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Putative Classics (7/11/2010)

The End Of The World. [John Hayes, 1977. Written by Frank Ray Perilli.]

Earnest young NASA scientist Kirk Scott — a man with a Seventies job, sporting Seventies hair, pensively smoking a Seventies on-the-job cigarette as he stares at a Seventies terminal in the Seventies computer center that gives him access to a Seventies mainframe running execrable Seventies software — discovers while poring over his computer logs that someone in the vicinity is sending and receiving radio messages from beyond the earth.

Returning home to brood over this revelation and smoke more cigarettes, he pauses momentarily to have unscheduled Seventies sex on the living room rug with his gorgeous California blonde Seventies wife (Sue Lyon, and no wonder) before stepping out to address his colleagues at a dinner engagement; after which his harried boss Dean Jagger takes him aside and insists over protest that he is being transferred to public relations, and must for a season wander the countryside from school to school giving pep talks to the eager youth who need to be recruited to the cause of space exploration, whether they want it or not.

Meanwhile strange earthquakes are being felt about the globe.

As the young scientific couple cruise down the blue highways of lost California, pausing here and there to rip their clothes off, wrestle, and then smoke more cigarettes, they stumble across a mysterious convent presided over by Father Christopher Lee, where a basement full of glowing electronic gear indicates that all is not as it seems to be — and, sure enough, in a trice our hero and his little blonde cupcake have fallen into the hands of — yes! — Evil Nuns From Outer Space.

Cross-examining his captives, the sinister priest, now revealed to be a shipwrecked mariner from another world, exerts his mesmeric influence to discover that NASA is experimenting with the manufacture of an essential part needed to restore his interstellar conveyance to full functionality; holding the girl hostage but promising to release her and go quietly as soon as his engines turn over, he dispatches the distraught husband back to his erstwhile workplace to score some dilithium crystals, or a carburetor, or whatever it is that seems to be missing.

More earthquakes.

The professor does his best ninja imitation, and meets with success, notwithstanding the inept efforts of a few overweight guards to deter him. Nonetheless Lee reneges on the deal; explaining, as he and his posse disappear through a teleportation portal into dimensions unknown, that he must follow the orders of the alien masters of the cosmos, who have decreed that the Earth is a menace to the galactic gene pool, and the human race must forthwith be culled.

Dumbstruck with this abrupt denial of genre convention, the couple look at one another aghast; look at the television monitors around the room showing recycled *Our Man Flint* footage of a world in peril from tornadoes, avalanches, floods, earthquakes, and volcanoes; look at one another again; shrug; and follow the departed religious order through the gateway to the unknown.

And sure enough: the world explodes.

The Wizard Of Mars. [David L. Hewitt, 1965. (Technical advisor Forrest J. Ackerman!)]

Four hapless bozos, three male, one female, are circling the Red Planet

in a dime-store spaceship on the usual ill-fated exploratory mission when — on cue — a cosmic storm strikes, their orbit falters, and, smoke pouring from their control panels, they plummet from the sky to the polar ice. Out of desperation they decide to journey to the south to look for a missing module which may have a working radio and fresh supplies, and, after rafting down the canals, fighting off carnivorous plants, wandering through rainbow-colored underground caverns lit by eerie phosphorescence, skirting a volcanic inferno, and trekking through inhospitable desert, arrive at their goal; only to be disappointed in their quest. All is not lost however: they stumble across an ancient abandoned roadway of (a cough behind the hand) golden brick, which leads them to a lost city haunted by the shades of an ancient race which mastered the secrets of space and time long before apemen learned the use of fire. Here they are lectured on their intellectual shortcomings by that consummate specimen of disembodied intellect John Carradine, and then assist the supermen in unsticking the clockwork that has frozen the Martians in some kind of (dare I say it?) chrono-synclastic infundibulum, returning themselves to their ship before the crash in the process: the time was out of joint.

The actors suck, the effects are pathetic, the sets are cheesy, and the reliance on the classical model a trifle too obvious. But the movie is strangely entertaining nonetheless: the structure is sound, and with better execution it might have become a classic; as can be inferred from the obvious borrowings made by the later and technically much more sophisticated *Mission to Mars* and *Red Planet*.

