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The Great Courses: "A Historian Goes to the Movies: Ancient Rome" (Part 5: Miscellanea (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

SCIPIONE L'AFRICANO (1937):

SCIPIONE L'AFRICANO was basically a propaganda film for Mussolini and his invasion of Ethiopia, by showing Carthage and the Battle of Zama in 202 B.C.E. as the original. In order to support the propaganda, there are anachronistic fascist salutes and ubiquitous fasces, and Scipio's mannerisms, profile, speaking style, etc., imitate Mussolini. (Does this remind you of any current politician?) The Carthaginians are portrayed as brutes, just as the Ethiopians were by Mussolini's propaganda about the invasion. It does try to accurately represent the different stages of the Battle of Zama.

In 1936 Mussolini had built Cinecittà Studios, blatantly Roman in style, complete with Roman-style mosaics with modern Italian images. He was able to provide 32,000 extras and 40 actual elephants, providing the only example of a charge of live elephants in film.

All in all, it is of some interest, but more as a heavy-handed propaganda film than an accurate Roman epic.

FELLINI SATYRICON (1969):

FELLINI SATYRICON came out at the height of social and sexual revolution, as well as avant garde filmmaking. Based on Petronius, the best anyone could make of it was that it portrayed the difficulty of understanding the past. Or maybe it was just confusing. Someone described it as "an imaginative vision inspired by certain elements of [ancient Rome]" rather than an accurate portrayal. Other phrases thrown around included "ambiguity and incomprehension" and "an outburst of creativity and lurid over-indulgence."

Bread and Circuses in Sci-Fi Films:

THE HUNGER GAMES (2012), THE MATRIX (2003), THE RUNNING MAN (1987), ROLLERBALL (1979), STAR TREK: THE ORIGINAL SERIES: "Bread and Circuses" (1967):

The last episode is about how science fiction films have adapted ancient Roman tropes to the future. To a large extent, this is elaborating on Juvenal's "panem et circenses" ("bread and circuses"). Aldrete decided to do this episode in reverse chronological order.

THE HUNGER GAMES echoes not just ancient Rome and gladiatorial combats, but ancient Greece, with the sacrifice of young people to the Minotaur. The polytor structure is also Roman, with "districts" instead of "provinces". Many of the characters have Roman names (e.g., Cinna, Caesar, Seneca, Cato), and even the country's name--Panem--echoes Juvenal. And the status of the tribunes has the same ambivalence as that of the gladiator: idolized by the crowds, but also considered mere tools by the aristocracy.

In THE MATRIX the population is all kept in a simulation, but kept pacified by food ("bread") and entertainment ("circuses"), but in this case the entertainment is illusory.

THE RUNNING MAN is more explicit, with the circuses being a game show. But entertainment is still distraction. Here, an additional similarity to ancient Rome is that just as Roman re-enactments had actual deaths (of convicted criminals), so does THE RUNNING MAN. (For that matter, many of the other events in this section also have actual deaths, but not of convicted criminals.) THE RUNNING MAN muddies the line between entertainment and politics, including the unintentionally ironic inclusion of entertainment figures Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jesse Ventura, both of whom eventually entered politics.

ROLLERBALL puts the gladiatorial-style entertainment to corporate use. The public is passionate over teams rather than politicians. There is an ancient parallel in the factions for the Blues and Greens in the Eastern Roman Empire. Supporters of the opposing teams were so "enthusiastic" than often riots ensued--and not small riots: in 501, the Greens massacred three thousand Blue supporters in the amphitheater in Constantinople.

As with the gladiators of ancient Rome, the roller-ballers each have distinctive styles and weapons, and there is the same "pompa" (entrance parade). Again, the status of the roller-ballers matches that of the gladiators--treated as stars, but in reality considered lower-class.

Aldrete notes that the 2002 remake was more just an action film than an imitation of Rome.

STAR TREK: THE ORIGINAL SERIES: "Bread and Circuses" has a lot of Roman tropes, but is ultimately a really bad episode. (This is my opinion, not Aldrete's, as is much of what follows here.) The premise is that there is a planet very similar that has a Roman Empire, where people and concepts have Roman names, there is a Roman political structure, and it is in fact Rome with a technology level of 20th century earth (including internal combustion engine cars that look just like out cars). And everyone speaks English. This is a stupid idea, probably even worse than having planets named Romulus and Vulcan. And they get it wrong anyway: there is a new religion that the Enterprise crew thinks worships the "sun", but it turns out it's really the "son" [of God], and the crew thinks it with replace Imperial Rome just as it did before. Except that Christianity did not replace Rome, Rather, Imperial Rome absorbed Christianity and lasted until 1453. The crew also claims there was no sun worship in Rome; this was absolutely not true.

