

Events culminate in a "TV Super Show" where Idem flips the script on his employers, denouncing his audience as contentedly passive consumers. This climax clearly echoes both Sidney Lumet's *Network* and Peter Watkins's even earlier *Privilege*. The film's ironic coda depicts a public execution where Idem is only virtually killed on television, while in reality at the end of his tether, yet free, as the final shot fades to white oblivion.

O-Bi, O-Ba: The End of Civilization tackles issues of faith and delusion. As with *Golem*, Szulkin uses newsreel footage of a mushroom cloud to lay out the narrative particulars: In the wake of a nuclear war, thousands of people have crowded into a deteriorating domed city, where the majority—known derisively to the ruling oligarchy as "loonies"—await the coming of a mythic Ark that will whisk them off to the promised land. The film centers on bureaucrat Soft (Jerzy Stuhr), a propagandist who was responsible for recruiting the gullible for residence under the dome. His name is no doubt a reference to the aforementioned "soft" power of persuasion.

The dome-dwellers maintains their belief in the Ark despite the authorities' official denial of its very existence, in a twist on Tertullian's famous dictum "I believe *because* it is absurd." Throughout the film, Soft encounters characters who deal with their absurd beliefs in different ways: A millionaire (Mariusz Dmochowski) assembles pairs of animals in order to construct his own ark according to biblical accounts. Gea (Krystyna Janda) practices walking the tightrope so she can sneak up the Ark's guy lines. An unhinged man (Krzysztof Majchrzak) prepares to deep freeze himself (and two unwilling companions) for later dethawing. On the other hand, there's a former engineer (Jan Nowicki) who knows the truth about the dome's imminent collapse, and he's resigned himself to quietly awaiting his own demise.

In this manner, Szulkin explores diverse methods for coping with the ineluctable finitude of existence: in this case, religion, art, and science, respectively. The failure of a bureaucracy to maintain any kind of order in this situation is personified by Soft's superior (Marek Walczewski), who spends his time fiddling about with the toy soldiers that cover his desk, while barking orders even he knows are pointless. The bureaucracy, the overcrowding, the rundown condition of the facilities, these all seem spiritually akin to Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, as does the surreal finale, which at the same time offers two very different endings: one happy, the other tragic.

Ga-Ga: Glory to the Heroes can be seen as the grand summation of Szulkin's abiding themes, particularly the arbitrary nature of moral order, albeit pushed here even further into the realm of the grotesque and surreal. Ironies abound from the outset during farewell ceremonies for our hero, Scope (Daniel Olbrychski), the resident dissident on a "space penitentiary cruiser" where hardened criminals can have their sentences commuted in exchange for venturing out to other planets as unlikely cosmonauts. Despite the fact that Szulkin significantly ramps up the sex and violence quotient here, this film comes the closest to being an outright black comedy. Take, for example, Jerzy Stuhr's exceedingly broad turn as Chudy, the glad-handing emissary from the planet Australia 485, who greets Scope upon his landing there.

The cosmonaut as noble hero in Soviet cinema stretches back at least as far as 1924's *Aelita: Queen of Mars*, but Szulkin ridicules the notion when Chudy dutifully informs Scope that his function in the local culture is to be a ritual sacrifice to the social order. In a scene that Fellini would've admired, Chudy takes Scope to the stadium where his public execution will be held. Though it's the dead of night, the place is packed with marching bands, cancan dancers, and, in a particularly absurdist touch, an old man dragging a harp across the snowy ground.

As usual, Szulkin works in some unexpected cultural allusions. On a humorous note, the sentient computer that controls Scope's space capsule clearly parodies Hal 9000 in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In a more serious vein, the opening credits' invoke Pasolini's *La Ricotta*, his contribution to the omnibus film *Ro.Go.Pa.G.* that sardonically takes on both religion and filmmaking. The media satire stems from the fact that Scope's execution, like Idem's in *The War of the Worlds: Next Century*, will be broadcast on live TV for public edification. The impious religious imagery involves three poles that are intended for use in Scope's impalement (he has his choice!), which seem clearly intended to represent the three crosses at Jesus's crucifixion.

Surprisingly, Szulkin avoids the anticipated tragic finale in favor of a surprisingly upbeat fairy tale ending. Scope and Once (Katarzyna Figura), a runaway prostitute, blast off for an uninhabited planet where they can play Adam and Eve to their hearts' content. Maybe this change of attitude had something to do with the growing sense that, by the mid-1980s, that Communist rule was clearly on its last legs.

