



View From the Top

The President's Column - Kevin Geiselman

My original intention for this column was for it to be something of a victory celebration. After months of struggle, we now have complete control of the PARSEC-SFF.ORG domain. The damper on that, however, was that the hosting service that I signed up with misrepresented how much the redirect from the .NET backup domain we bought would cost and don't want to give back the money I spent on it.

I have what I describe as an "overly developed sense of justice." It is part of what allowed me to persevere through these troubles, as I am too stubborn to give up and allow "them" to win. Sometimes this trait can be an asset. Sometimes it is more troublesome. In either case, at least our website is back up the way it should be.

That's about all I can think of to say on the subject at this time so this will be the shortest President's column I've yet written. See you at Confluence.

Minutes - continued from page 11

We have the standard features, Hugo talks, the play and evening entertainment.

Additional Topics that were suggested are:

YA Fantasy Carpet Baggers: What's good, and what are the rules of YA and how are they stretching it? Where's the new YA science fiction? We can all see the fantasy, no problem. Why can't anybody write a goddamn vampire series that doesn't devolve into porn? Big Brother was a lightweight. We are starting to see 'security' measures and technology that make 1984 look - uh - less scary. You got your Ebola in my bird flu. Big scary science fiction diseases and epidemics are not so scary. "Is the Nuclear Genie half full or half empty?" The sense of wonder in sci-fi has been replaced with fear.

Cult TV on DVD: *Lost*, *Battlestar Galatica*, *Stargate* and the like.

Transcending cliché in sci-fi musical performances. Why are there no real original ideas and music in sci-fi (movies or tv)?

Taking your writing to the next level. How can you improve your writing? What are you doing, what are you not doing?

How do you revise a poem? A mixture of techniques and methods to inspire you.

Where would science fiction be without volunteers?

Email Ann with any additional ideas for panels.

At 3:30 Randy talked about the film program he has lined up for us, and then played a series of excerpts from CDs, letting us hear a little of what the concerts are going to be like.

For a finale, members of the Parallax Second Players did a scene from the revised *Dune: The Soft Rock Musical*. This was very funny, and it really looks like it is coming together.

Someone suggested going to the Murray Avenue Grill for some after-meeting food, and we wound up with a group of 11. The grill handled it just fine.

Submitted by Alexandra (Sasha) Riley acting for Joan Fisher (who had to work).

May Minutes

Alexandra "Sasha" Riley



PARSEC met on June 11, 2005 at the renovated Squirrel Hill library. Once we got over the shock of the quasi-industrial finish, and claimed our new space, chasing the poetry group out, we settled in to watching a series of fan-made short videos (Star Wars fan films) that our esteemed President Kevin Geiselman showed on his laptop.

After everyone had stopped laughing at the fan flicks (they were intentionally humorous; the best being *Your Light Saber and You*, featuring the accidental turning of Mary Ellen into a Jedi Apparition), Geis read a selection from *Baby's First Mythos* (for those Cthulu fans with small children) (not really).

The meeting was officially started at 2:04 pm. PARSEC now has a new bag for stuff. There are still problems with getting the website back up and running, Geis will be calling them again Monday in hopes of getting it working again." I will talk to this Dip on Monday" Geis is looking at Ipower, another service, at 8 dollars a month.

Treasurer Greg Armstrong reported that we made enough money in dues to cover the postage of SIGMA this month.

Announcements:

Jean Martin had an article in the Post Gazette, "Where have all the Woodsteins gone?"

501 C3 report - All the paper work is in from the state, all that they need is the financial statements from PARSEC, Alpha, and Confluence in a form the government likes. When this is finished they will be able to finally file, which may not happen until the start of July.

David Brody has a play running for the last weekend of The Three Rivers Arts Festival. "Stavrogin's Confession" a play in one act. Admission is free.

"The Horror of the Monkey Squeezing Room"

The play for confluence is looking for people to help out with painting and putting the sets together for the play, and chorus members.

War of the Worlds is coming out; a British Version has already been released. *Fantastic Four*, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* are both on their way. *Serenity* is coming out in September and is already getting many good advance reviews.

At 2:34 we did the raffle, Judi Galardi won the raffle: She took one of Chris Hutson's cool bug paintings.

