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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
06/01/18 -- Vol. 36, No. 48, Whole Number 2017

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Television Memories (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

I have been thinking about how much TV watching has changed over my lifetime. For me there has always been television and I only found out years later that there might have been radio drama I was missing, but I did not get interested in listening to radio for several years. I was of the then-modern generation who had TV.

Our TV was part of what we might have later called an entertainment center. The TV was part of a cabinet, a large piece of furniture with two doors on the front. Open the right door and there was a TV with a screen about 12 inches in diagonal. Open the other door and there was a phonograph over an open area to store phonograph records. That big screen was a real luxury. When we visited my aunt Rose her TV had a four-inch screen. But we had a much bigger 12-inch. Eventually we replaced that TV with television with a Stromberg Carlson with a screen about 14 inches. This TV did not speak well for Stromberg Carlson and the repairman visited us often. I remember the TV had in front a plastic piece that was the signature "Stromberg Carlson" written in script and then rendered in gold plastic. It was the first thing to break off the TV.

Television was full of half-hour programs and a few that were an hour long, all to be shown only on TV. I can remember that the "Jackie Gleason Show" was a popular favorite with my family. It always ended with a sketch called "The Honeymooners." That one was so popular they took all the Honeymooner sketches and extracted them from the show that surrounded them and just the Honeymooner sketches became a syndicated situation comedy. Situation comedies (or "sitcoms") were a very popular formula for the networks).

For a more serious entertainment there were fairly good plays that would run for 90 minutes minus commercial time. But if you wanted to discuss a TV show with a friend you had to hope your friend had been watching at the same time. If your friend missed it your best chance was to hope they would have a repeat performance in a few months. Sometimes one of these plays would be adapted into a movie. You could see essentially the same story. There were films such as THE DAYS OF WINE AND ROSES, MARTY, and PATTERNS that were adaptations of television plays.

Eventually some minor B-movies like Roy Rogers and Gene Autry matinee films started to be shown on TV. Also, for Saturday morning television they borrowed from the theatrical Republic serials to make into a half-hour show "Commando Cody, Sky Marshall of the Universe." I don't know how one becomes a Sky Marshall of the Universe, but his beat was always very earthbound. But taking it from the serial, it could follow the network rule of getting cheap programming from big-screen films. One exception to the "get it cheap" rule was THE WIZARD OF OZ, which would be shown once a year. And those repeated showings took WIZARD OF OZ from a film that did weak business initially at the box office to a children's (and adult's) classic.

In 1961 NBC sensed a market for more recent theatrical films and they brought them to TV in "Saturday Night at the Movies," a weekly (of course) program. For NBC to broadcast a film on national television was taken to be a mark of respect. For me the real thrill was when they showed THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL in 1961. It was the first time one of my beloved science fiction films would be broadcast on national television. I had not yet seen the film, but I just knew I would love it from the still I had seen in Forry Ackerman's SPACEMEN magazine. It did not disappoint. About this time we were allowed to watch no more than two hours a day of television, but the rule was not strictly enforced. We frequently squeezed in another half-hour or so.

CBS and ABC saw the success NBC had with their prime-time movie. They introduced their own weekly movies. CBS started another weekly feature film series. Before long you could see a feature film on one channel or another any night of the week. And occasionally they would run science fiction. If you liked a movie you saw on television there was a good chance your friend has watched it also and we could talk about it over lunch.

I remember watching the ABC movie one Sunday night. The film they were showing was JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH (1959). It was their second and therefore last showing of the movie. Suddenly it struck me that I better watch the film closely. I might never again get a chance to see the film. They were not going to run it in theaters again--at least it was not very likely. (In fact it did appear on the theater's matinee on a double bill with THE TIME MACHINE (1960), but I could not know that at the time.) But for the overwhelming majority of movies, once they had played they flew off into limbo and might never be seen again.

Video has changed a great deal since that time. We no longer have so limited a choice of what to watch. But nearly everybody is watching a different program so it is hard to discuss over lunch unless you want to chew over "Game of Thrones." And there are people who watch six and seven hours a day. And they watch it on a flat, color TV screen just a little smaller than a handball court. [-mrl]

Turning on the Lights (letter of comment by Kip Williams):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on ANNIHILATION](#) in the 05/25/18 issue of the MT VOID, Kip Williams writes:

[Evelyn writes,] "I also commented at the time on how the turning on of the lights in ANNIHILATION was really stupid."

