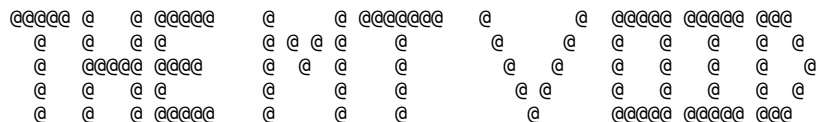


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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
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http://leepers.us/mtvoid/back_issues.htm.

Mini Reviews, Part 1 (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

It is that time of year again when I vote on awards for films. This is one very nice perq of my hobby of writing film reviews and being a member of the Online Film Critic Society. Filmmakers and publicists *want* me to see their films in the hopes that they (the films, not the people) will be considered for awards. I get to see new films either on-line or I get discs (or used to--these seem to be on the way out).

I cannot write my usual format for every film I see, but I can write brief reviews for many. I do not know where these films will play. These films may play in local theaters or in Manhattan art houses. But I can let people know what to look for on Amazon Prime and/or Netflix.

This year is a bit closer to a standard year, though the releases did get started later than usual. Far fewer films were released to theaters, and they split the difference on the Academy Awards (the focus of the awards season) by having it at the end of March 2022 (they used to be at the end of February; in 2021 they were at the end of April).

But here is the first batch, two documentaries about the oceans and the people who study them.

PLAYING WITH SHARKS--THE VALERIE TAYLOR STORY: This National Geographic film tells the story of Valerie Taylor, who has worked to educate the world about sharks, and to promote conservation efforts for them. It (and Taylor) are saying that the activity of the title is not nearly as dangerous as it suggests. (Taylor at one point says, "It's more dangerous to have a backyard pool" than to go swimming in the ocean.) One problem, of course, is that the world wants its monsters even if they are not true monsters.

Valerie Taylor has studied sharks since the 1950s. (She is now 85 years old and still diving.) The camera's eye shows you scenes from the early days of profligate hunting of sharks and one knows that the anti-shark attitude will be coming along soon.

Fueled by curiosity, Valerie Taylor and a group of other divers went searching to film a great white shark under water, something that had never been done before due to the lack of cameras and camera operators who could dive. Some of this footage was used for the film BLUE WATER, WHITE DEATH. Taylor was also involved in the making of JAWS, and there is some information on that as well. (When he realized that JAWS resulted in a massive increase in shark hunting, Benchley regretted writing it. Taylor does not say she regrets her involvement, but rather emphasizes that the film is fiction.) In general, between the divers portrayed and the sharks the attitude now seems to be pretty much live and let live.

[I hope there are subtitles, because many of the interviewees had fairly strong Australian accents.]

Released on Disney+ 07/23/21. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4), or 8/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11226258/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/playing_with_sharks

BECOMING COUSTEAU: This is a biography of Jacques-Yves Cousteau. Just like Valerie Taylor in PLAYING WITH SHARKS, Cousteau started with spear fishing and dynamiting to count fish, but ended as a strong environmentalist. Cousteau describes being underwater like being in heaven, where you have no gravity; it is utterly fantastic. His earliest interests were in flying (also in a sense a realm of decreased gravity), but a bad accident convinced him to change track to deep-sea diving and brought him to a fascination that would obviously last his whole life.

Although the photography is in monochrome at the beginning (due to the constraints of early underwater photography), some shots or parts of them are then colorized, either realistically or in a more psychedelic fashion. Interviews with Stuart Paton (20,000 LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA (1916)), and Louis Malle discussed some of the constraints. Malle's film with Cousteau, THE SILENT WORLD, won the Oscar for Best Documentary, though Cousteau says, "Our films are not documentaries. They are true adventure films."

The demands of the environment under the sea suggested to Cousteau technical inventions for better exploring and understanding that environment, including the aqualung. World War II interrupted his diving but when it was over, new opportunities with the Navy came along in terms of exploring sunken ships and planes. When diving using the aqualung, he could see much more under the water, but there were dangers from "Rapture of the Deep". His dedicated ship, Calypso, a refurbished mine sweeper, first sailed in 1951. In 1953 he was offered a job in oil research, and found (among other things) Abu Dhabi's oil. Later he found himself regretting some of these choices.

