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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 03/04/94 -- Vol. 12, No. 36

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

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

D A T E T O P I C

- 03/09 A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ by Walter M. Miller (Vividly Memorable SF)
- 03/30 THE MIND PARASITES by Colin Wilson (tentative)
- 03/31 Hugo Nominations must be postmarked by this date
- 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 discussion book is Walter M. Miller's A C a n t i c l e f o r
L e i b o w i t z, of which Charlie Harris says:

Walter M. Miller, Jr. (according to John Clute in Nicholls' T h e
S c i e n c e F i c t i o n E n c y c l o p e d i a) is an "American writer whose impact
on modern SF is out of proportion to the small amount of material
he had published in book form" during his scant decade of active
publishing. A C a n t i c l e f o r L e i b o w i t z is his "best and best-known
work," having sold over 500,000 copies by the date (unknown) of the

15th printing of the 95-cent paperback edition. Brian Stableford calls it "The most impressive single work to come out of the post-War [WW II] SF boom ... one of the most thoughtful speculative exercises produced within genre SF."

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Originally published as three novelettes in F&SF in 1955-57, C_a_n_t_i_c_l_e won the 1961 Hugo--an award that both Clute and L. David Allen (in S_c_i_e_n_c_e_F_i_c_t_i_o_n_R_e_a_d_e_r'_s_G_u_i_d_e, a.k.a. "Cliffs Notes") describe with the identical words: "richly deserved."

C_a_n_t_i_c_l_e's opening sentence conveys to a remarkable extent the subject matter, tone and concerns of the novel: "Brother Francis Gerard of Utah might never have discovered the blessed documents, had it not been for the pilgrim with girded loins who appeared during the young novice's Lenten fast in the desert."

It's some 600 years after civilization has been virtually destroyed by global nuclear war and its anti-technology sequelae. Brother Francis is a member of the sacred Order of Leibowitz, founded centuries back, in the hope of preserving some scraps of knowledge for future generations, by a Brookhaven physicist named Isaac Edward Leibowitz, now a candidate for sainthood. The few relics--including memos, a blueprint, a shopping list in Leibowitz's own hand--are revered and faithfully copied, though they are largely gibberish to his spiritual descendents.

When the second section begins, 600 more years have passed. Society has begun to rebuild, and the tension between secular and religious learning has re-emerged. Another 600 years elapse and, in the final section, the world has again advanced to the brink of nuclear annihilation.

Is this a bleak and hopeless progression? No, the last pages offer, on various levels, hope that humankind may be accumulating--haltingly and imperfectly--some wisdom and spiritual grace. This is evidenced not only by the not-unfamiliar-to-SF-readers departure of a saving remnant to a new world, but also by the reappearance of an elderly wanderer--the same one seen with with girded loins at the start of the book?--who may be the Wandering Jew still

expecting Christ's return, and by a striking mystical interlude involving a dying abbot and a two-headed mutant woman who may herald that return.

One of the very few SF novels that deals with formal religion respectfully (yet often with humor and irony), A_C_a_n_t_i_c_l_e_f_o_r_L_e_i_b_o_w_i_t_z is indeed, as Allen says, a book that "grows in depth, richness, and interest through repeated readings."

2. I can't win. Just when I start to think I am doing things right somebody comes along to tell me I am doing things all wrong. I try to be good but one person's virtue is another person's sin. Take greeting cards. Now all along I thought that it was supposed to be a virtue to send people greeting cards. When that special occasion

comes along I have just seen an episode of the Hallmark Hall of Fame. Somehow they always know when a special occasion comes up and run their program just a week before. It used to be just a week before Christmas featuring Christmas cards, or a week before Mother's Day featuring sentimental pictures of old time mothers bearing steaming apple pies and rocking in a favorite chair. (The last real specimen of that sort of dear sweet old mother died in 1957. I know. They have her stuffed in the Museum of Natural History. They also have her chair and a plastic pie.) Or a week before Valentine's Day they will run an episode featuring--guess what. Now the data age seems to have gotten into the act. They have radar and run one with birthday cards just before my wife's birthday or anniversary cards just before our anniversary. I live in fear the week after they feature "Congratulations on your vasectomy" cards. But somehow I have let them convince me that sending greeting cards on these occasions is the right thing to do. It's the polite thing to do. It's what people with pearly white teeth and refined manners do. It seems like what nice people do. At least they look nice in the ads. Just like the people in the smoking ads seem to have the bloom of health in their cheeks. And of course with smoking ads we know the people we see have lungs like black crepe paper--at least if you believe the educational

films on smoking they showed us in gym class.

I have recently become aware that these nice people in the greeting card ads are considered by some to be lazy, inconsiderate slobs. A better representation would be to show them sitting around in their underwear, drinking beer and watching "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous." At least that's how Miss Manners sees them. It seems like Miss Manners and Amy Vanderbilt are better people than the people who send greeting cards. Ms. Vanderbilt wouldn't be apprehended deceased in a greeting card store. Well, I want to prove I am the right sort. So from now on, when I send a greeting card I will crumple some buttered scone, accidentally on purpose, into the card. That way people will know how refined I am. Hey, I wouldn't shit you.

