

Snacks for the Ears and Feasts for the Eyes

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I feel like saying “well, a lot has happened since the last newsletter!” But when I think about it — not much has happened.

CNN finally called the remaining states and Joe Biden, ironically, will likely receive almost the same number of electoral votes that Trump did, although it looks like his lead in the popular vote is about double Clinton’s lead. Things could still shift a bit, due to faithless electors, but his win seems to be beyond doubt or manipulation now. Yesterday two Republican members of the board of canvassing for Wayne County — Michigan’s most populous county — briefly refused to certify the numbers in the county, which includes Detroit. They did this even though the various counts really don’t show any more discrepancies than they normally do. But then, just a few hours later, after this pandering got them the fifteen minutes of shame that they craved, and tweets from Trump, they collapsed like wet cardboard boxes. So the vote in Wayne County will be certified.

I made comments on Twitter about what I thought would happen. Here they are, slightly edited:

I could be wrong about this, but at the moment it doesn’t look so much like we will have an actual coup, in which Biden somehow won’t be allowed to assume the Presidency, but something stranger. We may have a “two popes” situation.

I’m currently imagining that Trump will leave, eventually, but *never actually concede*. He’ll retreat to Mar-a-Lago, or possibly even *overseas* to avoid prosecution, and refer to himself as President-in-Exile or something like that.

He could have a very loud voice and a lot of followers — a lot of supplicants, too — some in positions to cause harm and chaos. They’ll go to him to kiss his ring and swear fealty in exchange for favorable tweets or guest spots on his TV show, or whatever.

It might be very slightly analogous to the Francis/Benedict situation, where cranks who are out of power go to the old Pope, to try to get a sort of lesser *imprimatur* on their reactionary ideas.

How dangerous will this *actually* be? I haven't got a clue. But we know that he can still rile up his base, and trigger acts of stochastic terrorism and intimidation.

When might it end? I don't know. I suspect it might not end... for a long time. It might end when the *material needs* of the disenfranchised and disempowered in this country are actually met. Or... it might not.

I can imagine scenarios where it wouldn't end even after Trump's death. If enough people think he is still somehow "owed" another term as President, they might think this debt is hereditary and will therefore pass to his children.

There are a lot of people in America who, for some reason, never really liked the idea of democracy, or even democratic republics, and who, deep-down, still long to be ruled by a king. In lieu of a king, they might take an autocrat. America is already not really a democracy:

Asking "[w]ho really rules?" researchers Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page argues that over the past few decades America's political system has slowly transformed from a democracy into an oligarchy, where wealthy elites wield most power.

Using data drawn from over 1,800 different policy initiatives from 1981 to 2002, the two conclude that rich, well-connected individuals on the political scene now steer the direction of the country, regardless of or even against the will of the majority of voters.

"The central point that emerges from our research is that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy," they write, "while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence."

As one illustration, Gilens and Page compare the political preferences of Americans at the 50th income percentile to preferences of Americans at the 90th percentile as well as major lobbying or business groups. They find that the government — whether Republican or Democratic — more often follows the preferences of the latter group rather than the first.

The researches note that this is not a new development caused by, say, recent Supreme Court decisions allowing more money in politics, such as *Citizens United* or this month's ruling on *McCutcheon v. FEC*. As the data stretching back to the 1980s suggests, this has been a long term trend, and is therefore harder for most people to perceive, let alone reverse.

Anyway. Biden's cabinet appointments aren't looking too promising, unless you are a fossil fuel company executive.

Meanwhile, COVID-19 is really starting to get its freak on. CNN's headline today is "US sees deadliest day in 6 months." And Biden's transition can't really get underway until a sniveling Trump appointee signs a piece of paper.

Back at the micro level, I'm just continuing to go to my job, which is still where I left it. I'm continuing to plug away at several projects as well as I can. Right now the balls are in several other courts — I'm waiting on bug fixes from vendors. I can do a little R&D here and there, towards future products and firmware versions, but I'm really mostly just (metaphorically) nervously drumming my fingers on the desk and sending daily follow-up e-mail messages reminding other people that we need them to finish their things so we can finish our things.

