

# MT VOID 03/17/17 -- Vol. 35, No. 38, Whole Number 1954



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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society  
03/17/17 -- Vol. 35, No. 38, Whole Number 1954

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## Old Bridge (NJ) Comic Con:

The Old Bridge Library Comic Con will be held Saturday, April 1, 11AM-4PM. Featured guests include Tom Smith (artist), Michele Knotz (Pokemon voice actor) and Casey Webb (director of "Jedi Club"). There will also be a cosplay contest, an "Artist Alley", gaming, and more.

See <http://oblplcc.tumblr.com> for more information.

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## A Word of Advice (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Don't buy a haircut on eBay. [-mrl]

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## Selecting Words and Counting Ideas (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

In Fred Lerner's fanzine LOFGEORNOST #126 he mentions how he learned how important it was to use precisely the right word to express an idea. It occurred to me to wonder if there necessarily is always an exact right word. Language is, of course, an invention of humans. When words were first invented the world was full of ideas (I assume; perhaps not) and there were no words for these many, many meanings for which there were no words yet. Once humans got set loose and started coining words for ideas that floated around without any words to express them. (Mark Twain had a great take on this process in his story "The Diaries of Adam and Eve.")

Above I am assuming that ideas can exist independently of having words for the ideas. When a prairie dog pounds its foot to

warn his compatriots of danger, he seems to understand the concept of "danger" without the presence of words for it in the sense we know words. That is unless the pounding foot is in his language a word. If we are talking about the whole animal kingdom most all words need come from a larynx. That is just how these bodies of ours do most of their communication.

But do we have right words for every concept? Or do we still have exact meanings occurring or floating around without having coined words for them (yet). We know that the latter is the case because frequently a single language is insufficient to express an idea. But a second language may have the word. They say, "The French have a word for it." Do you want something like "nerve" but with a pinch more indifference to the nerviness? The word is borrowed from Yiddish. The proper word is "chutzpah." One language does not have words enough to cover all the ideas that the mind can want to express. If there were no Yiddish, could we express the precise concept of chutzpah? We would either have had to invent our own word for that concept and make do with an "almost right" word. I have to believe just about everybody who speaks has experienced schadenfreude but a word for that idea appears only in German, I am told. It seems there must be concepts without word to express the idea.

When Fred starts from the almost-right word, there is no guarantee that there even is a right word there to reach for. Unless the right idea cannot exist until there is a word to express it. That is what Sapir and Whorf believe.

My problem with Sapir and Whorf is they seem to imply you cannot have the idea without or until you have the word to describe it. If that is true you have a paradox that could be called the "bootstrap problem." The first word could not have existed if it needed other words to describe it. I do not know a lot about Sapir and Whorf but I find what they say to be counter-intuitive. I guess I believe that one can understand concepts before they are expressed in words. So in Orwell's 1984, abolishing the vocabulary of individuality will not abolish individual thought. It might make it difficult or impossible to express to someone else. But thinking beings will invent ideas and create words to have that meaning.

You can chew on those ideas if you want. Oh, after a dinner of ideas to chew on, for dessert, just how many expressible ideas are there? I would contend that there are infinitely many potential ideas, but there are only "countable many."

To prove that there are infinitely many ideas we need only find that there exists an infinite set of ideas and this set is a subset of the set of all ideas. It is easy to find an infinite set of ideas. Consider

Idea 1: "1 is a number."

Idea 2: "2 is a number."

Idea 3: "3 is a number."

Idea 4: "4 is a number."

Idea 5: "5 is a number."

Idea 6: "6 is a number."

Idea 7: "7 is a number."

Idea 8: "8 is a number."

Idea 9: "9 is a number."

Etc.

Note I did not say these were necessarily interesting thoughts. But it is an infinite subset of the set of ideas.

So there are infinitely possible thoughts, but there are only finitely many thoughts that a being has had in an hour interval and the entire history of sentient beings in the universe has to come down to a finite number of hours.

