



The Serials Pages

Cliffhangers! The Serial Thrillers

The serial film was born very early in the history of cinema, but its origins actually lie in the publishing industry. Serialized stories were a popular feature of newspapers and magazines in the first decades of the 20th century. In 1912, *The Ladies World* magazine promoted itself by arranging for the production of several two-reelers to accompany its latest fiction column. The Edison Company released the series, *What Happened to Mary*, and it was really a string of separate short tales that shared the same characters. This, perhaps, is what gave inspiration to the editors of the *Chicago Tribune*, struggling to maintain its circulation against fierce competition. They, too, sponsored a series of short films that would complement their latest serialized thrill yarn, but this time, each episode would end on a high point of suspense in the hopes of dragging audiences back for the next installment. Released in 1913, *The Adventures of Kathlyn* was a success not only for the newspaper, but the theaters as well.

And so the serial cliffhanger was born. The art form reached its pinnacle of both success and excess in 1914's *Perils of Pauline*. It was an epic serial with over twenty chapters (exactly how many were in the original version is a



matter of some debate) and it was enormously popular. Rip-offs and remakes followed by the dozens. Week after week, audiences returned for episodes of their favorite cliffhangers, thrilling to ever more harrowing stunts, usually performed by the stars themselves.

The true heyday of the serial was over before 1920. Full-length features were getting all the attention and all the budgets. Serials were relegated to second-string status, running like cartoons before the “real” film started. But cliffhangers continued to be a staple at matinées for decades to come. They



had minuscule budgets and minimal plot, but by golly they had action and plenty of it. By the end of the 1940's, however, studios were running out of comic strip franchises and serials had little to do but endlessly repeat themselves. Stingy budgets were stretched even further by ripping a good deal of the footage from previous serials. It was television that finally steamrolled Pauline, for it was the natural home of episodic adventures. One by one, studios ceased production of serials. The last serial film produced for theaters, *Blazing the Overland Trail*, was released in 1956.

Serial Films listed in Chronological Order

KING OF THE WILD

(1931 - 12 chapter serial) dir: Richard Thorpe; w/ Walter Miller, Nora Lane, Tom Santschi, Boris Karloff.

Hang on to your hats -- this traveling salesman in India happens to be the spitting image of the Rajah; when the Rajah is mortally wounded by a tiger, he asks the salesman to impersonate him until his brother arrives to save the kingdom from his scheming cousin -- but it's all crocked by the salesman's two-timing hunting buddy and he ends up in jail for the murder of the Rajah -- our hero escapes, travels to Africa, and tracks down the hunter in hopes of retrieving the letter from the Rajah that will prove him innocent. And that's just the first chapter! From there, we move on swiftly to hidden diamond mines, a hairy ape-man, a shipwreck, native uprisings, and secret agents galore. This is a wild & woolly adventure yarn where the disasters, disguises, and double-crosses fly so thick & fast that some episodes have to end with *two* cliffhangers! Karloff has a juicy role as the conniving Arab who's trying to double-deal absolutely everyone else. It's a silly & fun roller coaster ride that flies off the tracks more than once but never pauses long enough for anyone to notice the gaping holes in the plot (much less get bored).



the PHANTOM EMPIRE

(1935 - 12 chapter serial)
dir: Otto Brower & Breezy Eason; w/ Gene Autry, Frankie Darro, Betsy King Ross.

Singing cowboy Gene Autry just wants to make his daily radio broadcast



from the ranch. But evil scientists show up hunting for radium and they frame Gene for murder. Then the bitchy queen of a secret scientific city under the earth decides *everyone* needs to be executed. The script, really, is an afterthought and doesn't get moving until chapter ten. It was obviously aimed at the youngest audience members and the escapes are all provided by a good deal of extra footage we didn't get to see in the previous episode. But although they were sorely lacking in budget and talent, they made up for it with imagination. There's palace intrigue, horse chases, plane crashes, goofy robots, electric death chambers, disintegration rays, and television gets invented. And through all of that I really learned only one thing: Gene Autry doesn't have the acting talent of a cow-pie. But who the heck was gonna care? Despite having the unpolished look of a school play, this sci-fi western became one of the most popular serials next to Flash Gordon. It's just a big barrel o' cheesy fun.



the LOST CITY

(1935 - serial in 12 chapters) dir: Harry Revier; w/ William "Stage" Boyd, Kane Richmond, Claudia Dell, Josef Swickard.

