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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
02/01/19 -- Vol. 37, No. 31, Whole Number 2052

Table of Contents

[My Top Ten Films of 2018](#) (film comments by Mark R. Leeper):
[THE GOLEM \(2018\)](#) (film review by Mark R. Leeper):
[IN LIKE FLYNN](#) (film review by Mark R. Leeper):
[Elevations](#) (letters of comment by Joshua Kreitzer,
Dorothy J. Heydt, Peter Trei, Lowell Gilbert, and Tim Merrigan):
[This Week's Reading](#) (THE BLACK GOD'S DRUMS, THE DREAM-QUEST OF VELLITT BOE,
and PROOF OF CONCEPT) (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper)
[Quote of the Week](#)

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My Top Ten Films of 2018 (film comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Well, 2018 has come to a controversial end. Let us hope that 2019 has a better ending. I am now choosing what are the ten best new films I saw in the year 2019. This year we seem to have had a more dreary collection of in even the best films than we have seen that in previous years. I have no film that I can whole-heartedly recommend to any film fan.

It seems to me that a higher proportion of films than usual are on the subject of the Black-White experience and race relations and particularly those between black teens and police. I guess that was to be expected in a year in which there were so many fatal incidents involving police and black teens. Film is usually thought of as an escape from a troubled world. 2018 showed just how hard it is to find such escapes. The title of my first film does not promise to be any more cheerful.

1) THE HATE U GIVE: Spike Lee showed one possible scenario for a spark that starts a race riot with his DO THE RIGHT THING. In THE HATE U GIVE Director George Tillman presents us with a very different genesis but one that also leads to riots. While the film is a bit hard-bitten it seems a little too anxious to have a positive ending. Several racially charged and involved issues are brought together in an effective story.

Director: George Tillman, Jr.

Writers: Audrey Wells, Angie Thomas.

2) ROMA: This is Alfonso Cuarón's semi-autobiographical account of his life as a boy over the course of a very eventful year, 1970 and 1971. It is the story of one upper middle class family in a time of social turbulence. Cuarón shot the film in monochrome, which intensifies the emotional impact. It is not particularly a message film, or at least not primarily. The main character is the family servant Cleo, who is underappreciated and herself having a bad year. The people of the household by the end seem superficial compared to Cleo. This is a film that sticks with the viewer.

Director: Alfonso Cuarón

Writer: Alfonso Cuarón

3) BLACKKKLANSMAN: In this film a black policemen tries to investigate and if possible infiltrate the Colorado Springs chapter of the Ku Klux Klan by talking to them over the telephone. When it turns out they insist they will have to see him in

the flesh another policeman will represent the physical part of this invented racist. This film is based on a true story but still manages to include and coordinate drama, comedy, and suspense. Along the way it (superficially) tells the history of the Ku Klux Klan and also manages to include some excitement and give a viewer a history of American racism going back to THE BIRTH OF A NATION and up to Charlottesville.

Director: Spike Lee

Writers: Charlie Wachtel, David Rabinowitz, Kevin Willmott, Spike Lee

4) MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: FALLOUT: This is the latest continuation of the popular TV and film series. In fact it sidesteps the tropes of the series and really seems to have none of the tropes that made the series what it was. The ideas have been largely supplanted by death-defying stunts. There are no self-destructive assignment messages; no choosing a team that would have the strongest synergy. Also it was in part a sort of borrowing from the James Bond films; most of the stunts are performed by the lead actor, always to show Tom Cruise's athletic prowess. The stories were more complex and adult than the Bond films' plots. Where Bond films usually had a sexual subtext there was very little hanky-panky. I would not have expected it but the Cruise's are starting to make for better films than the Bonds. MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: FALLOUT is just about better than QUANTUM OF SOLACE. The plot is an attempt to head off a nuclear threat, just like some people do in the real world. Oh, and Cruise does (mostly?) his own stunts.

Director: Christopher McQuarrie

Writers: Christopher McQuarrie

5) WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?: This is a biographical documentary about the life and the career of Fred Rogers. A friend told me that housewives really appreciate PBS running the children's TV show, MR. ROGERS' NEIGHBORHOOD. Fred Rogers had a talent for keeping children entertained while he calmed them down. He instilled values into his viewers. There were no guns. In fact no conflict that could not be solved by getting to know and respect all people. There were no guns in evidence, though there was a discussion that nuclear war existed and Mr. Rogers told children about them as a loving parent would tell a child. The world is a better place for his gentle demeanor.

