

# A Slight Loss of Executive Function

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## Wednesday, October 28th

There was some sun today. Not a lot, because the days are short, but the sun came out for a while.

After the forced change in my schedule last week, I have managed to shift my days back a little bit, and the kids have gradually shifted their days back a little bit as well. So I've waking up about 8:00. On Monday and Tuesday I had my work laptop at home so after getting ready, I took my decaf bulletproof coffee downstairs and handled some e-mail and other work down there for a few hours, sitting in front of my S.A.D. light for an hour or so. Then I headed to the office to do some work that required some of the hardware there.

## Yes (the Band, not the Affirmative Expression)

Writing about Yes in last week's newsletter got me remembering the first time I heard the band. I think it was 1973, which meant that I was about six years old. My brother and I were living in with our mother in Valley Village trailer park in North East, Pennsylvania. I think the address was #10 Big Ben Lane. If Google Street View is up to date, the trailer is still there, and so is the trailer where our friend Mike Brusone used to live. We called him "buddy." Brian and I used to go over to visit him in his trailer, and he'd play records for us. I recall very vividly hearing an album by Yes.

Buddy, who was named Michael Brusone, died in 2012. I barely knew him but he was, just slightly, a father figure for me, and he certainly turned me on to some amazing music.

I just found out today, from his obituary that his middle name is "Paul."

Would you believe me if I told you that I remembered the music on that record in incredible detail? I remember the album art in less detail, but I do recall that it folded open, so it at least a double album, with one of the wild and intriguing fantasy landscape illustrations that I now know were created by Roger Dean.

Thinking back, I had no idea what album it was. I knew that it was not one of

the albums that I had in my (admittedly very limited) collection of Yes albums. There are quite a few, but it would have been one of their very early releases. The name Yes been applied to several wildly varying collections of musicians over the decades, and the resulting music has been of wildly varying quality, so I don't intend to ever acquire all of the Yes albums — according to Wikipedia, they have released 21 studio albums, 14 live albums, and 35 compilation albums.

I did a little research, and between Wikipedia and YouTube, I was able to find out which album I heard all those years ago. As soon as I listened to this YouTube video of *Yessongs*, which was released in 1973, I knew it was *that* album. It's their only platinum-selling live album. It's got the fantasy landscape artwork, and it's actually a triple album — originally released on three records — assembled from a number of shows played in 1972.

Would you believe me if I told that you when I listened to this album, which to the best of my knowledge, I haven't heard since that single listen to the vinyl record forty-seven years ago, that I remembered many, many passages in vivid, precise detail?

You don't have to believe me, but I'm pretty sure it's true. My brain has always worked a little differently when it comes to the things that stick in my head — music and sounds have always been some of the most “sticky” in my memory. There are sighthounds and scent hounds; I've always been a sound hound.

Back then, listening to music so ecstatic and complex in rhythms, timbres, and harmonies was a complete revelation to young me, compared to the music I remember hearing on the radio — songs like Tanya Tucker's “Delta Dawn” and Jim Croce's “Bad, Bad Leroy Brown.” I remember Steve Howe's solo guitar piece, “Mood for a Day” and Rick Wakeman's keyboard solo, “Excerpts from ‘The Six Wives of Henry VII,’” in which he jumps all over the stage, from Moog to piano to Mellotron, and I remember the way that piece ends in a bunch of siren and gunfire sound effects, and then segues right into the introduction to “Roundabout.”

Listening to it now, of course, I find Wakeman's performances in those shows to be utterly ridiculous — he was a long-haired guy in a sparkling cape leaping between piano, organ, Moog synthesizer, and Mellotron, playing them all like a lunatic. He interjects bits of Bach and bits of Handel in the most bombastic way possible, a bit like one of Keith Emerson's frenzied, feedback-driven, organ-destroying live solos, in which he rode his instruments like ponies, knocked them over to produce huge bangs from the spring reverberators, and stabbed knives into their keyboards to hold down notes. I'm pretty sure even his band-mates must have been at least a bit bemused by the hamminess of his performance, even though I don't think he actually destroyed his instruments. This is the kind of thing that Spinal Tap was making fun of. But I still love it.

