

# SOME FANTASTIC

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## Welcome!

A little over a year ago, I attempted to start a sf-based, semi-professional critical magazine. Unfortunately, despite setting guidelines that at the time seemed eminently reasonable, the idea was far more ambitious than I had either the time or the money for. It certainly didn't help that my idea to start the venture virtually coincided with the birth of my son Brandon. It never saw the light of day

So, from the smallish collection of ashes from the ill-fated startup—i.e., the few articles and reviews that I compiled—I decided to go the fanzine route, which my current resources more easily encompass. All those “ashes” are on display within, and as a result this first issue will have a decided critical-zine feel.

In future issues, *Some Fantastic* will certainly much more resemble an eclectic sounding board. While I intend to keep sf very much in the foreground, politics, humour (yes, spelled with a “u,” just be glad I won't use “Meihem in Ce Klasrum” by Dolton Edwards as my spelling guide moving forward,) social issues and other pop culture phenomena will certainly find a place within. I also hope to print articles by friends, acquaintances and anyone else who submits material.

Feedback and letters are welcome as well. Contact information is on page 2—just be aware that we don't pay anyone for their submissions. This is a labor of love.

I hope that my fellow writers and I manage to entertain you!

— Matthew

## Just for Fun: *Star Trek* vs. *Star Wars*

*With Wendy Stengel*

The October, 2003 issue (#86) of *MacAddict* magazine contains numerous comparisons between many different types of competing software and computer services and makes recommendations as to which is the best buy for the reader. Because *MacAddict* has always been a somewhat tongue-in-cheek publication, they also do a few more light-hearted comparisons: the American League vs. the National League, Bourbon vs. Scotch, Gummi Bear vs. Gummi Worm, etc. However the one that caught our attention was the *Star Wars* vs. *Star Trek* comparison. Here's *MacAddict*'s list of 20 comparison points (forgive me for not having the page number, the issue has long since found its way into a recycling bin,) with our picks and commentary. Note that *MacAddict* did not supply any commentary for their picks.

### 1. **Death Star vs. Borg Cube.**

*MacAddict*: Death Star.

*Matthew*: I concur. Yeah, the Borg Cube quickly self-regenerates and can go back in time, but their computer network security leaves a lot to be desired (see the *ST:TNG* episode “Best of Both Worlds, Part II” and *Star Trek: Nemesis* to see what I'm talking about.) Furthermore, the Death Star can flat-out destroy whole planets.

*Wendy*: I'm on the Borg Cube here, because, well, there was more than one. Death Star: Only one, and a rag tag fleet blew it up. Borgs are so much more adaptable.

**Winner**: Death Star (SW).

### 2. **Light saber vs. phaser.**

*MacAddict*: Light saber.

*Wendy*: CLEARLY PHASERS RULE. No contest.

*Matthew*: Wendy's right. Kind of an unfair comparison though as these are not equivalent weapons. The Light saber looks cool (especially the two-handed one Darth Maul used) and is a functional tool, but you really can't do anything with it if your enemy is more than 10 feet away. The phaser can stun, vaporize and in a pinch can be set to overload which makes it a very potent explosive device. For an analogy, think of the scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* when the swordsmen block Indiana's

“If I sell two issues, I feel like John Grisham.” -Alyssa Jones, *Chasing Amy*

path and he just shoots them. This analogy also gives me bonus geek points for cross-referencing another Harrison Ford-George Lucas flick.

*Winner:* Phaser (ST)

3. **Millennium Falcon vs. Enterprise NCC-1701.**

*MacAddict:* Millennium Falcon.

*Matthew:* I concur. However, the hand is stacked in the favor of *Star Wars*; notice that the comparison wasn't with the Enterprise NCC-1701D or even with the Reliant from *ST:DS9*. I'd take either of them over the Falcon in a heartbeat.

*Wendy:* Millennium Falcon, but that would change if I ever saw the MF being held in the hand of a godling. I suspect it wouldn't handle the pressure.

*Winner:* Millennium Falcon (SW)

4. **The Force vs. The Prime Directive.**

*MacAddict:* The Force.

*Wendy:* The Prime Directive. Eh, I'm weak on this. If you'd asked me BEFORE the more recent additions to *Star Wars*, the Force would have won, hands down. But now? It's some crappy biological determinism. Screw that.

*Matthew:* The Force. Despite the laughable midi-chlorians business (it makes it sound like being strong in The Force is like coming down with the flu, and that a shot of antibiotics will clear it away,) The Force just kicks ass. Despite

how clearly it's written, it seems the penalty for breaking The Prime Directive is about as serious as a ticket for a moving violation.

Lame.

*Winner:* The Force (SW)

5. **The Rebellion vs. The Federation.**

*MacAddict:* The Rebellion.

*Matthew:* Tie. Both are noble groups that represent all that is good in sentient species. I can't really pick a winner.

*Wendy:* The Feds, baby. Noble, yes, but with some rot at the core. Far more interesting.

*Winner:* Tie. (none)

6. **The Gungan vs. The Ferengi.**

*MacAddict:* The Ferengi.

*Wendy:* Ferengi are funny, and so detailed in their characterizations! Love 'em.

*Matthew:* I whole-heartedly agree. This one is not even close. In fact, there are 285 reasons (i.e., the Rules of Acquisition) why the Ferengi win easily.

*Winner:* The Ferengi (ST)

7. **Ewoks vs. Tribbles.**

*MacAddict:* Tribbles.

