

# 43 Notes about a Film

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1. It is a ‘sentimental mishmash . . . muddily photographed in flat television style.’ Peter Nicholls, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*
2. It ‘invites you to have some wonderful dumb, callow fun.’ Pauline Kael
3. It was made for €12 million – even at the time a relatively small budget – and released on 4 June 1982, when I was not quite a year old.
4. I don’t remember the first time I saw it, though I can guess that it was probably around 1991, when I was ten. I must have watched it at least half a dozen times a year since then. I am now forty, which means that I have seen it some 180 times. If we factor in the period in the middle of my adolescence when I watched this film once a week – every Wednesday afternoon, when school finished early – we can call it an even two hundred viewings. The last time I watched it was about two weeks ago. The ending, as usual, made me cry.
5. I no longer, strictly speaking, *need* to watch it. I can run the film in my head, from start to finish, and sometimes do, as an anxiolytic or to cure insomnia. Gestures, sound effects, camera angles, inflections of tone: I can recreate them internally at will. I can recite whole tracts of dialogue unerringly. ‘These coordinates are deep inside Regula, a planetoid we know to be lifeless.’ ‘He is intelligent, but not experienced. His pattern indicates two-dimensional thinking.’ ‘I’m afraid it’s even harder than you think, Doctor.’ I confess that these junk lines, and others like them, are among my most treasured possessions.
6. It runs for 113 minutes in the theatrical cut; the director’s cut runs an extra 244 seconds and explains one minor plot element but does not contain the scripted line ‘Midshipman, you’re a tiger’, which was cut during filming because everyone agreed it sounded ‘too gay’.
7. The editor of this essay, in an email to me, described this film as ‘very Shakespearean and very camp’, and went on to say: ‘I can completely appreciate how it has inspired devotion in you and so many others.’ I grant the accuracy of this description, and with the part of my mind that is not hostage to this film I recall these lines from Susan Sontag’s essay ‘Notes on Camp’ (1964): ‘Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style . . . It is the love of the exaggerated, the “off”, of

things-being-what-they-are-not . . . In naïve, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails.’ *Failed seriousness* would describe, with reasonable accuracy, many moments in this particular film. But this is where obsession comes in. After two hundred viewings I am able, as I watch, to toggle between modes of viewing: to see what is camp – exaggerated, wonky, tasteless, melodramatic, gauche – and to see what is (a useful word!) Shakespearean. To see the seriousness that fails and the seriousness that succeeds. My response to this film, when I watch it now, negotiates many layers of appreciation and critique – to watch this film now is, for me, a formidably rich experience. But why have I cultivated this richness? What compelled me? Why have I spent so much of my life watching and thinking about a film that is, as even the people who made it would agree, fundamentally second-rate – even, at points, actively bad?

8. It is, indeed, the sequel to a bad film based on a bad television series that ran on NBC for three seasons, 1967–1969: a TV show with terrible sets, surreally illogical scripts, abysmal acting and no more than four basic plots endlessly recycled.

9. The plot of this sequel is not recycled. An ageing spaceship captain, kicked upstairs to the Admiralty, feels stale, marooned, devoid of purpose. His former shipmates are now teachers, ushering a new generation of eager cadets through their training. His old ship is now a kind of school, used for practice voyages. Then something happens. An old enemy, trapped for fifteen years on a ruined planet, escapes. His mind has been warped by his desire for revenge. He lures the old captain and his unready ship into combat. Pulled into the fray are the captain’s former lover, and his son, whom he has never met and who does not know his father’s identity. The captain’s enemy is cunning, but insane. The captain – cunning but sane – is able to defeat him. But there is a cost. The captain’s closest friend (they are as close, really, as husband and wife; neither have ever married) is killed. The friend sacrifices himself to save the ageing ship and its trainee crew – and to save the captain, of course. The stale old captain in his admiral’s uniform weeps for his friend. When he is asked how he feels, he says, ‘Young. I feel young.’

