

CULTURE DESK

THE UNUSUAL GENIUS OF THE “RESIDENT EVIL” MOVIES

By Daniel Engber February 2, 2017



In the “Resident Evil” franchise, starring Milla Jovovich, the director Paul W. S. Anderson has found a way to turn what should be an empty-headed franchise into a vehicle for a spectacular, maximalist aesthetic.

Photograph by Coco Van Oppens / SONY PICTURES

The sixth and final chapter in the “Resident Evil” franchise has just come out in theatres, and you may as well start there. The films are best enjoyed out of sequence, with no prior knowledge of the plot. Your bafflement will spice the feast. Who is this woman with the pair of shotguns and the tight pants? What’s this undead beast that wants to eat her face? When did Washington, D.C., get turned to rubble? Be patient, my friend, and nothing much will be explained.

O.K., fine, you'll soon find out that the woman with the shotguns is called Alice. "My name is Alice," she says at the start of the movie, as she does at the beginning of episodes 3, 4, and 5 in the series. Then she tells you all you need to know about the world in which she's kicking so much butt: "There was an incident. A virus escaped. Everyone died." Careful viewers—or viewers who care—may discern a few more details along the way: there's a mega-corporation with a plan to bring about the apocalypse and "reboot the planet"; there's a well-groomed co-ed coterie of commandos that tries to help Alice on her missions and seems to rotate through the films at random; there's a malicious computer system called the Red Queen that wants Alice carved to bits. But, really, it comes down to this: *There was an incident, a virus escaped, everyone died.* The rest is commentary, as they say. Go and watch it.

Alice, played by the Ukrainian actress and supermodel Milla Jovovich, arrived onscreen in 2002, as an unlikely feminist icon—a female action hero who, unlike, say, Sigourney Weaver's character in "Aliens" or Linda Hamilton's in "Terminator 2," rarely seems to draw any motivation from her ovaries. The original "Resident Evil," adapted from a Japanese video game, had been set to be written and directed by George Romero, the godfather of zombie cinema, but he was pushed aside for a young British writer-director-producer named Paul W. S. Anderson. This may have been the original sin that turned the films' geeky target audience against them. The franchise has since achieved the queer distinction of being both hugely profitable—with a billion dollars in global revenue—and utterly unloved by either mainstream critics or genre fans. (On the site, Richard Brody has previously delved into the franchise's popularity.) Anderson himself has managed to accrue an abysmal lifetime rating of twenty-seven per cent on RottenTomatoes.com, and placement on countless worst-director-ever lists online. "Why is Paul W.S. Anderson a bad director yet successful?" one user on Quora, the crowd-sourced Q.-&-A. Web site, asks. "Why does McDonald's serve such bad food?" the top-voted response reads.

That's the wrong analogy, though. Anderson's work—and the "Resident Evil" movies in particular—may resemble formulaic junk, concocted by committee in some corporate flavor-testing lab and served to those who have no taste. But the films are far too strange for mass production. I wouldn't call them soulful—they're highly processed and derivative, as one might expect—but they also have a real electric spark. It's as if the robotic process that created them had Easter eggs hidden in its code, producing moments when calculated mayhem bursts into abstraction. Anderson may be a Hollywood hack, but he's one who has found a way to break into

the industry machine and turn what should have been an empty-headed action-horror franchise into a vehicle for his spectacular, maximalist aesthetic.

Nowhere is this unusual genius more apparent than in Anderson's application of 3-D. (Two of the last three "Resident Evil" films were shot with the stereo rig designed by James Cameron; the third was post-converted.) The director has a fondness for what he calls the "pokey-pokey" shot—the tired 3-D gimmick in which the end of a gun or the tip of a sword appears to jump through the screen. But he's also experimental: in the stunning set piece that introduces the fifth film, "Resident Evil: Retribution," for example, Anderson lets the action unfold backward, in slow motion, with explosions folding inward, blood spurting into wounds, and bullets zipping back into their barrels. It's classic pokey-pokey, but Anderson turns the image inside out.

The fourth movie, "Resident Evil: Afterlife," includes one of the greatest 3-D fights ever filmed: a zombie battle in a public shower, shot as though it were the closing number of a Bollywood musical. At first the scene appears to be a ripoff of the bathhouse tussle in David Cronenberg's "Eastern Promises" (which came out a few years earlier), with the linoleum-knife-wielding Russian mafioso swapped out for a monster wearing a potato sack and swinging a twelve-foot homemade axe. But then each of the monster's errant blows rips apart another set of shower pipes, setting off a geyser spraying water in the background, in the foreground, and on every surface in between.

