

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: Social Networking, Filmmakers & Quiet Horror – November 2009

This month I'll talk briefly on some varied topics. I'll start with some observations on social networking, how it seems to be evolving, and how it relates to independent filmmakers (such as me) and other artists. Then I'll conclude with a few observations on ***Paranormal Activity***, the indie horror film which has become a box office phenomenon.

A bit on Social Networking

I have to admit I was initially a bit slow to embrace social networking. After having established the Very Scary Productions web site back in 2002 (after investing a good amount of time researching web site design, hosting companies and the like), and having worked diligently over the years on maintaining and building it, I felt like I had a solid foundation upon which to promote my filmmaking activities. Then suddenly along came MySpace, and for several years it seemed like that was all anyone talked about. Web sites seemed old hat, too stagnant, and the incredible traffic numbers on MySpace signaled that was the place to be. So finally I jumped in and built not one, but two MySpace pages to help further promote my movies. By that time however there was this thing called Facebook, which quickly evolved and eclipsed MySpace. And of course we all know that next came Twitter, and here we are. Right now Facebook and Twitter are the big boys on the playing field, and the emphasis is squarely on the concept of keeping a growing number of people (followers, friends, fans and the like) informed on what one is up to at any given moment. To me Facebook has a very personal feel to it because of its design, its focus on updates, and the ease with which one can connect with friends from the past and present. It seems more geared toward these informal, personal communications, although I still mainly use it for movie promotions. I believe that (by comparison at least) this leaves MySpace squarely in the category of web site #1 or #2, depending on whether or not one also runs a traditional site. In other words, with respect

to artists such as musicians and filmmakers (and MySpace is undoubtedly especially geared towards musicians), this often means a MySpace page is *the* promotional site of an individual, company or band. And this seems to be working just fine, as it gives artists of all types a free web space with (still) extremely high traffic running through it. And so social networking continues to evolve...

Filmmakers & Quiet Horror

Switching gears completely, we come to a little movie called ***Paranormal Activity***. I'm guessing that by now I probably don't need to explain this is an independent (in the true sense of the word) picture made for a (relatively) small amount of money, which has grossed a tremendously large amount of money in theaters across the country. I often hear it being compared to ***The Blair Witch Project***, and in respect to both being highly profitable micro-budget movies, they are indeed similar. * Despite some major stylistic differences, they both had effective marketing and/or distribution campaigns, and both are more or less blood and gore-free, relying instead on psychological tension to convey their horror. It is on this last point that I wish to talk about.

Paranormal Activity tells the story of a young couple who are being haunted in their home by an unseen force (or forces). The entity (for lack of a better word) seems focused on the girlfriend, while the boyfriend sets up a video camera in their bedroom to try and capture some evidence. As the film progresses the haunting gets increasingly worse, until it comes to an unsettling conclusion. This movie features quiet, steadily building tension, unease and terror. It's basically creepy atmosphere with minimal visual effects, blood or gore. It proves (once again) that these visceral elements are not necessarily needed to produce some good scares. I say necessarily because there have obviously been horror movies with blood and gore in abundance which have been terrifying as well, although genre films admittedly often confuse gross-out viscera with terror. The real question is what effect, if any, this little movie phenomenon will have on future horror productions. Extreme horror (sometimes called torture films) has been all the rage in recent years, with movies like ***Saw*** (and its sequels), ***Hostel***, ***Captivity*** and ***The Collector*** being produced in abundance. Will ***Paranormal Activity*** change that cycle, or will things continue on as is no matter how much money the movie makes? That's a very good question. Personally I think that perhaps these extreme films have gone as far as they can go, and a swing back toward psychological terror might be in order - at least for awhile. ** Either way, I believe ***Paranormal Activity*** is yet another inspirational example for independent and underground filmmakers.

* The makers of ***The Blair Witch Project*** employed a clever idea which lead people to initially believe the filmmakers in the story were actually missing, while ***Paranormal Activity*** was reportedly screened on some college campuses, and then expanded gradually to larger audiences after filmgoers visited a website and requested it be brought to their areas. Both were highly effective forms of marketing.

** Other notable examples of micro-budget indie movies making it big are ***The Blair Witch Project*** and ***The Last Broadcast***. I believe this later film, reportedly made for around \$500 and shot on digital video, is a particularly relevant example for underground moviemakers.