

**MAX  
HEADROOM**  
"A specially effective  
movie"

"Meet Max Headroom", they said. The computer generated television announcer destined to be the new media star of Channel 4, whose features are the future of TV presenters to come. However, they were quick to apologise that Max is just off the computerised drawing board and isn't quite perfected yet. He stutters and stammers, gets words mixed up and sometimes suffers from a visual twitch that is quite (eye) catching.

But will you believe that computers can replace flesh and blood people that we know and love. So once you get used to the slightly strange, shiny plastic quality of his deeply tanned face, the plasticine hairdo, and his non-reflective reacto-light-rapide eyes, you won't be able to tell him from the real thing.

What is all this about you might ask – but then again you should already know, as the regular half-hourly *Max Headroom* shows are well underway, and the hour-long origin pilot was screened at the start of April (for all of you who saw the film and are still confused, you can catch it again at the end of the 13 programme run).

For those who would like reminding, the film is set 20 minutes into the future, where TV is the only growth industry. It tunes into the machinations of the world's top television station – NETWORK 23 – run by Mr Grossman, played by Nicholas Grace, and their top rated TV programme. The programme – a high powered, investigative news show – has been made a success through the agency of ace reporter, Edison Carter (Matt Frewer), who is aided in his electronic news gathering forays via a computer link with his controller, Theora Jones (Amanda Pays).

The visuals in this sequence are an overlap between video verité and computer graphics, which left me wondering if we were entering a new generation of TV/computer watchers who are capable of receiving multi-levels of information like this. But don't worry as it is by no means essential to the plot. . .

Thanks to computer whiz kid Bryce Lynch (Paul Spurrier), NETWORK 23 have invented the blipvert – a TV commercial compressed into a fraction of a second, which is over before the viewer can even think of changing channels. These blipverts have,



**Top: TTTT Talk about Talking Heads. Max Headroom, the computer generated video jockey. Above: Bryce Lynch (Paul Spurrier), not in as much control as he thinks.**

however, one unfortunate side effect on the slothful viewer. . . it causes them to explode. Edison gets hold of the story and is determined to expose his own employers.

However, before he can do this, he has to evade a futuristic Burke and Hare – Breughel and Mahler (Hilton McRae and George Rossi) – and escape from the computer controlled citadel of NETWORK 23, which, despite Theora's attempts is being manipulated by Bryce. It seems as if Edison is going to get away as he steals a motor bike and speeds through the underground car park. Then at the last moment Bryce lowers a barrier, with Maximum Headroom only 2.6m. Edison is knocked unconscious.

Now the dilemma for Mr Grossman is that Edison knows too much,

but he is also one of the top rated presenters – lose him and farewell ratings. The solution offered by Bryce is to generate a computer image of Edison, that will be controlled by another computer programme based on an analysis of his brain. However, the programme is only powerful enough to create an image of the head and the result is Max, who can't quite get the idea of Maximum Headroom off his mind, and who also knows enough to expose NETWORK 23. Grossman tells Bryce to get rid of them both, who in turn engages Breughel and Mahler to do the job.

Breughel and Mahler try to make a little extra on the side and sell off Edison's body to the Body Banks, entrusting the computerised Max to Blank Reg (Morgan Shephard) and

Dominique (Hilary Tindall) at Big Time TV, a pirate station broadcasting from the back of a truck. They plug the set in and out comes Max, with a fully made personality, and a greater sense of humour than Edison seemed to display. Max is then used as the host on a 24-hour rock/pop video show, which steadily climbs in the ratings, leaving Edison to fight his way out of the body banks and expose Grossman's part in the blipvert scandal.

So why is it, if the *Max Headroom Show* is just another way of re-packaging rock/pop videos, we had to go through the above? It seems the need for a rational, no matter how far fetched, explanation haunts us, even in the fantasy world.

As for the weekly show, the mode of presentation is in the form of a minimal link man, allowing the promotional videos to run, on the whole, uninterrupted. I much prefer the snappy stand-up comic approach to many of the ingratiating pop presenters who try to be the focus of the programme instead of acting as introducers. As a way of packaging rock/pop videos, this minimalist approach can't fail.

The hour-long pilot film and the half-hour regular shows are directed by Rocky Morton and Anabel Jankel. The film's imagery projects a post-electronic revolution world, where the computer has fallen into decline and disrepair. A world where a kick and a thump has entered the manual of every user friendly system. To this end the locations used are excellent, conveying a sort of lived in desolation.

Max Headroom's story is set in the decayed post-punk world so popular with many rock/pop videos, *a la* Billy Idol's *Dancing With Myself* (directed by Tobe *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* Hooper). This is combined with some perennial SF cliches in an amusing mish mash of styles from *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, to *Blade Runner*, to *Mad Max*, to camp horror and (consciously or not) to comics, particularly Howard Chaykin's (well and truly) mixed media *American Flagg!* (published by First Comics).

*Max Headroom* benefits from being a low budget TV film, as any extravagance might have only led to a special effects movie. Rather what we have is a specially effective movie.

**Richard Ashford**

Starring: Matt Frewer (*Max Headroom* and *Edison Carter*), Amanda Pays (*Theora Jones*), Nicholas Grace (*Mr Grossman*). Directed by Annabel Jankel and Rocky Morton. Produced by Peter Wagg. Written by Steve Roberts.