

Cyber Cozen

Science-Fiction Newsletter

Vol. XI, No. 4; April, 1999



to the Editor

While reading the last issue of *CyberCozen*, I couldn't help noticing a strange remark in Yuval Heller's review of *Robert Heinlein's "Ordeal in Space"*. In that review, Yuval gives *Star Trek* as an example of foreseeing cellular phones. Since his review concerns Heinlein, Yuval should know that Heinlein foresaw Cellular Phones a long time before *Star Trek* - in his novel *Space Cadet* (first published 1948).

Raz Greenberg



Film: Two Reviews of *Star Trek (9): Insurrection*

1) By Guy Eldar:

Jokes, the final resort. These are the decaying-repeating stories of the star-ship Enterprise. It's too long over told mission is to destroy everything good that we love and cherish in this TV/Movie series. To "infamously" go where no movie has taken us before.

It's very hard for me to open a review of one of my favorite series this way, but they had it coming. *Star Trek (9): Insurrection* renews nothing to us *Star Trek* fans, if anything it ruins our fond memories of this long legacy. First, the story line is the same as ever, with no big surprises (even the surprise of the movie is well expected). Data is trying his usual to be human, Geordi has another thing with his vision again, Will and Deanna are at it once more, the captain has a new romance and the writers have found yet another excuse why Worf should happen to drop by and resume his old post on the Enterprise (for those of you who might don't know, Worf supposed to be on *Deep Space nine* at this time). Even the movie's poster reminds us of some previous ones. Secondly, although one mild positive point of this movie is the great visual and sound effects, there just aren't enough of them. The Enterprise is not shown for long, the space shots are few and there aren't more

than two or three new gadgets that we haven't seen before. Finally, the costumes and makeup sit well with the rest of this movie, and that is not a good thing. All the actors look like they should retire (and maybe it's time they should!!!) and the new alien species is not very inventive.

The movie is not all bad. Another shining point is the second time ever use of the captain's ship, which is based at the bottom of the Enterprise. But like the special effects, it's use doesn't get enough attention. The final bright point in this fiasco is the growing amount of jokes, in comparison with previous episodes. Like many movie series before (such as *Lethal Weapon* or *Die-Hard*), this movie is funnier than its predecessors and most of the jokes are directed to it self and it's history.

Coming to this movie with low expectations, I'd say it was an OK minus movie. Knowing this ship and it's "crew", I'd say they could have done much better. My rating: 4/10.

2) By Raz Greenberg:

I was never one of those *Star Trek* junkies who have to watch every single episode of the different *Trek* shows, can speak fluent *Klingon* and know their way around the corridors of Deep Space Nine. I watched most of the *Next Generation* episodes, but stopped before the seventh season, feeling that the show started repeating itself. The spin-off *Deep Space Nine* caught my attention (especially because of *Armin*

Shirmerman) but I lost interest once they made this show a *Babylon 5* wannabe (I preferred the latter).

Now comes *Star Trek: Insurrection*, the ninth movie set in the show's universe. I was really looking forward to seeing it when I heard that this movie goes easy on non-regulars like me, and on this point, I wasn't disappointed. Unfortunately, this film has other problems.

The plot finds the federation caught in a conflict between the Baku, a colony of peaceful human settlers who hold the secret of eternal youth, and the Sona, a group of fascist, violent and (of course) ugly creatures who want to take this secret away from them. The twist: the federation sides with the bad guys. In a situation opposite to most of the show's episodes, the Enterprise crew finds itself protecting the prime directive from a federation official named admiral Dougherty (Anthony Zerbe). This plot line might suggest a more mature, darker story than usual, but it really isn't. Without revealing much of the climax, I will only say that at the end the federation is revealed to be less supportive of the Sona than it seems (I read that screenwriter Michael Pillar's original script was indeed darker, but was heavily re-written following demands of the producers and the cast).

The screen isn't the only big thing about this movie. It seems that every little problem in the show grows bigger with it: the cardboard characters are even more one-dimensional (though measured by today's Hollywood standards, that's nothing exceptional), the shallow dialogues are still shallow (see my remark about the characters) and the corny jokes are pretty embarrassing when you sit in a theater with 30 other people (but they do get better as the film progresses). In addition, the first half of the film does nothing other than setting the stage and introducing the characters (something which

should be done in less than 15 minutes). I suspect that even for die-hard fans, the first 50 minutes of the film will be a test of patience. But it's worth waiting, as the second half of the film is suspenseful and full of action.

True to the show's tradition, everyone over-acts, most notably Patrick Stewart and Brent Spiner. The exception is Anthony Zerbe, who actually seems less emotional than he should be, and Michael Dorn is a nice surprise, giving us a more relaxed and restrained Worf than the one we're used to (but again, the script here calls for more intense acting). Another problem with the cast is the fact that most of them (especially Jonathan Frakes and Marina Sirtis) have aged considerably since the show, looking (a) less attractive and (b) tired.

