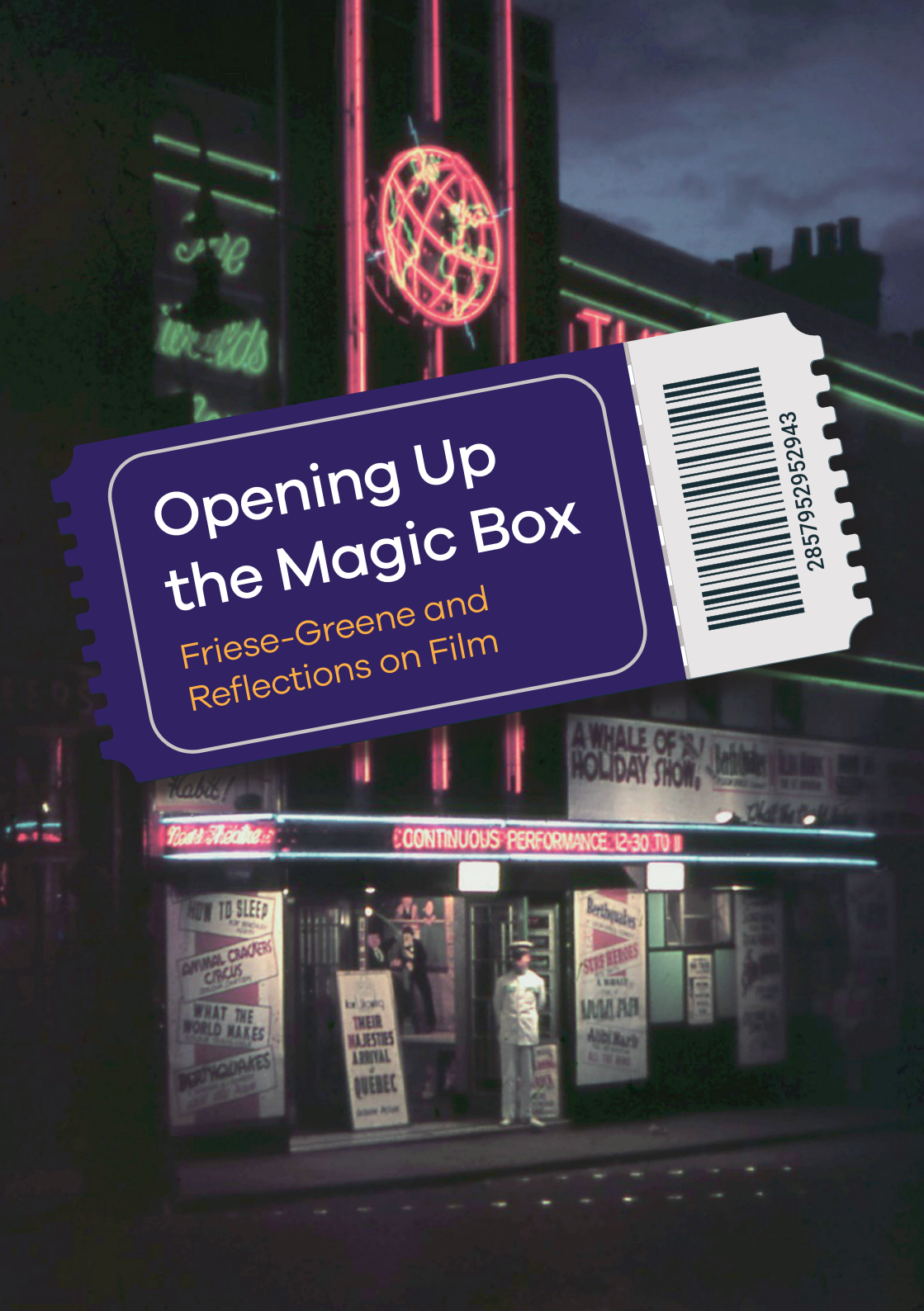


Opening Up the Magic Box

Friese-Greene and
Reflections on Film



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Foreword

2021 marks the centenary of the death of Bristol-born film pioneer William Friese-Greene.

It is also the 125th anniversary of the first public cinema screening in Bristol, which took place at the Tivoli on 8 June 1896. Earlier that year there had been the first British film screening when the Polytechnic Institute on London's Regent Street hosted a display of the Lumière brothers' new moving-picture device, the Cinématographe.

Film2021 is a multi-partner collaborative programme that celebrates the city as a world-renowned centre for film-making – past, present and future – as well as exploring wider social, technological and creative issues relating to cinema.

It is coordinated by Bristol Ideas. Partners delivering and promoting activities include: The Bottle Yard Studios, Bristol and Bath Cultural Destinations, Bristol Archives, Bristol Film Office, Bristol Photo Festival, Bristol UNESCO City of Film, Cinema Rediscovered, Destination Bristol, Encounters Film Festival, Local Learning, Royal Photographic Society and South West Silents.

This book has been published especially for Film2021. In addition to perspectives on Friese-Greene's career, impact and legacy, it includes personal reflections on cinema; a guided walk around cinema sites in central Bristol; and archive photographs of some of the lost cinemas of the city's suburbs. Several of the authors are based in Bristol; many have spoken at the Bristol Festival of Ideas; all have a passion for film.

We will regularly be adding news of events in the Film2021 programme on our Facebook page in addition to posting archive material and links to relevant articles and organisations: www.facebook.com/bristolfilm2021

Also visit the Film2021 section of the Bristol Ideas website: www.bristolideas.co.uk/projects/film-2021

We hope you will enjoy all that is on offer.

Andrew Kelly
Director, Bristol Ideas, September 2021

Peter Domankiewicz: William Friese-Greene and Me

Plaques can get you in a lot of trouble. The dead can change the course of your life. Don't say I didn't warn you.

In the early 1990s, I had been living in Bristol for several years, getting ever more involved in film and video-making, when I stopped to read a plaque I'd often walked past. It was by a doorway, opposite Maggs department store on Queen's Road, and it said:

ON THIS SITE W. FRIESE-GREENE THE INVENTOR OF THE
MOVING PICTURE CAMERA SERVED HIS APPRENTICESHIP AS A
PHOTOGRAPHER FROM 1869-1875

Now, by then I'd picked up a little about how moving pictures began, but I'd never heard of this guy – and he had a name you'd be unlikely to forget. So how could he be THE INVENTOR? Little did I know then how prodigiously and wantonly plagued – if such a verb exists – the man had been. Yet still forgotten, it seemed.

So, who the hell was this William Friese-Greene guy?

I turned to the Bristol Central Library and there encountered the welcoming arms of *Bristol As It Was* by Reece Winstone, a local historian whose books of photographs of Bristol through the decades I'd seen knocking around the city's bookshops. This told me a little of the Friese-Greene story – how he'd started as plain Willie Green, had been a charity scholar at Queen Elizabeth Hospital School, trained as a photographer where that plaque was, then married Helena Friese, joined their names and started photographic studios in Bath, Bristol and Plymouth. From there to London, success and the invention of a very early motion-picture camera, years before Edison or the Lumière brothers. And there were many more plaques, apparently.

It was clear Reece was passionate; it was clear he was an unwavering Friese-Greene fan; it was clear he had found some interesting images. But it wasn't clear how deeply he'd really studied the subject. Asking around, someone suggested I talked to Andrew Kelly, who had just started a new organisation to nurture the arts in Bristol (Bristol Cultural Development Partnership, now Bristol Ideas) and who was well-versed in cinema history.

We met. He seemed somehow taken with my naïve enthusiasm. He gave me a book and a warning.



William Friese-Greene. Sequences of images taken about 1885 to recreate movement. These cyclical sequences were projected using a lantern designed by John Arthur Roebuck Rudge [Science Museum Group, objects 1994-5014/6 and 1994-5014/4, Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 Licence].

The book was *Friese-Greene: Close-Up of an Inventor* by Ray Allister – who, confusingly, turned out to be a woman called Muriel Forth. This 1948 work was the only biography of Friese-Greene in existence but was considered romanticised and unreliable. Andrew lent me his own copy, which I still have, even though it has now been joined by three close relatives of assorted editions. This book was made into a movie, *The Magic Box*, for the 1951 Festival of Britain, which was apparently considered even more misleading, viewed as some kind of orgy of tub-thumping and Union Jack-waving which enshrined Friese-Greene as The Inventor of Cinema.

The warning was that Friese-Greene had already been scrutinised by a highly respected photographic historian, Brian Coe, and found to be severely wanting. All authorities on early cinema lined up behind Coe's conclusions. Andrew cautioned me that trying to reopen the Friese-Greene affair would be kicking an historical hornet's nest.

Now I knew exactly where I was. I was at that scene, about 20 minutes into any good detective movie, where the private eye is warned off pursuing a case that's come to him and told it would be better for everyone if he dropped it. He doesn't, of course, and we wouldn't want him to, otherwise it would be a short film instead of a feature. Now I knew I was onto something. Now I knew what I had to do, even if I barely had a clue how to do it.

I read the book, of course. It was full of fascinating detail about the life of Friese-Greene and had some intriguing photographs of

equipment and test films but included invented conversations and seemed hazy on technical details. Coe's articles from 1955 and 1962 were the complete opposite. They focused rigidly on the examination of material in photographic journals during the narrow period of Friese-Greene's initial inventing and concluded that he was a scientific ignoramus who stole other people's ideas and had zero to do with the invention of moving pictures.

So here were two 'definitive' versions of his achievements whose sources barely overlapped and whose conclusions couldn't be more opposed. Both were written with a sense of something to prove and both protested too much. The truth was clearly in between or somewhere else entirely.

I began hunting down the Friese-Greene family, in search of clues. The trouble was, sudden death ran through the male side and not even a grandson survived, but I found two of the widows. The first, Sylvia, had recently donated a collection from Anthony Friese-Greene to the Science Museum in Bradford, but she still had some materials. As we chatted in her cosy London apartment, she suddenly asked me, 'Would you like to see the purse?'. I was confused. 'You know,' she said, 'THE purse'. As she went off to get it, I finally understood – and now I was spooked.

Allister's book ends emotively and dramatically. At 65-years old, for some reason the forgotten Friese-Greene decided to attend a stormy meeting of film trade associations, intended to thrash out a raging price war. He insisted on giving a speech urging unity, then sat back down in his seat. Suddenly he slumped forward, dead. His heart had failed. A great movie scene, if ever there was one. Allister tells how Friese-Greene was taken outside the room and his clothes gone through to identify him: 'There was also a soft leather purse. It contained one shilling and tenpence. That was all the money the founder of cinema possessed in the world. It was also at the time, by coincidence, the price of a cinema seat.' Now, the death at the meeting was documented fact, but I assumed her final flourish was pure romantic mythmaking.

Sylvia came back into the room and held out something towards me. I took it. An old leather coin-purse. Nervously, I opened it and tapped the main section to dislodge its contents. The coins slid forward, some covered in Verdigris. I counted them with my eyes: one shilling and tenpence. I handled them: they were all coins that would have been in circulation at the time of his death. Holding that purse meant so many things at the same time, it was making my head swim.

I'm sure any historical researcher would tell you what a thrill it is to handle objects belonging to the subject you are investigating or to read what they had written in their own hand. It feels like being plugged into an electrical circuit that joins you directly to them. I felt something similar when, a while later, I found myself at the

Science Museum in Bradford handling some pieces of scrap paper dated the day before Friese-Greene's sudden demise, on which, in pencil, he had written what was clearly the outline of a speech. In it, he wonders if a film would be made of his life and speculates about what scenes might be included.

There was a bigger message from that purse and those notes, and the way that Coe was so strangely determined to judge a man and his life with no more than a keyhole view: I could neither assume that stories which appeared mythical were fictional nor that accounts which appeared rooted in fact were actually true. I was on my own, starting from zero.

For a decade, I kept researching, encouraged by others in the field and requests to contribute to significant reference works. On a script-development programme, alongside Andrea Arnold (director of *Red Road* and *Fish Tank*), I even wrote a screenplay about the six months Friese-Greene spent in New York, summoned to help beat the Edison monopoly of the film industry. I spent time in New York researching it. And then my energy ran out. I knew I had to either write a book or stop – and who would fund a book? It was a crazy amount of time to devote to a personal obsession.

For 12 years I left it all alone.

In the November of 2016, I joined a friend and 2,000 other people at the Royal Festival Hall to watch a screening of Abel Gance's silent epic *Napoleon*, accompanied by an orchestra led by Carl Davis. It was the third time in my life I had experienced this, and it put me in mind of how my father recalled seeing a version of the film as a child in Poland. He always remembered the extraordinary snowball fight. In the bar afterwards, still floating on air from the exhilaration of it, I began recounting to my friend how a long, long time ago I had done all this research about the beginnings of moving pictures.

The next day I idly wondered if I had any of my Friese-Greene research files on my current laptop. I did. I opened some.

That was all it took. The game was afoot again and since then I have immersed myself ever more deeply, not simply in investigating Friese-Greene but gaining a detailed view of what led to the phenomenon we would call 'cinema'. So, what have I learned so far?

That Friese-Greene came from a working-class background but turned himself into a brand as a photographer who was sought out by high society. And that he helped others do the same.

That his attitudes to women were atypical of his profession and his time – and that had an effect.

That by September 1889 he had not only co-patented a moving-picture film camera but had a second, more advanced version which encapsulated five of Edison's six later patent claims and, indeed, many of the fundamentals of what a typical movie camera would be.

That he didn't succeed in projecting these films as early as his supporters had claimed, but in 1891, whilst in social purdah after a catastrophic bankruptcy, he was experimenting with using perforated film and witnesses recall seeing it projected.

That the supposed evidence of him stealing other people's ideas doesn't hold up, but there is evidence of other people taking credit for his ideas.

That to depict him as some kind of embarrassing incompetent in the field of invention is nonsensical, given both the number of scientific figures who supported him and records showing that between 1896 and 1903 he earned the equivalent of over two million pounds solely from his inventions in a wide variety of fields.

That *The Magic Box* is a downbeat film that neither bangs the drum for Britain nor claims Friese-Greene as THE inventor of moving pictures. It gets things wrong – what biopic doesn't? – but it captures the man. You should watch it.

That his obsession with continuous inventing led to the loss of multiple fortunes and the loss of his family life.

That despite everything, William Friese-Greene remained optimistic, engaged, always thinking about the next great idea. I think perhaps it is my identification with this quality that has kept me hooked.

So, I've surrendered myself to what increasingly feels something like fate or destiny but may rather be an inexorable fascination with a complex and contradictory figure. At a certain point in life, I also had to surrender myself to the ever-mounting evidence that, whether writing or making films or having a conversation, I am fundamentally a storyteller. And that desire to tell stories and reflect the world back at others is so strong that it overwhelms logic and common sense. If it didn't, creative people wouldn't get a damn thing done: books would never be finished and films would never be started.

From the earliest days, Friese-Greene saw the potential for moving pictures to open up a window on the world. After three years of trying, I have been awarded funding to undertake a PhD about the work and influence of Friese-Greene. Now, telling his story has become my story.

I could ask myself what would have happened if I'd never read that plaque but, let's face it, it's way too late for that.



Peter Domankiewicz is a film director, screenwriter and journalist with an abiding interest in the beginnings of moving pictures. He has written for the Guardian and Sight and Sound, as well as contributing to reference works and academic publications. He left his heart in Bristol and intends to pick it up. (photo: Justyna Sanko)



King's Road, Chelsea. Filmed by William Friese-Greene c1891 (author's collection).

Christopher Frayling: Opening *The Magic Box*

Amongst the many plaques in Bath commemorating the great and the good from Georgian and Victorian times, which adorn the houses where they lived and worked (or sometimes merely slept), there is only one which points towards the popular culture of modern times.

It is just off New Bond Street in the corridor at the bottom of Milsom Street. It isn't one of the pucca bronze plaques with scrolls – so it isn't *quite* in the premier division – but by way of compensation it does contain an unusual number of explanatory words. Gainsborough, Fielding, Sheridan, Austen and Handel – even Handel's secretary – did not apparently require footnotes, but these two not-so-eminent Victorians evidently did. When the plaque scheme was first launched in 1899, it had been agreed to include just a name, the period of residence or dates of birth and death, because 'it was not to be presumed that the citizens and visitors would be ignorant of the life and history of the person so honoured'. Well, in this case, that was precisely what was presumed.

The plaque is dedicated to the scientific instrument-maker John Arthur Roebuck Rudge who – says the inscription – was 'the first Englishman to produce moving pictures by means of photographs mounted on a revolving drum', also to 'his friend William Friese-Greene... the inventor of commercial cinematography being the first man to apply celluloid ribbon for this purpose'. Rudge had lived in New Bond Street Place (next door to the plaque). Friese-Greene had lived at 3 Old Bond Street in 1876 (at the age of 21) before opening his shop as 'the Bath photographer' at 7 The Corridor a year later and then adding another outlet at 34 Gay Street in 1881. The research partnership of these two inventors, dating from the early 1880s, the plaque concludes, meant that 'Kinematography can thus be attributed to the labours of these two citizens of Bath where this wonderful invention received its birth'. In other words, together they overtook Thomas Edison, the Lumière brothers and others in the race to create and project motion pictures.

The plaque was sponsored by bookbinder Cedric Chivers – a committed promoter of all things Bath, elected six times as mayor between 1922 and 1928 – and it was unveiled at the beginning of December 1928 in the same decade as Friese-Greene's death in 1921, a time when the inventor was being hastily, and it has to be said

sentimentally, rehabilitated. We know it was Chivers because – most unusually – the plaque bears the name of its donor. It was as if the inscription was saying to citizens and visitors 'this is *my* judgement – it may not be yours'.

Friese-Greene famously died of heart failure, in somewhat ironic circumstances, in May 1921 at the age of 65 shortly after giving an impassioned speech about the parlous state of British film culture to a gathering of senior businessfolk (mainly film-distributors) in London's Connaught Rooms. He had only one shilling and tenpence in his pocket – the price of a cinema ticket – a pawnbroker's chit for a pair of cufflinks and a short reel of film. In a fit of collective remorse – Friese-Greene had become an almost forgotten figure by then – the industry decided to give him a Hollywood-lavish and much-publicised send-off. The funeral at Highgate Cemetery was covered by a newsreel camera; the coffin was decorated with a floral tribute showing a camera and an end title spelled out in purple flowers. The architect Sir Edwin Lutyens (of Cenotaph fame no less) selected a suitable burial plot. An elaborate neo-Gothic memorial sponsored by subscriptions from film people and erected in 1925 marked his grave ('The Inventor of Kinematography... His Genius Bestowed Upon Humanity the Boon of Commercial Kinematography') and the industrialists headed off any adverse publicity about their neglect by asking exhibitors in cinemas across the land to honour the great man's memory by turning their projectors off for two minutes' silence at 3.00pm, the moment of his interment.

Meanwhile, the collector and flamboyant showman Will (Wilfred) Day was writing a series of articles in the *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* about 'how the film was invented', which argued increasingly forcefully that Friese-Greene had indeed created and patented a moving-picture camera before anyone else; that he had successfully projected moving images to an audience; and that he was therefore the unheralded pioneer of the movies. Friese-Greene's name had been submerged by those of Edison and the Lumières, among others, who were much better than he was at publicity and entrepreneurship. In 1922, an exhibition of Rudge's and Friese-Greene's relics, which Day had lovingly assembled, opened at the Science Museum in South Kensington, which helped to promote the cause. This was the context for the unveiling of the plaque in Bath, and of its wording.

Dissolve to 1951. I first heard the name William Friese-Greene when I saw the film *The Magic Box* (John Boulting, 1951), the film industry's official contribution to the Festival of Britain. I can't recall exactly when or where I saw it, but I do remember visiting London's South Bank at the age of five and being deeply impressed even then by the refreshingly clean and modern architecture of the Festival Hall, the 300-foot-tall Skylon, and the Dome of Discovery, and by the thrills and spills of the big dipper, the water-chute, the caterpillar and the tree-top television camera in Battersea Pleasure Gardens. When I appeared on the large TV screen situated down below in the funfair,

I exclaimed to my mother, 'This is *wizard*!'. I even shook hands with a cube-headed metal robot whom I was inspecting at close quarters through my round National Health spectacles. Bliss it was in that dawn... Of the buildings and constructions, only the Festival Hall now remains, with its restaurant called 'The Skylon' – the innovative Telecinema (3D! Stereophonic Sound!) soon made way for the National Film Theatre – but *The Magic Box* is, 70 years later, a lasting trace of those heady days when British ingenuity, and a domesticated version of Modernism, were being celebrated as a tonic to a tired nation.

So, my memory of *The Magic Box*, conflated with my other memories of the festival, was of a nationalistic biopic, Hollywood-style, about a great and unsung pioneer; a piece of flag-waving about how the Brits are great at getting there first but not so good at investment; a stuffy tribute presented by a cinematic poet laureate. A bit like the concluding words on that plaque in Bath. And yet, looking back, it isn't like that at all. It is much more interesting. Yes, the film is based on a piece of hagiography called *Friese-Greene: Close-up of an Inventor*, first published in 1948, by a style journalist from Northern Ireland called Muriel Forth (she of *Manners and Moderns*) who wrote under the pseudonym of Ray Allister, an anagram of *styler* and *stellar*. But what is surprising is how careful the script by Eric Ambler is to acknowledge the controversies surrounding Friese-Greene's contributions and to avoid making any extravagant claims on his behalf.

The film was originally to be entitled *The Shining Light*; then *A Man Called Willie Green*; and finally – after shooting had begun at Elstree on New Year's Day 1951 – it became *The Magic Box*. The late change of title was certainly prudent: *A Man Called Willie* would have made it sound like a Donald McGill seaside postcard, a sort of precursor to the *Carry On* franchise. The *Kine Weekly* (as by then it was called), announcing the start of production, noted with evident relief that 'The script avoids any points which might cause arguments between interests within the industry'. The opening credits are played over incised monuments to the other claimants Edison, and the Lumières, as well as (surprisingly) Marey and Le Prince, while Friese-Greene's name has to wait until the end before it earns a place in the same pantheon as 'a pioneer of the cinema' – not '*the* pioneer', note. We see *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* by the Lumières (plus the apocryphal story of the audience ducking for cover) before we experience Friese-Greene's moment of triumph. And we learn, in a touching sequence involving the inventor's son Graham, that his name has not been mentioned in an encyclopaedia the boy has been reading. It says instead that Edison was the pioneer. 'You did invent the moving pictures, didn't you, Father?'/ 'Yes, I think I did. I wasn't the only one. But I think I was the first – the first patent anyway... in that sense, I was the first.' Which was true: Friese-Greene did indeed patent (in collaboration with a civil engineer) a process for 'taking photographs automatically in a rapid series with a single camera and lens' in 1889, and then presented it to the Photographic Society in Bath the following year.

For most of the film's running-time, Friese-Greene is presented as a gentlemanly, unworldly, idealistic man with a melodious voice ('to capture movement – movement is part of the beauty of things') – rather like Leslie Howard as designer R J Mitchell in *The First of the Few* and perfect casting for Robert Donat – who ends up a three-times bankrupt, and whose family falls apart as a result. Only in the second, delayed flashback – lit more brightly than the first by cinematographer Jack Cardiff – do we see the hero actually succeeding at something. *The Magic Box* – like *Scott of the Antarctic* and *Bonnie Prince Charlie*, both made at around the same time – is about an heroic failure, another great British tradition. In Hollywood, the climax would have been a public trial followed by vindication – and a triumphant montage of the hero's legacy. *The Magic Box* instead ends with the penniless, exhausted Friese-Greene sitting down and dying after he has tried in vain to persuade the film industry to 'grow up with its audience or it will die...'.

The film was intended to coincide with the festival – it was financed, written, filmed and distributed in double-quick time, less than a year – but only just made it: the premiere was on 18 September, just 11 days before the official end of the festival, and it wasn't generally released until early 1952. The marketing stressed that it featured 'over sixty British stars of stage and screen' – many of whom, like the key technical crew, had donated their services, worked for minimum union rate or deferred their reduced salaries – and that this Festival Film was the colourful story of 'the man who designed and operated the first practical cinema camera'.

Much of the pre-publicity centred on Sir Laurence Olivier's three-minute guest appearance as PC94B – filmed over a weekend during rehearsals for his productions of *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Caesar and Cleopatra* with Vivien Leigh – who, while patrolling the back streets of Holborn, unwittingly becomes the first person ever to view motion pictures. Friese-Greene runs into the street, hollering with joy, ushers the suspicious constable into his dingy, rented studio, then over-excitedly projects his flickering images – eight frames per second – onto a crumpled bedsheet. 'That's Hyde Park,' says the by now amazed policeman. 'Where's it come from? And where's it gone to?... You must be a very happy man, Mr Friese-Greene!'

Actually, this piece of folklore didn't happen to Friese-Greene at all. It was originally told about the film pioneers Robert Paul and Birt Acres – in another 'eureka' moment – when first they managed to get their own film running in a Kinetoscope machine, at Paul's workshop in Hatton Garden [February 1895]. It seems to have been the irrepressible Will Day who transposed the story to his hero when talking to a journalist a few days after Friese-Greene's death. There had, said the original account, been 'such a cheering' [from Paul and Acres] 'that the police came in to know what was the matter'. Since then, this incident had appeared in print as a Friese-Greene story a few times, in books such as Luke Wood's *Romance of the*



Page from the original pressbook produced as part of the promotional campaign for *The Magic Box* (Rank Organisation, 1951).

Movies [1937], and Allister included it – briefly – in her chapter 'I've got it!'. Eric Ambler added some poetic licence. The film's pressbook rashly claimed: 'That Friese-Greene succeeded in 1889 in showing the first results of his work to an audience of one, a bewildered City policeman, is established fact.' It devoted a whole page to that one sequence – with stills of Donat and Olivier – under the headline 'At last – the amazing achievement!'. As historians of film technology have noted, the wood-and-brass machine used by the inventor to project those images of cousin Alfred and his boy in Hyde Park wasn't in fact available to him at that point in his researches – it's a replica of his *stereoscopic* camera – and in any case it didn't function like that. Oddly, the production did make a replica of the actual machine used by Friese-Greene but decided for some reason not to make use of it.

So, on the screen the magic box was the wrong box. Never mind. It made for one of the most memorable sequences in the film. Olivier had been sent the script to choose which if any cameo role attracted him – and he chose well: one theatre critic reckoned that Olivier's performance as PC94B was 'a vastly more reticent piece of acting' than his pantomime villain *Richard III* on the stage, and all the better for it.

Also memorable was the meeting between Henry Fox Talbot (Basil Sydney) and Friese-Greene at Lacock – where 'the man who invented photography' (no mention of Daguerre and *those* squabbles over patents) gives an emotional speech about innovators and original thinkers who 'mustn't mind looking foolish' to conventional society, if they are to remain true to themselves. This speech is the heart of the film, and the key to its attitude towards Friese-Greene – who replies with his vision of making 'a camera that will photograph movement', a piece of dialogue filmed by John Boulting through the flames of a roaring fire. In the film, it is Rudge (Cecil Troughton) who introduces the two gentleman-inventors. In fact, Friese-Greene worked with Rudge in the early 1880s, Fox Talbot died in 1877, and there's no evidence that the two men ever actually met. Again, never mind. It is stirring stuff. The sequence occurs during the second flashback, where it is cross-cut with a concert given by the Bath Choral Society in the Assembly Rooms: a parody of a ponderous Arthur Sullivan oratorio is being conducted by the great man himself [played – as an in-joke – by the prolific conductor of film music Muir Matheson]. 'My true love has forsaken me – where is he?', warbles the choir with Joyce Grenfell much in evidence, as soloist Friese-Greene, who has forgotten all about the concert, continues his fateful conversation with Fox Talbot several miles away. His wife Helena is publicly humiliated by this – and they decide to leave Bath for London.

Reviewing *The Magic Box*, the *New York Times* wanted it to be *more* explicit about the claims it made for the hero: the main problem with the story, it said, was that the film did not have enough 'association with historical events', but at least it shone a spotlight on 'an almost forgotten Englishman'. Others in the United States took a more aggressive stance. One commentator claimed that this was a blatant attempt to establish England rather than America as the homeland of cinematography, which was probably a plot by the socialist government (half the funding for the film did come from public money). The production issued a defensive press release stating that America had Edison, France had the Lumières and we had Friese-Greene and let's leave it at that.

Whatever the reason, the film was not a success at home or abroad. It cost £220,000 and earned just £82,398 in the UK and hardly anything Stateside. The young Martin Scorsese loved it and called the scene where Friese-Greene explains the concept of 'persistence of vision' with the aid of a flicker-book 'one of my primal film experiences'. But the British public preferred another biopic doing the rounds at much the same time, *The Great Caruso* – in which Mario Lanza sang Gounod's 'Ave Maria' at a midnight Mass and declared that a crowd of American groupies singing 'Happy Birthday to You' was 'the nicest thing that ever happened' to him. Were these things actually experienced by Caruso? Swept along by the sentiment and the singing, the public didn't seem to mind. But Friese-Greene was somehow different. Attempts to rehabilitate or reappraise his contribution had always proved controversial. He'd been neglected,



Page from the original pressbook produced as part of the promotional campaign for *The Magic Box* [Rank Organisation, 1951].

then venerated. The over-the-top flag-waving of the 1920s would eventually lead to an equal and opposite reaction, and to a strong tendency in the 1950s to diminish his contribution.

But... every time I walk past that plaque in New Bond Street Place, and reread the inscription, I think of *The Magic Box* with all its contradictions. And the look on the face of PC94B, while he struggles to maintain his dignity.



Sir Christopher Frayling was formerly Rector of the Royal College of Art, Chair of Arts Council England and a Governor of the British Film Institute. A long-term resident of Bath, he is a writer, an award-winning broadcaster on network radio and television, and a film critic.

Edson Burton: Ticket Stubs, Brochures and Cookie Crumbs

Cinema is my life's companion. Who I am, how I am, what I believe has been a dialogue with cinema. Of all our journeys together, parenthood has been the most redolent.

I was a 20-something student when my then partner and I began parenting. Exhausted by teaching at a comprehensive, raising our two and my incessant talking, she rightfully claimed Saturday for pottering. My role, post-breakfast to early evening, was to entertain and adventure with the kids. We visited friends, played in parks, playrooms and the city farms. As much as all this was fun, our day would not feel complete without a *pièce de résistance*. Cost and/or distance – I'm a non-driver – make some of Bristol's family attractions biannual visits at best. Cinema was and remains, if you find the right deal, a cheapish family outing.

The Odeon cinema Broadmead was our favourite haunt. The No 90 bus at the bottom of our street stopped outside. It was also perfect for us if we were visiting friends in nearby St Pauls. Tickets were cheap and with only four screens and regular staff, the Odeon seemed familial.

Food rituals were a large part of our cinema visits. Such rituals were as important and sometimes more vivid than the films we saw. By the time we arrived at the cinema we were normally in need of a snack if not more. The Odeon either lacked the staff or could not be bothered to monitor whether the food being consumed in the aisles was purchased on site, at the nearby superstore, or pre-prepared. To assuage my guilt, we would purchase overpriced cookies, popcorn, or pick 'n' mix from the counter. Neurotically fearing favouritism, I would sit in the middle of my two, and while the ads rolled parcel out the food. Sandwiches consumed, I would then pass the snacks back and forth between us. The sharing was something of a dance with each of us adopting a strategy for ensuring we had our share. My daughter favoured the great scoop, my son the regular pick, me a conflicted nip. We ate in the first quarter of the film as food was ultimately distracting.

Cost-effectiveness and convenience were only the surface reasons for our cinema romance. Like many a parent, consciously or unconsciously, I salved the injuries of my own childhood through

my children. I was one of eight siblings raised by working-class Caribbean parents. Money was scarce. Treats were in short supply. I have scant memories of visiting the cinema as a child – *Jaws* and *Star Wars*. For the most part we had to wait until the new releases eventually made their way to the small screen. Yet film was a reason for the family to gather, hush and gasp in collective wonder. With my children, I was both adult and infant, identifying with the tropes of orphan, awkward or outcast child protagonists on a journey of self-discovery in a world dominated by angelic and diabolical adults.

Cinema provided reconnection and discovery. I had not seen an animation feature film at the cinema since I was a child. Mr Magoo and Bugs Bunny were inescapably part of my repertoire of cultural references, but I had subliminally associated animation with the stout legs of the Black maid in *Tom and Jerry*. There was plenty of Snow White and nothing, I realised on reflection, for my Black inner child. Returning to the cinema with my children I was won over by 3D animation. Moreover, Pixar invested in storylines that recognised the sophistication of modern kids. Our children see us weep, argue, divorce, lie and generally mess up. The flawed humanity on screen reflected our own story. My then partner and I separated before our children became teenagers. There were times when film played out conversations that I did not know how to even start.

Layered narratives also kept me and the other mums and dads present awake. We were, after all, the paying customers.

For the most part my inner critic was on pause but occasionally thoughts would intrude. Does Will Smith's voice role in *Shark Tale* or Eddie Murphy's in *Shrek* reinforce racial stereotypes? There is not word count enough to even consider my screaming disbelief at the anti-Semitic, anti-Black grotesques of *The Phantom Menace*. On balance the story arc – the little person coming good – trumped the racialised elements for which I could not find an easy language to explain to my then pre-teen offspring. You can imagine their eyes glazing over had I tried. I kept my disquiet to myself, conscious that we were still somewhat removed from finding Black representation that I could whole-heartedly endorse. There was little else available.

As a child I was a comic-book fan – Marvel over DC all day, every day. Thanks to CGI I was able to share my childhood passion with my daughter and son. CGI made superhero movies possible. Heroes appeared to fly against real skies compared to the strings, rigs and fake backdrops that I recalled in the Eighties. The children adored Spider-Man – for whom Tobey Maguire was a perfect choice. I couldn't quite get past the notion of a flying spider in lycra, though much respected the Shakespearean elements the writers brought to the franchise. I had no such scepticism when it came to the X-Men. Read as intended by the original comic-book writers, *X-Men* dealt with US race relations with more nuance than many realist movies. We also had a kick-ass Black heroine, Storm, played by Oscar-winner Halle



Poster promoting *X-Men: The Last Stand* featuring Storm [Twentieth Century Fox in association with Marvel Entertainment, 2006].

Berry. Of course, as teenage beckoned, the X-Men series also mirrored the outsidersness and identity crises that teenage-hood is air to.

We grew up with these franchises, they changed as we changed as we grew older. Choosing what we viewed increasingly became a shared decision. I was not always in pole position. I had to sacrifice my socialist-worker resentment of plummy posh kids, private schools, and castles for the higher goal of seeing my children ride the roller-coaster of the Harry Potter franchise. My daughter remembers sitting on my lap in terror in the closing scenes of the *Chamber of Secrets*. By the time we watched the final movie (part two of the *Deathly Hallows*), our roles were reversed. Like believing in Santa, we were all entertaining our inner children as the franchises that marked our lives came to the end of their generational cycle. In the final film of the Wolverine spin-off trilogy, a cracked, ageing Logan and a dying Professor Xavier sacrifice their lives to protect a new generation of mutants. Rated 15, the writers recognised the children of the first X-Men movie were young adults, open to more complex themes and references – and the adults that had accompanied them 15 years previously had moved that much closer to their own twilight.

Being father to two bright and film-savvy teenagers, I could also drop the false omniscience of earlier years. My children were far better at spotting minor details that made sense later in the plot line. Feeling hideously confused by the end of *Inception* I turned to my daughter for clarification. For her it was of course crystal clear.

Our rituals changed as university grew near. Friends took priority, so we saw movies as and when we could. We could not always agree on film choices and besides my children sometimes required different conversations. Watching *Juno* at the cinema with my daughter was a rite of passage for us both. Likewise, watching '71 with my son affirmed our shared interest in smart action, smart social realism. My daughter, the eldest, was the first to depart for university. My incredibly loyal son eschewed his social circle to spend time with his old man. His commitments increased and staying across town was no longer viable with early starts for rugby and/or choir. Cinema gave us consistency, and a space to commune without words. It also gave us moments of divine comedy. I assumed that the need for silence in *A Quiet Place* would kick in as the plot unravelled which would then give us enough time to throw back the snacks. Wrong – and thus ensued an agonising half hour of sucking crisps, whilst minimising the sound of the packet.

Parenthood does not end but as my children matured, we were able to share grown-up tastes. Sometimes as a three, sometimes separately, we would visit Watershed to catch an arthouse film that we agreed upon. This could however backfire as when my son, by then a strapping 16, agreed to join me to see *The Master*. Two of our favourite actors – Joaquin Phoenix and Philip Seymour Hoffman – were in the lead roles. It was a sure-fire bonding moment. It was certainly that as we both squirmed while on screen Freddie, the protagonist played by Joaquin, masturbated into a sand sculpture built by his fellow navvies. Viewing sex on screen is still something that most parents and children want to avoid.

My children now live in different cities at opposite ends of the country. We may still visit the cinema if they visit. Regardless, I have a clutch of memories, old ticket stubs, brochures and cookie crumbs.



Edson Burton is a poet, writer (for theatre, radio and screen), academic and compere. He has been a consultant and coordinator for a range of history projects in Bristol including a study of Bristol's Old Market ward, *Vice and Virtue* [2014] and *Black South West Network's Race Through the Generations*.
[photo: Claudio Alhers]

David Sproxtton: *The Wrong Trousers* in Venice

I must have felt it was going to be a particularly important event sometime before Nick Park and I set off to Venice in the first week of September 1993, because a few days beforehand I went out to buy a new jacket.

John Lewis supplied the necessary apparel, according to my diary, and no doubt at a good price, although that detail is omitted. My diary also notes that I was feeling quite nervous about the trip, as it was to be the first public screening of *The Wrong Trousers* at a major international film festival. The film had only just been completed and the print was fresh from the laboratories, unseen.

There are times when sitting in a cinema can feel extra special. I recall my father taking me to see Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* in Cinerama in London when I must have been about 14. That huge screen, extraordinary images, incredible sound, made it a highly memorable occasion, even if, as a school-boy, I didn't really understand what the film was all about. A few years earlier David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* had the same impact on me, again defeating my narrative understanding at the time, but registering as something exceptional. I don't recall noticing the audience's reaction for either of those films. It was just something I felt. The Venice experience would be rather different.

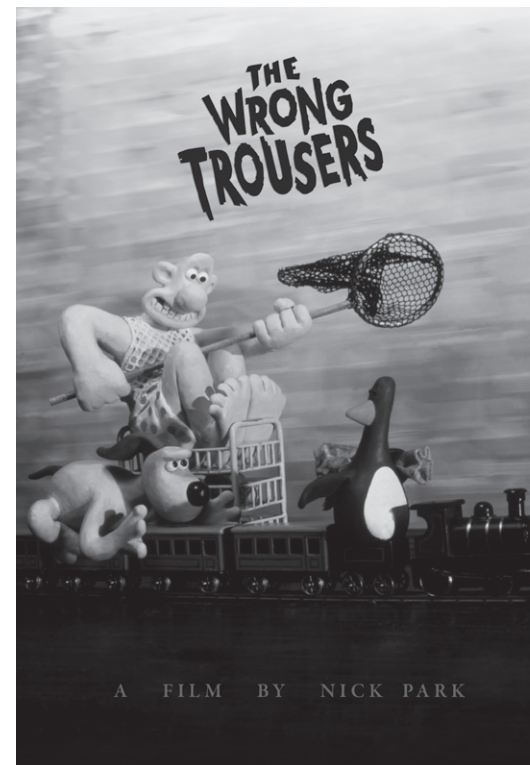
Nick and I arrived in the city from the airport on a waterbus, failing to see the hotel into which we had been booked, the Londra Palace, right in front of us. We walked in a circle of Venetian streets, with our bags, rather in the manner of Jacques Tati, before finding the hotel. We entered the five-star retreat no doubt looking very wide-eyed and innocent. Nick and I had both been to a few animation film festivals, but nothing as fancy and glamorous as the Venice International Film Festival, with its swish hotels and expensive drinks. We were a little disbelieving at first, especially as our film was just the cartoon short to support a full-blown live-action feature film. Our disbelief must have communicated itself because when we went to get our accreditation there was a certain hesitancy from security about whether to let us through to the inner sanctum. Clearly, we didn't fit their image of respected, international film-makers, despite my new jacket, but we finally got through the cordon and were welcomed wholeheartedly by the Italian women staffing the desks. First stage complete, now for a bit of sightseeing, then a few drinks in preparation for the following day's press screening.

The Wrong Trousers had been partnered with a film called *Manhattan by Numbers*, directed by the Iranian film-maker Amir Naderi not long after he had settled in New York. After a lazy breakfast we headed to the press screening room, a temporary cinema, as I recall, with the projector installed on a wooden platform. There were no introductions, no fanfare, just a bunch of film critics, probably hung-over from the night before, brandishing espressos and wondering what was in store for their morning cinematic experience. We were rather wondering the same. *The Wrong Trousers* was screened first, being the support film, and we were pleased to hear giggling and stifled guffaws from the hardened hacks who seemed to make up the bulk of those present. Nick and I looked at each other, pleasantly surprised by the reaction. There was a smattering of applause as the film ended. That was certainly good to hear.

Manhattan by Numbers soon started, and we settled back into our seats. At the first reel change-over something went wrong; the image was upside down and running backwards. Someone hadn't checked the geometry of the print. Squinting behind me to look at the projector I realised it would take some time to unravel the problem. I looked at Nick. We swiftly agreed that neither of us had been gripped by the film so far and that we could do with a cup of good Italian coffee. We discretely got up and left the screening room to find a café. We noticed a number of others had the same idea. I don't know whether Amir was in the audience but looking back at the situation I rather hoped he wasn't. The public screening of the two films was



Nick Park in Venice in 1993 [author photo].



Promotional poster for *The Wrong Trousers* [Aardman Animations, 1993].

the following afternoon so Nick and I relaxed by wandering around Venice and enjoying the atmosphere. It was all new to both of us.

September 4 1993, the Big Day, and we made our way to the Lido for the public screening, in the vast Pallazo del Cinema. But it was really Amir Naderi's Big Day; we were just second fiddle to his feature debut. We found ourselves escorted through the palatial cinema by Amir's entourage, behind the director, who the crowd were eager to see. What they thought of us, two young men, looking rather overwhelmed, following the man of the moment, I've no idea. The entourage, whilst courteous, were also not quite sure who we were.

We took our seats in the front row of the balcony sitting next to Amir, and wished him luck. The lights went down, and *The Wrong Trousers* came up. Very soon we heard laughter and it seemed to continue through much of the film. It was at this point that I realised that the film was something special. Here was a serious feature-film audience thoroughly enjoying 30 minutes of Wallace and Gromit, before the main feature for the evening started. Could it really be that the 18 months spent shooting the film was going to pay off after all? Before we knew it the credits began to roll, and to our

amazement the audience rose and gave the film a standing ovation. Many turned to look up to the directors' seats, clapping furiously. I turned to Nick gesturing for him to stand and take a bow. Nick, forever shunning the limelight, gently rose and acknowledged the applause. Amir turned to us, clapping enthusiastically. I suddenly felt very sorry for him, knowing that his film was unlikely to garner such a reception.

The applause died down, the lights dimmed, and *Manhattan by Numbers* wound its way smoothly through the projector this time. Unfortunately, the reels we hadn't seen didn't change our opinion of the film. Within 45 minutes a moderate proportion of the audience had left the auditorium. We knew we had to stay in our seats to the end and I spent much of the time wondering what to say to Amir once his film had finished. 'Such a film!' is a neat, neutral phrase in these circumstances, I've since learnt, but you have to follow it up with some positive comments. My diary doesn't recall how I managed the situation as we left the cinema with Amir, but I know Nick and I were buzzing. A standing ovation, what more could you ask for? We all went for a celebratory dinner with the festival organisers, where Nick was toasted for making such a wonderful film.

They were right, of course. *The Wrong Trousers* is a wonderful film, and it was that night at Venice, after all the angst, sweat and tears shed in its creation, that proved it for me. A few months later the film earned Nick his second Academy Award. Again, I had gone out to buy a new jacket before we flew out, but this time it was a dinner jacket.



David Sproxton co-founded Aardman with Peter Lord. He has overseen the development of the company from a two-man partnership to one of the pre-eminent animation houses in the industry. His most recent Aardman film credits are as Executive Producer on Nick Park's animated comedy-adventure *Early Man* and *A Shaun the Sheep Movie: Farmageddon*. He stepped back from the role of Managing Director in 2019 and is now a trustee of the company, which is based in Bristol. [photo: Aardman]

Sian Norris: Women on the Silver Screen

When I was 12 years old, I fell in love with a woman wearing a white blouse, arriving at a bar with a man to whom she was secretly married.

