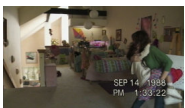


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PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 3

Let's cut right to it, because in the end, whatever complaints I have about the movie are irrelevant: *Paranormal Activity 3* scared me silly.

Especially after last year's underwhelming second entry, I concede that the novelty of the series' premise – in which demonic terrors are witnessed solely through home-video footage – has significantly waned since 2009's first *Paranormal Activity*. (Although, to be fair, a modern scare flick in which not a single droplet of blood is spilled will always be at least

somewhat

novel.) I'll also admit that

PA3

is replete with mostly awkward performances and weak dialogue, and characters doing the kinds of dumb-ass things that make certain audiences irrationally hostile, and annoyingly

talkative

, at films of this ilk. ("Why is that guy still videotaping everything?" "Why is that couple still leaving their kids unattended?" "Why don't these people just

move

already?!?") Plus, while it was a shrewd and promising decision to set this prequel in the late 1980s – when the original film's haunted Katie Featherston and her screen sister were little girls – the comedic (and comically horrific) possibilities behind the on-screen VHS recordings are

Toby, or Not Toby?: "Paranormal Activity 3," "The Three Musketeers," and "Johnny English Reborn"

Written by Mike Schulz

Sunday, 23 October 2011 15:51

barely explored. Couldn't we have been given one scene in which we're viewing some monstrous spectral occurrence yet aren't allowed to see its climax, because the tape reached the end of its six-hour capacity?

But enough griping; when directors Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman (of last year's "Is it a doc or not?" *cause célèbre* *Catfish*) are really on their game here, which is the majority of the time, you watch *Paranormal Activity 3* with a gut-clenching avidity. Joost and Schulman aren't above simplistic – and arguably cheap – “

Boo!

” effects, and they score a couple of strong jolts here with the unexpected appearances of a mask-wearing practical joker and the younger of the movie's two daughters (Jessica Tyler Brown), whose imaginary friend Toby may be the source of the

PA3

house's haunting. (Brown, who doesn't appear to be a day over four, also offers the film's freshest, most believable portrayal.) The directors, however, are even more effective when sustaining their scares past what would seem to be their breaking points, particularly in their employment of what proves to be a spectacularly unsettling, queasily enjoyable gimmick.

After setting up motionless surveillance cameras in two of his house's bedrooms, and witnessing minor instances of spectral oddness, *PA3* lead Christopher Nicholas Smith gets creative, and straps a video camera to a gently oscillating fan in his family's living room. For this gesture, I wanted to both applaud him and kill him (and screenwriter Christopher B. Landon, too), because the tension that builds during these

slo-o-owly

rotating shots is damned near unendurable. I don't want to spoil the innard-knotting fun for those who haven't yet seen the film; but suffice it to say that Joost and Schulman play such wicked games with their compositions and timing here – particularly in the surprise arrival(s) of a blandly nightmarish, sheet-covered figure – that

Paranormal Activity 3

, in these scenes,

becomes that most utterly welcome of scare movies: one in which you really,

really

don't want to see what's about to occur, yet are wholly unable to look away.

