

Holmdel Science Fiction Discussion Group  
Club Notice - 12/26/79

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

(Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are on Wednesdays at noon.)

<u>DATE</u>	<u>TOPIC</u>
1/9/80	BLIND VOICES by Tom Reamy, rm 3H-506
1/16/80	Iguanacon slide presentation, rm 3H-506
1/30/80	BERSERKER by Fred Saberhagen, rm 3H-506
2/20/80	LAST AND FIRST MEN by Olaf Stapledon, rm 3H-506

Our library is in HO 2D-634A. Rich Ditch (x3432) is librarian.  
Evelyn Leeper (HO 1G-318A x6334) is Club book-buyer.

1. No meetings coming up right away. I just wanted to get out these reviews before the films become ancient history. Included in this notice are short reviews of STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE and BLACK HOLE, and a somewhat longer analysis of the former film.

Mark Leeper  
HO 2B-502A x7093

## STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE

A Film Review by Mark R. Leeper

STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE is certainly the biggest science fiction film ever made. Its \$40 million price tag was somewhat inflated by costly production errors, but the film definitely shows that a lot of money was carefully spent on making an impressive film. The credits of the film almost read like a list of the best people possible in each area of production. The two biggest experts on astronomical and astronomical special effects, John Dykstra (STAR WARS, 2001) and Douglas Trumbull (CLOSE ENCOUNTERS, SILENT RUNNING, 2001), were united to create a truly awesome film. To write the story the producers got Alan Dean Foster, one of the best authors of space operas in novel form, and arguably the inspiration for STAR WARS. And Foster has written a solid piece of science fiction.

The list of impressive names goes on. If there is such a thing as a prestige science fiction film director it is probably Robert Wise, director of THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL, ANDROMEDA STRAIN, THE HAUNTING, THE BODY SNATCHER, and an impressive lineup of mainstream films. The musical score was composed by Jerry Goldsmith, one of the more popular current composers for films, whose recent films include LOGAN'S RUN and THE OMEN. All this was brought together on top of re-assembling the cast and the mythos of the STAR TREK TV show, which contributes its own ready-made audience. This is really the brute force technique of making a successful science fiction film, an opulent GONE WITH THE WIND of science fiction films. Yet, to my mind, it is a toss-up whether or not this film will flop at the box office.

With all this going for this STAR TREK, how could it possibly flop? Well, the film has some serious flaws in among its virtues. The most serious flaw is that the film is an icy intellectual exercise with very little action. It is a set-bound stage play combined with awesome but cold special effects. The pleasures of the film are almost entirely intellectual. While a number of very interesting science fictional concepts are explored in the script, the plot is really only an extravagant variation on one that was done in the TV series. Much of the plot advances by dialogue, the command of the Enterprise seeing sights and talking out what the sights imply.

The pacing of the film is much too slow. While the film is about 130 minutes long, it wastes about 50 of those minutes simply re-introducing the characters and establishing the situation -- what would have been established before the title sequence in an episode of the TV show. That leaves only 80 minutes for the main body of the story. With the pace of the main body slowed by longer special effects sequences (usually just long looks at awesomely large objects), we paradoxically may have less plot (and certainly less action) to the film than would have been in a single episode of the TV show.

To sum up: STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE is a film that will be impressive for all, but enjoyable for very few. It is a film that will be more respected than appreciated. STAR TREK is unlikely to garner the repeat business loyalty that STAR WARS did and is very unlikely to be a contender for that film's box office title. The producers will probably discover that few people really prefer good, thought-provoking science fiction to a simpler film with more of an accent on fun.



## UP FROM THE DEPTHS

A Film Review by Mark R. Leeper

This film is basically JAWS done for the drive-in circuit. Perhaps one of the best things I could say about it is that it effectively hid the fact that it is a Filipino film. In fact, as Filipino films go, this one is pretty good - but then that is not saying very much. UP FROM THE DEPTHS is almost indistinguishable from a fairly cheap American production. The story is really just a comic remake of JAWS set in Hawaii. Instead of a shark we have an unclassified killer fish from, it is implied, very deep in the ocean, but the basic plot is identical.

