

A segment from the film: **COLOSSUS: THE FORBIN PROJECT**

Analysis and Additional Notes: When I first saw this film it was savaged horribly by the editors of the television stations which ran it for commercial space, so the full impact of the film's direction and message was somewhat lost in translation. But it was both scary and thrilling at the same time in those widely interspersed snippets of horror.

Imagine if you will that a hyperintelligent operating system with access to 10 million worldwide servers took over your communications net and demanded to invade your privacy anytime it wished to, for an equal number of reasons. That was what this movie tried to convey. And also, that free will has become a rare commodity in a universe where God is a machine. True, the presentation was a bit clunky in spots, but there was no better way to show how far any computer could go.

It speaks to the tragedy of having to relegate our mutual decisions to a machine rather than to work out our differences at a conference table. That humanity's fragile existence can be obliterated with the push of a button. Whose finger pushes it is rendered irrelevant.

I am not sure if *2001: A Space Odyssey* was influential in the making of this film, but I would like to think that the monster computer Colossus represented a complete mirror image of the hapless HAL, with its ever reaching quest for knowledge turning into a quest to exercise complete control and godlike power over the humans who created it. I am sure that HAL had no such intentions itself. Its psychosis was based on paranoia and was due to human error, not deliberate design.

But what we learn from *Colossus: The Forbin Project* is that we went too close to the abyss of nuclear destruction, and placed our trust in an unfeeling, unsympathetic machine intelligence with the power to destroy as well as foster peace. That of course can never happen in real life. Or can it? Only the future of robotics and artificial intelligence will tell. So far, a robot or computer can only do as its design allows it to, but the day of positronic networks and terminating androids is approaching fast. If a machine can think as well as we do, what kind of decisions will it make? And how will we stop it, if just pulling the plug won't work?

I have seen *War Games*, which may have been influenced by this film, along with the *Terminator* series of films and its overarching theme of Skynet as the nightmare come true, and am also cognizant of the Cylons in the *Battlestar Galactica* television series representing technology as demanding its rights as a new species. While *Battlestar Galactica* represented a spinoff from this film, having been created and televised in the 1970's, *Colossus* is nonetheless a more graphic allusion to the God of the old testament. It is both demanding of tribute and sacrifice for the good of itself, never mind humanity. It may have absorbed much of man's history into its operational matrix, examining the good and bad of it without moral distinction; and decided that power by instilling fear was better than power through peace. In that case, it failed to exercise the function for which it was designed, and should have been dismantled from the moment it initiated a single thought. Bad computer. Bad, naughty, evil computer.

As a mild digression, there are arguments going on even now where the prevalence of the machine in our everyday lives threatens ideas we consider sacrosanct: privacy and freedom of speech. But these issues are being caused by multinational corporations who want to use our private information and data to make a profit. The hit television series *Person of Interest* (2010) has brought these issues out to the living rooms of viewers, challenging us to question the use of these machines as well as the broader implications of freedom and human rights.

In recent days, as I write this there is now a scandal in government as the National Security Agency was caught with its pants down for creating a data mining program designed to glean enemy combatant activity from the millions of pieces of data controlled by private internet giants. That they did not ask for permission is at the forefront of the controversy. And recently, copies of *1984* by George Orwell have suddenly been sold at bookstores everywhere. Thus, science fiction again follows public policy. But, before the book became popular, there were already people questioning authority.

Title differences: Both the movie titles and the theatrical poster list the title as *Colossus: The Forbin Project*. Yet the home video DVD release lists the title as *Colossus: "The Forbin" Project*. This is a typo which has been overlooked for its odd cultural and urban legend significance. Fans of the film insist that Colossus viewed Dr. Charles Forbin as its

own project, calling him "The Forbin." But there are no such references to that in the film itself. Therefore, I think we can safely dismiss the interpretation as wishful thinking and move on.

Production: Both Charlton Heston and Gregory Peck were considered for the lead role, but Stanley Chase insisted on an "unknown actor" for the lead. German-born actor Eric Braeden was cast, enabling Peck to film *I Walk The Line* and Heston to film *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*. Born under the name Hans Gutergast and cast as a German Afrika Korps officer on the TV series *The Rat Patrol*, Braeden was already famous for that role, and after *Colossus* landed other films and TV roles in the 1970s and 1980s.

Critical response: When the film was released, Vincent Canby, film critic for *The New York Times*, gave the film a positive review, writing, "Early in *The Forbin Project*, *Colossus*, a supercomputer that controls the United States' military defense system, goes into an unprogrammed rage and launches a missile toward the Soviet Union. The President of the United States turns to Forbin, the man who invented *Colossus*, and gives him a petulant look that seems to say: 'There goes the stock market ... the urban vote ... my golf game ... my image. You've made a fool out of me.' It's one of the appealing things about *The Forbin Project*, an unpretentious science fiction film with a satiric point of view, that when the world is about to blow up, the President of the United States can only bring to the occasion something akin to embarrassment. The film ... is no *Dr. Strangelove*, but it's full of surprising moments of humor and intelligence, a practically perfect movie to see when you want to go to a movie and have nothing special in mind."

That certainly speaks to the selfish motivations of the average politician, who resides remote from the rest of the populace and enjoys many of the perks of his position. It does not relieve him of the burden of acting responsibly in case of an emergency like the one outlined in the film. It does, however, provide a mime statement about politics in general, which have gotten out of control lately.

As for the reviewer stating that it was a surprising moment of humor, I tend to think it more of irony and a satire of the military industrial complex. The commander in chief becomes a clown to point out the failure of the entire system to protect the population of a country, much less the world. Fortunately, he snaps out of his moment of loss to order that something must be done to stop this new threat to national security.

Dave Kehr, film critic for the *Chicago Reader*, liked the film, but thought it lacked an effective ending. He wrote, "Above-average science fiction (1970), directed in functional hysteric style by Joseph Sargent."

Awards: Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films: Golden Scroll of Merit, Stanley Chase, for theatrical motion picture production; 1979. Nominations: Hugo Awards: Hugo, Best Dramatic Presentation; 1971.

Locations: The exterior scenes of the *Colossus* control center were filmed at the Lawrence Hall of Science museum at the University of California, Berkeley.

Remake: Imagine Entertainment and Universal Studios confirmed that a remake titled *Colossus*, to be directed by Ron Howard, would be in production as of April 2007, but it was delayed for years. In October 2010, the project moved forward with the announcement that Will Smith would star in the lead role, with the script being written by James Rothenberg. In July 2011, *Variety* reported that Universal had replaced Rothenberg with Blake Masters of *Law & Order: LA* to do a new draft of the script. Nothing further is known.

About the book: Dennis Feltham Jones; Series: *The Colossus Trilogy*; Genre: Science fiction novel; publisher: Rupert Hart-Davis Ltd, UK; Publication date: 1966; Print (Paperback).

Reception: SF Impulse reviewer Alastair Bevan treated the novel favorably, declaring that Jones's handling of a familiar theme made *Colossus* "readable." Apart from that, there appear to be no further reviews of the film or the book. It is interesting to note that the screenplay does not differ by far from the book, so the message was not lost.