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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
 Club Notice - 02/04/94 -- Vol. 12, No. 32

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are in Middletown 1R-400C
 Wednesdays at noon.

 D A T E T O P I C

- 02/16 Demo of Electronic Hugo and Nebula Anthology (MT 3D-441)
- 03/09 A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ by Walter M. Miller (Vividly Memorable SF)
- 03/30 THE MIND PARASITES by Colin Wilson (tentative)
- 04/20 VALIS by Philip K. Dick (tentative)

Outside events:
 The Science Fiction Association of Bergen County meets on the second Saturday of every month in Upper Saddle River; call 201-933-2724 for details. The New Jersey Science Fiction Society meets on the third Saturday of every month in Belleville; call 201-432-5965 for details.

HO Chair: John Jetzt MT 2G-432 908-957-5087 holly!jetzt
 LZ Chair: Rob Mitchell HO 1C-523 908-834-1267 holly!jrrt
 MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3D-441 908-957-5619 mtgzfs3!leeper
 HO Librarian: Nick Sauer HO 4F-427 908-949-7076 homxc!11366ns
 LZ Librarian: Lance Larsen HO 2C-318 908-949-4156 quartet!lfl
 MT Librarian: Mark Leeper MT 3D-441 908-957-5619 mtgzfs3!leeper
 Factotum: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 908-957-2070 mtgpfs1!ecl

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1. Our next film fest will be a retrospective of the films by whom many people believe to be the greatest American director--Frank Capra. We will show two very different films with very different styles. One takes place in the hustle and bustle of a then contemporary city; one in the timeless mountains of Tibet. One film is about mass political movements; one is about isolation. At 7 PM on Thursday, February 10, we will show:

Meet Frank Capra
MEET JOHN DOE (1941)
LOST HORIZON (1937)

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In M_e_e_t_J_o_h_n_D_o_e Gary Cooper stars in the title role as down-on-his-luck man who is chosen by a newspaperwoman to play the role of the writer of a suicide letter the woman actually wrote herself. It is not long before the fraudulent writer is chosen to head a national political movement. John Doe discovers he is being used as a puppet to manipulate public opinion. Along with Cooper the film stars Barbara Stanwick, Edward Arnold, Walter Brennan, and a cast of thousands of helots. The film was based on a short story by Richard Connell. Capra shot five different endings to the film before finding one that had sufficient audience appeal.

L_o_s_t_H_o_r_i_z_o_n, James Hilton's classic fantasy novel about utopia in the Himalayas, was adapted by Capra into a classic film, here restored with the most footage currently available. Ronald Coleman stars as Robert Conway, a British diplomat and one of a party of plane passengers who find themselves kidnapped and taken to a strange valley in the mountains where time seems to stand still. Also starring are Jane Wyatt, Edward Everett Horton, Thomas Mitchell, and Sam Jaffe as the High Lama. The score by Dimitri Tiompkin is also a classic.

2. 24TH TOURNEE OF ANIMATION (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

The T_o_u_r_n_e_e is an annual event and one that I have come to look forward to. At one point it was the only game in town for seeing current animation and one could more or less expect to see the best animation available. Success breeds competition however and other animation fests have been going on the road. In addition Expanded Entertainment also competes with themselves having a very similar Festival of Animation that they have to save some of their better animation for. So while previous fests have featured some really

excellent animated films including "Skywhales," "The Cow," and "Balance," these days it is much less likely that there will be a really terrific piece of animation. This year there were three pieces I would call very good but nothing I would say is in the class of the three films I just mentioned. On the other hand there also was only one piece I could actually call poor. There were no long self-indulgent pieces of what-am-I-looking-at? attempts at avant-garde animation. So perhaps things balance out.

When I rate the films I will be rating them primarily on how good the story was and how well it was told. I am no expert on animation technique and the technology that produces it. I will rate each as if it is a short movie and I will decide if I could or could not recommend it to a friend with my tastes. There are no plusses for a new animation technique, however impressive, if it does not make for a good film. It should enhance the style of the film if it is going to get points for the animation. However,

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really sloppy animation does get in the way of storytelling and so there might be minuses.

