

Our Summer Blockbusters

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Hello, Dear Readers. I hope you are keeping safe and staying well.

Assorted Updates

I'm back in my home office using Visual Studio Code running on "Casper," a ridiculously tiny PC, connected to a ridiculously large 4K monitor. This seems to be where things are headed. At this rate, in a few years my desktop PC will probably be the size of a nine-volt battery and I'll just carry it around on a keychain, and my monitor will be the size of an IMAX movie screen, and I'll have to keep it in the back yard.

It's been hot and humid and as I mentioned a few weeks ago, it seems like the humidity may be slowing down the growth of some of our food plants such as tomatoes and eggplant. We've been getting some ripe treats, though. They ripened very unevenly, but we finally accumulated enough ripe "super cayenne" chili peppers to make a batch of hot sauce and Grace made it. The recipe was pretty simple: chop up the peppers and remove the seeds and stems. Add vinegar, salt, and roasted garlic cloves. We didn't have enough white vinegar so used some white vinegar and some balsamic vinegar. Simmer for a while until the peppers were soft. Blend it up. Because we did not keep the seeds, it wasn't necessary to strain it. It's not super-hot, but it has a nice slow heat and a slight sweetness from the balsamic vinegar. It's not a complete replacement for Pippin's favorite, sriracha, but it's tasty.

Unfortunately we now have two underground nests of yellowjackets in the concrete-block border of the kitchen garden bed. I don't want to use a commercial insect-killer spray on them because they are right next to plants that we grow specifically to attract and feed pollinators — other good kinds of bees. Grace ordered an epinephrine injector, so she's got that on hand in case another stinging insect attacks her and triggers a severe reaction. I'd like to treat these nests by pouring a Dr. Bronner's soap solution into them, which should kill the yellowjackets. Using a spray, I can stand a few feet away, but to pour the liquid right into the holes I'd have to get very close, and I have to admit, I am not too excited about being stung myself, especially since there are a lot of them. So we're thinking over our options.

I've been trying an over-the-counter "drug cocktail" to see if it helps with my long COVID symptoms. I'm taking famotidine 10mg twice a day (that's Pepcid, half the usual dose), and cetirizine 10mg twice a day (that's Zyrtec, also a dose on the low side). I was hoping that this combination might help with my "COVID toes" symptoms, in which my feet continue to ache, burn, and tingle. Worst case, it didn't seem likely that these over-the-counter meds were likely to cause me harm. After a few days it seems like it is helping my feet slightly — there is still a lingering burning/aching, but the "tingle" seems to be reduced. But I have noticed that I've been sleeping quite a bit better, as reported by my fitness tracker, and my fatigue and "brain fog" seems to be lessened. So I'm planning to continue this regimen for 2 weeks. I'm not sure if I should continue it longer than that. You're not really supposed to take Pepcid for more than 14 days "without talking to your doctor" as the package info says. There don't seem to be similar warnings about cetirizine.

I'm trying to set up our COBRA coverage. I got the paperwork, but the continuing coverage plan shown for dental and optical did not include Grace, Benjamin, or Malachi. They were shown with coverage for medical. So the company administering COBRA coverage has "opened a case" and will try to verify with Argo that these three had coverage previously; we have insurance cards for them, and so as far as we know, they all have coverage. This will probably take weeks to resolve, unfortunately. Argo initially responded very quickly to my e-mail messages asking questions about severance pay and COBRA, but my last two messages have gone unanswered.

I've received my severance pay from Argo and so we have money for necessities for a while. I have to admit, I'm having trouble getting motivated to jump back into a job search. Working with recruiters and job sites is usually tedious and terrible. Every day I get a dozen job postings sent to me and almost all of them are terrible matches — often requiring skills that are nowhere to be found on my resume at all, and offering salaries far too low to even pay for our mortgage and food.

