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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
07/13/18 -- Vol. 37, No. 2, Whole Number 2023

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Happy Birthday, Mr. Mosca (Part 2) (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

[Last week](#) I was talking about the 60-year-old film THE FLY. The film is based on a short story by George Langelaan that appeared in Playboy Magazine. The original story took place in France, but here it was moved to Montreal to explain the French names while placing it in an environment that the audience could identify with. The plot starts almost immediately with a strange mystery. Andre and Helene Delambre (Al Hedison and Patricia Owens) seemed to be in love as much as any married couple could be. Andre and his brother Francois owned an extremely successful electronics research and development company. Things seemed perfect for them and it. But in the first moments of the plot the idyllic life of the Delambres is over. The night watchman at Delambre Freres has found Helene over the dead body of Andre. It seems he was killed in a factory press. What makes this all seem even stranger is that Andre should have known the press was coming down if it was. He would have had to have been a most cooperative victim in his own murder. What is more Helene did not know how to operate the press. That just does not make any kind of sense.

Francois is called almost immediately by Helene and he in turn calls in Inspector Charas of the Police to do the police work on the case. Helene admits to the killing, but maddeningly refuses to give answers to certain questions so that the action still just does not add up. Helene is free with some information, other questions she insists that she cannot answer. The one hole in this behavior is that she seems to have developed a fixation on seeing flies--any fly that can be caught. Francois finds out that Helene is looking for a particular fly with a white head. In an attempt to find out what really happened he bluffs Helene telling her that he has the fly and convinces her that he will destroy the fly as she wants if she will explain why and how she killed Andre. She begins to tell her story in a flashback sequence that comprises most of the film..

In the flashback story Andre unveils to her the device that has occupied much of his time recently. He has developed a matter transmission machine. It disintegrates solid objects placed in a transmission booth, transmits the matter to a receiving booth and reintegrates the object. In demonstrating the machine it generally works, but has occasional malfunctions, not surprisingly for a new piece of technology. At first the machine creates a mirror image of the object being transmitted. Then

for an unknown reason it fails to reintegrate just when the family cat Dandello is sent. But eventually it seems to be reliable, transmitting a guinea pig and allowing her to reintegrate. The machine seems to work and Andre invites Francois to see the machine in action. But instead of meeting his brother he leaves a note that he cannot see Francois. At about the same time Philippe finds a white-headed fly, but Helene makes him let it go. Andre refuses to leave the lab or to be seen. That night he passes another note out of the lab saying he has had a problem. It seems he wants Helene to look for a particular fly with a white head. She is allowed into the lab, but Andre has a cloth over his head and his hand in his pocket. When Helene tells Andre that she made Philippe release a fly with the white head Andre is shocked enough to take what should be his left hand out of his pocket, but instead of a hand there is a sort of black claw. Andre can eat only liquids, which he seems to noisily slurp. It seems that Andre transmitted himself with a fly in the box with him and the two had their atoms mixed. Now he needs the fly to untangle the two. The next day Helene and Philippe search for the white-headed fly. They succeed only in unknowingly letting the very fly they want get out the window.

Andre loses heart when the fly is not found and is finding he is losing control of his head and hand. He knows he needs the fly to unscramble the atoms but he allows himself to cooperate with Helene. He transmits himself one more time in the absurd belief that it will do some good. Helene, ever the optimist, pulls the cloth from his head and finds herself looking at a human-sized fly head. (Note: in the story it is a cat head with fly eyes, a side effect of the loss of Dandello.) Andre sees Helene's screaming face through compound eyes in one of the most horrific scenes of any film ever. Helene faints and Andre trying to control his body lays her out on a couch in safety. The horror gives way to tragedy as Andre tries to kiss Helene and realizes that he is no longer physically capable of kissing or caressing her. In angry frustration he destroys his laboratory and burns his notes. Pulling the cloth back over his head he writes on the blackboard asking Helene for help in destroying himself. More and more the fly head seems to be following orders of its own, his last humanity is being lost. Andre takes Helene to the room with the press and with her help he manages to commit suicide, being crushed in the press to destroy all evidence of what happened to him.

