



is "The Brick Moon." The story deals with a plan to put into orbit an artificial moon that could be used for navigation. To resist the heat of being hurled into space it is to be made of brick and covered with rock dust that will melt and make it airtight. The story goes into detail on the building of satellite and an

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unforeseen accident that sends it into space before its time with passengers who find they must learn to live on this new artificial world. Much of the science in this story is well thought out. (Of course, much is also completely wrong as well.)

If you want to get a copy of this story, now rare, there are copies online that you can reach from my or Evelyn's home pages (<http://www-gbcs.mt.att.com/~leeper> or <http://www.mt.att.com/~ecl>), or see us and we can get you a copy on paper or diskette. [-mrl]

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## 2. CUTTHROAT ISLAND (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: There are some good action scenes in what should be an exciting swashbuckler, but an unending staccato of bad touches undermines the enjoyment of Renny Harlan's pirate opus, not the least of which is that Geena Davis is just not right as an action hero. The plotting is fine, but the script needed much more work.  
Rating: high 0 (-4 to +4)

What is wrong with this action scene? A woman is standing on a coach speeding under a low awning on a building that overhangs the road. Rather than be knocked off she jumps onto the awning, runs through the building, pushing aside obstacles and dives out the window on the far side landing back on the coach. Well, there are two things wrong. First, the architecture has to be very contrived to set up the scene in the first place. 17th Century Jamaica could not have had many buildings with a second story that extends over a road. But secondly someone running an obstacle course will not go faster than speeding horses that have no obstacles. It makes for a

nice action scene, but given some thought, it just does not make sense. That in a nutshell is what is wrong with CUTTHROAT ISLAND. It has too many good sequences ruined by touches that do not bear close scrutiny. This is a film that fools you. Just when you start warming up to it and get pulled into the story, it does something stupid or poorly thought out and it loses you again. In the end it is the silly mistakes, the anachronisms, the scenes that don't make sense, the sexual double entendres, and the Bond-like wisecracks that sink a film that otherwise has a good action plot and some impressive visuals.

The year is 1668. Pirates like Black Harry (played by Harris Yulin), his infamous brother Dawg (played by Frank Langella), and his daughter Morgan (played by Geena Davis) rule the blue waves of the Caribbean (played by the blue waves off Thailand). Harry, Dawg, and a third brother each have a piece of a map to a fabulous treasure hidden on Cutthroat Island. Their father wanted them to

share but that is not what the brothers plan. This is the basis for what would have been a good fast-paced adventure film if the script by Robert King and Marc Norman had not tried too hard to be cute. But the credits are not over before Morgan's lover is holding a musket on her and she is telling him it won't fire because she "stole his balls." Big yucks here, folks. Too bad it totally ruins the period feel. It is not long before Morgan has inherited her father's crew and the companionship of an erudite thief (Matthew Modine) who join Morgan on her. Together they go off to try to find the treasure. And thereby hangs what could have been a good tale.

Perhaps the biggest blunder was to think that Geena Davis could play a convincing pirate queen and a terrific swordswoman. That just is not her kind of role and even the best stunt doubles cannot fix that. Frank Langella is a bit better as the villainous Dawg, but then he has some experience in swashbucklers. And then just as you are getting used to Davis in the role the film introduces Maury Chaykin of UNSTRUNG HEROES as a writer who is a guest on the pirate ships getting material for "a bestseller." That was the word they used, "bestseller." (Boy, that 17th Century culture was a lot like ours, wasn't it? Now was that before or after the Kennedy

assassination?) Of course not all of the problems have to do with period feel. There is the over-trained monkey who apparently understands English, but just enough to make very human gestures. For one painful example Morgan tells the monkey that she is the captain and the monkey salutes her. And once again the viewer is reminded that this is all just a movie.

Director Renny Harlin understands action scenes and does not worry too much about the logic of his scripts. He has explosive action scenes of terrific sea battles and dramatic helicopter shots with birds' eye views of magnificent pirate ships. But he will also have Morgan ready to make love to her doctor just moments after he removes a musket ball from her lower abdomen. Somebody desperately needed to go through this film scene-by-scene and ask, "Does this sequence really make sense?" With some films you could not take out the silly ideas or you would not have a story left. That is definitely not true of CUTTHROAT ISLAND. This is one film that you could tighten up scene after scene and still have a good story and, in fact, a much better piece of entertainment.

