

SKY CAPTAIN AND THE WORLD OF TOMORROW



DRINK TANK

So, I managed it: 4 cons in 5 weekends. I am exhausted, but they were all great fun, and they were all very different. That's part of the reason I do so many cons, because very few cons are very alike. Let's look at all the cons I went to this year.

Gallifrey is a con I've been meanign to go to for years and finally did! It was a great time and I'm very much looking forward to next year when we're going back and having a good ol' time. It's a young con, as far as attendance, and a lot of costuming. I had fun chatting up the folks who I know more as SF fans.

Minicon, where I was Fanzine GoH. It was a small con, less than 700 people, and it was a lot of fun. The focus for me there was not only having a good time (and riding roller coasters at Mall of America!) but also getting to know the folks of Minneapolis fandom, who were many, varied and awesome! It was a blast and it felt a bit younger than most cons I go to. Didn't hurt that one of my favorite writers, Ted Chiang, was the writer guest and Frank Wu was Artist.

That led into Baycon. It was a slightly down year, and the Assyrian folks added a layer of trouble (not to mention hookers) but it was a good time, especially Unwoman playing in the Fanzine Lounge.

After that was WorldCon. I had a ball, got to chat with so many people, and while it broke me financially, it was an awesome time. The food especially. I just wish we could find a way to keep costs down.

I had a break of a couple of months before SteamCon, which was good because that's how long it took to reestablish my pocket cash! I had a blast, the costumes were amazing, the people were a ton of fun, and perhaps most importantly, I found myself doing panels that were among the best I've ever been on. I wish we could go again next year, but it looks like we'll be in the UK!

Next was Con-Volution, which was so much fun, if again, bank-busting for parking and eating at the hotel. It's a shame that's what I took away from such a great con. I played poker with some great folks (including the infamous Dr. Noe, Dana O'Shee, and some guy named Stephen Brust) and we did an edition of The FanboyPlanet podcast (you can find it at fanboyplanet.com) with Stephen, Steve Jackson and Mo Starkey. I was on a few panels too and had a really good time! I hope the next edition is every bit as much fun. It felt like BayCon did back in the early 2000s, which I guess is kinda the point.

After that, it was off to SFConOntario. I did a full report of my trip to Toronto in Claims Department and it was so much fun. I got to hang with the good people of Canada, and a few Stateside friends I like to see. It was a con with inner-bigness. It was small, but it wasn't so small you felt like it was just a friends-only show, nor was it so big you couldn't see everyone. I liked the way the con felt, and being a GoH didn't hurt either!

Then, LosCon. There's a lot of talk about LosCon shrinking and getting older. That may be true, but it was also a lot of fun. There was so programming confusion, but in total, it was a blast. I actually thought that the panels I was on were pretty darn good, that the folks I got to sit down with, including standards like Milt Stevens, Chris Marble, Joyce Hooper, Elizabeth McCarty, Dave, Other Dave, Third Dave, and guests like Lloyd & Yvonne Penney, made me a happy camper. Maybe it's the fact that I'm becoming an oldster that I don't notice that everyone else is one!

So, this year's con attendance, and there must have been one or two more I'm forgetting, was actually more than last year (CorFlu, Wondercon, Nova Albion, BayCon, Westercon, WorldCon, FenCon/DeepSouthCon), but it seemed less busy. There's also con-like events that I tend to attend, so there's always that.

This issue is LoCs, TWO OF THEM!, and 52 Weeks on a film that I recognise as a lot of fun, and then there's a look at some stuff. I'm very much looking forward to the last issue of the year (likely issue 335) which will have a look at the year gone-by, the National Film Registry, and the final edition of 52 Weeks! So looking forward to that one, including bringing in a few new folks! And now, LETTERS!

# Letter Graded Mail sent to Garcia@computerhistory.org by Our Gentle Readers

**Not 20 minutes after I sent off the last issue of *The Drink Tank*, did ERIC MAYER sent in a LoC on the *Donnie Darko* issue! And here it is!**

Chris,

Holy cow, this is a great essay on a great, great movie. You have some amazing observations: "When the pain of everything else is gone, not because anything is solved, but because you've found the thing that makes you forget. Sometimes, forgetting is way more important than actually dealing with it." Jeez, that's fucking brilliant. Absolutely true.

