

## WHAT CRITICS ARE SAYING ABOUT “HEAD TRAUMA”

“Any number of big-deal filmmakers - M. Night Shyamalan, for one - would be well-served by a viewing of the low-budget Head Trauma. ...this simple and effective psycho-thriller creates a mood of dread and dissociation, and sustains it, without resorting to elaborate special effects, or a colorful crowd of actors, or otherworldly mystical hooey. ...3 out 4 stars.”

- PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

“Works its way under the skin, raising neck hairs while teasing us to pry open its psychological puzzle box.”

- LA WEEKLY

“Throws you into a nightmare world where you're never sure what's right around the corner. It's the kind of filmmaking that people lament not seeing more of- because it's spooky without resorting to cheap jump scares, well acted, and one hell of a story. ...A 9 out of 10”

- CREATURE CORNER - CHUD.COM

“Head Trauma is a well-shot, creepy experience, subjecting viewers to the unfolding visions of a troubled wanderer. The end result is an appealing film, with captivating visuals, trippy sound, and incredibly well-developed characters. ... 4 1/2 out of 5 skulls.”

- HORRORVIEW.COM

“Weiler has crafted a creepy, disturbing thriller that goes against nearly all the norms set forth by our genre today; though there are the occasional musically-queued jump scares and smash cuts, none of them feels contrived or out of place; indeed they seem to be serving the story as a whole and only add to the growing sense of dread. Solid performances by every single lead boosts the film's value in terms of longevity and re-watchability and mark a decided departure from most indie fare. ... 4 out 5 knives.”

- DREAD CENTRAL

“One of this year's touchstones... Demonstrating once again that ingenuity and invention are more important than millions of dollars in budget, Weiler most effectively works within the confines of the dark house. As more and more unsettling things start to happen, it's almost as though the house were growing into a full-fledged, recently awakened character that is not sure what it wants to do when it sees that it's under attack... Head Trauma creeped me out.”

- TWITCHFILM.NET

“The growling, hooded figure which dogs George through the story is an absolutely terrifying apparition, perhaps the simplest and most haunting monster to grace a movie screen since the debut of Freddy Krueger in the original *A Nightmare On Elm Street*.”

- BLOODY DISGUSTING

"Head Trauma" will leave you scratching yours in the midst of a fantastic, scary ride that leaves no unanswered questions and does its job with the utmost competence and sheer unalloyed glee.

4 stars!

- FILM THREAT

"Elicits effective creeps. A well executed haunted house exercise that treads the psychological vs. supernatural line."

- AIN'T IT COOL NEWS

"I'm giving this film my first ever 10 and have to say the hopes and dreams of the great American horror are now on Weiler's shoulders."

- CINEPHELIA.COM

"A slick, original, attention-grabbing feature... pushes the medium to the edge of its artistic bounds."

- ALBUQUERQUE WEEKLY

"Horror outing that revives the under appreciated monster of the id to great effect."

- MOVIE CITY NEWS

"You know the ones: Jacob's Ladder, 12 Monkeys, even Lost Highway. Head Trauma is a solid induction into these halls of creepy mindfucks."

- THE PORTLAND MERCURY

"Incredibly creepy... good re-creation of 70's horror."

- TUCSON WEEKLY

"Fright classic... surprisingly effective chiller."

- THE OREGONIAN

"HEAD TRAUMA is completely pro. From packaging to film quality to the movie's website, it seems like there was big money behind this film."

- LOCAL IQ

Full Reviews:

# Head Trauma

## Indie fright-fest opens the door on a chilly homecoming

By Devin D. O'Leary - Alibi Weekly

Directed by Lance Weiler

Starring Vince Mola, Jamil A.C. Mangan, Mary Monahan

A psychological drama with an emphasis on the "psycho," *Head Trauma* is the second film from ultra-indie auteur Lance Weiler. Weiler's first film was 1998's *The Last Broadcast*. That no-budget horror flick received a brief hiccup of publicity for being: A) the first feature to be shot, edited and screened (via satellite) using solely digital technology, and B) a major influence on 1999's *The Blair Witch Project*. Honestly, the first designation is the more significant. *The Last Broadcast* was assembled on home computers for a mere \$900, making it an impressive precursor to today's rampant digital filmmaking scene. (Both *Last Broadcast* and *Blair Witch* borrowed a healthy dose of inspiration from 1980's *Cannibal Holocaust*, rendering that "who made who" debate a bit moot.)

With his second digital video feature, Weiler steps things up a notch. He's kept the low budget, the video camera and the amateur cast, but he seems unwilling to remain in any direct-to-video ghetto (self-imposed or otherwise). *Head Trauma* is a slick, original, attention-grabbing feature that embraces its DV-ness, while pushing the medium to the edge of its artistic bounds.

