

ISSUE 34 OCT 2026

GIRLS, ON FILM



SPACE!

SPACE CAMP ALIENS THE LAST STARFIGHTER WAVELENGTH
DUNE SPACEBALLS MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE ARENA



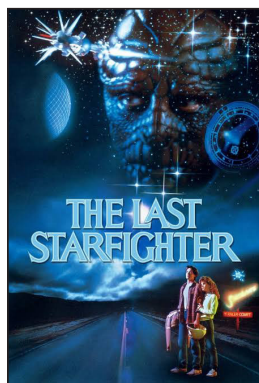
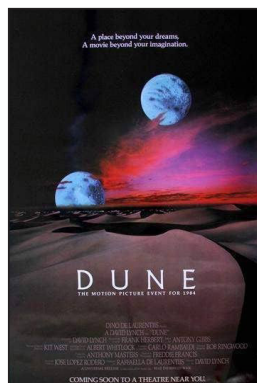
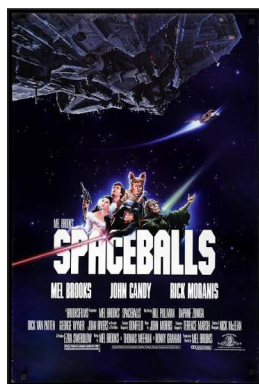
SPACE CAMP (1984)

Girls, on Film

THE SPACE ISSUE

Issue #34 October 2026

Opening Credits	3
Wavelength	5
The Last Starfighter	8
Dune	11
Space Camp	14
Aliens	17
Spaceballs	20
Masters of the Universe	23
Arena	26
Closing Credits	29



COME WITH US...

Welcome to *Girls, on Film* #34. This zine is hopelessly devoted to 80s movies! Each issue features eight movies released between 1980 and 1989, all related to a particular theme. We cover a wide variety of movies, offering a mix of commentary, history, reviews, and personal reflection.

In this issue, we blast off to outer space! Check out movie summaries below. You can find even more space movies in back issues (especially the *Aliens* issue) on our website at girlsonfilmzine.com.

Wavelength (1983) - Ex-Runaways singer Cherie Currie and future nerd Robert Carradine help child-like aliens get home.

The Last Starfighter (1984) - A kid obsessed with a video game ends up getting drafted to fight in an alien army.

Dune (1984) - A strange and beautiful disaster as David Lynch attempts to film the impossible.

Space Camp (1984) - NASA accidentally launches a bunch of teenagers into space.

Aliens (1986) - Ellen Ripley wakes from a 57-year hyper sleep only to discover that the Weyland-Yutani Corporation is still a shitty corporation.

Spaceballs (1987) - Mel Brooks's hilarious send up of the original *Star Wars* trilogy.

Masters of the Universe (1987) - Was NY Times critic right when he said: "If you liked the toy, you'll love the movie"?!

Arena (1989) - There are no rules in the Alien Fight Club!

About the Zine

Find Us Online & In Print

Digital issues of *Girls, on Film* are available to read for free on our website. Purchase full-color prints from our store or select vendors listed on our website. Limited issues are also available in zine libraries.

Guest Write for the Zine

Love 80s movies and writing about movies? Send a short bio and writing sample to the email address below.

Website: girlsonfilmzine.com
Email: info@girlsonfilmzine.com
Instagram: [@girlson80sfilms](https://www.instagram.com/girlson80sfilms)
Bluesky: [girlson80sfilms.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/girlson80sfilms.bsky.social)

Co-Founders/Editors

Stephanie McDevitt's one big disappointment in life is that she wasn't old enough to fully appreciate popular clothing styles of the 1980s, as she was mostly attired in paisley sweatsuits. A full-time editor and occasional freelancer, Stephanie looks nostalgically back on 80s films such as *Ernest Goes to Camp*, *Adventures in Babysitting*, and *Can't Buy Me Love* and wishes she could pull off the hairdos of Cindy Mancini and her friends.

Janene Scelza spent much of her teen years making zines and combing musty video stores and public libraries for all the 80s movies she could find. She's got plenty of faves, but she loves stylish indie films like *Desperately Seeking Susan*, *Repo Man*, and *The Terminator* the best.

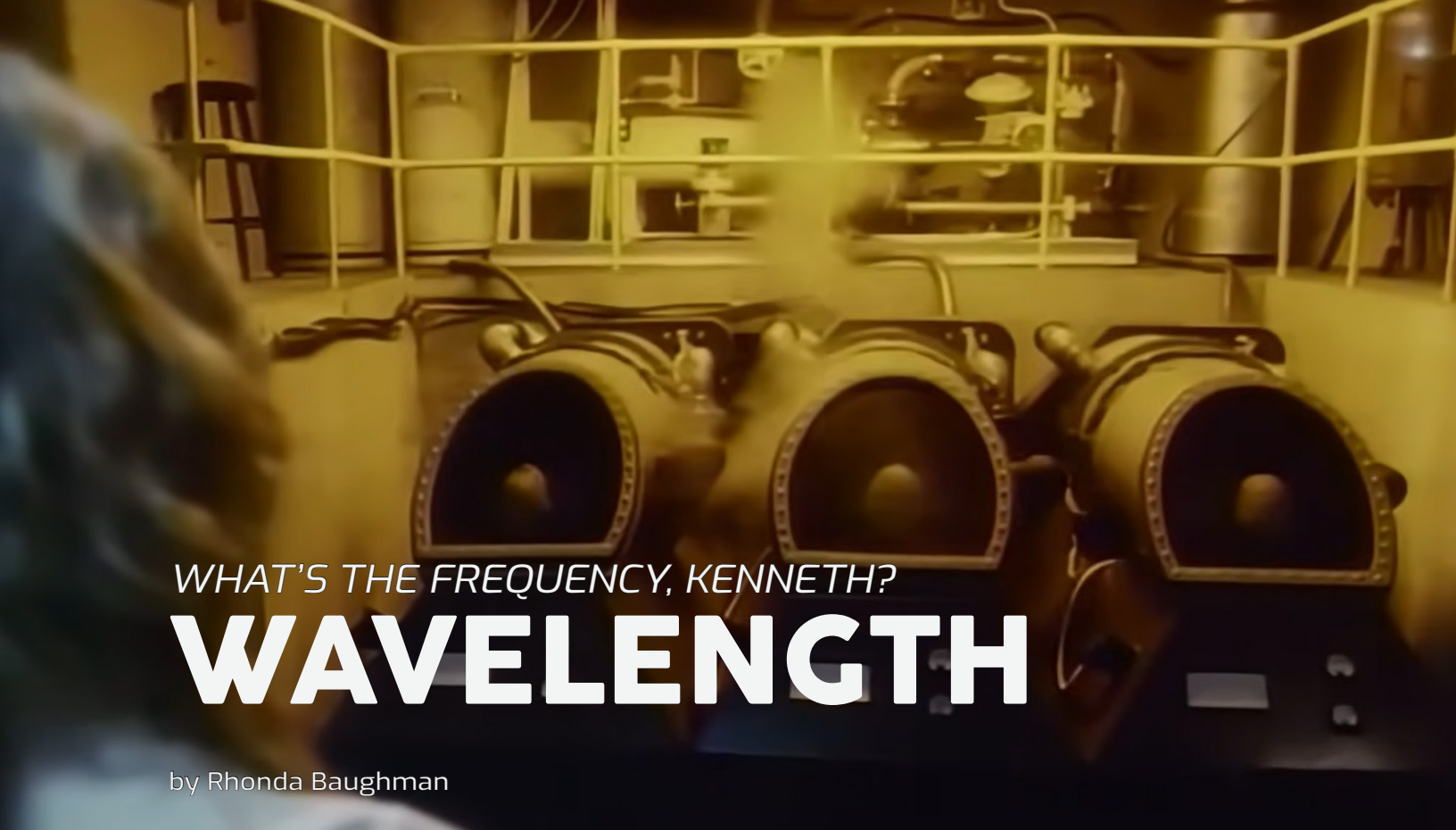
Contributing Writers

Rhonda Baughman, a teacher and freelance writer, raised adolescent hell in the 80s, and the horror films of that era were her BFFs! She loves all 80s pop culture, but nothing spoke to her quite like *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-O-Rama*, *Nightmare Sisters*, and *Reform School Girls*. She got a pink laminated Video Time Video membership at nine years old and she never looked back. Or forward, really; she still loves her VHS and VCR. And let it be known, the scrunchie never died for Rhonda: she STILL wears one proudly!

Sebastian Gregory came of age in the fiery crucible of the 1980s. His parents were avid cinephiles who dragged him to every small, independent movie house in Houston and made sure he had a thorough education in film, which may explain his enduring affection for low-grade Italian westerns. He has been an editor, writer, musician, and actor while masquerading as an IT drone in Sector 17.

Matt Scelza loves to dissect and analyze everything. He co-writes essays for the zine with his sister, Janene. He has also logged a lot of hours at the same video stores and public library film collections with Janene in search of odd and unusual titles. He's got too many favorites to name.

Tom Scelza prefers writing about movies he loves instead of jawboning about it. After years of mulling over those "small" movies that came out during the 80s, Tom gives it his all on movies he has loved forever. Movies should have more substance than car chases.



WHAT'S THE FREQUENCY, KENNETH? **WAVELENGTH**

by Rhonda Baughman

Certainly in the top ten of most underrated, overlooked films I've ever covered, *Wavelength* (1983) actually did have a limited U.S. theatrical release in 1983, opening in Chicago, Dallas, and Minneapolis and later in Los Angeles, according to AFI [1]. However, the lack of a later official U.S. home-video/streaming presence had me squinting on Youtube to watch this surprisingly relevant and introspective flick despite the fact it was clearly a rough VHS transfer [2].

I would not go so far as to call the film fun, but I loved the fact that *Wavelength* combines alien-contact science fiction, romance, government schemes, and questions about human morality. Its unusual production history, limited theatrical distribution, and long absence from official U.S. home release have only contributed to its status as an obscure cult film ripe for conspiracy theorists.

