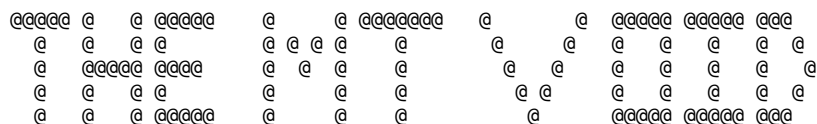


MT VOID 10/08/21 -- Vol. 40, No. 15, Whole Number 2192



Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
10/08/21 -- Vol. 40, No. 15, Whole Number 2192

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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.

THE FLY (1958) (film comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Two weeks ago I made THE FLY (1958) my pick for November, but did not say very much about it. Let me say some more this week.

THE FLY (1958) is a film that surprised even its producers. They knew the story was a little silly and expected only a modest return on the film from a mostly young audience. Even the film's name stars, Vincent Price and Herbert Marshall, could not take THE FLY seriously. The audience, on the other hand, found that there was much to respond to in the film. THE FLY cost \$350,000 to make and grossed \$3,000,000 on its release, considerably outstripping any expectation. Based on results of this film 20th Century Fox went on to make several other science fiction films. I would contend that the reason this film had the impact that it did is that it really is very much an archetypal story, an "Oedipus Rex" for the scientific age. It is the story of a man who has just about anything a man could want and loses it all in a moment of hubris. Helene and Andre Delambre, the major characters, have a warm and loving relationship and they love life. Andre himself just follows his curiosity as his profession, and that provides enough so they live very well. And in one moment of pride and carelessness it was all turned into horror. It is interesting to note that this is a film with no human--or even non-human--villains. Essentially, everybody wants the best for everybody else. It is basically people after a disastrous mistake struggling to put things right again. It is most unusual to have a horror film in which there is no ill-will. People even are doing what they see as acting in young Philippe's best interest when they so brazenly lie to him. Today candor seems a little more in vogue.

The film was directed by Kurt Neumann, who counted among his films several low-budget Tarzan movies, ROCKETSHIP X-M, and more recently (for Fox) SHE DEVIL and KRONOS. With the possible exception of KRONOS, there is not much there to suggest that he could have been responsible for how well THE FLY resonated with audiences. More likely it is the mythic elements from the story. THE FLY is based on a short story by George Langelaan that appeared in Playboy magazine.

The original story took place in France, but here it was moved to Montreal to explain the French names while placing it in an environment that the audience could identify with. The plot starts almost immediately with a strange mystery. Andre and Helene Delambre (Al Hedison and Patricia Owens) seemed to be in love as much as any married couple could be. Andre and his brother Francois owned an extremely successful electronics research and development company. Things seemed perfect for them and it. But in

the first moments of the plot the idyllic life of the Delambres is over. The night watchman at Delambre Freres has found Helene over the dead body of Andre. It seems he was killed in a factory press. What makes this all seem even stranger is that Andre should have known the press was coming down if it was. He would have had to have been a most cooperative victim in his own murder. What is more, Helene did not know how to operate the press. That just does not make any kind of sense.

Francois is called almost immediately by Helene and he in turn calls in Inspector Charas of the Surete to do the police work. Helene admits to the killing, but refuses to give answer certain questions so that the action still just does not add up. Helene is free with some information, but other questions she insists that she cannot answer. The one hole in this behavior is that she seems to have developed a fixation on seeing flies--any fly that can be caught. Francois finds out that Helene is looking for a particular fly with a white head. In an attempt to find out what really happened, he bluffs to Helene that he has the fly and convinces her that he will destroy the fly as she wants if she will explain why and how she killed Andre. She begins to tell her story.

