



daughter and son-in-law, I mentioned that by Thursday I had to write a review of a 650-page book that I hadn't yet finished reading. "How far along are you?" asked Elaine. "Page 34." Quipped Chris, "You'll have to get the Cliffs Notes."

THE MT VOID

Page 2

On Wednesday, having progressed not much farther, I stopped at the local library, and headed for Dewey 809.3. Imagine my delight when I saw, nestled among the volumes of critical commentary on sf, the familiar yellow and black of a Cliffs Notes cover! Sure enough, it was Cliffs S\_c\_i\_e\_n\_c\_e\_F\_i\_c\_t\_i\_o\_n: A\_n\_I\_n\_t\_r\_o\_d\_u\_c\_t\_i\_o\_n, with analyses of a dozen or so great SF novels.

Alas, S\_t\_a\_n\_d\_o\_n\_Z\_a\_n\_z\_i\_b\_a\_r is not one of them. (T\_h\_e\_M\_o\_o\_n\_I\_s\_a\_H\_a\_r\_s\_h\_M\_i\_s\_t\_r\_e\_s\_s is; I could have used that last month.) Is it fair to go ahead and review a book that one hasn't finished reading? Yes, I think so, especially if the fault is at least partly the author's.

S\_t\_a\_n\_d\_o\_n\_Z\_a\_n\_z\_i\_b\_a\_r is very difficult to read. Not only does it make heavy use of future slang, but, following in Dos Passos' footsteps, it intermixes snippets of news stories, biographies, excerpts from fictitious books, and commercials with rather short segments of the main plot line. Or rather, with at least three main plot lines.

I have no doubt that the plot lines will converge eventually, and that the snippets will be seen as integral to the book. At the start, though, trying to make sense of it all is a struggle. I have the feeling (as with John Barth's equally long T\_h\_e\_S\_o\_t-W\_e\_e\_d\_F\_a\_c\_t\_o\_r) that as soon as I finish S\_t\_a\_n\_d\_o\_n\_Z\_a\_n\_z\_i\_b\_a\_r I'll want to read it again, to catch all that I missed the first time.

The title of the book stems not from its setting, but from the overpopulation that is its shaping force: Whereas in 1900 the entire population of the Earth could have stood shoulder-to-shoulder on the Isle of Wight (147 square miles), by 2010 Brunner postulates that they'd cover the Island of Zanzibar (some 650 square miles)--and by the time the book ends, "tens of thousands would be knee-deep in the water." Stringent restrictions on reproduction have not stemmed the human tide. Living space is at such a premium that even a rising corporate executive like Norman House is obliged to share the exorbitant cost of an apartment with

Donald Hogan, a "synthesist" paid by the Government to study everything and look for connections. In return for the Government support, Hogan has agreed to take on other roles (for example, spy) when so instructed; the role he's later given is assassin.

Other characters include Dr. Sugaiguntung (a genius at genetic biology), Shalmaneser (a sentient computer), Chad Mulligan (a rebel sociologist, whose name we first encounter as author of several book excerpts), and Zadkiel Obomi (president of the suspiciously peaceful West African country of Beninia).

Comparing S\_t\_a\_n\_d\_o\_n\_Z\_a\_n\_z\_i\_b\_a\_r with another dystopian Brunner novel, T\_h\_e\_S\_h\_e\_e\_p\_L\_o\_o\_k\_U\_p (which I greatly enjoyed), David Samuelson in Magill's S\_u\_r\_v\_e\_y\_o\_f\_S\_c\_i\_e\_n\_c\_e\_F\_i\_c\_t\_i\_o\_n\_L\_i\_t\_e\_r\_a\_t\_u\_r\_e found Z\_a\_n\_z\_i\_b\_a\_r

"less

didactic, less directive in its social message.... Although the reader may not fully understand it, his complicity in helping to put together the fragments of this both familiar and unfamiliar

world may have a more lasting effect on the conscious level, reorienting the reader's observation of his own contemporary society, as well as the nature of the science fiction novel.... In S\_t\_a\_n\_d\_o\_n\_Z\_a\_n\_z\_i\_b\_a\_r, [Brunner] has given us a textbook example of how a futurological imagination can employ modernist literary devices to produce a science fiction masterpiece." [-csh]

