



THE GOLDEN COMPASS

The battle behind
the 2007 movie

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How the LaserDisc
changed movies at home



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THE 100% INDEPENDENT, SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT UK FILM MAGAZINE

FILM STORIES



WELCOME BACK!

EXCLUSIVE: as cinemas reopen, Ben Wheatley takes us
into the world of his new horror, *In The Earth*

**WHEN MUSIC STARS
MAKE FILM SCORES**

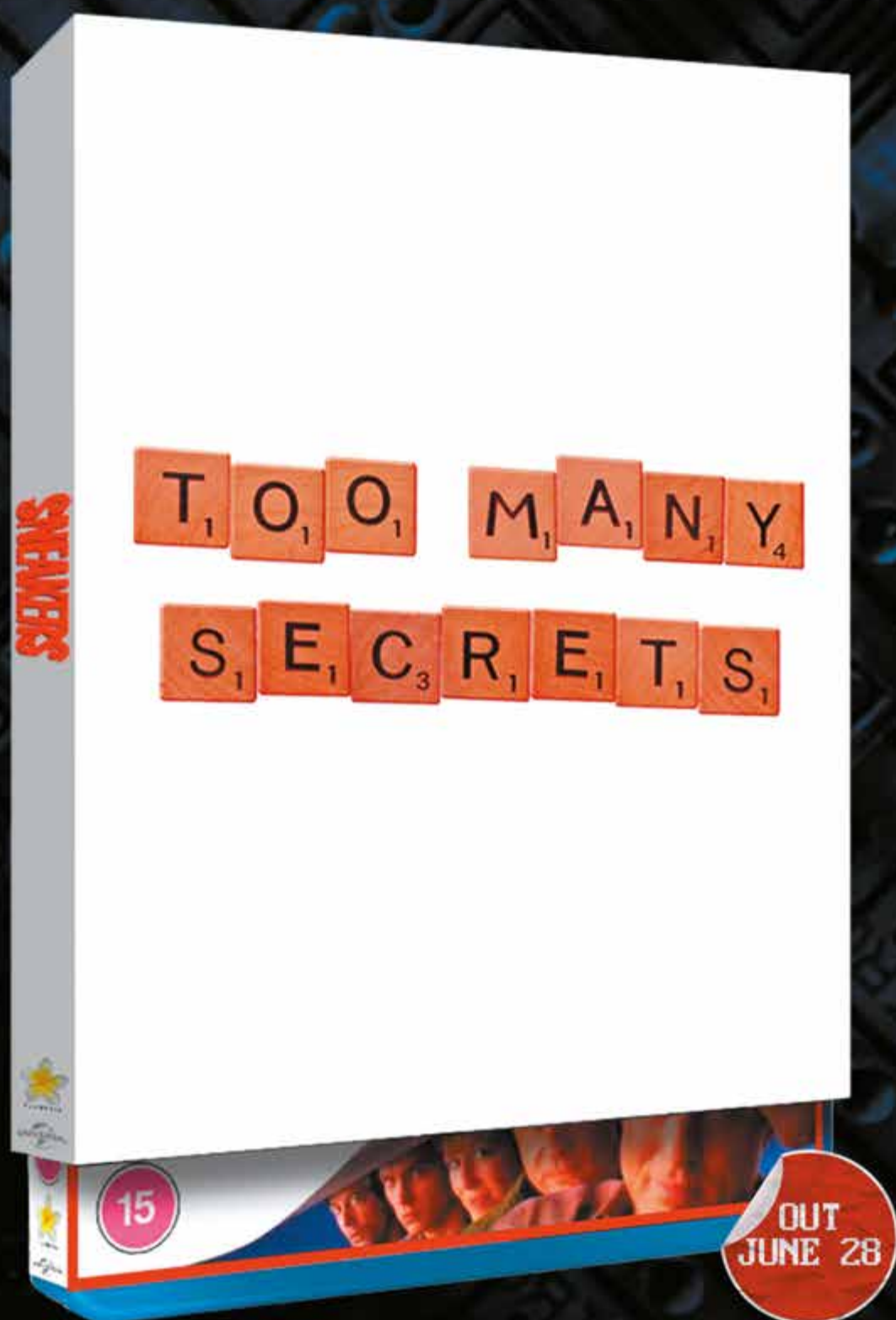
**DUNE, STAR WARS &
GETTING DUST RIGHT**

**MILITARY ADVISORS
& THE MOVIES...**

**...AND A LITTLE
BIT OF TIKTOK?!**



MISFIT LOSER AL RUBY



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A very warm welcome to Britain's slightly different film magazine...

FILM STORIES

We missed you!

Hello, and welcome to *Film Stories* magazine. This issue coincides with doors to indoor cinemas opening around the UK, and heck, does it feel like it's been a long wait this time. Hopefully, this issue finds you safe and very well.

Unlike the last time cinemas reopened after a lengthy closure, back in the summer of 2020 (and how long ago does that feel now?), distributors in the UK are being far less reticent about releasing their movies. Universal alone has more than 20 heading to British cinemas between now and Christmas, and over the coming issues we're going to be highlighting as many of the most interesting as we can find.

We've started this issue, as Ben Wheatley brings us his new horror, *In The Earth*. Just over a year ago, not a single word of the movie existed in any form, and in July it's going to be heading onto hundreds of cinema screens around the UK. Oh, and then he's off to make *The Meg 2*. He tells us about both this issue.

We've also got a host of *Film Stories*-related news to fill you in on, and you'll find that over on page 24. We're happy to say that we also have plenty of exciting things ahead, if all goes to plan.

The next issue will be with you towards the end of June, and we've got another terrific film to tell you all about in that one. Until then, I hope you enjoy this issue, and I hope you stay well.

Simon

Simon Brew
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How can I be next? Send us ideas to

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BACK TO EARTH

Ben Wheatley tells Simon Brew about his new horror film *In The Earth*, *The Meg 2*, and how he nearly made a *Tomb Raider* movie...

Had things gone, well, a bit more normally over the last 18 months, then this interview and the film we're talking about wouldn't exist. Just before the Covid pandemic hit and the UK went into its first lockdown early in 2020, filmmaker Ben Wheatley had been tying up his Netflix-backed adaptation of *Rebecca* and was in preparation for making a big-budget *Tomb Raider* sequel movie, with Alicia Vikander taking on the lead role.

"It was at an advanced stage," Wheatley confirms. "We were delivering *Rebecca* on the first day of prep on *Tomb Raider*. But then Covid happened, and everything was pushed for at least a year. And then it went into the haze."

For Ben Wheatley, he found himself in an unusual position. For the bulk of the last decade, he's jumped from film to film, interspersing his bigger productions – the likes of *High Rise* and *Rebecca* –

with quickly shot features such as *Happy New Year*, *Colin Burstead* and *A Field In England*. But, aside from finishing comic book *Kosmik Musik* (which he's been putting together with artist Joe Currie), he found himself staring at that rarest of things: free time. Which is where the story of *In The Earth* began to take shape.

"I suddenly had a lot of time open up in front of me, and I wanted to be productive," he says. "It's always a treat to have time to write... you end up chasing your tail quite a lot in the business of filmmaking. A lot of meetings and not a lot of empty space like that provided. So I kind of sat down and started writing."

One of the things he wrote just happened to be *In The Earth*. It's a horror-soaked story of a scientist and park scout, who head off into a forest. The world is looking for a cure to a virus, and they're deep into research. Things, without giving the game away, happen as they head into said forest. It turns into quite the adventure.



Breaking ground

With the script taking shape, Wheatley got talking to his producing partner and co-owner of their company, Rook Films, a man called Andy Starke. “We started bashing around ideas: after the lockdown had finished, is there a way of making the movie? That moment as people were allowed back to work, would there be a space where we could make something?”

Those were the questions. Yes was the answer to them.

A small cast of actors Wheatley had worked with before – Joel Fry, Ellora Torchia, Hayley Squires, Reece Shearsmith, Reece Shearsmith’s axe, Mark Monero

and John Hollingworth – was assembled. And in precious little time, a new film project had come together.

Wheatley’s keen to emphasise that although the film arose as a result of us all being locked down, the *modus operandi* was nothing new.

“We’re always thinking like [this],” he explains. “It wasn’t specifically to do with Covid, more that if there’s a big project that moves, and makes a gap, we’re like ‘let’s make something’.”

Rook Films has form here, with a tiny amount of capital to start developing a project.

“It always starts like that,” Wheatley says of his films. “It all

stems back to *Down Terrace*” – his first movie – “which was a film we made for £6000. I think we’ve always got around six grand in the bank, so we could always get out and make something. I think the thing of putting movies together is that if the train is leaving the station, then people want to get on board ... if you’re doing something, pushing it forward.”

