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### Review of Flash Gordon

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Flash Gordon (Blu-ray)

(Universal, 6.15.2010)

Dino De Laurentiis was apparently trying to cash in on the popularity of *Star Wars* when he decided to produce *Flash Gordon*. The title character had been a cultural icon since the thirties through a comic strip and a series of movie serials long popular on television. Perhaps because the 1980 film remains true to its pulp origins, not attempting to impose the mythic/philosophical baggage of *Star Wars*, it was dismissed as camp and failed (only \$10 million) at the U.S. box office. Yet its tongue-in-cheek pulpiness is what makes it more entertaining than many other more highly regarded comic adaptations.

“This Ming is a psycho.”

Just as Ming the Merciless (Max von Sydow), emperor of the planet Mongo, is unleashing a torrent of natural disasters upon the earth, New York Jets quarterback Flash Gordon (Sam J. Jones) and travel agent Dale Arden (Melody Anderson) are abducted by Dr. Hans Zarkov (Topol) and taken to Mongo by the mad scientist. Flash is soon sentenced to death by Ming, despite the pleas of his daughter, Aura (Ornella Muti), who has the hots for our hero. Ming has similar designs on Dale. Meanwhile, baddies Klytus (Peter Wyngarde) and Kala (Mariangela Melato) are out to increase their power, while Vultan (Brian Blessed), prince of the hawkmen, and Barin (Timothy Dalton), prince of the tree people and Aura's lover, bicker.

“You damn Mongo person.”

With the notable exception of Topol (*The Fiddler on the Roof*), who makes Zarkov a bug-eyed hysteric, the international cast does not condescend to the material. Though Anderson, who has retired from show business to become a substance-abuse counselor, and Jones have limited acting skills, they approach their roles without fear of appearing foolish. Muti, now a grandmother, is the perfect embodiment of female sexuality as conceived by comic-book artists. The difficulty she and Melato, star of Lena Wertmuller's *Swept Away*, have wrapping their lovely Italian tongues around English vowels only adds to their charms. As always, Blessed is having a grand time. If the Academy Award idiots ever deign to give von Sydow an overdue special Oscar, it will be a hoot to see a *Flash Gordon* clip intermingled with those from Ingmar Bergman films.

“No one dies in the palace without a command from the emperor.”

Mike Hodges, the director of two minor masterpieces, *Get Carter* and *Croupier*, seems an odd choice for this material, but he keeps everything flowing smoothly. Screenwriter Lorenzo Semple, Jr, likewise has some impressive credits: [Pretty Poison](#), *The Parallax View*, and *Three Days of the Condor*. Semple also wrote for the *Batman* TV series and approaches *Flash Gordon* in the same spoofing spirit.

“No, not the bore worms.”

The true genius behind *Flash Gordon*, however, is production and costume designer Danilo Donati, who recreates the color palette of the comic books with bright reds, greens, and yellows. While the cheesiness of the special effects is part of the charm of *Flash Gordon*, Donati cleverly uses color to make them look not too cheesy. The film resembles the decadence of *Fellini Satyricon*, for which Donati did the costumes. One of Semple’s in-jokes is naming Aura’s pet dwarf Fellini.

“Flash, I love you, but we only have fourteen hours to save the earth.”

Donati’s work is perfectly captured by Gilbert Taylor, the least heralded of the great cinematographers. A master of black-and-white (*Dr. Strangelove*, *A Hard Day’s Night*, *Repulsion*), Taylor gives *Flash Gordon* a more vibrant style than he uses in *Star Wars*. The explosive (some would say garish) colors of *Flash Gordon* are the main reason for seeing the film, and this Blu-ray makes it look better than it ever has, though, as always with Blu-ray technology, the rear-projection shots seem more phony.

“Give me the remote control.”

The extras are holdovers from the 2007 DVD. Artist Alex Ross, who has drawn *Batman* and *Superman* comics, offers an unabashed tribute to his favorite film. He discusses the film’s sexuality, with attention to Donati’s love for leather and latex, wondering if the “European flavor” contributed to its failure in America. Ross also adores Queen’s relentless title song (“Flash . . . AH-AH . . . savior of the universe”), the best remembered aspect of *Flash Gordon* for many.

“Have a nice day.”

In “Writing a Classic” the avuncular Semple describes writing the screenplay with little guidance from De Laurentiis and thinks he should have had some criticism along the way. He reveals that Donati did not even read the screenplay, creating sets and costumes that it was up to Hodges to merge with the script. Of the star Semple says, “You couldn’t have anybody more absurd than Sam Jones, saving the earth. Give me a break.” He goes on to say that Jones was perfectly cast and that the film’s silliness is what makes it work. A third extra is the first episode of the 1936 serial, starring my boyhood favorite Buster Crabbe, which demonstrates how surprisingly closely Semple followed his source.—Michael Adams