

CONTAMINATION AKA ALIEN CONTAMINATION

Directed by Luigi Cozzi
(1980) Arrow Films Blu-ray/DVD combo

After the success of his outrageous *Starcrash*, Luigi Cozzi (aka "Lewis Coates") was given the go-ahead to produce another science-fiction thriller, this one intended to cash in on the worldwide phenomenon that was *Alien*. Coincidentally, the film retitled *Contamination* against the director's wishes also rode the fresh wave of Italian gore films ushered in by Lucio Fulci's *Zombie* and even completed an unofficial and unconnected "trilogy" starring imported Scottish actor Ian McCullough. This sequence started with the aforementioned Fulci classic and continued with Marino Girolami's *Zombie Holocaust* (released in significantly re-edited form in the States as *Doctor Butcher, M.D.*); and all three films began in New York City but soon sent its characters to a different (and less expensive) tropical locale . . .



Contamination even shares an identical opening movement with *Zombie* as a derelict ship approaches New York Harbor with a deadly cargo; but in this case it's not a sailboat bearing the living dead but a freighter supposedly carrying . . . coffee. But the crew apparently couldn't handle their java--the investigating police find their splattered remains throughout the vessel before they happen across what's really inside all those crates of "Univerx" coffee. The large, green glowing "eggs" in the hold certainly resemble their *Alien* inspirations on the surface, but there are no little monsters inside--when they react to heat, they merely disgorge a toxic bacterial spray that causes anyone unlucky enough to get in the way to explode! It's a simple enough matter to put the lethal eggs on ice in the Big Apple, but that still begs the question of from whence they came . . . not to mention just how they contrive to possess the minds of their hapless human henchmen...

Long story short, military Colonel Stella Holmes (Louise Marleau in for Caroline Munro, whom Cozzi was hoping to cast in the wake of her turn as "Stella Star" of *Starcrash*) and Tony Aris of the NYPD (Marino Mase) find themselves reluctantly teamed on a mission to Columbia; but first they have to secure the cooperation of disgraced astronaut Ian Hubbard (McCullough). This won't be particularly easy as Holmes was on the committee that disgraced him to begin with by declaring that his tale of a frightening discovery on the planet Mars years earlier was a mere delusion. But Hubbard was Right All Along, of course, and it was his former partner Hamilton (Siegfried Rauch, a German actor frequently in demand for such war films as *The Eagle Has Landed*, *Escape to Athena* and *The Big Red One*) who carried the deadly Martian intelligence to Earth and who is now exporting "coffee" in a bid to take over the planet.

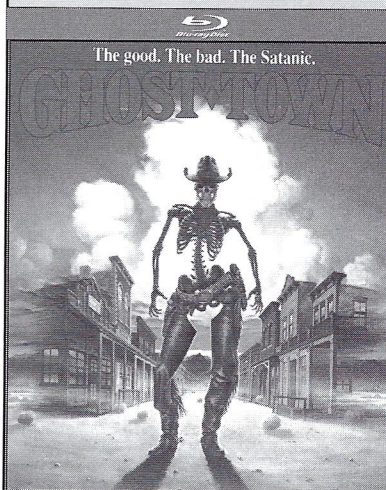
The legendary Cannon Group gave Cozzi's film the barest of U.S. releases under the title *Alien Contamination* (in a censored R-rated version). It took the eventual Paragon VHS edition and (probably especially) a nationally-syndicated slot in Elvira's "Movie Macabre" to alert most Stateside viewers to the fact that the film even existed. And that's a shame, because this is among the most eager-to-please spaghetti shockers of them all; with equal entertainment value derived from its strengths and weaknesses alike. Yes, thanks to the stock footage, we can clearly see crew members milling about the deck of the "abandoned" vessel in the first scene. Yes, we're asked to believe that the resourceful Colonel Holmes can't even contrive to escape a locked bathroom without manly assistance ("Help! Let me out! There's an egg!"). Okay, they couldn't afford to shoot a convincing Martian landscape--so why not set the scene on the polar icecap and film it as a whiteout (it works just fine)? And the climactic alien apparition was incapable of moving around as Cozzi had hoped (shades of *Bride of the Monster*); but why should he have to move when he has the gift of telepathy? ("The Cyclops is calling you! GO!") *Contamination* (especially as presented here in its fully uncut form) is bursting with Pasta-Land gore, familiar faces and a terrific Goblin soundtrack and serves up great fun from beginning to end.

