

**TRIOLOGY OF TERROR**

There are moments you've waited for all your life. For some, it's a wedding, a baby, grandchildren... But for me, it's writing about Karen Black.

Karen, Karen, Karen—how do I love thee? Let me count the ways: *Burnt Offerings*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *Airport 1975*, *Nashville*, *Capricorn One*, *Come Back to the Five and Dime Jimmy Dean*, *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie?*, *The Day of the Locust*, *The Great Gatsby*. And in 1975, apparently someone else loved Karen as much as I do.

The TV movie *Trilogy of Terror* (written by sci-fi novelists William F. Nolan of *Logan's Run* and Richard Matheson of *I Am Legend*, a.k.a. *The Omega Man*) was three separate horror

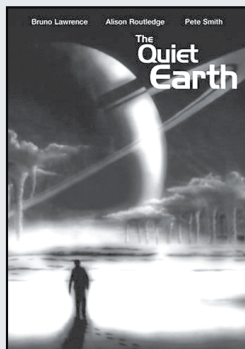
tales with four different female leads—all played by Karen Black.

The first, *Julie*, is pretty creepy and intriguing, at least initially—mostly because it has some really perverse subject matter that was actually shown on TV—but the disturbing romp bites the dust with a semi-predictable “twist” ending that sucks *super big time* because it's never even explained. *Boo!*

In the next episode, *Millicent and Therese* (Karen is *nvins!*), we knew what the “twist” was about three seconds into it, so we just skipped to the ending to make sure we were right. We were. But never-you-mind—it's the *last* story that was the stuff of legend.

In *Amelia*, Karen is at her shrieking best, running through her fancy apartment from a possessed Zuni hunting fetish doll that's wielding a carving knife. Of course, we know the doll is going to go after her, and we're pretty sure she'll survive—but finding out *how* she survives is the coolest, twistiest '70s ending we'd ever seen. Even today, my 9-year-old freaked, which gave me the chance to once again beat into his head that “while our modern world slathers on the Jar Jar Binks CGI vomit, back in the day, they had to figure out how to make little models move and seem real—and hide all the strings and pulleys.” Yeah, my kid hates me.

But Karen knew, Karen understood. She still does. With a body of work that includes over 169 films and/or TV appearances, Karen Black is an actor—that means she works. None of this bitching and complaining about crappy scripts or zero roles for women over 40—that's an actor with a bullshit ego, see. No, like Michael Caine (*Jaws 4* and *Alfie*), Karen knows there'll be two dozen *House of 1000 Corpses* for every *Five Easy Pieces*. In fact, even one classic movie makes up for starring in a thousand junk films. Karen knows it—she's cool. And right now, she's got five films in post-production. Eat your heart out, Meryl Streep. Karen would. (Stacy Davies) *On DVD from Dark Sky Films*



**THE QUIET EARTH**

Aaah... if only. For those of us who often long to move to an island far away from the maddening crowds, the thought of Earth's population disappearing in the blink of an eye can be a lovely, albeit warped, midnight pipe dream. It's also a major plot point in many sci-fi films—last man or woman on Earth and such—but mostly, we find out soon enough that our *Omega Man*—or gal—is not, really, alone, and must spend the better half of the picture battling zombies, *Road Warriors* or *Damnation Alley* carnivorous-for-human-flesh cockroaches. And all that pesky fighting can sure be distracting from the pure fascination of a desolate planet.

But, in 1985, the little island country of New Zealand sent forth into the sci-fi world what turned out to be the highest-grossing foreign film of that year—an unusual apocalyptic catastrophe that chose *not* to dip its fatalistic toes into the battle-for-what's-left-of-the-world clichés. Instead, in director Geoff Murphy's rapturous gem, when high-tech scientist Zac Hobson (Bruno

Lawrence) awakens one day to find that he is alone—and later, not so much—he joins forces with his companions to uncover the mysterious disappearance of everyone else.

