

FILMS FANTASTIC 17

The Journal of the NFFF Film Bureau

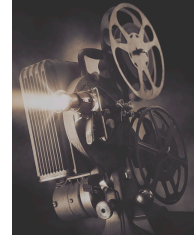
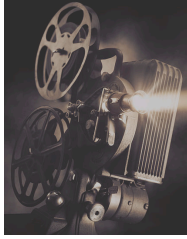
ED WOOD:



REALITY,

REVISION,

REDEMPTION



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FILMS FANTASTIC
The Journal of the NFFF Film Bureau

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Editor's Note:

There is a good crop of reviews in this issue, and we welcome Thomas E. Simmons as a contributor. It sounds as if he is interested in making regular appearances, so keep your eyes open.

I'd like to feature more long-form essays on single films, or comparisons between films, so if your tastes run in that direction, let me know. In the meantime, enjoy the issue. There's something for everyone here, I'm sure.

Films Fantastic is a quarterly publication of The National Fantasy Fan Federation, appearing in March, June, September, and December.

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ED WOOD: REALITY, REVISION, REDEMPTION

JUSTIN E.A. BUSCH



I: Reality

Edward D. Wood, Jr. was a director with great enthusiasm, little talent, and no money. He was also a transvestite, during a period when such choices were at best mocked and often reviled. A perennial outsider, he never succeeded in Hollywood, and ended up making, and appearing in, degrading soft-core pornographic films. His novels, likewise marginally pornographic, often written under pseudonyms, never sold well or attained critical recognition. A manuscript he prepared on Bela Lugosi, with whom he worked several times in the twilight of the once and future horror great's career, was lost when Wood was evicted, and much of his minimal property destroyed, by an irate landlord. Wood, already in ill health from years of poverty exacerbated by various forms of self-abuse, died not long afterward, all but forgotten. By most measures of success in the United States, Edward D. Wood, Jr. was an abject failure.

Nor were his collaborators much better off. Bela Lugosi, the most famous among them, was indeed once a famous star of horror films, but he had worked little since the mid-1940s and never in prestige productions. His long-standing drug addiction was growing worse, and his fourth wife left him not long after he met Wood. Criswell, ostensibly a psychic, was essentially a sideshow charlatan; Dolores Fuller's later success writing mediocre pop songs proved predictably ephemeral; Bunny Breckinridge was a minor nightclub performer and otherwise a dilettante without focus; and Tor Johnson was a professional wrestler at a time when the field was even less reputable than it is today. Apart from Lugosi, none knew how to act in films (indeed, few would appear in films other than Wood's), and not even Lugosi could bring more than momentary life to Wood's generally leaden dialogue.

Certainly Wood's extant films do nothing to contradict the overall sense of cinematic commitment

and aesthetic incompetence. *Bride of the Monster* is probably the best, in large part thanks to Lugosi's uninhibited performance in the lead role, but the limitations of budget and talent are otherwise all too evident throughout the film. *Glen or Glenda?* is heartfelt but often incoherent. *Jail Bait* is atypically dull, and typically prone to technical infelicities. *Plan 9 From Outer Space* is justifiably notorious for its chaotic approach to every aspect of filmmaking. None of the later films is notable even within the bounds of Wood's own style and approach, or ever achieved widespread theatrical release; at least one was not even issued in Wood's lifetime.

Wood died in 1978. Two years later a popular film writer judged Wood to be "the worst director of all time," and soon afterwards Wood became a posthumous celebrity. Further fame, at least of a sort, followed; in 1994 Wood became the subject of Tim Burton's oddly poignant biopic *Ed Wood*, a film which, like its subject, failed initially but survived to become the object of something of a cult following. This is not simply a coincidence. The Ed Wood of *Ed Wood* is not Edward D. Wood, Jr.; rather, he is a character, created by screenwriters Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski, a character who represents, in several interlocked ways, questions regarding reality, revisionism, and personal redemption in a secular age dominated by manufactured images. Ed Wood is no longer a person but an image, in many ways and for many reasons. It is my purpose in this essay to examine at least a few among those reasons, and to explore the interactions among them. Burton's film is not merely about Edward D. Wood, Jr., or even about the fringes of Hollywood in the 1950s, but about the very nature of Hollywood cinema, of its audiences and critics, and indeed even of the role and character of art and artists, good and bad alike, in general. This is a large topic. What follows, therefore, is not so much a critique or a summation as a series of unveilings, attempts to bring out and explore the implications of various shades of the psychological and emotional underpinnings of *Ed Wood*, its characters, and our reactions.

II. Revision

Being proclaimed "the worst" was surely the first act of cinematic revisionism as regards Wood, previously regarded, if at all, as a minor figure. He may not have been a good director, but he was certainly at least as competent as many others who had the luck to find a home with the poverty row studios in the 1940s; likewise, a comparison between Wood's films and many other quickies from the 1950s and 1960s would easily reveal him to be far from the worst of directors, even assuming that such an appellation could be assigned with any certainty. But in fact it was this very designation which, in a sense, 'saved' Wood from obscurity and made Tim Burton's film not only possible but likely. Mediocrity rarely merits attention, and simple failure never does, but the distinction of being the worst automatically compels notice; it is a superlative of negativity, a triumph of disaster. Just as the composer Antonio Salieri, a minor if once-well-regarded figure in Viennese musical life, did not come to the attention of most audiences until he was portrayed (unfairly, it must be added) as Mozart's pathetic and incompetent shadow on stage and screen in *Amadeus*, so Edward D. Wood, Jr. did not truly arrive as a cinematic entity until he had been condemned as having nothing whatsoever to offer filmgoers. His condemnation, therefore, became also the basis for his redemption.

III: Redemption

The first redemption is memory. "This is the one. This is the one I'll be remembered for." Memory is the key. Memory purports to offer truth, a recognition of reality. Reality is simply what is, yet this cannot exist meaningfully without interpretation-- that is, without judgement. Judgements, of course, are themselves subject to revision, for each judgement becomes at once a part of a new reality. The process is infinite, and thus terrifying; we seek, therefore, to attain certainty, a position of rest whence judgements can be finalized and reality at last understood fully, which is to say we seek redemption. Art creates the possibility of this, for it is at both infinite, open to unending interpretation, and finite, a closed structure with its own internal logic, character, and content. A work of art, unlike infinity, is present and comprehensible, or at least appears to be, which is all that is needed. "Eddie," Criswell says, "we're in show biz. It's all about razzle-dazzle. Appearances. If you look good, and you talk well, people will swallow anything." All art, but cinema in particular, is a recognition of the fact that aesthetic value is what is remembered. Art shapes memory; art creates truth. *Ed Wood* has ensured that Ed Wood will be

remembered for things which never happened, or which happened in very different ways. "Filmmaking is not about the tiny details; it's about the big picture," Ed insists. In film as in life, it is general impressions which create the context for assessing the details; over time the details give way to the general impressions-- if the latter are strong enough. It is the purpose of art to make those impressions ineradicable by even the most recalcitrant details. We become first what *we* remember, and later what *others* remember. We exist as remembered reality, and if not remembered we no longer exist at all.

