

## 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 2007

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For my first Thoughts For The Month column of the New Year I'd like to discuss some of the movies I enjoyed in the previous year. Below is my "Best Movies of 2007" list. Enjoy!

### **HORROR:**

***Blood and Chocolate*** - This werewolf movie was a pleasant surprise in the PG-13 teen horror category for 2007. It's a rather simple story really, about young Vivian (Agnes Bruckner), who is a werewolf and falls in love with a handsome human named Aiden (Hugh Dancy) in spite of her species efforts to stop them from being together. The movie is set in modern-day Bucharest, and at the outset we are shown scenes of hip underground clubs where young people hang out and drink. This first made me think ***Blood and Chocolate*** was going to be a film with a lot of trendy teens with accents who happened to be werewolves; however the movie quickly morphs into a more traditional love story mixed with elements of classic werewolf films. For example, one of these elements is the fact that silver is still deadly to the werewolves, while conversely the idea of the moon controlling their changing cycles is jettisoned. This balance of old and new ideas served the movie well.

Another big strength of ***Blood and Chocolate*** were the effects. I liked it that the special effects in this movie were not overdone, and were in fact almost downplayed. While others have criticized the fact that elaborate makeup and transformation effects were not employed, I found myself appreciating the simple white light effect as the werewolves changed at will from human form to that of a real wolf. Certainly this keeps the movie out of the league of such groundbreaking werewolf transformation films as ***An American Werewolf In London*** and ***The Howling***, however here effects aren't the point because the story is primarily about the two young lovers, their relationship, and their relationship

to the pack. This dynamic continually kept my interest and gave the movie a sort of violent soap opera feel which was easy to relate to. At the same time there were plenty of tense moments and enough graphic werewolf scenes to satisfy the horror/suspense component in the picture. And it was interesting to note that ***Blood and Chocolate*** didn't present the standard black and white, good vs. evil tale one might expect because the pack leader and werewolves trying to keep Vivian from her human lover were not portrayed as all bad. I could relate to them at least somewhat, which for me added to the overall appeal of the story.

I'd also like to note that this movie was based on a popular teen novel by Annette Curtis Klause, and writers and readers alike have leveled criticism over the fact that a lot was changed for the cinematic adaptation. Having not read the book, or heard of it before seeing the movie, I can't address this. However from the point of view of the uninitiated (so to speak), I can say that ***Blood and Chocolate*** is a movie that presents a compelling little tale in a highly stylized way, and is perhaps a sleeper film that could appeal to both hopeless romantics and horror fans alike.

***Bug*** - In perhaps one of the weirdest movies I've seen in quite some time, Hollywood A-lister Ashley Judd stars alongside Michael Shannon and crooner Harry Connick, Jr., under the direction of the legendary William Friedkin (who helmed ***The Exorcist***). First let me say this movie could just as easily be put under the categories drama or suspense as it could horror, because it doesn't really conform to any one particular genre. The movie is based on an Off-Broadway play with the story centering on Agnes (Ashley Judd), a waitress living in a rundown apartment in Oklahoma, who is struggling to free herself once and for all from the hold of her abusive convict ex-husband Jerry (Harry Connick, Jr), just released from prison. She's also still grieving over the disappearance of her son Lloyd some ten years ago. She dulls her emotional pain with drinking and drugs and is needless to say a very troubled woman. Agnes' life takes a turn for the bizarre when her lesbian friend R.C. (Lynn Collins) introduces her to mysterious loner Peter Evans (Michael Shannon). At first cautious and suspicious of Peter, she slowly begins to be attracted to him and the two share a night of passion, after which Agnes invites him to stay with her. From here on in we gradually learn that while he seems initially just a bit odd and softspoken, Peter is really a full-blown paranoid schizophrenic who was a soldier in the Gulf War. He claims he was subjected to terrible scientific experiments and that the government is now after him. He also believes his body is infested with... you guessed it... bugs.

This movie started out going in one direction, than abruptly took a turn for the weird, before going completely off-kilter towards the final act. The story of down-on-her-luck Agnes is compelling drama in and of itself, especially with the talented Ashley Judd essaying the role. Her situation with her ex-husband is bleak to say the least, and I thought perhaps the story would have Agnes find refuge of sorts in a lesbian relationship with R.C., based on the way the two seemed to relate to one another in early scenes. However lesbian sex scenes aren't the business of this movie as R.C. proves to be a peripheral character, and Peter Evans takes center stage and slowly takes over Agnes' world. At heart ***Bug*** is the story of a lonely woman longing to have companionship and love in her life. Because of this intense need she slowly begins to bond with and believe in Peter as he unravels his strange conspiracy tales and rants and raves about things perhaps real or imagined. In fact one of the highlights of this picture is the intense and incredibly believable monologues given by Michael Shannon as the viewer is drawn into his world along with Agnes and made to wonder if there really is anything to what he is

saying. And Ashley Judd paints an incredibly compelling portrait of a woman increasingly willing to believe and do anything to fill the huge emotional void in her life.

