PARSEC Meeting Schedule

August 2004
Date: August 14th 2004
Topic: Annual Parsec Picnic
Location: Bellevue Park

September 2004
Date: September 11th 2004
Topic: Bigfoot Research
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library

Stuff

• SFWA president Catherine Asaro appointed Diane Turnshek to fill the spot of Eastern Regional Director (until the election next year). The regional directorships are high service positions, with no pay involved. The Eastern Regional Director interfaces with WorldCon staff (if the con is held on the East coast), organizes the New York City Reception in November, and coordinates the SFWA suite at cons.
• From Greg Armstrong: For everyone who aided with the confluence Con Suite, I would like to extend my heart-felt thanks. There were many of you, and I couldn’t have done it without you. Special thanks to Lisa Walton for making 3 pots of barbeque kielbasi; it was marvelous as always. Lara, your help was especially timely; it gave me the energy to finish the day with a smile. Another special thanks to Pete Grubbs, who came up on saturday Night and played his guitar... and played, and played and played.
• Mary Soon Lee’s story “Shen’s Daughter” was just reprinted in The Year’s Best Fantasy #4, edited by David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer.
Random Rantings
The President's Column - Kevin Geiselman

In the weeks leading up to Confluence, I split most of my free time between immersing myself in kaiju culture in preparation for a weekend of Godzilla videos and keeping the website as current as I could manage. As a result, I come into this month’s Sigma with my brain completely stomped flat and absolutely nothing coherent to put together into a president’s column. Instead, you’ll get a handful of random ramblings necessary to fill this page.

I consider my weekend of preaching the Gospel According to Godzilla a complete success as Shoshana had to drag her boys literally kicking and screaming from the video room, yelling, "I wanna see Godzilla! I WANNA SEE GODZILLA!" Mission accomplished. I’m sure I will be made to pay for that later.

Ohio mosquitoes are nasty little monsters. Sure, the Pennsylvania variety bite and itch, but only for a day or so. The bites I got while camping two weeks ago are still itching. What’s up with that?

An insect haiku::

Forgot to wear Deet
Mosquitoes suck all my blood
Now a shriveled husk.

A friend of mine teaching in Japan used his cell phone to e-mail some of his drawings of his friends, including myself. I asked him what the story was behind them and he said that he used them as illustrations when talking about us to his poli-sci students. I don’t know whether to be flattered or frightened. I’m not psychopathic, I’m just drawn that way.

The past month at work has been murderous, but webcomics are saving my sanity. In the time between idiot phone calls, I’ve been reading Questionable Content, Elf Goonish Shive, Elf Only Inn, It’s Walky! and Megatokyo. Sure, there’s a lot of garbage on the internet, but some things shine through. I’m astonished that these people have time to work real jobs and still crank out webcomics three times (or more) a week. On the other hand, I’ve found the time to read all their comics while at work. I consider it more productive use of my time than online flash games.

Burt Rutan has announced that his privately funded and operated spacecraft SpaceShipOne, which successfully made it into space last month, will be going for the $1 million X-Prize at the end of next month. The requirement is that he launch three (or one and the weight equivalent of two more) into space and then turn around and do it again in three weeks. SpaceShipOne’s first flight will be on the 29th of September and he will turn it around and do it again on October 4th, continued on page 13

I include Jon Stewart here for three reasons. One: because Michael Moore refuses to arrive at any one consistent conclusion, anyone seeking a crash course in modern liberalism can’t just see the movie, they’ve also got to catch the show. Two: if you’re worried that these guys worship at the shrine of John Kerry, forget it, because Moore’s movie is ultimately worthless to Kerry, and Stewart’s show proves that. Neither Bush nor Kerry -- who might as well get together and start their own Skull and Bones party -- favor the cut-and-run pullout that Moore seems to want; for that option, you’re stuck with a Ralph Nader or a Dennis Kucinich. As for Stewart, it’s tough to argue that a show that consistently compares Kerry to a brain-eating zombie is unconditionally in love with the man.