The second redemption is pride. "Aw, jeez, honey, I'm so happy for you," Kathy O'Hara, Ed's loving girlfriend, burbles to Ed after the premiere of *Plan 9*. And we, too, are happy; the whole of the film has been directed to this point. Ed proposes and is, of course, accepted; persistence is, as always in romances, rewarded. As we are meant to, we share the pride of the happy couple, even though we have seen the making of the film and know that it cannot be good, or have received such a lavish, well-attended, and by all evidence successful premiere. It does not matter; "I have done that," says my memory. "I cannot have done that," says my pride, and remains inexorable. Eventually-- memory yields." In search of a happy ending, memory willingly surrenders to pride. Pride requires that we see ourselves as the subject of another's consideration, yet also that we see that consideration as taking place in the manner in which we would wish to be considered (shame comes when we cannot manage this, yet still recognize the gaze of the other.) Whatever we leave behind, be it an object or merely a reputation, we wish to have considered in the light in which we created it, for it will gradually become the signifier of our having existed at all. Thus we become what we remember, but often what we remember is what it was we wished to become in the first place. We become, to ourselves and to others, what we are believed always to have been, by ourselves and by others.

The third redemption is faith, the grace of belief. This is not in itself religious, but rather is the basis for religion: without faith all gods are meaningless; with a strong enough faith any god is plausible. Ed and his collaborators receive funding because the Baptists believe in their conversion, and the Baptists believe because of the faith in Ed shown by his friends. "How do you do it?" asks Bunny Breckinridge; "How do you get all your friends to get baptized just so you can make a monster movie?" Ed's answer says nothing, and its irrelevance provides the true answer. "It's not a monster movie," he replies; "it's a supernatural thriller." He could almost be describing his own life, in which a querulous landlord is suddenly motivated by the word of Ed to provide money (manna) from on high for a project neither the minister nor his congregation fully understands. Ed's friends comply with Ed's wishes because in him they have found a purpose greater than themselves, an intensity of ambition which transcends their own limited perspectives. Having little left to believe in themselves, they believe in Ed, who directs them in what will become, literally, the performances of their lives. It is this process which lies at the heart of *Ed Wood*.

Revision

I. Image



After a prologue in a thunderstorm, much of its text drawn from Wood's own work, declaimed from inside a coffin by Criswell (Jeffrey Jones), and the credits, the first thing we see is the iconic HOLLYWOOD sign, a clear indication that what ensues will be as much a fantasy as reality, despite Criswell's promise that the film will provide "the full story of what happened" (but how much should you trust a man speaking to you from inside a coffin, anyway?). Besides the histrionic hokum of Criswell's prologue, there are two other clues, both purely visual, that the ensuing story will be more than a simple true story of poverty row filmmaking. The first is obvious: *Ed Wood* is in black and white, which, in 1994 as now, served as a means of distancing the audience from the events portrayed, of making them more clearly

cinematic rather than realistic. The second clue is subtler, and cannot be grasped fully until the film is almost over, as we shall see. The camera appears to crane down from a cheap model space station (recognizably derived from Wood's film *Plan 9 From Outer Space*); a flash of lightning covers a cut, and the camera then tracks out from the HOLLYWOOD sign and over Los Angeles through a tremendous thunderstorm, coming to rest at last outside a run-down theatre where Ed (Johnny Depp) is pacing nervously in the rain, waiting for a newspaper drama critic to arrive-- waiting, in other words, for a stranger to pass judgement upon the play he has written, produced, and directed.

The central theme of the film is now in place, though it has yet to be made manifest. *Ed Wood* is concerned with the place and power of judgement, both aesthetic and personal. Judgement, even harsh judgement, validates because it proves that that which is being judged has reality beyond the hopes and fantasies of the creator. Yet at the same time judgement, and especially harsh judgement, can cripple the spirit of the person being judged, rendering it impossible for them to make use of the claims and criticisms made in the act of judging. Judgement is needed, for without judgement there can be no redemption, yet judgement is also that from which we require redemption. To be redeemed, you must first fail, but failure in itself never guarantees redemption.

The glimpse we are given of the play suggests that the subsequent hatchet job of a review (evidently written, based on hearsay, by a critic who never saw the production) is not far wrong. Ed nonetheless discounts the negative aspects of the review; as he points out, it praised the costumes, and "I've seen reviews where they didn't even *mention* the costumes." Besides, as he points out, reviews and success are not necessarily related; the last Francis the Mule picture had terrible reviews but was a huge hit. "Don't take it too seriously," he tells the cast; "we're all doing great work." Knowingly or not, Ed has articulated one aspect of an important truth-- but only one aspect. Success can be measured in more than one way, and the reactions of critics, though often deeply affecting, are only one measure, and by no means the most important, of success. Nor is commercial success a necessary indication of quality; it is possible to succeed on one's own terms without ever being accepted by others. This is a seductive, and dangerous, fact, for it can too easily be turned into its opposite: the claim that one's lack of success is in itself an indicator, or even a guarantor, of quality.

For the moment, though, Ed avoids that danger; very early the next morning, lying beside his girlfriend Dolores (Sarah Jessica Parker), he voices doubts. "What if I'm wrong?" he wonders; what if this is the best he has to offer? "I'm just scared that it's not going to get any better than this."

Ed is confronting one of the central dilemmas faced by almost any creative figure: how to judge one's own work honestly. Many are the stories of artists who survived brutal reviews, laughing, rioting, or, worst of all, indifferent audiences, and dozens, or even hundreds, of rejections of one sort or another, only to later become widely respected or acclaimed. Yet for every one of these stories there are many others of individuals who lacked both talent and the ability to recognize their lack of talent, who kept trying out of an unrequited love, and whose faith in eventual recognition remains misplaced, save perhaps as the subject of meanspirited humor. Nor is Ed's concern reflective only of mediocrities desperately attempting to inflate tender egos. A-list director Sidney Lumet, for example, experienced the same feeling, as expressed in his book *Making Movies*: "Creative work is very hard, and some sort of self-deception is necessary simply in order to begin.... Perhaps a better word is "belief." But I tend to be a bit more cynical about it, so I use "self-deception."" In one sense Lumet's term is wrong; deception, whether of self or of others, occurs only when we know what we are claiming is false. Where redemption is concerned, the problem is precisely that we have no knowledge at all, and must operate on faith. How does one know whether what they're creating is good or not? There is no way, from within one's own creativity, to be certain of the accuracy of one's judgement regarding that creativity. Nor does confidence (or faith) prove anything, as even an Ed Wood may be convinced of their own quality. Thus in another sense Lumet is quite right; to have faith is to be able to ignore, or even deny, the fact that we have nothing but hope on which to base that faith.

This early episode is the last we see of Ed's attempts at theatre; within the world of *Ed Wood*, he has recognized that a theatrical performance lives on primarily in the written reports of its existence: the reviews. Therefore, whatever Victor Crowley has printed under his name has now become the truth about Ed's play *The Casual Company*, and there is no direct way to challenge this (a fact noted by Producer George Weiss, who dismisses Ed's statement that Victor Crowley praised the realism of his play by pointing out that "there's about five hundred guys in this town who could say the same thing."). Ed's play, existing now only as a description in an out-of-date newspaper, can no longer be distinguished; it no

longer has an image, save through fading memories of second-hand reports.

