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Surveying the Carnage: The 100 Years War Between Mars & Earth

By Matthew Appleton

This is part one of a two-part article examining H. G. Wells' The War of the Worlds and subsequent adaptations, tributes & works inspired by it.

It started innocently enough. Once I found out that Steven Spielberg was producing a new movie adaptation of H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, I decided to reread the original as a way to prepare for the film. Nothing unusual there—I've prepped in such a manner countless times over the years for sci-fi films ranging from the truly dreadful *Battlefield Earth* to the really interesting, although heavily flawed, *Minority Report*. However, along the way I somehow decided that I wanted to really delve into the many different facets of the Wells classic, and check out as many as possible before the release of Spielberg's new take on the novel. I thought that all I would really need to worry about was the original work by Wells, the Orson Welles' 1938 radio dramatization, George Pal's 1953 movie adaptation and the *War of the Worlds: Global Dispatches* anthology of short stories edited by Kevin J. Anderson. Given the consistent popularity of the novel over the past 100 years, I knew the existence of other, less widely known adaptations was a certainty, but I didn't think I'd encounter that many.

I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I should've had some notion when I noticed the wide array of options available for someone interested in just the original novel, many of which offering a little something unique to accompany the text. Penguin Classics offers an edition with a forward written by Brian Aldiss while the Modern Library Classics edition offers an introduction by Arthur C. Clarke. In addition, the New York Review of Books reissued a 1960 edition that features illustrations by Edward Gorey, and for the younger crowd HarperCollins put out a new edition that comes with a 3-D puzzle of a Martian tripod on the back. This is just a sampling of the many different editions put into print as the release of the Spielberg version grew nearer.

Here then is my journey into the many different variations on the Martian invasion of Earth, which invariably fails every

"Everyone understands that when you wave the white flag you want to be friends!" - Salvatore, just before the Martians fry him with a heat ray in the 1953 movie adaptation of *War of the Worlds*.

time. With the exception of the Spielberg film, I attempted to review each item in chronological order, and along the way I discovered each work brought something unique to the narrative.

I. *The War of the Worlds*, by H. G. Wells

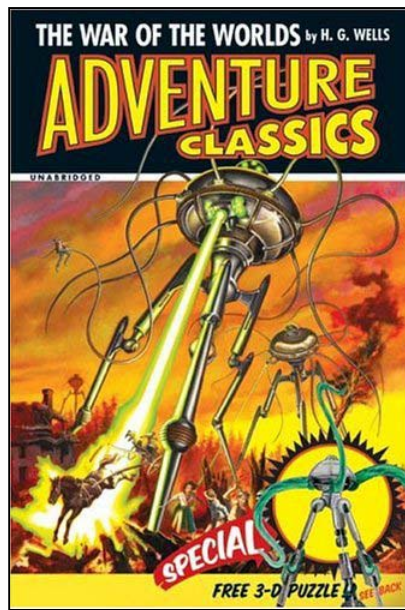
The original. The alpha and the omega. Nearly 100 years after its initial publication it still packs an amazing wallop. From a literary theory perspective, I don't know if there's much I can add to the discussion that hasn't already been said. (Read Adam Roberts' *Science Fiction* for a summarization of some key interpretations of the novel.) However, from my American, early 21st century perspective, a number of issues in the novel really resonated with me.

The first thing that struck me about reading the novel was that it offered amazing insights into late 19th century England in much the same way a Jane Austin novel transports readers back to early 19th century England. While many items about the narrative work in this manner, it was the relatively slow response to the landing of the first cylinder that really grabbed my attention. In today's highly connected society with the internet and 24-hour news television networks, it's difficult to imagine the news of a Martian invasion spreading as slowly as it initially does in Wells' novel. So much of what happens in the period after the first cylinders land—including people guffawing at the notion of an invasion and carrying on as if nothing is happening—is possible precisely because of the amount of time it takes to disseminate accurate information and to muster a military response. While the initial news coverage of the 9/11 attacks showed us that getting correct information quickly and avoiding speculation is still a very real issue even today, it's certain that a similar invasion today would receive a much faster, better coordinated response.

Another thing, almost a throwaway, that struck me in the opening chapters was a suggestion by one of the soldiers to build a trench to get closer to the Martians in the pit. He suggests this as a safer way of getting closer to engage in combat and avoid the heat rays, but his comrades dismiss the idea with a quick joke. In a study guide to *The War of the Worlds* he has posted online, Paul Brians points out that the Martian black smoke is frequently cited as prophetic of gas warfare in World War I. Yet, Brians makes no mention of the trench idea, which became the other signature aspect of World War I, and was used precisely for the very reason suggested in the novel, with the only difference that soldiers were protecting themselves from machine gun fire rather than heat rays.

Much like the trench suggestion, the red Martian weed is an item whose symbolic significance altered in the years since Wells wrote the novel. When the narrator first observes it, he states, "I noticed floating down the stream a number of red masses, some many feet across. I did not know what these were—there was no time for scrutiny—

and I put a more horrible interpretation on them than they deserved" (Wells, 479). Indeed, in the context of the novel, they are nothing more than a crude effort at terraforming on the part of the Martians, but given what we now know about how human activity inadvertently allows non-native species to migrate, it just as easily could've been an accidental import, such as spores in the Martian supply air getting loose on Earth. Today, non-native species invasion is so common that one *Washington Post* reporter recently stated, "the Potomac has been so altered by man that it has become the underwater equivalent of the *Star Wars* alien bar" (Fahrenthold), and that prevalence made it easy for me to draw the connection when reading about the Martian vegetation. Although



Wells had the Martians bring the seed stock along, we certainly now know such a proactive approach isn't necessary.

After the narrator further explored and pontificated about the new alien landscape, Wells goes off on one of his didactic rants. Through an artillery gunner who managed to survive the carnage inflicted upon his unit by the Martians, we learn about the lifestyle of many of the time:

“They haven't any spirit in them—no proud dreams, and no proud lusts... I've seen hundreds of 'em, bit of breakfast in hand, running wild and shining to catch their little season-ticket train, for fear they'd get dismissed if they didn't; working at businesses they were afraid to take the trouble to understand; skedaddling back for fear they wouldn't be in time for dinner; keeping indoors after dinner for fear of the back streets, and sleeping with the wives they married, not because they wanted them, but because they had a bit of money that would make for safety in their one little miserable skedaddle through the world. Lives insured and a bit invested for fear of accidents.” (Wells, 515-516)

It's an old sentiment—one I'm sure was expressed before Wells did so, though I cannot readily point to an example—that continues to get echoed to this day. In a much more succinct manner, Gaff in the movie *Blade Runner* said very much the same thing at the end of the movie: “It's too bad she won't live! But then again, who does?” This sentiment also formed a large part of the basis for the movie *Shaun of the Dead*, in which our hero leads a very zombie-like existence until the actually undead force him to take action and take control of his devoid, meandering life.

Shortly after this rant we find out that bacteria have done in the Martians and the gunner's plans to save humanity from them are now moot. While bacteria aren't exactly humanity's friends, Wells sermonizes, “By the toll of a billion deaths man

has bought his birthright of the earth,” (Wells, 528) meaning that we acquired some defenses against them. Yet, in the years since *War of the Worlds* first appeared, the battle between humankind and bacteria underwent profound changes. With the advent of a myriad of antibiotics developed during the 20th century, numerous debilitating conditions lost their effectiveness when treated quickly enough. However, thanks to growing microbiological resistance to these drugs, we are finding it harder to kill them before they can seriously harm us, and it's looking more and more like bacteria will once again become a serious concern to our general well being.

Again, an incident that occurred while reading the book—this time another in a series of ear infections in my 21-month-old son—brought this to my attention. Unfortunately, he is allergic to the most common antibiotics used for treating such infections, and the bacteria that cause the infections have grown resistant to the medications initially prescribed to him. As noted by Bob Harris, a writer, commentator and comedian, in his blog:

“I once read that the majority by weight of living matter on Earth is bacteria, and probably has been and will be for millions of years. In a sense, this is really their planet, and we're just an interesting (and still possibly unsuccessful, if you follow the news) evolutionary sideshow.” (Harris)

Much like the Martian invaders, as a species, we're totally at the mercy of bacteria. While the waning of the era of antibiotics won't destroy humankind, unless a new method of attack is soon found diseases such as tuberculosis will certainly start claiming more lives once again.

II. The 1938 Mercury Theater Adaptation of *The War of the Worlds*

What's so amazing about this adaptation is that how true it is to the spirit of the original story, even though the method of narration is radically

altered. Instead of conveying the story through one man's observations, experiences and insights, Orson Welles and Howard Koch (the man who actually wrote the original radio script) tell the story through a series of news bulletins that interrupt "regularly scheduled" programming. Over 65 years later it's easy to see how this style of performance caused panic in the estimated 1 million listeners who tuned in after Welles' announcement on CBS radio that the Mercury Theater was performing a dramatization.

However, anyone who missed the introduction but listened closely to the action in the first part of the broadcast could easily pick up clues that the action is not real. Events unfold much faster than real time allows: within 40 minutes, the first cylinder hits the earth, the Martians use the heat ray on the first to investigate, the New Jersey "militia" responds with over 7,000 troops and artillery before the newly-constructed Marian tripod quickly decimates them, and six tripods (three of which arrive from Virginia) descend upon New York City. In addition, when the time is given, it does not correspond to the actual time during the original broadcast. Notably, within the first few minutes of the broadcast, which started at 8:00 PM EST, we are told that the first cylinder hit Grovers Mill, NJ at around 8:50 PM. Furthermore, the radio program that gets interrupted by the radio news reports actually changes; when the program starts, we're listening to Ramón Raquello and his orchestra from Meridian Room in the Hotel Park Plaza in downtown New York, but before the first half hour is up we've switched to Bobby Millette and his orchestra from Hotel Martinet in Brooklyn. It certainly seems odd that the "program" would change without any sort of announcement from the network.

Still, the fact that people just didn't catch these clues says a lot about the effectiveness of this performance. All the actors wonderfully voice their

roles, and the sound effects, when they're used, are remarkably realistic. Additionally, many listeners surely remembered the horrors of World War I, and the Martians' use of gas warfare must have seemed horribly plausible. Beyond that, some of the production is just amazing; when the first part ends just before the commercial break, with one plaintive voice from a lone radio broadcaster begging for a response from anyone at all, you can feel the hair on your arms rise—even when you know it's just a dramatization. It's just that powerful. It's very easy to see how so many got lost in the story, thus not listening critically and growing panicked.

Interestingly, the second part of the performance becomes a much more straightforward dramatization of the novel. We find that Professor Pearson (voiced by Welles), who survived the Martian attack upon the first responders to Grovers Mill, escaped further attacks by holing up in a farmhouse while the Martians attacked New Jersey. When he's able to leave and find out what has happened, we're treated to a couple scenes very recognizable from Wells' novel: he encounters an artilleryman ranting about the lazy lives people led and his plans to help humanity survive, leaves him for New York, "anxious to know the fate of the great city." When he arrives there he witnesses birds and dogs picking over the Martian carrion. All of this is very faithful to the second part of Wells' work, even if it has been transported from England to New Jersey.

The broadcast continues to fascinate as a historical piece. Today radio is rarely used as a dramatic medium, so it's interesting to listen to how one man attempted to find a new way to exploit it in a time before television and when motion pictures were still almost exclusively in black and white. Welles showed that a well-executed radio telecast presented in an incredibly realistic mode could entertain and excite people as easily as any other form of entertainment.



III. *War of the Worlds* (1953), directed by Byron Haskin

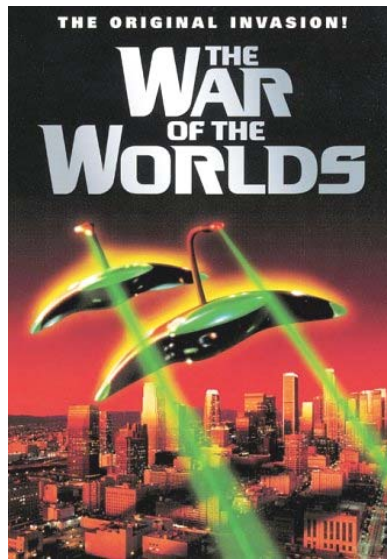
I would guess that until the recent release of the Spielberg adaptation, this is the version that most Americans are familiar with. Certainly, some of the images from the movie, especially the look of the Martian saucers and the destruction of iconoclastic structures in the early-1950s Los Angeles skyline, are now indelibly etched in our collective consciousness. Yet, I hadn't seen the movie since my teenage years, and when I started viewing it I was nearly completely derailed by the name of the hero of the film: Dr. Clayton Forrester.