*Matthew:* I agree. Tribbles make a nice, soothing noise when you stroke them and can warn you when there's a Klingon in disguise. Yeah, the Ewoks helped win a rebellion, but they're just too nauseatingly cute and they reek of merchandising opportunities to small children. Blech.

*Wendy:* Tribbles, but I loved the Ewoks. I did. I even had a button with two baby Ewoks on it. Yes. I did. I bought it. I admit it...

*Winner:* Tribbles (ST)

8. **C-3PO vs. Spock.**

*MacAddict:* Spock.

*Wendy:* Spock. Um... Okay, C3PO has a cute, cute accent. But, he's too friggin' limited. Spock, Spock has dimensions. And, he's a mental rapist, which was such an interesting place to put that character, and you could tell Nemoy was having a hard time with that scene, and it's just heart-rending to watch.

*Matthew:* At least we're unanimous, but what the hell? This is a crummy comparison—you compare C-3PO with Data, not Spock. Either way the *Star Trek* universe wins, but at least

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**Some Fantastic  
c/o Matthew Appleton  
4656 Southland Avenue  
Alexandria, VA 22312  
mattapp@cox.net**

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the comparison is more apt.

**Winner:** Spock (ST)

9. **R2-D2 vs. Data.**

*MacAddict:* R2-D2.

*Matthew:* What drugs are the *MacAddict* staff taking? There's really no comparison for R2-D2 in the Trek universe. Still, I'd take Data over R2-D2 any day. Ignoring events in *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones*, R2-D2 is about as mobile as a Dalek and the only true comparison to it is Twikki from *Buck Rogers*. Double-blech, but I get double bonus points for referencing two more sci-fi universes.

*Wendy:* Data. R2 is a trashcan that beeps.

**Winner:** Data (ST)

10. **Chewbacca vs. Montgomery Scott.**

*MacAddict:* Chewbacca.

*Wendy:* No! Frickin! Contest! Scottie all the way. Esp. because he KNOWS he's inflating his estimates. And, could Chewie figure out how to keep himself alive in a pattern buffer for hundreds of years? I think not.

*Matthew:* I'm starting to wonder if the *MacAddict* staff needs to go into rehab. Yeah, both are pretty skilled engineers, and Chewbacca gets bonus points for his ability to communicate through growling and hand gestures alone. However, do you really want your chief tech person to have such a violent temper? You need them cool and collected when you need your main engines back online in 10 minutes, and not have to worry about them flinging tools (and just maybe their feces) when they get too disgusted.

**Winner:** Scottie (ST)

11. **Leia Organa (IV) vs. 7 of 9.**

*MacAddict:* Leia.

*Matthew:* Puh-lease. 7 of 9 can say "Resistance is futile" to me anytime. However, if the comparison is with Leia at the beginning of *Return of the Jedi* where she's wearing that bikini outfit, then my vote changes. Schwing! (I would've typed the appropriate descriptive for the light saber swooshing sound, but it lacked the same immediate impact.)

*Wendy:* Leia, if only because we don't have any weird incesty mother-figure sexual tension for Leia. If you have to give me incestu-

ous subtexts, I'd rather it be brother-sister than mother-daughter.

**Winner:** Leia (SW)

12. **Emperor Palpatine vs. Borg Queen.**

*MacAddict:* Borg Queen.

*Wendy:* I'm with *MacAddict* here. Borg! Queen! She is SEXY. She gets Data to SERIOUSLY question allegiances. Brent Spiner's pained/delighted look when she blows on his new skin and gives him goosebumps? GENIUS. Best Data moment. Plus, her head detached. The Emperor is just creepy and so unsexy.

*Matthew:* I respectfully disagree. Yeah, the Borg Queen is a major babe, but she was unable to properly seduce Picard, Data or Janeway. I mean, what good is it if you can't use what cyber-engineering gave you? Palpatine, on the other hand, seduced Anakin to the Dark Side and managed to turn a Galactic Federation into an Empire.

**Winner:** Borg Queen (ST)

13. **Padme Amidala (I) vs. Kathryn Janeway.**

*MacAddict:* Janeway.

*Matthew:* I agree, but am left scratching my head. It's a ridiculous comparison as there really isn't an accurate counterpart for Amidala. Nonetheless, this is a no-brainer, just look at the ridiculous outfits Amidala has to wear. Furthermore, what good is it if you are the leader of an entire world & you look like a clown, and you cavort with something that sounds like a helium-inhaling Rastafarian?

*Wendy:* I can't believe I'm choosing Janeway over anything that exists. But Padme? Dumb character. Dumb costumes. "I will never be with you, get over it, but look at my black corset first..."

**Winner:** Janeway (ST)

14. **Anakin Skywalker (I) vs. Tribbles.**

*MacAddict:* Tribble.

*Wendy:* Heck, ANYTHING over Anakin. Ew.

*Matthew:* I agree, but why do the Tribbles get another go-round? A far more intriguing match-up: Anakin Skywalker (II) vs. Wesley Crusher.

*Wendy:* I must add that Wesley wins over Anakin. Oh, yes. After all, there's a Draft

Wesley Crusher movement  
(<http://www.draftwesleycrusher.com/>)!

**Winner:** Tribbles (ST)

15. **Luke Skywalker (IV) vs. James T. Kirk.**

*MacAddict:* Kirk.

*Matthew:* I agree. Kirk gets the weird green alien chicks while Skywalker gets a kiss "for luck" from his sister. Lame.