The first half of the film is breathtakingly unique: with almost no dialogue—save some mutterances or yelps—Zac mills about town and breaches his government lab employ searching for answers. He goes through the expected modes: disbelief, raiding the shopping malls for sweets and designer fare, and moving into a mansion—all the while recording the ever-increasing time warp pulses from the sun that seem to indicate that the world is now very fragile, and most likely falling apart. We call this the “ticking clock” syndrome, and it is *this* enemy that Zac faces, instead of cretins with sawed-off shotguns.

It's a wonderful dance of silence and solitude, of madness and the horror of isolation (beautifully played out in one very Kubrick-esque moment). Zac finally screws his head back on just in time for redheaded spitfire Joanne (Alison Routledge) to show up and screw everything else, and not far behind comes Api (Pete Smith) a sketchy hoodlum who isn't easily pegged, teetering between a violent nature and a spiritual one. But don't think you know what's going to happen—you don't; the dynamics of these three are unique, the hypothesis of why everyone vanished and why some remained is highly original, and the triage's quest to stop the pulsing before it destroys what's left of life on Earth is totally enveloping. Still, it's the finale that is most often referenced, for it is *so* off the map and curious, that no one still really knows what happened. Commentary by producer/writer Sam Pillsbury is somewhat enlightening in that regard—and perfectly fascinating in every other. (Stacy Davies) *On DVD from Anchor Bay*

**Now Playing**

Reviews by Amy Nicholson unless otherwise noted.

**ACCEPTED**

With the boobs and morosity of *Revenge of the Nerds*, but sans the redeeming intelligence and depth (yeah, I said it), this half-baked comedy about a too-cool-for-school dude who winds up opening his own (and learning important stuff about, like, individuality and responsibility) ambles along inoffensively—which is the last thing you want in a film about booze, parties and chicks.

**BROTHERS OF THE HEAD**

It's early 1975 and proto punks Tom and Barry are unformed, seething and nihilistic to their mutual core—which is a thick band of flesh linking them at their stomachs. Fulton and Louis Pepe's bewitching, faux rockumentary of the brothers' rise and fall is an elegy for artistic insulation and innovation. The film's focus is frustration, suffocation and the parasitic manipulation of talent: the grim tale of the traveling circuses that toured freaks a century ago and today make up the Billboard charts.

**CHANGING TIMES**

Set in French and Arabic speaking Tangiers, André Téchiné's solid, if staid tone poem about clashing cultures, expectations, and needs zooms-in on a family headed by Catherine Deneuve and its would-be home-wrecker (Gérard Depardieu), but pulls back to reveal a global struggle to find footing on shifty cultural ground.

**CLERKS II**

Kevin Smith's surprisingly smart sequel to 1994's *Clerks* deserves credit for being intuitive enough to recognize that the time had come to drag his lazy characters (and his lazy use of them) kicking and screaming into adulthood. Or at least a version of it that still allows time for donkey sex jokes and impassioned geek debates.

**CONVERSATIONS WITH OTHER WOMEN**

Aaron Eckhart and Helena Bonham Carter have one long and twisty conversation in this gimmicky, but sincere split-screen tale of a tryst with roots that go back nearly two decades. Though memories sweeten with age, reality doesn't as Eckhart prepares to upend his life for an old love who's cynical, clinical and detached. Gabrielle Zevin's talky script is a gift for actors, and few are

worthier than Eckhart who was born to play screwed-up dreamboats and men who use their handsomeness for evil.

**THE DESCENT**

Caves are innately skin-crawling and Neil Marshall's horror tale of six strong women trapped by rocks and cannibals two miles underground is the best execution yet of the recently-popular spelunkers-against-primitive-humans genre. It's grim, honest and one of most wrenching bloodbaths ever seen. Once the goofy-looking monsters slither in, the tone plunges from near-impossible to funereal. As a nightmare artist, Marshall's no innovator, but he is a merciless perfectionist.