Those unfamiliar with the show may not know this, but that name also belongs to the head mad scientist in the first seven seasons of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. In all my years of watching and loving the program I didn't once make the connection. However, this sudden realization actually caused me to stop the film and regroup—through no fault of the movie, I kept waiting for Mike (or Joel) and bots to appear on the bottom of the screen and start eviscerating the film.

That's actually not very fair. George Pal's production is one of the few sci-fi films of its era to stand up well over the years. Surely the nearly \$1 million budget—which undoubtedly went mostly to the special effects—helped, but Pal really made sure that the movie held up well on its own terms. At 85 minutes in length, Pal kept out unnecessary padding and kept moving the story at a fast pace. The relatively brief playing time also ensured that much of Wells' social pontificating in the second half of the novel never made it into the film, but who really wants to watch actors wax poetic upon societal ills when they came to see stuff get blown up? However, the movie is not without a few minor flaws, most notably that Sylvia Van Buren, Dr. Forrester's love interest, is reduced to the stereotypical

role women play in monster films (despite her M.A. in library sciences) and that the Martians, when they do appear on screen, are rather laughable. The movie would've been much better without their comical appearance.

The Martian issue aside, Pal obviously understood that working in a primarily visual medium meant reworking elements of the story. Even with Ray Harryhausen's best work, tripods would've looked clunky at best. So, the Martians now appear to fly in what look like flying saucers, but in a nod to the original tripods that Wells imagined, Dr. Forrester speculates that rays, "probably some sort of magnetic flux," keep the saucers afloat. In-



deed, as he makes his speculation, we get a close-up of a saucer that shows three tiny jets of sparks emanating in three different directions from below. It's the only time we see this level of detail during the movie, but the reference to Wells' original design is clear. The black smoke that figures so prominently in the novel and in Welles' adaptation is gone, most likely because Pal didn't have an effective way to film it as Wells described it. The other major change concerning the Martian craft is the heat ray. Again, the needs of film conflicted with

an invisible, soundless heat ray in much the same way soundless explosions in space conflict with audience expectations. Thus, we now hear and see the rays as they wreck havoc upon humankind.

This revision of the Martian ships necessitated another notable change in the story involving the damage inflicted upon the aliens. Clearly, if the Martians could completely withstand the effects of an atomic bomb then there's no way that any sort of weapon developed by humankind could harm their ships. Therefore, the writers removed the scene where the military managed to destroy a sole vessel. Interestingly, this change unwittingly gave birth to a cliché about alien invaders. For example, in *Independence Day*—which is actually

something of an adaptation as well, given that humanity defeats otherwise nearly indestructible aliens thanks to a manmade computer virus—the alien ships also completely withstand a nuclear bomb explosion. It comes as no surprise that Tim Burton chose to satirize this in *Mars Attacks!* by having the Martians not only survive such a blast, but also by harvesting and then inhaling the gases produced by the explosion in much the same way kids inhale helium from balloons to make their voices pitch higher.

The other really noticeable change—aside from the fact that the Martians are finally invading all of the Earth simultaneously rather than just one portion of it—is the elevation of the stories’ religious element. Although Wells called bacteria “the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon his Earth” (Wells, 528) in the novel, religion overall plays a small role in the events of the book. However, the Cold War called for a greater importance of God’s role—our open faith in God gave many Americans a sense of moral superiority that further elevated the United States over the Soviet Union. Remember, this was the period when Congress passed legislation inserting the words “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance. Peter Nichols, in his entry on the movie in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* wrote:

“The dazed conservatism of the human response to the Martians is true to Wells, as is the subtext suggesting that a retreat into religious piety is also an inadequate answer, though here Pal has it both ways.” (Nicholls)

I don’t know if I agree; Nicholls argument works if you accept that the Pastor’s attempt to communicate with the Martians only represents such a retreat. If you take the Martians as symbolizing the Soviet Union—i.e., the red menace from the red planet—then we have a parable for American beliefs in the cold war. The military only starts attacking the Martians—representative of the Soviet antagonism to religion—when they ruthlessly kill an unarmed priest trying to peacefully engage

them. There’s very little talk of religion for much of the rest of the movie, and it’s during this time that the Martians begin their relentless advance. The Martian attack only begins faltering once it attacks the church Dr. Forrester and Ms. Van Burden huddle inside together. The Martians can certainly kill the pious, but they cannot destroy the foundations of God’s institutions. As if to emphasize the power of God and its importance in elevating the Americans over the Soviets/Martians, the audience is treated to more than just a recitation of Wells’ “God’s wisdom” line—which Welles was content to leave unadorned in his adaptation—we also hear the peeling of church bells and a singing chorus of “Amens.”

IV. Jeff Wayne’s Musical Version of *The War of the Worlds* (1978)

If there’s one thing I can certainly say about Jeff Wayne’s musical adaptation of Wells’ novel: it is by far the most unique version of the story. As far as I know there aren’t any other musical versions of *The War of the Worlds*, and even if others exist, I doubt that they became the launching point for a video game and a CGI-animated feature film.

But I’m getting just a little ahead of myself.

Over two years in the making, *Jeff Wayne’s Musical Version of The War of the Worlds* (yes, that is the complete title) lies somewhere between a traditional musical soundtrack and music inspired by the text, ala Johan De Meij’s *Lord of the Rings; Symphonie No. 1*. A few of the songs are traditional pop compositions, but the rest is mostly instrumental, accompanied by first-person story narration performed predominantly by Richard Burton. Justin Hayward of The Moody Blues also handles a large amount of the lead vocals on the album—presumably in part because of his voice was so easily associated with the otherworldly sound of his band.

The album has since sold over 13 million copies worldwide and spawned one international hit, “Forever Autumn.” And I never heard of it until starting on this little project, although that’s most likely due to my age (I was six when it was re-

leased) and the fact it sold less than 500,000 copies in the U.S.

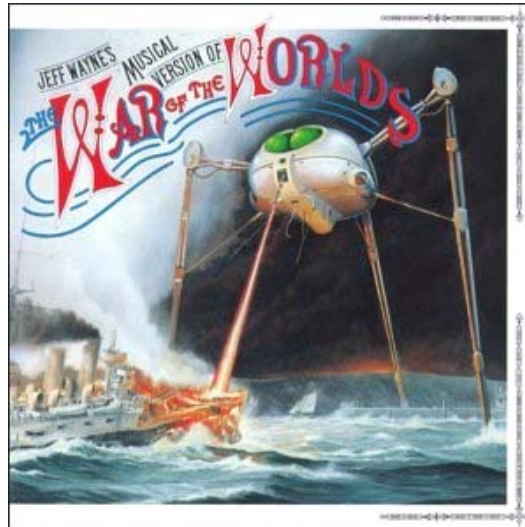
Overall, Wayne's musical is an interesting experiment. As can be expected, he made changes to the story, most notably combining the two story arcs from the novel into one comprehensive narrative. However, unlike Welles or Pal, Wayne kept the narrative in Victorian England, opting for a more faithful rendition, at least on the surface level.

After starting the album in virtually the same manner as the other adaptations—i.e., “No one would have believed, in the last years of the nineteenth century...”—the album opens with “Eve of War,” a basically instrumental piece with a chorus sung by Hayward that establishes a few of the important musical themes of the album. It's a combination of synthesizers, orchestral arrangement and a very disco-like beat. The sound is very cosmic in its reach and it does convey the vastness of space between the two planets, as well as sheer alienness of the Martians, whose musical representation doesn't follow the same rhythms, cadences or moirés conventionally used in orchestral or pop music.

With the album's second and third tracks, “Horsell Common and the Heat Ray” and “The Artilleryman and the Fighting Machine,” Wayne establishes the rest of the musical themes used in the album. The noise of a heavily distorted guitar becomes the sound of the death ray and we're introduced to the Martian cry of “Ulla,” which represents the one audible communication they make. Wayne makes effective use of this cry, and if you listen carefully to the recording, you can actually hear the cry become more distorted as the album progresses, thus clearly giving the sense of the Martians losing battle with bacterial infection.

Overall, the album effectively evokes the shifting of emotions and actions throughout the story.

Wayne's score wonderfully enhances Burton's narration, filling in details in a way that the spoken word can never match. This is most evident in “The Red Weed (Part One),” in which the music conveys how utterly changed the landscape is now that the Martian weed devours it. The music, virtually all synthesized, is simultaneously both discomfiting and serene.



At the climax of the story, “Dead London,” Wayne convincingly ties together all the movements and themes from the album to evoke the desolation of the deserted city and mirroring it with the death throes of the invaders. Their now heavily distorted cries of “Ulla” actually sound painful and almost make you feel some pity for the invaders. When the last of them dies, he wonderfully transitions into a celebration

of the Martians defeat, effectively morphing some of the music associated with them into the stirring triumphal sound that ends the main narrative.

Interestingly, the album's conclusion ends differently than the Welles or Pal versions. Most notably, Wayne removes God from the equation. While the rise of secularism during the 20th century certainly made this an acceptable notion in 1978, the fact is that Wayne's adaptation retains the original late 19th century setting, and during that period of time the notion of not giving God his proper credit was unthinkable—that's the very reason why Wells, a secularist, wrote it. Aside from that, given how famous the “God, in his wisdom” line is, its absence in of itself is somewhat jarring.

Yet, Wayne manages to incorporate an element tossed aside by Welles and Pal. Those two adaptations completely did away with the portion of Wells' epilogue where the narrator considers the possibility of another attack and what the future holds for humankind. Rather than just

let the narrator rap philosophical, Wayne includes as the final track a fictional landing of NASA probes on Mars which ends with an apparently new attack by the Martians that leaves NASA mission control searching for contact from other monitoring stations across the world in much the same manner that the radio operator does at the end of the first part of Welles' version. Yet, there's something rather unsatisfying about it—"Epilogue (Part 2) (NASA)" is almost as clunky as its name, and the final effect, completed by the resurgence of a couple musical themes associated with the Martians, is almost farcical rather than chilling.

But the final sounds from the recording do not mark the end of Wayne's adaptation. The album is packaged with full-color illustrations that supplement the narrative, and at the end of 1998, it became the basis of a video game that pitted metal-covered lorries (among other devices) against the Martian tripods. Last month, a seven-disc collector's edition of the album hit stores alongside a newly remastered SACD two-disc set, which actually debuted at number nine on the British charts during the week of June 20. Furthermore, according to the official website, www.thewaroftheworlds.com, Wayne has secured the funding to create a CGI-animated feature film based on his reinterpretation of Wells' novel, and the artwork originally packaged with the album apparently will provide the basis for

the look and feel for this movie. Clearly, he plans on competing with Spielberg's film.

V. *The War of the Worlds*, directed by Steven Spielberg (2005)

What a fascinating mess. A couple days after watching the movie, I recalled something Spielberg said in an interview on the *Dark Horizons* website:

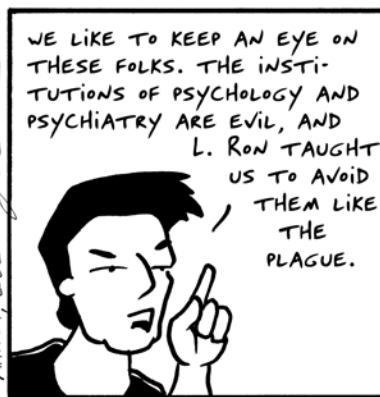
"Science fiction to me is a vacation. It's a vacation away from all rules of narrative logic. It's a vacation away from physics, basic physics and physical science. You can leave all the rules behind and just kind of fly. As a race human beings can't fly so we envy the birds. Science fiction gives you a chance to soar. That's why I keep coming back to science fiction because there are absolutely no limits to where the imagination can go. Now the challenge of science fiction is that to tell a credible science fiction story you have to then turn around and impose certain limits on yourself. You can't let the story get too fantastic." (Fischer)

Clearly, he doesn't fully understand science fiction; conversely, his track record shows that he understands what makes good movies. His adap-

Goats: The Comic Strip by Jonathan Rosenberg



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tation of *War of the Worlds* exists at the nexus where these two conflicting modes of understanding converge.