"And then some idiot turned on the lights," as Bradbury wrote in a story. Mentioning the title would be a spoiler, as the quote is rather a punch line. EC Comics liked the line. I don't recall offhand if they adapted the original story, but in one about a blind man getting revenge on a callous sighted person, the line is used in reverse ('on' becoming 'off'). Even though the 'idiot' part had no real bearing on anything, somebody (Al, I guess) just liked the sound of it. [-kw]

Issue Numbers, GET OUT, THE SHAPE OF WATER, and Turner Classic Movies (letter of comment by John Purcell):

John Purcell writes:

Hey, this is going to be interesting: in two weeks I will be writing a letter of comment on MT VOID issue #2018 in the year 2018. That's kind of nifty, eh? [-jp]

In response to [the list of Nebula winners](#) in the 05/25/18 issue of the MT VOID, John writes:

A couple things of note this time around, and they are both about movies. I have yet to see GET OUT, which won the Nebula Award and is nominated for the Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation, Long Form, but it definitely sounds interesting. We normally don't go out to see movies--unless we know for a fact that little kids will NOT be in the audience--so recent movie releases remain unseen until they are on our Dish service or we buy/rent the DVD version. Heck, Valerie and I really wanted to go out to watch THE SHAPE OF WATER because it looked so interesting and well done, but simply never got around to it. So it goes. [-jp]

In response to [Mark's comments on Turner Classic Movies](#) in the same issue, John writes:

Yeehaw! You have to love it when Turner Classic Movies sets up their genre nights. Even though I have seen every single movie listed on those Monday night skiffy and horror lineups, I will still watch. However, the movie I really want to watch is that Peter Lorre movie you fawned over, MAD LOVE (1935), and THE BEAST WITH FIVE FINGERS (1946) is also going to be recorded. I have long felt that Peter Lorre was vastly underrated as an actor, so I am looking forward to seeing these. Many thanks for the heads-up. [-jpl]

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

Movies being much shorter in 1942, Worldcon 76 decided not to try to force both a Short Form and a Long Form of Dramatic Presentation by re-locating works, but just put all the finalists in the category in which they would initially be placed: Short Form. This meant that feature-length movies dominated, with no shorts, radio shows, or other forms or media making the final ballot.

BAMBI: In answer to the first question people seem to ask, BAMBI is not science fiction but it is considered fantasy because of the anthropomorphized talking animals. Strangely, no one seems to ask this question about RUDYARD KIPLING'S JUNGLE BOOK, which also has talking animals (though less anthropomorphized).

I was not that keen on the "sliding around on the ice" scene in Peter Jackson's KING KONG, and it does not do much for me here either. I suppose as a children's film BAMBI is okay, although Disney's (and fantasy's) fixation on royalty seems a bit troublesome now, and the whole thing where the females are always the sexual aggressors and the males are told to beware is disturbing.

But the bottom line is, is this really that good as a fantasy film ... as Hugo material? I realize 1942 was a weak year, but still ... A better choice for this spot on the ballot would have been Angelo Cavalcanti's WENT THE DAY WELL? (That is not a question; the question mark is part of the title.)

CAT PEOPLE: I have seen CAT PEOPLE a dozen times since 2000 (when I started logging my movie watching), but I actually watched it again for this set of comments on the Retro Hugo Award finalists. It certainly has its flaws (e.g., since when could a fashion sketch artist live in such a magnificent apartment?). The real "problem" (or is it a problem?) is that Irena is the only sympathetic character. Oliver mostly pooh-poohs Irena's problems (e.g., joking and calling her "you crazy kid" when she is frightened by the woman in the restaurant) and a bit too open (especially given the times) about his marital problems; his quickness in falling in love with Irena, and equal quickness in falling out of love with her and realizing he loves Alice may fit movie psychology, but it makes him seem fickle and not serious about "for better or for worse." Alice is a bit too tactless. Dr. Judd, in addition to being a prime exhibit for the #MeToo movement, seems quite willing to discuss his patients' conditions and treatments with people who have no right to that information.

Then again, most of Val Lewton's films are filled with imperfect characters; maybe that is how he saw the world. Certainly all his films have a complexity missing from many of the other films of the time. During the war, studios tended toward straightforward patriotic films, light comedies, and musicals. (The big films that year were MRS. MINIVER, YANKEE DOODLE DANDY, THE PRIDE OF THE YANKEES, HOLIDAY INN, and ROAD TO MOROCCO.)

So much has been said and written about CAT PEOPLE that it is hard to know what to say here. Clearly carefully crafted, with attention to all aspects of the film--script, lighting, sound, set design--this is head and shoulders above the other finalists.

THE GHOST OF FRANKENSTEIN: The fourth in the Universal "Frankenstein" series, it is the first without Boris Karloff as the Creature, and Lon Chaney is no substitute. Bela Lugosi as Ygor is actually pretty good, but the rest of the cast is just adequate (or less). The script is sloppy (Bela refers to "the state and even the whole country" as if they are in the United States rather than Central Europe). (It is not clear exactly where in Central Europe, or even when. The clothing styles indicate a 1930s setting--given there is no war, it cannot be the 1940s.) They show the spirit/ghost of Henry Frankenstein played by Cedric Hardwicke while also showing archive footage of Henry Frankenstein played by Colin Clive, and the two look nothing alike. Why would the Creature agree to have his brain replaced by Ygor's? (And why doesn't the Ygor personality not continue into the next film?) It's redolent with Universal atmosphere and charm, but really, it is not Hugo material.

