



Cheesy Movies

On *Mystery Science Theater 3000*

BY WILL SLOAN

Let me tell you about a few movies I saw in the summer of 2000, when I was 11 years old, that would become vitally important to my budding cinephilia.

One was *Godzilla 2000*, the first Japanese Godzilla movie to reach Western theatres since 1985, and a movie I feverishly anticipated. I was a devoted fan of Japanese giant-monster movies at the time, but I'm sorry to say that I wasn't yet wise enough to appreciate them for the right reasons. At the time, I had only three categories for understanding movies: "good," "bad," and "so bad it's good." Godzilla and his kaiju friends fell in the latter category. I mean, that's obviously not a monster, that's a man in a rubber suit! Do the people who made these movies really think we're fooled?

Kids are powerless, and haven't had much time to build identities or accomplishments. One reason why I was interested in "bad movies" was because, frankly, it felt good to feel superior to something that adults had made. Earlier that summer I had also watched *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1957) with a friend, and we had a fun afternoon laughing at the toy flying saucers on strings and the cardboard tombstones that fell over. That same friend and I went to see *Godzilla 2000* together, and the experience was a revelation. It was a modern-looking movie where the man-in-suit effects were interwoven with CGI. Godzilla's eyes and body movements conveyed a personality. The miniature cities he stomped through were detailed and beautiful. I realized that in Japan, they *get* that it looks like a man in a suit. This is not a deficiency—it's a counter-aesthetic.

The other key movie I saw that summer was *Mystery Science Theater 3000: The Movie* (1996). It was the feature-film spin-off of a cult comedy show (often abbreviated as *MST3K*) that had aired 11 seasons between 1988 and 1999, first on a Minneapolis public access station, then on Comedy Central, and then on the Sci-Fi Channel. The premise of the show and film were the same: an everyman (series creator Joel Hodgson first, head writer Michael J. Nelson second) is kidnapped by a mad scientist and blasted into space, where he is forced to watch “cheesy movies” as part of a bizarre world-domination experiment. To retain his sanity, the host endures the screenings with two robot friends, Tom Servo and Crow T. Robot, and together they bombard the films with a non-stop running commentary of jokes hurled at the screen within the screen. The bulk of each 90-minute episode is spent watching a condensed version of a real movie from beginning to end, with the wisecracking hosts appearing in silhouette at the bottom-right corner of the frame. Periodically, the film is interrupted for brief comedy sketches around the satellite, in a local-TV horror-host tradition that stretches back to the late-night show hosted by *Plan 9* star Vampira.

The 1996 feature-film version of *MST3K* did not significantly expand the show’s structure or universe—in fact, its 73-minute running time was *shorter* than an average episode. Its main novelty was that its film-within-a film—the Universal sci-fi semi-classic *This Island Earth* (1955)—was a slicker “cheesy movie” than the sort of thing the characters usually watched. The film was a victim of studio interference, and today has a chequered reputation among *MST3K* fans, but to my 11-year-old self it was revolutionary. For the next few years I was fanatically devoted to the show, saving my allowance money to buy VHS releases of episodes, watching them repeatedly, and building an encyclopedic knowledge of the series’ lore. *MST3K*