The Cape Canaveral Monsters. [Phil Tucker, 1960.]

Bodysnatching aliens are blowing up experimental rockets. Scientists with German accents are baffled. Once again teenagers making out in convertibles defeat the menace.

Creation Of The Humanoids. [Wesley E. Barry, 1962. Written by Jay Simms.]

Dick Lite: in a postapocalyptic future (cue stock footage of mushroom clouds) in which a depopulated earth has been largely reinhabited by a servant class of humanoid robots and no one seems to have much to do except stand around and talk a lot, scientists of the Clicker android underground plot perfect simulation of the human condition while the vigilantes of the Order of Flesh and Blood try to crush them beneath their bootheels. Here robophobic boy meets anthropilic girl; only to discover, to their mutual chagrin, that they have both been replaced by simulacra unawares and are actually machines — a conclusion at which the viewer might already have arrived given their rather inanimate delivery of the dialogue. Having thus made the disconcerting discovery that one can pass the Turing test with respect to oneself, they are overwhelmed by philosophical perplexity; the curtain closes on a lengthy dialogue on the nature of the soul.

Woman Eater. [Charles Saunders, 1957. Written by Brandon Fleming.]

Transfixed by the tale told by a dying explorer, of a lost tribe in the Amazon whose juju can revive the dead, mad doctor George Coulouris swiftly snatches the treasure map falling from the cold dead fingers of the luckless wight, dons his pith helmet, and sets out forthwith on one of those expeditions in which sweaty white men with eyes wild from jungle fever are drawn by the beat of savage tomtoms through the

very heart of darkness and stagger at last upon an overgrown temple where they witness a secret native ritual which concludes after a remarkably explicit snake dance with a human sacrifice. By complete nonsequitur, we find him then after a title card announcing a five year hiatus returned to England and ensconced in a country mansion whose ample catacombs, apparently, are adequate to house not only the industry-standard secret laboratory and adjoining dungeons but also an Amazonian theme park in which a grinning native maniac beats upon his jungle drums as Coulouris feeds buxom blondes to a giant carnivorous plant; from whose sap, we infer, the magic elixir must eventually be derived. — Alas, Vera Day stumbles into the intake bin, her boyfriend is compelled to come and rescue her, and the dreams of Mad Science once again are crushed. There is no justice.

Battle Beyond The Sun. [*Nebo zovyat.* Mikhail Karzhukov and Aleksandr Kozyr, 1960. American re-edit by Thomas Colchart aka Francis Ford Coppola, 1962. Bearing some distant resemblance to a story of Stanislaw Lem.]

In a postwar world dominated by North/South conflict and Russian special effects, the South (the good Russians) prepares an expedition to Mars; the jealous spacemen of the North (the weasel Russians) jump the gun to try to get their own expedition there first, get shipwrecked, must be rescued by their rivals, and both parties are left stranded on an asteroid crawling with rock monsters while they wait for a relief ship to arrive with enough fuel to get them back. Very cool for its day, great rockets, space station, and not without influence on the Lucas franchise — indeed, I would guess that the giant snake-creature that springs out of a crater like a jack-in-the-box trying to swallow the Millennium Falcon in *The Empire Strikes Back* is a sort of phallic response to the famous fight scene here between the headless-fondue-pot creature and the vagina-dentata creature; one would otherwise have been forced to conclude that spaceflight may be hazardous to your dick.

Music by Carmine Coppola, who much later — truth again proves stranger than fiction — had the opportunity to score the restoration of Abel Gance's *Napoleon*.

The Colossus Of New York. [Eugene Lourie, 1958. Written by Thelma Schnee. Produced by William Alland.]

Scientific wizard and benefactor of humanity Ross Martin steps off the plane returning from the award ceremony in Stockholm and into the path of an oncoming truck — bad luck enough, but his father Otto Kruger is a somewhat unbalanced brain surgeon who does not believe in the soul! He performs the obvious Forbidden Operation, and before you can cross yourself superstitiously and mutter “but there are some Secrets Man Was Not Meant To Know” a strange android giant with a big metal head and radioactively glowing eyes has escaped from the laboratory and is stumbling around the city wreaking havoc as an expression of his existential anguish. — Photographed very capably by John Warren; striking score by Van Cleave.

