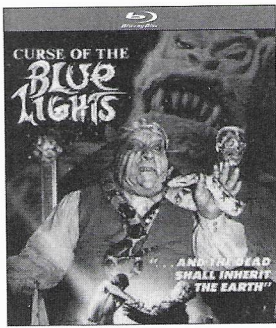


CURSE OF THE BLUE LIGHTS

Directed John Henry Johnson
(1988) Vinegar Syndrome Blu-ray



Urban legends are always a great place to start when it comes to horror movies. And in the case of John Henry Johnson's 1988 film *Curse of the Blue Lights*, pieces of urban legends, and rich local history merge to become an effects-filled creature feature that's grown a cult following and matured into a paragon of low-budget movie making.

Based on the mysterious "blue lights" seen by teenagers at a parking area in Pueblo, Colorado, Johnson's film expounds upon the local lore, imagining that the strange lights belong to a gang of ghouls prowling around in search of the monstrous Muldoon Man—an infamous piece of Pueblo history relating to a con man who claimed to have discovered the world's first petrified human. The movie follows a group of teens who, in a bit of a *Scooby-Doo* fashion, investigate the blue lights when the unexplained phenomena interrupts their weekend make-out session. After discovering a stone figure buried in the ground and a strange disc with enigmatic inscriptions, the gang of youths are relentlessly pursued and tormented by the blue-light lantern bearing ghouls who need the magical relic to resurrect their demonic leader, the Muldoon Man.

The rules of the resurrection ritual aren't super clear, and not only require dead bodies and ancient hardware, but result in a mass zombie awakening that eventually culminates in a teens versus monsters showdown to be settled before sunrise lest the world be consumed by "unspeakable horrors" at the hands of the Muldoon Man and his blithering minions.

The pace of the film is hardly hampered by its low-budget constraints. The movie starts by settling into the sub-sub-sub genre of scarecrow horror with the murder of a local farmer who suffers agonizing death by way of weaponized ghoulish vomit. After being introduced to the story's heroes, audiences become quickly acquainted with the movie's frightful freaks and all their rubbery foam latex laden glory. Though the make-up and dental prosthetics drown out much of the plot advancing dialogue, its never difficult to get an idea of what the *Blue Lights* villains are up to. Mystical rules apply and the magical disc McGuffin become inherently essential to events going forward, but plot and performance quickly become second to the film's thrilling visuals and overall spooky vibe. The momentum builds fast to get to the business of showcasing pure spectacle-driven entertainment.

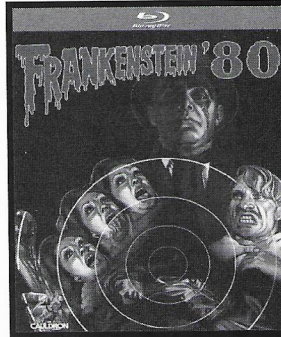
Viewers will be scratching their heads as the movie's effects extrapolate and compound, eventually revealing the towering seven-foot tall Muldoon Man. The arrival of the colossal beast defies what anyone believes about low-budget horror and is a testament to the crew's diligent passion and creativity in the face of limitations. Other eye-popping visuals include very effective displays of a variety of face-melting and walking through mirrors.

It's difficult to discuss this movie without exploring the background of its industrious director, John Henry Johnson. A veritable expert on Pueblo history, Johnson's first film explored the life of journalist and writer Damon Runyon which won a national endorsement and lead to the director establishing his own production company, Tamarack Productions. Johnson's success with Damon Runyon's *Pueblo* earned the attention of investors and resulted in funding his second film, *Zebulon Pike and the Blue Mountain*. Again accurately and competently dealing with regional history, Johnson attracted more money towards his next conceived feature *Red Wind*, based on the 1854 Christmas Eve massacre of Taos traders at Fort El Pueblo. Unable to raise enough money to complete that film, but raising some money nonetheless, Johnson looked to his assistant, co-writer and special effects enthusiast Bryan Sisson to help develop *Curse of the Blue Lights*. While not a proclaimed fan of horror, Johnson's charge to Sisson was to come up with whatever make-up and special effects he wanted to attempt and the two would develop a script to accommodate.

Presented in high-definition on blu-ray disc, Vinegar Syndrome's release of *Curse of the Blue Lights* will be a revelation to fans of horror effects and is a perfect addition to anyone's seasonal Halloween home video film fests. Packaged in a limited edition slipcover and reversible sleeve art, the disc has few but significant features including, most notably, the brand new 97 minute documentary on the making of the film, *Demons Down in Pueblo: Remembering Curse of the Blue Lights*. Also included are a few scenes from an alternate version of the film and an extensive stills gallery. A brand new commentary with director and co-writer John Henry Johnson as well as an archival commentary with the filmmaker and *Curse of the Blue Lights* star, the late Brent Ritter can also be found on the disc.

