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# DIALOGUE

A Journal of Commentary and the Arts



January/February 1992





# DIALOGUE

Vol. 24, Number 4    January/February 1992



# CONTRIBUTORS

**Jin Barclay**, an art major from New Hampshire, recently became co-chairperson of the Visual Arts Guild. He claims to have small internal organs.

**Kelly Benjamin**, a Resident Assistant in Noordewier Hall, is an art student who believes that when she is older she will have to move every two to three years to counteract her tendency to be a pack-rat.

**Andy Botts** is the other co-chairperson of the Visual Arts Guild. He enjoys picnics at his grandfather's farm in Pennsylvania and can often be seen wearing an unusual striped cap.

**Jeff Brower**, a senior English major, spent this past interim in New England. He plans to spend the next few years in the Seminary.

**Dan Emshoff** learned the blues on South Dearborn Street in Chicago from a parking garage attendant. He is now twenty years old and still looking for another kiss.

**Jeremy Lloyd** took a gender-trait analysis test in junior high school, the results of which informed him he was seventy-five percent female. Even more unusual, he is willing to reveal such information.

**Matt Sahr** prescribes the following procedure for making philosophical black bile: Put two cups sugar, one packet Purplesaurus Rex Kool-Aid™, one packet lemon-lime Kool-Aid™, and a fifth of bourbon into a gallon jug. Fill the jug the rest of the way with water and cap it. Then let the jug sit on a dusty shelf for one to two weeks. Pour it into cheap plastic cups and stare at it for awhile. Drink it quickly.

**Mary VanderMeer**, a married Calvin alumna and sister to Dan Emshoff, is currently earning money and avoiding pregnancy for the sake of graduate school.

**Julie Uken** has been at Calvin for five and a half years completing her Art/Education degree. She is working on becoming a renaissance woman and has been perfecting a design for neutrino detecting glasses. ○

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# Watering the Green Age

My father claims that the first time he saw my mother, he had a hunch that she was the woman with whom he would spend the rest of his life. Being several years older than she, he was in more than a bit of a hurry to marry this slender, dark haired, strong-minded goddess before someone else did. He wrote sonnets for her. She nursed him back to health from a terrible case of mononucleosis by feeding him warm Dutch pudding. (He says the Dutch pudding confirmed his hunch.) He even forgave her for driving his 1969 Volkswagen Bug into the side of Meijer (then Thrifty Acres), and they were married just nine months after they had met. They moved into a cosy downstairs apartment on Union Street. My father taught high school English, my mother worked on finishing her undergraduate college degree, and they immediately began planning to raise a family and saving money to buy a house. They were financially independent. My mother was almost twenty-one.

I am twenty-one now and my parents' behavior at that age strikes me as, well, awe-inspiringly, preposterously mature. I do not consider myself immature, but while I admire their independence, I am grateful to have considerably fewer responsibilities. Financial independence is still nowhere in sight for me (sorry, Dad); though I hate to do it, I still call home for money at least once a month, usually trying to preface the dread request with the report of a high test or paper grade in hopes of making my parents less hesitant to reach for their checkbook. I do not have, at present, a specific career goal or the means to move out on my own and can only hope that more schooling will illuminate me and propel me toward a decent job and financial independence. I bounce checks. My room is often a mess. When my roommates and I do not have time or money to go grocery shopping, we subsist on Cornflakes. In short, at twenty-one, my mother was most definitely an adult. At twenty-one, I (and many others my age), still feel like a big kid.

Statistics show that American young adults appear to be staying young longer by postponing the rites of passage that traditionally define adulthood. For my generation, adolescence extends into our twenties. Though I do know of exceptions, most of my friends and I do not foresee having husbands or wives, babies, houses, and "real jobs" until we are close to thirty; we will do at thirty what our parents did at twenty. Several factors account for this. More young Americans now than ever before attend colleges and universities rather than entering the work force immediately after high school, and more of those students continue on to graduate school. Furthermore, the current economic crisis and job shortage makes living independently of parents decidedly more difficult than it was twenty years ago. It is a much touted fact that for the first time, a generation will be worse off than the one preceding it. My generation is also more inclined to marry and raise families later than our parents did, if at all, and those who do get married will probably postpone having children.

Some of these factors, like staying in school and putting off starting a family, reflect conscious choices to avoid plunging too quickly into adulthood and to hold fast to what is comfortable and familiar, to prolong a childhood that either seems to or has indeed passed too quickly. For example, becoming an adult means departing forever from the comfortable, familiar cycle of the academic calendar, something which has dictated the rhythm of most of our lives since we were five years old. Remaining a student longer by attending college and graduate school is not only means of acquiring knowledge and getting a good job later in life; it also permits us to cling a bit longer

to a truly precious and important stage in life—that of the alternating eagerness to return to school on clear cool September days with new shoes and notebooks, and the loathing of it by the time May rolls around and promises three hot blissful summer months without shoes. Leaving school for the responsibilities of adulthood means saying goodbye forever to playing on winter afternoons until dinner. I know that just a few winters from this one, I will have to leave home in the dark each morning and when I return home in the evenings, it will be dark once again. Adulthood also means marriage (and later children) which throws easy, familiar friendships with those of either sex into a weird and uncomfortable state. Many of my friends and I regard the institution of marriage with awe and suspicion; from my vantage point, it is the most sacred and scary of bonds, both something distant and beautiful but also a spectre that looms closer and closer and will chase away my best friend of four years this summer.

I cannot simplistically say that my parents grew up in an easy, idyllic time and growing up now is just a lot harder; I think that leaving behind the joyous, less complicated time of childhood and adolescence and embracing the cares and responsibilities of a grown-up world is somewhat sad and difficult for any young adult at any time. We see it as connected to the greater sadness of growing older, dying, and shouldering the responsibilities of being human. But extending adolescence may be more tempting for me and my generation than it was for my parents'; it seems that social and economic circumstances have made it easier and in some cases almost necessary for young adults today to prolong this period of transition than before, and this may be a good thing. For example, at present getting a job almost requires a college education at minimum, and moving out of the family nest is impossible for many twenty-one year olds, and so on. This was not exactly the case for young adults in previous decades. For them, becoming adults involved the same anxieties, sense of risk-taking, and obligatory abandonment of comforting routines of home and school. But even more of my childhood friends than my parents' are products of broken homes and other such circumstances that tend to force kids toward adulthood at warp speed and deprive them of an appropriate childhood—people who as children had already themselves begun to shoulder the burdens of decaying marriages and ugly fights. Moreover, though I do not want to sound fatalistic, the next generation of twentysomethings may be rushed through childhood and adolescence even faster and more brutally as the world becomes a more and more competitive, expensive, and dangerous place to live. I laughed but was also appalled to hear of a few pregnant women alumni of an Ivy League school who marched into the admissions offices of their alma mater on different occasions to inquire if they could start admissions files for their still in utero offspring and how they could best steer the child toward assured acceptance to that school. The desire for an extended appropriate adolescence in response to such craziness seems natural and healthy. Holding fast to what is most precious about childhood need not lead to either an immature, irresponsible, escapism, or paralyzing anxiety about the future and adulthood. A prolonged adolescence can be a liberating transition period between childhood and adulthood; a time to wonder wisely, to gently water our roots, and to lay claim to tomorrow. ○



## Life

I had a friend  
I thought he was crazy  
He thought I was stupid

we were kids.

He played strip  
poker with his babysitter  
at age ten

crazy.

I first kissed  
a woman  
at age eighteen

stupid.

Life made the most sense  
when I was a kid  
adults only got spare change

get a Life.





S H O R T

the





Jeff Brower

## MUSEUM

It was Thursday. Davis had been puttering around the apartment doing odd jobs and listening to a dismal thing on the radio, so when Julie called and asked him to go to the presentation at the museum, he had agreed.