In this case, American indie distributor Neon wanted in, and with its backing Rook Films’ bank balance was safe for whatever its next project proved to be.

“It’s how *A Field In England* got going,” Wheatley recalls, a movie

that Rook started up and then FilmFour wanted to get involved with. “I think that’s a better way than writing stuff then going around and trying to get stuff financed, because that just takes forever.”

Sunshine

Still, even with Neon’s money for this one, there were challenges ahead. The film shot over 15 days in the summer of 2020, just as the UK was coming out of its first national lockdown. Whilst huge productions could spend millions on the requisite new requirements for filming, what were the practicalities where a smaller independent film was concerned?

Well, it started with the pre-production. “There was no production office, so everything was done on Zoom,” Wheatley explains. Unusually, he was a fan of doing things this way around. “I think it worked really well; I like Zoom a lot. I like remote working: you end up pissing away a lot of time in an office, chatting and not getting anything done. Everything’s much more precise when you’re doing it remotely.”

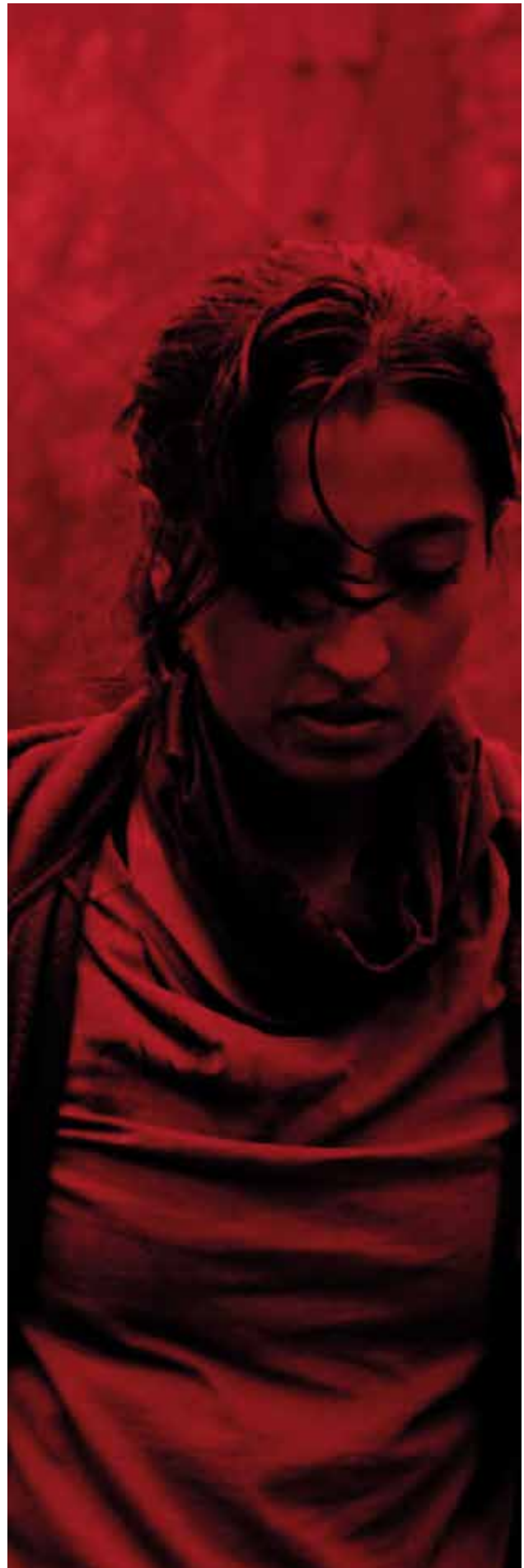
It certainly worked to the benefit of *In The Earth*, as did the fact that Wheatley has built up a trusted team who work on his movies. He also heavily storyboards his films (“why wouldn’t you do it? You get a chance to shoot the movie before you shoot the movie”). It wasn’t entirely business as close to usual, though.

“Some of it was different,” he explains. “There was a massive amount of thought about PPE and safety protocols. A lot of meetings about that.” On the upside, the film was shooting outdoors, which worked in its favour. Still, Wheatley went into the shoot wary of how much the new protocols around the production would slow filming down. Surprisingly though, they didn’t. It was possible to be safe, and keep pace.

“On the day, it was a fine,” he smiles. “I don’t think there would have been any difference in terms of how we made the film whether we’d made it in Covid or out of Covid.”

Furthermore, the cast and crew were keen to get moving as well.

“Everybody’d had the same experience of on the Wednesday having loads of work coming up, and on the Friday – because of the lockdown – all the work just melted away,” he explains. “There were some rumbles from the crew: because they hadn’t worked for a long time, they were worried they weren’t fit enough to do it. It’s physically demanding. But it’d all disappeared by the second day.”



Freak Shift

The Meg 2 might be the first blockbuster Ben Wheatley directs, but for a period in the 2010s he was all set to direct *Freak Shift*. This would have been a higher budget action thriller about the hunting down of monsters, which at one stage had Alicia Vikander and Armie Hammer attached to star. But the film's financing proved to be a struggle.

"I think I ducked a bullet on *Freak Shift*. I probably would have risen to the challenge, but I know so

much more now than I did then about how to make stuff. We came very close, just before *Colin Burstead* or *Free Fire*. There was a moment where we almost had it, but the budget had been reduced by another hundred grand and I was worried. Because the thing with that movie was that you'd shoot it, then you'd have to have a load of money left over to do the effects work. And I was worried I'd end up shooting it and having to compromise the effects."

It's a film that seems destined to remain unmade...

Action

In spite of the fact that he'd storyboarded it, he'd written the script and was going to edit the film himself, Wheatley has regularly said that he doesn't quite know what shape a film is going to take until it's done.

"I think the thing that's missing is the performance, and the emotional experience on the floor when you do it."

"You can predict that to a degree and you can hope for stuff that's going to happen, but you don't always know. So you might get, like, one performance, one bit of writing that works really well with an actor and another bit that doesn't. You figured the bit that was going to work would be the high point of the film, and the other part that you didn't think would be that much is actually really touching. Those are the curveballs that kind of throw you."

Still, this one wrapped up quickly. Thinking about it, there's something of Robert Duvall in *Apocalypse Now* in the way Wheatley talks about being on set and shooting a movie.

"I think I'm very lucky every time I get to make a movie, and I could never quite believe it," he admits.

"The pain of putting stuff together is so great and it's so

There were some rumbles from the crew: because they hadn't worked for a long time, they were worried they weren't fit enough



Calling The Doctor

Eyebrows were raised when it was announced that Ben Wheatley had signed up to direct a pair of episodes of *Doctor Who* in 2014, the first two adventures of Peter Capaldi's tenure in the TARDIS. As a long-time fan of the show, though, it was a job he pursued. I put to him that the usual story with shooting *Who* is that the money is okay, it's time that's lacking. He chuckles.

"The first day of shooting on it, we were shooting on this massive set they'd built of the Thames, where the Doctor regenerates. It was a huge set that we only got to shoot on for half a day, it was as big as the studio. Incredible. And on the last day of shooting, it was just Peter Capaldi standing on a green screen having to shout about 15 pages [of dialogue] out!"

The money, it turns out, had been a problem after all.

"One of the biggest bits of admiration for *Who* is how much they'd rinsed Cardiff!" he adds. "Every corner of Cardiff had been used: it'd doubled for New York, Victorian London, you'd go around every corner and there was a bit they'd filmed on! Not just them: *Torchwood* and everyone had been there!"

"I loved it," he admits when looking back on making the show. "And I loved working with Capaldi as well."

unlikely that anything will ever get made. I think when you do make it, you're really, really ecstatic about it.

"For me, it's like a kind of ultimate art form where you're right in the middle of a performance of actors and highly skilled technicians, and you're gently pushing them into a thing that you know you're going to turn into a piece of entertainment. That side of it is immensely gratifying. I'm always really excited when I'm on set."

Into post-production, and this is where Wheatley's background as an editor really helps. I ask him if his edits are as swift as his shoots, and he points me back towards his work in television. "If you look at television and you look at BBC comedy sitcom stuff, comedy drama, they're half an hour shot in five days. A 15-day shoot is fine. With drama and with comedy in the UK, you cut half an hour a week as an editor. You'll be cutting as they shoot. I've always maintained that that's perfectly doable, to cut a film in three weeks."

He did have a bit more time to edit *In The Earth*, given that he had a few months to get it ready prior to its debut at this year's Sundance Film Festival.

"I wasn't working on it full time, I was dipping in and out of it. *Free Fire* was cut in around three weeks, *High Rise* was cut in a year. It depends."

What hastened the process was that he was the sole editor.





