

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: Criticizing the Critics - A discussion on "Indie" Cinema, Underground Cinema and the Democratization of Filmmaking – May 2005

Recently a weekly newspaper in my area ran an article consisting of a series of "not quite indefensible" viewpoints on various topics ranging from the legitimacy of golf as a sport to the quality of the **Lord Of The Rings** movies. I believe the article was the type of piece that was meant to get readers riled up or at least get a reaction. While I wait patiently for the inevitable page of incensed response letters in an upcoming issue, I'll take this opportunity to share a few thoughts of my own on this newspaper column which suggested that "there's no reason to care about indie cinema".

The writer of this particular column begins by talking about the claims of what one might call the digital filmmaking revolution. To paraphrase, he states that people who believe in this revolution say that the rise of low-cost, high-quality digital video cameras and computer (non-linear) editing software will create an era of new cutting-edge independent cinema unlike what has been seen in the past. He then goes on to rebuff the idea by saying that this development is hardly a good thing, because for a small amount of money anyone with some basic camera and computer skills can call themselves a filmmaker and create video for their website that is only suitable for viewing by close friends or family, if that. The article concludes by talking about how capitalism is useful for filtering out material like this and how moviegoers have supported the current incarnation of Hollywood by turning out in record numbers for mindless Hollywood "event" movies, while at the same time providing the big studios with the motivation to establish "indie" divisions.

In regards to the first point about digital video producers being nothing more than glorified hobbyists, suffice it to say this is really insulting to independents that put ample thought, time, energy and planning into every production. While it's true that someone

who can aim a camera and load video onto a web server can call themselves a filmmaker, a large number of the new breed of independent digital filmmakers stand high above that mark. Making movies using low-cost digital video is an art form just like making movies using high-cost film equipment is an art form. The basic steps in production are always the same no matter what type of equipment is being used. Creativity, planning and skill are needed at any level of filmmaking. What is being attacked in the article is the quality level of these digital video productions. Having viewed many no-budget productions I can say that there are some I wouldn't consider to be much above the level of an amateur home video. However, as stated above, a good number of independent filmmakers have produced works that far exceed that quality level. Whether one is talking about no-budget cinema or Hollywood filmmaking, there is going to be the good and the bad. As I mentioned in a previous column, technical factors such as proper lighting and sound recording are crucial and usually make the difference between a professional-looking and an amateurish-looking production. These are skills that separate the serious independent filmmaker from the amateur. Good lighting for example can take away that dull home video look we all know so well. Creativity and originality are other skills that factor into this equation.

The question as to whether or not anyone besides friends and family would want to sit through a low-cost digital video production can be easily answered by a quick scan of the internet. The fact of the matter is that the independent, or as I like to call it underground, film scene is a big deal nowadays.* Today there are numerous websites devoted to this new breed of independent cinema ranging from individual filmmaker sites to independent production companies to movie review sites. In the Upstate New York area alone there are several filmmakers who have become well-established and who have produced movies seen by large numbers of people at live screenings, on the internet, and on video and DVD as a result of successful distribution deals. There are also well-known worldwide success stories such as the independent features ***The Blair Witch Project*** and, more importantly, ***The Last Broadcast***, just to name a couple. I won't devote the rest of the column to examining these movies, because they have been written about in-depth elsewhere. However the reason I call ***The Last Broadcast*** more important is because I believe it represents an example of the true possibilities and potential of the digital video format for low/no-budget independent filmmakers. While ***The Blair Witch Project*** was arguably something of a fluke in the sense that it was a technically amateurish production that succeeded almost entirely because of a creative marketing concept on the part of the filmmakers, ***The Last Broadcast*** was a technically solid digital video movie that succeeded on the merits of the production alone.** And while most people have heard about how much money ***The Blair Witch Project*** made at the box office in relation to the production costs of the film, it's a lesser reported fact that ***The Last Broadcast*** was made for the much smaller sum of somewhere under \$1000.*** What is significant here is that this is a good example of the amount of money that can be spent by an inventive and cost-conscious digital video producer in the production of a solid movie. ***The Last Broadcast*** went on to score a lucrative distribution deal with major video retailer Hollywood Video, proving that people can and do want to see such productions. I predict that more movies like this will become commonplace as time goes on.

Finally I'd like to take a moment to mention once again what I call "The Democratization of Filmmaking". **** Simply stated, I believe that filmmaking should be as democratic as anything else in our society. While I'm a big fan of Hollywood movies and couldn't imagine a world without them, I do believe that there is enough of a market to allow

low/no-budget filmmakers to prosper as well. I don't believe that capitalism does, or should, act as a filter in the way alluded to in the above-mentioned newspaper article.

* For a discussion of the independent and underground film scene, see the January 2004 TFTM column. Also see the FAQ page for a definition of independent digital filmmaking.

** My comments about ***The Blair Witch Project*** aren't meant to represent a bad review of the film as a whole. I actually liked the movie overall and thought the ending shot was especially creepy and disturbing. The ingenious marketing concept on the part of the filmmakers also cannot be commended enough. However I do think that from a purely technical standpoint the film was not up to the higher standards of many of the underground movie productions I've watched.

*** Several sources talk about production costs and box office information for ***The Blair Witch Project***. One site useful for looking up such facts is Answers.com.

**** For more discussion on the merits of digital video and what I like to call "The Democratization of Filmmaking", see the October 2002 TFTM column.