

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: What is a Horror Film anyway? - Some random thoughts – May 2006

As 2006 rolls along horror films continue to do big business at the box office. It seems that the horror film revitalization which arguably began with the Wes Craven/Kevin Williamson collaboration **Scream** in late 1996 still shows no signs of slowing. For the past few months just about every weekend has seen the debut of a new fright flick, and upon checking the box office numbers the following Monday, more often than not each of these movies has sat atop the chart for opening weekend gross. Actually, horror movies have been especially strong since around the second half of 2005, and have continued to gain momentum into the New Year. And it doesn't seem to be limited to just one particular type of horror film either. Unlike in the years following the success of **Scream**, when self-referential horror films and movies centered on fresh-faced teen television stars were all the rage, more recent films have been a bit more diverse. For example, the first two entries in the incredibly popular **Saw** movie franchise have taken blood and gore to new extremes for mainstream releases, while the recently successful release **Hostel** added copious amounts of nudity and sex to the mix as well. On the other end of the spectrum, a movie I really liked was the remake of the 1970's classic **When A Stranger Calls**, which was definitely one of those films in the *less is more* category. Here we didn't get a look at the killer until the very end of the movie, after a long series of tense, foreboding and bloodless scenes. This film also did extremely well at the box office, suggesting that no one single approach to the genre is the only formula that can be effective.

Thinking about these various approaches leads me to the question of what exactly a "Horror Film" is anyway. The horror film genre is one that has such a plethora of categories and subcategories that it's really surprising so many diverse types of films could be grouped together under one inclusive label. * (Actually, that's probably one of the reasons the word "thriller" is often employed.) When I was younger I tended to think

of movies centering on monsters and the supernatural as being the primary type of film that fell under the horror category. This is probably because I grew up mainly on 80's Slasher Films when characters like Freddy Krueger, Jason Vorhees and other masked madmen ruled movie screens and VCR's throughout the nation. These films were often very extreme with their shocking images of blood, gore and severed body parts, and this combined with their not-quite-human monstrous killers helped cement the definition of what a horror film was. (These monsters in fact followed in a long tradition of screen monsters dating back to the early days of cinema when vampires, werewolves, mummies and other strange creatures stalked across movie screens.) However as I've watched more and more movies over the years I've come to see that the horror genre really encompasses many different styles and types of films. For example, a seminal moment came for the genre with the 1991 Oscar-Award Winning film ***The Silence of the Lambs***, which presented a very human monster in the form of Dr. Hannibal Lecter (played fabulously by Anthony Hopkins) doing very monstrous things. Another example of this type of human monster would be Annie Wilkes (played by Kathy Bates) from the Stephen King adaptation *Misery* (released a year before *The Silence of the Lambs*) which told the story of an obsessed fan torturing a helpless writer. Thus movies about human psychos and Serial Killers came to be added under my now expanded umbrella encompassing what a horror film could be.

Another type of movie that sometimes falls into the horror film category is the Exploitation film. This category of film usually centers on gratuitous nudity and sex scenes and is primarily voyeuristic in nature. While soft-core adult dramas like the ones aired on late-night pay cable are mainly drama-oriented, movies heavy on exploitation elements which contain some horrific moments often are called horror films. The so-called Scream Queen films come to mind here. Scream Queen Films generally feature women who scream while being chased and attacked by all forms of monster, human and otherwise. They also tend to be films in which the ladies in peril often wear little or nothing in terms of clothing, which is why they are also considered exploitation films. (In fact many actresses have built entire careers around this category of film.) Some movies straddle the line and lean equally between nudity, sex and on-screen carnage. For example the ***Friday the 13th*** sequels are notorious for an overabundance of gratuitous nudity and teen sex. In fact their plots have most often depended heavily on it. Going down the budgetary ladder, films such as ***The Slumber Party Massacre*** series would also fall into this category, with groups of lovely, scantily-clad young ladies getting together and providing tempting targets for the local psycho. On that note it's also worth mentioning that since the explosion in low-cost digital video equipment and the corresponding increase in no-budget and B-grade horror film productions, exploitation elements have played a big role in many productions. Today there are several independent production companies that successfully specialize in what could be called the sexploitation genre, often cloaked by the horror umbrella. This makes sense because nudity and sex scenes can be an easy hook for independent filmmakers to use in advertising and promotion, as well as an affordable way to compete with larger productions that often have budgets and star power on their side.

A final question I'll ask is how comedy fits under the horror film umbrella. ** Many films that are categorized as horror films are actually more funny than scary. For example, a movie like Peter Jackson's ***Dead Alive***, while being one of the goriest films I've ever seen, is really quite hysterical and rarely one that induces gasps of fear. It's a movie that is truly deserving of the title "Horror Comedy". For some films in fact this label is used, probably in part to attract fans who want something a bit lighter than a true "Horror Film".

Another good example of a “Horror Comedy” (and another one I liked) besides ***Dead Alive*** is the 1999 film ***Idle Hands***.

As the subtitle of this column aptly states, this month I’ve chosen to rattle off some random thoughts about what exactly a “Horror Film” is. I realize most of what I’ve been discussing won’t be any huge revelation to many fans. And some horror fans believe in a stricter definition of what a horror film should be, and therefore for them films leaning heavily on exploitation or comedy or some other element might not constitute a true horror film. This is understandable, and I too have often wondered if some films placed in the horror section of the video store belong there. However it has been interesting over the years watching these various styles of films and coming to realize how much diversity the horror genre now encompasses.

* As I’ve mentioned in past columns, the word “thriller” is one I’ve never been very fond of. This is because I don’t believe it really means anything, and only seems to serve the purpose of being another friendlier alternative to attract those who wouldn’t go see a “Horror Film”.

** Admittedly my own films have often gotten as many (and sometimes more) laughs as screams at public showings, which I’m always happy about because I figure it means the audience isn’t bored.