

It is the coldest part of the year. You might want to sit down someplace warm with a good movie. Again here I am using a misspent youth watching movies, good and bad, and letting you reap the benefit. This is the month each year when TCM shows only films that were at the very least had been nominated for Academy Awards. I think that this leads of a lot of repetition from year to year. But I cannot really complain since they have even more repetition from one October to the next when they show nearly every horror film in their library. I may not watch any of their films that month but it is good to know the films are there. Well, on to the films.

One film coming up is a very good movie directed by French filmmaker Louis Malle. It takes place in an older Atlantic City that was a romantic place to be. Its old boardwalk was a national attraction at the end of an era. Now the historic hotels are being torn down and replaced and monetized into being a plastic money-making machine for soulless bankers and financiers. Burt Lancaster plays an old gangster--but not really. Actually he had been only an errand boy for the mob, but he cherishes the memories of when the city had been great. He has become obsessed with pretty, young card dealer (Susan Sarandon) who is a neighbor. Sarandon's sister and her husband Dave come to visit. Dave has stolen a mob shipment of drugs, putting everybody in danger. Lancaster decides to protect Sarandon from the mobsters and to prove to himself that he could have been a really dangerous thug.

Malle has a beautiful sense of atmosphere. John Guare wrote the film and does some pretty impressive writing. The sister-in-law just says one sentence about Dave and he is completely characterized. It seems like no great feat of writing until you realize how much you learned about Dave from that one sentence. Lancaster is great and melancholic as he is bringing to life his memories of the mob running the town like it needed to be run. I would pick this as the best film of the month. [ATLANTIC CITY, Saturday, February 16, 02:00 AM (ET)]

INHERIT THE WIND (1960) Stanley Kramer frequently fearlessly courted controversy when he directed a film. INHERIT THE WIND (1960) is an adaptation of the 1955 play of the same title by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee. The play is loosely based on the events of the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial when a high school biology teacher in Dayton, Tennessee was put on trial for having broken the state law that made it illegal to teach evolution in the classroom. William Jennings Bryan offered to prosecute for the state. But the trial became a national sensation when Clarence Darrow agreed to lead the defense. These were the two most famous and controversial lawyers in the country. The result was a media circus and under it all two great lawyers debated about the separation of Church and State. Spencer Tracy, Frederic March, and Gene Kelly star. March gives a terrific performance that really captures the mannerisms of William Jennings Bryan. Much of the courtroom testimony is taken verbatim from the trial record. [INHERIT THE WIND, Wednesday, February 20, 12:00 PM (ET)]

I should cover THE HIGH AND THE MIGHTY (1954), one of the most influential disaster films. It is melodramatic as all get out, but it is a lot of fun. John Wayne is a commercial pilot who earlier made a mistake as a pilot and it cost his life of his wife and family. He is now co-piloting another plane over the Pacific hen an engine dies on him. He has to decide between a wet or dry landing and what piloting strategy will save his passengers. Fun film. The trailer is hilarious: . You will see many cliches that later showed up in AIRPLANE! [THE HIGH AND THE MIOGHTY, Wednesday, February 20, 2019, 12:15 AM]

[-mrl]

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EVERYONE WHO EVER LIVED: THE HUMAN STORY RETOLD THROUGH OUR GENES by Adam Rutherford (book review by Gregory Frederick):

This recent science book delves into the study of genetics and the latest research and findings in this field. For example, researchers now know that everyone of European descent has a small amount of Neanderthal DNA in their genome. Interbreeding must have occurred during the time when Homo sapiens and Neanderthals co-existed. Also, scientists once thought that since we are a complex and intelligent being we would have the most genes of all creatures. Turns out humans have about 20,000 genes, which is far less than a roundworm, or a banana plant. Many plants have huge genomes and scientists do not know why. Many plants for example, have multiple copies of chromosomes. This book is a very interesting but difficult read. Not enough effort is made to bring the material down to a lay-person's level. [-gf]

Jules Verne's Geography and Politics (letters of comment by Joseph T. Major, Mike Glycer, Kevin R):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS](#) in the 01/18/19 issue of the MT VOID, Joseph Major writes:

Geographic matters were not Verne's strongest point.

DE LE TERRE A LA LUNE [FROM THE EARTH TO THE MOON] has an 1800-foot high hill in Florida. The tallest elevation in Florida is Britton Hill, which is 345 feet high. To cap it off, the location given for Stones Hill is flat. (A Florida SF club called its clubzine "The Stone Hill Launch Times".)