On the home front, while I'm still working, money is a bit tight going into the week of Thanksgiving, which is unfortunate. The food-shopping situation feels both desperate and dangerous, as people are stockpiling again and stores, even big stores like Costco that usually feel pretty safe, are overrun with crowds. We've canceled Thanksgiving get-togethers with any family members or friends from outside our household. We're not getting a turkey. We might do a curbside pick-up of a few extra food items. We have a couple of boxes of red wine on hand to help keep us calm as we hunker down for what looks to be an absolutely hellish winter.

We've been giving a bit of money to friends, as mutual aid, trying to keep them fed and housed. I titled one of the earliest issues of this newsletter "Helping When You Can't Help Enough," and we are again in that situation now — everything we can afford to give is not nearly enough, when we are trying to support folks who are unemployed, but not able to collect unemployment, or already receiving public assistance, but that assistance is so small as to be useless. The whole "village," that it takes to keep everyone safe, is not stepping up. It looks like many of our friends are going to be suffering more and more hardship in the coming months.

Those that don't die of COVID-19, that is.

So, all my usual upbeat preliminaries out of the way, I'm going to switch over to talking about more pleasant subjects. eBay continues to be my best friend during lockdown — I've been able to buy a steady trickle of inexpensive used movies on DVD and Blu-ray so that on any given night, if the chores are done early enough, I can pull out a disc the kids haven't seen.

Gounod's *Faust* (Metropolitan Opera Stream)

Last night Grace and I watched *Faust* in our bedroom on our big monitor. There were some difficulties. The kids had run down the battery on the laptop running Windows that I wanted to use, so I had to try a different laptop running Linux. It worked, mostly — for unknown reasons, it would not recognize the monitor as an audio destination. So while we could watch the video on the big screen, we could only hear the audio coming from the small, tinny laptop speakers. It was especially disappointing to hear Méphistophélès, sung by bass René Pape, with no bass.

From what I could hear, the music and singing in this 2011 performance were top-notch. But I found the staging to be unpleasant to look at. It was staged on an industrial-looking set of steel tables and chairs and steel staircases and catwalks, designed to look like the inside of Los Alamos labs at the time they were developing the first atom bombs. The costumes were out of nineteenth-century Germany. They don't fit well together. This opera has the distinction of being the very first opera ever performed at the Met, in 1883, not long after the end of the Reconstruction era. I am guessing that the original staging was much more appealing.

Partway through Act III, the laptop's battery gave out, so we went to bed.

More Yes: *Fragile* and *Close to the Edge* (Steven Wilson Remixes)

I received a couple more of the Steven Wilson remix versions of classic Yes albums and I've been listening to them on my headphones constantly at my desk. These versions of the albums sound much better than the older CD releases. Unfortunately, though, I had some difficulty with *Fragile*. The CD was brand-new and sealed, but it won't play perfectly, and I can't import it into my iTunes library. There are errors which translate into audible glitches: little stutters and clicks and pops. It's a bit subtle — no dramatic skips — but noticeable. To confirm that I wasn't crazy, I sent a file to my friend, an audio engineer, who confirmed that he can hear the glitches and they sound like digital drop-outs, not problems with the original tapes. I've tried it on several different CD drives, and I tried both iTunes and the separate open-source program Exact Audio Copy. It seems like the pressing is defective. It's pretty rare, but out of hundreds of CDs that I've imported, it does happen occasionally; it's happened maybe a half-dozen times that a brand-new CD won't give me a pristine digital copy. I have contacted the eBay seller and asked if I can return it for another copy.

Compact discs are very reliable and have built-in error-correction codes, but they aren't perfect. If things go well — a good player and a clean, un-scratched CD — the player or computer will never even need to apply the error-correction codes. But if errors are detected, the players and computers use different strategies

to try to cover them up. Some players will insert silence to cover up bursts of bad audio data. Some will “interpolate” — fill in the sound from before and after the glitch. Programs like Exact Audio Copy can do multiple reads to try to get a clean rendering of the audio, but if it can’t, it will also warn you that there were uncorrectable errors. I tested Exact Audio Copy on another disc that sounded fine to me, and it reported a clean bill of health — no errors at all. On this CD, it reported some errors, but also claimed that it fixed them. However, it clearly didn’t fix them.

