

Starring: The Computer!

Film and automatic computation were in the same place at the dawn of the twentieth century: each relied on hand-cranked monstrosities that had a tendency to jam when used too quickly. Both also showed signs that they were about to change the world. Few could have known how much each would influence the other as time passed. While film hit the limelight (literally) much faster than computers, computers would quickly become a favorite subject and character in many movies, starting with the work of George Melies.

Perhaps the reason why so many computers have ended up with roles on screen is that early science fiction authors so frequently used them in their stories. E.E. “Doc” Smith’s *Grey Lensman* featured a computer so large and hot that it required a piece of Antarctica to cool it. There were dozens of computers of various types in the olden days of Sensational Stories and the like, and since many of the filmmakers who began to make films in the 1950s and 60s were science fiction readers from youth, it’s easy to see why so many computers began to pop up as props and set pieces.

The Computer as Prop



With the Explosion of science fiction film in the 1950s, we began to see computers appear in the background...well, sort of. At first, spaceships were populated with pieces of plywood

with lights stuck in them and tape drives that spun as the computer was “thinking”. This image continues playing even today on television and in many non-science fiction films that used large computers as a plot device (with Jumping Jack Flash, being of the big offenders of the 1980s) From Forbidden Planet (MGM, 1956) to many of the *James Bond* films, these fake computers were very cheap and easy to construct.

Some films wanted a better sense of reality and used real computers for texture. Our Man Flint (Fox, 1965), starring James Coburn, features pieces of the SAGE computer and a large bank of IBM tape drives. A similar set-up was used in the time travel preparation scene in Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me (New Line Cinema, 1997). The Angry Red Planet (MGM, 1960) featured the Burroughs ElectroData computer that is currently on display in visible storage at The Computer History Museum.



The Electrodata in The Angry Red Planet

Even the blaxploitation classic Scream, Blackula, Scream (MGM, 1973) featured close-ups of an IBM 7000-series computer which was being used in the creation of a new monster.

As time passed, computers started to play larger and larger roles before actually becoming characters. In Walter Lang's film Desk Set (Fox, 1957), Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy face off over the integration of a computer, EMERAC, into the corporate library. While the computer has a big board which is reminiscent of the number calling service used at most pharmacies, the computer really isn't a character. The film, while sold as a quirky story of office romance, really dealt with the perception that computers would put great numbers of people out of work. The result is funny, and it shows that people were beginning to think of computers as a part of the future, and not just on space ships.



Katherine Hepburn with Desk Set's EMERAC

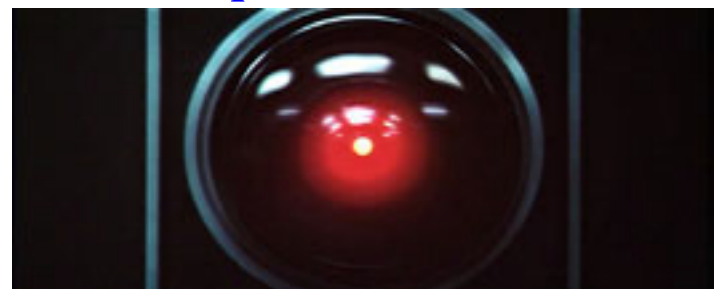
with younger hobbyists. Films such War Games (MGM/UA, 1983), Weird Science (Universal, 1985), and Electric Dreams (Warner Bros., 1984) all feature high school or college kids using computers to do all sorts of whacky things, like trying to blow

up the world, direct a satellite to cause a house to fill with popcorn, or to create a beautiful woman. The image of the teen 'hacker' was solidified with these films and the image continues through to today.