Written and directed by Mike Gray, and

with a fabulous Tangerine Dream score [3], *Wavelength* stars Robert Carradine as Bobby Sinclair, a down on his luck Cali musician; rocker Cherie Curie (*The Runaways*) as the love interest Iris Longacre; and Keenan Wynn as Dan, a local loner Bobby knows. While Iris and Bobby canoodle in his apartment, she starts to hear some things, noise no one else can hear (certainly not Bobby).

They decide to urban explore in an abandoned building not far from Bobby's apartment, and we eventually find out Dan helped build it once upon a time. Turns out not to be abandoned at all. Buried deep underground is a shady government bunker housing all sorts of military personnel large and in charge (so they think) readying to experiment on and dissect a trio of child-like aliens who crashed their ship on earth.

And oh, our alien pals might look like children [4], but they're a race older than anyone wants to think too long about, and it



Do you hear what I hear?

was their telepathic song on Iris's frequency, as well as Dan's who had been hearing them for a few weeks. Iris and Bobby decide to liberate the aliens from government clutches, risking it all to help them get the sunlight they need and back to their craft to go home. Besides, humans and aliens have to help each other since the government is about to implode the facility, burying Iris, Bobby, the aliens, and everything else under rubble—their version presumably of salting the earth and destroying evidence.

Once the aliens emerge, they do not speak (since they're telepathic) but boy, do they give young Michael Cera feels from his one-episode role on Canadian series *La Femme Nikita*. Once Iris and Bobby escape with the aliens' help, they're all on the run. They bob and weave through LA—taking the viewer on a little tour of the city in the early '80s—and it was a magnificent little jaunt to watch. A desert campfire chat between humans and aliens is a little awkward, but please do remember the aliens may be played by children, but the aliens themselves are NOT meant to be children.

Wavelength's obscurity is practically part of the film's narrative now. Gray's unconventional directing approach and his willingness to incorporate suggestions from cast and crew, as well as its strange production history easily reflects the spirited, unconventional character (and story) of the movie itself.



Do they deliver takeout to bunkers?

The film's Wiki page directly indicates the strange production journey. In a nutshell: "Gray wrote *Wavelength* in 1977 after his deal with Columbia Pictures to direct *The China Syndrome* (1979) fell through." He moved the film to Warner Brothers, but since *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) had been so successful, *Wavelength* was axed because it was "too similar." *Wavelength* "was kept going thanks to producer Maurice Rosenfield, who secured \$1.5 million to film [it] independently" [5].

"The film was shot over the course of six weeks with a non-union crew in Hollywood, San Pedro, and Death Valley. It was planned for the movie to be released before *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), but implementation of the film's special effects delayed its release" [6]. Honestly, it's a wonder we got the film at all, and with its lack of streaming and official release on any format, it's an even bigger wonder I could find it at all to watch as I did.

It's no accident, the cadre of military personnel are shown as cold and calculating, as well as close-minded—instead of helping the aliens or being the type of person who can "hear" them, they're readying the aliens for tests, experiments, and exploitation—only asking belatedly, near the end of the film if they're friendly.

Gray turns a personal romance into a moral confrontation between ordinary people



Creature from another planet welcome to our home!

and government authority. The good guys and the bad guys trying to save a race that didn't even harm anyone, intend to crash, nor intend to stay. At one point, Bobby asks Iris if the aliens are going to take over or try to destroy the earth. Iris responds with, "If you could go anywhere, you'd come to this loony bin?" I laughed so hard, I had to pause the film: It was not meant as comedy either, it was a deadly serious, sincere, and pointed statement. Two lines of dialogue that still hold up over 40 years later. Incredible.

Beneath its extraterrestrial plot, *Wavelength* explores whether governments and individuals have an ethical responsibility toward beings who are different from themselves. Yet another theme still relevant over 40 years later. The military and government personnel show no compassion, sympathy, empathy, nor genuine interest in the aliens as possible individuals—they are simply labeled in group as a threat and stored in what seem to be freezers or iron lungs.

There's a fine line between scientific curiosity and ethical responsibility and none of the latter is considered until Iris and Bobby stumble in and the government comes to realize this random woman can understand the aliens whereas they cannot. The hubris and ego involved is extraordinary: as people start dying, the men in charge simply seal off individual levels and start the process to blow the entire facility with their dead inside, as well as Bobby, Iris, and the aliens.



Someone finally turned the lights on in the movie!

Of course, some of those in charge left room for themselves to escape, although I can't say I was sad to learn that those involved with the alien autopsy were the first to begin dying. Government secrecy, fear of the unknown, and cruel exploitation are not only themes in *Wavelength*, but themes of our modern era—still. One might argue that the film ultimately suggests that humanity (civilians and government/military officials alike) is measured by how it treats the powerless or unfamiliar.

Wavelength has the feel of a student film, not necessarily low-budget per se, but independent and full of heart and soul and clearly, one man's desire to get it to the masses. Multiple blogs online review and wax poetic about the film—it was lovely to see I'm not alone. The film also distinguishes itself from more spectacular sci-fi films not only through its atmosphere, modest special effects, and music, but what I'd call an intimate, claustrophobic vibe (even once outside the facility and on the run) approach to extraterrestrial storytelling.

RIP to Robert Carradine, whose performance I enjoyed, even if he's 'off' at times. Moreover, it can be argued that the pacing is a little 'off' or slow, too, and the tone a little 'off' or strange, but overall 'off' and slow and strange all smashed together made for one hell of a first viewing experience for me and an easy recommendation to fans of hard-to-find '80s science-fiction cult films.



READY, PLAYER 1

THE LAST STARFIGHTER

by Stephanie McDevitt

The Last Starfighter has a fun premise: A kid gets so good at a video game that an alien race recruits him to fight in their war. Could you imagine beating an old school arcade game and then a guy shows up in a Delorian-like car to take you to another planet? This movie, however, isn't as cool as it sounds. It's beautifully filmed, and the effects are great (for 1984), but the story drags. It did reach cult status, so *The Last Starfighter* found its audience, it's just not a movie I particularly enjoyed.

The Last Starfighter tells the story of Alex Rogan (Lance Guest), an eighteen-year-old kid who lives in a trailer park with his mother and younger brother. His girlfriend Maggie (Catherine Mary Stewart) tries to get Alex to loosen up and have fun, but Alex doesn't want to goof off. He's got plans to go to college and make something of himself. He's also obsessed with a video game called "Starfighter", which sits in a small store on the edge of the trailer park. One

night, he breaks the record and becomes the game's highest scorer, and all his neighbors come outside to cheer him on. Alex is pumped, but he is quickly deflated when he finds out his loan application for college was denied.

While Alex is moping, a futuristic car approaches him and a guy named Centauri (Robert Preston) tells him to get in. Alex should have been more careful because Centauri is an alien and he immediately whisks Alex off to the planet Rylos. What Alex didn't realize is that Centauri invented the Starfighter game to find people talented enough to go to Rylos and join their army of Starfighters. So, when Alex beat the record, Centauri scooped him up and enlisted him to fight against the Ko-Dan Empire and Xur, its tyrant leader.

Well, Alex most definitely does not want to join a space war, so he demands to go home. Centauri eventually drops him off in



Ladies love the Starfighter high score.

the desert but gives him a communication device just in case he changes his mind. When Alex gets home, he realizes that Centauri has left a Beta at his house. The Beta is a robot that imitates Alex so no one knows he's missing. Alex contacts Centauri to come back to get the Beta, but when Centauri arrives they are attacked by one of Xur's assassins. Centauri explains to Alex that more assassins are going to come after him unless he agrees to become a Starfighter, so Alex has no choice but to head back to Rylos.

While Alex was trying his best to dodge this alien military draft, the Ko-Dan ships attacked Rylos and the Starfighter Command. The Starfighters are completely wiped out, so when Alex returns, he's the only remaining Starfighter in the fleet. Alex and his navigator, Grig (Dan O'Herlihy), take off in their ship to defend Rylos. Alex has to learn how to use his weapons (obviously finding out that they're very similar to the video game) and save the planet from the evil empire.

If this story sounds familiar, it's because this movie came out just a year after *Return of the Jedi*. Critics picked up on the similarities between *Star Wars* and *The Last Starfighter*. Roger Ebert said it was "not a terrifically original move" [1]. He compared it to both *Star Wars* and *Tron*, saying, "the battles in space are such close copies of the *Star Wars* movies that George Lucas might have a lawsuit" [2]. Gene Siskel said this movie



Would you just jump in a car with that guy?

was the best of all the *Star Wars* imitators [3], and Variety magazine listed it in an article called, "10 Movies That Wished They Were *Star Wars*" [4].

While *The Last Starfighter* is not *Star Wars*, it does have the distinction of being one of the very early movies to use computer graphics for its special effects. A company called Digital Productions created 27 minutes of special effects for this movie [5], which at the time was a big deal. Digital Productions estimated that using computer animation took about half the time and about a third of the cost of traditional special effects [6].

Despite the filmmakers use of digital effects, not all the effects were computer animated. The scenes with Alex's Beta were created by a makeup artist, which makes me very happy because the Beta scenes were some of my favorites in the movie. The Beta has to learn how to become Alex, and we soon see that he is really slow to figure out human behavior. When Alex first comes home from Rylos, he finds out that Maggie is mad at him because the Beta didn't know what to do with Maggie's "strange sexual urges." He imitates Alex and later he imitates Alex's friends because he doesn't know how to react in human situations. I thought those scenes were pretty funny.

I wasn't the only one who liked the Beta scenes. Test audiences also had positive



Try not to lose your head, alright?

reactions to the scenes with Beta, so director Nick Castle went back and added more scenes with Beta in the trailer park. When they filmed the extra scenes, Lance Guest had to wear a wig because he had cut his hair when they originally finished filming.

Aside from the Beta scenes, I thought the movie was slow. I really like the premise for *The Last Starfighter*, but once Alex gets to Rylos, the alien plot lines just didn't do it for me. I did enjoy the beginning of the movie with all the characters in the trailer park. They seemed like a fun group. And I liked the first few scenes on Rylos as Alex tried to figure out what the hell was going on, but there was nothing that made me care all that much about Rylos, so I didn't really care if Alex stayed. If you're already a sci-fi fan and into stories about alien civilizations, you might like it more than I did, but I really wish there was more background or information about Rylos.

