

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 5 – March 2008
(Note: See the October 2007 TFTM for Part 1 of this continuing column, the November 2007 TFTM for Part 2, the December 2007 TFTM for Part 3, and the February 2008 TFTM for Part 4).

In the second installment of this continuing column series on Underground Digital Cinema I discussed in some detail the movie ***Psycho Sisters*** from New Jersey-based W.A.V.E. Productions, a company specializing in low-budget, damsel-in-distress variety horror movies. As I mentioned last month the plan is to begin to talk about companies like W.A.V.E. Productions and others producing similar types of indie movies. In the footnotes section following the ***Psycho Sisters*** discussion I noted how the original version of the movie (included as an extra feature on the end of the tape) looked a bit like a mixed wrestling video. Now I'd like to elaborate more on the topic of mixed wrestling and its intertwinement with digital and new media, particularly on the internet. While it may seem a bit off-topic, this I believe would be a worthwhile tangent before proceeding on to what will no doubt be a lengthier discussion of some of the aforementioned Underground Digital Cinema production companies. The reason is because mixed wrestling and all its variants - including female vs. female wrestling, mixed boxing, mixed fighting, apartment wrestling, amateur and pro-am wrestling, bikini wrestling, erotic wrestling and so on - are today produced using digital video, have become quite an internet phenomenon, and therefore have some connection and/or similarities to Underground Digital Cinema. And while mixed wrestling videos are obviously quite a different animal from digital movies, they do seem to have emerged in the same way, and along the same timeline, that underground digital cinema has. And there may be a parallel between comparing them to traditional mainstream professional wrestling, and comparing independent and underground digital cinema to Hollywood studio productions. Therefore although it may seem like an odd sidetrack for a writer

who normally focuses his attention on movies, I'll go ahead and take the plunge (this month anyway) into very different territory.

The first task in a discussion on the subject is to define mixed wrestling. I previously wrote that mixed wrestling refers to a wrestling match between a man and a woman, and that it is an underground video phenomenon that has become increasingly popular nowadays, primarily on the internet. Today there are a large number of companies, both big and small, that produce, promote and distribute mixed wrestling videos and (increasingly) DVD's, mostly through internet and mail order sales. In addition to direct sales of tapes and DVD's to consumers, clips from mixed wrestling matches can be purchased as downloads or streaming video through membership to the producer's websites. Also, short mixed wrestling clips are being seen (and commented on) in increasing numbers on various video, fan and group websites across the internet, including many very widely accepted, mainstream sites. Given such popularity, it is accurate to say that this seemingly new sport is expanding to a large and diverse audience across the World Wide Web.

It might be a fair question to ask if any of this is really a new phenomenon though, aside from the internet aspect, given the long-standing popularity of professional wrestling on network television, cable, video and DVD. In other words is mixed wrestling all that different from mainstream professional wrestling organizations that fans have watched in steady and ever-growing numbers for the past thirty years or more? After all, professional wrestling shares some of the same characteristics seen in matches from a number of prominent mixed and female wrestling companies. * For example both types of wrestling have "personalities" (popular, well-known fighters as well as "jobbers"), and there are well-established wrestling moves and maneuvers used such as the piledriver, the figure-four leg lock, and the airplane spin, just to name a few. And also it should be noted that, at least in recent years, mainstream professional wrestling has integrated more female matches into the mix, although the majority of matches are still overwhelmingly between male wrestlers. However these broad similarities are vastly outweighed by the differences, which will now be further elaborated on.

The main difference between professional wrestling, like the kind I grew up watching on television back in the 1980's, and the new underground wrestling as I'll now call it (to use a broadly descriptive term), is that underground wrestling of all varieties mainly involves female wrestlers as opposed to the more traditional male vs. male wrestling. As stated, mixed wrestling matches are matches between a male and a female, while female wrestling matches (sometimes abbreviated as fem vs. fem wrestling), are about women wrestling. From there underground wrestling (both mixed and the female vs. female variety) breaks down into various, often overlapping subcategories, which also further separates it from mainstream professional wrestling. These subcategories generally define the specific content or flavor of the matches, and are often a main determinant in the appeal to viewers and buyers alike. Before going into these different types of matches though, I'll first take a quick look at female wrestling through my own short historical perspective.

From what I remember female wrestling was around in the 1980's, but never really took center stage until after the year 2000 when the internet and the World Wide Web started to surge in popularity. When I was younger I was a big wrestling fan and I watched a lot of it on television as well as attending live events in my area and elsewhere. I recall only seeing female matches on occasion and then usually only on big pay-per-view events.

