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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society  
Club Notice - 12/28/90 -- Vol. 9, No. 26

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are on Wednesdays at noon.  
LZ meetings are in LZ 2R-158. MT meetings are in the cafeteria.

\_D\_A\_T\_E                   \_T\_O\_P\_I\_C

- 01/09 LZ: BRAIN WAVE by Poul Anderson (Intelligence)
- 01/30 LZ: RITE OF PASSAGE by Alexei Panshin (Adolescence)
- 02/20 LZ: MARTIANS, GO HOME! by Frederic Brown (Social Satire)
- 03/13 LZ: TOM SWIFT by Victor Appleton II (Juvenile SF)

\_D\_A\_T\_E                   \_E\_X\_T\_E\_R\_N\_A\_L\_M\_E\_E\_T\_I\_N\_G\_S/\_C\_O\_N\_V\_E\_N\_T\_I\_O\_N\_S/\_E\_T\_C.

- 01/10/90 SFABC: Science Fiction Association of Bergen County: TBA  
(phone 201-933-2724 for details) (Saturday)
- 01/19/91 NJSFS: New Jersey Science Fiction Society: TBA  
(phone 201-432-5965 for details) (Saturday)

HO Chair: John Jetzt HO 1E-525 834-1563 hocpa!jetzt  
LZ Chair: Rob Mitchell LZ 1B-306 576-6106 mtuxo!jrtr  
MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3D-441 957-5619 mtgzy!leeper  
HO Librarian: Tim Schroeder HO 3B-301 949-4488 hotsc!tps  
LZ Librarian: Lance Larsen LZ 3L-312 576-3346 mtunq!lfl  
MT Librarian: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 957-2070 mtgzy!ecl  
Factotum: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 957-2070 mtgzy!ecl  
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1. Unlike many science fiction fans, I am not also a comic book fan. This, in itself, is a dangerous confession. Lots of comic book fans are perfectly sane and normal people. But when a film or a television show wants to portray someone whose elevator doesn't quite get up to the top floor, they show a big bruiser with a two-day growth of beard and he is reading a comic book. Reading comic books is synonymous with being a dolt. Perhaps it is not surprising then that there is a backlash of comic book fans who

have been rubbed raw by this sort of thing and are (shall we say?)  
overly sensitive. I remember when somebody said the B\_a\_t\_m\_a\_n film  
was in the hands of people who were fans of the comic book my  
response on Usenet was that was the good news and the bad news was  
that they read the comic book while they popped their bubble gum

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after finishing their paper routes. My implication was not that it  
was a\_l\_l comic book fans I was describing; it was one type of comic  
book fan. Nonetheless, I was flamed to a crispy black for an  
imagined implication that it was all comic book fans I was  
describing. It happens to be true, but I imagine it would help not  
at all to point out that some of my best friends are comic book  
fans.

Anyway, let me just say that comic books are a form of fantasy that  
I do not care for, but which I do not feel is inherently inferior  
to, say, vampire and werewolf stories which, in some cases, do  
appeal to me more. I can make a hole in my world-view that can  
accept there is a vampire running around. I cannot find a hole in  
my world-view that supports a scene of a crusty district attorney  
talking about what moves can be made against the Legion of Doom.  
The scene just strikes me as silly. Crusty old D.A.s just don't  
talk about things like a Legion of Doom. Well, art imitates life  
and eventually life imitates art I guess. Sometime in mid-November  
the Federal Government won a legal case against the Legion of Doom.  
In this case the Legion of Doom is a genuine, for-real crime  
organization. Actually they were computer hackers who got caught  
attacking BellSouth. Their name was inspired by comic books and  
that was really what they called themselves, so that was whom the  
government prosecuted. They have also prosecuted another hacker  
who called himself Shadowhawk. The prosecutors say they feel a  
little silly doing it, but they have to tell the judges about the  
nefarious activities of the Legion of Doom. And the world is a  
little closer to being like a comic book.

Mark Leeper  
MT 3D-441 957-5619  
...mtgzy!leeper

Written laws are like spiders' webs, and will like them only entangle and hold the poor and weak, while the rich and powerful easily break through them.

-- Anacharsis

## HAVANA

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

Copyright 1990 Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: C\_u\_b\_a\_b\_l\_a\_n\_c\_a. A victory of detailed setting over a much weaker political thriller plot and a love story of little interest. Rating: 0 (-4 to +4).

Gambler Jack Weil (played by Robert Redford) has a piece of advice for revolutionary Bobby Duran (played by Lena Olin) about how to play roulette. You should not put all your money on one number. You go for a more modest bet, like betting on black. "You still lose you money, but you lose it more slowly." Or another example: Hollywood should bet on a bankable combination like Sidney Pollack directing Robert Redford in films like T\_h\_e\_W\_a\_y\_W\_e\_W\_e\_r\_e, T\_h\_r\_e\_e\_D\_a\_y\_s\_o\_f\_t\_h\_e\_C\_o\_n\_d\_o\_r, E\_l\_e\_c\_t\_r\_i\_c

H\_o\_r\_s\_e\_m\_a\_n, and O\_u\_t\_o\_f\_A\_f\_r\_i\_c\_a. Eventually you will come up double-zero on a \$45 million spectacle, but it will take longer. Double-zero is essentially what Universal has with H\_a\_v\_a\_n\_a. One of the zeroes is a political thriller that pits the pre-revolutionary scummy government of

Batista against the idealistic supporters of Fidel Castro, most of whom we know are destined to have a rude awakening in the years to come. The other zero is a love story in which the lovers have all the chemistry of champagne and Miracle Whip\*.

