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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 10/21/94 -- Vol. 13, No. 17

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

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

_D_A_T_E _T_O_P_I_C

- 10/26 Book: FRANKENSTEIN (Classics *and* movies tie-ins) (5T-415)
NOTE ROOM CHANGE
- 10/22 THE PUPPET MASTERS (Saturday, 1:15 PM)
- 10/29 STARGATE (Saturday)
- 11/05 FRANKENSTEIN (Saturday)
- 11/12 INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE (Saturday)
- 11/16 Book: INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE by Anne Rice (movie tie-ins) (5T-415)
NOTE ROOM CHANGE
- 11/19 STAR TREK: GENERATIONS (Saturday)

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. This week our discussion will be in a different room--please note. The topic for discussion will be of Mary Shelley's 1818 novel

F_r_a_n_k_e_n_s_t_e_i_n. That should be really topical considering that an adaptation is about to be released starring and directed by Kenneth Brannagh. This is a novel that has been considered a precursor of modern science fiction. Certainly it has been the source of a lot of horror films, almost all of which have managed to neatly

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sidestep the intelligent themes of the novel--not to mention the fact they totally avoid most of the plot. One might never guess from the films that the philosophical content of the relationship of mankind with God.

By the way, this is also the discussion book for the November 17 book discussion at the Old Bridge Library, thanks to the efforts of Charlie Harris, who describes this as "two birds with one tome."

2. Several SF films will be opening over the next few weeks. Evelyn and I will be attending the first matinee Saturday of each of them at the Hazlet Multiplex. That is just about the full extent of our organization. Anyone who wants to join us for the movie and possible discussion afterwards (the Red Oak Diner, just a little north of the theater on the northbound side, might be a good lunch/coffee place for this--corner of route 35 and Bethany) is free to do so. Just look for us there. (If you don't know what we look like, we can probably provide a description. I will be the handsome bearded fellow in the photographer's vest.)

10/22: THE PUPPET MASTERS (showtime 1:15 PM)

10/29: STARGATE

11/05: FRANKENSTEIN

11/12: INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE

11/19: STAR TREK: GENERATIONS

(You can call me or Evelyn the day before to reconfirm, just in case the release schedules get changed or something.) My number is (908) 957-5619. ECL's number is (908) 957-2070.

Live long. Prosper. Buy bonds. Remember the Maine. Have a nice day.

3. [Continuing with my philosophical discussion with the missionaries at my door]

Their usual tactic is to try to convince me that they see things the same way I do. Don't I want to see a world full of agreement with everybody thinking alike? Well, that has its good and bad sides as far as I am concerned. It strikes me that that way lies stagnation. I never liked the old Coca-Cola jingle that went "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony." Generally people who have wanted to do that in the past have also wanted to choose the tune. That is certainly is what the missionaries want to do. Well I guess the reason to have a religion is to help you make ethical decisions. When the missionaries start out by showing me their views are like mine, there is a certain irony. If they

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already think the way I do, what do I need them for? On issues that they think the same way I do, I don't need them. It may come as news to them, but I already think the way I do. I need them only on the issues where we have disagreeing opinions. But when we actually get to the issues that we on which we disagree, oddly enough I think they are wrong. It isn't like I am a slave of my sinful ways. It is just some things they think are wrong I don't, and some things I think are wrong they don't agree with me on.

Yes, I guess that all our ethical differences probably come down to one or the other.

Of course, where they think something is wrong and I don't, they probably figure that I am a sinner but most of my sins are things like not seeing anything wrong with gays in the military or even in my neighborhood. I guess if I am going to sin, here it should be to sin on the side of tolerance.

Not that I am such an incredibly tolerant person. I like a tighter set of rules some places than they want to give. Now you take others and the choices others have to make.

