

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: Euro-Horror and the films of Dario Argento - An alternative to the mainstream – September 2004

This month I'd like to discuss a topic that many horror fans are already very familiar with. Euro-horror is a term used to categorize horror movies made in the European film community. Some writers limit the definition of the term to only include movies produced in that region between the late sixties and the early eighties, but many also apply it to films made in the present day. Before going any further with this discussion, I'd like to freely admit that I am not what you might call an expert on the subject. I know people who are much bigger connoisseurs of this horror subgenre than myself, and therefore are much more knowledgeable about it as well. However that having been said I have, over the years, developed a taste for Euro-horror, and find it to be a nice alternative on occasion to American fright films. It is from this perspective of the casual viewer that I offer the following observations on the subject.

One thing that has always struck me about Euro-horror films is their emphasis on visual detail. These movies frequently take the time to highlight rich, lush visuals and fine detail, rather than being primarily concerned with propelling the plot along at a snappy pace. Another way to say this is that in Euro-horror the camera spends time focusing on things that are not usually emphasized in American films. Some good examples can be found in the films of Italian suspense master Dario Argento. For those not familiar with Argento, he has been responsible for many films which are today considered classics of the horror genre, such as *Deep Red* and the surrealistic *Suspria*. In the serial killer movie *Sleepless* (one of his more recent efforts) we see a rather lengthy extreme close-up of the inner mechanisms of an answering machine. We see the parts of the machine moving as a message is recorded. This is used to effectively illustrate the importance of the machine and the message being left. The device almost becomes a character.

The Argento classic ***Deep Red*** offers another example in a sequence where a professional medium is demonstrating her talents of telepathy to a live audience. She suddenly senses evil emanating from one of the audience members and is visibly shaken as she proclaims this person has killed and will kill again. Here Argento uses extreme close-ups on her face, showing water dripping out of her mouth and down her chin (from her drink) as she makes her revelation. These shots make the scene incredibly unnerving and dramatic, highlighting her terror at what she senses. Extreme close-ups on body parts such as eyes (and gruesome things being done to them) have in fact become a stylistic trademark of Dario Argento movies. Such emphasis on artistic visual detail gives Euro-horror films a look, feel and intensity all their own.

A second observation I've made is that Euro-horror films seem to be overall less commercial in nature than their American counterparts. Although by strict definition all films that are made for profit can be called commercial in nature, Euro-horror films share several traits that put them more squarely outside the mainstream. As mentioned above, they often have an intensity that stems from their rich visuals. To use Dario Argento as an example once again, his movies usually include violent, gore-filled death sequences which are seldom seen in American mainstream horror cinema. These *mise-en-scenes* (as they are sometimes labeled) are typically elaborate and detailed, and very often overshadow plot and character, frequently slowing down pacing as well. Such characteristics serve to distance Argento's work from the American tradition of speeding films along rapidly towards a conclusion. Add to this the fact that Euro-horror films rarely feature big-name celebrities like in Hollywood (often because of their relatively smaller budgets), and it's easy to see why they have less mainstream sensibility than American studio films.

The above observations really just scratch the surface in describing Euro-horror. The characteristics I've discussed are those that have stood out most prominently to me when watching these productions. I've used some films from Dario Argento as examples because he is one of the most well-known Euro-horror filmmakers, and because I've seen more of his movies than those from anyone else in this subgenre. It's also worth noting that my comparisons and contrasts between Euro-horror films and American horror cinema are not meant to be negative towards either category. Both have their strengths and weaknesses and serve to offer diversity to the horror genre in general. For me Euro-horror is what I'd call an acquired taste. Being someone who grew up watching American-made horror films, it took me quite awhile to come to appreciate and understand Euro-horror. I liken it to the difference between popular (pop) music and jazz music. Both musical styles have their own appeal, but for many who are accustomed to mainstream popular music, jazz music can be difficult to grasp at first. In the future I'd like to write more on the subject and discuss specific films in greater detail. For now let me wrap up this writing by recommending a movie to those who may be interested in getting their feet wet for the first time in Euro-horror. One of my favorite efforts was produced by Dario Argento and directed by Lamberto Bava. In the 1985 film ***Demons*** (Italian title ***Demoni***), several people are invited to the opening of a new movie theatre, where they are shown a violent horror film. As the movie progresses, the events on-screen (the movie-within-a-movie) start to happen in the audience. Patrons are transformed into bloodthirsty demons and carnage ensues as the remaining human audience members' fight for their lives while trying to escape the prison-like theatre. ***Demons*** offers intense and graphic visuals highlighted by excellent demon makeup and transformation sequences. However it also has a somewhat American feel to it because

of the relatively quick pace of the action sequences, and because of the American rock soundtrack, which features artists like Billy Idol, Go West and Motley Crue. The movie really is a good cross between two different horror styles and I highly recommend it.