Aside from these errors, and assuming that I’ll get them fixed eventually, *Fragile* sounds incredible. To me, the answer to the question “what’s the best Yes album?” is that it’s a toss-up between *The Yes Album* and *Fragile*. *Fragile* has “Roundabout,” “Long Distance Runaround,” “The Fish (Schindleria Praematurus),” and “Heart of the Sunrise,” among a few lesser tracks. *The Yes Album* has “Yours is No Disgrace,” “Starship Trooper,” “I’ve Seen All Good People,” and “Perpetual Change,” among a few lesser tracks. These eight songs represent the majority of Yes’s greatest songs.

My copy of *Close to the Edge* plays just fine, and sounds fantastic as well. I’m enjoying it, but it isn’t quite as compelling to me as *The Yes Album* and *Fragile*. *Close to the Edge* has only three tracks on it: “Close to the Edge” (almost 19 minutes long), “And You and I” (over 10 minutes long), and “Siberian Khatru” (almost 9 minutes long). “Close to the Edge” is considered by many Yes fans to be the band’s singular masterpiece. It’s beautiful, but it’s a long journey, and I’m not always in the mood to take that journey. “And You and I” is an easier trip to take, but it’s very abstract. Other people might claim there is deep meaning in the lyrics, but as an English major, I’m here to tell you that they are profound-sounding abstract gibberish:

*Changed only for a sight of sound, the space agreed
Between the picture of time behind the face of need
Coming quickly to terms of all expression laid
Emotion revealed as the ocean maid
All complete in the sight of seeds of life with you*

Of course, a lot of their lyrics are gibberish, but in some songs like “Starship Trooper” the words scan better, the imagery is simpler and easier to appreciate, and more importantly, the words are easier to sing along to in the car:

*Sister bluebird flying high above
Shine your wings forward to the sun
Hide the mysteries of life on your way
Though you’ve seen them, please don’t say a word
What you don’t know, I have never heard*

Anyway — if you’re a Yes fan, or would like to find out if you’re a Yes fan, I highly recommend the remix versions of *Fragile* and *The Yes Album*.

I’m looking at two more albums that have been given the Steven Wilson remix

treatment, *Relayer* and *Tales from Topographic Oceans*.

Relayer features a 22-minute-long track called “The Gates of Delirium,” but the rest are of more conventional length.

Tales, according to Wikipedia, was devised by Jon Anderson when

...he read a footnote in *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda that describes four bodies of Hindu texts about a specific field of knowledge, collectively named shastras: the shruti, smriti, puranas, and tantras. After pitching the idea to guitarist Steve Howe, the two developed the album’s themes and lyrics that took shape as a double album containing four side-long tracks based on each text.

And:

When the band settled into Morgan Studios, Lane and Anderson proceeded to decorate the studio like a farmyard. Squire believed Lane did so as a joke on Anderson as he wished to record in the country. Anderson brought in flowers, pots of greenery, and cut out cows and sheep to make the studio resemble a garden as a typical studio did not “push the envelope about what you’re trying to create musically.” Wakeman recalled the addition of white picket fences and his keyboards and amplifiers placed on stacks of hay.

I have to admit that *Tales* sounds a little tedious and up-its-own-butt.

I might wait on acquiring copies of *Relayer* and *Tales*. Maybe I’ll listen to them on YouTube a few times. I might need to take a little break from Yes. Between the records I’ve already got, and *90125*, I’ve feel like I have most of the band’s best work. Maybe it’s time I heard something current? It would be nice if there were still record stores that I felt I could go into. Any recommendations?

Ant-Man and the Wasp (2018 Film)

The kids asked me if I could get them a copy of this direct sequel to the previous Marvel film *Ant-Man* (2015) and so I did. It’s a bit disappointing. While *Ant-Man* is obviously a big blockbuster film in terms of budget, it still has a bit of a smaller-film feel, and I like that. It also maintains a fun tone and mood across the whole film, punctuating even the moments of violence and peril with humor. This one, though, feels over-stuffed, with the screenwriters and director succumbing to the temptation to pack in so much more of what people liked, or at least what they *thought* people liked, about the previous film.

There are too many characters in this film, and some of their stories are too dark to work well in a light-hearted film. The back-story of the previous film is relentlessly retconned to squeeze in these characters. It still has a lot of funny moments, and Paul Rudd remains very funny, but I get whiplash watching the cuts between the extremely dark back-story elements and the present light

caper-film story, and the run-time is too long; I think there were too many cooks in the kitchen.

