

Our Indoor Summer

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My attempts to get back onto a regular newsletter schedule this year, even a monthly schedule, have not been successful. Instead I have thousands and thousands of words about King Crimson and the “Double Duo” lineup, but it’s still very incomplete, and my interest in completing the draft and editing it is currently low. Inside me are two lions, Attention Deficit Disorder and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and they fight one another. At the moment it seems like the ADD lion is winning. When he goes back to sleep and the OCD lion is in charge again, maybe I’ll be able to complete it. But in the meantime, here’s this.

Thursday, July 6, 2023

It’s been, for me, a sort of summer-that wasn’t, an indoor summer. Because of the heat and humidity, and also because of my work schedule, and my long COVID symptoms, I’ve barely been outside. As an hourly contractor, I have no paid time off at all. I’ve gone many work weeks this summer without leaving the house at all, except for a standing date with my wife Grace, to go pick up groceries, get a snack from a drive-through, and go sit in a park, or even a parking lot, to talk. Sometimes I’ve recorded parts of these talks, and some of those recordings have become podcast episodes. I’ve got another one that is mostly finished, that I need to get back to.

Our gardens this year have been almost completely neglected. Our kitchen garden is a jungle, with many plants and many weeds that are taller than we are. Our raspberry plants are completely out of control. The hugelkultur bed and circular fire ring beds are masses of weeds and chives. The two fire ring beds that were destroyed by delivery trucks are still crumpled masses of metal and soil waiting for attention.

Despite this neglect there have still been a lot of things to harvest. Many perennials came back, and a few things I didn’t expect to survive came back, too. When I’m not feeling too tired and it’s not too hot out, I can do a little bit of harvesting. Two kinds of lavender came back, to my surprise. The lavender plants were doing well with the very hot days, and I was able to harvest some terrific-smelling lavender, but when it got very wet a few weeks ago, they died back dramatically, as lavender really hates to be sopping wet. We also got a

lemon verbena plant, which was an even bigger surprise. I'm guessing it grew back from dropped seed rather than a root that survived the winter. I harvested some lemon verbena. I'll let it go to seed this year and hope it comes back again next year. I'd love to eventually have a whole *bed* of lemon verbena, as it is a personal favorite.

I collected a lot of bronze fennel flower heads when they were covered with pollen, before they went to seed. They are drying in paper bags in the utility room. I ordered a bag of arborio rice from Lundgren farms, and I'm planning to make a dish that Grace's uncle Dmitri made in North Carolina years ago, while we were visiting — fennel pollen risotto. I'm not entirely sure I'll have enough fennel pollen. I might have a tablespoon full. But I'll try. Despite collecting all these flower heads, it's hardly made a dent, and it looks like we will have mountains of fennel seed, too. I will collect at least some of that.

There is some good news to report.

Appliances

We have finally, after many months, gotten our ceiling fans and overhead lights replaced. So we can now eat dinner together without having to use camping lanterns to light the room, and the heat in our bedroom is a little bit easier to bear. We also have gotten a beefy whole-house surge suppressor installed, which, combined with the heavy-duty power strips and UPSes for all the small electronic devices, might give us a fighting chance at keeping our appliances from being destroyed in a future weather-caused (and DTE-caused) power surge.

Debt

With some assistance from my father, we have finally, after five years, paid off the loan that we had to take out in order to sell the house in Saginaw. That is \$400 a month that we will no longer have to give up just to continue digging out of the smoking crater our finances were left in, when we had to sell that house and move. We're now standing on the edge of the crater. We have one credit card, but the balance is pretty small, so our only substantial debt now is the mortgage. Don't get me wrong, the mortgage is bad enough; I have to figure out how to accelerate payments, or there's not much chance I'll be able to pay it off; it was not ideal to take out a thirty-year mortgage when I was nearly fifty, but we felt that we had little choice at the time.

The Library

I was finally able to get a replacement stereo amplifier for the basement library, the model I wanted to try after a previous experiment with an NAD unit that I wound up returning. This one is an Audiolab amplifier, and I like it much better. It has two TOSLink digital optical inputs. So now, we have both CD audio and streaming audio working in the basement again. I can sit at a table in

the library area and, with my laptop or phone, stream audio from our Synology server through the bookshelf speakers.

I've continued to make slow progress improving the library, weeding out books, DVDs and Blu-ray discs, and CDs, and adding new ones. It really feels like an evolving collection these days. The kids are, for the most part, not taking as much advantage of it as we hoped; they will almost always gravitate to going online instead, when that is available. But maybe some combination of limiting online hours, and providing them once again with the ability to crank up loud music down there, will entice them.

Reading

I'm reading more. Some of the cognitive difficulties I've had have lifted enough to let me read and enjoy reading again, although not nearly to the extent that I was before. Here's a quick overview of some of the books I've been reading, often aloud to Grace or to the kids:

***The Hair-Carpet Weavers* by Andreas Eschbach** I finally finished reading the entire novel aloud to Grace. It's an excellent if unfocused meditation on the meaning of labor and empire.

***Swann's Way* by Marcel Proust (*Remembrance of Things Past*, Volume 1)** I've been reading the first volume of this enormous novel, using the Vintage Books edition from 1982 — the Montcrieff translation, revised by Kilmartin. I first tried James Grieve's translation of *Swann's Way*, from New York Review Books Classics. I found certain sentences in that book to be so awkwardly worded and confusing that I pulled out the Vintage Books edition to compare it to, and decided that although Grieve's translation might be more literal, the Montcrieff/Kilmartin translation flows better, maintaining the beautifully meandering sentence structures of the original, and is easier to understand. Proust is slow going. I am not sure how far we'll get with it, as, while I love the language, I'm having trouble maintaining interest in the characters.

***The Heat Will Kill You First: Life and Death on a Scorched Planet* by Jeff Goodell** The first chapter of this book about survival in a rapidly warming world is a much-needed cautionary tale about how we've made the landscape inhospitable to us in ways we haven't fully caught up with.