Still, there is Jerry Goldsmith's cliché-driven but very effective score, amazing photography by Matthew F. Leonetti (*Dead Again*) – mostly due to the beautiful landscapes which the camera seems to enjoy every minute, and some pretty impressive special effects that couldn't be done on the small screen, most notably the space battles.

Overall, *Star Trek: Insurrection* offers enough reasons for both fans and non-fans to watch it, though both will find some flaws in it. I found the film's attempt to do something different from the usual *Star Trek* stories admirable, but it's a real shame it doesn't go all the way in doing so.



TV Review: *Earth: Final Conflict* reviewed by *Guy Eldar*

(Now showing in Israel Tuesdays to Thursdays, excluding those days in which they air live sports, at 21:00, METV-24)

After taking us to the final frontier, through worm holes and a never-ending voyage home, Gene Roddenberry now, as a legacy left after his death, takes us back home to face the new arrivals in our fight for freedom. For those of you who haven't seen this incredible new series, here's a second chance to watch the first season, as it is being aired for the second time on METV.

The time is the early twenty-first century. The Taelons, known as the "Companions", have come to share their knowledge with humanity. William Boone, rescues Da'an, the Taelon "overseer" for North America from assassination and is made the companions' interspecies liaison. But Boone is really working for the resistance, trying to learn the true reasons for the Taelons coming. In the pilot episode (aired at the beginning of April),

we learned that the Taelons are responsible for the death of Boone's wife. With the help of the resistance and Dr. Julianne Belman (Majel Barrett, Roddenberry's wife, ex. producer of EFC) he learns how he can get a transplant and yet stay loyal to Earth and the resistance.

As I mentioned in a previous issue (November 98), the special effects of this series are incredible and the story line is very sophisticated, building hint by hint toward the truth, resembling the long story line of *The X-Files*. Another resemblance is to *Babylon 5* with the giving of psychic abilities, and organic technology very much like Vorlons.

Whether or not this series is original, forgotten by Roddenberry in his drawers, or was created by adapting to the current tastes and fashions of Sci-Fi fans, it's worth watching. It's a fine example of the genre and I believe it will

take the place of *Babylon 5* (whose spin-off series only in it's early pre-production stages) in the hearts of the fans. If you haven't watched it so far, you have missed only a few episodes of the first season, and it is definitely worth starting

now (better late...). Since, unlike *Space, Above and Beyond* (which was taken of the air after it's first season), this one has already entered it's second season in the US and I do believe It's here to stay. **My rating: 9.5/10.**



Short Reviews: by Aharon Sheer

Ubik by Philip K. Dick (1969), 202 pages.

This book is recommended by sf author Stanislaw Lem in one of his essays; Lem considers Dick to be one of the most important sf writers, and *Ubik* to be Dick's best book.

In John Carpenter and Dan O'Bannon's dark humor film *Dark Star* (made in 1971, two years after *Ubik* was published) there is a strange scene in which a conversation takes place between the space ship's dead captain, who has been frozen into what looks like a block of ice, and one of the crew members. The captain's answers to questions are not always to the point, but clearly the captain has some kind of consciousness in his frozen state, and the crew member receives a useful answer to his main question. Until I purchased this film a few years ago -- one of my favorites -- I had never to my recollection encountered the idea of talking to someone frozen and dead, yet still in some sense alive. Now I've found the source of the idea; after long waiting, I finally got a copy of the book *Ubik*. The entire book is built around the idea of "half-life". When a person has died, if you can freeze him fast enough, his consciousness remains in half-life. It is possible to communicate with him. He retains an active mental life, although the half-lifer also suffers from gradual deterioration, and eventually dies. Relatives and friends can visit the half-lifer, chat with him, even consult with him. Near the start of the book we witness a conversation between one of the heroes of the book, and his wife who died years ago at age 20. The nature of this conversation bears a remarkable resemblance to the conversation with the frozen captain in *Dark Star*.

The other half of half-life -- what's it like to be half-alive -- does not appear in the movie, but it is a central theme of the book. Perhaps this is why this book never became a

popular classic like Dick's wonderful book *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), about a San Francisco occupied by the Japanese after World War II (also not a basically cheerful topic). For half-life, with its steady deterioration, is in some ways worse than death. The half-lifer, when he wakes up, does not realize he is dead -- he thinks that he has survived. The gradual process of discovering the truth is terrifying, as are the manifestations of deterioration.