There are fans that were probably very excited by the way this film brought in other characters and linked up with the Marvel Cinematic Universe. I'm not really one of them; I just wanted to watch a fun and interesting film. A post-credit scene ties this film to *Avengers: Endgame*, but that didn't mean very much to me, as I haven't seen *Endgame*. At some point, maybe we'll binge-watch the major films leading up to *Endgame* and then watch *Endgame*, but not soon. Per this Vox article, to get the most out of *Endgame*, one should have first watched

- *Captain America: The First Avenger*
- *Captain Marvel*
- *Iron Man*
- *The Avengers*
- *Guardians of the Galaxy*
- *Captain America: Civil War*
- *Black Panther*
- *Avengers: Infinity War*

Of these, we've only seen three: *Iron Man*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, and *Black Panther*. So we'd have a fair amount of catching up to do.

***X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009 Film)**

As a kid, I was more of a Spider-Man and Fantastic Four fan than an X-Men fan, mainly because those comic books were the ones that my step-brother Tony finished reading himself and gave me to read. So I'm not really very familiar with Wolverine and his back-story. This dark film explores it in depth. We're shown how a young boy named James Howlett (get it — howl — howl-ette?) witnessed his father's murder and this triggered bone claws to extend from his knuckle bones; he murders the killer, but not before the killer, Thomas Logan, reveals that he is the boy's father. It was a surprise to me that Wolverine (Logan) is incredibly long-lived.

The film follows Logan as he flees with his half-brother Victor Creed, who shares Logan's healing power. The two spend the next *hundred years* working as soldiers, through the American Civil War, both World Wars, and the Vietnam War. Logan eventually has the operation that replaces his skeleton with adamantium (a magic metal), is trained up as a super-soldier, and eventually escapes and goes rogue, eventually meeting up with Professor Xavier, and the modern X-Men storyline begins.

I have not actually seen more than a few brief scenes from this film, but Grace watched the whole thing with the kids. I asked her if it was good, and she said it was "OK." That's not really a ringing endorsement, so this one is probably best left for true fans of Wolverine and the X-Men.

***Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015 Film)__**

Now that we have a screen set up in our bedroom, it is occasionally possible for Grace and I to go in there and watch a movie by ourselves, even — *gasp* — a movie made for grown-ups! I’ve been curious about this one for a long time, in part because of the online memes it spawned.

This is a blockbuster production that also does not compromise with the audience at all. I find that a little bit fascinating. It’s relentlessly dark and grim. It makes the viewer withhold gratification — for example, we don’t even see Max’s face for, I think, the first 45 minutes of the film’s run-time, since he has a mask locked onto his head. Max is not played by Mel Gibson in this one — I think he was *persona non grata* by then, for good reasons, but Gibson was also too old for this kind of action film. Max is instead played by Tom Hardy, and he’s fantastic in this. It’s an odd coincidence that he is also the star of *Venom*, which we watched just a few days earlier. Charlize Theron plays Furiosa, and plays her in an absolutely uncompromising, powerful way. She has far more lines than Hardy. Furiosa is a feminist icon now.

The plot has some complexities to it, but the film mostly consists of a series of relentless, extended chase scenes. They go on far longer than you might expect, with very few breaks at all. There are no “info-dumps” — no one ever sets up a slide projector and starts explaining what is going on. You’re left to pick it up from some slim references that come up in the sparse amount of conversation. Max’s part in this film is barely a speaking part.

If you like action films, and I do, this one is absolutely indispensable. It’s a surprisingly serious film, filled with grim themes. It also looks groundbreaking — it’s shot digitally, I believe, not on film, making it ultra-sharp, and many of the action sequences are shot at an accelerated frame rate, giving the film a sense of hyper-realism. From what I could tell, almost all of the action sequences were done primarily with physical stunts and practical effects, without a lot of computer-generated imagery. The CGI that is present is so advanced that I had a very hard time picking it out. Computers were obviously used for color grading — the daytime scenes all have the same brilliant palette of yellow and orange lighting hues, while the night scenes were shot day-for-night and darkened digitally, which gives them an eerie feel. Between the gritty vehicles and costumes, and the color grading, the whole film looks gorgeous. Shooting, which took two years in Namibia, must have been incredibly challenging.

