

Tibor Takacs

The Gate

Horror movies — and other genres too — can be loosely divided into two opposing camps: the mainstream and the extreme. The extreme — **Videodrome**, **The Brood** — offers lots and lots of what the filmmaker figures you're paying your money for: suspense, thrills, terror, gore, never-before-seen sights and (much more rarely) never-before-thought ideas and glimpses into dark corners a lot of us would rather pretend do not exist. These are the movies that get some people very upset and generate pro-censorship movements.

The mainstream — **The Fly**, **Dead Zone** — offers carefully measured amounts of the above, watered down just enough so as not to turn off any potential ticket buyers. These are the movies that get network sales in prime-time slots and generate lots of lovely ad revenue, not to mention good notices in the daily papers. You could summarize the split by saying, 'real horror' versus 'horror for people who don't really like horror' movies. But that would hardly be fair.

The Gate is mainstream horror all the way. From its cute, suburban, pre-teen protagonists, through its very conventional camera angles and deliberately softened shock cuts (softened by allowing one or both of the shots involved to run a few frames too long), to its impossibly happy ending, **The Gate** aims for mainstream mass-market money all the way.

*Okay, let's cut the flow of bullshit for a moment. The rest of this review is irrelevant, it's the kind of crap you've read a thousand times before and it won't tell you anything you don't know, need to know, or can't figure out for yourself. There is one thing, and one thing only, worth saying about **The Gate**: it is a vicious, venal lie, a corruption and denial of the highest values of art and the core value of fairy tales — the value of truth, truth presented as fable or allegory so that all of us, and especially the kids, can see quite clearly the operations of good and evil, virtue and vice, innocence and experience, strength and weakness — the actions of human beings and their consequences — particularly their consequences.*

***The Gate** is a fairy tale — do I need to explain how horror movies are very often fairy tales? Naw, you already know that. A fairy tale: the cowardly kid finds the courage to use the weapons of love and light to beat back the force of darkness. And it works and it's fine... And then everybody who got killed comes back to life again and it's a slap in the face to any real emotion you might have invested in the characters, but more, far more important — it's a lie. Dead is dead. People don't come back like they were before — not*

in life and not in fantasy. They don't come back because there's always a price to pay with evil, because real actions have real consequences, because fantasy — honest fantasy and not mindlessly cobbled-together gobbledygook and special effects — is about truth and we all know that truth about death, don't we, despite what our secret five-year-old selves tell us we want. Remember being five and pleading with whatever unseen force you just knew controlled the universe: "Please, please, make it didn't happen"? This is a movie that feeds into that infantile misapprehension and denies all your hard-earned knowledge and all the knowledge you hope and pray your kids are going to grow into. Whoever made that decision — the decision to rip us all off — should be condemned to write horoscopes forever.

...Now, back to our regularly scheduled review.

We were talking about mainstream and extreme films and I was just about to tell you that there is nothing inherently wrong with being mainstream. **The Fly** is a terrific movie, so for that matter is **Poltergeist** and, as box office figures tell us, the mainstream audience really gets off on its mainstream nightmares.

Getting the mainstream audience off is partly a matter of setting up expectations that are later satisfied — unlike the extreme, where the more audience expectations you destroy, the bigger hit you're likely to wind up with. **The Gate**'s L.A.-based scenarist, Michael Nankin, sets up the hero's best friend as a troubled kid — mother dead, father absent a lot — with a cruel streak, so we might reasonably expect him to do a little aiding and abetting on behalf of the forces of evil. No such luck. The kid performs for the forces of good all the way, except for a brief interlude as a zombie — which isn't his fault; he got captured. The hero himself is set up as an object of scorn for the teenagers around him. Does he rescue his worst tormentor? Do any of them witness his bravery and triumph? Nope.

On the other hand, Nankin twice gives

us payoffs without set-up. The family dog emerges alive at the end and everyone gathers around to stroke it. It's supposed to be heartwarming, but nobody bothered to make the dog into a character in the first place. The undead workman — one of the film's three main menaces — is supposedly a supernatural incarnation of one of our hero's key personal terrors. But check the set-up, which ran something like this:

"Dad, Terry told me there's a dead workman behind the wall and I'm scared."

"Don't be, son. Your friend made it up because he's still upset over his mother's death. Take him with a grain of salt and treat him gently."

"Okay, Dad."

And that's it. I'm condensing and paraphrasing, but that's basically it: tell us about the fear, tell us about the cruel friend, but don't show us either. It's not enough to make the undead workman a big deal when he finally does show up.

