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Dreaming in Colors: Hollywood and SF animation

By Raz Greenberg

The Japanese have been doing this for years – producing Science Fiction and Fantasy animated films and TV shows with sophisticated contents and a strong appeal to the adult audience. Epics like the cyberpunk masterpiece *Ghost in the Shell* (credited more than once by the directors of *The Matrix* as a source of inspiration) or director Hayao Miyazaki's historical fantasy *Princess Mononoke*, which became Japan's biggest domestic box-office success (a record which now looks like it's going to be broken by the director's new contemporary fantasy film *Spirited Away*) made Japan the animation capital of the world.

In the past decade, Hollywood seems to have been trying to go in the same direction. Films like *The Iron Giant*, *Titan AE*, *Atlantis* and *Final Fantasy* – without doubt produced as a reaction to the popularity of Japanese animation in the west – were serious attempts by Hollywood studios to bring the SF animated film genre to the United States.

Yet all of these films – with the exception of *The Iron Giant* – have met with mixed (*Atlantis*), indifferent (*Final Fantasy*), and plain hostile (*Titan AE*) reviews. And ALL of them – *The Iron Giant* included – performed miserably at the box office.

What went wrong?

The Iron Giant still remains one of the best animated films produced in the United States ever, and one of the most intelligent SF films to be produced in the 1990s. The film took both a nostalgic look at the 1950s – a high point for science fiction and imagination – and a bitter look at the fear, hatred and intolerance that ruled the same era. Unfortunately, once the studio execs realized that what they had in their hands is very different from what people consider as an “animated movie”, they reached the conclusion that it had absolutely no chance of making money, and pulled the plug on the PR department. And of course, a movie that nobody hears about will never become a box office success. So the reason for the financial box-office failure of *The Iron Giant* wasn't really the hesitation of the audience to go to an

animated movie different than anything they'd seen so far, but rather a studio exec's hesitation to give that audience a chance. And it was a BAD decision, because the audience missed one of the best animated films done in Hollywood, ever.

Bad PR choices also killed Disney's *Atlantis*, albeit in a different way. Making a movie aimed at an audience a little older than the studio's usual films is fine. So why was the film marketed as a film aimed at the studio's usual younger audience? When you make an animated film in the spirit of *Indiana Jones* there's no sense in trying to sell it as *Pocahontas* or *Beauty and the Beast*. What we ended up with is a film marketed towards an audience which didn't care for it, while the audience it was aimed at didn't go to see it because of that marketing strategy. A lose-lose situation.

Of course, both *The Iron Giant* and *Atlantis* were heavily inspired by (in the case of *Atlantis* I'd even use the words “ripped off”) Japanese animation, so it was only a matter of time before some studio would take a Japanese director to show them how SF animated films should be done. It's weird, however, that of all the animation directors in Japan, they turned to Hironobu Sakaguchi, creator of the original *Final Fantasy* series of video games, to direct the games' film adaptation. Sakaguchi had absolutely no prior experience directing a movie, and it shows – the film looks more like a graphical display rather than something plot-oriented. And as good as the animation was, it couldn't save a messed-up story and characters the audience didn't care for.

I still think *Titan AE* deserves more credit than it got. True, the film's first 30 minutes were weak – a good reason enough, I suppose, to drive most of the potential audience away – but the film did improve as it progressed, providing an engaging story set against some beautiful and imaginative alien worlds. I suspect future critics and audience will be kinder to this movie than those who saw it when it came out.

Still, with all these four films being box-office disasters in a row, one can't help but wonder – maybe there just isn't a big enough audience for animated Science Fiction and Fantasy features made in Hollywood?

But of course there is. The best example comes from the animated films produced by Dreamworks, which demonstrated how you can revolutionize the entire industry without rocking the boat too hard. With their first animated feature, *Antz*, Dreamworks produced a CGI adventure about insects for kids that was also an Orwellian allegory for adults. *The Prince of Egypt*, which at first glance looked like a Disney-esque adaptation of a known historical legend, actually proved that animation can also be used to create cinematic spectacles ala *Ben Hur*. By the time they produced *Shrek* they felt confident enough to hang around in the territory of *The Simpsons* – while the fairy tale fantasy look of the film may imply it's aimed at kids, the real

audience for the film is adults who understand the sophisticated humor and cultural references.

