

When I was young I considered KRONOS to be one of the better science fiction films of the 1950s. Possibly I considered it to be on par with a film like EARTH VS. THE FLYING SAUCERS. It never occurred to me that it was a low-budget film. In fact it is something of a pinch-penny production with acceptable special effects and acceptable script-writing. Examined today, the script is horrible as it attempts to counterfeit scientific jargon, but the special effects are really very clever.

The film opens with a mysterious spacecraft emitting a globe of light that floats to earth and somehow possesses a truck driver by flashing into his face. Under its influence he breaks into Lab Central, a research establishment where the light jumps from him to a scientist, Dr. Hubbell Elliot (played by John Emery). The driver falls dead and now it is Dr. Elliot who is acting strangely. Lab Central is in an uproar over an asteroid that is behaving in an unusual manner. In specific, it is changing its course in ways not predicted by physics. It seems have changed direction to be on a collision course with Earth. Dr. Leslie Gaskell (Jeff Morrow) is convinced that there is intelligence behind the asteroid's change in course. He orders an atomic missile attack to destroy the asteroid only to have it change course again and plunge into the Pacific just off the Mexican coast.

Several scientific institutions plan expeditions to visit the site of the crash, but Gaskell believes that the asteroid is being controlled by intelligence and that there is no time to lose. While it is not apparent at first, something is happening. Alien forces are constructing an energy accumulator, a hundred-foot-tall metallic device to suck up energy and in some way not explained it will send that energy to an alien world. The accumulator marches its way north to Los Angeles sucking up energy from power plants along the way under the command of the possessed Dr. Elliot.

There are few mediocre touches in Kronos. Where it is good it is very good and when it gets silly, it is very silly. By now the concept of alien possessions were familiar, but perhaps because of the way it was filmed including the black and white photography, this one was particularly effective and chilling. The accumulator itself, vaguely humanoid and vaguely electronic looks like something very alien. It looks a lot like a vertical cylinder supporting two boxes, one over the other. At the corners of the lower box are pistons that look almost like legs and pump as the thing moves. At the top is a spherical dome and two antennae. It looks almost like some cubist image of a human. The accumulator starts a hundred feet high and grows as it collects energy. If this machine is to be considered a monster, it is one of the most intriguing monsters of the Fifties science fiction film.

As expected for cheap science fiction films of the Fifties, there is plenty of stock footage. This time the footage is of V-2 launches (or whatever the V-2 was called when the United States Army tested with it).

When we find out what is going on there is a basic problem with the idea that the aliens are collecting energy to turn it into matter. By Einstein's famous $E=MC^2$ equation a lot of energy turns into not very much matter. That is what the C^2 says. To have the aliens soak up the energy of the exploding H-bomb, they will get back only the mass of the original bomb or less-probably considerably less. That is just not enough mass to do them much good. They refer to this change as "anthropic conversion." Nobody in physics has ever heard of "anthropic conversion." Nor does it make sense in the finale to say that omega particles will reverse the polarity of the accumulator. But all this silly talk is part of the fun. I think the audience gives the story the same sort of latitude we give "Star Trek" to invent a little science as needed.

The score for Kronos was written by Paul Sawtell and Bert Shefter. The sound is big and brassy and at the same time tense and exciting. For a particularly weird effect it uses theremin squeals.

In spite of the places where the visual effects contradict the script, most of the visuals are highly effective in spite of the low budget. The proportions of the accumulator device do seem to change in minor ways depending on the scene. And it might have been advisable to find a way to show the accumulator move without animating the legs in cartoonish fashion. Still, many of the effects are done on a small budget and yet work surprisingly well. I was always impressed by a scene of the huge dome of the accumulator melting. The scene is rendered very believably but on close examination it appears to be just a light bulb dipped in wax. When the bulb is turned on, the wax covering melts down revealing the bulb beneath. There are odd effects like a sort of electronic hemorrhage. The movie has a title that says it was filmed in Regalscope. When Fox filmed in black and white but widescreen in a format that would otherwise be Cinemascope, that was called Regalscope.

