

Lincroft-Holmdel Science Fiction Club
Club Notice - 5/29/87 -- Vol. 5, No. 46

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are on Wednesdays at noon.

LZ meetings are in LZ 3A-206; MT meetings are in MT 4A-235.

_D_A_T_E

_T_O_P_I_C

- 06/03 LZ: SCHISMATRIX by Bruce Sterling (Human Transformations)
06/17 MT: THIS IMMORTAL by Roger Zelzny
06/24 LZ: MAROONED IN REALTIME by Vernor Vinge (Time Travel)
07/08 MT: FOOTFALL by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle
07/15 LZ: TITAN by John Varley (Megalomania) (in 1B-205)
08/05 LZ: The BERSERKER books by Fred Saberhagen (A/I)
08/26 LZ: ?
09/16 LZ: THE UPLIFT WAR by David Brin (Future Histories)

HO Chair: John Jetzt HO 1E-525 834-1563
LZ Chair: Rob Mitchell LZ 1B-306 576-6106
MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3E-433 957-5619
HO Librarian: Tim Schroeder HO 3M-420 949-5866
LZ Librarian: Lance Larsen LZ 3L-312 576-2068
MT Librarian: Bruce Szablak MT 4C-418 957-5868
Jill-of-all-trades: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 957-2070
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1. SCHISMATRIX is one of the best hard-science SF novels of the last five years. Written by the Dean of the Cyber-punks, Bruce Sterling, it combines transformational biocybetechnology with space colonies and industrial espionage. Although Sterling is not the stylist Gibson is, he throws off more ideas per page than most writers have in an entire book as well as an interesting plot and coherent characters. [-dls]

So, on June 3, the Tin Lizzies will be discussed this novel (and undoubtedly cyberpunkism in general). Join them for what will certainly be an interesting meeting. [-ecl]

2. People come to me time after time with the same complaint. They don't understand the universe. This is, of course, unfortunate, since the universe is one of the more beautiful things that we have to play with in life and it is closely associated with another favorite toy, reality. It seems these days few people

understand the nature of the universe and as a result many of you do not make full use of it. That could be a good thing, I guess. If you did you would probably spend too much of your time doing math, fighting the square dance conspiracy, and watching science fiction movies, like I do. If public response is good, however, I

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may give some rudimentary lessons from UNIVERSE 101 right here in the notice.

Someone asked me last week how long ago did the dinosaurs die out? My reply was 65,000,000 years. Well, he knew that, he really wanted to know how long 65,000,000 years is. I told him to say "tiger." He did. I told him that if the 65,000,000 years since the dinosaurs died out were shrunk down to a single year--uniformly, of course--then a year would shrink down to the length of time it took him to say "tiger." He thought about that for a moment or two and brightened up. You should see how grateful these people are to have a piece of truth like that. Someone else was having some problems with how far away the sun was. He knew it was 93 million miles or just about 500 light-seconds. (It is amazing how many people think of that as 8 light-minutes and a little over, when there is a nice round number for it.) But how far is that really? At 55 miles per hour that is just 192 years and nine months away, assuming you don't stop and eat and that you have reasonable roads.

3. Monday, May 25, was the tenth anniversary of the opening of STAR WARS. In honor of this event, we have a special commentary by the inimitable Mark Leeper. [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
MT 3E-433 957-5619
...mtgzz!leeper

THE ISLAND WORLDS
by Eric Kotani and John Maddox Roberts
A Book Review by Dale Skran
*** SPOILER ***

The cover has a quote from Charles Sheffield that "Niven and Pournelle should start looking over their shoulders," and indeed they should. Kotani and Roberts have produced the best Baen book I've read. In the past Baen has published a large number of hard SF books with good premises but poor execution and editing. TTTThhhheeee IIIssssllllaaaannnndddd WWWWoooorrrrlllldddssss breaks that trend. Lacking the sheer writing power to compete with the Gibsons, Swanwicks, and Sterlings, Kotani and Roberts have produced a refreshing new novel on about the level of Walter Jon Williams HHHHaaaarrrrdddddwwwwiiiiirrrreeeedddd. However, while HHHHaaaarrrrdddddwwwwiiiiirrrreeeedddd seems directly derived from NNNNeeeeeuuurrrroooooommmmaaaannnnccceeeerrrr, TTTThhhheeee IIIssssllllaaaannnndddd WWWWoooorrrrlllldddssss breaks new ground.

