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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society  
 Club Notice - 01/12/96 -- Vol. 14, No. 28

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are in the Middletown  
 cafeteria Wednesdays at noon.

DATE	TOPIC
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01/24/96	Book: THE MAN WHO FOLDED HIMSELF by David Gerrold
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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.

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1. People have asked about the availability of the next discussion  
 book, THE MAN WHO FOLDED HIMSELF by David Gerrold. It is available  
 in the following public libraries in Middlesex County: Woodbridge,  
 Highland Park, North Brunswick, Old Bridge, and Piscataway.  
 Unfortunately Monmouth County does not have its catalog on-line for  
 me to check. [-ecl]

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2. This is, of course, a publication of a science fiction club.

One of the obligations of writing editorials for a science fiction publication is that occasionally I should say something about science fiction. So every once in a while I think I ought to talk here about a science fiction topic. This time I want to present an idea I have been mulling over. Evelyn has a particular interest in

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alternate history novels and I hear a great deal about them. They seem to be something of a current rage. There seem to be a lot of alternate history novels being written, though I am sure that part of what gives me that impression is that I am married to an acknowledged expert on the subject.

For the benefit of those who don't know what I am talking about, science fiction was initially fiction that came out of scientific speculation. It tended to look at questions like "what if we had a substance that was opaque to gravity so that what was on the other side was not subject to the pull of gravity. The novel like THE FIRST MEN IN THE MOON took that as a starting point for its adventures. Science fiction has come a long way since then and the scientific assumptions are rarely as so obvious or important to the content of the story today.

But there is a branch of science fiction that is still very closely tied to "what if" sorts of speculation though they are not speculations about science but about history. Now it is surprising I guess that historically there was not a lot more speculative fiction written about history assumptions than about science assumptions. In the day-to-day work of scientists there is not a lot of speculation about the future or at least not to the degree of speculation that you have in the field of history. Now maybe I am not enough sure what historians do, but it seems to me that a great deal of historical research is about why people did what they did and what would have been the consequences if they had done something else. You can't understand the battle of Gettysburg without asking yourself questions like how would things have been different if the South had taken Little Round Top. It seems to me that speculation is, if anything, more intrinsic to the study of history than of science. Any understanding beyond rote memorization of historical facts brings one to speculation about alternate possible histories.

It is the usual model to say that the set of possible alternate histories has a tree structure opening toward the future. That is that you have at some point in time events happening that could go one way or another so you consider this a branchpoint to two or more alternate futures. There are lots of time travel stories in which characters go back in time, then forward again to try to return to our worldline only to find that they have taken the wrong branch and are in some alternate present where, say, the South won the Civil War or maybe where I studied harder for my history exam. Now the reason that a different path is taken may be the fault of the time traveler or, as some stories would have it, it is just inevitable. But the assumption is usually that you always hit your branch points going in the forward direction. It seems in the vast majority of stories I have read if you go a hundred years in the future and then a hundred years into the past, you are back in the same world you started in. There are lots of stories like

Bradbury's "The Sound of Thunder" in which going first into the past and then the same distance into the future puts you into another world entirely. In the Bradbury somebody goes back to the Mesozoic, steps on a butterfly and when returning to the present finds it changed. I always thought this was the origin of the name "The Butterfly Effect" in chaos theory, by the way. The idea is that a tiny change in the past causes a big change in the future. I have heard it claimed that "The Butterfly Effect" really applies to the theory that a butterfly flapping its wings in China may cause a hurricane in Florida just by setting events in motion that may eventually cause the storm. But the Bradbury story could have also inspired the name.

Well, I will look at the possibilities of alternate pasts next week. [-mrl]

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### 3. 12 MONKEYS (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: This is a complex and disturbing

science fiction story that will not be to most people's taste. Mixing time travel and schizophrenia in a film that is much too often painful to watch. 12 MONKEYS is by turns violent, revolting, contrived, and intelligent. This is a film that is good without being recommendable. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4). A plot description of "La Jetee" follows in a spoiler section. Be warned that it could be a spoiler for either film.

The virus attack that started in December of 1996 has killed all but a small remnant of civilization who live in 2035 in underground hi-tech steel bunkers. In the bunker under Philadelphia it is like living in a prison for everyone but prisoners. Convicted criminals are kept caged in steel boxes and moved in and out by cranes when they are chosen to "volunteer" for hazardous tasks. Prisoner James Cole (Bruce Willis) is picked to volunteer to collect biological samples on the surface. This mission leads to a more important mission, being sent back in time to 1996 to collect fresh virus samples. Instead, through miscalculation, he ends in 1990 where he is almost immediately thrown into a mental institution. His doctor is psychologist Dr. Kathryn Raily (Madeleine Stowe), an expert in of all things, prophecy. He is put under the mentorship of a hyperkinetic schizoid Jeffrey Goines (Brad Pitt) whose most harmless delusions are of being the son of a famous man.

