

decades without us admitting to each other that it really has not worked between us and it never will. At this point I think it is best if we just do what we can to not cause each other more pain than necessary. I know that when our relationship has turned violent that it is time to call it quits. And last night it did

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turn violent. I felt the anger and rage and the scissors in my hand and I admit I got a certain pleasure just in the pure animal rage of stabbing. And I guess I don't like the feeling that I was trying to just do damage. It was no longer just trying to unwrap a videocassette box to get to what was inside, I really was trying to vent my rage on shrink-wrap. But from now on I think I just have to avoid buying anything that has shrink-wrap.

Yes, there was a time when I was willing to put up with shrink-wrap, but that was many years ago and I was younger and had a lot more patience. I was a youth, shrink-wrap was young, and summers lasted a lifetime. At that time shrink-wrap spoke to me of purity and of innocence. It said that what was inside was just as the factory had made it. Sure, it was a little hard to remove the shrink-wrap but I knew when I got past it that I was The First. There was the feeling of a new beginning that made my efforts worthwhile.

But youth cannot last forever. I grew older, perhaps wiser. And things kept coming in shrink-wrap. The day of my great disillusioning approached, unnoticed. I cannot remember even exactly when it was that I noticed. Perhaps I was buying a video cassette or a stereo record. Anyway, there it was all glistening and shiny, factory fresh. Maybe I saw it through the gossamer-thin transparent shrink-wrap. Maybe it waited until I opened the package, but certainly the great disillusionment was there. I knew I had been defrauded and cheated upon. For what lay behind that shrink-wrap was something that had been sullied by the hands of others. How could this be? Didn't the shiny wrapping prove that the product behind was fresh and new? Yet didn't my own eyes betray the deception? The shock of that moment is wiped from my memory, but I know it is back there. I suddenly realized that an object can appear fresh and new, yet it is a lie, a terrible lie. Factories are not the only source of shrink-wrapping; many

establishments that seem honest and true in the front hide shrink-wrap machines in back. Their most shopworn and broken objects may be shrink-wrapped. That object that seemed so fresh and private, so mine-alone, was a lie. Yes, an object can be a lie. Any object can be made to seem fresh and new by some dark and steamy machine in somebody's back room.

And so the joy of removing shrink-wrap has become merely a task. It guarantees nothing. I must go through the motions of removing shrink-wrap from an object that I know may have known many hands before mine. Perhaps some previous invader has sneezed on the wrapped object or spit or worse. The warm, happy, expectant feeling of the unwrapping has become mere bother.

I cannot play the charade any longer. I find it too hard to open shrink-wrap and I wish to avoid it in the future. I have been disappointed too many times. So last night I realized in my rage

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and pain that I was not merely unwrapping a cassette, I was venting my hatred on the shrink-wrap. Not just the shrink-wrap on this cassette, but on every shrink-wrapped package I have ever opened. So much pain, so much rage, so much betrayal, so much effort just to get the broken promise of purity. [-mrl]

3. BLUE MARS by Kim Stanley Robinson (Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-10144-7, 1996, 624pp, US\$22.95) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Well, Kim Stanley Robinson has finally finished his Mars trilogy, and while it maybe heresy to say this, I'm glad it's over. It is possible that if I had read the whole trilogy at one time, I might have enjoyed the third book more, but the fact is that finishing it was more a chore than a pleasure.

Maybe it's just my reaction to massive multi-volume series that take years to finish. Orson Scott Card took so long for his latest Alvin book to come out that I had completely lost interest. The

current Turtledove World War series is another one that started out good, but two years later is bogging down, as I try to reconstruct enough of the earlier books to have the current one mean something. And even Robinson, whose work I generally love, cannot overcome this problem.

In the first book (RED MARS), Robinson sets the stage, introduces the characters, and gives us a clear picture of what is happening. Though obviously there was room for a sequel, the book did stand on its own. In GREEN MARS he continues the story, with even more emphasis on the technical aspects. But because it was a continuation, GREEN MARS did not stand on its own, having no real beginning and no real end in itself. (In spite of this, it won a Hugo. I was happy to see Robinson win a Hugo--I just wish it had been for one of his other works.)

Now in BLUE MARS we have an end. (There is, of course, always room for a sequel set on "blue Mars," but it is not necessary and I doubt Robinson will write one.) However, we still have no beginning per se. We also have tons more technical areological and terraforming discussions and explications, and some characterization, mostly to wrap up the stories of the people we have been following throughout. (With all this technical detail, it's almost inevitable there will be slip-ups. For example, "Hindu" is not a language [page 406].)

