

MT VOID 04/02/21 -- Vol. 39, No. 40, Whole Number 2165



Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
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An index with links to the issues of the MT VOID since 1986 is at http://leepers.us/mtvoid/back_issues.htm.

The Neverending Year of the Animals (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

CNN reports:

"Record-breaking floods in southeastern Australia have caused a mass animal exodus to higher ground, with spiders in particular surging onto people's land and into their homes. ... Spiders aren't the only animals seeking refuge from the water, [Matt] Lovenfoss added. 'The trees are full of snakes,' he said. 'If you take the boat out over the paddock they swim towards it trying to get on something dry, same with the spiders.'"

The article includes pictures.

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/22/australia/spider-exodus-australia-scli-intl/index.html>

A New Generation of Congressional Representatives (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Representative Ilhan Omar (@IlhanMN) tweeted last Monday [<https://twitter.com/IlhanMN/status/1376581779893710852?s=03>]:

"The dead cannot cry out for justice. It is a duty of the living to do so for them.' - Lois McMaster Bujold."

There was a time when Congressional Representatives would not even admit to knowing who an author like Lois McMaster Bujold was, and now they're quoting her. [-ecl]

Ezra Klein Interviews Ted Chiang (pointer from Richie Bielak):

Richie Bielak notes:

The latest episode of the Ezra Klein podcast is a conversation with Ted Chiang. Check it out!

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-ted-chiang.html>

[-rb]

Mini Reviews, Part 11 (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper):

Here is the eleventh batch of mini-reviews, three more documentaries, including one running on PBS next week.

OLIVER SACKS--HIS OWN LIFE: This is a biographical documentary by Ric Burns telling the life of Oliver Sacks in Sacks's own words. We find out that Sacks's parents' and the British government's attitude toward homosexuality drove him into exile in the United States but also sent him even deeper into his research. In addition to his scientific exploits, he also devoted himself to body building, motorcycles, drugs, and understanding his homosexuality. All these elements, scientific or not, combine to give us an unexpected view of the whole man. The sections where when the film goes in the details of how Sacks worked his clinical material into books is the least interesting and could have been excised. Released 09/23/20; running on PBS April 9. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4)

SOME KIND OF HEAVEN: "The Villages" in Florida is the world's largest retirement community and was in the news this year when President Trump visited it and tweeted a video of his visit, only for people to discover that the video included a resident riding by in a golf cart shouting, "White Power!" The Villages is 98.3% white, and overwhelmingly Republican, but this look at life in a retirement community does not deal with the politics, but more with the retirement community lifestyle, with a look at some of the residents' back stories. The film does seem to have a heavy infusion of religion, however. Throughout, people seem to be telling themselves that this is an ideal place to live but the residents are often living in denial. Has played at several (virtual) film festivals, but as yet has no general release. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4)

THE DONUT KING: This story of how a Cambodian refugee ended up starting an empire of donut shops in southern California actually tells two stories, one of the donut business and one of Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge; the non-sequential nature of the film may be confusing to some. Various refugees talk about their experiences in Cambodia, and having to steal or starve even in America until they were started in the donut business by Ted Ngoy. Various illustrations are clips from pro-American films, etc. Released 10/30/20; available on Amazon Prime streaming. Rating: 0 (-4 to +4)

[-mrl]

"Decolonizing Zombies!" (Part 2) (film comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

As promised, here is part 2 of my comments on the Middlebury College course "Decolonizing Zombies!".

LADRONAS DE ALMAS (INSURGENTES MALDITOS) (SOUL ROBBERS) (2015) takes place during the 1815 Mexican Revolution against Spain. A group of thieves/treasure hunters posing as insurgents come to an isolated estate. There is a young daughter, Camila, who does not talk, similar to Lydia in *THE OTHERS* (to be discussed in the article about the "Hispanic Horror Cinema" course). There is also fog around the house as in *THE OTHERS*, but this may be using a common trope rather than specific reference. The zombies are of the traditional sort, the dead brought back as slaves. The owner of the estate was opposed to this, but apparently when workmen were scarce, he resorted to it anyway. One can see in this the filmmaker's commentary on how the upper classes (and colonizers) may profess concern for their servants and slaves, but ultimately take advantage of their power and privilege.