Three, and most important: Stewart poses a question which, ideally, would be posed by Moore. Given not only the Bush Doctrine but the Bush Behavior, what is to now stop Bush from going through a checklist -- "evil dictatorship, yup; inflammatory anti-American rhetoric, yup; possible WMDs, yup" -- and declaring “preemptive” war against Sudan, or Iran, or North Korea? For that matter, what if Bush ever gets past the “blind spot” that Moore seems to accuse him of, and actually takes on Yemen, or Syria, or (dare we even breathe the possibility?) Saudi Arabia? The one bright spot in Iraq War II was the capture of Saddam, but let’s not kid ourselves, our planet has plenty more tyrants left who we could take on, like Kim Jong-Il, and we take on each and every one at considerable cost in money, resources, lives, and our standing in the world. Bush 43’s heritage to us is a wide open door to fight any dictatorship (which hardly narrows the geographic range, does it?) at any time for any reason, or even any conspicuous lack of reason. Moore strongly suggests a profiteering motive behind that wide open door -- however, with or without such a motive, it is still a door that should be closed. As I look back on history, many wars made some sense. World War II definitely made sense. Korea made some sense. The liberation of Kuwait made some sense. Even the Vietnam War might have made sense, if the Gulf of Tonkin incident had been an actual incident, and the war had been formally declared. But to fight an “anti-al-Qaeda” war which completely misses al-Qaeda and drains resources away from fighting al-Qaeda while enriching a medium for offshoots of al-Qaeda to grow and spread, by hunting a tyrant who had already been militarily neutralized -- sorry, uh-uh, no. A war must procure a wariness to us is a wide open door to fight any dictatorship (which hardly narrows the geographic range, does it?) at any time for any reason, or even any conspicuous lack of reason. Moore strongly suggests a profiteering motive behind that wide open door -- however, with or without such a motive, it is still a door that should be closed. As I look back on history, many wars made some sense. World War II definitely made sense. Korea made some sense. The liberation of Kuwait made some sense. Even the Vietnam War might have made sense, if the Gulf of Tonkin incident had been an actual incident, and the war had been formally declared. But to fight an “anti-al-Qaeda” war which completely misses al-Qaeda and drains resources away from fighting al-Qaeda while enriching a medium for offshoots of al-Qaeda to grow and spread, by hunting a tyrant who had already been militarily neutralized -- sorry, uh-uh, no. A war must procure a good that was worth it. A bearded Saddam, while amusing, was not worth it.

I even tire of GOP “God’s Own Party” claims. My father, a former Air Force captain now active in a Baptist church, imagines Bush 43 being asked by God “How could you declare a preemptive war, which didn’t even preempt anything?” Call me morally depraved, but I would exchange the war of Bush 43 for the extramarital slovenliness of Clinton in a heartbeat.

But enough about me. A final word, about the title: the phrase “Fahrenheit 9/11” was e-mailed to Moore, and it intrigued him enough to use it. Ray Bradbury, author of Fahrenheit 451, has asked for an apology, and as of this writ-
Reviews

Books

Singularity Sky
by Charles Stross
reviewed by Ann Cecil

Charles Stross is the hottest new name in science-fiction just now. He resonates with the internet geeks in a big way, and his newest novel contains cover blurbs from the leading authors and editors in the field praising him. "Where Charles Stross goes today, the rest of science fiction will follow tomorrow," according to Gardner Dozois.

So I looked forward with a great deal of enthusiasm to this novel, since it has been nominated for a Hugo. I have mixed feelings about it, I find. It is indeed, as the jacket blurbs, "A carnival of ideas disguised as a space opera." There are two problems: most of the ideas are pretty familiar ones, and the large cast (as you must have in a space opera) flash on and off stage before I really got to know (or very much care about) any of them.

Some of the problem is that Stross is trying for satire. Satire is a dangerous and risky proposition; it is all too easy to wind up with slapstick where you meant to have irony. The basic story is about a future where Humanity has been forcibly scattered into many colonies, mostly on habitable worlds, given the means to communicate at ftl speeds and the means to travel (somewhat less quickly), but also given a Set of Rules by an alien superpower called The Eschaton. Rule number 1 is no causal violations (i.e., time travel). We are using the latest scientific speculation here, with a 'way to do time travel' taken right out the latest physics journals. Stross info-dumps smoothly, explaining how this all works.

In the New Republic, Humanity has chosen to return to a harsher, drabber age, with a Tzarist governmental structure and much repression. One of the New Republic's colony worlds is visited by the Festival, an alien and marvelous group dedicated to communication and freedom of information. The colony world goes into an economic and political Singularity (which reads remarkably like a revolution), and the New Republic sends its fleet out to settle things down. Since this is a satire, the New Republic puts the fleet in charge of a senile Admiral. Several of the scenes meant to be riotously funny involve the man's pathetic delusions; I guess senility seems like a real laugh when you're under 30.

Our hero and heroine are agents for various groups from Earth who are trying to manipulate the colony worlds so as to avoid nasty repercussions from The Eschaton (like wiping out a set of worlds including those for some parsecs around the New Republic) because the New Republic plans to bend Rule Number 1 in their struggle against the Festival.

Commentary

Ann Cecil

20 years ago, in July of 1984, a dozen of us gathered in Barbara Carlson's old back yard (the house in Crafton heights where she lived with her first husband) and held the first PARSEC meeting.