Director: Morgan Neville

6) BOY ERASED: I have been fascinated by methods to "brainwash" victims and effectively reprogram their minds. This film is the fact-based story of the late-teen son of a Baptist preacher. Jared Eamons, son of Marshall Eamons, lets his father know that the son is gay. This sets off an explosion in the family relationships. Marshall registers his son in a gay conversion therapy program. The film dramatizes Jared's struggle to maintain who he is rather than who his family wants him to be.

Director: Joel Edgerton

Writer: Joel Edgerton

7) VICE: In this biographic account of the political life of Dick Cheney as portrayed by Christian Bale, Bale gives a bravura performance as Dick Cheney who saw a path to great political power by way of the seemingly innocuous office of the Vice President. Much of what happens was surmised for Adam McKay's script.

Director: Adam McKay

Writer: Adam McKay

8) 22 JULY: The title was the date of Norway's most deadly terrorist attack as a right-wing extremist seized an island belonging to a youth camp and opened fire. In total he murdered 77 victims. Shot in a photo-realistic style with handheld cameras, it shows us the government's efforts to rescue the captives. The film has a real sense of immediacy.

Director: Paul Greengrass

Writers: Paul Greengrass, Asne Seierstad

9) THREE IDENTICAL STRANGERS: This is a non-fiction documentary. In 1980 a man starting out college is surprised to find out that a large number of people on campus already seemed to know him. He had never met them. They are complete strangers, but it appeared at first that they are identical twins. They seemed to have been identical twins separated at birth. That seems very unlikely, and it is soon disproved. Instead there were three identical triplets separated at birth. This could not have been a natural occurrence. So what was going on?

Director: Tim Wardle

10) MOWGLI: LEGEND OF THE JUNGLE is the story of Mowgli, Rudyard Kipling's human boy-hero. Mowgli was found as a human baby in the jungle. Orphaned he was raised by wild wolves. It was adapted for the screen several times never quite satisfyingly. The filmmakers always have had to decide how to depict screen images and languages that were animals who looked like they were actually talking. In the new adaptation the talking animals are animated by CGI. This is a completely acceptable means of rendering the images the screen would need. This may be the screen's best rendering of the Kipling. The director is probably the world's greatest authority on motion capture animation, Andy Serkis (formerly Gollum and Kong).

Director: Andy Serkis

Writers: Callie Cloves, Rudyard Kipling

[-mrl]

THE GOLEM (2018) (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: This is one of the rare horror films built around that folkloric creature, the golem. As with most golem tales, the golem is an animated statue used for defense. But in this film the golem plot is upstaged by the view of life in 1673 in an Eastern European shtetl (i.e. a small Jewish village) setting. The Jews are persecuted and murdered until one starts thinking that making a golem is required for justice. Directors the Israeli Paz Brothers (Doron and Yoav); Writer: Ariel Cohen. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

I knew from an early age the difference between reality and fantasy. I quickly decided that fantasy was a lot more fun. My imagination was full of werewolves, vampires, and humans constructed from reclaimed parts. But I had never heard of a golem until I was about bar mitzvah age. I was entranced. "Wow! A Jewish monster!" I explored everything I could get my hands on that involved golems.

For the benefit of the uninitiated, a pious person can sculpt a clay figure of a human and then, if he knows God's mystical formula--and it is a well-guarded secret--he can use the formula to bring the sculpture to life. In Jewish folklore golems can be used as super-heroes. Or with huge strength they can also be deadly monsters. Some golem stories have plots that are very like that of the Sorcerer's Apprentice. Others are much more like FRANKENSTEIN monsters. Golem lore may have inspired both stories.

The Paz Brothers' film THE GOLEM has right the look and feel of a small Jewish shtetl in 17th century Lithuania. It was a very bad time for the Jews (but then rarely has it not been a bad time for Jews). There is a plague ravaging most of the region but not the isolated Jewish shtetl where the story is set. The main character is Hanna, who wants an education in Jewish mysticism. She still mourns for her son killed seven years previously. She wants to use forbidden knowledge to resurrect the son.

