

FILMS FANTASTIC 14

The Journal of the NFFF Film Bureau

Saving Spock **On Screens Small and Large**



Classic Sercon: The Unity of “Operation: Annihilate!”¹

Jean Lorrah

Author's Note (2021): This article was written in the summer of 1968, in the hiatus between Season Two and Season Three.



Ruth Berman's article, "Star Trek Structure," in *ST-Phile* #1, seems a very valid assessment of the series as a whole. However, she does not recognize the structural unity of one of the most important episodes of the first season, "Operation: Annihilate!" Its position at the end of the season is not accidental; it serves to unite the first and second seasons and provide for the increased importance of Dr. McCoy's role and his closer relationship with Kirk and Spock, particularly the latter. It has strong internal unity as well.

"Operation: Annihilate!" is misinterpreted by almost everyone because of the subtlety of the subplot. If small details are missed, the unity of its structure is lost. You see, the plot is balanced in what Ms Berman would call a mirror-image relationship: through the tragedy of the attack of the cell monsters Kirk loses a brother and Spock gains a friend. "Operation: Annihilate!" is the resolution of the conflict between Spock and McCoy that went on the entire first season. They reacted emotionally toward one another at first, McCoy snapping and Spock being cold. Then grudging admiration grew and they began to rely on one another. As Ms Berman points out, Spock went to McCoy for help in "The Conscience of the King." McCoy, however, although capable of recognizing Spock's virtues (as in his defense of him in Part I

¹ Reprinted from *ST-Phile* 2 (November, 1968, edited by Juanita Coulson and Kay Anderson, pp. 35-40) by permission of the author. The text has been revised by the author for this republication.

of "The Menagerie"), went to Spock himself only in desperation and then always belligerently, as when he found Spock playing chess in "Court Martial." His relevant attitude was, "Well, if you're so smart, do something." Subconsciously, of course, he knew that Spock always would.

We have never had McCoy's early antagonism toward Spock explained, so all we can say is that it was there, and Spock reacted to it until, probably, he realized two things: his reaction was human and McCoy, beneath his facade, was a friend worth cultivating. Growing up with a human mother and spending half his life among humans ("Journey to Babel"), Spock would have to have learned something of human psychology. The only way to make McCoy lose his antagonism toward Spock would be to make him aware of its unreasonable magnitude (Ms Berman is correct in pointing out that McCoy is not basically illogical), but this could never be accomplished by Spock's going to McCoy and saying "Doctor, you hate me." So the two continued in the antagonism that McCoy assumed to be mutual until "Operation: Annihilate!"

In McCoy's attitude toward Spock when he is infested with the organism, we see the love/hate relationship at work. McCoy, it seems, actually identifies with Spock in his pain (the audience readily accepts this because they, too, are forced to identify, through some of the subtlest and most skillful acting the series has seen), and it is a clue to his antagonism: McCoy seems to hate himself, sees much of himself in Spock, and therefore hates Spock. What Ms Berman identifies as "sanity" is really the same logic that Spock lives by with notable success. McCoy is human and cannot successfully live without feeling. (Nor can Spock; he just *says* that's what he's doing.) McCoy's sensuality is an attempt to sublimate deeper emotions. Like Spock, he refuses to love; therefore his feelings force themselves out as hate.

This unrecognized hatred is the situation Spock is aware of when "Operation: Annihilate!" begins. No, of course he has no idea of curing McCoy at the beginning of the episode! It never crosses his mind until, wracked with pain, fighting to control himself, he overhears McCoy explaining to Kirk that ultraviolet might kill the cells but would also blind the victims. He hears McCoy suggest that they have but one victim to experiment on and, seizing the opportunity, he offers himself as if he had *not* overheard. But his entry into the picture is so fast (less than a second after Kirk's line, "We've got to duplicate the conditions on the planet ... and Spock...," which might suggest that Kirk was thinking of another solution) that the audience ought to realize that Spock was so close he *had* to overhear. Even the average human would have, and by the end of the first season Spock's superior hearing was well established ("A Taste of Armageddon," "Devil in the Dark," and others).