This is supposedly one of the most underrated episodes, but to me it's on a level with the one with the Yangs and the Comms, except that one had at least some rationale. This has none.

Aldrete then points out that each of these reflects the concerns of its time:

- 1960s: civil rights
- 1970s: trust in government undermined by Vietnam and Watergate; and rampant capitalism
- 1980s: corporate dominance
- 1990s: concern about rampant uncontrolled technology
- 2000s' Spartacus-like uprisings, gender issues, and lack of humanity

And for the 2010s we have READY PLAYER ONE (2018), which has its version of favelas and townships, but people live in a virtual world, so they don't care. At the end of the film, victory consists of limiting product placement and being able to live in the real world two days a week, rather than any meaningful change, expressing perhaps the cynicism and pessimism of the 2010s.

(Professor Aldrete also did the "Great Battles of World History", which we had previously watched.)

[-ecl]

James Bond's Wardrobe (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

James Bond travels all over the world. He never seems to carry a suitcase (or anything larger than a briefcase), yet he always has the right clothes for any climate or occasion. How does he do this?

I suppose he could go into the men's shop in the airport, buy a new set of clothes, put them on, and just leave the old set there. But this doesn't explain the fitted tuxedos et al. In SPECTRE, for example, he arrives in the middle of the desert wearing a brown suit, and is then seen in a black suit. (At least for Dr. Swann, there is a change of clothing laid out for her. [-ecl])

DR. SLEEP (film review by Dale Skran):

It's been a while since I wrote a movie review, but I just saw something that I thought was worth watching. Amazon Prime now has included for no extra fee DR. SLEEP, a 2019 film based on a Stephen King novel of the same name. Although this is not immediately obvious to the viewer, it is a sequel to Kubrick's THE SHINING, also based on a King novel. I am not at all a fan of King, but THE SHINING is possibly the only movie by him that I have seen, and I recall that it was a bit of joke in that Kubrick knew nothing of horror tropes, and re-invented and over-used such standbys as the "jump scene" and blood flowing under a doorway. Apparently, King did not like the film either, as it did not convey key elements of his novel.

Now, long after, we see the squal, which is quite different in content and tone from THE SHINING, although connected to it, and in fact it does resolve some loose ends from the first movie. DR. SLEEP refers to the little boy in "The Shining," who now has become an adult struggling with alcoholism. Although some critics did not like the three-hour length of DR. SLEEP, I found that it made the film much more watchable outside the theater. There are six chapters, and I watched them over three days. There is plenty of time to develop both characters and the plot, but without any significant amount of padding. It may well be that as a movie, DR. SLEEP is too long, but that makes it perfect for binge watching at home.

In this glorious age of Wikipedia and IMDB, I will spare you the list of actors, directors, and so on. I found the film well-acted and well directed, so let's leave it at that. Although billed as "supernatural horror" "Dr. Sleep" reminded me to a great degree of the kind of psionic superhuman story ASTOUNDING/ANALOG use to publish in the 1950s and early 1960s. The two main characters are Dan, the grown-up little boy from the first movie, and Abra Stone, a teenage girl. Dan and Abra possess "the shining" which is just another word for magic, or psionics. They have a wide array of powers, although not simply characterized and not all the same. Abra is more powerful than Dan, but Dan's greater experience makes him a formidable combatant.

The villains call themselves "The True Knot," a group of immortal psychic vampires who have roamed the Earth for ages, torturing to death any children they can find with "the shine" so as to better consume their mental energies. Apparently as we age the "shine" becomes tainted and less tasty. They are led by the beautiful, powerful, and enigmatic "Rose the Hat," so called because she always wears a top hat. With her #2 "The Crow," "Snakebite Andi" who can "push" people to do things, and about six other followers, they are a dangerous menace, bent on finding Arba and enslaving her as an on-going source of "stream."