Strictly as a science fiction film, it's a failure. While good sci-fi productions can get away with some gaffs—think of the battery explanation in *The Matrix*—a few in this movie loom too large. The aliens use electromagnetic pulses (EMPs) to disable just about all the electrical devices in the areas where they land, yet videocameras continue to work after the aliens set off the EMPs. Along the same vein, a car mechanic is able to restore a minivan to running order just by replacing the solenoids. While they certainly would fail due to an EMP, just about every automotive engine made in the past 15 years incorporates computer chip technology—clearly just replacing the solenoids shouldn't get a car in running order.

Just as puzzling is the Martian weapon that instantly vaporizes humans but amazingly leaves their clothing intact. Spielberg must have his reason for this, but even in the post-9/11 context—more on that later—it makes no sense. Then there is the issue of just why the alien tripods emerge from underground. The characters in the movie speculate that the aliens buried the machines countless millennia ago and then transported into them when they were ready to attack. This seems absolutely incredulous, and given the size and location of the machines you'd think that someone would've accidentally stumbled across one of them at some point. However, it is possible that these ruminations were entirely wrong, and that there's a rational explanation that Spielberg just didn't divulge to the audience. Or maybe not—see interview quote above.

Yet, Spielberg also shows that he understands how to make a movie—in particular the visuals, which are downright breathtaking. While Pal's version depicted masses trying to flee the carnage wrought by the invaders, compared to Spielberg's vision of chaotic flight their march was rather organized and orderly—in Pal's version the true barbarism and inhumanity only came when the last to flee truly got desperate. Spielberg shows that anyone is capable of it at anytime, not just

when danger is literally footsteps away. Impressively, the tripods' incredibly fluid gait and incredibly long and nubile tentacles are more menacing than anything I ever imagined. Wisely, Spielberg also keeps their actual screen time, as well as the battle sequences, to a minimum, thus making them that stand out visually that much more. Just as impressive is the portion of the farmhouse basement scene which comes directly from Pal's release; during it, Spielberg effectively conveys terror felt by the characters as they avoid the aliens and the scope they use to examine the remains of the farmhouse before they enter it.

As an adaptation of Wells' book, Spielberg's movie is certainly intriguing. Like the other adaptations mentioned thus far, the film opens with a slight variation on the "No one would have believed, in the last years of the nineteenth century..." line, this time stating "the early years of the twenty-first century." As already noted, the aliens return to the tripods, and as a result Spielberg brought back elements lost in Pal's version. Aliens capture humans with long, incredibly dexterous tentacles, stored in cages attached to the machine and are later used as food, with their blood sucked out directly in the manner described by Wells. The red weed makes its return and even provides foreshadowing for the end of the invaders. For a moment early in the film, it even looked like Spielberg actually had the tripods emit the black, smoky gas to kill humans, but in the end it was literally nothing more than exhaust.

To be sure, Spielberg also makes changes, just as his predecessors did. Again, the story is moved forward to the present, which allows him to tap into America's post-9/11 anxieties. The Ogilvy, curate and nameless artillery gunner characters are unseemly merged into one character for a rather long farm house scene, and his demise is very different than how Wells wrote it. In an apparent nod to the Welles radio broadcast, the action starts in a New Jersey suburb of New York City, but just like Pal, Spielberg makes it clear that this is a worldwide event. However, the invaders are never called Martians, as there are no indications whatsoever that they invaders came from

there. (At least Spielberg partially understands that plausibility is still important to sci-fi, and in 21st century America, an invasion from Mars is highly implausible.)

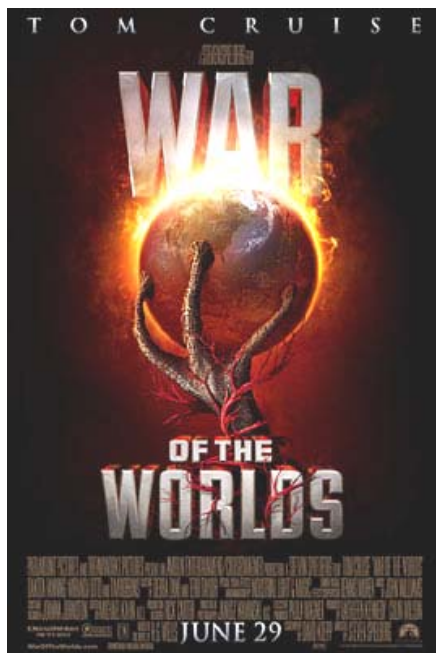
Because he felt that the Welles and Pal productions very much reflected the global uncertainties of their times, Spielberg made this version reflect the post-9/11 world Americans inhabit (Miska). Although the invasion actually starts in the Ukraine, no one pays attention to the news broadcasts in the background, so nearly everyone is shocked by the weather disturbances caused by the entry of the alien invaders, thus echoing the appalling lack of knowledge many Americans have about the rest of the world. When the attack commences, humans are quickly vaporized, leaving only a fine ash—an eerie reminder of the lack of identifiable remains for many victims of the Twin Towers attack. Shortly thereafter, one of the characters asks if the terrorists are striking again. Comparatively, these are incredibly subtle compared to what comes later. During the first night after the attacks, Ray Ferrier (played by Tom Cruise) and his children sleep in the basement of his ex-wife's house. Hours after falling asleep, an airplane crashes into their house, and even more amazingly they survive! Later when continuing to flee among thousands of others, we see walls where people have posted pictures of lost loved ones, asking for help in finding them.

Not content to play upon America's 9/11 experiences, Spielberg also takes the time to reference Pal's production. In addition to the before-mentioned farmhouse scene—which includes the severing of the visual scope with an axe—at the end of the movie Spielberg also recreates one of the iconic images of the 1953 film by showing a hand emerge from the opening of an alien craft just before it dies. The bell jar shaped, invisible

defensive shields also return, but thankfully there are no attempts to take down the aliens with nuclear weapons. Maybe the point parodied in *Mars Attacks!* finally sunk through the military's consciousness.

Interestingly, the other major change Spielberg made to the story is the one that gives this adaptation its truly interesting segments. This time, the protagonist, Ray, is a divorced, self-absorbed dockworker from New Jersey. He shows very little interest in his children's lives and they resent the fact that they have to visit him almost as much as it inconveniences him. When the attack starts, he must find a way to protect his family and actually act like their father. Along the way, he needs to figure out how to actually communicate with them and then earn their trust and respect. It's a rough journey—one that he doesn't realize he's actually making until over halfway through the film. The conflicts and emotions are far more palpable than any of the others that take place in the movie

In the end though, it never quite congeals. While his lack of understanding about what makes good sci-fi certainly hampered the film, Spielberg's biggest problem is that he tried to do too much. His use of the red weed is a prime example of this. When we see the weed dying, it takes less than a minute before we see the same thing happening to the invaders, making its inclusion feel like a rush job. By trying to recreate post-9/11 America, to ratchet up the terror and to make overlong homages to Pal's adaptation—the farmhouse scene took nearly 20 minutes—he took his attention off of the heart of the movie, which is learning to become a father. More troubling was the fact that Spielberg seems incapable of making a movie without incorporating some sort of happy ending, and the family reunion scene that closes the movie



is downright unbelievable. Finding a way to end the movie with the alien dying in a fashion similar to the 1953 version would've actually been preferable and kept in line with the homages to Pal. Sadly, this happy ending also eliminated any chance that Spielberg, like Wayne, would incorporate the possibility of another attack.

Next issue: War of the Worlds: Global Dispatches & some less widely known works inspired by H.G. Wells' classic novel.

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Goats: The Comic Strip by Jonathan Rosenberg



goats: the comic strip apr 26, 2002

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“Sith Happens”: The Political Lessons of the *Star Wars* Prequels

By Greg Saunders

For the past six years, George Lucas—who once defended his films by saying, “Why is the public so stupid? That’s not my fault.”—has been busy constructing a political epic that’s as subversive and timely as last year’s blockbuster Fahrenheit 9/11. The only question is... will anyone notice?

Science fiction has always been fertile ground for metaphorical examination of societal ills. In the fifties and sixties, Rod Serling’s *Twilight Zone* scripts confronted nuclear war, racism, and communist witch-hunts with a frankness that garnered critical acclaim and numerous awards. Yet, these topics remained forbidden to standard television dramas. After an exhaustive fight with network brass over a teleplay based on the slaying of civil rights martyr Emmett Till, Serling leapt into the world of fantasy remarking, “You know, you can put these words into the mouth of a Martian and get away with it.” (Neary)

A few years later, the *Planet of the Apes* series replaced the Martians with grown men in monkey suits, but kept the *Twilight Zone*’s fondness for subtle editorializing. In a genre known for little more than mindless eye candy, topics as timely as anti-war protests, animal rights, race riots, and the

conflict between science and religion were tackled with a knowing wink to the audience. Indeed, back in May it was hard to watch the ludicrous evolution hearings in Kansas without recalling the first film’s pivotal trial scene between Charlton Heston’s stranded human Taylor and the ape leader Dr. Zaius:

“Learned Judges: My case is simple. It is based on our first Article of Faith: that the Almighty created the ape in his own image; that He gave him a soul and a mind; that He set him apart from the beasts of the jungle, and made him the lord of the planet.

These sacred truths are self-evident. The proper study of apes is apes. But certain young cynics have chosen to study man—yes, perverted scientists who advance on insidious theory called ‘evolution.’

There is a conspiracy afoot to undermine the very cornerstone of our Faith.”

These days, it’s hard to remember a time when the big and small screens were a haven for social

commentary disguised in space suits and cheap prosthetics. When the original *Star Wars* hit theaters, audiences embraced what they saw as a simple morality play. To deflect criticism, Lucas hid the film's vagueness and shallowness behind a "hero myth" concept he borrowed from theologian Joseph Campbell, but whatever depth the films may have contained was lost on an audience that was more interested in lasers and robots than mediations on mythological archetypes.

By the time the third film in the series, *Return of the Jedi*, was released, there was a growing consensus that Lucas had lost his Midas touch. With the teddy bear like Ewoks in tow, it seemed clear that the "space opera" auteur has given in to the marketing dark side. Spin-off cartoons and TV movies squeezed the last drops of goodwill that the franchise had built up from its first installment and its superior sequel. George Lucas was more interested in making kiddie movies now.

This suspicion seemed to be confirmed after Lucas reemerged with 1999's *The Phantom Menace*, the first new *Star Wars* movie in 15 years. Presumably about the origins of bad guy Darth Vader, the film was much more a showcase for the retarded antics of a frog-creature named Jar-Jar Binks than any examination of the "dark side". Add to this scatological humor that would make Shrek blush and a fifteen-minute racing sequence cum videogame commercial, it's easy to see why so many fans were ready to declare the *Star Wars* franchise dead.

But a funny thing happened on the way to Mos Eisley. While the gaudy special effects, wooden acting, and amateurish dialogue distracted audiences, George Lucas was busy constructing a political parable about the death of a democracy.

As if to make the point that world-shattering crises rarely announce themselves, the chain of events that would lead to the end of the Lucas' fictional democracy is set off by an innocuous trade dispute. As the opening crawl of the *Phantom Menace* explains:

"Turmoil has engulfed the Galactic Republic. The taxation of trade routes to outlying star systems is in dispute.

Hoping to resolve the matter with a blockade of deadly battleships, the greedy Trade Federation has stopped all shipping to the small planet of Naboo."

That's right. This interstellar swashbuckling epic begins with a disagreement over taxes. As the film's title implies, the leader of the "greedy Trade Federation" is the mysterious Darth Sidious, a robe-wearing baddie who's obviously destined to be the emperor of the original films. Though never explicitly mentioned in the film, it's pretty clear that this goofy-named villain is also the alter ego of Galactic Senator Palpatine from Naboo. That's right. There's a "Galactic Senate."

Under the guidance of Sidious/Palpatine, the Trade Federation invades the planet of Naboo and holds its people hostage, which leads us to our first look at what C-Span would be like in outer space. In an effort to persuade the Republic to send help, Naboo's leader Queen Amidala pleads with the legislature, only to have the motion tabled under "Section 523A." Out of desperation, Amidala (under the guidance of Sen. Palpatine) calls for the ouster of the Supreme Chancellor, which eventually leads to the election of Senator Palpatine to be the new leader of the Republic on a "sympathy vote."

