

short people in the club (you know who you are)--the hero is 4'9" tall. But the biggest mistake his enemies can make is to underestimate him. Though part of a series of books and stories by Bujold, T_h_e_V_o_r_G_a_m_e can be read without having any other knowledge of the series. My one quibble would probably be that it is too

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obviously two novellas cobbled together rather than one continuous story, but then I really loved last year's H_y_p_e_r_i_o_n which was six novellas and a connecting story, so what the heck. At least this way, even if you finish only half before the meeting, you still can discuss it! [-ecl]

2. As a writer and the main force behind a major international news publication, the MT VOID, I believe it is very important to present all sides of an issue. I am n_o_t the kind of person that you have to dislocate my jaw if I am not presenting your point of view. No, sir, never again. A viewpoint has been presented to me and I want to pass it on and be rid of it. I recently argued against the eating of beef on the grounds (no pun intended) that a cow/bull is a reasonably intelligent animal that makes friends with others of its own kind. You should not be fooled by the fact that it spends all day eating the same grass it makes doo-doo in; we are not here to argue matters of taste.

The argument has been put to me that my attitude is unfair to cattle. (Yeah! Can you believe it?) The argument is that cattle are bred to be eaten and look at all the cattle I would be denying life to if I don't eat them ground up in tiny little pieces on a bun. This argument traces back philosophically to one of the more common and hence weirder views of the universe. That is that the universe is a giant amusement park with one ride called The Life. Souls, in this case cow souls, stand in a long line waiting to ride The Life. In some parts of the East the belief is that when a cow soul gets off it says, "Wow! Let's go on that one again!" In our part of the world we believe that if you rode the ride following the rules and sat quietly and enjoyed the ride, when you get off you go and get cotton candy. If, however, you stood up in your seat and screamed and waved your arms when you weren't really scared, then when you get off you throw up for all eternity.

Now if no cow soul ever gets off the ride, then the poor cow souls waiting in line never get a chance to ride. Now what my learned correspondent is suggesting is that we alleviate the problem by building an artificial brick wall on the ride where the car rams into it, killing the passenger. This frees up the car to return for the next passenger and gives us something we can scrape off the wall, put on a bun, and eat. And this is supposed to be a kindness to the cow souls waiting in line. I trust the fallacy in that argument is now abundantly clear.

3. Thanks to Rebecca Schoenfeld for volunteering to take the library off Tim's hands. Her room number and phone number appear above in the colophon.

Mark Leeper
MT 3D-441 957-5619
...mtgzy!leeper

TERMINATOR 2: JUDGMENT DAY
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: A big sci-fi (as opposed to "science fiction") film with amazing special effects has Arnold Schwarzenegger again playing a robot caught up in a battle for the future being fought in the present. Stronger on action than intelligence, it still manages to expand the ideas of the first film. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4).

(There are films plotted in such a way that it is very difficult to say anything without giving away twists in the plot. This review has been worded carefully to avoid spoilers that have appeared in e_v_e_r_y other review I have seen. A spoiler section will follow the review to discuss matters that could not be addressed in the main body of the review.)

On August 29, 1997, so the story goes, the world is plunged into

nuclear war, though of about six billion people, only about half are actually killed. The remaining three billion people are locked into a life-and-death struggle of humans against machines. The machines achieve sentience and set out to kill all humans to make the world safe for machine-kind. But the one human who most stands in their way is John Connor. So the machines send a killer robot, a "terminator," into the past to the year 1984 to kill Sarah Connor, who is destined to be the mother of John. The humans manage to send back a human to protect Sarah Connor. The struggle of these two time travelers and the conception of John Connor is the plot of the 1984 film T_h_e_T_e_r_m_i_n_a_t_o_r. The first robot, played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, failed in his mission so the machines, who could send only one robot back before, suddenly found a way to send a second robot. The humans, too, who could send only one human before, find the means of sending back their own representative for their own second shot. This time each sends to somewhere around the year 1995, one with a mission to kill the now ten-year-old John Connor, the other with a mission to protect John Connor. Their conflict is the story of T_e_r_m_i_n_a_t_o_r_2: J_u_d_g_m_e_n_t_D_a_y.