In the flashback story Andre unveils to her the device that has occupied much of his time recently. He has developed a matter transmission machine. It disintegrates solid objects placed in a transmission booth, transmits the matter to a receiving booth and reintegrates the object. In demonstrating the machine it generally works, but has occasional malfunctions--not surprisingly for a new piece of technology. At first the machine creates a mirror image of the object being transmitted. Then for an unknown reason it fails to reintegrate just when the family cat Dandello is sent. But eventually it seems to be reliable, transmitting a guinea pig and allowing her to reintegrate. The machine seems to work and Andre invites Francois to see the machine in action. But instead of meeting his brother he leaves a note that he cannot see Francois. At about the same time Philippe finds a white-headed fly, but Helene makes him let it go. Andre refuses to leave the lab or be seen. That night he passes another note out of the lab saying he has had a problem. It seems he wants Helene to look for a particular fly with a white head. She is allowed into the lab, but Andre has a cloth over his head and his hand in his pocket. When Helene tells Andre that she made Philippe release a fly with the white head Andre is shocked enough to take what should be his left hand out of his pocket, but instead of a hand there is a sort of black claw. Andre can eat only liquids which he seems to noisily slurp. It seems that Andre transmitted himself with a fly in the box with him and the two had their atoms mixed. Now he needs the fly to untangle the two. The next day Helene and Philippe search for the white-headed fly. They succeed only in unknowingly letting the very fly they want get out the window.

Andre loses heart when the fly is not found and finds he is losing control of his head and hand. He knows he needs the fly to unscramble the atoms but he allows himself to cooperate with Helene. He transmits himself one more time in the absurd belief that it will do some good. Helene, ever the optimist, pulls the cloth from his head and finds herself looking at a human-sized fly head. (Note: in the story it is a cat head with fly eyes, a side effect of the loss of Dandello.) Andre sees Helene's screaming face through compound eyes in one of the most horrific scenes of any film ever. Helene faints and Andre trying to control his body lays her out on a couch in safety. The horror gives way to tragedy as Andre tries to kiss Helene and realizes that he is no longer physically capable of kissing or caressing her. In angry frustration he destroys his laboratory and burns his notes. Pulling the cloth back over his head he writes on the blackboard asking Helene for help in destroying himself. More and more the fly hand seems to be following orders of its own, his last humanity is being lost. Andre takes Helene to the room with the press and with her help he manages to commit suicide, being crushed in the press to destroy all evidence of what happened to him.

Back in the present Francois and Inspector Charas cannot believe the story. The inspector is going to have Helene arrested. He returns with a warrant for murder against her. Helene is expecting that having told the story her trouble are over and remains confident until she finds out that Francois did not have the white-headed fly. Helene is terrified that Philippe will see her being arrested and asks Francois to take him away. Francois and Philippe make small talk and Philippe, not realizing the significance, says that he has seen the fly in a web. Francois is dumb-struck and runs to Charas insisting that he come and see. Charas follows reluctantly and is shocked to see a human-headed fly in the web just as a spider attacks it. Charas takes a rock and destroys the spider and the fly. Then, admitting to as much of a murder as Helene has committed, he and Francois concoct a story to cover up Helene's crime.

The only really familiar actors in the film at the time were Vincent Price and Herbert Marshall. Both thought the film hilarious, particularly the scene of the fly in the web, and luckily they were relegated to what were actually very secondary parts. Patricia Owens is really the main character and deserved top billing with secondary credit going to Al "David" Hedison. Ironically and luckily both give better performances than Price. David Hedison went on to co-star in *THE LOST WORLD* and then to have a long run on television in *VOYAGE TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA*, all for 20th Century Fox.