Kotani and Roberts ask (and answer) the question "What would really happen when space gets industrialized?" The answer isn't pretty, but I found it believable. Economic struggle, followed by political struggle, followed by open war between Earth and the colonies, followed by a brief

"peace," followed by another war, and so on. The Earth isn't room enough, and neither is the solar system. A lot of O'Neill's utopian space cylinders are built, and a lot of them get blown to shreds once the fighting starts.

TTTTThhhheeee IIIsssllllaaaannndddd WWWoooorrrlllldddssss suffers from the characterization problem of

SSSSccchhhhhiiiiisssmmmmaaaatttrrrriiiiixxxx, namely that the main character ages several years in between paragraphs in the middle of the book, avoiding the need to depict detailed character evolution. Also, Kotani and Roberts throw in some sci-fi mumbo-jumbo at the end that, like the matter transporter in FFFrrroooooonntttteeeerrraaaa, detracts from the overall high level of realism. Fortunately, (and as was not the case in FFFrrroooooonntttteeeerrraaaa) the mumbo-jumbo in TTTThhhheeee IIIsssllllaaaannndddd

WWWoooorrrlllldddssss doesn't affect the plot significantly.

Without going into details, the romantic aspects of TTTThhhheeee IIIsssllllaaaannndddd WWWoooorrrlllldddssss are many rungs above the ka-ka produced by Bova in his detestable PPPrrriiiiivvvvaaattteeeeeerrrrssss. On about page 249, a woman says to the main character, "This time, try not to breathe through your nose so much." You get the idea.

When the book ends, the space colonists are preparing to launch the first of many interseller arks, having realized that another war with Earth is inevitable, and will be more destructive than the recent one. The reader is left with a frightening and quite probably realistic realization of the sheer magnitude and difficulty that the colonization of space entails. We shall all die in this effort, one way or another, as will our children, and their children, and theirs. But there will come a generation closer to us than that of Columbus, which, if we have worked hard, planned well, and been very very lucky, will reach out for the stars.

Cook's Books
A Series of Micro-Reviews
By Dale Skran

At one point I reviewed the "Black Company" fantasy series by Glen Cook. The books include TTTThhhheeee BBBBllllaaaccckkkk CCCCooommmppppaaannnyyy,

SSSShhhhhaaaaddddooowwwwssss LLLLiiiiinnnnggggeeeerrrr, and TTTThhhheeee

WWWWhhhhiittteeee RRRRooossseeee. The short summary is Vietnam War meets sword & sorcery. I call it "dark fantasy" to distinguish it from works like TTTThhhheeee FFFFaaaaccceeee iiiinnn ttthhhheeee FFFFrrroosssttt and TTTThhhheeee WWWWiiiizzzaarrrrddd ooooffff OOOOzzzz, both of which are essentially children's tales. By mixing in large dose of realistic war story with grim magic and plain words, Cook keeps the pages turning.

Now that Cook is better known, he has gotten some of his earlier works published. According to discussions I've had with him at conventions, he wrote about ten books before getting anything published, but once he started selling, they all sold, giving him the appearance of enormous productivity. One such work is the "Dread Empire" series, consisting of AAAA SSSShhhhaaaaddddooowwww ooooffff AAAAIIIIII NNNNiiiiigggghhhhttt FFFFaaaalllllliiiiinnnngggg, OOOOcccttttoooobbbbeeeerrrr""ssss BBBBaaabbbbyyy, AAAAIIIIII DDDDaarrkkkknnneeeesssssss MMMMeeeettt,,, and the new RRRReeeeaapppp ttthhhheeee EEEEaaaasssttt WWWWiiiiinnndddd (available from TOR books for \$2.95). I believe the first three books of this series were written before the Black Company stories, and they seem less polished. They chronicle the centuries long history of warfare between a Roman Empire style Oriental "Dread Empire" and European feudal states on its borders. Cook's major contribution is that he has thought through how magic would be used in warfare. RRRReeeeaapppp ttthhhheeee EEEEaaaasssttt WWWWiiiiinnndddd is a treatise on how to use zombie armies against living men.