Most viewers of "Operation: Annihilate!" apparently assume that Spock is not aware of his own anatomy. Ms Berman calls the restoration of his sight a "last-minute coincidence" and claims she "can't change records that fast." But the viewer is expected to realize that Spock will recover—and not for the invalid reason that he is a series star—for the clue lies in the scene just discussed, in the swiftness of his appearance when McCoy says the ultraviolet may blind him, and in his insistence upon the experiment being carried out immediately, before, as it turns out, either Kirk or McCoy can think of trying non-blinding wavelengths on the captured cells, something Spock no doubt thought of immediately. For the viewer who may have missed these subtle points, "Operation: Annihilate!" ends with a reminder of Spock's superior hearing as McCoy whispers to Kirk, "Please, don't tell Spock that I said he was the best first officer in the fleet," and Spock answers from across the bridge, "Why, thank you, Doctor!" Here is the



final key to unlock the pivotal scene of Spock's volunteering for the ultraviolet experiment.



As for Spock's inner eyelid, ten seconds of thought tells us that Spock would be fully aware of Vulcan anatomy and of his own; he would have to know how he is human and how he is Vulcan in order not to die of something as simple as taking an analgesic! And so his "cure" should not surprise us at all; we should have merely experienced curiosity as to how it would come about. What is rather surprising is McCoy's lack of knowledge of Vulcan physiology: one would expect a doctor to have taken advantage of having Spock aboard to do a thorough study of him. It is further proof of his strange attitude toward Spock: the intimacy of such a study would probably have brought McCoy's ambivalent

feelings too much to the surface, and so he neglected what was really his responsibility toward Spock as a Star Fleet crew member entrusted to McCoy's medical care. The surgery he performs on Spock as a futile attempt to rid his system of the organism, however, is evidence not so much of a heedless attitude toward Spock (operating without full knowledge of his patient's anatomy) as of the desperateness of the situation.

In certain knowledge of his own anatomy, and having overheard McCoy's almost-wishful mention that he has but one victim of the cell organism to experiment on and that the experiment will blind its subject, Spock insists on volunteering, in order to give McCoy a chance to act out his antagonism. McCoy's horrified awareness, when the deed is done, that he should have taken time to try less harmful methods, tells us that he has come face to face with his hatred. This is catharsis, and he is purged of his deep antagonism toward Spock, ready now, after some time to work off guilt feelings, to enter into the strong friendship that now binds the three main characters of *Star Trek*.

It is difficult when a series consists of episodes written by a number of authors to support a thesis about one episode with material from an episode by another author. However, there is a hint in "Journey to Babel" that the events of "Operation: Annihilate!" were so intolerable to McCoy that he suppressed the whole incident. I am referring, of course, to his statement when he finds that he must perform surgery on Sarek that he has never operated on a Vulcan. I would consider this simply a mistake on the part of the writer, except that the author of "Journey to Babel" is D.C. Fontana, who, as *Star Trek's* story editor, is responsible for the series' continuity. Surely it is unlikely that she and all the actors involved forgot about McCoy's earlier operation on Spock. But it is quite likely that Ms Fontana would recognize that the doctor was very likely to suppress such a traumatic experience. This, evidence, however, is not necessary to prove my thesis; it merely confirms it.

As I have shown, "Operation: Annihilate!" is not only strongly unified within itself, but provides the bridge between the first two seasons of *Star Trek*. It should have been rerun last summer immediately before "Amok Time," in which the new relationship between Spock and McCoy was shown by Spock's inviting McCoy to his marriage ceremony. The banter between the two has been similar this year to last ... but could the exchange, "Shut up, Spock, we're rescuing you!" "Why, thank you, *Captain McCoy*," ("Immunity Syndrome") have occurred last season? There is a much friendlier sense of teasing on McCoy's part, and never has he told Spock to go away, as he did last year. Also—have you noticed?—McCoy isn't drinking as much. For example, in "The Ultimate Computer," when he gives Kirk a "therapeutic" drink he toys with his own, toasts Kirk with it, but never tastes it. McCoy is a happier man,

for he has come to terms with himself and opened up to friendship. He is still the only one of the three main characters whom we have never seen in love (he flirts, but never forms strong attachments), which suggests that an unhappy love affair (possibly the one from "The Man Trap") may have sent him into space in the first place. His refusal to form strong relationships may have caused him to identify with the same refusal in Spock, while blinding him to the fact that Spock gives only lip service to this ideal. Be that as it may, McCoy has changed.