With a few well-placed edits, the film shocks us to our senses and introduces us to George Walker (Vince Mola, exuding all the frumpy charm of a no-budget Paul Giamatti). George is a balding, middle-aged drifter who wanders back into his dinky hometown to reclaim his deceased grandmother's abandoned house. Seems George has been missing for the last 20 years, and we as viewers are no more privy to what the guy's been up to than his old neighbors. Is he a homeless alcoholic? Did he just get out of jail? An asylum? What's his story?

Seems granny's decrepit home has been condemned and is in the process of being demolished. Although George does his best to save the building, this looks like a losing battle. The neighbors want the house torn down, the basement is flooded and George isn't exactly Ty Pennington. Of course, home remodeling is the least of George's worries.

On the heels of his return to the old homestead, George is plagued by a series of chilling nightmares. Recurring images of dark hotel rooms, eerie woods, a dead female body and a menacing figure in a fur-lined parka are soon slipping from George's dreams and creeping into his daylight hours. Is George nuts? Is the house haunted? Is he being gaslighted? Is this a multiple choice question?

With his second outing, Weiler proves himself a seriously skilled director. His tone has much in common with the recent spate of Japanese horror films. There's the emphasis on atmosphere, the sad, restless ghosts of the past, the jittery camerawork. It's a wonder Hollywood hasn't snapped him up to helm one of the countless J-horror remakes taking place stateside ( *The Ring*, *The Grudge*, *Pulse* ). It's almost depressing to think what Weiler could have done with the recent revision of Kiyoshi Kurosawa's 2001 chiller *Pulse* . I can't guarantee it would have been better than director Jim Sonzero's pedantic version, but surely it could have maintained more of Kurosawa's sad and lonely brand of existential horror.

In the years since *The Last Broadcast* came out, Hollywood has caught up to Weiler a bit. It's no longer unusual to see a major release shot on video. (George Lucas and Robert Rodriguez are just a couple of the big-time "all digital" converts.) Weiler seems to know the strengths and weaknesses of the medium and plays well to both. Perhaps credit should be doled out to director of photography Sam Levy or to production designer Jennifer Nasal. The sets, locations and videography look perfect--dark, eerie and full of isolated dread. Most importantly, the film feels real, never overly "manufactured" like yet another hyper-stylized, mega-Gothic *Se7en* clone.

*Head Trauma* labors long and hard to build up its mood of menace. Though "jump out of your seat" moments are minimal, the film slowly saturates itself in shades of dread. By the end, we are both fascinated by the mystery surrounding George and a bit frightened to learn the truth. Do we really want to open the closet door and find a monster hiding there, or would we rather just close our eyes and keep whistling in the dark? Whereas most modern "survival horror" films ( *Saw*, *Hostel* ) are all about showing us the grisly goods, *Head Trauma* nicely plays with the "do we or don't we" quandary.

By the time it reaches its rather logical conclusion, *Head Trauma* has become more hauntingly *sad* than hauntingly *scary* . Those looking for "jump out of your skin" thrills would do better to adjust their expectations. This is more of a moody, old-fashioned "icewater in your veins" fright-fest--and all the better for it.

# Scares, simple and spot-on

By Steven Rea - Philadelphia Inquirer Movie Critic



Any number of big-deal filmmakers - M. Night Shyamalan, for one - would be well-served by a viewing of the low-budget *Head Trauma*. Shot on digital video by Philadelphia-area writer-director Lance Weiler, this simple and effective psycho-thriller creates a mood of dread and dissociation, and sustains it, without resorting to elaborate special effects, or a colorful crowd of actors, or otherworldly mystical hooey.

Weiler, along with Stefan Avalos, delivered the creepy-crawly 1998 faux-doc *The Last Broadcast*, a DIY cult hit that predated, and presaged, the indie horror phenom *The Blair Witch Project*. *Head Trauma*, which begins with a car crash and flashes forward, and back, and inside its protagonist's battered skull, aims for a different kind of realism: that is, the point of view of someone who has lost his hold on the real world.

George Walker (Vince Mola) is a bearded, scruffy jobless guy who returns to his hometown after many years to fix up his deceased grandmother's abandoned, dilapidated house. At least that's the plan, but George, crawling into his makeshift tent in the middle of a ratty room, falls asleep and descends into a nightmare realm. Or maybe he's not asleep at all, and those aren't nightmares, but some kind of fractured memory?

Whatever they are, menacing scenes of a lifeless body being dragged through the woods, of a hunched-over, hooded figure haunting a run-down motel, of a cardboard box and an eerie little pamphlet, keep recurring in George's head - and in Weiler's movie.

Mola, with his glasses, beard and bug-eyed, intelligent air, projects a Paul Giamatti-ish Everyloser vibe, and Jamil Mangan and Mary Monahan, as a comic-drawing neighbor and an old flame, respectively, bring easy authenticity to their roles.