From this description, I think you can see that DR. SLEEP has a lot more going on than THE SHINING. Dan is well developed as a recovering alcoholic who has used booze to escape his powers, and Arba comes over as engaging and realistic. This is basically a story of psionic war between two sides, fought for mere survival. I am rating DR. SLEEP as +2 on the -4 to +4 scale. Not for kids under 12, and only then for those who feel comfortable with horror tropes. There is no sex, but a good bit of violence. Recommended to fans of SF, fantasy, and horror. The mental combat is better thought out than is often the case in this sort of tale, and reminds me of a good Telzey Amberdon story from ANALOG. And no, I will not tell you why the title is DR. SLEEP--see the movie! Also, keep watch for the cat who has a bit of the "shine." Or more likely, King is suggesting all cats have the "shine." [-dls]

SERVICE MODEL by [Adrian Tchaikovsky](#) (copyright 2024, Torodotcom, \$28.99, Hardcover, 373pp, ISBN 978-1250-29028-1, Macmillan Audio, \$17.71, Audio Book, 12 hours and 21 minutes, ASIN B0CMYJRJPB, narrated by Adrian Tchaikovsky) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

Adrian Tchaikovsky once again demonstrates his vast range in SERVICE MODEL, a somewhat humorous post-apocalyptic novel where humanity is in ruins. Why it's in ruins, or even that it is in ruins, isn't evident at first, but Tchaikovsky masterfully leads the reader and his main character valet robot Charles through a sort of hero's journey of discovery that is both startling and amusing. No, you don't normally think of a post-apocalyptic story as amusing and humorous, but oddly enough it works.

Charles spends his days taking care of his Master: laying out his clothes, arranging his travel schedule, bringing his meals. In short, the kind of thing you'd expect a valet or butler to do. Charles also takes care of his Master's hygiene, including giving him his daily shave. One day Charles discovers blood on his Master's clothes. In short order, Charles comes to the conclusion that for some reason he cut his Master's throat. That he, Charles, himself is the murderer (this of course immediately brings to mind the statement that "the butler did it", and once you see that one coming you see that the rest of SERVICE MODEL will have other instances of humor that should have you smiling, if not chuckling, throughout). The police are called in--and they are all robots, by the way--and a scene right out of Monty Python occurs as the police try to decide just what is going on and what to do with Charles (the Keystone Kops may also come to mind, but this little scene is much more refined and organized than those cops ever were). Eventually he is banished by House, and is sent to Central Services in order to be repaired. However, now that his Master is dead and he has no more job, he eventually takes on the name of UnCharles, which of course is a statement that now that he doesn't have employment he is not a real robot. Central Services turns out to be a mess, as no services are provided at all, for reasons which are revealed during his time there.

Thus begins UnCharles' journey to find out just what is wrong in the world, and to find employment as a valet robot, as that is what he is programmed for and thus that is all that he can do. He is accompanied on and off by the Wonk, a sidekick who flits in and out of the story who insists that UnCharles has the Protagonist Virus, and thus is becoming a free and sentient being. UnCharles is having none of it, and in fact thinks that the Wonk is a defective robot. Like any other good sidekick, the Wonk comes in and out of the story at just the right time to help UnCharles along on his journey of not only self-discovery but of discovery of just what happened to the world.

For the world has collapsed. Nothing is working right. In fact, there are no human beings to be found anywhere, except maybe the Conservation Farms Project, a museum-like place where humans are re-enacting the way life was in the past as a sort of historical preservation society. The problem is that the humans are "conscripted volunteers", and they demonstrate the drab and lifeless way of life via endless commuting and office meetings. Even the Central Library, a repository of all human knowledge, is run by robots who store human knowledge in a very strange and useless fashion. There are no human beings to be found.

SERVICE MODEL is a tale of what can happen to a world when the robots become too good at their jobs because, in part, they are following their programs to the letter which is of course what they are supposed to do. The further along in the book we get, the more the world is a wasteland. Meanwhile, UnCharles just wants to find meaningful employment as a valet robot, because that is all he really knows how to do. It's also a cautionary tale (I think I said that in a previous review of a Tchaikovsky book) of what can happen when humankind tries to make life too easy for itself. We all want our lives to be easier, a little less stressful, and a little more restful. However, SERVICE MODEL tells us that we should be careful what we ask for, and that maybe we need a little challenge in our lives to find meaning.