Goodell describes the deaths of a young family including a 1-year-old baby and a dog, who went for a hike near their home in Mariposa, California, and all died, as temperatures rose to 109 degrees Fahrenheit on the trail. Goodell also describes his own experience with heat hiking in Nicaragua; the air temperature was only in the eighties, but the extremely high humidity created a very high wet-bulb temperature and brought on dangerous heat exhaustion. I think his description of the symptoms of heat exhaustion is very valuable to study; it

includes sudden very heavy sweating, fatigue, and nausea. I was reminded of an incident in college when I was quite a bit younger and more fit, and accustomed to exercising every day. I decided to go for a run on the campus track. It was about ninety, but extremely humid. After a couple of laps, I had a similar experience — I began to sweat very profusely, and became dizzy. I had to lie down on the track until I felt well enough to slowly walk home.

He discusses common misconceptions, such as the notion that if you have enough water on hand, you can survive high temperatures; this isn't true. Many victims of heat exhaustion have been found with plenty of water. The fact that they still had plenty of water may have emboldened them to keep going, when they might have survived if they had stopped moving so much (as their muscles pump out even more heat) and found shade until the heat of the day cooled down.

In the second chapter, the text starts wandering through the history of heat, going all the way back to the Big Bang, which I found ridiculous; I've got plenty of better books about astrophysics. It's interesting to read that camels evolved in North America, but this is not all that relevant to the topic at hand. This chapter feels like what it probably is, padding material added to help expand what could have been a long-form magazine article into a book. I had to skim for a while until the book settled down to talk in detail about sweat and how it works, and I actually was learning something again. It remains to be seen if the rest of the book will feel this padded, or get back to providing useful information on the important topic at hand. I read part of the first chapter to the older kids, because I want them to understand very well what heat exhaustion feels like and how to avoid it.

My Health

In general my health seems to be on a slow upswing. I can tolerate a bit more exercise. Now, lifting up the corners of the mattress to change the sheets doesn't leave me exhausted for the rest of the day. I can more easily climb up and down the stairs without having to limit the number of trips I can take to the upstairs or the downstairs. I still have constant tinnitus. I still have cognitive issues. For example, when writing, I make homonym errors all the time now. That wasn't a think I did frequently before. I know the difference between "close" and "clothes," but for some reason my brain often types the wrong one. I still have lingering "COVID toes" — burning and numbness in my feet and hands, although my toes no longer look purple much of the time. My lungs don't feel quite right. I have a lot of inexplicable muscle aches, especially in my shoulders.

I've experienced a rather surprising sudden weight gain; I've been hovering just above 180 or so for almost a decade, but in the last few months, I suddenly broke 200. I've determined that my regular use of intermittent fasting may actually be having a paradoxical effect, slowing my metabolism down too much and resulting in weight gain, so I've been experimenting with eating more, and earlier in the day — extra proteins and fats, mostly. So on a typical work day I might start

with black coffee, but after a few hours I'll eat three fried or scrambled eggs with some sliced ham and a modest amount of carbohydrate, such as pita bread fried in olive oil, with some added fat such as hummus with more olive oil. As a beverage I'll steam some oat milk and add several tablespoons of peanut butter powder for additional protein. Then, I'll eat a relatively large dinner. After eating like this for a few weeks, I haven't lost any weight, but I haven't gained any, and I feel considerably better.

I've once again had the experience of having a weird symptom crop up, and then looking for that symptom together with the words "long COVID." For a couple of months I've had a recurring sore throat, with the sensation of something stuck in the back of my throat, like I haven't completely swallowed a bite of food. I've determined that there isn't really anything stuck in my throat, but this is actually a symptom of heartburn, since omeprazole fixes it. It is likely that this is yet another problem caused by long COVID, which can apparently cause gastroparesis (paralysis of the stomach, which doesn't empty as usual after eating, leading to reflux, belching, and heartburn). I don't like staying on omeprazole continuously, because it messes with my sense of taste, but I've been taking it occasionally as needed, and that seems to help. So does eating earlier in the day.

Summer Dinner

This past weekend, Grace and I went to a local produce stand and, Sunday night, made a simple late-night, late-summer dinner. It was a pretty basic meal:

- Soft scrambled eggs (cooked very slowly on low heat, in a pot, not a pan), with herbs
- Sautéed fresh baby zucchini, sliced in half, with thyme
- Sautéed green beans with bagel seasoning, sesame oil, and lemon pepper
- For dessert, an apple and peach crumble, topped with vanilla ice cream

Simple, but one of the best meals I've had in ages, and the first time this year that I've cooked with a bunch of fresh, local produce. Reader, I nearly wept with joy. And, also, with sadness at all the meals I *haven't* been cooking from scratch over the last 18 months or so, instead using canned beans and pasta and frozen meatballs and fish sticks and packaged salads and vegetables and other convenience foods, due to the illness restricting my energy levels.

The kids just devoured everything. Even the babies scarfed down the vegetables.

Yesterday, September 5th, it was extremely hot and humid, with a "feels like" temperature of 100 degrees Fahrenheit. The AC could not keep up with this mugginess. It was hard to sleep last night. Grace and I got the kids down relatively early, for us, around midnight, and managed to get ourselves to sleep by 1:30 or 2:00. With the ceiling fan working, we were able to cool off a bit. Humid nights with a fan become a constant struggle to figure out just how much of ourselves to cover to keep from getting chilled, and how much to expose to

the fan, to serve as radiators. It's a complex dance. I fell asleep with a pillow around my midriff, on top of the covers. At some point Grace moved a little bit closer to me. I had to take the pillow off myself and move further away. Then I had to stick one leg under the covers. At one point I remember trying to figure out how to keep one leg under the covers with just my toes sticking out.

