

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: Movie Magic in the Age of Information – May 2004

Recently I was watching an independent movie with a friend of mine. This particular effort was a short, no-budget, shot-on-video picture. * Put another way, it was exactly the type of filmmaking I'm engaged in. What I found most interesting however was not the film itself, but rather the fact that while the movie ran under a half hour, the running time on the tape was over an hour. How, you ask, is this possible? Well, the tape contained over a half hour of extras, the bulk of which consisted of behind-the-scenes "making of" footage. We were treated to watching most of the key sequences being discussed, choreographed, rehearsed, and taped. I've noticed that this is becoming an increasingly popular trend in underground/independent cinema, as well as with mainstream Hollywood movies. While we were viewing this particular movie on VHS, the trend is most common with DVD/DVD-R, where additional material is today almost expected by audiences. What's good about behind-the-scenes (or bonus) material is that audiences can learn about, or at least get a brief look at, the different processes involved in creating motion pictures. Chats with writers, directors, composers and other key players give the viewer insights they wouldn't have had otherwise. The filmmakers in turn get to talk about what they do. (I know that I for one always enjoy talking about my filmmaking activities.) On-screen demonstrations of such processes as makeup effects also enlighten the viewer as to how things are done. Additionally, this type of material is obviously entertaining to audiences, as the demand for it illustrates.

While the above points are valid and true, recently I read an article in which somebody expressed a different view on the subject. I was reading a newspaper interview with a somewhat famous cult actress. One question put to her was what she thought about a recent DVD release of a famous movie she had starred in. I was somewhat surprised that this actress seemed to have mixed feelings about it. Although she said some

positive things about the benefits of DVD bonus material, she also thought this type of material could be viewed as lessening the art form in a way. I wondered after reading the interview if that case really could be made. Does a step by step breakdown of the processes involved in producing motion pictures lessen the art form? In addition to seeing how things are done, today we get to see footage that was not used in the director's (artist's) final vision. Does seeing this cutting room floor footage take away from the finished product? If the footage wasn't chosen for the movie, is it really something that should be seen? This is definitely something to ponder, and these questions are what inspired the title of this column.

I believe that "movie magic" today is not what it was in the past. Gone are the days when audiences would sit in wide-eyed wonder at the sights in front of them on the big screen, such as giant insects or space creatures rampaging through city streets. Today when viewing such images people immediately want to know if the bug was computer-generated or done mechanically. Audiences now need to be "in the know" about such matters. The magic and wonder of the movies has been replaced by our need for knowledge. While there's nothing wrong with this, it's interesting to note that this need to be "in the know" not only applies to the mechanics of motion pictures, but also to other aspects of the movie industry as well. For example, the (supposed) antics of celebrity couples take up time not only on entertainment programs, but also on regular television newscasts. (How much of it is true and how much is manufactured by the media - and maybe the persons involved - for public consumption is the only thing that is still a secret.) This gossip is also prevalent in countless magazines and on the internet as well, and public opinion of celebrities often has an impact on the performance of motion pictures at the box office, which in itself is frequently a big topic of discussion. Today people will often spend as much time discussing how much a movie cost to make as what it was about. This is a result of the information age we live in.

When it comes to the topic of DVD extras, I think that regardless of what the entertainment value of all this behind-the-scenes material is, the learning aspect is just too much of a plus to ignore. While initially having mixed feelings myself about DVD extras, I now see the value of them. Learning about the technology of motion pictures is just another type of learning. Movies have always been a mixture of art and technology (and commerce), and today the technology involved in producing motion pictures is also part of their appeal.

* I generally divide my time between working on features and short pictures. However to date they all have the similarity of being no-budget productions.