

Wrong Side of the Bed

**By Christina Harlin, your Fearless
Young Orphan**

***Flatliners* (2017)**

Directed by Niels Arden Oplev

***Flatliners* has a 5% rating at
rottentomatoes.com.**

In my mind, the original 1990 version of *Flatliners* was known more for the romantic scandal that took place behind the scenes (stars Julia Roberts

and Keifer Sutherland were going to get married and then, suddenly, they weren't) than it was for being a particularly good film, and it remained noticeable in film history only because of its hot young cast (Kevin Bacon, Oliver Platt and William Baldwin included, among others). The film is perfect material for a remake for these very reason: it's the perfect vehicle for a hot young cast, and it was never so wildly successful a film that a remake would warrant anger or have impossibly big shoes to fill. Even those of us who are old enough to remember *Flatliners* of 1990 – well, can we *really* remember it? (A note from the Orphan: Apparently my mom remembers it and loved it. Hmm. Who knew?)

Five young medical students embark together on a dangerous experiment. They want to know what happens to the brain after death; they're looking to map the process of brain death and possibly explain "after death experiences" and just possibly, if they're lucky, they'll learn something about the afterlife. (These multiple goals are expressed willy-nilly throughout the film; motivations change from scene to scene – just content yourself with the fact that they want to kill themselves but only temporarily.)

The way they chose to accomplish this is by taking turns stopping their hearts to spend a limited number of minutes dead as an MRI machine maps their brain's activity and then to be resuscitated by their hopefully capable friends. There is a basically preposterous reason why they have access to top-of-the-line medical equipment free and unsupervised, but fine, let's go with it, bigger frish to fye. Er, fish to fry. Courtney (Ellen Page) is the one who starts the experiment and she pulls her friends into it alongside her, giving them a pretty good line about this being all for the purpose of science and discovery while, in truth, she's just desperate to make contact with a younger sister for whose death she feels responsible. "Don't worry," she says, "I've signed a waiver that exonerates you." They don't even ask to see a copy of this miraculous document. I wonder if she got an attorney to draw it up for her.



"Actually, I'm quite eager to kill you. Have been for some time."

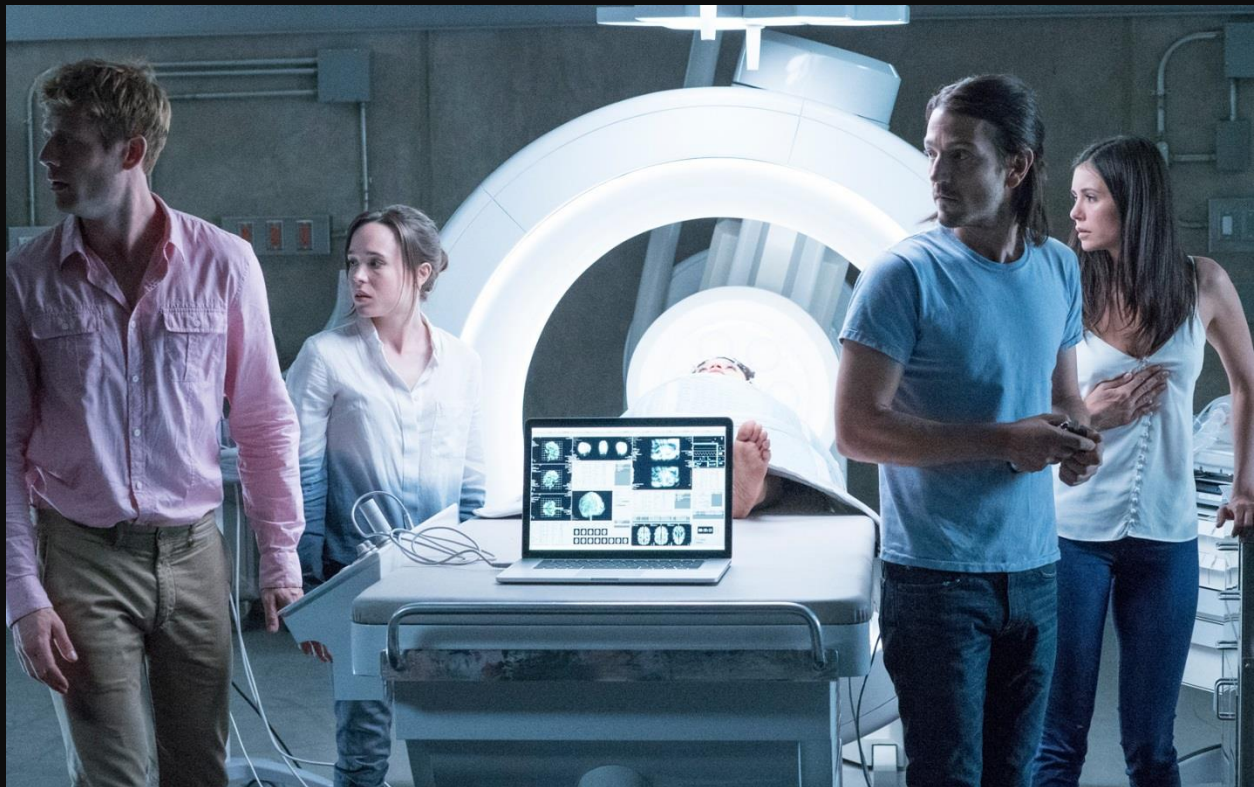
While watching the film, you may be like me, and feel a certain astonishment at how easy it is for Courtney to get accomplices in this scheme. Marlo, Ray, Jamie and Sophia, faced with this activity that could lead a variety of terrible outcomes including real, permanent death, manslaughter charges, expulsion from medical school, and a lifetime of guilt and regret,