---

2. I always knew that at some point we would really get to the "me generation." No, I don't mean just that everyone is thinking of themselves. I mean ME! As in Mark Leeper. People had to realize sooner or later that the true essence of cool is Mark Leeper. People would be trying to look and act like me. They would imitate my stylish, irreverent wit, my casual yet thoughtful style of dress, they would be growing beards that look like mine with the dashing highlights of brown and gray. Or people might be able to buy false-Mark-Leeper beards so they could look like me even if they could not grow such a great beard themselves and so the trend would not discriminate on the basis of sex.

Well, I have this to say about the Mark Leeper trend. Uh, it isn't here yet. But it's starting. People are starting to imitate how I was as a teenager. More and more people are getting into things that have been interests of mine all along. As a teen I was interested in Samurais and Japanese culture in general. Well it is more true on the west coast but there are a lot of people who share that interest. Movies have reflected the television shows I used to watch. When I was really young it was Superman for me, and films sort of followed the trend and have gotten up to my teenage years. This summer they got up to T\_h\_e\_F\_u\_g\_i\_t\_i\_v\_e there is now a release of T\_h\_e\_B\_e\_v\_e\_r\_l\_y\_H\_i\_l\_l\_b\_i\_l\_l\_i\_e\_s. They have not made a movie of O\_u\_t\_e\_r\_L\_i\_m\_i\_t\_s yet, but I suspect it cannot be too long. T\_w\_i\_l\_l\_i\_g\_h\_t\_Z\_o\_n\_e has been made into a film, as has S\_t\_a\_r\_T\_r\_e\_k. Of course they have already done T\_h\_e\_U\_n\_t\_o\_u\_c\_h\_a\_b\_l\_e\_s. Hollywood is slowly working its way up to my college years.

One real shocker was that I never expected recreational mathematics to take off. I loved it as a teenager. Give me a pencil and some paper and I was busy and happy for a long time. At the time I thought that if other people thought of mathematics in the right way, they would be doing the same thing. The problem was that most people just hadn't seen the beauty of mathematics. Well not all of math took off, but one problem in group theory did. At one point I remember seeing little kids on the street working the problem of finding inverses to arbitrary elements in a particularly complex group. The group is, of course, the set of positions of a Rubik's Cube. I guess the moral here is that if you can cast a math problem in plastic, it can capture people's imagination. There was even a cartoon show on TV with a Rubik's cube as a hero. No it

doesn't make sense, but it shows the degree to which people can learn to get enthused about a math problem.

Well, if I am right and we are going to get the Mark Leeper Generation, soon we should be finding a great flourish in quality writing and soon everybody is going to be writing weekly comments on the world around them. Just remember when they do that it was me who started the trend. The only thing that bothers me is that it is coming in so slowly--Rubik's Cube was almost a decade ago and

T\_h\_e\_F\_u\_g\_i\_t\_i\_v\_e was just this year--that by the time the Mark Leeper Generation comes along it may be too late to save the world.

---

### 3. ADDAMS FAMILY VALUES (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: In a second-rate plot punctuated by some first-rate jokes, the new Addams Family film tells the story of what happens when a new baby and a murderous nanny come to the Addams household. Lots of funny gags in the ghoulish Addams style fail to save the rather uninteresting plot. Rating +1 (-4 to +4).

Yes, it's time for another visit to the little house out in the middle of nowhere, the Addams House. Perhaps it is out in the middle of nowhere because nobody could stand to move next to the Addams, or perhaps it was once a thriving neighborhood before the darling Addams children were let loose on it. In either case, back are Gomez (Raoul Julia), Morticia (Angelica Huston), Uncle Fester (Christopher Lloyd), Wednesday (Christina Ricci), Thing (Francis Ingram), and the rest of the Addams clan. The characters are based on those of the television series which in turn were inspired by the ghoulish New Yorker cartoons of Charles Addams. Unfortunately that sums up the strengths and weaknesses of the new film and its predecessor. Magazine cartoons have no plot at all, just quick-punch jokes. Where the two Addams Family films are their strongest is in the quick-punch jokes. When the film tries to advance a plot it loses most of its energy and humor, and tells a rather weak story. It is only when the story-telling comes to a full halt for the sake of a joke that the film is really funny.

