

# *LJ Book*

Your Most Personal Book.

CERANDOR



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# Chapter 1

## 2009

### 1.1 January

#### 1.1.1 A Plan for '09 (2009-01-06 12:34)

Seeing as 2008 was a bit of a loss as far as keeping my New Year's resolutions went, I'm determined not to make the same mistake again this year. I want to set a target I can meet with a bit of effort, and which I can stick to throughout the year. However, trying to figure out exactly what I was going to aim for proved difficult. After turning over a bunch of potential resolutions in my head, nothing seemed to quite fit.

In the end, I realised that all of them could be boiled down to the phrase: "I'm not going to accept any more of this substandard crap." This is going to be a year in which I'm going to demand quality in what I read, watch and write, as well as in other areas of my life. In trying to explain this to someone else, this is how I put it: "Just because I'm lucky enough to have so much quality in some of the important areas of my life doesn't mean that I should stand for something less in areas that aren't as important to me."

A lack of motivation has always been one of the things that I've allowed to hold me back. I'm often too willing to go along just to get along. This year, I'm going to try to make a deliberate attempt to break out of that habit. To catch myself whenever I shrug my shoulders and do something more decisive instead. At the very least, it should make 2009 more interesting.

I've already made something of a start. There's a [1]teaser up on Cerandor Stories for my new project there. Something to stick to in the year ahead.

1. <http://cerandor.kaybensoft.com/?p=118>

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(2009-01-06 14:40:52)

Sounds like a great idea! It's on a slightly different topic, but this reminded me of a great post by Merlin Mann: <http://www.kungfugrippe.com/post/48588149/better/michael>

cerandor (2009-01-06 15:20:49)

That's fairly similar to my own thoughts. Though I was actually inspired more by Bruce Sterling's signoff on the Viridian Design Movement: discard that which is unnecessary and ensure that what remains is the best quality possible. <http://www.worldchanging.com/archives//009061.html> Something you often hear in financial/investment magazines is that when times are troubled, a "flight to quality" will often take place. This does tend to underline the reliability of quality, but it also begs the question of what they were doing away from quality in the first place...

kaleandwine (2009-01-07 07:03:12)

I have to thank you both for the great articles, so damn timely and perfectly targeted to the way everything feels at the moment. Rob and I have spent that last month looking to simultaneously downsize and upgrade our life, both online and off – but it’s been difficult to find a good roadmap that works for us both (he of the shiny, me of the sentimental). Damn if Sterling’s piece, in particular, doesn’t have some great clarifications all around. There’s still a part of me that feels like this collapse is a very <em>good</em> thing; that we’d all become falsely rich by making and consuming and trading mountains of pure crapola. Suddenly it feels like we’re falling back to earth, <em>real</em> earth. Like the end credits of Wall\*E or something. I guess it’s easy to say when you have a job, but: I like it.

### **1.1.2 Five Days, Three Highlights, One City (2009-01-12 15:24)**

With enough familiarity, cities take on particular personalities. For me, London is an old friend I don’t get to visit as often as I’d like, but who always has stories new and old to share when I come calling. Five days was probably not enough, but it did restore London’s place in my estimation, after dalliances with other cities over the past few years.

The first of the three big highlights of the trip was the reason it was made in the first place: The RSC’s Hamlet, starring David Tennant and Patrick Stewart. Despite the sci-fi fan potential of the show (and the audience was both younger and geekier than I suspect is normal), it was a definite success, with Tennant in particular deserving the hype. His Hamlet was alternately manic and bereaved by circumstance, and the physicality of his performance both belied his recent back injury and offered an insight into how he may have come by it. Also worth noting was the mirrored set, which provided an eerie backdrop and a stark visual aid at the play’s point-of-no-return, the death of Polonius, as the mirrors become cracked and splintered and stay that way.

Up the next day was highlight number two: the British Museum. Now, I’m a longstanding fan of London’s Natural History Museum, but my allegiances are a bit strained now. Not only is the British Museum a fantastic repository of knowledge and artifacts from around the world, but it works hard to make it all accessible. This time out, its centrepiece exhibition was on Babylon, and it was every bit as good as the last one, on the Roman Emperor Hadrian. Several free tours, lasting an hour or so, added to the experience, but when you can walk from a room featuring the Sutton Hoo treasure to another containing the Rosetta Stone, and on to Assyrian wall reliefs, it’s hard to avoid having your interest piqued at some stage.

The third of the highlights was the aforementioned Natural History Museum. This really is a temple to science and the natural world, complete with gargoyles, one which I keep coming back to. I hadn’t even meant to visit this time out, but an advertisement in the Tube for its latest exhibition scuppered that resolution. The exhibition in question was in celebration of Charles Darwin and the writing of *On the Origin of Species*. It was well worth the trouble, as I came out of it with a greater appreciation of the man and his work. Darwin was a genuine exemplar of the ideal of Victorian humanism, and his work on developing the theory of evolution was all the more groundbreaking because of his meticulous research and development of it. Of anything I saw while in London, I’d recommend this to a visitor.

There’s much more to mention, of course: a turn on the London Eye, only slightly spoiled by grey and drizzly weather. Borough Market, with its makers of fine wines, cheeses, meats and other produce (beer, chocolate and ostrich burgers, for example). The hands-on exhibits of the Science Museum. Sweet shops that I visited far too often. So on and so forth.

It may be a while before the next time I get back, but I don't doubt that there will be more stories waiting for me when I do.

Writing: The London trip is not an excuse here, as I'm now a day behind in posting new stories, even at this early stage of the year. This evening I shall do my best to make amends.

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kaleandwine (2009-01-13 07:07:19)

As usual, I be jealous, in a happy sort of way. :) We spent the day after Christmas at Pasadena's Huntington Library, which is a tiny sort of place compared to the famous museums you're describing... Still, they had a <a href="http://www.huntington.org/Information/darwin.htm">Darwin exhibit</a> of their own, which was fascinating. Given the year I imagine they'll be celebrating him around the globe. Not too shabby.

cerandor (2009-01-13 09:11:10)

There are photos too, which I'll get around to posting up. Including a couple of nice ones of the London skyline at night, and of the ice rink in front of the Natural History Museum.

### **1.1.3 Tony Hart (2009-01-19 11:27)**

There seems to have been a spate of celebrity deaths in the last week: Patrick McGoohan and Ricardo Montalban from the world of film and television kicked it all off, and at the weekend, they were joined by a figure from my childhood. [1]Tony Hart, the presenter of a number of arts programs for children on BBC, whose passing will be marked by a generation of kids who longed to have some of their pieces appear in the "Gallery" segment of his programs.

A talent for visual art was never part of my childhood, and so far as I recall, I never sent any of my scribblings for Tony Hart's perusal. Yet I always made an effort to catch his shows, and they remain a fond memory. Part of this, I admit, was due to the recurring appearance of [2]Morph, an early Aardman Animations creation. However, it was also down to Hart's character. Rather than teaching, he simply showed his young viewers what he did in an avuncular fashion. Together with the more manic [3]Johnny Ball, who introduced me to the joy of maths and science, Hart managed to make TV for children that was genuinely entertaining and educational.

1. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\\_pictures/7836154.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_pictures/7836154.stm)

2. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morph\\_\(character\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morph_(character))

3. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnny\\_Ball](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnny_Ball)

### **1.1.4 FlyBMI? (2009-01-20 09:16)**

Good customer service deserves notice, perhaps even more than bad customer service deserves criticism. On my trip to London last week, I flew with BMI, largely because they were relatively cheap (and have since become cheaper), but partially because I'll take any excuse to avoid Ryanair.

The beginning of the trip was not auspicious: my bag emerged from the carousel with one of its straps torn off. However, a quick complaint to the representative saw my details taken and a promise that I would be contacted in regards to a repair or replacement. The day after I got back, I was indeed called, and yesterday I received in the post a brand new replacement bag.

It's somewhat comforting when a company acts as though it would like you to choose them again, rather than relying on the notion that you'll be forced to choose them just to save money.

### **1.1.5 Frustration (2009-01-26 09:38)**

I'm struggling with 2009 so far. I came into January with a bunch of things that needed sorting out and have spent most of the month clearing them up. However, in the process, I've been unable (unwilling?) to stick to my self-appointed writing goals. This is despite certainly having the time available to do so.

The last week of this month, and all of next, I'm going to have to focus on building up my writing habit again. No excuses.

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kaleandwine (2009-01-27 06:50:24)

Indeed. Time has a way of, well, filling itself up. Good luck on the resolution. :)

## **1.2 February**

### **1.2.1 JDIFF (2009-02-17 14:56)**

In past years, sloth has seen me ignore the delights of the Dublin International Film Festival. This year, thanks to the encouragement of she who will not be named, that is not the case. Two days, two films, both excellent. Not a bad strike rate. Reviews to follow.

First up was *Coraline*, based on the Neil Gaiman novel and directed by The Nightmare Before Christmas's Henry Selick. Gaiman and Selick both understand that children are fascinated by the creepy and weird, and that fact is at the centre of this stop-motion feature. A child's-eye view of the strangeness of adults, it skirts deliciously along the thin line between delightful and disturbing.

More to the point, it looks absolutely beautiful, and is all the more stunning when viewed in 3-D, as I was fortunate enough to see it. Unlike other 3-D movies, it doesn't throw things at you or point them in your face - instead, it creates an almost magical sense of depth. This one is well worth seeing, especially if you have children, or if you suspect that you may have been one at some point in the past.

Last night took me to see *Frequently Asked Questions About Time Travel*, which I knew much less about than *Coraline*. It's the story of three friends (a science fiction geek, a procrastinating writer and fellow geek, and a hater of all things science fiction) who stumble into, well, the clue's in the title, but the unfolding of the story is half the fun, so I'll say no more on that.

This is a very geeky film, but hardly less funny for a general audience. Despite the evidently low budget, it looks great, and the only time it falters is with the overt use of CG (only twice, and briefly). The ending actually made me laugh out loud at least four times, which is usually pretty good going for an entire film. As above, this is one that all geeks should see, as well as anyone else who suspects that they may have the slightest geekish inclinations.

kaleandwine (2009-02-17 16:25:43)

<em>Coraline</em>... I might pay the \$10 again, just to see the opening credits. Before this film I was highly suspicious of the "new 3D" craze, but given the subtlety of the effect, and then the previews (most of which were in 3D, including Pixar's <em>Up</em>- I'm sure it was the same there?) I'm thrilled. I think you have the description right - it's not that things come forward, but more that they recede <em>back</em>. Into a world framed by the window of the screen. I liked. Going to have to look for that other one.

cerandor (2009-02-17 16:44:26)

Actually, this being a film festival, there were no previews or trailers. Which was actually a shame in this case, as it took me about ten minutes to get used to the odd feeling of wearing the 3-D glasses and for my eyes to adjust to the image depth. I normally enjoy watching trailers anyhow, but in this case they would actually have enhanced the experience of watching the film.

kaleandwine (2009-02-17 17:04:41)

That's a shame... especially as 10 minutes would have included that credit sequence. The floating words alone were so fantastic - I'm curious as to how this technology works. For whatever it's worth, I walked into the theater expecting those horrid cardboard red/blue things... I guess it's always good to start with crap expectations. :)

(2009-02-18 13:21:06)

Polarised light. Regular red and green 3D works by projecting two images onto the screen - one offset from the other by the distance between the average person's eyes. One image is projected in red, the other in blue. When you put on your glasses, the red lens filters out the red image and so that eye only sees the blue image, while the blue lens does the opposite. Thus each eye only receives one of the offset images, providing the illusion of 3D stereoscopic vision. The new 3D tech uses the same principle, but instead of colours, it uses polarised light. The clear 3D glasses have polarised lenses that filter out one of the two polarised offset images. So again - each eye gets one image, which tricks the brain into thinking it's looking at something with depth, rather than just a flat screen. Dr. P.

