

Easily Scared Viewers Should Stay Away From Buzzed 'Paranormal Activity'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on October 13, 2009 - 11:07pm

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

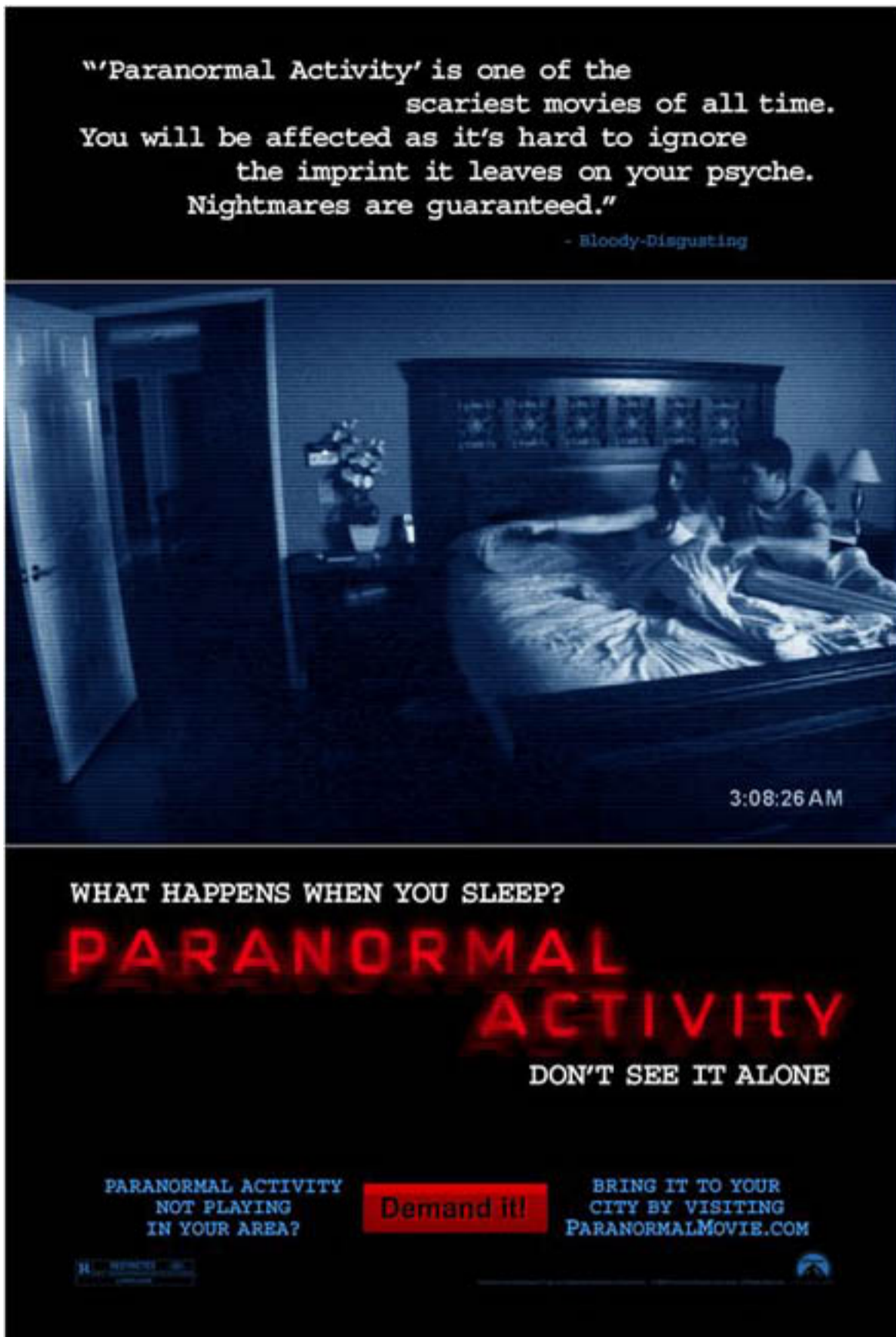
CHICAGO – Over the weekend, a little movie that cost reportedly \$11,000 to make and was shot on one set made over \$7 million at the box office. If you haven't heard about the phenomenon that is "Paranormal Activity," you're simply not paying attention. The good news? Unlike a lot of highly buzzed films, this one lives up to the hype.

