

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: A look at the evolution of Underground Digital Cinema - A discussion of some of my experiences, insights and perspectives - Part 2 – November 2007
(Note: See the October 2007 TFTM for Part 1 of this continuing column.)

* Since my first film convention visit in 1995 I've now attended well over a dozen more shows. For several years I went to *The Fangoria Weekend of Horrors* convention in New York City (usually in January), and then years later friends introduced me to the other big (rival) convention called *The Chiller Theater Toy, Model & Film Expo* (or *Chiller Theater* for short), which has traditionally been held in New Jersey. (New Jersey is actually, from what I've observed, a key center for Underground Digital Horror Filmmaking - more on that later). And as I mentioned in Part 1 of the column, the second big highlight of these shows (the first being the celebrity guests) is the vendor rooms. In these rooms sellers have almost everything horror film-related available for purchase, including video tapes and DVD's, film soundtracks, horror film t-shirts, horror film trading cards, posters, magazines, and almost anything else film and horror film-related one can imagine. ** Much of this material consists of Hollywood movies and merchandise related to Hollywood movies, however there is also a good amount of indie film merchandise one can buy, and it is this that I will primarily focus on in my discussion.

I believe the first truly underground horror movie that I ever watched was the 1995 shot-on-video title *Psycho Sisters*. I bought a copy of *Psycho Sisters* after posing for a picture with the beautiful lead actresses of the movie in the vendor room at the aforementioned 1995 *Fangoria Weekend of Horrors* convention in New York City. (Filmmakers, producers and actors running their own sale tables and taking photos with fans was a phenomenon I hadn't heard of until then.) Viewing this movie was what I'd call a shock to the system for me at that time, because even though I'd seen some extreme horror films, such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13th*, I'd never

before seen a gritty, home-made looking shot-on-video movie of this nature. And for this reason alone I think the production is worth a bit of discussion here.

*** The video version of ***Psycho Sisters*** was released in 1995, which was just before the whole digital video revolution (discussed in Part 1 of this column) began to swing into high gear. So I think it was unique in the fact that there weren't that many underground indie films of this nature around yet, or at least not that many known to the general mainstream movie-going public. The plot of the movie is centered on three loving sisters living in a house in a rural-looking area. Soon after we meet the lovely ladies the movie turns grim as the doorbell rings and in burst a gang of thugs who tie up and attempt to rape them. Dark-haired Janice Sicole (Tina Krause) puts up a fight and is strangled and killed, while her two blond-haired sisters - Jackie and Jane (Pamela Sutch and Christine Taylor) - manage to escape despite having been stripped down to their underwear and having had their hands tied behind their backs. Years after the tragic incident the girls are escorted out the doors of a psychiatric hospital - presumably cured of their emotional problems - by a caring doctor. Moments after he leaves them they turn toward the camera and their placid smiles disappear, indicating trouble is looming on the horizon. Throughout the rest of the movie the disturbed women proceed to go on a revenge killing spree against every male they encounter, hence the title of the film. Hapless male victims are lured to their deaths in many different scenarios, including an unfortunate jogger who is chloroformed, and a guy who delivers pizza to the ladies' house by mistake. The climax of the movie comes at the very end, when the vengeful women once again come face to face with the male intruders who killed their sister Janice.

Psycho Sisters was made by W.A.V.E. Productions, a New Jersey-based company specializing in low-budget horror and exploitation movies. It was released by El Cinema (now called POP Cinema), another New Jersey independent film company also producing exploitation movies. **** Ironically enough, this particular movie is what might be called a reverse exploitation film, in that (with the exception of the strangled sister at the beginning) it mainly consists of guys being captured, stripped and killed by women. ***** It might also be described as a rape-revenge movie in the tradition of such films as ***The Last House on the Left, I Spit on Your Grave***, and the 1981 film ***Ms. 45***. (These films all have some similar elements. In ***The Last House on the Left*** and ***I Spit on Your Grave*** there are similar types of revenge-mutilation scenes, and Abel Ferrara's ***Ms. 45*** features a woman who goes on a revenge killing spree against males in general). The movie also features many staples of underground indie horror filmmaking, including the use of simple, basic locations: mainly a few rooms in a house (including an exterior shot) and scenes out in the woods/fields, along with some driving shots and a scene at a local bar. It also includes other elements often found in underground horror movie productions including chloroforming, a plethora of strangulation scenes, and pounding heavy metal music (that sometimes drowns out the dialog), which for whatever reason tend to be commonplace in this subgenre.