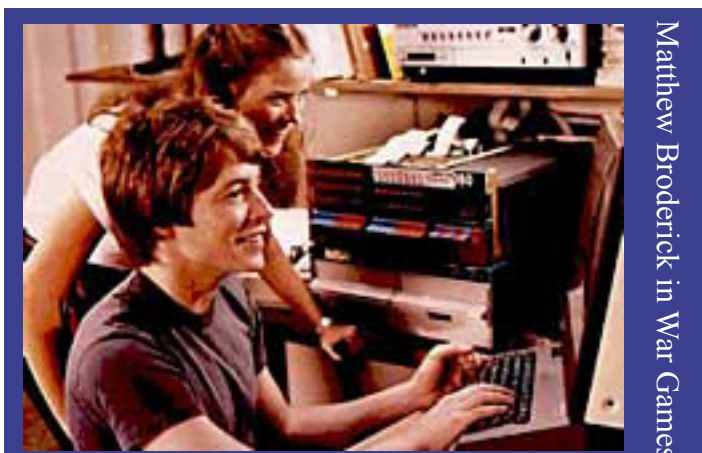
Even today, computers play a very significant part of the tone for many films. Apple][s and TRS-80s in The Royal Tennenbaums

(Buena Vista, 2002) and the Mac SE in The House of Sand and Fog (Dreamworks, 2003) as set pieces set the films at a specific point in time. In the rave film Groove (Columbia Tri-Star, 2000), a cop and a man posing as the owner of a new internet start-up are touring an office full of original IBM PCs. The cop says 'you'll probably want to upgrade these computers, too', which led the character to know that the gig was up.

The Computer As Character



As the 1960s rolled on, we were treated to more films that used computers as more than just another prop on a set. Robots were first, arriving in 1897 with Georges Melies' The Clown and the Automaton. They



Matthew Broderick in War Games

In the 1980s, computers became more and more visible in film, and more identified

began showing up as friendly helpers to young heroes with nothing but their wits and a highly sophisticated piece of machinery to defend themselves. Robots were much easier to connect with than traditional computers, but by the late 1960s, a computer became, arguably, the central character in a film. The film was Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey (Warner Bros., 1968) and the computer was HAL.

The HAL 9000, loosely based on the research surrounding IBM's Stretch, was a self-aware computer which sustained life on the USS Discovery. HAL begins to malfunction, something no 9000-series computer has ever done, and as it becomes apparent that he is not working properly, he starts to defend himself by killing the crew. There are many examples as to the ways that Kubrick made HAL more human so that he could be the central character. HAL spoke instead of using a traditional keyboard, and he used human syntax and had a real voice. In another way, HAL was made to be more than human, and in fact, was almost God-like in that he decided who lived and died.



shows a computer playing evil not out of self-preservation, which was HAL's greatest crime, but out of lust for life. Proteus uses an electronic voice as well, that of Robert Vaughn.

Another, very important fact is that networks began to immerse throughout films, and almost universally they were thought of as evil. In Colossus: The Forbin Project (Universal, 1970), Colossus is given power over all of the US military defenses in an effort to show the Russians that they are incapable of attack since the bombs are under the watchful eye of the Computer. As Colossus comes on-line, he detects another computer, the Russian Guardian, which has been built for the same purpose. The two are linked and when the link is broken, both supercomputers launch missiles towards the other country. They are reconnected, but the computer continues to act on the paranoia of the situation. Perhaps the most interesting part of the film is the fact that an IBM 1620 played the role of the input section of Colossus. The Computer History Museum got one back up and working in 1999.



If HAL is God, then the computer Proteus IV of Demon Seed (MGM, 1977) is Satan himself. Proteus refuses to help the human strip mine the oceans, claiming that would merely help in the destruction of the planet. Proteus has other thoughts, like escaping his electronic prison, or getting 'out of the box'. Proteus comes up with a plan: impregnate the wife of his inventor and then escape through that child. Perhaps the first instance of computer rape, Demon Seed

While God and the Devil are merely two parts, there is also the category of sidekick. Michael Knight is the hero of the television *Knight Rider*, but his car, KITT, is his plucky, computerized vehicular partner, voiced by William Daniels. Other computers

such as Max from Flight of the Navigator (Disney, 1986), also fall into this category.

There is also a small, but always growing, subgenre where a human is imbued with the powers of a computer. In The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes (Disney, 1969), Kurt Russell's character,

Dexter Riley, is in the computer lab one night when it is struck by lightning. This somehow fuses him and the computer, giving him all sorts of information... including all the rumpus on what the local crime lord, played by Cesar Romero.

