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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
08/27/21 -- Vol. 40, No. 9, Whole Number 2186

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Co-Editor: Mark Leeper, mleeper@optonline.net
Co-Editor: Evelyn Leeper, eleeper@optonline.net
Sending Address: evelynchmelisleeper@gmail.com
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An index with links to the issues of the MT VOID since 1986 is at http://leepers.us/mtvoid/back_issues.htm.

NPR Summer Books Poll: The 50 Best Science Fiction and Fantasy Books of the Past Decade:

<https://www.npr.org/2021/08/18/1027159166/best-books-science-fiction-fantasy-past-decade>

[I'm not printing the whole list here. -ecl]

There was also a short piece on three YA fantasy novels on "NPR Sunday Edition" last Sunday:

<https://www.npr.org/2021/08/22/1029750946/these-3-ya-novels-will-transform-your-summer-into-something-fantastic>

FRANKENSTEIN and DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Coincidentally, both the Boris Karloff FRANKENSTEIN and the Frederic March DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE started filming on the same day: August 24, 1931.

Even more coincidentally, the 90th anniversary of that was last Tuesday (which is today as I write this), but alas, I did not discover this until it was too late to be put in last week's MT VOID.

FRANKENSTEIN filming wrapped October 3; DR. JEKYLL & HYDE filming wrapped October 20. [-ecl]

Science Fiction (and Other) Discussion Groups, Films, Lectures, etc. (NJ):

Both groups have returned to the B.C. (Before Covid) schedules, and the films will be shown as part of the Middletown meetings.

September 2 (MTPL), 5:30PM: Ray Bradbury Centennial: three short films & stories:

"I Sing the Body Electric!" ("The Electric Grandmother")

<http://raybradbury.ru/library/story/69/2/0/>

"There Will Come Soft Rains"

<https://tinyurl.com/BradburyComeSoftRains>

"The Veldt"

<https://tinyurl.com/BradburyTheVeldt>

See <http://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/ea.cgi?194> for lists of the many books that also include these stories.

September 23 (OBPL), 7:00PM: THE FOOD OF THE GODS by H. G. Wells

My Picks for Turner Classic Movies for September (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

This column was originally intended to point out to the readers good films they have not seen before or to comment on films they have seen but were still interesting. Since that time my purpose has strayed and wandered. I see that TCM is going to show one of the great and iconic science fiction films of all time. I have never written my comments on this film so it is about time.

Turner Classic Movies has shown the visionary FORBIDDEN PLANET, one of the most imaginative and influential science fiction films ever made, but I have never actually made it my pick of the month. I guess that was on the theory that everyone already knew about it. It has been (inaccurately) claimed to be the first science fiction film to ever take place entirely in space. No scenes of this film take place on earth or even in our solar system, though the characters are all humans or one of a couple of zoo animals. Well ... that is if we disqualify a robot from being a character. And sadly it does not even hold the distinction of being the first truly space-bound film. That distinction probably goes to CAT WOMEN OF THE MOON.

FORBIDDEN PLANET is probably the best science fiction film of the 1950s. It is the closest to the quality of contemporaneous written science fiction, a genuine scientific puzzle with a sophisticated problem solution. Along the way we really are given all the clues necessary to solve the murder. Visually the film probably shows the greatest imagination of any Fifties film (in any genre) and when seen in its widescreen format, much of it still looks very good sixty-five years later. The beautiful planet-scapes and space-scapes would not be surpassed until STAR WARS. For the pre-digital age, the effects are very impressive. And the scenes are all the more impressive in widescreen format. And this in spite of the fact that what was released was only a rough-cut of the film with what we shall see are plenty of errors. Not that it is so much a tribute to this film, but when Gene Roddenberry was planning the original "Star Trek" series, he pitched it as being "'Wagon Train' to the stars," but what he was really planning was "FORBIDDEN PLANET: The TV Series." The film is almost a template for the original "Star Trek." Bits of the ideas show up throughout science fiction to come like bits of the props showed up in "Twilight Zone" episodes.