If the movie isn't entertaining enough, there are many adaptations to check out. *The Last Starfighter* was adapted into a musical that came out in New York City in 2004, a novel of the movie written by Alan Dean Foster, a three-issue comic book series by Marvel, a 1984 board game, and a computer game released under the name "Star Raiders II" [7]. There was supposed to be an Atari arcade game of *The Last Starfighter*, but it was never released because Atari executives saw expected the movie to bomb. There

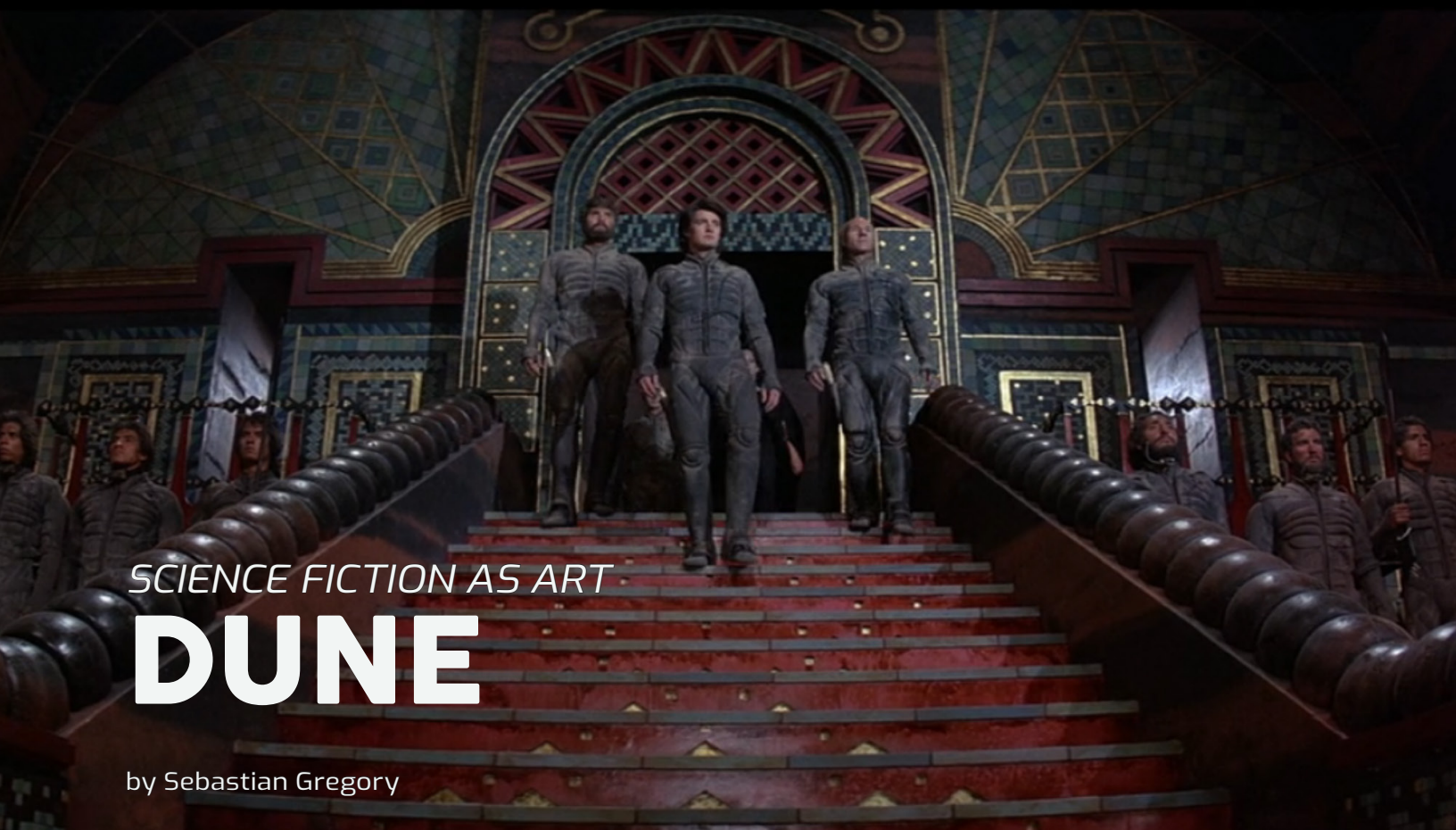


Something, something, Dark Side

were also Atari games for home consoles that were developed but never released [8].

The Atari execs weren't exactly right though. *The Last Starfighter* had a budget of \$15 million, but it went on to make \$28.7 million and made another \$13 million in home video rentals [9]. With all the adaptations, I feel like the Atari games would have been a hit, so it seems like a missed opportunity. There has even been talk of a sequel. In 2008, GPA Entertainment wanted to make it, but the project never got out of preproduction. Directors Seth Rogen and Steven Spielberg have expressed interest in making it, but they couldn't get the rights [10]. As recently as 2020, screenwriter Gary Whitta and original writer Jonathan Betuel were apparently working on it together [11]. If the sequel comes to fruition, Atari could have really gone bananas with nostalgia games and new releases.

I watched this movie on Prime and the picture quality was great—much better than we can usually find for all the 80s movies we watch. So, even though I didn't love this movie, I appreciate how beautiful it looked. The scenes in the trailer park are beautiful, and the lighting is notable (especially the use of neon lights). Even though they filmed this movie in northwestern Los Angeles county, it looked like it was filmed in the desert, and, as Janene said when we discussed *The Last Starfighter*, you gotta love a space movie set in the desert.



SCIENCE FICTION AS ART

DUNE

by Sebastian Gregory

"Arrakis. Dune. Desert planet." I still get chills just saying that aloud in my head. The trailer that accompanied the pre-release hype for David Lynch's *Dune* whipped the sci-fi nerds of 1984 into frothy anticipation. We'd already devoured the books. The shared popular opinion was that no decent movie could be distilled out of Frank Herbert's dense, encyclopedic outer space epic that—like all good science fiction—had at its core a story about human desire and human failing. Just because we thought it was impossible, however, didn't mean someone wasn't willing to try.

Even before 1977's *Star Wars* success proved there was big money in science fiction movies (and toys, and merchandising), there had been several valiant attempts to get a version of *Dune* on film. In the early 1970s, Arthur P. Jacobs (*Planet of the Apes*) had the rights and hired David Lean (*Lawrence of Arabia*, *Bridge of the River Kwai*) to direct. During pre-production, Jacobs passed

away. The project was shelved until Alejandro Jodorowsky made an infamous attempt (there's even a documentary!) with H. R. Giger's art and Salvador Dali as the Emperor. When Jodorowsky's vision failed to gain traction in Hollywood, Ridley Scott (*Alien*) was brought on as director but soon left to helm *Blade Runner* [1].

Super-producer Dino De Laurentiis then handpicked David Lynch, who was hot off critically acclaimed *The Elephant Man* and the midnight movie staple *Eraserhead*, to bring Frank Herbert's galaxy spanning epic to the big screen [2]. Lynch, who was unfamiliar with the novel, read the book and developed a new screenplay. An international (and intriguing) cast was assembled, locations in Mexico were constructed, thousands of extras were hired, and the rock band Toto was tapped for the soundtrack. Three years later, *Dune* was ready for release.

On paper it looked like it could work but



Dick in the Box jokes: incoming!

there were reasons to wonder if it would. This was only Lynch's third film. His first movie, *Eraserhead*, is one of the weirdest films ever made. His only other film, *The Elephant Man*, was a highly regarded period piece shot in black and white with a budget of no more than \$5 million [3]. These were hardly credentials for a director of a new multi-film, sci-fi franchise complete with toys and lunchboxes.

Even behind the scenes there was trouble; the producers (Dino De Laurentiis and his daughter) battled with Lynch over nearly every aspect of the film, especially the production in Mexico and the final cut of the film. Lynch's initial cut was close to four hours; it was trimmed down to 137 minutes, with scenes needing to be reshot for the movie to make any sense. It was a loss of control he would come to regret [4].

I was there on *Dune's* opening night in Houston. The first sign of possible trouble came when we were handed a sheet of paper as we walked in: definitions of terms from the book and movie that people might not understand. Helpful to those who had no clue what "Kwisatz Haderach" meant, but if you think a glossary is necessary to understand the movie, the theatrical release might be in for a rough road.

Francesca Annis, who played Lady Jessica, had similar concerns. "I only saw the film



The OG mod of /r/popping.

once at the premier...as soon as Princess Irulan started to talk in voice-over at the beginning, explaining the story, I thought 'Uh-oh, this film is in trouble.' Any Hollywood film that has to explain itself in detail at the beginning is in trouble" [5].

I'm not sure what we expected, but it was a confusing mix. Some parts were word for word from the book. Other things were created for the movie. None of it was easy to understand without familiarity with the source material. Characters with major story arcs were reduced to seconds of screen time. The dialogue came across as stilted and unrealistic. Those who knew the book nit-picked the differences. Everyone else was bored and restless long before the film ended.

Dune fans connected with a lot of it and stayed engaged, at least until the end... and then the ending was so bad, so frustrating, and such a betrayal of the source material that even the most hard-core Frank Herbert fan had to throw in the towel. It had beautiful moments, but it was a mess. The result was predictable: a critical and financial failure.

The critics fell over themselves to savage the film. Gene Siskel said, "This movie is a real mess, an incomprehensible, ugly, unstructured, pointless excursion into the murkier realms of one of the most confus-



Calling Captain Walker!

ing screenplays of all time" [6]. A financial failure, it barely made \$30 million back on a \$40-plus million budget. It was the 1984 Stinkers Bad Movie Awards Worst Feature, beating out *Bolero* and *The Gods Must Be Crazy* [7].

David Lynch's original four-hour cut and been pared back to just over two hours. He was so disappointed he disavowed the whole project by removing his writer and director credits (or credited to Alan Smith-ee) from several alternate cuts that have surfaced over the years. He cited the lack of creative control over both the production and final cut. In an interview from 2019 he admitted that "*Dune* is a huge, gigantic sadness in my life... it's not the film that I would have made had I had that final control" [8].

The film is a real feast for the eyes, even if the story is difficult to grasp. The art production was led by Anthony Masters (*2001: A Space Odyssey*) and the overall vibe is one of sinister elegance, a grimdark vision of grandiose decline. The incredible sets were designed by Giorgio Desideri and they look far more substantial than endless miles of greenscreen effects. The Harkonnen home world of Geidi Prime, for instance, is a Lynchian fantasy made flesh.