Electrical disasters all across the globe lead an expedition into Darkest Africa, where they find yet another evil mastermind from a lost race of, um... evil masterminds, I guess. He also has the usual Captive Kindly Old Scientist who makes all his terrible gizmos, including a machine that turns native blacks into giant zombie slaves. There really isn't much of a script at all here; the scientist guy acts as the living MacGuffin, suffering ten different kinds of abduction. New bad guys pop out of the woodwork to kidnap him for his secrets, while old bad guys try to re-kidnap him and the good guys keep on chasing and rescuing. Even the cliffhangers are distinctly undramatic. But there's plenty of jollies to be had anyway -- the hunchback ordering around a tribe of albino midgets by speaking really bad fake-african gibberish; the actor in a bedspread trying to look like an Arab slaver and hollering fake-Arabic gibberish at the top of his lungs; and of course the "giant zombies" -- really tall black guys crossing their eyes and stomping around like they've been constipated for a month. And racism is easy to find in movies of this era, but this thing deserves some sort of special prize -- in the eighth episode we discover one of the good scientist's earlier inventions, a serum that turns black people into white people; and this really thrills the natives, because quite naturally they would all prefer to be Caucasian... oh... my... God. Taken at face value, this is a crappy serial, but there's more than enough idiocy here to keep you entertained.



FLASH GORDON

(1936 - 13 chapter serial - aka *Space Soldiers*; recut into a 63 minute feature as *Rocketship*) dir: Frederick Stephani; w/ Larry "Buster" Crabbe, Jean Rogers, Priscilla Lawson, Charles Middleton.

Flash and Dale are pressed into service aboard Professor Zarkov's experimental rocket to save Earth from the menace of Ming, Emperor of the Universe! Thereafter, in typical serial movie fashion, the plot just repeats itself from deathtrap to deathtrap. This first Flash Gordon serial is bursting with imagination and nifty rocketships, but still has a poverty-stricken air to it. The sets are few and mostly simple -- some are dressed with little more



than old theater curtains. The “spectacle” scenes are ripped from old silent movies, they reuse a lot of their own footage, some of the costumes are borrowed from previous productions, and the acting talent of the supporting cast is, um, marginal at best. And the shooting schedule looks like it must have run to a day & a half. In an attempt to provide a little more explanation for the audience, bits of expository dialogue were dubbed into several scenes, so don't be surprised when people talk without moving their lips. It's a delightful experience really, both at face value and for the unintentional humor. See Flash defeat Tigrons and Orangupoids! See Zarkov blow the head off a fire-breathing dragon! See Dale raise uselessness and stupidity to Olympic proportions!



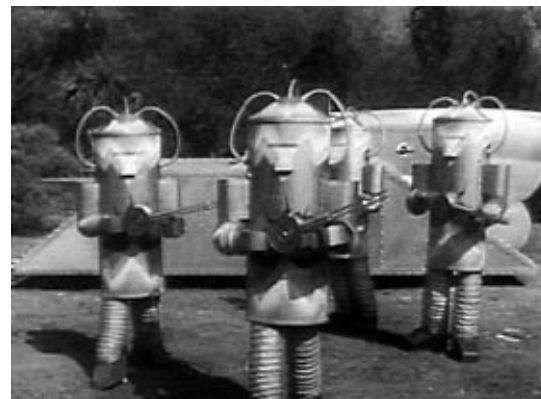
BAD CINEMA DIARY

the UNDERSEA KINGDOM

(1936 - 12 chapter serial) dir: B. Reeves Eason & Joseph Kane; w/ Ray (Crash) Corrigan, Lois Wilde, Monte Blue, William Farnum, (Lon Chaney, Jr. in a bit role).

A Navy jock, the kindly old scientist, the “go-getting” lady reporter, and the snotty kid sidekick head to the bottom of the sea in a rocket submarine and find Atlantis, housed in a watertight dome. The nice High Priest of Atlantis is under siege by the nasty Unga Khan, who wants to rule the world! Unga! Unga!