(2009-02-18 13:21:55)

And I didn't even have to Google or Wikipedia that answer! :) P.

kaleandwine (2009-02-18 14:45:29)

Aha, Dr P to the rescue! :) I did know that they were polarized lenses, just a better variant of red/blue - I was more curious as to how they used that to create wildly variable depths. But given the description above, I get it I think. Tweak the offset? It must be much easier to do now, with computers, than it ever was with two cameras...

(2009-02-18 15:22:13)

Oh - well they produce the depth by taking pictures (two pictures, off set; 24 pictures for every second of film to get the smooth flow) of something that has that depth, as I understand it. One of the things that Neil Gaiman said is that by CGIing out the machinery and armatures holding the models (and presumably some of the scenes where the Other World dissolves), it was all done with real models and stop motion animation. P.

kaleandwine (2009-02-18 15:44:29)

I believe it - that's why it looked so good. I was (ha, an obsession?) mostly thinking about the beginning and end credits, where strings and text materialized forward and backward - quite a bit - from the rest of the visuals. That at least was animated. Anyway, just gave in to wikipedia - the new stuff uses "circular polarization": <em>RealD</em> uses a single projector that alternately projects the right-eye frame and left-eye frame, and circularly polarizes these frames, clockwise for the right eye and counterclockwise for the left eye, using a liquid crystal screen placed in

front of the projector lens. Circularly polarized glasses make sure each eye sees only "its own" picture, even if the head is tilted (see Circular dichroism). The very high framerate, which is 72 frames per second per eye, makes sure the image looks continuous. In RealD Cinema, each frame is projected three times to reduce flicker. The source video is usually only 24 frames per second (which can result in a subtle stuttering on horizontal camera movements). The result is a 3D picture that seems to extend behind and in front of the screen itself..</em> Fascinating!

### **1.2.2 Memory Lingers (2009-02-23 15:18)**

Not too far away from my family home in County Down is a small road - the Ballylig Road. It connects the Downpatrick Road between Killough and Downpatrick with the Minervestown Road, part of the coastal route that runs along the length of Dundrum Bay. It's fairly straight, as befits the shortcut it was intended to be. It is however, quite narrow, and the high hedges to either side (when the council has been slow in cutting them) can make it a little nervewracking, given the habit of most drivers of bombing down it at 50-60mph.

It's also, to the best of my knowledge, fairly old. Somewhere around 100-150 years old, according to those who'd know better than me. Yet for all that, it's known by nearly everyone in the vicinity as the "New" road. Until I was old enough to check out road signs, and for a little while afterwards, I thought that was what its name was.

Communities can have memories much longer than the lives of the people who make them up, and names and reputations can linger on long after the reasons behind them have faded away.

### **1.2.3 Strange Signs in Dublin (2009-02-24 18:53)**

Of late, strange signs have been cropping up in Dublin. Here and there, rarely in obvious places, official-looking stickers have been added to pieces of public furniture. Quite who is responsible, I'm not sure, but whether it's an individual artist or a group of merry pranksters, the results can be quite amusing.

I first noticed one a few weeks ago: on one of those electricity boxes that can be found here and there on the sides of the pavement, a warning sticker announced. "Death Waits Within." That elicited a double take - it looked official, but the message certainly didn't sound like something crafted by committee.

I took it as a one-off, but earlier today, on Nassau Street, I noted a waste bin adorned with the legend "No Bombs Please." Not as professional as the first offering, but hardly out of place, other than the nature of the message. Wondering if this was a trend, I looked for other examples, and I'd gone no more than twenty metres down the street when I found another, announcing that a parking ticket dispenser was "Property of NASA."

So, how widespread is this trend? Who's responsible? I'll admit to being fascinated. Maybe it's been going on for ages, and I just haven't been paying attention. Has anyone else seen other examples of this?

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waider (2009-02-24 22:25:29)

There have, for years, been a bunch of signs all over Dublin in the form of corrugated plastic (akin to the material used in heavier cardboard boxes, but made from some sort of polymer) rectangle with

a triangular head on one end - making an arrow - and some sort of arbitrary stencilled-looking logo such as a pair of boots. They look sufficiently professional that you'd not immediately write them off as random art or whatever. See also <http://flickr.com/photos/waider/2344165414/> (which was still there - Tara Street station, southbound platform - last time I checked)

(2009-02-25 00:31:27)

There's a bunch of stickers up with "JC Deceaux" (the bus shelter ad and billboard company) and "All your base are belong to us" on them. Haven't got a picture yet. There's also a sticker that mimics the green embarkation card you fill in when landing in the US: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/woesinger/3274550985/> Oh and then there's the MySpace post box on Palace St: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/woesinger/3283143570/> P.

cerandor (2009-02-27 09:41:19)

I got a photo of one of the JC Decaux ones this morning. You wouldn't even notice the extra text ("Enjoy your invisible, shit-ass bikes") if you weren't looking for it. I'll post that up when I get a chance. This is a fun game. :)

## 1.3 March

### 1.3.1 Books to Lie About (2009-03-06 13:14)

A [1]recent survey revealed that there are certain books which people are more likely to lie about having read, whether to take part in a conversation, appear more intellectual or simply to get one over on that annoying bore. It's an interesting list, full of books ancient and modern, and the reasons why people might pretend to have read them are not too hard to figure out.

I'm happy to say I've actually read 4 out of 10 of them, and never lied about having read the others (except in college, which doesn't count).

#### 1. 1984 - George Orwell (42 %)

Read it only recently and enjoyed it. I can see why so many people lie about it though - its relevance to modern authority structures is startling.

#### 2. War and Peace - Leo Tolstoy (31 %)

Likewise read it within the last year. On my iPhone, which was a bit of a chore. Don't worry about keeping track of all the characters - just go with the flow.

#### 3. Ulysses - James Joyce (25 %)

Read a couple of chapters while I was in college. Amazingly well constructed as a piece of writing, but it didn't exactly inspire me to read the rest.

#### 4. The Bible (24 %)

I've read the occasional passage here and there, and heard the small portions the church deems fit for our ears so many times I could probably recite them verbatim. However, it would be tortuous to try and read it end to end (the gospels tell the same story four times, after all).

5. Madame Bovary - Gustave Flaubert (16 %)

Haven't read it and know little about it. Moreover, it doesn't really appear on my list of "Books to Read Before I Die."

6. A Brief History of Time - Stephen Hawking (15 %)

I've read neither this nor "A Briefer History of Time," which came out recently. I have read similar books though, such as "The Fabric of the Cosmos," so I'm not sure I'm pushed to cross this off any list.

7. Midnight's Children - Salman Rushdie (14 %)

Read it in college and quite enjoyed it. Again, didn't make me immediately seek out more Rushdie though.

8. In Remembrance of Things Past - Marcel Proust (9 %)

I keep coming across references to this in other books. However, this is one literary mountain that will probably remain unscaled by yours truly.

9. Dreams from My Father - Barack Obama (6 %)

I suspect I might read this one - but probably after Obama's tenure in the White House has come to an end. It might be more interesting to compare his viewpoint going in with his achievements on the way out.

10. The Selfish Gene - Richard Dawkins (6 %)

Actually read this recently. Written long before Dawkins became as notorious in certain circles as he is now, it's a well-put-together, if quite dense, explanation of a new way of looking at genetics and heredity.

1. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts\\_and\\_culture/7925720.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts_and_culture/7925720.stm)

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kaleandwine (2009-03-06 16:25:22) Well I, of course, read all of them.

Kidding. As an aside there should be *another* article about people who generally can't remember a lick of anything they read beyond the previous five years. 1984 (my only accomplishment of this list) is one of the few "classics" I actually remember clearly. But it's interesting. Before clicking on the cut, I'd expected an entirely different list. The Bible, yes, War and Peace, of course... but Obama's book? Who knew? I'm intrigued that you read Tolstoy's book on the iPhone. Books-on-paper vs books-on-a-reading-device is still probably the biggest argument Rob and I have (and it's an ugly one). He swears that an iPhone-esque device well-designed for books and online news is the only way to go. I can't *imagine* falling asleep with a screen, how unromantic, but yet... you managed War and Peace? Hmm.

cerandor (2009-03-07 16:51:26) Re: Well I, of course, read all of them.

Reading "War and Peace" on the iPhone was more a bet with myself than anything else - I've had a copy for years and never got around to reading it. The iPhone's not a perfect reading device, but it's fine for short stories, and the eBook reader I use - Stanza - is great for hunting out old public domain pieces and stuff you've always considered reading and never searched out. I suspect the list has a lot to do with things people think they *ought* to have read. That explains Obama's

book.

### 1.3.2 Istanbul (Not Constantinople) (2009-03-18 22:49)

After a week-and-a-half, I have returned to the working life, accompanied by unseasonal weather. Seriously - it was like summer looking out of the window. Not so much being out in it though: the sun couldn't quite heat this chilly island up. Promising nonetheless.

So I've been off on holiday lately, having spent a couple of days in London and the balance of the week in Istanbul, one of those places that's been on my "Must Visit" list for ages. This was an action-packed eight days though, so we're going for bullet points on the recap.



[1] Day 1

From Dublin to London: Flying with BMI? Much to be preferred to Ryanair. Especially when they pick you out of the crowd to inhabit the emergency exit row and thus safeguard your fellow passengers. Makes one feel . . . capable.

Accommodation: Right in the center of the City. London's financial district, that is, explaining why it was so dead all weekend.

Party Time: Despite London's Tube system being haywire over the weekend, we made it out to Elephant and Castle for a birthday party, courtesy of one of Dr. P's friends. Very hospitable they were too, and getting back to the hotel was a matter of a late night/early morning stroll.



[2] Day 2

One Museum is Much Like Another: Once more doing combat with the recalcitrant underground, we made it to the Natural History Museum, where Dr. P found he wouldn't be able to visit the Darwin exhibit for a couple of hours. So we headed across town to the Byzantium exhibit in the Royal Academy, nicely piquing our interest in Istanbul.

A Little Natural History: Dr. P headed back to the Darwin Exhibit while I popped over to the Apple Store (yes, I am weak) before following him. Having said hi to Charlie on an earlier visit, I explored the geology wing before joining forces with the good Doctor to revisit the Dinosaur hall, now showing signs of wear from many thousands of visitors.

Eat Like Girls: Another of Dr. P's contacts, the inimitable [3]Eat Like a Girl met us for dinner, leading us to [4]Wild Honey, which was quite excellent, setting a trend for the trip.