The costume design by Bob Ringwood manages to be both familiar and almost alien [9]. The special and practical effects are of



How Sting and Andy Summers choose album tracks.

various quality, even by the standards of the time. Sometimes the sandworms look a bit like sock puppets, and some of the effects are distracting. However, the actors look amazing; the international cast, generally unknown to American audiences, ensures the movie doesn't look too Hollywood. So do the wacky eyebrows... for some reason, nothing says the far future of humanity quite like overly hairy eyebrows!

Val Kilmer was considered for the role of Paul Atrides, but it ultimately went to a relative unknown, Kyle MacLachlan. For a young actor, he does an admirable job of carrying the movie. Then there's Sting and his lethal smirk and futuristic undies. He is onscreen for something like 11 minutes, but with a bod like that, it is all anyone could talk about.

The planned sequel was squashed, the toy line discontinued, and David Lynch recovered enough to have a brilliant career as one of the most celebrated filmmakers of our time. MacLachlan became something of a muse to Lynch, working with him on everything from *Blue Velvet* to *Twin Peaks*.

Over the years, the film has been reevaluated, and if you can look past its flaws, there's a lot to appreciate in Lynch's strange, ambitious, and unmistakably personal take on *Dune*. Lynch himself summed up my feelings best in that same interview: "I like many, many parts of *Dune* myself" [10].



WE HAVE LIFT OFF

SPACE CAMP

by Stephanie McDevitt

The movie *Space Camp* is based on the actual space camp that NASA runs at the US Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville, Alabama. Children as young as nine can go to camp for a week of astronaut training, and they even have programs for adults. It sounds like an awesome way to spend your summer vacation. Although, I don't recommend watching the movie *Space Camp* before you go. It's not really a bad movie, but it is not exactly accurate, and it suffered from some incredibly bad timing.

Space Camp tells the story of a summer camp experience with NASA. The movie starts with Astronaut Zach Bergstrom (Tom Skerritt), who runs the camp, trying to convince his wife, Andie (Kate Capshaw), who is also an astronaut, to be a space camp counselor. Andie would much rather be on a space mission, but she didn't get assigned to one, so she's stuck working with the kids this summer.

Andie's campers are five teenagers: Kevin (Tate Donovan), who's smart but really doesn't care about space and goofs off all the time; Kathryn (Lea Thompson) who really cares about space but sometimes struggles with being too bossy; Rudy (Larry B. Scott) who loves science but admits that he's not that good at it; Tish (Kelly Preston) who presents as a typical valley girl but is actually a genius with an eidetic memory; and Max (Joaquin Phoenix, credited as Leaf Phoenix), a 12-year-old junior camper who insists he's ready to do space camp with the older kids.

As camp gets underway, the kids go through astronaut training, and they fly around in machines and sit in fake cockpits. They even interact with one of the many famous movie robots to come out of the 80s, a squat little guy named Jinx. We learn that Jinx was deemed not fit for space missions because he is overly literal, which is a bad quality in a robot. Max and Jinx are friends, and when



Jinx ruin's everyone's summer.

the older boys break Jinx, Max is able to fix him and get him back online.

One night, Kevin convinces Kathryn to break curfew and go on a date with him. When Zach goes into the boys bunk to find out where they are, Jinx rats them out, and Kevin and Kathryn get in trouble. Andie tells Kathryn she believes she has the potential to be a great shuttle commander, but Kathryn has to focus and not let Kevin distract her. Meanwhile, Kevin wants to know who snitched, and when Max tells him it was Jinx, Kevin yells at Max. Max gets upset and runs away, and Jinx hears Max say that he wishes he could just be in space.

Well, the next day, the good folks at NASA decide it's a great idea to let the campers sit in an actual space shuttle during a routine engine test. Jinx knew about the engine test, and when Max said he wished he was in space, Jinx went into NASA's control room and secretly triggered a thermal curtain failure to occur while Max is on the shuttle. This failure causes the boosters to ignite during the test. So, while Andie, Kathryn, Kevin, Rudy, Tish, and Max are all on the shuttle, NASA is forced to launch the rocket to avoid an explosion, and Andie and all the kids go hurtling into space.

Unfortunately for everyone involved, the space shuttle was not mission ready at the time of its launch. It's low on oxygen and it has no long-range radio. So, as soon as they leave the Earth's atmosphere, the



Don't ever let a bad boy drag you down!

shuttle crew has no communication with mission control. As they try to find a way to replenish their oxygen, they also have to make their window for re-entry. The level of negligence on the part of the government is mind boggling, but in our current reality, it no longer seems that NASA's poor decisions are outside the realm of possibility.

Space Camp opened on June 6, 1986, which was less than five months after the Challenger explosion. For our readers who might not have been around in the 80s, in 1984 Ronald Reagan announced the Teacher in Space Project in which NASA was going to honor teachers by sending one into space. The teacher would then return to their classroom in the hopes of inspiring their students to study STEM and space exploration. After 11,000 teachers applied, 10 finalists were sent to astronaut training, and after two weeks of training, Christa McAuliffe was selected to go to space along with six other crew members. While in space, McAuliffe was supposed to teach two 15-minute lessons about space travel that were going to be nationally televised [1].

The Challenger Space Shuttle was launched on January 28th, 1986, and kids across the country watched the launch in school. Then we all watched the Challenger explode shortly after liftoff, killing all seven crew members on board. It was a national tragedy, and it resulted in an almost 3-year hiatus of the space shuttle program. Director Harry Winer said the first time he was



Never let NASA care for your children.

going to see the final cut of this movie was the morning of the Challenger disaster [2]. What incredible timing!

Fox decided to release the film despite the tragedy, which opened them up to commentary about whether or not they were trying to capitalize on the disaster. Winer said, "We decided not to associate ourselves with NASA, even though in our hearts we maybe wanted to make a dedication to the Challenger 7, feeling that the spirit of the movie really served them [but] no matter what we would say or do in light of an all too cynical world, we would be called to task for appearing exploitative" [3].

Lea Thompson said, "I'm hoping that it will help heal the kids who were traumatized by it and help America feel good about the space program again" [4]. She points out that the movie is very respectful of astronauts and the space program, and Winer said maybe audiences would see the movie as a catharsis because the shuttle in the movie lands safely [5], but that just wasn't the case. *Space Camp* only made around \$10 million on an \$18 million budget [6].

The reviews for this movie were all pretty bad. Roger Ebert acknowledged that the movie was doomed before it even came out, but he thought the dialogue was dumb and the direction was too slow [7]. It's definitely not a great movie, but I'm not sure it's that



Max walks the line....in space!

bad either. I liked this movie when I was a kid, and upon this rewatch, I was actually surprised to see that it's still an okay movie. It's definitely not scientifically accurate (you can read about all the goofs on its IMDB page [8]), and I know there are plot holes, but I enjoyed revisiting a childhood favorite and not being disappointed.

The one thing that boggles my mind about *Space Camp* is that NASA agreed to the script. Winer said NASA approved the script before he joined the project [9]. Why would they do that? Why would a government agency agree to a movie that makes them seem so incredibly inept? From the initial decision to put the kids on the rocket during the engine test, to launching the rocket, to sitting around the control room hoping Andie and the kids can figure it out—it's a bad look all around.

Despite not being a big box office hit, *Space Camp* did have a bit of a legacy. Lea Thompson said, "I've had a lot of people come up to me and say that they became physicists or inventors, how much they loved that movie and how much it inspired them" [10]. So, that's pretty cool.

The movie hard to find these days. It's not streaming anywhere except YouTube. NASA is definitely missing out on some free advertising for their summer programs.



EXTERMINATE. DESTROY.

ALIENS

by Janene Scelza & Matt Scelza

We ran into an *Aliens* fangroup twice this year, first at Awesome Con in Washington, DC, and then at Tidewater Comic Con in Virginia Beach. Niche fandoms are a curious lot, and here was one devoted entirely to a sequel—the first sequel, in fact, in what has become yet another seemingly immortal IP. The fangroup cosplays as the bug-stomping Colonial Marines [1], the fictional military unit at the center of the movie, aboard the USS Sulaco. Interestingly, their booth wasn't far from a *Ghostbusters* fangroup [2], the next crossover for immortal IPs perhaps?!

It's not too surprising to find major love for the *Alien* sequel because, unlike the one that immediately followed *Ghostbusters* (much as we love possessed Peter MacNicol), *Aliens* is real banger. And, depending on your preferred "flavor"—the slasher style debut or its rowdy action follow-up—*Aliens* might even rival its predecessor.

Under the tutelage of British director, Ridley

Scott, the franchise's 1979 debut is eerily somber and elegant. The *Nostromo*'s small crew have completed their mission and are preparing to head home when the ship's computer reports mysterious signals. Contractual obligations reroute them to Moon LV-426 where they discover dead aliens and clusters of strange eggs. A parasitic hatchling attaches itself to one of the crew member's faces, the impetus for John Hurt's famous chest-bursting scene [3]. The creature escapes onboard and we learn a vital lesson about messing with wild babies: don't. Angry mothers might be near.

Similar to *The Thing*, unfamiliar danger lurks in the shadows, picking off the crew one by one. (The isolated setting lends to a great tagline: "In space, no one can hear you scream."). Major destruction follows. The whole thing could have been avoided (in several of the *Alien* movies, really) if they listened to ultimate final girl, Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), who urged the crew



Don't let your sons grow up to be bootlickers.

from the beginning to follow protocol and quarantine those who had been exploring outside of the ship. They are ultimately betrayed by what turns out to be a rogue android (Ian Holm) who allows them in. Third-in-command Ripley rises through the ranks de facto, demanding answers, discovering sabotage, and battling (in terribly ill-fitting underwear) the hideous and exceptionally moist Xenoph final boss dreamed up by Swiss artist H.R. Geiger.

