



I'm not usually one to protest at the cost of big budget fantasy films, or of any film come to that. I genuinely thought that even the much-maligned *Heaven's Gate* had most of its mega-budget visible on the screen, and more importantly did provide a great deal of entertainment value. Likewise *1941*, *The Blues Brothers*, *Star Trek The Motion Picture* and, more recently, *Blade Runner*, all cost well above twenty million dollars. But all these movies, whether box-office or artistic successes, did at least entertain.

Now comes *The Dark Crystal*, the latest offering from Jim Henson's world of Muppetry, and for the first time in my movie going existence I felt that I had seen a monumental waste of money. *The Dark Crystal*, unlike previous Muppet features, doesn't star Kermit and Co going through their cute, and admittedly often entertaining paces. Rather it is a world of complete fantasy, against which is played the >

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The Dark Crystal

Review by
Phil Edwards





adventure of a pixie-like creature in search of a shard of crystal that, when inserted into the Big Daddy crystal from which it was taken, will put the ailing world of assorted goblins and fairies to rights.

For the first ten minutes of the film it is very easy to be astounded at the sheer bravura of technology which seems to be the sole *raison d'être* of its existence. When one considers the wealth of audioanimatronic and computerised puppet wizardry which went into its making, one can only marvel at the gigantic risk taken by Henson and his associates. But as has been said before, special effects alone do not a movie make, and *The Dark Crystal* can only be described as possibly the best example of this kind of corporate thinking.

The cynic in me is inclined to think it was the dreaded Yoda of *The Empire Strikes Back* which inspired *The Dark Crystal* rather than the delightful artwork of Brian Froud. Yoda proved to be one of the most popular characters of *ESB*, particularly with the pre-teen set, who incidently make

up the bulk of the merchandising market. If one cute little wizard can make millions for George Lucas, then what's the potential of an entire movie filled with them? Well, even more millions, I suppose, is a businessman's answer. And unfortunately it seems to be an accountant's thinking, rather than an artist's which is at the cold heart of *The Dark Crystal*.

On a purely dramatic level, David Odell's screenplay, from Jim Henson's story, is just too thin and simplistic even for the children's market at which the film is pitched. Steven Spielberg has proven with *E.T.* that it is possible to make a "Children's film" which doesn't pander to its juvenile audience; just like Disney used to do in its heyday. Certainly the characters and creatures of *The Dark Crystal* are instantly recognisable as "good" and "evil", just as much as those in the *Star Wars* films, but the problem with this lot is that they are simply uninteresting as characters, apart from their physical aspects.

Perhaps a great deal of the problem too, with *The Dark Crystal*, as an entertainment is the fact that without any humans at all in the film there is precious little for the audience to identify with — something that remains important in even the most outlandish flights of fantasy. Another problem with the film is the growing sense of claustrophobia one experiences while watching it. For despite the advances in Muppet technology, the creations on view here are still puppets, and just like *The Muppet Show* itself one is too often aware that the characters in *The Dark Crystal* are puppets and therefore nothing more than synthetic materials fashioned into a shape and manipulated from off-screen. Although there are several long-shots in the movie of creatures ambling about, far too much of it appears to be shot in medium close up, from the waist up.

But after long consideration the conclusion I have reached as to why *The Dark Crystal* is such a dud is simply that it's dull. Nothing of much consequence really happens and the story lacks any real conflict, either of a dramatic or a physical nature. The very nature of the simplistic story dictates that our pixie hero will find the missing shard and defeat the forces of evil. Sure we know that when *Return of the Jedi* fades out the Empire will have been defeated, but you are assured of a lot of interesting things happening along the way, as well as being introduced to a lot of interesting characters. Sadly, *The Dark Crystal* is lacking in either of these ingredients and, as a result, is actually boring, the cardinal sin any film can commit, let alone a fantasy film ●

