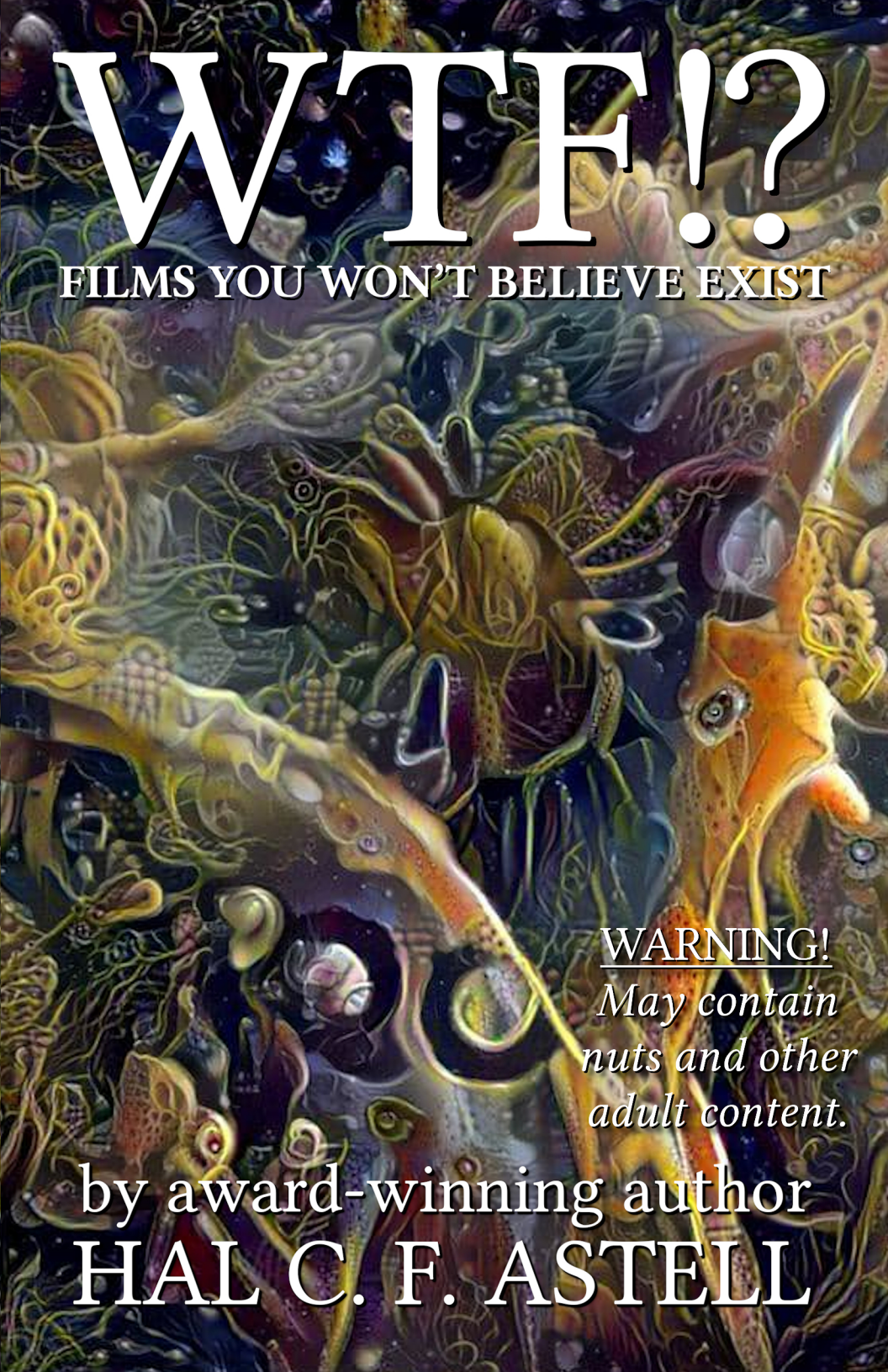
WTF!?
FILMS YOU WON'T BELIEVE EXIST
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by award-winning author
HAL C. F. ASTELL

WTF!?

FILMS YOU WON'T BELIEVE EXIST

APOCALYPSE LATER BOOKS
BY HAL C. F. ASTELL

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A Hundred in 2016
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A Horror Movie Calendar
WTF!? Films You Won't Believe Exist

APOCALYPSE LATER FILM
CINEMATIC HELL SERIES

WTF!?

FILMS YOU WON'T BELIEVE EXIST

(Colour Edition)

by

HAL C. F. ASTELL

APOCALYPSE LATER PRESS
PHOENIX, AZ

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DEDICATION

To the denizens of the vast underground cavern called Cinemageddon, who thrive on a diet of obscurity and leave no dank hole unplumbed. Had I not found you, I wouldn't have known about all these films and I certainly wouldn't have been able to see them all.

Also to the members of the Incredibly Strange Films Facebook group, a perfect place to be introduced to movies like these. Every week I spend in that company brings both another nostalgic trip to an old favourite and a fresh rabbit hole to something new and joyous that I've never heard of.

And specifically for Jim McLennan, editor of *Trash City* zine, curator of *Girls with Guns*, co-founder of the Phoenix Fear Film Festival (now part of Phoenix FearCon) and aficionado of the most unusual psychotronic films. I absolutely love when we independently search for information about the strangest films ever made online and immediately find each other's sites.

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INTRODUCTION

What's the strangest movie that you've ever seen?

If you'd asked me that question on the same date every year for the past forty years, I might well have given you forty different answers. However much I watch and learn, there always seems to be something beyond my experience that stands utterly on its own. I go looking for strange movies but the strangest often aren't easy to find, so there's always another one waiting to be discovered and a further one after that.

I grew up in England in the eighties and that was both a blessing and a curse for any genre cinema fan.

On the one hand, we were firmly into the home video age and a whole slew of material was being made available to open up the eyes of fans like me who had grown up on Hammer horrors and art films on BBC2 after the watershed of 9:00pm.

Things were starting to get more visible.

Discounting *Battle of the Planets*, I discovered anime at the same time as much of the UK, when Manga Entertainment started up in 1987 with *Akira* and *Urotsukidoji* among its first batch of releases. I put in a standing order at Groové Records for everything they put out, as well as the others who started in their wake, like Kiseki and Anime Projects.

Another video label that started up at the end of the eighties was Made in Hong Kong, which specialised in action films and Category III movies. I discovered the wonderful world of John Woo through them, as *The Killer* was one of their first releases. Again, I put in a standing order at Groové and so discovered the Shaw Brothers and *Hard Boiled* and began an abiding crush on Maggie Cheung. All with notes.

I didn't order everything published by Redemption Video but I did buy a lot of it. They released Eurotrash, horror and exploitation movies by Jess

Franco, Mario Bava and Jean Rollin, with elegantly packaged gems such as *Salon Kitty*, *Venus in Furs* and *Bay of Blood*.

I was also frequenting the video rental shops, not to rent anything for the night but to buy whatever I could from their bargain bins as cheaply as possible. It was the era when everything looked amazing, even the most awful movies, because of their glorious cover art. That's how I discovered Troma and blaxploitation and Herschell Gordon Lewis. I scoured the stalls at my local markets too for anything horror or sci-fi or action that was going for a song.

I read *Fear* and *The Dark Side* from cover to cover each and every issue and immersed myself in the zine scene, reading about whatever movies the editors had acquired on the grey market, which was physical back in the day, the tape trading circuit conducted through the mail. Hey Jim! I bought *Trash City* from issue zero but didn't meet you until we'd both moved to Arizona and married locals.

And I avidly tuned in to record the cult films screened on a BBC2 show called *Moviedrome*, presented by cult filmmaker Alex Cox, on my Amstrad double decker VCR. His eclectic selections introduced me to Samuel Fuller and Larry Cohen and David Cronenberg, along with other stunning cult movies like *Sonny Boy*, *Electra Glide in Blue* and *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*. I can't emphasise just how important that show was to me.

The show that opened my eyes the widest, though, was *The Incredibly Strange Film Show*, presented by Jonathan Ross. Over two short seasons, he gave us a tantalising glimpse into some of the most pivotal and outrageous names in underground cinema. Its first season alone dedicated shows to John Waters, Ray Dennis Steckler, Herschell Gordon Lewis, Ted V. Mikels, Russ Meyer and Sam Raimi. No wonder Edgar Wright has said that he was inspired to become a filmmaker after that Sam Raimi episode.

On the other hand, there was a lot that we still couldn't see. Reading *The Dark Side* or the zines and watching *The Incredibly Strange Film Show* was a great way to find out about films but it didn't help us actually see them, especially given that, even if we could get hold of a copy, it might be cut.

This was also the era of video nasties and garage owners being sent to prison for renting pre-cert tapes; the era of Mary Whitehouse and David Alton and "won't someone think of the children"; the era of Customs & Excise confiscating "obscene publications" as they entered the country. It was a rare horror movie that got a theatrical release without some of its juicier bits cut by demand from the BBFC. It was the era of the *Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles* and *Hollywood Hookers* with a picture of a chainsaw in between those two words, because you couldn't use "Ninja" on a cartoon and you couldn't put "Chainsaw" in a film title. Copycats, you know.

And so, while I bought no end of VHS tapes, many of them were cut for release, some seriously. Of that first batch of Manga Entertainment tapes, *Fist of the North Star* was missing over a minute, *Urotsukidoji* over two (and one of its sequels by something like a third of its running time). Many horror movies lost plenty of footage, even on original release in theatres. I didn't see all of *Hellbound: Hellraiser II* on the big screen in Halifax because some of it had been cut. Redemption Video's conflicts with the BBFC have become a thing of legend.

I managed to get hold of some titles literally under the counter. I'd go to market stalls that clearly sold exploitation videos and ask proprietors if they had a copy of certain titles that they couldn't legally sell. How they responded might end up with a mystery video tape moving into my bag under the table in return for a ten or twenty pound note. I had no idea what *Deported Women of the SS Special Section* would be like, but it had Nazis and boobs in it and I wasn't going to miss out on the illicit thrill.

Fortunately, we're in a new age. I now live in the United States, where banning content seems to be reserved for evangelical right wing school districts upset at naked mice in graphic novels about the Holocaust. They seem to be less panicked about sex and gore and more the potential for a student to read about someone who's like them (but not like the school district's board members). Heaven help them if girls discover that women actually did amazing things throughout history. What will happen to their perfect country when they realise they can too?

Sure, network television here is quite the prude compared to the BBC after the watershed, and there have always been people calling for bans, from Chick tracts to the PMRC, but they didn't really get anywhere, at least comparatively speaking.

I've lost track of how many video nasties I've seen uncut on a local big screen, courtesy of the Midnite Movie Mamacita. Many others are just a click away on Amazon, in BluRay quality with free shipping thrown in. It's not particularly hard to find films here, as long as they're still in print.

Of course, not everything is still in print and being banned is just one trigger for obscurity. There are plenty of other reasons why certain films are not easy to find, films that are not available to purchase legally not because they're against the law but because they're just not for sale.

And here the grey market steps in and saves the day.

I remember the "Home Taping is Killing Music" logo back in my day. The thinking was that the ready availability of blank cassettes meant that few people would actually buy music any more; they'd just copy it off their friends. Which, of course, we did, given that so many of us were in school and lived on the proceeds of paper rounds or allowances, but we also bought a heck of a lot of music with what little money we had and we grew up to buy a heck of a lot more once we had disposable incomes.

Not all pirates are thieves, preventing the hard working creators from putting food on their kids' tables. Some pirates are the best preservers of culture out there, because they're the ones tracking down all those out of print titles, often paying good money for copies and ripping them to share in torrent communities so they can be seen.

As much money as I pay creators, usually in person nowadays, for their books, music and films, I try to be one of those preserving pirates. Case in point: legendary filmmaker Roger Corman, who won an Academy Award for his lifetime of achievement, directed fifty films. I've owned forty-nine of them for years, in various forms, but the fiftieth is not commercially available. That's *Naked Paradise* and the story behind why is a tortuous one that I covered in my review of it at Apocalypse Later.

How did I review it, given that it's not commercially available? Well, I stumbled upon a video shop in Wellington, New Zealand that had a copy of it listed in their catalogue to rent, albeit only within that city, under its reissue title of *Thunder Over Hawaii*. A Kiwi friend put me in touch with a friend of hers who lived in Wellington, who was willing and able to rent it, who was also willing to rip it and upload it to a torrent community, where fans could finally watch it. And so one more film can be seen.

Most real pirates don't see that as morally equivalent to downloading a camcorder copy of the latest MCU movie while it's still in the cinema. It's not a black and white world. Torrent communities are crucial to my ability to watch and review some of the true obscurities of the film world, and I've been personally thanked by some of the filmmakers whose films I've pirated for review, on the grounds that someone saw their work and said interesting and often positive things about it in public.

That's why I'm dedicating this book to the denizens of Cinemageddon. Thank you, folks, for everything you've made available to me when the market steadfastly refused to do so.

And I'm drifting away from the point, but this particular book would not have been possible without the help of torrent communities such as Cinemageddon. This book is a deep dive, a quest for the real answer to the question I posed at the start of this rambling introduction: "What's the strangest movie that you've ever seen?"

Of course, there's no definitive answer, but the more we watch and read and learn about film, the closer we come to the real candidates, the ones that make us wonder why they were even made, such as *The Pink Angels*, which I covered in my first book, *Huh?* After I did so, I got to ask one of its actors, Dan Haggerty, what audience it was made for, given that it seemed to be offensive to the logical choices of bikers and gay men, who were the lead characters. He thought about it for a while before replying, "I guess you are."

And that's my key determination here about what counts as strange. I excluded such well known choices as *Eraserhead* and *The Holy Mountain* and

Gummo, because they make sense to me in a particular context. They're certainly strange, but I can see why they were made and who they were made for. You've heard of them because they reached their audiences and those audiences were happy about it.

The best known film that I've included, even though it's still little seen, has to be *The Star Wars Holiday Special*, because I still can't understand why it was made. Yes, I understand the cultural expectations of television in its day but they don't fully cover it. Drugs are very likely a good part of the reasoning but I don't think they fully explain it either. It was just an outstandingly public trainwreck.

A few more inclusions are well known within the cult film community, like *The Dragon Lives Again*, *For Y'ur Height Only* and *If Footmen Tire You, What Will Horses Do?* There are reasons for each of these too, but they go beyond typical frames of logic and even fans of psychotronic cinema will look at them and wonder why. These are titles that you won't hear until you've dived into certain areas of cinema but, once in the water, they'll come up surprisingly often.

Others are far more obscure but just as worthy of inclusion. Not a lot of people have seen the Peruvian Barbie porno known as *La farándula* or the 8-bit Japanese gem called *The Flying Luna Clipper*, for instance, but they're just as fascinating as anything else here and perhaps even more bizarre. I doubt any other topic could warrant the inclusion of *Little Red Riding Hood and Tom Thumb vs. The Monsters* in the same book as *The Groper Train: Search for the Black Pearl*, but both are gloriously inexplicable, thoroughly strange movies, one made for kids and one definitely not made for kids.

Needless to say, the range of cinema included here is insanely wide and deliberately so. These selections come from all over the world, were made to wildly different budgets and span quite a few decades, the earliest being a 1938 American film and the most recent a pair of features from 2015, one British and the other Malaysian. They run the gamut from niche fetish film to educational short, from ego trip to religious dogma, from art film to sheerest exploitation.

My hope is that, even if you're a devotee of incredibly strange cinema, I'll still be introducing you to a title or six that you've not come across before, even if you happen to be a Cinemageddon member of good and long standing. If so, then you're welcome! However, if you've already seen everything here, then I bow down to you and want to know where your book is, so I can buy it.

—Hal C. F. Astell

May 2023

ประกาศท้าคนไอเดียซ่า..
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THE SPERM (2007)

Director: Taweewat Wantha
Writers: Siwaporn Pongsuwan, Kiat Songsanant and Taweewat Wantha
Stars: Leo Putt and Pimpaporn Leenutapong

Once I'd read about *The Sperm*, whose original Thai title is, courtesy of the ironic gods of synchronicity, *Asujaak*—I kid you not—I knew I had to see it and, while it wasn't remotely what I expected, I wasn't disappointed. After all, how can any movie go wrong with a set of inflatable alien sex doll ninjas who can do synchronised dance routines?

Well, for all that this feature contains more masturbation, more flying sperm and more sex-crazed babies than any movie ever should, it's really just a teen comedy, a coming of age yarn—if you don't mind the pun—that is frankly almost Mormon-friendly. This is me easing you to the incredibly strange, folks. You're welcome.

Everything has to do with sex but we don't actually get to see any, even with a number of porn movies broadcast during the movie, and the only nudity is a brief shot of boobies on a DVD case being filed away in a young Thai gentleman's bedroom. If there was any swearing, and it certainly wasn't prominent across a couple of viewings, it could have been easily replaced in the English subtitles. Just like its lead character, Sutin, this picture is utterly obsessed with sex but it doesn't ever get any. That would only happen in a theoretical sequel after he grows up.

We meet him at a crucial time in his life. He's moved to Bangkok to become a rock star, but he spends a lot more time dreaming and obsessing over a teen idol. She's called Lammy in the version I have, Laem-Mee on the film's IMDb page and La-Mai on Wikipedia. Whatever the true spelling should be, she's an irresistibly cute girl next door type model who appears on billboards and magazine covers, acts as the draw in an advertising campaign for Addict body spray and judges the local battle of the bands.

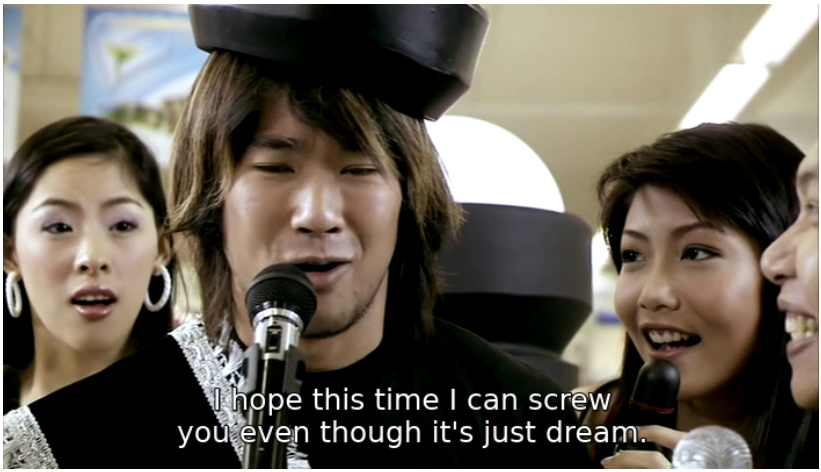
It's like she was designed to be everywhere in Sutin's life, but he even

sees her when his eyes are closed, because what seems like all his dreams are erotic fantasies featuring Lammy. One night she's saving him from a mob of ravenous fan girls in return for the privilege of giving him a blow job, the next she's knocking on his door in nothing but underwear and bubbles because her bath ran out of water and she needs to finish up by pouring his bottle over her head. If only he didn't always wake up before the climax, as it were.

While he wants to be famous, he isn't, at least not yet. Soon he'll be famous in ways he'd never dreamed of, which he would like to be undone. When his local grocery store erupts in a fanfare because he's picked the winning can of Addict and he's asked to say something impressive to Lammy, he just hopes that he'll be able to screw her, even if it is just a dream.

Which it isn't. He's live on national TV, promptly becoming a laughing stock for the whole country. No wonder he gets blistering drunk and has to be carried back to his apartment by his bandmates.

But the next erotic dream goes horribly wrong and he finds himself back on the streets, trousers half undone, being accused of attempted rape by the first woman he literally bumps into. She calls the cops, who arrest him while whacking off to a poster of Lammy in the dark street. Life is not going well for Sutin.



And, if that sounds like a detailed synopsis, it's just the beginning. This is the first nineteen minutes, by which point we've only just got to the animated title credits, with his freed sperm finding their way into the sewers and sprouting faces.

And now it gets weird!

Those sperm navigate their way back to the surface, where they float around like a icky swarm, impregnating every woman they can find, all of whom suddenly turn up pregnant. Very pregnant. And weirdly so, because after only a day, they each find themselves ready to give birth. Lives are suddenly ruined all over Bangkok, couples breaking up because of clear infidelity, and both the media and the army are all over it. And when four hundred women promptly give birth to babies with Sutin's face, there's a half a million baht reward out for information on the father.

Even though he's just met up with Lammy in the grocery store, where she tells him that his words were refreshing because nobody ever talks straight to her, his life has just got considerably worse and is about to take a swan dive down the crapper because his sperm children are growing at the rate of four years per day, utterly obsessed with sex and reproducing by whacking off and then dissolving, while their own sperm impregnate further women. Sutin's army of masturbation children might just bring about doomsday! Whew!

Everything I write here seems to be dripping with semen, because it's everywhere, but then this picture does aim to recount the growing pains of a young man so that's entirely appropriate. Sutin is really a nice guy, with the usual problems magnified because he's one of those people to whom the world seems to happen. Sure, he has Marilyn Manson on his door and he wears a Cocknoose shirt, but he's just a sweet kid who's polite to everyone.

He's played by Leo Putt, whose real name is Putthipong Sriwat—yes, every name is going to sound juvenile when associated with a movie like this. While he has a number of films to his credit, some of which I've seen, like *Dynamite Warrior*, he also hilariously turns out to be the Thai dubbed voice of Spider-Man in the Sam Raimi trilogy. I will never look at Peter Parker the same way again, that's for sure! With great power comes great responsibility! The puns just won't quit.

That casting makes a lot of sense too, because Putt has oodles of fun in this movie being placed into hilariously awkward situations. How would you react if you had to masturbate to save the world? Or if an army of sex-obsessed babies with your face rush your new girlfriend? Or a giant child version of you threatens Bangkok?

If Sutin is a sweet kid, Lammy is the nicest and most grounded celebrity I've ever seen in film. Pimpaporn Leenutapong—what did I tell you about

those names?—is the sort of young lady who could spark your lust and warm your grandma's heart at the same time. She's not conventionally beautiful but her smile is the work of angels and it's easy to understand Sutin's obsession and share it. Someone get me a plane ticket to Bangkok for Christmas.

She's still only made one other picture, *Sayew*, another coming of age comedy feature that revolves around sex, this time with her in the lead, playing a tomboy who writes the reader's experience column in a porn mag, even though she has a severe lack of experience in the subject. That's why she decides to seek the reality from the public at large, so generating the film. I wonder why she hasn't done more, because she glides through this picture with a grace that is astounding given the subject matter. She's believable on those magazine covers and billboards, but also when doing her shopping in the grocery store and as a damsel in distress stuck in the breast pocket of a giant child with the hots for her. That's range.

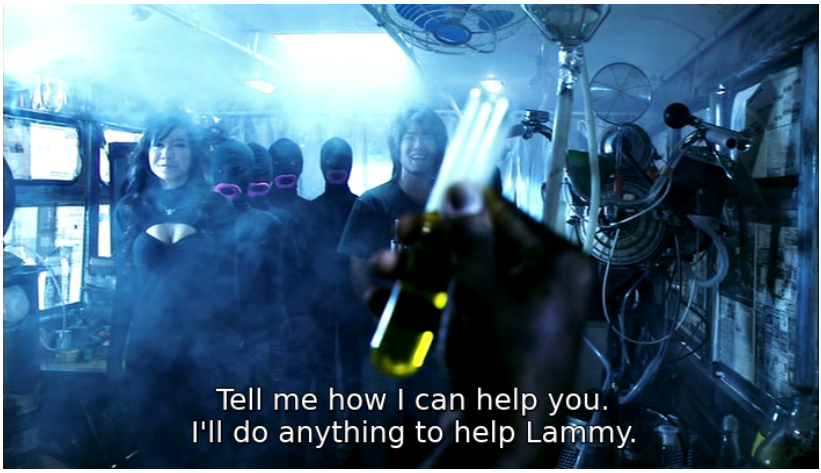
While Sutin and Lammy are the most prominent characters, there are a host of fascinating ones in support.

Sutin's bandmates are an odd bunch, with the slow but UFO-obsessed Prasert and Surachai, the drummer, who apparently decides partway through the movie that he's a transvestite, playing the battle of the bands set in full drag, right down to a serious upturned hairdo.

Of course, they're comparatively a thoroughly normal bunch when compared to the mystery man who reappears with his daughter in a barrage of increasingly surreal scenes until we finally figure out who he is. Apparently his character is called Dr. Satifeung, though I didn't hear a name in the movie itself, and he's played by Somlek Sakdikul from the *Buppah Rahtree* horror movies with an agreeable relish. His hair is grey and wild, he creates miniature dogs for fun and he gets insane lines like, "Such a genius... showing porno movies to children." Don't quote that at work. His daughter/assistant gets the dirty jobs, some of which are appropriate for every meaning of that word that you can think of.

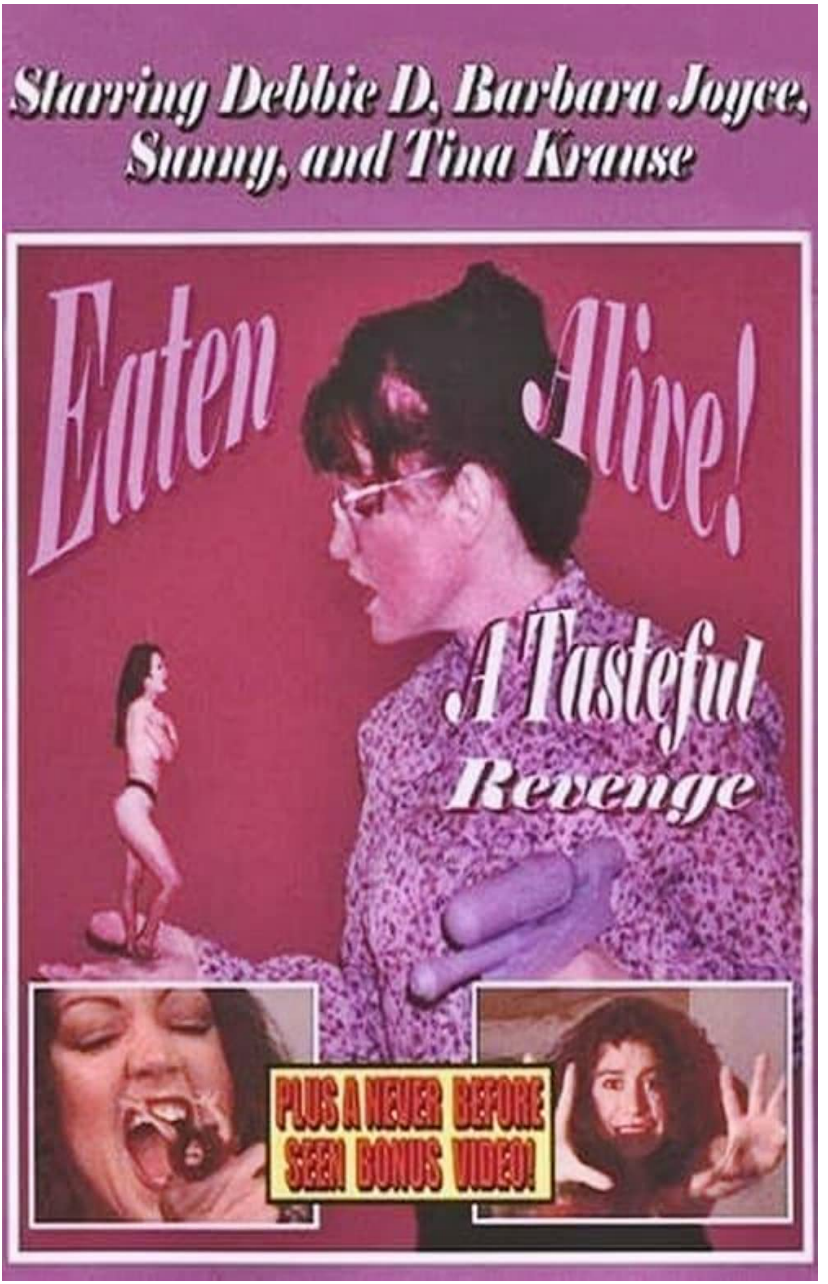
In Hollywood, coming of age movies tend to revolve around mundane things like being left at home while your family go on holiday or your dance group needing to win some talent show to save a convent and avoid breaking up. It's no shock that I find most of them depressingly dull. Sure, some have nuns and corpses and tongues on frozen poles, but how many of them have inflatable alien sex-doll ninjas, drive-in porn movie theatres and armies of identical masturbating children? Yeah, I couldn't think of any either. I can't even think of any if I substitute that "and" for an "or".

And that's a shame, because this is a lot more fun than anything I grew up watching. Sure, the pace is wildly inconsistent and the CGI faces make Sutin's bastard sperm children look like football players from a twentieth



century video game, but I don't care. What they look like is wildly less important than the fact that they're bastard sperm children in a movie that could be shown on network television. You owe it to yourself to watch this and drink a shot for each scene that features flying sperm.

"For the human race," says Lammy. You can do it too.


Starring Debbie D, Barbara Joyce, Sunny, and Tina Krause
Eaten Alive!
A Tasteful Revenge
PLUS A NEVER BEFORE SEEN BONUS VIDEO!

EATEN ALIVE! A TASTEFUL REVENGE (1999)

Director: Gary Whitson
Writer: Unknown
Stars: Debbie D, Barbara Joyce, Tina Krause, Sunny and Dean Paul

I reviewed *Eaten Alive!* right after a monochrome French short starring Josephine Baker, *The Fireman of the Folies Bergère*, which felt ahead of its time. This, on the other hand, is a bizarre movie that feels notably behind its time. While WAVE Productions was started in order to make films like the serials of the forties and horror and sci-fi movies of the drive in era, they didn't have either the budgets or the acting talent of the studios that inspired them, so they became something else entirely.

They're still in business today, with what is now a huge archive of fetish films, made to satisfy a whole variety of fetish needs. There isn't any sex in WAVE Productions movies, but there are usually many girls getting naked or at least stripping down to their panties, along with a threadbare plot that involves another niche fetish activity. They're the folk behind titles like *Thunder & Lightning 3: Chloroformed Heroines*, *Hypnotized and Cloned Models* and *Cannibal Island: Jungle Girl Barbecue*, though some are far more mundane, such as *Test Shoot*, *Love Object* or *Burglar*. And let's not forget compilations like *WAVE's Best Drowning Clips 3*!

Eaten Alive! A Tasteful Revenge dates back to 1999 when it was one of thirteen releases that year, after sixty or so previous titles dating back to the company's founding in 1987. As you might expect from the title, it's a cannibalism fetish video, running for around half an hour and featuring cheap sets, topless girls and horrible special effects, although the green blast from Stacey's shrinking pistol is surprisingly capable. In fact, the effects work gets better throughout the film, as if the crew didn't quite know how to handle a greenscreen set up early on but started to figure it

out by the time the film wrapped.

Most of all, though, it has an astoundingly inane plot with stunningly ridiculous dialogue that never ceases to amaze, however deep under the influence you happen to be at the time. Lead actress Debbie D grins her way through the film, even though she's supposed to be running through a varied set of emotions like jealousy, rage and satisfaction. She's a WAVE mainstay, a producer herself nowadays, but this is a long way away from her finest hour, assuming that she even has a finest hour.

As we begin, she's working as "an executive in a cosmetic and fashion company", according to the WAVE Productions website. We wouldn't be able to tell that otherwise, because the sets are stunningly generic: what could be a doctor's walk in cupboard, the corner of an executive office and a shower, used without the shower curtain drawn, of course. I've seen real porn movies with better sets.

Debbie D's character Stacey is excited because there's a promotion up for grabs and her friend, Dr. Baines, he of the wildly inconsistent accent, has mastered a new invention, which the pair will keep secret for now. It's a grey, rather bulbous gun, which looks like it was 3D printed but was

probably a NERF weapon with a sextoy attached, all painted one relentless colour. It has the power to either enlarge things or to shrink them, which opens up all sorts of possibilities like giving cows more meat and making *Fantastic Voyage* a reality. Now, I wonder how that's going to get used in a movie called *Eaten Alive!* Answers on the back of a postcard, please.

Now what scenario could be conjured up that might prompt Stacey to use such a dangerous weapon? It's not merely that she doesn't land the promotion she wants; it's that Trish, her boss, lets her down in a notably evil fashion. "You're an attractive woman," she suggests, "but I needed the most attractive woman in the company." Ouch! And the most attractive woman in the company is apparently Stacey's roommate, Lisa! Double ouch! And Robin would have been the second choice! Triple ouch! And... you get the picture.

So what's a poor overlooked cosmetics executive to do? Well, what else could she do but steal Dr. Baines's secret new invention, go home, stand there grinning while Lisa takes a gratuitous shower, then shrink her, bind her with string and eat her, slowly and sadistically.

You had a different idea? Well, you don't work for WAVE Productions,

so what do you know? Of course, it's entirely appropriate for Stacey to actually verify that Lisa is prettier than her. Of course, on noticing her voyeur, Lisa would cover her boobs not her bush. Of course, Stacey would eat her as a little naked snack. Why not?

My biggest problem with these scenes is actually the dialogue.

I can deal with the fact that the rest of the plot is merely repetition; after devouring Lisa, Stacey has only to work her way through the rest of the cast in similar fashion until the end credits roll. After Tina Krause's nude shower scene, which ably highlights how Lisa is definitely more attractive than Stacey, I'm surprisingly fine with nobody else stripping off completely; I assume Sunny, who was introduced here, and Barbara Joyce just have different contracts.

I'm fine with the stunning story progression that has Robin and Stacey try on bikini after bikini, because hey, this is a fetish video.

Frankly I'm even accepting of the outrageously awful greenscreen work that makes the swallowing scenes rather reminiscent of tenth generation VHS copies of Terry Gilliam animations. People don't buy fetish videos for their budgets, they buy them because they contain the asphyxiation/

drowning/cannibalism/insert personal fetish choice here enacted by half naked ladies. But the dialogue... how is that not a turnoff?

I honestly think this would play better with the sound off. Then we can't hear Dean Paul switch from some sort of Alpine accent to blustering British and back like he's been shot by some other secret gun that the WAVE Productions prop department doesn't have the budget to create. It would save us from Debbie D's accent getting broader every time she gets angry, like when she screams at her boss, "We done heah!?"

Mostly though, it would excuse us from cannibalism puns that vary from cheesy, such as, "This job would eat you alive!" to inappropriate ones that sound horribly wrong, like, "I'm not an ass kisser any more; I'm more like an ass eater!"

Oh, and let's not forget just how poorly these non-actors mumble the lines that they should scream. For some reason, when stripped half-naked, shrunk to action figure size and about to be eaten, all any of these victims can say is, "Don't drop me." I'm really not expecting Tennessee Williams dialogue or Marlon Brando delivery, but this is stunningly awful. I could do better, but I wasn't planning to writhe around in my undies in a huge

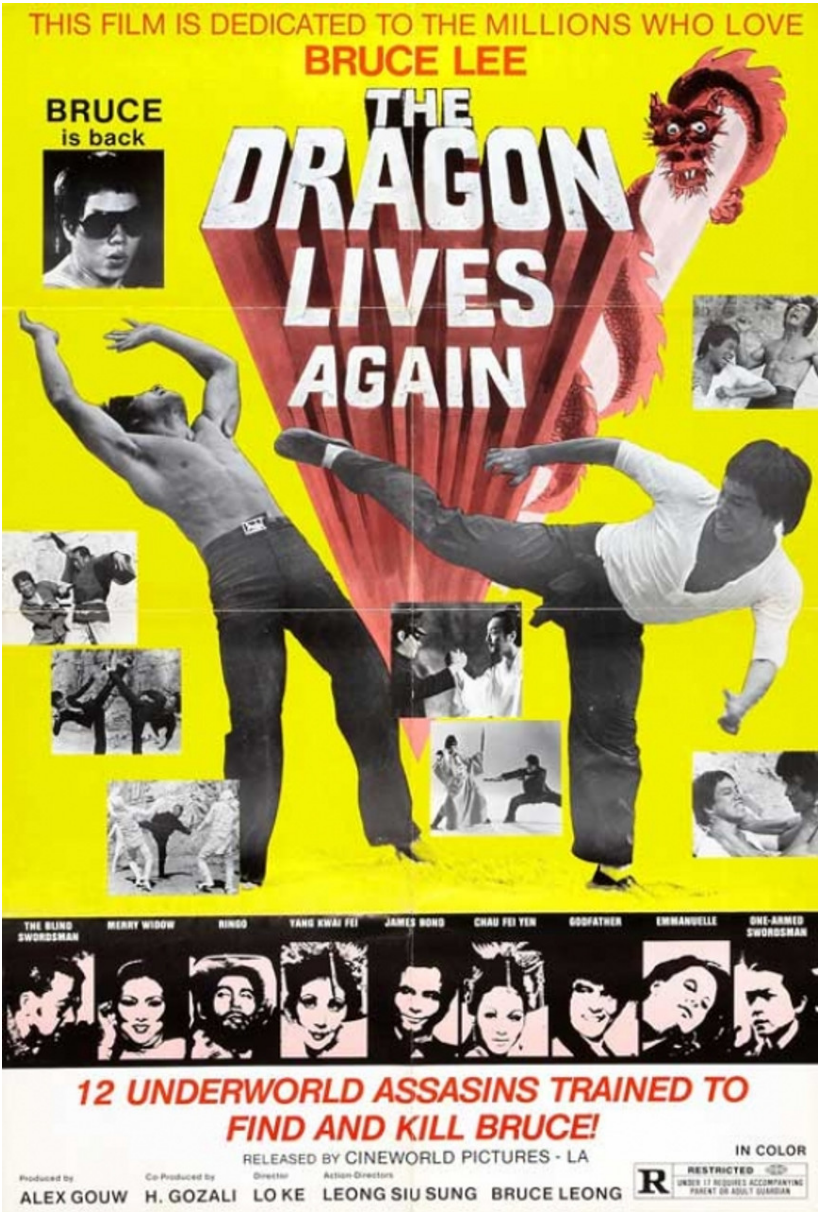
fake mouth being sprayed by saliva this afternoon.

I have to say that I had a blast watching this film, though it's probably less for the movie itself and more for the fact that I was nursing a white Russian and watching with family. To be brutally honest, their reactions were even more priceless than the bad CGI, the worse dialogue and the flamboyantly awful acting.

I'm fascinated to see how some of these folk progressed over the years, because a few are major names within this scene. Debbie D has made over three hundred movies, including *The Deepening*, alongside Gunnar Hansen and Debbie Rochon, which played the first Phoenix Fear Fest, and Bill Zebub's gleefully titled *The Worst Horror Movie Ever Made: The Re-Make*. Tina Krause is actually not awful here and has also racked up a filmography full of outrageous Z movie titles. The catch is that WAVE Productions films are often short but expensive (like $25 for this 30 minute DVD). Even a skimpy 287 MB WMV download of a 2014 title like *The Dream Killer! Chapter 1* runs $20 and longer films can be more expensive still.

So, can I borrow your credit card and what's your limit?

WHAT IF OUR LOVELY
LADIES HAD BEEN
EATEN BY AN
ALIEN CREATURE
INSTEAD?


THIS FILM IS DEDICATED TO THE MILLIONS WHO LOVE
BRUCE LEE
BRUCE
is back
THE
DRAGON
LIVES
AGAIN
THE BLIND SWORDSMAN
MERRY WIDOW
RINGO
YANG KWAI FEI
JAMES BOND
CHAU FEI YEN
GODFATHER
EMMANUELLE
ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN
12 UNDERWORLD ASSASINS TRAINED TO
FIND AND KILL BRUCE!
RELEASED BY CINEWORLD PICTURES - LA
IN COLOR
R
RESTRICTED
Produced by
ALEX GOUW
Co-Produced by
H. GOZALI
Director
LO KE
Action Directors
LEONG SIU SUNG
BRUCE LEONG

THE DRAGON LIVES AGAIN (1977)

Director: Lo Ke

Writers: Shek Ke and Wei Liang

Stars: Bruce Leong, Shin Ii Lung, Tong Ching, Alexander Grand and Jenny

Having changed the face of action movies forever by introducing the western world to Hong Kong martial arts pictures, Bruce Lee died in 1973, at the height of his fame. Needless to say, the kung fu industry was rather distraught and so it promptly cast everyone and his dog as "the new Bruce Lee", almost literally.

Some of the actors who were tasked with this role, such as Bruce Le and Bruce Li, did pretty well at it and became stars themselves. Some became famous once they stopped pretending to be Bruce Lee, like Jackie Chan, the star of the embarrassing *New Fists of Fury*. Others just earned their wages in a neverending flood of Brucesploitation movies, a few of which are fun, most of which are awful and some of which are outright bizarre.

I reviewed one of the worst, *Fist of Fear, Touch of Death* in my first book, *Huh? An A-Z of Why Classic American Bad Movies Were Made*, but this one is at least a Hong Kong movie and it's way out there at the outright bizarre end of the spectrum. It's a supposed comedy from 1977 known as *The Dragon Lives Again* (even though it isn't a sequel to the previous year's *The Dragon Lives*) and *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu*. The principal reason that it's bizarre is that Lee is far from the only icon in the movie; in fact, it's absolutely jam packed full of them!

It's also bizarre because of how these icons are treated, starting with Bruce Lee himself. Even though it's been four years since his death, he shows up unconscious on a set of trestles with a sheet hiding what is apparently a giant boner, one that the King of the Underworld's two wives are rather keen on.

Spoiler: it's really his nunchucks. Sorry.

Yes, we're in the kung fu movie underworld, which looks so much like the regular kung fu world that we might be excused if we think it's the same one. The impersonator this time out is Leung Siu-Lung, credited as Bruce Leong, a decent martial artist but one who looks a lot less like Bruce Lee than Shen Ie Lung, who plays the Godfather—yes, that one—without any of Marlon Brando's mumbling but with a physique that resembles Lee's, at least once he strips off his outfit for the final boss battle in the inevitable rock quarry that, contrary to the laws of physics, apparently sits right in the middle of town so that folk can merely look sideways whenever they want a fight and let it take over their environment.

So, this becomes Bruce Lee versus the Godfather, with the King of the Underworld somewhere in between them as a bad guy rather than a boss, to use a videogame term that originated in a Bruce Lee movie. He does have a pillar that he can shake to create earthquakes, which makes him pretty wicked, but they all seem to have an epicenter right there in his evil underground lair, which makes him pretty dumb instead.

This whole set up is odd to begin with, but it's only the beginning, as

there are many more icons waiting in the wings for their fifteen minutes of Underworld fame. We're quickly introduced to three in a single Chinese restaurant, starting with future star Eric Tsang as Popeye the Sailor Man, complete with requisite tiny hat and pipe—oh yes, the spinach shows up later. He's sharing a table with Kwai Chang Caine, the character that David Carradine introduced in the series *Kung Fu*, and over there is Zatoichi the Blind Swordsman, the Japanese wandering masseur that Shintaro Katsu played in no less than twenty-six movies and exactly a hundred television episodes. This isn't one of either.

I don't remember Zatoichi ever being a bad guy, but here he's working for the Godfather, who must collect icons, because all his other minions fit into that category too. There's the Man with No Name, complete with a requisite poncho, though the English dub refers to him as Clint Eastwood throughout; there's Exorcist (without a "the") who is inexplicably French; and there's Dracula and his army of zombies, who look rather like men in black bodysuits with white skeletons painted on them—they don't even attempt to stay in front of any black backgrounds to look cool against.

Two more are played by non-Chinese actors. James Bond appears in the form of "Champion-boxer of Europe, Alexander Grand", who had kicked off his career with a couple of real Bruce Lee titles, *Fist of Fury* and *The Way of the Dragon*. The other, the Godfather's sexiest assassin, Emmanuelle, is played by Jenny, who has neither a last name nor another film credit. Now, who could stand tall against such a line up? No, don't even bother to answer that question. This is Brucesploitation, baby!

What the writers were smoking to come up with this, I have no idea, but they didn't stop there. Soon the One-Armed Swordsman shows up too, as a weaker character than in the Shaw Brothers movies with his name in the title, and I'm not sure if any of the other people we meet aren't half inched from other Asian pictures too. I'm especially suspicious of the red cloaked chamberlain character who shows up to battle Bruce Lee and the forces of good in the name of the King of the Underworld. Maybe I haven't watched enough Asian movies to know who he's supposed to be, which I am trying to fix, but maybe he's just a rare original in this one.