None of Cook's books are Hugo material, but they are a lot more interesting than TTTThhhheeee SSSSwwwoorrrrrddd ooooffff SSSShhhhaaa----nnnnaaaa----nnnnaaaa and other "Lord of the Rings" imitations.

What's So Good about STAR WARS?
Film commentary by Mark R. Leeper
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This year marks the tenth anniversary of George Lucas's S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s. I think it is fairly safe to say that for the fantasy film genre and for the film industry as a whole, the decade has been very different than might have been expected when Fox was telling theaters that if they wanted to show T_h_e_O_t_h_e_r_S_i_d_e_o_f_M_i_d_n_i_g_h_t they would also have to book this science fiction film, S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s. There is little doubt--at least to my mind--that S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s is one of the three most influential films ever made. In fact, the only film that obviously was more influential was Edward Muybridge's sequence of snapshots of a running racehorse that was, in essence, the first motion picture.

But "influential" and "good" are two different things. Recently, when I listed films that I gave my highest rating to, I included S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s. One comment I got from a reader was that it was a good list but should not include S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s. The belief that S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s is actually good as a film is actually not very common. I have heard it claimed that it is the weakest of the three currently released "Star Wars" films or that the whole series is a piece of fluff without much cinematic merit. It is my contention that the original S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s is, on its own, a good film and the best of its series. Though it is not in the scope of this short article to examine an entire decade of fantasy films. I would contend that no better science fiction, horror, or fantasy film has been made in the interim.

Before we can determine if S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s really is a great film, in the sense that C_i_t_i_z_e_n_K_a_n_e is a great film, we have to determine some characteristics of film greatness. What is it that makes a film great? One characteristic would be originality. A film should be experimental and should break new ground. But many film experiments fail and leave audiences confused. The new ground that a film breaks must be accepted by audiences so that a film leaves its mark. To this extent, being good is connected with being influential. Still, it is clear that an exploitation film may be the first of its kind and have imitators without being very good. The ground that a film breaks must be valuable. It should advance the art of filmmaking. If a film does what it does well, breaks new ground in the art of filmmaking making valuable

contributions, and those contributions are accepted by audiences and become part of the palette for future filmmakers, no more is required for a film to achieve greatness. If you come down to it, that is really what makes C_i_t_i_z_e_n_K_a_n_e a great film. But is S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s great in the same sense? I think that while C_i_t_i_z_e_n_K_a_n_e undeniably has some virtues that S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s lacks (and vice versa), S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s is great in the same sense.

Star Wars Retrospective May 5, 1987

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S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s was a ground-breaking film. It was the first marrying of cinema and the new video and computer technologies for creating images on film. The effects people had to invent much of the technology as they went along. The last jump in visual technology of the same magnitude had been with Willis O'Brien's stop-motion effects for K_i_n_g_K_o_n_g. As late as the '60s the most visually imaginative films--films like J_a_s_o_n_a_n_d_t_h_e_A_r_g_o_n_a_u_t_s--still relied most heavily on variations on, and enhancements of, O'Brien's techniques. Between J_a_s_o_n_a_n_d_t_h_e_A_r_g_o_n_a_u_t_s and S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s there were some impressive pieces of visual fantasy, notably 2_0_0_1: A_S_p_a_c_e_O_d_y_s_s_e_y and L_o_g_a_n'_s_R_u_n, but they relied mostly on just extensive use of model work and other long-existing technologies. For S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s a battery of new technologies was employed and for the first time since K_i_n_g_K_o_n_g special effects made a real quantum leap toward the goal of being able to create on the screen any scene that the mind's eye can create.

