

Lincroft-Holmdel Science Fiction Club
Club Notice - 2/13/85 -- Vol. 3, No. 32

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are on Wednesdays at noon.
LZ meetings are in LZ 3A-206; HO meetings are in HO 2N-523.

<u>DATE</u>	<u>TOPIC</u>
02/20	HO: ROGER CORMAN--HOLLYWOOD'S WILD ANGEL (video)
02/20	LZ: THE MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS by Robert Heinlein
03/13	HO: DOWNBELOW STATION by C. J. Cherryh
03/13	LZ: DRAGON'S EGG by Robert Forward
04/03	HO: Book Swap (HO 2N-529)
04/03	LZ: HELLICONIA SPRING by Brian Aldiss
04/24	HO: CIRCUS OF DR. LAO by Charles G. Finney
04/24	LZ: MISSION OF GRAVITY by Hal Clement
05/15	LZ: DOOR INTO FIRE by Diane Duane
06/05	LZ: TACTICS OF MISTAKE by Gordon R. Dickson

HO Chair is Mark Leeper, HO 1E-412 (834-2657). LZ Chair is Rob Mitchell, LZ 1B-306 (576-6106). LZ Librarian is Lance Larsen, LZ 3C-219 (576-2668). HO Librarian is Tim Schroeder, HO 2G-427A (949-5866). Jill-of-all-trades is Evelyn Leeper, HO 1B-437A (834-4723).

1. Our next Holmdel meeting will be devoted to the films of Roger Corman. We will show a short film that describes his working techniques and describe what he is like to work with. Corman is perhaps the foremost name in grade C filmmaking and is responsible for films like LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS, a whole series of films based on the writings of Edgar Allen Poe, BATTLE BEYOND THE STARS, and a host of others. The date is 2/20 at noon and the room is HO 2N-523.

2. The Lincroft Left-behinds think they can run a club without me and are going to try to prove it by having a meeting to discuss Robert Heinlein's immortal classic (us Holmdellers write a little over-ripely) THE MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS. If you want to see how they fare, why not drop up to the meeting and see how it is going. The date is 2/20 at noon and the room is LZ 3A-206.

3. Then there is the famous Leeper film festival that continues at the Leeper house. All you out there who want to join us, be my guest. February 21 we will be showing a follow-up to our CASABLANCA/PLAY IT AGAIN SAM fest. This time we will be showing:

*****Presorted*****
* Leeper, Evelyn C. *
* 114A HO 1B-437A *

Bogie II:

THE MALTESE FALCON (1941) dir. by John Huston

THE CHEAP DETECTIVE (1978) dir. by Robert Moore

The first is one of the classic Bogart films, a crackling mystery based on a novel by Dashiell Hammett. It stars Bogart, Mary Astor, and, of course, Peter Lorre and Sydney Greenstreet.

CHEAP DETECTIVE is Neil Simon's madcap screwball comedy that lampoons both MALTESE FALCON and CASABLANCA. It stars Peter Falk and has a pile of other stars. This was sort of a follow-up to MURDER BY DEATH, but not seen by as many people. Maybe it's just me, but I think it is a lot funnier than MURDER BY DEATH, though just a bit weird to do well at the box office.

Mark Leeper

HO 1E-412 834-2657

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THREADS

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

One of the most frightening films I ever remember seeing is Peter Watkins's Oscar-winning short, The War Game, which includes some very believable and realistic footage of Britain during and after a nuclear war. We have seen a lot of dramatizations of the effects of nuclear war over the past years or so, including the much bally-hoed The Day After. They are all very good at underscoring what a pity it would be to be in a nuclear war. The films we see almost entirely ignore any but the luckiest 5% of the population. They show people whose lives are disrupted and who may eventually die from the effects of the bomb. There is never any mention of things like fire-storms or triage or the millions painfully maimed by the attack. And, incidentally, now that we have conveniently forgotten how terrible nuclear war is, all of a sudden it is once more "thinkable."

Now the BBC--who footed the bill for The War Game but decided it was too frightening to show--has made Threads, a film about nuclear war that covers some of the same ground. Threads is sort of a British Day After with some of the effective moments of The War Game thrown in. It falls short of The War Game in several important ways--I'll get to those later--but it is by far the second best film depiction of nuclear war I can remember seeing.