Otters? What do otters have to do with theology? What kind of decisions do otters have to make? Well, say a male otter, one with a family, is out looking for food. And suppose a hunter starts to track the otter. Generally what the male will do is head back to his home. When he gets there Mamma Otter has a decision to make. Sometimes she will let Poppa Otter back into the home; sometimes she won't. If she thinks it is safe, she will let her mate come in and hide. On the other hand, she may decide that she has to protect her babies and will chase her mate away. Now this is not an easy decision to make, if you think about it. How do you weigh the value of a mate against the value of your babies? This one is a real tough decision. Well, religion is about how to make decisions. You know what the missionaries say about this decision? They say that man has dominion over the animals. The hunter is just exercising his dominion by forcing this decision on Mamma Otter. Like I say, in some things I feel less than totally tolerant. I just hope the hunters never have to make a similar choice between their loved ones. Not that I think they don't deserve it.

I guess lots of people use religion as a moral compass. And that is good. Because I think in general moral compasses are a good thing. But as I explain to the missionaries who come to my door, I prefer to navigate by dead reckoning rather than use someone else's moral compass. Where we agree, I don't need them. I can follow my own instincts. And where we disagree, I have a lot more faith in my basic instincts pointing me the right way than I have in their word of what is right and wrong.

Now I am not saying I always follow my own moral compass. I don't. Anyone who says do follow their own ethics to the letter must have a set of Spandex ethics, elastic and form-fitting to their actions. But I do what I can.

But I don't ask the missionaries to adopt my moral compass, I explain to them, and I don't ask them to adopt mine. I tell them that and they say they think with time I will see they are right, and they will convince me of that when they come back. But they don't come back. At least not for a couple of years. Then the

whole process starts over.

4. PULP FICTION (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: What would you get if Robert Altman tried to do a super-violent crime film, a cross between S_h_o_r_t_C_u_t_s and S_c_a_r_f_a_c_e? Quentin Tarantino tells a weird collection of inter-connected crime stories peopled by a weirder collection of thugs than Damon Runyan could have imagined on drugs. This is a film with comedy, heavy violence, some terrific dialogue, and a whole lot of entertainment.
Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4)

At the heart of it all is Marsellus Wallace (played by Ving Rhames), a Los Angeles crime lord who employs two vicious hitmen, Vince and Jules (John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson). The hitmen are on an errand for Marsellus, killing some young hoods who tried to steal from Marsellus. Their conversation is disarming as they discuss how fast food restaurants are different in Europe and what a "TV pilot" is. They also talk about Marsellus's wife Mia (Uma Thurman) and what the crimelord did to someone who gave her a foot massage. It starts like a normal job for the two hoods, but it will not be a normal day and thereby hangs a tale. Meanwhile super-jealous Marsellus is planning to ask Vince to look after Mia for a few days while the crime lord is away on business. But things are not going to happen like Marsellus plans and thereby hangs another tale. At the same time, the crime lord is planning to buy off an aging prizefighter, Butch (Bruce Willis), and to have a fight fixed. Marsellus is not just in for a surprise, but genuinely the shock of his life. And thereby hangs yet another tale. Harvey Keitel has a terrific little piece proving that an expert janitor can have more prestige than a hired gun.

This is a film with some of the weirdest and perhaps among the most engaging criminals ever put on film. Tarantino has a real talent for creating interesting characters and situations, and even for how to set up a scene so that the audience is constantly seeing the

unexpected. Even when the plot slows down, as it does during Vince's night out baby-sitting, the film never bogs down.

Tarantino, who authored the script based on stories he co-wrote with Roger Avary, has chosen to tell those stories out of chronological order. That throws the viewer a little off balance, but never to the detriment of the story-telling. Many scenes are familiar, but Tarantino makes us see them with a fresh eye. When a character shoots up with heroin, we have a close-up on the hypodermic with red blood swirling into the colorless heroin solution before it is injected. A visit to a chic hamburger restaurant is a setpiece recreating 1950s culture. A taxi ride appears just a little strange until the viewer realizes everything seen out of the windows of the cab is in black and white.