I'll have to order a used CD.

It turns out that Wakeman was hardly essential to some of Yes's best work, as

*The Yes Album*, containing some of their greatest songs, was recorded with Tony Kaye, who then didn't play with the band until 1983, on *90125*.

I've discovered that there are remixes — not remasters, but remixes — of the five earliest Yes albums by Steven Wilson. Wilson, of the band Porcupine Tree and many other projects, started not with the stereo mix, as people who remaster albums usually do, but with a hard drive full of 24-bit, 96KHz versions of the tracks from the original multi-track tapes. He then remixed the whole album from scratch, following the original mixes closely, but cleaning things up adjusting panning, levels, and other parameters using a DAW (digital audio workstation) instead of a big analog mixing console.

It's possible to do things with digital mixing that it just wasn't possible to do in the early 1970s. The faders on old analog mixing consoles were usually operated by hand during a mix-down to stereo. The mixing engineer would have to punch tracks in and out and adjust levels on the fly while the tape was rolling. That kind of live mix is best thought of as a sort of performance, as critical to the sound of the final album as the performance of one of the musicians. The original mixes were amazing performances, given the technology of the time. But that doesn't mean it can't be surpassed by a dedicated person with a lot of time to work on it and forty years of improvements in audio technology to draw on.

That's just what Wilson's done. The new mixes sound amazing. Distortion is reduced and the dynamic range is improved. One of the single biggest improvements is that the overall level of each song is not louder, but considerably *quieter*. This gives the peaks more headroom, so the loud parts sound louder and the quieter parts sound quieter.

Mixing to tape, and cranking up the levels fairly high, gave a nice analog tape saturation, a kind of natural compression, which people have come to love and associate with classic albums. But that compression goes along with tape distortion, which I've never liked; things start to sound fuzzy, or crunchy, or crackly, even on some of these very highly-regarded albums. *Not* hearing that distortion, on this new release, is a revelation — there's so much more clarity.

I'm listening to Wilson's remix on YouTube, and it's astounding, even taking into account the fact that YouTube videos use compressed audio, which reduces the sound quality. In particular, Jon Anderson's vocal is wonderfully clear and present-sounding. Chris Squire's fat, buzzing bass tones are wonderful too, and sound more "live" than I've ever heard them.

Wilson has tried to do several things with this mix: pay homage to the original mix, produce something that sounds *better* and *clearer* than a mix to tape could, and undo the damage wrought upon remaster after remaster, in the "loudness wars."

There are copies of these remixes available, although they are somewhat expensive. Some are only offered by eBay sellers in Japan. So I won't be able to order all of them. I ordered one of them today, a remix of *The Yes Album*.

## Tuesday, November 10th

### *The Yes Album* (Steven Wilson Remix)

I got my copy of the remixed album a few days ago, and it's a revelation and a joy. It's in the "mini-LP" format, including the original artwork in reduced size. I don't find that particularly valuable, since it's painful to look at the shrunken text and images. But the sound is fantastic. I've never heard "Starship Trooper" sound better.

So, I've ordered a couple more of the remixed albums: *Fragile* and *Close to the Edge*. I was able to find an American seller who had a few of them in stock, so I don't have to pay for shipping from Japan. I also ordered a copy of the live album *Yessongs*, which has not been remixed. But I suspect that *The Yes Album* will always be my favorite, and largely because of "Starship Trooper," surely one of the most uplifting, ecstatic, and beautiful rock anthems ever recorded.

Steven Wilson has worked on other classic albums in the same way, including albums by Jethro Tull, Gentle Giant, and XTC. So I will probably be tracking down copies of some of these releases, too. They can be a little hard to find, since sellers don't always make a clear distinction as to which version of an album they are selling, but they are out there, and it's always fun to find something I've been hunting for, especially when I can find it for cheap.

### More Recent Entertainment

With so few things we can do outside of our home, I've been buying quite a few used movies on eBay. I'll skim through a few of the ones we've watched with the kids over the last few months.