For example in an event where all the male champions were defending their titles, all of a sudden they would tack on a women's championship title match seemingly out of the blue. Then it would be a rarity to see these women wrestlers again before the next pay-per-view event. (This excludes women who served as "managers" for popular wrestlers). At the time I didn't think anything of it because the norm was to watch men wrestle. However even back then there were some wrestling leagues a bit outside the mainstream such as G.L.O.W. (which stood for Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling) that featured only female wrestling and were in fact broadcast on television, albeit much less regularly than the well-established, mostly male professional wrestling leagues. G.L.O.W. and other such leagues were generally dismissed by most wrestling fans I knew though, both because they seemed light on real hard-hitting action, and because the thought of watching ladies wrestle probably didn't appeal to most male wrestling fans (who represented a large portion of the audience for professional wrestling). However now partially due to new media I believe that landscape, like many others in our society, has changed dramatically.

As I briefly talked about in my previous column footnote, underground wrestling matches are often set in a variety of ordinary-looking locations, such as apartments (usually called apartment wrestling), in an empty room on gym mats, as well in more traditional-looking wrestling rings. Generally speaking, they are less elaborate productions as compared to the high/expensive production values associated with mainstream professional wrestling organizations seen on television. In other words underground wrestling matches usually don't include such things as giant auditoriums, stages and walkways, expensive pyrotechnics or large audiences. And in terms of the actual video production, underground wrestling more or less has a single-camera feel. That is to say either single camera setups are used and/or there just isn't a lot of cutting involved like in mainstream matches. However this isn't necessarily a negative thing, because as I'll discuss, underground wrestling is less about a lot of over-the-top spectacle, and more about concentrating on certain specific themes and ideas. Just like low/no-budget indie movies often don't involve a lot of spectacle (albeit often out of financial necessity), the same can be said of underground wrestling. Again to use the parallel comparison, underground digital movies may be compared to Hollywood movies the way underground wrestling videos may be compared to the lavishly-produced wrestling seen on cable and national network television. Both have their strengths as well as their weaknesses, and both play to audiences looking for specific types of content.

The subcategories or flavors (to use a more colorful label) of underground wrestling are many and varied, however most tend to fall under the general themes of sex and/or athleticism. Whether looking at mixed or female vs. female wrestling, either one or both of these two aspects are almost always prominent. ** In mixed wrestling videos the action can be scripted or not-scripted, and in the overwhelming majority of matches the woman is the winner or at the very least comes out on top in the end. The women in these matches are generally armed with a seemingly overwhelming arsenal of wrestling moves which emphasize their natural strengths, such as the leg scissors and other tactics focusing on leg strength. They usually use such maneuvers to get the best of their male opponents, despite the fact that the men may look or be physically stronger and/or bigger in size. Mixed matches focus more often than not on themes of domination and submission, and since the traditional idea (or role) of the man being dominant is being reversed, mixed matches have what might be labeled a prominent fetishistic aspect to them - the fetish being the theme of the beautiful woman beating the strong man in the match. This I believe is one of the main selling points of these videos. The

sexual aspect is also emphasized by the fact that many mixed matches feature skimpy female attire such as bikinis, thongs or less, which is concurrently a selling point. This actually makes these matches exploitative while still being feministic. Additionally, the overall sexual appeal of these types of contests is sometimes further reinforced by skimpy male attire. This appears to be less consistent across the board though with some male contenders being fully clothed, unlike many of their female counterparts, and unlike in some female vs. female matches where more nudity abounds no matter who's winning the contest. However unlike in mixed matches, the female-only matches are often highly competitive, highlighting athleticism, strategy and skill, and only sometimes involve one opponent decisively dominating another from start to finish. And it's important to note that traditional female vs. female pro-style wrestling matches are often highly competitive in this way, rarely involving nudity or sexual themes. (In this way female professional wrestling is similar to traditional male professional wrestling).

Underground wrestling (again including both mixed and female vs. female) can be broken down even further than the general themes of sex and athleticism. Depending on the emphasis of a particular video, matches can focus on specific wrestling moves or body parts. Examples of this include matches emphasizing leg scissors, piledrivers, belly punching, lift and carry, sleeper holds, and breast smothering, to name just a few examples. *** In this way underground wrestling can be compared to some more extreme types of Underground Digital Horror Cinema, which often focus on fetish themes like strangulation and chloroforming, as well as other exploitative elements like nudity, lesbianism and sex scenes. And in both cases budget and production values come into play, as these types of exploitation elements are more easily produced than high-tech special effects (in the case of digital movies), and the costly production components of mainstream professional wrestling highlighted earlier on in this column. It also should be emphasized again that both forms of underground productions are similar in that they are distributed in more non-traditional ways, primarily through the internet and mail order, as opposed to the traditional widespread retail distribution of big-budget movies and mainstream wrestling products. **** In other words, underground productions in both the cinema and wrestling genres thrive on new media distribution outlets.

