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2/25/18, 10:10 AM

THE JOURNEY OF NATTY GANN (1985) makes its Turner Classic Movies premiere. Back in the mid-1980s Disney Studios was struggling with their business case. They had been releasing some very puerile films with names like THE LOVE BUG, SUPER-DAD, and THE COMPUTER WORE TENNIS SHOES (not being shown on TCM). Then in rapid succession they made and released two of the best live-action films they would make in the 20th Century. One was NEVER CRY WOLF (also not being shown). The other was THE JOURNEY OF NATTY GANN. The Great Depression was a time of desperation for many. People had to battle every day to find food enough to eat. In Chicago Sol Gann took care of his daughter Natty not knowing what they could eat or where they could sleep. Then Sol is offered a job logging in Washington State. But the bus is leaving before Sol will be able to find Natty. He makes the mistake of trusting the wrong friend to act as guardian and take care of Natty. Suddenly Natty is homeless and penniless and has to grow up very fast. She has to jump trains, riding the rails to get from Chicago to Washington on her own across a country devastated by the Depression. Contrary to what one might have expected from Disney this story is has a grim and real view of the 1930s in the US. It is told on the level of a good family film, just a little higher than the Disney classic OLD YELLER. [Friday, March 30, 2:15 AM]

I bet if I mention the Titanic you will have images of the 1997 James Cameron film TITANIC. Once that film came out it overpowered all previous versions of that film. In fact there were at least three previous films about that great ship (spoiler warning ...) sinking. There was a German propaganda film blaming the British financial interests. There were also at least two disaster films about the sinking in the 1950s. 1953 brought the melodrama TITANIC with a sad melodrama starring Barbara Stanwick and Clifton Webb. It was not a bad film, but it could have been better by covering more of the sinking. But it is hard to screw up a story so very dramatic as the sinking of the Titanic. Clifton Webb discovers that he is not the biological father of the boy he had assumed was his son. He refuses to accept the boy until losing the ocean liner under him shows him there are things more important than his foolish pride. Nyaaah! This TITANIC is just okay. At least it brought the story of the sinking to the screen. [Sunday, March 25, 8:00 PM]

That film is followed by A NIGHT TO REMEMBER (1958). For me anyway this film still ranks close to Cameron's film. This is not a film with chases and gunshots like the Cameron version. It sticks fairly close to telling the story of the great sinking of the unsinkable Titanic. The film is based rather closely to Walter Lord's book of the same title, presented as what today we would call a docudrama. This is one of those spectaculars that has several good contemporary stars in large and small roles. You can try to pick out your favorite stars, but I promise you the drama of the sinking will hold your attention. The film was directed by Roy Ward Baker who would go on to direct QUATERMASS AND THE PIT. The film stars Kenneth More, the Tom Hanks of his day. Also there is Honor Blackman, today best remembered as Pussy Galore in GOLDFINGER. You will hear a lot in the dialog that was also in the Cameron film. Some technical details are wrong in the film, but few of the current sources were available. [Sunday, March 25, 10:00 PM]

There is no clear winner for the best choice of March. A personal favorite of mine is BLOOD SIMPLE (1984). This was the first film written and directed by the Coen Brothers whose films have become an institution in the film industry. The owner of a Texas roadhouse suspects his wife of fooling around on the side, and he hires a private detective. But when he extends the deal to murder, an incredible chaos of misunderstanding ensues. The viewer can follow what is going on, but none of the characters can. I like to say this film is dedicated to the "Huh?" experience. It has a great cast with M. Emmet Walsh stealing the film. The last line of dialog is really a corker. [Sunday, March 18, 1:45 AM] [-mrl]

Nevula Award Nominees:

