

On Sci-fi and Fantasy in the 80's

by Stan Beeler

Have you noticed the trend towards escapism in films during the last few years? Everyone has seen **Raiders of the Lost Ark**, **Star Wars**, and **Lord of the Rings**, to mention just a few. I have become so encouraged by this movement in the direction of what once was labelled Fantasy and (heaven forbid) Science-Fiction that I have decided to admit to the world at large that I read it.

My first introduction to this outcast of modern fiction came on my tenth birthday. I was presented with a collection of short stories by Fritz Leiber which I still possess. This is because it is the only hardcover edition of Science-Fiction that I own. Since this momentous occasion I have been an avid reader if not a staunch defender of the genre. I always considered it to be a solitary and somewhat socially unacceptable habit rather like...Well, let us not develop embarrassing metaphors. In any case Science-Fiction has always been a solace in idle moments. I am sure you know what I mean, when other fools are studying for final exams or writing overdue term papers. When tension becomes too great then the fantasy world of technological extrapolation intervenes. It has saved me a fortune in tranqui-

lizers. And now it would seem that the rest of the world (Hollywood) has discovered what I have known for years. Unfortunately, as is usual with the mass production of any luxury item, the quality has deteriorated.

Harlan Ellison, a wonderboy of the Science-Fiction short story set has come forth in vigorous opposition to these new additions to the field. He labels the mass produced version Sci-fi. **Star Wars** was the big seller that sparked his protest I believe. I can't quote his article directly because my family attempts to break my nasty reading habits by burning my stash of magazines periodically. (How else would one burn magazines?) It seems to me that he resents the fact that the newcomers do not fall in line with what he considers to be the true spirit of the movement while borrowing images and concepts wholesale from the past masters.

In the case of **Star Wars**, at least, I disagree with his judgement. One of the most important things to successful Science-Fiction is the creation of an inherently consistent alternate world. **Star Wars** did this by building upon the long tradition of the American space-opera. That is a sort of swash-buckling adventure story set in a rather familiar setting. Battle-

ships are spaceships, guns are lasers and faithful servants are humanoid robots. The audience feels himself at home in this environment. One is not consistently surprised by the author.

Isaac Asimov, perhaps the most famous Science-Fiction author alive today, has written a series of stories concerning robots. One of the reasons that these stories are so engaging is the fundamental law of robotics (a sort of ten commandments for artificial intelligence) which is strictly obeyed. If a rule is bent, then it is the readers task to discover how. Like a good mystery story the answer is always logical.

Fantasy at its best, in Tolkien's **Lord of the Rings**, is consistent to the point of mania. The author has even developed written languages for the various mythical races that appear in the work.

Films usually suffer from the lack of time in which to develop an alternate universe. However there are two ways in which to circumvent this inherent limitation. The first is to keep the differences between the "real world" and the fictional to a bare minimum. In this sort of work one has a perfectly normal world with one or two wild cards thrown in. In the **Andromeda Strain** it is a plague

brought to earth by a returning satellite that is outside our normal frame of reference.

The second method is to use someone else's world. That is, the screenplay is built around an existing work (or type) of fiction. **The Lord of the Rings** animated film assumed an intimate knowledge of Tolkien's books on the part of the reader. To a lesser extent, **Clash of the Titans** was founded upon the complex world of classical Greek mythology. The big problem with this solution is that to the uninitiated the movie appears disjointed and requires leaps of understanding to bridge the gaps left in the plot. Hollywood has made for itself further difficulties with the "borrowed universe" solution by attempting to improve upon it by mixing and matching. Thus the Greek hero of **Clash of the Titans** winds up with a robot owl a la **Star Wars** for a sidekick. It is an unpleasant juxtaposition. The logic is that since audiences have shown that they like small squeaky robots, they shall be presented with one no matter how unlikely it may seem.

Another characteristic of the new wave of Science-Fiction and Fantasy movies is a taste for flamboyant special effects. In **Star Wars** they were well integrated into the plot. The **Star Trek** movie however, had sev-

eral million dollars worth of very boring special effects. In **Clash of the Titans** the monsters were ludicrous. Greek mythology has not survived two thousand years by reason of spectacular horrors, and I suspect that any film that attempts to dispense with plot will not last nearly as long.

Well this has been my rather opinionated view of what has been going on in the ever expanding realm of the unreal. I guess its all right to talk about it in public now. After all, Dalhousie is offering a course in Science-Fiction and Fantasy. They won't take away my degree will they?

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ambiguities of a character that had always been in control of himself until now, even when he was "killing gooks in Nam." The best thing to say of his performance is that he doesn't seem a star; he's an everyman wandered into this world of magic and illusion and trying to feel his way around.

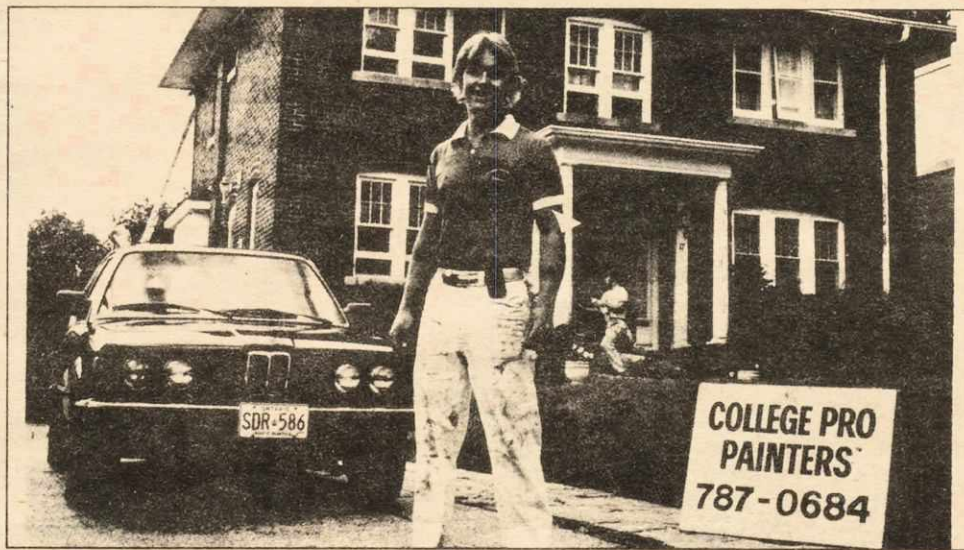
The Stunt Man is definitely a film to see if you didn't catch it last year in the theatres. If you did, then you know what I've been talking about, and seeing it twice wouldn't hurt none. When you leave the Cohn, I'll bet you'll be smiling.

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