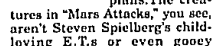


In 'Mars Attacks,' aliens take another shot at America



These are your standard bug-eyed, B-movie, thrill-crazy monsters gone wild. They invade the United States like ants at a summer picnic, blasting everything in sight. Blame all this mayhem on Tim Burton, the 35-year-old overgrown kid who has more of a "gee whiz" love of movie making than any filmmaker today.

He based the movie on a series of Topps trading cards from the 1950s and you can see that they had as much influence on his career as just about anything. And while "Mars Attacks" is, like his "Batman" movies, disjointed,

broadly drawn, and even slow in spots, it delivers the goods when it comes to delicious special effects and unique presentation. Part of the fun in "Mara Attacks" comes in the casting. In a nod to Peter Sellers in "Dr. Strangelove," Jack Nicholson tackles both the beleaguered President and a fast-talking casino owner. He's especially good in the former because, though we've learned to mistrust the intentions behind that alligator smile, he's actually got the country at heart.

As his respective wives, picture Glenn Close as a first lady

with a penchant for Nancy Reagan red, and Annette Bening as a New Age hippy who initially looks to the Martian invasion to solve all the earth's problems. It's not surprising that the film is dedicated to a group of Deadheads are the Martian's first victims, blasted to the bones in mid-air.

In one of the movie's best and most bizarre moments, Sarah Jessica Parker and Pierce Brosnan get a show-bust and pipe-puffing White House scientist who fall in love despite the cruel experiments performed upon them by aliens.

Instead of heading back to the 1950s, Burton strangely sets "The Thing" somewhere between the mid-1970s and the present-day, for perhaps no other reason than to make Vegas legend Tom Jones a plausible (sort of) action hero.

The "The Thing" continues in the film, often as well as bits by

Jim Brown and Pam Grier. Danny Elfman, who has scored virtually all of Burton's pictures, continues the mix of lounge music with heavy theremin used so effectively in "Ed Wood."

The music especially adds to the scary, sexy encounter with Martin Short's slimy press secretary and an alien seductress with out-of-this-world curves played by Lisa Marie.

Where "Ed Wood" was Burton's tribute to the worst director of all time, "Mars Attacks" takes its cues from Ray Harryhausen, the special effects master of stop-motion animation, whose "Earth vs. the Flying Saucers" (1956) is the movie's other main influence.

the seamless mix of animated aliens with live-action victims, you see it in the wonderfully hokey destruction of Washington as national monuments are blasted to smithereens.

Which brings us to the inevitable comparisons between "Mars Attacks" and "Independence Day."

The summer blockbuster about an alien invasion had its own arsenal of special effects and was in many ways more involving, but it could have been directed by a computer. I'll take Burton's free-wheeling approach, no matter how sloppy and unwieldy it gets sometimes not.

John Monaghan welcomes your calls and comments. You can listen to him on Dave Dixon's Radio Show AM 1270, 8 p.m. to midnight Saturdays. To leave John a voice mail message, dial (313) 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, mailbox 1866.

GUIDE TO THE MOVIES

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Comedy: President James Dale, First Lady Marsha Dale and daughter Tuffy (Jack Nicholson, Glenn Close and Natalie Portman, center) watch the Martian alert surrounded by presidential advisors (left to right) Professor Donald Kessler (Pierce Brosnan), Press Secretary Jerry Ross (Martin Short) and General Decker (Rod Steiger) in "Mars Attacks."

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