

Enfants Terribles: Enhancing Intelligence

CHARLY (1968) dir. by Ralph Nelson

COLOSSUS: THE FORBIN PROJECT (1970) dir. by Joseph Sargent

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C_h_a_r_l_y is the film adaptation of the novel F_l_o_w_e_r_s_f_o_r_A_l_g_e_r_n_o_n, probably my favorite of all time. Cliff Robertson starred in the television play "The Short Life of Charly Gordon" and for years wanted to do the same story as a full-length film. He finally put the project together and got a Best Actor Oscar for his efforts. Charly Gordon is mentally retarded, but has a real thirst to be intelligent like the people he sees around him. His condition even prevents him from recognizing the cruel jokes played on him by so-called friends. Then a medical experiment results in an ever-increasing IQ for Charly and as his mind changes, so does every perspective. The novel is a short and easy read and is strongly recommended. The film is flawed but any earnest attempt to do this story cannot be bad.

C_o_l_o_s_s_u_s: T_h_e_F_o_r_b_i_n_P_r_o_j_e_c_t, a.k.a. C_o_l_o_s_s_u_s, a.k.a. T_h_e_F_o_r_b_i_n

P_r_o_j_e_c_t, is lousy computer science but still a very good, even intelligent, science fiction film. Closely adapted from the D. F. Jones novel, it tells what happens when the President of the United States allows himself to be replaced by a giant super-computer. COLOSSUS is a machine that knows the job of the President better than any human ever could. But the story really takes off when COLOSSUS discovers that the Soviets have their own ruling super-computer. The film stars Eric Braeden, a.k.a. Hans Gutegast as Forbin and Gordon Pinsett, a well-known Canadian actor, as the President. They had to cast a Canadian, I think, because no United States citizen could believe or convincingly act a President willing to have less instead of more power.

2. ConFrancisco Media Report (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Nearly each year Evelyn and I go to the World Science Fiction convention. In 1976 at MidAmericon a then nearly unknown George Lucas came presenting materials from his upcoming film S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s.

While I would not rule out the possibility that it had been done before, this was certainly the first example I saw of a filmmaker using a science fiction convention like this. Starting that year popular film seems to have changed a lot in its pacing and also how it is merchandised. And one way is that more and more upcoming films seem to have previewed at science fiction conventions.

Over the years I have seen two major changes in these presentations. The first change is that rather than one filmmaker at presenting his own film, there were package presentations at which some "hired gun" who had sold his services to the studios would be presenting a whole package of films--sometimes from different studios. The other change was somewhat more subjective. The films seem more derivative and--well, lets admit it--much less exciting.

This year things are looking up ever-so-slightly. There is one upcoming television show that looks decent--actually, better than

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decent. But there is a lot coming up that I for one am going to be less than excited about. You can read that to mean that they look cheap, derivative, and way too much like things that have been bad in the past.

In the media presentation there were several teasers for the television series L_o_i_s_a_n_d_C_l_a_r_k. So far the cleverest thing I have seen about the series is the title, though I suspect some of the audience will not recognize the allusion to the famous expedition. Of course when I say that is the cleverest thing I have seen, it is about all I have seen. The whole presentation was three teasers implying that Lois Lane and Clark Kent would end up in bed with each other. Presumably it should be obvious that there are logic problems inherent in this inter-species coupling. Also poor Lois would probably be badly damaged by the man whose flesh is harder than steel. The same idea was explored in detail in the Larry Niven story "Man of Steel, Woman of Kleenex." My enthusiasm for the concept of sexy Superman stories is highly bounded.

Similarly we saw little more than teasers about s_e_a_Q_u_e_s_t_D_S_V, an expensive new series set in the ocean starring Roy Scheider and

something that looks a lot like a rubber Flipper stand-in. There is lots of nice looking hardware but no sign that anything of great value will come from the program. Steven Spielberg is producing.