Film, on the other hand, turns the tables; all but the most famous reviews will be long gone when the film remains to be seen afresh. All that is needed is a controlling vision, one in which individual images cohere into something larger and more complex than any single review can possibly acknowledge or contain. We see this attitude quite early in *Ed Wood*, during a scene which at first appears superfluous. Ed walks across the studio to deliver a plant, in the process ogling various props and costumed actors and even walking into what appears to be an ongoing take. Partway to his destination, he is called over by a friendly studio librarian, who shows him some stock footage. Ed is impressed, for reasons only his imagination could reveal. "This is fantastic," Ed says; "what are you going to do with it?" The response is curt: "Probably file it away and never see it again." What a waste, Ed replies; "Why if I had half the chance I could make an entire movie using this stock footage." He then proceeds to outline the plot, which does indeed answer to the grainy images we have witnessed on the moviola. It is, we will later realize, not far from a film which he does indeed eventually produce. Critics respond to films, but the very nature of criticism obviates the possibility of a comprehensive response; as Jean-Luc Godard said, "the only adequate critique of one film is another film." Ed knows that once his films get made, they will stand, at least potentially, beyond the reach of any critic save someone who makes another film in response-- which in itself is already a guarantee of cinematic immortality. It is the triumph of the image over the word. The question remains, though, what kind of films Ed will make, and what kind of responses they will evoke.



II. Imagination

The key to *Ed Wood*, and to *Ed Wood*, is found in what is almost a throwaway line. Ed is meeting with the television late night movie hostess Vampira (Lisa Marie), who has just lost her job due to suspicions of communism, and Vampira is clearly disdainful of the prospect of working with Ed. "You should feel lucky," Ed's new girlfriend Kathy (Patricia Arquette) says; "Eddie's only fella in town who doesn't pass judgement on people." Ed agrees; "That's right; if I did I wouldn't have any friends."

Consider again the people Ed has gathered around him: an aging, drug-addicted actor who hasn't had a worthwhile film role in years; a semi-articulate hulk of a wrestler; a camp queen who talks of a sex change but never actually has one; a collection of youngsters with no discernible talents at all. As Dolores Fuller, soon to be his ex-girlfriend, aptly comments, "You've surrounded yourself with a bunch of weirdos." Ed has, but he, and they, form a community of acceptance. Ed does not judge them, nor they him. And this, of course, is the reason why Ed's films are so very bad; he cannot see the flaws in what his friends bring to the films, or if he does he dismisses them as irrelevant, just as the oddities in himself and

in his friends are irrelevant to their friendships. In other words, Ed treats images exactly as he treats his friends; he accepts them for what they are, and works with what they offer. To reject one image is to reject them all.

But art is not friendship. Artistic creation requires judgements, many and often harsh. It is precisely this which Ed Wood cannot do, either because he cannot see the difference or because he will not make the choice (aesthetically, the result is the same). Ed has unconsciously recognized a disturbing fact about the very idea of redemption; only if there is a happy ending for *everyone* can we be certain that there will be a happy ending for us. To be the agent of an unhappy ending, for the take denied, the image discarded, the actor dismissed, is also to rend the curtain of faith, to contribute to the possibility of an unhappy ending not only for them but for oneself. This is not a pragmatic claim-- there is no sense of payback or karmic balance involved-- but rather an ontological claim: that what one is creating when one creates a work of art is indeed a mirror of the universe which implicitly sets the boundaries of possibility, and thus that one had better be very careful in deciding what possibilities to accept. Most art, or at least most art of any significance, confronts one or more of those boundaries and finds in them the source of its structure and content. Not so Ed's films; in denying the possibility that redemption might not be available to all, they deny the existence of any boundaries at all. It is this assurance which appeals to Ed's friends, and which enables him to convince them to get baptized so that he can make a "supernatural thriller". They are not becoming Baptists, whatever the minister thinks; they are instead acknowledging their faith in the world implied by the almost incomprehensible process through which the films of Ed Wood come into being.

Redemption

I. Memory

Redemption carries within itself reality and revision; revision, for all judgements are revisions; reality, because all judgements are judgements of something, and presume to offer an understanding of the truth about -- the reality of-- that thing. But judgements do not occur in a vacuum. They require memory.

"This film is for Bela." Martin Landau won, deservedly, an Academy Award for his portrayal of Bela Lugosi, whose reputation, never quite as obscured as that of Ed Wood or Wood's other actors, was nonetheless freshened by the honor (In an interview on the DVD, Landau quotes an unnamed critic remarking on his (Landau's) award: "The Oscar goes to Martin Landau. Its shadow goes to Bela Lugosi.").

Bela Lugosi is the fulcrum on which *Ed Wood* balances, holding a pivotal position between memory and pride. As a public figure, Lugosi is something of an anomaly within the world depicted in *Ed Wood*. Unlike anyone else associated with Wood, he was undeniably famous, yet his career had faded almost totally. Thus Lugosi is considered always first as a figure of memory, though often distorted memory. Ed's apartment is decorated with posters of Lugosi's films from the 1930s. Ed first sees Lugosi in person in a coffin, to all appearances already dead, and thus entirely in the realm of memory. *Dracula* (1931) was the first film seen by both Ed Wood and Kathy O'Hara, and each recalls seeing Lugosi give a live performance of the play; both agree that Lugosi was even scarier in real life than in the film. The nature of their memories, comparatively benign and apparently clear, suggests the link between them, the link of



redemptive love (Kathy, despite being from the 'normal' world, accepts Ed's transvestitism with scarcely a pause-- once she ascertains that he isn't gay-- and then is happy to be his girlfriend and, eventually, wife).

Others have less clear memories; several characters express surprise that Lugosi is still alive, and others remember him only in relation to Boris Karloff. Lugosi himself is all too aware of his fall from grace; "I'm just an ex-bogeyman," he comments almost dispassionately to Ed. And Lugosi himself acknowledges the power of memory when he has himself buried in his Dracula cape; "Whose crazy idea was it to bury him in the cape?" asks one reporter at the interment; "I heard it was in the will," replies a second. "It was how he wanted to be remembered."

Ed is determined to rectify the situation, but only within the proper sphere: cinema, the place where truth is what we see, where the image long outlives the reality to which it ostensibly refers; Ed, for all his lack of expertise, retains his faith in the future, his pride in the possibility of recognition. Lugosi, still in command of a formidable acting technique for which there is no demand, and who retains a justifiable pride in his earlier achievements, has lost his faith in the future; memory for him is painful, and he has all but abandoned hope ("Eddie," he says as he contemplates suicide, "I'm obsolete. I have nothing to live for."). Thus he will take immediate recognition-- the simple fact of attention-- any way he can obtain it. The two approaches at last connect, and conflict, in the hospital into which Lugosi has committed himself for addiction therapy. Ed discovers a pack of reporters snapping pictures of the frail Lugosi and chases them away, an action Lugosi queries, for he is at last again worthy of notice. "After all these years the press is finally interested again in Bela Lugosi," he murmurs plaintively. "Bela," Ed says, "these people are parasites. They just want to exploit you." Lugosi's reply is soft and sombre, yet acknowledges a reality Ed will never quite allow himself to admit. "Fine. Let them. There is no such thing as bad press, Eddie."