OK, the group wasn't called PARSEC then; we didn't know if there was enough interest to form a club, but Barbara was determined. She wanted a club, and she sent messages over the Internet and made cookies and browbeat people, so we held a meeting. Julia Ecklar brought some people she'd met at an SCA function, and she sang. Somebody volunteered to hold the next meeting at his or her place.

During the remains of 1984 (great choice for a starting year, right? All Barbara's idea), we met in Murrysville, and in Bloomfield [at homes of people who are no longer members], at Barbara's again, and someplace else? It wasn't until the next December (1985) that we held the first Christmas party at Ann's (yes, the tradition is that old). The July meeting (July 19) was held at Barb and Roy Carlson's as a joint Wedding reception/ PARSEC meeting.

And the name was hammered out during 1985; Roy Carlson was involved in the construction of that amazing acronym we came up with.

So next year PARSEC collected dues, elected officers (Barb was President, I was Treasurer, the VP was Larry Digoia), and put out a regular newsletter. It was named SIGMA from the start, but it didn't look much like the current newsletter.

We actually incorporated the club in 1991, when Glen Chambers (Toledo's gain, our loss) was President, Kevin Riley was VP, and Debbie Ayres was Treasurer (an excellent Treasurer, by the way). PARSEC has been a “not-for-profit” Inc. in Pennsylvania ever since. It's just the Feds we haven't dealt with.

And this year, finally, your officers are going to deal with the Feds and get the full, official, US government approved, you can pay cheaper postage, non-profit status. And, as Diane Turnshek says, "we can do grants!" And as Jim Mann says, "we can write off donations on our income taxes!"

Next year, PARSEC will turn 21. All grown up and fully legally recognized to boot. Are we gonna have a real celebration? You bet!
The Festival is a fascinating and exceedingly clever bit of invention. I found the Critics and the Bouncers particularly charming. When the Festival was on scene, this book was terrific; unfortunately we have to read through Martin and Rachel’s attempts at spying to get to the good bits. Stross also sneak in homage to various other authors and mythos here: the most notable is his exceedingly clever play on Terry Pratchett’s Luggage.

Singularity Sky is worth reading, but in my opinion, a bit over-praised. **2004 Short Fiction Hugo Nominees** reviewed by Dan Bloch

As has been the case for the past several years, the short fiction Hugo nominees are available on-line (thanks, Asimov’s, Analog, et al). There is a really strong field this year. In my judgment, there are at least three stories worthy of the Hugo in all three categories, and no really bad stories. Virtually all the stories have well-drawn and memorable characters. This is much better than most years.

In the novella (long story) category, "Just Like the Ones We Used to Know" is yet another Christmas story by Connie Willis. It's funny, human, and, I never thought I would use this word in a review, heart-warming. Connie Willis doesn't really need another Hugo but she'll probably get one. "The Empress of Mars," a non-technical look at the early colonization of Mars, is also a very enjoyable read, as is "The Green Leopard Plague", by Walter Jon Williams, a story of the near future after some very rapid technological changes. Vernor Vinge's "The Cookie Monster" and Catherine Asaro's "Walk in Silence" round out the selection.

The novelette (medium story) category has six entries due to a tie for fifth place, and there's not a weak one in the bunch. "The Empire of Ice Cream," by Jeffrey Ford, is a nice piece about a teen-age boy with synesthesia, a (real) condition where sensory input from the different senses gets confused. I'm pretty sure this is the first story published in an e-zine ever to be nominated for a Hugo. "Into the Gardens of Sweet Night," by Jay Lake, comes from L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future XIX, another unusual source. Unusual as well, this is only Jay Lake's second year as a professional--he's also a nominee for the John W. Campbell Award. The story itself is a road tale in a distant and stratified future, where high technology exists but not equally for everyone, and one of the technologies was the creation of intelligent animals. "Legions in Time," by Michael Swanwick, is a somewhat swashbucking story of a woman from the twentieth century who stumbles into the Time Wars. It's fairly intelligently written, and has one of the best portrayals of an older heroine that I've seen in a long time. "Bernardo's House," by James Patrick Kelly, is a story of an intelligent house trying to get by after her owner leaves her and civilization partly falls. "Hexagons," by Robert Reed, is an alternate history which diverged from ours quite a while ago, but is surprisingly similar in some ways. "Nightfall," by Charles Stross, is an adventure in space and cyberspace and is, IMHO, a little too cyber for its own

Kira Heston talked about three items: the tshirt she was wearing with the program book cover she drew two years ago; her laptop with a very cool unicorn that she created through a graphics program and then sent to a company to make into an acrylic that could become the laptop cover; and a font she is developing called "letter brush." She passed around two pages illustrating her font, which has no punctuation as yet. Kira explained that developing fonts turns out, even if you have lots of graphic arts experience, to take an incredible amount of time. She went to talk about the nit-picky details that she had to take into account.

