



Immediately this seemed to me like the statement of a math problem and I was supposed to graph on it. But then I thought that some of my ophthalmologist's patients would probably not be as keen on mathematics as I was. It also looked like a picture of how large masses of matter bend space. But that was not really his style either. The doctor did not give me a lot of instructions. He just said I should look at the grid every day and if the horizontal or vertical lines looked distorted I should contact an ophthalmologist right away. I realized it had something to do with my macular vision. The square is called the Amsler Grid. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amsler\\_grid](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amsler_grid).

Actually what I was looking at was a test to see if my macular vision needed immediate aid. The grid was intended to warn me that the macula at the back of the eye was pulling loose. You don't want to have that happen because it will leave you blind. I did notice a little bending at the edges, but very small and it probably was expected.

At least I sure hope it was expected.

But years ago I designed for myself and performed a thought experiment--at that time that was the only kind of experiment I could afford--that convinced me our eyes must always distort what we see. When you look at what should be a straight line, it must always really be a curved line.

Imagine, if you will, you are on a perfectly flat plane. I mean it is like it is a flat mathematical plane. But on the plane are two railroad rails, perfectly straight and parallel. They go off to infinity in both directions. Stand right between the two tracks. If asked you would probably say the rails looked perfectly straight. But I contend they really look curved to you even if you thought they looked straight. If you look down the track the two rails would look like they came together at a single point. Turn around and behind you the two rails again seem to come together at a single point behind you.

So the two rails intersect each other in front of you and also behind you. But two straight lines that have two different points of intersection have to be the same line. But we assumed you were standing between the two tracks. This is geometrically impossible. Your eye must be seeing the two tracks bow outward and you are interpreting it as two perfectly straight lines. What you see as straight lines cannot be really straight. Your brain must be interpreting the lines as being perfectly straight, but it cannot be seeing them that way. [-mrl]

### **2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY** (letter of comment by Jim Susky):

This morning BBC World Report's "witness" feature commemorated Stanley Kubrick's stunning 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY first released fifty years ago. Something must have been "in the air", since last weekend I happened upon a seven-part YouTube survey of the various methods used to make that as yet unmatched visual spectacle.

As Keir Dullea said this morning the entire film was made "physically"--no digital tricks existed then--with the possible exception of all those CRT displays used in the film. He stated that he was particularly proud that he participated in that film and that he has gotten by far more attention for his role in 2001 than all his other acting work combined.

I was close to ten years old when I first saw 2001 in a theatre. During the intermission I wanted to tell mom and the other adults how exquisitely cool that film was--but they all looked so puzzled, so mystified, so I held my tongue and waited for the second half. The opening act, with the early primates, was impressive in its way (more impressive, given that it was done on A SET!) but the space ballet between the shuttle and partially-completed space-station was stunning beyond belief.

And, amazing to a "space kid" like myself, I was amazed that a film-maker actually understood how a vacuum "sounds"! So it was not only visually impressive but scientifically faithful, too.

You are far more of a film historian that I'll ever be, so I'll ask: was 2001 really groundbreaking in its mundane use of trademarks? Some call that "product placement", though I suspect PanAm, IBM, (and others?) paid nothing (except possibly permission) to allow their use.

The BBC feature called Dullea the "lead actor"--and so he was. I would assert that Douglas Rain was second lead as the voice of HAL 9000--the "brains" of the Discovery probe. Certainly, Rain was instrumental in eliciting sympathy as HAL's "higher functions" were disabled.

Although 2001 is the extreme opposite of a "popcorn movie", I think we will pop some this weekend and have a movie night for this epic, unmatched, masterpiece. [-js]

Mark responds:

I don't consider myself a film historian or a film critic.

I am just a fan.

I am listening to some music from Richard Wagner while I read your mail. I feel about the same of each of them. I don't really think highly of either of them, but I like each.

At the time I said that 2001 was like space. There is a little matter here and a little matter there and a lot of space in between. But as I say, I am much more respectful these days. I also like any William Sylvester film. [-mrl]

Jim adds:

You are far more of a film historian that I'll ever be, so I'll ask: was 2001 really groundbreaking in it's mundane use of trademarks? Some call that "product placement", though I suspect PanAm, IBM, (and others?) paid nothing (except possibly permission) to allow their use.