Cousteau made many films and television shows. The first episode of "The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau" was about sharks; Cousteau was far less sanguine than Valerie Taylor about sharks' natures, though his attitude was never that there should be a mass slaughter of them. Cousteau also once foresaw a time when people would live in cities under the sea, but came to reject that idea. BECOMING COUSTEAU goes into how Cousteau's views evolved and how he got involved in saving the ecologies of the seas and oceans. These days nearly every documentary about nature will contain a downbeat note that the world we see is being destroyed by the selfishness of people, and this film is no different.

Caveat: The subtitles for French-speakers are very badly done, with white-on-white making them hard to read.

Released theatrically 10/22/21. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4), or 6/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10334438/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/becoming_cousteau

[-mrl/ec1]

THE RESCUE (film review by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

THE RESCUE is a documentary about the rescue of a Thai boys' soccer team trapped in Tham Luang Cave in June 2018, when an early monsoon rainfall blocked many of the entrances and would soon flood the cave. The team was trapped behind lower passages that had filled with water. The main "narrator" is Vern Unsworth, a British cave diver who had mapped a lot of the cave.

The first step was to assemble a rescue team. These were not professionals, but men whose hobby was cave diving, and they were acknowledged to be the best in the world. They were also introverts, did not play team sports when they were young, and often had been bullied as children. Even though they were experts, few cave divers have experienced conditions like this where the only path out includes extensive underwater navigation in a very strong current of murky water.

Their first dive found three additional trapped workers, men who had been working the pumps but had been caught by the rising waters. Their rescue gave the cave divers valuable information about how to accomplish their main goal.

The Thai Navy SEALs did some of the original rescue work including exploring the cave, then they turned it over to the British cave divers. At one point, the British felt it was hopeless--they had had great difficulty in bringing the pump workers out in thirty seconds under water, and could not see how they could bring children out in what would be a multi-hour trip. However, the SEALs refused to give up and took back the job until one died. At that point, the British realized they could not give up, and resumed their task. On Day 10 the dozen soccer players were found deep within the cave. Food was brought in, but the oxygen level in their section of the cave was down to 15%, below what would sustain life for long.

Having rescued someone from a cave is like no other caving experience. No place is the experience valuable except in going through the experience for another flooded cave. Because of the problems with the pump workers, one suggestion was to sedate the boys and bring them out unconscious. Although everyone agreed this was a terrible plan, ultimately they agreed this was the only plan that had any chance of working. Ultimately, they brought all the boys (and their coach) out on Days 15 through 17. And within hours of the last rescue, the cave flooded completely.

The same directors, E. Chai Basarhelyi and Jimmy Chin, previously made the documentary FREE SOLO, so they are familiar with filming tense outdoor scenes, which here was dramatic cave photography. Obviously a lot of the rescue operation footage was obviously recreated later, though authentically by the original participants, but there were at least fifteen minutes of original footage taken from almost 87 hours that the Thai SEALs had captured on cameras they carried. There is also an interesting animation style for telling of the legend of the cave and the end credits. Unfortunately, while the rescue was a momentous rescue, the film ended up just average, with perhaps too many scenes of people outside the cave that did not convey new information.

Released theatrically 10/08/2021. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4), or 7/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9098872/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_rescue_2021

ENTANGLED LIFE: HOW FUNGI MAKE OUR WORLDS, CHANGE OUR MINDS & SHAPE OUR FUTURES by Merlin Sheldrake (book review by Gregory Frederick):

This is a great science book by Merlin Sheldrake, a mycologist who studies underground fungal networks. There are more than 2 million species of fungi. Most take the form of multi-cellular filaments called hyphae, which grow at their tips, and branch in many directions, mate, fuse, and tangle, creating the networks known as mycelia. What we see above ground are the mushrooms, brackets and molds, which are the fruiting bodies that sprout from the mycelia to release spores. 50 megatons of spore a year are released. Spores float and concentrate in the atmosphere, sometimes changing the weather for example when a water droplet forms on one, this becomes the nucleus of a raindrop or hailstone.

White rot fungus can help solve our problems with too much waste and with toxic spills. Researchers have found that this fungus can devour used paper diapers when the plastic covering is removed. And the mushrooms produced from this action were healthy and free from human diseases. This fungus can also quickly decompose used cigarette butts, which normally do not decompose quickly due to the toxic chemicals in them that slows down decomposition. Even toxic herbicides can be metabolized when the fungus is given a diet of only that herbicide. Fungi can also degrade pesticides, synthetic dyes, explosives (like TNT), crude oil, some plastics, and human and veterinary drugs not removed by wastewater treatment.