Kevin Hayes showed off his sketches, including the cover artwork for the projected CD of Filk from Confluence 2003, illustrations of Scribble for use in Triangulations 2004, and a dragon and girl work named Cleanliness.

There was a decision to make a new PARSEC t-shirt with all the various Scribbles (Nancy's, Henry's, Kira's, Kevin's, and maybe even the original SanTara Scribble). This has been discussed before, but this time the decision was made to have it available at the December meeting, and take orders in November (which will be the book sale meeting).

Having run out of prepared artists, the group then disintegrated into several groups. Ann and Greg brought Sasha's TV, and showed an episode of Firefly, for those who aren't familiar with the show (since we are doing a panel on the show at Confluence). Others grouped into conversational mode, discussing books and other topics.

**Geiselman - continued from page 2**

I have convinced a friend of mine and fellow geocacher to do a presentation of Bigfoot and Bigfoot research in Western Pennsylvania at September's meeting. You won't want to miss that.

**Hall - continued from page 15**

ing that apology is forthcoming. Bradbury’s novel was about the suppression of books -- and critics of Moore are mistaken if they honestly believe that destroying Moore will destroy Moore’s case, because the fact is that Moore has a bibliography and is not at all that alone. Novelist Tom Clancy can’t believe this war. Leading cheerleader for this war, columnist and author Thomas Friedman, stands by the war but is furious over a cavalier attitude towards, say, the looting of Baghdad, and wonders how and why Rumsfeld and Tenet still haven’t been fired. General Hugh Shelton disowns this war. James Bamford, author of two good books about the NSA, has come out with the critique Pretext for War. Clancy, Friedman, Shelton, Bamford -- these are simply not granola-crunchin’, latte-sippin’, Birkenstock-galumphin’ guys in shaggy beards and love beads, and any who would discredit Moore ignore all these others (I’m taking Richard Clarke and “our” Paul O’Neill as givens, and I’ve already noted Craig Unger) at vast peril to their own credibility. Fahrenheit 451 was about firemen who burn books, but the challenge today is much subtler. The books need not be burned, if they are rotting for want of being read.
PARSEC met on Saturday July 10, 2004 at the East Liberty branch of the Carnegie Library for the usual meeting. A smaller than usual group assembled (15); several people sent excuses ranging from having their artwork displayed in Wisconsin in a special show to being sick as a dog to having to work.

The raffle was held and then we did the business agenda before drawing a winner: Kevin Hayes won and took the decorated glasses.

Ann talked about the booth at the Arts Festival and response from the public. Poetry was read by Chris Ferrier and Elizabeth Penrose, and well received; Judy Friedl and Ann Cecil read stories from Six From PARSEC and Triangulation, and Randy filked, all of which attracted a small but appreciative audience. We were next to the bandstand, so on Sunday mostly we listened to their music. PARSEC sold 4 copies of Six From PARSEC and 2 copies of Triangulation 2003 and handed out a bunch of flyers about Confluence.

Treasurer's Report was given by Greg Armstrong: mostly we spent a lot of money over the last two months, though some will be reimbursed by confluence leading to a current loss of $727.80.

Confluence program report by Ann, who traded bad puns with several members of the audience during her discussion. She plans to post both a list of confluence pre-reg members and the current program schedule up on the website on Sunday (July 11th).

Heidi Pilewski and Kevin Hayes reported on the Confluence play: Encounter at Four Points Sheraton. A non-musical parody, this had to be cut to fit the time slot (8-9 pm) and there was some discussion of ways to present the entire play as written.

Greg Armstrong suggested and Kira seconded that we re-institute the raffle for SIGMA contributors, so Geis said ok, next meeting we will.

Barton Levenson's novel: Year of the Human has been accepted by Scrybe Press, and will be available electronically and as a paperback. Everyone present clapped and congratulated Barton.

Greg Armstrong announced the death of the copier and his purchase of a new copier, and asked that PARSEC pay the annual maintenance contract of $387. There were no objections. Heidi moved that PARSEC pay this, Kira seconded, and it was approved by hand vote.

Geis announced that all Godzilla films will be released to DVD, but will probably be very expensive.

Among those absent was Sasha and most of the potential art exhibitors. But a few of our artistic members were there to do the Show and Tell.