*Wendy:* Luke is a putz. Kirk is an overacted buffoon, but he has PASSION.

**Winner:** Kirk (ST)

16. **Luke Skywalker (V) vs. Jean-Luc Picard.**

*MacAddict:* Skywalker.

*Wendy:* No. Frickin'. Contest. Jean-Luc, baby. Sexy, smart, diplomatic, drinks tea, likes archeology, sexy...

*Matthew:* I'm fairly certain the *MacAddict* staff is trafficking crystal meth. Luke loses a hand, needs to be saved by friends twice and flies an x-wing fighter. Picard captains the flagship of the Federation and is often saving humankind's ass.

**Winner:** Picard (ST)

17. **Han Solo vs. William Riker.**

*MacAddict:* Solo.

*Matthew:* Solo, easily. Both guys have their libido set on stun, but Solo is a go-getter who takes the command positions whenever offered while Riker waits over ten years for command of the Enterprise before finally giving up and taking another command, after repeated Starfleet attempts to give him his own ship. Wuss.

*Wendy:* Hans Solo: Sexy. Will Riker: THINKS he's sexy.

**Winner:** Solo (SW)

18. **Darth Vader vs. Khan Noonien Singh.**

*MacAddict:* Vader.

*Wendy:* Vader was never sexy. Not only was Khan sexy, but Khan had sexy henchmen. Mmmmmm, Joachim!

*Matthew:* I pick Khan solely because he's such an over-the-top villain. I'll take Khan's scenery chewing over Vader's heavy breathing any day. In a previous incarnation, Khan would've been an awesome Batman villain. In another life, Vader would've just been a well-decorated member of the military, who happened to succeed despite an asthma problem. There's certainly nothing wrong with that, but it's far less interesting.

**Winner:** Kahn (ST)

19. **Watto vs. Neelix.**

*MacAddict:* Neelix.

*Matthew:* Push. Both are equally annoying characters. Yeah, Neelix is a nice guy who can cook while Watto is a slave-driver (literally), but both of them should be jettisoned in the nether regions of space.

*Wendy:* Neelix. Who the hell is Watto?

**Winner:** Neelix (ST)

20. **Yoda vs. Gene Roddenberry.**

*MacAddict:* Roddenberry.

*Wendy:* Roddenberry, because, you know, Gene came up with the *Wagon Train* through the stars. Yoda's just a Muppet.

*Matthew:* I say that there is no way you can compare the two whatsoever. However, if I really must pick, then Yoda, if for no other reason than construct sentences like this he does. Also, Roddenberry decided to piss off Harlan Ellison. Bad, bad move.

**Winner:** Roddenberry (ST)

**Final results:** Star Trek 14, Star Wars 5, with 1 tie. & rehab suggested for the staff at *MacAddict*.

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## **The Time Machine DVD Review**

By *Edna Stumpf*

The human race has always yearned for a time machine. To correct the mistakes of history, to adjust and cosmeticize our futures, to create a green environment without fumes or car insurance, with maybe those cool transporters from classic Star Trek.

Cut. Retake. The human race actually has more sense. A time machine would give us a wide-range capacity for screwing up, and the century past has given us some insight into our ability—maybe even our sick willingness—to screw up.

Yet the Time Machine persists as a symbol of “what if,” ripped off, deconstructed and put to peculiar uses by hundreds of science fiction writers—who naturally prefer terms like “heritage” and “homage.” It was invented in the eponymous 1894 novel by the inventor of science fiction himself, Herbert George Wells, so it belongs in the field’s gloriously furnished collective attic. Every once in a while the book itself gets taken out and filmed. George Pal did it in 1960. Nicholas Meyer *sort* of did it as a screwball comedy in 1979 (*Time After Time*). Well, we can forget that one. Simon Wells, great-grandson of the Founder, did it in 2002 and was felled by exhaustion. Which seems to confirm what the production lore on the DVD version implies: current technology may have made the 19th-century imagination filmable. But even when you have Digital Domain on the job, it ain’t easy.

In the newest version, Guy Pearce plays H.G.’s unnamed Time Traveler, now known as Alexander Hartdegen, a Columbia professor and technology-hugger. The man darts about in absent-minded genius mode, collecting pocket-watches, chatting with the owner of a Stanley Steamer, corresponding with a patent clerk named Einstein. He presents his girlfriend with an engagement ring in Central Park mere seconds before she is killed by a robber’s bullet. (This was *not* in the book.) Thereafter fired by a desire to change the past, Alexander invents the time machine, saddles up with a flourish of laser beams and pretends to demonstrate to his own dissatisfaction that although he can reencounter and divert his

beloved, he cannot prevent her death. In a frenzy of dark hope, he plunges into the future where the denatured Eloi and savage Morlocks await. If you don’t know about them, I refer you to George Pal or H.G. Wells himself.

The future Alexander finds is one with a possible lover in Mara (Samantha Mumba) and a definite enemy in the Morlock Master of Mind Control (Jeremy Irons). It

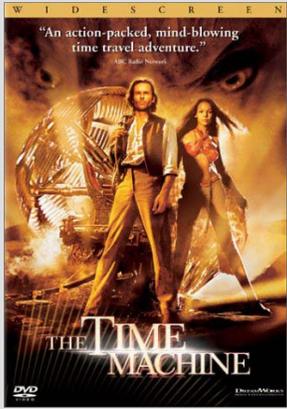
is a future in which he elects to stay. And we can hardly—with Morlocks eliminated, with Eloi smiling in sexy gratitude—blame him.