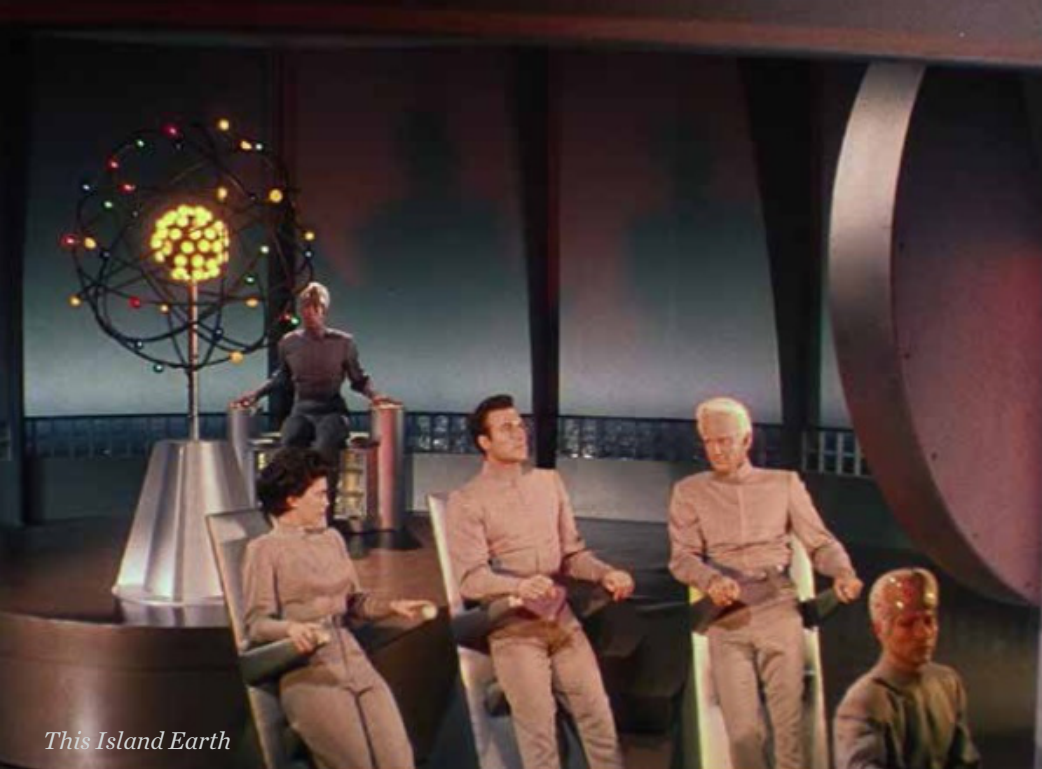
never aired on TV in Canada, so the Satellite of Love felt like my secret clubhouse.

Loving *MST3K* as a budding teenage cinephile meant eventually learning that its conception of “cheesy movies” was divisive among grown-up cinephiles. On one side was Richard Corliss, who wrote a lengthy appreciation of the series in the July/August 1995 issue of *Film Comment*, calling it “just about the funniest, smartest show TV has produced.” Corliss accurately located Harry and Michael Medved’s snarky 1980 book *The Golden Turkey Awards* as the Big Bang moment for modern “bad movie” fandom, the mixed legacy of which includes helping create a new market for the burgeoning body of criticism and scholarship on so-called “paracinema:” the works of drive-in movie critic Joe Bob Briggs, Michael J. Weldon’s *Psychotronic Movie Guide*, Jonathan Ross’ *The Incredibly Strange Film Show*, and Rudolph Grey’s pioneering Ed Wood biography *Nightmare of Ecstasy* (the credited basis of Tim Burton’s 1994 biopic), to name a few canonical texts. “*MST3K* rolls crazily around, like a pinball, through all these tendencies: derision, affection, research, obscurantism,” wrote Corliss, who defined the show’s definition of “bad” as: “Bad is what you think is bad; or what your parents or teachers thought was bad but you know is cool; or anything that can be twisted to be funny. It’s a display of pomposity, ineptitude, or emotion—unless *you* display it. Then it’s cool.”

Standing in opposition to this perspective was Jonathan Rosenbaum, who wrote a memorable zero-star pan of the *MST3K* movie in the *Chicago Reader*. After offering a semi-defense of *This Island Earth* as an example of intelligent Hollywood studio craftsmanship, Rosenbaum made the provocative suggestion that a more imaginative version of *MST3K* might take aim at challenging targets like Woody Allen’s dramas, the films of Henry Jaglom, or even



Manos: The Hands of Fate



Schindler's List (1993). “The results might have made more people angry, but at least things would have been livelier,” he wrote. “Instead, the writers opted for the most clichéd, simpleminded, and unreflecting idea of what a bad movie is, then adhered to that as if it were gospel.” Rosenbaum has worked admirably throughout his career to open Americans’ minds to films outside the mainstream, and saw in *MST3K:TM* an affront to his entire critical project: *This Island Earth* was chosen because it was old enough to appear dated, and thus “bad.”