There are two credited writers: Shek Ke, who earned no more credits,

and Wei Liang, who worked more often as an art director but also wrote *The Reincarnation*, an early Chow Yun-Fat movie, with its director Cheung Sum. Maybe that's just a warm up for this one, which simply couldn't be followed. What script could you write after this one to try to top it? Bruce Lee taught us the art of fighting without fighting; maybe that's what it means.

Clearly this isn't a movie for everyone, but it has so much happening that nobody watching is likely to be bored, even if they can't get into the weirdness of it. It also can't be accused of false advertising (except for that title) because it even showcases all those various icons during the action packed opening credits sequence; how can anyone fail to thrill to the sight of the Man with no Name shooting himself in the foot and so setting his poncho on fire? It's a special kind of movie genius to be sure, but it's still genius nonetheless.

What's problematic is that there's so much going on here that it's hard to pick what stands out the most. Strangely, as perhaps befits this movie, it isn't the fight scenes, because they're mostly underwhelming until the

boss battles at the end, which are much more like what we should have had all along. The Clint Eastwood and James Bond fights might prompt us to ask for our money back. They're more like what the wrestling industry call squash matches, there just to briefly showcase the hero and warm up the crowd to dish out heat.

I got a kick out of the King of the Underworld's wives, not only because they frolic around naked in a massive bathtub with their equally naked servant girls, but because they also bicker so well. After they play a round of rock/paper/scissors to see who will get the opportunity to transform into a different character and so be able to seduce Bruce Lee, the winner screws it up with more bickering and the other promptly joins in.

With them trying to cheat on the King, maybe because he freely admits to not feeling up to servicing them himself, Emmanuelle persuades him back into the sack after the Godfather sends her on a mission of death by snu snu. Yes, he wants her to screw him to death. This leads to amazing lines, another guilty pleasure in this movie. "Her pussy's in this plot too," he soliloquises. "She's using it to murder me!" The King's chamberlain

counts his vibrations while he's doing Emmanuelle (or rather while she's doing him); all out of beads on his abacus, he pulls out a conveniently positioned but highly anachronistic calculator instead.

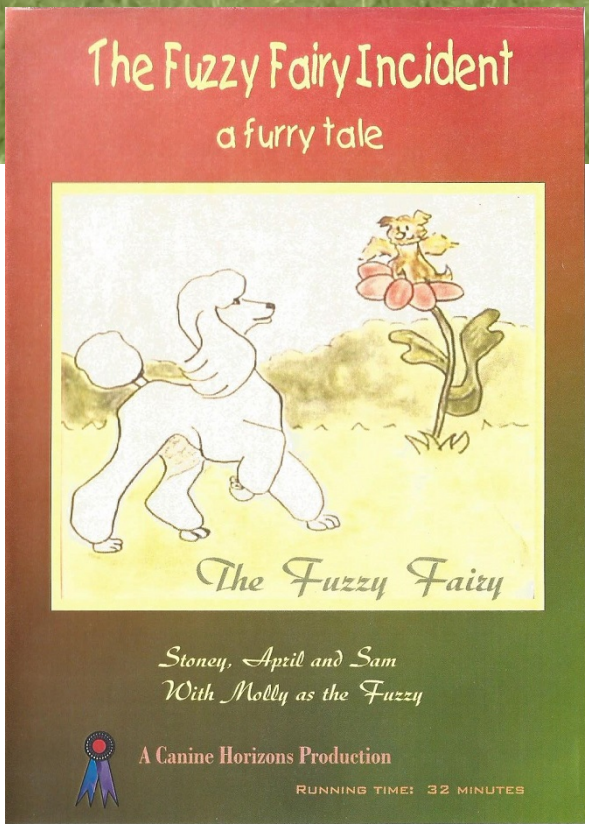
Given that this movie was originally released in Cantonese and I saw an English dub, I can't trust all the dialogue to be even close to accurate; I learned that lesson watching Filipino midget superstar Weng Weng's *For Y'ur Height Only*. However, during the Bruce Lee versus Zatoichi fight, the fighters' astounding repertoire of moves is mirrored in subtitles as well, just in case we missed the dialogue. Lee's are all named for his films, but Zatoichi's are thoroughly imaginative: Blind Chicken Beaks, Blind Guy Kills Mosquito and, best of all, Blind Dog Pisses, which looks pretty close to what you're likely to be picturing.

This imagination extends to the astounding lack of continuity. Bruce Leong plays Bruce Lee throughout the film except for his battle with Dracula, as he inexplicably shows up as Kato instead. Similarly, Dracula's zombies are silent throughout, except at a point where dialogue is needed and one demonstrates how fluent he is in English. The chamberlain's set of teleporting mummies merely mumble, because, you know, credulity.

Make no mistake, this is a stunningly awful movie, but I for one am happy to live in a world where Bruce Lee wakes up in the underworld and promptly stamps out gambling and opens a gymnasium. You know, the usual bucket list items to check off the moment you're dead. I can't hide my appreciation for Popeye going into snake stance to battle a corrupt cop and Kwai Chang Caine mule kicking his partner offscreen.

However, the many unanswered questions deserve panels of their own at conventions. Why is Exorcist French? Why does Lee only haul out his repertoire of animal noises for just one fight? Why is he floored at one point by electronica? Who stole all the water out of the king's wives' bathtub? Why do mummies teleport to Pink Floyd? Answers on the back of a postcard, please.

The Fuzzy Fairy Incident


The Fuzzy Fairy Incident
a furry tale
The Fuzzy Fairy
Stoney, April and Sam
With Molly as the Fuzzy
A Canine Horizons Production
RUNNING TIME: 32 MINUTES

THE FUZZY FAIRY INCIDENT: A FURRY TALE (2000)

Director: Charlene Dunlap
Writer: ?
Stars: Stoney, April, Sam and Molly

Now that I've warmed you up with sex, violence and fetishistic nudity, let me explain that *The Fuzzy Fairy Incident* isn't remotely sexual, horrific or inappropriate in any way and I hope that you won't be disappointed.

However it is certainly weird, at least to me, because Charlene Dunlap didn't just make one movie about dogs that are played by real dogs, but at least ten of them, according to her website, Canine Horizons, right up to the newest, *The Whisperwood Arsonist*, in which JD and Sydney, a pair of doggy detectives, solve the mystery of the arsonist who lights "suspicious fires on Whisperwood Lane". In fact, that's even a sequel, to *The Theft of the Rothchild Ruby*.

Those films only run ten minutes or so and are available to view on YouTube, but this one, with its cuteness overload title, runs past thirty and is only available on DVD, with hand drawn cover art to boot. There are five such half hour shorts for sale at Canine Horizons and, so far, I've sufered through two of them for your edification and pleasure, the other being *Paws for Dance*. This one does, at least, have a plot and a three act structure. I'm still not quite sure what the other one has.

Dunlap is clearly a dog lover, first and foremost, given how the variety of material on her website descends all the way to poodle limericks and cartoons, but she's a dog trainer not far after that. There's nothing strange in that and she certainly seems like a very nice lady who cares very much for her animals and trains them to the best of her ability with patience. I don't doubt that, based on what I see here.

What I doubt is her sanity, because she seems utterly sincere in reading

her dogs bedtime stories. At least when her fellow human co-actor, Lynn Franklin, answers the phone, realises it's one of Charlene's poodles and promptly hands it to her own dog, saying, "It's for you, Sam," she does so with a knowing air to her, as if she's playing along for the sake of the film. Charlene, who wrote, directed and edited, doesn't seem to acknowledge any weirdness here at all. This is the most natural thing in the world to her. Her clear lack of acting ability doesn't help, because we inherently know that the character we see is the character she is, simply because she can't pretend not to be.

At least there's an actual story here, if we can get past all the weirdness. Charlene has two poodles and she reads them stories at bedtime. The favourite of both Stoney and April is *The Fuzzy Fairy* and we get to hear at least the gist of it as an introduction.

It features Melody, a well-mannered poodle, who finds a fairy in her garden with invisible wings. This fairy is a mischievous creature, who likes doing things like knocking over the birdbath, and, because human beings can't see fairies, Melody promptly gets blamed. This one sided situation

comedy does end happily, but I blinked and lost how that happened. It was that sort of story.

The key is that dogs can apparently see fairies, who delight in causing trouble without any chance of being caught because people aren't dogs and so can't see them.

Now let me point out that Charlene has brought home a magic trick set because she wants to build a routine around it for the local Dog Talent Show and you can hazard a wild guess about where our film is going to go. Frankly, if you can't conjure up the rest of the plot from that, you really aren't paying attention.

Yes, April takes the wand which Charlene left conveniently hanging off the table for her, waves it around and, hey, there's a dog fairy played by Molly, who—I swear to the deity of your choice—gets an "introducing" credit at the beginning of the film as if she's already been signed by one of the major studios and booked to co-star with Vin Diesel in her next film. At least she could out-act him too.

Sure, Molly's a mischevious little dog fairy, though she teleports around

with a reasonable sparkly effect rather than flying around on invisible wings. I was hoping for that, but it clearly wasn't anywhere in the budget to be found. Most of the rest of the movie revolves around Stoney and April finding themselves in all sorts of trouble, for which they're never punished in the slightest, and trying to find a way out of it by using the cool techniques they learned during training, like calling in the cavalry and taking a Polaroid of the little monster knocking coloured toilet rolls off the counter. To show the depth of humour here, they're even taken to Dr. Q. T. Wags, dog psychologist. OK, I did like that. Sue me.

I found *The Fuzzy Fairy Incident: A Furry Tale* pretty awful, both as a story and a film, but I wasn't bored while it ran through its half hour. The story is wildly predictable but it's fair enough for a very young audience. Canine Horizons claims that their films are intended for "both children and adults who love dogs," but I find it hard to believe that many adults would get anything out of this except a sense of surreal wonder about what goes through Charlene Dunlap's mind on a daily basis.

At least she has the modesty to know she's being out-acted by a pair of

poodles; what's odd is that she still believes that it's a good idea to train these critters in very specific niche ways and then put them to work acting in "professional quality movies complete with music, sound effects, and entertaining stories". I use quotes there because the quality, music and sound effects are roughly what you'd expect from a GeoCities site in 1998. Then again, this was made in 2000, so that may be what Canine Horizons looked like back then. I should consult the Wayback Machine.

If it's decent as a story, it's pretty awful as a film. The editing leaps out for most disdain, because there are so many wasted opportunities to show off the skills of these dogs, which was surely the whole point of making the movie to begin with. Yes, we see each of the four animals in the story doing tricks, but they're all set up horribly. Instead of using long takes to demonstrate how clever the creatures are, we get fast cuts to the moment of truth. If April can ring a doorbell when asked, then let's see a single take from command to ring, not a cut to her paw on the bell.

I got the impression from some of Dunlap's stumbled dialogue that she just wasn't interested in multiple takes; her focus is in training the dogs to

begin with, so these films should just be shot quickly and edited together to make them seem as real as possible. Given that she also apparently has no problem with using not one but three separate wah wah waaah sound effects, I have no real investment in her ability to make good judgement calls.

There are no dogs in my house right now, but I did have a library ferret at the time and, frankly, I found it tough work training him *not* to do some of the things that Dunlap has trained her dogs to do in this film. I must say that Dunlap's house looks pretty neat and tidy so I presume that training Molly to climb up on the kitchen counter and push cereal bowls onto the floor hasn't backfired yet. Sneakily sliding books under ottomans seems safe enough, but I ask you: if you had mad dog training skills, would you train any dog who lives in your house to climb up on a chair and put your car keys into a cup of coffee?

At least she is able to train dogs and I have to grudgingly admit that I was impressed by what she did with the trio of her dogs who dominate proceedings. I just wish she (or Glenn Dunlap, who handles the camera)

had similar skills at filmmaking. Frankly, the editing during the magic show practice is worse than Georges Méliès was doing a century and more ago. And that note tells me that I've fallen into this film far too far and need to escape.

Let's just leave *The Fuzzy Fairy Incident: A Furry Tale* bemused at the idea of a dog trainer making films (plural) without any apparent knowledge of filmmaking technique beyond pointing a camera in the right direction.

Let's leave shocked at the realisation that the whole point is surely to showcase the tricks that these dogs have learned, a point that was just as surely forgotten once the camera was switched on.

Let's leave in the knowledge that the best actors on screen are canine, even though two of their persons share a host of scenes—I should explain that a dog's owner here is not called "an owner" but "its person").

Let's leave in the understanding that there are four more of these half hour films out there, including ones in which the leading doggies don't have mundane names like Molly and Sam but spaced out psychedelic ones such as Cherdon Moon Dancer and Myramagic Wizard of Ahhs.

And let's leave in the knowledge that this film does at least contain no dream sequence poodle poetry from Charlene Dunlap, which I presume is "doggerel" in more ways than one.

But the bottom line is: let's leave. Now.

THESE TOM THUMBS ARE COLOSSAL!
FIRST TIME ON ANY SCREEN!
JED BUELL'S
MIDGETS
The TERROR
of TINY TOWN
Screen Play by FRED MYTON
Directed by SAM NEWFIELD
ASTOR
PICTURES
CORP.

THE TERROR OF TINY TOWN (1938)

Director: Sam Newfield
Writers: Fred Myton
Stars: Jed Buell's Midgets

While we're on entirely family friendly weirdness and before we launch headlong back into wildly inappropriate sex and violence, let's leap back in time to one of the classic bizarre movies, a 1938 all-midget western that was distributed theatrically by Columbia.

You might believe that bizarre movies are a relatively recent invention but that's not the case: they date back to the early years of cinema. Many of the trick films of Georges Méliès and Segundo de Chomón count and so do early takes on famous stories like Thomas Edison's *Frankenstein* and *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*, produced by L. Frank Baum's own company. There are pioneering films like *Un Chien Andalou* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, all the way to precode gems like *Freaks* and *Kongo*. The thirties were a hotbed of weirdness, especially outside the studio system, such as *Reefer Madness* and *Maniac*, but the studios didn't hold back either. Check out a feature called *Swing Your Lady*, a hillbilly musical wrestling comedy starring, of all actors, Humphrey Bogart. But that can wait for a book about bad casting choices!

The Terror of Tiny Town is a legendary bizarre movie from the same year as *Swing Your Lady*, 1938. It's not a good picture but it's often a fun picture and, as exploitative as it is, it was a great opportunity for a swathe of little people working in Hollywood. Major roles were not generally available to them, even when they were well known names, like Billy Barty or Angelo Rossitto, so they toiled away playing children, dwarfs or freaks, often not with the respect that Tod Browning, the director of *Freaks* and *The Unholy Three* gave them. It's not easy today, but actors such as Herve Villechaize, Warwick Davis and Peter Dinklage have smashed some glass ceilings.

The actors here belonged to a troupe called Singer's Midgets, though they were renamed by the producer, Jed Buell, for this one movie. Leopold

Singer was an Austrian who was impressed by a troupe of little people at a Vienna amusement park, the Wurstelprata, in the early 1910s, so he chose to recruited a troupe of his own, initially putting them to work in a midget city, Liliputstadt, at another amusement park, Venice in Vienna. After the outbreak of World War I, they moved to the United States and performed in vaudeville, with some of them landing movie roles.

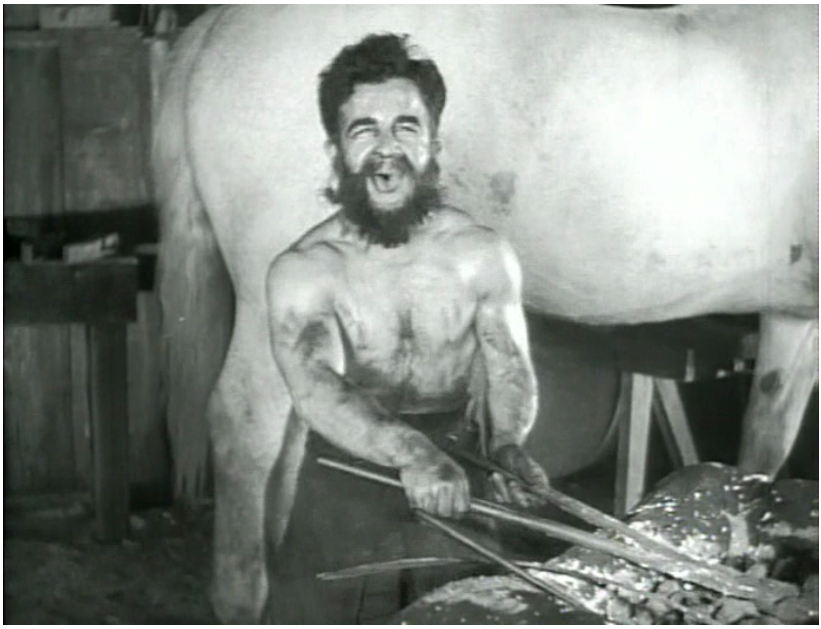
Singer's biggest screen opportunity, of course, was *The Wizard of Oz* and he provided 124 little people to MGM to play munchkins. Only a year away from that, many of them were hired out to Buell to be given a rare chance to play lead characters, in a musical western feature.

In fact, it didn't contain a single regular sized actor, except for an announcer during an introductory segment who was there to introduce "a novelty picture with an all-midget cast" and to suggest that, while it has absolutely everything that a regular western has, we should not take it too seriously. Allegedly, Buell's inspiration came in overhearing an employee joke that "if this economic dive keeps going, we'll be using midgets as actors". This film didn't contain a single regular sized actor, except for an

announcer during an introductory segment, there to introduce "a novelty picture with an all-midget cast" and to suggest that, while it has all the things that a regular western has, we shouldn't take it too seriously.

Naturally, he's also there to be interrupted by the hero of the movie, Buck Larson, who's eager to point out that it's actually a serious film and that "After this picture's up, I'll be the biggest cowboy star in Hollywood". Equally as naturally, Larson is then interrupted in turn by the villain, Bat Haines, who has his own ideas about that, not even believing that he's the biggest star in this film, and so the announcer becomes a referee trying to keep two fighters apart. That's ended by a decision to roll the movie.

What works is that the actors generally play this entirely straight and many of them have the talent to do so. The pantomime set up does hint otherwise and the opening scene doesn't help much either. It's a musical number that unfolds at B. Armstrong's blacksmith shop, with the citizens of Tiny Town backing an obviously overdubbed Billy Curtis, who plays the hero, Buck Larson. *Laugh Your Troubles Away* isn't quite the best attitude to take at this point and it's not a good suggestion of where the film's going.



That begins after the song's over, when Larson's dad asks him to check out North Fork Range. Something's wrong up there, because all the calves seem to have vanished. There aren't any mountain lion tracks, so it could be something more sinister. And, of course, it is, because Bat Haines is up there with his gang rustling the Larson cattle and, as they skedaddle on out of there, they leave a branding iron by the fire as a red herring, one that suggests that it's Tex Preston doing the rustling instead of Haines.

"I fought Tex Preston to a standstill fifteen years ago," suggests Pop Larson when he sees the planted object and we can instantly see how the entire script is going to play out. Sure enough, Haines's next stop is Tex Preston's ranch, where he plants a similar seed with similar result. "Why, I fought Pop Lawson to a standstill fifteen years ago," recites the rancher and we're off and running. Should I add that Preston has a niece named Nancy, who new in town and who Buck thinks is mighty fine? Surely, you don't need to me to go that far.

Pop Lawson is played by John Bambury, who enunciates well but is a bit wooden in a major role. Curtis is better as his son, well cast as the typical

sort of bland leading man with no depth who all the girls fall for. This was his first credit, though he'd played an uncredited evil dwarf in *Tarzan the Ape Man* six years earlier. Billy Platt is decent as Tex Preston with a highly memorable worn face too, at the other end of his career. This was the last role of twelve, dating back to *Snow White* in 1916, in which he inevitably played a dwarf. Each of his roles was named some sort of dwarf or midget.

The part worth getting an actor's teeth into in a western is always the villain's and it has to be said that "Little Billy" Rhodes is perfect. He looks a lot more natural in western gear than he did as the munchkin barrister in *The Wizard of Oz* and he gets far more screen time too. He relishes every second of it and he's very watchable. If it wasn't for Charlie Becker, the Mayor of Munchkinland, playing Preston's cook Otto here, he'd steal the entire film. Otto has a running joke about chasing a duck with an axe and a saucepan and, every time it shows up, it's comedy gold

What doesn't work here is the fact that, while the entire cast are midgets—Curtis was tall for this film at 4' 2" with Becker only 3' 9"—Tiny Town is not remotely sized to match. That means that we're stuck in a

strange world where being that size is normal and unworthy of mention, so making the fact that they ride Shetland ponies utterly understandable, but weirdly nothing else follows suit.

This leads to odd sight gags, like cowboys walking under the saloon's swinging doors or Otto climbing inside full sized kitchen furniture when he needs to retrieve something. It's as if the townsfolk aren't from this town at all, just like they found it or were beamed into it or it's the product of a magical bean that just sprang up one day out of nowhere and, with no other place to call home, they just moved in. They couldn't be bothered to make anything that might actually fit them, such as tools, furniture or musical instruments. That's an unusual visual for sure: two midgets teaming up to play the same double bass. Even the beer glasses seem, shall we say, a little overgenerous.

The question we simply can't ignore is this: how were we supposed to react to this film back in 1938 and how should we react now, over eight decades on? Are we supposed to play along and smile at the sight gags, which are plentiful. There's only so far we can go with these, though some

are rather inventive, like the customer in the barber shop who steps into the empty slot in the barbershop quartet, the whole joke being that we obviously aren't hearing his voice.

Are we supposed to laugh uproariously at the freakshow aspect of it? Oh hey look, a midget! Oh hey look, another one! That's likely the original intent, but it's pathetic and highly demeaning and it doesn't quite work. For all that novelty talk during the introduction, this whole thing plays out pretty seriously with at least some actors who can act and at least some singers who can sing. After all, their day job was working vaudeville for Singer's Midgets and it's crystal clear which members of this cast sing their own material.

For instance, check out the scenes with Austro-Hungarian Nita Krebs, who is excellent as the dance hall girl who carries her name, the sort of role you'd expect Marlene Dietrich to play in a regular film. Yeah, "dance hall girl" is a clear euphemism, as is "vampire", used in the old sense that was soon condensed to "vamp". She's obviously the town whore who has plenty of dirt on Haines and is just waiting for him to reject her one time

too many in favour of wholesome Nancy Preston and she'll do something drastic. Krebs doesn't have anywhere near enough to do, especially as it was her scenes where I forgot I was watching an all-midget western and found myself surprised when a midget walked into her scenes, especially one like Billy Rhodes, who's the epitome of a silent era villain. The only detail going against her was a slight accent, but then much of the west was populated by European immigrants so she's actually rather authentic for the period setting. This was her only credited role but she was also in the Lullaby League in *The Wizard of Oz*.

So should we take it seriously? That's really not quite as far fetched as it might initially seem, especially as its attempt at a musical western ends up being rather close to that old chestnut, *Romeo and Juliet*, with Buck Lawson as Romeo and Nancy Preston as Juliet, a tragedy just waiting to happen. She's Tex Preston's niece, if you recall, who arrives by stage to live with him as he's the only family she has left, but, when Bat Haines shoots her driver and the Wells Fargo man, it falls to Buck to save the day and rein in the horses. Naturally they fall in love on the spot and it's their love that

finally puts paid to Haines's dastardly plans to kick off a range war as a front for his profiteering, and also brings peace, love and happiness to Tiny Town.

You knew there had to be a happy ending, right? Westerns in the classic era never strayed from that requirement, even when they shoehorned in something supernatural or wildly anomalous like a dinosaur or a vampire of the sharp toothed variety to turn them into what we would call weird westerns today.

Perhaps the answer can be found in Jed Buell himself. He was the producer here, the man who came up with the original idea and had every intention of continuing it. After all, box office was excellent, and *Variety* reported that more would be on the way from Buell and Sol Lesser, who initially released *Terror of Tiny Town* under his Principal Pictures banner before Columbia bought it. Under consideration, detailed in a brief piece titled "Plan More Pee-Wees" were a version of *Gulliver's Travels* and an unnamed "lumber camp story". This fits what we know of Buell, because he was also a writer and director and he specialised in unusual B-movies.

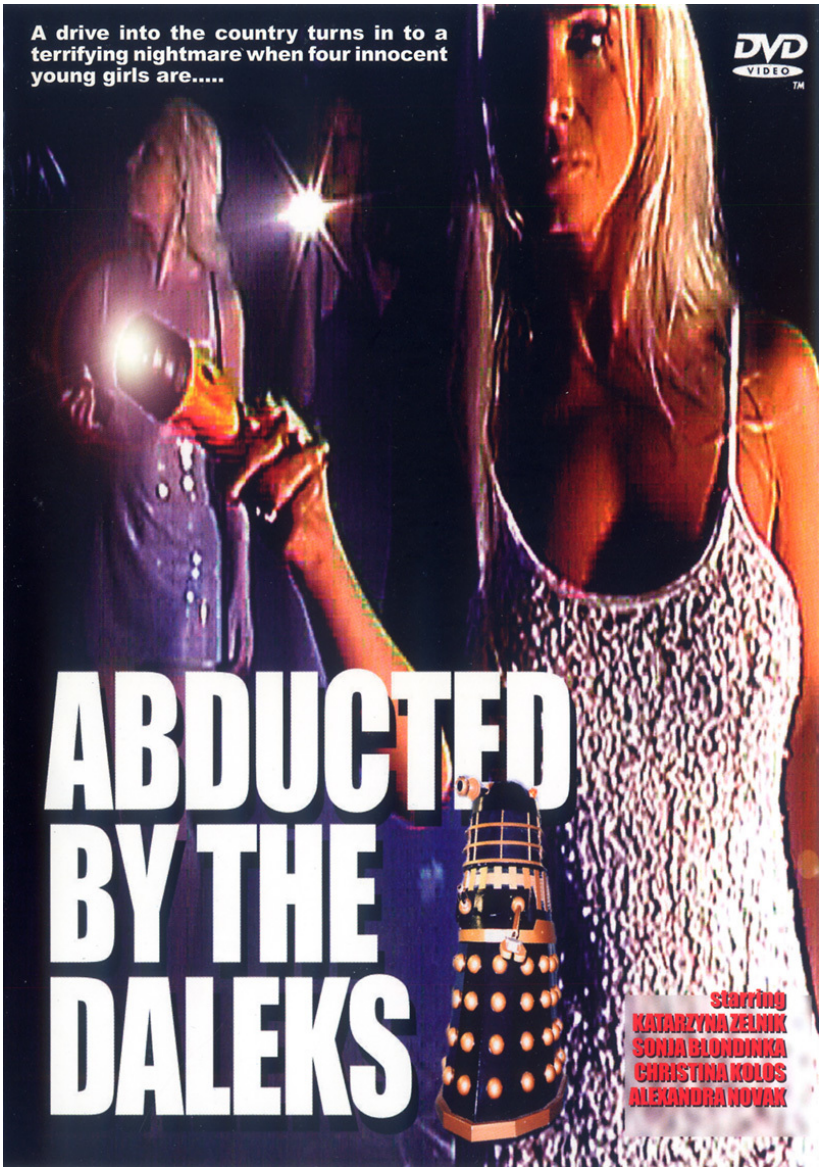
What's especially telling is that, in 1938, it wasn't merely films with an "all midget" cast that counted as novelty pictures. A year earlier, he smashed a different glass ceiling with a film called *Harlem on the Prairie*, featuring an "all-colored" cast, none of whom were credited on the film's poster, even Herb Jeffries—who would play similar roles in other features like *Two-Gun Man from Harlem*, *The Bronze Buckaroo* and *Harlem Rides the Range*—and Mantan Moreland, who was a popular comedian and sidekick.

It doesn't take much awareness of the Oscars So White campaign to see how ridiculous it is for an all black cast to have ever been considered as a marketable gimmick. However, this was the thirties and screen westerns were always frustratingly white. *Harlem on the Prairie* addressed that false image by populating the west with characters of colour, something that's historically accurate, but the attempt was seen as a "novelty picture" or a "race film" and, while, like this picture, it did provide lead roles to actors traditionally denied them, it had little impact on the genre, as underlined by the fact that *The Harder They Fall*, released by Netflix in 2021 with a primarily black cast, was still regarded as a "revisionist western".

Perhaps this just makes it more noteworthy that Buell made these two films as far back as the late thirties. I'm sure he didn't think of himself as a pioneer but he kind of was, even if he was working firmly in the world of B-movies, which were only there to pad out a bill by including some sort of shorter second feature after the cartoon and newsreel.

To highlight just how far into B-movies he worked, the director on both *Harlem on the Prairie* and *The Terror of Tiny Town* was Sam Newfield, who was so incredibly prolific that he had to take on a slew of pseudonyms just to hide how many movies he churned out. Most were for PRC Pictures, the production company run by his brother Sigmund. While these two stand out to us today, they were just the latest titles in busy outputs for him. *The Terror of Tiny Town* was one of fifteen films he directed in 1938, and *Harlem on the Prairie* one of seventeen in 1937. He peaked at nineteen in 1942.

Newfield died in 1964 and Buell even earlier, in 1961. I wonder what the pair of them might think if they were alive today, to realise that they may well be best remembered for "a novelty picture with an all-midget cast".


A drive into the country turns in to a terrifying nightmare when four innocent young girls are.....
DVD VIDEO
ABDUCTED BY THE DALEKS
starring
KATARZYNA ZELNIK
SONJA BLONDINKA
CHRISTINA KOLOS
ALEXANDRA NOVAK

ABDUCTED BY THE DALEKS (2005)

Director: Don Skaro

Writers: Billy Hartnell and David Stanley

Stars: Katarzyna Zelnik, Eliza Borecka, Sonya Karina, Linda Black, Maria Vaslova and Baron Trenk

I hesitate to suggest this but *Abducted by the Daleks* makes *The Fuzzy Fairy Incident* look like *Citizen Kane*. I once watched this movie on fast forward and found it a great deal more entertaining than it turned out to be at regular speed. I should add *Yakety Sax* as a soundtrack and see if that helps any. Trust me, it's not going to make it worse.

You might be surprised to discover how stunningly, outrageously and depressingly awful this picture is, given that it features both a trio of daleks, one of which appears to be a real *Doctor Who* prop, and a set of young ladies who begin it scantily clad and promptly remove what little they're wearing to spend the rest of it buck naked. That does sound like it ought to be at least some level of fun; in fact, it sounds like it would take some notably inept filmmakers to screw it up, which is just what these pseudonymous folk manage to do. They cast some good looking girls to frolic around in nothing but high heels and they did make a feature film containing daleks—which they had to rename to *Abducted by the Daloids* when the BBC sued them—but that's it. I can't find another positive thing to say about any aspect of this production.

Well, that's not strictly true. The opening credits could have been a lot worse, though they're better with the sound off, and there's a great score, albeit one that we would miss if we turned off the sound in order to ditch the narration in bad serial killer voice. Clearly the budget didn't stretch to a voice modulator. Now, that score isn't appropriate but it is mostly made up of Pink Floyd, early tracks like *Interstellar Overdrive* and *Pow R Toc H*, which is never a bad thing. I must have blinked when they played Black Sabbath's *War Pigs* though.

If the score is entertaining on its own merits, the sound is atrocious, which is unfortunate because the four young ladies driving into the forest at night are apparently Polish and not particularly understandable in the English language. Clearly none were cast for their ability to enunciate or intonate, but the obvious solution of having someone else dub over their voices was ignored. All four look great but this would have been far more successful if they'd have chatted in Polish, whether we got subtitles or not, because frankly nobody is watching this for the plot. We have no need to actually listen to them, we just want to believe that they understand what they're saying.

What's perhaps most surprising is that there is such a thing as a plot, even though it's an awkward and tortuous one that actually had my family debating what happened after it was all over. To be fair, that's not entirely because it's convoluted—though it certainly is that—it's also because it's mostly explained in dialogue that we struggle to understand, whether it's delivered by girls or daleks, and because there are long periods where nothing whatsoever happens except naked girls walking through a forest.

I did wonder for a brief moment if that was oddly appropriate, given how many episodes of classic *Doctor Who* involved the cast running up and

down the same corridors, but I really don't want to give credit for homage where that credit surely isn't due. Mostly, this is just a kludgy attempt to explain away naked chicks, shoehorn in daleks and end up in a slasher plot featuring the Serial Skinner. The script does tie these together, but very loosely. Plot progression is not a strong suit here, but then nothing is.

Whoever wrote the film didn't care about the script in the slightest, most obviously because he adopts a transparent pseudonym, Billy Hartnell —for those who aren't classic *Doctor Who* fans, William Hartnell was the very first Doctor, back in 1963. When he decides that he needs the girls to get out of the car and into the forest, he conjures up a bad CGI alien for them to literally drive into. When script ideas are half inched from *Eegah*, you know you're in trouble. When he realises that their skirts, so short that we can clearly tell that some are wearing no underwear, are still too much clothing, he has Isabella strip down to her skin in a clearing.

Why? Well, why not? After all, we've just spent way too long trying to decipher dialogue and way too long wandering around in a dark forest. It's time for a treat! At least the lighting is decent, as inappropriate as it is to have a strong light source conveniently placed for these ladies to know where to point their torches in the dark and avoid breaking their necks

while they do so.

And of course, just before Isabella strips off for no reason whatsoever, we discover that there are daleks watching through some remote viewing device. There's nothing to suggest that they'll be in the movie, except for the title; they simply show up out of the blue. We can't understand them either for the most part and they're so inept that they beam up her skirt instead of her (if it was still on her at the time, we might understand); they have to wait for her to spend what feels like ten minutes holding one high heel in a snag for them to grab her too.

Hilariously, she's blissfully unaware that she's not in Kansas any more, Toto, until the daleks tell her to obey their orders. She honest to God slaps one of them right in the plunger, which I have to say just might be the single best moment in the entire picture. Two others decide it's cold, so they disrobe, fondle each other and start licking thigh without noticing the onlooking daleks either, until one—hand on heart—says in a famously mechanical dalek voice, "Ahem." This movie has a whole two syllables of humour.

If plot continuity is as close to non-existent as makes no odds, there are plenty of goofs to watch out for too. While the girls weren't noticing the daleks, they weren't noticing the boom mike either. Later in the film, one

of the dalek operators is clearly visible during one scene as the metal bits surrounding its head aren't attached. The effects are just as miserable; one hilarious scene has two naked girls strapped to a stark metallic wall while the daleks fire some sort of laser beam at their parts; I'm not sure if we laughed more at the girls' unsynchronised writhing reactions or the fact that the daleks couldn't keep their beams up, perhaps telling some sort of cosmic Viagra joke. Of course, choreography is a word these filmmakers have no conception of (or simply don't care about, which might be more accurate). They apparently like dry ice enough to deluge some scenes in it, but their budget isn't up to cover the rest. The cameraman was clearly drunk as I can't explain his work in any other way. Yes, technically, it's all horrible.

Best of all, there's an impromptu actress switch. The villainous fourth girl turns out to be a slave trader from outer space who shows back up in the daleks' ship in a dominatrix outfit flopping a whip around in order to intimidate the others, but she's clearly played by the only actress to sign a contract that didn't task her with getting naked. That means that when she's transported back to Earth to engage with the slasher plot, she's not only stripped to the skin, it's someone else's skin. Lina Black transforms into Maria Vaslova, clad only in a pair of high heels, ready to be tied to a

tree and molested by a pervert in a bad Hallowe'en mask.

IMDb identifies the director, Don Skaro, as Roman Nowicki (also known as Trevor Barley), who apparently likes series, as this is the only one of nine films he's directed to not be part of one. Thus far there are no less than four *Fantom Killer* movies, and a pair each in the *Fantom Seducer* and *Mark of the Whip* series. The plot synopses and casts look rather familiar thoughout, though some were actually shot in Polish.

Katarzyna Zelnik was in the first three *Fantom Killer* films, but this was the last of her credits; the same goes for Eliza Borecka. Maria Vaslova, the intergalactic slave trader dominatrix, post-strip, took over for the fourth *Fantom Killer* and was also in both *Mark of the Whip* films and *Kristi and the Time Machine*, whose IMDb keywords include "time machine", "duct tape over mouth", "high heels", "leash", "bound and gagged" and "female nudity'. I wonder what that could be about. It's directed by Richard Stalin, who directed a Polish bondage horror porno called *Girl in the Lift*, so maybe Nowicki is more prolific than he first appears. The Kristi film does feature an actor called Rovert Yelrab, which of course nobody would notice is his Trevor Barley pseudonym backwards. Suddenly, Dr. Acula looks deep.

I should add that this film isn't pornographic, only going so far as to have the Serial Skinner touch both sets of Maria Vaslova's lips while she's

tied to a tree. She's manifestly the least aroused aroused girl I've ever seen though and the Serial Skinner is just as lackluster. I'm not going to suggest which complex set of emotions should be employed by either participant in a rape scene, but I will suggest that the experience should be emotional for both of them.

It's hard to imagine why this film was made, beyond the basic concept. Really it's a *Doctor Who* fan film, made by people without talent but access to an authentic dalek and a bevy of hot Polish beauties happy to get naked. Sure, if you have props like those, a soft porn fan film is clearly the way to go, but any perverted eight year old kid would have more imagination as to how to use them than "Billy Hartnell".

I fail to understand how any wannabe softcore director can fail to direct naked chicks to do interesting things for the camera. Even if these girls baulked at doing porn, they certainly proved willing to gyrate and fondle and lick. How can anyone fail to imagine how to put that to good use?

This movie would, honest to goodness, have been better with no plot at all. Just have these chicks strip off and stand on platforms for daleks to scream orders at for an hour and a half. That film would clearly suck but it would still be better than this. This has to be the best example of how to screw up a gimme since *The Phantom Menace*.

The motion picture PLAYBOY devoted 10 of their wildest pages to!
"A zany erotobiography that looks like a Marx Brothers movie shot in a nudist camp!" says PLAYBOY
CUE Magazine says: "It's whimsical, satirical, bawdy, and very funny! Shows originality throughout and a zest for being entertaining!"
"...CAN Heironymus MERKIN ever Forget MERCY Humppe and find true happiness?"
You're standing on my foot!
X
Anthony Newley · Joan Collins · Milton Berle in
"Can Heironymus Merkin ever forget Mercy Humppe and find true happiness?"
co-starring Bruce Forsyth · Stubby Kaye and George Jessel as "The Presence"
HERMAN RAUCHER and ANTHONY NEWLEY · ANTHONY NEWLEY · HERBERT KRETZMER · ANTHONY NEWLEY
A Universal Pictures Limited / Eurolex Corporation Production · A Regional Film Release · Technicolor

CAN HEIRONYMUS MERKIN EVER FORGET MERCY HUMPPE AND FIND TRUE HAPPINESS? (1969)

Director: Anthony Newley
Writers: Anthony Newley and Herman Raucher
Stars: Anthony Newley, Joan Collins and Milton Berle

Anthony Newley was a major star in 1969 and had been one for long enough that his ego apparently decided that it was time to ejaculate all over the filmgoing public. This picture, which he wrote, directed, scored and starred in, is surely remembered today mostly for its unwieldy name, which *Chicago Tribune* readers voted "The Worst Movie Title Ever", but it really is only as pretentious as the film it heralds. And yes, that's surely at least thirteen fonts on the poster.

I've racked my brain but can't come up with anything else as remotely self-indulgent as this movie. I applaud Newley's desire to experiment with the cinematic medium, but it was never going to be anything more than a bizarre footnote in an otherwise successful career, not least because the many boobs lent the film an X certificate and so it wasn't even allowed to advertise itself in many American newspapers. After all, he had played the Artful Dodger in David Lean's *Oliver Twist*, he'd co-written the theme for *Goldfinger* and he'd racked up a dozen hits—including two number ones—as a singer. This project reeked of professional suicide.

As it turned out, *Heironymus Merkin* didn't end his career, though it did contribute to his divorce from his third wife, Joan Collins, who plays a major role here as Polyester Poontang. Perhaps part of that had to do with the casting of their four and six year old kids in an X-rated movie. The majority surely has to do with what he says about both them as a couple in what has to be regarded as a thinly disguised autobiography with both of them playing themselves.

Given how utterly stunning Joan Collins was in 1969, how he chooses to reject her is important; it underlines how wrapped up in himself Newley must have been at the time. What would he have been like if the Oscar nomination that he received for co-writing the score for *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* in 1971 had become a win?

As decried as this film was by both the critics and the filmgoing public, though, it somehow made money at the box office. And hey, wife number four soon showed up in its wake and stayed for eighteen years. Somehow things worked out for Anthony Newley.

At least he had a wicked sense of humour, because the plot, if this film can be said to have such a thing, is astoundingly autobiographical, as wild as it is, and it must have taken some serious chutzpah to write it.

He starts out only a day past forty years of age and, as such, confronting his mortality. That leads, of course, to him gathering the detritus of his life onto a beach from whence it will be transported to the Heironymus Merkin museum so that the world can know the truth. Isn't that what we would all do in this situation? Like I said, serious chutzpah.

In front of his mother, played by Patricia Hayes, and his kids, played by his kids, he attempts to tell his story in film in a variety of styles, which bewilder as much as they enlighten. For example, the first is a flashback sequence, which depicts him as a marionette in thrall to Uncle Limelight, played by game show host Bruce Forsyth trying to be Jason Robards as he stalks the boards of a half built theatre set belting out a musical number. It just gets stranger from here, with the aid of simple animation, dramatic narration and, not least, the constant interruptions of George Jessel as a wise-cracking angel.

For all that Merkin—and yes, he named an autobiographical character after a pubic wig—wants us all to know his story, he leaps quickly forward to his rampant womanising years, visualised in subtle style by staging a long line of women in front of his tent, so he can order, "Next!" There are some moments of seriousness, such as the coverage of Merkin's lack of a father and the childhood death of his firstborn, both true details of Newley's life, but he treats himself with such scorn that we can't feel sympathy for him even then. His second marriage, which lasted seven

years in reality, is turned into a shotgun affair because she showed up pregnant, only to be quickly discarded after the child's burial. Merkin puts on a magnanimous air, standing aside so she can leave with a truer love, but then flounces around in delight at his escape from boredom. And how seriously should we take the narrator's question: "Oh, Heironymus Merkin, how many thousands of theatre lovers have you pleasured with the enormity of your gifts?"

At least at this point, Newley's autobiography and Merkin's meet in the form of Joan Collins, an audience member who interrupts his performance of Shakespeare to insightfully point out that the movie she hasn't been watching is clearly all about him. Is this a family discussion or character development? Who knows? Given that we're soon stuck watching three critics discussing the film so far, while scriptwriters scrabble at their work and Merkin puzzles between the two sides, we wonder just how much of it reflects what the ego of Newley was really trying to do. The suggestion is that he's soul searching, attempting to discover his real identity at a crucial point in his life, sparked by the work of Federico Fellini, whose

pictures were often this wild but never this disjointed. Maybe it was here that I started to appreciate Newley's honesty, because he accepts that his picture is nothing but masturbatory filmmaking, only to suggest that *The Birth of a Nation* and *Mutiny on the Bounty* were better pictures but suffered for the lack of good songs and pert tits.

For all the weirdness—and this feature is full of the stuff—the oddest moment might just be the most telling, in which Newley the director threatens Newley the actor with the sack. While we're watching him screen his life story to his own family, we're also watching him construct it. Newley may be admitting schizophrenia just as he admits paedophilia, without pressure from Goodtime Eddie Filth, the take on Satan played by Milton Berle, who guides him poorly throughout. At the very least it appears to be an attempt to suggest that Merkin isn't Newley after all, or perhaps is only a single aspect of his personality.

And so we ride into Chapter IV, "The Dream of Humbert Humbert or Snow White Meets Attila the Hun". The studio don't want this scene to be shot, let alone seen, which naturally makes it rather interesting. It begins

by introducing Mercy Humppe, the other titular character, who's played by *Playboy* centrefold Connie Creski, only to morph into an astrological dance sequence with Newley naked and Collins singing *Chalk and Cheese*. I feel for his therapist.

