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Screener Season (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

I have talked each year about "screener season", when studios send screener copies of films they are promoting for awards. But this year is different, and sadly disappointing.

First, the writers' and actors' strikes put a hold on both film production and film promotion, so many films were delayed, and others had smaller promotional campaigns.

But the second change was ecological in nature. For a few years there had been a trend to send passworded screening links rather than physical DVDs. This year is the tipping point: the Academy has forbidden studios to send physical DVDs to its members. They can still send them to other reviewers (e.g., the OFCS) but most will figure if they're providing links for the Academy, they should probably just go with them for everyone.

I can't fault the intent, but *my* problem is that my mechanism for watching a link is to Chromecast the film either from my iMac or from our smartphone. Alas, for some reason, the films are unwatchable that way this year. They keep "stuttering". I believe it's the Chromecasting, since the problem doesn't happen on the iMac or the smartphone. But who wants to watch a movie on a smartphone,

and even the iMac is a problem: sitting in a desk chair for two hours is no fun.

What is strange is that through the year we have gotten links for review copies that seemed to work fine, so I have no idea why it's all breaking now.

Anyway, what this means is that we do not have as many films to review this year as in previous years. The good news is that various streaming services still work on our older television: Netflix, Hoopla, Kanopy, Tubi, YouTube,... And if some have commercials, well, that just brings back the nostalgia of movies on broadcast television in the 1960s. (And our local library still gets DVDs, which is how we saw *BARBIE*, *ASTEROID CITY*, and *MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: DEAD RECKONING*. Three cheers for our library!) [-mrl]

Mini Reviews, Part 12 (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is the twelfth batch of mini-reviews, documentaries.

CLOSE TO VERMEER (2022): Vermeer is probably best known for his style of lighting in his painting. His paintings look like they are lit from a bright source of light not seen directly, and he understands light and shadows and the colors in the shadows. His pictures are the opposite of expressionist. In fact, His painting style looks almost photographic--his painting is that detailed! One question is how much Vermeer used a camera obscura, for example. In addition to their technique, his paintings shine a light on daily life in 17th century Netherlands (apparently including a craze for large hats).

But little is known of Vermeer's private life, except that he died young (at 43).

American art lovers may have been introduced to Vermeer by the painting "Girl with a Pearl Earring"--there was even a movie based on it. There have also been two films: *TIM'S VERMEER*, a documentary in which Tim Junison attempts to "forge" a Vermeer, and *THE LAST VERMEER*, a narrative film about Han Van Meegeren, a famous Vermeer forger who took advantage of the Vermeer craze of the 1930s and 1940s to sell his forgeries to high-ranking Nazis for a lot of money.

This documentary covers the planning of a major Vermeer exhibition in the Netherlands. Of the three dozen Vermeers (34 definitely attributed to him, with another three possibles), a third are in museums outside of the Netherlands--the Frick has three, National Gallery of Art in Washington has four, the Met has five but one is too fragile to travel, and another had as a condition of its donation that it never leave the Met, and so on. And several in the Netherlands are not in the Rijksmuseum, which has only four (the Mauritshuis has three). So part of the story is about Gregor Weber trying to get as many of these on loan as possible, particularly certain ones with a close relationship to pictures already in the Rijksmuseum. In one case, Weber really wanted the one painting that the Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum in Braunschweig, Germany, had to tell an important part of the Vermeer story, but that year's German art students had Vermeer as the topic for the equivalent of their dissertations, and so it was unavailable.

For an example of wanting particular paintings, there is the question of "rollmates"--paintings that can be shown to have been painted on material from the same roll of canvas. One pair is "Young Woman Seated at a virginal" and "The Lacemaker". Since the latter is definitely Vermeer, this provides evidence to support the idea that the former (disputed) painting is as well. On the other hand "Young Woman Seated at a virginal" (the only Vermeer in private hands) is far more crude in execution and parts seem to be copies of other painting (in particular the curl in the hair is a copy of "The Lacemaker"). Think of this aspect as "C.S.I. Amsterdam".

Another disputed painting, "Girl with the Flute", looks to many experts unfinished. It displays the use of green earth in the flesh tones that we see in eight Vermeer paintings, but the paint is lumpy paint, and the girl is looking straight at us, atypical for Vermeer. Gregor says of the painting, "I was so impressed, but now I have to hear [that you doubt it]," which raises the question of why he should stop being impressed if someone else painted it. Should it matter who painted it?

Another part of the film is about designing the layout of the exhibit. Vermeer's paintings are much smaller than the usual Dutch paintings of the era; how does one display them without having them appear as just small specks on a large wall?. How many people can see a painting from a given distance and how well can they see it? What should the floor plan be: which paintings should be near which other paintings, and in what order should the paintings be?

