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THE MT VOID

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appear in next week's VOID, just in time for the Fourth of July holiday weekend here, and certainly in plenty of time for Bastille Day in France or Bank Holiday weekend in Britain. To our members in Mexico and Denmark: I assume you have some holiday coming up, but my globalization hasn't extended that far yet. (I know we missed Cinco de Mayo, of course.) And to our Australian members: you have a whole six months before summer rolls around there! [-ecl]

2. It is time to at least talk about the last great taboo of our society. The words that everybody think but that few people have the courage to say. I must think these words thirty times a day and yet dare not speak them aloud. I hear what you are saying. "He must be going to talk about something sexual. I better hide this from the kids." Well, first of all, no it is nothing like that. (Besides, these days the kids could probably teach you a thing or two.) But even today I am talking about the words that nobody dares say, but that everybody thinks. Even kids in school think it but dare not say it. And experts say that people will be thinking this more and more in the future and may be all the more terrified to say it aloud. What are the dreaded words that we all think but only few have the courage to say out loud. The words are "I don't know what you are talking about. I don't understand."

Certainly in school you are taught from the first that you should study very hard and always be sure you will understand every pearl of wisdom the teacher utters. Your parents expect that when your math teacher says the hyperbolic tangent asymptotically approaches zero you will think to yourself "Of course it does." When your history teacher talks about the Diet of Worms you are expected to know what he is talking about and not stop to ask yourself "what do

worms eat, anyway?" (Actually, I wonder if anybody even teaches about the Diet of Worms anymore.)

As you get older it gets even worse with contractors asking you about rabbiting joists, and car ads talking about dual cam engines. Here at AT&T we take it a step further with the liberal use of acronyms. "Shall we connect the TSGs to the smart hubs via NFS or TCP/IP?" People who teach clarity of writing usually say to keep acronyms to a minimum, but have you read a Bell Labs Technical Journal lately. It looks like alphabet soup. Even when people talk about TV these days everything is going technical. When I was growing up I used to talk to my friends about the latest episode of T_h_e_O_u_t_e_r_L_i_m_i_t_s. I knew what they were talking about and they knew what I was talking about. These days people talk about S_t_a_r_T_r_e_k or BABYLON_B_a_b_y_l_o_n_5 you have to keep straight the names of seven or eight different alien races and forty or so different character and actor names. Conversation gets more and more

technical and harder and harder to follow, even talking about TV shows. These days talking about science fiction TV shows comes down to conversations like "Didn't the Traggleump have hyperwarp drive in their war against the Plargut?"

It is the hardest thing in the world to admit you don't understand. But deep down most of you are like that, going through life afraid to admit that you don't understand something. Now me, I am not like that. I have admitted it the few times I didn't follow a conversation. And you can believe that today I understand everything I hear. Please.

3. WOLF (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: Jack Nicholson stars in a film that tells a very traditional sort of werewolf story and makes no attempt to redefine the sub-genre in any way. Mike Nichols thankfully has more plot than special effects, but there is not enough here to

sink your teeth into. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4).

The Frankenstein monster and the vampire each owe their popularity to a single novel that captured the public's imagination. Werewolves are much more a product of the cinema, however. The closest there comes to being a classic werewolf novel that impacted cinema is Guy Endore's W_e_r_e_w_o_l_f_o_f_P_a_r_i_s of 1933. The first well-remembered werewolf film was 1935's W_e_r_e_w_o_l_f_o_f_L_o_n_d_o_n. That and T_h_e_W_o_l_f_m_a_n (1941) really were what captured the public's interest in human-animal shape-shifters. Since that time there have probably been only four films that did anything really interesting with the concept. Those would be (the flawed but original) W_o_l_f_e_n (1981), T_h_e_H_o_w_l_i_n_g (1981), the under-rated C_a_t_P_e_o_p_l_e (1982), and T_h_e_C_o_m_p_a_n_y_o_f_W_o_l_v_e_s (1984)--odd that they should all be in the space of four years. Most other shape-shifter films followed the same rules with minor variations and said little new about the condition of being a shape-shifter. Generally you find someone bitten by a werewolf, usually someone who is unable to express his rage, who gets an outlet by turning into an animal and letting rage be channeled in brutal ways. Unlike vampires, werewolves usually detest their condition, but they are powerless to control it. The condition easily applies itself to a metaphor for severe mental problems much as vampirism is often a metaphor for drug addiction.

Right down this centerline of interpretation with almost no spin on the ball is W_o_l_f. Jack Nicholson plays Will Randall, an editor for a leading publisher who looks for literary merit rather than books that will make a fast buck. When his publishing house is taken over by a corporate magnate, Raymond Alden (played by Christopher

Plummer), Randall finds himself being replaced and given the choice of a bad job or none at all. The old Will was a softie who would have stood by and taken it. However, after being bitten by a wolf on a back Vermont road, Will feel unexplainedly invigorated and ready to put up a fight. What follows is an almost by-the-numbers amalgamation of elements of W_e_r_e_w_o_l_f_o_f_L_o_n_d_o_n and T_h_e_W_o_l_f_m_a_n. This could almost be titled T_h_e_W_o_l_f_m_a_n_o_f_M_a_n_h_a_t_t_a_n.