Tarantino has given us a film that is fresh and funny. It is peopled with some of the weirdest characters we have seen on film in quite a while. It will be interesting to see if he can please both fans of his ultra-violent action films and a wider audience looking for interesting stories. If you do not object to the violence this is a most rewarding film with authentic horror, action, and characters of some depth. I give it a high +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

5. RADIOLAND MURDERS (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: Lucas aims at recreating the excitement and mystery that was radio in its Golden Age. The shot goes wild and instead he has the plot of a 1940s Bob Hope movie told with the pacing of a video game. A lot of promise was wasted in among some tired gags. This is a film with over a hundred speaking actors and not one real character. Rating: high 0 (-4 to +4)

Back in the days when George Lucas had a perfect instinct for what did and did not work on the screen, Steven Spielberg was hitting a bad patch with films like 1_9_4_1, a frenetic comedy with contrived scenes that looked too much like clockwork in need of a tune-up. 1_9_4_1 was full of jokes that could have worked but their timing was off or they just seemed too contrived. Now it is Spielberg who seems to have the feel for what works on the screen and Lucas has produced his own comedy with all the faults of 1_9_4_1.

The year is not 1941 but 1939, and it is the first night of new radio network, WBN. That is the name of both the network and of the Chicago station where the broadcasts originate. Just minutes before show time the new owner throws out half the scripts for the

evening's programs. This is all it takes to turn chaos at the station into pandemonium. And most of the pressure falls on Roger, the chief writer of the station. Roger thought his life was already hectic. Besides writing for the new network he is in the midst of a campaign to win back Penny, his estranged wife who also happens to be the personal assistant to the owner of the station. As bad as things are, they are about to get a lot worse. A phantom voice seems to be going out over the broadcast waves and each time it speaks, somebody at the station is murdered. And who do the police suspect but head writer Roger?

The plot of R_a_d_i_o_l_a_n_d_M_u_r_d_e_r_s is straight out of a 1940s comedy--perhaps with Bob Hope or Cary Grant--but the pacing and rhythms seem tailored more to the music video generation with little short choppy scenes to keep the action moving at a breakneck pace. There is some fun in spotting 40s radio programs being created for this supposed fourth radio network. The shows are mostly imitations of real radio programs from the same time. Though they are not called by the same names we see recreations of "Spike Jones and his City Slickers," "Sam Spade," "The Shadow," and "One Man's Family," as well as shows that never played on the radio, but were in the same spirit. One show called "The Black Whip" is based on Zorro. (The title may be inspired by the movie serial Z_o_r_r_o'_s_B_l_a_c_k_W_h_i_p.) Still this is not a very good representation of what radio was like. All shows seem here to be done live with absurdly ornate costumes--an odd expense for radio. Clearly somebody confused radio with early television. Why would anybody put a tap dancer in a large cigarette pack on the radio? Time and again this film sacrifices logic for a piece of spectacle or a gag. In one scene Roger sits on a ledge typing a script, but later when it suits the plot we are told that he is terrified of heights. Also it is absurd that a station owner would wait until the last moment and then throw out all the scripts for the evening just minutes before the evening's programming starts. The fact is that it is the script by Willard Huyck, Gloria Katz, Jeff Reno, and Ron Osborn that needed re-write most. Their imitations of radio drama really fail to catch the spirit of the originals. Admittedly for every good radio drama like "Broadway Is My Beat," there were five silly melodramatic shows like "The Whisperer" or "I Love a Mystery." But even the bad shows on the radio were a lot better than most of the

lampoons in this film.

Mel Smith, who directed R a d i o l a n d M u r d e r s, is a familiar figure

from British comedy television, but he probably never experienced the Golden Age of Radio in America and so is a bad choice to direct. His humor, in the Benny Hill mold, is to throw in lots of gags but not to create any characters on the screen. Roger is played by Brian Benben, who has moments but just is not the talent to carry the film. Benben plays a character similar to Roger but a very different type of humor in his "Dream On" series on HBO. He is the only actor in the film who might have done something with is

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role, but even he doesn't do much but dress in funny costumes. Mary Stuart Masterson as second lead is on the screen far less and does not have much opportunity to raise her role above a stereotyped Girl Friday.

This is a film that was made because it could look like a lot more than its \$10 million price tag. Lucas demonstrates that clever special effects can make an inexpensive film look like it cost a lot more than it did--even for a film that is not science fiction. But in his headlong rush to make this a good-looking film, he neglected the final re-write or two that this script would have needed. And Lucas did not get the right director. The majority of the gags in the dialog just fall flat. Comic scenes go off like clockwork, but lack spontaneity and are just not funny. Admittedly that may not be true of the whole film, there are many very funny scenes that do work. This certainly is a comedy with more laughs than, say, O n l y Y o u. But with such paper-thin characters, the look of the film and the gags that do work are just not enough.

