

MT VOID 08/11/23 -- Vol. 42, No. 6, Whole Number 2288



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The latest issue is at <http://www.leepers.us/mtvoid/latest.htm>.

An index with links to the issues of the MT VOID since 1986 is at

http://leepers.us/mtvoid/back_issues.htm.

Correction:

Two minutes after last week's MT VOID went out, I realized that it should have been "J. Robert Oppenheimer" rather than "Robert J. Oppenheimer". Ops. [-ecl]

Mini Reviews, Part 2 (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is the second batch of mini-reviews for this season, films of the fantastic.

THE MAN WITH THE MAGIC BOX (2017): THE MAN WITH THE MAGIC BOX is a Polish film that shows influences from MEN IN BLACK, GATTACA, Tarkovsky, and several other sources. But it's considerably lower-budget. For example, the cables connecting the android are just red/white/yellow video cables. (The "magic box" is a time machine, but there's an android as well.)

The Poles must have a different cinematic aesthetic; somehow this didn't work for me. [-ecl]

Released in Poland 20 October 2017; currently available on Kanopy. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4), or 6/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5782146/reference>

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

THE YELLOW WALLPAPER (2022): THE YELLOW WALLPAPER seemed very much like a first film, almost an amateur production, and evidence bears that out. In the end credits, there is a long list of people thanked for crowdfunding the film. Also, director K Pontuti has a Kevin Bacon number of infinity, meaning that no one acting in the film connects with people in other films in the IMDb (or at least that they are all in an isolated island of films in the IMDb). (Obviously there are connections for the author of the original work, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, since there are about two dozen films based on her 1892 short story.)

The story seems told as a series of vignettes, rather than a continuous narrative. There is very little dialogue, so the audience feels Jane's isolation. Whether this was the plan, or whether the shoestring budget meant recording more dialogue would have been too expensive is not clear. Pontuti uses extreme Dutch angles to the extent that Jane sometimes looks as though she should slide off the bed; they also photograph her face in close-up upside down.

John reminds me of Torvald in A DOLL'S HOUSE. He calls his wife by various animal names (e.g., "goose") and wants her to be concerned only with the house and the children, not with her writing. [-ecl]

Released streaming 29 March 2022. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4), or 6/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8372638/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_yellow_wallpaper_2021

65 (2023): 65 seems to have either gone through some major concept changes during production, or the right hand the left hand were not talking to each other. THIS IS NOT A SPOILER--what I'm about to tell you is told to the audience on screen in the first few minutes or so, but if you blink you will miss it.

Okay, here goes: The production notes say, "After a cataclysmic crash on an unknown planet, pilot Mills (Adam Driver) quickly discovers he's actually stranded on Earth--65 million years ago." But under the title card (seventeen minutes in), the film says, "65 million years ago a visitor crash landed on Earth." So which is it?

Well, I guess sort of obviously, the title card is correct, which means Mills never "discovers" he is on Earth, because he doesn't know anything about Earth--he's an alien from a non-Earth planet going to another non-Earth planet who ends up on Earth. (I'll add that for the ending to make sense, the title card has to be the correct answer.)

Mills and a young survivor have to travel to the escape pod, which somehow landed on top of a top near the rest of the ship. This gives them a lot of opportunity to be attacked by the dinosaurs of the Cretaceous, which seems to be the entire point of the movie. (There's a fairly shallow story about the two bonding over their respective familial losses.)

And (okay, this may be a SPOILER) they have crashed just a couple of days before ... need I go on?

A lot of the dinosaur action takes place at night or in caves, but I suppose as a 2020's version of a grade B 1950's monster film, it is an acceptable way to kill an afternoon. I do wonder why Adam Driver, who has been twice nominated for an Oscar, even took this role. (It has been noted that this was the first film in which Driver, an ex-Marine, got to use his weapons and combat training.) [-ecl]

Released theatrically 10 March 2023. Rating: 0 (-4 to +4), or 4/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12261776/reference>

What others are saying: <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/65>

DIASPORA by **Greg Egan** (copyright 1998, EOS, audiobook copyright 2013, Audible Studios, 11 hours and 5 minutes, ASIN: B00GMOI58M, narrated by Adam Epstein) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

I listen to a couple of podcasts, read Locus Magazine and various blogs, and I have yet to encounter a good definition of "hard science

fiction". Sure, rigorous science, exacting detail, long infodumps, and for a lot of readers all of that is incomprehensible. Then again, maybe I really don't mean a good definition. What I think I really mean is a good, consistent example. Long time readers of the field, those who have been around forever, will point to Hal Clement's *MISSION OF GRAVITY* as a prime example of hard science fiction, and I think they'd be correct. But I feel that a person's tolerance for the level of science in a book is more indicative of how the term should be defined. I'll be in conversations with folks who will give me an example of what they feel is hard science fiction, and in my mind I'll be thinking "What? There's hardly (sorry, no pun intended) any hard science in that book at all." Maybe it depends on a person's education, or interest in the sciences, or something else entirely.

