

Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
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<https://www.bookscool.com/en/A-Wrinkle-in-Time/1>

May 1 (OBPL author talk), 2:00PM (2 hrs): Neil Sharpson (WHEN THE SPARROW FALLS), details at <https://www.oldbridgelibrary.org/events/2021-05/> (this is a library event, not the discussion group's)

May 6 (MTPL), 7:00PM: THE STEPFORD WIVES (1975) & novel by Ira Levin (1972)

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x37rpim>

<https://www.hoopladigital.com/title/13326454>

May 27 (OBPL): TBD

My Picks for Turner Classic Movies for April (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

DESTINATION MOON (1950), the film that probably should have led off the Fifties science fiction cycle actually is still an enjoyable adventure film even if parts are a little dated. It is colorful and fairly realistic-certainly taking into account that it was released in 1950. Not that some of the information known then was handled as well as it might have been. The acceleration of takeoff is made to look more of a horror than it is in real life. Certainly details of weightless flight look more realistic than they did similar effects in ROCKETSHIP X-M. The script calls the moon a "planet" not once but twice. Of course because of its size, very unusual among moons, some astronomers have been tempted to call it that also, and to say it and Earth form a double planet. Somehow this film's color captures a Fifties feel better than the black-and-white Rocketship X-M. The color shows off better the baggy post-war clothing fashions. Somehow talk of going to the moon in an early Fifties film still has excitement that NASA footage of the actual moon launch lacks. It is much the same sort of thrill one gets from Jules Verne, even if he is describing an 1866 submarine that has long-since been surpassed by fact. It is the fact that this submarine is around in 1866 that is exciting.

What does seem somewhat dated is the Cold War paranoia that is present through most of the film. The nasties have sabotaged a rocket at the beginning; the main reason given for going to the moon is to beat the enemy; the enemy tries to use political pressure to sabotage the mission, and finally the important reason for returning to Earth is to tell the world how vulnerable it is from the moon. Meanwhile, when the Americans get to the moon, they claim it for the good of all mankind. Once they get to the moon it turns out to be a pretty place to look at, but somehow the film makes lunar exploration itself seem dull. The script writers have no way of engaging the viewer in the actual exploration process. What does save the film is a clever little engineering puzzle that becomes the last treasure of this film. It is one that would do credit to a Fifties science fiction story and it has a reasonably nifty solution. What is dramatically lacking is the return to Earth.

There are some interesting similarities between DESTINATION MOON and ROCKETSHIP X-M. Both use obnoxious, harmonica-playing comic relief characters, both have Texas humor, and both use stock footage of V-2 launches, though this film uses it more realistically.

George Pal uses the Chesley Bonestell paintings that he would make use of in later films, especially in the prologue to WAR OF THE WORLDS. The integration of the paintings and the forced perspective sets really gave the feel of being on another world, where ROCKETSHIP X-M had alien landscapes that did not look at all alien. Even at the time people knew that showing the surface of the moon as a cracked, dried riverbed was wrong, but it made it much easier to use forced perspective to make the lunar landscape seem much bigger than the set on which the scenes were shot.

This is a much more enjoyable looking film than most space travel films of the Fifties. The ship itself is not a V-2, and that in itself is something of a novelty. Pal designed a nice streamlined ship that looks a lot better than the real thing. The simple fact is that this is just a nicer film to view, both prettier and less downbeat, than is ROCKETSHIP X-M. If there are some technical problems with the rescue in space or in how weightlessness is shown, we can forgive them and still find this film good to watch. The biggest complaint most people have with the script is the incredibly dense character of Sweeney. Perhaps he is overly stupid, but the writers felt the need to explain the science and needed someone to whom people could explain what was going on and could serve as a sounding board.

[DESTINATION MOON, April 4, 4:00 PM]

[-mrl]

"Decolonizing Zombies!" (Part 1) (film comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Our niece is majoring in Spanish at Middlebury College, so I took a look at the course catalog for that department. (It's actually a joint Spanish-Portuguese department, which is fairly common.) And I found a couple of courses that were a bit surprising, and also of possible interest to readers of the MT VOID.