The kids were up at 7 cooking breakfast and making noise, talking and singing to themselves, and setting off the smoke alarm. That was too early for me to get up, so I tried desperately to get a little more sleep, and did so, a series of unpleasant naps, with a pillow over my head to lower the noise a bit, which then made the rest of me too hot again, woken up repeatedly by the kids and the smoke alarm, and finally gave up, downed some coffee, put on clothes, and went upstairs to my desk, feeling terrible, like I'd been beaten up.

In other words, it was a sadly typical start to my work days in the summer of 2023.

Summer Movies and TV Shows

I've accumulated a big backlog of movies to review, as we've continued to have our weekly family movie nights on Saturday evenings, and squeezed in a few additional movies and TV shows when the kids complete their chores early enough. Here is a list, no doubt incorrect in places and incomplete in others, assembled from sometimes-cryptic notes that I typed into my phone. It's an improvement over my earlier efforts to keep track of what we watch, but still imperfect. I'll try to come up with a better system to use for our ongoing movie nights. I have added notes where I felt inspired to add notes.

While I only mention a few episodes of *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*, season 2, we actually watched all the remaining episodes of this season. I'm not quite sure *when* we watched them, though. I have more to say about some of these episodes, but it will have to wait.

Saturday, July 8th

***School of Rock* (2003 Film)** This film has held up *very* well; Joan Cusack's character in particular is wonderful, and really sells the outlandish story to the viewer.

Star Trek: Strange New Worlds, Season 2, Episode 4, "Among the Lotus Eaters" This was a fairly mediocre episode, accomplishing little except harping on Captain Pike's relationship with Captain Batel.

***The Hunger Games: Mockingjay — Part 2* (2015 Film)** The finale is truly an excellent dystopian science-fiction film, and really redeems the weakness of the second film.

Saturday, July 15th

My notes from this week are a bit unclear; I'm not sure we watched both of these on movie night, but I know we did watch both of them recently.

Ghost in the Shell (1995 Animated Film) This film has held up remarkably well and is a deeper, more philosophical inquiry than the setting suggests.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004 Film) This is a remarkable, surreal, moving film.

Saturday, July 22nd

Star Trek: Strange New Worlds Season 2, Episode 6, "Lost in Translation" I always enjoy watching Celia Rose Gooding as Uhura, and this episode really showcases her character.

AI: Artificial Intelligence (2001 Film) This film has held up quite well, despite the fact that it is directed using a mix of Kubrick's chilly, intellectual, detached viewpoint and Spielberg's warmer, more affectionate viewpoint. I was afraid that this slow and artsy film might alienate the kids, but the older kids really demonstrated that they "got" it, and had quite a strong, cathartic emotional response to the ending. Grace frames this as "the origin myth told by our replacements."

Saturday, August 5th

The Twilight Zone (1958 TV Series), Season 5, Episode 3, "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" This is the famous episode where William Shatner watches in horror as a monster tears into the wiring of the plane he's riding in. The monster suit is ridiculous, but if you can overlook that, it's still a great tale.

Star Trek: Strange New Worlds, Season 2, Episode 9, "Subspace Rhapsody" This episode is absolutely over-the-top bonkers, silly and ridiculous, but also very successful. It's hard to believe this was green-lit, but I'm really glad it was.

Being John Malkovich (1999 Film) We're working our way through the films of Charlie Kaufmann and Spike Jonze. This remains one of the wildest and weirdest films I've ever seen, but it's great fun to watch. We still have *Adaptation* (2002 Film) and *Synechdoche, New York* (2008 Film) to watch. I've seen the second, but not the first.

Saturday, August 12th

Star Trek: Strange New Worlds, Season 2, Episode 10, "Hegemony" The season finale is a cliffhanger, as the USS Cayuga is ambushed by the Gorn.

This season ends with a cliffhanger. While as far as I know, season 3 has been greenlit, the strikes in the entertainment industry may mean that we will have to wait a long time to watch the end of this story.

Doctor Who, Series 4 Special, “The Next Doctor” We re-watched this special featuring David Tennant, from 2008, at Sam’s request. I know that we previously watched “Planet of the Dead,” but I can’t recall which day we watched it.

The Adventures of Baron Munchausen (1988 Film) I wanted to re-watch this Terry Gilliam film, as I had acquired the new Criterion Collection release, to go along with *Time Bandits* and *Brazil*. I had not watched this in decades. It’s a very untamed, unpolished film, filled with ridiculous practical effects, fun but very flawed. In particular, it isn’t paced very well. The surreal scenes on the moon, with an uncredited Robin Williams as the Moon King, form a wonderfully strange short film-within-a-film.

Saturday, August 19th

Years of Living Dangerously (2014 Showtime Documentary Series), Season 1, Episode 1, “Dry Season” I’m trying to gently bring the older kids up to speed on climate change and climate change denial, by working through various documentaries about the subject. We previously watched *Chasing Ice* (2012 Documentary Film). On the shelf I’ve also got *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (1992 Documentary Film), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006 Film), and *Merchants of Doubt* (2014 Documentary Film). In the library, I’m encouraging them to read *Our Angry Earth* by Isaac Asimov and Frederik Pohl, and *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit* by Al Gore. This episode features Don Cheadle, Katharine Hayhoe, Harrison Ford, and Thomas Friedman.

Gormenghast (2000 BBC Miniseries), Episode 1 This is a beautiful and strange attempt to adapt the first two books of a massive, gorgeous, and difficult fantasy trilogy. It isn’t entirely successful, but the world-building and critique of hereditary aristocracy is imaginative. Episode one covers the birth of Titus and follows Steerpike as he lights the library on fire with several members of the royal family, including baby Titus, locked inside.

Les Miserables (2012 Film) Hugh Jackman and Anne Hathaway stand out in this massive musical melodrama. Unfortunately most of the songs are not very memorable, but the staging and sets and costumes are amazingly good.

Saturday, August 26th

Years of Living Dangerously (2014 Showtime Documentary Series), Season 1, Episode 2, “End of the Woods” This episode features Arnold

Schwarzenegger with firefighters in California and Harrison Ford in Indonesia.