It is not very useful, but it is nice to know we can figure this stuff out. [-mrl]

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### **KONG: SKULL ISLAND** (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

**CAPSULE:** KONG: SKULL ISLAND has its share of excitement and effective acting, but the film does not fit with any other Kong film ever made as prequel, sequel or coquel. The script is creative where it needs to be and funny where it needs to be. If you think you wouldn't like a live-action film about a hundred-foot ape, you won't. If you think you would like the film, you will. If you are not sure, you might want to give it a try. At best it is a joy ride and at worst it is at least goofy. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4) or 6/10

At a hundred feet the Kong in KONG: SKULL ISLAND is too darn big. If you give a young girl a Barbie(r) doll she will dress it and give some thought to its appearance. In short, she will have a sort of relationship with it. Give the same girl a Lego(r) person and there will be little she can do with it except move it around. There is too much difference in size scale. In the 1933 KING KONG the size ratio between Kong and Ann is about the same as the ratio of the little girl to the Barbie(r) doll. The blond girl whose trunk fits comfortably into his paw intrigues Kong. Kong certainly has some interest in Ann that he probably would not have if Ann were the size of the last joint on his little finger. The new Kong is a hundred feet tall, according to director Jordon Vogt-Roberts. With kaiju proportions Kong would have a body falling apart of its own weight by

the square-cube law. More importantly the beast can have little emotional connection with six-foot humans on the island or in the audience. We see him in only two states, placid and angry. Even the 1976 version of King Kong showed more range of emotion. Kong here has no conscience, no affection, only the barest personality. That is not my idea of King Kong. It would have been a better film if they had named the chief monster something like Gorga rather than disappointing expectations by making the super-giant ape Kong.

The film opens in 1944 with an American and a Japanese plane in a dogfight. They both crash on an unknown Pacific island. On the ground the two pilots are fighting to the death when they are interrupted by ... can you guess? This strand of plot is abandoned, to have connections later in the story. Twenty-nine years later an apparent crackpot James Conrad (played by John Goodman) has been trying repeatedly to have the get an expedition to a nearly unknown island charmingly called "Skull Island." When the expedition is finally approved a team is put together including James Conrad (Tom Hiddleston) and helicopter commander Preston Packard (Samuel L. Jackson). It is joined by Mason Weaver (Brie Larson) who wants to expose the secret operation. One last member joins the group well into the story, but not too late to steal the rest of the film. John C. Reilly plays Hank Marlow, just a little charmingly deranged. Together the team will face the dangers of the island that time forgot. It is a better cast than this film would have needed, but it will probably pay off at the box-office.

The script by Dan Gilroy, Max Borenstein, and Derek Connolly has some original ideas and visual images we have not seen before, but also there are little touches we have seen in previous Kong films. Kong kills a creature by breaking its jaw and then checks to see the jaw is limp. We saw that in the 1933 version. Skull Island has gone undiscovered because it is eternally enshrouded in heavy clouds. That idea came from the 1976 version. In fact there are little shout-outs to all three US origin stories: 1933, 1976, and 2005, as well as references to APOCALYPSE NOW.

On the other hand, Kong's size called for some original thinking. For once Kong never carries a human anywhere for long because he is just too big and probably does not want red stuff and pulp all over his fingers. The island itself brings up more complexities than were thought through. The idea is raised that what we thought were Pacific nuclear tests were really attempts to kill monsters. That idea was borrowed from GODZILLA (2014). If that is true, who knew that the island was the home of monsters and how was it kept a secret if that was true? How did an island the size of Skull Island go undiscovered by all but the people doing the bomb test? The script could have used some doctoring before the film was shot. With such a great variety of kaiju-sized monsters on one island, the film has the feel of an (admittedly more detailed and realistically done) Toho film.

On the positive side somebody was very imaginative with ideas for the fauna of the island. There are a lot of "What-the-heck--Oh-my-god!" reactions. There are moments that are a lot of fun. Overall, I rate KONG: SKULL ISLAND a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale or 6/10. The filmmakers have what must be nine or ten minutes of credit crawl at the end, but there is a coda at the end of it all.

Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3731562/combined>

What others are saying: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/kong\\_skull\\_island](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/kong_skull_island)

[-mrl]

**TICKLING GIANTS** (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

**CAPSULE:** Dr. Bassem Youssef was a heart surgeon in Cairo who was fascinated by "The Daily Show" and its host Jon Stewart. He quit medicine and started his own satirical daily show, patterning himself after Stewart, but in a country where extremists can be deadly. This documentary, heavily laced with humor and satire, tells the story of Youssef and his send-up show(s) under three dangerous and autocratic presidents of Egypt. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4) or 8/10