The film's shaky plot and community theatre grade performances should be the least of anyone's concerns here. The "can-do" spirit of a scrappy band of cast and crew leaven the movie with the enthusiasm and awareness of a home-grown horror with a heart of gold. In spite of its low-budget proclivities, the gritty 16mm aesthetic, and often difficult to decipher dialogue, audiences will be nothing short of amazed at the film's sets, make-up, and special effects. From ghastly ghouls to gallons of glop, *Curse of the Blue Lights* is downright impressive with its horror show.

Lucas Hardwick



FRANKENSTEIN '80

Directed by Mario Mancini
(1972) Cauldron Films Blu-ray

Frankenstein '80 (1972) was widely distributed theatrically in the 1970s, appeared on multiple VHS labels in the 1980s (and later on DVD), and (in its public domain, English-dubbed version) made its way to the Internet. And yet Cauldron Films decided to release this on Blu-ray, and not in a cheap-jack, bare-bones package

either. Thus, perhaps the first time since the movie's theatrical release *Frankenstein '80* is available in a great-looking widescreen print. The film itself still isn't very good, but at least the viewer can see what's going on.

Dr. Frankenstein has created a patchwork monster named "Mosaic," who requires frequent operations to replace his failing organs, even after Frankenstein steals his colleague's anti-rejection serum. Reporter Karl's sister dies due to a lack of this serum, so he begins an investigation. Meanwhile, Mosaic goes on a killing spree, sometimes to obtain new body parts, sometimes because he's a sex maniac. Frankenstein's identified as the culprit thanks to the combined efforts of Karl and the police, but Mosaic kills his creator around the one hour-mark, making the last third of the film very anti-climactic. Whatever sort of narrative coherence *Frankenstein '80* had up to this point (which wasn't much) is completely jettisoned as Mosaic goes on an even more intense and unmotivated killing spree (at least this time he murders a bunch of men, whereas his previous victims were mostly women) before his brain explodes.

Frankenstein '80 is sleazy and gory, but it's not that sleazy and gory. Aside from the violence-against-women sequences, which are morally repugnant but not particularly explicit, the most graphic gore occurs at the outset, as Mosaic murders a woman in an alley and extracts her liver (or something), and a short time later when Frankenstein removes another organ (and one testicle) from a body in the morgue. The rest of time it's mostly Mosaic—who has a scarred face but isn't that monstrous in appearance—grabbing people, then beating and strangling them.

The performances are adequate. John Richardson is OK, Dalila Di Lazzaro has relatively little to do, and Renato Romano as a stereotypical "angry police official" seems to be playing it for comedy. Gordon Mitchell as Dr. Frankenstein is quite peripheral to the narrative. Xiro Papis, festooned with scars and given no dialogue, is mostly a cartoonish figure. None of the characters has a dramatic arc, or any personality, really.

This was the only directorial credit for cinematographer Mario Mancini, who doesn't display much personality. In fact, when he briefly diverges from the zero-degree filmmaking style with a couple of giant fish-eye closeups, these feel grotesquely out of place. The cinematography and music score are fine, but they can't really save *Frankenstein '80* from its lagging pace and simplistic plot.

Extras on this disc include an audio commentary by Heather Drain, and two videos. Drain's entertaining commentary is lively and enthusiastic, without making inflated claims about the film's quality or importance.

"Dalila Forever: The Recorded Memories of Dalila Di Lazzaro" (27:46) is a long audio interview in Italian (with English sub-titles), accompanied by relevant photos and film clips. "Little Frankensteins: History of Italian Frankenstein Films" (38:20) features Domenico Monetti discussing *Frankenstein '80* and a number of other Italian films from the 1970s and beyond which deal with the Frankenstein monster. Both of these provide interesting insights into the Italian film industry of the period.

Audio options are English dialogue, English dialogue with SDH, Italian dialogue with English sub-titles. Curiously, the English sub-titles for the Italian dialogue don't match the English-dub; additionally, the lip movements match the English dialogue better than the Italian dialogue, at least in some scenes. Consequently, I found the English-dub more congenial to watch than what would be my usual choice, the "original" language print with sub-titles.

Frankenstein '80 is not a good film, nor a particularly significant one, nor has it been overlooked or especially hard to find in the 50+ years since its release. It's a sleazy pot-boiler. Did we need a Blu-ray? Perhaps not, but Cauldron Films didn't let that stop them from putting together a package with a surprising number of entertaining extras. These don't make the film itself any better, but the producers of this project deserve credit for putting some tasty frosting on a rather stale cake.

David Wil