Aliens and capitalism take an even bigger toll on crew members in the second film, which bears a new tagline: "This time it's war!" Ripley wakes from a 57-year hyper-sleep only to be accused by her employers, the Weyland-Yutani Corporation (WYC), of detonating a perfectly good, very expensive cargo ship that had no problems whatsoever, honest! Demoted from pilot to menial machinery work, Ripley has reason to listen when suss corporate bootlicker Carter Burke (Paul Riser) asks her to accompany him and a Marine unit to LV-426, now a mining colony named Acheron, which they have lost contact with. Burke assures Ripley that the only purpose is eradication, not exploration, honest! They'll also be assisted by a new android named Bishop (Lance Henriksen), who comes with behavioral failsafes.

Aliens jumps into the action quickly and relentlessly. Roger Ebert delighted in his review that "*Aliens* is absolutely, painfully and



The Talented Mrs. Ripley

unremittingly intense for at least its last hour," adding, "I have never seen a movie that maintains such a pitch of intensity for so long" [4]. Agreed.

The team discovers that Acheron is infested with aliens. Predictably, military training, hi-tech gear, and macho self-assurance only get the soldiers so far. Plus, an inexperienced lieutenant makes some major missteps, squandering a good number of the talent early on.

Radars blip and bleep, sometimes confusingly, as the aliens seem to close in from all over. Ripley, with only wits and prior experience, helps. Michael Biehn gives quick weapons training, just in case. Later, they discover an orphan child named Newt (Carrie Henn). She's observant; she knows the layout and the creatures' habits. A horror cast this size inevitably dwindles, but not as quickly nor as easily as the first rodeo. They put up much more of a fight. The stakes are higher, too, for Ripley, who detonate ships (sorry WYC) and battles aliens all over again, now while protecting Newt. The finale is terrific.

Perhaps this is what sets this particular film apart from the imitators; that writer/director James Cameron gives us so many meaty characters in an otherwise fairly simple setting. The soldiers' machismo never feels overdone. Outside of the WYC slimeballs, there are no really unlikable characters

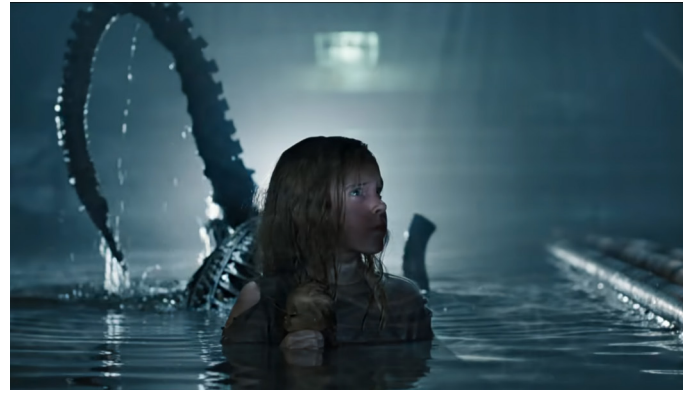


Wanna play some Contra?

or convoluted conflict that pointlessly has them at each others' throats. Even the incompetent lieutenant dies with honor. The corporate sabotage is far more ickier this time around, though, leaving Ripley to observe: "I don't see which species is worse, you don't see them fucking each other over a goddamn percentage!"

That seems typical of Cameron: strong characters. Especially women, and we should probably include Momma Xenomorph (the "bitch!"), who puts up a hell of a fight, too, to protect her own. Ripley, meanwhile, knows what she's doing, and the crew acknowledge this. (The costume department even puts her in proper fitting underclothes this time around!). Even Newt acts fast when she and Ripley are cornered in one of the rooms by frothing facehuggers. There's always the easily expendable numbers with a cast this large, but of the few characters that have any substantial screen time, they're given a real chance to be part of the story. Even the android is sympathetic this time around.

It's so easy for a sequel to quickly lose steam; to lose sight of whatever made any in the line before it particularly memorable, and that's especially true these days, where "sequel" is just studio shorthand for "remember this from the first movie?!" (our opportunity to bring up *Ghostbusters* again, perhaps?!). *Aliens* does open with a chest-burst fake out, but it's not doting on the past



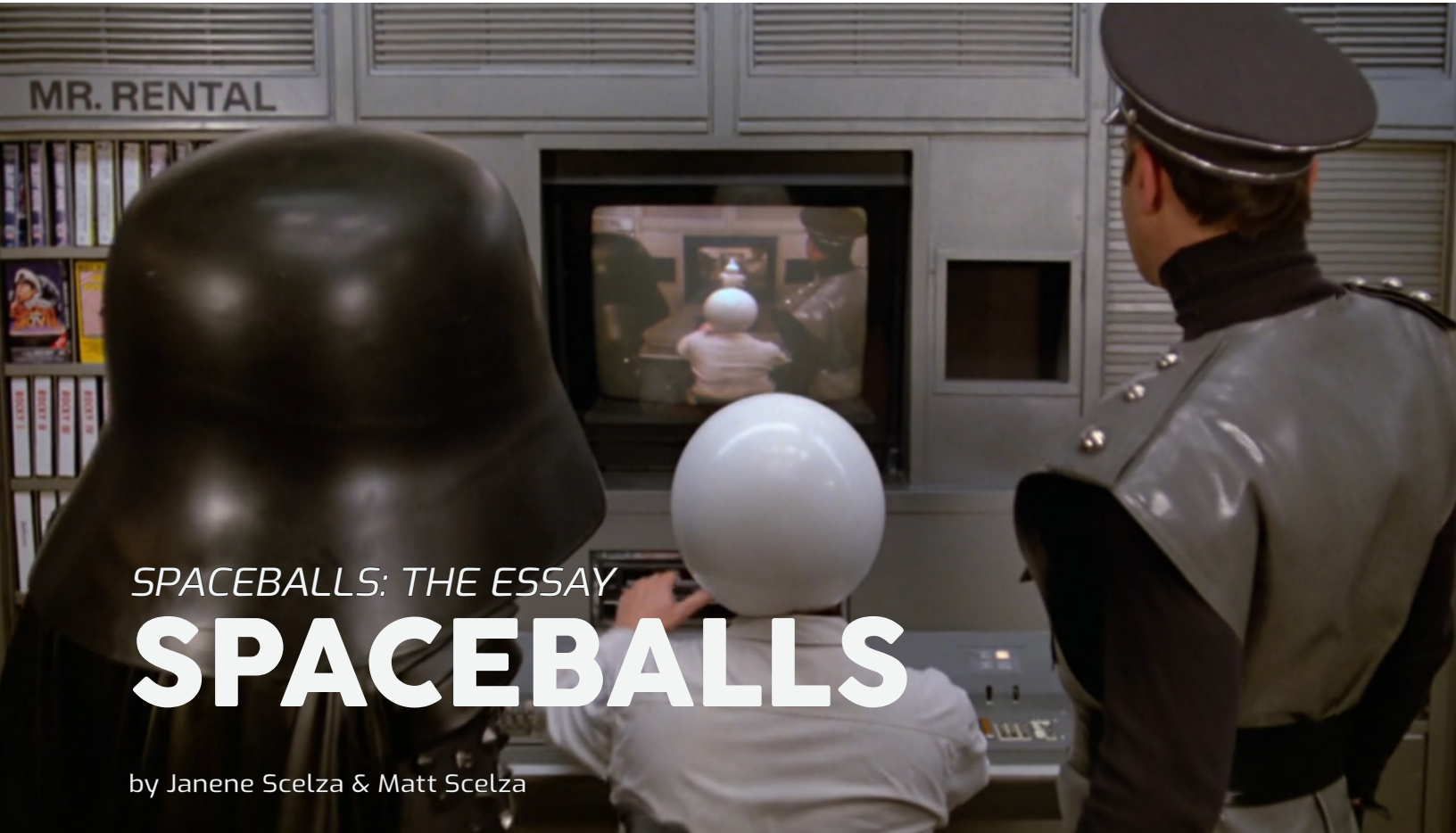
You hear a creature creepin' up behind...

beyond that. We can safely say that nothing in the shift from Ridley Scott's approach to James Cameron's continuation of the story feels secondary. As Ebert concluded in his review: "It does the job it says it will do" [5]. Amen.

The effort and the aftermath, too, seem pretty remarkable considering how long it took for the second film to get made. The first film was a hit, and while Fox seemed initially keen on a sequel, a lawsuit, executive turnover, contract negotiations, and lack of faith in an untested writer/director to do well with a big-budget production stalled the project. (Cameron, up to that point, had kinda sorta done *Piranah II* and was promised the job to direct *Aliens* only if *Terminator* was a hit, which, of course it was).

And yet, *Aliens* is just as good, if not better, than the first film. Critics and audiences certainly seemed to agree, as it became one of the highest grossing movies of 1986. The movie landed on the cover of *Time Magazine* with the headline: "The Summer's Scariest Movie" [6], and earned plenty of award nods (and wins), primarily for technical categories [7], but also acting [8], including an Oscar nod for Best Actress for Weaver, pretty impressive for science fiction films, much less women in science fiction.

And, of course, there's all the..."Merchandising! Merchandising! Merchandising!"



SPACEBALLS: THE ESSAY

SPACEBALLS

by Janene Scelza & Matt Scelza

"Science fiction! Now there's a genre I haven't wrecked yet!" joked Mel Brooks in his 2021 memoir, *All About Me* [1]. In 1987, it finally happened! *Spaceballs* hit theaters. Brooks, and co-writers Thomas Meehan (who worked in theater) and Ronny Graham (best remembered as the Princess Vespa's irritable wedding officiant in *Spaceballs*), set out to write a real low-brow comedy [2], but ultimately, came up with a fairly tame, fairly timeless, and in our humble opinion, hilarious spoof of the original *Star Wars* trilogy, source material that Meehan joked, was pretty "ludicrous" to begin with [3].

In the same memoir, Brooks was still "lamenting" a sequel, referring to the joke in the movie where the all-wise Yogurt (Brooks) offers his pupil Lonestar (Bill Pullman) optimistic parting words: "God willing, we'll meet again in *Spaceballs 2: The Search for More Money*." That's finally going to happen, too!

The sequel title changed to *Spaceballs: The New One*, since Mel "found the extra money in a basement" [4], but honestly, the original name was far more appropriate, considering what has happened to *Star Wars* in the intervening years. It's scheduled to hit theaters in April 2027. We hope that Mel, now 100 years old, lives to see opening day.