And, when Merkin can't decide between Mercy Humppe and Polyester Poontang, we can't help but wonder about the movie's title and whether this project was an externalisation of Newley's thoughts at the time, a sort of cellulloid mid-life crisis. If it's really an honest soul-baring plea to keep his wife at the cost of his sexual obsessions, it's a bitter irony indeed that he promptly lost her with this film cited as one of the reasons why.

I can't blame her, of course. How else was she supposed to interpret the choice of her husband of seven years and the father of her children to cast her not only as herself but also as the lady to which he, whom she has already personally identified in the film as portraying himself, cannot commit? And why? Because the devil made him do it! It's less a plea for forgiveness and more an admission that he hasn't been faithful to her and has no plans to ever do so. Oh, and he's going to make this completely

obvious to the entire filmgoing world, including their kids. Daddy loves mummy but, look, there's Hope Climax! Woohoo!

If it wasn't for the fact that he had major work left in him, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* and its Oscar nomination still two years away, I'd interpret this movie as an attempt to deliberately derail his own career, the only argument worth having being whether he did so deliberately or subconsciously. It isn't just the title and the weird choice to write a script that relentlessly bashes his own character, then take the role for himself. It's also in the frequent diversions from point that go as far as a fairy tale that casts Yolanda (of the dance couple Yolanda and Veloz) as a princess who falls in love with her donkey and spends her scenes with it naked. I do recognise that it ends with a pun that supposedly gives it validity, but no, it really doesn't. It's just another opportunity for Newley to highlight that his sexual shenanigans take precedence over his marriages. This is honest, but it's very sad indeed. Naming the princess Trampolina Whambang could have been genius but we're too concerned for his mental wellbeing at this point to really notice.

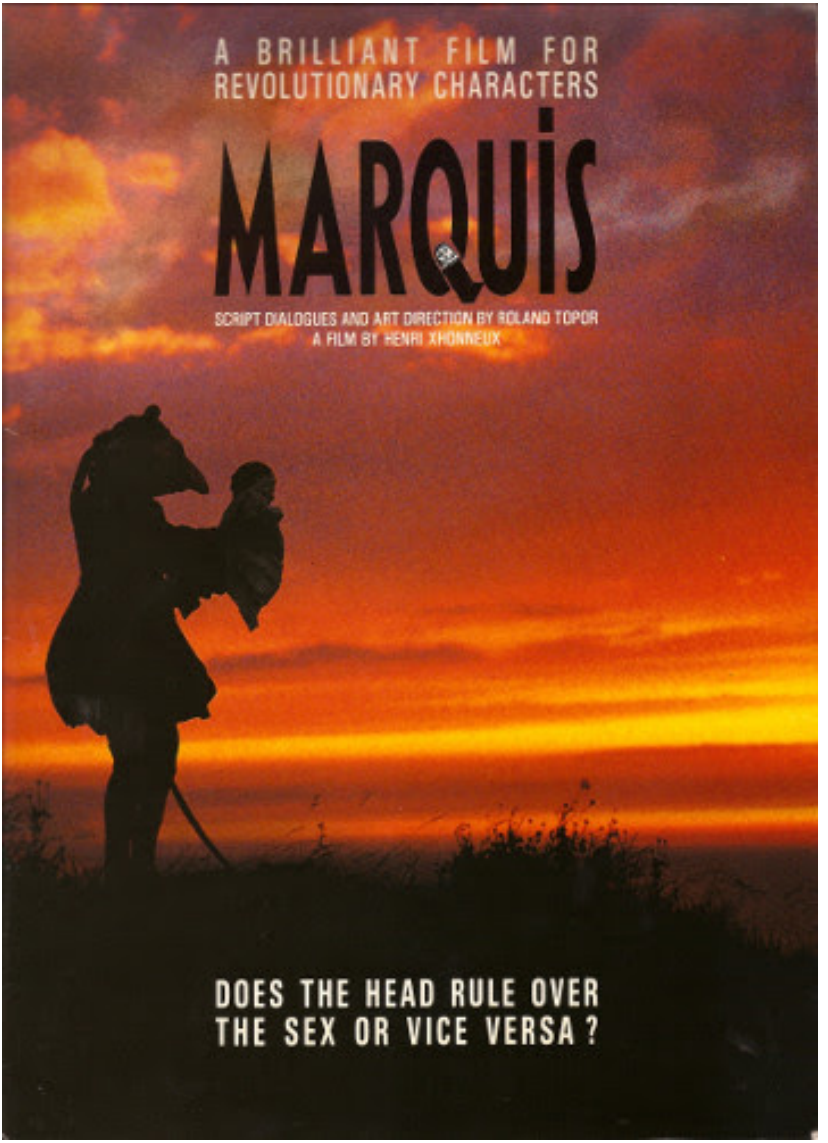
Today, the film wants to be forgotten. It's acutely a product of its time, when films were released once to theatres and almost never found their way back in front of eyeballs again. *Heironymus Merkin* did find a very brief release on VHS and DVD, but It's almost impossible to find today; and I do wonder what Newley, had he not died in 1999 roughly when the insurance tables that spark this film suggest, would have felt about people like me seeing it almost half a century after its day in the spotlight.

Most people would be acutely embarrassed, but this film suggests that his ego was vast enough to crush any embarrassment that might creep up to be acknowledged. Roger Ebert's contemporary review suggested that it might be the first attempt to make a personal film in the English language to sit alongside those of Godard and Fellini. I'm not going to argue with that but, when Fellini juggled, he kept all his balls in the air.

The last word here goes to Goodtime Eddie Filth: "Gonna be one of the all time greats," he says. "Definitely Hall of Flame material."

Definitely.

ERKIN


A BRILLIANT FILM FOR
REVOLUTIONARY CHARACTERS
MARQUIS
SCRIPT DIALOGUES AND ART DIRECTION BY ROLAND TOPOR
A FILM BY HENRI XHONNEUX
DOES THE HEAD RULE OVER
THE SEX OR VICE VERSA ?

MARQUIS (1989)

Director: Henri Xhonneux

Writers: Roland Topor and Henri Xhonneux, based on the writings of the Marquis de Sade

Stars: Bien de Moor, Gabrielle van Damme, Philippe Bizot, Bernard Cogniaux, Olivier Decheveau and Pierre Decuypere

If it might seem that I'm stretching your credulity by suggesting that a major star would deliberately make a movie to self-destruct his career and his marriage to Joan Collins, then try to imagine the elevator pitch needed to land this movie in this book.

How about a movie about the French revolution, with a primary focus on the Marquis de Sade, locked up in the Bastille writing pornographic novels? That's edgy, but not weird enough, huh?

How about if all the human actors appear as anthropomorphic animals, aided by freakish masks that journey deep into the Uncanny Valley? Yeah, that's a little more like *WTF!?* territory, but we surely need something just a little more to seal the deal.

I know! What if the most prominent character is Colin, the Marquis's gigantic penis, with whom he chats at length and depth, their relationship being the most important one in the picture? Yes, now we have it!

I should mention quickly that this is not the outrageous comedy you may expect. There are comedic elements, of course, most of them utterly surreal, but it doesn't reach for laughs and there's as much history and tragedy as there is comedy.

It's nothing like we might remember from *Spitting Image* or *Meet the Feebles*, to name but two easy comparisons. Also, those are both puppet shows, whereas this is really acted by human beings, merely wearing masks that completely cover their heads and often parts of their bodies, in a sort of un-furry version of what furries wear.

The story is also packed full of outrageous topics, but they're not played

exploitatively. If anything, most are underplayed, especially rape, a core plot element that affects a few of the characters. One was raped before the movie begins and is pregnant because of it; for political reasons, scenes are staged to suggest a more palatable rapist to the public. Circumstances prompt the same character to be raped a second time, during the film, but that isn't shown on camera.

And while I did just describe the Marquis as "a more palatable rapist", not a description I ever thought I'd type, he's a philosophical chap here, far from a ravenous beast. Most of the characters are given animal forms to mirror their personalities, like Ambert, the guard who appears rat-like both inside and out. The Marquis is given dog form, looking somewhat like a sedate old spaniel, and he can't seem to get worked up over anything. Now, I'm no expert on the Marquis de Sade, but I really doubt he was quite so sedate a pervert as he appears here. Sure, he happily writes his twisted erotica, some of which we see brought to life in claymation form: a ram, for instance, which literally splits his naked body in two before one of its horns transforms into a black snake which spits out semen-like venom. But in this film, the Marquis is merely eloquent, whether his words are spoken or written; it's Colin, his chatty appendage, who wants to dive into action. They're two halves of a single personality, making this a sort of

schizophrenic buddy movie.

It's important that Colin, whom we might easily see as having the most animalistic nature of any character in the movie, given that he's always trying to persuade the Marquis to stick him into holes, even they're slits in the stone walls of his cell, is the character who looks the most human, the only one, in fact, who looks remotely human.

Sure, he's a huge phallus, jutting from between his master's legs like a hobby horse, so large that the Marquis could fellate himself without even leaning over, but he has carefully crafted and animated features and a dome that looks like a human brain. And, of course, he wears a turtleneck, because this is a French film and, apparently, the Marquis wasn't Jewish. It's hilarious to consider that American audiences might have more issue with the fact that Colin has a foreskin than anything else in the movie, but that's an aside. What's important is that the dog-faced Marquis is all about restraint, or at least the channeling of urges into deviant literature, while the human-faced Colin is a real hound dog. Their relationship is deep (no pun intended).

There are other prisoners in the Bastille beyond the Marquis, who has been locked up for a peculiar form of blasphemy (defecating on a crucifix, presumably in a place of worship). There's Pigonou the Grave, the hog

that his name suggests, who was ironically put into prison for circulating bad pork; apparently cutting off his own leg in recompense didn't go far enough. He shares a cell with Lupino, a member of the Patriotic Citizens who are pledged to revolution, and the owner of much more intellect than his dim-witted cellmate. I'm not sure if he's really a ram or a goat, but the other prisoner of note is Justine, who is clearly a cow. She's the lady who was raped and by no less a personage than the king. She's pregnant with his child and the powers that be are keen to scotch any sort of rumour in these turbulent times. The powers that be here are the preening rooster of a governor, Gaetan de Preaubois, and his priest, Dom Pompero, who has the form of a camel, presumably for a reason couched in French culture that eludes me.

The cast of characters is small and focused, but not quite that much. Beyond Ambert, the guard rat, who wants nothing more than for the Marquis to bugger him senseless, there's also Juliette, another Patriotic Citizen, whose attempts to break Lupino out of the Bastille have led her to become the governor's dominatrix of choice. She's a horse, or perhaps a mule because she's single-minded, while her co-conspirators are Jacquot, a parrot, and the boar who runs the Wounded Nightingale where they meet. The financier of the group, whose name I never caught, is a relaxed

monkey, who claims to be a cousin of the king. There are so few characters that the filmmakers have time to explore their motivations, but this clearly aims at being a fable, telling a historical story through the use of archetypes represented by the animals they most resemble. In other words, they're simple characters with little depth. Only the Marquis, as befits the title character, has any real substance and that's explored through him talking with his penis.

And I can't highlight how important that is. It sounds like a joke, a skit or—dare I say it—a gag, but it's the foundation of this picture. Whatever the filmmakers had in mind, it was rooted—yes, I do apologise for these unintentional puns—in a conversation between the head with a brain and the head without. And I can't help wonder why they thought that it was such a bright idea to create the film.

The writers were Roland Topor and the director, Henri Xhonneux. The latter was Belgian and he made a few other films, including a 1970 feature with the suggestive title of *Take Me, I'm Old Enough*. His most relevant other work, though, is an animated pastiche of TV news called *Téléchat* that he made with Topor for French television in the mid-eighties, starring a cat and an ostrich. The style is different but not greatly so and at least one of its regular voice actors, Valérie Kling, returned here to give voice to Colin

the lead penis. It aired between 1982 and 1986, running for 234 episodes, so it's not hard—there I go again—to see this as the next logical step.

Except that this step took them into some rather wild territory. The most outrageous scene involves a crawfish, some mayonnaise and a jailer's buttocks, because even Colin has to say no sometimes, even if he's already committed himself. However, this is taken from the life and work of the Marquis de Sade, so even the tame parts aren't that tame. Justine, who becomes quite the aficionado of his writings, tells him that *Hitting Low with Two Dying Nuns* is her favourite. One claymation interpretation involves a quartet of monks being pleasured by naked women while a fifth attempts to balance on top of a vast pole, only to fall and die mangled amidst a conveniently placed pile of thorns. There's even an orgy scene, in which the governor's confessor reads the Marquis to the ladies under his cassock and those writhing around him, all wearing outrageous masks carved like spreadeagled women. It's here that he commits to stealing the prisoner's work to sell to fish-faced journalist Willem von Mandarine for publication.

And yet it all comes back to Colin, who complains to the Marquis about how many verbs he uses and, really, this is what's the most shocking thing. It's not the torture, suicide or rape. It's not the BDSM, though a leather-clad horse caning the backside of a rooster is not something I can

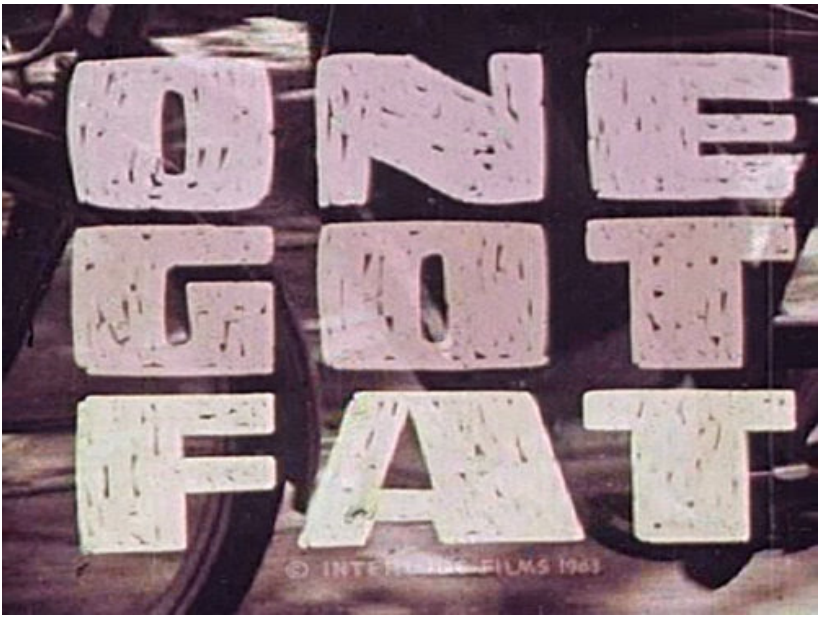
honestly claim to have seen before. It's not even the scene where Justine starts to suck the blood off Colin's previously bandaged head, before Ambert steals her away to milk her on the rack. It's the fact that this picture ought to play like degenerate pornography but is instead full of history, literature and philosophy. It's like a porno movie made by the Amish or the Mormons, but with the porn taken out, so that what remains is a more accessible artistic layer hiding something that was never meant to be family friendly. Beyond the frequent presence of a vast talking penis, who is either erect or hidden from view, this is surprisingly tame for something so decadent and depraved. It's like the art actually matters.

Xhonneux's collaborator, both on *Téléchat* and *Marquis*, was Roland Topor, a multi-talented Frenchman. I knew his name from the 1964 horror novel he wrote entitled *The Tenant*, which was later filmed by Roman Polanski, and as the actor who played Renfield in Werner Herzog's version of *Nosferatu*. Others know him as a collaborator with René Laloux on such films as *Fantastic Planet*. His career is full of tantalising moments though; he designed the magic lanterns for *Fellini's Casanova*, wrote songs for *The Butcher, the Star and the Orphan* (among many other roles) and contributed monstrous drawings for the opening credits of *Long Live Death*. This is the filmography of an artist, someone who wrote, painted, composed, drew,

acted, animated and filmed.

And this particular film is certainly a creation of artists who have more concerns about critical acclaim than financial reward because, let's face it, the latter was never going to happen; it still hasn't seen a Region 1 release and, frankly, probably never well.

It fits much better into the context of gothic novels like *The Monk*, recently filmed in France by Dominik Moll with Vincent Casselin the lead; the *Fables* of Jean de la Fontaine, published in France in the second half of the seventeenth century; and, of course, the writings of the Marquis de Sade, a French aristocrat who is more relevant today than when he died in 1814 in the Charenton-Saint-Maurice lunatic asylum. I find it fascinating that most people think of de Sade as a sexual deviant, whose works and teachings have found a welcoming home in European exploitation films, but his legacy is just as relevant in philosophical circles, foreshadowingas it does existentialism, surrealism and even psychoanalysis. Maybe a movie like this, which seems completely weird to both my English eyes and to the American eyes of my better half, might be worthy of family discussion in France, where hardcore pornography has been broadcast on late-night TV for decades. Like the work of de Sade, it will fascinate and repel, often at the same time, but hey, can't that be said of all the best art?


ONE
GOT
FAT

ONE GOT FAT (1963)

Director: Dale Jennings

Writer: Dale Jennings

Stars: Charles Hagens, Dick Hutto, Kevin Lindsay, Janice Powell, Dan Whitehead and Lucie Hagens

I got a pleasant surprise when I played this bicycle safety short because it turned out that my better half had seen it. It was screened to her and her class in school, somewhere between kindergarten and second grade, perhaps a decade after its original release.

Over four decades later, it had stuck in her mind to the point that she remembered it immediately, just from the opening shot of a odd huddle of kids with immobile tails. That detail will become clear shortly, I promise. The film didn't traumatise her, she says, but then she didn't ride a bike. She remembered this as merely creepy, but probably funny too, at least back when she was a six or seven year old kid.

I'd only read about it, so this was a first time experience for me and I have no idea what the filmmakers thought they were doing. Why would they set up something so surreal just to make one meaningless punchline work at the end of fifteen minutes, especially given that it hurts the points of the movie, which, the more we think about it, are really horrible life lessons that should not be learned in classrooms.

The logical explanation for the film is that the folk at Interlude Films wanted to tell kids how dangerous it could be to ride their bikes without following safety precautions. Nobody has a problem with that, right?

I fell off my bike as a kid, breaking one bone in my left arm and bending the other—so learning what a greenstick fracture is—so I know what it's like to get hurt. Then again, I didn't break any of the cardinal rules that are outlined in this film; I just fell off and landed awkwardly on the kerb.

Anyway, I'm all for this film in principle. But then I watched it. So now I have to wonder if anyone actually benefitted from the intended message.

Did anyone avoid an accident on their bike after remembering to abide by the rules they learned in *One Got Fat*? Or did kids get into more accidents after emulating the bad behaviour of the monkeys on bikes?

And there, I said it. The ten kids who get together and decide to go have a picnic in the park nine blocks away aren't really kids. Well, one is. The others are all monkeys, wearing a variety of monkey masks and curiously immobile monkey tails.

Why? Well, I'm going to spoil the joke because it's an irresponsible one that gets worse the more we think about it. The title refers to the one real human boy, who makes it to the park safe and sound just because he isn't, get this, a monkey!

So what's the lesson? Is it that monkeys make terrible cyclists? Is it that kids have no peripheral vision when they ride their bikes while wearing monkey masks? Nah, I'm just kidding. Surely it's that when every one of your friends dies a horrible death all around you, you should carry on regardless so you can eat their lunches and get fat. Don't call 911. Don't make a responsible adult aware. Don't stay to comfort your dying buddies

in their last moments on earth. Just think about all those packed lunches and the carnage won't even register. Then again, not acknowledging what's going on while you're actually riding down the road sounds pretty dangerous. And hey, didn't "Slim" Jim McGuffney's bike collapse under his weight? Eat up all those lunches, Orville Slump, because you'll be next, kiddo, you'll be next!

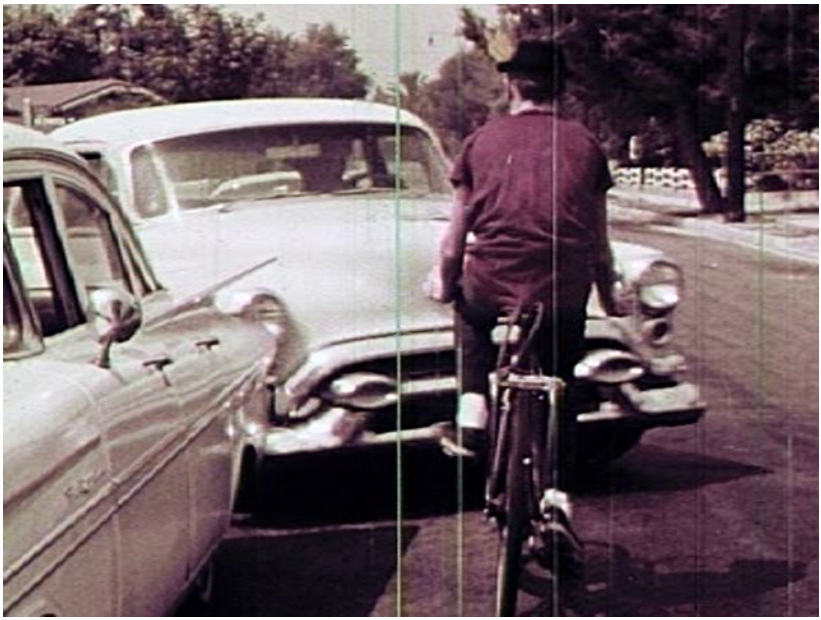
I was actually as flabbergasted by the narration as the visuals, courtesy of Edward Everett Horton, one of the gems of golden age Hollywood in the thirties. Each time I dropped down to the level of trying to figure out why I was watching a bunch of monkeys on bicycles, he'd throw out a new line of inappropriately chipper monologue to grab my attention back.

For instance, the reason why Orville has all ten lunches defying the laws of physics on his bike's back rack is because, "Slim thought that his sack would be hard to handle." Did Dale Jennings write this deliberately? He certainly aimed to fit as much inappropriate humour as he could into this morbid monologue of mangled monkeys, so perhaps he did. Just look at the names of the characters! Just watch the cartoon explosions and

listen to all the squishing sounds! Just think about how cheerful Horton sounds after each accident! His dismissals of each character after their horrible deaths is reminiscent of the dark wit that Vincent Price got to use so frequently when making horror pictures for William Castle. "Phillip Floogle is no longer bored." You can feel the sheer delight Horton felt in not speaking the reason because, well, you can see why.

I won't run through all the deaths, because you should certainly watch this surreal how-not-to yourself. I'll just illustrate the comments above with some examples. First up is "Rooty Toot" Jasperson, described as "a slam-bang go-getter headed for big things in life." Like a car, when he gets fed up of making hand signals when he wants to turn and swerves into traffic. "At this point," enthuses Horton, "'Rooty Toot' Jasperson left the party."

We can only assume that he was so far ahead of the pack that the emergency services cleaned up the road before the rest of them caught up. Otherwise, why wouldn't these monkeys stop and gawk in horror at the bloody remains of their friend? Those damned dirty apes! They don't



rubberneck at all, even though they actually have rubber necks, they carry on and continue to make mistakes.

Tinkerbell McDillinfiddy—seriously, where did these names come from?—is just a forgetful soul and, in this short, that leads to being hit by a big ass frickin' truck. Worst is perhaps Filbert Bagel, who gets squished by a steamroller because he doesn't do maintenance on his bike, so his brakes fail. Really, we just wonder why he doesn't swerve out of the way.

Best of all is Mossby Pomegranate, who doesn't even have a bike, as he didn't register it and failed to obtain a license, so the cops couldn't do anything when it got stolen. He's the first monkey not to die in a horrible fashion, which perhaps leaves us with the lesson that the safest way to ride a bike is to let the damn thing get nicked so that you can't get into an accident on it. All he ends up with is fallen arches because a few blocks of jogging was apparently deeply unhealthy in 1963, albeit not as deeply unhealthy as riding a bike in an ape mask.

Of course "Slim" Jim McGuffney gets his, as does Trigby Phipps and Phillip Floogle, Nelbert Zwieback—who's a girl, by the way—and Stanislaw Hickenbottom, who rides his bike into a tunnel without lights or reflectors and apparently exits into the *Twilight Zone*. "Picture this," we can hear Rod Serling say in his memorable voice, "a world populated by apes, who ride bikes and drive cars and do all the things that we do, except adhere to the safety rules of cycling in traffic."

And that's what it felt like. Right? Right!

THE FINISHING LINE
directed by
JOHN KRISH

THE FINISHING LINE (1977)

Director: John Krish

Writers: Michael Gilmour and John Krish

Stars: Juniors and Seniors of Roebuck Junior School, Watton-at-Stone Primary School and the Simon Balle School, Hertfordshire, Peter Hill, David Millett, Jeremy Wilkin, Kevin Flood, Antony Carrick, Yolande Palfrey, David Howe, Don Henderson and members of the St John Ambulance Brigade, Hertfordshire

If *One Got Fat* was traumatising, and I've heard that adjective used more than once, then *The Finishing Line* is truly nightmare-inducing. It's another safety film but a British short this time, made by John Krish for British Transport Films, on his return to work for them after a blacklisted period, following his unauthorised commentary on the closure of London's trams in 1953's *The Elephant Will Never Forget*.

He was asked to make a film that might help to stop children playing on railway lines, where they would often vandalise them. What he came up with, in collaboration with co-writer Michael Gilmour, was *The Finishing Line*, which features more maimed and dead children than *The Hunger Games* and *Battle Royale* combined. It proved immediately controversial—like, duh—and was even debated on the TV show *Nationwide*. Some felt it was a tough film for a tough problem, while others appropriately worried about it traumatising their kids or even encouraging the sort of vandalism that it intended to prevent. It was promptly pulled from circulation, to be replaced by a safe and inconsequential film called *Robbie* that everybody promptly forgot about.

So what did John Krish do that so upset the British public in 1977? Well, contrary to every other public safety film, he turned the problem at hand into a game. Well, not really a game. It's more of a competition, a school competition spawned from the resonant words of a headmaster floating over the opening shots.

"The railway is not the game field!" he pronounces, so the one kid who sits dangerously on the edge of a stone bridge overlooking a railway line, immediately thinks, "Yeah, but if it was..." And we're off and running. He would have lots of trains, a twenty foot scoreboard and even a brass band, which strikes up as we watch his twisted imagination at work.

I grew up with British sports days and was six when this was released, so there's much that I remember here, from the bowl haircuts to having to restart the first race after some eager kid jumped the gun. The only bit that doesn't feel familiar is when the folk from the St John's Ambulance bring stretchers out of tents in preparation for what's to come.

And off we go! We're given four events, to be competed by four teams of kids. They're each introduced by an announcer, eagerly explained by the anonymous kid on the bridge through narration and illustrated by a very basic diagram of what's going to happen.

It begins with "9 and Under Fence Breaking", a particularly simple to explain event, in which the kids from each team have to run to the wire fence, break through it, get all their members down the bank, across the rails and up the opposite bank to cross the finishing line. Sounds easy

enough, right? Well a train is due to drive through halfway just to spur some extra speed out of these kids, and you just know someone's going to trip on a rail and lie sprawled on the track. It turns out to be a girl from the blue team and her team-mates have to abandon her when they can't summon up the strength to carry her off the track. "Blue are disqualified for failing to complete with a full team,' says the announcer as everyone watches silently while the bloody corpse of this pre-teen is lifted onto a stretcher and hauled away.

Now you're getting the idea? There's "12 and Under Stone Throwing" next, then "Last Across", with the "Great Tunnel Walk" to finish things off. Each event wraps up with dead or maimed children and stone throwing adds disfigured adults to the mix. That involves simply throwing bricks, colour coded for teams, at a passing train from a distance of only ten feet away from the track. You can obtain two points for each smashed window, we're told, and four for "a direct hit", which means a passenger. Yellow even score six for hitting the driver, who holds in his eyes while the blood pours out of them. Last Across ups the stakes, with two teams on either side of the tracks, fighting each other to get across before the oncoming

train hits them head on. By this point I was counting myself and can swear there are twelve kids sprawled in the train's wake, even if the announcer only claims five injured and five dead. The Great Tunnel Walk is when it gets really serious; as Krish told *Fangoria*, a magazine that doesn't have a habit of covering educational training films, he wanted to make it "look like the Somme from 1914." And, in case you're wondering, it did.

It's utterly surreal to watch this and realise that it was commissioned by an actual government department. Krish pitched the concept to British Transport Films, which he had co-founded decades earlier before his stint in the wilderness, and their in house psychiatrist loved it. "This is exactly what we need!" he announced.

And so Krish made it, with the expected audience schools, screening to children between the ages of eight and eleven, as it was felt that older kids might see it a little differently. It played in some schools, always to a "very silent" audience, with a few kids needing to be taken out partway through because of the trauma. Krish dismisses them as "the nosebleeders—the ones who are going to faint at anything". Then the controversy that built up in its wake led to it being screened on TV and, to quote Krish, "there

was a riot afterward," so British Transport withdrew it from circulation and banned it for twenty-one years. The next time anyone saw it in public was in 2003 as part of the Krish retrospective that was organised by the British Film Institute.

Anyone immediately surprised by the boy sitting on the wall of the bridge at the beginning of the picture, in a long shot that zooms into him and clearly shows that there's no safety equipment underneath just in case he falls off, won't be too surprised to hear stories of the shoot. According to Krish, he was given 175 kids for five days in the last week of term before the holidays. Given that the line was active, he couldn't get onto it until 9:30am and he had to be back off it by 3:30pm. He had to finish by the Friday or all those kids would vanish and some of the extras with them, as none of the parents were there. The final shot of the massed dead had to be shot in only twenty minutes, because the production office had cut costs with the sign for the Great Tunnel Walk. They'd printed "Start" on one side and "Finish" on the other so, with time running out, Krish had to shoot the beginning, pull the sign down, transport it through the three and a half mile tunnel and put it up the other way round so he

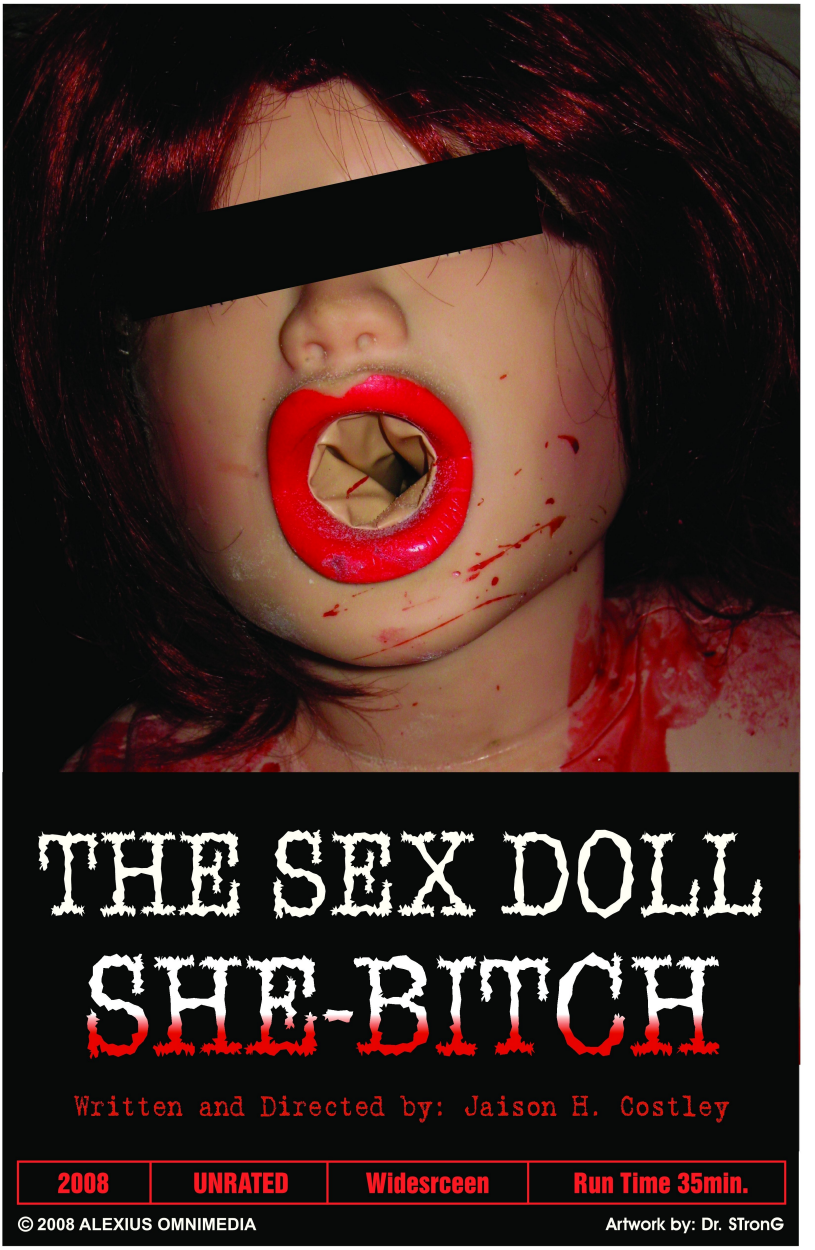
could shoot the ending.

I was six when *The Finishing Line* was made, so I didn't see it in school. I vaguely remember seeing a few films here and there but not what any of them were, which is a shame as apparently the seventies were strong for public safety films in Britain.

Donald Pleasence voiced *Lonely Water* as the Grim Reaper, warning kids about the dangers of playing near rivers. *Apaches* was made in 1977 by John Mackenzie, who would go on to helm *The Long Good Friday* with Bob Hoskins; it features kids playing cowboys and indians in the countryside, only to fall prey to a host of hidden dangers, like suffocating in grain pits or burning alive in hayrick fires.

Perhaps part of this unexpected impact came from the techniques used being borrowed from the horror and exploitation films that dominated the late sixties and early seventies in the UK, as Katy McGahan, a curator at the BFI, suggests. This was probably helped by the BBFC, those official censors whose scissors got busy in the video nasty era, because they left public safety shorts alone. Why stick a rating on something that nobody actually had a choice in watching? They didn't even ban this film which,

like *A Clockwork Orange*, was voluntarily withdrawn.


THE SEX DOLL
SHE-BITCH
Written and Directed by: Jaison H. Costley
2008
UNRATED
Widesrceen
Run Time 35min.
© 2008 ALEXIUS OMNIMEDIA
Artwork by: Dr. STronG

THE SEX DOLL SHE-BITCH (2009)

Director: Jaison H. Costley

Writer: Jaison H. Costley

Stars: Sitara Falcon, Melinda Chilton, Bob Lanoue, Jaison H. Costley and Matt Johnson

With that brief but traumatic foray into educational short films, here's a return to the traditional sort of *WTF!?* movie: indie sex and violence.

It's hard to pick a favourite aspect to this picture with its undeniably awesome title. Could it be that a movie starring a sex doll out for bloody revenge was shot entirely in Utah? Maybe it's that the doll and its sister are given credits: Ilsa is played by Sum Young Poon and Violated Sex Doll is played by Sumotha Young Poon. Perhaps it's that every location has a profane but highly descriptive name (warning: this paragraph finds itself full of profanity just by referencing credits and locations), from the Cheap as Fuck Used-Ass Car Lot in which we begin the film, through the Cheap as Fuck Dive Ass Bar and all the way to the Cheap as Fuck Cockroach Infested Diner. The music comes courtesy of the Seeping Vagina Orchestra, while the band on stage in that bar is subtly named Cunt Grinder, complete with requisite chick bassist and a lead vocalist in a monk's habit. There's even the professionally offensive poster for Crispin Hellion Glover's *What is It?* on the back of a door, the one with a riding crop thrust between Shirley Temple's labia.

I think I'd have to plump for the lead actor, Sitara Falcon, because not only does he nail the misogynistic insanity of William Cronenbourg with such admirably straight vehemence that I wonder how many takes were lost to the crew falling prey to infectious laughing fits, but because he comes back later to play the role of Todd, tasked with seducing the very same sex-doll which has already raped his eye socket with a poker. This really wasn't the sort of film I was expecting to find good acting in, but Falcon, who's best known as a comedian, does a fantastic job, far beyond

what the film really warrants, even in a stick-on moustache. It's especially noteworthy for being delivered almost entirely to an inflatable sex doll who doesn't move or react throughout his diatribes. I'm sure his dialogue was provided by writer/director Jaison H. Costley, but it wouldn't surprise me to find that he improvised whole swathes of it while the camera just kept rolling and captured it all. I'd love to see the outtakes and hope there are hours of them.

The story is pretty straightforward. Young William is a prize, beginning the film getting head from a hooker, whom he promptly kicks out of his car so he can go home to the wife. He spends the trip talking to everyone he knows, each haranguing conversation more demeaning than the last. He doesn't have any positive words to say about anyone or anything, not even his car and especially not his wife, played by the sex doll of the title.

When he gets home, where she's watching *PIGS* (*Police Investigating Gay Shit*), he rages at her in a hilarious one sided argument that gets better and better. He even shouts at the baby (which is another doll, though not an inflatable one this time, as that would be a little out there even for this movie). It's all as misogynistic as is humanly possible, right down to his suggestion that his sex doll wife should have had an abortion instead of having his doll baby. In a great touch he even slaps her, which prompts her very first movement; She goes to the kitchen to get a patch to seal the

new hole in her cheek. Up till that point, we wondered if this was all in his head.

Just as Sitara Falcon is surprisingly strong in each of two prominent roles, the sound and video quality is also shockingly high. I was expecting something cheap and cheerful, if not as cheap and cheerful as a WAVE movie like *Eaten Alive: A Tasteful Revenge*. What I found was a very capable, professional piece, merely one that stars a blow up doll in the lead role, one that does move around at points—because, honestly, that's kind of required of a lead actor—but never attempts to speak; everyone else just acts as if she's providing her half of the conversation, which we never hear. These other actors even underdo things, just as Falcon overdoes them with unabashed bravado.

Once William Cronenbourg is dead, murdered by his harangued sex doll wife, a detective shows up to investigate in monotone. When he finds the baby doll face down in the bathwater, he flicks on his voice recorder and states, simply and without any emotion, "the baby's dead". Moments like these are every bit as hilariously inappropriate as they are inappropriately hilarious. And they made me wonder how the film got financed.

Costley is not a prolific filmmaker, though he did return to many of the roles he served here for a picture in 2013 called *Dickhead Dave*. The only credit he has on IMDb that predates this was as a videographer and grip

for a 2008 comedy short called *Maybe...* For someone with little experience at that time, he certainly earned plenty here, on a wildly non-commercial thirty-five minute short; in addition to being the film's writer/director, he produced, foleyed, composed and storyboarded it, as well as reserving one supporting role for himself. That he even completed this thing deserves kudos and what he did with it deserves more.

That it's as utterly out there as it is, the approach taken restricting its potential audience massively but, then again, perhaps glowing in the dark to the people who would get a kick out of it, also deserves respect. It isn't the usual debut short to sell yourself to an agent and so land that prized Hollywood gig; it's more of the opposite and I have a lot of respect for that proudly niche achievement.

How we can categorise this film, I have no idea. It's about as awkward to place as the sex doll of the title is to act opposite. It's certainly a comedy, but it's gruesome enough in its effects work to qualify as a gore movie too, which is an odd combination to begin with. Casting a blow up doll as the lead character is a shift into Troma territory, as is the dialogue which runs the gamut from police dispatch messages like, "Be on the lookout for a brown piece of shit station wagon. Subject is a white latex female," all the way to outré monologues such as Todd's chat-up routine that involves the bizarre details of the porn collection his former girlfriend burned.

Like I said at the beginning, it's hard to pick a favourite aspect to this film because it's full of wildly inappropriate awesomeness. It's very, very wrong on so many levels, but if you really don't give a monkey's about a sense of wrongness, it might just become the favourite short film in your dormroom, played afresh for each unwary new arrival, horrifying most and becoming a legend for the rest.

¡UNA EXTRAORDINARIA AVENTURA EN UN FUTURO APOCALÍPTICO!
UNA PRODUCCION RIBEFEX - LA MIRADA
EL BARÓN CONTRA LOS DEMONIOS
UNA PELÍCULA DE RICARDO RIBELLES
Protagonizada por
JUAN CARLOS ROMEU
HELENA LECUMBERRI
ALEJANDRO RIBELLES
XAVIER BERTRAN
IRENE BELZA
EVA BARCELÓ
GERARDO ARENAS
SUSANA PALMA
y PAULINA GALVEZ
Filmada en 35 mm
en Color
FRIKI FILMS

THE BARON AGAINST THE DEMONS (2006)

Director: Ricardo Ribelles

Writer: Ricardo Ribelles

Stars: Juan Carlos Romeu, Helena Lecumberri, Alejandro Ribelles, Xavier Bertran, Irene Belza, Gerardo Arenas, Eva Barceló, Susana Palma and Paulina Gálvez

Much of the joy of this project for me was found in discovering wild movies, watching them and attempting to figure out who the filmmakers thought their audiences might be. I really have no idea about *El barón contra los Demonios*, because it mixes a few very deliberate approaches that I'm pretty sure I never expected to coincide in a single movie.

For instance, as the usual English language title (it's also known as *Star Troopers*), *The Baron Against the Demons*, suggests, this feels like a tokusatsu picture at heart, with foam latex suits, imaginative monsters and a bizarre tale about a futuristic organisation dedicated to fighting evil. That it was made with Spaniards rather than Japanese is one reason why that doesn't ring quite true, but there's also the BDSM comic book aesthetic and the gratuitous gore effects, which suggest that this was never meant for kids. What's more, the most important aspect is the overriding Catholic dogma which drives the whole thing so rigidly and fundamentally that this can only be a Christian metaphor dressed up for sexual deviants who like the Power Rangers. You know, that sort of film!

Oddly, for a movie so overtly about good and evil, we never quite grasp who represents those two usually easy to define sides.

Sure, the villain is Satan himself, who's visiting from the Ninth Planet to witness the birth of the Antichrist, which here means a man in a rubber suit, conceived from seed stolen from a chained hero by a leather clad dominatrix with gigantic knockers, who was birthed by a hermaphroditic

stick monster. We may be relatively safe in assuming that they're the bad guys! But who represents the side of good?

Initially, we might presume that it's Exorcio Deus Machine, a late 21st century band of Spanish Inquisition commandos sharing their steampunk space satellite with an alien race of muppets, from which lair they combat evil. After all, that's who our hero, the titular Baron, works for. Yet, if he's clearly on their side, they're surely not quite so clearly on his, as the man in charge, Coronel Doménico, dreams of dropping an atom bomb on his head. What's wrong with the usual *Triumph of the Will* inspired awards ceremony for heroes? No, atom bomb it is.

So, are we to see the Baron as our hero or just some rebellious heretic? I have no idea. He certainly appears to be a hero, not least because he saves the day almost single-handedly, the useful contributions of Exorcio Deus Machine comprising one woman who succeeds in rescuing him from the deviant underworld of Scotland, even though she was only sent because the Coronel wants her vaporised by the same atom bomb as the Baron. However, unlike most sci-fi action films, the phrasing forces us to read it from the standpoint of Catholic theology too and it's hardly a stretch to see the Baron as a Christ substitute, most obviously because he actually describes the quest this picture is for him as his Via Crucis. For those who

don't expect their genre flicks to periodically drift into Latin, that refers to the Stations of the Cross, those fourteen iconic moments which Jesus endured from death sentence to burial. You know, the procession of brutality from *The Passion of the Christ*. This is just like that but with more biomechanical parasites.

So, if the Baron is really a post-apocalyptic Jesus, what does that make the organisation he thinks he works for but which secretly aims to see him extinguished? Are they true defenders of God's Word, the New Crusader Legion commanded by the Inquisitorial Committee? Or are they merely a sorry bunch of religious fanatics? Quite frankly, is there even a difference between those options? Well, there lies a dilemma, surrounded by all the invisible detail that writer/director Ricardo Ribelles carefully omitted just to keep us confused. He's willing and able to craft dynamic dialogue, but he doesn't appear to grasp that "dynamic" doesn't have to come at the expense of meaning. For instance, when Coronel Doménico tasks Lt. Ira Bowman with rescuing the Baron, we wonder who she is. Well, she's a human with no special powers, but she has a score of 77 in the Danger Room! Wait a second. What's a Danger Room and is 77 a good score or a bad one? Is that 77 out of 80 or 77 out of a gazillion? It's dynamic but it's also meaningless.

