

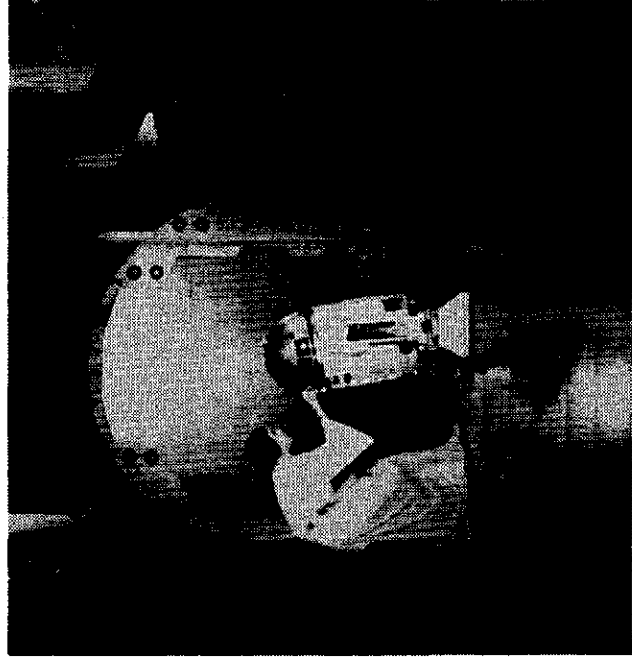
REVIEW

THE GREAT INTERGALACTIC SCI-FI FREAKOUT

Star Wars

MEYAN TOMASELLI and GREG GARDEN

If you can't convince them, confuse them.
Truman's Law.



This law appears to have become the last refuge of film critics who find themselves faced with a set of celluloid images which don't conform to their conception of what they *think* a film *should* be. Parochial opinion based on personal prejudices contributes little to an in depth assessment of the film in question.



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THE DAY THE PIGS REFUSED TO BE DRIVEN TO MARKET is the long but apt title of a book on advertising which argues that the consumer is freeing himself from the clutches of Big Brother who is no longer the manipulator, but the manipulated. Much has been written about Brother George Lucas and Sons and their product, STAR WARS. Despite the frenzied efforts of many leading arbiters of public taste to confine this film to a galactic junkyard, the Pigs dressed as cinemagoers, disobeyed these consumer guides and refused to stay at home. This rebellion occurred despite an unprecedented number of column inches consumed by the critics in their soul saving mission. Eric Liknaitzky was assigned three pages of SPEAK while Robert Greig performed his own version of a critic's cosmorama pastiche in THE STAR.

These two critics are in company with a faithful band of apostles who are desperately trying to figure out the connection between STAR WARS and 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY. Their critiques meander aimlessly between a nostalgic grief about what the film could have been on the one hand and "dung heaps", "popcorn" hazes and the use by a "geriatric" of a "Lamborghini for trips to the Supermarket" on the other. Critical theories, methods, approaches and simple logic were sucked down the "Plastic Age" plughole and dissipated in the thrill of "flying a space-fighter" armed with a "water pistol".

Liknaitzky, it appears, derived his critical inspiration from the telepathic thoughts of an "elderly couple sitting across the aisle" while Robert Greig furiously consulted the sci-fi STAR WARS comic to check continuity. The results in each case read like a concoction gelled from MAD Magazine, pseudo-intellectual swashbuckling and association word games. All the issues Liknaitzky "hoped to illustrate" got lost somewhere among all his "buzzards and beeps, heroes, villains, beasts and freaks". Robert Greig on the other hand fell prey to the dreaded "tech..." lurgey and interchanged his terminology faster than Lucas could change lenses. Confusion reigned as "technological", "technique" and "technical" were applied loosely to describe situations which, more correctly, were of a thematic nature:

"The other limitation of the film, inherent in Lucas' determination to stay within rigid conventions is its technique. Technologically, it is adventurous, technically non-descript. The medium of film is being used to narrate, and that's it."

Unfortunately, this kind of flippant language, while fun to write, does not clarify the essence of the film. If cinema is to have the force of serious literature, music, painting and sculpture, film criticism must rise above responding to those aspects of film

which are least cinematic. "Being trained to watch out for themes and symbols and other literary impedimenta, the critic responds to the overtly 'serious' in the dialogue, instead of following the visual clues peculiar to each director." (van Zyl) A responsible critic, if he is to fully understand the significance of any particular film or group of films beyond a literary or superficial interpretation must understand the vocabulary of criticism in order to choose a path of analysis.