**And how tied-in to *Donnie Darko* was it too?**

And the eyes. Have people's eyes really changed over time? (Could the appearance it be due to the technology recording them?) I don't know but what a fascinating thought. That one could place someone in their era by their eyes. Man, you ought to take that idea and run with it. It's got to lead someplace.

**They really have changed. It's one of the things you can tell from modern photos using old equipment. It's really strange.**

Anyway, this whole essay is a tour de force. And about *Donnie Darko*. I loved that movie but do I understand it? Am I not smart enough or perceptive enough to piece together exactly what it means or has everything been left deliberately ambiguous? There's so much going on, so many possibilities suggested. (What about those time tracks people leave behind?) My nephew and I chewed over the movie for a long time and looked at websites devoted to it. But I guess in the end a work of art is more important in making you think than in presenting you with conclusions.

**I do what I can.**

I can't put my finger on why the movie seemed so unique. I can't think of anything else quite like it. Look at the rabbit suit. Why isn't that just stupid (as your voter says?) It ought to be laughable. And aside from that, WTF? Does that rabbit suit mean something? Why a rabbit suit?

**And the Rabbit Suit instantly takes you any from what you expect, so I think it's perfect.**

I'm in the odd position the movie felt like a work of genius but I don't really have anything constructive to say. *Donnie* seems to be searching for the answers to the things that most interest me, well, obviously the basis for everything, time, death, reality. And I don't know, either there aren't answers or they are just beyond the reach of my intelligence.

Best,

Eric

**And now, His Lordship Andy Hooper!**

November 27th, 2012

Dear Chris,

I wanted to send a reply to *The Drink Tank* #331, having rather enjoyed your précis of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and then empathized with your personal reactions to the movie's text. I can see why you have

your fans. Great Fanac elicits strong reaction – almost no one ever finds it necessary to denounce a merely Hugo-nominated fan editor – and you put yourself into your writing in a way that can be quite irresistible. How odd to be so pallidly reassuring to the recipient of fandom’s supreme decoration – but you have been bleating that you and/or your fanzine “suck” in the letter columns of other titles, so you put me in the curious position of refuting your assessment of your own work.

***I always took M’s concept that all writing must be personal, no matter what the context. While I have a very low opinion of hte quality of my writing (I work on the Blind Squirrel concept) I do get an occasional nut...***

I know that mail is a sometimes dubious blessing to the frequent fanzine publisher, but with only one correspondent (the 9th Century warlord “Warre Buff”) in this issue, I felt a sort of moral imperative to reply. I have been moving the entire “stock” of “my” fanzine output around in my house over the past several weeks, and they are slowly filling up a pile of banker’s boxes about the size of a refrigerator. The highest issue number I ever reached was 80, which was Apparatchik, with Victor and Carl (and Martin and Randy and Lesley and Steve, etc.). A stack of 80 issues of Apak makes a nice chunky block of paper, but one that can still be carried in one hand by most people. What would a 331-issue pile of The Drink Tank look like, were one to print all its issues and somehow keep the resulting tower of pages from falling over? It’s this image that makes one feel as if some reply is eventually imperative.

***I’m pretty sure there’s at least one printed copy of every issue of The Drink Tank around my house, save for issue 300. I’ve been putting together a USB drive with all my issues to give to the good people of The Eaton Collection at UC Riverside. THERE’S A LOT OF ‘EM!!!!***

Charlie Kaufman acknowledges both Phil Dick and Stanislaw Lem as influences on his writing, and some sequences in his work have made me see parallels with similar stories by Ted Sturgeon and Robert Silverberg. One of the things that makes us fans is that we respond positively to works by writers and filmmakers who have a significant experience and literacy in speculative fiction, and more or less pander to that same sensibility in the audience. Kaufman’s movies exhibit a sophisticated vocabulary of science fantasy – if Johnny Quest grew up to attend NYU Film School with Chris Columbus, he might have a similar facility with plausible super-science. I think his work is some of the most essential science fiction to appear on screen in the past 15 years. People so inescapably associate SF with space opera that they want nothing to do with the actual words “science fiction,” but if I’m asked to introduce an adult to the concept of modern fantasy, Adaptation or Eternal Sunshine would be superb tools for the task.