#### *Blinded By the Light* (2019 Film)

My friend Rich has been recommending this film for a long time so I finally ordered a copy, even though I am not a huge Bruce Springsteen fan. It's a "small" movie, in that it is somewhat light-hearted and tells a relatively conventional coming-of-age story, but it's also a fun showcase for a number of classic Springsteen songs. It's set in 1987 in Luton, a borough of Bedfordshire, England. 1987 in England means England under Thatcher, which was one of the worst periods in recent history in England for working-class people. Javed, the protagonist, played by Viveik Kalra, is a Pakistani Muslim teenager living a fairly miserable existence, caught between his dominating father trying to keep him in the obedient-son role and push him into studying economics and business, and the rising racial tensions as the National Front arranges marches against the "Pakis." Javed, though, is encouraged by a teacher to continue working on his poetry and journalism, and a fellow student loans him a couple of Springsteen cassettes to listen to on his Walkman. Then, Malik, Javed's father, is laid off from his job working at Vauxhall motors, and the family is suddenly in economic peril.

It's a lovely film, and tackles some heavy themes, but it feels a little too silly at times to really deliver much emotional punch. The exception is Malik, played by Kulvinder Ghir. Despite being Malik's sort-of antagonist in much of the film, he really anchors the film with his convincing portrait of middle-aged misery in a man caught between two cultures and worlds. His performance is gripping without ever becoming melodramatic.

Rich keeps telling me to watch it again, expecting that I'll be absolutely blown away by this film. I don't have the heart to tell him that it isn't going to happen. Still, it's a pretty good movie. Ghir's performance, especially, is very much worth watching, but the other supporting cast members are all pretty good, too. I'd only *not* recommend it to people who already know in advance that they just don't want to hear a lot of Bruce Springsteen songs.

### ***Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988 Film)**

I watched this one in a theater back in the day, when I was in college, and it remains a favorite. It's really a sort of a mash-up of two films, and one can watch it in two ways. On the one hand, it's a funny and clever piece of storytelling that takes a few very tired *noir* private eye tropes and runs with them, with a very funny and clever screenplay. On the other hand, the blending of animation and live action is so brilliantly done that one can spend the entire film just marveling at this technical achievement in filmmaking, and the many ways in which the animated characters interact with the "real" people, sets, and props. Watching it *either* of these two ways is entertaining.

I'd say, in fact, it's the most successful combination of live-action and animation ever devised, or at least the most successful full-length film that does this, as there are sections in many classic films such as *Mary Poppins* that also incorporate animated elements. And I suppose I should stipulate that I'm talking about traditional, hand-drawn cel animation, as opposed to computer animation, which is now ubiquitous in many genres.

So much about it is great that it seems nitpicky to point out that the movie drags in a few places, including the climax. But it's not really important. By the time we get to the silly climax, the film has already built up so much goodwill in the audience that even some weak spots can't ruin it.

### ***Star Trek Beyond* (2016 Film)**

Veronica has become a huge *Star Trek* fan, especially of the original series and the Next Generation series. We already have the original cast feature films and Next Generation cast feature films, so I figured we might as well watch *Star Trek Beyond*, even though it is set in the rebooted Kelvin Timeline, which I don't really like, and I was not a fan of the 2009 *Star Trek* film directed by J. J. Abrams, who I think of as a useless hack. In fact, I disliked it so much that I've never seen the 2013 film *Star Trek Into Darkness*.

This one, though, was directed by Justin Lin, and Simon Pegg, who plays “Scotty” in the previous two films, was one of the screenwriters. And I’m happy to say that these two people have made a somewhat better film.

Somewhat.

It’s still a big, sprawling mess, with a really unconvincing villain and some very annoying scenes. I don’t like the relationship between Spock and Uhura. I don’t like the motorcycle chase. (Motorcycle? Really?) But the overall character arcs in this one are pretty decent, if you’re willing to accept all the retroactive continuity changes. And it’s always fun to see the Enterprise blown to smithereens. (Oh... ummm, spoiler warning! Although it hardly matters; it’s been blown up before, and I’m sure it will be blown up again.)

Personally, I like the Enterprises that don’t get blown up.

