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Greece (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Evelyn and I recently visited Greece for the first time. I am not sure why we waited so long. Much of our culture came from Greece and it is, of course, a major country historically but one that I have never been to. Right now Greece is poised to bring some very negative economic changes to the world economy. How could little and not very powerful Greece do that? Our tour guide presented us with what is the general opinion of Greece.

Greece was one of the countries that formed the European Union, logically enough. There is strength in numbers. There in particular is financial strength in the union of states that is the United States. If Puerto Rico is going bankrupt (and it is, by the way) there is the whole United States to buoy up its economy. The more countries in the European Union, the more stable *should be* their union.

When Greece joined the European Union, it was part of a plan that was supposed to bring prosperity to all of the member countries of Europe. All of Europe gave itself a high credit rating.

Greece did what too many United States wage earners have done in our own country. It maxed out its credit. Greece borrowed scads of money to buy its way into a life of prosperity. No small proportion of that money went into graft and corruption. Doesn't it always? Credit is always just a way of kicking down the road the responsibility to pay money. So Greece took loans without much thought to how it would pay off its debt. So far our guide and I are in agreement.

Now here is where I disagree with the general Greek view of what went wrong. The Greek view seems to be that Greece is too small and new a country to know what it was doing. It did not know how to be financially responsible. In 1973 it declared democracy, throwing out the then-current military dictatorship. The Greeks consider that the current country started at that time. Greece pleads youth and incompetence. It blames the international creditors and not the Greek borrowers. It blames the lenders. I say that Greece should have known what way too many Americans have learned, that you have to manage debt. That is why so many people, even social liberals, are fiscal conservatives. The IMF, the International Monetary Fund, is trying to bail out Greece by loaning funds to Greece and allowing it to spread out its payments over a longer interval of time, if in return Greece limits its spending. That is a mighty big if. It means lowering salaries, raising taxes, cutting pension payments, laying people off, and other painful austerity measures. This situation is what Greeks are calling "the crisis."

Greece wants to re-finance its debts. And it may be the best thing to do to let it. Greece's other alternative is to not pay off its debts. It can default. What will that do? It will ruin Greece's credit rating. The odds are the country will find it much more difficult to get credit. But there are people who have borrowed money on the security of Greek loans. Without the funds expected from Greek loan payments they may also default on their loans. And so the pool of loan defaults will spread to other countries. Other countries' economies could fall like dominoes. What the United States saw in 2008 could be happening on a large scale in Europe.

Just a whimsical thought connected to all this:

I notice that Greek is a language that has profligate use of its alphabet. It is just like French in this regard or even worse. Signs are in Greek and English. If it takes 12 letters to say something in English, in Greek it will require 18 to 24 letters. Same idea, but it just takes a lot more letters to express in Greek. Government documents, newspapers. Even advertising. Everything requires a lot more ink and effort because of the inefficiency of rendering ideas into Greek. The Greek government could economize by making English its official language. There could be some savings there. Who knows what the long-term effects are on the Greek people? [-mrl]

AFTERIMAGE (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: The late Andrzej Wajda, one of the most respected names in Polish cinema caps off his career with one final protest against the Stalinist suppression of intellectuals and artists in the early late 1940s and early 1950s. He may be filling it with what are probably autobiographical details. Wajda directs Boguslaw Linda as Wladyslaw Strzeminski. The Soviet indifference to art and people's lives is chilling. Some of the conflicts in the film are going to seem timelier than Wajda would have suspected. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

One of Europe's greatest filmmakers, Andrzej Wajda died in October of 2016. He was 90 years old and still making films. His final film was AFTERIMAGE, a look at the persecution and death of an artist. AFTERIMAGE is one great Polish artist's examining the Soviet persecution of another great Polish artist, Wladyslaw Strzeminski. Strzeminski was considered the most important Polish graphic artist of the twentieth century, usually dealing with brightly colored abstract painting.

Our director is Andrzej Wajda, himself considered one of the greatest film directors of Europe. Among his classics are KANAL (1956) and ASHES AND DIAMONDS (1958). He died in October 2016 with his final film being AFTERIMAGE (2016).

In the early 1950s Wladyslaw Strzeminski was one of the great living avant-garde painters. His style of bright abstracts was his own. But the Polish government was a puppet of the Soviet Union, which was in turn under the control of Joseph Stalin. Strzeminski had lost both an arm and a leg in World War II. Still, he taught art and his lectures on art held his classes spellbound. While the Nazi attitude toward great art had been to steal it, the Soviets, if it did not suit their ends, wanted to see it destroyed. Bright colored abstracts did not suit their ends. The Ministry of Culture and Art demanded that Strzeminski follow or at least respect the Socialist Realist style of art and the artist did neither.

What followed were a series of incidents of the artist losing some ingredient necessary for his art and finding himself struggling to survive. He loses his teaching position, then his room at the arts museum, and then his right to own paints. He would swallow his pride and take a less prestigious position or a piece of his own art only to have the ministry find him again and the cycle would continue until it would finally take his life.