Among Anderson's signature shots is the dramatic zoom-out, with the camera pulling back to reveal some panoramic hellscape, or a cavernous chamber full of corpses, as the industrial soundtrack pulses louder. Like many of his favorite flourishes, this one feels as though it's swiped from earlier, more successful films. ("The Matrix" comes to mind.) But then Anderson often finds a way to embellish the familiar with fresh absurdity and wit. He'll zoom out, for example, from a bird's-eye view above a rainy street in Tokyo, pulling up into the clouds so that we're watching droplets falling from above and pouring down into the screen. I've watched a lot of 3-D movies, and I've never seen anything like it.

Even seen in two dimensions, the films will dazzle you with their relentless fantasia of slo-mo jump kicks, fireballs, and severed limbs. A "Resident Evil" movie leaves no avenue for action unexplored. Even mundane medical procedures can be turned into melees on the screen: when a villain injects Alice with a virus, the camera swoops

inside her veins so we can watch the germs wrestling her T-cells. According to Anderson's ironclad logic of more is more, any source of excitement must be doubled, and then doubled once again. Why shoot a single pistol at a zombie's face when a gal can fire two at once? Why have one katana strapped to your back, or one knife tucked into your belt? Idle hands are the devil's workshop!

The same doubling-down applies to Alice, too. Her capacity for violence multiplies in "Resident Evil" parts 2 and 3, in which the virus gives her magic superpowers so she can blow up things with her mind. These go away in "Resident Evil 4"—don't ask me why; it doesn't matter, since by then we learn that she has been cloned by the corporation. Now she can lead an army of her kick-ass selves—a murmuration of well-armed Milla Jovoviches—into crazy combat with her foes. Each Alice has her own pair of guns, her own pair of swords, her own handfuls of grenades, etc. You see how it all adds up.

The constant cloning of the heroine, and of the major villains, adds welcome and inscrutable complications to the plot. (Why kill a baddie once when you can kill him twice or more?) Among the many pleasures of the franchise is the fact that its major characters are often as perplexed by the story as we are. "I'm your brother, remember?" Chris says in "Resident Evil: Afterlife," when he finally gets a chance to speak with Claire. Who's Chris? Who's Claire? You surely won't remember, and neither does Claire. "What about Mike? Carlos? L.J.?" Alice shouts, trying to jog Claire's memory with a string of names that may well have been ad-libbed. "What about Kmart?!"

Entire settings are also cloned throughout the series, rehashed and remixed from one movie to the next, nonplussing everyone involved. A replica of the mansion from the first film shows up in the third. Alice must fight her way, in episode 5, through a virtual-reality simulation of the zombies-in-Tokyo scenario from the opening of episode 4, as well as several other scenes from prior films. In the final movie, she goes back to the site of the first "Resident Evil" as a clone of herself, with some evil clones in hot pursuit.

All this repetition of embedded worlds makes me wonder whether Anderson might not himself feel trapped inside the franchise that has kept him flush for so many years and yet made him so reviled. Could things have worked out differently for his career? After his success with "Mortal Kombat," Anderson moved on to make "Event Horizon," an ambitious and interesting sci-fi horror movie from 1997 that

ended up a critical and commercial flop. (It has since developed a cult following.) When another director named Paul Anderson had a major success that same year, with “Boogie Nights,” the director of “Event Horizon” sheepishly added the initials “W. S.” to his screen credit. But even this attempt to distinguish himself from a more talented, eponymous colleague would be complicated by the subsequent emergence, in 1998, of Wes Anderson. (Why be upstaged by one critically acclaimed young director with a similar name when you can be upstaged by two?)

As his fellow-Andersons quickly gained the sort of film-world fame that gets you into the Criterion Collection, Paul W. S.’s career veered into the critical underworld of mid-budget blockbusters, with a special emphasis on video-game adaptations. But even as he sank into this genre sub-basement, he never quite gave up his visionary impulse. Instead, he’s found a way to make himself an action-trash auteur, injecting doses of the sublime into vapid science fiction.

Daniel Engber writes about science and culture. [Read more »](#)

Video

“Carnival of Souls”
Richard Brody on Herk Harvey’s “Carnival of Souls,” from 1962.

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