

MECHANICAL MEN of the Movies

From *Metropolis* through *Forbidden Planet* to *Star Wars* robots have lumbered across both cinema and tv screens in droves. Starburst looks at some of the best (and some of the worst) robots since 1926.



Dr. Morbius (Walter Pidgeon) demonstrates Robbie the Robot's inability to harm a human being by ordering him to fire a blaster at Commander Adams (Leslie Nielsen). *Forbidden Planet* (1956).

The movies have a long track record of consistent change, adaptation, and alteration when it comes to using written works as a basis for screen treatment. Science-Fiction material, in particular, and—in this case—the literature of the automation or robot. There exists a tremendous chasm between the written sci-fi following and the filmed sci-fi faction. Since Czech writer Karel Capek's play *'R.U.R.'* (Rossum's Universal Robots), the movies have adapted and formed their own version of the robot—sometimes exciting, often ludicrous.

One of the most famous robot figures in the history of *genre* cinema is Rotwang's bizarre creation in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926). The film was a masterpiece of special effects in its day—though its power is such

that it manages to fascinate even today's well-worn viewer—and introduced an automaton that eventually became a powerful guideline for most future robot characters. Compare, for instance, the initial design of the robot in *Metropolis* against the See-Threepio character in *Star Wars*.

The story in *Metropolis* (from the novel by Thea von Harbou) concerns a city in the distant future which is split into two factions; the skyscraper maze of the wealthy and the gloomy underground dwellings of the workers. When a young girl, Maria, appears to be effecting a strong influence on the workers by way of protest, the master of *Metropolis* arranges for the scientist Rotwang to build a robot in her likeness which will be put amongst the workers to break down their ranks.

The electronic creation of the robot—with its switches, coils, lights, and profusion of wires—set down the foundations for all Frankenstein-like laboratory sequences during the following three decades.

The Serials—a whole separate division of Cinema—utilised, and went overboard with, the robot element during their days as matinee actioners. *The Vanishing Shadow* (1934), from Universal, saw a vengeful character using a wide array of technological devices to destroy an evil political group—including in his arsenal a (silly looking) robot. In 1935 Gene Autry was fighting Murania, a futuristic city existing some 20,000 feet under Autry's ranch—in *Phantom Empire* (1935). Needless to say, these Muranians are a highly advanced race and Autry is given a tough time, with death

rays and robots. **Undersea Kingdom**, in 1936, saw Crash Corrigan clashing with the evil forces of Atlantis, and was called upon to fight robots—called 'volkites' in the film. The basic design of these robots was used again in the serial-spoof **Flesh Gordon** (though somewhat adapted). Buster Crabbe as **Buck Rogers** (in 1939) was pitted against the villainous Killer Kane; here there were human-robots controlled by 'filament-ray helmets'. 1939 had **The Phantom Creeps** and crazed scientist Bela Lugosi attempting to destroy the world. Part of his ridiculous plan consisted of an 8-foot tall steel robot—the face of which looked like a kiddie horror-mask. More robots appeared in the 1940 **Mysterious Dr. Satan**, only they happened to be the same 'props' as were originally seen in **Undersea Kingdom**. **Zombies of the Stratosphere** (1952) also used these robots in their proceedings. Further down to comic level was **The Monster and the Ape**, in which a professor's robot battles the villain's ape—which he calls 'Thor'. These robots throughout the Serials shuffled, clanked and stumbled about each serial-episode and were in line as much with Musicals as sci-fi literature.

'Klaatu Barada Nikto'—next to 'Keep watching the skies' (from **The Thing**)—is about the most famous line in the history of science-fiction cinema. The line comes from a highly dramatic sequence in the classic 1951 film **The Day the Earth Stood Still**, directed with great subtlety and force by Robert Wise. **The Day the Earth Stood Still** tells of an alien 'ambassador' who journeys to Earth with a severe warning about armament control and world aggression.



Jessica (Jenny Agutter) and Logan (Michael York) come face to face with the robot, Box, in the 1976 MGM movie **Logan's Run**.

