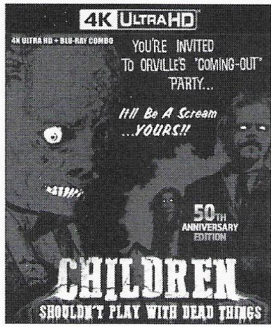


CHILDREN SHOULDN'T PLAY WITH DEAD THINGS

Directed by Bob Clark

(1972) VCI Entertainment 4K/Blu-ray combo



In the pantheon of classic zombie films, *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* might just be the darkest movie ever made. Not thematically, but literally.

In purely visual terms, this is a very, very dark movie. That's long made porting it to home video a challenge, with black crush being damn near omnipresent and compression artifacts showing up more noticeably against the picture's stark, minimalist cinematography. That hasn't stopped VCI Entertainment from giving it the ol' college try, though.

The company, which previously released the film on both Blu-ray and DVD, recently debuted director Bob Clark's grotty drive-in gem on 4K UHD as part of a new 3-disc 50th anniversary edition. The results may not exactly be a cinematic revelation, but they certainly constitute the best presentation this movie has received to date.

What makes *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* a headache for videophiles is the same thing that makes it a charming treat for horror fans and b-movie connoisseurs: its scrappy, DIY production. Armed with a meager budget of just \$50,000, Clark shot the film pretty much entirely at night using very limited lighting equipment and a small cast of amateur actors. That the final product is as engaging as it is speaks volumes about the man's considerable talent as a filmmaker.

The plot concerns a flamboyant theater director named Alan (Alan Ormsby, who also co-wrote the script and did the special effects) who bullies and berates his young troupe of actors into spending the night on a secluded island that's being used as a burial ground for criminals and paupers. It's all just a power play for Alan, an excuse for him to push people's buttons with his morbid pranks, safe in the knowledge that no one will turn against him for fear of losing their jobs.

Alan goes a bridge too far, though, when he forces the actors to dig up one of the island's corpses so he can dabble in witchcraft. His black magic showboating seems like much ado about nothing at first, until the dead finally rise up to punish the troupe for their grave-defiling shenanigans.

That's all there is to it; the story has the effective simplicity of a campfire ghost story or an EC Comics tale. It may prove too slow-going for some (the zombies don't even turn up until an hour in), but the characters are so vividly drawn and the dialogue is so acid-tongued and witty that it's hard not to get drawn in regardless. Ormsby in particular leaves quite the lasting impression, delivering a performance so comically foul that even the unholy undead seem shocked by the depths to which he'll sink.

Although *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* keeps its tongue firmly in cheek for the first two thirds, the final act doesn't skimp on the ghastly goods. Clark imbues his already eerily isolated setting with a foggy, foreboding atmosphere that is further enhanced by Carl Zittler's disturbingly dissonant score. Likewise, Ormsby's zombie make-ups are satisfyingly gnarly (no surprise, given that he would later author the seminal book *Movie Monsters: Monster Make-Up & Monster Shows to Put On*), far outclassing the greasepaint ghouls of *Night of the Living Dead*.

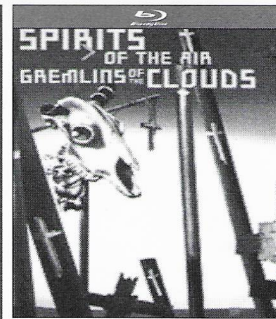
Now, thanks to VCI, Ormsby's undead look better than ever. This 50th anniversary edition boasts a spiffy new 4K transfer that features greater clarity and better color than prior releases. It's actually overall a little darker than the old transfer, but makes up for that with cooler, more naturalistic tones in lieu of its predecessor's brightness-boosting oversaturation. The DNR has been reigned in, as well, helping the film retain a greater degree of texture, detail, and grain. Black crush remains an issue, but with a movie this dark, that's likely unavoidable.

In addition to the 4K UHD version, the new transfer can also be viewed on a standard Blu-ray disc. Both discs include the movie, a commentary with Ormsby and co-stars Jane Daly and Anya Cronin, a theatrical trailer, and a brand new 73-minute documentary titled "Dreaming of Death: Bob Clark's Horror Films."

The rest of the special features can be found on the third and final disc, which is also a standard Blu-ray. Said features include a Zoom interview with Ormsby from 2022, an interview with longtime Clark collaborator Gary Goch, a Q&A panel from the 2007 Los Angeles Grindhouse Festival, a short "Memories of Bob Clark" featurette, a pair of music videos from the band The Deadthings, an image gallery, a collection radio spots, and a baffling "tribute video" that's really just a metal song playing over stills from the movie for some reason.

In any case, those who already own *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* may not feel the need to upgrade. However, for those who don't yet own the movie or who want to see it in its best possible presentation, VCI's 50th anniversary edition is definitely the way to go.