**FACTOTUM**

Charles Bukowski—or more precisely, his transparently-veiled alter ego “Henry Chinaski”—has plenty of reasons to drink during the few hazily-defined years covered in Norwegian director Bent Hamer's film based on the novel of the same name. The problem for him *and* us is that he's drifting aimlessly through a chain of crap psyches and bad girlfriends, and while Bukowski would eventually shake up the literary world by spinning ennui into gold, watching the nothingness happen isn't as interesting as reading about it. Still, as the notoriously unattractive ladies' man, Matt Dillon transcends his Tiger Beatitude commendably, shrinking into his shoulders, jutting out his jaw, and thudding about like a man who's used to being punched.

**HALF NELSON**

Though it points in broad strokes—Ryan Gosling's junior high teacher is a crack addict and his pet student Drey (Shareeka Epps) has a drug dealing surrogate dad—this indie-to-its-core ballet between him, her, their ideals and their weakness is surprisingly nuanced and intimate.

**THE ILLUSIONIST**

A picture that prides itself on the leading man's trickery can only shock the audience by playing it straight. Instead, this captivating, but complicated period picture about a magician (Edward Norton), his sweetheart (Jessica Biel), and her fiancée, the prince (Rufus Sewell) suffocates under the weight of so much decorative intellectual embroidery.

**AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH**

Promise you'll see this documentary of a slideshow-heavy speech by Al Gore—James

Bond in a sensible blazer—on global warming. Be assured that it is phenomenal, fascinating, horrific and—quite-literally—the only legitimate must-see movie of the summer. There's no mistaking it—Gore aims to shock. But that's not hard with facts like these, and in our current climate of hotter summers and confounding political leaders, he's a man who speaks to our common interest with forthright intelligence that's as refreshing as a glass of cool ice tea—which you'll need after vowing to lay off the fuel-burning air conditioner.

**THE LA RIOT SPECTACULAR**

Unsparring in its finger-pointing, this laugh-under-your-breath retelling of the 1992 riots lines everyone up against the wall—from the news anchors, cops, politicians, and Simit Valley White Supremacists (whose ranks include Jonathan Lipnicki promising his dad he'll always question the liberal media) to most devastating and cynically, the black community itself, who, when not pleading victimization, are seen shooting up “Mr. Kim's Riquor” and nursing from 40s labeled “False Hope.”

While their preachers willingly promote revenge if it'll bring more applause, the Crips and Bloods are in the cemetery shooting each other into open graves. Through it all walks Snoop Dogg like Marley's Ghost, shaming the Angelinos with such pithy ponderings as, “I'm here to tell you this shit's fucked up.” That Snoop is, at best, an inactive Crip (he was still touting his membership in 2003's *P.I.M.P.*) doesn't dilute the venom of this deeply cynical comedy where everyone's trying to spin hatred into financial gain.

**LEONARD COHEN I'M YOUR MAN**

This documentary tribute doesn't roast the revered singer-songwriter—it marimates him in compliments and sugar, heaped on by every musician from Rufus Wainwright to The Edge. Devotees will find sweetness in hearing his songs reworked by worthy talents, but they won't find much of Cohen himself—who largely remains on the sidelines, his acuity, emotionality, sophistication and inner life only taking center stage when sung as lyrics.

**MATERIAL GIRLS**

This Hilary and Haylie Duff vehicle (a vehicle powered by Hilary with Haylie hitching a ride by offering the modicum of acting talent) has one big life lesson: Easy Spirit shoes rule. Otherwise, these two spoiled heiresses turned—*eewww*—poor, and the slagged-off film they've found themselves in, are worse

than immature; they're insignificant.

**THE NIGHT LISTENER**

This most recent effort by Robin Williams to dig his career out of the teacher-doctor-schmuck graveyard has more than novelty value. A slightly heavy-handed tale of a morally slipshod writer obsessed with uncovering the truth behind a 14-year-old boy's rape claims, this decent nail-biter is compelling, if not confounding.

