

TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM STUDY CENTER

WEDNESDAY

JULY 17, 2019

7 PM • WHITNEY
HUMANITIES CENTER

speed racer

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



The “demon on wheels” takes a lap through a formalist film fantasia in *SPEED RACER*, the Wachowskis' 2008 action comedy that's equal parts *BEN-HUR*, *MARIO KART*, *THE CASTLE OF CAGLIOSTRO*, and *THE WACKY RACES*. Love it or loathe it, this “poptimistic photo-anime” (in the words of the filmmakers) revs up Eric Thurm's rules for a successful anime adaptation: “First, get earnest. Second, get expressionist. Finally, get corny.”

The Speed Racer character took the wheel for the first time in the summer of '66 in the manga series *Mach GoGoGo*, which was followed a year later by a televised anime series. Like the 2008 film, *Mach GoGoGo* was a family enterprise with international influences. Series creator Tatsuo Yoshida based Speed on the racer Elvis played in *VIVA LAS VEGAS* (thus the pompadour), and Speed's tricked-out car was inspired by 007's gadget-packed Aston Martin in *GOLDFINGER*. Tatsuo's brother and creative partner Toyoharu said the series “was based strictly on our all-out adoration of America.” A dubbed version of the anime series arrived in America in 1967, where an ABC run was followed by years of syndication in the 1970s, and the series reached a new audience with an early 90s run on MTV.

Development of the live-action film adaptation began in earnest in 1992, but it took 16 years for it to reach screens. Early plans for the film had Johnny Depp as Speed Racer and Henry Rollins—and later Vince Vaughn—as Racer X. Directors attached to the project over the years included Julien Temple, Alfonso Cuarón, and music video director Hype Williams. Lana and Lilly Wachowski were brought aboard in 2006 by producer Joel Silver, who had worked with them on *V FOR VENDETTA* (for which they wrote the screenplay) and their blockbuster *MATRIX* trilogy. The Wachowskis considered Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Shia LaBeouf, and Zac Efron for the title role before selecting Emile Hirsch, while Kate Mara, Elisha Cuthbert, and Rose McGowan were in the running for Trixie, a role that ultimately went to Christina Ricci. Supporting actors in *SPEED RACER* range from Rain to Richard Roundtree, with noteworthy performances by Susan Sarandon and John Goodman (who brought heart to the roles of Mom and Pops) and Roger Allam as the villainous CEO of Royalton Industries. “The characters are broad and the narrative arcs are simple,” wrote *Slate*'s Chris Wade, “but the actors invest them with enough energy, humor and palpable sincerity to feel like they belong in the outsized world they inhabit.” Fans of the anime series should be alert for cameos by original dubbing artists Peter Fernandez (as an announcer for the first race) and Corinne Orr (announcing Speed's Grand Prix entry).

The Wachowskis' first high-def video production, *SPEED RACER* was shot almost entirely against greenscreen at Potsdam's Babelsberg Studios, creating what Richard Corliss—an early champion of the film—praised as a “part retro, part nextro, all-artificial syntho world.” The film had a \$120 million production budget plus \$80 million in marketing support, but it bombed badly, grossing less than \$94 million worldwide. Reasons for its commercial failure include a challenging release date—it was lost between the first *IRON MAN* and the fourth *INDIANA JONES* film—and a trailer that misled audiences to expect a dark superhero movie. The film's flamboyant aesthetics also alienated many early critics and viewers (Stephen Colbert called it “the classic story of boy meets seizure-inducing lights”), but as Corliss observed, “Not every avant-garde FX masterpiece receives instant audience validation.” “For me,” Lana Wachowski noted, “I always felt that whenever you had an aesthetic shift in what the dominant cultural aesthetic is, that movie or that piece of art is always attacked. People always hate it. When you assault a dominant aesthetic, usually people feel almost violent.” The Wachowskis accepted that challenge for *SPEED RACER*, with Lana stating, “Okay, we are going to assault every single modern aesthetic with this film.” Go, *SPEED RACER*, go!



DIRECTED BY LANA AND LILLY WACHOWSKI

SCREENPLAY BY LANA AND LILLY
WACHOWSKI BASED ON THE SERIES BY
TATSUO YOSHIDA

PRODUCED BY WARNER BROS.

(2008) 135 MINS.

STARRING EMILE HIRSCH, SUSAN
SARANDON, JOHN GOODMAN,
CHRISTINA RICCI, AND ROGER ALLAM

DID YOU KNOW: THE “M” ON THE HOOD OF SPEED RACER'S CAR IS A TRIBUTE TO JAPANESE FILM STAR TOSHIRO MIFUNE. IN JAPANESE VERSIONS OF SPEED RACER STORIES, SPEED'S FAMILY NAME IS MIFUNE, AND THE “M” IS THE EMBLEM OF MIFUNE MOTORS. (HIS GIVEN NAME IS GŌ, PUNNING THE ENGLISH WORD AND THE JAPANESE WORD FOR FIVE, A NOD TO HIS MACH FIVE RACE CAR.) TOSHIRO MIFUNE, INCIDENTALLY, PLAYED A RACE TEAM OWNER IN *GRAND PRIX*, RELEASED IN 1966, THE SAME YEAR THE SPEED RACER CHARACTER FIRST APPEARED IN PRINT.

NEXT UP: TREASURES ADJOURNS FOR THE MONTH OF AUGUST AND WILL RETURN FOR OUR SIXTH SEASON WITH A FULL SLATE OF 35MM FILM SCREENINGS IN THE FALL, INCLUDING ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS (**DO THE RIGHT THING** AT 30 ON SEPTEMBER 19, **BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID** AT 50 ON SEPTEMBER 27) AND AN ENTIRE SEASON OF FILMS DIRECTED BY WOMEN IN CELEBRATION OF THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF COEDUCATION AT YALE. IT ALL KICKS OFF WITH SALLY POTTER'S **ORLANDO** ON **SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 8 AT 2:00 PM.**