There is genuine suspense in the film's mystery. Helene's actions seem to be so out of character for her. Every conventional explanation has a good reason why it does not explain the facts. Andre had to have, at some level, cooperated with Helene, even if only to the extent to show Helene how to run the press. Yet Andre should have been able to commit suicide by himself had he wanted. Clearly they both must have suddenly wanted Andre dead. And that seems to make no sense. Then James Clavell adapted the George Langelaan story into a screenplay. Clavell is, of course, known best for a series of best-selling novels set in the Far East including *SHOGUN*. Clavell also wrote the screenplay for *THE SATAN BUG*, taking some liberties with the original story. In this case, however, he maintained the original story very accurately. In so many other films, even the remake, the transformed human is dangerous and kills. While Andre is transformed, he never becomes a monster, in spite of being a horrifying sight. Andre loses his features and toward the end he loses control of himself, but he never loses his humanity. Kurt Neumann seems to have risen to match his script with high production values. The film has the very good look of a careful and high-quality production. It was shot in wide-screen and Technicolor.

Sadly, even with its classical tragic story this film also has its moments that are all too easily mocked. Conservation of matter would indicate that the fly's head on Andre's should be the size of a fly's head. Similarly with the human head on the fly's body, you should barely see the fly parts. The concept of the projection is different from the concept in the remake. The 1958 version has essentially a projector that moves atom for atom. It may distort the image at the far end--like reversing it--but it should not just switch selected parts. The remake has the device analyzing DNA and essentially cloning it. I would say that this is a more absurd approach to matter transmission. The simple fact is that humans play host to many small life forms from eyelash mites to a variety of organisms internally. There are many forms of DNA the machine could pick to reproduce. Adding a fly just adds one more. And why does it reproduce things like fingernails? That is non-living matter and cannot be reproduced from DNA. It has been mentioned that Helene disposes of

her husband in the time-honored tradition of disposing of flies, she squashes it in what is essentially a big swatter.

Not all of Neumann's touches work. When the night watchman sees the dead body his mouth drops open in an exaggerated scream, but instead we hear the ringing of a phone. Hitchcock could have made the scene work, but it really does not here. Neumann overuses the sound of a fly's buzzing in the background; it becomes tiresome. For the sound of the electronic equipment, a rhythmic cello-string is used, borrowing an effect from THE WAR OF THE WORLDS. The one unfortunate aspect of the script is that nobody asks the really interesting questions. What happens when you can transmit people across borders? Is the transmitted human really the same person or just a replica? For at least some serious questions you must see THE CURSE OF THE FLY and David Cronenberg's semi-remake. The fly's head on Andre is quite well done and not made huge, as it was in the sequel THE RETURN OF THE FLY. There was no good way to give a fly a human head and little daub of white paint on the head is not convincing. It is surprising in the scene where Helene and Philippe are trying to capture what really is the right fly, they were not saying the fly's head was white--an important detail and one they would look for.

This is for me one of the milestones of the Fifties science fiction film, and I give it a +3 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

TCM's October Promotion Email:

Join ACTOR Mario Cantone and TCM host Ben Mankiewicz EACH SUNDAY EVENING IN OCTOBER for thrills, chills and some laughs along the way. From creepy kids to terrifying family hauntings, there is nothing more classic than scares and screams at Halloween.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 3 Creature Features

8:00 PM The Birds (1963)

10:15 PM Little Shop of Horrors (1986)

Sunday, October 10 Creepy Kids

8:00 PM The Bad Seed (1956)

10:15 PM It's Alive (1974)

Sunday, October 17 Family Hauntings

8:00 PM Poltergeist (1982)

10:00 PM Burnt Offerings (1976)

Sunday, October 24 Bette and Joan Horror

8:00 PM What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? (1962)

10:30 PM Strait-Jacket (1964)

Sunday, October 31 Slashers

8:00 PM Psycho (1960)

10:00 PM Blow Out (1981)

Then spend Halloween with TCM with our Happy Halloween Marathon!