There are some continuity issues I noticed — actors who become smudged with dirt or grease seem to magically clean themselves up a few times — but this is only distracting if your eye is like mine, always fixated on details.

This film is absolutely not for kids, but I recommend it highly. It’s intense. I wish I had gotten the chance to see this one in a theater. Maybe I will, one day. This one is definitely worth re-watching.

***Big Night* (1996 Film) (Spoiler Warning)**

I saw this movie back in the day, in the theater, and loved it, but it had been a long time since I last watched it. I've had this DVD for a number of months, but hesitated to watch it because I remembered the film opening with a sex scene, or at least with a post-coital scene.

The version on the DVD does not open with this scene, and I'm not sure if it was edited, or if I'm mis-remembering the original theatrical release. But it isn't that significant, since we learn what we need to know about the characters in later scenes.

Big Night is an *auteur* film created largely by actor Stanley Tucci, who stars in the film and also co-directed the film with Campbell Scott and co-wrote it with Joseph Tropiano. As such it is one of a handful of films I know and love that were created by people who were primarily actors, who created their own visions largely as personal projects. The other two are *The Apostle* starring, written by, and directed by Robert Duvall, and *Sling Blade* starring, written by, and directed by Billy Bob Thornton. I have copies of those other two films on DVD as well, but we have not watched them yet, because they really aren't good films for kids. We might be able to re-watch them soon, and if we do, I'll write about them in this newsletter.

This film, by comparison, not only did we watch with the kids, but the kids really, really enjoyed it. I thought I was going to have to explain the humor inherent in many of the conversations, but the older kids picked up on it immediately

Big Night is one of those rare films which, I think, comes very close to being a perfect film. I can think of *no* flaws that are worth mentioning, no reasons to deduct points from a perfect ten-out-of-ten score at all, and I'm usually like a Russian figure-skating judge, ready to deduct points for the slightest infraction.

The cast is amazingly good. It co-stars Tony Shalhoub, Minnie Driver, Ian Holm, Isabella Rossellini, and Allison Janney. I'm not sure just *why* all their performances are so amazingly good, but they are. I don't think it is a stretch to think that Tucci, as a very distinguished actor himself, really knew how to get great performances out of fellow actors, perhaps in ways that directors who don't know film "from the inside" like this can't quite manage.

When I watch a film, especially on a second or third viewing, I'll watch the actors and think thoughts like this:

- Are the actors hitting their marks convincingly and looking where they are supposed to look, without their eyes darting every which way, and are they speaking their lines convincingly, or does it just sound like they are reading the script? (These are my criteria for "competent screen actors.")
- When you look into the faces of the actors, do they seem like, at the end of the scene, they might just walk off the set and walk home and continue to exist as the character they are playing? Are you convinced that the

character might really exist, and have a life beyond the scenes that you can see? (These are my criteria for “good screen actors.”)

- When you look into the faces of the actors, do they convey to you that they have a rich and complex inner life, and that they are actually *living* the emotional state of the character, in a way that seems both compelling and believable? (These are my criteria for “great screen actors.”)

Tucci and Shalhoub play two brothers, amusingly named Primo and Secondo. They are first-generation immigrants from Calabria, Italy, and they are trying to make it in America by running a restaurant called “Paradise.” (I think the name of the restaurant might be a nod to the 1988 film *Cinema Paradiso*, but I’m not certain of that). These two leads are fantastic, but *all* the characters in *Big Night* are played by great screen actors doing some of the best work I’ve ever seen them do. And, very importantly, the film has maintains a clear and constant focus on these characters, which really helps turn the artifice of acting into art. In his review, Roger Ebert wrote:

Big Night sees all of these people with great fascination: It is truly interested in them as individuals. When Primo and Secondo are in the kitchen, for example, notice how absorbed they are in their professional and culinary conversations. They don’t seem to be acting, and they don’t seem to be in a scene; they seem utterly devoted to the business at hand.

Primo is an obsessive perfectionist of a chef. He believes particularly in the importance of preserving the traditional dishes that he learned to make in Calabria. His brother, Secondo, basically does everything else — he took out the loan to open the restaurant; he goes out into the world; he buys the food; he runs the front of the house. He does his best to shield his brother from all of these concerns so that his brother can focus on what he does best.