***Gormenghast* (2000 BBC Miniseries), Episode 2** This episode features King Sepulchraive’s descent into madness — although he really didn’t have very far to go — and his subsequent death.

***Star Wars: Episode I — The Phantom Menace* (1999 Film)** I wrote a quick review on Twitter: Since it’s been many years since the last time we watched it, and the kids have been asking for it, tonight we watched *Star Wars: Episode I — The Phantom Menace*. Seeing it again was like meeting an old friend. A friend I never liked much, and who is weirdly bigoted and boring. The story was by Lucas himself, but it’s like it was written by someone who is not really a Star Wars fan. For example, Anakin correctly guesses that Qui-Gon is a Jedi, so he’s heard of the Jedi, but refers to his lightsaber as a “laser sword,” applying the name of a specific technology not from their world, but from our world. There are just so many weird unforced errors like the midichlorians — demystification of the Jedi, but also nonsense, which can apparently get people pregnant from many light-years away. And the pacing is just terrible. The pod race scene is fun, but the other battles are dull as hell. Qui-Gon Jin really pulled out all the stops to try to free Anakin’s mother, right? Oh... wait... he has one discussion with Watto, and that’s that. And then there’s Watto himself, a classic antisemitic caricature (Jews were often portrayed as mosquitoes or vampires — the blood libel). I don’t regret showing this film to my kids because we will be discussing it. But it is painful to relive the day I, who grew up with Star Wars, saw it in the theater and came out into the light not thrilled, but bored and angry.

Saturday, September 2nd

***Years of Living Dangerously* (2014 Showtime Documentary Series), Season 1, Episode 3, “The Surge”** This episode features the horrific aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, and shows how politicians cynically score political points from climate-fueled tragedies.

***Gormenghast* (2000 BBC Miniseries), Episode 3** In part 3, Titus is eleven years old, and Irma Prunesquallor is in need of a man; Hugh Grant as Professor Bellgrove might just be desperate enough to apply for the job.

***Battle Royale* (2000 Film)** We showed this only to the oldest kids. I wasn’t sure it would go over well with either the kids, or with Grace, as it is an exceptionally violent film. However, everyone saw the violence as it was intended, an allegorical depiction of the rage the dying older generation has towards its young people. This film exceeded my expectations, especially with the amazing ending, as a pitch-black satire. The author of *The Hunger Games*, Susan Collins, may not have actually cribbed from the original novel, as she

claims. The number of parallels between the two stories, though, invite suspicion; see this article if you want to start down this rabbit hole.

Saturday, September 2th

***Years of Living Dangerously* (2014 Showtime Documentary Series), Season 1, Episode 4, “Ice & Brimstone”** This episode features Anna Jane Joyner, the daughter of Evangelical preacher Rick Joyner, who has tried for a decade to convince her skeptical father to accept the reality of global heating and join the side of the angels.

***Gormenghast* (2000 BBC Miniseries) Episode 4 (Conclusion)** Steerpike’s dastardly deeds are uncovered, and Titus must seek his own destiny.

***Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977 Film, Director’s Cut)** I have fond memories of seeing this film in the theater. It has held up very well, with several truly amazing scenes. Most of the film looks great, and the audio sounds great. Unfortunately, the intensely bright and colored practical lighting effects used to create the alien ships aren’t captured well by the DVD format, and there is a lot of aliasing and loss of detail in these scenes. There’s probably a 4K Blu-ray edition out there that looks better than my 30th anniversary “Ultimate Edition,” but I’m not in a hurry to buy it.

Other Films Watched Recently

***Real Genius* (1985 Film)** The generalized sexism of the era is here, but it isn’t as horrifying as, say, *Sixteen Candles* from the previous year. It’s interesting to look back at it now and realize it is really quite a low budget film with a few cool laser effects and one big set piece at the end. The nerd humor and anti-war messages has held up reasonably well, and the needle drops are very nice.

***Planet of the Apes* (2001 Film)** This is the Tim Burton reboot. It’s a flawed film with moments of greatness as well as moments of extreme silliness. Helena Bonham Carter’s character Ari really stands out, as she makes the best of her someone inert mask, although she has some moments in the film that I wish I could un-see; you’ll know what I’m talking about if you watch it. Tim Roth’s Thade is also wonderful to watch. There’s a startling uncredited cameo by Charlton Heston, who starred in the early films as Taylor, and another by Linda Harrison, who played Nova. Reviews for the film online tend to be negative, with many people criticizing the ending, claiming it makes no sense. While it sticks much closer to the original Pierre Boulle novel, which I read back in grade school via the Scholastic Book Club, than the 1968 film does, the way the wormholes work is a bit confusing to people who aren’t used to thinking hard about time-travel storylines. This video includes a diagram that lays out how the journeys through the wormhole criss-cross backwards and forwards in time. It does make sense, if you accept the premise. Does it really *work* as a film, for a

wide audience, if so many people who saw it found it confusing? No. A film can be fascinating to fans of old-school science fiction, but a relative failure outside of that niche audience.

Dungeons and Dragons: Honor Among Thieves (2023 Film) My expectations were low, and this fantasy adventure film exceeded them in every respect. The acting is all quite competent, but in my view it is the many weird monsters, some straight out of the early Dungeons and Dragons Monster Manual, that steal it. There's an awful lot of CGI, but I'll forgive it because it's mostly a light and funny film.

John Wick (2014 Film) Again, we showed this only to the oldest kids. It's also an exceedingly violent film, but with a lot of terrific action, playing out in amazing locations. It's unusual in that the protagonist, played by Keanu Reeves, is not a good guy in any sense; he's a vicious assassin with a long history of killing not in self-defense or for justice, but according to the whims of a criminal cartel. The entire plot of the film consists of him taking revenge. But yet, there are unwritten codes of conduct, understood by both him and the... ummm... badder guys. I'm not a "gun guy" by any means, but this film had me reading up on the different kinds of gun that Reeves uses (very convincingly) during the film. There are a lot of them. We have a set of the first three films, so we'll probably watch the next two soon.