I watched, spellbound, as she was forced to choose between her husband and the man she loved – who in turn was forced to choose between his own self-interest, and fighting for the anti-fascist cause.

The woman was Ingrid Bergman and the film was *Casablanca*. I must have watched it dozens of times since then, including on the big screen. From that first discovery, I devoured as much as I could about Bergman and the films of her era, watching scratchy recordings of *Spellbound* and *Notorious* on VHS video, staying in to watch *For Whom the Bell Tolls* on a Saturday afternoon on BBC2, cutting out pictures from magazines of Hollywood's Golden Era stars and keeping them in a scrapbook. I may have been growing up in the 1990s, but my heart was in a 1930s picture house watching the talkies.

Back then, my interaction with cinema was almost entirely through still photographs. This was before the days when you could stream classic movies on YouTube or even buy second-hand DVDs on Amazon. I gazed at photos of Garbo and Dietrich before I ever watched *Queen Christina* or *Blue Angel*. I cut my hair in a Jean Seberg crop, inspired by the *Breathless* poster on my wall. I'd not yet seen her hawk the *Herald Tribune* on the Champs-Élysées. When I taped Garbo's *Camille* off BBC2, and bought a VHS boxset of Marilyn Monroe films, I watched them over and over until the tape ran thin.

I was intoxicated with the glamorous image of Old Hollywood – even if images were all I had. My bookshelf was crammed with coffee-table books full of photos from films I'd never seen, although I could tell you the plots and the stars of all of them.

To me, those movies were populated by a world of women. It was women who were the stars, not the men who played beside them. Who remembers Glenn Ford when next to Rita Hayworth, or Fred MacMurray compared to Barbara Stanwyck? The women were spot-lit, front and centre – it was their names in lights.

When I went to London as a student, the pictures in my coffee-table books finally began to walk, talk, dance and sing. I got a membership to what was then the National Film Theatre (NFT) and, as often as I could, I'd be in the middle row watching their reruns of classic movies.



Promotional lobby card for *Stage Door* (RKO Radio Pictures, 1937).

I saw musicals and noir, political thrillers and lots of romance. I watched a print of *Porgy and Bess* that was so old, the film was washed in a light pink. I finally got to see Audrey Hepburn take a bite of her breakfast outside Tiffany's window, as she towered above me a hundred feet tall. I laughed as Mae West cracked her whip at a lion and Cary Grant; cheered on Marilyn racing into the horizon on a motorboat with two men in drag and a Florida millionaire; giggled at Katharine Hepburn's pre-wedding hangover in *The Philadelphia Story*.

At this point I was living in a shared house with no windows downstairs. My bedroom door had a habit of falling off and a draught meant I'd get woken up by the attic door banging in my ceiling. Let's just say, in the NFT, the lives on screen were a little less grotty and a lot more luxe.

But the movies weren't simply an escape because the characters had natural light in their homes and bedding that looked clean.

This was the early 00s – a period whose treatment of women has been undergoing some re-evaluation after the release of the Britney Spears documentary by the *New York Times*. When I look back on that cultural moment, it can be summed up with the phrase: women were seen and not heard.

Everywhere you looked in the early 00s, women's bodies were on display. On the covers of lads' mags, women's naked bodies were served up to a male gaze. In women's magazines, slices of naked flesh were served up with bits of cellulite magnified and circled. Women existed as legs, arms, tits and asses – men's mags gave 'vital statistics' relating to cup size; women's magazines offered statistics on weight and body mass with the obsessive cruelty of a stalker. We saw the faces of car-crash celebs in mug shots and their crotches in paparazzi pics. We were surrounded by female flesh, but we hardly ever got to hear women's voices.

That overt misogyny and its accompanying silencing seeped out of the media and into our own lives. Sexism was all around us, but it had become impossible to complain. We were post-feminist now, and if we didn't like the jokes and the cut-up bodies and the sexual entitlement then that was our problem. It was ironic, except when it wasn't.

It's no wonder that in university seminars, I didn't say much. One time I ventured an opinion and was told by a man that we weren't talking about the suggestion I'd made. I don't think I said another word that year.

Then I'd walk into the NFT and everything would change.

At the cinema, women got to speak. We got to be brave and we got to crack jokes and we got to cause havoc and wreak hell. Some of us met bad ends but it was even better when we got away with it.

Women in these movies never stopped talking: Katharine Hepburn wisecracked her way through *Bringing Up Baby* just like she did in *Adam's Rib*. They were successful at their careers – didn't I want to be a journalist after watching Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday* and Kay Thompson in *Funny Face*? Women were funny – Jean Harlow in *Bombshell* and Clara Bow in everything [but especially *It, I love It*]. They were sexy and in control – no wonder you can't tear your gaze from Mae West when she wrote, directed and starred in her best roles. They were brave and self-determined, just look at Lauren Bacall in *To Have and Have Not*. It didn't always end well for these women, but some of them had a happy ending and at least all of them got to *do*.

Of course, most of the bad endings were a result of women characters stepping outside the strict gender roles imposed on them during the Golden Age. To be fair, many women in modern films are punished for transgressing those roles too (and rewarded for sticking to them). Still, I'm not trying to say the 1930s was some magical era of female emancipation. Life was dangerous for women movie stars in the patriarchal studio system, where they faced a culture of sexual abuse and even enforced drug use.

But when the mainstream cinema I grew up with was packed with teen gross-out comedies and superhero epics – films where women's

bodies existed as objects for men to use and abuse, where they're 'hooker', 'daughter', 'wife' – then hearing women speak funny lines or even get to express a full range of human emotion felt pretty damn liberating. Let alone Jane Russell exhibiting the female gaze in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

One of the best films of that era for me remains *Stage Door*. Ginger Rogers may have done everything backwards and in high heels for Fred, but in *Stage Door* she is determinedly moving forward with life on her own terms and in sensible shoes. The film celebrates female friendship in all its complex loves and rivalries. It exposes poverty and women's working lives – showing with empathy the vulnerability of women who don't have wealth or family or connections to keep them afloat. It tackles issues of male exploitation and entitlement in a way that is strikingly modern... and it does it all with Rogers, Katharine Hepburn, Lucille Ball and the is-she-isn't-she Eve Arden, who strides around the rickety set in enviably well-cut trousers while draped in her cat.

This essay isn't intended as a nostalgia-fest, a sigh and a shrug that *they don't make them like they used to*. There were terrible films made in the 1930s and 1940s, and there are incredible films made today.

It's simply that, at an age when I was being told women could only be one thing, the NFT reruns showed me how I could be something else.

Women didn't have to be naked and silent. We didn't have to exist in the male gaze, or only ever be a plot device in *his* narrative. Women didn't have to be bit parts in men's lives.

We could have the best lines, while wearing the best hat.



Sian Norris is a writer and journalist specialising in reproductive and LGBTIQ rights. Her work has been published by *openDemocracy 50:50*, the *Guardian*, the *i*, *New Statesman*, *Byline Times*, *politics.co.uk* and many more. Her book, *Birth Violence*, will be published by Verso in 2022. She is also the founder of the Bristol Women's Literature Festival. [photo: David Sturdy]

Tara Judah: My Year Without Cinema

More than a year has passed since I last visited my one true love: cinema. Our breakup was unwitting and unwanted. It was an almost 40-year romance. I miss it.

In its absence, I travel regularly through my memories to the most beautiful moments of that long-standing love. Sometimes shared with family, sometimes with colleagues and friends, even if alone or shared with strangers, cinema-going is an enchantment, alive in my heart and soul.

Growing up in Australia, my earliest memories of cinema are like my earliest memories of life: nothing romantic, just the way things were. And an especially prevalent pastime in the summer, because the cinemas had air-conditioning and our family home did not. I don't ever remember a time of not going – even on holiday we would visit a cinema. It wasn't special to me as a child, because it was normalised in my lower-middle-class suburban existence. It wasn't until I was a teenager that I realised it could be romantic.

I've told this story countless times and will happily wax lyrical until my dying days about *the* cinema that turned my head and stole my heart, at the tender age of 15 or thereabouts – the romance genre can get rose-tinted and misty-eyed on the details. It was Melbourne's iconic Astor Theatre, a single-screen beauty built in 1936, with a seating capacity of close to 1,100 at the time. It was 1996, Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* was mid-run, back when a single film could marquee for a month or more – and it introduced me to cinema as an event. From its glorious gold curtains that physically announced the 70mm photochemical film print (with six-track magnetic sound), to the biggest cinema screen I'd ever seen (it was then the largest cinema screen in the southern hemisphere, dwarfed only by IMAX Melbourne, in 1998, which has, on and off, held the title of largest cinema screen anywhere), the Astor rocked my world.

At the Astor, I fell in love, and I fell hard. Even though I'd been cinema-going all my life, it was the first time I discovered cinema-going as more than just the movie I went to see. There was an overture and an intermission, and whether I was queuing for an ice-cream or staring quizzically and in awe at the theatre's mash-up of Art Deco and jazz modern designs, I could hear people discussing the finer elements of the films, talking about them in a way that I, as an outer-suburban teen, had never heard before.

This was not just about falling in love with cinema, it was also about learning the more sophisticated inner-city, upper-middle-class arthouse cinema discourse. Watching a host of big-screen epics – most memorable are Wolfgang Petersen's *Das Boot* (1981), John Sturges' *The Great Escape* (1963), and Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) – I learnt fast. I was too young and car-less to travel to the cinema myself, so I convinced my mother to take me every Sunday until I was 18, when I immediately got my driver's licence and my first job in an arthouse cinema. This was no fleeting affair; cinema was the love of my life.

I have, ever since, sought out the warm embrace of a darkened auditorium, where flickering images dance with wild abandon; ideas, aesthetics, and ideology pirouetting across the light-porous canvas of a cinema screen. My romance only ever accelerated over the years as my access to cinema increased with press screenings and exhibitor preview events along with invitations to and even holidays at international film festivals. My passion blurred the lines between my personal and professional selves. Not once, as attendances skyrocketed from weekly to almost daily, did I ever think there would be a time in my life where cinema would be missing.

It was slow, at first. People – in the industry, especially, but even friends – would tease me when I was pregnant, about how I'd miss it once I had the baby. I didn't believe a word of it. I would simply take the baby with me, tucked under my jacket, in a sling. Or so I thought. I was able to continue to travel to film festivals right up until my third trimester, when I journeyed to Rochester, NY, for the George Eastman House's Nitrate Picture Show, where I would sit, slightly uncomfortable for my almost eight-months-pregnant body, but emotionally at ease as the proscenium lights dimmed and the curtains drew to reveal staggeringly beautiful shades of black and white in a most pristine nitrate print of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940). In fact, cinema-going was one of the very last things I did before my baby arrived, visiting my then workplace, Watershed in Bristol, to see Asif Kapadia's *Diego Maradona* (2019) followed by a Q&A with the film-maker, the same day that my waters broke (thankfully not in the cinema, but more comfortably at home).

One saving grace for me in the first seven to eight months of my son's life was Cube Microplex's Baby Cinema (also in Bristol). Sure, the lights are dimmed rather than out, and the sound isn't quite banging through the Dolby stereo as the film-makers intended, but at least I could sit in my favourite hometown venue and let the romance reignite, like a slightly awkward teenager after an accidental mini-break. Sometimes, especially around the six-to-seven-month mark, my son would veto a screening. I still don't know how Alejandro Landes' *Monos* (2019) ends. Other times, and at the multiplex, he was so delighted by the images, that I was forced to stay, even if I didn't care much for the film or the experience – Tom Hooper's *Cats* (2019) springs to mind. It wasn't so much a relationship on hiatus as one rediscovering its rhythm.

As my son reached eight months of age, I took my first trip to the cinema without him. I didn't know it would also be (at the time of writing) my last. When the reality of the pandemic hit the UK, I had barely rediscovered my love in its purest form; sitting in pitch-black darkness, my heart, mind, and body illuminated only by the light reflecting off the screen in front of me; stillness and silence, interrupted only by the film-makers' wants; the comfort of sinking into a plush seat, raked at the appropriate angle and height so that even if I wasn't in the front row (as I so often am), I would still only see the moving images set before me, my fellow cinema-goers present but as still and steady as the screen-masking framing the experience.

The last film I saw in a cinema was Leigh Whannell's dramatic horror *The Invisible Man* (2020). It was a great film, in my opinion, but probably not so defining if it weren't for the more than year-long absence of big-screen experience that has followed. Every cinema experience I have ever had – even the most technically awful ones where films shot in the 1.37: 1 aspect ratio, to enhance the feeling of claustrophobia felt by their protagonists, including Andrea Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* (2011) and László Nemes' *Son of Saul* (2015), were presented without masking – has meant something to me. It became my life's work because it was my life's passion. It is missing but we remain inseparable. Cinema-going, and the majesty of its experience has, I believe, engendered in me, and in my heart, an empathetic, emotionally-led critic and improviser.



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Margaret Heffernan:

Watching *Never Look Away*

You can't look away: the film is too gorgeous, its characters too vulnerable, their story too puzzling. Tightly crafted, it feels loose: no genre, no signposts, no familiar structure that tells you early on what you're in for. Only sounds and images too rapturous to ignore.

But it's three hours long. Almost impossible for cinema owners to schedule profitably, it ran just a week or two and few came. The minute Watershed scheduled it, I insisted that my two children (aged 20 and 25) come with me. This wasn't a huge stretch; they'd loved Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's earlier film, *The Lives of Others*. But three hours? I offered the reward of a Chinese meal afterwards. What kind of film was it, they asked. I couldn't tell them; I still can't. Yet when it finished, they turned to me, bright-eyed: that felt like no time at all.

Time is a big subject in this movie. In the first part of the film, we see a lot of Sebastian Koch's rigid Nazi doctor, Carl Seeband. But then he disappears for an hour. We forget all about him as we follow the early life of an aspiring artist, Kurt Barnert (played with a rough tenderness by Tom Schilling). But for at least an hour, we have little idea what the film is about. The length of his film allows von Donnersmarck to give us the experience in a movie that we have in life: moving past any number of unexplained people and places whose meaning we don't know unless the passage of time connects them. We wander from tragedy to happiness to confusion, love, laughter and frustration, collecting and discarding memories but with no capacity to predict which, if any, will matter.

Kurt dimly gleams this, as he moves from sign-painting, to socialist realism in East Berlin and to a state of abject confusion at the Art Akademie in Dusseldorf. 'If I tell you six numbers at random, that's just dumb,' he tries to explain, 'but when I read the winning numbers from the lottery, suddenly they have some quality, something imperative, even beautiful.' No one knows what he's talking about, but the film shows us: that the random events in our lives acquire meaning, even beauty. But it takes time to see how.

Time and freedom. That the film can't easily be categorised is as important and deliberate as its length. Genre imposes a certain inevitability; the formal logic of an action movie reassures us from



Promotional poster for *Never Look Away* [Pergamon Film/Wiedemann & Berg Filmproduktion/Beta Cinema, distributed by Sony Pictures Classics, 2018].

the start that, however disconnected a series of events might appear, the mystery will be neatly solved by the end. All along the way we're given clues, the handrails that reassure us we're on a predetermined path and we're safe. That isn't von Donnersmarck's game. He is all about ambiguity and paradox: a horror story imbued with love, a sensuous film about ideas, a Nazi movie that deeply explores the source of human creativity, a ravishingly beautiful film about the ugliest people. Ambiguity, the irreducibility of life to slogans, mantras, equations and strategies, holds all of that tension. Early on, Kurt asks, 'why does the most idiotic snapshot have more reality than my paintings?' only to discover that it's his paintings that reveal the true reality of the snapshots.

Had I said any of this to my kids, they would probably not have joined me; it all sounds so cerebral and abstract. (The film even risks an explanation of Descartes' 'I think therefore I am' that bests any philosopher's.) But the visual and aural beauty of the film makes the ambiguity mesmerising. Cinematographer Caleb Deschanel, the only English speaker on the set, says that not understanding the actors' words meant that he could judge the effectiveness of shots only by

how they looked; most have the eloquence of paintings. The weave of sound effects [rustling leaves, clocks] with Bach, Purcell and Max Richter's soundtrack gives the film that sense of choiceful intent that persuades us it *will* all add up to something, even though it's nearly two and a half hours before we know what.

Beauty in image, sound and performances makes us care. We've seen in young Kurt a childhood of violence and loss. Can it ever be repaired? What would that look like? Our question, of course, is his. Instinctively he moves towards freedom: from the demands of the East German state to an art school where he's told: you can do anything you like in here. 'If only I knew what that was,' he replies lightly, though the thought threatens to crush him. After so much hardship, freedom is confusing.

What turns Kurt into the painter he feels himself to be is life: failure, experiments, love, grief, frustration and laughter. It is as these accumulate that he becomes an artist: not from ideas but from experience deeply plumbed. It's an agonising process, saturated with uncertainty about whether any of his flawlessly executed but derivative attempts will amount to anything. Almost all artists talk about their work as a mysterious combination of invention and discovery and that's one of the stories *Never Look Away* tells. Kurt tries to invent himself through any number of styles: from socialist realism when in East Germany to faux-Jackson Pollock when searching for a marketable idea in the West. Each is a conversation with himself: is this the artist I am? He's dazzlingly competent but knows the answer is 'no'. The scenes are funny, tender; we all experiment to find out who we are. But as time passes, the quest becomes desperate for Kurt. His art fails. His wife miscarries. He has no money and depends on his Nazi father-in-law who points out grimly that, by Kurt's age, Mozart was already dead. Nobody can help him. His radiance dims. The whole film goes dark.

The search is hard and long; it won't be condensed into a neat 90-minute narrative. It wanders, seems lost, comes in and out of focus. Having the fortitude to persevere in the face of doubt is what gives art and artists their strength. What von Donnersmarck knows is that Kurt's is the generation that restored Germany, not by looking away but by insisting that the past be examined. The physical reconstruction of the country in the immediate post-war period had been accompanied by moral blindness and silence, looking away with avid determination. Only in the Sixties did young people demand to explore what had happened to Germany and to Germans, a spiritual reconstruction that built a path from the past to the future. Kurt of course cannot know this, but his search for himself, and Germany's for itself, are fiercely, unconsciously intertwined in what he comes to paint. This is what art can do: discover buried truths. It's what happens if you refuse to look away from what you don't understand. Keep at it and the truth emerges. Art changes what people see.

Having the stamina and courage to confront hard questions, to reject fake and half-truths, is what art does and where it gets its power. That is why repressive regimes fear it. They belittle it as trivial [a hobby], infantile [it's just play, even a child could do that], lazy [what do artists do all day?] or commercial [not bad for \$82 million] in an attempt to diminish its force and longevity. To a utilitarian, one who values facts over understanding, and efficiency over beauty, to whom the only progress that matters is economic, art is frivolous, wasteful and pointless. Why become a ballerina when you could have a secure job in cyber-security? But to others, art inspires us to understand and to feel what we can see by no other means.

This is why I wanted my children to see this film. Growing into adulthood in an age that favours the instant hit, caring more about price than cost, and where we are encouraged to look away fastest from issues that matter most, what could be more important than a celebration of looking, seeing and persevering? To challenge their own history with penetrating questions, refusing to settle for glib answers, choosing with care the role they play in their future, finding meaning in work and knowing that in its difficulty lies value: these are habits of mind I want them to treasure. For themselves and for all of us, the bulwark of human creativity.

The Chinese meal was excellent. But the conversation, even better, continues.



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Amanda Craig: Hitchcock and Me

If I had to point to one of my strongest formative experiences as a novelist, it would be seeing Hitchcock's *Vertigo* at the now defunct Scala Cinema in Pentonville Road in 1981, the year I came to live and work in London.

I had seen other films of his before: the utterly terrifying *Psycho* at school, and the compelling but mystifying *North by Northwest* in the school holidays. I must also have seen *The Lady Vanishes* and *The 39 Steps*. In the 1970s, Hitchcock had seemed part of an era confined to black-and-white afternoon television, in which stylish couples tap-danced, slapped, swooned and swapped wisecracks. His work merged with classics by Powell and Pressburger, Otto Preminger, Rogers and Hart.

Vertigo was to change all that. I have never been so electrified by a movie, and its complete blend of image, music, script, direction and actors. It achieved the dissolution between the inner and the outer worlds in a way I had thought possible only in literature. When I read, and even more when I write, I 'see' it as a film, only with added sensations like smells, touch and taste, and an awareness of form. *Vertigo* revelled in its own artifice, while also having a degree of naturalism, and it celebrated what I have always believed in, passionately and unfashionably, which is the supremacy of plot.

Hitchcock's preference was for bad books, which he turned into Hollywood gold – but there was one exception, and that was the novels and stories of Daphne du Maurier. Largely dismissed as 'women's fiction' by the literary elite, du Maurier wrote supremely Gothic novels that fitted seamlessly into Hitchcock's own obsessions. It also, for a variety of different reasons, fitted into the state of mind I was in when writing my latest novel, *The Golden Rule*.

It is my belief that art moves us deeply when it is created by people wrestling with a terrible schism in their personality which gets played out like a recurring nightmare. That nightmare can be about all kinds of things – like a boy genius feeling he is owed the education of a gentleman yet forced to work in a blacking factory (Dickens), or a brilliant young woman artist being raped by her father's pupil (Artemisia Gentileschi) and having to testify to this in court, or, like so many women writers, being born poor and plain and supremely gifted in a society that denies women respect or

autonomy. Du Maurier's public persona was that of a beautiful, conventional wife and mother; in private, she was a lesbian who lived in Cornwall partly so she could have affairs with women. Hitchcock's public persona was of an all-powerful Hollywood director who fell in love with his leading ladies but was rejected because he looked like a human potato.

In other words, these artists knew one thing but felt another. Everyone has to cope with different kinds of conflict and trauma, whether this is in trying to reconcile the ideal and the real, or rooted in particular, private and specific experiences. Artists confronted with trauma typically tend to split themselves into two, so that both sides can fight it out and find catharsis. Both du Maurier and Hitchcock repeatedly turn to plots which revolve around doubles. Think of the second Mrs de Winter and the first – the former innocent and gentle, the latter cruel and manipulative. Think of *Strangers on a Train*, and the contrast between good Guy and bad Bruno, and the plot hatched by the latter that they should each murder the person who is stunting the other's life. Interestingly, Hitchcock's film deviates from the novel by Patricia Highsmith. Highsmith wrote her novel as a form of homosexual seduction. Her Guy is blackmailed into committing the murder of Bruno's father, and so into a suggestive intimacy with a psychopath, but Hitchcock's hero, crucially, resists killing. Even allowing for Highsmith's torment as a gay woman in a time of homophobia, it's a grim story. Hitchcock's hero never entertains Bruno's plot. He is truly innocent, which makes him rather less interesting if more sympathetic.

My own novel, *The Golden Rule*, is inspired by both *Strangers on a Train* and *Rebecca*. It arose out of conversations with a number of friends who had discovered, after many years of blameless married life that their spouses were unfaithful. It was when I heard this story for the third time in one year, and the words, 'It would be so much easier to be a widow', that the idea of two women agreeing to murder each other's husbands clicked in my head.

Two women agreeing to murder is very different, however, from two men; for one thing, the scandals involving #MeToo had started to erupt. As soon as I had remembered the plot of *Strangers on a Train*, I thought immediately of the train journey I knew best, which is the Paddington to Penzance line, and I also thought of *Rebecca* because the first time I went to Cornwall it was to Fowey to the Daphne du Maurier festival. *Rebecca* was also crucial because not all the friends who had been betrayed were women. Two were men, much in the Max de Winter mould. If I raged on behalf of the women dumped with their children and no money, I also raged on behalf of the men who had slaved to pay the bills only to lose half their home and their children.

Hitchcock is drawn to plots which pivot on the notion of choice and impulse, and so am I. This is why Con, the man whom Hannah has been sent to murder, is a computer games designer. He turns out

to have two names, and two possible identities. The palindromic Hannah has just one. She makes certain choices – but she could make others that would have different outcomes.

Hitchcock's films did not quite get this far – though *Vertigo*, his masterpiece, based on the novel *D'entre les morts* by Boileau-Narcejac, comes very close. Its traumatised retired detective, Scottie, is hired to follow the mysterious Madeleine, whom he falls in love with, and who commits suicide by jumping off a tall building. Later, he encounters a woman who is Madeleine's double, and persuades her to dress and behave just like his lost love. For a time, he has the hope of a happier outcome in a new relationship with Madeleine's identical twin – only to discover he has been the victim of a dizzying, manipulative murder plot.

Because Hitchcock was an artist as well as a storyteller, everything in the film amplifies its themes of disorientation. This is something I particularly learned from, because to me fiction, like film, works best when its interiority is made visible. Every single thing in my own novels, from weather to plants to details of homes and clothes, is there for that purpose, just as it is in *Vertigo*. When a plot moves through this emotional and psychological landscape, an audience experiences what the creator does. The director himself suffered from vertigo to the point of fainting, fear of death [he had recently been in hospital and hated it] and the desperation to control his lead actresses. You are inside his nightmare. The whole film is so saturated with interiority that it can be seen as a dream. The rise and fall of San Francisco's streets, the plug-hole swirl of Madeleine's blonde chignon, the plunge into destruction from a height and even the title sequence all mesmerise while causing you to question what you are seeing and believing. The film is, in essence, about the anguish and ecstasy of falling in love with someone you know to be manipulative and untrustworthy – which, it so happens, was my own state of mind when I first saw it.

What Hitchcock addresses, repeatedly, is the despair of someone who finds themselves gaslit – which is to say, not believed that what they know to be true is true. This is a strikingly contemporary preoccupation. Whether this truth involves fake news or bad science or false gods, it is a very terrible thing to feel. Ultimately, all Hitchcock's best work is about trust. Whether the story is a relatively light-hearted spy caper (as in *The Lady Vanishes*) or profoundly personal and sinister (as in *Spellbound*) it asks, whom can we believe? Can we trust our own eyes and ears? Can we even trust our own selves?

Unsurprisingly, given that he had to work with some of the world's most good-looking people, Hitchcock's own self-image caused him deep anguish. 'I have always been uncommonly unattractive. Worse yet, I know it,' he said of himself. He also said, 'I never understood what women wanted. I only knew it wasn't me.' In his films, the

heroes [his avatars] are always played by the most handsome and attractive actors of their day – Cary Grant, Gary Cooper, Michael Redgrave, Laurence Olivier and Jimmy Stewart. A significant number of them are also damaged, physically like Jimmy Stewart in *Rear Window*, or psychologically, like Jimmy Stewart in *Vertigo*. All live under a cloud of suspicion. Are they criminals, murderers, lunatics, spies – or are they being manipulated by others?

In *The Golden Rule* my heroine, Hannah, is an impoverished Cornish girl who meets the handsome, upper-class Jake at university. She becomes pregnant, and they marry, but she discovers he has been conducting a long affair with a woman she knows only as Eve. When Hannah travels down to Cornwall to see her dying mother for the last time, she is invited into the First-Class compartment of a crowded train by the rich and beautiful Jinni – also an abused and angry wife. They get drunk together and agree to murder each other's husbands. But the huge, hairy, ugly man Hannah goes to kill is possibly even more a victim of abuse than she is.

We want to believe Hitchcock's heroes are telling the truth because in the fairy-tale Hollywood lexicon, beauty is truth and truth beauty. And they always get the girl, those famously icy, sophisticated, mysterious blondes like Grace Kelly, Ingrid Bergman, Eva Marie Saint, Kim Novak and Tippi Hedren, whom Hitchcock himself controlled professionally yet could not possess.

His films, which blend the shriek of a kettle or a train with that of a human (usually female) scream of terror, his suppressed eroticism and use of trains, pistons, water and big set-piece scenes to suggest sexual tension, are like haunting evocations of a dream. Their slight clunkiness make the inner world of feeling and fantasy visible as 'real' things, places and phenomena. This became too literal in the film *Spellbound* – whose sets were by the Surrealist artist Salvador Dali – but in *Vertigo* that tension between the real and the fantastical was held perfectly in balance. *Rebecca* too begins with the words 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again'. Framed by this, the whole novel (and film) is a dream, or a nightmare. It is clearly inspired by Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, but both are variants of the fairy-tale 'Bluebeard'.

The unnamed second Mrs de Winter is also unwittingly married to a murderer, but he himself is the prey of a wicked and ruthless wife who manipulates him into killing her. Max de Winter is first humiliated in public, then accused of murder and then [wrongly] exonerated of it. He is both prince and monster; the narrator both victim and saviour. A story inspired by du Maurier's own (admitted) jealousy of her husband's previous lover becomes something deeper and more complex about truth, love and lies.

This, above all, is one of the reasons why Hitchcock has such a hold on my imagination. One of my contentions as a novelist is that we do

not live in the rational world that many would have us believe is the only reality. All of us have experienced that other world of passion and fantasy, and it is this that Hitchcock shows erupting into the affluent American middle class he typically depicts. Nobody can be trusted. We don't really know why Cary Grant, a twice-divorced advertising executive, is mistaken for a spy in *North by Northwest*, only that this mistake immediately endangers his life. The film's comical but terrifying scene in which he is forced to drive when drunk down California's winding roads is like a preview of the dizzying camera-work of *Vertigo*; so, too, is its hugely dramatic climax in which the hero tries to save the heroine from falling to her death. The psychological manipulation of *Strangers on a Train* segues naturally into the psychological manipulation of *Rebecca*. People put their trust in strangers, and they really, really shouldn't. Yet without trust, the innocent can't be saved, either.

In my stories, too, the violent, criminal and irrational are interwoven with a satirical view of ordinary life. Unlike Hitchcock, my perspective is informed by feminism and humanism. I am sometimes told off by critics for including murder, rape, suicide, prostitution, poverty and mental breakdown, as if these belong only in genre rather than literary fiction. Perhaps the long peace the West enjoyed after the end of the Second World War seemed to be the only normality possible to audiences – until international terrorism taught us otherwise.

All art aspires to the universal while emerging from what is painfully particular and personal. As if to acknowledge this, Hitchcock put himself in his films – you glimpse his cameos as a man in the street, a railway guard and so on. I, too, put in cameo appearances in my novels (usually with my dog), partly as a *hommage* to Hitchcock. I do not believe he was simply teasing his audiences, however. He put himself in his films, I suspect, to remind us that even in the imaginary world of beautiful actors, the ordinary kind of human being he represented has a place, and that we should not forget that the Hollywood god directing the movie may look more like him, than like them.



Amanda Craig is a novelist, short-story writer and critic. Her ninth novel, *The Golden Rule*, is published by Little, Brown. Described as 'Strangers on a Train meets #MeToo', it was long-listed for the 2021 Women's Prize and chosen as a Book of the Year by all major national newspapers. [photo: Charlie Henderson]

Sheila Hannon: Sunday for Seven Days

*My mother had to take me out of **Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs** – that's my earliest cinema memory.*

The Wicked Queen in Disney's 1937 animation absolutely terrified me, her eyes, the sudden close-ups (we had no television then), even her back, gazing at her own reflection, 'Magic Mirror...', her absolute evil. Every time she appeared, I crouched on the floor behind the seat in front, covered my eyes, screamed and was eventually removed from the stalls. I've still never seen *Snow White* all the way through. *The Exorcist* would have had the same effect only I'd read the book first – which just goes to show that The Devil Has the Best Tunes.

When I think about the films I've loved there's often been a villain, and usually a female one, in there somewhere – Margaret Hamilton, Wicked Witch of the West, in *The Wizard of Oz*; Barbara Stanwyck as Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*; Angelica Huston as Lilly Dillon in *The Grifters*.

By the time I was nine we had a television, I'd worked out what film was all about, and was allowed to go to Saturday morning cinema with my brother Paul and best friends from across the road, Bernadette and Helen. The Regent Picture House on Liverpool Road, Crosby, was a ten to 15-minute walk from home. Saturday morning children's cinema cost 6d, the noise was deafening, and if you were unlucky the contents of a Kia Ora carton, decanted from the balcony above, would literally drown out the adverts. The Regent was an ABC cinema, we were the ABC Minors and the loudest moment of all was when we all sang (or shouted):

We are the boys and girls well known as
Minors of the ABC
And every Saturday we line up
To see the films we like
And shout aloud with glee
We love to laugh and have a sing-song
Just a happy crowd are we
We're all pals together
We're minors of the A-B-C!

The programme was cartoons, shorts – Laurel and Hardy; cowboys – and finally a serial ending with a cliff-hanger, so you came back next week. I loved nearly everything, although week after week two things

really puzzled me. At some point the screen would say COMING SOON in giant letters and there'd be a clip, then more giant letters: SUNDAY FOR SEVEN DAYS. The following Saturday it would be the same, COMING SOON, a different clip, then, SUNDAY FOR SEVEN DAYS. After a while I decided SUNDAY FOR SEVEN DAYS must be incredibly popular because it had been showing for so long. I couldn't work out what it was about because every week the clip was different. I decided it was far too long and complicated and – having spent Monday to Friday at a convent school – was pretty sure I didn't fancy Sunday for Seven Days anyway.

The other thing that bothered me was how the serial always ended with some poor unfortunate staring death in the eye – man wrestling lion; woman tied to railway line; bad guy training gun on good guy – and then the words on the screen TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK. I truly believed that poor unfortunate had to wrestle that lion for a whole week – until we all returned and the film could carry on. It gave Sunday for Seven Days a whole new meaning.

One of those Regent Saturday morning short films haunts me still. It was an animation about a little girl, set in the future where it rained all the time. People stared out of their windows, trapped indoors, gazing out hopelessly at grey skies and endless sheets of rain. Occasionally the rain would stop and when it did trees would suddenly bud and then rapidly leaf, fabulous flowers would bloom, people would dash out of their houses and turn their pale, sad faces up to the sun. Children would laugh and play outdoors in the sunshine. And then a shadow would appear on the grass, the clouds would return, the sky would darken, and the rain would begin again. Sometimes I wonder if that film really existed or if I dreamed it years ago. It seems strangely prophetic now.

Around the same time, in the school holidays, there were occasional, wonderful trips into Liverpool with my dad to the Tatler News Theatre, a cinema showing nothing but news and cartoons. We'd sit in the dark watching Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies, Mr Magoo, Bugs Bunny, Wile E Coyote and the Road Runner, Tom and Jerry, Sylvester and Tweety Pie, Daffy Duck, Porky Pig and 'That's All Folks!'.

When the Regent and the Tatler closed within months of each other in 1968, victims of the television sets now in so many homes, we transferred our affections to the Odeon – also on Liverpool Road but further along, in Waterloo. It was renamed the Classic in 1967 but the old name stuck. We were growing up, straying further afield, exciting. My friend Bernadette entered the Odeon's Yoyo Competition – up on stage, in a line, whoever kept their yoyo going longest won. It was *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* – with yoyos. Although she never won, Bernadette always acquitted herself respectably and never showed you up. This cinema, originally called the Plaza, had opened on 2 September 1939 (with Edna Best in *South Riding*) – the very day war broke out. Waterloo's Plaza is the only cinema to have opened and

closed on the same day. After further name changes – Cannon, Apollo – it's now the Plaza again, a community cinema run with the help of many volunteers, well-supported and well-loved. Fingers crossed the Plaza makes its centenary.

The Regent's fate was to become a Mecca Bingo and finally a school gymnasium. The Tatler fared rather differently, reopening the following year as the Tatler Cinema Club showing uncensored films, starting with the Danish-Swedish *I, a Woman*. We never went to the Tatler again, but this woman still watches cartoons whenever she can.

Speaking of censorship, while I've mentioned some of the films and cinemas I remember and love, there are also the films I don't remember because I didn't see them. If my mother had worked for the British Board of Film Classification, then most of the cinema of the 1960s and 70s wouldn't have happened – wouldn't have been shown at any rate. Fatwabs were issued from her armchair when anything deemed dodgy appeared on TV: 'And that's going off for a start!' If there'd been remotes back then she'd have been a stone heavier.

One of the biggest pleasures of lockdown, with cinemas closed, has been seeing films I missed 50 years ago – some I wasn't even aware of, as my mother took those censorship duties very seriously indeed. Thanks to Talking Pictures TV I've now seen *A Taste of Honey*, *The Killing of Sister George* and – just this week, 56 years after it was made – *Georgy Girl* (screenplay by Bristol's Peter Nichols who I worked with many years later when I produced his new plays at Quakers Friars and the Tobacco Factory). I tried imagining my mother's reaction to *Georgy Girl*'s heady cocktail of premarital sex, abortion, and infidelity in 1966 Swinging London, but the screen went blank, started to smoke and finally went into meltdown – much like the Wicked Witch of the West at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*. That's probably my favourite film of all, with *Double Indemnity* a close second. The strange thing is there's something about both that witch – or rather her doppelganger, Miss Gulch – and Barbara Stanwyck as Phyllis Dietrichson that remind me of my mother. What's that all about then? Perhaps I need to watch *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in the cinema all the way through.



Sheila Hannon is the creative director of *Show of Strength Theatre Company* in Bristol, which she co-founded in 1986. [photo: Melanie Kelly]

Stephen Lightbown: Watching *Avatar* at the London Waterloo IMAX

A quick look through James McAvoy's filmography shows that he has played a character with a disability, or 'cripped up' as it is known in the disability community, at least seven times.

That's seven times he has taken a role from a disabled actor that could have been played more authentically.

Bryan Cranston, who received criticism in 2019 for playing the role of a quadriplegic billionaire in *The Upside*, seems at least open to have the debate about where the line is between what you can and cannot portray as an actor. One of his arguments about taking the role is that it was a business decision. The film made \$125m worldwide; a compelling argument but does it make him right?

And where does that argument make sense in a film such as 2019's *Come As You Are* in which three disabled friends take a road trip to a brothel to lose their virginity? None of the three main actors in that film have a disability and it took \$55,000 at the worldwide box office. Granted the film was released amidst a global pandemic but there is nothing to suggest that had it been released in any other year it would have been breaking box-office records. The reasons given by the film-makers as to why those actors were chosen were, they said, down to time and resources. And I do have sympathy for that argument. Having a small budget and little time to make a film you have to make business decisions, and at least with *Come As You Are* there were other disabled actors cast in the film, though these were minor roles.

Why does it matter? Well as a wheelchair user, it matters to me. It matters because accurate representation of disability in cinema and equal opportunities for disabled actors are severely lacking.

One film not restricted to the same budget and time constraints as *Come As You Are* was 2009's *Avatar*. A box-office return of \$2.8b against a budget of \$237m. The lead character is Jake Sully, a former marine and paraplegic played by non-disabled actor Sam Worthington.

I first watched *Avatar* when it was released and chose the IMAX at Waterloo in London, completely at capacity for the screening. It's a huge cinema based on a roundabout next to Waterloo station. It's impossible

to miss. It fitted my desire to see this film on the biggest screen possible.

Much was also made of the fact that many of the screenings would be in 3D to create an immersive viewing experience.

Let's remember this is a sci-fi film, set on an alien moon. There are spaceships, walking robots, incredible technology that allows you transfer your consciousness into the body of a different species. And Jake, who pushes onto the screen for the first time in his wheelchair, one that looked more basic than the one I arrived at the cinema in.

As he pushes onto the base he is met with the phrase 'Look, it's meals on wheels'. This was when I started to become very aware of my presence. This whole set-up is designed to make the audience start to feel sorry for Jake: the barbed comment, the wheelchair that looks prehistoric alongside the advanced technology, and the fact that he is only there because his able-bodied twin had died and they have no option but to turn to him.

These are the first few seconds of the film. Perhaps I'm over thinking it, perhaps the rest of the cinema was not aware of this, perhaps little thought was given to how the disabled community would feel upon seeing this film as it was intended to break box-office records, not change perceptions. Perhaps. But these things matter. They matter because, intended or not, these are the messages they give.

As a paraplegic it was the nuances and small details I saw: the way Sam Worthington's legs had been made to look atrophied through CGI; the way he is able to lift and wear a heavy backpack that should have knocked him off balance and pushed him forwards; the way he seems to labour when transferring out of his chair; or the fact he doesn't sit on a cushion. That last point is probably the one that annoys me the most. I've lost count of the times I've watched a film, seen a wheelchair user and they are not sat on a cushion. Cushions are essential for pressure relief. Paying such little attention to these details shows quite clearly that portraying an accurate depiction of paralysis was not high up on the agenda.

For those who may be unfamiliar with *Avatar*, the year is 2154. Humans are mining Pandora, a habitable moon, home to the Na'vi, to replace natural resources that have been depleted on Earth. To learn more about the moon, scientists place the consciousness of genetically matched humans into Na'vi hybrid avatars. The head of the security force protecting the scientists tells Jake that he can have his legs restored if he gathers intelligence on the Na'vi.

You with me? Let's unpick this some more. The year is 2154. Now let's look at Jake's wheelchair again, a wheelchair that is less developed than the one I sit in to write to this. Do we really think if we can fly to a moon in another planetary system that wheelchairs will not have advanced? Or that by that point a cure for paralysis will not

have been found? Or if there is one the only way to access that cure is to pretend to be an alien lifeform? What does that tell us about how society views disability?

The film is about four days long and the above is a lot to process so I was totally unprepared for what came next. The first time Jake's consciousness is placed into the Na'vi hybrid and he begins to walk.

In all my years of watching films in the cinema I am yet to have a visceral experience like the one I felt when Jake, as the avatar, first stretches his legs, stands, find his balance and then goes outside onto the basketball court, starts running and feels the sensation of grass on his feet. With the 3D glasses, viewed through the eyes of Jake, this felt incredibly real to me and is the nearest I have felt to walking since my accident. The result was profound and I started to cry. At what I was experiencing, at what Jake must have felt, at being jealous of someone using an avatar to experience by what at that point should have been medically possible.

This is one of the parts of the film and the treatment of disability that I think is handled well. However, I was angry at the implied reasoning that the carrot of walking again at whatever the cost was worth casting aside everything and everyone you know. This film is set almost 150 years in the future and the views of disability clearly haven't progressed in all that time. The impact of what I felt was difficult to process but I tried to articulate it in the poem below which I wrote on leaving the film and it appeared in my first poetry collection published in 2019.

Walking Again Through Avatar

ACT 1

In 3D glasses I walk as Sully's blue-skinned Na'vi, mobile again. I've got this. Folded into my velvet cinema seat, somehow unbalanced, running on feet not owned for fifteen years. I breathe, I believe.

ACT 2

Behind the glasses tears escape the red-blue hue as I escape into celluloid. Trapped by my body, prisoner in the IMAX, grateful for the black box darkness.

CREDITS

I'm not ready to wrench atrophied legs from seat to wheelchair. Groundbreaking. I ran. The names of those who helped me challenge surgeons' words roll before my eyes.

In many ways the film left me frustrated for all the reasons outlined above. But in many other ways I was grateful. At the point of watching this film I had been paralysed for 13 years and I was grateful to have felt in some way through the 3D glasses what Jake felt when he takes his first few steps. And I might have disagreed with what much of the film says about disability but seeing a disabled character front and centre in one of the biggest films of all time is important. It is progress. In many ways Jake is the heart and moral compass of the whole film. That too is important.

At the end of the screening I made sure to avoid eye contact with those who had also watched the film. I couldn't help thinking that they were looking at me asking the question, what would I have done to have regained my legs?

It's a question I have asked myself many times, would I leave my body, my life and the world I knew behind to place my soul into another species just so I can walk? I don't believe so and by 2154 I hope it's a question that paraplegics aren't actually faced with. Or if films and cinema are still a thing then, that films with disabled characters are at least played by disabled actors. That wouldn't be too fantastical, would it?



Stephen Lightbown is a poet and spoken-word artist, born in Blackburn, who now lives in Bristol. He writes extensively but not exclusively about life as a wheelchair user. [photo: Ali Fewell]

Neil Brand:

Revolution in the Head

It was a little-regarded Patty Duke film in my eighth year that began the revolution.

I was aware of the rumblings before that: the dim awareness that going to the pictures meant receiving a warm embrace from big-sounding music, and that covering my ears when I was frightened made more sense than covering my eyes, as somehow the worst thing I could hear would be much worse than the worst thing I could see. I was not yet old enough to distinguish how cinema was developing inside me any more than other stimulations like food, school or friends; yet somehow I knew by the age of eight that, between the joys of real life and the necromancy of films I was seeing, real life was already dragging behind, a very poor second.

