

HANDCRAFTED FABULOUSNESS

Czech director/screenwriter/special effects artist **Karel Zeman** was responsible for some of the most imaginative and amazing-looking live action/stop-motion movies ever made, influencing the likes of Terry Gilliam, Jan Švankmajer and Tim Burton. With films including *The Stolen Airship* (1967) and *On the Comet* (1970), Zeman brought to the screen fantastic worlds via the combination of myriads of practical effects methods (stop-motion animation, cel animation, split-screens, forced perspective, matte paintings, multi-plane cut-out shots, props, double exposure, stylised trompe l'oeil scenery, miniatures and more), using these effects and camera tricks - techniques harking back to the very dawn of filmmaking - to craft mind-boggling entertainments that still have the power to astound viewers today.

Second Run, a UK-based film distribution company dedicated to releasing rare and important classic and contemporary films from all over the world, boasts a catalogue that encompasses works from Ivan Passer, Yorgos Lanthimos, Andrzej Wajda and Miloš Forman, plus 4K restorations of Karel Zeman's most beloved achievements: *Journey to the Beginning of Time*, *Invention for Destruction* & *The Fabulous Baron Munchausen*. Zeman fan **Charlotte Quist** immerses herself in these three wildly inventive mixed-media extravaganzas...

JOURNEY TO THE BEGINNING OF TIME (1955)

Written by J.A. Novotný and Karel Zeman, directed by Karel Zeman, and starring Vladimír Bejval, Petr Herrmann, Josef Lukás and Zdeněk Hustak, this movie (original title: *Cesta do pravěku*) follows the adventures of four boys who, whilst travelling down a river in their small boat, gradually move back in time, encountering the flora, fauna and landscapes of Earth's various prehistoric periods...

I like Zeman's use of the young characters' child logic to launch the story: after they happen upon the fossil of a Trilobite, the four friends - Jirka, Tonik, Petr and Jenda - simply decide that they really want to see prehistoric animals alive and in the flesh, so they row their boat through a cave and matter-of-factly start a trip back through the ages! Sweet!

The foursome first row through Ice Age waters, then pull the boat over a section of frozen river to make camp and eat jam sandwiches. The next day they travel in the open river again... and they see a Mammoth standing on the river bank, amongst fir trees! Zeman, as is his way, uses a mix of techniques here with the Mammoth, including stop-motion, a live action puppet and forced perspective.

The friends discover cave paintings, an axe, and other signs of early man, and Tonik falls into a pit at one point. For this section of the film Zeman includes stop-motion ducks and bison, and shows us stop-motion Woolly Rhinos fighting each other! When one of these rhinos wades into the water, a live action puppet is used. The film really looks fantastic, with Zeman taking inspiration from the work of another

Czech creative super-talent: the paleoartist Zdeněk Burian.

Reaching the hotter Tertiary Period (this period has subsequently been officially replaced by the Paleogene and Neogene periods), we get to see stop-motion Flamingos and Vultures. Other animals on view here include Gazelles, a Deinotherium (a type of prehistoric elephant-like mammal with tusks growing from its lower jaw) and a Sabre-Toothed Tiger (Smilodon). Zeman uses cel animation for some of these shots of the gazelles, the Smilodon and some Giraffes: whatever he thinks would work best, Zeman uses that technique!

There's a nicely-done scene with model Crocodiles, and a cool shot of a 2D animated Leopard lurking in a tree above Jirka, which is intercut with footage of a real Leopard. Zeman really delivers a lot of Tertiary fauna for our enjoyment here, including a look at an Uintatherium: a megafauna beast with a head topped by a bunch of bony knobs!

There's a sequence with a Terror Bird that includes amazing shots of it running really fast through foliage, chasing one of the boys. Very dramatic!

The friends now drift into the Mesozoic Era, where Pteranodons flap and swoop overhead, and the flora is composed of Araucaria trees and palm-like Cycads. Now in the age of the dinosaurs, the pals see a Styracosaurus and a Stegosaurus. A shot showing a grazing hadrosaur (a species that would previously have been referred to as a Trachodon before being re-classed as an Anatosaurus) standing on the river's edge as the kids look on whilst continuing to travel down the river, is accomplished using forced perspective. It's nicely done.

Another hadrosaur is depicted wallowing in the river, munching on plants, and is created for the film as a puppet dinosaur, with puppet kids in the background.