I wanted to like this book. But I have to say it was too much of a good thing, too stretched out. I'm not even sure why I am saying this. People who read the first two will probably read this one

for a sense of closure in any case, and people who didn't probably wouldn't read this anyway. I suppose if you want to read the entire trilogy through you will appreciate this more, but that's not likely to encompass a large number of readers. [-ecl]

4. THE PHANTOM (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: Another comic strip character makes it to the big screen as Lee Falk's Phantom becomes involved in a chase for three mystical skulls. The plot has more holes than the face of The Phantom's cave but does have some of the feel of the old serials. Billy Zane is a curious choice for The Phantom, but he manages to hold his own. This is not a good film--along similar lines I much prefer THE SHADOW--but does have some fun. Still, not enough for actual respect. Rating: high 0 (-4 to +4) (Minor spoilers in the review.)

The legend of The Phantom began in the 16th Century when off the shores of the Island of Bangalla ("Bengalla" in the film) Singg pirates captured a British merchantman ship and put all to the sword but for a young boy, Kit, who dived over the side just in time to see his father killed. The boy swam to shore and was rescued by pygmies (not so small in the film). The boy swore revenge on the pirate who killed his beloved father, but days later he found the pirate washed up on shore dead. His goal in life gone, he instead devoted his life to fighting piracy, greed, cruelty, and injustice wherever it occurred. He swore that this would be not just his mission, but that of his sons and their sons. When he died they would carry on after him. So began a long line of Phantoms. As there always was a Phantom around fighting evil, even as generations and even centuries passed, the legend grew that The Phantom could not die. He could appear to die, but would return ever and again looking just the same. He was called "The Man Who Cannot Die" and "The Ghost Who Walks." The pygmies kept the secret that The Phantom was a mortal and gave each Phantom the secrets of their deadliest hunting poisons. He made his home Skull Cave in the deep woods of Bangalla and found other Skull Caves in other parts of the world including the American Southwest. From these he could fight evil-doers everywhere. But when one Phantom's adventures were ended a Phantom would always return to Bangalla, his true home. The pygmies knew that the day would come when each Phantom would die, usually violently, and The Phantom's son would be summoned to don the costume and assume the role of The Phantom.

I have to admit that even as a child I was not very interested in The Phantom. He was just about the least intriguing-looking super-hero I could think of. A black mask and a skin-tight purple suit was just too little costume. He looked a lot like a professional wrestler. But what really unsold me on The Phantom were his garish purple and black diagonally striped shorts (missing in the film). Because I thought the shorts looked silly, the stories probably never got much of a chance to impress me, though modern critics say that it was one of the better adventure comic strips. The Phantom was the creation of Lee Falk, who previously had created Mandrake the Magician. The strip began its long run on February 17, 1936, and sixty years later it was still running. The strip was adapted into a fifteen-chapter Columbia serial in 1943, with Tom Tyler playing the title role. Now, with the character a little over sixty years old, The Phantom is back on the wide screen in a story with a strong serial feel.

The year is 1938 and the world is in turmoil as dictators try to bring about a New World Order. The United States has its own would-be dictator, the ruthless gangster/businessman Xander Drax (played by Treat Williams). Drax's plan is to get power through the use of supernatural means. He wants to gain possession of three mystical jeweled skulls which when brought together will bring their owner about the same power that the Lost Ark would. (And this film does borrow heavily and repeatedly from RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK, albeit lacking the style to make it all work.) As the film opens we see three ruthless Indiana-Jones-like characters who have tracked the first skull to the Island of Bengalla (ugh-oh!). The skull is in a cave somewhere in the deep woods (UGH-OH!). But it is safe, you see, because one of the mercenary explorers had actually killed The Phantom several years before (Dead meat!!!). Out of the forest, on a white horse and followed by the wolf, Devil, comes riding The Phantom. And so begins an adventure that will carry The Phantom to New York City and later to a meeting with the last descendants of the Singg pirates, killers of the father of the original Phantom.