"Get a Haircut" by Mike Smith (USA)

Length: 5 minutes

Rating: fair

The lead-off piece may well have been the worst item in the whole T_o_u_r_n_e_e. At least in the first position the viewer is not comparing it to something better that came before. This is kind of a stupid rock song illustrated with slap-dash animation. It is about a teen who is hassled by his family to get his hair cut and to get a job and it builds up to a very uninteresting irony. This is for the low end of the MTV crowd.

"The Stain" by Marjut Rimminen and Christine Roche (UK)

Length: 10 minutes

Rating: fair

Over-long and rather dull story of a family murder done in a combination flat and 3-D animation. Most of the hand-drawn animation seems to use intentionally weird view angles that obscure characters' faces. The stop-motion is perfectly happy to show faces. The whole story seemed filmed through a fly-specked screen.

I guess if you are anxious enough to see animation there are a few minorly interesting points, but it is not much better than "Get a Haircut."

"We Love It" by Vincent Cafarelli and Candy Kugel (USA)

Length: 5 minutes

Rating: fair

Americans love films but they also love to hate Hollywood and the business of making films. I have never understood that. Perhaps it is because I see everything that the film industry is accused of happening in my own industry and people tend to take it as a matter of course. In any case here we have a song telling the weird genesis of an idea for a film. While people are saying they love the idea for the film they keep wanting to make small changes that are merely fundamental to the concept. Big deal. This is from the filmmakers of "I Got a Warm Reception in L.A." and one of the two films is superfluous. But at least this was the most entertaining film to that point in the T_o_u_r_n_e_e.

"The Path to the Abyss" by Georges Schwizgebel (Switzerland)

Length: 6 minutes

Rating: good

I think this was what Walt Disney originally intended to do with F_a_n_t_a_s_i_a until he decided it was not commercial. I think this really is a translation to the screen the images an artist sees when he hears a particular piece of classical music, in this case part of Berlioz's T_h_e_D_a_m_n_a_t_i_o_n_o_f_F_a_u_s_t. I am not sure the images all go together, nor do they fit into F_a_u_s_t, but it is a pleasant enough piece to see and hear.

"The Square of Light" by Claude Luyet (Switzerland)

Length: 4 minutes

Rating: good

This is a subjective POV of a boxer in the ring. He is getting a little punchy and starting to hallucinate. This one may be the most serious and disturbing piece in this year's T_o_u_r_n_e_e. One image, his seeing his opponent as a snarling gorilla, might have gotten the filmmaker in trouble in this county if he were from the U.S.

"Prehistoric Beast" by Phil Tippet (USA)

Length: 6 minutes

Rating: very good

I am not quite sure if the flowers are an anachronism or not, but with that possible exception this is a reasonable recreation of the Cretaceous. Tippet was a major contributor to J_u_r_a_s_s_i_c_P_a_r_k and the production of this film may have been somehow connected of that. The concept may be a little over-familiar but there are some nice variations.

"The Man Who Yelled" by Mo Willems (USA)

Length: 3 minutes

Rating: fair

This pointless little joke has an intriguing build-up only really to disappoint with a wasted piece of absurd physical comedy. Why go to all the effort to make an animated film if this is the best idea you have for a story?

"I Think I Was an Alcoholic" by John Callahan (USA)

Length: 4 minutes

Rating: good

I am guessing that this is a true and autobiographical account of the filmmaker's experiences, rendered in simple line drawings. At times it is funny, other times it is tragic. I am also guessing that this is Callahan's therapy for himself. But at least there is a sense of humor to give you a reason to want to hear Callahan's problems.

"Diner" by Gahan Wilson (USA)

Length: 6 minutes

Rating: very good

Gahan Wilson has been popular for his macabre humor and his distinctive art style for many, many years. He is best known for single-frame cartoons like the ones he published in Playboy and Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction. This film translates his weird style to animation and a short story and it makes the transition well. This piece is full of Wilson's horror/humor and is a lot of fun.

"The Billy Nayer Show" by Cory McAbee and Bobby Lurie (USA)

Length: 2 minutes

Rating: poor

I think this looked like a rotoscope demo tape. It appeared to be two minutes of a stand-up comic who wasn't funny. It seems as if somebody thought that rotoscope would make this something someone wanted to see. Wrong!

"Little Wolf" by An Vrombaut (UK)

Length: 6 minutes

Rating: good

While this is not a particularly intriguing story, this tale of wolves who chase sheep and bay at the moon does have some mythic elements. It makes for a light but pleasant piece of entertainment.