The first was "Decolonizing Zombies!" and the description was: "SPAN 0381--Decolonizing Zombies: Zombies are generally depicted as metaphors that represent contemporary affects. In this course we will study a number of zombie movies with a focus on theories of race, gender, coloniality, iconoclasm, and queer temporality. With a strong emphasis on

the American continent, the course will have a global approach, which will allow us to delve into issues of neoliberalism, cannibalism, genocide, diaspora, virus spread, and political criticism. The main goal is to expose colonial structures embedded in the representation of zombies, as well as in the making of the genre. Among films included are: WHITE ZOMBIE, THE NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD, SAVAGELAND, WORLD WAR (United States); MANGUE NEGRO (Brazil), JUAN DE LOS MUERTOS (Cuba), EL DESIERTO (Argentina), EL AÑO DEL APOCALIPSIS (Peru); LADRONAS DE ALMAS, HALLEY (Mexico); DESCENDENTS (Chile), REC (Spain), "I'll See You in My Dreams" (Portugal), THE GIRL WITH ALL THE GIFTS (United Kingdom); TRAIN TO BUSAN (Korea); THE EMPIRE OF CORPSES, and VERSUS (Japan)."

The second was "Hispanic Horror Cinema"; I will cover that in a separate article.

For both courses, I have seen several of the films, but certainly not most of them. Some are not even available easily in the United States. (I can only assume that the department has a multi-region DVD set-up.) But I will comment on those that I can.

In this article, I will discuss half of the zombie films, at least those I have seen. (I'll admit it: I'm too cheap to spend full price on the ones I cannot get through Netflix or other streaming we have.) The remainder will be discussed in next week's issue.

WHITE ZOMBIE (1932) (United States) is the first English-language zombie film, and actually sticks to the classic zombie tropes, even if Bela Lugosi's stare and hand gesture are a bit overdone and not at all part of the folklore. But the zombies are kept by white colonizers as slaves, which is in line with much of the folklore.

I am surprised that they did not include I WALKED WITH A ZOMBIE (1943) (United States), which really does include some pointed comments on colonialism, slavery, etc.

THE NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD (1968) (United States) completely subverts the traditional zombie folklore and makes zombies into basically a sort of vampire. They attack the living and if they bite someone, that person becomes a zombie. Any connection with colonialism or slavery is gone. Ironically, there is a racial context to the film, but it is entirely accidental. That the main character/hero is African-American was not planned, and none of the dialogue or action was written with that in mind, or changed to fit it. So when he slaps the female lead, it was shocking in 1968 in a way that was not intended (unlike a similar scene in IN THE HEAT OF THE NIGHT, equally shocking, but intentionally so).

I haven't seen SAVAGELAND (2015) (United States), though it is available for about \$13.

I have seen WORLD WAR Z (2013) (United States) but don't remember it well enough to comment on it.

MANGUE NEGRO (MUD ZOMBIES) (2008) (Brazil) is not available.

JUAN DE LOS MUERTOS (JUAN OF THE DEAD) (2011) (Cuba) is described in the IMDB as a take-off on DAWN OF THE DEAD, but that is incorrect; it is more fashioned after SHAUN OF THE DEAD, even down to the best friend who makes tasteless jokes, and the use of graphic novel-style illustrations under the credits. It clearly helps to know something about Cuba and Cuban history (such as what the "Special Period" was). This is more violent than SHAUN OF THE DEAD, though, because rather than just try to hide out, Juan and his friends become capitalists and he starts answering the phone (which still works) "Juan of the Dead; we kill your loved ones. How can I help you?" You can take a cue from one of the zombie fighters who blindfolds himself because he faints at the sight of blood!

EL DESIERTO (WHAT'S LEFT OF US?) (2013) (Argentina) is not available.

EL AÑO DE APOCALIPSIS (2016) (Peru) is not even in the IMDB, but it is available on YouTube (at [this link](#)), and even has English subtitles. (The second word in the title should have a tilde over the 'n'; as it is, the ASCII I use for the basic MT VOID won't let me put one, so what is left is not the word for 'year', but a rather rude word for a nether body part.) The title is reminiscent of Daniel Defoe's JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR and Norman Spinrad's JOURNALS OF THE PLAGUE YEARS.

Warning: SPOILERS ahead.

This film starts with a long voice-over serving as an infodump to explain the plague. Even throughout the movie, much of the "dialogue" even in the original Spanish is in the form of subtitles. This means that Rafael Arevalo (who seems to be the producer, director, write, and just about everything else) doesn't have to worry about synchronized sound. Given that he had no budget to speak of, that was important, as was the minimal cast. (We do not see hundreds, or even dozens, of zombies in a scene.)

The film consists of twelve vignettes, one for each month. From the days and dates given, the year is probably 2016 (the year the film was released), though coincidentally, it could be 2021.