Billy Zane is a reasonable actor, best remembered, at least by me, as the sea-going psychopath in the taut thriller DEAD CALM. And in the purple suit he physically looks the part, even without the striped shorts. Treat Williams plays his villain with a subtle tongue-in-cheek. He does not interpret the role so broadly that he could be in a Batman film, but he is not really playing it straight either. Kristy Swanson, known too well as BUFFY, THE VAMPIRE SLAYER, puts the most character in her maiden-in-distress that I have seen from her in any film, but she has a long way to go. And veteran Patrick McGoochan is known for underplaying his roles and so fits right in. Some of the most interesting faces are in bit parts: a gangster here, a cab driver there.

Perhaps the most intriguing part about Jeffrey Boam's script is its unwillingness to commit to whether The Phantom is supernatural or not. The legend is that The Phantom is supernatural and supposedly the truth is that he is not, but there are bits in the film that imply he is able to do what no mortal man could. Does he commune with the ghost of his father or is it only a memory? The supernatural certainly mingles with the natural world in this film. Some of his abilities seem to be just on the edge of what is naturally possible, but it could be just the writing. Certainly Boam is willing to contrive some absurd coincidences, particularly having villains fall a little too perfectly into some set traps.

One problem with the script is that while it is sort of explained how The Phantoms find mates to extend their line, it is a little less clear how the Singg pirates find sufficient mates considering where they are. Nor is it really clear why, lacking the dedication of the Phantoms, they continue their line in the same profession. And it is a little hokey having everybody be descendants of originals, repeating the same battles that have gone on for 400 years. Many of the scenes are not staged very well. When someone swings on a rope, if you watch the angle that the rope hangs you will see definite continuity errors. One odd departure from the original suit is the addition of surface designs. It is like little black lines were added to accentuate muscle definition. One absurd scene has the wolf Devil apparently talking to The Phantom's white horse and telling the horse where to go to pick up his master. The horse then outruns an airplane. Some horse. There is little on-screen violence, but there is a gruesome scene of implied violence (borrowed from the film THE HORRORS OF THE BLACK MUSEUM).

In spite of a valiant effort to recreate a feel of the 1930s, THE PHANTOM never really works perfectly and often not even well. Then again the same can be said of the old serials. And it is good-natured fun in the style of the old movie serials. If you did not like THE SHADOW which had a good deal more panache, it is a good bet you will not like THE PHANTOM. For the sake of that fun I give it a high 0 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

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5. THE ROCK (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: Hannibal Lector meets UNDER SIEGE. There is a little too much action packed into 131 minutes, though not a whole lot that is new or novel. There are all sorts of unexpected but strangely familiar action film sequences like a mine train ride and a spectacular San Francisco car chase. Even the Zimmer score seems like an old friend. Toward the end it

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really goes over the top. Still it does deliver what the audiences are coming to see. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4). A discussion of plot weaknesses follows the main review and includes some plot spoilers.

A large part of the idea and appeal of Batman in the early days was that he was a sort of Dracula, the crime fighter. After all, if Dracula was so powerful, think what a crime-fighter he would make. These days action films seem to be about terrorist plots and the kind of monster that scares people is the psychological kind like Hannibal Lector, and so is born a plot where someone with the deductive power of a Hannibal Lector is an anti-terrorist. (Okay, he is not exactly Lector, just like Batman was not exactly Dracula, but Lector clearly is much of the inspiration for the character.)

General Francis X. Hummel (played by Ed Harris) is one of the most respected and highly-decorated Marines this country has, but he also has seen the government betray some of his closest comrades in arms. Now he has planned and is executing a grandiose extortion scheme to see justice done and to make a tidy profit for himself. He is going to grab some tourists visiting Alcatraz Island and hold them for ransom. But that is just a part of the plot. Just to sweeten the kitty, if he and his men are paid nicely and on time they will refrain from shooting some of the world's most deadly chemical agent over San Francisco, thereby horribly killing everybody within the city limits. A crack FBI team is to be sent to Alcatraz to release the hostages and to nullify the chemical

weapon. Chosen for the assignment is an FBI field agent and chemical expert, the wise-cracking Stanley Goodspeed (Nicholas Cage). The team also needs to send an expert on the interior of Alcatraz. And, yes, it turns out they have one, but they do not want anybody to know about him. He is not an FBI agent; he is a prisoner and the only man ever to have escaped from Alcatraz, lived, and gone free. But he has never had a trial and the government wants nobody even to know that he exists. Just the knowledge of why he is imprisoned could have serious political implications. His name is Patrick Mason and if he does not already sound formidable enough, he is played by Sean Connery! (Oh, incidentally, as for escaping from the Rock, there was someone who did escape from Alcatraz and made it to shore alive. He was, however, immediately arrested and at least reportedly he is the only man to have ever made it to shore.) If this illegally imprisoned man Mason can be made to help the team that will go to the island and try to disarm the missiles, they might have a chance to succeed. The problem is that Mason is himself a dangerous weapon and who he really hates is the FBI.