Best Novel

AMBERLOUGH, Lara Elena Donnelly (Tor)
 THE STRANGE CASE OF THE ALCHEMIST'S DAUGHTER,
 Theodora Goss (Saga)
 SPOONBENDERS, Daryl Gregory (Knopf; riverrun)
 THE STONE SKY, N.K. Jemisin (Orbit US; Orbit UK)
 SIX WAKES, Mur Lafferty (Orbit US)
 JADE CITY, Fonda Lee (Orbit US; Orbit UK)
 AUTONOMOUS, Annalee Newitz (Tor; Orbit UK 2018)

Best Novella

"River of Teeth", Sarah Gailey (Tor.com Publishing)
 "Passing Strange", Ellen Klages (Tor.com Publishing)
 "And Then There Were (N-One)", Sarah Pinsker (Uncanny 3-4/17)
 "Barry's Deal", Lawrence M. Schoen (NobleFusion Press)
 "All Systems Red", Martha Wells (Tor.com Publishing)
 "The Black Tides of Heaven", JY Yang (Tor.com Publishing)

Best Novelette

"Dirty Old Town", Richard Bowes (F&SF 5-6/17)
 "Weaponized Math", Jonathan P. Brazee (The Expanding Universe,
 Vol. 3)
 "Wind Will Rove", Sarah Pinsker (Asimov's 9-10/17)
 "A Series of Steaks", Vina Jie-Min Prasad (Clarkesworld 1/17)
 "A Human Stain", Kelly Robson (Tor.com 1/4/17)

"Small Changes Over Long Periods of Time", K.M. Szpara (Uncanny 5-6/17)

Best Short Story

"Fandom for Robots", Vina Jie-Min Prasad (Uncanny 9-10/17)
 "Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience TM",
 Rebecca Roanhorse (Apex 8/17)
 "Utopia, LOL?", Jamie Wahls (Strange Horizons 6/5/17)
 "Clearly Lettered in a Mostly Steady Hand", Fran Wilde (Uncanny 9-10/17)
 "The Last Novelist (or A Dead Lizard in the Yard)",
 Matthew Kressel (Tor.com 3/15/17)
 "Carnival Nine", Caroline M. Yoachim (Beneath Ceaseless Skies 5/11/17)

The Ray Bradbury Award for Outstanding Dramatic Presentation

GET OUT (Written by Jordan Peele)
 THE GOOD PLACE: "Michael's Gambit" (Written by Michael Schur)
 LOGAN (screenplay by Scott Frank, James Mangold, and
 Michael Green)
 THE SHAPE OF WATER (Screenplay by Guillermo del Toro and
 Vanessa Taylor)
 STAR WARS: THE LAST JEDI (Written by Rian Johnson)
 WONDER WOMAN (Screenplay by Allan Heinberg)

The Andre Norton Award for Outstanding Young Adult Science Fiction or Fantasy Book

Exo, Fonda Lee (Scholastic Press)
 Weave a Circle Round, Kari Maaren (Tor)
 The Art of Starving, Sam J. Miller (HarperTeen)
 Want, Cindy Pon (Simon Pulse)

The Verge (at <https://tinyurl.com/void-nebula-nominees>) has links to on-line copies of many of the short fiction nominees.

THE SECT (a.k.a. THE DEVIL'S DAUGHTER) (1991) (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: This is not great, but it is an unexpectedly satisfying supernatural suspense film. A schoolteacher nearly hits a very old man on the road. She invites him into her home only to find out he seems to know more about her house than she does. He seems to know about some sort of demonic sewer she never knew was there. The film is co-written and directed by Michelle Soavi. It was also co-written by Dario Argento. Both men produced. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

At some point the Italian horror film took what I consider a wrong turn. They went in big for the "giallo" film. These are not so much horror films but serial killer films with a slasher killing off (not well developed) characters one by one. But so frequently the characters are not very well developed. They are just sort of fungible targets for the killer. The films are big into sex and violence, but somehow there are no characters in the film worth investing much empathy in.

