

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: Some cool movies from 2005

January 2006

For my first Thoughts For The Month column of the new year I'd like to talk about some of the movies I enjoyed in the previous year. Below is a list of my Best Movies of 2005.

HORROR:

Cry Wolf - This is a movie I never expected to be putting on a best-of-the-year list. In fact, if I remember correctly my friend and I only went to see the film because there wasn't anything more interesting playing in theaters that weekend. I had heard something about the movie and from what I could tell it sounded like a typical modern "trendy" teen slasher picture - in other words attractive teenagers being stalked by a masked killer. And apparently they had added in the technology element, in this case instant messaging and the internet, in the vein of the 2002 film ***FearDotCom***. Well much to my surprise I found myself enjoying this very appealing mystery concerning a group of high school students at a high-class private boarding school who send out a fake E-mail about a killer supposedly stalking the campus. The plot and characters were engaging and the movie kept me guessing all the way through right up to an unexpected twist in the final moments of the film. ***Cry Wolf*** features a cast of talented young actors who play their parts well, especially Julian Morris as clever and suave new student Owen, and Lindy Booth as redheaded Dodger, a girl who is equal parts tough, clever, mysterious and sensitive. Musician/actor John Bon Jovi has a supporting role of a teacher who may or may not be involved when it appears that a real murderer has indeed begun stalking the campus. Gore hounds will probably be disappointed in this PG-13 rated effort due to the fact that there is hardly any blood to be seen. In fact the movie is edited in a quick-cut, MTV-style way. However I believe an extended cut of the film has recently been released on DVD, so there may be more graphic mayhem to be had than what was seen in theaters.

The Exorcism of Emily Rose - This was another PG-13 horror film that I found to be intriguing. The title character here is a teenage girl played by Jennifer Carpenter who purportedly became possessed while attending college and subsequently died under the care of her parish priest Father Moore (Tom Wilkinson). Her story is told through flashbacks as Father Moore is on trial, being charged in her death. The other major player in the film is his lawyer Erin Bruner, played by Laura Linney. Erin is a career-minded professional who doesn't believe in things like demon possession and exorcisms but must defend the priest using the possibility that these things may exist as her main arsenal of evidence. Her internal struggle with her beliefs is as much a main focus in the film as is the question of what exactly happened to Emily Rose. Emily's life and the events leading up to her death are shown in flashbacks as testimony is put forth in the trial. Strong acting from the leads really anchors this film and makes it compelling. Laura Linney paints a full picture of her tough but increasingly questioning lawyer character, while Jennifer Carpenter gives an impressive performance in an incredibly physically demanding role. The scenes of her possession and exorcism are often truly chilling. All in all this film is perhaps two parts intense legal drama, one part horrific exorcism story which together present an absorbing tale of a shocking, tragic and mysterious death and the lives affected by it.

George A. Romero's Land of the Dead - See my August 2005 Thoughts For The Month column to read about why I liked the fourth entry in Mr. Romero's zombie saga.

Malevolence - This movie from Anchor Bay Entertainment is a bit of a throwback to early 1980's slasher films like ***Friday the 13th***. It concerns a group of bank robbers who hide out in an abandoned house in the middle of nowhere after a robbery. Their plans go awry when it turns out a house nearby is occupied by a masked, deranged killer. The movie is generally suspenseful in the same way that many slasher films from the 1980's were, and it's evident before long that some of these hapless crooks are in for a gruesome demise. Because I kept thinking to myself that this or that part of the movie reminded me of ***Friday the 13th*** or ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*** or whatever, it could be called derivative. However despite this (or because of it) I mostly enjoyed the film. And the ending which explained who/what the killer was proved to be interesting enough if not entirely unpredictable. This is the type of picture that should appeal to horror fans who like films with a harder edge. It's also nice to see a company like Anchor Bay, known primarily for their DVD releases, get a movie into wide (if brief) theatrical distribution.