"January" starts, appropriately in a cemetery with someone who does not want to die alone and so takes an extraordinary step. "February" has four people on a roof who end up killing each other, but while one is totally destroyed, the other three rise. (Destroying a zombie hasn't changed since NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD--if you destroy the brain, you destroy the zombie. Decapitating them (a.k.a. "topping them off" in the English translation) also works.) Zombie speed doesn't seem to have changed either. Unless you trip or are

surprised by zombies, you can probably easily outrun them.

"March" has a girl who is being attacked by zombies saved by a Good Samaritan. Alas, she has faked her peril in order to bring the man home to her zombie boyfriend for dinner.

In "April" a group of the elderly and the young are secure in a compound, but all the other adults have disappeared when they went out scavenging. This turns into a sort of "Lord of the Flies" scenario, where the young first kill the old and then the very young, out of what is claimed to be necessity. The one person who resists this kills some of the others, who then turn into zombies and destroy the rest of the survivors.

In "May" there is a mute but not deaf girl who is disgusted to see that people kill each other, but zombies don't. She also hates the sounds of humans that she cannot be part of and decides the world would be better off if the humans all became zombies. The girl's dialogue is all in captions, not dialogue, or even the voice-overs of other characters. This episode is shot with very stylized, formalized staging and photography. But it leaves the viewer with the question, "Are the dead supposed to be translucent or is that just poor green screen?" There is actual green screen shown near the end of the episode, so it is possible the audience is supposed to realize it was shot with green screen.

"June" has the explicitly stated moral of "survive with dignity or die trying" and to illustrate it, the main character tries to help a girl, and she kills him.

In "July" an infected man digs grave, then is shot in the chest by another man while a woman watches. The man buries the corpse, then man drugs and handcuffs the woman. When she wakes, she finds a note giving jealousy as the reason. The corpse rises as the woman finds a gun the man left with one bullet and three choices in the note: permanent suicide by shooting herself in the head, destruction of the zombie ex-lover, or shoot herself to turn into a zombie. End of vignette.

"August" has one man killing another then turning cannibal by roasting and eating part of him. When the corpse rises, the man flees and is rescued by a woman, who takes him home and shows him something in a pot that horrifies him, but which we do not see. The man then kills and eats the woman, leaving us to wonder what could have been in the pot that so horrified him?

"September" has two women giving the viewer the "Rules of Survival".

In "October" a man is attacked by zombies but survives by faking being a zombie. It turns out that he is immune. (Apparently his immunity is that he won't become a zombie if he is bitten, not that the zombies won't attack him.) He finds his girlfriend Zoe, but her friend resents him and so lets zombies in to house to kill them. To save Zoe, he bites her. He's immune, but does that mean the zombies won't attack him? Apparently they will.

"November" has us in a laboratory looking for a cure. Their process involves killing off the researchers one by one. The last one tries to escape but apparently can't get the gate open. However, she shows up in "December" when she is shot by a man with a slingshot shoots her but she is rescued by the immune man. To save her from zombies he bites her and sends her to a safe camp by the sea. She arrives, immune, but in an echo of NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD, the guard sees she has been bitten, assumes she is infected, and shoots her.

The rest of the films I will comment on next week. [-ecl]

UNITY by Elly Bangs (copyright 2021, Tachyon Publications, Print ISBN: 9781616963422; Digital ISBN: 9781616963439, print price \$16.95) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

Tachyon Publications has been making a habit of introducing readers to new writers, most recently with Kimberly Unger's NUCLEATION. Now, they've given us a terrific novel by Elly Bangs. UNITY is a lot of things: post apocalyptic, cyberpunk, adventure, thriller. But most of all, it's an exploration of human consciousness and what it means to be human.

Danae is a worker in the underwater city of Bloom. The landscape has been obliterated, forcing most of society to live below ground. Danae does not feel complete, whole. She feels the need to escape Bloom and return to those that make her complete. She hires a mercenary, Alexei, to get her safely out of Bloom. Alexei, Danae, and Danae's lover Naoto begin the trek across the desolate landscape to find Danae's people. The problem--and there always is one, of course--is that there is a bounty on her head--well, more precisely what's inside of her--placed by a man named Duke, who has taken over Bloom and who wants the secret of what she carries. There is a crazy and wild escape from Bloom itself, and then an eventful chase across a desolate landscape that we learn used to be the American Southwest. Danae is desperately trying to get to the people she wants to reunite with before she is captured and taken back by Duke and his men.

So far, it seems like a fairly standard kind of story we've read before, and there really is nothing new: character has a secret that bad people want, bad people chase character across dystopian landscape, other stuff happens. It's the "other stuff happens" that separates UNITY from other novels with this plot.

