



# The Fabulous World Of Jules Verne (Invention for destruction)

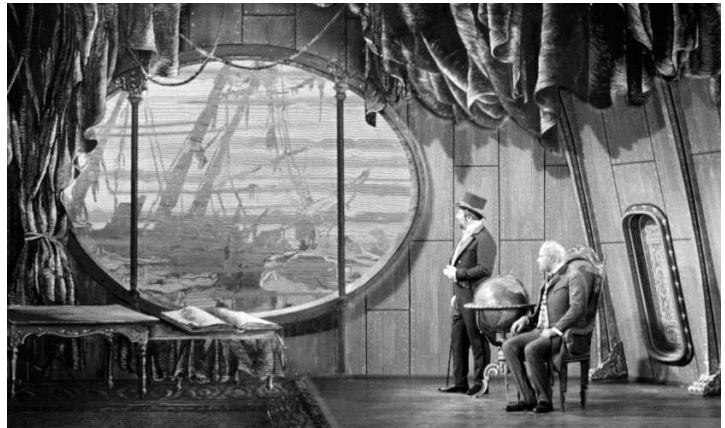
**Director:** Karel Zeman

**Country:** Czechoslovakia

**Date:** 1958

A review by Wheeler Winston Dixon for *Senses of Cinema*:

Like so many others in the United States, I was first exposed to Karel Zeman's exotic adventure film *Invention of Destruction* (1958), when it was released in the West in a dubbed and retitled as *The Fabulous World of Jules Verne* in 1961. Zeman was one of the greatest of all Czech animators and special effects artists, and used a process unique in *Invention of Destruction* combining 19th century pictorial steel engravings with live action photography. This created a fantastic vision of what can be identified today as a steampunk past, where elaborate mechanical devices, hot air balloons, oddly constructed airplanes, submarines, and other infernal machines were brought to life in a manner at once poetic and yet deeply sinister.



Jules Verne (1828-1905) was in many ways one of the most forward thinking of all imaginative popular writers, and his works were both commercially and critically successful. Films such as *De la Terre à la Lune* (From the Earth to The Moon, 1865, famously made into an early film by Georges Méliès in 1902), *Vingt Mille Lieues sous les mers* (Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea, 1869-1870), *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* (Around the World in Eighty Days, 1872), and *L'Île mystérieuse* (Mysterious Island, 1874-75) consolidated his reputation as a prolific and prophetic futurist. Verne's works have been filmed countless times, either as straight adaptations or updated versions, but Zeman's film stands alone as perhaps the most faithful of all filmic versions of Verne on the screen. It embraces not only his then-fanciful (and now all too real) vision of the future, but also remains faithful to the iconic images of Verne's own era.

As Alex Barrett notes, *Invention of Destruction*

*“...sets about recreating the look of the woodcut and steel-engraved images illustrating the published texts: here, etching lines are painted onto sets and superimposed over shots of the clashing sea to give them an authentic, hand-drawn look. Furthermore, the film combines all manner of tricks and effects – double exposures, painted animation, cut-out animation, stop-motion animation, puppets, miniatures, models, stylized matte-paintings, and who knows what else – with its live-action footage to create a seamless blend of startling, crisp, black-and-white material... The film's faithful recreation of the feel and look of Victorian illustrations... gives the film a tactile texture that would be impossible to create in our current CGI-dominated era. In fact, the film harks back to the days of Méliès and shares with the early pioneer a clear sense of wide-eyed wonder for the possibilities of cinematic fantasy.”*<sup>(1)</sup>

As the film's title implies, the narrative for *Invention of Destruction* was cobbled together from various stories by Jules Verne, but for the most part finds its inspiration in Verne's little known novel *Face au drapeau* (Facing The Flag, first published in 1879). This book predicted a future in which super powers would compete for weapons of mass destruction, and technology would be turned towards destructive ends. The film's narrative runs along those lines; wealthy industrialist Artigas (Miloslav Holub) owns and operates a killer submarine that roams the oceans from its headquarters inside a huge volcano. It looks for

boats to sink for treasure, reminiscent of Captain Nemo's exploits in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.

