



by Christian Klusman

For the first time in nearly 50 years, Cap was about to hit the big screen in a 1990 film produced by the short-lived 21st Century Film Group, another offshoot of Israeli film producer Menahem Golan after the collapse of Cannon and his fallout with cousin Yoram Globus. This time, the Star-Spangled Avenger was to be directed by Albert Pyun, probably best known for his 1989 film *Cyborg*, starring Jean-Claude Van Damme.

As was the case for so many films based on Marvel properties up until recently, the film never did hit the theaters, even while superhero blockbusters like Tim Burton's *Batman* films were dominating the box office. It seemed like it was only a matter of time before one of the Marvel heroes hit it big, but it would still be another ten years before Marvel finally started to get their act together.

While this Captain America film is closer to the original comic book story than anything previously done, *Captain America* still remains one of the sloppiest superhero films ever made, complete with no pacing, shoddy editing, no character development and a host of plot holes and idiocies that just can't be overlooked enough to allow viewers to take the film seriously. And to top it off, it's just plain boring.

This time, Captain America is played by Matt Salinger, son of *Catcher in the Rye* author J.D. Salinger (yes, really). But as is the case with most Captain America live-action adventures, Salinger isn't really the biggest problem here. Salinger is likeable enough, if perhaps a bit dull (and a bit goofy, and sometimes a bit effeminate). Imagine Morrissey in a red, white and blue suit (minus the poofy hair) and you have a pretty good idea what we're dealing with here.

The rest of the cast is rounded out by some actual name actors. With the film beginning in the 1940s, Michael Nouri and Bill Mummy both play American soldiers commandeering the U.S. Army experiment that will turn polio victim Steve Rogers into a super soldier. In the present day, Ronny Cox plays a hip, denim-wearing President Kimball who, with his old buddy Sam Kolawetz (Ned Beatty, now a reporter), tries to uncover the story of the mysterious terrorist "Red Skull," as well as the identity of that red, white and blue guy tied to a missile headed straight for the White House that Kimball saw as a child (it was Cap, of course, and he managed to avert this disaster by simply kicking the rocket off course).



On the evil side, we have the great Darren McGavin completely wasting his talent as a U.S. Army general turned traitor to the United States. It's pretty embarrassing to see somebody of his caliber relegated to roles like this. Then again, that can also be said of Melinda Dillon, who plays Steve Rogers' mother. Fortunately, her role is so small that she can comfortably leave this off her resume. I'm sure that while these two actors were filming the holiday classic *A Christmas Story*, neither of them imagined that they'd be reunited in a film quite like *Captain America*.



Red Skull (not "the" Red Skull) is played by Scott Paulin, who, despite being a guy you've probably never heard of, has a pretty long resume on the IMDB. From the comics, we all know the Red Skull as Captain America's arch nemesis: a Nazi terrorist opposed to everything America stands for. Sadly, the makers of this film didn't seem to think he was that important. Red Skull (in actual Red Skull garb, anyway) is only in the film for about five minutes (no, this is not an exaggeration). And his head doesn't really look too much like a skull. It is red, but that's about it. The first thing you'll probably notice is that he has a nose. Apparently nobody told the costuming guy that noses are made primarily of cartilage, and aren't really part of the skull.

I'm not going to go into too many of the specifics regarding the Skull; they're just too depressing. Suffice it to say he's Italian instead of German, his red skull-look is a deformity presumably brought on by the effects of the unperfected Super Soldier serum (this is never stated outright, but is indicated through the use of a big, red, stop motion animation rat puppet in a cage at the beginning of the film). Unless I missed it (which is entirely possible because this film is very difficult to get through in one sitting), the serum (which isn't really a serum but rather a table with a blue, flashing light that sparks and smokes) is perfected by the time it gets into Steve Rogers.

Once Cap awakens from his ice tomb in Alaska after his five minute struggle with Red Skull back in the forties, Cap wanders and hitchhikes vagrant-style all the way to Northern Canada (why is Cap always portrayed as a vagrant in these movies?). Through a strangely edited montage of newspaper covers (typos included) and historic sound bites playing in the background, we find that it is now 50 years later. Red Skull is now going by his birth name, Tadzio de Santis, and is a businessman/scientist/terrorist intent on world domination. And, at some point during Cap's long, icy sleep, Red Skull has had plastic surgery to fix his not very skull-like face. Now he just looks like an ugly white guy.