“It’s like a kind of ultimate art form where you’re right in the middle of a performance of actors and highly skilled technicians, and you’re gently pushing them”

“Having come from an editing background, I can turn around a project faster and faster the fewer people I have to talk to,” he grins. “If I’m the editor, the director and the writer, that’s two other people I don’t have to talk to when I’m editing!”

On the road

Wheatley is a filmmaker with an eye firmly on his audience, and few contemporary directors have put in quite the miles around the UK with their films. Whilst he can’t do it this time, time after time he’s toured the country with his movies, and put on post-screening Q&As.

“It was just a treat, first off, to be able to do it as part of the marketing of a film,” he says of those events, which in turn brought him closer to the audiences for his films.

“Then it was suddenly a revelation: I get to go and see all these cinemas, and actually see what people think. I learned a lot from doing that,” he says of the times he spent watching his films around the UK with a genuine audience.

“I met a lot of the network of what makes up British film. Exhibitors, the people who organise the festivals, the hardcore festival goers. And I got a flavour of what different bits of the country were like above and beyond just visiting them.”

Furthermore, he was determined not to be London-centric, as most Q&A events in the UK tend to be.

“As we did more films, we got bolder. It was a point of pride to say ‘we’re going to go to Inverness’, to go to the top of Scotland and try to work our way down ... I think that was for *Free Fire* – we did Falmouth and Inverness!”.

Such a tour may not be possible for *In The Earth*, but conversely this quickly made, economic movie is getting the widest ever release for a Wheatley movie in UK cinemas to date. That's because Universal Pictures snapped up the British distribution rights, and is debuting it across hundreds of screens from 18th June. Surely this isn't what he'd have expected when he stepped onto location for the first day?

"I don't know what I expected," he admits. "I kind of figured it would be a cinema release in the States, that was all we were thinking about through our conversations with Neon."

He's very happy about the UK development, though. "I'm excited that's what Universal is doing. I'm really happy, and I get a tinge of excitement when I see the Universal logo on the trailer."

"It's into that world of why horror films are so great: on one side they can be low budget, but on the other on quite a wide release. It's always been there, but it's Blumhouse Productions that's pushed it. The audience is less interested in star names being in stuff, because it starts to show you the hierarchy of who will die! If you've got a big star, you know they're not going to get killed."

Swimming with sharks

He's now going from this film to his biggest production to date, the aforementioned blockbuster *The Meg 2*. "I'm really excited about it," he says. "I feel like it's the right time to be doing something like that. Because of Covid, I've ended up with about nine months of extra prep than I would have had. I've been spending a lot of time storyboarding and planning."

That starts shooting that in January of 2022, and it's going to dominate his next two years.

After that? He's written several other horror films during lockdown, and there's other stuff he's working on as well. But for now, he's looking forward to finally tackling blockbuster cinema.

"The only problem with making a film at low budget is if you've written a high-budget film. When you're making something massive, the scale of the production is bigger and the things you're doing are bigger, but at the end of it, when you've put it all together and have to show it to people, it's the same set of concerns. Whether it's someone on their own doing a monologue, or it's robots smashing the shit out of each other fighting on top of the moon, it's the same set of problems."

Whether those problems are sending Joel Fry and Hayley Squires into the woods, or setting a massive fish against The Statham, Ben Wheatley's up for the challenge... 



Foot-note

There's a particular moment involving, well, a foot in the movie *In The Earth*, which saw Wheatley working once again with prosthetics expert Dan Martin. Preparation and smart thinking in this department saved the shoot some time as well.

"If you were stupid, you would then go, oh, let's get [spoiler redacted] to get into makeup to have that foot put on, and it would take, you know, four hours to put that on and get it ready," Wheatley says, as we dance around what actually happens on screen.

"But in the conversations we had in pre-production, we said why don't we get some dude in as an extra, he can have the foot on, then there's no four hours for [redacted spoiler] to get ready."

When you see the film, let's just say you'll know which bit we're talking about...

"Gorgeous and tender" "Surpassingly lovely"

"Frankie has it all - beautiful scenery,
family drama and Isabelle Huppert"



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
COMPETITION
2019 OFFICIAL SELECTION



Isabelle Huppert

Frankie

Brendan Gleeson Marisa Tomei Jérémie Renier Pascal Greggory and Greg Kinnear

a film by Ira Sachs



SATU-BEN SAUD & MICHEL MALINT PRESENT "FRANKIE" ISABELLE HUPPERT "FRANKIE" BRENDAN GLEESON MARISA TOMEI JEREMIE RENIER VIVETTE ROBINSON PASCAL GREGGORY GREG KINNEAR
WRITTEN BY MAURICIO ZACHARIAS & IRA SACHS DIRECTED BY IRA SACHS
CASTING BY ANNE MARIE LEBLANC
COSTUME DESIGNER ANNE MARIE LEBLANC
PRODUCTION DESIGNER ANNE MARIE LEBLANC
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS ANNE MARIE LEBLANC & MICHEL MALINT
PRODUCED BY SATU-BEN SAUD & MICHEL MALINT
SCREENPLAY BY MAURICIO ZACHARIAS & IRA SACHS
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY JAMES L. NEWSON
EDITED BY ANNE MARIE LEBLANC
MUSIC BY JAMES NEWSON
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS ANNE MARIE LEBLANC & MICHEL MALINT
PRODUCED BY SATU-BEN SAUD & MICHEL MALINT
WRITTEN BY MAURICIO ZACHARIAS & IRA SACHS
DIRECTED BY IRA SACHS

written by Mauricio Zacharias & Ira Sachs directed by Ira Sachs

IN CINEMAS 28 MAY

FRANKIE.FILM

Your Letters

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Hello and a very warm welcome to *Film Stories'* monthly letters page. Here's your chance to ask us questions, to sound off, and to chat movies. We're happy to print longer letters to try to get some old-style conversations going, but we will if necessary edit letters for length.

If you want to be included, send your missives to letters@filmstories.co.uk.

Sharkbait

I enjoyed Romesh's piece on *The Meg* in your April issue, and it's funny to hear that Ben Wheatley is directing the sequel.

One thing that stood out to me was how good Jason Statham was in the water, he's more convincing than Aquaman. A bit of googling showed that he used to be a diver, and was in the Commonwealth Games!

The Meg is not a great film, but it's funny how a little real-life experience can go a long way.

Ben Oliver

Simon writes: A perfectly timed letter, given that this issue we've got Ben Wheatley and he, indeed, talks about *The Meg 2*! My dream Statham project remains *Spy 2*, though. What's yours?



Whereabouts

I enjoyed your April 2021 issue (issue 24), and have been waiting for issue 25 with some interest – but it's not appeared! I'm assuming if this makes it to you letters page (I won't be surprised if you don't print this) then the magazine is out. Can you please tell me what's gone on?

David Aitchinson

Simon writes: As you've correctly observed, this issue has run a little behind, and apologies for it. I do put an update on our website if that's the case, but also I appreciate it's not always possible to get the message out to everybody.

A collection of circumstances led to the delay. One or two unforeseen factors – away from work – affected the tiny team of us who put the magazine together, and also the planned front cover features we had fell apart very late in the day. I could come up with some glossy way of telling you that, but I'd rather tell the truth. In the end, it made sense to hold a few weeks for when cinemas had reopened their doors, and press ahead with our planned piece on *In The Earth*, which would have been in issue 26 but is now in this one.

Hopefully, it's been worth the wait. We're back on track now, and as always hugely appreciative of your support.



Closed Window

I've just watched the new Amy Adams-headlined thriller *The Woman In The Window*, a film that's been delayed for lord knows how long. I really enjoyed the book, and was disappointed when Disney seemed to bury the film after it acquired it from Fox. Then I've been waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting and... then Disney sold it to Netflix.

Finally, this weekend, I've got to see. Was it worth it? Absolutely not. As much as I love Amy Adams, they managed to turn a really gripping book into a film that looks like they barely read it. Why does Hollywood do this?

Just goes to show: every now and then, a film is dumped straight to streaming for a good reason.

Yours disappointedly,

K L Evans

Simon writes: I'll give *The Woman In The Window* this – it felt like a compilation album of different Hitchcock films, and made me want to go and watch them again. I'm reminded of the oft-quoted mantra, nobody sets out to make a bad film. I certainly wouldn't call this a particularly successful one, but more leading roles for Amy Adams I'd have to say is a good thing. Plus, you've still got the book...!



Challenge Matt

In this column, you tell Matt Edwards what to watch. He goes and watches it. Send your suggestions to: letters@filmstories.co.uk

This month: *Assassin 33 A.D.*

Suggested by Mark Harrison (@MHarrison90)

SPOILER WARNING!