The local gentiles blame the Jews for the plague. Murdering Jews has become the local popular sport and a sort of religious duty. One non-Jew has come to the shtetl in the hope that they can cure his plague-ridden daughter, but in return for the restraint of killing only Hanna's sister and one other person, they offer him a place to stay away from the sickness. The murderous visitor, Vladimir, tells the Jews that they seem to be able to avoid the plague, and if they let his daughter die he will have revenge on them all.

Bitter from her experiences, Hanna has immersed herself in mystical books, learning how to use them for power. Hanna is warned by others in the shtetl that if she reads the many texts she wants she could lose her mind. The style of the writing is slow, and deliberate.

The Paz Brothers previously wrote the zombie film JERUZALAM co- directed here. THE GOLEM is a big improvement, but it still has an undeniable drag to it at times. It has some of the tone of THE DYBBUK (1938) or THE VVITCH (2015). Bloody violence is mostly kept off-screen but toward the end it is used more freely.

The plot of THE GOLEM runs parallel to that of the Golem of Prague. The depiction of the golem is unusual. But he is wet biology inside and is portrayed as a human covered with mud in his earlier scenes. And he has other strange powers not usually associated with golems.

This makes it at once a good movie about a golem and a not-so-good golem movie. It will be interesting to see if horror film fans embrace it in general. Over all I rate it +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 7/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8329290/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_golem_2018

[-mrl]

IN LIKE FLYNN (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: Based on an autobiography by actor Errol Flynn (CAPTAIN BLOOD, THE SEA HAWK, THE DAWN PATROL), IN LIKE FLYNN tells the story of an adventure shared by Flynn and three friends, searching for gold. The four have varying views of what their worldviews should be. The pacing is uneven, but the film still has some philosophical heft. Directed by: Russell Mulcahy; Written by: Marc Furmie, Corey Large, Steve Albert, Luke Flynn. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4) or 6/10

In the 1940s the most famous and popular lead actor for action and adventure films was Errol Flynn. But Flynn was not in films until he was 29. In the years up to that time he bounced around New Guinea and Australia as a land speculator, a gold

hunter, a card- cheat and a prizefighter. (How he avoided scarring that famous pretty face is unclear.) At times he stole from his employers and saw some life on the sea. IN LIKE FLYNN is a screen adaption of his first novel, BEAM ENDS, based upon his pre-acting life of adventures.

The novel BEAM ENDS Flynn claimed was "mostly" authentic, but Flynn allowed himself to stretch the truth and not disappoint his fans. It is still being read today and it formed the basis of IN LIKE FLYNN, directed by Russell Mulcahy. A ship is on her beam-ends when she has heeled over such that the beams are vertical and she cannot be brought back to an upright position. Similarly Flynn had the sort of spirit that refuses to be dominated, even on a path to self-destruction.

The film opens like an Indiana Jones movie. It is 1940 and in Papua New Guinea, Flynn and a small camera crew are in the jungle. Flynn is (probably) helping with location hunting for jungle settings. It seems the local native population is not happy about uninvited visitors.

Mulcahy knows to catch his audience early in the film. He puts his most exciting storytelling at the very beginning. Most of the rest of the film is not nearly as exciting, though there are extended sequences of Flynn boxing and street fighting. It is almost a pity that after the opening chase the camera follows Flynn and the filmmakers and not the local residents. Almost every scene seems to involve Flynn getting into a fight. The third fight we see is a prizefight. Later to get out of prizefighting he steals a boat and with three other gold hunters he goes off to follow a rumor of where gold can be found.

One of the people I saw the film with had a suggestion and a request that the film be subtitled. Not all Americans appreciate and understand a fine Australian accent and prefer to have the diction a little easier to comprehend. I rate IN LIKE FLYNN a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale or 6/10.

Its theatrical release was January 25.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5303442/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/in_like_flynn_2019

[-mrl]

Elevations (letters of comment by Joshua Kreitzer, Dorothy J. Heydt, Peter Trei, Lowell Gilbert, and Tim Merrigan):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on elevations and building heights in Florida](#) in the 01/25/19 issue of the MT VOID, Joshua Kreitzer writes:

Both Illinois and Louisiana also have buildings taller than their highest natural point--the Willis Tower in Chicago and One Shell Square in New Orleans. [-jk]

Dorothy J. Heydt writes:

Hal (who is sound asleep at the moment, so I can't ask him) used to do bicycle-racing as an undergraduate. In the course of this activity, somebody told him about the racer* who decided to ride to the top of the highest mountain in each state in the US. In the course of this project he got to Kansas, where he got in touch with the local bike club and they arranged to take him to the highest spot in Kansas.

