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1. Lots of things are seasonal that we see only this time of year. Many are borrowed from pagan worship, like wreaths and trees. These tend to disappear with Christmas. Others require daily

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devotions. These are "personal organizers." As the end of the year rolls around, as it all too often does these days, my mailbox at work fills up with ads for people all anxious to organize my person. Is it just me or do other people see something sinister in the concept of a "personal organizer." Sure, on the positive side they can be as innocent as a little pocket calendar. At the other end of the spectrum, the slave ships that used to prey on the west coast of Africa could be thought of as just an extreme form of personal organizers. Death camps were very effective "personal organizers." The idea of paying somebody to come in and organize my person sounds a bit like paying someone to come in and rearrange my face.

I realize even as I write this, I am trying to create a positive attitude for myself. A positive attitude is very important to the patient going "cold turkey." I am trying to break myself of the very expensive addition to one particular time organizer. The company actually let a pusher come into its doors and addict me to his product. And it is addictive, one of the many common addictions we see around the office. (How many of us hear people say, "I'm no good until I've had my first cup of coffee in the morning." This is the acceptable shorthand for saying, "I am a speed freak, but I get my uppers from a legally sold, over-the-counter drug. I need it to alter my behavior in the morning." My advice to anyone who is no good until they've had that first cup of coffee: stop drinking the stuff until you are! I drink about a cup of coffee a month and I am u t t e r l y c h a r m i n g in the morning.)

So this year, instead of getting the sinister woodtone box full of little booklets to be used one per week--these boxes seem to get more expensive each year--I am going to methadone myself with a pocket calendar and extra lists on little green routing slips. So I ask you to bear with me. I may be a bit irritable through February.

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LAIR OF THE WHITE WORM
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: Ken Russell reminds us how much fun and how much art went into 1960s horror films. L_a_i_r_o_f_t_h_e_W_h_i_t_e_W_o_r_m is a horror film with more style than fake blood. While less ambitious than most of Russell's output, it may well be his best-realized film. Rating: +2. (But not for all tastes.)

Some of the most stylish and interesting horror are those directed by Terence Fisher. Fisher's films include H_o_r_r_o_r_o_f_D_r_a_c_u_l_a, K_i_s_s_o_f_t_h_e_V_a_m_p_i_r_e, I_s_l_a_n_d_o_f_T_e_r_r_o_r, and T_h_e_D_e_v_i_l's_B_r_i_d_e (a.k.a. T_h_e_D_e_v_i_l_R_i_d_e_s_O_u_t). Some have said that Fisher is to horror films what Hitchcock is to suspense. Any year is a banner year for horror fans when two Terence Fisher films come out. 1988 is such a year--well, sort of. Lamentably, Fisher died several years ago, but if the term Hitchcockian can be applied to films done in his style, you should be

able to do the same thing with Fisher. For Fisher, making horror films was an art. Making films about razor gloves or hockey-masked killers and mass-producing those is at best a craft and barely that. But 1988 can boast two films in the best traditions of Fisher, both made by filmmakers with much better reputations. T_h_e_d_e_c_e_i_v_e_r_s was directed by James Ivory and L_a_i_r_o_f_t_h_e_W_h_i_t_e_W_o_r_m was directed by Ken Russell.

Russell like to spice his films with sequences of near-hallucinatory images. Sometimes that works, as it did in A_l_t_e_r_e_d_S_t_a_t_e_s or T_h_e_D_e_v_i_l_s. Sometimes it is a complete non sequitur, as in C_r_i_m_e_s_o_f_P_a_s_s_i_o_n. He let weirdness totally take hold of his last film, G_o_t_h_i_c, but with L_a_i_r_o_f_t_h_e_W_h_i_t_e_W_o_r_m he is back telling a story reasonably linearly. And while it is not his most ambitious project, making a 1960s-style horror film--and doing it well--is better than trying to do a biography of Tchaikovsky and trashing it as badly as Russell did with T_h_e_M_u_s_i_c_L_o_v_e_r_s. In this case, Russell's source was the Bram Stoker novel of the same title. Stoker also wrote J_e_w_e_l_o_f_t_h_e_S_e_v_e_n_S_t_a_r_s, which was adapted into T_h_e_M_u_m_m_y's_S_h_r_o_u_d and T_h_e_A_w_a_k_e_n_i_n_g. And, oh yes, he wrote a book called D_r_a_c_u_l a which, if I remember, has been the basis of a few films.

