

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!

SUBJECT: The horror of the PG-13 rating - December 2003

As I've mentioned in previous columns, 2003 has been a banner year for horror films. Several R-rated films I really liked - ***Underworld***, ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003)***, and especially ***Freddy vs. Jason*** * - have done well at the box office. However, the real trend in fright fare (which I noticed emerging in 2002) has been the prevalence of the PG-13 rating. More and more I see studios gearing their horror releases toward younger audiences and holding back on the more visceral elements in favor of suspense and/or off-screen violence. An example of a youth-targeted approach would be ***Darkness Falls*** **, whereas a film like ***The Others*** *** (which appealed largely to older audiences because of its subject matter and pacing) was all about generating mood and suspense through unseen elements. This approach has proven very financially successful, with many PG-13 efforts generating huge box office revenues well over the 100-million dollar mark. This level of success is less prevalent with R-rated efforts because the potentially huge teen/pre-teen audience is kept out of theaters. Additionally (and more importantly), many PG-13 pictures have been artistically and critically successful as well, proving that it is possible to make a movie that scares, creeps out, or at least affects viewers, without dumping gallons of blood onto the set. An obvious past cinematic example would be the 1999 release ***The Sixth Sense***, which achieved all of the above with just a sprinkling of visceral elements.

So what does all this mean? The way I see it, a more mainstream-friendly approach is a mixed blessing. Horror films are definitely hot, with audiences not previously effectively reached - such as teen and pre-teen females - being drawn to theaters in increasing numbers. This creates more demand, and thus more films will be produced by the studios. However, patrons who like their horror on the visceral side can often be put off by the latest trendy ***Halloween*** sequel or ***Scream***-type teen flick, with only the occasional studio picture (such as ***Freddy vs. Jason*** or

Final Destination 2 ****, for example), or independent theatrical release (like the recent ***Cabin Fever***), to hold them over. Therefore these viewers have to look elsewhere for visceral thrills. This is where underground filmmakers come into the picture. Luckily in this age of the internet, home video/DVD, and digital moviemaking, this audience has somewhere to go. New and emerging horror filmmakers working with little to no budgets are free to create whatever content they want for audiences eager to see it. They are not restricted by MPAA-mandated ratings as studios and large-budget independent producers are. In fact today many underground movies released on video/DVD or on the internet go unrated. It truly is a new age of moviemaking, with talented people working well outside traditional distribution systems. A good way to look at this is to realize that while studio pictures are drawing more mainstream audiences to our beloved genre, the independent spirit is still alive and well in the underground horror film movement. Even though the days may have passed when a groundbreaking visceral horror flick like ***A Nightmare On Elm Street*** could play theatrically to mass audiences across the world, it's good to know that new and emerging talents still have channels for showing their visions to viewers. And of course, it's also important to keep in mind that horror films on any level can work or not work. Mainstream horror flicks can be just as effective or ineffective as underground movies aimed solely at the horror crowd. Some of my all time favorite horror movies (like ***A Nightmare On Elm Street***, for example) have been pictures filled with blood and on-screen carnage, which at the same time have compelling characters and drama to carry the story along. As I've often found, it's not always about the rating.

* For discussions of ***Underworld***, ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003)*** and ***Freddy vs. Jason***, see the following past TFTM columns respectively: October 2003, November 2003, and December 2002/September 2003. (I wrote two columns on ***Freddy vs. Jason***).

** For a discussion of ***Darkness Falls***, see the February 2003 Thoughts For The Month Column.

*** For a discussion of ***The Others***, see the January 2003 Thoughts For The Month Column.

**** It's worth noting that the R-rated genre efforts ***Final Destination 2***, ***Freddy vs. Jason***, and ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003)*** were all from horror-friendly New Line Cinema. It appears that "the house that Freddy built" so many years ago is still standing strong today.