Fungi have survived calamitous times and extinction events. And are so robust that radiotrophic fungi can even harvest energy emitted by radioactive particles. This is the first book from this author and it is a very interesting read. [-gf]

Halloween Binge Watching (comments Evelyn C. Leeper):

For Halloween this year we binged the Universal horror cycle. We did not watch *every* Universal horror film (there are about 150 of them!), and we stuck pretty much to the main through-line. So we did not include films such as DRACULA'S DAUGHTER or THE INVISIBLE AGENT (though it is not clear why the mere use of the name "Griffin" should get THE INVISIBLE MAN'S REVENGE included). At any rate, the schedule ran as follows:

Thursday, October 28:

Carl Laemmle

Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman (1943)

Friday, October 29:

DRACULA (1931)

FRANKENSTEIN (1931)

THE MUMMY (1932)

THE INVISIBLE MAN (1933)

SIX MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT (2021)

THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN (1935)

THE WOLF MAN (1941)

Saturday, October 30:

SON OF FRANKENSTEIN (1939)

THE GHOST OF FRANKENSTEIN (1942)

THE INVISIBLE MAN RETURNS (1940)

THE MUMMY'S HAND (1940)

THE MUMMY'S TOMB (1942)

THE MUMMY'S GHOST (1944)

THE MUMMY'S CURSE (1944)

THE INVISIBLE MAN'S REVENGE (1944)

Sunday, October 31:

HOUSE OF DRACULA (1945)

HOUSE OF FRANKENSTEIN (1945)

Then rather than proceed to the "Abbott and Costello" films, we switched to haunted house films (and music):

THE UNINVITED (1944)
THE LEGEND OF HELL HOUSE (1973)
POLTERGEIST (1982)
The Cincinnati Pops "Chiller" album

We watched the Universal films mostly in chronological order, but putting SON OF FRANKENSTEIN and THE GHOST OF FRANKENSTEIN together, and also running the four "Kharis" films consecutively.

A few observations: A lot of music gets re-used. Quite a few actors get re-used, some in the same role, but many in different roles, even in the same thread. Michael Mark, for example, was Maria's father in FRANKENSTEIN, a councilor who is killed in SON OF FRANKENSTEIN, a (presumably different) councilor in GHOST OF FRANKENSTEIN, and one of the men who sent Niemann to prison in HOUSE OF FRANKENSTEIN, not to mention many roles in other Universal horror films. (Think of him as the Michael Ripper of Universal Studios.)

One note on HOUSE OF FRANKENSTEIN: There are no sympathetic characters, except for possibly Larry Talbot, and he's the Wolf Man. Daniel might have been one, but he's a murderer, as is Niemann. Ilonka is shallow, and cruel to Daniel. Dracula and the Monster are, well, Dracula and the Monster (now shorn of any sympathetic characteristics).

I don't have to point out that the "Kharis" movies are a mess, with Mayan temples, southern California landscapes, and a swamp in New England that apparently connects through a wormhole to one in Louisiana. (Oh, and a character who confuses werewolves with mummies.) [-ecl]

Wolfgang Puck (letter of comment by Pete Rubinstein):

In response to [Mark and Evelyn's review of WOLFGANG](#) in the 10/29/21 issue of the MT VOID, Pete Rubinstein writes:

[Mark and Evelyn wrote:] "Puck changed that. For example, he apparently invented the Asian chicken salad. He also started the whole celebrity chef/food show culture." [-mrl/ecl]

I always thought Julia Child came first. (Or doesn't she count as a celebrity? Or did she fail to "change the culture"?) [-pr]

Evelyn responds:

A bit of both. Child was a chef on television, but on public television, and did not start up a chain of restaurants, a brand of food in supermarkets, and the sort of following that rock stars get. [-ecl]

Oysters, CASINO ROYALE and NEVER SAY NEVER AGAIN, Latin, and the Eastern Roman Empire (letter of comment by John Hertz):

In response to various comments previous issues of the MT VOID, John Hertz writes:

In MT VOID 2182 (07/30/21) "Rogue oysters threaten to disrupt Tokyo Olympics after officials shelled out \$1 million for repairs" seems to be Mark's. Evidently no commenter noticed how raw this was. They otter.

