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Mini Reviews, Part 4 (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is the fourth batch of mini-reviews for this season, this time documentaries.

WHAM! BLAM! ROY LICHTENSTEIN AND THE ART OF APPROPRIATION (2022): Roy Lichtenstein is seen as one of the leaders of the "Pop Art" movement. His iconic paintings, based on comic book art, have sold for over \$100 million. Hy Eisman and Russ Heath are practically destitute. Yet they are the artists whose original work Lichtenstein was inspired by--or rather, copied. David Barsalou (from my home town of Chicopee, Massachusetts) is the creator of the "Deconstructing Roy Lichtenstein" project, which displays the original panels beside the Lichtenstein copies.

WHAAM! BLAM! ROY LICHTENSTEIN AND THE ART OF APPROPRIATION (2022) is a documentary about Lichtenstein, Eisman, Heath, Barsalou, and others, covering both the history of comic book art as both low and high art, and Lichtenstein use of it.

It is fairly clear that one can match up Lichtenstein's paintings with their originals, and that in many cases they are apparently merely

tracings of the originals, with some changes in coloring. The question is whether what Lichtenstein did was "transformative", making his paintings new works, or plagiarism.

This is complicated by the copyright law of the 1950s and 1960s, when the original comic book artists worked. At the time, their work was considered "work for hire" and the copyrights were owned by the publishers. And the publishers had no interest at the time in going after Lichtenstein, since that was well before his paintings started selling for millions. But the documentary looks at the moral issues as well as the legal ones. (One might suggest that the Lichtenstein estate should pay some money to the original artists. However, that might lead to the artists claiming that this was in some way an admission of guilt. Perhaps a contribution to a fund for all comic book artists in need, in recognition of their "inspiration"?)

What is revealing is how, for example, a museum curator who has a Lichtenstein hanging in their museum had no idea of the original source, or the original artist, and no interest in changing the information about the painting which hangs next to it.

This is a documentary of interest to those interested in art, in the history of comic books, and the legal and moral issues of intellectual property.

Released at a festival 9 December 2022. Rating: +3 (-4 to +4), or 9/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt22774294/reference>

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

THE LOST KING (2022): Having just written 1200 words on Winston Churchill's comments on Richard II, I ended up getting THE LOST KING at the library (because it finally showed up). And what's it about? Richard III, the Richard III Society (a.k.a. the Ricardians, or at least their main organized group), and the search for the grave of Richard III.

Based on fact, Sally Hawkins plays Philippa Langley, who begins by seeing a production of Shakespeare's RICHARD III, and feeling that he was not treated very fairly. She discovers the Richard III Society, and when she mentions wanting to visit his grave, is told that no one knows where it is. And so begins her search for his grave. Throughout the film, she keeps seeing the "ghost" of Richard, serving to motivate and possibly direct her. I find it surprising that she actually managed to find the grave, or rather that no one else did, because all the clues were hiding in plain sight (as it were). It was, I suppose, more that person A knew one fact, and person B knew another fact, and person C had yet another piece of the puzzle, and it took Philippa to put the pieces together.

A lot of the film is spent explaining the reasoning behind believing that Richard was much maligned and so on, and given that I had heard pretty much all of it before, I had to accept that was for the wider audience who has not read More and Churchill and various chronicles. So it's also hard for me to judge whether the wider audience would enjoy the film. I know I did. [-ecl]

Released theatrically 24 March 2023. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4), or 8/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13421498/reference>

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

THE LONELIEST WHALE--THE SEARCH FOR 52 (2021): THE LONELIEST WHALE--THE SEARCH FOR 52 is a documentary about a whale that calls at 52 hertz. This is a higher frequency than other whales, and was unique until recently when a second 52-hertz whale was heard. Alas, the documentary is like PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK--it sets everything up, but there is no pay-off. Okay, that may be accurate, but it makes for a disappointing film. (There is a possible sighting at the end, but it is not clear that the scientific community accepts it.) If you want a documentary that actually comes to a conclusion, this is probably not for you. [-ecl]

Released theatrically 21 July 2021. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4), or 6/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2401814/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_loneliest_whale_the_search_for_52

Texas, WorldCons, GODZILLA RAIDS AGAIN, A STRANGER IN THE CITADEL, AVATAR--THE WAY OF WATER, OPPENHEIMER, BARBIE (letter of comment by John Purcell):

In response to various comments in various issues of the MT VOID, John Purcell writes:

Good afternoon from the oven known as Texas. Of course, a huge chunk of the United States is under this heat dome that has been baking the country for two months now. Our forecast here in Texas is to expect temperatures either at or exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit through October--yup, right up to Halloween--which is an unprecedented stretch for us. The same forecast is predicting a wetter and colder winter ahead, possibly including lengthy stretches of subfreezing weather. Yes, snow and icy conditions are involved, so here we go again. Texas Governor Greg Abbott is more concerned about spending the 18 billion dollar state budget surplus on floating barriers in the Rio Grande River than repairing/upgrading the energy infrastructure of the state, among other pressing needs. You know, little things like making basic health care affordable, aiding the homeless, improving teacher pay... The list goes on. You get the idea. This summer's heat is making a lot of Texas's registered voters edgy, so you can imagine the rhetoric flying ahead of next year's elections. At any rate, Valerie and I hope that you two are doing well.

Hard to believe that six years ago we had just returned from my TAFF Trip to the Helsinki WorldCon. My Facebook feed has been filled with daily "memories" of photos and commentary from that trip. It has all been a very nice retrospective for us. Mayhaps next summer we will be able to afford the Glasgow WorldCon. We are hoping to make that one. Otherwise, it's waiting until 2029 to vote for the Texas in 2031 bid. I'm not sure where that will be located, but my suspicions are Austin. That's a big city with large enough venues and hotels, to say nothing of lots of attractions, to host a 7000-member WorldCon. We shall see how that all plays out.

