

20th Century Fox.

James Clavell adapted the George Langelaan story into the screenplay. Clavell is, of course, known best for a series of best-selling novels set in the Far East, including SHOGUN. Clavell also wrote the screenplay for THE SATAN BUG, taking some liberties with the original story. In this case, however, he maintained the original story very accurately. In so many other films, even the remake, the transformed human is dangerous and kills. While Andre is transformed, he never becomes a monster, in spite of being a horrifying sight. Andre loses his features and toward the end he loses control of himself, but he never loses his humanity. Kurt Neumann seems to have risen to match his script with high production values. The film has the very good look of a careful and high-quality production. It was shot in wide-screen and Technicolor.

Sadly even with its classical story this film also has its moments that are all too easily mocked. Conservation of matter would indicate that the fly's head on Andre's should be the size of a fly's head. Similarly with the human head on the fly's body, you should barely see the fly parts. The concept of the projection is different from the concept in the remake. The 1958 version has essentially a projector that moves atom for atom. It may distort the image at the far end such as reversing it. But it should not just switch selected parts. The remake has the device analyzing DNA and essentially cloning it. I would say that this is a more absurd approach to matter transmission. The simple fact is that humans play host to many small life forms from eyelash mites to a variety of organisms internally. There are many forms of DNA the machine could pick to reproduce. Adding a fly just adds one more. And why does it reproduce things like fingernails? That is non-living matter and cannot be reproduced from DNA. It has been mentioned that Helene disposes of her husband in the time-honored tradition of disposing of flies; she squashes it in what is essentially a big swatter. Not all of Neumann's touches work. When the night watchman sees the dead body his mouth drops open in an exaggerated scream, but instead we hear the ringing of a phone. Hitchcock could have made the scene work, but it really does not here. Neumann overuses the sound of a fly's buzzing in the background. It becomes tiresome. For the sound of the electronic equipment, a rhythmic cello-string is used, borrowing an effect from THE WAR OF THE WORLDS. The one unfortunate aspect of the script is that nobody asks the really interesting questions. What happens when you can transmit people across borders? Is the transmitted human really the same person or just a replica? For at least some serious questions you must see THE CURSE OF THE FLY and David Cronenberg's semi-remake. The fly's head on Andre is quite well done and not made huge like in the sequel The Return of the Fly. There was no good way to give a fly a human head and little daub of white paint on the head is not convincing. It is surprising in the scene where Helene and Philippe are trying to capture what really is the right fly; they were not saying the fly's head was white? This is an important detail and one the hunter would look for.

Best Touch of the film: Patricia Owens gives an excellent and unrecognized performance.

Worst Touch of the film: The yowling of the cat after it has been disintegrated.

This is for me one of the milestones of the Fifties science fiction film, and I give it a +3 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

THE GENERAL (1926) (film retrospective by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: Buster Keaton joined with Clyde Bruckman to write and direct a comic account of a true incident, the Great Locomotive Chase. Keaton plays his usual nebbish character, in this case Southerner Johnny Gray whose girl will not marry him if he does not enlist as a soldier and the Confederacy will not draft him because he is too valuable where he is as a locomotive engineer. Then Union agents steal Gray's beloved train engine in a plot against the Southern troops. Keaton has great sight gags and goes to amazing ends to get the thrills he wants. Rating: +3 (-4 to +4) or 9/10

[It is not really clear if one can evaluate and rate a silent film on the same scale one would use to evaluate a current film. If it could be done, this would be the silent film to use. This is a film that has many of the current virtues of films. It has comedy, drama, romance, and historical spectacle. Instead of car chases it has one long locomotive chase. It uses only minimal special effects. If it needs an image from the Civil War it just re-staged the event and filmed it. As the most spectacular of its images it has a locomotive ride over a railroad trestle over a river. The trestle buckles under the weight of the train and dumps a whole train into the river. And how did Keaton stage this spectacle? He obtained a full-sized locomotive. He got himself a trestle somehow, and he had the trestle collapse for his camera. Try doing that, George Lucas or Steven Spielberg.