HALLEY (2012) (Mexico) is not available.

DESCENDENTS (SOLOS) (2008) (Chile) may be included simply because of the coda, because on the whole it is very slow-paced, with not enough plot for a feature-length film. It is sort of "zombie apocalypse meets 'Lord of the Flies'", although the children do not go feral. (Indeed, it is the adults who are the savages. And how well-known is *LORD OF THE FLIES* in Chile, anyway?) The film begins with children's drawings and hand-held footage, and thought it changes to a more standard approach, albeit with washed-out color (but not black-and-white, and the flashbacks are tinted green). One observation: the Chilean army are as poor shots as any other army in movies--they have clear shots at the children, but always miss. Other than that, not much happens. The ending is bizarre but the groundwork for it was laid earlier, and there is also a long coda in the middle of the credits showing the start of the infection which includes a fairly pointed slam at the United States, with Mexico ("The Aztec Nation") talking about how they have to restrict immigration from the United States because of the danger of infected people getting in.

REC (2007) (Spain) is one of those "found footage" films that became so popular after *THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT (1999)* grossed 4000 times its budget. (*CLOVERFIELD* is perhaps the best known of these.) In *REC*, a television crew is following a group of firefighters on the night shift when they are called to an emergency in an apartment building which turns out to be an outbreak of zombies. Chaos ensues, the government barricades them in, and more chaos ensues. The "found footage" element gives it a sense of reality that more formally staged films lacks.

It was remade as an American film in 2008 titled *QUARANTINE*.

"I'll See You in My Dreams" (2003) (Portugal) is a short film (20 minutes) which is in Portugese even though the title is in English. Luckily, it was subtitled on YouTube ; unluckily (somewhat) it was subtitled in Spanish. Luckily the dialogue was minimal and basic, so I could actually follow it. We see a zombie hunter at the beginning, walking through a forest complaining about "sh*tty zombies". Then we get his back story: he caught his wife with another man, so he killed the man and threw her outside to the zombies. Now he has somewhat repented and keeps her in a cage, feeding her food with his blood on it. He rescues a girl in a bar, takes her home and

has sex with her. His wife sees, then escapes, and she and other zombies attack the pair. Ultimately, the hunter throws the girl to the zombies, but is killed by his wife. The last scene repeats the first, including his monologue, except now he is a zombie and it is "sh*tty humans." I'm not sure where the colonization comes in, but there is male chauvinism (or patriarchy, if you prefer) aplenty in the hunter's attitudes towards his wife and the girl from the bar. Stylistically, there are a lot of creative visual effects: rays of light through walls, zombies silhouetted in fog, strangely filtered zombie point-of-view shots.

THE GIRL WITH ALL THE GIFTS (2016) (United Kingdom) has echoes of DESCENDENTS. In both, the focus is on the children, the next generation after the "zombie apocalypse." In both, the next generation is immune to/ignored by the zombies, and represents the next stage of evolution. In this they are both "descendents" of THE LAST MAN ON EARTH, based on Richard Matheson's I AM LEGEND, which has a similar theme, though without the specificity of children. (Miss Justineau is black in the book, but played by a white actress. However, one cannot quite accuse the film of white-washing, because in the book Melanie is white, but in the film she is played by a black actress.)

TRAIN TO BUSAN (Korea) is set in the present day urban South Korea, so everything is much more modern-looking than in many of the other films. Many of the other films are set after the "zombie apocalypse" when everything is destroyed or broken down (e.g., JUAN DE LOS MUERTOS), in rural settings (e.g., NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD), or in historical settings (e.g., LADRONAS DE ALMAS). TRAIN TO BUSAN attributes the zombification to a chemical leak at a factory, replacing the magic of many earlier films but still implying colonization, albeit by a large corporation rather than by another country.

THE EMPIRE OF CORPSES [SHISHA NO TEIKOKU] (2015) (Japan) is available on DVD and Bluray, but not from Netflix. As noted above, I am too cheap to buy this.

VERSUS (2000) (Japan) is also available on DVD and Bluray, but not from Netflix, and again, I'm not going to buy it.