There is no single approach to film criticism. Film is a multifaceted code and meaning is to be found on a variety of levels ranging from the superficial to the very complex. Whatever critical method is used, whether it be aesthetic, non-aesthetic, auteurist or sociological, a blend of all of these or an approach unique to the critic in question, it must at least be consistent.

Why so many critics should be caught out by a simple film like STAR WARS devolves upon a definition of sci-fi. Robert Greig resurected this term and both he and Liknaitzky associate STAR WARS with 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY. Greig: "you'd expect STAR WARS to be at least as radical a film as SPACE ODYSSEY", while Liknaitzky poses the question " - a recipe for 2001 PART II?"

They both lack a method of coming to terms with the film. Historically, "sci-fi" refers to that branch of science fiction called Space Opera which is nothing more than the conventions of the Western transplanted into the reaches of space and time. Greig is aware of this in his references to "Gulch City" and his equating of the film with an old Western. But he is critically unselective because he has mixed up "sci-fi" with "sf". Indeed, the distributors were more perceptive than the critics, marketing the film as a "Space Fantasy". STAR WARS IS A TECHNOLOGICAL FAIRY TALE. That it was so successful cannot be attributed merely to advertising as Liknaitzky implies, but also to a sociological need on the part of the audience to escape into a comfortable familiar dream territory in which technology is used to triumph over the forces of evil. But for the lack of a strong central personality, STAR WARS could be the '70's equivalent of James Bond. The Bond of the '60's reflected a national fear of the Red peril as he toiled single-handedly to protect the West. STAR WARS serves the same purpose as the JAMES BOND films did during the 1960's. Perhaps a sociological analysis holds the kernel of a more useful criticism which would establish the relationship between audience and film.

While the sincerity of these critics was undetermined by a lack of critical method, the Pigs were not confused: THIS TIME THEY DROVE THEMSELVES TO MARKET.

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COMES A HORSEMAN

There may or may not come a time in every American movie director's life when he feels the need to do a Western. Pakula certainly seems to have caught the romantic bug in **COMES A HORSEMAN**. What happens when a director whose films (like **KLUTE**, **ALL THE PRESIDENTS' MEN**) goes West is difficult to describe other than in terms of self-indulgence.

Hollywood has recently developed the habit of falling in love with itself again. Bogdanovich has aped and inspected styles of movie-making with varying degrees of success. Mel Brooks and his offshoots have made some of the funniest but also the most boring film comedies by sending up Hollywood conventions. Polanski used conventions with chilling accuracy in **CHINATOWN**; Scorsese had a witty go at the musical in **NEW YORK, NEW YORK**. The list is endless. When Arthur Penn turned to the Western in **MISSOURI BREAKS** he produced a tediously violent movie. Sam Peckinpah had more success with **PAT GARRET AND BILLY THE KID**. Pakula's film is so slushily romantic that it can well be seen as a cautionary tale. The symbiosis between Hollywood director and the tradition which sustains and is sustained by him yields a boringly self-conscious piece of work.

The script is embarrassingly clichéd and its tone is typified by the advertising blurb for the film: "She was as strong as the land for which she fought. And as vulnerable." A tough but soft-centred cookie complete with sexy hips holds her own against the ravages of exploitative neighbours and oil barons. Abetted by her handsome new young partner and lover (who fought in the War) she saves her land and her self-respect. One may argue, of course, that in such a film the plot is incidental or that clichés are in themselves important. But the extended coverage given to clichéd scenes is tiresome, and furthermore there is little in the film that is NOT clichéd.

One is presumably expected to view the heroine as a post-war liberated frontierswoman. Jane Fonda works wonders with her role, giving a sensitive and careful performance. But she doesn't have much to work on. Her transfiguration from tough woman to pretty young lady dancing around in a party dress is inevitable from the moment we set eyes on her. And surely the caricature of "tough but really mixed-up and yielding" has been overplayed by now and is hardly complimentary to women. When Hayley Mills got too big for child star roles she appeared in **THE TRUTH ABOUT SPRING** as a tomboy who blossomed into a pretty young thing in a sundress. Fonda has to do much

the same kind of trick, the only difference being that she is provided with an ill-drawn and tawdry sexual and emotional history.

