THE DEVIL’S BACKBONE, a film that strives as successfully as any in the genre to make you care, to make the events on screen affect you as if they really do matter. Watching this film is to enter its world, as completely as you ever enter any mainstream drama, and the range of emotions evoked is impressive without ever being manipulative.

This is a film rich in texture, characterization and themes. Besides being genuinely creepy, it is also surprisingly moving. It is, quite probably (this is not a back-handed compliment) the saddest horror movie ever made.

The ghost is actually a haunting memory of the casualties of war, an embodiment reminding us that the violence of the outside world has already claimed one victim within this supposed refuge, and others may follow.

Much of the effectiveness of the ghost’s appearances comes from the fact that the story overturns the conventional horror movie plot, in which normal life is threatened by a monster but ultimately restored at the ending. In this case, with war raging in the world at large, there is no chance for a return to normality, and the young boys must learn to cope in a world where adult violence destroys youthful innocence, of which the ghost is the most obvious example.

It’s as if the forces of civilization and intellect are withering away while the war rages on, strengthening the virility of violent, self-interested thugs like Jacinto. GENDER CLASH: Male machismo overwhelms the nuturing feminine principal as, one by one, characters representing sympathy, love, and intelligence are neutralized, until the remaining boys must revert to a sort of primitive tribalism in order to survive.

THE DEVIL’S BACKBONE has an important difference: it embraces the action of the group as a necessary survival mechanism marked by loyalty and the courage to take action in a world without recourse to law and order. Thus, the supernatural forces at work cease to be symbols of blind superstition; instead, they take on a talismanic significance, to warn and protect the boys from the modern-day violence that threatens them.

The script is slow to build, a necessary element of the ghost story, which requires a careful laying of the foundation before introducing the supernatural elements. This deliberate construction yields magnificent results, providing numerous identifiable characters instead of the usual shooting gallery of potential victims.

The cast is uniformly excellent. The special effects are some of the best ever seen, easily matching work from the best US facilities; in fact, in at least one way they are even better. The conception of the ghost’s appearance seen as if underwater even when standing in the open air, results in some truly unsettling imagery

THE DEVIL’S BACKBONE takes the genre seriously enough to move the audience on a deeper level, instead of settling for the easy scream and shock effects. Del Toro’s ambition is nowhere more evident than in the film’s ending, which (without giving away the plot details) is a curiously moving mixture of optimism and remorse.