This time around the Addams have a new baby and little Wednesday and Pugsley decide to execute the little thing as ghoulishly as possible to protect the status quo. To keep peace in the family Gomez and Morticia hire a nanny who turns out to be a Black Widow murderess (Joan Cusack) out to marry and kill Uncle Fester for his fortune. Did I miss something? The plot calls for Fester to be rich and famous. I do not remember that ever being part of the plot before this outing. The story also calls for Wednesday and

Pugsley to go to Summer Camp. So we flash back and forth between the Addams at home, a married-to-a-killer subplot, and a Wednesday-and-Pugsley-make-a-shambles-of-a-Summer-Camp subplot. The two subplots have been done better as full-length films in the past. There is also an equation of Wednesday's and Pugsley's eccentricities with positive political correctness. The latter really was a fiasco and threatens to torpedo the whole spirit of the series.

Still, when it is just showing little vignettes that could have come from Addams cartoons, it is terrific. We have very little impression of what Addams characters are like between the little flashbulb glimpses we get from the cartoons, so Huston's and Julia's performances are based on the interpretations of John Astin and Carolyn Jones. It is not easy to outdo an actor at a popular role that actor created. That is like trying to do Inspector Clouseau better than Peter Sellers. But Julia and Huston actually outdo Astin and Jones at their own game. This is a film with big ups and big downs so overall it gets just a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale. (My apologies to Christopher Hart who did such a good job as Thing. Attributing the part to Ingram was something of an inside joke though I doubt that anyone will recognize the reference to Francis Ingram. Anyone want to try to identify that name?)

---

#### 4. THE PIANO (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: I may stand alone on this one, but for me T\_h\_e\_P\_i\_a\_n\_o is an unbelievable and over-wrought melodrama. Keitel is at least able to put in a good performance, but as talented as Hunter is, even she cannot make the bizarre Ada believable. The production values are good, but the writing of this pot-boiler strikes me as being on a par with that of M\_a\_n\_d\_i\_n\_g\_o. Rating -1 (-4 to +4).

Do not trust me on this one. I am not someone who gets a whole lot out of stories of people who do strange illogical things in the heat of passion. I tend to find these tales comic at just the moment that they are trying to be the most serious. I have this nasty tendency to chuckle at D. H. Lawrence stories. But for me, T\_h\_e\_P\_i\_a\_n\_o was an incredibly overwrought and pretentious melodrama. When I should have been shuddering I found myself chortling. The critics who are liking this film so much clearly are better able to appreciate this sort of story.

Holly Hunter plays Ada, a woman who has chosen at an early age to remain mute for reasons that even she does not understand. Already we can see that Ada gets caught up in situations where she does not

understand her own behavior and motives. Rather than a voice she has come to express herself through music on her piano and through sign language. As the story opens, some time in the 19th Century, she has a daughter of about eight (Ana Paquin) and her father has arranged a marriage between her and a New Zealand settler Stewart (Sam Neill). On her arrival in New Zealand her husband decides that her piano is wrong for life in New Zealand. For practical reasons, though also insensitively, he abandons it on the beach. But without a care for the wishes of his new wife he does not go back for the piano even when he has a chance. Ada goes to a crude neighbor, George Baines (Harvey Keitel) to ask him to rescue the instrument. That he does but convinces Stewart to trade to him the piano for a piece of land. Stewart agrees without even consulting Ada. He knows how much the piano means to her, but after all he is a man and so is insensitive to the wishes of the wife whose affection he is trying to win.