10. Its writer-director wanted to subtitle it *The Undiscovered Country*. The line is Hamlet’s, and refers, of course, to death. But the studio intervened – too literary! – and the film is known to history as *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*.

11. The writer-director in question, Nicholas Meyer, had directed one previous film, *Time After Time* (1979), but he was also a novelist, the author of a Sherlock Holmes pastiche called *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* (1974) and a Ross MacDonald-echoing thriller called *Target Practice* (1974), both of which I have read. I have also read Meyer’s memoir, *The View from the Bridge: Memories of Star Trek and a Life in Hollywood* (2009), from which I learnt that Meyer has a charmingly modest sense of his own talents:

The first man who said a woman’s lips were like a rose was a genius; the second guy who said it was a plodder . . . That is the sort of artist I am; not of the first rank, perhaps not even of the second, but I do recognise something original when I see it . . . I could never write *The Odyssey*, but I can probably make it into a very good screenplay.

We should all know ourselves so well. But Meyer's self-estimation gives me pause. Because this is the guy who wrote and directed my favourite film – a film I know, in my heart's core, to be second-rate. I mean, come on: by the standards of the art-movie canon (Tarkovsky, Godard, Bergman, Kurosawa, et al.), *The Wrath of Khan* is just a cartoonish *divertissement*, a franchise-instalment cash cow, a cheesy space opera made for kids. But I haven't watched Godard's *Le Mépris* two hundred times; nor have I curled up with *Stalker* more than once. Thinking about this piece on *Khan*, I found myself ruminating on an old and persistent fear. I wrote in my notebook: *Worry that the art I truly like is second-rate. Why am I not more loyal to austere, high-art stuff, et cetera? Yes, I love Henry James and Flaubert, but it's The Wrath of Khan and certainly not, say, The Ambassadors or Madame Bovary that I'd take with me to that proverbial desert island. Shouldn't a critic prefer only the best? Have superb taste only? James Wood, for example. His taste is basically 'the Western literary canon'. But my taste would appear to be far more decadent and populist than that. Am I any use, as an artist, as a critic, if my standards of aesthetic pleasure derive, even if only partly, from 200+ viewings of the same trashy film?*

12. Or maybe the whole question is beside the point. 'First-rate', 'third-rate', 'high art', 'low art': we claim no longer to need these categories. Fifty years' worth of anti-elitist cultural criticism has done its best to erase these supposedly invidious distinctions, so that no one is required, in the third decade of the twenty-first century, to defend their taste if their taste runs to trash. 'Let people enjoy things' goes a popular online motto. We seem no longer to be comfortable with evaluative criticism as such – this is why bad reviews so often achieve a scandalised virality on Twitter – and prefer a criticism that treats the given work of art as a coded statement of politics. I know the coded-politics views on *Star Trek*. I am aware, for instance, of the argument that the Klingons represent, in the original series, the Japanese, and that the episode ('Errand of Mercy') in which the super powerful Organians impose an uneasy peace treaty on the Klingons and the Federation dramatises late-sixties US anxieties about an economically resurgent Japan. Sure, I get it. That stuff is there. But I cannot dispel the feeling that this kind of historicist criticism is a covertly philistine attempt to rob art of its ancient glamour (Sontag again: 'Interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art'). Art – high art, popular art, any kind of art that *works* – re-enchants the world, temporarily. To be told a good story is to be returned to childhood, when the world appeared incipiently storyable; when it was not yet damningly clear that the world was not a story, and that the task of making meaning would fall (verb deliberately chosen) to us. So, I am interested in art that *works*: yes, already, writing about *The Wrath of Khan* has taught me something useful about myself. This might be something like my guiding principle, as an artist, as a critic: not to make or praise 'high art' as such, but to make and praise things that *work*, art that successfully re-enchants the world, and to anatomise the books and films that *don't* work, that leave us, by dint of their cack-handedness, marooned in bare contingency – back where we started. And it might be the case that 'second-rate' works of art are *better* at re-enchanting the world than masterpieces are, precisely because they are easier to grasp and they are unafraid of *just going for it* – that this is why we seek out artworks made up of big emotions (melodramas, prog-rock albums, musicals) and wind up cherishing them, as I cherish *The Wrath of Khan* – because, in their unsubtle ways, they whisper to us rumours of a re-enchanted world.