Getting ready had taken only a few minutes. He put on a sportcoat of mottled blue and fitted a thin dark tie around his neck, ushering the knot up to his chin. After checking his hair in the mirror, he put the brush down on the dresser next to a small black velvet box, picked up the box, and looked at it for a moment. He slipped it into one of his pockets. Twenty minutes later he was knocking on the door of her apartment. She came out wearing a tee shirt, sweater vest, and a long, flowing skirt.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Yes. You look great."

"Thanks." She swung her purse around her shoulder.

The presentation was standard museum fare, a film about Greek sculpture. The voice of the curator cut through the darkness, relating the history of each statue as it flickered by on the

screen, where it had been found and its subject. It droned on, seeming to Davis more like a lecture than a lesson. He tried to move closer to Julie but she seemed to shy away, so he sat feeling alone, the faces of the windows as his only consolation.

He noticed an uncanny similarity among the statues. Each face seemed to have a sense of sadness about it, no matter what the subject. Something in the eyes of the blind stone, or the set of the jaw, or the tilt of the head. Why was there such a look of doom on their faces, of noble misery? Was that the only thing worth immortalizing? He could not understand it.

Though the lights came on slowly, he blinked and his vision swam for a moment. He rubbed his face with one hand and turned to Julie.

"How did you like it?" he asked hopefully, trying to get a glimpse of her whole face. She was fiddling with her purse.

"It was okay," she said, nodding. Then she turned to him and flashed a quick, nervous smile. "Come on, let's walk." She got up hurriedly and snaked her arm through his.

It was always dark inside the museum, and



doubly so in the Hall of Weapons. With all the steel fangs crouching behind the panes of glass, Davis felt as if he were walking through the mouth of a beast so huge that only its teeth could be seen. He and Julie strolled through the hall, talking about inconsequential things. He walked beside her, hands stuck stiffly in his pockets, just a step behind so he could see the shadows play off her face. He leaned toward her and put his mouth close to her ear.

"You've, ah, got something caught between your teeth," he murmured, miming a cleaning action with a finger. He smiled.

"What? Oh, um, thanks." She scraped a tooth with a fingernail.

"No, not that one, the next one over."

"Alright, okay, I've got it." She did something mannered with a finger and closed her purse.

"Did you ever stop to think," he said, as they passed by row upon row of swords, "that every single one of these has been used?"

"How do you mean?" she asked disinterestedly.

"I mean, these weren't ready-made for this place." He pressed his nose against the glass. Old light still slid along the edge of one of the blades. "Someone owned this. Hung it by his side. Killed with it. And look—ultimately, let it fall. So he failed in the end, didn't he?"

"Erch. That's morbid," she said, uncomfortably.

"Yeah. Yeah, it is." But it was true, he thought.

One of the things that had interested Davis the

most about Julie when they started dating was the way she handled her world. One side of her was rigid, unalterable, and the other was one of raw, uncontrollable emotion. Perhaps because he loved her, she sometimes, in moments of weakness, allowed him to enter her space, but such times had always been as infrequent as they were intense. She seemed to him like a centrifuge, spinning with her arms out straight, trying to separate things within herself which would better remain in fusion . . . dancing close to him and then spinning out of arms' length, trying to regain momentum and balance. But he had hope that she could somehow learn to slow down, stop whirring for a moment, lessen the centrifugal force on herself, and bring herself with one last slow turn into a moment of perfect silence.

Her eyes looked very clear today, as if she had made some sort of a choice.

They wandered into the Hall of Dinosaurs and wove their way through the exhibits. The shadows of childhood boojums and lurkings were cast on the walls there, with the Tyrannosaurus Rex in the middle of it all. She took his arm again, and led him to one of the benches in the middle of the room.

"Come on, sit down. We've got some things that really need to be talked about," she said. He remembered the little box in his pocket and his heart jumped.

She sat very still for a long while, thinking and gazing around the room. She drew herself up suddenly.

"This . . . relationship can't go on anymore,

Davis. I don't think we should see each other any longer. I . . . "

"What?"

"I don't think we should see each other anymore."

The earth stopped its rotation. Davis suddenly felt the stone in his pocket weighing on his chest. Diamond is the hardest stone in the universe, he thought. He had once seen one cut a mirror. He let out his breath slowly.

"What do you mean?" he asked, holding his mouth in a cupped hand.

"Calm down."

"I mean, is it something I did, something that we can talk about? I mean, oh, Julie, we can work it out, I mean . . . "

"No. It isn't like that. It's about me." Her eyes were fearfully placid. It does not concern you, they said. I already worked it out, all by myself. Worked it out on my little centrifuge. Spin, spin, spin.

He could not accept it, though he began to understand.

He sat still. "Why?" he finally asked.

"I told you. It's about me. I've made some changes in my life, and well . . . "

"I'm not part of them, right?" The sigh came from someplace deeper now, someplace ripped. "I . . . get it. It's because of inconvenience, isn't it? You can't have any chinks in your armor." He tried to hold her hand, but she pulled away. "Oh, Julie . . . "

"No. Stop it." The momentum in her eyes terrified him. "I've made up my mind."

They both sat rigid. Finally, her eyes darted to her watch. "I've got to go. Please, Davis, don't call me . . . "

But he had already stood up. He faced the Rex, his arms spread out wide in front of him and he shook his head slowly. His voice was filled with wonder. "Look at it, will you? Just look at it. It's all there, everything it needed for survival. Nothing superfluous. Can you imagine what must have been like in those days? Lord, it must have been incredible! All the heat and death and mud, and this thing striding through it all, the perfect survival machine, bristling with fangs and claws. Secure. Powerful. Streamlined. No loose ends." He swung around and the skull rose above his shoulder. "Just like you. Just like you."

"Stop it!" she said.

He understood now why she had wanted to come here. He looked in her eyes and saw it, the comfort of being barren and the power of being certain of failure and the dead hall in which they stood. Elsewhere, he could have shown her that hope was not a lie, that everything truly did mean something, but in here, four hundred million years of cheap, bloody survival were on her side, eons without compassion or mercy or love and hope. Weird relics of failure loomed up on every side, broken, discarded, rotted, and lost, tended by the curators of the not and gone. She was too afraid to care. And who could speak of hope in a museum?

"Don't be like that. This is hard for me too."

"Oh really? Somehow this strikes me as the easiest thing you've ever done." It was a cheap



shot, he knew, but it was the only thing he could say.

"I can't afford to know you anymore," she whispered, and was gone. He was alone.

He thought he understood the statues now. He closed his eyes and let a choir of solemn faces sing through his mind. Sympathy was what mattered, sympathy and the sorrow of sympathy denied. Silence filled the hall. People came and went, taking no notice of him. He was just another exhibit, small, wooden, and immobile. Time passed.

And what was the consolation that was offered, he thought, what does it show me?

It shows that they survived, came the answer from another hall. They survived, though it was costly. Ah, yes. Yes.

He got up and left the room, finally, he knees popping like shells underfoot. He worked his neck with one hand, trying to massage some feeling back into it, and he wandered absently around the place. Every room was cold, and he was afraid to go home. After a while, he found himself at the end of a tour, led by a helpful young man in a museum employee's uniform. The group was mostly made up of children, with a few harried mothers standing here and there like tentposts, keeping the whole circus afloat. On the shoulder of one of them drooped a sleeping toddler, his arm slung loosely over her back, and in his hand was clenched a small plastic pennant with the picture of a dinosaur on it.

The group passed through one more room,

and the tour guide asked all the children to hold hands so they would not fall behind. Davis prepared to drop back. But at the very end of the new line was a small child who held out her hand insistently to him.

"Give me your hand," she said. "Come on, give me." Her palm was like a lilac in the darkness.

He looked at her and knelt quickly, placing the small velvet box in her hand. He closed her fingers around it.

"There you go," he whispered. "Something bright and shiny." And he veered off quickly into another room, so she would not hear the lump in his throat and ask her mother a question she could not understand.