But Ed has recognized an underlying truth which goes beyond Bela's pragmatism, the same truth which drives Ed's own filmmaking; it is not the contemporary press report which matters but maintaining a presence in history. Today's newspaper article, even one on the front page, lasts only until tomorrow's edition hits the streets; scarcely noticed to begin with, its significance vanishes almost immediately. Journalism thus serves as a cage for memory, locking a person or event into the condition of a moment. But Ed's project answers to a broader call: *ars longa, vita brevis*. The work of art, even one which is weak, incompetent, or downright bad, continues to exist *regardless* of whatever judgements may be passed upon it. So long as you live in a work of art, therefore, there is indeed no such thing as bad press, because even the worst press still requires that which it condemns. Criticism, like tabloid journalism (albeit sometimes at a higher level), is parasitic; it derives its legitimacy only from the work it criticizes. Any work, therefore, regardless of its quality, takes precedence over its subsequent critical reception, good, bad, or indifferent.

And there remains always the possibility of resurrection, the ultimate redemption-- for what is a revival of a film if not a form of resurrection? Long dead people move and speak and are once more as they were at some time now otherwise lost. Ed makes the same point more directly when quizzed regarding Lugosi's posthumous double in Plan 9. "Isn't it wonderful?" he says. "Bela lives." The Baptist minister watching the filming is less sure; "Doesn't it strike you as a bit-- morbid?" "No," Ed replies, "he would have loved it. Bela's return from the grave. Just like Dracula." But the point is clear: the return is possible only through the necromancy of cinema, where the resurrected are both subject and stars of the film.

Thus we have several layers of filmic redemption. Edward D. Wood, Jr., is doing his best to find work which will allow an aging star one last bid for dignity. Lugosi's first request after being thrown out of the hospital for lack of insurance is that Ed find him another picture in which to appear, a request Ed grants by shooting footage with no apparent function at all save to capture Bela on film one last time; "you're a very important and respected man," he tells Lugosi in describing the ostensible character the latter is portraying. At the same time, Ed Wood is seeking to create a cinematic legacy which will keep his name, and his stories, alive long after he is gone. And Tim Burton, Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski, and Johnny Depp and Martin Landau and the others are doing exactly what Ed would have wished: they are producing a film which itself serves as a memorial not to what Ed actually achieved through his films, but to what Ed wished he could have achieved: a kind of cinematic immortality. And in so doing, the creators of *Ed Wood* have, of course, helped grant precisely the immortality which ought to have been denied by virtue of the wretched quality of the very films we have witnessed being made. Edward D. Wood, Jr. is a failure, yet the mere fact of *Ed Wood* turns that failure into a kind of success, for the later film would never have been made without the example of Ed's films. Edward D. Wood, Jr. could never have guessed what fate awaited him long after his death, yet perhaps he would not have been

surprised; his faith had made the films possible, so why shouldn't it make posthumous fame possible?

II. Pride

Bela Lugosi is the fulcrum of memory; Dolores Fuller is the nemesis of pride. Alone among Ed's companions she is intermittently and increasingly troubled by the nature of his situation and ambitions, and it is significant that she alone is shortchanged by Ed. The production of *Bride of the Monster* having stalled for lack of funds, Ed meets Loretta King (Juliet Landau), an ingenue he mistakenly believes to have a great deal of money. She willingly invests in the picture (three hundred dollars, which is in fact everything she has in the world), but in return she insists on taking the lead role, one written originally with Dolores in mind. Dolores is predictably angry, but eventually agrees to take a smaller role. Arriving for her scene as a file clerk, she is clearly in a judgmental mood; "I see the usual gang of misfits and dope addicts are [sic] here," she comments nastily. Seeing the slow-witted star of the film (who obtained the role because his father put up 50,000 dollars) struggling to learn his lines, she adds a further sarcastic dismissal: "Wood Productions-- the mark of quality." Ed's response is typical; "Listen, the movie's getting made; that's all that matters." Behind the set, Dolores and Loretta encounter each other in a stereotypically catty fashion, but Ed pleads with Dolores not to get "goofy," and her brief scene is filmed without incident. "That was perfect," Ed says. "Of course it was," Dolores says curtly as she stalks off stage, clearly unimpressed with any of the proceedings, cinematic or personal.

Dolores represents normality, never quite comprehending or approving Ed's choices. At first she is shown as a conventionally supportive girlfriend, but this changes as soon as she reads the script to *Glen or Glenda?*, Ed's semi-autobiographical version of his hopes for their life together. The lighting as she finishes reading, raises her head, and looks toward the door behind which Ed waits is deliberately suggestive of the moment in a noir film where the heroine realizes that she is in deadly danger. She opens the door and sees Ed in drag gazing at her. Her first reaction is quiet-- "So that's where my sweater's been"-- but soon she is screaming at Ed. Her reaction is confused, alternating between condemnation of Ed as a transvestite and anger at his gall in writing a screenplay about it. "What kind of a sick mind operates like that?" she shouts shrilly; "this is our life; it's so embarrassing!" Ed misses her point altogether; "Of course it is," he tells her; "that's why you should play the part." Dolores flinches as Ed approaches her, but his last offer is seductive. "Do we break up," he asks, "or do you want to make the movie with me." The latter prevails; after all, Dolores, as an actress, presumably has enough pride in her craft to want, like Lugosi, to work, even in such a picture as this.

Yet the tensions between normality and those on the fringe are barely hidden, as a subsequent scene quickly makes clear. Dolores is seen looking baleful and shaking her head as we hear Ed, dressed in an angora sweater and blonde wig, telling George Weiss that "I'm proud. I wrote, directed, and starred in it, just like Orson Welles did in *Citizen Kane*." Weiss speaks what must surely be on Dolores's mind: "Yeah, well Orson Welles didn't wear angora sweaters, did he?" Neither Weiss, the practical producer, nor Dolores, the doubtful girlfriend, sees anything for Ed to be proud of (though both have unthinkingly identified Ed's persona with Ed's films, which is not far from the truth). Immediately afterward, a further exchange between Dolores and Ed (part of which I have already mentioned) drives home the incompatibility of the two worlds. "How can you just walk around like that in front of all these people?" she demands. "Well, hon, nobody's bothered but you. Look around," he responds. "Ed," Dolores says, "this isn't the real world. You've surrounded yourself with a bunch of weirdos."

Although Ed is outraged, and Dolores herself a little embarrassed, by her outburst, in cold fact she is right, at least so far as the conventional world is concerned (what she cannot see, or at least does not wish to admit, and Ed does not point out, is that in this company it is *she* who is the weirdo). Nor does Ed argue otherwise; he appeals instead directly to her as a person: "Dolores, I need your help." She allows herself to be persuaded; in fact, after the last scene is shot, her reaction is even one of joy; she squeals and jumps as if already enjoying the plaudits of audiences as yet unknown. For a time, her relationship with Ed proceeds relatively smoothly.