(Gosh, that’s fun to say.) Anyhow, on one level, this is a fun serial -- it delivers silly hats, silly robots, rayguns, tanks, and weird aeroplanes. On another level, it’s a complete failure. The script just has the characters running back & forth doing the same things over & over again (that way they can reuse much of their footage), many of the cliffhangers are shameless do-over cheats, and the characters, even for a serial, are unusually flat. And it doesn’t help that Corrigan delivers a performance a little less lively than a wax dummy. This is obviously a vague remake of *Phantom Empire* with a bigger budget, but despite the better quality, the script leaves it lacking in spirit.



JUNGLE JIM (1937)

(1937 - serial in 12 chapters) dir: Ford Beebe & Cliff Smith; w/ Grant Withers, Betty Jane Rhodes, Raymond Hatton, Evelyn Brent.

Jim & his pal, Malay Mike, discover that a young heiress lost in a shipwreck has grown up in the jungle and become



queen of the lions (Africa must be just littered with lost heiresses); but then they have to fight with a white criminal who rules the local black tribe ('cause he's white, ya know, so naturally black people worship him... oog). Anyhow, that's just about the whole of the script right there; this thing has barely enough story content to fill one chapter, let alone twelve. It's a Universal serial and benefits from their backlot resources, getting some good sets & costumes. But, um, the bad guy rules his tribe from inside a medieval castle... in the middle of Africa... they might have tried a little harder to borrow a more appropriate set. However, aside from the good production values, we've got a script that's just a string of lame excuses and characters who have the appeal of yesterday's oatmeal -- this is actually one of the dullest serials I've ever seen.

Apparently, the producer had a load of stock footage of tigers, so by golly, this version of Africa is full to bursting with tigers. But not everyone wanted to look stupid. When Malay Mike shoots a tiger, he walks up to the body, kicks it & says, "Consarned tigers . . . Ain't got no business in this country no how."

DICK TRACY

(1937 - 15 chapter serial) dir: Ray Taylor & Alan James; w/ Ralph Byrd, Kay Hughes, Smiley Burnette, Lee Van Atta.

It turns out that Dick Tracy is a San Francisco FBI agent. The nefarious Spider Ring have kidnapped his brother and done wicked brain surgery to turn him into a master criminal! Unknowingly, Dick pursues his own brother through a series of daring crimes. Perhaps Republic had this generic G-man script and at the last minute got the rights to slap Dick Tracy's name onto it -- either that, or the screenwriters never bothered to read a word of the comic strip. But as serial scripts go, this isn't too bad; there's plenty of variety and action in each episode. However, it's a tossed salad script where each episode doesn't really have much of anything to do with any other, and the cliffhangers are mostly lame non-events ("Agh! I'm about to be crushed! ...unless I just step out of the way here."). But it's cute enough to be entertaining, the Spider has a nifty flying wing, and Ralph Byrd's "acting" is always good for a few chuckles.



BAD CINEMA DIARY

SOS COAST GUARD

(1937 - 12 chapter serial from Republic) dir: William Witney & Alan James; w/ Ralph Byrd, Bela Lugosi, Maxine Doyle.

Wicked Bela Lugosi has invented a terrible Disintegration Gas and he will sell it to the highest bidder. Only the manly men of the U.S. Coast Guard can stop the evil scientist and his hulking henchman from sneaking the gas out of the country. It's certainly a formulaic serial, but it has a decent budget (for a serial), a large cast, a script that almost makes sense most of the time, and most shocking of all, the sidekick female reporter is actually a clever and capable female reporter. Although she's mere decoration for most of the flick, in the final episode she zooms in flying her own airplane and saves the day! (The fact that this serial was released the same year Amelia Earhart disappeared may have had something to do with that little plot twist.) Overall, a pretty ordinary serial, but fun to watch.



FLASH GORDON'S TRIP TO MARS

(1938 - 15 chapter serial) dir: Ford Beebe, Robert Hill; w/ Buster Crabbe, Jean Rogers, Charles Middleton, Frank Shannon.