*Head Trauma* is a razor-sharp, bare-bones genre film, and doesn't pretend to be anything more. 3 out of 4 stars!

## HEAD TRAUMA ★★★ out of 4

Reviewed by Mike Mayo (Video Hound, The Washington Post, national radio host)

This independent production is the best horror movie I've seen in years.

It's built on simple stuff—a frightening house with an even more frightening basement, dark menacing barely seen figures, whispery sounds, standing water, clots of hair—and it's told at a careful pace without a wasted frame.

We know from the beginning that George Walker (Vince Mola) has survived an automobile accident and suffers from terrible headaches. Five years earlier, his grandmother died. Her house has been condemned by the city until he returns and tells anyone who'll listen that he wants to restore it. But it's clear that George doesn't have the resources to do the job. He can't concentrate. He has trouble sleeping. He's plagued by visions or memories or something.

Horror fans will catch hints of Polanski's *Repulsion* and the better new Asian horrors, but the film isn't at all derivative. Compared to filmmaker Lance Weiler's first feature, the underrated *Last Broadcast*, *Head Trauma* is more focused and tighter. It was filmed on a few locations. Acting in the lead roles is excellent. Other reviewers have compared Vince Mola to Paul Giamatti and that's not inaccurate. He's a character who's alternately sympathetic and scary. The key scene where he shares a late-night snack with an old high school friend rings absolutely true.

The film works through a growing sense of dread and so the running time has been cut down to 84 minutes. If it were any longer, the atmosphere would simply become too oppressive. And, most important, where so many horror films these days arrive at murky endings that seem to have been created by a committee, this one is completely logical and satisfying.

## Head Trauma Review

by Peter Martin TWITCHFILM.NET

In the course of covering Fantastic Fest, I've seen 25 features so far, with more to come. My mind feels like it's reaching capacity with blood, body parts, savage killers, and psychic traumas doing battle within my cranium.

Yet I keep coming back to *Head Trauma* as one of this year's touchstones.

Directed by Lance Weiler, the film had its World Premiere at the Los Angeles Film Festival earlier this year, and then Weiler took the still daring and semi-insane self-distribution route across the United States. *Head Trauma* is [available now on DVD](#).

Weiler captures the free-floating anxiety caused by skittering insects running across a hardwood floor when it's pitch black and you're lying all alone in a sleeping bag in an abandoned house.

George Walker (Vince Mola) returns to his hometown after a lengthy absence. His grandmother has died and left him title to her crumbling multi-story house, which is on the verge of being condemned.

George is not a very appealing character. He's balding, overweight, dresses bad, and unintentionally annoys people. Still, after a confrontation with a neighbor and old nemesis, it's easy to take George's side as he attempts what seems impossible: to fix up the old house on a tight deadline to keep the house from being condemned and torn down.

As George chips away at the garbage and decay, he enlists the reluctant assistance of another neighbor, Julian Thompson (Jamil A.C. Mangan), a young artist, and tries to rekindle a romance with long-ago girlfriend Mary Sherman (Mary Monahan), who is now involved with that old nemesis of a neighbor.

The problem is that the more time George spends in the house, the more he's afflicted with bad dreams and discovers unsettling items left behind in the house. And we just know that the mental trauma he begins to experience will spill over into real life.

Demonstrating once again that ingenuity and invention are more important than millions of dollars in budget, Weiler most effectively works within the confines of the dark house. As more and more unsettling things start to happen, it's almost as though the house were growing into a full-fledged, recently awakened character that is not sure what it wants to do when it sees that it's under attack.

*Head Trauma* creeped me out. Wherever you're able to see it, make sure the lights are out. And bring a friend.

The DVD is a fine set that includes an 8-page booklet, director's commentary, trailers, the artwork, special effects, cast interviews, and behind-the-scenes features. It also highlights the appropriately atmospheric musical score of composers Brian McTear and Amy Morrissey.

## **DVD REVIEW: HEAD TRAUMA**

by Alex Riviello - Creature Corner CHUD.com

Directed by: Lance Weiler

Starring: Vince Mola, Jamil A.C. Mangan

It's tough going into a movie you have high hopes for. More often than not the film will never live up to the expectations in your head. Fortunately, Head Trauma erases all fears right from the beginning... throwing you into a nightmare world where you're never sure what's right around the corner. It's the kind of filmmaking that people lament not seeing more of- because it's spooky without resorting to cheap jump scares, well acted, and one hell of a story.

### The Film-

George Walker is coming back home. His grandmother died a few years ago, and her house has been left abandoned and in disrepair. It is soon to be demolished. George isn't exactly the kind of guy who keeps a steady job, so he sees an opportunity in this- to fix up the place real quick and sell it for a few bucks.