Sarah Connor's reaction to the events of the first film bordered on the psychotic. She made it her mission to learn everything she could about guerilla warfare and survival tactics to pass on to her son. She slept with mercenaries and made friends with military personnel to help achieve her goal. She was eventually placed in a mental institution and John was given to foster parents. He seems to have aged fast and behaves like a much older boy. He even apparently has a license for a dirt-bike that he rides like a teenager and has broken the security on local cash machines. One might assume that the sequel is more of a juvenile film if the main character is so young, but director James

Cameron uses that device only to widen the band of audience appeal to include younger people. Arnold Schwarzenegger is as tough as he was in the first outing but this time has more of an opportunity to put personality into his character.

The new script adds some new concepts and forgets about some of the old. And both actions are welcome. We discover this time around that the nuclear war was not with the Soviets. This might have been considered a necessary change since month by month the possibility of nuclear war between the United States and the Soviets seems more and

more remote. But without the Soviets as foes, the question would be whom would we be fighting with. The film provides an answer, as Cameron often does, by borrowing a concept from another major science fiction film. (See the spoiler section if you dare.) Not entirely gone but soft-pedaled is the ridiculous idea that only living matter can go through the time portal. So the time portal strips away clothing and weapons but for some reason leaves intact other dead matter like hair and fingernails. However, at one point in the film, the machines of the future send back a piece of metal and it makes it through just fine without being living tissue. The concept that some physical process in the time portal recognizes what is living and what is not is dubious at best. This of course does raise an inconsistency in the plot, but then Cameron considers and develops the ideas of the film only enough so they do not get in the way of all the action scenes. Along those lines it still has not occurred to the humans of the future (is "still" the right word for events in the future?) that their efforts might be better spent in sending back agents actually to avert the war, rather than just to lessen its impact.

The action scenes and special effects--what most of the audience has come to see--are delivered, even if not always in the most intelligent manner. I consider Cameron's last film, T_h_e_A_b_y_s_s, a much more intelligent and interesting action film. It had better characters and a much more engrossing story. In one sequence of T_e_r_m_i_n_a_t_o_r_2, one of the good guys is sprayed with machine gun fire that should have been instantly fatal, but he lives considerably longer to exact his revenge. It is a little redundant, incidentally, to say that it is a good guy sprayed with machine gun fire. From a certain point in the plot on, the good guys undertake to do what has to be done without killing any more of the bad guys, much like in the Japanese action film S_a_n_j_u_r_o. The special effects are extremely well done and undoubtedly account for a big piece of the film's price tag of somewhere around a tenth of a billion dollars. That cost was apparently partially defrayed by rubbing the audience's collective nose in the name of a well-known soft drink.

While much of the special effects budget went into creating some really impressive robot effects, there was enough left over to spend some very impressive effects on a dream sequence. In the film T_h_e_M_o_u_s_e_T_h_a_t_R_o_a_r_e_d, in the midst of showing some screwball characters playing tag with a nuclear super-weapon, we see a huge nuclear detonation. The narrator reassures us that it did not really happen in the plot and the

scene was just to remind us what could happen any moment. Similarly, we see some of the most frightening and realistic scenes ever created of a city destroyed by a nuclear bomb. And we see them in a dream sequence to tell us, this is what Sarah Connor is trying to avoid. In those scenes and many others the audience can only marvel at the incredible technology used to create this fervently anti-technology film.