The room he had turned into contained only one thing. On the far wall was a glass cabinet lit by a greenish spotlight. Inside the glass was a huge slab of Wisconsin limestone covered with hundreds of fossils and indentations in the shapes of shells, plants, little creatures. This was the only light in the room. The surface of the limestone was fantastic. It looked like a stone photograph of things caught in sudden motion, thrown together without regard for time, era, or species; a conglomeration of everything under the sun or the water, just there, the most amazing cross section ever. He tried to run his hand over it and remembered the glass. The funny thing about fossils, he thought, was they seemed so . . . alive, but for millions of years, they had not really existed. They were just copies of real things trapped in mud or stone while the minerals

took over slowly and replaced them. He tried to imagine the process taking place, each day just a little less wood, a little more stone, the wood leaching away until there was nothing real left. He closed his eyes and thought about it all, the eons of petrification, the heat and the light of an ancient sky filled with strange birds that circled and swooped down to the bodies of dying animals, weak or old or trapped in pits where tar pulled them down some terrible new gravity, their eyes rolling crazily in their stupid heads as they struggled to free themselves but sank deeper, where there was no light . . .

His eyes snapped open. A sudden, crackling horror hit him like a hot mudslide. He began to back out of the room. He bumped into one of the walls, slid along it, found the entrance to the room, not taking his eyes off the fossil because he could now see his own face there, perfect and frigid and dead. He was not sure what his real face was anymore and he heard again what the statues had told him with their beautiful, chipped marble eyes. Costly survival? What was the cost? Still backwards, still silent, he slipped through the doorway, and he was afraid. He could hear the old lizards laughing far away down the corridor, laughing in the dark.

"NOT REAL!" he suddenly shouted. "You're not real! NO!"

Then, just as suddenly, his mind became silent and he stood there quivering. Yes, it was all so clear; he could see right through it. A security guard came up to him and asked if there was any problem and Davis told him, no, officer, no

problem at all, and they stood there in the main rotunda with the light coming from very high up. "Well," said the guard, "maybe you had better go anyway," and he touched Davis's shoulder and led him toward the door and that was when Davis knew, and was sad. He saw the cold, glassy gleam in the man's eyeballs and felt the stuffing in his arm, and underneath, the ingenious twists of wire that held the plaster bones together.

"Where you buried?" he asked the man. "Who excavated *you*?" But the guard just said that maybe Davis should leave and then led him to the door and outside into the sunlight.

Something about the light helped bring his mind back together, and he leaned against a railing, gathering his strength. "Whoah," he said to no one in particular. He heard the sound of children around the corner, let it slip into the familiar weave of horns and the rush of tires, and was comforted. Maybe, he thought, I should be getting home. He started down the steps and kicked something out of the way. Then he stopped and bent down to pick it up. Something a child must have dropped, something that would have enchanted her for awhile and then fallen, unnoticed when she turned her attention to something else. He held the box carefully in one hand and cracked it open like a soft and secret egg.

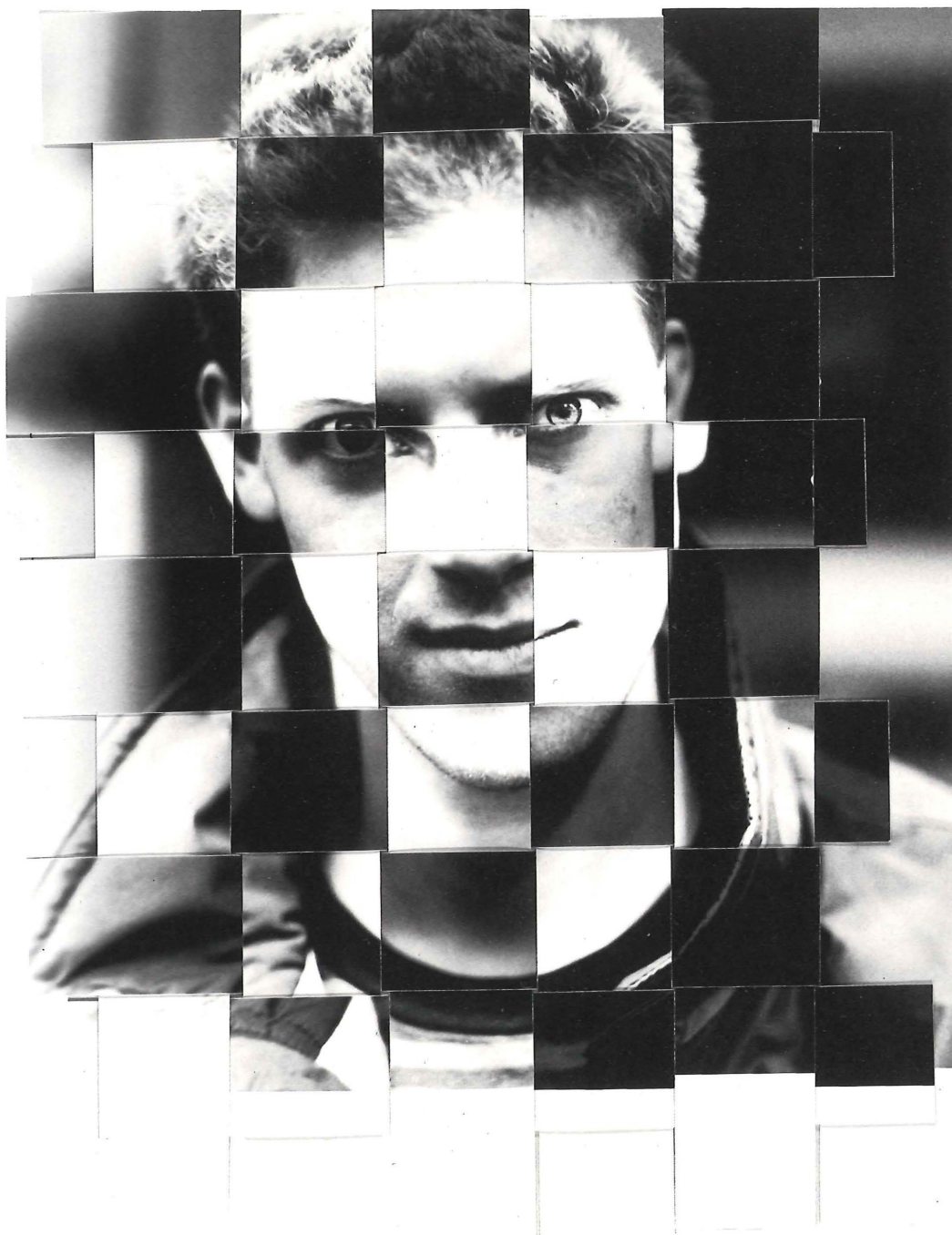
Home? He turned his head and stared slowly into the ossified sun. He smiled an easy, unaccusing smile that had no particular focus. Yes, home.

○



## On the Last of the Colors

Black is the colors of eyes shut, spooky cats and depression.  
It invidiates into us, shadowy corners and closed-shut closets.  
It is quite impossible to discover in the intense gaze so many grades of grey.  
But it swells up in stark contrast when we stare out with blinders on,  
Or fail to look with more than a casual glance at the scenery.  
Nonetheless, I insist it is there, skidding from scrutiny's glare,  
And never showing up for scientific verification.  
Yes, I have seen the Black, with eyes full open and piercing  
Deep down in the roots, where the blackness closes in around  
In heavy metallic liquid mercury with the lights out black,  
I've been there.  
There's nothing of the sublime, nothing of the fearful, nothing profound  
Or corrupting, terrible or binding, nothing there.  
Absolutely nothing.  
The spooky cats, the melancholy depression, never shut your eyes.



