

I think I may have come up with a solution to an ancient mystery today. I am afraid and this is not the most scholarly journal to report solutions to ancient mysteries, but, hey, it's all I've got. I cannot even cite you the source of the mystery, However, I have

THE MT VOID

Page 2

heard that there is an account in someone's journal of his days in Ancient Rome that captured my imagination when I first heard it years ago, and only today has a likely explanation for what really happened come to mind. See what you think.

In some Ancient Roman's journal is a passage to the effect of something like the following: "An eagle landed on the walls of the city today. To the surprise of the citizens the eagle could speak and spoke to citizens for a length of time before flying off. However, what the eagle had to say was not of sufficient interest to be recorded here."

This incident has, I am assured, puzzled experts for some time and since I heard of it, it has puzzled me. Of course there are a couple of mysteries here. One is what actually happened, and the other is the peculiar attitude of the journalist. Talking eagles being a novelty and almost certainly a rarity in Rome, you would think that it would be of interest to record whatever it was the eagle had to say. Our journalist apparently found the eagle's conversation to be so banal as to be not even worth the effort to record. I have wondered about this strange passage for years--on and off, of course.

I think that the solution to the mystery comes from Mexico. I have been told that in Mexico it is the custom among common people not to be really explicit about animal species. If an animal is smaller than a certain size it is "el raton," the rat. A little bigger and it is "el zorro," the fox. A mouse will be called a rat; an opossum might be called a fox. The same thing might have been true in Ancient Rome. It was, after all a very Eagle-centric, even if not eagle-itarian society. Suppose they used the word "eagle" for any large bird--say a parrot. Had it been a parrot instead of an eagle, it might not be at all surprising that it spoke to people. And frankly, though a parrot can speak its

conversational style is generally very limited, not to say also incoherent. The sort of testimony one can get from a parrot might hardly be worth the effort to transcribe into a journal.

I don't know if there were parrots in Imperial Rome, but that's a minor detail. [-mrl]

2. Some of you have access to the World Wide Web and are interested to find some science fiction sites. These are many and varied. The following are some of the best URLs to visit. Apparently people on the WWW tend to like science fiction. Each of these sites has links to many other sites and it may well be that there is overlap or that they link to each other. But let us herewith move the MT VOID even further into the electronic age. Please free

THE MT VOID

Page 3

to send me additional sites that are of general interest to our readers and I can publish.

The Science Fiction Resource Guide

<http://sundry.hsc.usc.edu/hazel/www/sf-resource.guide.html>

This is huge and powerful guide to LOTS of stuff. It just goes on and on and on.

Laurie Mann's Science Fiction and Fact Pages

<http://www.lm.com/~lmann/hot/sf.html>

Laurie is a familiar fan particularly to Massachusetts fandom. She runs a fairly complete resource page.

Linkoping SF&F Archive

http://sf.www.lysator.liu.se/sf_archive/sf_main.html

One of the best of European SF sites. It also has a link to the MT VOID for Europe:

http://sf.www.lysator.liu.se/sf_archive/sf-texts/MT_Void/

[-mrl]

3. I have been wondering for a long time just who Anita Price is. She must be someone wonderful, the patron saint of working women. All I know is that whenever I go to the grocery there always seems to be a cashier calling out her name. [-mrl]

4. THE SECRET OF ROAN INISH (a film review by Mark R. Leeper)

Capsule: This is a moody Irish children's fantasy written and directed by John Sayles. A ten-year-old girl goes to live with her fisherman grandfather's family and discovers her family traditions tied in with mythical selkies. The photography is moody, but the story and the cold, wet landscapes are hard to warm up to. Some nice animal photography also sets the scene. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4)

The scene is an Irish fishing village in the late 1940s, and this is the sort of story that might be told to children around the hearth. Fiona (played by Jeni Courtney) goes to live with her grandparents so she can get away from the city and so that her father can devote his time to drinking. There, amid the gulls and

the fish and the seals, she hears mysterious folktales of her family history, especially the story that one of her relatives had really been a selkie. A selkie, in Irish tradition, is a seal who can turn into a human. The "dark ones" of her family are really just showing more of their seal heritage. And there is the tale of Fiona's own brother who was washed out to sea in a boat-shaped cradle, but who some say is occasionally still seen. Fiona hears the folk stories from her grandfather (Mile Lally) and other members of her family--"superstition" her grandmother (Eileen Colgan) calls the stories. But they send Fiona's imagination

racings and the somber, wet landscapes under what always seems an overcast sky (even when it looks blue) only set the mood for the mystical and the supernatural. Before she is done Fiona's own experience will make for a new tale to join the others.