T_e_r_m_i_n_a_t_o_r_2: J_u_d_g_m_e_n_t_D_a_y is a large film with large virtues and large faults. Like Mt. Rushmore, it is huge and a must-see, but one wonders if it really was such a good idea in the first place. I would rate this Mt. Rushmore of a movie +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

SPOILER SECTION*SPOILER SECTION****SPOILER SECTION***

One of the nice touches of the script is its use of the audience's expectations from the previous film to surprise the audience this time around. Once again you have a mean-looking Arnold Schwarzenegger and a smaller and more human-looking guy--thin, short, and his ears stick out--arriving from the future. The natural assumption the audience has is that the Schwarzenegger robot will be a killing machine aimed at John Connor, and the other visitor will be playing defense. It would have caught the audience nicely off-guard when each does precisely the opposite thing. Unfortunately, you are looking at the first and only review I have seen that does not spoil this twist for the audience.

Every review also gives away the nature of the bad terminator, a truly awesome idea for a killing machine which it strikes me was borrowed from a 1960s DC comic book called "Metal Men." Visually the effect, a close relative of the "water-tentacle" used in T_h_e_A_b_y_s_s, is very impressive. However, the story simply did not carry through with the power of this killer. In at least three of the scenes, he should have been able to take out John Connor by turning himself into a strong clamp and a very long sword. He should have been able to kill any human within twenty or thirty feet of him fairly easily. There may have been some rule that said only a certain percentage of his weight could go into the sword, but if that were the case they should have said so. And this thing is many orders of magnitude advanced over the old-style terminator. Where did the new technology come from? It seems unlikely for 2029 that any such technology will be possible.

It is nice that Sarah Connor starts to use her head, but why does nobody in the future think in terms of stopping the nuclear war? And destroying the computers is a good thought for someone like Sarah, but it probably would not work. It is a standard security precaution to store important software backups off-site just in case two robots from the future decide to use your lab as a battleground. Or in case a defense computer becomes sentient and starts dictating terms. I think

Cameron probably borrowed that idea from C_o_l_o_s_s_u_s: T_h_e_F_o_r_b_i_n_P_r_o_j_e_c_t.

One last question: When the liquid nitrogen truck took the liquid robot into the foundry, am I the only one who knew the next two forces

that would be used against him? No, I thought not.

The Action Film Heroine
Two film reviews by Dale L. Skran, Jr.
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Until very recently, there were almost no action heroines in film, at least in "real films." By an "action heroine" I mean a woman who resolves major plot elements via the use of physical action, and not just as a last resort. This excludes the "rape revenge" story where some unfortunate woman is "pushed to the limit" and then explodes. Consider a female Robin Hood. A female Lancelot. The use of these male examples merely demonstrates the sheer paucity of female action figures, especially in film.

The use of the phrase "real film" explicitly excludes films in the "Bimbos from the Death Star" mold, as well as campy efforts such as _ M_ o_ d_ e_ s_ t_ y_ B_ l_ a_ i_ s_ e (note that in the _ b_ o_ o_ k_ s Modesty Blaise is surely a female action heroine). The modern female action figure has been almost exclusively defined by director Ridley Scott in _ A_ l_ i_ e_ n_. Here Sigourney Weaver plays "Ripley," the co-pilot of an ore-freighter that picks up an unwanted guest. One by one, the unstoppable alien picks off the crew, leading to a final mano-a-mano battle between Ripley and the Alien, which she wins the way humans beat the mammoth and the saber-tooth tiger -- by being trickier! No other film in recent memory so naturally accepts a woman as having a vital role - a pilot and level-headed explorer - and finally as the surviving representative of the human species.

Ripley returns in _ A_ l_ i_ e_ n_ s (with a different director) and another female action character - an archetypical marine named Valasquez - who goes out the traditional marine way. Ridley Scott has moved on to other things, and in the controversial _ T_ h_ e_ l_ m_ a_ &_ L_ o_ u_ i_ s_ e has out-done himself. Scott brings to life a place at least as strange and dangerous (to women) as the world where the Alien was found - the American small-town Southwest. _ T_ h_ e_ l_ m_ a_ a_ n_ d_ L_ o_ u_ i_ s_ e is an excellent, finely acted film lensed beautifully by Scott. Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon star as two small

town women who break away from their dismal existence and repulsive male associates for a weekend at a cabin together. On the way, they stop at a bar and a macho bar-stud attempts to rape the innocent Thelma. Louise rescues Thelma with a gun the compulsive Thelma brought along more or less by accident, and then cold-bloodedly kills the bar-stud.