***Hmmm... I can see the Dink in Kaufman, and now that you mention it, there’s a bunch of Sturgeon in there. I don’t think I would have thought of that. I love the way he looks at the ideas of fantasy within an SF context. Being John Malkovich is a great example.***

More specifically, I see Eternal Sunshine as a cautionary tale. Everyone has had the impulse or desire to forget a lost love in the ache of its immediate end. But in latter days, I treasure all the moments I’ve had with all the people that I’ve loved, and the thought of impulsively dismissing them from my memory is frankly scary. Clearly, time and biology will work to accomplish this goal if we want it to or not. Impatience with the present and faith in the future are such classic elements of science fiction – clearly, these stories are written for us.

***Damn straight! There’s a lot to say about the role of memory in how we form our world view. If we forget, does it still effect us. What role does the sub-conscious play? That’s the heart of the film and one that Kaufman had such fun playing with.***

I’ve only found the time to read about a quarter of your film series, and I still hope I get around to reading the rest of them. Any ambition to collect and republish them in some format that people can pay for? Why not? I’m curious to see what you will take on thereafter as well -- what has been bubbling under the surface all these months, waiting for the movie series to conclude?

***I’m planning on putting together a complete collection as an issue of Claims Department, with a bit of polishing and a few other essays from folks. I have talked to a few folks about a few of the films and I think it would be a lot of fun. That’s down the road (maybe in time for the 2014 Westercon...)***

Yours in Roscoe,

Andy Hooper

***Great to hear from ya! Once a year, that’s all I ask!***



So, Linda and I are planning a trip to England. It's World Fantasy in Brighton, and while the World Fantasy crowd ain't my usual bunch of folks, it's as good an excuse for a trip to the UK as I can think of! I've got ideas, and even bigger than my hopes is Linda's over-whelming NEED to go to the Museum of The City of London to see a particular temporary exhibit.

The Cheapside Hoard was a bunch of jewellery found in 1912. It was in a ball of clay about the size of a soccer ball (some claim a football, but they're wrong) and containing hundreds of pieces from the Tudor era. I'm interested, though there's a bit of research I'm going to want to do in the Museum on their holdings of wrestling-based material. They've never done a full exhibit like this and I'm kinda psyched.

There are the five museums I always make sure I go to. The Victoria & Albert Museum is the most important to me. Then there's the Cartoon Art Museum, the Natural History Museum, The Science Museum (gotta see the best exhibit in the world: Making the Modern World) and The British Museum. I've also never been to the Imperial War Museum (which James loves, maybe I'll make him show me around) the National Gallery, The British Library or the Coffee & Tea Museum, or even 221b Baker Street Sherlock Holmes museum. I've also never done any of the Palaces or the Tower of London. Go figure. I also hear that the Kew Steam Museum and the London Museum of Transport are both well-worth visiting.