This is a mediocre film with a really good old tyme swashbuckler inside fighting to get out. It needed a sharper cutlass. Rate this one a high 0 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

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

Capsule: A long, dark, bleak, often bewildering biography of one of this century's most controversial figures mixes large doses of fact and speculation. Sometimes it is insightful, sometimes it is not very credible, and occasionally it even becomes muddled and incoherent. It falls well short of the great film everybody was hoping for but, it has some very good points. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4)

Some critics complained earlier this year when THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT portrayed some Republicans as sitting in dark rooms hatching dark conspiracies. That film was mild compared to Oliver Stone's cold expressionist painting of America's most controversial President. NIXON is the bleak story of a man who had a harsh, unpleasant childhood. He parlayed that experience into life of power and pain only to be brought down and destroyed by the powers he unleashed. NIXON is a look inside the head of Richard Nixon that comes up with no revelations beyond that it was a dark and scary place haunted by images of his youth, a place as frightful for Nixon as it was for anybody else.

The film begins with a sales training film that may or may not present Nixon's philosophy of dealing with people. It is being watched by the Plumbers on their way to Watergate. The scene makes no earthly sense in saying that these people would be watching this particular film at just this instant of time. But it is the sort of artistic liberty that Oliver Stone takes in NIXON. From there the film jumps to points all over Nixon's life, flashing back in time for a few scenes only to flash forward again and then to jump to some third point. We see Nixon's stern Quaker upbringing and his love/fear relationship with a mother who had a power over him all his life. Flash forward and we see the deals he is making as a President after the Watergate story broke. Flash back and he is making other deals with J. Edgar Hoover or with shady businessmen in Texas who seem to know before the assassination that Kennedy will not be running for office in 1964. Yes, this is an Oliver Stone film and secret deals and conspiracies are salted into the plot. In Stone's view, Nixon was a man who repeatedly conspired with others and who saw conspiracies against him and betrayals nearly everywhere. He is a natural subject for an Oliver Stone film.

Under Stone's direction Sir Anthony Hopkins plays Nixon as a stern vengeful man who must always assign blame for every misfortune, sometimes bizarrely inappropriately. Nixon is a man who remembers every slight that he has ever received or imagined. The 190 minutes spent in Nixon's world is more than enough time. Or more accurately, it is far too much and yet not enough. It is too much because of the personality Stone gives Nixon is so sullen and unpleasant to be around. And it not enough because the narrative

is strangely out of kilter. It seems to assume the viewer already knows much of Nixon's history. The film spends an hour on Nixon's involvement with Watergate but not enough to explain coherently the Watergate scandal to someone who does not already know it. Stone assumes the viewer knows the facts and instead gives us a sequence that could be called "Famous Scenes from the Watergate Affair." I pity the foreign audiences who will try to understand Watergate from what Oliver Stone tells them about it. And on top of that, Stone handily sidesteps the question of whether Nixon knew in advance of the break-in. In another odd sequence the film has Mao and Nixon admitting to each other that they are tyrants. Even if the thought crossed Mao's mind, he would hardly tell Nixon. Stone's idea of what heads of state say to each other in private is almost surreal.

Some of the characterizations of the people around Nixon will be equally controversial. Haldeman and Ehrlichman are played by perennial screen slimeballs James Woods and J. T. Walsh. While Haldeman is as slimey as any of Woods's characters, Ehrlichman comes off as surprisingly troubled by Nixon's actions. Pat Nixon (played by Joan Allen) is elevated to almost heroic stature, torn between love and loyalty on one hand and moderation and conscience on the other.

The Hollywood Pictures production is a prestige film and has a superior cast of actors led by Anthony Hopkins but including Powers Booth, Ed Harris, Bob Hoskins, E. G. Marshall, David Paymer, Paul Sorvino, and Mary Steenburgen. Hopkins is, of course, a terrific actor, but his Richard M. Nixon is one of his worst performances in recent memory. He neither looks nor sounds much like Nixon, but worse yet he exaggerates Nixon's slight slouch giving him a round-shouldered hunched look. Making matters worse the make-up artist has given him a much more serious case of five o'clock shadow than the original ever had.