This begins a crime spree that builds logically and culminates with a final gesture at the Grand Canyon. As events unfold, Thelma discovers that she has a flair for crime, and both find that once freedom has been tasted, you can't go back to what amounts to slavery.

SPOILER WARNING - ENDING REVEALED

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As I left the theater, I heard people wondering aloud why Louise and Thelma decided to commit suicide by driving their car into the Grand Canyon to avoid capture by about five hundred cops. At the risk of seeming overly melodramatic, their decision seemed perfectly sensible to me. Throughout history there have been many who chose to die free rather than be held captive. If a film were made where black slaves escaping from Southern Plantation owners elected suicide over capture, no one would be shaking their heads. What T_h_e_l_m_a & L_o_u_i_s_e dares to suggest is that women are not really free in the United States today. They live in fear and are subjected to constant unwanted assaults. If they protest, all too often the justice system does not respond.

T_h_e_l_m_a & L_o_u_i_s_e is not an action film in the sense of a puerile shoot-um-up. It is a serious film with excellent acting, a strong script (although the truck scene gets too preachy for my taste), and it just happens to be about two women who attempt to resolve their problems via physical violence. Rate this a +3 on the Leeper Scale (-4 to +4).

Another recent film with a female action heroine is L_a_F_e_m_m_e_N_i_k_i_t_a. In this case, the term anti-heroine may be more appropriate, but the action is central. Compared by some to the minor E_n_t_e_r_t_h_e_D_e_s_t_r_o_y_e_r, L_a_F_e_m_m_e_N_i_k_i_t_a is a much darker, more serious look at the underbelly of government operations than most James-Bond-type fare.

Firstly, Nikita is not some wimpy baby doll who is trained by the French government to do a few karate chops and take fingerprints like a good little girl. She is instead a raw elemental force on the scale of the _ B _ a _ t _ m _ a _ n or Rorschach from the _ W _ a _ t _ c _ h _ m _ e _ n. Giving up and fair play are not in her vocabulary. Confronted during interrogation with a policeman who insists that she give her "real name" rather than Nikita she attacks him (and the entire roomful of cops) with a pencil! Nikita is not a "nice" person anymore than Bruce Wayne is. She teeters on the twilight of psychosis, driven by her need for drugs, and absolutely devoid of conscience.

The French government sees in Nikita material that might, with effort, be molded into a killing machine, so they fake her suicide in prison and begin her training (after first shooting her in the leg to prevent further escape attempts!). It is not gunplay or the martial arts that she requires training in but simple human things such as smiling or ordering from a menu. On her first outing to the shooting gallery she obliterates the paper target with a heavy-duty weapon. The instructor remarks that she must have used it before. She replies, "Never on paper." Attempts to teach her the fine points of the martial arts end disastrously for the instructors (I hope the French have found some who are more capable!). All this re-emphasizes that Nikita is not a normal person who is being trained to kill, but a deadly force that is being refined and directed. Nikita needs all her natural abilities and training to survive the graduation exercise contrived for her.

The actual assassinations Nikita is involved with are anti-climactic. After years of training, she plays a series of minor roles in complex operations involving many other agents. I found this bureaucratic style of operation to be highly believable and a welcome contrast to the lone-wolf activity so often portrayed in fiction and film.

Finally, after she has become involved in a double life (nurse by day, assassin by night), she is allowed to plan and execute her own operation. This goes terribly wrong through no particular fault of Nikita's, and she ends up on the run, unable to cope any longer with the

stress of her double life.

Overall, L_a_F_e_m_m_e_N_i_k_i_t_a is a +2 film on the Leeper Scale (-4 to +4).