"Mr. Sandman" by Paul Berry (UK)

Length: 10 minutes

Rating: very good

Paul Berry was lead animator for T_h_e_N_i_g_h_t_m_a_r_e_B_e_f_o_r_e_C_h_r_i_s_t_m_a_s, a real tour-de-force of animation as impressive as anything that the T_o_u_r_n_e_e has to offer. Here he presents another child's nightmare, a small horror story making really effective use of dimensional animation. This one gets my vote for best of the T_o_u_r_n_e_e.

"Words, Words, Words" by Michaela Pavlatova (Czechoslovakia)

Length: 8 minutes

Rating: good

Word balloons in comics are a metaphor for language. This animation takes the metaphor several steps further. There are no discernible words--a common mechanism in animated films that try for an international market. Instead we see a physical representation of how people use language by seeing what they do with word balloons. Not everything works, but this piece has the most intriguing ideas of any at the fest this year.

"A Tribute to the Dimensional Artistry of Will Vinton Studios" by Will Vinton Studios (USA)

Length: 22 minutes

Rating: good

It seems a little odd that Will Vinton Studios is making a tribute to themselves. I thought only incumbent politicians did that. Perhaps they did not write the title themselves. In any case, what we get is a disorganized collection of small pieces of animation. A lot are commercials. Am I the only one who is getting tired of the joke of raisins singing about hearing it through the grapevine? There are some new things I had not seen, but it really is just more of the same of techniques I had seen before. As far as a grand finale, this was competent, but an uninspired twenty-two minutes. They probably should have run "Mr. Sandman" or "Diner" last.

3. Top Ten Films of 1993 (film comment by Mark R. Leeper):

This has been the most impressive year for film since I started writing reviews. Some films that did not even make my top five list would have been my choice for best picture other years. While most years I have no more than one or two +3 films, this year I think I have ten.

The capper was something I have talked about as possible that I never expected to see, a film I thought was much better than any of my +4 films of the past. That means I have to either call it a +5 film or lump it in as a high +4. As you can see below I am still indecisive, but unfortunately it is not a decision I expect to come up again.

One of the interesting trends I see in this list is the recreation of history. For a while the historical film was in decline since filmmakers thought that history was not popular with today's audiences. This year is not representative of that trend. We see in the films below recreations of the Holocaust, a civil war battle, and the war in Vietnam, and one film in part about Chinese history early this century. More recent history is also represented with the recreation of a British court case and the research done in the fight against AIDS.

1. S_c_h_i_n_d_l_e_r'_s_L_i_s_t: I have said before that it is impossible to make a film about the Holocaust that does justice to the subject.

S_c_h_i_n_d_l_e_r'_s_L_i_s_t comes as close as any film could. This is a supremely powerful depiction of the banality of evil and--for once on film--the seductiveness of good. As a special case, I leave

S_c_h_i_n_d_l_e_r'_s_L_i_s_t unrated but very strongly recommend it.

2. G_e_t_t_y_s_b_u_r_g: This film that contains more authentic military history than any other film I have ever remember seeing. The film itself is more than four hours and very little of seems to be fiction or not well-grounded in historical record. Perhaps a little is speculation, but the highest proportion of time is reenactment of the most important battle in United States history.

This too is one of the best historical films I can remember.

Rating: high +3

3. J_u_r_a_s_s_i_c_P_a_r_k: Steven Spielberg has tapped into the mother lode of human dreams and sense of wonder. Michael Crichton's story may be "Westworld" with dinosaurs, but for once the technical basis for a science fiction film and the special effects are both exceptional. Rating: +3.