are all quickly recruited. After all, Courtney signed a form absolving them of blame, like that's going to hold up in a legal proceeding. Courtney goes first, and when she comes out of her after-death experience with improved cognitive function (wowing their chief resident with her doctoring know-how) and long-lost skills returning (playing the piano again after 13 years), most of the remaining friends can't wait to ride the afterlife train.

Now at this point, ignoring the astounding risks these supposedly intelligent young people are taking, the movie could still touch on something amazing. An after-death experience is a wondrous thing and exploring it could make an incredible story (Oh, and it has – check out *The OA* on Netflix). These young

scientific minds could stumble into the secrets that mankind has been asking itself since we first fell out of the trees. Alas, instead of trying to touch on something mystical, *Flatliners* instead becomes like a less-scary version of a *Final Destination* film.

Each of the four experimenters (Ray doesn't go; as played by Diego Luna, he's too cool to die) comes back from the beyond with "something else" dogging them: Courtney can't stop seeing her dead sister, Jamie is followed by a hollow-eyed young woman and the cries of an infant, Marlo sees a girl she wronged badly in high school, Sophia is tormented by a man she inadvertently killed in the emergency room with a bad diagnosis. And even this could be interesting if the movie only handled the scares with some flair or intelligence instead of handling each one in almost exactly the same way (the character spends five minutes wandering around in a "horror movie" setup, complete with shadows, jump-starts, lights going out, spooky faces looming out of the dark). By the time we get around to the third and fourth interludes of spooooky stuff, we're bored and we know exactly where each scene is heading. When we get "the truth" about their haunting visions, it's actual silly enough to undermine any tension the film has built so far.



"Shh, shh. Everybody act natural."

As for science, the scientific study of the experiment seems to have led nowhere and they've discovered nothing, or if they did, the film simply doesn't have the energy to try and tell us about it. Eventually they're just a group of young people hooking up and being pestered by scenes copycatted from popular horror films.

Here are five things to like about the flat-lining *Flatliners*. I'm positive I'm not the first person who has made that joke. But there you have it.

1. Keifer Sutherland makes an appearance as the chief resident. That's amusing.

2. Comedy. The script is often hilarious, if you're a fan of bad scripts. Some of the expository dialog (and there's just a ton of it, and it's mostly awkward) is a hoot, particularly when these young doctors are

giving us a quickie explanation of what's happening because the movie doesn't trust us to know for ourselves. Characters make baffling decisions and do silly-ass things. *Flatliners* is never going to make it as a cult-classic bad film, but it certainly has some of those qualities, if you're somehow stuck with watching it.

3. The cast is occasionally appealing. Particularly, Diego Luna as Ray and Ellen Page as Courtney are both magnetic stars who can turn poor material into decent material by simply saying it the right way.

4. The trips to the afterlife are beautifully constructed, if not entirely original.

5. The peppery romance between Ray and Sophia – who hotly compete with each other academically and professionally - is convincing enough that you'll wish it had been in a better film, or maybe on one of those medical TV shows.

Here's the rather embarrassing truth. While I acknowledge this is a dumb movie with a lot of dumb people, I was still interested enough (Thanks to the stars? The basic idea? Nostalgia?) that when my Movie Buddy tried to fast-forward near the end, I asked him not to, because I wanted to hear what the



Keifer!

characters had to say. So you see, I was on the afterlife train too, just a wee bit.