I have to recommend THE GENERAL, a silent comedy that takes place during the Civil War. It was underwhelming at the box-office and was almost completely forgotten until the 1950s when it fell into public domain and it started to be seen by a generation who did not have bad memories of the Civil War. The film is a beautiful re-creation of the same civil war that Matthew Brady photographed. In spite of all the humor--and Buster Keaton was a comic genius and an amazing acrobat--you can learn a lot about what that war looked like. The film is a dramatization of the Great Locomotive Chase, an actual event of the war. Chattanooga, Tennessee, was a strategic railhead for the South that the Union desperately wanted to put out of action. On April 12, 1862, Union soldiers and Union scouts crept into Big Shanty (now Kennesaw) Georgia and stole a train intending to use it as a moving platform to destroy bridges, telegraph lines, track, and it was hoped make it to Chattanooga and points north to do to the South all the damage they could manage.

Buster Keaton plays the engineer whose train was seized and who has to chase his own train to get it back. THE GENERAL works as an exciting action film and as a comedy at the same time, not an easy balance to strike. Keaton always had a way with props and sets, using them in unexpected ways. The climax has a train crossing the Rock River Bridge, which collapses under its weight. As I said it is no special effect--they actually intentionally collapsed the bridge and wrecked a train for the spectacle of it.

Today THE GENERAL is considered one of a handful of the greatest films this country has ever made. If you have never seen THE GENERAL, even if you do not like silent films, this film is a prize and a great film experience.

By the way, if the situation of the stolen train seems familiar, Walt Disney used the same incident as the basis for his studio's THE GREAT LOCOMOTIVE CHASE (1956). Disney tells the story from the UNION point of view; Keaton tells it from the Confederate point of view.

Initially a financial failure, THE GENERAL has been reevaluated as being one of the greatest silent films ever made

I rate THE GENERAL high +3 on the -4 to +4 scale or 9/10. Portions of this review have appeared previously in the MT VOID.

Film Credits: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0017925/?ref=fn_al_tt_1

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1008166_general?

[-mrl]

3:10 TO YUMA (1957) (film retrospective by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: A dirt-farmer rancher is just about ready to give up on his drought-stricken farm. The local officials, however, will give him the money he needs to keep his farm alive, if, in turn, he will escort a dangerous killer to the train to Yuma prison. The catch is that the killer's gang is all over the streets of town, and they are willing to kill to rescue their leader. Delmer Daves directs Glenn Ford and Van Heflin in a film based on a strong suspenseful story by Elmore Leonard. Rating: +3 (-4 to +4) or 9/10

Dan Evans (played by Van Heflin) is currently a rancher whose ranch has been hit by disastrous droughts year after year. The ranch is failing. If he had just a little cash for water he probably could save his farm, but the sun just keeps beating down as the sun kills his farm.

Dan happens onto a stagecoach robbery and he sees a notorious killer kill two men. The killer is mild-mannered Ben Wade (Glenn Ford). Wade is shortly thereafter captured, but the authorities have a problem. Wade has to be taken to the authorities in Yuma. His gang is riding to rescue him and they will kill anyone trying to take Wade to jail. They want to hire someone to take the risk and Evans would find that reward money very useful if he lives long enough. Evans is willing to get himself killed to get the reward money for his family. Wade's gang want to rescue Ben before the train carries him away to prison. Evans decides to take the job.

Evans wants no part of the notorious killer, but then the rancher finds the outlaw totally unlike what he expected. Ben Wade is amiable, friendly, and clearly planning an escape. Evans must figure out the Wade's game before not knowing gets him killed. Let the games begin.

Dan Evans has chosen to limit himself to a simple life. He would not have to get involved in violent conflicts as long as he could dig his living out of the ground. Now he has found that a quiet farmer's life is not necessarily peaceful the can lead a man just as well to life and death conflict.

Delmer Davies directed 3:10 TO YUMA. Van Heflin plays the killer Ben Wade is played by Glenn Ford and the rancher, Dan Evans. The film is originally derived from a story published in 1953 authored by Elmore Leonard. Aspects of the story seem to borrow from HIGH NOON. Rating +3 on the -4 to +4 scale.

The film 3:10 TO YUMA was re-made in 2007. The remake was larger- scale and louder and though it was not bad as a Western it had lost its personal touch. It is hard to imagine a better Ben Wade than Glenn Ford. Ford has a quiet personal feel to his characters.