In *Assassin 33 A.D.* a scientist kneels before Jesus, who is nailed to a cross, and screams to him, begging him to revive his time travelling colleague who has been gunned down. It is perhaps the only moment of *Assassin 33 A.D.* that I felt really spoke to me, because with an hour and 15 minutes behind me and a sizeable chunk of film left to go, I was on the brink of an emotional outburst too.

The tale is one of a small team of brilliant scientists who unwittingly build a time machine for a wealthy terrorist, who sends a team of assassins back in time to hunt down and kill Jesus, which will stop Christianity from ever existing. This is perhaps the most hysterical rendering of tedium filmed. With a punishingly slow pace and near two-hour runtime, you really need all of the manic and dreadful ideas to result in something that is in any way enjoyable to watch. This is played with all of the earnestness, subtlety and confused decision making of a Facebook *Minions* meme, resulting in a film that's less so-bad-it's-good than so-bad-it's-awful.

I'd describe it as a 'Godsploitation' movie; the plot plays on runaway paranoia (terrorists using science to destroy all of Christianity in what one character calls 'the ultimate Jihad') while the film seeks to spread a message of forgiveness, while slyly aiming to entertain you with lots of violence.

In one scene, a time travelling assassin fells Jesus with a gunshot before executing him with two more shots to the head. In a later scene, a weeping scientist forgives him. Elsewhere, Jesus quotes *The Terminator*. Yet, somehow, it's boring.

It's badly acted, the dialogue would suggest an unfamiliarity with how or why human beings communicate, and there's so much air in the film I suspect it may float off the streaming service before this column sees print. I think the idea is to bring science and Christianity together, although it's more likely to unite people in bored indifference. This is one oddity that's less religious action sci-fi than regrettable action, sigh, why?

***Assassin 33 A.D.* is available on Amazon Prime.**

A Game of Two Halves

Producer Andrew Macdonald tells Simon Brew about the new feature documentary, *Alex Ferguson: Never Give In...*

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“They’ve been hassling me about this for years”. The words of Sir Alex Ferguson, the most successful football manager in British sporting history, and a man who nearly lost his life in 2018 when he suffered a brain haemorrhage. He was talking at the time to producer Andrew Macdonald – *Trainspotting*, *Annihilation*, *28 Days Later*, lots of other things – over a lunch. The purpose? To explore a film where Ferguson could put some of his memories on camera.

The difference between this and previous attempts to mount such a project was that Ferguson and his family were driving the idea. That his son, Jason, and his lawyer were exploring meeting people to help put the project together. It was the lawyer who mentioned Macdonald as a possible candidate. “I just chatted to them about how they could do it,” he tells me, “and what I thought were the most important things. We got on, and then I met Sir Alex.” Ferguson told Macdonald ‘they tell me you’re the one to do it with’.

Macdonald had never done a documentary before, and thus recruited a man who had to help him. John Battsek (*Searching For Sugar Man*, *Listen To Me Marlon*) thus became a producer on what became *Alex Ferguson: Never Give In*. He was adamant that Ferguson had to be happy with the direction of

seemed to me to make it personal and make it about family and connect it to something real.”

There are some stark moments in the film too. Cathy Ferguson, married to Sir Alex for decades, is on camera along with some of his sons, and they talk about the fact he simply was barely at home. Sir Alex too is open

It’s very much about Glasgow, and Glasgow was very much the football city, especially in the 50s and 60s

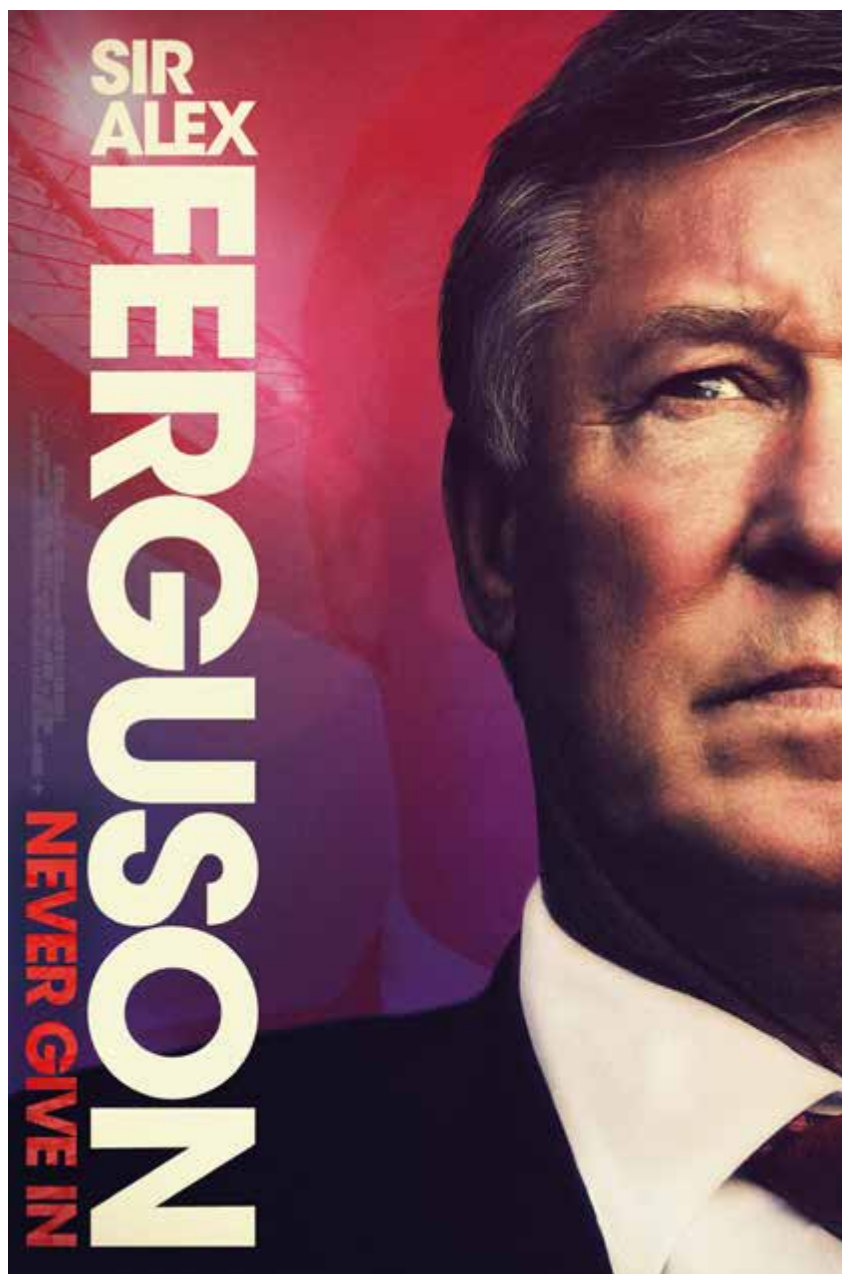
the film, but also that he was open and honest.

“It was always going to be a bit about football and winning cups and stuff. But I thought I had to understand a little more about the family, where they came from. It was a story of a man who came from a very poor background and ended up, you know, running the country,” Macdonald smiles.

The film thus spends a lot of time in Glasgow covering Ferguson’s early years. “It’s very much about Glasgow, and Glasgow was very much the football city, especially in the 50s and 60s. It just

to talking about clearly a sore emotional point. Then there was the backlash Cathy and Sir Alex faced when their religions didn’t align in the eyes of some.

“You wanted to remind people he’d had three terrible years at Manchester United,” Macdonald says, confirming the plan was always to explore the edges a little. “He’d had a terrible time marrying a Catholic woman in this sectarian city. It wasn’t all easy. Most young people for instance, if they remember him at all, it’s remembering him winning, winning, winning,



winning. And I think that we all know in life that we need both sides. I think with any successful person the truth is they have to give something up.”

Macdonald found himself working with a first-time director on the project too – and it was far from a done deal that Jason Ferguson would be helming the film. “We made a big decision,” Macdonald explains. “We met a lot of directors, we were ready to hire one, and every time you ask these people a question, Jason knew the answer. He’d done 50 hours of recording. Some of that

is even more revealing because it was just the two of them in a room. I think you get in some of those discussions that this could only happen between a father and son really. The complete trust.”

It’s not just the audio recording either. The depth of the archive footage is really quite something. “We have an archive producer,” Macdonald grins.

“Even now, I was watching a Billy Connolly documentary the other day, and in that they’ve got some footage of a Rangers-Celtic game that we’ve got, and I went ‘I only want to see it in our film!’”

Macdonald tells me as our time wraps up that the project has “taken over three years to do”. I ask him if there was ever a thought this may be a multi-episode television series rather than a film, but he’s adamant this was always a feature documentary.