It took Wajda two decades to get this film made. He orchestrates color in the film like he orchestrates acting. Most of the visuals of the film are suppressed to make Strzeminski's art stand out. The artist's color was vivid and gave a sharp contrast to the dismal gray-green color palette that is used for most of the film, particularly the later portions. The repetition of lost battles that Strzeminski fights makes the film downbeat and a little less engaging than AFTERIMAGE needed to be.

AFTERIMAGE is a dramatization of how even a very strong personality can be ground down between the stones of clashing political ideologies. The film slowly flows from a cry to a whimper. I rate AFTERIMAGE a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 7/10. It is currently playing in New York City and will open May 26 in Los Angeles.

Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5186236/combined>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/afterimage_2017

[-mrl]

Spot the Space Station (letter of comment by Philip Chee):

In response to [David Goldfarb's comments on spotting the ISS](#) in the 05/26/17 issue of the MT VOID, Philip Chee writes:

[David Goldfarb wrote.] "The "spot the station" website also allows you to sign up for email notifications of when the station will be visible. I went out and looked at it just today: viewing conditions in Houston were ideal. The station was in the sky for about six minutes, which is about the longest it ever is. It passed quite close to Jupiter, and at its brightest was noticeably the brighter." [-dg]

In *SPELL OF CATASTROPHE* (the first of a series of novels) [it] starts off like a standard sword and sorcery book with sword wielding barbarians (think CONAN), magicians, and gods--or god like beings--who have an interest in limiting the level of technology available to humans (e.g. LORD OF LIGHT, SCRAPPED PRINCESS, etc) but eventually turns out to be s.f.

The author throws a curve ball at the reader by writing in the first chapter that "The big moon was up, plus some of the small fast ones" reinforcing the fantasy aspect.

In retrospect "the small fast ones" are obviously you know whatnots. [-pc]

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

LAST YEAR by Robert Charles Wilson (ISBN 978-0-7653-3263-9) is a time-travel novel, but with a more carefully thought-out premise than many. Given the "Grandfather Paradox", Wilson supposes that one is not traveling to the past (in this case 1876) of our world, but to a parallel world identical to ours, but running behind ours (in this case, by about 150 years). (An alternative explanation would be that the visit to our past causes another branch to sprout off, but it seems to me that Wilson explicitly specifies the first explanation.)

The "time travel" here at first seems mostly for the purposes of tourism, but it turns out that there are other motives as well, and the whole question of the ethics of time travel is raised. In a sense this is about colonialism, and Kant's categorical imperative (are the people in the past/other world "real"?).

[Kant's Categorical Imperative: "Act as you would want all other people to act towards all other people. Act according to the maxim that you would wish all other rational people to follow, as if it were a universal law." -mrl] Wilson is always engaging, and other than his one trilogy, he does not repeat a theme as do so many other authors, so his works always seem fresh.

As with any novel, if you read *THE MARTIAN* by Andy Weir (ISBN 978-0-553-41802-6) enough times, you start to find contradictions. For example, on Sol 34, Mark Watney says, "Nothing to be done about the heat. There's actually no air conditioning in the Hab." But then on Sol 39, he relates his plan to leave the Hab for a short trip and says, "I can lower the Hab temperature to 1-degree C..."

In his log for Sol 33(2), he says, "NASA put a lot of effort into making sure nothing here can burn," and he is forced to cut up a wooden crucifix to start a fire. But then on Sol 97(2), he says, "I have limited paper to work with." On Sol 201, he says, "Using a funnel made from a piece of paper..." and on Sol 387, "I even made a model out of paper."

Laptop displays either freeze or boil off in Martian atmosphere (Sol 98(2)). When the Hab blew (Sol 119), Watney should have lost any laptops in it, yet he doesn't mention this. By Sol 388 he mentions "three remaining laptops", so I suppose they might have been in the Rover at the time rather than the Hab, but that seems unlikely.

(None of this addresses the unlikely in the novel. For example, when every ounce counts, NASA sends enough multi-vitamins "to last years." (Later, he says he has double what he needs for four years, so that's eight years' supply for one, or sixteen months' supply for the entire crew for their thirty days on Mars.) A thirty-day mission for six people should give him enough to last six months--a year at the outside. And why do the meals have five times the amount of protein needed? And one more word: sandstorm.) [-ecl] [Mark notes: Non-flammable paper can be made out of hydroxyapatite. -mrl]

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Quote of the Week:

Whatever you give a woman, she will make greater.
If you give her sperm, she'll give you a baby.
If you give her a house, she'll give you a home.
If you give her groceries, she'll give you a meal.
If you give her a smile, she'll give you her heart.
She multiplies and enlarges what is given to her.
So, if you give her any crap, be ready to receive
a ton of sh*t!

--William Golding

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