Since before the Garden of Eden the god of the Bible has been at war with the primal snake god Dionin. Through the ages various snake cults have flourished and, where necessary, opposed Christianity (as well as Conan!). A disciple of Dionin--thousands of years old, thanks to clean living and the power of the snake god--has set up shop on the English countryside where legend has it a great "worm" was slain by a Lord D'Ampton after it had feasted on people and cows. Since then there had been disappearances in the region, but not enough to cause too much fuss until the discovery of the skull of some inexplicable animal is

found by a Scottish visitor. Then things start to happen.

Surprisingly for a film by Russell, L_a_i_r_o_f_t_h_e_W_h_i_t_e_W_o_r_m is, if anything, a bit lightweight. But it is a well-crafted horror film. He finds surprising places to hint at snake shapes in the film, from a water hose to the insignia on a policeman's collar. Amanda Donohoe makes a superbly sensuous villainess and is always marvelous to watch, but never more so than when she is seducing an unlucky but eager Boy Scout for the greater glory of Dionin. L_a_i_r_o_f_t_h_e_W_h_i_t_e_W_o_r_m will

probably be my favorite Ken Russell film. I sat through it twice and had a great time both viewings. Rate it a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

THE LAND BEFORE TIME
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: Apparently inspired by the art of William Stout, T_h_e_L_a_n_d_B_e_f_o_r_e_T_i_m_e is short on characterization as well as screen time. The idea of doing a Disney-style cartoon with dinosaurs as characters was a good one, but T_h_e_L_a_n_d_B_e_f_o_r_e_T_i_m_e does not deliver enough. Rating: low +1.

It is surprising that Disney studios never did "cute" animation of dinosaurs. They have done cute versions of most familiar animals in their various films: dogs, cats, pigs, mice, birds, fish, insects--and those were just "bit parts" in cartoons; that does not count as continuing characters. But the only time Disney ever did dinosaurs was in F_a_n_t_a_s_i_a and there they were just big, meaty blood-and-thunder engines of destruction who crashed into each other to the tune of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring." As much as children love dinosaurs already, Disney never animated a dinosaur that was even remotely likable. Not that it was a void that really needed filling, but Disney animation department veteran Don Bluth, who specializes in imitating Disney's animation heyday, has made an almost-feature-length animated film, T_h_e_L_a_n_d_B_e_f_o_r_e_T_i_m_e, about the adventures of some likable baby dinosaurs. And Bluth uses "flat animation" in what may be the only serious attempt of such animation since F_a_n_t_a_s_i_a and a good while before. The field of animating dinosaurs has been very nearly the exclusive province of dimensional animators such as Willis O'Brien, Ray Harryhausen, Jim Danforth, and David Allen. In spite of the principle that flat animation offers the artist greater freedom of expression--admittedly at the cost of some realism--it has very rarely been used for dinosaurs.

But I rather suspect that the real inspiration for T_h_e_L_a_n_d_B_e_f_o_r_e_T_i_m_e came from the dinosaur art of William Stout, particularly as seen in his 1982 book T_h_e_D_i_n_o_s_a_u_r_s (Bantam Books, \$12.95). Unlike most dinosaur artists who try for a realistic,almost photographic style, Stout's art is more stylized and almost comic-book-like. He tries more for caricature rather than for realism and so is able to put more expression into his dinosaurs. I do not remember if Stout's name appeared in the credits of T_h_e_L_a_n_d_B_e_f_o_r_e_T_i_m_e, but several of the illustrations from T_h_e_D_i_n_o_s_a_u_r_s are dramatized in the film, including an appealing camarasaurus baby hatching from an egg. Another illustration shows ultrasauri standing among trees. The top of the painting cuts off the heads but a visual analogy between the necks and the tree trunks is implied. This scene also appeared in the film.

