With THE HANGOVER PART II breaking box-office records in theaters, now’s a good time to look back at one of star Bradley Cooper’s earliest big-screen credits: the horror film MY LITTLE EYE. Far from an embarrassing skeleton in the closet, Cooper’s turn in EYE (made shortly after the actor began his regular role on TV’s ALIAS) is a memorable part of a seriously underrated movie; read on for Michael Gingold’s original review.

Produced by the WT2 genre arm of the prolific Working Title company and originally set to open Stateside from Universal via its Universal Focus division, the British chiller MY LITTLE EYE was effectively orphaned by the shutdown of that arm and sneaked into very limited release before being tossed onto DVD. How odd and unfortunate for MY LITTLE EYE to be neglected this way, because the high concept would seem to make it an easy sell to the youth and horror crowds at the time: It’s TV’s BIG BROTHER gone horrific.

Yet it’s not nearly as commercially opportunistic—or simplistic—as that logline makes it sound. Rather, it’s one of the most uncompromising, get-under-your-skin creepy movies in ages, one which spins its basic premise into such disturbing directions that it almost seems to be accepting a dare from the audience: You think things can’t get any worse? Check this out! It’s the kind of film where once it’s over, you start trying to find the plausibility holes—not to pick it apart, but to convince yourself that such horrible events couldn’t really happen.

That’s a tribute to the reality that director Marc Evans brings to the potentially gimmicky setup. Although the film’s events are presented entirely through the many video cameras placed around the isolated-house location, Evans uses this approach to heighten the intimacy, rather than the artificiality, of the situation. The cameras are there to capture every action of five

young people taking part in a six-month live webcam stunt: If they can make it through the half year without one of them leaving the house, they get a million-dollar prize. As the story proper begins, the group has a week to go, and it seems that the sponsors of the webcast are trying to inspire them to give up or turn against each other. A package that’s supposed to contain food is full of bricks instead; another holds champagne and a loaded gun; and one of the youths receives word that his grandmother has died. But can the news be trusted?

More really should not be said about what happens next, because it is the uncertainty of the motives of both the characters and the people overseeing them that fuels MY LITTLE EYE’s suspense. Writers David Hilton and James Watkins etch a vivid quintet of characters and come up with a continuous series of surprising reversals and frightening revelations, while Evans takes what could have been a visual liability (restricted only to what the cameras can see) and turns it to voyeuristic advantage. The movie is scary sometimes because the audience is reduced to helpless observers; sometimes because of the way certain people play to the cameras; and sometimes because of the sense that we’re taking the point of view of overseers who are uncaring, manipulative—or worse.

Casting unknowns might have wound up a disadvantage in terms of getting the film wider Stateside exposure (though it had a fairly successful theatrical run in Britain), but it’s crucial to MY LITTLE EYE’s effectiveness. We don’t know what to expect from any of the characters at the beginning, and the unfamiliarity of the faces only heightens this unpredictability. That said, die-hard horror fans will appreciate seeing GINGER SNAPS’ pot dealer Kris Lemche again, and enjoy watching Laura Regan fulfill the vulnerable promise she demonstrated in THEY. The most recognizable presence, though, is probably ALIAS’ Bradley Cooper, whose nice-guy persona on that show makes his actions here that much more unexpected.

While MY LITTLE EYE’s origins are British, the wintry, remote location and North American cast erase any sense of national identity—and that’s as it should be. The only specificity it

needs is that of its situation; by the half-hour mark, we feel as trapped in that house as its protagonists are. What it shares with another new British horror film, the equally effective 28 DAYS LATER, is a sense of bleakness—that horror is not a malevolent other invading normality, but being one of a few individuals trapped in a threatening environment. In that context, MY LITTLE EYE is one of those rare films that takes you beyond wondering whether any of the characters will get out alive to a point where you question whether you’ll come away with your nerves intact.