His teasing of Spock these days includes references which only the closest friendship permits, such as his repetition of the "pitchforks and pointed ears" theme. This kind of thing is typical of *pure* teasing; you don't make fun of someone's racial characteristics unless you are certain of two things: your teasing does not veil antagonism, and he knows it. And Spock does know it. He is fast establishing the same close relationship with McCoy that he once had only with Kirk. Originally it was only with the Captain that he ever dropped his emotional guard (that is, when not under the control of drugs, spores, etc.); in "Devil in the Dark" he ran hurriedly to Kirk's rescue and would have killed the Horta despite his respect for all life had not Kirk stopped him. This was one of the times he called Kirk "Jim" instead of "Captain," something he only does under stress (joy in "Amok Time," worry practically every other time). Alone with Kirk aboard the *Enterprise* in "This Side of Paradise," he did not find it necessary to fully withdraw into his unemotional shell until after he had spoken to Leila. And it was only Kirk to whom he could explain the Pon Farr in "Amok Time," which, as I have shown, is meant to follow "Operation: Annihilate!" Here McCoy proves that his attitude toward Spock has changed from antagonism to understanding as he deduces Spock's problem, and Spock responds by inviting McCoy to his marriage ceremony. Since then Spock has quietly allowed his awareness of the new relationship to show from time to time. Kirk seldom needles people; McCoy does it constantly, and Spock no longer sticks to the two responses he used last season. He still sometimes ignores it, or squelches one of McCoy's remarks with a calculated-to-sound-naive answer, but three instances come to mind that could not have happened last season. First, in "The Gamesters of Triskelion," when McCoy accuses Spock of acting human, Spock turns the remark back against him with, "Through constant human contact one cannot help becoming corrupted." In "The Ultimate Computer," McCoy threatens violence if Spock should label an event "fascinating," Spock's reply, "No, but it is *interesting*," is obviously intended to grate on the same nerves that "fascinating" had rubbed raw. Later, he deigns to *notice* that McCoy has borrowed his word "logical" and is using it to excess ("Bread and Circuses"). These condescensions to McCoy's sense of humor are further evidence of the new understanding between the two men. Finally, again in "Bread and Circuses," we may see that Spock now grants McCoy the trust that only Kirk had formerly. When the two are alone in the jail cell, with nothing to do but worry about what has happened to their Captain, it is Spock who paces like a caged animal, trying the bars to work off his excess energy. And McCoy is upset by it: this is the first time he has ever seen Spock react emotionally without there being a physical reason for it. He is so unnerved by Spock's display of humanness that he berates Spock for being afraid to be human—and elicits a response so unexpected he has to back off and start over. For instead of being goaded into Vulcan stoicism by McCoy's attack—instead of becoming once again the strong support McCoy can lean on or take out his frustration on—Spock bends! Physically, he slumps right to the floor, he turns away from McCoy's attack, and he allows the human side of his nature to show.

It is exactly what McCoy has just accused him of being afraid to do. Tears fill his eyes and his voice as he finally looks at McCoy. The words, "Really, Doctor?" are Vulcan, non-committal, neutral. The delivery is totally human. And McCoy finds himself in the incredible position of having to comfort Spock!

The human side of Spock *qua* Spock is something that has never been seen before (and if Gene Roddenberry continues to keep his finger successfully on the pulse of fandom it will never be seen again), and it is significant that it is McCoy to whom it is revealed. This is the final proof of the new relationship between them, ambiguous as Spock's response itself may be. He initiates the scene by pacing and testing the bars. We have never before seen Spock exhibit nervousness except in "Amok Time," Does he deliberately try to take McCoy's mind off their predicament? Unlikely; McCoy is reacting quite calmly.