July Minutes

The short stories lead off with "A Study in Emerald," by Neil Gaiman. I took this to be a science fictional Sherlock Holmes story, but found out later, on the web, that it's really supposed to be a Sherlock Holmes/H.P. Lovecraft pastiche. I didn't see a strong Lovecraft connection, but then I'm not a big Lovecraft reader. Anyway, it was very enjoyable, and if history is any guide will win the Hugo (Gaiman hasn't lost one in a while). This isn't altogether a good thing--I really liked "The Tale of the Golden Eagle," by David D. Levine, another Campbell Award nominee. Without being in any way an imitation it was strongly reminiscent of Cordwainer Smith, and no one has written anything like it in a long time. "Robots Don't Cry," by Mike Resnick, is another nice piece. I first heard it at an author reading at ConJose, and it had the audience crying. The short story nominees are rounded out by Michael A. Burstein's "Pay It Forward" and Joe Haldeman's "Four Short Novels."

Links are at http://www.noreascon.org/hugos/nominees.html. Check 'em out.

Movies/TV

I, Robot

directed by Alex Proyas

screenplay by Jeff Vintar and Akiva Goldsman inspired by Isaac Asimov

starring Will Smith as Detective Del Spooner, Bridget Moynahan as Dr. Susan Calvin

reviewed by Anders Brink

Forget everything the critics are saying about this movie. Forget one's misgivings upon seeing the movie teasers where robot armies march, killing people and destroying property. This is a movie that remains true to the spirit of Isaac Asimov's robots. May he rest soundly in peace.

First let's get the planks of snootiness about Hollywood out of our eyes. Yes, this is a summer blockbuster, where the hero is an action figure that races bikes, outruns explosions and jumps across walkways of dizzying height, all the while mouthing witty one-liners. All of these movie cliches are there, and if their mere presence turns you off, then go no further, the movie will be a waste of your money. If however, you go in with your expectations adjusted such that you see these as mere plot-devices to carry a LOGICAL story about The Three Laws of Robotics, about the relationship of Humans to Robots, then you will not be disappointed.

Secondly, forget about the claims that the movie only pays lip service to the Three Laws. It does not. This is full-blooded robot story and deserves to be included in Asimov's anthology. I say that without reservation.

The movie begins with the President of USR Robotics (James Cromwell, from Star Trek: First Contact) found dead within his laboratory of robots. Detective Del Spooner (Will Smith, who needs no introduction) is personally asked by the victim via a holographic recording to investigate the case. The official record is suicide, but Del Spooner suspects murder, by a robot. Is it because
he is a luddite, who hates robots and is looking for any excuse to pin this on them? The movie trailers play up this angle, but I hope I am not spoiling it for you to say that it is not so.

In fact, Del Spooner's dislike of robots is based on experience, and is a reasonable, morally noble one that has nothing to do with whatever injury he has suffered because of robots. I found this piece of character-building remarkable, coming from a Hollywood SF movie. This is a genuine hero. I apologise again if this is spoiling it for you, but there are more twists in the story than that.

In fact, the movie is a murder mystery, and like all murder mysteries, it encourages you to try to outguess it. That I could is testament to the how logical to plotting is. And when it is finally explained, it is done using one of Asimov's ideas. One that he found necessary to develop until it tied to another series that he wrote. That's all I will say about this.

Unfortunately, this is the reason why I think the movie failed. It failed not because it wasn't true to the Asimov's vision of robots, not because it did not explore the tensions created by the Three Laws but because it did not reach a wide audience. As that final piece of explanation unfolded onscreen, I sensed that the audience, unfamiliar with Asimov's writings, found the resolution ludicrous.

You can't blame them. This is the same audience that found the ending of Spielberg's A.I. ridiculous. Blind to the SF-thinking that went on in that movie, they consider that movie finished at the point where the child-robot pines for the blue fairy, seemingly forever, at the bottom of the ocean. No doubt, that was the emotional end of that movie, but not the intellectually satisfying resolution.

In other words, this is one movie that will be remembered well by the SF fan who understands SF as the literature of ideas, and the SF movie as pushing it beyond literature. It will probably be played again and again at SF cons. But the general audience will see it as a Hollywood popcorn movie, and forget it in a week. Even Ebert, one of the widest read, SF-friendly critic has panned it. Alas.

But I am not done yet. The most disappointing aspect of the movie was the cliched way they handled the final conflict, where the robots riot. Yes, they do, and yes, it's a First Law violation. Disappointing for this SF fan was also Susan Calvin, whose character was not established or developed well. I had hoped to see more of her brilliance, and less of her body. (Yes, there's that.) Using nanites to disable a positronic brain is also not canon. It is not that hard to invent a way to disable a positronic brain without having to invoke yet another technological wonder not from Asimov.