It is difficult to decide when T_h_e_L_a_n_d_B_e_f_o_r_e_T_i_m_e would have taken place. One needs to identify exactly what dinosaurs we are

seeing. I have heard the main character, Littlefoot, described as a "brontosaurus." If that was what was intended then Bluth and company were hopelessly sloppy. Most of the dinosaurs in the film did not live until the late (or Upper) Cretaceous Period--sort of the grand finale of dinosaur life that brought into existence familiar dinosaurs such as triceratops and tyrannosaurus. That is entirely the wrong era for "brontosauri"--more accurately called apatosauri. But then, the dinosaurs of the film had more rounded faces than apatosauri would have had. They had the rounded faces that brontosauri used to be portrayed as having. Also, apatosaurus died out in the late Jurassic era; even camarasaurus, which outlasted them and lived only into the e_a_r_l_y (or Lower) Cretaceous was not contemporary with late Cretaceous animals. Littlefoot could have been some lesser-known species of sauropod, some of which did live late enough to be contemporary with triceratops. The stegosaurus also is an Upper Jurassic dinosaur, but some of its similar-looking relatives could have been alive in the mid to late Cretaceous. Before you decide that the questions of era are trivial matters, realize that the Upper Cretaceous has been over for 70 million years and you can see how much animal life has changed since then. Go back another 70 million years and you are just about at the end of the Jurassic period with the Cretaceous soon to begin. "Bigmouth," incidentally, is a parasaurolophus who is respectably Upper Cretaceous. And what appeared to be a dimetrodon that should have died out 150 million years before this story was more likely an Upper Cretaceous spinosaurus. Stretching a point, all these dinosaurs could have been contemporaries, but it still seems unlikely.

Even more questionable is the geological background of the film. Yes, the Earth was geologically active at that time, but nowhere near as active as shown. In a short space we see the characters encountering powerful earthquakes and unrelated volcanos, and they struggle with a tar pit. Even in a geologically active era, this is entirely too much activity to be credible.

The story of T_h_e_L_a_n_d_B_e_f_o_r_e_T_i_m_e is about a baby sauropod of some sort--they call themselves "long-necks"--who is born in a time when food is scarce. His mother wants to take him, along with his grandparents, to the "great valley," where for some reason food is still plentiful in

spite of the fact that every dinosaur and his brother is headed there or is already there. Along the way he meets a cute, pugnacious little girl triceratops, but the parents of both know that mixed species relationships rarely work out. Each gets the sort of reaction you would get if you told your parents you were really good friends with a sheep.

Through circumstances I will not describe, Littlefoot finds he must make the journey without his elders. Instead, a set of lost young dinosaurs band together to make the trip as group. The story could be reasonable but the characterization is not. The characters are not well-developed. Littlefoot goes through all kinds of tribulations without giving up, then suddenly at some point, gives up entirely: possible, but unlikely behavior. And if you doubt that real

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characterization can be done in an animated film, see W_a_t_e_r_s_h_i_p_D_o_w_n or T_h_e_P_l_a_g_u_e_D_o_g_s.

T_h_e_L_a_n_d_B_e_f_o_r_e_T_i_m_e is a short film, even by animated film

standards. It is just 66 minutes long--so short, in fact, that it is always shown with a cartoon, "Family Dog." The cartoon, by the way, is the first half of "Family Dog," the February 16, 1987, episode of Steven Spielberg's A_m_a_z_i_n_g_S_t_o_r_i_e_s television show. If it seems like it ends a trifle abruptly, that is why. If it means anything, they have chosen the best piece of the original broadcast. Apparently they could get the cartoon cheaply since Spielberg was one of the executive producers of T_h_e_L_a_n_d_B_e_f_o_r_e_T_i_m_e.

T_h_e_L_a_n_d_B_e_f_o_r_e_T_i_m_e does boast a nice score by James Horner and an

okay song sung by Diana Ross. But it still does not show the effort of other animated feature films. And padding the length with part of an episode of A_m_a_z_i_n_g_S_t_o_r_i_e_s is no substitute for the kind of story-telling that Disney Studios or even Bluth himself have done in the past.

Rate T_h_e_L_a_n_d_B_e_f_o_r_e_T_i_m_e a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

NOT OF THIS EARTH
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: Take a below-average 1950s sci-fi film, take out what atmosphere it had, put in gratuitous nudity, car chases, and feeble attempts at humor, and what do you get? Something not very good and _ N _ o _ t _ o _ f _ T _ h _ i _ s
_ E _ a _ r _ t _ h. Rating: -2.