The alien visitor Klaatu (Michael Rennie) brings with him a giant robot—Gort. 'Klaatu Barada Nikto' is the order that must be given to Gort in the event of anything happening to Klaatu—otherwise the robot is likely to destroy the Earth as a form of retaliation.

Based on the story 'Farewell to the Master' by Harry Bates, the actual situation is that the robot is the master and in their own civilisation it is the robots who rule. In

Bates' book this is revealed in a 'twist' ending, but in the film version this was played down because the implications would be too complex.

At the beginning of the film Gort exercises his power when Klaatu is struck down by a nervous rifleman by vaporizing the army's tanks and guns with a destructive heat ray. The robot, later in the film, also vaporizes the wall of a jail in which Klaatu is kept. At one stage the military try drilling into the giant robot's metallic casing to test the strange metal, but the casing proves impregnable. In short, the robot is totally without weakness.

Art director Addison Hehr came up with the idea of a 'fluid metal' robot figure, with no joints or sections but a smooth metallic—almost elastic—appearance. The only feature Gort had was a 'closed-eye' visor spanning the face. When the art department had completed their 8-foot Gort costume it was Robert Wise who came up with the man to wear it—7ft 7in doorman of Grauman's Chinese Theatre, Lock Martin. The suit, made of foam-rubber and painted silver (the helmet was actually metal), built up such intense heat inside that Martin could only work for a few short hours at a time.

The heat ray seen coming from Gort's helmet was done by the special effects department who made a special helmet and later matted in the deadly ray effect.

The Day the Earth Stood Still is one of the rare sci-fi films to cast a robot character as one of its central characters yet manages to extract a restrained but effective performance from it. The playing down, somewhat, of this special effects marvel adds greater credit to the movie as a whole.

Robot Monster is a cheapie picture about an ape-like alien invader, Ro-Man, who



Kent (Eddie Cobb) watches the malevolent robot clutch at Gloria (Ada Ince) in the Universal serial **The Vanishing Shadow** (1934).



Doctor Zachary Smith (Jonathon Harris) and his mechanical friend from the episode "Island in the Sky" of the sf tv show *Lost in Space*.

kills everyone on Earth except 6 people. Young Johnny, a big fan of sci-fi comics and pulps, and his family are the survivors and eventually see Ro-Man destroyed by his master, the Supreme Ro-Man. Then Johnny wakes up to prove that it has all been a dream. Though originally made—in 1953—in 3-D, it was finally released 'flat'. The only curious element with this picture is trying to figure out how they (3-Dimensional Pictures) got Elmer Bernstein to supply the music...

Lee Sholem—who directed many of the *Superman* TV episodes—brought forth in 1954 a good-natured, emotional robot called *Tobor the Great*. Tobor was a strange collection of joints and hinges, built with the intention of being the first space-pilot to explore outer space without risking human life. From that point on the script (by Philip Macdonald and Richard Goldstone) takes up a spies and enemy agents story, with the scientist and his grandson being rescued by Tobor.

A girl awakes after taking a heavy dose of sleeping pills and finds the whole city deserted. Desperately, she searches to find someone, eventually meeting up with a man who had been robbed and knocked uncon-

scious during the night. Together they find that the city was evacuated during the night and when, along with another couple, they prepare to leave they are confronted by some enormous robots. This was the beginning of *Target Earth* (1954)—and turned out to be the only imaginative part in the whole movie. The robots are apparently controlled from Venus and—blazing away with their death-rays (mounted on the heads)—intend to conquer Earth. The scientists eventually create a counter-weapon which shatters the robots' glass cathode-tubes. The film ends with a scientist declaring that if the tubes had been made of metal instead of glass there would have been no way of stopping them. *Target Earth* is the sheerest juvenalia which falls completely to pieces after the beginning. The robots are the big, bulky box type which induce no visual terror at all—in fact, they are somewhat reminiscent of the cardboard kind that used to shuffle around in the serials. The story was based on 'Deadly City' by Ivar Jorgenson (aka Paul W. Fairman) and originally published in 'If: Worlds of Science Fiction' (March, 1953).

