

ZWEIHANDER

A SUTEKH PUBLICATION

ISSUE 2, 2003



THE GHOSTS
OF ALBION



WINTER FILM
PREVIEWS



THE ANIMATRIX
UNCOVERED

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ZWEIHANDER 2, 2003

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Every once in a while, the comic book movie genre undergoes a sudden burst of evolution - so here's a look at the movie that's put itself at the top of the food chain.

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These days you can barely move without treading on a vampire, but there's still room for more, as this animated adventure from *Buffy's* Amber Benson shows.



EDITORIAL:

Not enough of you are coming to Movie Night, you know that? Oh sure, our loyal regulars have enjoyed the delights of Johnny Depp Night, Disney Sci-Fi Night and Mind-Frell Night, but I'm sure the rest of you are missing out on an enriching experience...

Anyway, that's beside the point. Welcome to Issue #2 of *Zweihander* 2003, brought to you in spite of the best efforts of lethargy, procrastination and a complete hard drive failure (ouch). The good news is everything's back on schedule, and Issue #3 will be on time and under budget (not that they give me any money...), around about August. In the meantime, *Zweihander's* thanks go to Chris Adams, who decided reviewing crap movies for the good of Sutekh was more important than stupid old university work.



See you all next issue. Mrowr.

COMING ATTRACTIONS:

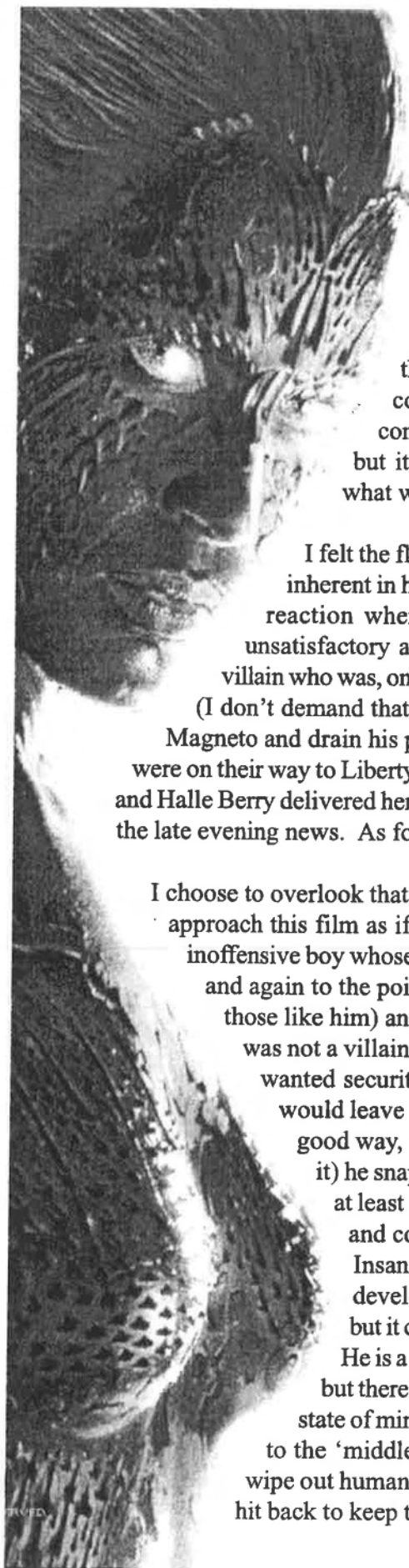
Next issue *Zweihander* will be going into full detail on *Tron 2.0*, which looks set to be the greatest, bestest first-person shooter ever. Plus it's got lightcycles, and Rebecca Romijn!



BEST QUOTE EVER:

"Oh, man. I wish I WAS a lesbian. I would get laid every night for the rest of my life."

~ Amber Benson, 3/14/02



X-2

Obviously when film-makers produce something like *X-Men* they won't be looking to change the formula much – identical sequels get made to *bad* movies, so if the formula worked as well as it did for *X-Men*, there's no way in hell it was going to be changed. (Actually, now that I come to think of it, *Alien/Aliens* is the only original/sequel pair that comes to mind where a fairly successful movie has been completely up-ended for a sequel.) So *X2* isn't really original, but it does what it should under the circumstances - figure out what was flawed the first time around, and make it better.

I felt the flaws in *X-Men* were three: Magneto fell short of the potential inherent in his situation (I felt his immediate, casual 'I don't believe you' reaction when told his machine would kill everyone it affected was unsatisfactory and undermined a lot of the work that went into creating a villain who was, on some level, understandable); Rogue was completely spineless (I don't demand that she save the day, but she could have at least *tried* to touch Magneto and drain his power when he captured her on the train, or later when they were on their way to Liberty Island – just a little something to show some fighting spirit); and Halle Berry delivered her lines with all the conviction of a stand-in finance reporter on the late evening news. As for fixing those flaws – well, two out of three ain't bad.

