In Praise of Men in Rubber Suits

Over the past few months I’ve started introducing my two sons to some of my favourite “vintage” science fiction films. You know the ones I’m talking about, midnight creature features distinguished by long, silver rocketships and lurching, bipedal boogeymen wearing ill-fitting rubber suits with v.z.l. (visible zipper lines).

This past week it was It! The Terror From Beyond Space. Now, I’ll admit that due to its cheesy acting and buck fifty-nine production values this one is definitely what I would call a “guilty pleasure”. The flick, filmed in 1958, usually gets a “Bomb” or “Lowest Rating” in most film review anthologies and has been relegated to the trash heap (i.e. “cult status”) among the stuffy cinephile set.

On the other hand, It! was also (supposedly) the inspiration for the first Alien movie and was scripted by sci-fi vet Jerome Bixby, author of one of the all-time great tales of wonder, “It’s A Good Life”. I warned my sons ahead of time not to expect much but I was pleasantly surprised when the movie received a fairly good reception—my youngest, Sam, in particular, thought it contained some genuine chills.

I can remember the first time I saw it. I was likely Sam’s age, come to think of it. It! was playing on the late-late show, beginning around 2:00 a.m. Everyone else was in bed and I recall being so frightened at one point (likely the scene in the air vent) that I perched on a hassock about a foot from the TV with my hand poised over the on-off switch should the movie become too much for me to handle. Unfortunately, I was so
scared that I literally froze, lacking the strength to turn the knob. So there I sat, one arm outstretched for the rest of the movie (fortunately it boasts a running time of just over an hour).

Another little gem I’ve shared with my lads is the original *Invaders From Mars*. That one played as a serial on afternoon TV and I used to rush home from school every day so I wouldn’t miss one of the 22-minute installments. When the hole opens up in the sand, preparing to suck down its latest victim while spooky Martian music plays in the background--well, what can I tell you, I was practically spot-welded to the floor in front of the set. My boys loved that one too—I think they especially related to the fact that nobody believes the kid when he tries to tell them that something really weird has landed just over the hill behind his house. Then his parents are taken over…and the police chief…(subtitle this one “The Boy Who Cried ‘Martian!’”).

I suppose, in all fairness, I should mention that my boys, ten and eight, aren’t too discriminating at this point in their lives. A friend of mine sent us a tape he recorded off the *Space* channel with all three of the *Creature From The Black Lagoon* movies and it received the highest possible approval rating (even the two far weaker sequels).

Other popular titles in the Burns house of late include the *Sinbad* films and *Jason & The Argonauts*, highlighting the incomparable talents of the one and only Ray Harryhausen. I’m told Ray’s still alive and chipper, well over 90 and going strong. If anyone out there in the distant reaches of cyberspace has an e-mail or snail mail address so my lads and I can send him our regards, please drop us a note and let us know.

Ray’s last major project was *Clash of the Titans* and while *Titans* is more than a tad hokey, its fx eclipsed by today’s state of the art computer animation, we still found it
a worthwhile way to spend a lazy Sunday afternoon. And I’m not just saying that because Ursula Andress has a small role as the Goddess of Love (now there’s typecasting—rrowr-rrowr!). Granted, Harry Hamlin doesn’t exactly set the screen on fire as Perseus and Larry Olivier as Zeus appears either drunk or embarrassed (or both). There’s still a lovely bit in Medusa’s lair and a memorable appearance by the city-leveling Kraken. Oh, and the little mechanical owl—Liam and Sam loved the little mechanical owl.

Next up for us, the films of George Pal: War of the Worlds, When Worlds Collide (bit stuffy and dull, that one) and, if I can lay my hands on a copy, an under-appreciated flick called The Seven Faces of Doctor Lao (scripted by the late, great Charles Beaumont, unless I’m mistaken).

Thanks to the kindness of friends and the wonders of the internet I’ve also managed to secure copies of Destination Moon, Them, The Day the Earth Stood Still, Earth vs. The Flying Saucers, The Incredible Shrinking Man, This Island Earth and two more It movies: It Came From Outer Space and It Came From Beneath the Sea. Hours of great family viewing.

We’re planning an all sci-fi movie marathon over the summer. You’re welcome to attend, of course. Just make sure you bring your own junk food and sleeping bag. Oh, and one of those large-screen plasma TV’s, if you happen to have one…

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I suppose if I had to pick a favourite flick from the Golden Age, it would have to be Forbidden Planet. The production values and fx are absolutely first-rate, the acting, featuring Leslie Nielson, Warren Stevens and Walter Pidgeon, notable 2. Ann Francis is
cute as a button and Robby the Robot shines in a supporting role (though not when he’s used as a comic foil).

