



troglydyte humans who hate and fear snakes, another who love and want to pet them. The ones who feared the snakes have an evolutionary advantage. Petting some snakes is not a good idea. Then there can be conflicting messages left in our genes by our ancestors. There is survival value in liking and wanting to fondle

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things that are young and cute. This is fine when it expresses itself in fondling babies or even puppies. (It is another one of my "pet" theories that we co-evolved with canines and perhaps cats. It has been noted that human blood pressure is higher than usual when we are under stress, but lower than usual when we are with pets. That could indicate that we are under a constant low-level stress when there are no animals around to relieve it. That low-level stress has come to be accepted as normal.) In any case, the urge to fondle small helpless things could have been downright dangerous to our ancestors when they did things like cuddle cute, little, helpless wild bear cubs, but those incidents were rare enough that they didn't leave much of a record in our genetic message.

Well, let me add one more behavior that could go way back. Why do we like ice in our drinks? Well obviously because it makes the drinks colder. But why do we like that? Why is a cold beverage more pleasing than a warm one? Again posit two sets of troglydyte ancestors, one who likes to drink cold water, one who likes to drink warm. The cold water is more likely to have been recently melted from ice. The warm water has stagnated. There are things in it that look ugly and make you feel worse than you do driving down the NJ Turnpike. The colder water was safer and that was adopted into our aesthetics.

So, if I am right, much of our aesthetics have reasons to be what they are going back to our prehistoric ancestors. Let us take another example. I got a big, sweet piece of cake from a local restaurant last night. Horribly fattening. Now most people would think that it was fattening because it was sweet. More accurately it was fattening because it is rich in sugars and sugars are sweet. I think that it was sweet because it was fattening. Sweet is to us a pleasant flavor. (Someone who might disagree is Evelyn who thinks it is pleasant snack to eat cooked kale or radishes, but then

everyone knows she has peculiar tastes in some things. She picked me, didn't she?) The things that give us quick energy and then some to store up and use later had survival value to eat. Those who found they tasted pleasant survived. Those who hated high-energy foods had a harder time outrunning mammoths and one such male would be more likely to end up a pate than a pater. So finding high-energy foods pleasant-tasting is a survival characteristic. Particularly for carnivores like our ancestors.

Now notice that rabbits seem not so fond of what we consider sweet foods. They like leafy vegetation and other things that to us seem bitter and unpleasant tasting. Also some vegetation we don't find so unpleasant. Is that because it tastes bitter to them and they like bitter? Probably not since other foods that we don't like rabbits don't either. My suspicion is that you evolve so that what is useful to your survival tastes sweet and pleasant to you. And the reason that big, unhealthy piece of cake still tastes so good

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is that evolution lags behind reality. When us cake fans die off early without heir for long enough, the human palate will slowly find healthy things taste better to us than unhealthy ones. And then everyone will like radishes and kale as a snack. Perhaps Evelyn's tastes are the wave of the future. Hmmm! Naaaah!

2. I have nothing to say about Mark's and my relative tastes in foods; I think they speak for themselves. However, the British \*don't\* like ice in their drinks. What does this all mean? Darned if I know. Maybe Mark can enlighten us after he finishes gorging himself on that cake. [-ecl]

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THE SEVENTH SIGN  
A film review by Mark R. Leeper  
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Capsule review: In the year of the baby film, a pregnant yuppie (Demi Moore) finds herself entangled in Biblical prophecy, not just as a student but she herself is a sign of coming destruction. A few too many

coincidences in the plot, but an okay little film.

Rating: +1.

Following the success of first R\_o\_s\_e\_m\_a\_r\_y's\_B\_a\_b\_y and the T\_h\_e\_E\_x\_o\_r\_c\_i\_s\_t, there were a number of "Bible prophecy" horror films. In them, the word of the Bible took on new relevance as young people in them discover that all the prophecies and strange symbolism are true and perfectly relevant to our times. Films like T\_h\_e\_S\_e\_n\_t\_i\_n\_e\_l\_H\_o\_l\_o\_c\_a\_u\_s\_t\_2\_0\_0\_0 (a.k.a. T\_h\_e\_C\_h\_o\_s\_e\_n), and the three-film O\_m\_e\_n series. After a while they disappeared, only to return about a decade later with T\_h\_e\_S\_e\_v\_e\_n\_t\_h\_S\_i\_g\_n. As the run of this sort of film goes, T\_h\_e\_S\_e\_v\_e\_n\_t\_h\_S\_i\_g\_n is probably above average. Even without the big Hollywood treatment that Twentieth Century Fox gave T\_h\_e\_O\_m\_e\_n, this is a nice suspenseful story well told.

