

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: ***Rob Zombie's House of 1000 Corpses*** - An artistic misfire? - June 2003

Rocker Rob Zombie's new horror flick ***House of 1000 Corpses*** was one that I had been looking forward to seeing for awhile. The word was that this film would be one of the most raw and shocking horror movies to hit theaters in a long time. It was reported that the movie was originally going to be distributed by Universal Pictures until they actually saw what Rob had created. Apparently they found the film to be too intense and dropped it. To me this meant there was a very good chance the movie was going to be something special. After Universal let it go a lot of time went by and rumors flew about different distribution deals until Lions Gate Films picked it up and it was finally released to theaters. Now that I've seen the movie I can understand why everybody was talking about it. However I can also honestly say that I was very disappointed with it.

In ***House of 1000 Corpses***, two young couples are driving through the back roads of America and wind up stopping at a tourist trap of sorts run by a showman named Captain Howdy. When the captain tells them about a local legend called Dr. Satan, they go traveling to the spot where the legend supposedly originated. After their car breaks down the youngsters find themselves stranded for the night in an old dark house inhabited by a family of psychotics. Murder, cannibalism, satanic rituals and other forms of graphic mayhem ensue as the kids are set upon by these maniacs. Before I go into why I didn't like this movie, let me discuss what I did like - or, to put it more accurately - what I admired about it. First, as everyone was saying, this was a very graphic and disturbing picture. I won't go into specifics so as not to spoil it for people, but this movie contains quite a bit of intense mayhem and bloodshed. There were several scenes of torture that especially bothered me, which is saying a lot, considering I'm a fairly hardened horror fan. The fact that Zombie was able to get a movie like this into theaters is surprising. I read an interview with Rob where he said he just wanted to make a really

scary horror flick, and ***House of 1000 Corpses*** definitely delivers in terms of it being “shocking and disturbing”. It’s great that Rob was able to make the movie he wanted and get it out there. Horror fans who like extreme product like this shouldn’t just be relegated to choices on home video. Congratulations to Rob for getting it wide theatrical distribution. Also, besides the extreme graphic imagery, the movie had lots of style and artistic merit. For example, the opening scene involves two punks trying to rob an establishment run by the aforementioned Captain Howdy. The Captain takes guests through a house of horrors of sorts - a carnival-type haunted house attraction. This scene is so over the top in style that it reminded me of something out of a Quentin Tarantino action flick. It’s exciting and entertaining and starts the movie off with a bang. This stylistic excess continues on throughout the movie not only in terms of the crazy characters presented, but through many shots of wild and imaginative imagery. Many bizarre images are quick-cut throughout the film. Most involve the family of psychos, and most are shown with some kind of negative art tinting. Seeing these shots one gets the feeling that Mr. Zombie really dreamed up all this stuff on his own and knew exactly the feeling he wanted for the film. Again, he should be congratulated for getting a very unique vision up on the big screen.

Keeping the above observations in mind I’ll now discuss why this film didn’t work for me. First and foremost, I found this movie to be too similar to the cult classic ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre***. In both movies a group of youngsters fall victim to a family of psychos living out in the middle of nowhere. In both movies victims are skinned and their faces worn by the psychos. *In both movies there is a similar ending involving one female character. I could go on listing other similarities involving specific scenes, but I think I’ve made my point. Some people might say that every movie is like some other movie in some ways, and this shouldn’t be a criticism. (This goes with the idea that there are only nine original storylines out there and everything is just a variation on one of them). Although this is a valid point, for me this was something (try as I might) I just couldn’t get past. (Although he gave a good performance, having Bill Moseley - from ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2*** - in the cast didn’t help the matter any.) In fact, not only did this movie remind me of ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre***, it really seemed like a sketchy imitation of it. As crazy and over the top as the psychos in this movie were, these characters didn’t really have much substance. It seemed to me that the actors were chewing the scenery in a series of elaborately designed set pieces that didn’t make up any cohesive whole. An example of this would be a scene where the character of Baby (Sheri Moon) was giving a sort of Marilyn Monroe-type striptease performance for the young victims. This act seemed to be just a pointless, showy set piece which served no real purpose. If it was supposed to give some insight into the mindset of the crazies, I didn’t understand it. There were several other scenes as well that just didn’t make sense to me. However I could just have looked at it the wrong way. It’s possible the point is that these people don’t operate with any rhyme or reason whatsoever.

A second criticism I have (which is very much tied in with the first one) is that many of Rob Zombie’s stylistic touches just didn’t add anything to the movie. As mentioned earlier, the director uses many quick-cut shots consisting of weird imagery and negative art tinting. I believe most of these shots were supposed to illustrate the mental psychosis of the family. This is only a guess however; when most of these admittedly interesting images flashed by, I found myself wondering what I was looking at. Again, this is an example of inspired artistry that just didn’t strengthen the movie.

Another example of what I would call artistic miscalculation involves a scene where three people are shot and killed. This scene ends with a shot of one of the psychos holding a gun to someone's head. Instead of just finishing it quickly, the camera holds (panning just ever so slightly as I recall) what seems like forever on a wide overhead shot of the scenario, until finally the trigger is pulled. The audience I was with started getting antsy and making noise when the shot froze. Today's audiences aren't used to seeing such a thing in Hollywood movies. (I believe audiences today have a very short attention span and are used to seeing MTV-style pacing.) When the shot didn't cut and the scene didn't end, people reacted to it. The director obviously used this extreme tactic in an attempt to build tension and suspense and add a memorable moment to the movie. I can't be sure, but I don't think people in the audience I was with reacted that way. It seemed that viewers were thinking something was wrong, as if a mistake had been made with the editing. Rob Zombie should be commended for adding such a risky shot, but I don't believe it really worked.

Finally, one smaller criticism would be that the over the top theatrics of some of these characters got a little annoying as the film went on. In particular, the constant cackling of Baby Firefly (Sheri Moon) started to become grating on my nerves. Also the young victims (especially the guys) were especially annoying and stupid. The one young man who just had to go out exploring the local legend really deserved his fate. I know this is often the case in such films, but this didn't help me to identify with the characters and the horror they were subjected to. Also, when we finally get a look at the supposedly legendary Dr. Satan, it's a big letdown. I won't describe in detail what this character looks like, but (if I'm indeed right in assuming what I was seeing was supposed to be the infamous legend) to me this creature just looked ridiculous. I kept thinking it could be something out of a low rent *Terminator* rip-off.

Having made my criticisms of the film, the question would be whether or not I recommend this movie. My answer is that I would recommend fright fans check this movie out and decide for themselves whether the picture is a new masterpiece in horror cinema, or just a series of disturbing sequences that don't really add up to much. Either way, *House of 1000 Corpses* should make some kind of impression on most genre fans.

* When I say that there is a similar ending involving female characters in both *House of 1000 Corpses* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, I don't mean to suggest that the fates of each of the two heroines are exactly the same. *House* offers a slight twist at the end so as to leave the conclusion of the film uncertain, whereas *Chainsaw* has a more definitive conclusion.