About the 1967 CASINO ROYALE (J. Huston et al dirs.), and the 1983 NEVER SAY NEVER AGAIN (I. Kershner dir.), which Evelyn can't stand (MT VOID 2183, 8/6/21), I'm reminded of leaving the theater with Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle after RETURN OF THE JEDI (R. Marquand dir. 1983). Pournelle found fault at length--not without justice. Niven answered, "Well, *I* liked it."

Much can be, has been, and should be said about Latin (MT VOID 2185, 8/20/21; 2186, 8/27/21). I did in VANAMONDE 1454 (7/5/21; the poem is acrostic, like Japanese tanka):

Later it would fall,
Although its power, beauty,
Took evil no turn.
In its day our minds, our speech,
Nourished, seemed universal.

Latin was the language of the West for two millennia. The Romans brought it. The Church maintained it. Neither it nor anything else could or did go on so long merely by command; people found it helped communication. From Poland to England, from Sweden to Spain, you could write to anyone, and travelers could talk; in itself it was considered expressive, indeed using it was felt to improve thought. Much of it has been influenced and been adopted into English--not at all incidentally, those (and "incidentally") are Latin words. "E pluribus unum" ("Out of many, one")--which I wish the United States had not replaced as a motto in 1956--is Latin; so is the warning I still must keep in mind, "Brevis esse laboro obscurus fio" ("When I labor to be brief, I become obscure"). Let us treat with respect even what we do not care to resume.

About the Eastern Empire (MT VOID 2187, 9/03/21), I was a good boy at Loscon XXIII when moderating "Twenty Questions for Harry Turtledove" who was Pro Guest of Honor, and finding we'd run out of questions submitted in advance, I got some from the audience, added a few myself, and in a magisterial exercise of self-restraint did not ask "Why did Byzantium fall?" He has ever since

been suitably grateful. [-jh]

Evelyn responds:

The articles on animals were pretty much mine, not Mark's.

Why did Byzantium fall? Because the Arabs invented/built a cannon strong enough to breach the Theodosian walls. That's pretty straightforward. A more complicated question is why the Western Empire fell. [-ecl]

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

As I write this, I have not yet seen the new movie, THE GREEN KNIGHT, but I figured I should re-read the original, especially since I last read it back in college fifty years ago. The "Classical Stuff You Should Know" podcast had an episode and read some of SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT translated by Simon Armitage (Norton, ISBN 978-0-393-06048-5). This is a wonderful translation that preserves the alliterative form of the poem. Note that I do not say it preserves the alliteration of the original; in fact, most of the lines seem to have been considerably changed. (For example, in lines 150 through 159, only one line of the translation has the same alliterative sound as the original.) Armitage notes this in his introduction (which is very informative about English poetry of the 14th Century), saying that the need to choose words in modern English determined the patterns.

However, I sometimes find Armitage's word choice odd. "Ebullience" (line 86) is a modern word, but seems out of place in this epic. "Inveigle" (line 804) may have a French/Latin origin, but still sounds out of place. "He leaps from where he lies at a heck of a lick" (line 1309)--a heck of a lick? Really? "Snooty" (line 1496) also seems a bit informal.

Sometimes Armitage abandons modern English altogether. For example, I don't think "gralloching" (line 1340) or "nithering" (line 2002) are words much in use today. But oddly, they are not the original words either. I have no idea how Armitage came up with them.

Obviously some of these observations depend on seeing the original. Luckily, this edition has the original Middle English (*not* Old English--it was written around 1400) and the Armitage translation on facing pages. I had the idea of reading the original--after all, I had read all of THE CANTERBURY TALES in the original in college, and it was written at the same time. But it is like comparing William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway (or Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Luis Borges). Just because two works are in the same language does not make them equally accessible.

So you can see what I mean, here are the Prologue from THE CANTERBURY TALES, and the opening lines of SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT:

Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote,
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y--ronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye,
So priketh hem Nature in hir corages,
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially, from every shires ende
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.
[--THE CANTERBURY TALES]

Sithen the sege and the assaut watz sesed at troye,
The bory brittened and brent to brondez and askez,
The tulk that the trammes of tresoun ther wroyt
Watz tried for his tricherie the trewest on erthe.
Hit watz Ennias the athel and his highe kynde
That sithen depreced prouinces and patrounes bicom
Welneye of al the wele in the West Iles:
Fro riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swythe,
With gret bobbaunce that burye he biges vpon first,
And neuenes hit his aune nome as hit now hat;
Ticius to Tuskan and teldes bigynnes;
Langaberde in Lumbardie lyftes vp homes
And fer ouer the French flod Felix Brutus
On many bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez
Wyth wyne,
Where werre and wrake and wonder
Bi sythez hatz wont therinne,
And oft bothe blysse and blunder
Ful skete hatz skyfted synne.
[--SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT]

[The capitalization and punctuation of SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT are Armitage's, as well as the substitution of "th" for "thorn" and "y" for "yogh".]