The acting ranges from substandard down to the "high school play" level, with a number of lines spoken as if the actor (if I may use that word) just wanted to get them said so he could move on to something else. Not that the audience ever minded just moving on to something else, particularly with awkward lines like "I've only one thing to say to you---no comment." While the actors appear to be speaking English, never does the dialogue fit their lips.

Satire seems to be the main thrust of the film, but it rarely hits home. After seeing the film, I discovered that the director had written the screenplay of one of the most undeservedly classic films of the Fifties, LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS. In retrospect, I can see that UP FROM THE DEPTHS has much of the same brand of attempted humor as LITTLE SHOP. For example, a starlet (whose main contribution to the film seems to be in nude shots) is asked how she likes Hawaii. She responds that she has never been there and must be informed that that is where she is now. [A real knee slapper, huh?] In another scene, the corpse of an ichthyologist is used as bait for the killer fish. Another character sagely says, "He'd 'a wanted it this way."

A number of Hawaiian boats in the film have carved wooden figures. Occasionally these figures are indistinguishable from the rubbery monster. In fact, it seems to me the fish monster model was completely inanimate throughout the film. The monster's attacks are rather transparently staged to avoid requiring the fish to move. The monster swims toward its prey and then suddenly the camera cuts to water filled with red dye. All that seems to matter is getting an effect done as simply and as cheaply as possible. In fact "as cheap as possible" is clearly the byword of the production.

This semi-science-fiction, comedy, non-thriller offers little that other JAWS rip-offs do not. Contrary to the title, it fails to raise itself from the depths.



## H. G. WELLS' THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

A Film Review by Mark R. Leeper

The title of the film is not THINGS TO COME or THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME, but H. G. WELLS' THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME. And there is just a chance that Wells might not have minded having his name on the film. But then Wells died in 1946 and would have been impressed by special effects that today come off as humdrum cliches. The story is perhaps not even sillier than that of the 1936 film THINGS TO COME, with which Wells himself was closely associated. Perhaps Wells would have forgiven the fact that the screenplay has almost nothing to do with his book, SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME. After all, Wells's own screenplay for THINGS TO COME had very little to do with the book. I suspect the chief complaint Wells would have had with the new film is that it lacks the philosophical basis that his works had.

But let's fact it, anyone who died in 1946 would find a lot in our world to misunderstand. The fact that Wells might have enjoyed this garbage by no means implies that modern audiences would. While this film is less imitative of STAR WARS than a number of films I've seen, it none the less comes off as a poor man's BUCK ROGERS, and that was a starving man's STAR WARS.

The story takes place in a future in which technology has rendered the moon habitable and the Earth not. Wells might have appreciated that irony, but it certainly was not in his book. So right off the bat the film has absolutely nothing to do with anything Wells ever wrote. Against this backdrop we have a very pallid FLASH GORDON-like serial plot of a mad scientist, played by Jack Palance, who wants to become the benevolent monarch of the moon and is willing to destroy the moon to do it. His old teacher, John Caball (a reference to the earlier film, I suppose, but this Caball, played by Barry Morse, bears no relation to that one), and Caball's handsome son Jason (ugh!) set out to destroy the madman. The plot of the resulting struggle was a yawner when it was done as FLASH GORDON serials, and the infusion of better but still obsolete special effects does little to improve the film. Instead of being THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME, this film represents at best only a shadow of what has gone before.

STAR TREK: THE MAMMOTH MOTION PICTURE  
film criticism by Mark R. Leeper

Suppose you were convinced that science fiction was REALLY in this year - that a science fiction film just could not fail. Suppose you felt that the more you spent on a science fiction film, the more you would get back in profit. Suppose all this convinced you that you wanted to make the biggest, most expensive science fiction film ever made, a veritable GONE WITH THE WIND of science fiction. What would you do? You obviously would make one of the biggest and most expensive films you could. You would get the acknowledged expert in every field of science fiction film production to work on your film. You would get actors so popular that your film would be assured of success on their name alone. This was not the original plan for STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE but it clearly came to be the plan at some point.

