

FILMS FANTASTIC 5



The Original **CAPTAIN MARVEL**

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Captain Marvel was originally a character in Fawcett Comics, their entry into the super hero comic market. In the origin story newsboy Billy Batson encounters the wizard Shazam who tells Billy that by speaking the wizard's name he will become Captain Marvel. In the form of Captain Marvel he will have the wisdom of Soloman, the strength of Hercules, the stamina of Atlas, the power of Zeus, the courage of Achilles, and the speed of Mercury (thereby hopeless scrambling Greek/Roman mythology). The character quickly caught on, due in part to the often tongue-in-cheek approach.

In 1940 Republic Pictures was interested in bringing a super hero to the screen and approached DC Comics about licensing Superman, but DC had already made a deal with Max Fleischer to produce a series of animated cartoons. Republic then approached Fawcett and got the rights to make a serial of the ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN MARVEL. Now Republic made the best serials at the time, but was not necessarily known for its fidelity to the source material.

Billy Batson was no longer selling newspapers, but was broadcasting on radio. Captain Marvel became a bit more gritty, casually tossing bad guys from the roofs of tall buildings and not bothering to catch them. But the Saturday morning audiences ate it up and the ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN MARVEL became one of the most popular serials of all time, right on the heels of Universal's FLASH GORDON.



The cast was headed by Tom Tyler, popular Cowboy star as Captain Marvel, and Frank Coghlan, Jr. as Billy Batson. William Benedict and Louise Currie also starred. The supporting cast was made up of Familiar Faces, many of who were regular fixtures at Republic. The plot was not like anything that appeared in the comics. An archaeological expedition to Siam uncovers a tomb containing a golden scorpion holding six lenses. A trap is sprung. Meanwhile Billy Batson encounters the wizard Shazam and is given the secret of becoming Captain Marvel, enabling him to rescue the party. The scorpion turns out to be a device that can turn base metals into gold and also be a destructive weapon. The lenses are divided among the party so one person will not have control of the golden scorpion.

The rest of the serial involves a mysterious robed figure called the Scorpion (how convenient) attempting to get the lenses. Obviously the Scorpion is a member of the party, but who? This is a typical Republic plot device used in numerous serials such as ZORRO'S FIGHTING LEGION and THE LONE RANGER. Republic also tended to not play fair. The robed Scorpion is not played by the same actor who is unmasked at the climax. Even sneakier, a third actor provides the voice for the Scorpion.

Logical plots were not what attracted fans to the serials. It was the action, and no one provided action like Republic. They had a corps of top notch stuntmen, guaranteed to put on a great show. Howard and Theodore Lydecker headed the special effects department, creating better effects on a tight budget than many of the major studios with deep pockets. They developed a dummy and wire rig that created realistic flying effects. Their miniatures were also very convincing.

Captain Marvel was the first comic book hero to be portrayed on the screen, and Republic quickly got the rights to other characters including Spy Smasher and Captain America (changed from a soldier to a district attorney for some unknown reason). From the newspaper comic strips they had Dick Tracy, the Phantom, and Red Ryder. From fiction magazines they borrowed Fu Manchu and Zorro. Other studios, particularly Columbia, jumped on the bandwagon with the Green Hornet, Batman, Blackhawk, and Superman.



For those unfamiliar with the serials of the thirties through the fifties, ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN MARVEL is a good place to start. You can see the complete serial on YouTube. Other serials are also available there. They can be addictive. They can also be a bit too much if you try watching them in one sitting. They were designed to be shown one chapter a week, although one a day is a good pace. But there is always the temptation to keep going since each chapter ended with one of the main characters in mortal peril via machine guns, runaway cars, a guillotine, and more. How will the hero escape was the question, not will the hero escape. Except for Spy Smasher, but that is a different story.

SHAZAM

Short Takes-Science Fiction on YouTube

As most are probably aware YouTube is a great source for free viewing online. Here are a few Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror titles available. I have watched many of these, some to my regret. Somebody had to do it. Not listed in any particular order.

THINGS TO COME (1936) Written by H. G. Wells, directed by William Cameron Menzies. Cast includes Raymond Massey, Edward Chapman, Ralph Richardson, Cedric Hardwick, Margaretta Scott, Ann Todd. Music by Sir Arthur Bliss.

A seemingly endless war erupts and drags on, splintering society. A group of scientists join forces to defeat the petty warlords and rebuild civilization. The movie ends after several generations with mankind poised to set out for the stars.

Typical of Wells' later works this tends to be a bit preachy. Still, it is worth a look, especially the rebuilding of society and the future utopia created. In England an album of the score was released, making this the first film soundtrack recording.