There are a plethora of underground wrestling companies prevalent today on the internet, and it would be beyond the scope of this column to discuss them all. Suffice it to say, this new breed of female-dominated wrestling appears to be here to stay and growing in popularity. And lest one still think this month's column is too far of a stretch from horror films or independent and underground cinema, I would simply point to a press release I recently stumbled upon on one of the horror film websites. The news was about an event humorously called Blood Wrestling, taking place at a major horror film convention called Genghis Con II in Pittsburgh during the summer of 2006. ***** It was sponsored by an independent film company (Happy Cloud Pictures) and read that a long list of indie film actresses and bikini-clad scream queens would be wrestling in a pool filled with FX Blood. Now that sounds funny! And so things come full circle in the world of Underground Digital Cinema! Stay tuned for the next installment of this continuing column series...

* The term "jobbers" goes back to traditional professional wrestling to describe a male or female wrestler (usually male), who would be beaten easily, usually by a "name" wrestler. As memory serves me, jobbers were more prominently featured in professional wrestling back in the 1980's, when most broadcasts would showcase matches where name

wrestlers would easily defeat them week after week. Some of these jobbers would keep coming back for more punishment, and others would rarely, if ever, be seen again after being demolished once. They were all obviously there just to highlight the skills of the name wrestlers. Nowadays it seems there are less jobber matches (also sometimes called squash matches) in professional wrestling because most of the wrestlers are big names of high caliber. Also, "jobber girls" is a term for female wrestlers who lose constantly or are beaten badly in wrestling matches, and is applicable primarily to the types of wrestling discussed in this column. Some of these new jobber girls themselves have become popular with fans on the internet, and it's interesting that underground wrestling would adopt this style of match so many years later. However this is of course in line with the domination element discussed above.

** A parallel might be drawn to horror films and the concept of the "Final Girl" prominent in the American slasher film subgenre. (Although this may seem like an incredible stretch - comparing apples to oranges, so to speak - I'll make it since horror films are still my primary area of interest). That is to say horror films, like wrestling, have traditionally been a male genre. However in the American slasher film the female survivor usually triumphs over the traditionally male killer. And in the new underground mixed wrestling we have the female fighter triumphing over the male opponent. The term "Final Girl" was coined by Professor Carol J. Clover in her groundbreaking 1992 book *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. It refers to the female survivor in the American horror slasher film. The Final Girl is the woman who uses characteristics like intelligence, wits and strength to escape from and/or defeat the traditionally male killer in these films. The idea of the Final Girl and her film-ending triumph is part of an argument suggesting that American slasher films can be seen in a feministic light, as opposed to being viewed simply as male-dominated, voyeuristic affairs. I believe that *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* is an incredibly important book in the examination of the psychology of several contemporary horror film genres, and I highly recommend it to all horror film fans.

*** This is not to suggest that all Underground Digital Horror Cinema focuses on fetish themes or exploitative elements like nude scenes. Indie and underground horror cinema is varied, just like big-budget horror films can be, in using or not using these types of devices.

**** To break things down even further on a production level, both underground digital movies and underground wrestling videos are primarily produced with DVD production equipment prevalent with consumers, such as computers, non-linear editing programs, DVD-R authoring programs and burners, and/or low-cost DVD duplicators. This contrasts sharply with big studio productions, which use more expensive production methods such as large scale pressing and replication.

***** The label "scream queen" is one primarily associated with the horror film genre. Scream queens are actresses who do a lot of screaming in horror films, both of the mainstream, big-budget type and B-movie or exploitation variety. These women can be damsels in distress or tough Final Girls (see footnote #2 above). An example of a mainstream actress sometimes referred to as a scream queen would be Jamie Lee Curtis, who played beleaguered babysitter Laurie Strode in several of the *Halloween* horror films. It's also worth noting that the whole idea of the scream queen actress, or character, has also been portrayed in movies as well. For example, the 1997 independent film *The Vicious Sweet* tells the story of a popular B-movie scream queen

(played by well-known indie actress Sasha Graham) imprisoned by one of her fans. And the 2004 horror film ***Kill the Screamer Queen*** is about a guy who believes scream queens have ruined the horror genre and is bent on revenge against aspiring horror film actresses.