So what was the result? Is STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE the greatest science fiction film ever made? Well in some aspects the answer is an undeniable yes. In other aspects the film is a complete flop. My guess is that the film has little hope of being anywhere near as successful as STAR WARS and probably not even as successful as it will have to be simply to return its investment. Why? Well, purely from a matter of economics, STAR WARS cost about ten million dollars and had the sort of excitement that made audiences want to see it again and again. STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE on the other hand cost about forty-two million dollars and is far too cerebral (spelled D-U-L-L) a film to earn the sort of repeat loyalty that STAR WARS had.

By my calculation that forty-two million dollars is considerably more than was spent on three seasons of STAR TREK plus whatever was spent on the STAR TREK cartoon series combined. It bought some interesting ideas and some truly awesome special effects, but a story which is little more than a set-bound stage play. The plot is mostly carried on by dialogue. The film has little of the action that STAR TREK fans are used to from the series. Instead the characters are placed in situations that they talk out and come to conclusions about, but which offer little excitement to the audience.

Part of what makes this a dull film is the result of it being such a big special effects film and the fact that it is based on the STAR TREK series. Being an outgrowth of the STAR TREK series, the film has fans of the series to satisfy. This means that all the old characters have to be brought back and brought up to date. They are obviously older, so the script has to account for what they have been doing in the span of time since we saw them last. This reintroduction takes up about fifty minutes of the film leaving only eighty minutes for the actual story. Already there is not as much time to tell the story as there would have been in two episodes of the television program. I would have thought that less time should have been necessary to introduce characters. After all, they should have already been familiar to much of the audience. But apparently with characters as popular as these, the producers felt the audiences would have



been disappointed without considerable time spent on each of the old regulars.

The producers, then, have allowed themselves eighty minutes to tell the story, and even that time cannot be spent entirely on story telling. The problem is that some of the special effects are just too good. A large piece of the film is every bit as mind-boggling as the lightshow at the end of 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY. With some expensive and admittedly extremely impressive effects such as these, they cannot be just flashed on the screen. They require a considerable period of screen time. This tends to further slow the pace of the film and cut down on time that can effectively be spent advancing the story. There remains just about enough time to tell a story of about the complexity of a story from the old tv series.

With so much of the film devoted to updating the familiar characters and to the special effects, was the result really worth the time? It seems to me that it might have not been necessary to bring back so many of the old characters. Space travel and youth seem to go together. It seems a little inappropriate to see this over-the-hill gang of space trying to save the world. Not that the characters all seem like old fogies, but enough of them do to be embarrassing. DeForest Kelley always seemed a bit old and crotchety in the series, but he seems even more so now that his voice has gotten gravelly. Majel Barrett is looking particularly old and tired and completely out of place on a starship that could be deciding the fate of the world.

Spock (whose name we discover is pronounced with a Germanic "ch" sound) seems as physically up to the part as ever but his voice sound considerably deeper. I suspect that his voice was electronically deepened on the sound track. Even if Spock has not changed much physically, his planet certainly has. The scene we get of Vulcan shows it darker, craggier, and more barren than we have seen before. Almost all the characters have moved up the career ladder in the intervening years. Kirk is now an Admiral, Nurse Chapel is now Dr. Chapel. Even the always brutish-looking Klingons have been promoted to being full-fledged monsters with boney ridges being sprouted up the center of their foreheads in the few years since the series (Isn't evolution wonderful?). On the other hand, the Enterprise, while it has been completely and refurbished, is still being captained by a nurd [More on him later].

Visually the film is enough to make anybody O.D. on awesome. While much of the time the effects just seem to portray abstract shapes in space, they are more than impressive enough to be worth the price of admission alone. Occasionally we are given slightly more familiar sights to look at. There is an almost endless sequence of views of the new souped-up Enterprise, shot from every conceivable camera angle. One over-dramatic sequence is about five minutes or more that is just showing the Enterprise from different angles as Kirk and Scotty approach the ship. Another scene of visual hamminess has the Enterprise flying by at close proximity to Jupiter to get where it is going. Considering the size of the solar system, I find the need for so close a



fly-by just a bit unlikely.

