

I have always believed that horror should not be set aside as a separate film genre. Instead, it should be seen as a subsection of comedy – albeit a sadistic subsection, where cruel laughs are generated at the expense of the dimwitted characters that find themselves victimized by circumstances that could have easily been avoided if they exercised a few of their long-dormant brain cells. (After all, intelligent people don't go tramping through haunted houses or stirring up ancient curses – take away the dum-dums going where they don't belong and you don't have horror films.)

Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of Stephen King's novel *The Shining* is best viewed as a dark comedy – if you approach it as a dramatic journey into the horrific, it falls apart almost immediately. For starters, the set-up makes no sense: a couple and their young son are hired to be the off-season caretakers in a mammoth resort hotel in the Colorado Rockies, yet the structure is so vast that it is impossible to imagine the two adults being responsible for the entire upkeep of a property that would require a small janitorial army to maintain when the hotel is operational. It also doesn't help that neither adult has any qualifications to handle such a task: he is a former teacher aspiring to be a writer and she is a stay-at-home mom whose slovenly appearance does not give any clue of cleaning skills.

The film's screenplay by Kubrick and Diane Johnson unwisely denuded the specifically supernatural elements of King's source material. The strategy was to make the viewer wonder whether the grisly apparitions that haunted the hotel were genuine or the products of the increasingly warped minds of the father (who was already a bit frayed around the mental edges from alcoholism and a failed writing career) and his son (who channels a gravel-voiced imaginary friend that supposedly lives in his mouth) as they react violently to their isolation from the world in that enormous yet empty hotel.

And while some of the allegedly eerie imagery in *The Shining* became belatedly iconic – the seemingly endless Steadicam tracking scenes, the waves of blood flowing from the elevator, the creepy little girls that appear and disappear in lonely hallways – Kubrick's decision to have his actors convey their fears with broad emoting dilutes the effectiveness to the point that it feels as if the cast was living in a D.W. Griffith melodrama. The result is a cue for the audience to laugh rather than shudder in fear.

Jack Nicholson's wild ping-ponging from rabid lupine posturing to eyebrow wiggling diabolical menace is amusing only because Nicholson is a likeable ham, but there is absolutely nothing scary about his character's descent into madness. The funniest scene in the film, with

Nicholson bellowing “Here’s Johnny!” after taking an axe to a door, is hilarious, but it doesn’t fit the supposedly terrifying mood that Kubrick tried (and failed) to convey.

And poor Shelley Duvall’s wide-eyed hysteria becomes so one-note in its synthetic hysteria (which was not what King had in mind in his novel) that it is easy to understand how her performance earned a Razzie Award for Worst Actress of the Year. (Kubrick was also nominated for a Worst Director Razzie that year.) Oddly, the one genuine funnyman in the cast – the charisma-rich Scatman Crothers, playing the hotel’s chef who can communicate telepathically with the caretakers’ son (young Danny Lloyd in his only big-screen role) – is directed to play his role with a numbing seriousness.

Over the years, Kubrick and *The Shining* gained a on a cult following that has prevented any in-depth criticism of the filmmaker and the many shortcomings in his works. Anyone coming to this work for the first time should be forewarned that the will generate more giggles (and perhaps a yawn or two), but there is absolutely nothing here to fear.

(571)