

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 9 – May 2009

(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, the February 2008 TFTM for Part 4, the March 2008 TFTM for Part 5, the April 2008 TFTM for Part 6, the September 2008 TFTM for part 7, and the November 2008 TFTM for part 8).

In an earlier installment of this continuing column series I discussed the movie ***Psycho Sisters*** and how it was the first underground horror movie of its type I had ever seen. Now I'd like to talk more about W.A.V.E. Productions, the New Jersey-based company behind ***Psycho Sisters*** and many other indie horror movies. And a good way to start is by taking a look at their first-movie ***Sisters***, which coincidentally was only recently released on DVD.

Director-Editor Gary Whitson, who also appears in the movie, talks quite extensively about the production in an on-camera segment which starts off the DVD. He discusses being a big fan of horror movies of the 50's, 60's and 70's, the desire to produce his own movies, and how production equipment such as Super 8 cameras used to be too expensive and/or technically inhibitive. (This once huge divide between professional motion picture production and consumer video equipment is something I've discussed at length in previous columns.) However after consumer video cameras emerged in the 1980's Whitson got together with others who were also interested in making indie productions, and the result was the 1987 murder mystery-stalker movie ***Sisters*** (sold by W.A.V.E. Productions under the title ***Stalked***, which incorporated some additional-alternate scenes).

To me a movie like ***Sisters*** is especially relevant to this discussion on the evolution of underground digital cinema because it's a very early example of determined people using low-cost consumer video equipment to produce a motion picture. In fact it's one of the earliest examples I've seen to date. It's also something I can personally relate to because I clearly remember using VHS and 8mm video for my first productions in the mid 1990's right before digital video was poised to revolutionize how movies could be made. It's interesting that others

had the same idea even as far back as the 1980's, and were able to realize their ambitions as well.

Sisters begins in classic stalker film style with a young woman walking alone in the woods being pursued by a mysterious killer. We only see the legs, feet and hands of the assailant as he methodically stalks his increasingly panic-stricken victim. The sequence reminded me very much of **Friday the 13th** in that the woman begins running while the killer continues to walk, while of course still keeping up with her. After this opening scene and the opening credits, newscasts inform us that the killer is known as the Valley Strangler, and that he/she has been terrorizing the area. However this is no simple killer-on-the-loose movie, because we are soon introduced to twin sisters Janice and Mary, both of whom are in love with a television reporter named Philip who is covering the Valley Strangler case. Both want Philip to be their own, and both may be willing to kill to have him. Indeed the movie quickly becomes a complex whodunit murder mystery involving this love triangle and a police detective's desperate hunt for the Valley Strangler. The plot is very ambitious, and keeps one guessing just who killed whom, why they did it, and who is really dead.

Despite the lofty ambitions of the story, **Sisters** might best be described as the epitome of a truly (early) underground horror movie. As mentioned the movie was made pre-digital, most likely using VHS or 8mm video judging from its look. And it employs the type of production elements one might expect from a movie made this way, including the use of many basic locations such as woods and suburban houses (interior & exterior shots), as well as plenty of driving scenes. And judging by the number of people with the last name Whitson listed in the opening credits, it also features many family members in the cast. Additionally, the music score comes mainly from buyout production (stock) music. All these elements tend to give the movie a somewhat homemade look and feel, while at the same time emphasizing the admirable achievement of having produced a competent feature with such limited resources.

If one is to appreciate a movie like **Sisters**, one has to accept the production on its own merits. I think true indie (underground) cinema is often an acquired taste, and usually not appealing to the casual mainstream viewer. Therefore this type of movie will not be for everyone. The visuals have a mostly home movie look, and some scenes appear a bit washed out, while the sound quality is what one might expect from camcorder video. However despite these considerations I found **Sisters** to be interesting enough, and at times quite entertaining. The aforementioned complex plotline kept me scratching my head, and even compelled me to rewind (the DVD) several times to listen to dialog scenes again. I laughed in a few spots where the dialog sounded wooden or awkward, however as is often the case in low-budget indie productions this was not necessarily a bad thing. One great example was right after Philip finishes interviewing the detective on the Valley Strangler case and does his wrap-up. He informs viewers in a deadpan delivery that "the Police seem helpless" to do anything, while the detective is still standing right next to him. Now that was a truly funny indie movie moment! I also smiled at the continuous use of radio and television newscasts which ran throughout the movie. The Valley Strangler case definitely dominated all media in that small town! Again, one has to accept a movie like this on its own merits.

One other prominent element in **Sisters** is the emphasis on strangulation scenes. Most of the killings (and supposed killings) are done this way, which falls in line with the killer's M. O. While this may not seem significant in and of itself, it's worth noting that strangulation seems to be a preferred plot device on a lot of underground horror movies of this type. Many indie companies - like New Jersey-based Factory 2000, for example - employ this cinematic device extensively. One possible explanation for the proliferation in underground horror of this

cinematic approach could be that this method of onscreen murder doesn't require elaborate props and makeup, and is therefore perfectly suited to low/no-budget productions. Another could be the fascination of indie horror filmmakers with such cult classic, extreme horror films like ***The Last House on the Left*** and ***I Spit on Your Grave***, which feature lots of "hands on" attack scenes. Whatever the case, W.A.V.E Productions went on to employ it liberally in future releases, making characters similar to the Valley Strangler central to whole lines of movies. Stay tuned for the next installment of this continuing column series...