

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: Zombies, The Internet and Filtered Realities (or Movie Magic in the Age of Information – An Expansion) – July 2008

Recently my production partner James Carolus and I sat down to watch zombie master George A. Romero's latest fright flick titled, appropriately enough, **George A. Romero's *Diary of the Dead*** (also known simply as ***Diary of the Dead***). This movie is of course Mr. Romero's latest entry in his long-running, legendary zombie film series (it followed ***Night of the Living Dead, Dawn of the Dead, Day of the Dead*** and ***Land of the Dead***). Being a long time Romero and zombie film fan I was, not surprisingly, eager to see the new movie. However at the same time I had heard about the films' premise, and was intuitively thinking that it was a little out of the range of what a zombie film should be about. (***Diary of the Dead*** had received some negative press as well, which was unusual for a Romero film, and was also cause for some concern). For the uninitiated, this installment in the series is about a group of film students whose horror film production gets interrupted when a real-life zombie outbreak unfolds around them. Despite my initial trepidation towards this storyline, I thoroughly enjoyed the film and found it to be a worthy entry in the zombie film franchise. While in my opinion not on the level of some of the earlier installments, it nonetheless held my attention right to the end, with good acting and the great zombie gore effects I've come to expect from a George A. Romero flick. However rather than use this column to give an in-depth review of the movie, complete with detailed story breakdown and point by point kudos, I'd like to discuss some of the themes and ideas present in ***Diary of the Dead*** and why I think they are important. I'll also discuss how some of these themes and ideas have been used in other movies as of late, and what I think it all means in the context of contemporary horror cinema today.

The first part of the movie I found interesting was where film student Jason Creed (Joshua Close) is filming his killer mummy movie. In this sequence he begins lecturing

the actor playing the mummy on how the monster should move and why this type of movement is necessary for the chase scene being filmed. This intense young director also has words with the student handling the mummy makeup effects (he chews him out for the mummy makeup not being up to par), as well as the actress being chased. She gets into the conversation by asking why women being chased in these types of horror films always do the same things (like falling down and losing their clothing). The reason this sequence jumped out at me was because I immediately thought to myself that here was yet another film-within-a-film scenario. In other words it was another movie that incorporated the making of a (horror) film into its plot. In fact, not only did it show some of the filming of this mummy movie, but there was also discussion early on about the model camera being used to shoot it. While all this may not seem extraordinary, that's actually the point. * The making of movies, especially low-budget independent movies, is now seen and portrayed as almost ordinary and commonplace nowadays. My May 2004 Thoughts For The Month column was titled *Movie Magic in the Age of Information*, and in it I discussed such things as behind-the-scenes footage, filmmaker interviews and other DVD extras which are now commonplace and even expected by modern film audiences. The focus of that column was on how these elements have become part of the overall entertainment package, along with the actual movie(s) itself, and the positive and negative aspects of all this added bonus material. Generally speaking I still believe this deconstruction and enlightenment of the movie-making process is entertaining and educational; however at the same time the point can be made that gone are the days when audiences would sit in wide-eyed wonder at the incredible sights in front of them on the screen without asking how a particular effect was done and how much it cost. Getting back to *Diary of the Dead* and the discussion of this column, it's obvious that things have moved even farther in the deconstruction of films when movie-within-a-movie plotlines are seen with increasing regularity in more productions. This includes not only showing how a movie is made, but films that feature amateur filmmakers and videographers roaming around with camcorders recording everything and everybody in sight. For example in the recent big-budget monster movie *Cloverfield*, we watch a movie that is presented entirely from the point of view of the person (character) or persons holding the camcorder. *Cloverfield* follows in the footsteps of earlier, smaller-budget movies of years past employing this idea, such as the mega-successful indie films *The Blair Witch Project* and *The Last Broadcast*, among others. Movies of this sort of course reflect the ever-increasing prevalence and popularity of these electronic imaging devices in everyday society (as well as with micro-budget filmmakers), and how this contemporary trend has not gone unnoticed by filmmakers and Hollywood in general.

