Let’s get this out of the way right now—I hated this movie. It took all the creepiness, simplicity and dread I loved in the first film and made it a funhouse ride of nothing but cheap “boo scares” while serving many of the same reheated plot points and fear tactics. In a word, disappointing. But the point of this post isn’t to bash the film outright—PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 2, to me, exemplifies all the problems and pratfalls one encounters when trying to create a good horror sequel, issues that have plagued the genre since its inception.

(WARNING: Spoilers Ahead for PA 2)

PROBLEM #1: THE ISSUE OF AN EXPLANATION

Nothing has severed the heart of fear out of more horror films than this caveat—over-explaining the origins of the evil. As sequels continue, the basic mythology of the antagonist must be expanded, and any fan can tell you that the less we know about something, the better. PA 2 tries to explain why the demon is involved with this family and well…it’s lame at best. The idea that this demon had just attached itself to Katie Featherston (in the original) was scary because there seemed to be no reason to it—it was random, and the thought that something so awful could pick you for no reason is terrifying. The moment the sequel explains why the demon has taken residence with the family, it instantly detracts from the proceedings. Oh…so they have a demon after them ’cause their mother held séances and promised their first-borns soul to get rich? Righttt…

This has always been a problem for horror. I’m sure HALLOWEEN would be a lot better without the damn cult/Thorn subplot that it kicked around for three movies, and Jigsaw’s web has gotten so knotted up over the course of seven films his backstory more resembles a wound-up ball of yarn than anything coherent. From POLTERGEIST to THE RING, THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE, THE EXORCIST (friggin’ Pazazu) and PREDATOR, each have gotten worse as

more knowledge was known about their antagonists. In fact, the only villain whose backstory (not character, big difference) got more interesting as the series went on was Freddy Krueger’s, but then FREDDY’S DEAD happened and I had an aneurism that I still haven’t recovered from.

PROBLEM #2: MORE OF THE SAME—BUT MORE!!!

Another cardinal sin of most horror sequels is failing to deliver anything new. Sure, more backstory may be explained, but the majority of the film simply rehashes what worked in the original. I won’t harp on this point too much, simply because I realize how difficult it is to craft a sequel that isn’t too much of a retread, without being too different (we all know what people thought of BLAIR WITCH 2).

But PA 2, along with most sequels, doesn’t even care. It copies most of the scares of the original without the build-up or pay-offs—girl getting dragged out of a bedroom, ouija board antics and an incredibly inane possession (forgivable in the original because it only occurred in the last minute) that really don’t go further in any respect. It’s a problem horror has always faced—any great scare is like a great joke, use it too much and soon no one’s laughing (or screaming). How many slasher films just up the body count? How many demon/devil films just add more crazy happenings? Turning the amp up to 11 doesn’t make the player any better, and in these cases, even though there are more “scare scenes” they are carried out in such a lazy, patronizing way it ruins the effect.

PROBLEM #3: SHOWING TOO DAMN MUCH

Nearly all horror sequels give their villains far too much screentime. If you go back and look at original horror films, you start to realize that with few exceptions, the now-iconic baddies weren’t actually in it all that much, making the few scenes they were a part of that much more memorable. Samara, Freddy, Jigsaw, Ghostface and any number of horror villains are barely in their first film, but as the sequels tick forward so does the presence of the villain, diminishing the fear factor along with the turgid explanations. How could PA 2 overstep this boundary, considering its villain is an invisible demon?