T_h_e_l_m_a&L_o_u_i_s_e has been quite controversial and L_a_F_e_m_m_e_N_i_k_i_t_a would be if it ever got a wide release. There is a scene in 4_8_H_o_u_r_s in which Richard Pryor enters a bar with a gun and a badge, saying something like, "I'm your worst nightmare -- n****r with a badge." For all too many men, guns are badges of their own virility, and the thought of women handling them skillfully makes them nervous. Perhaps they remember a saying from the old West: God made men, but Colonel Colt made them equal. It applies to women as well.

[Yes, before you ask, Dale has seen T_e_r_m_i_n_a_t_o_r_2; a review of that may eventually be forthcoming. -ecl]

Three Summer Reviews
Film reviews by Mark R. Leeper
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I have come back from three-and-a-half weeks in eastern Europe, so I have a lot of catching up to do. I do not really have the time to go out and see a lot of movies and write reviews. Oh, I am still seeing movies, but for a while I will have time to review only the biggies. I have now seen three comedies, for none of which did I really plan to do my full write-up. But three small reviews can go together to make one article. I will review them in order of increasing respect.

 N a k e d G u n 2- 1/ 2: T h e S m e l l o f
F e a r is something of a

disappointment. The team of Zucker, Abrahams, and Zucker worked like a well-oiled machine to make some pretty funny comedies. Now they have split up and gone in three directions. With this film that machine is operating on only one piston, David Zucker. He wrote and directed the film without either of the other two people. The film has about the same number of jokes, but only about a third of the laughs and nothing particularly hilarious. What is worse, the film tries to be about a serious subject. In A i r p l a n! the trio was, in part, saying how silly their own story was. Even the original N a k e d G u n tried to steer clear of any hint of seriousness. Here we have a bunch of just okay jokes hung on a paper-thin plot about a conspiracy against the environment. The film has a laugh or two but in general is kind of tired. I give this one only a 0 on the -4 to +4 scale, though I did enjoy Lloyd Bochner's allusion to what is probably his most famous role. (I don't count that a spoiler, because who remembers Bochner's famous role anyway?)

Better constructed and with some better gags is S o a p d i s. This is occasionally a pretty funny comedy, though never as madcap as intended.

The story, of course, is about the back-stabbing, the politics, and the personal crises that go on behind the scenes of a popular soap opera, "The Sun Also Sets." Sally Field plays the main character of the program, but will not be for long if another actress (played by Cathy Moriarty) has anything to do with it. The jealous Moriarty constantly flirts with the show's producer (played by Robert Downey, Jr.), getting him to make decisions that are driving Field crazy, including bringing back Kevin Kline, who many years before was Field's on- and off-screen lover. Whoopi Goldberg brings her S t a r T r e k: T h e N e x t

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personality to the screen as Field's friend and confidante as well as the show's writer. The plot is contrived and this is hardly a believable picture of how a soap opera is made, but at least the gags are mostly funny. I rate it a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale. The best scene is Kevin Kline's D e a t h o f a S a l e s m a n.

Not too surprisingly, the best comedy is from the writers of

_ P _ a _ r _ e _ n _ t _ h _ o _ o _ d. Three upper-middle-class Easterners in their late thirties

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end up fish out of water in a real cowboy cattle drive. Yeah, it sounds like eight different bad movies on cable, except it's not teenagers. But that does not mean that this film could not possibly be done right, and writers Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel do pull this one off with attention to character and some solid human values. This is not the kind of script that Chevy Chase and Dan Aykroyd get, in part because they just do not deserve it. This is a film about mid-life crisis and the meaning of friendship. Once you realize these are characters who have fears and consciences and feel pain, when there are action scenes they mean much more. The three are played by Billy Crystal, Daniel Stern, and Bruno Kirby as childhood friends who take unusual vacations together. This time they take a packaged vacation to learn basic cowboy skills and go on a real cattle drive--more real than they at first expect. They have a chance to talk out their problems and their relationships and learn to operate as a team. There is a major character named Norman and Billy Crystal's reaction to Norman's first appearance makes the best scene of any of these three films, and also is perhaps the most real. _ C _ i _ t _ y _ S _ l _ i _ c _ k _ e _ r _ s is worth seeing and rates a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

