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 thoughts on Independent Filmmaking, Movie Criticism and Cinematic "Old" & "New" media – July 2007

The advent of the global internet and the World Wide Web has changed the way people communicate and made our world more interactive than ever before. This has had far-reaching implications on many facets of life, including the media, and in particular the entertainment industry. Traditional or "old" media, as it's sometimes called, has historically been more or less a one-way communication street. This means there have always been a relatively small number of producers of media (content producers), and a larger number of consumers of media (everybody else). However because of the online world and new digital technologies these lines are becoming more and more blurred as individuals who were once strictly consumers begin to produce their own content in many different forms, including video, music, and of course written commentary, feedback and criticism, of all varieties. Because of this new level of unhampered interactive communication, movie criticism, among other things, has become more prevalent than ever these days.

With websites such as The Internet Movie Database (IMDb), blogs, online message boards and opinion columns (like this one), people are commenting on and publicly discussing movies like never before. Of course this isn't to say that prior to the emergence of the online world movies weren't regularly discussed. Traditional media has always given movies (and the entertainment industry in general for that matter) ample coverage. Long before the first website appeared, local and national newspapers and magazines regularly ran reviews of the latest Hollywood blockbusters, while television shows like Siskel & Ebert focused on each week's new theatrical releases. These media outlets however generally didn't reach much beyond product produced by Hollywood or their "indie" divisions when it came to covering film, and they certainly didn't facilitate viewer feedback given the one-way nature of the mediums. Even today,

traditional media continues to focus primarily on Hollywood output along with selected high-profile independent offerings. This is understandable of course, because despite the emergence of independent digital filmmaking, studio films continue to dominate the industry to a large degree. * However as I've discussed at length in previous TFTM columns, independent digital movie makers have begun making a mark, and the democratization of filmmaking is something no longer just imagined. This all has great implications for the art of movie criticism, feedback and commentary.

A good starting point for a detailed discussion of movie criticism (or any kind of criticism for that matter) is to first define what it is. I believe a good definition of movie criticism is commentary about movies based, at least in part, on one's own personal likes and dislikes, and/or opinion on what something should or should not be. This definition is especially applicable because of the fact that filmmaking is an art form not easily quantified. For example, judges in film festivals and film competitions can give numerical scores on such aspects of a production as sound, lighting, pacing and the like, while a film as a whole is still very subjective in nature above and beyond these technical considerations. However technical aspects definitely do count, which begs the question of how much things like budgetary restraints and resources should factor into decisions and critical evaluations of films. This of course is especially relevant to the new independent digital filmmaking movement, which is often characterized by low to no-budgets and lots of hard work, dedication and creativity. I know from personal experience what goes into these types of productions, and how indie filmmakers are often just as dedicated to seeing their vision come to fruition as any Hollywood filmmaker. As mentioned previously, traditional media has generally not, until very recently, ventured much beyond Hollywood output in terms of coverage and criticism. However the advent of the online world has given rise to numerous specialty websites covering this new type of independent filmmaking. When it comes to horror films for example, there is currently a plethora of sites dedicated to the genre, many of which focus primarily on independent horror cinema. Another way to put this is that a new breed of critics has come forth to cover the emerging world of digital horror cinema. My DVD Horrors movie reviews appearing in this column often fall squarely in that category.

The online world truly has given more and more people the opportunity to have their voices heard. This is, in my opinion, an unequivocally positive development. However with such freedom comes responsibility. In focusing again on movie criticism, there is much to be taken into consideration. Traditional media movie criticism has generally not focused on lack of budgets and resources, or technical considerations, because Hollywood doesn't have such limitations. ** Conversely, some online movie critics who cover independent movie making have, to a degree, not focused on relative shortcomings in such areas, because this is often the realistic norm in many truly independent productions. This understanding by writers is good because it allows more focus to fall on the artistic side of cinema however. This is not to say that deficiencies in technical aspects should be ignored; on the contrary, technical considerations are always an important responsibility of filmmakers working under any conditions and budgets. In other words good sound, lighting, picture quality etc., need to always be present no matter what the budget. Happily, this fact is not being lost on more and more independent filmmakers, as evidenced by the ever-increasing number of impressive and polished productions being made day after day. With those conditions met the focus in independent movie criticism can fall squarely on artistic merit.