As the film opens, Artigas kidnaps the distinguished scientist Professor Roche (Arnošt Navrátil) and his assistant Simon Hart (Lubor Tokoš), giving them unlimited access to the latest equipment to create an explosive device with which Artigas can rule the world. Hart is suspicious, but Roche – an impractical idealist oblivious to Artigas's real aims – persists in working for the power-mad would-be dictator. Roche's daughter Jana (Jana Zatloukalová) is taken hostage when Artigas's submarine rams the *Amelie* (a ship on which she is a passenger), and Hart and Jana fall in love. Hart comes up with a plan to get news to the outside world, and eventually foils Artigas's plans.

Though released as a children's film in its English-language version, *Invention of Destruction* was originally marketed as a prestige art film. It screened at Expo 58 in Brussels, and won the Grand Prix at the Brussels International Film Festival<sup>(2)</sup>. André Bazin gave the film a rave review in *Cahiers du cinema*, and Alain Resnais named it one of the ten best films of 1958<sup>(3)</sup>. What gave the film its surreal and almost transcendent quality was Zeman's life long love of Verne, and his agility and skill in creating striking visual effects to bring Verne's stories to life.

As Zeman himself noted in a short film about *Invention of Destruction*, "Jules Verne was a dreamer. He was a dedicated follower of technology, but he saw it through his own eyes, and the eyes of his time. But with his vast imagination, he created a whole world of magical things imbued with a delightful naiveté, which charms us even today." His daughter Ludmila adds, "my father continued in this Vernean tradition. As a child, I remember I had all the books with those beautiful engravings. I really can't visualize the story any other way"<sup>(4)</sup>.



An entrancing combination of stop-motion animation, period engravings, and a whimsical sense of humor pervades the film. The flying machines are fantastic contraptions, and one even gets a glimpse of an early attempt at a motion picture camera which Artigas captures, which displays the fanciful newsreels, all accompanied by a haunting score by Zdeněk Liška. The addition by this distinguished Czech composer suits the flavor of the film, by turns forceful, melancholic, or nostalgic as the mood requires.

Perhaps the most commercially successful Czech film ever released in the West, in its Americanized version as *The Fabulous World of Jules Verne* was hailed by Pauline Kael as a "wonderful giddy science fantasy [which] sustains the Victorian tone, with its delight in the magic of science, that makes Verne seem so playfully archaic"<sup>(5)</sup>. Zeman's other films are equally marvelous in their use of period special effects and 19th century technology. But it is perhaps in *Invention of Destruction* that Zeman created his finest and most accessible film, now in the pantheon of the greatest hybrid animation/live action films ever made. *Invention of Destruction* is an imaginative delight, and a stunning personal achievement. Once seen, never forgotten.

From: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2015/cteq/vynalez-zkazny-karel-zeman/>

#### Notes:

1. Alex Barrett, "The Fabulous World of Jules Verne," *Experimental Conversations* 6 (Winter, 2010), <http://www.experimentalconversations.com/review/the-fabulous-world-of-jules-verne>
2. Peter Pišťanek, "Karel Zeman Génius animovaného filmu" [*Karel Zeman, Genius of the Animated Film*], *SME*, September 17, 2009, <http://kultura.sme.sk/c/5019919/karel-zeman-genius-animovaneho-filmu.html>.
3. Jean-Loup Bourget, (June 2000), "Le chaînon manquant: Karel Zeman ressuscité" [*The Missing Link: Karel Zeman Resurrected*], *Positif* (472): pp. 98–100. p.98.
4. *Proč Karel Zeman film natočil* [*Why Zeman Made the Film*], (video featurette). Prague: Karel Zeman Museum. Nov 6, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-n1519eEC0c>.
5. Pauline Kael, *5,001 Nights at The Movies* (New York: Holt, 1991), p. 179.