I mentioned earlier that the novel is humorous. It is, but I wouldn't call it a comedy, unless we want to call it a comedy of the absurd. Having been a software developer for a good portion of my career, it was funny to me to see where things were going and where they would probably end up based on what Tchaikovsky is telling us about how the world is ordered via the software in place in the robots. It's a funny book at times, but not over the top. And I don't think Tchaikovsky was aiming for that.

SERVICE MODEL is a good book--not great, but good. It's well worth your time.

Tchaikovsky himself does a serviceable job narrating SERVICE MODEL. He does a pretty good job differentiating robot voices so that you know what robot you're listening to or what mood the robot is trying to convey. He does a really good Eeyore robot. Trust me. [-jak]

METAMORPHOSIS (letter of comment by Arthur Kaletsky):

In response to the announcement of METAMORPHOSIS for the book discussion group in the 10/25/24 issue of the MT VOID, Arthur Kaletsky writes:

May I , from another continent, respectfully suggest that two brilliant and very hilarious riffs on METAMORPHOSIS be included in the Halloween discussion? They are Philip Roth's THE BREAST and Irvine Welsh's "Granton Star Cause" (the latter collected in THE ACID HOUSE) [-jak]

Evelyn adds:

THE ACID HOUSE was made into a film incorporating all four stories in it. It is available on Tubi. [-ecl]

Historical Advisors (letters of comment by Hal Heydt and Keith F. Lynch):

In response to Evelyn's comments on GLADIATOR in the 10/18/24 issue of the MT VOID, Hal Heydt writes:

[Evelyn wrote,] "In fact, the professor hired as a historical advisor for the film asked to have her name removed from the credits when she discovered that her function was to provide support for what the filmmakers wanted to do (e.g., have female gladiators who fought with razor blades on their nipples) rather than to help them get the film to be accurate. [-ecl]"

Dorothy was once told, by someone in the business, that the sole and exclusive purpose of a studio Research Department was to answer one--and only one--question: Can this get us sued? [-hh]

Keith F. Lynch responded:

I'd think that for historical fiction, the answer is always no. Under our system, nobody can sue when a dead person is defamed.

Otherwise, the heirs of Gus Grissom would have sued the producers of THE RIGHT STUFF into the poorhouse. [-kfl]

This Week's Reading (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

FROM GIBBON TO AUDEN: ESSAYS ON THE CLASSICAL TRADITION by G. W. Bowersock (Oxford University Press, ISBN 97-0-19-537667-8) is an example of why it is dangerous to read history books: they lea you down a rabbit hole. The bibliographies are risky, of course, but even more so are the works mentioned and discussed in the text. For example, in the first chapter ("Gibbon's Historical Imagination") Bowersock writes about Henry Edwards Davis's "An Examination of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of Mr. Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" (which attacked Gibbon's scholarship) and Gibbon's own response, "A Vindication of Some Passages in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire". I decided I wanted to read these, but they were both written in the eighteenth century and neither was in Project Gutenberg. The "Examination" is available in book form, but at a higher price than I want to pay, so my option here is a scan of the original text in Google Books. Have you ever tried reading eighteenth text? The font is unfriendly, and all those 's's that look like 'f's are not helping. And it's over three hundred pages of this. The "Vindication" is available in PDF form, which could be converted to text, plus it is not over three hundred pages long.

So I may report on these, depending on whether I decide to slog through the "Examination".

And that was from just the first chapter of Bowersock.

Bowersock also compares Suetonius and Plutarch, discusses the discovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum, and talks about Andrea de Jorio's 1832 analysis of sign language in ancient Rome and (then-)modern Naples. I had hoped for more from the last, especially since sign language was so critical to the character of the news reader in the HBO series ROME. Professor Gregory S. Aldrete (of the "Great Courses" course "A Historian Goes to the Movies: Ancient Rome" (see above) has written a book GESTURES AND ACCLAMATIONS IN ANCIENT ROME which I may be able to read on archive.org if it ever comes back up. (The claim is that it is up in read-only mode, which apparently means I cannot log in to borrow something.) [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

I do not like broccoli. And I haven't liked it since
I was a little kid and my mother made me eat it.
And I'm President of the United States and I'm not
going to eat any more broccoli.
--George Bush, 1990

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