Like *Star Wars*, *Spaceballs* follows various galactic collectives engaged in the basic battle of good versus evil. Arrogant Dark Helmet (played so wonderfully by Rick Moranis) gloats that evil will always triumph because "good is dumb," (an unfortunately prevailing theory in our shitty real-life timeline, too).

The movie opens with the iconic text crawl, starting at Chapter 11, to catch viewers up on the story thus far. Planet Spaceball has squandered all of its air—they're stuck with artificial "Perri-air"—



Distracted Princess meme.

and now they want to infiltrate the air shield on idyllic Planet Druida to steal their supply, thus killing the planet. They plan to kidnap Princess Vespa (Daphne Zuniga) during her honeymoon and hold her ransom for the air shield code.

It's an arranged marriage for Princess Vespa, but she's a modern lady who just can't go through with marrying the bozo groom, Prince Valium (Jim J. Bullock), so she flees in her spaceship with her personal robot assistant, Dot Matrix (voiced by Joan Rivers). The Spaceballs start attacking, prompting King Roland (Dick Van Patten) to hire handsome mercenary Lonestar (a mix of Han and Luke) and his sidekick, Barf (John Candy as a half-man, half-dog) to rescue Vespa and Dot and return them to Druidia. If so, he will reward them with one million space bucks. Lonestar and Barf happily accept, since it is precisely what they owe to Pizza the Hut (voiced by Don Deluise) and his android strong-arm (Rudy DeLuca).

Lonestar and Barf find Vespa and Dot Matrix, but before they can get back to Druidia, bumbling baddies Dark Helmet; his Number 2, Colonel Sandurz (George Wyner); and ultimate dumb-dumb, President Skroob chase them around the galaxy in their comically oversized craft.

There is quite a lot in *Spaceballs* that follows the *Star Wars* trilogy (see our



Even backwards is a good look in a well-tailored suit!

recap in Issue #32), but Mel Brooks adds some of his own unique touches to the space adventure, like *Princess Bride* aesthetics to idyllic Planet Druidia, a burgeoning love story between the Princess and Lonestar modeled on *It Happened One Night* (1934), and of course, his trademark Jewish New Yorker humor.

In his middling review, Roger Ebert asked, "How do you review a movie like this, anyway? I guess by saying whether you laughed or not" [5]. We certainly did. This movie was on regular rotation when we were kids, and we still enjoy it to this day. Sure, it has a lot of dopey humor, like the Spaceballs literally combing the desert to find the heroes (the basis for the sequel's movie poster), or the revelation that a lot of the crew on Spaceball One share the surname Asshole ("I knew it! I'm surrounded by Assholes!").

There are brilliant jokes, too, like the Spaceballs mistakenly capturing the heroes' stunt doubles (check out Stephen Tobolowsky in a bit part); Dark Helmet and Colonel Sandurz popping Spaceballs into the VCR to spy on their nemeses (begging the existential question, "When will then be now?!"); and Yogurt and Lonestar's meta conversation about "Merchandising! Merchandising! Merchandising!". Silly as it is, too, the movie feels so depressingly relevant...oi vey.



Slap some giant eyeballs on and the kids will love it.

Watching this now in our 40s, we wonder, probably for the first time, what it was like—is like? [6]—working in the writer's room with Mel Brooks? We imagine loud, raucous fun as the writing trio pitched outrageous jokes. Apparently, it could get pretty intense [7]. Meehan, in a PBS interview, provided some context for the making of the film: "Pictures were coming along more and more that were a little crazier than they had been before" [8]. Brooks's *Young Frankenstein* very much looks and sounds like a classic Frankenstein movie. Much of the humor is in the abrupt, baffling things the characters say, like how Gene Wilder insists on pronouncing Frankenstein Frank-en-shteen (Yinglish?), or Marty Feldman happily telling the frazzled doctor that the monster's brain came from someone named "Abby Normal." *Spaceballs*, on the other hand [9], is totally ridiculous in every way; a true screwball comedy. A perfect fit for the decade.

Funnyman Brooks is quite serious about storytelling, however. That attention to developing a story and characters is what makes parody really work. The joke-a-minute fests like *Not Another Teen Movie* and similarly forgettable, straight-to-video spoofs often felt more like a string of bits loosely stitched together to fill the runtime; never substantive enough to remember so convoluted



This is why you don't cross the beams!

it felt like a chore. Strip away the jokes in a Mel Brooks film, and you still have a story worth watching.

More than that, however, Brooks wrote comedies that start with some kind of core humanity. "To preserve the longevity of a comedy, there's a secret you must follow: you have to have an engine driving it." Racial prejudice drives *Blazing Saddles*, for example. *The Producers* involves a get-rich-quick scheme that backfires. Man plays God and ostracizes its creation in *Young Frankenstein*. And *Spaceballs*, much like *Star Wars*, is perhaps the most basic: some OK folks are very outmatched by bad, dumb ones.

Brooks tells stories that feel timeless. You don't have to know the sources or the period really, to get the humor or be invested in the story. There is lots to laugh at, just as much as there are people to root for. We feel the despair when Dark Helmet gloats about tricking Lonestar into giving up an all-powerful ring, or when King Roland is willing to suffer for his daughter's safety. Likewise, there is genuine joy when the heroes save the day and fall in love and the bad guys wash up on the *Planet of the Apes* beach, knowing what this entails. We are curious to see how much of this approach to screenwriting, to crafting parodies, carries over to the sequel.



TOYS TO MEN

MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE

by Tom Scelza

Once upon a time, Mattel passed on licensing *Star Wars* toys. Realizing their millions-of-dollars mistake, they took an option on *Conan the Barbarian*, but this too, turned into a bad idea; *Conan* got an “R” rating. Executives were appalled when they got a sneak peek. Their design team, Mark Taylor (responsible for concept art) and Roger Sweet (who sculpted over an existing Mattel Big Jim action figure), came up with a representation that became He-Man [1] [2].

Mattel started making a line of He-Man toys. Parents had concerns, since dolls...*ahem*... action figures, were new to boys. Kids were unsure how to play with the characters even though the figures came with little comic books. Mattel turned to Halperin, a writer who had his start with cartoons. Halperin created *The Masters of the Universe Bible* [3] as the background to planet Eternia, He-Man, and his human persona, Prince Adam. Said Halperin: “I wanted them to understand that you don’t need to punch someone in the

face to get your way. That was the goal — to create a better world” [4].

Mattel also wanted a cartoon series to promote the toys. Lou Scheimer, who headed Filmation, had a background in kids TV. He had helped create *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*. As of 1971, children’s TV shows had been under scrutiny by the Surgeon General, especially for sponsors’ infamous cigarette ads for the *Flintstones*, junk cereal ads, etc. Both Halperin and Scheimer had to keep the show wholesome. Scheimer did not need financing from Mattel, which proved to be invaluable [5].

I came home one day to find my nephew watching this cartoon. In fact, he was watching it every day. I asked my Dad, what is this thing? I hear the deep voice of Prince Adam, all these creatures, and that whiny-ass, Skeletor. He says, it isn’t really violent, and at the end, there is always a message. But of course, there are the toys, but they’re



You're tuned to Skeletor TV. All Skeletor. All the time.

not that expensive. Then, we heard there would be a movie.

If Halperin and Scheimer had some altruism towards children, less could be said about Mattel. The 1987 *Masters of the Universe* movie was a clown car driven by the greedy toy execs who opted to go with producers who offered more money, but whose products were lousy. Warner Brothers offered to put it together for \$15 million. Cannon Pictures offered \$20 million. The rest is history.

"Tell me about the loneliness of good, He-Man. Is it equal to the loneliness of evil?" asks the evil Skeletor (Frank Langella), who has taken over beloved Eternia and is holding the Sorceress (Christina Pickles) captive at Castle Grayskull. Our heroes, He-Man (Dolph Lundgren), Man-At-Arms (John Cypher), and Teela (Chelsea Field) seek help from Gwildor (Bill Barty), a colorful dwarf, who invents the Cosmic Key, which can open time portals. He tells them a woman, whom they realize is Skeletor's ally, Evil-Lyn (Meg Foster), tricked him into giving her one. The Key emits a musical signal when activated, therefore Skeletor can locate other prototypes. As they speak, Skeletor has already sent troops to capture Gwildor, his Key, and the heroes, but Gwildor uses the key to transport them. Only, he misfires, sending them all to 1987 California.

Teen couple Julie (Courtney Cox) and Kevin



Stood still long enough for a frightening screencap.

(Robert Duncan McNeill) are visiting a cemetery when they find Gwildor's Key. Kevin, believing it to be a synthesizer, mistakenly sets off the signal. Fascinated, he leaves Julie at their empty high school, to show his friend at a music store. Skeletor has sent a group of Evil Warriors, including Beast Man (Tony Carroll), to the school. He-Man rescues Julie as the foes destroy the school. Julie leads the heroes to the music shop, where a detective named Lubic (James Tolkan) arrives with Kevin. Lubic believes Kevin is responsible for the school being destroyed. During the mayhem, Julie is tricked by Evil-Lyn into giving her the Key. Eventually, all escape not only from Skeletor, but also zealous Lubic. They also get the Key back, but Skeletor arrives, damaging it and injuring Julie. He threatens to kill everyone, including the Sorceress, if He-Man does not become his prisoner, setting up the never-ending but final battle.

Cannon was in financial trouble before they started the project. They wanted to reuse *Star Wars* stuff they had for another movie. Director Gary Goddard said that by the final shoot of Skeletor and He-Man dueling, the sound stage's electricity had been cut off. He also said Mattel promised to financially support the film, had too much to say, and were always late with payments.

Writer David Odell did better work with the Muppets and *The Dark Crystal*. Script revisions began immediately. California



Sing with me to find the key!

replaced Eternia. Orca and Battle Cat, He-Man's cartoon companions, were tossed out, and Gwildor was invented. Some of the behind-the-camera people were first rate [6]. Goddard was a first—and last time—director. His background included the auteur of Universal Studio's "The Adventure of Conan: A Sword and Sorcery" theme park adventure. And Mattel okayed him!

Dolph Lundgren was hired for body image and box office, last seen as Ivan Drago in *Rocky IV*. His Swedish accent was thick. In his contract he was allowed to post-dub, rather than have someone else dub his dialogue. Frank Langella was and still is a first-rate actor who took the part to impress his son, although he had reservations about the script [7]. Meg Foster really had nothing to do, except keep those beautiful eyes open, probably hard work for this epic snooze.