Whew! Are you still with me? Anyone expecting to see the transition from Republic to Empire to be a non-stop battle between the forces of good and evil would have to deal with a few hours of legislative deal-making first. Is it any wonder why



audiences tuned out this portion of the film? Hell, I almost fell asleep typing this stuff.

But the portrayal of Palpatine does stand in contrast to the earlier films' lack of ambiguity. While a coup of some sort would have been a quick and easy way to explain away the origins of the Empire, this Senator is playing by grifter's rules. Why steal something when you can trick them into giving it away? Through a manufactured crisis for which he's responsible, this Senator from a tiny planet was able to undermine confidence in the duly-elected leader and take the position for himself.

This may seem ludicrous to some, but the parallels to local politics are all too real. Residents of California lived through a phony crisis of their own a few years ago thanks to the deregulation schemes of former Republican Governor Pete Wilson and the President's buddies at Enron. In the months following the California power crisis, the public campaign to undermine sitting Governor Gray Davis' leadership gained steam in large part to the financial support of state GOP leaders like Darrel Issa and aided by a public gullible enough to believe that California's woes were the fault of Davis (who warned about an impending crisis for months prior to the rolling blackouts that dominated the headlines).

In the end, Davis was recalled and replaced by Pete Wilson's handpicked successor, actor Arnold Schwarzenegger. When it was revealed that Schwarzenegger met with Enron executives during the height of the crisis, the final piece of the puzzle fell into place. While it's not quite as straightforward as the one-man scenario in Lucas' film, the way the perpetrators of these twin catastrophes were able to turn the public's out-

rage to their political advantage would make Machiavelli proud.

With the 2002 entry in the franchise, *Attack of the Clones*, Lucas took things a step further. Having already shown how a Senator from a tiny planet snuck his way into the Supreme Chancellorship, the second episode concerns Palpatine's consolidation of power by, once again, manufacturing a crisis and taking advantage of the ensuing fear and confusion. The convoluted scenario involving a clone army isn't really worth trying to unravel here, but suffice it to say that the ensuing war provides the perfect excuse for an "emergency powers" resolution, via the easily manipulated Senator Jar-Jar Binks. (At the time the movie came out, our President, a former drunk who's unable to speak in complete sentences, was still basking in his post 9/11 afterglow. So the notion that the man-child Jar-Jar would go into politics isn't that farfetched).

Once again, an analogous situation can be found in our recent history. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the Congress hastily approved a laundry list of Bush Administration requests under the Orwellian name The USA PATRIOT Act. The common thread holding the proposals together was a lot more about consolidating power within the executive branch than effectiveness in fighting terrorists. (Forgive me if I missed the part of the 9/11 Commission report that concerned what Mohammed Atta was reading at the library.) The debate is still raging about the effectiveness of these "emergency powers", but the fact that the Act itself was printed in the middle of the night and passed before anyone had a chance to read it does raise some disturbing questions about the motives of those involved. Though the terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon obviously weren't work of evil Republicans hiding in the shadows, the eagerness of the ruling party to exploit the fear and confusion of the American public should serve as a wakeup call.

As Lucas put it in an interview with *Time* magazine to promote *Clones*, the de-



struction of democratic governments is almost always an inside:

“All democracies turn into dictatorships—but not by coup. The people give their democracy to a dictator, whether it’s Julius Caesar or Napoleon or Adolf Hitler. Ultimately, the general population goes along with the idea...How does a good person go bad, and how does a democracy become a dictatorship? It isn’t that the Empire conquered the Republic, it’s that the Empire is the Republic.” (Corliss)

That’s the lesson hidden within the new *Star Wars* films. Despite what we want to believe about the strength of our own democracy, most despots don’t seize power; they convince the public to give it to them. It’s understandable that audiences haven’t responded to the political themes in these films. After all, these are the same people who are too busy following the ins and outs of the Michael Jackson trial to pay attention to more boring stuff like the Bush Administration coddling human rights abusers while extolling the praises of democracy abroad, the gradual shifting of the tax burden onto the backs of the poor and middle class, or the looming healthcare crisis. Is it any wonder that they tune out the interstellar Senate hearings while waiting for another fart joke or light saber fight? Perhaps fans will finally start paying attention with the

final installment in the series, in which Lucas’ fictional despot takes a lesson from Joseph Stalin and goes on a bloody purge of his political enemies. But I guess that all depends on whether or not there’s another runaway bride or vegetative woman in Florida to distract us.

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Book Review: *St. Vidicon to the Rescue*, by Christopher Stasheff

By Christopher Garcia

Oh, sweet St. Vidicon, please let my word processing program defeat the best efforts of Finagle and allow me to send my review of Christopher Stasheff’s novel on your after-life and times to the good people at *Some Fantastic*.

OK, with that required piece of Post-Modernist humor out of the way, I can proceed. Chris Stasheff has been around for just about as long as there have been people looking for good-humored sf. He’s never really gotten the attention that Bobby Aspirin

or even Spider Robinson have received over the years. He’s best known for his Warlock series of novels, in one of which, *The Warlock Unlocked*, he introduces his readers to St. Vidicon.

St. Vidicon, who I always want to say is actually St. Vicodin, is the monk who served as the trouble-shooter for the Vatican in a period where folks are fleeing the Catholic Church in favor of Reverend Sun’s. The Pope makes a deal to get on the air in most of the major countries in the world

and make his case. A resistor goes bad and then Father Vidicon grabs both ends and allows the broadcast to be completed, saving the Catholic Church and becoming a Martyr at the same time. This gets him named St. Vidicon and he is made the patron saint of Computers and High-Tech.

This mythos is great, and as I understand it, has been introduced in the Warlock series and a couple of other stories before. That's the easy stuff—the things that are already fully-grown and ready to head out on their horse into the fields of Readership. The rest of the story is a bit tougher. Tony Ricci is a tech who can fix just about anything. He's also a guy who is lonely and a HUGE geek. We're talking about the type of person who could actually give a tour of a Computer History Museum; he's that big a loser (or so says the guy who works at a Computer History Museum). He goes to a job at a company that has been having a very structured problem that they couldn't solve. Tony comes in and quickly gets a handle on it. He also meets a gorgeous doll of a woman who is a tech-nut too and seems more than a little interested in good ole Tony.

The love story aspect is good, and at times actually carries along what I found to be an otherwise dull real world. The real interest in this one is the world that comes to Tony through the computer screen. That very structured problem turns out to be the Gospel of St. Vidicon as he struggles against Finagle and other lesser imps of technological chaos. The tales told of St. Vicodin... I mean St. Vidicon's adventures are what really drive the story ahead. After St. Vidicon brings Tony in to his role of solving people's technological issues, he gains the ability to intervene in various ways by becoming small and actually fixing problems like stopped sparkers and the like. This was actually not as entertaining as the portions of the story that

dealt with St. Vidicon's adventures with gremlins and other beasties. The writing of St. Vidicon's missions is decidedly Old World, with 'hast's and 'thou's and 'doth's popping up all over. There is a bit of that in the Tony stories, but not nearly to the same level.

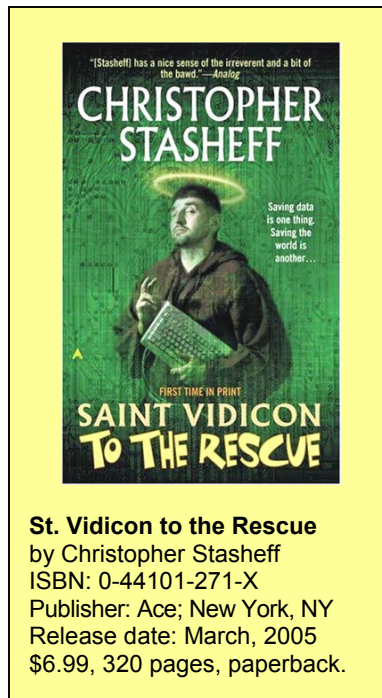
As St. Vidicon helps Tony with his love life, we are in the most interesting portion of the story.

Vidicon is interesting, far more so than Tony. I wanted more of Vidicon and his adventures and less of Tony. Tony's character is interesting, but once he gets into the world that Vidicon lives in, he loses a lot of his strength as a personality.

The writing here is very good, and for some reason I got the feeling that Stasheff was an Englishman writing in America, though it turns out that is not the case. He's just an American who has obviously read his Pratchett, Adams and all those other great comedic writers. Then again, he was producing material like this before any of those guys I mentioned, so maybe it's just a funny guy voice that I associate with the British Isles.

One of the other issues I had was that it was really a book of vignettes set together and strung through with the love story. That sort of disjointedness bugged me, as the individual stories ranged from great to OK, but the through line was weak save for the Sandy/Tony relationship stuff. I might have liked this better as a series of short stories, that were separate, but as a novel, I was a little disappointed.

I'll say this for *St. Vidicon to the Rescue*: it's a cute little story. It's not great, it's not something that would make me want to go and buy every book by Stasheff and read them without getting out of my chair, but it is worth reading if you've got time on your hands. It's a good train book, as I discovered on a trip to San Francisco. It's entertaining enough that you lose track of the tedium



of the trip and not overly taxing. The laughs are just big enough that you'll get one or two crazy looks from those around you, but it's not so uproarious that you'll get taken in as a mad man.

So, thank you, St. Vidicon, for allowing me to make it through this review without a disk crash.

Christopher J. Garcia edits The Drink Tank on eFanzines.com and is a writer, filmmaker and historian from San Jose, CA. He has had work appear a bunch of places a bunch of times and he is damn proud of it.

DVD Review: *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events*

By Caroline-Isabelle Caron

I never in my life thought I'd ever write this: I liked the movie better than the books. *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* is better paced and more detailed than Daniel Handler's (a.k.a. Lemony Snicket) first three books in the series, adapted by Robert Gordon (screenplay) and Brad Silberling (director). By no means a perfect movie, it nevertheless solves many of the inherent problems of the novels, particularly in character development and in some of the plot devices.

Granted, the Lemony Snicket books are youth literature and as such cannot bare the same depth than an adult novel. Nevertheless, if anything, J.K. Rowling has taught us that a youth novel need not be simplistic, repetitive or caricatural, all of which these novels are, to the point of being tedious.

On the other hand, the movie is most entertaining.

Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events opens with a delightfully animated sequence, the fake beginning of a movie about the cutest "Little Elf". The sequence is cut short by the voice of Lemony Snicket (Jude Law) who informs us to leave the theatre at once if we do not wish to witness the sad story of the Baudelaire children. Just like in the books, Snicket acts as the narrator, his comments just as depressed and hopeless. We are then introduced to the Baudelaire children, in much the same manner as in the first pages of *The Bad Beginning*.

Violet the 14-year-old inventor (Emily Browning), Klaus the 12-year-old bookworm (Liam Aiken), and baby Sunny the biter (Kara and Shelby Hoffman), are presented playing on their favorite beach, deserted under a thick fog. They are met by Mr. Poe (Timothy Spall), a family friend and banker, who comes to announce that their parents have died in the terrible fire that has destroyed their house. Left with nothing but the family fortune Violet will inherit upon her majority, they are to be

given over to their closest living relative (meaning the one that lives the closest...) their "Dear Uncle Olaf", of whom they have never heard.

We then meet Count Olaf (Jim Carrey) and his theatre troop—composed of a bald man (Luis Guzmán), a hook-handed man (Jamie Harris), a person of

undeterminable gender (Craig Ferguson), and two white-faced women (the hilarious Jennifer Coolidge and Jane Adams). Olaf proves abusive and his house filthy. The children are forced to execute an inordinate amount of chores for Olaf and his minions. The group soon hires Justice Strauss (Catherine O'Hara as good as usual), who is naively sucked into the evil plan to marry Violet to Olaf so he can get his hands of the Baudelaire money. This plot defeated, we follow the children as they are sent to live with their distant Uncle Monty Montgomery (Bill Connolly), the herpetologist from *The*



Reptile Room, who is then murdered by Olaf mimicking as a newly hired research assistant. The children then go live with their equally distant Aunt Josephine Anwhistle (a perfectly hysterical Meryl Streep), a multiphobic grammarian who falls under the charms of the disguised Olaf, as in *The Wide Window*. Let me also mention the striking performances of Cedric the Entertainer as The Detective (who proves he can actually act) and of the uncredited Dustin Hoffman in the role of The Critic, the latter appearing because his grand daughters play Sunny. In the *Marvelous Marriage* sequence, the two men are simply hilarious and the DVD extras *Dismal Deletions* and *Obnoxious Outtakes* prove that much of their performance was improvised and that sadly most of it ended up on the cutting room floor.