What is never explained is why this woman is so attached to her land and determined not to taste the forbidden fruits of "progress". If the script writer is prepared to hint at Freudian motives for her attachment to the West, the viewer is entitled to know how these motives work. Ecological sentimentality is not enough to carry the "message" through. And if we are being called upon to mourn a more beautiful or honest way of life, the film does not give us much indication of the virtues of that way of life. Exquisitely photographed scenes of people scampering about on horses rounding up cattle have long since lost their polemical appeal, simply because it's all been done so many times before.

Curiously enough, James Caan is given top billing in what is obviously Fonda's film. He functions as little more than a foil to the heroine, a burly presence. In the light of this, his inarticulate grunting can be forgiven. Jason Robards as the villain has the real problem of wrestling with a hopelessly underdrawn role. It is only through a studied performance that he avoids playing the lurid epitome of one who ruthlessly sells his birthright and that of others for the inevitable mess that is the result of doing such things.

COMES A HORSEMAN is a disturbing film because there is obviously much fine talent at work in it. But the sentimentality to which it constantly descends gives it a quality which insults this talent. One can only hope that in the future Pakula will return from the beautifully green fields of Western mythology to the subjects he treats so well. When the exploited are indulged so completely, and when the director identifies so closely with them, one's sympathies turn to the exploiters who at least have their feet on the ground, if not on the earth.

and BLACK AND WHITE IN COLOUR

LESLIE SWARTZ

The Vistarama in Johannesburg looks as if it will become a worthwhile cinema. After opening with **MADAME ROSA** it was forced to offer the inevitable shark for a while, but its latest film is certainly very good indeed.

As a South African watching **BLACK AND WHITE IN COLOUR** in a whites-only cinema one is entitled, if not compelled to feel rather uneasy. By the same token any film dealing with colonialism makes one suspicious and

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over-critical. This film, far from confirming any fears, actually presents a refreshing and very witty account of the colonial situation during the First World War.

By focussing on a tiny French community isolated in West Africa (now the Ivory Coast) the director Jean-Jacques Annaud can emphasize the absurdity both of war and of colonialism. After hearing about the war almost by accident the colonists pull together with a will, give a stirring rendition of the Marseillais, and set about pitting their local blacks against those of the Germans across the little stream. Their boredom leads them to jump at the opportunity of formulating grand plans, and at reinterpreting the action of their former friends, the Germans. They are quick to assess that their tiny insignificant community has a place in the grand design of history.

We laugh at all the grandiose references to history, but what Annaud implies is that it is of this type of absurdity that history itself is made. These sleepy degenerates have the gall to give to themselves the glory of being part of a grand design. It may be specifically because these people and others like them view themselves in this way, that they do become the grand design. In this and other respects **BLACK AND WHITE IN COLOUR** is reminiscent of **OH WHAT A LOVELY WAR**. It is the ill-considered carnival full of colour and romance that changes the lives of people shockingly and irrevocably.

Clearly, then, this film does not subscribe to the "great man" theory of history - the world is not changed by the magnificent or tragic actions of an exceptional leader. We are offered instead a view of an exception in the small community in the person of Fresnoy, the only young intellectual for miles around. But his position is not presented

unequivocally. As he writes a letter to Paris about opera and theatre, the camera sweeps about his dusty environment. He opposes the war but comes to manage it with ruthlessness. He "understands the native" more than the other whites do, but he is fully prepared to use the blacks as pawns in his personal war with his compatriots. While on the one hand he grants the blacks status they have not enjoyed before, he uses this status to exploit them more efficiently.

Not that these exploited blacks are in any way "noble savages". Mercifully, we are spared the romantic view of black Africa that Alex Haley has recently repopularized in **ROOTS**. The blacks in this film are just as absurd as their exploiters. Though they constantly make secret fun of the whites, they are prepared to be exploited. The black chief has no qualms about referring to the "German" blacks as savages and in his way he is just as much an exploiter as are the whites. Folly is not restricted to those in power - it is the province of all.

But though it is this folly that makes up history, history is not a joke. Throughout the film there are underplayed flashes of horror. People are being bought and are selling themselves. But worse than this, respectable stupidity is killing people. And it is not the young white socialist who dies, it is the person who through cultural or other reasons is not proficient at winning the game.

Only once is the horror overplayed. This is in a scene where a mask that looks like a black face is luridly consumed by fire. However, the ham-handedness of this scene serves as an indication of what the film could have been like if less skilfully handled. It is controlled clever cynicism that makes this a good film.

