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Film Review

Ed Wood

Michael Oppermann

In 1975 cinema freaks Harry and Michael Medved labelled Edward D. Wood Jr. as "the worst director of all time." Their Golden Turkey hit list also named Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1956) as the worst film in cinema history. No chance for the notorious *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes*, it seems . . .

Edward Wood died in 1978 as a victim of alcoholism and extreme poverty. He was not allowed to witness the strange revival of his 1950s low-fi vision of the cinema in late-night shows all over the world.*Plan 9* and *Glen or Glenda*(1955), Wood's quick stab at transvestism, became cult films in a league of their own. All of a sudden, Wood appeared as Orson Welles's "pulp brother"; as the missing link between Tod Browning and Andy Warhol.

Wood reached his "creative" peak in the 1950s when he shot sci-fi horror flics in rapid succession. Most of them were produced on a shoestring budget and "boosted" the same cast of hard core non-actors (such as TV witch Vampira and former heavyweight champ Tor Johnson). Wood's excessive passion for the medium of film ignored all laws of standard Hollywood perfection; Wood became the master of the "C-movie," a category in which he faced no challenge. He literally patchworked himself from one scene to the next by plundering all kinds of archives to make up for a constant shortage of money. Among his bizarre findings was a (defunct) mechanic octopussy (a left-over from some kind of obscure John Wayne film), which created very little horror in *The Bride of the Monster* (1956). For the same movie, Wood intercut footage from a nuclear blast with the explosion of a laboratory, thus creating an (unpurposefully funny) effect on the surreal side of life. Being his own scriptwriter, actor and director, Wood was an early auteur; a cinema maverick whose wild and frantic style was entirely driven by a severe sense of passion. "This guy was movies, 24 hours a day," a friend recalls.

Tim Burton's recent homage to Ed Wood (1995) opens with a marvellous doubling upon the beginning of Plan 9. The camera (Stefan Szapsky) sweeps over a series of tombstones which bear the names of Burton's cast. Burton, who has previously

presented us with such oddballs as Beetlejuice, Edward Scissorhands and Jack Skellington, opts for stylish black and white to portray Wood's anarchistic charm at work. Wood (Johnny Depp), sure of himself and firmly convinced of his impending success, stumbles from one disaster into the next. Apparently, he and his entire crew, at one point, were going to be mobbed by an infuriated first-night audience.

Burton focuses on Wood's most productive phase in the 1950s when he relentlessly poured out one movie after the next. He portrays Wood's strange relationship with the late (and not so great) Bela Lugosi (Martin Landau), whose morphine addiction led to an untimely death during the shooting of *Plan 9*. Wood replaced him by the neighbourhood chiropractor who had to hide his face behind his coat during the rest of the movie . . . As seen through Burton's eyes, Ed Wood makes film-making appear as a refusal to grow up; as the fulfillment of a private vision which follows its own (surreal) type of logic. Due to Burton's subtle direction and Depp's and Landau's standout performances, the film's central characters are not sacrificed to cheap laughter. Bela Lugosi, trying out a coffin for a film scene shortly before his death, is tragic and funny at the same time. Even an infuriated Ed Wood, storming into a totally chaotic set of Plan 9 as Charley's Aunt, is sadly funny, not hilarious. Burton opts for a deadpan approach which successfully questions established binary oppositions between "good" and "bad" types of filmmaking. In this manner, Burton uncovers the charm below the surface of Wood's obscure dilettantism and paper spaceships. The director had replaced perfection by sheer passion and child-like naiveté.

Shortly before his death Wood typed a few lines for a film script. It started like this: "On the day I died I had a very bad dream . . ." Of being forgotten, maybe.

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The film plays it big right from the start. In its first, uncut sequence the camera falls from the sky against the sea, races over its surface and stops right between the legs of a man. The man urinates into some kind of alchemic device which produces drinking water. He opens a tap and consumes the result with a deadpan expression. True, there is a certain sense of humor here which is sadly absent from most parts of the film. Simultaneously, though, the sequence (which was filmed with a steadycam) is a gesture of empty opulence created by expensive technology. Filmed almost entirely at the sea,*Waterworld* (1995) marks the point at which Mr. Big struggles with the forces of nature. Every scene of the film radiates constraint: the constant process of waiting for the right type of postcard sunset, the right kind of smooth water surface, and the right type of deep blue sky. Lots of time and material were wasted so that the production costs exploded to a hitherto unparalleled 180 million dollars. So far,*Waterworld* has grossed about 80 million throughout the world . . . Kevin Reynolds invites us into an ecological dystopia; a world after the melting of the polar ice and the sinking of the continents. The survivors are split into two parties. There are the Atollians, who live in a water fortress in the middle of the sea. And there are the bad guys who found shelter in the wreck of a tanker, Hell's Angels in pirate outfits. Their leader Deacon (Dennis Hopper) is a bald-headed impersonation of evil, an over-blown amalgam of Stalin, Sun God and Bond's arch-rival Blofeld. Deacon empties the last bottle of Jack Daniels and distributes cigarettes called "Black Death" to his followers. His antagonist is Kevin Costner, a no-name hero who does everything on his own. In the end, he sets sail again to depart into nowhere. In between, both Hopper and Costner become involved in the search for some kind of mythological island which is inscribed at the back of little Enola (Tina Majorino). Enola is protected by Helen (Jeanne Tripplehorn), who is attractive but a very bad actress. They both join Kevin who speeds through the sea on a steel Trimaran, a postmodern version of Bond's Aston Martin. Reynolds and Costner have plundered thousands of years of cultural heritage. Columbus, Captain Ahab, Atlantis--it's all there. In their cinematic

potpourri, clichés follow each other in such rapid succession that they produce a highly demystifying effect called boredom. The action sequences alone quote a whole universe of Hollywood movies while, simultaneously, promoting a post-Marlboro sense of spare-time adventure. Water skis function as motorbikes or "Mad Maxian" turbo cars. Free-climbing and bungee-jumping make Costner the Indiana Jones of the Sea, whereas the rest of the action scenes follow the logic of *Die Hard*. There is always the right rope lying around somewhere to save the hero's life, and if things get too dangerous, the enemy's gun is not loaded. The overall effect is that of a total cinematic void.

Costner's real saving island is not very mythological. It's about 100 million dollars away. I propose that we send the guy to *Plan 9 from Outer Space* instead.