The entire script is so dynamic but so meaningless that I wanted to transcribe every other line of dialogue but couldn't figure out what was going on for about an hour. I could blame poor subtitles, given that I don't speak Spanish, but they seem to make sense, as far as the script lets them. I just don't know where to start.

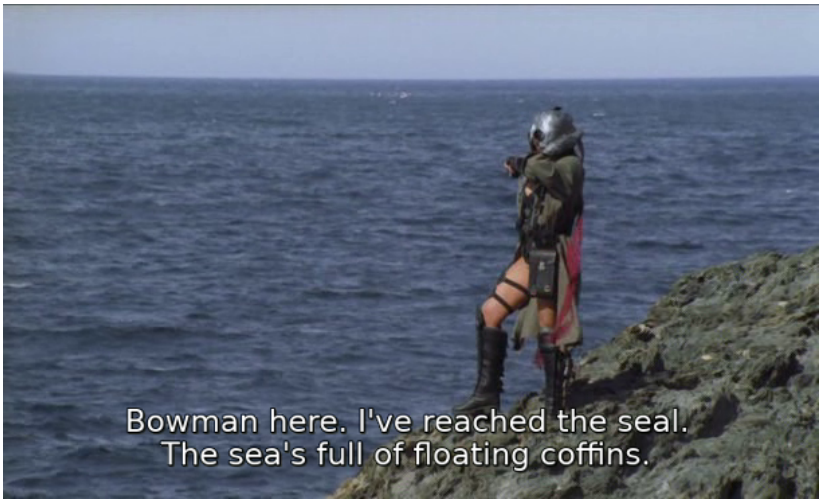
For instance: "Justice was the one who had the fetus in her entrails" should be the title of a black metal album. Justice here may be one of the wildly endowed bondage mutants we find and massacre, but we're never really introduced. "A curious funeral rite for satanic androids" is enticing. I'm still not sure how androids can find religion but it happens here, just too quickly, so the Baron massacres all his followers before he realises that they're actually following him. He isn't too bright, but he's flamboyant with soliloquy: "Blind, Black Faith!" he shouts in vain at an unresponsive sky. "The faith that moves those who died without washing their souls that resurrects the eyeless dead!" No, I have no idea what that means either and I watched this movie.

Occasionally, there's a sliver of explanation. For instance, we first meet the Baron and his sidekick, Lt. Alexander, as they battle an onslaught of Chattering Laughers in northern France, but he vanishes, mysteriously showing back up again in the evil clutches of Doña Pervertvm in her evil

lair called Pandemonium, which to Space Catholics is apparently located in the Perfidia Caverns below Inverness. Now, I've only travelled through Inverness but it seemed to be a nice place, devoid of any "sub-world with necromantic roots created under the command of a two-headed leader." I'm also very sure I'd have noticed anyone wearing an outfit like Doña Pervertvm's, given that it appears to be a leather bikini so narrow that it had to have been glued to her labia, with skimpy straps and a massive brass bra that looks like it was crafted from a couple of missiles. Jane Russell, eat your heart out! Then again, Jane Russell wasn't tough enough to tie her hair back with scavenged intestines. That would have improved *The Outlaw* considerably!

Doña Pervertvm likes the sound of her own voice just as much as the Baron likes his, so we start to discover some of the details that we need to understand the movie here in Pandemonium. She's keen on extracting the Baron's blessed sperm so she can leverage it to make the Ragnarok-Beast pregnant. And time is short; as Sgt. Burkina Fasso explains to the Coronel up on the space satellite, "Ragnarok's still in heat. If this infernal beast doesn't perpetuate his species before the Winter Angelus, he'll eat himself as punishment."

I may not have grasped the point of this, partly because I have no idea



what the Winter Angelus is, but it seems like this Space Inquisition only need to stamp out bestiality underneath Inverness and they'll be golden. It's a crying shame the Baron gets himself captured, huh? Doña Pervertvm interrogates him, rapes him—without actually undressing him first, which is a neat trick—then stabs him in the crotch with a carved dildo so that he can spurt all over her face in a bloody shower. "This is my blood," I guess, "which is given for you."

Clearly Doña Pervertvm is the mistress and slave of Ragnarok, nesting with him under the Sign of Pluto, and clearly she has a plan. I just wish I understood everything else going on here.

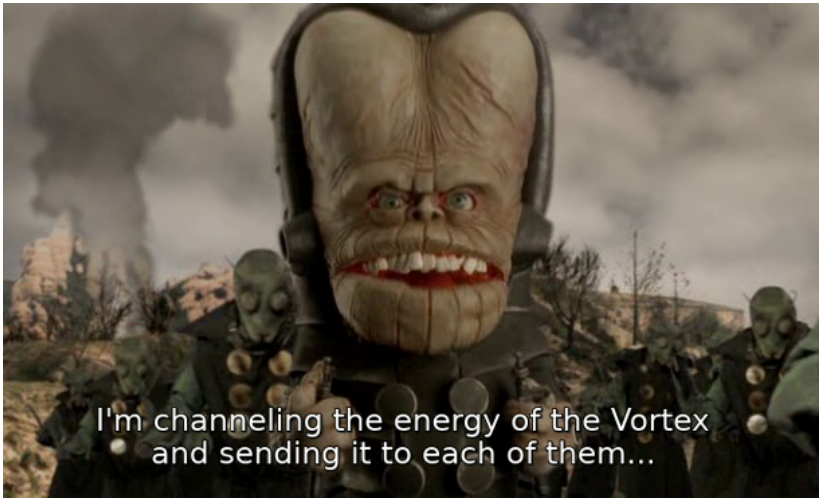
For one thing, why does she have an army of cackling midget android clowns, beyond why everyone should have an army of cackling midget android clowns, of course. Why have they already started to convert to the Baron's unspoken ideology before he even gets there to corrupt them? Why do they believe that blessing themselves, confining themselves to coffins and then throwing those coffins into the ocean is a good way to demonstrate their devotion?

It's no better up on the satellite. For example, why has Dr. Michas, a muppet alien from the utterly unexplained planet of Belfídia and the head of the Revolutionary Prototype Dept., replaced Lt. Alexander's clown-

bitten arm with a prosthetic that is utterly useless except to threaten the satellite? Why do they even have this department? And why does every woman in the film have to dress in a bondage leotard, whether they're in combat in the field or just chilling inside the lab? Suddenly the chainmail bikinis in pulp sword and sorcery seem wildly realistic.

Frankly, I gave up trying to figure out the plot. There's a war, for Pete's sake, complete with bagpipes and wicked masks and some little general whose body appears to have been removed from the nipples down, which is why he zooms around in an invisible jet pack. And, even if the script is lunacy on acid, these visuals are actually pretty cool, both in how they're imagined and how they're animated.

That's especially true, given the date. *The Baron Against the Demons* was released in 2006, incorporating a short film by the same writer/director, *Exorcio Deus Machine: La misión*, made a full decade earlier. Yet, the majority of the gadgetry, weapons and even spacecraft are notably steampunk in nature, making this aesthetic, surely taken from Jules Verne's submarines, notably ahead of the curve, steampunk coalescing as a scene soon before 2010. I adored the modelwork, which is intricate and ingenious, though some of the other effects work is ridiculous in the extreme, especially the gore effects, which are as wildly enthusiastic as they are utterly inept.

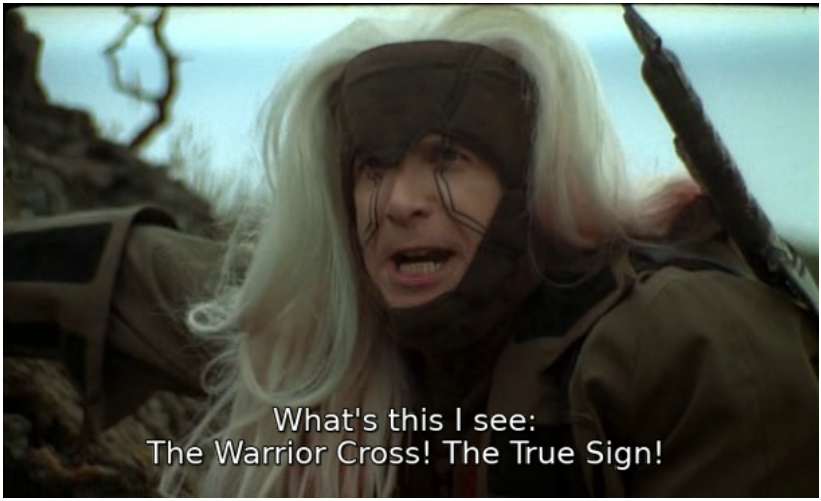


So, is this the story of Jesus? Maybe it's just one of the Gospels of the New New Testament, to be discovered between now and the end of the century, when this is set. If Ribelles made another three movies, telling the same story from different angles, I'd watch every one of them. Maybe by then it might make sense. This feels like an incomplete tale with much more to tell; there's so much action that he could double the length of the film without it feeling slow, but there are so many gaps that he'd have to double the length of the film just to fit in all the explanations he needs. In reality, it's a short film that grew to feature length, but it plays like a twelve episode serial shrunk to a quarter of its size.

As far as I'm aware, the international versions are all the same movie, just with new, more misleading, titles. Its latest is *Star Troopers*, which fails to describe this adequately at all. In France, it's *Battleship Pirates*, which is even worse. *The Baron Against the Demons* works best because, never mind just the title, that's the perfect synopsis too!

And so I wonder what Ricardo Ribelles was attempting to do here. What audience was he trying to reach? I can't help but assume that the logical audiences for its component parts wouldn't be happy with the others.

Tokusatsu fans may love the wild aliens and blissful miniatures, but would probably throw their hands up in despair at all the pontificating on



theology while being stabbed. Catholic action fans (is that a genre?) may dig the fact that it has no problem with staging a new crusade a century into the future but I'm not convinced that it makes any liturgical sense whatsoever and it suggests that Jesus is cool and all but his church has lost the plot. I have no doubt that the outrageous leather bikinis will appeal to readers of European fetish comics but they only like religion if it means that monks can do unspeakable things to nuns or demons can, well, do unspeakable things to nuns. There aren't any nuns to be found here, so I have no idea what they'd think of the scenes that don't feature leather bikinis and/or the Ragnarok-Beast.

I'd argue that there's certainly an audience for this sort of insanity, but it's mostly people like me who are looking for this sort of insanity. It's full of bizarre and engaging imagery but I honestly think I'd have got as much out of it if I'd turned the subtitles off and attempted in vain to figure out the foreign language dialogue. Perhaps that would have been my better option, because I'd have had to conjure up my own story to explain what I saw and that can't have made any less sense than the one Ribelles actually wrote. I would have failed to rustle up the levels of Catholic guilt and inevitability of self-sacrifice that Ribelles seems to bathe in, but I'd have imagined the Baron as a wild escapee from a live action anime, an old school knight who wants everyone and everything to fight him. I don't think the rules of journalism would allow me to review the movie that would have played in my head had I had the foresight to switch off the subtitles, but, by Doña Pervertvm's beautiful brass bazongas, I was sorely tempted to do so.

Luke Skywalker and Han Solo battle evil Imperial forces to help Chewbacca reach his imperiled family on the Wookiee planet - in time for Life Day, their most important day of the year!

Starring MICKEY MORTON PAUL GATE PATTY MALONEY ART CARNEY BEATRICE ARTHUR HARVEY KORMAN
Co-Starring MARK HAMILL HARRISON FORD CARRIE FISHER ANTHONY DANIELS PETER MAYHEW
REGINALD DILLINGHAM JAMES EARL JONES and DIAHANN CARROLL

THE STAR WARS HOLIDAY SPECIAL (1978)

Director: Steve Binder

Writers: Pat Proft, Leonard Ripps, Bruce Vilanch, Rod Warren and Mitzie Welch

Stars: Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford and Carrie Fisher

Let's stay in epic sci-fi/fantasy mode for a moment and remember the most notorious such picture ever made, partly because it's been the dream of tape traders for so long it made it into a Weird Al parody video.

The first official *Star Wars* tie-in after the original episode four, it was broadcast once on CBS in November 1978 and once in a few other English-speaking countries, before vanishing into legend. It has never been re-screened or given an official release, meaning that it's circulated for years only in a variety of horrendous nth generation copies. Fortunately, a first generation copy surfaced a couple of years ago, recorded directly from that CBS broadcast on WHIO in Dayton, Ohio. It's of vastly higher quality than any previous version I've seen, enough so that I finally sat down and watched the whole thing instead of just bits here and there.

What I found was that it's pretty awful, though, like another infamous George Lucas picture, *Howard the Duck*, it isn't as irredeemable as some would have it. There are points that are deliberately funny rather than just accidentally so, after all. However, it's so consistently off kilter that it's an easy choice for this book. What's weirdest is that George Lucas allowed it to happen.

Today, we tend to look down on Lucas, who turned himself over to the cinematic dark side and so became everything he hated: the businessman over the filmmaker, known as much for Jar Jar Binks, midichlorians and licensed products as weird as severed wampa arm ice scrapers for your car windows as he is for creating the *Star Wars* universe, one of the richest and

most beloved in history, maybe even the top of the heap.

Back in 1978, however, he was admired not only for the original *Star Wars* movie but also for *American Graffiti*, which is a quality picture that deserves to be remembered as more than a footnote in his career, a movie he made before he struck gold. People even enjoyed the unprecedented movie tie-in merchandising that *Star Wars* generated and I'm sure many of them regret ditching their 1978 toys after realising that girls were more important.

What people didn't enjoy was this, which stunned audiences in roughly the same way that *The Phantom Menace* did 21 years later, but with more commercial ruthlessness. Today, it's tough to figure out who might have enjoyed it, because it's so inconsistent as to bore kids and so ridiculous as to make adults roll their eyes. No wonder it went down in legend, the way that *Velma* seems to be doing today, but on a grander scale.

The opening sets the scene magnificently. Everyone who fell in love with *Star Wars* and eagerly wanted more got an early Christmas present for about seventy seconds. Sure, the cockpit set of the Millennium Falcon

looks a little flimsier than we remember but that's really Han Solo and Chewbacca racing through space in an attempt to escape not one but two Star Destroyers. As they hit light speed, the holy script, "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away..." appears on screen to the joyous accompaniment of John Williams's famous theme. I'm sure that, at this point, people were not too fussed about having to miss a week's worth of *Wonder Woman* and *The Incredible Hulk*. The opening credits are horribly narrated but at least folk were going to see a host of original cast members: not merely Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford and Carrie Fisher but also Anthony Daniels as C-3PO, Peter Mayhew as Chewbacca and, well, R2-D2 as R2-D2. Quite why Kenny Baker would be so slighted, I have no idea, but it's still promising. See, the voice of James Earl Jones as Darth Vader!

It's at this point that everything starts to go horribly wrong and never manages to recover. We're going to see Chewbacca's family, which sounds cool: his wife, Malla, his father, erm, Itchy, and his son, Lumpy. C'mon! Oh, and there are special guests: Beatrice Arthur, Art Carney, Diahann Carroll, the Jefferson Starship and Harvey Korman. Yes, you can just feel a sinking

feeling creeping up on you, right?

And just in case the true horror of that guest list hadn't yet sunk in, it immediately breaks for commercials and returns with what must be the weakest sponsorship screen ever. "*The Star Wars Holiday Special*, sponsored by General Motors, people building transportation to serve people." That was as catchy as an entire advertising department could think up?

And Itchy and Lumpy? What sort of family did Chewie have? It might have helped immensely if the five (count 'em) writers had explained that these were pet names, Malla being Mallatobuck, Itchy being Attichitcuk and Lumpy being Lumpawarrump. Then again, no. That would suggest that *Star Wars* made a habit of making fun of ethnicities two full decades before Jar Jar and Watto would delve awkwardly into African American and Jewish stereotypes.

Fortunately, we can sit back and relax a little because the first nine and a half minutes of the movie are actually silent. As a classic film aficionado, this approach can't help but remind me of the Dawn of Man sequence that begins *2001: A Space Odyssey* and I have to respect the sheer balls of the

producers for delivering almost ten minutes of banal but surely family friendly Wookiee (yes, there are two Es) dialogue blissfully unsubtitled.

Why they thought it might be a good choice, I have no idea, but maybe they're silent movie fans, as the first variety performance, of an acrobatic troupe displayed holographically from some plastic device in Chewie's front room, is highly reminiscent of what French cinemagician Georges Méliès was doing three quarters of a century earlier. Even this is kept silent, the intended announcements of ringleader Yuichi Sugiyama cut and replaced by electronic music. The tumblers are the Wazzan Troupe, the furry orange jugglers the Mum Brothers and the gymnast Stephanie Stromer. Every one of them is far better than this movie.

As I'm sure you haven't guessed by now, the plot of the Holiday Special has to do with Chewbacca trying to return home to his home planet of Kashyyyk through an Empire blockade to celebrate Life Day with his dear family. What Life Day actually is we're never too sure, even though we eventually get to see a bunch of Wookiees in blood red robes walking into a star, only to find themselves in a cave full of dry ice in which Princess

Leia sings some soporific nonsense to the vague tune of the *Star Wars Theme*. Coincidence much?

By the way, nobody explains how Luke, Leia and the droids magically make their way to this cave, but, if it was that simple, why was it such a trek for Han and Chewie? Did they really need five writers to come up with plotholes like these? Then again, this must all be high entertainment on Kashyyyk, where the Empire apparently broadcasts routine dispatches to stormtroopers via every TV set on the planet, just in case. And you complained about *Jersey Shore*? The only reason Wookiees keep TV sets is because they double as communicators.

And yes, as communicators suggest, we do end up venturing back into the world of dialogue that isn't in what is presumably the Thykarann dialect of Shyriiwook. Somehow that never quite achieved the popularity of Klingon among nerds. I wonder why. Thykarann Boggle must be a riot.

Anyway, having the special centre on Chewie's family means a number of things. One, the budget required for these cast members is contained cleverly: Mickey Morton, Paul Gale and Patty Maloney hardly commanded

salaries like Hamill, Ford and Fisher were surely asking post-*Star Wars*. And why Chewie's wife is played by a man and his son by a girl, I don't want to know. Two, Chewie being late home for Life Day celebrations is a perfect way for Malla to reach out to everyone in the Rebel Alliance to ask about him and so provide them with much cheaper cameo slots. And three, we don't see Kashyyyk in the first movie, so we can't complain about how much cheaper it appears here. Well, except that Chewie apparently lives inside a painting. That's cheap.

Finally, there are a whole slew of opportunities to throw in variety performances and guest appearances without having to spend ~~any~~ much money on sets. Most of them are televised, so they didn't even need to fly people in to the same place. Jefferson Starship appear in the form of a holographic video used to distract a thug from the Empire, which basically means that they're small and they glow pink throughout. Art Carney is a local trader who shows up initially via communicator but joins the main thrust of the story at Chewie's as the only guest who takes part in the plot. Bea Arthur is Ackmena, bartender at the infamous Mos Eisley Cantina, her

story oddly told during an official Empire broadcast to highlight *Life on Tattooine*. Harvey Korman appears as three different characters: in drag as Chef Gormanda, a four-armed parody of Julia Child, whom Malla fails to keep up with; as a malfunctioning Amorphian android on an instruction video which makes precisely no sense; and as a complete moron in Mos Eisley who's fallen hopelessly in love with Ackmena.

Worst of all is Diahann Carroll in what has to be the most misguided scene in this misguided special, credited as Mermeia Holographic Wow. When Saul Dann, Carney's rebel supporting trader, brings some Life Day presents to Chewie's family, we think he's being nice, but he brings weird presents. Itchy, Chewie's father who looks remarkably like a furry version of the Crypt Keeper, is apparently a pervert, so he's given a full size cyber sex machine that allows him to conjure up his fantasy, right there where his grandson's playing.

Sure, it's a private gizmo but many parents surely spent an eternity of uncomfortable minutes wondering if their kids were imagining a geriatric Wookiee whacking off to a glittery black chick in a nightmarish shared

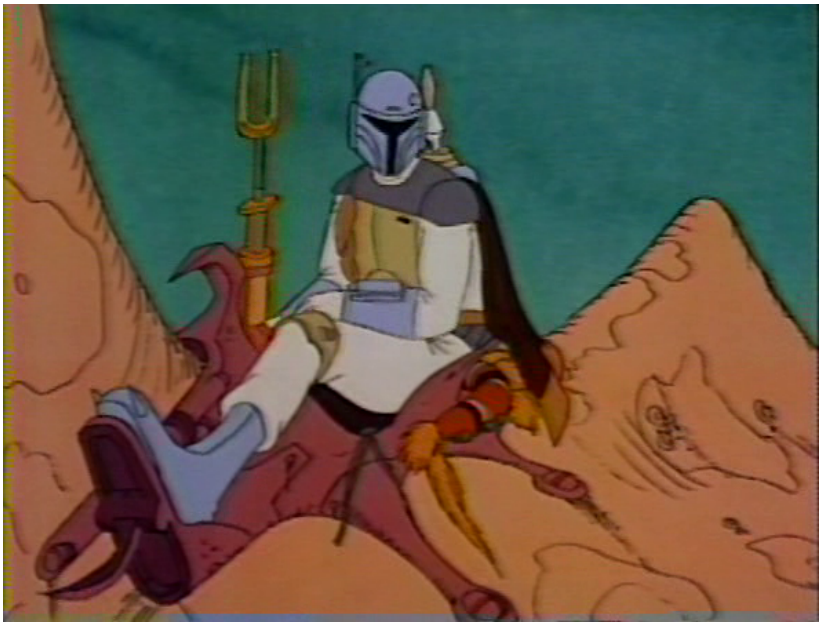
Star Wars inter-racial, inter-species bestiality fan fic experience. "I exist for you," croons Carroll suggestively. "I'm getting your message. Are you getting mine?" "Ah, we're excited, aren't we?" "We can have a good time." "I find you adorable." "I am your fantasy." "Experience me." Trust me, I'm never going to see *Paris Blues* the same way again. How much of a back tax bill did the massively talented Diahann Carroll rack up to warrant signing her name on this contract? That's the usual reason, right?

There's no doubt that this section is the most wildly inappropriate part of this special. It's so wrong that I can't comprehend why anyone could ever have thought it a good idea to write it, shoot it or, once they'd seen it, leave the frickin' thing in. When Nathan Rabin, the first head writer of the AV Club, wrote, "I'm not convinced the special wasn't ultimately written and directed by a sentient bag of cocaine," he was surely thinking first and foremost about Diahann Carroll and Itchy the horny Wookiee granddad.

Hilariously, as relentlessly suppressed as this holiday special is, it's also officially canon, mostly because the animated bit introduces the popular character Boba Fett for the first time, so we can't ignore that Chewie's dad

is into inter-species VR porn, Luke Skywalker understood Wookiee before *The Empire Strikes Back* and Bea Arthur has more *Star Wars* dialogue than any other actress except for Carrie Fisher until the prequels showed up. That's a heck of a factoid to use to upset nerds everywhere. What's most hilarious is that she's pretty good.

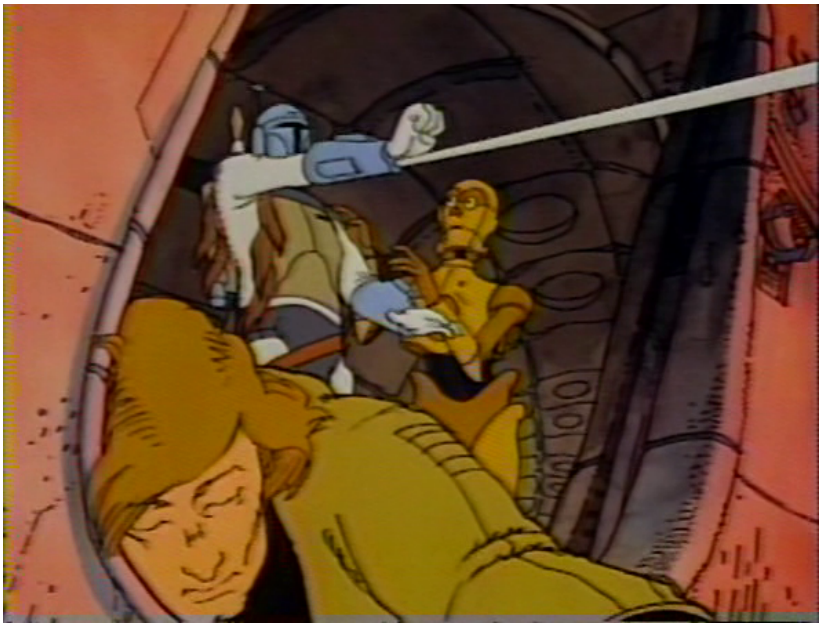
And that's the real surprise here. Sure, this is an unholy mess, even for seventies variety television, but it's not the $115m unholy mess that was *The Phantom Menace*. Carrie Fisher has said that she had a copy to screen at parties, "mainly at the end of the night when I want people to leave," but I'd suggest that it's not quite as embarrassing for its actors as that first prequel. Sure, it's hardly a jewel in their filmographies, but the work they do in it is generally cameos or skits, not serious acting; nobody's judging their talent based on this holiday special. However, actors of the stature of Liam Neeson, Ewan McGregor and Natalie Portman, whose talents were so spectacularly wasted in *The Phantom Menace*, have to live with millions of people knowing their work only from a billion-dollar grossing nightmare. Remember that Sir Alec Guinness, a legendary actor with a whole string of



amazing but underseen classics to his name, is known primarily today for what he described as "fairy-tale rubbish", albeit fairy-tale rubbish that made him rather wealthy late in life.

The only part that most see as a highlight is the animated segment, officially titled *The Faithful Wookiee* to keep in theme with the rest of the special, but known today as the introduction of bounty hunter Boba Fett.

It's a ten minute piece, produced by the Canadian animation studio Nelvana, best known today for children's television shows like *Strawberry Shortcake* and *Care Bears*, but George Lucas was a particular fan of their holiday specials and kept them onboard after this for Saturday morning *Star Wars* cartoon series in the eighties like *Droids* and *Ewoks*. It's actually quite fun, as utterly stupid as it is, with Han and Chewie crash landing onto the ocean planet of Panna while searching for a mystical talisman that makes things invisible. Luke and the droids follow them, only to fall prey to Boba Fett, who seems to be a nice guy just trying to help. It's primitively done but with some style, like a budget cross between Moebius and Carlos Ezquerra. Of course, I like it just because it forced the holiday



special into being canon.

If *The Faithful Wookiee* is the best segment and Mermeia Holographic Wow is clearly the worst, my favourite is probably the *Life on Tattooine* broadcast that unfolds in Chalmun's Spaceport Cantina in Mos Eisley, where a whole bevy of actors in recognisable alien costumes drink, enjoy the music of Figrin D'an and the Modal Nodes and refuse to leave when the Empire imposes curfew and closes them down. Just as Art Carney treats the weak material in his scenes with respect, Bea Arthur does far more with her portion of the film than anyone perhaps expected. She's funny in the early scenes with Harvey Korman's lovesick Krelman, an alien who drinks by pouring alcohol into a hole on the top of his head, but suitably emotional when she buys a round for everyone and sings a song that's half Jewish singalong belter and half cantina jazz. I have no idea why the Empire wants stormtroopers to see this or how Chewie can be a secret rebel when Wookiees watch cartoons about him, but I enjoyed both.

That's not to say that I enjoyed the entire holiday special. Most of it alternates between horrifying, unfunny and boring; it often manages to be

all three at once. The cast are almost entirely ashamed of it, George Lucas has said that, "If I had the time and a sledgehammer, I would track down every copy of that show and smash it" and even the die hard *Star Wars* fans who have kept this alive on the grey market for 37 years are hard pressed to say good things about it.

Yet, I'd suggest that it's worth watching once, just for the experience and as a warning about how careful you should be when licensing your product. Sure, Lucas's goal was clearly to rake in as much cash from the unprecedented success of his new franchise as possible, thus agreeing to such outlandish ideas as inflatable tauntauns, Darth Vader ponchos and Jabba play gel, but this was one step too far, even with a Kenner action figures advert to wrap up proceedings.

Lesson learned: don't license a musical variety television special and don't license a Christmas album, because you'll regret both (unless you're *Guardians of the Galaxy*), but everything else is fair game.

PINKEIGA
DVD VIDEO
UNCUT AND UNRATED
From Academy Award® Winning Director YOJIRO TAKITA
GROPER TRAIN
SEARCH FOR THE BLACK PEARL
痴漢電車
下着検札

THE GROPER TRAIN: SEARCH FOR THE BLACK PEARL (1984)

Director: Yojiro Takita

Writer: Isao Takagi

Stars: Kaoru Kaze and Yuka Takemura, Naoto Takenaka and Yukijiro Hotaru

When I found out about this Japanese *pinku* film, I had to see it for my because it refuses to play by any of the rules that we've come to expect for cinema, at least outside Japan.

For a start, this is the twenty-third movie in a series, something almost unprecedented in the west where we believe the *Friday the 13th* franchise has gone on way too long after ten original features, one crossover with *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and one reboot. In fact, have you ever seen the twenty-third movie in any series? I've seen a couple, like *The Lone Wolf in London*, which in 1947 was the penultimate outing for Michael Lanyard, the jewel thief turned private detective of the title, but that was hardly a consistent series with Gerald Mohr the ninth actor to play the part over a thirty year span. I've seen all thirty Carry On movies, so 1972's *Carry On Matron* was another twenty-third movie for me, but those films were a thematic series rather than a real one. Perhaps this one is too, but I doubt I'll check out the rest as there are at least *one hundred and twenty* movies in this series! That's truly insane.

What's even more insane is that it's a series called *The Groper Train* or, according to other translations, *Molester Train*. You know all those stories you've heard about the Japanese having weird sexual fetishes? Well, I've never been to Japan, so I really shouldn't say much, but when used panty vending machines do exist on Tokyo streets, tentacle porn goes back to nineteenth century woodblock prints and there are a hundred and frickin' twenty *Molester Train* movies, it's rather hard to argue against the idea.

The *Groper Train* concept is based on the fact that men, often older men, grope women, often sailor suited schoolgirls, on Japanese trains so often that some transit companies now reserve some carriages for women only. A 2001 survey suggested that 70% of female students at two high schools had been groped. It's illegal, of course, even in Japan, but a *chikan*-minded soul in a country with a 99% conviction rate can always go to a girls' club instead and pay the equivalent of $130 to legally grope his choice of girl on a full size reproduction of a train. What a surreal way to make a living!

Another weird aspect to this concept is that, unlike in the west, where major stars or directors are often embarrassed by the movies they started out in and try to pretend they don't exist, the Japanese have no problem with genre material that extends to *pinku* or soft porn films.

I noticed, while devouring the Japanese films of the fifties and sixties, that actors would often alternate between arthouse films and *kaiju* movies. Takashi Shimura, for instance, made nineteen movies for Akira Kurosawa, for whom he gave one of the best performances of all time in *Ikiru*. In 1954 he was the leader of *The Seven Samurai* and the doctor in *Godzilla*; in 1955 he made *I Live in Fear* and *Gigantis: The Fire Monster*; in 1956 *Throne of Blood* and *The Mysterians*. No stigma was attached to the latter half of each of those pairings. And I mention that here because Yojiro Takita, the director of eleven *Groper Train* movies, including this one, would in 2008 accept the

Academy Award for Best Foreign Film for his picture, *Departures*.

Even with that background, I still wasn't prepared for *Search for the Black Pearl*. It's clearly a *pinku* film, with everything revolving around sex and a whole slew of groping scenes in which actual intercourse is almost an afterthought. Yet it's also a mystery, a comedy and a drama, though rarely all at once. It even becomes a romance at one point, which is rather jarring. And, it starts as a war picture and ends like a horror movie.

How do all these genres get mashed together into a soft porn flick over a short 64 minute running time? You may need to watch this yourself to figure out how that happens, but I'll do my best to explain. Never mind all those sex scenes, because anyone actually wanting to get off on the movie would do better with the visuals off at those points because there's almost never any dialogue or accompanying score to take away from the young Japanese ladies moaning. What's interesting about the film isn't the sex, which is quite frankly a distraction from the sheer imagination on show during the rest of the film.

In this picture, the Black Pearl isn't the name of a pirate ship; it's just a black pearl, mounted onto a ring worn by Zhang Zuolin, who is killed by a Japanese Army Unit 69 bomb in Manchuria in 1928. Did I mention period drama in that genre list? It's promptly scavenged off his severed hand by Gohei Yamamori, a Japanese soldier who can't believe his luck in finding

what is heralded as the largest pearl in the world.

When we leap forward to 1984 Tokyo, where he doesn't look any older, we discover that it's worth a cool two million dollars. However, Gohei dies soon afterwards, literally shagged to death by Matsuko, his much younger wife, who displays her true feelings by asking him during sex where he hid the thing. He won't tell her, of course, but he does leave her a clue with his final words, which are "pussy print". No, he isn't referring to the octopi in nineteenth century woodblock *hentai*, he's really talking about a framed work of art that's hanging on his wall. It's an abstract and monochrome piece, created by covering the labia of his niece, Yoko, with ink, then pressing them onto a piece of paper.

Now, why any niece would even consider doing this, I have no idea, but it's hardly the most outrageous or unbelievable element in this picture, so perhaps we should pass it by with the note that this was the only pussy print in Gohei's collection to survive a fire that destroyed all his others and took half of this one too. "What a unique hobby!" cries Ippei Kuroda, the private detective whom Matsuko promptly hires to investigate the pussy print and he isn't kidding.

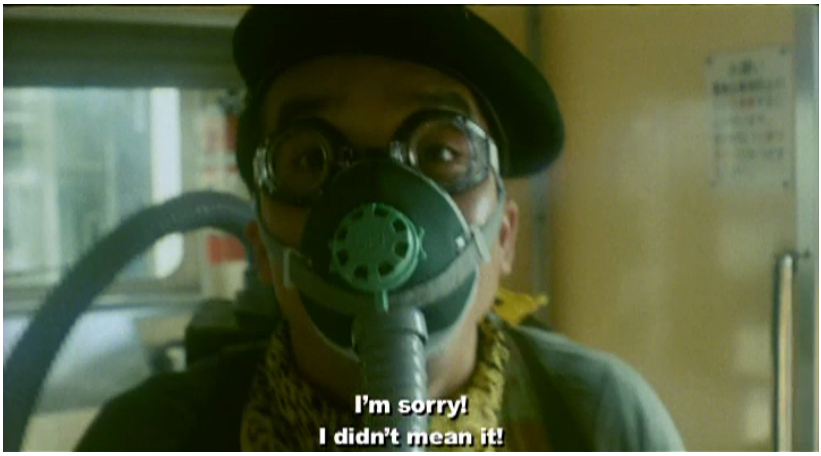
Now, I knew about *chikan* but I didn't know anything about pussy prints and I don't want to spend an hour or six filtering through animated cat gifs to figure out if they're a major Japanese fetish or not. Watching this PI

test the process on his assistant, Hamako, suggests that it does, at least, make more sense than groping schoolgirls on a train. Then again, I have trouble understanding the latter concept. When your fetish relies on the traditionally subservient nature of Japanese women to not report you for sexual assault, it's probably not a particularly good fetish.

Now, of course, Kuroda immediately gets to indulge in *chikan*, because he's a dedicated private eye and Yoko is a mystery. Apparently she was close enough to Gohei to make a pussy print for him but not close enough to actually leave him any contact details and his wife only knows that she has two big moles on her thigh, not exactly much to go on. So, given that the population of Tokyo, the most crowded metropolis in the world, was over eleven million in 1984, how would you go about tracking down which vagina made this particular piece of art?

Well, Kuroda puts on some kind of gas mask apparatus, jumps on the train, gropes every young lady he can find and gets a pussy print from each of them in the process. That's the same idea you had, right? Well, if it's the most ridiculous thing that you've ever heard in your life, it won't help to tell you that it works pretty quickly. In only a few days of madcap comedy, accompanied by a similarly madcap piece of music and grossout visuals, Kuroda finds Yoko, only to wonder how that even helped at all.

Now his only option is to solicit the assistance of Mr. Matsuki, a "great



mystery writer" who appears on a show called *20th Century's Mysteries*. He's a really strange man, a sort of hunchback pervert who floats about like a ghost with his head stuck out from his body and his bottom lip stuck out from his head. He's a little like Columbo if only Columbo was played by a Japanese Donald Duck.

His method of investigation is to have Yoko strip naked and open wide so he can inspect inside her vaginal cavity with a magnifying glass and mutter things like, "Your pleasure center is the key to finding the Black Pearl." Of course, this clinical examination promptly ends in sex, because everything ends in sex in this picture, whose moral message appears to be that, no matter who you are, where you are or what you choose to do to a young lady you've never previously met, she'll always be politely happy and be turned on enough to submit to your every whim. I doubt that's a particularly good message to send out to a country with a *chikan* problem, but then I'm not Japanese.

As if to emphasise that *Search for the Black Pearl* isn't at all like anything you might have caught on Skinemax, we're even given a couple of inside out shots here, as in pussy POV. Outside the framework of this movie, I might have suggested that looking out from inside a young lady's vagina to see an old man looking in with a magnifying glass might be rather a nightmarish experience not likely to be included in a soft porn flick, but

this film does seem to revel in doing things that we don't expect.

Next up, for instance, is a diversion to a locked room mystery, that old chestnut where someone is apparently murdered but in a room whose doors and windows are locked from the inside, meaning that the killer had no way to get out. Here, that's Haruo, Gohei Yamamori's son, which we're not upset about in the slightest because his response to discovering that there's no inheritance is to rape his stepmother. No, those aren't spoilers, by the way, because she's all for it and he's not important at all. It just leads to a weird breaking of the fourth wall while maniacal Mr. Matsuki challenges us to solve the riddle.

I can't believe I'm writing this, but the mystery aspect of this film is surprisingly capable. Sure, there's no shock to whodunit, but how it was done is an intricate little manoeuvre that is more impressive than any of the remotely similar gimmicks I've seen in Hollywood movies lately. We even watch it done and it's agreeably clever. What's more, solving the murder doesn't end the movie, because the black pearl, the two million dollar MacGuffin of the piece, still has to be located and there's a clever set of sequences left to show how that happens.

Again, it feels surreal to be avoiding spoilers in a review of a 64 minute straight to DVD Japanese soft porn feature, but these final scenes are handled magnificently, featuring as they do a delicious stew of revenge,

irony, karma, slapstick comedy, cameraderie, horror, romance, sex and, of course, the groping of a young lady on a train. You try to write a film that features all that, let alone just a finalé! *Search for the Black Pearl* is surely intended to give perverts a safe and legal thrill, but this is a far more imaginative way to do that than it ever needed.

I have to say that, while it's hardly a good film from the standpoint of cinematic criticism, I enjoyed it immensely and not because of the sex. I'm hardly going to complain about young Japanese ladies getting naked and moaning a lot, because that sort of thing would improve most movies, but there's way too much of it and it's far too unimaginative, which seems odd given how imaginative everything else is.

If it wouldn't take all the weird fetish elements out too, I might suggest that the Mormon company that bowdlerises movies so the faithful can watch without seeing any boobs or alcohol or hearing any bad language should release an edit of this that cuts out the sex scenes. Sure, the result would be about half an hour long, but it would be a weird and wonderful half an hour without the other half an hour of groping to slow it down. Frankly, if there weren't so many similar sex scenes to get through, this wouldn't even feel like a soft porn flick, just another example of Japanese weirdness. Maybe we should all just walk out during the seventh inning stretch, like we do in *The Room*.

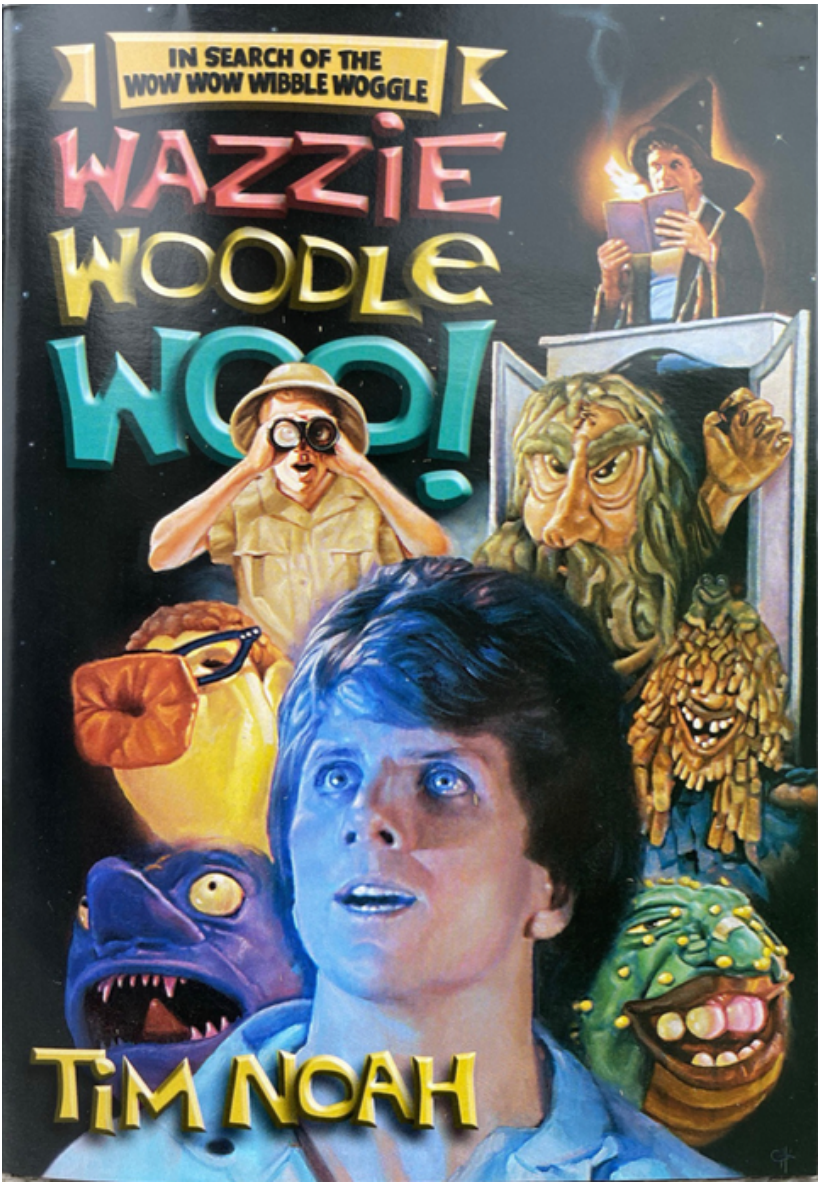
Much of the reason is that the quality is a lot higher than we'd expect, given that soft porn movies tend to care a lot more about boobs and butts than sets and lighting and camera angles. This was never going to win Yojiro Takita any early Oscars, but it's well put together by filmmakers who have delusions of artistry and some of whom may actually be artists.

I was surprised to find that I've seen some of these actors before. While the ladies, Kaoru Kaze as Matsuko and Yuka Takemura as Hamako, were stuck in *pinku* movies, the former making three *Groper Train* films and the latter seven, Naoto Takenaka, who debuted here as Mr. Matsuka, went on to become a regular cast member for Takashi Miike and I've seen him in pictures as wildly varied as *Shinjuku Incident*, *RoboGeisha* and *The Happiness of the Katakuris*. I also noticed a number of pictures in their filmographies which I'll be covering under an upcoming project about unusual sports movies, like *Ping-Pong*, *Waterboys* and *Sumo Do, Sumo Don't*, not to mention *Female Gym Coach: Jump and Straddle*.

Clearly, though, it's the director Yojiro Takita whose work I should be pursuing, even if the filmography of the actor who plays the private eye, Yukijiro Hotaru, looks more spectacular. While he's appeared in a slew of mainstream genre movies like *Stacy*, *Suicide Club* and the three nineties Gamera films, he's also appeared in much more enticing titles like *Reigo, the Deep-Sea Monster vs. the Battleship Yamato*; *Banana, Gloves and Whale Shark*; and, more pertinent to this film, *Female Detective Molester Buster: My Ass Wins*.