I choose to overlook that mis-step (as I see it) in Magneto's character in *X-Men*, and approach this film as if he had been what I think he was supposed to be – a fairly inoffensive boy whose life has been a succession of unfair trials, pushing him again and again to the point where he mentally separates the world into himself (and those like him) and everyone else, until it becomes second-nature to him. He was not a villain who wanted to wipe out or even enslave humanity – he just wanted security, a situation where (by whatever means necessary) They would leave Us alone. Interesting. Well, *X2* follows up on that in a very good way, subjecting him to mental torture to the point where (as I see it) he snapped completely, and now does not see the need for Them to at least survive. It's as if Colonel Stryker finally pushed him too far, and completely severed Magneto's bond with his human origins. Insanity – even the quiet, fairly unobtrusive sort he seems to have developed – may make Magneto himself more one-dimensional, but it creates a very interesting situation with regard to his followers. He is a leader by way of being extremely charismatic and persuasive, but there's a difference between ruthless and insane, and as Magneto's state of mind becomes more apparent he will no longer be able to appeal to the 'middle ground' of mutants, the ones who don't actually want to wipe out humanity, but are just sick of being persecuted against and want to hit back to keep the bully away from them.

Sir Ian McKellen did a fantastic job. I was surprised not to like his performance in *X-Men* – it felt a bit vacant and superficial, as if he was saying his lines but not really believing all the subtleties of his character. This time, it looks like he threw himself into it 110%, supported by a number of scenes where his newfound madness is contrasted with lingering elements of his humanity – shame at betraying Xavier, and sadness at leaving him to die. Acting alone makes this more straight-forward (though manipulative) Magneto more interesting than the multi-layered Magneto of the first film, who I think was intended to be more honest, in his own way, and thus more complicated as a villain.

I might as well talk about Mystique now – I'll get to Rogue and Halle Berry later. Mystique was magnificent. Just to get it out of the way, yes, I am inclined to like any sexy character who slinks around practically naked the whole time and moves like a dancer. But I found her most interesting because she seemed to confirm my feeling from the first film, that she is a lot more complex than she needs to be to fulfil her role as supporting villain. I think she's sort of like a mirror image of Wolverine – both strong-willed, determined, somewhat amoral characters with a lot of anger to burn, but where Wolverine fell under the influence of Professor X, Mystique came to follow Magneto, and thus the two similar characters drift towards opposite ends of the good-evil spectrum. I don't think Mystique is an evil character, not in the same way Stryker or (now) Magneto is. I think it's very significant that, in both films, she's been given a moment to show her point of view in a fairly understandable way – in the first one, when she says to Senator Kelly "people like you are the reason I was afraid to go to school," and in this one where Nightcrawler asks her why she doesn't just make herself look human, and pretend not to be a mutant, and she answers "because I shouldn't have to." Her arc in this film is a bit like Magneto's life as a whole – she begins it in what could be considered a neutral position (making questionable use of her abilities for a goal that is ultimately good – aside from reversing Kelly's position on mutant rights, she does make an attempt to dismiss Stryker's suspicions about

Xavier's school, even though she knows full well what it really is), and at the end, I think, her part in helping Magneto try to exterminate humanity came directly after she was almost killed by Stryker's Cerebro, pushing her past her breaking point the way Magneto has been time and again. I'd have personally liked her to seem a little more angry and vengeful as she imitated Stryker to Jason, as if loyalty to Magneto wasn't her sole motivation, but overall I'm convinced that I'm on to something here. I've got a vague suspicion that, as Magneto's insanity is revealed in the cold light of day in *X3*, Mystique will fulfil a sort of Darth Vader role, standing by him out of loyalty and love (their relationship, which I'm told was to be made obvious in cut scenes from *X-Men*, is still being hinted at strongly), but ultimately being the one to kill him when she can't stand it any more, probably sacrificing herself in the process.

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I'm interested in her sort-of-attempted seduction of Wolverine, too. It could be argued that she was acting on Magneto's orders (further proof that he's insane - if I was involved with someone like Mystique, I would *not* be suggesting that she try out Hugh Jackman just to see what he's like). I think it's also fair to suggest that she was acting, in part or in whole, on her own - recognising (whether consciously or otherwise) Wolverine's similarity to her, and maybe wondering what the difference is between them, and what she might become if what changed him had the chance to change her.

Rebecca Romijn-Stamos was excellent again, given more screen time to herself in this film to display the talent that made her stand out (as a *character*, dammit, stop sniggering) in *X-Men*, when she had only a few scenes. The dynamic between Mystique and Magneto was absolutely visible in the way they moved around each other, aside from the obvious 'couple' scene in the X-Jet when Rogue confronts Magneto. I love the way Mystique always looks proud of herself, it's very in character (convenient for eye-candy as well), and the intelligent look in her eye that sets her apart from Magneto's former minionators Toad and Sabretooth - no way I could imagine either of them doing espionage. Add to that the way she moves - it looks like every single motion she makes is planned. Look at that scene in Wolverine's tent, for example, after he's tossed her back: she's been dumped inelegantly on her butt, and in one smooth motion she's up and out the door. Mystique in action (I'm not sure whether to credit Romijn's stunt doubles or the CGI team) was outstanding - ten frantic seconds of unarmed combat that I won't forget in a hurry. The whole thing looked as if she was part of a single machine, comprising herself and everyone else in the room, and by her actions alone she was controlling all of them, making them move and react exactly the way she wanted. Normally you'd think it would be a weakness in a fight scene if it looked choreographed, but in this case I just got the impression that Mystique was a goddess. Purrrr.