NON-HORROR:

Batman Begins - Finally we are given another good ***Batman*** picture. Not since the dark and twisted ***Batman Returns*** (still a favorite of mine) has the masked crusader been this brooding and true to form. Here the talented Christian Bale takes over the role of the Dark Knight in a movie directed by Christopher Nolan, who impressed me years ago with his unusual independent film ***Memento***. Here he restarts the ***Batman*** franchise in a film which focuses quite heavily on the story of how a young Bruce Wayne became ***Batman*** in the first place. This movie is much less campy and comical in nature than were the two previous entries in the franchise, which is a fact that should please many fans. Christian Bale gives the role his own personal touch, as Michael Keaton did in the first two Tim Burton-directed films. He is also supported well by a high-caliber cast including

Liam Neeson as his mentor, Morgan Freeman as a worker at Wayne Enterprises, screen legend Michael Caine as faithful family butler Alfred, Katie Holmes as the determined District Attorney, and Gary Oldman as an honorable cop named Jim Gordon, who will one day go on to become Police Commissioner of Gotham City. The movie also stars scene stealer Cillian Murphy as Dr. Jonathan Crane (aka Scarecrow). Although Scarecrow was not always the main focus in the film, his scenes were some of the most memorable because of the creepiness that the actor imbued the character with. I'm not sure whether it's his looks or his delivery or, more likely, a combination of both, but Cillian Murphy is definitely one to watch. Additionally the movie features some stylish, if sometimes too over-the-top, action sequences. However the characters and story always remain the primary focus in this film, and although the picture ran a tad too long for my taste, this **Batman** is a worthy addition to the series indeed.

Derailed - This was another movie that I wound up seeing just because there was nothing more interesting playing that weekend. It was also another movie I didn't expect to like, but wound up being pleasantly surprised with. In **Derailed** two married strangers named Charles and Lucinda, played by Clive Owen and Jennifer Aniston, meet on a train and subsequently go on to have an affair. One night they discreetly get a room at an out-of-the-way hotel, but are rudely interrupted in their extramarital bliss by nasty thug Philippe LaRoche (Vincent Cassel), who viciously beats Charles and then presumably has his way with Lucinda. Following this the clever criminal blackmails Charles with an escalating series of threats. Now while this movie hasn't gotten the best reception from critics, I for one found it to be interesting and for the most part unpredictable. Every time I was sure I knew where things were headed there was a new wrinkle. And the things I did see coming didn't detract much from the overall story. The lead actors here do a good job, but despite the presence of high-profile Jennifer Aniston the movie really belongs to the two male leads and the exchanges between them. Charles is a likable guy who is easy to root for even though he makes a series of bad decisions in order to protect the privacy and safety of a woman he still doesn't know all that well, while Vincent Cassel plays a simply nasty fellow with a French accent. There is also an unexpected twist at the end that really surprised me, but apparently may not have surprised everyone, making this the type of film that will be praised by some but easily picked apart by others. If nothing else I'd say **Derailed** is well worth watching just to find out which camp you fall into.

*Warning: The following paragraph about "**A History of Violence**" contains some plot details which could be considered spoilers.*

A History of Violence - This movie from director David Cronenberg was one of the very best of 2005. It is the story of a loving family man named Tom Stall living in a small Midwestern town who is suddenly thrust into the media spotlight after foiling a robbery attempt at a diner he owns. Soon after this gangsters show up in town claiming he is somebody else, somebody they are looking for. This threatens his peaceful, happy family life and forces him to deal with the situation in order to try and keep what he has. Tom is played by the interesting-looking Viggo Mortensen, while supporting players include Maria Bello as his wife, William Hurt as a mob boss, and Ed Harris as a rather unpleasant-looking but smooth-talking gangster. Those familiar with some of Cronenberg's other films including **Shivers** (aka **They Came From Within**), **Rabid**, **Videodrome**, **The Fly (remake)** and **Dead Ringers** probably know much of this work could be described as visceral in style. In other words his movies often focus on disease and other assaults on the physical body. While many of the aforementioned films fit

nicely into the horror/gore film category, this film is what I would call a crime drama containing the trademark Cronenberg gore quotient. The title **A History of Violence** is quite apt here as several characters meet gruesome ends, including an especially grisly death from a gunshot to the face. However this movie is not a horror film about exploding body parts, but rather a subtle, often quiet character study of a man being forced to confront his own past and the nature of the potential violence that dwells within him (and all of us). This is not the type of picture that is wrapped up in a nice neat little package at its conclusion, which is one of the intriguing elements about it. The movie made me think long and hard about what I had seen and what the meaning of it was. **A History of Violence** is a memorable film which in many ways made me think of an earlier (and favorite of mine) effort by the director called **The Dead Zone**, which was an adaptation of a Stephen King novel. David Cronenberg also directed this movie starring Christopher Walken in a similar (if uncharacteristically) restrained style which was well suited to the brooding subject matter.