Unsurprisingly, it was Takita's feature that won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film and *Departures* isn't the only highly regarded film to his name. His eighties work was prolific and *pinku*, but slowed down when he got serious later on in that decade. I've only seen one of his other films, a feudal supernatural fantasy from 2001 called *Onmyoji*, and I loved it. Now I want to see *Ashura*, a theatrical adaptation about demonic war; *Tenchi: The Samurai Astronomer*, about a go master reforming the Japanese calendar; and a mind transfer drama called *Secret*.

Even within the vibrant world of Asian genre cinema, Japan is the gift that keeps on giving.


IN SEARCH OF THE
WOW WOW WIBBLE WOGGLE
WAZZIE
WOODLE
WOO!
TIM NOAH

IN SEARCH OF THE WOW WOW WIBBLE WOGGLE WAZZIE WOODLE WOO!? (1985)

Director: Barry Caillier

Writer: Tim Noah and Barry Caillier, from a story by Tim Noah, Creed Noah, Mary Noah and Barry Caillier

Star: Tim Noah

Yes, that's the film's real, honest to goodness, title and it's enough to suggest that this short 55 minute feature would be prime material for this project. But wait, as they say, there's more! The film is a solo performance for Tim Noah, who has done almost nothing else, according to IMDb, and comments there and elsewhere suggest that it's a particularly surreal trip.

"Is this what inspired the Just Say No campaign in the 80's?" asks one shocked viewer. "Try to imagine *Pee Wee's Playhouse* in the Guggenheim without Lawrence Fishburne or any other entertainment value," writes an IMDb reviewer. "Saving it for the next time I drop acid," suggests another.

It seemed like an utter obscurity, best appreciated by people who were already stoned by the time they pressed play. That it's a musical comedy for children performed by a man who is far older than he should be only adds to the weirdness. And I can't deny that it truly did live up to all those expectations within the first twenty minutes.

But then something strange happened: I started to dig this.

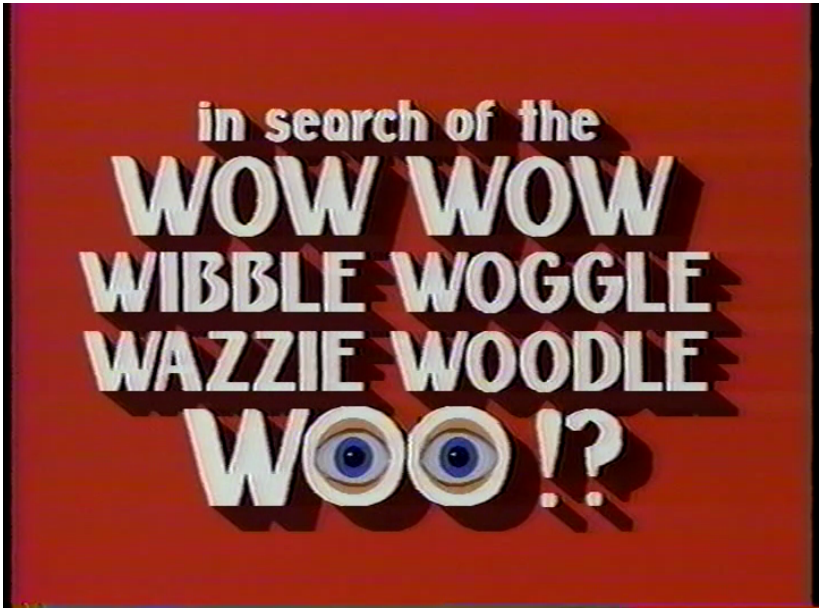
Now, I am still trying to figure some of it out, as there are some things going on that play very oddly, but I delved deeper into the history and reception of the film and found a lot that surprised me.

For a start, it apparently won four Emmys, which is four more than, say, *Star Trek*, which was nominated for thirteen of them but didn't win one. I can't seem to find any information about which Emmys it won because the Emmy website doesn't mention it at all, so it's likely that these aren't the

regular Emmys but maybe Northwest Regional Emmys, just like the dozen which Noah won a decade and some later for a children's TV show entitled *How 'Bout That*. His IMDb credits are also misleading; it's fair to say that he's a particularly versatile and busy talent, merely not on the big screen, as his one and only feature, 1990's *Daredreamer*, completely failed to set the box office alight. He's recorded albums and written books. He's toured exotic countries and even founded his own performing arts center, the Tim Noah Thumbnail Theater in Snohomish, WA.

What's more, the lack of reviews at IMDb—there were only two when I reviewed this at Apocalypse Later but there are now five, three of which give this one star out of ten—is more than made up for by the profusion of praise that dominates the DVD page on Amazon—87% gave it a maximum, and hey, those other two at IMDb did too—and in the many testimonials Noah is happy to plaster across his website.

Apparently this began life as an album, Noah's debut, in 1983; it won the Parents Choice Award and the American Library Association listed it as a Notable Children's Recording. This film version is really a long form music



video for the album, initially aired on KOMO TV, an ABC affiliate in Seattle, and later HBO, the Disney Channel and even the BBC. Then again, the BBC brought us the Teletubbies, so that's not entirely a given!

It would appear that a sizeable audience watched this on TV, happily picked up the VHS cassette and proceeded to wear the thing out through repeated viewings on their VCRs. This is a genuine cult hit, merely a cult hit that's not mentioned in the circles which rave about filmmakers like Herschell Gordon Lewis or Alejandro Jodorowsky.

So, what's it about? Well, having just watched the film in entirety, I'm not entirely sure I can answer that question!

At heart, it's an attempt to connect to children who aren't having the greatest time of it and help them to escape their dull lives by exercising their imaginations, but then so's every other show for children, right? I'd suggest that, whatever this is, we can't fairly dismiss it by dumping it into a basket, any basket, with a collection of other shows. For all its faults, and there are a bunch, it's notably original.

For a start, it's focused utterly on Noah himself, the only human being we see in 55 minutes of running time. Yes, we hear his mum's voice and he interacts with a plethora of puppets, but mostly it's him in a single set. Beyond acting, he showcases his singing in a variety of styles, all of which thankfully predate today's pop trends. He bounces around a lot, in a mild but energetic combination of dancing and acrobatics. He pantomimes. He performs magic tricks. He sports a wild range of outfits, from the pastel shades that pervaded the eighties to circus ringleader. Everything's about him, so he has to carry the whole film.

Another reason why he stands out is because he's in colour while his room is in black and white. No, that's not a clever effect; the room and everything within it is simply painted black and white. It's a neat way to highlight a drab childhood, even if the real reason was that the budget was somewhere south of not a heck of a lot. It also means that each of the dozen songs gives him a chance to escape into a new world, which grow inside his room using imaginative stage gimmickry and props.

The big exception is the first one, which is easily the most dubious and

not merely because it's shot using primitive eighties technology; there are things that I have trouble explaining away, given that this production was clearly aimed at young children. I'm assuming, for a start, that Noah was not really trying to hint that kids should own up to their homosexuality, then have incestuous sex with paedophile fathers, but it's right there, next to bouncing on peanut butter sandwiches in space, which symbolism now seems even more kinky in context.

So, let's back up a step or two and see if any of you can suggest a better explanation. We begin when Mr. Tim—the name the disembodied voice of his imagination calls him—arrives home and enters his black and white room with his giant black and white boom box. He listens to different stations, reacting with dance moves or air guitar, but retunes a lot as they're all obsessed with his closet. Announcers tell him not to look in there, singers sing about its hidden dangers and he even tunes into KLST Kloset.

He's promptly sucked into that closet but emerges from it a spaceman, leaping off a moon and taking a bath in space with an inflatable shark. As

you do. He's naked as a jaybird but daddy joins him in that bath anyway, dressed up as a sailor in a pink shirt and a porn moustache. Here's verse two of *Zoom*, which this accompanies: "Me and my friends were in the bathtub havin' fun tryin' to get clean, when in walked my father; he dived in the water, took us for a ride on his submarine." Yes, please explain this to me without recourse to incest, paedophilia and gay group sex.

While it's hard to explain that one away, the rest of the picture settles down considerably. Mr. Tim's imagination rings him on a stone dinosaur to set him a mission: to find the Wow Wow Wibble Woggle Wazzie Woodle Woo of the title. Mr. Tim doesn't want to know. He's well aware that his imagination tends to get him into trouble, but he's promptly talked into it for the fame and the fortune. The second song, *If I Only Knew*, the first one we see Noah actually sing, is a strange meta piece because it's all about how he doesn't have any idea what the Wow Wow Wibble Woggle Wazzie Woodle Woo is.

No, we don't have any idea either. If I understood the true point of the movie, then it's whatever Mr. Tim wants it to be. Like any six year old, Mr.

Tim is upset that he doesn't know what it is, gets distracted by monkeys and then decides that it's going to be whatever he wants. That's a pretty fair lesson to teach the little ones, after all, one that's much better, to pick just one example, then suggesting that they can live in the trees and raise a family of monkeys. I don't think biology works that way.

While I don't usually pull out records intended for kids to listen to, the twelve tracks we hear from Noah are actually pretty decent. They're also agreeably varied in style, from the country folk of *Sunshiney Mornin'* to the James Taylor-esque seventies soft rock of *Friends with a Song* via the Elvis Presley style rockabilly of *Big Booger*. That one, in case you're wondering, is about Mr. Tim getting picked on at school by a musclebound bully and the teacher never noticing; it leads into a self-explanatory sad little ballad called *Tears on My Toes*.

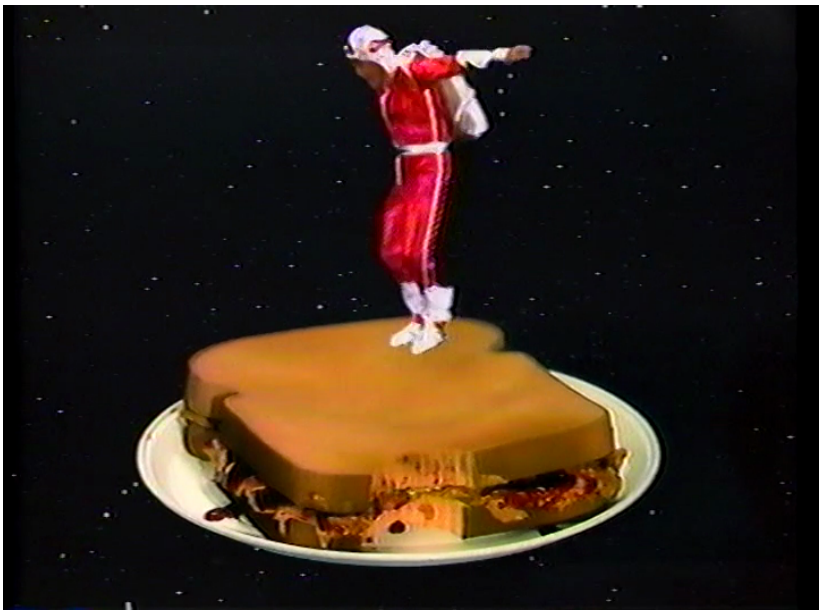
Noah wisely avoids trying to be hip and leaping on the latest styles, using whatever works for each moment in this story. He doesn't have the greatest voice in the world but he's versatile enough to sound right with every one of these styles, which is a good thing given that the success of

this entire enterprise rests on him and only exists to showcase the songs. I wouldn't rewind a VHS tape of this to watch again and again but I can see why so many kids did. It's like a compilation of different music that teams up to tell a single story.

The weirdest song has to be *Musty Moldy Melvin*. While Mr. Tim is the only human in evidence, he's had a great time with puppets while singing his setlist of songs. He keeps a cat and a dog in his chest of drawers. During *If I Was*, a gorilla rips off his trousers and an elephant pulls him behind a tree. There's an oddly undulating giraffe in his room during *The Monkey Song*, perhaps because it's just the right height to look up his loincloth when he's chilling with a monkey on top of the closet. But *Musty Moldy Melvin* features a host of weird creatures like the title character, who does the hoochie-koochie-koo, and Greasy Grimy Gertie who does the boogie boo. In fact, all the creepy little critters in the gurgly-gloppy-goo want to dance with him and every one of them gets a shot. He doesn't seem to be remotely happy about it, but they were my favourite part of the movie. Sadly, my grandkids know how to whip and nae nae; I wish they'd do the

boogie boo instead with these glorious nightmare creations that look like diseases on legs.

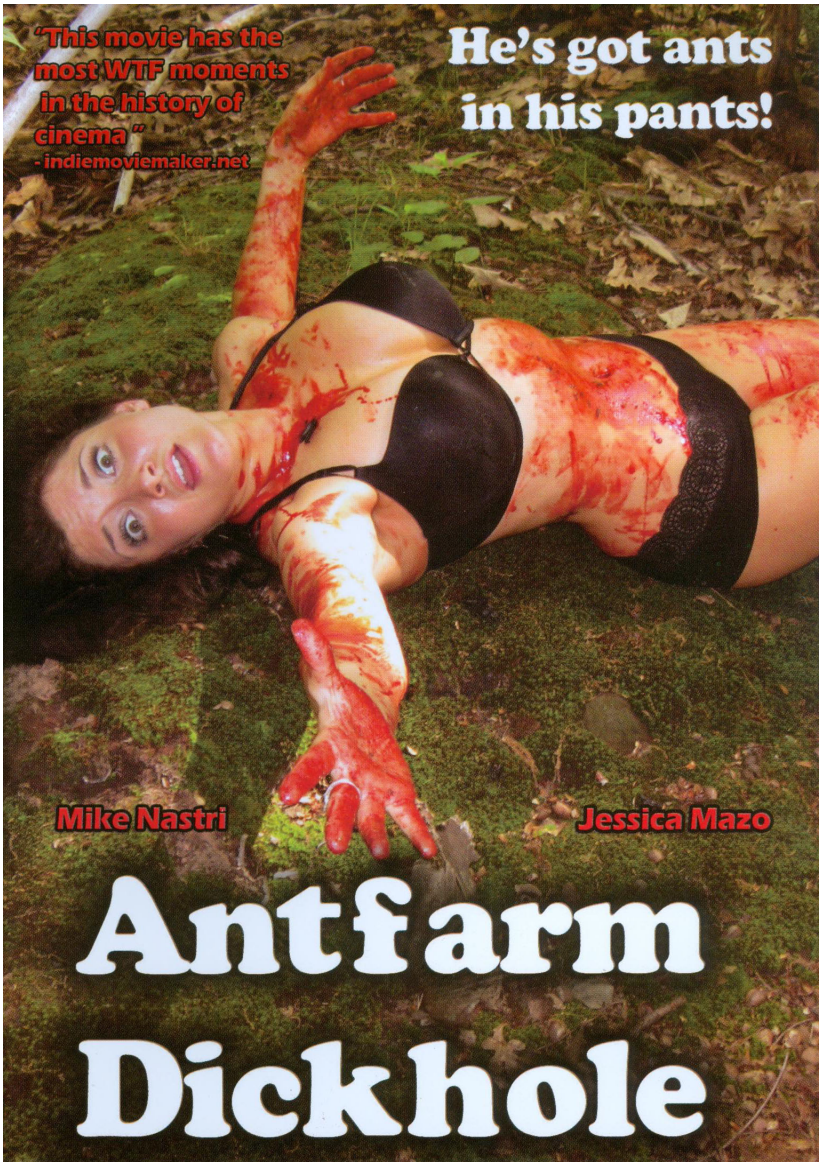
I can't see Tim Noah doing the stanky legg, but he does appear to have found that magic spot where he can explain real world social issues, like social ostracism and environmental awareness in songs that are engaging to children. His album, *Kaddywompas*, seems to be a good example of this. I'm not sure how his feature, *Daredreamer*, works from that standpoint; from what I've read about it, it seems to revisit many of the themes he explored here and in a similar musical fashion, but with the inclusion of odd anomalies like a brief nude scene and a couple of swearwords that would bar this from appealing to the same audience. Surely, however, an adult audience would have a problem with Noah, who would have been 39 when *Daredreamer* was shot, portraying a high school student. We can't buy it here in *In Search of the Wow Wow Wibble Woggle Wazzie Woodle Woo!?* and he was a relative spring chicken at only 34! I will find that and check it out, one day, but I can't see it living up to this one, even the calmer last forty minutes after *Zoom* is done.



What shocks me most about this film isn't the title and it isn't even that first deviant song, it's the fact that Noah managed to do so much with so little. The budget is so low that almost everyone else in the credits shares the same last name. Tim Noah wrote the story with Creed Noah and Mary Noah (and director Barry Caillier); Creed Noah also produced (with Pat Royce), while Bill Noah and Zola Noah were both executive producers. Mary Noah also created the costumes.

At this point, we have to wonder if set designer Rollin Thomas is merely a pseudonym, given that it's his sole credit. While the film clearly belongs to Tim Noah, Rollin Thomas cannot be ignored for the craftsmanship that he put into these sets and the imagination with which he endowed them; if he's real, I can only assume that he was massively experienced in stage work. And here I am praising this picture, even though I fully expected it to be a bad acid trip that would have been impossible to watch.

To be honest, I'm half disappointed! But only half. The other half plans to petition the NFL to stage the boogie boo during the Superbowl halftime show.


"This movie has the most WTF moments in the history of cinema"
- indiemoviemaker.net
He's got ants in his pants!
Mike Nastri
Jessica Mazo
Antfarm Dickhole

ANTFARM DICKHOLE (2011)

Director: Bill Zebub

Writer: presumably Bill Zebub

Stars: Michael Nastri, Jessica Mazo, Bill Zebub, Adam Kuligowski and Steve Nebesni

Talking of outrageous titles, here's Antfarm Dickhole, which deserves to be an entire category of its own on *Jeopardy*. There's little doubt that Bill Zebub (geddit?), the underground auteur who made this film—filling what might just be every role in the crew there is—was aiming for a reaction. When indiemoviemaker.net said that it had "the most WTF moments in movie history", he got the one he was surely aiming for, as that quote shows up wherever the film is mentioned, including the cover of the DVD. It's over there at the top left, hard to read in monochrome.

He's also clearly not aiming for a multiplex run or a review from *Rolling Stone*, though some of his sixty plus pictures have made it all the way to mainstream outlets such as Blockbuster (remember them?), FYE and even Netflix. He's a prolific creator but always in the underground where things are done only for the love of it. Nobody ever started a fanzine to get rich, but Zebub's death metal zine, *The Grimoire of Exalted Deeds*, is a quarter of a century old and still going strong. He even hosts a weekly radio show on WFMU delivered in character as Professor Dum Dum: Scientist of Music and Human Behavior.

Of course, it's his movies for which he's best known, because you can't make sixty movies with titles like this and not get noticed. He has a strong and dedicated fanbase, as suggested by the fact that the limited edition DVD of his crossover of Nazisploitation and jungle cannibal exploitation films, *Holocaust Cannibal* (as against *Cannibal Holocaust*), was 250% funded on Indiegogo. Merely browsing the titles of his films highlights themes that have kept him busy throughout his career.

There are Jesus movies, such as *Jesus, the Total Douchebag*, *Zombiechrist*

and *Jesus, the Daughter of God*.

There are rape movies like *Rape is a Circle*, *Frankenstein the Rapist* and *Forgive Me for Raping You*.

There are metal documentaries, such as *Black Metal: The Music of Satan, Death Metal: Are We Watching You Die?* and *Metal Retardation*.

There are movies about movies, like *Assmonster: The Making of a Horror Movie*, *Indie Director* and *The Worst Horror Movie Ever Made*.

When he gets inspiration, he even merges themes like with *Jesus Christ: Serial Rapist*, up there for the Most Offensive Title award with *Loving a Vegetable*. Oh, that was his too.

Now, nobody's going to accidentally find themselves sitting down with the extended family after stuffing themselves at Thanksgiving to watch *Antfarm Dickhole*. Zebub does point out on his website that he gets a lot of 1/10 ratings, but I find it hard to believe that anyone could be surprised by what they see unless their DVD was mislabelled *101 Dalmations*. However, he also gets a lot of 10/10 ratings, because there's a sizeable audience for Z-grade movies that might not deliver good acting, good stories or good anything, but do at least deliver on what they promised.

In case you're scared to imagine what a movie with a title like *Antfarm Dickhole* actually promises, it features a young man who discovers that an army of ants has made a home in his urethra and his immediate reaction,

after they eat his girlfriend alive while she's giving him head, is naturally that they seem like the perfect way to find revenge against the bullies who have plagued his young life: he traps their girlfriends and then whacks off some ants to eat them to death.

So, there's nothing controversial to see here, right? Move along, move along.

Well, actually, I have to admit that this wasn't quite what I expected. I do see odd movies like this with outrageous titles and plots but they tend to be horror movies, as indeed you might expect this to be from the brief synopsis I provided, but it isn't. It's not horror and it's not porn either, even though almost every female cast member was clearly hired on the grounds that they had no problem with full frontal nudity rather than for any acting ability.

It's actually a comedy, which was my first surprise, and a funny one in its way, which was my second. The story is your standard bully story, as written by an imaginative metalhead high schooler on drugs and abuse, but all the cast are too old to think about school and I'm pretty sure a few are older than me and I have an eighteen-year old granddaughter. This makes the experience jarring, a word of which Zebub is particularly fond. Just to jar us even more, the comedy is a wild mix of childish wordplay and weird philosophising about things like evolutionary psychology.

No, you didn't read that last line wrong. Let me provide a fresh synopsis with character names. Our lead is Ant-Drew, who's talking with his friend, Ant-Thony, when he's pushed over in the park by a bully. After he gets home, his unnamed girlfriend strips and gives him a blow job but ends up dead because the ants in his urethra clearly thought she was an anteater! They leave her a skeleton, even eating her labia ring. Walking to the police station to report this, Ant-Drew is accosted by another bully, gets wedgied for the second time in ten minutes and out come the ants to defend him once more. And so Ant-Drew realises how he can plan revenge on all his bullies because, hey, if he can't have a girlfriend, they can't either!

I lost track of who was who, because not everyone in the cast is given a proper introduction, but there's Ant-Gela, Ant-Tonette and Ant-gelica. He traps the first in a car and humps its tailpipe, sending ants into the vehicle to eat her. The second takes a shower at home (in her panties, no less), so he climbs up to whack off through her bathroom window.

So this is hardly rocket science—the scientist here is Ant-Drea, a buddy of Ant-Thony, who inevitably looks things up on the anternet—but instead of actually following the story, we find ourselves drawn into all sorts of surreal humour.

Ant-Drew's reaction to seeing his girlfriend's skeleton, for example, is to ponder on the consuming powers of the amoeba. As you do. Ant-Thony

is an incorrigible grammar Nazi. "You think I like correcting grammar?" he asks. "It's a burden!" Then again, he's an ant-achronism because he has no interest in watching TV. He says so, in a scene right in front of the TV. Continuity is not a strong point here. One woman shows up a few times reading Richard Dawkins on her couch, in a bikini, no less—and I do mean the woman not the couch, but I feel the need to make sure. We wonder who she is, until Ant-Thony visits and we find that she's an antomologist. Their entire conversation is comprised of philosophical puns, centering mostly around Freud and Jung. There's philosophy to be found all over this film, mostly for comedic effect, and no, I wasn't kidding about the evolutionary psychology angle. Just what you expect from a character called Ant-Thony, right?

I've played up the comedic angle because it's by far the best thing about the film. I didn't laugh at all the jokes, which are often deliberately lame for effect, but I laughed a lot. The dialogue is not at all natural, a surreal Z-grade movie take on Kevin Smith if Kevin Smith could talk about any outrageous subject for a full ninety minutes and never bring up *Star Wars*. Never mind *Tusk*, this is what Smith would make if he had ten bucks for a budget and no equipment worth speaking of.

There's enough material here to choose my favourites. Should I go with "Torturing serial killers is thirsty work", "No matter how gently you touch

my penis, the ants would still see you as an intruder", "Army ants are evil and they're making you evil" or "I'm waiting for you to get used to the pain of your dick exploding before I cut off your balls"? Clearly I should find some way to use these in everyday conversation at work. Hey, how are you today? "I found the dick who killed my bitch!" Yeah, that'll be a challenge for sure, but a fun one.

The rest of the film lags notably behind. *Antfarm Dickhole* looks pretty terrible, but as it fits towards the end of the Prosumer Days of Zebub's filmography, it's likely to look notably better than the seven he shot on VHS and the seven shot on camcorder. The lighting is terrible and colour correction is absent, meaning that sometimes people's armpits are orange and roads can be yellow without any Oz metaphor being intended. The camerawork isn't good either, with some shots even cutting off the tops of people's heads. The editing is even worse, with many of the characters unintroduced and some showing up before they're actually supposed to be part of the film. It's about Ant-Drew's ant-laced masturbatory revenge until, well, it isn't; suddenly it's about some chick getting raped by a giant spider. The effects are almost non-existent; the ants are plastic ants from a dollar store and Ant-Drew's stunt dick surely didn't cost that much. The music is varied but cheap and underground. One song used twice has a spoken word bit that gets in the way of the film's dialogue.

It could be argued that all those technical aspects are still better than the acting, because that's utterly inept. Surely none of these people are actors; certainly most of them haven't appeared in anything that wasn't made by Bill Zebub. Many scenes needed retakes that never happened, including most of those with girls who were hired for their willingness to shed clothing. A few behave as they should; most grin their way through their entire performance as if they can't believe they're doing anything quite this awesome. The lead is Mike Nastri, who has never acted before and delivers all his lines as if they're just conversation, apparently unable to comprehend the occasional need for emotional investment, such as when he discovers the skeleton of his girlfriend, killed while sucking him off. Most charismatic is Zebub himself, playing Ant-Thony. He's done this long enough to know exactly how he wants things timed and he's able to deliver that even if nobody else can. Well, him and the scenestealing cat.

And there's precious little to counter any of this. The subject matter is neatly outrageous enough to be one plus point and Zebub's surreal wit leads to amazing things like an ant-POV shot of a banana being carried back to be stuffed down Ant-Drew's erect stunt cock while he sleeps in the park. Zebub's dialogue is certainly another, as it's by far the best thing on show and I grinned my way through this review as I was writing it because I'm still remembering some of it.

I should mention sound too because, of all the technical aspects, it's the only one that works; we can at least hear almost everything that we're supposed to. Choreography isn't needed much but there's a slo-mo fight scene that's actually choreographed pretty well. The poor soundtrack is enhanced by the presence of Shooby Taylor, the Human Horn, which came out of nowhere for me. If I'd ever really thought about which movie might feature him scatting all over *Stout Hearted Man*, one of my go to favourites whenever I'm feeling down because it's guaranteed to cheer me up again, I would never have plumped for this one, but it's there while Ant-Thony steals an anteater, and again later. Respect!

Above all, though, even beyond the willingness of so many young ladies to shed all their clothing for art, there's Zebub's willingness to make films like this. He must enjoy the process, or he wouldn't have made it past the first seven shot on VHS. Now he's preparing to make a seventieth movie, an amazing achievement for someone making big bank from this stuff but especially for someone who probably isn't grossing in the nine digits per feature. Clearly he makes this sort of material because he wants to and it's fair to say that there's no better reason to make movies.

As horrible as much of this was, it left me with a strong respect for Bill Zebub. I was expecting to see ninety minutes of outrageous gore but found an oddball comedy that avoided gore in favour of female nudity and wild

conversational subject matter. For anyone stunned by America's penchant for fetishised violence but puritan sex, this might just start to redress the balance. It's as healthy as a deliberately offensive film can be. And that's one reason I'll happily look for some more Bill Zebub.

捷豹林
JAGUAR LIM
KIERAN
(SINAR FM)
叶雨金
BOBBY YIP
(HONGKONG)
一路有殭屍
P13
ZOMBIES VS THE LUCKY EXORCIST
出品人、導演、監制、編劇
JAGUAR LIM 捷豹林
12 MARCH 2015
STEPHY LAU
BRANDY AKIKO
ALVIN WONG
曾宏輝
GADRICK CHIN

ZOMBIES VS. THE LUCKY EXORCIST (2015)

Director: Jaguar Lim

Writer: Jaguar Lim

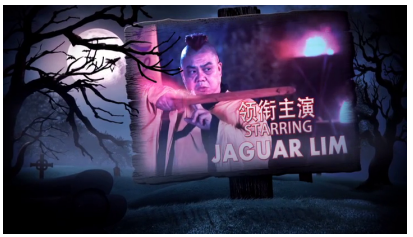
Stars: Jaguar Lim, Bobby Yip, Kieran, Hidy Yu, Henry Thia, Jaguar Lim, Jaguar Lim, Jaguar Lim, Jaguar Lim and Jaguar Lim

If you haven't heard of the name Jaguar Lim before now, be warned: you're going to be repeating it in your sleep after this review because the man is like a human meme. His Facebook page is a research rabbit hole from which I may never escape and, you know what? I'm OK with that.

I have no idea what planet he's from but he seems to spend his time in Malaysia, where he runs, of all things, a nostalgic chain of sweet shops. It's Country's Tid-Bits & Candies Cottage, which apparently made him a large amount of money, and I mention it here because its name is the first thing we see in the movie after the ident of the production company, Jaguar Lim Films & Productions (M) SDN BHD, and the crediting of Jaguar Lim as the producer on a dedicated screen.

By the time we're done, we see no less than fourteen such dedicated screens before the title card, detailing all the key members of the cast and crew, and Jaguar Lim himself has, get this, ten of them, each one with a different photo. No, I'm not kidding. Sorry, Tommy Wiseau, you're clearly not egotistical enough. You'll have to step up.

Lim is less of a credit and more of a drum beat. Producer: Jaguar Lim. Executive Producer: Jaguar Lim. Director: Jaguar Lim. Scriptwriter: Jaguar Lim. Starring Jaguar Lim.



Then we take a brief break to introduce some other folk who appeared in the film, highlighting in the process how Jaguar Lim has connections. Credited with special appearances are Bobby Yip, a prolific Hong Kong actor who has worked for Wong Jing, Tsui Hark and Stephen Chow; and Kieran, a DJ on Hot FM in Bandar Utama, Malaysia. In shorter cameo roles are Hidy Yu, a model, actress and martial artist from Hong Kong; and a

comedian and actor from Singapore called Henry Thia.

Then it's back to Jaguar Lim because he has no fewer than five cameo appearances too, three of them in drag. By the time we get to the end of the movie, we find ourselves in the forest with our hero, played by Jaguar Lim, watching his grandparents, both played by Jaguar Lim, fly away on a giant banana. Originally called *Red Haired Priest*, I am abidingly unsure as to why this wasn't simply renamed to *Jaguar Lim*.

You'll be shocked, of course, to discover that we begin the film with, it's that man again, Jaguar Lim, here the red haired priest of the original title and the lucky exorcist of the new one. Judging from his Facebook page, his hairstyles are creatures of legend, but he's wearing a relatively calm red mohawk here as a Taoist priest named Hong Mao.

This opening scene sums up the picture: it has other actors in it and their characters come to his, but he's the one who drives the conversation, identifies the problem and then becomes the one and only solution. Here, he determines that there's something wrong with their ancestor's grave, though they never explain why they ever thought there was an issue, so he puts on his saffron robes and goes to work. It's like he's isn't the star of the movie but the actual movie itself and these actors are just props like the paper money that they burn around the grave site, the spade he uses to dig up their grandfather and the white shirt he's wearing that remains

miraculously clean throughout.

And, sure enough, gramps hasn't rotted and promptly leaps out of his grave to hop after them. Now, if that sounds strange to you, then let me blow your mind.

While the subtitles refer to re-animated grandpa as a zombie, he's really what the Chinese call a jiangshi, a creature of the night usually translated as "hopping vampire". Jiangshi are corpses who are so stiff that they can't move their joints. Originally, they were reanimated by Taoist priests and taught to hop so that they could be led safely back home, especially those who died far away. Kept under control by sealing spells attached to their foreheads, they have an uncanny habit of running wild and attacking the public whenever those spells come loose, hence the abundant sub-genre of hopping vampire movies in Asia, led by the amazing *Mr. Vampire* series. Like any creature of folklore, there are weapons to fight them: mirrors, sticky rice, ritually stained threads and, as we see here, the neat little trick of simply holding your breath. I believe every movie would be improved by a hopping vampire: like, say, *Titanic* or *Philadelphia*.

Now, jiangshi are Asian monsters, so it's not surprising to see one in an Asian monster movie. But, as they say, wait, there's more! This particular jiangshi promptly finds himself battling what the subtitles call a dracula, apparently a generic term for a traditional western vampire. He's dressed

in the usual outfit: frilly shirt, velvet waistcoat and cape, not to mention a pair of prominent fangs.

Frankly, I'm all for east vs. west vampire battles and would buy tickets to any feature that existed solesly to explore that concept. That said, this particular east vs. west battle is phrased only through eastern style and technique, like kung fu and wirework, suggesting that this dracula is just another monster to Jaguar Lim and he doesn't really care too much about exploring the culture behind it. Maybe it's only in the movie to set up the following scene, in which Hong Mao inadvertently knocks the dracula unconscious with a gigantic fart; he's been eating spring onion and garlic snacks, thus allowing a combination of product placement and fart jokes all at once.

Even if they're only here to be punchlines in cheap jokes, a profusion of monsters is surely the best thing about this movie and it isn't going to quit on us now.

Next up is Madeline, a pretty young lady who claims to be a university student doing forest research. It's the following morning and Hong Mao, having sent everyone home while he searches for his ancestor's compass, is hardly going to say no to the company, especially when the saxophone music hits. Of course, this lucky exorcist isn't quite that lucky; she's some sort of monster who can disguise her true, repulsive form with its corpse

face and its long pointed purple nails.

I'm not sure what she actually is, maybe a rakshasa, an energy vampire or a form of hungry ghost; maybe a combination of all the above. Anyway, their inadvisable necking sessions are consistently interrupted by a child jiangshi with a kawaii grin and, really, if there's anything any movie needs more than a hopping vampire, it's a juvenile hopping vampire in its mini-mandarin outfit. Like I said, *Titanic*. *Philadelphia*. *Schindler's List*. *Godzilla vs. Kong*. *Debbie Does Dallas*.

While the plot appears secondary to the showcasing of this myriad of monsters, at least we have one at this point. Hong Mao runs from the child jiangshi and, when he realises what he's running with, he runs from the rakshasa too. Given that Jaguar Lim may have been over-indulging on his candy store stock, he doesn't run too well or too fast and it's a good thing that another Taoist monk shows up to save him.

This is Bai Yi, a character Bobby Yip plays with cheesy comedic relish, but he also provides depth to the story, mostly in flashback. Apparently Hong Mao's ancestor battled a teleporting witch half a millennium ago in a battle that is depicted rather like a bout of *Mortal Kombat*. They stamp their feet and the earth shakes; they wave their staffs in a threatening manner to spark some gratuitous After Effects action. Needless to say, the witch is eventually defeated but he (yes, it's male) curses his opponent's

entire line of descendants in the process, promising their eradication. And that's why the Hong Mao family moved from China to Malaysia.

At this point, I have to say I was enjoying this feature. Sure, it's stupid. Sure, the acting ranks from cheesily bad on down. Sure, Jaguar Lim feels like the inevitable retarded character in throwaway Hong Kong comedies who's somehow landed a lead role in Malaysia. However, there isn't a dull moment and the jokes, as awful as they mostly are, are delivered with a very knowing wink.

Unfortunately, it goes rapidly downhill from here, wrapping up this plot with a big battle scene just under halfway through the movie. It's the fight refought for a new generation. Hong Mao, backed up by Bai Yi, who has three child jiangshi in reserve, plus a bomoh or Malaysian shaman called Osman, with a trio of toyol in his corner, battles "the witch's next generation" with her bloated ghost assistant. Cue some pretty dismal fight choreography, oodles of After Effects abuse and cheesy dialogue as battle commences! Toyol, I should add, are Malay spirits, usually kept as thieves, saboteurs or mischief makers. Here, they appear as three painted kids in similarly painted underwear.

Now, if the picture had ended here, with the lovely Hidy Yu, one of the stars of 2013's *Kick Ass Girls*, being defeated by our inept heroes teaming up properly for the first time, then it wouldn't have been too bad; not good, I

emphasise, but interesting to those who get a kick out of monster movies from other cultures. After all, just think about what's in this last battle. We have two Taoist priests and a bomoh, set up in thoroughly different ways to wield their respective sorceries. We have not one but three hopping vampire children and three toyol, which I don't believe I've ever seen in a movie before. We have surely the best effects scene in the picture, as an effectively ominous black cloud arrives and transforms into the witch's huge ghost. Finally, we have a beautiful kick-ass witch from Hong Kong, dressed up in uncompromising black like any serious movie villain should. I just wish this scene had played out longer and with better writing. This paragraph is the sort of thing to give me wet dreams.

On the flipside, we then have the second half of the movie. The first half sounds a lot better than it is, just because so much cool stuff is crammed into it, but the second half is so bad that I don't believe my words could ever do it justice. Let's just say that we kick it off by having Hong Mao urinate from a great height on three lovely ladies who are bathing, fully clothed, in a river by a waterfall and for them to discuss how salty and sweet the water suddenly tastes. It sparked memories for me of my brief voice acting career in Damon Foster's *Shaolin vs. Frankenstein*, in which my Thug #2 character is pissed on while hiding in some bushes; the best line I delivered was surely, "Mmm. Salty!"

Here, it degenerates further, because the only way he can get them to leave—he's supposedly here to find those three child jiangshi who have suddenly grown up and vanished—is to threaten to fling poo at them. High cultural art this really isn't. And, trust me, it only gets worse from here. Wait for the bathroom break and the armpit odour attack and...

Most of the rest of the movie consists of opportunities for Jaguar Lim to put on new outfits to deliver a neverending supply of characters, of both genders and maybe some more in between—"You have made my hormone imbalance" says Jaguar Lim to Jaguar Lim after she gives him the desirable superpower of big boobs—; puerile humour, both sexual and otherwise; and a succession of characters who confuse us because we've lost track of who anyone not played by Jaguar Lim actually is and why they're even in the movie.

If there's a high point, it has to be the Sikh zombie, as I can't remember seeing one of those in a movie either—there may have been some in *The Dead 2*, but the handheld camera on that film meant that I saw most of that in my peripheral vision to avoid motion sickness. The next high point is surely... well, I can't think of one. It isn't the infamous flying banana, the severing of an umbilical cord with a machete, the flashback to Jaguar Lim with jumper cables on his nipples, his transformation into an orangutan, the... and now I'm just tormenting myself.

I have to admire Jaguar Lim. He's a chubby dude who runs a chain of candy stores, but he had the balls to make a feature film on his own terms. The fact that he didn't have a clue what he was doing didn't turn out as badly as it could have done; for a start, we can see and hear everything that we should, and that's something that I can't say for a lot of films shot here in the States by so-called professionals. Because I assume that he financed this out of his own pocket, it has to be close to what he wanted to make, which is a valuable freedom that many filmmakers never find.

I salute Jaguar Lim for those achievements, even as I have to highlight that this movie is bad in ways I hadn't previously thought were possible. It's a 90 minute vanity film that jumps the shark halfway through, then decides to do it again. And again. And again. It doesn't just jump the shark, it jumps the frickin' sharknado. The message is that anything's possible but probably shouldn't see the light of day. Just because you could doesn't mean that you should, right?

I'll leave the closing words to the man himself. "Don't ask where I come from and where to go," says Jaguar Lim. "I, just a legend."

Zombie face?

PELICULAS RODRIGUEZ, S. A. presenta a:
MARIA GRACIA
CESAREO QUEZADAS
JOSE ELIAS MORENO
MANUEL LOCO VALDES
EL ENANO SANTANON
Caperucita y Pulgarcito contra los monstruos
EASTMANCOLOR
ROBERTO RODRIGUEZ

LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD AND TOM THUMB VS. THE MONSTERS (1962)

Director: Roberto Rodriguez

Writers: Fernando Morales Ortiz and Adolfo Torres Portillo, from a story by Fernando Morales Ortiz and Adolfo Torres Portillo

Stars: María Gracia, Cesario Quezadas, Jose Elias Moreno, Manuel "Loco" Valdes and El Enano "Santanon"

Once upon a time, so long ago that I can't remember truly how long, I stumbled onto the surreal majesty that is the filmography of K. Gordon Murray. He was an entrepreneur who borrowed a varied combination of children's movies and horror features from Mexico, dubbed them poorly into English, gave them new, often more outrageous titles, and released them to the American market. I don't know if I popped my Murray cherry on *The Brainiac* or *The Robot vs. The Aztec Mummy*, but I revelled in these pictures and was rather delighted to discover, on moving to the American southwest, that many of them were easily available in dollar stores.

However, I'm a strong believer in experiencing films in their original forms and it was only much later that I was able to track down some of these Mexican features sans the later Murray treatment. Sadly Mexican movies are rarely available in the U.S. with English subtitles included, a poor situation that I really hope starts to change, but those that are tend to make a lot more sense than Murray's bastardised versions.

This is one of Murray's signature films, under the title of *Tom Thumb and Little Red Riding Hood*. The more recent DVD completes the original Mexican title, as *Caperucita y Pulgarcito contra los monstruos* has more than just our two childhood heroes, it has them facing off against the Monsters, the primary reason why this film is such a blast, in the very title.

Let's have fair advertising, please! Let's face it, if the Mormon family

round the corner took their kids to see *Tom Thumb and Little Red Riding Hood*, they might reasonably think that they would have plumped for a safe family friendly movie, only to be progressively traumatised by the wild array of monsters sprawled across their screen.

I would love to be a fly on the wall as they fought for their refunds. Would they be more upset about the Satan-worshipping Queen Witch that they stole from Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* or the paedophile who gets strung up to be used as a piñata? Maybe the monster who looks like Carrot Top if he was a fish man from Innsmouth.

The reason there are so many monsters is that we kick things off in the Kingdom of Evil. You have to admire the balls of the Queen Witch who runs the place. No doubt it was called something like Chihuahua when she took the throne, but she promptly renamed it to the Kingdom of Evil. Now that's fair advertising, Mr. Murray! The Kingdom of Evil is, naturally, the place where we can once again catch up with "all the storybook witches and monsters that we have met in fables".

Now, I have absolutely no idea which fables the scriptwriters, Fernando Morales Ortiz and Adolfo Torres Portillo, grew up devouring, but I have no

recollection of the Brothers Grimm writing down cautionary tales about vampires and Frankenstein's monster. Maybe Child Snatcher would have fit in their work, as full as it was of dire warnings to children, and I could see Hurricane Dwarf working for them too, with his signature talent of blowing really hard. But what about Boogie Man, who looks rather like Sloth from *The Goonies* but with Groucho Marx's moustache for eyebrows? Talk about traumatising for children!

Anyway, all these monsters have assembled in the castle of the Queen Witch for the trial of the Big Bad Wolf and the Ogre, charged with, well, being nice. El Lobo only had one job to do but he blew it; instead of eating Little Red Riding Hood, or Caperucita, as she's known south of the border, he chose to befriend her instead. A similar fate befell the Ogre, who was supposed to devour Tom Thumb, or Pulgarcito in Spanish, but somehow switched his diet to spinach, ice cream and popcorn instead; sadly, nobody clarifies if that's one meal or three.

Of course, such behaviour isn't tolerated in the Kingdom of Evil so, after she asks how they plead, the jury pronounce them guilty and the sentence is given: death, when the full moon rises and the wicked owl chirps three

times. Why she couldn't have plumped for "the witching hour", I have no idea, but that does sound cool. Oh, and she'll also turn those sickeningly pleasant children, and everyone else in their village, into "gross mice and ridiculous monkeys". Just because she's evil. That's what evil witch queens are supposed to do, right?

Well, where there's evil, there has to be good. Little Red Riding Hood is a real girl, though her dialogue feels dubbed except when she sings with an adult voice. Maybe it is hers; after three outings as Caperucito, María Gracia grew up and married José Domingo, Placido's eldest son.

And yes, this is a sequel, folks! It follows *Little Red Riding Hood*, or *La caperucita roja*, in 1960, and *Little Red Riding Hood and Her Friends* in 1961, though *Caperucita y sus tres amigos* could be translated as *Little Red Riding Hood and the Three Amigos*; now that would have been a film!