Baines is extremely lonely and he finds seeing and hearing Ada play extremely erotic. He first works a deal for Ada to teach him to play the piano as part of the land agreement. But as a side arrangement he tells Ada she can buy back the piano, a black key at a time if she will give him little sexual favors while she plays. This arrangement sets into motion a melodrama of sex and violence worthy of a drive-in triple feature of exploitation films. Perhaps writer/director Jane Campion has made this film with a modicum more polish, but the material is no less trashy than if the story were set on an Arkansas sawmill.

Keitel, Hunter, and Neill are all good actors but of them only Keitel manages to rise above the material and invest his character with real humanity. At his worst Baines is never far from being a sympathetic character. It is a bit too easy to feel sorry for poor Ada as the powerless victim. But still her character is top-heavy with too many weird facets for even Hunter to make believable. (Are there genuinely people who not only sleepwalk but sleep-piano-play?) Ada brings about the climax of the story of her and Stewart in an enigmatic act of piano mutilation that was disastrously unsuccessful, but which would have been no less a fiasco had it gone as she planned. Somebody would have noticed the

effect on the piano soon. In addition the act seemed to involve a note to someone whom she already knew was illiterate.

At least the film is well-photographed, showing both positive and negative aspects of life among the Maori of New Zealand in the last century. That adds what watchable elements the film has. But I cannot help feeling that in years to come, once we are past the initial rush of political sympathy, this film is going to be considered an embarrassment in just the same way B\_i\_l\_l\_y\_J\_a\_c\_k has been. I give this film a -1 on the -4 to +4 scale. For me, this is the most over-rated film of the year. Sorry, I fully expect that there will be many who disagree, but Harvey Keitel and the

THE MT VOID

Page 7

Emperor are dressed just alike.

---

#### 5. A PERFECT WORLD (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: This is something of a departure for Eastwood, a gritty and realistic crime drama that slowly fades into a story with warm relationships. Costner has center stage as an escaped convict who forms a father-son relationship with his young hostage. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4).

Clint Eastwood has built a career on playing violent characters particularly his "Man with No Name" and Dirty Harry. Two films back he made U\_n\_f\_o\_r\_g\_i\_v\_e\_n, an anti-violence Western that was nonetheless violent. There was speculation that his films would be less violent from that point on and that U\_n\_f\_o\_r\_g\_i\_v\_e\_n was a sort of penance. The next film he starred in, I\_n\_t\_h\_e\_L\_i\_n\_e\_o\_f\_F\_i\_r\_e, was another film in the "Dirty Harry" mold, but Eastwood claimed that he had no artistic control and was just an actor playing a part. Eastwood has now directed his first film since U\_n\_f\_o\_r\_g\_i\_v\_e\_n. Like U\_n\_f\_o\_r\_g\_i\_v\_e\_n it is a film with some violence, but at the same time does not glorify that violence.

Kevin Costner plays Butch Haynes, who breaks out of a Texas prison

on Halloween night of 1963 together with Terry Pugh, a brutal hood. Along the way they pick up an eight-year-old hostage, Philip, played by T. J. Lowther. On their trail is Texas Ranger Red Garnett (Eastwood) who has been assigned a state criminologist Sally Gerber (Laura Dern). This is a Clint Eastwood film, so of course Dern is along to play the required female lead to be subjected to the Eastwood character's insensitive male chauvinism in the early parts of the film but to be won over by Eastwood in the later parts of the film. In this outing, however, Eastwood and Dern take a backseat to Costner and Lowther, who play the real main characters of the film, Haynes and Philip. Eventually it is just Haynes and Philip on the run and learning to get along with each other. Lowther is attracted to the father figure he was missing at home, Costner is torn between his anti-social urges and his desire to be a better father figure to Philip than Haynes's father had been to Haynes. Costner make a very believable Texas con.

Much of the story is told with very little mood music as Eastwood adopts the realistic style of I\_n\_C\_o\_l\_d\_B\_l\_o\_o\_d and B\_a\_d\_l\_a\_n\_d\_s.

Unfortunately that is only the part of the story about the fugitives. The witty in-fighting of the police on the case and comic bits involving an aluminum trailer serving as police headquarters for the Texas backroad chase tend to sabotage the almost documentary style of the fugitives' story. Eventually this

part of the plot gives in to more humanistic values and we get some more background music to tell us how to feel about what we are experiencing.

