**[John Kenneth Muir's Reflections on Cult Movies and Classic TV](http://reflectionsonfilmandtelevision.blogspot.co.nz/)**

One of the horror genre's "most widely read critics" (Rue Morgue # 68), "an accomplished film journalist" (Comic Buyer's Guide #1535), and the award-winning author of Horror Films of the 1980s (2007), The Rock and Roll Film Encyclopedia (2007) and Horror Films of the 1970s (2002), John Kenneth Muir, presents his blog on film, television and nostalgia, named one of the Top 100 Film Studies Blog on the Net.

**Saturday, October 04, 2008**

**CULT MOVIE REVIEW: *Equilibrium* (2002)**

[](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_mpBGa4P5jUo/SOeQFRzCwwI/AAAAAAAACHE/-IkQbBmnkUw/s1600-h/200px-Equilibriumposter.jpg)On the set of the second season of ***The House Between***, some of my cast and crew members unexpectedly scooped up prop guns and began enthusiastically indulging in the art of "Gun-Kata," the mathematical discipline of (gun) battle practiced by the ascetic Grammaton Clerics in the 2002 Orwellian epic, ***Equilibrium***.  
  
I had absolutely no idea what my friends were doing, and worried that some of them had gone inexplicably bonkers. Then Tony Mercer -- glock in hand -- explained to me about ***Equilibrium*** (and "Gun-Kata"). Backing away slowly from my armed friend, I made a note to myself that I needed to see this movie.   
  
And *voila* - I've finally seen it! I'm just sorry it took me this long. Because ***Equilibrium*** is a highly entertaining pastiche of ***Fahrenheit 451, Logan's Run***, ***1984*** and ***The Matrix;*** one that ratherunexpectedly boasts a heart *and* a brain. The film also features some great stylized action sequences, although bad (or rather, dated...) CGI spoils the *coup-de-grace*, a villain (Taye Diggs) losing his head (or face) in a climactic sword duel.  
  
***Equilibrium*** tells the story of 21st century Earth after a devastating World War III. Realizing that mankind could never *"survive a fourth"* war, and that our own *"volatile natures"* are at fault, A New World Order outlaws...human feelings. Accordingly, the global population willingly doses itself several times a day with useful new pacification drug called "Prozium." it suppresses all emotions, which is described by Big Brother as a *"disease."*  
  
By the way, Prozium (read: Prozac) is amusingly referred to by the Great Leader (named Father) as "*the opiate of our masses"* and *"the glue of our Great Society."* The film thus simultaneously alludes to Karl Marx *and* LBJ, two political leaders undeniably on the left side of the spectrum.  
  
But there's a problem in this Brave New World: our runaway feelings can be aroused by virtually anything: love, grief, ecstasy, pain...and especially great art. Which means that literature, music and art must also be outlawed by the state, or rated *"EC-10"* -- **forbidden.** This facet of ***Equilibrium's*** narrative is no doubt a not-too-subtle reference to the unfortunate trend in the 1990s towards political correctness, and the way that craven politicians scored points with "value voters" by attempting to "rate" music and violent video games (Joe Lieberman*, j'accuse*.)

In this totalitarian society, those who willingly indulge in feelngs, in emotion -- *going off their "dosing"* -- are amusingly termed *"sense offenders."* They are eradicated (with extreme prejudice) by a disciplined constabulary called The Grammaton Clerics: stoic, highly-centered men that have refined gunfighting to a set of mathematical equations (hence the Gun-Kata).  
  
Echoing the Firemen of ***Fahrenheit 451***, The Grammaton Clerics burn books and other historical treasures. In one egregious case, we witness paintings -- *including The Mona Lisa* -- go up in flames. And also like ***Fahrenheit 451***, an organized resistance has flowered, one which indulges in "sense offenses" and hides valuable literary works (and jazz albums) in secret rooms. The film's protagonist, a cleric named Preston happens across one of these rooms, and his reaction upon hearing "forbidden" music represents one of the movie's emotional high points. Another one involves his unexpected, last-minute rescue of a dog. If that scene -- a firing squad for pets -- doesn't have you squirming with discomfort and empathy, you must have ice water flowing in your veins.  
  