The 2nd Flash serial, it begins with our heroes' return to Earth and wastes no time in inflicting worldwide disasters. It appears Ming is alive & well and has allied himself with the evil queen of Mars. So our heroes are off again, this time with a stowaway reporter for comic relief. Yah, the effects are silly, but the sets are fabulous and the gizmos are terrific! This one certainly had a bigger budget than the first, with lots of gaudy doors, weird weapons, and odd locations -- it's just too bad they didn't spend much on the writers. The plots of most serials tend to go in circles, but this poor thing just spins in place. If you're paying attention (and it's not recommended), the characters often go five episodes before actually accomplishing anything other than running from one place to the next. Rather boring in large doses, actually, but worth watching for the art direction alone.



BAD CINEMA DIARY

the PHANTOM CREEPS

(1939 - 12 chapter serial) dir: Ford Beebe & Saul A. Goodkind; w/ Bela Lugosi, Robert Kent, Dorothy Arnold, Regis Toomey.

Doctor Zorka, mad scientist (so described in the chapter intro scrolls), has discovered a great secret with which he can make himself invisible and put others into a state of suspended animation -- quite naturally, he plans to conquer the world. In his way are some stalwart G-men, one plucky lady reporter, and a gang of nefarious foreign spies. I sort of wanted to like this thing better, but in spite of a big, goofy-looking robot and Bela doing his best mad scientist shtick, this serial plods along without a shred of imagination. The plot flatlines about ten minutes into the first episode and never recovers. The action centers around a box containing the source of Zorka's secret "element", and the spies, G-men, & Zorka just take turns grabbing this MacGuffin & being chased by the others. The production is cheap & threadbare and features a lot of secondhand footage -- most of their cliffhangers are snipped from earlier pictures and they even have the gall to sneak in a little footage of the Hindenburg disaster (inanely, it is used to illustrate the headline, "Federal Building Destroyed"). And the cliffhangers themselves are the worst sort of cheats -- there's at least one complete do-over, but most of them are fiery plane, train, car, & boat crashes that... just turn out to be not very fatal after all. There is some amusement in seeing the cast constantly walking out of flaming wreckage with nary a bruise -- and then there's Monk, Zorka's henchman, who keeps getting shot by just about everybody -- but bullets just seem to daze this guy for a few moments. There's a few cute scenes and Bela is always worth watching, but he's the only one who seemed to be working hard at all on this back-lot production.



FLASH GORDON CONQUERS THE UNIVERSE

(1940 - 12 chapter serial) dir: Ford Beebe & Ray Taylor; w/ Larry "Buster" Crabbe, Carol Hughes, Anne Gwynne, Charles Middleton.

Purple Death rains from the sky! Is it another fiendish plot by the insidious Ming? Of course it is, silly. Flash, Dale, Zarkov, & Barin rocket all over Mongo in a dizzying whirl of deathtraps, super-weapons, and vile treachery. This third & final Flash Gordon serial is easily the best and by far the most opulent. It has a bigger budget, bigger sets, bigger costumes, and a more concerted effort to mimic the look of the newspaper strip. Even the cast



is new -- except for Flash, Zarkov & Ming, there's fresh faces all around. And this Dale even manages to be useful, although she still spends most of her time pouting at all the babes making passes at Flash. The looming war in Europe has an effect, too. Ming trades in his robes for a European-style uniform and is sometimes referred to as "dictator" rather than "emperor". And if you want to know where Lucas got the idea for the opening shot of the first Star Wars film, this is it. Gobs of good, old-fashioned fun cinema.

DRUMS OF FU MANCHU

(1940 - Republic serial in 15 chapters) dir: William Witney & John English; w/ Henry Brandon, William Royle, Robert Kellard, Gloria Franklin.

That awful Fu is after the secret hiding place of the sceptre of Genghis Khan in a bid to conquer all of Asia! This is a fast moving serial that jumps right into the middle of the plot, even if said plot amounts to little more than fifteen chapters of McGuffin-swapping. Since this is an American flick, Sir "Nayland Smith" provides moral support while the real action hero is a young American guy out for revenge for his father's death. In addition to a rather vacant plot, the cliffhangers are all pretty obvious.