Gog, from United Artists, concerns a subterranean laboratory where scientists are

constructing the first space station. The entire lab complex is under the control of a massive computer, Novac, which also controls and manipulates the robot Gog. This robot is a small tank-like machine with steel arms and pincers—and soon becomes a threat when Novac is sabotaged and Gog runs amok. The whole show—utilising the rogue-computer theme—is quite similar to the excellent *Colossus: The Forbin Project*. Photographed in lush Eastman Color and produced by Ivan Tors—producer of such TV fare as *Sea Hunt*, *Flipper* and assorted marine juvenalia.

Produced by the Danzigers, *Devil Girl from Mars* has Patricia Laffen as the title character come to Earth in search of men for breeding purposes. Along with her she brought a hulking robot to enforce her commands. Once again this particular robot is an extension of the breed used in the serials—looking too much like a stylised vending machine.

From MGM—just about Hollywood's most glossy studio—came *Forbidden Planet* in 1956. This picture introduced the most widely known robot in cinema history—Robbie the robot. *Forbidden Planet* was a marvellous science-fiction adventure involving a defunct alien civilisation and its wayward influence on the remnants of an old Earth outpost. The strange power is not unleashed until an Earth rescue ship arrives to pick up the inhabitants. Professor Morbius, survivor from the original party, has managed to construct a robot from information he has acquired from the alien records. This construction of technology he has named Robbie.

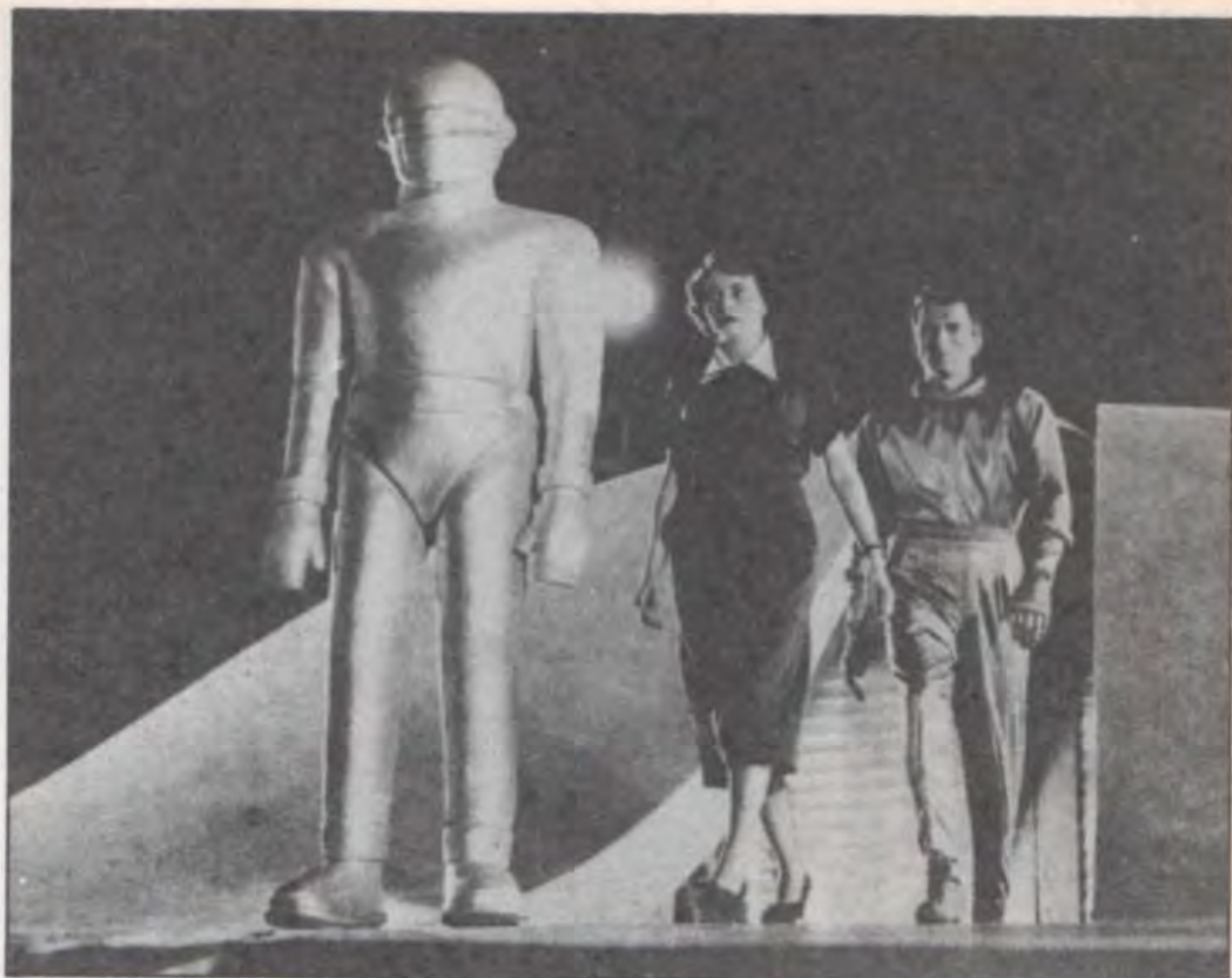
The exciting visuals in *Forbidden Planet* belong very much to the special effects team and the studio art department (not forgetting Joshua Meador on loan from Disney). The results of their combined ingenuity appeared as the astounding Krel laboratory, the landscape of Altair-4, and the rescue flying saucer. However, Robbie the robot was their greatest achievement. Robbie was so successful a creation that Metro basically built a film around him when they made *The Invisible Boy*, in 1957. This follow-up film was really a piece of juvenile extravaganza, relating the lightweight tale of an alien force which takes over control of Robbie and puts him to evil use. The human characters in this are very much secondary players; considering the expense that the studio went to in making the robot they were eager to get as much as they could out of their investment. Robbie was designed by Arnold Gillespie and Bob Kinoshita and constructed around the Karel Capek concept with the basic elements of Isaac Asimov's robotics laws. Adding a touch of polite superiority, Marvin Miller supplied Robbie's voice.