I have always been a little amused by the lyrics of the title song. The last nine lines seem to imply that the train has some sort of supernatural hypnotic come hither power:

There is a lonely train
Called 3:10 to Yuma

The pounding of the wheels
Is more like a mournful sigh.

There's a legend and there's a rumor
When you take 3:10 to Yuma
You can see the ghosts
Of outlaws go riding by, (riding by)
In the sky (in the sky).

'Way up high
The buzzards keep circling the train
While below the cattle are thirsting for rain.

It's also true they say
On 3:10 to Yuma
A man can meet his faith
For faith travels everywhere.

'Though you've got no reason to go there
And there ain't a soul that you know there
When 3:10 to Yuma whistles its sad refrain
Take that train (take that train)
Take that train.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050086/combined>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1000123_310_to_yuma?

[-mrl]

LIFEFORCE (letters of comment by Daniel M. Kimmel and John Sloan): In response to [Mark's review of LIFEFORCE](#) in the 07/13/18 issue of the MT VOID, Dan Kimmel writes:

I can still quote a line from my 1985 review of LIFEFORCE: "Those wanting to see more of Mathilde May will find that difficult." [-dmk]

John Sloan writes:

I like LIFEFORCE. I see the nudity as a feature, not a flaw. I like Mancini's theme. But most of all, I like it because its plot coincides with my thinking about the Fermi Paradox. I've done a lot of reading over the years about the Fermi Paradox: popular science articles, scholarly papers, and non-fiction books on the topic. My favorite rationales for the lack of any detectable evidence of other extraterrestrial intelligent life tend to revolve around economics. One of those is based on a sort of game theory argument that incentivizes civilizations to wipe out competitors before they themselves are wiped out. The most efficient mechanism I can come up with to wipe out other civilizations is weaponized self-replicating von Neumann machines: automatons that consume all the resources of a planet to build copies of themselves to launch out into space in search of other planets, spreading in an exponential fashion. I like to think of the vampires of LIFEFORCE as a kind of biological weapon cast in this mold: destroying an intelligent civilization, then using its resources to build copies of the spaceship to send to neighboring planetary systems. The bat-like creatures on the spacecraft may have been the originators of the weapon--maybe they lost control of their own creation and were destroyed by it--or they may have just been earlier victims of it, trapped on board the spaceship that earlier visited their star system. Like you, I see a lot of interesting science fictional ideas on LIFEFORCE. We could do with more films with interesting ideas, instead of yet another reboot, superhero movie, or sequel of an old franchise. [-js]

HISTORY'S WORST DECISIONS and Martian Invasions (letter of comment by George Phillies):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on HISTORY'S WORST DECISIONS](#) in the 07/13/18 issue of the MT VOID, George Phillies writes:

More lifeboats on the Titanic: This was actually a well-known ship design issue at the time. The issue is that the weight of the lifeboats is less weight for other things, such as other safety measures. The lifeboats are only useful if the ship goes down far from shore under conditions where it founders slowly enough that they can all be launched. If you are on-shore, the boats make several trips. If you sink quickly, they are useless. If weather conditions are unfavorable so the ship is sinking in a

storm, a common outcome, they are useless. There was a historical record as to how ships sank; the Titanic was by historical standards a freak. There was the loss of the Arctic, a half-century earlier, but the introduction of collision bulkheads made that loss non-repeatable, well, until the Andrea Doria.

In response to [Evelyn's comments on THE MARTIAN WAR](#) in the same issue, George writes:

With respect to "War of the Worlds" novels, [Scott] Washburn's "Martian War" series is much better than what you describe. [-gp]

THE FLY (1958), LIFEFORCE, HISTORY'S WORST DECISIONS, and THE APARTMENT (letter of comment by Taras Wolansky):

In response to [Mark's comments on THE FLY \(1958\)](#) in the 07/13/18 issue of the MT VOID, Taras Wolansky writes:

Terrific account of THE FLY (1958). My own inclination is to prefer it over the 80s remake--and I felt that way even before I learned it was written by James Clavell. [-tw]

Mark replies:

Thank you. I think we are in complete agreement. [-mrl]

In response to [Mark's comments on LIFEFORCE](#) in the same issue, Taras writes:

Mark's review of LIFEFORCE (1985) suggests to me the idea that nudity in a film (especially jaw-dropping nudity) is too powerful a distraction to permit the rest of the film to be properly appreciated and understood. The audience shifts from watching to ogling, as if the film were soft-core porn. [-tw]

