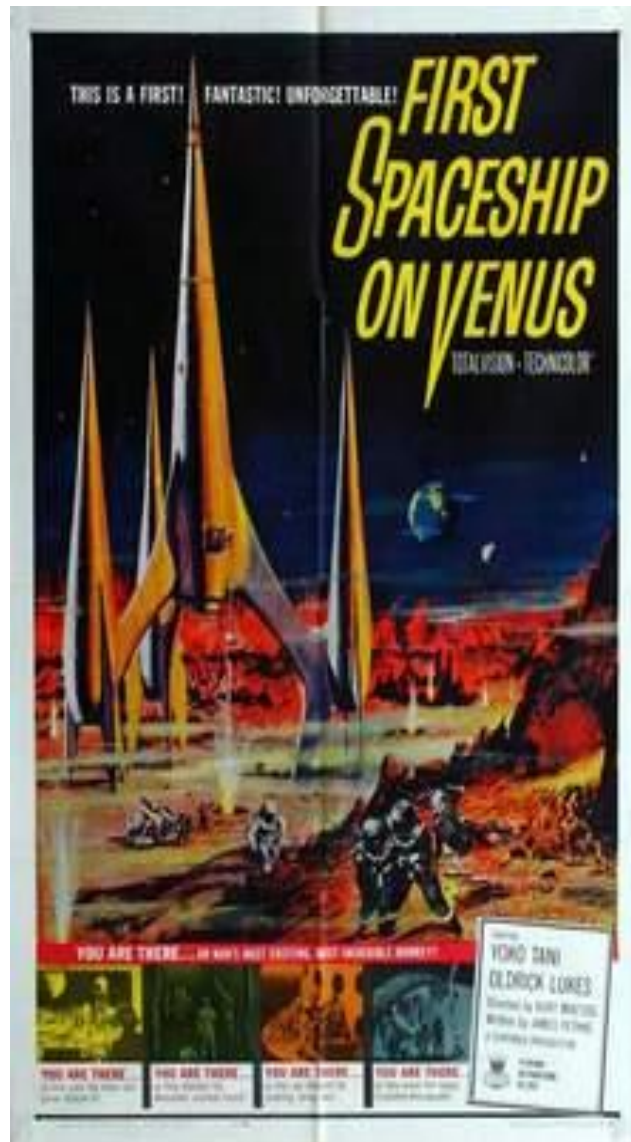


FILMS FANTASTIC 8



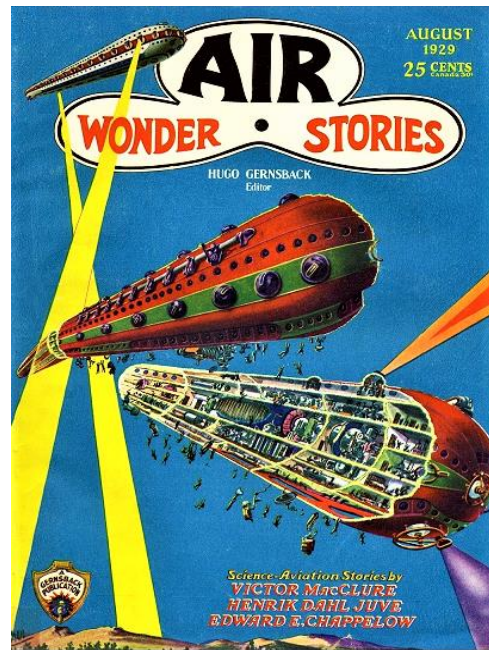
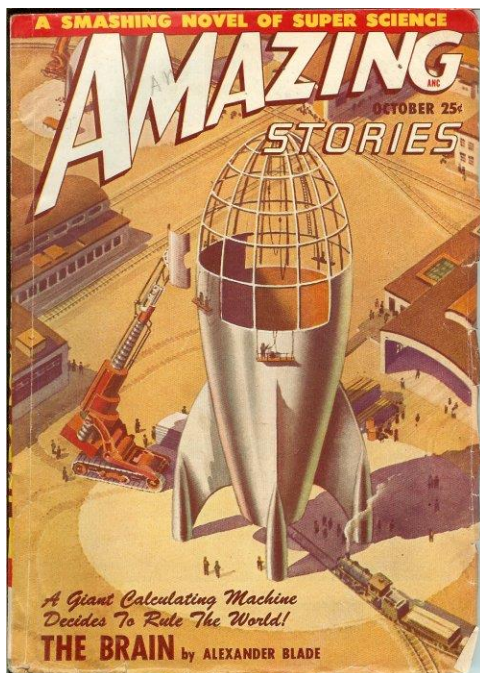
Rockets In the Movies