Back in 2011, Egypt's Arab Spring protests against the country's then-President Hosni Mubarak managed to depose him. The days following deposing Mubarak were heady times for Egyptians. The protest, largely waged by youth, had overcome the corrupt regime, toppling its most powerful man. About the same time one Dr. Bassem Youssef had been making humorous short films for YouTube. It was a dangerous pastime, but Youssef thought he might be able to get away with it. He was taking his chances. His films poked fun at a number of political targets including President Hosni Mubarak himself. His little satirical jabs were very popular on-line. They were so popular that Youssef--till then a heart surgeon--decided to take a risky course for his life. In the good feeling following the fall of Mubarak he gave up a profitable career in medicine to become a full-time comedian and offered to do a TV show of political satire, much like Jon Stewart's program on American TV, "The Daily Show". Youssef much admired "The Daily Show" and very much borrowed its format. Somewhat modeling himself after Stewart, he created and wrote for the Egyptian TV show "The Show". With humor that could easily have gotten him into deep trouble with the government--could even have gotten him murdered--he nonetheless poked his barbs at the Mubarak regime. The Arab Spring became an epic struggle in itself, but in the end Mubarak was forced to resign, his regime was deposed, and Mohamed Morsi replaced Mubarak as president.

Despite expectations, Mohamed Morsi proved to be no better a president than Mubarak, allowing himself to be dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. TICKLING GIANTS chronicles Youssef's humor and the politics of Egypt through three presidents, each a tyrant. Youssef seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of humor jabs and like Jon Stewart was willing to unleash that humor on the government. His popularity was huge. Youssef was one of the most recognized personalities in the country. He formed a fast friendship with Jon Stewart and each appeared on the other's program. By this point Youssef was so popular in his country that the government could not squelch him. In a country where life is cheap for those opposing the government, he continued to do his thing and became a great believer in the power of a sense of humor to give strength, even while being accused of insulting the government's people and institutions.

The documentary TICKLING GIANTS was produced, written, and directed by Sara Taksler and it is laced with Youssef's humor. It tells dangerous episodes in Youssef's history and some of the humorous ones. More importantly, it gives us a look at Egyptian politics at a high level.

The main point being driven home is that the right to satirize government is one of the most important freedoms. The viewer is shown what it can do and, perhaps as importantly, what it cannot do. This documentary juxtaposes humor with tragedy even as Youssef himself does. I rate the documentary a high +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 8/10. TICKLING GIANTS had a limited release March 15.

Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5494396/combined>

What others are saying: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/tickling\\_giants](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/tickling_giants)

[-mrl]

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#### **Malaya and Talented Minority Syndrome** (letter of comment by Philip Chee):

In response to [Taras Wolansky's comments on "The Four Thousand, The Eight Hundred"](#) in the 03/10/17 issue of the MT VOID, Philip Chee writes:

"It appears to be an example of what I call Talented Minority Syndrome: Indians in East Africa (driven out), Jews in Germany (killed), Chinese in Malaya (driven out) ..." -tw]

Um, we are still here, not to mention Singapore. I think you mean Indonesia. [-pc]

"... Armenians in Turkey (killed), Christians in the Middle East (all of the above). The majority is humiliated by the minority's success and cuts off its nose to spite its face (as it were)." -tw]

Yep, definitely, yep. [-pc]

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#### **Superman vs. the KKK** (letter of comment by Tim Bateman):

In response to [Mark's comments on Superman vs. the KKK](#) in the 03/10/17 issue of the MT VOID, Tim Bateman writes:

You really should have mentioned the villains in the earliest Superman stories--wife-beaters, mine owners who ignored HASAW legislation, arms dealers, et cetera.

[Re: Stetson Kennedy bringing information about the Klan to the police:] The impression that I get on this side of the Atlantic is that many of the police would probably have been members of the Klan.

[Re: the effect of the "Superman" show's exposure of the Klan:] Classic! The children's games bit especially. [-tb]

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#### **Greg Benford, Reading, HIDDEN FIGURES, ANDROMEDA NEBULA, and MEDUSA'S WEB** (letter of comment by John Hertz):

In response to various comments in recent issue of the MT VOID, John Hertz writes:

Thanks as ever for THE MT VOID.

It seems right for Greg Benford to comment, he being one of the VOID Boys.

Mark is I fear right that the prevailing mythos says real men don't read. I suppose this is along the line that culture, or Heaven forbid refinement, is woman stuff. The man is dragged to the ballet, the symphony. Movie posters show the woman coiffed

and well-dressed, the man a slob. "Beauty" means a woman. As we creep toward sexual equality (nouns have gender, people have sex) we may outgrow this.