Anyway, back to what I was saying earlier (she had a nice voice effect, too - a little strange at

times, but very melodious, a good match for her character) Rogue was a definite improvement. Of course most of her scenes were opposite Bobby Drake, a.k.a. Iceman (don't adolescent mutants get beat up by other adolescent mutants for giving themselves dorky names?), and he was surprisingly good. But her scenes with Wolverine were very helpful, showing a sort of maturity on her part - there's still the remnant of her crush on him, but you get the feeling she's recognised it for what it is - a teen hero worship kind of thing - and it's evolving more towards a big brother kind of relationship. Plus there were two moments where she got to strut her stuff, both of which worked well - when she absorbed Pyro's power, a positive decisive move of the kind that was so lacking in *X-Men* (though anyone who didn't remember *X-Men* might have been confused, given that *X2* made no attempt to explain Rogue's power), and when she piloted the X-Jet at the end. I adored that scene - a perfect blend of the need to make her assertive and heroic (this is a superhero movie, after all, not Dawson's Creek), and the need to keep her believably teenage. Anna Paquin didn't impress me in *X-Men* (largely due to the writing, though I've got to say she is, for some reason, on the lower end of my bizarre and capricious attraction scale), but this time I just thought of her as Rogue (about as good as an actress I don't consider sexy can do), and I really appreciated her expression of blind panic when she was at the controls of the jet, so that's quite a good turn for her so far as I'm concerned.

And, last of the flaws that needed to be fixed, Halle Berry, and unfortunately I think the way they should have fixed her was by re-casting Storm. It's no secret that I don't think much of Halle Berry - something about her manages to undercut her fairly phenomenal good looks, so when I look at her I see someone I don't like, and that's pretty damned unusual for me and attractive women. I hear (second-hand) that she doesn't think Storm got enough screen time, or that the writing was up to par. Well, feh. Storm is a supporting character, after all, and I didn't think her writing was any different to the rest of the film (capable, and inspired in more than a few instances). She had just as much screen time as

Nightcrawler, sans dialogue-less fight scenes, and her lines were (if you ask me) just as good. The difference is that she looked like she just wanted to fulfil her contract and collect her paycheck, whereas Nightcrawler-



Nightcrawler deserves a paragraph of his own. He wasn't the star of the film, but I think he's the one who will be most remembered, and rightly so. His action scenes, particularly the opening assault on the White House, were first rate, well-designed and complemented brilliantly by the effects. But it was when he was just talking that he made the movie his – the sincerity Alan Cumming put into his lines was really moving. I don't think there was a single scene of his that he didn't milk for every drop of interest it could provide – the net effect is that the guy is phenomenally likeable. *That's* how you play a supporting role – he never upstaged the main cast, he just made his scenes the best he possibly could, and the movie was far better for it. I think his rescue of Rogue after she fell out of the X-Jet got the biggest round of applause from the hyped-up preview screening crowd. If you had to pick one face to put on the poster for X2 - not to sum up the whole film, but just to be the face to promote it - Nightcrawler would have to be it.

Jean Grey was a little bit of a sore point, though – the character arc they pick up on in X2, that she'd always been hesitant about her power, is something you can see in *X-Men* (it's either that, or she was just kind of useless compared to the others), but I think the film might have benefited from having a little more of that hesitation on show – unless you bear *X-Men* in mind, that characteristic of her is something you really have to consciously insert to make her arc make sense.

I also think she might have been better served having her first exposition scene, about her powers being magnified, with Xavier instead of Scott – I know they needed to do some groundwork for her relationship with Scott (after it got ignored a bit in *X-Men*), but the ending and Xavier's reflections on her really needed one good scene between the two of them to be the other bookend to.

Scott actually impressed me more this time than before – in his scenes (limited though there were) there was a continuation of the momentary spark of interest to his character in *X-Men*, in the "How do we know it's really you?" "You're a dick" "Okay" scene – he's a boy scout with a bit of a jealousy thing, but he's not one-dimensional or *too* full of his own importance. By the end, enough good work had been done on his character that his crying fit didn't seem overly melodramatic. If I can pick out a single line, his delivery of his first line in the final scene (something along the lines of "Could we have done anything to save her?"), where he starts to speak but his voice literally isn't there, and he starts again, rephrasing it, was absolutely on the mark.

Iceman (I can't call him that with a straight face) was surprisingly likeable, though a bit goofy now and then. I assumed he had some sort of plan in mind when he was kissing Rogue – ultra-thin film of ice on his lips, or something – and it was a bit of a 'duh' moment when he started veining up then. Well, seeing as all he had was good intentions, what did he *think* would happen? I didn't really feel that much for him in the scenes with his parents, beyond what I got from the scenes themselves, but overall I was relieved of the impression the first film gave me, which was that any significant subplot involving Bobby Drake would be a mistake. Pyro, incidentally, wasn't quite the way I think they wanted him to be – I didn't much care that he ended up with Magneto, as you could see it a mile off as soon as the possibility arose. It would have been more effective if he'd been a more sympathetic character to start with.