But the situation is little different from many they have been in before; why a nervous reaction now? Possibly because of two factors, both negative: there is nothing for Spock to do to help Kirk, and there is no one to observe his actions except McCoy, whom he has come to trust. Therefore he does not hide his frustration, at least not completely. When McCoy jumps on him then, he has already let a part of his facade slip, and when the doctor tells him that he would rather die than exhibit human emotion it drops completely, for McCoy has hit the nail on the head. Spock's reaction says plainly, "You're absolutely right, Doctor. Now what do you expect me to do about it?" McCoy, of course, realizes that nothing can be done; Spock has carved out a place for himself in a universe where he is a misfit. It is too late now to change the means that have brought him to a position of respect and responsibility, and so McCoy draws back to allow Spock to resume his facade. But again the friendship between the two men has changed, for Spock has never before deliberately allowed anyone to glimpse his inward emotions. Whether or not he could have controlled them at that moment is academic; the fact is that he didn't.

"Bread and Circuses" was effectively the last program of *Star Trek's* second season ("Assignment: Earth" was the pilot for a spinoff, and the *Enterprise* crew really had only nominal roles), and it is easy to note the parallel with "Operation: Annihilate!" as the relationship between Spock and McCoy takes another new turn. It will be interesting to see whether McCoy continues to goad Spock toward humanity in the new season. If the continuity is as good as it has been up to now, he won't.

Thus the second season of *Star Trek* plus evidence from the episode itself prove the unity of "Operation: Annihilate," both the internal mirror-image unity of the individual plot and the unifying nature of the episode within the series as a whole. Containing as it does the turning point in the relationship between Spock and McCoy, it is a most important and strongly unified episode in a truly unique series.



Spock Dies, and Nimoy Takes Charge: *Star Trek Returns to Vulcan*²

Justin E.A. Busch



Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan did not earn as much at the box office as had the first Trek film, but since its budget was a quarter of that of its predecessor the profit margin amply satisfied Paramount. The studio did, though, face a problem: the climax of the second film included the death of Spock, the single most popular character. Bringing him back required only cinematic legerdemain, but making sure audiences understood that Leonard Nimoy, whose role it was, would not be replaced required something more dramatic. As Nimoy wrote in *I Am Spock*, he had already decided he wanted to direct the film, and found the studio brass surprisingly enthusiastic. "What a fantastic idea!" Michael Eisner, who controlled the film's fate, exclaimed. "Leonard Nimoy directs the return of Spock! I love it!"

Gene Roddenberry is reported to have told Leonard Nimoy, when Nimoy won the job, that they had hired a director they couldn't fire. This was true; the negative publicity would have sunk the film. This gave Nimoy a sense of security which shows in the on-screen results; although crammed with action, the film is, at its heart, serene, with many fine moments and relatively few weak ones.

The weakest component of the film is the scenario itself, which places some quite strong demands on the viewer's willing suspension of disbelief. Shoehorned into the shortest running time of any of the Trek films is a plot which must explain not only how Spock's body and mind survived, but how the two can be reunited. Little of this is conducive to much on-screen action, so a sub-plot involving a Klingon attempt to steal the Genesis Device, the very thing which led to Spock's death in the first place, was added in order to generate more excitement. The screenplay which resulted, while adequate for its purposes, does not bear overly close examination; all too obviously unanswered is a central question: just how it is that everyone, even those unconnected with the original events (which, it will be recalled, were classified information), seems to know that Spock's body survived and where to find it.

But this criticism does little to undercut the many subsidiary pleasures of the film, which is much like a series episode, albeit one with a larger budget than any two entire seasons of its progenitor. Once we accept the plot motivation, the ride which follows is fun, with plenty of thrills along the way. Yet the action does not overshadow the characters; *The Search for Spock* is ultimately a film about friendship and loyalty, and strong performances from the principals easily carry the weight placed on them.