In one of the earliest scenes we see an American customer served Primo’s trademark dish, a delicious-looking seafood risotto. She did not expect to have to wait so long to get the meal; risotto, of course, is famously slow to cook, requiring constant stirring and attention. She’s not impressed with the creamy, delicious result. She asks for a side of spaghetti and meatballs. Secondo tries to politely explain to her that it isn’t the best move to add a starch to a starch, but she is undeterred. So he goes into the kitchen and asks Primo to make her a side of spaghetti and meatballs. Primo flies into a rage, calling her a “philistine.” The cinematography in this sequence is great — we see Secondo fling open the swinging door between the kitchen and the dining area so that Primo can see who they are talking about, and the camera shoots the annoyed customer right through the doorway. Primo, though, does not actually want to go and argue with the customer, so in frustration, he gives in.

The names of the characters are a hint that they aren’t “real.” Oh, they are actually convincing characters with lovely small story arcs. But they also represent the opposite sides of a timeless debate about immigrants and immigration

— to assimilate, or hold on to the culture of origin? Secondo seems *mostly* eager to assimilate, and especially to “climb the ladder” of success in America, which seemed impossible to him in Italy; at one point he actually mimes climbing a ladder. Primo mournfully calls his relatives to talk to them, and seems to feel genuine homesickness.

The film takes place across a very short time span — just a couple of days — and mostly, one day, the day of the “big night.” Another Italian immigrant, Pascal, runs a nearby restaurant that serves Americanized Italian food, happily playing into every stereotype Americans have about Italian food. It’s sort of the Olive Garden of the time, and everyone looks to be having fun, but to Primo, it is an abomination — he describes what happens in that restaurant as “rape! Rape of cuisine!” Because Pascal is fundamentally a businessman, quite willing to sell people whatever they want, and Primo is something very different. Which of these approaches to life is “better” is one of the philosophical questions that makes this film so interesting.

I don’t think one *has* to be an obsessive purist to make good art, and in the restaurant business, making people happy, rather than challenging their expectations and educating their palettes, is not necessarily a bad thing, although I draw the line at Guy Fieri’s “donkey sauce.” My version of “Paradise” is our local Italian restaurant Paesano’s, which makes some very fine regional Italian dishes. You can get a Ragú di Coniglio, made of braised rabbit with celery root and white carrot soffrito with pappardelle, or Affumicato Rissoto, with smoked salmon and parmesan, peas, baby spinach, and shaved black truffle. Or you can get the spaghetti and meatballs with tomato sauce. No one will grimace or throw a pan in the kitchen or sneer at you behind your back if you order it — I promise. (But their Rigatoni and Country Greens, with sausage, garlic butter, rapini, and hot peppers over rigatoni is a pretty simple dish, aromatic and spicy, and a personal favorite.)

Dammit, now my stomach is growling and I am longing for the day that I can go back inside a restaurant.

Anyway, desperate for money to keep the restaurant open long enough to start to turn a profit, and with the bank threatening foreclosure on Paradise, Secondo goes to visit Pascal, to ask him for a loan. Pascal is played hilariously by Ian Holm. The cinematography in their conversation scene is amusingly weird — at one point, both the men are facing each other speaking, but their faces are both partially obscured by lamps. The cinematography is not an accident — we are being told that the two can’t clearly *see* each other. And the audience knows, but Pascal doesn’t, that Secondo is sleeping with Pascal’s wife, the sexy Gabriella, played by Rossellini, while at the same time dating Phyllis, played by Minnie Driver.

Secondo cares for Phyllis, and she seems ready to marry him and/or sleep with him before marriage, but he isn’t ready for either. In a fascinating scene, he lectures her about how *she* doesn’t understand money (although she works at a

bank) and *she* isn't ready to marry him because he isn't yet successful. He is thus claiming to know what she wants, although as a financially independent young woman who has been supporting herself, Secondo's success doesn't seem as important to her as it does to him; she'd rather have his love and commitment, which appear to be lacking. Where Secondo and Pascal couldn't see each other, in this scene, Secondo and Phyllis can't (or won't) hear each other.