There are funny things happening in the world. Off Haiti there are fish dying and washing up on shore. In the Negev Desert an entire village is found frozen. But then weird things happen every day. We see them on the news over dinner and then they get forgotten. Abby Quinn (played by Demi Moore) sees and forgets a lot of news. Her interests are more worrying about the baby that she will very soon have. She also worries about her husband's career as a criminal defense lawyer (he is played by Michael Biehn) and about the mysterious boarder (played by Jurgen Prochnow) who has come to live above her garage. The audience knows this mysterious figure has been present at each of the strange events that has happened fulfilling some sort of mission. It all has to do with a prophecy of seven signs that the end of the world is coming. One of the signs has something to do with Abby, but what sign, and why? Well, since even the film is confused about what the signs are (in fact, it outright contradicts itself), it is not surprising that Abby does not know the signs. The story unravels to a nice piece of fantasy as will a good horror story.

It is nice to see Demi Moore in a film that calls for her to be a little more than just a yuppie. On the other hand, this may be Michael Biehn's most forgettable role, as a lawyer with little personality. Not that he had a lot of personality in T\_e\_r\_m\_i\_n\_a\_t\_o\_r or A\_l\_i\_e\_n\_s, but there he was enough action so that you did not notice. John Heard has a cameo as a likable Catholic priest, somewhat recreating his role from H\_e\_a\_v\_e\_n\_H\_e\_l\_p\_U\_s. T\_h\_e\_S\_e\_v\_e\_n\_t\_h\_S\_i\_g\_n is not a great horror film. A year from now it will play one month on cable (guaranteed! It's a Tri-Star film) and then probably be forgotten. But it is a reasonable little exercise in Bible horror. Rate it a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

Of Milk Duds and Minsky  
Comments by Mark R. Leeper  
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A while back I got a bad Milk Dud. When I was growing up I would often get Milk Duds at the movies. They are a lump of good caramel wrapped in chocolate. A friend of mine liked to go to the local zoo and give handfuls of them to the monkeys. The idea was that once you sink your teeth into good caramel it holds onto your teeth and you can't open your mouth for a while until some of the caramel dissolves. Cheap caramel does not have the same problem. It is kind of granular in consistency and just sort of falls apart in your mouth. Well, a few years ago I got a package of Milk Duds and from this package the monkeys would have had nothing to fear. These Milk Duds lived up to their name and were duds. On the other hand, Milk Duds with cheap caramel are pretty bad. Now Milk Duds may have gone back to using good caramel. They may even have had an ad campaign claiming to be returning to being "original Milk Duds." If so, I missed it. I think of how they were the last time I ate them and the bad Milk Dud which was the last one I ate remains the last Milk Dud I ate.

But that does not mean I do not think about companies like the one that makes Milk Duds. I ask myself who makes a decision like "we are going to start using cheap caramel in Milk Duds." This is not a simple decision. Cheapening caramel saves the company money and improves profits, but then there are people like me whom Milk Duds loses as customers. This loss is only semi-reversible. For all I know, Milk Duds may have used cheap caramel for only a one-month period and this may have been many years ago, but they still have lost me as a customer for decades to come. They mortgaged a piece of their future for a stretch of years for a short-term profit.