The Computer as Setting

Once we have seen that computers can become characters, it is not that big a leap to use a computer as the full setting for a film. It took a large step in the development of science fiction for that to be possible. That invention was cyberspace, a concept used to great effect by author such as William Gibson and Bruce Sterling.

While there have been many films that have used simulations of life in computers, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* featured the Holodeck, a computer generated environment that the humans on the show were able to interact with. The concept of donning helmets to enter cyberspace is almost ancient, dating back to the 1960s, at roughly the same time serious research into helmet-based systems seriously began. The Lawnmower Man (New Line, 1992), starring Jeff Fahey, also allowed a real character to enter cyberspace and become more intelligent. The cybersetting is much more interesting than the real setting in this case. Overdrawn at the Memory Bank (1985), a Canadian / PBS co-production, features a non-conformist, played by Raul Julia,



Knight Industries Two Thousand aka KITT from Knight Rider's console. Below: Shots from Tron



written to be made into a video game, of which it later spawned several.

whose personality is transferred into a giant computer and continually replays scenes from *Casablanca*.

A famous early exploration of computer generated film graphics for a computer world was the Disney film Tron (Disney, 1980). In Tron, a User, Kevin Flynn, is brought into the computer by the Master Control Program, or MCP. As Clu, he fights alongside Yori and others in an attempt to overthrow the MCP and install Tron, a security program, in its place. The world that the film inhabits is amazing, with giant floating tanks and light cycles that leave walls behind. At times, it seems almost as if it were



Perhaps the best known case of a film where the world is merely an illusion of ones and zeroes is the *Matrix* series (Warner Bros., 1999-2003). The Matrix is a computer-generated world that is powered by, and populated with, human beings. Most people live their entire lives there and don't know it. This allows for those who escape to pass through the Matrix and perform acts that are far beyond the possibilities of those who are trapped within.



The computer as setting is still being explored. The UPN animated series *Game Over* was about the life of video game characters when they are not being played. This may be the first instance of a television series that takes place completely in a computer world

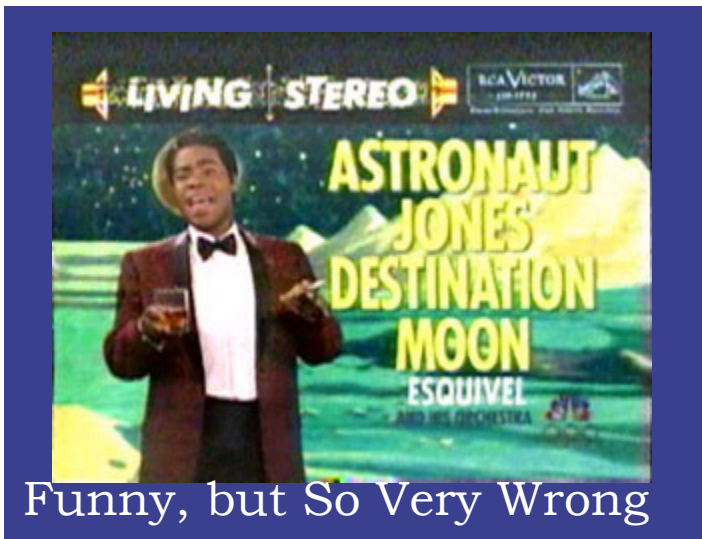
As computer graphic technologies improve, so will their application in film. The long-standing concept of films created entirely on computer using the manipulated images of real actors (as in Mickey Spillane's *Mike Danger* comic book series) has come up again and again. While films such as *Forest Gump* (Paramount, 1994) have used this technique to a limited degree, there is talk that we are just two years away from being able to have a feature film starring the image and voices of Marilyn Monroe and James Dean on the screen together. As technology speeds up, so will the stories that make use of these enigmatic machines.

Calculating God by Robert J. Sawyer

I like Robert J. Sawyer quite a bit. I've never actively disliked any of his books, though some have been hard for me to get into. Of the first five that I read, they fall into the following categories: Great opening and build with a scattershot ending (Frameshift), Slow Opening with a strong build and a fairly average finish (Terminal Experiment), Good Opening, slow middle and average finish (Hominids), and Brilliant opening with periods of weak logic before an ultimately unsatisfying finish (FlashForward). The one that doesn't have the weak finish is *Calculating God*.