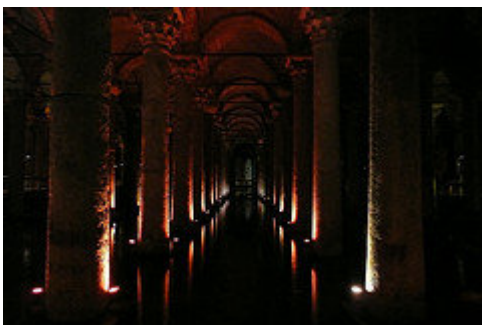
[5] Day 3

To the Plane!: Despite our best attempts, we managed to catch the flight in time, with Dr. P catching up on his sleep and John Julius Norwich while I watched some "John Adams" on the laptop. The view on the way in was fantastic, with the plane circling the city, crossing the Bosphorus and Old Istanbul on its way to Ataturk Airport.

A City for the Ages: The taxi took us from the airport to the city, through the massive Theodosian Walls, providing yet another "wow" moment, and on to the Sebnem Hotel, just down the hill from the Hagia Sophia.

Explorers in an Antique Land: We spent the first evening exploring the area of Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque, fending off vendors of various goods and finally grabbing some carbohydrate-heavy foods to restore the spirits.

Whirling Towards Infinity: To wrap up our first day in the city, we engaged [6]Les Arts Turcs to take us to see some genuine whirling dervishes. As this was a religious ceremony, no cameras were allowed, and despite the need to sit more or less still for an hour, it was a heady and eye-opening experience.



[7] Day 4

The Church of Holy Wisdom: Our first full day in the city was devoted to the big nearby sights. First up was the Hagia Sophia, where we steeped ourselves in 15 centuries of architecture and history, Byzantine and Ottoman. Venetian tombs, Viking graffiti, golden mosaics and the hidden prayer kiosk of a Sultan. Pity about the scaffolding, but it's worth it if it keeps this treasure standing.

A Hidden Cathedral: I'd never heard of the Basilica Cistern before, but it was probably the most impressive sight of the trip. Underneath the streets of Istanbul lies a massive pillared space, designed to water the ancient palace that once stood nearby. It remains magnificent, all the more so considering how long it was lost.

The Remnants of an Emperor: Constantine's Palace is long gone, but its remains are everywhere. In particular, they can be seen in the Mosaic Museum, around the back of the Blue Mosque. The massive decorated floor is in pieces now, but enough remains to still be stunning.



[8] Day 5

Go North Young Men: You can't visit Istanbul without being drawn to the Bosphorus. We headed out early in the morning and caught a ferry to take us north, to within spitting distance of the Black Sea. There were sights aplenty on the way north, and we were only looking at the European Coast.

Guardian of the Narrow Way: We stepped ashore at Anadolu Kavagi, giving myself a first taste of Asian ground beneath my feet. From there we climbed to the keep high above the town and lingered there awhile, drinking in the sights. People have been sailing these waters for thousands of years, since before Jason and his Argonauts. That adds a spice to being in a place like that.

Sunset Over the City: The trip south offered just as many sights as the northward voyage, and once back in Istanbul, we crossed the Galata Bridge over the Golden Horn and climbed one of the city's many hills to the Galata Tower, overlooking the rest of the city, north to south. We waited there a time for some sunset photos and then left, heading north.

Swanky Food: We'd received a tip for an eatery in Istanbul from Eat Like a Girl, and now seemed as good a time as any to follow up on it. [9]Chan'ga is well worth checking out if you're ever there, despite some toilet-related strangeness. The food is heartily recommended, even if it was the most expensive meal we had while there.



[10] Day 6

Fortress of Seven Towers: After some messing around with regard to transportation, we made it out to Yedikule Hisari, former gatehouse to the Theodosian Walls that marked the outer limits of Constantinople. We spent several hours just exploring on, under and in the massive towers and walls. Yet more awe-inspiring scenery.

Restoration of Golden Glory : The Kariye Museum lies not far from the walls, though we needed a taxi to get there. It's a former mosque, in which the old interior mosaics have been carefully restored to something approximating their former glory. With so much of old Constantinople still buried, this place provides an indication of how it must have once shone during its thousand years of empire.

The Cats of Istanbul: We ended up in the Taksim district beyond Galata, searching fruitlessly for a map shop and eventually decamped to a bar for some drinks. There we were entertained by a couple of cats - she a dignified tabby, he a mangy and damned ugly alley tomcat - con-

ducting their courtship in front of us. Sadly, we never did find out if the tomcat got anything more than claws and teeth for his trouble.

Steaming Up the House: The Cemberlitas Hamam, or bath house, was a last-minute addition to the list, but we were both glad of it. We received the full Turkish bath treatment, with a scrub down, rinse and general pummelling. Thereafter, we recuperated with freshly squeezed pomegranate juice. An experience I'd heartily recommend.



[11] Day 7

Palace of the Sultans: Last full day in the city and two big sights to see: the Topkapi Palace and the Grand Bazaar. First up was the palace, which proved bigger than either of us had anticipated. The Harem alone took over an hour to traverse and had more sights than any camera could capture in total. After that the Palace itself remained, with its gardens and breathtaking views over the Bosphorus and the Golden Horn. Finally there was the Archaeological Museum, with its near-eastern treasures, many of which I hadn't heard of before. Either one of us could have spent the entire day there.

Haggling? You Must be Mad: I don't like haggling. Never have, never will, and my brief experience of the Grand Bazaar didn't change my mind. It's a chaotic place, but not unwelcoming, and there are undoubtedly treasures to be found amid the mountains of tat. All the same, one needs a certain degree of patience to appreciate a place like that.

Winding Up the Evening: From the Grand Bazaar, we headed to the Spice Bazaar down near the Galata Bridge, a place just as colourful and even more fragrant than its larger sibling. Then it was back to Cemberlitas, where we divested ourselves of several days of stubble with a genuine Turkish shave, complete with cigarette lighter-singing of earlobe fluff. I think I'll stick with the Turkish Baths, thank you very much.

One Last Thing: With the sun having set, Dr. P wanted to try to capture the look of Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque by night. I tagged along and made my own efforts. Not certain how they worked out, but you should be able to see the results below.



[12] Day 8

One More Last Thing: We had a few hours before our flight, so we filled them up. First of all we made a last run through a nearby bazaar, then we visited Kucukayasofia, the Little Hagia Sophia. It was closed, but the nearby graveyard was full of beturbaned gravestones, as well as a wall of stone turbans long detached from their grave markers.

Feeling Blue: We also visited the Blue Mosque, Hagia Sophia's younger mirror. It's a more glittering place, and in far better repair - hardly surprising as it's still in use. However, I prefer the older church, though that's not to say I don't appreciate them both.

Farewell to All That: After that and a brief sojourn in the Topkapi gift shop, we grabbed our

bags and headed out of the city, crossing through the Theodosian Walls on the way to the airport. In Heathrow we managed to catch the rugby game, which thankfully offered up an Irish victory. Arriving home to Dublin offered up the first and only hitch of the trip, with Dr. P's bag going missing. Thankfully, it has since reappeared.

1. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cerandor/3364258852/>
2. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cerandor/3363437285/>
3. <http://eatlikeagirl.com/>
4. <http://www.wildhoneyrestaurant.co.uk/>
5. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cerandor/3364254118/>
6. <http://www.lesartsturcs.com/>
7. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cerandor/3363421939/>
8. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cerandor/3363403787/>
9. <http://www.changa-istanbul.com/v2/englishmain.html>
10. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cerandor/3364215962/>
11. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cerandor/3364201236/>
12. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cerandor/3364181784/>

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kaleandwine (2009-03-20 18:20:57)

What a delightful travelogue! What a place... also sounds like you both travelled in style. Nice. :) So I'm fascinated (or confused) by the cistern: it was designed to be <em>filled</em> with water? It's still so beautiful! I'm thinking of our water towers and storage tanks and utility buildings and strip-mall churches and— heck, the building I'm sitting in now – and they're all totally ugly. And here's a cistern that looks like a temple. Progress, bah. But I'd like to know how it smells. Clean? Dank? Like wet stone?

cerandor (2009-03-20 20:26:38)

It smells of wet stone for the most part. Presumably it was meant to be filled with water once upon a time. These days the water is only shin deep. Honestly, it's the stand out memory of my time in the city. I'd heard of these cisterns before, but it's my first time being in one. The presentation is wonderful. Grand and melancholy at the same time, especially when you come across the massive Medusa heads that form the bases of two of the columns. We found a third later on in the Archaeological Museum.

kaleandwine (2009-03-20 21:00:26)

Was there a reason or theory (or perhaps you know more of the mythology than I) for having Medusa's head in a place where water would be stored?

cerandor (2009-03-20 21:27:39)

Actually, I think they were rejected pieces from the quarry. We found other examples of a "many-eyed" pillar from the cistern in the ruins of a temple about half a mile away.

(2009-03-24 12:39:03)

They looked like cast offs or recycled material from some other building (perhaps a pagan temple). Though there may have been some additional symbolic meaning - either pagan or Christian. P.

### **1.3.3 A Triumph of Optimism Over Experience (2009-03-20 09:11)**

No, not a second marriage: expecting Ticketmaster to be able to organize something slightly more complex than a piss-up in a brewery.

If you're going to use a captcha system, please test it on a variety of platforms. If you set

a maximum purchase limit of four tickets, don't change it to six several minutes after you start selling. And don't make people wait four or five minutes to hear that the tickets they opted for are no longer available and they'll have to go back and start again.

I could explain how I feel about them right now, but I suspect such language would get this journal shut down.

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(2009-03-20 09:36:59)

Channelling the Quant here: You know what the problem is? The tickets are too cheap. Instead of having a creaky 50-second-sell-out-free-for-all, they should auction them. The tickets would sell at their real price and the system wouldn't fall over because half the population of Ireland tries to access it simultaneously. Also - you'd cut down on scalping and provide more money to artists, so perhaps they can stop being such fans of DRM. As it stands the current system involved trying to sell an undervalued product in the middle of a self-inflicted distributed denial-of-service attack. It's essentially a lottery. An auction would at least ensure that the people that really value the tickets will get them (provided they're able to pay). P.

cerandor (2009-03-20 11:03:36)

I can see the value in such a system. Not that I'd trust Ticketmaster to run it. The problem I had was with the captcha system. I was online and trying to buy at 8.00 on the dot, only to get rejected 20-odd times after entering the exact phrase I was presented with. I only got through when the black and white captchas were suddenly replaced with one in colour. Only to be told that the tickets were no longer available and be sent right back to the start and . . . nonfunctional black-and-white captchas! Grr. The thing is that the web site seemed quite responsive, so that's an improvement over former attempts. It was the captcha delay that killed any notion of getting reasonably priced tickets.

kaleandwine (2009-03-20 18:28:56)

Ha... Rob almost threw the computer into the wall a few days ago, courtesy Google's damn confounding and pointless and totally inaccessible captcha. It is not a spam test, it is some sort of vision test, and apparently we all fail. The bastards. I also have to laugh because his bitching about captcha is trumped only by his bitching about Ticketmaster. Damn international conspiracy. I do hope you got *some* tix, though, to whatever it was... Btw, P: Very smart theory. Except that means I'd never afford a concert, eh? Not sure I like it, sorry. :)

#### **1.3.4 Cowengate (2009-03-25 10:43)**

Other countries get their "-gate" scandals from financial or political shennanigans. We get ours from a practical joke and media servility.\*

For those of you who haven't been keeping up with the [1]news reports, a few days ago, some practical jokers snuck into art galleries in Dublin and added to their collections, in the form of some paintings of Taoiseach Brian Cowen au naturale. The paintings stayed up for 20-30 minutes, until security spotted them and had them removed. The gardai were called in, but a spokesperson for the Royal Hibernian Academy said that they "don't want to make more of it than it is."

