Lincroft-Holmdel Science Fiction Club
Club Notice - 6/12/87 -- Vol. 5, No. 48

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

06/17   MT: THIS IMMORTAL by Roger Zelazny
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. We all know that Mel Brooks is one of the great art film
directors of our times. He directed the startling THE PRODUCERS,
the moving YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN, the searing BLAZING SADDLES.   But
there is a puckish, whimsical side to Brooks that most people never
notice. A side that likes to trash the British and their history.
His Brooksfilm company has made two films along these lines. On
Thursday, June 18, at 7pm the Leeperhouse film festival will show:

    Brooksfilm Baroque Britain
    ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN MARVEL (the next chapter)
    THE ELEPHANT MAN (1980) dir. by David Lynch
    THE DOCTOR AND THE DEVILS (1985) dir. by Freddie Francis

Anthony Hopkins, John Hurt, Anne Bancroft, and John Gielgud star in
the true story of David Merrick, a man so deformed from birth to
earn the title ELEPHANT MAN. Hopkins plays the doctor who finds
the enigmatic Merrick living in squalor and tries to help him. The
film is beautifully photographed by Freddie Francis, a great

cinematographer and a sometimes director, as in the case of THE
DOCTOR AND THE DEVILS. Dylan Thomas's play about the Burke and
Hare case was the basis of Francis's film. Burke and Hare were in
the biological supply business in Edinburgh in the 1700's. They
robbed graves for a Dr. Knox. When demand for corpses outstripped

the supply of recently buried, they cleverly developed new
processes for creating corpses from materials available to them.
Burke and Hare have been the subject of several films, but this
one, is certainly the best. The film starts Timothy Dalton (who
has the distinction (?) of being the next James Bond, but who is a
fine actor anyway) and a really great actor, Jonathan Pryce (Dark
from SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES).

2. Well, it has finally happened. I have gone off the deep end. I
suddenly realized my pocket TRS-80 is useful in doing simple
arithmetic with large numbers and I am going crazy applying it to
simple problems about how long ago the dinosaurs died out, the
distance of stars, etc. I have gone the Isaac Asimov route and am
writing boring articles about what I am finding out. Two issues
ago it was just a paragraph or two. This time is was a full-
fledged article. It can't go that much further. I don't know a
whole lot more. What started humorously two issues ago is only
semi-humorous this issue.

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

The Towers of Hanoi, the 60th Light,
   and the Age of the Universe
   Commentary by Mark R. Leeper
   Copyright 1987 Mark R. Leeper

     Meanwhile, back in the universe... I talked two issues ago about
how much time has passed since the death of the dinosaurs. This time I
will take a binary look at the age of the universe. I read at some
point that someone has a legend that at the beginning of the universe
some god or other started playing the game "The Towers of Hanoi" with 64
disks and when the game is over it will be over for the universe too.

     In this game you have a set of disks (in the god's case, 64), each
with a different radius and each with a hole through the center. You
also have three posts narrow enough that they fit through the holes in
the disks. You start the game with all 64 disks on one post so they
form a sort of cone, widest at the bottom, and with the post at the
center. Now you start moving the disks to another post. The rules are
1) you can remove a disk from a post but you must immediately put it on
another post, 2) you can move only one disk at a time, and 3) you can

never put a larger disk on a smaller disk. The object of the game is to
move all the disks to another post.

   You may want to try the game before reading on. You can take all
the spades out of a deck of cards and arrange them face up in ascending
order in a stack with the ace on top, and the king on the bottom.
Picture that arrangement as two empty stacks and one stack with 13
cards. Now move the cards one at a time from one stack to another,
never putting a lower-rank card on a higher-rank one, and try to move
all the cards from one stack to another that way. I am about to make
some references to the solution of this game so you should try it
yourself before reading on. Go ahead. I'll wait....

   Okay, is everybody back? Good. In fact, you can prove by
mathematical induction that you know how to move the disks from one post
to another all along. Let's call the posts O, D and U. All the disks
are on O (the origin post) and you want to move them to D (the
destination post) and you can use U (the utility post). If you start
with one disk the game is trivial--you move that disk from O to D and
you are done in one move.

