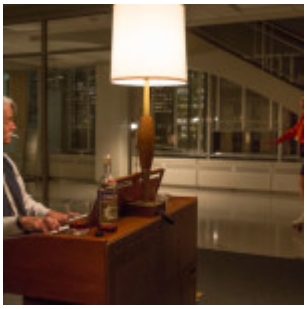
Your Electric Picture Radio Box Matters #1

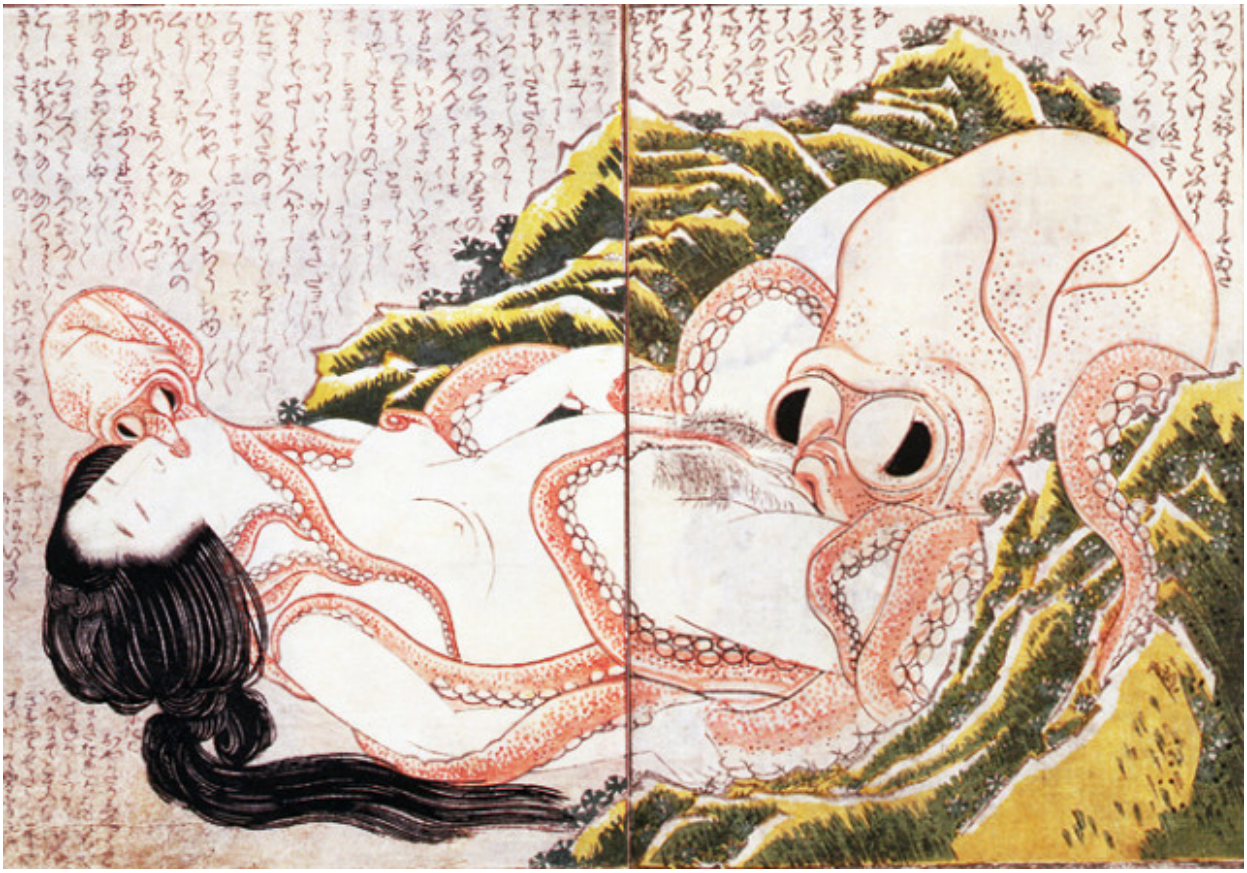


SPOILER ALERT: Mad Men Season 7 spoilers below.