And speaking of famous people with initials S.S. (hey, I am admired for my clever transitions) Sylvester Stallone looks like he is aiming for T_e_r_m_i_n_a_t_o_r with his D_e_m_o_l_i_t_i_o_n_M_a_n, but it sounds like he will end up closer to F_r_e_e_j_a_c_k. The concept is that the worst criminal in all the world (played by Wesley Snipes) is captured by a reckless, but effective cop nicknamed the "Demolition Man" (played by Sylvester Stallone). Unfortunately a bunch of innocent people are killed in the process. So both criminal and cop are sentenced to cryogenic suspension--freezing. (Moral: In a topsy-turvy world, a good cop is treated like a criminal.) For Stallone the sentence is just some fifteen years in the freezer which implies the congealing of all that body oil into grease. For Snipes the sentence is eternity. It is not entirely clear why waste the freezer space on someone who is never going to thaw, but I guess there are precedents. (Also I guess some of the stuff at the back of our freezer at home is in pretty much the same state.) Flash forward some long time to a pristine and crimeless future--don't ask me how we got there from our present with ever-growing numbers of criminals, bad inner cities, racism, and ever-increasing library overdue incidents. Society is too effete to handle real crime, but through a nasty freezer accident Snipes escapes and is terrorizing utopia. Luckily we have a macho greaseball on ice in the fridge. It's at times like this that society learns to value it's macho greaseballs. (Incidentally, all of this was in a trailer I had seen weeks earlier at my neighborhood theater, and there was nothing in this tacky presentation I didn't already

know.) This is not a film to look forward too.

We saw a trailer and little more for R_o_b_o_c_o_p_3 and what we saw made it look like little more than the mindless shoot-em-up that R_o_b_o_c_o_p_2 was. This time the evil system is against Robo and has made him a criminal. (Moral: In a topsy-turvy world, the good robocop is treated like a criminal.) I don't expect much here. Incidentally, Peter Weller is replaced by someone I could not recognize under the makeup, but he wasn't Weller or probably anyone else well-known.

One of the longest running of the great super-heroes is Lamont Cranston, who learned in the orient the ability to cloud people's minds so that he is essentially invisible. When he is invisible he is his alter-ego, The Shadow. Now nobody ever really knows what The Shadow really looks like since he was a hero of radio and pulp magazines. All you ever see is an artist conception of a man with a long crooked nose under a big concealing hat. It's enough to give you the willies. It is tough to judge who would make a good Shadow on the screen in the upcoming Shadow film. Basil Rathbone is pretty close, he might give you the heebie-jeebies if he was hiding somewhere in the shadows. Maybe they should get some unknown for the part in the film. But an unknown would give you no marquee value I guess. So instead got the modern equivalent of Basil Rathbone, the man with the commanding presence, with the deep voice, with the slightly scary looks. Yes, they cast as Lamont Cranston... Alec Baldwin??? (Oh barf! Well I guess he would be marginally better in the role than Julia Roberts.) We did see some production sketches on this one and the production seems to be in the hands of people who would rather emulate successful films about Batman than to try to understand the persona of the Shadow. At least one mistake: in the long-running radio show, which is where the Shadow became best known, all of his powers and all of his tools came from between his ears. He had no special cars or gas pistols. Everything he did was by mental powers. Well we saw a sketch of his office where an iris opens up and his chair sinks down when he wants to make a getaway unseen. As if he couldn't walk out right in front of his secretary and simply cloud her mind. He is, after the Shadow. Or he was before they started the film. Mechanical gimmicks are right for Batman but all wrong for the Shadow.

Oh, and speaking of weird casting, Stan Winston, an Oscar winner for special effects like those of J_u_r_a_s_s_i_c_P_a_r_k was on hand to defend the casting of Tom Cruise as the Vampire Lestat in I_n_t_e_r_v_i_e_w_w_i_t_h_t_h_e_V_a_m_p_i_r_e. He talked for a long time about the film but at the same time said very little. He had brought a slide of what Cruise will look like as Lestat, but could not show it since it might be videotaped and of course it must be kept in extreme secrecy for whatever reason filmmakers always like extreme secrecy. I guess there is some danger that some other filmmaker will cast Cruise as Lestat in some other film and use the same makeup. In

any case we heard how g_r_e_a_t Cruise was as Lestat, but learned little else of value.