While McGavin tries to convince de Santis that President Kimball needs to be taken out because of his commitment to cracking down on industrial waste (yes, this film even has a green angle to it), de Santis says that assassination is not a viable option anymore. It seems that our friend Tadzio de Santis, the original Red Skull, was also responsible for the assassinations of not only John and Bobby Kennedy, but also Martin Luther King. We can only imagine what other historical figures were taken out as a result of the Skull (Abe Lincoln, perhaps?). Anyway, the Skull decides that kidnapping the President while he's in Rome on an environmental mission, implanting a microchip (which the skull invented) into the President's brain to gain control of him and then sending him back to the United States would be a simpler option.



After finding his way back to his 1940s home, and after a few wacky adventures on the road with the daughter of his 1940s girlfriend (who had forgotten about him and is now married with a family), Captain America saves the day. Cap shows up in his dirty costume (more about this later) at the hideout of de Tadzio (where the president is being held), and saves the world from both de Tadzio and his cronies (including his daughter and her friends, who look like The Human League). The kidnapped President is rescued, and liberty and justice reign once again over the world.

The first thing that needs to be said about this film is that it's downright boring at times. During the few minutes of the film in which we actually get to see Cap in action, it's pretty lackluster. In fact, while we get the indication that Captain America has some super strength, super durability, super stamina, etc., the only real super power that we see him put into action is the power of playing pranks. Here's the scenario: Cap hitches a ride. Then, while in the car, he pretends to be carsick. The driver pulls over, Cap gets out of the car to "puke", the driver comes over to make sure he's okay, and Cap quickly jumps into the car and drives away. The worst part about this is that it happens not once, but twice in the movie. Ladies and gentlemen, this is your Captain America.



As for the costume, it's a pretty accurate representation, albeit a low-rent version. Rubber is not the most appropriate material for superhero costumes. And this one is not only made of rubber, but has a built in set of rubber ears. Yes, Cap's ears are not really his own; they were sculpted into the suit. Cap's wings aren't too cool either. They just look like little white swishy pieces of plastic. But aside from the glaring budget issues, Cap's costume is pretty much right-on (minus a star on the back). They do mention that Cap's suit is made of a mystery compound that is impervious to fire. Unfortunately, it was invented by the same scientist that developed the sparkling, smoking table, so the secret ends with Cap.

One of the really big problems with the costume is that we rarely get to see it. Steve wears it maybe a total of 20 minutes in the film. And it should also be noted that when he is wearing it, we never see it clean and intact. From the second Steve Rogers lands on the ground for his first mission, his suit is torn and dirty, and until the end of the film, it remains that way. Apparently this same material that is impervious to fire is not impervious to tearing or staining. Is it too much to ask that for the short amount of time we do see Cap in this film that he be wearing a clean and un-tattered costume? Even the iconic final shot of him posing with his shield features him all dirtied and scraped up.

And to make matters worse, there's never any costume "reveal", or introduction. Of course, anybody watching this film knows what Cap's costume is supposed to look like. But every superhero film has that iconic moment when the costume is revealed in all of its glory. This film doesn't have that. Then again, this film doesn't have much of anything, so why expect it?

*Captain America* was finally released on video in the U.S. in 1992 (after being released theatrically in other countries, but not America, a country you may have heard of being that our hero, Captain America, is from there and has the country in his frickin' name). While it's definitely required viewing for all superhero enthusiasts, it's a tough one to get through (I had to split it into several segments). Repeated watchings only create more questions that will forever remain unanswered. Unfortunately, it's since gone out of print, no doubt in anticipation of a bonus-laden DVD release (not bloody likely).



So, as it stands, Captain America has had three chances to make his mark in the world of film, with two of them being in the theater. Sadly, it's been a tough road for the Star-Spangled Avenger. We can only hope that now that Marvel is actually up and running on the film front (despite several missteps), a competently made Captain America film is on the horizon. To hear the executives at Marvel tell it, Cap is at the top of the list to be made into a theatrical film. Hopefully, after over sixty years of getting it all wrong, someone's going to treat this patriotic icon with the respect and dignity he deserves.