12 MONKEYS is a film of great flaws and of at least moderate virtues. There are far too many places where the film wanders far

beyond the realm of believability. In one scene Raily goes visiting dangerous and unstable men in prison wearing a provocative short skirt. Admittedly the character had not planned for this at the beginning of the evening, but it is unlikely she would do it, even so. Some of the coincidences that move the plot along are incredibly contrived. This is a film that even for strong science fiction film fans will be one that is better to have seen than to be seeing. Director Terry Gilliam made BRAZIL a downbeat film to watch, but at least one with its whimsical side. For this film he has removed just about all the charm and created a nightmarish past

and present, and an especially bleak future. His images grate like steel claws scratching on a blackboard. The entire film is an assault on the emotions and the senses. For example, this is just the film for all those people who have been waiting years to see Bruce Willis drool, bleed, spit, and eat spiders. That is just the kind of film it is. Much of the story takes place in mental institutions or alleys of homeless schizophrenics. There is little that is uplifting or exciting about the film, though there are some intriguing science fictional ideas, particularly about causality and time travel. There are several nice ironic time travel paradoxes. The screenplay is provided by David Peoples (who co-authored BLADERUNNER) and Janet Peoples. Rarely does a film bear a credit for being inspired by another film, but 12 MONKEYS is inspired by Chris Marker's 29-minute film "La Jetee," which originally ran on a double bill with ALPHAVILLE.

Willis and Pitt each give disturbing performances. Willis is not a great actor, but he is better than he often appears. And this film certainly gives him more opportunity than most of his action films to create a character. Mostly this film gives him an opportunity to show bewilderment. Brad Pitt has been getting some attention for his wildly gesticulating mental patient. He is adequately strange, but nothing world-class. Madeleine plays someone considerably more normal than the two male leads and as a result has a much less flashy role. She is much harder to notice by contrast, proving that in an insane world a sane person appears not insane but only unmemorable.

12 MONKEYS is a pretentious and self-indulgent piece of oppressive and cheerless filmmaking, but for mavens of time travel stories it delivers the goods. I rate it a low +2 on the -4 to 4 scale.

Spoiler...Spoiler...Spoiler...Spoiler...Spoiler...

"La Jetee" is a short film made up almost entirely of still photos. The following is a synopsis:

It is a post-holocaust Paris in which survivors live underground. The underpinnings of reality and causality have been blown away. He is haunted by the image of a woman's face that he cannot get out of his mind. It becomes an obsession. Because it has weakened his

hold on the present, a scientist thinks that he can actually send H traveling in time (similar to SOMEWHERE IN TIME). H goes back in time to an incident in his past where he thinks he may have seen the woman on a jetty. Something bad (I forget what) happens while he is on the jetty, and he is killed. The last thing he sees before his death is the image of a woman's face, the same image that brought him to his death. [-mrl]

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4. MEMOIRS OF ELIZABETH FRANKENSTEIN by Theodore Roszak (Random House, ISBN 0-679-43732-0, 1995, 425pp, US\$22) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Is it that Mary Shelley's story has always been this popular, or is it that it is having a revival now? In 1994 there was a major film based on it and a major science fiction novel using it as a starting point. Now there is MEMOIRS OF ELIZABETH FRANKENSTEIN, a re-telling of the story from Elizabeth's perspective.

At first, I had the impression that Roszak was following in the footsteps of many modern writers, wanting to show women were not the innocent creatures they had been depicted as, and thinking that the only way was to show their "seamier" side. But it soon became clear that this was not what Roszak had in mind. Roszak is instead elaborating on the conflict between Romanticism and Rationalism that Shelley used in her original work. Though his approach owes perhaps as much to Fritz Leiber as to Mary Shelley, he has a style that is distinct from either. His approach to Romanticism is certainly different from Shelley's, and clearly inspired more by present-day New Age and Wiccan beliefs than by the Romanticism of the 18th century. There's also more than a touch of the search for hidden, occult knowledge that was current during Shelley's time.