Tom Thumb is a real boy too, though he's initially shot using camera tricks to make him look only six inches tall; the scenes of him climbing up a table leg are excellently done. However, the effects budget clearly wasn't going to let that continue, so he's quickly rendered normal size by magic. He's Cesáreo Quesadas, who first played Tom Thumb in *Pulgarcito* in 1958,

making this a sequel to two series. So associated was he with the part, he later took Pulgarcito as an occasional stage name.

Clearly, this was cobbled together from various sources, as tended to be the case with Mexican films of this era, who had little care for copyright infringement. I'm still stunned by the Mexican *Santa Claus*, in which our space hero collaborates with Merlin, Vulcan and their international child labour factory to produce toys for everyone.

Tom Thumb comes from English folklore and dates back to at least the 16th century. Little Red Riding Hood, borrowed from European fairy tales, predates him by six hundred years or so. The Queen Witch, however, is clearly pinched from Disney rather than the public domain stories they raided, just as Frankenstino is a steal from Universal just as much as Mary Shelley's novel. El Vampiro is just a generic vampire with goofy teeth, like the sort of action figure you'd pick up as a Chinese knock-off for a buck. I have no idea where the child sized El Zorrillo, aka Stinky the Skunk, comes from, but El Enano "Santanon" is surely the best actor in the movie, even stuck in a furry suit for the whole thing.

There's one more steal before we can get moving. With El Lobo and El

Ogro locked up in the Queen's dungeons, complete with iron balls chained to their legs, it falls to Stinky, the Wolf's loyal little squire, to run for help. She (I assume she's female) quickly locates our two heroes, though Red's initial suggestion of, "Let's visit the Queen Witch and ask her not to be so evil," is hardly called for.

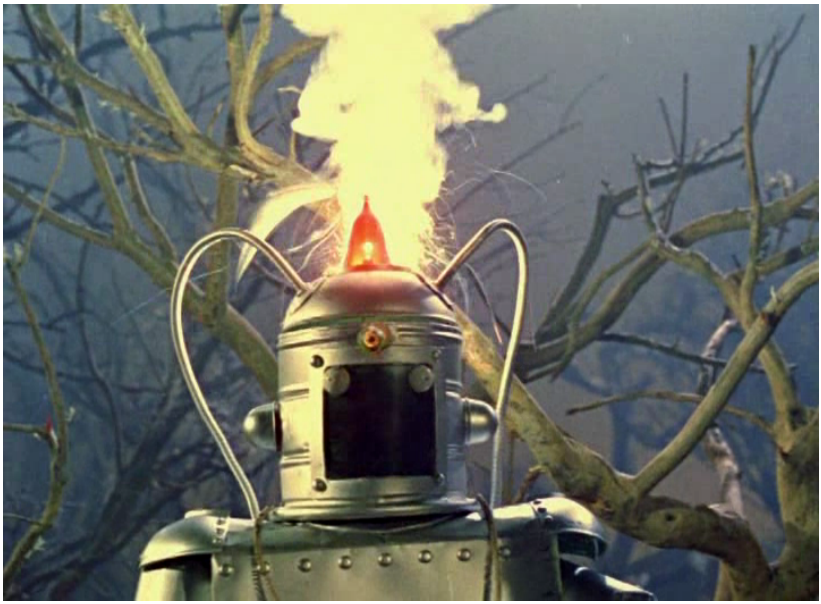
At this point, the Queen has already cast a spell, poured a concoction into the Singing River and made the weather hotter so everyone needs to drink. Given that this water is red, not clear, the townsfolk clearly either all need glasses or deserve to be turned into mice and monkeys. Now we see where Red's brains aren't! Maybe if Mexico appointed Ambassador Red to ask Mr. Trump "not to be so evil," though, all talk of the wall would end. Anyway, Stinky suggests they visit the Morning Fairy, who's like Glinda the Good but with a magic wand made of fireworks. So, in this *Snow White* vs. *The Wizard of Oz* tale, our heroes quest for the Queen's magic filter.

Now, I don't know who compiled these subtitles but that one had me confused for a while. After all, the Queen Witch kicked off a heatwave; maybe the Morning Fairy could use her magic filter to fix everyone's AC. But no, eventually I realised that this is really a magic philtre, or potion.

Similarly, the Big Bad Wolf's "brought idea" to get out of jail, which he brings up no less than thrice, is a "bright idea" in real English. However, I never did figure out why Tom Thumb kept on seeing mops instead of monsters. That's going to plague my sleep until I wake up, six weeks from now, with the proper translation on my tongue.

It's hardly fair, of course, of me to pick on the subtitles, when they were probably written half a century on by someone otherwise unrelated to the movie, but it's certainly fair to pick on what's in the picture. You know, like the clunky Martian robot which appears out of nowhere to attack Red while she's stuck in a skeleton. Why Mexicans adored clunky robots in the sixties, I have no idea, but they were everywhere!

What stuns me most here is that this was supposed to be a children's movie. Even if we manage to ignore the whole monsters angle, which is a tough prospect given that Boogie Man is enough to scare the bejesus out of adults, let alone kids, it veers wildly between English pantomime and Japanese gameshow. I'll throw out a couple of examples. That "brought idea" of the Wolf's is to pretend that he has Panfleta the millionaire flea in his hand and that suckers Boogie Man into opening the cell and idiotically



allowing everyone to escape. That's entirely stupid on every level, but it's quintessential pantomime and I could almost hear the kids in the audience willing El Lobo on! However, they're later tied to a torture rack, ready to be sent into a pair of circular saws, when the Queen orders torment before death. That means tickling their bare feet with feathers, force feeding them far too much water and then tickling them again until they pee like racehorses. Through their mouths. Onto each other. And their torturers. Here, I heard a commentator in stitches.

Of course, it was 1962 so times were different. Many of the moments that could never happen today were apparently utterly fine back then. For instance, the Queen gradually sends her menagerie of monsters at the kids and eventually we get to Hurricane Dwarf. In fact, he catches both Tom and Red, but Stinky the Skunk promptly grabs a torch from its sconce and sets his nuts on fire; then they all pile on and pull out his chest hair. Or are they just tickling him? I didn't want to guess.

Earlier, of course, was Child Snatcher, who is absolutely like the crazy paedophile you might expect, snatching up children in his large net and secreting them into a large sack that he keeps in a cave. Tom is caught, but

Stinky literally bends over and sprays the poor pervert until he curls up in a foetal position; then they tie him up, haul him into a tree as if they're going to lynch him and beat him with sticks as if he was a piñata. Mexican kids are apparently twisted; I remembered others sleighjacking Santa in *Santa Claus*; no wonder those kids ended up with coal.

It's worth mentioning here that the torch Stinky grabbed contained real fire, just like the Dragon of Avernus breathes real fire in dangerous quantities; I kept waiting for the set to catch fire or the costumes of the actors in it. At one point, this dragon shoots an impressive flame right at the head of the Big Bad Wolf, which is an actor in a fursuit. What did the insurance cost on this picture? Was there flame retardant material on Mexican shoots in 1962? How many stuntmen died of first degree burns? Inquiring minds want to know.

The filmmakers did realise their priorities. The Dragon of Avernus is two guys in a cheap pantomime horse outfit with a cheap papier maché dragon mask that has a fully functional frickin' flamethrower mounted inside it. Maybe Tom Thumb was magically grown to adult size as Películas Rodríguez had blown their effects budget on a flamethrower. Did María

Gracia stop playing Caperucita because she was supposed to be on fire throughout film four, *Flaming Red Riding Hood vs. The Human Torch*?

While it's easy to rip this film to shreds, there are positive qualities. It crams a heck of a lot into its 81 minutes, rarely slowing down even when the characters decide to launch into musical numbers. And yes, this is a musical too, though without many songs or, indeed, anything at all in the soporific Disney vein. The sets are often decent, the Queen Witch's castle looking like a castle should, and the twisted trees outside in the Kingdom of Evil are delightfully twisted. The props are even better yet, with the Queen's fireplace, perhaps the mouth of Hell itself, absolutely gorgeous. It looks like a demon's head with full length fangs and I want to buy it and build my own castle around it.

None of the costumes are up to that quality, especially those of the supporting monsters who roam this Mexican island of lost souls, and the effects are mostly awful, but the lurid Eastmancolor does add a larger than life quality that the movie sorely needed. Nothing matches that fireplace though, even the dragon's flamethrower.

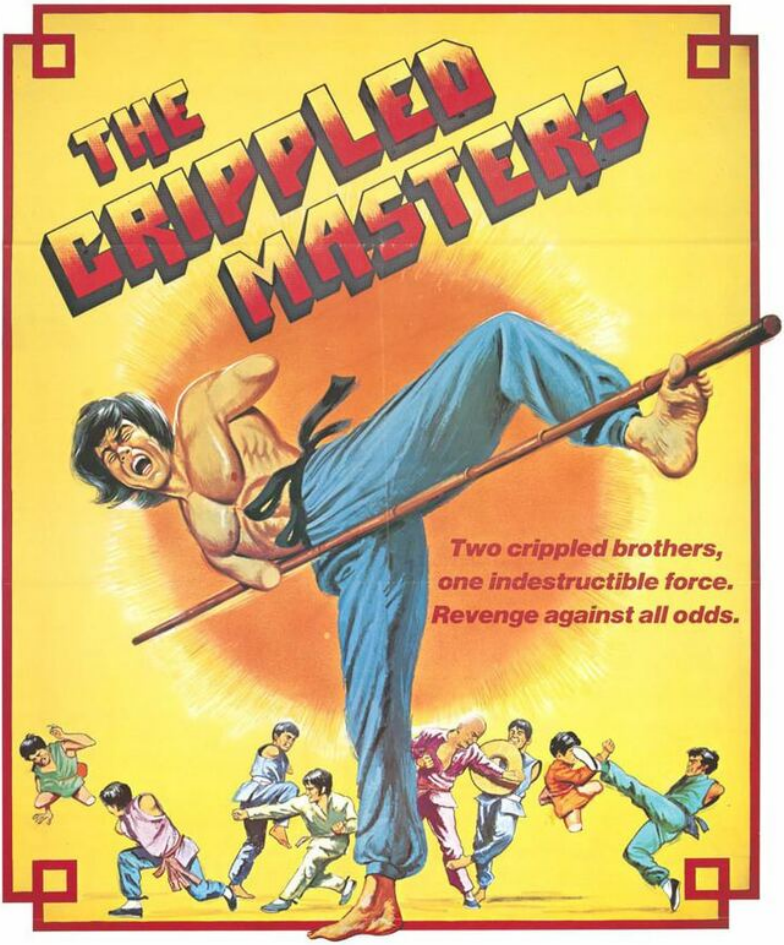
The other aspect that surprised me is the quality of some of the actors. Nobody really acts well here, because it's all larger than life lunacy but there are some excellent actors in the cast.

Surely the best visible actor is Ofelia Guilmáin, Spanish by birth but who fled her home country after the rise to power of General Franco, so all her movies were Mexican. Naturally, she worked with ex-pat Spanish filmmakers, like Luis Buñuel, which leads to the suitably surreal situation that this was the middle of her three pictures in 1962, wedged in between *The Exterminating Angel*, one of the best films ever made, and *The Brainiac*, which would surely be one of the worst if it wasn't so much lunatic fun.

José Elías Moreno, who plays the Ogre, was a veteran character actor famous for his versatility and his macho men; it's ironic that he's best known today not for quality titles such as *Black Wind*, Mexico's submission for Best Foreign Language Film in 1967, but trash like *Santa Claus*, in which he played the title role, or *Night of the Bloody Apes*.

Of course, if you're reading this, you're looking for trash. Unlike many of the Mexican movies that K. Gordon Murray brought over the border, like *The Brainiac*, *The Living Coffin* and *The Aztec Mummy* trilogy, this doesn't really benefit us much if we go back to the original. Sure, we do hear the high-pitched original voice of El Zorrillo rather than Murray's own dub as Stinky the Skunk, but that's not much of a gain. Perhaps we should seek out the originals of the horror flicks he dubbed, but stay with his versions of children's films. After all, he became "the King of the Kiddie Matinee" for good reason.

What's important is that we psychotronic cinema fans know who he is and experience the surreality of his work, but also acknowledge that these weren't really his films at all, that Mexico churned out bizarre children's pictures; atmospheric, if batshit insane, horror movies; and, of course, a slew of lurid luchador features starring wrestlers like Santo whom Murray turned into Samson. These are gloriously weird worlds to explore and you should join me in exploring them!


THE CRIPPLED MASTERS
Two crippled brothers,
one indestructible force.
Revenge against all odds.
An A Y F SEAR Production of "THE CRIPPLED MASTERS"
Introducing FRANKIE SHUM and JACK CONN as "THE CRIPPLED MASTERS"
Directed by JOE LAW • Fight Choreographer CHEN MU CHUAN
From NEW LINE CINEMA
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THE CRIPPLED MASTERS (1979)

Director: Chi Lo (Joe Law)

Writer: Unknown

Stars: Li Chung Keng, Chen Mu Chuan, Frank Shum, Jack Con and Ho Chiu

Whenever I people talk online about *Blazing Saddles*, the groundbreaking 1974 Mel Brooks comedy, it's usually accompanied by two opinions: firstly, it's still incredibly funny, and, secondly, nobody could remake it today. Now, they may have a point about that, even if Andrew Bergman kind of did with *Paws of Fury: The Legend of Hank,* but *The Crippled Masters* never fails to spring immediately to mind as an equivalent.

Even though it has an easy reading as a film that enables the disabled, it's so outrageous in the way in which it does so that many would find it difficult to watch and I can't imagine that anyone could tread this ground in 2020. The closest that anyone's come lately is Xavier Leret's *Unarmed But Dangerous* in 2009, a picture also released as *Kung Fu Flid*, starring Mat Fraser, who has been a professional drummer in a variety of bands even though he was born with thalidomide-induced phocomelia.

I adore *The Cripped Masters* and, even though it's a truly awful film in many quantifiable ways, I think I always will, however many times I watch it. The basic idea is to cast a martial arts movie with cripples, a word I only use here because it's the word used throughout the English dub of the film to describe the characters at its heart. That's not just Lee Ho and Tang, the two crippled masters of the title, but presumably their nemesis, Lin Chang Cao, as well.

It's Lee Ho we see first, losing his arms in a judgement by his boss. No, I'm not talking about heraldry, I'm talking about the severing of his upper limbs with a sword. Fewer than ten seconds after the opening credits end, we hear a scream and watch an arm fall to the floor of the Pluahchi crime organisation's courtyard and, fifteen seconds later, his other arm joins it.

We don't actually see the act and the fake arms are props, but it appears shockingly real. This is a Hong Kong movie shot in Taiwan in 1979, after all. Do you think the production had a CGI budget? This is surely why the scene has surprisingly little blood and no arterial spray at all, though the actor, Frankie Shum, is clearly not hiding his limbs either inside his shirt or behind his back. It looks as if he just has no arms, only a flipper-like stub sprouting out of his left shoulder that looks rather like a mandrake root. And, crucially, this is because he really has no arms. Shum, like Mat Fraser, was born with thalidomide-induced phocomelia, which tends to leaves malformed and shortened limbs, among many other deformities and health issues.

It's purest exploitation to cast a thalidomide sufferer as a man whose arms have been cut off, but that isn't enough for Pow, who's the official in charge, so he has his minion, Tang, also quite literally throw him out of the compound. Hey, Lee Ho broke the rules! Why not?

I have to say that he does sell his newfound difficulty well, though, as we saw during the opening credits, he's more than capable. We watch him wander around and fall down some steps. The flipper stump, covered in blood, looks horrific. And, to add to all his troubles, when he stops at a restaurant for some tea, the waiter teases him with a chicken leg and the big bouncer hurls him out to the street, knocking him unconscious in the

process. After all, some of the customers just don't want to see that sort of thing! He wakes up in a coffin at the shop of Chin the town's undertaker, who's sympathetic, but Cao's enforcers come in to order three coffins and, seeing that Lee Ho is still alive, promptly decide to kill him. He escapes, beaten but alive, falls into a river and is washed downstream.

After he finds his way ashore, he sneaks into a farm and chows down in the pig's trough, underlining his new status in the world. However, he's quickly found and put to work for his keep. The things we take for granted with two functioning arms, he has to figure out new ways to accomplish, but he does so. He learns how to hold things with his stump, surprisingly large things like a pole carrying a couple of barrels of water. He uses his feet to tip them and balance and so on.

Suddenly, from our point of view, he's impressive, though we expect that time has passed from his mutilation to this point. I don't know who wrote this film but it's clear that he, she or they really didn't care about traditional details like the passage of time. What they cared about was the exploitation of disabled talent and cool fight scenes. Frankie Shum and his fellow screen debutant, Jack Conn, are up to both tasks, ably assisted by the fight choreographers Chen Mu Chuan, Ho Feng and Shao Sam.

We've already seen Jack Conn but he appeared to be fully formed at the time. He plays Tang, who ordered that Lee Ho's arms be cut off and goes

along with the extra cruelty of throwing him out of the compound, even though he personally thinks it's a bit much. In the undetermined amount of time since, karma has come a-knockin' on Tang's door because he's now fallen out of favour with Lin, who pours acid over his legs while cackling maniacally like a cartoon villain at the cries of pain. Why? Apparently he knows a little too much.

Beyond being another wildly horrific act for this exploitation flick, it works well to introduce what we haven't yet seen of Conn, because the acid melts both his trousers and his skin, leaving what look like the legs of a severe anorexic or a famine victim, merely bone under skin, attached to a man who looks completely normal above the waist. Again, we expect this effect to be the work of CGI rather than an unfortunate twist of fate in the real world, but Conn's vestigial legs were due to complications during his birth.

I'm sure you've guessed the next step, pun not intended, because Tang rolls his way to the river, where he discovers Lee Ho. You're probably a step beyond that, because surely there's some sort of kung fu master in the immediate vicinity who can train them both in the martial arts so that they can wreak appropriate vengeance on Lin Chang Cao. And you'd be right, but there's a twist. Lee Ho is still a little miffed at Tang, so drags him into a nearby cave to torture him to a slow death. Before he can do so,

they realise that the cave is not unoccupied.

Folded up like a pretzel inside a tiny food basket is a yoga master, who's played by guest star Ho Chiu. He looks a little on the wrong side of eighty but is more flexible than most contortionists. Jean-Claude van Damme has nothing on this guy! In the sequence behind the opening credits, he lies back on his neck and sticks his body vertically up in the air, then does the splits to the point where both his feet touch the ground! Oh, and don't try that at home, folks. You might want kids of your own one day.

What follows is much as you expect, if you're able to picture this. There are training montages, which are surprisingly endearing to my eye, even though they feature a man with no arms and a man with shrivelled legs doing the bidding of a contortionist with the odd habit of hiding in places too small for anyone to reasonably hide in. And, of course, they achieve their revenge, though with the benefit of an astounding plot convenience.

It seems that this ever-cheerful yoga master is only unhappy about one thing and that's the fact that he once discovered Eight Jade Horses that were promptly stolen by, take a wild stab in the dark, Lin Chang Cao. So he's not just training Lee Ho and Tang to be literally two halves of a single great martial artist out of the goodness of his heart, they're a method to get his statues back. And, get this, the purpose of the Eight Jade Horses turns out to be to teach two half-men to combine into a whole to achieve

their full potential. I mean, what are the odds? Maybe akin to being hit by lightning ten days on the trot, right after nailing the Mega Millions.

And here's where I have to point out how stupid this film gets. Sure, it has what might be the most outrageous plot convenience in the history of cinema, but it also has a bunch of archetypal characters, a threadbare plot and a fortune cookie mentality; the best piece of advice the yoga master has for his new charges is this: "The worst thing is to be crippled in your mind." Oh, and the film ends so suddenly that we're actively taken aback.

Even when something different happens, it doesn't stand up to any level of scrutiny. Lin's henchmen are named Black and White and they dress accordingly, down to White's powdered white face; he sometimes looks like a hopping vampire out of costume. But we have no idea why. There's a wildcard who continues to show up, by the name of Ah Po. He's eating at the restaurant where Lee Ho gets some revenge on that waiter and bouncer and he lends a hand. Then he shows up outside a brothel, picking a fight with Pow and his men. He's like the wildcard in a spaghetti western but with even less back story.

And what the heck is going on with Lin, the big boss of the film? He's fully functional and a master of the martial arts, but he's given disabilities of his own. Frankie Shum and Jack Conn are disabled actors but Li Chung Keng doesn't appear to be. A very prominent blemish that appears under

his left eye like a butterfly wing—maybe it's a burn mark or maybe it's a sword slice, but it's never mentioned once—doesn't appear there in the other roles that he's taken over the years and I seriously doubt that he has a hunchback in those either. He doesn't move as if he has a problem with his spine, his movements always fluid and elegant, but whatever's on his back serves as a secret weapon in his arsenal. The overdone sound effects make it seems like it's made of metal, like he's a Ninja Turtle in disguise, and he employs some strange movements in order to bash his opponents with it. That works just as oddly as you might imagine, with him literally having to back into people for effect. But there's no explanation given for any of it. It's not even attempted.

Somehow all this remains enjoyable. I rather like Lee Ho and Tang, a pair of unusual characters in thoroughly usual roles, and it's a hard task indeed not to like the impish yoga master with his infectious grin. It helps that all three of them are able to do things that we probably can't, even with our fully functioning arms and legs. Frankie Shum and Jack Conn do many of the things that the freaks in *Freaks* did, like Johnny Eck and the Living Torso, but then they successfully battle capable able-bodied martial artists as an encore.

What's more, while this is inept on many fronts, the fight choreography is fantastic, whether between able-bodied actors or factoring in Shum

and/or Conn, which inevitably changes the styles employed. Conn, in particular, spends most of the film in a seated position, as he can't use his legs, so the ways in which the bad guys attack him are very different from those in which they might attack Ah Po or even Lee Ho. It's all as inventive as it needs to be and that's a good part of why this is such a success.

Asian cinema has a history of featuring disabled characters, perhaps most famously Zatoichi, the Blind Swordsman and Fang Kang, the One-Armed Swordsman. Shintaro Katsu played Ichi in no fewer than twenty-six *Zatoichi* feature films and a hundred episodes of a *Zatoichi* TV series, with the quality never dipping. Jimmy Wang Yu, who portrayed the One Armed Swordsman twice and also the One Armed Boxer, was, in many ways, the first martial arts star, certainly the highest paid until the advent of Bruce Lee. However, Katsu wasn't blind and Yu had use of both arms, at least until a stroke late in life forced an echo of his most famous roles into reality. Similarly, the 1978 film, *Crippled Avengers*, had a cast of able bodied actors, including most of the Five Deadly Venoms in different roles as disabled characters.

However, it was this picture a year later that took the leap to hire disabled actors to portray disabled characters, so avoiding what Fraser has called "spacking up", as a direct reference to "blacking up", when white actors play black characters. It was successful enough that Conn and Shum

subsequently teamed up in three further movies: *Fighting Life*, *Two Crippled Heroes* and *Raiders of the Shaolin Temple*.

While this new millennium has brought prominent roles, especially on television, to talented actors who sadly would not have landed major parts in the entertainment industry half a century earlier, like Peter Dinklage in *Game of Thrones*, Clark Middleton in *The Blacklist* or C. J. Mitte in *Breaking Bad*, I simply can't see anyone revisiting a concept like this in the 2020s, especially as it isn't a touching drama.

It's an exploitation flick and, if anyone honestly tried to create a martial arts film today starring one actor without arms and another without functional legs, they'd either do it through the use of CGI, the way that Charlize Theron became an amputee in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, or it would be as painful to watch as the brutal fates dished out to its characters.

Somehow this film remains watchable and even entertaining. Sure, it's exploitation, but it's hard to see Shum and Conn as exploited when they're the heroes of the piece and they're so much better at what they do than we would be. All power to both of them!

ROOK FILMS RELEASING PRESENTS A LINCOLN STUDIOS PRODUCTION IN ASSOCIATION WITH BOUM PRODUCTIONS LTD
A Film by Steve Oram
Aaaaaaaah!
We are not men
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY STEVE ORAM
JULIAN BARRATT LUCY HONIGMAN TOM MEETEN STEVE ORAM SEAN REYNARD JULIAN RHIND-TUTT TOYAH WILLCOX
HOLLI DEMPSEY NOEL FIELDING SHELLEY LONGWORTH ALICE LOWE WAEN SHEPHERD TONY WAY
MAKEUP & HAIR DESIGN BY JODY WILLIAMS SOUND RECORDIST TOM HARDURT MUSIC BY KING CRIMSON PROJEKCTS & DAVID WESTLAKE
SOUND DESIGN BY MARTIN PAVEY, EDITED BY STEVE ORAM DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY MATT WICKS PRODUCED BY STEVE ORAM & ANDY STARKE
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AAAAAAAAH! (2015)

Director: Steve Oram

Writer: Steve Oram

Stars: Lucian Barrett, Lucy Honigman, Tom Meeten, Steve Oram, Sean Reynard, Julian Rhind-Tutt and Toyah Willcox

In many ways, *Aaaaaaaah!*, which is actor Steve Oram's debut feature as a director, is merely a soap opera, because all the characters are defined entirely through their relationships, which change considerably over the course of the picture.

Denise lives at home with her mum, Barabara—which is not a typo, by the way—who's currently with Ryan, even though her ex, Jupiter, is still hanging around looking forlorn. Denise clearly has no time for Ryan and what passes for a home life that their family has, so acts up accordingly, drinking and shoplifting with her cousin, Helen. When a stranger named Smith shows up at a party that they're hosting at their house, she hooks up with him and that promps everything to change.

Smith and Ryan clash repeatedly, each trawling in friends and family members to their fight until everything eventually settles down to a new normal, a word I probably shouldn't use here. But the good times are good and folk enjoy cooking or playing console games. The bad times are bad, deteriorating into violent arguments that leave nobody happy. This could be *Eastenders* or *Coronation Street*, right? But it isn't. Oh no!

Oram's soap opera world has one major difference to anything you'll see on primetime television, perhaps best highlighted with a note that the film's title is easily the most coherent line of dialogue anyone utters in 79 minutes of running time. These characters might look like regular human beings and they might live lives that oddly echo our own, but they're not regular human beings at all.

What they are, Oram refuses to explain, so we have no easy recourse to a virus or a chemical leak or some alien experiment to explain anything.

Things just are and it falls to us to figure out what Oram is trying to do in this film with each of his actors communicating only through animalistic grunts. It's like the world as we know it simply changed one day when everyone woke up with the primal urges and the low (well, comparatively) intelligence of a chimpanzee. They carry on regardless, being British and all, but just through routine, because any higher functions, such as speech, have been forever lost. Civilisation has fallen, even if nobody's apparently acknowledged it yet.

For instance, when we first encounter Denise and Ryan, erroneously assuming that they're a couple because actor Julian Rhind-Tutt, of *Stardust* and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* fame, always appears to be at least a generation younger than he is, they're dressed as you might expect and doing things you might expect: she's sitting on a couch looking at the pictures in a magazine and he's attempting to unpack his new big screen TV. Now, that magazine does feature adult body parts without somehow ever seeming pornographic and she's also scratching her fingernails on the wall, while he's angrily throwing packaging around and grunting at her, but they're

attempting to do what they're supposed to do.

Denise goes down to the kitchen, where her mum is watching a cooking show and trying to follow the instructions. Sure, the host has her breasts out and Barbara is slamming her meat against the door to tenderise it before loading the microwave, but they're attempting to do what they're supposed to do as well. Even when they take a dump on the floor together, it's on clingfilm.

But the peace doesn't last. Everything becomes a battle for dominance. Ryan is the alpha male in this household and he expects that everything will go exactly the way he wants. Perhaps, even if it does, because food turns out looking far better than I ever expected it to, he has to play up to retain that alpha male status. So after abusing Og to finish setting up the TV and a console system for him, because, if he can't do it himself, he can at least order it to be done, he throws his food about, pitching dessert at Barabara, who then responds in kind and rampages around, breaking the console system that Og only just got working.

And, if it's odd to see Rhind-Tutt in a wild scene like this, it's even odder

to see Toyah Willcox. When I was a kid in thrall to Adam Ant, my sister was a diehard Toyah fan and I can see some of that punk and post-punk attitude here. After all, her most important early acting roles were in Derek Jarman films like *Jubilee* and *The Tempest*, as well as the Who's rock opera *Quadrophenia*. This is, however, far beyond anything I ever thought I'd see her do, even after watching a collection of *Toyah and Robert's Sunday Lunches* on YouTube.

Meanwhile, Smith is coming to town, in the form of the writer/director himself, Steve Oram, and he is absolutely not messing around. The very first scene features Smith crying over and then peeing on a photo of what we expect to be his ex-wife. We know that he's another alpha and Keith is his beta male because, when he's done, Keith wipes both Smith's face and his fake cock and they wander off to the city so Smith can hump a tree.

I should mention that this film isn't anywhere near as graphic as it could be, given what a summary of the action must read like, but it's no Sunday afternoon flick for the family. For instance, when Smith and Keith make it into town, they pick on Og, whacking him with roadsigns, perhaps

as a sign of dominance and perhaps just because he's masturbating outside with a mouse. It's that sort of movie. So do we side with Og, because he's getting bullied in the street? Or do we side with Smith and Keith, because Og gets his jollies with a mouse? Really, we side with the mouse, because we have no doubt that he, she or they is the character we feel for the most in this movie.

I should also emphasise at this point that I'm helping you out a great deal here, because Oram doesn't want us to have any information to make assumptions from. Not only do these characters have no dialogue beyond grunts of varied emphasis, they only have names because I peeked at the credits. At no point during the film is Denise introduced to us as Denise or Smith as Smith and that makes a lot of sense. Without language, names are meaningless. Depending on the science behind how these people have devolved into apes, they would have to figure out another way to identify each other, like sniffing each other's butts. Certainly, other behaviours we see are recognisable from our own pets and nature shows on television, because there's a heck of a lot of territory marking going on at the party.

How many people end up peeing on that fridge? It's certainly not a good time for Ryan, the local alpha male, to be drunk out of his brain. Keith is happy to whip out his testicles and drops them onto Ryan's unconscious head for a particularly memorable photo. Tea bagged!

Needless to say, this is a highly polarising movie. Most people are going to hate it with an absolute passion. If they saw this at a film festival, they'd walk out in horror but still be talking about it when next year's event comes round. The only recent movie I can put in that category is *The Greasy Strangler*, which also traumatised a lot of my fellow viewers when I saw it at the International Horror & Sci-Fi Film Festival. However, this is also so original and unexpected that many called it their favourite film of whichever festival it decorated like the urine dripping down that fridge.

It's certainly not a film to easily forget, for good or bad, and art should always have an impact, whatever that impact might be. I kind of liked it, a transgressive soap opera that might well have started out life as a sort of visceral acting exercise. How do you get across your character and how do you interact with the others when none of you have the benefit of speech?

My better half, on the other hand, was traumatised by it and wants it to vanish from her memory.

It'll take a while to do that, but I wonder which part will hang around in her head the longest? It may well be Og whacking off with a mouse, as that's something I never expected to see on screen and never expect to see again, but it's hardly the only obvious candidate.

Holli Dempsey makes quite an impact as Denise's cousin, Helen, given that she's not in the movie for long but still manages to cram rather a lot into her little screen time. When we first meet her, she's on a park bench pouring vodka down her crotch to alleviate a case of VD. Then she takes Denise shoplifting and gets caught, which ends up with the pair of them in the shop's basement, where the proprietor whacks off in front of them (onto a photo of Prince Harry) and Helen then gives his assistant, in the recognisable form of Noel Fielding, a blowjob before biting off his pecker completely so they can abscond with the cashbox.

Another strong candidate for most memorable scene comes late in the film, when the family cook and eat Keith's testicles in tribute, after he falls

during the turf war.

Personally, the scenes that may stay with me longest are the ones that aren't just outrageous in the context of the movie but extend way past it in surreal fashion. In another movie, we might focus on the scene where Smith rips Ryan's arm off in a fight and waves it over his head as if he has an audition for the opening sequence of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. However, to me, the more outrageous scene has to be the one that immediately follows it, because of the way this was shot: guerrilla style (ha) in South London over a two week period with minimal equipment. Smith, bleeding from the head, takes Denise home, now that his key rival has been eliminated, but he doesn't leave Ryan's arm behind. He takes it with him, even as they pass real cyclists, joggers and other people who just happen to be out and about in south London on that day, perhaps unaware of the film being shot around them. He's holding it when they stop at a shop on the way and as they pass a playground of a school in session, kids running around happily. And nobody says a word.

Then, of course, there's the animated chicken, which plays a pivotal

part in proceedings, rather surprisingly. It's terribly animated and it's as inane as anything I've ever seen, but it drives the end of the movie and really makes us wonder about how much of what we've seen is a reflection of the human condition.

It seems weird to get deep and meaningful about a movie in which a character actually tries to paint a wall with the battenberg cake he uses as a safety blanket, but this is obvious social commentary. If everything boils down to what makes us happy, are the ape-like former people in this film happy and, if so, at what point? Are we happy and, if so, how close are we to doing exactly what the characters are doing in this film? I hope we're not pissing on the fridge and cooking the testicles of our dead friends, but are we looking for happiness in the same big screen TVs, cheap shoplifting thrills or getting passed out drunk at our own parties? What's more, is the animated chicken any more inane than *Jersey Shore* or *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*?

In its way, *Aaaaaaaah!*, perhaps the most aptly named film ever made, is also one of the cleverest. I have no idea how much budget Steve Oram had

to play with—he surely had to replace that fridge—but there clearly wasn't much of it. His actors threw themselves into their roles, regardless what outrageous tasks the next page of the script had in store for them.

Apparently, that script did have actual dialogue and they rehearsed with that to get their characters down before replacing their lines with grunts during the actual shoot. The outrageous material guarantees press and ongoing conversation, but it's not so outrageous that this can't be watched by a wide audience. Sure, it'll gross many of them out, but it'll stick in their brains afterwards and prompt some of them to think about it a lot more than they ever expect to. And all that from a soap opera with no dialogue shot in two weeks in mostly natural lighting with a cheap camera. I don't know what they used, but the aspect ratio is the 4:3 full frame of old television and videocassettes.

I have to wonder how much of this just grew out of a basic idea and a bunch of mates. Oram had a decade and a half of features and TV shows behind him at this point, so had plenty of friends in the business to call when he decided to make a feature of his own. I have no idea if he did any casting or whether he wrote this for specific friends and colleagues.

Surely networking played a big part in the production process, because both executive producers, Pete Tombs and Ben Wheatley, are distinctly well connected and well respected in British cinema circles. Also, the score is largely comprised of music from King Crimson ProjecKts albums, lending an oddly sophisticated veneer to a rather scatalogical story. This is arthouse cinema anyway, but it feels more arthouse because of that score and I'm sure the inclusion of a selection of ProjecKts songs came through Toyah Willcox being married to Robert Fripp.

Somehow, the film feels even more offbeat for having a xylophone version of 21st Century Schizoid Man over the end credits. Nothing about *Aaaaaaaah!* is easy to forget, not even those.

A CAST OF REAL LIVE ANIMALS DO THE MOST AMAZING THINGS!
a cat who runs a railroad! .....
a dog who takes pictures! .....
a frog who rides motorbikes! ....
a bunny who shoots pool! .....
a duck who flies a balloon! .....
a monkey who builds missiles! ...
and more, MORE, MORE! .....
JOSEPH E. LEVINE presents
The Secret of Magic Island
IN COLOR
An Embassy Pictures Release
SAT. SUN. MAT. ONLY!
It's a wondrous story of these "little folks" who really think they are people!

THE SECRET OF MAGIC ISLAND (1956)

Director: Jean Tourane
Writers: Louise de Vilmorin, Jean Tourane and Richard Lavigne
Stars: Robert Lamoureux

Sometimes tracking down the weirdest movies of all time takes some effort, which is why I'm watching this 1956 French-Italian co-production from a grey market VHS rip that has been dubbed into Swedish and fan subbed back into English.

I have to applaud the dedication needed for the former, even though there's no dialogue and it's always easier to dub a narration than the words of a dozen characters. I thank Dr. Death at Cinemageddon for the latter, even though my streaming device wouldn't pick them up on my TV so I had to read them on my laptop while the film was playing. Such are the lengths to which I must go to in order to report on cinematic insanity for your edification and pleasure!

And talking of insanity, there's plenty of it because this picture is entirely acted by animals. And no, I don't mean animals playing animals interacting with humans; you're not going to see *Lassie* in a book like this. All these characters could have been played by regular human actors, just as we might expect. But they aren't. They're played by animals. Because.

And we get to see a whole heck of a lot of them during the first half of the movie, because nothing happens beyond regular folk going about their regular business in their regular town, merely one sized to appropriate levels given the cast. It's a damn good model and it's easily the best thing about the movie.

So we follow the postman as he delivers the mail, just as a human might do it, except that Gustaf is a duck. His cantankerous wife is a duck too, which is probably a good thing. The barber is a fox named, I kid you not, Foxy. The tavern has a dog for a bartender, who pours wine better than some human bartenders I know.

It's not merely the model town that's immediately impressive; it's the props as well because this is a well equipped model. There's a pool table in the bar and there are balls on the table. The fireplace has a fire in it. The goose drives around town in an actual moving vehicle.

And, amazing as it might seem, we fall into this logic because it's never commented on. Within the framework of this story, it isn't worthy of mention and so is presented to us in that fashion.

The English title is pretty meaningless, because there is no island in this movie, magic or otherwise, and thus it has no secret. The original French title makes a little more sense, because *Une fée... pas comme les autres* can be translated as *A Fairy Tale... But Not Like the Others*. I should add that most of the fairy tales I grew up reading featured animals for characters too, so it's *entirely* like the others, merely in a live action movie instead of prose.

However, this sort of thing wasn't unprecedented. Silent era legend Hal Roach produced a series called *Dippy Doo Dads*, which were thirteen short comedies from 1923 to 1924, featuring animals dressed up as people and doing all the things that we do. The leads were usually trained monkeys, playing cops or firemen or shoeshine boys, driving miniature vehicles

through puddles to splash the ducks, that sort of thing. In *Lovey Dovey*, a monkey rides a goat to pursue another monkey, who tries to escape with the titular heroine on a hot air balloon; good guy monkey battles bad guy monkey on the top of that balloon. But those were one reel shorts; this is an hour long feature and it feels ambitious.

It also occasionally feels icky, just as the *Dippy Doo Dads* films often feel icky, because Hal Roach was operating long before an organisation like American Humane came along to supervise animal action in movies; their work began in Hollywood in 1939 after 20th Century Fox forced a horse to run off a seventy foot cliff in *Jesse James*. Of course, Jean Tourane was making movies in France, where American Humane have no jurisdiction. I would hope that there's some sort of equivalent nowadays, but my google fu let me down when I tried to find out what it is. If there is an equivalent, it clearly wasn't in place in the fifties and sixties to supervise Tourane.

I should point out that he specialised in this sort of thing, starting with short films featuring a duck called Saturnin, then moving into feature length with this film, over to television for *The Adventures of Saturnin* and back again for the 1969 feature *Saturnin and Vaca-Vaca*. By the way, that

show was re-edited and re-written in the nineties into an American secret agent show, *The Adventures of Dynamo Duck*, which aired on Fox Kids, with Dan Castellaneta, of Homer Simpson fame, voicing the titular duck.

And so we work through this film, our spirits rising at the marvellous model work and dropping again in scenes where we wonder how Tourane got all these animals to do all the things they do here. In other words, half the time we're wanting to see the Behind the Scenes footage and the other half the time we're absolutely *not* wanting to do that.

Possibly the best example of the former is a train, which runs along a long track bordering a lake and a wood, whose moving parts seem to be borrowed from musical instruments and which is driven by a cat wearing goggles. It's stable enough that a fox can read to a lamb and some rabbits can play chess. Sure, Per, a duckling poet easily distracted by nature, is only able to catch it when the cat stops because August the snail scout is on the rail, but we can't help but wonder how many of these passengers have been glued into their seats or secured there by hidden wires. How does a dog lift spectacles to his face? Is that Tourane's hidden hand lifting them or are they secured to the paw? Inquiring minds want to know.

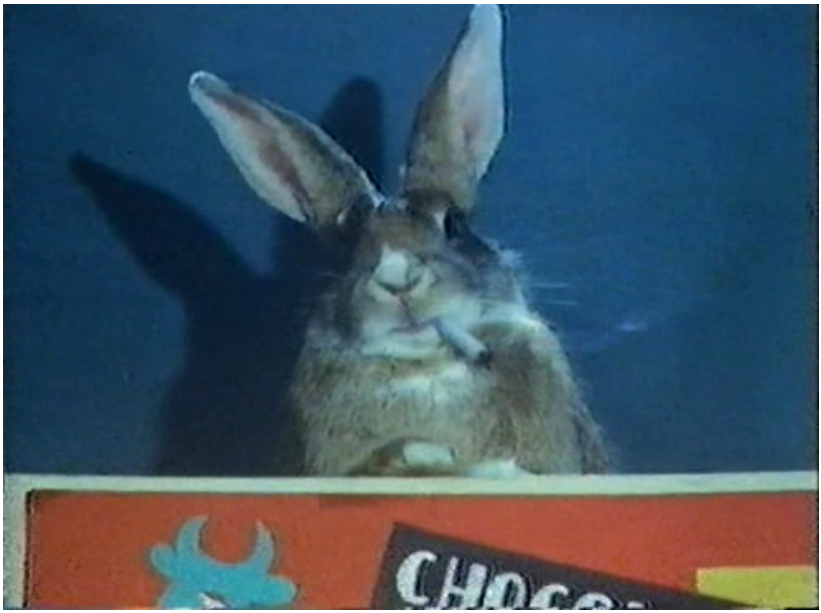
It's once Per is safely on the train that the actual plot decides to show up. We've been distracted thus far by all the cutesy animals, a majority of which seem to be babies—kittens rather than cats, ducklings rather than ducks, chicks rather than birds—and we'll keep on being distracted for a while yet. There's an inventor called Franz, who has conjured up an alarm clock using water: it dumps a bucket on an unsuspecting puppy to wake him up. There's a carpenter called Lindqvist, who's planing an ironing board as a gift for a seamstress called Lucidor, whom he loves with all his heart, even though she's a cat. There's a music class of birds who are surely not wired to their perches but can't seem to move their legs. On an even more dangerous note, Foxy the barber actually shampoos the head of a chicken, which looks acutely painful. How many chickens did they get through trying to shoot that scene? And it didn't stop there. One sits under a hair dryer, which sure looks like it's putting out heat and leaving the head of the chicken charred.

But, amidst all this, we keep getting hints that a carnival is coming to town, prompting Mr. Julius, the rabbit in charge of news, to put posters up all over town. That's where we're going, even if we're focused on rabbits

playing billiards. The carnival shows up in force and it looks amazing, if we discount the rabbit smoking a cigarette and the frogs riding mopeds around a wall of death, but it's all being orchestrated by the supervillain of the story. Boo hiss!

He's Black Troll, a capuchin monkey, who's been watching the town all along with the aid of massive remote viewing equipment of the type we tend to see in *James Bond* movies. Now he's masquerading as a baker in a magically manifested caravan. As we learned at the beginning of the film, he's upset because a forgetful fairy rejected his proposal of marriage, and his grand plot for revenge involves destroying the town. Oh, and just in case we aren't invested in that angle, because it shows up so late and has so little substance, Black Troll also hates love. The bastard. He's got his eye on Per the duckling poet and his object of lust, Barbara, a performer at the carnival who looks so lovely on her poster that Per is stricken.