For shots of a Brontosaurus, Zeman uses a mix of techniques that includes the use of a very Burian-esque painting for the sauropod's body (in a shot where only the creature's neck and head move). Zeman also utilises a puppet model Brontosaurus when it is in the water, close to the boys, who are again portrayed in the scene by model kids in a model boat.

Viewers are treated to a clash between a Stegosaurus and a Ceratosaurus, with the herbivore scoring some damaging, bloody hits on the predator's chest with its thagomizers (tail-spikes), forcing the Ceratosaurus to leave, but the Stegosaurus dies from its own wounds. The boys go to the dead dino, which is a full-size model, and Jirka climbs over its back. Interestingly, in a documentary made about Zeman's effects techniques, a very ingenious forced perspective set-up is shown to explain how the dead Stegosaurus scene in this film was accomplished, yet in the movie itself the deceased Stegosaurus is clearly a big prop dinosaur model. Was the trick effects explanation depicted in the documentary included as a way to keep Zeman's movie magic a mystery, or did Zeman just fancy trying a new, cleverer way to recreate the scene when the opportunity arose during the making of the doc? Who knows?

Forced to make a raft when their boat is wrecked, the pals continue their passage along the river, fetching up in the swampy Carboniferous Period. Festooned with ferns, horsetails and too much collapsed foliage, the environment prohibits the use of the raft, and the kids resort to traipsing through the marshy surroundings. The whole Carboniferous environment is achieved through the use of miniatures and atmospherically decked out, waterlogged sets. The animals encountered here include a Meganeura (the large dragonfly is brought to the screen via the use of a full-size articulated model and a stop-motion puppet for the flying shots,) plus amphibians (on-set models) like the pesky frog/newt critter that loiters near the journal the boys had momentarily lost.

The barren rocks of the Silurian Period are reached next. The lads trudge to the edge of an ocean and they find a Trilobite: the creature in the fossil that inspired the trek into the primordial past in the first place. Such a nice touch.

Journey to the Beginning of Time is utterly charming and a delight to watch from start to finish. It's a very magical film, almost like a Czech *Swallows and Amazons* merged *The Lost World*! The film is made with real care, like a documentary in some ways, allowing the child actors to perform

naturalistically, and treating the creatures like animals rather than aggressive monsters.

Zeman definitely makes the most of the river setting, using the far bank of the river as the edge of his split-screen shots. He also uses painted backdrops that were employed at the shooting locations, suspended in the air so that they seem to be the scenery on the opposite bank of the river: this is a simple and clever alternative to matte paintings because they allow the child actors to cross in front of the painted backdrops.

Employing hand puppets, mechanical creature heads, cut-out 2D animations, stop-motion puppets, in-camera FX, miniatures and more, Zeman succeeded in making a film that is like a Zdeněk Burian illustrated book brought to colourful life. What a joy.

The region-free Blu-ray from Second Run that I watched was a 4K restoration of the film from original materials. Its extras include the alternative English-dubbed US version by William Cayton, a new filmed appreciation by filmmaker and animator John Stevenson (*Kung Fu Panda*), an image gallery, a 20-page booklet featuring a new