The film flops; the producer for whom Ed made it rejects it, and a big studio producer who views it describes it as the worst movie he's ever seen. Oddly enough, it is Dolores who, apparently by now fully accepting Ed's peculiarities, draws the appropriate conclusion (though probably she hopes that Ed will discover, in the process of attempting to raise funds, that it would be better if he just got a regular job

and gave up his film fantasies): "Well maybe you're not studio kind of material. Maybe you just need to raise the money yourself." Ed sees the truth in her words and begins fundraising, thus starting the process which will inevitably lead to his debacle with Loretta King and the end of his relationship with Dolores.

The split, when it at last comes, is dramatic. Dolores, having urged Ed along paths which, given his abilities and interests, could only be unconventional, and having by now all but broken with him, attends the wrap party for *Bride of the Monster*. Ed performs some sort of bizarre dance in drag, and Dolores snaps. "You people are insane," she shrieks, "you're wasting your life [sic] making shit! Nobody cares, these movies are *terrible!*" She then runs out, pursued by Ed. "Ed, it's over," she tells him, much more quietly. "I need a normal life." She stuck it out so that he could finish the movie, but "now that it's done, so am I." She walks out of Ed's life, and out of *Ed Wood*.

Again, Dolores is objectively right, at least so far as the conventional world is concerned; the creation of *Glen or Glenda?* or *Bride of the Monster* is not something of which conventional people such as George Weiss, Mr. Feldman the big studio executive, or Dolores would be proud in any way. But Dolores, Weiss, and Feldman have missed the real point of pride: that Ed, despite having no resources (or indeed



talents) was able to get anything made at all. Ed has literally created his films *ex nihilo*. Ed's faith has transcended Dolores's reality, reality in the conventional sense; there is simply no reason at all why he should have been able to achieve anything at all, let alone create two feature films. Indeed, Ed's attitude and actions all but embody faith as famously set out by St. Paul: "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Dolores has no such faith, and thus she cannot see the possibilities of redemption embedded in Ed's failures. Nor can she see that one of the things from which Ed will need redemption is her brutally honest expression of her feelings, from her crushing judgement of him and all that he stands for.

III. Faith

Redemption is always something in the future. "Worst movie you ever saw? Well, my next one will be better." Redemption comes in no longer being what one has been presumed to be but having become something greater-- or at least something which is perceived as being greater. We cannot redeem ourselves, for it is only in the eyes of others that we are redeemed; if we knowingly act so as to attain that redemption, we have already lost it, for we have erased who we are in order to be what someone else takes us to be; we have conformed to the reality of someone else, and thus it is no longer we who are being redeemed. As Orson Welles says to Ed when at last they accidentally meet, "Why spend your life making someone else's dreams?". Redemption does not, and redemption *cannot*, conform to current reality; if the latter were enough, redemption would not be necessary. But since the latter is never enough, redemption is always necessary, whether it exists in fact or not.

Yet we can, as it were, believe in advance in the fact of our redemption; we act as if it were so and eventually come to believe that it is, or will be, so. This is the ground of all redemptive religion, but it applies equally well to secular redemption. In both cases, though, it requires faith, and faith is never certain; always we could be mistaken.

"This is the one. This is the one I'll be remembered for." Three principal reactions are possible at the moment Ed utters this as he raptly watches the opening credits of *Plan 9 From Outer Space*. The first, if we know nothing of the life and work of Edward D. Wood, Jr., is incredulity; no one could long be remembered for such rubbish. Yet it should already be clear that *Ed Wood* is not the monument to mediocrity it might appear to be. Quite the reverse is true; *Ed Wood*, in order to be meaningful at all, requires that we accept the division of art works into good and bad, for only if Ed's films are indeed bad can they, and he, deserve redemption. What seems to be a glorification of mediocrity or worse is in fact a strong statement in support of clear aesthetic standards. Strangely enough, the fact that Ed *is* being

remembered for such rubbish pushes the viewer's reaction onward; there must be more here than meets the eye.

The second reaction, then, already partakes of irony, though we may not yet understand why; no one could be remembered for such rubbish, we say, yet clearly someone (Tim Burton et al) *has* remembered Edward D. Wood, Jr., and they have made a movie about him, a movie which by its very existence suggests that he does, after all, have some reason to be proud of his cinematic achievements, however poor they may have been. We may reflect that *Ed Wood* is a better movie than any ever made by Edward D. Wood, Jr., but that it was proportionally no more successful than his at the box office. The vast majority of moviegoers found nothing which compelled them to see the film; either they had never heard of Ed Wood, and thus did not care about a film based on his life, or they had heard of Ed Wood and saw no point in a film based on his life. The successful, whether actually or conventionally, see no need to celebrate the unsuccessful, and thus would have no interest in such a film as this. The successful of course thus miss the point; it is neither Ed's life nor his films which is being celebrated, but the desire for redemption which drove him and animates them. The successful, being successful in the present, see no need to take heed of the future, for they see no need of redemption from their own success. And there is truth in this; if one is successful enough, the very fact of that success carries its own guarantees regarding one's posthumous reputation. Yet even a slight acquaintance with the vagaries of historical taste and evaluation suggests that such reputations are not always as secure as the successful might wish. Thus Dolores's pop song hits were more 'successful' than Ed's films, which never made much at the box office; yet already it is obvious that her creations stand in relation to serious music in no better, and in some ways a worse, position than Ed's films do to serious filmmaking. The same is true of the producer George Weiss, recalled now primarily through his association with Ed, or of any number of other filmmakers contemporary with Ed whose cookie-cutter products are now all but indistinguishable from each other. Success, in the conventional sense, often entails obscurity shortly afterward, an obscurity redeemed only by an occasional film student desperate for a thesis topic. Thus we have a film which by conventional standards failed which is itself immortalizing the work of an even greater failure-- which means, of course, that by those same conventional standards Edward D. Wood, Jr. must be accounted at least something of a success, and perhaps a greater one than those who have celebrated him. Is anyone likely ever to make a film yclept *Tim Burton*?

The third reaction displays the irony more clearly. Only now it is ourselves, not simply Edward D. Wood, Jr., or even Ed Wood, who become the focus of the reaction, of the concern for redemption; we laugh at Ed's prediction because we know that it is true, that he will indeed be remembered as the worst director of all time, as the man who made *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, the worst movie of all time, at least by reputation if not in reality. Yet at the same time we take stock of our own redemption in the light of Ed's putative failure, and perhaps we begin to wonder at who will redeem us from our own putative successes (or indeed even our failures), or whether anyone will care at all. It is the possibility of this last reaction which makes *Ed Wood* such an interesting movie.