Battered from its encounter with Khan, the *Enterprise* has returned to Earth, where, despite Scotty's yeoman work in automating its systems, it is to be decommissioned. Prompted by Spock's father Sarek, Kirk learns that McCoy is possessed of a Vulcan mind meld. After a fruitless attempt to convince Star Fleet to let him take his ship to the Genesis Planet to locate Spock's body and re-turn it to Vulcan for the fal-tor-pan, the re-fusion of body and mind, Kirk and the rest of the bridge crew elect to steal the *Enterprise* and rescue Spock on their own. At the same time, Kruge, something of a renegade Klingon, has obtained a copy of Kirk's report to the Federation regarding Genesis and is likewise headed to the planet, which is now being scientifically investigated by Kirk's son, Dr. David Marcus, and Lieutenant Saavik. The three forces converge; after a battle which overloads the *Enterprise's* automation system and leaves her defenseless, Kruge has David killed and Kirk is forced to destroy the *Enterprise* to foil the rest of Kruge's plan. Kirk and Kruge have a climactic fight as the unstable planet disintegrates around them;

² Reprinted, with modifications, from *Stipple-Ations*, a fanzine for StippleAPA mailing #341 (April 3, 2021).

Kirk, unsurprisingly, wins. Kirk then seizes command of the Klingon ship and returns Spock's body to Vulcan, where the appropriate ceremony succeeds in linking body and mind. The film ends on an optimistic note, explicitly promising a sequel: "...and the Adventure continues..."

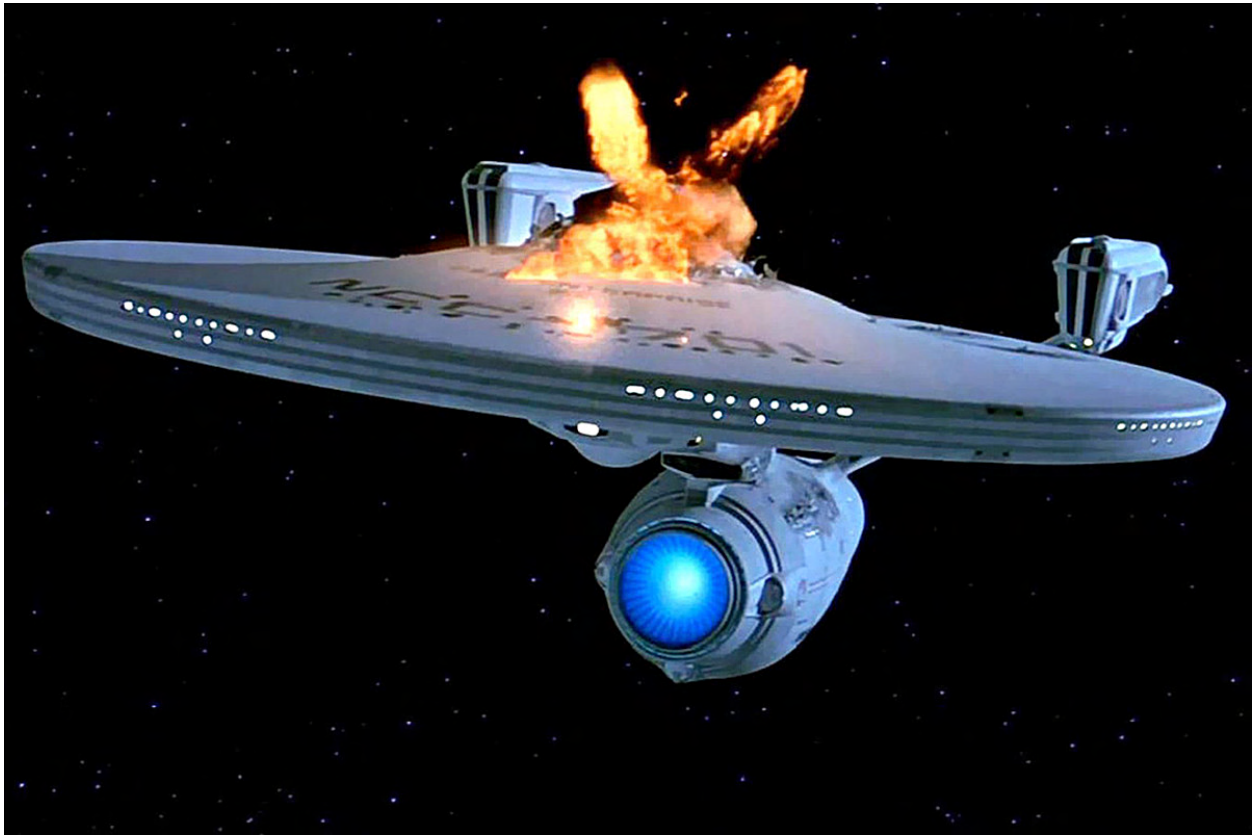
Despite awkward elements (the explanation of the Genesis planet's instability is given in expository dialogue so clumsy that a first-year film student would have known better than to include it, for example), the script has some fine moments for each of the main characters and an enjoyable overall lightness of touch. Especially impressive is the scene in which Kirk learns of the murder of David; he stumbles back and collapses against his command chair, the symbol of his power and authority, for the moment an almost broken man. Shatner's acting, probably his best work in any of the films, perfectly captures the devastation Kirk feels. Similarly, the short scene between McCoy and the body of Spock as the captured Klingon ship heads for Vulcan is very well played by DeForest Kelley, who manages to portray McCoy's love for Spock, and concern lest all the proceeding action has been in vain, quite effectively; here, for the first time in any of the films, we see into the heart of the friendships which drive *Star Trek*. There are also gratifying, though small, scenes for Sulu and Uhura; the best of these is Uhura's turn as an unexpected, and decisive, transporter operator.