ROBUR-LE-CONQUERANT [ROBUR THE CONQUEROR] has a volcanic crater in North Carolina. (It also has a Federal Police Force, which is a little ahead of the time.)

He also tended to be a little vague about politics.

LES CINQ CENTS MILLIONS DE LA BEGUM [THE BEGUM'S MILLIONS] has France-Ville and Stahlstadt being given extraterritoriality in Oregon. That's a pretty hefty piece of Gilded Age corruption there. And the Hayes administration seems rather blase about France-Ville raising a large militia in response to Schultze's threats against it. (And the succession rules for the baronetcy seem a little odd, since it is passing to the descendants of the sisters of the original grantee.)

LA CHASSE AU METEORE [THE CHASE OF THE GOLDEN METEOR] has a marriage being performed according to French civil marriage procedure. In the state of Virginia. (In general, it could be seen as an earlier version of Sir Fred Hoyle's ELEMENT 79.)

And then there is the continuity problem between VINGT MILLE LIEUES SOUS LES MERS [TWENTY THOUSAND LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA] and L'ILE MYSTERIEUSE [THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND] ... [-jtm]

Evelyn responds:

I often tell people that the highest point in Florida is the top of a skyscraper in Miami. (Currently, that would be the top of the Panorama Tower, which is 868 feet tall. There are 35 buildings taller than 550 feet in Florida.)

And I did note the time loop problem. [-ecl]

Mike Glycer notes:

Wikipedia says there were *some* Southern members of Congress in 1862--not all the seats were vacated.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/37th_United_States_Congress

[-mg]

Kevin R adds:

There were a few Unionists representing states that had declared secession in the 37th US Congress, but nowhere near enough to form a bloc that could push for a more southerly route. [-kr]

Evelyn replies:

The only states with members were the border states (Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri) and Virginia, which had not yet fissured into Virginia and West Virginia. The latter was almost definitely where Virginia's members came from. (And though the CSA counted Missouri and Kentucky as members, neither ever actually seceded from the Union.)

The bottom line is that the few members that would be considered Southern would have no real effect on what the Congress decided about the route of the transcontinental railroad. [-ecl]

In response to Evelyn's comments on Jules Verne and the capital of California, Dorothy Heydt writes:

"San Francisco became the temporary capital from 24 January 1862 to 15 May 1862..." [Whether it was due to a fire or a flood in Sacramento is unclear.] [-djh]

Evelyn replies:

However, the events of AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS take place in 1872, by which point the capital is back in Sacramento. [And, yes, the original French says "capitale".] [-ecl]

Hot Food (letter of comment by Peter Trei):

In response to [Mark's comments on hot food](#) in the 01/18/19 issue of the MT VOID, Peter Trei writes:

Chilis: Birds can't sense capsaicin (the chemical which creates the hot sensation). Mammals can. I don't know about insects (there is some evidence that tarantulas(!) may be able to sense it. Capsaicin is also a deterrent for some fungi which attack chilis.

Mammals have molars, and destroy many chili seeds when they eat them. Birds do not--they pass through.

The general thought is that capsaicin evolved to prevent seed destruction by small mammals, while allowing it by birds.

One common method to discourage squirrels at bird feeders is to mix hot pepper into the feed. [-pt]

Around the World in 40 Minutes (letters of comment by Peter Trei, Dorothy J. Heydt, and Keith F. Lynch):

In response to [Dan Cox's comments on orbits](#) in the 01/18/19 issue of the MT VOID, Peter Trei writes:

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, Act 2 Scene 1, line 160:

Puck (told to do something quickly):
"I'll put a girdle round about the Earth In forty minutes."

At the time, circumnavigation of the globe was the equivalent of a moonshot, possible, but hard to accomplish, taking years. [-pt]

Dorothy Heydt responds:

Okay; what kind of orbit would you need to orbit the earth in forty minutes, and would it be stable? [-djh]

Peter replies:

You couldn't do so in any normal way; you'd have to be under continuous power, with the rocket facing away from Earth to prevent you flying off into solar orbit. [-pt]

And Keith Lynch says:

The shortest possible unforced Earth orbit is 88 minutes. A shorter forced orbit is possible, but would require ridiculous amounts of fuel. A 40-minute orbit would require that you accelerate straight down at 3.8 Gs while moving sideways fast enough to miss the Earth. That would be uncomfortable for the astronauts, but not dangerous. Also, you'd need rocket technology way beyond anything we have today.

