

MATINEE [1993]

by

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In the middle of the Cuban Missile Crisis, a new horror film is about to open in Key West, Florida. An extroverted huckster, Lawrence Woolsey (John Goodman) comes to town to promote, unscrupulously, his new film, “Mant” which is touted as “Half Man, Half Ant - All Terror.” Looking for a way out of his economically borderline life, Woolsey hopes to score a big hit by using such tricks as wiring the seats with electric joy buzzers. He is aided and abetted by a youngster, Gene Loomis (Simon Fenton) whose navy-officer father is posted aboard one of the ships blockading Cuba. The film follows several romantic, social, and economic episodes in the life of each of them. Central to each resolution is the horror film itself. Yet contrary to our expectations, the conclusion is not all happy; the film ends on a truly chilling political note.

Joe Dante, the director of *Matinee*, is stuck on films. God, does this guy love movies! He’s not embarrassed about it; he doesn’t hide it. This is a love affair Cole Porter could write about. Dante, of course, is not alone; Hollywood is full of film lovers. While only a few of the “old-timers” admit their addictions (like Robert Altman in *The Player* [1992]), it is chiefly the generation raised on films, not on literature, that is interested in making films about films, films about film making. While many of these efforts are primarily homages, Joe Dante attempts something more.

Even amongst the younger generation, there is often a reticence to admit that a filmmaker is hopelessly in love with films. This emotion, they seem to be saying, is somehow

tainted with something not quite honorable. Many filmmakers, for instance, will passingly refer to other films and then quickly look the other way, almost hoping no one will notice. Others so smitten manage to make it the central theme of their films while at the same time denying it.

The example that comes easily to mind is Peter Bogdanovic's *Targets* [1968] which seems to me simply an excuse to work with, and put on the screen, the legendary Boris Karloff. Yet there is a hesitancy on Bogdanovic's part to admit this; he must wrap his unmitigated admiration for Karloff and the films he has (for better or for worse) graced in a joyless, depressing context. Perhaps he thinks this will somehow elevate his film, give it class.

How much more refreshing are films in which the filmmakers just come out and admit they are wacko about a specific bunch of films or about a specific film personality. I find Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* [1990] (an homage to Vincent Price's one-hundred-plus film career and to *The Wizard of Oz* [1939]) is a delightful combination of reverence, respect and playfulness. Burton is completely uninhibited in his romance with the popular culture of the past, thus his *Batman* films [1989 & 1992] mine both the past – from comic books to Dracula to Richard Nixon – and the present for their imagery. But Burton is rare among the Hollywood filmmakers and therefore Joe Dante's lack of embarrassment about *his* love affair with the movies is most refreshing.

Joe Dante, however, has had other problems in freely expressing his feelings. His *Gremlins* [1984] is a good example. This film lovingly and generously quotes a number of science fiction and other films (*It's a Wonderful Life* [1946], *The Time Machine* [1960], *Forbidden Planet* [1956], *The Big Wheel* [1949], *The Blob* [1958], *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* [1937], *The Wizard of Oz*, *Casablanca* [1942], *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1956], *E.T.* [1982], *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* [1977] come to mind even without a recent viewing). He even "corrects" some of these films: the studio's "happy ending" tacked onto Siegal's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* appears to have been removed in the version Billy is watching on TV. Wishful thinking!

Obviously, Dante loves these films. But, at the same time, he seems to hate almost everything else. In *Gremlins*, Scrooge-like, he sees middle-class America as fatuous, impotent, boring, foolish, and hopeless. America's creativity is degraded into making useless gadgets that work for a week and break down, and usually squirt some noxious fluid on the hapless user/victim. America blames its own loss of spirit on "outside forces." (It is difficult to tell whether Dante believes what he is saying or simply satirizing America's mid-80s attitudes.) Xenophobia is rampant. The cute and cuddly Gizmo (his name is an obvious metaphor for invention) is transformed into the *ma gui* (Mandarin Chinese for "evil spirit") that invade and destroy middle America. But this vitriol is not directed at the Oriental only. If nothing else, *Gremlins* is an equal opportunity offender. A German car refuses to start when asked to go to work. Yet when asked to go into battle, it starts immediately, only to stall again when asked to retreat! While all this may be intended to be funny, there is a bitter edge to it.

