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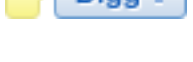
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V: The Original Series: a close encounter with ham and cheese

PUBLISHED ON FEBRUARY 17, 2012 BY [TOPE](#) IN [DISSECTING THE MINISERIES](#)

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V: The Original Series, a close encounter with ham and cheese

(197 minutes, 2 parts)

Directed by Kenneth Johnson

Written by Kenneth Johnson

1983, US, NBC

From the get go, *V* does itself a slight disservice. In a move that would drive even the barely conscious to leap up and yell “thief!” this two-part miniseries rolls its opening credits to a rip-off of Bernard Hermann’s inimitable theme for *North by Northwest*. The mischievous, whirling melodies and propulsive brass of that great score are unmistakable and no amount of tinkering and fudging and key manipulation can excise the Hermann from the music. So, as a series of largely unfamiliar faces (at least presumably unfamiliar, back in 1983) is introduced in a manner bordering on hammy, one is left with the uneasy feeling that they are in the hands of either a witless parodist or a guileless plagiarist. In light of this, some relief can be found in the knowledge that *V: The Original Series* is neither witless parody nor guileless plagiarism. Not entirely.

In 1982 writer-director Kenneth Johnson fashioned a screenplay adaptation of a novel called *It Can’t Happen Here* authored by American writer Sinclair Lewis. Penned during the rise of the Third Reich, *It Can’t Happen Here* questions the apparent impossibility of a successful fascist movement evolving in the United States in much the same way it had in Germany. NBC executives apparently took a look at Johnson’s script, saw little ratings potential or – being fiercely patriotic – perhaps took offence, and turned it instead into a sci-fi matinee. Whether Johnson put up a fight is a slice of knowledge not widely accessible, but changes aside, *V* is no riddle or mind-boggler. It boldly announces the concerns of its creator, unsubtly, one could say. In addition, the decision to replace warm-blooded human fascists with literally cold-blooded extra-terrestrial colonialists is a curious one, but one which probably doesn’t contribute to nor detract much from the viewing experience.

V kicks off with an oddly action-packed *A-Team* style teaser that announces the fact that this production has some money behind it. While escaping from an undercover story gone wrong video-journalist/camerman Mike Donovan encounters an enormous craft resting in the sky. In fact, across the globe, similar city-sized objects have positioned themselves above earth’s largest centres, including – of course – New York City. When the UN Secretary General makes televised contact with the occupants of the craft, dubbed “Visitors”, the human population is surprised by how peaceful and humanlike these extra-terrestrials appear. This perception will be gradually proven to be erroneous when Mike sneaks onto the mother-ship only to uncover and capture on camera a ghastly truth, the sharing of which makes him a fugitive and unleashes the true wrath of the Visitors upon the natives of planet earth.

It feels unfair to call something as socially conscious (or so it thinks) and heartfelt as this miniseries cheesy, but no other word will suffice in the face of such unambiguous parallels with Nazism and fascism in general. Not when a host of young Visitors tasked with forming inter-planetary bonds with young humans are dubbed the Visitor Youth. Certainly not when a prominent Visitor Youth convert is the grandson of a Holocaust survivor. But where *V* redeems itself slightly (perhaps unwittingly) is in its transition from simply being a ham-fisted metaphor to being a mildly clumsy sci-fi resistance drama, shifting from New York to Los Angeles where the series’ co-protagonist Julie Parrish, an excessively serious medical student, leads an underground resistance movement. The presence of defectors within the Visitors camp adds an extra layer of even-handedness, though one could argue that this is simply a convenient device for the advancement of plot in favour of the earthlings.

With respect to its sci-fi slant, *V* might be considered indebted to *Wars* and *Trek* for their particular brands of intergalactic politics, diplomacy and warfare as well as *Close Encounters* with its concept of a peaceful – well – encounter. Throw in some 50s era science fiction hysterics and a hint of Don Siegel’s DNA and you end up with serviceable camp. Equally serviceable are the performances, most of which are perfectly adequate if a little dated (overused as the word may be). Content-wise, this could easily lose an hour and become a feature, or a tightly-paced TV movie at half its length. *V*’s bloatedness is really a result of its high-mindedness. Where most miniseries use their length to indulge pre-existing narrative richness, there is very little here to justify the format, much like *Dead Set*, a much superior work.

V ends with something of a cliff-hanger ending, that is to say, an ending with no definite resolution but with the affirmation that resistance is triumph in its own right. Succeeded by two continuations in the 80s, *V* was most recently revived in 2009 as a lukewarmly received series. In light of this, there is a definite dated charm to the ’82 original, to the Spielbergian idealism and palpable sense of conviction. Unfortunately this charm does not extend to the special effects considering some of the aforementioned influences i.e. *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters* and even *ET* had already raised the bar for effects believability. In light of this, *V: The Original Series* is not exactly victorious in its ambitions.

- Tope Ogundare



2 Comments

Tope says:
February 18, 2012 at 5:50 pm
Man, that completely skipped my mind. What an absolute sledgehammer of a production choice. I’m going to assume that the NBC string-pullers sanctioned that decision, just to distance it even more unambiguously from the source text. But my real gripe with the series is the fact that the Visitors aren’t really fascists. They don’t even seem particularly nationalistic. They’re just colonialists in search of “natural resources”, and colonialists tend to be fascistic by nature anyway. If an alien race wished to enslave mankind why wouldn’t they exercise absolute power and disregard the individual?