The new 1080p HD transfers of these four films have been newly restored by Vinegar Syndrome from existing studio masters. All told, they look fantastic, boasting deeply saturated colors (especially when the films switch to heavy monochrome tinting), clearly delineated fine details of costume and décor, and largely well-managed grain levels, though the grain in *Ga-Ga: Glory to the Heroes* gets a bit heavy from time to time. Audio comes in Polish Master Audio mono mixes that ably support the dialogue and admirably convey the various scores.

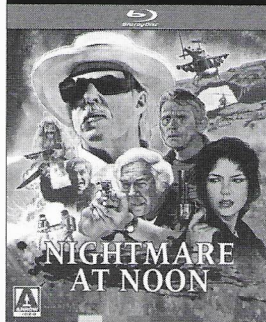
The bonus materials offered by Vinegar Syndrome aren't numerous, but they provide plenty of insights into the films, as well as their cultural and historical contexts. The commentary track for *Golem* by film historian Samm Deighan goes deep into the folk tales, literature, and cinema that surround the titular monster, dwelling at length on Gustav Meyrink's novel and Paul Wegener's 1920 silent film adaptation. Deighan also does a commendable job of situating the film within Polish cinema, and suggesting various links between Szulkin's films.

Michael Brooke's commentary on *The War of the Worlds: Next Century* provides thumbnail biographies of the cast and crew, examines Polish history from Solidarity to martial law, points out Szulkin's "hardcore pessimism," explains the influence of British novelist J. G. Ballard, and examines some of the film's themes that are maybe even more pertinent today. Jonathan Owen and Andrew Nette each contribute substantial video essays that succinctly lay out the themes of *O-Bi, O-Ba: The End of Civilization* and *Ga-Ga: Glory to the Heroes*, respectively.

Budd Wilkins

NIGHTMARE AT NOON

Directed by Nico Mastorakis
(2004) Arrow Video Blu-ray



Taking cues from 1980s cold war paranoia science fiction films such as *War Games* (1983) and *D.A.R.Y.L.* (1985), *Nightmare at Noon* takes place in a secluded desert town, shot in Arches National Park in Moab, Utah, that is cut off from society by a group called APE, led by a unnamed mad scientist (Brion James). The group injects a deadly toxin into the town's water supply turning the town's unsuspecting residents who happen to drink the tap water that

day into violent and psychotic killers.

The survivors, Sheriff Hanks (George Kennedy), high priced Hollywood lawyer (Wings Hauser), mysterious lawman turned hitchhiking stranger, Ken Griffith (Bo Hopkins) and deputy sheriff Cheri Griffiths (Kimberly Beck), must fight back the transformed residents, attempt to find a way to get help from the outside world, and find the cause of and who is behind the evil plan.

The story also has a hint of cynicism, found in similarly themed George Romero's *The Crazies* (1973), when the film's characters debate if APE is made up of is foreign agents, domestic terrorists, or even the United States government as an experiment on its own citizens.

Nightmare at Noon does not fit neatly into one particular genre. On top of the science fiction story, *Nightmare at Noon* incorporates a number of Western style shoot 'em up action sequences, brutal extended fights, car chases, motorcycle stunts, a lengthy helicopter dogfight, and horror scenes filled with gushing green blood that rivals splatter-fest *Street Trash* (1987) that was released a year prior.

The film's director, co-writer and co-producer Nico Mastorakis started his career in making the notorious graphic exploitation film and "video nasty," *Island of Death* (1975). Mastorakis went on to make a number of horror, thrillers, and science fiction titles throughout his career. Mastorakis and even co-wrote the critically panned big budget J. Lee Thompson film *The Greek Tycoon* (1978) loosely based on the love affair between Aristotle Onassis and Jacqueline Kennedy.

Made up of mostly noted Hollywood character actors, the film's biggest star George Kennedy, who was perhaps most famous for his roles in *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) and *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), was busy in 1988. Kennedy appeared in films that year including the Italian produced action science-fiction knock off film *Alien Terminator*, American horror film *Uninvited*, and comedy *The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad!*

The score was composed by Stanley Myers and Han Zimmer. The duo had previously worked together on a number of films including Nico Mastorakis's slasher *The Wind* (1986). The year *Nightmare at Noon* was released, Myers would receive a BAFTA Award for Best Film Music for the film British drama *Wish You Were Here*. Zimmer would go on to score numerous blockbuster and critically acclaimed films throughout his storied career including Disney's *The Lion King* (1995), the second installment in Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy *The Dark Knight* (2009), and the most recent Bond film *No Time To Die* (2021) . . . just to name a few.

Arrow video's crisp Blu-ray is a 2k restoration of the original negative and includes a 33 minute documentary *The Films of Nico Mastorakis*, behind the scenes footage shot on set, and archival interviews with Wings Hauser, Bo Hopkins, Kimberly Beck, George Kennedy, and Brion James. Also included are trailers and image galleries.

Thom Shubilla