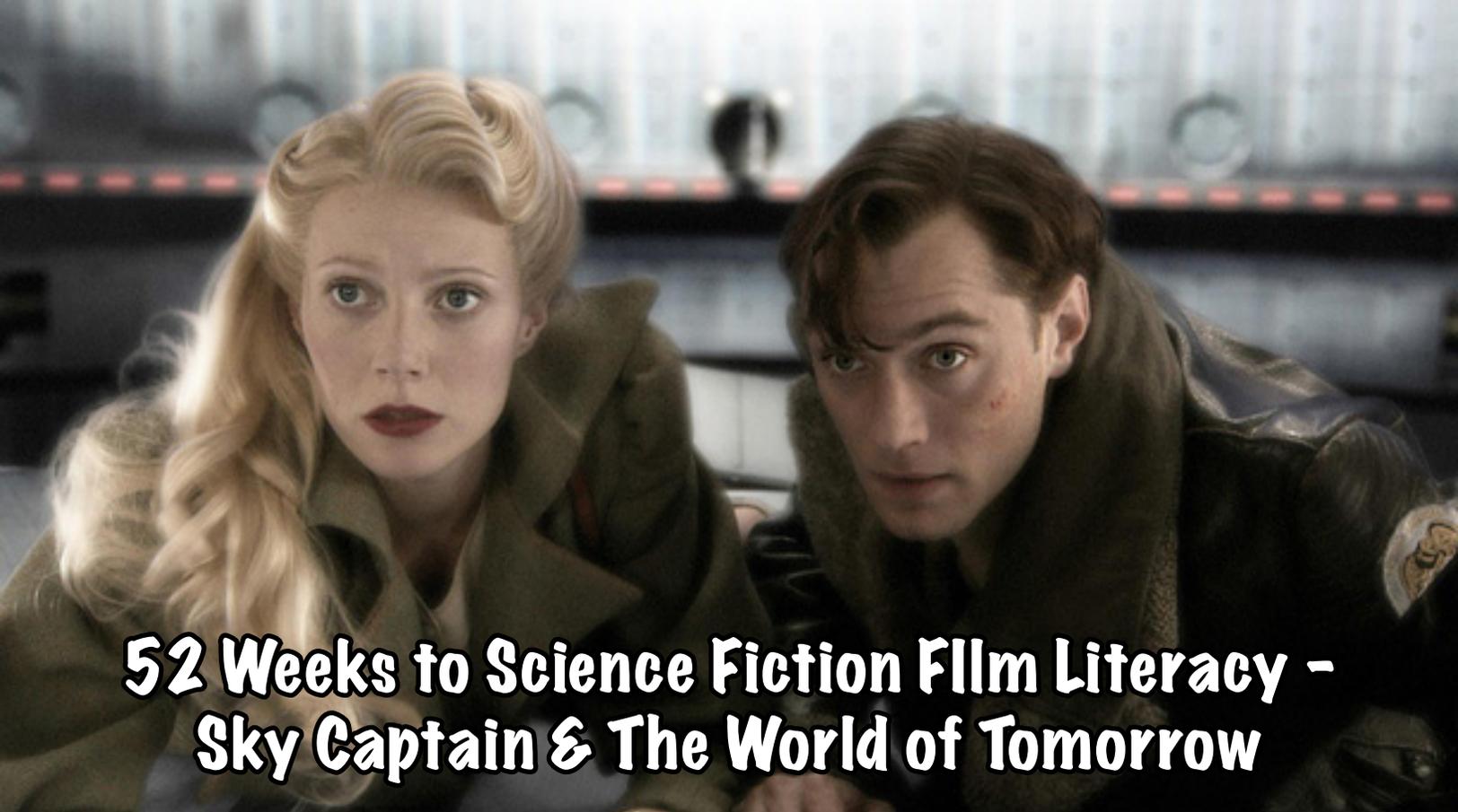
We'll probably only have three, maybe four days in London, so I'm guessing one for the Museum of the City of London, one for the V&A/Science Museum, maybe one for the British and Imperial War, and one for other. That sounds right.

In Brighton, there's the con, the Pier, and the Palace. We've done those, and there's Harry Ramsden's with its awesome fish & chip,s but I'm thinking there's also the Booth Museum, a natural history museum that has some really cool fossils, The Brighton Toy and Model Museum, and The Brighton Fishing Museum. Will we get around to them? Maybe one or two, and I am betting Linda would love to go back to the Royal Pavillion.

There is also talk of Paris. And the girls from Bella Donna, which is the Venetian Courtesan troop that Linda does Renn Fairs with. They are a lively group and will be an absolute blast to see in the UK.

And there's also the potential of Paris. I've never been, so even a two day visit would be great. Of course, this is a big expense with WORldCon 2014 in London too. That's gonna be costful, so I'll have to figure something out. It might be time to liquidate many of my assets... and also to gather some assets to liquidate. Might wanna do that first part before arranging the sale.

So yeah, if you're in the UK, and wouldn't mind a guest for a night or two, lemme know!