And the budget shows some serious stretch-marks -- they pretend the hotel hallway set is actually the interior of a train carriage, and "Asia" here is limited to a small hamlet in India, probably because they had those sets and costumes available. However, what they lack in substance and budget they more than make up for in action; the cast can hardly get out five lines of dialogue before it's time for the next fist fight or for the hero to hurl himself off the top of something, and there is some fine stunt-work. It's not one of the best serials, but it's still fun to watch.



JUNGLE GIRL

(1941 - Republic serial in 15 chapters) dir: William Witney & John English; w/ Frances Gifford, Tom Neal, Trevor Bardette.

Jungle girl Nyoka is the daughter of a crusading white doctor in the heart of darkest Africa, but the doctor is murdered and his evil twin brother and some bad men are out to steal the tribe's diamonds! It's a good thing there's a studly bush pilot around to battle the bad guys; Lord knows, we can't let a woman do it. Oh, well -- Frances Gifford makes an appealing jungle princess, and her stunt lady gets in some terrific vine-



swinging, cliff-diving, and croc-wrestling stunts that would make Tarzan jealous. As serial plots go, this one manages a vague sort of consistency throughout, and it certainly can't be faulted for its generosity. Each episode is jam-packed with action and Nyoka gets in more than enough trouble for the pilot to have to rescue her from imminent death every fifteen minutes. And in a shocking plot twist, Nyoka actually gets to rescue the guy once or twice. The only real production faults on this one are the truly wretched sound effects and what is probably the dorkiest gorilla suit I've ever seen. Not a great serial, but well done and kinda fun.

CAPTAIN MARVEL

(1941 - 12 chapter serial) dir: William Witney & John English; w/ Tom Tyler, Frank Coghlan, Jr., William Benedict, Louise Currie.

The mysterious Scorpion is out to collect all the parts of an ancient machine that will give him the power to rule the world! Only Captain Marvel can save us now! This is an unusually well-crafted serial with a good budget. The script is tight, a few of the cliffhangers are quite creative, and the special effects are even passable -- if occasionally over-enthusiastic (when Billy turns into Captain Marvel, it's not with just a puff of smoke -- the whole damn landscape explodes). And this Captain Marvel is real *mean*. He doesn't just slug the bad guys, he bullies them, throws them off of tall buildings, and at one point even machine-guns a few of them. It's a lively serial that's a gas to watch.



GANG BUSTERS

(1942 - serial in 13 chapters) dir: Ray Taylor & Noel Smith; w/ Kent Taylor, Irene Hervey, Ralph Morgan, Robert Armstrong.

Professor Mortis and the League of Murdered Men are on a crime rampage that aims to obliterate the city government. See the quick-witted detective and the spunky reporter trail the clues -- see the police chief worry -- see the mayor bluster and holler -- see the city newspaper put out an updated edition every *five minutes!* Not only does this serial have a decent budget, it has an unusually good script with great characters and lively dialogue. The cast are all great, but best of all is William Haade, a veteran bit player with just a minor role here as a two-bit henchman, but he still manages to upstage the entire production in each episode. The only disappointment on this one is a string of rather obvious and unexciting cliffhangers -- but other than that, it's a rollicking action serial that manages to deliver the goods in each & every chapter.



BAD CINEMA DIARY

BATMAN (1943)

(1943 - serial in 15 chapters) dir: Lambert Hillyer;
w/ Lewis Wilson, Douglas Croft, J. Carrol Naish,
Shirley Patterson.

Alfred chauffeurs Batman & Robin around town as they chase down a wicked Jap spy who uses evil science to make zombie slaves of his white enemies -- thankfully, the racist remarks are kept to a minimum here (for 1943), but the villain does come straight out of wartime paranoia. Just so we don't forget who the good guys are, our spy's hideout is inside a spook ride that shows the horrors of Japanese atrocities. They had a fair budget on this one and a good cast, especially Naish, who hams it up as the bloodthirsty Japanese saboteur. The script, however, is a paint-by-numbers string of vaguely related episodes that always end in Batman & Robin getting their butts kicked so they can set up the cliffhanger. The action is lame, the cliffhangers themselves are lame... heck, even the chapter titles are lame. It's a dreary and mindless serial with nothing memorable outside of J. Carrol Naish -- in fact, it's unnecessary to watch all fifteen chapters; you're not likely to remember more than one or two of them.



