

UNSUNG CELLULOID:

TEN GREAT FILMS

THAT NOBODY

TALKS ABOUT

We're not saying that the following movies should have won Oscars for best picture. We recognize that little films like *Dances With Wolves* and *Schindler's List* need a forum.

It is surprisingly common, however, for excep-

tional science-fiction and action-adventure movies to slip into video oblivion without ever becoming acquainted with a large audience.

Indeed, choosing just 10 underrated genre pics proved to be frustratingly difficult. Many first-rate movies, destined to live a

little longer in anonymity, didn't make the final cut. But at least they can be comforted by the knowledge that 10 of their fellow celluloid sufferers have found the light.

So, here is a brief look at some unique and intriguing movies that you may have missed.

BY THE EDITORS

The Hidden

1987

Three years after James Cameron's *The Terminator* established a new standard for intensity in action movies, director Jack Sholder challenged Cameron's definition with this high-adrenaline entry.

Following a murderous alien parasite that inhabits the bodies of humans, *The Hidden* offers the genre's three core elements (fast cars, big guns and heavy-metal rock) while maintaining a subtle comedic panache reminiscent of other fish-out-of-water movies.



Pursuing the offworld killer on Earth is a second alien that is "hosting" in the body of a missing FBI agent (Kyle MacLachlan). Out to avenge the murder of his family and keep the body-hopping creature from continuing its mindless destruction, the alien/FBI agent doggedly pursues the parasite until an astounding slow-motion shoot-out at the film's conclusion.

The Hidden offers a premium of bizarre, over-the-top action that mixes science-fiction weaponry, effective special effects, a lethally sensual Claudia Christian (*Babylon 5*) and an alien who aspires to be president of the United States. Can't-miss fun.

BEST LINE: "He killed 12 people, wounded 23 more, stole six cars—most of them Ferraris—robbed eight banks, six supermarkets, four jewelry stores and a candy shop. Six of the ones he killed, he carved up with a butcher knife; two of them were kids. He did all that in two weeks. If anyone deserves to go this way, it sure as hell is him."

To Live and Die in L.A.

1985

Hollywood's formula for "realistic" cop movies is straightforward: the story must revolve around an incorruptible hero who defies the numbing bureaucracy of his own department as well as the murderous efforts of intensely vile villains. The latter's ultimate capture or death is, of course, as inevitable as the credits at the end of the movie.

For pure entertainment value, such *pro forma* moviemaking isn't bad. But the message that often underpins such films—that any amount of carnage is acceptable as long as the protagonist triumphs—is disturbing. Death is trivialized because bad guys are cartoons; and the hero is always, well, heroic.

In *To Live and Die in L.A.*, director William Friedkin deftly remixes the formula by blurring the moral lines between dedicated Secret Service agents—played by William J. Peterson and John Pankow—and counterfeit-er Rick Masters, a memorable character that launched Willem Dafoe's film career.

The movie's storyline ties our most basic emotions—loyalty, love, hate, revenge—into a latticework of complex motives that bridge the chasm between right and wrong. Sometimes, we discover, movie good guys can do terrible things, too.

But the picture doesn't depend solely on this fascinating moral conflict. There are also a variety of exceptional action sequences, including one of the most riveting chase scenes ever filmed. After more than 50 years



of filmic escape attempts, it is difficult to avoid being redundant. But Friedkin, who gave us the famous chase sequence in *The French Connection*, somehow manages to find a new way to amaze us—with both the chase and the entire first-rate movie.

BEST LINE: "If I was one of your a-hole cronies, you'd be spread-eagle on your desk to do this for me."

Escape from New York

1981

When he isn't trawling for goo and gore, horror hetman John Carpenter (*Halloween*) is sailing fast-paced action movies that never manage to make much money. In his best unsuccessful big-budgeter, *Escape From New York*, Carpenter expands on the people-are-animals premise that he first tackled in the tense *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976).