The above elements are complimented by the acting performances, which enhance the impact of the violent scenes. As I said, the first time I watched ***Psycho Sisters*** it was quite a shock because the production was so unlike any movie I had seen previously. It was akin to watching a violent home video, and the performances by leads Pamela Sutch and Christine Taylor were akin to watching people in such a home video.

***** Actually, on my first viewing of the movie all those years ago I initially couldn't decide if I found the performances to be way too believable or campy and stilted. There seemed to be moments of each. On a recent repeat viewing I found the film more

believable on this level, especially with Pamela Sutch's character, as she goes back and forth between her sweet, caring sister of old (before Janice's death) and cold-blooded killer. On the other hand some scenes, such as one where the women easily overpower and capture several guys at once, aren't entirely believable. Along these lines it should be noted that the movie also has some humor sprinkled throughout, such as a scene where the women are watching their doctor on television and he attributes the killings to a gay male, leading the ladies to be disgusted because the police are searching for some psycho guy instead of their sister's killer (apparently not realizing the doctor is talking about their killings).

Regardless of how believable ***Psycho Sisters*** ultimately is, I suspect a majority of film fans have still today not seen this kind of raw, underground cinema. I also believe ***Psycho Sisters*** was sort of a prototype for a whole slew of underground horror films that have come out of New Jersey (as well as some other places) from a handful of companies since then - such as W.A.V.E. Productions and EI Cinema in particular. Also, some of the actresses in the film - particularly Tina Krause and Pamela Sutch - would go on to become key players in the whole New Jersey underground horror movie scene. It is these things... and more... which I'll begin to discuss in Part 3 of this continuing column.

* I've previously written quite a bit about *The Fangoria Weekend of Horrors* convention, and *The Chiller Theater Toy, Model & Film Expo* (or *Chiller Theater* for short). See the February 2004 and October 2005 Thoughts For The Month columns for discussions of a couple of my *Weekend of Horrors* convention visits (for those years), and the March 2003 TFTM column for a general discussion about *Fangoria* magazine. See the May 2003 TFTM column for a discussion about *The Chiller Theater Toy, Model & Film Expo*, and the June 2006 column for a discussion of my visit to *The Chiller Theater* show that year.

** The term "indie" is often used interchangeably with the term "independent", referring to independent filmmaking, or the independent filmmaking scene.

*** I point out that I'm discussing the 1995 video version of ***Psycho Sisters*** because the movie was remade a few years later on film with different actors by the same director (Pete Jacelone).

**** Director Pete Jacelone has a short commentary at the end of the video where he talks about this, and about how W.A.V.E. Productions usually makes exploitation movies. He also talks about the origins of the movie and the original casting choices. Here we get to see clips from the original (first) version of ***Psycho Sisters***, which I found quite comical, in that it's basically two young women fighting and wrestling with a guy in what appears to be a barn. It actually looks somewhat like a mixed wrestling or backyard wrestling video, like the type seen on YouTube and other video sharing services, and sold today by several companies on the internet. [For the uninitiated, mixed wrestling is another underground video phenomenon that has become increasingly popular nowadays, primarily on the internet. Mixed wrestling refers to women wrestling men, and several companies specialize in producing these videos and DVD's, as well as videos of women wrestling other women (often called female wrestling). Mixed and female wrestling videos are often set in a variety of ordinary-looking locations, such as in apartments (usually called apartment wrestling), or just in a room on gym mats, and have many common characteristics depending on what the emphasis of the video or production company is. (Some mixed and female wrestling videos are also set in

wrestling rings as well). The videos can be scripted - usually in favor of the woman - or not, and are sometimes advertised as focusing on athleticism and sometimes on exploitation - thong bikinis, nudity, etc. Actually, these underground wrestling videos (to use a more broadly descriptive term) have some relation to this continuing column in that like underground digital movies, they are produced using (now mostly digital) video equipment. To use a parallel comparison, underground digital movies are to Hollywood movies what underground wrestling videos are to the lavishly-produced wrestling seen on cable and national network television.]

**** The rape-revenge film is a type of horror film discussed in Professor Carol J. Clover's groundbreaking 1993 book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. And movies like *I Spit on Your Grave* and *Ms. 45* are just a few (extreme) examples of this type of movie in which a woman takes revenge against her (usually male) attackers. (In *The Last House on the Left* it's the parents of a teenage girl who take violent revenge against a gang of killers).

***** One of the most disturbingly believable performances I've ever seen is David Hess starring as Krug, the ringleader of a gang of killers, in the 1972 Wes Craven-Sean S. Cunningham film *The Last House on the Left*.