Colonel Stryker was an interesting choice for a villain – I'd been a little worried that having a non-mutant as the bad guy would reduce the potential for a really good finale, but I was pretty much wrong there. I liked the way he had all the elements of a 'man-pushed-too-far' villain (see his little tirade to Kelly/Mystique about war, and the tragic circumstances of his wife's death), but you just got the feeling that, even if he hadn't been pushed too far, he'd still be an asshole. He was very effective, and that contemptible aspect of his personality suited him ideally to being the man who finally pushed Magneto past the point of no return. Jason Stryker didn't really have much to do, but his expressions were interesting – I liked the way there was actual malevolence buried there, along with all the screwed-up remnants of whatever personality he used to have – and he was very creepy.

There were a lot of little touches I appreciated, as someone who only vaguely knows the comics. I liked Colossus by his screen presence alone (I know nothing else about him). I did spot the cameo of Dr McCoy (the Beast, or something, I believe), which was a nice touch - from the sound of it, the rest of the audience loved it. Also, when Stryker entered his access code to Cerebro 2, the keys he pressed on the keypad played the *Close Encounters* tune – cute (and maybe, for some reason, a nod to *Moonraker*, which did the same thing).

The effects were uniformly excellent, as you'd expect. I've already mentioned Nightcrawler's White House raid; also of particular note were Magneto's escape (him standing still with the camera pulling back while his cell crumbles in front of him was a great visual), the tornado obstacle course they used to get the F-16s off their tail, and the pulse of energy that went through the entire dynamo chamber when Jean finally hit back at Cyclops.

The one weakness in the film (apart from Halle Berry) was Lady Deathstrike, as I'm told fingernail girl is known. It may have been wise to keep her abilities secret, rather than splashing them all over every trailer

and poster – there was nothing surprising about her big moment when it finally came, and I think it would have been a very good moment if the audience had had no idea what she was, and had shared Wolverine's "holy shit" at seeing her claws extend. As a Darth Maul-style 'stalking nightmare' character (not that Darth Maul really worked as such, but that was the idea behind him), she didn't do enough threatening – her approach to her office, with Mystique still inside, was good, but her attack on Cyclops would perhaps have been better implied than shown, and otherwise she just followed Stryker around like a secretary. Her momentary lapses back to her own personality weren't exploited nearly enough – in fact, it escaped me the first time I saw the film that she was reverting to herself just as she was dying. Speaking of which, the design of her fight with Wolverine was poor – too much action, not enough art. Compared to the Mystique vs. Wolverine fight in *X-Men*, or Mystique's decimation of Stryker's guards not ten minutes earlier, the Wolverine/Deathstrike fight didn't grab me at all.

Finally, as a parting comment, I found the wings of fire in the final shot to be admirably restrained.



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Movies



THE CORE

June 12

With the universe in general having failed to wipe out humanity with giant meteors, alien armadas, triffids and the Andromeda strain, the job falls to the planet Earth itself. The core of the world

is about to stop spinning – this is a Bad Thing – and the fate of the human race is in the hands of a bunch of people in space suits walking slowly towards the camera while the soundtrack goes berserk. It's pretty much business as usual for a sci-fi disaster film, but the cast (including Hilary Swank and Stanley Tucci) promises to at least make a decent showing of some inevitably shaky writing. If you enjoyed *Armageddon* (oh come on, there must have been *someone* else who did), this might be your thing. If not, you might want to catch it just to see how a space shuttle handles *Grease's* quarter-mile storm water speedway.



CHARLIE'S ANGELS: FULL THROTTLE

July 3

The Angels return, promising even more ludicrously over-the-top stunts and gravity-defying fights than in their last out-

ing. The plot this time revolves around a 'fallen angel' (Demi Moore), but it's really just about how many explosions, flying kicks and pairs of leather pants can be shoved on screen at once. Hopefully, the answer is 'a lot'. The movie's prospects might be slightly weakened by Cameron Diaz's apparent attempt to look as much like a corpse as possible, but Drew Barrymore and Lucy Liu return to provide eye candy for those who prefer the living, John Cleese has a part, and if there's any justice one of the exploding set pieces will consume guests stars Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen.



SINBAD: THE LEGEND OF THE SEVEN SEAS

June 26

Brad Pitt takes time out from laying siege to Troy for a more light-hearted ancient classic. Okay, it's a cartoon, and what's

more a cartoon romance, so it's probably going to be almost unbearably sappy – but the voice cast is good. Apart from Pitt, there's Catherine Zeta-Jones as the love interest Marina (and is it just me, or do the animators seem to have Velma Kelly in mind?), Joseph Fiennes, Michelle Pfeiffer, Christine Baranski and Dennis Haysbert, the coolest American President ever.

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TERMINATOR 3: RISE OF THE MA- CHINES

July 17

Now, I don't like to judge a film just by its trailer – but what the hell, I will. I don't like the looks of this.