*The Time Machine* circa 2002 (*TTM02*) was unenthusiastically received. *Matrix* fever may have had something to do with this, or possibly script liberties of the sort purists love to disapprove. But a leisurely revisit in front of the TV reveals several virtues. It looks wonderful. The central artifact glitters like the supercharged Victorian plaything it is. The acting is perfectly okay, though the characters played by Pearce and Mumba, having other things on their mind, never manage much heat. Orlando Jones plays a holographic agent of the New York Public Library. It appears to be stunt casting, but the funniest and saddest moments of the film are his. Jeremy Irons can of course do villainous mastermind in his sleep, and here he seems semi-sedated and almost regretful as he explains ugly Darwinian facts to our hero. He’s

no paper monster, however, but so genuinely horrific in the Nosferatu style that when he actually gets physical with Alexander, it seems unfortunate that he’s been reduced to mere... fisticuffs.

Despite all these efforts, *TTM02* is a passive piece of work, a foregone conclusion spread out for examination like a mural on a wall. This may be no one’s fault. It may be, as H.G. himself would understand, a matter of timing.

In Wells’ day, science was a potent concept, a weapon to be wielded against the unsettling im-



**DVD Release Date:** June, 2003  
**Starring:** Guy Pearce, Mark Addy, Jeremy Irons, Samantha Mumba, Orlando Jones  
**Director:** Simon Wells  
**Rated:** PG-13  
**Studio:** Universal Studios  
**DVD Features:** Commentary by director Simon Wells; theatrical trailer(s); deleted scenes; Making of Morlocks; making of The Time Machine; widescreen anamorphic format.

plications of evolution. The Machine itself was such a powerful image that many have never bothered with the story surrounding it, in which one branch of the race regresses to cannibalism while the other becomes mindless and diminutive prey. Not pretty storytelling, so I suppose screenwriters can be forgiven for attempting love interest. (Weena, the Time Traveler's Eloi companion, had the personality of a household pet. If your tastes run that way, we don't want to hear about it.) Pal gave us Eloi who were impeccably blonde and beautiful—Yvette Mimeaux beautiful—and that they were really, really dumb didn't bother folks so much back in 1960. (If you want a taste of the Pal production without hitting Blockbuster, it was closely imitated in an early *Star Trek* episode, down to the fuzzy, Muppet-like Morlocks.)

Even by 1960, the spirit of serious scientific risk-taking that Wells initiated—a thereby sort of starting-up science fiction—was compromised. The adventure of the mind played as child's adventure, and the thrill was a nostalgic one: we had already started to worship the Victorians. The budget special effects won Pal an Academy Award. The industry loves an underdog. It was a B-movie (starring Rod Taylor, whose bland presence increases your respect for game little Guy Pearce) but a B-movie with the patina of a thrift shop find: a poor man's antique.

Look, the thing is, *The Time Machine* is not A-list literature. Pretty good, sure, and *important*—just look at what Heinlein and company have done with the concepts—but not for every generation. Do we really believe in science now? Heck, no one even *gets* quantum physics. As for technology—well, we've done a lot of bad stuff with that, and a lot of the good stuff we could do we can't afford. Philip K. Dick, dark lord of the dystopia, is getting filmed more often and more effectively than Wells. One can't help imagining that Alexander Hartdegen could learn a lot by chatting, in some alternate reality, with Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Mounting *The Time Machine* after the turn of the century carried psychic baggage that Simon Wells may not have been aware of—or that may have left him sadder, wiser and weaker. Nostalgia. Romance. Technology. What you might call dead

options. The hero has a wonderful toy to play with and a love interest who is intelligent enough to teach the English language left scrawled on sacred stones—work with us here—and to sense that her people are in deep trouble. She's nurturing and pretty as a picture and she lives in a delicately crafted cliffside village of earthtones and pastels. The Eloi possess a rich and humane culture. And when Alexander repeats the phrase "It was only a machine" after his creation is destroyed—a phrase Wells Senior never would have put into the mouth of his Traveler—it's not inappropriate. Not when you consider the audience's distrust of machines. It's just disappointing.

Special effects can't save a movie and they *especially* can't save *TTM02*. We know how much money Hollywood spends on its toys and, a bit disgusted with Hollywood and with ourselves, we want them to be self-justifying. But they aren't. They're only machines.

Alexander Hartdegen stays with the Eloi—who represent our tribal past—hoping to advance them toward civilization. The audience, questioning tribal values, civilization *and* the love option, is left in stasis.

The final images of *TTM02* are as powerful as anything in the movie, oddly because they capture the reason for its failure. We see Alexander, far in the forested future, point out to a woman and a child the site of his old home. Beside him, as he disappears, appear his friend and his housekeeper, mourning his absence in the fussily furnished past. As his friend exits into the Victorian street, he throws his bowler hat into the air—a reference to Alexander's earlier contempt for conformists in bowlers, frightened of the challenges of science. As he does this, we hear the chant of the Eloi, the ignorant innocents among which Alexander has found a home. Irony. Stasis.

Let's allow this famous book to lie fallow for a while. Maybe it will yet yield a film that can reach through the special effects and grab us by the soul. Which is the simplest and most important effect of all.