The special visual effects in *Earth Vs The Flying Saucers* were as pleasing and expert as anything else that Ray Harryhausen does—but the invading robots that emerged from the saucers were pretty

dreadful. Sadly—for this particular picture—the robots were of the tin-man variety. By this time (the mid-Fifties) the alien-invasion-of-Earth phase of films was in full swing—having already given us **War of the Worlds**, **Invaders from Mars**, **Killers from Space** and **Invasion of the Body Snatchers**. Among these films **Earth Vs The Flying Saucers** is one of the dullest (excepting some of the fx), and the robot invaders are a forgettable bunch.

Using the same theme in general as **Earth Vs The Flying Saucers**, but proving to be a far more exciting picture, **The Mysterians** arrived in 1957. This was a Japanese version of Pal's **War of the Worlds**, pulling out all stops and settling down to a complete onslaught on a vast scale. One of the central invasion elements was a gigantic robot (looking something like a strange ant-eater) which emerged out of the side of a mountain and was virtually invincible. This character stomped Godzilla-like over the countryside emitting deadly rays and destroying everything in its path. **The Mysterians** is a pleasing film for allowing itself full use of a totally destructive robot being. In **Godzilla Vs Mechagodzilla** the Toho monster meets and battles a massive metallic creature called Mechagodzilla, a mechanical Godzilla look-alike who is under the control (again) of alien invaders. This 'cyborg' is eventually defeated in a colossal battle and Godzilla retires to his South Pacific home until the next city-crushing crisis.

Kronos is a giant accumulator—in the form of two cubes erected on a set of pile-driving pillars—sent from outer space to draw Earth's energy. The 1957 film, directed by Kurt Neumann (of **Rocketship XM**, **The Fly**, etc.), is a pretty dogged sci-fi picture—but the vast metal robot is an exciting and unique display of special effects.



Left to right: The robot Gort (played by Lock Martin), Patricia Neal and Klaatu (Michael Rennie) from **The Day the Earth Stood Still** (1951).

Half of the special effects team on **Kronos**, Irving Block (in *'Fantascene'* Vol. 1 No. 2), explains:

'In **Kronos** there's another planet similar to our own, but perhaps on a higher industrial and technological state of development. They discover they're running out of energy, so what do they do? They can't send a wire, you know, so they send into outer space a machine that comes and sucks up all the energy and brings it back, like a parasite.'

