Film Science: Future Human TV

Chimera + Q&A

We are delighted to welcome author Stephen Gallagher and director Lawrence Gordon Clark for a post-screening Q&A.

Chimera
Directed by: Lawrence Gordon Clark
©: Anglia Television Films & Drama
a Zenith production for: Anglia Films, ITV
Executive Producers: Brenda Reid, Archie Tait
Developed by: Zenith Productions
Developed in association with: Simon Moorhead
Produced by: Nick Gillott
Production Executive: Clair McCoy
Executives in Charge of Production: David Fitzgerald, Mike Nunn
Production Supervisor: Jake Wright
Production Co-ordinator: Caroline Cornish-Trestrail
Production Accountant: Michael Yell
Location Managers: Michael Harvey, Simon Moorhead
Assistant to the Producer: Sylvia Pyke
2nd Unit Director: Chris Edwards
Assistant Director: Bill Westley
2nd Unit Assistant Director: Ian Ferguson
2nd Assistant Director: Peter Heslop
Script Supervisor: Sarah Garner
Written by: Stephen Gallagher
Based on the novel 'Chimera' by: Stephen Gallagher
Director of Photography: Ken Westbury
2nd Unit Director of Photography: Dick Dodd
Camera Operator: Nigel Slatter
Focus Puller: Simon Mills *
Gaffer: Terry McGuinness
Best Boy: Micky Wilson
Stills: Stephen Morley
Special Effects Supervisor: David Beavis
Supervising Editor: Alan Pattillo
Editor: Brian Peachey
1st Assistant Editors: Bob Robinson, Ian Neale
Production Designer: Chris Edwards
Art Director: Humphrey Bangham
Set Dresser: Duncan Wheeler
Art Department Assistant: Jamie Carmichael
Property Master: Tim Youngman
Construction Services: Postmill Ltd
Costume Designer: Derek Hyde
Wardrobe Supervisor: Janet Tebrooke
Make Up Artists: Penny Bell, Sue Black
Special Make Up & Animatronic Effects by: Image Animation *
Image Animation Special Make Up & Animatronic Effects by: Little John, Fiona Cazley, Jimmy (C) Sands, Vicky Stockwell, Dave Keen, John Schoonraad, Paul Spateri, Sue Higgins, Louise Rosner, Grant Mason, Simon Sayce
Main Title Design: Plume Partners
Processed by: Universal Film Laboratory
Originated on: Eastman (R) Kodak
Music by: Nigel Hess
Music Supervisor: Graham Walker
Music Recorded at: CTS Wembley
Sound Recordists: Tony Dawe, Chris Gurney
Sound: Harry Fairbairn *
Sound Re-recorded at: Delta Sound
Dubbing Mixer: Brian Saunders
Sound Editors: Philip Bothamley, Jim Roddan
Stunt Arranger: Marc Boyle

Chimera: a contemporary review

According to *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary* a chimera is a mythical beast with a lion's head, a serpent's tail and a goat's body. Alternatively, it is simply a wild fancy. In Anglia's new thriller *Chimera* is an altogether more complex beast, a cocktail of human and ape concocted in a secret lab in Yorkshire. We've only got Anglia's word for it though. The first episode of this four-parter gives a whole new meaning to the term 'serial killer'. You don't see anything of this DIY furry Frankenstein, just a trail of bloody corpses which point to a devilish government experiment that has gone horribly wrong.

The cautionary tale is adapted from the shocker by its author Stephen Gallagher, but has all the makings of a sci-fi classic. In the first episode there are shades of *Quatermass* in the sinister men from the ministry led by oleaginous Parkinson-clone Hennessey (Kenneth Cranham) as well as the more recent mutant megabuster. *First Born*, in which Charles Dance dished up a test-tube man-monkey. Naturally though, those involved say they studiously avoided watching *First Born* during production.

In *Chimera* any high-falutin ideological notions play second fiddle to a rip-roaring chiller which is a latter-day Prometheus both unbound and bloody. It all starts when Nurse Tracy Pickford (Emer Gillespie) moves to a northern fertility clinic to escape from a difficult relationship with intense film buff Peter Carson (John Lynch) who would rather pore over 30s expressionist prints than paw his putative girlfriend. While she works on the wards where expectant mothers await a miracle cure, the real procreative action goes on behind closed doors. That is until the people in white coats come up with a creature with the ability to pick locks, the strength of Mike Tyson and the anger of someone who has just received his final Poll Tax demand.

At first it seems as if inquisitive Tracy is going to solve the mystery behind the bolted doors, but the climax of the first episode makes it clear that she isn't going to have such a meaty role in future instalments. Instead it is left to Carson to put away his cine-tracts and track down the real baddies, another example of the hack turned hero; eventually even the bookworm turns.

In reality John Lynch is quiet-spoken and thoughtful. But in the same way as his character trades an obsession with offbeat movies for an obsession with the truth, so Lynch found himself becoming obsessed about the potential misuses of science. 'Nature is so finely tuned, and the effects of what we are doing have not been realised. Throughout History there have been cover-ups and *Chimera* shows that.'

It's no surprise that this Frankenstein fable should be so enduring, particularly when it involves our favourite anthropomorphic first cousin, apes. Genetic engineering is particularly topical with recent documented cases of sheep and goats being cross-bred. Only the other night, there was a timely repeat of *O Lucky Man!* in which a poor unfortunate finds his head grafted on to a pig's body. Perhaps the last word should go to author Stephen Gallagher, who isn't averse to a little hyperbole to give his stories an extra *frisson*. 'There are scientists who claim to have actually created a chimera in real life, but it was destroyed in the embryo stage because of the social, moral and ethical question involved'. The Brooke Bond chimps will never seem so cuddly again.