No real-life red was as red as the capes of the Roman centurions swarming over the pirate ships in *Ben-Hur* – no yellow existed that was as bright as the colour of Hayley Mills' *In Search of the Castaways* island. The roller-coaster emotions of *Mary Poppins* were unmatched in my everyday life on an Essex council estate (black-and-white TV, no phone, no car) and Cliff Richard was the grooviest person on the planet, bar none.

In my first decade, a trip to the State Cinema, Grays, was a fortnightly Saturday afternoon *mardi gras* for me, much more so than to the Ritz 200 yards away from it, VERY much a second-run house and pooh-poohed by my family except when they ran Disney reissues. The excitement of the event began on the bus with the first sight of the State's queue, which gave us a pretty good idea of whether we would get straight in or have to hang around for second-house (which might mean milkshake at the Italian ice-cream place while we waited) – then the agonisingly slow crawl from the pavement with its lurid movie posters ('Sister Sister oh so fair, why is there blood all over your hair?') through the bright red doors (still not as red as what would soon be on that screen) and into the warm miasma of smoke and old carpets, the big, 1,500-seater hall and a full house. I don't remember seeing the organ that made the place famous, but perhaps they reserved that for Friday and Saturday evenings. The seats weren't that comfortable, the sound sometimes atrocious (the State didn't get magnetic soundtrack projectors when the Odeons did) but we had zero expectations and loved whatever came up, especially when it was a film made for me, like *Thunderbirds Are Go*, or for all of us, like *The Jungle Book*.

And the magic began as I was cocooned in that dark, over-packed womb, all too aware of a communal experience unfolding whilst



Interior of the State, Grays, Essex c1940 [Cinema Theatre Association Archive, photographer unknown].

maintaining an intense and deeply personal engagement with the screen. Like Laurence Harvey in *The Manchurian Candidate* or the ape in *2001*, I was being hypnotised, shaped, formed and evolved by the higher intelligence of the films I watched; random images, sounds and moments came together in my still-forming mind to make up the boy who would leave the cinema unable to entirely shake off its dream-state hold until the bus was past the gravel pits and onto the Belhus Road. And always the last chimera to release its grip was the music.

We had a piano. It was a very old upright that had done service when our house was a makeshift church and boasted an organ stool that could seat three. I was plonked between my brother and sister when they played, then later thumped away on my own, making up tunes and picking out notes and chords I heard randomly elsewhere. Until Patty Duke...

Patty Duke was a teenage tomboy star of the Sixties with her own TV series and *Billie* (which I probably saw in a 1966 reissue) was intended to be her big break into films. It was the story of a girl who could beat all the boys at her college in races because she heard a rhythm in her head which made her run faster. As she stood at the starting line with her coach's words dinning in her head ('listen for a rhythm – find that rhythm and go with it!'), the soundtrack just featured the dialogue and the natural sounds around her – but at the

crack of the starting pistol all that sound drained away, she sped off and a fast drumbeat kicked in, plus rock and roll guitar, and began to get faster.

I was used to leaving the cinema acting out the movie I'd just watched – in this case I behaved perfectly normally to begin with, walking along with my parents, gauging the gaps in the crowded pavement like a spy and mentally preparing my starting gun. Then, with our bus stop still a hundred yards away, I slipped my hand out of my mother's, put my head down and ran full pelt up the road, Billie's rock and roll hammering in my head. I could sense immediately that two things were wrong – one, I was no faster than I'd ever been, and two, my parents were yelling in concern behind me, and I suddenly realised I would have some complicated explaining to do.

But I had made a connection, and much more musically exotic fare grasped my imagination on subsequent visits. *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines*, *In Harm's Way*, *The Railway Children*, all had scores that growled and boomed impressively and provided my impressionable young mind with a wealth of new sounds and tunes for all dramatic occasions. Every time I walked out of the cinema, I carried the music, still playing with impressive clarity, in my head, desperate to hold on to it all the way home and through the front door to the piano. As I got older, my improvisation became more sophisticated, until I blew away my schoolmates with the theme from *The Persuaders*.

Fast-forward to the spring of 1986 or thereabouts. I had cut my teeth as a silent film accompanist with the Eastbourne Film Society, Keaton's *Steamboat Bill, Jr* and Pabst's *Pandora's Box*, and I was auditioning for the National Film Theatre. They were deep into one of John Gillett's impressive silent seasons, this one entitled 'Hollywood Bubbly', the best and rarest of Jazz Age Tinseltown fare. I was due to play Norma Shearer's 1926 hit *Upstage* at sight for the press and, unbeknownst to me, David Gill and the pianist booked to play the public performance later that week. It was a theatre film [that was good, I knew theatre] but the rest I would have to glean as it unspooled.

It was my first time playing a film I hadn't seen, and I was quietly confident, with all the arrogance of youth. I had prepped ten minutes of music each for *Steamboat* and *Pandora*, and improv had kicked in fine with them, mostly driven by adrenaline. This was a different matter, decisions had to be made on the hoof, and appropriate music found in an instant. But thanks to the State, the Orion Burgess Hill, the Commodore Aberystwyth and hours of late-night TV, I wasn't confronted with anything I hadn't seen and heard before.

My title music was brash, showbizzy, the story clicked into a generic template almost straight away with our gauche heroine meeting the challenges of theatre [*Singin' in the Rain*], then climbing too high

[*Funny Girl*, *A Star is Born*], then a massive, self-inflicted fall from grace [*Paper Tiger*, *The Fallen Idol*]... but the final act gifted me the best musical inspiration of all.

When I was little, trying out my 'playing by ear' chops, I would ask my parents to 'give me something to play'. 'A windmill.' 'A fairground.' 'A storm.' And best of all, 'Snowfall'.

In the last reels Norma was reduced to the chorus of a cheap show touring the sticks. She had been branded 'not a trouser' because of her previous diva behaviour, and this was her penance. And wondrously, it was snowing. So, I did what all those cinema visits had taught me about final act redemption – I played the 'sacred space' in which Norma would win through – and it was the shimmering, tinkling world I had been playing for 20 years – the Realm of the Ice Queen.

This was, of course, intentional, director Monta Bell being very sure-handed when it came to *mise-en-scene* and Norma being required to put her very life on the line to prove her trouperdom. In good melodramatic tradition the plight of our isolated, rejected protagonist coloured her whole world, so it was snowing. But I could not escape the rush of confidence and certainty that flooded into the snowy music for that last action-packed 15 minutes. I was at home, just as I had been in the State two decades previously, and all the music I was to play for the silent movies had been provided in those years by the sound of films I knew and loved.

The revolution had come full-circle, and the day was mine.



Neil Brand has been a silent film accompanist for over 30 years. He is a writer, performer, composer and TV presenter, including for the BBC4 series *The Sound of Cinema*, *The Music That Made the Movies*.
(photo: Noelle Vaughn)

Melanie Kelly: Watching Movies, Reading Film

This is the story of a former film student and how, after three years of 'reading film', she returned to her near life-long love of watching movies.

I was the youngest of four siblings with a ten-year gap between me and my eldest brother. Subsequently I was included in family outings to the pictures ('cinema' wasn't part of our vocabulary then) to films aimed at an older audience than that of most of my contemporaries.

The first film I remember seeing on the big screen (and one of my earliest of all memories) was *Help!*. It was 1965. I would have been coming up to my fourth birthday and it must have been a weekday as we were taken by my mum who worked on Saturdays and wouldn't let us go beyond the front gate on Sundays. I can clearly see the five of us sitting in the centre of the front row of a full house. We were all fans of The Beatles. As there were four of them and four of us children, we were assigned one each – I, who had the last choice, was 'given' Ringo.

I loved *Help!* but was disappointed by our next cinema visit, to see *The Sound of Music*. I'd liked some of the musical numbers but soon got bored with the romantic plot and at one stage was stomping up and down the aisle singing my own version of the theme song until the manager came down and threatened to evict us all. A few years later I was responsible for us nearly being ejected from the bus home because I was singing 'We All Live in a Yellow Submarine' to the annoyance of the clippie.

Saturdays were the days we'd go to the pictures with my dad. I remember seeing *Far From the Madding Crowd*, losing my six-year-old heart to the exquisite Terence Stamp; *Zulu* (we all started calling the lane that ran by the local primary school 'The Zulu Cut' because the bank on one side of it reminded us of the ridge in the film); and *Mary Poppins*.

My sister and I shared a tiny box bedroom, her on a reconfigured ship's locker with a mattress on top, me in a ship's bunk (my dad was a boilermaker at Vosper Thornycroft's Southampton shipyard and had access to surplus material during refits). Eight years older than me, by the late 1960s Jill was going to the cinema with her friends, without the family, telling me the plots as my bedtime stories. Thus, I could picture the opening sequence of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and the endings of *The Graduate* and *The Hot Rock*, among others, long before I saw them.

We were still watching a black-and-white TV until the mid-1980s which might be why the colour of the big screen had such a lasting impact on me. Those rich visual memories are sometimes tied in with ones related to food: the knickerbocker glory I had with my mum in the restaurant at Tyrell and Green before going to my birthday treat of *Half a Sixpence*; the previously unimaginable luxury of a top-of-the-range ice-cream purchased in the interval of *Star!* by our visiting cousins; and the box of fruit gums I shared with my mum when we saw *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* at the dingiest of the high-street cinemas, the Classic.

The individual films I saw on TV during that period are less memorable but the recollection of us sitting together on a Sunday night, the only light coming from the screen, is still strong. I used to start the evening sitting behind my mum on the back of her armchair; by the end of the film, I'd have the chair to myself and she'd be on the floor, leaning against it.

As the rest of the family drifted away to their own pursuits, it was Mum and I who remained the film addicts as far as TV-watching went. We liked what we would call 'a good western' – though didn't agree on Audie Murphy who I thought was adorable and she thought was a twerp – or a tough-talking film noir or an MGM musical. She wasn't keen on the screen depictions of London's East End. She was born in Poplar where she lived until marrying Dad after a post-war holiday romance. She found dour kitchen-sink dramas jarred with her memories of all the love, laughter and community spirit that still made her homesick, while the sentimental stories of cheery, gullible Cockneys seemed patronising.

In the early 1970s I found a fellow film fan outside of the family: my friend Patricia, who I met at secondary school and who shared with me the indignity of being among the last to be picked for any sporting teams. We bonded on a school coach trip and I was impressed when she told me how she would cut the film photos out of the *Radio Times* and stick them on cards to keep a record of what she'd seen. We lost touch for about 20 years but reconnected on Facebook where we now share recommendations from the Talking Pictures channel.

When it came to choosing a course for my university degree, I knew it had to involve English (my best school subject) but was also hoping for something film-related that didn't entail actually making films. I was overjoyed to discover a brand new course at the University of Warwick. Film and Literature. What could be better? Place secured, I obtained an advance copy of the reading list and starting ordering copies of the books from the library. My delight soon turned to dismay as I began to read. This was my first encounter with academic film criticism. I read *Photoplay*, not *Screen*; I took advice from Barry Norman, not Colin MacCabe.

I tried to reassure myself that this tortured analysis was perhaps all meant as a spoof and began to tentatively enjoy what I was reading. But no. Once I took up my place on the course, I realised this was for real. I spent the next three years feeling slightly out of the loop. With a little practice I could trot out the expected jargon and concepts to write essays that met the required assessment criteria, but I never 'felt' it. Every day I was convinced my masquerade would be seen through.

Jump forward to 1986. I'm sitting in the lounge of my parents' bungalow. I'd graduated three years earlier and was still living at what had been my childhood home. *A Turnip Head's Guide to the British Cinema* is on the television, part of a Thames TV documentary series marking British Film Year. Someone from the British Film Institute (BFI) is talking on screen when director Alan Parker unexpectedly rises out of the pit of a splendid Art Deco 'picture palace' (the Carlton Cinema, Essex Road), playing a jaunty tune on its glorious organ, drowning out the dry words, obliterating the greyness with a burst of colour and light. I let out a whoop of glee.

Subsequently I've learnt Parker wasn't quite the saviour of British cinema he might have hoped to be, and his depiction of the BFI was largely unfair. Nevertheless, I salute him for giving me the freedom to lose myself once again in a movie. Without a trace of guilt, I could blissfully switch off that irritating checklist I'd had in my head since starting at Warwick and ignore all thoughts of camera angles, framing devices, structuralism, semiotics, auteur theories, editing techniques, the iconographic significance of everyday household objects, and other mental encumbrances and get swept up by my personal emotional response again. I was free to laugh, cry, swoon, be enraged, be frightened and, at times, be thoroughly bored or irritated.

Although university was not the happiest time of my life, I did see some good films I might otherwise have missed and there were some interesting lectures. Forty years on, I wish I could tell my younger self to accept that what I was finding such a struggle was in a separate compartment to my everyday way of thinking, rather than being so hung-up on being consistently true to myself. However, I am still grateful for Alan Parker's irreverence and the relief of feeling the final traces of those academic years fall away.



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Niven Govinden: On Not Watching *My Own Private Idaho*

I'm rewatching Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* with a view to my own safety. Seeing the film on its UK release in spring 1992, a few weeks shy of my nineteenth birthday, was transformative. It followed similar cinematic experiences around the same period, watching work from queer film-makers Derek Jarman, Tom Kalin and Gregg Araki, where I saw something of myself on the screen, saw a world or a sensibility that felt like mine (or could be), but the essence of *Idaho*, particularly down to the intensity of River Phoenix's and Keanu Reeve's performances, stayed with me and would not let go. What played out that evening in a mostly empty screening room in Richmond, was a queer film that wasn't a queer film, and a buddy road movie that went further than the template. On every level, it was a film that seemed to bend the rules in a way intended to thwart the viewer, as if to say, if you're a queer kid, don't watch it expecting a happy ending, and if you're a cineaste, prepare to have your preconceptions of the mid-West milieu fucked with. I was still in my first year at Goldsmiths studying film, and my head was full of theory, but the film struck closer to home. What can never be overstated is the experience of seeing something of yourself on screen when you yourself are not the default. *Idaho* is hardly brimming with queers of colour yet the film felt like my life – most intently in River's search for a place or people that were his – this search for utopia. The magic of cinema is the suspension of disbelief yet also is the amplification of belief. All that you wish to personally project coming to the fore; of seeing a dream realised. My reluctance over the years to see *Idaho* again was the fear that I wouldn't have the same feelings because my yearning to escape wasn't what it was. The film had given me plenty and that was enough – yet curiosity remained, the desire to pick a scab never fully abating, no more so than recalling the visual language. When I think about how I write books now, my preoccupation with tone and creating a sense of space partly originates from Van Sant's grammar making such an impression on me. There are other films I can credit to that also, but when I think about the lingering shots of the barren Idaho landscape, the big skies, the tracking shots of Portland and Seattle hustlers in doorways and street corners and the *vérité* of their confessions, I recognise a correlation in how I write fiction – not the same results, but the same desires. The magic of watching the film in 1992 was greater than the sum of its parts, of course; the precise magic itself down to chemistry, making this an essay that's also about love, because analysis aside, how could you be 19 and queer, and not fall in love with the vulnerability of Mike (River) and the assurance, bordering on arrogance of Scott (Keanu)? I loved them and still do;

loved who they were as characters, who they were as actors, and in my mind blurring the line between both. I hadn't realised how long I'd held onto that, until I finished writing my novel *Diary of a Film* and saw what was left on the page; the same sense of desire between film actors and the need to merge on-screen and off-screen life. I thought about rewatching *Idaho* for several months in the course of writing this essay, and while I usually dived into multiple viewings without pause, something in the film's mythology held me back. It's not only the legend of the film I was reluctant to unearth, but also my own. In 1992 I was learning about queer possibility in London, but in my heart I was looking across the Atlantic. NYC, the home of house music and vogue balls, was where I wanted to be; the streets walked by Act Up, Suzanne Bartsch, Marc Jacobs, Willi Ninja and RuPaul, Ciccone and Bernhard. The grime of New York was elevated several stories above the grime of New Cross, where Goldsmiths was. I pounded those South East London streets in my Junior Gaultier platform sneakers and fake fur coats, but in my mind I was walking downtown to the East Village, or maybe driving through night-time LA with Gregg Araki, and then on seeing *Idaho*, grungy Portland became my new epicentre of queer dreaming. I'm aware of the baggage that you as a reader bring to a book – your life experiences to date, projections and prejudices, and how that shapes what you absorb from the page. I realised then that I could never write anything definitive about a film that's so loved in the queer pantheon – all I could offer were my thoughts on where I was leading up to the film, what changed in the screening room, and where it took me afterwards. It's why I don't rewatch the film now – that and the need to avoid a crushing sense of vulnerability. Instead it's safer to study the original trailer several times, where I feel transported again without losing the core of what felt important to me. I turn to *My Own Private River*, James Franco's recentish recut of the film using deleted scenes as a tribute to *River*. It's like watching the original film projected through a hall of mirrors, vaguely familiar yet distorted into a new shape of its own. There's no narcolepsy here, no explicit stating of Mike's desire for Scott (indeed, it's very hetero in its narrative shaping), yet once again, I'm drawn in, beguiled to a story that exists beyond the screen. The shots of Mike holding onto Scott as they bike through the city still take my breath away, ditto the swag as they stalk the streets. The lofty *Henry V* retelling [Scott being of differing stock, and essentially a tourist in Mike's world] is stripped away though its essence remains. So while this is all about the film, this is about everything but the film. This is an essay about fear; more specifically a fear of nostalgia; a fear to re-evaluate the person I was, and that's okay. I'm happy with a memory of what was, rather than what is. It's like that sometimes.



Niven Govinden is an author whose sixth novel, *Diary of a Film*, published in 2021, is about cinema, flaneurs, and queer love. (photo: self portrait)

Hannah McGill: Dream Palaces

Cinema is changing again. We can expect denial ('no, it isn't'), anger ('how dare you say it is'), bargaining ('it must be funded not to!') and depression ('nothing will ever be any good again'), at the end of all of which cinema will still change, because that's one of the main things it does.

The idea that cinema is a medium that clings on bravely despite permanent vulnerability to philistine attack is often important to cinephiles. It's there when people venerate 'the communal big-screen experience', or the dim, velvety 'palaces of dreams' in which they imagine having it.

These concepts are valid, of course. The communal big-screen experience can be glorious, if you chance upon a well-behaved commune; and a well-kept cinema is a lovely thing. The notion, however, that an ideal film-viewing experience not only exists, but is always *barely surviving* progress, misunderstands the fact that cinema – just like that guy next to you in Screen 7 – has pretty much never sat still.

In Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, the fictional silent movie superstar Norma Desmond, played by the real silent movie superstar Gloria Swanson, laments the coming of sound to her industry. 'I had the eyes of the whole world,' she tells William Holden's jaded screenwriter, Joe Gillis. 'But that wasn't good enough for them – oh no! They had to have the ears of the whole world too.' Wilder and Swanson, of course, make this wonderful, the cracked melodrama of her voice demonstrating exactly what sound can do even as she denounces it as ruinous. *Sunset Boulevard* at once honours Norma and proves her wrong. But even as it broods sardonically upon resistance to technological change, it is itself a nostalgic hold-out in some ways. Though colour was in the process of taking over, *Sunset Boulevard* is black-and-white; Wilder would later explain that he found early colour 'very hideous'. Indeed, this was one of the last major pictures to be shot on fragile, flammable nitrate film stock – meaning that its original negative would within a few decades be as dilapidated as Norma Desmond's career.

That this film, released at the midpoint of the twentieth century, presented cinema as something already sick, corrupted, *spoiled*, indicates the extent to which cinema has always operated alongside



Promotional lobby card for *Sunset Boulevard* [A Paramount Picture, 1950].

predictions of its imminent demise – often issued by those who profess to love it most. This medium has survived not by fidelity to tradition, but by continual rejection of its own past. A cheap sideshow attraction became the biggest of entertainment media; silence became Norma Desmond's 'talk, talk, TALK!'; black-and-white became Technicolor became just colour; big-screen entertainment became home entertainment became entertainment you could carry in your pocket and watch on the bus. When people declare themselves old-fashioned or nostalgic about cinema, they impute a constancy to the form that was never really there. Whichever system they think should be protected or brought back – it was a blip.

I don't know if *Sunset Boulevard* was screened at the Ritz Cinema, Lincoln upon its release in 1950, but there's a good chance it was. The Ritz was a 1930s Art Deco cinema – the sort that used to have multiple manifestations in every British city, and the only one operational in Lincoln by the time I was a teenager there in the 1990s. It sustained Nazi bomb damage in 1941, got Cinemascope ahead of the competition in 1954, became an Odeon in 1956, and closed down at the dawn of the 1980s multiplex era. I was there during its final phase, when an end-of-the-pier entertainment impresario bought it, renovated one big screen into three little ones, and relaunched it under its original name. This Ritz was

independently run, but showed mainstream films, not arthouse ones – a once-typical business model that was in the process of being firmly kicked out of the market by centrally-programmed multiplexes. [Ensuing phases would see most arthouse independents also succumb to central programming, via the Picturehouse chain, itself then bought by Cineworld; a very small number of people decides what films get theatrical exposure in the UK.] The impresario would intermittently come into the building to make his selection of upcoming films, accompanied by a giant standard poodle that would go to sleep on the floor of his office. Far more interested in panto than film, he had an extraordinary radar for flops: *Tank Girl*, *Judge Dredd*, *Waterworld* and *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers: The Movie* all got bookings as fat as their box office was bad. He turned down the sensation that was *Pulp Fiction* in favour of a long run of *Congo*, a film in which Laura Linney teaches a gorilla to speak.

I was an usherette. We tore tickets, different colours for each film, and threaded them on to strings. We received deliveries of popcorn, which came ready-popped. We shushed teens, cleaned up spills and walked on with trays of choc-ices while the film was paused for a reel change. Was I drawn to the job by the romance of cinemas? If I had any such sense, it came from fantasy, not experience. I am of that first generation of film buffs whose education came from VHS tapes, not matinees. I'd never known a cinema that showed classic or arthouse films and wouldn't until I went to university in Glasgow in 1995. In any case, while the Ritz had retained the odd whiff of its Golden Age origins [there was even an usherette, Margaret, who had first worked there in 1938], my experience there was sobering rather than heady. The work was grimy; the uniform was grim; the projectionists were unfriendly, clumsily sleazy or both; and we were required for reasons of fire risk to remain in the screens while the films were on, which brought the questionable taste of the impresario into sharper focus than the screenings sometimes were. Should you need the services of cinema staff in this day and age, you can walk through endless barren tracts of neon-lit corridor before you find a breathing human. We had to *sit right there throughout* – which meant watching the same films many, many times. Still, now, there is a patch of mid-Nineties cinema, much of it very bad, from which I know the dialogue by heart. I remember with crystalline specificity the way in which certain lines are delivered by certain actors, including how the gorilla in *Congo* introduces herself ('Amy – good gorilla. Amy – pretty'). I remember continuity errors [films have far more continuity errors than you think, papered over by persistence of vision for the normal viewer but glaringly apparent on the third, fourth and 17th view]. I experience strange emotional triggers: the song 'A Kiss from a Rose' by Seal, which played over the closing credits of *Batman Forever*, is piercingly redolent for me both of some deep teenage moodiness, its cause long forgotten, and the smell of old popcorn.

I would go on to obtain a degree in Film Studies, to become a professional film critic and to programme a film festival. I would get

to meet people from all the way up the film food chain, including the director of *Batman Forever*, Joel Schumacher, who would be wearing a peach cravat. It sometimes seems to me, however, that the Ritz, for all its workaday unglamour, for all its underinvestment in the art of film, taught me at least as much about cinema as any of my more sparkly professional experiences. It taught me that a cinema is a workplace, and the people in charge of it don't necessarily love the medium they're peddling. It taught me that precision-tooled mainstream entertainment has astounding resilience, whilst superficially dazzling films may come to bits if regarded too closely [watch *Die Hard With a Vengeance* and *The Usual Suspects* several times each, if you want to know exactly what I mean]. I think it taught me, actually, that I don't quite trust people who go all gooey about the dreaminess of the dream palace. They have their Norma Desmond glasses on, showing them cinema as a once-perfect thing despoiled by progress. Well, it isn't that. However much you love it, it's always been agile; practical; a product that changed with the times. One that could be talked through, snogged through, walked out of early, and sliced down the middle when there were Magnums to be sold.

We don't know what changes loom for our surviving cinema venues. We do know that toothpaste does not tend to go back into tubes, especially when it is the sort of toothpaste that allows people to experience brand new movies without leaving their homes. Perhaps multiplex venues – so often echoingly empty even before the Covid-19 pandemic – will need to be repurposed *en masse*, just as 1930s cinemas regenerated into pubs and bingo halls in the course of the 1990s. The Ritz is a Wetherspoons now. The outside décor features strips of film; the Art Deco bar and the staircase where I used to stand with my string of tickets are both intact. The impresario ended up working as a producer on Jim Davidson's soft-porn panto films. I'm going to assume Margaret, too, eventually moved on.



Hannah McGill is a freelance writer and critic, and former artistic director of the Edinburgh International Film Festival. [photo: Ryan McGoverne]

Rosie Rowan Taylor: The Film Screening That Changed My Life

I became a *cineaste* at the age of 30. Whilst film has always played an important part in my life for as long as I can remember, I never obsessively watched films from the age of two, or anything to that effect.

Instead, films played a big part in fuelling my childhood imagination and games. I'd re-enact scenes from films either by myself or with my friends, as if they were real life, and adding my own twists and ideas. I went on to study Costume for the Stage and Screen, and European Cinema, but found my calling when a single screening changed my life and took me on a path that I had never even dreamed of at the time. And to this day it is my personal testament to the power and importance of film and cinema.

I moved to Bristol in 2010. I had friends there and I wanted a creative job [for several years I had been working on and off for the NHS as an administrator in between studying and travelling]. What kind of creative job I wanted I did not know. So, I moved in with some friends and got a job working for Ofsted for a time as an administrator again. I then put myself out there in my spare time. I contacted every creative and/or film-related organisation in Bristol I could find, asking about jobs or volunteering. I volunteered for the Cube Microplex for a time, and helped out stewarding for Encounters Short Film Festival, on their community out-reach screenings. But the two film festivals that became the driving force in my direction, and my financial bread and butter for a time once I left Ofsted, were Afrika Eye Film Festival and Slapstick Festival. And it was Slapstick Festival that provided the turning point. The 'Ah ha' moment, if you will.

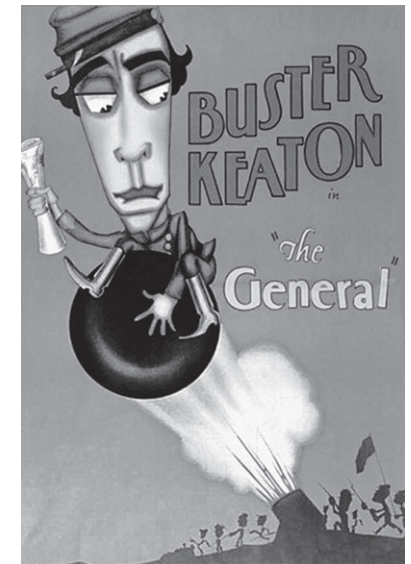
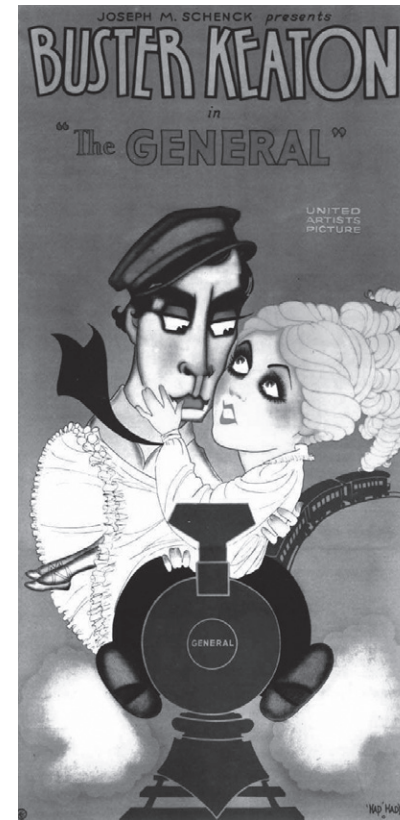
I signed up to volunteer for Slapstick Festival 2012. The first volunteering shift they gave me was selling t-shirts at the Friday night gala event at Bristol Beacon (then known as Colston Hall), a music venue of over 2,000 seats. Excited as I was to get the volunteering opportunity, when it came to the crunch on the day, I reluctantly dragged myself down to the venue straight from my day job at Ofsted, probably wishing I was going to the pub instead, telling my boyfriend at the time that I would do my volunteering shift from 5pm to 8pm, then I would meet him.

I don't now remember much about the shift, other than everyone was very nice, and they all knew a lot more about film than me. They informed me that the main feature film of the gala that night was Buster Keaton's *The General* (1926). Having studied film, I had heard of Buster Keaton, and had probably heard of *The General*. But the only silent films I had seen at that point [which had all been whilst studying] were *Metropolis*, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* and *The Birth of a Nation*. The first two I viewed on very ropey VHS owned by my university, and the third on LoveFilm [remember them?] in the very early days of online video-streaming [a very small viewing window with a very pixelated image]. I had never seen a silent film on the big screen, nor with a live orchestral accompaniment, and I don't think I even knew it was possible in this day and age.

Well, I was offered a free volunteer ticket to the gala. In the moment I was actually more interested in meeting my boyfriend and going to the pub. However, wanting to make a good impression, in the hope it might lead to something [which in the end it did], I reluctantly accepted the ticket, and attended the screening. And how glad I am that I did.

The experience was mind-blowing. Here I was, sat with nearly 2,000 other people, watching a film made 84 years previously, that was *still* making us laugh all this time later. The image quality was so good the film looked like it could have been made yesterday. The score was so seamless I think if it hadn't been such a novelty to see an orchestra accompanying a film, I probably would have forgotten they were there. And to be laughing along with a large audience [the essential part of the cinema experience] just topped it off. All sense of time between Buster Keaton then and all of us watching this film now, disappeared. I was completely absorbed, along with the rest of the audience, all crying with laughter and empathising with the ups and downs of Buster's journey. For the first time in my life, I felt a strong connection to history. It was no longer something that happened in a different time and place, to people who were primitive and different to me, and to the world today. I realised that people then had similar fears, hopes, desires, dreams, and above all, senses of humour. It was a window onto the past I had never looked through before. I walked out of that event with a completely different view of what cinema was and could be. It was the beginning of my realisation of the power and importance of film to connect us to our past, teach us about the world, and ultimately entertain us when we need to escape real life for an hour or so.

Of course, while Buster Keaton is the central genius of this moment in my life, I came to learn that there is much more to what made this event have such an effect on me. The combination of seeing *The General* on the big screen, in such good visual condition, with a superb live score by the Silent Screen Virtuosi, and of course excellent projection provided by a brilliant projection team [as I would discover when I came to work with them in the coming years], brought this film



Early promotional posters for *The General* (United Artists, 1926).

to life like it had been made yesterday. Prior to this experience, my perception was that 'old films' were primitive, blurry, scratched, had silly music, and were generally very fast and ridiculous. But watching *The General* turned this perception on its head.

As I continued to volunteer for Slapstick and attend silent film screenings by Bristol Silents [the parent company of Slapstick], I met people who were passionate about silent film and film history, and I began to learn that 'old films' were not originally blurry, scratched, fast moving, with silly music, and that many still weren't. I learned that when these films were like this, it was because that was the condition in which they survived. They had been scratched and damaged over the years, copied so many times that the images became blurrier and blurrier each time a copy of a copy was made. They were often projected at the wrong speed making them faster than they actually were supposed to be, and quite often any old piece of music was recorded or played alongside them. It was this, I realised, that often alienated people from wanting to watch silent and/or old films, thus detaching people from history in all its

splendour and importance. This, until now, is what had alienated me. I began to wonder, if my experience of watching *The General* could change my perception of the history of cinema so profoundly, could it do the same for others? And what else could I do to excite people about the history of cinema?

My new-found passion led me to eventually leave my job at Ofsted and work for film festivals full-time. Slapstick Festival became my place of work for several years, where I continued to develop my passion for film history and getting silent films to new audiences. I went on to train as a film and media archivist, and I now work at the British Film Institute National Archive, as well as working for South West Silents and Cinema Rediscovered in my spare time.

I was, and still am, convinced that if *The General* could have such a profound effect on me in the way that it did, then silent film and old films in general could have a similar effect on other people too. I am as passionate as ever about the power and importance of film to connect us to our past, teach us about the world, and of course entertain us. I continue to advocate for film and media history both inside and outside of my work at the archive to help keep film history (and history generally) alive for future generations.

I can only wonder what different fate would have awaited me had I decided to go to the pub that night after my volunteer shift, and not accept that free ticket to the Slapstick Festival 2012 Gala.



Rosie Rowan Taylor is a film and media archivist and historian. She is Curatorial Specialist at the British Film Institute National Archive, Co-Director and Co-Curator at South West Silents, and a Co-Curator at Cinema Rediscovered. [photo: Tony Richards]

Mark Cousins: A Tuesday Afternoon at Filmhouse

It was an epiphany, I suppose or, to use an Indian word, *darshan*: That moment when a curtain is pulled back, when you glimpse something astonishing, or sacred.

I'm not sure of the day or the exact year, but let's call it a Tuesday afternoon, and it was certainly in the early 1990s, before everyday visual distance had been collapsed by Skype and Zoom, before *Citizen Kane* was a click away. I was in Edinburgh, Scotland, as usual, walking to its arthouse cinema, Filmhouse. I'd done that walk from my flat so many times that my body remembers the journey and, more than once, has taken me there when I meant to go to another place.

I was in my mid-20s and had, in my work life, been directing documentaries for British TV. Since my pre-teens, I'd been drawn to cinema as if it was a tractor beam and, rather surprisingly given my working-class roots, found myself calling 'Action' and 'Cut'. Film had been a harbour and consolation for me, and I'd evolved a canon and set of preferences, which found their way into the kind of work I was making. I was using longish takes, working with children quite a bit, and the mood in my documentaries tended towards contemplation rather than sensation. I never used voice-overs and relied on interviewees to tell the story of the film: the approved style of the time, an approach rooted in BBC documentary film-making of the 1960s, perhaps.

My voice as a film-maker, therefore, combined my own taste and instincts with TV's highbrow aesthetic techniques.

But then, that Tuesday afternoon, I bought a ticket for a Japanese documentary called *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*. It is well known amongst movie lovers now but, 30 years ago, it was a rarity. I was drawn to rarities, to what I didn't know. Back then, as now, I felt that my ignorance was my best friend, my life raft. I didn't know much about Japanese documentary or – the subject of the film – the aftermath of the country's World War Two experiences, and I wanted to. And so I took my seat.

The lights went down and, almost at once I saw on screen a man who would haunt me, Mr Okuzaki, an ex-soldier who believed that the

Japanese government had wronged some of his fellow soldiers at the end of the war, and then covered up the iniquity. The respectable BBC way to investigate his allegations on camera would have been to interview retired soldiers and politicians and challenge them about what happened four decades earlier. A more dramatic version of the same reportage-storytelling tradition would be to bring Mr Okuzaki to do the interview himself, using his moral authority, his eye-witness account, as an extra lever to lift the lid of history or establishment cover-up.

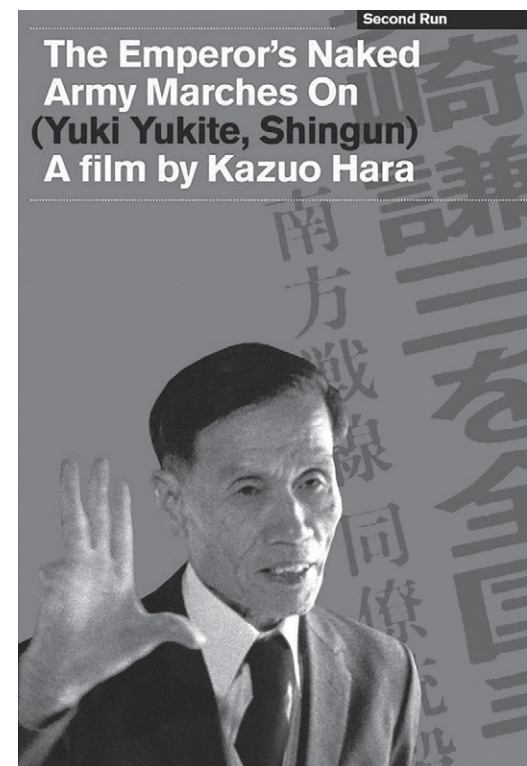
But *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* out-rode the latter in audacity. It vaulted over questions of journalistic measure and norms of intellectual decorum. Near the start we hear that Mr Okuzaki had been imprisoned for shooting pachinko balls at the Emperor. We see him approach elderly and sometimes unwell former military commanders and, when they feign ignorance or forgetfulness, he becomes enraged and – in a scene which, for me, sheared, hacked and gashed documentary decorum – *attacked* his interviewee, wrestling him to the ground, beating him and, at the same time, asking for the police to be called.

My eyes seemed to burn as I watched. I could feel my mind trying to situate this film, this scene, this rage on the map of documentary ethics or aesthetics that I had absorbed but, realising that it was off that chart, widening my mental map to incorporate this new infraction.

Four things are relevant about what happened that Tuesday afternoon in Filmhouse. The first is that the widening was permanent. Thirty years later, I not only remember the expansion of my documentary horizon clearly but, also, it has never contracted. As a movie-lover, as a movie-goer, when I see a new non-fiction film I always wonder where it fits in relation to *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*. Compared to its infringement, many films seem under-powered. A new room in the movie mansion had opened up for me and, regularly since, I've shown the film, or talked about it in an attempt to jolt audiences and, also, to think through its ethical complexities.

'What ethical complexities?' you might say. 'Mr Okuzaki was wrong to beat up those old guys.' But was he? This is my second point. Soldiers died after the end of the war, and they were killed and then cannibalised. This was the buried, unrevealable, unsayable atrocity that fuelled Okuzaki, and the only people who could confirm it were the men before him. In order for Japan to face up to this particular historical abasement, he felt that he should use any means necessary.

The third element of the story is that *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* changed my own film-making. Perhaps the combination of personal temperament and documentary tradition that I had used for some years was, anyway, running its course. Maybe as I went to Filmhouse as a film fan, the film-maker in me was looking to be



Cover of Second Run's 2019 DVD of *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* [Imamura Productions/Shisso Production/Zanzou-sha, 1987].

disrupted, to see something I hadn't seen. Whatever, as I watched I could feel myself thinking about a project I'd been planning and, as I did so, as Okuzaki assaulted, that project changed shape.

My planned film was about Holocaust denial. Neo-Nazism had been on the rise since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and I – together with a young film-maker called Mark Forrest – wanted to make a documentary about that denial. The standard method would be to interview survivors of the concentration camps, to present their eye-witness accounts. Or perhaps to film the children or even grandchildren of survivors as they visit Auschwitz or Treblinka for the first time.

There would have been memory in that method, but detachment and obliqueness too. As I watched Okuzaki, I realised that we needed something more frontal. I realised that I wanted to take the young Holocaust deniers to Auschwitz, and lie to them if necessary about where we were going and why. The resulting film, *Another Journey by Train*, did just that.

The fourth significance I'd like to mention about that Tuesday afternoon was that the cinema was almost empty. The person who

programmed the film – Jim Hickey, the then head of Filmhouse – might well have been disappointed by the smallness of the audience, and I'm sure the cinema's finance people were. The cost of importing the film print, etc, will definitely not have been recouped. And yet the effect was considerable.

Not only did I, a young film-maker, take my career up a gear, I went on to co-edit, with Kevin Macdonald, *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary* in which I ensured that *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* was covered, as were other Japanese films which – I discovered – were as good if not better. Some years later I did a three-year season on Japanese documentary at Sheffield's Doc/Fest. And when I came to make *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, my 15-hour history of the movies, I tracked down the film's director, Hara Kazuo, interviewed him and give him a prominent place in my film.

My mind had been opened and, in gratitude, I tried to alert others to the greatness of Japanese non-fiction cinema to counter, to a small degree, Euro-centrism.

All four of these things – my learning about documentary, my encounter with the horror of post-war Japan, the breakthrough in how to make the Holocaust film, and my advocacy, as an emerging film historian, of a Golden Age of Japanese documentary – were the *darshan*. Going to Filmhouse that Tuesday launched things in me and beyond me.

I know this is mostly a small story, a personal one, but its river has a delta.



Mark Cousins a film-maker and writer whose work includes *The Story of Children and Film*, *I Am Belfast* and *The Eyes of Orson Welles*. [photo: self portrait]

Richard Holloway: Going to the Pictures

Plato's most famous allegory, 'The Parable of the Cave', is found in his most important philosophical text, *The Republic*.

In the parable he invites us to imagine a vast underground cavern at the bottom of a steep slope. There are people sitting so tightly chained in the cave that all they can see is the back wall. A fire burns behind them, and between them and the fire actors carry puppets that cast flickering shadows onto the back wall, which the prisoners mistake for reality. But suppose the prisoners could release themselves and escape? Standing up and climbing out of the cave would be painful for their cramped legs, and the light of the sun would blind them when they emerged into the day. But it would be worth it, because they would have moved from fantasy to reality, from intoxicating shadows to painful enlightenment.

When I was working on *The Republic* as a student, I was stung when one of the scholarly expositors I read offered movie-going as the most obvious modern example of the kind of addiction to unreality Plato was warning us against. Everything about the cinema replicated the parable, he said. Cinema-goers sat glued to their seats gazing at pictures beamed onto a wall in front of them from a machine flickering behind them. And to many of them, what they saw on the shining screen was more real than the lives they lived outside in grey reality. The moral? They should abandon the cinema and its fictitious dreams and engage exclusively with the real world outside.

I was stung by the accusatory nature of this interpretation because I knew there was some truth in it. This was Glasgow in the 1940s and 1950s when I was growing up. Glasgow was the movie-going capital of Britain, a city packed with enormous picture palaces into which the citizens crammed themselves in their thousands twice a week. If you had the money and the time, you could take in four movies in six days. There was always the main presentation plus a B-movie or second feature, Monday through Wednesday, with a change of programme Thursday through Saturday – Saturday being the great movie-going festival of the week. And it wasn't just Glasgow. Most Scottish towns, even small ones like Alexandria, the town north of Glasgow I grew up in, had picture houses. Some of them had two, usually, for some reason, with exotic Italian names: La Scala, the Rialto, the Coliseum, the Astoria, with the odd Regal or Roxy thrown in here and there.



The Astoria, Glasgow [Glasgow City Archives, D-CA 8/245, reproduced with the permission of Glasgow Life].

What was the appeal? Escape. Going to the pictures was the antithesis of Plato. It was a conscious decision to check yourself out of grey reality into shining unreality for an hour or two a week. And it was what the poor did in their thousands every night. In the circumstances, I doubt if even Plato would have blamed them for taking a holiday from the harsh world most of them lived in. It was my mother, addicted herself, who got me addicted, and I remain grateful, because going to the movies has been my favourite escapist activity for as long as I can remember. I don't pretend to any pure aesthetic impulse or any desire to be intellectually challenged by the movies I go to. It has always been popular films I've gone for, escape and unreality I craved.

They say some alcoholics can remember their first drink; well, I can remember my first movie. I saw it in the Astoria in Possilpark in Glasgow in 1937 when I was four. The Astoria was a huge picture house that could seat 3,000 and every seat would have been filled the night my mother took me to see *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. I can still remember the occasion vividly because I wet myself laughing at the antics of the dwarves and, to the good-natured amusement of those sitting near us, I cried out in a spasm of laughter: 'Mammy, a'hm peein' masel.'



Main Street, Alexandria, Vale of Leven, c1930 [Courtesy of West Dunbartonshire Council Arts and Heritage, reference 6156].

At the beginning of the Second World War we moved 20 miles north of Glasgow to Alexandria in the Vale of Leven, and it was there that another twist in my movie-going compulsion asserted itself. I started pretending I had seen movies I hadn't. This is how it happened. We used to take two Sunday papers at home, the *Sunday Mail* and the *Sunday Post* – the latter for the comic strips, 'The Broons' and 'Oor Wullie'. But I preferred the *Sunday Mail* because of its advertisements for films showing up in Glasgow in the great cinemas on Sauchiehall Street and Renfield Street, much grander than anything in the Vale. I devoured the announcements of 'future presentations' coming soon to these giant Glasgow screens.