Ah, but everyone who has read a Greg Egan novel (hold that thought) can agree that he writes hard science fiction. Greg is a mathematician, a computer programmer, and a science fiction writer. I've read more of Egan's short fiction than his novels; in fact, *DIASPORA* is only the second Egan novel that I've read. I have a degree in computer science, have been working in IT, for all of my career, and telecommunications for most of the last 34 years. I'm not one to back away from science and technology (I guess that's why I read science fiction), but Greg Egan takes hard science fiction to another level. Egan likes inventing new types of physics for his novels, and they play an important part in the stories. *DIASPORA* is no different.

The novel takes place in a posthuman society, and in fact transhumans are the dominant life form. Humanity has diverged into three separate groups: citizens, who run as disembodied computer software in communities called "polises", which are a sort of simulated reality; gleisners, software intelligences who run inside artificial bodies who interact with fleshers (don't worry, I'm getting there) in real time and live in space within the Solar System; and fleshers, which as you might guess are the natural evolving race of humans, some of whom nonetheless embrace genetic modifications such as increased intelligence or extended life span. The novel starts with a tale of "orphanogenesis", the birth of a citizen without any ancestors. This new life is Yatima, and is the main character of the story. The kickoff event is the collapse of a neutron star, which will result in such a tremendous burst of energy that it will cause the extinction of everyone living on Earth. The problem is that while the neutron star's collapse and burst of energy were predicted, they were also predicted not to occur for some seven million years. Unfortunately for humanity, the actual time frame was four days. The prediction was made by the dominant physics paradigm, call the Kozuch Theory. The majority of the novel is taken up with the tale of Yatima and others travelling throughout the universe--and eventually universes--to try to determine why the Kozuch Theory was wrong and what they can do to change it.

And this is where I finally break down. Egan invented the Kozuch Theory, and the novel goes into great detail discussing the theory and how it affects travel and life in the universe of the novel. As in Egan's other novel that I read, *INCANDESCENCE* (from 2008), I got lost in the science, so much so that it was hard to keep focused on the book as I was listening to it. I tuned out as my mind wandered to other things. I pushed my way through it, hoping that eventually it would make some sense to me, but it never really did.

Maybe another one of the reasons I tuned out was the narrator, Adam Epstein. I found his narration dull and, uh, monotonic (is that even a word?). Quite frankly, nothing in this book held my interest; even the opening chapter describing orphanogenesis started losing me early, and Epstein's narration didn't help. In the end, as much as I like science and hard science fiction, *DIASPORA* was not a book I cared for. Other readers will, I'm sure. Earlier on, I said "hold that thought" when talking about a Greg Egan novel. While the two novels of his that I read I found opaque and difficult, I find his shorter fiction (including novellas) much more appealing and accessible. It seems to be more character and plot oriented, and less interested in describing in the nitty gritty details of the science behind everything. I have *THE BEST OF GREG EGAN* sitting on my shelf, waiting to be read. I suspect I'll find that book more appealing. [-jak]

BARBIE (film review by Art Stadlin):

Saw the *BARBIE* movie last night. It was a heart-warming story of the struggle girls have as they leave the fantasy land of dolls and experience the harsh expectations of womanhood in the real world. In Barbieland, the Barbies are in charge, with the Kens taking on the role of the eye candy in an emasculated role to support the Barbies. Life is perfect for everyone in fantasy land.

But then Ken (one of the Kens) escapes to the real world, to discover the privilege and dominance men have in real society. He realizes Kens can be more than just accessories to the Barbies. So he goes back to Barbieland and tries to get the Kens to assert their rightful patriarchy. It doesn't quite work out that way.

Any movie that would turn the tables on the fundamental dominance of men is obviously woke. Even if it's only a fantasy switch, to help the audience more clearly see the struggle of young women, trying to have it all, while getting and pleasing a man.