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Rockets and Science Fiction go hand in hand, or fin in hand, and have done so for ages. The earliest tales of space travel did tend to use other, more fanciful, methods. Cyrano De Bergerac wrote of a trip to the moon, not on gossamer wings, but via balloon. H. G. Wells pictured a sphere coated with anti-gravity paint. Jules Verne sent his space travellers to orbit the moon via a shell fired from a giant cannon, the method chosen by Georges Melies in A TRIP TO THE MOON.



Rockets became a staple on the covers of Science Fiction magazines.





WOMAN IN THE MOON (1929)

was directed by Fritz Lang (METROPOLIS) and presented this very Teutonic, heavy weight rocket. The plot is about an expedition seeking gold on the moon. Included in the story is a stowaway, soon to become a popular cliché. Also featured in this movie is the use of a countdown leading up to the launch of the rocket. This was the

first use of the device which was then adopted for use in actual rocket launches. The movie was restored in 2000 and is available on DVD and Blu-ray..





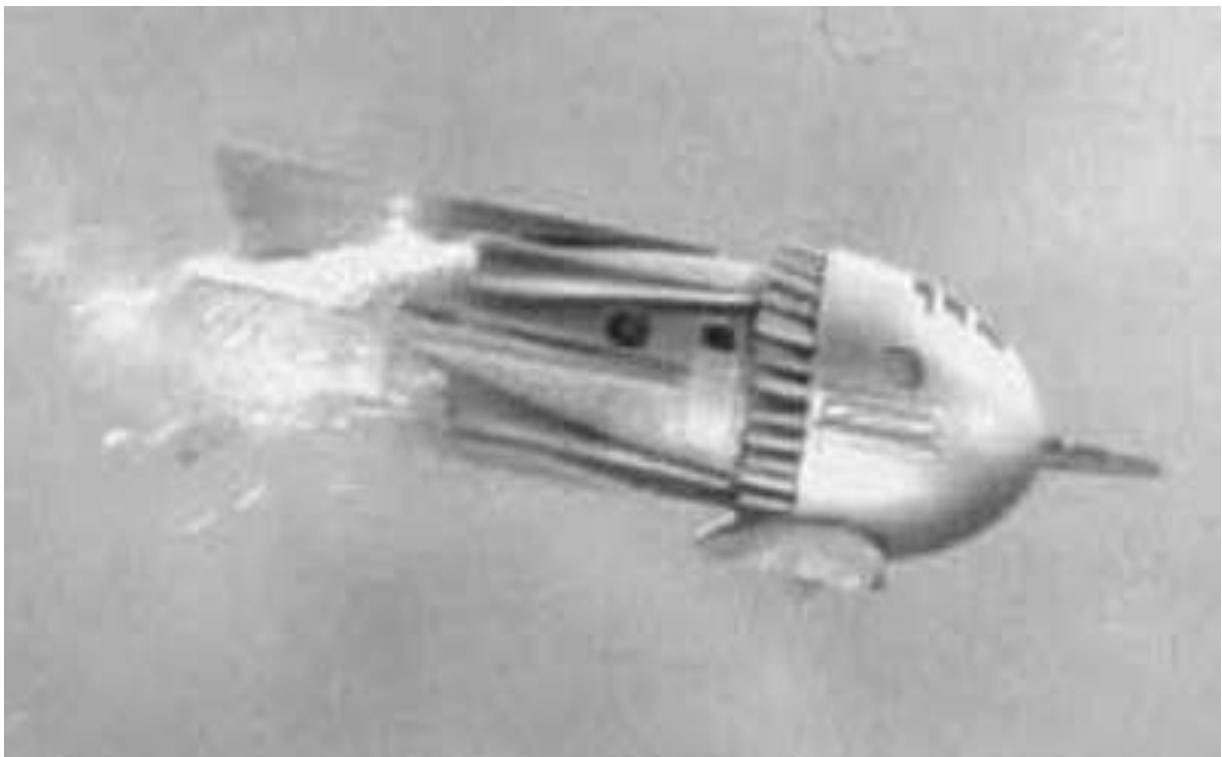
Fox Pictures released JUST IMAGINE, the first Science Fiction musical, in 1930. While visually interesting, the movie itself was a pretty painful affair with dialect comedian El Brendel as a human from 1930 who is struck by lightning and is revived by scientists in the far distant future of 1980. Here people have numbers instead of names and Brendel's character is dubbed Single-O (no license to kill here). The