There have been some minor problems with the room block at the hotel for Confluence, everything should be corrected.

The Art Workshop meeting the weekend after Confluence is going to allow children to attend. The group running it are unsure as to what age.

Geis is holding a picnic at his house on the Fourth Of July. Let him know if you are thinking of attending so he knows.

Confluence Preview - Run by Ann Cecil:

The guest list for Confluence is still growing despite the problems that have arisen with inviting people. So far we have about 25 people who have agreed to come, another 12 or so that Ann still needs to contact or reconnect with to get an idea of whether they are attending. [Ann read the list aloud, but it is already out-of date.]

continued on page 2

I liked the war machines. A lot. They are big, scary and real tripods, unlike George Pal's flying manta rays of 1953. Wells described the Martians making an "Ulaaa" cry and while these aliens don't make the same sound, the recognizable "Ulaaa" they do make is very powerful.

I disliked the aliens themselves. When you first see them, they are shadows and glimpses in a demolished room. But very soon after that you see them in full view and they looked to me almost exactly like the aliens in *Independence Day*. Actually cute, though too slimy to be cuddly. I would have preferred to never see them at all.

I liked that you didn't really see any battles. There are plenty of views looking up at the war machines from under foot but when the military is going at it with tanks and helicopters, the battle is hidden beyond the hill. The main characters don't crest the hill to spectate so you don't get to see it from their point of view either. That's the way such a war would be.

I didn't like the heat ray. Actually, it was more like a disintegration ray that had the interesting effect of vaporizing the person but leaving their clothes to flutter away. Disturbing, yes, but misused in that the aliens vaporize anyone that gets within arms length of Tom Cruise just to make the chase scene more action-packed. It's not the indiscriminate spraying of the crowd that I would expect from nigh-omnipotent invaders.

I didn't like Spielberg's use of flagwaving and terrorism fears. There are so many filmmaking tools he could have used (and did use in other places) that using the contemporary 9/11 imagery strikes me as a cheap method of manipulating our emotions. 20 years from now (or even today in overseas markets) those images won't hold the power they really need, in the same way that the 1953 version has lost much of its Red Scare impact. When the aliens are dying at the end, Spielberg can't resist the opportunity for the US military to seal the victory by bringing down a tripod with small arms and rocket fire. Finally, he adds a paragraph at the end that makes it seem not so much that we got lucky when the aliens got sick and died because of the microbes of Earth, but that those microbes are there to protect us from all invaders. A mighty fortress is our germs.

There are plenty of continuity problems: The digital camera that continues to film while the whole city of electronic devices has been shut down by an electro-magnetic pulse. There are no bodies strewn about an airline crash site. When the Protagonist reunites with his estranged family at the end of the film, they look like they've been sitting in their living room watching television, as if this war was something that happened to someone else.

But most everything leading up to those last weak scenes is very good. More disturbing than the aliens feeding or the rampant destruction is the scene where the protagonist's car is attacked by an angry mob.

In spite of some of its minor weaknesses, I highly recommend this film.

Reviews - continued from page 1
ward by Huff.)

Things get worse and worse. The good guys are struck down one by one as the party slowly runs out of ammunition. Several very clever delaying tactics are used; each one buys them a little time, but the forces arrayed against them are so many that defeat is inevitable. When the good guys are down to their last half-clip, a bunch of likeable characters have been killed, and things look hopeless, the war suddenly ends -- the Silsviss adolescents surrender. The Marines have fought so well, the Silsviss teenagers have declared them dominant, and leave after presenting them with a trophy. Saved by the bell.

This is a good, enjoyable story, except for the very end. Here's the spoiler. It turns out the shooting-down was staged by the Confederation. It was so important to recruit the Silsviss by impressing them with Confederation military valor, the government was willing to sacrifice a platoon of its own Marines to make things work out. Okay, fair enough, governments are often that cynical and this isn't intrinsically hard to believe. But Staff Sergeant Torin Kerr, the book's hero, goes along with it, staging a confrontation with a Silsviss official which backs up Confederation propaganda and ensures the treaty will be signed. In the end, she chooses her government over her friends.