There is also quite a bit of discussion between the characters in *Diary of the Dead* about the video camera and the implications and effects of documenting events with it. This theme is a prominent factor in Romero's latest film because main character Jason Creed is absolutely determined to capture the events unfolding around him at all costs. His single-minded documentary quest is an obsession in fact, as he refuses to stop filming even in the face of extreme danger to both himself and his closest friends and loved ones. This idea was touched upon in both *The Blair Witch Project* and *The Last Broadcast* with characters who shielded themselves from what was happening around them through the use of their video cameras. In *Diary of the Dead* there is talk about how events and images seen through the lens of the video camera are not quite real, which made me think of some dialog in *The Blair Witch Project* where they discuss a "filtered reality". In other words images captured with the camera are filtered through the lens of the device and not quite real as a result. Movies themselves are of course not

real, and this sort of discussion of how the (video) camera lens twists reality is another bit of deconstruction of the whole process of moviemaking and “movie magic” (as I referred to it in my previous column).

Besides focusing on video cameras and movie production techniques, *Diary of the Dead* also takes things one step further and makes both new and old media a main point of interest and discussion. The opening of the film shows a news report with dead bodies being taken out of a building and then coming back to life as zombies and biting the attending paramedics, thus starting the zombie infection and epidemic. Then throughout the film Jason Creed talks about the need to get current, real information out to the public, and how what is being released by mainstream media is false and/or inaccurate. At one point he uploads his video footage to the web and reports getting 72,000 message replies within eight minutes as a result. ** Thus computers and the internet (the aforementioned “new media”) become an integral part of the plot of this movie as well. This of course is also not new, as there have been many movies in recent years (both horror and otherwise) focusing on all aspects of technology as part of plotlines and storylines. Like video cameras, the internet and World Wide Web (and the associated applications and technologies that go along with them) have become a constant presence in modern life – something which is also not lost on Hollywood and indie filmmakers alike. It’s also worth noting that George Romero has always offered a myriad of social commentary in his zombie movies, and this focus on the internet and new media reflects the time when *Diary of the Dead* was made (just as the underlying themes and commentary present in *Dawn of the Dead*, *Day of the Dead*, etc. reflected the years when those films were produced).

As I mentioned previously, I really enjoyed *Diary of the Dead* despite having an initial gut feeling that this type of documentary approach would not work well on a zombie picture. It was a solid movie from start to finish, although admittedly the pace felt a little slow and the length a tad bit too long for this film fan. (Such was not the case in previous Romero films which actually had longer running times, such as the original *Dawn of the Dead*). However despite having enjoyed the film, I also found myself hoping that we do not continue on with a constant flood of horror movies focusing on camcorders, behind-the-scenes “making-of” plotlines and so forth. It seems to me this focus on deconstructing horror movies has come full circle and maybe reached its logical end point, despite the prevalence of digital video technology, new media, and the overall information age we live in today. The “Movie Magic” I spoke about in my previous column may simply be an element of nostalgia, however I still believe it has a place in horror cinema today. For me it’s always a pleasure when I can sit back for a short while and simply enjoy what is unfolding in front of me onscreen without pondering how it came to be. After all, that’s what we have DVD extras for!

* This also has a lot to do with the fact that low-cost, high-quality digital video equipment is readily available to people today. This is something I see as a positive development, and is a topic I’ve spent several columns on previously. As such I won’t delve into it again here, except to say it’s an ever-present factor in the indie film scene nowadays.

** In another instance of technology playing a prominent role in *Diary of the Dead*, there is also a scene where Ridley Wilmot (Phillip Riccio), the actor playing the mummy in Jason’s student horror film, calls via webcam and invites Jason and his friends over to his mansion in Philadelphia to safely ride out the zombie infestation. (I previously discussed Cinematic “old” and “new” media in the July 2007 TFTM column).