plot takes our heroes to Mars which is inhabited by chorus girls right out of a Busby Berkeley movie. The songs are forgettable and the comedy is painful. The only bright spots are Maureen O'Sullivan, soon to gain fame as Tarzan's Jane, and the neat rockets, soon to appear in films at Universal. Director David Butler had a long career including directing three films with Shirley Temple, numerous musicals and a lot of television episodes including one for The Twilight Zone.



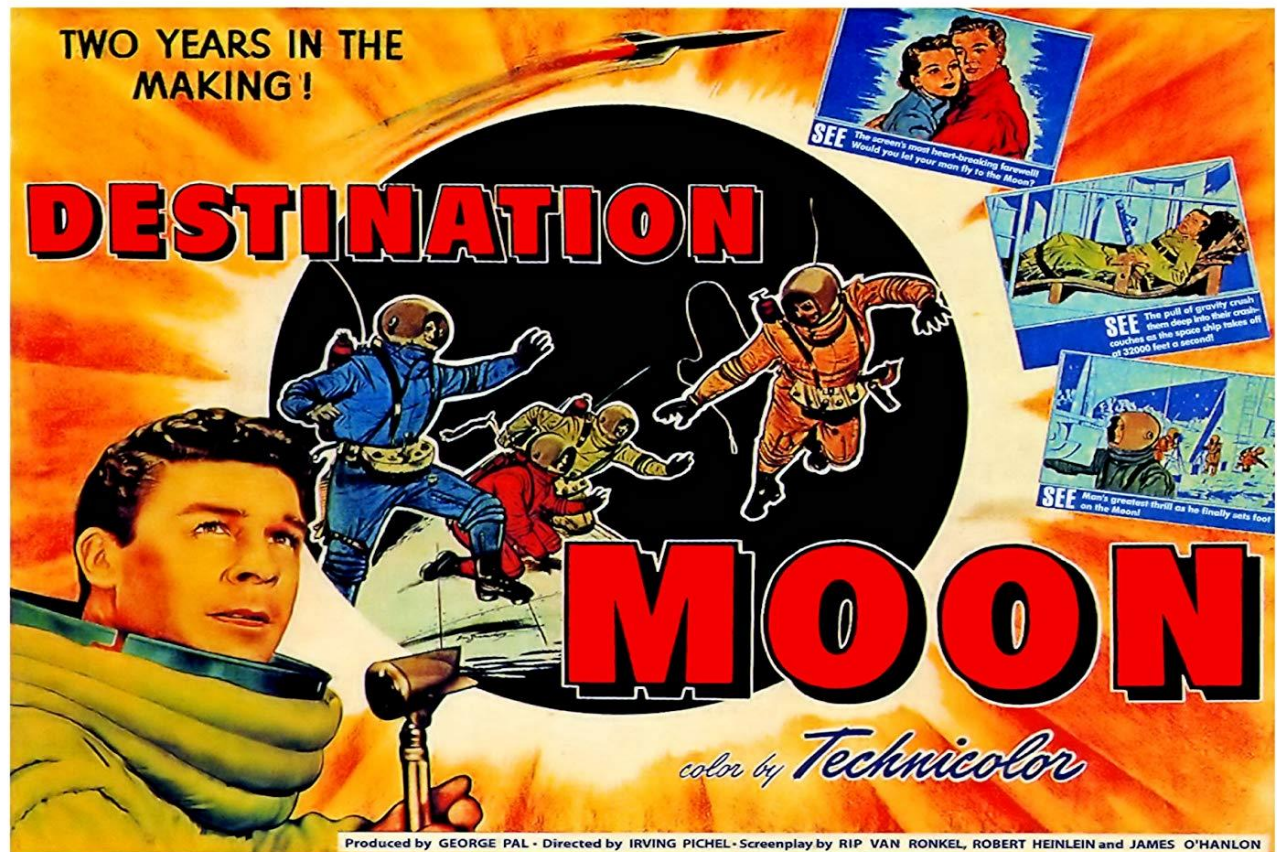
In 1936 Universal brought Alex Raymond's popular comic strip Flash Gordon to the screen in thirteen exciting chapters. The star was former Olympic athlete and screen Tarzan Buster Crabbe with Jean Rogers as Dale Arden and Charles Middleton as arch villain Ming the Merciless. James Pierce, another former Tarzan, was Thun, King of the Lion Men. Also featured were the rocketship models originally built for JUST IMAGINE. Here they were put to much better use. This serial was so popular that it spawned two sequels.