13. Of course, when I was ten I mainly liked the space battles.

14. *Very camp and very Shakespearean*. After two hundred viewings the movie's campness only declares itself at certain moments, as when, after the *Enterprise* has at last torpedoed Khan's ship, the *Reliant*, in the Mutara Nebula, Khan lifts a lump of broken bulkhead from the prone body of his lieutenant, Joachim, and the bulkhead is clearly made of easily liftable prop plastic. Despite Ricardo Montalban's strenuous 'lifting' he cannot make it look as if it's actually heavy. In such instances of crude joinery, the film's campness becomes obvious to me. But otherwise I am fully capable of watching the film as if it were actually Shakespeare. This is not merely, I think, a form of aesthetic Stockholm syndrome. Shakespeare, entertaining the groundlings, seized the big emotions and put them on display. The insistently ironic highbrow art of our age has long since forfeited this territory – ceded it to melodrama. If you want Shakespearean emotions and you happen to be a science-fiction fan, well then, *The Wrath of Khan* is waiting for you. We are not always able for Shakespeare: this is the truth of it. We need 'easy' art as well as the hard stuff. Sometimes you want to be off-duty.

15. And then there's the music: James Horner's sweeping, indeed perhaps to certain tastes rather cloying, orchestral score, which is to me a work of art worth valuing in its own right. According to *The View from the Bridge*, Meyer told Horner to listen to Debussy and said he wanted a 'score that suggested the sweep of the ocean'. Horner's duly oceanic score for *Khan* liberally remixes one of his own previous scores, one composed just two years earlier for the ultra-cheesy Roger Corman-produced *Star Wars* rip-off *Battle Beyond the Stars* (1980), in which Richard Thomas (John-Boy from *The Waltons*) saves his pacifist planet from a Vaderish evil empire. Horner's music for *Battle Beyond the Stars* is stirring – too good, actually, for the not-even-good-Camp B-movie it adorns. Listening to it is like hearing an early draft of the score for *Khan*, which contains three of four of my favourite pieces of music. 'Enterprise Clears Moorings', 'Battle in the Mutara Nebula', 'Genesis Countdown' and 'Epilogue/End Title' show up every year on Spotify's list of my most-played tracks. As I type this I am listening to 'Enterprise Clears Moorings' and marvelling afresh at how superbly Horner evokes tall ships, an eighteenth-century nautical mood. Meyer told him to think of Hornblower in space and the score he produced is all French horns and stately chords. It's Napoleonic, capital-R Romantic. The emotions of the film (the ache of middle-age, the promise of adventure, the thirst for vengeance, the camaraderie of the crew, the agony of sacrifice and loss) are Romantic emotions. *The Wrath of Khan* is a Romantic film. And here's a mystery: generally I prefer a certain coldness in art, a geometrical precision, a classical perfection of style. But to love a film you loved in childhood is to find yourself in what is basically a Romantic situation – harking back, gripped by *sehnsucht* (longing, desire, yearning).

16. I often listen to Horner's score independently of any viewing of the film. Not just the emotions of the film but the emotions of my life are therefore built into this music, so that when I listen to 'Genesis Countdown' on my walk to the train in the morning I experience a sort of pocket catharsis, a quick recension of some of my own most important griefs and passions. I am reminded of times when I was happy – that is, times when I was watching *The Wrath of Khan*. Why be ashamed if a work of art comforts us? A 'comfort read', a 'comfort watch': we discuss these things with the shared understanding that these are not our *official* choices, not what we *officially* prefer. But we are all in need of comfort, are we not?

