

I would like to tell you that SCHOOL FOR SCOUNDRELS is a very funny comedy. By most accounts it is, but I will be seeing it for the first time at this showing so cannot personally vouch for it. Both Maltin and Scheuer give it three stars out of four in their video guides. Ian Carmichael, Alistair Sim, and Terry-Thomas star in the story of a young man who takes a college course in one-upmanship.

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The humor continues in a similar vein with Alec Guinness as a reluctant seaman turned reluctant scoundrel when he inherits a pier with a carnival. In order to save the pier he has to take unusual measures. This one I have seen and it is often very funny. It is one of Guinness's funniest. [-mrl]

2. CITY OF LOST CHILDREN (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: This is a bizarre and wonderful French fantasy that defies description. In a never-never land that seems to combine Marseilles at the turn of the last century and the next, the evil scientist Krank kidnaps children to steal their nightmares. He is opposed by a carnival strongman and a young girl. This is one of the most visually creative films ever made, combining the style of BRAZIL with a wall-to-wall creativity almost rivaling THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4)
text

The plot is almost as bizarre and complex as the characters. Evil Krank (played by Daniel Emilfork) has lost the ability to dream and as a result is aging before his time. He can preserve his life by kidnapping children and stealing their dreams. To do this kidnapping he has a band of video-enhanced henchmen called Cyclopes. They steal children and bring them to his fortress in an off-shore oil derrick. There he keeps a philosophical brain alive in a tank and is tended by six identical clones (all played by Dominique Pinon seamlessly rematted into the same frame as many as seven times since he also plays a diver) and their dwarf mother

(Mireille Mosse). Pitted against Krank is One (Ron Perlman), an inarticulate carnival strongman looking for his adopted little brother who has been kidnapped. He is joined by a young thief Miette (Judith Vittet) from the local band of child criminals ruled over by the villainous Octopus, a pair of Siamese twins played by Genevieve Brunet and Odile Mallet. Now have I left any of the weird character out? Yes, lots of them. But I do not have the space to list them all.

The film is the brainchild--or is it the enfant terrible--of Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro, who in 1991 gave us DELICATESSEN, a popular but not fully realized post-holocaust comedy. This time they have created a film that will be hard for them ever to match. This is a creation that is so full of visual wonders that it really needs to be well-dubbed since the eye is much too busy to read subtitles translating the French. The visual style is very much like that of Terry Gilliam in BRAZIL with if anything a darker

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sense of humor. But the density of images is somewhere between that of BRAZIL and THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS. (I saw the trailer for the film perhaps eight times before I noticed the screaming faces in the green nightmare smoke! That is just the kind of film it is. By comparison 12 MONKEYS's imagery is simplistic.)

The film has a nifty set of sequences that work like something out of either Rube Goldberg or "Mission Impossible." One sequence asks the question if you want to get into a locked room, why would you start by grating cheese onto the floor? Another follows a miraculous set of events that shut down a city because one tear flew through the air. This is a film of often jaw-dropping imagination. Few faces will be familiar to American audiences, though it does star Ron Perlman of TV's "Beauty and the Beast" and CRONOS. Daniel Emilfork will be a pleasant surprise for audiences who have not seen him before, though he did make an excellent devil in the surprising horror film, THE DEVIL'S NIGHTMARE.

For those with a taste for the unique or who just want to be weirded out by the creatively bizarre, this is an amazing film. Mostly for its originality I give it a high +2 on the -4 to +4

3. SCREAMERS (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: After a bit of updating, SCREAMERS is a fairly accurate version of Philip K. Dick's 1953 story. Unfortunately, it takes more than that to make a science fiction film that stands out from the crowd. Dick's 50s paranoia comes across today as pretty tame stuff that other films have done better. This is just another cold SF film set in a high-tech but grungy world. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4)

Most of Philip K. Dick's science fiction deals with paranoia about reality not being what it seems, or people who are not what they seem, or just something sinister going on behind the curtain. Films that have been based on his writing include BLADE RUNNER, about androids that look human, and TOTAL RECALL, about a reality that may be coming off a tape. Paranoia has its place in SCREAMERS also, though more in later portions of the film. The film is based on Dick's 1953 story "Second Variety."

That original story was set on Earth in a disastrous war with Russia, but to keep the story current the setting has been moved to the planet Sirius 6B where the 2078 war is with the "New Economic

Block." The best American weapon is a "screamer," a small robot that attacks from just under the surface of the ground. It tunnels with lightning speed, pops out of the ground, and with the same speed rabidly attacks with whirling blades and deafening screams. The Alliance soldiers, most of whom are Americans, have special devices that prevent them from being detected by the screamers. The problem is that screamers have themselves become intelligent and are creating new varieties of screamer radically different from what came before them. And they are unaware that compatibility with the detection jammers were an important part of their original

design. The new models attack anybody.

The original story has been adapted by Dan O'Bannon (a creative force behind ALIEN) and Miguel Tejada-Flores (writer of FRIGHT NIGHT, PART II). The problem with SCREAMERS is that the original story, while obvious film fodder, just does not have a lot of ideas that have not already been plundered for other films. The Dick story itself borrows much of its paranoia from stories like John Campbell's "Who Goes There?" which has already been adapted twice to film. Had SCREAMERS been made in 1980 it would have achieved classic status. But the thrills offered by "Second Variety" are too little and too late--years late. Ironically, SCREAMERS will appeal mostly to people in widely separate groups. It will seem best to those open to science fiction action films without much experience with them. And it will appeal to super die-hard Dick fans. The range that stretches between including most science fiction fans will find too little that is new or interesting about the film.

The director is Canadian Christian Duguay, who did most of his filming on the snowy landscapes of Quebec and in the grungy sets that are now so cliched for post-holocaust and futuristic stories. Coming out at the same time as the releases of CITY OF LOST CHILDREN and 12 MONKEYS only makes the sets look more impoverished than they normally would. The only really familiar actor is Peter Weller, who seems to be majoring in playing stories about paranoia and general weirdness.

SCREAMERS is a low-budget film that has a few expensive explosions, but the matte artist simply does not seem to be able to do convincing work. This adaptation of Philip K. Dick's "Second Variety" offers far too little variety from what has come before and comes in second to far too many films. Rate it a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

Sources for Philip K. Dick's "Second Variety" include:
THE BEST OF PHILIP K. DICK edited by John Brunner
SPECTRUM 2 edited by Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest
THE VARIABLE MAN by Philip K. Dick
THE YEARS BEST SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS: 1954 edited by Bleiler and Dick
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