This movie was not the dud that I had thought it would be. See it if you can afford to. I consider it high up there, on par with "The Thirteenth Floor", "A.I." and "Dark City", Alex Proyas's other SF film.

Addendum:

After calmness has set in, I have started to notice the cracks. The grand arc of the story is not very well motivated. Why did the Lanning HAVE TO DIE? This is not explained well, and for this reason, I have to reduce my praise for this "conclusions." That's too kind. Moore does not reach conclusions -- he never has and probably never will. The whole joke of Roger & Me was that he never got to actually meet GM president Roger Smith, and in Bowling for Columbine he tested some pat liberal assumptions but wound up still about as mystified by the American culture of gun violence as when he began. I suspect that at heart Moore is a pacifist, or at least a Chomsky-like pacifist, who essentially believes that America should never do anything anywhere, and that's where he and I have to part company. He allows Richard Clarke to complain about the inadequate troop presence in Afghanistan, only to lampoon our entry into Afghanistan with the opening credits of Bonanza and go on to make points which are emotionally powerful, and deservedly so, yet ultimately unedifying: war kills good people and maims and mutilates so many others, it inflames outrage no matter how carefully you plan and target it, so many soldiers are recruited from the ranks of the poor, etc., etc. Has it ever occurred to Moore that he can't be UltraDove AND GloboCop in the same breath? I doubt it.

The first half hour or so of Fahrenheit 9/11 is brilliant, it's solid journalism. The moment it enters Iraq, though, it sort of evaporates and meanders and never really regains its linear power. Moore, having written "Dude, Where's My Country?", leaves me wondering "Dude, where's my movie?" Here's where he prefers to assess the human toll rather than questions of policy, though it is still quite something to learn of Bush 43's cuts of veterans' benefits, or to meet Lila Lipscomb of Moore's own Flint, Michigan. Lila Lipscomb deserves an answer for the death of her son, and I've not heard it yet.

It is at times like these, watching or reviewing a Michael Moore movie, that I am so glad that The Daily Show exists as a crucial supplement. I still don't get premium cable, not even HBO, so I feel privileged that Comedy Central is part of my basic package. Lots of kids now rely on this fake news show for actual news coverage -- and honestly, who can blame them? Where else will they see the endless parroting of the "a map of Afghanistan was rolled out" line, a piece of political theater I've not witnessed since the 1969 thriller Z? Where else will they see videotape directly and flagrantly contradicting later statements by Bush or Cheney or Powell? When Bush says he doesn't remember seeing the document that releases him from the constraints of the Geneva Convention, who else will show us his signature on said document? Lest you worry that this Emmy-winning show is merely Rush Limbaugh inverted and thereby just more gasoline on the fire, fear not, for its host, Jon Stewart, handily outclasses Limbaugh by several orders of magnitude. Stewart actually converses with guests -- a tactic that Limbaugh tried early in his career and simply couldn't handle -- and deals with an interesting mix of people. He will talk with Oliver North, William Kristol, Bush counsel Karen Hughes -- in short, a fair selection of conservatives and even archeconservatives. What's more, he will even chide his own audience to remain polite, and is consistently interested in keeping all (or just about all) lines of communication open.

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er who can be fascinated almost as much by the analysis of a misfire as by the appreciation of a masterpiece, so I girded my loins and went, fully anticipating that if I were to review it at all I might try out the title "Fahrenheit 9/11: How Moore Has Become Less."

Of course, if you were to accuse me of rooting for Moore to succeed on some personal level, you would be correct. We live in increasingly science-fictional times, and I consider it neither hype nor exaggeration to be properly concerned that we may stand at the brink of an era of perpetual war. If the best way to fight and win a War on Terror does indeed demand such a Hundred Years War, then so be it; however, if it is not at all the best way to combat terror, if such a policy in fact inflames terror, then one begins to wonder: How did so bleak and radical a policy look so irresistibly attractive to our leadership in spite of so much data to the contrary? In and of itself, the headline of the Bush Doctrine is fine, the hunting out of terror worldwide; I liked it way back when it was the Jim Marshall Doctrine in the magnificently hokey Harrison Ford thriller Air Force One. Nor did I even mind the caveat that we would go alone if necessary. However, when you add to the Bush Doctrine what I would call the Bush Behavior, then the sort of perpetual war that Orwell warned us about begins to look inevitable -- more on this later.

So I went, not likely to disagree -- yet thoroughly prepared to disown it. I was all set to say that Moore had reached critical mass of hubris, that he had bitten off more than even he could chew, that the movie was a tragic and regrettable disappointment.

It's not.