That disappointed the hell out of me. I wanted to like Torin. But I can't respect someone who covers up the murder of comrades in arms to advance government policy. Utilitarians and followers of the philosophy of power will like *Valor's Choice*; natural rights freaks like me will be appalled. For that reason, and that reason alone, I cannot recommend the book. It's fast-moving and interesting; the characters are mostly likeable, the scientific errors aren't too grating. But it's a well-written book with what I consider an immoral message.

Technical errors: The xenobiology is silly. One of Huff's species, the di'Taykan, have a throat organ that emits sexual pheromones which work on all other known humanoid species. Just throwing the word 'pheromones' into a book doesn't make it good science. The very point of pheromones is that they are species-specific, because from the standpoint of evolution by natural selection, you don't want to attract mates you can't reproduce with. To think that they would work on people from another planet, and not just one species, but several, is ludicrous.

Not only that, but the di'Taykan can tell, by smell, which of a species they've just met is male or female. Do you believe that? I don't.

And another species, the Krai, has a taste preference for human flesh. Ms. Huff, if you eat a death's cup toadstool, you will die, and you have far more in common, biochemically, with that toadstool than you do with someone from another planet. The Krai who eats a human deserves everything he gets, which means at best systemic poisoning and weeks in the hospital and at worst, anaphylactic shock, cardio-respiratory failure and termination within minutes. Man-eating extraterrestrials were a dumb idea when SF writers first thought them up around 1910. They're still a dumb idea.

Another species, the Mictok, are giant spiders. Who wants to bet Tanya Huff has never heard of the square-cube law? I have used intelligent giant spiders in my own SF, but I made them water-breathers, since you could, at least in theory, have an arthropod that size if it were supported by water. There were other technical glitches, but those were the major ones.

The Martian War

a Novel by Gabriel Mesta

reviewed by Kevin Geiselman

“What if H. G. Wells were actually involved in the events portrayed in his novels?” It's not an uncommon premise. In fact, the first time I saw it in the Wellsian context was in the 1979 film *Time After Time* where the author chases Jack the Ripper using a time machine. In *The Martian War*, Wells is recruited by famed Darwinist Thomas Henry Huxley (“I would rather be the offspring of two apes than be a man and afraid to face the truth.”) to join a secret government scientific research group developing high-technology weapons for the expected war against Germany. He sees presentations by Hawley Griffin on invisibility and biological warfare and by Selwyn Cavor on armor that “may even be opaque to gravity.”

Interspersed with the narrative but actually having taken place months before, wealthy amateur astronomer Percival Lowell has fallen in with one Doctor Moreau in an effort to signal the inhabitants of Mars. Lowell's scheme succeeds and a Martian scout ship crashes in the Sahara Dessert.

I did say earlier that it's been done before. Specifically, Lowell's attempt to signal the Martians was first told by the author writing under his real name of Kevin J. Anderson in the WotW anthology *Global Dispatches*. (He also edited the book). Anderson/Mesta does an acceptable job, but his characterization of Wells as an action hero involved with a secret government organization just doesn't sit well with what I know about the real H. G. Wells. Anderson also fails in creating what the novel's subtitle calls “a thrilling eyewitness account” by writing the scenes with Wells in the third person instead of writing, as Wells himself wrote much of the time, in first person.

To be honest, Alan Moore did the genre much better in his graphic novel *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. In fact, I have no doubt that Anderson took many of his queues from Moore's work. This is evidenced in the names. In Wells's original work, *The Invisible Man* is identified only as Griffin. Professor Cavor from *The First Men in the Moon* was also only identified by last name. Alan Moore invented the first names of Hawley Griffin and Selwyn Cavor for his graphic novel. That Anderson used the same names is a clear indication of the infringement. (Just for completeness, when Claude Rains played the Invisible Man in the 1933 film, the name was John Griffin.)

While an easy read (I got through the whole thing between calls at work) and a reasonable depiction of Wellsian England, it feels too derivative and comes out too close to other WotW releases for me to think it's other than a quick publication designed to ride coattails.

inclination of a chemist to become a mass poisoner would lie within him, rather than in the nature of the elements and compounds themselves. He might administer arsenic to someone's detriment, but nobody would talk about the "dark side" of arsenic seducing him. Nor would it be circumstantial: There was someone whose death would be convenient, and poison's properties presented themselves conveniently. Sometimes, to be sure, chemists have poisoned people. However, we place the responsibility with the poisoner, not the poison.

