

Thanksgiving turkeys! ULTIMATE FORCE starring Mirko Cro Cop and DEATH RACERS starring Raven

By Scott Foy (www.foywonder.com) "Mirko 'Cro Cop' Filipovic is a new Charles Bronson." - Jean Claude Van Damme

That quote appears on the DVD case for Ultimate Force, a b-level action movie every bit as generic as its title implies. I can only assume Van Damme made this comment when he was high on the nose candy because the only thing Mirko Cro Cop has in common with Charles Bronson is Bronson is dead and Cro Cop displays all the personality of a corpse. Lord knows acting skills have never been a hallmark of action movie stars but they still have to display signs of a pulse. I'm hard-pressed to think of another action movie I've seen in recent memory starring a guy displaying less personality than Cro Cop and, mind you, I've seen many a b-action movie starring Olivier Gruner. The amazing thing is that one of the DVD extras is an interview with Cro Cop in which he comes across quite animated and personable, the exact opposite of how he comes across in the movie. One can only assume it was the movie's writer-director who insisted Cro Cop play his role as the strong silent type. That only works when the lead's face isn't a constant blank slate and they don't voice what few lines they have in a heavily accented monotone of complete disinterest. Maybe there's still hope for Cro Cop as an action hero – just not here. Cro Cop plays a Yugoslavian war hero named Axon Rey (Great name!) turned clandestine Eastern European government assassin codenamed "Sphinx" (Not so great name). He's the top assassin for SATO (State Anti-Terrorist Organization), which itself is run by SIN (State Intelligence Network). Are we in GI Joe acronym territory or what? His latest assignment is to eliminate an enemy of the state for reasons ultimately unimportant. That means donning his finest jet black Steven Seagal wear and his trusty silencer pistol and working his way into the target's not-so-well guarded estate. Sphinx gets the job done but cannot bring himself to kill the guy's wife because looking at her brings back memories of the woman he loved who had been killed sometime earlier. A reluctant hitman type? That's original. Failure to complete his mission by eliminating everyone does not sit well with his boss, Janus, soon to be revealed as the film's true villain. This is not giving away anything because the script tips its hand regarding this fact during the first half hour. I'm also not giving anything away by telling you that Sphinx's lost love is alive and well and in cahoots with Janus. This is also given away during the first act. The typical punishment for Sphinx's insubordination would be to have him killed. Janus, however, has this warped belief that his killers can be reprogrammed like computers; wiping away their memories and stripping away their humanity in order to make them that much better at their jobs. In Sphinx's case it seems a moot point since the guy already shows about as much of a pulse as a rock. You know you don't have much of a screen presence as an action hero when you're so wooden you make Don "The Dragon" Wilson look like a charisma machine. Janus has Sphinx sent to the "rehabilitation island" of Gulag 7 where he's forced to fight for his life against five other operatives. Yeah; like The Condemned. Sphinx just listlessly walks about the island until the next random assassin tries to jump him. All this is supposed to somehow help "reprogram" Sphinx. It's bad enough that Sphinx is such a boring character, now even his opponents are just random dudes that don't say a word, don't look all that intimidating, and are almost universally incapable of putting up much of a struggle against him. There's no drama whatsoever to the fight scenes and though they're competently choreographed, you'll find more exciting fight scenes on any random episode of Walker, Texas Ranger. I will say you don't often see submission holds incorporated into movie fight scenes. With good reason, I say. Watching a guy on the ground with another guy immobilized by a limb lock does not make for thrilling rock'em, sock'em movie mayhem. There's no ref there to stand them up so Sphinx will frequently release the hold so they can get back up and go back to slugging it out. Cro Cop eventually ceases to make any use of his MMA skills in favor of sluggish gun battles. I suspect by that point most viewers will have already given up. One thing action movies should never be is boring. He'll eventually find his lady love alive and (supposedly) being held captive on the island. Janus will "rescue" them and take them both back to the mainland where the mind games continue and the story now gets built around Sphinx being ordered to commit a questionable assassination that's actually being done for personal political gain on Janus' part. The gist of this second half could be boiled down to wondering just how long it will take the ultimate force to realize he's being used as the ultimate dupe. Too long. If Ultimate Force is any indication, Mirko Cro Cop's action movie career will be about as successful as his UFC stint. So have you been in a video store anytime in the last couple years and seen titles that sound remarkably similar to certain big screen movies that recently opened at a theater near you? Snakes on a Train Transmorphers I Am Omega When a Killer Calls AVH: Alien vs. Hunter Allan Quaterman and the Temple of Skulls Sunday School Musical You can thank a production company called The Asylum for those titles and more where they came from. The term "mockbuster" has been coined to describe these cheaply produced, often of dubious quality, knock-offs released to DVD just in time to piggyback off the name value of specific big screen blockbusters opening in theaters. Next month a remake of The Day the Earth Stood Still opens in theaters and The Asylum will counterprogram with The Day the Earth Stopped (unless Fox has anything to say about it - they're suing). A short while ago Death Race starring Jason Statham opened in multiplexes and The Asylum coincided with their mockbuster version, Death Racers, starring the Insane Clown Posse and Scott "Raven" Levy. It's the near future, society has crumbled, and the worst criminals have been wrangled into a location called the "Red Zone". Think Escape From New York without any sort of budget. A criminal mastermind known as The Reaper is forcing a scientist to make him some sarin gas that he intends to unleash into water supply that just happens to run beneath the Red Zone where he is imprisoned. What about Raven? He plays "The Reaper" looking like a bloated merchant seaman in dire need of a bath. He isn't given much to do, which is fine because Scott Levy's not much of an actor at this time. He's not awful, mind you, certainly better than most of the cast member. That's not saying much in this case. Let's just say as far as wrestlers turned actors go, I don't think "Rowdy" Roddy Piper has any reason to be looking over his shoulder just yet. The Reaper is looking to stick it to the government that now appears to consist of four people in a small room. Those four come up with a scheme to stop The Reaper: institute a death race of two-person condemned

