

## 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 2006

January 2007

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 2006.

### **Horror:**

***The Descent*** - This movie is another in a string of extreme, cutting-edge horror offerings from popular Lions Gate Films. The story here is about a group of women who go on a caving expedition and find themselves trapped underground, pursued by bloodthirsty predatory creatures dwelling there. Intense and violent are the terms that best describe this film. The all-female cast do a good job with their roles and the creatures, while somewhat reminiscent of monsters in other films, still have their own unique look and mannerisms. The movie also manages to deliver a surprising psychological punch as well, as the fight for survival pushes the women to the edge. This was definitely one of the best extreme action/horror pictures I've seen in some time, and to those who missed the theatrical run I highly recommend checking it out on DVD.

***Final Destination 3*** - This third installment in the popular ***Final Destination*** horror film franchise is pretty much on par quality-wise with the first two. In the opening disaster scene (a trademark of the series) High School senior Wendy Christensen (Mary-Elizabeth Winstead) has a premonition of death after boarding a carnival roller coaster ride. She then becomes hysterical and her and some friends are let off before the ride begins. The roller coaster then crashes, violently killing the students still on board just like in her vision. As in the other installments Death refuses to let the survivors go and the remaining kids are knocked off one by one as Wendy and fellow classmate Kevin (Ryan Merriman) race against time to figure out a way to avoid their own grisly fates. The two lead characters here are well written and the actors do a good job portraying

both their resourcefulness and vulnerability. As in previous installments there are some grisly and inventive demises which are sure to please the horror crowd, while at the same time this third chapter also adds some b-movie style nudity to the mix in a scene reminiscent of the beginning of the campy 1980's slasher film **Killer Workout**. Overall **Final Destination 3** is fast-paced fun and delivers the thrills one might expect from talented **X-Files** veterans Glen Morgan and James Wong.

**The Hills Have Eyes (2006)** - I really liked this remake of the classic Wes Craven film from 1977. Here a suburban family is traveling through the great American Southwest when their car breaks down. They soon realize simple mechanical problems may not be to blame and find themselves surrounded by vicious mutants living in the nearby hills. Isolated and alone these average suburbanites must band together and fight for their very survival against the now bloodthirsty remnants of an old mining town long since devastated by the effects of government radiation testing. The film overall is brutal and disturbing just like its predecessor, with the chemically mutated townspeople substituting for the original film's inbred clan. However like in the original this violence is part of a believable story with well-defined characters. The Carter family is portrayed as a decent middle class family, but one that is not without its faults. They are not action heroes, which makes empathizing with their plight much easier. The mutants also, despite their physical grotesqueness and savagery, can be seen as victims in the fact that the government tried to force them to leave their home in the name of technological warfare. Overall this movie is fast-paced, compelling and eerily realistic, and is a good example of successfully updating and expanding upon a solid original. I highly recommend this remake.

**Silent Hill** - Now here's a movie I never expected to be putting on a "Best Of" list. The main reason I say this is because first of all I haven't really been interested in video games since the heydays of Atari, and secondly because most of the video game-based films I've seen haven't been very good. So going into **Silent Hill** I was expecting more of the same CGI-dominated mediocrity. However while this film does make liberal use of CGI, it is anything but mediocre. The complex narrative tells the story of Rose Da Silva and her disturbed daughter Sharon. It seems young Sharon is having sleepwalking nightmares where she keeps mentioning the name Silent Hill. Despite the protests of her husband Rose believes the way to help her daughter is to bring her to this town, which turns out to be a place long abandoned after underground fires forced the residents to evacuate thirty years earlier. In her rush to get there Rose is pursued by a motorcycle cop and winds up crashing her car. When she wakes up Sharon has disappeared and Rose heads to **Silent Hill** to find her. What follows can best be described as a hallucinogenic nightmare through which Sharon must skillfully maneuver to defeat the evil darkness that engulfs the ghostly town and save her daughter. The town proves to have two realities as the harsh wail of an emergency alert siren signals the emergence of the dark forces, and this same wail also signals the temporary retreat of these forces. The creatures themselves are difficult to describe, and are part of a larger religious battle taking place within the town. This film also features such nastiness as a lynch-mob inspired burning, as well as a scene that could've come right out of one of the **Hellraiser** films. Overall however the movie works not so much because of an overabundance of graphic violence, gore or flashy visuals, but rather because it features an intriguing, multi-faceted storyline which isn't easily forgotten. This one should keep people talking long after the lights go up.

**Snakes on a Plane** - To see why I liked this occasionally campy horror comedy so much see the September 2006 TFTM column.

