Brainstorm, produced and directed by Douglas Trumbull, starring Christopher Walken, Natalie Wood, Louise Fletcher, and Cliff Robertson. A Metro-Goldwyn Mayer release, now playing at the Sack 37.

As classical painting, sculpture and literature have distinct styles and periods, the art of film is similarly categorized into genres. Yet just as epic poetry and Early American Gothic have become historic relics, certain types of motion pictures cease to be regularly made. The western, the gangster pic, and the full-chorus musical have all lost their fascination for the modern director, and have passed peacefully into the archives of the cinema historian. The problem lies with the exhaustion of ideas as Hollywood scrambles to ride the bandwagon of any successful film. After seeing an earthquake, a skyrocket fire, and a shipwreck, however, the "disaster" films wear thin and the fad dies a deserved death.

Brainstorm, sad to say, appears to be signaling the death of the science-fiction film. This is not because filmmakers have run all the angles but is due to technology turning most science fiction into science fact: The Orion shuttle from Space Odyssey is now called Challenger and the Advanced Graphics Have Become Historic Relics. These sensations may then be re-experienced in their entirety by another perusal. What makes this "breakthrough" device so feasible is the way it synthesizes actual advances in various scientific disciplines. One can recognize elements of holography and computer imaging, artificial intelligence, cybernetics, and psychology in the recorder. Brainstorm begins with the device's invention in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina's answer to Silicon Valley. Soon after the novelty of experiencing a roller coaster ride, Grand-Prix auto racing, and breathtaking aerial panoramas has subsided, the research group turns its efforts to some of the recorder's not-so-innocent uses. One technician splices a tape of sexual intercourse into a continuous loop, thereby ending the search for the continuous orgasm. As expected, the government interferes to exploit the military potentials of the invention, creating toxic psychological warfare tape. This hackneyed formula—the evil (governmental) use of a new technology versus the peaceful uses—carries the film to its conclusion.

The cast may include three Oscar winners and one time nominee, but the acting in Brainstorm takes a distant backseat to the technology. Trumbull, the special effects wizard of Close Encounters of the Third Kind, Blade Runner, and Silent Running (which he also directed), is fairly inexperienced at handling his performers—unless the performer is the camera itself. He does seem to have a sense of how the high-tech middle class lives, to the point where many MIT students will find elements of themselves incorporated into the characters. For example, inventor Michael Brace (played by Christopher Walken) rides a recumbent bicycle which was invented by an MIT professor. Despite the witty characterizations, however, the majority of the dialogue rehashes the moral scientist stereotyope.

The flaws in Brainstorm's screenplay are compensated by the actual viewing experience. The frame dimensions are almost square for the narrative sections, but during the "experience" sequences fall screen. 70mm Super Panavision and a thunderous Dolby stereo soundtrack take over to propel the viewer into a cinematic mind trip.

Trumbull had originally planned to release Brainstorm in a process called "showcase." The technique involves projecting the film at two and a half times the speed of normal equipment, creating an incredibly rich, almost three-dimensional image. Unfortunately, the cost of outfitting theaters was prohibitive and the system is currently used only in amusement park exhibitions.

Brainstorm is truly an innovative film, both in its subject matter and style. It is refreshing to see film attempting to deal with some of the most profound ramifications of this theoretical device as well as the purely spectacular ones. I would not be surprised to see a machine like this available in the next twenty years, and I could not help but imagine even further extensions of its use, recording hallucinogenic drug episodes or experiencing erotic stimuli from the view point of the opposite sex come to mind. In the future there may even be a new breed of filmmakers called "experience artists" who will challenge others to live through what they have. I can hardly wait.

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