The making of a monster seems not to proceed from childhood trauma such as parental death, even if witnessed by the child. It is more likely to proceed from having been simultaneously spoiled and somewhat abused, a la Stalin. It may arise from a deep ambivalence which the child, maturing, cannot resolve, and the child never comes to understand that inside every other person is an "I" as there is within him.

Destruction is so much easier than creation: Someone with explosives can do terrible damage to a building which he could never hope to erect. Someone with a gun can do harm that even very skilled surgeons cannot repair. Any vandal can destroy; building takes skill and planning.

Just so, there should have been some immunity, some inclination toward the Good, conferred upon Anakin by his being "strong in the Force." For him to be so easily diverted to the "dark side" without ever even asking for any proof that it would get him what he sought, trivializes the whole thing. It would take more effort to convert a Pepsi drinker to becoming a Coke lover than the Emperor put into gaining Anakin's allegiance and, by extension, the use of his ability. Anakin had bad dreams about his wife dying, and so he lent himself to the deaths of countless others? Sounds like a bad case of road rage.

There's a disconnect there. The reason for the conversion doesn't rise to the power which should have been needed to cause the seismic shift. All we saw was the petulance of a very young man who was gifted, placed prematurely and by patronage on a Council which didn't want him, and "was born on third base, hit a single, and thought he'd scored a home run."

Anakin became Darth Vader, scourge of the galaxy, because he wasn't welcomed by the Jedi Council and given all the perquisites? He was responsible for the deaths of millions because he was afraid his wife might die? Talk about disproportionate reaction. . . was this really the best motivation Lucas and his writers could devise? Maybe things really do end “not with a bang, but a whimper.” My response to his dilemma was, basically, “Awwwww, poor li'l guy...” followed by a sigh of exasperation.

War of the Worlds

a Film by Steven Spielberg

reviewed by Kevin Geiselman.

I'm sure that by now you know the basic story line of invasion that is covered in Spielberg's interpretation of the H. G. Wells classic novel so I'll just jump right in to talk about some of the things I liked and disliked.

Kaufmann's and I appreciate their trying to stick around. Kaufman is played by Dennis Hopper as a nicely dressed tough cynic, and Hopper, Baker, and others are afforded chances to deliver the occasional neat line.

A key question this time is: Are the zombies beginning to learn and organize? The answer: Not much, but still enough to be plenty dangerous. I enjoyed how the plot seems to subtly exploit local culture. Our July 4th fireworks, for example, become "skyflowers," distractions to momentarily mesmerize zombie hordes before mowing them down. The Fiddler's Green tower vainly insists on making every night a "light-up night," even though that light will lure said zombie hordes, inspiring them to march right over the river bed towards it.

This is basically drive-in fare, but particularly good as that goes. The gore effects are cheesy, but earnest and loving (as cheesy gore effects go), and we get to see Tom Savini himself pitch in as something called the Machete Zombie. There's good support all around: Asia Argento as a tough gal, John Leguizamo as a can-do fighter much as he was in *Executive Decision* — and somehow I'll have to figure out who the great zombie is who comes closest to being the "leader" of his bunch. When we first meet him, he is trying to pump gas — and before movie's end, he will get rather inventive about it.

So, it takes away some of the letdown of *Dawn* -- but what's the point this time, anyway? As ever, writer (as well as director) George Romero toys with classism, only to offer a too-literal interpretation of the radical battle cry "Eat the rich!" Meanwhile, from beginning to end, Baker obsesses over getting away to Canada. Sure, Riley — and maybe folks just like you down in Mexico City are thinking "So much for all that — now, El Norte!" We seem to care less these days if the grass is actually greener — just so long as it's snowier.

Star Wars

Commentary by Carole McIntyre

A conversation that didn't make it into film:

"You don't, for example, use the Force to win at solitaire."

"Could I?" Anakin looked at Obi-Wan with surprise.

"Yes. You could also use a sledgehammer to kill a fly on a coffee table.

However, the coffee table would not benefit."