Speaking of *The Simpsons* – Science Fiction, intelligence and animation were never strangers to each other when it came to Television in America. From prime-time hits like *Futurama* to niche pieces like MTV's *Aeon Flux*, SF animation has a firm hold on the small screen. Even shows aimed at kids, notably *Batman Beyond* (which plays like a typical Japanese animated show done for American sensibilities) demonstrate cleverness that puts most live-action comic-book adaptations to shame. So here's an idea: instead of spending millions of dollars on CGIs, makeup, settings and actors' paychecks, why not make the next film in the *Batman* or *X-Men* franchise an animated feature? Animation, after all, is closer to the comics medium than live action will ever be.

Two Book Reviews by Aharon Sheer:

The Way to Heaven by Gail Hareven (1999), 200 pages הדרך לגן עדן מאת גיל הראבן

[In Hebrew.] In Eli Eshed's article "A Survey of the State of sf in Israel in the Last Five Years" in the August - September 2001 issues of *CyberCozen*, Eli wrote that this book is "one of the best Hebrew sf books ever written". But he also wrote that in Israel "Dystopic and apocalyptic sf books are the norm". This book is certainly dystopic. Every story is depressing. It reminds me a bit of J.G. Ballard's *The Disaster Area*. After reading that book I never wanted to read anything else by J.G. Ballard. *The Way to Heaven* has other problems in my eyes. This is a collection of short stories, about a variety of possible futures. Almost every story is in the first person. I've noticed this is very common in Israeli sf. It's as if the author cannot step out of himself and look at the world objectively. It's always, "If I was a different person in a different world this is how I would feel." Hareven has a wonderful gift for dialogue (which means it will be hard to translate from Hebrew), and is superb at describing feelings and thoughts. There is, however, in most of her stories, no environment. There is no feeling for place. Worse than that, in most of the stories there is no place. In many of the stories, there is almost no description of rooms, surroundings, streets, or buildings. The stories do not take in a future Israel, nor in a future city or town somewhere else. The only thing we can say is they are somewhere, probably on earth, in a sterile, homogenized environment.

The first story is an example. "*Sapan*" ["*Sailor*"] is a story about a young

couple who have set up a small farm. They spend 12 hours a day, seven days a week, like small independent farmers always have, sitting in front of the computer screen, doing all the things that small farmers have done throughout the ages. The problem is – and the heroine knew it when they got married – her husband is also a sailor. From time to time he takes off on sea voyages. He may be gone for days at a time, leaving his wife to do all the work, including caring for their child. The sea voyages actually take place in a club, and they are entirely virtual reality. Her husband never leaves the club during his entire voyage. But when his voyages become longer, and his stays at home shorter, his wife becomes more and more distressed, until finally she acts. The wife's thoughts and feelings are beautifully portrayed, but there are almost all there is to the story; except at the end, where the reader gets some feeling for what the rest of the heroine's world is like.

Another bitter story is "*Lir'ot et haNolad*" ["*To See the Future*"], in which an entire religious and educational system has been set up to plan how to change the future. It seems that people in trances can travel mentally to the future. There they can only observe, but what people have seen is the future destruction of all life on earth. The religion has been set up to study the future in hopes of changing it. Here the heroine has been offered the chance to visit the future under the priests' direction, to help add some small pieces of information which will help in

the planned "Correction" which the priests will soon make in order to prevent the future destruction of all life. In this story the environment of the religious experience is well portrayed. The subject of the story is how you can plan your actions when you *know* what the future will bring – a point relevant to all of us today.

To my taste, the best story is "*Yeled*" [*"Child"*]. That was what I decided when I read it. But when I thought about it afterwards I noted several things: (1) the story is the only one in the book which is NOT in the first person; (2) it is the only one in the book which might be considered to have a happy ending. It also, in a significant portion, has a clear sense of physical surroundings, not present in most of the stories. Like several stories in the book, the basic idea is related to future uses of **cloning**. In the world of this story, nobody wants surprises. Each family purchases the genes of someone famous – according to their ability to pay. The family described is wealthy, and they have cloned a famous singer (a "troubadour") and a famous mathematician. Each generation they alternate: troubadour, mathematician, troubadour, mathematician. Thus each troubadour is the "father" of a mathematician, in the sense that he must raise the child, and each mathematician is the "father" of a troubadour. On the other hand, each "mother" is a woman chosen to be suitable to raise the next generation's child. Unless I misunderstand, they did not take the idea to its logical conclusion. Obviously – at least to me – each mother should be the clone of the mother two generations before. That is, the "mother" of each troubadour should be the clone of the troubadour's "grandfather" [who was also a troubadour]'s "mother", while each "mother" of the troubadour's "son", the mathematician, should be the clone of the "mother" of the mathematician's "grandfather" [who was also a mathematician]'s "mother". Am I making myself clear? At any rate, this was not done; "mothers" are chosen anew each generation. Basically the idea seems to me unlikely to work. For one thing, it assumes that only genetics counts, and environment is not so important. I remember my mother telling me