Lest it sound like there was nothing good to look forward to in upcoming productions, J. Michael Straczynski was present to show what was coming up for B_a_b_y_l_o_n_5. I want everyone to remember that after the pilot was broadcast, it was me who said that I was willing to trade two episodes of any S_t_a_r_T_r_e_k series for any one episode B_a_b_y_l_o_n_5. Reactions to the pilot were very mixed, but I was really impressed by what I was seeing. I am already preparing to say "I told ya' so." I would now say that the two for one trade underrates "B_a_b_y_5" (as I have nicknamed the series, without loss of respect). We saw about twenty minutes from one of the episodes and forget the series, I really want to know how the episode will come out. It involves a conflict between two species, one good, one evil. The problem is that you can only determine which is the good species and which one is evil if you know if the spirit dies with the body or if souls are somehow reincarnated to live again. And B_a_b_y_5 isn't going to tell you. It seems like a lot of the episodes are going to hinge on philosophical principles that the viewer is going to have to decide for him/ herself. Straczynski says his goal is to start arguments and perhaps a few good bar fights with his series. It has been a while since we have seen science fiction sophisticated enough to do that. The British do that at least on occasion, but American SF in film and television seems to have the flash of effects but rarely the spark of any real intelligence.

Of course B_a_b_y_5 will have its "toaster graphics" which certainly are impressive. They substitute a sort of artistic feeling for the realism of effects that the current S_t_a_r_T_r_e_k shows seem to use. The effects in B_a_b_y_5 look more like animations of the book covers use, particularly British ones. They are imaginative and for the time being it is very impressive to see sights like spaceships unfolding solar sails like giant metallic insects. I would say, however, that the novelty of that sort of effect is bound to wear off over the projected five-year run of B_a_b_y_5. This is particularly true since "video toaster graphics," the kind used in B_a_b_y_5 are a lot cheaper than those created by Industrial Light and Magic, and B_a_b_y_5 has no exclusive on them. That means we are probably going to see similar effects very commonly. The special effects are not going to be that much of a draw after the first six months, but I think that the story will be. I am just a little concerned about a series that is going to be hard to join in the middle because of what the viewer has already missed. For now I intend to watch faithfully and I suspect that once the series gets going, I will not be alone.

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

Capsule review: No, it's not a sports film. This macabre and erotic story story of frustration, obsession, and revenge could almost make an episode of T_a_l_e_s_f_r_o_m_t_h_e_C_r_y_p_t. It will probably turn off many viewers, but for others there will be a certain fascination. This is a moderately well-done film if somewhat selective in its appeal. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4)

Dr. Nicholas Cavanaugh (played by Julian Sand) has overcome his unhappy childhood--mostly. The neglected son of a great surgeon is himself a great surgeon. He has a beautiful house, an attractive mistress, and a king-sized obsession. The object of his obsession is Helena (Sherilyn Fenn), a stunningly beautiful woman with whom he has had sex once (as apparently has just about every able-bodied man available) and who now wants nothing to do with him. Forget his status, his position as chief surgeon of his hospital, he cannot stop himself from thinking about and even stalking Helena ... even to the point where he is climbing the tree outside her bedroom window in order to watch her love-making. Nick tries to invite Helena to his home only to be treated with contempt when she comes to a party he is throwing. He lures her back to the house the next day only to have her escape, running from the house and into the path of a hit-and-run driver. Nick could take her to the hospital, but decides to treat her in his home, amputating both her legs and making her his prisoner. Eventually, when she tries to strangle her captor, Nick will amputate her arms also.

What we have then is a rather ghoulish variation on John Fowles' T_h_e_C_o_l_l_e_c_t_o_r and at the same time an erotic fantasy. Nick lives out his dream of having his beloved Helena dependent on him and at the same time at his mercy. She obviously has objections to him personally, but he hopes if he is sufficiently disarming she will be left without a leg to stand on. The ending of the tale will be disappointing to some, but one that has a time-honored tradition, particularly in early film.