So far, so funny. An amusing story to tag onto the end of a news programme, as both RTE and BBC presumably treated it. Certainly, the story, as reported on the [2]RTE web site, has a gentle tongue in cheek tone.

However, much like rats, politicians are most vicious when cornered. During a time when they're taking flak from all sides, Fianna Fail weren't about to let a bit of fun at the expense of their glorious leader go unpunished. A swift complaint saw RTE not only apologise abjectly but also remove the offending reports from the record.

So who comes out worst from this? Not the politicians: at this point in the game, no one expects any better from them. Not the offending artist, who was merely showing admirable entrepreneurial talent in a downturn. No, it's RTE that most clearly revealed its lack of backbone by refusing to contemplate standing up to political pressure.

This too at a time when the Irish broadcaster is facing complaints about some of its comedy taking on [3]easy targets. Having gently ribbed someone with actual power, they folded like a house of cards. Unsurprisingly, this has made some people [4]rather angry (NSFW language and images).

When times are bad, humour (like coffee, the blacker the better) offers a useful safety valve for the sort of rage that a lot of people are feeling towards the political and business establishment at the moment. The establishment, rightly, sees that being laughed at diminishes their aura of superiority, and when that aura is already crumbling, they stamp down on the laughter. Perhaps in this case, perhaps in something else to come, they might find that they crack right through the thin crust of humour to the anger beneath.

I'm not sure any name has emerged from this affair at all yet. I chose the above one for its resemblance to a popular brand of baby food, which seems appropriate given the behaviour of some of the principals.

[Edit] It seems to have been the work of a single artist, which I hadn't been sure about. [5]Chartophylax has more, including some nice links to YouTube video of the offending material.

1. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/northern\\_ireland/7960997.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/7960997.stm)
2. <http://www.rte.ie/news/2009/0323/cowennude.html>
3. <http://bestofbothworlds.blogspot.com/2009/03/is-this-funny.html>
4. <http://www.mulley.net/2009/03/25/picturegate-or-whatever-we-call-it-is-not-about-a-facebook-group/>
5. <http://chartophylax.kaybensoft.com/?p=1616>

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laerfan (2009-03-25 11:15:34)

Typical Ireland though isn't it? Someone makes a funny, if poignant statement and nobody hears about it. Then those who do make light of it and then back down from it. Ireland is a mad place isn't it?

cerandor (2009-03-25 11:21:47)

Not so much mad as maddening, right now. Given that we pay our license fees to keep RTE running, it us they should be answering to, not the government.

waider (2009-03-25 22:14:42)

I was more bothered by the fact that the Garda &iacute; visited the Today FM studio in order to obtain some sort of contact details for the artist. Frankly I think there's a lot of more important things they could be doing.

cerandor (2009-03-26 09:26:01)

There are many more important things the government ought to be doing too. The problem is that

they might not see it that way.

## 1.4 April

### 1.4.1 Movie Request (2009-04-02 08:43)

I have decided that Hollywood needs to create an action movie that co-stars Vin Diesel and Jason Statham. Either as good guy/bad guy or as co-protagonists. Just as long as they spend as much time as possible on screen together. The sheer amount of balding, growling machismo should create some kind of cinematic singularity, after which no films other than sequels to "The Fast and the Furious" and "The Transporter" will be possible.

Preferably it'll be a science fiction film too, but I'm not picky.

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(2009-04-02 08:48:30)

How about a Transporter/Chronicles of Riddick crossover where Riddick sent into his past, our present to prevent Something Bad from happening that will doom his timeline? This Something Bad is happening in the South of France where Jason Statham is plying his Transporter trade, unaware that he's a pawn in the game of the evil folk doing the Something Bad. The initial encounter between the two does not go well, setting up the necessary antagonistic tension between the two (think Judge Dredd and Johnny Alpha in the Strontium Dog/Dredd crossover story). Of course, though, when Statham's employers double cross him, or he finds out they're up to no good, or both - he has to team up with Diesel to save humankind. And the girl (because there's always a girl). Do I get the gig? :) P.

cerandor (2009-04-02 13:42:42)

The job is yours. A percentage of the net will be fine, right? I'll get my accountants to work on that right away.

### 1.4.2 A Weekend's Entertainments (2009-04-05 23:28)

The weekend just past was a relatively quiet one, and seeing as this state of affairs is somewhat unusual, I took the unusual step (for me) of filling some of the gaps with movies. Not too many, as computer games remain an ongoing distraction. Still, three isn't too bad a score.

Without further ado, in reverse order of everything...

[1]V For Vendetta: I'm a massive fan of the original graphic novel, but I've seen the film only once, which experience has taught me isn't enough to disentangle one medium from another. So I gave it another chance, and I'm glad I did. It's shot through with some brilliant touches, especially in the first third, not all of which are drawn from the original. That said, the film as a whole is fatally undermined by the rejigging of the story in an effort to make it "relevant." Moreover, I got so tired of getting hit by the exposition hammer that I didn't stick around for the ending. Which was probably wise, as that was the bit of the film I disliked most first time around.

[2]Cast A Deadly Spell: This was something of an oddity, which made its way to me through several channels of recommendation. Imagine H.P. Lovecraft meets Sam Spade, written by someone with a knowledge of both occult horror and gumshoe genres, and with their tongue

hovering dangerously near, but never quite getting stuck in their cheek. The casting is fun too, with a young Julianne Moore, a post-Highlander Clancy Brown and the always-watchable David Warner. It's not high art, but it was an enjoyable way to spend an hour and a half.

[3]Eastern Promises: The big hit of the weekend was this David Cronenberg movie, which was a lesson in solid scriptwriting. A tale of the Russian mob in modern London, it's solidly acted as well, with Viggo Mortensen outstanding in the lead role. The structure of the film ably supports the characters and their motivations, and there wasn't a moment when I found myself shaking my head or going, "Yeah, but." Given a lot of what I watch these days, that's not to be sneezed at.

1. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0434409/>

2. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0101550/>

3. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0765443/>

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(2009-04-06 09:42:14)

I actually ended up watching VfV the other way around - missing the start and watching the end. And, yes, I liked it even less on the second viewing. Once you get over the whiz-bang of seeing V on screen, the rest of the movie really is bollox. Children of Men did a far better job of depicting a dystopian Britain. P.

(2009-04-06 10:00:31)

And another thing... There's also some problems with the underlying story, of course. There is something faintly ridiculous about the system that Alan Moore concocted - the Eye, Ear, Finger, Nose thing, for example. Fascist systems have an element of the absurd in them, but it's never out in the open like that. They're designed to look strong and serious and efficient from the outside. Moore did get across how the Middle Britain bought into the Norsefire agenda, though it was somewhat understated. This was something that completely evaded the Wachowskis. The populace in the film is fundamentally decent, but complacent. In the book, it's far less clear cut. The people seem to have had no problem with the ethnic cleansing that went on. They don't get up in arms until the government starts shooting their kind, rather than non-whites and they devolve into a far more realistic mob by the end of the book. The film also largely misses out on the corruption and the underbelly of Tory-on-steroid seediness within the Party that brings it down. Which is a shame. All in all - the film of VfV would probably have been better as a miniseries if it was going to be put into moving pictures at all. Something understated and gritty like House of Cards or A Very British Coup with the addition of a man (?) in a cape and mask. P.

cerandor (2009-04-06 13:18:00)

In actual fact, I find that the "Eye, Ear, Finger, Nose" thing is excellent story shorthand. Readers can figure out the exact function of each bureau without having to wonder exactly what a "Minister of Internal Security" actually does. It also fits very well with the notion of the body politic that both V and his opponents use repeatedly. I take your point that it's a little hyperbolic, but it still works. Also, whereas the book is grimy and dirty, everything is so damn clean in the movie. You could probably eat your dinner off London's cobbled streets, which is not something I'd advise in the real world. A BBC miniseries would have been the perfect venue for V, I think, but what are the odds of that ever happening? I'd offer HBO as an alternative, but somehow high production values and V don't mesh well in my mind.

kaleandwine (2009-04-11 00:29:30)

I am amused by: *there wasn't a moment when I found myself shaking my head or going, "Yeah, but"*, following a post that basically requested a whole lot of *yeah, but*s. No? :) A History of Violence is another excellent Cronenberg/Mortensen combo (can you really go wrong there?), if you haven't seen it. There were a few *but...* moments for me, but there were

very few, and Viggo's performance was pretty damn riveting.

cerandor (2009-04-12 19:06:26)

Yeah . . . but. :) I fully admit that my cinematic tastes vary wildly between solidly crafted pieces of cinematic artistry and big daft movies where things go "boom" a lot. (Speaking of which, I'm looking forward to the Transformers sequel this summer.) Variety is the spice of life, and I plan to keep things spicy. I think A History of Violence may be in my library somewhere. If it is, I might watch it tomorrow, assuming nothing else demands my time.

kaleandwine (2009-04-13 00:53:41)

Of course my current favorite tv show is [Destroyed in Seconds](http://dsc.discovery.com/tv/destroyed-in-seconds/destroyed-in-seconds.html), so, you know, we're mostly in agreement on "spice". :) (Hell yeah on Transformers!) Still, though, a girl has to have limits. Jason Statham and the driver/violence combination are admittedly awesome, but [Lola](http://www.imdb.com/media/rm1892980992/tt0388482)? Ha... sure. Poor Rob - I think he was trying to get into the movie but all I could do was giggle and raise the left-eyebrow-of-doom and look at him. I eventually got up and let him watch it alone because, well, the movie clearly wasn't made for my sex. :)

### 1.4.3 Cinematic Insanity (2009-04-18 21:51)

Further to that whole Jason Statham thing mentioned before, I and she who will not be named went to see Crank: High Voltage last night. Never saw the film to which it's a sequel, but by all reports it was an over-the-top slice of everything designed to offend all right-thinking people. Well, this one takes that premise and turns everything up to 11. Seriously, if you're easily offended by anything, avoid it. If not, you'll find it hard to avoid mean-spirited giggles throughout.

Details of the premise can be found elsewhere, so I'll stick to saying that this is the essence of videogame moviemaking. Statham's character is effectively indestructible, apart from the dodgy ticker that requires him to power himself up every so often, resulting in a manic spree of violence. No character has any real depth, only an array of amusing quirks, and the main purpose of the plot is to shoehorn in as much action-based insanity as possible.

It's outrageous, offensive and tasteless to the nth degree. If that sounds appealing to you, I'd advise you to go for it.