One Monday morning, during my last year in primary school, I found myself describing to a group of pals an exciting movie I had not actually been to but had seen advertised in the *Sunday Mail* the day before. Soon I was locked into a permanent playtime routine on Monday mornings, as a group of boys gathered round me to hear about the film which I hadn't seen that Saturday – except in my imagination. I became skilled at spinning stories based on the information I'd picked up from the advertisements in the previous day's paper. And I began to feel guilty about it. One night, in an agony of remorse, I woke my mother and poured out my difficulty, my father sleeping beside her. 'It's aw right, Dick,' she said, 'you've jist got a good imagination. Don't worry about it.' I went back to my bed absolved – and stopped the Monday morning movie sessions.

So maybe it was a true instinct that led me, a few years later, to choose a vocation that would make me a teller of stories that were best understood as containing their own meaning within themselves. What had mattered to my friends in the cold playground on those Monday mornings was that I took them out of themselves with my fictions, not that I hadn't actually seen the movies I described to them. Implicit in my childish fraudulence was a whole theory of religion, though it was to take me years to figure it out.

Unlike the other animals we share the planet with, who seem to live in unselfconscious harmony with nature, we humans are a puzzle to ourselves. That's what makes us creative, seekers of meaning, tellers of stories, trying to figure out who we are and how we should live. And religion has been one of the most prolific spinners of stories in human history. The trouble is that, while it is good at spinning its stories, it has been bad at knowing how to read them, how to interpret them. This is because it has wanted its stories to be fact when they are best understood as fiction. But fiction is not untruth. It is truth conveyed through story, and one of its purposes is escape and consolation, a vacation from grey reality. That's what I was offering my pals on those dismal Monday mornings in the playground in Main Street Primary School, Alexandria.

Imagining films that I hadn't seen in order to lift my pals out of themselves helped me fumble towards a different way of understanding theology and a more honest way of doing religion: as stories we tell ourselves to help us get through our complicated and sometimes painful lives. It would take me years to work all this out, of course. But it was going to the movies that started it.



Richard Holloway was Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church. A former Gresham Professor of Divinity and Chair of the Scottish Arts Council, his memoir Leaving Alexandria won the PEN/Ackerley Prize and was shortlisted for the Orwell Prize. His most recent book is Stories We Tell Ourselves: Making Meaning in a Meaningless Universe. [photo: Colin Hattersley]

Pamela Hutchinson: Fear of the Dark: Anxiety in the Audience

If you love movies as much I do, there's a beautiful word for that: cinephile.

But what if your heart races, and your hands turn clammy at the thought of going to the cinema? If you squirm in your seat as the lights go down, and you have to let your eyes dart towards the exit signs, or tell yourself 'it's only a movie' to calm yourself before the trailers have even finished? If you've ever had to dash from the auditorium and breathe into your handbag during a film, what are you then? I'm not asking for a friend. I'm asking for me.

The flipside of cinephilia must be cinephobia, right? And cinephobia is defined as the fear of films themselves. But I'm a movie critic, and a film historian, with a passion for everything from silent cinema and classical Hollywood to the kind of downbeat European arthouse fare that some people would call 'gruelling'. Don't you dare tell anyone I am a cinephobe. I love watching films, it's just that sometimes, cinemas make me feel trapped, and the feeling of being transported into another world by the screen always brings to mind Susan Sontag's phrase 'kidnapped by the movie'. And not in a good way.

I have looked for other words. Cinemaphobia sounds good at first, but this is a different thing. It is really an aversion, not a phobia: cultural snobbery plus panic-mongering, first coined by critic Clifford Howard in 1929 for what he called a 'morbid alarm'. It's a shape-shifting stance that objects to cinema in general on an evolving but depressingly familiar set of criteria, from the fear that exposure to American accents in the talkies will corrupt the Queen's English to the video-nasty furore of the 1980s. Most often, it's an unpleasant mix of censorious moralising and the patronising attitude that classifies cinema as something less than art, and irredeemably commercial. 'Like the gout,' Howard wrote, 'it serves as a symbol of polite superiority, and accordingly whosoever would have it known that he is not of the common herd develops a spleen against the Hollywood movies.' If that's my diagnosis, then I may have a serious amount of self-loathing to deal with.

Though on second thoughts, cinemaphobia may be a necessary component of cinephilia. A fear not of cinema itself, but what cinema may become. The prevalence of franchises, sequels and remakes,

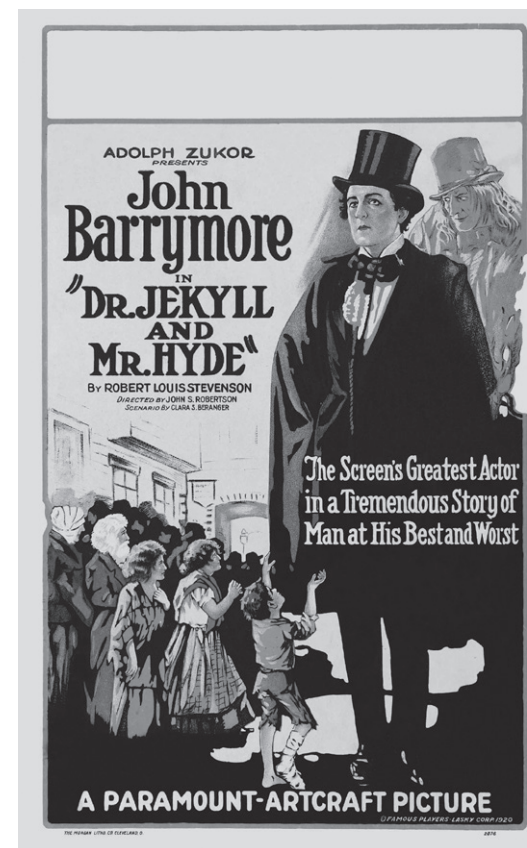
the conversion from physical film to digital or simply the disturbing ability to stream a masterpiece on your phone have all been known to cause outbreaks of cinemaphobia. The academic Sarah Keller has written about the anxiety that is wrapped up in cinephilia. 'From change to change, dread has been a factor in how theorists, scholars and film-goers have characterized cinema,' she wrote. 'Dread over the possibility of losing the object of one's affection, dread over cinema's death.' That Sontag phrase comes from an essay entitled 'The Decay of Cinema' written in 1996, which expresses exactly this kind of dread. Cinemaphobia, in certain cases, may just be a dirty word for saying that you care about the pictures. Every critic is a little bit of a snob, after all. In my own inevitably prejudiced mind, the keyboard warriors fuming about the *Ghostbusters* reboot are cinemaphobes, but the critics aghast at *Green Book* winning an Oscar are just cinephiles. Like me, a critical cinephile, fretting along with minds much cleverer than mine, about the future of the art form. So maybe I'm a little cinemaphobic too, but surely it's not bad films that make me hyperventilate at the multiplex.

Cinematophobia may be more the word I am looking for. This is a fear of the cinema space itself. It is a variant of agoraphobia, in which patients who are anxious about spending time in public places in general become especially fearful of going to the cinema. One wiki bluntly states that cinematophobia is no longer taken seriously, but perhaps that is because advice available online suggests that there is plenty of hope for cinematophobics. They can simply avoid going to the pictures – although that might cramp their social life. No mention of the detriment to the patient's cultural life here, nor the peril of doing one's job in the middle of an anxiety attack. Because clearly, no self-respecting film critic could be a cinematophobe...

Hello.

When, one day in the middle of March 2020, my temperature spiked, my energy levels plummeted, my lungs tightened and my brain began to fog over, I had to wonder whether cinema had really done for me this time. Was it the woman who sat behind me and coughed through a screening of Stella Meghie's enchanting romantic drama *The Photograph* who infected me with Covid-19? I gave the film a positive review, but perhaps it would be the last one I'd ever write. Who ever heard of a film critic who is scared of going to the cinema?

Well, in 2020 I wasn't alone. That may have been the last time I go to the cinema without a mask for a long time. The nation's cinemas closed shortly after I took to my bed. And although I personally could just as easily have picked up the virus on the tube or in a supermarket, cinemas were officially on the risky list. Many people, even film professionals, considered the idea of watching a movie in an enclosed space, surrounded by people laughing, eating and breathing, with something approaching horror.



Promotional posters for *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* [Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, 1920].

It would not be the first time. Historically, cinemas have witnessed their fair share of trauma. And I don't just mean those apocryphal Parisians who allegedly jumped to their feet when they saw the Lumières' train pull into La Ciotat station. I feel spiritually connected to them, even though I am pretty sure it didn't happen. In the days of nitrate film, before building regulations required certain safety standards, cinema fires were common, and could be devastating. The word fleapit originated from the creepy-crawlies that festered in the warm seats in the days of rolling cinema programmes. Which means that, yes, early cinema managers did have to spray the auditorium down with Jeyes fluid, and other noxious aerosol disinfectants, especially when they reopened after the 1918 flu pandemic. Ew.

That was then. Now, cinemas are fairly safe places to be, and the only things I have ever really been scared of encountering in the dark are thankfully rare menaces. From creeps invading my personal space to whatever was concerning the multiple security guards

at my press screening of *Joker*. In both cases, it is the patrons, not the venue or the film itself that are considered to be a disruptive influence. The cinema continues to demand obedience: silence your phone, stay in your assigned seat, don't pirate the movie. Perhaps my anxiety is a tiny rebellion against the rules?

There's a contradiction here. In the name of thrills, the films themselves, or the film-makers who create them, go out of their way to disrupt our sense of security, to prevent us from sitting quietly in our seats. Movies kidnap us with intent to cause psychic harm. Sound and colour first assaulted our senses, then widescreen, 3D and even Smell-O-Vision. The measure of a film has become the amount to which it disturbs your bodily functions: not just to laugh or cry but to flinch or scream or pass out. Mischievous director William Castle used to boobytrap the auditorium with skeletons and buzzers to make his audiences jump. In 1920, critics warned that the scares in the film *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* might cause physical harm to young children or even unborn babies in the audience. The real danger came when punters rushed the cinemas to get a ticket, clambering through windows and crushing in the doorways. Nowadays, the marketing for new films capitalises on our physical upheaval. Press releases reveal that the shocking scenes in everything from found-footage horror *The Blair Witch Project* to arthouse cannibalism drama *Raw* have caused audiences to faint, or vomit.

Such stories do little to settle my nerves. But in my case, absence has made the heart grow fonder, or at least less faint. When I returned to the pictures after the pandemic break, I found I was glad to be back. I had missed the cinema: the darkness, the enveloping screen, the reclining chairs and the ear-blasting speakers. Not just that, but I also welcomed the queasy tingle of apprehension and the rush of blood around my system.

I have come to realise that there's nothing wrong with enjoying a movie so much that it makes your heart race. The sweaty palms, the dancing stomach, the uncanny feeling that the world is spinning out of control? They are all symptoms of being in love.



Pamela Hutchinson is a freelance writer, critic and film historian who has written essays for several edited collections and is the author of the *BFI Film Classic* on Pandora's Box and the editor of *30-Second Cinema* [Ivy Press]. She writes the silent cinema website *Silent London*.

Diane Coyle: *Napoleon and Me*

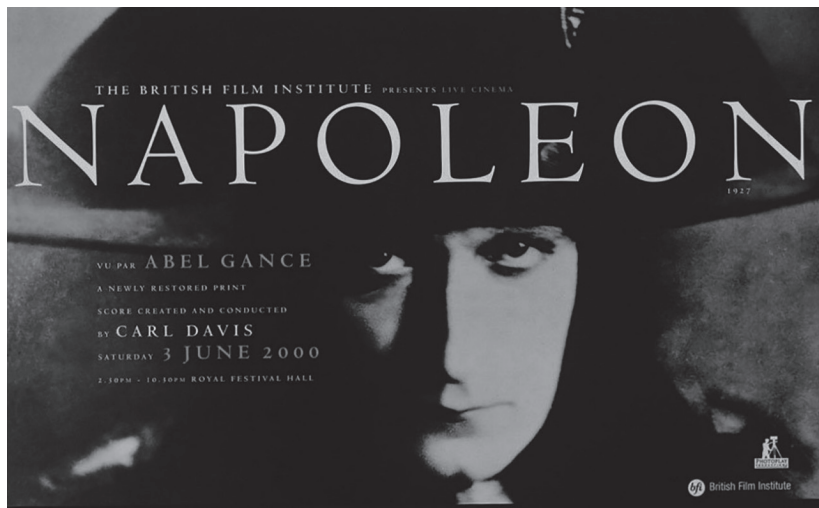
I first saw Kevin Brownlow's restoration of Abel Gance's 1927 epic *Napoleon* when it was new – not the famous January premier at Radio City Music Hall in New York (although I still have the poster from that occasion on my wall), but a year or two later in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The restored movie had an astonishingly warm reception in the US, among both audiences and critics. After all, that version was nearly four hours long, black-and-white, silent (albeit with a fantastic Carl Davis score), and requires some working knowledge of the events of the French Revolution. Since then, I've watched it on TV once, and attended a multi-hour all-day screening with meal breaks at the Royal Festival Hall, featuring a live performance by the Philharmonia Orchestra. It was a day well spent. Netflix has announced plans to fund and show Gance's seven-hour director's cut version later in 2021.

What is it about the film? It certainly isn't that I'm a Napoleon groupie. War-loving authoritarians are generally not my cup of tea. You don't need to know much of the history of the period to appreciate that Gance's perspective is not at all objective. The film's techniques are clearly – still – innovative and amazing, including a unique triptych format. This is definitely wide-screen. But then it is also a multi-hour, black-and-white, silent movie. What makes it so compelling?

The answer has to be at least in part the emotional impact it had. The exact details are hazy in my memory, but I had just arrived in the United States to do my PhD. It was all a bit of an accident. I had only applied to the programme because somebody a year ahead of me had done so and for some reason I decided to give it a go too. When they offered me a place and funding, I was horrified, although it would clearly have been crazy to decline. I was 20 when I flew into Boston for that first semester in September 1981. I had only been abroad once before, by boat train to Paris; family holidays had always been to places like Blackpool or Skegness or Margate. I had never flown before. In the departure lounge at Heathrow, a large Texan man mocked me for clutching my teddy bear.

After the culture shock of my undergraduate years at Oxford (though I quickly grew to love it), now came the culture shock of the United States and graduate school at Harvard. It was hard work keeping up



Promotional poster for British Film Institute screening at Royal Festival Hall of *Napoleon* [Ciné France/Films Abel Gance, distributed by Gaumont, 1927].

with my peers, fuelling a bad case of imposter syndrome: what on Earth was I doing alongside all these people who were *really* clever? Like all immigrants, I had to learn quickly how to fit in enough to get along with everyday life – how to pronounce ‘tomayto’ so you would be understood and get some on your lunchtime sandwich, how the subway tokens worked, how to get a social security number, how not to stand paralysed in front of the huge array of toothpaste brands in the supermarket.

By the time *Napoleon* was screened – I think at the Cambridge Arts Theatre – I must have been over these early hurdles, coping. But although many details of that time are hazy, I do remember my terrible homesickness. It was too expensive to fly to the UK for Christmas. I had made some friends of course, kind people, but not yet close.

And then I saw the movie. The earliest scenes are set in the military academy at Brienne where the young Napoleon was schooled. He is an outsider mocked for his provincial Corsican accent. He is bullied. He keeps an eagle sent by his family, consolation in his loneliness. The bullies free the bird, which then returns to the sobbing Napoleon. The snowball fight scene at the school is a filmic marvel, and the young actor [Vladimir Roundeko] is extraordinary. And then there's the rest of the movie, with the compelling performance of Albert Dieudonné as the adult Napoleon. Nevertheless, I think it was emotional identification with the lonely young misfit that imprinted the film on me.

If and when Netflix shows its new version, I'll watch that too, all seven hours, even on a small screen. The movie never flags, there are no moments of surreptitiously (or not) looking at the time. I have to give some credit to Napoleon himself: you don't need to be an admirer to recognise an extraordinary life in extraordinary times. Perhaps it helps to have been a forlorn newcomer to recognise and identify with the bullied school-child, but then a lot of us have been there. No wonder this nearly century-old movie has so many ardent fans.



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Promotional image from *Napoleon* featuring the boy and his eagle [private collection].

Jane Duffus:

Small-Town Dreamers

Nostalgia makes us feel a familiarity for something that we may never have experienced, simply by virtue of having viewed a rosy-lensed version of it that neatly edits out the terrible times that inevitably coexisted with the good bits.

And when times are tough in the present, what better than to escape into a carefully edited version of the past?

I'm as guilty of this as anyone. In the past year or two, I've rewatched all my hot-water-bottle films. None more than *Billy Liar* and *Gregory's Girl*, both of which are bestowed with great casts, brilliant scripts and escapist plots. And both of which I discovered via pop songs.

On the 1993 album *So Tough*, Saint Etienne bridged most of the songs with samples from classic films. Which was how I first heard the following disembodied lines:

'Of course, London's a big place. It's a very big place, Mr Shadrack. A man could lose himself in London. Lose himself, lose himself, LOSE HIMSELF IN-A LAHNDAHN!'

A few years later, hearing those same words bellowed into an undertaker's urn and booming out of a chunky TV, was therefore ver' exciting. I finally knew where they were from. They were from the 1963 film *Billy Liar*.

That life-changing Thursday morning was in spring 1995. I was 17 and studying for an A-level in Film Studies. Suddenly, everything was swirling into one bright flash: Saint Etienne! Tom Courtenay! Julie Christie! That bloke from *The Likely Lads*! *Billy Liar*! What an auspicious morning. Yet I just sat there, wondering why nobody else was as excited as I was by this unexpected pop culture explosion. Wondering why nobody else felt their heart fizz as Billy [Courtenay] longed to avoid orange-munching mundanity with Barbara [Helen Fraser] by escaping from Yorkshire to London with the exciting Liz [Christie].

And where was I when this momentous event took place? I was in a classroom in a repurposed dentist's surgery, in an extension of the college in Somerset I attended. The institutional TV was wheeled in on a trolley and, along with the VHS player underneath, was bolted

down so we couldn't steal it. Nobody ever bothered to close the blinds for these screenings. And we sat on uncomfortable wooden chairs with fold-over arm rests for putting our ~~eigarettes~~ notebooks on.

It was tremendously exciting, suddenly piecing together the fragments that formed my teenage world. As a band, Saint Etienne is steeped in nostalgia. In the 1990s, singer Sarah Cracknell even looked and dressed like a 1960s model. On *So Tough*, that *Billy Liar* quote bridges into 'You're in a Bad Way', which is a song about nostalgia and the kitchen-sink dramas of the 1960s, written in the style of Herman's Hermits. There's burnt toast, cold coffee and Bruce on the old *Generation Game*. The narrative of 'You're in a Bad Way' is of a bored young man who has lost direction. It could be the story of Billy Fisher. Or Gregory Underwood.

Although I was just two when *Gregory's Girl* was released in 1980, that hasn't stopped it becoming one of my favourite films. Rewatching *Gregory's Girl* is akin to being swaddled in a comfort blanket imbued with the scent of a past I am too young to remember, and which I never would have experienced anyway, given I have never played football, never been a teenage boy and never tried to hitchhike from Cumbernauld to Caracas.

Just as my love for *Billy Liar* developed into a crush on actor Julie Christie, my fascination with *Gregory's Girl* stems from my adoration for pop star Clare Grogan, who I had fallen in love with after discovering her band Altered Images when I was 12. More than 30 years later, this crush shows no signs of abating. Via a single by The Fat Tulips called 'Where's Clare Grogan Now?', I made another new discovery. The run-out groove of the 7" includes an audio grab of Clare saying 'Goodnight, Mr Spaceman' from *Gregory's Girl*, a film I had not yet seen but now needed to find urgently. But with no internet to stream anything from and the local video rental shop not having it in stock, I was stuck. Until a VHS copy arrived on my 15th birthday in 1993.

Glued to the living-room sofa that morning, elbows on knees, chin in hands, I was transfixed for the 91 minutes that the video ran on the family TV. It was a very dark print and most of the exterior shots were difficult to see, but I loved it. The synthesizer soundtrack, the blow-dried hairstyles, and the gawkiness of the boys who were desperate to attract the sophisticated girls at school. I was a similar age to the characters when I first watched the film and maybe that was part of the appeal.

Gregory's Girl is a seemingly innocent film about a goofy boy [John Gordon Sinclair] who falls in lust with Dorothy [Dee Hepburn] who is so good at football that she replaces him on the school team. But the film is not really about teenage infatuation or football. It's a clever and funny study into the way people gently manipulate one another for their own goals, and it's about a longing for something



Promotional poster for *Billy Liar* [Vic Films Productions/Waterhall Productions, distributed by Anglo-Amalgamated Film Distributors, 1963].

more. Sure, some of it is a little troubling in hindsight: the male teachers fantasising over the schoolgirls, the kids selling pastries from the toilets, the boys hiding in the bushes to take photos of the nurses getting undressed in their lodgings.

However, *Gregory's Girl* is also gently mocking the fragile male ego. Mr Menzies the football coach is the most emasculated man imaginable, and even little sister Madeline's ten-year-old beau is portrayed as an overzealous loser ('You're going to run out of perversions before you're 12,' sneers Gregory). Meanwhile, Dorothy and her friends manipulate Gregory into doing whatever they want; Gregory's kid sister is the wisest person ever committed to celluloid; and the girls study science at school while the boys take cookery classes.

Everything director Bill Forsyth put into this film is deliberate. There are so many tiny details that seem disparate but create a masterpiece. With a cast of unknown teenagers, Forsyth set the film in the town of Cumbernauld, which was itself an unknown teenager having been built post-war. This is juxtaposed with a headmaster whose only concerns are where Dorothy will shower after football, what kind of pastry he should choose for his secret order of treats, and interrupting his jaunty piano playing to utter – perfectly in rhythm – 'Go away you small boys'. Brilliantly, the school is haunted

by a child dressed as a penguin who is shuttled from one corridor to another as a variety of teachers tell him a different classroom to go to, none of which is ever explained. The physical humour of Gregory is balanced with the controlled, coordinated movements of Dorothy.

And then there is Clare Grogan as Susan who, while her classmates look brash in their post-punk clothing and make-up, exudes the sophistication and taste that we would expect from a beret-wearing goddess who dances in the park.

The similarities between the two films are endless. Both Billy and Gregory are facing pivotal points in their lives; they are on the brink of crisis. Both are infatuated with unattainable women. Both are kind-hearted dreamers with big ambitions to escape small-town mentalities. Really, it all comes back to the penguin in the hallway – forever searching for something unspecified, going around in circles and ultimately ending up back where they began after bumping into doorways.

In 1996, the Watershed cinema hosted a screening of *Gregory's Girl*. I didn't live in Bristol at the time but drove up just for the evening, unable to miss the chance to see such a significant film on the big screen. I sat in Watershed 1 utterly mesmerised, not least because the print was perfectly lit and I could finally see all the exterior shots that my grubby VHS copy had denied me.

A year or two later, I found a VHS tape of *Billy Liar* in my undergraduate university's library and persuaded my flatmates to watch it on someone's tiny telly while we perched in a row on a single bed. They were unimpressed, unable to believe anything good could be in black-and-white or, worse, nearly 40 years old. A few years later, after a press junket in London, I finally won my prize: my very own VHS copy of *Billy Liar* which had been sitting quietly in the racks of the big HMV on Oxford Street. These days, I've upgraded both *Billy Liar* and *Gregory's Girl* to DVD but still listen to Saint Etienne on the original vinyl because it sounds better. The three elements combine to create the ultimate pop culture experience and nostalgia has never felt so reassuring.



Jane Duffus has worked as a journalist and editor for numerous national magazines and publishers. She is a freelance writer, editor and public speaker, and the author of five books including two in The Women Who Built Bristol series. She still longs to see *Billy Liar* on the big screen. (photo: Jon Craig)

Mark Bould:

Flicks! Flicks! I Love You!

Falling in love with movies was easy – I can't remember a time when I didn't know King Kong, Laurel and Hardy, Johnny Weissmuller, Larry 'Buster' Crabbe – but that was down to our black-and-white TV. Falling in love with the cinema was much harder.

Growing up in villages, first in Staffordshire then in Devon, cinemas were not even part of the landscape. They were like mythical beings. Oddly grand structures glimpsed through car windows, their insides mysterious, unimaginable.

And growing up dirt-poor didn't help. Sure, there was the postal order from my great-aunt every birthday, and at the end of our every-other-Christmas trip up to Birmingham Grandad would slip a 50p into my hand – a trick he performed with a great show of secrecy, as if no one had the slightest inkling of what he was up to (I believed it every time). But we lived a dozen miles from the nearest cinema so even if Mum and Dad allowed I was old enough to go without them into Plymouth, that wretched hive of scum and villainy, the bus fare alone would have wiped me out.

Besides, all my early experiences of projected film were frankly terrifying.

I like to pretend I'm so cool that my first outing to the flicks was to see a Kurt Russell movie, which is technically true. It was on one of those Christmas visits – 1974, I think – and the whole family, including aunts, uncles and cousins, went to a double-bill of Disney's *Charley and the Angel* and *Peter Pan*. Dad reckons it was at the West End, but that closed down in 1967, so unless we were in the carcass of a ghost cinema, which I'm not ruling out, it would have been the Gaumont or the Odeon. I vaguely recall staircases sweeping up from the lobby, red carpets, golden banisters. But the two things I really remember are the size of the auditorium – we were chapel, not church, folk so I'd no idea the inside of a building could be so big – and the crowds of people, every single one of them bigger than me and much too close. Nice work, cinema: agoraphobia and claustrophobia all at once.

Things didn't get better any time soon.

We lived on the edge of the moors, so in junior school, projected on the wall of the gym, we were shown *Apaches*, the public information film about kids playing on a farm and dying in assorted horrible ways. For weeks afterwards, I had nightmares about drowning in a slurry pit; I couldn't close my eyes without seeing the boy's viewpoint shot as he sinks below the muck (a shot which, incidentally, doesn't actually exist).

And then there was *A Thief in the Night*. I can't imagine the route by which a print of David W Thompson's Rapture movie made its way from Iowa to Dartmoor, but there it was, flickering away in a darkened church hall in the middle of nowhere. At the time, Mum and Dad were being drawn away from a vaguely leftist Methodism towards a charismatic evangelical fundamentalism – something self-righteously manipulative, misogynist, full of spite; something less than them – and me and my brother were dragged along in their wake. So, there we were, trapped with some creepy Midwich teens and this nasty, mean-spirited film made with the sole purpose of terrorising audiences into belief, while the adults were off somewhere being baptised in the Holy Spirit and urged to speak in tongues. The movie ends with young Patty, who found Jesus just minutes too late to be Raptured, fleeing from agents of the Antichrist, from a narrative structure that closes around her like a trap, and towards the camera, towards freedom. But in a surprisingly artful long-lensed final shot she runs and runs yet never seems to get any closer, while the folk-rock soundtrack endlessly repeats 'You've been left behind, you've been left behind...'.

Inevitably, there were nightmares, and I know Dad thought talking to me about Jesus and eternal life in those disturbed small hours would be comforting, but I quickly decided I'd rather lie petrified and alone in the dark. I'd have been about eight.

At least by the time someone projected *Sleeping Beauty* in the Masonic hall I was old enough to channel my anxiety into laughter at younger kids who were scared by cartoon witches and dragons. This kind of trick came in handy when school screened *Dr Syn, Alias the Scarecrow* and, the following year, the differently traumatising *National Velvet*. But it was no help at all when, on a rainy weekday in 1977, Mum took me and my brother to see *The Rescuers*. All I really remember is that it was one of her bad days: struggling with depression and poverty, at her wit's end, needing a break from it all. I remember her trying not to cry. I remember knowing there would be a row later about wasting the housekeeping, and I remember not even trying to talk her out of it. But I don't really remember the rain. I suspect that is just some pathetic fallacy, the unconscious shaping recollection.

Sometime, though, money worries must have eased a little because every so often Mum and Dad decanted us into the Saturday morning picture show and told us to have fun. Clearly, they had no idea. It was Ballardian in there. Mayhem reigned: an unleashing of impulses; a

directionless flailing. Popcorn pelted down from the balcony by the fistful. Intermittently, bullying, extortion and actual violence broke out as kids in tank-tops, hopped up on Spangles and Tizer, ran wild. Older kids, posing as smokers, hacked at fags; booze – or so they claimed – passed back and forth in ostensible bottles of pop. And when the lights lowered, libidinal fumbblings, amateur necking, brutal lovebites. Given half a chance, someone would have barbecued a dog.

Management's unconcern was magnificent. The only thing I remember seeing was a trailer for Cronenberg's *The Brood*.

But the fleshpots of Plymouth beckoned! So, we would duck out or, even better, manage to not even go in, which meant there was ticket money to spend – but never on anything we could keep because sooner or later we would have to explain where it came from and then we would be back to spending trips into town squabbling in the back of the Skoda while Mum and Dad did the shopping.

Poverty colours it all.

My best mate at school was from the rich end of the village. He'd always loan me his *Action* comics, and his *2000AD*, and whenever he bought himself a Lion Bar or Cornetto, he'd get one for me, too. For his ninth birthday, his parents planned a trip to see *Star Wars* and a party at the Wimpy, but his mum told him he couldn't invite me. This sudden exile took ages to figure out: all the parents had to bung in a fiver to help cover the cost, and she knew mine couldn't afford it. She meant it kindly, I think, but it soured me on cinema even more than all that scary stuff had done, so when we went as a family to see *Grease* at the ABC, I was glad we couldn't get in (the queue was so long we didn't even try).

Then in 1979 Dad had a chronic chest infection – for years he'd been cycling to work and back, more than 20 miles a day, whatever the weather, because they couldn't afford the petrol – and so we moved to Plymouth. Early in 1981, I went to the cinema on my own for the first time. And every agonising moment of those weeks of not spending my Christmas money on *this* or *that* paid off. Because I saw Mike Hodges' *Flash Gordon*, and everything changed. That was when I fell in love with cinema.

My brother, a couple of years older and thus less troubled by our childhood experience of projected film, was no more accustomed to cinema-going than me. He soon took to returning home and declaring whatever he'd just watched the best film he'd ever seen, be it *Rocky III* or *Friday the 13th Part 3 3D* or, I kid you not, *Soul Man*. But what he was getting at was that same intensity of feeling I had watching *Flash Gordon*.

I can't now summon up the elation and exhilaration, that experience of joy and delight filling an auditorium, but I remember so vividly

that I *felt* all those things. Not just the thrills of the movie, but also its thrilling mirror: that odd communality of being alone yet connected to all these other people by overlapping waves of affect, by the intimation of a fuller, richer world.

It is more fleeting now, that sensation, but it is still there: being as harrowed as everyone else in that freezing cold Edmonton hall by a battered old print of *Come and See*; the fellowship that night in LA when one of the projectors at Cinefamily was down, and an increasingly intoxicated Greg Proops popped up onstage to improv through every reel change of *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three*; just plain loving those kids in Manchester at xXx: *The Return of Xander Cage* cheering at, yet clearly baffled by, the sudden appearance of Ice Cube, not entirely sure who he was, let alone who he was playing; choking up a little in Watershed when a friend's young son was so scared by the T-Rex fight in the original *King Kong* that they had to leave; that unexpected surge of grief at Brian Conner's final quarter mile; the relief and delectation when it's revealed the blues-and-twos are not the cops but the TS-motherfucking-A turning up to handle shit, cos that's what they do; that clutch in the throat when Letty says, 'Hey guys, surprise' and finally there is #JusticeForHan...

All those moments – from films *but in cinemas and with audiences* – won't be lost in time like tears in the rain.



Mark Boulton teaches and writes about film. His books include *Film Noir: From Berlin to Sin City* (2005), *The Cinema of John Sayles: Lone Star* (2009), *Science Fiction: The Routledge Film Guidebook* (2012), *Solaris* (2014) and *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate Catastrophe Culture* (2021). [photo: Andrea Gibbons]

John Gray:

Solaris

I first watched Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Solaris*, not long after it was released, in Oxford in late 1972.

My next viewings were in San Francisco, where it seemed to be permanently showing when I was spending time in northern California later in the Seventies. The film shows a seemingly sentient, water-covered planet making replicas of human beings and places from the memories of visiting astronauts. Rewatching the film on DVDs, it has recreated for me the places in which I watched it.

The fact that I watched *Solaris* originally in cinemas may be significant. Looking at a film in a darkened theatre is an experience separate from the rest of life. That may be why films that have an edge of unreality about them can seem so compelling on the big screen. The distance between imagination and perception shrinks, and what is seen feels like a vision coming from a hidden part of the mind.

There is a sizeable literature on Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, to which I contributed in a section of my book *The Soul of the Marionette* (2015). I concluded that the simulacra fashioned by the ocean may be not radically different from the forms we find in the world we actually inhabit. Something like this is intimated in what for me is the most powerful scene in the film. The psychologist Kris Kelvin has been sent to the planet to report on whether the mission of determining whether it is truly sentient should be continued or abandoned. Inexplicably, Kelvin is joined for a time by an avatar, or 'mimoid', of his deceased wife Rhea, who is as baffled as he is as to how she has come to be there.

Towards the end of the film the psychologist is shown walking through trees towards a wooden house where he meets his late father. The camera then pulls back to reveal that the house, the woods and Kelvin's father are all of them mimoids, tossed from the ocean only to crumble and fall away when Kelvin is no longer looking at them.

If the ocean planet *Solaris* fashioned a place from Kelvin's memories, *Solaris* the movie evoked memories in me of cities I once lived in. As they were in the Seventies, Oxford and San Francisco seem like imaginary places today. A place is not a physical location but a moment in the life of a soul. The scruffy, down-at-heel Oxford I relished as an impecunious student has gone, and apart from the colleges the city looks and feels much like central London. The misty,

lotus-eating streets of San Francisco through which I wandered are no different from those of many other American cities, a mix of anxious affluence and rancid despair. But even as I watch it today, *Solaris* revives the cities as I once knew them. Like Kelvin, I am drawn into a world that exists only while I am perceiving it.

A few weeks after I first watched the film, I read the novel on which it is based, published in Polish in 1961 and in English in 1970. Sections of Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* consist of discussions of 'Solaristics', a research programme attempting to understand how contact with an alien intelligence might be achieved. It was a project, the narrator tells us, which seemed to its critics to be 'the space era's equivalent of religion: faith disguised as science'. The struggle to contact an alien mind is a surrogate for the mystical quest for God.

In another interpretation, also suggested in the book, those who claim to be trying to understand the water-covered planet are not attempting to contact an alien mind at all. They are only 'seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors'. The struggle to understand an inhuman intelligence then becomes a critique of solipsism, the inability or unwillingness of the human mind to move outside itself. For Lem, this may have been the meaning of the book.

Tarkovsky's *Solaris* is different. It is a stream of numinous images, which – as we see them on the screen – seem intermingled with our memories and desires. Yet what we see is not manufactured by our conscious selves. Instead, film releases parts of ourselves we had not known before. We cannot fully articulate what they tell us. For me, though, the epiphanies evoked by Tarkovsky are revelations of the dream-like transience of the human world.

Living in Britain in the Seventies felt more than usually provisional. There were industrial conflicts, power shortages and a three-day week. Following the oil shock of 1973, queues for daily necessities formed outside shops. At night, pubs and restaurants served customers by candlelight. Heating was cut to save energy. Waste was collected only intermittently, and in London the streets were littered with rubbish. Occasionally rats could be seen scuttling across the pavement.

As I recall the time, it seemed like a collective dream was breaking up. A sense of evanescence was in the air. The media were full of talk of the collapse of capitalism, while the oil shock stoked fears of the end of industrial society itself. Neither of these denouements seemed to me likely, but I was not surprised when the world of the Seventies came to an end. By 1979, when Margaret Thatcher took power, another dream was taking over.

Many were shocked by the sudden disappearance of the world they had known, and – despite all the idle chatter about revolution that was common at the time – unthinkingly took for granted. But abrupt

shifts are in the nature of dreams, whether they are those of societies or individuals. Long periods of drift are suddenly interrupted, and a new dream quickly takes shape.

While I loved the ramshackle world of the Seventies, I did not mourn its passing. Nor did I expect the new dream to last forever. Thirty years later, in the financial crisis of 2008, it too began to melt away. Now, as a result of the pandemic, we find ourselves between dreams. Happily, a full awakening is a nightmare we will not have to endure. In one form or another, the dream will continue.

In Lem's novel, the last mimoid Kelvin encounters is a floating island, looking like a city tens of centuries old, a maze of winding streets and alleyways that descend abruptly into the waves. Landing on a beach, he finds the waves responsive to him, producing a flower that moulds itself around his fingers, then floats off to sink into the water. The ocean seems to have been playing with him.

The novel ends with the psychologist undecided as to whether to remain on Solaris or return to Earth. If he stays, perhaps the avatar of his beloved wife will return. Or maybe the planet will go on playfully fashioning mimoids, while being indifferent to his memories and his hopes.

Tarkovsky's film has stayed with me in a way that Lem's book – one of the greatest works of speculative fiction – has not. As the places in which I watched it have been washed away, what I feel is not sadness. Instead, it is wonderment at the ever-vanishing human dream, of which I am a part.



John Gray is the author of Straw Dogs: Humans and Other Animals (2002), Feline Philosophy: Cats and the Meaning of Life (2020) and other books. He writes regularly for the New Statesman. [photo: Justine Stoddart]

Mark Fuller: What Makes a Great Cinema?

My life has been defined by the cinema. I was taken to the local cinema by my parents or grandparents from around age four. There, I caught the tail-end of the ABC Minors, the Saturday morning pictures where children went to the cinema *en masse*, without much adult supervision, for a diet of film serials and short comedies from roughly 40 years earlier, and newer but more wholesome and thus patronising-feeling products of The Children's Film Foundation.

I was at school before the days of videotape, so if there was anything audio-visual to be seen and it wasn't a live TV broadcast, out came the school's 16mm projector. Occasionally – perhaps once or twice a year – there would be film shows for entertainment, too. Wildly age-inappropriate feature films of the period would be screened to us in the main hall. This included the X-rated psychological horror that had been shot in that very hall, with our teachers and prefects lurking as extras in the background. So that was all right then.

As a student, in the early Eighties, I got the bug badly: College Film Society, a Film and Video Unit as part of the course. Then when I started going to work, investment in a videotape recorder, and the recording of obscure old British fare broadcast on the nascent Channel 4 in the early hours. Cinema-going again, in its various forms, when I reached Bristol. And eventually, film festivals, here and abroad, broadening my range in terms of the age and provenance of the films I was getting to see and learn about. Thus, I've had many unforgettable film-going experiences: Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* under an Italian starlit sky; Powell and Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale* in Canterbury Cathedral itself; Abel Gance's silent epic *Napoleon*, with live orchestra, in a 3,000+ seat picture palace in California.

So, I've given a bit of thought over the years, as to what exactly makes for a great cinema.

I think we are fairly well blessed in Bristol and its environs. We have a huge range of film venues in and around the city, catering for most tastes, from the big commercial multiplexes to smaller cinemas like the Orpheus and a myriad of spaces where films are screened

regularly such as 20th Century Flicks' Kino, various community halls, back rooms in pubs, hidden cellars... as well as spaces with occasional screenings, like Bristol Beacon, our Cathedral, the Planetarium, and so on. Yes, we look at the abandoned IMAX with sorrow, and fear for the Odeon on Union Street, but overall, Bristol isn't doing too badly.

So, is it the fabric of the building that makes a cinema great? Yes, I love the faded beauty of the Curzon at Clevedon; equally the luxurious modernity-in-an-old-setting of the Everyman. But also, the setting of Watershed with its excellent customer facilities that make it such a popular hangout even if you aren't taking in a film; and the Cube with its slightly raffish air, giving you a slight feeling of wickedness for attending it. So long as the fabric of the place is doing its basic job, the roof is keeping the rain out, the seats don't give you cramp in the running-time of a feature film, and the toilets aren't flooding, the fabric of a cinema may add interest, but it isn't what makes or breaks a cinema.

The projection facilities and equipment then? Well, again, so long as the basic requirements are met. I'm not a fetishist for 35mm projection as I do realise that it isn't always feasible, either practically or economically, and a good digital projection system is just fine. My interest in old films means that I'm used to seeing films screened that, in some cases, survived into the present-day by the skin of their teeth. There are hints of decay, scratches, loss of image quality through generations of duplication, or by surviving on 16mm or even smaller gauges that are now the only sources for what is screened. Therefore, if the aspect ratio is about right, and the focus is reasonable, I'm happy.

Programming? Important of course. If a balance can be achieved between those films that are going to be popular and those films that should be seen but may otherwise fall under the radar of a keen cinema-goer, between the old and the new, between the entertaining and the thought-provoking, you will have my business, and in a city like Bristol, a successful venture. You build a reputation and your audience will trust you if you present something outside their comfort zone. But that isn't done by algorithms. It's done by people.

I think it's the people that make a cinema great. Some you will see; some you may never meet. I've mentioned the programming. The programmer of a standalone cinema or a chain will make or break the cinema in the eyes of the public. Unadventurous programming can bore an audience; over-adventurous can scare an audience. The cinema needs paying patrons to make its way, but it has to be a mixed diet. The best programmers, as in every profession, make it look easy; you only notice a programmer when the programming isn't great. The management too. Balancing the books of a cinema must be a dark art at the best of times, let alone currently. Applying for grants, funding, keeping staff on board, employing the best a

cinema can afford. Investing in the new equipment, and the expertise needed to deliver those programmes. All the time, ideally, remaining grounded with your audience, taking on board feedback, and staying aware of new developments, new films, creating special events from time to time, building that reputation.

That reputation is in the hands of the Front of House staff. I spent all my working life in customer service, so feel qualified to say this. Whether it's the Box Office staff or the ushers, they are the most obvious representatives of what a cinema is trying to achieve, and how successfully it does so. The staff in a multiplex tend to be absolutely polite. They can be helpful, but too often they seem disengaged, and any interaction one may have feels scripted, like the sort you hear in America, but without the sincerity American customer service seems to have... or seems to fake better, perhaps. Staff in smaller cinemas tend to be more engaged. I hope it's because they are being better appreciated by their employers, because they have a genuine interest in both the particular cinema and cinema in general, and that it isn't just a job to them. Arthouse Front of House staff tend to be more knowledgeable, and genuinely friendly. They may ask your opinion of the film, because they are wanting to see it too, or have seen it and want to talk about it. In the smaller venues, they may well be there solely for the love of it; they will be volunteers, keeping our film culture alive in places where it wouldn't survive as a strictly commercial undertaking. The volunteers of the Curzon, the Cube, and at other venues around the city, I salute you.

However, there's more to it than that. It's something I've known for a while, but the pandemic brought it into sharpened relief. However much I miss a big screen, here in my flat, or the atmosphere that helps aid concentration on that screen in a darkened room, with no distractions from knowing what is in the fridge, or neighbours hovering, it isn't just sitting in a cinema that I miss the most. Nor is it the films themselves; I have access to the streaming services and online festivals, and they have been fine in their sub-optimal way. What was missing was the rest of the audience.

I miss the rest of the audience on various levels. In an audience full of strangers, their almost imperceptible responses are as important to a film's atmosphere as its music. A stifled gasp, an intake of breath, a holding of breath, a giggle under a hand, multiplied in a crowd changes one's response. You are not alone. This is a shared experience. Cinema, for all the home-streaming happening now, remains, at its best, a communal activity. The best films engender conversations with fellow audience members when the lights go up. No fellow audience, no conversations.

And it's that; it's the conversations one can have subsequently, whether with strangers, acquaintances or friends. Perhaps turning strangers into acquaintances, those acquaintances into friends over time. That is the part of film-going that I missed most and is the

hardest, well, impossible really, to replicate: the new friendships developed over a shared love of film. Hence my Friends list on Facebook is about ninety percent populated by fellow film nerds.

Bristol's important film culture depends on a fairly small network of people who pretty much all know each other; and, by and large, they originally met in a bar, after a film. It's the organic nature of what has happened in Bristol over the last few decades that makes it strong. Strong but not indestructible. There is much work to be done to repair the damage done by the pandemic. Only a cinema, and the best cinemas, can provide the fertile ground needed to grow a culture of film, and it needs a willing audience to help develop it. The best cinemas gain the best audiences, not just numerically, but the keenest, the most knowledgeable, and the most open to new ideas and to new people.

But there is hope. Because what makes a cinema great, in my opinion, is a combination of its ability to cultivate an audience and the audience it has already cultivated. We must preserve and build on that. As audience members we must return to cinemas as soon as practicable, support our cinemas as best we can, however we can, or we will lose our great cinemas, and that will be a tragedy for Bristol.



Mark Fuller is a retired bookie and has been involved with the silent film scene in Bristol for over 20 years, helping out at Bristol Silents, Slapstick and now South West Silents. He's a regular at many screens in Bristol and at archive film festivals everywhere.