Redford plays Jack Weil, a wise-cracking gambler who sticks to business, but might have more going on below the surface, much like Rick Blaine in C\_a\_s\_a\_b\_l\_a\_n\_c\_a. He becomes the third side of a triangle in which the other two sides are a married couple of revolutionaries (Lena Olin and Raul Julia) living a dangerous life, much like Ilsa Lund and Victor Laszlo in C\_a\_s\_a\_b\_l\_a\_n\_c\_a. Weil must decide if he will do nothing and let events take their course, try to steal the woman, or become committed to the cause, much as Rick does in C\_a\_s\_a\_b\_l\_a\_n\_c\_a. Now it seems to me that some film other than H\_a\_v\_a\_n\_a has used this plot before. It's on the tip of my mind, but ... oh, well. Seriously, one reason that this film does not engage the audience like C\_a\_s\_a\_b\_l\_a\_n\_c\_a did is that Bogart was an actor who could show pain. Redford can wince a little.

Of the love story, the political thriller, and the setting, the setting wins by default. Much of that humungous budget went into creating the look and feel of Havana of 1958. Others have vouched for its accuracy; I can vouch only for its believability. Not that pre-revolutionary Havana was that interesting a city but, filming in the Dominican Republic, Pollack has captured at least a believable look. And at nearly two and a half hours in length, the film lets you get a long look. And you might as well look at the background; you are not missing much in the foreground. I give this film a 0 on the -4 to +4 scale.

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\* Miracle Whip is a trademark of Kraft Foods Co.

## MERMAIDS

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

Copyright 1990 Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: While a comedy on the surface M\_e\_r\_m\_a\_i\_d\_s has a serious underside. Cher plays a mother whose irresponsible self-indulgence is destroying the

lives of her family. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4).

Rachel Flax (played by Cher) has not handle responsibility well. On the surface she seems a likable kook with some odd ways of getting through life with minimal commitment. When life gets too hectic for her, she packs up and moves on, together with her two daughters. What she refuses to face is that she is hurting everyone around her and making both daughters incredibly neurotic. At first the viewer chuckles at the odd quirks of the family, but with time the chuckling becomes more uneasy and we get a feel for the painful contortions the Flax family is being put through by their mother's willful avoidance of any commitment. The movie is seen from 15-year-old daughter Charlotte's point of view as she desperately tries to understand her coming-of-age with no guidance whatsoever from her mother. (Charlotte is played by the ubiquitous Winona Ryder, who is currently in E\_d\_w\_a\_r\_d\_S\_c\_i\_s\_s\_o\_r\_h\_a\_n\_d\_s and W\_e\_l\_c\_o\_m\_e\_H\_o\_m\_e, R\_o\_x\_y\_C\_a\_r\_m\_i\_c\_h\_a\_e\_l and is rumored to have had a nervous breakdown that prevented her from also being cast as Michael Corleone's daughter in T\_h\_e\_G\_o\_d\_f\_a\_t\_h\_e\_r\_I\_I\_I. Predictably she gets everything confused. One minute she wants to become a nun (though she is Jewish), she is fixated on Catholicism), and the next she is praying to be raped by the 26-year-old hunk who is the caretaker at a nearby convent.

Mrs. Flax is having her current affair with a Lou Landsky who owns the local shoe store "Foot Friendly." There are a couple of problems here, actually. "Foot Friendly" at least sounds like a take-off on the phrase "user-friendly," but M\_e\_r\_m\_a\_i\_d\_s is set in 1963, before terminology like "X-friendly" was familiar or perhaps even invented. The second is that the script apparently calls for Lou to be Jewish and from the Midwest and the role is something of a stretch for actor Bob Hoskins. His character Lou realizes that behind all the weirdness there is a lot of pain in the Flax family. He wants to help but must tread a narrow line of helping the children and not scaring Rachel into "moving on."

Richard Benjamin directed, though a recent PBS discussion said that Cher was able to maintain much of the artistic control. The script's worst faults are its lulling the audience into believing the material would be light-weight, and a gratuitous piece of suspense toward the end that cheapens the effect of the film and makes it seem more manipulative where earlier it had been more sensitive. Still M\_e\_r\_m\_a\_i\_d\_s has more to it than first meets the eye. I rate it a low +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

VINCENT AND THEO  
A film review by Mark R. Leeper  
Copyright 1990 Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: Robert Altman does Ken Russell doing a biography of Vincent Van Gogh. The film is over-long and mostly very unappealing. Rating: -1 (-4 to +4).

