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Science Fiction (and Other) Discussion Groups, Films, Lectures, etc. (NJ):

Meetings in Middletown are in-person; meetings in Old Bridge are Zoomed, at least through the winter season. The best way to get the latest information is to be on the mailing lists for them.

May 4, 2023 (MTPL), 5:30PM: BEYOND THE INFINITE TWO MINUTES (2021) & THE 7TH VOYAGE OF EGON TICHY (2020) & story by Stanislaw Lem (1957)
<https://tinyurl.com/LemTichy7th>

May 25, 2023 (OBPL), 7:00PM: ATTACK SURFACE by Cory Doctorow
June 1, 2023 (MTPL), 5:30PM ALTERED STATES (1980) & novel by Paddy Chayefsky

My Picks for Turner Classic Movies for May (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

As part of their Memorial Day weekend marathon of war films, TCM is running OPERATION CROSSBOW (1965). OPERATION CROSSBOW is dramatized (as were most of the war films of the 1960s), but based on fact and is a lot better than certain other films I could point to. And although all this time has passed, this watchable history still sheds a light on the development and the use of the V-1 missile.

There was a lot of deception going on with this film. The pseudonymous screenplay ("Richard Imrie" was credited) was actually written by Emeric Pressburger, whose reputation had shrunk and wanted a fresh start (much as authors whose sales have been dropping will choose to write their next novel under a fresh name). Second-billed Sophia Loren actually has little more than a cameo. The title was at one point changed to THE GREAT SPY MISSION in the United States because the distributors thought it would be mistaken

for a medical film.

Trivia: TCM notes, "Sandys, portrayed as one of the prime movers behind the heroic operation, had by the time of this film been vilified as the man who destroyed the British aircraft industry for his insistence (as Minister of Defense in the late 50s) that missiles had made airplanes obsolete as military weapons."

[OPERATION CROSSBOW (1965), Monday, May 29, 6:45 AM]

I cannot leave without praising the multi-national FIVE MILLION YEARS TO EARTH/QUATERMASS AND THE PIT. This film gives a single science fiction explanation for paranormal phenomena, race prejudice, different myths popping up all over the world (e.g. flood myths), ... And the list really does go on. It has very strange ideas yet it remains intelligent and credible. I have been told it is also a very big with fans in France.

[FIVE MILLION YEARS TO EARTH (1968), Friday, May 11, 3:15 PM]

Here are some more films of interest. Again, these are mostly of the fantastic--there are way too many excellent films on TCM this month, and every month, to list them all. Memorial Day weekend is their usual marathon of war films.

05/01	9:30 PM	Mark of the Vampire (1935)
05/03	12:15 PM	Atlantis, the Lost Continent (1960)
05/05	4:00 AM	The Last Wave (1977)
05/05	6:00 AM	Stalker (1979)
05/08	8:00 AM	Angels in the Outfield (1951)
05/11	9:45 AM	The Snow Devils (1965)
05/11	11:30 AM	It! (1967)
05/11	1:30 PM	Monster Zero (1965)
05/11	3:15 PM	Five Million Years to Earth (1968)
05/11	5:00 PM	Village of the Damned (1960)
05/11	6:30 PM	Plan 9 from Outer Space (1959)
05/12	3:45 AM	Network (1976)
05/13	12:30 AM	A Face in the Crowd (1957)
05/13	1:30 PM	Matinee (1993)
05/13	3:15 PM	The Thing from Another World (1951)
05/13	8:00 PM	Stand and Deliver (1988)
05/15	3:15 PM	White Zombie (1932)
05/15	4:30 PM	Cat People (1942)
05/19	2:30 PM	The Body Disappears (1941)
05/21	2:00 AM	Coma (1978)
05/22	6:00 PM	Clash of the Titans (1981)
05/23	12:15 PM	The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm (1962)
05/23	2:45 PM	7 Faces of Dr. Lao (1964)
05/23	4:30 PM	Doc Savage: The Man Of Bronze (1975)
05/23	6:15 PM	Atlantis, the Lost Continent (1960)
05/24	6:00 AM	The Ghost Ship (1943)
05/24	7:15 AM	The Corpse Vanishes (1942)
05/24	8:30 AM	Doctor X (1932)
05/24	10:00 AM	Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1941)
05/24	12:00 PM	Bedlam (1946)
05/24	1:30 PM	Kongo (1932)
05/24	3:00 PM	The Devil-Doll (1936)
05/24	4:30 PM	House of Wax (1953)
05/24	6:15 PM	Chamber of Horrors (1966)
05/26	7:15 AM	A Midsummer Night's Dream (1935)
05/30	2:30 PM	The Thing from Another World (1951)

[-mrl]

FLIGHT AND ACHOR: A FIREBREAK STORY, by Nicole Kornher-Stace (copyright June 2023, Tachyon Publications, 192pp, paperback, \$16.95, ISBN 9781616963927) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

You're the director of the Stellaxis super soldier program. Your job is to take young children and turn them into warriors to help you win a civil war in a (to the reader) nameless city. Two of your prized specimens, numbered 06 and 22, have escaped into the city in the dead of winter. They are dangerous, as all supersoldiers are: fast, strong, keen eyesight, and all the rest of it. 06 has been the rebellious one, but the two of them are close. They protect each other, to the point of giving their lives to save the other one. Your job is to capture them and bring them back to Stellaxis to continue their training until they're ready to go to war.