## 52 Weeks to Science Fiction Film Literacy - Sky Captain & The World of Tomorrow

There are worlds that are too beautiful to create out of atoms. There are times that are too distant, too strange to make real. There is no way to create Shangri-La in three dimensions. In the old days, you could do some of that with Matte Paintings or miniatures and forced perspective, giving the illusion of vast vistas. You can still do that, and some films do, but the costs are high, the work has to be incredibly precise to make them feel at all real. Combining these techniques with computer animation has been done successfully with films like Jurassic Park and Mars Attacks, but there was a thought that you could do it all without the physical component at all, that these backgrounds, these worlds, could all be created in the computer and the actors could be shot separately and then composited. This concept is one of the most controversial as many folks say that it has killed acting, has given a flatness to film. It's an interesting point, one that could be argued until the virtual cows come home, but when a film needs technology to create one of those special visions, it can really be a magical thing.

Thus it was with the green screen masterpiece *Sky Captain & The World of Tomorrow*.

And I do mean Masterpiece.

Let's start with the whole concept of Green Screen shooting. Chroma Key is the process of shooting something against a specially coloured background which is then replaced with another image. It's an old process, Originally it was a Traveling Matte process, and then in the 1950s a more impressive way was found. It was the 1980s where an 'Ultraviolet Matting' process (I believed pioneered for *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) took over as a standard. For the longest time, the main user of what was then Blue Screen technology was weather forecasts for television news. The computer made it so much easier to work with the technique, as did the switch from Blue Screen to Green Screen, and it was used widely not only in science fiction and fantasy film, but in all sorts of movies. One great short film that used it as a gag was Sean Becker's *Dude, Where's My Scooter?* that showed at Cinequest in the early 2000s.

The idea of shooting films without real backgrounds wasn't really fulfilled until the early 2000s. George Lucas shot *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* mostly without backgrounds, but it still used many. The follow-on, *Attack of the Clones*, was almost entirely shot without backgrounds against a green screen. I believe that they built the largest completely green screen facility in the world to accomplish this.

Before *Sky Captain & The World of Tomorrow* was released, I'd seen a film shot with no real backgrounds, Able Edwards, at Cinequest. It was a 30,000 film that was basically *Citizen Kane* if Welles had a thing against Walt



Disney instead of W.R. Hearst. It was a good little movie, and it showed what the possibilities of shooting this way could be. There was a sort of sfumato thing going on, perhaps to disguise some of the digital sourcing, but it's still a strong film.

Which brings us to *Sky Captain*.

The story of *Sky Captain's* quest is a fun one, and thoroughly based in the history of Pulp science fiction and adventure. Jude Law plays Joe Sullivan, better known as *Sky Captain*. He's a somewhat devil-may-care flyboy who is the leader of the Flying Legion. It's a sort of private Air Force, and if you think on that a little too much, your head'll go 'plodey! Law is perfect for this kind of role, and I thought that he did a remarkably good job playing it.

Polly is the reporter. She's one of those "Woman in a Man's World" types. She's played with exceptional moxie by Gwenyth Paltrow. She's not my favorite actress, not even my fifth favorite, but she does a really good job here. And that's HUGELY important to make the audience feel like the characters are actually interacting with real backgrounds and fake characters. Let us look back on *Jurassic Park*, where Ariana Richards is in the jeep and the T-Rex is looming over her. This was not an actual T-Rex puppet, but a CGI version that was added. I believe they were doing the ball on the end of a stick thing at that point. She sells that there is a real T-Rex and that it's right there. Where Polly is interacting with the images in the background, she sells their reality. That's one of the things that makes *Sky Captain* so remarkable. They manage to act it with a fluency in a cinematic acting language that was still being created.