The necessary acceleration increases with the square of the speed (minus 1 G due to Earth's gravity). So if you wanted to circle the Earth in *20* minutes, you'd experience 18 Gs, which is probably about the limit for survival even with water immersion. [-kfl]

Evelyn notes:

But Puck is a supernatural creature, so it's not clear that he would be affected by G-forces, at least in the same way natural creatures are. [-ecl]

Hot Food and MARY POPPINS RETURNS (letter of comment by John Purcell):

In response to [Mark's comments on hot food](#) in the 01/18/19 issue of the MT VOID, John Purcell writes:

And the hits just keep on coming!

I do enjoy spicy food, sometimes really spicy food. A good flavorful curry that is not overly spicy-hot is something that I do like, and Szechuan food likewise is welcome on my plate. In a way, I am like Andrew Zimmern (the host on Travel Channel's foodie shows "Bizarre Foods" and "Delicious Destinations") whose mantra is "if it looks good and smells good, eat it!" I feel the same way. It all depends on the mood I am in and what's available at the restaurant we are at or what we want to make for dinner at home. No matter what, if it's yummy smelling, I will definitely give it a try.

In response to [Jim Susky's review of MARY POPPINS](#) in the same issue, John writes:

I have absolutely no desire to see MARY POPPINS RETURNS, even if Emily Blunt is a cutie. I just can't understand why Hollywood keeps returning to the well and dredging up yet another bucket of old films or television shows that somebody wants to revisit and revise. No thank you, very much. Oh, and don't get me started on that abomination called HOLMES AND WATSON starring Will Farrell and John C. Reilly. *shudder* Just. No.

This week's issue of the VOID was abbreviated, but still full of fun material. Thank you for producing and sending it along. [-jp]

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

We are in a "Golden Age" of novellas. When "short" fiction (under 40,000 words) was published exclusively in magazines, novellas were rare. Editors did not usually want to devote a large percentage of an issue to a single story. And book publishers thought their readers wanted something more substantial than a hundred-page story.

The first publisher to produce novellas in quantity was Ace books. How? Those classic "Ace Doubles". Described by Ace as two novels, each one was really two novellas (not counting the occasional story collection). These appeared in their Western line, but the science fictions ones were the real success.

Then along came small press publishers such as Subterranean Press, who were willing to publish works that weren't trilogies or doorstops. As the web expanded, various on-line publications started publishing novellas as well.

But the field seems to have really taken off with Tor Books' program of publishing trade paperback novellas at the rate of about two a month. While one may quibble that some of these are in "series" that are really longer novels broken into pieces, that's still a pretty good rate.

Luckily for me (and my pocketbook) my public library is very good about buying new science fiction in general, and new Tor novellas in particular. So on my last trip I was able to check out three novellas off the new book shelf.

In *TIME WAS* by Ian McDonald (ISBN 978-0-7653-9146-9) a love letter found in an obscure poetry book leads the primary narrator on a search involving mysterious vanishings, old photographs, legendary bookshops, and something mysterious under it all. The language is poetic and evocative, but because there are multiple first-person narrators, the plot is thread sometimes a bit hard to follow.

UNLOCKED by John Scalzi (ISBN 978-1-250-30799-6) also has multiple first-person narrators. In this case, however, these are presented as something like parts of interviews or report, each labeled at the start with the name of the source of that section. Though most of it is focused on the progression of a debilitating, often deadly disease (which renders its survivors incapable of even the slightest voluntary motion), the book is ultimately more concerned with the social changes that come out of the research to treat the effects of the disease. As such, the reader may discover that what seemed like a subsidiary plot that they skimmed over is actually the point of the book.

ALICE PAYNE ARRIVES by Kate Heartfield (ISBN 978-1-250-31373-7) reminds me of "El Ministerio del Tiempo"--there is time travel and a "time patrol", but there are also other organized groups who have conflicting ideas of how time travel should be used. Should one attempt to "maintain" history? Should one attempt to "fix" history's "mistakes"? Should one try to make changes to improve history? (A lot of this shows up in an info-dump towards the end as an experienced time traveler explains all this to someone just let in on the secret.) [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
mleeper@optonline.net

Quote of the Week:

A skilful leech is better far,
than half a hundred men
of war.

--Samuel Butler

[Tweet](#)

Go to [our home page](#)