

rating of +4 on the -4 to +4 scale, and of the list P_h_a_s_e_I_V is certainly the most controversial. (The films are K_i_n_g_K_o_n_g [1933], F_o_r_b_i_d_d_e_n_P_l_a_n_e_t [1956], T_h_e_W_a_r_G_a_m_e [1967], Q_u_a_t_e_r_m_a_s_s_a_n_d_t_h_e_P_i_t [1968], P_h_a_s_e_I_V [1974], S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s [1977], and B_r_a_i_n_s_t_o_r_m [1983].) Why do I rate this little known and less liked film above such popular favorites as B_l_a_d_e_r_u_n_n_e_r and 2_0_0_1: A_S_p_a_c_e_O_d_y_s_s_e_y?

THE MT VOID

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One of the staples of the science fiction film is conflict between alien species from W_a_r_o_f_t_h_e_W_o_r_l_d_s, E_a_r_t_h_v_s. t_h_e_F_l_y_i_n_g_S_a_u_c_e_r_s, T_h_i_s_I_s_l_a_n_d E_a_r_t_h, up through E_n_e_m_y M_i_n, and probably well beyond.

Invariably the enemy is a minor variation on humanity and their tactics as depicted concentrate on how similar they are to humans.

In W_a_r_o_f_t_h_e_W_o_r_l_d_s you have beasts who look v_e_r_y different from

human. But they attack us in what are essentially floating Sherman

tanks. So do the aliens from E_a_r_t_h_v_s. t_h_e_F_l_y_i_n_g_S_a_u_c_e_r_s. E_n_e_m_y

M_i_n's conflict is more like a dogfight-war, like from the Battle of Britain.

In general, the concept of fighting aliens is handled very unimaginative, as often as it has been portrayed. Then there is

P_h_a_s_e_I_V. It is humans against ants. That sounds unpromising at first, and in lesser hands it would be. The ants do not behave like ants and they do not behave like humans. They behave like reasoning ants, and that is as alien an enemy as humans have ever been portrayed as fighting in film.

It starts with one scientist, an entomologist, noticing that ant behavior was changing in one spot in Arizona. He writes a dry paper on the subject and gets the services of a mathematician and together they set up a laboratory out where they can study the ant behavior. They soon come to realize that a war has already started and is going in favor of the ants before humans ever realized it. The first task of each side is to try to understand the enemy.

Some attempts are made to communicate, but mostly each side uses its physical advantages over the other species to collect information and eventually to fight. The humans often know what the ants have done but have to wait tensely to find out why. The ants too have to work hard to figure out the humans.

The insect photography is impressive and in many cases pretty amazing in what they were able to get the ants to do for the camera. There are places where the film is overly mystical, but in general this is an amazingly intelligent science fiction film.

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Banish me from Eden when you will, but first let me eat
of the tree of Knowledge.

-- Robert G. Ingersoll

THE ROCKETEER
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: The 1981 graphic novel comes to the screen as what may be the best film ever made based on a comic book. This is a wonderful tying together of historic detail in the story of a man who becomes a super-hero with the help of a rocket pack. Expect this one to run (or fly) for much of the summer. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4).

I recognize that there are some films that it is hard for me to be objective about and all I can do is state my prejudices at the beginning of my review. I think I was about five years old when Saturday morning television ran C_o_m_m_a_n_d_o_C_o_d_y,_S_k_y M_a_r_s_h_a_l_l_o_f_t_h_e_U_n_i_v_e_r_s_e. At five years of age I decided that I really liked something I later learned to call "science fiction" and everything I have ever really been interested in since has been an out-branching from that root. For years, I dreamed of somehow getting a rocket suit like Commando Cody's. Not being a graphic novel fan, I never heard of T_h_e_R_o_c_k_e_t_e_e_r, released ten years ago. However, seeing the stand-up poster for T_h_e_R_o_c_k_e_t_e_e_r several months ago brought a flood of memories and I knew even then this was a film that I would have a hard time being objective about. And the film turned out to be much better than I expected even then.

The setting is 1938 Los Angeles. The title character is Cliff Secord, played a bit too callow and pure by Bill Campbell. Secord is a flying ace who, through rather contrived circumstances, comes into possession of a stolen rocket suit designed by Howard Hughes (played by Terry O'Quinn). Lots of people want this suit for lots of different reasons, but it is Secord who has the suit and who reluctantly lets it make him into a superhero. The main villain who wants to get his slimey hands on the suit is handsome film star Neville Sinclair, a character based on allegations that have been made about Errol Flynn. Sinclair is played by Timothy Dalton. The basic plot is very basic and is a negative aspect of the film.

But while the plot is pretty humdrum, much of the writing is not. Like David Mamet's "Water Engine," T_h_e_R_o_c_k_e_t_e_e_r ties together many pieces of 1930s and 1940s popular culture into a single story. For little details to throw into the story, T_h_e_R_o_c_k_e_t_e_e_r draws heavily on Hollywood icons, on then-contemporary world events, and on details of aviation history. Through Rick Baker's make-up we get one final film in which Rondo Hatton plays the heavy. There is a witty reference to the famous Hollywood sign over Hollywood. There are allusions to the Hindenburg, here called the Luxembourg. As a rather canny inside joke, a small piece of animation is done in the style used in Frank Capra's "Why We Fight" films. The joke is that Capra's animation, like the film

the classic planes of the period, provided in part by the heavy involvement of Howard Hughes as a major character. Also we see the classic art deco and just plain weird Los Angeles architecture. For example, the Bulldog Diner is shaped like a giant bulldog. The flying suit itself is art deco. All these elements combine to make a fascinatingly detailed film that constantly challenges the viewer with more than meets the eye.

Special effects are charmingly provided by Industrial Light and Magic. They are generally fairly good with the ironic exception of the flying suit sequences, which are not quite visually believable and which would in real life rip our rocket man apart with whiplash. The script's weak points are the occasional lapses into self-satire, the overly complex interrelations of the villains, and a sequence in a nightclub that drags on much too long. With those exceptions, one has to say that

T h e R o c k e t e r is a very nicely crafted film offering entertainment on many levels. This is one of those rare films you can truly say the whole family should enjoy. I give it a high +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

