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Six Lost Worlds: The Dramatic Adaptations of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Novel (Part 2) (film comments by Mark R. Leeper):

[continued from last week]

THE LOST WORLD (1960)

The 1960 version of THE LOST WORLD was the first version I ever saw, not too surprising for anyone of the Baby Boomer generation. Most critics think that it is a totally ugly dog. I can sympathize with that point of view, but do not agree. It certainly is a giant step down from the 1925 version. But in the context of a 1960 film, it comes off a bit better. The 1950s had several gaudy adventure films of much the same style, films like RUN FOR THE SUN. In years to come the same sort of film would be a special effects extravaganza, but in the 1950s filmmakers would use real settings.

Infusing a little bit of science fiction into that formula is a welcome variation. One can almost reconcile oneself to the film in that context but then one remembers how badly the "dinosaur" effects are created. And there is Frosty the Poodle. The film just has its good and more than its share of bad moments.

The 1960 version of THE LOST WORLD, directed by Irwin Allen (who also produced and co-wrote the screenplay with Charles Bennett), boasted the name of Willis O'Brien as "effects technician." Sadly the dinosaur effects were created by the later illegal practice of using live lizards, perhaps enhancing their looks by pasting horns or plates on them, and then having them fight other such lizards. It was cruel to the animals and only the least discerning audiences could suspend disbelief and think of these things as dinosaurs. Part of what makes dinosaurs dinosaurs is that they stand straight upon their legs the way an elephant does. Lizards have legs that go out to the side. Dinosaur bodies can support more weight because their legs are like columns under them for support. The previous year lizards were used to good effect in JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH to simulate Dimetrodons. However, Dimetrodons were not lizards and not dinosaurs.

This version is not a very good rendering of the story, in spite of introducing color to the adaptations. It nonetheless was my introduction to Doyle's story and as such it has fond memories for me. Rains is too thin to play the barrel-chested discoverer, but otherwise he is not too bad at playing Challenger. He has the personality approximately right. His acting is the best thing about this adaptation. On the other hand, choosing comic actor Richard Hayden as Summerlee was a fiasco. His performance grates on one's nerves whenever he is on the screen. He acts as if he is in some other movie. Michael Rennie makes a decent Roxton. He has the self-assured quality that Doyle would have appreciated. David Hedison is a little old to play Edward Malone and have the sort of boyish enthusiasm and insecurities that Doyle gave that character.

Irwin Allen updates the story to roughly 1960. The film opens with Challenger returning from the Amazon to report his discoveries of live dinosaurs on a plateau of South America. With Challenger's traditional hatred of reporters he clouts Ed Malone trying to interview him. Malone is pulled from the ground by Jennifer Holmes (Jill St. John), the daughter of his publisher.

At the geographic society Challenger reports having seen dinosaurs. The skeptical audience suggests a return visit to verify his findings. In return for funding, Challenger is saddled with a reporter on the expedition, Malone. He also gets Professor Summerlee and big game hunter Lord John Roxton. At a stop in South America the expedition picks up two local guides, pilot Manuel Gomez (Fernando Lamas) and lackey Costa (Jay Novello). (Manuel and Gomez are two different characters in the novel.) Also joining the expedition more or less by blackmail are Jennifer and her brother David (Ray Stricklyn) as well as a poodle named Frosty. The siblings are no invention of Doyle, but the choice of the name Holmes is likely an allusion to Doyle.

The expedition takes helicopter to plateau, getting magnificent views from overhead. They land the plateau but see no sign of dinosaurs. That night they hear a large beast in their vicinity, terrorizing them. They soon find their helicopter was crushed and kicked over the side of the cliff. We get a glimpse of a large lizard with a neck frill. Challenger identifies it as a brontosaurus, but what we saw did not look anything like a brontosaurus. In any case the explorers find they are now stranded on the plateau. The next day they are menaced by man-eating plants and more dinosaurs. One of the latter splits up the group and Malone and Challenger as one subgroup finds a native girl. Malone follows her and finds her, even at the cost of running through the web of a four-foot-wide tarantula spider.

Malone brings her to camp where only Roxton recognizes that capturing her could mean trouble from the rest of her tribe. Relations are about to degenerate into a fistfight when Roxton finds a strange diary. It was kept by Burton (not Maple) White who discovered the plateau in partnership with Roxton. White's diary says he is waiting for Roxton to rescue him and that he is looking for legendary diamonds. Roxton was part of that team, but let the others down. He never came to them. Now he has come again with Challenger, but with of motive of looking for the diamonds. Jennifer is deeply disappointed in the man she was hoping to catch.

David tries to comfort the native girl and in the process discovers that she knows how to use a rifle. He is about to tell the others when the group is attacked. The native girl escapes and Malone follows. He loses her and Malone returning through the forest finds Jennifer. The two are returning to camp when they find themselves in the paths of two fighting dinosaurs. They must hide as the two titans fight. This is a rather sadistic piece of footage when one sees that these are live lizards pitted against each other. Eventually they fall over the side of the plateau.