Where Corliss and Rosenbaum agree is in the belief that there is no overarching ideological critique behind *MST3K*’s conception of a “bad” movie. Politically, *MST3K* scans as basically liberal—especially on the episodes featuring ’50s and ’60s classroom films—but it is hardly immune from the status quo prejudices of its day. Rosenbaum took the feature to task for its overreliance on gay-panic humour, and today I find myself wincing at the Season Eight episode targeting Ray Dennis Steckler’s *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies* (1964), which leans heavily on running jokes that the leading lady looks masculine. Steckler himself took umbrage to these jokes in a 2005 interview, calling the episode “just disgusting” and “racist, sexist, and even anti-Semitic.”

Steckler was a prolific independent filmmaker with a small but devoted cult following, but if *MST3K*’s writers knew his underground reputation, they didn’t feel any need to engage with it. Similarly, Corliss took mild umbrage with their evident unfamiliarity with auteurist *cause célèbre* Edgar G. Ulmer when they tackled his film *The Amazing Transparent Man* (1960). At first glance, this hardly seems like a big deal—it’s a comedy show, not a film studies graduate seminar—but it does speak to the show’s tendency to regard any old, low-budget genre movie as grist for the “cheesy movie” mill, regardless of context. “The guys that do that show just have no respect for what a filmmaker goes through with very little money,” said Steckler in 2005. “You give up a lot to make a movie like *Strange Creatures*, time and money.”

Does it sound as if I now dislike *MST3K*? In fact, I don’t—I still like it, and I also still watch it from time to time. Much of my ongoing attachment is sentimental: I spent a *lot* of time onboard the Satellite of Love when I was a teenager, so I guess you could say that the voices of cast members like Kevin Murphy, Trace Beaulieu, and Bill Corbett

reside in the same audio file in my brain as Raffi and Fred Rogers. Whether or not the show is good or bad for cinema is less personally relevant to me than the fact that it’s always been there for me.

I also have more rational reasons for liking the show. Something that its critics have historically missed is that its general tone is upbeat, silly, and family-friendly, and not really snide or vicious. Series creator Joel Hodgson began his career as a whimsical prop comic, and the ingeniously handmade quality of his “inventions” carried over into the aesthetic of the show: the Satellite of Love set was built out of thrift-store junk, and the robot companions were made from objects like a gumball machine and an infant car seat. The show is rarely scabrous toward the movies it tackles, using them mostly as a springboard for funny meta-commentary—although head writer Michael J. Nelson’s acerbic sensibility is admittedly a little more pronounced after Hodgson’s departure midway through the show’s cable run. Even so, the platonic ideal of an *MST3K* joke has always been the same: when an actor appears onscreen, shout the name of a celebrity that he or she vaguely resembles.

Was Rosenbaum right that *MST3K* has helped encourage the closing of the American mind? My friend Justin Decloux, a director of low-budget genre films himself, recently posed the question on Twitter: “If you’re a fan of *MST3K*, did the show ever influence you to seek out the kind of films they riffed on beyond the ‘We’re making jokes over them’ context?” He was flooded with replies from people attesting that the show led them toward a real, non-ironic love for regional horror films, Japanese monsters, Soviet fantasy epics, and the character actor Joe Don Baker, among other acquired tastes. A typical Golden Age *MST3K* season ran 13 or 24 episodes on a meagre budget, so the show would take whatever it could get: repackaged TV shows, biker movies, Italian exploitation films, a beach-party comedy, public-domain potboilers from Hollywood’s Poverty Row studios, and oddities from regions of America far away from Hollywood. If all of these things were “cheesy movies” to *MST3K*, at least the flavours of cheese were a little more diverse than Rosenbaum knew.

For my part, my *MST3K* fandom was densely intertwined with my developing cinephilia, and the show exposed me to new and exotic textures in film. One of *MST3K*’s most famous subjects is *Manos: The Hands of Fate* (1966), a satanic thriller made by an El Paso busi-

nessman with no prior filmmaking experience. Shot with a wind-up camera and without synchronized sound, its images are frequently out of focus, and just two people dub the large cast of characters. Much of the running time is spent with the camera just grinding in front of decidedly un-scenic Texas landscapes, during which the *MST3K* crew all but admits defeat. By accident, the film creates an otherworldly ambience that gets under the skin. It may sound like an overstatement to say that a movie like this, or the comparably arid patience-testers of director Coleman Francis (*The Beast of Yucca Flats*, 1961; *The Skydivers*, 1963; *Red Zone Cuba*, 1966), helped prepare me for Antonioni, but I know how my brain works.