Applying for publicly-listed jobs has not worked for me for decades. Even if I get an interview, the usual outcome is that I don't hear anything back, and the company won't respond to queries at all. Companies want applicants to jump through more and more hoops — write essays, submit multiple code and writing samples, go through days of interviews, write code on virtual whiteboards, run a gauntlet. After over thirty years of escalating responsibilities and successes developing software, it's hard to get excited about jumping through hoops demonstrating skills that don't have much to do with the job.

There have been some bright spots — I don't have much of a "professional network" because I've never been good at that sort of networking. The unfortunate end of my employment at Thorlabs left me unable to use my previous supervisor as a reference. But through co-workers, I've gotten a few introductions and references that might turn into work.

I am looking only for fully remote work now. There is a hidden, extremely politicized struggle going on between workers demanding safety. A small piece of that struggle is the struggle of the members of the so-called “laptop class” to work from home when their work can be done just fine from home. Employers demanding that employees go back to their commutes and go into unsafe working conditions. The state and institutions of the state and members of the professional-managerial class have come down decisively on the side of employers. Demanding fully remote work puts me on the other side of this struggle. Many recruiters want to argue about why I’m simply wrong to believe that COVID-19 can still harm me or my family. In general there is no winning those arguments because they are not informed arguments, they are performative demonstrations of servitude to capital.

I don’t have a lot of power here other than the ability to withhold my labor, and I can only do that so long. But I feel like the sand is shifting — I’m starting to see more articles about the risks of BA.5 and COVID reinfection in mainstream news organs like Forbes and Business Insider. I think that monkeypox is about to shake up the “urgency of normal” crowd as we head into a grim winter.

My Interview with Joshua

If you haven’t listened to my interview with Joshua on the Grace and Paul Pottscast, you can find it here.

Our Summer Blockbusters

In our movie nights, we’ve been watching some recent releases, and some not-so-recent. Sadly we still aren’t going into theaters; we’ve watched these all on a 4K screen at home.

***Snowpiercer* (2013 Film)**

Snowpiercer, directed by Bong Joon-ho, is a Korean film based on a French graphic novel called *Le Transperceneige*. A warning to potential viewers: it’s rated R for graphic violence including fight scenes involving knives and axes. Chris Evans, who we know better as Captain America in several recent Marvel films, stars as Curtis.

The premise is that a last-ditch attempt at geoengineering to reverse global heating has failed and instead turned the planet into a frozen waste, killing almost all life. The only survivors live aboard a train which endlessly follows a huge circular route of across several continents. The train never stops and has been running continuously for 18 years. The story begins in the rear cars, the tail section, where the train’s poorest, lowest-status residents live, and follows an insurrection led by Curtis to escape from the tail section and take over the entire train, including, eventually, the engine.

The train and its rigidly segregated compartments is an allegory for the brutality of a seemingly inescapable capitalist structure, while the story is a very dark journey that shocks the viewer at times and raises the stakes very effectively. The ending, I'm sorry to report, feels a bit unsatisfying, but that's part of the allegory — it's hard to imagine the world after the machine stops. I highly recommend this film but only for adults and older teens who are prepared for the violence and will understand the allegorical nature of the story.

***Moonfall* (2022 Film)**

I saw trailers for this film some time ago and knew that I wanted to watch it eventually. In *Moonfall*, it is revealed that the moon is shifting out of its orbit. A conspiracy-minded amateur astronomer believes that the moon is not what it seems — that it is actually a “megastructure,” an ancient alien construct in disguise. Meanwhile, chaos erupts as the moon's eccentric orbit starts to produce huge tsunamis.

Moonfall is a very polarizing movie — on Rotten Tomatoes, the critics rate it 36%, while the audience rates it 70%. In the case of split reviews like this, I often wind up standing with the critics, but in this case, I'm with the audience. This is a big dumb disaster spectacle. It's best to set aside whatever science you know for the duration of the movie and just enjoy it. The jargon that is employed to try to explain events doesn't make any sense; ignore it. The critical reviews are mostly scathing; ignore them, too and have fun with it.