Jennifer and Mallone return to camp finding it empty. They realize that the others have been captured. In moments they find that they are also prisoners of the natives. Taken to the native city they find drum-beating ceremonies in progress. They are reunited with their fellow explorers.

Just when they realize they are to be eaten the native girl comes along to rescue David. With a little effort she is convinced to help the whole group escape. He takes them to find a blind Burton White (Ian Wolfe). White tells them there is a path thought the plateau to the base. How it got there in a volcanic plateau is hard to understand. Why would lava take such a path? But the expedition takes this path past deadly people-grabbing tendrils and a graveyard of dead dinosaurs.

The entire plateau is starting to erupt and explode. They expedition uses fire to keep back the pursuing natives. They find the diamonds, but also more trouble and another dinosaur. As they leave the plateau blows itself to pieces.

This version invents its own subplots, but which version does not? The script is not great, but it would have made for at least a good adventure film had the dinosaurs looked like dinosaurs.

For those in the audience who would recognize Willis O'Brien's name, in the credits as "effect technician." He was reportedly asked his opinion of the possibility of lizard special effects and told the producers how bad those effects were. They paid him for his opinion, ignored it, and put his name in the credits. That probably was the plan from the beginning. The film had moments, but overall was not very good. The plot is confused with a previous expedition that was bungled, a treasure hunt for diamonds, and a revenge plot. Perhaps the capper of mistakes was to have the woman expedition member bring a poodle. There is no adventure film so exciting that it cannot be ruined by the presence of a poodle. The Disney film *THE ISLAND AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD* made the same grievous error. Perhaps it was supposed to be a counterpoint of Gertrude the Duck of the previous year's far superior *JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH*, also from Fox. However, while the duck worked well, Frosty the poodle served only to demonstrate how silly this expedition was. With the exception of the dog, the writing is not really bad--it just fails to be very interesting. It might be best appreciated if one just does not look at the screen once the expedition reaches the plateau.

With all its faults, at least this film does not talk down to its audience and does not have the juvenile feel of the 1992 and 1999 versions. It has a sort of empty, Technicolor, wide-screen, 1950s feel. The plateau never looked so good as seen from above at a distance.

This was a bad and disappointing version of the Doyle, but it would neither be the last such, nor would it be the worst. Irwin Allen was aiming for an adult audience while relying on a teenage crowd (not unlike the soon to begin Bond series). The next version would wait thirty-two years, just three years short of the interval between the silent and first sound version. And the new version was definitely made with a younger audience in mind.

[continued in two weeks]

[-mrl]

SEVEN BRIEF LESSONS ON PHYSICS by Carlo Rovelli (book review by Greg Frederick):

SEVEN BRIEF LESSONS ON PHYSICS is the third book I read by the physicist Carlo Rovelli. It is a very short book at less than 100 pages but it packs a lot in it. The author describes the quanta, the Cosmos architecture, probability, time, sub-atomic particles, and black holes. Since this book is short, Rovelli introduces concepts without some detailed information. Rovelli is a big supporter and founder of the loop quantum gravity theory. This theory and String Theory are the two big competing theories to explain how to combine the four fundamental forces. As is typical of this author, the book does a good job explaining complex ideas for a casual reader. [-gf]

CONTACT and Pi (letter of comment by Keith F. Lynch):

In response to [Mark's comments on CONTACT](#) in the 07/08/22 issue of the MT VOID, Keith F. Lynch writes:

[Mark writes,] "If you have read the book, you may be a bit disappointed, since there is far more science fiction content in the original story, but the film does not exactly remain earthbound either."

The movie is a fairly generic first-contact story. But the book also contained the intriguing idea of hidden messages in the base-11 digits of pi, a subplot completely left out of the movie.

Coincidentally, just last month, inspired by the recent calculation of pi to a record hundred trillion decimal places, someone on a math chat list joked that it was done years ago, but kept secret due to the hidden messages. I responded that the hidden messages were only in base eleven and that that's why pi is always calculated in base ten instead. But, I humorously conjectured, after the Nth digit pi is the same in bases ten and eleven.

That was of course an absurd conjecture, but one impossible, at least with today's limited knowledge of pi, to disprove. (Knowing lots of digits really tells us very little about the nature of the number. It was proven irrational in the 18th century and transcendental in the 19th, but almost nothing about it has been learned since, except how to calculate lots of digits.) In specific, it isn't known whether pi is "normal" in all bases, or, indeed, in any base. If it's normal in base eleven, then there can't be any N after which it's always identical in bases ten and eleven.

But one person went further, and insisted that there can't be *any* number that's the same after the first N digits in bases ten and eleven.

Leaving aside the integers, which are obviously all .00000... in both bases, I soon found eleven rational numbers that have this unusual property. And that's just between 0 and 1. (They of course repeat between 1 and 2, and between 2 and 3, ad infinitum.) Then someone else found two more.