Arnold Schwarzenegger seems to be playing a caricature of his former Terminators, Claire Danes is in it and Linda Hamilton isn't, and I've got a nagging suspicion that *T3* will be all about massive destruction, and not at all about intelligent writing. It's a pity the original *Terminator* – a very smart film – has come to this. Though, let's be honest, the signs were there when the best *T2* could come up with to back up its extravagant effects was a 'machine learning to be human' subplot recycled from *Star Trek*. Even if it *does* condemn the human race to slavery and misery, I'd rather see the T-X rip Arnie's head off.



PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL

Release date TBA

Cutthroat Island managed to get away with Geena Davis as a pirate; now

we'll see if they can manage the same feat with Orlando Bloom. Movies have been based on real life, novels, computer games and comics – this is the first time one has been based on a theme park ride. Fortunately it's a kick-ass ride, so maybe there's something to this after all. Aside from Orlando, the girls will be squirming in their seats at the sight of Johnny Depp as Captain Jack Sparrow, menace will be provided by Geoffrey Rush as Pirate Captain Barbossa (I swear that's how they credit him, 'Pirate Captain', just in case no-one notices the skull-and-

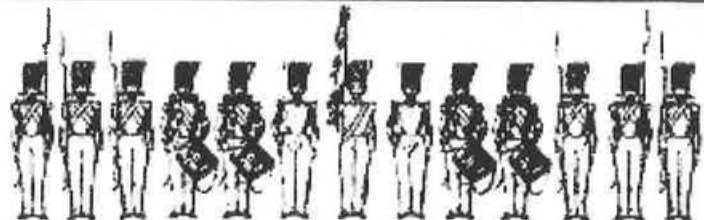
crossbones flag on the mast I suppose), and Keira Knightley (is it just me, or does that sound like a Bond Girl name?) will be providing the eye candy for the boys. Gore Verbinski is directing; his rendition of *The Ring* was very powerfully directed, if slightly unsubtle in parts, so – script permitting – this might turn out quite decent.



28 DAYS LATER

Release date TBA

More like *Six Months Later* – this is one of last year's movies, held back until now because... well, who knows why? A virus wipes out most of the planet's population, and the survivors don't have things their way either. At any rate, *28 Days Later* is notable for two things: it's got a British cast, which means with luck everyone will be putting some effort into their lines, even if they're just supporting characters (not mentioning any names of people who *don't* earn their paycheck coughHalle Berrycough), and the trailers don't spoil the whole thing by showing everything the film has to offer up front. *Superman 2*, I'm told, was the first film to screw itself by showing the finale in the trailer – *Signs* is the only recent one that comes to mind that put together a trailer without spoiling its surprise, though it did it so effectively that I very nearly didn't see it because the trailer looked too boring. Selah.



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MOVIES I LITERALLY FISHED OUT OF THE GARBAGE AND REFUSE TO WATCH

Meditations on Bad Cinema by Chris Adams

Many members of Sutekh will profess their love for various films of dubious merit. From *BASEketball* to *Beowulf*, if a movie has had little commercial success and is universally reviled by those who have seen it, chances are there's a Sutekher who has a guilty affection for it. Here, however, I intend to review some films which I own only because I rooted through a bag of discarded rental tapes while dropping garbage off at the tip. With that stunning prospect in mind, I present to you films not even Ed Wood could love!

GRIZZLY

The first of these movies is also the least promising, as far as I am concerned. For a start, the front-cover art on the box is drawn, containing no shots from the film whatsoever. It's also salutary when a film proudly displays its credits on the cover and not one of the names is one you've ever heard of. The back cover is no better – here's the blurb:

“Terror comes to the site of a national park in the form of a mammoth, fifteen foot grizzly bear, a survivor of a prehistoric breed. To satisfy his massive hunger, the grizzly preys on unsuspecting young campers. As the deaths mount, all possible attempts are made to stop the onslaught and carnage, leading up to a spectacular climax. Grizzly is a first rate action-suspense film, a shocker that does for campsites what Jaws did for sea resorts.”

I am actually prepared to believe that this film is a shocker, though perhaps not in the sense which the blurb-writer intended. My suspicions in this regard are, I feel, justified by the fact that this ‘mammoth’ bear appears, judging by one of the shots from the film which appear on the back

cover, to be brought to life through such magical filmmaking techniques as using a normal bear and clumsily blowing up the side of the frame in which he appears to make him appear enormous. When the grass surrounding your ‘mammoth’ bear is twice the height of the grass surrounding your helicopter, it's not that convincing an effect.

Add to this the fact that another shot on the back of the box features a BAZOOKA, and you know you have a recipe for action-suspense GOLD, right? Right?

SHAOLIN TEMPLE AGAINST LAMA

The title of this article contains a lie, for I have indeed watched *Shaolin Temple Against Lama*. What can one say about such a masterpiece of martial-arts action and suspense? The box has absolutely no photos from the film on either front or back, and only the front-cover art - in which a hunky young warrior wields a thick and suspiciously phallic staff (he's holding it in front of his crotch!) against an evil-bearded evil guy who is using a SKULL to block this fearsome tool of righteous power – gives you a clue as to what the film is like.