“We wanted to make something that was good enough to be in a cinema. And now, because of lockdown and whatever, we’re only getting two days in the cinema now due of timing, but we’ve got Amazon [too].” It’s been finished for a while, and now it can be put into the world, following its successful premiere at the Glasgow Film Festival earlier this year.

“He’s got such a phenomenal memory,” Macdonald tells of Ferguson when I ask if there might be more similar projects ahead. “I think you could do a British social history, because from the 50s and 60s he knows everything about football!”

The more pressing work for Macdonald is his new project with writer/director Alex Garland, a feature by the name of *Men* that’s currently filming. “We’re making it with A24, who distributed *Ex Machina*,” he tells me.

“This is really British. It’s in the world of *The Wicker Man* and *Don’t Look Now*, and it’s based on some ideas and stuff that [Garland] has been working on for a long time.”

“It’s really exciting for me, because it feels like it’s connected to the land of Britain. And I think it sounds like it might be right up your street,” he smiles.

He’s right. Jesse Buckley stars, and it’s out in 2022. *Sir Alex Ferguson: Never Give In* arrives in cinemas first though, on 27th May 2021 (before heading to Amazon Prime Video on the 29th). [f8](#)

How to Launch a Streaming Service

Simon Brew finds out how Arrow launched its own dedicated service, in seemingly double quick time...

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Daniel Perry is very pleased with what he's wearing. It's a *Maniac Cop* T-shirt, but a very rare one: a one-off, in fact. "When I first started at Arrow, we went to the storeroom in the office. It was filled with amazing T-shirts, and my boss at the time said if you want any, help yourself. I took a load with me, and it wasn't until a few months later that I realised I've taken these versions of T-shirts that had never been made. They were one-offs, just made as tests." They now live in his wardrobe, and he's not giving them back.

Perry is the head of digital at Arrow, which until the start of 2020 tended to cover films going to video on demand, and managing services through third parties. This year, though, he's overseen the UK launch of Arrow Player, it's very own streaming service. And it's been quite a story.

Primed

Arrow already had an existing Prime Video channel setup with the Amazon network, which had been running for four years. "It got us a foot in the door to understand how a subscription video on

demand service might work," Perry explains. In all that time, there'd been thinking that a dedicated Arrow streaming service was an option, but somewhat inevitably it was the worldwide pandemic that fast-tracked the project.

"When everything started and went insane [in 2020], it just sped things up and we were, let's just do this." Alex, the-then head of Arrow, went to Perry and said you've been bugging me about this for years, it's time to go do it.

That greenlight came in "May, June last year, and we launched in the US and Canada in October." It helped of course that when Arrow negotiates rights for titles, it picks up the rights to allow it to stream the features it releases, so there was already a big catalogue in place to draw from.

"We've always had those rights for a lot of the titles," Perry explains, "and it gave us a good, solid base."

Still, when someone says 'go and build a streaming service', and six months later it's live, how does the tech side of it work? "The technological part of this is a partnership we've done with [online video service] Vimeo. Vimeo takes care of a certain amount of the build, and there

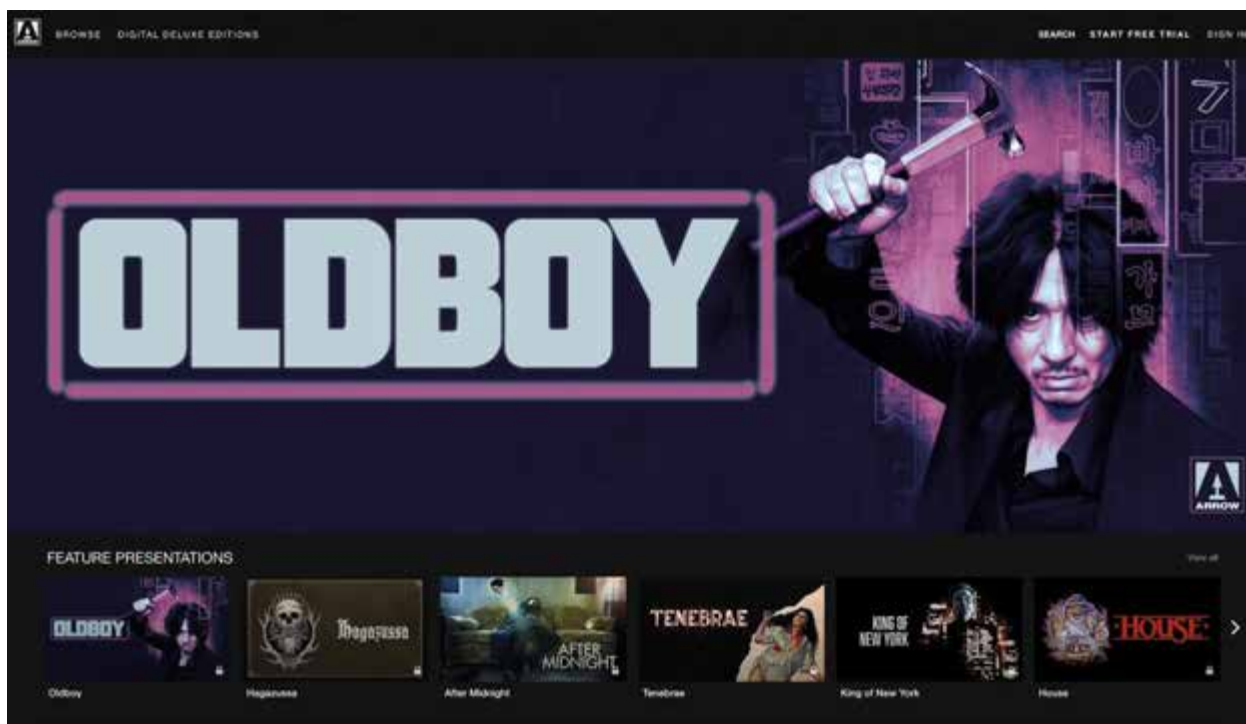
are avenues into the app stores. But everything is managed through us. In a sense, they're like our development team, that's probably the best way of looking at it."

The conversations with Vimeo had already been taking place for the best part of a year, but also Arrow had grown to the point where it could launch such a service with the team and expertise it had built up in-house.

It could also use the filmmakers it had relationships with to come up with all sorts of material for Arrow Player. Acclaimed independent filmmaker Jim Cummings, for instance, got in touch with Arrow when he saw the service.

"He's like a friend to us now," Perry says. "He stands for independent filmmaking and helping develop new talent. You'll see this more as the year goes on, but what we're going to be doing in terms of highlighting independent filmmakers is incredible."

"We're having conversations that stretch out much further than simply a short film, or a feature. We're trying to dedicate each month to a big new release coming in... so this month it's *Clapboard*



“You’re going to get a wide selection of films from a bunch of people who don’t take themselves too seriously”

Jungle. It’s from director Justin McConnell, and Arrow on top of the main release is “bringing in his short films, bringing in his other features, bringing in interviews with him.”

Collaborators are encouraged to use the service as a sandbox, with Arrow investing in material itself where appropriate, and building a different collection for its service.

For the company is investing in short films, and it has its eye on long-term relationships. The idea of investing in filmmakers when they’re making shorts, then potentially backing their first feature. These are some of the goals, and it’s always looking for fresh filmmakers to work with: scouring festivals, watching shorts, paying attention.

“For me, it’s always been about creating something a little bit different,” Perry says.

“What’s a better viewing experience? What do we feel people are after? And it’s thinking around what could we do as a company. We’re known for cult films, for creating a high-quality, premium product. But also, it’s a bunch of people who like these films at different levels.”

Ahead

With the service up and running and exceeding projections, what now? What material lies ahead?

“Without revealing too much, there are two really exciting times [coming up],” Perry smiles when I asked what lies ahead. “One will be July, and one will be October for Halloween. We’ve got an idea right now that, if it happens, will be incredible. It’ll be like nothing else out there. But also, over the next six months or so, you’ll continue to see what you already

know as Arrow Films, but you’ll also start to see more and more each month a far greater growth of other people’s titles coming into the service.”

Artificial Eye titles, for instance, are already to be found on the player, and other companies are set to sign up too. All curated by the team at Arrow. The firm is producing its own series too, is bringing more TV seasons, and a lot more short films are incoming. TV series will also feature the kind of behind-the-scenes material that Arrow has been producing for its films.

“There’s a lot,” Perry grins. “You’re going to get a wide selection of films from a bunch of people who don’t take themselves too seriously. It’s a lot of fun, and very different from any other service out there.”

Arrow Player is live now at www.arrow-player.com, with a free trial available, and the team is hard at work bringing more material to it. There’s much to look forward to. But, if you’re after that *Maniac Cop* T-shirt you’re out of luck... 