The person who decided to cheapen Milk Duds saved his company a lot of money and probably left his position a hero, moving on to make other parts of the company more profitable. That is one of the American dreams: to be the kind of person who can go around a company bringing higher profits wherever he goes and then moving on. Twenty years later when sales are down, nobody really remembers who it was who made the decision to cheapen Milk Duds. Most American businesses have rewards systems that are geared to the short-term profit. Nobody gets rewarded for a decision that will mean a lot to the company in another twenty years, much less a decision that will mean a little bit to the company over a whole range from ten to thirty years in the future. If Milk Duds went back to their original formula, they probably did it at least on the basis of short-term gain. How so? well, to choose another candy-- Chunky a while back started advertising it was going back to being "Original Chunky" with all the original quality. It was a lie, incidentally, but at least they did start improving their product. But it was a lot of hoopla so it could be turned into a short-term gain.

And this philosophy of applauding and rewarding the short-term gain does not apply to just the candy business. Airlines used to want to give the fell of supreme safety in a superbly maintained craft. Now they have decided to save money and improve the bottom-line profit picture by letting their planes and airports go a little bit downhill. While writing this article I flew on a plane that gave me much the same feel I get when I ride on the New York subway system: that things have been let slip. The tray-table had been warped out of shape somehow and it took me and two stewardesses to force it into "the full upright" position." It probably will remain that way for many flights. This may seem like a cosmetic problem but this seat back did not just suddenly warp. This plane has not been well-maintained and this is from what I considered among the most reliable American airlines, United. Others are worse. The government is currently investigating Eastern Airlines' safety. One day an executive of the company said, with some bravado, that he hoped the investigation would be open and public. He got his wish. The next day's news said the government ordered two operating Eastern planes grounded for problems like "a one-inch crack in the wing." Airlines have cut back on maintenance to improve the profit picture. Now we get daily reports of air disasters and near-disasters.

Richard Nixon was able to get some nice short-term cash into the budget by cutting funding for the National Science Foundation. After all, what does the NSF offer us? Pie-in-the-sky. Stuff of questionable years down the road. Well, now we are years down the road and have lost our technological edge. Nixon decided not to pay for pie-in-the-sky and now we are in that sky and starving to death. And I choose Nixon just because I was more aware when he cut funding than when other Presidents made the same dangerous decision to cut back on math and science funding.

Marvin Minsky has said--with supreme accuracy, I might add--"The Soviet Union is still training people in math, where the United States seems to be engaged in unilateral intellectual disarmament." But why is that? Is mathematics more interesting in the Soviet Union? Is it more rewarding? Well, perhaps yes on both counts. I do not know what the situation is in the Soviet Union but I can see why it is neither interesting nor rewarding in the United States. It is because math beyond algebra does not give a short-term gain. It is an investment in the future. The National Science Foundation, which funds among other

things educational programs to make mathematics interesting to students, is being cut to the bone for the short-term gain of diverting that funding elsewhere. There is no funding for the educational programs that would make math interesting to students.

But real estate is not intrinsically interesting either for most people, or the law, or finance. Yet these fields seem to have no shortage of people. These fields attract new blood by use of a simple device known as ... "money." Even without the government making an investment in the training of the young in math and science those fields would still attract the young if they were financially rewarding. At

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the very least those fields could compete with others that were financially rewarding. But the simple fact is that very few people find careers in mathematics and science lucrative. Throughout most of industry the lucrative positions are in management. That situation may be related to the fact that it is management that decides what ideas are going to be financially rewarding and usually that means the well-paid are those who bring in tangible short-term profits and those who manage. Of course, for a lucky few basic science can lead to recognition, perhaps a Nobel Prize, and that recognition leads to advancement with financial advantages. And the advancement usually takes the form of taking the prized research person away from doing research and in management. But American industry is not investing much in pure research that may not pay off for decades.

So the simple fact is that not many people are interested in going into research. Very few of the young want to go into a field with so little status or rewards. The fascination that I and many of my friends had in our youth with the lives of the great scientists and mathematicians has been supplanted with a fascination among the young with the lives of the great rock stars.

And with less basic research being done and fewer and fewer young people even considering going into math and science, we see one-by-one the technical areas in which we lead the world technologically being stripped away by other countries. American companies who find they cannot compete abroad (because twenty and thirty years ago foreign companies were preparing for today) are instead trying to keep foreign technology out of the United States so they do not have to compete at



home.

The government and the corporations who have insufficient faith in the future to match other countries' investment in pie-in-the-sky technology research are facing a future that there is less and less reason to have faith in.

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