The guest cast is likewise effective. Mark Lenard, returning from the series as Sarek, conveys well the dilemma of the dignified man of logic confronted by a situation the solution of which requires actions driven entirely by love. In the role of Kruge, Christopher Lloyd is amusingly overblown without toppling into risibility. His character, while vital to the action, could not be allowed to dominate it, and Lloyd's performance maintains balance between menace and deliberate self-indulgence. Robin Curtis, reprising the Kirstie Alley role of Saavik, offers a much more restrained performance than Alley (gone is any hint of the character's supposed half-Romulan origin); carefully coached by Nimoy, she remains one of the few actors portraying a Vulcan to capture the essence of non-emotionality (a fact which has earned her unfair criticism from those who prefer to see an actor emoting). Christopher Sicking likewise does a fine job in his brief moments as the pompous and cocksure Captain Styles of the *Excelsior*.

Echoing the moments of character insight are some lovely images; in the midst of what is after all a fairly conventional action-adventure film Nimoy takes care to provide evocative visuals. The approach of the *Enterprise* to the space dock, with the ship seen first approaching on the diagonal from the lower right of the screen, and the gradual revelation of the massive dock itself, is in the best tradition of Golden Age science fiction illustration; only the central imagery of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* is more hauntingly powerful. The fall of the shattered *Enterprise* into the atmosphere of the Genesis planet has a simple grandeur that is quite moving. And there is a shot of Sarek, standing against a wall, his face impassive, watching the landing of the ship bearing his son, that in its lighting and composition is almost painterly in its beauty.

But attention to detail does not preclude effective larger action sequences. The theft of the *Enterprise* is among the best such sequences in any of the Trek films, with a fine balance of humor, pathos, and tension, all ably enhanced by James Horner's score (which, it must be admitted, is otherwise overall considerably weaker than the one he provided for *The Wrath of Khan*). The climactic fight between Kirk and Kruge cries out for musical accompaniment (try watching it with the famous fight music from "Amok Time" playing, and you'll notice a significant uptick in the excitement level), but the actual explosion of the planet itself is superbly done. And, of course, there is the destruction of the *Enterprise*.





