

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: DVD Horrors Movie Review: ***Going To Pieces: The Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film*** – April 2007

Note: DVD Horrors is a Thoughts For The Month topic focusing on horror films made for the DVD and home video markets, and horror films that have been successful primarily upon release to DVD and video. The majority of the movies I review under this topic heading are low/no budget, non-Hollywood independent films, or foreign titles that don't see theatrical release here in the USA. The first DVD Horrors TFTM column was a review of ***Day of the Dead 2: Contagium*** in December, 2005. Prior to that I reviewed the following independent horror films: ***Slashers*** (in the November 2002 TFTM column) and ***Beyond Re-Animator*** (in the March 2004 TFTM column). I also reviewed the independent short film comedy ***More Than Friends*** in the December 2004 TFTM column.

Do you remember exactly how many camp counselors and staff were killed in the slasher film classic ***Friday the 13th***? How about what horror film Zsa Zsa Gabor (briefly) appeared in? Or what female director helmed ***The Slumber Party Massacre***? While a search through The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) would most likely yield these answers, one could also choose to watch the new documentary ***Going to Pieces: The Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film***. The preceding questions are some of the easier ones included in the trivia question section of this exciting new production. Now let's take a more in-depth look at what this documentary covers.

Going to Pieces: The Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film focuses exclusively (as the name implies) on that sometimes loved, but often maligned, horror film subgenre of the slasher film which came to prominence in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Beginning with a brief discussion of the two very different seminal 1960's horror classics ***Peeping Tom*** and ***Psycho***, from directors Michael Powell and Alfred Hitchcock, respectively, it

then moves into the (bloody) heart of the matter starting with 1978's **Halloween**. The documentary looks at the success of John Carpenter's most famous film, before proceeding to focus on other known, and not so known, films that followed it. Some recognizable slasher film titles discussed are **Friday the 13th**, **My Bloody Valentine**, **Prom Night**, **A Nightmare on Elm Street** and **Scream**. Clips from lesser-known movies like **Black Christmas** (the original version), **Graduation Day**, **Happy Birthday to Me**, and **Alice Sweet Alice** are also included. The evolution, successes and impact of this varied group of films (and many more) are comprehensively discussed and analyzed, with the diversity of viewpoints presented being nothing short of impressive. ***Going to Pieces** includes interviews from some of the top names in the horror film field including directors John Carpenter, Wes Craven, Sean Cunningham, Rob Zombie and **Slumber Party Massacre** director Amy Holden Jones, as well as actors like Betsy Palmer and **Sleepaway Camp** star Felissa Rose. Others providing commentary include New Line Cinema CEO Robert Shaye, Fangoria Magazine longtime editor Tony Timpone, and special effects wizard Tom Savini. As noted, the documentary basically proceeds along a timeline from the late 1970's, through the slasher film golden years of the early to mid 1980's, to the sub-genre's decreasing popularity in the early 1990's, and finally to its resurgence (triggered by Wes Craven's **Scream**) in the late 1990's. Throughout this journey slasher film fans are treated to a plethora of facts, figures, reminiscences and incredibly interesting points of discussion.

The first thing I especially liked about this documentary was the in-depth coverage, behind-the-scenes revelations, and contrast and comparison offered with regards to certain films. For example early on there is detailed discussion on **Halloween**, and how it was such a minimalist movie in terms of the small amount of onscreen carnage (blood and gore effects) employed. This seamlessly leads into discussion about **Friday the 13th**, a film that knowingly followed **Halloween** and was as opposite in approach as one could imagine. Here director Sean Cunningham offers some great revelations, and his insights combined with those of John Carpenter paint a picture of how the two films relate to one another. Mr. Cunningham further discusses the challenges faced with promotion and distribution, as well as the overall success of the movie. These interesting aspects are also discussed by others, including **Prom Night** director Paul Lynch, who relates how his film received more limited distribution than **Friday the 13th** but still found an audience. Coverage of **A Nightmare on Elm Street** is equally enlightening, as Robert Shaye and Wes Craven discuss shopping around the original script, financial difficulties in making the movie and more.

Another interesting part of **Going to Pieces** is the discussion about holiday-themed slasher films. While I've always realized how the use of holiday themes has been a major staple of this subgenre for a long time now, I was amazed at the breath of coverage on this subject. I also realized that while I consider myself quite knowledgeable with regards to slasher films, there were many titles either discussed or shown (with mostly quick clips) that are largely unfamiliar to me. While **Halloween** no doubt was the template, the early 80's also saw the release of a slew of other movies (besides **Friday the 13th**) such as **Happy Birthday to Me** and the often maligned **April Fools Day**, to name a couple. ** Additionally, some school-themed titles I found myself scratching my head at were **Graduation Day** and **Final Exam**. These are also the types of titles offered as possible answers in the Advanced Category of the trivia questions. Might I suggest to even knowledgeable horror fans to watch the documentary first before jumping right into the (incredibly fun) trivia?