Yes, Danae carries a secret within her. Alexei has a secret too. And within the course of the second half of the novel, Bangs slowly but surely rolls the secrets out, little by little. Danae's secret is the whopper, of course, the one that the whole story hinges on. As Danae and Alexei interact more, it becomes less of a job for Alexei than it is a badge of honor.

He must finish what he started with Danae because it is the honorable and right thing to do. He is let in on the secret just as slowly and surely as the readers are, and while he may not understand it, it helps him in his journey of honor. Complicating this whole thing is the appearance of a character out of Danae's past called "The Borrower". Who is he and what part does he play in all of this?

As an aside, you may be wondering how Naoto fits in with all of this. He carries a secret too, but it comes out fairly early in the story and provides motivation for what he does throughout the novel. In my opinion, he is a minor but important character.

The story's climax is one of the best I've read in years. Well, maybe not a climax, but a revelation. Danae and The Borrower meet and Danae learns that her project--the secret she's been carrying with her--had been carried on without her. What she learns about humanity and herself is a wonderful statement on what humanity is and could become, and whether we'd want to go down that road that The Borrower revealed to Danae.

It's a bit of an uneven book, especially at the start, but once it gets going and we find out what's really going on, it turns into one of the best first novels I've read in a long time. It seems like Bangs has a bright future ahead of her, and it may be time to hop on for the ride. [-jak]

CARNAGE AND CULTURE: LANDMARK BATTLES IN THE RISE OF WESTERN POWER by Victor Davis Hanson (book review by Gregory Frederick):

This military history book is more than just a contribution to our knowledge of Western history. It explains why the West has largely been successful. The book describes nine decisive battles where a Western military force faced a non-Western foe. It starts with ancient Greece and the naval battle between Greek city states and Persia at Salamis in 480 B.C., then proceeds to Alexander the Great in 331 B.C., who fought against the Persians at Gaugamela. Eventual this review of nine battles ends at the Tet offensive in Vietnam in 1968 where the United States military fought the North Vietnamese. And after more than two millennia of battles the author proceeds to underscore an overarching theme: the West's enduring military superiority. Hanson believes that the roots of Western military dominance lies with Hellenic culture and its legacies, particularly its brand of rational, individualistic thinking, which rejects excessive reliance on theology, custom, and tyrannical politics. Hanson suggests that a tradition of civic militarism, that is, the West's ability to mobilize citizen soldiers and animate them with the discipline of collective endeavor has created an ascendancy in military matters that remains, secure. A well-written and thought provoking book which creates the argument for the dominance of Western military forces. [-gf]

Evelyn adds:

I feel obliged to point out that while we may have won the Tet offensive, and every other battle, we did lose the war. [-ec]

Mark adds:

I feel I should point out that while the North Vietnamese may have won the war the country went strongly into capitalism. You see international brand names all over the country. [-mrl]

Nebula Award Finalists

SFWA has announced this year's Nebula finalists. Note: all the short story finalists are available free on-line.

- Novel
 - PIRANESI, Susanna Clarke (Bloomsbury US; Bloomsbury UK)
 - THE CITY WE BECAME, N. K. Jemisin (Orbit US & UK)
 - MEXICAN GOTHIC, Silvia Moreno-Garcia (Del Rey; Jo Fletcher)
 - THE MIDNIGHT BARGAIN, C. L. Polk (Erewhon)
 - BLACK SUN, Rebecca Roanhorse (Saga; Solaris)
 - NETWORK EFFECT, Martha Wells (Tordotcom)
- Novella
 - TOWER OF MUD AND STRAW, Yaroslav Barsukov (Metaphorosis)
 - FINNA, Nino Cipri (Tordotcom)
 - RING SHOUT, P. Djeli Clark (Tordotcom)
 - "Ife-Iyoku, the Tale of Imadeyunuagbon," Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki (DOMINION: AN ANTHOLOGY OF SPECULATIVE FICTION FROM AFRICA AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA, Aurelia Leo)
 - THE FOUR PROFOUND WEAVES, R. B. Lemberg (Tachyon)

