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Mini Reviews, Part 2 (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is the first batch of mini-reviews in this volume of the MT VOID, all films related to the fantastic.

THE SPECTACULAR FAILURE OF THE STAR WARS HOTEL (2024): Jenny Nicholson was a "Star Wars" fan and a theme park fan, so when Disney announced a "Star Wars"-themed hotel, she was eager. When she heard how much it would cost, she was somewhat less eager, but decided to go for it anyway. As a YouTuber and general content creator, dealing with pop culture in general and "Star Wars" in particular, it seemed like a necessity. And never let it be said she does anything halfway. Her review of the "Star Wars hotel" runs over four hours, and covers it from conception (and even before that) through its ultimate demise and what future plans might be.

I will not attempt to summarize her review, though if you really want to hear just a summary, she does split the review into about a dozen chapters, and one of them addresses the first question everyone asks: "Was it worth the price?"

I cannot review the "Star Wars Hotel", but I can review THE SPECTACULAR FAILURE OF THE STAR WARS HOTEL with this: when you are filling in your Hugo Awards ballot, I would like to suggest that this is eligible for, and worthy of, a nomination in the "Best Related Work" category. The Dramatic Presentation categories refer to "dramatized productions", which does not accurately describe a documentary. Meanwhile, "Related Works" are defined as "a work related to the field of science fiction, fantasy, or fandom" and other non-printed works have been nominated (including a CD and a live acceptance speech). [-ecl]

Released on YouTube June(?) 2024. Rating: low +3 (-4 to +4), or 8/10.

LIFE (2017): Most reviews compare LIFE to ALIEN, and I can't argue with that but it also has a bit of THE THING (in all its various versions), and a touch of THE QUATERMASS EXPERIMENT. And the opening had the feel of THE EUROPA REPORT in the general ambiance on the space station. (I was going to say "atmosphere" but that would be misleading.)

The premise (a single-celled life form that reproduces and acquires intelligence without ever specializing) is promising, but the actual story doesn't make much use of it. [-ecl]

Released theatrically 24 March 2017. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4), or 6/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5442430/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/life_2017

DISCONTINUED (2022): The basic premise of DISCONTINUED isn't revealed until twenty minutes into the film, but I'm going to have a spoiler here in order to comment on the film. The basic idea is ... SPOILER SPOILER SPOILER ... Sarah is living in a virtual reality (simulation). Okay, not all that original. But in *this* simulation, the people have just been told that *this* simulation is being discontinued, and people have two choices: stay in an unsupported version of the simulation, or have their consciousness moved to a stripped-down version where they relive their five best memories over and over.

While DISCONTINUED is clearly related to THE MATRIX et al (and ABRE LOS OJOS and VANILLA SKY, the former explicitly referenced at the beginning of the film), there there is also a lot of LAST NIGHT, and ON THE BEACH, and other end of the world films, including those with survivors such as FIVE and the various versions of THE LAST MAN ON EARTH (minus the zombies, of course).

There are some discussions of what is our purpose (collectively and individually), and whether we have free will, and so on, but none go very deep. And I hate to say it, but there's also a "magical Negro". The whole thing was okay, but never achieved the level it could have. [-ecl]

Released streaming 02 May 2023. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4), or 6/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt14668044/reference>

What others are saying: <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/discontinued>

This Week's Reading (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

EVERY LIVING THING: THE GREAT AND DEADLY RACE TO KNOW ALL LIFE by Jason Roberts (Penguin Random House, ISBN 978-1-9848-5520-6) covers the conflicting attempts of Carl Linnaeus and George-Louis de Buffon (and those who came after them) to categorize all living (and in Linnaeus's case, non-living) things. In some sense, they were the Cope and Marsh of taxonomy, Edward Drinker Cope and Othniel Charles Marsh being rivals in the search for dinosaur bones in the 19th century.

Linnaeus is the better known because his approach caught on, but the man himself had some serious flaws, and his categorization of humans in four "races", complete with positive traits for the Caucasian, and increasingly negative traits for the Asian, Amerindian, and finally African, began a long trail of "scientific" racism that persists to this day. This was only reinforced by his insistence that all official names must be in Latin--or possibly Greek, so long as the Latin alphabet was used. He also started with a particular set of categories and defining features in mind, and seemed unwilling to change them. (After he died, others made Linnaeus himself--a northern European male--the type specimen for Homo sapiens, which is also a bit biased.)

In addition, Linnaeus sent several "apostles" on excursions to gather samples from around the world. Only one came back, hence the "deadly" part. And he refused to educate his daughters, expressing the belief that it would be wasted on them. (Perhaps ironically, all of his descendants are through his daughters.)

Buffon, on the other hand, seemed more willing to go where his observations led him (which is not to see that he also didn't have some fixed ideas that he wouldn't change. He also made his knowledge--and knowledge in general--available to all, opening the Jardin du Roi to all with entrance fees, and allowing anyone to attend lectures given there, again with no fee.

Both of them--and those who followed them--had to deal with difficult questions. Pre-Darwin (and pre-James-Hutton and his concept of geologic time) European biologists had to fit everything into a framework that said everything was created by God six thousand years ago and unchanged since then. (For that matter, at the time there was no word "biology", and "science" had a very different meaning.)

Another question was which characteristics were important in distinguishing species (or genera, or families) and which were not. The coloration and patterns on a butterfly's wings are important; those on a cow or dog are not. A naive approach of look-and-guess would put wolves and Alaskan Huskies in the same category, separate from chihuahuas and whippets. And when it comes to cougars, pumas, mountain lions, panthers, jaguars, and leopards, it becomes even more confusing. (And the fact that the Florida panther is not actually a panther emphasizes this.)

A lot of the philosophical dispute was over the "Problem of Universals": are properties that items have in common (such as color or shape) real outside of those objects? Roberts gives the example of Vermont: "As an entity of reason, [Vermont] exists. As a fact of nature, it does not."

As Roberts brings the science of taxonomy up to the present, he emphasizes that whenever we think we have a solution to all the problems, new problems arise; there will never be a perfect system. The best we can hope for is a system that is an improvement over the previous one.

While looking up EVERY LIVING THING: THE GREAT AND DEADLY RACE TO KNOW ALL LIFE I found EVERY LIVING THING: MAN'S OBSESSIVE QUEST TO CATALOG LIFE, FROM NANOBACTERIA TO NEW MONKEYS by Rob Dunn (Smithsonian, ISBN 978-0-061-43030-5). Clearly we have a shortage of short titles--and a surplus of excessively long ones. This book is about the current search for new species and forms of life, rather than a history of taxonomy.

Our book discussion group this month read "The Flowering of a Strange Orchid" by H. G. Wells and "The Reluctant Orchid" by Arthur C. Clarke in conjunction with THE LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS (1960). This was particularly apt, because the characters in "The Flowering of a Strange Orchid" talk about how dangerous the search for orchids and other rare plants is. There is also a discussion of varieties of orchids. And "The Reluctant Orchid" references "The Flowering of a Strange Orchid" explicitly. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Most people would rather die than think; in fact,
they do so.

--Bertrand Russell

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