Is Moore the best person to make this movie? On so many levels, absolutely not -- yet to me, focusing on Moore only misses the larger and far scarier point. To me, the real question is: why has it been left to one lone working-class schlub of a guy to show us what the "liberal media" has not? Why, in a country where many people imagine Democrats to be whiny grubby opportunistically insurrectionists, have we never before seen footage of the signatures of over 26,000 Florida voters being brought before the Senate, with Gore presiding, and not one Senator coming forward to add his own signature? Why is it still news to many people, in spite of the availability of the book House of Bush, House of Saud by Craig Unger, that Bush had a business partner, one James Reynolds Bath (the similarity to "Ba'ath" just kills me), in common with the rich and powerful bin Laden family; a relationship enriching the Bushes and their partners by $1.4 billion? Why were members of the bin Laden family permitted to fly out of America right after 9/11 when not even Bush's father, "Bush 41" in Presidential lingo, was permitted to fly? Why were the two crucial months immediately after 9/11 frittered away during which it would have been ideal to "smoke out" Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan?

And by the way: why are we in Iraq?

Some who see this movie will complain that they disagree with Moore's movie somewhat. In other words, be prepared for a roller-coaster ride to nowhere. **Forgetting How to Add:**

**I, Robot, Catwoman**

reviewed by William Blake Hall

The more movies I see, the more I wonder: are moviemakers all businessmen, or are there any moviemakers still left among them? Among writers I find that a good writer is usually a good reader, with some appreciation of what has been written before and of what is currently being tried out by various talents. I get worried when I hear people involved in a remake refusing to watch the original, either out of humility or a fear of "infecting" their creativity. Is the simple act of properly informing -- and entertaining -- one's self really so big a deal? It would be nice if Hollywood ever became conversant in SF literature, but for right now I would be satisfied if it ever showed signs of staying aware of its own SF lore.

Certainly I was filled with dread going to I, Robot, as the ads for it relentlessly pushed the apparent storyline of Maverick Cop as Lone Prophet Against Instant Revolution by Gratuitously Cranky Machines. Hollywood continues to buy into the equation Will Smith Plus Big Summer Actioner Equal Sure Thing. However, the simple phrase "directed by Alex Proyas" would have gone far to reassure me. Proyas salvaged Brandon Lee's last movie, The Crow, and displayed a compelling vision in Dark City. You can sense him struggling to keep this thing unique and intelligent in spite of its production process.

I, Robot is worth catching, but it suffers from the same problem that plagues a nifty project like Titan AE, the ending of which can not help but be overshadowed by Wrath of Khan. I see a hunter of humanoids becoming the hunted and wistfully wish for Blade Runner; I see Asimov getting invoked and wish for something more direct, like the clunky but effective "I, Robot" episode from the original Outer Limits; I hear the Great Motive and think of Colossus: The Forbin Project, or Jack Williamson's "With Folded Hands," or even the original Star Trek episode "I, Mudd." For those of us who already know what SF is, the Prince may be Fresh but most of the ideas, though enjoyable, feel stale. I wish the movie had better developed the story of a unique robot called Sonny, who/which was the one best original contributions this movie made.

Alternately, I so wanted to like Catwoman, and for a half hour it was going nicely -- and then she got into costume. Donkey-sized ears cap something far more like a helmet than a mask -- and is she going to run around that bare in the winter? I don't give a proverbial fig for the Batman purists, but I must admit that the idea of an Ultimate Bad Girl is an enduring and powerful one. One could check out the two Cat People movies (I prefer the Simone Simone original), or Emma Peel in old Avengers episodes, or even Roger Corman's Batman ripoff Black Scorpion featuring the bewitching eyes of Joan Severance, as well as such oddities as Irma Vep starring the wonderful Maggie Cheung. But no, while Witchbladishly suggesting a centuries-long reign of catwomen, it can't be both-
er to be anything more than "Halle Berry as Spider-Man." The rush to produce once more overrides that basic rule of the scientific method -- check the literature.

So, I. *Robot* won't hurt too bad and will have its diversions, while you should save *Catwoman* for video rental when you can edit it to your tastes. (The lesson of *Catwoman* is that star power means nothing without co-star power -- the villains are nothings, Benjamin Bratt is, considering his name, ironically bland, there's barely a plot and the director stinks.) As we drift into the leavings of the August feast of films, I wonder if simply forcing producers to sit and watch good movies would have any effect. You would think they shouldn't even be forced.