In spite of low budget touches and some silly dialogue, this film still has a lot to offer. I rate it a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050610/>>

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

[-mrl]

Museum Thoughts (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

We went to the Princeton Art Museum the other day. If you live in the area, and haven't visited it, you probably should. They

have a fairly impressive collection, including several Impressionists and post-Impressionists (including a Van Gogh). But we started with the "non-Western" art: Asia, Africa, and pre- Columbian American art. One doesn't know quite how to describe the category of European art after 1400 or so and American art after 1607 or so. It seems to be lumped together, and is often displayed together, while everything else is displayed in a separate part of most museums. The problem is that "American" could include pre- Columbian art, which in turn seems to be applied to Latin America rather than including Mississippian or Northwest indigenous art.

Anyway, the museum had nice displays of Chinese art, Japanese art, African art, and pre-Columbian art. They were a little light on Indian art. What I noticed was that they had a lot of Chinese paintings with text written along one side, and Japanese screens with calligraphy, but they did not provide any translations. I can understand how they might not have translated it fifty years ago, but one would think by now that they would realize that the text was as much of the art of the piece as the painting.

The Mississippian and Northwest pieces are all recent to this museum (acquired within the last twenty-five years). And they seem to have been acquired from (or on loan from) the Department of Geology and Geophysical Sciences. ?! Well, that department used to have a museum called the Museum of Geology and Archaeology, and it held all these items. That is now the Museum of Natural History, and probably because of the push over the last several decades, items from non-Western cultures that are arguably art have been moved from natural history museums to art museums. [-ecl]

CURVATURE (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: A woman wakes up in bed and realizes that a recent chunk of her life, the time since she went to bed, is now missing. Then she discovers through the magic of time travel that she had killed someone--and really that is not like her--and since then has been trying to send messages through time to stop herself from committing the murder. Mexican filmmaker Diego Hallivis directs his second film after GAME TIME. The story is not really new, but it has enough science fiction to satisfy viewers tired of superheroes. Much of this story is a somewhat humdrum chase that does not really need the science fiction element. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4) or 6/10

While some people hear "science fiction" and think "STAR WARS battle", CURVATURE shows how to make a decent science fiction film on a mid-range budget like science fiction films were in the old days. Familiar actors in the film are Linda Hamilton of the "Terminator" series and Lyndsy Fonseca of KICK-ASS.

Helen (played by Lyndsy Fonseca) is still in mourning for her recently deceased husband. They were working together on a time travel machine and having some success. Then when the device was almost finished her husband committed suicide. Helen considers

continuing working alone. Then her life gets another shock. She gets a mysterious phone call from--no, not her husband--but from her herself. She finds out that she has been unconscious for several days. Now she is getting these phone calls apparently from herself. But it is a younger version of herself who is placing these calls from the days she was conked out. The younger version of herself committed murder while Helen was unconscious and now the older earlier version of herself is trying to prevent the nastiness from happening. Are you confused? Good. Good science fiction may do that. CURVATURE could use a little more of that sort of confusion.

There are a few cute touches in the script that I felt pulled me right out of the movie. In this film about a time machine Helen's dead husband is named Wells. Elsewhere is a character named Griffin (as in THE INVISIBLE MAN, but also may be a nod to film editor Joel Griffen). But somehow the plot does not feel very Wellsian.

As happens all too commonly with the current political correctness policy, from the first frame in which we see the villain we know he is going to be the villain. He is just the right demographic to be a bad guy. One more problem: the twists in the plot telegraph themselves.

CURVATURE has chase scenes that it would well have done without or with less. In general in a film chase the characters may be moving fast, but the plot is standing still. One way the writing is unusual is the discussion of an after-life. Most United States science fiction films steer clear of religious discussion.