For a nostalgic look at pre-war radio, there are better choices for films. There is more authentic period feel in R a d i o D a y s or for that matter in T h e S h a d o w. With a bit more work this could have been a much better film but as it stands I give this one a high 0 on the -4 to +4 scale.

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6. ConAdian 1994 (con report by Evelyn C. Leeper) (part 4 of 6 parts):

Panel: Reviewing/Criticism

Saturday, 10 AM

Dean Wesley Smith (mod), Rick Foss, Ashley D. Grayson,
Paula Johanson, Janeen Webb, Tom Whitmore

Description: What is the difference between a reviewer and a critic? How can you be a successful one?

(I don't have Smith down on my actual list of panelists, but I can't remember now for sure if he was there or who moderated in his place if he wasn't.)

Foss started off by claiming that the difference is that a reviewer does not have to learn how, in his software, to put footnotes in his article.

A more serious difference was that criticism establishes the "canon" (which may, of course, be of interest only to other critics). Also, critics engage in more of a dialogue with each other than reviewers. Reviewers, on the other hand, "mediate"

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between the producers and the consumer.

Whitmore says as far as length goes, "I tend to err on the side on conciseness." This is probably another difference between reviewers and critics--critics seem much less concerned with conciseness.

Grayson mentioned that some reviews seem to be merely "reprosings" of the advertising blurb. Often when she reads reviews, Grayson says, she gets the feeling that "none of the reviewers come from the same planet, much less have anything common with each other."

(An early review of Robert Forward's Dragon's Egg said it was a great book because it did such a good job with its orbital calculations.)

Someone in the audience asked the reviewers what they did if they got an assignment they didn't want to do. Most reviewers say they try to write mostly positive reviews, preferring to tell the reader what is good than to spending the time warning them against a book the reader probably wouldn't have bought anyway. But a reviewer needs to write the occasional negative review, both to establish some credibility and to give the reader a better idea of what the reviewer does not like as well as what he or she does. Foss says he writes negative reviews only of books by big-name authors who _ s _ h _ o _ u _ l _ d do better. Someone else said that if you don't see any reviews for a book by a major author, it probably means something negative. But it would be foolish to draw this conclusion simply because any individual reviewer chose not to review it. And even a negative review, if it gives the reasons for its negativity, may convince some readers that they would enjoy the book.

In any case, given that there are over 1600 science fiction and fantasy books published each year, reprints and re-issues rarely get reviewed. Some publishers don't send out review copies. (This is particularly true of small presses.) And most media tie-ins get skipped as well. So there are lots of reasons why you might not see reviews of any given book.

When you do see a review, however, you have the right to expect honesty from a reviewer.

Someone pointed out that newspapers, with their general book review columns, reach far more people than even _ L _ o _ c _ u _ s, and that critics have an even smaller audience. (True, but the audience of _ L _ o _ c _ u _ s has a far higher percentage of book readers and buyers than the average newspaper.)

As for prerequisites for being a reviewer, the panelists said that reviewers need to have a firm grounding in reality and in real life: the technophile is probably _ n _ o _ t the right person.

Andre Lieven, Derryl Murphy, David Nickle

Description: As Canada moves from crisis to crisis, can stability come from merging with the U.S.?

[Thanks again to Mark for taking the notes for this.]

I was apparently the token "United-Statesian" on this panel. (Actually, since all the Canadians seemed to refer to me as an American, I will use that designation. Just understand that I do know the difference.)

When I initially proposed this panel, I had envisioned an alternate history panel, and the title certainly implied that to some audience members, but the description seemed to deal more with alternate futures. As a result we did a little bit of each.