Somebody once said that if you remake a film, remake one you can improve on, not a classic. If that is true, you could do much worse than to choose Roger Corman's 1957 NotofThisEarth, a lackluster quickie with Paul Birch, looking like a businessman in sunglasses and riding around in a big black Cadillac. His real mission was to collect blood and other biological samples from humans and ship them off to his home planet where they are needed for a war. Beverly Garland played Nadine Storey, a registered nurse hired to take care of what she thinks is just an unusual patient and slowly comes to realize he was (dah...dah...duh...DAH!) not of this earth. Even as a fan of 1950s science fiction films, I have always been indifferent to NotofThisEarth. Improving on it should not be difficult if it has to be remade.

The weakness of the original makes it all the more surprising that the remake actually turns out to be a travesty on the original. The Beverly Garland role now has ex-porn star Traci Lords, who can act her way out of her clothing much easier than she could a paper bag. The film has been peppered with tasteless nude scenes and an occasional car chase or two, but nothing that improves on the plot. Little vignettes intended to be humorous, like a bag lady who thinks she has a radio to heaven, simply fall flat. The original was a solid -1 on the -4 to +4 scale; the remake is -2.

TWINS

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

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Capsule review: Two winning comic actors, DeVito and Schwarzenegger, overcome a severely problem-ridden hodge-podge of a script to make a comedy that is at least enjoyable, if little more. Rating: 0.

Hollywood long ago discovered that film formulae carried with them built-in audiences. Make a film in the formula, you get the audience. Frankenstein movies had a built-in audience that was interested in seeing any film about Frankenstein. Abbott and Costello comedies had a different built-in audience. If you make a film like A b b o t t a n d C o s t e l l o M e e t F r a n k e n s t e i n you get both audiences. Never mind the fact that Abbott and Costello film style is really incompatible with Frankenstein film style. The technique of crossing formulae was usually restricted to "B" films; "A" films seemed not to need it. But in the 1980s, while the distinction between "B" films and "A" films is much less obvious, most films made are what used to be "B" films. And crossing formulae is done in clever ways, but is more prevalent than ever. That's why Tom Cruise's young, high-gloss smoothie characters--teenage audience pleasers--appear opposite serious characters from serious adult dramas. In T h e C o l o r o f M o n e y Cruise plays opposite Paul Newman's Fast Eddie Felsen from the realistic, gritty film T h e H u s t l e r. Then Cruise plays opposite Dustin Hoffman's autistic savant in R a i n M a n. These are films trying to bring in more than one pre-made audience. But the most blatant formula-mixer in recent history is T w i n s. This film is a Danny DeVito comedy, an Arnold Schwarzenegger action film, a science fiction film, a warm human relationship film, a crime story, a bit of C r o c o d i l e D u n d e, and much more. How do they fit all these things together? Not very well. T w i n s is more a pile of plot elements than an actual story.

To read the credits, T w i n s seems to have been made from two different scripts and the result was a film with two different plots going on simultaneously. One is the story of how two brothers created by a scientific experiment go out in search of their origins. The other story is how DeVito gets involved with industrial espionage, ends up in over his head, and is rescued by his large, powerful brother.

The plot of T w i n s is full of coincidences which range from unlikely to absurd. It has problems of casting: Arnold Schwarzenegger could be the required age of 35, but DeVito is too old for the part. It assumes that one person could have six different fathers. That is dubious even with modern gene-splicing technology, but it is ludicrous with 1953 technology. And then the concept of the six fathers is never really used in the plot. The climax of the film occurs with DeVito inexplicably knowing how to use a piece of equipment that does not make

any sense even when you know what it does. (Sorry, that statement probably will not make sense until you see the film, but people who have seen the film should know what that is all about.) The script of this film is a mess. Any chemistry between DeVito and Schwarzenegger seems forced, but each has talent as a comic actor in his own right and that, together with a pacing that keeps things happening, is what makes the film as watchable as it is. Rate it a 0 on the -4 to +4 scale.

A DANGEROUS LIFE
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
Copyright 1988 Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: Six-hour HBO made-for-TV movie of

the fall of Ferdinand Marcos combines strong doses of T_h_e

P_r_e_s_i_d_e_n_t's_M_e_n,_Y_e_a_r_o_f_L_i_v_i_n_g

D_a_n_g_e_r_o_u_s_l_y, and e_x_o_d_u_s

in one film. A little slow in the middle, but it pays

off by the end. This should be a model for future

docu-dramas. Rating: +3.