The teaser on the back only serves to further heighten expectations:

“A stunning action saga filmed in Nepal, which reveals the distinctive characteristics of Chinese Kung-Fu, and the secrets of an esoteric Buddhist sect! ... A shattering martial arts showdown that Kung-Fu fans won't want to miss!”

As a ‘Kung-Fu fan’ I can assure you that my desire to miss this is quite great, especially having seen it. The plot concerns a prince with martial-arts mojo saving the kingdom from an evil tyrant,

et cetera et cetera ad infinitum et nauseam. The action is enlivened only by the hilarious chop-socky dubbing, and the translations for the lines are a strain upon the ear. Without even spectacular action to recommend it, I must sadly say that this film deserves to have been left with the workout videos and 1970s telemovie dramas from whose company I rescued it.

THE TIME GUARDIAN

Carrie Fisher, welcome to the price of cocaine addiction. Along with Dean Stockwell, you are condemned to appear in this kind of mindless sci-fi tripe until the memories of it fade and you are safe to emerge from obscurity once more. The pictures on this box are the usual low-budget no-brain sci-fi drivel, and the blurb is so precious that I want to share it with you in its entirety:

“During the 24th century a new city is launched into time, to escape from a polluted and dying

Earth. And for centuries it cruises up and down the Time Stream. The Jen-Diki are mutated descendants of the people they once were. They are now supported and monitored by powerful armoured metal exoskeletons. *[These things sound familiar... ye gods, I think I've seen this. -Ed.]* Massive, relentless and evil, they are the city's natural enemies.”

Just to take a break from the blurb here, isn't it nice how a 24th-century city launched into the Time Stream can have NATURAL enemies in the form of power-suited cyborgs? Isn't Mother Nature inventive?

“After yet another ambush attack from the Jen-Diki, the city must stop in a safe year to recharge and repair. It spins to a stop in the late 20th century. As always the city sends a Guardian ahead to prepare the way and warn of any danger. This time the task is Ballard's, the city's toughest man, and Petra, the city's expert on the ways of the 20th century. This time there is no escaping

to a safe year, the Jen-Diki are planning their most violent attack yet. When the time line breaks open a battle of epic proportions begins. And only one man can save them... THE TIME GUARDIAN.”

Makes you shiver with anticipation, doesn't it? No? Yeah. In any case, some hopefully-unemployed skill named Stan James from The Advertiser bleats on the back “A sci-fi adventure... in the mould of ‘Star Wars’... it's pure escapist entertainment”. Notwithstanding that this film is obviously trading on the presence of Princess Leia to entice foolish consumers into wasting their hard-earned cash on it, I love the fact that it's ‘pure escapist entertainment’, which is really film-industry code for plotless, scriptless, mindless images on screen with a handwaving rationale for existence. Surely a gem.

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THOR THE CONQUEROR

This is the last film I'll review in this article, and the only other one which I have seen. Notwithstanding that the front cover features an Italian 'hunk' holding aloft a ridiculously-proportioned sword – isn't Thor a blonde Norse god with a hammer, people? – being menaced by a half-naked chick wearing a helmet which appears to be made from a wicker laundry basket, and the fact that the back cover features 'Thor' helping this same woman to drink from a river while both are topless (a scene which does not appear in the film, mind you), the true worth of this film can be found in the fact that it is a product of the great sword-and-sorcery director Anthony Richmond.

Who? you ask, and well might you. Anthony Richmond is the Anglicised name of Italian auteur Tonino Ricci, responsible for such gems as *A Man Called Rage* and *Bad Kids of the West*. Recognise it now? No? Good. If you did, there might be trouble. The quality of this film is clear from the back of the box:

“A tale of mythology and magic, of how Thor, a legendary god triumphs over overwhelming odds to great victory and the destruction of his foes. His parents slain at birth, Thor is raised by Etna, the birdman. Taking the beautiful warrior virgin, Ino, as his companion, his exploits lead to a confrontation with Gnut, the slayer of his father. Blinded, how can Thor overcome Gnut and his horde? Watch the story of Thor, The Conqueror, to this day recalled in legend and in rock drawings.”

In case it hasn't been clear up to this point, let me make it clear. THIS FILM IS AWFUL. Legendary dialogue such as (to paraphrase) “Yes, take the female and make her your own, for men always dominate females, they are weak”, is just one of the many attractions of this

cinematic gem. To be honest, I watched the last third of this film on fast-forward, looking for fight scenes or ANYTHING of interest whatsoever. Sadly, the fight scenes proved so dull that I could barely keep my eyes open, and I shut it off in disgust.

Truly, the only reason to watch this film is to be disappointed at the lack of nudity – and if you don't think that's a good enough reason, you may be on to something there.

What have we learned, fellow Sutekhers? We've learned that many bad films have been made throughout history, and these are only four. We've learned that I shouldn't be allowed to pick movies up out of the garbage. We've learned that even if I do, I shouldn't be allowed to review them for *Zweihander*.