17. On the day Leonard Nimoy died (27 February 2015), my wife and I watched *The Wrath of Khan* on the tiny sofa in our tiny rented house in Ringsend. We both cried when the credits rolled. 18. Nobody makes great claims for Nimoy's abilities as an actor. Nobody makes great claims for William Shatner, either. But no other actors – perhaps no other artists of any kind – have given me so much joy over such a long period of time. To watch them together on screen – even in the goofiest episodes of the original series – is to witness genuine chemistry at work and to be reminded that good art gets made by luck as well as by intention. It might not have been Shatner; it might have been Jeffrey Hunter, who played the captain of the *Enterprise* in the original, unaired *Star Trek* pilot. But it was Shatner, that charismatic ham, that florid and tic-ridden old matinée idol who ended up working alongside the granitic-faced and bass-voiced Nimoy, and thereby set the emotional tone of a certain section of my mind.

19. Those four basic original-series *Star Trek* plots: one, the *Enterprise* encounters space hippies; two, the *Enterprise* encounters a godlike alien force; three, Captain Kirk defeats an omnipotent computer using only his feelings; four, the *Enterprise* discovers a planet that resembles one of the TV sets already built on the NBC backlot (Nazi planet, Chicago gangster planet, 1960s America planet).

20. The plot of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), to which *Khan* is nominally a sequel, uses plot number two: the *Enterprise* encounters a godlike alien force. It is a very bad film (though I have, of course, seen it dozens of times). The godlike-entity plot was Gene Roddenberry's one idea – though we must give Roddenberry credit, of course, for thinking up *Star Trek* in the first place. It is interesting to contemplate the fact that *Star Trek* only became actually, watchably good when Paramount Studios kicked Roddenberry off the franchise and got Nicholas Meyer to save *The Wrath of Khan* (by writing a screenplay in twelve days). Meyer saved *Star Trek* by throwing out almost everything that Roddenberry valued. He even dispensed with the idea that the United Federation of Planets should be a utopia. In *Khan*, Doctor Carol Marcus has invented the Genesis Device, which creates new planets from dead matter, in order to solve the 'cosmic problems of population and food supply' – problems that the Federation is supposed to have transcended. Meyer made *Star Trek* more like the present: crisis-prone, mundane, hopeful, badly lit. Abruptly, *Star Trek* came alive.

21. From an email to the editor of this essay:

Dear Catherine,

Does *Hocus Pocus*, your 'bad art' favourite, top *The Wrath of Khan*? I wonder! I am interested in that whole 'I know it's bad but I love it and, also, it is actually good, so I'm going to be proud that I love it while acknowledging that it's bad' mode of experiencing/loving certain works of art. I think it's one of the ways we negotiate our way out of 'fan culture', which basically does art wrong – criticising, say, *Star Wars* for not being fascist enough ('Luke should KILL those stormtroopers') or complaining that the internal continuity of the Marvel movies differs from the comics – a worldview caricatured in that *Simpsons* episode where the nerd asks Homer why Scratchy's rib produces two clearly distinct xylophone notes. We love things fannishly when we're kids; if we read and see and learn more as we get older, we start to see what might be

wrong with, say, *Star Trek* or *Hocus Pocus*. I think this makes us better readers of those films, or I hope it does, anyway