Arrow's all-region Blu-ray (one of the label's many forays into America) is simply a joy to behold in a perfectly rendered and deeply colorful negative transfer that renders previous releases instantly obsolete, while the English-language mono soundtrack (including the Goblin score and the memorable and persistent electronic "moan" of the eggs) remains clear as a bell. A nostalgic and informative feature commentary is provided by *Fangoria* editor Chris Alexander, and the affable Cozzi is all over the supplementary material, starting with a vintage "making of" documentary starring and narrated by the director. A lengthy contemporary convention Q&A by Cozzi and star Ian McCullough is included, as is "Luigi Cozzi vs. Lewis Coates," a 43m solo interview which thoroughly covers a remarkable life and career. Goblin keyboardist Maurizio Guarini describes (and demonstrates) his contribution to *Contamination* in "Sound of the Cyclops," and historians Maitland McDonagh and Chris Poggiali discuss the wave of Italian "ripoff" cinema in the 70s and 80s (Universal Pictures will halt any Stateside screenings of Enzo G. Castellari's 1982 *Great White* to this very day; and yes, as I've been telling anyone willing to listen since the early 90s, Fulci's *The New Gladiators* predated the Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle *The Running Man*). The disc goes on to provide the original theatrical trailer and even a sample of graphic novel art inspired by the film.

Shane M. Dallmann

GHOST TOWN

Directed by Richard Governor
(1988) Scream Factory Blu-ray / DVD



After a woman apparently running away from her wedding (Catherine Hickland) vanishes in the desert, Deputy Langley (Franc Luz) tracks her to a mysterious ghost town after following a set of hoof prints. There, after a cryptic warning from the dusty corpse of a murdered sheriff, he discovers a town full of peculiar (and as it turns out, dead) residents, trapped in a sort of limbo by undead outlaw Devlin and his gang of shambling cowboys.

Luckily, Langley just happens to be an amateur quick-draw enthusiast. After taking on some of Devlin's gang, the townspeople try to convince him that he might be the one who can finally kill Devlin and lift the curse that is holding them all in

the town. As it turns out, the town was originally cursed by the sheriff, who was killed by Devlin (in something of a nod to another supernatural-themed western, *High Plains Drifter*). To rescue Hickland and escape, Langley has to find a way to destroy the demonic outlaw.

Ghost Town was made during the last days of Charles Band's Empire Pictures, and shares the same slick production values and zippy pacing that marked most of the studio's other film. It also boasts special effects from John Carl Buechler, and a script based on a story by *Tourist Trap* director David Schmoeller. Texas-native Schmoeller would go to write most of the *Puppet Master* films for Charles Band. Director Richard Governor was an Australian who appears to have no other credits. Hickland was a regular on the soap opera *One Life to Live*, while Skaggs (who is a lot of fun to watch) has mostly had minor roles in other film/TV projects, along with a handful of appearances in other Charles Band productions. Luz also played the hero in the enjoyable *The Nest* (1988).

Ghost Town is a rare horror-western hybrid, and Governor does a good job mingling oater tropes (gunfights, scantily clad barmaids) and horror/gore elements. There have been surprisingly few films to attempt this type of mash-up (*Grim Prairie Tales* from the roughly the same era is another good example), even though there is some fertile ground to be mined in the type of bleak desert vistas and weather-stained buildings that Governor showcases here.

The film was a straight-to-video release through New World, and is one of the titles that got lost in the shuffle as Empire faded (producer Charles Band sold the company to Epic Entertainment the year this film was released) and Full Moon ascended. Scream Factory's 1.78:1 transfer is the film's Blu-ray debut, and showcases Mac Ahlberg's excellent cinematography. (Ahlberg also directed some scenes, according to most sources). This is a bare bones disc with no extras.

Brian Albright