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Friday, 25 May 2012 09:20

With prominently advertised Oren Peli involved as a writer and producer, one might expect CHERNOBYL DIARIES to be a found-footage investigation-gone-wrong movie—PARANORMAL RADIOACTIVITY, if you will. Instead, it’s a largely conventionally shot film, with material to match.

A story set near the site of the 26-year-old nuclear-power-plant disaster featuring characters with a true purpose in exploring its aftermath might have had more resonance, or dealt with the setting in more interesting ways. A bit of historical exposition aside, this flick could have been set near last year’s Japanese meltdown, or Three Mile Island, or some fictitious manmade screwup. Our protagonists are Chris (Jesse McCartney), who really loves his girlfriend Natalie (Olivia Taylor Dudley) and plans to propose to her during their European vacation, and his brother Paul (Jonathan Sadowski), an irresponsible type living in Kiev who digs Natalie’s friend Amanda (Devin Kelley) and whose Russian fluency is helpful for defusing a potential confrontation with some local street toughs.

That’s pretty much all we learn about them before Paul convinces the other three to go on a jaunt with “extreme tour guide” Uri (Dimitri Diatchenko) into Prypiat, a city whose residents had to flee in a big hurry, leaving their lives and possessions behind, after the nearby Chernobyl catastrophe. Some have protested the utilization of this real-life tragedy as the basis for a horror film, and the young foursome, who are joined by Aussie couple Michael (Nathan Phillips) and Zoe (Ingrid Bolsø Berdal), might be forgiven their lack of misgivings about the trip, considering it happened before they were born (though Amanda expresses concern about “radiation levels or something—it’s probably pretty dangerous, right?”). Peli and co-scripters

Carey Van Dyke and Shane Van Dyke do themselves no favors, though, in scenes ilke Chris and Natalie posing for a kiss picture with the abandoned reactor in the background. “Our love is exploding,” Chris quips as Uri brushes away evidence of a recent campfire in another room.

It goes without saying that they’re not alone among the desolate buildings, and after an unexpected and startling (if rather implausible) encounter with one of the local fauna, CHERNOBYL DIARIES falls into a formula that makes watching it a banal sort of guessing game. When the group heads back to their van to leave, will it be disabled or simply gone? Which one of them will receive severe leg injuries preventing them all from walking out of the city to safety? How many dark rooms and other spaces will the unarmed kids explore? And how good a look will we get at Prypiat’s unfriendly residents when they emerge from the shadows, hungry for dumb tourist?

The answer to the last question is, not very; the camera tends to get all jerky and turn away whenever the human monsters show up, barely allowing the makeup FX designed by Brit expert Neill Gorton to register. Like LOVELY MOLLY, another new film by a *vérité*-horror pioneer, CHERNOBYL DIARIES employs the tenets of a found-footage movie without actually being one. A few scenes are presented as video material, but for the most part it’s shot traditionally, albeit in a handheld, observational style. As such, director Brad Parker, a visual FX artist and 2nd-unit director (on LET ME IN and others) making his debut at the helm, wrings a decent amount of suspense out of the uninspired scenario, and he and the cast make the protagonists’ actions and interactions seem naturalistic, if not exactly plausible.

The real stars of CHERNOBYL DIARIES, however, are production designers Aleksandar Denic and the location scouts, who discovered and/or created some great eerie places in Hungary and Serbia, and cinematographer Morten Søborg, who shot the hell out of them. These range from a skylighted underground chamber with lots of dripping-water atmosphere to a series of rooms the survivors flee through that suggest deeper levels to the scenario. They go largely unexplored, though, as the movie proceeds to a climax and conclusion as generic as what has come before. What a shame—the filmmakers have chosen a location rarely presented on screen, then used it to stage 86 minutes of been there, seen that.