Nicholas Cage has a unique acting style. It is hard to mistake him for any other actor. He seems to go back and forth between small independent films and majors, letting the major films finance him

while he goes back and tries something a little different, like LEAVING LAS VEGAS which netted him an Oscar. I am unconvinced that he has real acting range and most of the characters he plays seems to have the same schmaltsy, half-awake feel. Here he is playing an action hero, sort of, and he brings to it much the same feel as his Ben from LEAVING LAS VEGAS. Connery is always fun to watch (dragonized or not) and so is Ed Harris. There is little in the roles here that any of them gives us that we have not seen from him before with the exception that Cage has not play this physical a role before. This seems to be very much a by-the-numbers sort of film. This is Michael Bay's second major film as director, the previous being BAD BOYS.

The score is very, very Hans Zimmer, even for a Hans Zimmer score. Zimmer is joined by Nick Glennie-Smith, but the style is all Zimmer. If you have heard the music from BACKDRAFT and CRIMSON

TIDE, you know the score. The pacing of THE ROCK is a little odd. Not that there is not always some action either going on or about to happen, but there is a long section in the first half of the film that seems to forget about Hummel's plot altogether and concentrate on whether the FBI can deal with Mason or not. Yes, there is action going on, but what is on the mind of the viewer is the main threat from Hummel, and diverting to long action scenes built around Mason seems a bad plot choice. Now I could be wrong about this, but I doubt that Alcatraz has somewhere in its bowels a mine train and something else that looks like an amusement park sky-ride. And this strange furnace with the flame and the stamping metal did not make a whole lot of sense to me either. It was a plot device needed to provide some suspense, but I for one would like to know a little more about what the intended purpose of this contraption was. Alcatraz seems to have more weird rooms in its lower levels than the Paris Opera House has in THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA. John Schwartzman's photography is heavy on colored filters and a smoky look.

In short, this is a summer action film that entertains for an afternoon and then fades away. Rate it a high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

For those who were wondering after the film who is this Don Simpson for whose memory THE ROCK is dedicated, he is the producer of the film. According to the Internet Movie Database he produced FLASHDANCE (1983), THIEF OF HEARTS (1984), BEVERLY HILLS COP (1984), TOP GUN (1986), BEVERLY HILLS COP II (1987), DAYS OF THUNDER (1990), THE REF (1994), DANGEROUS MINDS (1995), CRIMSON TIDE (1995), BAD BOYS (1995), and THE ROCK (1996).

SPOILER... SPOILER... SPOILER... SPOILER... SPOILER... SPOILER...

There is much toward the end of the film that leaves a sour taste in one's mouth. There were contrivances in the plot that just work

too blatantly to smooth off rough edges. General Hummel was doing what he thought was right and there certainly were those in the audience who would probably have agreed. He was certainly risking his life for a principle. The film would have taken some risks by

having an idealistic villain who was not just a fanatic and it would have been a nice touch to leave the character that way. But this was not a script to take any such risks. The script had to turn him around and make him change sides at the end so that there was no chance that anybody would be rooting for the bad guys. The script had to make sure that by the end of the film everyone the heroes were fighting were unquestionably bad. That makes the ending just a little too neat. Having Goodspeed stab himself in the heart (thank you, Mr. Tarantino), roll on the floor, then drag himself up in a dramatic pose to wave flares at the approaching planes was just a bit more overripe a climax than the film needed. All that was needed at that point was for a Great White Shark to jump out of the water and start nipping at his toes while a tidal wave bore down on him from the right. And does anybody have any idea how an injection in the heart can stop someone's skin from boiling off???

Oh, and by the way, Alcatraz was closed as a prison in 1963 so if Mason had spent so long in there it would have had to have been well prior to 1963. Now for what was he imprisoned and what were the last words of the film? [-mrl]

Mark Leeper
MT 3F-434 908-957-5619
mleeper@lucent.com

Principles have no real force except when one is well fed.
--Mark Twain

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