**QUINCEANERA**

Writer-directors Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland (white dudes who grew up in Queens and Leeds, respectively) won the two biggest awards at Sundance with this sleepy, slow-burning mini-drama. Though it's laden with Grand Guignol elements, including a drugged seduction, an accidental pregnancy and a death, the film stretches them out with the lazy local color of Echo Park, which is the movie's true strength, and unlikely duo director's greatest feat. It's a contrivance gifted with authenticity that finds music in its innate dissonance, as the cobbling together of fantastic, mundane, modern, ancient, Hummer and push cart is nothing if not the song of Southern California.

**A SCANNER DARKLY**

Under Richard Linklater's slithery animation, Keanu Reeves stars as Bob Arctor, an undercover cop and drug addict described condescendingly as a “vague blur” and “burnt out husk” with only “two functioning brain cells.” When not spying on himself at the office, Bob wiles away the hours crushing on coke fiend Donna (Winona Ryder), two overgrown man children Jim and Ernie (sly turns by infamous tokers Robert Downey Jr and Woody Harrelson), and a pill popping habit far more entrenched than he'll admit even to. True to his Slacker roots, Linklater cares most about relaxed, infectious character dynamics; he's thinned out much of Philip K. Dick's exploration of consciousness and opted for a fun and chatty bit of futuristic Hunter S. Thompson that celebrates plotlessness—call it “Waiting for Gonzo.”

**SCOOB**

Eventually, Woody Allen's career will hit a tipping point when people stop biting their fingers in hopes that surely his next film will be worth a damn. Pity this comedy (by intention, that is) about Scarlett Johansson wondering if her hunky British crush is a murderer is too slight and disposable to remember.

**SHADOWBOXER**

Lee Daniels' Oscar aspirant goes for broke (and baroque) in its tale of a hitman named Mikey (Cuba Gooding Jr.), his foxxy older lady (award-laden British thespian Helen Mirren). An edgy concept plus luxurious cinematography make a serious award season contender, but not when large parts of William Lipz's script popped up a decade ago on Melrose Place. Just as this ridiculous film can't come to life when every frame has been over-gilded by ambition, it can't be racially ground-breaking when every black female is an addict or a tramp.

**TALLADEGA NIGHTS: THE BALLAD OF RICKY BOBBY**

Will Ferrell's latest is closer to *Kicking and Screaming* than *Anchorman*, which will delight some and depress many others. As Ricky Bobby, NASCAR champion and prize meathead, he howls, scratches, acts the fool, and invests in his character like it's Google stock—things nobody does better than Sacha Baron Cohen. Luckily, he's in the movie too, and when they're together, their comedic nuance begs to be forgiven for the plot's frequent forays into eighth-grader mayhem.

**WORLD TRADE CENTER**

Did Oliver Stone, smarting after a string of flops, sell his soul to the devil? (Satan or Cheney, you pick). His well-acted but dusty Hallmark card to American heroism pushes buttons labeled “Tears” and “Awe,” but never pushes the envelope. That five years and a flood of information later, Hollywood's raconteur is regurgitating the jingoistic party line when even my grandmother talks about 9-11 conspiracies makes me want the NSA to illegally tap his phone lines to get to the bottom of it.

**YOU, ME AND DUPREE**

Owen Wilson is either a sucker or an egomaniac. Maybe both. How else to explain his habit of signing on to hara-kiri stinkers for which he's hailed as the only good thing in the picture? Here, he twinkles yet again in a world of broad bathroom humor and stereotypes about the sexes that's as dated as Carlos Mencia's. Pity that in giving him that golden glow, Kate Hudson is forced to play a wan shrew.

**ZOOM**

Tim Allen's updated *E! True Hollywood Story* will be thrilled by this half-assed, half-brained superhero and superkids rip-off that fits perfectly into their favorite segment: Star—hounded by bills for houses, cars, bottles, and powders—signs on to stinker so bad, it's Tomatometer is zero.