Bruce Dessau, *Time Out*, 3 July 1991

Primate Consultant: Peter Elliott
Publicist: Fliss Coombs
Medical and Laboratory Equipment supplied by: Millipore (UK) Ltd, Radiometer – Copenhagen Ltd, Carl Zeiss (Oberkochen) Ltd, Heraeus Equipment Ltd, Arnolds Veterinary Products Ltd
Video Transfer: Unitab (R) *
Made at: Shepperton Studio Centre
Cast:
John Lynch *(Peter Carson)*
Christine Kavanagh *(Alison)*
Emer Gillespie *(Nurse Tracy Pickford)*
David Calder *(Doctor Jenner)*
Gary Mavers *(Forester)*
Gillian Barge *(Doctorr Horsley)*
Kenneth Cranham *(Hennessey)*
Bhasker *(doctor)*
Debra Gillett *(Julie)*
Kerry Peers *(Christine)*
Frank Baker *(Rob)*
John Skitt *(Tom)*
Johnny Leeze *(Billy Hamilton)*
Richard Durden *(minister)*
Dhirendra *(Cotterell)*
David O'Hara *(Reynolds)*
Liz Brailsford *(Marie Forester)*
Maggie Lane *(hotel landlady)*
George Costigan *(Schaffer)*
Pip Torrens *(Windeler)*
Andrew Leighton *(Peter Gaskell)*
Malcolm Raeburn *(Davis)*
Jennifer Harris *(Sarah Gaskell)*
Douglas Mann *(Chad)*
Philippa Haywood *(Diane Rohmer)*

Episode 2 only
Christopher Whitehouse *(plain clothes D.I.)*
Peter Armitage *(Sergeant Crichton)*
Corinne Ransome *(Mrs Gaskell)*
David Neilson *(Mr Gaskell)*
Paul Savage *(Donaldson)*
Peter Elliott *(Claimant)*
Badi Uzzaman *(morgue attendant)*

Episode 3 only
Sebastian Shaw *(Doctor Liawski)*
Susie Johns *(orderly)*
Liam Halligan *(Eddie)*
Tom Lockyer *(civil servant)*
Sarah Winman *(Julia)*
Christine Cox *(Rennie Hamilton)*
Johnny Leeze *(Billy Hamilton)*

Episode 4 only
Emer Gillespie *(Tracy)*
Vivien Parry *(rental manager)*
Liza Tarbuck *(girl on coach)*
Sue Jones Davies *(library assistant)*
Fred Pearson *(Superintendent Stonehill)*
Joe Williams *(mechanic)*
Great Britain 1991©
ITV tx 7-28.7.1991
4 x 52 mins

* Uncredited

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Few of the horrors droolingly recounted in those garish paperbacks with names like *Slime* or *Spawn* or *Slurry* can match the horror with which polite society has tended to greet the tentative proposition that, actually, one or two modern chillers can be rather good. In the wake of Thomas Harris' excellent *The Silence of the Lambs*, however, a certain amount of critical back-pedalling appears to be in progress. Before too long, one suspects, the name of Stephen Gallagher will be dropped knowingly over the canapés, and a taste for his fiction will be admitted to as guiltlessly as a partiality to his transatlantic namesake, Stephen King.

More immediately, Gallagher's move into mainstream attention is about to be hastened by ITV's screening of the Anglia/Zenith Films co-production *Chimera*. This four-part series about strange doings in a Cumbrian fertility clinic, which ultimately proves to be engaged in more unhallowed forms of creating new life, has been freely adapted by Gallagher from his own novel. A far scream from its superficially similar peers on the station bookstalls, *Chimera* is written in an agreeably, literate, understated prose. Still more surprising, it contains barely so much as a hint of sex, and most of its violence occurs off-stage, as decorously as in a classical tragedy. (His television adaptation is actually, and unusually, a good deal more bloody than the book.)

And though one or two of Gallagher's later novels have indulged sparingly in what he refers to as 'yuk effects', on the whole he regards such moments as the prose equivalent of special effects in movies, arresting on first acquaintance but fated to early redundancy.

Indeed, Gallagher denies that he ever deliberately set out to make a career in the horror genre. He does concede, however, that he sees himself as trying to work in the same traditions as, on the one hand, gentlemanly craftsmen like Leslie Charteris, author of the *Saint* series, and on the other, the best-selling novelists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries – 'The entire drive is to tell a good story and use whatever means are at hand to do it.' *Chimera*, for example, is self-consciously in the tradition of H.G. Well's *The Island of Doctor Moreau*: 'There's nothing in the concept of *Chimera* that's entirely new, but what I wanted to do was take that *Moreau* idea and suppress it as much as possible, surround it with as much reality as I could in order to say "this thing [biotechnology and the production of artificial creatures], which one might be tempted to dismiss as a fantasy simply because it has a fantasy tradition behind it, is slipping up behind us unnoticed, for that very reason".'

For all this, and even though Gallagher spent a good deal of time reading about genetic engineering, he also admits that: 'Really, the technical side of it is less interesting to me than the mythological side. What I was trying to do with the novel was to tell a story about conscience and responsibility, and I didn't want to get bogged down in specific arguments about whether these things could actually happen now, or in five years' time or whatever. Like all fiction, the horror field is really about human character and the interaction of human characters, and genre is simply the set of tools you pick up with which to explore it. I don't want to get too interested in the tools and forget about the characters, because there are already too many writers who do that.'

Kevin Jackson, *The Independent*, 27 June 1991

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