Is the plot a rip-off (er, I mean homage) to The Tempest and is Dr. Morbius a thinly disguised Prospero? Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a tinker’s damn. Altair IV is truly an alien world, providing an authentic and exotic other-worldly backdrop. The score is creepy and adds to the overall atmosphere. The scenes that showcase the incredible Krell technology stand the test of time, as does most of Forbidden Planet. Okay, the “romantic” scenes between Francis and Nielson lack passion…but keep in mind, her character has lived a sheltered life on Altair IV; she’s never met a man in his prime before so if she doesn’t understand the concept of kissing…

And, yes, I suppose I could’ve also done without the silliness between the bourbon-loving cook (Earl Holliman) and Robbie…but in the context of the overall strengths of Forbidden Planet this really is nit-picking.

I don’t think my sons will be that critical when we finally get around to plugging Forbidden Planet into the VCR some slow-moving weekend. I’ll be sure to mention to the lads that this is one of the few occasions during the time it was made when a science fiction film was given Class A treatment by a studio system that rarely bothered to lavish such attention on “kiddie stuff”.

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A few of the films I definitely won’t be inflicting on my boys: The Fly (1958 version) 3, The Time Machine, Day of the Triffids, Fantastic Voyage, Zardoz 4 and Logan’s Run. Silly, silly, silly.

And let us make special mention of one of the most ponderous sci-fi flicks ever,
Things To Come (1936). This talky, plodding adaptation of the H.G. Wells’ novel has only a single saving grace: it boasts a manned rocket fired from the bore of a gigantic space cannon (and damn the G-forces which would have undoubtedly pulped the hapless astronauts inside).

An amusing anecdote—in Arthur C. Clarke’s account of the making of 2001: A Space Odyssey, Clarke reports that he recommended Things To Come to director Stanley Kubrick. Once he’d viewed the film, Kubrick reportedly told Clarke that he would never again trust his (Clarke’s) taste in movies.

After watching the first twenty minutes of Things To Come, you’ll see why.

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Once we finish our mini-tour of the 1950’s, it’s my hope that we’ll move on to the 60’s, although that decade has far fewer fantastic films of interest. Do I want to subject my boys to the likes of Barbarella? Might not Children of the Damned give them some funny ideas? The first two Planet of the Apes movies aren’t entirely devoid of merit but what about the rest? How much of Roddy McDowell, even under heavy makeup, can a sane, well-adjusted person take?

I’ll have to wait a few years to show them the aforementioned 2001. Too cerebral. Besides, Kubrick’s masterpiece is a sore point in our household. I consider it the single greatest science fiction film of all time, a visionary epic encompassing a time scale of millions of years (even more once we pass Jupiter and go “beyond the infinite”). Unfortunately, my wife holds a radically different opinion. She started to watch it twice and neither time made it past the prologue before her chin hit her chest and she commenced snoring.
With the 70’s we start entering blockbuster territory but there are a few worthwhile flicks that arrived *pre*-Spielberg & Lucas. One minor classic I’d like to get my hands on is *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (1970). This little sweetheart is the forerunner to the *Terminator* flicks and presents an all too believable depiction of the rise of the machines. The U.S. and U.S.S.R. put their defensive networks into the hands of supercomputers and rather than making war on each other, the computers join forces. A surprisingly downbeat and sobering film with a nuanced, under-stated performance by Eric Braedon 5.

Other lesser known offerings that come to mind include *The Omega Man* (co-starring one of the best character actors ever, Anthony Zerbe), *Soylent Green* 6 and, especially, *Silent Running*.

Filmed on the cheap on an old, mothballed aircraft carrier, *Silent Running* boasts a remarkable performance by the always reliable Bruce Dern, with a supporting cast of amputees squashed into ’droid carapaces. Its ecological message is timely, the story and direction (by special fx genius Douglas Trumbull) first rate. Eagerly anticipate sharing this one with my boys a few years down the road (although I’ll make them turn down the sound whenever Joan Baez warbles the awful, awful, *awful* title song).

With the arrival of Spielberg and Lucas, the entire movie industry changed and not for the better. We all know the type of movies (product?) they spawned. Hundreds of special effects shots, breakneck editing, massive promotional campaigns. With some notable exceptions 7, audiences from the mid-Seventies onward have found themselves inundated by a host of sequels, comic book adaptations, filmed video games--derivative
crap helmed by directors who got their thrills from seeing how many CGI shots they could cram into 100 minutes.

Fi on them.

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What is it that still draws me back to films like Forbidden Planet, It! The Terror From Beyond Space and Invaders From Mars? What makes them resonate even now, fifty years later, with Sam and Liam, two kids from the Nintendo/Gameboy generation? The monsters aren’t monstrous, the special fx laughable, the acting wooden. Christ, the crews in some of these films are smoking in the claustrophobic confines of their spacecraft and never mind the oxygen-rich environment (hey, maybe that explains what happened to the ill-fated crew of Apollo I—feeling a bit tense, Gus Grissom lights up a Pall Mall and…).