One of the best novels I've ever read is almost at an end. This book sits on a list that includes *Les Miserables*, *Infinite Jest*, *Catch-22*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Wire.* Yeah, programs from the electric picture radio make the list.<fn>Wanna make something of it?</fn> If I were to include short story collections, I'd mention *Twilight Zone* and *Outer Limits*, Chekhov, and Raymond Carver.

Last night I watched the 3rd-to-last episode of *Mad Men*, and out of seven seasons, that image above is one of the most evocative and cool and resonant and hallucinatory and plain badass moments of the entire book. The bare bones of the abandoned SC&P office; the closest thing left we have to play the grand patriarch, albeit thinly represented; and Peg of our Heart casting it all to the wind, drunk and roller skating through the ruins as Roger plays *Hi-Lili, Hi Lo* on a cheesy organ – the whole sequence felt like that revelatory acid trip moment where you *really, really see, man*.

Roger, the Pale King, grants the princess in disguise a token of power from the One True Patriarch in the form of an antique Japanese porn print (Lear and Ran meeting nicely). Peggy recoils; *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* is not the kind of art a nice Catholic girl would hang in her office.



Peg is an ace copy writer, or as we prefer to be known, cunning linguists.

And then, the best piece of Roger-Peggy dialog in the whole damn book:

> *“You know I need to make men feel at ease,” she says.*
>
> *“Who the hell told you that?” Roger replies.*

Who told her that? Joan, the dethroned Queen Bee, back in the very first episode – 7 years ago in our time, 10 years ago in Mad Men time. Peg takes this advice to heart, this blessing of the dwindling patriarch to go and be as badass as she can muster. And while I thought I’d never enjoy an image of Peg as much as the drunken roller skating, I was wrong. Here we see her here striding the halls of McCann like a colossus, brandishing her cigarette and Asian porno like a sword and shield.

Warrior Princess

This is a woman who has run out of fucks to give, and who has the internal strength to not have to give them anymore. The sequence plays beautifully, rendered in slow-mo as the white collar drones stumble over their feet trying to get out of her way.

Like the best books of my life, I want *Mad Men* to slow down as we approach the end. I can't wait to find out how it ends<fn>Though given their history of landing the biggest blows 2-3 episodes *before* the season finales, we may already know. For example: Joan told Peg in the first episode years ago to defer to men; she now knows she doesn't need to. I think it means we've seen the last of Peggy. She's done here.</fn>, but I also can't stand the idea that we won't get to follow the characters beyond the final page.<fn>Not that I want anything to do with sequels, prequels, spin-offs, board games, *Mad Men*-labeled scotch or filterless cigs, &c.</fn>

And yeah, it's a novel. It's as textured and considered and layered as any great novel. People have derided it<fn>To my face!</fn> as nothing more than a soap opera, as though many of the greatest pieces of literature don't also fit that

description.<fn>Paging Emma Bovary and Countess Olenska.</fn>

There are more fully realized characters here than in most great novels, and more than a few secondary characters rendered with greater depth and sympathy than most books/movies/ tv shows can muster for their central players. The detail accorded fashion and cultural context are damned near encyclopedic, on par with Hugo's description of the Paris sewers or DeLillo's shot heard round the world baseball game chapter in *Underworld*.

One thing *Mad Men* delivered that's really striking is the sense that, even when characters are not on-screen for weeks (or years!) at a time, when they re-appear we get the sense that they have actually been *living* the whole time they were away. This is an impressive achievement, and one that not many of our favorite novels can deliver.<fn>e.g., even the implacable Javert seems to have been sitting on a shelf whenever we are not with him on the page.</fn>

And maybe even more pertinent to Your Narrator: I know these people. I lived in the NY suburbs during this period. My Dad was a marketing exec, right at the edge of the Madison Avenue gaggle. I recognize the bosses, the underlings, the sycophants. I know the secretaries whose job description included remembering the boss's kids' birthdays; to recognize their voice on the phone; to 'take care' of us when we visited the skyscrapers at inconvenient moments. I wore the pajamas that kid wore, and I had some of the same toys, and the houses looked that way, and the moms and dads acted that way. The clothes and cars and hairstyles and music all changed the way we see it unfold in this book.