'I made the drawings of **Kronos**, I remember it distinctly and I know exactly why I did, how I did it. We had a beautiful

little model, a gorgeous model. I wanted it to be anthropomorphic, to look like a robot, but at the same time I wanted it to look like a piece of machinery. I spent a lot of time on it, it didn't just come like that! It was a long process of thinking. At one point it looked more like a construction by Picasso, but I reduced it down by a whole series of steps until it ultimately became just a black box...'

Jack Rabin, the other half of the effects team, also comments:

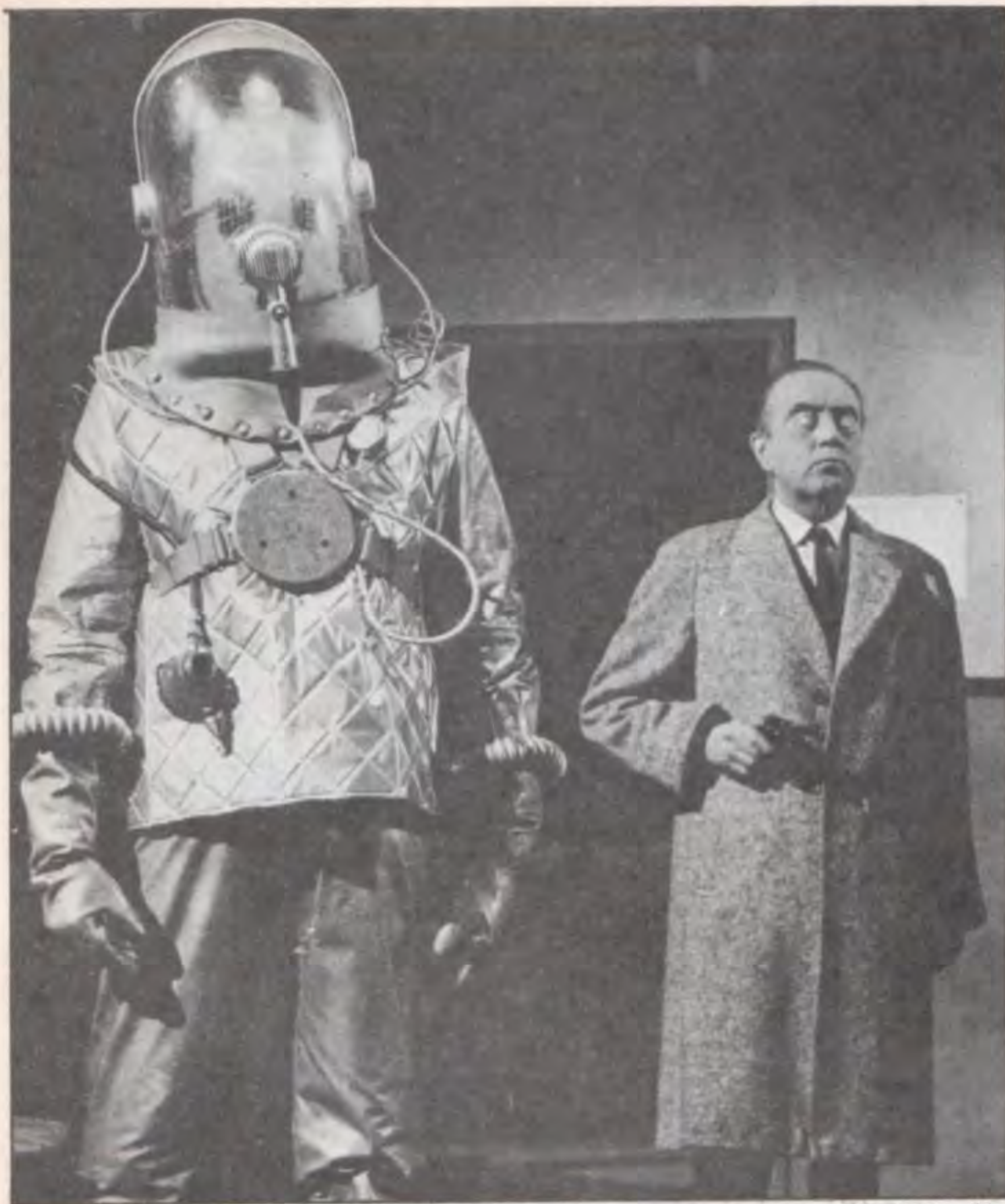
'When it became a box it was done through a series of dissolves—we never had a totally collapsible model. What we couldn't do with either model (*they had a 6-inch model and a larger one*) was done by animation. When **Kronos** is disintegrating in the end we put a sheet of glass in a door frame. Atop that we put aluminium powder. We heated it up so it started to melt, to run. Everything else, the lightning etc, was animation put on top of that. The powder wouldn't run fast enough so we really heated it up—we got pyrex glass to withstand the heat so that the stuff would crack and "do its thing".'