Anton Yelchin (who played Chekov) died in a tragic accident a year before this film was actually released, at the age of 27.

He got out of his Jeep Grand Cherokee while it was on a slope outside his house in California, to check his security gate, and the car rolled back down the driveway and crushed him against a brick pillar next to the gate. There had already been a recall, and another software update was pending.

It seems that he was killed by bad user interface design. Apparently the Fiat Chrysler shifter in that model was:

...unusual in that it resembles a classic floor-mounted gear selector that can be physically moved between different transmission modes, but FCA’s lever always returns to the center position, making it impossible to tell by feel alone which gear you’re in.

He was killed by an imaginary lever which did nonsensical things, which is a strange and ironic death for an actor who sat at a fake console pushing imaginary buttons that did nonsensical things.

As a software engineer, I’ve long believed that modern car designs that replace simple mechanical levers and knobs with touch-screens are terrible and dangerous. I hope Yelchin’s family gets a billion fucking dollars out of the morons who push these dangerous designs on us; in fact, I hope someone does jail time.

### ***Venom* (2018 Film)**

Veronica had asked to watch *Venom* for her birthday. I was somewhat aware of this film, having listened to a couple of reviews. I was a bit hesitant, not because I thought the film was bad *per se*, but because I thought it had a little too much body horror for kids to deal with.

I really needn’t have worried. *Venom* is no *Videodrome* or *Poltergeist*. There are some body-snatching special effects, but the whole symbiont thing is largely played for laughs, as well as occasional jump scares involving growling and giant

teeth and tongues. Still, I can't really recommend it for kids younger than, say, 12 or so.

*Venom* is a standalone story set somewhere in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Apparently *Venom* appears in *Spider-Man 3*, although I've never seen it. This film is *Venom*'s back-story. *Venom* is an alien, part of a group of aliens who were found on a comet by a space probe and returned to Earth. The guy who developed the private space probes is billionaire Carlton Drake, an amoral Elon Musk-like character fond of running dangerous experiments on unwilling human subjects. After a series of accidents, investigative journalist Eddie Brock winds up with the alien merging with his body. Apparently unshaven Eddie (Tom Hardy) has just the kind of terrible diet that the alien is looking for, since it did not find the previous hosts suitable.

The chase scenes in this film are amazing and hilarious. Hardy's Eddie is a wonderfully greasy anti-hero. The whole film is a lot silly, but it's fun, and so I'd place it alongside the handful of Marvel movies that don't take themselves too seriously, and therefore I can recommend.

I haven't seen all of the Marvel Cinematic Universe movies by a long shot, but the ones I have both seen and recommend are:

- *Iron Man* (2008)
- *Ant-Man* (2015)
- *Doctor Strange* (2016)
- *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017)
- *Black Panther* (2018)

*Black Panther* does take itself pretty seriously, and this makes it less good than it could be; the car chase scenes in *Venom* work because they are silly, but similar sequences in *Black Panther* don't work because while the action is silly, the film presents it seriously, which makes it unconvincing. I'll still recommend *Black Panther*, because it is ground-breaking in many ways: not just for its cast, but for the depth of its screenwriting; the script takes some big risks and makes interesting choices, including an amazing fake-out with a character we think is the villain, but who turns out to only be a warm-up villain. *Black Panther* is also loaded with fascinating and repugnant techno-utopianism and neoliberalism, which Grace and I should really talk about on a podcast sometime, and so should definitely not be swallowed whole, but that's another topic.

Technically, *Venom* is not part of the "Marvel Cinematic Universe" series of films, but part of the "Sony Pictures Universe of Marvel Characters," because it has different licensing and distribution arrangements. And somehow, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, also produced by Sony, and which I also can highly recommend as a truly excellent and creative animated film, although it does not appear on Wikipedia's lists of either "Marvel Cinematic Universe" films or "Sony Pictures Universe of Marvel Characters" films, for reasons I can't begin to explain, and also simply don't care about, even a little bit.

***Over the Garden Wall* (2014 Animated Miniseries) (Spoiler Warning)**

Someone on Twitter was talking about this show in the run-up to Halloween, and I had never heard anything about it, so I looked it up. It looked very promising, so I ordered a copy. The ten short episodes ran on Cartoon Network, which showed two episodes a day each day from November 3rd through the 7th.