Julie Uken

I N T E R V I E W

# Catherine COMET

• Sarah Koops

Catherine Comet is both a woman and the Music Director of the Grand Rapids Symphony, but don't call her a "woman conductor." Comet (pronounced co-MAY) is not only the most respected of a handful of full-time, employed symphony directors in the United States who happen to be women; she is one of the most respected conductors in the country, period. It doesn't even occur to her to look at her successful career in terms of her sex. She doesn't know exactly how many women symphony directors there are in the United States, and she doesn't care. Comet states vaguely, "Oh, I don't know . . . There are many women conductors." She claims not even to have a working definition of the word "feminism," and, in her soft, resonant voice, she impatiently brushes off any questions about discrimination and gender-related obstacles to her success. Comet says mildly, reproachfully, "If you have talent, you have talent. If you don't, you don't. Gender has nothing to do with music," (only it sounds so French, so









*feminine*, “Zshgendeur has nozzing to do wit museec”). What, no sad tales of being harassed by male conductors or one-upped by chauvinistic first-chair violinists? I ask her if she ever experienced any prejudice or discrimination or even the teeny-tiniest difficulty, “as a woman.” “No,” she answers succinctly, clearly wanting to change the subject. And that’s that.

Instead, she speaks with great passion about the importance of music in the lives of children in communities whose symphonies she has conducted, and in Grand Rapids in particular. This is perhaps because her own love for music was cultivated at a very young age. Even as a little girl, Comet “*always* wanted to conduct. Always.” She recalls, laughing, “My mother never really encouraged me or discouraged me, either. I didn’t pay any attention; it was all I wanted!” A native of France, she studied the piano as a child and made her way to Paris to study with the famed Nadia Boulanger at age twelve. At fifteen, she traveled to the United States for the first time, alone, entered the Julliard School of Music, and obtained her Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in orchestral conducting in three years. At that time, Comet was the only young woman at Julliard pursue a career as a conductor. She is one of only three women ever to study conducting at Julliard, the other two being JoAnn Falletta and Victoria Bond, who also work full-time Music Directors for respected symphonies.

Comet recalls with great warmth the Baltimore Symphony, where she worked as Associate Conductor from 1984 to 1986, saying, “I used to do seventy or eighty concerts [a year] “—known as Lollipop Concerts, which are specifically geared toward children—”for thousands of kids in the Baltimore area.” Comet continues, intensely, “The arts should be a part of every child’s rearing . . . and of course I’m terribly prejudiced when it comes to music, but I think it’s the most important part! A life without music is not really a full life. We make a very strong effort in the Grand Rapids Symphony to play for as many children as we possibly can . . . through our Lollipop Series and our Family Series. All our musicians are very involved with music education for the children of the Grand Rapids community. It takes a lot of effort, it takes a lot of dedication, but it is very important.” The function of such concerts for children, she explains, is to both delight and instruct: “to present the orchestra, to present the instruments, to explain the music, and to open each child to it. This is one of the most important functions of an orchestra in a community.”

Comet sees bringing music to children as an urgent mission in part because she believes children are not given enough education in the fine

arts or a chance to cultivate an appreciation for art in schools or at home. She laments that, in elementary schools, "the music teacher is always the first to go when there is a financial problem. Me, I think that a music teacher is far more important than a football coach." Comet goes on to talk the importance of music to children as morally imperative, and about musicians as role models: being a serious musician, she says, takes such a great deal of discipline, self-control, and vigorous work that musicians make superb role models for children. She even goes so far as to say, "If there's really a role model, it's a musician. You cannot, for example, be a musician if you have a drug problem. You couldn't have the infinite amount of muscle control and reflexes it takes to play the violin . . . or oboe, or cello, or horn. You just couldn't do it . . . because of the discipline it takes, every day practicing, every day working, constantly."

If Comet had her way, every man, woman, and child would learn to play an instrument if only for the hard work it requires, which she views as a good intellectual exercise, and the sense of mastery and achievement it affords. "It takes a lot of discipline to master a musical instrument, and discipline is always a very good thing." Comet herself is certainly not averse to hard work. She works a staggering number of hours and travels to a different American city almost every week. In the past year, she has appeared as a guest conductor with the Boston Symphony, the Chicago Symphony, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the San Francisco Symphony, the Toronto Symphony, and the National Symphony of Washington, D.C., to name just a few on a very long list. When I called to interview her, she was in a hotel room in Detroit, studying her music scores and preparing to rehearse with the Detroit Symphony for several weekend performances. The day before, she had performed with an orchestra in Carnegie Hall.

When I begin to ask her what it is that makes a truly excellent conductor, she interrupts forcefully, "Work. And a lot of it." Comet's French accent draws out the word so it emerges as a throaty, emphatic, "*Whooooehrrrk*." She pauses for a moment and then adds, with a tone of finality, "Talent, plus work." Comet outlines her schedule in these terms: "I work all the time. When I get off the phone with you, I'll be working until ten or eleven tonight." (Incidentally, it was two o'clock then). "Tomorrow morning I'll rehearse with the Detroit Symphony, and then tomorrow afternoon I'll be back in the hotel room and studying the music again for another eight or ten hours." She continues, "I take a lot of planes. I go to a lot of hotels." She describes the rhythm of her life by saying, "Life as a conductor goes by weeks, because it takes a week of [daily] rehearsals to prepare for a



concert, and usually orchestras play two, three, or four concerts, on the weekend or starting Thursday, with concerts Thursday, Friday, Saturday." Comet explains that the number of hours a guest conductor works with an orchestra to prepare for a weekend of performances is "absolutely standard . . . you rehearse four times [for] two hours and a half, with a break." She spends about twenty-two weeks of the year in Grand Rapids and travels the rest of the time. But Comet does not boast about her stamina or gloat about her frequent flier mileage; she modestly and matter-of-factly compares her career and the travelling it entails to that of "a salesman . . . or someone in theatre. I mean, people do travel a lot." When she is not rehearsing and performing with orchestras around the country, she makes her home in Pennsylvania. Comet is married to Michael Aiken, the provost of the University of Pennsylvania, and has one fifteen year old daughter, Caroline. Marrying an American was what made her decide ultimately to stay in the United States and pursue a career here rather than in Europe.

Though Comet is reluctant to discuss her career in terms of her gender, she concedes that there may indeed be discrimination at some levels of the professional music world, which she found to be the case in Europe. She states that during her time with the Paris Opera, "there were no women in the orchestra. Women were never auditioning for the Paris Opera Orchestra. I resented that . . . That's where what you call "feminism" comes in. That was not fair. Friends of mine [who were] at the *conservatoire* school . . . who played violin or cello or bassoon . . . were just not allowed to audition for the Paris Opera. That was really discouraging. I was hired to conduct the orchestra. There [were] only men. There was not one woman in the orchestra. There was not discrimination on the conductors' level but there was discrimination on the musicians' level. That is something that I think has changed, though I haven't been in Paris in a very long time."

The word "community" surfaces constantly in Comet's discussion of her work. She seems to see her role as conductor as to administer something mysteriously potent and absolutely vital to audiences, and she wants those audiences to include members of every sector of the population. She dismisses as "nonsense!" the notion held by many people that classical music is esoteric and attending concerts is something that only wealthy, older people want to and can afford to do. Comet strongly believes that the arts are for everyone and that they are indeed accessible. She states that this is particularly the case in Grand Rapids, saying, "We depend on our



community. There is constant feedback between the community that supports us and the symphony. We are nourishing our community . . . ; it's a constant, magic circle."