The plot follows closely the general outline of the three first Lemony Snicket books, though many parts of books two and three were streamlined or simply rewritten. Indeed, *The Reptile Room* and *The Wide Window* both have rather tedious plots, sometimes quite repetitive, where the Baudelaire children have to circumvent not only Olaf's attempts on their lives, but also the sheer stupidity of most of the adult characters. In the books, the main reason why Olaf and his minions constantly get away is not that they are cleverer than the good guys; it's because the good guys are inane! In the movie, the adult characters appear to be naïve, but not retarded, as they are too self-involved to realize the children are in danger. They are thwarted by Olaf and his troop because they cannot believe someone can be as evil as he his. Strangely enough, Olaf is actually here a more subtle and multifaceted character than in the novels. In the later, Olaf is simply evil: he is violent, cunning, murderous and proud or it. He is

often seen as inflicting violence on the children. We see him push Aunt Josephine in eel-infested waters to her certain death. There is nothing good in Olaf, and that is all there is to him. He has no other significant character distinction. Carrey's Olaf is equally evil, but much less blatantly violent. For instance, he does not shout for all the world to hear that he will kill the Baudelaire children, goading Mr. Poe and the police, as he does

at the end of *The Wide Window*. Rather his threats are understated and whispered, and they are also so elaborate as to inevitably fail. He is seen abandoning Josephine alone in a raft to be attacked by the killer eels, but he does not actually kill her. Carrey's Olaf is also quite a pathetic actor, which give him a strangely clownesque quality that gives him depth. As unbelievable as it may seem, Carrey brings detail and subtlety to a character that otherwise would be completely one-faceted. The same can be said of his theatre troop, which only serves as décor in the books, but who is here brought to life, even with very little dialogue. They too are pathetic and clownlike. They seem to follow Olaf as one would follow a charismatic leader, rather than because they too are evil, as it is in the books. Only the hook-handed man seems as bad as Olaf, but only because of his role in the marriage plot and

the investigation of Uncle Monty's death.

The children and all the other characters are depicted much as they are on the book covers, in equally gloomy décors. The movie's sets, props and costumes are a clever mix of fin-de-siècle and 1940s, emphasizing the darkness of the plot. Rick Heinrichs surpassed himself in this movie. He understood how this look was clearly intended by Brett Helquist himself, as so many of his characters refer back to authors and personalities of the



DVD Release Date: April, 2005
Starring: Jim Carrey, Jude Law, Liam Aiken, Emily Brown-ing, Kara Hoffman, Shelby Hoffman, and Catherine O'Hara
Director: Brad Silberling
Screenwriter: Robert Gordon
Rated: PG
Studio: Paramount Home Video
Special Features: Commentary tracks by Brad Silberling, Lemony Snicket and Brad Silberling; Bad Beginnings (3 Featurettes); Deleted Scenes and Outtakes.

period, such as Poe and Baudelaire, to name only two. Nevertheless, the look of the movie is strangely mid-1990s, as it appeared in Smashing Pumpkins (*Tonight, Tonight*) or Nine Inch Nails (*The Perfect Drug*) music videos. It is a fake fin-de-siècle, setting the movie as a clear and undeniable fiction. This look is also marvelously rendered in the animated end credits, and in the DVD menus. The end credits in particular are simply amazing and are a notable example of the recent trend to fill end credits with as much content as the movie itself, trying (unfortunately in vain) to keep the audience in their seats past “The End”. In this case the 10 minute-long credits are even more luscious and detailed than in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, which is saying much. The menus are simply marvelous. The ubiquitous eye icon even allows one to change the animation in the background.

For all its many characters and settings, *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* remains before anything else a Jim Carrey vector. Although in principal a movie about the woes of the Baudelaire children being tossed from one foster parent to another while being chased by Olaf, the movie's screenplay and all the DVD extras clearly show that Carrey is at the heart of every scene, and the character of Count Olaf the product of the greatest effort. An entire section of DVD extras, entitled *Bad Beginnings*, show the elaborate work done by Carrey and Silberling. In *The Making of a Bad Actor*, we follow them as they build the character of Olaf, in look and in background, fleshing out not only Olaf “au naturel” but also his performances as Olaf's alter egos, Stephano the mock-herpetologist and Captain Sham. Going much farther than simple costume tests, we witness the creation of the character's self-descriptions, background stories, and mannerisms. This is especially clear in *Interactive*



Olaf, where we can watch Carrey's screen tests side by side. In collaboration, Carrey and Silberling put weeks of work in the constitution of Olaf. Silberling's director commentary goes even farther in explaining this collaboration as well as much of the movies cinematics.

The result is a movie where Carrey overshadows everything and everyone, to the point of being his usually annoying self. This said, Carrey's tendency to overact serves Olaf quite well. In the end, one can only be impressed by Carrey's work here, but we are left wishing that as much work had been put in the other characters, especially the children. Indeed, it becomes rapidly clear that the latter were born out of Silberling's reading of the books only. Though this is by no means a problem, no matter how competent the young actors prove themselves to be, the children's lack of character development outside of the books leaves them a little flat. Yet, the highlight of the DVD is a direct result of Carrey's and Silberling's collaborative

work. In *Brad Silberling and the Real Lemony Snicket Commentary*, an unrecognizable and uncredited Carrey poses as Snicket, brought to a screening of the movie under false pretenses by a remarkably sneaky Silberling. For the duration of the movie, Snicket bemoans Hollywood, the movie's existence, its scenes, the poor actors who have compromised their careers by acting in the movie, and of course his books. This commentary track is hilarious and both men manage a wonderful acting performance where Silberling only breaks into quiet laughter once at Snicket's remarks. The DVD is worth watching just for this track.

Caroline-Isabelle Caron is an Assistant Professor at the Department of History at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. Her research focuses on North American popular culture, primarily among French-speakers.

DVD Review: *Donnie Darko: The Director's Cut*

By Richard Fuller

Donnie Darko: The Director's Cut (DD), a debut feature film by writer-director Richard Kelly, is a jigsaw collection of genres with some of the pieces missing, I think. Maybe that's why the movie is addictive to its fans. Call it *The Director's Cult*.

Deeply troubled 16-year-old Donnie (Jake Gyllenhaal) is the main character in *Donnie Darko*, a title so self-conscious it seems to stare into a mirror—like the movie itself.

Several genres arise when Donnie meets a giant rabbit named Frank (James Duval) about 11-plus minutes into the movie. Frank's mask has skullish teeth. Is he related to the Grim Reaper, making this Horror? Back from the dead, making it a Ghost flick? Near the film's end, Donnie shoots and kills a young kid named Frank, who's wearing a Halloween rabbit costume. A Darko Film Noir? When rabbit Frank appears in the movie's present, he has time-traveled *from his death* into the past, making this Science Fiction/Fantasy. Why isn't Frank after revenge, making this Science Fiction/Crime?

In his comments on *DD*, Kelly often refers to comic books: Donnie's last name suggests a superhero; an eye filling the screen is a comic book image. For me, Donnie's last name is a pun-ny comment on his criminal acts: he's accidentally burned down an empty house and served time in jail. That big eye is a cliché meaning you're about to "enter" a character's mind.

Kelly says, "There's nothing evil about the rabbit at all." But Frank tells Donnie to ax a water main, which floods his high school. He burns down the house of a self-help guru, which is bad and good: the guru is involved in a kiddie porn ring. Did Frank enter the guru's eyeball and into his evil mind? And did Frank consider that if Donnie's

caught for these actions, he could go to jail again?

During their first meeting, Frank tells Donnie the world will end in 28 days, 6 hours, 42 minutes, 12 seconds. While most specific about when, Frank is vague about *how* the world will end. Donnie's life could have ended if he weren't outside because of Frank: an airplane engine falls onto his room! Are you in an *Airplane!* disaster genre?

Regarding Kelly's love of comics, the movie's other characters, as in many comic books, are goodies or baddies. Some of the latter are close to being flat, cartoonish caricatures but the movie is so well cast that most of the performances are "round."



Kelly says his picture is about possibilities, which seems to mean questioning everything: the rigid foolishness of some high school teachers, the meaning (if any) of life and death, the probability that we all die alone, the possibility of God, the cruelly indifferent accidents that take lives, the difficulty of trying to overcome

mental illness even with the aid of a compassionate therapist, the possibility of time travel.

As you'll perceive from the above list, *Donnie Darko* is multi-layered.

Near the film's end, Donnie knows he's going to die because he's chosen to do so—alone—and he's *laughing* because "there will be so much to look forward to." God?

Why does he joyously commit suicide? One, to save the life of his true-love Gretchen (Jena Malone). The rabbit is involved because Frank was driving the car that ran over and killed Gretchen. Donnie shoots Frank, without his rabbit mask of course, in the right eye with his father's pistol. Two—this is visually confusing and how would Donnie know it's happening?—he will also save the lives of his mother and young sister on an airplane.

You're inside the plane staring at mother and daughter when a storm starts to shake it apart. Then the movie cuts to a shot of a stormy sky. Miles in the distance you see a tiny speck falling downward. The plane? One of its engines? Kelly's shooting script indicates it's an engine. But I defy *anyone* to say for sure what that falling speck is onscreen.

That storm looks as scary as the one in *The Wizard of Oz*. In his shooting script, Kelly calls it a Time Portal. How are you supposed to know that? Looks like a storm to my wide-open non-comic book eyes.

Kelly says, "Life is archetypes." My dictionary defines *archetype*: "An original model or type after which other similar things are patterned." Most of the actors in this movie are so original that their performances in other movies do not seem modeled on their characters in *DD*. Kelly's comment doesn't apply to his movie.

Let's look at the movie's main storylines and see if there are any archetypes:

Preface. As the film begins, you hear thunder but see no evidence of a storm. Or a Time Portal! Shooting script says it's 11am. Looks about 6am to my eyes. A boy (Donnie of course) is asleep in a road, his bicycle by the road's edge. The boy awakes and gets up.

Family. As the boy rides his bike, you hear a song, "Don't ask me what you know is true..." Kelly says, "songs are part of the dialogue" and admits, "I pay too much attention to the lyrics." I hate "editorializing" songs and want to mute them. The kid bikes past a sign—"Middlesex Halloween Carnival Oct 26th-30th"—and into a suburban yard. You see his father Eddie (Holmes Osborne), older sister Elizabeth (Maggie Gyllenhaal, Jake's real sister), younger sister

Samantha (Daveigh Chase) and mother Rose (Mary McDonnell). Biker enters the house and goes to the refrigerator with a note on it: "Where is Donnie?" Later, his mother asks Donnie where he goes at night. (To meet a rabbit who asks if he believes in time travel!) He's seeing a therapist for \$200 an hour. Sane news? He has a smart, loving household. Are you in an archetypal "healing" family flick?

Ghostly Rabbit. Title on the screen: October 2, 1988. (You see a number of title dates throughout the movie as you countdown to the world's end.) Thunder. A voiceover says, "Wake up." Donnie gets up and goes outside to meet the rabbit. In this meeting between the two, Frank is an archetypal Good rabbit because Donnie is asleep on a golf course when that airplane engine falls on his room. Later, the archetypal family stays in a hotel where Dad says to Mom about their son, "Somebody was watching over him." Does he mean God? Is that rabbit an archetypal Christ? Does Donnie crucify him?