Set in a depressing future in which the entire island of Manhattan has been transformed into a hands-off federal prison, *Escape*



is a suspenseful and original chase movie, alternately gruesome and funny. A blueprint for the dark cinematic futures that are now *de rigueur*, the film sidesteps the temptation of socio-political commentary in favor of straightforward thrills.

Escape opens with Air Force One going down inside the penitentiary, which is ruled by its inmates. To recover the president, played by a cowering Donald Pleasence, the government sends war hero and budding criminal Snake Plissken (Kurt Russell).

During his adventure, Plissken meets an assortment of weirdos, ranging from a remorseless killer (Isaac Hayes) and his wonderfully buxom odalisque (Adrienne Barbeau) to a scholarly tramp called the Brain. Inevitably, Plissken finds the president and—dodging bullets—gets out of town.

Released at the height of Hollywood's "feel-good" craze, *Escape From New York* met the same box-office indifference as *Blade Runner*. Fortunately, it has been kept alive on video, where a new "director's special edition" offers a catalogue of more creepy and distasteful characters per capita than any non-horror film since its release.

BEST LINE: "Snake Plissken, I've heard of you.... I heard you were dead."

Logan's Run

1976

It's the year 2274, and Earth's post-apocalypse inhabitants are compressed terrarium-style into a domed city—a hedonistic emporium of the young and feckless. And therein



lies the catch: No one is permitted to live past age 30, as mandated by the "life clock" implanted in the palm of each resident at birth. When Logan (Michael York)—a Sandman who pursues and kills "runners" determined to become thirtysomethings—suddenly finds his own life clock on the blink, he joins a pretty nonconformist named Jessica (Jenny Agutter) and together they risk everything to blow the glitzy dump in search of the rumored Sanctuary.

Consistently watchable, *Logan's Run* delivers equal doses of eye candy (e.g., Logan's holographic interrogation; the orgiastic undulations of "The Love Shop") and violent action (particularly at Carousel, where dome-dwellers on the cusp of their fourth decade go out in a blaze of glory). The performances may be overripe—witness Farrah Fawcett's trashy cameo as a technician at the "New You" laser surgery boutique—but we can still empathize with the characters' search for meaning and their anger over being denied a full life.

Although the miniatures used to create the City of Domes look, well, pretty small, the film did walk off with a special Oscar for visual F/X. Yet the film ultimately is more worthwhile for its scary idea of utopia run amok than for its execution. On a purely emotional level, *Logan's Run*—both the movie and its shortlived TV spin-off—touches that desire within each of us to find a sanctuary of our own.

BEST LINE: "Let's have sex!"

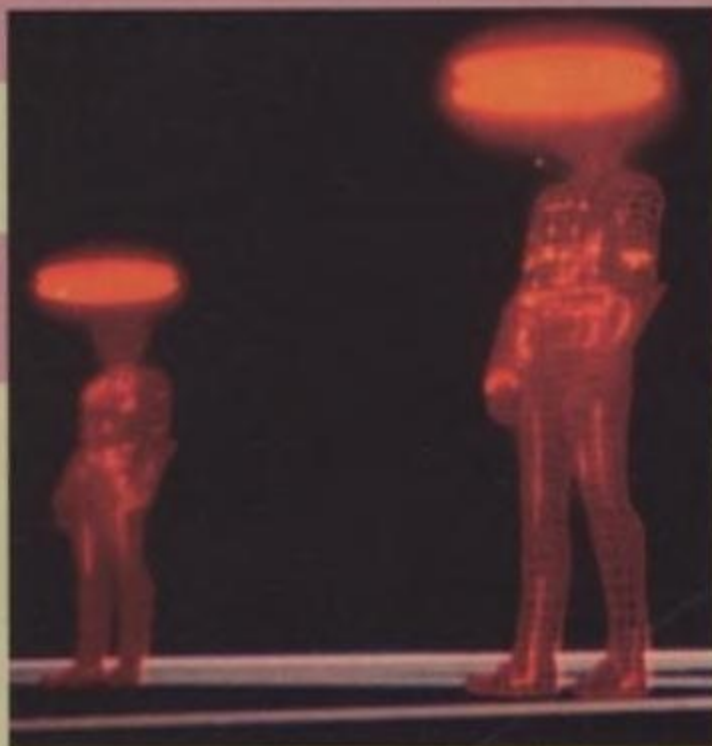
Tron

1982

The Walt Disney Studios was assailed for the uninvolved dramatics of its second major foray into big-budget and—gasp!—PG-rated science fiction (the first was the ponderous *The Black Hole* in 1979). But *Tron* deserves to be hailed for creating a daring production design—a landmark in computer animation.