4. A_n_d_t_h_e_B_a_n_d_P_l_a_y_e_d_O_n: HBO gives us one of the best films of the most compelling films they have ever made. This is a detective

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story, a story of politics and sex, and has a terrific script and some very moving performances. HBO has made my top ten list multiple times in the past, but this is the best film I have seen from them. Rating: +3

5. T_h_e_N_i_g_h_t_m_a_r_e_B_e_f_o_r_e
C_h_r_i_s_t_m_a_s: Tim Burton proves himself a creative genius with a film deserving of instant holiday classic status. Just about everything comes together and genuinely works in the best Christmas film since Alistair Sim starred in A
C_h_r_i_s_t_m_a_s_C_a_r_o_l. This is a marvelously inventive animated feature film. Rating: +3

6. I_n_t_h_e_N_a_m_e_o_f_t_h_e_F_a_t_h_e_r: This is the true story of the victims of a conspiracy by British police to scapegoat eleven innocent people, many from a single family, for an IRA bombing. The main character spent fifteen years in prison before an enterprising lawyer uncovered the conspiracy and was able to overturn the conviction. Pete Postlethwaite is particularly effective as the main character's father who is imprisoned in the same cell as his son. Rating: low +3

7. T_h_e_J_o_y_L_u_c_k_C_l_u_b: These are the stories of four families who emigrated from mainland China in the last generation. It is the story of four mother-daughter relationships in the United States and the story of the four mothers' lives in repressive and sexist

Chinese society. The stories are often heart-wrenching and often inspirational. If this is a woman's film, as some have accused it of being, it at least is miles ahead of something like B_e_a_c_h_e_s.
Rating: low +3.

8. M_u_c_h_A_d_o_a_b_o_u_t_N_o_t_h_i_n_g: No Laurence Olivier standing statue-like and soliloquizing with stentorian speeches, Kenneth Branagh clearly communicates why this is considered a comedy. He puts back into Shakespeare the fun that the original audiences must have had. And with proper delivery the language is not at all hard to follow. This is a joyous film. Rating low +3.

9. I_n_d_o_c_h_i_n_e: There is human drama, political spectacle, and beautiful scenery in this D_r._Z_h_i_v_a_g_o of Vietnam. A story of a love triangle is told against the backdrop of the Vietnamese revolt against French imperialism. Very little has been done in film about the Vietnam of this period. Rating: low +3.

10. U_n_C_o_e_u_r_e_n_H_i_v_e_r: Most of the film revolves around the personality of one of the main characters, which is only gradually revealed in the film, so I will refrain from discussing it. This is a thoughtful, intelligent film. A minor tragedy that is surprisingly affecting. Rating: low +3.

4. THE SIGN OF THREE: DUPIN, HOLMES, PEIRCE edited by Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (Indiana University Press, ISBN 0-253-35235-5, 1983/1988, 236pp, US\$12.95) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

This collection of ten essays centers around the idea of "abduction." Abduction appears to be a term coined by Charles S. Peirce to signify what might be considered the third side of the triangle whose other two sides are induction and deduction. (Peirce was an American philosopher of the late 19th Century and the founder of the pragmatic movement.) Abduction (also called retroduction) does not attempt, as do induction and deduction, to predict the future, but rather to explain the past. Peirce used a

bag of beans to explain the three forms:

- Deduction:

- All the beans in the bag are white.
- This bean is from the bag.
- Therefore, this bean is white.

- Induction:

- These beans are from the bag.
- These beans are white.
- Therefore, all the beans in the bag are white.

- Abduction:

- All the beans in the bag are white.
- This bean is white.
- Therefore, this bean is from the bag.

Peirce also apparently posited that we have a tendency to guess correctly about the world. (If that were true, why do we have so many contradictory religions--or scientific theories?) He further claimed that this was due to our subconscious reading of "clues" that we don't consciously recognize.

The application of all this to Holmes's methods is obvious. (Dupin, in spite of top billing, is not as much in evidence in these essays.) Holmes's deductive methods are clearly abduction, and his ability to take details unnoticed by others and "guess" correctly from them certainly helps support Peirce's claim (if the doings of a fictional character can be said to support a real-life claim--but then Holmes's observational talents were derived from the real-life Dr. Bell's, who is discussed in one of the essays).

The essays provide an explanation of Peirce's theories and then apply them to the various Sherlockian stories, as well as to other uses. (The most interesting was a discussion of Giovanni Morelli's method of attributing artworks, and its application to "The

Adventure of the Cardboard Box.") At times descending (or ascending) into the academically abstruse, these essays nonetheless provide valuable insights into Holmes's methods even for the non-academic reader. This is not the first analysis of Sherlock Holmes I would recommend that someone read, but for those familiar with the more common studies, this would be an interesting next step.

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Many errors, of a truth, consist merely in the application of the wrong names of things.
-- Baruch Spinoza

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