In none of the *Star Wars* films is the nature of the Force spelled out. However, to at least some of its beneficiaries, it is more than just a cosmic electricity; it seems to have the ability to convey wisdom. Obi-Wan and later Yoda are both wise and somewhat wary of the Force. The Jedi Council seems made up of thoughtful, seasoned users of the Force. It is available to them, it is certainly helpful, but some, they know, have used it to the detriment instead of the benefit of their societies. That's the key. Who is using what? Are those who are using the Force also being used by it? If the Force has a "dark side" it presupposes a personification.

If it's just a martial magic, something like a talent for chemistry, then there is no reason for it to have be a "dark side" which can seduce a practitioner. It's a technique, not a teleology. It would be a science, neutral ethically, and the

Movies

Batman Begins:

Gothamer Wings

reviewed by William Blake Hall

The good news is, after six movies (not counting a World War II curiosity) and nearly forty years, this is the best one to have "Batman" in the title (although the presence of Michelle Pfeiffer as Catwoman should still be appreciated). The bad news is that, eight whole years after the disastrous *Batman and Robin*, and with proven competitors like *Spider-Man* and the *X-Men* around, it may be a little too late to resuscitate this particular franchise. I hope for a sequel, but even as I do so I wonder in what new direction this can fly.

Way back with *Batman Returns*, I announced that these were Camp Operas. To its credit, *Batman Begins* is no Camp Opera, no grand carnival for the indulgences of a Tim Burton or a Joel Schumacher. If there's any essential weakness, it's that, just as I have seen the mystique of Jedi knighthood vanish before my eyes in *Revenge of the Sith*, so the conceit of Lone Superarmored Fighter-Acrobat Defends Megalopolis From Powerful Madmen really does seem to be hitting its limits. Within those limits, though, *Batman Begins* is unusually intelligent and has its nifty diversions. Here Gotham is a kind of metaphor for America, and the Wayne family is a dynasty of private enterprise providing the equivalent of the great soldiers and statesmen of our heritage.

As surely as Manderly is haunted by the unseen titular entity in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, so Wayne Manor is haunted -- but in a good way -- by the spirit of the briefly glimpsed father Thomas Wayne (Linus Roache). We learn that Wayne Industries nearly went bankrupt trying to help keep society afloat during the Depression, and we even learn that the Waynes may have used the caves deep below their land as part of the Underground Railroad. In Christian Bale, we see Bruce Wayne reasoning out how and why he should take on this persona. (Unfortunately, there's still never getting around the fact that this is a man going around dressed like a bat, a sight more likely to generate jeers than fears, but Bale does what he can.)

The grimness of this tale is nicely balanced by the presence of Michael Caine as Alfred Pennyworth, here not just a butler but a kind of surrogate father figure, and Morgan Freeman as Lucius Fox, who is roughly to Batman what Q is to James Bond. It is almost sad to see Tom Wilkinson, my personal hero from *The Full Monty* and *In the Bedroom*, made a Mafia figure with the corny name Carmine Falcone, but he does all right. Similarly, it's sad to see Liam Neeson play a not-so-nice guy, but he's up for that as well. Cillian Murphy is subtly creepy as the rarest thing of all: A Batman villain who is genuinely scary; in this case a psychologist calling himself the Scarecrow. Katie Holmes is enchanting and tough – I'd say more, but Mr. Cruise might resent my treading on his monopoly. Even Rutger Hauer is on hand as an untrustworthy Wayne CEO. What's more, the Batmobile this time is sort of a cross between a

Lamborghini and a tank. There's a lot to relish.

Personally, I wish the plot could have focussed more on the Scarecrow, because other plot devices just smack of the obligatory. The League of Shadows seems mainly a grand excuse for evil stuff to happen, and it is almost disappointing to learn that a Joker might be on the horizon. There are precious few villains I care about, ranging from Spidey's Doc Oc to Dr. Doom in the forthcoming *Fantastic Four* venture. I'd love to see The Owl, if only I could avoid Ben Affleck as *Daredevil* in that bargain. In my personal opinion, the Batman villainology needs a serious overhaul -- it needs more Scarecrows, and not from Oz either.

What is particularly cool is how much this reminds me of other things. Batman's exotic travels remind me of Lamont Cranston, *The Shadow*, grappling with issues of evil and power in Asia. Batman's playboy persona brings to mind *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

So I'm up for another dose of this. After decades of alternating between campy parody and circuslike nightmare, the bar has finally been raised -- and so, with any luck, has the bat.