In Ireland this may well work as a family film, but it is a little hard for American children to follow. The Irish-American co-production is written and directed by John Sayles in a style very different from his MATEWAN or his EIGHT MEN OUT or just about anything else that Sayles has done. Sayles has taken as his source Rosalie K. Fry's children's novel SECRET OF THE RON MOR SKERRY. Indeed, in the United States some children will enjoy this film, but the thick, sometimes impenetrable, Irish accents and the generally somber tone and photography may make this a children's film that can be appreciated only by adults.

Much of the interest value of the film is in its portrait of fishing village life in Ireland. The simple hearthside diet of fish and soup in the thatched houses, the hard work on the fishing boats and on the shore, and the eternal gray skies combine to make a portrait that is bleak, but well-observed. Sayles takes his time telling his story as a combination of Fiona's experiences and a mosaic of the stories told to Fiona. Apparently this structure is hard on some children. Several of the children in our audience had to have the plot details explained to them by parents who were probably having some problems themselves, at least with the accents.

Fiona is played by Jeni Courtney who seems already accomplished as an actress in spite of her young age. Lally and Colgan are each enjoyable to watch in each's own way. Veteran cinematographer Haskell Wexler has managed some nice animal photography. Irish music also helps to set the feel of the film. Not a bad film, but the story is a little slow and unambitious. I give it a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

5. Boskone 32 (con report by Evelyn C. Leeper--part 2 of 4 parts)

Bloopers and Bad Science on TV

Saturday, 12 N

Jeff Hecht (mod), Jeffrey A. Carver, Hal Clement,
Don Sakers, Melissa Scott, Earl Wajenberg

The panelists started out by giving a prime example of what the panel was about: the introduction to *BATTLESTAR GALACTICA* in which the characters are described as "looking for a star called Earth." They said they did **not** want to discuss sound in space, which is necessary for dramatic effect, and should be considered almost as part of the music soundtrack.

One way of looking at this is to follow the approach that George MacDonald Fraser used in his *HOLLYWOOD HISTORY OF THE WORLD*: determine if the telling is true to the spirit of the times rather than to the "objective" truth. As he says (page xv), "Provided [the screenwriter] does not break faith with the spirit of history by wilful misrepresentation or hatchet job, he may take liberties with the letter--but he should take as few as possible." (This, by the way, is a book I highly recommend to fans of movies--or of history.)

Of course, people are less forgiving of shock waves in space--or at least feel that if there are shock waves, all those spaceships should have seat belts. Regarding all those little sparkles you see when you see a shot of a spaceship traveling in space, someone opined that these are really the "missing matter" in the universe. And when asked, "What is subspace?" Wajenberg replied, "Subspace is a convenient plot device."

Scott said what really annoyed her was the depiction of scientists (and how science is done) in films. As she said, "You know someone is a scientist because they stare at something for a while." (And, I would add, usually wear a white coat while doing it.) But Scott also said that you have to ask yourself if the story is about science, or about people in a future society, and allow more leeway in the latter. Later in the panel, some good movies (not television) about science were mentioned: *THE MAN IN THE WHITE SUIT*, *DAM BUSTERS*, and *NO HIGHWAY IN THE SKY*.

Much of the panel was about *STAR TREK*, in part because when you talk about science fiction on television, the one program that serves as a lingua franca for fans is *STAR TREK*. The panelists' primary objection to science on *STAR TREK* (a.k.a. Treknobabble) was that it had no consistency. This week the transporter could be used to cure disease; next week that is completely forgotten. (As someone expressed it, "*STAR TREK* resets its science every week.") And the show has fallen into what is referred to as the "particle-of-the-week" syndrome. But the writers' knowledge of even basic science is faulty. Sakers said that someone should explain DNA to the *STAR TREK* writers, who talk about "the DNA of his molecules"

and even have humans "regressing down the evolutionary chain" to become spiders! The recent description of an event horizon as "a force field that surrounds a star" also came under attack. Scott said that when she worked on a "Deep Space 9" novel, she found that the producers, apparently taking Emerson's comment about a foolish consistency to heart, describe the power conduits as extremely reliable on one page of the series "Bible" and extremely unreliable on another.