Back in the present Francois and Inspector Charas cannot believe the story. The inspector is going to have Helene arrested. He returns with a warrant for murder against her. Helene is expecting that having told the story her trouble are over and remains confident until she finds out that Francois did not have the white-headed fly. Helene is terrified that Philippe will see her being arrested and asks Francois to take him away. Francois and Philippe make chat and Philippe, not realizing the significance, says that he has seen the fly in a web. Francois is dumb-struck and runs to Charas insisting that he come and see. Charas follows reluctantly and is shocked to see a human headed fly in the web just as a spider attacks it. Charas takes a rock and destroys the spider and the fly. Then admitting to as much of a murder as Helene has committed, he and Francois concoct a story to cover up Helene's crime.

More on THE FLY next week. [-mrl]

LIFEFORCE (1985) (film retrospective by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: Bat-like aliens are found in Halley's comet. Also there are two that look like one human male and one beautiful woman. She and her line of progeny are vampires and on Earth spread vampirism in a chain reaction. Tobe Hooper directs a screenplay by Dan O'Bannon and himself with several interesting ideas and touches. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4) or 6/10

At a science fiction convention I was talking to one of the speakers. Somehow the film LIFEFORCE came up. I said that I actually see a lot of ideas in the film. He turned to me and said in a loud voice, "DON'T EVER TALK TO ME ABOUT FILM AGAIN." (I didn't.)

The film LIFEFORCE gets little respect, mostly for one touch. There is one character--the seductive alien--who is on-screen for several minutes and she is always in the nude. (She is played by seductive Mathilda May.) I would tell the people who were so bothered by that that they should get over it. It made sense in the context of the film. May's character is Patient Zero for an epidemic of people becoming vampires until all of London is engulfed by the plague of vampirism.

LIFEFORCE with its philosophizing about death is inevitably a film of narrow appeal. The film's most audacious ideas are not clear to the viewer until the end of the film (and likely not then).

The story keeps the viewer guessing and following a series of twists and its radically changing in style every ten minutes or so. It can be by turns a disaster film, a detective film, or a zombie film. There is more than one occasional tip of the hat to Nigel Kneale and his QUATERMASS AND THE PIT.

Henry Mancini provided the main musical theme of the film. Somehow it does not seem to go with any of the moods of the film. It does have a brash adventurous feel.

History has shown that the film does not have much audience appeal. And it loses more respect with its naked Mathilda May. But I would call this a thinking person's SF/horror film. I give it a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale or 6/10.

Film Credits: https://www.imdb.com/find?ref_=nv_sr_fn&q=lifeforce&s=allk

What others are saying: <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/lifeforce>

...SPOILER...SPOILER...SPOILER... SPOILER...SPOILER...SPOILER

The aliens have come to Earth to culture human lifeforce as we culture cheese.

How is cheese made? You take a container of perfectly good milk and introduce to it just a tiny amount of cheese culture. Then the cheese culture will grow and spread out. It infects the milk and as it goes it will create more cheese culture, which will infect more milk. Soon you are left with little or no milk and a lot of cheese. Humans do not consider the process of cheese-making to be in any way immoral even though we totally destroy the micro- environment in the milk. This is just how cheese is made. The lives of the life forms consumed by the process are considered beneath worrying about.

In LIFEFORCE this is almost the identical process the aliens are employing. They probably consider the humans to be beneath their consideration. They need lifeforce to live. Rather than introducing cheese culture to milk, they introduce vampires to humans and then they just sit back and let vampires suck up the lifeforce from their victims. But vampires can hold lifeforce for a limited time only. They suck it in and then release it. The aliens just suck up the big pools of lifeforce. The aliens do not concern themselves with the chaos they are causing on the planet. They just suck up the lifeforce left by the vampires. When their source dries up they just seem to close up the huge collector and silently float away, probably to their next source.

Electronic Menus (letter of comment by Joy Beeson):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on electronic menus and confusion](#) in the 07/06/18 issue of the MT VOID, Joy Beeson writes:

The first time I saw McDonald's tachistoscopic(*) menu, I gave up and went to the grocery next door. I've been back once since then, but turned right around and left without even trying. [-jb]

(*) Displaying an image only for a specific length of time [-ecl]

Confusion, THE FLY, and THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN UNKNOWN INDIAN (letter of comment by John Purcell):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on confusion](#) in the 07/06/18 issue of the MT VOID, John Purcell writes:

Frankly, I am already quite confused. I consider this a wonderful time-saver because I don't have to wait until I die for confusion to occur. Every day I see, hear, and read things that befuddle my middle-aged brain. I totally blame modern technology for this, too. For example, the autocorrect function on my cellphone's texting feature is massively frustrating. Stop changing my words! I meant to type "faunch" not "flaunt"; and stop interrupting me while I'm typing a letter of comment to fanzines! In fact, I am not worried about being confused when I die, but the frustration of not being able to finish the book I will probably be reading at the time.