Scenes From A Marriage

Director Jennifer Sheridan talks to Maria Latilla about her debut feature *Rose*, women in horror and directing intimacy

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Jennifer Sheridan says she's "trying to put a positive spin on it", but has felt the effect the national lockdowns have had on her and the film industry in general.

"It's been heart-breaking, losing jobs and things. But in other ways, I felt like it came at a really good time for me because I was slightly burning out."

Sheridan's debut feature *Rose* received its world premiere at the 2020 BFI London Film Festival to much acclaim. Starring Matt Stokoe – who also penned the script – as Sam, and Sophie Rundle as the titular Rose, the film is equal parts love story and a chilling horror film about vampirism. Sheridan describes her love for horror starting in college when her teacher loaned her a DVD of the Hong Kong-Singaporean film *The Eye*. "I was blown away by it, the visual aspects of it. It scared me so much, but it intrigued me more than anything," Sheridan tells me over Zoom. Her teacher then plunged Sheridan right into the deep end by giving her copies of *Battle Royale* and *The Ring*, igniting her passion for scary stories.

I think every intimate scene that you do as a director, you're like, 'I hope this is okay and it's not awkward'

Sheridan says her interests lie in the human element of horror. After struggling to find her identity as a filmmaker and working as an editor in comedy, Sheridan started looking at her body of work and found the common factor in her films. "They had quite human heartbeats at their centre. They had quite a high concept idea attached, so whether that was in the world of sci-fi or horror, it was that high concept idea that would hook me in, and then I'd be looking for the human aspect to give it some sort of beating heart."

Taking a toll

Stokoe and Rundle are a real-life couple, which according to Sheridan helped when it came to creating the central relationship. "There's a kind of hidden, unspoken, physical language that they share already. It's easier because you don't have

to fake any of it, it's all there to be drawn on from the real world. The flip side of that is when you're trying to shoot a scene where something horrible is happening to one of them. Them as actors are acting, but them as human beings [are] also having to witness something horrible happening to someone they love in real life. It was clear that had a toll emotionally on Matt and Sophie."

The film also features a resonant scene in which the couple are having sex and Rose is keen to turn the lights off while Sam wants to see his wife.

"As a director, I was slightly nervous about it. I think every intimate scene that you do as a director, you're like, I hope this is okay and it's not awkward. We tried to be as respectful as we possibly could, create a safe space for Matt and Sophie, where they



felt like they could just be themselves and not be self-conscious.”

Rose, inspired by Trey Edward Shults’ *It Comes At Night* and Corin Hardy’s Irish horror *The Hallow*, is a visually stunning affair despite the film’s small budget. “I can’t claim too much credit for that, because that is my incredible cinematographer Martyna Knitter. And as soon as I met her, I thought she’s going to do a really good job of this. You meet a lot of directors of photography and they say, this is good but I’m worried about the fact that we don’t have much money for lights, and we need to light the forest at night, whereas Martyna embraces the restrictions.”

Beneath the surface

Horror fans have been treated recently, as *Relic*, *Saint Maud* and now *Rose* have all been released in the last year; all are feature debuts by female filmmakers, as well as being extraordinary films. Women directors are still an anomaly in genre filmmaking, but Sheridan believes it’s getting better.

“You can’t sort of ignore it because it is like you say, still a bit of a movement thing. It doesn’t feel like it’s been normalised yet, but it’s definitely getting there, and the more *Saint Mauds* and *Relics* and *Roses* there are, the more it does become not so much of an anomaly, hopefully.”

Horror as a genre has always been inherently female, and Sheridan agrees. “It feels like as a genre, in some ways it’s quite behind, but in other ways it’s quite forward thinking when it comes to women protagonists and female stories,” she adds.

Rose may be a horror film, but it’s also an examination of a marriage.

“The genre of horror is such an incredible platform to explore really human, quite deep emotional things like trauma, death, love. Also, in this instance, having to care for someone with an illness or a disease, which is something that people have to face in their real life.

And in real life, it can be horrible, it can be incredibly hard,” Sheridan says.

“You’re not just having to think about yourself, you’re having to think about two people at all times and anticipate the needs of someone. And it’s really hard to maintain a romantic relationship in those scenarios. Once you slip into that caretaker role, trying to claw back to romance, sex, it’s not easy. That’s what we were exploring in this film, but the horror genre allowed us to do it in a way that was much more heightened, and not as heavy as reality.” 

Natural Born Film star

Diana Dors encapsulated a uniquely British glamour. In her new biography, Anna Cale looks at the star's career and lasting cultural influence

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When Diana Dors walked out into the adoring crowds at the Cannes Film Festival in 1956, it was perhaps one of the greatest moments in her life. Finally, she felt like a true film star. Lauded for her leading performance in J Lee Thompson's *Yield To The Night*, itself nominated for the Palme d'Or, it should have been the beginning of a glittering international career for Dors. Yet, by the end of the decade, she had fallen out of favour with critics, and the success she craved, particularly in Hollywood, had not come her way.

Diana Dors was a uniquely British film star. Few performers have captured the hearts and imaginations of the public in the way she did. More than 35 years after her premature death in 1984 aged just 52, she remains a familiar face, symbolising to many fans a bygone age of glamour. She was an ordinary girl from Swindon who became seen as Britain's answer to Marilyn Monroe.

Dors navigated her rollercoaster career through

some of the most fascinating periods in British cinema and of social change. She was an outspoken and sometimes controversial figure, grabbing headlines for her personal life as often as her film roles. Her 'no holds barred' approach to life was fascinating for audiences, and a gift for newspaper editors.

But there was more to Dors than the 'blonde bombshell' reputation suggested. A talented performer, she worked on numerous film and television projects, building a fascinating acting career which spanned decades.

Origins

Born in Swindon in 1931, her acting career began in the shadow of the Second World War, entering the film world as a young teenager and negotiating the difficult British studio system of the 40s and 50s, where careers for young stars were often brief.

She made her screen debut in *The Shop At Sly Corner* (1946) and won a small role in David Lean's *Oliver Twist*, released in 1948, before landing her first film studio contract with the J Arthur Rank 'Charm School' for young

stars aged just 16. Alongside a pool of talented young hopefuls all dreaming of stardom, Dors was groomed for success.

Often, her film roles exploited her looks more than they did her acting talent, and she found herself typecast as the bad girl or the femme fatale. Although she was popular with the public, her screen career was often patchy and unpredictable. She experienced critical success for her performance in *Yield To The Night* in 1956, but also faced disappointment when the phone stopped ringing and her private life gained more attention than her acting in the 60s and 70s. Her ambitions for international fame were dented by bad luck and poor decisions.

Scribbling

Writing a biography of Dors was a challenging but fascinating task. Much has been written about her over the years, but the focus has often been on the salacious aspects of her personal life, or on her dramatic fall from grace.

When setting out to write the book, it was important to identify the reasons why her story should be told again. There

was an opportunity to show all aspects of her journey and engage with readers who know her perhaps by reputation and might not be as familiar with her long and varied screen career.

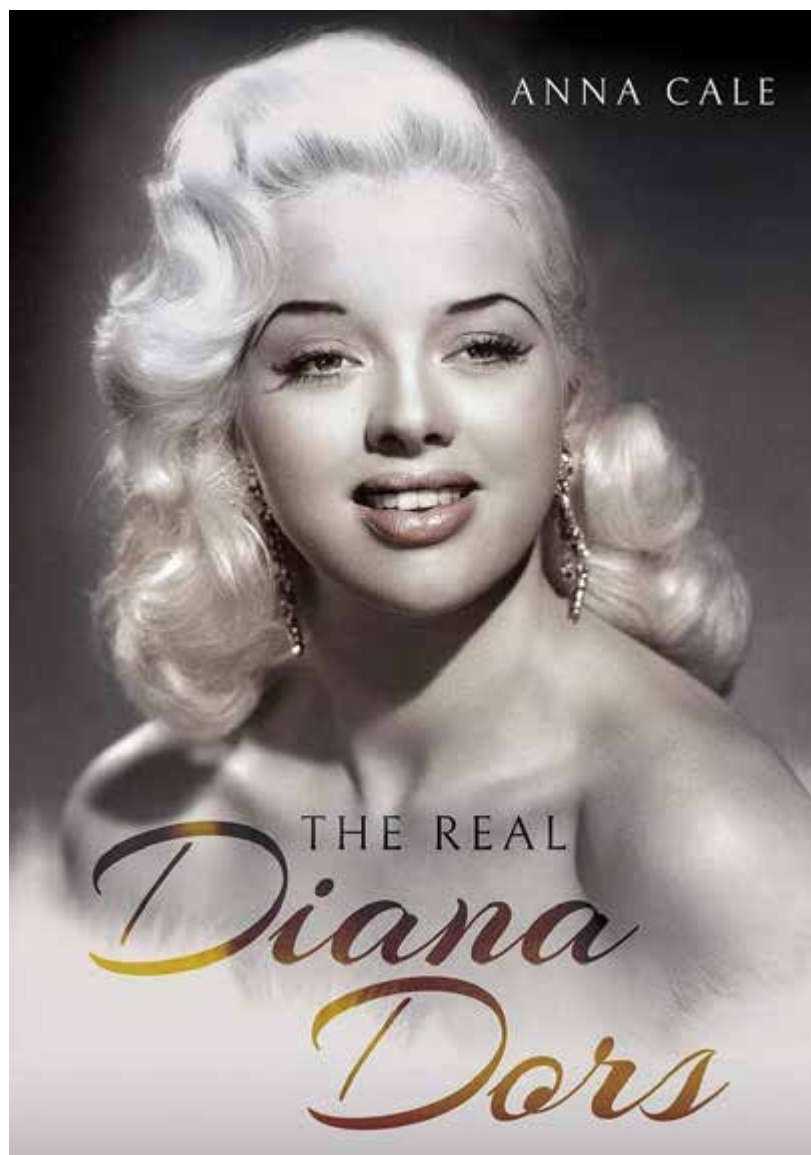
A re-evaluation of her as an actor and her role in defining stardom was needed. It was also important to place her work and private life in the context of the times. To achieve that, the research needed to unravel the intricate web of rumour and opinion surrounding her, take things right back to the source material and set about putting the pieces of the puzzle back together again.