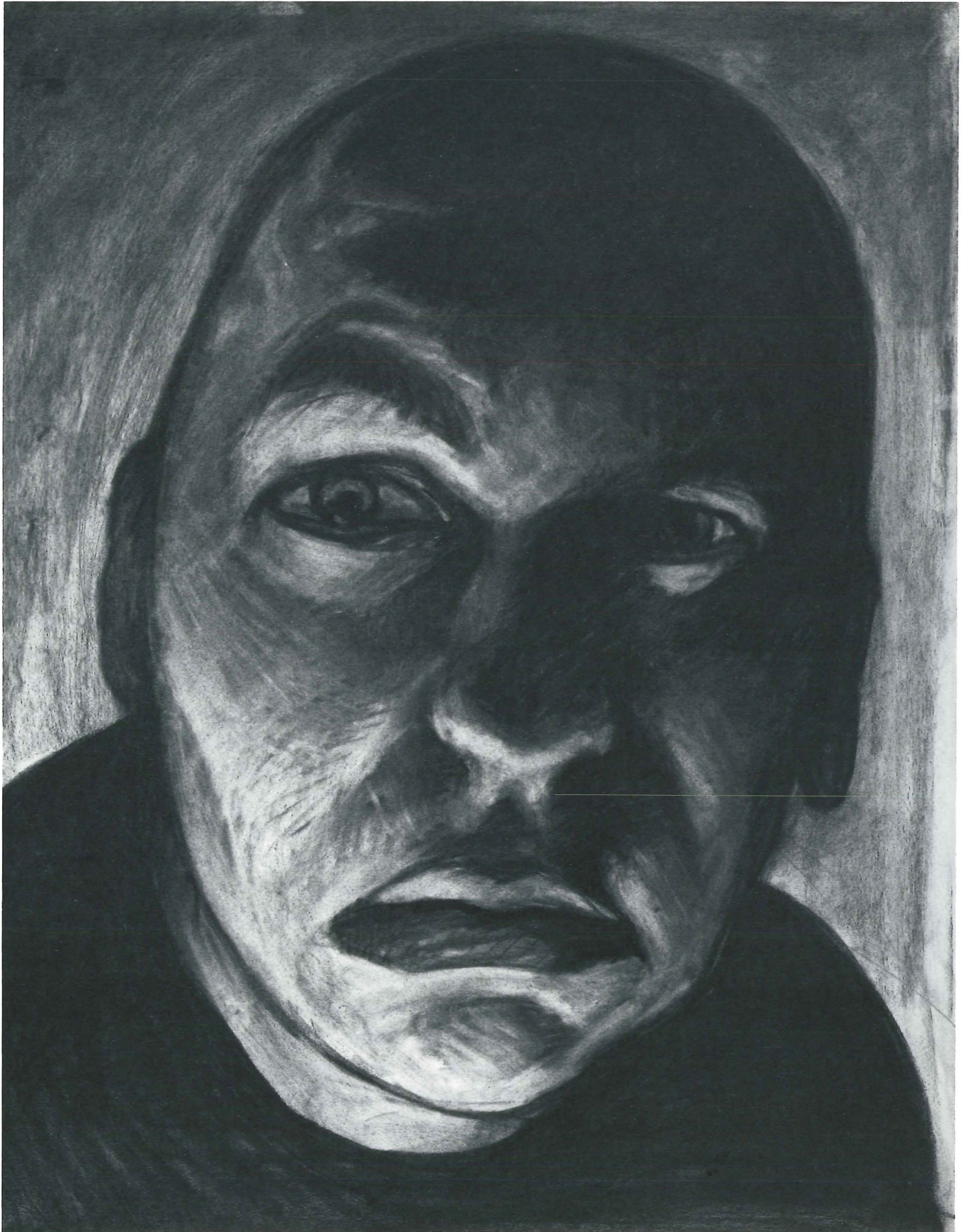
Comet has served as Music Director of the Grand Rapids Symphony for the past five years. She was the Associate Conductor of the Baltimore Symphony from 1984 to 1986. During that time she conducted that orchestra in regular performances, youth and family concerts, special events and subscription performances. She was the Exxon/Art Endowment Conductor of the Saint Louis Symphony during the 1981-82 and 1983-84 seasons. Before her engagement with the Saint Louis Symphony, Comet served as conductor and Music Director of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Symphony and Chamber Orchestras. Prior to that, she conducted the Ballet Company of the Theatre National de l'Opera de Paris for three years.

Speaking enthusiastically of her work and progress in Grand Rapids, Comet exclaims, "It is wonderful to be the director of the Grand Rapids Symphony because we are a very strong orchestra and we are on the rise. We are very well known and very well respected in the community and around the country. We work very hard." The Symphony, originally founded in 1929 by a volunteer group of musicians from the community, became a fully professional orchestra in 1973. At present, it employs approximately thirty-eight full-time and sixty part-time musicians. The Grand Rapids Symphony's operating budget has grown in the last decade from \$650,000 in 1979 to over \$3 million in the 1991-92 season. Comet plans to "keep the orchestra growing, as it has been growing immensely." She hopes to employ more and more full-time musicians and increase the budget.

Comet is fervent in discussing the role of art in human life, using religious, and dare I say it, almost *reformed* terms: "You cannot be alive without art. Art is part of life. You don't separate them and say, now I have my little time to do art; it's all part of being a human being versus being an animal." She continues, "And music is a very important art. It gives you access to a spectrum of feelings and expression that are sometimes difficult to find in real life." Though she sounds like a charismatic, larger-than-life high priestess of art, maestra Comet politely refuses praise from critics and her colleagues for her dedication and assertive, intense conducting style, saying, "That's just myself, you know. I'm a musician and I make music."

○





## Menstruation

(a man named)  
George  
(had a dream one night)  
He was with a beautiful woman  
(in an Amish horse-drawn buggy)  
He would have enjoyed  
the sweat  
and hard labor  
but he couldn't bear  
(life)  
(with so many)  
children.



## Religion 201

Can I cut  
a slice of God  
and lay him  
on my plate?

Can I suck out  
marrow of bone  
blood bread wine  
tongue feel thorns  
plucked from  
his head?

Can I anesthetize  
the Christ  
that wit may win  
and heart  
stop  
throbbing?

Hold Jehovah in your hands;  
razor wit,  
suck sweet wine,  
and slice the apple of your eye.

Just leave me  
a theological scrap  
that I might  
know

his love.

Mary VanderMeer



Kelly Benjamin



E S S A Y

# Of Rayguns and Replicants:

Science Fiction Film in  
the Twentieth Century

Robert Kroese



Science fiction has long been one of the most popular film genres. Four SF films (*The Star Wars* trilogy and *E.T. The Extraterrestrial*) rank in the ten top-grossing films of all time. Movie studios continue to pour tens of millions of dollars into films like *Total Recall* and *Terminator II: Judgement Day*, and hordes of people turn out to witness the latest breathtaking advances in special effects or simply to see Ah-nold blow away the bad guys.

DIALOGUE

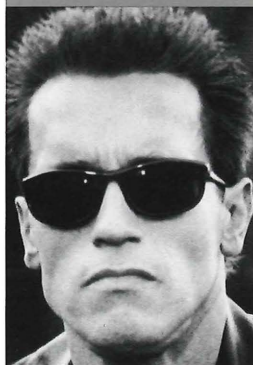


Yet, while the general public is content with the SF flicks churned out by Hollywood, the people responsible for this genre continually bemoan the lack of quality SF films. The consensus among SF writers and critics can be summed up by SF writer Norman Spinrad's characterization of these films as of "a relentlessly commercial genre demographically targeted at [a] huge adolescent audience and supplied, for the most part, with simple good-versus-evil action-adventure plotting designed to show off special effects, and no adult artistic intent at whose fulfillment to succeed or fail" (*Science Fiction in the Real World*, 80). In fact, not only do those in the "SF community" lambaste the quality of most of these films, they often argue that many SF films have been so mutated in order to appeal to a mass audience that they cannot even be classified as science fiction. *The Star Wars* and *Star Trek* films, for example, are often categorized with pejorative terms such as "science fantasy" or "space opera."

