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COMMENTARY

# Hanks: Fantasy films draw their lifeblood from Austin

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For the last year, my husband has spent his Saturdays helping friends build a 9-foot copy of the TARDIS time-traveling spaceship from the BBC's "Doctor Who" TV series. To the uninitiated, it looks like a 1960s British police call box. Yet to the science-fiction uber-geek, it's the equivalent of a hot-rod sports car for transversing the universe.

This construction project isn't out of character. Our tiny house boasts stacks of anime DVDs, vintage Dungeons & Dragons games and shelves stuffed with dusty comic books. Hubby's version of male bonding is a fantasy board game, where, if you play your cards right, you might spend the day as an elf.

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So, when I first started proclaiming that Austin's movie scene was a hotbed of fantasy, horror and science-fiction genre films, I wondered whether my home life skewed my perspective. After all, taking your morning banana out of a skull-shaped fruit bowl must weigh on the subconscious.

Yet, as this year's South by Southwest Film Festival lineup illustrates, Austin creates and supports the sci-fi, horror and fantasy communities with remarkable devotion. After all, Austin can boast that Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino recently shot their B-movie inspired "Grindhouse" double-feature here. Richard Linklater made his sci-fi film "A Scanner Darkly" here, while Mike Judge used Austin Studios for "Idiocracy," a comedy set 500 years in the future.

Then there's the SXSW film I'm most looking forward to — the locally made quasi-gothic love story "Elvis and Anabelle." The film features unlicensed mortician Elvis falling in love with an only slightly dead Texas beauty queen. What could be sweeter?

Inspired by the intrepid heroines of countless horror films, I had to find out how this local enthusiasm for otherworldly films developed.

So I called Paul Alvarado-Dykstra, co-founder of Fantastic Fest, the ghoul-a-licious genre film love-in. He told me Austin loves genre films because of its residents' collective geekiness. He said the area boasts many people working in creative fields such as advertising, technology, film and game-making. Together, these creative people form a geek critical mass.

Then I called Matt Dentler, a SXSW programmer, who agreed that Austinites love genre films.

"I think it's absolutely true. Austin has created a whole community for that scene," Dentler said. Part of Dentler's explanation was demographic.

"Austin is a young town, the university in particular. Thousands of new residents coming in each year," said Dentler, adding that genre films were great for the young and young at heart.

Hmmm, so geeks and young people are responsible. And where do you find the largest concentration of geeks and young people?

As a University of Texas alumna, I proudly reasoned that genre film appreciation must have originated at UT.

Under a full moon, I devised a UT geek divining rod out of two No. 2 pencils. The makeshift longhorn pointed me to UT's Harry Ransom Center, the final resting place of rare books and manuscripts, including 35,000 volumes of science fiction.

That's when I realized Austin's genre appreciation must be caused by the vibrations emanating from Ransom Center materials. Just the collection of horror master Edgar Allan Poe must be generating

megawatts of paranormal power. Poe-centric objects at the Ransom Center include a lock of his hair, his writing desk and first editions of most of his works. Throw in the center's other, um, curiosities, such as the socks peeled off after Sherlock Holmes creator Sir Arthur Conan Doyle died, and you get serious paranormal potential.

I'm not alone in thinking these objects have massive mojo. The Ransom Center has restricted public access to Victorian occultist Aleister Crowley's tarot cards to study-only, because of the number of patrons using his cards for a presumably enhanced reading.

OK, maybe it's far-fetched that Austin embraces otherworldly films because of UT's collection of old papers and human hair. That's OK, because SXSW is about fantasy — like the fantasy of a free downtown parking spot or that your band will be signed by a major label before you finish high school.

Personally, my SXSW fantasy is that the world premiere of "Undead or Alive: A Zomedy," starring Saturday Night Live alum Chris Kattan, will be something to laugh with, not at. I guess Austin's critical mass of geek-dom will be the judge.

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