Ant Man and the Wasp: Quantumania (2023 Film) The kids are dedicated to the idea of watching every film that emerges from the maw of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, even now that the whole franchise feels played out, like a machine grinding its gears as it burns out, so I ordered a used copy of this film for them. I really enjoyed *Ant-Man* (the 2015 film), and have happily re-watched it more than once. The sequel, *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, from 2018, is a big disappointment compared to the original, but this one is far worse.

As soon as I saw the trailer, I realized we were in for an all-CGI, all-the-time spectacle of excessive visuals without a clear, simple story to hold on to, and a nonsense villain who comes from nowhere and goes nowhere. Cassie, Scott Lang's daughter, is now played by a *third* actress, Kathryn Newton; she's a decent actor with a lovely, appealing face and manner, and works hard in this film. Its failings are not her fault.

The only things — really, the *only* things — I like about this film are some of the minor CGI characters. Veb is a gelatinous creature voiced by David Dastmalchian. He's quite funny, and the CGI character design is hilarious. Veb, and some other things in the quantum realm like the sentient buildings, are right out of Rudy Rucker's "Ware tetralogy" of cyberpunk science fiction novels, *Software*, *Wetware*, *Freeware*, and *Realware*. Veb, and the sentient buildings, could be "boppers," right out of Rucker's works. You've got to find what

enjoyment you can in these films. I'd much rather watch a decent adaptation of a Rudy Rucker novel, though.

Star Trek V: The Final Frontier (1989 Film) This outing is really a buddy picture assembled as an excuse for the three main characters (Kirk, Spock, and McCoy) to bust each other's balls. These parts are fun to watch in parts, and drag on painfully in others, but ultimately there isn't much else that is appealing in this film. The plot, featuring Spock's half-brother, makes it a detached, insignificant episode in the overall arc of the *Star Trek* universe. The confrontation with a godlike being on a mysterious planet at the center of the galaxy is under-dramatized and staged in a way that gives the audience very little sense of place. My opinion of this film is not new, as I felt that it was quite weak back when I first saw it in a theater. And my opinion was shared by an awful lot of critics: here's Siskel and Ebert's review segment from 1989.

The visual effects are subpar, probably due the fact that the famous effects should Industrial Light and Magic was not available for this film. The exterior shots of starships, shuttles, and planets look like they belong in the original series, not a major film. I wouldn't expect fantastic direction from Shatner, since this was his first time directing, but it's far worse than I expected, and, upon re-watching the film, worse than I remembered. Many scenes are blocked badly, with the principle actors much too close or much too far from the camera. Sometimes, he seems to forget that the film format is widescreen — possibly because he's so accustomed to shooting for television — and we see distracting, blurry legs and forearms on the far left and right sides of the frame. There's usually nothing interesting going on in the backgrounds. In some scenes the principal actors are even out of focus while they are delivering lines, with distant minor characters in focus instead, for no apparent artistic reason.

Back in 2016 I wrote:

To add insult to injury, this film on DVD also suffers from a poor transfer and shaky color.

Seeing how good *Star Trek: The Motion Picture - Director's Edition* looked on 4K Blu-ray — although I do have some quibbles with the director's changes to the color palette throughout the film — I gradually acquired 4K Blu-ray versions of the rest of them, hoping they would look significantly better than the DVD versions. Most of them do, but this one certainly doesn't look great; the contrast in many scenes is too low, giving the film a murky look, and the film grain, brightness, and color are uneven. This review generally praises the transfer on technical grounds, but points out:

...the cheap visual effects stand out even more than before. The fake El Capitan (where you can see the real El Capitan in the distance) looks even more obvious and any rear projection or optical shot is shoddy at best and noticeably stands out. But those are things that can't be fixed.

It's ironic that getting a really good look at the original film, digitized at high resolution, results in something that looks *worse* than it did in theaters. This is unfortunately true of many films. Some effects elements could have been completely remade, but that would be costly, and risks crossing into George Lucas territory. There probably was no cost-effective way to improve the unnaturally shiny look of the fake fiberglass rock face, now captured in high resolution. This is a case where it might have been better to watch the standard Blu-ray disc in the set, not the 4K HDR Blu-ray.

It's too bad. Even a flawed film deserves to be presented in the best possible way, but in this case, given the quality of the original, it's not entirely clear what "the best possible way" would mean. Fortunately, the next one, the "swan song" of the original cast films, *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, from 1991, is far better.

***The Day After Tomorrow* (2004 Film)** A while back, *The Day After Tomorrow* was available free on YouTube and Veronica really wanted to watch it. I think her interest was at least in part because she likes the young Jake Gyllenhaal, especially after watching him in *Donnie Darko*, but that's OK. This is a fun film, although the thermal dynamics in it are ridiculous. At one point, a wall of cold air descends upon Manhattan. As it descends, *buildings* freeze up instantly, and so do the many feet of water flooding the streets outside the Public Library. People exposed to this air also freeze instantly. This is entertaining and serves as a way to plunge most of the United States into a sudden ice age, but the implausibility is... off the charts. Mostly. The same evening we watched this, I saw a video clip of a massing hailstorm in Seregna, Italy, which flooded the streets with rivers of moving ice. Yikes.

Returning to *The X-Files*, After a Slight Delay

Back in the day, I watched the first few seasons of *The X-Files*, more-or-less as they came out, or not too long after, probably on VHS tapes rented from Blockbuster video on South Main in Ann Arbor. At some point, and I'm pretty certain just when that point was, I lost interest. By the end of season 6, the mythology episodes just did not seem like they were getting us anywhere. "Two Fathers" and "One Son" are dull, but something happens: the Syndicate is mostly destroyed. The standalone episodes "Drive," "Triangle," "How the Ghosts Stole Christmas," "Monday," "Arcadia" and "Milagro" are worth your time. "The Unnatural," written directed by David Duchovny himself, is a remarkable standout. But at the end of the season we hit "Biogenesis," which continues into the start of season 7 with "The Sixth Extinction" and "The Sixth Extinction II: Amor Fati," and these are just awful. They aform a hot mess, with weird religious elements that seem like they are right out of *The Exorcist II*. "Amor Fati" might be called "The Last Temptation of Fox Mulder." It's all really quite jaw-droppingly bad. This is the point I gave up.