Nonetheless, one visual effect is done at least half accurately for the first time in my memory. The Enterprise must be lit by its own lights to be seen in the blackness of space. Usually special effects wizards just light of their space craft with a spotlight without worrying if there would be light in space or not. In fact, if the special effects people were really going for realism they would not have lit the ship at all. Nor would they have the invading alien craft radiate the light. There is, after all, no real need to light a ship in space. No self-respecting spaceship could hope to navigate by vision, anyway. They would obviously navigate by instruments and leave the outer hull completely unlit. That, however, would make a very dark and dull film to watch. The inaccurate use of light (and even worse, in this film, sound) in outer space seems to be a familiar and necessary evil in science fiction films.

The darkness served a secondary purpose, beyond realism, that of masking matte lines. From what we see of the matte work in the early scenes of the film, we should probably be grateful for the masking. The special effects in better lit San Francisco are overwhelmingly unimpressive. Also unimpressive is a scene which I suspect was contributed by the first special effects team (who, incidently, were fired). In this scene a column of light attacks the bridge of the Enterprise. Not only is the color in this scene extremely washed out, the two sides of the picture seem to jitter in and out as if they were filmed separately by unsteady cameras. For a film with this pricetag, I would have expected more uniform quality for special effects.

Of course the focal point of special effects in any space opera is the modelwork done on the spaceships. In the tv series the models were done with little surface detail. There was more than in the days of the FLASH GORDON serials, but not as much as we see in science fiction films today. The big change came with Douglas Trumbell's modelwork for 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY. When Trumbell designed the models for STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE, he must have faced the problem that the models had to look like those in the original series, but still have the detail he uses to give the craft scale on the wide screen, the detail that is very much his trademark.

The result was something of a compromise. The Klingon craft we see at the beginning of the film look much like the originals. In fact, by making them as undetailed as the originals, they do lose their scaling factor and look like rather small models. All new craft that Trumbell designed look far more detailed. And parts of the invading alien are in some ways quite reminiscent for Trumbell's ships from 2001 and SILENT RUNNING. The Enterprise represents the compromise wrapped into a single ship. It still is shaped like the old Enterprise, but it has recently been remodeled in ways that give it much more surface detail. Just enough such detail is given to make the craft look big enough on the wide screen.

Another example of special effects redesign is the effect of the disintegration/reintegration in the transporter. Instead of



the bubble effect of the earlier series, we now have a moire-like design form on the reintegrating bodies. The transporter, incidentally, is responsible for the film's one concession to horror, borrowing an idea from CURSE OF THE FLY. This little piece of action has little to do with the rest of the plot of the film, but I, for one, was glad to have any action at all.

Fans of the old series will be pleased to know that the dramatically the film is faithful to the absurdities of the original. Once again we get a story line that tells us in the usual chauvinistic way that as humans we are lucky to have emotions. One of the subplots of the film has Spock going from being a candidate for some sort of emotionless Vulcan fraternity called Kohlinhar to a true believer in the value of human emotions and even, it is implied, the value of religion. Kirk evolves from selfish, pompous admiral, to self-doubting commander, to confident leader in record time. He wades his way back to the helm of the Enterprise, elbowing aside the current commander, Captain Decker. The two then spend about about half the film vying with each other to see who can be the bigger jerk in the face of a situation in which the Enterprise is all that stands between the Earth and a world swallowing menace. Of course there is the requisite scene of Kirk pushing the Enterprise to the absolute limit of its capabilities, in spite of the fact that if the ship breaks down, its curtains for Mother Earth. Captain Decker, on the other hand, petulantly berates Kirk for the loss of a single crew member due to a command that if not given would have abandoned Earth to apparently inevitable destruction. Considering the stakes, this sort of bickering seems all the more petty and absurd.