CURVATURE is an uneven piece of science fiction with a few predictable touches and a few ideas that come as surprises. I rate it a high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale or 6/10. I failed to notice any place where the story involves curvature of anything.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4720596/reference>

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

[-mrl]

PARADISE LOST (letter of comment by Jerry Ryan):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on PARADISE LOST](#) in the 07/27/18 issue of the MT VOID, Jerry Ryan writes: [Evelyn writes,] " One, what is the deal with the Trinity? Okay, it's an old question, but I still do not get it. "

As the priests in my high school used to say, "Well, that's the mystery, isn't it." [-gwr]

Heat Wave, Philcon 2013, WAR OF THE SATELLITES, MYSTERY IN THE WAX MUSEUM, and PARADISE LOST (letter of comment by John Purcell):

In response to [the 07/27/18 issue of the MT VOID](#), John Purcell writes:

Hello, Mark and Evelyn. I trust you two are fine, and surviving the current heat wave sweeping across North America. Over here in SouthCentralEastern Texas it's the typical daily triple digit highs and no rain, so we are in the annual burn ban, which never bothers us since we don't burn trash or anything like that in our yard. Instead our yard turns into baked brick, and that's about it. What a fun place to live! [-jp]

Mark responds:

Don't trust too strongly that we are fine. We are starting to get on in years and the unexpected is expected. I have Parkinson's and that is putting some limitation on my activity. The unexpected is also expected in the climate. I think Texas and California may be paying a heavy price for climate change. [-mrl]

In response to Evelyn's comments on Philcon 2013 in the same issue, John writes:

Those Philcon 2013 notes make me a little sad because I see Gardner Dozois's name listed as a panelist, plus there was that panel discussion of DANGEROUS VISIONS. The brief comments about movie remakes were fun to read, and it is good to see that both of you were on some of the panels. I trust you enjoyed attending. How many Philcons have there now been? [-jp]

Mark responds:

Philcon started in 1936. I am not up on fan history, but I guess that means there have been 83 Philcons. [-mrl]

Evelyn replies:

Actually, this year is being called the Philcon 81 (i.e., the Philcon of the 81st year since they started). Fancyclopedia says, "The history of Philcon is unusually vague--Harry Warner, for instance, mentions that he was unable to find out much for his histories of the 50s and 60s. This may be why Philcon does not label its conventions by number, but instead uses years." The list in Fancyclopedia includes only 58 conventions, counting this year. [-ecl]

In response to Mark's comments on TCM in August in the same issue, John writes:

Interesting that next Friday--August 3rd--TCM is broadcasting the 1933 movie THE MYSTERY OF THE WAX MUSEUM, which just had an extensive write-up in Robert Jennings' fanzine FADEAWAY #55. I would watch it but we will be at ArmadilloCon 40 that weekend, so I shall set it up to record and watch it when I get the chance. I have seen it before, but it's one worth having on file. [-jp]

Mark replies:

If you are recording MYSTERY IN THE WAX MUSEUM, I assume you know that DOCTOR X (made the previous year) is very much a companion piece. Both were produced by many of the same filmmakers. Most noticeable is that both were shot in two-strip Technicolor. They just sort of complement each other. TCM is showing DOCTOR X later the same night. [-mrl]

In response to Mark's review of WAR OF THE SATELLITES in the same issue, John writes:

I truly enjoy watching (and heckling) gawd-awful skiffy movies from the 1950s and 1960s, and Roger Corman flicks are prime fodder for practice. WAR OF THE SATELLITES (1958) is in my DVD collection, and quite frankly, it ranks right up there with the best of the worst. I don't think I would be able to last watching past three Roger Corman movies in a row for fear of rotting my brain. That would be inhumane treatment, and probably is prohibited by the Geneva Convention. Yes, I know: that was held three decades earlier. My theory is that they were planning ahead.