22. *The Wrath of Khan* is, in part, about parenthood and growth. The key character is Lieutenant Saavik (Kirstie Alley), a command trainee and a Vulcan (hence logical, humourless, charismatic). According to the workmanlike 1982 novelisation of *Khan*, by Vonda N. McIntyre, Saavik is half-Romulan and has endured a traumatic childhood. But to give Saavik a traumatic childhood is to make her *experienced*, when the whole point of the character is that she is *inexperienced*. ‘We’re over our heads,’ she says in the film’s first scene, and so she is. She gives us our perspective on the ageing *Enterprise* crew, as we watch them struggle through a new adventure, some of them now old enough to be grandparents. She is Spock’s (metaphorical) daughter, counterbalancing David Marcus, Kirk’s (actual) son, who gets the film’s best line of dialogue (which I will get to in a later note). Parents, children. Teachers, students. *The Wrath of Khan* is about learning. ‘We learn by doing,’ Kirk says to Saavik at one point. He’s talking about humour, which Saavik finds a ‘difficult concept’. But he means everything: life, death. Can her teachers teach Saavik anything? Only indirectly. I’m tempted to say: all true teaching happens indirectly. *We learn by doing*.

23. Spock’s death is the film’s crux. News of it leaked before production had even begun. The fans were outraged. Meyer received death threats. (Fan stupidity – what the novelist M. John Harrison has called the ‘great clomping foot of nerdism’ – is nothing new.) Meyer put a joke death for Spock into the opening scene – the scene in which Saavik takes the Kobayashi Maru test. This test is also about death. It sets up the structuring principle of the film and one of its two central metaphors (the other being the Genesis Device).

24. The Kobayashi Maru test: You are commanding the *Enterprise*. You receive a distress signal from a freighter, the *Kobayashi Maru*, which has struck a ‘gravitic mine’ and is losing life support. But the ship is in the Neutral Zone between Klingon and Federation space. Starships are forbidden to enter the Zone by treaty. What do you do? You enter the Zone, of course. But when you get there, the freighter has vanished. It was a trap. Three Klingon cruisers surround you, arming weapons. You are outgunned. There is no escape. What do you do?

25. The Kobayashi Maru test, like most of the key sequences of *The Wrath of Khan*, can be watched on YouTube. The comments beneath are full of people explaining how they would beat the test: ‘Wouldn’t the most logical thing be to simply sit there and do absolutely nothing until it was over? Everyone knows it’s an unwinnable situation ahead of time, so whatever you try to do it will always be completely pointless.’ Or: ‘I would be deeply suspicious right from the off.’ Or: ‘Me as Captain: “Your transmission is breaking up . . . Mr Sulu, turn the ship around, warp 3, this shit’s a trap.”’

26. To watch the Kobayashi Maru scene is to take the Kobayashi Maru test. Whether these commenters know it or not, they have all failed. But of course they have – the Kobayashi Maru tests not your skills as a starship captain but your ability to face death. These YouTube comments neatly summarise the small range of human responses to death. Do nothing (the stoic solution). Strategise – try to get clever. Run away. In *Khan*, James Kirk cheats – that is, he strategises; thus, the immature-adult mind. Saavik complains that the test is unjust; thus, the

adolescent mind, the student mind. Spock says to Kirk at the end of the film: ‘I never took the Kobayashi Maru test . . . until now. What do you think of my solution?’ Spock’s solution is to embrace death: to embrace that which cannot be avoided; thus, the mature mind. Spock is the only character, apart from Carol Marcus, who begins and ends the film as a grown-up.

27. Khan, of course, also takes the Kobayashi Maru test. In fact, Khan’s taking of the test is the engine of the film. Khan cannot beat Kirk; his quest for revenge is a no-win scenario. He, too, embraces death – but only because he thinks his death will destroy Kirk at the same time. This is the broken mind’s solution to the test: a precise mirror image of Spock’s solution (self-sacrifice to save others). I don’t know if anyone has ever noted that Khan does, in fact, get his revenge. As Kirk took Khan’s wife, so Khan takes Kirk’s wife: Spock (‘I have been and always shall be yours,’ Spock tells Kirk, early on). Khan wins. Or: everyone loses; hence: the Kobayashi Maru.