Charlotte Crofts: 'The Transmission of Divine Light'

'I used to think of prayer wheels... Night after night, prayer wheels ceaselessly turning in the darkened cathedrals, those domed and gilded palaces of the Faith, the Majesties, the Rialtos, the Alhambras... While the wonderful people out there in the dark, the congregation of the faithful, the company of the blessed, they leant forward, they aspired upwards, they imbibed the transmission of divine light.' (Angela Carter 'The Merchant of Shadows')

For me cinema-going – when it is done properly – is a quasi-religious ritual: that coming together with strangers to share a sense of *communitas*. Sometimes I think the only reason I set up the Cary Comes Home Festival is so I could see Cary Grant's films on the big screen. The difference between watching *North by Northwest* alone on DVD in your bedroom and watching it with 300 other people at the Bristol Hippodrome, the theatre where Archie Leach started out, is palpable. I jumped, hid my eyes behind my hands, laughed out loud: it's funnier, sexier, more thrilling watching it with an audience.

I grew up round the corner from the ABC Cinema, Whiteladies Road for the first seven years of my life and it's where I had my formative cinema-going experiences. It's likely that Cary Grant's mother, Elsie Leach, used to watch her son on the silver screen there, as she lived on Whiteladies Road in the 1930s. It's where I am told I saw my first film, *Dumbo*, and where I was traumatised by the death of Bambi's mother – in the first film I actually remember seeing – and where I saw *Star Wars* with my big brother, gazing up at that huge yellow opening crawl receding into space on what would have still been an enormous screen. The cinema was subdivided into three screens in 1978, but by that time we had emigrated to Urbana-Champaign, Illinois in the mid-West of America. On our first flight back to Bristol for the summer holidays the inflight film was *Grease*. I had my headphones tuned into the wrong radio channel so I wondered what all the fuss was about when my school-friends were raving about it, as I was listening to the wrong soundtrack. A lot of my film-watching has been on planes.

One of my strongest cinema memories is seeing Terence Malick's *Days of Heaven* at the Art Theatre in Champaign – both film and



Whiteladies Picture House was completed in 1921 (Vaughan postcard collection, c1925, Bristol Archives: 43207/9/7/31). The image is part of the Historic Cinemas layer of the Know Your Place: Bristol website at maps.bristol.gov.uk/kyp

venue leaving a lasting impression on me: Ennio Morricone's mesmerising score; Néstor Almendros' and Haskell Wexler's heavenly magic-hour cinematography; and the hellish imagery of locusts and conflagration. I'm not sure I fully understood it at the time, but Linda Manz's hauntingly naive voiceover resonated with my prepubescent confusion over my parents' breakup.

My mother and I moved back to Bristol in the early 1980s and I remember queuing down the side of the ABC Whiteladies to see *ET the Extra Terrestrial*. I will never forget the experience of my first *Rocky Horror Picture Show* there as teenager, with full audience partici-[SAY IT!]-pation. The film celebrates B-movies and the power of cinema to fuel our imagination, with Tim Curry's tragic Frank-N-Furter climbing the beautiful RKO tower singing 'Don't dream it, be it' at the end. By this time the cinema had been subdivided and we were upstairs in what would have been the original balcony. We got told off for dancing on what we thought was a stage but was presumably a false ceiling separating us precariously from the two cinemas beneath.

My other Bristol cinema experiences include the still extant Odeon in Broadmead – I mostly remember the pink-tiled loos – and Studios One to Four on The Pithay (where I saw *Jaws 3-D* during that short-lived early Eighties mini-resurgence of 3D). And, of course, Watershed, the UK's first 'Media Centre' where I took part in a darkroom photography course and in later adolescence remember emerging from Scorsese's *After Hours* into the harbourside wondering where

the night would take us. It's where I revised for my A-levels whilst gallery-sitting in Watershed's photography gallery, now Waterside 1, 2 and 3.

Cinema-going was not my only mode of film-watching. I consumed my fair share of video nasties and of course the wonderful BBC2 film retrospectives, my favourite of which was the Clint Eastwood season. I videoed *For a Few Dollars More* and rewatched the ending over and over again: 'Any trouble, boy?' asks Lee Van Cleef. 'No, old man. Thought I was having trouble with my adding. It's all right now.' I learnt it off by heart. I wanted to have Clint Eastwood and be the man with no name all at the same time.

Summers in America to see my dad: watching *Ghostbusters* in a packed, sweaty auditorium escaping the summer rain with newborn sister breastfeeding under my step-mother's shirt; watching *Revenge of the Nerds* at the Sky-Way Drive-In in Door County, Wisconsin, letting the rain sheet over the windscreen and getting bitten by mosquitos finding their way through the tiny crack in the window where the radio speaker hung.

During my university days, Manchester's arthouse cinema, the Cornerhouse, was a mainstay – often conflated in my mind with Watershed as the Cornershed or the Waterhouse. It's where I first saw David Lynch's *Eraserhead* – the only film I've ever walked out of because I found the soundscape so disturbing. We would often catch a worthy movie at the Cornerhouse, followed immediately by a Bridget Fonda movie at the Odeon opposite, emerging squinting out into the sunny Saturday afternoon. A different kind of binge-watching. Seeing *Arachnophobia* at the local Cine City in Withington, jumping out of my skin when someone threw popcorn from the back row just at the climax of the flame-thrower scene; and where the 35mm film caught in the gate at the end of *Men in Black* at the precise moment that Tommy Lee Jones neuralyzes Will Smith – thinking what a brilliant way to end the movie as the celluloid melted to white on screen, as if we were all being neuralyzed. I've always felt the coda unsatisfying after that.

When I returned to Bristol in 1999, to do the MA in Film and TV Production at University of Bristol, the ABC Whiteladies was still open. One of our documentary productions filmed there, using it as a double for the interior of the Odeon, for a re-enactment of the infamous unsolved murder of the manager Robert Parrington Jackson in 1946. He was shot precisely at the moment that gunshots rang out on screen in *The Light that Failed*. The ABC closed in 2001 and nearly a decade later, when I became involved with the campaign to reopen the cinema, I had the privilege of seeing inside the now derelict building. The projection booths were full of pigeon droppings but still intact and the most astonishing feature was the sprung dance floor of the mirrored ballroom. Although the Whiteladies Picture House campaign was not successful in its goal to set up a community

cinema, it was instrumental in blocking the planning application to convert the cinema into a gym and it did galvanise public opinion that led to its eventual refurbishment by the Everyman Cinema chain.

After becoming a mother my cinema-going had a renaissance with Watershed's Cinébabies – watching *Il Divo* with a baby up your jumper is not to be missed! I've since enjoyed terrorising my son by taking him to the pictures. He has always had a very intense, visceral reaction to films. I lied when I said *Eraserhead* was the only film I'd ever walked out on. I was forced to miss the end of *The Last Jedi* when he begged me to leave as he was so terrified by the music. Like mother, like son I suppose. Although the pandemic paused our worship at the altar of the silver screen, watching films online sustained us throughout lockdown. However, I for one can't wait to get back to that sacred, shared cinema experience.



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Grace Staples-Burton: Watching Queen Latifah in *Hairspray*

#BlackGirlMagic is a recognised hashtag where Black women celebrate our successes. But there did not seem to be much of this magic when I was a kid.

It was not until I was 12, in fact, that I saw the possibility of a woman, brown and full-figured, owning the screen and taking up the space I wanted to be able to take up.

Growing up mixed-race in a predominantly white neighbourhood is a strange experience because you don't see yourself reflected back at you. My parents worked really hard for me and my brother to not feel the odd ones out. I defy you to find a child who knew as much about their cultural history as me and my brother did. Any time we were fighting my father would say, calmly, 'No violence, remember Martin Luther King'. My mother would not let me have Barbie dolls because she did not feel that Barbie – and whatever her Black friend was called – represented me, my natural hair or body shape well enough. As hard as they worked, though, you cannot stop a child from looking around themselves and understanding the world based on what they see. I looked around and saw girls with straight hair, with thin bodies, with pale skin. I turned on the television and I saw Lindsay Lohan and Anne Hathaway. I am aware now this was due to my own choices in viewing, but then I thought this was what the world looked like.

The few Black women I saw still seemed unattainable in their appearance and the space they inhabited. I was no Beyoncé or Rihanna, despite desperately trying to learn to dance like them when I was too young for it to be appropriate. As a fat child, the one type of Black woman I saw still felt so disparate to the experience I was living. The body I inhabit still does not always feel like home, but as a child it felt foreign not only to me but to what I saw around me. I was, and still am, a very dramatic person. As a child I thought I ought to be on the big screen but didn't see where that would sit with the films I saw, with the music videos I watched, or even with the kids TV shows that filled the gap between the two.

This was long before Viola Davis or Octavia Spencer had won their Oscars, and before Lizzo taught us that big girls belong on the stage. At age 12 what began my understanding of the space all these

women now inhabit for me was the movie *Hairspray*. I am aware there was an original *Hairspray* made in the Eighties, but I am 25 years old and to me the 2007 film was a revelation. It is strange how a film about segregation in the Sixties provided representation for me that no modern-era films managed. The singing and dancing awakened a life-long love of musical theatre within me, but more importantly this was the first film in which I saw Queen Latifah. She lit up my screen, and in turn lit up my world.

Queen Latifah is effortlessly beautiful in the film. Her outfits are decadent and dramatic, and her introduction is a stop and stare moment. Or at least it was for me. She is elegant and wise and provides the dramatic heart of the film. Without her the story is a white saviour tale, but with her we see that this is a movement that goes far beyond the white lead. Queen Latifah's character has been campaigning for integration at the TV station where she works for long before the lead, Tracy Turnblad, arrives on the scene. She has been managing 'Negro Day' with class and charisma while experiencing the songs performed and written by her performers being stolen by the white cast members. All this, and she still managed to be joyous and defiant. Queen Latifah plays her role with grace but also with frustration. You feel in every scene she is in that she is tired of this. She is maternal, she is a leader, but she is angry, and Queen Latifah gives her a nuance that is not on the page.

The cement that locked in forever my love of Queen Latifah was her first big song of the film. She sang the powerful and celebratory 'Big, Blonde and Beautiful' and it was as if she was singing directly to me. The most beautiful woman I had ever seen, Black and big, was singing to me that not only was she beautiful, but these were the things that made her beautiful. I cannot claim I have ever been blonde, apart from the occasional Halloween wig, but you could not have told me this song was not about me. Looking in her unapologetic face that day changed something in how I saw myself. No longer did I feel that people who looked like me did not exist. No longer did I feel that the way I looked was wrong or outside of what beauty could be. She was the Pied Piper, and I was part of the army of Black girls who were following her song to acceptance.

Today I understand that a fuller-figured woman is an accepted part of Black beauty standards. I see that Queen Latifah had a long and storied career before this, even playing romantic leads in films like *Last Holiday* or *Beauty Shop*. I know that Jennifer Hudson had won an Oscar the year before for her turn as Effie White. I know that Missy Elliott had been a successful rapper for years with her body not being problematised by the media. However, as a child this was not the world I saw. I saw only the beauty standards peddled by magazines and fashion houses. I saw Kate Moss and Paris Hilton and understood that if I could not be thin and statuesque I could not inhabit this public space I was so sure I belonged in. Queen Latifah's career mirrored the reality of Black beauty standards, where she could play

these romantic parts that, to me, were only for white women with a certain body type. On researching Queen Latifah I understand that her look had changed to be more feminine, possibly more palatable, as her star rose. To me however, she has always been the most glamorous woman in the world. She has always been her *Hairspray* character, Sixties beehive and all.

Years after I saw the film my school put on a production of *Hairspray*. I can remember the excitement that ran through me when I found out this was happening, as I had been preparing for this role since Queen sang her first note. I did my first audition and got a callback. I had not put down which role I wanted but my callback was for Queen Latifah's part, so I felt the teacher knew I was meant to be her. I was not majorly involved with drama at school, as I was part of a drama club in the evenings and felt it was unnecessary to encourage any ridicule from classmates. This was different though. The whole school was abuzz with *Hairspray* excitement, the first musical we had put on of a film we had all seen. I practised 'Big, Blonde and Beautiful' everywhere I could. In the shower, in my room, probably in my dad's ear.

When the audition came, they handed out the sheet music and I was taken aback. Queen Latifah has another big solo in the film, and this is what we were to sing. The other solo in the film is the song she sings during a protest. It is called 'I Know Where I've Been' and to most others this would be the big political number of the film. This song is a dramatic ballad about the trials of racism but never for a second had it occurred to me to prepare to sing this. To me, 'Big, Blonde and Beautiful' was so powerful that it had eclipsed even the possibility that another song could be the expected audition song. I struggled through the audition and left with the realisation that what can be powerful for one person, can be completely missed by others.

As an adult I am so grateful for what this film did for me as a pre-teen. I was able to see that the world had a place for me, and that women like me had existed all along. Queen Latifah is still someone I follow religiously, and with the growth in plus-size activism I see people like me inhabiting the spaces she built for us. When she sang 'Big, Blonde and Beautiful' I heard her true words. I heard the rallying cry of 'Big, Black and Beautiful' and I saw myself reflected back at me.



Grace Staples-Burton is a blogger and marketing assistant. She has a passion for social justice, pop culture, theatre, TV and film. Her work decodes how media reflects and has an impact on her experiences as a mixed-race British person. Information on her writing and projects can be found via her social media: @gracesleeps1 on Twitter and @gracesleeps on Instagram.

Jonathan Bygraves: Making Connections

It's a position I suspect we've all been in at some point in our lives: sitting someone else down, whether a friend, a partner, or a special someone we're trying to impress, and showing them a film they haven't seen before.

The reasons for choosing said film might be manifold: an old favourite, perhaps, or something you suspect would be to the other person's liking, or more profoundly something which has some personal resonance or meaning to you and which – you hope – might mean something similar to them too.

The act of choosing a film can thus reveal something about yourself, and in showing it to someone else it reveals something about them too. How will they respond to it? If it's a comedy, will they laugh at the right parts? What if they laugh at the wrong parts? It's an experience which brings with it a combination of excitement and trepidation, which can strengthen existing bonds of commonality or reveal hitherto unseen differences in the ways you and the people you think you know see the world.

For nearly a decade now I've been a repertory cinema programmer, and throughout I've felt this same sense of anticipation in choosing which films from the century-and-a-quarter of cinema to screen to the public. The key difference, of course, is that the audiences have been rooms of [mostly] strangers, which perhaps renders the role more akin to that of the role of a nightclub DJ, albeit without the reassurance that, if you somehow manage to clear the dance floor with a dud, there's always the potential to pull the crowd back with a banger in a few minutes' time. Once the lights go down and the projector whirs into life, there's no changing the tune.

Repertory programming is in many ways similar to the role I undertook in my former capacity as a librarian at Bristol's 20th Century Flicks video shop. There, the objective was to connect individuals with films they might like to watch – sometimes a straightforward task, but sometimes a puzzle to put together from an impressionistic series of stipulations to triangulate from. Naturally, the major difference between the two is that rather than waiting a few days for their return and their feedback on the film, in the cinema such feedback is in real time, and inescapable [save for a hasty dash to the exit door].



Promotional poster for *Dead of Night* (Ealing Studios, 1945).

The hope remains the same as that of screening a film in a personal capacity – that a work of art that you cherish and which speaks to you in some way will do similarly to those around you. Rep can, particularly when allied to established canons, have a reputation for being dutiful rather than enjoyable, a nutritious but unappetising bowl of kale when what you really want is a cheeseburger. I often think of the episode of *The Sopranos* in which Carmela Soprano gathers together a group of the other gang members' partners to dutifully sit through *Citizen Kane* [1941] motivated more by an aspiration of cultural betterment rather than enjoyment. The challenge with older films is to show them as being still alive and resonant with today rather than as staid ornaments for unquestioned admiration.

There is a great deal of pleasure in being there to witness an older film of your own selection having the desired effect on an audience, and many such experiences have permanently coloured my feelings towards the films themselves. I can vividly remember a screening of William Friedkin's *Sorcerer* [1977], whose famously nerve-jangling rope-bridge suspense sequence elicited a delightful mixture of screams, shrieks and nervous laughter from all around me in the auditorium, a reaction which I readily recalled revisiting the film myself again years later. Seeing audiences gleefully emerging from the likes of *The Young Girls of Rochefort* [1967], *I Know Where I'm Going!* [1945] or *The Shop Around the Corner* [1940] has been enough to maintain a personal faith in the continued power of the medium itself.

Frequently, though, seeing a film with an audience has also more profoundly changed my own thoughts about it. For example, at a screening of *River's Edge* [1986], a film which I had sold on the basis of it being one of the darkest teen dramas ever made, what was highly unexpected was the regular bursts of uproarious laughter whenever Crispin Glover, playing a stoner in a register approaching high camp, appeared on screen. Prior solo viewings had given me one particular experience, but a communal one, composed of dozens of

individual responses coalescing and gaining a shared momentum, elicited a very different one. I have not watched the film since, but have no doubt that, while the film itself hasn't changed, my response to it will be henceforth.

My most memorable experience as a programmer was my very first: a screening of Ealing Studios' portmanteau horror film *Dead of Night* (1945) at Bristol's Cube Cinema. Almost inevitably for a film more than seven decades old, there were some moments which failed to land – in particular one low-budget effects sequence depicting a bus crashing off a bridge, which unfortunately fails to resemble anything other than a Dinky Toy accident at a model village. It's a moment which resulted in a ripple of mirth from the audience, but that mood would contrast with what was to come. Two of the film's rightly more celebrated segments – 'The Haunted Mirror' and 'The Ventriloquist's Dummy' – changed the atmosphere in the auditorium completely, which quietly progressed to a palpable sense of tension, at its height crescendoing to pin-drop silences. If I had earlier doubted whether a 1940s horror film could still have a hold on a contemporary audience, this had been conclusively refuted for me by the time the lights came back up again, and this left a strong impression on me which lasts to this day.

At the time of writing, the world has passed through more than a year of living with a pandemic, during which time under the series of lockdowns these kinds of cinematic epiphanies have been mostly denied to us. Parallels with wartime seem particularly cruelly ironic given how important a social experience cinema was for audiences during the 1940s. Repertory cinema at its best offers the possibility of discovering in art some past truths which still hold fast or resonate with today's values and can offer the kind of reassurance that is desperately needed in challenging times. I look forward to sharing in these kinds of experiences in packed houses once again.



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Malaika Kegode: 'This Must Be the Place'

As passionate as I am about the survival of the cinema, with thriving box offices and packed-out audiences, there's nothing quite as exquisitely blissful as an empty screen.

That giddy thrill as you turn the corner, scan the seats and realise no one else has booked. Of course, you then need to sit through the trailers with bated breath, and it's not really until around ten minutes into the film you can fully relax. It's a luxury experience, like being in an episode of *MTV Cribs*. You can even take your shoes off if you're so inclined.

Part of this delight is being free from the buzzy, indignant anxiety I feel when people make noise in the cinema. For a while, I worked as an usher at Watershed cinema. It was a dream job; my colleagues were unfailingly lovely and I got to watch multiple films a day. Sometimes it would be the same film multiple times a day for three consecutive weeks but, hey, it was character-building. It was a great feeling to have the authority to ask people not to wave their phones around, or to stop eating the garlic-sauce-drenched kebabs they'd smuggled in under their coats. These days I lack that authority, so I just sit with a frothy frustration in my chest as people take phone calls and throw nachos around with reckless abandon. Only once have I told people off for bad cinema etiquette in my civilian life, at a local multiplex. It didn't go well. In fact, it resulted in a standoff between me and the man who'd been taking multiple phone calls from people looking to purchase herbal refreshment. The confrontation ended in me huffily grumbling, 'Well... I'm going to go... and tell!', like an affronted ten-year-old in a playground. When the long-suffering cinema usher came to mediate, he asked if I had really called this low-rent Howard Marks 'a twat', as he'd claimed. I assumed my best doe-eyed expression and lied wholeheartedly that I hadn't. Eventually, he was let back in, and we watched the remainder of the film in resentful silence. His parting shot was a middle finger in my direction as he and his girlfriend scuttled out during the credits.

Evidently, for me, an empty screen is usually a happy screen. But I don't want to fall into the tempting trap of lamenting bad cinema etiquette. Too quickly that discussion can turn to a kind of misanthropy that I'm not interested in indulging. In truth, the annoyance we experience during these interactions stems from a disconnect. Cinema should feel like a universal connection, all

bodies engaged in *feeling* something together. There's something incredibly intoxicating about being part of a group – your reaction being strengthened by those around you. Your emotions validated by a shared engagement. When someone is talking at full volume to their friend about their evening plans, that spell is broken. When we go to the cinema, life outside those walls should be suspended for a couple of hours as we fall into the worlds presented to us on screen.

My favourite cinema experience, where I felt that headiness of communal connection most intensely, took place on 9 June 2017. A few weeks previously, my partner had booked us tickets to see *Stop Making Sense*, Jonathan Demme's electrifying 1984 concert film that captures Talking Heads in their prime. It had been one of those pale, transitional spring days, with yellow skies and an undercurrent of that sweaty heat that makes you floppy and inert. We almost didn't go, almost gave in to the dehydration and laziness. But we pulled ourselves together and sauntered down to the Cube, Bristol's bijou, volunteer-run microplex, nestled in its neon glory just off Dove Street. The Cube is a beautiful cinema. The minute you step through the gates you automatically feel about 40 percent cooler. From the tiny, leafy smoking area to the endearingly shabby bar and the nostalgia-tinged cinema with its red velvet seats, the Cube makes you feel as though you're living in your very own indie movie fantasy. The screening was sold out, and the Cube at full capacity has something of a house-party vibe. The place smelled of IPA and bodies that had been in the sun all day – fresh sweat and ozone. We bought our ales and settled into our seats, feeling *very Bristol*.

Stop Making Sense opens with the growing sound of an audience filling up Hollywood's Pantages Theatre – disembodied voices chattering and whistling – their excitement is palpable as the volume grows. The sudden, buoyant woops as David Byrne takes the stage – we see only his legs at first, in baggy grey trousers – had a quietening impact on our audience in the Cube. The film was about to begin, so we assumed the cinema etiquette we were used to as Byrne's distinctive tenor opened the show: 'Hi. I got a tape I wanna play...'.

David Byrne is absolutely captivating in *Stop Making Sense*. His wide eyes rove across the audience as though he hasn't seen human beings before, his cheekbones are razors and his long, thin body draped in a loose-fitting grey suit is a striking presence on a wide, empty stage. Accompanied only by a guitar and a boombox, he breaks into a bold rendition of 'Psycho Killer'. When the drum machine that supports the song begins glitching, the rattle resembling the sounds of gunfire, Byrne stumbles about the stage. Journalist Stephanie Zacharek likens his movements to those of Jean-Paul Belmondo's final moments in *Breathless* [1960] – 'a hero succumbing, surprised, to violence that he'd thought he was prepared for'. With each glitch, Byrne shifts his focus from audience to camera and back, while behind him, stagehands begin assembling the set. If you were in any doubt that this film would be cinematic, this is the moment we realise this is



Promotional poster for *Stop Making Sense* [Talking Heads in association with Arnold Stiefel Company, 1984].

much more than just a recorded gig. As the stage is built, the rest of the band trickle in song by song: Tina Weymouth providing her steady, searing basslines, the eternally smiling Chris Frantz on drums and slinky Jerry Harrison on guitar. Finally, the exuberant presence of Lynn Mabry and Ednah Holt, Bernie Worrell, Steve Scales, and Alex Weir complete the line-up. Each person brings on stage a story, a character, and Demme frames them as a ragtag band of misfits, welcoming us to join them. And who wouldn't want to?!

At first, nobody at the screening quite knew how to react. Everyone was on their own wavelength, some singing along, clapping quietly after each number, others sat in reverential cinema silence. But something began to shift. You could practically hear the rush of adrenaline as our bodies fell in pace with the film and each other. I believe the turning point came during the thumping, apocalyptic 'Life During Wartime' – one of the most iconic moments of the film. Everybody on stage (who is able to) jogs in place, their movements are perfectly synchronised and energy punches through the screen. We feel the sweat, our knees bounce with them. Eventually, Byrne – in a burst of untethered energy – begins galloping laps of the

stage. The camera follows him, seemingly caught up in the same frenzy as everybody else. This number is characterised by the band's movement, in particular Byrne's gorgeously weird, jerky flamboyance. In a 1983 interview with *Rolling Stone*, when asked about his dancing on stage, Byrne said, 'I felt like I couldn't help but move... When the band was really cooking, it tended to make one transcend oneself'. This transcendence shone through the screen that night at the Cube in Bristol, and from that number, the mood shifted into something uniquely communal and galvanising. With each passing song, more people sang along, drinks were bought for strangers and we stomped approval on the wooden floorboards. We cheered and laughed together into the night, shrieking in approval as Demme enraptured us with the explosively transgressive power of the Talking Heads.

Writing this, I'm reminded of the stories of teenagers dancing in the cinema aisles to Bill Haley and the Comets' 'Rock Around the Clock' at screenings of *Blackboard Jungle* in 1955 – frightening their pearl-clutching parents. Cinema has an amazing capacity to energise and captivate. To rise above the humdrum and transcend normality. When the kismet of a great film and a receptive audience come together, we *feel* every second of it. In those screens, when we're all engaged, everything we know and believe can be set alight and challenged. I love an empty, silent cinema screen, but that night I welcomed all the noise and revelled in the company.

My favourite moment in *Stop Making Sense* is 'This Must Be the Place [Naïve Melody]'. It's a love song, and a moment of tenderness in the high-octane show. The band members are stood close together, and the stage is lit by a single standing lamp. There's something unbearably touching to me about Byrne's big voice being contained by the quiet honesty of this song. Byrne begins to dance with the light, and the camera moves with them. It's playful, lilting and strange. My chest filled up during this number. I cried and felt totally at home in this cinema full of people. At that moment, I was exactly where I wanted to be.



Malaika Kegode is a poet, performer and producer based in Bristol. She has performed across the UK at a number of celebrated venues and festivals including WOMAD, Boomtown and Edinburgh Book Festival. Her poetry collections *Requite* and *Thalassic* are published by Burning Eye Books. [photo: Jon Aitken]

Nigel Warburton: Cinema Days

My first sexual fumbblings were in the Welling Granada cinema. I was 14.

'Wanna go to the flicks on Friday night?'

'Yeah, alright. Bexleyheath or Welling? I'll have to ask my mum.'

'OK.'

This was back in the 1970s, the age of greasy Wimpy bars and smoking on buses. The tedium of life in the suburbs is hard to evoke. It never really mattered what we were watching. Most of the films we ended up going to were dire – sub-*Carry On* or about car rallies, as I remember them. But we didn't pay much attention. Instead, there was the slow progress from legs just touching, hands brushing against denim, a clumsy kiss, then, if things were going well, the stealthy and very slow progress of hands... mine... over thighs, waist, trying to get under a t-shirt without being seen by anyone behind us, and without her clamping her arm down on mine to stop me... and maybe, just maybe, I'd reach her breast, or just once, her nipple, before it got too risky, and we pretended to watch the film for a bit. More than once we stayed in the cinema and 'watched' the same film twice.

Apart from that, growing up, it was *Bambi*, Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, and *The Sound of Music* (all with my mum), or the latest James Bond movies (with my dad). Cinemas were always the same – uncomfortable noisy folding seats of faded red velvet, the smell of stale tobacco, the usherette with a torch, the dust motes floating in the conical beam of the projector, endless advertisements before the main feature. Then the weird peekaboo creaky closing and opening of the nylon curtains in front of the screen, the rustling of sweet papers, loud 'shhhhhhhhh' noises, and the shaky film certification as the projectionist tried to get the focus right.

Another confession. There was that time three of us from the school rugby team met up to go to an X-film. We'd been lured by a movie poster that showed naked women cavorting outside, their bodies barely covered. The X-certificate told us that we'd definitely see more if we got in. We were only just 15, but had hit adolescence, and thought we could pretend to be 18. It was obvious that we couldn't pass, but the old man taking our money for the matinee clearly couldn't care less. I kept looking down at the floor, as Kieron, the tallest and oldest-looking of us asked for three tickets as we kept out of sight behind him. We could hardly believe we'd got in.



Promotional poster for *Alice in the Cities* (Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR)/Filmverlag der Autoren, 1974).

Manspreading our legs in the nearly empty cinema, we waited, feeling guilty and excited, for the advertisements to end. Finally, the movie came on. It was Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Canterbury Tales*, the artiest film I'd seen. Not at all what we'd expected. We couldn't really follow what was going on, but there were – eventually – the promised glimpses of flesh. It was still a great disappointment, though, barely titillating. We left feeling cheated.

At university in Bristol I started watching better films, inspired by a flatmate: *Bladerunner*, *Stop Making Sense*, *Eraserhead*. Later I'd write short reviews for the student newspaper and the local equivalent of *Time Out* – that gave me access to press viewings at Arnolfini and then at the newly-opened Watershed. I even got a job sitting in the art gallery at the Watershed that was paid entirely in cinema tickets – a good deal as far as I was concerned. I remember seeing Fassbinder's *Querelle* and *Veronika Voss* and not knowing quite what to make of either.

Then to Cambridge in 1984 where the only cinema that really mattered was the Arts Cinema. That was my perfect cinema. I never had enough money to see all the films I wanted to. There were so many films I missed. I think I saw *Down by Law* and *She's Gotta Have It* there (or did I misremember where they were screened?),

but I wish I'd gone to the film festivals they held. The most moving and powerful experience I have had in a cinema was there watching *Shoah*, all nine hours 21 minutes of it. The two parts were shown on consecutive days. It was almost unbearable. Straight after the second, the director, the philosopher Claude Lanzmann (the only man to have lived with Simone de Beauvoir), gave a talk on the small stage in front of the screen. He was strong, tall and confident, and strode around taking no prisoners. On the stage with him was a survivor of Auschwitz – he hardly spoke. Someone dared to criticise Lanzmann for being unfair to the Poles in the film – Lanzmann was fierce in his response. Someone else near the front couldn't formulate his question. Lanzmann came to the edge of the stage and loomed over him, making him repeat the question several times in what seemed more like a public humiliation than a request for clarity. I didn't want him to be a bully, his film was so important and so brilliantly put together. But that is how I remember him.

Dates at the Cambridge Arts Cinema were very different from my days in the back row in Welling and Bexleyheath. I met a beautiful Greek archaeologist, Alexandra, at a college disco, and we fixed up to see Kurasowa's *Throne of Blood* a few days later. I was excited that she wanted to see a Kurasowa movie, and that she had seen it several times already. That seemed so promising. I bought both our tickets and waited in the alleyway outside the theatre. She didn't show. I couldn't believe she had stood me up. I was disappointed and hurt. I almost left and went home. But I didn't want to miss the movie (even though I'd seen it once already). So, I tore up her ticket and went in. Twenty minutes into the movie, she slipped into the seat next to me, whispering an apology.

Somehow, and I'm not really sure how, while I was in limbo between finishing my PhD and getting my first lectureship, I ended up with a wonderful part-time job at the National Film School in Beaconsfield. I didn't apply for the job. Someone just offered it to me. All I had to do was go into the school on the chartered coach from Marylebone a couple of days a week, attend the various seminars on scriptwriting and film criticism, make a few minor contributions, and then once a week give my own seminar on a philosophical theme that might be of interest to film-makers. They not only paid me for this but let me sit in on the weekly screenings in the school's cinema. This was a real education. The film critic Mark Le Fanu was there too – he spoke knowledgeably about Tarkovsky and Ozu. Some of the other staff were film editors who'd worked on films such as *Peeping Tom* and *Deep End* and who were able to explain montage and visual storytelling from the inside. Memorably, film directors would often show up to the screenings to talk about their own films. I remember Jiří Menzel talking about *Closely Observed Trains*, and Terence Davies discussing his amazing *Trilogy*. I couldn't believe my luck. I still can't.

At this time, it must have been 1990, I was going to the cinema whenever I could afford it and watching videos when I couldn't. I

read Hitchcock's interviews with Truffaut and struggled through film theory; I read Stanley Cavell on Hollywood remarriage movies, and Susan Sontag on Robert Bresson. I met Anna, now my wife. One of our first dates was watching *Alice in the Cities* at the National Film Theatre [I'd told her the story of Alexandra arriving 20 minutes after the film had started, and she later revealed that she'd been terrified of being late]. We held hands through the film. I was impressed that she could follow the film without reading the subtitles. We moved in together in Brixton in 1991 and we'd go to coffee-fuelled late-night showings at the Ritzy – the single-screen shabby cinema that we loved, not the chic multiplex that took its place. Occasionally we'd travel as far afield as the Gate in Notting Hill. But when I got a job at Nottingham University, our movie-going tailed off. Instead, we became regulars at the Forest ground, watching Stuart Pearce, Stan Collymore, and the final days of Brian Clough in charge of a team that bristled with talent, but seemed to lose too many matches. Then we had children and our cinema-going days more or less ended. There was so much else going on.

Now that our children have grown up, pre-Covid, we had started going back to the cinema – sometimes with them, sometimes not. In Oxford, where we now live, we moved between the tiny Ultimate Picture Palace, the multi-screen Vue Cinema, the Phoenix in Jericho, and the newly-opened Curzon Cinema, the most luxurious of the four. Recently we saw *The Irishman* and *Parasite* there. It felt as if we'd started to date again.



Nigel Warburton is a freelance philosopher. His books include *A Little History of Philosophy*, *The Art Question*, *Free Speech: A Very Short Introduction*, a biography of the architect *Ernö Goldfinger*, and an edited book about the photographer *Bill Brandt*. With David Edmonds he makes the podcast *Philosophy Bites*. (photo: Anna Motz)

Mark Cosgrove: A Life Cinematic – The Early Years

This 2021 Covid-19 moment has prompted a lot of thinking about the cinema or perhaps, more keenly, that 50-year-old question of 'the death of cinema', which somehow feels all too real with my own cinema, like everywhere else, closed for months on end.

The death of cinema has been much predicted ever since television took grip in the 1950s. The graph of UK cinema attendance since then is a slalom slope of decline until the mid-1980s and the arrival of the multiplex where admissions seemed to have levelled out at around 170 million visits per year. Sounds a lot until you compare it to the height of 1,225 million in the late 1940s. This pandemic year, however, has brought into stark relief the fragile assumption of the pre-eminence of the cinematic. As we consume more and more films online, on multiple screens, on the move, will we finally lose the habit of going to the cinema, that place which for people like myself became the definition of how to experience a film?

I've spent most of my professional life in or around the cinema and before that most of my growing up in and around films. What follows are some personal and professional reflections on a life cinematic.

My earliest cinema memories are of the George, a high-street cinema in Barrhead. Most vivid is that of the luminescent grandfather-style clock on the left of the screen by which you could keep track of the real world's time. Also – and this is very *Cinema Paradiso* – that of me and my friends rushing upstairs for front row seats on the balcony where we would drop the occasional Malteser or, if we were really intent on serious damage, a mint imperial. More often than not it would hit the floor and you could hear it run down to the front of the stalls (this was during the quieter matinee slots). Sometimes it would hit a target and you would hear exclaimed 'yous little buggers I'm going to come up there and skelp yous'.

Ironically it was the very growth of television which opened up my cinematic horizons. I grew up in a new-build council estate on the fringes of Glasgow in the 1960s as captured so dreamily in Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher*. Jimmy Cagney, Humphrey Bogart and John

Wayne were my holy trinity. Being from a Catholic background, albeit less than half-hearted, the febrile aura of religion was never far away in a Glasgow neighbourhood. The overlaps between religion and film first met when at the age of ten I did the entrance exam to attend the prestigious city-centre St Aloysius school. The question was something along the lines of 'which person do you most admire and why?'. From a 40-plus-year distance I now see this was a leading question: 'which of Christ and the apostles should you pick?' I plunged in about my admiration for Jimmy Cagney, particularly in his gangster roles. Even though I got the initials right and must have referenced Cagney's emotional act of salvation at the end of *Angels With Dirty Faces*, I didn't pass the exam.

Film horizons were further widened with the discovery of a film society in the West End of Glasgow run by the Scottish Film Council. Amongst the films I attended, it is George Pabst's *Kameradschaft* and feeling the claustrophobia of the mines and the miners that sticks out along with Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. At the time – late Seventies – it was *de rigueur* for adolescents to wear army-and-navy surplus gear. I walked out of *Taxi Driver* into the wet mean streets of Glasgow – well, not so mean in the West End – pulled up my khaki army-surplus collar and wondered if I might be 'God's only man'. Or was it 'lonely'?

By this time I was at Glasgow University, ostensibly to study English but realising I could also study a new subject: Film and Television. I was beginning to meet my tribe – Bob, Grahame, Sally et al. Grahame in particular took film obsession to a whole new level. In those days the course's selected titles arrived on film, mainly 16mm. Grahame could project so we arranged to have our own screening of Polanski's *Chinatown*. We turned up at the allotted time but no Grahame. We heard a noise coming from the cupboard, opened the door and there was Grahame holding the 16mm running projector. *Chinatown* in all its Cinemascope splendour being projected onto the cupboard wall in dimension of inches. 'I've worked out how he did it!' exclaimed Grahame. 'What?' we replied. 'The nose slicing!!' And so we all watched as frame by frame the tip of Polanski's flick-knife sprung open to squirt fake blood over Jack Nicholson's nose. It was as if the Dead Sea Scrolls had offered up their mysteries.

Glasgow did not have a full degree in film. At that time – the early 1980s – there were only a handful of degree courses in the subject. [Film was just beginning to flex its intellectual muscles as a serious subject of study.] I transferred to one of them at Bulmershe College in Reading where I was taught by Doug Pye and Jim Hillier from the *Movie* school of film theory and Laura Mulvey, the then rising-star of psychoanalytical and feminist film theory.

My film education was deepening not just through the course – which included study of melodrama, American independent cinema, the European avant-garde – but through regular trips to the many rep cinemas in London. My new group of cinephiles included the now



Promotional poster for *Angels With Dirty Faces* [Warner Bros, 1938].

Professor of Film at Salford University, Andy Willis. He and I would take the bus up to London to go to the now legendary but then insalubrious Scala Cinema in the equally seedy and intimidating neighbourhood of Kings Cross to take in double-bills of the likes of Wim Wenders, Fassbinder or Sam Fuller.

There was a college film society which Andy and I found underwhelming in its mainstream selection of *Porky's* type films. We decided that we would infiltrate the committee. The screenings were on Sunday afternoons and having just watched Wenders' three-hour-long *Kings of the Road* at the Scala we decided it would be a perfect opener for our takeover season.

We got the print in – I think this was 35mm – and immediately put it onto the Steinbeck preview machine to take photographs of the scene with the iconic line 'The Americans have colonised our subconscious'. Hey, we were students! And also to double-check if that ablution scene was indeed a single take. So Rüdiger Vogler really did take a dump at the side of the road...!

The thing about film societies is that members pay for the season of films upfront and on a college campus you also have a captive

audience. So, it was on that fateful Sunday that *Kings of the Road* played to 250 eager fully-paid-up Bulmershe College Film Society students. Some of them lasted the first hour. You have to remember that these were mainly *Porky's* reared PE-teacher-training students. What else could you expect when faced with a slow-paced, black-and-white, three-hour classic example of New German Cinema? By the end of the screening there were maybe eight, possibly six, including Andy and I who heartedly applauded our and Wenders' achievement.

I realise now, from this distance, that this was my first experience of programming a cinema; of introducing something new to an audience; of expectations being challenged and audiences voting with their feet. But also, how mesmerising, beguiling and brave was Wenders' exploration of his generation of post-war young Germans and how cinema – a particular kind of cinema – was going to be central to exploring, presenting and shaping their identity.

What I have learned from these formative experiences, and since, is that there is something unique, ineffable, mysterious, entrancing and, indeed, confrontational about the screening of a film in the cinema and I am quietly confident that cinema's post-pandemic future lies in the essential alchemy of the shared communal cinematic experience.



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Nikesh Shukla: *Into the Spider-Verse*

There is a bench on a hill overlooking the sea somewhere in East Devon.

It is in a car park and because of the hedge that acts as a border between you and the sea breeze, you can sit and bathe in the sun and feel a gentle wind on your flesh and feel truly happy. You feel untroubled by the world. You feel so far away from your problems, deadlines, opinions that need to be publicly had in real time and the horror of the news, unfolding every second. You feel miles away from the phrase 'the cruelty is the point'.

This is the bench I sit on when I want to centre myself and feel my steadiness return, my resolve recharge, and most importantly, my mind rest happily.

Good art evokes this bench for me. I watch stuff and I read stuff and I listen to stuff that'll move me, make me feel something. And the best stuff puts me here, on this bench.

It had been years since anything I'd read or seen or heard put me on this bench. And then came *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*.

A fourth attempt at a Spider-Man, and somehow, the best one, because of the joy it evokes for me. With respect to Tobey Maguire, but your black suit jazz-dancing in *Spider-Man 3* was enough for me to erase any good your moment in the franchise held. And with respect to Andrew Garfield, I didn't sign up for sad-sack Spider-Man. Now, Tom Holland, he's my guy. He brings out everything I love about Spider-Man. He is the very epitome of the comic-book character I have been reading since I was about ten or so. He's small and wracked with guilt and nervous and funny and sweet-hearted and only wants to do good and when he puts on the mask, he gets to be the very best version of himself.

I was happy with Holland. I didn't need a new Spidey. But Miles Morales? Oh man, I had to see that.

There's a perniciousness in the comic-book world when a character is introduced and they aren't white or male. The comic-book fan-guy reaction is 'oh, look, diversity is being forced upon us'. Before they've even read the damn funny-book.

Miles Morales entered the Ultimate Spider-Verse (not the Volume 1 696 one) in *Ultimate Fallout #4* following the death of Peter Parker's Spider-Man. The 13-year-old biracial teenage son of a Black American father and a Puerto Rican mother, he was classic Spider-Man fodder: a lost teenager trying to do the right thing by his parents' expectations of him, while trying to do the right thing by the world and their expectations of people with his kinds of powers. He was sweeter than Parker, more lost, more humble. While he had moments of arrogance and spikiness, he was definitely quieter.

So, when that *Spider-Verse* trailer dropped, I had two very visceral reactions: I was both elated to be a part of the MCU (Morales Cinematic Universe) and tired of having to sit through another Spider-Man, especially seeing as we'd finally just got a good one.

Either way, I was there the day it opened.

I like going to the cinema in the morning. No one else is there except for me and two other weirdos. It feels like the closest I'll ever have to a private screening. It's quiet and serene. Much as cinema-going is a communal experience, there's something much more focused about seeing a flick by yourself at a time when people with sensible jobs are doing said jobs sensibly.

Me, in the centre of the cinema, almost alone. That is how I like to watch things.

One of the most defining things about the way *Into the Spider-Verse* is shot is that it wants you to see what's on screen as a construct. As the screen glitches us through various multiverse iterations, as we watch Miles rush through scenes, we see the pixels, we see the block squares that comprise the animation. The film-makers want us to see beneath the frames and see how it all comes together. Because for the multiverse to exist in the films is for us to accept that we are in that same multiverse. We are one portal away from a world with superheroes forged from the bones of the ordinary among us.

Miles Morales is ordinary. Except that he is not. He is you and me. Except that he is not. Miles is an every-kid and yet the only one who could bear the mantle of Spider-Man.

I went to a private school. I've written about this a bit. It's not a secret. It's something that grosses me out over two decades later and something that fuels me to use the privilege I had then for good now. It's the only way to acknowledge the start you were given. Like a lot of kids of immigrant parents, I went to school because I was to be one of the first in the family to go to university and a lot of parents felt that a good university could be easier accessed through a private school. Now, of course, my parents made the choice to send

me there, and that choice was based on them being able to make it a choice. And as the years went on, and they increasingly couldn't afford it, I became the return-on-investment kid, even long after I left that school. It affected the choices I made for sixth form, for university, for the year after uni. I had to make back that money. I felt that responsibility.

In this way, I am Miles Morales and the guilt he feels about making good on his parents' decisions in sending him to Brooklyn Visions in *Spider-Verse*, it got me in those first few minutes. I was weeping at his home life, the separation from his school life, how he wore different masks. At home, everything was fine, and at school, he was the cool guy, sort of. And in between those, with his best friend, he was him.

I was smiling and crying all by myself in the dark.

The way the film brings to the fore themes of 'what could have been' being irrelevant compared to what we choose to do in the moment is canon in Western literature. We teach in creative writing about agency. About choice. About how the characters' decisions to better themselves take them through the plot until they self-actualise.