Speaking of ice water in your veins, ascetic John Preston (Christian Bale) is the best of the Grammaton Clerics. He is so cold-blooded he even executes his partner, Cleric Partridge (Sean Bean) for failing to turn in contraband (a book of poetry by Yeats). But one day, Preston accidentally goes off his Prozium and begins unexpectedly to...feel. Suddenly, he has regrets about the fact that his wife -- a secret resistance fighter -- was taken away by the state for *"summary combustion"* (meaning incineration). Preston is suddenly fascinated by books too; and moved to tears by jazz music. For the first time, the world even appears...*colorful.* Before long, Preston is finding inventive ways to save books from the fire, shield resisters (decried as "terrorists" by the State), rescue endangered puppies, and even attempting to assassinate Father, the figurehead of the oppressive regime.  
  
If any of this material sounds oddly familiar, it should. Both ***Fahrenheit 451*** and ***Logan's Run*** (books and films) focus on law enforcement agents (Fireman or Sandmen) of an oppressive totalitarian regime who -- because of a woman's influence in both cases -- become symbols and leaders of the resistance; ultimately challenging the *status quo*. ***Equilibrium*** follows that template closely, and the important woman in this film is named Mary O'Brien (Emily Watson). She is captured by the State, and held for summary combustion...but there's something about this particular sense offender that touches Preston; that reminds him of his late wife, perhaps.  
  
Watson also speaks the words that come to define the resistance, and not coincidentally the movie's thematic point: *"Without love, without sorrow, without anger...breath is just a clock."* In other words, if we can't be ourselves -- if we can't be human -- is life worth living? Or is it just a dull, beating countdown to non-existence?  
  
Some critics also view ***Equilibrium*** almost entirely as a ***Matrix*** knock-off (timing is everything, isn't it?), though there is evidence for that accusation only in the visual presentation of Cleric John Preston. Christian Bale -- with his hair slicked back and outfitted in a high-collared black frock -- certainly resembles Keanu Reeves' Neo a little too closely. And I guess you might argue too that ***Equilibrium****,* like ***The Matrix***, seeks to apply some weird combo of martial arts/special effects to the updated fight sequences (bullet time vs. Gun-Kata). But other than those mostly unimportant elements, the two films couldn't be further apart. ***The Matrix*** concerns layers of reality. ***Equilibrium*** is about the ways we deaden *this* reality; particularly with mood-altering pharmaceuticals that take "the edge off" pesky emotions. Again, a pertinent indictment of now -- the Age of Ritalin -- an epoch in which we chemically adjust the moods of even our youngest children.  
  
***Equilibrium*** offers another helpful philosophical nugget, one that seems especially valuable in these post-911 tumultuous times. *"Without law, there is no logic...only mayhem."* In regards to this statement, Preston has finally awakened to the truth that The State commits murder (a sense offense, no?) for its own agenda while ostensibly outlawing murder amongst the populace. It is hypocrisy pure and simple. Like waging war for the purposes of protecting peace. It is Orwellian double-think.  
  
I enjoyed ***Equilibrium*** a great deal, and recognized the nods of homage to various man-against-the-system science fiction films of the 1960s and 1970s. The action sequences are engaging too, and oddly beautiful, like a bizarre ballet (particularly one dark sequence wherein the only illumination is the staccato flare of gunfire). My only real beef with the movie is that it seems far too easy to take down Father, his Cleric defenders and the Government. That's the same flaw in ***Logan's Run*** (1976), you say? Well, in that film, Logan de-stabilizes a controlling computer, and if I've learned anything from using Microsoft Windows for years, it's that de-stabilizing a computer isn't a very hard thing to do. In ***Equilibrium***, by contrast, we must believe that one Cleric could simultaneously defeat all the clerics (not to mention that a ready and armed Resistance was just sitting around waiting for Preston to come along.)  
  
Now, you might argue this point with me. You might say that Preston is the one cleric who "feels," and that this human quality of emotion grants him an advantage of over his brethren. But what are the mathematical odds (given the fact that gun fights and sword fights are algebraically calculated here) that not even *one* other Cleric would get lucky and land a death blow before Preston completed his task?  
  
