

Jeff Kirkendall's Thoughts For The Month Column

Thoughts, Opinions, Reviews, Commentary & More!

Hello and Welcome! My name is Jeff Kirkendall and I'm an independent filmmaker and actor from the Upstate New York area. This is the section of the Very Scary Productions website where I write about topics related to independent filmmaking, digital video production, acting, movies in general, horror movies in particular, my own indie movies, as well as anything and everything related or in between.

I decided to create this commentary page because I find that I often come across things that either interest me, excite me, intrigue me, or maybe just bug me. Any topic related to movies and cinema is fair game, from the most mainstream to the most controversial. For example I'll often read about movie projects that I have a strong interest in or opinion on, for one reason or another. This page gives me a forum to discuss these things. It's all about discussion and furthering understanding of our pop culture. Anyone who has feedback concerning what I have to say here, feel free to contact me (see the contact link at <http://www.veryscaryproductions.com/>).

I'd also like to point out that the following is just my opinion, and everyone is free to agree or disagree with what I have to say. Enjoy, and to all the Indies out there: Keep on Filming!

Topic: Needless Remakes of Classic Horror Films Part 2
Plus: A review of ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003)*** – November 2003

Quite awhile back I wrote a column (TFTM, Sept. 2002) about the trend of remaking, and in most cases butchering, classic horror films. Well, unfortunately, that trend is still alive and well today. Even though this summer has been a great time for our beloved horror genre, and even though most of the movies released have been original creations (or at least sequels), this month brings us the remake of another seminal classic ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre***. While Tobe Hooper's cult shocker is admittedly not among my favorite films, the news that it was going to be remade caused me to involuntarily roll my eyes and groan. The original movie was a raw, documentary-style independent film that had a look and feel that is not likely to be duplicated by any of today's filmmakers. The 1974 *Chainsaw* is one of those movies on that short list of films which really disturbed me.* When I went to the theatre to see the remake on opening night (yes, despite my feelings on these remakes I'm usually still a glutton for punishment as soon as they come out) I had to keep telling myself to try and remain objective and not compare it to the original. And to a certain extent, I succeeded in that task.

Before I get to my review of the new *Chainsaw*, I'd like to mention something a friend of mine suggested right before we watched the film. Despite being much more optimistic about the remake than I was, he said he thought that remakes should have to be called just that - remakes. He suggested having "THE REMAKE" placed after the titles of these films. That goes along with what I mentioned in my previous column when I pointed out that "many people in their teens and younger today will grow up thinking of these new "updated" versions when they think of titles like ***Psycho*** and ***The Haunting***." I therefore propose it should be required that all remakes add the phrase "THE REMAKE" (in capital letters) to the title. This way anyone who hasn't seen the original will know that what they

are watching is derived from something else, which hopefully will inspire people to go back and view the source material. While this will most likely never happen, it certainly would be a great public service. And now: on to my review of the 2003 version of ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre***.

Despite my aforementioned reservations, I have to concede that this 2003 version of *Chainsaw* is a well-made movie. For those totally unfamiliar with the basic plot, the tale (based on a true story) concerns a group of young people traveling on a desolate stretch of road in Texas, who have the misfortune to stumble upon a sick, demented family, including the chainsaw-wielding Leatherface. The movie introduces us to these young people and quickly throws them into an ever-worsening nightmare beginning with the appearance of a mysterious hitchhiker. Whereas the original film was effective through the shock value of the torture and violence alone, here liberal doses of the red stuff splatter the screen as well. I liked this movie because, generally speaking, the production was so solid. The characters and situation are developed just well enough, the suspense is involving, and there are several disturbing, visceral scenes that are very effective while still not slowing down the pace of the film. While these scenes (mostly involving meat hooks, and, of course, the infamous chainsaw) never quite match the best moments in the original version, they still pack a punch.

Another interesting thing about this movie is how much of the film focuses on the character of Sheriff Hoyt, who turns out to be the scariest person in the movie. R. Lee Ermey's portrayal is incredibly cruel, mean and sadistic. His interaction with the kids is really unnerving, as he seems like he could just snap at any moment and kill them all on the spot. There is an especially unsettling scene where he forces one of the kids to show him what happened with the hitchhiker they picked up. The Sheriff gets in this young man's face in the tight confines of their van and pushes him to the breaking point with a vicious interrogation. It's a well-done scene with a lot of tight shots on the actors' faces. It was a nice twist how the filmmakers decided to place much of the emphasis on a character besides Leatherface. Suffice it to say, R. Lee Ermey is quite good in the role.

In regards to Leatherface himself, I'll just say that his scenes are generally effective. They mostly involve action sequences, where he is chasing characters around with his trusty power tool. One thing that was a little bothersome about many of these chase sequences however, was the fact that often the cutting (of shots) was so quick, and the lighting so dark, that you weren't quite sure what happened just a moment ago. Nonetheless, the filmmakers were probably smart to keep things moving with this character and not linger too long on him playing around with human skin and such. It makes the few moments where they really focus on this all the more effective. I also should note that while the other members of this psychotic family weren't elaborated on very much, I still got a good overall impression of their (very dysfunctional) family unit. To them, everything going on seemed perfectly natural.

The one really big criticism I have of this film centers on the casting of Jessica Biel in the lead role of Erin. While I think she gave a good performance (as did most of the cast), I also think this actress is just too damn good-looking for this movie. Dressed in tight jeans and an equally tight white t-shirt, she looks like she just stepped off the set of a Maxim magazine photo shoot. Regardless of how sweaty and dirty she gets in this film, she still retains this appearance. Now while it's probably not fair for me to make such a comment, I'm making this point because, quite frankly, her looks kept pulling my attention away from the action and horror in this story. Although it wasn't enough to sink the movie by

any means, it was an ever-persistent distraction. For many horror movies - such as the recent ***Freddy vs. Jason*** for example - I would call an ultra-sexy lead heroine a plus; but this isn't the case here. It's just not right for the mood of this material. My opinion probably comes from having seen the original *Chainsaw*, and having been totally involved in the horror without the distraction of obviously targeted sex appeal. While I guess this was to be expected, given that we are now in the year 2003, I still feel this kind of trendy casting ** wasn't appropriate here. However, since the movie has already made a lot of money at the box office, it apparently didn't bother many other people.

A second, somewhat lesser criticism I have of this picture is the ending. I won't divulge it here, but suffice it to say the ending in this remake is a bit anti-climactic, especially considering what has preceded it. The finale doesn't even come close to the slam-bam ending of the original.

The above criticisms notwithstanding, ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003)*** is a solid effort well worth seeing. It proves once again that the horror-friendly folks at New Line Cinema have not given up their commitment to our beloved genre. My hat goes off to them for breaking the remake losing streak we had going up to this point. Now I can only cross my fingers as we approach the new year and face the impending ***Dawn Of The Dead (2004)***.

* Some other movies that have disturbed this horror fan are ***The Exorcist, Jaws, The Last House on the Left, I Spit On Your Grave***, and ***Raising Cain*** (because of one disturbing shot of a woman having been "scared to death".)

** In my very first TFTM Column (August, 2002) I talked about my mixed feelings on the topic of "trendy casting".