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THE ANIMATRIX

THE SECOND RENAISSANCE

Styled as a historical document from the Zion Archives, the two-part *Second Renaissance* tells the story of the development of AI and the events that led to the war between humanity and the machines. Laden with biblical and historical imagery and symbolism, it is – if analysed seriously – somewhat more controversial than *The Matrix* itself, substituting dark allegories for the film's often-playful experiments in philosophy. Instead of the menacing Agents and insectoid Sentinels, the machines are portrayed – visually and as characters – in much more human terms, while humanity is given the lion's share of the inhumane behaviour.

Second Renaissance depicts a near-future Earth where sentient robots, the ancestors of *Matrix*'s AIs, are manufactured as a slave class, given human-like capacities for thought and reason, but afforded no rights. The execution of a robot who kills his master in self-defence is the catalyst for riots and robot-rights demonstrations, leading to a draconian campaign of genocide against the machines. The survivors flee and establish their own nation – Zero One – and for a time co-exist peacefully with humanity. However, when the efficiency of the machines threatens the prosperity of human nations, hostility re-emerges, and all-out war between men and machines begins, culminating in the events described in *Matrix*, the blackening of the sky to deny the machines solar energy, and their subsequent enslavement of humanity as a power source.

If anything, *Second Renaissance* is *too* ambitious in its efforts to create a history behind *The Matrix*. The original's tendency towards philosophy was always styled as an intellectual exercise, a questioning of the world around humanity. *Second Renaissance* goes so far as to question

humanity itself: our treatment of the machines, coupled with the last-ditch efforts Zero One makes to secure peace, raises the question of whether we *deserve* to survive, when contrasted with the machines, who – until the loss of the sun, when they become *Matrix*'s alien-style creatures – are very much human, and are presented with more compassion. *Second Renaissance* is an interesting counterpart to *Matrix*'s adventure, but if considered too seriously, undercuts its parent's basic tenet that humanity is superior to the machines.

PROGRAM



A stylish, if slightly shallow, duel of warriors and philosophies, that explores the nature of reality and whether, given conditions in the 'real' world, it might be better to accept the matrix and live in a comfortable illusion. *Program* offers visual style by the bucket-load, but falls short in that it is really impossible to build familiarity with characters and challenge them all in the space of a few minutes. That would not be so much of a weakness, except that the theme of the film has already been explored, in Cypher's sub-plot in *The Matrix*, and without re-interpreting it through the lens of a new protagonist and antagonist, it feels recycled. The ending is a nice touch, which I won't spoil.

BEYOND

An intriguing look at the ramifications of living in an artificial world generated by an imperfect (though powerful) system. An error in the matrix causes an abandoned house to become 'haunted' – strange sounds echo through the rooms, gusts of wind rush through the corridors and distort the walls, and time and gravity blur and bend in places. *Beyond* is the most unlike *The Matrix* itself, in that it has very little in terms of straight-forward plotting and character development. Its reliance instead on suggestion and mystery means that you'll either love it or be left wondering what the point was.

WORLD RECORD

A fascinating concept, executed with surrealistic flair, and just enough plot to sustain interest among those who don't go in for the experience itself. *World Record* plays with the notion of defying reality, in a situation where reality – in the form of the matrix – is vulnerable to defiance.

An Olympic sprint runner pushes himself to run the fastest time ever, and in the process his single-mindedness exceeds the boundaries of the matrix, allowing him a glimpse of the potential to be 'free' of the limits of physical being. The film ends without a clear victory or defeat, allowing itself to be interpreted in favour of either the runner, or the Agents, whose presence here is more malevolent than even *The Matrix* itself manages sometimes.

KID'S STORY

An interesting story, though one that suffers a little from its reliance on story-telling tricks such as telescoping its ending into a 'flash-forward' that begins the story, and a faintly ridiculous sequence in which the Kid eludes the Agents pursuing him by skateboarding through the halls – that part in particular feels a little like a children's cartoon. *Kid's Story* is notable both for its ending, which gives us a look at the reactions of the Kid's family and friends, who have to deal with the fact of his actions without



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knowing the true cause of them, and for being followed up directly in *The Matrix Reloaded*.

MATRICULATED

My pick for the best of the *Animatrix* films, the work of Peter Chung, creator of the surreally psychological cartoon series *Aeon Flux*. A group of humans in a hidden base on the surface of the ruined Earth experiment with capturing and 'converting' machines, using an artificial reality to reach their captives' AI consciousness, and attempt to induce a feeling of kinship with humanity. Chung's influence can be seen throughout the film -- the attenuated physiques of the humans, the surreal, thought-provoking dialogue... the tendency of the heroine to wander around in a tank top and g-string -- that's diagnostic, really. Very much like *Aeon Flux*, *Matriculated* does most of its work in visuals, with long sequences running without dialogue. Nevertheless, of all the *Animatrix* films, this is the one that has the greatest impact, and tells the most unique story. The ending is truly poetic.