Should such criticism be taken seriously? After all, people involved in SF are a notoriously critical and crotchety bunch. By way of illustration, consider my use of the abbreviation "SF" for "science fiction," rather than the colloquial "sci-fi." I have adopted "SF" because "sci-fi" bears such negative connotations of mad scientists and bug-eyed monsters that the mere mention of the term will cause the typical thin-skinned SF fan to dig his or her fingernails into the nearest piece of furniture and launch into an impassioned defense of this genre as a serious, legitimate, and literary. (Similar results can be obtained by calling a dedicated *Star Trek* fan a "trekkie," rather than the politically correct "trekker.") Such nitpicking lends little to the credibility of their criticism. In addition, many fans and writers of SF takes its role as a sociological force and visionary genre far too seriously. In part, their criticisms of this genre could stem from an exaggerated idea of its potential or merely a disdain for popular culture. Or perhaps they are simply resentful because they realize that a hundred times more people will see *Terminator II* than will read a novel by Theodore Sturgeon or William Gibson.

The fact is that much of the criticism of SF film is warranted. But to take all of this criticism at face

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value would be to ignore the subtle evolution of SF film which has been taking place from the turn of the century until the present. This evolution has not simply been a matter of higher quality visual effects or larger amounts of money spent on production, but of a significant shift in the themes and content of SF film which has ultimately been a change for the better. Though this evolution has been irregular and not completely linear, the fact that it has occurred demonstrates that SF films cannot be considered isolated works in a vacuum, and that this particular genre cannot be summarily dismissed. To explain this evolution and its importance it is necessary to take a brief tour through the history of SF film.

#### 1906-1951: The Creature Stirs

The first notable science fiction films were Georges Melies's *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926). These films, however, did little more than provide foreshadowing of what was to come. *Le Voyage dans la Lune* is a somewhat tongue-in-cheek adventure story in which men voyage to the moon in a bullet-like craft which is shot out of a gun and lands in the eye of the man in the moon. The film is important primarily because it was the very first true SF film. As Barry K. Grant states in his essay "Looking Upward: H.G. Wells, Science Fiction and the Cinema," "The films of Georges Melies were of course crucial to the development of expressionist cinema, but they could not be taken seriously in scientific terms" (*Literature/Film Quarterly*, 1986, number 3, 158). And *Metropolis*, for all its stature as a visual masterpiece, sorely lacks content. Grant notes that H.G. Wells, the giant of early SF, called the film a "soupy whirlpool" of confused ideas (158).

A few other SF films appeared during this era, mostly during the 1930s. The best of these were adaptations of four of Wells' works: *The Invisible Man*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (filmed as *Island of Lost Souls*), *The Shape of Things to Come* (filmed as *Things to Come*), and *The Man Who Could Work Miracles*. All were of high quality and hinted at cinema's great potential for excellent SF works. Yet, as Grant states, the themes of Wells's



masterpieces were somewhat blunted in the translation from the literary to cinematic medium (155-6). For example, in Wells's classic mad scientist tale, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, the main character succumbs to the animal passions which underlie his humanity; in the film version, however, he ultimately overcomes them, making the film more palatable fare for general audiences. Similarly, the focus of Wells's *The Invisible Man* is the protagonist's alienation from society, for which invisibility serves as a metaphor. Due to the visual nature of the cinematic medium, however, the film's focus is shifted to the invisibility itself, making it an entertaining, but far less meaningful narrative.

### 1951-1968: Bug-Eyed Monsters

SF film really began to take off in the 1950s, to the dismay of many fans. For the films of this genre which dominated the fifties were of the BEM (Bug-Eyed Monster) variety. These movies typically consisted of cardboard characters battling some horrible creature(s) which have invaded from outer space, discovered in some remote region of earth, or created (accidentally or otherwise) by scientists. Generally, some brilliant, square-jawed WASP scientist would devise a special weapon or discover the Achilles' heel of the creature(s) just in time to save the earth (or a beautiful woman) from certain destruction. While these far-fetched and simplistic movies provided a great deal of enjoyment for some viewers, they also served to further the stereotype of SF as a childish, escapist genre. It has been argued that this sub-genre was terribly damaging to the SF genre as a whole and, in a way, this is true. But this was also a necessary step in the development of SF film: it was, simply put, the childhood of the genre. The obsession with the extreme possibilities (and, in many cases, impossibilities) of science was something that had to be worked out in the collective consciousness of filmgoers.

It should also be noted that the 1950s marked the production of several important films which varied from the BEM sub-genre. Nineteen fifty-one saw the release of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, a film somewhat ahead of its time. It was the first,

and one of the very few films of that era, to express an anti-McCarthyist sentiment. On the other side of the coin were films such as *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, an anti-communist allegory. Additionally, two more of H.G. Wells's works, *War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine* were adapted during this period. These two have long been regarded classics of the genre. In addition, the "space opera" films such as *The Forbidden Planet* emerged, and though they were hardly cinematic masterpieces, they at least rose above the genre's most tiresome clichés. Yet while these films showed some of the potential of film as a SF medium, for the most part the genre remained mired in stereotypes.

The sixties were virtually devoid of any notable SF films. The public began to tire of the BEM variety of movies, and the genre entered something of a dry period. The single major event of the early-to mid-sixties in terms of this genre was, ironically, not directly related to SF film at all. This was, of course, the phenomenon known as *Star Trek*. As Spinrad writes, "While *Star Trek* limped along for three years in the Nielsens before expiring, over twenty million people watched [it] every week, and a whole generation grew up on the endless reruns. More people saw *Star Trek* every day than read a work of literary SF in five years" (79). *Star Trek* introduced into the mass consciousness the imagery, metaphors, and technology of SF. Despite its artistic limitations, *Star Trek* had a profound impact on the development of SF film which has been greatly underestimated.

Two other films of the mid-sixties deserve some mention. The first of these is Francois Truffaut's adaptation of Ray Bradbury's masterpiece *Fahrenheit 451*. Though the film does not measure up to the novel, it is noteworthy because it was one of the first film adaptations of a major SF work (outside those of Wells's) and because it was the first entry by a world-renowned film director. The other important film of this era is Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove, Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Though it could be placed in a category other than SF (even Kubrick did not consider it a work of science fiction), it dealt with a classic SF premise: an atomic holocaust. It is

Despite its artistic limitations, *Star Trek* had a profound impact on the development of SF film which has been greatly underestimated.



arguably the best treatment of this subject which has been produced to date.

### 1968-1977: Childhood's End

The year 1968 brought to a close the long childhood of SF. This was the year of the greatest SF film ever made and one of the greatest films of all time, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. *2001* is significant for a great number of reasons. It was the result of the collaboration of a well-known and respected SF author, Arthur C. Clarke, and a director of first class standing, Stanley Kubrick. It is also important that *2001* was an original work: the production of the movie proceeded more-or-less simultaneously with the writing of the book. Thus the literary and cinematic aspects of the SF genre were, for once, working in synchronicity, whereas previously SF film had lagged behind the innovations of its literary counterpart. Additionally, the film was both a critical and popular success. It was both well-regarded by critics who had panned childish SF films of the previous era and widely viewed by the public. The budget of *2001* was one of the biggest of any film that had been produced by that time. The reason for this, and another reason for the film's prominence, is its spectacular use of new special effects techniques, which opened up broad new vistas for the genre. Finally, the film is painstakingly accurate in its depictions of technology. Its creators even went to the trouble of devising a lengthy list of instructions for the use of a "zero-gravity toilet." The list appears in the film for only a few seconds.

*2001* is a film of grand scale, beginning with the Dawn of Man and ending in the Tea Room Beyond the Infinite. In between, we witness the excavation of an alien monolith on the Moon and travel to Jupiter aboard a ship controlled by a sentient computer, HAL 9000, who seems to have gone mad. All in search of the answers to mankind's most urgent questions: How did we get here? Why are we here? Where are we going?