Carver said we should not be too hard on the bloopers in science in STAR TREK, because the producers and writers "have no better understanding of, say, religion than they have of science."

When it comes to violating scientific principles, it is not just science fiction that does it. Roadrunner cartoons did it all the time, and action movies and television shows do it as well, with cars bursting into flame every time they crash into something, except when driven by the hero, in which case no matter how violent the crash, they can still be driven away, and so forth.

Speaking of bursting into flames, Wajenberg said, "Someone has decided that the technology of the 24th Century depends on the magnesium transistor."

Basically, the panelists felt that an author should be allowed to break one (scientific) rule, but that the story should be *about* breaking the rule. In other words, if you postulate instantaneous matter transmission, your story should be about the consequences of that, not about your main character's angst over whether to go to Harvard or Yale.

The panelists seemed quite critical of small slips, such as SPACE: 1999's reference to "the dark side of the moon." Yet I noted that when Larry Niven had the Earth rotating backwards in the first chapter of the first edition of RINGWORLD, fans may have found it amusing, but did not anathemize him for it. (And the fact that MIT students with Cray computers eventually proved that Ringworld as described was unstable passed with nary a flicker.)

I asked about other television shows. LOST IN SPACE was considered

one of the major contributors to the "Blooper Hall of Fame," consistently confusing solar systems with galaxies and so forth. Of TIME TUNNEL (one of my favorite shows when it was on) Sakers said, "The good thing about TIME TUNNEL was that its scientific inaccuracies were more than overwhelmed by its historical inaccuracies." VOYAGE TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA and LAND OF THE GIANTS were equally laughable. No one had anything critical to say about the science in BABYLON 5, although Scott (who has purple and yellow layered hair) said that the producers seemed to like to define their aliens by their funny hair. (I do not think this statement was intended ironically.) The anthology series (TWILIGHT

THE MT VOID

Page 7

ZONE and THE OUTER LIMITS) were dismissed as "not really science fiction," as was QUANTUM LEAP. (Do not ask me to explain this.)

Wajenberg reminded the audience that while we scoff at them, "Producers have their artistic pride, but it is a different art." They are trying to make something that works dramatically, and it is difficult to transmit information in a drama.

Essential Films for the SF Fan
Saturday, 1 PM
Mark R. Leeper (mod), Craig Shaw Gardner,
Daniel Kimmel, Jim Mann

As usual, Leeper produced a hand-out for this, and therefore much of the hour was spent adding films to (and deleting films from) that list. It is included with comments in Appendix 1, but the films were (in chronological order):

A TRIP TO THE MOON
METROPOLIS
THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN
KING KONG
ISLAND OF LOST SOULS
THINGS TO COME*
DESTINATION MOON
THE THING FROM ANOTHER WORLD
THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL
THE MAN IN THE WHITE SUIT
THE WAR OF THE WORLDS*

GOJIRA
THIS ISLAND EARTH
THE INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS
FORBIDDEN PLANET
UNEARTHLY STRANGER*
QUATERMASS AND THE PIT (FIVE MILLION YEARS TO EARTH)*
2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY
THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN
COLOSSUS (THE FORBIN PROJECT)
PHASE IV*
STAR WARS*
BRAINSTORM*
BLADERUNNER*

(Asterisked films are the ten "basic" ones.)

Kimmel and Mann had seen all the films except for UNEARTHLY STRANGER, which is a very difficult film to find.

Kimmel had a whole list of films that he said he would add (without saying what he would drop):

INVADERS OF MARS (1953),
THEM!,

THE MT VOID

Page 8

THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN,
THE TIME MACHINE,
SECONDS,
FAHRENHEIT 451
PLANET OF THE APES,
SOYLENT GREEN,
INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS (1978),
E.T.,
BRAZIL,
THE FLY (1986), AND
TOTAL RECALL.

