Top Ten Sci-Fi Tyrants

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This isn't really any kind of definitive top ten of geek dictators, it's just ten that happen to interest me. There are loads of glaring omissions, and there's nothing you can do about it, mwuhahaha….

10: General Zod – Superman 2 (1981)

"Why do you say these things to me – when you know that I will kill you for it?" The Emperor of planet Houston, wicked though he may have been, didn't really know what to do with his easily-won power. Once they'd pushed around some cheap hicks in the sticks and carved their own likenesses onto Mount Rushmore, there didn't seem much left for the super-villains to do but hang around the ruins of the Oval office idly threatening Lex Luthor and waiting for Superman to show up…but you gotta love that New Romantic styling. Flunkies: Ursa and Nod; Lex Luthor. Evil Acts: Killing astronauts for a laugh; ripping the cupola off the white-house; monument desecration.

9: Lord Humungus– Mad Max 2 (AUS 1982)

Kjell Nilsson's self-proclaimed "warrior of the wasteland" and "ayatollah of rock-and-roll-ah" was a formidable presence as the leader of the petrol- scavenging desert scum that besiege the oil-drilling good-guys in George Miller's superior post-apocalypse sequel. Former Olympic weight-lifter Nilsson retains an air of mystery under his face-plate, and the Humungus's adjurations to the settlers to surrender show him to be a keen psychologist as well as a car-sized bag of muscles. But ultimately Mel G and company abide rule No.1: Protect the fuel… Flunkies: Rag-tag collection of King's Road refugees c.1981 Evil Acts: Murder, rape, bad haircuts and lack of ecological sensibility.

8: Number Two – The Prisoner (UK TV, 1967)

Though played with varying quality and commitment by an impressive array of esteemed British acting talent, both male and female (No.2 was an equal-opportunities 'shift-work' position), the visible face of Patrick McGoohan's nebulous imprisoner will always be the lugubrious and irreplaceable Leo McKern, who was in charge of the psychedelic hot-seat in Fall Out, Once Upon a Time and the superb The Chimes of Big Ben.

No.2 was the amanuensis in absentia of the shadowy 'No.1'…or so we are made to believe… Flunkies: Big white beach balls and worldwide network of spies and double agents. Evil Acts: Kidnapping, psychological torture, brainwashing and lava lamps.

7: Rich Biff Tannen – Back To The Future Part II (1990)

Thomas F. Wilson was called upon to play so many incarnations and versions of Michael J. Fox's dreaded high-school enemy in Robert Zemeckis' paradoxical time-travel trilogy that he must have developed a nasty tic. But at least despicable school-bully Tannen got to live the high-life as a Howard Hughes type in Part II, when a future version of himself steals the trans-time DeLorean and hands young, deadbeat Biff fifty years of 100% guaranteed racing tips. Flunkies: Standard-issue goons just looking for a reason to throw you into an alley. Evil Acts: Killing Marty McFly's dad and marrying his mum; Hitting Marty's mum and forcing huge tits on her; re-employing Elvis Presley's interior decorator.

6: Emperor Palpatine – Return Of The Jedi (1983)/Revenge Of The Sith (2005)

One of the coolest things about Revenge Of The Sith was getting to see the Emperor again, exactly as he looked and sounded in his impressive debut/finale in 1983's Return Of The Jedi. So enveloping was Ian McDiarmid's make-up in Sith and Jedi that the performance between the two films was seamless. Better yet, the emperor's character is far richer in Sith, where we got a close-up view of the seductive and surprisingly patient evil of the aspiring Palpatine. McDiarmid's performance – perfectly-pitched between sci-fi and horror – is multi-levelled and one of the main reasons that Sith very nearly washes away the foul taste of the preceding prequels. But strong we would have to be in the force for that to really happen… Flunkies: Impressionable young Siths; millions of short-sighted robot/clone troopers; all those weird-eyed 'yes-men' in the senate. Evil Acts: Having the 'younglings' killed; not telling us what that weird, motile black mark is on his right cheek in Jedi (love bite being glossed over by ILM?).

5: Vilos Cohaagen – Total Recall (1990)

"But I thought – " "You thought?!? I don't give you enough information to think!" Fluffy country-singer and all-round nice-guy Ronnie Cox polished up his dark side for Paul Verhoven's gruesome sci-fi nightmares Robocop (1987) and Total Recall. Though despatched by Murphy in Robocop's now-classic ending, Cox returns nastier than ever as a Martian industrialist tyrant pitting his wits against revenant secret-agent Schwarzenegger in the O'Bannon/Shussett adaptation of Philip K. Dick's deliciously mind-bending short-story We Can Remember It For You Wholesale. Flunkies: arch-nasty Michael Ironside; miscellaneous goons who couldn't hit a barn door with an ICBM. Evil Acts: Wanton asphyxiation (of mutants, colonists and tropical fish); anti-feminist brainwashing; reminding you that you're an asshole in real-life.