The War of the Worlds

a Film by Timothy Hines

reviewed by Kevin Geiselman

Last year when I learned that Stephen Spielberg was doing *War of the Worlds* I immediately set out to search the web for as much information as I could find. In short order I discovered that there was another production under way in England. Indy filmmaker Timothy Hines was doing WotW in it's proper, turn of the century setting. I had been waiting a very long time for such a thing.

But as more and more news came out from Pendragon Pictures and hit the WotW bulletin boards, I began to despair. The theatrical release date was pushed back. The on-line trailer looked preliminary. The director reported pressure from Paramount. The theatrical release was delayed again without the DVD release date changing. The announced DVD distributor was known for "bandwagon" releases. The official website stopped updating.

Pendragon Picture's *War of the Worlds* hit Wal-Mart shelves a week before the official DVD release date -- on the \$9.95 shelf.

It is an absolutely inept piece of filmmaking. *Manos the Hands of Fate*, *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, *Battlefield Earth*, heck, even the sci-fi channel's *Mansquito* is better than this piece of filth. The acting is bad. Much of it is filmed in Canada (which looks nothing like England). The Canadian actors either have badly faked English accents or are badly dubbed with badly faked English accents. When the heat ray sets people alight, they all respond in the same amateurish hands raised manner, with the same expression and stagger about without falling, as if they're afraid of getting their rented costumes dirty. The effects are unfinished. Fire and explosions are superimposed over the action. People killed by the heat ray are turned into smooth skeletons that continue to writhe about. The Thunderchild looks worse than a children's toy. The

ferry skates across the water as a poorly perspective'd cut-and-paste job. The Martians are comical squids that moon-walk out of their cylinder. The cinematography is cut-rate. When the foot of a Martian war machine stomps in the foreground, it stays rock-steady while the background wobbles. The editing is almost non-existent. There are extended scenes of the Narrator walking or running along abandoned roads. Scenes supposed to be after dark are missing the cheap blue filter often used to simulate night.

I can find nothing good to say about this film. Heck, even the CD case had an odd smell to it. Just about every *Star Wars* fan film that I've seen come out of someone's garage looks better than this. With a decent piece of software and a big box of Legos I could make a better film than this.

In a disturbing turn, at Amazon.com the reviews come in two flavors. Those who, like me, believe the movie is awful and wish they could review it at lower than one star and the others that think it is the greatest movie ever made. Look closer and you will see that all those who rate this at five stars only have one review in their history. I have no doubt that these are "sock puppets", dispatched by Hines to try to skew the ranking and generate profits.

I have waited a long time for an authentic presentation of H.G. Well's *War of the the Worlds*. I'm still waiting.

Land of the Dead:

When There's No More Room in Hell,

The Living Will Move to Canada

reviewed by William Blake Hall

I'm gratified to see that New York City may get to live on fictionally, not only through Spider-Man, or as Metropolis in a new Superman movie, but as Gotham City with Christian Bale (what a marvelously loaded name!) as its Dark Knight. (Incidentally, I caught *Batman Begins* a second time, something I rarely do anymore, and enjoyed it even more.) When it comes to Pittsburgh, though, you may as well catch *Land of the Dead* as fast as possible, because this may be the last major tribute to our city in any foreseeable future.

Land fulfills one small but appreciable favor: It rounds out the "trilogy," which began with a classic and continued with a good movie in its own right -- inspiring the British homage *Shaun of the Dead* earlier this year -- only to then slam into the rather pointless *Day of the Dead*. *Land* comes close to reclaiming the thrills of Dawn, although with no particular end or resolution.

Simon Baker, from TV's vaguely Pittsburgh-based *The Guardian*, stays close to the Burgh by playing Riley(!!!), a professional zombie fighter complete with his own iconic vehicle, a giant armored truck beautifully named Dead Reckoning. Pittsburgh is never cited outright, but it's all there: the three rivers, the profusion of bridges, the compact but still respectable buildingscape of Downtown. This time around though, Downtown has a weird (even by PPG standards) tower superimposed upon it called Fiddler's Green, where people can persist in an illusion of carefree neo-royal yuppiedom. The Green is the masterwork of Kaufman -- an inside joke I didn't care for, since I rather like