B_o_x_i_n_g_H_e_l_e_n_a is directed by Jennifer Chambers Lynch, daughter to David Lynch. Her father probably would have done the same story

every bit as weirdly but it also would have been full of images that would be meaningful only to him. His daughter's style is at least comprehensible. Perhaps as one allusion to her having a famous father, incidentally, Lynch includes on the soundtrack the aria "O mio babbino caro" ("Oh my dear little papa") from Puccini's G_i_a_n_n_i_S_c_h_i_c_c_h_i. Speaking of Puccini, to convey the upper-class feel of Nick's house Lynch uses as background music to scenes in the house no less than four arias from Puccini and also fills the house with Greek statuary--indicating she does know high class when she encounters it. Of course the primary piece of statuary, a reproduction of the Venus di Milo, does fit thematically into the film.

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There are some problems with this story, but it does show promise for Lynch. My rating is a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

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

Capsule review: Marriage-of-convenience comedy of a gay, well-to-do, Chinese-American businessman marrying a citizenship-seeking artist in order to please his parents. The is an enjoyable Taiwanese comedy (filmed and set in Manhattan) but what we see of Chinese culture is more of interest than the well-trodden material about gays and straights.
Rating +1 (-4 to +4)

Miss Wei-Wei and Mr. Wai-Tung Gao are in love and are getting married. Wei-Wei (May Chin) is in love with Wai-Tung (Winston Chao) and Wai-Tung is in love with Simon (Mitchell Lichtenstein), his long-time roommate and lover. So why is Wai-Tung marrying Wei-Wei? His parents do not know that he is gay and would not be able to handle knowing it. They have tried for years to get him paired with a nice Chinese girl, and Wai-Tung has not had the heart to tell them his sexual orientation. Wai-Tung is a well-off landlord and his tenant Wei-Wei, an out-of-work artist and an illegal alien, has been attracted to him and also would like American citizenship. So Simon has suggested this charade of a marriage and the two Chinese have reluctantly decided it was a good idea.

The most disappointing aspect of this film, written and directed by

Ang Lee, is that while it is pleasant enough, the basic story is

overly familiar. It is very much a L_a_C_a_g_e_a_u_x_F_o_l_l_e_s set in the Chinese-American community. (And even C_a_g_e itself was derivative

of Frank Capra films such as L_a_d_y_f_o_r_a_D_a_y.) So T_h_e

W_e_d_d_i_n_g

B_a_n_q_u_e_t is an engaging view into a community too rarely depicted in film, but the story itself could occur in just about any culture

and has little in the plot that is not telegraphed. I think I

learned more about Chinese-American marriage customs and life in

general in their community than I learned about gays from T_h_e

W_e_d_d_i_n_g_B_a_n_q_u_e_t. Where this film shows us what we have not seen,

it is in Gao's parents' cultural fascination with Chinese

calligraphy; it is in some odd wedding tradition about a piece of

what looks like fried chicken on a string. Then there is the wild

party after the banquet that seems so out of character with the

usually staid outward appearances of the Chinese. Take these out

of the film and it becomes a television-level situation comedy with

a few very pat lessons. In fact, it is even a bit uneven as a

comedy. The showpiece scene seems to be the marriage ceremony with

the two principals having almost no command of English. That seems

a bit contrived since at other times they seem to have considerably

more command of English.

Generally, performances are very good. Sihung Lung as the father

has little to do but look stiff and dignified in the early parts of

film, yet still finds opportunity to make his the most memorable

character of the movie. Perhaps because he is enigmatic for so

much of the story. Lichtenstein is winning, if a little overly

bright-eyed. The score, by Mader, is a bit of a disappointment as

it is neither particularly melodic music, nor does it use Chinese

themes. But it is always interesting to see foreign films set and

filmed in the United States just to get some idea how other people

view the United States. This Taiwanese film really effectively

uses its Manhattan locations.

This is an enjoyable film, though perhaps not as good as word-of-

mouth would have it. I would say it is just average for theatrical

films I have seen this year, giving it a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

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I fear yet this iron yoke of outward conformity hath left a
slavish print upon our necks; the ghost of a linen decency yet
haunts us.

-- John Milton