28. What is it about *Star Trek*, anyway? I should be able to tell you. I have loved *Star Trek* since I was a kid. Back then it was an obsessive love – ardent, implacable. I collected *Star Trek* novels and books. I wrote my own *Star Trek* stories. This was in the 1990s, before the internet. I did not yet know about ‘fan fiction’. But this is what I produced: reams of it, in school notebooks. My dream was to publish a *Star Trek* tie-in novel. And it so happens that now, twenty-five years later, my UK publisher is also the UK publisher of *Star Trek* tie-ins. Dare I go to my agent and say, ‘I want to write about Captain Kirk.’? My mind is imbricated with the tones and textures of *Star Trek*, certainly. I could inhabit that world. But how far should we go, to realise our adolescent dreams? Now my ardent love has dwindled. I have other loves, other favoured worlds. Better to grow: this is, after all, the lesson of *The Wrath of Khan*.

29. Why did – why *do* – I love *Star Trek* so much? I think it’s simple. *Star Trek* is better than reality. An ordered universe, intricately furnished. And *spacious* (forgive the pun). The *Star Trek* universe has been so expansively fleshed out that you can very easily make up your own corner of it. Command your own starship. Invent your own interplanetary anomaly. This, I think, explains the urge, common among *Star Trek* fans, to write *Star Trek* fiction. Gene Roddenberry was, by all accounts, kind of a goon, but he was a genius in one respect: he created a storytelling template that is at once rigorously simple and almost infinitely malleable.

30. The other reason I love *Star Trek* is because it is literate. ‘I would not remind you of that which you know so well,’ Spock says in *The Wrath of Khan*. *What articulacy!* I thought, as a teenager. I wanted to live in a world where people spoke thusly *as a matter of course*.

31. Speaking of which: *Khan* knows its lineage. (Not so trashy, after all.) The books on Khan’s shelf, in the crashed cargo carriers on Ceti Alpha V which are all that remain of the SS *Botany Bay*, include *Paradise Lost* and *Moby-Dick*. Kirk, too, carries a book on his first appearance: an ancient copy of *A Tale of Two Cities*, a gift from Spock on Kirk’s birthday. (How old is Kirk? William Shatner was fifty when *The Wrath of Khan* was filmed; let’s go with fifty, a watershed age, as decade-markers tend to be.) In the Elizabethan theatre, a character who entered carrying a book was understood to be suffering from an excess of melancholy (a bit of lore I picked up as an undergrad and have always liked). A melancholy Kirk, backlit, martial in his uniform, book under his arm, steps forward from behind the fake wall of the Kobayashi Maru simulator room: his first appearance in the film.

32. In her 1982 review of *Khan*, Pauline Kael says that Kirk is the ‘most bureaucratic of all action-adventure heroes, and his complacency has [in *Khan*] acquired a patina. Yet with middle age there has come the fleeting awareness that younger officers may find him an unctuous know-it-all.’ Clutching his antique book, condescending to his trainees, Kirk is permitted to do something that very few action-adventure heroes ever do: age; become ridiculous; lose faith. This is the point: he lacks all conviction. While Khan is full of passionate intensity. They never meet in person, but they don’t need to. A fight scene, with Shatner doing his trademark two-handed punch to his enemy’s back (guaranteed to break your fingers, as my father used to point out whenever we watched old *Star Trek* episodes together), would be undignified. Worse, it would do nothing to drag Kirk out of his doldrums. His reinvigoration must not come from physical dragon-slaying, as it did in his youth, but from learning to live with grief. This is the task of middle-age: not to recapture the past (‘Get back your command’) but to incorporate into ourselves our permanent losses; to accept that the Kobayashi Maru test cannot be won, and to find hope and energy in that knowledge. This is the way out of the middle-aged doldrums. This is the way to grow again. Spock’s death, Kirk says in his closing monologue, takes place ‘in the shadow of new life’. He means the new planet created by Khan’s detonation of the Genesis device (and Genesis, the film tells us, means ‘life from lifelessness’ – another metaphor for Kirk’s reinvigoration). But ‘in the shadow of new life’ is where we live, in middle age: we are shadowed by the new life of our children, or our students, or, more simply, of people younger than us, with all their energy and hope. No longer ‘new’ ourselves, we must begin to make our accommodations: with age, with death, with loss.