And then one day, they sit you down and tell you that mommy and daddy aren't going to live together anymore, but don't worry because nothing really is going to change and they both still love you very much and the earth opens up because you know it's sugar-coated bullshit even if you're too young to

even know that word.

That’s me, second from the left. I swear I had that same shirt.

> *Don: “I’m not going, I’ll just be living elsewhere…”*
>
> *Sally: “That’s GOING, you say things and you don’t mean them, you can’t just do that!*

I can attest to the veracity of the dialogue, the setting, the emotion, the whole package. No cluster of words on a page has ever devastated me more than watching this scene of this “soap opera” on the idiot box. I don’t remember any printed words causing me to explode into broken-hearted sobbing like this one.<fn>The death of Gavroche Thénardier on the barricades caused me to burst into tears. But no heart-tearing sobs.</fn> (For that matter, I rarely laugh out loud while reading, but often do so while watching tv or movies.<fn>That Your Narrator may be an unwashed Philistine is a question disposed of quickly. He most certainly washes.</fn>)

So does the electric picture radio matter? Since I casually

name-dropped Emma earlier, let's hear from her on the delights of reading:

> *"You forget everything. The hours slip by. You travel in your chair through centuries you seem to see before you, your thoughts are caught up in the story, dallying with the details or following the course of the plot, you enter into characters, so that it seems as if it were your own heart beating beneath their costumes."*

Television at its best delivers the same experience. Sure, it serves up some weak sauce, but we don't let Bulwer-Lytton or 50 Shades of Grisham keep us from the pleasures of [insert your favorites here]. The long-form format – especially on cable – enables stories that can contain Tony Soprano and Omar and Al Swearingen and Frank Pembleton, with characters and storylines that put to rest any argument that television cannot be as profound and *literary* as books.

It's a fair bet that I'll write more about *Mad Men* as time goes by. I'm going to take a break for a while and then re-read it, just like my other favorite novels.

My Favorite World #21

Some of My Most Favorite Things are the moving picture shows. This week, I got to watch *North by Northwest* again for the

eleventieth time.

The movie is terrific in every way, really one of Hitchcock's best. The story framework – a case of mistaken identity that draws the Cary Grant character, Roger Thornhill, into a spy vs. spy intrigue – is a classic 'wrong man' plot. It's a common plot device<fn>Hellloooo Lebowski</fn>, and one that is at the core of so many of his great movies.

The dialogue has the kind of snap and charm that makes me want to listen to Cole Porter and drink a dry martini. Or a Gibson.<fn>Grant's cocktail of choice in the film, basically a martini with a cocktail onion instead of the olive.</fn> Eva Marie Saint, playing Eve Kendall, is a classic Hollywood dame, a model of pluck and barely suppressed sexuality, a character that served as a template for dozens of femme fatales from the classic Bond girls (think Pussy Galore and Tiffany Case) to *Romancing the Stone*'s Joan Wilder.<fn>Who actually combines the *dame* persona with the hapless mistaken identity victim in one character.</fn> She is not quite as overt as some of the pre-Code dames, but in some ways that may actually turn up the heat. Film nerd fact: During filming, Eve tells Roger that, "I never make love on an empty stomach." The censors flipped and made them overdub a change: "I never *discuss* love on an empty stomach." The change makes Grant's double-take response a little less effective.

Roger hearing something the rest of us did not.