Kronos—apart from being one of the largest automatons to rampage across the screen—is quite a remarkable example of technology being completely indestructible and impervious to military might. It is only when the hero-scientists set up a chain-reaction and reverse the energy-extraction process does the monolith halt—and destroy itself.

Colossus of New York, directed by Eugene Lourie, was only interesting for John P. Fulton's special effects. The story of a benign robot turned bad is not new, and this film didn't reveal any imaginative



The Robotrix (Brigitte Helm) takes her first faltering steps in Fritz Lang's classic movie **Metropolis** (1926).



A glassy-eyed Dennis Price and a mechanical invader from outer space from film *Earth Dies Screaming*.

variations. The publicity for this film, with all its colour and action, is more exciting than the picture itself. However, despite a way-out, caped robot figure, *Colossus of New York* is somehow an interesting reflection of 1950s sci-fi screenplay treatment.

During the early 1960s Hammer director Terence Fisher made *The Earth Dies Screaming*—one of three sci-fi films for Planet. The story about a group of people menaced by robot invaders in a small deserted town was tedious and flat—illustrating just how much Fisher lacked interest in science-fiction. The robot figures marched aimlessly around the streets, and appeared to be as bored about the situation as everyone else.

The robotic figures of *Dr. Who and the Daleks* (1965) and *Daleks—Invasion Earth 2150 AD* (1966) spring from their popularity on the tube. Both films directed by Gordon Flemyng, for Amicus, basically expand on the teleseries' Daleks mythos. However, the Daleks are not really robots because when originally introduced into the BBC-TV series they were partially shown to be small mutated creatures who only operate the

Dalek machines from inside—thus the Daleks are merely destructive little vehicles and not automatons.

Inoshiro Honda's 1967 *King Kong Escapes* features Kong and a robot duplicate of himself battling it out amongst Eiji Tsuburaya's special effects. The robot Kong looks as stupid as the guy in the monkey-suit, and the results are an insult to celluloid.

George Lucas' *THX 1138*, made in 1971 for Warner Bros, told of a futuristic world where people's emotions are minimal, numbers now replace names, heads are shaved bald and just about everything is coloured white. From this sterile and unfeeling society *THX* decides to run away. During his attempt to escape he is pursued by the police—blackleather clad, helmeted humanoid robots. These robots resemble contemporary American riot-police, excepting their expressionless metal faces. But maybe this is what Lucas wanted to convey. *THX 1138* is an excellent sci-fi film of a possible future, and the robot-police depicted may not be so futuristic after all.

Douglas Trumbull's charming *Silent Running*, released by Universal in 1972, had

astronaut Bruce Dern totally depend on his two 'drones' for companionship and to alleviate loneliness in deep space. His situation is that the last of Earth's flora is now contained in an orbiting greenhouse and when the order comes though to destroy it Dern rebels and sends the station out of orbit. Thus he ends up with two small boxlike robots (a third is destroyed along the way), which he names Huey and Dewey. He programmes them to participate as close to human company as possible; he teaches them how to play cards, how to plant a tree, how to take care of the greenhouse, how to play pool.