### 1.4.4 On the Goggle-Box (2009-04-21 09:09)

Tonight The Tudors makes its return to Irish screens in the form of series three, in which yours truly appears in the important role of a Yeoman, standing in the background, wearing a funny costume and holding a big stick. I can't be certain exactly which scenes I'll be showing up in, and whether or not I'll even be visible in them, but it should be fun playing a personalised version of "Where's Wally?" (Waldo, for the Americans among you) as I watch along.

I'm going to be rather more visible in a couple of weeks, when my Eggheads appearance is shown on the BBC. That'll be either May 1 or May 4 - I'll clarify once I'm sure.

laerfan (2009-04-21 17:04:16)

You're going to be on Eggheads!? AMAZING!

#### **1.4.5 A Game of Extras (2009-04-22 09:29)**

Interesting [1]news this morning: the pilot for HBO's adaptation of George R.R. Martin's A Game of Thrones is to be filmed later this year, in Belfast no less. The Paint Hall, formerly part of Harland & Wolff's shipbuilding yards, should allow for some magnificent sets to fit the ambition of Martin's setting. As I'm a massive fan of the books, I'm more than a little excited by this.

Now I just have to figure out how one gets to be an extra on this shoot...

1. <http://grrm.livejournal.com/84893.html>

#### **1.4.6 Bus-ted (2009-04-27 14:09)**

So, courtesy of the [1]strike-happy Harristown garage, my dwelling place has been rendered somewhat more isolated than usual. That wasn't too much of a problem last night, when I could simply lurk at home and ignore the existence of the rest of the world. This morning though, getting to work involved an hour-long walk. At least it was sunny.

There was one major compensation. Part of my walk to work takes me along the canal, where it runs parallel to the Whitworth Road. About two-thirds of the way down, a pair of swans has made a nest on the bank of the canal. For the last while, one of them has been permanently seated there, while the other one forages. This morning, the swan on hatching duty was asleep, the other paddling nearby.

It won't be too long before the hidden eggs start to hatch, and the cygnets emerge. When I was younger, I would mark off the months as swans near Ardglass and Killough raised their young. Now I'm half-tempted to do the same, and make that walk to work a once-a-week event, weather permitting. Something to thank those strikers for, perhaps.

1. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/breaking/2009/0427/breaking8.htm>

#### **1.4.7 More of Me on the TV (2009-04-28 20:53)**

It's so long ago since I recorded the episode of [1]Eggheads that I can't even really remember what questions I was asked. I can, however, remember exactly what I was wearing, for reasons that will become clear when the show gets broadcast.

And I now know when that broadcast is going to be. This Friday, May 1st, on BBC2 at 18.00. If you fancy seeing me wearing a very dodgy shirt, feel free to tune in.

1. <http://www.12yard.com/programmes.php?sid=2>

#### **1.4.8 Blasphe-Me, Blasphe-You, Blasphe-Everybody! (2009-04-30 12:39)**

The latest topic to have the Irish blogosphere up in arms is the [1]news that Dermot Ahern TD, Minister for Justice, is attempting to have an amendment added to the Defamation Bill, introducing an offence of "Blasphemous Libel," which would carry penalties of up to €100,000

and grant Gardai the power to use reasonable force to enter premises in search of evidence of such an offence. This has [2]already been [3]covered in more detail and with more clarity than I can offer, so I'm just going to offer my take on a particular part of it, blasphemer though I might be.

Blasphemy already exists as an offence under the Irish constitution, but the sole time this stricture has been tested, the Supreme Court judged that there was no way to determine exactly what the offence of blasphemy consisted of. That the Minister is introducing this amendment is in part an effort to remove a gap between the constitution and legislation, but that gap only exists because the recommendations of an Oireachtas Committee that this segment of the constitution be removed and rewritten have been ignored.

Why? Personal beliefs may factor into it. The Minister is of a generation different to my own and presumably grew up in very different circumstances. He may genuinely believe that blasphemy is an offence which the law ought to address. However, if this is the case, that raises the question of why he spoke out against, and voted against, the inclusion of blasphemy prohibitions in the United Nations last year.

In fact, it is far more likely that Minister Ahern has an eye on re-election. The most vociferous voter groups are not always the most numerous, and churches have long had an ability to amass substantial blocs in favor of their own interests. At a time when disputes between believers and nonbelievers are sharper and more public than they have been in years, the proposed amendment could well generate goodwill for a beleaguered government among a substantial number of voters. (Whether or not they would be so happy when every religious group gets to avail of the same protections is another matter.)

The ridiculousness of the situation is revealed by the opposition to the amendment, which sees Pat Rabbitte TD proposing that the penalty be reduced to €1,000 and exceptions be allowed for matters of "artistic, social, or literary merit." An improvement, certainly, but by introducing so many loopholes to an already nebulous concept and cutting down on the fine, Rabbitte only highlights the fact that this amendment's only achievement will be the enriching of lawyers and the impoverishment of the taxpayer as a result a series of frivolous and pointless lawsuits.

If this amendment has emerged as a result of strident voices calling for it, then it is the responsibility of those who oppose it or see no need for it to raise their own voices in response. I'm as guilty as anyone of viewing politics cynically, and of not getting involved when I should. So I've done something that I've never done before - contacted both Minister Ahern and Mr. Rabbitte to express my disagreement with the amendment. I've received no response yet, and only half expect to receive anything at all, but I think it's worthwhile.

Voting is the standard way of registering a protest, but it's far from the only one, and it may not even be the most effective. Raising your voice loud enough that others can hear it, in the hopes that they will agree and join their voices to your own, seems to me a far more promising way to proceed.

1. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/frontpage/2009/0429/1224245599892.html>

2. <http://chartophylax.kaybensoft.com/?p=1799>

3. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/opinion/2009/0430/1224245681506.html>

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waider (2009-04-30 12:46:51)

It did occur to me to wonder about the driver behind this piece of legislation. I'm curious as to whether there are *really* that many people out there who'd vote for Aherne on the back of this legislation, and more inclined to wonder whether there's a lobby group out there with a bunch

of lawsuits up their sleeves who want this on the books so they can sue. Of course, blasphemy - helpfully defined for me here as &quot;the disrespectful use of the name of one or more god &quot; is a crime which I suspect pretty much the entirety of the cabinet has been guilty of at one time or another, and searching D &acute;il records for occurrences would no doubt be entertaining. Aside from that, a truly non-partisan view of the &quot;crime &quot; is that most religions commit blasphemy by denying the validity of other religions and/or their deities. I suspect the blogospheric discourse will die down in favour of some other hobbyhorse next week.

waider (2009-04-30 12:53:12)

<blockquote type="cite">a crime which I suspect pretty much the entirety of the cabinet has been guilty of at one time or another, and searching Dáil records for occurrences would no doubt be entertaining.</blockquote> Case in point: <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/DDebate.aspx?F=DAL20070201.xml&Page=1&Ex=115#N115>

mopti (2009-04-30 21:12:21) Which part of this?

That link opens the list of items discussed that day. Where among them is your case in point (please let it be Dermot Ahern himself).

waider (2009-05-01 08:40:23) Re: Which part of this?

Well, dammit. The transcripts are good, but the ability to link to individual items seems a little weak. It was this, from the order of business for the day:<blockquote type="cite">Mr. Quinn: Single party Government, no thanks. Jesus Christ.</blockquote>

kaleandwine (2009-04-30 17:32:29)

Cheers to you and P and PZ and everyone else for raising a ruckus on this. It always pays to raise your voice... I'm frankly amazed by the proposal, and can't really imagine people standing for it. Or am I wrong? What's your sense of the general level of public approval for something like this?

cerandor (2009-05-01 08:19:28)

I think the general public is barely aware of it - there have only been brief reports on the news. There certainly has been any great outcry for this legislation, and the only anger being raised has been online thus far. Still, I've got a response from Pat Rabbitte (whose name I spelled incorrectly above) at least, saying that his party is opposed to the amendment and is trying to sabotage it if the Minister refuses to drop it. Which seems plausible but is hardly the full-throated opposition I would hope for.

## 1.5 May

### 1.5.1 Star Trek (2009-05-12 10:55)

So I managed to get to see it at the weekend. And, after a certain amount of thought, I've come to the following conclusion: It's not meant to be taken seriously. (See this [1]review for an example of why.)

It's a dumb blonde of a movie. Nice to look at, fun to spend a few hours with in a darkened room, but you'll feel like you've let yourself down afterwards, and your IQ will have dropped a few points in the process.

1. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2009/may/11/star-trek-jjabrams-sexism>

(2009-05-12 16:12:28)

The curious thing is, though the plot is vacuous, I can't bring myself to actively hate the film. However, I suspect it won't stand up much to repeated viewings, when like dating a dim blonde, familiarity enhances the flaws and diminishes the novelty factor. P.

kaleandwine (2009-05-13 16:33:55)

Yay! I'd been hoping one of the two of you would post something on the film, as you're probably the most reliably-to-my-taste reviewers I've met... Haven't seen the film, but I'm glad you've tempered expectations a bit. The college kids here are gaga over the film. And most of our local papers have given it four stars, but have *also* included lines to the effect of: finally, a star trek that's not just for dorks! . The bastards. :)

cerandor (2009-05-14 08:15:41)

Dorks/geeks/nerds are likely to have their enjoyment of the film tempered by the gaping plot holes and the number of times they find themselves saying "But science/reality doesn't work that way!" So it's a fair comment, in a way. That said, it *is* fun. Just rather dumber than its predecessors tended to be.

(2009-05-14 15:19:21)

Great characters. Stupid plot. The End. P.

laerfan (2009-05-12 16:27:09)

I thought it was excellent. As a film in its own right and as a part of the series

### **1.5.2 In the Gloamin' (2009-05-14 09:15)**

A rather forlorn-looking pigeon has been perched on a railing outside my window for the last half an hour. With its feathers ruffled to an extreme, it looks somewhat like a fluffy rugby ball, with a pair of pink feet gripping the dripping iron beneath. Not being an avian expert, I don't know how old it is, or what gender, but if I had to guess, it's the pigeon equivalent of a teenager who's just left home, dealing with the harsh world for the first time.

I know how it feels. It's one of those mornings, where you're not dealing with rain so much as water-saturated air. Dublin's rooftops are lost in a drizzled haze, and no one with any sense is outside. Only the seagulls don't mind, wheeling about in the air as they look out for abandoned scraps of food. The pigeons, meanwhile, just perch and mutter to themselves as they wait for summer to finally show up.

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kaleandwine (2009-05-14 17:47:43)

The pink-footed teenage rugby ball is such a great visual. I have to admit to a bit of affection for pigeons, dirty little birds that they are. I think it's their blank stare: they're either bored silly or overwhelmed with the world, or...? There's a lot of character in having no character at all.

cerandor (2009-05-15 08:17:10)

I wouldn't be too fond of them myself, but this one caught my eye. I managed to get a couple of photos, so I'll post them up when I get the chance.

### 1.5.3 A Pseudo-Liberal and Proud of It (2009-05-21 11:05)

So poor, put-upon Dermot Ahern is [1]complaining about all the nasty "pseudo-liberals", who are being so intolerant and raising a stink about his efforts to just follow orders and fine them massive amounts of money for saying nasty things about religion. One wonders if Dermot is, even now, waiting by the phone for a call from some kettles regarding his midnight hue.

