

much better at picking up on body language than humans are. They know your mood by your bearing. But a dog's eyes must be weaker than ours are if for no other reason than they cannot get corrective lenses. There is odd information about a dog's color perception. Dogs do not have the rods and cones in their eyes that would allow color perception. When I was growing up the word was that dogs definitely do not see colors. Then somebody actually tested it. I suppose you could have an experiment in which dogs are rewarded for finding green objects but not red ones. What was discovered was that dogs had weak color-perception. Why a dog has any color perception at all could not be explained.

Still more to come. [-mrl]

GENERAL MAGIC (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: General Magic was a company that was hugely innovative. General Magic designed many of the design and communication protocols. Time after time when the developers of cutting edge electronics would get to a point in design, General Magic had been there first. The strategy for defining interfaces would have already been defined by General Magic. General Magic was as world-beating as any of the tech giant corporations. But financially the company was a bust. They had been precisely at the right place at the wrong time. They had the answers too well before their technology was needed. **GENERAL MAGIC** is a look at the inside of the tech company by many of the people who were there. It is the story of the company as seen by insiders of the General Magic. Directors: Sarah Kerruish, Matt Maude; Writers: Sarah Kerruish, Jonathan Key, Matt Maude. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

The intended theme of this documentary is dropped directly in the viewer's lap so it cannot be missed. "Failure is not the end. It is only the beginning." However, if General Magic the company is going to go beyond this beginning documented here, it will not be in its own name but rather as a widely diffuse legacy. And that is a pity.

We tend to think of corporations as being either a success if employees make enough to live on or a failure if the staff does not. The corporation General Magic is almost unknown today yet there are billions and billions of pieces of high-tech equipment that were originally envisioned and in their original precursors were built by General Magic,

General Magic was founded (to be rich and) to change the lives of people all over the world. The founders were superstars of Apple who broke off and founded their own company. General Magic invented or refined iPhone/Android, iPad, iPod, the Internet, LinkedIn, Google circles and eBay. Yet the company remained little known to the general public.

General Magic's star developers would meet and spend much thought rediscovering what their equipment had to do. Rather than update what already existed they would re-design from scratch. They did not adapt the task to work on the equipment available. They would reinvent the equipment to fit the task. This was especially true during the early heady days of design. The company attracted the best computer designers in the world. It was typical to have a piece of equipment suggested in an afternoon meeting and it would be designed that evening and by the next day's meeting the equipment was designed, built, and delivered the next day. That was an environment that attracted the "rock stars" of computer design.

The film tells the story of one of General Magic's largest blunders. General Magic had been a division of Apple, when it split off and made itself its own corporation. John Scully had been a director of General Magic but went with the new company. But he also maintained ties with Apple, passing along their intellectual property, essentially spying for them. This enabled Apple to develop the Newton using ideas from General Magic.

This film is a paean to ideals of design making it ironic that the opening frames of film show text in a very hard to read fine print. Overall I rate **GENERAL MAGIC** a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 7/10.

Release date: **GENERAL MAGIC** will open in New York City on July 12th at IFC Center.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6849786/reference>

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

[-mrl]

Canine Perception (letter of comment by Gary Labowitz):

In response to [Mark's comments on canine perception](#) in the 07/05/19 issue of the MT VOID, Gary Labowitz writes:

My current dog, and the one before it, both used a similar barking style. I have noticed that one muffled "woof" is a sort of hello to what is going on. Two sharp barks was always a call for help with something. Repeated loud barks always seemed to be frantic about something, usually wanting to go out. My father always said that our family dog, when I was young used to

come to his side of the bed and made a sound that he said was "Iwannagoout." You could almost hear that. I think he was "projecting," but it was always just what she wanted. As to what they "hear," I think it is just single words or a set phrase that has meaning to them. I can ask my dog if she wants to go out (word "out" being the one) and after she thinks about it for about 10 seconds or so, she will get up and go to the door. If I say "front" or "back" she will go to the correct door. When I ask if she wants a treat the word "treat" is the clue. She goes right to the kitchen to get one. If I say, "Let's take the trash out," or other phrase with the word "trash" in it, she eagerly gets up and goes to the door. She likes to take the trash out or bring the cans in, leading me all the way. When we are outside and I ask if she wants to go for a ride in the car, I think "car" is what she hears. She then heads to the car and to the door to the back seat. These, and other clues make me think she can consider options and picture what I am talking about. I have always said dogs are like little children who never grow up. She responds like a baby who clearly recognizes me and my wife by name, and gives us responses that show what she wants or knows. You'll never convince me otherwise. [-gl]

Mark replies:

I would not want to convince you otherwise. As may be obvious I think that dogs are a lot smarter than is currently believed by the experts. Understanding humans is a big part of what dogs do for a living. And some are very proficient. [-mrl]

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

IS THAT A FISH IN YOUR EAR? TRANSLATION AND THE MEANING OF EVERYTHING by David Bellos (ISBN 978-0-86547-857-2) covers the basic question of what constitutes a good translation, but also the more basic one of what constitutes a translation at all. Along the way, He discusses at length the balance between retaining some level of "literalness" while not making the translation sound stunted, and while making the content understandable. (Someone at a convention once said their Japanese translator called them up to ask what he meant by saying some people were "like Unitarians on Quaaludes.")

Bellos also looks at some of the more specialized and constrained areas of translation. For example, subtling movies requires that all dialogue fit into sequences of two lines of no more than 32 characters each which stay on the screen long enough to be read, and not slop over into the next scene. Graphic novel and comic strip translations must fit into the same "balloons" as the original. And simultaneous translation needs to manage to deal with different grammar and sentence structure. e.g., translating a long sentence from a language where the verb appears late in the sentence to one in which it appears earlier, or expressing formal versus informal "you" in a language that does not make the distinction. (Or perhaps even more difficult, knowing which one to choose when going in the other direction.)

If you are interested in languages, or even if you are not but read a lot of works in translation, I recommend this book.

GOOD ENOUGH: THE TOLERANCE FOR MEDIOCRITY IN NATURE AND SOCIETY by Daniel S. Milo (ISBN 978-0-674-50462-2) makes the argument that "survival of the fittest" is not an accurate description of how evolution works. Milo uses various examples to show how features that seem maladaptive manage to survive because they are just not so maladaptive as to kill off their possessors. He also talks about chance as a factor: if only 1% of a population survives a bottleneck (e.g., by being far enough away from a natural disaster that wipes out the other 99%), it is their characteristics that will survive, even if they are not the "optimal" ones. This is actually fairly obvious, and I think ultimately Milo is just trying to expand the notion of "fittest" to "fit enough". If you have a population of finches, it is not just those with the longest beaks to reach the seeds that will reproduce, but pretty much all those whose beaks are long enough.

One thing Milo emphasizes is that the acceptance of "good enough" throws a wrench into "intelligent Design": if "nature is not optimized," as Milo says, then one must attribute waste and mediocrity to the intelligent designer (i.e., God), and most intelligent design promoters are not willing to do that.

It is worth pointing out that Milo specifically says that this does not negate the theory of descent with modification, or of natural selection in general, though it does dispute the assumed ubiquity of the latter.

In short, the book is interesting, but not the revolutionary revision one might expect. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

I've seen a look in dogs' eyes, a quickly vanishing
look of amazed contempt, and I am convinced that
basically dogs think humans are nuts.
--John Steinbeck

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