Ed loves movies, and he loves what he is doing. But it is not enough that you love what you do; someone else must love what you have done, and love you for having done it. It is not that we identify with the specific deeds of Captain Kirk, say, or of Wonder Woman, save perhaps in an idle moment of juvenile fantasy, but that we identify with the idea of achievement, an idea which is embodied and personified through the character onscreen. The film's portrayal of Ed Wood, a slightly extraordinary movie lover writ large, invites us to identify with his passion and with his attempts to requite that passion. Why, then, was *Ed Wood* not more successful commercially? After all, if we can identify with achievements with little or no basis in reality, surely we would connect that much more strongly with a character whose achievements are not only grounded in reality but are so much more mundane. But the latter is itself already the reason: *Ed Wood* has two sides, and while each is entailed by the other, each also conflicts with what it is we, as audience members, are experiencing or wish to experience. The film redeems Edward D. Wood, Jr., but at the same time it serves to remind us of our own lack of achievements worth loving or even noticing. It is no accident that the film has found so much of its limited audience among amateur and would-be filmmakers, for it is they who can most closely identify with Ed's dream, with its failed reality, and with its unexpected and unasked-for fulfillment through Tim Burton's fantasy. Ed is a dreamer, and most of us have long since traded in our dreams for a drab, but far more secure, reality. Ed Wood reminds us, perhaps too closely and clearly, of the price we have paid for our pragmatic choice: in attaining a secure place within reality, we have given up the hope of redemption

outside it ourselves.

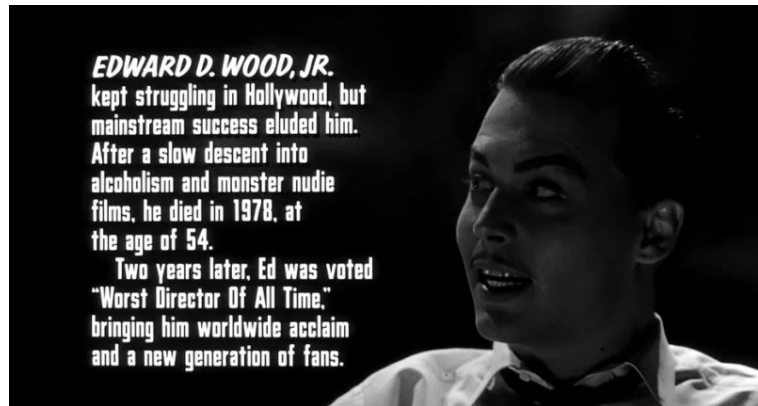
There is more. The end of *Ed Wood* at first suggests circularity; a thunderstorm begins as Ed and Kathy arrive for the premiere of *Plan 9*, and it continues as they leave afterward to get married. Once Ed has driven offscreen, the camera tilts upward to show the theatre marquee, then cranes up and above the theatre to reveal the HOLLYWOOD sign in the distance, remote and unattainable yet strangely irrelevant, and then continues to move, not toward the sign, in a reversal of the opening shot of the main action as we might expect, but rather further upward through the rain and lightning and into the epilogue.

The music here is especially noteworthy. It begins softly, with woodwinds, harp and strings, as Ed declares his anticipation that this is his true cinematic legacy. Serenely it underscores Ed's proposal to Kathy, but already it is becoming more chromatic and darker in character, and as Ed drives away the brass instruments become more and more noticeable. What began sentimentally becomes by stages more plaintive and eventually sombre, even grand, adding an emotional weight that reaches well beyond much of what we have seen thus far. The epilogue itself thus takes on a solemn quality which distinguishes it from the preceding images. As the music unfolds, a series of images of the central characters, some previously seen and others apparently freshly filmed, accompany intertitles purporting to record their lives after the happy ending.

And so reality intrudes again after all. "Edward D. Wood, Jr. kept struggling in Hollywood, but mainstream success eluded him," the intertitle informs us, as Ed's image looks toward the words as if attempting to read his own future, and then directly at the viewer as if looking for confirmation of his own success-in-failure. "After a slow descent into alcoholism and monster nudie films, he died in 1978, at the age of 54." But this is not quite the last word on Ed Wood. "Two years later, Ed was voted "Worst Director Of All Time," bringing him worldwide acclaim and a new generation of fans." Thus we do come full circle; *Ed Wood* could be made only because Ed Wood, in failing, created an unexpectedly long-lived body of work, and his work lives simply because of its own sublime ineptitude. Failure becomes success, and Ed's redemption is complete.

Thus we can see at last the significance of the visual transitions from the credits to the action of the film, and from the action of the film to the epilogue. To all appearances, the space station hovered directly over Hollywood, and now, to all appearances, Ed Wood and his colleagues and friends occupy the same space. Ed's work and Ed's life become one. Hollywood, in the end, is both subordinate and vital to the life and work of someone who never found a place in the cinematic mainstream. Ed cannot reach Hollywood, but this, in a way, is because he is already beyond Hollywood; yet it is only through a Hollywood production, and in the light of the standards of filmmaking which have largely been created by Hollywood, that Ed and his work can attain fame and redemption. The circularity of the film reflects the circularity of the situation: Ed the Hollywood failure becomes Ed the Hollywood success because of a film that was made because of the scope of his failure; has he succeeded instead he would have failed, for the greater the failure the greater the opportunity for redemption. Appropriately, the last image we see is that of Criswell, the man who alerted Ed to the superficial nature of show business, reclining back into his coffin; equally appropriately, the summation of Criswell's post-film life reminds us that he "continued making highly inaccurate and bizarre predictions," much like the predictions of success he made for Ed, predictions at once bizarre yet relevant, inaccurate yet genuinely prescient. Redemption comes as it will, and for reasons which can never be known, and rarely even guessed, in advance. "The End," a final intertitle tells us as the music scales upward into silence; "Filmed in Hollywood, U.S.A."

The fantasies— those of Ed Wood and of Tim Burton alike— have become real, reality signified by the very existence of the film(s) themselves. Even failure, once locked into cinematic existence, means more than fact, with nary a sword or a sorcerer to be seen. What better fantasy could a director ask for?



THYESTEAN TARTS: DELICATESSEN (1991)

THOMAS E. SIMMONS

In issue 16 of *Films Fantastic*, Heath Row provided a glowing review of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985), a film I've long admired. In doing so, Row connected that film to both *Eraserhead* (1977) and *Delicatessen*, writing: "If you haven't seen *Brazil* yet, if you enjoyed *Delicatessen* and *Eraserhead*, and you generally enjoy the work of Terry Gilliam, watch this with all due haste." I took Row up on it. With all due haste, I proceeded to screen *Delicatessen*. Row's advice was appreciated; the film is astounding. It's French cannibalism and social commentary at its finest.

Delicatessen is a zany French post-apocalyptic surrealistic black comedy concerning a landlord with an interest in the culinary arts and unconventional ingredients. It wasn't precisely "directed" by Monty Python's Terry Gilliam (who also directed *Brazil*) but it was – according to the film's credits – "presented by" him, whatever that means. It was co-directed by filmmaker/cartoonist Marc Caro (*The City of Lost Children* (1995)) and Jean-Pierre Jeunet (*Amélie* (2001) and *Bigbug* (2022)).