(This is thirteen films, over half the list, so what films from Leeper's list is would drop is a no-trivial issue.) Kimmel later mentioned a certain fondness for FANTASTIC VOYAGE and also the rather obscure YEUX SANS VISAGE.

Gardner said that one omission from both lists seemed to be Japanese animation, and suggested AKIRA. But Kimmel did not think that Japanese animation has broken out of its ghetto, and he is still waiting for that "breakthrough" film. For an animated science fiction film, the French FANTASTIC PLANET was suggested.

Mann said that when he drew up his list, he took "SF" to include fantasy, so he would add such films as THE MUMMY (1932) and SEVEN FACES OF DR. LAO, and he has a personal preference for THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK over STAR WARS.

Gardner pointed out that there were no Ray Harryhausen films mentioned, and that EARTH VS. THE FLYING SAUCERS would be a reasonable addition from a science fiction point of view.

Mann felt that perhaps either ALIEN or ALIENS should be included (or "some other James Cameron film," though Cameron did not direct ALIEN--Ridley Scott did). The panelists seemed to agree that films such as ALIEN and OUTLAND did change the depiction of space as clean and glorious to just another place to work.

The panelists all agreed that CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND was *not* on their lists, that JURASSIC PARK was too recent to judge, and that whatever ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW was, it was not something they wanted to discuss.

From the audience, Kate Pott asked about foreign films, of which she mentioned SOLARIS and ALPHAVILLE, to which Kimmel added LA JETEE, BEAUTY AND THE BEAST, and ORPHEUS, as well as the Czech animated films THE FABULOUS ADVENTURES OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN and THE FABULOUS WORLD OF JULES VERNE.

Gardner added ROAD WARRIOR, STALKER, and some Hong Kong fantasy film (A CHINESE GHOST STORY, ZU FROM THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN, or WICKED

CITY, which he described as being like "Philip K. Dick directed by David Lynch").

In the made-for-television arena, Mann mentioned the PBS version of

LATHE OF HEAVEN and the BBC version of THE DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS. (This reminded Kimmel that VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED had not been listed. His list of twenty-five must be up around fifty by now.) Leeper recommended PANDORA AND THE FLYING DUTCHMAN and DARK INTRUDER (the latter of which was made for television).

Kimmel's suggestion of WILD IN THE STREETS led Leeper to mention PRIVILEGE and THE WAR GAME. I would add to those THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE, and the mention that the panelists should include at least one of the post-holocaust films such as TESTAMENT and THE DAY AFTER leads me to pick THREADS as the best of that group.

Someone in the audience asked for a list of the worst films, which prompted Leeper to say this was like asking for the hottest cold day in that this would be a list of really bad films that were still good enough to be released. Someone said that if nothing else, "Mystery Science Theater 3000" has proven that PLAN 9 FROM OUTER SPACE is far from the worst film ever made. (Leeper's choice of worst film he has ever seen is THE CREEPING TERROR.)

Is Research Necessary for SF&F?

Saturday, 2 PM

Hal Clement (mod), Ellen Kushner, James D. Macdonald,
Delia Sherman, Joan D. Vinge

Clement started this panel by reminding us that the title was, "Is research necessary for science fiction and fantasy?" then saying, "Yes, and thank you for coming." This did not appear to satisfy the audience, so Clement said he could elaborate: "Yes for science fiction, and who cares for fantasy?"

However, this did not go over well with the fantasists (as Clement had predicted), and the panel decided they had to answer the question at greater length.

Kushner said she had been thinking about the topic and had come to the conclusion that "those who do, and who do believe in, research should do less and those who don't should do more." Macdonald asked, "How do you research faster-than-light travel in a distant galaxy?" Clement extended this to the general question of "What constitutes research?" and how much should one do. Sherman says the only way she can answer that is by saying that the author needs to match the research to the task at hand: one should not do as much research for a five-thousand-word short story as for a four-hundred-page novel. Clement later noted that the real problem was often that "you don't know what you don't know."