But I've returned to the show, 23 years later. I've bought used copies of the last

few seasons of the original show on DVD, and now have all nine seasons. I'm glad I decided to watch the rest; I've also been re-watching some of my favorite, and less favorite episodes.

In season 7, episode 6, "The Goldberg Variation" is a real standout: very funny. "The Amazing Maleeni" is also very entertaining, and reminds me of one of my favorite earlier episodes, "Humbug." The mythology two-parter "Sein und Zeit" and "Closure" are not great, but they do bring the narrative thread of Mulder searching endlessly for his missing sister Samantha to an end. "X-Cops," a parody of *Cops*, is funny, but contains some dated and troubling characterizations, and since I never liked *Cops*, I didn't love this. "En Ami," in which Scully travels with the Cigarette Smoking man, is quite good. The episode "all things" [the lowercase is as intended] was written and directed by Gillian Anderson. I didn't find it quite as good as Duchovny's episode, but it's not bad. "Hollywood A.D.," "Fight Club," and "Je Souhaite" are all quite good and worthy of your time. The series ends with "Requiem," a mythology episode in which Mulder himself is apparently abducted by aliens.

Season 8 begins with a mythology two-parter that introduces us to Scully's new partner, John Doggett, played by Robert Patrick, probably best known for his role as the liquid metal antagonist of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, the 1991 film. The next few episodes of season 8 did not spark joy for me, but I do want to talk at some length about the remarkable episode 6, "Redrum."

***The X-Files*, Season 8, Episode 6: "Redrum"**

This standalone X-Files episode was far better than I expected it to be. It wound up having a screenplay that was worthy of the best episodes of the old *Twilight Zone*. I watched it myself, and then, later, watched it a second time with Grace, in bed, on an iPad, with the lights off, as *The X-Files* was meant to be watched. As the Barenaked Ladies mention in their song "One Week":

Watching X-Files with no lights on
We're *dans la maison_*^{*}
I hope the Smoking Man's in this one

**As Robin Williams said on his 1979 comedy album Reality... What a Concept, playing William F. Buckley: "I won't translate for you; someday you'll understand."*

In the opening scene, the camera shoots through a spider web, complete with a large spider, above the face of Martin Wells, a Baltimore-area prosecutor, who is waking up in a prison cell. A radio broadcast informs us that it is a Friday morning. He stares briefly up at the spider, before sitting up, confused by a freshly-sutured wound in his cheek. He is met by Scully (Gillian Anderson) and Doggett (Robert Patrick). Wells is due to be transferred to another facility, although he does not know where he's being taken, or why. Outside the building, Wells, Scully, Doggett, and other officers trying to protect Wells are swarmed

by reporters, and in the confusion he is shot; Wells has just enough time to call out the shooter's name, Al, as he seems to know him. Even though he has on a bulletproof vest, one bullet apparently hits his neck, and he bleeds out on the pavement. As he dies, he stares at Scully's watch. The hands of the watch appear to slow down, and stop. His eyes close. We, the *audience*, then see the hands of Scully's watch begin to turn backwards, but Wells does not. For him, the watch has stopped with his death.

After the opening credits, Wells wakes up the "next" day. It is Thursday, the day before he was shot. Doggett and Scully arrive to question him. He claims to have no knowledge of what has happened; he does not remember the murder of his wife, but he does remember his *own* shooting. Later in the week (actually, earlier), Wells is confronted in the exercise yard** by Cesar Ocampo (Danny Trejo). Ocampo attacks him using some sort of improvised weapon that slashes open his cheek. Wells notices a spider-web tattoo on Ocampo's arm. When he wakes up the "next" day, there is no wound on his cheek.

***There's a slight confusion here as to where Wells is, in jail or in prison; another character who speaks to Wells in the yard, someone Wells sent to prison through his aggressive prosecution, would actually be in prison, while pre-trial, Wells would be in a jail cell. Grace pointed out another slight misstatement of rules governing pre-trial evidence, but that's getting pretty far into the weeds.*

At first I thought we might be looking at an "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"-style story, in which the protagonist was experiencing a counterfactual existence as a sort of psychic death-rattle; see also the novel *Passages* by Connie Willis. But then I realized that this is really a sort of reversed-time *Groundhog Day* scenario. Unlike the protagonist in *Groundhog Day*, our protagonist is not living the same day over and over, with his memories intact, but living days in reverse order.*** The strangeness *seems* at first to start at with his death on the first day he's experienced, before the opening credits. We later realize that for our protagonist, things were completely off the rails from the moment he woke up in his cell on that day, having absolutely no memory of several previous days.

****Does this makes any sense, given the way we see Scully's watch hand moving backwards? This depends on what the rules of this counter-factual situation are. Every time-travel story has to play fast-and-loose with our everyday understanding of cause-and-effect; for me, the important thing is that a time-travel story picks a set of rules, and sticks to it. Our protagonist experiences the events of each day in the usual order, but experiences the days themselves in reverse order. Those are the "rules" in this story. The retrograde movement of the watch hand is a hint to the audience, not to the protagonist; if Wells were moving through each moment in time contrary to Scully and her watch, he would see everyone else moving backwards, and hear them speaking backwards. That's what happens in *Tenet*, the Christopher Nolan film, not this episode.*

Once again I am humbled by my wife, Grace, who understands the art of screenwriting far better than I do. I recognized that there was heavy symbolism

in the spider web, which matched that tattoo on Ocampo's arm, but I thought at first that this was limited to suggesting that the protagonist was caught in Ocampo's web. But Grace pointed out that this was actually suggestive of dark magic — that Ocampo may have actually cast a spell on the protagonist, *causing* him to have his reverse-Groundhog Day experience.