We started by asking one of my suggested questions: what if the Norse settlements had survived? Lieven thought that was an interesting question, in that it sort of underlined that the Norse had their equivalent of the Apollo program: "They came, they saw, they hung out, they pulled a few rocks, and they left." Because of that, of course, currently the defining aspect of Canada is between the French and the English. Norse settlements would have added a whole new culture to the mix. (One must question if the French and the English would have gotten as strong a foothold if the Norse were well-established in Canada.) Grant said that disease vectors were a factor to consider in any such scenario. For example, the high densities of people in Europe made Europeans more resistant to disease. (Some also think that the Europeans' close proximity to domesticated animals built up resistance as well.) On the other hand, the high densities meant that when a disease did take hold, it would wipe out large numbers. Someone said that continued contact with Europe would have meant that the Americas would have had the Black Death sweep through them in the 14th Century. I noted that since 90% of the casualties to Native Americans during the period of conquest were due to disease rather than warfare, this issue would be critical.

I put forth the theory that since the Norse came for different reasons, the resulting interfaces with the local indigenous population would also have been different. For example, because the Norse were more interested in finding fish than in sending large amounts of gold back to Europe, there might be less enslavement of the local population for mining, etc. Also, with a less "narrow" view of religion, the Norse might have been more willing to intermarry with the local population, resulting in a more homogeneous and less stratified society. Murphy also believed

that based on what the Vikings did elsewhere, there would have been more co-mingling, more blending, and in general more like the "Old West" (although that is hardly an example of inter-mixing). In any case, Murphy felt that history would have been "a much more violent past and a much more gun-happy future." (I am not convinced that this is true, partly because the Norse in Europe changed before guns came along.)

(Someone in the audience felt there was evidence that the Vikings of this period were Christian, which might negate some of this, but I don't believe that they were as violently evangelical as many of the other Europeans.)

Nickle felt that the problem was that Vikings were not stereotypically Canadian. (This certainly seems to be reversing cause and effect!) On a more serious level, Nickle said that Norse cultures were not set up for long-term dealings with other cultures, but tended to just kill outsiders. The small settlement which would have been established in Canada would need "a different kind of Norsemen."

In any case, the continued knowledge of the Americas throughout Europe would certainly have resulted in other groups coming over earlier, resulting in a faster European expansion. But as someone pointed out this earlier expansion would have meant that the invaders did not have as wide a technological edge over the indigenous population.

Since we had spent far more time on this than Sawyer had expected, we proceeded apace to my other question, "What if the invasion of the United States had succeeded?" A Canadian immediately responded that w e had invaded t h e m. This led fairly obviously to the other half of the panel, "What lies ahead for Canada?" "Will Canada and the United States become one country?" Given our histories, we could have ended up as one country in the past; is that the future?

Lieven seemed to imply that a union was unlikely, because (based on what he said) Americans would treat Canada as sort of a poor orphan they adopted. For example, CNN gives the exchange rates for many major currencies, but not the Canadian dollar, nor do they report on the Toronto Stock Market, even though Canada is the United States's biggest trading partner.

Lieven noted that Canadians "are historically not Americans; historically we are different from Americans. We are trying to

find our own way."

One major difference is how the dividing lines within each country are drawn. In the United States, the division has traditionally been north-south. In Canada it is east-west. In fact, as Grant pointed out, there is only one highway connecting the eastern

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provinces with the western ones. Given the size and lack of connectivity, he's surprised Canada hasn't broken up already. (I noted that the United States had already given that approach a shot.) Someone else said that big, centralized governments tend to fall apart. I said that this didn't seem to be true of Russia (not the Soviet Union, but Russia). On the other hand, it may be that what keeps the United States together is that it is n o t a giant centralized system--there is a lot that is done on the state or local level.

But I've always liked the way Canada and the United States were a sort of special case: the border was not strictly patrolled, and you didn't need a passport to cross it. But it's getting tighter and the European borders are getting looser (at least in Scandinavia).

Of course, any ideas of what might happen have to factor NAFTA into the picture. And many people seem to think that any union between Canada and the United States will be primarily an economic one. Most attempts to paste together two or more independent countries have failed. In the case of Yugoslavia, this failure was rather dramatic, but there have been many other examples: both United Arab Republics, for example. (The only example I could think of that worked was Tanzania, but that occurred not all that long after the independence of Tanganyika and Zanzibar, and Tanzania is not exactly thriving today.)