The Brainiac. [*El Barón del Terror*. Chano Urueta, 1962. Written by Adolpho Lopez Portillo and Frederick Curiel.]

Condemned for sorcery in 1661 by a Mexican subsidiary of the Spanish Inquisition, evil Baron Vitelius d'Esteria calmly names the men beneath the executioners' hoods as he is burning at the stake and vows to return in 300 years (this has some unspecified relationship to the period of a comet) to exterminate their progeny. True to his word, he falls from the sky in a meteor in 1961 a giant beast with claws and fangs, morphs into faux nobility in evening clothes, occupies a convenient castle, and proceeds to suavely swap spit with the upper classes, the better to single out his victims, denounce them for the crimes of their ancestors, and suck their brains out with a soda straw;

thus preparing them for careers in politics and screenwriting, I guess, but in any case attracting the attention of the police chief and his comedy sidekick, and rendering the fate of the attractive young astronomical couple (she the descendent of his tormentors, he the descendent of his sole defender) dramatically uncertain. At least until it all goes up in flames again: look out, 2261.

Terror Is A Man. [Gerry De Leon, 1959. Written by Harry Paul Harber.]

Variations on a theme of Wells: shipwrecked mariner Richard Derr washes up on the shores of a tropical isle inhabited by mad doctor Francis Lederer, horny neglected wife Greta Thyssen, and a strange bandaged monster, halfmanhalfbeast, which keeps escaping from the dungeon laboratory to terrorize the few remaining natives who haven't poled off in their canoes to escape the inevitable wrath of the gods of evolution.



Ms. Thyssen assumes the position.

The Head. [Victor Trivas, 1959.]

Thanks to his invention of a mysterious Serum Z, Professor-Doktor Michel Simon has succeeded in forbidden experiments which reanimate the heads of animals severed from their bodies; alas, his own heart fails him at a critical juncture, allowing sinister assistant Horst Frank to perform the same favor for him, park his protesting cranium in a vat, and then commence the project of transplanting the brain of a hunchbacked nun into the body of a stripper. A lovestruck sculptor saves the day — or rather, the perpetually dark and stormy night. — Formulaic, but as with all things mechanical the Germans make them better

Crack In The World. [Andrew Marton, 1965. Written by Jon Manchip White and Julian Halevy.]

Gray geophysical eminence Dana Andrews, obsessed with a Faustian quest for new sources of energy all-too-obviously motivated by an inability to service the needs of his young wife Janette Scott, decides to compensate for his phallic deficiencies by firing a nuclear missile into the Earth; striking magma and producing a convincing eruption, he is momentarily jubilant, but then discovers (oops) that his professional nemesis (and, of course, romantic rival) Kieron Moore is right after all, that this was not a healthy act of lust, but one of rape and twisted violence, and that he has cracked the crust of the planet (weakened, we have been warned, by repeated nuclear testing), with what promise to be universally fatal consequences. — Frenzied action and excruciating melodrama ensue (and the birth of a moon does finally result), but, really, nothing can top the opening shot of the wrong-way missile dangling impotently from a gantry and aimed into a hole in the ground: without question one of the most limp-dicked metaphors ever committed to film.



Soft and fuzzy.

The Space Children. [Jack Arnold, 1958. Written by Bernard Schoenfeld, after a story by Tom Filer. Produced by William Alland.]

After a terrifying opening sequence which shows Fifties parents conveying Fifties kids somewhere on a road trip in a station wagon — the searing acid flashback! the dorky glasses! the asshole crewcut! the dipshit shorts! the claustrophobic horror! the screaming of four little sisters! the ghastly lunch at Howard Johnson's! the carsickness! the vomit! the gruesome cleanup in a gas station restroom! the whining ... the whining — we arrive, finally, mercifully, among a colony of poor rocket scientists living in trailers on the beach where discontented suburbanhousewifewannabes sniff that sand gets into everything and aliens that look like giant omelettes have beamed themselves down out of the empyrean into a cave beneath the cliffs close by the water. Here these visitors from another world await the arrival of the eponymous Children, who in due course wander in out of the surf after an errant soccer ball and are converted by cosmic mesmerism into unstoppable secret agents (junior Jesuits) who sabotage the test launch of an ICBM in the name of a universal conspiracy for peace, harmony, and the end of the nuclear terror. If only Reagan had seen this one instead.