Mark replies:

The amount of nudity is perhaps regrettable. It is a pity since the film is full of interesting ideas. It is interesting that decades after the film's release I am at last finding there are a lot more fans than there used to be. I think people are looking past the nudity to the story beneath. It may be because GAME OF THRONES and other films have had both nudity and a story worth telling. [-mrl]

In response to [Evelyn's comments on HISTORY'S WORST DECISIONS](#) in the same issue, Taras writes:

Review of HISTORY'S WORST DECISIONS AND THE PEOPLE WHO MADE THEM: "The argument that there were no Y2K disasters might mean that the preparations were unnecessary, or it might mean the preparations helped prevent problems, or it might mean the preparations might have been a reasonable insurance 'just in case'."

As a member of the vast army of programmers involved in this, almost 20 years ago now, I can assure you that the correct answer is "B". Many Friday evenings in 1998 and 1999, we would copy our system onto hundreds of data cartridges, truck them over to an IBM DR (Disaster Recovery) site in Sterling Forest, and spend the weekend bringing up our system, informing it that it is now December 31, 1999, 11:45 PM. At fake midnight, things would start to break, and we would fix them, and other things would break.

On Real New Year's Eve 1999, the company had some of us stay at a hotel near the data center, so we could get in fast if something went seriously wrong. And, in fact, even after all the cycles of testing and remediation, there were still some remaining problems on New Year's Day 2000 (and for days and weeks afterward); but the people on site were able to handle them, and I slept undisturbed. [-tw]

In response to [Mark's comments on THE APARTMENT](#) in the 06/29/18 issue of the MT VOID, Taras Wolansky writes:

Review of THE APARTMENT (1960): "Then [Jack Lemmon's character] discovers that the woman the execs are handing around is the elevator operator (Shirley MacLaine) whom he cares for." That makes her sound like a slut! Actually, she was just having an affair with Shelldrake (Fred MacMurray), the executive who had seduced her with false promises of leaving his wife for her. The other executives are fooling around with party girls who know the score, it would appear. [-tw]

Mark replies:

I concede. My review was factually incorrect. I will try to correct that. [-mrl]

THE MARTIAN WAR, THE FLY (1958), and HISTORY'S WORST DECISIONS (letter of comment by John Purcell):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on THE MARTIAN WAR](#) in the 07/13/18 issue of the MT VOID, John Purcell writes:

I have one word to share here: Cavorite. [-jp]

In response to [Mark's comments on THE FLY \(1958\)](#) in the same issue, John writes:

Other than that, I don't have much to add to Mark's ongoing comments on THE FLY, at least not yet; I believe I shall wait until this coming Friday's MT VOID arrived to see what else Mark has to say about the movie. It has definitely been interesting reading so far, that I will say. [-jp]

In response to [Evelyn's comments on HISTORY'S WORST DECISIONS](#) in the same issue, John writes:

Evelyn continues to find fun books to review. HISTORY'S WORST DECISIONS, etc., sounds like something that I would enjoy reading, but as things stand right now, I have way too many titles lined up into my afterlife. What's another book, right? [-jp]

This Week's Reading (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

MAKING MOVIES by Sidney Lumet (ISBN 978-0-679-75660-4) is the perfect book if you want to know just how a movie is made. Lumet traces the production from the "where do you get your ideas" state through the director, the writer, the style, the actors, and so on, up to the answer print and the studio. Along the way, he explains how different camera techniques give different looks, how to read a daily call sheet, and why he is not keen on the teamsters. He illustrates the various stages, choices, etc., with anecdotes about his own films. For example, he explains how he managed to shoot 12 ANGRY MEN on a truly shoestring budget by shooting it totally out of order: first everything with one wall as a background, then rotate the camera 90 degrees for everything against wall two, and so on. Arguments that took place across the table had their covering shots done one day, participant one's close-ups another day, and participant two's close-ups yet a third day. Amazing!

Needless to say, some familiarity with at least some of Lumet's films is helpful. Luckily, people who are interested in all this detail probably have seen most of the ones he references. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

The great appeal of the doctrine that the mind is a blank
slate is the simple mathematical fact that zero equals
zero.

--Steven Pinker

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