33. Kirk and Khan. Two Ks. Each has his signifying book. Khan’s is about revenge. ‘He tasks me. He tasks me and I shall have him. I’ll chase him round the moons of Nibia and round the Antares maelstrom and round perdition’s flames before I give him up!’ Khan is Ahab. Kirk is the white whale. (Paunchy, adrift, oblivious.) Kirk’s book is about duty and self-sacrifice in a bad time. *A Tale of Two Cities*: Sydney Carton, a man of lavish gifts, cannot find a purpose in life. ‘It is a far, far better thing I do . . .’ Khan quotes Ahab. Kirk quotes Sydney Carton. Two nineteenth-century classics, at thematic loggerheads. This is my kind of movie.

34. Kirk makes a good white whale. Shatner at fifty is still handsome (he was always handsome). But he is flabby and he looks depressed. Mooching around Starfleet headquarters, delivering glib maxims to his trainee crew. ‘How we face death is at least as important as how we face life, wouldn’t you say, Lieutenant?’ He says this to Saavik in his first scene. He doesn’t mean it.

35. Khan makes a good Ahab. Ricardo Montalban’s magnificent face, hawklike, proud, is a pure theatre face, a pure melodrama-villain face. His charisma is potent. In his scenes Khan is always surrounded by desert colours: fawn, maroon, beige, silver. (He is a desert.) Kirk in his scenes is always gloomily lit, often in strong but subdued reds. (His passion is suppressed.)

36. In what is probably the film’s single most famous moment, Shatner’s face quivers and turns beetroot-red. He screams with rage against his enemy, and his scream echoes through space: ‘KHAAAAAN! (KHAAAAAN!)’. This moment is famous for its badness (the last time I saw *Khan* in a cinema, this scene got a laugh). I admit it, this moment is bad. It is bad in precisely the mode of ‘failed seriousness’ that Sontag says appeals to the Camp taste. But, but, but. I can never watch Kirk’s scream without being reminded of a joke – a specific family joke,



as it happens. When my brother and I were teenagers, in our parents' house in Rathcoole, we used to entertain each other by writing parody screenplays. One was a parody of *Star Trek*.

Scene: Kirk, Spock, and McCoy are ordering lunch.

Kirk: 'What's for lunch?'

Waiter: 'Soup. Would you like it from a packet, or a can?'

Kirk (turns red; quivers): 'CAAAAAAN!'

This – my brother's joke – still makes me laugh, twenty years later

37. The works of art we love as children: we keep them inside ourselves as talismans, not merely of a state of unreflecting aesthetic bliss once and never again to be attained but of the experience of utopia itself. Here, in these works of art, we watched the world perfect itself for the first time, and as we watched we were not yet wholly convinced that the world would not perfect itself again, this time for us specifically, when we were older, when we were ready for our grown-up lives to begin. This is the sweetness and the pathos we look for, when we go back to these books, films, songs, pictures. This is why I think our response to these 'bad' works of art (the campy films, cheesy songs, stiffly drawn cartoons) is, finally, an aesthetic response. These works of art become, for us, our original images of art's perfection. When we revisit them as older, more experienced appreciators, we are revisiting the original promise of art. Because we know – and this is our tragedy, or one of our tragedies – that the world will not perfect itself for us, no matter who we are or what we do. No political programme or faith or fad diet or workout regimen or love affair will help us to perfect the world – there is no mundane fix for the mundane error. Only art can do it, and only temporarily.