The three leads — Stephen Dorff as the hero, Glen, Louis Tripp as his friend, Terry, and Christa Denton as Al, the sister torn between her teenage impulses and her affection for her kid brother — all have appealing, middle-class cute faces and all are decent actors. Tripp is a newcomer, but the others have done TV, commercials and one or more TV movies.

But their scenes together are oddly flat, as though director Tibor Takacs either feared to milk the emotional moments lest he be accused, perhaps, of Spielberg-ism or simply missed their point. One has to look carefully and analyze the dialogue to realize that this scene signals the start of a real brother-sister rift, or that one is meant to pinpoint loneliness and friendship.

Likeable characters are a mainstream expectation, especially in Spielberg territory, **The Gate**'s chosen ground. In an extreme film, like **Evil Dead II**, character can be reduced to behaviour in the face of life-threatening situations, because those are the only situations happening. In the mainstream, big character

moments are important — not least because they keep you interested while you're waiting for the booga-booga to start up.

It takes a full 45 minutes for the booga-booga to start and **The Gate** just can't support the wait. Yes, there's a scary dream to open the movie and a few shivery foreshadowings to carry it along. But they aren't nearly good enough to carry you over the blank character moments, the witless insult humour (sample: "G'bye, Faggot"), the clunky exposition...

An aside: the plot is this: backyard tree gets dug up, thereby opening the way for a dark, pre-Christian god to come through and rule the world. The kids inadvertently perform the necessary rituals. The god comes through. The hero sends it back. This kind of stuff needs explaining, so Nankin invents a heavy metal band that uses the relevant lore and then writes two scenes, the first showing Terry figuring out what's happening, the second showing Terry telling Glen what we've just seen him figure out. And Takacs leaves both scenes in the final cut. One is enough, or would be if they weren't so badly shot that, even with both, we get only a vague notion of the supernatural system at work here. One thing he does make perfectly clear, though: as we watch in close-up a record being played backward by hand, Terry tells us, in no uncertain terms, that he's playing a record backward by hand. End of aside.

... the pointless conflicts. The audience I saw it with was restless and bored, hooting at the scary bits, talking through the rest and paying attention only in one black comedy sequence — guy lugs around a dead dog, unable to get rid of it — that seemed to belong more in another movie.

Complaining that the booga-booga isn't good enough to support the picture is a bit misleading — once it gets going it's fine. We've got Melting Dad, Undead Workman, Miniature Demons, Giant Fish-Head-On-a-Turd Dark God, Tunnel To Hell, Erupting Floor, Cosmic Darkness and Utterly Meaningless But Really Evocative Living Eye In A Hand and they're all executed with top-of-the-line professionalism by special effects man Randall Cook and special make-up artist Craig Reardon, whose credits between them include **2010**, **Ghostbusters**, **Fright Night**, **The Thing**, **American Werewolf in London**, **Mean Season** and **Altered States**. They are also all worked into a sequence of battles, victories, sudden reversals and stalk-and-shock scenes that moved with enough speed and escalation to get the audience to sit up and pay attention.

I know next to nothing of the functions of the director in special effects sequences, but since critical convention demands all praise and all blame to be attributed to the director, I can only say that Tibor Takacs demonstrates an overall level of competence far beyond that generally associated with Canadian horror movies — excepting, of course, those of David Cronenberg. I have seen none of his previous works — **Metal Messiah**, **Snow**, **The Trouble With Trolls**, **Tales from a Toyshop**, **The Tomorrow Man** — but the latter picked

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up a CFTA award in 1980 and the others have received domestic and foreign awards and nominations at festival screenings.

Competence is maybe the single most important mainstream quality. We can ignore bad acting, mickeymouse effects and glaring technical flubs in the extreme movies — we're too busy being scared to care — but the mainstream audience, wired into Hollywood standards, demands the gloss of the well-made picture. *The Gate* has it. In terms of presentation there's nothing major-league awful here. At worst, it's flat and pointless. At best, though, there's nothing great, nothing to give any but the least experienced viewer a rush of real pleasure or thrill.

At best, *The Gate* is competent. Which is about as mainstream as you can get.