Earth is being threatened by a rogue planet from outside the solar system. Flash and Dale have parachuted from an endangered plane and land near the lab of Dr. Zarkov, a reclusive scientist. He forces them into his rocket and then takes off for the threatening planet. As it turns out the planet Mongo is controlled by the meglamaniacal space tyrant Ming the Merciless. Our heroes are captured, escape, get captured by other people of Mongo, and eventually save the day. Adding to the drama, Ming's luscious daughter, Princess Aura, sets here sights on the hunky Flash. A lot of hard breathing here, to say the least. Remember, these serials were not aimed just at kids. All in all pretty innocent since the Production Code had Hollywood in its grip by this time.



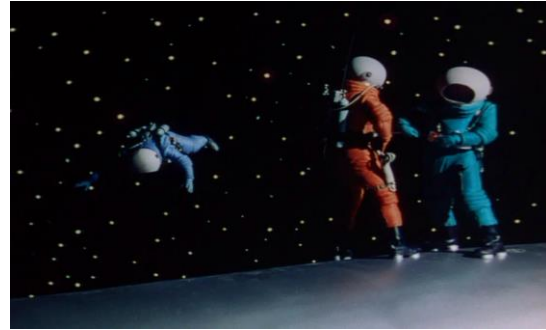
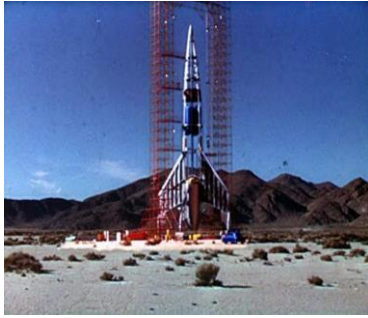


Jumping ahead to 1950 we have *DESTINATION MOON*, the first Science Fiction film produced by George Pal. This was an attempt to portray a realistic mission to the Moon; no Bug-Eyed Monsters or things from another world. One of the writers, along with Alford van Ronkel and James O'Hanlon was Robert A. Heinlein. Material from *ROCKETSHIP GALILEO* and *THE MAN WHO SOLD THE MOON* was incorporated into the script. Astronomical art was by Chesley Bonestell. The plot is heavily influenced by Heinlein involving the rocket, not as a government project, but privately funded.

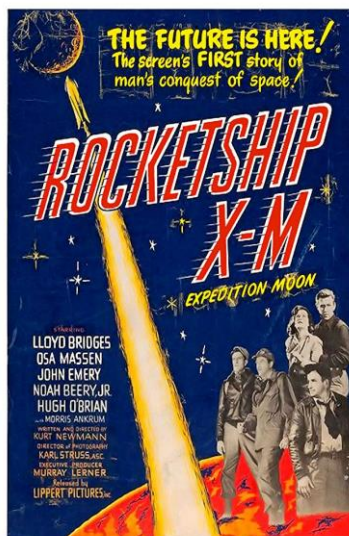
The moon rocket, dubbed “Luna” is a sleek, graceful craft, looking every bit like the perfect rocket. Luna is atomic powered, as was the accepted thinking at the time. The movie uses several plot devices that have since become cliché, including a space walk that turns into a rescue. Landing on the moon they use too much fuel and it appears they will have to leave one of the four crewmen behind. But in the world of film they were used here first.