4: Kesslee – Tank Girl (1995)

"Shoving a small, innocent child down the pipe and then slowly letting her drown…is that wrong?" Rachel Talalay's under-regarded and very amusing comic-strip adaptation gives Malcolm McDowell yet another chance to chew the scenery as a psychotic nasty. Similarly profiled actors like Brad Dourif and Michael Ironside have come a cropper trying to break their 'evil' typecasting, whereas McDowell did so very successfully, Cushing- style, as H.G. Wells in Nick Meyer's Time After Time (1979). But having proved he can do 'nice', McDowell returns to more familiar territory in a scene-stealing turn as the head of the super-governmental Water And Power in Lori Petty's whimsical post-apocalypse world… Flunkies: More templated goons and Robocop-style yuppie acolytes. Evil Acts: Child-dunking; wanton dehydration of slacking minions.

3: Ming The Merciless – Flash Gordon (1980)

Though 1930s version Charles Middleton is clearly the visual template for Max Von Sydow's Ming in Mike Hodges' delightful 1980 fantasy romp, the acclaimed Swedish actor makes the role his own as easily as Ming collects planets and slave-girls. On his must-have Flash Gordon commentary, Brian Blessed says (well, bellows) that it was his suggestion that Von Sydow base his performance around his hands, and indeed the emperor does love to limber up his digits in anticipation of his next evil deed… Flunkies: Klytus the Perverse; pig-men that can't see straight; floating art-deco globes. Evil Acts: Destroying planets; gassing Flash; coercing Dale; putting the Bore Worms on his daughter; re-employing Elvis Presley's interior decorator (what is it with tyrants…?).

2: Baron Vladimir Harkonnen – Dune (1984)

David Lynch’s conception of evil as sadomasochistic, perverse, drug-dependant and tyrannical is most famously represented in his output by Dennis Hopper’s amyl-nitrate-chugging Frank Booth in Blue Velvet (1986).However, in my opinion, Kenneth Macmillan’s intensely evil turn as Frank Herbert’s space-tyrant, the ‘floating fat man’, is hard to beat. So fat is the ruler of House Harkonnen that he needs a gravity-defying ‘suspensor’ in order to move about. Like being covered in pus isn’t enough, the Baron also likes to float up a bit and take a shower in what looks like slime. Flunkies: A very bad actor (Sting); men with green gas in their helmets; traitorous Dean Stockwell; The Beast Rabban; the Spacing Guild. Evil Acts: Kinky steam-showers with his own nephew; pulling innocent slaves’ heart-plugs out for a laugh and showering in their blood; daring to drool in the lovely face of Francesca Annis (though he’s not alone in drooling over her in Dune).

1: Big Brother – Nineteen-Eighty-Four (1984)

We shall turn you into gas and pour you into the stratosphere… Nasty. Even the Baron Harkonnen will let you muse your own thoughts while he’s putting your heart-plug in and addicting you to the milk of a feral cat, but that’s not good enough for the titular figurehead of George Orwell’s hyper- dystopia, who wants your utter, inner allegiance…before he blows your brains out as a traitor. Using Room 101 to disassociate dissenters emotionally from their beloved collaborators (by forcing them to admit that they are willing to transfer their own unbearable torture onto the ones they love most, in order to be spared it) is arguably the most evil bit of despotism in the sci-fi world. Flunkies: Rats; secret police; spies in the bushes (and everywhere else); telescreens; you (since you are bound to betray your hatred of him in some way eventually). Evil Acts: The total

murder of the human spirit (shortly followed by the body hosting it); the worst torture imaginable; rewriting of history on an ad hoc, daily basis, to suit the current facts; serving very oily gin in the canteen at the Ministry Of Truth.

Honourable mentions: Deacon (Waterworld, 1995); King Koopa (Dennis Hopper again, in Super Mario Brothers, 1993); Princess Ardala (Buck Rogers In The Twenty-Fifth Century, US TV 1979); Servalan (Blake’s 7, UK TV 1977-81); Davros (Doctor Who, UK TV, 1975 – ?); Sauron (Lord Of The Rings, 2001-03); Thulsa Doom (Conan The Barbarian, 1981); Queen Taramis (Conan The Destroyer, 1984); Padishah Emperor Shaddam IV (Dune, 1984); Imperious Leader (Battlestar Galactica, US TV 1978).