Artistic merit is of course very subjective in nature and hard to define. It also becomes an ever more complicated idea because of the always-increasing diversity and nature of films being produced by the studios and, more often by the new breed of independent digital filmmakers. For example in Hollywood a giant budget is often the norm, and with these budgets come incredible visuals, star power and thrilling cinematic moments. However with this norm also comes a baseline standard which dictates commentary and criticism be directed at things other than effects and flashy visuals. In other words, audiences and critics alike have come to accept these things as normal in studio films, and are often not impressed by them alone. Criticism can then fall on more important aspects such as plot, character and story, which is a good thing. At the same time this baseline standard can also create something of a mainstream mentality, which can be detrimental to lower-end studio movies, as well as indie films not having costly CGI (computer-generated imagery), star power and the like. I've seen many reviews of lower-end studio films that focused attention on the fact that a production didn't have recognizable names in it, and more often than not this was seen (by the reviewer) as a negative. Such a review is also more prone toward being a bashing piece, not really discussing the merits of the movie, but rather heaping overly harsh or unjustified criticism on actors, premise or the like. This also has the unfortunate additional side effect of suggesting that audiences should only prefer studio films with gigantic budgets and major star power. Personally I believe a good story should come far ahead of such considerations, and lack of big celebrity names should not be a damning thing. *** For example I can remember reading a review of the movie **Wes Craven's New Nightmare** in a major entertainment publication where the writer barely mentioned any specifics of the plot or story, but rather spent most of the review making sarcastic and/or negative commentary about such things as the "B-movie" actors in the picture and the fans who might be interested in watching them. I wondered if this writer even viewed the movie, or if perhaps he only skimmed through it, having decided in advance it wasn't worth much. Such unfounded negativity is also true of some online reviews I've read about independent digital horror films as well. Regardless of what type of production is being discussed however, this type of writing to me is really a wasted opportunity because it doesn't focus on the merits of a movie, but rather merely on negativity. **** When I write film reviews I always attempt to take into consideration the positive aspects of every production (although with some films that's difficult), even if I didn't like the film as a whole. It really bothers me when a movie is dismissed simply because of a lack of recognizable, or "A-list" names, and even more so when I sense a writer is simply eager to trash a film without any more justification than an "it sucks" attitude. Also, a lack of sophistication doesn't necessarily have to be a negative factor as it often is in many movie reviews. I believe many filmgoers (myself included) enjoy some movies simply for, or in spite of, their relative simplicity. For example the **Friday the 13th** movies could be called lowest common denominator filmmaking because they focus primarily on gory death scenes, sex scenes and nudity, etc. above all else, which may be exactly what some fans like about them. I don't believe every movie has to be intellectually stimulating and sophisticated every moment. If they did, then today's popular gross-out comedies wouldn't exist, and cinema would become overly serious drudgery to say the least. Films that are nothing more than fun and escapism definitely have a place alongside more serious pictures.

The ease of use of new media tools such as websites, blogs, online feedback forms, forums and the like has made it possible for anyone with a computer to become a critic. It has made possible alternative views to those of traditional critics, and as mentioned has initiated a new era of movie criticism, as well as many other types of media criticism.

The challenge for writers is to use the new opportunities presented to improve the craft of feedback and criticism, and contribute to the overall betterment of cinema as a whole.

* I previously discussed independent digital filmmaking and/or what I like to call "the democratization of filmmaking" in the October 2002, May 2005 and March 2007 Thoughts For The Month columns.

** I noted in my May 2005 TFTM column how I often prefer the term "underground" movie making to describe independent low/no-budget digital filmmaking, as opposed to movies produced by the indie divisions of major studios. My own movies of course fall squarely into the low/no-budget digital filmmaking category.

*** I should admit to being a bit biased in discussing **Wes Craven's New Nightmare**, because I'm a huge fan of the film. I believe it is one of the most engaging, sophisticated, and imaginative horror films ever made, and I was really taken aback by what I considered to be the unfairly dismissive review mentioned above. (Although overall the film did get some of the best reviews of any movie in the **Nightmare on Elm Street** series.)

**** For examples of reviews where I couldn't find much good in a film see the October 2004 (review of **Alien vs. Predator**), November 2005 (review of **The Fog 2005**) and February 2007 (review of **Black Christmas 2007**) TFTM columns.