We "pseudo-liberals" are indeed intolerant, especially when it comes to enshrining intolerance for free speech in the law. Dermot seems to think that a true liberal is tolerant of everything, especially governments that fiddle while the economy burns, hand out the proceeds of a global boom to their cronies, and collaborate with the Catholic Church to [2]hide decades of child abuse. We are indeed intolerant of things like that, which is presumably why Dermot considers us only "pseudo-liberals".

1. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/breaking/2009/0520/breaking59.html>

2. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/frontpage/2009/0521/1224247040720.html?via=mr>

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mopti (2009-05-21 15:12:07)

Or his colleague, Michael Woods, who cut a deal\* with the church on his last day in ministerial office without getting cabinet approval or getting it costed by the Dept Finance. \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \*The deal sees the religious institutions getting a cap in the amount they will pay in damages to their victims with a guarantee that the state will pick up the tab for the rest.

## 1.6 June

### 1.6.1 Declan Finds His Petard (2009-06-08 18:56)

Reading "Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72" in the midst of election season has created a weird disjunction in my brain. While we have corruption aplenty, it's relatively meagre stuff, and the level of debauchery has been rather disappointing, glamorous airbrushed election posters of young female candidates notwithstanding. And Brian Cowen only wishes he was Richard Nixon.

Still, there's amusement to be had. Especially when arch anti-something candidate Declan Ganley [1]demands a recount only to find that he'd been given 3,000 more votes than he should have got.

What with Mary Lou McDonald losing her Euro seat here in Dublin, it's been a good set of results all round.

Edit: [2]Snerk.

1. <http://www.rte.ie/news/elections/stories/2009/0608/euroelection.html>

2. <http://www.rte.ie/news/elections/stories/2009/0608/euroelection.html>

### 1.6.2 Always With the Shiny... (2009-06-09 11:11)

So another Apple keynote speech has come and gone, leaving behind the new shiny. The basic details are easy to find: a laptop upgrade, a new OS, a new phone OS and new, faster iPhones. All very appealing, and if you want to know more, you can always go to [1]MacRumors.

However, Apple being what it is, it's always more fun to speculate about the next big thing, and on that front, two things caught my eye: a person who wasn't there, and a product line that ended the night looking somewhat denuded.

For the last several years, Apple has divided its computer products into four segments, Pro and Consumer desktops, and Pro and Consumer Laptops.\* Yesterday, Apple recognised what had been obvious for several months and rebranded its aluminium-bodied MacBooks as 13" MacBook Pros. This left the consumer-oriented MacBook line (Apple's biggest seller) with a measly single model, which is now looking more than a little dowdy.\*\*

Apple's not likely to leave this state of affairs to endure for too long, but how do they go about changing it? Well, it just so happens that the architect of the "four-segments" scheme has been on a break from the company for the last six months and is due to return at the end of June. Showman that he is, Steve Jobs knows that his absence has garnered Apple a lot of media attention (read: free advertising) and he's not likely to waste the opportunity to return to the company with a bang.

What I suspect will happen will be that Apple will hold one of its "media events" towards the end of the month, where Jobs will return and present the world with the new MacBook line (or MacBook replacement). Quite what that will be, I'm not sure, but I can speculate. The netbook market has become big enough and solid enough for Apple to want to grab a slice, but they're not going to compete at the low-end. If I had to guess, I'd expect a device around 10-11", with a touchscreen, possibly running a modified version of the iPhone OS. Like the MacBook Air and most netbooks, it'll have no CD/DVD drive, but it will have both WiFi and 3G. I'm up in the air over whether it will have a keyboard, but I suspect it might, though at this point my speculation fails me.

All very vague, I know, but the point is that Apple hasn't released a genuinely game-changing piece of hardware since the iPhone. Moreover, the iPhone only really hit its stride last year, with the creation of the App Store, making the point that it's all about the software. At this stage, Apple has a large online ecosystem that they could plug a new device into, and an untapped market of consumers eager for cheap, connected devices. They'd be fools not to at least be thinking about it.

The MacMini and MacBook Air fall outside this scheme, but they're niche products at best.

\*I have one myself, and although it's a pretty constant companion, it's not nearly as drool-inducing as its metal-clad younger siblings.

1. <http://www.macrumors.com/>

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kaleandwine (2009-06-09 23:14:40)

Aha! I always enjoy your posts on this because, one, it's tech-y but I actually get it! And two, well, it's such a direct link to what's going on in my house. Cut to last night, eight hours after Rob sent me this email: <em>Getting a new iPhone, yessireee.</em>. Two hours after he came home and gushed about the new features, the loveliness of full video, the shine (new shine!). Rob is sitting in his "office", surrounded by gobs of stuff, two laptops, various metallic Mac parts I can't even name. I am standing in the doorway, arms crossed. He is telling me about all of the ways that we can save money by "simplifying" and "paring down". Because we really don't need most of what we buy! And we just have too much stuff. Furniture might be given away. Gadgetry in the closets should be tossed! Why do we buy things we don't need? "Mmm," I say, "so... no new iPhone then. Right?" "Welllll....." Because everyone needs a phone video camera. I mean, really. :)

cerandor (2009-06-10 08:22:21)

Methinks the lady doth speak the truth. I can very much sympathise - every time Apple brings out new devices, the techno-lust fires up again. I can just about resist the iPhone 3GS, as my 3G continues to work just fine, and OS 3.0 will make it all the better soon enough. (Plus, the carriers are making upgrading a painfully expensive endeavour.) The new 13" MacBook Pro is more difficult to resist, but hard to justify: my MacBook is only a year and a half old, and Snow Leopard will hopefully give it a new lease of life later this year. I really need someone to remind me occasionally that I don't actually *need* this new stuff. Still, a MacMini to go under my TV will be hard to resist come September and the arrival of Snow Leopard...

### **1.6.3 (2009-06-21 14:19)**

Over the last four weeks, I've been lucky enough to take not one, but two week-long holidays. On the first, in west Clare, I had just enough Internet connection to keep in touch with the news. On the second, in the south of Spain, I had no Internet at all. And you know what? I didn't miss it. Apart from some twitchiness on the first day, I was happy enough going without (and much more relaxed). It's nice to know that even ingrained habits can be disposed off without too much trouble.

That said, when I got back this morning, it was to face 60-70 emails and several thousand news items. So, I've been speed-skimming the latter for the last few hours, and the following is a list of the things that jumped out at me.

[1]Steve Jobs Had a Liver Transplant: I wonder if Apple are going to get in trouble over this, given how many investors whined about disclosure over his earlier illnesses. Still, I wish him well.

[2]Celtic Steal West Brom's Manager: Actually, I saw this in a newspaper while on holiday and it had been on the cards before I left. Still, having just been relegated, we've now lost our manager and look likely to lose several of our best players. Next season could be tough, and I worry about another period in the wilderness.

[3]Apple are to Open a Dublin Store: Well, it's about time. Mind you, given that I can spend €22 on a return bus trip to Belfast and save €200 on a 13" MacbookPro, I may not be doing too much purchasing hereabouts.

[4]There are Racist Thugs in Belfast: Not exactly news to anyone. There are racist thugs everywhere, of course, but the meme of "us-vs.-them" that the Troubles instilled in so much of the population makes this particularly sickening.

[5]Iran's Elections Were a Bit of a Joke: Having just had some fairly pleasing election results over here, it was a bit disappointing to see this one come through. Still, at least the reformers [6]were allowed to compete this time around. I suspect Obama is right when he says that although the arc of history is lengthy, it tends towards justice. And speaking of that cold-eyed killer...

[7]Obama Swatted a Fly: Effete, wishy-washy liberal? The Republicans only wish he was. Look at his eyes as he closes in for the kill - the man's a born assassin. That fly was doomed as soon as it invaded his personal space. I'm sure North Korea has taken note. Oh, and [8]PETA has complained. Seriously. That group's existence is now solely devoted to publicising its own existence.

1. <http://www.macrumors.com/2009/06/20/steve-jobs-had-a-liver-transplant-two-months-ago/>
2. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/teams/c/celtic/8104788.stm>
3. <http://www.siliconrepublic.com/news/article/13191/digital-life/apple-planning-a-retail-store-for-dublin>
4. <http://sluggerotoole.com/index.php/weblog/comments/psni-savaged-over-roma-attacks/>
5. <http://www.boingboing.net/2009/06/15/iranian-election-upr.html>
6. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4571495.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4571495.stm)
7. [http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2009/06/dawkins\\_fleas\\_are\\_joined\\_by\\_th.php](http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2009/06/dawkins_fleas_are_joined_by_th.php)
8. <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/sns-ap-us-obama-dead-fly,0,37987.story?track=rss>

#### **1.6.4 The Universe is Endlessly Fascinating (2009-06-25 10:16)**

Wikipedia is an awful time-sink, and I try to avoid spending all of my free time in it. Still, the occasional browse is worthwhile, because it sometimes turns up gems like this:

"The radius of a white dwarf is inversely proportional to the cube root of its mass."

Or to put it another way, the more mass you add to a white dwarf, the smaller it gets. Which, to me, is both counter-intuitive and wonderful.

I now return you to your original programming.

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rustynails9 (2009-06-25 11:06:58)

My brain is trying to process this, but it's just too difficult :)

(2009-06-25 12:53:46)

More mass = more gravitational pull = more density = smaller radius. P.

cerandor (2009-06-25 13:09:20)

Until you hit the Chandrasekhar Limit, at which point the force exerted by electron degeneracy isn't enough to counteract gravity and the entire thing collapses into a neutron star or some such. But that may be a bit much for a Thursday afternoon. Mind you, I also love the fact that degeneracy, even if only of the electron kind, is powerful enough to counteract gravity.

#### **1.6.5 O2 Idiocy (2009-06-26 08:56)**

The iPhone 3GS receives its Irish launch today, a week after it arrived in several larger and therefore more important markets. To promote it, O2 has opted for a cover sheet on the daily Metro newspaper. Said cover sheet offers four pages: outside front and back and inside front and back. So what does O2 do? It puts the exact same image (of some shiny iPhone 3GSs, which look exactly like the old iPhone 3G) and copy (saying no more than that the iPhone 3GS is the fastest, most powerful iPhone yet) on each page.

Not one word about the iPhone 3GS's new features, nor about the prices you'll pay should you opt for an O2 contract. Nor about the fact that the iPhone 3G is still available, cheaper than ever. Nope, just the same image and copy repeated four times. (The fact that "fastest, most powerful" is a tautology in computing terms just depresses me further.)

It used to be said of Apple, during Steve Jobs' wilderness years, that the Mac was a great product in the hands of an idiot company. That particular description seems to fit O2's possession of the exclusive iPhone contract very well. I think I advised O2 this time last year to

fire whoever is responsible for their marketing. Well, I'd like to amend that. They should shoot them instead. It can only do them good in the long run.

### **1.6.6 Ten Things I Learned From Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen (2009-06-29 23:36)**

Last year's Writer's Strike has a lot to answer for. We're just now facing up to the results of the dark times when everyone in Hollywood with a grasp of realistic dialogue and narrative structure was on the picket lines, and the view isn't pretty. Three of the biggest films of the year, Star Trek, Terminator: Salvation and now Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen have shown just what you get when you make a movie with only intermittent or frantically hurried writerly support. The last of the three was my viewing choice for the evening, and while it wasn't as offensively bad as Terminator, it was an order of magnitude dumber than either of its predecessors.