Going to Pieces: The Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film also proves to be comprehensive in covering the socioeconomic and societal aspects of these films. In other words, there is quite a bit of discussion about the time periods these movies were made during, and the reactions they garnered from both fans and critics alike. One thing I really found to be compelling was how newspaper and television clips were utilized to frame the time periods. For example clips and discussion spotlighted the Ronald Reagan years, while several segments from the Siskel & Ebert television program were used to show a rather angry Gene Siskel leveling scathing criticism toward these films for their (proposed) portrayal and disempowerment of female characters. One story I found particularly interesting was how certain individuals and groups attempted (and to some extent succeeded) getting the holiday-themed movie ***Silent Night, Deadly Night*** pulled from theaters. Some of this I remembered and some of this I didn't, and it really helped to paint a picture of how this horror film subgenre has seemingly always been under attack by somebody somewhere.

*** Some other interesting topics discussed in ***Going to Pieces*** are television actresses (such as Melissa Sue Anderson, Courtney Cox, Sarah Michelle Gellar and Jessica Biel) making a splash in slasher films, the evolution of makeup and blood/gore effects, and the idea of the "Final Girl" and empowerment of women/sexually frustrated male killer themes present in the subgenre. **** There is also some discussion towards the end of the documentary about horror film fans and horror film conventions (such as Fangoria's Weekend of Horrors). Here people like Felissa Rose and Rob Zombie offer some particularly insightful and pointed comments.

Overall this documentary is a fascinating and comprehensive look at an often misunderstood class of horror films. It far surpasses previous efforts like the more mainstream-oriented ***Boogeymen***, and is in fact I believe aimed primarily at hardcore fans. Having said this it should be noted that the material included is definitely not for the easily offended, as it features some of the most graphic clips from these films (in other words clips with blood, gore, sex, nudity, etc.). While slasher film fans will no doubt appreciate seeing the "money shots" from some of these movies, those who dislike the genre and all it (supposedly) stands for will probably not be swayed from their opinions. Guided along by insightful interviews, commentary, revealing insights and trivia, ***Going to Pieces: The Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film*** is a must-see for fans of slasher films as well as for any non-fans daring enough to venture deeper into this particular horror film subgenre. I highly recommend it.

* While watching the interviews in this documentary I couldn't help but reflect on how many of these horror film luminaries I've been fortunate enough to meet at conventions, festivals and such over the years. I've spoken to many of them at places like The Fangoria Weekend of Horrors convention and the Chiller Theatre Toy, Model and Film Expo. And last November I was one of the hosts of The New York State Museum 2nd Annual Classic Horror Film Festival, where we had as our special guest actress Betsy Palmer (Mrs. Voorhees in the original ***Friday the 13th***).

** My friend and I have, for some time now, been on a quest to locate and watch some of the more obscure slasher films from the early 1980's which we haven't yet seen. Watching ***Going to Pieces*** added several titles to our list and definitely has me re-energized to continue visiting the (increasingly rare) VHS video sections of our local stores in hopes of stumbling on some of these hidden chestnuts.

*** I first encountered the term “Final Girl” in the 1992 book *Men, Women & Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* by Carol J. Clover. The Final Girl is the female survivor or heroine in a slasher film. *Men, Women & Chainsaws* has chapters on the slasher, occult, and rape-revenge horror film subgenres, and features some fascinating and enlightening discussion of each.

**** As the documentary mentions, horror film conventions became especially prominent in the mid 1990's. I can remember attending my first Fangoria Weekend of Horrors convention in New York City back in the summer of 1995 and seeing people like **A Nightmare on Elms Street** actress Heather Langenkamp and director Wes Craven, to name but a few. At this same convention I also met actresses Christine Taylor, Tina Krause and (Wave Films regular) Pamela Sutch, who were there promoting the movie **Psycho Sisters** (the video version). Even though I always considered myself to be something of a rebel film-wise because of the fact that I read Fangoria magazine and enjoyed slasher movies like **A Nightmare on Elm Street** and **Friday the 13th**, I was blissfully unaware (at that time) that wicked independent horror films like **Psycho Sisters** existed. Viewing **Psycho Sisters** (purchased at the show) really was a shock to the system to say the least. Back then the whole independent digital filmmaking boom hadn't yet gone into full swing, primarily because of the fact that low-cost digital video was not widely available (or known) to everyone. And to my knowledge companies like E.I. Cinema (the distributor of **Psycho Sisters**) hadn't yet achieved wide distribution at major retail chains.