In the years intervening *Gremlins* and *Matinee*, Dante has mellowed. Or perhaps he now feels he can express his irremediable involvement with movies directly, without the need to disguise it as caustic commentary. The result is a far more subtle film. Perhaps he no longer takes himself quite as seriously: *Gremlins'* title and credit sequence ended with his (and only his) name appearing inside a bank; in *Matinee* he places his name over a pair of pink plastic flamingos. Is he perchance slyly admitting his taste for bad taste? As in *Gremlins*, the rampant references to other films are still there, but there is also something more. Let's look at the film allusions first.

Films are mentioned in *Matinee* in almost every conceivable way. The production company of *Matinee* is named after a character in *Dracula* – "Renfield Productions." The film-within-the-film, *Mant*, is a combination of *Them!* [1954] and *The Fly* [1958]. Alfred Hitchcock is referred to by name and profile. The movie marquee features *Tales of Terror* [1962] (with Vincent Price and directed by Roger Corman – Dante was a Corman protégé) and *Burn Witch Burn* [1962]. The movie posters that adorn the Florida theater where most of the action takes place are almost exclusively Horror and Science Fiction:

Day of the Triffids [1963], *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* [1962], *Panic in Year Zero* [1962], etc. There are drawings of Frankenstein's monster tacked to bedroom walls. We even get a taste of a Lenny Bruce routine on a phonograph. The music playing on radios and phonographs throughout the film comments on the action like a vinyl Greek chorus.

But perhaps the greatest homage is the Lawrence Woolsey character who replicates many of the stunts actually perpetrated by schlock-meister William Castle. Pushing hype far beyond what would embarrass even the likes of P. T. Barnum, Castle brought out a number of films that today are the darlings of the cult/bad-taste film crowd. *The Tingler* [1959], for instance, is a preposterous film about a coroner (Vincent Price), who discovers that fear causes a slimy creature to grow in people's spines and that it can only be eradicated by screaming. Castle put the audience in the mood by wiring electric joy buzzers to selected seats! *The Tingler* may also be the first film to depict someone taking LSD – a color sequence within a black-and-white film. In *Homicidal* [1961], he offered a two-minute “Fright-Break” for those too scared to watch the end of the film and a “Coward's Corner” for those who wanted their money back. Among his other inventions were “Emergo,” skeletons that flew over the audience, and a \$1000 insurance policy for anyone who “died of fright.” (On the other hand, he produced such films as *Rosemary's Baby* [1968] and Orson Welles' *The Lady From Shanghai* [1948].) Dante's flame is well placed.

However, Dante takes this film far beyond an homage to previous films and their makers. He deals with two very important questions: Why we are so fascinated with horror films? and What is the nature of the cinema itself? There have been other films that have addressed these questions, Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo* [1985] and the recent *The Icicle Thief* [1992] are examples, but none with quite the panache of *Matinee*. In both cases, cinema and reality blend and melt into each other. Film characters step off the screen and “real” characters step into the film. Both films are hugely entertaining, yet somehow not involving, for these are obviously fantasy situations. In *Matinee*, Dante does something quite different: the audience watching “Mant” mistakes the screen for

reality and takes us right along with it. Rather than being observers amused by the obvious errors and fantasies of others, as in *Icicle Thief* and *Purple Rose of Cairo*, we are the victims of cinema's easy purchase on confusing reality and fantasy. What is questioned here is our very conception of reality in terms of cinema, how film affects our lives and our belief systems. These difficult and disturbing issues have been addressed by film scholars under the rubric of "post-Modernism" for the past decade but have rarely been explored in films themselves.

Post-Modernism is an art movement that addresses these questions. In academic circles, such issues are most often discussed in almost unreadable papers written in an arcane academic language that has little to do with English. In *Matinee*, Dante quite seriously addresses the same questions and still manages to entertain us – and part of the entertainment value of this film is the very serious theoretical questions it poses. To fully appreciate these, one must know a little about post-Modernism.

For thousands of years, art was judged by how well it imitated nature. The more realistic the painting, or sculpture, or drawing, the better the artist. In 1839, all this came crashing down with the arrival of photography. The camera threw two monkey wrenches into the world of art. First, it could render nature more accurately than any artist. Second, and perhaps far more important, was the syllogism that accompanied the birth of photography: since photography is mechanical and art is not mechanical, then mere accuracy of rendering could not be the goal of true art. Thus began the modern period in art – the search for the true nature of art. To find the core of what constitutes art, artists began to eliminate various aspects of what they had previously assumed essential. First to go, of course, was accuracy of rendering (since photography could do it better) and the result was Impressionism. Other assumptions fell by the wayside – a single point of view with Cubism, rational color with Fauvism, painting rooted in the world of the rational with Surrealism, etc. – throughout most of the twentieth century. However, this process of elimination is obviously a dead end. After all is eliminated, what is left? Depending

which critics you believe, this actually happened – artists ran out of things to eliminate – sometime in the 1960s or 1970s. At that moment, post-Modernism was born.

