

Biography of a Place: Silent Hill (the movie)

written by Byron Alexander Campbell | March 7, 2015



The mid-2000s was a dark time for the Silent Hill series, now a franchise with the release of the Hollywood film in 2006 and the first externally developed game, *Silent Hill: Origins* on the PlayStation Portable, in 2007.

This misguided era began hopefully enough. Despite some backlash from fans, *Silent Hill 4: The Room* suggested intriguing new directions for the series with its first-person segments and semi-randomized elements. The announcement of a *Silent Hill* film sparked the usual mix of excitement and trepidation—Hollywood's track record with video game adaptations, which includes such gems as [the Bob Hoskins *Super Mario Bros.*](#) and [Uwe Boll's *lazy-ass take on House of the Dead*](#), inspires more dread than hope in the hearts of most video game fans. While not all Silent Hill fans would have recognized the name, I perked up when Christophe Gans (*Brotherhood of the Wolf*), an earnest fan of both video games in general and Silent Hill in particular, was announced as director. Early production stills of props, sets, and Gans' costume and makeup effects (as demonstrated by his earlier Francophone hit, *Gans prefers puppetry and practical effects as a foundation, using CG effects to touch up his creatures in post*) further bolstered fans' expectations.

My first indication that all might not be well with the *Silent Hill* film adaptation came when the director explained, in an interview, his decision to give the main character, widower Harry Mason, a sex change. Rose Da Silva, played by Radha Mitchell, replaced Harry because, and I quote, the protagonist's obsessive quest to find his missing daughter seemed "feminine, almost maternal...he's acting like a woman." When you listen to some of the fantastic things Gans has to say about the game series and the process of adaptation, it's even more frustrating to hear him spouting this kind of 16th-century bullshit. (Which is not to say that the decision to replace Harry with Rose turned out to be a bad one, as I will describe below, but that doesn't stop the stated motivation from stinking up the room.)

This same ambivalence extends to the rest of the film. Like *Silent Hill* itself, the *Silent Hill* movie has two sides, one atmospheric and moody, the other a Hellish nightmare. I firmly believe that Gans' heart was in the right place with this production, as evidenced by his ardent fidelity to the games' visual and aural style. However, where details from the games were altered, it's almost always for the unfathomably worse.

I limit most of my criticisms to the script by *Rules of Attraction* adapter Roger Avary. As outdated as its stiff-as-a-board dialogue reads today, the original *Silent Hill* game script offered an unusually nuanced and ambiguous plot only superficially similar to the generic, overexplained horror pap that survived the Hollywoodization process. I mean seriously, what is this crap?

Most egregiously, the film reinvents the genesis of the fire that burned Alessa and created the town's blood-and-rust Otherworld. In the game, Alessa's own mother, Dahlia, burned the girl in a ritual of immolation to prepare her womb to carry the cult's god into the material plane. Avary's script turns this critical plot fulcrum into a *Crucible*-esque witchhunt, erasing much of what made *Silent Hill* interesting in the first place. His bland script also suggests that the being inhabiting Alessa (entirely coincidentally, thanks to the aforementioned edit) is the Judeochristian devil. The original *Silent Hill* took influences from *Carrie* and blended them with a bevy of other Western horror plots and a uniquely Japanese touch incorporating elements of Shintoism, creating a deliciously open-ended stew. Interpreting the game was a game of itself. The *Silent Hill* movie, in contrast, is basically just *Carrie*.