S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s was obviously a ground-breaking film from the first moments of the film. Just showing a field of stars, S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s did something that no other film had ever done. It panned the camera upward. That does not sound like much, but consider that not even 2_0_0_1 had ever done it before. Space scenes had always been done with a fixed camera, and for a very good reason. It was more economical not to create a background of stars large enough to pan through. So scenes in space had always been done with a static camera, just like all scenes were done in the early days of film. I had never even realized that in all science fiction films I had seen, the space shots were done with a static camera until the instant I saw Lucas's 90-degree pan. Not a single model had shown on the screen and certainly not a single set or character and already the film was a one-of-a-kind!

When we do finally meet characters the first two we meet are robots with personalities that are a cliché now, but the closest I remember seeing before was the robot in L_o_s_t_i_n_S_p_a_c_e, who occasionally would lose his cool and yell, "Warning! Warning! Danger! Danger!" while gesticulating wildly. We have seen characters for all of two seconds on the screen before we again see that S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s was unprecedented.

And the impact of S_t_a_r_W_a_r_s continues right through the film. Scene after scene is done with an originality and sense of wonder totally unprecedented in the science fiction film. The audience reaction was nothing short of astounding. In Detroit, where the film played there was a difficult left turn to get to the theater parking lot. V_a_r_i_e_t_y reported that making that left turn had become the new summer sport in Detroit. The lines that queued up to see the film were legendary because in so many different ways the film delivered more than it had to. There was more bang per dollar of admission than perhaps any other film made to that point.

One thing the film delivered was a sparkling score by John Williams. Williams used a leit-motif approach, but composed many themes, each of which was attractive and which blended together into a

very fine score that was reproduced--for the first time--with the process of Dolby sound. It gave a live-orchestral clarity to the score as well as allowing far more use of subliminal sound effects surrounding the audience. Many were barely perceptible to the ear but certainly helped to make the experience seem more believable.

This reality was further enhanced by the detail Lucas imbued the film with. Small details--throwaways--that few filmmakers bother with were painstakingly added. In one scene after the visit to the cantina, we are watching the main characters in the background and the silhouettes of two spindly legs walk by in the foreground. Because that is not where the viewer's attention is at the time, many in the audience never even noticed the legs. To throw in unnecessary details and then purposely call the viewer's attention away so the details may well go unnoticed is a mark of a good craftsman.

A little more noticeable, though again unnecessary to the plot, is the skeleton shown in the background in a desert scene. Nobody in the

script mentions the skeleton of some gargantuan desert creature, as if it is a perfectly normal sight. Similarly the speeder, which could have been easily made a wheeled vehicle, instead floats. No mention is made of the floating vehicle; again, the matter of fact acceptance of this wonder is what helps to make the film work.

More noticeable but equally unrequired to the plot are some breathtaking planetscapes, again of a scale that never had been used in science fiction films to that point. Films like T h i s I s l a n d E a r t h F i r s t S p a c e s h i p o n V e n u s had shown planetary landscapes but they used unconvincing models or matte paintings. ILM has since become known for very impressive backgrounds and spacescapes. S t a r W a r s was their debut.

A few more touches, perhaps not as original, but which were unexpected, should be mentioned. One is the use of two distinguished actors in major roles. Getting Sir Alec Guinness to appear in any science fiction film is something of a wonder. His first response on seeing the script was reportedly, "Oh crumbs, this isn't for me." He enjoyed the script sufficiently, however, that he changed his mind. More so than even actors like Olivier or Gielgud, Guinness has been selective of his parts and his presence in this film puts S t a r W a r s in fine company. Peter Cushing was then, as he is now, perhaps the most accomplished and beloved of actors specializing in fantasy roles.

Another unusual touch is the pacing. The audience comes in with the story already in progress. The viewer has to catch up by reading the screen explanation rolling by, then is immediately tossed into the action. This requires more from the audience, but that is far better than boring the audience with slow introductions. This style, borrowed from internal chapters of serials, might not work well outside of the fantasy genre, but captures audiences very effectively here.

