Framework of Fear: The Postmodern Aesthetic of "Paranormal Activity 2"

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Framework of Fear: The Postmodern Aesthetic of *Paranormal Activity 2*

Cinema as an art form has, naturally, never been immune to the pull of postmodernism and a wide variety of films and filmmakers have embraced the postmodern philosophy. A penchant for overtly intertextual film elements have been exhibited by directors such as Quentin Tarantino, David Lynch, Brian De Palma, and Wes Craven, who, in particular, incorporates such components into his horror films. When postmodernist techniques are employed in the current era of commercial filmmaking, they are commonly done with the ironic and knowing sense of self-awareness that has come to broadly represent the movement and its array of meta-prefixed extensions. Tod Williams’ 2010 sequel *Paranormal Activity 2* is a horror film whose metaformalist aesthetic is more restrained than, say, the four entries in Craven’s *Scream* series. Despite this subtlety, the film is no less effective or intelligent. Contemporary critics note “…postmodern film can in many ways be seen as a logical extension of older montage techniques and indeed of the evolution of film itself as a medium” and this idea is especially salient with regard to Williams’ film (Booker 2). *Paranormal Activity 2* stands out not only as an example of the cinematic medium’s evolution into the contemporary digital age (with its application of modern digital technology for both its real-world and in-story mode of production) but as a rigorous exploration of one of the oldest montage techniques: basic narrative editing. It also functions on the similar level of actively exercising and engaging shot composition and duration as inherently essential to mise-en-scene as the fundamental cinematic image-making tool. These characteristics combined with its central narrative conceit of being a found-footage documentary reveal *Paranormal Activity 2* to be a metatextual construct of postmodern inquiry into the making and ordering of images as the formal essence of cinema.

The plot of the film centers around the California-based Rey family which consists of Kristi and Daniel, their teenage daughter Ali, and newborn son Hunter. In the aftermath of a mysterious break-in at their home, Daniel decides to install inconspicuously placed security cameras around the house in an effort to document any
occurrences that may be going on unbeknownst to them, especially at night. It is a frightening twist of fate that these recording devices actually end up capturing the increasingly hostile supernatural force that plagues the family and their home throughout the film. Although fictional, Paranormal Activity 2 is presented as a truthful found-footage documentary chronicling the bizarre and tragic “real life” events that befall the Rey clan. Williams’ method of depicting this story consists of two formats: raw low-grade footage from a handheld digital camera used sporadically by various family members and the recorded video feeds from the permanently watchful security cameras. This stylized approach highlights the primary tool of moviemaking – the camera – and reflexively draws upon it by being persistently conscious of the camera itself as the means of production. The film “…foreground[s] the presence of the camera and quite effectively turn[s] the camera into an agent of horror” (Leyda et al.). By maintaining an awareness of the camera to enhance its genre aspirations of horrific verisimilitude, the film also places a distinct focus on the mechanical process of creating images, therefore establishing its inclinations towards the essence of the cinematic.

But what the camera captures is just as important as the attention paid to the mechanism itself, and the mise-en-scene of Paranormal Activity 2 serves as a catalyst for developing its atmosphere of tense horror and its connection to the concept of how images function cinematically.

The security camera footage that comprises the majority of the film’s visual content consists of six individual static shots: outside front/porch, outside back/pool, kitchen, family room, foyer, and Hunter’s bedroom. Each shot preserves, in addition to small elements such as
dishes in the kitchen or various objects in the family room, a spatial and organizational continuity of details within the frame. In fact, it is often the case in the film that the only aspects of these shots that do change is the presence and/or absence of characters and the results of any actions committed by the invisible paranormal force. In conjunction with this, “…there is the warping (the dilation and compression) of time that comes about through rhythms of dread, anticipation, and urgency: the empty time when the characters or the audience are waiting for something to happen, or something to arrive…” (Leyda et al.). Furthermore, “the terror lies not just in anticipation of what will happen, but in the uncanny shots framing the empty spaces of the house. It is the mundane trafficked areas of the house – the foyer, the kitchen – where terror lurks” (Rombes). Therefore, the viewer is encouraged to scrutinize each seemingly ordinary image and search for indications of what exactly is occurring in the shot.