He breaks into his childhood home only to discover that in the time since his grandma died it's been inhabited by all manner of squatters and drug addicts. It's no wonder that his neighbors want the house gone. But George still has hope that the inspector will see the hard work he puts into it and will allow it to stay till he can find a buyer.

But it's just not that easy. Besides the enormous amounts of trash around the place, the basement's flooded- and it doesn't exactly look stable. George also starts having strange visions revolving around a hooded figure- nightmares where horrible things happen to him and the people around him. He happens on a comic in the house that seems to be showing exactly what he's going through- is he going nuts? Or is something else going on in the house? His old friends and neighbors worry for him as he tries to figure out what's happening...

### The Judgement-

Saying too much about this movie would ruin it. Director Lance Weiler has managed to do something that's pretty impossible nowadays- he's made a film that's genuinely creepy. As a horror junkie, it's insanely hard to get into a film completely- I'm constantly wondering how effects were done or shots were pulled off, all the while looking at the characters as nothing more than actors. It's hard to get completely into a horror movie these days, especially since more than often it seems the filmmakers have no idea of how to scare people. Not so with Head Trauma. The film immerses you right from the beginning, with the beautiful shots that make you feel as if you're flying above a forest.

And the rest of it creeps you out- big time. I love it when a film makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

One important factor in this film (and indeed, something that made me interested in the concept in the first place) is that it was shot in an actual abandoned house. They checked out over 60 empty buildings before finally finding their place. The house is as much of a character as any of the actors- and when you realize that the filth and garbage in the house was actually real- you'll understand why it all feels so grimy.

The relationships between the main characters feel genuine, even as you are just as confused as George at what exactly is going on. The film's more of a personal journey than anything, but that's not saying that you won't get just as scared as him. The scenes with the hooded figure that seems to be stalking the house are truly spooky- the sound effects and music helping to turn a faceless monster into a nightmare...

The one letdown with the film was a somewhat predictable ending. Even so, it's the only way that it could end- anything else would've made the rest of the movie seem ridiculous.

#### The Sight and Sound-

Of course this is shot on DV (Weiler's first film, *The Last Broadcast*- was the first film to be shot, edited and shown entirely in digital- take that, George Lucas) and it's got a great look to it. Forget the DV naysayers. The transfer is crisp and clear, and the colors on a whole are muted- adding to the feel of the film. The sound is great as well, in a 5.1 mix that will fully immerse you in the creaking sounds of the house.

#### The Extras-

This disc is packed... seriously. Every feature is worth multiple views, something that can't be said with a lot of DVDs. It shines with extras... a blinding beacon of goodness, especially for anyone with an interest in low budget filmmaking. You will have so much more appreciation for the flick when you realize just how guerilla the film was.

First off there's an 8 page booklet which features notes on the script by *The Grudge* script Stephen Susco and images from the comic book included in the film (a few of which we ran as exclusives.)

Commentary- with the director. Most of it I already knew from my interview with him but he's a really interesting guy and it's constantly amazing how they got this much together on such a small film. He tells lots of interesting stories on the production and gives the whole explanation of the plot. Some people may not like hearing everything spelled out for them, but it's good to see what the creator had in mind. You'll want to check this track out.

Blowing up a Car- Exactly what it sounds like- they show how they got away with blowing up a car without permits.... and how to do multiple takes with a limited crew and a massive fire going on in the back of the frame. Amazing stuff.

Shooting in the House - Man, was this place nasty. There was the constant fear that the damn thing would collapse around them, especially since they flooded the basement for some of the creepier scenes.

John Magdic and his Amazing Flying Machines - The guy who flew the ultralights that captured some of the soaring aerial footage talks about his contraptions. Interesting stuff- and he definitely gave the film a much more interesting look . Guy didn't even charge Lance anything!

S.R. Bisette - The Swamp Thing cartoonist talks about what it was like to create a comic for the movie. Sounds like a phone interview but it's edited with footage from the film and sketches he's done... interesting stuff.

Cast interviews - 8 minute feature of most of the main actors talking about what they did to create their characters. They all seem genuinely excited about the flick.

Music of Head Trauma - Brian McTear shows off some of his equipment and talks how he went about creating the tone for the film.... and how he got some of the stranger sounds in the film. In other news, there is a cd with an alternate soundtrack to the movie.... we'll have more news on that soon.

Trailers- for The Last Broadcast and Head Trauma.

The Packaging-

Awesome looking slipcase that holds an equally cool dvd cover that has an x-ray of a skull. Love that it's different art underneath the slipcase.... it's such a waste when companies put the exact same art twice. The disc is plain black- gotta dig it. Also- the dvd case is clear and has some cryptic messages written in the inside that only become clear after you've seen the film...

The Lowdown-

A must-buy. Anyone who laments not being creeped out by anything but Asian horror flicks lately would do well to check this out- as well as anyone who wants to see how to do a smaller flick effectively.

The Movie- 9/10 The Disc- 9/10