(It also ends with a very Byzantine rant, with Ygor crying out, "What good is a brain without eyes to see? What good is a brain without eyes?" That was the belief in Byzantium, where when they deposed an emperor, they did not necessarily kill him, but instead would blind him, which apparently precluded his ever taking the throne again. This no doubt dates back in turn to the notion of the emperor as a warrior-king.)

I MARRIED A WITCH: One reason this section was delayed as much as it was that we did not have a copy of this film (boo!), and had to wait until Turner Classic Movies re-ran it the beginning of May (yay!).

This is based on THE PASSIONATE WITCH by Thorne Smith (and Norman H. Matson), and is one of that subgenre of films that was popular back in the 1940s--the supernatural comedy. You know it is in that sort of film when it starts with someone

as the "master of ceremonies" at a Puritan witch-burning announcing an intermission, at which point a vendor starts hawking Indian popcorn. Television shows such as BEWITCHED and I DREAM OF JEANNIE may be considered their direct descendents. Actually, many of this subgenre were based on Thorne Smith, and actors such as Robert Benchley and Cecil Kellaway are also representative of these films.

This film is amusing enough, but really pretty silly. Still, it is more original than such sequels and derivative films as THE GHOST OF FTANKENSTEIN and INVISIBLE AGENT.

INVISIBLE AGENT: The grandson of Jack Griffin (the original "Invisible Man") has moved to the United States and is living incognito. (That Jack Griffin was killed before he could marry and have children does not seem to have occurred to the writer.) Nazi agents try to steal the formula, but Griffin foils them, nor will he give it to the U.S. government, but after Pearl Harbor, he changes his mind, on the condition that only he uses it. (Why did he keep the formula if he was so opposed to its use for so many years?)

The writers must have thought their audience was relatively young, because the Germans are mostly buffoons (though there are a few genuinely menacing characters). The special effects are uneven-- sometimes they are very inventive, but other times they are sloppy (visible mattes, Griffin's teeth visible after he puts cold cream all over his face to become visible, etc.). It's fairly standard example of a wartime propaganda film laced with elements of science fiction.

RUDYARD KIPLING'S JUNGLE BOOK: Just to clarify, this is *not* the Disney animated musical version, which appeared twenty-five years later. The copy I have of the 1942 version is in a DVD pack, "Great Cinema", with 15 films on two two-sided discs. Needless to say, the magnificent Technicolor is not very magnificent. (The film is in public domain, but there is an "official" video release from Criterion, which may be in better condition.)

The Korda brothers disagreed on the level of realism versus fantasy in the film. Alexander, the realist, won out so there are only a few scenes of animals speaking human language or of Mowgli speaking various animal languages. As noted above, this minimal level of the fantastic does not seem to bother people as much in this Hugo finalist as it does in BAMBI, which arguably has considerably more.

In addition to cross-species talking, this film shares with BAMBI having several scenes with fawns, and having a big forest (jungle) fire.

This film may not be a close adaptation of Kipling's book, and judged by today's standards, it has its problems, among them exoticizing and making child-like the Indians, not helped by the period's tendency to insist on some humorous character in every film. (This humorous character was almost always an ethnic stereotype, Stepin Fetchit being the best-known example, but extending to the drunken Irishman, the excitable Italian, the violent and greedy Mexican, and so on. Ironically, during World War II, our "Good Neighbor Policy" cultivated Latin American countries as allies, and the Mexican stereotype was changed to one of historical freedom fighters and the musically talented. But I digress.) In any case, this avoids the depiction of Europeans as superior to Indians, by not having any Europeans except the woman in the framing sequence.

For what it's worth, many of the exterior temple shots seem to be more Cambodian than Indian, though the eastern part of India may have similar temples.

My bottom line is that it is a fantasy film, but it is not what I want to give a Hugo Award to.

Trivia fact: Sabu was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his missions as a tail gunner and ball turret gunner in the Pacific theater in 1944 and 1945.

Rankings: CAT PEOPLE, no award, I MARRIED A WITCH, THE GHOST OF FRANKENSTEIN, BAMBI, RUDYARD KIPLING'S JUNGLE BOOK, INVISIBLE AGENT

[-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

The first mark of intelligence, to be sure, is not to start things; the second mark of intelligence is to pursue to the end what you have started.
--Panchatantra, c. 5th c.

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