This is one film that really could have benefited by being done in black and white. Director Mike Nichols occasionally manages an

atmospheric scene, but he is no Paul Schrader and Nichols probably would not have had the clout to insist on black and white or highly muted colors even if he wanted to use them. (Perhaps he could have used a werewolf bite himself!) He also makes the irritating mistake of showing Wolfman Will's superhuman leaps in slow motion where they look totally unbelievable. (With Nichols directing, listen for a voice cameo by his wife, Elaine May.)

_W_o_l_f features sound in THX, the screen's new abbreviation for "too darn loud." The werewolf makeup was the creation the talented Rick Baker, though here the effect is a bit understated. Wolf-Nicholson looks like a Dickensian thug with an underbite. Nichols probably could have chosen more elaborate special effects but for once a director did not feel the need to have elaborate special effects up-staging the actors. However, perhaps better effects were needed for animatronic wolves, which do not look realistic.

Nicholson is a rather obvious choice for a werewolf since he always seems to be barely keeping his animal side in check. Nevertheless as the book editor with a heart who is always looking out for the interest of his staff, he is less than totally convincing. Michelle Pfeiffer is on-hand as an heiress and a woman who runs (around) with the wolves. James Spader, Kate Nelligan, and Christopher Plummer co-star and each give a reasonable performance.

This is a film that gives all it promises, but little that is new or novel in the werewolf film. I rate it a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

4. Julien Duvivier's THE GOLEM (1936) (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

To start with, what is a golem? It is a statue that has been brought to life by mystical means. The Bible claims that God created man by bringing the dust of the earth together and breathing life into it. Legend has it that God can be invoked to do it again by special Ceremonies, though the formula is imperfect and the resulting Artificial human will lack the power of speech.

F r a n k e n s t e i n was inspired by golem legends. The most famous golem story is of the Golem of Prague, brought to life to protect the Jewish community. Films about golems are unusual though there had been two made in Germany previously starring Paul Wegener. One of them is a lost film, but the other is considered a classic. Since that film was made a tide of anti-Semitism had risen in Germany. In 1935 the Nuremberg Laws institutionalizing German state anti-Semitism. About the same time a film, a French and Czech co-production, was being made with veiled anti-German and not so veiled pro-Jewish sentiments, T h e G o l e m. The film has interest as a political document as well as a fantasy film. For many years this has been a rare film, but this year it is starting to become available on videotape.

The time is the 17th Century in Prague. Rabbi Loew, who created the Golem is dead, but Rudolf II is still emperor. The troubled Jewish community is now led by the young Rabbi Jacob, student and friend of the late Rabbi Loew. Rudolf's tolerance of the Jewish community has lasted about as long as the life of Loew. Now he is reinstating persecution albeit warily. His dreams are still troubled with visitations of the Golem and he will not rest easy until he possesses it and is sure the Jews cannot reanimate it. He is willing to torture and kill to get his hands on the magical statue. All his attempts to confiscate it fail until one night it just appears in his palace, still stone-like and inanimate. With the Golem under his thumb, the Rudolf safely returns to persecution.

Except for the metaphor of its politics, and perhaps not even that at the time, this is not a film of extreme subtlety. The filmmakers were primarily interested in getting their idea across. The feeding of Jews to lions is probably anachronistic, but it is an image that the audiences could probably find meaningful. The writers obviously felt very strongly about the film's message and was neither shy nor particularly subtle about expressing that message. When somebody tries to warn the Jews "Your brothers are in the hands of murderers" it is clear that the message is meant for more than the characters in the film. When the Emperor calls himself a friend of Jews while torturing one the analogy may break down slightly--at least the Nazis admitted their motives toward the Jews--but still it is clear that it is another dig at the Third Reich. The burning of the Jewish ghetto also seems to be a very contemporary image in the film. The motto of the film, often repeated, is "revolt is the right of a slave." The French filmmakers do not say the French will come to the Jews' aid if they revolt, but it definitely affirms their right.

Julien Duvivier directed the film as a somewhat fancy costume drama, perhaps to attract a wider audience in the bleak days of the late thirties in Europe. In a golem film, of course one of the main considerations is the design of the Golem itself. Ferdinand

Hart is perhaps one of the least imaginative visualizations. It looks more or less like a statue of a large bald man. The reasons for toning down the horrific aspect of the Golem are again likely to be political. If the film is supposed to instill a sense of solidarity with the Jews, it would not make sense to have them be the creators of monsters. The script then seems intentionally to build suspense about the appearance of the Golem. He is not shown on-screen until well into the plot and only at the end of a suspenseful sequence of a nighttime walk through the big empty palace. Disorientation and insecurity on the part of the emperor are often created with a tilted camera.

Harry Baur as the emperor is goggle-eyed and insecure. He was at the time a familiar actor, I believe. Charles Dorat as Rabbi Jacob is young and handsome but his performance is not particularly inspired. Finally there is Ferdinand Hart in the title role as the mystical statue. What can you say about a role that for most of the film requires you to stand absolutely still, then in the inevitable climax for this sort of film suddenly in the final reel turns into Machiste. The role requires more broad shoulders than depth.

I would say that the film is less a work of art and more a piece with some entertainment and an artifact of a dramatic period of history. Nevertheless, as someone with a particular interest in golem legends I am very pleased to see this particular film, usually only available at campus showings, now on videotape.

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