Underlying the film's neon-trimmed costumes, trippy racing grids and kaleidoscopic visuals, the nominal storyline follows computer whiz Flynn (Jeff Bridges) as he tries to retrieve some valuable video-game programs from sinister computer company exec Dillinger (David Warner). After Flynn is zapped by a laser that instantly "digitizes" him into the world of diodes and bytes, the flesh-and-blood conflict becomes a dazzling electronic contest, highlighted by a wham-bang chase on careening Lightcycles.

While convincingly integrating the human actors into the artificial milieu, the colorful graphics are definitely more decorative than functional. But this is, after all, the filmic equivalent of an arcade game. And *Tron*



succeeds as such, all the while exploiting our then-burgeoning interest in computers and forecasting the current virtual reality boom. It's also smart enough to maintain a sense of humor about the whole thing.

Even with the weak plot, *Tron* illustrates how a mere 96 minutes of celluloid can permanently impact the medium, which is now infested with digital effects. The movie is also noteworthy for a purely human aesthetic: it's the only other significant screen appearance of the comely Cindy Morgan, who did some spirited club-swinging with Michael O'Keefe two years earlier in the ribald country-club comedy *Caddyshack*.

BEST LINE: "If you've seen one consumer electronics show, you've seen them all."

On Her Majesty's Secret Service

1969

This movie is a wonderful aberration in the Bond series. By the time it appeared at the end of the franchise's first decade, the 007 films had already slipped into formula. With each wildly successful movie, the signature car chases, gadgets and quickie affairs left room for little else. Yet director Peter Hunt, working with unknown actor George Lazenby instead of Sean Connery, believed he could improve on the Bond myth. And he did so, creating a remarkable picture rich in both action and characterization.

The sixth 007 film gets moving with Bond pursuing the villainous Blofeld (Telly Savalas), who plans to stun the world with a powerful germ weapon. An admirable foe, Blofeld engages Bond in numerous fights and chases, all leading to a great battle on racing bobsleds.

The action is exciting and inventive, as expected in a 007 picture. What is unexpected is Lazenby's fully realized Bond. Vulnerable and sentimental, this unfamiliar Bond falls in love, marrying a countess named Tracy (Diana Rigg). Her Majesty's famous secret agent even resigns from the spy business at one point to reflect on his experiences.

Filled with interesting surprises, the film ends with an especially uncharacteristic twist:



Bond and Tracy, heading off on their honeymoon, meet Blofeld once again—and this time a bullet finds Tracy's head. We are left with Bond cradling her in his lap, tears running down his face.

This is a decidedly downbeat, though more interesting, 007—one that audiences would not see again.

BEST LINE: "This never happened to the other fellow."

The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai

Across the 8th Dimension

1984

In director Rick Richter's comic-book universe, Buckaroo Banzai (Peter Weller) and his team of extravagantly strange do-gooders use their spare time to repel an invasion from the eighth dimension. Giddy and preposterous, this



Raiders of the Lost Ark parody is consistently funny without relying on the kind of wink-and-nudge schtick that drives most movie takeoffs (see the *Airplane!* and *Naked Gun* movies).

Though Richter's production design makes for pleasing hallucinogenic visuals, the movie thrives on the lead performances. John Lithgow, in particular, gives a magnificently campy performance as Dr. Lizardo, the creepy Red Lectroid villain. Desperately pale and gashing dark green teeth, Lithgow hits a perfect manic pitch for this trip through a happy lunatic's paradise.