Sawyer felt that there were serious roadblocks to an economic union. For example, Americans would never accept a two-dollar bill or a one-dollar coin. I noted, however, that since both currencies are called the dollar, no one would have to "change" to the other country's currency name. Dunn said that was okay as long as we make the United States bills look like the Canadian ones.

(For the non-travelers among you, the United States has some of the most boring-looking money around. It's amazing it's as popular as it is. The fact that people will willingly trade really interesting-looking money for ours is proof that there are considerations in life besides art.)

Of course years ago, when the Canadian and United States dollars were at par, people in the New England states would take Canadian coins as readily as United States ones. The only difference was that meters and machines were pickier.

Sawyer also felt our politics could use some improvement. Just as he said he "wanted to see a woman Prime Minister [in Britain] but not that one," he also "wanted to see a black President, but not Jackson."

Dunn said that in regards to an economic union, people are talking about Alvin Toffler's "Cascadia," an economic union of British

Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana (and Manitoba and North Dakota?). This union might eventually expand to include California and the countries of the Pacific Rim. Of course, such a move would mean even more balkanization of Canada (and the United States) than we have now. And people wouldn't want to give up everything that the central Canadian government provides (Dunn gave the CBC as an example). I assume there's something we get from our central government in the United States that we'd miss but nothing comes immediately to mind. Dunn also said that economically we might re-align, but politically we would want to keep the same ties. (Consider the British Commonwealth as an example of this. Canada is still a member of that, but is in NAFTA rather than the EEC.)

Dunn said that high-level talks about economic union of Cascadia, including part of United States, are going on now. Grant said that other parts of the world have thought about it also (e.g., an economic union based in the Pyrenees).

Sawyer noted that David Brinkley once said union between Canada and the United States wouldn't happen, because no United States

administration would want to bring in 60,000,000 Democrats. I pointed out that wasn't a problem with the current administration.

Grant thought that globalization was nearing its end, and we won't have a free market everywhere. He said he would not be surprised if the EEC is temporary as well. "There won't be any reason to globalize."

Someone in the audience asked about E_d_g_e_C_i_t_y: L_i_f_e_o_n
t_h_e_N_e_w
F_r_o_n_t_i_e_r by Joel Garreau, who also wrote T_h_e_N_i_n_e
N_a_t_i_o_n_s_o_f_N_o_r_t_h
A_m_e_r_i_c_a, aligned by common interests. Grant said that one of them (Cascadia plus California?) would immediately have the world's largest GNP.

Nickle commented that a lot of this reflects the fact that the role of nations has become radically different in the last two hundred years.

Nickle also said that while the idea of the British successfully invading the United States warms his heart, he couldn't see that it could have lasted. As it was, the example of the American "secession" from Britain as what inspired Canada to seek independence as well. Without independence there would be a "bunch of little Canadas" and they would have been involved in World War II a lot earlier. And without independence, we would have been involved in World War I a lot earlier. As it was, we waited until millions had already died on both sides, then came in and took credit for winning it for the Allied Forces. Actually, World War I was the final straw for the Canadians: they had achieved partial independence from Britain in 1867, but when Britain declared war on

the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1914, they told Canada, "By the way, you're in it too." After the war was over Canada said, "Don't e_v_e_r do that to us again!" and so the more complete independence of 1931 was established.

Nickle felt that the independence of Canada led to the break-up of the British Empire sooner than might have happened than if the

Revolutionary War had failed, since other colonies saw that independence was achievable (an existence proof, as it were).

On the other hand, independence may not be the ultimate goal. Brian Burley (from the audience) pointed out that Ireland fought to become independent of Great Britain, then turned around and joined the (then) Common Market. I suppose this is just another example of countries or areas wanting to form economic unions independently of political ones.

At some point I mentioned that I was not quite sure what a "dominion" was (as in "the Dominion of Canada"). Sawyer responded that he was still baffled by the "Commonwealth of Massachusetts." I couldn't explain that (or the Commonwealths of Kentucky, Pennsylvania, or Virginia either), but did say it was not the same as the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, which was r e a l l y hard to explain.