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

I recently have had a much appreciated opportunity to see three horror films from Hong Kong: M_r._V_a_m_p_i_r_e, A_C_h_i_n_e_s_e_G_h_o_s_t_S_t_o_r_y, and C_h_i_n_e_s_e_G_h_o_s_t_S_t_o_r_y_I_I. They were fun films, somewhat similar to each other in approach. Each was heavy on the comedy aspects. Generally I don't care much for comedy in horror, particularly slapstick. But I am told that Chinese audiences really expect it and it would not be a Chinese horror film without being tongue-in-cheek. While horror does not get in the way of the comedy, in my opinion comedy often damages or destroys the impact of the horror.

In each of these films the result is a horror film that works no better (though certainly no worse) than A_b_b_o_t_t_a_n_d_C_o_s_t_e_l_l_o_M_e_e_t_F_r_a_n_k_e_n_s_t_e_i_n. While these films have the pacing that a K_w_a_i_d_a_n lacks, they could afford take themselves a little more seriously like K_w_a_i_d_a_n does. Perhaps what I would enjoy most is something between the Hong Kong approach and the K_w_a_i_d_a_n approach. It would be nice if Hong Kong were making films of the style of Hammer Films of Britain, but that just isn't their style and probably not what their audiences want.

M_r. V_a_m_p_i_r_e--which would more aptly be called M_r. H_o_p_p_i_n_g G_h_o_s_t--has the novelty of adding a new folklore monster to the horror film, at least new to us Americans. I have, though, read a little about Chinese Hopping Ghosts. The idea is that in most dead the Po--that is the soul--has departed for the next world. But some corpses die with unfinished business, for example if the body has not been buried in the corpse's home town. In such circumstances the Po will stay in the corpse, which will then not decay. For even more the corpse may get up and walk. And when it walks it will have superhuman strength and will kill any mortals it can get its hands on. Rigor mortis will, however, make the stiff, well ... stiff. It will be too stiff to walk, but will be able to manage a hop. That is why a hopping ghost hops. So as an American seeing M_r. V_a_m_p_i_r_e you have to be part cultural detective as well as being a film fan. But some of the images are as eerie for me as they would be for someone raised with the culture. Some perhaps even more so since they are such alien images. The film opens with a scene of a row of hopping ghosts standing in a monastery, each with a prayer paper seemingly tacked over its face. I suspect it is as weird for me, not knowing what it meant as it would be for someone who did. Perhaps a bit more.

Some of the fun of seeing this film, and it is fun though faint subtitles also make it also hard work, is in trying to figure out the rules that apply to hopping ghosts. If you are being stalked you can make yourself safe as long as you neither move nor breathe. Apparently they home in on their victim's breath. (How long can YOU hold your breath?) They can be stopped by putting some sort of inscription on a piece of paper and attaching it to the hopping ghost's forehead. I don't know what the inscription says since I don't read Chinese, but I think it is a kind of death prayer. They cannot walk on uncooked sticky rice, probably because it absorbs things around it (which is why restaurants will put some rice in with the salt in shakers). They are repelled by inscriptions written with a mixture of Chinese ink and chicken blood. You kill them by burning them coffin and all. So they do have some characteristics in common with cinema vampires but they are not vampiric--they do not seem to suck blood. Instead they strangle and mutilate.

I will say a bit less about C_h_i_n_e_s_e_G_h_o_s_t_S_t_o_r_y_1 & _2 since they are a somewhat better known in this country already. In some ways they borrow a lot from the E_v_i_l_D_e_a_d films but they have a panache all their own. A sort of ne'er-do-well happens upon a haunted monastery and soon is facing ghosts and Chinese demons. Eventually he has a guide through this world in the form of a Taoist master who sings an amusing song that is a sort of commercial for Tao. They are sucked into another world where mythical figures battle. It is fast paced with variable special effects but always watchable. Again the worst touch is the poor subtitles, but much of the action transcends the language barrier. Again, as with M_r._V_a_m_p_i_r_e, there is a disadvantage for the Western viewer in that the rules of this universe are foreign. But like spiciness in some Chinese food, for some the foreign-ness of the mythology will be a disadvantage and for others it will be the main advantage and the greatest attraction.

When I was about six years old there was a foreign-language movie theater in the town I lived in. I think it was Polish, but I don't remember for sure. And I found that frustrating because I imagined they had their equivalent of Godzilla films and I was missing them because there was this language barrier between me and the films. As I got older many of these mis-impressions became obvious to me and I realized I wasn't missing a whole lot of great monster movies because I knew only one language. Well, what I am discovering is that my fears were not so foolish, they just were premature. Today in Asia there are a lot of good fantasy films being made, many of which just are not making it to America for years or perhaps never make it. So far there are relatively few films I would miss, but the number is clearly growing.