that in the 1930s singers who had throaty, breathy voices were very popular. Twenty years later, such voices had no success. Styles change. In a living musical world, I find it hard to believe that for many generations – as described in this story – the genetically identical voice and singing characteristics will continue to be popular. The same is true of mathematicians. Mathematics also has different characteristics. A mathematician who is world class in algebra, may not be world class in geometry. Continuous mathematics requires a different kind of mind than discrete mathematics. A great mathematician of 1900 is not likely to have the kind of mind required for world-class mathematics in the year 2300. It's hard to imagine that there will not be dramatic changes in the kind of work required, and hence in the abilities required. On the other hand, maybe this kind of cloned world has become so static, so riskless and unchanging, that the method would really succeed. In this sense this story, like all of the others, portrays a rather sad future, at least from our point of view.

The last three stories in the book are not sf at all. "*Simla*" [*"Dress"*] could have taken place in Stalinist Russia, although there is no sense of place and it could be anywhere. "*Ele Shel'mata*" [*"The People Downstairs"*] might have been in Nazi Germany, but again there is no sense of place and it could be anywhere – even in our present.

The last story in the book, "*MatzavRuah*" [*"Mood"*], takes place in Tel Aviv! (The only story in the whole book that takes place in a specific city.) And this story is a well-told portrayal of a woman suffering from manic depression, who first goes through her marvelously creative and exciting high manic state, and then, at the end of the story, crashes. This could be an attempt to display a scientific reality, as has been described by sufferers from manic depression (bipolar disorder), and is done very well. But again this is not sf.

The Way to Heaven is really a collection of cautionary tales, warning us of futures to avoid. Perhaps through this book, and others like it, we can really change the future.

The Alien Years by Robert Silverberg (1998), 488 pages.

A very good book. I generally don't care much for Robert Silverberg. One of the things that bothers me is something that some might see as praise, "his smooth-as-silk writing style", as Connie Willis put it in a review of this book. Silverberg's books feel as if he wrote them without thinking about it. They

flow so smoothly, without hesitation, without doubt or uncertainty. This book also starts that way. But at some point Silverberg got carried up. He began responding to what he was doing, he got involved emotionally. And as a result, the reader gets caught up too.

This is an epic alien invasion novel. One day the aliens just land, in major cities all over the world. They are super-powerful in every way. Earthmen soon discover that there is no way you can go up against them. Attack the aliens and they will shut off all the electricity on earth. Yes, the electrons just stop flowing. No electricity for a few days, or a few weeks, depending on how severe the attack was. No computers, no cars, no airplanes, no telephones, no lighting, no heat, no industry – nothing functions in this modern world without electricity. With an enemy like that, civilization collapses. Man's self-confidence is destroyed, for no one knows how the aliens can do such a thing. Governments at all levels fall, and criminals and gangs take over everywhere.

The aliens are also telepathic. They communicate freely with each other, but do not bother to do so with humans. Well – they can read your deepest thoughts, anytime they want. They can also give humans orders that humans cannot refuse. But, other than orders, they have nothing to say to humans.

Soon there are human traitors prepared to cooperate with the aliens – provided these traitors get what they want. And eventually it is the humans who are running the humans, with the aliens giving only general directions. “Build a wall around each major city”, say the aliens. “Control entry and exit.” So humans, with the aid of alien technology, wall off the entire Los Angeles metropolitan area with a wall hundreds of meters high and hundreds of meters thick. Why? Nobody knows, no one will ever know. Perhaps just to keep the humans in their place.

The aliens like a certain kind of sea algae to eat. So they take over all the coastlines all over the world, to grow food for themselves. Humans can never again go swimming in the sea, or boating, or surfing. The sea belongs to the aliens.

The contemporary model for this kind of thing might be primitive Indian tribes in the Brazilian jungle faced by groups of people using modern technology who want to mine the resources in the ground under the jungle. So the trees are cut down, the land is cleared, and mining starts. Indians who cooperate, survive. Those who don't, don't. Who cares -- the Indians are just not important.

How do people in Silverberg's book respond to such a situation? Well, most people just want to survive. If there's a way to do what the aliens want and survive by doing it, people will do it. Gradually almost everyone is locked into this new world – except the heroes of this book. They are the “Resistance” – one family, and their friends -- who keep alive the hope of driving the aliens away. And Silverberg follows the course of these resisters for fifty-five years. Every five or ten years he picks up the story, gives us an intimate view of what is going on, and then drops it for another five or ten years. Underneath, the resisters doubt that they can succeed, and the reader does too. But still there is hope.