One small example of how woke this movie is: In Barbie's fantasy land, the Supreme Court is composed entirely of women (various Barbies). Enlightened Ken requests to be added to the Supreme Court. President Barbie says, flatly, no!--but your time will come. Role

reversal here to drive a point home. But certainly an affront to the anti-woke culture warriors.

This is a good movie for people of all ages. I was hooked during the opening scene, a play on an iconic scene in 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY.

I didn't play with dolls as a kid. I had plenty of model trains and model cars, and of course Tinker-Toys, Lincoln Logs, and Erector Sets. So many fantasies with those toys... [-as]

The MT VOID (letter of comment by Guy Lillian III):

In response to several issues of the MT VOID, Guy Lillian III writes in THE ZINE DUMP #58:

This weekly zine of opinion on matters SFnal and related has apparently been going on for forty-five years, an amazing display of commitment and scope. The Leepers'™ reviews and thoughts are always sharp and valuable. So much is covered I™ have to pick issues at random--there's a review of THE MOUNTAIN IN THE SEA almost as enthused as David Grigg's ... John Hertz joining in a discussion of MOBY-DICK, not quite SFnal ... Evelyn on Peter Jackson's™ tremendous and original WWI documentary THEY SHALL NOT GROW OLD ... Mark Leeper on the Quatermass films (ENEMY FROM SPACE really impressed the tween GHLIII) ... Gregory Frederick's™ review of a fascinating book on physics ... Mark again on THE TRUMAN SHOW ... even a bit of a discussion on FINNEGANS WAKE! Exhausting but exhilarating. [-ghliii]

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

I take a break from my book comments to comment on the Hugo finalists for Hugo Award Dramatic Presentation (Long Form).

AVATAR--THE WAY OF WATER (2022): AVATAR--THE WAY OF WATER is another Hugo finalist sequel that introduces a blue-skinned race that lives in the water (at least part time). (The other is BLACK PANTHER--WAKANDA FOREVER.) And you know, a blue-skinned race that lives in the water is not a magic ingredient that makes a film great, The visuals are terrific, but the story is pretty much a rehash of Westerns (including THE SEARCHERS), just as the original AVATAR was a rehash of DANCES WITH WOLVES. And three hours plus is too long for a film with impressive visuals but no originality in plot--or for long stretches, no advancement of the plot at all. It is not helped by having all the characters in blue make-up; at times I had trouble distinguishing the hero from the villain.

BLACK PANTHER--WAKANDA FOREVER (2022): BLACK PANTHER--WAKANDA FOREVER is a finalist for the Hugo Award for Dramatic Presentation, Long Form, but I can't say it did much for me. I have never gotten that invested in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but I have seen BLACK PANTHER and that was reasonably good. Unfortunately the sequel seems to be not much more than a series of battles, with the addition of a blue-skinned underwater race descended from ancient Mayans. I realize the filmmakers had to either dump the script they had or make major changes to it after Chadwick Bozeman (the original Black Panther) died, but the result is ultimately disappointing.

EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE (2022): Everyone loved EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE. It was nominated for eleven Academy Awards, and won seven, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, and three of the four acting awards. I've seen it three times--and I still don't understand why it is so popular. I realize that my coolness toward AVATAR--THE WAY OF WATER, BLACK PANTHER--WAKANDA FOREVER, and EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE makes me an outlier in SF movie fandom, but there you have it. Again--it's a very visual film, although the Screenplay Academy Award indicates the script had something going for it. So maybe fancy CGI visuals are not my cup of tea.

NOPE (2022): NOPE is the third Jordan Peele film (after GET OUT and US), and while it is not up to the first two, it is genuine science fiction (complete with an A-plot about UFOs and a B-plot about a psychotic chimpanzee) with a script, and a plot, and not a lot of CGI whizbangs. As such, it gets my vote for the Hugo this year--or would if I were eligible to vote.

TURNING RED (2022): *This* was nominated for a Hugo? So far as I can tell, 2022 must have been a bad year for science fiction and fantasy films. But even if I wasn't crazy about the other nominees, I could understand why they were nominated. With TURNING RED, I have no idea. The characters also seem stereotyped, especially the "Tiger Mom", but also the "aunties" and for that matter the tweens as well.

Ranking: NOPE, no award, BLACK PANTHER: WAKANDA FOREVER, EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE,

AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER, TURNING RED
Not seen: SEVERANCE (Season 1)

[-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

TV is chewing gum for the eyes.

--Frank Lloyd Wright

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