Trumbull, working from an idea created by Tod Browning's *Freaks*, recruited four children through Children's Hospital as drone operators. Trumbull described the workings (in *Cinefantastique*, Summer '72):

'The drone bodies are made of a very lightweight plastic, but still they weigh 20 to 30 pounds. When an operator was actually working inside one, we removed the metal arm from the front—that arm alone weighs over five pounds—and replaced it with an artificial one made of the same lightweight plastic as the rest of the body. Still, it's difficult to carry around a 20 or 30 pound plastic suit, for anybody; so they didn't have much endurance. We worked that out with a two-wheeled dolly, the kind you'd use to move a refrigerator. It had an extended tongue on the front so that we could slide it under the drone outfit, tip it back and wheel them around the set, to conserve their strength. And the suits come apart—the louvred section of the front just pops right out, so between takes they could drink a Coke or something.'

Westworld (1973) and the sequel *Futureworld* (1976) centre on the world of dreams going haywire. The world in this case is a fantastic holiday resort for the wealthy called Delos; the dreams are robot technology malfunctioning with disastrous results. The first film, *Westworld*, was quite well done and slickly executed. The holiday resort of the Delos complex consists of three separate fantasy worlds: Roman world, Medieval world, and West world. All the inhabitants of these worlds are robots and all are programmed to 'play' along with the human visitors, enacting whatever the visitor wishes.

At this point it is appropriate to mention that the 'realism' is so effective in the movie that one tends to forget it is actors playing robots playing actors.

Needless to say, as all three worlds depict a particularly violent period of history, when the entire complex malfunctions the ensuing havoc is most bloody. The follow-up movie *Futureworld* deals partially with an investigation of what previously occurred but mainly goes off on a strange tangent dealing with 'cloning' and world-domination by androids. *Westworld* is a good—albeit restrained—piece of adverse technology science-fiction.

Logan's Run is the result of that happens when an exciting, fast-paced science-fiction novel undergoes eight script rewrites to become a movie. The result is a lot of expensive and glossy sets for the actors to wander around in; there is little meaning in the brilliant architecture and stunning structures. William F. Nolan and George Clayton Johnson's successful story told a thrilling tale of the world in the 22nd century, depicting such marvels as an underwater city, automated eagles, a robotic civil war battle, and Box, a robot that has a cruel artistic flair with ice and human flesh. Little of this magic comes out in the finished film version—the Box reduced to merely playing another stage of the not-too-exciting visuals. **Logan's Run** ably illustrates that the big movie machine corporations want to make an intelligent science-fiction film—but don't want it to come out looking like a science-fiction film.

Star Wars brings us pretty much up to date, being the most recent major film to give us robots, or 'droids', who are central to the movie's development as a story. The more prominent one of the duo is See-Threepio (C3PO) because he is allowed speech—though in a very English-butler tone and manner. This robot is played from inside by British actor Anthony Daniels, who lets the robot display a wide range of human emotions—although when things aren't going too safely during the story See-Threepio is given to a lot of whining and worry. The other robot is Artoo-Detoo (R2-D2), played by 3ft 8in tall Kenny Baker. This little 'droid' bleeps and



Michael Crichton's 1973 film *Westworld* portrayed a futuristic playground peopled by robots that malfunction and turn on their human masters.

whistles his way around and is really something like a pocket calculator in its calm efficiency. These two robots have more charm and character than any screen-robot ever seen; they also react beyond the science-fiction literature law or robotics, making decisions that not always conform to honesty and goodness.

During the *drawing-board* creation of the two robots, writer-director George Lucas examined previous robot characters in films and books—and disposed of most of the static laws and interpretations regarding robotic nature. The basic comparison is one of emotion—the viewer's emotion.

Forbidden Planet's Robbie, despite its childlike charm, doesn't evoke audience sympathy or feeling as such because Robbie is presented as an indestructible automaton more than capable of looking after itself in any situation. The 'droids' of **Star Wars** are entirely different—they need the audiences' concern. They are presented as vulnerable beings with human reactions, and as such are open to all forms of danger and destruction. The human cast of characters in **Star Wars** play in fear of being over-shadowed by the robots.

Who said robots would never replace man?



The most recent movie robots, C-3PO and R2-D2, brought mechanical men back to the screen with a vengeance in George Lucas' *Star Wars*.