## POSTSCRIPT

Any state-of-art sf film requires hands and brains in the thousands, and the hipper sort of

viewer—not me, unfortunately—wants to know how it’s done. This disc includes background chat between the director and the editor (Wayne Wahrman) and more voiceover skinny from co-producer David Valdes as he converses with visual effects supervisor Jamie Price and production designer Oliver Scholl. There are cast bios, a rousing stunt-guy blocking Alexander’s big fight and a rundown on how to build scary Morlocks. (And they are very scary, moving with the throat-gripping threat of a velociraptor crossed with a giant frog. You won’t laugh.) Special kudos for the somber score (Klaus Badelt) and the millennia-spanning costumes (Deena Appel and Bob Ringwood). Also to Mindy Marin, who had the smarts to cast the inexperienced but extremely dishy pop singer Samantha Mumba.

It all could take days.

Personally, I dug the little, synchronistic details. The scene in Central Park was shot in Central Park—the one in Schenectady, designed by the same architect. Alan Young, who had a hefty part in the Pal production, does a bit as a florist (wearing the same collar). The tiny tots who appear in Alexander’s dream of a lost future were played by H.G. Wells’ great-great-grandchildren. I’ll admit it. That destroyed me.

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## K-PAX DVD Review

By Richard Fuller

This movie with an odd title is about one of the medium’s odder couples: therapist Dr. Mark Powell (Jeff Bridges) and his strange—and strangely troubled—patient Prot (Kevin Spacey).

When the doctor asks where his patient is from, Prot says a planet, called K-PAX, that’s a thousand light-years from Earth. Prot claims he arrived on a beam of light.

Sane versus insane? The deeper into therapy the two travel, though, the more the doctor wonders if Prot really is from outer space. So does an astronomer when Prot correctly diagrams the orbit of K-PAX.

Kevin Spacey calls the picture “kind of a science fiction fable.”

Director Iain Softley insists it’s “not a genre movie,” saying the movie asks: Who are we?

Softley suggests possible answers to who the doctor and his patient are by contrasting two parallel worlds: the Psychiatric Institute of Manhattan, where Dr. Powell and other therapists attempt to heal a group of quite different patients including Prot, and the doctor’s home life. There’s a crossover between the worlds on July 4th when the doctor invites Prot and some colleagues to a lawn party.

Eventually, Prot has a more healing effect on the patients

## B Movie Sci-Fi Heaven

Let me first start by defining this column. This is not about honoring your run-of-the-mill bad films. No. This column is about honoring the bad films that are fun to watch; the guilty pleasures, if you will. Bad movies are a dime a dozen, and that’s the reason why *Mystery Science Theater 3000* shot nearly 170 episodes. However, it’s a rare moment when you see a bad movie that compels you to act like you’re rubbernecking at a particularly nasty accident scene where the jaws of life were used. It’s these films that this column will honor going forward.

Having gotten the preliminaries out of the way, welcome to star of this new hall of fame, the movie by which all other entries into B-Movie Sci-Fi Heaven are judged: *Starship Troopers*.

I knew this movie was going to be bad the second preliminary shooting was announced. Having read the book, I suspected that the movie was going to spend a lot more time on the visuals of the novel rather than the philosophy. In other words, the statements of military heroism and citizenship were going to take a backseat to the combat. That in of itself isn’t bad thing—by its very nature, film is very visually oriented. Furthermore, in the movie’s defense, it did manage to incorporate some of Heinlein’s societal musings.

Now, why the movie achieves the honor of being inducted as the first entry into Sci-Fi B Movie Heaven:

**1. Michael Ironside.** This is actually the first sign you’ve entered B Movie Sci-Fi land. In fact, I’m fairly certain that every sci-fi production starring Ironside qualifies as B material. See *Scanners*, *V: The Miniseries*, *Highlander 2*, and *Total Recall*.

(continued on page 10)

than any doctor while Dr. Powell, obsessed with Prot because Prot chose him, seems alienated from his home, his wife Rachel (Mary McCormack) and young daughters, and especially older son Michael from his first marriage.

The picture begins in New York City's Grand Central Station, which is shadowy in spots and radiant with beams of light in other places. Light is a major theme, visually and otherwise: Prot supposedly arrived on one of those beams. A piece of paper floats through the air and downward on a beam. You see the paper twice. (A reference to *American Beauty* and Spacey's Academy Award performance?)

A man in a wheelchair (called Freddie the Homeless Veteran in the credits) holds out a paper cup for money, staring at something. Cut to walking passengers. Cut back to staring wheelchair Freddie. Cut to Prot, wearing sunglasses, who is standing there as motionless as a statue. He seems to have just happened, not arrived. The sequence, with its many out-of-focus shots, is photographed, you're told by director Softley in his voiceover annotation of the movie, as if through Prot's eyes. Prot usually wears sunglasses. He didn't on *K-PAX*, with its two suns, where it's always twilight.

When a woman in the station is robbed, Prot tries to assist her—a preview of his always helping others. Two cops mistakenly assume he's the robber and cuff him. Freddie insists he's innocent. The lady cop asks Prot to take off his sunglasses. He doesn't, saying, "Your planet is really bright." As the cops take Prot out to their police van, followed by wheelchair Freddie, lady cop asks Freddie if Prot came through a gate.

"Brother came from nowhere," says Freddie.

Nowhere? The movie will obviously track down Prot's somewhere. Two aspects of the opening sequence, in this very self-conscious movie, recur later: crime and a wheelchair.

Dr. Powell turns into a sort of private eye to find out who Prot really is and what happened to him nearly five years before. A key clue in the search is Prot's pencil stub with an area code phone number on it: objects are often "characters" in movies. The detective-doctor finally discovers his patient is Robert Porter from New Mexico.

