

HEAVY METAL

Review by John Brosnan



Mindblowing is a word that used to be bandied about a lot once upon a time. It was applied to so many things it soon became devalued and a cliché. Well, I'm blowing the dust off it and dragging it back into the limelight...

Heavy Metal is mind-blowing. There's no other way to describe it. It's a movie that takes your mind and blows it out the back of your skull, especially if you're sitting in the front row. It overwhelms you.

with an onslaught of dizzying images that leaves you mentally gasping at the audacity of the animators—and admiring their skill. **Heavy Metal** is the *Fantasia* of the 1980s—hard, brutal, funny and very unsubtle, with none of the lofty intellectual pretensions of the 1940 Disney movie. It is very much a film of its time.

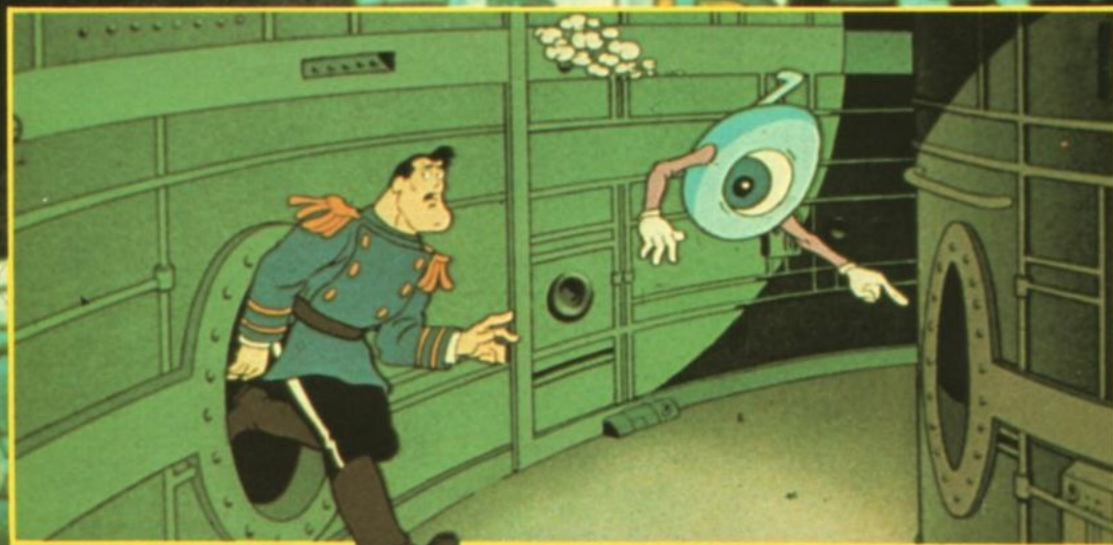
Conceptually, of course, there's not much to it. It creates its sense of wonder purely on a visual level, mainly by juxtaposing small objects against big ones. This is a device that Ray Harryhausen has often used in his films—as he once said in an interview: "The very big or the very small have always been a source of fascination to me. I like the comparisons of sizes—of great heads looking down on little things, and little things looking up at great heads." Harryhausen has exploited this technique to great effect on many occasions—the sequence in *Jason and the Argonauts* when the statue of Talos comes to life and looks down on the tiny humans is a prime example—but there are limitations to how far you can go with this using the model animation process. With straight animation, however, there are *no* limitations to the range of sizes you can suggest. The sky is literally the limit...



Top left: The production art for the *Taarna* episode, used also as the poster art. Left: Hired killers fire upon the cab driven by Harry Canyon. Right: Some of the vicious warriors dominated by the Lochnar, a kind of evil green bowling ball. Above: The artistry of top British fantasy illustrator Angus McKie provides one of the most spectacular scenes in the film.

Thus in *Heavy Metal* there are innumerable shots of vast statues and structures dwarfing the human characters, culminating in the sequence where a giant space ship that is so big it blots out the whole of Washington DC with its shadow is in turn reduced to the size of a pea in comparison to a gigantic city in space. The advantage that animation offers is that you can create the illusion that the camera is moving in on an impossibly large object by putting an increasing amount of detail on the screen, something that is impossible to do when zooming in on a three-dimensional model. *Heavy Metal* exploits to the fullest the potential that animation has for creating *Star Wars*-type vistas on an almost limitless scale.