Wells rips down the web and kills the spider, but this does not stop his experience of living days in reverse. But when Ocampo, who may be a *brujo* (sorcerer), is actually killed, on the last “reversed” day, this *does* seem to end the reversal of time. Wells again notices Scully's watch. The second hand is motionless, for a long moment, apparently having stopped with Ocampo's death, but then as Wells stares, it begins moving again — forwards.

Wells has gotten a second chance. It isn't just that the murder of Wells' wife is prevented; that may just be a sort of side effect. What seems to be significant is that Wells has come to realize that he has committed criminal acts in his over-zealous prosecution of Ocampo's brother, and maybe other people, accepts that *he* must face justice for his crimes. In a coda, we see Wells in jail again, and understand that is atoning for his own crimes. And so the viewer has to reshuffle his understanding of the protagonist and antagonist, and reverse them; the hardened criminal Ocampo sacrifices himself not for revenge, but for *justice*, and the protagonist is really a man who has become sick from swallowing a poisonous view of the people he has prosecuted, and inflicted a punitive “three-strikes” sentence on Ocampo's brother, ignoring exculpatory evidence that he was legally required to share with the defense attorney.

In later discussions, as this screenplay continues to occupy my thoughts, we talked about how the action was structured around a “hole” — there's a gap, or lacuna, in the protagonist's experience, or memory, as he jumps forward in time and begins skipping through the days backwards like a reversed film of a stone skipped across a lake. I'm reminded of the Babylon 5 episode “And the Sky Full of Stars,” where a Minbari assassin tells Sinclair “there is a hole in your mind.” Exactly how the “hole,” and the experience of reversed time, is created, remains a mystery, and this is actually why it is such an effective “X-File.”

Did Wells experience the events a first time in forward order, and then forget them when Ocampo, or maybe the impersonal moral arc of a universe bending towards justice, changed the rules? Was it Ocampo who who lived through the murder of Wells' wife up to the moment of Wells' death, and then decided to change the story and force Wells to experience the days backwards, so that each successive day he would have foreknowledge of the future, producing a different outcome — not his murder, but justice? Did Ocampo sacrifice his life, or does he still live, in the original timeline, where he is a murderer? There are some notable flaws in this episode — for example, it ends too fast, requiring the use of a voiceover in the coda to clarify what is happening. A brief clip of Wells' trial would help here, but given the rapid-fire nature of television production, schedules and budgets may not have allowed for that. But it remains one of the best episodes of *The X-Files* and a remarkable piece of uncanny fiction.

A Requiem for iTunes

I'm still trying to fully replace the wonderfully integrated functionality of early versions of iTunes, and I keep running into failures of other tools to work well, or work together.

I used to maintain my music library entirely in iTunes on my Mac Pro, which provided a very refined experience. The features I relied on the most were:

- Podcast and audiobook content were treated similarly to music content
- Automatic organizing of content into folders, which were easily accessible and understandable
- Easy and excellent tag editing
- A built-in server that would let me share my library with other computers running iTunes, both Mac and Windows computers, on our home network

However, over time Apple gradually removed support for the home library sharing feature, instead pushing sharing via Apple cloud services. The Mac Pro I'm running it on is from 2008, running MacOS 10.11.6, "El Capitan," released in 2015 and last updated in 2018. I can't run any later software on that machine, but I wouldn't want to upgrade iTunes, because later versions don't have the home sharing feature any more. When I finally replace it, I won't be able to run that older version of iTunes. Running the Apple Music application on my M2 MacBook Air, I can still view my old shared library, but playback is unreliable, and it will usually disconnect after a few minutes. In addition, this home sharing feature has never been supported on iOS devices (iPod, iPhone, and iPad), so as our family grew and we offered the kids access to lower-cost, less-fragile iOS devices instead of laptops and desktops, they lost access to the shared music library.

My workaround has been to migrate the entire music library to the Audio Station application on a Synology NAS, and use the DS Audio application on our iOS devices. For the most part it's been great — everyone can use either the iOS devices or any computer with a modern web browser, Linux, Windows, or Mac, to access the whole music library. But I still use Apple's Music application to add new material ripped from CDs, because it still has an excellent tag editor, and at least for now, will still organize contents into folders, and I can just duplicate this structure on the Synology music library.

This mostly works well, except that my workflow for occasionally saving podcast episodes to the music library is a disaster now. Podcasts used to be stored like music files in iTunes, but are now supported by a separate application, Apple Podcasts, which stores the audio files in files given obfuscated names, in a hidden, system-managed "Cache" directory. On my laptop this directory is in my home directory under **Library/Group Containers/243LU875E5.groups.com.apple.podcasts/Library/Cache** and by default it is hidden by the operating system. Files from different podcasts are all in the same directory along with other system junk, and they have user-hostile names like **10DB6259-9A59-**

4BDA-9242-AD5FC2EE3807.mp3. So if I want to move podcast files to the music library on the Synology, the first challenge is to identify them; the Podcasts application does not have an option to open a given episode in the Finder, the way that the Music application does. If I want to find the audio file for a podcast episode that I liked and want to save, I have to listen to a bunch of these files to try to determine which is which, because of Apple's stupid whims.

Really, this means I have to find a more user-friendly podcast application, but I haven't found one yet.

By comparison, the Music application has files stored in my home directory under **Music/Media/Music** and the files are organized by artist and album, with folder names like **Discipline [2011 Stereo Mix]** and filenames like **01 Elephant Talk.m4a**. I would not be surprised if, at some point, Apple updates the Music application so that it starts treating my own imported music files in the same user-hostile manner. At that point, it will be time to abandon Apple Music completely. I've had to abandon some older purchased audiobooks for similar reasons, as they are tied to provider-specific copy protection. So, I now only listen to audiobooks that I've ripped from CDs. And I've never been willing to purchase copy-protected e-books.