The doctor flies there—on a plane, not a beam of light. A sheriff takes the doctor to Porter's deserted house in the middle of an alien-looking "nowhere," telling how a thief got into the house. When Porter's wife Sara and daughter Rebecca returned home, the thief raped the wife and then killed both women. Porter returned from his job at a slaughterhouse, brutally ironic under the circumstances, and broke the murderer's neck "like a twig," the sheriff says.

The doctor "sees," in distorted images, what Porter saw and did, the doctor's anguished face revealing how he totally identifies with his patient. The doctor even "sees" Porter try to cleanse blood from his hands in a water sprinkler and then wander into a river to drown himself. His body was never found, the sheriff says. If Porter is alive back in New York City, the sheriff doesn't want to know.

A water sprinkler is a major plot point. Before the doctor discovers who Prot really is, Prot is invited to the doctor's July 4th party, immediately bonding with a dog, claiming to read its thoughts, and then bonding with three kids, especially the doctor's younger daughter. While Prot pushes the girl in a swing, someone turns on a water sprinkler and Prot freaks. Some think he tried to hurt the girl and the doctor's colleague is about to give Prot an injection. But the doctor realizes Prot is trying to protect his daughter and holds off the injection. This event inspires the doctor to hypnotize his patient three different times, sending Prot back into his past to confront his horror on planet Earth—just before Prot plans to beam back to *K-PAX* on July 27



**DVD Release Date:** March, 2003

**Starring:** Kevin Spacey, Jeff Bridges, Alfre Woodard, Mary McCormack

**Director:** Iain Softley

**Rated:** PG-13

**Studio:** Universal Studios

**DVD Features:** Audio commentary by director Iain Softley; Making-of featurette, ;Never-before-seen alternate ending; Deleted scenes; "The Making of *K-PAX*" pictures by Jeff Bridges

(five years before, on that date, something horrible happened to him on planet Earth) and take one of the patients with him.

In a way, Porter/Prot's hideous past has psychically coupled the two men. When Dr. Powell returns home, he embraces and kisses his wife, truly aware of her for the first time in the movie.

Alas, Porter (Prot?) doesn't beam up to K-PAX. He's found lying under a bed. As he's wheeled away, none of the patients see him as Prot. They think fellow patient Bess accompanied the real Prot back to his planet. Catatonic Porter ends up in a wheelchair, on the institute's roof, pushed by the doctor, although the patient does kind of smile.

Turns out the patient heals the doc. As the picture ends—in Grand Central Station where it began—Dr. Powell meets his estranged son Michael, as Prot said he should, and puts an arm over his shoulder as they walk away from you.

"Who are we?," as director Softley says the film asks.

Before Dr. Powell meets Prot, he says to his secretary, "Who is it this time? Jesus Christ or Joan of Arc?" Neither one but the film does suggest a religious implication.

Dr. Powell escapes into his work to avoid personal relationships (at one point he closes his home office door, shutting off the sound of his wife teaching their daughter the piano). Robert Porter tries to kill himself to escape from his personal horrors, instead "beaming" off to another planet where there are no families, sexuality is painful and ugly, and he has no wife or child—no one does. He's very negative about planet Earth although he's a better therapist than any doctor. But he fails this time to escape to K-PAX, ending up as catatonic to escape his personal hell.

A film tries to blend—seamlessly, if possible—performances, dialogue, art direction, cinematography, music, editing.

*K-PAX's* greatest strength is in its performances, all of which are good. Which means you're never aware that anyone is acting. The anchor of this fine ensemble is the underrated Jeff Bridges, one of the medium's quietly consistent great actors. Director Softley says Jeff Bridges has "great art to disguise the art." Jeff might wince at the word art. I wonder what he thinks of the shot

down through the bottom of a glass he's drinking from, an artless visual cliché, at the doctor's lawn party.

Bridges is so persuasive as Dr. Powell that you want to believe him when he says Prot is from K-PAX. Kevin Spacey, in spite of a face that's borderline cartoonish, gives his usual mesmerizing performance, especially during the three sequences when Dr. Powell hypnotizes him, sending Prot back in time to recall how a boyhood friend (himself) committed suicide. Prot almost turns into a weepy little boy as he remembers. Call it a borderline great performance.

What keeps the movie well this side of greatness is some of the dialogue (screenplay by Charles Leavitt based on a novel by Gene Brewer). When the doctor asks where Prot is from and Prot mentions his far-away planet, Prot adds, "But don't worry. I'm not going to leap out of your chest."

That self-conscious reference to the science fiction/horror classic *Alien* sounds as if Prot has briefly leaped outside of his character for a nudge-nudge wink-wink stand-up comic remark. (Spacey does brilliant impressions of other actors, including—gasp, gasp!—Katharine Hepburn.) But why refer to a movie that has, in that landing on an alien planet, the best sequence ever in any science fiction movie? Some viewers might wish they were off on that creepy, visually compelling planet rather than wondering about the reality, or fantasy, of planet K-PAX, which of course you never see.

On the cover of the DVD version of *K-PAX*, you read this quote from a reviewer: "Keeps you guessing right to the end!"

Not this viewer. While the movie tries to avoid being stuck in a single genre, it's basically character-driven. Which means you decide early on that K-PAX is some kind of "escape" metaphor for Porter/Prot.

But why does he "beam down" to crowded Grand Central Station? Because Prot seeks the most extreme contrast he can with the totally deserted, alien-looking New Mexico where Porter lived with his wife and daughter?

