I had the good fortune recently to interview the big three—Mr. Sun, Hemo, and Meteora—at a get-together held to talk about a possible jubilee. We covered a number of aspects of the films and their lives since, but I was particularly interested in finding out their thoughts about how the films would play now. The segment of the interview I excerpt here focuses on problematic points in the films, especially in regard to "political correctness." In their answers I noticed a number of what seemed to be canned jokes between them, coming especially from Mr. Sun, no doubt developed over the years in their occasional joint appearances.

GS: I'd like to ask some questions regarding "political correctness." You are familiar with the term?

Hemo: We haven't been hibernating. Just last year we got a gig opening for . . . who was it?

Meteora: Are you thinking of the Santa at the Mall? I'm pretty sure the agent thought she was booking Peter, Paul, and Mary.

Hemo: As I say, things are a little rough now, but we were ahead of our time then . . . we still are! We could have gotten more gigs of course—first rule of Broadway: always leave 'em wanting more!
GS: I'd like to ask about the prize-fight scene in "Hemo the Magnificent"; there are several “p.c.” problems with it, but one that sticks in my head is the group of little men used to explain how the body works: I notice they're always a bunch of little white guys, even in the case of . . .

Hemo: You're crazy; those little guys represent the insides of one person, one body! Mr. Big is the brain, the muscle-men pump the heart—but they're all one person—any kid would get it. You want the fighter to be black? OK, fine: all I'm saying is that then the little men inside all have to be black . . . the muscle men would probably wear those baggy shorts, Yo, Brother Sun! [Hemo high-fived Mr. Sun, who responded as well as he could with his rays]. You want women’s boxing—they have it now you know, though the wrestlers are better—OK, then all the little men, er, [feigning Meteora's inflection] little women are still women. Well, these days, maybe not . . . But basically you can't have this diversity thing inside one person.

GS: Aren’t there many people who are multi-racial, multi-cultural, bi-gender inside?

Long ago Carl Jung said we all had animus and anima. Besides, the Hemo film already goes against what you’re saying: remember the doe's head! Coherence at the body-level did not figure . . . there's a hegemonic . . .

Hemo: Doe's head?
Meteora: Doe, Hemo—a deer, a female deer.

Mr. Sun: Ray, a drop of golden . . .

GS: Yes, the doe—part of the pack of animals that follows Hemo around. The doe has the lead in the segment about why our hearts speed up when we are frightened. She sees a lion. Inside her are the same group of little white human males, Mr. Big, the muscle men, who start pumping faster—the same people from the prize fight scene. The wrong gender for her, not to mention the wrong species!

Hemo: There were no . . .

Meteora: He's right Hemo. I noticed—it’s very . . . invasive.

Hemo: Human guys in a deer's head? Why didn't I notice it then?

Meteora: Because you're a man! I’ll refrain from adding, “you’re a real drip.”

GS: I'm certain of it. Though, to be honest, I don't think I noticed it as a kid.

(there was a long pause)
Hemo: Must be for continuity, then . . . Yes, of course, you see what Frank's [Frank Capra] doing there? A little deer inside that first deer's head would throw viewers off. And it would be repetitious: better just to use the little guys you'll need for the human scenes. Continuity, yes . . . you just said you didn't notice it as a kid, so that means it worked! Besides, when you think about it, everything that talks in these films, human or not, must have a little human inside it.

GS: But all cartoons talk anyway. So a little talking deer, instead of a talking man, inside the first deer would not throw anyone off . . .

Hemo: It would! Because when you're showing how the insides work, you're being analytical—you're explaining things. Or I guess now you’re supposed to say deconstruct instead of analyze—I do keep up. There it would be obvious that what you have is a deer that talks—and we all know that deers don't . . . anyway to me it all seems very fluid.

Meteora: Deer don't talk—the plural is deer.

Hemo: Deer don't talk, so if you want to explain the insides of a talking deer you have to put a little man in there . . . if not inside the first deer, then inside a little deer inside that one, an even littler deer, the bottom one . . . And how would little muscle-deer push the squeeze-bulbs, answer that—with their noses? Not their horns, it would puncture them—so you'd have red-nose deers, er deer . . . anyway, that's already been done.
GS: But . . .

Hemo: At some point you have to put in a human, or else you'll have deer upon deer—deers on down, er, scuse me, deer on down . . . better to just go with humans, put him in from the start . . .

GS: *Him?* Males, humans, the phone company and corporate America—all in a doe's head? And the muscle *men*—what about Title IX [which mandated equal access for women in American university sports]? The mechanisms of a hegemonic discourse . . .

Hemo: Hedge-funds are ruining us all! . . . if that’s what you’re saying!? . . . but that only proves what *I’m* saying: you need continuity, whether monic or filmic!

GS: Things should never change?

Hemo: Not within one film. We're talking about artistic continuity within one film.