Stranger From Venus. [Burt Balaban, 1954. Written by Hans Jacoby, from a story by Desmond Leslie.]

Enigmatic interplanetary wanderer Helmut Dantine drops out of the heavens into the English countryside — running feckless heiress Patricia Neal off the road in the process, but thoughtfully taking time to revive her from the dead before walking to the nearest picturesque inn, where he performs assorted other prodigies mental and physical (not however including halting all terrestrial machinery or muttering anything memorable into the ear of a giant robot) and lectures everyone on the necessity of nuclear disarmament. All ears are deaf to his warnings save those of Ms. Neal, who can once again be counted

on to fall for a visitor from another world like a ton of bricks; alas, the son of the gods must sacrifice himself to avert universal cataclysm and save mankind. Anyway, he's an alien and she's from the Valley.

From Hell It Came. [Dan Milner, 1957. Written by Richard Bernstein.]

Dispatched to a remote Pacific island to monitor the results of nuclear testing, a party of American scientists inadvertently provokes a political upheaval among the native Polynesian tribe, setting traditionalists at odds with those newly corrupted by the spirit of rational enquiry; when the son of the chief is executed by the witch doctor's party for consorting with the outsiders, an evil tree grows out of his coffin and starts walking around seeking revenge upon his killers. — All this has something to do with native women bathing in secluded lagoons, but, please, don't quiz me.

The Day The Earth Caught Fire. [Val Guest, 1961. Written by Wolf Mankowitz and Val Guest.]

Nightmare on Fleet Street: after reckless nuclear testing knocks the axis of the world askew and sends it reeling toward the sun, a wisecracking London newspaperman trying to drink himself out of a job and a buxom babe from the office pool meet cute as earthquakes, floods, unscheduled eclipses, killer fogs, tornadoes, heat waves, fires, drought, riots, mass hysteria, famine, pestilence, martial law, and sweating female near-nudity portend the end of humanity. — All beautifully photographed in black and white by Harry Waxman (and smoothly matched with stock disaster footage.)

The Snow Creature. [W. Lee Wilder, 1954. Written by Myles Wilder.]

Dauntless Man of Science Paul Langton launches a voiceover expedition into Himalayan stock footage in search of new botanical species, accompanied only by his photographer, Man of Liquor and the Lust for Money Leslie Denison, and a happy-go-lucky party of Sherpas whose focus falters midway through the expedition when their leader Teru Shimada discovers his wife has been kidnaped by a Yeti, prompting a mutiny and deviation from plan: the boojum is captured; deep philosophical argument ensues between the photographer, who wants to exploit the creature by exhibiting it to make money, and the pureminded scientist, who wants to exploit it by first shipping it to a museum in California, where it will be exhibited to make money; the scientist wins, but the creature is detained in customs on suspicion of being a terrorist, or something; and, while the humans are arguing over its immigration status, the Yeti escapes, going upon a suburban rampage which somehow does not remind us in the slightest of King Kong in New York. — Cops drink coffee and smoke cigarettes, anxious stock-footage citizens listen to period radios, the occasional molested woman screams in protest. — With the cunning of the cave dweller, the creature attempts to use the storm drains to escape pursuit; a chase through the sewers ensues. The creature, now unmasked as Harry Lime, is cornered and dies ignobly like a cornered rat after making a speech advising the citizens of Los Angeles to stop making cuckoo clocks and instead build their houses under Vesuvius; fade out on the long walk back from the cemetery.

Photographed by the great old pro Floyd Crosby, who surely saw better days but here renders some beautiful film noir LA nights.

Battle Beneath The Earth. [Montgomery Tully, 1967. Written by Charles F. Vetter.]