High School. A school bus appears to be on its side (symbolic!) as Donnie and his two buddies get out and the bus seems to tilt upright. There's a cross atop the school but it's not Catholic. The goodie teachers are couple Karen (Drew Barrymore, a key producer in getting the movie made) and Kenneth (Noah Wyle). A Graham Greene story Karen teaches is a

preview of the school's punk baddie breaking into a woman's house. Teaching that story also gets Karen fired. Baddie teacher Kitty Farmer (Beth Grant) inspires Donnie to tell her to shove an item up her anus. Donnie publicly calls her self-help lecture friend Jim Cunningham (Patrick Swazye) an anti-Christ and burns down his home. After



DVD Release Date: April, 2005
Starring: Jake Gyllenhaal, Holmes Osborne, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Daveigh Chase, Mary McDonnell, James Duval
Director: Richard Kelly
Screenwriter: Richard Kelly
Rated: R
Studio: Fox Home Entertainment
Special Features: Commentary by writer-director Richard Kelly and director Kevin Smith; Production diary with optional commentary by director of photography Steven Poster; Featurettes: "They Made Me Do It Too: The Cult of Donnie Darko," Storyboard-to-screen featurette; "#1 Fan: A Darko-mentary"; Director's cut theatrical trailer

Donnie breaks a water pipe, feces are found in Kitty Farmer's office! Considering the cross atop the school, is this a "holy shit" pun by Kelly? Guess this storyline is about archetypal Goodies versus Baddies.

Grandma Death. Donnie's father almost hits an old woman—kids call her Grandma Death (Patience Cleveland)—crossing the road to her empty mailbox. She whispers something in Donnie's ear. (You later learn she said everyone dies alone.) Donnie's teacher Kenneth says she was a nun named Roberta Sparrow, taught at his school and wrote a book called *The Philosophy of Time Travel*. That book becomes a "character" as you see excerpts from it onscreen. You suspect Donnie will time travel but you don't guess it's to save lives by committing suicide. She also warns that the storm—a Time Portal?—is coming. She and Frank both know the end is coming? In a way, when Frank swings his car to avoid hitting Grandma Death and kills Gretchen, Grandma is also responsible for Gretchen's death. This isn't archetypal. It's confusing. Kelly is trying to tie up all the loose ends. But Frank and Grandma Death don't "tie up."

Dr. Lilian Thurman. When Donnie mentions meeting a new friend named Frank, his therapist (Katharine Ross) wonders if he's real or imaginary. In the movie he's both: real when Donnie shoots him, imaginary when Donnie pokes his bathroom mirror and Frank appears. Is he Donnie's "murdered" side? Are you into *The Three Faces of Donnie* and multiple personalities? The therapist also talks with Donnie about God, finally deciding Donnie is an agnostic. Near the end, when his therapist says Donnie can stop taking his medicine because it's placebos, the implication is that he isn't mentally ill. Why, then, does she talk to Donnie's parents about increasing his medicine? Is the therapist lying to all of them? Donnie lied by omission to his therapist about finding his father's gun. Is the archetypal patient-therapist relationship in this movie one of lies?

"I couldn't figure out," says Richard Kelly, "what all this meant."

What it all means to me, a non-therapist, is that

Donnie Darko the movie is schizophrenic with too many non-cohesive genres. However, the dialogue and acting by *everyone* in the movie is sanely memorable. And the improvs are great. Mary McDonnell added her character's constant drinking because of her troubled son. When she tells her husband that Donnie called her a bitch, Holmes Osborne says she's not a bitch, improvising, "You're bitching." Brilliant! Jake Gyllenhaal apparently mimicked Richard Kelly for the character of Donnie. Perfect!

About the genres being pieces from jigsaws that don't fit together: *DD* cultists don't care, as you'll see in the DVD's trivial pursuit of fans and a junkie who made a home move about wanting to be Donnie and ends up kissing Kelly on the cheek. Holy mush! A good extra for admirers of the movie's actors is by cinematographer Steven Poster annotating the film's shoot. A curio extra has Richard Kelly and Kevin Smith (*Clerks*, *Dogma*, etc) talking to each other during the running of the movie. They don't say much specifically about the picture but do add curious asides. For instance, Donnie's sister Elizabeth is dating Frank. The real guy not the rabbit. Anyone who figures that out should get the Sherlock Holmes Award.

In spite of my problems with what *DD* is really about, I enjoyed revisiting the movie several times and give it the Harvey Award. *Harvey* (1950) is about James Stewart's relationship with a rabbit who's several inches taller than Frank. And invisible. Richard Kelly deserves this award because he very bravely *shows* his rabbit.

Kelly's at work on a new movie. I hope he avoids the sophomore jinx. But please: keep wonderful composers Michael Andrews and Mike Bauer and cinematographer Stephen Poster, and send any songs to a planet far, far away with no reverse time travel!

Richard Fuller was Philadelphia Magazine's film critic for over twenty years. He was The Philadelphia Inquirer's book columnist and reviewer for over thirty years. He also taught film and review-writing courses at several universities.

DVD Review: *Dawn of the Dead: Unrated Director's Cut* (2004)

By Matthew Appleton

Last year on my birthday, my wife and I went to see the new *Dawn of the Dead* at the theater. It was a rare night out after the birth of our son five months earlier, and having grown up watching the various *Dead* films, she was incredibly interested in seeing a new version of the George Romero classic. Yet, despite knowing ahead of time that these were not the shuffling, almost comical zombies we've grown up watching, we were both shaken by the experience. Later I would realize that what we experienced was unadulterated shock.

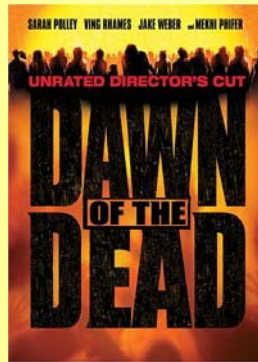
Given the success of the first *Resident Evil* film and *28 Days Later*, even one of Romero's zombies eventually would have come up with the idea to remake one of the *Dead* films with the new breed unleashed in those two films. In fact, from a purely self-preservation standpoint—the Christian theological aspect is certainly more troubling—zombies always struck me as the Washington Generals of the horror world. How inept did you really have to be in order to succumb to them? The only way someone intelligent becomes zombie cuisine is in a situation where you're completely overrun and trapped by them.

However, just making the zombies a far greater threat wasn't enough for the producers of this edition of *Dawn of the Dead*. The shock from which neither of us recovered comes at the beginning of the film. Unlike the original film, which takes place in a world where the zombie infestation is an ongoing problem, the opening sequence of *Dawn of the Dead* shows us the world as it starts falling apart. The

movie starts by introducing us to Ana (Sarah Polley), a nurse who is ending her shift at the hospital and heading home. As she's finishing her duties and making sure that the nurse relieving her is brought up to speed, we're given the first of a few of clues that something unusual is going on. A man bit in a barfight is now unexplainably in the ICU, and on her drive home, Ana bypasses radio stations giving news updates she has no interest in listening to. Most disconcerting, while showering with her husband, she misses a special news announcement airing on TV—a news announcement that the audience doesn't get to witness either.

When she wakes up the following morning, hell literally breaks loose. A neighbor's daughter, whom she is friendly with, attacks Ana and her husband, killing him in the process. When he suddenly revives after her futile efforts to save his life, she finds herself under attack from him. She's able to eventually flee the scene in her car, but not without witnessing other disturbing grotesque acts of violence being committed by zombies and by humans who are just trying to save their own lives. At a couple points during the carnage, the skyline of the city comes into view. Fires rage throughout the city, which is obviously in utter chaos. Clearly, the end times arrived overnight; it's quite possibly the most effective piece of movie making I've ever seen when it comes to depicting such a collapse of civilization.

Eventually, Ana meets up with other survivors who are fleeing for their lives. She finds out from a



DVD Release Date: Feb., 2005
Starring: Sarah Polley, Ving Rhames, Mekhi Phifer, Jake Weber, Ty Burrell, Michael Kelly
Director: Zack Snyder
Screenwriter: James Gunn
Rated: Unrated (original release rated R)
Studio: Universal Studios
Special Features: Commentary by Zack Snyder and Producer Eric Newman; Director's Cut with nine additional minutes of footage; Featurettes: "The Lost Tape: Andy's Terrifying Last Days Revealed," "Raising the Dead"—turning actors into undead killers, "Attack of the Living Dead"—a look at the most memorable zombie kills, "Splitting Headaches: Anatomy of Exploding Heads," "Special Bulletin: We Interrupt This Program!"—complete news coverage of the attacks; Undead (deleted) scenes.

few of them that the zombies overran the locations broadcast as government safe zones over the radio, and immediately they bicker over the best thing to do as a group. Kenneth (Ving Rhames), a police officer, wants to head for Ft. Pastor—a nearby military installation announced as a safe zone to look for his brother—while Andre (Mekhi Phifer) and Michael (Jake Weber) want to head over to a nearby mall, thinking it might be safe. Seeing there's no way he can make it to his brother on his own, Kenneth joins them, Ana and Andre's pregnant wife, Luda on their way to the mall. After breaking in, they reseal the doors and eventually find themselves trapped inside with a small security contingent as well as a few other latecomers whom they manage to allow inside while holding back the horde of zombies that has congregated outside.

On its surface, the film shares the same basic plot as George Romero's 1978 camp classic. However, differences abound. Writer James Gunn (no relation to the sf author/critic) has removed much of the social commentary found in the original screenplay. Instead, we get a larger number of survivors and much of the drama comes from the interaction of these people, whose wide variety of personalities frequently and violently clashes. Furthermore, the restructured plot makes this movie a self-contained event, unlike the original, which clearly takes place in the world where *Night of the Living Dead* took place. As a result, the group of survivors in this mall is not aware of how the disease animating the dead spreads, and their ability to ascertain this and act accordingly becomes a plot-point for the film.

Yet, many elements from the original find their way into this version, albeit in a mutated fashion. Ken Foree, who starred as one of the survivors in the original version, returns in a cameo as a fundamentalist televangelist, delivering his famous "When there is no more room in hell, the dead will

walk the earth" line from a new, inflammatory perspective. Luda's previously mentioned pregnancy parallels that of the female protagonist in the original, but she ends up bitten, which carries great implications for their child. The living still experience issues in regard to accepting the zombies are not their loved ones anymore, but unlike in Romero's original version, the emotional implications of watching a loved one become something else are much more fully explored. We're also finally treated to a scene where the zombies finally overrun the mall.

In the end, they are not forced out of the mall they way the survivors of Romero's 1978 original

were. Instead, they realize that they just exist in a self-made prison and come to the conclusion that this is not the way they want to keep living. Unfortunately, a mercy/rescue mission they undertake for Andy, another

survivor in a gun shop across from the mall, goes awry, thus causing them to flee the mall before they're truly ready.

Overall, the film is a very solid production. The picture works effectively as a horror film that conveys the horror of its protagonists effectively. Because we get to know and understand the protagonists of the film, we're better able to empathize with them. While a few of the minor characters are strictly stock, they survive their purpose well, helping to make the point about how difficult it is to accept death, especially when they're not inanimate. Even more important in a movie such as this, with one major exception most of the characters really don't do anything stupid per se, and even that exception wasn't lethal to the group as a whole. They make understandable mistakes, but nothing that makes you want to scream at the screen, "What the hell are you doing!?"

However, you can voice that sentiment when watching the "Special Bulletin: We Interrupt This



Program!" featurette. As one of the two featurettes specifically designed as supplemental material to the story, I expected this series of news broadcasts to at least come close to the quality of the movie itself—especially when considering how well news snippets were used in the movie. Sadly, it looks like it was done on an even cheaper budget than the original *Night of the Living Dead* and is so amateurish that it's not even worth a second look. It's a shame because it contains a few more otherwise nicely done homages to Romero's original *Dawn of the Dead* were thrown into this piece, and it could've been so much better.

Thankfully, "The Lost Tape: Andy's Terrifying Last Days Revealed" makes up for the disappointment of "Special Bulletin." Here, we can expect amateurish production because the tape is nothing more than Andy speaking to his video-camera at various times during the unfolding of the movie. It's a nice insight into his character as we really don't get to know much about him since he is cut off from the rest of the survivors until the very end, yet still comes across as rather likeable in his limited exposure. Interestingly, thanks to the timestamp we know that one month passes during the course of the movie, and that because the tape

was found by survivors after the end of the undead epidemic that at some indeterminate point after the events of this film the menace is no more, which infers a limited timespan in which a sequel can take place.

The rest of the special features are the garden variety you'd expect to find in a production such as this. The makers show what went into the zombie makeup and the special effects behind some of the more spectacular "kills," and we get to see some deleted—the main menu calls them "undead"—scenes that were rightfully left on the cutting room floor. As can be expected, director Zach Snyder offers up a few insightful comments in his commentary track, but strangely he occasionally mocks his own film. The other "nuts and bolts" special features will probably only appeal to those who enjoy these types of things in the first place.