A short animated film with Woody Woodpecker is used to explain the basics of launching a rocket to the moon. This provides a bit of relief as the main characters explain the science to potential investors. John Archer, Warner Anderson, and Tom

Powers are not big stars, but were reliable actors with long careers. This was Dick Wesson's first movie and he went on to become a familiar face in film and TV. The music by Leith Stevens was released as a soundtrack recording.



DESTINATION MOON is available on DVD and is worth checking out, especially for fans of classic Science Fiction. It provides a good look at how the future was.



Also in 1950 Lippert Pictures, which specialized in good quality, low budget movies, hearing about the upcoming release of DESTINATION MOON, rushed their own film

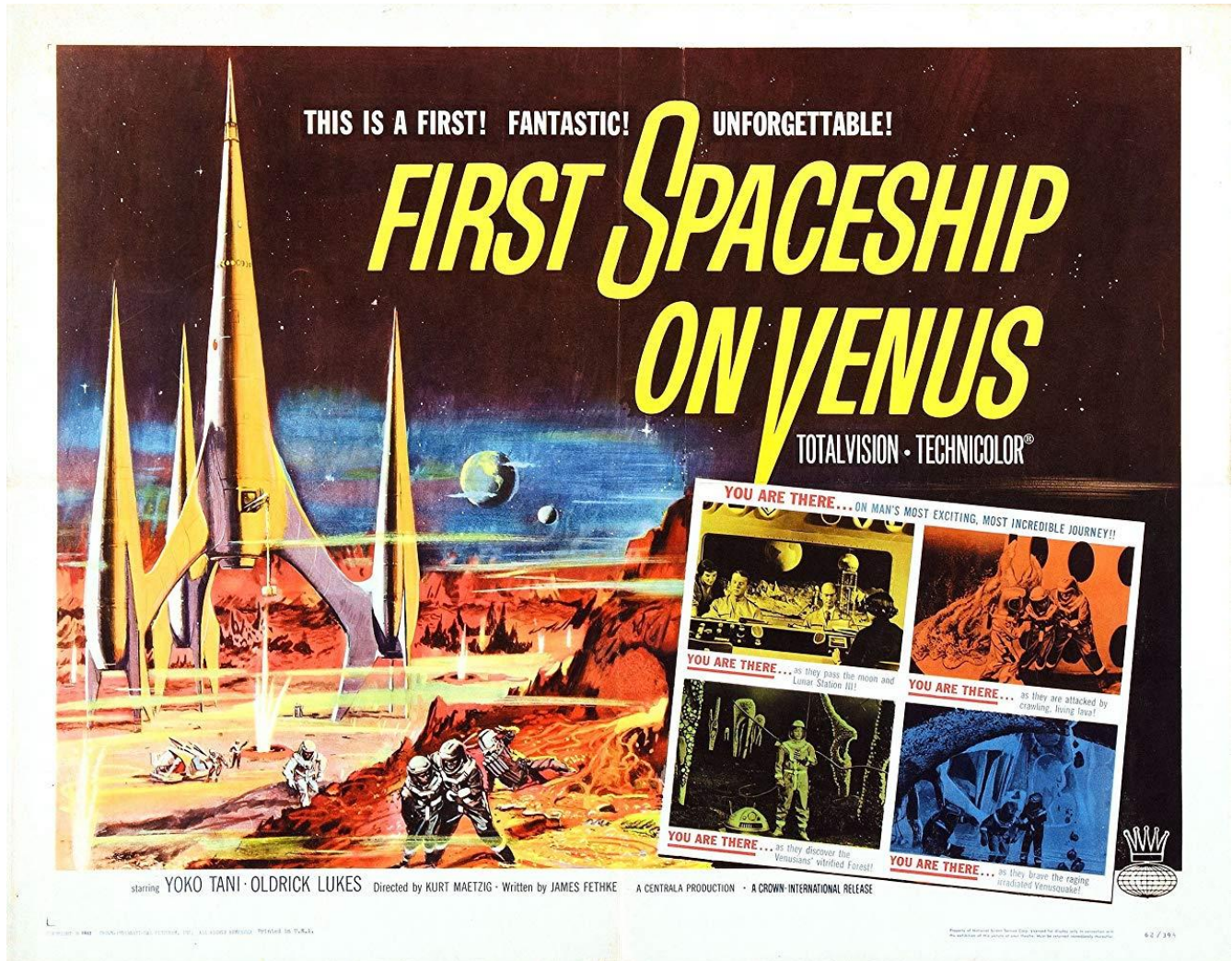
into production. Originally dubbed **XPEDITION MOON**, a lawsuit from George Pal led to the title change. The plot also involved a planned trip to the moon, but something goes awry and the ship winds up on Mars. (I knew I should have made that left turn at Albuquerque.) Here they discover the remnants of a once advanced people blown back to the Stone Age due to a nuclear war. The return trip has its own perils.