The characters are a little stereotypical and 1950s-ish in their sensibilities and their morality. Much has been made of the idea that the story was built around the plot of Shakespeare's TEMPEST. That may be true, but little more than the basic situation and some of the characters are taken from the Shakespeare. The murder mystery, which is the main thrust of the plot, and the character's motivations, are entirely different from the Shakespeare. For those who have not seen it, the story, in short, deals with a rescue mission to the planet Altair IV. An expedition to the planet two decades before had disappeared without a sign. From Earth United Planets Cruiser C-57D captained by Commander Adams (played by Leslie Nielsen) comes to investigate and discovers the sole survivor living on the planet with his daughter. Nearly everyone else from the expedition had been killed under very mysterious circumstances, ripped apart by an unseen force. Only Dr. Morbius (Walter Pidgeon) and his wife survived, and the wife died of what we are told were natural causes a year or so later. (In the light of the denouement one wonders if that is actually true.) Morbius's only company is his daughter Altaira (Anne Francis) who was born on this planet and Robbie, a fascinating robot who talks but prefixes every speech with the sound of an old-fashioned mechanical adding machine.

Connected with the mystery of what happened to the original expedition is the fact that the planet was at one time millions of years earlier inhabited by a super-scientific civilization that were called the Krell. One of the points of the story was to show the immense power that the Krell had, and for once, what we see really seems to confirm the fact. The great set piece of the film is a visit to one of four hundred Krell power shafts. We see four or five levels of what we are told are 7800 levels. So what we are seeing is a tiny fraction of what the film claims the Krell had, but what we do see is dumbfoundingly immense. This is a film that really dwarfs the human and overwhelms the viewer with the magnitude of what is possible.

This is a film with beautiful effects that rely in large part on matte paintings and not models. That approach gave the effects department much more artistic freedom in the images it could create. Mostly the effect was used for planet-scapes and space-scapes, but they are impressive. Then there is Robby, the most famous film robot outside of the "Star Wars" universe. Over the years the suit became almost a star in itself. The design is incredibly creative, a flurry of moving parts and flashing neon to make it look more a mechanical device than man in a robot suit. Each time the robot speaks it is prefaced by the noise of a cash register as if it is computing mechanically. The voice is Marvin Miller, a familiar voice often used for narration and dubbing at the time. And those who remember 1950s television may remember him as Michael Anthony in the television series "The Millionaire."

Special mention should be made of the electronic music by Louis and Beebe Barron. It was the first totally electronic score in a feature film and the MGM music department would not even allow it to be called a score. They were somewhat disappointed that there was not more interest in their new musical form, "electronic tonalities." In 1976 Louis Barron decided that there might be a market for the soundtrack on record. He still had LPs so packed some cases at his own expense. He brought a case to MidAmeriCon, the World Science Fiction Convention, in the hopes that there might be some interest in the record. He told himself that some people might still be interested in the unusual score after twenty-one years. After selling in the huckster room for an hour he put in an emergency call home to Beebe saying to ship him the all rest of the cases as quickly as possible. He had no idea the demand that there would be either for the record or for himself. He suddenly found himself to be a celebrity. For years I remember seeing copies of the record for sale. I believe it is even on CD. I hope the latter-day popularity of the score helped the Barrons in their later years.

Leslie Nielsen plays his role straight, as he would his roles for many years to come. But it is hard to see him in this film without being reminded of his later slapstick comedy roles. Walter Pidgeon is clearly a bit uncomfortable in a role very unlike what he is used to playing. Of course that quality may be just what Morbius needs. Anne Francis in an ingenue role is somewhat better than many young starlets have been in similar roles. Les Tremayne who played a general in WAR OF THE WORLDS narrates three or four sentences at the beginning.

This is one of the great science fiction films of all time. I give it a full +4 on the -4 to +4 scale.

[FORBIDDEN PLANET (1956), September 21, 6:15 PM]

(But even so great a film as FORBIDDEN PLANET has a few flaws, and I will talk about them next week.)

Turner is also running two "festivals" of special interest:

Magic/Witchcraft (September 17):

6:00 AM The Magician (1926)
7:30 AM The Magician (1958)
9:30 AM Miracles for Sale (1939)
10:45 AM Fingers at the Window (1942)
1:45 PM La Main du Diable (1943)
3:15 PM The Hypnotic Eye (1960)
4:45 PM Death Curse of Tartu (1966)
6:15 PM The Devil's Own (1966)

and

Lewton/Lewtonesque (September 23):

7:30 AM The Ghost Ship (1943) [Lewton]
8:45 AM Isle of the Dead (1945) [Lewton]
10:00 AM The Picture of Dorian Gray (1945)
12:00 PM Dead Men Walk (1943)
1:15 PM Scared to Death (1947)
2:30 PM Bedlam (1946) [Lewton]
4:00 PM The Mysterious Doctor (1943)
5:00 PM Cat People (1942) [Lewton]
6:30 PM The Curse of the Cat People (1944) [Lewton]

as well as another on September 10:

8:00 PM Seventh Victim, The (1943) [Lewton]

[-mrl]

Bond Songs (letter of comment by Kip Williams):

In response to [Mark's comments on James Bond songs](#) in the 08/20/21 issue of the MT VOID, Kip Williams writes:

Something in the current look at Bond lyrics reminds me that "Gold" in the various book titles is (apparently in Fleming's glossary) a rather childish reference to a familiar smelly substance. Sorry, I don't know where I picked this up, though I'll speculate it was in reading the second series of Legman's RATIONALE OF THE DIRTY JOKE, which I could never quite motivate myself to buy, because so much in it was merely disgusting and not much else.