North Country - Yes Charlize Theron probably deserves another Oscar award for her portrayal of Josey Aimes, a young woman working in a northern Minnesota mine who has to endure various forms of harassment before taking a stand and doing the unheard of - suing for sexual harassment. I saw this film with a friend who got tickets for a sold out advance preview, and although it is not generally my type of movie I have to say I found the picture to be incredibly moving. The movie is a very detailed and believable fictionalized telling of the first successful sexual harassment case in the United States. It shows what a working class mother had to endure just to make a living. Charlize Theron nicely portrays Josey's toughness and inner strength, while also showing that she is vulnerable and has her limits as well. I really felt for Josey and what she was going through and at times found it hard to believe that not all that long ago things like this went on, and were in fact, very much acceptable. Supporting cast members in this film include Frances McDormand as a coworker and Woody Harrelson as the lawyer that takes Josey's case. **North Country** is a movie well worth seeing on DVD or home video if you missed it in theatres.

Red Eye - Even though it was directed by horror movie maestro Wes Craven, this movie about a hotel manager (Rachel McAdams) terrorized by a very well-spoken hit man (Cillian Murphy) would more likely fall into the suspense/thriller category. However it is categorized the movie is solidly directed and very well acted. The story is engaging enough, but the movie works primarily because of its two leads. I have to say I was really captivated by Rachel McAdams when I first saw her in the comedy **Wedding Crashers** (see below). This lovely young actress has one of the most expressive faces I've seen in a long time, and she makes it easy to identify with her resourceful yet vulnerable Lisa Reisert character in this film. Her performance is complemented nicely by the equally talented Cillian Murphy playing professional assassin Jackson Rippner. As he showed in **Batman Begins** (see above), he has the looks and presence to easily play truly menacing characters. While I've seen better (and worse) movies in the mainstream thriller category, the choice of these two actors makes this movie worth watching. The ending sequence involving a game of cat and mouse between the two leads was also very well done, proving once again that Wes Craven hasn't lost his touch when it comes to directing suspenseful scenes.

Warning: The following paragraph about **Wedding Crashers** contains some plot details which could be considered spoilers.

Wedding Crashers - My final movie on this Best of 2005 list is the outrageous comedy **Wedding Crashers** starring Owen Wilson, Vince Vaughn, Christopher Walken and Rachel McAdams. The story is about a couple of guys named John Beckwith and Jeremy Grey, played by Owen Wilson and Vince Vaughn, whose main pursuit in life is crashing weddings in order to meet and seduce unsuspecting women. They take it so seriously in fact that they have a set of rules to follow such as to "never leave a fellow crasher behind". Things go incredibly well as the guys move obnoxiously from one wedding to another in pursuit of the lovely ladies. However this all changes one day when John and Jeremy suddenly find themselves at odds with one another after John falls for young and beautiful bridesmaid Claire Cleary, played by the striking Rachel McAdams. If all of this sounds a bit ridiculous that's because it is. That's also what makes the movie so darn funny. Vince Vaughn and Owen Wilson have a comic chemistry that works so well primarily because Vaughn's rapid fire, often manic delivery contrasts so well with Wilson's mellow, smooth persona. Rachel McAdams is also a standout here playing a girl that seems like such a nice person one can't help but not want to see her hurt in any way. (She's definitely an actress to watch.) The situations the guys get into after being invited to spend time with Claire's family are also so over-the-top and outrageous that it's hard not to laugh. A couple standout scenes include one at the dinner table involving Claire's sexy sister and Jeremy, and another where Claire's treasury secretary father William has a somber conversation with Jeremy while the young man is strapped to a bed. This latter scene works so well because of Christopher Walken's delivery and reaction to seeing the leather straps holding Vaughn to the bed. While **Wedding Crashers** probably won't garner any awards, it's scenes like these which make the picture. Towards the end of the movie things shift (as films of this type often do) into romantic comedy mode when Jeremy decides to get married and John goes to great lengths to win Claire away from her macho jerk fiancé. Until then however **Wedding Crashers** is one of those films that's simply decadent adult fun. It's definitely not for everyone, but for those who like this sort of thing and can appreciate a film about a couple of older guys acting like crazy teenagers, it's just the ticket.