While **DESTINATION MOON** was more Astounding Science Fiction **ROCKETSHIP X-M** is more **AMAZING STORIES** with a touch of Shaver thrown in. While the first is plausible, the latter is pure pulp. But that does not mean it isn't entertaining. First, it has a cast that would soon leap to stardom on the big screen and television. Hugh O'Brian and Lloyd Bridges would soon have their own shows and Noah Beery Jr. would be a fixture in many shows and movies. The score was by Ferde Grofe, famous for *The Grand Canyon Suite*.

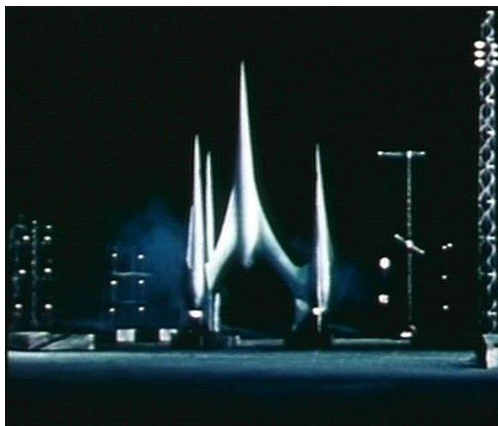


To finish up our look at some of the Rockets from Science Fiction movies we jump ahead to 1960 for **THE FIRST SPACESHIP ON VENUS**. This was a coproduction between East Germany and Poland, based on the novel *ASTRONAUCI* by Polish author Stanislaw Lem (most famous for *SOLARIS*). The plot involves a strange recording

device discovered during a construction project which, when partially translated, is discovered to have come from Venus. Immediately an international team is assembled and a ship is designed for the flight to Venus. The ship is dubbed the Cosmostrator (Kosmokrator in the original version), one of the loveliest rockets in movies.



American release poster for the film.



A team of astronauts is assembled for the mission including German, Polish, Russian, Japanese, American, Chinese, and African. Very diverse for the era. After a successful launch the mission proceeds. Meanwhile, the rest of the alien recording is translated and reveals the Venusians were planning to invade the Earth. Will the mission be greeted by a hostile force?



The movie was released in the US by Crown International arranged for a dubbed soundtrack and also shortened the running time. The original score was replaced by music from *THE WOLFMAN* (Frank Skinner), *THIS ISLAND EARTH* (Herman Stein), and *DESTINATION MOON* (Leith Stevens). Unfortunately, the American cut is the only version of the movie currently available on DVDs of varying quality.

This ends our trip through space for the present. Please feel free to comment on your favorite rocketship from Hollywood and beyond.

Film Reviews by Tom Feller

Ad Astra—

Brad Pitt is having an excellent year. One reviewer commented that he may be nominated in two Academy Award acting categories next year, Supporting Actor for *Once Upon a Time in ... Hollywood* and Best Actor for this film. Pitt is excellent, but the film itself is not so good. It is set some time in the future when both the Moon and Mars have been colonized. Clifford McBride (Tommy Lee Jones) led a mission to Neptune 29 years ago, but he and his crew went missing after reaching their destination. His son Roy (Pitt) has grown up in his shadow, is estranged from his wife Eve (Liv Tyler) because of his emotional detachment, and is now assigned a mission of

finding his father. Power surges originating from Neptune are now disrupting life in the inner Solar System, and U.S. Space Command believes the elder McBride, assuming he is still alive, is either responsible or knows who is. The younger McBride has some adventures and encounters on the road to Neptune. Some reviewers have described the film as *2001: A Space Odyssey* meets *Apocalypse Now*, based on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, with the younger McBride as Marlow (Martin Sheen) and the elder as Kurtz (Marlon Brando), although this film does not have the psychological depth as either the book or the film adaptation.