Yet *2001* seemed to be only a brief interruption of the stagnant period of science fiction which followed the 1950s. The primary reason for this was that *2001* was something of a fluke. It went so

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far beyond the previous SF fare visually and thematically that no one really knew how to match it, much less surpass it (it is a safe bet that many filmmakers did not even *understand* it). There were very few directors with any significant knowledge of SF, and fewer still with the clout to obtain the funding needed to create a major SF film.

A few films with some artistic aspirations did appear, such as Nicholas Roeg's pretentious *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, starring David Bowie as an extraterrestrial who has come to earth to get water to save his family back home, only to end up a victim of Western materialism; *The Andromeda Strain*, based on the novel by Michael Crichton about a deadly "space virus" which has inadvertently been brought to earth; and, of course Pierre Boulle's *Planet of the Apes*. During this period of turmoil and indecision, however, the vast majority of SF films were dystopian fantasies, notably Kubrick's ultraviolent adaptation of Anthony Burgess's novel about social conditioning, *A Clockwork Orange*; the post-apocalyptic satire *A Boy and His Dog* (starring a very young Don Johnson); and George Lucas's vision of an inhuman, mechanical society, *THX 1138*. Other films of this type included *Rollerball*, *Westworld*, *Logan's Run*, and *Soylent Green*. None of these, however, could approach the production quality or mass appeal of *2001*.

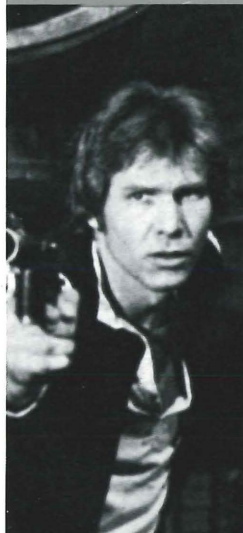
### 1977-1982: Using the Force

Nearly a decade after *2001*, SF film leapt into adolescence with *Star Wars*. *Star Wars* was, in some ways, a great step forward for SF. It forever changed the SF film genre, in many of the same ways as did *Star Trek* and *2001*, but on an even grander scale. Like *Star Trek* it reached a gigantic number of people, thus successfully propelling SF into the mainstream. Like *2001*, it was a large budget project and exhibited special effects the like of which had never been seen before. It was the biggest blockbuster of all time, spawning two epic sequels, *The Empire Strikes Back* and *The Return of the Jedi*, and inspiring dozens of copycat films.

After *Star Wars*, movie studios could no longer



For all its  
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ment,  
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but  
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and  
Indians in  
outer  
space?



afford to ignore the tremendous force that SF had become. The crew of the starship Enterprise was recalled from limbo to save Earth against the Special Effects from Outer Space in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. *Alien*, Ridley Scott's SF debut, explored the combination of SF and the horror of the unknown, Steven Spielberg entered the genre with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and Mel Gibson blasted his way through post-apocalyptic Australia in *Mad Max*. Any artistic quality attained by these films was usually somewhat incidental; they were, for the most part, conceived and produced to make money in the wake of *Star Wars*.

One implication of this was that movie studios were not interested in SF per se, but rather in making movies with dazzling special effects and far-out plots that would attract enormous audiences. Consequently, the qualities which caused these films to be classified as SF were also primarily incidental. The writers, producers, and directors of these films cared little about the speculative or sociological facets of SF. It did not matter to them how unrealistic and scientifically inaccurate the films were. What mattered to them was whether or not the films made money. And, for the most part, they did.

*Star Wars* is the classic example of the action-adventure film which is only incidentally SF. For all its value as entertainment, what is *Star Wars* but cowboys and Indians in outer space? In this film, George Lucas assembled a collage of SF elements—laser guns, interstellar empires, spaceships, robots, and aliens—as background for a simplistic tale of good versus evil. Those who would dispute this assertion are challenged to find a single original idea in *Star Wars*. Granted, it is an ingeniously designed collage, but it involves no real extrapolation or speculation, which are two cornerstone elements of true SF. Must we conclude, then, with the SF critic that *Star Wars* is not truly science fiction? Perhaps not, but it certainly is not good science fiction.

That is not to say, of course, that *Star Wars* and its like are bad films. Most of the films mentioned earlier, including *Star Wars*, are well-made and entertaining. The fact remains, however, that in most cases the science fictional aspect of any of

these films is not integral either to its plot or theme. The apocalypse in *Mad Max* serves only to return our hero to a Wild West environment. The role of the hostile alien creature in *Alien* is little different from that of the shark in *Jaws*. Captain Kirk, boldly going where no man has gone before, is not essentially different from Columbus venturing to discover new worlds.

### 1982-Present: A Fine Line

A great number of SF films have been released in the past decade. David Lynch provided us with an example of how *not* to make a novel into a film, with *Dune*. For pure entertainment there were the *Back to the Future* films. James Cameron gave us three action-packed adventures: *Aliens*, *Terminator* and *Terminator II: Judgement Day*, as well as one sinker, *The Abyss*. David Cronenberg created several quality SF/horror films: *Videodrome*, *The Dead Zone*, and *The Fly*. Arnold Schwarzenegger went to Mars in *Total Recall*, based on Philip Dick's short story "We Can Remember it for You Wholesale." *Robocop* gave Schwarzenegger some stiff competition, and Captain Kirk donned his toupe for five more installments of the *Star Trek* saga. William Hurt ventured into the primal realm of the imagination in *Altered States*, and Mel Gibson starred in two big budget sequels to *Mad Max*. Jeff Bridges came down to earth in what has been called "E.T. for adults," John Carpenter's *Starman*, and Roy Scheider traveled to Jupiter in a somewhat anti-climactic sequel to 2001. And, of course, the *Star Wars* trilogy drew to a close with *Return of the Jedi*. None of these films, however, was nearly as significant in the evolution of SF as was *Blade Runner*.

Ridley Scott's 1982 adaptation of Philip Dick's classic SF novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* was a watershed event, almost on the scale of 2001 or *Star Wars*. Though it was only a moderate commercial success, it was well-regarded by critics and, as a work of SF, it was a giant step forward. Whereas *Star Wars* is only incidentally SF, *Blade Runner* is essentially SF. Firstly, its portrayal of Los Angeles in 2029 is the first depiction of a realistic, coherent SF milieu of such depth and completeness.



Secondly, its SF premises are integral to its plot and thematic content.

The basic SF premise of *Blade Runner* is the development by the giant Tyrell corporation of incredibly lifelike androids called "replicants," which are exactly like human beings except in one respect: they lack the trait of empathy which all living things possess, and thus cannot be considered human. These replicants are used as slaves to do jobs unsuitable for human beings. There is, however, one problem with these replicants: as time passes they begin to develop human emotions, gradually becoming indistinguishable from human beings in all respects. So a safety feature is installed: replicants are given four-year lifespans, at the end of which they will self-destruct. The protagonist, Deckard (Harrison Ford), is a "Blade Runner," a cop whose job is to "retire" renegade replicants. When the line between human and replicant begins to blur for Deckard, he realizes that "retirement" is merely a euphemism for murder. Those who have read Dick's novel may wonder why the screenwriters have coined the term "Blade Runner" to describe Deckard's occupation. At this point in the film, the reason becomes quite clear: Deckard is walking the razor's edge between human and machine; between "retirement" and murder. He begins to suspect that the robots he is killing are actually human and, perhaps even more frightening, begins to suspect that he has become a robot. At the end of the film the sociopathic replicant Deckard has been pursuing, Roy Batty, has Deckard at his mercy. But as Batty's lifespan begins to come to an abrupt end he realizes his own mortality, and, in a final effort of will, saves Deckard's life. In this moment, he becomes fully human and the film's moral becomes clear. The film has shown that the term "human" is not a distinction of birthright, but a spiritual and moral quality which can be gained or lost.