The film's other chief failing is one of pacing. Theatregoers and film critics could be excused for assuming that the original *Silent Hill* was a mindless action game (as in [Roger Ebert's disdainful conclusion](#) that he failed to understand the film because he was using too much of his brain), but it was in fact precisely the opposite: a deliberately slow-paced *atmosphere* game. Although Harry Mason ended his journey with a small arsenal of guns and lead pipes, players were more likely to remember the game's devilishly clever riddles than any combat that might transpire, as it were, on the way from one puzzle to the next. The same can be said for the game's approach to gore: setting a precedent for the series to come, it offered its players glimpses of [the aftermath of hideous things](#) but seldom allowed them to witness any violence in process, except that committed by the player character himself. The movie fails to capture either this pacing or this deliberate approach to blood and guts—scenes such as the elevator freefall into Hell or Pyramid Head ripping a naked woman's skin from her body with the original's dream-like atmosphere of ghost trails and slow dissolves. (On the subject of Pyramid Head...in a series in which each creature plays a specific symbolic role for its game's protagonist, what's with all the *Silent Hill 2* monsters in a *Silent Hill 1* adaptation?)

These betrayals alone (it's funny how a fan regards "unfaithfulness" in adaptation) were enough to make me despise the movie for several months after seeing it in the theater. How could the film's creators so misrepresent my beloved franchise, reinforcing non-gamers' out-of-hand dismissals of the storytelling depth of the video game medium? When a video game from the Stone Ages of the original PlayStation era, a time when game creators outside of the RPG genre were *just beginning* to understand how to tell a deeper story than "go save a princess," is more complex and thought-provoking than its 2006 movie remake, you know that someone, somewhere has dropped the ball.

Once the red veil dropped from my eyes, though, I found myself strangely attracted to Christophe Gans' vision of *Silent Hill* (and it's still, despite its flaws, one of the most faithful video-game-to-movie adaptations). The entire cast delivers strong performances, particularly star Radha Mitchell and Laurie Holden, who plays the motorcycle cop Cybil Bennett. Even Alessa/"Sharon" (I guess "Cheryl" is too weird for American audiences), played by 11-year-old Jodelle Ferland, proved to be a strong casting choice,

with the exception of those scenes in which she tried to do the “creepy horror movie kid” thing. And, while I maintain that her character had no place in the movie, Alice Krige kills it in her portrayal of evangelist Christabella.

You may have noticed that I haven’t cited a single male actor yet. That’s because, outside of some forgettable scenes featuring Sean Bean as Rose’s husband Chris, *Silent Hill* boasts an all-female cast. The male side characters, where they do appear, remain segregated in the “real world,” beyond the confines of Silent Hill proper; as grey, faceless rabble; or as specters of male sexual violence (see the aforementioned Pyramid Head), a violent incursion into this matriarchal “paradise.” Gans digs deeply into this theme with his appropriations of the game series’ monsters and other visuals. He also takes time to explore some Sapphic sexual tension between Rose and Cybil, stronger than any romantic notions Harry and Cybil ever shared. (And although the film invents some other excuse for her death, this unspoken relationship ultimately sees the butch cop burned at the stake in another sequence of ultraviolence.)

Finally, in terms of recreating the distinct visual feel of the game series, the *Silent Hill* film absolutely hits the mark. Piece by piece, down to the look of the rubbish bins and school desks, Gans meticulously recreated the Silent Hill of the games. His monsters—contortionists and ballet dancers squeezed into latex suits—feel authentic to the mannequins and stretched-flesh abominations of the series. Where Gans does add his own visual touches, such as his peeling-paint Otherworld transition (shamelessly copied in subsequent games), they generally feel organic to the world the games created, although the too-human janitor monster was a mistake.

That the film’s soundtrack is almost entirely composed of (occasionally remixed) tracks ripped straight from the first four games certainly doesn’t hurt—sound and music director Akira Yamaoka has been, in many ways, the backbone of a series that frequently cycled directors, writers and protagonists even before it became a franchise (his absence in *Silent Hill: Downpour* was clearly felt).

I comfort myself by imagining that, like *Silent Hill 2* is popularly understood as James’ purgatory, so might this film be Christabella’s. Considered this way, it can almost (but not quite) coexist with the universe of the games. Just as long as nobody mentions *Silent Hill: Revelation* (in 3D!), that’s a compromise I can live with.