As mentioned above, **Bug** could fall under any label, and in fact the unbelievable climax makes it almost undefinable. Fans looking for a straightforward horror film may be disappointed, although there are definitely a lot of bloody, visceral moments in the film, most involving Peter's (and later Agnes') attempts to remove the bugs from their bodies. This really is a character piece from start to finish, although from theatrical previews it appeared more like a monster movie or creature feature. For mainstream viewers expecting a straightforward drama there will probably be bewilderment, for this is in no way, shape or form a mainstream movie (despite the star power of Ashley Judd and Harry Connick, Jr.). It's also worth noting that the movie presents a good amount of nude flesh, however probably not enough to satisfy fans looking for a spicy exploitation romp. (Even though it has been reported the movie featured a body double in the nude sex scenes, the plot becomes so crazy and twisted towards the end that I can only guess Ashley Judd must have really wanted to work with William Friedkin or really liked the original source material). However despite the fact that **Bug** probably won't satisfy fans of the horror genre, and is admittedly talky to say the least, it's still presents the most unforgettable 100 minutes or so I've seen on the big screen in quite some time.

***The Hitcher (2007)*** - The original version of ***The Hitcher*** is an 80's horror chesnut that probably greatly contributed to the decline of the practice of hitchhiking that was so prevalent in decades prior. The film could also be classified as a violent road movie which starred C. Thomas Howell as Jim Halsey, a young man transporting a car across country who has the extreme misfortune of choosing to pick up psychotic serial killer John Ryder (Rutger Hauer). In fact, Ryder turns out not only to be a cunning, sadistic and extremely persistent killer, he also displays seemingly supernatural strength by being almost unkillable himself. A young Jennifer Jason Leigh also appears in the film as a waitress who tries to help Halsey.

In the remake Sean Bean takes over as John Ryder and proves to be just as menacing in the role as Hauer was, albeit in his own distinct manner. Here he stalks Jim Halsey and his girlfriend Grace (Zachary Knighton and Sophia Bush), and manages to create chaos and leave a trail of bloody bodies in his wake while tormenting the young people. Although I'm generally not a fan of remakes and always brace myself when I hear one is coming out for a movie I liked, this film turned out to be a fairly solid outing. The creepy and terrifying thing about both this film and the original is that it's never really clear who John Ryder is, where he came from, and why he does what he does. The obvious guess in both versions is that he is simply a mad killer who enjoys murder. In fact in the original version Hauer injects a slight touch of sly humor as he goes about his grisly business, which may indicate that the obvious guess is correct. However in this new version it seems John Ryder is more bent, for reasons still unexplained, on finding someone who can kill him. He is much more downbeat and seems suicidal at times, although in a matter-of-fact kind of way. So he pushes Grace to the breaking point in order to force her to either die or become an avenging angel (of sorts). This could be interpreted as the new version having a slightly more focused direction than it's predecessor, which was a bit more surreal in nature while still being extremely disturbing.

In ***The Hitcher (2007)*** both the action and the violence were cranked up, the pace was quickened, and the acting was solid throughout. The bottom line for me was that this remake was an entertaining road movie/horror film that stood nicely on it's own, while

not necessarily improving on its predecessor. An in this era of lousy and/or unnecessary horror film remakes, that's not too bad.

**P2** - This very accomplished little film is basically a two-character piece which shows us one long and excruciating evening in the life of a businesswoman named Angela Bridges (Rachel Nichols) who is working late on Christmas Eve and gets trapped in the parking garage of her building (hence the title **P2**). Everyone has gone home for the holiday, just as she should be, except for a lone parking lot security guard named Thomas (Wes Bentley) who offers to help her out. Unfortunately he proves to be unstable and psychotic, and before Angela knows it she is tied up in his office sitting in front of a table full of food to share Christmas dinner with him. It turns out Thomas is incredibly lonely and wants Angela all to himself, much to her dismay. From then on the movie turns into a game of cat and mouse as Angela tries desperately to escape from him and the locked building. Along the way Thomas shows just how far he will go to have her, and eliminate any competition for her affections, by leaving some bloody bodies in his wake.

Although this situation may sound a bit derivative in terms of horror and suspense film conventions, in **P2** it's also very believable and well-acted. The premise is well within the bounds of plausibility, and the two leads do an admirable job making us care about them and their plight. Angela seems like a likable enough woman, other than perhaps having the flaw of being something of a workaholic, and when she is held against her will she elicits sympathy. She also proves to be courageous and really tries to stand up to the guy despite still being visibly terrified throughout the ordeal. (And it might be worth noting that in true horror/exploitation film fashion Angela proves to be a real feast for the eyes after Thomas redresses her for dinner in a dress which shows off her ample cleavage - seems the boy definitely knows how he wants his ideal woman to look). However the real draw here is how Wes Bentley gives us a character that can be identified with to some degree even if we are rooting for Angela to escape from him or perhaps kill him. This is because he's not a garden variety psycho who just kills for no reason or because he's crazy, and he's not a faceless killer in a mask either. While those types of slashers films can make for some good entertainment and certainly have their moments, that is not the story here. In **P2** we meet someone who's a lonely man inwardly bitter at the fact that he doesn't have anyone in his life. And he is trying to rectify that situation at all costs.