Mark replies:

I think you were probably right about product placements. It was the first film that I remember using placements like that. It adds to the realism. [-mrl]

Bue Mark also adds:

The 1925 film THE LOST WORLD showed a Corona typewriter. [-mrl]

**BAJA** (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

**CAPSULE:** BAJA reminds the viewer of the 1980s "school break" and "student mischief" films. It is the story of a group of 22-year-olds each with his own agenda for taking a trip on a very fancy RV. Their destination is in Baja California. The trip is to get away on Winter Break. They find themselves getting involved with crime and also some of the most beautiful natural scenery in Mexico. The film was written and directed by Tony Vidal. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

This year Mexico looms very high in the American public's awareness. Disney Studios has released COCO, which heavily features Mexican popular lore. BAJA is heavily invested in Mexican mysticism and Mexican popular music. Perhaps a certain President's political plans this year keeps Mexico very big in popular culture.

Bryan (played by Jake Thomas) is a sort of non-entity who works at a Southern California sporting goods store. His friend Todd (Chris Broch) is always working some dirty deal to make money off his friends. There is no situation so screwed up that Todd cannot make it worse. Bryan is caught between his own strict parents and his rebel friend Todd.

Bryan's parents give their son a mission. They want to have Bryan drive their RV to Cabo, leave off their RV, and pick up a car, and drive it north and home. It is a good plan and lasts just long enough for Todd to hear of it. Soon the number of people knowing of the boy's plans increases. Each new passenger has his or her reason for wanting to come. The boys find themselves dealing with gangsters and prostitutes. They also find their way to some astoundingly scenic landscapes.

Joining in the festivities is a Mexican Shaman played by the ever-engaging Mark Margolis. Margolis has a cult of fans since he played the enigmatic "Alberto the Shadow" a Latin-American assassin in 1983's SCARFACE and later an equally mysterious Cabalistic rabbi in the 1998 PI.

Eventually under the influence of Margolis' character the order of business turns to turns to a mystical appreciation of the natural beauty of the area.

The story is more sophisticated than it at first appears, but it is not tremendously original or insightful. I rate BAJA` a low +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 7/10.

BAJA will have a limited release to theaters on April 13.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6701492/reference>

What others are saying: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/baja\\_2018](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/baja_2018)

[-mrl]

**YEAR 2018!, STAR WARS, MOBY DICK and Starbucks, Edgar Allan Poe, and FRANKENSTEIN** (letter of comment by John Hertz):

In response to various comments in [the 03/02/18 issue](#) of the MT VOID, John Hertz writes:

[VOID 2004, 2 Mar 18, v. 36 n. 35] Here in 2018 are lots of things we didn't think of back there. Lots of things we did of aren't. Consider James Blish's 1956 novel YEAR 2018! (later THEY SHALL HAVE STARS). Mark probably is acquainted with the jesting question whether the title means "Year 2018, goshwow" or Year 2018- factorial"--an even more staggering thought since the year would be--well, rather than write, and make you print, thousands of digits, let's say  $9.46 \times 10^{5794}$  [you may re-format that number as needed].

When the first "Star Wars" film, now known as "Episode IV" and "A New Hope", was released in 1977, it was favorably reviewed outside our field. My father and stepmother, whom I loved, were kindly mystified by my love of science fiction; they didn't object but couldn't see it: I recommended they watch STAR WARS. My stepmother said, "Why were all those space-ships flying around?" She was no dope, just (with me, anyway) blunt. My father said, "If I hadn't been in a wheelchair [he was a quadriplegic from polio] I'd have walked out." It occurred to me that the film had a top and a bottom but no middle. At bottom it was a shoot-'em-up adventure with good guys and bad guys. At the top was a rendition of classic themes: the boy, nearly adult, who comes home to find it destroyed; the hermit who's abandoned his former greatness; the far bigger world in which he reluctantly guides the boy: everything was perfect, even the masterly touch of setting it \*long ago\* in a galaxy far away. But if neither the bottom nor the top reached you, you had nothing.