There are a few slip-ups. Roszak (and his proof-reader) seem to confuse "prone" with "supine" (twice on page 15). And the description of the automata on page 49 is inconsistent with the earlier description of its performance. As for more substantive questions involving the accuracy of the mystic and pagan traditions as depicted by Roszak, I am not knowledgeable enough to say. But given that Roszak has made a previous foray into the field of secret medieval societies (FLICKER) and there is some overlap in the research involved for the two books, I would expect that he had in fact been reasonably diligent, and certainly diligent enough for the lay reader. While this probably won't appeal to readers who are more attracted to the science fictional aspects of the Shelley novel, I do recommend it for those who see it more for its place in the European literary and philosophical corpus. [-ecl]

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5. SENSE AND SENSIBILITY (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: Jane Austen's plots generally do not appeal to me, but this adaptation is done with style and quiet wit that livens the story. Emma Thompson's script and Ang Lee's direction make this the most pleasant excursion into the world of Austen I have yet seen. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4)

Well, it is almost certain now. E. M. Forster, monarch of art house class film productions has been deposed. With so many of his major novels already adapted, it was only a matter of time before a new monarch had to be chosen. The new queen is Jane Austen. Emma Thompson, one of the two most popular art house actresses (the other being Helena Bonham-Carter) not only stars in this adaptation of Austen's SENSE AND SENSIBILITY but in this case she even tries her hand at writing it. Well, perhaps suggesting that a crown has been passed is overstating the matter, but in less than a year we have seen CLUELESS (inspired by EMMA) and PERSUASION, and we will shortly have a serious adaptation of EMMA and a BBC version of PRIDE AND PREJUDICE. The current SENSE AND SENSIBILITY certainly has the marks of being a prestige film. It is directed by Ang Lee of THE WEDDING BANQUET and EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN and it has a lush and luscious score by Patrick Doyle who has done so many of Kenneth Branagh's films, often featuring Branagh's wife Emma Thompson.

In Jane Austen's time "sensibility" was almost the opposite of today's meaning of "sense." The word meant following emotions rather than logic. Austen's novel is of two sisters who have very parallel sorts of stories, but one of whom approaches life with sense and the other with sensibility. In the story Mrs. Dashwood (Gemma Jones) and her three daughters find themselves reduced from having a comfortable existence to being homeless when Mrs. Dashwood's ex-husband dies. The widow discovers her home has been left to her step-son, John Dashwood and his wife, the aptly-named Fanny. John was left with the responsibility to take care of the women, but Fanny talks him out of the expensive duty. The

family of four women eventually are invited by a cousin to move into a Devonshire cottage much smaller than their previous living arrangements and the daughters' prospects for finding good husbands are much diminished. Marianne, the middle daughter (played by Kate Winslet of HEAVENLY CREATURES), a woman of great sensibility (in the Austen meaning) but little sense, is attracted to the handsome John Willoughby (Greg Wise), who seems to love her. The eldest daughter Elinor (Emma Thompson), a woman of strong sense but little emotional sensibility, is attracted to Fanny Dashwood's brother, the pleasant but oh-so-diffident Edward Ferris (Hugh Grant). But their plans will go awry when each man is called away unexpectedly

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to London.

I cannot claim to be much of a fan of Jane Austen and her stories of what seem often to me to be overwrought accounts of love and manners. But Ang Lee tells this story so well and with such warmth and wit that he overcomes the weaknesses in the plot. He manages to make Austen's characters far more interesting than what they do. And it is the minor characters who have the most interest. Yes, there is some depth to Elinor Dashwood as the logical spinster in the role Thompson wrote for herself; Thompson is always very good with body language. Also Winslet is good but not really memorable as the flighty, romantic sister. But the minor characters are the most engaging. Gemma Jones has a great air of sad dignity as Mrs. Dashwood. Elizabeth Spriggs, a freight train of a woman, is a popular busy-body. Much too rarely seen outside of British TV comedy is the rubber-faced Hugh Laurie who could read the phone book and make it funny. Here he has a small role, but a funny one. Alan Rickman is usually good actor and here as the patient, disappointed suitor he matches the sad dignity of Gemma Jones. Hugh Grant plays almost the same likable foul-up that he played in FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL. The look of the film and especially the costumes give a real period feel, though at least the print I saw seemed to be faded and the film stock inconsistent from scene to scene.

After I did not greatly enjoy PERSUASION earlier this year I was not expecting to like SENSE AND SENSIBILITY. In fact it was the first film of Jane Austen that I can remember having enjoyed. Rate



it a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

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A pessimist is a person who has had to listen to too many optimists.

--Don Marquis

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