Okay, so we're agreed that *Heavy Metal* is a mind-boggling, mind-blowing animation extravaganza but what's it exactly about? Well, I suppose you describe it as a science fantasy story, or rather series of stories, with the emphasis on *Sword & Sorcery* (or as Harry Harrison once suggested as a more accurate term: "Sword & Butchery"). It can also be described as violent and sexist with strong element of sadomasochism and even a whiff of fascism, but these dubious ingredients are defused by the movie's predominant sense of fun. The fact that *Heavy Metal* is essentially a comedy is not surprising considering that the Executive Producer, Leonard Mœgel, is co-founder of *National Lampoon* magazine and a producer of *Animal House*, and that the two main writers, Dan Goldberg and Len Blum, also co-scripted *Meatballs* and *Stripes*.



Heavy Metal consists of six separate stories linked and framed by sequences concerning a mysterious green sphere, called the Lochnar, which represents universal Evil or something. If the film has a serious flaw this is it. Sometimes the green ball fits into the individual stories but at other times it has to be forced into the narrative, with distorting and unsatisfactory results. I suppose some sort of link between the stories was necessary but I wish it had been in a different way (still, it's not as senseless as some of the framing devices around many of the Amicus anthology films).

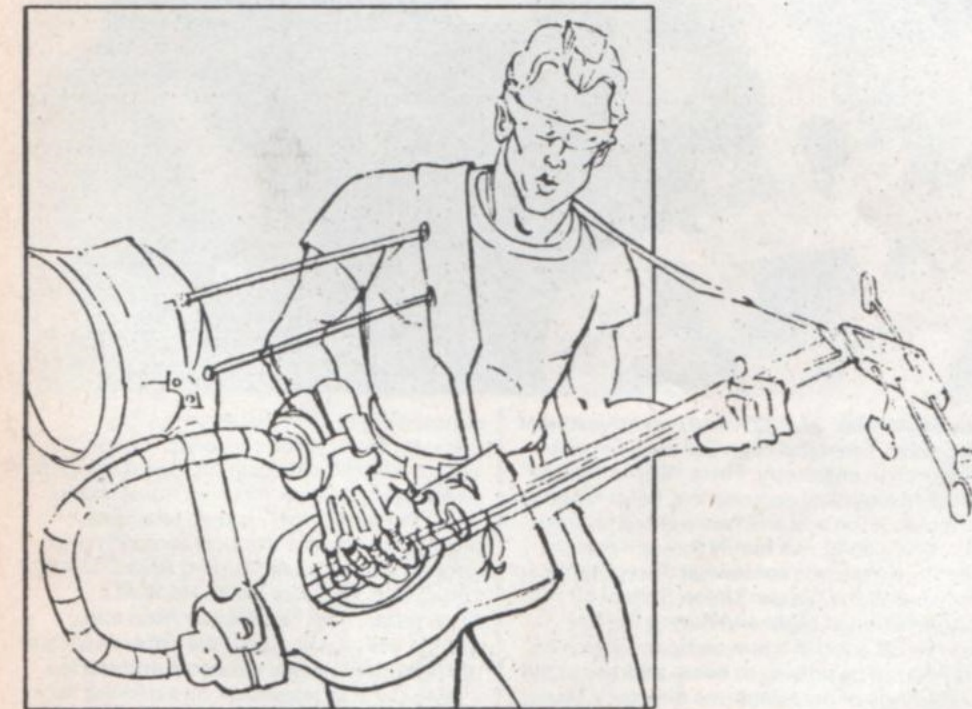
It begins with an astronaut returning to Earth—in a convertible yet!—with a present for his young daughter. The 'present' is the deadly green sphere which promptly zaps Daddy and then menaces the daughter, telling her of its past triumphs over goodness...

The first story it tells is *Harry Canyon* which concerns a tough-talking taxi driver in a future New York that is even more anarchic and dangerous than today's. He is persuaded by a beautiful girl to help prevent the Lochnar falling into the hands of a criminal gang but she turns out to be just as treacherous as everybody else. It's a kind of private-eye parody, packed with splendid visual jokes, that I found very amusing. It also manages to be much more inventive within the confines of its short running time than the whole of

Carpenter's vaguely similar *Escape from New York*...