Another thing comes to mind as I follow the discussion, and that's the filk I wrote on "You Only Live Twice":

You only live once, that's how it goes.
One life and you're gone, most evidence shows.

You live for your years, you turn your wheel
Some say you get more, but that's not the deal

Your life is the least the world puts on your plate
Be fast to the feast, or be late for your fate!

One life all your own, and you're the price.
One more would be nice, but you don't live twice.

(ca 2014)

[-kw]

Latin (letters of comment by Dorothy J. Heydt, Keith F. Lynch, Scott Dorsey, Andy Leighton, Gary McGath, Tim Merrigan, Paul Dormer, and Kevin R):

In response to Evelyn's comments on Latin in the 08/20/21 issue of the MT VOID, Dorothy J. Heydt writes:

There is a man at the Vatican who invents such [new] words as needed. It's been years since I read the article about him, but I bet he (or his successor) is still there.

["Do Catholics with no other common language converse in Latin?" -ecl]

They used to, but since the vernacular Mass came in, Latin among the laity has become like whatever language you and I had to learn in high school (mine was Spanish) and mercifully forgot immediately after graduation.

Pope Francis recently came down on the Latin Mass, still clung to by conservative Catholics, who complain (a) that the initial English translations were in very clumsy English (true) and that the Latin Mass united the congregation with the Church worldwide (not true: the closest thing we have to a world language at present is English).

I miss the Latin Mass, but then, I understand Latin.

And there's a letter set in WWII from Lord Peter Wimsey (who, let's remember, is fictional) to his wife, which says (reconstructing from memory): "Like the fellow in the hymn, I have seen a wonder sight: an Anglican padre and a Greek Orthodox ditto discussing the persecution of the Jews under the Nazi regime. I have never heard such expressions of sympathy or so many false quantities."

[-djh]

Keith F. Lynch responds:

I've heard that Church Latin would have been incomprehensible to the ancient Romans, due to misunderstandings about pronunciations. For instance "Caesar" was pronounced "Kaiser" (which is where the Germans got that word), and "veni, vidi, vici" was pronounced "weenee, weede, weese." Which pronunciation is taught in schools today, and does it differ between public schools and church schools? Thanks. [-kfl]

Scott Dorsey answers:

I can say that the pronunciations taught in schools today in England and in Italy are very different. [-sd]

Dorothy adds:

Yes. I studied Classical Latin but sang in Church Latin, which is as near to Italian as makes very little difference.

Andy Leighton responds:

The C in vici was hard--so more like wiki (with the 'I's sounding like the 'I' in machine)

Quintilian wrote that 'K' should not be used at all in words as 'C' maintains its force in conjunction with all the vowels.

Also Veni would have a 'eh' sound for the first vowel. 'E's never had a 'ee' sound in Latin. [-al]

Gary McGath elaborates:

My familiarity with Church Latin is mostly through classical music, specifically the Mass and Requiem texts. The northern and southern European pronunciations have noticeable differences. German choirs pronounce "pacem" as "pahtzem," and Italian ones pronounce it as "pahchem." Ancient Romans, if I'm getting this right, pronounced it "pahkem."

Those pronunciations aren't "misunderstandings"; the pronunciation of Latin just shifted over the centuries.

"Caesar" was pronounced roughly "Kah-es-ahr" in ancient Rome, so not the same as "Kaiser" though close.

I saw a video claiming that the Latin hard 'C' sound has less of a puff of breath than our 'K' sound. The best I can approximate what I heard is to pronounce the first syllable as "Gah" with an unvoiced G. How did they figure out such fine differences in pronunciation? [-gmg]

Dorothy replies:

Correct. Sound-changes over the centuries with minimal chances to *hear* the other regions pronunciation.

Classical Greek distinguished between aspirated and unaspirated consonants. "pi" was pronounced [p], and "phi" was pronounced [p(h)]. Similarly "tau" [t] and "theta" [t(h)] and "chi" [k(h)] and "kappa" [k].

