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The Great Courses: "A Historian Goes to the Movies: Ancient Rome" (Part 2: The Fall of the Roman Epic) (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

CLEOPATRA (1963):

CLEOPATRA is best known as the most expensive film ever made (\$49 million dollars, the equivalent to \$400 million today, and coming in at 35 times its budget), squandering money, changing the cast, discarding sets. It killed both the studio system and the cycle of ancient epics. Envisioned as a six-hour duology, it was cut down, first to four hours and then to three. The DVD version is the four-hour cut). But is it accurate?

Unlike some of the other epics, it takes place at a pivotal period and is full of with famous people. Also unlike the other epics, it is not Christian versus pagan, and indeed there are no references to Christianity (even films set before Christianity usually managed to work one in).

There is a lot that is accurate, but there were still mistakes made, as Aldrete enumerates. In real life, Caesar never recognizes Caesaron as his son. The film also ignores Cleopatra's three children with Marc Antony. The film also misrepresents the office of "dictator" and Caesar's attitude towards it.

While the "testudo" formation shown is accurate, a lot of the other military imagery is wrong. In general, the costumes are more like Hollywood conventions (e.g., leather cuirasses instead of metal or chain mail, giant plumes on helmets, etc.) One somewhat accurate touch are the leopard-skin decorations on Marc Antony's costumes, which links to his self-identifying himself as Dionysus.

One bad touch is that Caesar is wearing what looks like long underwear under his toga or cuirass. No self-respecting Roman would have been caught dead in such clothing. But Rex Harrison had scrawny arms and legs, and the long sleeves and leggings concealed padding to make him look more muscular.

Cleopatra's golden dress and headdress for her grand entrance were inspired by an actual carving at Dendara. Her other costumes, though, are more like 1950s negligees and the then-fashionable wig-toque skullcap hats decorated with feathers. The make-up is more accurate, but the bottom line is that Cleopatra did not look like Elizabeth Taylor--the real Cleopatra had a prominent jaw and a large hooked nose.

As for the sets, Aldrete says that the Harbor of Alexandria conveys the "fusion" feel of the period, with Roman, Greek, Egyptian, and other influences on the buildings as well as the costumes, mannerisms, and so on.

The Roman Forum was built at three times the size of real Forum (and then used for only one seven-minute scene!). The African dancers look more like 18th century Zulus, and the Arch of Constantine hadn't been built for over another two hundred years. The barge on the Nile was a real seaworthy ship, and cost \$250,000.

As far as characters go, Harrison is reasonable as Caesar. On the other hand, as Antony, Richard Burton is ineffectual, indecisive, moody, and much less of a general than Antony actually was. Taylor shows little of Cleopatra's intelligence, shrewdness, political savvy, etc. In Aldrete's opinion, Malcolm McDowell is the best character as Octavian, scheming and maneuvering, but also sickly and relying on Agrippa in military matters.

CLEOPATRA was followed by THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE. The financial failure of the two basically killed the ancient Roman epic for forty years.

THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE (1964):

Professor Aldrete says this presents the most accurate portrayal of Marcus Aurelius in film, which leads me to ask how many portrayals of Marcus Aurelius there have been? All I can find (other than television documentaries about the Roman Empire) are GLADIATOR and REBEL GLADIATOR. But the box office failure of CLEOPATRA and this film ended the Roman epic film for forty years, until GLADIATOR came along.

[-ecl]

Mark Leeper's Biography (a la Raymond Chandler) (from ChatGPT):

Mark R. Leeper was the kind of guy you'd miss if you didn't know what to look for. Quiet, thoughtful, like a rainy night that just sits outside your window, dripping time away. He had the air of a man who knew a lot but didn't need to tell you. But make no mistake: beneath the understated demeanor was a mind sharper than a switchblade and twice as quick. If you wanted to talk science fiction, well, you better have your facts straight, because Leeper wasn't the type to suffer fools.

He got his start early, back when most kids were chasing baseballs or dreaming of astronaut suits. But Leeper, he was hooked on the other side of the stars--the fiction of it all. Aliens, rockets, time machines--he gobbled them up like a hungry stray. By the time he hit college, the University of Massachusetts, he was knee-deep in fandom, dragging his soon-to-be wife, Evelyn, into the murky depths of sci-fi subculture. If fandom was a crime, they were Bonnie and Clyde, but instead of robbing banks, they stole imaginations.

In 1978, they built their little empire--a science fiction club at Bell Labs. It wasn't much at first, just a few geeks huddled in a room talking shop about their favorite novels and films. But they weren't just reading--they were creating. That same year, the MT VOID was born. A weekly fanzine that didn't just scrape the surface, but drilled down into the bone of sci-fi, exposing its marrow. Leeper was behind it, along with Evelyn, and together, they churned out issue after issue. No flash, no frills, just pure, uncut commentary. If you wanted the good stuff, the real science fiction critique, you knew where to look.