The story follows two half-brothers wandering through a wooded land that looks like New England in, maybe, the 19th century. The brothers have a guide, a bluebird of unhappiness named Beatrice, and so the story explicitly references Dante's *Paradiso*; in *Paradiso*, Beatrice takes over as guide, because Virgil cannot enter Paradise. This is a hint that the events of the story represent a divine revelation to the two brothers.

It turns out that the boys are wandering through a bardo, a liminal, transitional state between life and death. The people and creatures they meet are heavily allegorical, but in the tradition of the Brothers Grimm, not the safe, bloodless Disney tradition. The characters and story elements are drawn from a wide range of folklore and fables and the animation style is a throwback to earlier styles, occasionally channeling Max Fleischer's Betty Boop cartoons.

There are some terrific voices in the cast, including Elijah Wood, Christopher Lloyd, John Cleese, Tim Curry, and Fred Stoller. I highly recommend it.

***The Pink Panther* (1964 Film), *A Shot in the Dark* (1964 Film), *The Return of the Pink Panther* (1975 Film), and *The Pink Panther Strikes Again* (1976 Film)**

These films are slightly hard to find. There are a number of different boxed sets, but most of them leave out at least one of these four films while adding in more of the later films. The later films were produced after the death of Peter Sellers, and either feature clips of him, or have the same character played by different actors. I don't think any of the later films are even a little bit good, and probably will never watch them; the whole effort to play the character or reboot the series seems obviously doomed. No one could really play Inspector Clouseau but Peter Sellers, and a few outtakes aren't enough to hang a whole movie on. I don't think that anyone would disagree that these are the best films of the series, and not by a narrow margin.

The Pink Panther in the series refers to a diamond — an enormous, priceless pinkish diamond with a flaw in the middle that looks, just a bit, if you squint, like a springing panther. But somehow the name, the Pink Panther, came to be associated more with the character of Inspector Clouseau than with the diamond.

Clouseau is a classic comic character straight out of the era of silent film. Everything he does is clumsy and ridiculous, but he never laughs, or breaks character — well, *almost* never. There's a very funny moment in *A Shot in the Dark*, probably the best of them, in which everyone around him is bickering and fighting about who is having an affair with who, and Sellers very briefly stares



straight at the camera, raising his eyebrows as if to say “can you believe this?” It’s one of the funniest moments in any of these films, especially because it is so unexpected.

The first one barely features Clouseau. It’s more of a mannered sex farce. We see a lot of David Niven, and there are some uncomfortably dated scenes in which he attempts to seduce a much younger Claudia Cardinale. The movie’s OK, with some nice slapstick moments, but slow, and not very entertaining for kids. So it’s my least favorite of the four.

The next one, *A Shot in the Dark*, is terrific. The Pink Panther jewel is not actually part of the story. This is the first one to actually feature Clouseau, who has developed an exaggerated French accent. It’s a basic murder mystery, but features a romance between Clouseau and the maid Maria Gambrelli (Elke Sommer), also uncomfortably young compared to Clouseau. It also is the first one to feature the character of Cato, who has been instructed to launch sneak attacks on Clouseau at any time, to help keep his reflexes in tip-top shape. There is a whole series of funny murder scenes that take place in restaurants on consecutive nights. There’s also sequence in a nudist colony; watching this part, you can see where at least half the gags in the Austin Powers movies came from. This is one of those rare films where the sequel is far better than the original, and so this is definitely the best one.

There was a 1968 film, *Inspector Clouseau*, starring Alan Arkin as Clouseau, but I’ve never seen it and don’t particularly want to.

*The Return of the Pink Panther*, is a semi-remake of the first one, and brings back the diamond thief character The Phantom, now played by Christopher Plummer. Dreyfus, played by Herman Lom, is a major character in this installment. But, honestly, I don’t remember a lot more about the film — I found the last half-hour very slow and gave up on re-watching it.