And even the issue of Vermeer merchandise and the commercialization of an artist's work, especially as part of an exhibition such as this) is touched on. (A Dutch friend was somewhat offended that the Dutch Worldcon used a modified version of VanGogh's "Starry Night" on their T-shirts.)

All in all, this is a documentary art lovers won't want to miss--and it doesn't require a lot of background knowledge to appreciate it. [-

ecl]

Released theatrically 26 May 2023. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4), or 7/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt26773666/reference>

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

DESPERATE SOULS, DARK CITY AND THE LEGEND OF MIDNIGHT COWBOY (2022): DESPERATE SOULS, DARK CITY AND THE LEGEND OF MIDNIGHT COWBOY begins and ends with a lot of archival film of New York at the time of MIDNIGHT COWBOY. Throughout there are copious examples of the media of the day and they really brings back the spirit of the late 1960s.

But the director of MIDNIGHT COWBOY, John Schlesinger, began his career in documentaries, and gives an almost documentary effect to MIDNIGHT COWBOY itself.

Schlesinger was both gay and Jewish, and both aspects showed up in MIDNIGHT COWBOY. The former is more obvious, with fairly obvious coded gay characters and open homosexuality. But Schlesinger also drew heavily on the Western genre, which was just beginning to fade in the wake of Vietnam. (The 1964 Presidential election was basically between two cowboys, and the question of the day was, "Whose finger is on the trigger?" Other cinematic influences were Tony Richardson and John Osborne.

MIDNIGHT COWBOY followed FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD, a notable bomb for Schlesinger. So Hoffman didn't want to test for THE GRADUATE, and then when he changed his mind, it turned out that Schlesinger didn't want Hoffman.

DESPERATE SOULS, DARK CITY AND THE LEGEND OF MIDNIGHT COWBOY becomes a chronicle of the period of the 1950s and 1960s and is a history of that period by clips from films, discussion of film makers, and Warhol-esque art. But it centers on what the period meant to Schlesinger. There is some discussion of the effect MIDNIGHT COWBOY had going forward, but writer/director/producer Nancy Biurski primarily looks at how the film came to be at all. [-mrl/ecl]

Released theatrically 23 April 2023. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4), or 8/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt21372066/reference>

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

How to End Plastic Pollution on Earth for Good (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

The Washington Post has an article "How to End Plastic Pollution on Earth for Good". Amazingly, nowhere in it is Mutant 59 mentioned. [-ecl]

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

I've recently read two very different books with the same premise: trying to build a community in a place that is ultimately hostile to such a plan.

The first was A CITY ON MARS: CAN WE SETTLE SPACE, SHOULD WE SETTLE SPACE, AND HAVE WE REALLY THOUGHT THIS THROUGH? by Kelly and Zach Weinersmith (Penguin, ISBN 978-1-9848-8172-4), a non-fiction book published just a month ago. The full title says it all ... well, not quite. The Weinersmiths cover not just Mars, but also the Moon, the asteroids, and plain old outer space (with brief comments on Mercury, Venus, and other bodies in the solar system). Not to label them spoilsports, but the book basically explains why all the existing ideas for large, permanent cities off-Earth are fraught with problems: air, water, food, shielding, low/no gravity, power, human psychology, ... Oh, and legal issues.

It is therefore similar in some ways to Kim Stanley Robinson's AURORA, a novel which looks at why relying on generation ships to save humanity, or even just to branch out, is a bad idea. (I reviewed AURORA at length in 07/24/15 issue of the MT VOID, available at <http://lepers.us/evelyn/reviews/robinson.htm#aurora>.)

But that is not the other book I just read. That was BLACK NARCISSUS by Rumer Godden (Open Road Media, ISBN 978-1-504-06637-2), a novel published in 1939 about a group of nuns trying to establish a convent, school, and hospital in the Himalayas. It is

best known through the 1947 film of the same name made by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, which is fairly true to the book (though Sister Ruth's arc is a bit different). There is also an FX mini-series, which I haven't seen but by all reports is not anywhere near as good.

The nuns have similar problems to space colonists. They are isolated from the rest of their order, and indeed from everyone they knew before. The food is often monotonous, the air is too thin, the structures they have need a lot of repair, and they are unable to deal with the local villagers effectively because of different attitudes. And the view from the settlement has the same mesmerizing effect as that of the view in space or on another world.

And (SPOILER) the results in **BLACK NARCISSUS** are pretty similar to what is predicted in **A CITY ON MARS**. (No, they don't die of starvation, or radiation from the sun.)

Now I know this comparison sounds weird, because they are very different books. Which I suppose proves (or at least supports) Ecclesiastes 1:9: "... there is no new thing under the sun."

I recommend both books, though perhaps for different reasons, and also the film **BLACK NARCISSUS**, which is gorgeous. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

I intend to live forever. So far, so good.
--Steven Wright

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