

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: The Decline of the Theatrical Movie Experience - April 2006

This year I did something I haven't done in a long, long time. This year I actually sat through the entire Oscar Awards show. Being a filmmaker and huge movie buff I suppose I have a special obligation to watch this show, considering it is a ceremony honoring the best movies, actors, directors, etc. of each year. However the fact of the matter is that I usually find it to be too long and drawn out for my tastes. Some of this probably has to do with being accustomed to the MTV-style pacing of so many programs, movies etc, and just the overall fast-paced society we live in. Another reason is that the show always airs on a Sunday night, which means Monday morning and the start of the work week is just around the bend. For whatever reason though, this year I did somehow manage to make it through the whole show, and I'm glad I did. While overall the telecast was about what I've come to expect from these shows, complete with emotional acceptance speeches and drawn-out musical numbers, this year I heard something that made my ears stand up. I heard comments about the merits of seeing movies on the big screen, as well as a rather sarcastic comment referring to DVD's. If memory serves me correctly, this latter comment was about nobody considering how great some part of a movie would look on the DVD. Now normally I might not make too much of this, because everybody, including celebrities, has their opinion. However I think these comments were specifically targeted towards the increasing awareness that the Hollywood movie industry is slumping as far as theatrical box office is concerned. This is something I've heard a lot about and something I'll talk about in this column.

Before I start discussing the reasons for this theatrical decline let me first say that I'm the kind of moviegoer that Hollywood could definitely use more of. For as long as I can remember I've gone to the movies on average once a week. To this day most of my weekends begin on Friday evening sitting in a theater (usually with a longtime friend of mine) for the latest Hollywood offering. In recent years, since the resurgence of the

horror genre, I've been an especially happy camper. However the fact of the matter is that most people I know do not go (to the movies) half as often. In fact when I'm discussing films with people other than my filmmaker friends, or when I hear others discussing the latest theatrical releases, I most often hear comments about waiting for the DVD, or waiting until the movie comes to television. I even know several people who say they haven't been to the movies in years. To me this is almost unimaginable, but the reality is that people just aren't going like they used to.

Not surprisingly there are many factors involved with this decreasing attendance rate. I believe one reason is because of rising ticket prices. *As with all things price is often an important consideration, and with ticket prices now hovering just under the \$10.00 mark (at least in Upstate New York), it's easy to see why someone would be content to wait for a movie to come out on DVD rather than head to their local multiplex. Back in the 1980's movie tickets cost a fraction of that amount, and as years have gone by they've steadily increased. For a whole family to make a trip to the movies it now costs a large chunk of change just for tickets alone, and if refreshments are added to the bill it can be a costly night out. Of course movie ticket prices aren't unique in this sense, as the cost of most things have gone up over the years, but the fact that technology has given consumers cheaper alternatives to theaters makes these increased ticket prices even more detrimental to the movie industry than they might have been otherwise.

One complaint often leveled against Hollywood nowadays has been the lack of originality and new story ideas. Much has been written as of late about how sequels and remakes mostly dominate the schedule of new releases. Considering that Hollywood movies now cost enormous amounts of money to produce and market, it's not too surprising that major studios would lean towards sticking with proven commodities rather than risking large amounts of cash on more original, but unproven, ideas. Whether or not the trend towards recycling old ideas is a major factor in declining theater attendance is unclear, as certain types of films (such as horror movies) have actually been doing well lately with many sequels and remakes. This year's Oscar Award winning films were not anywhere near what could be called top box-office champs, while conversely many low-budget horror films, most without the benefit of big-name Hollywood stars in their casts, performed exceedingly well in theaters. More likely once again it really comes down to simple economics, with huge marketing and production costs making it harder and harder for movies to turn a profit theatrically.

** In examining alternatives to watching a movie in theaters it's easy to see how the popularity of DVD and pay-per-view cable, not to mention other technology that competes for a consumers' time such as video games and computers, contributes heavily to the decrease in box office revenue. The home video explosion started with the advent of VHS tape and movie rentals, which gave viewers the option of seeing a movie at home well after a film's theatrical run. Now with DVD the movies are hitting the rental and sale shelves at increasingly faster rates, making the choice to "wait for the DVD" even more appealing. And with the added storage capacity of DVD's (not to mention the ease of use and control they offer the viewer) the extra features on many DVD releases really give the viewer a lot more content for much less money. Indeed this is most likely the reason why we were treated to remarks on the Oscars about there being no place like a theater to see a movie. My take on it is that there are truths to both sides of the argument. I still think sitting with a crowd of strangers in a darkened theater in front of a huge screen is a unique, and in many ways unmatched, experience. However sitting at home, or at a friend's home, in front of a smaller (but ever-increasing in size) screen with

DVD remote in hand is also not too shabby. The theaters still have that unique, larger-than-life quality going for them that only those with the biggest, most expensive theater-quality home projection systems can currently come close to matching. DVD's have price going for them. And in the end economics always seems to play the most important role. Whether theatrical exhibition will remain a powerful component in Hollywood or whether it will continue in a slow and steady decline as home viewing options replace it remains to be seen. Personally I can't imagine my weekends starting without those exciting moments of anticipation as the theater lights dim and the opening credits role.

* I believe \$10.00 is something of a price ceiling for movies. I think over the years many people (myself included) have been generally willing to accept the slow, incremental increase in movie ticket prices, but now that the double digit mark has been reached any further increases will be met with increasingly slumping sales. I also think this particular dollar amount also holds true as a fair ceiling figure for other entertainment items as well, such as music CD prices. However that would be a whole separate column.

** I might also point out that independent filmmakers like me represent one of those "other options" competing for consumer attention. Independent and underground film and video makers increasingly distribute their works on DVD and the internet, providing yet another alternative to viewers.