   If you start with two disks, the game is still simple. You move
the top disk to U, the bottom disk to D, and the top disk to D. It
takes three moves. You know that already. So you already know the
solution for _m disks if _m was 1 or 2. Now assume you know the solution
for _n disks. Given _n disks you know how to move them to the post you
want to. You want to move _n + _1 disks. You just use what you already
know to move the top _n disks to U. You move the _n + _1st disk to D, then
you move the _n disks from U to D. Bingo! You've moved _n + _1 disks from
O to D. Of course, there is some sort of paradox here. Sit someone in

front of the game with 13 cards, and they will not realize that they
immediately know the solution to the game. If you start the victim with
one card, then two, then three, each time reminding the victim to do
what he/she did last time, usually the victim picks up the game very
quickly.

   But what is important is the number of moves it takes in the game
with _n disks. With one disk, it takes one move; with two disks, it
takes three moves; with three, seven moves, or 3 + 1 + 3, since it takes
three moves to put two disks on U, one move to put the third disk on D,

and then three more moves to move two disks from U to D. Each time you add one more disk, the game takes twice as many moves and one move more. With _m disks it takes (_2^_m) - _1 moves (two to the _m-th power minus one). With 64 disks, assuming one move per second, it would take (2^64) - 1 seconds or over 584 billion years--over 32 times the estimated 18-billion-year age of the universe. Whatever god is playing the game hasn't even gotten to the bottom five disks on the stack!

Which brings me to the real question I was going to ask when I first started thinking about this column. You have a row of 100 lights on a panel. At the moment of the Big Bang the panel started registering the age of the universe in seconds, in binary. For the first second there was a lot of really interesting physics going on but the panel remained dark. At the end of the first second, the rightmost light went on; one second later, it shut off again but the light to its left turned on. How many lights have been used so far? Well, the answer is 59, but not for much longer.

Well, that is hard to say. The most prominent current estimate of the age of the universe is about 18 billion years. (18 billion years is just about 2^59 seconds. When the universe turns _2^_n seconds, _n + _1 lights will be needed and the god will first move the _n + _1-st disk in his cosmic "Towers of Hanoi" game.) That is a rough guesstimate based on how far away stars seem to be from the parallax. In six months we will be on the other side of the sun or about 186 million miles from where we are right now and with eyes 186 million miles apart, we get some depth perception and can use it to judge how far away a given star is. By looking at the color of the star, we see its color is shifted to the red end of the spectrum from what we would expect by a sort of Doppler effect and we can judge how fast that star is moving away from us. From that, we estimate that 18 billion years ago everything was together and in one place. As you might guess, estimates vary. But assuming it was smack-dab 18 billion years ago, that would mean that the 60th clock light will very soon go on. How soon? In about 267 million years. We are right now about halfway between when the 60th light goes on and the heyday of the dinosaurs. That may make it seem like a long time from now, but the 59th light would have turned on about 8867 million years ago; 97% of the time between when the 59th light was initiated and the 60th will be initiated has already passed. 267 million years is really very small in the terms we are talking about. We could easily be off just a gnat's eyelash on the 18-billion-year figure. That 60th light may already be on and we don't know it yet.

THE UNTOUCHABLES
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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     Capsule review: Big mythic cops-and-robbers film is
long on excitement, short on accuracy, brash and
colorful. It is solid entertainment with a lot of fun in
the first half and a second half nearly as good. One of
the big films of the summer.

     There are lots of ways to make a gangster film. You can make it as
realistic as _T_h_e _G_o_d_f_a_t_h_e_r or as romanticized as _A _P_o_c_k_e_t _F_u_l_l _o_f
_M_i_r_a_c_l_e_s. You can do a _B_o_n_n_i_e _a_n_d _C_l_y_d_e where the crooks are giants and
the cops are midgets, or you can make the crooks vermin and the cops
squeaky-clean personifications of purity and virtue as was done in _T_h_e
_F_B_I _S_t_o_r_y and the TV show _T_h_e _U_n_t_o_u_c_h_a_b_l_e_s. Brian DePalma did one
gangster already with tiny cops and giant hoods, his violent but
engrossing remake of _S_c_a_r_f_a_c_e. He has returned to the gangster film
with a movie based on the _U_n_t_o_u_c_h_a_b_l_e_s TV series and the book by Elliot
Ness and Oscar Fraley that the TV series was based on. His approach is
romanticized to the point of being mythic. The hoods are big and the
cops are giants. Even a mousy accountant for the Treasury Department
who is impressed into service turns out to be a giant. And a film
adaptation of a TV show surprisingly turns out to be giant too.