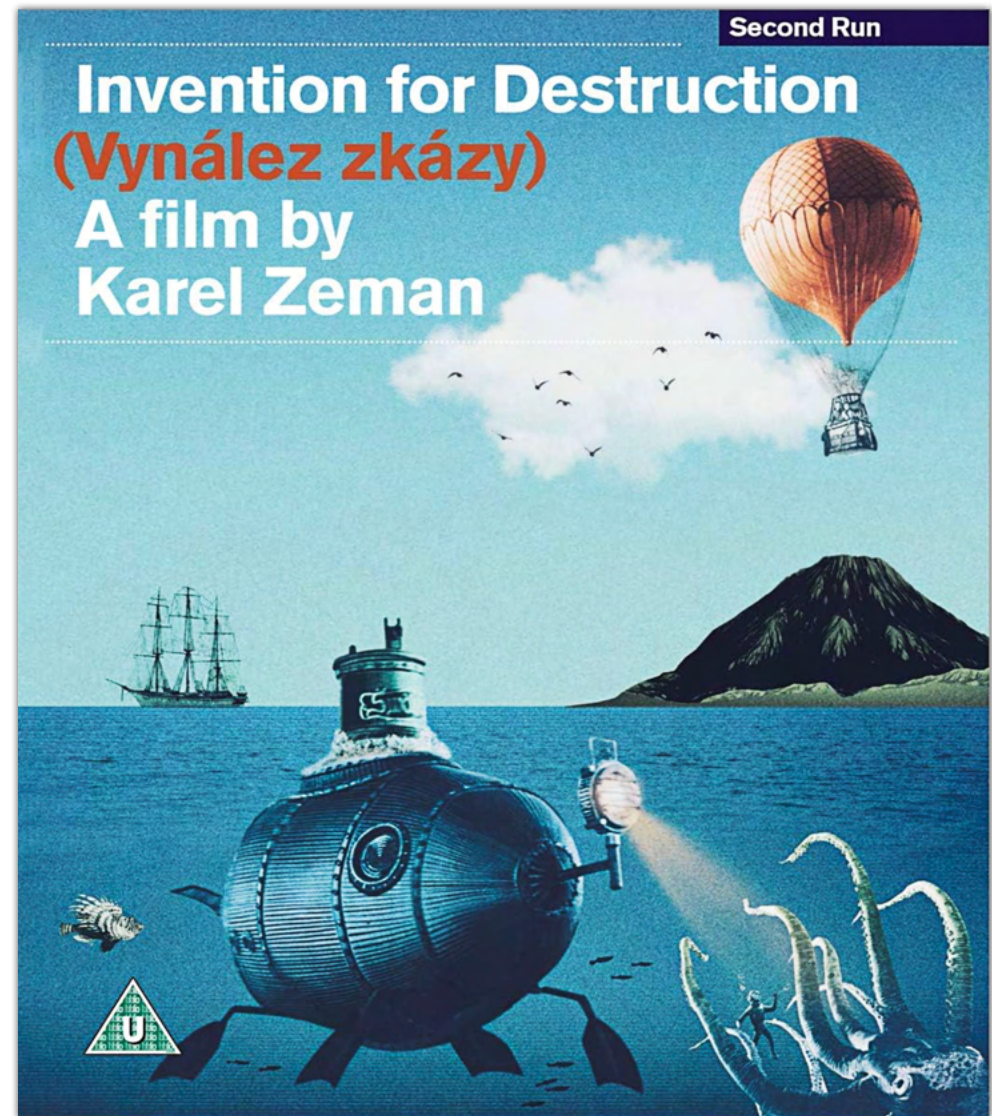
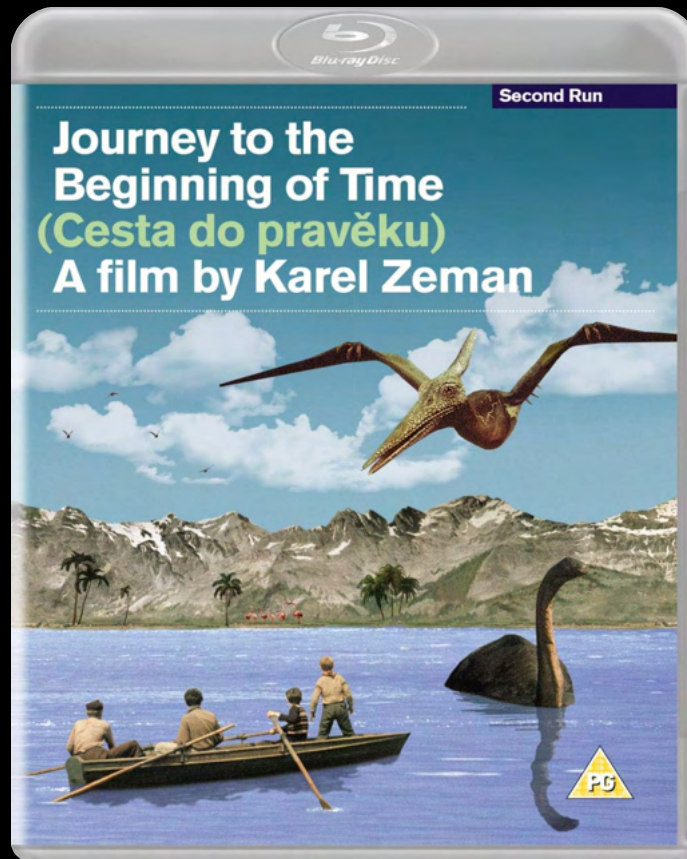
essay by film historian Michael Brooke, and a new, improved English subtitle translation.