- RIOT BABY, Tochi Onyebuchi (Tordotcom)
 - Novelette
 - "Stepsister", Leah Cypess (F&SF 5-6/20)
 - "The Pill", Meg Elison (BIG GIRL, PM Press)
 - "Burn or the Episodic Life of Sam Wells as a Super", A. T. Greenblatt (Uncanny 5-6/20)
 - "Two Truths and a Lie", Sarah Pinsker (Tor.com 6/17/20)
 - "Where You Linger", Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam (Uncanny 1-2/20)
 - "Shadow Prisons", Caroline M. Yoachim (serialized in the Dystopia Triptych series as 'The Shadow Prison Experiment', 'Shadow Prisons of the Mind', and 'The Shadow Prisoner's Dilemma', Broad Reach Publishing + Adamant Press)
 - Short Story
 - "Badass Moms in the Zombie Apocalypse", Rae Carson (Uncanny 1-2/20)
 - "Advanced Word Problems in Portal Math", Aimee Picchi (Daily Science Fiction 1/3/20)
 - "A Guide for Working Breeds", Vina Jie-Min Prasad (MADE TO ORDER: ROBOTS AND REVOLUTION, Solaris)
 - "The Eight-Thousanders", Jason Sanford (Asimov's 9-10/20)
 - "My Country Is a Ghost", Eugenia Triantafyllou (Uncanny 1-2/20)
 - "Open House on Haunted Hill", John Wiswell (Diabolical Plots 6/15/20)
 - The Andre Norton Nebula Award for Middle Grade and Young Adult Fiction
 - RAYBEARER, Jordan Ifueko (Amulet)
 - ELATSOE, Darcie Little Badger (Levine Querido)
 - A WIZARD'S GUIDE TO DEFENSIVE BAKING, T. Kingfisher (Argyll)
 - A GAME OF FOX & SQUIRRELS, Jenn Reese (Holt)
 - STAR DAUGHTER, Shveta Thakrar (HarperTeen)
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This Week's Reading (book and film comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

I recently saw THE LAST VERMEER and this led me to read THE FORGER'S SPELL by Edward Dolnick (HarpersCollins, ISBN 978-0-06-082541-6), upon which it was based. (There are several other books on this subject, both non-fiction and fictionalized.)

And to be specific, the subject is Han van Meegeren and his forgery of paintings by Vermeer and several other 17th century Dutch painters. They were quite convincing, apparently, and he even sold one--"Christ and the Adulteress"--to Hermann Goering. That was what got him into trouble: he was accused of collaboration in selling Dutch national treasures to the Nazis. Faced with the death penalty, he put forward what was certainly a unique defense: the painting he had sold was a forgery. Art experts were disbelieving--they had raved about the painting for years--but van Meegeren was able to prove it three different ways. One of which was to paint another "Vermeer" in front of witnesses. One was to tell the court what modern chemicals could be found in the paints of the forgeries. (These two also confirmed that his other "Vermeers" were forgeries.) The best--though only applicable to this specific painting--was a plank shown to match perfectly the stretched behind the Vermeer, and hence have been sawn from the same larger piece of wood. And van Meegeren had bought a 17th century painting (for which he had documents of the sale) that was just the size of the two pieces of wood placed together.

After this, van Meegeren became a folk hero to the Dutch for defrauding Goering, although he also profited handsomely from it and appeared to have been a bit more chummy with the Nazis than his folk hero status might imply.

At his trial, van Meegeren said, "Yesterday this picture was worth millions of guilders, and experts and art lovers would come from all over the world and would pay money to see it. Today, it is worth nothing, and nobody would cross the street to see it for free. But the picture has not changed. What has?"

In the book, however, Dolnick notes, "Today, visitors to the Boymans Museum will not find 'Emmaus' in a place of honor. For years they would not have found it at all. Its banishment now past, it hangs high above the ground--the bottom edge of the painting is perhaps six feet above the floor... The painting bears a label, but it is mounted on the frame's top edge and cannot be read from ground level. The museum's audio tour skips over 'Emmaus'. So does the postcard collection in the gift shop. But to the dismay of the Boymans's curators, "Emmaus" is the picture that most visitors want to see. 'It's awful that it's one of our most famous paintings,' laments Jeroen Giltaij, a specialist in the Dutch Golden Age."

Van Meegeren's "today" was 1947. Dolnick's "today" was 2008. The admission fee in 2018 was 17.50 euros. Ultimately van Meegeren was wrong about the painting's popularity, but not about how it is valued artistically. It is popular the same way the ashtray of Jackson Pollock or the inkwell of Lord Dunsany would be: as an associational item or curiosity.

Dolnick also discusses why van Meegeren was able to fool so many people at the time, yet why now the paintings seem so obviously forgeries. The book is worth reading for those interested in art or hoaxes or both. and the film is entertaining enough if you keep in mind that it is not entirely true to the actual facts of the case. [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
mleeper@optonline.net

Quote of the Week:

All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling.
--Oscar Wilde

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