The landlord-chef-protagonist in the film is Clapet. He presents an assortment of tasty dishes, including those utilizing human flesh. He operates a butcher shop on the ground floor of an apartment building he supervises. He can't run things alone, so he regularly posts job openings. But rather than hire helpers, he murders the applicants, and then sells the meaty dishes derived therefrom to his tenants. In this way, the eating of the poor is rechanneled into high rents, overpriced meals, and actually eating the disenfranchised poor. Capitalism is reconfigured as cannibalism. For Clapet, it works.

But the status quo goes all topsy-turvy when a particularly skilled worker applies – Louison. Louison is too skilled with a butcher knife to be reduced to stew. So, Clapet actually hires him and delays his execution. One has to extract value wherever one finds it, he seemingly reasons. Clapet attempts to extract value from Louison as a laborer, instead of as meat. From this decision, Clapet's orchestrated haute-cuisine scheme begins to unravel. Factor in a love interest between Louison and Clapet's daughter, Julie, the growing suspicions of the tenants, and the underground machinations of the Troglodistes (vegetarian dissidents living in the sewers), and you've got a lively plot.

Delicatessen succeeds on account of the sincerity with which it treats its characters and the reserve with which it introduces moral lessons. Heath Row was right. *Delicatessen* is indeed in the same vein as *Brazil* and *Eraserhead*. It's comedy that triggers giggles and nausea in equal measure while stirring in a generous dash of social commentary and a sprinkling of weirdness. It deserves a spot on the same video shelf as *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* (1989), *Cannibal! The Musical* (1993), and *The 'Burbs* (1989), films which also take a tongue in cheek approach to filmic irony and narrative innovation.

REVIEWS IN RETROSPECT

SCREENED AT THE GLOBE

Reviews by Heath Row

In the heart of Los Angeles, there's a very small movie theater some call The Globe. It is my living room. (We live on Globe Avenue.) The reviews in this column will focus on science fiction, monster, horror, B movies, and other films of interest to Neffers.

The Alpha Incident (1978)

Arrow Video's new boxed set *Weird Wisconsin: The Bill Rebane Collection* is an impressive documentation of Rebane's regional movie production history. The set includes four Blu-rays featuring six movies and the documentary *Who Is Bill Rebane?*, as well as a hard-cover book.

A friend and I watched *The Alpha Incident*, a 1978 movie Rebane made in Tomahawk, Wis. I thought I didn't already own any of the Rebane movies included in the set, but I also have *Gift of a Red Planet*, which I'd ordered directly from him, in my collection; it's an alternate title for this movie.

Relatively slow and even handed as a movie, *The Alpha Incident* tells the tale of some kind of substance brought back from Mars. While a sample is en route by rail to Colorado for further testing, a hard-drinking railroad worker breaks a vial of the stuff—and the people working at the remote Moose Point railroad station are quarantined when the train stops to change engines to continue on to its final destination.

The science fiction elements of the movie are represented by two scientists frantically working to determine how the substance affects higher forms of life—and to develop a counter-agent once they realize its danger to humanity. Meanwhile, viewers are left to witness the tension and drama build among those quarantined: a government agent, the hard-drinking man who caused the trouble, a fiercely independent working man, a bespectacled office clerk, and a young, lonely female bookkeeper.



Initially, the group focuses their displeasure and concern on the government agent, viewing him as a representative of a government they cannot believe or trust. That leads to some political-philosophical discussion and debate. They soon turn their attention to mutual survival and working together to stave off the effects of the substance with which they might have come into contact.

To stay awake, the group resorts to playing cards, dancing, and in one pairing,

RECENT FILMS REVIEWED

ADDICTED TO SCI-FI
Reviews by Tom Feller

Top Gun: Maverick (2022)



I have read that the main reason that Kelly McGillis did not reprise her role of Charlie from the original 1986 *Top Gun* film is that at the age of 64 she had gotten too old to be Tom Cruise's leading lady, and her character is not even mentioned in the latest film. In this sequel, that honor goes to the younger Jennifer Connelly, herself 51 years old. She plays Penny Benjamin, a divorced mother and owner of a bar frequented by Navy pilots. Penny was mentioned, but never shown in the first film. She lives in the same house that Charlie lived in during the original film, and they both drive a Porsche. Cruise himself is 59, although principal photography took place four years ago and the release was delayed by the Covid.

Meg Ryan does not reprise her role either, although she is shown in pictures and flashbacks, and her character is described as having passed away. Val Kilmer, on the other hand, reappears as Tom "Iceman" Kazansky, now a four-star admiral commanding the Pacific Fleet. Kilmer's throat cancer, currently in remission, is worked into the story and for his dialogue, the filmmakers used recordings of his voice. The cancer had destroyed ability to speak, which is why he had retired from acting. His one scene with Cruise is the best one in the whole film.

At the beginning of the new movie, Pete "Maverick" Mitchell (Cruise) is working as a test pilot, reminding me of a few scenes in *The Right Stuff*. Unlike Iceman, he has not advanced

beyond the rank of Captain, because of his, well, maverick ways. Then he is ordered back to the Navy's Fighter Weapon School, aka Top Gun, to train a group of graduates for a special mission that resembles the attack on the Death Star in *Star Wars* as well as the mission in the film *Iron Eagle II*. The enemy is not named, but presumably it is Iran. The ending resembles one scene in *The Great Escape*.

Among the pilots is Lt. Bradley "Rooster" Bradshaw (Miles Teller), the son of Goose (Anthony Edwards) and Ryan's character in the original movie. He blames Maverick for both his father's death and his own failure to get into the U.S. Naval Academy. Other pilots include Hangman (Glen Powell), Coyote (Glen Tarzan Davis), Payback (Jay Ellis), Fanboy (Danny Ramirez), Phoenix (Monica Barbaro), and Bob (Lewis Pullman). Another source of conflict is that Maverick does not, except for Iceman, get along with admirals such as Chester "Hammer" Cain (Ed Harris, in another nod to *The Right Stuff*), who tells Maverick that he will be obsolete soon because of the development of drones. Admiral Beau "Cyclone" Simpson (Jon Hamm) doesn't like him because he repeatedly breaks rules. Reportedly, all the breath taking flying scenes involving the F/A-18s and a P-51 (personally owned by Cruise) were done with real planes rather than CGI, and the actors portraying pilots had to learn to fly the F/A-18s. Like the old silent movie *Wings*, cameras were mounted in the cockpits to show the actors piloting their planes while speaking lines. It is a very entertaining movie and at times nostalgic.

Jurassic World: Dominion (2022)

This is supposed to be the last film in the series that started in 1993. Yeah, right. Since it displaced *Top Gun: Maverick* as the number one film at the box office, I expect more films in this series down the road. Now, it does wrap up some loose ends and even brings back Sam Neill, Laura Dern, Jeff Goldblum, and B.D. Wong to reprise their roles from the very first film. As foreshadowed in the previous film, the dinosaurs have escaped and spread out across the world. Since many of them regard human beings as food, they are dangerous and invasive. Then the film added genetically-altered locusts that threaten the world's food supply, and a human trafficking story line involving the world's first human clone, Maisie Lockwood (Isabella Sermon). At the beginning of the film, she is being raised in a secluded cabin by Claire Dearing (Bryce Dallas Howard) and Owen Grady (Chris Pratt), the stars of the previous two films. Nearby the velociraptor Blue and her baby Beta have carved out a niche for themselves. Blue has reproduced asexually, so Beta is captured by black market dinosaur thieves.