Andrew Dowler •

THE GATE A New Century Entertainment Corporation presentation in association with the Vista Organization Ltd An Alliance Entertainment/ John Kemeny Production d. Tibor Takacs sc Michael Nankin p. John Kemeny co-p. Andras Hamori d.o.p. Thomas Vamos prod. des. William Beeton ed. Rit Wallis spfx des. and sup. Randall William Cook sp. makeup Craig Reardon mus. Michael Hoenig, J. Peter Robinson cast. Mary Gail Artz. Clare Walker prod. man. Robert Wertheimer 1st a.d. Michael Zenon 2nd. a.d. Bill Bannerman 3rd a.d. Kathleen Meade sc. sup Nancy Eagles loc. man. Woody Sidarous 1st asst. cam. Daniel Vinclette 2nd. asst. cam. John Davidson add. cam. op. Malcolm Cross set photog. Takahi Seida loc. sd. Doug Ganton boom Reynald Trudel key grip Michael O'Connor grip Bert Gouweleuw. Scott Keares. Tom O'Reilly. Lee Wright gaffer Richard Allen best boy Craig Wright elec. Mark Woodley. Erk Tahysen. Paul Court. Robert Dichiera. Ross Edmunds. Ken Hillier. Dan Piva asst art d. Barry Birnberg. Julia Bourque set dec. Jeff Cutler. Marlene Graham asst set dec. Zana Ancerl prop. master Liz Calderhead prop man Adrian Hardy art dept. p.a. Stephen Levitt construct co-ord Helene LaFrance head carp Rejean Brochu carp. Andre Brochu. Michel Brochu. Serge Gagne. Jean Marie Valerland. Robert Sher. Sheldon Walters. William Armstrong. Joe Hampson landscaping Wm. J. White and Associates scenic artist Steve Willetts painters Shannon F. Griffiths. Frank Lefeuve. Terri Aikenhead prod. acc. Joanne Jackson asst. acc. Loretta Van Hart prod. co-ord Fran Solomon prod. sec. Gina Fowler asst. to Mr. Kemeny Vicki Ahrens asst. to Mr. Hamori Arlene D. Hay pub. Janice Kaye sp. cultpt. Reet Puhm. Film Arts Inc. Angus doll Lisa Smith spfx Frank Carere asst spfx Deborah Tiffen. Jordan Craig spfx p.a. John Bakker blue screen assembly Mutabilis Scenic Services Inc costum des. Trysha Bakker ward. Sylvie Bonniere make-up Linda Preston hairdresser Jenny Arbour tutors Mary Davie. Wendy Beck driver capt. Dan Dunlop drivers Gabe Fallus. Ted Fanyeck. Mark Moore. Barney Bayliss catering/craft service Zee's Catering moths supp. by Northern Animal Exchange trainer Gerry Therrien dog wrangler Jane Conway second unit d.o.p. Peter Benison asst. d. Judi Kemeny asst. cam. Dan Roy key grip Brian Potts gaffer Kenneth Salah elec. Bill Buttery prod. asst. Terry Gould. John B. Lind Visual effects prod. at Illusion Arts Inc. matte photog Bill Tayler Matte sup. Syd Dutton Illusion Arts Crew visual fx cam. Mark Freund sp. rigging Lynn Ledgerwood prod. co-ord Mark Sawicki anim. Catherine Sudolcan matte artist Mark Whitlock optical co-ord David Williams Randy Cook's Crew Fumi Mahimo. Jim Aupperle. Michael F. Hoover Craig Reardon's Crew Michael Mills. Kent Jones. Frank Carrisoa. Mark Wilson. Keith Edmier sd. ed. David Evans. Wayne Griffin. Steven Munro. Jane Tattersall. Robin Leigh. Rick Cadger post-prod. sup. H. Gordon Woodside assoc. pic. ed. H. Gordon Woodside assoc. pic. ed. Susan Schreiner music ed. Carl Zittler. Jim Weidman Foley Mike Liotta. terry Burke re-rec. Joe Grimaldi. Dino Pigat 2nd. ass. ed. Charlene Olson asst. sd. eds. Susan Maggi. Sandra Moffat. Cherie MacNeill. David Giammarco No Pleasure song and video by Eva Everything (Great Shakes Productions) Everybody Running by Vince Carlucci and Sandy Macfayden Love Will Find a Way by Vince Carlucci (Secret Songs Publications Delusions of Grandeur by Carl Tafel. performed by Terraced Garden (Melody and Menace Records) Yes It's True and Modern Personality by Julia Bourque. performed by True Confessions (Bomb Records) colour Medallion Film Laboratories Ltd sd. facilities Soundmix Ltd. Pathe sound and post-production centre titles Film Optical Canada Ltd (Dolby Stereo, Nabet I.p.) Stephen Dorff. Christa Denton. Louis Tripp. Kelly Rowan. Jennifer Irwin. Deborah Grover. Scot Denton. Ingrid Beninger. Sean Fagan. Linda Goranson. Carl Kraines. Andrew Gunn. stunts Randy Kamula. Peter Cox. Leslie Munro

Lewis Furey's **Champagne for Two**

and Mort Ransen's **Sincerely, Violet**

As the continuing success of *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and the *Harlequin* novels prove, the public's appetite for love is unsatiated, maybe even insatiable. The words and images of Love are gobbled up by the reading and viewing audience as fast as they can be produced. To satisfy this voracious appetite, Astral Film Enterprises has brought us *Shades of Love*, a series of eight contemporary romance movies. *Shades of Love* is an attempt to transfer the immensely popular romance novel to film. The romance novel in question is not the early *Harlequin* variety that first comes to mind: insecure waif initiated into womanhood by worldweary man who falls in love with her intoxicating innocence and energy, marries her, and takes care of her — but one that has adapted to changing times.