So that's it. I'm sure the class would provide deeper insights into "issues of neoliberalism, cannibalism, genocide, diaspora, virus spread, and political criticism," but this is the best I can do on my own.

[-ecl]

Classics, Hero, and Jorge Luis Borges and Sufism (letter of comment by John Hertz):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on I, ROBOT](#) in the 02/05/21 issue of the MT VOID (probably), John Hertz writes:

The classics are still classics. "I know of nothing before I was born" isn't just self-centered, it's the road to boredom. Also, as I keep saying, cross-cultural contact is homework--oops, there went half my readers--I'll speak to the other one--for SF. Indeed we have to expand our minds--you should pardon the expression--to take in something from another place or time. Look how much trouble we have now with Hari Seldon's father in Asimov's "Foundation" books being a tobacco grower. Eewww, dated! What would happen if we met real aliens?

In response to the comments on heroes in the 02/12/21 and 02/19/21 issues, John writes:

I tell people the first Hero was a woman--whom Leander swam the Hellespont for.

In response to [Evelyn's comments on Borges and Sufism](#) in the 03/05/21 issue, John writes:

E's comment [MT VOID 2161] about Borges and Sufism reminds me of the anecdote--told by B himself, if I recall correctly-- that someone reading B's story "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" was so enchanted as to order from a bookshop the 1934 edition of THE CONVERSATION WITHIN THE MAN CALLED AL-MU'TASIM--published by Gollancz--with a preface by Dorothy L. Sayers! [-jh]

Mexican-Americans in THE WAR OF THE WORLDS (letter of comment by Dorothy J. Heydt):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on the ethnicity of one of the characters in THE WAR OF THE WORLDS \(1953\)](#) in the 01/22/21 issue of the MT VOID, Dorothy J. Heydt writes:

We see more Mexican-Americans when Forrester goes to look in churches for what's-her-name. In one of them we see a priest leading a group of frightened children in the Rosary. [-djh]

Evelyn replies:

True. My point was more specifically, though, about Salvador and his attitudes towards invaders showing up in his land. [-ecl]

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

PROJECT HAIL MARY by Andy Weir (Ballantine, ISBN 978-0-593-13520-4) is the third book from Weir, the first two being the wildly popular THE MARTIAN and the less popular ARTEMIS. He has returned to a white male science nerd as his protagonist, a wise choice, given that his female Muslim smuggler in ARTEMIS was less than totally convincing. Write what you know, they say. And on the whole this is more successful than ARTEMIS, though (inevitably) not as good as THE MARTIAN.

It is, however, much in the mode of *THE MARTIAN*, with Ryland Grace in a desperate attempt to save not just himself, but all humanity. Without giving too much away, he is faced by one problem after another, requiring that he "science the sh*t" out of them.

And here is the real problem, for me anyway. If you recall, in February I complained that Kim Stanley Robinson's *THE MINISTRY FOR THE FUTURE* had too much infodump. Well, the quantity in *PROJECT HAIL MARY* is not necessarily too much, but the level of detail is excessive. While Mark Watney felt that he was speaking to an audience at least partially comprising non-scientists, Ryland Grace has no such scruples and goes into detailed and at times incomprehensible explanations of what he is doing. (I also think that there is a definite bit of hand-waving to get the story going, not unlike the impossible sandstorm in *THE MARTIAN*. Again, I'm not saying what.)

But clearly there is an audience for this sort of thing. Greg Egan is an obvious example; he is known for putting detailed mathematical descriptions of the physics of his stories on his website. Weir just skips the middle step. And if I skimmed the parts that were too detailed, the plot was engaging. I would definitely recommend this for fans of the Robinson and Egan "diamond-hard SF", but even if you are not, if you skim judiciously, this is an enjoyable book.

I do have a criticism about the book's cover, though. The title has the words "HAIL MARY" and Weir's name in letters nine times the size of those of "PROJECT" (three times as high, three times as wide). Looking at the cover on a small screen, I was constantly reading it as just "HAIL MARY". Who thought this was a good design? [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

There is no such source of error as the pursuit
of truth.

--Samuel Butler

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