

# Ten Years Of 'A Nightmare On Elm Street' and the Pitfalls of Remaking A Classic Horror Film

By **Murjani Rawls** - May 5, 2020

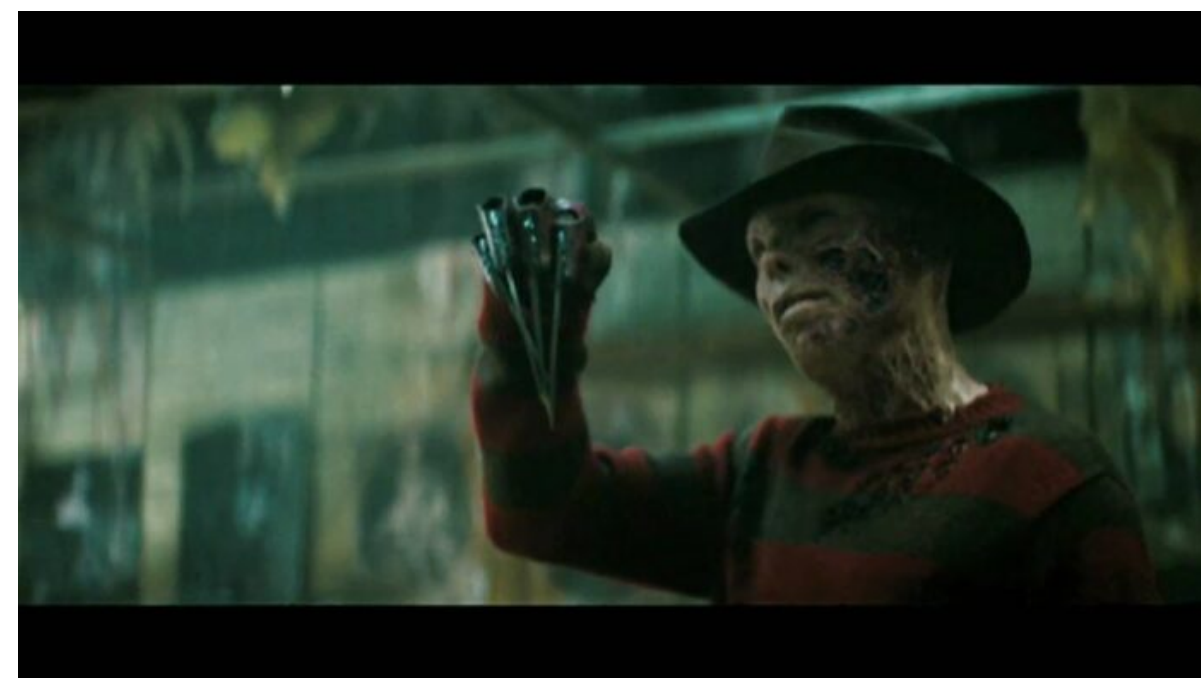


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Who could ever forget the opening of the late Wes Craven's 1984 horror classic, *A Nightmare On Elm Street*? Charles Bernstein's score is paired with the visuals of Freddy Krueger's sharpening steak knives into his trademark glove. He chases Tina Gray (Amanda Wyss) through a dimly lit and desolate boiler room to what we would soon find out is a dream. When doing a remake, the pressure to live up to the substance of the original film is hard enough. Imagine doing this to one of the most famous slasher films of all time.

*The Nightmare On Elm Street* franchise has tormented filmgoers throughout eight films including the 2003's *Freddy vs. Jason* crossover. Within the same year, Platinum Dunes, founded by Michael Bay became somewhat of a horror remake machine. They began production on a slew of horror movie re-imaginings such as 2003's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, 2005's *The Amityville Horror*, and 2009's *Friday the 13th*. While these films found financial success, they were panned critically.

Ultimately, it was a matter of time before *Elm Street* caught the redo bug with first time director, Samuel Bayer at the helm. There was an overall train of thought to both bring in themes from the original film while going for an overall darker tone. While the 2010 version tries it's best to put a new spirit into this franchise, it shows what happens when you forget what made the movie great in the first place.

One of the things that the original did so well is the melting of the reality and dream states. Scenes were done in such a way where you began to question what was real and what was not. Transitions were seamless and generally caught you off guard. The remake introduces the concept of 'micro naps' where someone is so sleep-deprived, the brain goes into states of sleep for up to 30 seconds. This aspect could have been utilized to make for some inventive creative choices. Instead, the movie relies too heavily on jump scares to the detriment of both the dream sequences and Freddy himself.

A large part of what made the character of Freddy Krueger frightening in the original movie was the lack of his physical presence. The kills that occur throughout the film show a specter of him. Krueger actively exists in dark corners and only glimpses of his grotesque face are revealed to the audience. It's the space where your brain can come up with the most terrifying of scenarios that's effective. Less is more.