Kushner said that before researching something, the author needs to ask who s/he is trying to satisfy. If one is writing for a hard science audience, one needs to do more research for a matter transmitter than if it is just a small part of a novel where the main plot is about social transitions under a hierarchical government.

In this regard, Clement said that members of the MIT Science Fiction Society analyzed the planet in MISSION OF GRAVITY and proved Clement got the shape all wrong. Clement said that he eventually decided that the best approach was just to say to himself, "Well, I did write the book to give people pleasure."

Sherman said that the problem with doing too much research is that there comes a point when "you find that the details are taking over the tapestry."

In any case, the panelists agreed that even if you do not do a lot of research, you should at least avoid internal inconsistencies. (Sounds like good advice for the "Star Trek" producers as discussed in the panels on "Bloopers and Bad Science on TV.") Macdonald asked, "How many copy editors does it take to change a life bulb?" and then answered, "You said 27 on page 4 and 35 on page 60; which did you mean?"

Kushner said that we might be taking too narrow a view of research, and said, "Your entire life is and should be research." (This is more applicable to social science fiction than to the sort of thing that Clement writes, of course.) But Kushner also was in favor of traditional research, which she said made life easier. "If you look it up, you don't have to make it up."

Clement asked what the panelists do when they discover halfway through the story that one of their basic assumptions is discovered to be wrong. Sherman says since her assumptions are generally historical she just makes it alternate history. The other panelists did not have any real answers, probably because their styles of writing do not require the rigorous physical assumptions that Clement's does. Clement said that his approach was to come up with a way to make his assumptions true by changing some of the variables that would not affect his story.

The one thing that was clear from this panel was that Clement writes from a very different set of premises and with a very different purpose than most other authors. To Clement, the purpose of a story is the scientific extrapolation. While there is nothing

wrong with this, it does mean that a panel with Clement and other people on it is somewhat bifurcated. Given this, a more neutral moderator might be a good idea.

THE MT VOID

Page 11

Neglected Authors: Murray Leinster
Saturday, 4 PM
Mark Olson (mod), Hal Clement, Joe Rico

Let's start with the basics: Murray Leinster's real name was William Fitzgerald Jenkins, and he pronounced his pseudonym "lenster" (in the Irish fashion). Born in 1896, he sold his first story, "The Runaway Skyscraper," in 1919, and wrote up until the time of his death in 1975. Much of what he wrote was what has been called "gaslight science fiction" (although that term conjures up images of the 1890s rather than the 1920s). Many of his stories deal with worldwide catastrophes (e.g., "Mad Planet"). While he wrote some novels, they are generally conceded to be inferior to his short fiction, where he broke ground with stories such as "Sidewise in Time" (the first parallel worlds story, written in 1935), "A Logic Named Joe" (the first Net story, written in 1949), and "First Contact" (the first first contact story, written in 1945).

Though the panelists said that at times Leinster tended toward "unnecessary narration" (Olson added that he relied too much on the omniscient narrator), he was not an unsophisticated author. In "A Logic Named Joe," for example, he examines the sociological impact of his premises. And he does not resort to cardboard villainous aliens. Even when the aliens are villainous, they are villainous for a reason (e.g., "Proximi Centauri"). But the panelists agreed that Leinster should be read for his ideas, not his style.

Much of the hour consisted of a listing and description of Leinster's stories, without very much background. He did also write Westerns, and worked in Hollywood (where the panel claimed he invented the process of front projection).

Much of his short fiction was published in book form in now out-

of-print collections such as OPERATION: OUTER SPACE and THE BEST OF MURRAY LEINSTER. In fact, there were two different books with this latter title, one British and one American. It was also mentioned that much of his science fiction was published in England under his real name, which sounded more English than the Irish-inspired Leinster. THE PLANET EXPLORER (a.k.a. COLONIAL SURVEY) was described as a collection of his "Colonial Survey" and "Med" series stories, though an audience member said that Nicholls and Clute list it as a novel. (Peter Nicholls and John Clute included only authors who had written novels in their ENCYCLOPEDIA, so there may be an unconscious prejudice here.) It was for one of the "Colonial Survey" stories, "Exploration Team," that Leinster won his only Hugo (Best Novelette, 1956).