The 'new' romance novel, on which *Shades of Love* is based, has incorporated into its formula certain inescapable truths of our society the older one avoided: work, gray hairs, sexual experience, stretch marks, failed marriages, etc. However, this is nothing more than a facelift. The skeletal plot remains intact — they meet, clash, fall in love, separate, return to each other, marry and, of course, live happily ever after. But it was never the plot that attracted readers except, perhaps, for its familiarity. The appeal has always been its language, its preoccupation with the heroine and her handling of the romantic situation and the access it gave to vicariously fall in love.

The language of the romance novel is purposefully vague and traditionally veiled in an idiom of sensation that allows

the reader to actively participate, filling in the precise detail according to personal preference. The final product is as much the creation of the reader as it is of the writer.

The most important element of the romance novel is the heroine. And it is in her depiction that the facelift is most obvious. She is now a fiercely independent and successful career woman who, having already been involved in a disastrous relationship, has become a bit of a cynic in regards to men and resists involvement with them unless she is in full control. The man she eventually falls in love with tears down her defences without, except superficially, threatening her independence or career.

The genre continues to favour the heroine. We are allowed access to her inner thoughts and frustrations. The man, on the other hand, remains a vague shadow except when he is with her. He develops into a character only through having had contact with the heroine. However, in spite of the attractively modern wrapper, the heroine essentially continues unchanged: she is and feels incomplete until the man enters her life; he redefines her existence and gives it real meaning; it is he who drives her to do her best and achieve excellence. This, however unpalatable, does not detract from the genre's appeal. Like the skeletal plot, its familiarity numbs the jar.

The success of *Shades of Love* in translating the romance novel to film is dependent on its ability to make available to the viewer the opportunity to participate in the creation of the romance and to be privy to the heroine's inner thoughts.

Shades of Love's attempt to capture the spirit of the romance novel is a wonderful success in *Champagne for Two* and a dismal failure in *Sincerely, Violet*. *Champagne for Two* is a light, intimate and humorous look at what happens to the life of Cody Prescott (Kirsten Bishop), a young architect-engineer, when she agrees to share her apartment with an unexpected house-guest (Nicholas Campbell). *Champagne for Two* discloses the romance that develops between Cody and her house-guest from the heroine's perspective. The man plays a secondary role to the woman's

vulnerabilities, fears and feelings which are made available to the viewer via her confidences to her friend Mollie (Carol Ann Francis). Having been allowed entry into the heroine's psyche and having been given the opportunity to fill in the 'falling-in-love' scenes, the viewer sympathises with the heroine when the relationship breaks down and is happy for her when she is reunited with the man she loves.

Lewis Furey succeeds in translating the veiled and vague quality of the genre's language to that of film. He appears to know that the romance novel's language is, first and foremost, a language of sensation that must be interpreted and not taken too literally. It is flesh to its familiar, skeletal plot. It foreshadows the plot and is suggestive of the sensations the reader should vicariously feel as the heroine falls in love. Lewis transmutes the foreshadowing language of the novel by using its film equivalent — the visual cliché. For example, at the beginning of the film, while Cody is taking a shower, Vince enters the apartment without her being aware of it. Shots of her in the shower are juxtaposed with shots of Vince's gloved hand opening the apartment door. She soaps herself and Vince (unidentified as yet) takes out several knives from the kitchen drawer. She rinses herself and he revs the electric knife. She dries herself and he throws a piece of meat to his dog.

Furey elicits certain audience expectations of the plot which he then humourously undercuts. At the same time, and in the tradition of the suspense/ horror film, he prompts the viewers to participate in the filling in of things only hinted at by the shots and allowing their imaginations to take over.

Sincerely, Violet fails to capture the spirit of the romance novel. It is difficult to believe that Elizabeth (Patricia Phillips) — a shy retiring history professor with a basso profundo, furniture-stroking second self, Violet — and the man we are told she is in love with (Simon MacCorkingdale) are actually in love. There is a complete absence of intimacy between them. This may be because Elizabeth enters Mark's life fraudulently as Violet (an identity made up by her friend when Elizabeth is caught trying to steal a letter from Mark's study), disap-

• Nicholas Campbell and Kristen Bishop do it, romantically, in *Champagne for Two*

