

"Occupants" – A 'found footage' film of voyeurism and psychological terror

Ben Ragunton June 2, 2016 Horror, Reviews Comments



There is something to be said about “found footage” films. Ever since The Blair Witch Project was released, we have started to see an increase of this style of filmmaking, and while a few have been firmly grounded in the drama genre, the majority of them are easily in the horror category. It’s even possible to consider “found footage” as a sub-genre. The trick, however, is to keep it fresh. The somewhat claustrophobic feel was quite effectively pulled off in The Blair Witch Project, so doing anything else like that would merely be pale imitations. Others, like J.J. Abrams’ Cloverfield from 2008 were derided for bringing about something known as “vomit cam” through all of the intense movement and action supposedly taking place in the story. However two independent films have come out within

the last 12 months that have made both brilliant and original use of this form, the first being the zombie horror I Am Alone. The second, and the more recent film, is Occupants.

From the opening moments of Occupants we are immediately introduced to the Peterson Research Institute, an organization that deals with parapsychology, metaphysics, mythology, and extrasensory perception. We are shown a case file of a young couple, Annie and Neil Curtis from Los Angeles California, as well as some text scrolling across the screen informing the audience that this footage we are about to see was used with permission by the Peterson Research Institute, and that this case is unsolved. From here on the entire movie is built on this “found footage” sub-genre on the story premise of this young couple going through a detox regiment. The wife, Annie, is a filmmaker/documentarian and her latest project is showing how detoxification through diet and healthy living for 30 days will improve their lives. To adequately record all of this she has placed cameras in almost every room of the home that she and her husband, Neil, live in. This includes their living room, dining room, and kitchen. Annie does have an office in her home where she edits her films, and some of the footage used is taken from her computer camera as we see her working and editing her recorded footage. It is here that the story slowly starts to turn badly for our young couple as the footage Annie, and later Neil, review start to show glitches. They start off really quickly and are sporadic, but as the film progresses they start to occur with greater frequency, and then the heart of this thriller is revealed; they continue to see the same rooms and the same people in the recorded footage, only they are not the same rooms and the same people. The rooms are painted and decorated differently, and the young couple has a different look and appearance about them.

Somehow the cameras that Annie has set up are now peering into a parallel universe. The observations made by “our” Annie and Neil start off as purely benign, but as the story progresses it becomes clear that things are not all rosy “on the other side,” and what started off as a bad, slow turn, for our happy couple, suddenly takes a very seriously dark shift in this movie, now adding a creepy voyeuristic layer to this film.

Julia Camara (How to Get a Date, Bikini’s Blues) wrote the story and she also served as this film’s co-producer. The movie’s stars are Michael Pugliese as Neil Curtis and Briana White as Annie Curtis. They clearly make up half of why this movie performs so strongly. They have excellent chemistry with each other, allowing us to believe that they are a happy, very much in love couple, especially in the first part of the film as they are documenting their detox regiment. You believe that you are actually watching something that might be on YouTube or other form of social media. Kudos must go to director Russ Emanuel for it was his decision that these two actors spend time together away from the set and the cameras just to become familiar with each other before filming was to begin. It worked brilliantly, especially as Annie starts to slowly have an emotional breakdown due to a highly unpleasant turn of events. The comfort level that actress Briana must have with her acting partner, Michael, needs to be there in order to give a truly emotionally vulnerable performance of this nature.

Michael Pugliese, as Neil, comes off as mostly jovial, optimistic, and very much in love with wife Annie. However it is in his portrayal of the “other” Neil that we see a totally different person. Michael’s challenge is to play the same character, yet with a different twist. As Annie observes earlier, she says, “they are us,” but as Neil later states, “they are totally different people.” That’s a difficult line to straddle and Michael executes with perfection. Both Briana’s and Michael’s acting could have destroyed this film. However they didn’t. Their performances pulled me in, kept me intrigued, and seeing the events unfold through their eyes, as well as their reactions to said events, created a level of suspense that left me exhausted when the film was over.

The other half of this film’s success rests on the shoulder’s of director Russ Emanuel. Starting off with film shorts he quickly graduated to directing feature length films (P.J., Chasing the Green, The Legends of Nethiah). With Occupants he manages to deliver two different stories, and yet they are sort of the same story. The way he was able to direct both Michael and Briana to have them act out two different parts, and yet the same parts, is what makes this entire film work, not to mention having the vision to have two parallel storylines intersect, and then later interact, in near perfect synchronicity.

One last mention must go to actor Robert Picardo (Star Trek: Voyager) as Dr. Alan Peterson of the Peterson Research Institute. We only see his character in the film by way of video chat, but his part is in no way inconsequential. He is there to occasionally provide advice to our Annie and Neil as they try to understand, and deal with, what has become a series of terror filled events.

[On a personal note, we here at TG² Studios deeply appreciate Robert Picardo’s support of independent filmmaking, especially in this

film.]

The most bone-chilling horror film is that where it is voyeuristic, and while this film starts off as "found footage," the moment it shifts to where Annie and Neil are the voyeurs is when the true psychological horror manifests itself. Through the incredible acting and directing of this film, **we** become the voyeur as we witness the nightmare that Annie and Neil are experiencing. Even as the closing credits were rolling, and for quite some time after that, I found myself quite shaken by what I had watched.

Occupants will be having its world premiere at [Phoenix Comicon](#) on Thursday, June 2, 2016 during the [Phoenix Comicon Film Festival Feature/Short](#) from 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM in [West 102A](#) at the Phoenix Convention Center.

To learn more about Occupants you can visit the movie's [website](#), and in the most brilliant marketing move imaginable, you can even check out the [Peterson Research Institute](#).

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