

THE FLINTSTONES

by

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Barney Rubble (Rick Moranis) returns a favor to Fred Flintstone (John Goodman) by switching aptitude tests with him. Thus, Fred becomes a vice-president of Slate, Inc. Actually, he becomes a dupe for the evil machinations of Cliff Vandercave (Kyle MacLachlan) who frames Fred for embezzlement. The film consists of following Fred, his family, and his friends through his rise, his fall, and his recovery in an environment of amazingly elaborated sets that represent the middle-class world of two million years ago.

Television currently seems to be a viable source of popular movies. Last year's *The Fugitive* [1993] was a major hit (and, admittedly, did much better than, say, the movie version of *The Beverly Hillbillies* [1993]). Because I so strongly believe that popularity indicates psychological and social significance, let me bore you with a few numbers. The movies based on *Star Trek* have made over \$450 million in North America; the three *Naked Gun* movies based on the very short TV series *Police Squad* made over \$200 million, even the two *Wayne's World* films based on nothing more than a *Saturday Night Live* skit made over \$170 million, and the two *Addams Family* films made over \$160 million. And now *The Flintstones*.

Obviously, the major appeal of a film based on a popular 1960s TV series is nostalgia, but for what? In many interesting ways, *The Flintstones* disguises this nostalgia by stressing the difference between TV and film – through movie technology. The texture of *The Flintstones* is so dense and visually arresting (and the plot so thin), that it is very difficult to talk about the movie

itself. Let me comment on both the plot and the texture, but in a larger context – the film's political implications.

The plot first. *The Flintstones'* plot is as slight as any of the TV episodes. As a rule, the greater the number of writers, the lower the quality of the writing of a film. However, the reported 32 writers who worked on this film do not seem to have damaged its presentation. In contrast to Hollywood films, which tend to support the idea that a single personality is somehow behind a product that it takes thousands to produce, television programs, especially comedies, are written by committees. Perhaps this committee writing kept *The Flintstones'* plot light, airy, and unburdened with too much "message."

The Flintstones' TV career began on September 30, 1960. An overnight success, it became the longest running prime-time animated series (ending in 1966). With the fifties just over and the Levittown model of suburban mass-produced housing invading the outskirts of every major city in the country (we can see its beginnings in films like *It's A Wonderful Life* [1946]), a satire on suburban life was an instant hit. Although they live in a prehistoric pseudo-suburbia called Bedrock, all the characters behave and speak in a contemporary manner. This series said several things about the changing lifestyle of the day.

First, by placing contemporary suburban life into pre-history, the TV series justifies it by giving it a history. If your life, the program was saying, is like the Flintstone family, you are part of a very long historical continuum. And any history this long implies this particular lifestyle is somehow "natural."

This bit of historical juggling has important political and economic consequence for the nascent consumer culture developing in the late fifties.

Second, by making fun of middle-class, suburban life, the TV show is assuaging the insecurities people have upon entering this (then) new social venture. In fact, if we include *The Jetsons* (appearing in 1962 and also produced by the Hanna/Barbara team), the middle-class continuum extends from the prehistoric past to the indefinite future. In this way, *The Flintstones* made a comfortable and comic psychological niche for those entering a new life in the suburbs. If one lives in Bedrock, one experiences a stable life, as if secured in bedrock.

In 1994, however, the film version has quite different meanings. Television is now being quarried for movies. Just a few weeks ago *Maverick* [1994] opened (with one of the most embarrassingly Oedipal stories since *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* [1989]). And now it's *The Flintstones*. What's going on? Obviously, the messages must be different; after all, we are all settled into suburbia with little anxiety about life there. Well, anxiety there is, but not like that experienced at the end of the fifties. Today our anxieties are about violence, drugs, governmental corruption, taxes, and so on. In a way, we long for the innocence of those days – and this is where films like *The Flintstones* come in. We are nostalgic not for those simpler times, but for those simpler anxieties, those simpler worries, those days when contemporary life could be satirized without fear of either being politically incorrect or being out of touch with reality.

If we were willing to specify *The Flintstones'* displaced nostalgia, anxiety about work might be a good candidate. We are now poised at the on-ramps of the so-called information highway. However, many people feel that these will be the career off-ramps of their working lives. Job insecurity, even in our recovering economy, is rampant. Fred and Barney represent a day when working for a living was a far simpler affair than it is today – they went to work, they worked, and they came home. The fact that the plot line of the film disturbs this routine makes these concerns even more evident.

The same device that was used by the TV series to assuage our anxieties about suburban life – placing it in a long historical context – is used by the film version. But now the topics that "have been around forever" are things like cheating on exams, labor strife, technology-induced unemployment, homelessness caused by automation, and embezzling corporate officers (played by Kyle MacLachlan – the only actor with a prefab Bedrock chin). Thus, the anxieties of today are satirized – acceptably – by being placed in the context of the fifties, which in turn dealt with a satire that placed its problems in prehistoric times. So perhaps the plot's not so thin after all. Now a look at the texture of the film.

Much of the TV show's flavor continues and is even expanded in the film version. All the "rock" puns are there – both traditional and contemporary: Rockapulco, stone newspapers, a Dicta-bird, Chevroc gasoline; and there are some new twists: Steven Spielrock Productions, George Lucas' Tar Wars, the Cavern on the Green, and so on. The necessary in-group humor is also there: Jean Vander Pyl (the voice of Wilma in the TV series) can be seen in

a conga line behind Dino, Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera (the original producers of the TV show) have bit parts. At the other end of the spectrum, Dino's voice is still that of Mel Blanc through the wonders of computer sampling. Nineties sensibilities are introduced in many ways. A bit of toilet humor has been added: imagine what a pigeon the size of a dinosaur would do to your car. The friendship between Fred and Barney has been strengthened to the point that it almost becomes a "buddy film" in the mold of the *Lethal Weapon* films – buddies do each other favors, hate each other, save each other.

But the texture of the film is more than just the TV series materialized. It *is* that, but it is also much, much more. In an animation, there can be blank spaces here and there, leaving the viewer's imagination to fill them in. In a film there are no blanks, everything must be filled in, like a photograph compared to a painting. The middle-class household of two million years ago is manufactured and presented with tongue-in-cheek glee. There are contemporary touches here and there – mostly quite subtle. The visual puns match the verbal puns, some of which give us an opportunity for a bit of art historical detective work. The corporate office of Slate, Inc. has a lobby which features Picasso's *Guernica* and a mobile by Alexander Calder. Upstairs is a Mondrian and Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans*. Outside is Picasso's sculpture of an Afghan hound (which I always assumed was bull) which now, after 2 million years, is in Chicago. We have finally identified the location of Bedrock, U.S.A. – Chicago!

The Flintstones. Directed by Brian Levant. Written by Tom S. Parker, Jim Jennewein, and Steven E. de Souza. Costumes Design by Rosanna Norton. Art Direction by Jim Teegarden, Nancy Patton, and Christopher Burian-Mohr. Set Design by Paul Sonski, Elizabeth Lapp, and Erin Kemp. Special Effects and Creatures by Industrial Light and Magic, and Jim Henson's Creature Shop. Distributed by Universal Pictures, 1994.