Assessing what source material was accessible was crucial too. The research stages were intense but vital to creating a fair assessment of the subject, within the context of the times. Luckily, plenty was written about Dors during her career in newspapers and magazines. It was also possible to capture her own words, as she wrote a number of books and articles herself.

The unforeseen effects of the COVID-19 pandemic curtailed much of the planned research and required considerable improvisation in order to locate primary sources. But support and engagement with the project on social media enabled access to new information and anecdotes, and even to finding original source materials hidden in people's lofts.

Life

Dors experienced many ups and downs, and her life was full of contrasts. Speaking to people who knew her and discovering that the book's narrative seemed to ring true showed it was on the right track. Giving an account of someone's life, particularly someone as complex as Diana Dors, is a balancing act. The intention was to give as open and considerate an account of her as possible, but without skirting over some of the more challenging events.



A re-evaluation of her as an actor and her role in defining stardom was needed

The story of Diana Dors is a fascinating one. In recent years, there has been interest in her legacy as a performer, a renewed focus on her as a woman who achieved success in her own right and challenged expectations. She was a chameleon who went from being 'Britain's number one bad girl' in the 50s, to a familiar staple of British prime time television by the 80s, adding a touch of glamour wherever she went. Whatever the role, she would give a performance that lit up the screen. She was a truly unique star. [**£**](#) **The Real Diana Dors by Anna Cale is published by White Owl on 30 July 2021.**

What's Going On?

As it heads towards its third birthday, Simon Brew has an update on the *Film Stories* project — and what's around the corner...

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It was back in June of 2018 that *Film Stories* first burst into life, back then as a half-hour podcast with a very nervous person (that'd be me) warbling into a microphone. As this issue makes its way to print, 180 episodes of said podcast are now complete, with plenty more on the way.

What's more, in the three years since that first episode launched, a lot has happened. This magazine for a start, as well as its sister publication, *Film Stories Junior*. There's also been a series of live shows, the launch and growth of the website, and the loss of an awful lot of hair.

Now, we're taking a few more baby steps forward, and selfishly have commandeered a couple of pages of our own magazine to tell you about them.

Sneaky

On 28th June this year, we're putting our money where our mouth is when it comes to physical media. We've long banged the drum for physical discs of movies, and we're launching our very first physical media release. We're keen to use our platform to bring to market

films that may have fallen out of print, and we were staggered to discover that the Blu-ray of wonderful 90s heist caper *Sneakers* had been discontinued.

Partnering with new disc label Plumeria Pictures, we've spent the last few months chasing down the rights to the film and, as you can probably guess by the fact this article is being written, have secured them. As such, we're launching the first ever *Film Stories Presents* Blu-ray, hopefully the first of many. And *Sneakers* is our choice to give this a try.

At some point, we may go into the ins and outs of how we've managed to do this, and explore just how a Blu-ray is put together. At the moment, we're in the midst of compiling some new extra features for the disc, including a fresh commentary track from *Sneakers* superfan James Moran and myself, as well as one or two other things I'd best not say in case they don't happen.

We're selling the film direct in the first instance, and it's over at our online shop now. You can find it at store.filmstories.co.uk. If all goes to plan, more releases are planned a little further down the line.

Live & Kicking

Secondly, we're restarting our live shows. Before the world locked down for the first time, a monthly *Film Stories* show was running at the Midlands Arts Centre in Birmingham. That's returning on 23rd June in whatever the new normal seems to be, and tickets for that are on sale now. Furthermore, we're in talks with venues around the country about bringing a *Film Stories/Movie Geek Live* show elsewhere as well. Again, it's small steps at the moment: as we go to press, nobody knows whether the reopening of cinemas will be greeted with a stampede or a trickle. The same is true of live events.

If there's a UK venue that you'd like the show to come to, drop us a line at letters@filmstories.co.uk. And if you're a UK venue looking for someone to come and talk movies for 90 minutes, the same email address works.

If all goes to plan, the next stage of the live events will be a couple of live director Q&A sessions. We've got a 'yes' provisionally from two filmmakers for this, one of which will be to celebrate the 200th episode of the *Film Stories* podcast. That's pencilled in for the autumn, the second event for

NEWS ROUND-UP

Universal has pulled a surprise, not in announcing the expected *Downton Abbey 2*, but in revealing it's going to be with us this year. Look for it in cinemas in December.

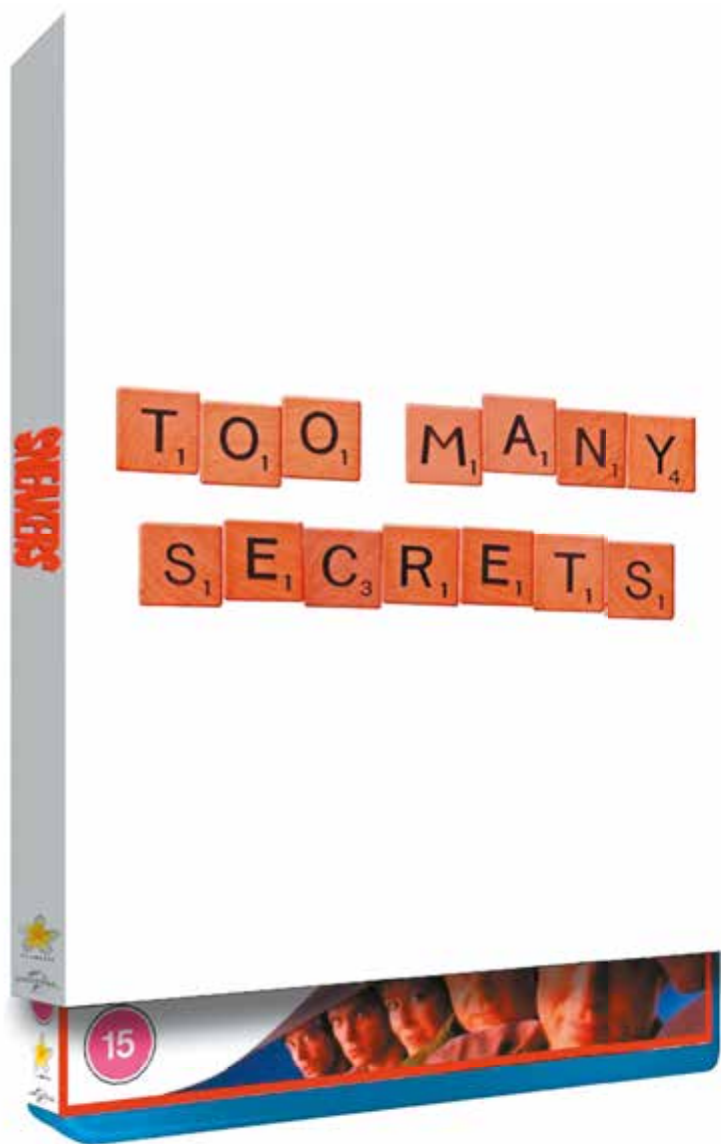
British independent director Simon Cox (*Invasion Planet Earth*) is plotting his next ambitious sci-fi film, *Of Infinite Worlds*, which he's now in the midst of making. He's part-funding this by selling mugs too. Fancy something to drink out of, and helping a film come to life at the same time? Head to www.ofinfineteworlds.com

A few issues back, we put the animated film *Dogtanian & The Three Muskehounds* on our front cover. The movie – a big screen updating of the much-loved 80s children's television animated serial – didn't have a UK distributor back then. But now it has! Altitude has picked up the UK rights, and will be releasing the film on 25th June. We, as you might expect, can't wait...