Black Troll's quest for vengeance takes up much of the second half of the film and it's given all the accoutrements it needs, from an abundance of fireworks at the carnival onwards. After this dastardly monkey turns Barbara to stone, Per and Maestro Ericson, local music professor cat, take

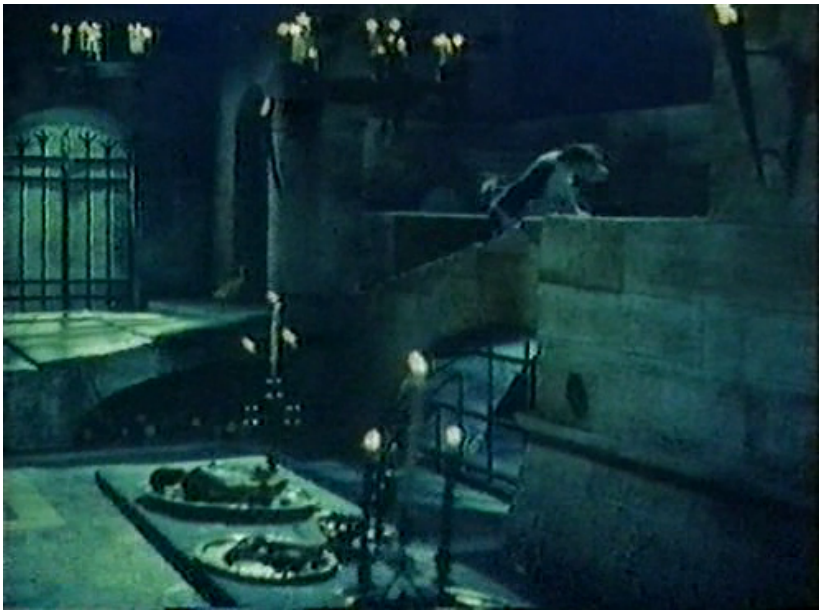


off in a balloon to save her—there's a whole quest here, outlined by an owl astronomer—but it's promptly destroyed by a rocket, one of Black Troll's "super demonic thingamajigs", leaving them to parachute to safety.

There's a castle and an owl monster with a vehicle that's half mole and half fish. There's a forest, though it's soon blown up by Black Troll with about as many explosions as the average Michael Bay movie. There's the realm of a furry spider, who has a lamb confined behind a huge web that innocent Per must free as a part of his quest. There's even a ridiculous slapstick resolution that hearkens back to the karmic endings of old *Doc Savage* novels. The good guys aren't supposed to kill people, so the bad guys have to accidentally do it to themselves.

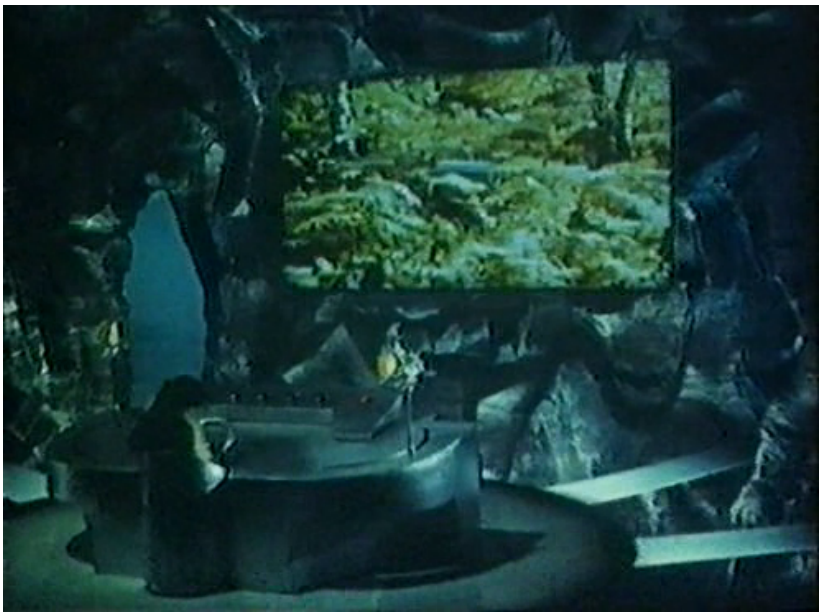
In short, there's a lot here and I can't say that it isn't entertaining. It's certainly a wild curiosity. You may not remotely care what happens next from the standpoint of plot progression but you will absolutely care about what happens next from the standpoint of wanting to see what wonder Jean Tourane will conjure up next and what fantastic miniature sets he'll build for it to happen in.

That scale really helps when it comes to explosions too, because they're



huge but not inappropriately so and thus the escape through the forest reminds of the grandeur of *Apocalypse Now*. No kidding. I've chatted with professional effects guys who talked up how easy so many things are but how hard it is to do small fire and small water. I have no idea what budget Tourane had but he put it to strong use here. However you're imagining this looks, based on my descriptions here, it looks better, aided by the Eastmancolor that feels rich and often makes scenes with minimal colour look like they're taken from a tinted silent film.

My better half doesn't ever want to watch this again. While animal cruelty isn't obviously visible on the screen, it must seem clear to anyone watching that it had to happen. This is 1956. Nothing is CGI. Everything is done with physical effects work, which means that Tourane had to figure out a way for rabbits to play billiards and frogs to ride motorbikes and birds to sing in unison in a music room in as believable a fashion as he could muster. Without obvious use of wires, I'm assuming this was done by gluing live animals to the objects they're supposed to be using. It wouldn't shock me if the generally calm behaviour from all these animals, even while there's a fireworks show exploding above them, was due to



some sort of sedative use. Like I said earlier, I really want to know how this was done but then again I really don't want to know anything.

Of course, given that this was made fifteen years before I was born, I have to assume that all these unlikely stars are long dead. Tourane is too and has been for thirty-six years. He's not getting anything out of me watching this VHS rip.

As to the wider question, that I'm asking so often during this book, of why someone thought it would be a bright idea to make such a movie, I guess it was a thing at the time. Hal Roach was doing it in the twenties. Jean Tourane was doing it in the fifties and sixties. It wouldn't surprise me if a bunch of other people were doing it in other places at other times.

Nowadays, we can make features like *Clifford the Big Red Dog* using CGI. We don't need to glue puppies to bedframes and fortunately we wouldn't be allowed to under most circumstances. American Humane monitors 70% of productions in the United States, both in film and television, which involve animals, in part because the Screen Actors Guild require it when they're involved. The American Humane website says that amounts to two thousand productions annually, with a hundred thousand animal actors protected every year. It's fair to say that times have changed and for the better. Nobody uses tilt shutes and running Ws any more. Filmmakers are not even allowed to glue baby birds to branches. And I hope that's the case in France as well.

IKKO'S THEATRE
PHA
The Flying
LUNA CLIPPER

PHA
LUNA
CLIPPER

THE FLYING LUNA CLIPPER (1987)

Director: Ikko Ono
Writer: Ikko Ono
Stars: Anne Lambert, Ina Krantz, Mark Hagan and Zev Asher

Back in the eighties, films weren't as available as they are now, because the internet is a wonderful thing and we shouldn't ever lose sight of that. Then, I'd read about amazing movies in fanzines that I had no expectation of ever seeing myself. Because I read quite a few zines, I could see the paths of the underground tape trading circuit manifest like a map out of the order by which the latest wild title that came out of nowhere, like *Nekromantik* or *Urotsukidoji*, would see review in those zines.

For decades, *The Flying Luna Clipper* was one of those wild titles, a film about which the psychotronic cognoscenti could rave as if it was manna from heaven but the rest of humanity didn't have a shot of ever seeing it. Now, of course, it's on YouTube in entirety, because, of course it is. The world has fundamentally changed. It's said that someone found a laserdisc copy in a thrift store, ripped it to digital and sent it over to Matt Repetski, because he writes about both movies and video games. In turn, he showed it to Matt Hawkins at Attract Mode, who uploaded it to YouTube.

And that sparked a big resurgence of interest in *The Flying Luna Clipper*, which is quite possibly the most unique film I've ever seen and a sort of visual shot of happiness. It's batshit insane, it makes next to no sense and yet, while watching it, I drift into a feeling that all is right with the world. Given that I'm writing in September 2020, the ninth level of the *Jumanji* game that has comprised this crazy year, that's quite the achievement, especially for a film released in Japan in 1987, on Video8, Betamax, VHS and LaserDisc, for what was then the equivalent of sixty bucks.

And, quite frankly, it's not really even a film in the sense that we tend to think. It's more of a psychedelic graphics demo, created on an 8 bit MSX computer. Nishi Kazuhiko had clout, as a founder of the ASCII Corporation and a vice president at Microsoft, and his grand achievement would be to create a unified standard for home computers in 1983. Except he failed. Sony made the bulk of the MSXs and they only shipped five million units in Japan, those sales helped by the original *Metal Gear* game.

Research by Hawkins and Victor Navarro-Remesal has shown that *The Flying Luna Clipper*, which always seemed like a brain dump of the wild imagination of creator Ikko Ono, grew out of the pages of *MSX Magazine* in 1986. Ono had combined art and tech early in a stint for the New York digital effects company known simply as Digital Effects, who had animated early "flying logos" for TV and created both the main title and the flying Bit for *Tron*. Returning to Japan, Ono became friends with Nishi and he contributed regularly to *MSX Magazine*, responsible for all its cover art and for a monthly column called *Ikko's Gallery*.

His job was effectively to show how the MSX could be used to create art

and he did so with beautiful surreal imagery that, through that year and into the next, starts to become recognisable as characters from *The Flying Luna Clipper*. The March 1986 cover has Yukio, a snowman with a tray of drinks, June 1986 introduces a pear smoking in a bar and the August 1986 cover features a sexy banana in a hammock.

It's probably about this point that you're wondering just what this film must look like. Sexy banana in a hammock? Ha, you haven't seen anything yet! Maybe I should add that it's possible to interpret this entire movie as taking place within the dream of a pelican!

It looks, as you might expect, like an 8 bit game, especially with the opening screens a versatile collection of mildly animated images with all progression forward done through *Star Wars* wipes. It reminded me of my days playing a Sierra On-Line PC game, *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards*, though the sheer quality of the art means that their *Kings Quest* is a far better comparison.

We start out in Florida, jumping image by image towards St. Petersburg on Route 92, where we zoom into a gas station with a giant plane on its

roof. Smith has finally found *it*, a 1935 Martin M-130 flying boat, one of only three ever made and likely the only one that still exists. He calls it in to his boss, a bigshot executive called Kahn Blackquail, who is a black quail in a suit and tie.

This is a dream for Blackquail and dreams are notably important here. He has the plane transported to Honolulu, restored to flying condition and named the Luna Clipper. His goal is to "revive the romantic flights of the good old days of aviation", even though the three real 1935 Martin M-130 flying boats—the China Clipper, the Philippine Clipper and the Hawaii Clipper—all crashed while in service, killing 23, 19 and 15 respectively.

That said, there is a palpable sense of anemoia here, a longing for a time before our own, aided nowadays by 2020's consistent attempts to kill us. Part of that is because Blackquail's plan is to have the maiden flight of the Luna Clipper to be to Tahiti and a string of other south Pacific islands, so prompting an atmosphere of exotica we recognise from the modern tiki movement. The exotic synthpop soundtrack adds to that too. However, Ono isn't dismissive of modern technology, being an MSX animator, so he

installs a 200" wide television screen inside the Luna Clipper, as well as seatback video screens surely ahead of their time.

I like the idea that nobody is allowed to buy a ticket unless they firmly believe that they're a great dreamer, thus suggesting that we must be great dreamers too, given that they generously allow us to come along for the ride. However, our fellow passengers aren't at all like us. For the most part, they're anthropomorphic fruit.

And, at this point, that really shouldn't surprise us. We've only seen one person thus far, a moustachioed gentleman named Jose who phones a duck in a leopardskin apartment who can't pronounce his name. He's Jose not Holose, the latter the name the film gives a recurrent image, a plus inside a circle, maybe because it's the sun cross, astrological symbol for the Earth, and certainly part of the logo of Pan-Holose Airways, who fly the Luna Clipper.

The duck is a passenger, Abibu by name. So's a tomato woman called Nancy, with a baby tomato on her lap; Duku Camari, a Russian onion with a beard; Yukio, that snowman from Nome, AK; a top-hatted grasshopper

named Anz; and a living pickle by the name of Loofar.

My favourite pair are the photographer named Tiara, who is surely the hottest turnip I've ever seen, taking me far back to the early days of PCs when we could fall in love with wallpaper images of anime characters, and the stewardess, Grace, another sexy banana in a film full of sexy bananas. Given that Grace ably introduces us to shows on the 200" Luna Clipper screen, maybe she's a cousin to Gail, the sexy banana TV presenter of *Honolulu Voices*, who reported back in Hawaii about the upcoming flight. Maybe they're both distant relatives of the sexy banana hulu dancers in bras that we'll meet later in Tahiti.

Hey, in this film, even the volcanoes end up with their very own dance scenes, because why the heck not? If we're going let Ikko Ono go hog wild to show us just what graphics work is possible on an 8 bit MSX computer, then why not let him give us dancing volcanoes and gorgeous turnips? The two key lines here are probably "Everything is true in your dreams" and "What a strange monkey the human race is".

I should talk about these shows that Grace shows us on the jumbotron

in the Luna Clipper, as they transform this film into something still more than a graphics demo, especially as some are live action and others are animated in different ways, brought together with the MSX work with unknown other tech. For a while, this is like MTV VJ Max Headroom introducing schizophrenic public access TV.

One minute, we find Grace introducing *Great Voyagers*, which recounts a legendary Polynesian voyage that left Raiatea 1,300 years ago to discover Hawaii. Then it's time for Professor Dragon, an oceanographer seahorse with a pipe and a pot belly, to explain how we can make the Holose Cross in mosquito bites with our fingernails. Captain Ikko himself shot *Gravity Dance*, an avant-garde piece featuring lots of diving, a naked Japanese baby falling over a lot and waterfalls working in reverse. Eventually, we get to *Parabolic Locus*, a vibrant video art piece with alternating screen quadrants dedicated to fireworks and flowers. Break a giant Sony TV in the sky and it'll waterfall out for diving.

It's easy to fall into a need to explain *The Flying Luna Clipper*, but going too far down that rabbit hole finds madness. It's clearly about dreams, as

everything is true in them, if you recall.

The Luna Clipper is Kahn Blackquail's dream, within the context of the story, but it may be that the story is the dream of the pelican we see at the very beginning. The Polynesians found Hawaii because they placed their trust in a yellow bird that came to one of them in a dream and, by the end of the film, the Luna Clipper is overtly blurred with the yellow bird and the pelican. Yukio the snowman figures it out and apparently steals the entire plane at the end of the picture to take wherever he might dream, though he may well be having a dream within someone else's dream, presumably making it doubly true. Maybe the whole film is a fever dream brought on by our having been bitten by an 8 bit animated mosquito in our sleep and cutting the Holose Cross into our skin with our fingernails. Really, it doesn't matter that much.

What matters is that this stands alone in the annals of film history as something completely different from anything else and, to an explorer of psychotronic cinema, that's real value. The fact that it also happens to be both bizarrely watchable and bizarrely likeable, even given its technical

limitations, an inconsistent pacing and a constant shift between wildly disparate surreal content, is a bonus.

If we truly start to dig deep, we'll never run out of questions. Why is there an intermission 41 minutes into a 55 minute movie? Why would the weather forecast in Hawaii include leaf colour in Paris and a seven day report for the Palau Islands almost five thousand miles away. Why does Grace, our stewardess banana, suddenly acquire wings and a swimsuit? Is the Luna Clipper certified for extra-atmospheric travel? Was blackface still an acceptable variety show format in Japan in 1987? Who are the Japanese wannabe Beatles who show up on seatback video screens in montages of London? Why do passengers have to parachute down to Papeete? What's Tiara the gorgeous turnip's phone number?

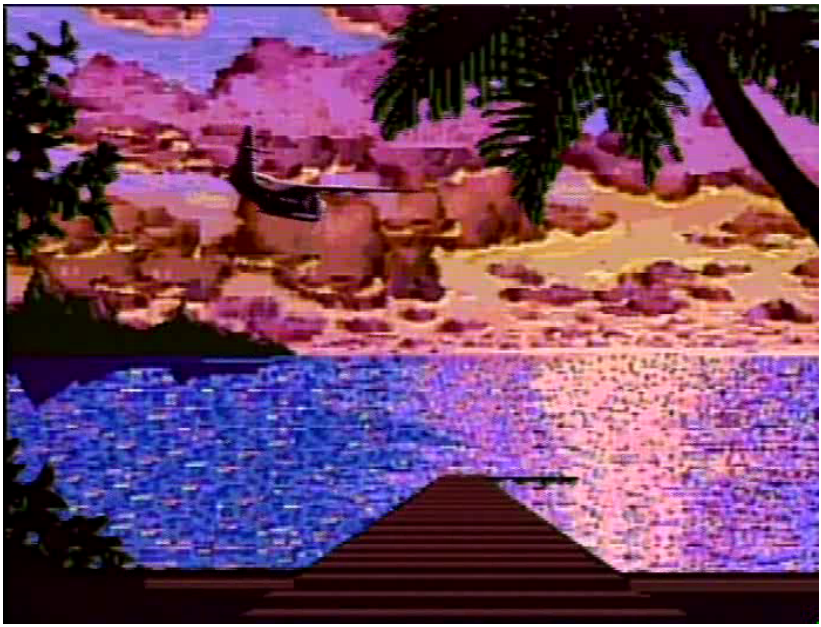
The only way I can make real sense out of this movie is to see it as a brain dump of all the things that Ikko Ono seems to appreciate. Clearly, he likes to make art on his MSX computer, but that's a gimme. Many of his covers for *MSX Magazine* have anthropomorphic animals or fruit as their focus: monkeys in spectacles, kingfishers in top hats or sexy bananas in

hammocks. Many visuals inside are painted like postcards and the general design aesthetic reminds of scrapbook techniques, as if Ono likes distilling down treasured memories into single iconic images then collecting them together, even if their only commonality is that he personally believes that they're cool. There are maps everywhere in *The Flying Luna Clipper* and they highlight how much Ono doesn't just enjoy travel in its own right but the ephemera that surrounds it too, right down to airports and hotels and televisions in bars in farflung locations. Sometimes that all feels just as important as the culture: the luaus, the pulsating totem poles and the sexy banana hula dancers. And that's fine. Everything in a dream is true.

I've been a film fan for as long as I can remember, I dedicated a lot of hours in the eighties to old school Sierra On-Line video games like *Leisure Suit Larry* and, for a while, I really dug then-cutting edge graphics demos, created on equipment that was primitive in every way compared to what we tend to have in our pockets today. What I never expected to see was a piece of entertaining video art that encompassed all three of those worlds.

It may be that *The Flying Luna Clipper* is the only such piece of video art ever made, so making this film both the best and the worst in a particular niche. There was also talk about a sequel, during one of Nishi Kazuhiko's periodic attempts to revive the MSX platform, quite a few pages in *MSX Magazine Permanent Preservation Version 2* dedicated to a project called *The Flying Luna Clipper 2004*, but it doesn't seem to have ever been made.

Now, of course, such a creation would be seen not as technological possibility but nostalgia. That bird has flown. And it was a giant yellow pelican dreaming of being a 1935 Martin M-130 flying boat.



WENG WENG
as
agent 3½
in
"FOR Y'UR HEIGHT ONLY"
executive producer
PETER M. CABALLES
directed by
EDDIE NICART

FOR Y'UR HEIGHT ONLY (1981)

Director: Eddie Nicart
Writer: Cora Caballes
Stars: Weng Weng, Yehlen Catral, Carmi Martin

One day I'll find a copy of *For Y'ur Height Only* with the original Tagalog dialogue accurately subtitled into English instead of dubbed by what I'm half-convinced is an improv troupe. Maybe then I'll discover how serious this movie actually intended to be.

On the face of it, it appears to be a parody of James Bond pictures, and it was, but however ridiculously diverse the set of accents given by the voice cast—apparently Jim Gaines and Nick Nicholson, a couple of American expats who built quite a career in Filipino cinema—to these Filipino actors, those actors mostly played it straight. To them, this seems to be just a spyfy action movie with a leading man who's dedicated enough to do all his own stunts and martial arts, something he later happily demonstrated to an amazed public at the first Manila International Film Festival, a major event organised by Imelda Marcos—yes, the dictator's wife with the insane shoe collection—to promote Filipino cinema globally.

It's just that the leading man in question isn't your usual leading man, let alone your usual James Bond clone. He's Weng Weng, a nickname from childhood usually reserved for toy dogs, and, at a mere 2' 9", he held the world record for the shortest actor in a feature lead role until 2005, when Ajay Kumar, a 2' 6" Indian, took over.

Now, Kumar's leading role was in a Malayalam movie called *Athbhutha Dweepu*, playing the prince of an island where all the women are of regular size but all the men are dwarves, meaning that the cast likely featured as many little people as *Terror of Tiny Town* and more than *Time Bandits* or *The Wizard of Oz*. For the majority of this film, Weng Weng is the one and only such actor on screen and he carries on as if he's exactly the same height as everyone else.

He gets all the girls, just like James Bond always did, and, while some of them certainly mention his height, none of them have a problem with it in the slightest. "I like 'em little," says the lady who poisons his drink. Irma thinks he's cute, "like a potato", one of a number of lines delivered on the English dub that probably aren't in the original Tagalog. It's a given that the wide range of accents, from New York Italian to British upper class twit, don't accurately represent the Filipino cast; they're an artefact of this film becoming the biggest cinematic export from the Philippines, not just at the time but to this day, except maybe the jungle women in prison genre, pioneered by *The Big Doll House* a decade earlier.

Weng Weng plays Agent 00 (or Double O), presumably just because it's a shorter codename than 007. He's the main man of the Secret Agency, a master of the martial arts who kicks ass, often literally (and balls even more). He's also adept with gadgets and his unnamed boss is always keen to keep him equipped, even though he does an even worse job here as the Q equivalent as the M.

At least they're cool gadgets, from a gold ring that detects all poisons (they can't afford platinum) to a pair of glasses that penetrate through all material. Oh yeah, we get exactly the scene that you expect when Double 0 tests those out in the secretarial pool, but this is a family friendly movie so everything of note is carefully concealed.

Some of these gadgets are miniaturised, of course, through necessity, such as the specially built tiny machine gun with a single clip, and they extend as far as a miniature jetpack, which is fantastic. Double 0 uses that to fly onto a hidden island which, I'm not kidding, is called Hidden Island, thus highlighting just one of the problems with this movie.

Don't get me wrong, I adore *For Y'ur Height Only* and I think I enjoy its sequel, *The Impossible Kid*, even more (I haven't seen *Agent 00*, the opener of the trilogy), but it's an awful movie on so many levels, only some of which can be fairly explained by a small budget and/or the comedic English dub track that changes the tone completely.

The editing, by an uncredited Edgardo Vinarao, is an absolute disgrace and the script by Cora Caballes isn't much better. It's full of moments that any random viewer could easily improve off the cuff with just a single flip comment, including that gadget explanation scene, in which some of the gadgets aren't explained at all! Here's a buckle. It's got gadgets in it. Figure it out. And these spectacles. Take a wild guess. Filipino M says his pen is specially built but not for what; Agent 00 figures out at the appropriate moment that it's a gun. At least they're all used; Caballes understood the dramatic principle of Chekov's Gun, at least, stating that a rifle hung on the wall in the first chapter must be fired in a later one.

Fortunately we have Weng Weng as a glorious saving grace, because his

sincerity and charisma carry this movie. He was born Ernesto de la Cruz—not to be confused with Ernesto de la Cruz, the lead antagonist in Pixar's *Coco*—in 1957 in Balacaran, a suburb of Manila and he was tiny—"no bigger than a coke bottle", according to his brother—due to primordial dwarfism. He wasn't expected to survive but he grew up to be a martial arts fan who trained seriously. His career began when his instructor contacted a major Filipino movie producer, Peter Caballes, the husband of scriptwriter Cora, and they pursued the opportunities until this one came up.

We also have a succession of "Bond girls" to elevate proceedings, even though they're just as subject to Cora's inept scriptwriting as anyone or anything else. The first of them is Lola, in the lovely form of Yehlen Catral, whom Agent 00 saves from a syndicate planning to put her on the streets, or "peddle my pretty bod", as this dub puts it—but I won't blame Caballes for that. I will blame her for the fact that Lola turns from helpless victim to kick ass agent at the drop of a hat. One minute, she's in dire need of salvation from Agent 00 because she's "shot at once or twice a week"; the next, she's leading our diminutive secret agent into Columbus's lair and beating up the crooks entirely as effectively as he does. They're a fantastic double act, as we find when they take down the boss in his hotel room. Lola simply knocks on the door and, as he monologues about shooting her dead, Double 00 sneaks between her legs, slides across the floor past the

bed and shoots Columbus instead.

That's not the case at the heart of this feature, of course; it's merely a prologue. The real case ties to one Dr. Van Kohler, a physicist who's in the Philippines to offer the government his new creation, the N-Bomb. Before he can do so, he's kidnapped by the organisation of Mr. Giant, a suitably mysterious crime lord who wants to use this unexplained superweapon to take over the world. Well, that's what suitably mysterious crime lords do.

We might actually find ourselves sympathetic to his cause, given that we're pretty sure that the kleptocrat dictator Ferdinand Marcos, leader of the Filipino government in 1981, would probably have used the N-Bomb to take over the world too. So what does Mr. Giant stand for? "The forces of good are our enemy." Well, never mind then. Anyway, the N-Bomb is only a McGuffin and a blatant one at that. We don't know what it does or how it does it, only that it's something that can apparently be used to take over the world, like *Gangnam Style*. We have zilch on Van Kohler either, other than that he's a doctor and he invented the N-Bomb. Cora Caballes clearly doesn't care about background.

In true *Doc Savage* villain style, by the way, Mr. Giant is content to stay off stage for the vast majority of the movie. He runs the show, but at a remove, communicating only with the few henchmen even aware of his identity through the abstraction of what's called an infinity mirror. Thus

he's a mystery, even though you may be able to deduce just a little (ahem) about him from the fact that he's named Mr. Giant and his nemesis is a 2' 9" secret agent.

Agent 00, of course, works his way steadily towards him by eliminating lackeys, henchmen and bosses of wildly different levels—Andrew Leavold, Weng Weng's biographer, suggests "every Bad Guy (or 'Goon') still alive at the time"—until they face off against each other in the boss battle finalé.

And he does so with serious style! My favourite scene has to be the one where he enters a tall building for no apparent reason. He battles a bad guy in a bad turban who's taking shots at him with an umbrella. At least ten storeys later, he waltzes into some girl's bedroom, pauses to give her a long lingering kiss and then leaps out of her window, using the turbaned thug's umbrella as a parachute, landing on top of a jeep and waving up at the bad guys as it drives away.

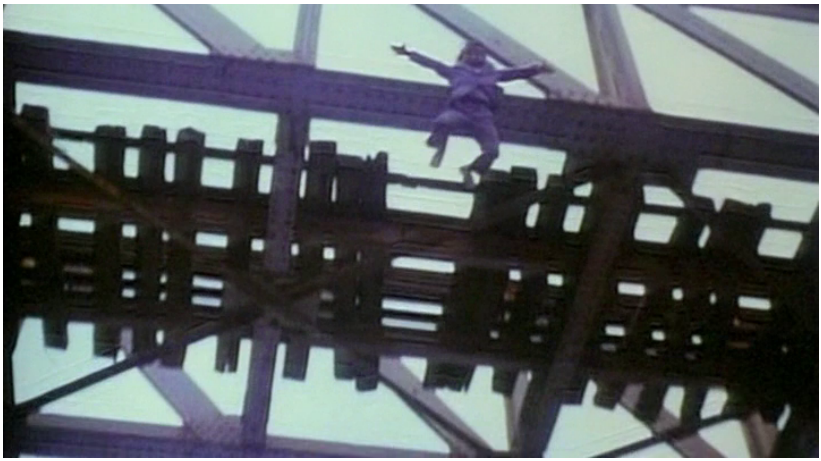
I can't swear that Weng Weng actually does that, but he certainly does a lot of the stuntwork here, trained for three months before shooting began by Eddie Nicart, an experienced stuntman getting his first opportunity as a director, who been the stunt director for the SOS Daredevils.

And it doesn't even take the overtly dangerous stunts to impress us, like the jetpack scene, during which he looks acutely uncomfortable but just as acutely real. There is clearly no greenscreen work in play; that's obviously

Weng Weng flying a jetpack, even if there are strings we can't see moving him onwards. Frankly, he impresses me by just jumping off walls, because they'd be high for me and I'm 5' 10", four inches past double Weng Weng's height. Heck, I bruised a toe bone climbing down off a foot high bookshelf the other day. This diminutive stuntman is apparently very happy leaping down from six or eight foot walls, which would be twelve or sixteen foot to me. At one point he jumps off a bridge into a river. And, beyond all this admirable jumping around, he performs plenty of martial arts, shoots lots of guns and indulges in swordplay with full size opponents with full size swords. I think I have knives in the kitchen that may be larger than Weng Weng's sword.

And, of course, he romances the ladies. Lola is only the first to appear in the Bond girl tradition and she sets the bar high. After her is Irma, who's a "pretty broad we infiltrated into the syndicate", though she gets rumbled by that syndicate and that puts an end to disco dancing with Agent 00. After a brief dalliance with Anna, who, in this bizarre English dub is crazy about Agent 00 in quintessentially disinterested upper class British style, there's Marilyn, a police photographer, who kicks ass as well as Lola and Irma. She's also not particularly hard to get: buy her a highball and she'll share her private rogues gallery.

These ladies are all given prominent roles in this story, tasked not only



with looking good but with getting in on the action and helping take down seemingly no end of syndicate thugs. Yehlen Catral appeared with Weng Weng in at least two further films, comedy westerns called *D'Wild Wild Weng* and *Da Best in da West*. Beth Sandoval, who plays Irma, was also in *The Cute... the Sexy n' the Tiny*, inevitably a Weng Weng movie given that title.

While Weng Weng and his various ladies consistently impress, I can't say the same for Mr. Kaiser and the other members of Mr. Giant's crime organisation. I mean, we do expect our hero to take them down, but these guys are so useless that the girls take them down, including Lola who has no training in this sort of thing. The sentries don't see anything. The thugs can't hit anyone. The bosses fall for every trick.

There's even a scene where they actually catch Agent 00, tie him up and secrete him in a wooden box, protected by a random thug sitting on it. It doesn't take a clairvoyant to suggest that he's going to escape, but he cuts the ropes with blades concealed in his shoes and then burns a hole in the box to escape without the thug sitting on top of him even noticing that he had moved.

By the time we jetpack our way over to the hidden island called Hidden Island, the bad guys show up so thick and so fast to be defeated so quickly that surely some of these actors got beaten up a whole bunch of times in different scenes while pretending to be different guards. Many of them

are careful to fall into the same swimming pool. How many extras actually were there? Inquiring minds want to know.

In short (dammit), there are precious few surprises here. The script is threadbare and the characterisation even worse, with the movie keeping our interest only through its surprisingly viable novelty, the engaging and energetic performance of Weng Weng and an ever-changing set of rather exceptional female sidekicks. The surprises come at odd moments and I can't help wondering, given how bad this script is, whether they might have been entirely accidental.

For instance, Agent 00 runs out of bullets a lot, so frequently that my better half actually commented on it. I'm used to her complaining about how action heroes *never* run out of bullets, so the shift between extremes must be notable. What got me was the scene when Agent 00 catches a taxi away from the swordfighting at Mr. Kaiser's mansion and it runs out of gas. That never happens! Sure, he doesn't walk far before a passing beauty picks him up and drops him off right in front of another collection of bad guys in exchange for a kiss, but I thought hard about when I last saw an action hero in an action movie stranded like that and came up empty.

If that perhaps offers amusement, there's plenty more to be found in the dialogue, which is often clearly taking the piss. I'm aching to know if any of these outrageous lines were in the original Tagalog script and I'm

guessing that they aren't, but, as frustrating as the dialogue is to a movie purist, it works incredibly well to a large audience. No wonder this film outgrossed *Raiders of the Lost Ark* at the Jamaican box office for two weeks in a row!

The tagline is a good start: "Bigger than Goldfinger's finger. Bigger than Thunderball's..." But how could I pick a favourite line? It's certainly not "There's a lot of dough in this dough", as a thug pulls a drug baggy out of a loaf. Maybe it's an executive warning: "You're members of a syndicate! Look the role!" More likely it's "He's done it to us again! Made a monkey out of the forces of evil!" I think I'd have to settle for one line from Mr. Kaiser, Mr. Giant's right hand man, to Irma: "I lost a lot of good baddies," he confesses, and that should be a mandatory inclusion in every movie villain's repertoire.

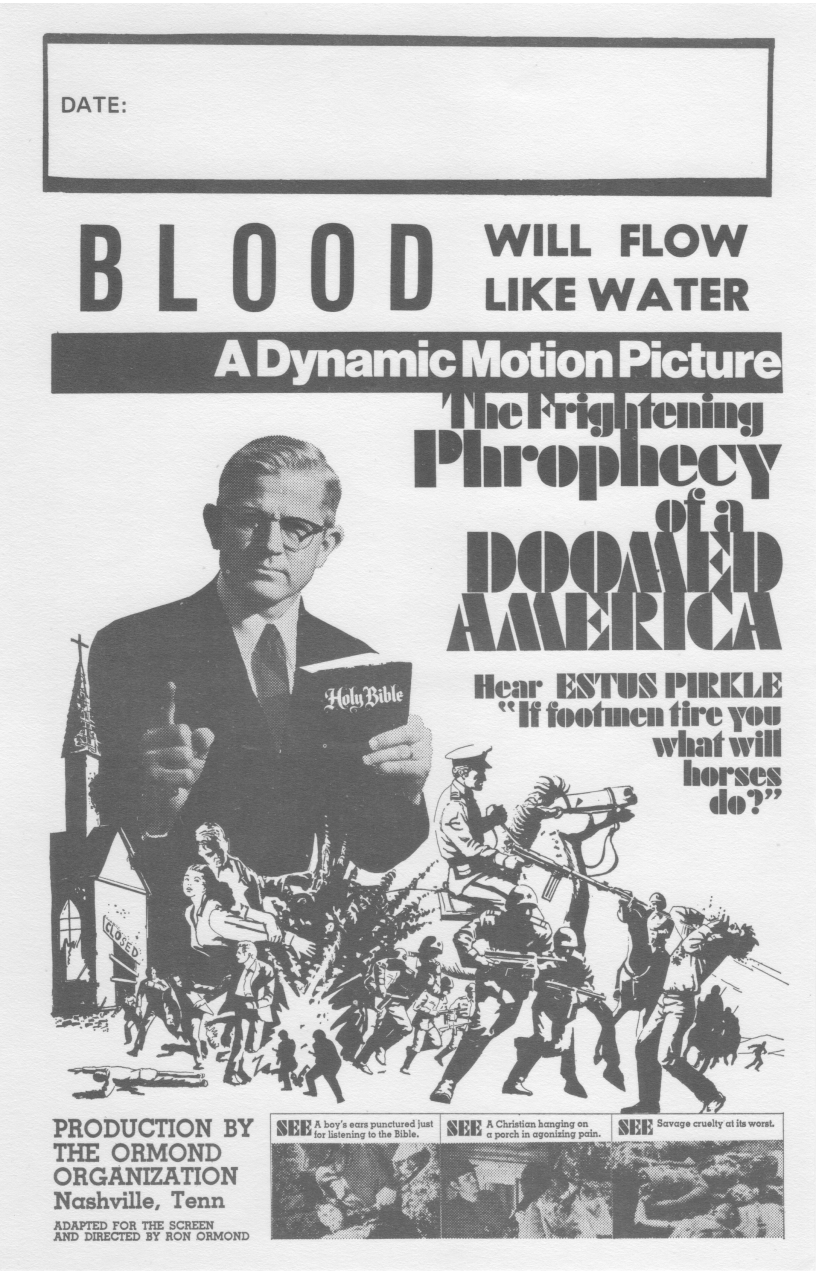
Filipino cinema is an endlessly fascinating creature and I would highly recommend documentaries like *Machete Maidens Unleashed!* and, far more focused, Andrew Leavold's *The Search for Weng Weng*. It thrived on a bizarre combination of American money and in country support from a dictator's wife, who considered it a personal mission to publicise worldwide. That's why the Manila International Film Festival and an opportunity for Weng Weng to take the world by storm, becoming in the process the first true international star from the Philippines.

After being "discovered" by Peter and Cora Caballes, who were already film producers, he appeared in a handful of further bizarre features that could well have appeared in this book. He's a kung fu police controller in *Stariray* and a cameo appearance in *Legs... Body... Girl!*, films which Leavold describes respectively as "gay disco kung fu" and "disco biker kung fu spy western comedy musical starring Hagibis, the Philippines' own Village People (but a strictly hetero version in leather and denim)". I've seen part of each of these, during one of his roadshows, and they're truly wild!

Weng Weng became a leading man in *Agent 00*, though he had already played the latter half of *Chopsuey Met Big Time Papa*, yet another cheap dig at his height, and he became *the* name in Filipino cinema in *For Y'ur Height Only*, consolidating that role in *The Impossible Kid*. Ironically, the actor most known for playing James Bond equivalents in the Philippines before this was Tony Ferrer, who was cast as his boss, Agent X44.

Sadly, his star waned pretty quickly, as novelties tend to do, and his career ended with a comedy western, *Da Best in da West*, in 1984. And, from there, he vanished rapidly into obscurity, becoming almost a myth. It took Leavold's quest for information, having been shellshocked by this film in Australia, to uncover what had happened to him, an often surreal journey that he documented in his film and book, *The Search for Weng Weng*.

I should add that surreality follows Weng Weng wherever his name goes, even though he died back in 1992, a true cult icon. I can't imagine explaining to family back home about a night out at FilmBar in Phoenix, where I chatted about a 2' 9" Filipino secret agent with an Australian film historian and a lovely local lady and confirmed Weng Weng fan, who had pioneered amputee porn as Long Jeanne Silver.


DATE:
BLOOD WILL FLOW LIKE WATER
A Dynamic Motion Picture
The Frightening Prophecy of a DOOMED AMERICA
Hear ESTUS PIRKLE "If footmen tire you what will horses do?"
Holy Bible
CLOSED
PRODUCTION BY THE ORMOND ORGANIZATION
Nashville, Tenn
ADAPTED FOR THE SCREEN AND DIRECTED BY RON ORMOND
SEE A boy's ears punctured just for listening to the Bible.
SEE A Christian hanging on a porch in agonizing pain.
SEE Savage cruelty at its worst.

IF FOOTMEN TIRE YOU, WHAT WILL HORSES DO? (1971)

Director: Ron Ormond

Writer: Ron Ormond, from the book by Estus W. Pirkle

Stars: Estus W. Pirkle, Judy Creech, Cecil Scaife, Gene McFall and Wes Saunders

I've long held to the idea that the most interesting people in Hollywood aren't the stars of big budget blockbusters, but the various characters behind exploitation films. And I don't just mean stars, but producers and directors and writers, folk who were flexible enough and aware enough to jump from one thing to another as times changed.

One of the people I've long wanted to read more about is a gentleman named Ron Ormond, who was all over this weirdly titled movie like a rash. It was a production of his company, the Ormond Organization. He directed it. He wrote it, from the "book" by Estus W. Pirkle, which was a pamphlet that ran a mere 46 pages long. He edited it with his son, Tim, and the two of them also operated the cameras. Both of them also appear in brief, uncredited roles within the movie. About the only job that Ormond didn't do was production supervisor, as that was his wife, June. It's a very strange movie, but I feel like I should build up to it by explaining how Ormond got to this point.

Born Vittorio di Naro in Baldwin, Louisiana in 1910, he soon found his way into vaudeville as Vic Narro, borrowing his eventual name from his friend, Ormond McGill, who was a magician and hypnotist. He met June in Oregon while working as a magician and MC on shows in which she was a singer and dancer. The Ormonds went on to manage the Three Stooges, produce roller derby on television and travel in the exotic east, Ormond penning a string of books with McGill that had pure exploitation titles such as *Religious Mysteries of the Orient*, *The Master Method of Hypnosis* and

The Magical Pendulum of the Orient.

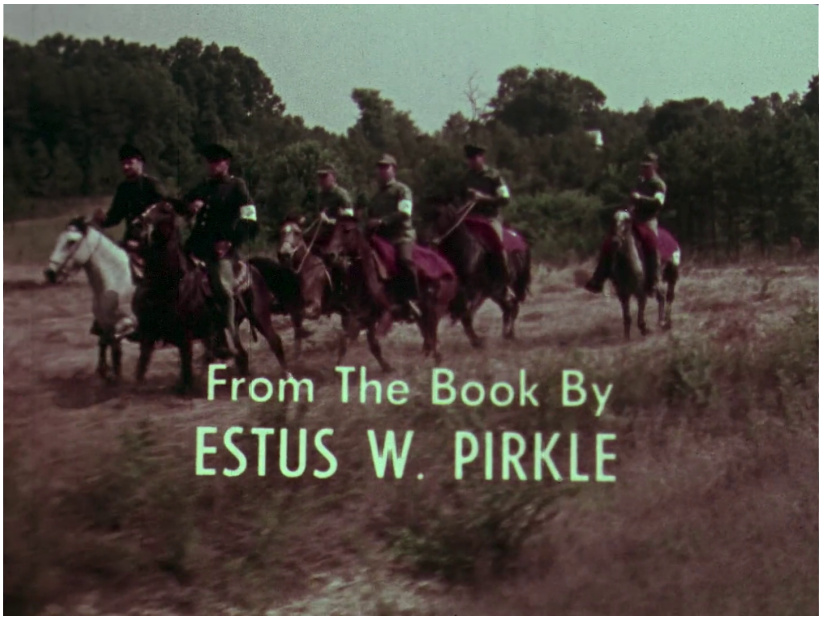
And they got into the movie business, Ormond directing a fantastic string of B movies. He started out with Lash LaRue westerns like *King of the Bullwhip* and *The Frontier Phantom* but lent his hand to anything that looked likely to make a buck, especially in the deepsouth. *Forty Acre Feud* had an all-star country music cast led by Minnie Pearl. *White Lightnin' Road* is a stock car drama. *The Monster and the Stripper* (aka *The Exotic Ones*) is... well, it's exactly what you think it is.

And then he found Jesus. As Tim Ormond tells the story, the family set off in their Beachcraft Bonanza plane to fly to the première of *Girl from Tobacco Row*, a hicksploitation musical with Tex Ritter and Earl "Snake" Richards, but their engine quit on them and they promptly crashed into a field. Ormond had been a pilot in the air force so he was able to control the crash, thus allowing all of them to survive, but both Ron and June fractured their backs in the landing. June especially felt that they had been spared by the hand of God, with the statement, "I could see an angel sitting on the wing." That was 1966 but, on a trip back from the Bahamas

in a replacement plane in 1970, Ormond's skill saved them once more, as a fresh engine failure prompted a forced landing. Now, I don't know if the Ormonds had been at all religious before this, but these incidents certainly made them open to an opportunity that came their way through a mutual friend, to work with a fundamentalist preacher by the name of Estus W. Pirkle. And that relationship kicked off with this insane movie.

Effectively, this is an hour long sermon by Pirkle, his signature warning on the dangers of an imminent Communist invasion of the United States, enabled by the liberal attitudes of the modern American youth. However, Pirkle earnestly preaching fire and brimstone to an audience of women with big hair and men in bland suits, all dour faced, is only half the film.

The other half is more like a Herschell Gordon Lewis gore movie, which is more than a little jarring. In fact, it starts out rather like an episode of *The Wild Wild West*, with men on horses riding through rural America with distinctively un-American hammer and sickle emblems blazoned on their armbands. Where's the train? Who's Artie going to be this week? But then it gets vicious, with a cast of hundreds, furnished from at least four Baptist



churches, being machine gunned or tortured or visited with outrageous indignities. But Estus W. Pirkle is here to explain to us that it doesn't have to be like that! We can save America from the Red Menace together, if we only choose Jesus as our personal saviour.

To his way of thinking, we're at a fork in the road and there are only two ways forward: Jesus Christ or Fidel Castro. That's it. We even get to see this choice acted out with help from a lecherous Commissar played by Ormond regular, Cecil Scaife. He sits in front of a nervous schoolroom of children and requires them to pray as hard as they can to Jesus to bring them candy. Needless to say, Jesus doesn't do jack but Fidel Castro does. In comes an assistant with a big paper bag so that our Commissar can throw candy out at the kids like he's a daytime TV host with a T-shirt gun.

When Pirkle asks us a very specific question only two minutes into the movie, this is what he has in mind. "What do you think about the future of our country?" he asks, preparing for a Jesus vs. Fidel fork. Given that I'm writing this with Donald Trump in the White House, racial protests in major cities and COVID-19 an ongoing threat, Pirkle's particular vision of

the future of our country, whichever fork we might have chosen, turned out to be complete nonsense. What a surprise!