GS: By the way, are any of your little animal-friends still around—Mr. Turtle?—the animals you ran around with?

Mr. Sun: You mean the animals he used to *circulate* with, heh heh? Among ourselves, we called them Hemo's groupies, but maybe Hemo's *band-aids* is better.
Hemo: A turtle's lifespan is pretty long, but, no, haven’t seen him.

GS: Mister Rabbit?

Hemo: Rabbit—12 year lifespan; deer—20, figure it out. Anyway, contrary to what it looked like in the film, I don't get involved with particular animals, rarely even species—it’s all just life to me . . . there's a sameness. . . . That hero thing I had with the animals—that was a one-time thing, for the film. The truth is I never saw them again, or if I did I didn't recognize them. Is this about animal rights? They probably took the money and buried it in the forest. Sorry, but some of those animals didn't have their heads screwed on right, you know what I mean? You teach mythology, you say?

I turned to Mr. Sun.

GS: Mr. Sun.

Mr. Sun: Sorry, no little deers—deer—in me, just a lot of hot gas, heh heh! In "Our Mr. Sun" I thought I, er, we, Frank and I that is, did rather well on the diversity thing, even though we had different terms then: the contributions to science from various lands—Hindus and algebra, Arabs and early scientific instruments—surely that’s worth something.
GS: I agree that for their time the films were pretty enlightened; who else back then was telling the public about global warming and the energy crisis? But things have gotten more complex since the Mad Men era. This idea that science will unite the human race now to some people seems a unity imposed by a western cultural imperialism. Roland Barthes’ essay on the “Family of Man” photography exhibit—the vision is too innocent and corny, not to mention hegemon-

Mr. Sun: Sheesh, in the course of the film Dr. Research—I’ll tell you what's corny, a man named Dr. Research, that's what's corny—convinced me that the poor devils in the old days who thought I was a god had been duped; now it sounds like you're telling me that I'm the one who's been duped—by science! I had it right the first time; the humans are the corny ones. Mr. Fiction Writer—give me a break . . .

GS: But is anything that clear?—either that you had it right the first time or the second . . . we're into ambiguity these days . . .

Mr. Sun: And we didn't have ambiguity then?

GS: In some ways you guys are ambiguous: mythological figures newly-minted to tell us that we should abandon mythology—bizarre. In "Mr. Sun" you go on about how you were revered in mythology and religion until science came along and spoiled everything for you. But in your story you also say, let me find it here, "Of course what I really am is
a star, an average, everyday type of star”; that line is a clunker, destroys any feeling of an ambiguous status . . .

Mr. Sun: But the purpose is science education, so at some point you have to distinguish the "real" from the gimmicks . . .

GS: Yes . . . and I think that's why you guys ultimately don't make for ambiguity. Although there are still some ambiguous moments: In "Goddess" there is a similar reality moment when Dr. Research and his assistant confront the weather gods with the "real" reason why wind blows. The cause turns out to be the sun's heat, so we have a flashback to your film—and what we see is not a photo of the "real" sun but your mug, Mister Sun, a fantasy bite plugged into a reality bite.

Mr. Sun: You think it’s bizarre but I think it’s artistic. Ah, my one cameo appearance, and the residuals . . . burned through those rather quickly.

GS: There's something that I noticed as soon as I rediscovered you a few years ago. In Mr. Sun where you're talking about the ways that pre-scientific peoples revered you, you show a little parade of mythological representations of you, and you say that some people had some “pretty odd notions" about you. The background music is Berlioz's Symphonie Fantastique, music supposedly inspired by a mad dream.
Mr. Sun: I know what you're going to say: no one has the right to call anyone else's beliefs "odd," right—you keep thinking you're ahead of me but you're not!

GS: In the film, you also don the trappings of a movie director—a director's chair and . . .

Mr. Sun: my "sun glasses," yes, heh, heh—

GS: So I'm asking: why weren't you in the parade? In the line-up of peoples' odd notions about the sun, why do we not see Mr. Sun the Movie Director?

Mr. Sun: (after a pause) For Continuity.

GS: Again?

Mr. Sun: In the film I am your friend—"Our Mr. Sun—yours and the rest of the audience's. Am I supposed to suddenly turn "odd" on my friends—even though I suppose you’re got a point that someone in another culture might think of the idea of sun as movie director as . . . odd. OK, very odd: the whole damned scene was Frank's idea; just put on the glasses and do it, he says, you’re no superstar—a million more like you in the universe . . . Glasses or walk, he says.

GS: Can we conclude that one can't see one's own mythology?
Mr. Sun: I think we can conclude that continuity is important in film-making [he winked at Hemo]

At last I got around to Meteora:

GS: I suppose you can guess what I'm going to ask you about?