Many of the movie's structural elements – like the preposterous chase in a ridiculous setting (e.g., scampering across the face of Mt. Rushmore or the crop duster chasing Grant across the corn field) have left their stamp on a flood of later productions like the Bond movies, the *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon* franchises, *Bullitt*, *French Connection*, even in a Dr Who episode.<fn>Somebody could write a cool film studies dissertation on this.</fn>

The fourth Doctor waiting for a plane

But forget all that. The thing that rang my bells with this viewing was the design sense of the movie. I grew up in the 70s and 80s, and there really has been no more dismal fashion era than that. Sure, we get a little campy buzz off of polyester bell bottoms in eye-popping colors, but nobody wants to dress like that.<fn>The less said about the teased-hair, shoulder-padded 80s the better.</fn> But that suit that Grant wears pretty much the entire movie? Good god, people…that is a piece of clothing!

I want that suit. Hell, I want that dress, too.

In this scene, Thornhill believes Eve to be one of the bad guys.<fn>Which she both is and isn’t.</fn> He’s in gray, she’s in red: colors in opposition.

Here, we find Roger and Eve in cahoots. Same suit for Roger, but now Eve is dressed in a dress from the same color family: colors in concert.<fn>All credit to Tom and Lorenzo for getting me to think like this in the first place. My default mode had been “Hey, cool suit!”, if I even noticed it at all.</fn>

I still want that suit.

But the visual element that really tickles My Favorite World spot, even more than the fashion, are the sets. Much of the movie was filmed on location, as with this early scene in NY’s Plaza Hotel.

Just like a Holiday Inn Express

Now that, people, is what a hotel lobby should look like.

And this scene, in one of my favorite places.

Glory days of Grand Central. A recent restoration has pretty much brought it back to full gorgeousity.

Also, too…Hitchcock knew how to paint a picture. Check out this overhead shot of Grant fleeing the UN Building.

I can tell ya, the UN Building can’t look that good these days. It was already falling apart when I was a kid.

But the killer is the Vandamm House, a complete fabrication designed to look like a Frank Lloyd Wright-ish construction at the top of Mt. Rushmore.<fn>In fact, the area at the top of Rushmore is extremely restricted. Almost nobody gets to go up there, and there are definitely no cantilevered houses dangling over GW’s ear.</fn>

Nice digs.

The exterior shots are matte paintings, and the interiors are all built on a soundstage.

I would so live in this house.

I mean, come on. A McMansion or this? Even with the gun entering frame left, I'd still live there.

Another cool film nerd tidbit…look again at this still from the cafeteria.

I still want that suit.

Just to the right of Eve, there is a child extra who has his fingers in his ears. From rehearsals, he knew that 1) there was a gunshot coming and 2) that it was loud. So he pre-emptively plugged his ears before the gunshot. Nobody noticed at the time, but apparently Hitchcock was pretty miffed about it when they noticed it later on.

More substantively, Favorite World-wise: this is the first film appearance by Martin Landau. He played Leonard, Vandamm's (the awesome James Mason) assistant thug.

A couple of real creeps

Hitchcock had asked Landau to play Leonard as “gay” to help explain his animosity and mistrust for Eve. I have to admit that I did not pick up on this the first few times I watched, probably because Landau was so understated.<fn>And partly because I am a little oblivious.</fn> This was considered pretty controversial at the time, and many of Landau’s friends urged him to refuse.

The great thing about the portrayal is how he avoided cliche. The menace of Leonard is front and center; hints to his sexuality are almost entirely background, although at one point he ad-libbed the line, “Call it my woman’s intuition, if you will.” Anyway, Landau went on to an impressive career, frequently working alongside his wife, Barbara Bain. His turn as Andro in *The Outer Limits – The Man Who Was Never Born* is one of my all-time favorite episodes on the electric picture radio box.

There is nothing wrong with your electric picture radio machine.

So let’s review:

- Gripping plot
- Great dialog
- Eye popping fashion
- Gorgeous sets and scenery
- Film nerdery goldmine
- Amazing cast
- Hitchcock!
- Cary Fucking Grant!

