

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: Hot Summer Nights, Killer Robots, and Movies from Back in the Day - A nostalgic look back at the 80's horror films ***Chopping Mall*** and ***Night of the Comet*** – July 2006

* In previous columns I've talked about the merits of digital video and how this exciting technology has helped to begin democratize moviemaking. That is, it has given people the resources needed to produce video that is of professional quality. I certainly remember back about ten years ago, when I began pursuing my dream of making movies, how the main formats available to most consumers were VHS and 8mm video. A few of my early short films were produced using these consumer camcorder formats, and I also remember vividly the primitive "pause and click" method we used for editing these movies as well. Looking at these films now I'm often amazed at how well they turned out given our limited resources. After those first few movies things began to get easier of course, as digital camcorders, computers and editing software packages came into the picture. And now with the powerful presence of the internet, movies of all types, genres and lengths produced on low-cost video from all over the world can be viewed by audiences hungry for new content. As I've often said, it truly is an amazing time to be an independent filmmaker. However this makes me think how different things were when I was growing up as a teenager. Back in the 1980's I was very much unaware of how it would have ranged from difficult to impossible to make my own movies given the lack of affordable equipment available. This was okay though because at that time I hadn't even had my first inklings about the possibility of making my own movies. However I was a huge movie fan, and I remember how exciting it was when VCR's and pay cable allowed me to discover some of the memorable B-movies produced during that decade. I was nostalgic for these movies from "back in the day" now after having gotten together with some friends recently for an outdoor, summer backyard viewing (via video projector) of a couple of 1980's horror chestnuts. Oddly enough we watched a couple films starring a couple of the same actors. Our selections were the 1986 Action/Horror/Exploitation

killer-robots-on the-loose film **Chopping Mall**, and the more straightforward Science Fiction/Horror hybrid **Night of the Comet** from 1984.

*Caution: The following paragraphs discussing **Chopping Mall** and **Night of the Comet** contain some plot details which could be considered spoilers.*

It's really interesting that we chose these two particular films to watch. **Chopping Mall** is a movie I believe I first saw on home video, probably at least a couple years after it was made. It's one of those films that no doubt gained some cult status thanks to the home video revolution. ** The movie was directed by Jim Wynorski, who over the years has produced and/or directed a long string of action, comedy, and horror movies, many of which could be placed under the general umbrella category of Exploitation. Here he takes us to a suburban mall where a group of security robots (called Protector Robots) are being employed to protect the premises. The designer of the robots assures a captive audience that the potentially lethal machines are perfectly safe and reliable, and that a simple mall identification card is all that is needed for them to differentiate intruders from mall staff. Well it doesn't take a genius to guess that this spells trouble for somebody other than criminals, and after a lightning storm plays havoc with the robots' control system this quickly becomes the case for a group of teenagers working at the mall who decide to party after hours. (It's just amazing the things lightning can do in these films, isn't it.) First the robots kill the technicians in the control booth and then they start patrolling the mall, after which things get ugly. The teens here are what one might expect in a film such as this, and include a group of young guys and gals who mainly just think about partying and having sex, along with a couple of nerdy types. *** The most recognizable faces (at least to this horror and b-movie fan) in the group are actresses Kelli Maroney as the nerdy girl and **Re-Animator** co-star (and soap star) Barbara Crampton as a whiny party-girl. **** I won't go into a play-by-play, but let me just say that this movie operates pretty much by the rules of the slasher film with the robots sitting in for the masked killer. Therefore even in a mall well-stocked with potential weapons it's pretty obvious right from the start who is going to be dead meat and who's most likely going to survive.

Having not seen this movie in quite some time I'd forgotten how funny and enjoyable it is. **Chopping Mall** really is a good example of campy, low-budget B-horror. As I said before it strictly follows the formula set down by the slasher films of the early 1980's. And because it's so obvious from the start, or at least as soon as the teen characters are introduced, that this formula is being strictly adhered to, the movie quickly inspires a **Mystery Science Theater**-type reaction. Or at least it did with the live audience I was part of. Other elements also add to the hilarity, including the fact that the slow-moving robots are rather comical-looking and are armed with outrageous high-tech weapons (including lasers) more suitable for some kind of a war than patrolling a mall. Add to this gratuitous nudity, signature 80's synthesizer music, cheesy dialog, a mall well-stocked with automatic rifles and propane tanks, and a hilarious end credit shot, and one can see that this film really is made for a drive-in movie screen.

Lovely Scream Queen Kelli Maroney returned once again to grace our outdoor movie screen in the 1984 flick **Night of the Comet**, a story about a comet which wipes out all but a small group of humans on earth. Here Maroney and Catherine Mary Stuart star as valley girl sisters in high school who wake up to find that everybody they knew has been reduced to a pile of red dust. They later learn they were inadvertently spared that grisly fate because they had both spent the night protected by steel structures. Soon the

sisters team up with a Native American man and must fight off partially exposed survivors turned into savage, cannibalistic zombies, as well as a group of desperate scientists bent on developing a serum at all costs.

Night of the Comet is a much more straightforward, serious movie than ***Chopping Mall***, and overall is a very solid production from start to finish. Set in the 1980's, this film features a rather creepy and believable premise, solid acting throughout, and convincing zombie makeup. The scenes where the women are being pursued by the zombies are suspenseful and work effectively because of the fact that many of the ghouls are part human and part zombie and therefore twice as deadly. There are also some comical touches thrown in that work nicely while never changing the overall grim tone of the film, such as when the girls go shopping at a suburban clothing store while dancing around to the eighties classic *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*.

Like ***Chopping Mall***, ***Night of the Comet*** is a movie that most likely found its audience on the small screen during the home video revolution. I remember I first saw this movie on pay cable, and seeing it again recently made me appreciate it all the more. While it doesn't feature any over-the-top special effects, this movie is entertaining throughout and just the kind of film to watch on a big screen with an audience of movie lovers. Long live hot summer nights and B-horror movies from Back in the Day!

* For a discussion of the merits of digital video technology see the October 2002 TFTM column.

** Other films by Jim Wynorski include ***Not of This Earth*** (the remake with Traci Lords), ***Sorority House Massacre II***, ***Hard to Die***, and ***Sins of Desire***. To see his entire lengthy filmography visit the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com).

*** ***Chopping Mall*** also features actors Mary Woronov, Paul Bartel and Dick Miller in smaller roles. Mary Woronov is an actress who has been around since the 1960's and has starred in a number of movies too numerous to list. The one I remember her from most is the black comedy ***Eating Raoul***, which also starred Paul Bartel and ***Night of the Comet*** co-star Robert Beltran. Dick Miller has appeared in movies since the 1950's and has made cameo appearances in a whole range of movies. One really interesting horror movie Mr. Miller starred in which I'd recommend for those who haven't seen it is the 1959 film ***A Bucket of Blood***, which was directed by Roger Corman. For more information on all these actors visit the Internet Movie Database.

**** For anyone who is interested in the topic of 1980's slasher films I'd strongly recommend the 1992 book *Men, Women & Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* by Carol J. Clover. This book has chapters on the slasher, occult, and rape-revenge film genres, and features some fascinating and enlightening insights and perspectives on each.