With the world celebrating the 100th anniversary of Vincent Van Gogh's death, the time was ripe for a biographic film about the artist. Kirk Douglas had played Van Gogh in the 1956 film L\_u\_s\_t\_f\_o\_r\_L\_i\_f\_e, but that was a sort of polished Hollywood version. This time we have an international production directed by Robert Altman. It seems from Altman's film about the great artist who was so misunderstood in his own time that, in fact, there was good reason to misunderstand Vincent Van Gogh.

Tim Roth, who plays Van Gogh with an English accent, makes his subject not just someone you would n\_o\_t want to meet, he makes him someone who could drive you out of a room just by entering it. Vincent chooses to live in squalor not through poverty--at least initially--but through apathy. His teeth are rotted and discolored through lack of care and his clothing is tattered. His fascination with color is by no means limited to his painting. He seems to have a passion for smearing himself with paint and for eating his paints--we see him licking paint at several points in the film.

V\_i\_n\_c\_e\_n\_t\_a\_n\_d\_T\_h\_e\_o concentrates, not surprisingly, on the love/hate relationship between Vincent and his brother Theo. A little ungraciously the film shows Theo's wife as having little but disgust and disregard for Vincent while historically it was her perseverance that eventually brought the art of Vincent Van Gogh to the attention of critics. While that is not wholly inconsistent with what we see in the film, it does seem unlikely considering her constantly unfriendly attitude toward her brother-in-law--not surprisingly toward a man who seems to like to take a big mouthful of wine and then drool it out of his mouth.

Kirk Douglas played Van Gogh as a man of deep passions. Roth plays him as just plain weird and cold with occasional explosions of emotions. It is hard to judge which is the more accurate representation, though the earlier interpretation is by far the more watchable and dramatically interesting.

There is an odd disjointed quality to the script. Syphilis victim Theo in one scene tries, fails, and tells his wife, "I can't pee any more." In the next scene he is back at work as if it were just an activity of no importance that has been dropped from his schedule.

Though my wife did not remember it, I really thought I heard one character tell another to look him up in the phone book. We both heard a reference to South American velvet painting, which seems a likely anachronism.

The time may have been ripe for a film biography of Van Gogh, but I just don't feel this was the one. I give it a -1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

THE RUSSIA HOUSE  
A film review by Mark R. Leeper  
Copyright 1990 Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: Colorless spy story keeps promising to pay off with something happening, but plot twists are a long time coming. Photography in Russia tries to make it look exotic and interesting, but the rather drab cities are not the best photographic subjects. Rating: 0 (-4 to +4).

At the beginning of T\_h\_e\_R\_u\_s\_s\_i\_a\_H\_o\_u\_s\_e three notebooks purportedly containing Soviet military secrets have been passed to a British publisher and the British want to know if the notebooks are genuine. An hour and forty minutes into T\_h\_e\_R\_u\_s\_s\_i\_a\_H\_o\_u\_s\_e we have seen a lot of Russian scenery, we know some of the characters involved a little better, a fourth notebook has been passed, and now the Americans as well as the British want to know if the notebooks are genuine. That may well be how the spy business really is, but it really is not a very good piece of story-telling. It would be one thing if the evidence built up in an interesting way the way it did in a previous LeCarre adaptation, T\_i\_n\_k\_e\_r,\_T\_a\_i\_l\_o\_r,\_S\_o\_l\_d\_i\_e\_r,\_S\_p\_y. But here we are dealing with far less than compelling characters. The two main characters are Sean Connery as British publisher Barley Blair and Michelle Pfeiffer as Soviet publisher Katya. Katya passes the notebooks written by a former lover Klaus Maria



Brandauer as the enigmatic Dante. Barley and Blair seem to fall in love for reasons never very clear. This has to be a what's-the-attraction love pairing to rival the one in  H\_ a\_ v\_ a\_ n\_ a.

Fred Schepisi has taken a script that would move moderately well at thirty minutes and stretched it to a hundred and twenty-three. One way that he has stretched it is to show you the scenery of Russia, mostly Moscow and Leningrad. This plays off the new post-glasnost interest in the Soviet Union; however, it seems unlikely this film will greatly contribute to Soviet tourism. While many of the buildings are of majestic design, the film only underscored the drabness of Russia. That drabness is further emphasized by filming Russia with perpetually overcast skies. The film also unsells tourism by underscoring how much the economy has degraded under glasnost. As Katya complains, "Glasnost gives everyone the right to complain and accuse, but it doesn't make shoes." Curiously, Katya manages to be able to get plenty of eye make-up, as Michelle Pfeiffer's characters always do.

What is curious about the uninteresting background is that the screenplay is by Tom Stoppard, who made Shanghai mystical and fascinating in his screenplay for  E\_ m\_ p\_ i\_ r\_ e\_ o\_ f\_ t\_ h\_ e\_ S\_ u\_ n. Here, however, he tries to show us not a physical landscape but the figurative landscape of the world of espionage and counter-espionage. LeCarre can make that landscape interesting, but it does not come through in Stoppard's screenplay. I like Stoppard and LeCarre, but I hope they realize they are no good for each other. I rate their result a 0 on the -4 to +4 scale.

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