It's a fascinating book, moving and convincing. Recommended.

Two Book Reviews by Gal Haimovich:

Wasp by Eric Frank Russell (1957), 170 pages.

For ten months, a war rages on between the Terran and the Sirian empires. The Terran are technologically superior, but the Sirian outnumber them more than ten to one. And so, the Terran government has decided on a new tactic that will lead to victory. A single wasp can kill four men and convert a car into a heap of scrap, simply by buzzing inside the car and irritating the driver. Thus, human “wasps” can theoretically destroy the Sirian war machine from within by irritating the powerful men pulling the strings. James Mowry was sent, disguised as a Sirian, to Jaimec – one of the Sirian outpost worlds. There, he must act as a wasp, irritating the local police, annoying the secret service men and frightening the government into a domestic

action that will be totally out of proportion to his own actions.

It began by posting anti-war stickers all over the main cities, then sending threat letters to government officials, then murder of selected police and secret service men, then much more.

The Sirian government, as might be expected, appears as a secretive, powerful tyrant.

It is apparent especially from the heavy censorship (and falsifying) of news items and in the secret police - the Kaitempi, which reminded me the KGB or the Nazi SS. Everybody is afraid of the Kaitempi. Mowry must avoid frequent searches, ID checks and the lot conducted frequently by the Kaitempi.

It doesn't help that all civilians and even regular police are afraid of the Kaitempi.

I couldn't help comparing this book with Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*.

Although the background, the plot and the style are all different, the basic concept is similar. In both books we are exposed to the thoughts and acts of people trying to arrange a revolution (a real one in *Mistress*, an imaginary one in *Wasp*) and describing the hazards of living in the underground. In this respect, I found *Wasp* very interesting. Russell does a good job in developing the wasp theory and practice, until the reader believes that such tactics could actually work: that a single man can shake a government into wasting hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of law and military personnel to hunt him (and his imaginary rebellious organization) down. On the other hand, we frequently encounter the wasp's suspicions and fears. In many cases,

Mowry imagines a conversation between a policeman and a potential eyewitness:

"You see anyone leave this booth right now?"

"Yar. A fat yokel. Seemed in a hurry."

"Where'd he go?"

"Down the road. Got on forty-two bus."

"What did he look like?"

[...]" (p. 94).

This conversation is purely the result of the wasp's imagination, but it serves Mowry as a powerful tool to detect flaws in his plans.

To conclude, *Wasp* is a good spy story, with an interesting idea and good story telling. Full of fast action, the right amount of paranoid thoughts and a dash of humor.

Recommended.

***Dolphin Island: A story of the people of the sea* by Arthur C. Clarke (1963), 140 pages.**

Clarke, a known fan of marine biology, wrote this juvenile-style novel which deals with man-Dolphin relationship, but mainly just praises the Great Barrier Reef near Australia. Johnny, a 16-year-old orphan from America, runs away from his aunt's house and goes on a boat to Australia. The boat sinks about 300 km from the Australian shore and a group of Dolphins rescues Johnny, and brings him to Dolphin Island. There Johnny discovers a research center, headed by Prof. Kazan, which investigates the Dolphin language and Dolphins in general.

Kazan, a Russian scientist-linguist, has succeeded, in the past 15 years, in creating a large English-Dolphin dictionary. But only now, after Johnny's miraculous rescue, he realizes that Dolphins are even more intelligent than he suspected. An attempt to communicate with the wild Dolphins who rescued Johnny leads to a surprising result – the Dolphins now wish humans to help them against their greatest enemy: the Orca, the Killer whale.

Here we meet with a difficult moral question: The Orca are probably as

intelligent as Dolphins. And although Dolphins are happy, friendly people, who, according to many tales have helped stranded sailors, as they have helped Johnny, they are also competitors with the human fishing industry. On the other hand, while the Orca are less friendly and kind, and there are also stories about Orca attacking humans, they help the fishermen by diluting the Dolphin population.

Clarke introduces two-three possible solutions to this dilemma, though he develops only one of them into something longer than a paragraph. In fact, although this moral dilemma makes the main theme of the novel, the book itself is made up of many small adventures that Johnny experiences living on the Great Barrier Reef, the connection between them and the main plot is sometimes very loose.

Clarke actually leaves the moral question open, with no more than a thread of a beginning of a solution, more of an optimistic possible future that Prof. Kazan sees with cooperation and peace between man, Dolphin and Orca.

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