*Blade Runner* is a work of great spiritual and artistic depth. Its visual impact rivals that of *2001* and *Star Wars*. It is superbly acted and directed, and thematically it is light-years ahead of any SF film other than *2001*. In fact, in dealing with somewhat more concrete, less metaphysical issues, and making its entire content seem absolutely



With  
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believable, in many ways it goes beyond *2001*. In short, *Blade Runner* is SF film as it can be, and as it should be. With *Blade Runner*, SF film finally reached adulthood.

### Mass Appeal

To suggest that the history of SF film has been one of continual, linear progress would be ridiculous. Many of the films made in the fifties and earlier are of a much higher quality than some which are being produced today. No SF film has yet been made which surpasses *2001*, and no film of the past decade has been able to match *Blade Runner*. However, an evaluation of SF film over the past century leads one to certain conclusions regarding the evolution of this genre.

When one views a particular film, it is wise to do so with an eye toward the time period in which the film was made. Most people (at least those who enjoy watching old movies) have learned to do this automatically. We can enjoy a film like *The Time Machine* without making disparaging remarks that its predictions of the future are somewhat off the mark, just as we can see the truths in *Dr. Strangelove* without commenting on how dated it is politically and technologically. In fact, we have gotten so good at apologizing for these films in our minds that we often do not recognize how much different today's films are.

This is especially true of SF films, and it is primarily because of this fact that the evolution of SF films has gone largely unnoticed. I am referring not to the fads of SF film, such as the predominance of the BEM films in the fifties, but rather to the underlying causes for the fads and trends which make up the history of SF film. The cause for these, simply put, is that movie studios produce films which they believe people will want to see—that is, not a select group of people (such as SF fans), but the general public. Science fiction films were never intended for viewing by SF writers, critics, or fans, but rather for the general moviegoing public. It is no wonder, then, that those involved with literary SF have consistently been disappointed with SF film. But, one might ask, why would the studios not make movies that would please both SF fans



and a general moviegoing audience? The answer, of course, is that for most of the history of SF cinema, this was impossible.

Before the forties, literary SF was a relatively new genre and so was not much ahead of cinematic SF. Thus for a short time movie studios could please SF readers as well as the general viewing public, especially with film adaptations of classic SF stories such as those of H.G. Wells. But in the forties, a number of innovative new SF authors entered the field, notably Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Ray Bradbury, among others, and literary SF began to move in bold new directions. So by the time cinematic SF began to gain ground as an artistic medium, many of the "new" ideas which were being presented were already clichés in SF circles. This film genre simply could not remain on the cutting edge with literary SF, even if there had been any screenwriters or directors around who knew anything about literary SF. The moviegoing public was busy digesting old ideas—and taking its own sweet time about it. This trend continued until the advent of *2001* and, to a slightly abated extent, it continues today. An example of this phenomenon was the film *The Andromeda Strain*. No matter that SF fans whined that the film's premise had been lying around in copies of *Amazing Stories* for decades; it was new to the moviegoing public.

### Closing the Gap

Today, the gap between literary and cinematic SF is closing, for several reasons. The SF film genre is no longer growing at the rate it had been for the past several decades. As a genre, it seems almost to have played itself out. Most of the "big ideas" have been used up; what remains are new variations on old themes. Of course, there will always be room for innovation in the sub-genre of "hard" SF, which concerns itself specifically with the effects of technological advances on human beings. As long as there is technological advance, there will be some room for such writers to discuss it. Such fiction, however, is difficult to write (and becoming more difficult all the time) as it requires a great deal of scientific and technical knowledge.

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SF circles.

Another reason for the closing of this gap is the current proliferation of screenwriters and directors who have at least a basic grasp of SF. A handful of directors at least have the potential to create some truly great SF films, including James Cameron, David Cronenberg, Ridley Scott, Stanley Kubrick, George Lucas and, of course, Steven Spielberg.

The most important reason, though, is simply that the general public is finally ready for SF films on the same intellectual level as some of the better literary SF. Compare the SF movie audience of today with that of the fifties. In George Pal's 1960 adaptation of *The Time Machine*, the protagonist must go to great lengths to explain how the time machine works, whereas in *Back to the Future* (1985), time travel is explained simply by the existence of something called a "flux capacitor." There is no need for additional pseudoscientific gobbledygook; time travel is now a familiar staple of SF film. It was typical for characters in SF films in the 1950s to spontaneously launch into detailed explanations of the workings of high-tech items. Because such things as robots and rayguns were so unfamiliar to the audiences of the day, not only did their workings have to be explained, but their mere existence had to be justified. Contrast this with the SF audience of today, which readily accepts the hypothetical existence of droids, x-wing fighters, and star destroyers. *The Time Machine* and *Back to the Future* are both excellent films, but if *The Time Machine* had been released in, say, 1985, it would have been dismissed as a silly throwback to a time when audiences were less science fictionally literate. When considered on level ground, *Back to the Future* dwarfs *The Time Machine* because it does not spend nearly as much time on superfluous (as they seem today) soliloquies on the specifics of time travel.

This fundamental difference between the viewing public of today and that of yesterday becomes even more obvious when one considers the attitude toward technology in the representative films of each period. In the majority of the popular films before 1977, especially those of the 1950s, some aspect of science or technology was, in a sense, the "star" of the film. Early SF films served as showcases for fantastic visions of the future, amazing inventions and discoveries, and terrible



creatures which were either the result of some scientific experiment or accident, possessed superior technology, or had to be destroyed by some amazing new weapon.

With the advent of *Star Wars*, however, science and technology began to play a background role. Amazing technological items are regarded as everyday objects in these films, and serve only to make the action of the film more interesting and dazzling to the viewer.

Modern SF films have begun to examine technology in a different manner than either of these two previous views did. Today, these films employ technology as both the focus and the background. A film like *Blade Runner*, for instance, is about a cop who is perfectly at home in a world with flying cars and genetic engineering. But technology also serves as a source of conflict in the film. Thus the genre has outgrown its childish "gee-whiz" phase and, to some extent at least, its adolescent treatment of technology as a mere plaything, and has begun to fulfill the primary purpose of SF: to reflect upon the effects of technology on human beings. This is not to say that movie audiences have advanced to such a level of SF literacy that if a fourth installment of the *Star Wars* saga was released this year it would be a dismal commercial disappointment. People will always turn out for a well-made "science fantasy," but the fact that a film such as *Blade Runner* can be produced offers hope that at least some good-sized segment of the population is looking for something more.

### Conclusions

Granted, this is some fairly optimistic rhetoric. Hollywood will probably continue to make films which appeal to as large an audience as possible and, because most SF films require a relatively large budget, this rule will restrict the genre of SF more than any other. Which, in turn, means that films of the intellectual level and subtlety of SF's literary masterpieces will always be few and far between. And with doomsayers predicting that movie studios will no longer be able to afford to produce as many big-budget special effects

extravaganzas, the genre will undoubtedly suffer.

However, this does not mean giving in to the critics of the genre. There have definitely been a number of high-quality SF films, and at least one masterpiece. And, most importantly, a moment's reflection on the history of the genre over the past century reveals that SF, as a film genre, is definitely improving. The BEM genre has thoroughly played itself out (as evidenced by the unceremonious flop of every recent revival attempt), and there is definitely an audience for intelligent films which truly live up to the name "science fiction." It is inevitable that intelligent works of SF film will be produced in the future, and that the genre will be regarded much more seriously and positively than it is today.

But I digress. For it is not my place to predict the future; that remains the realm of science fiction. ○





## **Damn**

There is nothing like  
expletives muttered  
at muddy extremities  
in an early  
February  
thaw.

Jeremy Lloyd

# First Annual Presidential Coloring Contest

Grab your crayons, swipe your roommates' markers, and harness the creative whirlwind inside you. Color President Diekema the way **you** think he looks (or should look) and you may get your "art" published in the next issue of *Dialogue*. Send your masterpiece to the *Dialogue* office in the Commons Annex before February 20. Be creative, be colorful, and be somewhat nice to the man who raises your tuition every year.







Andy Botts