In one startling scene, the kitchen camera’s fixed perspective shows Kristi reading a magazine while sitting at the island in the middle of the room. The shot proceeds as a long take, depicting Kristi in the simple act of reading while persuading the viewer to don a more watchful eye to discover the secrets of the frame. Eventually, after a lengthy amount of time in which it seems that no actions or events have transpired, all of the cupboards and cabinets in the kitchen suddenly burst open simultaneously. Since the film works squarely within the realm of horror,

“the genre expectations [the viewer] bring[s] to the film lead[s] [them] to believe that something will change, that something will happen. The static surveillance shots are the ultimate expression of mise-en-scene, inviting viewers to scan the screen for information, for clues, for the slightest of movements. [The viewer] become[s] complicit in the visual interrogation of domestic space: the banality of hallways, kitchen cabinets, family room sofas, closet doors” (Rombes).

Effectively committing a viewer to this process of inspection demonstrates
the film’s visual aesthetic as the ultimate expression of mise-en-scene in the truest sense, one in which the images themselves reign supreme and the inherently cinematic qualities of framing and composition are brought to the forefront as vital components of representation and conveyance. Through upholding a minimalist portrayal of events, the film’s “…fixed cameras constitute a form of creative restraint that push the boundaries of cinematic narrative” (Rombes). It is this distinct restraint which contributes a bare-bones quality to the core of the film, rendering its narrative style one that privileges the close examination of its visual compositions rather than passively absorbing them. Indeed, it can be said that Paranormal Activity 2 “…is expressly about understanding what’s happening in the film through active engagement with the text’s mosaic-tile images” (Abrams). Utilizing this engagement, Paranormal Activity 2 speaks to the power of mise-en-scene as an essential characteristic of cinema and expresses it by creating a viewer-film relationship rooted in carefully attentive watching.

In addition to a meticulous and demonstrative employment of mise-en-scene, the film also acts as an inquiry into the operational basis of editing. When the film transitions into its many prevalent nighttime sections, these begin with each shot from the security cameras ordered in the same specific way. First, the viewer is shown the outside front/porch view, then the outside back/pool view, then the kitchen perspective, the family room, the foyer, and lastly, Hunter’s room. The film presents this “…sequence of shots again the next night, and the next, and so on – to first establish the familiarity of the house and then to make [the viewer] jump at the smallest potential changes in the environment” (Abrams). Once this familiarity is concretely established and the viewer is accustomed to the arrangement of images, the film exploits this sense of security because “the predictability of the sequencing means that [the viewer] begin[s] to look for difference” and “it is precisely in the repetition of the everyday, the familiar, that the traces of terrifying unfamiliarity arise” (Rombes). Paranormal Activity 2 applies this strategy as the driving force in its efforts as a horror film to elicit scares, but there is another connotation at work within its montage technique. Just as with its concern for exploring mise-en-scene, the film subtly underscores the effect of editing as a cinematic
device. By concentrating on the repeated sorting of images in these sequences, the film registers as a construction of pieces into an intended whole, thereby drawing attention to just how significant editing is to cinema.

The implications of how the film is put together don’t end there. Another level of understanding that results from the editing style of *Paranormal Activity 2* is the determined thematic effect. The aforementioned nighttime sequence of shots used in the film is always seen at least once for every shift of the narrative’s timeline into the nocturnal hours. Sometimes the pattern restarts after it has finished its first cycle and goes through each perspective again, and sometimes its subsequent cycles are punctuated by repeated inclusions and/or exclusions of certain shots. Variations in the order of the sequence such as this emphasize a deliberate intention at work for how these sequences are assembled, which, in a way, betrays the film’s appearance as a documentary of found footage. As such, an especially formally-conscious viewer is “…frequently reminded that [they are] watching edited footage (i.e. a narrative that only looks like raw documentary footage)…” (Abrams).
One of the most explicit examples of this idea is the scene where Ali is home alone babysitting her baby brother Hunter. As the family room camera and bedroom camera show, respectively, Ali sleeping on the couch and Hunter in his crib, the shots in the kitchen and foyer are also interspersed throughout the beginning of this sequence. But as the progression of images continues, and the threat of the demonic presence’s hostility towards Hunter mounts, a more concise ordering of images arises that builds tension by frequently crosscutting between the bedroom (where Hunter is taken out of his crib by the supernatural force) and other parts of the house, such as the empty kitchen and the front porch where Ali has been locked outside. Quite obviously, this scene has been carefully planned and edited to induce fear and suspense, a practice which stands in opposition to the film’s facade as an untouched digital document. The viewer is not watching a naturally occurring string of events that just so happened to have been caught on camera (this doesn’t make sense even within the diegesis), but rather a selected assortment of images put in a specific order to assist the film in achieving its desired effect, in just the same way that editing is used in all movies.