There are few moments in any science fiction film series as powerful as the explosion marking the end of the most famous starship of them all. The entire sequence is very well handled. Kirk bids Kruger transport his boarding party, then he and Scotty head to Chekov's science console. There Kirk begins the self-destruct command sequence, to the obvious shock of the others. As the camera moves very slowly into an ever tighter close-up, emphasizing the narrowing range of options left to Kirk and company, the music gradually creeps in, at first almost imperceptibly, shifting to a more rapid pulse only as the crew prepares to escape to the planet below. The Klingons appear, and the music shifts again, becoming tenser, as they press onward to the bridge. There the music stops, allowing them, and the audience, to hear the last few seconds of the destruct count-down. Kruger screams a futile escape order as he realize he has been gulled by Kirk. The bridge then explodes, followed moments later by the entire saucer section; the eruption is almost volcanic in its visceral impact, as an era ends on an entirely convincing note.

Star Trek: The Motion Picture was created because of the fans, but was aimed at a general audience. *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* was developed directly from the original series, yet contained much which resonated with viewers unfamiliar with the series. *Star Trek III: The Search For Spock* was the first Trek film clearly written for the fans. It is aimed at, and trades upon, a particular set of expectations within a specific group of people. In this fact lies both its strength and its weakness. Too often it takes for granted that our sympathy with the central figures will lead us to overlook plot improbabilities. Occasionally it winks a little too broadly at the fans in the audience, or reaches too obviously for a laugh (the clanking, squeaking and puffing that accompany the break-down of the sabotaged *Excelsior*, for example). Yet at the same time the film has a deep sense of congeniality about it that helps bring the characters to life as human beings as well as legends; there is a relaxed quality to their interactions which shows them to be at home with their world, and invites us to join, as much as to watch, them. *The Search For Spock* is not, in the end, a great film. But it is a very enjoyable film, one in which, for all the action (and more happens, in fact, than in either of the preceding films), what matters is the people. Watching *The Search for Spock* is like going on a trip with old friends; we recognize and acknowledge their flaws, but enjoy their company all the same, for the friendships are as important as the journey.

Star Crash: An Unexpected Stellar Pleasure

Artemis van Bruggen

The success of *Star Wars* ensured a plethora of imitations. Most were bad, and some were appalling (probably the worst being *Diinyayi Kurtaran Adam*, or *The Man Who Saved the World* (1982), popularly known as “Turkish Star Wars”). Some few, though, manage to overcome their derivative status to achieve a charm of their own. One such is the *Star Crash*, a 1978 American production filmed in Italy, where it was directed by Luigi Cozzi.

Star Crash is unusual in that its appearance and approach reflects the visual style of the pulp magazine era as much as the movie serials so important to George Lucas. The debt is acknowledged almost immediately; after the obligatory *Star Wars*-style pass-over of a tremendous space ship, the ship’s name is revealed to be that of one of the best known authors of the pulp era: *Murray Leinster*. Similarly, the costume designs for Caroline



Munro, playing heroine Stella Star, are a mix of 1950s aesthetics and the 1940s art of Earle Bergey, once well-known for his brass-brassiered women on the covers of *Thrilling Wonder* and *Startling Stories*. The climactic assault on the villain’s star ship feature torpedo-like tubes which plow into the ship and then pop open to reveal soldiers, who roll out with their blasters ready for action, an image rather more illustrative than cinematic.

The design is only part of the film’s appeal. The script, as one might guess, is pretty silly, but the performers, whether amateur (Marjoe Gortner), semi-professional (Caroline Munro, who would go on to better work and greater fame), or top-flight (Christopher Plummer, brought in for 10,000.00 for a day-and-a-half of filming to add some thespian gravitas), show no sign of giving anything but their best. The special effects are serviceable; the film’s budget was larger than many of its successors: four million dollars, as opposed to eleven million for *Star Wars*. The film’s score, by John Barry (better known for his work on James Bond films (1963-1987) and *The Black Hole* (1981)), although occasionally repetitious, contributes much to sparking a sense of mystery and excitement.

Of course, there is no point in pretending that *Star Crash* is a forgotten classic of cinematic science fiction. So why should you watch it? Because it is genuinely entertaining, in very much the same way that a good story from the pulp era is entertaining: the creators and performers pile on the thrills and keep the action moving in a manner which allows the viewer to simply lose themselves in the moment and go along for the ride. And sometimes the ride is the whole point.





**Spock says:
"It's the logical
thing to do."**

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