FLAC Files

I may have mentioned that I'm willing to purchase unprotected, lossless audio files when I find something I want to listen to. I've been enjoying live King Crimson material purchased as FLAC files from the Digital Global Mobile web site. iTunes and Apple Music will not play FLAC files at all, but I can play them just fine from the music library on my Synology server using either the iOS application or a web browser. But unfortunately the files as they arrive from DGM are often not tagged at all, and they have names like **kc20030706-0114-Larks'_Tongues_In_Aspic_Part_IV.flac**.

The album files are organized into discs and come with a PDF file that is designed to be printed and put in a CD case. In other words, they are organized for the use of people who will burn the files to CD-Rs and put them in their CD library. That's great for people who want to do that, but I don't really burn CD-Rs these days, because there is no need. We still have a large library of CDs in our basement library, so we do play CDs downstairs, but because they are fragile and we still have toddlers that like to rip apart cases and use discs as frisbees, I discourage the kids from bringing them upstairs, and ask them to play music from the server instead.

This means that to play the FLAC files back correctly from the server, they need to be tagged. Without tags they are hard to browse, and songs in an album won't necessarily play in the correct order.

Tagging FLAC Files

iTunes and Apple Music will not tag FLAC files. I've tried a tag editor for MacOS, Meta. It allowed me to tag the files right on the server volumes, using SMB file sharing. It has a nice interface, but it crashed a lot, so I was not too keen on paying for it.

Yesterday I tried another solution: since I have a headless Linux server on the shelf right next to the Synology, and I connect to that with Microsoft Remote Desktop, I decided to try a highly-recommended tag editing application for Ubuntu, simply called Tagger. Unfortunately, I found that it was very buggy. I mount the server volume using SMB, and this works fine for everything else, but apparently although Tagger can open the files and let me edit them, it is unable to save the changes, due to some kind of issue handling the path to the server volume. It's not a permissions issue; I can open up a terminal window and read and write the files on the mounted volume without any difficulty.

So, I tried copying the files from the server into a local folder on the Linux server, using Tagger to edit the files, and then copying them back. Unfortunately I discovered another rather severe bug. After editing the tags and saving the files and copying them back to the server, Synology Audio Station would no longer play the files correctly, either using a web browser or the DS Audio application. They appear to have been corrupted somehow. I had to restore them from backups.

Strangely, the Synology File Station application will still play the files just fine. So it can't be a completely irrevocable corruption of the file; it's changed it in a way that Audio Station can't tolerate, but File Station can. That's extra-odd, because I'd presume that different apps on the same Synology would use common libraries for this sort of thing, but perhaps they don't.

There is a way to edit the FLAC file tags using File Station itself, and this seems to result in a file that will still play fine using Audio Station. However, this tag editor is very limited compared to the standalone applications I mentioned above, and something may still be wrong - Audio Station doesn't work right after I start playing the file. It continues to play, but the "mini player" feature doesn't show the information about the currently playing song correctly, and no longer has any controls or even a close box, so once that song stops playing, the application is dead until I stop the service and restart it.

I know this feature used to work, so I tried replacing the FLAC file from backup again, stopping the service, and restarting it, but the mini player still doesn't work. I tried uninstalling Audio Station, and reinstalling it. The mini player still doesn't work, so maybe it broke in a recent update. Note to self: *don't ever use the mini player.*

But now, it will no longer show two of the three folders full of music files that it showed before. All searches fail. Sigh. The files are still on the server — is there a configuration I need to re-do? I guess I need to run the re-indexing service,

which takes a long time. iTunes and Apple Music never required a separate indexing service; everything was updated automatically and metadata was stored in the library folder.

The User Experience

This is my experience, so often, using open-source tools; there are so many pitfalls, and so many bugs. Modern applications should make it so that users don't have to be concerned with whether they're working with local files or files mounted on a network shared volume — this technology is *quite* old now. But we do. FLAC is not a new standard, and neither are tags. What's the big difference in user experience? In my view, it's integration testing. In old iTunes, all the components were there in one application and a QA team ensured that iTunes was extremely reliable, and the user experience was refined, and it never crashed. And that's why I used it for so long.

I don't know how less experienced users, with less knowledge of the infrastructure under the graphical user interfaces, make any progress trying to use these open-source tools. It shouldn't be a hellish nightmare of interoperability failures in 2023. But it still is. I could try to put more work into diagnosing and fixing these issues, but you'll have to excuse me; I've got my *paid* work dealing with hellish nightmares of interoperability failures to do.

Update: Mp3tag

I finally solved the FLAC tag editing problem with a new application for Mac, which I tried out on a trial basis and wound up paying for. It's Mp3tag for Mac. It works very nicely. It hasn't crashed, and I haven't seen any compatibility problems. The user interface is excellent, allowing me to update the tags for groups of files with a minimum of typing. I have one quibble; I can set the disc number, but I can't set the field that indicates how many discs are in the album. I'm not sure why. Is that an iTunes-specific tag? I don't know. It isn't really important, though.

Sunday, September 10th

For some reason, our yard is teeming with mosquitoes, all of a sudden. It hasn't been particularly wet. Does it have something to do with the horse farm up the road? We're not entirely sure, although as I've mentioned before, the risk of Eastern Equine Encephalitis in this situation is not comforting. We need to see if there is some way we can improve this situation, long-term; we put so much effort and money into our house in the woods, hoping the kids would be able to play outside constantly. But at the moment, just as it has cooled down, and the air quality is good again, no one wants to be outside at all, because if we do so, we are quickly covered with bites. It's disheartening. This could, ultimately, be a reason to move, although the prospect of moving everything again, including

our library, seems so costly and overwhelming that I can barely bring myself to consider it.

Have a great week!

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