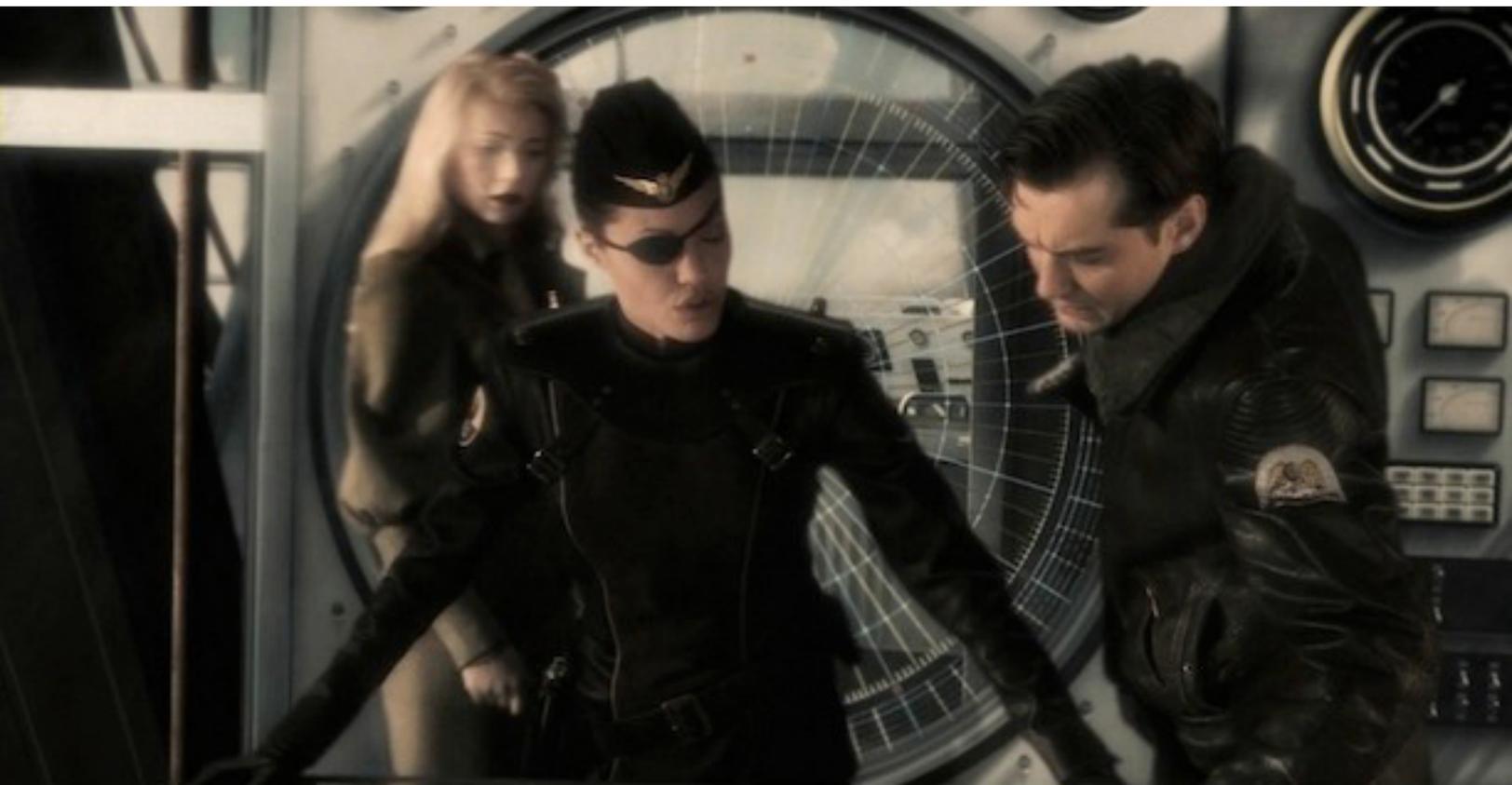
The general story is Polly looking into the disappearance of various scientists. Turns out they're being kidnapped by Totenkopf, an evil scientist played by the great Larry Oliver. Sorry, by Laurence Olivier. He appears as a hologram on an awesome screen that is obviously influenced by our good friends at *Things To Come*. Go ahead, look back at the *Things To Come* issue of 52 weeks, I think it was April 2011. OK, so they're being kidnapped and Totenkopf has a killer he's sent out played by Bai Ling. It's really the only time she's been good in anything, not to mention that she looks spectacular in the costume! Totenkopf sends Giant Robots (which look

incredibly like the Iron Giant!) to attack all the major cities of the world. In New York, Polly takes pictures and Joe fights them. It's an action-packed sequence, and one that I loved. They end up on a great adventure leading them to the Himalayas and later to Shangri-La. They then make it to the Flying Fortresses of The Royal Navy, commanded by the lovely Franky Cook; played with charm, bite, and sexiness by the great Angelina Jolie. Seriously, everything she should have been doing with her Lara Croft character in the Tomb Raider movies she did as Franky, even though she only had a couple of days on set. She did a great job and provided an excellent foil for both Joe and Polly.



