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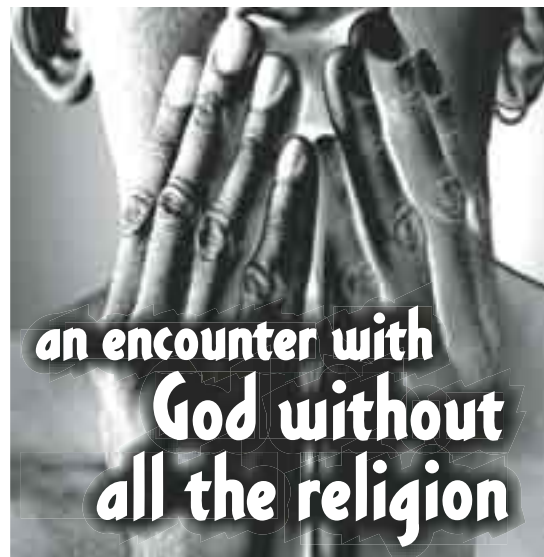
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# film reviews



Jay Hernandez in *Hostel*

## HYPE FACTOR

### *Hostel*

review by George Sax

I had a terrific review of *Hostel* all set to print. Unfortunately, I had to junk it after I actually saw the movie.

Let me explain. While most movie genres can be recycled every decade or so when a new generation of filmgoers appears, horror films (like pornography) have been continually forced to up the ante: what was scary and shocking in the 1980s would be laughed at by teens who grew up watching those films on cable and video.

But there's only so far you can go to horrify viewers. The most awful thing I can think of to witness would be documentary (i.e., unfaked) footage of a sympathetic person being slowly tortured to death. It's probably safe to assume that we will never see such a thing offered as mass entertainment, despite rumors of such things available on the Internet.

The ultimate possibility that viewers are actually likely to face is a fictional film in which a sympathetic, likeable character is brutally tortured. Movies have approached but veered away from this extreme in various ways: by slaughtering monsters and aliens that bleed green rather than red; by adopting a comic tone to negate any sense of realism; or by making the victims dislikeable, implying that they deserve what they get.

But still, as producers seek to appease ever more jaded audiences, that line keeps moving closer and closer. The 2003 remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* included scenes that were as close to it as I would ever care to see.

According to early reports, *Hostel* was going to be that movie. Internet reviewers who saw the film (it wasn't press screened in Buffalo) characterized it as a nadir in sadism—a film that dwelt on torture with an unflinching camera. I decided that this was a film I could go without seeing.

But when it came in at number one in the weekend box office ratings, I steeled myself to face it. I was ready to condemn it as bread and circuses for morons, responding to fans who admired its technical skill by asking if they would have commended the Nazis for the efficiency with which they ran their death camps.

It just goes to show that you should never believe hype. *Hostel* is wuss city.

OK, it's still not a movie that you would take your grandmother to, and I wouldn't advise bring a date to it (though the two college-aged girls at the screening I attended didn't seem to have any problem with it). It's a fairly nasty movie with a high quotient of gore and mayhem. But if you follow horror films with any regularity (and especially if you're up on Asian horror films), you're not going to see anything you haven't seen before.

The plot in a nutshell is about two American college students in Europe in search of cheap drugs and easy sex. On a tip they and a fellow traveler from Iceland head to an unadvertised hostel in Slovakia where the women are plentiful and desperate for, um, company.

They get all that in 45 minutes that play more like a soft porn film than a horror movie. It seems too good to be true—and, of course, it is: they've been lured into a business run by Russian gangsters in which rich sadists are offered the (expensive) opportunity to torture and kill a victim of their choice. And American victims command top dollar.

You may smell an element of dark satire there. After a decade of being exploited by Hollywood and the porn industry, the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe are probably eager for some payback. *Hostel* has a bit of that; but it has a bit of a lot of things. The movie it most reminded me of was *From Dusk til Dawn*, like *Hostel* a stew of competing ideas thrown together in one movie.

The connection is Quentin Tarantino, who wrote *Dusk* and executive produced *Hostel*. The advertising so prominently features his name that many ticket buyers probably assume he wrote and directed it. Those chores were handled by Eli Roth (*Cabin Fever*), a young filmmaker of considerably less wit and panache.

*Hostel* is efficiently made, and Roth is not without some skills. Like most modern horror films, it's an unpleasant experience that I wouldn't recommend to anyone but fans of the genre. But to those fans, I say: don't get your expectations up. For better or worse, there's nothing here you haven't seen before.

av

To respond to any of the film reviews, e-mail [artvoicefilm@aol.com](mailto:artvoicefilm@aol.com) or write to: Artvoice, 810 Main Street, Buffalo, NY 14202