Mark makes some very interesting comments about the 1958 movie THE FLY, particularly on how it resonated with the viewing audience. Yes, it does seem to possess a mythological connection that people can understand, as if THE FLY is a modern parable that not only warns us about our over-weening pride in self--the hubris you refer to--that can bring about the downfall of humanity, but I think this movie serves the same purpose of warning humanity against the dangers of being so enamored of science that we are blinded of its dangers. In this sense I can see the themes of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's FRANKENSTEIN (1818) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark" (1843) framed in a modern context and medium (film). In "The Birthmark" Dr. Aylmer deeply loved his beautiful wife, Georgianna, but by trying to make her perfect through his mastery of science by removing the sole imperfection on her, a small hand-shaped birthmark on her cheek, she dies; in this way, Aylmer and Andre commit the same sin with the same result: their pride in their command of science brings about tragic consequences. In the post-World War II, Cold War era of the 1950s, this makes a lot of sense. For this reason these examples share that mythic fear of science, a fear that man should not try to play at being God-like, nor mess with the natural order of things. To me, this is the mythic element of THE FLY.

Finally, Evelyn's review of THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN UNKNOWN INDIAN by Nirad C. Chaudhuri has me very interested in reading it. When I remember that you two have been to India, I can see why she chose to read this. Here is yet another book to add to my reading list, which is getting longer by the week. Hmm. At this rate, THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN UNKNOWN INDIAN may be the very book I'll be reading when my final day on this earth arrives. Great. Now I'll never know how it ends. [-jp]

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

The decisions in HISTORY'S WORST DECISIONS AND THE PEOPLE WHO MADE THEM by Stephen Weir (ISBN 978-1-4351-1174-5) are among the worst, or at least many of them are, but various constraints have led to a set that are not really the fifty worst decisions. First of all may have been the marketability of the book. Of the fifty decisions, twenty-four are from the 20th century and eight are from the 21st. (Obviously part of this is also that there is more historical documentation for more recent events.)

Some of the choices are just peculiar. Why choose Gerald Ratner's bankruptcy over Pickett's Charge? And on the one hand he talks about how people should have put more lifeboats on Titanic, or a tsunami warning system in Indonesia, but then ridicules the Y2K preparations. The argument that there were no Y2K disasters might mean that the preparations were unnecessary, or it might mean the preparations helped prevent problems, or it might mean the preparations might have been a reasonable insurance "just in case".

Weir also seems a little shaky in his history. He claims the Arabs had invented the concept of the number zero; actually, it was almost definitely the Hindus. And he seems to attribute to Aethelred's sobriquet "the Unready" its modern meaning, but in this case "Unready" comes from the Old English "unraed", meaning "poorly advised" and is a play on words on his name "Aethelred", which means "well-advised".

THE MARTIAN WAR by Gabriel Mesta (ISBN 978-0-7434-4639-9) is an attempt to treat H. G. Wells's classic novel THE WAR OF THE WORLDS as a cautionary tale inspired by events unknown to the general populace but of which Wells was aware. Unfortunately, Mesta (a pseudonym for Kevin J. Anderson) felt obliged to bring in many of Wells's other characters and ideas: Cavor, Griffin, Moreau, the crystal egg, Herakleophorbia, and so on. This is even less convincing than Isaac Asimov's attempt late in his career to retro- fit all his major works into a single "future history". The "fun" of being able to "spot the reference" is more than overcome by the annoyance of having everyone and everything shoe-horned in.

As far as the story itself, it has its flaws. Wells was vague about how long it took Cavor's capsule to get to the moon. He does say that the occupants felt no hunger (no explanation given), but surely their oxygen supply would have been a limiting factor. Mesta has the capsule not only travel to the moon, but to Mars and solely by manipulating the gravitational forces. Naturally, there is someone who has calculated how long it would take a capsule that size to fall to Mars if there were no other gravitational forces: 7.8 years if you started at the point where Earth (would have been) farthest from Mars, or 1.7 years at the closest point. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Food is an important part of a balanced diet.
--Fran Lebowitz

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