Still, you can always learn something from opening yourself to new experiences.

1. It is possible for a movie to be over the top before the film itself has started to roll. Somebody let the sound editor loose on the Dreamworks and Paramount title sequences. The result wasn't pretty.
2. If your first movie has provided you with a bombastic, recognisable and catchy theme tune, you should use it in the sequel. What you shouldn't do is let the composer noodle around with it on his synthesizer until everything that made it good has been lost.
3. Megan Fox finds it impossible to run in any speed other than slow motion. On the bright side, she does have hypnotic powers while doing so.
4. Egypt is one of the world's smallest countries. It's true. No more than 20 km square at most. Cairo is just downhill from the pyramids, and Petra (in Jordan) is no more than a short drive and a sprint away.
5. There's something wonderful about the fact that Michael Bay got so excited about the notion that a giant robot could have giant robotic testicles. It's like someone once told him to release his inner child, and he's never been the same since.
6. When making a sequel to a film like Transformers, it's important that not only should the sequel make no sense on it's own terms, but it should also retroactively ensure that the original makes no sense either. Revenge of the Fallen is so dumb, it made its own parent stupider.
7. If your main hero is in the middle of a fight with a cadre of bad guys, it's important that his loyal soldiers hang back until there's absolutely no point in them showing up at all. Then, and only then, should they arrive to do whatever is necessary to advance the plot past this particular set piece.
8. Speaking of which, a plot is not entirely necessary for a film. All that is required is that you have a chain of set piece moments, loosely tied together by the fact that the same characters show up in several of them. Not with any logic, mind you, just when you feel that you ought to throw them in there for maximum impact.
9. It is possible to shoot a film in which every female character is tokenistic. In fact, pretty much every human character here is tokenistic. One feels that Michael Bay somehow

resents the fact that he has to pander to an audience and would prefer to be allowed to blow things up until doomsday (which he would direct).

10. Any movie, no matter how bad, can be redeemed by a cranky British robot with a walking stick, doing his best [1]Warren Ellis impersonation. At least until he turns into Mr. Exposition and then disappears for no adequately explained reason.

1. <http://chartophylax.kaybensoft.com/?p=2038>

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kaleandwine (2009-07-01 18:20:22)

Ah (chuckle), thanks for this. I can now continue my avoidance of Transformers Part Duh, and not feel remotely bad about it. :) Stoopid Michael Bay! I stayed away after reading [this commentary](http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2009/06/the_fall_of_the_revengers.html)... I really have to say I hope the movie tanks so Hollywood gets the message. Didn't see Terminator (similarly dismal reviews), but I have to say that I disagree with you and P. on Star Trek. Bay and McG are good on action but their humans kinda suck – at least JJ Abrams does humans well. I can see how the movie would frustrate die-hard Trek fans (especially, in my mind, those who grew up on TNG and BG and the like instead of the sixties-era shows). And seem idiotic to people who wanted hyper-realistic science. BUT. The pacing was great. The acting was great. The characters and chemistry were brilliant... gave such a clear sense of a team of comrades/friends coming together. Which seemed, to me, the point of the film. No? \* just realized that all I seem to comment on these days are movie reviews. this is a sad sad thing. :)

cerandor (2009-07-02 08:37:01)

Actually, all I seem to write these days are movie reviews, which is more a sad reflection on me than anyone else... That said, I agree that the characters were a high point in Star Trek. It's just that I kept getting dragged out of the action by the feeling that the writers had opted for shortcuts in the narrative, under the assumption that the audience wouldn't notice or wouldn't care. I was never a massive fan of Star Trek, but I still found plenty to enjoy - I just hope that the next one's better. (Grumble, mutter, etc.)

## 1.7 July

### 1.7.1 Tell, Then Show (2009-07-14 08:38)

I ended up watching The Mummy 3: Revenge of the Tomb of the Dragon Emperor (or something) the other evening and was witness to the following scene, which summed up most of my problems with the movie.

Brendan Fraser is leading the rest of our heroes through a snowy valley somewhere in the Himalayas. He looks up and points into the distance.

"We'll camp there for the night."

Cut to: A long shot of a CGI valley in the Himalayas, where some ruins perch implausibly on a ledge. As we watch, day fades quickly into night, revealing, yes, a campfire in the middle of the ruins.

Cut to: A close up shot of our heroes huddled around a campfire.

Now, I know I've been harping on about bad writing in movies (a lot) lately, but is there

any part of the above that isn't redundant, other than the last shot? Other than providing work for hungry CGI artists, is there any reason why we can't just jump to the campside scene? Human brains, even those of children, are remarkably good at filling in the gaps in narratives. Stuff like the above might just train it out of us.

### **1.7.2 Reboot, Start Again (2009-07-29 09:02)**

The complete lack of posting here lately is reflective of the general lack of productive activity I've been engaging in lately. Around the halfway point of the year, I made a concerted effort to get back to writing and set up a few projects to work on. Unfortunately, "concerted" turned quickly to "half-hearted", and I'm back where I began.

So let's start again. Due to work and a few other factors, I have a bit more free time each week than I've had for a long time. Apart from writing, I've had a pretty good year - lots of travelling, and my Pendragon campaign is now only a session or two away from Badon Hill, which will be very satisfying (and provide a place for a break, providing me for more free time). If I can get back into the habit of spending an hour writing whenever I get home, before anything else, I'll be halfway to being productive again.

I'll let you know how it goes.

## **1.8 August**

### **1.8.1 Pleasant Surprises (2009-08-02 17:22)**

There's been too much cinema on this journal lately, or perhaps too little of anything else. Still, after a summer in which "witless" was the highest form of praise, to come across a genuinely interesting and affecting piece of cinema shouldn't go without notice.

The film in question is *Moon*, a low budget piece that looks down on the Transformers and Terminators of this world from great heights. Its minimal cast, with Sam Rockwell front and centre almost all the time, packs in nuance and personality aplenty. Yes, there are twists to this tale of a lonely miner serving a 3-year contract on the dark side of the moon, but they're not the point. This is all about character and predicament, and with the help of Clint Mansell's haunting, uplifting score, it manages to be bleak and beautiful and many other things besides.

The only potential downsides are a couple of slightly too-clever nods to SF predecessors, but they're borderline cases at worst. Go see it: it won't change your life, but you'll come out of it with a feeling of an hour-and-a-half well spent, and that's rare enough this summer.

P.S. Another thing worth mentioning was the venue in which I first saw *Moon* (yes, I've watched it twice now). The Lighthouse cinema in Dublin's Smithfield district is a most uncinema cinema, pared back to the bare essentials, with plenty of space to sit down and hang out before, during or after the film. Comfortable too, as its seats don't bother with that spring-loaded action, and offer plenty of legroom. Definitely somewhere to come again in the future.

### **1.8.2 Just a thought... (2009-08-04 08:41)**

...is Madonna a talent vampire?

Sean Penn was never so good while he was married to her as he has been since, and Guy Ritchie looked like he was heading for oblivion until he got shot of her: now his Sherlock

Holmes looks like a film I'd actually like to see.

Admittedly, that may be a combination of Robert Downey Jr. and my love of all things Holmesian, but still, whichever Hollywood flavour-of-the-week she hooks up with next ought to watch out.

### **1.8.3 Hanging With Arthur and the Boys (2009-08-10 16:26)**

The weekend just past was something of a busy one. Friday was steaks in Ryans of Ratoath, followed by a late-night game of Risk and much beer, and Saturday started with recovery from the aforementioned and a fry-up breakfast before seguing into a gathering to watch West Brom's first match of the new season (a disappointing 1-1 home draw), finished off with the first half of The Fellowship of the Ring, watched from the comfort of the couch. Sunday, though, was the killer: The Battle of Badon Hill, where King Arthur's knights finally faced and defeated the Saxon menace.

I've been running a Pendragon campaign using the "Great Campaign" sourcebook since the start of 2007. That's just about two-and-a-half years, not counting a gap of around ten months in the middle. It's been fascinating, frustrating and hard going, and the fact that it has been so rewarding is mostly down to having four excellent players (plus a few others who have dropped in from time to time), who have put up with my mistakes and entered into the spirit of things at all times.

It's now time to take another break, and let someone else run something. The notes for my campaign have become unwieldy and disorganised, and the list of NPCs is more than I can keep in my head at any one time (though the great Badon cull will help with that). Time to take it all back, rejigger it with one eye on the future and the other on the weak points in the campaign just past. Hopefully, when (not if) it returns, it'll be even more satisfying, both for the players and for me.

### **1.8.4 Moving On Up (to HD) (2009-08-16 14:16)**

So NTL/UPC finally got around to offering a HD service. And I, being unwilling to subject myself to several months dealing with their online ordering service in order to save Eu30, had it installed yesterday morning. Some early thoughts follow.

It's a Dust Magnet: The new HD box, being blacker and slimmer, is better looking than the old one, but it certainly needs its heat dissipation. The top is entirely taken up with ventilation holes, and the interior is going to get filled with dust very quickly.

The Software is Flaky: UPC is fairly good at updating the software on its boxes regularly. It's going to need to - although the HD box is quicker than the old DVR to respond, if you try to change channels through the guide before it's ready, it'll give up and start again. The picture also disappeared on me once or twice, but it seems to have stabilised a bit.

It's a Very New Service: There are only nine HD channels on offer, of which two (ESPN and Disney Cinemagic) are unavailable unless you subscribe to sports or movies, respectively. Most of the rest are documentary channels, which I'll admit appeals to me. Also, the guys who installed the box connected up both the Scart and HDMI cables, which seemed a bit excessive, so I took away the Scart and it seems to be working fine.

The Picture is Great: I'm not sure what the UPC HD standard is (720p or 1080i, both of

which the box offers), but it certainly looks great - a lot better than digital, which was itself much better than analogue. For Eu2.50 extra a month (above the cost of a standard DVR), it seems worth it if you have a TV to make the most of it.

You'll Lose Your Recordings: I forgot to ask about this until it was too late. Most of what I had recorded onto my DVR was stuff I can live without, but my Eggheads appearance went along with everything else. Although there are other copies of that, I would much rather have been offered a way to transfer my recordings onto the new box. Hopefully, UPC will figure out a way to do that.

### **1.8.5 Proverb Testing (2009-08-20 09:17)**

This morning, on my way to work, I spotted an actual early (black)bird catching a very un-proverbial worm. While I feel a little sorry for the invertebrate, I have to congratulate the little bird on its hard work supporting our linguistic cliches.

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laerfan (2009-08-21 15:48:49)

I wonder how many proverbs were happening in the world at that same time.

## **1.9 September**

### **1.9.1 Four-Corner Travel (2009-09-14 09:37)**

Something that occurred to me at the weekend (and posted here for the purposes of amusement rather than gloating): entirely without forethought or planning, I'll have managed to hit all four extremities of Europe during 2009.

Westmost: Ireland - and on the west coast too.

Southmost: Spain - likewise on the south coast.

Northmost: Norway - sadly not taking in the Arctic Circle. That will wait for a later trip.