BAD CINEMA DIARY

the PHANTOM (1943)

(1943 – serial in 15 chapters) dir: B. Reeves Eason; w/ Tom Tyler, Jeanne Bates.

This masked white guy rules over the tribes of the African jungle -- because of course no native African has an IQ higher than a toddler's. The dotty professor tries to find the lost city, when suddenly bad men try to stop him, when suddenly more bad men try to stop both of them, when suddenly the darn Mongols show up for no good reason. This is mildly fun to watch in a “quaint old serial” kind of way; but it's also completely unremarkable. It's a purely off-the-shelf production that looks to have been cranked out by some tired old men who were just sick to death of cranking out serials. The so-called natives are played by white guys in bad “injun” wigs from some western flick, the hero has all the verve of cottage cheese, and the story is wrapped up so abruptly you'll miss it if you sneeze. It is well enough made (within genre expectations) and moderately enjoyable, but quite unlikely to stick in your memory.



ZORRO'S BLACK WHIP

(1944 - serial in 12 chapters) dir: Spencer Bennet & Wallace Grissell; w/ George J. Lewis, Linda Stirling.

A masked vigilante calling himself the Black Whip (Zorro is never actually mentioned) defends Idaho from lawlessness -- but he gets killed halfway through the first episode! So his kid sister dons the mask and continues the fight -- and in 12 chapters, the squeaky-clean undercover federal man only gets to save her twice! This is a rip-roarin' western stuffed to bursting



with chases, fights, shootouts, and dastardly villains. Best of all, it features the most capable, courageous, and independent heroine of any film in its era. Stuntlady Helen Thurston (who plays the Whip when under the mask) puts on a great show whipping and shooting and occasionally even out-wrestling the bad guys. We're also treated to an extravaganza of terrific stuntman work directed by the legendary Yakima Canutt -- when these guys get into a fist-fight, no piece of furniture is safe. Yee-hah -- a tall tale of the wild west as it was meant to be.



BATMAN AND ROBIN (1949)

(1949 - 15 chapter serial - aka *The New Adventures of Batman & Robin*) dir: Spencer Bennet; w/ Robert Lowery, John Duncan, Jane Adams, Lyle Talbot.

A mysterious villain has stolen a machine that can remotely control any vehicle and he holds the city for ransom! And for 14 chapters, the crooks keep getting away because they can continually beat the snot out of Batman & Robin! There are a few cute moments, but the quality on this serial is just dismal. Instead of a Batmobile, the Dynamic Duo are driving an older Ford sedan... but in the next episode, the bad guys are driving that car and Batman has switched to a snazzy Mercury convertible because the ragtop is needed for a particular stunt. The “Boy” Wonder is played by a short man who talks like a boxer and the fellow playing Batman has less dramatic range than a slab of baloney. The script shows a similar level of budget; it circles aimlessly while critical plot points drive a couple episodes and then are conveniently forgotten in the next. The shabby production and braindead script do give it some MST3K appeal, but you'll need a firm constitution to get through this thing.





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Icon Glossary:



Good Stinker -- These are the films where a good deal of the entertainment comes from filmmaking incompetence; fun to watch in spite of themselves.



Goopy Gore -- These films exhibit distinctly above-normal quantities of unpleasantly abused body parts.



Naughty Nudie -- Films with this flag feature frequent and/or explicit nudity (almost always female) beyond that normally found in your average T&A flick.



Butt Stompin' -- These films feature at least one superior violent fight or shootout scene that will get the testosterone pumping.



Gold Star -- These are the flicks that I felt reached above their expectations or at least pleasantly surprised me; they may not always be actually good flicks, but I did find something in them worthwhile.



Blue Max Medal of Really Goodness -- These are flicks that I not only enjoyed, but I think are actually quite good films (not always the same thing).



Lethal Cinema -- These wretched viewing experiences go beyond being merely bad to become genuine sources of pain and regret; they should be avoided by all but the most masochistic trash cinema veterans. Don't say I didn't warn you.