After an unbalanced veteran goes Wozzeck in Vegas and starts babbling about hearing voices in the earth, twofisted young military

scientist Kerwin Mathews is summoned to the psychiatric hospital to hear a strange tale of an invading Oriental horde armed with nuclear weapons and heat rays which has invested Fortress America by tunneling under the Pacific and now poses a mortal threat to the soft underbelly of the continent; sure enough it is all true, and, aided by improbably comely vulcanologist Vivienne Ventura and a pack of Army grunts who thought they were being clever ducking out of Vietnam, our hero must plumb the depths of a subterranean labyrinth gouged from bedrock by futuristic drilling machines to penetrate at last into the lair of the mastermind of the offensive, mad faux-Chinese warlord Martin Benson, who has surrounded himself with the lavish interior decoration appropriate to a Fritz Lang villain. — Announced by a gong, interrogated with a cigarette and a sneer, bombarded by the hypnotic radiations of a fiendish apparatus designed to turn captured American scientists into zombie fifth columnist Manchurian candidates, and tossed into a medieval dungeon to complete his reeducation, all seems lost — unless, of course, he can club the guard over the head and hot-wire a Chinese nuke to blow his captors into carbonaceous slime. — Be that as it may, we must count ourselves fortunate that Mao didn't watch the all-night movies on Sixties television; if the Great Helmsman had seen this, he surely would have tried to implement the scheme; and, as the impeccably scientific logic of this scenario demonstrates, undoubtedly would have succeeded.

Dimension 5. [Franklin Adreon, 1966. Written by Arthur C. Pierce.]

Jeffrey Hunter and France Nuyen engage in international intrigue involving chases in sports cars, beautiful women with guns in their purses, cameras in watches, deep cover agents masquerading as maîtres d' in Chinese restaurants, exploding statues, enhanced interrogations, and diminished scruples — with, however, the dimension added by some kind of magic spatiotemporal displacement device that allows our heroes to timewarp/teleport their way out of tight spots, jump onto waiting helicopters to make their escape, and get back to the office in time to banter with the secretaries. Alas, as an

unforeseen side effect it fogs the intelligence of those who use it, so that they only remember once in a while that this magical gadget, which renders all enemy strategy useless and every other weapon irrelevant, is available for their use; and then employ it only for the narrowest applications — so that, for instance, they do not deal with the formidable Dragon Tong which opposes them by travelling back to a time and place five minutes before its first organizational meeting and planting a bomb in the conference room; or, indeed, settle the ongoing Vietnam War by retroactively changing the outcome of the battle of Dien Bien Phu; or for that matter erase Communism from history by strangling Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Ho Chi Minh in their cradles. — Their mastery of Sixties spy movie paraphernalia is otherwise impressive, however, and I expect that mad-scientist character back at the laboratory to have the best of luck with his next invention, which will harness the elusive antigraviton: in any scenario such as this, weight is just an illusion.

The Gamma People. [John Gilling, 1956. Written by Gilling and John Gossage.]

The setup recalls *The Lady Vanishes*: a couple of journalists who look like Hitchcockean comic relief are taking the scenic route on their way to an assignment in Salzburg when at a fork in the railway line, by some whim of the gods, their train goes one way and their car goes another; leaving them stranded in an isolated principality where visitors are unknown, possibly because it isn't on any map drawn since the last remake of *The Prisoner of Zenda*. Apprehended and incarcerated by soldiers in operatic costume, though they are presently released it soon becomes apparent that there is no telephone, no telegraph, and no transport out; even stranger, no one will tell them why. Of course there can be only one explanation for this conspiracy of silence, namely, that the country has been enslaved by a mad scientist who is trying to create the Master Race by bombarding children with gamma rays; a procedure which also gives them all German accents and makes them arrogant and obnoxious and wear shorts while playing the

piano. (Naturally they are whipped for their mistakes.) — Just a guess, but this dude may have an appointment with destiny in a burning castle.

Killers From Space. [W. Lee Wilder, 1954. Written by Bill Raynor, from a story by Myles Wilder.]