I've just read HIDDEN FIGURES. Haven't yet seen the movie. Shetterly has evidently dug for these facts, and I think we may say, at the cost of mixing metaphor, that she digs them. ("You gotta dig it to dig it; you dig?" seems roughly "To bring home the wealth of the India, you must carry the wealth of the Indies with you", which Samuel Johnson called a Spanish proverb.) I think she marshals them. She tells a story. I think it's well integrated--irresistible--but I love Dickens and (possibly in ignorance) on first reading THE DREAM OF THE RED CHAMBER this month its famed profusion of people didn't perplex me. She preaches two sermons sounding the trumpet, against race prejudice and sex prejudice, two more by silence. I wish the surface of her writing had been smoother; to mix metaphor, it's full of clinkers. I suspect this is a by-product of the many revisions she speaks of. She is certainly--alas!--within the norm.

About s-f written in the U.S.S.R., you may have seen (e.g. 29 Oct 16) that one of the Classics of S-F book discussions I led at Loscon XLIII was on Yefremov's ANDROMEDA NEBULA (1957; Hanna tr. 1959 as ANDROMEDA). My "trailer" was:

Poetic, lyrical. Sold 20 million copies. Changed Soviet science fiction. A thousand years in the future when Earth is a Communist paradise, starships at 5/6 the speed of light meet alien challenges and we struggle against Time.

Since, as I've sung elsewhere, it's nomination time, let me join those who recommend the new Tim Powers novel MEDUSA'S WEB. He is a fine fantasist and, among much else, you know when you read a Powers story that if you find a man living on Red Hots (no, not this story) you will eventually learn why. [-jh]

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

THE LIFE AND GROWTH OF LANGUAGE by William Dwight Whitney (ISBN 0-486-23866-0) is a classic work, first published in 1876, so it is not surprising that much of what he says is now considered outdated and parochial.

It does not take long (on page 2, actually) for Whitney to say, "Man is the sole possessor of language," dismissing all forms of communication in other animals as so inferior and different that they cannot be called language. He also claims that in regards to color, some languages are "so much less elaborate and complete, that their acquisition gives the eye and mind a very inferior training in distinguishing colors." Did he consider that since English makes fewer distinctions than Russian, English speakers are inferior to Russian ones?

In general, Whitney exhibits an unapologetic belief in his (our) cultural superiority. For example, he says, "Certainly, the exceptionally gifted Polynesian or African who should learn a European language--English, French, German--would find himself prepared for labor in departments of mental action which had before been inaccessible to him, and would realize how his powers had been balked of their best action by the possession of only the inferior instrument." That he might have an "inferior instrument" for certain mental actions apparently does not occur to Whitney. Later, in talking about the Ugrian family of languages, he writes, "The Finns and Hungarians are the only cultivated peoples of the branch," apparently dismissing the Estonians, Livonians, and Lapps. And when he mentions another branch, the Samoyed, he says of the people who speak it, "It has no culture, nor no importance of any kind."

Whitney spends a lot of time explaining the various sounds that form the basis of languages, but concentrates only on the ones in the more Western languages. He does mention the various clicks in passing later on, but treats tones as something that hardly counts. But again, he feels that we have "the best of all possible languages" (to paraphrase Voltaire) and says, "A system like our own, which contains about forty-four distinctly characterized sounds, is hardly excelled in richness, among tongues ancient or modern."

Whitney also claims that Chinese has only about 1500 words. It seems as though he was counting characters as words, but even so that is a very low estimate. (The figures I found were between 3000 and 4000 characters.) But we don't say that English has only 26 words, or even that languages that use a syllabary have only as many words as the syllabary has syllables. Even in English, we count a lot of compound words as words in their own right, especially those constructed from Greek or Latin roots, e.g., "telegraph" or "neo-conservative".

One observation Whitney makes that I do not recall having seen before is about the "statistics" of borrowing or adopting words from other languages. Nouns and adjectives are the most commonly borrowed, verbs less so, particles even less, and prefixes, suffixes, and especially inflections, declensions, and conjugation hardly at all.

Whitney predated Sapir and Whorf, but touches on their theories when he writes, "There is always and everywhere an antecedency of the conception to the expression. In common phrase, we first have our idea, and then get a name for it."

I have no idea whether Whitney's spelling of the Spanish word for woman as "muger" (rather than the correct "mujer") is a

typo, or an attempt at phonetic spelling.(though he seems generally not to do this unless he specifically indicates it). [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

I hate to be near the sea, and to hear it raging  
and roaring like a wild beast in its den. It puts  
me in mind of the everlasting efforts of the human  
mind, struggling to be free and ending just where it  
began.

--William Hazlitt

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