criminal teams in weaponized vehicles fighting it out through the zone for points with the surviving team earning their freedom by killing The Reaper. I couldn't help but notice how surprisingly little racing there was to this death race. The racers spent more time sitting in their parked cars or standing outside their vehicles bitching at one another than anything else. There's less action going on and more of characters just behaving like assholes. Death Racers is the cinematic equivalent of a bad indie garbage wrestling match. I believe the word "clusterfuck" was coined specifically to describe movies like this. Like an Asylum attempt to make a Troma movie that's really just an Insane Clown Posse fan film in disguise, it's 100% attitude and 1,000% bullshit. Nothing makes sense. There's gore galore but little point behind anyone or anything. Worst of all, every character is repellently obnoxious. This whole low rent effort boasts an abrasive tone loaded with such allegedly witty dialogue such as: "You're a dumb ass. You drive like a bigger dumb ass, dumb ass." "That car can go from zero to suck my dick in 0.2 seconds." Even the in-movie television presentation of the race, the sort of TV breaks we've seen done with real ingenuity and wit in films like Robocop and The Running Man, is devoid of clever commentary. Naming an all-female team "Vaginamyte" is the sharpest writing in this grating stinker. ICP's music dominates the soundtrack (except for the portion of the score that's a blatant rip-off of the Predator theme music - what was up with that?) and their mindset permeates about every aspect of the screenplay. Shaggy 2 Dope and Violent J play themselves in the future after becoming outlaws; their music having been banned for inspiring multiple murders. Now they're driving a ferocious-looking ice cream truck of the Twisted Metal video game variety and - God help us all - serve as the heroes of the film. This movie will probably be bliss for hardcore Juggalos. If you're not a fan of the clowns then Death Racers will only serve as a sturdy reminder as to why you're not.