4. ON DEADLY GROUND (a film review by Dale L. Skran):

Periodically, I review an ultra-violent, hackneyed movie that is so bad it is actually funny. Recently I saw O_n_D_e_a_d_l_y_G_r_o_u_n_d, the latest Steven Seagal opus. My official motive for following Seagal's movies is to observe his martial arts technique. Unlike some other box-office superstars, Seagal is a legitimate Akido blackbelt, and his fight scenes are, by and large, more realistic than most, and often make use of a large variety of techniques. However, O_n_D_e_a_d_l_y_G_r_o_u_n_d is far more than a martial arts film. It is, in fact, a rousing educational experience for the entire family (or, at least, for the Addams Family). Among the fascinating facts we learn are the following:

1. If a violent movie has many scenes of cute animals (bears, dogs) it will be more popular, presumably with women.

2. There must be a considerable audience for extended dissertations on torture techniques, since one part of the film actively strives to compete with M _ a _ r _ a _ t _ h _ o _ n _ M _ a _ n in this vital aspect of film-making.
3. There is no "I" in the word "TEAM." (This was taken from the torture scene.)
4. If you wish to shoot someone quietly, but have left your silencer at home, you can improvise a silencer by taping an empty plastic coke bottle to the gun barrel and shooting through it.
5. If you happen to be carrying a claymore mine in an elevator, you can use it to really surprise anyone who may be waiting for you.
6. Ex-CIA agents generally have secret rooms in their homes full of guns and other goodies. These ex-CIA agents also maintain remote cabins in the woods which are filled with enough explosives for a small war.
7. No film is complete without a loyal old buddy of the hero who is tortured to death by a German-punk type bad-guy corporate lackey.
8. Corporate women are not only ball-busters, but untrustworthy, unreliable, and good candidates for incineration.
9. Native American women (played by Joan Chen), are, of course, competent, at least in the vital work area of ammunition carrying, but also fully in tune with the natural environment, as well as being real babes.
10. Oil companies are run by bad ex-CIA agents who regard Alaska as a third world country, and are environmental hypocrites. These oil companies regularly hire German punk-type lackies to "clean up problems," but when they prove less than adequate for dealing with other ex-CIA agents, are perfectly willing to hire large numbers of additional "Soldier of

Fortune" type cannon fodder.

11. The Oil Companies and Big Business are forcing us to use gasoline, poisoning the environment, and cheating the native Americans out of their tribal rights, not to mention building drilling rigs using faulty parts.
12. Movies are vastly improved by long, dry, didactic lectures near the end, especially when delivered by excellent vocal talents such as Steven Seagal, appropriately dressed in pseudo-Indian garb.

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13. Wearing buckskin jackets with lots of tassels is a great way of showing your solidarity with native Americans, and further, the more different jackets you wear, sometimes even in the same scene, the better the film.
14. Scenes where the powerfully built, highly trained hero beats the crap out of a mean-spirited but dull-witted bully by forcing him to play a sadistic game add a lot to the film, and help the audience to really respect the hero.
15. If you, perchance, are a mean, tough, smart mercenary captain who is wily enough to sneak up on Steven Seagal by hiding a vat of oil, for heaven's sake don't talk to him while getting closer and closer, allowing him to skillfully grab your shotgun and blow you to smithereens!
16. Long dream sequences, especially those populated with naked Alaskan babes, really pull in the young male audience. Enough baffling images will convince the audience that it all actually means something.
17. Gratuitous mysticism is great--it draws in the new age crowd, but it can be abandoned in time for the big shoot-out, thus appealing to gun-lovers and action freaks, as well as hard-headed environmentalists who know that the only good corporate lackey is a dead corporate lackey.
18. Any big technical device, especially an oil rig or refinery,

is the devil's work, but if blown up by a real expert like Steven Seagal, will do hardly any damage to the local environment.

All in all, O_n_D_e_a_d_l_y_G_r_o_u_n_d is a powerful educational experience, that may well be finding a wider audience than the earlier Seagal movies. Although we can hope that a film this heavy-handed will not be taken too seriously, it always concerns me when such a one-sided and negative portrayal of a particular technology is presented. Much like Ralph Bakshi's W_i_z_a_r_d_s, D_e_a_d_l_y_G_r_o_u_n_d is completely hypocritical in attacking corporate violence with the deadly technology of war at its best, wielded by expert practitioner Seagal.

From a martial arts perspective, Seagal presents only a limited number of action sequences, one a bar fight, and the other a no-holds barred stick and knife fight with a mob of mercenaries where guns are not used since the air is full of gasoline vapor. The stick fighting is actually well choreographed, although not for the faint of heart. Seagal has started imitating Van Damme in his use of slow-motion, but the focus appears to be on making the technique more understandable rather than increasing the effect a la John Woo. Seagal actually uses rather more kicks, usually front kicks,

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than in previous movies.

Recommended only for hard-core action move freaks and Seagal fans, as well as those who like watching practical Akido in action. Keep the kids far, far away. After watching, read a Jerry Pournelle novel as an antidote to the extreme environmentalism of O_n_D_e_a_d_l_y_G_r_o_u_n_d. Rated (-1) on the Leeper scale.

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Besides learning to see, there is another art to be

learned--not to see what is not.
-- Maria Mitchell