Basically, the film turns into your traditional “Evil Guy Trying to Burn-Up the World and Start a New Eden” story, which is a lot of fun. They end up saving the day, and it's awesome. The story is only part of the awesomeness, and while it does seem that a couple of folks phone in their performances (Michael Gambon is one of 'em), but the great Giovanni Ribisi is amazing as Dez, the scientist for the Flying Legion. He's a great character, a wonderfully bright-eyed sciencer. He's so perfect as the wide-eyed wonder kid with the sciencing ability.

Now, why do I call it a masterpiece? Because it's exactly the kind of story a bunch of kids with a bunch of playtime would come up with. I can remember when I was a kid, we'd get together, Rich Casem, Felicia Louie, sometimes Maria and her brother from across the street, Brian Gardner, too. We'd run around the neighborhood, playing superheroes, detectives, adventurers, whatever. We'd start off exploring a cave, in this case the camper parked in my 1860 Briarwood Dr. driveway, and then we'd find a jewel that would transport us to another world where there'd be huge tigers that would chase up the mulberry tree in my front yard, but then we'd have to jump out to get the jewel that Felicia dropped and then we'd run through the yard, maybe create a river with the hose, climb the little house in my backyard, play in the fort, maybe try and shoot-down the attacking Russian planes with plums from the tree that over-hung the house. We had huge, long afternoons of imagination and play, and if we'd all grown-up watching movies like Bwana Devil, or maybe reading B'Wana Beast comics. Our world wasn't sepia-toned, it was crisp as HD-DVD, and we shared it together.





WHAT? I hear you say. How does that make for a masterpiece

It's the vision. When the writer-director Kerry Conran conceived of it (along with his brother doing a bunch of concept art), it was born out of the adventures of the 1930s and 40s, and the comics, especially those adventure comics, of the 1950s. Watching *Sky Captain*, you can see where there are direct pieces that reference things in other films, especially old serials like *Flash Gordon* (remember when I talked about that one in *52 Weeks?*) and old SF Pulp covers. The robots are so obviously influenced by images from the likes of Frank R. Paul and Kelly Freas. This film isn't straight-ahead, it's a twisty maze of passages through an alternate Earth of the 1930s. It's a powerful film vision. The thought process that would lead to a film like this is the same as the way we'd create our shared play-visions when we were kids. He played with concepts, genres, images, symbols, all of it, and he produced a film that celebrated that sort of ideal. This is the perfect marriage of all the concepts of genre fiction of the 1930s through the 50s. There's the war book, especially the *Flyer* novel and comic, and that perfectly melds with the adventure tales that were so popular and that *Indiana Jones* so beautifully paid homage to. There's naturally SF, but it's not the jaded SF of the 1960s and forward, it was the optimistic SF that was informed by adventure novels and so many other genres. It's a fantasy, it's a little bit of everything! It's everything, and as we've seen films going to the world of merged genres, this is an absolutely Beautiful example. It's so much fun, it's gorgeous and, while the story has the feeling of having been the playtime imaginings of Golden Age-influenced children, the story has the feeling of having been the playtime imaginings of Golden Age-influenced children. That is a HUGE selling point to me, allowing me to connect with it so much better than if this was a story that dealt with a more reality-based form.

The thing is all the elements are there. There's a raygun, robots, planes, Shangri-La, a beautiful reporter, a flyboy, a sexy-as-hell Royal Navy woman with a patch on one eye, flying fortresses, New York City, Zeppelins docking at the Empire State Building, tiny elephants, a mad scientist, everything. This is the interaction of every kind of marker you could think of for genre film, and they're all playing out on the screen in a film that's been created using new technologies. This is what the promise of computer graphics has been leading to, and it was well-played, wonderfully produced and acted and delivered. This is what filmnuts/genre freaks like me had been waiting for.

And it was worth it.



# Sky Captain & The World of Tomorrow