Meteora: Gender of course, it's the only thing academics ever ask me about—must be all you guys think about. Who pays your salaries? The questions started coming when the national weather service started [in 1979] to give hurricanes men’s names too . . .

GS: Yes, years after you starred in The Unchained Goddess, well, let's start with that: how did you feel about the change in policy of naming hurricanes?

Meteora: It didn't do anything for my career! But at least you didn't ask how I liked being cut back to half-time—very funny!—the first hundred times. I'm not so sure the change in policy had any benefit for women; the old way gave women power—who had the last word in Unchained Goddess? Guys doing cartwheels for me.

GS: It seems to be a lot of mythologies give women a sort of background power—cosmic power—perhaps just so they can save the real power, I mean political power, for men; cosmic power is bigger but less real . . .
Meteora: There was nothing unreal about my power in that film! Actually I’m more of a post-feminist.

GS: Even so, wasn’t your power largely negative, a version of the old theme of woman as the origin of chaos in the cosmos motif . . . sometimes connected with symbols that can be read as female symbols, Pandora's jar, for example.

Meteora: I don't do that kind of film, if that's where this is going . . . not that I haven't had offers.

GS: I'm sure . . . If you don't mind, for decades I've been wanting to ask you about your gown.

Meteora: I don't know who made it—there's no label, just some low-level animator I guess. Anyway, what difference does it make?

GS: My question is: why don't we ever see the bottom of it—the hem, I mean? Your gown just keeps stretching downward, far past where your toes would be—downward, toward the earth I guess.

Meteora: You want to see my legs? Why? Well, I guess that's normal, but if you really believe that old-fashioned feminist line, I would think you'd approve of our steering clear of naughty bits.
GS: From the waist down your gown seems to be stylized as a narrow but gradually broadening trapezoid. When I saw your film as a kid I imagined the gown as turning into a rainbow or the aurora borealis as it stretched downward—in fact, decades later when I started looking for you again for this research, I discovered that I had misremembered your name as Aurora. I assumed that the gown connected you with earth from wherever it is up in the air that you and your minions are hovering throughout the film.

Meteora: I like it. All that from the film?

GS: Actually, there was more. A nun in my Catholic grade school gave the advertising poster of you and your minions to my older brother after the film was over—so there was a poster of you in that impossibly long gown, plus a brother-thing as well as the film.

Mr. Sun: Jealousy over a nun-approved pin-up—you must have been very . . . innocent. Is there a marketing concept there . . . I wonder?

GS: Later I developed different ideas about the gown.

Meteora: Perverts looking up my dress, I suppose?

GS: No, no, nothing that gauche. The same thing happens, with a positive spin, in depictions of the Blessed Virgin’s gown—portal of salvation. But in your case, more
negative: on the lower end your gown seemingly encompasses the earth, on the other it narrows to . . .

Meteora: Pandora’s jar?

GS: Well, yes, I’m not sure that you aren’t—subconsciously of course—Pandora: the way chaos and evil get into the world, specifically through female sexuality.

Meteora: Well, maybe . . . you probably also think it’s hegetonic, right? What is that word anyway?—must be a new word for bad. Or something about music? Medicine? But, no on Pandora, I think it’s you.

GS: One more thing, though. All through the film if you look on the wall of the “weather station” there is a prominent photograph of a long, thin, dark tornado funnel cloud; if you turn that shape over you’d have essentially the shape of your gown—an inverse funnel cloud stretching from the atmosphere to the ground. Put that together with the notion of unconscious archetypal symb . . .

Meteora: Look, the dress had to be simple to save on animation expense, upside-down funnel or trapezoid, or whatever—how many drawings per minute of action, I can’t remember, but a lot, back then. You wouldn't know, now it’s all done with computers. No on the Pandora thing—not Frank, not me, it’s you.
We concluded with a discussion about the general significance of the films.

GS: Much as I am a fan, I have some reservations. First, I marvel at how well I remember you all. I have to say that when Jack Warner took over the series, his films were slicker, classier than Frank's ever were, but almost nothing sticks in my head from them, even though they were more recent than Frank's. The only parts of Jack’s films I remember are the parts that were like Frank’s: there was the cartoon guy getting into the spaceship and going the speed of light and aging more slowly or rapidly, I forget which—the relativity thing [in About Time]—and the dopey scene of Aristotle and his students, played by real humans rather than cartoons [in Gateways to the Mind]. My only other memory of Jack's films is my mother, a really brilliant and educated woman by the way, saying how The Alphabet Conspiracy was not as interesting as the earlier ones in the series—she must have meant Frank's.

But I did remember you guys. Take Hemo's prize-fight scene again; once, when I...