As for the poem itself, I still have the same problem--the fantasy elements seem out of place for the time and setting. Yes, I know Arthurian legend is full of fantasy--the sword in the stone, Excalibur (*not* the same sword!), Merlin's prophecies and imprisonment in a tree, etc.--but those don't seem as wildly at odds with the medieval Christian context as someone who disguises himself as totally green and survives having his head cut off. Or that no one at the dinner where that happens seems even surprised by it.

[Merlin living backward seems to be the invention of T. H. White in THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING.]

For those who enjoy the old alliterative style, there is a translation by J. R. R. Tolkien of SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT in that style. I have not read that, but Tolkien also wrote an original poem in that style, THE FALL OF ARTHUR by J. R. R. Tolkien (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, ISBN 978-0-544-11589-7). The poem itself is rather short (and apparently unfinished), but there are several essays about its creation and so on to fill out the book. Here are the opening lines:

Arthur eastward in arms purposed
is war to wage on the wild marches,
over seas to Saxon lands,
from the Roman realm ruin defending.
Thus the tides of time to turn backward
and the heathen to humble, his hope urged him,
that with harrying ships they should hunt no more
on the shining shores and shallow waters
of South Britain, booty seeking.
[--THE FALL OF ARTHUR]

And speaking of booty, THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF COINED WORDS by Ralph Keyes (Oxford University Press, ISBN 978-0-19-046676-3) notes in the introduction that one needs to be careful in citing first uses, and especially when automated methods are used. For example, Google's Ngram says "booty call" was used in an ancient hymn in Sanskrit. It turns out the quotation was "Men in the strife of booty call on Indra."

I got THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF COINED WORDS from the library primarily for the chapter on neologisms from science fiction, which turned out to be distressingly skimpy--it included "robots" and "robotics", "genetic engineering", "pod person", "Stepford wife", "Manchurian candidate", "thoughtcrime", "doublespeak" (and other "-speak" forms)", "grok", and a variety of space and space travel terms", but oddly *not* "Big Brother" or "terraforming".

Shakespeare is known to have coined a lot of words, but Milton is almost as prolific percentage-wise in PARADISE LOST, having coined several hundred words and phrases, including "advantage", "damp", "fragrance", "obtrusive", "sectarian", "all hell broke loose", "by hook or by crook", and of course "Satanic".

After I gave Borges as an example of "easy" reading (in the review of SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT above), I read the following statement by him in SEVEN CONVERSATIONS WITH JORGE LUIS BORGES by Fernando Sorrentino (translated by Clark M. Zlotchew, Paul Dry Books, ISBN 978-1-589-88060-3): "The truth is that to reach the point of writing in a more or less uncluttered manner, a more or less decorous manner, I'd had to reach the age of seventy." In another interview, Borges says, "I believe in my latest books there is a certain simplicity, a deliberate poverty of vocabulary or ... a certain economy of vocabulary which could be beneficial." Even so, it is clear that he abandoned an overly baroque style fairly early on.

Borges once said, "I do not believe that the entire dictionary is fit for literary treatment. We can take (for example) three words: 'azulado', 'azulino' and 'azuloso', [all meaning 'bluish']. I believe that 'azulado' can be used in writing because it is in our oral usage. 'Azulino' and 'azuloso', on the other hand, are words that are in the dictionary, but not in our mouths. Thus it is better not to use 'azulino' or 'azuloso', stumbling blocks to the reader and small surprises that the writer gives." [pages 155-156, "Borges ante el espejo"] In "The Aleph" he writes, "[Danieri] had revised them following his pet principle of verbal ostentation: where at first 'blue' had been good enough, he now wallowed in 'azures', 'ceruleans', and 'ultramarines'. The word 'milky' was too easy for him; in the course of an impassioned description of a shed where wool was washed, he chose such words as 'lacteal', 'lactescent" and even made one up--'lactinacious'." [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Most people eat as though they were fattening
themselves for market.

--E.W. Howe

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