The script has several technical problems that clearly should have been better thought out. The crew of the Enterprise is shown a close up film of the invading force destroying a space craft. There is no explanation why there happened to be a camera so near the craft when it was destroyed. At another point the Enterprise is visited by a computer probe in human form. The probe believes the Enterprise to be itself a life form that the computer respects; it considers humans to be only a parasitic form infesting the ship. Yet it carelessly smashes through a bulkhead without bothering to opening it. If the computer really wants to befriend the Enterprise, smashing holes in it seems to be an illogical show of friendship.

Several pseudo-scientific concepts are thrown into the film to liven up the script. One of my favorites is the coining of the term "photic-sonar" as a scanning device. It is not really clear if they meant this to be some form of sonar (which apparently would work in the sound effect laden reaches of space that the Enterprise travels) or if it works like sonar but uses light instead of sound. If the latter is the case it sounds like they are going to scan space by shining a light on it and seeing if anything is visually reflected back -- not the most advanced of scanning techniques. Another piece of pseudo-scientific gobbledy-gook involves the Enterprise falling through something called a "wormhole". What a wormhole is was never explained, and

it seems like just another excuse for a lightshow. One peculiar effect of the wormhole, also never actually explained, is that while under its influence, the crew of the enterprise seem to be slowing down. Both their actions and their voices go slower and slower. This makes no sense at all. If the slowing down is some sort of relativistic time dilation, then from the frame of reference of the crew, they are not slowing down at all. The whole point of relativistic time-dilation is that it is unnoticeable, so why show it to the audience. The script does not show the crew slow down when the Enterprise revs up to relativistic speeds, are we to believe that the effect of dropping into a wormhole is to force the camera into a different time-frame than the one the crew occupies? On the other hand, maybe we were intended to believe that the crew does feel itself slowing down. If it does see the slowdown in their frame of reference, then the dilation is not a relativistic effect and hence is completely unexplained. I guess it is just some sort of senseless "strange and mysterious" thing that happens "out there". The script is, in fact, chock full of such "strange and mysterious things that happen out there," right up to the pseudo-mystical ending of the film.

One word about the musical score of the film, I like it. Of late John Williams has been doing the scores for all the major science fiction films. This score by Jerry Goldsmith is a refreshing change and does a fair amount to enhance the feel of the film. While it sometimes borrows from the old STAR TREK theme and other times sounds almost biblical, it is an upbeat piece of music and does a great deal to make the film feel more lively.

I have concentrated here, for the most part, on faults of the film. In fairness I should say that in spite of all its faults, STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE is one of the most elaborate and intellectually stimulating science fiction films ever made. It should not be necessary to spend forty-two million dollars to make a good science fiction film, but I cannot deny that spending that much money does get results.



THE BLACK HOLE  
a film review by Mark R. Leeper

Back when George Lucas was making STAR WARS he was interviewed in American Film. At that time he described his project as being the making of a children's film. He called the making of the film as "going the Disney route". Well if Lucas could make so much money "going the Disney route", Disney Studios thought that they probably could too. I am sure this was their reasoning when they started to put together their own spectacular science fiction film, THE BLACK HOLE. Apparently they even mimicked the PG rating of STAR WARS, a first in the history of Disney Studios.

What they have come up with is one of the strangest science fiction films to come along in quite a while. The BLACK HOLE is an uneasy hybrid of the usual Disney sugar (like naming a spaceship Palomino) and a decent science fiction film. The plot deals with a group of space explorers who come upon what appears to be a derelict spacecraft on the brink of falling into a vortex caused by a black hole. Somehow the craft is fixed stationary in space. On boarding the ship they find it to be inhabited by a host of robots and a mad genius with an insane plan to ride the gravitational forces of the black hole like a surfer riding a wave. That really is most of the plot. Only at the end of the film does that story actually advance beyond what is established in the first twenty minutes. Not that there is not enough action. This is not a staid set piece; Disney did not make the mistake that was made with STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE. But most of the action does nothing to advance the plot. It only underscores that the scientist (Dr. Reinhardt, played by Maximilian Schell) is really mad on the project of seeing the inside of a black hole.