Someone suggested that if there had been only a few small changes in the exploration and settlement of North America, Canada and the United States would be even more similar, and would be as hard to tell apart as Austria and Germany. Someone else said that you should never say that to an Austrian or a German. This led someone else to say that there was a cultural difference between Canada and the United States that Americans just don't see. Sawyer said that was true: "Our Pizza Hut is different." What I noted was that when Canadians try to define what is Canadian, they often do it in terms of being "not America" rather than from scratch.

Someone said they never heard Americans talk about separation (of Quebec). Perhaps that is true, but I observed that in the United States we have our own non-English-language area talking about separation: Puerto Rico. Of course, I think on the whole Puerto Rico is happier being part of the United States than Quebec is of being part of Canada, but I could be wrong.

Regarding the upcoming elections in Quebec and whether it would separate from the rest of Canada, the Canadians on the panel seemed to think not. Grant said that Jacques Parizeau visited a bathtub factory and told them they were an example of how Quebec could go it on its own. The owner replied that if not for Federal government help, the company could not exist. And Lieven said that apparently the Olympic Committee is trying to encourage Montreal's bid for the Games in the future by telling them that even if Quebec

secedes, Ottawa would contribute to the cost of the Olympics.

Panel: SF Films

Saturday, 1 PM

Steve Fahnstalk (mod), Myra Cakan, John M. Landsberg,
Mark Leeper, Craig Miller, Michael Skeet

Description: A discussion of SF from Hollywood: The good, the bad, and the cyberpunk.

The first question the panelists discussed was, "Have science fiction films grown up or just more expensive?" Certainly there are more in number, so numerically there are more good ones, but there is not necessarily a higher percentage of good ones.

One reason for this is that science fiction films are seen as a way to break into the market, especially the direct-to-video market. Companies like Charles Band and Troma are putting out, in the words of one panelist, "a lot of trash." Leeper claimed that the top-end films are better now than they were previously, but not everyone agreed with that.

Skeet said, "Cinema doesn't lend itself as a medium to the most sophisticated science fiction." One example of this given was Robert Silverberg's D_y_i_n_g_I_n_s_i_d_e, which seems as if it would be impossible to film successfully. Leeper noted, however, that we should probably be comparing films to novelettes, not to novels.

In an attempt to make more money, many science fiction films are not sold as science fiction. For example, S_t_a_r_m_a_n was marketed as a romance. Fantasy seems to be much more acceptable: F_i_e_l_d_o_f_D_r_e_a_m_s, The Natural, and G_h_o_s_t were all successful with mainstream audiences. Of course, fantasy films have a longer heritage, including the classic fantasy cycle of the 1930s and 1940s (Thorne Smith stories and such).

Miller said that along these lines, a science fiction film set in our real world with one small element of science fiction or fantasy (such as C_o_c_o_n or S_h_o_r_t_C_i_r_c_u_i_t) will succeed better with audiences than a film with an entirely different world (such as C_o_n_a_n_t_h_e_B_a_r_b_a_r_i_a_n), which requires more suspension of disbelief.

It's still a bit hard to explain why G_h_o_s_t succeeded when T_r_u_l_y, M_a_d_l_y, D_e_e_p_l_y (a very similar film) did not.

One must also distinguish between commercial cinema in Hollywood and art films, foreign films, and other non-Hollywood products. Some of the latter which were mentioned as being good were

C l o s e t l a n d, W i n g s o f D e s i r e, and
U n t i l t h e E n d o f t h e W o r l d.

Miller, in talking about Hollywood in general and R o b o c o p in particular, said, "The process of sequelization involves extracting

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the marketable elements," which may not be what made the first film
g o o d. Skeet was less positive about the first R o b o c o p, however, saying, "When you get below the surface, you find more surface," to which Miller replied, "That's better than finding nothing."

Hollywood is also into "high concept" films rather than more complex stories. In fact, the panelists noted that it was surprising how well B a c k t o t h e F u t u r e fared considering it had some "fairly deep science stuff."