Eastmost: Turkey - Actually, Ukraine is easternmost in Europe, but the Asian part of Turkey extends further east, so I'm claiming it. Besides, crossing the Bosphorus to Asia was a real highlight of the year.

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kaleandwine (2009-09-15 16:08:14)

That is pretty darned cool, I'll have to agree. So... Norway? Eh? Was it wonderful?

cerandor (2009-09-16 07:50:23)

Norway doesn't actually happen for a week and a half. Full reports and photos will eventually be forthcoming. Mind you, I really need to be more prepared than I am. Blowing the cobwebs off my hiking boots might be a good start.

kaleandwine (2009-09-16 14:33:58)

Yay!

### 1.9.2 Set-top Box of Apples (2009-09-25 09:45)

So Intel has been promoting its [1]new chip, designed for consumer electronics, the announcement of which even managed to hit the BBC Web site. At the same time, falling stocks, price cuts and groundless rumour indicate that Apple's AppleTV could be seeing some changes before Christmas.

All eyes have been on the rumours of Apple's touchscreen device (now looking set to emerge in early 2010), so the AppleTV stuff has been drifting more or less below the horizon. All the same, there's a space beneath my TV for something that can play my media and hook me up to the Web, and I'd be interested in what Apple can offer, either a new Mac Mini, a more capable AppleTV, or something in between. I'll be watching for this.

1. [http://www.reghardware.co.uk/2009/09/24/idf\\_atom\\_soc\\_sodaville/](http://www.reghardware.co.uk/2009/09/24/idf_atom_soc_sodaville/)

## 1.10 October

### 1.10.1 Back from the Fjords (2009-10-05 08:47)

After a week doing a circuit of southern and central Norway, I'm back - though I suspect that my brain still remains partway over the North Sea. It's a fantastic country, well worth visiting, and not as expensive as I had feared (though that may be partly due to the fact that I already live in Dublin). There are plenty of photos to present and thoughts to expound - I'll offer more when they're in a presentable form.

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kaleandwine (2009-10-05 14:55:31)

Welcome back! Looking forward to hearing about it. :)

cerandor (2009-10-05 19:58:21)

Thanks. It was a lot of fun, and the first scratchings of a report are now up in the journal section of Cerandor.com (yes, that's a new site, and very much a work in progress, but I have to start somewhere).

kaleandwine (2009-10-05 20:23:02)

Yay yay yay! If it's a start it's a great one. Bookmarked.

laerfan (2009-10-06 15:23:20)

My most-want-to-visit country. Is it not too expensive, really? I'd go if it was in some way reasonable.

cerandor (2009-10-07 07:57:36)

It is expensive, but if you're careful about when you go and where you eat and sleep, it can be affordable. We went at the end of the high season, before it had got too cold and before too many places had closed for the winter. We also took the overnight train from Bergen to Oslo, which saved money on accommodation and transportation both.

### 1.10.2 Planetary End Scenario (2009-10-09 11:47)

In 1999, Warren Ellis, a rising name at the time among comics writers, thanks to the success of his Transmetropolitan series, created two superhero comics very different from anything

else on the market at the time. In May\* came The Authority, an offshoot from Ellis's earlier work on Stormwatch, featuring large-scale action and violence. These factors helped Ellis's 12-issue run on The Authority revitalise an at-the-time stagnant superhero genre, but the series benefited even more from Ellis's dark humour and his light touch with characters, making them more than the caricatures that they could have been.

However, the previous month, Ellis had brought out another series, Planetary. Less directly influential than The Authority, Planetary was an exploration of the superhero genre, tracing its roots in pulp fiction, and all the way back to the gothic horror, detective, and cowboy genres of the 1800s, to name but a few. Plagued by delays due to personal and professional issues, it remained a high-water mark in terms of quality whenever it appeared on comic store shelves, and two days ago, the last issue, number 27, came out, a little over ten-and-a-half years since the first.

Part of Planetary's consistency was down to the art. Every issue benefited greatly from John Cassaday's art-nouveau linework and Laura Martin's sumptuous colours. Adding to the quality of the overall package was the story that Ellis weaved. Starting as an exploration of the strange history of the world depicted within (the characters self-identified themselves as archaeologists rather than superheroes), it gradually revealed greater secrets beneath the initial premise, and as the series progressed, the nature of the action shifted gradually from exploration to using acquired knowledge to act and make the world a better place thereby.

The last issue, released this week, was something of an epilogue as regards the main plotline, but it was no less satisfying for that. Tying together many of the threads from earlier issues, it made the point that saving a single life can be just as important as saving the world. Also, quite beautifully, it showed that uncovering secrets makes the universe more strange and wonderful, not less.

I'm going to miss Planetary, although given its publication schedule, what I'm more likely to miss is the anticipation of a new issue. Still, I now have the entire series to read at my leisure, with the inevitable collected editions down the line. Even when something comes to an end, there's always something else to look forward to.

The dates printed on comic books were, at the time, somewhat in advance of their actual publication dates. For example, a book dated May would actually come out in March. Whether this is still the case, I don't know: I no longer pay attention to those dates.

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laerfan (2009-10-09 15:17:43)

I liked Warren Ellis's Transmetropolitan. Year of the Bastard was such a great title. Looking forward to seeing where he takes Astonishing X-men. His run on that has started by now I'm sure. Must look into it. Thanks for the reminder.

### **1.10.3 The Voice of Homophobic Middle England (2009-10-16 12:40)**

The Daily Mail is a [1]hate-soaked rag. That is all.

The link is not to the Mail itself - I wouldn't give it more traffic than I had to.

Edit: [2]Charlie Brooker responds in a far more eloquent way than I could. The text of Jan Moir's non-apology apology can be found [3]here.

1. <http://sluggerotoole.com/index.php/weblog/comments/gatelys-death-not-natural-says-moir/>

2. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/oct/16/stephen-gately-jan-moir>

#### **1.10.4 The Latest Shiny (2009-10-21 08:53)**

Without any real fanfare, Apple updated the consumer end of its Mac lineup yesterday, offering up new iMacs, iBooks and Mac Minis. The absence of one of the company's "media events" was reflected in the fact that these were not major updates, but there were things worth noting nonetheless.

Mac Minis: A minor update here, which is a shame, because I'd be in the market for a Mac Mini with decent storage and a HDMI port. The home server model, with no optical drive but two 500GB hard drives, is aimed at small businesses. Sadly uninspiring.

MacBooks: A form factor update here, with the occasionally damage-prone case of the old MacBook replaced by a hopefully more robust unibody. Better screen and battery bring it into line with the MacBook Pro line, but the pricing means that spending a little more for its metal-clad sibling seems a better deal.

iMacs: Not too many changes to a device that has one of the most attractive form factors in the business. Apart from larger screens, the big change is that customers can now order iMacs with the new Intel Core i5 and i7 chips, providing a serious power boost. If I had the money and the need, I would seriously consider getting one of these.

Magic Mice: Further adding appeal to the iMac is this replacement for Apple's much-maligned Mighty Mouse. Rather than a scroll wheel or a fiddly scroller ball, this sleek device has an upper surface that's also a multitouch touchpad. Quite how comfortable it will be to use, or how apt to mistaken touches, is something that only time will tell, but this has an immediate visual appeal that makes it Apple's first real mouse contender in a very long time. (And all the more amusing given Microsoft's very recent preview of some early multitouch mouse prototypes.)

Not a particularly exciting lineup then, but this is a good time to get consumer devices out, just before Christmas, and the iMac speed upgrades will be popular. Those who traffic in rumours can now go back to obsessing about Apple's mythical touchscreen device, which may actually show up some time next year.

### **1.11 November**

#### **1.11.1 Retail Warfare (2009-11-11 09:00)**

The recession seems to be making a lot of companies uncomfortable, and the relationships between suppliers and retailers might be breaking down a little. A few months ago, Bulmers cider started an advertising campaign stating that it had cut the prices it was charging retailers for its products. In other words, if the prices hadn't come down for customers, it was because the pub owners were keeping the extra for themselves.

Not exactly a friendly move, but it must have been successful. Buses all over Dublin are adorned with Unilever brands, such as Hellmans and Ben & Jerry, proclaiming that they have cut prices so that retailers can pass on the savings to customers. It's a great piece of brand building, I suppose, but given that different shops charge different prices for the same goods, and that consumers are unlikely to monitor the price of a jar of mayonnaise from day to day, it's difficult to verify. I just wonder how happy Tesco and other retailers are about it.

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lainey316 (2009-11-11 15:17:06)

The radio version actually states something like "we cannot control the prices retailers charge". I suppose Tesco etc may not be happy at the implication that perhaps they'll engage in sharp practises and not cut their selling price, but the actual cut makes little difference to them - they can adjust the selling price without losing any margin.

cerandor (2009-11-12 09:14:55)

True: price isn't the issue, perception is. None of the ads, of course, have said *how much* the wholesale prices have been cut by.

### **1.11.2 Merlin Surprises (2009-11-16 09:36)**

When the BBC's Merlin series first started airing, I took [1]a look at it and deemed it promising, if somewhat vacuous. Sadly, the first series went nowhere and I stopped watching. Imagine my surprise then, when I caught an episode of the latest season on Saturday and found it to be excellent.

"Sins of the Father," the episode in question, was replete with the tragedy, deeply hidden secrets, raging passions and scheming enemies that mark some of the best Arthurian myths. Admittedly, the ending was something of a cop out, and the actor playing Merlin is a little bland for my tastes, but the actor playing the young Arthur had real presence and really seems to have grown into the role.

I hope it was representative of the series as a whole - if so, I may go back and watch the rest of it. Certainly, compared to what I was expecting, it shone.

1. <http://cerandor.livejournal.com/121715.html>

### **1.11.3 The Hand of St.-Denis (2009-11-19 11:03)**

Well, after having watched that match last night, some points can be made.

1. It was a very deliberate handball. You can't really blame Thierry Henry for trying it, but you can blame him for claiming it was accidental.
2. FIFA's match report has no mention of the foul. Is anyone surprised? They got the result they wanted.
3. The entire Ireland team played out of their socks last night, and it was a crying shame to lose the way they did.

Oh, and...

4. [1]Dermot Ahern is an attention/sympathy-seeking idiot.

1. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2009/nov/19/thierry-henry-handball-ireland-world-cup>

### **1.11.4 Missing the Point (2009-11-29 09:48)**

There are a lot of places where the four gospels contradict each other and vary in their messages. Having been written for different audiences, that's hardly surprising. So when you get

three of them putting across the same message, more or less verbatim, you have to assume that you're within touching distance of how the historical Jesus thought.

Matthew 18:6 but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

Mark 9:42 "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea.

Luke 17:2 It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.

The fact that the Catholic Church placed its own [1]well-being [2]above that of the children in its care, and indeed [3]continues to do so should demonstrate clearly enough for anyone that this is an organisation that exists for its own benefit and the benefit of the clergy, not for the benefit of the many genuine believers, for whom it has been, and remains, a key part of their lives.

1. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/breaking/2009/1126/breaking59.html>

2. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2009/1127/1224259548746.html>

3. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/breaking/2009/1127/breaking25.html>

*gads*

Gad's LJBook v0.8,  
 $\text{\LaTeX}2_{\epsilon}$  & GNU/Linux.  
<http://www.ljbook.com>

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