Reminding viewers of the ten-year-old "The Blair Witch Project," "Paranormal Activity" is another independently made, ultra-low-budget, shot on handheld camera horror film that is going to spark more than a few nightmares as millions of viewers are drawn to it over the next few weeks. I know we haven't seen "Saw VI" or "The Stepfather" yet (although it is notable that neither will screen for critics), but it's hard to believe that this won't be the hottest and most effective horror ticket this Halloween.

Even writer/director Oren Peli would admit that most of the work of "Paranormal Activity" was done in pre-production. It's the hook of the concept that grabs you and doesn't let go. There's so much horror potential right in the construct of "Paranormal Activity" that it almost would have been difficult to screw it up. A young couple - Micah (Micah Sloat) and Katie (Katie Featherston) - are going to document their haunting and we're going to watch it all go down.

Katie has actually been haunted most of her life. Micah, the man who has been dating her for a few years and only recently moved in with her, thinks the demon that Katie has carried around is interesting. Katie knows it's terrifying and potentially deadly. From the beginning, Peli solves a major problem with most haunted house movies by answering the timeless question "Why don't they just leave the house?" In this case, leaving would do no good. It's Katie that's haunted.

But that doesn't mean they can't document it. To get to the bottom of what Katie's invisible friend wants, Micah has set up a camera in their bedroom. The entire film is seen from the perspective of this camera, creating the sensation that you're watching some horrible piece of evidence, a piece of surveillance video from an experiment gone horribly wrong. The opening frames, cleverly thanking the San Diego Police Department, add to the sensation that this is not going to end well for this cute, young couple.



Paranormal Activity

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

The days are relatively incident-free (although that won't last), but when the camera is put in its stationery position in the bedroom and the time code begins to tick down in the corner, the audience is automatically drawn to the edge of their seats. The time zips by, as if a police officer is fast forwarding it, and then stops back to real time and the hair on the back of your neck stands up and chills shoot up your spine. Why is it stopping? What now? We wouldn't be watching Micah and Katie sleeping if something wasn't about to happen, right? Right?!?

It's an amazingly effective construct that only grows in intensity as the film progresses and the nights get longer for Micah and Katie. We know what happened on "Night #19". So when a title card comes up that reads "Night #20" and the time code stops forwarding, the viewer's mind reels. How could they possibly top last night? What could possibly be scarier than the night before?

Remarkably, "Paranormal Activity" actually does get scarier as it goes along. So many modern horror films, especially ghost stories, work against themselves, getting less effective as more questions are answered. The unknown - a light that goes on and off or a slamming door - is always scarier than the known. Peli wisely doesn't feel the need to wrap everything up neatly, although fans turned off by the lack of an ending to "Blair Witch" should know that this one is a lot more concrete. It's effective up until the final chilling shot.

The nighttime scenes work but the daytime ones could have been a bit more interesting and believable. I never fully believed Micah and Katie. They're not bad actors, but they haven't been given fully-rounded characters. They feel like devices in the haunted movie machine more than real people. And the film suffers from the suspension of disbelief necessary for a movie where a character carries a camera everywhere when he would probably just be crying in a corner or loading a shotgun.

The overall plot, dialogue, and characters could have been stronger, but the hook and the actual horror are as notable as anything the genre has produced this year. "Paranormal Activity" is something that so few entries in its genre have actually been in the last few years - honestly terrifying. That's all that really matters. You've been warned.

'Paranormal Activity' stars Micah Sloat and Katie Featherston. It was written and directed by Oren Peli. It is rated R.



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