

They Shoot Movies, Don't They? The Camera as Star

By MICHAEL CIEPLY
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Paramount Pictures

At Paramount Pictures these days, a lot of movies are less about the star than the camera — and the way it's been keeping an eye on the rest of us.

In an unusual confluence, Paramount's schedule has been crisscrossed lately with films that share a conceit: an amateur's camera capturing what it is not supposed to see. It is rare for any theme to run through a studio's output. Hollywood mostly keeps an eye on the money, and stays flexible in pursuit of it.

But in at least nine recent and forthcoming films, Paramount appears to be reaching toward an audience that was raised on flip-phone cameras, YouTube and a belief that everything, ultimately, belongs inside the frame. It may even be finding its way to the feature film equivalent of reality television: a genre for the type of movie that gets its impact by seeming to catch its subjects by surprise.

Viewers got an early peek at one of those camera-themed pictures this month, when "Super 8," which was directed by J. J. Abrams and counts Steven Spielberg among its

producers, was introduced with a 30-second Super Bowl spot. Set to open on June 10, it is a science fiction thriller that unfolds as young people turn their home movie camera — precursor to the digital eye — on the wreck of a train from the supposed space-alien holding tank at Area 51. Mr. Abrams has said the film is a homage to the Eastman Kodak Super 8 hand-held cameras on which filmmakers like himself and Mr. Spielberg earned their chops years ago. But it is also part of a cluster of projects — by moviemakers who happen to be based at Paramount — that use the camera as both a character and a bridge to viewers who are getting comfortable with the many lenses in their own lives. Most of these films make liberal use of so-called found footage, which seems to chronicle some disaster.

“It remains to be seen whether the found-footage genre is the reality television of theatrical movies,” said Jason Blum, a producer who has been involved with Paramount’s three “Paranormal Activity” films, in which the amateur camera seems to catch things that go bump in the night. “If it is, we’d better buckle up for a long ride.” Paramount executives did not agree to be interviewed about their lens-loaded lineup. But others see a trend.

“Each change in technology opens the door for different storytelling,” said Barry Levinson, who in 1989 won an Oscar for directing “Rain Man,” and a few months ago shot “The Bay.” That is an indie film — not on Paramount’s schedule — in which the cameras of dead victims have caught the horror of a biological disaster on Chesapeake Bay.

“The Bay,” Mr. Levinson said, began as a conventional documentary about environmental degradation and evolved into a drama supposedly photographed by its own protagonists. “Now anyone can tell a story visually,” he noted. The observer and his technology have a long history in film. In the 1966 film “Blow-Up,” a fashion photographer played by David Hemmings believes he has photographed a murder. Later, the device surfaced in movies like “The Blair Witch Project” and “Eight Millimeter,” camera-themed thrillers from 1999.

(The theme also showed up with an audio twist in “The Conversation,” with Gene Hackman, and “Blow Out,” with John Travolta.)

Heidi Levitt, a casting director, points to “Sex, Lies, and Videotape” as a later example “of voyeuristic and raw filmmaking” that lets everyone into the film casting process, since most of us are on-camera anyway.

“It seems logical that this genre of films morphed into the ‘Super 8’s and ‘Paranormal Activity’ of today,” Ms. Levitt added.

Paramount’s recent fascination with the amateur camera appears to have taken root with “Disturbia,” in 2007. The film starred Shia LaBeouf in a kind of tribute to “Rear Window,” though Mr. LaBeouf — unlike James Stewart in Alfred Hitchcock’s classic — used a mini-digital-video camera to look in on the possible psychopath next door.

The next year brought “Eagle Eye,” in which Mr. LaBeouf was tracked and threatened by ubiquitous cameras and other relentless technology.

“Cloverfield,” a low-budget “caught on camera” sci-fi hit produced by Mr. Abrams, followed in 2008, and its success led to immediate talk of a sequel, though none has yet been made.

Then “Paranormal Activity,” released by Paramount in 2009, took in nearly \$200 million at the worldwide box office. A sequel followed. A third film is on the way.

Meanwhile, Oren Peli, who directed the first “Paranormal” and was a producer of the others has been working on “Area 51,” in which young interlopers record their misadventures on the secretive and presumably alien-infested military base. (And you could even include the concert film Paramount released last weekend, “Justin Bieber: Never Say Never.” Old home movies feature in that documentary.)

So far, the audience has been responsive.

“People feel less distance between themselves and characters on the screen when they feel those characters are filming each other,” theorized Mr. Blum, who, is a producer of not only “Area 51” and the “Paranormal” series but also “The Bay.” (He also makes films with a more conventional viewpoint. Those include “Insidious,” a horror picture set for release by Filmdistrict on April 1.)

For Paramount, a challenge has been to keep guerrillas like Mr. Blum and Mr. Peli, whose “found footage” films cost a few million dollars, at most, from colliding with gorillas like Mr. Abrams and Mr. Spielberg, who are spending about \$50 million on “Super 8,” an effects-filled movie that is supposed to deliver the energy, but not the shaky production values, of the amateur camera.

While both “Area 51” and “Super 8” involve children, cameras and visitors from outer space, those behind the smaller film say they are not concerned.

“Story lines and concepts overlap all the time,” said Stuart Ford, whose IM Global company is among the backers of “Area 51.” “What counts with a genre film is whether the movie is scary and whether it is a fun ride.”

Mr. Ford said “Area 51” will be released by Paramount sometime this year.

“Area 51” was shot not in Nevada, where the aliens and their craft, by popular conspiracy theory, are secretly held, but in Utah, where the filmmakers are expected to get a lift from that state’s incentive program.

Marshall Moore, the director of Utah’s film commission, dropped in on the relatively austere set back in 2009. And he came away convinced that a primary impulse behind the

current vogue for films that appear to be shot by amateurs has little to do with cinematic point of view.

“It seems to be less expensive to make a movie that way,” he said.