In response to Evelyn's comments on PARADISE LOST in the same issue, John writes:

I had to read both PARADISE LOST and PARADISE REGAINED for a John Milton seminar course I took for my BA in English back in the mid- 1970s. One part of the final exam was to write out the first twenty lines of PARADISE LOST using the original spellings, grammar, and punctuation. I don't remember what I earned on that exam, but I did pass the class with a B+, and I can still recite the first four lines word for word. Some things get drilled into your brain and remain there, whether or not you want to remember. Those were the days of rote recitation in "academic learning." [-jpl]

Mark replies:

Your PARADISE LOST exam makes my head spin. I have always had memory problems. [-mrl]

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

FIRE WATCH, a collection of Connie Willis stories (ISBN 978-0-553- 26045-8), was our book discussion selection this month.

"Fire Watch": I got "temporal whiplash" reading this. It was written in 1982, anchored in 2055 (or so), with most of the action taking place in 1940, and referencing events in 1945, 1951, and 2007. Oh, and the 2007 events (and hence in some sense the main character's entire story) are not in our world, but the then-future world as envisioned by Willis, but which did not come to pass. (This is the first story that Willis wrote in her "time travel from Oxford" series, though the mention of Kirvin visiting 1349 may indicate that she already had the idea for DOOMSDAY BOOK, even though she would not write that for another ten years.)

"Service for the Burial of the Dead": One almost gets the feeling that this is a "Schrodinger's cat" sort of story, with the big scene relying on a wave form collapsing in Dr. Sawyer's office.

"Lost and Found": This might have been more meaningful to me if I were more steeped in Christian theology (or at least Christian eschatology). As it is it stuck me as a sort of "screwball end of the world" story, but without the humor.

"All My Darling Daughters": I read this a long time ago but skipped it this time, as being singularly unpleasant. Willis is often thought of as the author of light, frivolous stories, but that is only part of what she writes, and a lot of the stories in this volume are from the other part.

"The Father of the Bride": I suppose it is an interesting idea to merge the "person misplaced in time" trope with the "Sleeping Beauty" trope, but I am not sure it progresses beyond "interesting".

"A Letter from the Clearys": Willis is very slow in handing out information in this story. We figure out early on that we are in a post-holocaust world, but the causes, the extent, and the implications of this are very slow in coming. John Kessel has pointed out that this is not the traditional "plucky teenage heroine" story--he thinks Lynn is as much a terrorist as those (the one?) who started the war. And her burned hand is not accidentally burned each (which certainly seemed unlikely), but her way of concealing the real problem. His main point was that people did not realize how bleak this early Willis story was.

"And Come from Miles Around": This is a fairly neat idea. Unfortunately, Willis's introductory note pretty much gives it all away, so do not read it until after you read the story.

"The Sidon in the Mirror": Not all Connie Willis stories are readable. I somehow couldn't get into this one.

"Daisy, in the Sun": This is a classic, apparently, but it didn't work for me.

"Mail-Order Clone": My problem with this story is that it is told from the point of view of a mentally defective narrator, not in a sympathetic manner, but more in a "let's laugh at how dense the narrator is" sort of way.

"Samaritan": This is not a new topic, but it may well have been less familiar forty years ago when Willis wrote this in 1979. As it stands, it is merely another version of the idea, in a religious setting.

"Blued Moon": It is a basic guideline for anthologies and collections that you start with the strongest story and end with the second strongest. "Fire Watch" won both the Nebula and the Hugo. "Blued Moon" may not be as "strong" (in some sense) as "All My Darling Daughters" or "A Letter from the Clearys", but it is strong in terms of being the sort of story you want to leave in the readers' minds when they close the book. It is also the sort of story that people think of when they think of Connie Willis.

[-ecl]

Mark Leeper

mleeper@optonline.net

Quote of the Week:

For myself I am an optimist--it does not seem to be much
use being anything else.

----Winston Churchill

[Tweet](#)

Go to [our home page](#)