Both locations are great movie choices providing memorable visuals. The locations in the novel are the Port Authority Bus Station and Montana,

## B Movie Sci-Fi Heaven

(continued from page 7)

**2. Drinking games.** This movie has inspired numerous drinking games. The best of which is at <http://postviews.ediththispage.com/movieVideo/StarshipTroopers>, and was written by Paul-Michael Agapow. The drinking game is part of a wonderful review that you should read as well.

**3. Neil Patrick Harris.** Whose idea was it to make Doogie Houser a Gestapo-like soldier in the strategic division of the military? Words cannot do justice to the imagery of Doogie Houser as SS soldier. Trust me on this one.

**4. Stupid characters getting what they deserve.** For example, I've never been in the military myself, but even I know that in a pitched battle, you do not turn your back on them, pump a first into the air, and let out a victorious scream after you have the good fortune to kill one of them. You deserve it when the pincer pierces your body like a shish kabob skewer.

I know that this movie has it defenders—hell, they wouldn't have created the *Starship Troopers: The Roughnecks* animated series or made *Starship Troopers 2: Hero of the Federation* otherwise—but it doesn't change the fact that this is an enjoyably bad B movie, albeit one with a great special effects budget. Thank you Paul Verhoeven for writing and directing such an enjoyable awful film.

### Starship Troopers

*Columbia Tristar; 1997*

*Directed by Paul Verhoeven; Written by Paul Verhoeven & Ed Neumeier (based on the novel by Robert Heinlein); Starring Casper Van Dien, Dina Meyer, Denise Richards, Jake Busey, Neil Patrick Harris, Clancy Brown, Patrick Muldoon, Michael Ironside.*

neither of them described and therefore visualized in the book. Novelist Gene Brewer is basically a talker. The movie version, even with lots of talk, is much better.

When Prot ends up in the mental institute, he faces another crowd: the many wildly different patients who compete, each writing essays, to be the winner and therefore the one chosen to accompany Prot back to K-PAX on July 27 at 5:51 a.m., "Eastern Time," as Port adds.

Some of those patients at first seem flat and one-note: the man who forever whines that everyone stinks, the woman with the fur collar waiting for "gentlemen callers" because she never leaves her room, the man who refuses to go outdoors "because there's things that can kill you." All these patients change—become round, multi-note human beings—because of their relationships with Prot.

And they all converge when patient Howie, who's been assigned by Prot to keep looking out a window for the bluebird of happiness, finally sees it (up, Up, UP with the celebrating music by Edward Shearmur) and those patients come running to the window. A young woman named Bess, who never speaks, goes to Prot that evening and says, "I know who you are. You're the bluebird."

A very self-conscious movie? When Prot first arrives in Dr. Powell's office, both of their faces overlap and merge in a window reflection. (The excellent cinematography is by John Mathieson.) When that bluebird flies away to the left, there's an immediate cut to a train moving to the left. It's the train Dr. Powell takes home. The implication, of course, is that the doctor will eventually find happiness.

The music is also self-conscious. You hear lots of piano—it's one of best and richest of instruments—because the doctor's wife Rachel plays the piano. There's a scene when husband and wife sit together before the piano. Alas, that short and effective scene was cut from the movie along with five ineffective short scenes. But some of the music—during the credits as Prot is driven in the police van—is that trite percussive rat-tat-tat you hear in too many movies and TV episodes.

Much of the editing is unobtrusively memorable, linking scenes organically. Prot complains about Earth and its inhabitants, saying, "It's hard to imagine how you made it this far." Immediate cut to a kid's feet as that kid swings back and forth. The implication: we've made it this far because of our children. Eventually, you find out Prot/Porter hasn't "made it" because his child was murdered.

In another wonderfully edited sequence, Dr. Powell looks at a little globe glowing with starry particles. Cut to glowy neon signs. A cab has several passengers including Prot, who looks outside at a small floating space balloon, a preview of the cab's

destination: a planetarium where Prot diagrams K-PAX's orbit for several doctors.

The picture works well on a small screen because it's a relationship movie. But it must be seen letter-boxed as on the DVD version. In their early scenes, doctor and patient sit facing each other with lots of space between them. These two-shots convey both the distance, at this point, between the two but also their connection because they're in the same shot. In a version formatted for TV, the two-shot would either be turned into a panning sequence, the visual swinging back and forth to the person talking, or it would cut back and forth between the two, therefore ruining the visual fact that doctor and patient are connected.

The DVD extras are uneven. The nearly 12-minute feature about the film's making is mostly an extended, unmemorable preview. Producer Lawrence Gordon says it took "six years to get the movie made." Why? No one says. I'd guess the title was a hard sell. Is it really a science fiction fable? Well, kids, it's not exactly *Star Wars*. Clunk! Spacey says, "It's primarily an interior film." Hm. Sounds dull.

The alternate ending has the doctor pushing his patient in a wheelchair, patient not quite smiling. Cut to doctor at home looking up at the starry sky. In fact, at the end of the film's credits, there's a cut to the doctor looking up at the starry sky, but

who sat through four minutes of credits and saw it? Probably no one.

Usually, several of the filmmakers annotate their film. Softley risks a solo annotation and it works because he's very smart and obviously loves what he does.

