Pen Densham’s
The Kiss

In a brightly lit swimming pool at night, two women are swimming. From one of their mouths protrudes a foot-long, thick, slimy creature. It thruts itself into the younger woman’s mouth. Just then, her father jumps into view screaming “No!”, and yanks the beast from out of both of their mouths. The thing in his right hand turns to face him and snickers.

This scene is the climax of The Kiss, a Canadian horror film released last year. The opening scene and others of a similar calibre of weirdness provide a few moments of interest in what is an otherwise cautiously constructed genre piece. Every conflict, every gag, every scare is telegraphed years in advance to prime the viewer for the appropriate reaction.

To fans of the horror genre, The Kiss’ climax may recall David Cronenberg’s parasites in Shivers. However, the origin and function of the all-important monster differs significantly in this film. Whereas Cronenberg’s monsters were products of science and repressed sexual energy, the creature in The Kiss belongs safely in the realm of magic and witchcraft. In terms of its meaning, this monster therefore lacks potential for the social criticism that the beasts in Cronenberg’s earlier films have, arguably, suggested. In accordance with his decision to go with a more familiar formula, director Pen Densham has created a film that, despite its flirtation with strangeness, lands firmly on the side of the traditional nuclear family.

The story involves two sisters, separated at a tender age, who don’t quite meet again because one of them is created by a pick-up truck on her way to meet the other. With Hillary the Good (Pamela Culloty) out of the way, evil sister Felice (Joanna Pacula) ingrates herself into the lives of the beseamed young husband and nymphet daughter. They don’t know that their mysterious relative draws witchcraft power from a parasitic thing, the carrier until it is time to move on to a younger female member of the family. Amy, the daughter, (Meredith Salenger) is targeted to become the new host, and Felice uses witchcraft ceremonies to murder all who come between her and the girl. At the end of the film, it looks very much like young Amy is going to get the beastly Kiss; however, Dad (Nicholas Kihlberta) and neighbor intervene just in time and blow Felice to the other place.

The premise of this film, as in others of the genre, is wholly contingent upon everyone’s disbelief in the young heroine’s instinctual recognition of her foe. In The Kiss, this conflict is aggravated by the fact that the girl’s father starts sleeping with the witchwoman. The adults can then with good reason mistakenly suppose that psychological factors like grief and jealousy are responsible for Amy’s conviction in her aunt’s evil nature. This pseudo-scientific explanation of the supernatural typified and necessarily delays the adults from reacting to the threat until the last possible moment. Meanwhile, on another level, the film insinuates a psycho-sexual connection between the girl and the father that is not only quite rude but unexpectedly blatant.

To begin with, the various scenes depicting the supposedly virgin Amy in her Tambour-white swimsuit, announce her physical maturity. In one sequence, she flirts and poses “Sports Illustrated”-style and in the company of her father. But it is montage that provides the strongest implication and condemnation of an incestuous relationship. One sequence employs crossing-cutting to link Amy in class and Dad and Felice consoling each other at home. As the couple begin to make love, back at school (and to her surprise,) Amy flushes with sympathetic heat and hepatness. Cut between the two locations establish a postural echo between Amy and Felice that strongly suggests a shared sexual experience with the father, except for the fact that Amy experiences the feeling as profound comfort. She cries out and runs from the room as Felice is shown reaching orgasm back home. The camera even lingers on Amy’s vacant chair to reveal a trickle of blood. This delusion via sympathetic magic is never explained or pursued in the film. One wonders what, if anything, the typical 14-year-old horror-goer made of it. Similarly, in a scene in which Felice detours dad from saving Amy by seducing him into cropping sex, the inference that Amy is participating in forbidden sex with both Dad and Aunt is openly suggested. Amy awakens in distress to hear her father’s sex-voices, which are indistinguishable on the soundtrack from sounds of suffering.

The lesbian overtones to the threat that Felice poses are also somewhat unusual in such a mainstream film. She is physically aggressive with Amy, who dislikes her from the start because “she’s always trying to touch me.” The image of Felice going in for The Kiss’ evokes the figure of the lesbian vampire, who rarely gets much screen time in American horror films. But there is yet another twist that may be present in order to ally any discomfort caused by the lesbian overtones. Out of the mouth of the lesbian vampire makes the label phallic beast! The vampire is, after all, just the host (the original title for the film) for a praying mad evil that fearfully inhabits and is passed on between women!

All the layers of taboo-stirring and literally spiritualized sexualism raise questions that are potentially interesting, but that the film does not pursue. In the end, they simply cloud your understanding of the nature of the beast. The only unequivocal statement of the filmmakers’ intent lies in the articulation of the character Brenda, who pulls Amy from the pool, and it is she who bestows the “real” Kiss – on, she really meant.

The film also implies that Brenda will go on to become the new mother and complete the otherwise endangered family.

For all its attempts at a semi-serious discourse, The Kiss is floating on the whole and ultimately a generic facsimile of American horror flicks, making it generally less amusing to watch than to talk about later. Given that the production values are quite high, the filmmakers must have been stunned by the film’s brief run in the theatres, proving that even following what seems to be a recipe for success in a currently mega-popular genre is no guarantee in the hide main stream. Unfortunately for the filmmakers and for us, the feature’s poor box office showing is undoubtedly the main Canadian thing about it.

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