When I saw that THE SECT was made in 1991 it seemed very likely that it would be just another serial killer film. But what a surprise that it turned out to be a supernatural suspense with two or three characters whom we come to have a feeling for. The original 1991 title was at least a hint that it might be a more interesting film. The title THE DEVIL'S DAUGHTER conjures of two Hammer films on Satanism, THE DEVIL'S BRIDE and TO THE DEVIL A DAUGHTER, both based on horror adventures by Dennis Wheatley. The film, which I will call by its current release name THE SECT, makes some effort to look like an American horror film. It is dubbed in English, has a large part for British actor Herbert Lom (who would be in only two films after this one). However, any pretense that this might be an American film quickly fails as we get a title that says "South California. 1970." Somehow we do use the name "Southern California", but we never call that area "South California." The film has a short prolog with hippies in a small group of friends who are visited by a Charles-Manson-like figure.

After the prolog the setting moves to Frankfurt, Germany, 1991. Schoolteacher Miriam Kreisl (played by Kelly Curtis) accidentally nearly hits a very old man Moebius Kelly (Herbert Lom) on the road. She is not sure if he is hurt or not, and so she brings the man to her house. She indeed had reason to worry since the man does appear to die. Then he returns from the dead. Then he returns to it. For a while he treads the boundary between life and death. During one of his living periods the stranger discovers in Miriam's basement something that seems like a demonic sewer, decorated as Expressionist.

There are touches that remind one of other films. There are moments of Lovecraftian horror and others with a satanic rabbit and a more satanic rabbit hole. (It cannot be easy for a writer to wring horror from a rabbit or from a stork.) The whole plot could be considered homage to a certain other well-known horror film--not that the viewer is likely to guess it in advance.

Herbert Lom, incidentally, made only two films after this one. This was his last role of this size in a 1991 film. He died September 27, 2012 (He was age 95).

Writer-directors Michele Soavi and Dario Argento try a number of experiments in horror. Some work and others do not. But I would rather see a film with a few experimental horrors that fail than one that has no new ideas. I rate this low a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 7/10.

THE SECT will be on Blu-ray and DVD February 27. It has been remastered in high definition with more than 45 hours of color correction.

Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0100581/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1035862_devils_daughter?

[-mrl]

THE MILLIONAIRES' UNIT (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: In much the style of an episode of "The American Experience", this documentary recounts the history of a wealthy group of men at Yale who in 1914 decided they wanted the fun of learning to fly airplanes. Then World War I broke out and they were guided by the principle that "of those to whom much has been given, much is expected." They determined to learn to fly and to be prepared if/when the United States would join the fighting. They would be ready with America's first real air force. "The First Yale Unit", as they called themselves--or "The Millionaires' Unit", as the newspapers called them--went from private ownership to being the basis of United States air power and left an extraordinary record. The documentary is based on the book of the same title by Mark Wortman. Darroch Greer who shares director credit with Ron King wrote the film. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4) or 8/10

In the days before the First World War a group of high-spirited students from Yale wanted to learn to fly the newly invented airplane. It was a rich man's hobby. But from the ground they could tell there was nothing so free as the freedom of the air. Flying was just one of the privileges of the wealthy. The small group got permission to form the Yale men into an official reserve unit.

Then suddenly war was declared in Europe. Woodrow Wilson had so far kept the United States out of the war, but the boys from Yale expected the United States would be pulled into the war and they wanted to be ready. They felt if they had the privilege so they also had responsibility. So in a spirit of responsibility and perhaps in the expectation of jolly good sport they went to France to join the fight. Paris was better than expected (with women coming up to them asking "sleep... with... me...?"). But soon they were in the war and they stayed until the end. The film gives an engrossing history of those Yale grads over World War I's four years. The spirit of the film is ebullient well into the war, but it would be unrealistic to expect that some of the men would not be killed in battle or in flying miscalculations. The film does have its downbeat stories. But overall the spirit ran high.