INVENTION FOR DESTRUCTION (1958)

Starring Lubor Tokoš, Arnošt Navrátil, František Šlégr, Miloslav Holub, Václav Kyzlink and Jana Zatloukalová, the writers for this film were František Hrubín and Karel Zeman. The design and direction was, of course, by Karel Zeman.

Simon Hart (Tokoš) is an engineer and the assistant to Professor Roch (Navrátil), a scientist researching a new energy source. When Hart and Roch fall into the hands of Count d'Artigas, Hart realises that the Count intends to encourage Roch, who is unaware that d'Artigas is in fact the dangerous leader of a gang of pirate submariners, to continue his experiments within the isolated confines of an extinct volcanic isle called Black Cup. If the prof succeeds in developing this advanced type of matter, Hart knows that the Count will devise a weapon of mass destruction capable of threatening the world powers... but can Hart prevent this dire scenario from coming to pass?

Based on the novel *Facing the Flag* by



Jules Verne, Zeman’s *Invention for Destruction* (original title: *Vynález zkázy*), also known as *The Fabulous World of Jules Verne*, still looks as incredible today as it did when it was first released. Zeman, who adored Jules Verne, includes elements and imagery from other Verne works, including a guest appearance by Robur’s airship the Albatross from the novel *Robur the Conqueror*, and lots of undersea sequences very reminiscent of ideas and situations found in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*.

What really sticks in the memory with *Invention for Destruction* is its graphic style, which harks back to the look of the kind of wood engraving illustrations used within the pages of old editions of Verne’s books. 3D sets, 2D cut-outs, miniatures, matte paintings and various objects and props are overlaid with lines that give everything the look of a ‘printed’ artefact, and this includes shots of ocean waves, which also have the printed line effects superimposed over them! Some elements in a scene, such as the drapes of a four poster bed, are flat on-set graphics added to other 3D set elements, further adding to the illustrative vibe of the production. Throughout the film Zeman tries his best not to trick viewers into thinking what they’re seeing is real, rather he does his best to encourage viewers to embrace the notion that what they’re watching is a series of book illustrations come to life.

As with other Zeman films, it can be entertaining just trying to fathom which images are 3D and which are 2D graphics? Or are they 2D graphics pretending to be 3D?! Zeman crams his sequences with varied techniques: in underwater scenes 3D stop-motion fish, real shots of fish and jellyfish, and 2D animated fish vie with each other for screen time. Ships sometimes look like flat illustrations and sometimes they look like miniatures. Up in the skies, flocks of seagulls are added to shots via double exposure, and deliciously-stylised scenes of steampunk-style vehicles feature characters that are sometimes photographs of people, or actual actors, or stop-motion puppets, depending upon the requirements of each particular shot.

Amongst all these wonderful scenes, which endlessly strive to be living etchings, some of the highlights include a stop-motion chase between Verne-style submarines, shots of stop-motion pirates in diving suits tramping across the sea floor, and an impressive stop-motion octopus that rises from an undersea crevice to launch its attack against the pirate-divers. This octopus is a marvellous-looking tentacled terror! Oh, and I also adore the peddle-powered underwater bike-devices used by the pirates when they’re zipping about in their diving gear. Very charming! There’s a

stop-motion shark to look out for too! Ending with an act of self-sacrifice, *Invention for Destruction* takes time out to warn against the threat of atomic bomb-style weapons getting into the wrong hands, though the film is mainly a gorgeous, fantastical visual feast striving to constantly entertain viewers with its intermixing of stylised techniques and trick effects.

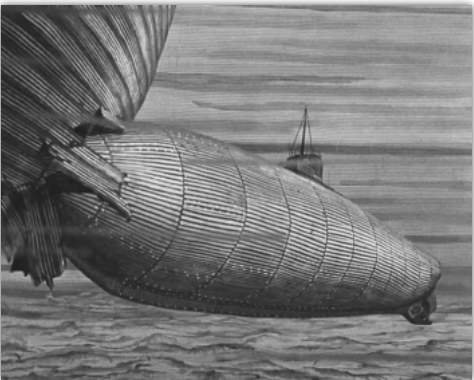
Second Run’s Blu-ray boasts a brand new 4K restoration of the film, taken from original materials. It also includes *The Fabulous World of Jules Verne*, which is the alternative feature-length English-dubbed version of the feature film, there’s a booklet by film critic and historian James Oliver, a new filmed appreciation of the movie by filmmaker and animator John Stevenson, various featurettes, plus there are two of Zeman’s short films to enjoy: *Inspiration* (1949) and *King Lavra* (1950).