What *Spider-Verse* does is something more interesting. It lends itself to the mysticism of stories not formed in the West. It allows the universe to intervene in the life of a boy who needs some help becoming the person he needs to be. That radioactive spider could have bitten any New Yorker, even Uncle Aaron. But the story tells us that it could only bite Miles Morales. In the midst of coincidence and wonder, there is the grand design of everything around us. It all makes sense. Only he could be Spider-Man. Just as the second Peter Parker (Peter B Parker), and Spider-Ham, and Spider-Gwen, and Peni Parker were chosen by something bigger than themselves to become something for us all to aspire to.

Into the Spider-Verse is ultimately a film about resilience. No matter what life has thrown at each iteration of Spider-Man, whether it's the realisation that your uncle is the Kingpin's henchman, or Mary-Jane dumped you and your life fell apart, or you're incredibly sensitive about people pointing out that you're a pig, being a hero is using that adversity and spinning it into heroism.

The movie runs fast. There isn't a second to catch your breath. From the moment Miles meets Peter B Parker at the grave of Peter Parker, we move with the quickness. It has the feel of a comic-book. Each panel is teeming with life. Each frame is bursting with action. Each scene is a combination of comedy and tragedy.

As soon as the credits rolled over Miles taking his first dive as Spider-Man, in his new black suit, I had a moment where I was sitting on a bench, looking out to sea. It was one of those perfect summer days where the blue of the sea and the blue of the sky blur into one. The horizon is a hazy portal. And I felt untroubled by the world. I felt a joy in my heart. I haven't felt like this in years. Every time I have watched a person of colour on the screen, or read about them in a book, the weight of the oppression against them has loomed large. Systemic, structural, institutional racism and classism, social inequality, all of it. In every story. And that is the truth of the world, yes. But in *Spider-Verse*, there was room for a young boy of colour to take his time, breathe deeply and jump into the unknown, to see what it means to be a hero. It was beautiful.



Nikesh Shukla is a writer of fiction and YA. Most recently, his memoir, *Brown Baby: A Memoir of Race, Family And Home* came out early 2021. He is the editor of the award-winning bestselling essay collection *The Good Immigrant*.
(photo: ShamPhat Photography)

Estella Tincknell: Of Genomes, Genius and Jenkinson, or How I Gained a Film Education

As a lecturer in Film Studies at the University of the West of England, I spend much of my life thinking about and analysing films.

At times this can lead to frustration with my students' responses to a film I have long cherished or, conversely, one I have included on the syllabus out of duty which I personally dislike but which students adore. The thing I never tire of or find remotely frustrating, however, is conveying my general love of film to my students. But I am increasingly aware of the way streaming and downloading are a way of life for them; films can be readily accessed at the press of a button, and can be paused, rewatched, skipped through, at whim. When I remind them [and they *know* this, but they don't really know it] that at their age I was almost entirely reliant for feeding my film hunger on television schedules and trips to faded city-centre Odeons, the shabby relics of the pre-multiplex picture palaces, they are faintly incredulous. They take access to films for granted – quite understandably.

However, this plenitude is not all it seems. Despite the widespread availability of on-demand films, the range offered is largely Hollywood-dominated. Indeed, the system algorithms are set up to keep giving us more of the same rather than offering us genuine breadth. This means that many of my students have never encountered some of the films I found culturally and intellectually transformative and uplifting as an emergent film *aficionado* in my teens and early twenties. This is not through any fault in themselves, but rather because the systems they use have narrowed not broadened what is available.

When thinking about this, then, I am often struck not only by my good fortune in teaching something I love, but also by the relatively serendipitous process by which I ended up doing it. Unlike most of my students, I did not study film at school, nor did I have an inkling that it was possible to do so at university. Indeed, it generally wasn't in the 1970s. Film Studies as an academic discipline was in its infancy. For someone growing up on a Somerset council estate and attending the local rural comprehensive school, where simply going to college was a significant aspiration, the idea of studying film was unimaginable. Nobody at my school (bar the odd English teacher, as

I recall] discussed film as an art form very much at all. My parents were anxious for me to get a qualification in something 'practical', so I ended up doing a sandwich course in Librarianship at what was then Birmingham Polytechnic, and only found my way into Film Studies much later.

That doesn't mean I didn't set out to educate myself in cinema as a teenager. I sought out books about film and requested them as birthday and Christmas presents. These were largely glossy popular histories which nonetheless opened this world up to me; one particular favourite was a book about film musicals by John Kobal, whose stills from 1930s Mae West comedies and insider knowledge about Judy Garland fascinated me. Notwithstanding these autodidactic attempts, however, the cultural institution I really have to thank for my early film education is not publishing, it's the BBC. Let me explain.

I wasn't only fascinated by films as a child and teenager, I was also intrigued by television and radio – by the phenomenon of 'mass media'. I wanted to know what producers, directors and editors did; why it was called a 'screenplay' not a script; what the differences were between an adaptation and an abridgement. I was alert to the nuances, curious about the hierarchies and distinctions. The primary source for my nascent knowledge was the weekly BBC listings magazine, *Radio Times*. Fortunately, my parents had it delivered each week, and the following week's issue always arrived on Monday. As soon as I got home from school at four o'clock on Monday afternoon, I would settle down to pore over it.

Philip Jenkinson's film review columns introduced me to classical Hollywood: to the RKO Astaire and Rogers musicals, to post-war film noir, to westerns (which I initially had no interest in but grew to appreciate) and to melodrama. The reviews were intended to evaluate rather than educate, but I was also absorbed by the more arcane information they proffered. Jenkinson casually deployed the eccentric vernacular of the film buff, using terms originally coined by *Variety* to describe genres or stars ('oaters', 'hoofers'). Gaining access to this specialised language and to information about directors I had then never heard of (John Huston, Orson Welles), or to obscure stars from the 1950s whose careers had briefly flared then faded, gave me a pleasing sense of expertise.

I gobbled down all this knowledge and stored it up for the future alongside a growing understanding of the cultural hierarchies involved. Initially, my interest lay with plot-heavy thrillers and mysteries (I never much cared for romance, being of a cynical disposition); later I began to be intrigued by the nature of film itself – its variability and richness – and especially by films which had no plot to speak of, but which were nonetheless clearly pregnant with meaning. The *Radio Times* thus not only inculcated knowledge, it also educated my taste.



Promotional posters for *La Dolce Vita* [Riama Film/Cinecittà/Pathé Consortium Cinéma, 1960].

I began to seek out specific films described in Jenkinson's column, and to request that we watched them, often at times my parents regarded as faintly scandalous, such as Saturday afternoons. The fact that I had to ask permission reminds me, too, that there was one television set in the house and that its place in the family sitting room meant access had to be negotiated. The three o'clock matinee was where I discovered the splendours of Old Hollywood and its impossibly glamorous stars: Dietrich, Hayworth, Miller. And BBC2 was essential to my encounters with European cinema. I have powerful memories of watching French and Italian films by myself at night on BBC2, my parents having retired for the evening. And yet I had almost persuaded myself these memories were figments. The concept of a mainstream television channel screening foreign-language films in prime-time weekend slots now seems implausible. Perhaps I had simply retrofitted my memory to suit a narrative of prodigal intellectualism?

Yet thanks to the BBC's recently launched Genome archive, which is available online and gives access to every *Radio Times* listing since the 1920s, I find my recollection to be pretty accurate. I'm sure I remember watching *Mouchette* (Robert Bresson, 1967) when it was screened as part of BBC2's World Cinema series on a Friday in 1973, for example. And, on checking the Genome archive, I see I probably first encountered Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960) in the same nine

o'clock slot on Friday 3 May 1974. I doubtless followed this the next day with the Saturday Musical, which on 4 May 1974 was *Painting the Clouds with Sunshine* (David Butler, 1951), a somewhat weak Warner Brothers effort starring the now largely forgotten Dennis Morgan.

I would never have been exposed to classical Hollywood or to the French New Wave, to Fellini and Bergman, and, yes, to weakly-plotted musicals, formulaic thrillers, or even British B-pictures, if it hadn't been for the BBC and for the fact that there were only three television channels to choose from, one of which had an explicit policy of offering 'highbrow' fare. Whilst filling afternoon schedules with old movies was clearly in part about convenience and cheapness, the consequences were to open an infinitely rich world of popular cinema to a teenager who would not otherwise have had access to it. Perhaps more importantly, the BBC's commitment in the 1970s to screening films made by some of the greatest directors on Friday nights in an accessible timeslot on BBC2 (and followed, incidentally, by a magazine arts programme) meant I got to see films I had never heard of but knew I needed to watch. That's the important thing, really. It was these almost serendipitous but mind-expanding encounters that were so important. And that's the experience my students don't really have any more.

So, this essay is really not just about me and films. It's also about the importance of the BBC and the concept of public-service television. While many undermine or scoff at the Reithian ideals that underpin public-service broadcasting in the United Kingdom, and point to the wonders of Netflix, Amazon and streaming as the way forward, I know differently. You see, for a girl growing up on a council estate in Somerset the BBC provided – to use a contemporary term – a portal into a realm of cinema that nobody else had told me about. It offered me access to the kind of culture that wasn't on the school curriculum and which I would not have encountered elsewhere. There really were some people who knew better than me and made it their business to educate and inform me. For that, I am grateful, and keep telling my students so.



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Chris Daniels: Three Days That Shook My World

My life has transformed unrecognisably over the past two decades. Working moments today are consumed with dreaming up creative ways to engage new audiences with silent film, especially silent film comedy. But it wasn't always so.

In my less conscious cinema-going days in the 1980s and early 1990s, I didn't know a director from a producer and knew even less about the creative process of making a film. I enjoyed mainstream films and blockbusters and had no interest in delving any deeper. Films of this era were both captivating and ground-breaking.

In 1992, alongside a course in integrative counselling, I signed up for a Film Studies A-level. Film had always offered an escape for me, and so I felt incredibly enthusiastic about the prospect of 'studying' film. It sounded like a wonderful opportunity to learn about the greats and have some fun doing so.

On the horizon were three days of cinema that were set to irreversibly change me and the course of my life, forever.

Silent Film Study Day, 1993, Watershed, Bristol. Audience: 40. Live piano. My first experience of silent film, which proved to be the day that a burgeoning passion became ignited, was at Watershed for a study day in 1993. I confess that at the start of the day I was one of those people who ignorantly viewed silent film as a redundant antiquity, despite never having seen a single frame. I took my seat with low expectations and some trepidation. At least we were in a cinema for the day. That was exciting enough to get me through.

It began with lecturer and silent film champion Norman Taylor screening a film called *The Unwritten Law* (1907) from 'the primitive period', as he called it. A true-crime drama based on the controversial Thaw and White court case. Shot in a single long take with a fixed camera, it was interesting but uninspiring. Next, another tutor, Jim Cook, astutely introduced a selection of moments from the best silent cinema films ever made. I still remember vividly: D W Griffith's *Mender of Nets* (1912), Cecil B DeMille's *The Cheat* (1915), *Battleship Potemkin*'s magnificent Odessa Steps sequence, F W Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) and King Vidor's anti-war classic *The Big Parade* (1925).

I felt as though I was discovering a whole new art form, and my familiar world of cinema became suddenly expansive. The impact of those first few extracts of silent film was immeasurably profound. I wondered: why don't people know about these films? Why are these films preserved only for those studying film? I couldn't understand why huge audiences weren't flocking to see these incredible works of art and celebrating this superlative form of cinema. I was incredulous at how I had managed to live my first three decades without exposure to silent film. The years I had wasted!

Finally, and in case there was any doubt remaining, lecturer Andrew Spicer closed the day by presenting what I have now come to know as one of the finest films ever made: Murnau's magical silent masterpiece *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* [1927]. I was utterly transfixed. It was one of those rare moments in life when you realise that everything had changed – and for me, cinema would never be the same.

My initiation continued with a series of documentary films I found on VHS videotape in the college library, produced by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill. I avidly watched each moment. They weaved the stories so well and in such a compelling manner that I was hooked. It seemed the deeper I ploughed into this magical world, the more gems there were to discover. I was introduced to late great megastars such as Lon Chaney, Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford and Clara Bow, as well as great directors such as Griffith, Erich von Stroheim, Victor Sjöström and Clarence Brown. The list seemed endless, and the productions grew more and more impressive, grander and impactful.

Allan Dwan's *The Iron Mask* [1929], Saturday 13 November 1999, Sadler's Wells, London. Audience: 1,600. Live orchestra.

By 1999, I was a fully paid-up member of the silent film fan community, devoted to what I considered to be a much-maligned and mostly forgotten art form. I was determined to experience as many quality screenings of these films as I could and started taking regular trips to the National Film Theatre in London to watch seasons celebrating silent film directors. Each train journey from Bristol felt like a pilgrimage.

By now, I had started a fan group called Bristol Silents with my Film Studies tutor Norman Taylor. Our shared passion for the silent era was underpinned by a feeling that if audiences could experience these films at the right speeds, in excellent prints and with first-class live music, they would be just as enchanted as us.

So this became our mission. Our early Bristol Silents' audiences were populated with passionate devotees and new converts to the art form. Before too long we accumulated 100 members and were holding regular screenings at Watershed, thanks to the sterling support of its programmer Mark Cosgrove, who shared our vision of building new audiences for silent films.



Promotional posters for *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (Fox Film Corporation, 1927) and *The Iron Mask* (United Artists, 1929).

1999 saw yet another pilgrimage to London, to see a film starring Douglas Fairbanks, the follow-up to the hugely successful *The Three Musketeers* [1921]. *The Iron Mask* [1929] was one of the productions that formed part of the Channel 4 Thames Silents series: great silent features presented in restored prints with newly commissioned scores, usually by Carl Davis. Brimming with enthusiasm, and with poster and souvenir programme under my arm, I noticed a crowd of people gathering in the foyer for a pre-event talk with Carl and film historian and restorer Kevin Brownlow. They were showing examples of their collaborative work but much to my disappointment, Kevin brought news that this event would be their last.

After more than a decade of funding restorations and investing in preserving and promoting silent cinema, Channel 4 was de-commissioning the series, moving into new areas of television. The focus was shifting to a new show called *Big Brother*. It felt prophetic and poignant. Silent films' unique art form was being pushed aside, once again, for the latest innovation in the medium of visual entertainment, this time the newly burgeoning medium of reality TV. My heart sank and I felt a palpable sense of loss. My first grand silent film experience with live orchestra was also to be the last! I took my seat, deflated. *The Iron Mask* saw Fairbanks kill off a character for the first time. I felt the painful parallel: Thames Silents coming to an end and Fairbanks in his last silent film, swash-buckling for his life and, right at the finish, stabbed in the back, betrayed. The emotion was overwhelming: Doug's passion

and determination on screen, Kevin and Carl's off screen, and for me, roused as I was by the magnificent score, the realisation that this was my calling. I knew in that moment that I must devote my life to championing silent film. As I travelled back home to Bristol that night, I knew, with certainty, that I had to work in silent film and to present these films to new audiences, in the footsteps of Kevin and for the love of this ever-rich art form.

Abel Gance's *Napoleon* [1927], Saturday 3 June 2000, Royal Festival Hall, London. Audience: 2,700. Live orchestra.

The following year I had the pleasure of being invited to Kevin's home in London to discuss silent film, in response to my devoted 'fan' letter. In Kevin I immediately found a kindred spirit like no other. Kevin was encouraging of my enthusiasm and mentored me in my passion for silent film. Of notable significance, Kevin was also the person who introduced me to the film critic and historian David Robinson. Both Kevin and David became patrons of the growing Bristol Silents movement.

Sometime later, I was overjoyed to discover that Abel Gance's *Napoleon* was being screened at the Royal Festival Hall in London with a newly revised, fuller version of Kevin's restoration, which he had worked doggedly on for decades, adding an additional 20 minutes so it now had a running-time of five hours and 24 minutes. Full of anticipation, I entered the hall with my friend and fellow silent film buff Mark Fuller. I was utterly bowled over by the audience. In the bar I spotted actor-director Richard Attenborough with Monty Python's Terry Jones. I didn't know (and wouldn't have believed) at that time, that they were destined to become patrons of Bristol Silents. I took my seat with film director Alan Parker behind me, actress Jean Boht in front of me, and Welsh actress Nerys Hughes to my right. It was difficult to believe I wasn't dreaming.

If you haven't seen *Napoleon* [which you must] it is difficult to describe the visceral impact of this exceptional and breath-taking work. Shot on location in France, Italy and Corsica, costs running into millions of francs, starring more than 40 principal characters, with some scenes employing up to 6,000 extras, it's an epic sweep of history and audacious 'poetry of action', featuring Gance's innovative legendary triptych experience, towards the end, where the screen expands into three shots, tripling its size.

Napoleon was, and still remains, the greatest cinematic experience of my life. For me it is the film masterpiece *par excellence*. I've had the privilege of watching the film live on three more occasions and the experience hasn't diminished. The impact of my first screening back in 2000, however, served to consolidate my dedication to silent film; its innovation, importance and artistry were a cinema revelation.

As I reflect on these three pivotal days, I see these three films ignited a passion that fuelled decades of inspiration, commitment and work as a 'champion of silent cinema'. The transformative power of this art form led to two special friendships with fellow passengers on this journey who became mentors and role-models, as well as life-long friends: David Robinson and Kevin Brownlow.

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to play a role (albeit a small one) in the renaissance and rediscovery of silent film spearheaded by Kevin in the 1960s. It has been my guiding light to keep attracting new generations to silent film and to keep the passion alive.



Chris Daniels is co-founder of Bristol Silents and Director of Slapstick Festival, which have reached over 125,000 people over more than 500 live events during the past two decades. Established in 2005, Slapstick Festival continues to attract huge audiences at each annual celebration of silent comedy in Bristol. [photo: Slapstick]

Julian Baggini:

'There's Nothing New Under the Sun'

A long time ago, in what seems like a galaxy far, far away, a much younger version of myself would take his musty wine-red faux-velvet seat in Folkestone's Curzon Cinema, ready to be immersed in whatever the curtains opened to reveal.

Today when I settle into a much more comfortable chair at Bristol's Watershed or Everyman it is not only the cinemas that have changed. I see very different kinds of films now because I have in many ways become a very different person.

Yet it seems to me that the continuities are more important than the differences. '*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*,' as the graduate me might now say, and if I used to say 'there is nothing new under the sun' instead it only reinforces the point.

I am that old cliché, the grammar school boy whose education opened a route to the middle class. I grew up with little exposure to what I might then have called high culture. Most of it came in the form of English Literature at school where it now staggers me how little we were taught about art and music. At home, our household's books seemed largely ornamental, with volumes of the aspirational but mostly unread *Encyclopaedia Britannica* taking up much more space than all the other books combined. Although my father was a reader and autodidact, he was largely absent. Ours was a home filled with the sounds of Radio Two in the morning and, from the time we got back from school in the afternoon, with whatever was on the television, rubbish or not.

My town, Folkestone, offered some supplements to this thin cultural diet, only partially ingested. The one art gallery was completely off our radar and I never even thought of going to it. I did see my first orchestral concert at the Leas Cliff Hall, but only the one. For the most part it was the scene of numerous memorable rock concerts.

The closest I got to high culture was the Leas Pavilion Theatre, which housed a repertory company. When my father visited, we often used to see whatever was playing. Nine times out of ten it was a whodunnit or a farce, but with the likes of Alan Ayckbourn and J B Priestley in the repertoire, it was a priceless introduction to theatre.

Incongruously, they once performed Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, which was utterly baffling yet engrossing. However, it closed in 1985, fittingly with a production of Agatha Christie's *An Unexpected Guest*.

The most visited cultural venue by some margin was the three-screen Curzon Cinema, as it will always be known to me, despite changing its name to the Cannon at some point. It screened only mainstream fare, and when I try to remember the films I saw there, it is a little dispiriting to find that there are so few I'd relish seeing again. For nostalgia I'd sit through *Flashdance* (1983) and for curiosity *The Dark Crystal* (1982) but not much else. These were the years of the worst Bond films, *Octopussy* (1983) and *A View to a Kill* (1985); crowd-pleasing comedies such as *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984) and *Crocodile Dundee* (1986); the big-budget adventures of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984). I remember the technically ground-breaking but dull sci-fi hit *Tron* (1982), the disappointing *Dune* (1984), the Cold War teen drama *War Games* (1983), the pure entertainment of *Back to the Future* (1985), as well as the unadulterated dross of *Police Academy* (1984) and *The Goonies* (1985).

If I were looking for evidence of precocious or idiosyncratic tastes, history would not provide me with any. Indeed, my soft spot for Disney took me to the Curzon not only for *The Rescuers* (1977) when I was still respectably under ten, but also as a should-have-been-too-cool teenager to see *The Fox and the Hound* (1981) and as a sixth-former to *The Black Cauldron* (1985). The only hint of originality is that I failed to be caught up in the manias for *Star Wars* (1977), *Grease* (1978) and *ET* (1982) which in the days before advanced booking saw queues round the block. The only time I would stand in line was on Mondays, after they made it the cheap ticket night. I did see all three once things had calmed down, but at least I never have seen *Top Gun* (1986).

Yet my years in the tatty stalls were a kind of apprenticeship for years of cinema-going to come. My tastes may have been primitive, but I always went along for the films, which is not something that can be taken for granted. I remember going to a Saturday morning 'juniors' club, but only once or twice because I couldn't stand all the raucous shouting and mayhem, which was, of course, precisely what most of my peers loved the most.

As I got older, if I went to the cinema with a girlfriend it was not to snog on the back row. I still remember being annoyed by the teenagers rolling around shouting 'fucking 'ell!' in hysterical laughter at the smutty oral sex scene in *Police Academy*. They were hardly disturbing my viewing of a masterpiece, but still: the film was always the thing, even if the thing was crap. It is telling that although I can remember many of the films I saw, I rarely recall who I saw them with.

And then one day I saw a film that changed my cinematic life: Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986). Here was a film the likes of which

I had never seen. No action, no adventure, no soundtrack-powered tension-building, no hero's journey. But it was philosophical, intelligent, brilliantly acted, both funny and serious. It was as though I had finally discovered what an adult movie looked like and, no, it wasn't full of X-rated sex. Was this what they meant by *art house cinema*?

If that makes me sound naive that's because I was. My film-viewing life had been extremely sheltered. The most unusual films I had seen to date had been Sergio Leone's Spaghetti westerns on the television. The only other vaguely unconventional film I can remember seeing was *The Snake Pit* [1948], which seemed at the time to be a remarkably vivid exploration of madness (since no one would have said 'mental illness' at the time). Of course, I had seen films that I would still consider classics, but all conformed to the conventions of the epic, biopic, adventure, war film, comedy and so on.

Hannah and Her Sisters did not transform my viewing habits overnight. Some people like me respond to their cinematic epiphanies with the zeal of the convert, rejecting all the 'trash' they used to love and desperately watching as much 'serious' stuff as they can. I didn't. Even if I had been keen to devour the entire oeuvre of Ingmar Bergman, I doubt my local video shop would have stocked any of his films and we didn't have a VCR anyway. I remained a viewer of mainstream films, just one whose tastes had moved along the spectrum towards the more serious. I went on to become an avid reader of the film magazine *Empire* when it launched in 1989, not a subscriber to the highbrow *Sight and Sound*.

But the studio films I eagerly went to see became increasingly more serious, often directed by *auteurs*. In 1987 I would have seen Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables*, Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* and David Jones' *84 Charing Cross Road*; in 1988 Lawrence Kasdan's *The Accidental Tourist*, Jonathan Kaplan's *The Accused*, Terry Gilliam's *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, Stephen Frears' *Dangerous Liaisons*, Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning*. Even at university in Reading, there were few chances to see anything really different, except at the fortnightly film club where Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* [1989] widened my horizons further. (Note – with horror – how all these directors were white men.)

Slowly, between now and then, my tastes evolved. Now if I go to the cinema, it's more likely than not that the film will have subtitles. There is little I want to see at the descendants of the three-screen Curzon: the huge multiplexes with their huge popcorn tubs and fizzy-drink cups. Yet we are our histories, including our cultural ones. For instance, although my musical tastes have widened enormously, most of what moves me most is still rock of the late Seventies and Eighties. Nor have I ever entirely made up for all the culture I missed out on in my first 18 or so years. In some ways I have come a long way from a declining English 1980s seaside town, but I will never have the polish and accomplishment of those who grew up steeped in arts and culture.

That's OK. It's what I am. Like many who were the first in their family to go to university, my roots still show through. Although I loathe the inverted snobbery that would make me proud of them, I am certainly not ashamed of them. But whereas some cultural progressions are difficult to make if you leave it too long, cinema is at least more accommodating to late developers. I don't feel ignorant about film in the same way as I do about music or art. It's not that I have a lot of knowledge, but I feel I understand enough about film to appreciate properly what I am seeing. And that, I think, says more about the democratic nature of film than it does about me.

There have been no opportunities to wallow in nostalgia at the Curzon. The year after I left home for university it closed due to structural problems and was demolished with indecent haste. If it were still open, I doubt many films it showed would attract me. But were I to drop in, perhaps to see the latest Bond, I would feel at home, at ease, in a place where I belonged. The old cliché is that you can take the boy out of the town, but you can't take the town out of the boy. The same is true of our cultural homelands. My eyes have widened but they remain the same eyes that were shaped by a childhood of Hollywood, B-movies, cans of Cresta and tubs of interval ice-cream.



Julian Baggini is a writer and philosopher whose books include *The Ego Trick*, *Welcome to Everytown*, *How the World Thinks: A Global History of Philosophy*, *The Godless Gospel* and *The Great Guide: What David Hume Can Teach Us about Being Human and Living Well*. He writes for several newspapers and magazines, was the co-founder of *The Philosophers' Magazine* and is Academic Director of *The Royal Institute of Philosophy*. [photo: Antonia Macaro]

Jules Evans:

On *Inception* and the Dream of Reality

There is a certain state of mind, call it dissociative, mystical or psychotic, when the unreality or uncanniness of ordinary reality feels suddenly revealed.

Maybe it's a moment of *déjà vu*, or an absurd coincidence, or something so surreal it undermines your faith in the real. You ask yourself, is this a dream, a fiction? Am I in a movie?

There are also some movies that evoke and explore this mental state, drawing attention to their own fictionality, creating dreams within dreams. *The Truman Show*, *Solaris*, *The Matrix*, *Inception*.

They go back to one of the oldest ideas in Western philosophy, from Plato's *Republic*. Plato suggested that humans live in a world of illusion. He uses the metaphor of a cave – we're all sitting in the cave, watching shadows on the wall and thinking they're real. We're all in the movie theatre of our ordinary ego-mind. But we can wake up, he said, get out of our seats, and walk towards the green exit sign into the daylight of reality.

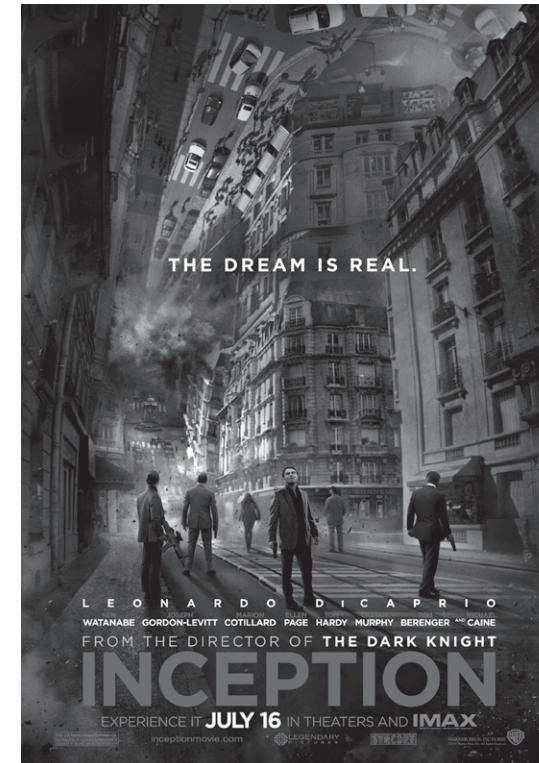
But what if this too is a dream? Once we start to think we're in a movie, how can we ever be sure of anything again?

Sometimes, psychedelic drugs can take us into this dissociated space. The first psychedelic therapy clinic in the UK just opened in Bristol, by the way, offering ketamine-assisted therapy for alcoholics.

One of the pioneers of psychedelic therapy, Timothy Leary, describes how, the first time he took LSD, he felt like he was on a TV show. Everything seemed fake, plastic, unreal in the 'magic theatre' of his mind. He says that trip gave him a 'deep ontological shock from which I never fully recovered'.

In 2017, I travelled to the Peruvian Amazon to take part in an ayahuasca retreat. Ayahuasca is a potion made up of two psychedelic plants. Many Amazon Indian tribes drink the potion to heal themselves and open them up to the spirit world.

The actual retreat was extraordinary. A group of 20 of us took the potion five times over ten days. There is a lot one could say about



Promotional poster for *Inception* (Warner Bros in association with Legendary Entertainment, 2010).

ayahuasca but the best way I could describe it is as an intelligent virtual reality machine, which manages to penetrate deep into your subconscious and detect your most toxic beliefs and painful memories – not over years of therapy, but instantly. Imagine it somehow intuitively what you need to learn in order to grow, then conjures the idea or experience in front of you with all the skill of a genius theatre director. It helps you confront it, feel it intensely, learn from it and then purge it.

Imagine the intelligent machine somehow responds in real time to your mind, so that a terrifying monster instantly transforms into an ally if you can bring to mind the appropriate intention. Imagine, all around you, members of your group are plugged into the same intelligent machine, and sometimes your virtual realities overlap, so you appear in each other's visions, help each other and purge for each other. The intelligent machine gives you a glimpse of a reality beyond the individual self, beyond the body, even beyond death. Now imagine that this incredible technology grows wild, can be picked for free, and connects you to the awesome intelligence of nature.

It's a magic theatre of pain and purgation, in which you are both the subject matter and the audience. Who is the director? What is

this awesome intelligence you encounter? That's a difficult question, one we face all our life: who are 'you', really? The psychiatrist R D Laing wrote:

Ask yourself who and what it is that dreams our dreams? Our unconscious minds? The Dreamer who dreams our dreams knows far more than we know of it. It is only from a remarkable position of alienation that the source of life, the Fountain of Life, is experienced as the It. The mind of which we are unaware is aware of us. It is we who are out of our minds.

I felt very happy at the end of the retreat. My heart felt extremely open and connected to my fellow retreat participants. But I got into trouble back in the real world. My heart froze shut, I felt very disconnected from other people, time started to feel strange, and I started to wonder, 'is this real?'.

I had some buried trauma from my adolescence and had partly decided to take ayahuasca to try and process this trauma. But I expected any difficulties to happen *during* the retreat, while I was on the drugs, not *after* it. How long would this last? When would it end?

I'd booked a trip to the Galapagos Islands immediately after the retreat. I thought this would be a nice place to relax and integrate the experience. But taking three flights right after a psychedelic retreat probably wasn't the best idea. On that journey, I decided that I wasn't in ordinary reality.

I decided this partly because the reality I was in felt so strange. Time, in particular, stretched out weirdly. Other people seemed strange. I guess above all my own state of mind was dissociated, and this was making the world seem unreal.

I arrived in Puerto Ayora and walked down the high street. Every sign or advert seemed to affirm my sense of unreality. 'Welcome to your dream holiday.' 'Galapagos – it's paradise.' I even passed a museum exhibiting a display of shrunken heads, which set me off wondering if I was in a fake reality created by the shamans to entrap me for ever.

I found a hotel and booked a room, walked out onto the balcony, and smoked a cigarette, looking out onto the sea. Cigarettes were about the only thing keeping me together. Then I heard a great retching sound, like someone being sick on ayahuasca.

I looked down, and there were two seals sprawled out on sunbeds like tourists, bellowing. Around them waddled grotesque black iguanas. This isn't real, I thought, not for the first time.

I tried to work out what sort of alternative reality I was in. I decided it couldn't be a dream, they didn't last for days. The only other possibilities I could come up with were that I was in a fake reality

created by an evil shaman (what Descartes called the 'evil demon' theory of reality), or I was in some sort of bardo limbo state. Perhaps I was actually in a coma back in the UK and imagining all of this. Again, this is a scenario various films and TV shows have explored, like *Vanilla Sky* and *The Singing Detective*.

I would get texts or photos from my family, but I assumed they weren't real, they were constructions from my imagination. I'm dead, I thought. I'll never see my family again.

My best friend, Louisa, texted me to ask how I was doing. I told her I wasn't sure what was real. She sensibly said I didn't sound well and should come home to the UK. So, I did. Three more flights, all the way thinking I was in a fake reality.

It was quite a journey, full of bizarre occurrences and obstacles. I started to feel like Truman when he tries to leave his island, and everything conspires against him. But finally, I got onto a flight back to Europe. I was amazed at the plane. How clever of my subconscious to generate such a realistic fabrication! I even upgraded myself to business class. Why not? Money was an illusion.

Finally, I landed back in the UK at London Airport. There was my friend Louisa waiting to see me. It reminded me vividly of the end of *Inception* when the hero emerges from his long dream and is finally reunited with his family. But is he still dreaming?

A similar moment happens at the end of *Solaris*. The hero is reunited with his father in his family home, after his long journey through space and through his imagination. But, again, is he still dreaming? Is he still on Solaris?

I decided to go with it. To act as if Louisa was real. And as soon as I hugged her and smelled her hair, I knew she was. I had faith in this material reality once more. I returned to my senses. Love, basically, brought me back to Earth.

We really do fabricate reality, every day. We are movie-editors of our experience. But this is a collective fiction, not a solitary one. We are together in the magic theatre, making it all up.

And maybe if we do wake up, we wake up together.



Jules Evans is a writer, speaker and practical philosopher. He is the author of *Philosophy for Life* and *The Art of Losing Control*.
[photo: Claudia Hernandez]

Roger Griffith:

My Life on Screen

Film has played a key role in my learning, development, career and activism.

It has helped me formulate ideas, create a bank of memories, forge friendships and develop philosophies. It has provided inspirations that have illuminated my world and given me a new language with which to interpret it. My treasured cinematic moments have taught me about feelings and made dreams come true. Writing has given me the means of expressing myself and defining my Black identity, but film-watching laid the foundation. Exploring countless portrayals about race and racism has helped me understand the world around me.

Ever since D W Griffiths' 1915 *The Birth of a Nation*, the portrayal of Black men in film has been used to demonise those who looked like me. Until relatively recently we have been denied a space to reply, educate or inform. Our response has been led by Spike Lee's urgency, Ava DuVernay's craft and Steve McQueen's storytelling. Their legacy will influence future film-makers, activists and audiences in ways that were absent from my formative years. Growing up and watching scenes of racism depicted on screen stopped me thinking I was going insane. Merely denying racism's existence does not eradicate it. In *Babylon* [1980], *Do the Right Thing* [1989], *La Haine* [1995] I saw I was far from alone. Their anger at the injustice and isolation from different parts of the globe connected me to something much bigger than me.

We did not need serial killers and ghouls to understand evil. Portrayals of the transatlantic slave trade stirred trauma. Oral community storytelling warned us to fear the police who were supposed to protect us from skinheads. The news reports of murdered teenagers were not slain in horror films but in the New Cross fire, where 13 died and nothing was said. Or in the murder of Stephen Lawrence, where the prime suspects ran free and hid in plain sight.

From a screenwriter's imagination, a director's artistry or an actor's skill the big issues had an impact on me, such as subjugation, social justice and colonialism. Next came the subtleties where I gained clues to life beyond the silver screen about sexuality, gender, masculinity and loyalty. These perspectives gave me answers to questions I never knew I needed to ask.

My cinematic journey began with Saturday matinees and graduated into double-bills. Kissing in the back row would be paused lest you miss the real action from a plastic shark or an alien bursting

from a chest. Queuing around the block to view battles in galaxies far, far away soon progressed into sneaking into X-rated movies. Teenage friendships forged in the silence of picture houses have turned into comradeship with the Come the Revolution collective at Bristol's Watershed.

Growing up in the 1970s, Black-British icons were invisible to my generation. The self-proclaimed first third-world superstar was Bob Marley and his *Live at The Rainbow* [1977] captivated the globe.

Bermudian Sidney Poitier, though not part of the Windrush experience, embodied it through his screen sophistication. You can transport yourself back to imagine the same indignation burning just under the surface from a Roy Hackett or Paul Stephenson during the Bristol Bus Boycott. Poitier was symbolically chained to a white convict in *The Defiant Ones* [1958]. His slapping of a white bigoted Mississippi sheriff in *In the Heat of the Night* [1967] caused audible gasps. Poitier even taught in a London comprehensive, *To Sir, With Love* [1967]. These issues of ignorance, acceptance and education are still being grappled with today.

Harry Belafonte and Poitier were my parents' favourites, keen to get past negative depictions of pickaninnies, minstrels and gollywogs. Denzel Washington became our matinee-idol-du-jour, becoming a pin-up when Idris Elba was still watching his first James Bond movie. Washington's resumé covers box-office hits, awards and archetypes. Action hero, crooked cop, flawed genius, rebel, absent father, victim of justice and gangster. He also embodied an icon, mesmerising in *Malcolm X* [1992]. In an age of ignorance his performance in *Philadelphia* [1983] representing a gay man fired for contracting the HIV/Aids virus was memorable. His portrayal replicated many heterosexual men's fears and all of our shame. I watched Hollywood become a launchpad for previous unknowns to break barriers. Oprah Winfrey and Whoopi Goldberg were elevated by their roles in the ground-breaking *The Color Purple* [1985] directed by Stephen Spielberg from Alice Walker's intoxicating novel.

Machismo was mainstreamed into Black culture via Blaxploitation movies. The Blaxploitation era brought sizzling soundtracks and style that would cascade through the generations. Film, fashion, politics, protest and music all fused together, pulsating from the screen. John Shaft strutting down Harlem Boulevard, with a sharp Afro and confidence that I later mimicked from the pavement to the dancefloor. Pam Grier made the no-nonsense Black female figure a symbolic figure. Rapper Foxy Brown took her name from the 1974 film. You can still see this female braggadocio in many of today's top female Hip-Hop artists. Isaac Hayes with his funky score for *Shaft* [1971] blazed a trail for scores of Black singer/actors. Curtis Mayfield's *Superfly* [1972] soundtrack became an essential anthology of inner-city life. In Steve McQueen's opus *Small Axe* [2020] music is an essential backdrop displayed in blues parties, record-shops and sound systems.

Reviewing my masculinity, some of the worst toxicity arrived in various inner-city tales and ghetto stories. Ignoring the 'thugs and drugs', 'gangsters and girls' tropes, a few films stand out. Reported to be Malcolm X's favourite film, *Nothing but a Man* [1964] showed the complexities of family struggles, fighting racism and battling poverty. Seeing Laurence Fishburne give an on-screen version of 'The Talk' to his son played by Cuba Gooding Jr in John Singleton's seminal *Boyz in the Hood* [1991] still moves me. Jimmy Cliff's star-turn in *The Harder They Come* [1972] was my first inkling that there was a tough side to the Caribbean idyll that my parents called home. The last of the Black-British 'hood trilogy, *Brotherhood* [2016], began to examine the consequences of crime that *Bullet Boy* [2004] first revealed. Sadly, this was too late for some around me unable to walk the line between reality and fiction. Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* [2016] tenderly blurred the lines between sexuality and hyper-extended masculinity. Isaac Julien's prescient *Young Soul Rebels* [1991] segued together issues of race, class, violence, homophobia and Black-Britishness.

The biopic provided great insights into Black history. *Cry Freedom* [1987], featuring the murder of activist Stephen Biko, provided background to Apartheid South Africa. *Hidden Figures* [2016] literally uncovered the story of Black female NASA scientists. The memoirs of Solomon Northup told in *12 Years A Slave* [2013] remain essential to remind us of human horrors from history that some are anxious we forget. One moment in time can be retold to illuminate history such as Dr King's role in the Civil Rights story *Selma* [2014].

For those like me seeking true-life testimonies the documentary provides rich fare. Two of Spike Lee's documentaries changed my life: *4 Little Girls* [1997] about the murder of four girls at Sunday school in Birmingham, Alabama and *When the Levees Broke* [2006], the story of how a natural disaster turned into national disgrace. I have visited the church on several occasions where the four girls were slain, each time staggered by the barbarity of the crime. I have also volunteered in New Orleans on a Hurricane Katrina home-rebuilding programme called lowernine.org, gaining lasting friendships in America's most vibrant city. Raoul Peck showed great skill in developing a narrative strand to the complex life of James Baldwin in *I Am Not Your Negro* [2016]. For sheer educational value as an indictment to the mass incarnation of Black and brown lives, *13th* [2016] is peerless. *When We Were Kings* [1996], the story of a world title fight involving Muhammad Ali in the African jungle, a concert, a monsoon and shady deals, is beyond fictionalisation. The exploitation and implosion of hope in *Hoop Dreams* [1994] is still heart-breaking.

Black Panther [2018] broke new ground not just in the superhero universe, sparking imaginations at seeing an uncolonised Africa. At Afrika Eye [the South West's biggest celebration of African cinema and culture] I have enjoyed a range of films. Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* [1991] carried images of African aesthetic that Beyoncé

would later emulate in *Lemonade* [2016]. From Zambian/Welsh director Rungano Nyoni came the inventive *I Am Not a Witch* [2017]. One of the best family films is *Queen of Katwe* [2016]. African actors continue to garner accolades, such as Lupita Nyong'o and from the diaspora John Boyega's stunning reveal as a Black stormtrooper in *The Force Awakens* [2015] was genius. Surnames Ejiofor, Oyelowo and Kaluuya are now global favourites. Amma Asante's imaginative film-making – *Belle* [2013] and *A United Kingdom* [2016] – has shown new ways of retelling British history.

Jamie Foxx was the first Black lead to star in a Pixar film in the bold *Soul* [2020]. Laughing at extraneous circumstances really does help. Possessing sharp wits and wisecracks to deal with racism are essential tools. Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy have delivered comedic value and depicted camaraderie that launched scores of Black buddy movies. Too often the Black rom-com has been undervalued with trauma and tragedy seen as a safer investment. The rom-com heart still beats and charms as seen in Radha Blank's wonderful homage *The 40-Year-Old Version* [2020].

We have moved on from Hattie McDaniel's dignified acceptance speech for her role as a maid in *Gone With the Wind*. Lived through the #OscarsSoWhite controversy and finally seen enlightened progress in the Black Lives Matter era. *Clemency* [2019] and *Just Mercy* [2019] have encouraged recent reforms of the death penalty in Virginia. Viola Davis' performance in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* [2020] surely moves her to legend status, which we bestow posthumously to her co-star Chadwick Boseman. Naomie Harris has shown us we can play crack mothers and a kick-ass Moneypenny. There has been a renaissance of independent Black-British film-making that was pioneered by Horace Ové's *Pressure* [1975] and John Akomfrah's *Handsworth Songs* [1986] and *The Stuart Hall Project* [2013]. The subtlety, diversity and ingenuity shown in *Rocks* [2019] and *His House* [2020] have brought acclaim. Those 'hood tales show greater depth and dexterity with *Blue Story* [2019] and *County Lines* [2019].

There is no going back to stories told without nuance in shades of black and white. The silver screen continues to teach and inform us all to provide inclusive stories in living colour.



Roger Griffith MBE is an author, UWE Bristol lecturer and member of the *Come the Revolution Film Collective*.

Megan Mitchell:

Raising Expectations

Since the birth of cinema sceptics have heralded its death, and that supposed death has never seemed more real or closer than in the past year.

Independent cinemas and film exhibitors have stared the realities of the pandemic in the face, with venues closed during lockdowns, a constantly changing calendar of new-release films, and the very fabric of cinema, of being able to come together, becoming impossible. But even though the light of the projector might be dimmed momentarily, the light that cinemas have brought and bring to my life will never go out.

Until the age of 15, I had never stepped over the threshold of an independent cinema. Until I had crossed that doorway, I had no concept of what an independent cinema was. I had never felt the unrivalled joy of viewing thoughtful, challenging and entertaining films with others in spaces that care about their audiences and the films. Growing up in the East End of Glasgow my cinema options had been firmly planted in the one multiplex attached to an ageing shopping centre, with alternative viewing experiences being offered solely via television and VHS, later DVDs. My first trip to an independent cinema was thanks to my English teacher, free cinema tickets and free council-provided bus travel. No longer than a week later I became involved in film programming and have given the past 12 years of my life to the independent film exhibition sector of the UK, working in cinemas, film festivals, film clubs and everything in between. All the time knowing that my peers – nearly everyone I interact, collaborate or argue with – do not share the understanding of what it is like to be the working-class 'disadvantaged audiences' the sector so frequently speaks of.