**Underworld: Evolution** - This sequel continues the story of the battle between Vampires and Lycans (werewolves) introduced in 2003's **Underworld** (see my October 2003 TFTM column). Here we are taken back to the origins of the war between the two species while beautiful vampire heroine Selene (Kate Beckinsale) and lycan hybrid Michael (Scott Speedman) must work to uncover the secrets of their bloodlines and fight to stop the destructive ambitions of Marcus, the last remaining elder vampire. The second film in this series is more grand and epic in scale than its predecessor, with the drama and action taken to a higher level. The story is inventive and interesting, and as a big fan of the original **Underworld** I was very pleased with this second entry. One can only wonder if a third exciting chapter is waiting in the wings.

#### **Non-Horror:**

**Clerks 2** - This film is a sequel to the 1994 independent sensation **Clerks** from writer-director Kevin Smith. The movie picks up the story of Dante and Randal ten years later as the two convenience store clerks, now in their 30's, must seek new employment when a fire destroys the building. They find jobs at fictional fast food establishment Mooby's when they begin to slowly realize it's about time to look toward brighter horizons. Like in the original **Clerks** the duo banter about life, sex and pop culture in rude and often hysterical ways while working and under-serving customers. Dante must also struggle with the serious choice of whether or not he is ready to move away and settle down with his wealthy and overbearing fiancé (and in doing so leave behind his friendship with Randal). Lead actors Brian O'Halloran and Jeff Anderson are as effective together as they were back in 1994 as straight man Dante Hicks and his abrasive buddy Randal Graves, respectively. The talented Rosario Dawson is also on board this time around as Dante's manager Becky, and the movie is rounded out by the essential presence of Jay and Silent Bob (Jason Mewes and director Smith himself). Standout sequences include Randal harassing a **Lord of the Rings** movie fanatic, and a scene reminiscent of the famous stag party in the Tom Hanks 80's classic **Bachelor Party**. For those who like abrasive, crude humor and for anyone who liked the first movie this one is a must-see.

**Firewall** - In this taut thriller Harrison Ford plays a security executive named Jack Stanfield who is in charge of computer security for a bank. He is also a caring family man, and when he is blackmailed to the tune of 100 million dollars of bank funds and his loved ones held for ransom he decides to fight back. While this plot isn't that extraordinary, the ever-reliable Harrison Ford makes this movie worth watching. The supporting cast is also very good, including Paul Bettany as ruthless blackmailer Bill Cox, Virginia Madsen as Jack's wife, and Robert Patrick and Robert Forster in smaller roles. Also, the ending fight scene between Jack and Bill Cox is well-staged and convincing. This is partly due to the presence of Harrison Ford, who has the ability to bring empathy and believability to even the most unlikely of stories, characters and plot devices. For those who missed it in theaters this one is definitely worth a rental.

**Scary Movie 4** - The fourth film in this outrageous movie franchise continues to follow the exploits of mostly clueless Cindy Campbell (Anna Faris), as she stumbles into more danger and excitement. Here the basic plot of the Tom Cruise blockbuster **War of the Worlds** is followed as Cindy must figure out a way to stop an alien invasion. In the

process horror movies like **Saw**, **The Village** and **The Grudge** are spoofed along with real-life media events. The one-liners mostly work in this installment and supporting players like Leslie Neilson as The President, and cameos by the likes of Dr. Phil and Shaquille O'Neil as themselves, are hysterical. Other recognizable faces include Bill Pullman, Carmen Electra and Chris Elliot, to name but a few. **Scary Movie 4** is highly entertaining fun.

**Superman Returns** - While nobody could ever really replace the late Christopher Reeve as the heroic "Man of Steel" in the **Superman** movies, it did seem about time for a restarting of the series. Here Brandon Routh takes over the roll as the caped hero in a story that sees Superman travel to his home planet of Krypton and return to Earth five years later to find a world that has changed dramatically. Many have called the film a Christian parable because the story depicts the residents of Earth having lost faith in Superman as their savior. At the same time he must battle an ever-determined Lex Luthor (Kevin Spacey) who is plotting to use crystals from Krypton to create a new land mass which will eventually submerge all others. However the real crux of the story deals with Superman and his relation to ex-love Lois Lane (Kate Bosworth), who now has a new man in her life and a child as well. This drama involving Superman, Clark Kent (his alter-ego), Lois and Richard White (James Marsden) seemed to me to be slightly more dominant in the film than the action-oriented elements, while not overwhelming it. In these scenes we get a sense of Superman's isolation and loneliness in being the last of a race, and in having to grapple with his place in the world of mortal man. At the same time the grandiose and spectacle are not lost and the viewer is treated to some of the most stunning visuals ever seen in a **Superman** movie. With an excellent cast, solid story and skillful direction from Bryan Singer, this **Superman** movie presents a welcome return for a beloved comic book hero.