A DETECTIVE STORY

A straight-forward re-telling of the search for the truth, this time through the eyes of a detective hired by Agents to track down Trinity. *Detective Story* is at once interesting and frustrating, because it offers a glimpse at the process of learning the world is wrong -- which was largely glossed-over in *Matrix* itself, as something Neo had 'always known' -- and then for the most part ignores the potential for a story to be told within that idea. The visual style of the film is quite different from other portrayals of the matrix, and deserved credit for that. Carrie-Anne Moss puts in a distinctive vocal performance as Trinity.

FINAL FLIGHT OF THE OSIRIS

At once the most impressive and disappointing of the *Animatrix* films. *Final Flight of the Osiris* has a lot going for it -- the film is created entirely

from top-of-the-line CGI, giving a near-realistic feel, particularly in the scenes aboard the Osiris, where deep shadows allow the artificial reality to look quite real. The exteriors, of the Osiris and the machine army and drillers, are very much as you'd expect, identical to those used in *Matrix Reloaded* itself -- probably generated by exactly the same technology. The crash of the Osiris deserves mention, as a particularly successful piece of simulated destruction featuring a dust-cloud, a notoriously difficult effect to pull off.

The problem is that *Osiris* is shallow on any terms, and particularly compared to other *Animatrix* stories, let alone *Matriculated*. Behind all the impressive effects, there is really only a few lines of plot, giving the audience nothing to think about whatsoever. The duel is a perfect example of this problem -- it is visually stunning, a joy to watch, but completely pointless, in that it adds very little, if anything, to the story. Long stretches of the film are taken up with Sentinels attacking the Osiris, which defends itself with various cannon turrets -- again, visually stunning, but devoid of any lasting interest. This sort of thing is fine in a full-length film, but with only a few minutes to tell a story, this is time wasted. Ultimately, aside from the single plot element dropped in the lap of *The Matrix Reloaded*, *Final Flight of the Osiris* is little more than an exercise in computer graphics.



THE GHOSTS OF ALBION

There is evil in the world... as if we didn't know that already. And in particular, Amber Benson's fans already *know* about vampires, werewolves, sorcerers and demons. But there's more to the eternal struggle between light and dark than Sunnydale and Slayers, as we find out in *The Ghosts of Albion*.

Written by Amber Benson and Christopher Golden, and directed by Benson, *The Ghosts of Albion* is an animated miniseries produced by the BBC and released online. The flash-animated cartoons are created by the Cosgrove Hall team, known for their characterful and charismatic renderings of Terry Pratchett's *Wyrd Sisters* and *Soul Music*, and the vocal talent comes courtesy of Jasmine Hyde, Rory Kinnear, Emma Sams and Anthony Daniels (yes, *the* Anthony Daniels).

It is the 19th Century, and Britain is in danger. For decades the mystic spirit of the nation, Albion, has been protected by the guile and magic of Ludlow Swift, but he is an old man, and his health is failing. With evil creatures on the move,

Ludlow passes on his knowledge and duty to his grandchildren, Tamara and William Swift. With werebeasts and dark spirits already searching for them, they must master their innate gift for magic to protect their homeland and save their loved ones. The spirits of Albion's past champions will aid them, offering the knowledge and wisdom they have accumulated over the ages, but they will have to stand on their own to drive back the servants of evil.

The visuals of *Ghosts of Albion* are simple, yet stylish and full of life. At first glance the characters and backgrounds are unassuming enough, but the animation is spot on – Tamara's brow creases in a frustrated glare, or William's mouth quirks in a wry smile, and suddenly you could not get a more vivid 'performance' from the animation if you spent years rendering every detail. Cosgrove Hall's style translates beautifully into flash animation, allowing even we poor dial-up modem users to enjoy the show without having to wait unduly for each act to download. And, rather than be satisfied with workmanlike





presentation, each scene is laid out with an eye for cinematography, featuring evocative angles and constructions.

The script is a piece of art in itself. Benson is no stranger to scripting – her debut film *Chance* (in which she is writer, director and star) continues to gather rave reviews from every festival it is screened at, and interest from distributors (who formerly didn't know what they were missing) points to a commercial release this spring. Golden is a veteran of many novels and comic books, including several *Buffy* titles, and the first *Watcher's Guide* companion to the show. The two have worked together before, producing the whimsical, mystical Willow/Tara comic *Deep in the Woods*. Here their combined talents produce a script full of adventure, danger, mystery and quirky humour – the last reminiscent of *Buffy's* most endearing style.

Under Benson's direction, the voice actors produce memorable performances. Rory Kinnear gives William Swift a kind of rebellious confidence, quickly shattered by the

onset of demonic events (or reduced to blushing incoherence at the sight of the spirit of Boadicea, clad in blue paint and not much else), but just as quickly restored as soon as he has a moment to gather himself. Jasmine Hyde's rendition of Tamara Swift is a delight, full of determination to prove herself (and put her brother in his place), regardless of how far out of her depth she gets. Aside from a few fortunate and memorable exceptions to the rule, you wouldn't expect this kind of depth in animated characters.

The Ghosts of Albion is available from its feature-laden website at

www.bbb.co.uk/cult/ghosts.

For now it is complete; however the potential for future stories is abundant, and further productions have been a possibility kept in mind during the creation of the series. BBC willing, *The Ghosts of Albion* might continue for some time yet.