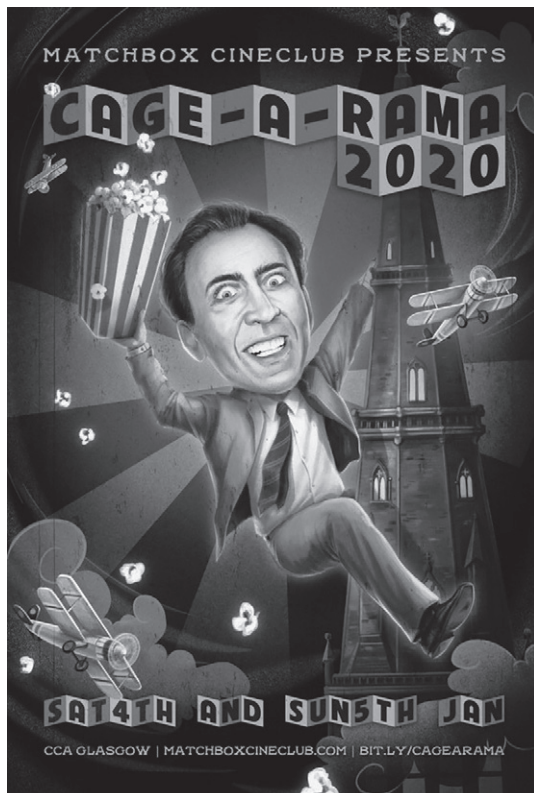
The geography of my early teen years, spent predominantly in a secondary school which shared walls with Scotland's largest prison for no discernible reason other than lackadaisical urban planning, lacked organic hope or opportunities for anything beyond the boundaries of the East End, and certainly nothing outside Glasgow. Cinema offered me an escape, not through beautiful films, but practically through opportunities, connections and prospects far beyond what I could access in my own context. My journey, particularly in the teens and early twenties, was a mix of necessary supportiveness from a sector critically lacking in young voices and exposure to harsh realities. These realities often related to how limited my knowledge of middle- and upper-class lifestyles was and

the impact these experiences, totally outside of my own frame of reference, have in getting by in the sector. It's one thing to be able to 'understand' films, an almost universal virtue of the egalitarian art form; it's another to understand the sector which facilitates them.

Some of these experiences serve as mere comical anecdotes, including 17-year-old me attending an industry roundtable where a British Film Institute (BFI) representative said young people watch foreign films so they can think about where they would like to go on their gap year, or the subsequent tongue-in-cheek denial by the BFI's Head of UK Audiences that he could have made this statement when I recalled it years later on social media. To quote the famous Scottish proverb, 'well it was one of yours'. Although the sum of my experiences, learning the creative and emotional craft of choosing films alongside the intellectual and administrative undertakings of bringing them to audiences, has been positive I am reminded, daily, that 12 years on I have yet to come across another working-class young woman from the East End of Glasgow in the sector. And in reflecting and continuing to experience less positive situations – continually high ticket prices, exclusionary employment practices and selective attitudes to access improvement – I understand why this is the case. If cinema is a machine that generates empathy, why is exhibition, the cogs of the machine, so lacking in it?

Informed by my learnings in my initial years in the sector I have carved a small but mighty niche speaking on and to young people and the special 'hard reach' margins within them. I'm uneasy but empowered by the knowledge that being 'young', 'woman' and 'working class', in that order, ticks boxes when it comes to visibility. Having to constantly retell and reframe my own experiences, having to lay bare the struggles of being working class – which ultimately can be summarised as not being able to afford the cost of cinema tickets let alone opportunities in the sector – in order to garner understanding from those with power to implement change is tiresome. But it is necessary to ensure that if and when other young working-class people look at the sector they can see and hear voices that represent them already playing a role, already demanding change. And despite all of this, cinema and film exhibition have defined me, they have shaped my adult life.

Cinema at its best brings people together. It unites people through experience, aesthetics and emotions, and if the momentary loss of cinema as we knew it has shown us anything, it is that cinemas are unique and invaluable spaces in people's lives. In being gifted the privilege to view films cheaply or freely in my local independent cinema and subsequently in beautiful, odd and endearing cinemas across the UK, I have truly known the impact cinemas have, alongside films and in their own right. It is from this understanding that I am able to so heartfully demand the sector does better because I have known it at its best. I have sat in darkened cinemas gasping as credits roll, crying over the death of an 80-year-old leaving behind



Promotional poster for Matchbox Cineclub's Cage-A-Rama 2020. Illustration: Vero Navarro. Poster design: Sean Welsh. © Matchbox.

her 20-year-old lover, laughing grotesquely at mumblecore turned body-horror drama, sharing astonishment with a packed room of fellow Nicolas Cage fans that he's done it again, and blinking deeply into the final moments of the projector lighting up the screen to ensure I capture every second of heartfelt emotion.

The multitudes of emotional experience that cinema offers up, its ability to transport and transform by exposing us to stories, lives and moments far beyond our own may be the headline of cinema but it is not its totality. Films have played but a small role in how cinema has had an impact on my life and the ways in which it elevated my own expectations for what working-class people like myself should expect from the arts. Having the chance to delve into the sector, finding my passion as a film programmer when mere months before I had no concept of that job existing, allowed me to take on a trajectory I could not have imagined otherwise. And I feel so grateful for that access, which has taken me around the UK and around the world. I have screened films in the Barrowlands in Glasgow and the favelas of Manaus, but I still feel the sector's missing pieces.

Working-class people should not have to feel grateful for the rare and far between opportunities the few of us are allowed. The sector should go beyond recognising these voices, and the voices of Black people, disabled people, D/deaf people, people from ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ people, and anyone else outside of the white able-bodied middle-class established norm and turn to meaningful and effective action. No matter how close the cinema screen can bring representation of diverse voices, if this is not reflected in those actually bringing these stories to audiences the gaps will persist. Ken Loach cannot carry the weight of all working-class representation any more than I can.

I do not know what the future holds for cinema, but the uncertainty of the present is not necessarily a negative. Real harm will be done if smaller independent exhibitors and cinemas with genuine commitment to developing the exhibition sector alongside audiences are allowed to perish. But I am hopeful that a brand new landscape for and of cinema promises more than it threatens, especially if the sector commits to real change. I look to the next 12 years with the hope that come 2033 there will be many young working-class women from the East End of Glasgow who can challenge my own perspectives and allow me to finally retire as the go-to mouthpiece for working-classness.



Megan Mitchell is a film programmer and event producer. She began working with Sean Welsh as Matchbox Cineclub in 2017. She is currently undertaking a PhD researching the role/s of independent cinemas in the age of on-demand, in partnership with Watershed. She is the co-founder of Europe's biggest and longest-running Nicolas Cage film festival [Cage-a-rama] and the world's first-ever film festival dedicated entirely to Keanu Reeves [Keanucon]. According to Deborah Foreman, Mitchell is the universe's foremost Valley Girl [1983] academic.

Paul Mason: The Greatest Movies Never Made

In 1975, just as the American New Wave was about to peak and break, the novelist Thomas Pynchon suspended a life-long refusal to allow screen adaptations of his work and gave the go-ahead for Sidney Lumet to shoot *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Lumet had just finished making *Dog Day Afternoon* and had been reading Pynchon's thousand-page masterpiece while on the set.

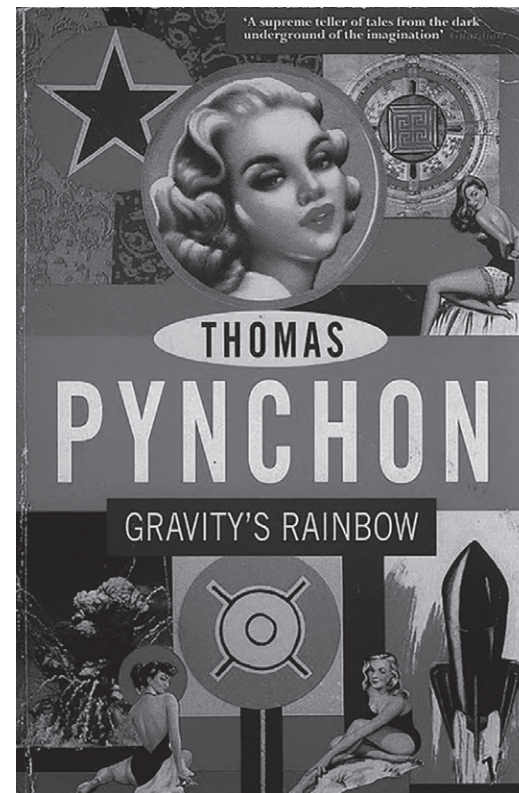
The book is about the war, and Lumet had been in the war. The book is written like a screenplay, albeit one produced in defiance of the five-act structure, and with so many flashbacks, sub-plots and indeed so much sex that, even for the 1970s, it was thought unfilmable.

But Lumet rose to the challenge. He cast Robert Redford as Slothrop, the protagonist, a US intelligence officer who – because of childhood involvement in a Pavlovian experimentation – finds himself sexually aroused by the impact of V2 rockets on London, only [Pavlovians will get this] *in advance of their being fired*.

He cast a then-unknown Sigourney Weaver to play Katje, a Dutch resistance fighter and karate-kicking femme fatale deployed by Allied intelligence to manipulate Slothrop, and – with the story set in London, France and Nazi Germany – the entire living phalanx of British and European character actors, with Peter O'Toole as Katje's gritty mentor figure, Pirate Prentice.

This being the era of long films – think *Heaven's Gate*, *The Godfather Part II* – Lumet figured he could go to three hours 40 minutes with an intermission and in any case realised that, once you cut the genealogies and biographical flashbacks, the plot itself is remarkably terse, and close to the classic story arc.

Slothrop in London under the falling V-bombs; Slothrop in the Riviera, in love with Katje but determined to escape from his intelligence handlers; Slothrop amid the chaos of post-war Germany, in a variety of disguises; Slothrop in a Buster Keaton-style railway chase through the V2 factory, evading the psychotic Major Marvy (played by Nick Nolte). Finally – and this is what then positions the work firmly within the American New Wave genre – Slothrop vanishing as a person, with only his spirit alive in the 1970s amid a surreal caravan of harmonica players on the Santa Monica freeway, with 'quilted-



Cover of paperback edition of *Gravity's Rainbow* (Vintage UK, 1995, design Paul Burgess).

steel catering trucks crisscross in the afternoon. Their ripples shine like a lake of potable water after hard desert passage...'

The shoot goes well. Lumet only does realism, so nine-tenths of the novel's surrealism is cut at the writing stage and – controversial for Pynchon fans – all the songs. Even the ones that could have worked diegetically – like the opener where Prentice and his wartime buddies jerk off to the tune of 'Have a Banana' – are cut on principle by Warner Bros.

The movie, once in the can, reads more like *Bullitt* than, say, *Dog Day Afternoon*, and has that same misty, Bay Area sunshine glow about it. But it's disconcerting.

Gravity's Rainbow is seen by some, me included, as the greatest twentieth-century novel – with perhaps only one equal (see below). But in Pynchon's narrative Slothrop is not just an anti-hero (being overweight, messy and lazy) but only *vaguely there*. Though the action happens to him, and triggers emotions and decisions, even by page 1,001 we know the subsidiary characters better than the main one.

However, you cannot achieve this effect on celluloid. Not with Redford's shimmering eyes and wan smile, and O'Toole's blue lamps glaring back at him. Redford, in the movie version, becomes the 1940s Everyman; fighting the war as it really was fought – dirtily; seeing all the things that made your dad come back 'not wanting to talk about it'.

And while Lumet's style favoured bleak interiors – the newsroom in *Network*, the strip-lit bank in *Dog Day* – once in the edit they found the scenes that worked best were the ones they'd spent money on: Slothrop's fight with a killer octopus on the beach at Cannes, clad in a garish Hawaiian shirt; the chase through the V2 factory; his encounter with an ageing German actress from the silent era on the abandoned UFA sound stage in Potsdam...

It bombed, of course, just like *Heaven's Gate*. As one critic put it at the time: 'Somewhere on a beach in California, in a mansion paid for by Warner Bros, Thomas Pynchon is having the last laugh: his novel is unfilmable; the real movie is the book itself.'

With the death of Brezhnev in 1982, and the sudden onset of *glasnost*, Soviet cinema entered a late, unheralded Golden Autumn, offering opportunities to directors who had been dead to the system until Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, and who might have emigrated to the West had the big thaw come, say, eight years later.

One was Aleksandr Askoldov who had been banned from the Soviet cinema after producing a single, iconic movie: *Commissar* [1967], a bleak, funny realist drama about a Jewish family in the Russian Civil War, based on a short story by the also-banned war journalist Vasily Grossmann.

Newly rehabilitated, Askoldov seized on Grossmann's recently rediscovered novel *Life and Fate* – which had survived only on a microfilm smuggled out of the USSR in 1974.

The novel, which is a searing critique of both Stalinism and Nazism, and a powerful condemnation of the experience of anti-Semitism on both sides, was pronounced 'unpublishable for two hundred years' by Russian censors. It tells the parallel stories of the battle of Stalingrad and the Holocaust on the same epic scale as Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.

Naturally, Askoldov turned to the great Soviet cinematographer Sergei Bondarchuk, who had filmed *War and Peace* as a four-part movie series in the Sixties, both for inspiration and advice. Given the scale of the project, and the potential international audience, Russian film chiefs determined that the movie would be made in English, with a largely Anglo-Italian cast. Bondarchuk would focus

on the battle scenes while Askoldov wove together the intricate personal stories of purges, betrayals and redemptions set across several families and cities.

With Anthony Hopkins as Viktor Shtrum, the scientist purged and then revived by a personal phone call from Stalin, Vanessa Redgrave as the female lead, Zhenya, and Carlo Neri as her lover, the tank commander Novikov, the interpersonal drama reprises Askoldov's early realist style. Liberated by the decision to shoot in anamorphic widescreen, Askoldov's scenes depicting family crisis, interrogation and despair take on an epic quality.

Grossmann, a war veteran, had written: 'There was something terrible, but also something sad and melancholy in this long cry uttered by the Russian infantry as they staged an attack. As it crossed the cold water, it lost its fervour. Instead of valour or gallantry, you could hear the sadness of a soul parting with everything that it loved...'

That single paragraph in Grossman's story takes seven minutes to tell in the movie; each image becomes a long beat of the action, taking the movie audience from the snow-strewn battlefield to a general's bunker by the Volga, to the rooftops and minarets of Kazan, to the bedroom of a grieving family.

But *Life and Fate* ultimately owes its reputation as a movie to its ground-breaking depiction of the Holocaust. Though TV audiences in both Germany and the USA were still reeling from the impact of the miniseries *Holocaust* [1978], there had been no epic-scale depiction of the Nazi genocide on celluloid, and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* documentary series was still five years away.

In the novel the narrative follows a Jewish army doctor, Sofya Levinton, into the gas chamber, and to the bitter moment of death. In the movie this scene is faithfully and realistically staged. Though numerous national censors tried to cut the scene, it remains the centrepiece of the authorised version of the film and has been acclaimed for its worldwide contribution to understanding of the genocide.

Askoldov, who remained a bitter critic of Soviet-era anti-Semitism, turned the tables on the censors and threw open the entire history of the USSR to public discussion. Many identify the release of *Life and Fate* in 1981 as the turning point of modern Russian history, preventing the resurgence of anti-Semitism and great Russian chauvinism that many feared, and speeding up Western re-engagement with the details of, and culpability in, history's greatest crime.

Askoldov's *Life and Fate*, together with the novel that inspired it, are rightly hailed as masterpieces of twentieth-century art.

This being the age of fake news, I am obliged to point out that neither *Gravity's Rainbow* nor *Life and Fate* were ever made for cinema. The former was finally turned into a German radio play last year, with Pynchon's approval. The latter became a highly affective Russian TV series in 2012, though with much of the anti-Stalinist and Holocaust sub-plots eviscerated.

As we enter the age of Netflix, maybe these stories will be told on screen, at a length and depth commensurate with their iconic literary status. If so, I hope their directors will draw inspiration from those who came before.

Askoldov was never again allowed to make a full-length movie, though *Commissar* was finally released in 1988, to win a Silver Bear. Lumet, as we know, did fine.



Paul Mason is a journalist, film-maker and writer living in London. His latest book How to Stop Fascism: History, Ideology, Resistance is published by Allen Lane. [photo: Jürgen Bauer]

James Harrison: The Eye of the Camera

William Friese-Greene did not invent cinema. Like many past and future technical developments, cinema/film [call it what you will] is a technological art form which was developed over the course of years by many different names.

In those first pioneering years the likes of Louis Le Prince, Thomas Edison, William Dickson, Léon Bouly, Max and Emil Skladanowsky, Eugène Augustin Lauste, Woodville Latham, Auguste and Louis Lumière, Robert Paul, Birt Acres, Charles Urban, George Albert Smith and William Friese-Greene and his son, Claude, all made their mark in advancing either the technological or theatrical essence of what we now know as cinema. But why were they doing all of this? Were they there to tell us a story? Maybe. Were they there thinking they would make money? More than likely. Were they there to see what they could do next with this new technology? Definitely.

Some consider the names listed above as the first film businessmen, others class them as the first film directors. I find them to be the first pioneering cinematographers. Cinema is a language of images and I have always been fascinated by this. For me, it's all about the image. Probably the reason I co-run an organisation like South West Silents, I guess.

I love directors, but I love cinematographers/directors of photography even more. Names such as Mikhail Kaufman, Billy Bitzer, Herbert Ponting, Laura Bayley, Jack Cox, Rudolph Maté, Lee Garmes, Karl Struss, Burnett Guffey, John F Seitz and, most recently, Seamus McGarvey, Charlotte Bruus Christensen and Roger Deakins are my real heroes.

Directors may have the imagination to know what they want to go on the screen, but it is the cinematographer who has the technical knowledge to get it into the camera for the director. Without that, we don't have anything.

A case in point here is the collaboration between Orson Welles and Gregg Toland on *Citizen Kane* [1941]. Welles knew what he wanted; he even knew how to light the shots. But he still needed someone like Toland to guide him through the technical aspects of film. Toland was a genius. I'm always shocked that everyone just namechecks his work with Welles on *Kane* and not the other films he made with

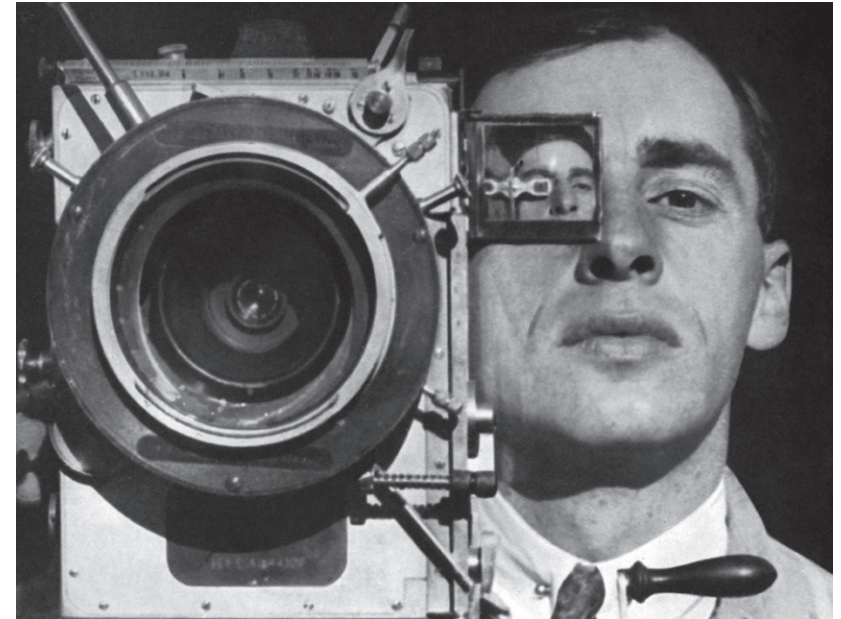
the likes of King Vidor [*Street Scene* 1931, *The Wedding Night* 1935], William Wyler [*Dead End* 1937, *Wuthering Heights* 1939, *The Best Years of Our Lives* 1946] and John Ford [*The Grapes of Wrath* 1940, *The Long Voyage Home* 1940]. All of these films showcase Toland's style of giving depth on the film's set via the use of shadow, light and space. But with *Kane*, Welles pushed Toland to the next level with the use of deep focus adding to his past style. One of the reasons I love a cinematographer is because, if anything, they have to be a team player; even if, at times, the director might not want to be one.

Twenty years before, cinematographer John Arnold [*The Big Parade* 1925, *Show People* 1928, *The Wind* 1928] was composing very contrasting images with a simple amount of artificial and natural light. Whether it was the silhouette of soldiers marching through a forest or an endless desert with blinding sand being thrown into the air, Arnold was making his mark.

But what I love about Arnold is that he was also following in the footsteps of William Friese-Greene. Arnold would infuriate his bosses at MGM by playing around with every aspect of the camera and lighting equipment on the studio's backlot. During his time Arnold would develop his moving 'rotambulator' camera system, a new piece of lighting equipment dubbed 'Arnold lights' which replaced the infamous burning arc lamps that would not only blind but also burn the studio's stars. And with the arrival of sound, Arnold devised his very own camera sound blimp to muffle out the noise of the camera's motor when recording audio for the new 'Talkies'. What an inventor!

Arnold's fellow MGM cinematographer William Daniels [*Foolish Wives* 1922, *Greed* 1924, *The Merry Widow* 1925] is another of my favourite silent film cinematographers. Daniels had just completed Fred Niblo's *The Temptress* [1926] and had realised that the film's star, Greta Garbo, had made him her personal cameraman. Hardly anyone else was allowed to film Garbo apart from him. Think of that?! You were nearly the only person allowed to film one particular star. Even more so when you begin to realise that Daniels had the power to overrule the director's decision when it came to filming Garbo as well. But as star Colleen Moore once told historian and film-maker Kevin Brownlow: 'The most important people on the set were the director and the cameraman. And especially the cameraman!' Of course, Moore is saying this from the perception of a star, but it does show how much respect cinematographers had during the studio system.

So, what did Daniels bring to the table unlike his contemporaries? In many ways the total opposite to what Arnold's style was at the time. Daniels used very soft low lighting throughout and with the help of much smaller lights he was able to use direct light and shadow far more effectively whether a scene was set in an alleyway or in a grand ball room. He made Garbo look like a goddess wherever she stood. Daniels' work on Garbo's second film at MGM, Clarence Brown's *Flesh and the Devil* [1926], is a classic example of this style



Promotional image for *Man With a Movie Camera* [1929]. Cinematographer Mikhail Kaufman. Production company Vseukrainske Foto Kino Upravlinnia [VUFKU].

and is very much the blueprint for all of Garbo's future classics such as *A Woman of Affairs* [1928], *Anna Christie* [1930], *Anna Karenina* [1935] and *Ninotchka* [1939]. It is Daniels' work with Garbo that made me fall in love with silent film.

However, I began to realise it wasn't just Daniels who invented this style. The look of German Expressionism had begun to seep into Hollywood before *The Temptress* and with the import of directors as influential as Paul Leni [*Waxworks* 1924] and F W Murnau [*Nosferatu* 1922, *The Last Laugh* 1924] to Hollywood [Garbo being part of the same import from Europe] then it was only a matter of time before the look of German cinema appeared in American films. So much, in fact, that I still think German Expressionism really did make an impact on the work of Toland and thus on Welles when it came to *Kane*.

But another love of mine, film noir, also has its own ancestry with German Expressionism. Nicholas Musuraca [*Cat People* 1942, *The Seventh Victim* 1943, *Out of the Past* 1947, *Born to Be Bad* 1950], John Alton [*T-Men* 1947, *Hollow Triumph* 1948, *The Black Book* 1949], James Wong Howe [*Hangmen Also Die!* 1943, *Body and Soul* 1947, *Sweet Smell of Success* 1957], all were challenged on what they did, all of them pushed the possibilities of clashing different styles

of cinematography and yet they were successful. Some of the films might not be very good, story-wise anyway, but I LOVE them because of the way they look.

The same challenges appeared when it came to colour, even more so when it involved a company like Technicolor. Technicolor had its own rules and, for many, too many rules. Cinematographers Jack Cardiff and Douglas Slocombe fought their corner for what they wanted to do with the use of colour. Dougie [probably better-known for his superb black-and-white cinematography at the time] came to heads with them while making Ealing Studios' first ever Technicolor film *Saraband for Dead Lovers* [1948]. To dodge their continued complaints of his lighting, Dougie would simply disappear from the set if any member of the Technicolor team appeared. For Jack (who I was lucky enough to meet on a number of occasions; one time in Bristol) it was during the filming of three films: *A Matter of Life and Death* [1946], *Black Narcissus* [1947] and *The Red Shoes* [1948]. Jack told me he would always try and keep the over-powering Technicolor team either off the set or away from his camera team. Both of these two great British cinematographers were trying to push the way colour could be used in cinema. Instead of just flat imagery, both of them wanted to enhance the depth of the contrast and tone by using colour; almost lighting their colour films in the way they would light black-and-white ones. They defied the industry and when watching their films today you realise that they won. The development of the camera, film and cinema could continue.

It is this kind of attitude that make them stand out for me. Cinematographers are always pushing the boundaries, making them, for me anyway, the masters of cinema.

It is through their eyes and the eyes of the camera that we see this great art form. Cinematographers are my heroes and if William Friese-Greene wasn't the inventor of cinema, then we can make sure he is classed as one of the first great pioneering cinematographers. And every time I watch a film, I know that the likes of William Friese-Greene are still very much with us.



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Mani Kidston

The Camera Does Lie

As Danny and Sandy flew away in the Greased Lightnin' car, I sank back into a soft mix of teddies and pillows with a grin on my face.

'You liked it then,' my friend Jess stated smugly, reciprocating my smile. 'I can't believe you hadn't seen it before.'

'I know.' As it fell quiet and the credits rolled, my grin faded. 'Bit weird how it ends though, isn't it? Like, after all that, Sandy's just completely someone else now.'

'Yeah, I always think that. Bit of a stupid ending really, isn't it?'

At 13, that was my first experience of noticing a film where a woman had to change who she was for a man. Thinking back now, the boys looking up the girls' skirts on the bleachers and 'Tell me more, tell me more, did she put up a fight?' was pretty messed up too.

Don't get me wrong, we've come a long way since 1978, but harmful stereotypes of women still saturate modern film and TV. These negative gender stereotypes have a serious impact on the lives of real women. Their perception of self, their place in society and their goals and aspirations are all influenced by what they see on screen. As Douglas Kellner put it: 'Radio, television, film and the other products of media culture provide material out of which we forge our very identities, our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female...'

In the first few years of secondary school, I worried intensely that I wouldn't grow a pair of boobs. My mum didn't have the genetics for them, and I assumed I was destined for the same fate. Although Mum didn't seem to care, TV and film said otherwise. They seemed incessantly focused on these unattainable symbols of femininity. So, one day as I was getting ready for school, putting on the pink star-patterned padded bra I just bought, a great idea hit me. I would stuff it! How had I not thought of it before?

It was at my first festival that it all came crumbling down. We were dancing to Newton Faulkner at the front of the crowd. Breathless, high on the atmosphere. My cheeks ached from smiling. Little did I know, with each rhythmic jump my body made, the tissue inched its way further out of my bra. I was entirely oblivious until my friend Lauren looked at me with a horrified grimace on her face.

'What's that?' she mouthed over the music, pointing at my chest. My throat dried up. I looked down, terrified at what I might find. There it was. Sticking out. A wad of tissue that scarred me for life. OK, maybe a bit dramatic, but I was mortified. My face burned as I shoved it back where it came from at lightning speed. I looked at my friend, shook my head, speechless, and acted as if it didn't happen. The remainder of that night and my memory of the festival were tainted with shame from that moment on.

It's no surprise the lengths I went to in pretending I had a pair of boobs before my body was ready. Many damaging, socially-accepted ideas regarding gender began in and are perpetuated by the dominant narratives of pop culture. From a young age, the idea that women need to be sexy is shoved down our throats. Women exist as objects of male desire throughout film, including those aimed at children. Even animated females are hyper-sexualised. From Jessica Rabbit through to Lola from *Shark Tale* we see exaggerated eyelashes, breasts and curves and we see the male reaction to them.

The disparity between what I grew up seeing on screen, and my real-life role-model, my mum, was confusing and alienating. As stated previously, when everyone else's bosom seemed to be sprouting forth and giving them a new-found sense of womanhood, I bought my first padded bra. Something I felt I could never tell my mum – the human antithesis of making an effort to look sexy – an advocate of vests or nothing at all. This female figure sat side by side everything I saw in TV and film where women were these sexualised beings. In hindsight, I realise how insanely cool it is to not care what anyone thinks of you – something I still haven't mastered. But at the time, with hundreds of examples compared to one, it felt obvious to me which was right and what I had to do to be a woman.

From the age of 14, I wore make-up to school every day. I hated my face without it.

'You're going to be late!' Mum called from down the hall. Cue footsteps and a head poking round the door. I was on my tiptoes, my face an inch away from the mirror balanced on my windowsill, trying to get my eyelashes perfect but my breath kept steaming up the glass. Her unimpressed reflection stared for a moment. 'Stop faffing around with your eyes, it's ten to nine.'

'Mum. Do you want me to get bullied? I look like a naked mole-rat without this! I'll be one more minute, OK.'

Because of my elaborate routine, I was usually late, rushing to get to school. I'd head straight to the toilets instead of to my tutor room to check my appearance. Before I even opened the creaky door, the smell of Boots' Charlie hit me. Below clinical lighting and wet paper towels stuck to the ceiling, I smoothed my hair, put on one more lick of mascara, and adjusted my skirt so that it was short enough to not

look like a dinner lady. But not too short. I didn't want to look slutty. Then came the slow walk to my tutor room so my heart rate would return to normal, eliminating any sign of flush left in my cheeks. Mrs Jay glared at me as I walked in. I mouthed sorry as I sat down.

Now, I know that most teen girls would rather be late to school than go in looking like a 'mess', and that this isn't a special story in any sense. But that's exactly the point. This story doesn't *need* to represent so many girls' experience of teen-hood. But it does, because through film and TV, we're taught that sexualising and objectifying women and girls is normal. That their appearance matters more than almost anything else about them.

One of the first films that challenged the negative gender stereotypes that have long pervaded Hollywood was *Thelma and Louise*. There was a real promise of positive change in the roles of women on screen when it came out. I finally watched it for the first time last summer with my two best friends. We sat cross-legged on an emerald-green pull-out sofa, absorbed from the off.

'Well,' I said as the credits rolled, 'that was fucking brilliant.'

'I can't believe none of us had seen it before,' said Poppy.

Brogan nodded, smiling. 'So nice to watch something so female-led.'

'It's ridiculous really though, isn't it? Half of the films we watch should be female-led. Or you know, an equal mix that isn't degrading to women one way or another.'

The room fell silent for a moment – a rarity when we're together.

For the rest of the night, we drank wine and discussed the women's journey to escape the constraints they lived under, their need to break free, to become independent in a man's world, and how relatable that felt. We contemplated the ironic sadness that arose from watching a film that made us feel so good. We just wanted to watch kick-ass women kick ass and that be normal. *Thelma and Louise* felt beautiful, empowering and a breath of fresh air because it was based around authentic female characters and their friendship – something Geena Davis, who played Thelma, thought would soon become the norm.

When that promise of change never materialised, Davis founded her Institute on Gender in Media. She echoes Kellner and countless others when she says that women's aspirations are being hindered and their perception of self being warped. She says we need more females behind the scenes. Real women's stories don't get told because such a small proportion of writers, producers and directors are women. Studies have shown time and again that gender representation behind the scenes directly affects what comes out on screen. Films that have higher proportions of women working on them

tend to hire more women in key roles and represent them with more authenticity and positivity.

We need to create more of these role-models on screen so that life can start to mirror art and our women and girls can aspire without restraint.

We need to show them not only that they can be who they want to be and do what they want to do, but that that is preferable, and the world will be a better place for it.



Mani Kidston wrote this essay while she was studying Creative and Professional Writing at UWE Bristol. She currently writes monthly content for digital magazine Fully Grown and is just about to start mentoring in Write Bristol's new scheme to improve equity of education in the city.

Jeff Young: Ghost Cinemas

There is no silver screen, no beam of smoky light, no flickering phantoms of fantasy and desire; instead, there are men, mostly sitting alone, lost philosophers bent over pints of lager and laminated breakfast menus, staring into the hours that stretch ahead, into their haunted memories, into the broken moment.

I'm in a Wetherspoons in Liverpool ordering a cup of tea. Too early for an old friend's funeral, I've come in here to get out of the rain. It's 10am on a rainy Monday morning and 'Spoons is already busy. It smells of rain-damp coats, bacon, sausages and beer and the rain seems to have followed me in and made itself at home.

Framed photographs on the walls show rows of awestruck faces staring out of darkness, stardust in their eyes. And I realise these people are sitting in this very building long ago: children at a matinee, roaring with laughter; lovers on dream dates, misty-eyed and swoony; men watching cowboy films, gunslinger moody.

Time slips, a slow fade into the past. Wetherspoons transforming into the Picturedrome, the cinema this building used to be, and for a fleeting moment I can see my mother – wearing Katharine Hepburn-style pleated pants and a belted swagger coat – arriving for her dream date with my dad. The film she's been dying to see – Deborah Kerr and Jean Simmons in *Black Narcissus* – is just about to start. Her date, my dad, arrives and in they go, disappearing into the cinema shadows at the beginning of their future lives together. She loves the film but he's not sure. He likes it because she loves it. He looks at her as she enters into the supernatural fever-dream of wild desire...

Slow fade back into the present moment. I turn to the barmaid and say, 'My mum used to come here... when it was a cinema... before it was a 'Spoons..?' She looks at me blankly, 'Didn't know it was a cinema. Thought it was just a pub. It's just some 'Spoons.' She looks at my funeral suit, sniffs at it, shrugs, looks away, makes herself busy with the J2Os. I take my cup of tea to a table, near what would once have been the silver screen, and I slow dissolve into my cinema of memory.

A beam of smoky light above my head, a corridor of cigarette mist moving through darkness, astral plane of fantasy and desire.



Promotional poster for *Black Narcissus* [A Production of the Archers, 1947].

Memories of saturation, immersion in shadow, atmosphere and smell – chewy juice of wine gums, pizzazz and jazz-spy glamour of Pearl and Dean music, mirage-mist of cigarette smoke, twisting through projector beam, dusty smell of ashtrays. Sensation overload as romantic as the actual films.

The Picturedrome was my mother's local cinema, her twice-a-week dream palace where she would disappear into celluloid adventures. Romantic by nature, thrilled by glamour, fond of a dashing leading man – Stewart Granger in *Madonna of the Seven Moons* or Montgomery Clift in *A Place in the Sun* – she would travel by bus or tram to cinemas all over the city, the names of the picture houses like glamorous destinations, distant stars: Futurist, Essoldo, Majestic, Scala, Palais De Luxe, Rivoli, Trocadero... a dazzling, electric galaxy of rapture.

Often on a shopping day in town we'd slip into a cinema and get lost in the Sahara, a cattle-cowboy homestead, or a goldrush town in the Klondike. It didn't really matter what the film was; it was the getting lost in dreamland we were after, slipping the bonds of Liverpool and time-travelling into fantasy. Cinemas *were* dreams.

Nostalgia for the queue (in memory it always rains, and we shelter beneath umbrellas), fleapit mustiness, taste of pear drops like

acetone solvent, torch-beams of usherettes, back-row smoochers, choc-ice-sticky lips. I can't remember ever watching a film from the beginning. We'd always arrive halfway through and see the end, before it looped back to the start and the opening credits rolled – an out of sequence logic of middle, end, beginning and often middle, end again. And when we'd leave the cinema, it would always be night-time. And the world had changed.

In Wetherspoons I finish my cup of tea and sit there for a moment, looking at the room, fading in and out, from present to past and back again. In the present there are motes of dust, floating in phantom light, like memories and moments. Like hauntings. In the past there is smoke in the projector beam like signals from ghosts. The cinema is packed with families, lovers, loners, but all of them have come together to sit in the dark, become a congregation, become transformed by moving shadows and light. I have always found this incredibly moving – that we gather with strangers to gaze at phantoms – and when I see a building that used to be a cinema, and is now a carpet warehouse, or a gym, or a car park, a feeling akin to loneliness comes over me, of homesickness, of loss.

I leave the pub, cross the road and stand looking at the cinema in the rain. There's a touch of the mosque about it, with its vault-of-heaven dome, but perhaps it's more like the entrance to a raffish seaside pier. My mum started coming here in the 1930s, to matinee shows or to watch the Pathé news. My granddad would walk her to the corner of their street and wave until she was safely in the queue, and as I stand here, I begin to watch the moment, as if it is projected on the Picturedrome's façade: damaged nitrate film stock, the street at dusk, lens flare of streetlights. A young girl in poppy-red waving in slow motion, her father waving back, waving through time, through shadow. As the cinema manager welcomes my mum into the lobby the film becomes pock-marked, blistered, *bacterial*, the scene slowly disintegrating, literally dessicating, back into the present moment. And then this street in Liverpool returns to its traffic jam and dirty-grey reality and the dream palace is once again a mediocre chain-pub in bad weather.

I stand there in the rain, remembering old cinemas. Leaving the Futurist on Lime Street, late 1960s, after watching *Paint Your Wagon* with my mum, I look up at a hoarding on the Scala next door advertising *A Fistful of Dollars*. Clint Eastwood stared down at me, stogie clamped between his teeth, Colt 45 raised against the western sky. It dawns on me that this mean-looking outlaw is portrayed by the same actor I've just watched pathetically singing about talking to the trees. It's a portal moment of transformation – a passing from my mum's romantic cinema universe into my own cinema landscape of savagery and apocalypse; from the embarrassment of sitting with your mum, listening to this excruciating *mum's music*, to a sudden, jolting flash forward into Sergio Leone carnage and Peckinpah bloodbath.

Sometimes I stand outside derelict cinemas, or in car parks and empty lots where cinemas once stood. In these buildings, these dream cocoons and Art Deco ocean liners, these palaces and grottos, my mother once watched lovers kissing and I watched men kill other men with guns. My mother watched children running through Alpine meadows scattered with edelweiss and I watched long-haired outlaws riding Harley-Davidson choppers through the painted desert. My mother watched Calamity Jane singing 'Whip Crack Away' and I watched slow-motion Peckinpah shootouts and existential death. She loved – and I love it that she loved – to be entertained and emotionally transported, whereas I wanted to be unsettled and disturbed. But cinema became part of me because of her, because there had been times, particularly when I was a child when we entered magic kingdoms together and in darkness thrilled to tin men and lions, and chimney sweeps on rooftops.

When my mum was dying she mentioned Stewart Granger, dashing star of *Madonna of the Seven Moons*, the star who made her swoon. 'I saw him once, in real life, on stage, in a theatre. He unbuttoned his shirt...'. This struck me as such a wistful thing to say it moved me to tears. 'Do you ever remember going to the cinema?' I asked her, and she replied, 'I still go to the cinema. At least I do in dreams...'.

It's time to go to the funeral. On my way to the church, it occurs to me I can tell my life story in visits to cinemas. When I was a child, wide-eyed with wonder. When I was a teenager, wild-eyed at Coppola. When I was a parent watching Ghibli in tears. Now that I'm old I still go to cinemas even though they're derelict, or demolition sites, or car parks, or no longer there. In ghost cinemas, I gaze at the silver screen, the beam of smoky light, the flickering phantoms of fantasy and desire.

At least I do in dreams.



Jeff Young is a Liverpool-based dramatist for theatre, radio and TV. He broadcasts essays for BBC Radio 3 and collaborates with musicians and artists on audio installations and performance. His memoir *Ghost Town: A Liverpool Shadowplay* was published in March 2020 by Little Toller. [photo: Pearl Buscombe Young]

Liz Chege: Apostasy and Cinema as Confessional Space

The familiar orange papaya blush of a Nairobi sunset flooded the wooden floor in union with the television's purple glow, as trees rustled by the window.

'This is the time of renewal,' says a female AI voice through the screen. Michael York's character fires his gun in haste as he comes to terms with his new reality in Michael Anderson's *Logan's Run* [1976]. This is the first film I recall knocking me over. It made me a life-long fan of science fiction and subsequently helped to influence my choice to study architecture and town planning. Set in the year 2274, humans somewhere in the US now live in the confines of a domed city enjoying an idyllic, hedonistic lifestyle. They are all young. When a person turns 30, they are 'reincarnated' for another blissful life cycle, thereby keeping the population of the city low. Those who know the dark truth become 'runners' and flee in the hope of finding sanctuary in the 'outside' but do so in blind faith as no one can confirm if it's even possible to breathe outside the dome.

A late afternoon double-bill of dystopian sci-fi concluded with Richard Fleischer's *Soylent Green* [1973], a nightmarish render of a future world controlled by big corporations and an innocent law enforcement officer (played by Charlton Heston) who uncovers an ugly truth. What a revelatory afternoon for a nine-year-old to behold. I was perpetually mortified by the rest of the Turner Classic Movies season of science fiction films – especially the infamous coda in *Planet of the Apes* [1968] – but I relished the abiding relationship between mystery, imagination and scientific truth. I still do. Somehow, this art found its way to a child in Kenya decades after it was made, finding a deep connection.

This wasn't the first time film had planted itself as an animating force in my life. My first big-screen experience was watching *Forrest Gump* [1994] at the Fox Drive-In Cinema in Thika, Nairobi. When it was opened in 1958, it was attended by white patrons only but was accessible to all Kenyans in 1963 after cinemas were integrated. My mother needed an adventure after child-minding three children under the age of nine. I was so excited. I didn't care that I didn't quite understand the film. We had popcorn and the old speaker was hanging right above the window next to me, so the audio was crisp.

It was expensive to go on these outings, but as disposable income increased and the middle class grew, going to the cinema became more and more common. A key turning point was going to see Gus Van Sant's *Finding Forrester* [2000] with my father after a rough day at work for him. He usually fell asleep during movies but didn't snooze once! The excitement and debate about our personal responses to the film during the drive home will stay with me to my dying day.

My favourite films tend to grapple in some way with the business of being alive. In the opening sequence of Goran Dukić's *Wristcutters: A Love Story* [2006] – another formative film for me – we find young college student Zia in the midst of making a decision. We think that it's just to water his plants and clean his room, but soon discover that, as the title suggests, it is a resolution in favour of self-destruction. Consigned to a desolate hereafter that is the same but 'just a little worse' than his life before, we find him trapped in a purgatorial existence where he works for the aptly named restaurant Kamikaze Pizza. The landscapes are bare, but still beautiful in their muted, near colourless fugue. No one can smile here; no stars shine in the sky and no mirrors are directly shown (the latter, perhaps a consequence of the gruesome deaths suffered by a few of those who find themselves in this curious predicament). You're never quite sure if there is a hierarchy, or if a system of reciprocity is in place, or if there is scope to go beyond what lies here. Surprisingly, it is an ultimately uplifting treasure.

I didn't truly understand the power of cinema until Watershed in Bristol plunged into my life. I saw Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968] for the very first time at this venue and had somehow escaped spoilers. It was screened as Kubrick intended, with an intermission, correct aspect ratio, curtains and music. The works. Watershed is responsible for many memorable cinema moments in my life thanks to the excellent curation and passion of Mark Cosgrove. Ironically, this is where I saw a Kenyan (and African) film on the big screen for the first time. Tosh Gitonga's *Nairobi Half Life* [2012] imbued a sense of urgency in me to change my career path and recalibrate my love for film located in the margins of my life and pull it to the centre.

However, the most transformative experience I've ever had as an audience member arrived with Daniel Kokotajlo's *Apostasy* [2017]. Moral and representational stakes are high in this film, but Kokotajlo's restraint at presenting this intimate, complex and brutal affair without condemnation or condescension is firm and compassionate. A former Jehovah's Witness, he wrote and directed this story imbued with his own personal experiences and the circumstances he witnessed. The film centres upon devout Jehovah Witnesses Ivanna and her daughters Alex and Luisa and the frictions they endure in a journey of purgation, pursuit of The Truth, grief suppressed by faith, and the promise of The New System (the faith's term for God's kingdom).