Mark lists out some fun movies for September, including GODZILLA RAIDS AGAIN (1955) on October 1st. That's one of my favorites of this lengthy series. All those great Hitchcock flicks on September 10th are a wonderful way to escape the heat, as are many others listed. As always, lots of classic films. One of my all-time favorite horror movies is listed, too: HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL (1958). The first time I saw that it scared the bejeezus out of me--and that was on television when I was about ten years old. It's a great movie.

That review of Tobias Buckell's novel A STRANGER IN THE CITADEL sounds really interesting. Lately, Valerie and I have been on a reading jag of books from our local library--about two miles from our house--so I'm putting this on my "to read" list should the library get a copy. If anything, I can put in an inter-library loan request for it. In case you are wondering, some of the books we've been reading this summer are pretty much all series'. Valerie has breezed through the Witcher books, N. K. Jemison's "Broken Earth" series, and the "Riftworld" series by Raymond E. Feist, of which I am now on book two. Myself, I cranked through all nine of the "Expanse" novels, and now await a copy of MEMORIES LEGION, the collection of eight short stories and novellas set in the "Expanse" universe, except for "The Last Flight of the Cassandra". Don't worry: that one is easy enough to snag from online sources.

We have watched AVATAR--THE WAY OF WATER and sort of fell asleep during it due to that film's length. It really is beautifully done, but I found it dragging a lot. Now, OPPENHEIMER I really want to see; this appeals to me a great deal because I really enjoy movies based on historical people and events, especially if they are based on strong, well-developed characters while allowing for dramatic embellishment to appeal to the audience. I have read quite a few positive reviews of OPPENHEIMER despite its running head-to-head against BARBIE. I might even watch that movie, too. It sure sounds like it's pushing all the right buttons.

Well, that seems to do it for now. Many thanks for the latest issue, and take care of yourselves. [-jp]

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

"The Musgrave Ritual" by Arthur Conan Doyle is considered one of the best Holmes stories, but it is actually seriously technically flawed, and the ritual itself is the problem.

First of all, there are two versions of the ritual. The original one in the Strand was:

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'Whose was it?'
'His who is gone.'
'Who shall have it?'
'He who will come.'
'Where was the sun?'
'Over the oak.'
'Where was the shadow?'
'Under the elm.'
'How was it stepped?'
'North by ten and by ten, east by five and by five, south by two
and by two, west by one and by one, and so under.'
'What shall we give for it?'
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'All that is ours.'
 'Why should we give it?'
 'For the sake of the trust.'

When collected in the British edition of THE MEMOIRS OF SHERLOCK HOLMES, the following was added as the third question:

'What was the month?'
 'The sixth from the first.'

However, both William Baring-Gould and Leslie Klinger *do* include it in their annotated volumes.

Holmes says the starting point must be the end of the elm's shadow. Clearly one needs to know the date to perform the ritual. Stonehenge and other primitive structures are constructed so that the sun shines between two pillars, or down a tunnel, only on a specific date, so it has been known for millennia that the sun rises and sets in different spots every day, and hence is positioned differently every day when it "sets" on the oak (or "rises"--how does Holmes know that he is supposed to use the afternoon sun?). So even specifying the month does not fix the end of the shadow, because there is still some movement of the sun that will have the shadow moving slightly.

And Professor Jay Finlay Christ (in "Musgrave Mathematics") asks how Holmes knew where to stand to see this setting sun over the oak, since he could not stand where the elm was already occupying space. Actually, these are two aspects of the same problem; on different days the viewer can stand in different places to see the sun over the oak, and hence start their pacing from different spots.

But it's even more complicated. At the time of the ritual there were two "first months": the new year officially began on March 25, but January 1 was also considered the start of a new year. And is "the sixth from the first" the sixth or the seventh? (The BBC Clive Merrison version drops the question about the month entirely, re-introducing the ambiguity.)

Again, the ritual dates from the mid-17th century, so by then both the oak and the elm must have stopped growing taller (since that would throw off when the sun is over the oak in the future--one assumes this means it is "touching" the oak--and also affect the length of the elm's shadow)--and somehow the writer of the ritual knew this. (Actually, the writer probably figured the ritual would be performed shortly after its creation, rather than several hundred years later. He was just lucky that the trees had already reached maturity, and that Reginald Musgrave had happened to measure the elm as part of his trigonometry lesson.)

A. D. Galbraith points out as well that at the time the ritual was written, a magnetic compass pointed to true north, but in Holmes's time, it pointed 20 degrees west of north, so the Holmes would be walking in a totally wrong direction.

Sherlock Holmes is over six feet tall, so when he paces off "ten by ten", wouldn't he have paced off a greater length than, say, Charles I, who was only five feet four inches? And why such precision for pacing in the front hall, when in fact they needed to move away from the final spot to find the stairs to go down?

And what about those "three rusty old discs of metal" that are mentioned at the beginning of the story? "These are coins of Charles the First," said [Holmes], holding out the few which had been in the box ..." and one presumes that also applied to the discs in Holmes's possession--except the coins would be gold, silver, or copper--none of which rust. Yes, silver tarnishes, but it seems unlikely Watson would mistake tarnished silver for rusted iron. (And it's most likely that a treasure being hidden would be in gold rather than silver or copper.) [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Always code as if the guy who ends up maintaining
 your code will be a violent psychopath who knows
 where you live.

--Anonymous

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