

# REVIEWS

## Gerald Potterton's Heavy Metal

Do Canada's cultural commissars (no names - we all know who they are) ever wake up in the middle of the night, their bodies bathed in a cold sweat as they realize that this country's cinema maintains its balance of payments through the efforts of such disreputables as David Cronenberg, Ivan Reitman and Andrew Alexander's collection of loons from Second City?

If you spend your days trying to find funding for the Jean-Pierre Lefebvres, Claude Jutras and Michael Snows (all of whom, I should say, certainly deserve the funding to make films), does your stomach turn at the thought that a punk kid like Ivan Reitman has a better track record than any producer in Canada, and that he has done it with few qualms about making movies which appeal to teenagers, rock fans and people who like sex and violence much more than warm humanist dramas?

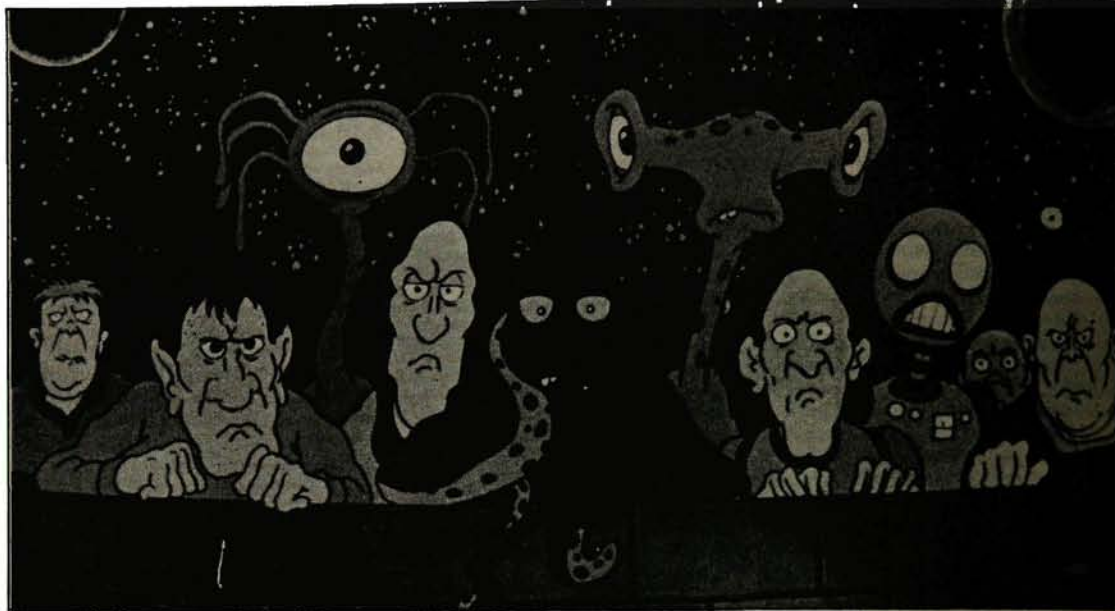
Well, it's time to get out the Roloids, because Reitman's done it again. *Heavy Metal*, a lurid, sexy, violent cartoon, may just do enough business to make Reitman's *Meatballs* look like a failure. The audience I saw the film with - an aggregation that would have looked more natural thronging about Maple Leaf Gardens before a Ted Nugent concert - literally cheered the title and various parts of the film.

*Heavy Metal*, adapted from and inspired by the magazine of the same name, is a series of six episodes linked together by a green ball which represents absolute evil (no, I'm not making this up). The episodes take place in the future, in the present, and in a galaxy or two far, far away.

Directed by Gerald Potterton and scripted by Dan Goldberg and Len Blum (who also scripted *Meatballs* and *Stripes* for Reitman), *Heavy Metal* does have its problems. As in most of Reitman's films, there are almost no women characters. Reitman's world-view is distinctly adolescent, and all the charges of sexism that one wishes to make will be firmly supported by this reviewer. On the other hand, this is true of most of the great popular animators, from Disney and the Fleischers through Chuck Jones and Tex Avery up to Ralph Bakshi. Some of the animation is not quite up to par (during the comedy sequence "So Beautiful and So Deadly," for instance, you can see the clouds through a supposedly solid spaceship).

The follow-the-bouncing-ball-of-evil method of linking the six episodes is fairly juvenile. There is enough happening on the screen to keep the most concentrated plot fiend distracted, and the audience seemed amused by the concept of universal evil.

Finally, the soundtrack, which features a baker's dozen of musical heavies, is almost irrelevant. With one or two exceptions, like Don Felder's "Takin' a



● *Heavy Metal*: "... A genuine wit in some sequences".



● *Taarna* rides again.

Ride" and Devo's "Through Being Cool," the selections tend to run together, homogenizing even a distinctive voice like Steely Dan's Donald Fagen into the general sludge. Part of the problem stems from the fact that several of the bands - Nazareth, Black Sabbath, Journey and Grand Funk Railroad - already sound very similar. (As Joey Ramone has noted, almost all heavy metal rock is just recycled Led Zeppelin, with stuper lyrics).

On the plus side are some generally stunning visuals, proving the superiority of full animation and the multi-plane camera over the abomination of rotoscoping that Bakshi used in *American Pop*.

There is a genuine wit at work in some of the sequences, and some truly thrilling excitement in others. The voices of the cartoon characters are brilliantly executed, with special kudos to John Candy, Joe Flaherty, Marilyn Lightstone, Harold Ramis, Alice Playton and August Schellenberg.