Promotional poster for *Apostasy* (distributed by Curzon, 2017).

The screening was followed by a Q&A with the director during which former Witnesses spoke of their own experiences and their dismay at their inability to forgive the damage that false and hollow fellowship had done to them. The trauma they experienced was extensive. Their testimonies included accounts of suicide, severe expulsions and all manner of abuse. The event was so powerful, I was still thinking about it four years later. I hadn't experienced cinema as confessional space in this manner before, and it was all the more powerful because of Kokotajlo's sharp sculpturing of this restrictive, claustrophobic world. My experiences with Catholicism – specifically the colonial tinges of Christianity – have no doubt shaped many of the tensions I've experienced in my personal and professional life, but also, most importantly, my self-perception and place in this world. Most moving in this film for me, is how we witness unravelling women who aren't always aware of their unravelling or can't reconcile with it once they are. It offered a rare insight into the complex nature of faith, family, duty and love. When forgiveness is honest and suffused with humility, it nourishes and emboldens relationships.

While Kokotajlo eschews ornament and traditional religious imagery, his use of light and colour is effective in conveying the liminal spaces where the characters ruminate on transformation and where absolute faith can be paralysing. To contemplate escape would be denying and leaving behind so much of what you have entangled

into your identity. A life without a community bound by faith is unbearable. A mark of how accomplished this feature debut is, is the presentation of some aspects of the faith that could be seen as appealing and inclusive. For instance, the Witnesses are portrayed as having a strong commitment to reaching out to a multitude of communities and learning languages such as Urdu accurately. However, this veneer is closely balanced with the dark undercurrents shrouded in *The Word*. Once in a while, I retrieve the pockets in me where wounds still reside untended. While Kokotajlo doesn't prescribe a remedy for us, his film is a tender but sharp and direct dispatch to us about examining where our own compassion lies and how we deploy it.

There isn't always a complete and available remedy for our unseen maladies, but when we make it through, we can also help others grow strong. Cinema does this for me. While our human condition's proclivity for distress can be temporarily escaped through this medium, I believe its purpose is far more encompassing and healing. To now be in a position where I can share this gift with others is the best gift of all.



Liz Chege is a film programmer, critic and curator. She is a Berlinale Talent alumni and founding member of Come the Revolution, a collective of creatives and curators committed to exploring Black life, experience and cultural expression through cinema. She was programme producer of the British Council's No Direct Flight project at British Film Institute Southbank. She has curated programmes for international festivals and worked as a freelance marketing specialist for film-makers and distributors. Recently, she was appointed festival director of Africa in Motion.

Beth Calverley: Co-Creating a Poem About the Cinema

Since I started reading and writing poetry, I've been mesmerised by its cinematic power; its potential to transport me to faraway worlds through the magical screen of my mind's eye.

Perhaps more importantly, poetry, cinema and other creative experiences can guide us, blinking, back to the everyday brightness of the real world. Shared creative experiences bring us together while reminding us of our individual identities. They can connect us with the people, places, and experiences that matter to us. They can also show us how to encounter the unexpected in our own lives.

For the past two years, I've been the Poet in Residence at University Hospitals Bristol and Weston NHS Foundation Trust's Arts and Culture Programme, made possible by local charity Above & Beyond. I host poetry sessions with patients, staff members, families and carers in hospital. Being in hospital is often stressful, whether you're coming to terms with an illness, visiting a loved one who you're worried about, or working a long shift under pressure. Having a piano to tinker on, a nature-inspired mural to explore, a garden to help you catch your breath, a cinema afternoon in the day room, or a creative writing lunchtime session can connect people with their personal identities, fellow patients and colleagues, and the world beyond the hospital walls and windows. For long-stay patients, it can make their time in hospital feel less like a scary movie and more like an interval to prepare for the next scene in their life's story.

I co-created 'Feel Good' with a group of older adults at South Bristol Community Hospital, hosting a conversation about cinema. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, our conversation took place online. Before we started, I explained that I would weave their words into a poem and they would have a chance to suggest changes. I also explained that this poem could be shared in an essay for the Bristol Festival of Ideas programme if every member of the group would like this.

First, we showed photos of historic local cinemas to warm our memory projectors up. We perused black-and-white photos of the Odeon in Broadmead (showing *The Sound of Music* in 1966), the Triangle in Clifton (in 1940, before it was destroyed in the Blitz), the Concorde on Stapleton Road, the Metropole in Ashley Road, the Van Dyck in Fishponds (now a pub), the News Theatre on Castle Street,

the Gaiety on Wells Road (with children waiting outside), the Picture House on Staple Hill, and the Coliseum Picture Theatre on Park Row (which also used to be a skating rink).

I made notes of everyone's words and phrases as they were expressed. While the conversation continued, I wove these fragments of dialogue into a poem on my manual typewriter and read it aloud to the group twice. I've transcribed the poem below with the permission of all the co-creators.

'Feel Good' (March 2021)

I came out of the cinema
and there he was – waiting for me
home from leave.

Just an ordinary cinema,
just a single balcony.
Art deco. So luxurious.

An old mini parked outside.
My parents courted in his car –
amazing how many times it broke down.

They used to drop us off outside
the skating rink and we'd sneak
off to go bowling.

On Saturday mornings, they'd play
children's shows. We cut out
the stamps from the teabag boxes.

I met my husband at jive class.
He'd forgotten his money for the
pictures, so I paid the 1/9d – each –

to get us in. We've been married for
61 years. My brother still remembers
me taking him to Keynsham cinema.

You used to pay 6 pence back then.
Before the film, they played the
lion's roar, the news, trailers

of what was coming soon.
The ads for PG Tips – the monkeys
with their teapots. So cute.

The taste of butterscotch,
strawberry and vanilla.
I don't mind salt but I prefer sweet.

And singing along to the musical
together with my friends.
Such a good night. Feel good.

After our group session, the wonderful members of staff who organised this event took copies of the poem to every co-creator so they could read it and ask for any changes. Each group member received their own copy of the typewritten poem to do with as they wished. In this way, the memories they had collectively expressed became a tangible reminder of our shared conversation.

As everyone contributed their thoughts and feelings, we heard memories of childhood cinema trips, romantic dates with partners, and musicals with friends. Some of the group members were local, others were from further afield, yet the cinema theme transcended space and time. It shone a light on shared experiences, as co-creators fondly discussed key elements of cinema-going, such as interval ice-creams and trailers before each movie. The theme also brought individual differences into play. Each co-creator had their own favourite flavour of ice-cream: 'butterscotch, strawberry, and vanilla...'. One person described going to an 'ordinary cinema' while another remembered the foyer of a 'luxurious' Art Deco cinema.

To me, it felt significant how vividly the participants emphasised *who* was with them; the loved ones meeting them outside, sitting in the seats beside them, or sneaking off to go bowling – the siblings, parents, friends, and lovers. Another noticeable theme was the admission fee that co-creators remembered paying for cinema tickets when they were younger (a lot less than we pay today). This reminded me that, while the value of money changes over time, the intrinsic value of shared experiences never changes, though we may notice its value more or less vividly at different times.

The poem starts with a co-creator's memory of seeing their partner outside the Triangle Picture House, home from leave on a surprise visit. This story resonated with me, as I've seen films with my partner at the nearby Whiteladies Picture House, which opened in 1921 and still operates today. We've also been to the Odeon on Broadmead together, which opened in 1936. A cinema trip often reminds me of the brief intensity of life. We enter the flickering chrysalis and emerge changed, older, wiser – just as we emerge from each scene of our own lives. One moment, we'll step out of the cinema after a first date, and the next we'll take our great-grandchildren to see the latest animated adventure in a VR theatre powered by solar panels on Mars. Which cinema experiences will we see through a nostalgic lens in decades to come?

As the conversation progressed, musicals took to the stage. One co-creator shared a recent memory of singing along to a musical (*Mamma Mia!*) with her friends at the cinema. She described the film as 'feel good', which became the title of the poem. Personally, I believe the feel-good factor in art is often under-rated. *Feel-good*

saves a seat for hope, and hope brings popcorn for our hungry hearts. Particularly during times of disconnect, when we don't feel so good, creative experiences can provide emotional nourishment.

From our conversation, I learned that the red plush seats at the Gaiety Cinema used to be itchy. I learned that families used to save the stamps from teabags towards the cost of tickets for the Saturday morning children's shows. Most of all, I was reminded of the need to preserve more time for collective experiences with loved ones, no matter how difficult it can be to escape from the daily demands of work and life. I'm grateful to the co-creators of 'Feel Good' for this reminder.

Cinema is a feeling that brings us together, whether our particular version has a vintage curtain or a high-definition screen, a live orchestra or surround-sound. It feels like sitting with others as the lights hush, safe in the knowledge that something unexpected is about to happen.

Thank you for reading. Now I'd love to invite you to write some poetry of your own about a time you have spent in the cinema, at home watching a film, or a time in your life when a movie inspired you. Where were you? Who was with you? How did you feel?

With thanks to Jillianne Norman, Chaplain, and Karen Nash, Patient Flow and Administration Co-ordinator, who co-hosted this session and made this collaborative poem possible.



Beth Calverley is the Poet in Residence at University Hospitals Bristol and Weston NHS Foundation Trust. She co-creates poems with people via her supportive practice *The Poetry Machine*. She is also part of *House of Figs*, a music and poetry duo, and co-produces *Milk Poetry*, a nurturing platform for spoken word. [photo: Tamsin Elliott]

Andrew Kelly: My Movie Heaven

I can't recall the first film I saw but I remember where I saw it.

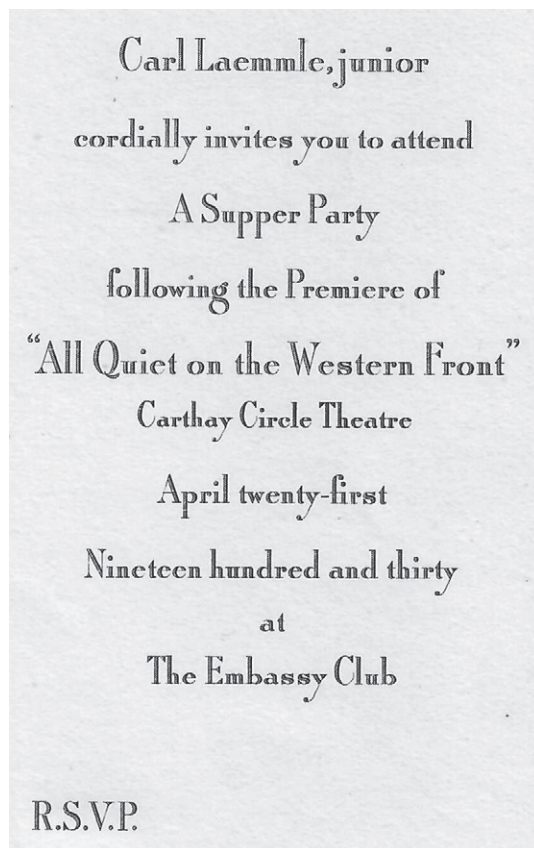
We were on holiday in Conwy in Wales where we stayed in a caravan every year. I have few fond memories of caravan holidays, but I liked Conwy. Its castle and beach, harbour, and nice high street made it a good place to explore. And it had a cinema, which we were desperate to visit.

One day, Dad – no doubt fed up with the seven of us in such cramped conditions – said that we could go to the pictures and gave us the money. He warned me that we may need to get someone to take us in as young children without adults were not welcome. We waited at the entrance and a kind lady offered to help. It was the Palace Cinema, and a palace of dreams it was: 750 seats in one big auditorium. My experience that day led to a lifetime of joy.

Despite the cinema being my first love, it took a while for me to be a regular goer. There were no cinemas where we lived. There was the ABC in Wolverhampton, but this was a bus journey away and my pocket money was limited. My early film experiences were thanks to television (and well before video recorders, DVDs and streaming). You took what you were given and there was a lot. I loved Laurel and Hardy. I watched as many Bogart films as I could, even one miserable night in the caravan when, after days of never-ending rain [our holidays seemed full of rain], we rigged up a portable television to a car battery. Not a perfect screen image, but it was still Bogie. I loved musicals, too.

At the age of 11, staying at my elder brother's house, I was told to watch *All Quiet on the Western Front*. I was captivated and horrified. This film had such an impact on me that some years later I searched the archives of the world for details of its production and reception; went to California twice to interview people who had appeared in it; and wrote a book, *Filming All Quiet on the Western Front*, and another, *Cinema and the Great War*. I didn't know then that what I had seen was a much-cut version of the film; it was some decades before the full reconstruction was released (and a triumph it is).

Dissolve to teenage years. I remember seeing *Star Wars* at the cinema, but no other visits, though there must have been some. At school, an annual 'treat' was watching *Kes*. My film education continued to be provided by television and still is with the remarkable Talking Pictures channel. I hated domestic science on



Original printed invitation to the premiere of *All Quiet on the Western Front* [author's collection].

Thursday mornings so would feign illness. Wrapped in a blanket, with a supply of bourbon biscuits, I watched a series of old films on ITV. I remember seeing *The Big Parade* and *The Iron Horse* (both classics – though I didn't know that at the time). I remember seeing the full 'Lullaby of Broadway' sequence from *Gold Diggers of 1935*. And I saw *Things to Come*.

Things to Come was mad, but also 'Wondrous!' and 'A Mighty Challenge to the World of Today!' as the posters said. The early attack on Everytown was a tremendous piece of cinema and the new peaceful city – another Everytown – created after decades of conflict was a science fiction *tour de force* (though even then I wondered why anyone would want to live underground). I'd been captivated by the moon landing a few years before, and the space rocket at the end was from my dreams, though a tad over the top, as was the dialogue generally. H G Wells had written this, and it showed. At one point, set in the then future of 1970 (not many years before I watched this for the first time), Raymond Massey declares that the

'Brotherhood of efficiency, the free masonry of Science' now rules and helps overthrow the dictator. Portentous but wonderful.

By the time I got to university and then entered – for a short while – teaching, the cinema was my world. The Little Theatre and the huge IMAX screen at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford provided latest releases and classics. I won a competition for free entry to all Bradford's cinemas for a year and saw at least 200 films. But the television was still important and no more so than for my first viewing of *Citizen Kane*. One year over Christmas, BBC2 had a Welles season. *Citizen Kane* was on Christmas Day when I would be with my parents. There was video, but could I trust my programming skills and what would happen if there was a power cut? The solution was simple if cumbersome: I got two friends to record it; I recorded it at my parents; and there was also my copy at home in Bradford as back up. In the end I got four copies; and I watched it on transmission. Now you can download *Kane* with a couple of clicks.

I graduated with two degrees in Peace Studies at Bradford and worked there for a short while. My attention had moved from my subject – the non-nuclear balance of forces between NATO and the Warsaw Pact – to movies and war and peace (which led to my first two books). To pay the bills, I took a short-term job with Cambridge City Council to investigate the impact of a nuclear attack on Norwich, Peterborough, and Cambridge. They gave me a rudimentary Amstrad computer, and a programme to predict levels of attack and their impact. It took at least five hours to come up with the results. What else to do while waiting but go to the cinema. There was a multiplex nearby. I started a weekly double-bill treat – often with me being the only person in screenings – which lasted six months. By the way, when I got back the first time the results were clear: I had to tell the council that no one would be left alive (there's a movie in that).

Bringing destruction to the people of East Anglia was meant to buy me some time as I wasn't sure what to do. I looked briefly into a career in film – first, as director of the Bradford Film Theatre (no); then as a film critic (too few jobs); and then as an academic, which was a dispiriting experience. I tried to read the film theory books; I really did. All they left me with was a sadness that something that had brought such joy to millions, was *the* artform of the twentieth century, should be eviscerated like a poor laboratory animal and written up in terms that, fortunately, few would want to read. I chose another career, though this hasn't stopped me programming film seasons, setting up film festivals, and – most important of all – seeing movies as such an integral part of the work that I do that I can legitimately call this research. In 2021 we were finally able to do the project I had wanted to do since 1993 on William Friese-Greene, of which this book is part.

I've always liked this from the novelist Elizabeth Bowen about why she goes to the cinema (written in 1938): 'I go to be distracted (or



Promotional poster for *All Quiet on the Western Front* (author's collection).

"taken out of myself"), she says. 'I go when I don't want to think; I go when I do want to think and need stimulus; I go to see pretty people; I go when I want to see life ginned up, charged with unlikely energy; I go to laugh...'. She adds:

I go to be harrowed; I go when a day has been such a mess of detail that I am glad to see even the most arbitrary, the most preposterous, pattern emerge; I go because I like bright light, abrupt shadow, speed; I go to see America, France, Russia; I go because I like wisecracks and slick behaviour; I go because the screen is an oblong opening into the world of fantasy for me... I go because I like sitting in a packed crowd in the dark, among hundreds riveted on the same thing....

I go for all these reasons, too. But I also go because I believe watching movies has taught me many lessons about the meaning of life (and of the work I want to do) and by continuing to go I can learn even more. *The Magnificent Ambersons* about America, wealth, business and the growth of cities; *All That Heaven Allows* and *Magnificent Obsession* about love; *Une Partie de Campagne* about following your life's desires when you can and avoiding regrets

later; *The Way to the Stars* about wartime sacrifice and post-war hope; *Ikiru* about making things matter even when you face death; *Casablanca* about ideas and opposing Fascism; *Frankenstein* about hubris and helping the underdog (was it this – and not the song 'Nelly the Elephant' – that led me to my lifetime work campaigning for the rights of animals?); *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* about nuclear war and, now, climate disaster; *Singin' in the Rain* about joy; *The Day the Earth Stood Still* about peace; those three great films about World War One which taught me how appalling that war was – *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *La Grande Illusion* and *Paths of Glory*; and *The Way Ahead* about coming together to defeat an enemy.

I could have mentioned many more. What we each take from the films we love is different; but watching films does offer a way to reflect on what to do with your life, about the ideas that guide you, about making your mind up; about love and loss; life and death; about meaning.

What's next? Simply more of the same. I turned 60 last year. By July 2021 I hadn't been to the cinema for over 16 months due to the pandemic. The first two films I saw on my return, *Nomadland* and *Summer of Soul*, reminded me why I love the cinema. Now that there are more years behind me than ahead, I don't want to waste time. Every year alive after the age of 60 is more precious than ever. My cinema-going and film-watching days are not over.

And the end when it comes – the final fade out? I don't believe in heaven (I believe more in *Heaven's Gate* – which I still regard as a masterpiece). But if life after death exists, I'd like to travel there on the stairway to the other world that transported David Niven and Kim Hunter in *A Matter of Life and Death* or with Georges Guétary on the stairway to paradise he builds in *An American in Paris*. At the top I'd see another palace of dreams – much like the first one I entered many decades before. There's an old-fashioned commissionaire, bright lights, a red carpet, and a sign saying, 'Now on: *La Ronde*, *Ikiru*, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, *All That Heaven Allows*, *Magnificent Obsession*, *Casablanca*, *The Music Box*, *Une Partie de Campagne*, *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, *Gold Diggers of 1935*, *Sunrise*, *The Way to the Stars*' – all for me. My heaven.



Andrew Kelly is the director of Bristol Ideas. He has published books on cinema and the First World War, Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, legible cities and managing creative partnerships, among other topics. (photo: Melanie Kelly)

Bristol Cinema Walk



Bristol Cinema Walk

This walking route, from Clifton to Broadmead, will take you to some locations that were key to William Friese-Greene's early life in Bristol.

It will also take you to the sites of some of the city's cinemas, past and present. In the first half of the twentieth century, Bristol saw a cinema boom, 57 opening between 1909 and 1940 alone. Many of the old buildings have now been repurposed or have gone entirely, destroyed during the Blitz or demolished and replaced. The tour will share the stories of some of these including the first venue in the city to project moving pictures and the scene of a long-unsolved murder.

The route is mainly level, with slight declines down Park Street Avenue, Park Street, St George Road and Union Street. Allow around an hour to complete the walk (not including stops at visitor attractions and cafés along the way). You may find your way disrupted by roadworks and diversions, and therefore need to improvise a little in order to pick up the suggested route again.

Begin your tour outside the Victoria Rooms, at the junction of Queen's Road and Whiteladies Road.



View of the site of Friese-Greene's former photographic studio beside the Victoria Rooms in a clipping from *Gloucestershire and Avon Life*, October 1975 [Bristol Libraries L78.89 6393].

1. The Victoria Rooms

Adjacent to the Victoria Rooms (to your left when facing the main entrance) is a small building that once housed one of William Friese-Greene's photographic studios. He also had studios in London, Plymouth, Brighton and Bath, as well as two other sites in Bristol. The Victoria Rooms was opened in 1842 and became a public venue for music, readings and political meetings. Eadweard Muybridge – the photographer famed for his capturing of motion through still photography – delivered a lecture here in November 1889. It briefly operated as the Clifton Cinema [c1919-1922].

Use the pedestrian crossing to cross to the Royal West of England Academy and turn right down Queen's Road. Stop at the junction with Queen's Avenue and look across at Embassy House.

2. The Embassy

This building stands on the former site of the Embassy Cinema. Built in 1933 to a design by E C Morgan Willmott and W H Watkins, the Embassy was at the time Bristol's biggest cinema. It seated 2,100 people (700 of them in a balcony) and had a staff of 50. The Embassy closed in 1963, ending with a series of Greta Garbo films. It was later demolished and replaced by Embassy House.

Cross at the pedestrian crossing and continue on Queen's Road. Use the first crossing on your right to get to the other side and continue to 67 Queen's Road (currently Lola Lo). On the wall you will see a plaque.

3. Plaque to William Friese-Greene

The youngest of seven siblings, William Green won a four-year scholarship to Queen Elizabeth's Hospital on Brandon Hill. In 1869 he left school and later started an apprenticeship with Marcus Guttenberg, who had previously been based at this site (the dates and location of the apprenticeship are wrong on the plaque). In 1874 he married Helena Friese, adding her name and an 'e' to his, and broke his apprenticeship, setting up his studio in Bath.

Continue along Queen's Road. When you reach the next set of pedestrian crossings, cross over to Browns. Turn right and continue to Bristol Museum and Art Gallery.

4. Bristol Film Office

Bristol Museum and Art Gallery is home to Bristol Film Office, the city council's production support service. In 2017 Bristol was named UNESCO City of Film, a permanent status that recognises the city's achievements as a world leader in the field of film and the moving image. The accolade enables Bristol's film-making community to engage with and learn from other cities around the world, forging international collaborations, creating new artistic exchange programmes and exploring cross-cultural projects that combine film with other mediums within the Creative City fields.



Postcard of the Coliseum Picture Theatre, c1912 [Bristol Libraries 1841/L79.89].

Continue along Queen's Road as it merges into Park Row. Stop on the corner of Park Row and Woodland Road.

5. The Coliseum

The narrow building on your left is the Coliseum. It opened in 1910 and from 1912 operated a 450-seat cinema, with the entrance at this junction. The building had many other uses, including as a roller-skating rink, an ice rink and an exhibition hall, and for the manufacture of aircraft. The cinema closed in 1924. The building was severely damaged by enemy bombing during the Second World War, with only some of the original façade saved. Over the door you will see a tribute to the dog Nipper (a nearby plaque provides more information).

Cross to the other side of Park Row. Walk back towards Queen's Road, but take a left turn down Park Street Avenue. At the end of the avenue, turn left into Park Street and proceed down the hill. Use the pedestrian crossing on your right at the bottom of Park Street to cross the road, then walk a little way back up the hill, taking the first left onto St George's Road. Continue straight on (and across the mini roundabout) to College Street. Stop and take a look at the plaque on the wall beside the pedestrian crossing, at the rear of City Hall.

6. Another plaque to William Friese-Greene

Friese-Greene was born on 7 September 1855 at 68 College Street, a house that used to stand opposite this spot but was demolished in 1958. This plaque was unveiled in September 1955 to mark the centenary of Friese-Greene's birth. During the ceremony, the Lord Mayor spoke about the way in which the social habits of millions



W H Truman painting Friese-Greene's former home in 1955. The painting was purchased by Graham Friese-Greene and now hangs in the office of the headmaster of Queen Elizabeth's Hospital school (Bristol Archives: 40826/BUI/31). The house was originally numbered 68, but this was later changed to 12.

of people had been changed by the invention of cinematography. The plaque was relocated to its present site in May 1959. The 1955 commemorations were organised by Bristol photographer and author Reece Winstone.

Continue walking along College Street. Turn left at the end of the street and walk past Central Library. In front of you is Bristol Cathedral.

7. Bristol Cathedral

In August 2014 the nave of Bristol Cathedral was used to represent Westminster Abbey for the scene of the coronation of Anne Boleyn in the TV adaptation of Hilary Mantel's award-winning novel *Wolf Hall*. The cathedral has produced a leaflet giving further details of its use as a location for the programme. You can pick up a copy of the leaflet inside or download it from the website:

bristol-cathedral.co.uk/images/uploads/2015_Jan_Wolf_Hall_Trail.pdf

Bristol regularly doubles for other major cities in films. Its historic buildings and streets are used as settings for medieval, Tudor, Victorian, Georgian and more modern eras. King Street, for example, has been used in *Sherlock: The Abominable Bride* and *These Foolish Things*, and areas of Harbourside have been dressed as Boston in the 1700s and wartime Guernsey. The Film Office website has more details of Bristol's filming hotspots and you can follow [#FilmedinBristol](https://www.instagram.com/filmedinbristol/) on social media. filmbristol.co.uk/bristol-movie-maps

Among the earliest known footage shot in Bristol was that of a visit by Boer War hero Lt General Lord Methuen in 1902. It was filmed by the Mitchell and Kenyon company, which was based in Blackburn. It can be viewed for free on BFI Player. player.bfi.org.uk

Follow the path past the cathedral and continue along College Green, past the Marriott. Use the pedestrian crossings to reach the Centre Promenade and then turn right into the covered harbourside area. Carry on walking until you reach Watershed.

8. Watershed

Watershed opened in 1982, declaring itself 'Britain's First Media Centre'. It is the leading film culture and digital media centre in the South West. It advances education, skills, and an appreciation and understanding of the arts, focusing particularly on film, media and digital technologies. Each year it hosts Encounters Film Festival, which promotes the short film as a way of developing the next generation of film-makers and animators. Watershed has historic links to the independent microplex cinema the Cube on Dove Street South.

Continue along Harbourside. When you see Pero's Bridge on your left, turn right into Anchor Square and continue straight across it into Millennium Square. Stop at the statue of Cary Grant beside the Millennium Square urban allotments.

9. Cary Grant

Cary Grant was born Archibald Leach in Horfield, Bristol, in 1904. While still at school he became an assistant at the Bristol Hippodrome, and at the age of 14 he joined Bob Pender's Knockabout Comedians as an acrobat. In 1920 he travelled with the troupe to America and decided to stay. He was signed by Paramount Pictures in 1931. In 1957 Grant starred in *An Affair to Remember* with Deborah Kerr, who also had connections with Bristol: she had attended Northumberland House Boarding School in Henleaze and had later received acting lessons at the Hicks-Smale Drama School in Durdham Park.

The first Cary Comes Home festival was held in Bristol in 2014. Find out more at www.carycomeshome.co.uk

Retrace your steps to Pero's Bridge. Cross the bridge, turn right and walk along Narrow Quay to Arnolfini (take care on the cobbles).

10. Arnolfini

Arnolfini was founded in 1961 and moved to its current location – a former tea warehouse – in 1975. It is one of Europe's most important centres for the contemporary arts and is regularly used for film screenings. It shares its facilities with UWE Bristol whose acclaimed School of Animation is based out at the Bower Ashton campus.

Return to Pero's Bridge and continue along Narrow Quay to Centre Promenade until you are opposite Bristol Hippodrome (on your left).

11. Bristol Hippodrome

In 1911 Oswald Stoll successfully applied for a licence to build a music hall and cinematography exhibition at 13 St Augustine's Parade and the theatre opened in the following year. For two weeks

in September 1929 it screened the film *This is Heaven*, which was so popular that it was decided that the Hippodrome should become a full-time cinema. Live theatre ended in 1932. However, after six years of film, the building was closed for renovation and alteration. After reopening, it focused almost exclusively on live performances.

Continue past the fountains and Neptune's statue. When you get to the pedestrian crossings, use the one in front of you to cross to the other side of the Promenade then turn right and cross Colston Avenue. Continue to the semi-pedestrianised Clare Street. Stop outside number 9, currently the Hatter House Café, on your left.

12. Clare Street Picture House

Numbers 9 to 11 Clare Street were once the site of the Clare Street Picture House, one of the cinemas that Cary Grant mentioned visiting as a child. In 1922 Friese-Greene's son Claude – who continued his father's work – demonstrated an early experimental stage of his colour process here to an audience that included the Lord and Lady Mayor. The 470-seat cinema had opened in July 1911. It proved too small to survive financially so its owners, the Provincial Cinematograph Theatre Ltd, built the Regent Cinema in Castle Street to replace it. The Clare Street Picture House closed in March 1927.

Continue along Clare Street. At the end of the pedestrianised section turn right into Marsh Street and continue to Baldwin Street. Here, turn left and stop at the large building whose upper stories are painted white (13-21 Baldwin Street).



Photo of Baldwin Street, c1894, looking towards Broad Quay in which the People's Palace can be seen on the right [Bristol Libraries LS 123].

13. The People's Palace/New Palace/Gaumont

The People's Palace, designed by James Hutton for the Livermore brothers, opened as a music hall in 1892. The Theatrograph system patented by R W Paul was used to show films here as part of a variety programme in October 1896. The People's Palace was converted to a cinema in 1912 and sold twice in the 1920s. In 1927 it was purchased by the Gaumont British Picture Corporation and was completely refurbished. Renamed the New Palace, the cinema could now seat 1,600 and had its own orchestra, and an organ that was equipped with the latest cinema sound effects. In 1952 it was renamed the Gaumont, and in the 1960s its auditorium was modernised. The cinema closed in 1980 and the building has since been repurposed as a nightclub and a bar. Permission to convert the building to student accommodation (the recently opened Market Quarter Studios) was granted in 2017, after ten years of it standing vacant. The façade of the building is Grade II-listed and has been retained.

Continue along Baldwin Street and turn left into St Stephen's Street. When you get to the junction with Clare Street, turn right and walk along Corn Street. When you reach the pedestrianised area continue straight on and past St Nicholas Markets. At the end of Corn Street, cross over Broad Street and continue straight along Wine Street until you reach the top of Union Street. Use the pedestrian crossing to cross Wine Street and enter Castle Park.

The Castle Park Cinemas

The next five cinemas were once located within this area, considered Bristol's main shopping centre before the Second World War. It suffered substantial bomb damage during the Bristol Blitz, and much of the site was eventually redeveloped to create Castle Park, which opened in 1978.



The Queen's Picture House, c1932, © Bristol Culture (Hartley Collection, Bristol Museum and Art Gallery 239393).

14. Dolphin Picture House

The Dolphin Picture House, situated on Dolphin Street, opened in 1910 and was nicknamed the Kosy Korner Kinema. Converted from two existing buildings and given a new frontage, the cinema seated 500 people. In 1922 a fire started in the rewind room and spread throughout the building. The cinema never reopened.

15. Queen's Picture House

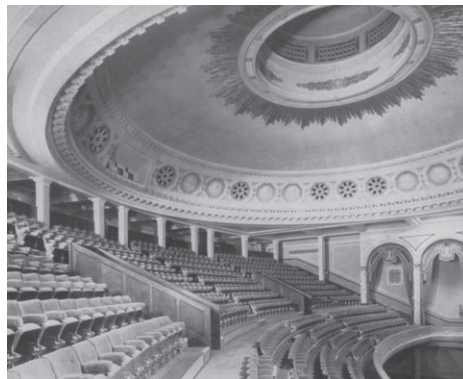
The Queen's Picture House was located at 17 Peter Street. It opened in 1910 and was Bristol's first purpose-built cinema. A 16ft by 12ft (approximately 4.8m by 3.6m) section of its roof could be opened for ventilation, to let fresh air in and smoke out. The cinema was one of the last to move over from silent films to talkies. It was demolished in 1933 and the News Theatre was built on the site in the same year.

16. The News Theatre

When the News Theatre was opened in 1933, the Lord Mayor of Bristol, F C Luke, was unable to perform the opening ceremony in person. Instead, his speech was filmed and shown on the screen. The cinema, which could seat 400, mostly showed news items. The building also housed a parcel depository, an information bureau and a children's nursery. The News Theatre was damaged in an air raid in November 1940 but reopened in late December. It closed permanently in 1956 and stood empty until it was demolished in 1959.



The bomb-damaged News Theatre, c1940 [Bristol Archives: 43784/192].



These photos of the interior of the Regent come from a booklet titled *Progress* promoting various construction projects across Bristol and Weston-super-Mare. The photos have been provided by Oli Tratt whose great-grandfather, Frank Wilkins, worked on the projects.

17. Regent Cinema

The Regent Cinema took two years to complete. It opened in 1928. At the time, it was considered one of the grandest Bristol cinemas. The main entrance opened into a hall that could accommodate 1,000 people, and the auditorium itself had 2,014 seats and standing room for a further 212. It was equipped with a Wurlitzer organ that would rise from beneath the stage, and had capacity for a 22-piece orchestra. The first film shown was *The Magic Flame* [1927], and the first talkie was *The Donovan Affair* [1929].

Like the News Theatre, the Regent was damaged in the air raid that took place on Sunday 24 November 1940, but it fared much worse than its neighbour. Its owners were keen to rebuild, but materials were difficult to obtain. The shell of the building remained until the end of the 1950s, when it was demolished as part of the Castle Street area redevelopment.

18. Castle Street Cinema

The Castle Street Cinema, also known as the Cinema Picture Hall, opened in 1911 at 65 Castle Street and could seat 550. It closed in 1926 when Woolworths extended their premises.

Leave Castle Park, crossing back over to Union Street. Walk down Union Street, stopping outside the Odeon Cinema near the bottom of the hill.

19. Odeon Cinema

The Odeon Cinema, built on the site of J S Fry and Sons' former head office, opened in 1938. It could seat 1,000 in the stalls and a further 900 in the balcony. Ellen Perry, who became a trainee at the Odeon in 1939, was Bristol's first female projectionist. The cinema only closed

for a few days during the Second World War, when a bomb hit the corner of Union Street, broke a culvert and flooded the basement with water from the river Frome.

In May 1946 32-year-old Odeon manager Robert Parrington Jackson was shot dead in his office as cinema-goers watched *The Light That Failed*. No one was ever arrested for the crime but in 1989 a man called Billy Fisher confessed to the murder on his deathbed. He told his son that he and Dukey Leonard had gone to the cinema to rob it but had panicked when Parrington Jackson returned to his office unexpectedly.

The Odeon was the first in Bristol to use Cinemascope, and speakers were later installed in the cinema to augment the sound. By 1974 it had been converted into a multi-screen cinema, and in 1983 it was completely gutted and rebuilt. It reopened in June 1985.

Walk a little further down Union Street and use the pedestrian crossing on your right to cross into the pedestrianised Broadmead shopping area. Walk straight on, stopping beside the Marks & Spencer store. This was once the site of the Tivoli.

20. The Tivoli

This was the first venue in Bristol to show projected moving pictures, screening a programme of shorts for a fortnight from 8 June 1896 presented by the showman and entrepreneur Augustus Rosenberg of Newcastle. For the first week of the run, the films were shown on their own; for the second they were incorporated into a variety show. The



The Tivoli Palace of Varieties, late 1890s [Bristol Archives: 35529/9].

theatre had been known by other names previously [the Alhambra in the 1870s and the New Star from 1889] but was the New Tivoli at the time of Rosenberg's appearance. It went through further name and management changes and in 1916 was the Broadmead Picture Palace, in a brief period as a full-time cinema, after which time it was primarily used as a venue for live theatre and entertainment. It closed in 1936 and was demolished in 1952. There's a detailed account of the 1896 Tivoli screening on our website: www.bristolideas.co.uk/read/when-cinema-came-to-bristol

Acknowledgements and Sources



This walking route was devised by **Amy O'Beirne**, Project Coordinator and Researcher, Bristol Ideas.

The Bristol Legible City map is used with the permission of Bristol Design, Bristol City Council.

These resources have been used as part of the background research for this and the following chapter:

Anderson, C, 1983. *A City and its Cinemas*. Bristol: Redcliffe Press.
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Our thanks to Peter Domankiewicz and Mark Fuller for additional information.

A more detailed version of the walk can be found on our website: www.bristolideas.co.uk/read/friese-greene-and-bristols-ghost-cinemas/

Bristol's Suburban Cinemas

In addition to the cinemas that once flourished in the city centre, many of Bristol's suburban communities used to have cinemas within walking distance of their homes. We feature a few of them here.

The Bedminster Hippodrome on East Street opened as a variety theatre in 1911 but was converted into a cinema in 1915, reopening on April 12 that year. It was renamed Stoll Picture Theatre in 1918. In 1941 it was badly damaged by enemy bombing and was never repaired. It was demolished in 1954.



Bedminster Hippodrome, c1911
[Bristol Archives: 43207/9/13/41].

Fishponds Picture House operated from 1911 to 1927. The building was taken over by the council and housed the local library until 2011.



Fishponds Picture House, c1924 [Bristol Libraries L79.89 2980].

The picture house at Staple Hill was built in 1912. Its distinctive dome was removed as part of the redevelopment of the building which saw it relaunched as the Regal in 1927. It closed in 1963 and the building was a bingo hall until 1992. It is currently home to the Sanctuary Church.



The Regal, 1927 [Bristol Archives: 43207/38/2/1/2].

The Globe Cinema, at the junction of Church Road and Jane Street in Redfield, opened in 1914. It was remodelled in the Art Deco style in the 1930s and was closed – and demolished – in 1973.



The Globe, c1940,
© Bristol Culture
[Hartley Collection,
Bristol Museum and Art
Gallery 276736].

Bristol North Baths on Gloucester Road were completed around the start of the First World War and the building was taken over as a training factory for war-time munition workers. The baths finally opened to the public in August 1922. During the winter months, in the days before the water could be heated, a temporary floor was installed over the pool and the space used for dances and the screening of films. The screenings proved so popular that the winter cinema continued until 1936.



Postcard of Gloucester Road, c1922 [Vaughan collection, Bristol Archives: 43207/9/19/25]. The baths are on the left.

The Carlton Kinema in Westbury-on-Trym opened in 1933. It closed in 1959. The building was demolished, replaced by the Carlton Court shopping precinct.



Postcard of Canford Lane, c1930s [Vaughan collection, Bristol Archives: 43207/9/33/38].

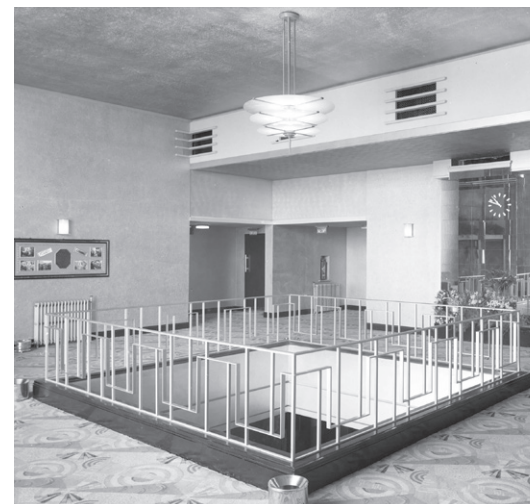
The Cabot was a cinema in Filton, at the corner of Gloucester Road North and Braemar Avenue, which opened in 1937. It closed in 1961 and the building was taken over by the Fine Fare supermarket. It has since been demolished.



Cabot, c1957 [Bristol Libraries L79.89 6337].



The Art Deco Orpheus in Henleaze operated from 1938 to 1971. These photos show the stylish interior shortly before the building was demolished to make way for a Waitrose supermarket. A local campaign helped to secure the addition of a mini three-screen cinema as part of the new building – Studios 5-7. It was renamed the New Orpheus when taken over by Picturedrome in 1995. It is now part of the Scott Cinemas chain.



© Bristol Culture [Hartley Collection, Bristol Museum and Art Gallery 263599 and 263603].

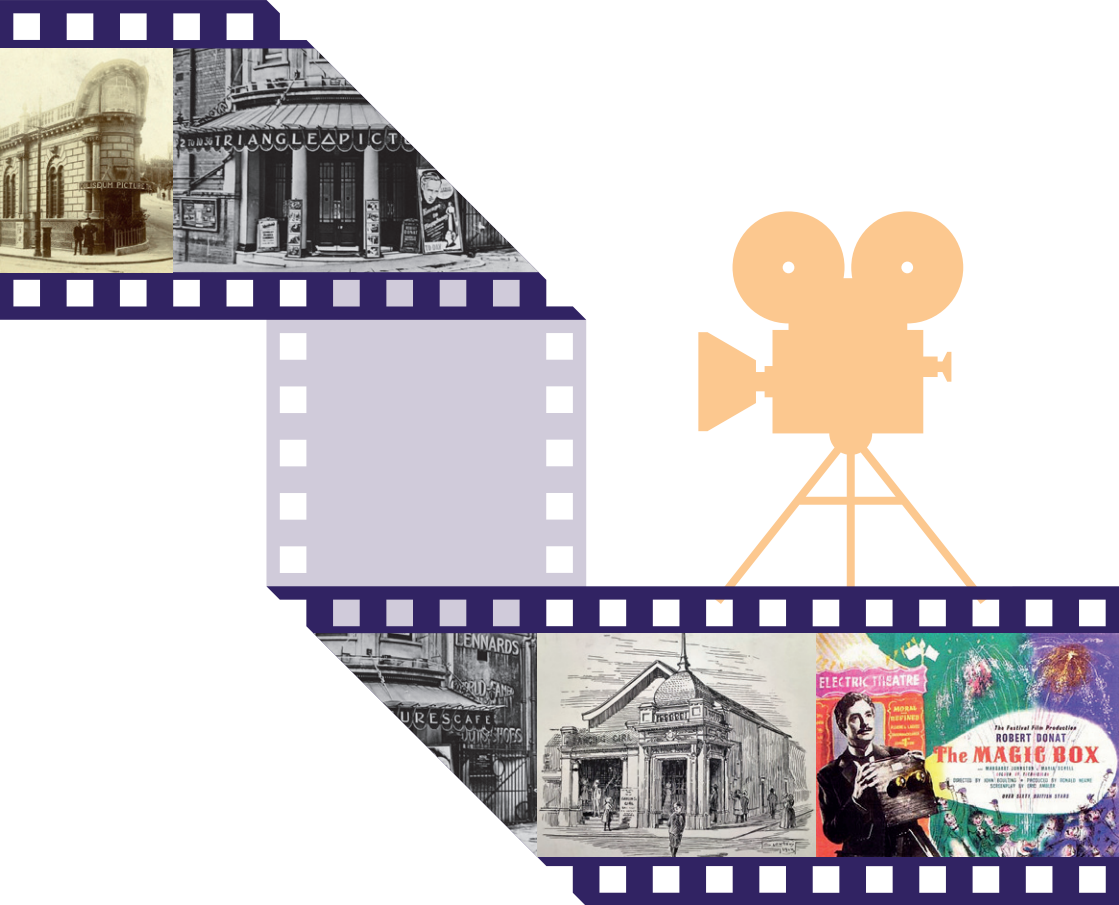
The first Friese-Greene memorial to be erected in Bristol was a plaque installed at the Orpheus in 1939. The inscription reads:

This tablet was placed here on June 21st 1939 by the proprietors of the Orpheus Cinema Bristol as a tribute to the genius of their fellow citizen William Friese-Greene the inventor of Kinematography and to mark the fiftieth anniversary of his patent granted by the British Patent Office June 21st 1889



Framed photograph of William Friese-Greene taken by T C Leaman, Bath, 1889 [Science Museum Group, object 1994-5014/1, Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 Licence].





Film2021 is a multi-partner collaborative programme that celebrates Bristol as a world-renowned centre for film-making – past, present and future – as well as exploring wider social, technological and creative issues relating to cinema. 2021 is the centenary of the death of Bristol-born film pioneer William Friese-Greene and the 125th anniversary of the first screening of motion pictures in the city. Aspects of the Film2021 programme are supported by funding from the British Film Institute. *Opening Up the Magic Box* is a specific heritage element within Film2021 that is supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund using money raised by National Lottery players.

This collection of specially-commissioned essays written by people from across the city and further afield reflecting on watching films includes the experiences of film-makers, former cinema usherettes, festival programmers, poets, novelists, performers and philosophers. It also contains a guided walk of cinema-related sites in the city centre.

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