In the final sequence of the film we do get to see the Disney concept of what is at the center of a black hole, but that comes off as something of an anti-climax. In part, it is something like the psychedelic ride at the end of 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY with obscure visions of Maximilian Schells within Maximilian shells, but it is hardly a fitting ending for what has gone before. It may titillate those of the audience with a literary bent, but it will leave the scientifically inclined cold.

The cast, which includes Anthony Perkins, Yvette Mimieux, and Ernest Borgnine, is uniformly bland. So bland, in fact, that it becomes a real problem in this film. The audience really needs somebody to identify with and not one human character any sort of personality appeal. The two friendly robots have considerably more appeal than the humans, but they go too far in the other direction. They seem like three dimensional extensions of Mickey Mouse's personality. These robots look like they were first drawn as cartoon characters and then imperfectly rendered in solid material (not unlike a Snoopy telephone).

The special effects are among the best that have come from Disney Studios, but still there are problems. Mixing cartoon with real life in an optical printer may have been a knockout

idea for films like MARY POPPINS, but the effects it creates are just not realistic enough for use in a live action science fiction film. And that effect is used all too often in the film. The view we get of a black hole vortex is impressive, but entirely unscientific. A black hole should be invisible and spherical; this one is neither. Instead it, or the debris around it, is quite visible and shaped like a whirlpool. We see the rendering of the black hole vortex dozens of times in the course of the film, but if one looks closely one can see that it is always the same shot being used over and over. Apparently they had about four seconds of footage of the black hole effect and they just used it over and over.

To sum it all up we have a mediocre science fiction story told with what would have been good special effects if fewer corners had been cut. The script is poorly paced and is an odd patchwork, sometimes too cutesy, other times pretentious. What could have been a good science fiction film gets muddled, so that it is little more than just a good children's film.



THE MAGICIAN OF LUBLIN  
a film review by Mark R. Leeper

The year is 1901, the place is Poland. Yasha, the Jewish street magician, is a genius of the ilk of Rasputin and Svengali. He has no loyalty for his wife, for his assistant, for his manager, or for his numerous lovers. Yasha has just one loyalty, and that is to himself. But Yasha also has a two-fold dream. There are two things that Yasha wants from life. He wants an engagement at the Alhambra theater in Warsaw, and he wants to fly. Any other magic trick he can think of comes easily to Yasha. Bound in chains, he can escape from tanks of water. He can read minds, he can perform levitations, he can provide himself with an endless stream of Christian bedpartners. Why shouldn't he be able to add flying to his list of accomplishments? Yasha works his way to Warsaw only to find out that he cannot perform at the Alhambra because he is a Jew. But, his manager tells him, the managers of the Alhambra might forget he is a Jew, if he has one particular trick in his repertoire. He must be able to live up to his boast that he can fly.

Alan Arkin plays Yasha, THE MAGICIAN OF LUBLIN. Mr. Arkin seems obsessed with never playing the same sort of role twice and Yasha is very different from anyone that Arkin has played before. The mysterious, charismatic, and mystical Yasha could well be the most interesting and believably drawn character in any film I have seen this year. In supporting roles are Lou Jacobi as Wol-sky, Yasha's manager, Louise Fletcher and Valerie Perrine as mistresses of Yasha, one an aristocrat, one a naive street girl. Shelley Winters plays the mother of Yasha's assistant. This type of role is becoming old hat to Winters who seems less afraid than Arkin of being typecast.

The film is based on the story by Isaac Bashevis Singer. No punches are pulled in portraying Yasha's selfish and hedonistic life style. We see a fair amount of sex, but it never descends to being pornographic. This is an adult film in the serious meaning of the term. It is a solid drama, a character study, with supernatural and Jewish mystical overtones, and it is a study of two conflicting societies, one Christian, one Jewish, in turn-of-the-century Poland. In the end the film concludes in an ambiguous and mystical way. After the film I counted at least three different interpretations for the last scene of the film, each with its own set of implications. As with SEANCE ON A WET AFTERNOON, the puzzle of the last scene is left tantalizingly unresolved, as perhaps it should. This is definitely one of the best films of the year.