The best sequences are superb: "B-17," about the death of a bomber crew, has the chilling look of old EC comics (Tales from the Crypt, Weird Tales) and the twisted humour of the best of *The*

*Twilight Zone*; "Harry Canyon" crosses the urban apocalypse of *Taxi Driver* and *Escape from New York* with *The Maltese Falcon*. Even the weaker sequences, like the overlong "Taarna," have moments that are positively breathtaking in their image depth and quality.

Of the actors, John Candy of Second City fares best with "Den," the story of a Tom Swift nerd (the sort of guy who carries 17 pens in one of those plastic shirt protectors and always wins the science fair) who is transported to another world and turned physically into a powerhouse that makes Arnold Schwarzenegger look like Dustin Hoffman. Candy's voice is a marvellous choice for the part because he has always been physically too large for his rather soft voice. Harold Ramis, as the pilot of an alien ship, comes second, if only because there is something ineffably right about hearing his supercilious whine coming out of a stoned alien.

Certainly *Heavy Metal* is the best animated feature to appear in the past 10 or 12 years. Reitman has wisely handed director Potterton a crew of top animators and let them indulge some of their wildest fantasies: "Taarna," "B-17" and "Harry Canyon" are classic animated shorts. Still, the film's stature as cinematic art remains problematic.

Can a great work of technique be great art without a mature intelligence guiding it? Goldberg and Blum do have the glow of intelligence, but it is the glow of a lava lamp illuminating some foul rag and bone shop of pop culture, its flicker brightening to reveal shelves stocked with Frank Frazetta posters, Hammer Horror films, EC comics, scratchy old heavy metal rock albums, dusty video-cassettes of *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits* and an assortment of low-budget soft porn.

Of course, this conflict has always been inherent in discussions of popular animation - particularly when people generally do not see much difference between the meretricious Woody Wood-

pecker and the sublime Bugs Bunny.

Suffice it to say that *Heavy Metal* is a superbly crafted popular entertainment that, unlike many Canadian productions, knows its audience and their tastes intimately. Not only that, but for those with a healthy taste for sex and drugs and rock and roll, it is a lot of fun.

John G. Harkness ●

**HEAVY METAL** d. Gerald Potterton  
**sequence directors:** "Soft Landing" - Jimmy T. Murikami (T.V. Cartoons Ltd.), John Coates; "Grimaldi" - Harold Whitaker (Halas & Bachelor Animation Ltd.); "Harry Canyon" - Pino Van Lamsweerde (Atkinson Film-Arts Ltd.); "Den" - Jack Stokes (Votetone Ltd.); "Captain Stern" - Paul Sabella, Julian Szuchocha, (Boxcar Animation Studios Inc., Toronto); "B-17" - animation: Barrie Nelson, (Atkinson Film-Arts Ltd.), storyboard: Lee Mishkin (Heavy Metal Animation Co. Inc.); "So Beautiful & So Dangerous" - Brian Larkin, (Halas & Bachelor Animation Ltd.); "Taarna" - John Bruno  
**p. Ivan Reitman sc. Dan Goldberg, Len Blum based on original art & stories by** Richard Corben, Angus McKie, Dan O'Bannon, Thban Warkentin, Berni Wrightson **songs by** Black Sabbath, Blue Oyster Cult, Cheap Trick, Devo, Donald Fagen, Don Felder, Grand Funk Railroad, Sammy Hagar, Journey, Nazareth, Stevie Nicks, Riggs, Trust **mus. Elmer Bernstein conducting the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra exec. p. Leonard Mogel assoc. p. Michael Gross, Peter Lebensold, Lawrence Nesis p. co-ord. Joe Medjuck p. superv. Christine Larocque, Elizabeth Murdoch (asst.) p. design. Michael Gross synthesized (asst.) p. Peter Jermyn superv. ed. ed. Peter Thillaye superv. ed. Janice Brown, Jason Levy (asst. ed.) post. p. superv. Dan Goldberg ed. ed. Rod Crawley, Marc Chlasson, Gordon Thompson, Joanne Hovey ed. ed. rec. Peter Thillaye, Gordon Thompson post sync ed. ed. Andy Malcolm, Peter McBurnie asst. ed. ed. Gordon Thompson, Nick Rotundo, Joanne Hovey dialog. ed. Tony Reed mixers Joe Grimaldi, Austin Grimaldi, Dino Pigat d. op. ed. John Bruno sc. asst. Debbie Tiffin mus. ed. Jeff Carson ed. asst. Gary Toole, Peter Aries, Marc Kaskouski asst. to d. Nicole Beaudry-Pilon p. sec. Wendy Loblaw, Jacqueline Johnson, Christiana Asimacopoulos voices Roger Bumpass, Jackie Burroughs, John Candy, Joe Flaherty, Don Francks, Martin Lavut, Eugene Levy, Marilyn Lightstone, Alice Playton, Harold Ramis, Susan Roman, Richard Romanos, August Schellenberg, John Vernon, Zal Yanovsky, Caroline Sempie, Douglas Kenney, Patty Dworckin, Warren Munson, Al Waxman, Harvey Atkin, Glenis Wootton Gross, Vlasta Vrana, Mavor Moore, Thor Bishopric, George Touliatos, Cedric Smith, Len Doncheff, Joseph Coland, Charles Jolliffe, Ned Conlon p.c. An Ivan Reitman - Leonard Mogel Production running time 95 min. dist. Columbia Pictures.**