

“SINISTER” (Movie Review)

Written by Michael Gingold

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The title SINISTER sounds like INSIDIOUS, and the movie was backed by one of the same people and carries some of the same virtues. It also has a number of qualities that set it apart from its predecessor, and significantly above most run-of-the-mill modern horror fare.

SINISTER was produced by Jason Blum of Blumhouse Productions (whose nifty new logo debuts at its head)—who, as the ads are sure to remind us, is “the producer of PARANORMAL ACTIVITY and INSIDIOUS.” As opposed to the former film, SINISTER is a traditionally shot movie *about* found footage, in this case a box of Super-8 films discovered by Ellison Oswald (Ethan Hawke) in the attic of his new home. A true-crime writer who had a best-seller called KENTUCKY BLOOD a decade ago but is now in desperate need of a hit book, Ellison has moved his wife Tracy (Juliet Rylance) and their two small children to a small town where a terrible unsolved crime has taken place: a whole family was hanged from a tree in their backyard, minus one daughter who vanished without a trace. We get a good look at their deaths at the very beginning of SINISTER via Super-8 footage, which sets the disturbing tone and prepares us for the aesthetic by which we and Ellison will witness more horrors as the story progresses.



What Ellison hasn't told Tracy is that they're not now living *near* the scene of that crime, they're

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in it—the very house where that family dwelled before meeting their makers out back. Spurred on by his discovery of that home-movie evidence, he obsessively tries to get to the bottom of the case, his profession allowing writer/director Scott Derrickson and co-scripter C. Robert Cargill a convincing way around the usual questions of why the protagonist is so determined to pry into dangerous areas, and why he doesn't immediately take off when things start becoming threatening. Ellison's exploration—or is it exploitation?—of true tragedies also provides for a resonant moral quandary, plus secondary drama involving Tracy (still smarting from her ostracization in previous towns where Ellison dug into painful past events) and the local law enforcement (the sheriff, played by Fred Dalton Thompson, doesn't approve of Ellison's criticism of the police in past tomes, and would prefer he left town sooner rather than later).

But mostly, it allows for good 'n' spooky moments as Ellison gradually realizes the nature of the evil he's dealing with, and how widespread it has actually been, and Derrickson teases us with clues as to whether the malefactor is human or supernatural, as well as the odd but not outside-explicable behavior of the Oswald kids, 12-year-old Trevor (Michael Hall D'Addario) and preteen Ashley (Clare Foley). Perhaps just as scary as the exterior events is the deterioration of Ellison's mind, as his fixation threatens to give way to madness. As he and we watch and rewatch the Super-8 footage, the events depicted therein don't become any less disturbing, and also become a grisly reflection of the horror audience's own fascination with witnessing ghastly activities on film.

Derrickson isn't out to make a statement, though; his love of the genre is clear from the care he has put into making SINISTER a well-oiled fright machine, eschewing cheap tricks and building suspense through a steady accumulation of detail and the characters' plausible reactions to the goings-on. As lit and lensed by cinematographer Chris Norr, the Oswald home is a dark, shadowy place even when it's sunny outside—an environment where anything could be lurking in the corners or up in that attic. Just as crucial are the contributions of composer Christopher Young (venturing away from his usual ominous melodies in favor of more skittery material) and sound designer Dane A. Davis, who make SINISTER as nerve-racking to listen to as it is to watch. Kudos, too, for those flickers of Super-8 footage—actually shot on the small-scale stock—which pack more creeps in their few minutes than many entire home-camera-based features.

Once the final revelation is sprung, a couple of plausibility threads are left dangling like that unfortunate family, and SINISTER has its share of familiar tropes, like the occult expert (played by an uncredited Vincent D'Onofrio) whom Ellison must consult. But even in these moments, Derrickson throws in little personal touches that humanize the situation, and thus the overall scenario, which is presented with a commitment to realism that allows the few credibility bugs to be forgiven. Well-acted by all involved and leavened with just the right amount of character-based humor, SINISTER is back-to-basics fear fare that puts a modern spin on

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housebound-horror standards while respecting what makes that subgenre work—*really* work, in this case.