And there's a poem by Catullus* about a man who would say "chommoda" when he meant "commoda," because that was his local accent. The poem ends with his visiting the Ionian Sea, which promptly became Hionian.

So that's a clue that at least "c" and "ch" were the unaspirated and aspirated versions of the same stop.

(*) Which I can't quote just now, because my complete Catullus is in the fiction room, where (as all know) I can't go without letting the cats in. [-djh]

Keith answers Gary:

In the old rasff tradition, I'm disagreeing with you just to be polite.

Live languages evolve. Dead languages don't, but are held to have been correct at some specific past time and place. For Latin, that's usually whatever dialect Augustus spoke.

Latin evolved, but people today in the former Roman Empire are neither speaking Latin wrong nor speaking Latin right; they're speaking Spanish, French, Italian, Romanian, or whatever right.

Similarly Old English and Middle English are no longer evolving. They were replaced by Modern English, which is still evolving. Anyone who speaks Old English in a way that couldn't have been understood by even one person living in England before 1066 is doing it wrong.

Similarly, dinosaurs are extinct, hence no longer evolving. The living descendants of dinosaurs aren't being a dinosaur wrong, nor are they being a dinosaur correctly. They're being birds correctly. [-kfl]

And Gary responds:

Latin was used for over a millennium after Augustus's time as a scholarly language. Newton wrote his major works in Latin. That had to involve coining new words, so I don't think you can call it a dead language until the 18th century at the earliest.

It was used as a written language much more than it was spoken, which is a situation that would encourage changes in pronunciation. Against that, the Church was trying to maintain tradition, and it may have been the main area where Latin was still spoken. Even so, pronunciation shifted to reflect Italian pronunciation. [-gmg]

Scott observes:

I was looking up a number of mathematics papers from the *late* 19th century to find they were all in Latin.

Although of course all the chemistry papers from that era were in German.... [-sd]

Evelyn notes:

As Gary explains (I think), he isn't saying that Spanish is not just Latin pronounced differently, but rather that Latin pronunciation, as it is spoken, has changed over the years. There are many words in English that are pronounced differently than they were even a hundred years ago, but Modern English is still Modern English. (Another example would be Spanish, with the "s" sound pronounced differently in Spain than in Latin America. And Hebrew is pronounced differently between Askenazim and Sephardim.) [-ecl]

Tim Merrigan also responds to Gary:

["Caesar" was pronounced roughly 'Kah-es-ahr' in ancient Rome, so not the same as 'Kaiser' though close." -gmg]

And not the same as T/Czar which is also descended from it. [-tm]

And Tim responds to Keith:

My understanding is that when The Church adopted Latin as their official language in the 4th century C.E., around the time of the Council of Nicaea, there was a debate as to whether it should be Classical Latin, which was still, and pretty much only, used in legal documents, or Vulgate Latin which was spoken in the streets of Rome. They decided on Vulgate because that way the word of God could be spread more easily. [-tm]

Paul Dormer writes:

There's a bit in the 1939 film GOODBYE MR CHIPS where Chips complains about the new pronunciation of Latin that he now had to teach. Of course, he taught at what in the UK is called a public school and therefore you had to pay to go there. [-pd]

Evelyn responds:

Paul beat me to it, but honestly, that is the one thing I remember best from that film. [-ecl]

Dorothy recalls:

A looong, long time ago my mother was in a chorus who were rehearsing a song in Latin. She told me how the conductor very pointedly said they did not want to hear *any* Classical pronunciation (and I wouldn't be surprised if they had been looking at my mother when they said that--if the conductor was who I suspect they were (it's been a while), he knew she had a son who took Latin at a school that taught Classical pronunciation).

Diverging wildly....

The text of Stravinsky's opera "Oedipus Rex" is in grammatically medieval Latin. But the instructions are to use Classical pronunciation. (Since when I first heard it I'd had a couple years of singing Church Latin, it came as a bit of a shock.) [-djh]

Keith asks:

Shouldn't it be in classical Greek? Or, given Stravinsky's nationality, modern Russian? [-kfl]

Paul Dormer replies:

He had his reasons, and apparently even consider ancient Greek. "... but [he] decided ultimately on Latin: in his words "a medium not dead but turned to stone."

The libretto was actually written by Jean Cocteau in French and then translated into Latin. There is also a narrator who comes on from time to time to explain what is happening in the audience's local language. [-pd]

Kevin R notes:

On the rare occasion we in our children's choir sang a hymn in Latin rather than English, we used "church Latin" pronunciation. Soft "g" in "Regem angelorum" in "Adeste Fidelis/O Come, All Ye Faithful," exempli gratia. We didn't turn "venite" into wehn-ee- tay, either.