Then comes *Den*, created and designed by Richard Corben ('Gore' of underground comics fame). This is an hilarious send-up of a typical sword & sorcery story. Skinny teenage boy inventor, Dan, is suddenly swept through time and space, thanks partly to the Lochnar, to a distant world where he finds he has been transformed into the hulking, mighty-thewed Den. And before he knows it he is up to his jock-strap in naked women, monsters and evil magicians—all the usual sword & sorcery ingredients. But throughout it all he remains, on the inside, the same callow teenager and his 'gee whiz' style voice-owners, provided by John Candy, are the chief source of the humour.

Captain Sternn, the next episode, is probably the nearest thing to a 'cartoon' in the picture and also, in my opinion, the least successful section. Captain Sternn, who resembles a *Mad Magazine* version of Superman, is on trial in a giant space station for various disgusting crimes. His defence rests on the evidence of a nerdish-looking character who falls under the influence of the Lochnar on the way to the witness box and turns into a rampaging giant. The subsequent chase through the station is quite amusing but it all leads up to a very unsatisfactory pay-off. One feels it could all have been a lot funnier than it was...



Opposite: The giant space ship which makes an appearance in the segment *So Beautiful and so Dangerous*. Opposite inset: The two alien acid-heads who star in the same story. Opposite inset: Captain Sternn, from the story of the same name, who finds himself on trial for a huge number of horrendous crimes. Above: One of Howard Chaykin's Futurock musicians from the *Taarna* story. Below left: This cartoon was produced by the staff animators in one of their slacker moments. Below right: The prosecutor who appears in the *Captain Sternn* story.



Dan O'Bannon of *Alien* fame supplies the story for the next episode, titled B17 which is a straight horror story in the EC Comics style. Corpses in a bullet-riddled B 17 are taken over by the Lochnar and return to life, sort of. The pilot parachutes to safety but ends up on an island populated by more animated corpses... The graphics are brilliant (Mike Ploog was the designer) but as in the previous episode there's a lack of internal logic for what happens (are we to presume, for instance, that the green sphere is also responsible for the walking dead on the island?).

The fifth story, and my personal favourite, *So Beautiful and So Dangerous*, also lacks a point but it matters less in this case because it is a surreal, free-wheeling romp where the marriage between the visuals and the sound track is at its most successful (music here provided by *Nazareth*). This is the one involving the giant spherical space ship mentioned earlier—for some reason a Pentagon secretary is sucked up into the ship where she has a close encounter with two alien acid-heads, who talk like 1960s hippies, and an amorous robot who not only beds her but later proposes marriage. The sequences where the ship arrives at the unimaginably vast city in space are the most mind-blowing in the movie but unfortunately the episode comes to an abrupt halt at this point, just when it seems to be really starting.

The sixth and final story is also the longest. Called *Taarna* it is a sword and butchery (I mean *sorcery*) fantasy with no humorous content at all. It's also the one with the heaviest quota of sado-masochism which is either a plus or minus depending on your personal taste.

It begins with the arrival of the ubiquitous Lochnar on some planet (possibly a future Earth) where it turns a tribe of desert dwellers into a horde of blood-crazed murderers. When the horde attacks a city of peace-loving softies the elders send out a telepathic SOS to someone called *Taarna*. We next see a cloaked figure riding a flying creature that looks as if it escaped from a starring role in a Christmas dinner. They arrive at the ruins of a vast structure and land at the foot of a statue about a zillion miles high.

The rider removes the cloak and is revealed to be a beautiful, naked girl with long blonde hair and eyes like Clint Eastwood in a mean mood. After taking a ceremonial swim in a pool she slowly dresses in a costume that consists of little more than black boots and a few leather straps. She takes so long doing this that by the time she reaches the city everyone is dead, thus creating the impression that as far as saviours go this one is not exactly a model of efficiency ("Sorry I missed the massacre, squire. Had trouble with the knots on my leather G-string..."). Where would Superman be today if, every time there was an emergency, he took several hours to get into his costume? I ask you!

Of course she redeems herself later on, though first she has to undergo ritual humiliation and torture at the hands of the leader of the baddies, by plunging into the Lochnar itself and destroying it.

The graphics and animation in this episode are undoubtedly very impressive but I found the story itself a little predictable and overlong. And also, thanks to the lack of humour, a little pretentious. I think it was a mistake to end the movie with a long episode devoid of humour but that's only a minor criticism and didn't detract from my overall enjoyment of the film.

I think I can safely say that if you're a science fiction or fantasy fan, an animation freak or simply into 'AA' style sex and violence you're going to like *Heavy Metal*. Especially if you sit in the front row.