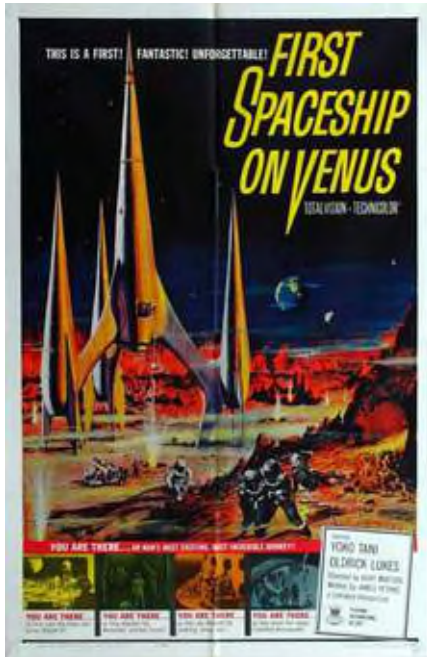
KILLERS FROM SPACE (1954) Directed by W. Lee Wilder, Billy Wilder's considerably less talented brother. Starring Peter Graves.

This was one of a series of minimal budget Sci Fi flicks let loose on an unsuspecting world by W. Lee Wilder. This involves an invasion by pop-eyed aliens using their science to create giant bugs, among other things. This fits in the category of So-Bad-It's-Fun movies. Wilder may have actually been more talented than Ed Wood, but certainly lacked Wood's goofiness.

PHANTOM FROM SPACE (1953) Another one from W. Lee Wilder, starring no one you ever heard of.

The plot is a bit more interesting. An alien lands on earth and winds up killing two humans who were freaked out by his space suit. The alien removes the suit, becoming invisible. The rest of the movie deals with whether this will be a positive first contact or one that ends badly. Not terrible and worth seeing once.

FIRST SPACESHIP ON VENUS (1960) An East German/Polish production, in color, featuring an international cast.



When an alien artifact found on earth is discovered to have come from Venus, an expedition is sent to that planet.

Based on a novel by Stanislaw Lem **FIRST SPACESHIP ON VENUS** is an interesting movie, and it features one of the best looking rockets ever seen on film. The available print is the one prepared for release in the US and Canada and is dubbed into English. It also suffers from a number of cuts and a few subtle plot changes. After all, this was still the height of the Cold War. That it received distribution in the West is amazing considering how closed off East Germany was. But on the other hand, it was before the Berlin Wall went up.

The acting is often weak, but there are some stunning visuals, and the overall plot is interesting. This one is definitely worth a look.

GOG (1954) Produced by Ivan Tors, directed by Herbert L. Strock. With Richard Egan, Herbert Marshall, William Schallert, and Constance Dowling.

Scientists in an underground laboratory are being killed, possibly by the base's robots (calling Dr. Asimov). An enjoyable thriller with decent production values.



MASTER OF THE WORLD (1961) from American International Pictures, written by Richard Matheson, directed by William Witney. Starring Vincent Price, Charles Bronson, Henry Hull, Vito Scotti, Mary Webster, Wally Campo. Music by Les Baxter.



American International had not yet discovered Poe, but Jules Verne had inspired a number of popular films, so AIP joined the crowd. Based very loosely on the Verne novels ROBUR THE CONQUEROR and MASTER OF THE WORLD, Matheson hijacked some of the plot from 20,000 LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA, making Robur something like Captain Nemo with anger issues.

A party, including government agent John Strock (Bronson) winds up trapped aboard the Albatross, a fabulous flying machine in the late 1800s. Master of the Albatross is Robur (Price) who plans to bring about world peace even if he has to kill everyone to do it. Not one of Matheson's best scripts. Another weakness is the use of stock footage. Flying over London we see Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, from Olivier's HENRY V. Later they attack the British fleet, this time consisting of Nelson's 18th Century Navy. At least the footage from THE FOUR FEATHERS is proper period.

Still, it is an enjoyable film, due a great deal to the cast. Price was a hot property on the heels of some William Castle films, and Bronson was on the edge of stardom. The Albatross is a wonderful machine, one of my favorite Victorian era devices (along with George Pal's Time Machine, and Disney's Nautilus). Another plus is Les Baxter's score, probably the best of his career. Recommended.

THE FLESH EATERS (1964) Directed by Jack Curtis. Starring Martin Kosleck. A small plane is forced down and the passengers are trapped on an island run by the maddest of mad scientists Martin Kosleck. If you do not know the name you will recognize the face. He had a long career and made a good living playing Nazis during World War II, an Egyptian high priest sending Kharis the Mummy out to commit dastardly acts, and even played some good guys. Here he is developing a particularly nasty life form, the Flesh Eaters of the title. I first discovered this on the cover of Famous Monsters of Filmland, but did not get to see it for almost forty years. It is a lot of fun and provides a few genuine shocks. Get your popcorn and enjoy.

Art by Jose Sanchez