While there's no arguing we've seen this type of plot many times before, this particular example is so well-crafted it doesn't matter. The story and acting are solid, and overall the movie provides well-paced tension that mostly doesn't let up until the climax. **P2** is the type of small picture that can easily get lost in the shuffle of big-budget special effects epics and horror film remakes, however it is one that definitely shouldn't be missed.

#### **NON-HORROR:**

**Live Free or Die Hard** - This film is of course the fourth entry in the long-running and successful **Die Hard** action movie series. Here everyman hero John McClane (Bruce Willis) battles ruthless computer guru Thomas Gabriel (Timothy Olyphant), a disgruntled former US government employee who was fired when he told his bosses the infrastructure of the country wasn't secure. He and his team of hackers and henchmen begin a major cyber attack on government computer networks and it's up to McClane and a young hacker named Matt Farrell (Justin Long) to stop them. This could be John

McClane's toughest battle yet, because, after all, he's decidedly old school in everything he does.

It's amazing how consistently good the **Die Hard** movies have been over the years, and this one continues the tradition. Bruce Willis plays his character in the same dependable manner he always has, and as usual it's impossible not to identify with him and root him on. Justin Long is absolutely believable as a self-centered, cynical, but ultimately good-hearted slacker computer hacker. And Timothy Olyphant convinces us that the master plan he's attempting to pull off is utterly possible, whether it really is or not. To his credit he plays his role with menace while not being over-the-top or cartoony. Film guru Kevin Smith also gives a good showing as another computer hacker, while popular young actress Mary Elizabeth Winstead appears as McClane's daughter Lucy. Additionally, the movie continues the tradition of incredible, if not always entirely believable, action sequences which keep the excitement level high. Standout scenes involve McClane duking it out with Gabriel's Martial Arts expert girlfriend Mai Linh (Maggie Q), and a sequence involving a jet fighter, a huge truck, and our hero jumping from one vehicle to another. All in a day's work for hero John McClane! Fun and engaging from start to finish, **Live Free or Die Hard** made me think it wouldn't be such a bad thing at all if John McClane didn't decide to retire for a long, long time to come. Go Bruce!

**Mr. Brooks** - In this psychological thriller Kevin Costner plays the title character of Earl Brooks, a respected businessman by day and cold-blooded serial killer by night. The film starts off with Mr. Brooks receiving a Man of the Year award in honor of his business accomplishments, and not too long after this he leaves his house at night, breaks into the apartment of a young couple making love, and shoots them right in the middle of the act. However this movie is more than a simple dual-personality tale where Mr. Brooks is a good guy one minute and bad guy the next. Rather he is a man who truly wants to repent and repress his intense desire to kill. However unfortunately for him he is continuously stirred to murderous action by his cunning alter ego Marshall, played with relish by William Hurt, who only he (and we) can see. Vowing to make the young couple his final victims before retiring to a peaceful family life, he runs into a major snag when an amateur photographer (Dane Cook) appears at his office with photos of him at the crime scene. Calling himself Mr. Smith, the photographer explains that he wants to come along with Brooks on the next murder and learn how to kill. To make matters worse a determined detective (Demi Moore) is now hot on the trail, and police show up at Mr. Brooks's house to question his daughter, who has recently returned home from college, about a murder near her campus. Such difficult circumstances would surely break a lesser man; however Mr. Brooks is incredibly smart and adept at everything he does.

If the above description seems overly complex, that's because it is. However far from making the plot muddled or stilted, the plot complexity is handled skillfully. The pieces of this intricate puzzle overlap while still unfolding seamlessly, and we are in for quite a ride. Simply put, **Mr. Brooks** is an intense and witty psychological suspense piece that is engaging from the opening moments until the final shocking scene. The main attraction though is the great performance by lead actor Kevin Costner, which is complimented nicely by his supporting players. Costner plays a character who alternates smoothly between caring family man and cold, emotionless murderer. He also pulls off the tough task of making the audience root for him despite his terrible deeds. Similarly, the other characters are easy to identify with as well despite their flaws. For example although Mr. Smith is not such a nice guy, he can still at least be pitied because of how naive he really is; for we know he's in way over his head in his dealings with Earl Brooks and is

being played like a fiddle by a master craftsman. And cop Tracy Atwood (Demi Moore), truly the only wholeheartedly good character in the movie, is involved in a bitter divorce which constantly brings out the worst in her.

Horror and suspense fans leary of a movie with Kevin Costner's name in the cast list need not be worried. Here the talented actor has chosen a part that casts him against his usual good guy persona in a movie that is suprisingly graphic and gritty, while at the same time being very polished and sophisticated. As a tried and true horror film fan I wholeheartedly recommend this engaging, and at times terrifying, study of a multifaceted and diabolical personality.