

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: Movie Recommendation – ***Underworld*** - The Summer 2003 horror movie season ends on a high note – October 2003

After the spectacular ***Freddy vs. Jason***, I felt quite happy and satisfied. This was the movie I had been waiting for forever, and luckily it didn't disappoint (see last month's TFTM column to read my praise of the film). I really didn't care all that much what other horror releases arrived in theatres. However, since the success of ***Freddy vs. Jason***, much to my surprise horror has continued to be red hot in the remaining weeks of summer 2003. After the battle of the horror titans came a cool little independent sort-of zombie film called ***Cabin Fever***, followed by the even cooler studio picture ***Underworld***, which tells the story of an ancient battle between vampires and lycans (werewolves).

Underworld centers around a character named Selene (Kate Beckinsale), who is one of a group of warriors assigned to hunt down and exterminate the last remnants of the lycan race. She discovers that a human named Michael is the key to a plot by the lycans to combine vampire and werewolf blood. Selene becomes torn between her attraction for him and her allegiance to her race. Other characters involved in this ancient battle include Kraven (Shane Brolly), who is the leader of the vampire house after the former leader Viktor (Bill Nighy) goes into hibernation, and Lucian (Michael Sheen), the Lycan overlord. As the battle rages in both modern and gothic-looking locations, secrets are revealed and alliances tested.

There are several reasons why I liked this film. First and foremost the movie had an interesting story and equally interesting characters. Selene is compelling because of the way she thinks and the situation she is in. This femme fatale is someone who has always lived to kill lycans, driven purely by her desire for retribution.* At the same time, since the lycans are on the verge of extinction, her purpose (her entire existence) will

soon be gone. Add to this the fact that it's obvious she really doesn't fit into, or doesn't want to fit in with, the more aristocratic lifestyle of her coven. She is lorded over by Kraven, the unlikable aristocrat who wants Selene by his side and is mostly concerned with rising to prominence in the vampire coven. However, besides his quest for power in the coven, it is revealed that he knows many secrets regarding Selene's past which he has guarded dutifully for a long time. He is definitely more than he first appears to be. These very secrets are the key to understanding the battle between the vampires and the werewolves - who are lead by Lucian, a third character I found fascinating because of his back-story and the situation he finds himself in. Lucian is both a fierce, vicious warrior and leader, and a tormented, sympathetic soul who is also motivated by a desire for retribution as fierce as that of Selene. ** He is a victim of his past just as she is.

Besides good characterizations and back-stories, I also like the mixture of genres present in the picture. *Underworld* is part *Matrix*-style action, part horror film. The influences of *The Matrix* can be seen immediately by looking at Selene's black leather outfit and watching the numerous scenes of highly stylized high-tech gunplay.*** Surprisingly enough the horror elements are not lost either, as many characters are dispatched brutally, with blood splattering just heavily enough to satisfy this horror fan. (Indeed, despite the stylish trailer, this is not really a mainstream picture.) The vampires look fine, and while the werewolf transformations may not be entirely groundbreaking, they also don't look like a lot of the silly CGI sequences we've all seen in the past. The movie moves at a brisk pace, providing lots of action and gruesome images, while never getting too bogged down in heavy-handed dialog. The dramatic elements nicely blend with all the carnage and gunplay to provide a moving narrative that never bores.

While I thoroughly enjoyed *Underworld*, this movie is also definitely not without its faults. The first criticism I as a horror fan can level against this movie is that just about every time there is a confrontation between the two species, gun play and high-tech weaponry is involved. In other words, the vampires and werewolves don't really get physical with one another until after all the bullets are exhausted. (The way they are presented would suggest that - with the exception of Victor and presumably the other Vampire lords - the lycans could eat the vampires for breakfast in physical combat). However this does make sense in that both species are presented as having evolved intellectually enough to make strategic use of such weaponry, especially the vampires, who are portrayed as highly evolved and aristocratic. Luckily, as I mentioned above, the action keeps moving and the aristocratic lifestyle of the vampires is not dwelled upon too much, saving this movie from becoming another slow *Interview With The Vampire* type picture. (For the record I tend to prefer my vampires to be fierce, vicious creatures like in *John Carpenter's Vampires*.)

A second criticism I have is that the relationship between Selene and her human attraction Michael never really goes far enough. In a movie like this it would have been nice to see some real steam develop between the two of them. Instead all we get is an incredibly restrained Selene and an always bewildered and confused Michael. This isn't to say this behavior doesn't fit these characters and the story, but it just would have been nice if the filmmakers could have gotten a little heat and chemistry in there between the two leads. This also applies more generally to the entire picture as well, in that the trailer - with its emphasis on shots of Selene in her tight black latex outfit - would suggest that we were in for a lot of kinky sex appeal ala *The Matrix*. Alas, they were only teasing us. Most shots on Selene are tight close-ups on her face, which usually

appears stone cold or contemplative. Put simply, the sexual elements in this movie are kept to a minimum.

A final (and lesser) criticism I have is that the ending of the movie borders on being silly, and feels too brief for what has transpired before it. However I will be the first to admit that it is still somewhat funny and entertaining, providing what could be described as a lighter moment in a dark and heavy end sequence. This finale will definitely get mixed reactions from moviegoers.

Despite these minor complaints, when all is said and done ***Underworld*** is a highly engaging if not entirely original action/horror picture. Given that so many vampire movies have been made over the years, it's always a daunting task to do something new and fresh with the fanged creatures. Werewolf movies are also difficult to get right, not so much because a lot of them have been made, but rather because it's hard to top the groundbreaking transformation effects seen in a movie like ***An American Werewolf in London***. I can't think of another movie in recent memory that has pitted werewolves against vampires (although I'm sure there are some), and for this reason alone ***Underworld*** has at least some originality to it. While many hardcore horror fans will no doubt see this film as an action picture with a few horror elements tossed in for good measure, I see it as an entertaining ride well worth taking.

* I won't give away exactly why she is driven by revenge, as this is a plot element/revelation that doesn't come up until late in the film.

** Again, I won't give away exactly what motivates him, as this is a plot element/revelation that doesn't come up until late in the film.

*** I definitely found the story here more likable than the jumbled and confusingly minimal narrative in ***The Matrix Reloaded***, which served only as an excuse to highlight long and drawn out CGI action sequences.