*The Pink Panther Strikes Again* is the one that I remember most clearly from my childhood. I recall watching it on broadcast TV and laughing so hard at some of the dumbest jokes that I feared that I would pass out. I’m now fifty-three and the dumbest jokes don’t quite have the same effect on me, although the kids loved them. But a lot of the references and gags that flew right over my head back then now make me laugh almost as hard. This one features stand-ins for President Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger. Kissinger’s accent is ridiculous. Ford, a big fan of University of Michigan football, is constantly tripping over things, so this portrayal is very much like Chevy Chase’s version of Ford in old episodes of *Saturday Night Live*. There are some scenes shot in a gay nightclub that are, when viewed with a 2020 sensibility, a little dated, but they certainly aren’t as offensive as they could have been. The film features Inspector Dreyfus cracking up again and becoming a super-villain, who eventually winds up building a death ray and holding the world hostage. Herman Lom is great in this, despite the over-the-top silliness that follows. Sellers, sadly, died just a few years later, at the age of 54.

## **A New Pottscast**

Grace and I managed to have a conversation on Saturday, which I was then able to turn into a podcast episode on Sunday. We haven't been able to do very much in the way of preparation for these, just as I've been lagging far behind on newsletter issues, but at least we got something out there. In this conversation, we spoke about the election, among other things.

It's now been seven days since Election Day, and the election's been called for Biden. But his electoral vote margin remains worryingly thin at 279, just ten votes over the line. We still don't know the results from four states: North Carolina, Georgia, Arizona, and Alaska. Alaska is a foregone conclusion, but the latest results in the other three put Biden and Trump within a half of a percentage point of each other. I think Georgia will eventually be found to have gone for Biden, by a very narrow margin, but this delayed vote counting is emboldening people who want to declare the election "fake news." Today, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said there would be a "smooth transition to a second Trump administration." Meanwhile, Trump, the chief executive, is rambling away on Twitter, spouting off links from Breitbart, NewsMax, and OAN, which is not at all how I think that a chief executive should perform the functions of office, especially during the worst national crisis of my lifetime.

## **A Slight Loss of Executive Function**

If you're reading this newsletter, I'm pretty sure you've experienced a lot of anxiety and distraction recently, too. I had an interesting experience at work yesterday. I was discussing with a co-worker whether to contract out some of my development work, work I'm very hard-pressed to finish because of the number of other projects I'm working on, to a consulting company, on a trial basis. I wound up spending a whole lot of time thinking through the pros and cons of this decision, and found myself entirely flip-flopping multiple times on whether I wanted to do it, or not. In short, I was very indecisive.

I'm not usually like this at work; I'll usually make decisions relatively quickly, on the grounds that even if they turn out to be wrong, I'll wind up with more information. In this case, even if the contractors don't do a good job, and don't produce anything we can use at all, we won't be out a lot of time and money, because it is quite a small project, and if they produce anything at all, I can still probably learn useful information from it, which will make it easier to write my own version. So, really, it should have been a no-brainer.

I'm not sure if this terminology and the theoretical framework behind it are universally accepted among mental health professionals — probably not — but I think this is termed "loss of executive function." When the mind is occupied by anxieties or worries, the "executive" has trouble staying focused and, especially, in my case, trouble concentrating, trouble thinking things through in the manner we are accustomed to, and making decisions. This article describes the phenomenon and how it may be related to the pandemic:

Many of these fears and new challenges are expected and understandable. They are responses that intuitively make sense to us as humans, as many of us experience them on a small scale throughout a typical year. Most people can name a time when they could not fall asleep before a big test or did not take excellent care of their physical health when they were hugely stressed or anxious. However, one effect of this newly heightened stress and anxiety that is less frequently mentioned is the decrease in executive function skills.

The article references this CDC article.

That CDC article mentions “ending a period of home isolation.” But, increasingly, it’s becoming clear that we’re not really going to be able to safely end our lockdown anytime soon. In fact, with the number of cases rising so much in my county, I’m starting to lose hope that I’ll be able to avoid, at some point, spreading the infection. But I still want to do that, if I can.

I’d like to hear how you’re handling things. How’s your executive function?

Have a great week!

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