The principal villain is Lewis Dodgson (Campbell Scott), a character from the first film (played by a different actor) who heads a biotech company called BioSyn, loosely based on Apple/Google/Facebook, and his performance is the best in the movie. The scene toward the end in which he tries to make his escape recalls one from the first movie in which the computer saboteur Dennis Nedry (Wayne Knight) tries to escape from the island. He is even carrying a can of Barbasol! Goldblum is good, as usual, but Neill and Dern look like they are there only to

collect a pay check. Two new characters are Kayla Watts (DeWanda Wise), a mercenary pilot who draws the line at human trafficking, and Ramsay Cole (Mamoudou Athie), a corporate whistle blower. They may become the stars of the next film.

One scene reminded me of the old “Bambi vs. Godzilla” cartoon and another reminded me of a variation of an old joke, “Where does a 15 ton brontosaurus sit?” The dinosaur black market on Malta was reminiscent of Mos Eisley in *Star Wars* and the action that takes place there would not have been out of place in a James Bond movie, except that there are the dinosaurs. The computer graphics and animatronics are excellent, as you would expect, but the story is uneven and highly derivative, although entertaining.

Nope

Jordan Peele has a problem similar to M. Night Shyamalan in that both writer-directors had big hits with their first films and have had difficulty duplicating that success. Although Peele's latest film lacks a big plot twist at the end and there is no “message”, it is nevertheless a very creepy horror film. It is mostly set in a valley somewhere in southern California. One part is taken up by a horse ranch for training film and TV horses run by siblings O.J. (Daniel Kaluuya) and Emerald Haywood (Keke Palmer), which they inherited from their father Otis (Keith David). He had died in a freak accident while the ranch's power was cut off. Now anyone who has seen a lot of flying saucer movies, such as *Close Encounters of a Third Kind*, knows that this signals there is a UFO in the area. Their neighbor Ricky “Jupe” Park (Steven Yeun) is a former child TV star who operates Jupiter's Claim, a Wild West theme park, and he also suspects that there is a flying saucer lurking nearby. O.J. and Emerald recruit a techie and UFO buff (Brandon Perea) and a documentary cinematographer (Michael Wincott) to help them photograph the intruder and, hopefully, make a fortune. It turns out that the UFO is not only malevolent, but also carnivorous. As in *Jaws*, it doesn't actually appear until well into the film.



This is a very effective horror thriller, and the first horror movie ever filmed using an IMAX camera.

Thor: Love and Thunder

When someone asked me who played the title character in this movie, I had a senior moment in which I could not remember whether it was Chris Hemsworth or his brother Liam. I guess that shows you how much I admire those actors. Anyway, it is Chris in the fourth Thor movie in eleven years and the funniest. Hemsworth at least has the appealing quality of not taking himself too seriously. The villain is Gorr the God Butcher (an unrecognizable Christian Bale) who first appears in a scene that reminded me of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. Feeling betrayed by Rapu (Jonny Brugh), the god of his world, he embarks on a quest to kill all the gods in the universe after obtaining a weapon called the Necrosword.

At the film's beginning, Thor is inconveniently still part of the *Guardians of the Galaxy* team. After a short action scene, he and his sidekick Korg (voice of Taiki Waititi) leaves them to

return to the Earth, where Valkyrie (Tessa Thompson) has established New Asgard, populated by refugees from the original Asgard destroyed in the previous *Thor* movie. They make a living through tourism. Jane Foster (Natalie Portman) is dying of cancer, except when she wields Thor's original hammer Mjolnir, turning her into a female version of Thor. (Thor is not using an enchanted battle axe named Stormbreaker.) Seeking out allies, they visit the hedonistic Zeus (Russell Crowe) in Omnipotent City, who refuses to help them but invites them to stay over for the next orgy. Nonetheless, they eventually have their showdown with Gorr.

It is an average film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe in terms of action, but above average on its humor. It is the 29th in the series.



A SHOUT FROM THE BALCONY: LETTER FROM A VIEWER

Will Mayo I may have erred in as much as I believe the *Superman* movie was released a year before the taking of the hostages in Iran. But otherwise I had fun reviewing this and the other film. And I enjoyed being included with the others. A fine bunch.

Darkness Divided: The Black Hole (1979) Artemis van Bruggen

In writing these dips into the lesser side of sf films, I usually encourage the reader to meet each film at least halfway on its own ground, to look for such pleasures as the film has to offer on its own terms. With *The Black Hole*, this is very hard to do; perhaps fittingly, given its title, this film has no center; there is nowhere you can meet it halfway (or, there are plenty of halfway marks, but each is separate from the others. It is that which makes its failure so fascinating; the film could have been better, but then it would have been much less interesting.

It's a Disney film, which already says a lot. Disney has always been good at cashing in on someone else's success, and then overdoing their response. *Star Wars* had a cute droid; we'll have two, one with a southern U.S. accent. ESP is popular; we'll have an ESP plot line. *2001* ends confusingly; we'll make sure *absolutely no one* understands the end of our film. And so on.

So why watch this? Three main reasons. First, the design. This is truly spectacular, from the early CGI opening credits, dated but still effective, to the exuberantly Edwardian ship



within which most of the action unfolds (Roger Ebert complained about the sheer amount of wasted space, but surely that vastness is part of the point: it symbolizes the hubris driving Hans Reinhardt). Even the design elements influenced by *Star Wars* tend to have a mysterious edge not seen in the earlier film.

Second, Maximilian and Max[imilian]. The former, of course, is Maximilian Schell, who plays Dr. Hans

Reinhardt, the villain of the piece. Yes, he chews the scenery in the grand manner, but he also knows when quiet menace is the better choice. Max is his robotic alter ego. Design plays a role here as well; Max is one of the few utterly frightening robots of this, or any other, era. There is nothing cute or forgiving or indeed even emotive about Max; he exists on a plane, and in a manner, unlike anything else in the film or most others (the vague similarity to Darth Vader is purely a matter of design, not character; Max remains completely silent throughout the film).

Third, the ending. Anyone—everyone—who has watched this film all the way through has the same reaction: WTF? The ending is so obscure that it hasn't even generated much discussion, fannish, academic, or otherwise. Yet it has a grandeur all its own, both visually and aurally (John Barry's excellent score is at its best here), and, if you let yourself respond at a gut level, it even has some emotional resonance. Nor is it devoid of interest. The problem is simple: nothing in the film has prepared the viewer for the ending. Not in the sense of explaining it, but in the sense of setting it up structurally and emotionally. Whatever is on the other side of a black hole (ignore the junk science; it's a movie) ought to be utterly strange to our experience. But we needed to feel that possibility before confronting the reality full-on.

Still, give this one a fair chance, and give it some conversational space afterwards. You might be surprised at the results.

