's working in an air conditioning vent.

The film veers into a spider-less direction. Nancy (Patricia Landon), another young friend, discovers Uncle Walter putting some incestuous moves on Susan. He cannot risk his name being ruined in the community, so he chases Nancy and kills her to keep his secret safe. He returns to Susan, but in the ensuing scuffle, is knocked down the stairs—only to end up paralyzed. With a calmness befitting Zoë Lund's vigilante seamstress in *Ms. 45* (1981), Susan dispatches Uncle Walter by entombing him in a hermetically sealed casket. Dad returns home from a trip, and father, daughter and all the little arachnids live happily ever after.

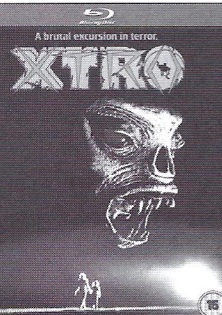
Slow even by a tarantula's standards, the film pads its running time with extended scenes of spiders crawling over body parts, and a lengthy outdoor chase scene between Nancy and Uncle Walter. There's no evidence of a single spider bite—all the victims seemingly die from heart failure—and a tarantula foreleg found on a victim is never mentioned again. Susan's potential boyfriend, Joe (Mark Smith, *Blood Diner*, 1987), appears in one scene and disappears from the narrative thereafter. These things could be overlooked if the story and acting were more engaging. Since it's not, they stand out like a spider on a white wall.

Shot in a whirlwind 10 days during December 1974 and January 1975, the Columbus, Georgia, locations are dreary and uninteresting—but no doubt inexpensive for its \$60,000 budget. And except for a few coffins, even the family mortuary lacks any character or definition. The settings are as drab as the characters and plot.

The same can be said of the direction by Chris Munger (*Black Starlet*, 1974; a single episode of *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams*, 1978) help the production. There are few camera movements to speak of; most everything is handled by edits. Even the spider attacks are flaccid and uninteresting, lacking any sense of tension or terror. To be fair, it wasn't as if Munger had a plethora of resources at his disposal. The story by Daniel Cady (who would go on to oversee production on a number of 70s and 80s sexploitation films) is essentially a poor man's *Willard* (1971) but with spiders. And Munger had little to work with in terms of cast, as evidenced by their one-note performances. Pulled from local repertoire companies, over a dozen cast members never made another movie or television appearance. Warren Hamilton, Jr., churned out the screenplay, but would find greater success as a sound technician in such films as *Escape From New York* (1981), *Gremlins* (1984), *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), and *Starship Troopers* (1997).

*Kiss of the Tarantula* was originally released on DVD in 2010 by VCI as part of a double feature paired with Curtis Harrington's *Ruby* (1977). This time around VCI treats us to a Blu-ray/DVD combo pack. The DVD remains abysmally dark in many places with blacks swallowing up nearly everything in frame. Spots and streaks from the well-worn source material pop up here and there. The stereo sound is tinny and flat—probably just like it was originally heard from crackly drive-in speakers. The saving grace of the Blu-ray is an audio commentary by film historian David Del Valle, offering production insight and historical background for this regional low budget yawner.

J. Todd Kingree



## XTRO

Directed by Harry Bromley Davenport  
(1982) Second Sight import Blu-ray  
region free

In the early 1980s, New Line Cinema gradually emerged as a dependable source for strong, offbeat, independent horror films. Along the path towards their major breakthrough with 1984's *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, New Line scored by producing such well-received items as 1982's *Alone in the Dark* and by securing the distribution

rights to such films as Sam Raimi's original *The Evil Dead* as well as this potent and surreal British shocker which was shrewdly marketed as an alternative to Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* ("Not all extra-terrestrials are friendly!")