38. A month or two after my father died, I rewatched *The Wrath of Khan*. This was late in 2016. I was thirty-five: not young, not yet old – in the dead middle of things, astray in Dante's *selva oscura* (or so I certainly felt). In the final scenes of the film, I now noticed, Kirk becomes, as it were, a father. His son David, who has only just discovered his true paternity, visits Kirk's quarters. He says that Kirk was right when he told Saavik that 'how we face death is at least as important as how we face life'. 'Just words,' Kirk says, in despair. 'But good words,' David says (and here's the film's best line): 'That's where ideas begin.' David turns to go. 'Is that what you came here to say?' Kirk asks. 'Yes,' David says. 'And also that I'm proud. Very proud. To be your son.' I burst into tears. David's lines had spoken my grief for me. I was proud to be my father's son. A simple feeling, but expressed here precisely as I needed it to be expressed: by these two familiar characters, whom I had known for almost all of my life. Fathers, sons: how had I not seen before that Khan is about being a father? Being a son, a daughter? And losing a father: Saavik loses her metaphorical father when Spock dies. 'Don't grieve, Admiral,' Spock tells Kirk, as the radiation kills him. 'It is logical. The needs of the many outweigh . . .' He is unable to finish. 'The needs of the few,' Kirk mumbles. 'Or the one,' Spock says. But Spock is wrong. Grief *is* logical. My favourite film: it is a film about grief, and growth. Watching it in the midst of my own grief, I found solace, and the release of emotion I had not quite known was in me. And therefore the possibility of growth – that is, the possibility that I would find a way to

incorporate my father's death into myself and move forward, into middle age. Isn't this what art is for? The successful work of art is an intricately built device, set to detonate when you watch it, or read it; most especially to detonate when you come to it in need. It detonates your buried heart – the things you need to feel, whether you know it or not.

39. Another echo. In the months before my father's death I found myself reading and watching almost exclusively books and films about nuclear war: Mick Jackson and Barry Hines's *Threads* (1984), Jonathan Schell's *The Fate of the Earth* (1982), John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946). At the time it didn't occur to me to wonder why I was doing this. Now the reason seems obvious. I had no other way to think about the end of the world. One of the films I watched repeatedly in those months was *The Day After*, a 1983 TV special that dramatises the aftermath of a nuclear strike against the USA. I didn't notice this at the time, but the director of *The Day After* was Nicholas Meyer.

40. In the hospice in Harold's Cross, during my father's last week of life, I found myself loitering in the corridor with my brother. A late summer's day. A fuchsia bush outside the window, dangling its earring blossoms. 'This is it,' my brother said. 'The Kobayashi Maru.'

41. One possible title for this essay: 'Genesis Countdown'. Looked at in a certain way, every life is a genesis countdown. We are all counting down to our own new genesis – by which I don't just mean the children we may or may not have, but our own post-mortem regeneration as life-giving matter (and it's quite a science-fictional idea, isn't it, when you put it like that?). Carol Marcus: 'Put simply, genesis means life from lifelessness.' We die in the shadow of new life. We become our rememberers, as my father has become me. ('He's really not dead,' says Doctor McCoy of Spock, 'as long as we remember him.') Perhaps this is what Kirk means when, in the film's last line of dialogue, he says, 'Young. I feel young.' This is the solution to the Kobayashi Maru test. To accept the genesis countdown, to accept the irreducible truth that we cannot win. We die. But until then, we are young – that is, we are young if we are willing to face the no-win scenario, rather than trying dishonestly to evade it – to cheat death, as Kirk puts it, to trick our way out of death. You must take the test honestly.

42. The film's other best line is delivered at the end of the second act, as the demoralised good guys contemplate Khan's apparent victory. Carol Marcus asks Kirk how he's feeling. 'Old,' he says. 'Worn out.' In reply she says this, and her words speak the hidden promise of *The Wrath of Khan*, the hidden promise of art:

43. 'Let me show you something that will make you feel young . . . as when the world was new.'

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