The panelists closed by listing cliches they could do without. Leeper mentioned "barbarians on motorcycles in the future"; Fahnstalk said, "cyber-anything." Skeet said there was nothing he'd rule out if it was done well. And Miller closed by observing, "There's bad and there's dreadful."

Panel: Economic/Political Aspects of Future History

Saturday, 2 PM

Philip Kaveny (mod), Briccio Barrientos,

M. Shayne Bell, David Hayman, Timothy Lane

Description: Are we moving toward a global economy or just re-entering the Dark Ages?

While the panelists agreed that to ask if we were entering the Dark Ages sounded dystopic, one need only look at Bosnia or Rwanda to see that perhaps it was a reasonable question. Lane thought the key factor was whether the educational system continued to function. (It was not clear here if he meant within the United States or globally.) Bell said that we (the more affluent nations) were suffering from "donor fatigue," or the "erosion of good will." There are only so many pleas for help one can answer. I have seen this discussed elsewhere, and one explanation of the basis of the problem lies in how our morality was shaped by our limitations.

That is, it used to be that individuals were limited in what charity they could perform. You could help only those in your tribe, or village, or city. The fact that millions were dying in a famine or a war on the other side of the globe was unknown to you, and so you had no responsibility. But because you did have such a limited field of action, you were deemed to have a responsibility to act within that field. Now our fields of knowledge and of action are global in scope, and individuals cannot cope with that. (See "The Beggar in the Living Room" by William John Watkins for an extrapolation of this.)

Can we escape Malthus? Some people said we could handle 5.5 billion people now only because most are impoverished. Others thought this was just a distribution problem. Compounding this is the fact that a lot of the good arable land is being turned into cities instead of being farmed, and the question still remains, "What are the people at the top willing to give up?"

Kaveny mentioned Carolyn Merchant's T_h_e_D_e_a_t_h_o_f_N_a_t_u_r_e:
W_o_m_e_n,
E_c_o_l_o_g_y, a_n_d_t_h_e_S_c_i_e_n_t_i_f_i_c
R_e_v_o_l_u_t_i_o_n, which was described as anti-Baconian and anti-"knowledge is power." Merchant claims, for example, that the land "healed itself" during the Black Death.

Politics often confuses the issue. In Idaho, land-use planning was branded as "Communism" and rejected. Then Communism fell (at least in Europe--I find it amazing that people can ignore the fact that the vast majority of people living under Communism in 1985 are s_t_i_l_l living under Communism), and people decided land-use planning was okay. (The problems that arose from lack of planning may also have affected their opinion.)

Other changes are affecting our economic world. Kaveny claims, "There's a lot of useful work that needs to be done that we can't pay people to do." Whether this is because minimum wage laws have priced these jobs too high to be cost-effective, or whether labor unions prevent people from hiring non-union workers to do these jobs, or whether people have decided that these jobs are "beneath" them is not clear. A combination of all three plus others is most

likely.

Someone in the audience cited the sociological theory that people naturally live in groups of five hundred, and that many of our problems come from trying to maintain larger communities than that. (Is this why smaller conventions seem to have a very different character than larger ones, not just a qualitative one?)

Barrientos said that one factor preventing us from finding solutions is that "society likes dualities and dichotomies; everyone likes to have an enemy." No one system will win, he says. Lane hit a hopeful (?) note when he declared "It's certainly possible that the United States will remain stable."

Kaveny also mentioned Sandra Harding's W_h_o_s_e_S_c_i_e_n_c_e,
W_h_o_s_e
K_n_o_w_l_e_d_g_e?:_T_h_i_n_k_i_n_g_f_r_o_m
W_o_m_e_n'_s_L_i_v_e_s as an example of non-traditional thinking on these issues. And Lane recommended T_h_e
O_t_h_e_r_P_a_t_h:_T_h_e_I_n_v_i_s_i_b_l_e
E_v_o_l_u_t_i_o_n_i_n_t_h_e_T_h_i_r_d_W_o_r_l_d by Hernando de Soto.

[To be continued]

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Happiness is an imaginary condition, formerly attributed by the living to the dead, now usually attributed by adults to children and by children to adults.

--Thomas Szasz