So out they went, and presently he saw a little rise in the ground ahead, and sprinted up it and waited at the top for the others to arrive. He looked around; everything was as flat as made no difference as far as the eye could see. "So where's this high point you were talking about?" he said when they showed up.

"You just sprinted it."

(*Possibly apocryphal, but maybe not. [-djh]

Peter Trei responds:

I suspect there are a *lot* of highest state points which are not reachable while riding a bike. Denali/Mt McKinley for a start. When I visited Hawaii, I took a jitney up to the Mauna Kea observatory. A *very* determined German tourist was pedaling up the road to the summit (14K feet), and walked his bike to the tippy top. [-pt]

Lowell Gilbert replies:

That *is* the obvious counterpoint. No pun intended.

When I lived in Rhode Island, the highest point was basically inaccessible because the path crossed private property owned by a man who was very determined to keep trespassers out. That property and the summit ended up being given the state eventually, but until the twenty-first century was underway. [-lg]

Peter adds:

In Denmark (another very flat country) from 1874 to 1953 the highest point was said to be Yding Skovhøj (Yding Skovhøj for the obsolete), at 172.54 meters.

In 1953 it was determined that the top was a Bronze Age burial mound, and hence artificial. The 'natural height' of the site is now 170.83 meters, and the peak of Danish altitude is now held by Mollehoj (Mollehoj), standing 170.86 meters. [-pt]

Tim Merrigan asks:

Why am I reminded of THE ENGLISHMAN WHO WENT UP A HILL BUT CAME DOWN A MOUNTAIN?

Though that was in Wales. [-tm]

Peter replies:

It's similar, though the Welsh example was much more recent, and done deliberately to get the peak above 1000 feet, where it would be recorded as a mountain.

When I started my response, it was with a mangled version of the story in my head, wherein (my Dad had once told me) a Danish farmer, realizing that his land was almost as high as the highest point, bulldozed up a pile of dirt, planted trees, etc, and waited enough years that it looked natural, after which he claimed that *he* had the highest point.

Went to Google to confirm this, and came up with the above. [-pt]

Dorothy notes:

SCANDINAVIA AND THE WORLD has at least once featured some tourists (probably American) coming to Denmark intending to ski, and being disappointed that there's nothing to ski on. [-djh]

Evelyn adds:

In the play COPENHAGEN, Heisenberg and Bohr talk about skiing in Norway.

For what it's worth, while Florida has the lowest high point of the states; Colorado has the highest low point. [-ecl]

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

THE BLACK GOD'S DRUMS by P. Djeli Clark (ISBN 978-1-250-29471-5) is set in the late 19th century in an alternate world where New Orleans is free from either side of the still-continuing Civil War, and Haiti has achieved a much more successful independence. The book is told in a first-person narrative in a New Orleans patois; one wonders how the audiobook would sound! (There is no audiobook so far--one suspects finding the right reader for it is even more difficult than usual.) At any rate, a very enjoyable read. THE DREAM-QUEST OF VELLITT BOE by Kij Johnson (ISBN 978-0-7653-9141-4) is based on Lovecraft, so for a new reader unfamiliar with the Cthulhu mythos et al, it may well be confusing, or at least seem incomplete. (One of the characters is "Randolph Carter"; this will not mean anything to someone unfamiliar with Lovecraft.) On the other hand, Johnson is heavy on description and the naming of things, but light on actual plot. Oh, there is a plot, but it occupies very little of the book. Still, the poetry of some of the sections, and Johnson's addressing all this from a woman's perspective, makes this worth reading. And as evidence that not everyone will like all the Tor novellas, I tried reading PROOF OF CONCEPT by Gwyneth Jones (ISBN 978-0-7653-9144-5) but frankly, I could not follow what was going on at all. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

No experiment should be believed until it has been
confirmed by theory.

--Sir Arthur Eddington

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