I have not yet found any irrational number that has this property, but I'm all but certain that infinitely many exist. I did find a number, not just irrational, but also transcendental like pi, that has this property, not for bases 10 a [-kfl]

THE LOST WORLD (letter of comment by Gary McGath):

In response to [Mark's comments on THE LOST WORLD](#) in the 07/15/22 issue of the MT VOID, Gary McGath writes:

I saw THE LOST WORLD [1960] in a second-run theater and must have been a little older than nine when I saw it, but not much. I remember immediately being disappointed with the "dinosaurs," which were obviously lizards.

It was much later that I first saw the 1925 film. I'm a fan of it. [-gmg]

Hugo Award Finalists, A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT, and Paradoxes (letter of comment by John Hertz):

In response to [the list of Hugo Award finalists](#) in the 04/08/22 issue of the MT VOID, John Hertz writes:

Not much more joy for me in this year's Hugo Ballot than in last year's. Paul Di Filippo in LOCUS loved SHADOWS OF ETERNITY, as the electronic may see at <https://locusmag.com/2021/11/paul-di-filippo-reviews-shadows-of-eternity-by-gregory-benford>. It didn't reach the ballot. Nor did you, or I, or others it would have been an honor to be crowded out by.

Maybe Tim Powers' new novel STOLEN SKIES will reach next year's ballot. It's splendid.

In response to [Kip Williams's comments on Mark Twain](#) in the same issue, John writes:

About Mark Twain's long stuff (MT VOID 2218, Vol. 40 No. 41, 8 Apr 22), the LASFS website still isn't working as I write, but I trust you will eventually be able to see my 2,000-word note on A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT there again.

YANKEE was one of the Classics of SF we discussed at Loscon XLVII. In announcing it I said [<https://file770.com/classics-of-science-fiction-at-loscon-47/>] "Is this a 'keen and powerful satire on nobility and royalty'? What about the King at the hut?" Reporting the discussion I said (VANAMONDE 1478, not available electronically):

Sunday afternoon at 2:30, I led Loscon XLVII's third Classics of SF discussion, on A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT (Mark Twain, 1889). From the audience: a classic must be seminal. Another: Or ovarian. Lively consideration of whether YANKEE is a classic *of SF*. How Hank Morgan the Yankee goes back in time is vague. I said the heart of the book is what we now call technology transfer; in Sturgeon's great pun, "Science fiction is knowledge fiction" ("science comes from the Latin for knowledge). See how Twain sets up Morgan's being able to build all kinds of things, and includes the machines to build the machines, e.g. making the wire Morgan needs so as to conduct electricity. Yet Morgan's apparent success proves a tragic failure. Where lies the tragedy? Compare Bartorstown in THE LONG TOMORROW (Leigh Brackett, 1955; discussed on Saturday) with Morgan's methods; as Twain has him say, "but no, I must pick out a picturesque one; it is the crying defect of my character" (ch. 37). Likewise his constantly blaming the people he can't reach is a bad sign; and with his wretched lambasting of the Church, it naturally is what undoes him. What of Merlin's being a fake (though he does know the territory, "Rick Island", Meredith Willson's MUSIC MAN, 1957) yet casting an effective 1,300-year sleep spell? Could Morgan's whole story be a dream--the round hole through the chain mail in the left breast (ch. 1) having in fact be made later? From the audience: Twain finished the book in a hurry, maybe he missed that.

And in response to [Evelyn's comments on PARADOXES](#) in the same issue, John writes:

About paradoxes, I'm still a fan of "'Yields a falsehood when appended to its own quotation' yields a falsehood when appended to its own quotation". [-jh]

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

Lately, I've been bingeing Agatha Christie--mostly short stories with her lesser-known continuing characters: Mr. Satterthwaite and Harley Quin, Parker Pyne, and Ariadne Oliver. I'm also reading some of the Poirot and Miss Marple stories, but not the ones I am overly familiar with from BBC radio or the Poirot television adaptations. Even if I don't remember the plots, though, it is usually easy to spot the culprit. As I have noted many times, Christie re-uses plot devices, so it's often easy to spot who has disguised themselves as someone else, or who has a fake alibi. Also, Christie re-wrote some stories, expanding them into novels, adding or deleting Poirot as a character, and so on, so often after a few paragraphs, I can recognize a supposedly unfamiliar story. (Well, not totally--I have read all of them before.)

But I am in one of those slumps where sometimes I want comfort reading. I am also reading CRIME AND PUNISHMENT by Fyodor Dostoevsky, perhaps an apt parallel, but certainly heavier going than Christie.

One question I have: Why did they never make a movie of any of the Harley Quin and Mr. Satterthwaite stories? They would seem to be something they could do really well.

Of course, if I don't get out of this slump soon, I won't have anything to write about. :-(-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Too often we... enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.

--John F. Kennedy

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