In 2017, 18 years after it was cancelled by the Sci-Fi Channel, a new season of *MST3K* premiered on Netflix. Partially funded by a blockbuster Kickstarter campaign, this revival arrived under the stewardship of Joel Hodgson, who reclaimed ownership of the brand in partnership with the home video company Shout! Factory. As executive producer and frontman, Hodgson was the only founding player to have a major creative role in the revival, which traded the original show's staff of Midwestern club comics for Los Angeles-based nerd-culture heavyweights. In front of the camera this time were Jonah Ray, Felicia Day, Baron Vaughn, and Patton Oswalt, with guest appearances by Jerry Seinfeld, Neil Patrick Harris, and Mark Hamill. Behind the camera, former *Daily Show* head writer Elliot Kalan presided over a sprawling writing staff that included contributions from Dan Harmon, Joel McHale, Nell Scovell, and Dana Gould.

Netflix cancelled the revival after two seasons, but thanks to another massive Kickstarter campaign, *MST3K* is back for a new season (its 14th overall) on an independent streaming platform called the "Gizmoplex." Most of the onscreen players from the Netflix era are back, with a new multiverse structure that accommodates several episodes with the show's first female host, Emily Marsh. Thirteen new episodes are being spread across the rest of 2022 on the platform, which also hosts special events and houses a large catalogue of classic episodes for rent or purchase. (How the business model will be sustained after the current season is an open question. Is a yearly Kickstarter campaign viable?)

There's no need to bother with a rundown of how the show's plot and mythology have evolved since 1999. Across its many eras and cast changes, the basic concept has remained the same: a host and two robots tell jokes over a "bad" movie. This premise is foolproof, and the revival has done an admirable job of capturing the tone of

the original, in addition to being frequently very funny. So at this point, I'd like to try to figure out why I have absolutely no affection for it.

Context is important, and much of the spirit of the original *MST3K* comes from the time and place in which it was made. The original staff were all colleagues from the same regional comedy scene, and while I can't say if they were all close friends, there is a warmer group chemistry in the original show than on the slick, rapid-fire revival. And then there are the movies. Certain of the classic *MST3K* targets fall squarely and uncomplicatedly in the "so bad it's good" category, like the inept South African *Star Wars* clone *Space Mutiny* (1988) or the Joe Estevez joint *Werewolf* (1996). Many others are strange, or antiquated, or simply boring. What we saw in the original series were whatever a low-budget cable show could afford, and while not every episode rose to the challenge, this unpredictability was important to the show's soul. In a 2013 interview with *Flavorwire*, Hodgson said, "The kind of movies that we used, most people have never heard of, so it really is like going into a haunted house. Is it as bad as they say? What will it be like? We don't know anything about it, so the host and the bots were really your guides in a haunted house, and so going into *Manos* is like a really great haunted house of a movie." A few years later, the Netflix revival tackled *Mac and Me* (1988), one of the busiest haunted houses on the block.

"I doubt if any television show in the history of the medium has inspired more traffic on the internet than *Mystery Science Theater 3000*," wrote Roger Ebert in his review of the 1996 feature film. "It's as if the sight and sound of all those ad libs inspires fans to log in with their own." Ebert was prescient: the internet sustained and grew *MST3K*'s popularity in the 18 years it was away, with fan sites providing community for old fans and YouTube uploads creating new ones. From this online fandom emerged a whole *MST3K*-derived subculture of bad-movie mockery, from the popular *Rifftrax* website (launched in 2006 by several former *MST3K* staffers, who sell downloadable mp3 commentaries) to YouTube shows with *MST3K* DNA like Red Letter Media and The Cinema Snob.

These countless DIY projects vary wildly in quality, but there is something in their intimacy and grassroots energy that captures the spirit of the original show. It's one thing when a staff of Midwestern journeymen are riffing on "cheesy movies" on a low-rated cable channel; it's another when a team of A-listers are doing it on Netflix. *MST3K* is dead; long live *MST3K*.