As feckless VIPs in sunglasses oblivious to the perils of blast and radiation queue up to watch an atomic bomb test from bleachers in the Nevada desert (cue the military stock footage), dauntless scientific observer Peter Graves circles in a jet overhead, taking readings; glimpsing a strange shining ball on the desert floor below, he approaches to investigate and seems to auger in, but later stumbles into the base unharmed save for a mysterious surgical scar, a hole in his memory, and an alarming tendency to rifle the safes of the nuclear establishment when he thinks he's unobserved. Apprehended by security bozos, he tells a bizarre tale of having been resurrected from the dead by alien invaders who wear black hoods like Death in *The Seventh Seal*, except that they are all popeyed like Marty Feldman; their world having entered terminal entropic decline (cue the stock footage of futuristic cities on other worlds)(no, really, this is kind of cool), they have hidden in caves beneath the testing range to steal the energy released by atomic explosions to create a new element which will somehow make inevitable the subjugation of mankind. — When this tale is received with the credence it so richly deserves, Graves escapes the atom shrinks and races off in his pajamas to the power plant, where he plans to unplug an extension cord the aliens use to power their nuclear capacitors; after a bizarre chase, he succeeds, and it turns out This Was All (Not) A Dream. But I still don't believe it.

The Atomic Man. [Ken Hughes, 1955. Written by Charles Eric Maine.]

A stiff pulled out of the river comes back to life on the operating table seven seconds out of synch with the rest of the universe and starts

answering questions before they are asked; it must be the isotopes talking.

The Cyclops. [Burt I. Gordon, 1957.]

Searching for her missing fiancé in the lost world of the Mexican outback, Gloria Talbott and her aerial posse crash into a mountain of uranium crawling with mutant lizards and ruled by a one-eyed giant who looks strangely familiar and will probably kill Lon Chaney Jr. for his pocket flask.

The Day Mars Invaded Earth. [Maury Dexter, 1963. Written by Harry Spalding.]

The day after his probe lands on Mars and mysteriously stops transmitting, overworked scientist Kent Taylor takes a leave of absence from the Cape and goes home to Beverly Hills, little realizing that the disembodied intelligences that inhabit the Red Planet have returned the favor and landed a probe on him. Checking into the neglected gothic mansion neglected wife Marie Windsor and their two neglected children seem to have rented from Gloria Swanson, he is baffled and dismayed as the invisible aliens master the nuances of human emulation by cloning each of the family members in succession; but his reactions are rendered moot when the Martians deem their experiments successful, toast their practice dummies with a heat ray, and set off to conquer the world by replacing everyone in power with body-doubled Evil Twins. — Alas, this explains everything that has happened ever since.

The Flying Saucer. [Mikel Conrad, 1949.]

Sent upon a mission to save the Free World by solving the mystery of the eponymous flying disc, millionaire playboy and sometime spook Mikel Conrad returns to his native Alaska, where amid breathtaking scenery even a film this cheap can't spoil he brushes off the attentions

of Russian spies on his way to a rendezvous with an eccentric inventor with a hanger full of surprises.

The Magnetic Monster. [Curt Siodmak, 1953. Written by Siodmak and Ivan Tors.]

When a new element goes rogue and starts sucking in energy in an exponential frenzy that threatens to devour the planet, the Office of Scientific Investigation and its staff of investigating A(tom)-Men are called in to crack the case; what ensues takes the form of a sort of police procedural in which the inimitable Richard Carlson delivers the Joe-Friday voiceover as the investigation proceeds from a hardware store in the Midwest through a variety of laboratories and picturesque ancient computer facilities to a giant particle accelerator beneath the sea, where in a grand Nikola-Tesla finale gigantic arcs of electricity cross the atom chamber as a billion volts get tossed into the ravenous maw of the deviant form of matter, and it chokes on its own gluttonous appetite. — No doubt elements embodying the other six deadly sins were to be disposed of in the sequels, but, alas, those didn't get made.¹

¹ I thought this was a joke, but apparently Ivan Tors and Richard Carlson had plans for a scifi franchise; which, however, advanced no farther than *Gog* (Herbert L. Strock, 1954) and *Riders to the Stars* (Richard Carlson, 1954; written by Siodmak and produced by Tors) — the former a personal favorite, prophetic in that it foresaw a secret laboratory that relied on a central computer to control everything would be vulnerable to hacking; the latter a rather uncanny anticipation of *The Right Stuff*, made before the astronaut corps even existed.