Many of Philip K. Dick's books deal with an unreal reality, in which the hero (and Dick's many books have only one character, presumably himself, beautifully portrayed) tries to understand a world in which things are not what they seem to be. "What's going on? What's happening to me?" are questions Dick's one character often asks himself. I've often thought the Dick was almost psychotic; his books should be fascinating to a professional psychologist.

An entertaining aspect of interest in the book is the briefly but well portrayed future. Future city life, technological changes such as the settling of the Moon and Mars, the development of half-life, and the institutionalization of telepathy, precognition and other parapsychological skills are described. Part of Dick's joke is that he says this future -- far in advance of today's technology -- takes place in 1992, only 23 years after the writing of the book. It's clear to me that he didn't really think we would move so fast; it's just part of the book's dark humor.

I'll close by quoting what Brian Stableford and John Clute say in the Clute and Nicholls' *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* about Philip K. Dick: "He was the funniest sf writer of his time, and perhaps the most terrifying. His dreads were our own, spoken as we could not have spoken them."

The Roadside Picnic by Arkadi and Boris Strugatsky (1972, translated from the Russian 1977), 153 pages.

This is one of the great classic sf novels. Imagine a group of cars travelling a highway. They decide to stop for a picnic by the side of the road. After the picnic, each car leaves some garbage scattered: perhaps a child's toy, a cigarette lighter, a knife, some plastic wrappers, leftover food, whatever.... What will the weasels think of all this? Well, if weasels were as smart as humans, they might learn a lot; but they might also get burned. In this Russian novel, unknown aliens landed in six spots on the earth, doing great damage over the area of an entire city neighborhood and leaving a lot of junk. One of the most useful is a self-reproducing battery, powerful enough to drive an electric car. The only problem is, man has no idea how to make one from scratch; we can only get them to

reproduce! The alien technology is far beyond us. Other things are not so useful, and far more dangerous. While the governments have the "Zones" sealed off for official scientific study, daring young men called "stalkers" sneak into the Zones and try to take things out. Often the stalkers die in the process, but often they discover things that the official researchers may not get to for years. This is the tale of one successful stalker, whose contributions to man's knowledge are great -- as well as his monetary success. This novel is one of the most successful alien "contact" stories, because these aliens -- even if no one alive ever saw one -- are really *alien*. In 1979, it was made into a very long (161 minutes) and much too talky Russian movie called (in Russian!) *Stalker*, by the great Russian director Andrei **Tarkovsky**. Recommended (the book, not the movie).

The Postman by David Brin (1985), 321 pages.

If the present is not so good, can the future be worse? If the technology used in a world war destroys civilization, will mankind let technology recover? David Brin is obviously pro-technology, and in this book the good guys are those who want to reestablish civilization, the villains those who want to return to feudalism. The book takes place in Oregon, formerly part of the U.S.A. The hero has taken it on himself to restart the postal service, pretending to represent a distant but gradually developing "Restored United States". Single-handedly he appoints postmasters and postmen, and restarts a basic

component of modern civilization: friendly mail communication between different communities. Peace rather than war. This arouses the ire of the anti-technologists, who are determined to stop all that nonsense. Lots of blood and rape and torture, lots of individual and group suffering, lots of successes and lots of failures, and the future is still in doubt. Now made into a movie of the same name, and with a plot substantially similar to that of the book, except for the movie's dumb (happy!) ending. Steve Davis reviewed the movie in the March issue of *CyberCozen*.



Off the Net:

From: Peter Langston

To: Fun_People@langston.com

Subject: Uh-Oh . . .

There's a slightly alarming line in *Oliver Sacks'* excellent book *An Anthropologist on Mars*. He visits a house in which most or all of the family members are at least mildly autistic... and notes that "as in most such households" there is a large bookshelf of science fiction placed very prominently in the living room.

For Comments: POB 9443, Tel Aviv 61093. Email: asheer@netvision.net.il. Tel: Aharon Sheer 08-947-1225.

Editor: **Aharon Sheer**.

Graphic Editor and Design: **Guy Eldar**.

Logo by: **Miriam Ben-Loulou**.

For mail delivery of *CyberCozen*, please donate 30 shekels per YEAR; For airmail to US \$15; If Aharon Sheer can hand-deliver it, 15 shekels.

עורך: אהרון שיר.
עורך גרפי ועיצוב: גיא אלדר.
עיצוב לוגו: מרים בן-לולו.

עבור משלוח בדואר של *CyberCozen*, הנכם מתבקשים לתרום 30 ש"ח לשנה; עבור דואר אוויר לארה"ב \$15; אם אהרון שיר יכול למסור את העיתון באופן אישי, 15 ש"ח.

Copyright © 1999.

All rights reserved to specified authors and artists.
כל הזכויות שמורות למחברים וליוצרים, כפי שצוינו.