Phyllis doesn't know that Secondo is already getting certain needs met elsewhere, with a glamorous, chic woman. Secondo seems to view his affair with the married Gabriella in the same way that views test-driving a Cadillac. Both the glamorous Gabriella and the Cadillac would, to him, indicate that he is successfully climbing that ladder of success. And he can't actually afford to keep either of them. Gabriella, for her part seems to like Secondo, but appears to be pursuing the affair mainly out of boredom, as Pascal no doubt works a lot of late nights at his restaurant. There's a lot conveyed in a few short scenes, and a lot to unpack about biases and traditions, including the near-universal traditions of misogyny and extramarital affairs.

Secondo takes out almost all his rapidly dwindling supply of cash to throw a big party, after Pascal tells him that he will bring his friend Louis Prima, the jazz musician, along with Prima's band. They are hoping that this big night will bring in a bunch of new customers, who will become regulars, and the press will bring in even more customers. Secondo and Primo and Phyllis and their waiter work like mad to cook a special dish from their home town: a *timpano*, or enormous baked pasta dish in the shape of a drum, more commonly known as a timballo_. It's basically an enormous lasagna, but we get to watch them make the pasta, by hand, and cut it, and assemble the dish, which will take many hours to bake.

The night is, indeed, fabulous — everyone has a wonderful time, consuming gallons of wine, dancing, and plowing through mountains of incredible food. But it gets later, and later, and Louis Prima and his bandmates never show.

Some of the truly special scenes in this film involve Primo and the woman he is attracted to, the quiet proprietor of a flower shop, Ann (Allison Janney, in a small but terrific role). Primo has not been able to actually ask Ann out on a date, but Secondo invites her to the big night party. At first, she resists, feeling put out that despite her obvious interest in Primo, he has been too shy to actually ask her himself. But Secondo talks her into coming anyway. It turns out that Ann is a second-generation Italian immigrant and a foodie. And in Primo's kitchen, he can speak to her in an entirely different way, and share his passion for food. A few scenes later we are not surprised that Secondo catches them together, with Primo literally feeding Ann tidbits of his favorite foods, with his fingers, as she moans and practically swoons with delight. It's clear that she has found the man that she didn't even realize, before tonight, was always the man of her dreams and yearnings.

The small, perfect arcs exhibited by the characters in this wonderfully executed

screenplay — a screenplay which is, really, a master class in screenwriting in itself — take place not because the circumstances of each character actually change that much. At the end of the big night, nothing is solved. The restaurant is still desperately insolvent. Will it survive? We don't know. Will Primo wind up going back to Italy, leaving Secondo to go it alone, or work for Pascal? We don't know. Will Secondo's relationships with either Phyllis or Gabriella actually work out? We don't know. We are pretty confident, though, that it will work out, *somehow*.

There's actually not much that we *do* know, except that Primo will never, ever compromise, and the brothers have a bond that will never, ever be broken, no matter what happens. The other characters all learn something — not how to solve all their problems, but smaller things, about who they, themselves, really are, and what they value, and who the two brothers really are, and what *they* value. And that's more than enough for one night.

This film is out of print on home video, and there is only a DVD release, not a Blu-ray. It doesn't look as wonderful as it could. I have been begging the Criterion Collection to create a Blu-ray version with the full Criterion treatment — restoration, possibly a director's cut, deleted scenes, an essay, maybe a booklet, maybe interviews. It is long overdue.

That Famous Timpano

Cooking something like this *timpano* is not really that difficult. Baked pasta dishes in general aren't that difficult. It doesn't require any super-special techniques, just a lot of experience, and a *lot* of labor. There's no magic to it. Getting them to come out picture-perfect is another matter. It is quite possible to make a smaller one at home, in a Dutch oven, and it will not take nearly as long to bake, since the interior volume will be much smaller. There's a YouTube video that looks pretty convincing. There's no getting away from rolling out the pasta shell by hand, but if you're willing to compromise more than Primo is, you could probably get away with using store-bought pasta inside the shell — just precook it a bit (not too much) before assembling the dish. Like lasagna, infinite variations are possible on this dish; in Italy, there are variations with seafood, or made with eggplant, or game, or mushrooms. You could make it with ground meat and a béchamel sauce, making it more like a Greek pastitsio. Just about any combination is likely to be quite tasty, and extremely filling! Yeah, this one is definitely not “paleo.” But that's OK. We might try making one ourselves.

Have a great week, and please stay safe!

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