***Godzilla vs. Kong* (2021 Film)**

This is not the original 1962 film *King Kong vs. Godzilla*, but a modern American-made film created by Legendary Pictures and Warner Brothers. It is a sequel to the 2014 film *Godzilla*, which I didn't find very good, the 2017 film *Kong: Skull Island*, which I haven't seen, and the 2019 film *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*, which I enjoyed quite a bit, although my favorite contemporary Godzilla film remains the 2016 film *Shin Godzilla*. Like *Moonfall*, this is a big spectacle that is best viewed without picking too hard at the plausibility. The human characters in general are less expressive than the *kaiju* — Kong himself actually conveys a lot of expression. In *King Kong vs. Godzilla* we learn that the giant monsters come from deep inside the hollow Earth. This is very far from a new premise but it is played out very nicely here and we get to see a lot of really stunning visual effects, punctuated at regular intervals by enormous fight scenes, and tied up with a satisfying ending. Just don't try to work out the physics.

***The Batman* (2022 Film)**

The latest Batman story is a sort of prequel and reboot, not quite an origin story but a story that takes place early in the crime-fighting history of a new Batman. Batman, played by Robert Pattinson, has only been fighting crime for two years. In this film, his antagonist is not the Joker, but the Riddler. Pattinson does a

decent job, but Paul Dano as the Riddler absolutely steals the show with an absolutely stunning performance. Andy Serkis plays Alfred, and it's strange to see his face, but he's excellent, too.

This story leans into an older conception of Batman as a sort of freelance detective, working with the police. It's practically a police procedural. It's also a mob story, as Batman is fighting corrupt city officials as he tries to take down the Riddler. We also meet Selina Kyle, Catwoman, played by Zoë Kravitz (yes, the daughter of Lenny Kravitz and Lisa Bonet). She is actually not new to the role, as she voiced Catwoman in *The Lego Batman Movie*, although this is a far different and darker Catwoman.

I can recommend this film highly, although it is very dark and violent, and the mafia sub-plots may be difficult for younger viewers to follow.

Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (2022 Film)

Now I've come to the last film I want to review, and the review I didn't really want to write. We've been waiting a long time for a second *Doctor Strange* film, after really enjoying *Doctor Strange*, the 2016 film. Benedict Cumberbatch as Strange has been in several other Marvel films since then: he appears briefly in *Thor: Ragnarok*, *Avengers: Infinity War*, *Avengers: Endgame*, and *Spider-Man: No Way Home*. But this is the sequel to *Doctor Strange* that we've been waiting for.

It's got wild visual effects, of course. It's got both new and old characters popping up. And this is where things get really awkward.

The main antagonist in this film is Scarlet Witch, *aka* Wanda Maximoff, played by Elizabeth Olson. This story is a sort of direct sequel to the TV show *WandaVision*, which none of us have seen. It's not available on Blu-ray. Watching *WandaVision* might be strictly required in order to understand the character's behavior in *Multiverse*, but it seems like it might help, because her character's behavior is pretty inexplicable. In the films, Wanda Maximoff is an admirable character who comes to love Vision. After Vision's death, she retreats into a literal fantasy world in which Vision is still alive, and the two have a future together, complete with children. I'm told, though, that she eventually realizes that her unconscious creation of this reality is harming others who have been unwittingly dragged into it, and she is able to confront her grief and release them.

In the film, she's descended into a very stereotyped sort of madness, in which the loss of her children has driven her insane, and she'll do anything to get back some version of them, no matter how many lives it costs. She embodies a horrific, misogynistic stereotype and the heroic Wanda is reduced to a shrieking harpy. It's a shame, because much of the multiverse chaos, including Sam Raimi having fun with horror tropes, is quite enjoyable to watch. But I can't recommend this film at all.

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