Written by Mike Schulz
Sunday, 18 October 2009 14:48

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PARANORMAL ACTIVITY

It's not often that you witness an image in a horror movie (or in any movie, really) that you instinctively recognize as iconic. The last one I can think of in the scare-flick genre would probably be Heather Donahue in *The Blair Witch Project*, with her wool cap, her nose running, and her mouth out of camera range as she videotapes a final, tearful apology. (Seeing that shot for the first time in 1999, you knew it was one that would endure - and be parodied *ad nauseam*.) But we now have a new addition to the Iconic Image Hall of Fame thanks to *Paranormal Activity*, which, like *Blair Witch*, was filmed on a shoestring budget, and which features a shot, like that of Donahue, that will no doubt be instantly identifiable for generations of horror-movie fans.

The image in question is actually even more static than Donahue's hand-held closeup - nothing more than an immobile shot of a bedroom, as seen from a video camera mounted on a tripod. But once you've seen it, you'll be hard-pressed to forget it. Set up by the skeptical Micah (Micah Sloat) as a means to document the nighttime haunting of girlfriend Katie (Katie Featherston), the camera allows us a good, eerie look at the couple's bed, the doorway, and a half-illuminated room at the end of the hall. It's a simple image, but it's one that gets more evocative, creepy, and almost unbearably intense the more it's repeated.

On the first night of the videotaping, there's no movement in the shot at all - just the faraway sound of keys dropping to the floor. On the second night, the bedroom door gently moves a few inches, then a few inches back. And on the third night ... . Well, I won't reveal what happens on the third and subsequent nights. Let me just say that the stagnant composition of these scenes turns out to be stunningly smart; not knowing how or where the supernatural forces will reveal themselves (The door? The hallway? The *bed*?), you simultaneously don't want to look at the screen and don't want to *stop* looking. And let me also say that whenever you see this newly iconic image again in years to come - even in some *Scary Movie* -style parody - you'll immediately think back to *Paranormal Activity* , and likely remember just how much it freaked the ever-lovin' crap out of you.

So yeah, this underground-sensation-turned-marketing-triumph *is* as terrifying as rumor had it. I wish that the leads were more convincing as "real people" - they don't quite have the naturalistic acting chops of *Blair Witch*'s Donahue, Michael Williams, and Joshua Leonard - and I definitely could've done with fewer of Featherston's " *Put the damned camera down* !" tirades. (She's good when scared, much less so when shrill.) But writer/director Oren Peli's low-rent shocker is still one for the ages. With its continually unpredictable rhythms, its exquisite silence interrupted by explosive bursts of sound, and its ingenious visuals - on a budget of $11,000! - *Paranormal Activity* is fantastically spooky and wickedly clever, an independent release to make Hollywood's obvious, formulaic fright flicks look even more wimpy and witless than they usually do.

And on that note ... .

THE STEPFATHER

It's a good guess that the young audiences for whom the PG-13-rated *The Stepfather* was re-made haven't seen 1987's R-rated original. If any of them *have*, are they embarrassed to discover that a spectacularly hair-raising and vicious horror/thriller has been so grossly homogenized and dumbed down for their benefit?

Like its predecessor, director Nelson McCormick's 2009 *Stepfather* finds a serial-killing family man taking up with a new, fatherless clan after dispatching his old one, and replacing the sinister, witty Terry O'Quinn with the blandly serviceable Dylan Walsh is just the first of this remake's depressingly safe, vanilla-pudding choices. Instead of a heroic teenage girl, which lent the original an added threat of sexual discomfort, we're given the 22-year-old male hottie Penn Badgley, who is many things - earnest, dull, frequently shirtless - but is *not* the high-school senior he's meant to be playing. (For grrrl power, we're stuck with the breathtakingly vapid Amber Heard as Badgley's girlfriend.) Instead of the suspense and sick-comic bravado provided by the original's helmer, Joseph Ruben, we're given McCormick's pedestrian, TV-movie staging, a soundtrack that blares exactly on cue, and jolts that never rise above the "*Aaaaa*! Oh, it's just the cat" variety. And instead of the unexpected and unexpectedly affecting bloodletting, we're given ... well, no blood at all. Concerned parents will probably consider this an upgrade, but for true horror fans, this *Stepfather* is to its inspiration what the recent *Fame* was to its - a pointless little excursion that only serves to remind us how much more squeamish and timid Hollywood has become over the past two decades. It's a gutless movie, both figuratively *and* literally.

For a review of Where the Wild Things Are*, see* "Wild Things, *I Think I Love You.* "