The rest of the cast was promising, coming either from TV or moving up. Jon Cypher had been a decent TV actor in *Hill Street Blues*. Christina Pickles had been known for her Emmy nominated role in *St. Elsewhere*. Chelsea Field, in one of the funniest costumes, went from a Solid Gold Dancer to a TV and film roles. Courtney Cox's career survived this movie, going on to do the *Scream* franchise and the beloved *Friends*. James Tolkán (Detective Lubic) was Principal Strickland in the *Back to the Future* movies.

In fact, like *Back to the Future*, *Masters of*



He's not a human. He's like a piece of iron.

the Universe hinted at a sequel (namely, the parting gift from the Sorceress to Julie and the numerous goodbyes). Dolph Lundgren wasn't coming back, nor Gary Goddard. Mattel didn't receive royalties and wasn't happy with the first movie. They were also in trouble [8], so it wouldn't happen. The print I saw did not show Skeletor alive. The leftovers would be used for *Cyborg* (featured in Issue #9), after which Cannon went bankrupt.

There was lots of post-production razzamatazz and far too much time spent on the He-Man versus Skeletor finale, which takes about a third of the film and is very repetitive. The movie was a critical and commercial failure, grossing \$17 million worldwide against a budget of \$22 million (Goddard says he had \$17 million). Cannon survived, but thankfully not for long. The toy line tanked, Mattel fell to a number 2 spot for a while and was out-grossed by Hasbro and the Transformers.

The new *Masters* (2026) is a whole lot better, but seems to have befallen the same fate, not yet earning back its \$200 million budget. Ironically, Lou Scheimer's cartoon only ran two years (1983-1985) but was picked up for syndication (see it on Amazon Prime). He had another hit with a *She-Ra* spin off [9]. The 1987 *Masters* is free on YouTube and Tubi. I also made a YouTube video, "In Search of the Masters", a compilation of reflections on the film [10].



FIGHT FOR YOUR FREEDOM, FIGHT FOR YOUR LIFE

ARENA

by Rhonda Baughman

Ahh, Empire Pictures—how I adore you. Before you disintegrated and Charles Band helped you rise once more from the ashes as Full Moon Pictures, you had some truly ridiculous VHS capers I loved watching. However, there was one I did not watch as a kid, instead choosing to stare at the box cover art every chance I got, my young brain desperately trying to figure out what the hell I was looking at [1]. Director Peter Manoogian's *Arena* (1989)—bright yellow box, bold red title letters, monster and human, and actually, the box cover succinctly said it all—I just didn't grok it at ten years old. With age comes wisdom! (sort of). Looking back, I wanted the monster and human to be friends. Honestly, I still do.

Arena is a comfortable formula—the underdog fighter earnestly battling his way through a futuristic, intergalactic fight club, but it's also from Empire Pictures, so that means colorful characters, amazing practical effects and sets, low-budget genre

filmmaking at its best, and ultimately, a tale about exploitation, challenging an unfair system, and viva la never surrendering.

Set in a futuristic world where humans and aliens coexist, *Arena* features competitive fighting that has become entertainment, and this doesn't feel all that far-fetched anymore. (I think about that episode in *The Walking Dead* where the Governor pits humans against zombies in an arena setting for the denizens of Woodbury [2], but I seem to have more empathy for the aliens in *Arena* than almost anyone in *TWD* [3]).

No zombies as best I can tell in *Arena*—I mean, a few look zombie-ish, but that's possibly just 80s FX—we do, however, get buff human Steve Armstrong (Paul Satterfield) who loses his service worker in space contract and just wants to return to Earth. Unfortunately, his BFF Shorty's (Hamilton Camp) foray into an underground casino for the dough needed for travel goes



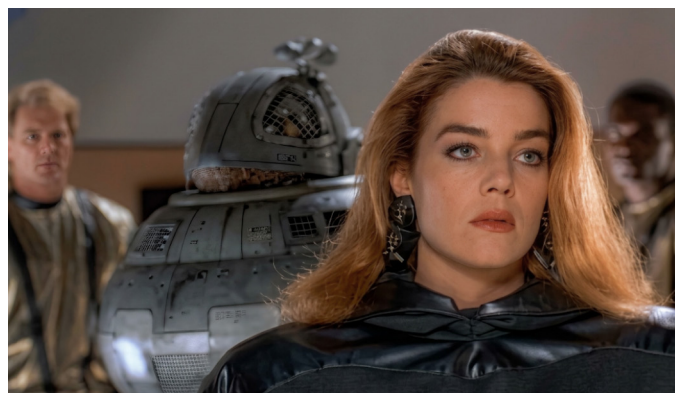
Two things enter. One thing leaves!

awry and he's held for ransom by bad guy manager Rogor (Marc Alaimo) and his right hand Weezil (Armin Shimerman, of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). Steve is tempted into the dangerous world of arena fighting to help pay off his pal's debt, but he comes to like the adrenaline and attention.

Refusing Rogor's additional contractual offer, Steve returns to an original proposition from sassy hot promoter Quinn (Claudia Christian), signs with her, and wins a fight against Sloth (Steve Wang)—a truly magnificent effect to behold [4]. Steve is now a contender, and Rogor will be damned if a human upsets the kingdom he's built, so he enlists the aid of nightclub singer and girlfriend Jade (Shari Shattuck).

Additionally, Jade is an obvious honey trap, poisoning Steve, but a last-minute antidote helps him into the ring anyway for the main fight against alien cyborg Horn (special effects supervisor Michael Deak). There is one more devious plan from Weezil and his sidekick Skull (William Butler) [5] to try to stop Steve from winning, but in the end, the human comes out on top.

After watching the movie, I had to know if the film was as fun on set as it looked like it might be. In a brief email exchange with William Butler, he proved my assumption correct. "I absolutely had a blast on that set," he said. I knew it! Additionally, Deak's special effects feature on the DVD release that I



You ever seen the face of a woman on the edge?!

watched cemented that folks not only had fun on the set, they worked with the utmost love and dedication.

That obvious love and dedication shines throughout the film—I mean, it's just so sincere, so earnest. I would lay money on the fact that everyone involved with the film was either super sure or super hoping *Arena* would become a big hit—and not only to capitalize on the popular sci-fi of the era, but in its own right.

There is no official record for the box office or home video take because as *Arena* was nearing completion, Empire Pictures went bankrupt. A budget between \$2-\$6 million is listed online, but after reading both Charles Band's recent autobiographical books (highly recommend), I wouldn't be surprised if it was more. Clearly, it's a low-budget film, but it has grit and heart with memorable human performances, numerous extraterrestrial characters, bangin' costumes, notable sets, and a striking practical and creature effects.

The film's overall visual style is one of the reasons I loved Empire Pictures back in the day; it's fun to look at and not overwhelming either visually or aurally. In several newer movies, I've had to stop watching due to photosensitivity issues, and by that I mean constant flashing and overly-bright lights coupled with either low-frequency and infrasound audio ranges or music so loud as to distract from any engagement or



Rogor don't take 'No' for an answer.

suspension of disbelief I had going.

There was a message in *Arena* that I would like to think transcends time and can give us humans (and any aliens reading this) some sunshine in our somewhat dark modern era; the good guys can still win with determination, luck, a plan, several back up plans, and a solid support network.

And the viewer gets all that, with someone to root for in Steve Armstrong. As the central character, Armstrong carries the narrative; as the underdog, he hits all the right notes: talent, willpower, obstacles, and opposition from the powers that be. He manages to go from service worker to arena champion—also giving hope and power back to the people. His journey is not a straight line, but all roads for Steve lead to the big win after a series of smaller wins and painful losses.

Chances are that we've all got that friend like Shorty getting us into trouble, OR we are the Shorty [6]. Chances are also solid that many of us have been duped by career titles and hot humans we now call exes, as Steve is, but do we all have the resolve and the fearlessness Steve does? He fights creatures at least twice his size and fights for the forces of good, as opposed to evil.

Moreover, there's a larger conflict surrounding the arena's business. They seem to be a monopoly, with one gross,



Satterfield and Horn could've been Beastly.

crooked dude in charge of the whole mess and supporters who won't check him. The fighters are exploited and manipulated for profit, no matter if human or alien. Violence is entertainment and entertainment is violence, and as much fun as I had with this movie, honestly, people hitting each other for sport always felt weird to me. Was it just a coincidence or did *Arena's* writers and director mean to critique a system that turns people into commodities? Maybe, maybe not. But I don't believe in coincidences, and an evaluation of corruption and power is what I saw by the final credits.

Arena is a solid sci-fi/action movie during an era that loved its science fiction and action movies, but I've never heard anyone actually mention the film. Instead, I'm reminded of the more often talked about *The Last Starfighter* (1984), *Spacehunter: Adventures in the Forbidden Zone* (1983), and *Enemy Mine* (1985): underdogs, memorable aliens that are as realized as the humans, and layered, ambitious storytelling. It's these very elements that still gives *Arena* its charm, its loyal fanbase and later cult appeal, even if it may have been lost among the pile upon release [7]. Despite the film's rather obscure status, the writers knew viewers do want the good guys to win and the bad guys to be punished, and both happen here. I simply cannot imagine where else in the real world we might see ideas and wishes like that, can you, Gentle Reader?

Closing Credits

What's the frequency, Kenneth? Wavelength

Release Date: September 16, 198

Written by: Mike Gray

Directed by: Mike Gray

Essay by: Rhonda Baughman

[1] First public screenings were at Cannes in May 1983; Chicago, Minneapolis, and Dallas in August 1983; later opening in LA on October 14, 1983.

[2] Quick deadline so I didn't have time to boogie about bootleg land.

[3] A decent vinyl soundtrack will run about \$40.00 or more on the usual channels; the Wiki indicates Tangerine Dream remixed tracks from other albums.

[4] Dov Young (Gamma), Joshua Oreck (Beta), and Christian Morris (Delta). The fourth is dissected as the viewer learns of the inner-workings of the underground facility.

[5] "Wavelength (1983 Film)" (Wikipedia)
<https://tinyurl.com/y6h9r4wp>

[6] Ibid.