Now, sermons, just like anything else, are products of their time, and Ormond shot Pirkle for this film in 1970. Nixon was President, the war in Vietnam wasn't going at all to plan and the National Guard was shooting students dead at Kent State. Americans hadn't forgotten about the Cuban Missile Crisis less than a decade earlier, the Communist witch-hunts or even "duck and cover" paranoia from days of imminent nuclear attack.

So I'll give Pirkle just a little leeway for timing, but he was the pastor at Locust Grove Baptist Church in New Albany, Mississippi for 36 years and yet I don't believe we see a single person of colour in this entire movie! A third of Mississippi is black, a percentage that outstrips every other state of the union, but the only colour Pirkle sees in America's future is red?

Clearly the four Baptist churches who provided the "actors" for this movie, none of whom had clearly acted in anything other than a nativity play, weren't *those* Baptist churches. We're apparently supposed to buy into dancing being a bigger threat than segregation.

And hey, we're getting deep all of a sudden! This film tends to do that. It is a sermon, after all, designed mostly for screenings within churches to scare the living heck out of anyone thinking about straying from the fold. And that's where Ormond comes in, because every time we find ourselves getting too serious, he pulls something outrageous from his exploitation background. For instance, Pirkle can pluck dubious statistics out of his ass, like how the Communists took over China in a week but it'll only take them fifteen minutes to take over the United States, but Ormond brings it to vivid life.

"We interrupt this program," chimes in a newscaster. The President is dead, the Secretary of State and the Speaker of the House too and a whole bunch of governors. People are being machine gunned in the streets like cattle. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is the Communist takeover of the United States." My favourite is the teacher who tells his class that pre-marital sex is necessary. "And now we'll go on to discuss the seven erotic zones of passion in every woman." This feels like what scares Republicans today. Po-nog-ra-fee in classrooms, folks!

In case you were wondering about the film's unwieldy title, the modern education system is apparently one of the "footmen" that Pirkle's talking about. These footmen are running loose against our sons and daughters, Pirkle warns us. You know, he sees strange people all the time. In church, he even saw a girl singing who had a mini-skirt twelve inches above her knees. And that's because she's constantly plagued by these footmen.

Television is another one. Saturday morning cartoons! They motivate children towards "sex, crime and murder" and suddenly crime skews up a thousand percent! And hey, how can good men read the Bible when the TV's on? Pirkle calls out drive-in theatres because they're "nothing more than a spawning house for sex"! Dancing too, "the front door to adultery"! Good grief, one death every day in New York is because of drugs! He even calls out other preachers, as some of them are now marrying people who have been married before! And, as the title suggests, if the footmen don't get us, watch out for the horsemen!

Oddly, there aren't a lot of horsemen in this film because the volunteers from those four Baptist churches were clearly much happier being cast as

blood-spattered corpses. In fact, most of the horsemen are Cecil Scaife and his impressive sideburns. And so it's Scaife's Commissar who comes for the children, because these Communists can't indoctrinate you as well if you're over thirty. It's Scaife's Commissar who staggers drunkenly into a house and throws out the former owner just so he can rape his wife. It's a "documented incident", says Pirkle, though he doesn't point out that the freakiest aspect of this scene is that the rape victim is played by Scaife's own daughter. It's Scaife's Commissar who shoots a pastor dead in front of his congregation, then hauls off a young boy so his men can pierce his ears with a pointed bamboo stick. Oddly, it isn't Scaife who then tells this deaf kid with Shatner-esque pauses, "We puncture your ears... so you cannot hear... the word of God." Like, dude, he can't hear you! How long do you think it takes to learn how to read lips?

Now, I'm not remotely going to suggest that Communist dictators and their inevitable secret police forces have never committed atrocities, as they're widespread and documented, but Pirkle's imagination seems to be oddly limited. Communists might force you to tell them everything that

you've said and done since the age of five. Communists might make you stand seven inches away from a wall and stay there all night. Communists might force you to sit down on a bench without a cushion or a back for seventeen hours listening to a mantra of a polemic that might have been written by Sheldon Lee Cooper: "Communism is good. Communism is good. Communism is good. Christianity is stupid. Christianity is stupid. Christianity is stupid. Give up. Give up. Give up." Hilariously, the agitpop music group Negativland memorably sampled that for a song they called *Christianity is Stupid*, neatly reversing its meaning in the process. The only real imaginative scene here is the one with a man tied up and held by his struggling kids above pitchforks, while a cackling Commissar (not Scaife for a change) has them dip him down.

That's a gruesome scene indeed, one that's worthy of Herschell Gordon Lewis's *Two Thousand Maniacs!*, but it's not the most gruesome. I'm still reeling from this one, because it actually gives a kid something notable to do before coming to an inevitably grisly demise. In almost every instance, the kids do nothing except stand there like lemons, maybe crying a little,

and then lying down in the dirt to be splattered with blood and, for some reason, mud. None of the adults are ever covered in mud but many of the kids get that treatment.

But this kid leaves a church late enough that he misses being machine gunned along with the entire congregation, only to run into Cecil Scaife's Commissar, whose accent is even more outrageous than normal. I'm not sure if he aimed to be Cuban or Russian, gangster or redneck, Elvis Presley or Mickey Mouse, but he veers wildly between them all. Scaife tells him to stamp on a portrait of White Jesus that he's carrying with him or he'll cut his head off! Now, what would you do?

Well, this stubborn brat of a kid looks up at the sky and says, "Jesus, one day you died for me and I'm willing to die for you." Scaife is, at least, true to his word. He lops that little kid's head right off and sends it bouncing across the dirt!

Once again, a little snippet of background information helps make this incredible scene just a bit more incredible. Apparently the kid was played by Estus W. Pirkle's very own son! No wonder he was stubborn. Now I

remember going to church as a child, albeit not once to a fundementalist Baptist church in New Albany, Mississippi, and finding myself a little more engaged when our curate did such strange things as deliver his sermon while dressed as Darth Vader. That said, however, I don't remember him decapitating parishioners and bouncing their heads down the aisle as a stark warning of what England would be like if the Communists took over because hey, we danced and went to the drive-in and tuned in to Saturday morning cartoons. They should have announced. I'd have shown up for that service!

There's so much in this film to focus on that I'm actually leaving a heck of a lot out.

There's the moment when Pirkle suggests that Communists will make kids work in the fields for twelve to sixteen hours a day. What's odd about this moment is that he adds that, of course, kids should work like adults, but twelve to sixteen hours a day is just slavery. How long isn't slavery, Estus?

There's the point where Pirkle explains that Communists are worse

than Hitler, because Hitler would merely kill you but Communists would torture you first.

There's the odd realisation that at no point in this movie does Pirkle use the word "commie", which was particularly prevalent in the U.S. in the fifties, a decade or two earlier than this. Every instance is the full "Communist", almost like he has some sort of respect for the enemy in this anti-Communist propaganda screed.

And, of course, there's poor Judy, played by the only person in the entire feature who looks like she could have been an actor, Judy Creech. By the way, she wasn't. She just faked it better than the rest.

Judy shows up to church partway through, because she's not interested in listening to Pirkle but feels the need to give the right impression, given that she's following all the footmen that the reverend warns against. She drinks, dances, presumably sleeps with her boyfriend who drops her off but won't be seen inside the church. "I'm a lover not a Christian," he grins at her. She probably likes Saturday morning cartoons too, but this sermon by Pirkle really gets to her.

Everything he warns against triggers a memory of her doing that exact thing. And, by the time that Scaife's vicious Commissar slices off Pirkle's son's head, she's so traumatised that she screams out "No!" in church and sets up the end of the movie, with Pirkle saving her immortal soul. He has her pray with him at the altar and confess her sins in front of everyone, because that's the only thing her guilt-trippin' mama would ever have wanted. In the logic of this movie, Judy's mum, who clearly never saw a cheeseburger she didn't like, is only dead because Judy likes to dance. The slut. "You'll be the death of me!"

Ron Ormond continued to work with Estus W. Pirkle. They followed this film up with *The Burning Hell*, an interpretation of how Pirkle sees Biblical teachings on Hell. Then they knocked out *The Believer's Heaven*, which is the equivalent for up instead of down, before a parting of the ways saw Ormond continue his quasi-horror religious propaganda flicks with other preachers.

It seems to me that Pirkle didn't talk a lot about Heaven, being fire and

brimstone and all. In fact, if you want to get hold of a copy of any of his movies, you can find them at burninghell.com. This one runs just shy of an hour but it's $29.95 per DVD, plus $6 shipping and handling. It's still 1971 at the Burning Hell online store, apparently. I'm shocked these aren't VHS. What's more, you can't just pop in your credit card number; you have to fill out a PDF to mail to the Estus Pirkle Evangelistic Association in Myrtle, Mississippi with your money order or cashier's check enclosed. It seems that, even though Pirkle has been dead since 2005, he's still resisting any change in how we do anything.

LA
FARANDULA
Una película de Cristian Cancho
INKART
Digital

LA FARÁNDULA (1998)

Director: Cristian Cancho
Writer: Cristian Cancho
Stars: Erick García, Fanny Labbé, Karla Aquije and Daniël Schoonenboom

La farándula, which means *Showbiz* in Peru, where it was made, is the epitome of the movie that you won't believe exists. And while you might assume that's entirely because of what happens within it, given that this is basically a porn flick acted out by Barbie and Ken dolls, among others, I'd also call out the hour long running time in conjunction.

I can imagine filmmakers with the intense discipline needed to animate an hour's worth of stop motion with Barbie dolls, because it's been done before and with much more nuance; Todd Haynes used that technique in *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* so that he could shave down the title character's doll progressively during the movie to illustrate her raging anorexia. I can also imagine a group of filmmakers sitting around their mancaves, probably drunk, laughing about how funny it would be to make a porno with Barbies, but never actually getting round to it because, hey, we're all out of beer and we have to be at Walmart for the early shift at nine. Is that the time? The wife's going to kill me.

The thing is that I wouldn't have expected any crossover between those two sets of filmmakers, but there's apparently one down there in South America. In fact, this isn't even the first South American adult stop motion animated Barbie movie to cross my path, because I first heard about an Argentinean short film from 2002 called *Barbie Can Also Be Sad*. That was apparently broadcast on television in Brazil but eventually fell afoul of Mattel, the company that manufactures Barbie. They obtained a court order to prevent it being shown at the Urban-Fest film festival in Mexico City, pushing it underground where *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* had grown into such a cult success, after Richard Carpenter sued Haynes

for copyright infringement and got the film withdrawn from circulation. This is the longest of the three films and easily the most outrageous, given just how much Cristian Cancho managed to cram into his hour. That's one good reason to cover it here, with another in the consistently hilariously broken English subtitles. "You may uncomb my hair with one fart."

In this film, Barbie and Ken start out together, but don't stay that way very long. She's in the bath when we first meet her, covered in soap and imagining how her holes will be stretched when she finally marries Ken and allows him to have sex with her. He walks right in and attempts to convince her to do that right now because he's horny, but she's having none of it and so their relationship ends there and then.

Fortunately, they both have other options. Ken goes to a whorehouse, called Las Cucardilas, but can't even get any from a nymphomaniac whore ("Hello, I'm whore," says Miloo). Instead, he ends up raped outside by José Carlos Cruz Cruz and his gang of gay wrestlers. Now he's a bloody mess, left in a gutter for his friends to find. Barbie, on the other hand, goes to a big concert with a bevy of friends, all of whom have exactly one thing on

their mind and are blissfully unafraid to talk about it. These young ladies are enough to make a sailor blush. No wonder all the voice actors are laughing their heads off during the end credits!

I should add that, given how depraved this film ends up getting, the most surprising thing to me is the diversity of the soundtrack. I honestly can't name another film with music this varied and that's a surreal overlay to the action. Hilariously, my son wandered in within twenty seconds of my starting this movie because he had to know what we were watching that had Exodus's *Pleasures of the Flesh* on its soundtrack. It seems safe to point out that this was utterly not what he expected.

I can't imagine that, even if Cancho had permission to use Peruvian rock 'n' roll outfit, Melchormalo, he had rights to use anyone else's music too, whether that be the Tornadoes or Sepultura, the Bee Gees or Ozzy Osbourne, the New Kids on the Block or the Lunachicks, the Righteous Brothers or Ennio Morricone, the Eurythmics or Figrin D'an and the Modal Nodes, those wacky musicians from the *Star Wars* cantina. I'm sure the global megacorps who own all that music are about as happy with it being

used in Peruvian Barbie porno movies as Mattel is in providing the cast members, which is to say not in the slightest.

I bring up the wild soundtrack because everyone ends up at the concert and I'm trying to imagine its particular line-up making any coherent sense anywhere in the world. The opening act is Body Count, with the fact that a doll was painted black to represent Ice T somehow less offensive than his striped Waldo shirt. After that, it's apparently the Red Hot Chili Pepper, because only Anthony Kiedis is there from that band, even though he goes all out to make up for the lack of the rest of them, not only wandering on stage naked but for a famously placed sock but ejaculating onto a girl in the audience for good measure. Then it's Jem. Yes, that's the cartoon singer Jem, with her recognisable packaging as a backdrop, even though the subtitles have called her Yem throughout. Finally, it's Donnie from the New Kids, who's quite the popular guy in Peru, it seems, if mostly in gay porn circles. He gets quite the story arc here, albeit with less of a stage presence and more of a presence in between Ken and what looks like a modified Samuel L. Jackson doll in a sex sandwich.

The budget is much higher than I thought it would be, given that the club includes an actual crowd. Maybe the crew spent a month of prep raiding the Peruvian equivalent of thrift stores for whatever dolls they could find and shoehorned them into the script. Of course, I'm sure the dolls in the queue outside are the dolls stagediving inside and they ended up painted black for the bookends with Shaka Zúlu and his army of south seas cannibals ("Germans?" "Forget it, he's rolling.")

That's still a lot of dolls though. Heck, we realise how many dolls they must have found by watching five minutes of the end credits featuring individual voice actors playing their individual characters with their own recognisable dolls.

Frankly, I was most impressed with the animated eyes and lips, because these dolls blink and talk far better than I'd have expected for a project like this. I've seen a lot worse on Cartoon Network and in this millennium too! I'd suggest that *Robot Chicken* didn't feature mouth movements this efficient and that didn't come along for another seven years.

Talking of *Robot Chicken*, this trawls its net much wider than Donnie

Wahlberg's gay orgies, because there's an actual story in play here and parts of it appear rather like what that show might consider if Cartoon Network was willing to sanction it.

For instance, over in the cemetery, Ken's buddy Pete unwisely pisses on the grave of Jason Voorhees, which I hadn't even realised was in Peru. This may just be a generic magic show business cemetery, though, because his gravemates include Elvis, Caligula and some dude called Lucio Cabro, who brings up zero hits on Google when I search for him. Anyway, Jason rises from the grave and seeks out Pete, who's now paying Manuela to be his girlfriend. She thinks he's ugly and wants him to get lost, but screws him anyway because we're firmly in porn film logic here and everyone screws everyone in porn films whether they like each other or not. Pete is so popular that, in the subtitles, he's only ever referred to as "the jerk of Pete". And Jason stabs him with a spear mid-thrust. Pete, that is. Well, both.

Now, nobody else notices because Manuela is separated from the other girls at the concert. All the others went back to Angie's place to get their

freak on with their giant spiked dildos, which is not remotely the reason why this is one of the most outrageous scenes in the movie. Sure, we're coming off (pun well and truly not intended) Ken and Donnie from the New Kids letting Guillermo join in on their trip round the lazy susan, even though he's apparently Donnie's antebellum slave who can't speak a name without putting "Master" in front of it.

However, Dorella has invited Chela and Rasputin, Chela being another nympho friend and Rasputin being Chela's horse. Yeah, you heard right. I think I learned a lot in this scene, if mostly about how hard it is to frame an orgy with a horse in an aspect ratio of 4:3. No wonder there weren't any bestiality orgies in Hollywood movies of the twenties and thirties. Why does it all have to be about the Production Code? Sometimes, legs are just too long to fit in the frame!

Anyway, I promised you a story. The other strand of that, in between the debauched sex scenes, is Ken going to see Barbie because he wants one more chance. We know how serious he isn't, because when Barbie leaves because of some temporary mystery crisis, he immediately tries it on with

her cousin Wendy from Miami, who caught his eye the moment that she opened the door.

Now, Wendy is only thirteen, so when he gets her high and has her play in his pants, we suddenly find ourselves in kiddie porn territory. They promptly go upstairs so that he can play Papa Smurf with her and the soundtrack switches to Urge Overkill's *Girl, You'll Be a Woman Soon*, which may well take the absolute biscuit for inappropriately appropriate. And Barbie's right there when Ken goes downstairs so his goose is cooked. The next time they meet will be in a courtroom, because she's going to have him up on statutory rape, and we're going to turn not only into courtroom drama but social commentary too, because Donnie's lawyer got Michael Jackson off. In a manner of speaking.

At this point, I actually started wondering how much of what I was seeing was bona fide social commentary and how much was just Cancho's script being as outrageous as it could be. Does the inclusion of a Troll doll at the Dragon where Ken meets with his lawyer, Miguel Villaseca, mean anything? There was a *South Park* style animated character earlier, so the

same question there! Does it mean anything that Villaseca has trained his dog to give oral sex, or, when it doesn't step up to service Ken, he does instead? As we know that Ken and his buddies are all lowlifes anyway, is there meaning to their funeral for Pete when they set fire to his corpse and pee on his head? Is there a reason why the guys watch *The X-Files* in a Metallica filled bedroom? Above all, is there any social commentary to be found in the finalé with Ken being gang raped on a pole by an entire island of cannibals, all while King Kong wanders in the background, presumably wondering if he's going to have to join the queue. Revenge for colonialism, maybe? Karma for the ape!

Maybe not. Maybe the only social commentary here is in the way that the beautiful people believe they can get away with anything. Ken doesn't have any regrets about anything he's done and firmly believes that all his problems can be made to go away by simply throwing the right lawyer at them. He only fails because the judge bizarrely turns out to be Wendy's dad and the forensic report on Jason Voorhees's spear comes in, which he'd touched, and so he's lumped with double homicide for good measure.

Even with life imprisonment handed down, he's still unrepentant, merely waiting for his lawyer to slip a judicious five grand to the right guard so he can sneak away.

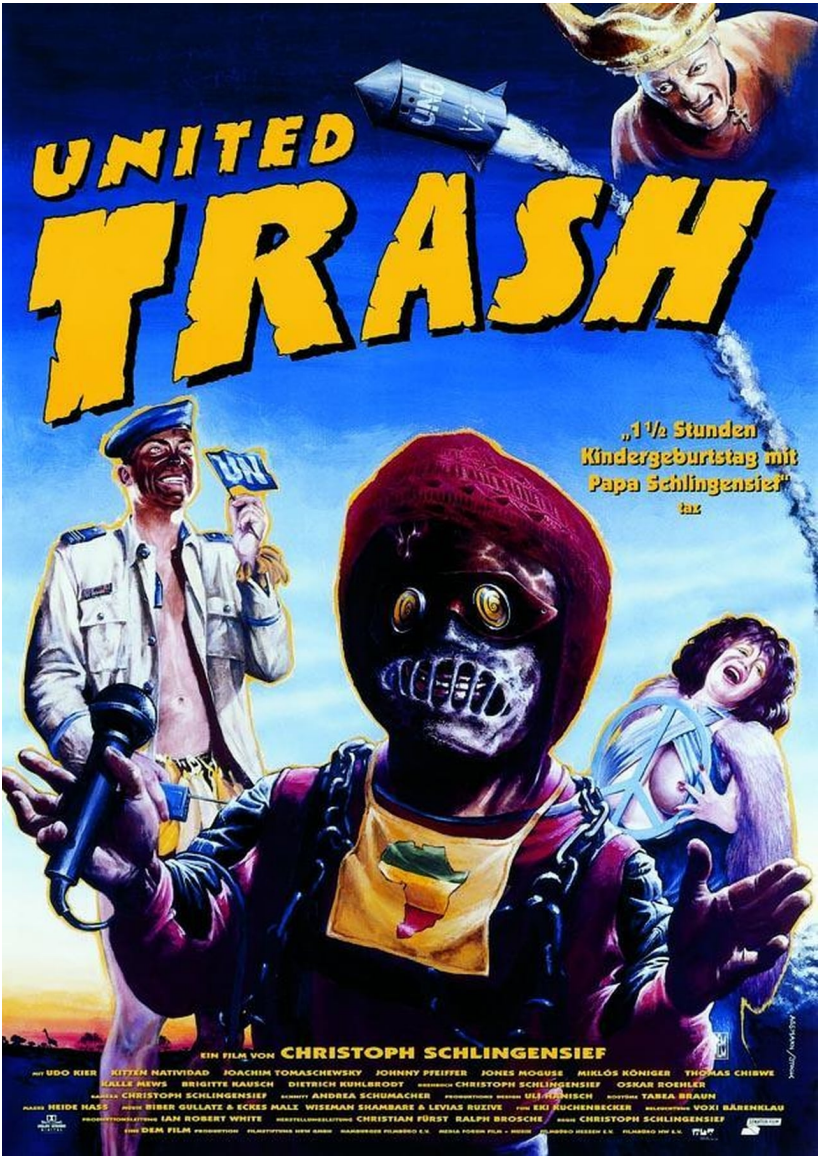
If I'm reading this correctly, it may actually take the intervention of Superman to restore the balance of karma, downing Ken's plane on the cannibal island so that we can be sure he'll spend his days getting shafted. And yet, even there, Ken wins because he frickin' enjoys it. Given how gay Ken turns out to be, why was he ever with Barbie in the first place?

Perhaps most surprisingly, this is a very watchable movie, though sex scenes are even more boring (pun not intended) when they're made with Barbie dolls. This ends up becoming a transgressive comedy as much as anything else, the sort of thing that would likely grab stoned attention if played in the background at a college party. Sure, most would see it as a *Robot Chicken* ripoff, not realising that it predates it, but it would still play well in that scenario, I'd think.

There's also the added benefit of hilarious subtitles in the likelihood of the volume being turned down so nobody can hear the unexpected use of theme tunes from *Bonanza* and *Hawaii Five-O* or Nino Rota's *Love Theme from The Godfather* in a Peruvian Barbie porno. Sure, this would lose an entire dimension without sound, but it would remain quite a conversation piece and the subtitles only add to that. I need to hire the translator of "Oh, yes, some buttheads bring him down and bang gang him" and "Yes indeed, nigger guy and don't forget to to dream with my butt" to subtitle Saturday morning cartoons.

...with that big ass,
you may uncomb my hair with one fart!

Are you running from Freddy?
Or did Bashi frightens you?


UNITED
TRASH
„1 ½ Stunden Kindergeburtstag mit Papa Schlingensief"
taz
EIN FILM VON CHRISTOPH SCHLINGENSIEF
MIT UDO KIER KITTEN NATIVIDAD JOACHIM TOMASCHEWSKY JOHNNY PFEIFFER JONES MOGUSE MIKLÓS KÖNIGER THOMAS CHIBWE
KALLE MEWS BRIGITTE KAUSCH DIETRICH KUHLBRODT CHRISTOPH SCHLINGENSIEF OSKAR ROEHLER
CHRISTOPH SCHLINGENSIEF ANDREA SCHUMACHER ULI HANISCH TABEA BRAUN
HEIDE HASS BIBER GULLATZ & ECKES MALZ WISEMAN SHAMBARE & LEVIAS RUZIVE EKI RUCHENBECKER VOXI BÄRENKLAU
IAN ROBERT WHITE CHRISTIAN FÜRST RALPH BROSCHE CHRISTOPH SCHLINGENSIEF
EINE DEM FILM

UNITED TRASH (1996)

Director: Christoph Schlingensief

Writers: Christoph Schlingenseif and Oskar Roehler

Stars: Udo Kier, Kitten Natividad, Joachim Tomaschewsky, Johnny Pfeiffer, Jones Muguse, Miklós Koniger and Thomas Chibwe

I've brought you some weird movies as part of this project, but perhaps I'll never be able to bring you another one weirder than this, a 1996 art film from German auteur Christoph Schlingensief, rather appropriately known as *United Trash* and later released as *The Slit*.

I am convinced that the director had a serious purpose in mind, namely to offer a socio-political commentary on the failure of the United Nations in Rwanda, but he chose to do it in an incredibly offhand manner. What he delivered was a sort of screwball comedy, in which no taboo is too low to exploit. It's what you might get if Luis Buñuel took aim at western political and religious power structures and John Waters rewrote his script. If that sounds schizophrenic, it really is. The entire approach screams loudly for analysis, as if there are deep and meaningful metaphors in every scene, but they're all smothered in faeces and hurled at us by a chimp tripping on acid. The end result is somehow both aberrant and magnetic; we really don't want to watch at all but we just can't look away.

Let me introduce you to the key characters and you'll get the idea.

First up is Werner Brenner, a German general working for the United Nations somewhere in sub-Saharan Africa; we're never told where, but the film was shot in Zimbabwe, so that's as good a location as any. Brenner, played by Schlingensief regular, Udo Kier, who has been neatly described as the "Ron Jeremy of cult movies" because he's in so damn many of them, is quite clearly an effete Prussian noble which, to Schlingensief's thinking, means poor leader, flagrant queen and scat muncher.

His wife, Martha, is Kitten Natividad, voluptuous vixen of many a Russ Meyer film, who racked up (pun not intended) quite the cult career of her

own. Martha is a former American hooker, whose debauched past (which landed her a twenty year stretch for exhibitionism) has been inexplicably replaced with a sexless present as a bored hausfrau. She starts this film heavily pregnant and the baby shows up as black as the ace of spades, so that life change surely didn't happen the way we're told.

Well, either that or the child really is the new messiah, by virtue of a case of immaculate conception; which is exactly how the local priest sees the situation. He's Bishop Pierre, in the toothless form of actor Joachim Tomaschewsky. Pierre is German as well, but he's been exiled to Africa for crimes that are never explained, though surely tie to his undying hatred for the Roman Catholic church.

It's no stretch for us to believe that Lund, the bodybuilder boyfriend of General Brenner, has been kicked out of Europe too, because he's as freaky a "dyed-in-the-wool pervert" as I've seen on screen in a long while. There are scenes where Jonny Pfeifer sells his role so impressively that it surely cannot have helped his future career; the one in which he's discovered molesting an infant is truly abhorrent and I can only assume it was shot very carefully indeed. Then again, this film is not likely to be showing up on the resumés of anyone involved, unless they chose to become known primarily for sheer unadulterated weirdness and they want to milk that (pun very much not intended).

That leaves the unlikely narrator of the film, a baby who begins that narration an hour before he's actually born. This is Peter Pan, who soon becomes Jesu Peter or Mohammed Peter or any other wild combination of similar religious names. He's played by Thomas Chibwe, an actual African dwarf who spends the film with prosthetic make-up on his head to make it look like it features a constantly erupting vagina.

Just in case you might want an explanation for that, it's the product of a deranged plan, though it might seem like a combination of accidents: Martha walks in on Lund molesting her baby, so administers a marble test to check for penetration, only to leave it with him to unwisely stick up his nose. In hysterics because her son can't breathe, she attempts to extract it with a knitting needle, but her husband trips on his way into the room and prompts the poor child to be scarred horribly for life. However, back here in the cheap seats, we suddenly realise why Bishop Pierre spent so much time ramming a needle through a voodoo doll's head.

If you're getting conditioned to my choices and this doesn't sound too wild, let me add that the doctor suggesting a five year recovery period for this budding messiah is an Adolf Hitler lookalike who moonlights as the local rocket expert, a "thorn in the flesh of Werner von Braun". Kicked out of the west after the Challenger space shuttle disaster, he's experimenting with human engines, which apparently translates to local unfortunates

drenched in whiskey. This is needed because the goal of the local chief, a budding Idi Amin, is to ride on the back of a discarded V2 rocket all the way to Washington, DC, so he can blow up the U.S. President. Why, we have no idea, given that this was 1996 and it would be twenty years before Donald Trump got elected, but that's hardly the wildest suggestion in this picture.

This outrageous setup seems to be rooted in the concept that the west is utterly bankrupt morally and the people it sends to help less fortunate souls abroad are the least qualified people imaginable. And, what's more, those less fortunate souls seem to be quite happy without the water well and crematorium that seem to be the UN's crowning achievements in the locality thus far.

We're clearly asked to imagine what life would be like here without a western influence. So let's take away the bishop who's leading them all horribly astray, remove the United Nations and their litany of horrendous examples and ditch the local chief, who, we are reliably informed, was educated in Munich. Who's left? A couple of musicians who sound far better with a guitar and a small drum kit than they should, and some abidingly happy folk.

Of course, we can't help but extrapolate that message to include this production too; I'd swear blind that most of the locals couldn't understand

a word said to them, whether in English or German, so they just smiled or laughed along in blissful ignorance. However, according to the website of the International Film Festival Rotterdam, the entire crew were arrested by the secret police "on suspicion of making a porn film", and a number of sites report that the resulting picture even prompted a brief cessation of diplomatic relations between Germany and Zimbabwe. The power of art!

What's oddest here is that this sounds like a particularly unhinged exploitation flick, but it really isn't; it's an art movie that aims to make a serious point using the cinematic language of exploitation flicks.

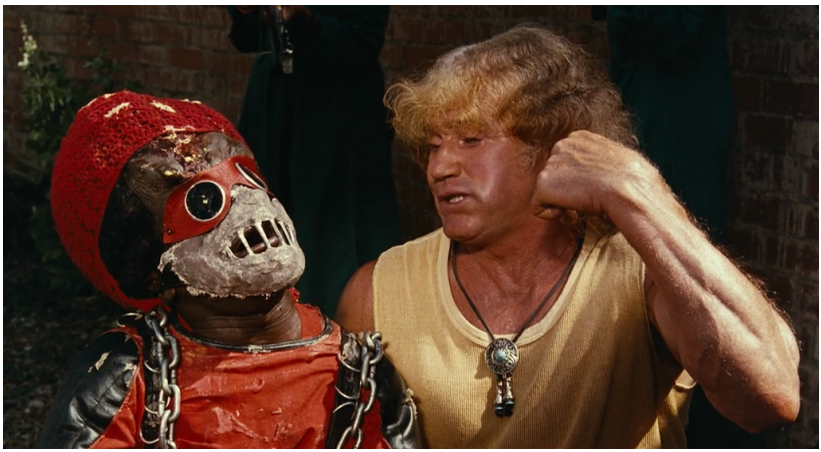
Schlingensief, who wrote the script with Oskar Roehler, is able to keep things scooting along fast enough that we can't get bored and variably enough to keep us believing that there's worse yet to come. It doesn't take the presence of Kitten Natividad, a lovely lady who looks bloated here (she looked fantastic when I met her years after this) to realise the Russ Meyer influence; we can't fail to notice it in the editing. The score is lively; it would have worked well in a Alejandro Jodorowsky movie and Tom Waits would surely give his seal of approval to all the Bohemian brass that's in the soundtrack. The offensive material is in your face and taken from the John Waters textbook, but it's given a more artistic edge than a camp one, so it also reminds on occasion of Pedro Almodóvar.

What it doesn't have is the cohesion of any of those filmmakers. I got

the strong impression that the budget was low and the time brief, so Schlingensief, who also shot the film, kept his camera rolling while his actors improvised in front of the human backdrops and pieced the semblance of a story together in post, with editor Andrea Schumacher. For instance, there are a couple of scenes of pageantry, which happen years apart in internal story time but appear to feature the exact same array of musicians and marchers.

What it does have is an apparently never-ending supply of outrageous shots to burn themselves on our retinae and scar us for life. There's actually a line of descriptive dialogue that suggests, "like a maelstrom of wrong feelings, the images poured ecstatically." That line really sums up the movie to me far better than any of the much longer attempts at synopses that I've read. This film isn't really the sum of its parts; it's just a really long montage of them, something to play silently at a party and confuse your friends.

In fact, it's incredibly hard to highlight examples because there are so many to choose from and there's so much going on even way back there in the background. For instance, we jump around in time like a narcoleptic: five years later, two hours later, four months later; most of these jumps are documented in paint on makeshift wooden signs that are literally carried past the camera by local extras.



Some, however, can't be ignored. One scene has Bishop Pierre proclaim Martha the mother of God by biting the head off a chicken and pouring the blood all over her; she immediately flashes back to her bathtub, from which she emerges naked to discover Lund whipping the bare ass of her husband, so cracks a bottle over his head in slow motion. The ever-flowery narration describes this as: "like a gigantic orgasm, the wave of African folklore penetrated her in a growing helix of hatred and violence." Surely, this aims to mark the point in the film where Martha's allegiances change, but we really don't care. It's just a barrage of mad imagery.

Perhaps I might get a little more out of *United Trash* if I understood the references.

At one point, Martha visits a hospital and suddenly starts being referred to as Effi Briest. I know that *Effi Briest* was a late Victorian novel that was adapted to film twice, most recently by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, one of Schlingensief's key influences and the filmmaker from whom he borrowed a number of regular actors, most obviously Udo Kier. However, none of that helps explain why Martha is suddenly referred to as Effi Briest.

When I did get a reference, such as to what we discover in the White House right before Chief Hassan el Haachi arrives in his V2 rocket, it didn't seem too insightful. The U.S. President is Jeff Koons II, who's doing La Cicciolina II (or is it vice versa?) in bed in front of a camera crew. In 1996,

they were a recent celebrity couple. He's an American artist and she was a Hungarian porn actress turned Italian member of parliament. During her tenure as the latter, she offered to screw Saddam Hussein in return for a peace accord; she made the same offer to Osama bin Laden in 2006. Koons made a series of artworks called *Made in Heaven* which were of him and her having sex. So, is this a dig at how tame Bill Clinton's then-current sex scandals must have seemed in Europe? It really doesn't matter. We're too busy laughing at the cheap animation and wondering how much money Schlingensief saved on CGI.

At least I recognised those as references. Others seem like them but I may be digging too deep in a vain attempt to find meaning in a film that laughs at me for the attempt.

For instance, after his five year recovery period, Jesu Peter obtains a release from the asylum and becomes incredibly popular, but is he really dressed up as Michael Jackson in a Hannibal Lector mask or is that just a wild coincidence? After the failed attempt on his life by his father on a pair of prosthetic legs and the bazooka-equipped Lund, is the fantastic surreality we see the sort of release that wraps up a TV show, with a bizarre set of dancers: Jesu Peter, looking rather like a midget Mr. T after an albatross dumped a full load on his head; Kitten Natividad, the buck naked mother of God; some local in Bishop Pierre's outfit and what looks

like a mask from *Scream*; an inter-racial couple of German midgets; and the local anti-American chief, resplendent in a red, brown and gold muu muu? It sure felt like it to me, but there was probably no real intent behind it at all. Who knows?

Perhaps the most telling moment is when Werner Brenner gets up on stage in front of the local militia, Africans one and all, complete with a full compliment of machine guns. Not only does Udo Kier put on blackface, he paints his entire body black and attempts some sort of improvised native dance naked but for a brief skirt of bananas. Lund is there too, clad in a truly awful blue Elvis-style jumpsuit, but we hardly even notice. What matters is that this scene somehow doesn't stand out from those around it (the previous scene involved the general masturbating a banana as an apparent warm-up) and that it works as the entire movie in microcosm.

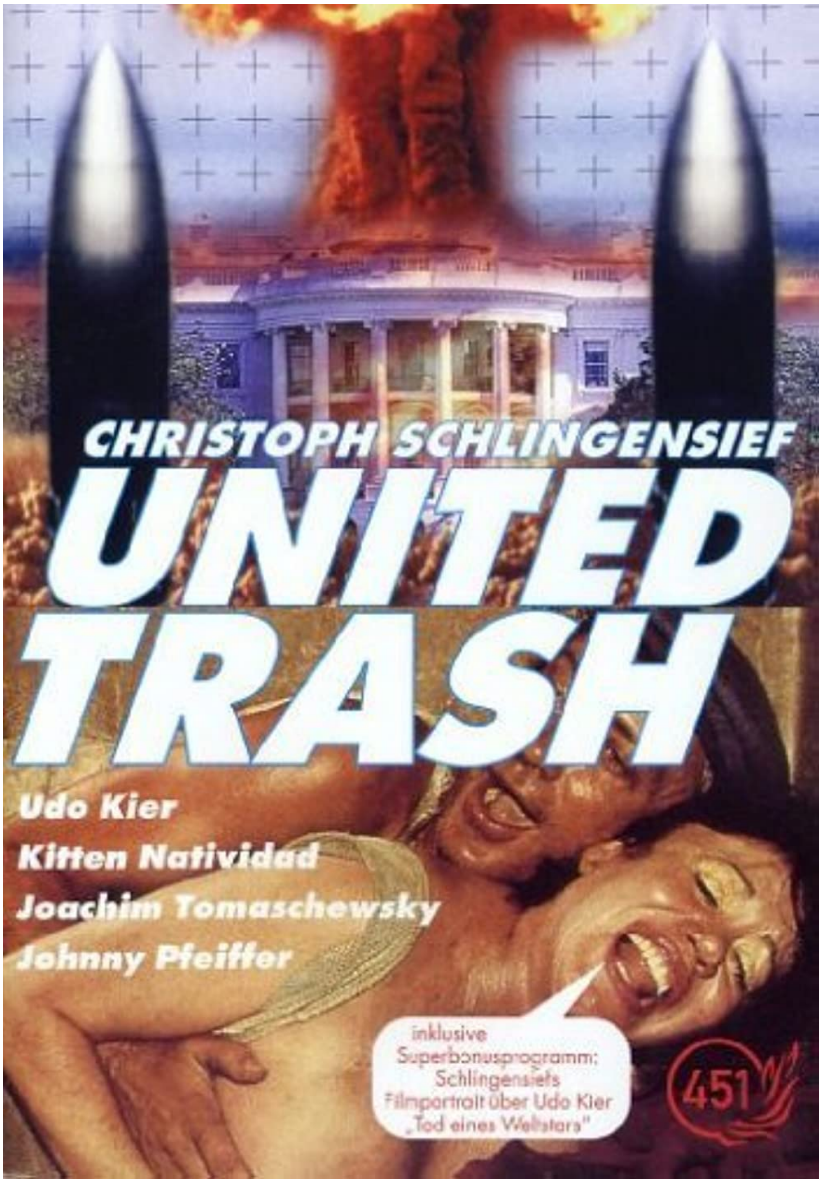
Really, the whole film is a deliberate minstrel show, bludgeoning us with so much politically incorrect and morally abhorrent content that it slowly becomes passé and we accept it as the norm. No, I'm not quite that jaded a cult film watcher, but that's surely much of the point. Atrocity here, atrocity there; scandal here, scandal there. What are we ignoring in the world today, simply because we're used to it? This suddenly becomes a lot more prescient in the age of Donald Trump.

I'd love to know more about the filming of *United Trash*, but there's

almost nothing online about it. I'd especially like to know more about how this feature film affected a diplomatic relationship between two different countries, the one which produced it and the one where it was shot; again, there's little online beyond some repeated paragraphs probably sourced from an official press release.

What I did find online was a strong connection between Schlingensief and Africa. He'd been travelling to that continent since 1993, initially to Namibia, where he would later stage at least one Wagnerian opera and shoot a documentary, *The African Twin Towers*; then Zimbabwe, where he shot this picture; and later Burkina Faso, formerly Upper Volta, where he started to build an Opera Village.

His earlier pictures often centered around a thematic search for the real Germany, like *A Hundred Years of Adolf Hitler* or *The German Chainsaw Massacre*; rather bizarrely, he seems to have found it in Africa. I'm still trying to figure out what I found in this film and perhaps you're trying to figure out what you've found in the pages of this book.


CHRISTOPH SCHLINGENSIEF
UNITED TRASH
Udo Kier
Kitten Natividad
Joachim Tomaschewsky
Johnny Pfeiffer
inklusive Superbonusprogramm: Schlingensiefs Filmportrait über Udo Kier „Tod eines Weltstars"
451

ABOUT HAL C. F. ASTELL

While he still has a day job to pay the bills, Hal C. F. Astell is a teacher by blood and a writer by the grace of the Dread Lord, which gradually transformed him into a film critic. He primarily writes for his own site, Apocalypse Later, but also anyone else who asks nicely. He writes monthly book reviews for the Nameless Zine.

Born and raised in the cold and rain of England half a century ago, he's still learning about the word "heat" many years after moving to Phoenix, Arizona where he lives with his much better half Dee in a house full of critters and oddities, a library with a guard ferret and more cultural artefacts than can comfortably be imagined. And he can imagine quite a lot.

Just in case you care, his favourite film is Peter Jackson's debut, *Bad Taste*; his favourite actor is Warren William; and he believes Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* is the greatest movie ever made.

He reads science fiction, horror and the pulps. He listens to everything except mainstream western pop music. He annoys those around him by talking too much about Guy N. Smith, Doc Savage and the *Friday Rock Show*. He tries not to go outdoors, but he's usually easy to find at film festivals, conventions and events because he's likely to be the only one there in kilt and forked beard, while his fading English accent is instantly recognisable on podcasts and panels. He hasn't been trepanned yet, but he's friendly and doesn't bite unless asked.

Photo Credit: Dee Astell

ABOUT APOCALYPSE LATER

Initially, Hal C. F. Astell wrote film reviews for his own reference as he could never remember who the one good actor was in forgettable entries in long crime film series from the forties. After a year, they became long enough to warrant a dedicated blog.

The name came from an abandoned project in which he was reviewing his way through every movie in the IMDb Top 250 list. Its tentative title was a joke drawn from covering Apocalypse Now last.

Gradually he focused on writing at length about the sort of films that most critics don't, avoiding adverts, syndication and monetised links, not to forget the eye-killing horror of white text on a black background.

Four million words later and Apocalypse Later Press was born, in order to publish his first book, cunningly titled *Huh?* It's been followed by plenty more with double digits worth of others always in process.

This growth eventually turned into the Apocalypse Later Empire, which continues to sprawl. In addition to film and book reviews, he posts a pair of album reviews each weekday from across the rock/metal spectrum and around the globe. He runs the only dedicated annual genre film festival in Phoenix, AZ, the Apocalypse Later International Fantastic Film Festival, or ALIFFF. He publishes books and zines by himself and others. He presents programs of quality international short films at southwest conventions.

Apocalypse Later celebrated its fifteenth anniversary in 2022.

Apocalypse Later Empire	apocalypselaterempire.com
Apocalypse Later Film	apocalypselaterfilm.com
Apocalypse Later Books	books.apocalypselaterempire.com
Apocalypse Later Music	apocalypselatermusic.com
ALIFFF	alfilmfest.com
Apocalypse Later Roadshow	roadshow.apocalypselaterempire.com
Apocalypse Later Press	press.apocalypselaterempire.com
Apocalypse Later Now!	apocalypselaternow.blogspot.com

What's the strangest movie that you've ever seen?

In *Huh?*, film critic Hal C. F. Astell provided 26 different answers to the timeless question, "Why did someone ever think that making that movie was a good idea?"

In *WTF!?*, he introduces 26 more unforgettable films that beg even louder for answers. He answers "What?", "Who?" and "When?", covers some "How?" and "Why?", then dives headlong into the hardest one of all to answer: "WTF!?"

You'll be asking "WTF!?" when you read about sex-crazed babies, cannibalism fetishes and midget westerns. You'll be crying "WTF!?" when you read about sexy anthropomorphic turnips, thalidomide martial artists and Peruvian Barbie porn. You'll be screaming "WTF!?" when you read about 2'9" Filipino secret agents, sex dolls on murder sprees and histrionic sermons about imminent Commie invasions of the good ol' US of A!

And you won't even be able to form words when you read about Christian metaphors dressed up for sexual deviants who like the Power Rangers, locked room mysteries concealed inside soft porn flicks catering to weird Japanese fetishes and the Marquis de Sade conversing with Colin, his giant erection, while locked up in the Bastille as an anthromorphic spaniel!

From educational shorts through zero budget art flicks to wild commercial missteps, not forgetting insane vanity projects, these WTF!? films may well be the *strangest movies that you've never seen!*

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