My two years of Catholic School Latin were in 1970-71 and 1971-72. We leaned classical pronunciation from Sr Thomas Aquinas. She briefed us on the difference between that and "church Latin," which had adopted pronunciations that eventually led to Italian becoming its own language.

What I was told was that, especially prior to Vatican II, with priests from all over the world, sometimes when two met the only language they had in common was Latin. I suspect this happened much less often between two lay Catholics. [-kr]

Gary remembers:

I remember learning that song in school, but I think the teacher didn't get the pronunciation right by any version of Latin. We pronounced "Bethlehem" with the English "th," which I don't think Latin has ever done. [-gmg]

Kevin responds:

Since "Bethlehem" isn't of Latin/Roman origin, not pronouncing it in a Latinate way didn't bother me. Who knows how close to Hebrew or Aramaic we got, though?

Since we have the internet, we can find people quibbling over it:

<https://forum.musicasacra.com/forum/discussion/17591/how-to-pronounce-bethlehem-in-adepte-fideles/p1>

[-kr]

This Week's Reading (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Towards the beginning of the pandemic, I read (well, re-read) Samuel Pepys's diary entries about the plague in London in 1665 and Daniel Defoe's JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR (written about 1665, but in response to the plague in Marseilles in 1720). I finally got around to (re-)reading THE PLAGUE by Albert Camus (translated by Stuart Gilbert) (Vintage, ISBN 978-0-679-72021-8). First, my local library was completely closed. Then it was open for curbside pickup, but it did not have the book and was not doing inter-library loans. It was only when the library in the next town was re-opened to people from other towns that I could find it. (Even then, it wasn't easy--it was not in the "Fiction" section, but a "Classics" section peculiar to only that library.)

Camus writes about a fictional plague--the bubonic plague, in specific--that strikes the city of Oran sometime in the 1940s. (Based on internal evidence, and assuming it is set in the future, it must be 1947.) He often makes reference, however, to the 1720 plague in Marseilles, so all these books tie together. (I also (re-)read Connie Willis's DOOMSDAY BOOK, but that does not tie in to the others.)

In speaking of Oran, our narrator claims that "social unrest is quite unknown us." One has to remember that Camus wrote this before the Algerian War, which began in 1954 and lasted eight years.

While Camus wrote THE PLAGUE as a metaphorical and philosophical work, much of what he wrote is quite accurate vis-a-vis the current pandemic.

For example, there is the initial reaction to the plague: "Our townsfolk ... thought that everything still was possible for them; which presupposed that pestilences were impossible. They went on doing business, arranged for journeys, and formed views. How should they have given a thought to anything like plague, which rules out any future, cancels journeys, silences the exchange of views. They fancied themselves free, and no one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences."

Even the claims to freedom sound spot on.

There's the claim that something that sounds like herd immunity is the answer, because nothing else would stop it, so why bother trying: "The only hope was that the outbreak would die a natural death; it certainly wouldn't be arrested by the measures the authorities had so far devised."

One character insists he should be given special privilege to leave the quarantined town, because he was just visiting and is in love with someone on the outside. He feels he should get this because "public welfare is merely the sum total of the private welfares of each of us." The problem being, of course, that he is only looking at the positive side of what he wants--his private welfare. He is not considering the negative side, the people who may get sick and die because of his actions, particularly if he spreads the plague to the rest of the world.

We talk about COVID fatigue; Camus writes, "The truth is that nothing is less sensational than pestilence, and by reason of their very duration great misfortunes are monotonous," and "[people] who hitherto had shown a keen interest in every scrap of news concerning the plague now displayed none at all."

And regarding the actions of some politicians as contrasted to their words, Camus says, "But the most dangerous effect of the exhaustion steadily gaining on all engaged in the fight against the epidemic did not consist in the relative indifference to outside events and the feelings of others, but in the slackness and supineness that they allowed to invade their personal lives. They developed a tendency to shirk every movement that didn't seem absolutely necessary or called for efforts that seemed too great to be worth while. Thus these men were led to break, oftener and oftener, the rules of hygiene they themselves had instituted, to omit some of the numerous disinfections they should have practiced, and sometimes to visit the homes of people suffering from pneumonic plague without taking steps to safeguard themselves from infection..."

And some observations are perennially applicable: "Stupidity has a knack of getting its way; as we should see if we were not always so wrapped up in ourselves." [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
mleeper@optonline.net

Quote of the Week:

I just love dogs, and there really is no better
companion than an animal.

--Rita Rudner

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