I'm a sucker for happy endings in the right context, and I always like to see the little guy beat City Hall, but overturning a ruthless totalitarian society should require a bit more than one man...and Gun-Kata, don't you think? The ending of ***Equilibrium*** rings false, when so much of the film plays as bitingly honest. After all, this is a movie clever enough to understand the sentimental value of a sea shell or the scent of a woman's perfume on a ribbon. It understands the million little things that we, as emotional humans, attach meaning to. Any movie smart enough to express that idea doesn't need to resolve in a sword fight and bad CGI.

Posted by [John Kenneth Muir](http://www.blogger.com/profile/15629979615332893780) at [10:02 AM](http://reflectionsonfilmandtelevision.blogspot.co.nz/2008/10/cult-movie-review-equilibrium-2002.html)

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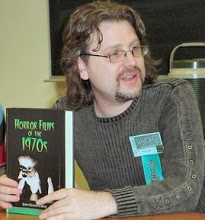
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[*Kia*](http://www.blogger.com/profile/16636756878597812808)[12:47 PM](http://reflectionsonfilmandtelevision.blogspot.com/2008/10/cult-movie-review-equilibrium-2002.html?showComment=1223138820000#c1188056446259305165)

Here's the movie that made me a Christian Bale fan. His slowly blossoming emotions as he pulls the paper blinds from his window and awes outside on a sunlight-through-rainclouds vista nailed the movie in my heart.  
  
The action was nice, and the idea of a precise probabalistic-oriented martial art is one of the few explanation ever offered for 'good guy bullets vs bad guy bullets' in any film. Nothing amazing, just gunplay action sequences though. The emotive content sets this above any thought of a Matrix wannabe.

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[*John Kenneth Muir*](http://www.blogger.com/profile/15629979615332893780)[2:02 PM](http://reflectionsonfilmandtelevision.blogspot.com/2008/10/cult-movie-review-equilibrium-2002.html?showComment=1223143320000#c6950972438929692016)

*Jake Lockley*[3:47 AM](http://reflectionsonfilmandtelevision.blogspot.com/2008/10/cult-movie-review-equilibrium-2002.html?showComment=1223192820000#c3141182714299760486)

This was the movie that also made me a Christian Bale fan. His performance was spectacular and I especially liked the scene where he woke up to the rainfall.   
  
The review was great but you failed to mention what was perhaps the deepest moment of the film. The moment where John Preston (Bale) attains equilibrium while not on Prozium. That scene had a lot of depth to it that addressed man's struggle with himself as well as with the man. On the one hand he had been used, but on the other he would have never had the knowledge of a Cleric. It was their training that he used while sober that allowed him to master his emotions and his destiny while freeing society for better or worse based on the emotional gauntlet he himself experienced.   
  
I like the movie a lot and your review was as usual a great articulation of what I appreciate about it.

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1. http://img1.blogblog.com/img/anon36.png

*Anonymous*[12:17 AM](http://reflectionsonfilmandtelevision.blogspot.com/2008/10/cult-movie-review-equilibrium-2002.html?showComment=1241669820000#c5266044134457986619)

I don't think a "ready and armed resistance" is that big a stretch. From the very start of the movie the society is depicted as unstable waiting for a champion to collapse it. One can even imagine a "mathematical" jusification for it (like Gun Kata) where the likelihood of successful revolution is inversely proportional to the amount of control the State attempts. Not talking about money or property (god knows even democracies violate that with taxes), but the freedom to do what you want when not on the clock, the body, thoughts, the soul. Even 1984's vast majority were proles, but here everyone has to take the prozium or face combustion. The revelation that Father was dead for many years was just icing on the cake -- the cult of personality was and had been dying for a long time.  
  
If there was one mistake in the film it was Preston still seemed like a cold blooded killer after he reached equilibrium (as one commenter points out) in the rising sun scene. I would've had Preston laughing and raising his hands up, a little cliche but does it more than him just staring. He still fights the same way he did off the prozium as on prozium... I would've had a few screams, a war cry in the hallway scene for sure. And the tiny smile at the end when he's staring at Liberia through the cross, now free... I'm sure Bale could've done better.