

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 impact of New Media on our celebrity-obsessed culture - August 2007

I've written numerous columns on the impact new media - including the internet, the World Wide Web, DVD, high-end video/computer gaming, and especially independent digital filmmaking - is having on our entertainment landscape. In my April 2006 TFTM column I discussed how the popularity of DVD video (as well as other home entertainment options) is contributing to the decline of the theatrical movie market. Basically, because of the ever-increasing abundance, selection, and availability of new media (some of it now consumer-generated such as on YouTube and other video sharing sites), people are being offered more and more entertainment choices. Accordingly, this abundance of choices is putting growing numbers of new performers in front of large, often worldwide, audiences. Internet celebrities are emerging with increasing frequency. How then does this affect the popularity and impact of "traditional celebrities" like Hollywood movie stars and recording artists represented by music industry major labels? Those questions will be the major focus of this discussion.

The title of this column may seem a little extreme; however I believe the fact is we do indeed live in a celebrity-obsessed culture. Entertainment stories about well-known actors, singers, athletes, etc., have always been a part of both local and national newscasts, as well as the main focus of a plethora of entertainment television shows and print magazines. * Looking at the last couple months for example, hardly a day has gone by when there hasn't been some story or commentary about movie and television stars Lindsay Lohan or Paris Hilton. Watching the news often makes me think that the public will always have an insatiable appetite for celebrity stories and gossip. Yet over the past few years I've also noticed that more and more television news coverage seems to be dedicated to technology, new media, and people involved with new media. This is, of course, a reflection of our continually developing information society and related societal trends. New media is being used to give the average person a voice on television. For example, major news networks like CNN now regularly include viewer feedback in the

form of E-mail poll question responses as part of many news programs. Average citizens are now also contributing even more directly to breaking news stories by providing (often dramatic) video footage captured on consumer camcorders. These contributors are even given on-air credit and often referred to as “I-reporters”. ** Internet bloggers have also become a major force, and their discussions about various current topics and issues now often get taken into account on major newscasts as well. A very recent example where viewers took center stage was the CNN YouTube Debates, where viewer questions to presidential candidates were submitted using the YouTube video service, with a chosen number used on the broadcast. Generally speaking in fact, more and more user-generated videos are showing up on national newscasts and television as a whole, many of them purely entertainment-oriented.

Given such developments one can ask how this will affect the role of the traditional celebrity in our society. From my observations the appeal of megastar actors, musicians, etc. hasn’t waned much, however it’s quite apparent that such established performers are now sharing the limelight more frequently with many new faces. Trends in broadcasting such as the popularity of so-called “reality shows” have focused attention on a new wave of individuals. Similarly, many reality shows focus on actors, singers and other entertainers who were once popular years ago, thereby giving them a resurgence of sorts and further altering the celebrity landscape. Additionally, with the ever-increasing focus on popular technology such as computers and online media, technology innovators like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs have become celebrities in their own rights as well.

The online world and new digital technologies help to facilitate the possibility of everyone having a public voice. As I’ve often talked about, digital video equipment is giving aspiring filmmakers a voice, and new media in general is furthering our collective dialog about all topics large and small. I think this will only further fuel our discussion about, and fascination with, celebrities. With the increasing entertainment options both online and off, I believe more and more people will have time in the limelight (their “fifteen minutes of fame” one might say), however often for a relatively short period of time. And while I believe there will always be megastars as long as Hollywood and the music industry exist, there will probably be less of them simply as a result of the overall increased competition for viewers and attention. Society will continue to be fascinated with, and consumers will continue to talk endlessly about, celebrities of all types. The question is who will we be talking about tomorrow?

* Perhaps Paris Hilton is an ideal person to comment on in relation to the theme of new media and celebrity. A good argument can be made that she began being a mainstream celebrity primarily as a result of her infamous, highly-publicized home-made sex tape which appeared on the internet. She is of course unique in the fact that she comes from a rich and famous family, and in that respect it’s not accurate to say she was somebody totally unknown to the public that became famous purely because of the internet. However, even given the uniqueness of her identity, I believe it’s fair to say she (perhaps inadvertently) launched her celebrity status online, and then successfully migrated to traditional media outlets like Network Television and Hollywood Cinema.

** One book I highly recommend on the subjects of blogs, bloggers, blogging and the blogosphere is the 2005 publication *Blog: understanding the information reformation that’s changing your world* by Hugh Hewitt. This book is a fascinating read, and really gave me a good understanding of what exactly a blog is, as well as how blogs came to be. It also provides an interesting historical context to the new medium by looking back to the days of the Reformation, and the development and dissemination of type and textual messages, all the way up to present-day. Numerous well-known news stories (many of them political in nature) are also

discussed which illustrate how blogs and the people who write them have become a powerful force in shaping current events.