Hemo: Oh brother, now he's going to want partner benefits for the little men . . .
GS: Once, when I was giving a talk about brain theories at an academic conference, it occurred to me at the very last minute before I went on that I could add a little pizzazz by describing the brain-theory behind that prize-fight scene from *Hemo*. I described the scene *from memory*—this was decades after I saw it. It’s not a very scholarly way to give a talk, because what if I remembered wrong? But when I later checked I found—whew!—that I had the scene exactly right. And a lot of people came up after the talk and recalled not just that scene but others in the series as well . . . Those scenes really tapped into something.

Mr. Sun: And what’s wrong with that?

GS: Well, for one thing, would that I had remembered the *science* so well; instead, it’s you guys that stuck in my mind.

Mr. Sun: So you’re saying you made the right decision in becoming a mythologist?

G: The motto "education through entertainment" that follows these films was OK—innovative—back when you were a treat. But based on my experience as a teacher, education without entertainment has since come to be unthinkable. And there's the corporate sponsorship thing. Intrusion of corporations into education—growing. My reservations are not with you, but with what you may have unleashed! Like fast food: OK until it becomes your normal diet; 50s, 60s stuff unleashed . . .
Meteora: Well at least someone finally sees us as trend setters—we've said as much all along. . . . And—how should I put this?—remembering me is at least better than remembering nothing, isn't it? [she batted her eyes]

Hemo: Good or bad, what I don't understand is, if what you're saying is true then why aren't we getting the gigs?

GS: While we’re on the issue of staying-power, do you know whether the promise made in *Strange Case of the Cosmic Rays* to revisit the mystery contest in 50 years—1957, so that that would have been 2007. I found no evidence, was that promise ever honored?

Hemo: those puppets, you mean? Not that I know of, we don’t keep up with them at all—why would anyone since they’re not real. I wonder how many other forgotten time-capsules are still buried somewhere.

Mr. Sun: Block heads, we called them. Let’s face it; people today want entertainment but we're no longer considered entertaining—we're has-beens, totally eclipsed. We’re the first phase, the vaudeville of science through entertainment. Billy Nye killed us [a reference to the later science education series "Bill Nye the Science Guy"].

Meteora: I think it was Steven Jay Gould's appearance on the Simpson's—drove the nails into the coffin. After that, who's going to want to see a heart-shaped guy in a toga, even if he is all heart . . .
GS: Speaking of Gould, did you know that one of his books is *Wonderful Life*—titled after another of Frank's films?

Hemo: Oh that's just great, Bailey [George Bailey, the lead character in *It's A Wonderful Life*, played by Jimmy Stewart] gets to be both Christmas *and* science—think of those residuals—while we are left with . . . we're Frank's misbegottens . . . The USO wouldn't even be interested; another decade and we'll be down to elder hostels . . .

Meteora: Unless you cut the drinking, Hemo, you won't last another decade anyway; too much is bad for your . . . it’s bad for you, Hemo.

Mr. Sun: Poisons the blood, heh heh! As a life-long smoker, I guess I shouldn’t say too much.

Hemo: But I *must* decline in order to reflect entropy.

Meteora: Entropy will never catch up with you!

GS: Besides, entropy does not apply to life, because life is not a closed system.

Hemo: I knew that! I wanted to see if you knew it. I guess it applies to Mr. Sun here, however, because—what he *really is*, is just an average, everyday star.
GS: So, why do you think you haven't had the shelf-life of *It’s A Wonderful Life*?

Mr. Sun: It didn’t help that our role was always to play the has-beens of science, but I don’t think that’s the problem. Capra stuff is too maudlin for anything except one feel-good day a year, people are too cynical—you say ambiguous, but I say cynical. If someone invented a serious feel-good-about-science holiday we might have a chance. Sounds like science could use such a day—we should get behind it. Be proactive, our agent used to say, while we could afford one. Otherwise it’s Valentine's day for Hemo, orange juice ads for me—all those markets are saturated anyway.

GS: There actually is a Carl Sagan day. I’ve attended; I’m interested in the sort of secular hagiography.

Meteora: Hagi-what? Who does your lines? Well, I don't really agree cynicism’s the reason. The 50s corn can also be good daily dose of fantasy—look at Mayberry, look at the Beaver, Twilight Zone!—with this nostalgia thing everyone has been sequelled, remade, whatever . . . except us. Although I must say, cartoons seem particularly short-lived—is Huckleberry Hound still around?

GS: If so, I haven't seen it; but I don't watch much TV.

Hemo: Dog—14, 15 years, maybe.
Mr. Sun: Not many years, but lot of dog days, heh heh.

Meteora: Well at least we won't have him to compete with for the gigs . . . . Maybe we're not high-concept enough, or maybe too high, I don't know . . . All I know is that I don't give up!

It was still the same Meteora. At the risk of setting them up for disappointment I told them that I thought the web-postings were picking up. They looked hopeful in the way that people look hopeful when their hopes have been repeatedly dashed. A sad, sagging but still noble little troupe: I have a feeling that they spend a lot of time by the phone.