Other sources for Leinster stories are the retrospective "Year's Best" series edited by Isaac Asimov and Martin Greenberg. Someone added that those books make a very good overview to the science

THE MT VOID

Page 12

fiction of the period, with the only major omissions being Bradbury and Heinlein. He did not explain why Bradbury was missing, but apparently Heinlein demanded such a high percentage of the royalties that there would have been hardly anything left for the rest of the authors. This gave me an image of a future in which the only knowledge of the science fiction of this period was a set of these books, and as a result Heinlein was totally forgotten. In any case, Leinster's best work was from 1945 to 1950, so people should look for those particular volumes in their used bookstores.

Clement, who had met Leinster, described him as "just a nice guy, easy to talk to on just about any subject."

In part this panel was an advertisement for (or suggested by) NESFA's work on a collection of Leinster's short fiction, including some that have never been previously collected before.

Leinster's bibliography in Donald H. Tuck's ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY runs two and a half double-column pages and only goes up to 1968; it is not included here.

[to be continued] [-ecl]

6. 25 Important Science Fiction Films (Appendix 1 to the Boskone
Con Report (by Mark R. Leeper (mark.leeper@att.com))

The BOSKONE Science Fiction Convention has asked me to moderate a panel on the essential science fiction films--whatever that means. This is my list of the 25 and 10 and 1 most important science fiction films. Some are here because I consider them to be great, but may not be well known. Others may not be of what I consider the highest quality, but are here because they have been highly influential. My top 10 are prefaced by asterisks. The film I consider number 1 is QUATERMASS AND THE PIT. In each case I have given a phrase or two to explain why it made this list. I don't promise that I wouldn't come up with a different list if asked again. I have limited myself to films over 10 years old, but frankly I don't think that made any difference.

I. Silent

A. A TRIP TO THE MOON--Birth of SF film

B. METROPOLIS--Visual impact

II. 30s

THE MT VOID

Page 13

A. THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN--Creative though only fringe SF

B. * KING KONG--Big step forward in SPFX

C. ISLAND OF LOST SOULS--Literate interpretation of Wells straddling Gothic and Realistic approaches

D. * THINGS TO COME--Vision of future, spectacle

III. 40s--nothing major

IV. 50s

- A. DESTINATION MOON--Birth of the 50s cycle
- B. THE THING FROM ANOTHER WORLD--Solid thriller, good acting
- C. THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL--Message that people responded to
- D. THE MAN IN THE WHITE SUIT--Serious social comment wrapped in amusing comedy
- E. * THE WAR OF THE WORLDS--Great SPFX, real shocker
- F. GOJIRA--Spawned Japanese SF market and series, exploration of post-nuclear trauma
- G. THIS ISLAND EARTH--First real presentation of interstellar warfare, somewhat mechanical but still has real sense of wonder
- H. THE INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS--Great piece of political paranoia, powerful allegory (though it is not clear if anti-McCarthy or anti-Communist)
- I. * FORBIDDEN PLANET--Highly influential (inspiration for Star Trek), powerful images, first film set totally off Earth (?)

V. 60s

- A. * UNEARTHLY STRANGER--Powerful, dramatic use of cinema, good SF without SPFX
- B. * QUATERMASS AND THE PIT--(U.S. title: FIVE MILLION YEARS TO EARTH) Finest idea SF film I can name
- C. 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY--Highly influential (though story-value is overrated)

VI. 70s

- A. THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN--Well-researched and current technology worked into the plot of a film
- B. COLOSSUS--(a.k.a. THE FORBIN PROJECT) Technological age updating of Frankenstein
- C. * PHASE IV--Strong tale of two really alien intelligences warring, humans and ants. Extremely intelligent use of science fiction
- D. * STAR WARS--A huge leap in representation of imaginative images on the screen. One of the most influential films ever made, it changed how the film industry sees its business

VII. 80s

- A. * BRAINSTORM--Very believable view of the research, very believable view of how the right tool can really transform a society. It breaks down in the last half-hour, probably because of notorious difficulties in production, but this is a film that really could have dozens of fascinating sequels.
- B. * BLADERUNNER--Terrific set design (though story is over-rated)

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When people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other.

--Eric Hoffer