I might tie in MOBY DICK by applying Brother Dormer's remark, "It seems to have that effect."

Once I saw at a Starbucks coffee shop a copy of MOBY DICK for sale, quietly placed along other souvenirs and gadgets. In fact it was the scholarly 1988 Hayford-Tanselle-Parker edition. I wrote to the corporate office in Seattle suggesting every shop might carry one, perhaps by means of a chain-wide incentive and an arrangement with the publisher. It would not sell much, or fast, I said, but would be a fine gesture. That, unlike my letter to Mars (!) applauding the campaign "M&Ms, the candy of the millennium--MM means 2000", got alas no response. Perhaps Starbucks has a bottom and a middle but no top. [-jh]

In response to various comments in the [03/09/18](#) and [03/16/18](#) issues of the MT VOID, John writes:

This letter has been long enough, so I'll curtail comments about Poe, and about FRANKENSTEIN [VOID 2005-2006, 9 & 16 Mar, v. 36, nn. 36-37]. Poe's essays are much worth attention, ranging--if I may say so--from "Maelzel's Chess-Player" (1836), "A Few Words on Secret Writing" (1941, called "Cryptography in my 1927 Black's COLLECTED WORKS), and "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), which Evelyn notes, to "X-ing a Paragrab" (1849). His scientific point of view, which Evelyn rightly perceives, shows constantly, e.g., in "The Gold-Bug" (1843; cryptography). FRABKENSTEIN I fear is one of those books everyone talks of but no one has read. I cannot make an exception for someone who thinks the Creature a compassionate being. The book is a double tragedy, a remarkable work of feminism, and an irresponsibility contest between the man and the monster. [-jh]

**Retro Hugo Award Finalists** (letters of comment by Peter Rubinstein and Kevin R):

In response to Evelyn's comments on the Retro Hugo finalists in the 04/06/18 issue of the MT VOID, Peter Rubinstein writes:

Is BAMBI really an SF dramatic presentation? I'd likely go for CAT PEOPLE anyway. [-pr]

Evelyn responds:

I think in general anthropomorphized animals that talk to each other across species is considered at least fantasy. [-ecl]

And Kevin R writes:

[Evelyn writes,] "On the other hand, missing entirely is THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS by C. S. Lewis. Much as I love Olaf Stapledon's work, THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS should be on the ballot instead of DARKNESS AND THE LIGHT." [-ecl] Unless you think making works of fantasy eligible has always been a mistake, or has been one ever since the World Fantasy Award started back in 1975. Yes, "speculative fiction" is a catch-all for both forms, but the premiere stf award should be awarded to scientific works. Give separate fantasy awards, if that is deemed necessary, but Lewis, who did write some science fiction, did not produce an "edge case" with SCREWTAPE, which Orwell described as a "silly-clever religious book." Splitting categories further into SF and F would exacerbate the ballot-length problem, of course. Best to leave fantasy to the WFA. [-kr]

Evelyn notes:

This led to a \*long\* discussion/debate on whether the Hugo Awards cover fantasy (they explicitly do), and whether they should. I am not going to include it all here; you can go to the entire thread <https://tinyurl.com/void-hugo-fantasy>. [-ecl]

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

THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS by Ursula K. Le Guin (ISBN 978-0-441-47812-5) was our discussion book this month. I had read it a long time ago, but I re-read it for the discussion and have a few observations. (Quelle surprise!)

One observation is that one could never confuse character names from Le Guin with those from, say, Isaac Asimov. If I tell you that one has Cleon, Bel Riose, and Ebling Mis, and the other Genly Ai, Argaven Harge, and Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, I am pretty sure you could say which was which. And the term "shifgrethor" would also be clearly Le Guin's rather than Asimov's. In part this may be because Asimov patterned his names after Roman ones in the "Foundation" series, but even out of it Asimov tends toward "European-format" names, and western Europe at that, while Le Guin ranges more widely. (This may be an effect of her father's career in anthropology.)