In all, this edition of *Dawn of the Dead* is a keeper. While it lacks the biting social consciousness of the original, it nonetheless is an excellent pastiche for the MTV generation. On a final note, make sure you watch the credits once they start rolling; that is unless like Steven Spielberg you prefer to keep the ending as upbeat as possible (at least as possible as it can be at that point).

DVD Review: *Finding Neverland*

By Edna Stumpf

Return with me now to an innocent turn-of-the-century time. Ladies and gentlemen wear evening dress to the British theatre and do not encounter torn tee shirts. Fairies are diminutive winged creatures that some claim to have sighted in their gardens. Neverland is not a piece of real estate. Even as a state of mind, it has not yet been located.

And Mr. James Barrie (Johnny Depp), gentleman playwright, has just had a flop.

His producer Charles Frohman (Dustin Hoffman) warns him to come up with a moneymaker. His ex-actress wife Mary (Radha Mitchell) gives him a stare a shade too cool for sympathy. When we visit their beservanted town house, we note that they maintain separate bedrooms.

Next morning in Kensington Gardens, as Mr. Barry romps with his Newfoundland Porthos (Sophie), he meets a family of four young brothers and their widowed mother, Sylvia Llewelyn Davies (Joe Prospero, Nick Boud, Luke Spell, Freddie Highmore, Kate Winslet). They charm him, he charms them in return, and before you can say "foreshadowing" he's calling at their residence and introducing games of pirates and Red Indians. (Yes, there are still Red Indians. Sorry.)

In the course of this admittedly obsessive relationship with Sylvia Davies and her brood, several things happen to James Barrie. He, a man who will never have children, nurtures someone else's bereaved sons. He loses his wife to another man. He

infuriates and then wins over the formidable Davies grandmother. (Julie Christie plays the widow of the novelist who invented Svengali—George du Maurier—and skillfully displays a wary insight into show-biz types.)

Finally, James Barrie writes *Peter Pan* and makes it a hit by inviting twenty-five bedazzled orphans to opening night. And, by introducing dog costumes, flying apparatus and fairies, he energizes and arguably revolutionizes the proper old proscenium stage.

The rest is history. Unfortunately, it's a history that contains Walt Disney. And Michael Jackson.

But that's not important right now. After several wary viewings, I've fallen in love with *Finding Neverland*. I was wary because, having written a thesis on the man, I know more about James Barrie than any normal person should.

Fact: there were five Davies sons, not four. Fact: Arthur Davies did not die of cancer until well after Barrie had attached himself to the family, and Davies wasn't crazy about him. Fact: having been traumatized by his older brother's death and his mother's subsequent breakdown, Barrie was emotionally and physically arrested at an early age. He was sexually dysfunctional. He was no pederast, but he wasn't husband material. And—a fact disclosed during the writer/director/producer conversation on this disc—there exists an exquisite engagement ring purchased by James Barrie for Sylvia Davies before her death from tuberculosis. *Just* before her death.

Do the psychological math on that one.

None of these unhappy facts cripple the flight of *Finding Neverland*. In his screenplay, David Magee deliberately truncated the original play by Allan Knee (*The Man Who Was Peter Pan*) at the

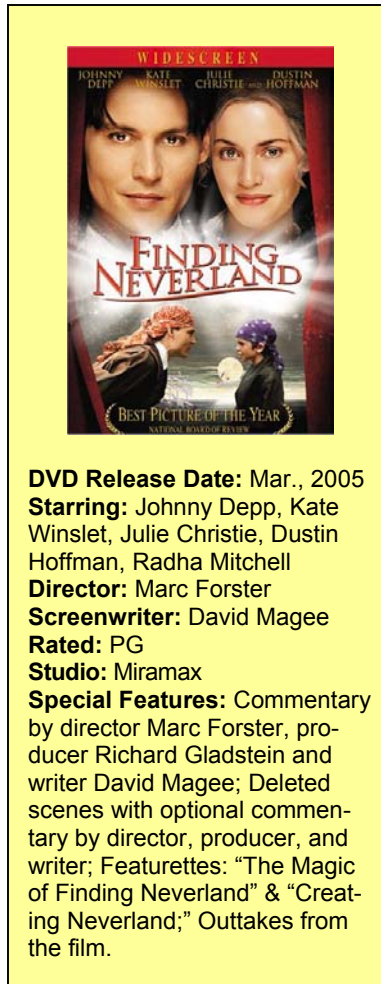
point of the subject's bittersweet triumph. As its makers insist, it is not the biopic of a virtually forgotten West Ender but rather a celebration of imagination when put into the service of love.

To a great extent, the actors sell it. Depp, with his adolescent looks and his ability to talk just like anyone in the known world—in this case a literate Scot—is a convincing if cosmeticized incarnation of Barrie. Dustin Hoffman finds comedy in the American Frohman, playing him as a natural cynic prone to indulgence and waylaid by enchantment. Kate Winslet is endearing as a beleaguered single mom bemused by an overqualified babysitter. Radha Mitchell and Julie Christie, in two borderline unsympathetic roles, succeed in clueing the viewer in to the downside of a youth obsession. (We first see Mary Barrie as a social climber before coming to understand her as a neglected wife. In a terrific visual bit, James and Mary simultaneously open the doors to their adjacent rooms. Behind Mary's we see Edwardian furniture. Behind James's opens a vista of an unknown land.)

This is one of those "prestige" period pieces, heavy on costume, intonation and character subtlety. And I might point out that a film so laden with production values plays especially well on DVD, where our curiosity as to nuance and detail is indulged

by behind-the-scenes lore. During a formal dinner, for instance, explosive laughter was induced from the child actors by the installation of a fart machine under the table. Now, aren't you glad you know that?

The special effects people (Gemma Jones is listed as production designer) deserve special credit for understanding their role: inject interest into the script by enhancing the theme. The play-



wright's now-famous fantasies of walking the plank and scrapping with Indians are done with a delicate stylization until their apotheosis on an actual London stage. From the "realism" of seeing actors do scenes in this play-within-a-movie we move to the Davies drawing room, where *Peter Pan* is recreated as a gift for a dying woman. Neverland suddenly becomes literal, and Sylvia enters it as a queen. It's a risky effect that might have fallen flat, but it strikes an expert and elegant balance. And incidentally tears your heart out.

All of which returns us to the theme of, well, the theme.

As regards *Peter Pan* itself, Barrie would have no hesitation. Shameless showman that he was, he would lean hard on the innocence of youth, the power of imagination, the importance of magic. The magic started coming apart for Barrie even as *Peter Pan* sent his career past the first star to the right and straight on till morning. Sylvia died. Cramped by his playfellow-style devotion, the Davies boys pulled away. Three later died; two by suicide, one of which was Peter (the bitterest brother, very remarkably played by Freddie Highmore). Barrie's last play, *Mary Rose*, is about a young mother who is stolen by fairies and ends an



unhappy ghost. It's a very psychologically acute play. It's never performed; the pain maturity brings not being a moneymaking theme.

There's hardly anyone in the known world, though, who hasn't heard of *Peter Pan*. In this sentimental masterpiece—a contradiction in terms, if

we care—Barrie found the perfect people on whom to lavish his childish love and the perfect vehicle in which to reveal his innermost obsession. He wrote from his wound, and he got his wish. At least as long as Americans search for the fountain of youth, Peter Pan will never die.

Fact: more children than we will ever track have been drawn into a lifelong enthusiasm for fantasy through their exposure to *Peter Pan*. (Walt Disney, okay.) Fact: James Barrie left all the proceeds of his famous play to the Great Ormond Street Orphanage. Fact: there's a statue of Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens. Barrie himself paid for it and the sophisticates think it's pretty funny. Fact: the kids love it.

Edna Stumpf was a regular Philadelphia Inquirer book reviewer for over 25 years, often writing about science fiction. She also guest-lectured for science fiction film courses.

DVD Review: *Spaceballs (Collector's Edition)*

By Caroline-Isabelle Caron

In many May, 2005 movie magazine editions, among the numerous pages focusing on the release of *Star Wars: Episode III, Revenge of the Sith*, appeared a simple one-page add. On a burnt sienna background, the mysterious silhouette of a large black helmeted head, behind which popped the head of a

very young, mustached Mel Brooks pointing up to four white-lettered words: "The Revenge of the Shtick." Though in the works since 2002, MGM has decided the release the two-disc collector's edition of *Spaceballs* in the midst of the *Episode III* hoopla. They could not have chosen a more appropriate time.

Spaceballs tells the story of the evil schemes of Dark Helmet (Rick Moranis), who helps planet Spaceballs (Brooks plays President Skroob) steal planet Druidia's air. It is up to the clueless rogue Lone Starr (Bill Pullman), the half-man, half-dog Barf (John Candy), the Druish Princess Vespa (Daphne Zuniga) and her android guardian Dot Matrix (voiced by Joan Rivers) to save the day. In the course of their adventures, they meet the evil Pizza the Hut (voice by Dom DeLuise), the everlasting know-it-all Yogurt (Brooks again, who teaches Starr all about the powers of the Schwartz), not to mention the hapless Colonel Sandurz (George Wyner) and a ship full of Assholes. Did I mention there was a circus?

Episode III has been out since May, and we are only now coming out of the "we-will-inundate-you-with-stuff" phase of the merchandizing of the movie. It is no secret that George Lucas's genius is as much in his cinematic vision than in his foresight to secure all merchandizing rights for the *Star Wars* franchise in 1977. Companies producing licensed products usually give over 12% profits to the franchise owner... Over 150 companies have acquired merchandizing licenses for the *Episode III* in France alone, for instance. In North America we have seen *Star Wars* branding on everything from Burger King to Pringles to M&M's, and everything in between. Those of us who have been alive since the early 1970s don't remember a time when there was no constant movie merchandizing. No wonder Mel Brooks thought something should be done about it! In 1987, he released *Spaceballs*. Brooks had not spoofed science fiction, having done horror, western, and silent movies already. *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* and *Planet of the Apes*, beware!

This film has not aged a day! Even the special effects have held up nicely to the nearly twenty-years since the movie's original release. The jokes and the pacing still work. The movie's critique of the genre and of over-merchandizing is as potent as ever. Indeed, the later theme underlines a majority of scenes. President Skroob sleeps in a bed made with Spaceballs: the Sheet and wipes his imposing (and sometimes misplaced) behind with Spaceballs: the Toilet Paper. Not to mention Yogurt's demonstration of Spaceballs: the Flame Thrower ("The kids love this one.")

As Yogurt wisely states: "Merchandizing! That's where the real money is made."

The DVD plays up this aspect marvelously. The menus recall the movie's best moments and add a couple of pee-pee-kaka jokes, as also does the Winnebago dashboard easter egg. "*Spaceballs: The Documentary*" revisits the actors (Daphne Zuniga has not gained a pound or a wrinkle!) as they reminisce on shooting the movie. "*Spaceballs: The Trivia Game*" and "*Spacequotes*" remind us of just how many times we've seen this film (over 30 times for me). "*Spaceballs: The Behind-the-Scenes Photos*," "*Spaceballs: The Costume Gallery*" (designed

by no other than Donfled), and "*Spaceballs: The Art Gallery*," confirm Brooks's assertion that to spoof a genre, you have to produce a film of equal quality than the best of the genre.

An amazing amount of work was put in the development and production of *Spaceballs*. Both the audio commentary by Brooks and the hilarious "In Conversation: Mel Brooks and Thomas Meehan" (fellow script writer with the late Ronny Graham). We are also reminded of just how totally insane Brooks really is, and how even more decep-



DVD Release Date: May, 2005
Starring: Bill Pullman, John Candy, Rick Moranis, Mel Brooks, Daphne Zuniga
Director: Mel Brooks
Screenwriter: James Gunn
Rated: PG
Studio: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
Special Features: Commentary by Mel Brooks; Featurettes: "Spaceballs: The Documentary," "John Candy: Comic Spirit," "In Conversation: Mel Brooks & Thomas Meehan," "Spacequotes," "Spaceballs: The Costume Gallery," "Spaceballs: The Art Gallery," Behind-the-scenes photographs; Theatrical trailer.

tively insane Meehan is as well—he had a cameo in the movie that I had totally missed until this DVD released. We also recall the comic genius of both Ronny Graham (who also played the bishop)

and John Candy. Bring out tissues for “John Candy: Comic Spirit.” This is a great DVD set, well worth the money, well worth putting money in Brooks’ pockets.