Admit it. Cary Grant is the coolest guy ever. As he once remarked: “Everyone wants to be Cary Grant—even I want to be Cary Grant.” Well, I can’t be Cary Grant<fn>I’m barely even Archie Leach on my best day. Probably more like Archie Rice.</fn>, but I can pretend.

My Favorite World.

My Favorite World #14

The regular visitor to My Favorite World has probably noticed that I love movies. Here we go again.

A couple of weeks ago, the family was having a celebratory dinner and we spontaneously decided to go see a movie. This never happens. We all have so many schedule issues, but this night, we tossed it all aside.

We dashed to the theater with son using his hand-held intertubes google machine to find something worth seeing. The listings were grim. Would I endure the never-going-to-go-away Matthew McConaughey trying to sell me a Lincoln from the depths of space? How about another animated romp with soulful animals sporting overlarge eyes? Perhaps a celebration of someone who hides in trees and shoots people in the back? Things were not looking good.

Then he mentioned one that I had heard of, vaguely, and since it was the only one that fit our timing, we gave it a spin. And wow.

Two Days, One Night turned out to be one of those little films that really stick with you. Made by the Dardenne brothers<fn>Think a Belgian-flavored Coen Brothers partnership</fn>, in French with subtitles, this is the story of Sandra (Marion Cotillard). Recovering from illness and all set to return to her job, Sandra gets word that her co-workers have voted her out so they could each receive a thousand-Euro bonus. Dogs eat dogs.

But she convinces the boss to hold another election to give her the weekend to convince her co-workers to change their vote. That's the setup, and the rest of the movie shows Sandra going from one co-worker to the next, making her case. Occasionally groveling, always a bundle of nerves barely contained by her Xanax, the reactions she elicits run the gamut. From people who felt such shame at their greed to people who wanted her to *understand* just how important that money is for her family and wouldn't she just see it their way, to actual outbursts of violence that she would dare 'stir the shit'.

In lesser hands, this setup could devolve into simplistic characters playing out obvious cliches. In Hollywood, there would have to be gun play or a big speech about shared humanity and triumph of the spirit or some such bushwah. But here, every character has a human dimension.<fn>Even the dickhead supervisor and boss who thought it was a swell idea to pit these people against one another in the first place. Fucking motherfuckers.</fn> You see that everyone is struggling; that even good people who know right from wrong can succumb to the pressures of not having enough money to make ends meet; that the conflict within the working class – conflict often deliberately instigated by the Galtian superheroes – creates degrees of rightness/wrongness that makes moral judgement nearly impossible, because you know how much it costs to send your kids to school/take care of medical expenses/&c.<fn>Again, with the exception of the dickhead bosses. Fk those guys. I recognized them as though I had known them personally.</fn>

And in Hollywood, you can bet there would be at least *some* makeup. Cotillard, one of Europe's most financially and artistically successful actors, is a beauty, a fashion model, and spokesperson for a variety of glamour products. But here, she is washed out, an aging woman of former beauty who has endured too much to trouble with her appearance.

Too tired to care

A mother of two, married to an underemployed man who also happens to be filled with love and devotion, Sandra is at the end of her rope. She looks tired and beaten. The question at the core – will she persuade enough people to give up their bonus to save her job – seems at once impossible to achieve while we believe “of course she can, it’s the movies!”.

And Cotillard is just stunningly perfect in the role. (She was nominated for the Best Actress Oscar for the role.) Of course we’re rooting for her, and of course we see there is no way in hell she can possibly succeed. We know that she is fragile, and in many ways barely even alive to her world anymore. And yet…

So, no spoilers. This movie held us in the palm of its hand for 95 minutes. Along the way, we meet some truly good people, some people who wish they were good but aren’t quite, and a couple of people you wish would slip and fall down some steep stairs. It’s kind of like life that way.

Two Days, One Night. Just the kind of unexpected surprise that makes this My Favorite World. Go. Watch. Thank me later.