The characteristics of post-Modernism that concern us here are primarily the ideas that creativity no longer involves invention of new concepts and that the past is the place which is to be mined and recombined into productions for the present and the future. post-Modernism affected all aspects of creative ventures – architecture, painting, fashion (retro-clothing), food (eclectic cuisine), popular music (sampling), and, of course, film. The first post-Modern film to become hugely popular was *Star Wars* [1977]. It could easily be argued that there is not a single original scene in the whole film; every shot is borrowed, admittedly respectfully and in good humor, from other films and stories, some famous, some obscure: *Metropolis* [1926], *The Wizard of Oz*, *Tarzan* [1918-1984], *633 Squadron* [1964], *Laurel and Hardy*, *Forbidden Planet* [1956], *Batman Comics*, *The Maltese Falcon* [1941], *The Sword and the Stone* [1963], *Flash Gordon* [1936], *Triumph of the Will* [1935], etc. Other films have, of course, followed in these post-Modern footsteps. What makes *Matinee* unique is that it does much more than simply cite other films, it questions the role of film in our lives and the nature of film in our psyches. Not only does the screen melt (literally) into and meld with reality, there are other explorations of these questions. For example, we are shown a theater owner, one who is ‘in the know’ about the falsities of motion pictures, who stakes his life on a pocket radio, not realizing that medium too is only tenuously related to reality. In how many ways then, asks *Matinee*, are we taken in by what we see (or hear) on the screen?

So then, why is *Matinee* such a flat film? While it feels good in the eyes and in the mind, it never catches fire in our emotions. The problem, I believe, is in the deep mythological structure about which the film is organized, or I should say, not organized. There is no central character. This is the same problem found in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* [1991]. This film uses a family structure – kid, mom, dad – and puts them through an adventure. But there is no central character for us to identify with, nor do they interact in a unique way. *Matinee* has the same problem – an adult and a teenager are both central characters,

yet the relation between them doesn't take center stage. Nothing does (except the post-Modernism – and that just ain't good enough to make a film work, no yet anyway).

The second problem is the relation between the two main characters: it has little mythic basis. It is quite obvious why it is necessary in these times to have two main characters – one young and one middle-aged – in any film: to catch a broader audience. One attracts the main movie-going audience of youngsters while the other beckons the graying but well-heeled baby boom population. The problem is to make a relation between the two that catches both audiences. The only recent film to cleverly solve this problem is *Scent of a Woman* [1992]. This film cleverly uses a basic mythological structure – the young man's journey is the Iliad while the older man's is the Odyssey. The relation between them is that they are two versions of the same hero. And, after all, these myth structures are pretty basic to Western culture. In this aspect *Matinee* flounders badly lacking any sort of deep structure in the relation between the two main characters.

Since the William Castle character is so strong, several possibilities of integrating him into a deeper structure present themselves. The most obvious is to take advantage of his love of humor and trickery (an aspect of the character beautifully brought you by John Goodman's performance). What he does to an audience can only be considered the act of a mythological figure called the trickster. In mythologies from all over the world, the trickster does hateful things to people that, in the end, are for their own good. Rather than having the father-substitute relation with the boy, perhaps the Castle character should have been nice to everyone else and gruff to the boy, tricking him to discover his own manhood. This (or some other deep structure) might have given the film a little more life beyond an homage of early SF films and a delightful exercise in post-Modernism.

Stirred into all this is a generous helping of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Red baiting, intolerance for the political outsider, the role of the creative individual in a conservative society, puppy love, the fear of nuclear destruction and the beginning of the disintegration of the nuclear family. The film shows how healing is possible. And central

to this healing is the Horror Film itself. By watching the unwatchable, says *Matinee*, we are given the opportunity to face our worst fears – be they personal or political. This film points out that when we face what we have repressed – materialized on screen in the form of the monster – we are given an opportunity to examine our own psyches, and thereby an opportunity to be healed.

Matinee – Directed by Joe Dante, Screenplay by Charlie Haas, Production Design by Steven Legler. Distributed through Universal Studios, 1993.