THE FABULOUS BARON MUNCHAUSEN (1962)

Directed by Karel Zeman, *The Fabulous Baron Munchausen* (original title: *Baron Prasil*) was written by Karel Zeman, Josef Kainar and Jiří Brdečka, and was adapted from works by Gottfried August Bürger and Gustave Doré. Starring Miloš Kopecký, Jana Brejchová, Rudolf Jelínek, Rudolf Hrušínský, Karel Höger and Eduard Kohout, the film benefits from a fine music score by Zdeněk Liška.

With this film Karel Zeman, who was frequently described as the ‘Czech Méliès’, presents us with his interpretation of the escapades of Baron Munchausen, ingeniously inserting a 20th century astronaut into the mix, thus allowing the production to juxtapose the space age with the larger than life, ornate and fantastical worlds that Baron Munchausen preferred to inhabit.

Zeman begins his film with a brief and delightful ‘history of flight’ montage, ending it with a shot of a spacecraft rocketing to the moon. Up on the lunar surface, we follow an astronaut as he discovers footprints that lead him to a group of characters who’ve beat him to the moon: Jules Verne’s Gun Club members (from the book *From the Earth to the Moon*), Cyrano de Bergerac, and Baron Munchausen, who is riding his horse! Believing the astronaut, who is called Tony, to be a moonman, the Baron decides to take him to Earth in order to introduce the moonman to the ways of mankind. Baron Munchausen’s spacefaring mode of transport turns out to be a sailboat pulled by stop-motion winged horses: these equine creatures are handsomely designed and are a mix of toy-like steeds of varying degrees of complexity, with one winged horse only having simple pieces of wood for legs. As they travel through



Invention for Destruction (1958)

space, the Baron, who is obviously a believer in the fantastic, observes that this moonman, Tony, insists on talking about science and technology.

On reaching Earth the Baron takes Tony to meet the Great Sultan of Turkey, which indicates that Munchausen has been flying through time as well as space, or at least his fecund imagination has fashioned the reality on Earth to coincide with what he wants to present to the ‘moonman’. After the Baron and Tony meet the captive Princess Bianca Di Castello Nero, the threesome are swept up in various adventures and escapades, with both Munchausen and Tony competing for Bianca’s romantic attentions...

Zeman had previously fashioned *Journey to the Beginning of Time* to resemble the paleoart of Zdeněk Burian, he’d filmed *Invention for Destruction* to mimic the line-engraved style of ink illustrations from classic novels, and with *The Fabulous Baron Munchausen* he uses all of his clever ideas and cinematic tricks to craft a production that echoes the visual style of the work of the 19th-century French painter, engraver, sculptor and book illustrator Gustave Doré.

Sometimes the visuals in *The Fabulous Baron Munchausen* are almost entirely composed of lovingly rendered illustrations and 2D cartoon work, whilst other shots are



a merging of live action and stylised props and any number of other stylistic combinations. One impressive moment involves multi-plane shots of cut-out illustrations of ornate doorways through which the camera passes.

Zeman approaches the events with a light, humorous touch. The Baron, for instance, is a master of the ‘language of international diplomacy’, which proves to be an indecipherable, silly bunch of noises that other important people, like the Great Sultan, seem to understand. Zdeněk Liška’s music perfectly matches the mood of each scene, so the quirkiness factor of the score rises during the funnier and more ridiculous moments.

The film is overflowing with delectable details and memorable sequences... There’s a days-long horseback chase through a landscape of illustrated topography. There’s a face-off between the protagonists (on a Dutch merchant ship) and the Turkish Navy, which involves Munchausen getting the whole Dutch crew to smoke pipes and blow the clouds of Turkish tobacco smoke into the air... because the merchant ship will then become invisible to the Turks who, it seems, are unable to see through smoke produced by their own-brand tobacco! There’s the famous flying-on-a-cannonball stunt that Munchausen employs so that he can check out enemy positions for his friend in a fortress!

