

who introduces himself as "Jebediah Morningside" and calmly offers Mike some lemonade. Realizing that he has met a past incarnation of his enemy, one who had not yet turned to evil, Mike later toys with ways he might use this new information. "We know he can't be killed," he muses that night in his diary. "But could he be stopped from ever *existing*?"

Meanwhile, Reggie is having his own problems. His trek across the Southwest has been unsettlingly lonely: He's been through many emptied ghost towns in the last two films, but by now he is unable to find *any* inhabited towns at all; he is able to drive for days on end without seeing another human soul.

He eventually picks up a girl named Jennifer, a stunning blonde who's been stranded on the highway. It is a great relief, both for Reggie and for us, finally to see another *person* amid the unrelenting emptiness—and it is a severe blow when she turns out to be a minion of the Tall Man after all, housing a pair of the dreaded killer chromium spheres in some—er, clever places. With the aid of a tuning fork, Reggie is able to defeat the spheres, and as beautiful as Jennifer is, he's left with no choice but to smash her skull in.

Separated, the two men are on parallel journeys: Reggie on a cross-country trek to find his friend, and Mike on a desperate jaunt through time and space, on a mission to find and, hopefully, destroy the Tall Man before Mike can be subverted to his will. It's an intense odyssey for both, and when Reggie and Mike are finally reunited, it is in a cataclysmic final confrontation with the otherworldly mortician whose campaign against humanity has destroyed their lives, their families, and the world they knew.

Each time I watch *Phantasm IV*, I am further convinced of its brilliance. It takes the nightmarish qualities of the first film and combines them with the action elements that made *II* work, and the result is a truly haunting conclusion to the story of Mike, Reggie, Jody, and the Tall Man, disturbing in a way that *II* and *III* never were.

The most successful horror films work with what is *implied* rather than what is shown, and the implications of *Oblivion*—that, despite Mike's and Reggie's best efforts, the Tall Man has largely succeeded in his campaign to empty the world of humanity—are terrifying indeed.

Gone is the irreverence of *III*. Absent are the isolated stabs at over-the-top, Raimi-esque action. The world of *Oblivion* is very cold, very empty, and very lonely—and it is painfully obvious that the losing battle fought by Mike and Reggie can never restore their own.

Particularly effective are the visuals. The *Phantasm* series has always prided itself on solid production values, no matter how low the budget (and here, the budget was pretty damn low), and *Oblivion* is no exception: The film *looks* great.

But, just as the original *Phantasm* tried to bring visual coherence to the ethereal world of the nightmare, *Phantasm IV* injects a liberal dosage of truly frightening, unexplainable imagery.

There is the faceless man briefly glimpsed in the rear of the hearse, silently screaming. A vision of the old woman—the fortune-teller from the first movie?—slowly turning to look at us, laughing malevolently. The half-glimpsed, malformed *things* that leer out at us from the caverns of Death Valley and from the depths of Reggie's dreams. And, of course, the silence, the maddening, inescapable

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silence; the quiet death throes of an emptied world.

The entire original cast is back: A. Michael Baldwin as Mike, Bill Thornbury as Jody, Reggie Bannister as Reggie—and, of course, the incomparable Angus Scrimm as the Tall Man.

There are two other credited actors: Heidi Marnhout (*Roadkill*) as the beautiful (mmm) Jennifer, and stuntman Bob Ivy as the "Demon Trooper." But their roles are small; *Phantasm* is a story about the principal four characters—the Mike/Jody/Reggie triumvirate and their mutual enemy, the Tall Man—and *Oblivion's* focus on these four to the virtual exclusion of all else is one of its greatest strengths.

The respective journeys of Mike and Reggie make up two paralleling plotlines, and where *III* dropped the ball (no pun intended) by giving Reggie a heavily disproportionate amount of screen time at the expense of the almost-ignored Mike, *Oblivion* balances the two characters perfectly.

Many of the series' mysteries are unlocked here, with the revelation that the Tall Man was once an ordinary undertaker, and that he built the interdimensional spacegate in an attempt to unlock the mysteries of life and death.

We are told that Jedediah Morningside believed these mysteries were hidden in the basics of "shifting phases; frequencies; warmth and cold." It is cryptic no matter how you look at it, but though this statement neither confirms nor denies many fans' theories *why* certain things in this series happen the way they do, it is nevertheless a *validation* of what we've thus far seen.

Still, many will be left with questions. Why did the Tall Man free Reggie? What was the significance of the ball in Mike's head? *Did* Jody die in a car accident? Which versions of the Tall Man were we seeing at what times? And for the love of God, what does it all *mean*?

Much of the fun of the *Phantasm* films is in trying to figure these questions out. The movies tend to be very subjective experiences: I've watched them enough times that they *almost* make perfect sense, at least to me, but the guy next to me might have an entirely different interpretation of the proceedings; indeed, it's not at all unreasonable to suppose that each fan of the series has his or her own personal explanation of what's going on, and each theory could be entirely valid.

Phantasm is, as they say, a mystery inside a riddle wrapped in an enigma—and it would almost have been a cheat if Coscarelli were to conclusively wrap up the labyrinthine mysteries that have been carefully constructed over the space of four films.

The series, like the nightmares from which it draws its inspiration, operates along its own unique lines of logic. Those who cannot accept *Phantasm's* singular method of rationalizing the irrational will always be frustrated, but those who can may find it possible to see the series in a different light with each new viewing.

Phantasm IV: Oblivion is an underrated gem. It took many potential liabilities and turned them into towering strengths. My hat is off to Don Coscarelli for the enduring contribution to horror that is the *Phantasm* series.

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