There is a lot to tell about in those four years in a 121-minute film. This is a film for people who like flying themselves or watching flying, war stories, or history, witness testimony or expert testimony, stories of courage, or stories of romance. The filmmakers do go the whole American Experience route with news and documentary footage, talking heads interviews, and narration. The narrator is actor Bruce Dern. If he does not seem to be of the Yale mold, he narrates because he is the grand-nephew of a flyer in the Yale unit. His contribution to the story telling is one of the few stylistic elements that might be questioned. He tries to add a little too much zest to the reading, emphasizing some words for no apparent reason as if to create dramatic effect.

"Of those to whom much has been given, much is expected." That is the theme of the film and the philosophy of the unit and a rare one today more than a century later. I rate this film a high +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 8/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4224460/reference>

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

[-mrl]

THE MT VOID Issue 2000,Mashed Potatoes, Computer Fonts, THE BERLIN PROJECT, "By the Red Giant's Light", MY JOURNEY TO THE STARS, and ENDURANCE (letter of comment by John Hertz):

In response to [the MT VOID's 2000th issue \(02/02/18\)](#), John Hertz writes:

Congratulations on MT VOID 2000, gosh.

Ponder whether Mark's sorrows over soi-disant bagels, and mashed potatoes, are essentially the same. Perpetrators offer us similar coffee, tea, English. Computer fonts which fake handwriting are harder to exonerate as no worse than incompetent; their mere use indicates more strongly an intention to deceive.

From the past year I recommend Greg Benford's novel THE BERLIN PROJECT; Larry Niven's short story "By the Red Giant's Light" (Nov- Dec F&SF); Scott Kelly & Andre Ceolin's aimed-for-children tale of Kelly's near-year on the International Space Station MY JOURNEY TO THE STARS, illustrated both by Ceolin's childlike renditions and by photographs. I am nominating each--MY JOURNEY for Related Work.

THE BERLIN PROJECT I think not only extraordinary but excellent. "Light" is one of Niven's pointillistic masterworks: he paints dots of bright color, we are to perceive the whole. ENDURANCE, Kelly's more detailed aimed-for-adults version, is very much worth reading, but I think MY JOURNEY better. [-jh]

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

Synchronicity seems to be getting even weirder: On the same day that the Teaching Company course I am listening to on Alexander the Great got to the lecture on the Battle of the Hydaspes against Porus, the chapter in MOBY DICK I am annotating mentions Porus in the context of elephant hunting!

A NUMERATE LIFE by John Allen Paulos (ISBN 978-1-63388-118-1) is more about the writing of autobiographies than an autobiography per se. For example, Paulos uses Benford's Law to explain (sort of) why autobiographies tend to cover childhood and recent adulthood more thoroughly than, say, college or early adulthood. To a great extent, this makes the book more interesting than a straight autobiography would have been.

THE HISTORICAL FILM: HISTORY AND MEMORY IN MEDIA edited by Marcia Landy (ISBN 978-0-8135-2856-4) is a 2001 collection of articles about the historical film and history as shown in films. While I was reading one article, "How to Look at an 'Historical' Film" by Pierre Sorlin, I came across the following: "We cannot discuss the cinema without bringing up the central question of money. As there is heavy demand, due mainly to the requirements of television, the film companies charge high prices. We have to make do with one film, when for the purposes of comparison we would prefer to use ten. In the book from which this essay is taken [THE FILM IN HISTORY: RESTAGING THE PAST], we are going to discuss a number of films, but if the reader wants to see them all it would prove to be an expensive undertaking." To today's reader (e.g., me) this sounded odd, so I checked the date of the essay. It was written in 1980, right before the home video revolution hit big. These days, while there are still films that are difficult/expensive to find, the vast majority of films discussed in books about the historical film are readily available on DVD, from Netflix or Amazon Prime, or even on YouTube. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

When a dog wags her tail and barks at the same time, how
do you know which end to believe?
--Unknown

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