**Buy the Numbers:**

**Harry Potter 3, Shrek 2, Spider-Man 2**

reviewed by William Blake Hall

Having decided to dedicate itself to sequels, Hollywood is now bothering to get some right. Sometimes a sequel is actually a step up: *Superman II* was liberated from Kal-El's pedestrian backstory, and *Wrath of Khan* was light-years (har har yuk yuk) beyond *Star Trek: The Motion Sickness*. As we look forward to dubious exploitations of long-established titles like *The Manchurian Candidate* numbers may signal (relative) freshness and quality.

I'm not sure I've commented on any previous Harry movies, but this one appealed to me the most. So far this has been a summer of sublimated sexuality, and when it begins with Harry hiding under his covers workin' his wand, workin' his wand, workin' his wand until his wand finally erupts in a triumphant burst of glorious energy (we've all been there, haven't we, guys?), you know that major life changes are afoot. Unfortunately, Harry doesn't seem to be thinking much about Hermione during all that wand-workin'; he's rather glum and angry right now, and I do hope he gets over that. Still, I found this to be a refreshing change from the "Guess which suspect is the privately sneering villain" formula of the previous two. These three sequels I'm reviewing all seem to be synchronized by and for the common theme "Can I be loved or respected for who I truly am?", and not too surprisingly it is the British movie that takes the more sophisticated approach, dealing with simple respect rather than mushy love and having Harry scramble to defend respect for others, not simply himself. During the course of the movie we must wonder and worry about escaped prisoner Sirius Black (Gary Oldman) and a seemingly sympathetic teacher named Lupin (David Thewlis), but we must worry even more about law enforcement wrathful Dementors whose shrieky, willowy, narrow-chilling style recalls the Nazguls hunting the One Ring. Throw in a truly cool creature called a hippogriff, Timothy Spall as a rat (figuratively or literally, he goes either way), and Hermione, who deserves an award as World's Greatest All-Time Nerd (and I mean that in a good way) demonstrating powers of time travel, and you're off and running. In my old age I've gotten a bit fed up with time travel, but this movie applied it cleverly enough for me to discover time travel's charms all over again, and that ain't hay. Now I'm into this series.

*Shrek 2* may have run its course, but it reaches a fine destination. The first *Shrek* didn't do much for me, as it seemed to take rather easy and/or vulgar pokes at fairy tale lore, but this one takes as mild a problem as "Shall I visit the in-laws?" and turns it into an epic struggle all its own. Like the old Hope-Crosby Road movies before it, we get endless pop culture references: *Alien, The Matrix, From Here to Eternity* -- nothing is sacred. Antonio Banderas voices a rather Zorro-like Puss'n Boots, who can become THE most pathetically irresistible kitty you ever saw in your life whenever it suits him strategically. The story is subtly sophisticated, dealing with the Wishing Things Had Been Otherwise issue, and stays true to its characters. It's good stuff.

The original *Spider-Man* was no slouch, but *Spider-Man 2* is also a must-see. J.K. Simmons' tabloid publisher J. Jonah Jameson is half the fun all by himself, and it is wild to see Peter constantly up against schizophrenic geniuses, rather like ... um ... Peter! In *Doctor Octopus* ("A man named Otto Octavius becomes an eight-limbed monster -- what are the odds?" notes Jameson) we see an even more conflicted person than the Green Goblin, and the fact that he has as many limbs as a spider makes the whole business all the more eerie. There's also some great un-Supermanlike self-deprecating humor, as when Spidey has to take an elevator, or director Sam Raimi treats us to a sequence using "Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head" to surprisingly good effect. Spidey is asserted once more as a Hero of the People, and Kirsten Dunst as Mary Jane Watson gets the movie's best lines. This is a worthy chapter.

What can I say? When you're gambling at the multiplex, try a number. It doesn't always happen, and there's no telling when it will happen again.

**The Original Forever War:**

**Fahrenheit 9/11, The Daily Show**

reviewed by William Blake Hall

Towards the end of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Michael Moore quotes from that wonderful book "The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism" by Emmanuel Goldstein, which of course is the "book within the book" of George Orwell's *1984*. Orwell, as Goldstein, writes that war between Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia is designed to be eternal and pointless, the better to provide internal stability for the dictators engaged. I suppose you could think of that condition, with a nod to Joe Haldeman, as the Original Forever War.

Invocations of Orwell are the proverbial dime a dozen among extremists both Left and Right, so if all Moore did was abuse one quote I wouldn't even be reviewing him. In fact, I was fully prepared to see Moore misfire terribly. I caught George Stephanopoulos making a correction to how Moore edited his conversation with a congressman, and I read David Denby's New Yorker piece noting, very correctly, that any military thesis of Moore's isflagrantly self-contradictory, and I even read Christopher Hitchens' exhaustive (and exhausting) point-by-point critique on the webzine Slate. Yet I am that perverse sort of moviego-