It seems then that S t a r W a r s was an innovative film, every bit as much as was C i t i z e n K a n e. Had this much innovation been lavished on a mainstream film it would be considered an artistic triumph. As it was, it was a box-office champion, an accolade that perhaps meant even more, at least to its backers.

I would like to conclude this discussion with a comparison of the "Star Wars" films which purport to be a continuation of the same story but which I consider to be stylistically inferior to the first film. I will continue to call it S t a r W a r s, incidentally, in spite of the retitling to S t a r W a r s: A N e w H o p e.

When George Lucas made S t a r W a r s he had little expectation that it would become one of the most popular films ever made. In some ways that contributed to the artistic achievement. In the later films he knew what had worked well in the first film and could consciously repeat and effectively milk it. In the first film the line "I've got a bad feeling about this" was used and got a positive audience reaction. It even appeared on humorous buttons people wore at science fiction conventions. It was a good line, but its popularity prompted it to be used twice in T h e E m p i r e S t r i k e s B a c k.

Each of the S t a r W a r s treats aliens in a different manner, but the first film is by far the most satisfying treatment. In that film robots, intelligent non-humans (INH), and humans all interact in roughly the way people of different origins interact in New York City. S t a r W a r s takes place in a sort of melting-pot universe. We are introduced to many species of INH in S t a r W a r s. The only new one to be added in T h e E m p i r e S t r i k e s B a c k was Yoda. For that matter, Chewbacca is the only other INH in T h e E m p i r e S t r i k e s B a c k. Gone is the melting-pot universe. It was, however, back with a vengeance in R e t u r n o f t h e J e d i.

In a documentary made by Lucasfilm, it was claimed that George Lucas was never happy with the aliens in S t a r W a r s and he was finally able to create the effect he wanted for R e t u r n o f t h e J e d i. True, there were more aliens in R e t u r n o f t h e J e d i, but they were stupid ideas for aliens. While the aliens in S t a r W a r s were misshapen creatures designed by Ralph McQuarrie, Ron Cobb, and Rick Baker, R e t u r n o f t h e J e d i featured aliens like Sly Snoodles, a singing elephant with lips on the end of her nose. Also, there is Salacious Crumb, a rather obvious muppet who looks like he would be more at home on F r a g g l e R o c k than in a major motion picture. And who can forget the dancing fat woman? Of somewhat higher quality are the pig guards, but they are reminiscent of Earth creatures and look like something out of a fairy tale. Only Jabba the Hut seems sufficiently alien and he resembles a caterpillar. The aliens are cute and not crisply done like the creatures in S t a r W a r s.

And speaking of cute, Lucas at one point said the third film would take place in large part on the Wookiee planet. But Wookiees would not have made very good toys and certainly not new toys, so Lucas reversed the syllables in Wookiee and got Ewok, a lovable, merchandisable teddy

bear. Most fans over the age of ten get a little sick at the thought of Ewoks.

There is also a question of realism. In the first film we see a guerilla attack on the Death Star; the second has the Empire crushing a rebel base; the third has the killing of Jabba and his crew and the Empire fighting the teddy bear Ewoks. So in which of the three films do we see the greatest number of allies of the rebellion killed? By far, the answer is the first film. Not even counting Lars and Beru, who were innocent bystanders, more allies were killed in the attack on the Death Star, which was done reasonably realistically, than in all the battles in the later films. In R_e_t_u_r_n_o_f_t_h_e_J_e_d_i one Ewok is apparently killed, I think, and one is knocked out by his own bolo. I don't think a single "good-guy" is killed in T_h_e_E_m_p_i_r_e_S_t_r_i_k_e_s B_a_c_k. And this is in spite of the apparent darker tone of the second film.

Because of all the points mentioned above and because so much more of Lucas's creativity went into the first film, for which a universe was created--the other two films just used, and only in minor ways amplified on, this universe--I still contend it was the best of the three films and will remain the "Star Wars" film most people will remember. In 2077, it will be the best-remembered "Star Wars" film.

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