Weller, the nominal star, wisely avoids competing for center stage. As the half-Japanese, half-American neurosurgeon/rock musician, he gives an up-tempo, deadpan performance that somehow makes this ridiculous world seem normal. Rounding out Richter's fast-paced lark are far-out performances from Jeff Goldblum (*Jurassic Park*), Christopher Lloyd (*Back to the Future*) and the incredibly sexy Bill-the-Cat look-alike Ellen Barkin.

Expecting their entertaining product to grow into a parody franchise, *Banzai's* producers closed the movie with the promise of a sequel. But not only does the movie's failure at the box office preclude a follow-up, the cost to reclaim the stars would probably triple the original's budget now that the principals have all become A-list players.

BEST LINE: "This all seems very strange. Lectroids, Russians, a woman named John?"

They Live

1988

John Carpenter offers a uniquely disturbing vision of the future in which Earth is populated, controlled and pillaged by aliens who have lulled society into complacency with technological excesses. The alien force has assumed all positions of power, gaining human accomplices by rewarding them for going along.

The action kicks in when Roddy Piper discovers a loose band of rebels determined to uncover the aliens' activities. The pace slows down in the middle for some reflections on a past devoid of great technology and its trappings, but picks up again for Carpenter's typically inventive spin at the conclusion.

BEST LINE: "I've come here to chew bubble gum and kick ass ... and I'm all out of bubble gum."

Highlander

1986

You may have been numbed by the dreadful 1991 sequel that offered nothing worthwhile beyond the sultry Virginia Madsen. Or you may have channel surfed past the mediocre syndicated television series. With these lackluster follow-ups soiling the *Highlander* name, it's easy for genre fans to forget that the original movie is one of the most watchable action pics of the past decade.

The premise is intriguing, if not cerebral: Immortals live among us and spend most of their time hacking off each other's heads. The movie's protagonist is played by Christopher Lambert, who is tracked from 16th century Scotland to present-day America by his arch-enemy (he's the guy with the big sword and the pins in his neck). Inevitably, they have a final showdown in an intense, impressively choreographed duel.

Lambert is as apeish as usual, but he manages to be a sympathetic immortal being. Not surprisingly, the best performance comes from Sean Connery, who brings the early scenes alive with his brief turn as Lambert's philosophical tutor.

Director Russell Mulcahy, a veteran of the rock-video circuit, keeps the production interesting with a sleek and violent style that breezes us from century to century and scene to scene.

BEST LINE: "I took his head and raped his woman before his blood was even cold."

2010

1984

Nine years after the spaceship *Discovery's* crew disappeared while exploring Jupiter's moons, mission specialist Heywood Floyd (Roy Scheider) hitches a ride aboard a Soviet craft to find out what happened—suspecting that it had something to do with the mysterious monolith drifting ominously nearby. His suspicions prove accurate, of course, leading to experiences that suggest we have only begun the grand adventure of existence.

Though largely cast aside by critics and audiences, director Peter Hyams' movie is a classy and moving follow-up to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, for which it exhibits great affection and respect. Indeed, the movie's faults grow out of its attempts to decipher the all but impenetrable narrative of Stanley Kubrick's original. Certainly Hyams overreaches in trying to solve Kubrick's Cube—particularly during the mawkish and distracting supernatural scenes wherein *2001's* lost astronaut David Bowman (Keir Dullea) returns to say goodbye.

Taken on its own, however, *2010* is a well-made, generally well-acted film, as well as something rarer: a serious, cerebrally-driven sci-fi effort—the only one to emerge from the '80s. As such, it accurately reflects the



paranoia and politics of the times (the Cold War, for instance, hadn't yet grown cold). Among the more memorable moments are the cataclysmic, yet life-generating, conversion of Jupiter into a second sun and the verbal interplay between Hal 9000 (again voiced by Douglas Rain) and its creator, Dr. Chandra (Bob Balaban). And while too-literally presented as the building block of life, the monolith itself is as enigmatic as ever.

BEST LINE: "Something Wonderful!"