Therefore, it is clear that “…the transitions between different cameras in the film isn’t motivated by any internal logic but rather a narrative one” (Abrams). It is this narrative logic dictating the film’s construction, within the pretense of not being constructed at all, which reveals Paranormal Activity 2 to be much more than it ostensibly seems. In actuality, it is a metacinematic representation of how movies work at a basic formal level. As illustrated in the babysitting scene, “…[the viewer] only get[s] to see what the implied documentary filmmakers, as omniscient storytellers, want [them] to
see in order to make their narrative spookier” (Abrams). These implied omniscient filmmakers are never seen or mentioned in the film, but they are assumed to govern control over the creative direction of the film within the diegesis; which is to say, they are the presenters of the footage that was found in the fake story-world of the film. Outside of the diegesis, there is an additional layer of production in that Paranormal Activity 2 itself is a real movie created by Tod Williams and his crew. As a result, “there are essentially two levels of film: the security camera footage, and that footage obviously shaped and edited into the ‘footage’ that constitutes the whole of Paranormal Activity 2” (Rombes). With this reflexive dual-layer at work, the film is “…footage of a fake haunting transformed into a film-within-a-film” (Abrams). This fictional film within the real film is the source of the movie’s examination of cinema and its intrinsic attributes. Not only does it examine mise-en-scene as the basis of visual film design, but also how the process of selecting and combining shots into sequences is the formal basis for all narrative filmmaking.

That the fictional film within the film is said to be real, but is in fact not, points to the self-reflexive aesthetic of Paranormal Activity 2, one that is thoroughly postmodern. Through its “…showing of the process and machinery of film production and presentation…” the film employs one of the most common postmodern “reflexive techniques which draw attention to the formal qualities of film ‘as film’…” (Siska). On the basis of narrative continuity and storytelling in movies, editing is the formal essence (the process and machinery) of the art and this is exemplified in Paranormal Activity 2 in the way its structure reflects and highlights editing as a significant factor of the medium in which it was created. The film isn’t overtly stylized as an outwardly self-aware piece, but the implications are certainly, at the very least, subtextually present. It is fairly
common that “…postmodern films are so self-conscious about their formal fragmentation that this fragmentation itself becomes a metafictional commentary on…conventions of film editing and narrative” and this is especially true of Paranormal Activity 2 and its unique brand of fixating a perceptive gaze upon certain principles of filmmaking (Booker 6). Because the film’s conscious interpretation of mise-en-scene and editing for its own narrative sake, and it is so concerned with the substance and handling of these devices, its metatextual connection to the basic formal essence of cinema becomes essential to its meaning.

As such, Tod Williams’ Paranormal Activity 2 is quite subversive for a mainstream American film, with its intelligently crafted postmodern interrogation of properties of cinema and its unconventional use of formal techniques to achieve the more conventional effects of the horror genre. Indeed, its “…use of surveillance-camera-based long shots and long takes, and the consequent withholding of expected close-ups and reaction shots, intensifies the dread and anticipation, which are the conventional affects of horror”, but the film’s metacinematic stylings elevate it to a more advanced level of intellectual inquiry (Leyda et al.). From this perspective, and “under slightly different historical circumstances…” it is possible to “…see [the film] as avant-garde. Arguably, [its] experiments with form and constraint…are as rigorous as other contemporary films considered experimental or, at the least, challenging…” (Leyda et al.). At its core, it is a narrative film about how narrative films are made. Viewing Paranormal Activity 2 through this lens enables the skilled viewer to consider it a postmodern work of metacinema whose connotations are cleverly knowledgeable and, ultimately, very rewarding.
Works Cited


Leyda, Julia, Nicholas Rombes, Steven Shaviro, and Therese Grisham.