But the MT VOID was just part of the puzzle. Leeper had something more up his sleeve. He started writing movie reviews--tight, no-nonsense critiques that could strip a film down to its skeleton in just a few words. The kind of reviews that didn't give a damn about your feelings. If a film was good, he said so. If it wasn't, well, he wasn't going to sugarcoat it. Leeper was old-school like that, one of the first to take to the internet to publish his reviews. He wrote with the kind of honesty that could make a director sweat. No wonder people kept coming back for more.

But it wasn't just the reviews. Leeper had a love for the strange, the quirky--like fannish origami. Folding paper into shapes only his mind could see. A hobby, sure, but also a metaphor. Leeper could take the ordinary--whether it was paper or a mediocre sci-fi flick--and twist it into something worth a second look.

He and Evelyn were honored guests at conventions--Novacon, Windycon, and the like. But if you asked him, Leeper probably wouldn't have cared about the accolades. He wasn't in it for the applause. No, Mark R. Leeper was a man who saw science fiction for what it was: a mirror to the world's soul. And he wasn't afraid to tell you what was looking back.

The Search for Life on Europa (comments by Gregory Frederick):

The search for life on Jupiter's moon, Europa has begun in earnest.

"NASA plans for launch of Europa Clipper: What to know about craft's search for life"

<https://www.yahoo.com/news/nasa-plans-launch-europa-clipper-181629642.html>

[-gf]

Biblical Verse (letters of comment by Gary McGath and Jay E. Morris):

In response to [the Biblical verse](#) at the end of the 09/27/24 issue of the MT VOID, Gary McGath writes:

[In regard to the quote:]

"Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. --Zechariah 7:9-10

There's a Biblical verse I hope we can all agree on. Which translation is that, using the word "alien"? [-gmg]

Jay E. Morris responds:

New King James, Christian Standard, New International Version, and New American all use alien but that exact verbiage appears to be the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition. [-jem]

Turner Classic Movies in October (letters of comment by Peter Trei, Gary McGath, and Scott Dorsey):

In response to [Mark and Evelyn's comments on Turner Classic Movies](#) in the 09/27/24 issue of the MT VOID, Peter Trei writes:

Some thoughts:

They're showing BIRTH OF A NATION? Pair it with INTOLERANCE, Griffith's response to criticism of the first film.

I AM A FUGITIVE FROM A CHAIN GANG, has sometimes had some odd censorship. At one point, a character says 'I'm free, white, and over 21', which was an idiom at the time the film was made. I've seen showings where the word 'white' was silenced.

As for THE WICKER MAN, what's the length? It was originally 100 minutes, but the full version has been lost, and there are cuts ranging from 87 to 99 minutes out there. The shorter ones lose a lot. [-pt]

Evelyn replies:

The listing says 97 minutes. [-ecl]

Gary McGath notes:

The best thing about BIRTH OF A NATION is Woodrow Wilson's endorsements of it as accurate history. They make it clear what a scumbag he was. [-gmg]

But Scott Dorsey notes:

Yeah, but ... he kept us out of war! Almost, anyway. [-sd]

This Week's Reading (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

MATH IN DRAG by Kyne Santos (a.k.a. Kyne) (Johns Hopkins, ISBN 978-1-4214-4874-9) caught my eye in the library. I have no problem with drag queens, and I have no problem with math--I just was at a loss as to the connection, particularly in such a non-visual medium as a book whose only illustrations are graphs. It turns out that Kyne is a math educator who has 800,000 followers on TikTok for a series of math tutorials. ("Math educator" seems to be a parallel term to that of "science popularizer" or similar, often used to describe such writers as Isaac Asimov. These days I suppose that Martin Gardner would be described as a math educator.)

Anyway, the book makes more sense, given Kyne's following, and the examples in the books follow the themes. Cardinality is illustrated by matching queens and wigs. There is also a fair amount of drag history, and LGBTQI+ history in general. (For example, Kyne points out that the film A BEAUTIFUL MIND completely ignores the persistent rumors that John Nash was gay.)

But the problem is that for the person who wants a book about math, the side comments are just an interruption. When Kyne is discussing exponential growth (and savings) they go into a long digression about how gay people were often short-changed by inheritance laws. I suppose "Math with Christ" (if such a book existed) might have a digression on laws forbidding leaving an estate to the Church. While both are interesting, they aren't math, and while a brief aside on a non-math subject is fine, sidelining math for several pages to cover history seems to short-change both.

But maybe as a mathematician I'm not the target audience. I suppose anything that gets people interested in math should be encouraged. I would be curious to see one of Kyne's tutorials, but I'm not joining TikTok just for that (or for any other reason).

On the other hand, holiday season is coming up, and if you know a drag queen who wants to learn more about math, this is clearly the perfect gift. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

The second law of thermodynamics holds, I think, the supreme position among the laws of nature. If someone points out to you that your pet theory of the universe is in disagreement with Maxwell's equations - then so much the worse for Maxwell's equations. If it is found to be contradicted by observation, well, these experimentalists do bungle things sometimes. But if your theory is found to be against the second law of thermodynamics I can give you no hope; there is nothing for it but to collapse in deepest humiliation. --Arthur Eddington

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