     The story should come as no surprise to anyone. An ambitious
Treasury agent,Elliot Ness (played by Kevin Costner), comes to Chicago
to bring down an oily Al Capone (played by Robert DeNiro). When he
realizes he is still wet behind the ears, he calls for the assistance of
one good Irish cop (played by Sean Connery) and, with the help of a few
friends, they set about hewing down the biggest tree in the underworld
jungle. When the film works best, mostly in the first half of the film,
it is a positive joy. Toward the second half, I started to realize what
I was enjoying is a story about the groovy side of the Secret Police and
that Connery's honest and pure philosophy of law enforcement was
actually a pretty scary thing.

     But David Mamet's screenplay captures the fun of the TV series.
When Ness drives a huge snowplow through warehouse doors to smash up
shipments of illegal booze, you know you're watching the real thing
eight times bigger than life. Though, admittedly, the film's most
exciting sequence harks back more to Westerns than to gangster films.
And the whole package is done to a score by Ennio Morricone, sometimes
tense, sometimes flamboyant, sometimes arrogant.

     Now, as for the film's accuracy, yes, there really was an Elliot
Ness and he was a Treasury agent. There really was an Al Capone and a
Frank Nitti and they were crooks. And Al Capone really was indicted for
income tax evasion. Of course, most people knew all that already, and

Mamet and DePalma are counting on most people knowing no more than that, because just about everything else is wrong. Ness's accomplishments were exaggerated by newspaper accounts of the day and much more so by his autobiography and by the TV show. Nobody has ever portrayed Frank Nitti accurately in anything. Nitti was one of Capone's lieutenants whom the newspapers thought ran Capone's gang when Capone went to jail. That squares with neither the TV nor the film version. Capone's representation is neither accurate nor inaccurate. We just don't see much of his strategy in the film.

    But with all its faults, _T_h_e _U_n_t_o_u_c_h_a_b_l_e_s is a big film, an exciting film, and it will likely be the big film of the summer. Rate it a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

PRICK UP YOUR EARS
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: The true story of the homosexual
relationship of successful playwright Joe Orton and his
equally talented but much less successful "wife," Kenneth
Halliwell. This is a solid dramatic film and one of the
year's best.

It would be nice to feel that success is a matter of talent alone,
but clearly charisma and luck have a hand also. _ P_ r_ i_ c_ k _ U_ p _ Y_ o_ u_ r _ E_ a_ r_ s
is

about two men--lovers--who appear to be about equally talented. One
makes it as an award-winning playwright; one is doomed to fail at
whatever he puts his hand to. _ P_ r_ i_ c_ k _ U_ p _ Y_ o_ u_ r _ E_ a_ r_ s is the story of Joe
Orton and Kenneth Halliwell's relationship and how it is affected by
Orton's success. We see the story in flashback after Halliwell murdered
Orton and then committed suicide.

Orton was a popular playwright whose death in 1967 caused a stir,
particularly after it was revealed that he had had a longstanding
homosexual relationship with Halliwell. _ P_ r_ i_ c_ k _ U_ p _ Y_ o_ u_ r _ E_ a_ r_ s is
based on
a biography of Orton which in turn was based on Orton's diaries. The
film flashes back and forth as Orton's biographer (played by Wallace

Shawn) interviews Orton's agent, Peggy (played by Vanessa Redgrave).

The flashbacks themselves jump around in time a bit, but generally
tell the story from when Orton and Halliwell met in acting school to
their deaths. Though there was not much difference in their ages at the
beginning of their relationship, Halliwell was more sophisticated. In a
dramatic scene in acting school, Halliwell shows himself to be more
imaginative than his classmates and perhaps a bit disturbed. He seduces
Orton and starts a life collaborating with him as well as living with
him. After each spends six months in prison for defacing library books,
Peggy takes notice of Orton's writing and guides him to success while
Halliwell is left behind.

Alfred Molina plays Joe Orton. Molina previously played sociopath
Sid Vicious in _ S_ i_ d _ a_ n_ d _ N_ a_ n_ c_ y. Joe Orton matures into a very different
sort of person than Sid Vicious. Based on clips I have seen from _ S_ i_ d
_ a_ n_ d _ N_ a_ n_ c_ y, I am as impressed as the critics were with Molina's
versatility. But perhaps because it is a less appealing role most
critics I know of have under-praised Gary Oldman as Halliwell. The
withering of his self-respect is what makes this film and he deserves
more attention than I am seeing him get. In any case, _ P_ r_ i_ c_ k _ U_ p _ Y_ o_ u_ r
_ E_ a_ r_ s gets a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale. Look for Oscar nominations for
this film.

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