With any horror movie, having characters that you can personify with enhances the emotional payoff of losing them. The 1984 version introduces us to Nancy Thompson (Heather Langenkamp) who we see grow throughout the movie. In a welcomed tweak to the 'final girl' trope, Nancy learns how to save herself. Instead of running away or waiting for a male character to come to her rescue, she saves herself. Not only does she take on Krueger in the physical world, but she also disarms him of the one weapon he has – fear. Krueger is no longer able to amplify his presence and a female protagonist can stand tall against a dominating male antagonist. Also, the original movie at least frames that the four main protagonists at least have a friendship.

In the 2010 version, the plot itself creates a distance between the audience and the characters. You don't feel as emotionally invested as you should because the connections with our main characters aren't as strong. In the new story, Nancy (Rooney Mara), Quentin (Kyle Gallner), Kris (Katie Cassidy), and Jessie (Thomas Dekker) are united by a mystery of their past. Their

memories of being in preschool together somehow get repressed and then become awakened by the sudden rash of killings.

Nancy Holbrook is mostly withdrawn and painted as an outcast within the film. Unlike the first film, the final confrontation that comes between her and Krueger doesn't feel earned. This is despite Nancy being the 'favorite.' Given that point, an attachment to other characters dying isn't established. There's also a pseudo-love story that happens between Nancy and Quentin that doesn't quite work. The 2010 iteration tries to build some emotional stakes, but the lack of chemistry between characters makes the bonds fall short.

The performance of Robert Englund's portrayal of Freddy Krueger is exemplary. For the small screen time that he gets within the original film, he can captivate audiences with the trademark costume and sharp one-liners. It's a hard act to follow. Jackie Earle Haley does as much as he can with the role that's given to him in one of the few plus sides of the movie. Another positive is both Bayer and cinematographer Jeff Cutter work together to frame Krueger in his classic, unnerving essence. This either occurs through shadows, his voice, or the view of his classic claw.

Where the movie hits a rut is when it tries to recreate the classic scenes of the 1984 version constantly. There are going to be callbacks and homages in these types of films. A remake succeeds when it strikes a balance of what you loved and improving upon the foundation that's given.

There is one plot choice within Freddy Krueger's backstory that both troubling and puzzling within the recent film. In the original, Krueger is shown to be a child murderer which is already horrific as it gets. The remake decides to lean in on a child molestation aspect of Krueger's character. Given this plot point, the movie could have explored the post-traumatic damage that such events would present a survivor and those surrounding them. Instead, it paves a way for a more vengeful Freddy Krueger character. Only seeking to kill the now teenage victims of the town because they told their parents of the abuse. It's only more confusing given the next aspect of this.

The second act of the film has a flashback moment where Quentin witnesses the parents of the town burn Freddy alive. It's even more peculiar with the next scene where Quentin gets an argument with his dad and implies the possibility that the kids made it up and framed Krueger. Now, Freddy Krueger, the demonic pied pier figure is a sympathetic character? It's later revealed

within the third act reveal that Krueger was guilty and Nancy being the particular target when she was young. If you look through Elm Street lore, the audience is not supposed to root or feel sorry for Freddy Krueger. He's the perfect amalgamation of evil and most fans already know who he is. By making that choice, the remake puts the audience on the uncomfortable side of the antagonist.

In the 1984 version, the parents of the town are withdrawn and helped captive in their vices such as denial and alcohol. While their children are undergoing the torture of sleep deprivation and possible murder, you can see the toll that killing Krueger has taken on everyone. Both sets of parents in these films engage in vigilante justice, but the subtext of the original movie is stripped.

Freddy Krueger does not get charged for his crimes in the court of law. He's released on the technicality, thus, the parents of Elm Street have to take the law into their own hands to protect their children. The collective in the 2010 film does this under the pretext of their children not going to trial to tell their stories and enduring that trauma. This is even as evidence would show with Nancy's childhood dress having claw marks. The parents are so within their denial with no signs of trauma themselves that their children are seemingly on their own to solve the mystery. If there was that added ingredient, this would have been more emotionally plausible.

Therein lies the pitfalls of adopting an iconic horror movie into a modern pretext under the guise of being a darker tale. Think about it – the essence of an entity attacking you in a place where someone presumably can't save you is scary enough. Dreams are a mixed bag. They can even be an endless pit of your darkness fear or a blissful getaway. Even the concept of rest, where it seems like a haven of safety, can keep us up at night. It's not that a remake needs to go darker – it just needs to remember the simplicity of what scares us the most and hold to it. No matter when it was made, the practicality of the 1984 version of Elm Street still has a legacy because of this principle.

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