After the Dutch merchant ship sinks, everyone takes to a pair of lifeboats, with Baron Munchausen, some of the crew, and Princess Bianca finding themselves together in one of the craft. The Baron says to himself that he wishes the Princess, who is sleeping next to him, could understand his fabulous world, so it’s as if the Baron himself, whether voluntarily or not, conjures up the exotic animals that now appear in the nighttime seascape. This is a scrumptiously imaginative scene, with the menagerie of curious creatures travelling through the water and the sky: there’s a stop-motion sea serpent glimpsed in the distance, there’s a flying dragon and an animated strange-snouted winged critter, there’s a couple of live action aquatic finned monster puppets (that look especially good moving through the water), there’s a stop-motion flying fish-thing, and there’s an animated arachnid creature that walks across the surface of the sea on the horizon. Finally, a humongous, large-mouthed fish swims up and swallows the lifeboat. Inside the beast, the Dutch crewmen row the lifeboat across a lagoon in the fish’s belly, over to a shipwrecked vessel, where they encounter other mariners who’d been gulped down by the piscine peril sometime in the past.

The great fish (depicted on-screen via the use of a generously-sized prop, a

stop-motion puppet, and as 2D drawings) travels the seas of the world - and the colour of the sea always matches its name, so the waters of the Black Sea are black, and the Red Sea’s waters are, of course, red! As a lot of time is spent traversing the globe within the guts of the fish, the Baron uses this interval as an opportunity to try and woo the Princess, and they do seem to grow closer, but this all comes to an end when the fish is harpooned and all the characters meet up again in the outside world, with the Princess immediately becoming beguiled again by Tony, who spends his time attempting to build a steam-powered vessel on a barren stretch of shoreline.

The Baron observes that the Princess has, for reasons he can’t really fathom, switched her affections back to the science-minded ‘moonman’, but his musings are cut short when he is carried aloft by a great Roc (brought to the screen as a fine-looking stop-motion puppet). The unflappable nature of the Baron is very appealing in this film, and it is illustrated well here, as Munchausen is shown simply sitting in the massive talons of the giant bird, smoking his pipe, quite unflustered by the whole affair!

Realising that he needs to get back to the others, the Baron finally jumps from the Roc’s clutches into the ocean below, immediately acquiring the services of a flipper-footed horse to carry him through the water! When the Baron ignores the attentions of a mermaid she turns into a fanciful shark, and when he travels into the mouth of a gargantuan fish he simply exits through the mouth of the head at the opposite end of the fish-creature’s body! What a wonderful undersea interlude!

The final act of the film has the characters staying at a besieged fortress, where Tony gets arrested for stealing all the gunpowder,

but the Baron comes to his aid, igniting a gunpowder-filled well, causing an explosion that catapults Tony, Bianca and the Baron all the way up to the moon for the rather endearing ending in which Bianca, wearing a retro-futuristic spacesuit, clutches a bunch of flowers as she stands with Tony and his fellow astronauts.

As I have no doubt said many times in these reviews: the appealingly imaginative artifice of the visuals, continually switching between effects techniques, is a constant joy to behold. Zeman, as usual, uses split-screens masterfully: it’s a simple effect he always ensured looked amazing. With his use of drawings of architecture and landscapes, shots of billowing clouds created by dropping dyes into water, colour-tinted footage, and lots of other scenes and shots that involve so many techniques that you cannot work out quite how they were achieved with a single viewing, Zeman utilised his prodigious imagination, just like the Baron, to conjure up a unique and magical movie world that, like many of his other productions, transcended borders, allowing the film to be lauded and appreciated internationally.

The Blu-ray from Second Run features a new 4K restoration of the film. It also includes (as a Blu-ray exclusive) the feature-length documentary *Film Adventurer Karel Zeman* (2015), which looks at the life, work and influence of Zeman, with contributions from Tim Burton, Terry Gilliam, Kôji Yamamura and others. *Baron Munchausen: Facts and Fibs* (2017) is a new and exclusive filmed appreciation of *The Fabulous Baron Munchausen* by the writer, editor and film historian Michael Brooke. Plus there are various featurettes (*The Birth of a Film Legend*, *Why Zeman Made the Film*, etc), and there’s a 16-page booklet featuring a new essay on the film by critic and journalist Graham Williamson. ●



The Fabulous Baron Munchausen (1962)