Ready Player 1: The Last Starfighter

Release Date: July 13, 1984

Written by: Jonathan R. Betuel

Directed By: Nick Castle

Essay By: Stephanie McDevitt

[1] "The Last Starfighter." (Roger Ebert, 1984)
<https://tinyurl.com/4k9yjk6n>

[2] Ibid.

[3] "The Last Starfighter" (Wikipedia)
<https://tinyurl.com/yw98xmkn>

[4] "10 Movies That Wished They Were Star Wars." (Variety, 2017) <https://tinyurl.com/msze9zhw>

[5] "The Last Starfighter" (Wikipedia)
<https://tinyurl.com/yw98xmkn>

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid

[10] "Steven Spielberg Couldn't Even Get The Rights To Remake 'The Last Starfighter.'" (SlashFilm, 2014) <https://tinyurl.com/4vduhxf>

[11] "The Last Starfighter" (Wikipedia)
<https://tinyurl.com/yw98xmkn>

Science Fiction as Art: Dune

Release Date: December 3, 1984

Written by: David Lynch

Directed by: David Lynch

Essay by: Sebastian Gregory

[1] "Dune (1984)" (Wikipedia)
<https://tinyurl.com/27wtan5b>

[2] "Dune (1984)" (Wikipedia)
<https://tinyurl.com/27wtan5b>

[3] "The Elephant Man" (Wikipedia)
<https://tinyurl.com/3ycczdd9>

[4] "Dune (1984)" (Wikipedia)
<https://tinyurl.com/27wtan5b>

[5] "'Dune' 1984: Francesca Annis, The Original Lady Jessica, Lifts The Lid On Life Behind The Scenes Of David Lynch's Epic, The 'Heaven's Gate' Of Sci-Fi" (Deadline, 2021)
<https://tinyurl.com/ye9vh6xe>

[6] "Dune" (Roger Ebert, 1984)
<https://tinyurl.com/2fcvu4cy>

[7] "1984 Stinkers Bad Movie Awards" (Wikipedia)
<https://tinyurl.com/ywh6acut>

[8] [VIDEO] "David Lynch Video Q&A live link from LA | Manchester International Festival | #MIF19" (YouTube, 2019) <https://tinyurl.com/49rfnujn>

[9] "Dune" (IMDB) <https://tinyurl.com/2j7msjav>

[10] [VIDEO] "David Lynch Video Q&A live link from LA | Manchester International Festival | #MIF19" (YouTube, 2019) <https://tinyurl.com/49rfnujn>

We Have Liftoff: Space Camp

Release Date: June 6, 1986

Written by: Clifford Green and Casey T. Mitchel (screenplay), Patrick Bailey and Larry B Williams (story)

Directed by: Harry Winer

Essay by: Stephanie McDevitt

[1] "Teacher in Space Project" (Wikipedia)

<https://tinyurl.com/46mp8uvn>

[2] "When Hollywood Fiction Becomes Real-Life Fact Makers Of 'Space Camp' Grapple With Challenger Tragedy." (The Morning Call, 1986)

<https://tinyurl.com/3nv5krkj>

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] "Spacecamp At 40: A Wish-Fulfillment Fantasy Brought Down To Earth By NASA's Real-Life Disaster." (Space.com, 2026)

<https://tinyurl.com/mrye7zr7>

[6] "Space Camp" (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/yxv6w4sa>

[7] Roger Ebert. "Space Camp." Roger Ebert.com. June 6, 1986. <https://tinyurl.com/2s8xwxjm>

[8] "Space Camp Goofs" (IMDB)

<https://tinyurl.com/bdz52e5f>

[9] "When Hollywood Fiction Becomes Real-Life Fact Makers Of 'Spacecamp' Grapple With Challenger Tragedy." (The Morning Call, 1986)

<https://tinyurl.com/3nv5krkj>

[10] "Lea Thompson" (A.V. Club, 2012)

<https://tinyurl.com/ypf29m4v>

Exterminate. Destroy.: Aliens

Release date: July 18, 1986

Written by: James Cameron (screenplay); David Giler, Walter Hill (Story)

Directed by: James Cameron

Essay by: Janene Scelza & Matt Scelza

[1] "Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Colonial Marines (Aliens Film Fan Group)"

<https://tinyurl.com/bde563dn>

[2] We rag on the Ghostbusters movies in this essay but the Virginia-based fangroup is doing some good: <https://ghostbustersva.com/>

[3] Does the imperviousness to stomach acids indicate an evolutionary link with the Superworm? See Mary Roach's fabulous book, Gulp: Adventures of the Alimentary Canal (2013) <https://www.maryroach.net/gulp.html>

[4] "Aliens" (Roger Ebert, 1986)

<https://www.RogerEbert.com/reviews/aliens-1986>

[5] Ibid.

[6] "Cinema: Help! They're Back!" (Time, 1986)

<https://tinyurl.com/mpt77apn>

[7] Unsurprisingly, the cinematography is gorgeous. Very little about the film, save outdated monitors, looks all that dated, and little about the animation and feels ever feels so janky that it takes you out of an otherwise intense adventure.

[8] "Aliens (film)" (Wikipedia)

<https://tinyurl.com/2td9vxcj>

Spaceballs: The Essay!

Release date: June 24, 1987

Written by: Mel Brooks; Thomas Meehan; and Ronny Graham

Directed by: Mel Brooks

Essay by: Janene Scelza and Matt Scelza

[1] Mel lovingly narrates the audiobook for his memoir, All about me!: My remarkable life in show business (Ballantine Books, 2021). If you love his style, give a listen to Pacino reading his 2024 memoir, Sonny Boy.

[2] [VIDEO] "Tom Meehan." (American Masters Digital Archive/PBS, 2012)

<https://tinyurl.com/52rsrr7b>

[3] Ibid.

[4] "Rick Moranis, Mel Brooks reveal new details on 'Spaceballs' sequel" (Yahoo, 2026)

<https://tinyurl.com/2r4ebuzy>

[5] "Spaceballs" (Roger Ebert, 1987) <https://tinyurl.com/477sahtp>

[6] We hope that even at his big age, Mel is still just as excited to do movies, and has the energy for it!

[7] [VIDEO] "Tom Meehan." (American Masters Digital Archive/PBS, 2012)

<https://tinyurl.com/52rsrr7b>

[8] Same for Robin Hood: Men in Tights (1993), which followed this movie.

Toys to Men: Masters of the Universe

Release date: August 7, 1987

Written by: David Odell, Gary Goddard and Stephen Tolkin (uncredited); Roger Sweet (characters)

Directed by: Gary Goddard

Essay by: Tom Scelza

[1] "A thorough oral history of He-Man and the Masters of the Universe, the game-changing '80s toon" (SYFY WIRE, 2019)

<https://tinyurl.com/ex666kub>

[2] Ibid.

[3] "The Masters of the Universe Bible" (Michael Halperin, 1982) <https://tinyurl.com/yyc2dyes>

[4] "A thorough oral history of He-Man and the Masters of the Universe, the game-changing '80s toon" (SYFY WIRE, 2019)

<https://tinyurl.com/ex666kub>

[5] Ibid.

[6] Composer and musical director Bill Conti was nominated three times for an Oscar, winning for Best Original Score (The Right Stuff). (Bill Conti Awards, IMDB <https://tinyurl.com/yh47p6er>. According to a 2013 interview Conti, his work on Masters of the Universe (1987) was a chaotic compromise, due to a musicians' strike. He could not conduct his own music; it was done in Europe. (<https://tinyurl.com/ad38utee>)

Costume designer Julie Weiss was nominated for a Saturn Award for her work. She has received various accolades, including two Costume Designers Guild Awards, two Emmy Awards (The Dollmaker, A Woman of Substance), in addition to nominations for two Oscars (12 Monkeys, Frida), a BAFTA, and a Tony Award. (Wikipedia, <https://tinyurl.com/m9ksvv2z>). Film Editor Anne V. Coates was a 7 time Oscar Nominee including her win for Lawrence of Arabia (1963). (Wikipedia, <https://tinyurl.com/c4jawcsw>).

[7] [VIDEO] "Frank Langella Breaks Down His Career, from 'Dracula' to 'The Americans' | Vanity Fair (YouTube, 2020) <https://tinyurl.com/rjkpe3mb>

[8] "And then 1987 hit. He-Man's sales declined 98% in one year and went from being Mattel's

top-seller to out of the top 20. Sweet blames He-Man's catastrophic failure on poor marketing decisions. Mattel simply hadn't foreseen MOTU's success and tried to catch up, forcing a glut product into the market. Unsold action figures littered the shelves, retailers rebelled, and that was the end of the line. It didn't help that 1987 was the year of the Masters of the Universe motion picture, a critically panned disaster."

"Mastering the Universe: He-Man and the Rise and Fall of a Billion-Dollar Idea" (PopMatters, 2005)

<https://tinyurl.com/nhb7bsnf>

[9] "Remembering 'She-Ra' and 'He-Man': Interview with Lou Scheimer (Animation World Network, 2006) <https://tinyurl.com/3y4w4fys>

[10] [VIDEO] "in search of masters" posted by Hyperman1010 (Tom Scelza) to YouTube on October 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/46phvkar>

Fight for Your Freedom, Fight for Your Life: Arena

Release Date: March 29, 1989

Directed by: Peter Manoogian

Written by: Danny Bilson, Paul De Meo

Essay by: Rhonda Baughman

[1] I don't know precisely what kept me from renting it – I rented EVERY OTHER DAMN THING at least once. For heaven's sake, I still own an original Slave Girls from Beyond Infinity (1987) poster.

[2] Season 3, ep. 5 "Say the Word"

[3] Except for Carol and Darryl, obv's.

[4] Arrow's release of Arena contains a special feature interview with special effects supervisor Michael Deak who details just how magnificent this monster truly was. And how this was Empire's final film.

[5] As of this essay, he's working on another book and directing a film titled Bestest Fan. That could be me depending on how rabid that fan is.

[6] I teach some of my students about Malcolm X's essay, My Fist Conk for this reason and MANY others.

[7] Ryan Gosling could remake this as he's in his good guy sci-fi era.

GIRLS, ON FILM

GIRLSONFILMZINE.COM