The film is beautifully photographed. The most egregious scientific error occurs during a lift-off when crew members leave their seats and float as if in zero gravity although they are still under acceleration. While not scientifically impossible, it was implausible for commercial flights from the Earth to the Moon to be launched directly from the Earth's surface, then for a Moon to Mars mission to be launched directly from the Moon's surface and have the same spacecraft land on Mars, and finally to launch the same ship again from the surface of Mars in the direction of Neptune. In addition, the film never shows any crew quarters, although the trip from the Moon to Mars takes 19 days and from Mars to Neptune 79. One of the film's few action scenes takes place on the Moon's surface when moon-buggy bandits pursue Pitt and his companions as if they were in a *Mad Max* movie. Overall, I found this movie to be terribly pretentious.

Joker—

The Joker (Joaquin Phoenix) with his white face and green hair was the villain in the very first issue of *Batman* in 1940 and has even had a few comic books of his own. Since I was already reading comic books before the *Batman* TV series debuted, I don't recall when I first encountered him. I have read the graphic novel "The Killing Joke" by Alan Moore, one of the best Joker stories, which is cited as one of this version's influences. The new movie is an origin story set in 1981, but does NOT use the falling into a vat of chemicals story. I presume the Joker and Batman will have a showdown in a future movie, although the filmmakers deny Phoenix will appear in the next Batman movie, which is scheduled for 2021 and is supposed to star Robert Pattinson, the vampire heartthrob in the *Twilight* movies.

Gotham City is in the middle of a garbage strike when the movie begins. Arthur Fleck (Phoenix) works for an agency that provides clowns for advertising and parties while he is trying to break into stand-up comedy at comedy clubs. One day he is outside a store

and waving a sign trying to entice people to come inside when a group of young men steal his sign. Arthur pursues them and, unfortunately, catches them, because they beat him up. When one of his co-workers gives him a hand gun to protect himself, he forgets to put it away during a job at a children's hospital. When it is discovered, he gets fired. Arthur lives in a slum, supports his invalid mother (Frances Conroy), who had been treated for mental illness at Arkham Asylum, and suffers himself from a neurological condition called "pseudobulbar affect" that causes him to burst into uncontrollable laughter even in the most inappropriate situations. He takes seven medications for mental illness and sees a therapist (Sharon Washington), but funding for his program has been cut. Eventually he cracks during a scene set in a subway in which he shoots three Wall Street-types and becomes the supervillain we know and feel guilty that we love to watch. Another complication is that he believes himself to be the illegitimate son of Thomas Wayne (Brett Cullen), possibly making him the half-brother of the future Batman.

Director and co-author (with Scott Silver) Todd Phillips has cited *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, and *King of Comedy* as influences, and he even cast Robert De Niro, the star of all three films, as a late-night TV talk show host. However, this film takes the fan violence in the third film to another level and is even more violent than the first two. Another influence is Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* in its depiction of the city's class structure, and it uses of the song "Smile", which Chaplin composed for that movie. Overall, the movie is rather surprising considering that Phillips had previously been known for the *Hangover* series of films.

Phoenix is excellent, especially for Joker's laugh. He lost 52 pounds to play the role, and I would not have thought he had that much weight to lose. He looks terrible in the scenes in which he takes his shirt off. He does a lot of dancing and studied videos of Ray Bolger, the Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*, in his preparation. His make-up is inspired by the serial killer John Wayne Gacy, who entertained children as Pogo the Clown. (The comedy club where Arthur is shown performing is called "Pogo's".) He is ably supported by the other actors, such as Zazie Beetz as Arthur's supposed love interest, Bill Camp as a detective, and Brian Tyree Henry as a hospital clerk.