Le Guin, "At noon in the passes of Wehoth, at about 14,000 feet, it was 82 degrees F in the sun and 13 degrees in the shade." If there is anything that rips one out of the alien setting it is the appearance of what are now obsolete Terran units of measurement. With the United States, Burma, and Liberia the only countries left using these units, it is completely unbelievable that an international and interplanetary effort would be using them.

And much of what seemed progressive when the book was written now seems terribly dated. On Gethen, those who are permanently male or female "are not excluded from society, but they are tolerated with some disdain, as homosexuals are in many bisexual societies." The term "bisexual" here apparently means "having two sexes" rather than its current meaning of "being attracted to both men and women."

"But now there is evidence to indicate that the Terran Colony was an experiment, the planting of one Hainish Normal group on a world with its own proto-hominid autochthones." Given that it is now fairly clear that our ancestors interbred with all those "proto-hominid autochthones" (Neanderthals, Denisovans, etc.) and are also closely genetically related to other primates makes this extremely unlikely.

"Will anything [other than genetic manipulation] explain Gethenian physiology? Accident, possibly; natural selection, hardly. Their ambisexuality has little or no adaptive value." Why Ong Tot Oppong (the author of this statement) thinks she can determine what adaptive value this ambisexuality has (or had) is a mystery. There are many peculiarities on Earth that we do not understand and that seem non-adaptive, but most biologists do not think genetic manipulation is the cause.

"As with most mammals other than man, coitus can be performed only by mutual invitation and consent; otherwise it is not possible." Actually, we are finding more exceptions to this as more research is done: various apes, dolphins, sea otters, and others. Whether Le Guin's "most mammals" is still accurate is questionable.

"... continuous sexual capacity and organized social aggression, neither of which are attributes of any mammal but man ..." Again, the former may be exclusively human, but we are finding that the latter is not.

"Your race is appallingly alone in its world. No other mammalian species. No other ambisexual species. No animal intelligent enough even to domesticate as pets." This seems a contradiction, since Ai later talks about furs and leather, both of which come from mammals. The pesthry are "oviparous vegetarians", but that does not preclude them being mammals. And while no mammalian species evolving on such a cold world is possible, there would probably be no land animals at all (since cold-blooded animals seem even less likely). In any case, I am not even sure this makes sense from a survival point of view for the Gethenians.

"The seeming nation, unified for centuries, was a stew of uncoordinated principalities, towns, villages, 'pseudo-feudal tribal economic units', a sprawl and splatter of vigorous, competent, quarrelsome individualities over which a grid of authority was insecurely and lightly laid. Nothing, I thought, could ever unite Karhide as a nation." Clearly he has not looked at early eighteenth century Germany--or rather, "pseudo-feudal tribal economic units', a sprawl and splatter of vigorous, competent, quarrelsome individualities over which a grid of authority was insecurely and lightly laid" occupying the territory that is now Germany. I am also reminded of the historian (whose name escapes me) who wrote very lucid book in 1989 explaining how Europe came to arrive at its current situation and was quite convincing--right up to the point when he explained why West Germany and East Germany would never rejoin into a unified Germany.

Estraven asks, "Equality is not the general rule, then. Are [women] mentally inferior?" And Ai replies, "I don't know. They don't often seem to turn up mathematicians, or composers of music, or inventors, or abstract thinkers." I realize that we have not yet achieved perfect equality between the sexes, but given how far in the future this is, this seems like an awfully bleak viewpoint, especially as this seems to suggest not just inequality, but a wide gap.

"But it is not human to be without shame and without desire." As we have learned more about human sexuality, it has become clear that there are humans who are asexual.

A few quotes of interest:

"The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty."

"It is hard, I found, to be called traitor. Strange how hard it is, for it's a easy name to call another man; a name that sticks, that fits, that convinces."

"Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear; what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was." [-ecl]

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Mark Leeper  
mleeper@optonline.net

Quote of the Week:

A marveilous newtrality have these things mathematicall,  
and also a strange participation between things  
supernaturall and things naturall.

--John Dee

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