Harry Bromley Davenport's *XTRO* gives us Philip Sayer as Sam Phillips, an average-Joe family man in the middle of enjoying the day with his young son Tony (Simon Nash) when he's abruptly whisked away from his Earthly existence by what we soon learn is an alien presence (the low-budget light show we're given to depict the abduction is far more effective than any attempt to realize an on-screen spacecraft would have been and sets the tone for the rest of the film perfectly). Three years later, Sam is back as abruptly as he disappeared; but before he can check up on Tony, his newly-reconfigured alien body must be (quite literally) reborn in human form in one of the most outrageously gruesome highlights of the still-young decade. Three years is quite some time to be absent, however . . . plenty of time for Sam's wife Rachel (Bernice Stegers of Lamberto Bava's *Macabre*, aka *Frozen Terror*) to move her new photographer boyfriend Joe (Danny Brainin) in with herself, Tony and au pair Analise (Maryam D'Abo makes an unforgettably sexy first impression before joining the ranks of the Bond girls in *The Living Daylights*). Oh, and Tony's pet snake Harry (actually a "Harriett," as we learn when Tony catches dear old Dad snacking on her eggs).

Clearly, Sam has a lot of adjustments to make as he tries to re-ingratiate himself to his family and enter into an uneasy truce with Joe. But all he really wants is his son back. Under the terms of his new way of life. But he'd better hurry, because the stability of his human form clearly isn't going to last very long on Earth. (Raw snake eggs and deep inhalations from a broken gas pipe can only get you so far, after all.) And the moment he's left alone with Tony, he takes steps to ensure their continued compatibility. This is where *Xtro* starts to stake out its own unique territory in an eternal sea of "alien invader" movies, as Tony discovers and begins to test the limits of his sudden new abilities, which transcend not only traditional physics but *movie* physics and take the film into the realm of dark magic and genuine horror. Davenport adds to the effect by populating the bizarre goings-on with unconventional performers to match: the mime team known as "Tik and Tok" serve respectively as Sam's alien form (a creepy crab-walking manifestation) and as a Commando action figure that comes to full-size life to right some wrongs; while Peter Mandell materializes as a nasty little clown (also a former toy) that amuses Tony with a "rubber hammer" gag while helping him convert one of his flatmates into a human incubator as Davenport's self-composed synthesizer score incorporates a circus motif. The sheer lack of plausible explanation for such unworldly powers prevent *Xtro* from ever settling into a comfortable or conventional sci-fi/horror groove, much to the consternation of such contemporary critics as Roger Ebert, who lamented the fact that the disturbing film wouldn't simply admit to being "trash" and thus have fun with itself.

Ebert, incidentally, further excoriated the film for its "nihilistic" ending, but that wasn't the fadeout that British filmgoers got on the first go-round. The "original ending" cut (one of no less than *four* variants included on the Second Sight all-region Blu-ray set, which includes a bonus CD of Davenport's score) is less violent but still provides a creepy and inconclusive revelation for the last character standing (on Earth, anyway). This version reportedly appeared on American television, as well. What's known as an "alternate ending" in England is what American viewers saw in the first place; while the "UK Video Version" essentially matches New Line's American release down to the removal of the legend "The End" as the titles commence. Brand-new is Davenport's 2018 revision, in which he was allowed to tinker with various elements of the soundtrack, lighting and effects: those familiar with the regular edition will notice a slight difference here and there, but this is certainly nothing along the lines of George Lucas's *Star Wars* "Special Editions." There's no feature audio commentary to be had here, but there's a souvenir booklet, a new hour-long cast/crew retrospective and several additional featurettes, including a tribute to the late Philip Sayer and an explanation as to how Davenport wound up making two distressingly generic *Xtro* "sequels" (he somehow maintained the rights to the title but *not* to the story he concocted with Iain Cassey, Michael Parry and Robert Smith in some sort of *Thunderball*-esque complication). We're also threatened with something called *Xtro: The Big One*. Sorry, but to invoke a completely unrelated series, "there can be only one." Seize on it.

Shane M. Dallmann