Costner's character is one of the more complex ones we have seen on the screen in a while, particularly in an Eastwood film. His unfinished business with his own father has led him to idolize children and his violence is usually triggered by his seeing a child not being treated well. He is infuriated to discover that Philip's religion, Jehovah's Witness, does not allow the boy to trick or treat or to go to carnivals and does not distinguish between religious restrictions and parental brutality. It is the combination of his own unintended cruelty to his young companion and his desire to protect the boy that lead the story to its

denouement.

Eastwood makes a few beginner's mistakes not expected of an experienced director. There are serious continuity flaws, particularly with arm positions in a key scene at both the beginning and end of the film. This combined with the uneven style do not sink the film, but certainly count against it. My rating for A P e r f e c t W o r l d would be a less than perfect +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

---

6. MRS. DOUBTFIRE (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: This is an electric blanket of a movie. It is thin but it is reliable and can be warm when it has to be. Robin Williams plays a divorced man who wants to be with his children and is willing to cross-dress to secretly become the family nanny. There are funny moments and warm moments, but few thoughtful, intelligent, or perceptive moments. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4)

Robin Williams plays Daniel Hillard, who is a bit like a big child. He temperamentally walks off of a job providing voices for cartoon characters over a principle. (This reminds one of T o o t s i e, and it certainly will not be the last such reminder.) To cheer himself up he throws a lavish birthday party for his son which backfires involving both police and his wife Miranda (Sally Field). This is the last straw and Miranda files divorce proceedings that severely limit Daniel's right to see his own children. To appease his need for work as well as his emotional need to see his children Daniel has his brother, a gay makeup artist, make him up to look like a woman. Disguised and taking the name Mrs. Doubtfire, he secretly takes the job of nanny to his own children. There he is able to win the acceptance, albeit unknowing, of his family. From there

you can pretty well figure out what comic situations arise. For example, he must learn to cook for his family. Most of the gags

here do not even require the major premise of the film, they are just generic learning to cook gags. Then when his ex-wife starts dating a rich handsome bachelor (Pierce Brosnan), and of course he uses his position as confidant to steer Miranda back to him. There are few unfamiliar situations in this by-the-numbers comedy. We even have that old standby from dating movies, having to balance two simultaneous dates (well, dinner appointments) without anybody realizing he is not spending full time with them.

I will not say I was a big fan of T\_o\_o\_t\_s\_i\_e, but at least it attempted a little more substance than this light-weight comedy. I will say that if I saw both Dustin Hoffman and Robin Williams on the street dressed as women, I would probably be more convinced by Williams portrayal, but there the advantages of M\_r\_s.\_D\_o\_u\_b\_t\_f\_i\_r\_e over T\_o\_o\_t\_s\_i\_e end. There are serious flaws in logic in this film. Not the least of these flaws is that even using a bodysuit and mask, the Doubtfire costume would take on the order of fifteen minutes to put on and perhaps as long to take off. There are times in the film where Williams slips in and out of his disguise in seconds. Williams is good at varying his voice, but probably not so good as the story calls for him to be. In specific, he fools his wife of fourteen years throughout the story with many different voices. I doubt that even Mel Blanc could have done that. The film glosses over the difference between being able to put several different characterizations in a voice and the ability to actually disguise a voice so is not recognizable. Another flaw is the dependence on slapstick comedy. Yes it brings a quick laugh, but it just is not as satisfying as real wit in writing. Too many of the scenes are just obvious and mechanical. This is a fluffy see-once situation comedy that is about what you would expect from Chris Columbus who directed the two "Home Alone" films and the somewhat better

A\_d\_v\_e\_n\_t\_u\_r\_e\_s\_i\_n\_B\_a\_b\_y\_s\_i\_t\_t\_i\_n\_g. This one gets a rating of +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

Mark Leeper  
MT 3D-441 908-957-5619  
leeper@mtgzfs3.att.com

Every age is fed on illusions, lest man should renounce  
life early and the human race come to an end.

-- Joseph Conrad

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT ALMOST BLANK