I guess they did give off a democratic air early on. Whatever. It’s still a mildly fun watch.

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Bill Mesce says:
February 18, 2012 at 10:52 am
You forgot to mention that Visitor insignia which is two line-strokes away from being a swastika. Yeah, subtle it ain’t.

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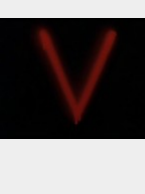
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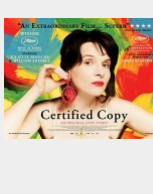
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Nigerian-Australian Sydney-based med student, film enthusiast and fledgling writer. Also a soccer fan and filmmaker in-utero.

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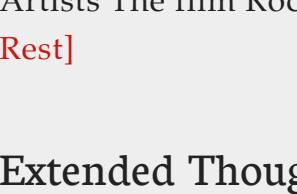
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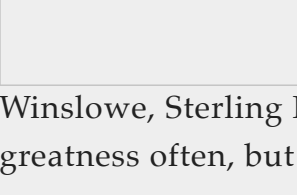
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Bambi Directed by David Hand Written by Perce Pearce, Larry Morey, Vernon Stallings, Melvin Shaw, Carl Fallberg, Chuck Couch, Ralph Wright Starring Bobby Stewart, Donny Dunagan, Paula Winslowe, Sterling Holloway Bambi is a film that touches greatness often, but only ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

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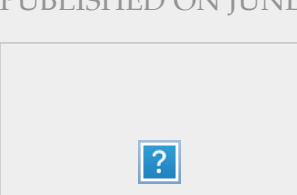
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‘Bernie’ clunky and lacking cohesion

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Bernie Written by Skip Hollandsworth and Richard Linklater Directed by Richard Linklater USA, 2012 Bernie’s a really nice guy. I mean really nice. There are a lot of people in Carthage, Texas that still think so, even though he just ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

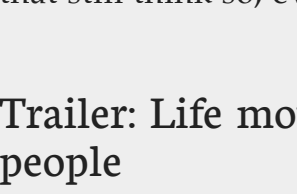
Trailer: Life moves at ‘360’ degrees for some people

PUBLISHED ON JUNE 8, 2012 BY BILL ARCENEAUX

360 Written by Peter Morgan Directed by Fernando Meirelles UK, Austria, France, Brazil, 2012 Looking awfully similar to Babel and Crash, director Fernando Meirelles returns with a dramatic, multiple storyline, intertwaving tale. Familiar territory aside, this one looks pretty good, ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

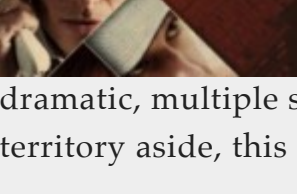
‘Moonrise Kingdom’ further establishes Wes Anderson as a director who knows how to engage audiences

PUBLISHED ON JUNE 8, 2012 BY JOSH SPIEGEL

Moonrise Kingdom Written by Wes Anderson and Roman Coppola Directed by Wes Anderson USA, 2012 Nearly 15 years since he last put a child front and center in one of his films, writer/director Wes Anderson does so again in his ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

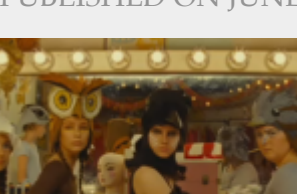
Top Five Casino Movies

PUBLISHED ON JUNE 8, 2012 BY RICKY

Casino Directed by Martin Scorsese Screenplay by Nicholas Pileggi and Martin Scorsese 1995, USA Based on the non-fiction book of the same name by Nicholas Pileggi, who also co-wrote the screenplay for the film with Scorsese (the two previously ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

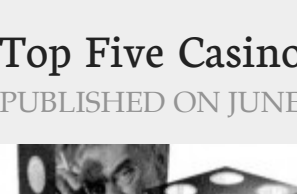
Friday (neo)Noir: ‘Blade Runner’ is a feast for the eyes and a powerful exploration of disillusionment

PUBLISHED ON JUNE 8, 2012 BY EDGAR CHAPUT

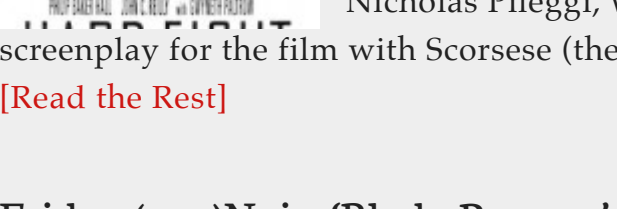
Blade Runner Directed by Ridley Scott Written by Hampton Fancher and David Webb Peoples U.S.A, 1982 Every Friday during the month of June, the Friday Film Noir column will be taking a slightly offbeat look at noir in film. More ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

TIFF Bell Lightbox Presents The Rise of Beefcake Cinema: ‘The Running Man’, or ‘Network’ as brought to you by the makers of American Gladiators

PUBLISHED ON JUNE 8, 2012 BY JUSTIN LI

The Running Man Directed by Paul Michael Glaser Written by Steven E. de Souza USA, 1987 Amid a maelstrom of bullets, a trio of prisoners orchestrate a break out. William Loughlin (Yaphet Kotto) and Ben Richards (Arnold Schwarzenegger) take sentry ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

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