While Stone was bending reality he threw in more than this film's share of surreal and experimental scenes including sequences that were highly under-cranked to show cars or clouds zipping by or shots printed in negative. Rarely do these convey much to the film but a touch of pretentiousness. Certainly in an epic film of this length a few of these strange effects should have been cut.

On the other hand it is hard to rate NIXON too low as a historical film that tries to analyze a figure as complex--not to say pivotal--as Richard M. Nixon. This is not a film that reaches for easy and pat answers, even if it does at times seem overly harsh on the man. It covers a broad swath of history and presents it in a way that does not underestimate its audience. Like Nixon the man, NIXON the film has major problems and major virtues. I give the film on balance a high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale, still a rather tepid rating for so lavish a production. [-mrl]

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#### 4. SHANGHAI TRIAD (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: Zhang Yi-Mou, director of RAISE THE RED LANTERN, does a gangster film with a unique but not totally effective style. He mutes the action and pulls us away from the real action by telling the story from the point of view of a character only tangentially connected to the meat of the story. Many of his traditional themes come through in spite of his radical change of subject matter. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4)

The Triads are in Southeast Asia very much what the Cosa Nostra is in the United States, a secret society that runs organized crime. Some historians attribute them to the 17th Century Heaven and Earth Society, augmented by an outgrowth of the Boxers of the 1898-1900 Boxer Rebellion. In the beginning and for much of the intervening time their avowed goal was to return the Ming Dynasty to power in China. It is not likely that they still take that cause seriously, but they still hold a great deal of power in the countries where they operate in places as diverse as Vietnam, the United States, and the Netherlands, though probably not much in their native China, having been to a large extent cleared up in 1949 and 1950 by an equally ruthless Communist government.

However, the title SHANGHAI TRIAD is a play on words. The film is really about a triad of three people involved in the underworld of 1930s Shanghai. At least the English subtitles never explicitly say they are Triads. Suffice it to say one of the characters runs a Shanghai crime syndicate, controlling the trade in opium and prostitution. And that could be part of the Triads.

Shuisheng (played by Wang Xiaoxiao) is a country boy brought to Shanghai by an uncle who is a flunky for Mr. Tang (Li Boatian), the biggest crimelord in Shanghai. Shuisheng's new job is to be a servant for Tang's mistress Xiao Jinbao (Gong Li) a prostitute and a singer in Tang's nightclub. We see the story from Shuisheng's viewpoint from which it is frustratingly difficult to see who it is

killing whom and why. It will be more clear by the end of the film, but in the mean time the story concentrates more on how cruelly treated Shuisheng is by the beautiful prostitute Xiao Jinbao, who clearly is herself very angered and frustrated by something and takes it out on Shuisheng. Some of her anger is caused by her own virtual captivity by Tang. In spite of her status as a popular singer, Tang keeps her on a short leash and uses her like a piece of furniture. Shuisheng struggles to understand his new employers and their current crisis.

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By now international audiences have come to expect Zhang Yi-Mou films to star Gong Li. The two have been very closely associated since 1988, having made RED SORGHUM, JU DOU, RAISE THE RED LANTERN, THE STORY OF QUI JU, and TO LIVE. In fact, their association is to come to an end after just one more film already made but not yet released entitled TEMPTRESS MOON. Gong Li gives her most unusual and perhaps most complex performance. But perhaps she plays it with a little less credibility than in some of her previous films. Certainly this is the most fanciful role she has played. It is hard for a Westerner to judge nuances in her acting due to the language barrier in this subtitled film.

Zhang is not constrained by some of the conventions of popular Western films, so he is free to experiment a little with the form. The plot takes some turns that would be unlikely in a Western film, particularly toward the end. He is also able to tone down the violence or leave it off-screen entirely. And not just the violence but much of the crime story takes place where the viewpoint character, Shuisheng, cannot see it. Zheng uses Steadicam shots to give us Shuisheng's subjective viewpoint extensively. This is his first use of Steadicam and he reports in an interview that he mistrusts a reliance on the device. This is certainly one of Zhang's most opulent films and it seems very strange to see musical production numbers in one of his films. Still, one cannot say overall that it all works. I rate this one a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]



Mark Leeper  
MT 3F-434 908-957-5619  
m.r.leeper@att.com

America is the greatest of opportunities and the worst  
of influences.

--George Santayana

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