Gemini Man—

Henry Brogan (Will Smith) is America's top assassin with 72 kills to his credit. He started out as a sniper in the Marines before transferring to the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA). At the age of 51, he decides it is time to retire when he notices that his accuracy is slipping. However, the agency, now run by Janet Lassiter (Linda Emond),

and a private contractor, called Gemini and run by Brogan's former commanding officer Clay Verris (Clive Owen), have other ideas and employ another assassin to silence him permanently. This assassin turns out to be a clone of Brogan, but 20 years younger. The film uses the digital de-aging process to allow Smith to play both parts, and the action scenes are excellent, especially a motorcycle chase. Benedict Wong is quite good as Brogan's old Marine buddy. On the other hand, Mary Elizabeth Winstead as a DIA agent who takes Brogan's side and Owen do their best with a poorly written characters, but Emond is mostly wasted. This film is very entertaining, but don't expect any interesting ideas.

The Lighthouse—

I'm sure many of you remember the story "The Little Red Lighthouse and the Great Gray Bridge" about a small lighthouse in New York that feels neglected and obsolete after a large bridge is constructed nearby. This movie is NOT about that lighthouse, but instead is loosely based instead on an 1801 real life story about two Welsh lighthouse keepers. It is set on a remote island off the shore of Maine during the 1890s, although actually filmed in Nova Scotia, and it is tended by two-man teams of lighthouse keepers, called "wickies", on four week rotations. The senior wickie is Thomas Wake (Willem Dafoe), who claims to have been a sailor before one of his legs had to be amputated. The junior is Ephraim Winslow (Robert Pattinson) who claims to have been a lumberjack. Neither turns out to be a reliable source of information about himself. Wake is clearly shown to be a drunken, abusive boss, however.

Whether this is a fantasy depends on how you interpret two events. First, Winslow encounters a the mermaid (Valeriia Karaman). It could be a real mermaid, or it could be a hallucination from the isolation and/or the heavy drinking of the characters, especially after they run out of alcohol and begin drinking kerosene. Second, Winslow kills a sea gull, which Wake claims is bad luck and for which Wake blames the storm that prevents them from leaving. These items, however, are actually secondary to the question of whether they are going to kill each other before the movie ends. Both actors are excellent, and the film feels claustrophobic because the two characters are trapped on a rather small island with only each other for company. Yet at the same time, there are enough funny scenes to relive the tension.

The Terminator: Dark Fate--

It has been 35 years since the first *Terminator* movie. The latest one, the sixth in the series, also features the latest Terminator, Rev-9 model (Gabriel Luna), which has been sent back in time to kill Dani Ramos (Natalia Reyes). She will become the leader of the resistance against the machines, and her future self in the year 2042 sends back a cyborg named Grace (Mackenzie Davis) to protect her younger self in 2020. They are assisted by Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) and a human-friendly Terminator T-800 model (Arnold Schwarzenegger). Sarah has only temporarily prevented the rise of machines who want to exterminate humanity, and, in this timeline, her son John is killed by a Terminator in 1998. History has been changed so that the third, fourth, and fifth films and the TV series are irrelevant to the plot. Good riddance, I say.

Not only do Hamilton and Schwarzenegger return to the series, although Hamilton is the one who gets to say “I’ll be back”, but so did James Cameron, the director and author of the first two films, as one of the producers and co-authors. The special effects and fight choreography are excellent, as you would expect, but the dialogue is awkward in several scenes. The plot is quite predictable to anyone who has seen the earlier Terminator films, and even a supposed big plot twist was quite obvious ahead of time. Nonetheless, this film is quite entertaining.

Doctor Sleep—

Although Stephen King himself did not like Stanley Kubrick’s adaptation of *The Shining*, many horror film aficionados consider it a classic. When King wrote a sequel to his novel, a film adaptation was automatic. Danny Torrance (Ewan McGregor), the little boy in the original, is now grown-up and middle-aged. Like his deceased father, he is an alcoholic, but has been sober for the last eight years. He works in a hospice in New Hampshire, where he uses his abilities to ease the passing of the residents. Dan meets Abra Stone (Keliegh Curran), a twelve-year old girl whose “shine” is the strongest he has ever met. The villains are a group of semi-immortals who call themselves the True Knot and are led by Rose the Hat (Rebecca Ferguson). They travel across the country in RVs searching for children with the shine so that they can torture them to death and extract their “steam”, which is the part of the shine that can be transferred to another person and extend their lifetime. They want to capture Dan and Abra, of course, and the climactic battle takes place at the now abandoned Overlook Hotel. Ferguson is excellent, but otherwise this is just a competently made sequel.