In my case there’s undoubtedly a touch of nostalgia involved, a desire to return to simpler times when films didn’t have visual fx budgets that dwarf the GNP of a medium-sized country. Where the atmosphere and mood were dictated by the use of lighting and malevolent shadowplay and the actors emoted to something other than a blank, blue screen. And whatever happened to the theremin, surely one of the best friends sci-fi films ever had?

Contemporary film-makers, bedazzled by gadgets and technology, expend three quarters of their budgets on elaborate sets, eye-popping visuals and designing software for the creation of fifty-foot trolls and three dimensional fairy tale kingdoms, etc. etc. As for the waddayacallit, the script, well, nowadays a storyboard works just as well (especially for a twenty-five year old auteur raised on comic books and Japanese anime).
Okay, so I’m employing hyperbole. And, if I was being honest I’d have to admit that my sons love the *Lord of the Rings* movies and watched, open-mouthed, the few scenes of *The Matrix, Aliens* and the third *Terminator* movie I’ve allowed them to see. *Pirates of the Caribbean* was a big hit with them—but that movie seems like a throwback to me, exhibiting the puckish charm of *The Crimson Pirate, Captain Blood*, etc.

It’s stuff like the *Godzilla* films, *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* and *Jason & The Argonauts* that they ask to see over and over again. Afterwards, they grab their plastic swords and shields and caper about the house doing battle with Ray Harryhausen’s animated skeletons or giant metal warriors, slashing at the air and ducking the talons of cruel raptors. The Golden Age films don’t attempt to overwhelm them with frenetic editing, pulse-pounding music scores and non-stop action. There’s time to take stock of the plot, come to know characters and *care* for them, empathizing with the plights they find themselves in. My sons pitied the captain from *It! The Terror From Beyond Space* who’s blamed for the loss of his original crew. They fretted over the kid from *Invaders From Mars* and shared Sinbad’s disgust with his disobedient and avaricious crew.

In a world menaced by giant, marauding ants or murderous Martian flying machines it’s easy to know who to cheer for. Scott Carey’s grim, life and death struggle with an ordinary house spider (*Shrinking Man*) matters because we’ve come to know him and understand what the stakes are as he dwindles away to absolute nothingness.

The posters and stills that promoted vintage sci fi films often featured a man and woman huddled together, confronting unseen danger. Despite the evident alarm and terror on their faces, there is also a resolute will to prevail, regardless of seemingly
insurmountable odds. The implied message being that the human spirit is imperishable
and that, more often than not, love, ingenuity, courage and honour does save the day.

In a post-9/11 universe where the monsters have all-too-human faces and are, in
fact, indistinguishable from the good guys, vintage sci-fi films offer a glimmer of hope.
They’re low-tech, sappy and unpretentious, a refreshing change from today’s soul-less,
mega-buck abominations.

*Klaatu Barada Nikto*, baby!

And fer Chrissakes stop hogging the popcorn.

*Endnotes:*

1 Do *not*, under any circumstances, waste your time with Tobe Hooper’s dreadful 1986
remake of *Invaders from Mars*, which doesn’t even manage to fall into the category
of a “curiosity”.

2 …and look closely, you’ll spot the monotonic Richard Anderson (“Oscar Goldman”
from *The Six Million Dollar Man & Bionic Woman* TV series).

3 While the 1958 film is truly laughable, David Cronenberg’s 1986 remake is both
sublime and horrifying, one of the iconoclastic director’s best films.

4 Can you believe John Boorman directed this turkey? The guy that brought us
*Deliverance, Excalibur* and *Point Blank*? What happened, John?

5 *Colossus: The Forbin Project* also stars a Canadian, Gordon Pinsent, as the
President of the United States.

6 *Omega Man, Soylent Green, Planet of the Apes*…hmmm. Can anybody tell me if
Charlton Heston has ever received a Lifetime Achievement Award from any science
fiction organization? Seems to me the bugger deserves it for the contributions he’s
made to the genre (and regardless of his wonky politics).

7 These exceptions include: the *Alien* movies David Fincher didn’t direct, the first two
Terminator films, *Star Trek II & VI, Blade Runner, Road Warrior, The Thing, Escape
From New York, Robocop* and, by far the best of the bunch, *Brazil*. Note that no
recent release (post-1997) makes the cut. *Now that’s* scary.
Other films that get thumbs up from the Burns boys: *Men in Black I & II*, *Spy Kids*, anything starring Jackie Chan and, ulp, *E.T.* (the crummiest sci-fi film from any era; I saw it in a theater back in 1982, earning the ire of those around me—and the management—when I screamed “Shoot it down!” as E.T.’s ship took off at the end).

I’m seeking the following films to add to my collection. Contact me if you know where I can find decent priced DVD or VHS copies of:

- *Metropolis* (New, restored version)
- *The Conquest of Space* (1955)
- *Tarantula* (1955)
- *The Seven Faces of Dr. Lao*; 1964
- *Phase IV*; 1974
- *The Invaders* (TV series; Roy Thinnes)

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