Book Review: *Fourth Planet from the Sun: Tales of Mars from the Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, edited by Gordon Van Gelder

By Jessica Darago

Until I was about 10 years old, and the hair-pulling started in earnest, my big sister was my idol. She was largely responsible for my tastes in movies, music, and fashion; that I allowed her to give me not one but *two* disastrous haircuts over the years is proof of my awe and devotion. And for a brief time, she convinced me that we wanted to be astronauts.

It began with her 5th-grade science project on the birth and death of stars. Her eyes alight with macabre glee, she glued a half-dozen spirals of silver glitter onto black construction paper as she described to me the wonders and horrors of the black hole. That was her first obsession; shortly thereafter, it was pulsars, quasars, and neutron stars, and then on to nebulae. She was determined to visit them all, until she discovered Mars.

It was the only one of her blazing trails I did not myself follow. No matter how long she chattered about faces and pyramids and canals and terraforming and a mere two-year round trip, I never understood what was so fascinating about that angry, dead, red rock. Give me the pale, barren beauty of Luna, the pointillist rings of Saturn, the mysterious Planet X. But Mars? What’s so fascinating about Mars?

That is one of the questions that the anthology *Fourth Planet from the Sun: Tales of Mars from The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* tries to answer. Editor Gordon Van Gelder has collected a charming array of stories aimed to convince a skeptic like myself that Mars is the most fascinating object in our solar system. Sinking into this volume’s depths, I could almost be persuaded. Many of the stories

were already familiar to me—I was once a voracious reader of *Year’s Best* anthologies and a subscriber to *F&SF*—but discovery and rediscovery can be equal pleasures.

Van Gelder clearly understands this, as he begins the collection with a selection from Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles*, called “The Wilderness.” Simply put, if you’re picking up this book, you’re already an sf reader, and if you’re an sf reader, you’ve read some Bradbury. He’s Mars’ unofficial poet laureate, and his prose is like the folklore of a space program that never was. In this story he sings the story of the frontier bride:

“Is this how it was over a century ago, she wondered, when the women, the night before, lay ready for sleep, or not ready, in the small towns of the East, and heard the sound of horses in the night and the creak of the Conestoga wagons ready to go, and the brooding of oxen under the trees, and the cry of children already lonely before their time? All the sounds of arrivals and departures into the deep forests and fields, the blacksmiths working in their own red hells through midnight? And the smell of bacons and hams ready for the journeying, and the heavy feel of the wagons like ships foundering with goods...? And she decided, as sleep assumed the dreaming for her, that yes, yes indeed, very much so, irrevocably, this was as it had always been and would forever continue to be.”

Bradbury's well-known, lyrical, yearning voice telling a tale with roots as deep in America's past as in its future, not only draws the reader in with comforting familiarity, it also skillfully spins the thread that binds all of these tales of Mars together. In the introduction, Van Gelder says he chose these stories to illustrate that "in the same way that [Mars] reflects sunlight, it reflects humanity back at itself" and let the reader see "how our perceptions and images of Mars have changed over the last 50 years." What Van Gelder doesn't seem to notice is that his collection evokes not just 50 but in fact a thousand years of human experience; what is chronicled here is not the idea of exploration in the 20th century but the entire human history of voyaging, conquest, and colonization.

Here we encounter Martian civilizations dead ("Crime on Mars"), dying ("A Rose for Ecclesiastes"), and all too vigorous ("Purple Priestess of the Mad Moon"). They are sometimes friendly ("In the Hall of the Martian Kings"), sometimes hostile ("We Can Remember It for You Wholesale"), or at the very least, mischievous ("The Great Martian Pyramid Hoax"). Sometimes, the only enemy on Mars is another would-be conqueror ("Mars is Ours" & "Hellas is Florida").

But in all of these stories, humans, either by design or by accident, have come to Mars to stay, to

shape it into something of our own. Opinions vary among the authors as to the wisdom of this idea. The more successful stories seem to be those that, whether pro- or anti-colonization, treat the idea very seriously, even if the final product isn't serious in tone. Aside from the Bradbury, who like an old familiar song is always welcome, outstanding pieces include Alex Irvine's "Pictures from an Expedition," a meditation on the psychological toll exacted on the explorers, and John Varley's "In the Hall of the Martian Kings," which suggests that we could finally build Utopia, if the natives are willing to help. Despite their common theme, there's a wide variety of styles represented here, from military SF to Burroughs-esque space fantasy. Not everyone will like every piece collected here, but everyone should find one story to love.

As for me, I think I understand why my sister—always the alpha—was so entranced by the dream of Mars. It's not the planet itself but the idea of humans upon it that captures our imagination.

A fascination with the red planet isn't about what is, or even about what could be; it's about what we could make it into.

Jessica Darago spends 40 hours of her week trying to make science—and scientists—make sense, but she prefers the fictional variety of both.



**Fourth Planet from the Sun:
Tales of Mars from The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction**
edited by Gordon Van Gelder
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Publisher: Thunder's Mouth Press; New York, NY
Release date: March, 2005
\$15.95, 304 pages,
trade paperback.

Letters of Comment

Well done again! Probably my favorite issue so far, even without one of my reviews appearing!

I loved the article on my favorite author, Phillip Jose Farmer. I've been a PjF fan for a good long time and it's a wonderful view from someone on the inside of the

family who is discovering a relative through is writing and interactions. Having the ability to get an author on the phone and get the answer to a question about their writing is one I don't have, but could very much use. My Dad met Phil at BayCon 1968, though he had not read any of his books at that point. They chatted for a few

minutes and Pops says that he was a very nice guy who talked about history a lot. He also says that, having read all of PJF's books since and reading interviews and the like, that I'm a little too much like the guy. It's odd that I also read an article in other Magazine called "Science Fiction Saved My Life," in a fit of coincidence. I can't wait to read any of those ancient stories from the Farmer file cabinet.

As big a comic fan as I am, I never got into Miller's Batman. I don't know why. I fell in love with the Batman *Elseworlds* titles, where the Caped Crusader is thrown to a new time and place. The best of these, *Gotham By Gaslight*, is my all-time, 100% Favorite Batman title. Miller did break ground, and his work in so many comics is top-notch beyond belief. Miller's take on the TV media is brutal and wonderful, though the way he makes Batman into a man possessed wasn't my cup of tea.

I've read Wells and can say that his works, though they fall short of being nearly as predictive as Verne's, are wonderful and full of the joy of life that much SF from those days possessed. *The Island of Dr. Moreau* has been made into at least three films, and none of them capture the book, but they all have strong places in my memory. I had also forgotten that this was where Devo got "Are we not men?" from.

There is so much that can be said about *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. I've got half-a-mind to say them all, but that'd take up far too much space. The one thing that it had me thinking was the script, full of powerful metaphors and brutal scenes of self-doubt, is almost unfilmable if you read it. It's got no way of presenting a sympathetic character that isn't crazy and completely unreliable. Truth in the film is represented by a series of unraveled lies, most notably in the relationship between the Good Doctor and Kirsten Dunst. Plus, Kate Winslett is so amazingly radiant as the freak Clementine.

Jessica Darago's "Quick Rant" was exactly the type of review I like to read. Angry and to the point.

Christopher Garcia
The Drink Tank
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Insightful review to *Dark Knight Returns*. I enjoy an "outside" perspective on comics from time to time to see if the forms and conventions of comics translate easily to other readers. You make a couple of allusions that I want to expand upon in your review, most notably that Miller is "clearly not enamored" with Batman. On the contrary, he followed up *Dark Knight Returns* with the critically acclaimed (and also collected in trade paperback) *Batman: Year One*, with David Mazzucchelli providing art. This story allowed Miller to expand upon and reset some of the Batman mythos. Amazing stuff. Nearly twenty years later (and the impetus for the reissue of *DKR* that your reviewed) Miller released *The Dark Knight Strikes Back!* This is further exploration of Batman in his new world, and most importantly, his utter disdain for... Superman.

Your suggestion that Batman lacks any regard for his kid-sidekicks is off-base, in my opinion. What Batman values most is free will, and having learned the lesson of the death of a former sidekick, he still is willing to let free will reign. The fact that Superman has become a

Editorial: Rockin' the Suburbs

Okay, just about every newspaper, magazine and sf-oriented website in the English speaking world ran articles about *The War of the Worlds* during the past month or so, and that's in addition to a number of websites that are exclusively devoted to it. So, am I really adding anything to the public discourse in the two-part article that opens this issue? I don't know, but I thought that documenting my journey through the novel and the various other works it inspired would make for something interesting. If nothing else, it's a little more in-depth than the usual article released recently, and hopefully a little more accessible than John Flynn's new book, *War of the Worlds: From Wells to Spielberg*—which I actually haven't seen. If nothing else, it's certainly been fun finding all the different ways people have reinterpreted Wells' classic work.

Unfortunately, spending so much time working on this project left me with very little time to work on book reviews for this issue. I know this is getting to be an old-hat discussion in my editorials, but I am still trying to find people interested in writing book and/or short fiction reviews. I know I'm not helping my own cause by spending some of my own precious writing time on sci-fi instead of sf, but I'll at least acknowledge that I understand why it is so much easier to find writers for the media-driven stuff.

This issue also includes an essay concerning sci-fi and politics from a decidedly liberal slant—the second such article in *Some Fantastic's* short existence. While my own political viewpoints certainly lean left, I don't want anything thinking that this is influencing my decisions on what gets printed. I'll be more than happy to run any intelligently written pieces linking sci-fi or sf to any other political ideology.

By the time the next issue (our First Anniversary Issue) hits the web, the Hugo Awards will have been handed out. Unfortunately, I am not a member of WorldCon so I cannot vote on them. In fact, I've never been an eligible voter,

(continued next page)

Editorial

(continued from page 31)

which is probably enough to get my membership in the Fanzine Editors Guild revoked, but thankfully it only exists in my head. One of the things I'm fond of saying in regards to politics is that people who don't vote shouldn't complain about the final outcome, so I'm not going to voice my opinion on who should win which award. It doesn't help any that I've only a few select items from the novel and various short form lists, so there's no way I can intelligently choose.

In light of that admission, I would certainly love to see some publisher resume printing collections of Huge Award winning short stories. During my teen and college years, I put together a collection of hardcover editions of all the editions that compiled the award-winning short fiction. However, the last such collection was *The New Hugo Winners IV* and was released in 1997. Worse, it was only issued as a paperback. I'd love to see some publishing house resume the series and do it in hardcover to boot. Admittedly, I don't know a quarter of what's necessary to put together new collections and bring the old ones back into print, but if the SFWA can continue to authorize yearly Nebula Award collections and allow the reprints of the first two volumes of the *Science Fiction Hall of Fame* series, then surely there must be a way to bring the Hugo collections back.

One last thought before wrapping things up. For those of you not fully acquainted with fanzines—which *Some Fantastic* technically is—feedback to the editor is an important part of the culture. Because this issue includes some changes to the layout of the contents and editorial boxes, I'd appreciate thoughts on the changes as well as anything you have to say about the issue or the 'zine in general. Also, for those who are interested, a limited number of saddle-bound print editions of all issues are now available for \$5.00 each or "the usual." All the necessary contact information is just over to the right.

As always, thanks for downloading!

— Matthew

puppet of the state only further embellishes his regard for free will.

Lastly, Miller comes back "home" this fall with the release of *All-Star Batman and Robin: The Boy Wonder*, his collaboration with artist superstar Jim Lee, re-imagining Batman for a new generation.

Again, kudos on the review.

Scott Millen
smille@mac.com

Editor's Note: *I reread what I wrote about Batman's sidekicks, and I stand by it. I don't think I inferred he lacked any regard for the safety of the teenagers who fight beside him. Rather, what I was trying to convey was that he didn't take their safety seriously enough. On a couple different occasions the new Robin in The Dark Knight Returns ignores his orders to stay out of the way, even after he tells her that he won't let her continue as Robin if she disobeys him again. Although he's not her father, he's certainly a surrogate parental figure. If he doesn't make good on his disciplinary threats, then there's no way he's reasonably going to keep her out of trouble. Yes, Dick Grayson's death affected him greatly, but he continued to allow teenagers to act as his sidekicks and that's still endangerment of minors—even if they willingly go along with him.*

some fantastic

Editor Matthew Appleton
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