William Tea



SPIRITS OF THE AIR, GREMLINS OF THE CLOUDS

Directed by Alex Proyas

(1989) Umbrella Entertainment Blu-ray

The American Western is one of the most replicated and repurposed genres in cinema. Its harsh, desolate landscape, and lawless proto-civilization vibe offer a dynamic for rich storytelling and disparate characters. However, the bottom line so often is survival in the midst of paranoia, and when appropriated into the post-apocalypse, the frontier of discovery that's so inherent to the Western, is replaced with aspirations of desperate hope. Australian writer-director Alex Proyas examines the end of the world through the eyes of the Western in his 1989 debut feature film *Spirits of the Air, Gremlins of the Clouds*.

Surrounded by crucifixes on a homestead in the Australian outback, Felix Crabtree (Michael Lake) and his sister Betty (Rhys Davis), encounter a mysterious, black clad drifter on the run from a trio of menacing characters. The implication is that the stranger, Smith (Norman Boyd), is a wanted man, and his destination is escape over the mountains to the north. With nothing but the scant remains of civilization at his disposal, Felix convinces Smith that he can build a plane that will send him over the impassable mountains while Betty insists that their visitor is evil incarnate.

The heart of the story is compassion and escape in a world that wants anything else for its inhabitants. The contrast of theme against the harsh trappings of a bitter reality amplifies the desires of the film's characters in a traditional sense of irony. Proyas beautifully illustrates these divergent forces in long, wide visuals of barren, orange desert against endless, teal skies that suggest possibility in the face of hopelessness. The slightly over-saturated look Proyas demonstrates indicates a world beyond reality but one still tangible through the motivations of its characters. The film's inspirational intentions are further illuminated in the ethereal, dreamlike quality imbued by the score from composer Peter Miller.

Though the plot doesn't reveal why Smith is being pursued, he is never a threatening presence and his veil of mystery is fleeting as he becomes closer to the Crabtrees, and he quickly embraces Felix's plans for a skyward journey intended to place him safely beyond the northern mountains. Felix's zeal for building a capable aircraft is reinforced by tomes of books and drawings left by his father, leaving the majority of the film's plot to consist of various trial and error attempts at flight.

The three entities searching for Smith are only ever seen in silhouette, one of which carries a scythe implicating imminent death. This troika of doom exists for mere seconds on film, but looms ominous over Smith and the Crabtrees as time grows short for achieving flight and thus, freedom. The danger is palpable, and combined with restricted means and the uncooperative desert climate, matched psychologically by Betty's incessant assertions of Smith's evil intentions, the film's narrative becomes underscored with a unique, quiet tension.

One key moment that deepens the movie's message of inspiration and hope is early in the story when Smith discreetly spies Felix outside in his wheelchair vigorously flapping his arms imitating the act of flying. In a cutaway of Smith as he watches Felix, his gaze begins to drift upwards as if he actually witnesses Felix taking flight. This flash of textbook irony—a man in a wheelchair believing so fervently that he can fly—affirms Smith's confidence in Felix.

Another important juncture in the film is poetically related in a line of dialogue when Felix reveals to Smith that he believes when people die they become clouds. This illustrates the meaning behind Felix's ardent desire for conquering the sky, to not only be free of the earth and its post-apocalyptic confines, but to symbolically rejoin his late father. Instead of copping to the tragic theme of death, Proyas chooses one of hope and ambition. And in a traditionally Judeo-Christian move, Felix ultimately acts out of compassion and sacrifice, giving of his own life and limited means to help a stranger.

After a string of music videos and short films, Proyas would go on to direct the 1994 comic-based feature *The Crow*. The gothic visual style of that film would continue into Proyas' 1998 cult hit *Dark City*, which is perhaps the director's defining work. Proyas is also known for bigger blockbuster style features such as *I, Robot* (2004) and *Gods of Egypt* (2016), but none of these films match the intimate, poetic themes and stark visuals of his debut effort in *Spirits*.

Umbrella Entertainment presents *Spirits of the Air, Gremlins of the Clouds* in high-definition from a 2K scan of the original 16mm negatives. The region free Blu-ray (distribution in the U.S. through Vinegar Syndrome) includes audio commentaries from the director as well as the film's composer Peter Miller and editor Craig Wood. The disc also features a making-of featurette and interviews with actors Michael Lake and Rhys Davis. The limited edition is packaged with an exclusive slipcover and an essay booklet by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas.

The reality Proyas creates in *Spirits of the Air, Gremlins of the Clouds* will remind viewers of a realm adjacent to *Mad Max* (1979) or even one unintentionally concurrent with the George Miller classic. But stripped of its vague sci-fi tropes, the film is, at its core, a spin on the traditional American Western with a message of inspiration that unexpectedly appeals to the heart.

Lucas Hardwick