32 Movies Starting October 29 at 8 p.m. through October 31

[-tcm]

The "Living Dead" Saga (letter of comment by Dorothy J. Heydt):

In response to [Mark's comments on the "Living Dead" saga](#) in the 10/01/21 issue of the MT VOID, Dorothy J. Heydt writes:

Magnificent prose saved to disk. Bravo! [-djh]

FORBIDDEN PLANET (letter of comment by Dorothy J. Heydt):

In response to [Kip William's comments on a "Forbidden Planet" 45rpm disc](#) in the 10/01/21 issue of the MT VOID, Dorothy J. Heydt writes:

I had one of those 45s once: it was actually performed by Louis and Bebe Barron on their electronic instruments, and was not bad. I did a solo modern dance to it for some occasion or other in junior college and got a lot of applause. (Never mind that I forgot my carefully prepared choreography halfway through and had to improvise. Ah, youth ... mine and my audience's.) [-djh]

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

Well, I've finally caught up with my Hugo reading; this week I'll comment on the novelettes.

"Burn, or the Episodic Life of Sam Wells as a Super", A. T. Greenblatt (Uncanny Magazine, May/June 2020): Sam Wells wants to join the other superheroes, but his super-power is that he can set himself on fire, which hardly seems useful. On the other hand, he is also an accountant... An interesting twist on the super-hero genre.

"Helicopter Story", Isabel Fall (Clarkesworld, January 2020): This generated a lot of controversy when it was first published under the title "I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter", with so much vituperation directed at Fall personally that she asked to have the story taken down, and basically disappeared from social media for a while. Whether the title change has resolved these issues is not clear (I suspect not entirely), Fall did accept the nomination, so some sort of toning down has probably been achieved. That said, I'm not sure I get *why* this was nominated for a Hugo. Yes, it examines gender roles in a new way; contrast this with such earlier works as THE SHIP WHO SANG or ROBOCOP, which ignore gender issues altogether. Maybe (as I often fall back on) I'm not the target audience, or maybe I'm just an old fart who is out of touch with the world today, but it didn't ring the Hugo bell for me.

"The Inaccessibility of Heaven", Aliette de Bodard (Uncanny Magazine, July/August 2020): This is a crime story set among the Fallen, that is, the fallen angels after a rebellion in Heaven, though the world itself it not quite ours. On the other hand, if Heaven and the fallen angels and all that were real, maybe our world *would* look like this. An interesting world-building exercise.

"Monster", Naomi Kritzer (Clarkesworld, January 2020): ****SEMI-SPOILER**** This is another "super-powers" story, though quite different from Greenblatt's "Burn". Kritzer uses a series of flashbacks within her "current" narrative to slowly reveal the situation to which the main character is reacting. It becomes obvious halfway through what is going on, and the resolution has a touch of "pulling a rabbit out of a hat." It's an okay story, but nothing great. "The Pill", Meg Elison (from Big Girl, (PM Press)): The basic premise is a pill that lets fat people lose all their excess weight with no real effort (though there is some pain), but it kills ten percent of the people who take it. It is all about body image, body shame, and basically the same lookism that Ted Chiang addresses in his "Liking What You See", but with the action being initiated by the "target" rather than the "observers". Elison also ups the ante by bringing in effects due to the change being real rather than merely apparent. Insurers and those who pay the insurers--hence most corporations--pressure fat people to take the pill. When enough people have taken it, finding clothing, or furniture, or anything, that will accommodate fat people becomes increasingly difficult. But there are other, less predictable, effects as well. A thoughtful, and well-thought-out, look at the social effects of a technological change.

"Two Truths and a Lie", Sarah Pinsker (Tor.com): This explores the boundaries between truths and lies and what happens when that boundary blurs. I felt a little out of touch, though, when Pinsker talks about the games Truth or Dare, or Two Truths and a Lie, she is talking about things after my time. Truth or Dare has been around since 1712 (supposedly), but only really caught on after Madonna popularized it in 1991. I have no idea when Two Truths and a Lie came along.

Ranking: "The Pill", "The Inaccessibility of Heaven", "Burn, or the Episodic Life of Sam Wells as a Super", "Monster", no award, "Helicopter Story", "Two Truths and a Lie"

[-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

I like long walks, especially when they are taken
by people who annoy me.

--Noel Coward

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