

## “CHAIN LETTER” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold  
Friday, 01 October 2010 00:39

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You gotta wonder about film distributors sometimes. Did the people who are releasing CHAIN LETTER, which has been bounced out of two previous release dates and landed on the same day as the highly publicized debut of HATCHET II, really think there was room in the marketplace for two movies about hulking killers bloodily dispatching hapless victims?

Given that electronic communication devices are the source of CHAIN LETTER's negligible terror, perhaps they were attempting a tie-in with David Fincher's birth-of-Facebook drama THE SOCIAL NETWORK. Certainly director/co-writer Deon Taylor's visual style is marked by sub-Fincher gloom, with lots of rain and dimly lit interiors. But its cautionary point of view on the dangers of our information age was dated when CHAIN LETTER was shot nearly three years ago and is even more so now, not to mention completely muddled.



Welcome to Carlson, a town that a newscaster informs us is “known nationwide as the technology and software communication industry capital,” though there's no evidence elsewhere in the movie to back that up. It's also a place where the high-school protagonists' parents seem to be non-existent, even after it has become known that someone is stalking and brutally killing the local teenage population. The murders are heralded by a mysterious chain letter that's e-mailed to computer addict Neil (Cody Kasch) and then accidentally passed on to several of his friends, including heroine Jessie (Nikki Reed) and her maybe boyfriend Dante (DEADGIRL's Noah Segan, wasted in a bland role). Dante doesn't receive it immediately, though, because he's the only one in the group who doesn't own a cell phone; his explanation is, “They just buzz and they beep and they have little buttons on 'em...I'm just not into it, man.” So much for a pointed commentary on the ubiquity of technology in our lives.

Prior to this line, Taylor and co-scripter Michael J. Pagan (who also co-produced with the

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director and co-stars as another of the targeted youths) hit us with all kinds of tired tropes regarding the dangers of the Internet, from identity theft and phone cloning to creepy older guys hitting up young girls. As for the older guy who’s doing more than hitting his victims, he’s known as The Chain Man (Michael Bailey Smith), and is apparently connected to some sort of anti-technology conspiracy whose details and players are never made clear, though it may involve the supporting characters played by veteran cinema oddballs Brad Dourif and A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET’s Charles Fleischer. Rather than tie up any of his story threads coherently, Taylor revels in the kind of fast-cut montages familiar from the climaxes of the SAW movies, which are also echoed in the torturous kills of a couple of the victims.

In fact, Twisted Pictures, the company that made its name with the Jigsaw saga, was originally credited as a co-producer of CHAIN LETTER, but is now absent from the opening and closing titles. (SAW sequel regular Betsy Russell does turn up briefly as the partner of detective Keith David, whose investigative metier involves breaking into farmhouses and asking the occupants if they recognize a particular piece of chain link.) The Twisted team aren’t the only ones to have pulled a vanishing act here; actress Bai Ling, credited since the start of production, is nowhere to be seen on screen, and initially announced composer Michael Wandmacher was replaced somewhere along the line by Vincent Gillioz. This all bespeaks of a movie that went through some tortures of its own in postproduction, though none as much as the ending, which is really not an ending at all; the movie simply stops in a maddeningly abrupt fashion with absolutely nothing resolved.

What we’re left with is a movie that seems to want to say something about paranoia and faceless persecution in the digital era, but has no idea how to articulate it beyond dropping facile factoids and names like Unabomber Ted Kaczynski. On a simple horror-film level, its themes of terrorization via electronic device have been done to death by the Asian likes of RINGU and ONE MISSED CALL and their many remakes/ripoffs. And those seeking cheap thrills may get off on the brief nudity (courtesy of PARASOMNIA’s Cherilyn Wilson, who deserves better) and sporadic gore, but even they are unlikely to find CHAIN LETTER to be anything worth messaging their friends about.



{comments on}

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