I'd recommend reading Gene Brewer's novel after watching the film version. Not because it's a good novel: Gene Brewer names his novel's doctor Gene Brewer, which is... well, amateurish, Gene-Gene. What's fascinating is how much of the dialogue the screenplay uses, the characters that are dropped (a reporter named Giselle who tracks down who Prot really is) and the changes in the doctor's family. It's like looking over the shoulders of the filmmakers to see what works onscreen and what works on a novel's pages. They're very different media.

But I think that what keeps the film from flying into possible greatness is its reliance on a book that's basically a verbal debate, about K-PAX and Earth, between patient and doctor. In spite of all the talk, the DVD is worth experiencing because it co-stars two great actors.

P.S. Consider this "preview" from the novel. At one point, Prot's favorite films are listed, including *Starman*. Remember who starred in that movie?

Guess.

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## What Would Neo Do?

### A Brief Ruminaton on *Terminator 3: The Rise of the Machines*

You wouldn't know it from the overall contents of this issue, but I am by and large an sf lit snob—i.e., I don't pay much attention to what is going on in the land of sci-fi. As a result, I generally don't get around to catching the giant blockbusters until well after they land at the local video store, and sometimes not until they start showing up on the cable movie channels.

For this reason I only recently watched *Terminator 3: The Rise of the Machines* (*T3*). It wasn't as bad as I feared, and certainly a far cry better than *Matrix Revolutions*, the piece of dreck that ended the *Matrix* trilogy; a series that also features a messiah figure saving humankind from the domination of machines (more on this later.) However, it certainly undercut the whole point of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (*T2*)—that the future is what we make of it. At the very end of the movie, Sarah Connor tells us in a voice-over, "The unknown future rolls toward us. I face it for the first time with a sense of hope."

Yet, is it true hope? She dies from cancer before the events of *T3*, and her will stated her ashes should be secretly scattered at sea and that her coffin turned into a cache of weapons for John Connor's future use. Contemplating the stash of guns, John tells Kate Brewster, "She fought for three years. Long enough to make sure... that the world didn't end. 'Everyday after this was a gift,' she told me. 'We made it. We're

free.' I never really believed that, I guess she didn't either." But John says "guess" which means that neither he nor the audience will have any way of knowing why she did this. Maybe she changed her mind before her death... Maybe she never updated her will after the events in *T2*... Maybe in the last stages of the cancer that took her life she experienced dementia that compelled her to plan as if the war was still coming. There's no way to know for certain.

Luckily for him, this accident of fate worked to John's advantage—he certainly needed them to battle the Terminatrix (John's description of the T-X)—but he still needed to figure out why the future returned to disrupt his life again:

*John: No. You shouldn't even exist. We took out Cyberdyne over 10 years ago. We stopped Judgment Day.*

*T-101: You only postponed it. Judgment Day is inevitable.*

Instantly, the philosophy of the first two movies is overthrown. Furthermore, we find that John and Kate would have gotten together sooner if the events of *T2* hadn't taken place. Again, this plays into the idea that while details and minor events can be changed, the overall scheme of things is unchangeable; fate will win out. Yet it doesn't immediately sink in with John. Later in the movie:

*John: There doesn't need to be a war. We can stop it!*

*T-101: There's insufficient time. First launch sequences will be initiated at 6:18 PM.*

*John: What... today?*

*T-101: Affirmative.*

*Kate: John, what is he saying?*

*John: Judgment day. The end of the world. It's today, three hours from now.*

This put me in mind of two different scenes in *The Matrix*. First, when Morpheus questions Neo about whether he believes in fate:

*Morpheus: Do you believe in fate, Neo?*

*Neo: No.*

*Morpheus: Why?*

*Neo: Because I don't like the idea that I'm not in control of my own life.*

Later, in the movie, during a fight sequence Agent Smith says to Neo, "Do you hear that, Mr. Anderson? That is the sound of inevitability... That is the sound of your death. Goodbye, Mr. Anderson." At

which point Neo suddenly finds a new reserve of energy and manages to throw Agent Smith into the oncoming train that was threatening to kill him.

Juxtaposing the events from the two movies initially left me wondering what Neo would do if he found himself in John Connor's position. Here's the future running relentlessly down upon him—previous events did nothing to stop it, only delay and slightly change some of the minor details. In fact, the last-ditch final attempt to try to stop SkyNet from starting the war is an act of folly. When John and Kate arrive at Crystal Peak, they really only put themselves in the necessary safe location to wait out the earliest, deadliest stages of the war.

As mentioned previously, both he and Neo are messiah-like figures in their stories. Both are told their destinies before they are ready to assume them, and both are forced in some degree to fulfill their destinies. Ironically, in their efforts to resist fate, both end up fulfilling it. After all is said and done, John ends up leading the resistance that will eventually defeat SkyNet, and Neo, despite his protestations against fate, fulfills the role that The Oracle intended him for, thus ending the war between humans and machines.

In the end Neo would've probably taken the exact same path as John. In fact, at the end of *Matrix Reloaded*, he's faced with the choice of saving all of humankind or saving just Trinity. This is not so different from the decision that led John and Kate to the Mojave Desert to save her father, when at that moment the T-101 was telling them that they had to go to a safe location to wait out the coming nuclear bombardment. Neo was just a little bit luckier in that he had some super-human powers to help save the day for humankind and preserve the illusion of self-determination after rejecting his Hobson's Choice.

But you can't help but wonder about how he would have felt about fate if he were in John Connor's situation at the end of *T3*.

## Writers Wanted

I'm looking to include material from other writers, so I'm willing to mail genre-related DVDs or books to anyone who is willing to write a review of it. Please contact me (contact information is found on page 2) for more details.