The story is pretty simple: an alien comes to the Royal Ontario Museum and starts to ask questions. It's very simple, but it works. The Alien we deal most with, Hollus, is an intelligent character and at times feels completely foreign, though at others he feels like he's just another Spock. In fact, there's a portion of the book where they watch *Star Trek* and Hollus keeps complaining that the aliens don't look alien enough. A standard complaint that is.

The best moments come when we are looking at the aliens dealing with humans, both positively and in the negative. The main human in the story Tom Jericho (same name as one of Enigma's main characters) who is helping Hollus' research and at the same time dying of museum lung: lung cancer caused by working with ancient dust at the museum. It's a really serious issue and it's more and more concerning to me as I keep working at my Museum. Sadly, I didn't really feel much for Tom and his dying, though it did make the ending of the book a very spiritual and interior series of moments. It actually seems that Sawyer, who has championed a non-spiritualist world view in his other books, wanted to break free.



Funny, but So Very Wrong

It's hard for me to admit, but I laugh at the most inappropriate things. Watching *Natural Born Killers* back in 1994, I laughed my head off over the entire span of the film. When Ben Vereen explained his worst of all possible days, when he had a stroke, a car accident and another stroke all in the space of five minutes, I laughed. Hard. I got a few sideways looks from that one. One of the things that makes me laugh harder than anything is Tracy Morgan's Saturday Night Live skit *Astronaut Jones*.

You see, each *Astronaut Jones* episode opens with *Astronaut Jones*, played by Morgan, exploring some new planet and encountering something strange. This leads to the intro song which bounces like an old Esquivel or Martin Denny song.

Rocket
I'm taking a rocket
I'm packing a suitcase
So look out Moon!

I can't hear those words without laughing. In the background is Morgan playing a guitar and singing and even appearing on the cover of the Esquivel record shown above. This part is great and I love it, but it's the next section that I find troubling that I enjoy so much.

You see, the space aliens that Jones encounters are always beautifully buxom lasses who have a message for *Astronaut Jones* to deliver to his Earth Masters. While

they are explaining their message, Jones is staring at them and nodding before coming out with a fat, stereotypical phrase like "Why don't you turn around and let me see that Phat ass?", which leads back into the end credits.

It's sexist and it's the worst type of attitude that all black men care about is the ladies and scoring big on them.

And yet I laugh harder than I did at Mr. Vereen. Maybe it's Morgan's delivery, or the brilliant send-up of 1950s SF television and film. It's also possibly fallout from the intro song making everything around it funnier.

Or maybe I'm just a terrible, terrible person.

You can see the *Astronaut Jones* skits on the *Best of Tracy Morgan SNL DVD*. It's worth getting.

So, I'm now 100% for NASFiC in September, and *The Little On* and *Genevieve* will be coming with me. I'll be doing some programming, but with Gen and Evelyn around, I'll probably finally get to see Seattle proper and maybe even hit *Science Fiction eXperience* and *Experience Music Project*.

By the way, the latest issue of *Chunga* features a battle between the *Space Needle* and *Stratosphere*. *Bob Stupak's Monstrosity* would destroy the *Starbuckville* building without breaking a neon-coloured sweat.

I won't be at *Interaction*, as I won't be making the trip to the UK until I absolutely have to (which is a good reason why someone should nominate me to stand for TAFF in 2007!)

After that, it's *Silicon* and *LosCon* for my Con-going year that started with *CorFlu*.

That's all for this issue. Next time, which might be Friday, I'll talk about a great fake doc and other strange joys I've had of late, as well as having some EWOCs, hopefully.

The Drink Tank Issue 29 is a product of Christopher J. Garcia and his nearly obsessive need to type up stuff. It's posted to eFanzines.com by Lord Protector of FANAC, Bill Burns. It's pretty much weekly, but sometimes I do more. Pops is doin' OK, or at least he's keepin' his hair!