This should be an easy job. You know where they're at and generally what they're doing. You don't necessarily know why they decided to escape, but that doesn't matter at this point in time. You need to get them back. The whole thing is a bit of a mess, though. Within the program at Stellaxis, you need to fabricate excuses why the pair are not in their various classes. You need to hide the whole affair from your superiors, because it certainly wouldn't look good on your record to have two very expensive projects get away. And it's not easy in a world where everything is under surveillance. Sending out a few of the other super kids to retrieve them, or worse, some adult squad, would possibly result in bad press and would most likely result in a lot of blood being shed. So you try to think of strategies to undermine their partnership. Maybe turn them against each other. Send some old, discarded tech after them. Things like that. But no matter what you do, 06 and 22 are not giving up. They don't like it at Stellaxis, and they don't want to go back.

Just what are the two of them doing? Trying to survive in a world they've been sheltered from and know absolutely nothing about. They're sleeping in an abandoned storage container and basically scrounging to survive. They don't know what they want to do, how they're going to do it, and where they're going. The only thing they do know is that they don't want to go back to Stellaxis. It's a marvelous game of chess, really. The Director thinks she's going to win, but every decision she makes turns out to not give the result she needs. 06 and 22 know the director is watching them, so they're doing the best they can to make the Director's life miserable. And they do get a bit of help from an unexpected source.

I was a bit concerned coming in to the story, as I hadn't previously read FIREBREAK. It turns out there was nothing to be concerned about. While the story takes place in the Firebreak universe, it can be read as a standalone. Kornher-Stace does a good job of giving the reader just enough background of the world we're in without bogging the book down. And she makes FLIGHT AND ANCHOR a fun read. While it's not lighthearted by any means, it's light enough that it's a good, fast paced read. The novel is well written, the characters are interesting, and the plot is engaging. It's almost fun to watch 06 and 22 foil the Director's plans, sometimes intentionally, sometimes not. FLIGHT AND ANCHOR is a book I recommend, and as a result of reading it I want to go back and read FIREBREAK. [-jak]

Toward Compassion (article by Leland R. Beaumont):

I recently wrote a "future fiction" essay called "Toward Compassion". See https://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Envisioning_Our_Future/Toward_Compassion. [-lrb]

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

UNTHINKING THINKING: JORGE LUIS BORGES, MATHEMATICS, AND THE NEW PHYSICS by Floyd Merrell (Purdue, ISBN 0-911198-72-5) has a back story to it. I had first heard about this book at least ten years ago, but probably closer to twenty years or more. (It was published in 1991.) When I started looking at listings, all copies were more than \$100 each, and for years \$142 was about the lowest price I could find.

But it was in my list of books I checked every week or so, and a couple of weeks ago, to my astonishment, a copy appeared for ... \$5. And it wasn't even a charity shop, but a major used book dealer. I immediately bought it, and when it arrived, I had an inkling of what happened. There was a Post-It stuck on the front page sticking up like a bookmark that had "95.99" and under it "4.82"--but the '9's had big loops and small tails. And \$4.82 looks like the tax amount on \$95.99.

So what probably happened is that someone priced it at \$95.99, but the data entry person took a quick look at the note, read the '9's as '0's, didn't wonder why anyone would write \$5 as "05.00" and entered it as \$5. (Or they were using a scanner to enter the data.)

Anyway, someone there knew the value, but someone entered it wrongly, and while I feel a twinge of guilt, the seller doesn't allow refunds from or returns to its outlets or warehouses. (Of course, normally this policy benefits them. :-))

But what about the book itself? I was at first intimidated by the very academic writing. Here's an example:

"Consider the possibility that in 'The Circular Ruins' a projection of spatio-temporal synchronicity into linear existence entails a symbolic abolition of the life/death dichotomy. This assumes an implicit attempt to overcome temporal existence wherein spatial hierarchy and temporal linearity predominate."

However, as I read on, I started to see errors, or at least slips. For example, on page 4 Merrell says, "'The sun rotates around the earth' and 'the earth rotates around the sun' represent two conflicting perspectives." Actually that's not true; the Earth and the moon revolve about a point that is three-quarters of the Earth's radius from the Earth's center. And the pairs Pluto-Charon and Sun-Jupiter each revolved around points that are not within either of the bodies involved. And so it is possible to consider both true, or both false, rather than one absolutely true and one absolutely false.

But even more of a flub is that Merrell speaks of bodies "rotating" around each other, when he means "revolving" around each other. Rotation is the motion of a single body about a point or an axis.

Later, he writes about Leibniz's "binary system based on the root 2"; he means Leibniz's binary system based on the base 2 (which is actually a bit redundant).

Another, deeper dispute I have with Merrell is that he defends the argument that mathematics is invented, not discovered, by saying, "In sum, from this perspective mathematics is invention rather than discovery, a human institution rather than an eternal playground for the gods. Right and wrong mathematical behavior lies in the game, for mathematics is normative. Consequently, number systems need not be decimal, as is our Western system. To cite only two examples from among many, the ancient Mayas used a system to the base five, for reasons unknown. And within a fictive context, the inhabitants of the planet Tlon used a duodecimal system...." Merrell seems to confuse the way we express mathematics with the mathematics itself. He could as easily claim that the different shapes of the ten digits used in Egypt makes their mathematics different from ours.

"We are to suppose not only that each page of the book after page one is followed by an immediately preceding page, but also (and this is not unimportant) that each page is separated from others by a finite number of pages." This makes no sense, given the rest of the description, even in a chapter about paradoxes, unless what he meant to say was "an immediately succeeding page."

I may comment more on this book again when I finish it, but it is very slow going. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

All the best stories in the world are but one story in reality--the story of escape. It is the only thing which interests us all and at all times, how to escape.
-- A. C. Benson

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