Now my measure of quality is for the most part accuracy. Testament was a very well-made film, beautifully directed with great insights into the characters. But while those characters were believable, the situation was not. The producers failed to do their homework. The characters in Threads are not nearly as well-developed, but most of what was wrong with Threads were omissions, not outright inaccuracies. It presents a genuinely possible scenario of nuclear war and its aftermath. Its estimations of the impact of nuclear winter are on the light side, but not entirely outside the range of scientific opinion.

Where Threads falls short of The War Game is simply that it conveys less information and pulls its punches a bit more. In Threads we see what is happening and get a few words on the screen explaining it. The War Game had a dispassionate narrator explaining what was happening. Instead of seeing fires, the narrator explained the nature and scope of a firestorm so that you know what you are seeing is not an isolated fire, but part of a huge mire measured in square miles. In some ways Threads does tell more than The War Game, just by virtue of the fact that it has more recent information and that it is longer, so can show more of the aftermath. But for Threads to fall so close in quality to what I obviously use as the yardstick for nuclear war films, I have to rate Threads high. Give it a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

THE UNION CLUB MYSTERIES by Isaac Asimov
Fawcett, 1985, \$2.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

This is a collection of short mysteries told in the same fashion as Asimov's "Black Widower" stories. In both cases there is a standard set of characters: in the "Black Widower" stories it is a set of friends who gather once a month for dinner; in the "Union Club" stories it is a regular set of Union Club members. In both cases the mystery is presented and then there is a (literary) pause to give the reader a chance to deduce/guess the solution before Asimov reveals it. In both cases the same character solves the mystery each time: in the "Black Widower" stories it's the waiter (Henry); in the "Union Club" stories it's the retired government employee who has told the story in the first place.

When I saw this book, I thought, "Oh, great! Another set of "Black Widower"-type mysteries." Well, no. Perhaps it's because Asimov wrote the "Black Widower" stories for a mystery magazine and the "Union Club" stories for a "men's" magazine, but the stories here aren't as good, nor the writing style as enjoyable. Also, the fact that here it is the same character presenting story after story of his exploits, with no attempt at modesty, but rather bragging about how clever he was each time, starts to wear on the reader rather quickly. (In the "Black Widower" stories, it is always an outside guest who presents the mystery, which provides more variety in the types of stories also.)

And, finally, the solutions to these stories range from the obvious to the impossibly convoluted, in a sort of inverted bell-shaped curve. Puzzle-type mysteries should be such that, even if you can't figure out the solution, it makes sense when you read it. Many of the stories hear break that rule.

If you're an Asimov completist or want some short mysteries to read, this book is okay, but I can't really recommend it.

OVERDRAWN AT THE MEMORY BANK

A short story and teleplay review by Mark R. Leeper

Overdrawn at the Memory Bank is a PBS "American Playhouse" story that has plot elements and a title in common with a story by John Varley. Loosely speaking, it is based on that story, but when I speak that loosely, my jaw drops off. In fact, the play and the short story might almost bear no stronger connection than being two adventures set in the same universe.

The story and the play both deal with a character named Fingal whose consciousness has been surgically moved to an animal as a sort of amusement park ride. Unfortunately, when it comes time to transfer his mind back to his body, the body has been misplaced. His mind is instead placed into a computer where it creates its own reality. Arguably the reality in the play must be somewhat altered from the story in order to fill 90 minutes.

The "American Playhouse" version has given the story a Bradbury twist by making Fingal a cinema fan in an age when cinema is forbidden. Fingal's fixation on Casablanca crops up in odd ways in the computer. To add further excitement, there is sort of an illogical subplot of a villain trying to kill Fingal. The villain is the chairman of the company that performs the mind transplants. In spite of his already knowing that if harm comes to Fingal the corporation will go bankrupt, he still feels he has to kill Fingal for some never clearly explained reason.

The play is a cut below the quality and humor of the story, but each has a good-natured humor of its own. Rate the story a low +2 and the play a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale. Oh, and you can add this play to War Games, Superman III, and a host of other recent dramatic works of science fiction that completely misunderstand computer security.

SPASMS

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

Oliver Reed plays a philanthropic industrialist who is telepathically linked, a la The Eyes of Laura Mars, to a supernatural snake the size of a small traffic jam. He brings it from a South Sea island called The Gate of Hell to Los Angeles where it escapes and rampages. When the snake's papier mache' head bites people, they blow up like the Michelin tire man. We see mercifully little of the snake and much too much of the rest of the cast. Eventually Reed blinds the snake by sticking his thumb in its eye, giving his psychiatrist, Peter Fonda, a chance to machine gun the serpent. And, you know, some films aren't good enough to make it to cable.

ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST
A film review by Mark R. Leeper

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, The Wild Bunch, The Professionals, The Magnificent Seven, Lonely Are the Brave--what do these films have in common? They all lament the passing of "the Old West" and its replacement by modern times. Sergio Leone's addition to this group is his Once Upon a Time in the West. This is a long film, particularly in its full 165-minute version. Frank Capra used to give his films pace and excitement by rehearsing his actors, then telling them that they had to go through a scene twice as fast. Leone does just the opposite. This film is full of long scenes where short ones would have advanced the plot as much. Leone uses the slow pacing to give the film texture: to show scenery, to build mood, to zero in on facial expressions, and to give the feeling that the West was a place of boredom punctuated by moments of terror.

Charles Bronson is a reasonable stand-in in a part that was likely written with Clint Eastwood in mind. After all, this was Leone's follow-up to his "Man with No Name" series. He plays his role enigmatically with little more expression than a piece of wood. In a Leone western, as often as not, the hero is more image than character. Henry Fonda, perhaps tired of all the nice guy parts he has played over the years, plays a vicious and ambitious gunman. In a Leone western one expects to see Italians in all the bit parts, including in this film the part of a particularly ludicrous Irishman. This film even has Claudia Cardinal as a femme fatale from New Orleans. Jason Robards rounds out the list of lead actors as a mean hombre with a likable side.

Once Upon a Time in the West has a good reputation for its mood, created in large part by Ennio Morricone's score, but its pacing leaves it time for little more plot than a cheap Saturday matinee western used to have. Still, it is above average for this sort of thing. Give it a +1 on a -4 to +4 scale.

THE BAD SEED and Other TV Remakes
A film review by Mark R. Leeper

We all know about made-for-TV movies. The networks churn these things out to save money over buying theatrical films. Leonard Maltin's rating system for films in TV Movies is a scale from one to four or "TV-M." "TV-M" means it was mad for television so why bother to rate it? Phillipine films which seem to be about 90% about monsters running through jungles, Maltin feels are cinema, but if it's made for TV, it is not really cinema. (I do, in fact, like Maltin's book, but refusal to rate made-for-TV movies is a little irksome.)

One of the TV filmmaker's unpleasant habits is to take a popular classic film and remake it trading off the popularity of the original. They did it a couple of seasons back with a very poor version of The Phantom of the Opera and a much worse version of The Picture of Dorian Gray.

I would like to list some TV remakes that I feel are better than their originals. The TV remake of The Hunchback of Notre Dame is the only version to be faithful to the bitter irony of the book. I was actually shocked by the depiction of gas warfare in TV's All Quiet on the Western Front and really wanted to see the original classic film with Lew Ayres. What a let-down! The original pulls its punches and is nowhere near as effective. I prefer the George C. Scott version of Beauty and the Beast to the Cocteau film and the TV edition of Thief of Bagdad is the best version of the oft-remade film. All but the last of these was shown as part of the "Hallmark Hall of Fame," incidentally. Now there is another TV remake that is a real improvement.

I have always liked The Bad Seed, the film adaptation of the Maxwell Anderson play about a woman (Nancy Kelly) who discovers her daughter (Patti McCormack) is a remorseless murderer whose apparent innocence covers a string of killings for items as small as Christmas decorations or the class penmanship medal. The story is really what I liked about the 1956 version and the realistic interplay between Patti McCormack as little Rhoda and Henry Jones as a bullying handyman. The acting seems considerably better in the 1985 version. David Carradine takes the role of the handyman better, playing it as an immature child. It works much like Martin Sheen's role worked in Badlands.

But the real improvement is the sinister ending. All three versions--two films and the play--had it but the film code in the Fifties did not allow having crime go unpunished, so an epilogue was added in which the mother's suicide attempt fails and--get this--little Rhoda is struck by lightning! Then all the actors come out for a curtain call and when Patti McCormack comes out for a bow, Kelly grabs her and spanks her, apparently to punish her for killing all those people. The last five minutes do all they can to ruin the film, all thanks to a silly film code rule.

Suffice it to say the remake has all the best aspects of the first film without the terrible last five minutes. It is the version I prefer to remember.

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