The title is A_D_a_n_g_e_r_o_u_s_L_i_f_e and if that title seems to be
reminiscent of the title of Peter Weir's popular Y_e_a_r_o_f_L_i_v_i_n_g

D_a_n_g_e_r_o_u_s_l_y, it may not be just a coincidence. I suppose the title

could refer to it being dangerous for people that Ferdinand Marcos was

alive and in power, or it could refer to fictional newsman Tony O'Neil's

(played by Gary Busey) occasionally endangered existence covering

dramatic events in the Philippines from the death of Ninoy Aquino to the

fall of Marcos and the presidency of Ninoy's widow Corazon. Even if the

title seems a little crass, the three-part, nearly six-hour mini-series

delivers as a dramatic political story and at the same time as an

historical chronicle. Because the title and subject matter conjure

memories of Y_e_a_r_o_f_L_i_v_i_n_g D_a_n_g_e_r_o_u_s_l_y,

A_D_a_n_g_e_r_o_u_s_L_i_f_e invites

comparison of the two films. The Weir film had one charismatic,

enigmatic character, Billy Kwan. A _ D _ a _ n _ g _ e _ r _ o _ u _ s _ L _ i _ f _ e has no particularly fascinating character in a leading role. The main characters are involved in a nominal but dull love triangle. Who cares? In virtually every other regard, A _ D _ a _ n _ g _ e _ r _ o _ u _ s _ L _ i _ f _ e is a model for the political chronicle. It tells a piece of history most of us remember and tells in a dramatic and engrossing way a detailed history of the fall of Marcos. And it seems even more immediate for the extensive use of television news videotape.

Actually for interest value, the lead parts are eclipsed by that of Imelda Marcos (played by Tessie Tomas). Most people think of her as a sort of international joke, a vain woman who had a huge collection of shoes. Under Robert Markowitz's direction, she is as hypnotic and deadly as a cobra, a consummate politician and actress.

If it seems by the second installment that the story is going overly long, have faith--the third and final part more than compensates. One complaint that could be made is that it is a trifle one-sided. It does not protect the United States government, which gets a thorough and very probably well-deserved lambasting for valuing its Philippine military bases over the lives of the Filipino people. But Corazon Aquino is just a little too saintly and pure. Making her so perfect makes the film seem a little manipulative. But as a fault, this is only a very minor one. This production for HBO will inevitably be the first American made-for-television film to ever make my "Ten-Best-of-the-Year" list. Rate it a +3 on the -4 to +4 scale.

BLUE HEAVEN by Joe Keenan
Penguin, 1988, 0-14-010764-9, \$7.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
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Gilbert is broke. Desperate for money, he goes to a family wedding, hoping to hit up his stepfather for some cash. Having failed at this, he wanders off and accidentally finds the room where the gifts are. As he's looking at them, in wanders Moira, also lost, also broke. They look at the gifts. They look at each other. A plan is born!

Yes, Gilbert and Moira decide to marry--for the gifts. There are a

few minor problems. One, they hate each other. Two, Moira can be trusted about as far as you could throw a seven-tiered wedding cake. Three, Gilbert is gay. But as they say, the course of true love did never run smooth, and believe me, for the gifts they have true love.

Set in the trendy world of Manhattan artists (one friend makes sculptures out of trash bags filled with trash), B l u e H e a v e n is the funniest book I can remember reading in years. There is Vulpina, who shows up at one point wearing "immense brown jodhpurs, a sort of black lace mantilla and a skin-tight white silk tube top. The total effect suggested a teabag in mourning." There is Gilbert's stepfather, Freddy "the Pooch" Bombelli, so called because it is rumored that his enemies end up as input to his pet food factory. (That is, those that don't suddenly have a fit of remorse, set themselves on fire, and jump from the top of a ten-story building.) That's right, folks, Gilbert and Moira are trying to cheat the Mafia.

Of course, things don't go as smoothly as this explanation might indicate. (Think about it.) There's Moira's mother, the Duchess, who can be counted on to cause problems. There are all of Gilbert's past lovers and rejected lovers who can be counted on to cause b i g problems. And then there is the problem of which of Bombelli's nephews will inherit his "business."

In summary, this book is absolutely wonderful. I found myself laughing out loud--a lot. I kept thinking it would make a great movie, somewhat along the lines of A f t e r H o u r s , but more madcap. (The back cover compares it to P. G. Wodehouse and Preston Sturges.) Go read this book.

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