Studiocanal has put into production a sequel to the 70s family favourite *The Railway Children*. Jenny Agutter returns, joined by Sheridan Smith. Morgan Matthews directs, and the film is due in April 2022.

Just as we went to press, we got word that Jack Thorne is to pen a sequel to the hit Netflix film, *Enola Holmes*. The follow-up will re-unite the cast and production team of the original.

Finally, in the last month, the 2021 Golden Raspberry Awards were given out, but that's already more ink than they deserve...



We're launching the first ever *Film Stories Presents* Blu-ray, hopefully the first of many. And *Sneakers* is our choice

December. When we can officially confirm them, we'll post details at www.filmstories.co.uk. Given who's going to be involved, both of these are likely to be in London.

Thank you

If you're new to *Film Stories*, you may not know the backstory: that it's 100% independent, brought to life via crowdfunding, and doesn't have a publishing company behind it. As such, we never lose sight of

the fact that we wouldn't be here without your support. Inevitably, the pandemic has slowed down some things we wanted to do – and at one point it nearly put us out of business – but the plan now is full steam ahead. The new Blu-ray label is one part of that. The range of live events is the next. And there's something else up our sleeves too, if we manage to pull all of this off. Thank you. We really couldn't do this without you... 

Treasures in Unexpected Places

Leoni Horton looks at the filmmaking gold hiding away on TikTok...

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Like wildfire or an allergy rash, there's little we can do to stop TikTok from spreading. Over the past year, the increasingly popular video-sharing, social media app has steadily crept its way past teenage obsession and into the mainstream public consciousness, leaving little untouched by its significant influence. TikTok has managed to latch its hooks into every fandom, hobby and industry, catering to everyone and everything through engaging, easily digestible video material across various interests.

MovieTok is the latest sensation within the vast and wacky world of TikTok, and if you're interested in film, filmmaking, film criticism or acting, it's past time to take the plunge down the rabbit hole. To those of us past high school age, the platform may seem unfathomable at first glance. However, only a few minor roadblocks stand in the way of the newest home for an emerging community of film fans lurking underneath TikTok's brightly lit, bubble-gum surface. Given the millions of users directing

their attention to it every day alongside society's desire for quick and easy content, the platform holds notable possibilities for the future of the film industry.

What's on MovieTok?

Using the hashtag #Movietok, film fans on TikTok collectively create and share their own video content, covering the spectrum of film. By doing so, these film-crazed TikTokers are forging a space among the endless slew of viral dancing videos TikTok is so famed for, where other film fans can find and interact with a worldwide community of movie buffs.

The most popular kind of videos existing within MovieTok are listicles and movie recommendations. The lists span across big blockbuster hits, classics, art-house and esoteric film. Some video listicles tend to take a generic approach, hoping to ensnare

a broader audience: 'Movies to Watch Before You Die', '5 Movies Rotten Tomatoes Got Wrong' and 'Hidden Gems on Netflix'. However, there are also lists aimed toward more specific fields of interests: 'Movies That Will Make You Believe in Love', 'Horror Movies for Those Who Can Handle the Extreme' and 'Movies You Should Watch If You Just Want to Cry'.

Yet listicles are only the very tip of this iceberg; further exploration through the lower echelons of TikTok reveals a substantial amount of movie-related magic. There are classes in everything from directing to cinematography and script-writing. In these videos, filmmakers and film students share their knowledge across a series of posts, providing lessons in everything you could possibly want to know about making your own film.

If you're interested in film, filmmaking, film criticism or acting, it's past time to take the plunge...



Cristina Dobre, a New York-based TikToker and cinematographer, aims her content specifically at beginners. On her account, she reveals which cameras are the best to use as a novice cinematographer and which paths she considers best to getting started in the industry. An account named Screenwritingtiktok aims to teach users how to format a professional script and offers valuable writing skills in characterisation and worldbuilding. Plus, it's also possible to take a peep behind the scenes with Kelsey Sound, as she uses her account to capture day-to-day life on an active film set.

Some MovieTok pioneers pick apart and closely inspect movies, discovering hidden details and easter eggs in many beloved films. Have you noticed the portrait of a giant bear hung on the wall in Ari Aster's *Midsommar*? Or the Pizza Planet truck from *Toy Story* hiding in Pete Doctor's *Soul*? Other accounts focus on performance, revealing the tricks of the trade while creating opportunities for users to partake in act-along challenges to develop their own acting chops. TikToker Mary Kelly focuses on the subtleties of mouth-acting, while Ashleytodayo breaks down leading Hollywood professionals' signature moves.

There are also a wide variety of accounts dedicated to movie make-up and costume artistry. Users can follow step-by-step tutorials as beauty gurus and FX artists teach them how to recreate iconic movie make-up and create professional standard

prosthetics. Alternatively, users can also interact with costume designers to learn how to play with style and design their own wardrobes. Alongside all of this, MovieTok is home to reviews of the new releases, the latest movie news and more. Make sure to be on the lookout for famous faces, too; big stars such as Tom Holland, Will Smith and Dwayne Johnson frequently spill movie-related secrets via their own personal accounts.

Getting involved

TikTok is available to download from any app store, and creating an account requires only a few simple steps. Once signed up, you can simply watch the content on offer or start creating and uploading your own bite-sized videos (think of TikTok as an evolution of YouTube, except all videos shared via the app must fit into the strict 15 to 60 second time restriction).

The first thing on offer is TikTok's For You page – a smorgasbord of videos that users can scroll through endlessly. TikTok uses an algorithm, so the more users interact with the app, the faster it will learn what sort of content they're interested in and build a unique page suited to the individual. However, a simple search of the word 'MovieTok' will take you directly to the film content. Try adding other words into your search to narrow down the results: 'Movietok make-up' 'MovieTok filmmaking.' All that's left to do is scroll away, and get stuck into the growing world of MovieTok. 📺

FROM Mill Hill TO HOLLYWOOD



Marc Goldberg, the founder and CEO of UK independent distributor Signature Entertainment, talks about the current state of the industry – and building up a company from his bedroom...

In the annals of the British film industry, the 2009 movie *The Velveteen Rabbit* – an American adaptation of Margery Williams’ novel – doesn’t seem particularly of note. By most accounts it was a decent film, yet when it came to the UK it was the first release from a brand-new distributor. So far so what. Yet the man behind said distributor was working out of a bedroom in Mill Hill, London. His wife was pregnant with their second child. Whilst he wasn’t quite betting the house, there wasn’t much of a safety net if everything went wrong.

But the gamble paid off. The disc sold heavily, and the British film industry had a new name. Over a decade later, that name – Signature Entertainment – has brought over 1000 films to the UK, and plenty more are on the way.

Uprising

The man behind it is Marc Goldberg, whose journey has now taken him from his spare bedroom in London to a home in Los Angeles, from where he’s producing several movies himself.

“My father was in the business, and I grew up around the business,” Goldberg tells me, as his lockdown dog barks away in the background. In fact, his dad quickly spotted the potential of the then burgeoning VHS format at the end of the 70s. “He was one of the first people to have a distribution company in the UK.”

“So I grew up around it. We had tons of videos coming home every week, and I grew up watching movies.” Goldberg then left school at 16, and by his early 20s – a few jobs later – his dad had started a DVD label. This was at a point when DVD was already heavily on the radar of major studios, and Goldberg Sr started a distributor called Hollywood DVD. Marc worked with him for six or seven years on that and another label, Boulevard Entertainment. “He didn’t run 20th Century Fox,” he smiles of this tiny way into the industry.

“The DVD market was a very buoyant business,” he recalls, “with people buying more DVDs than they ever bought VHS.” Marc would travel the country, tasked with getting the DVDs into stores around the UK. He gained a first-hand knowledge

of the nation's motorway service stations for a start.

"It was a lot of hard work, but it was a great place to understand the market. I was out there really seeing how the business worked."

It was a small business too, with the metaphorical all hands on deck philosophy, and he learned the breadth of it as a result of it. There were challenges to working in a family business, of course, but Marc Goldberg had got his first full taste of the movie industry. At least one corner of it.

Thirtysomething

When he eventually moved on, he initially went to work with a company outside the industry. But at the age of 30, he had the hankering to try something himself. "It was time to go and start something on my own."

That was back in 2011, at a point where the DVD market had just started to decline, fears over piracy were sky high, and the industry appeared to be moving towards making bigger movies, and fewer of them. The idea of video on demand? Well, doom and gloom mongers were not in short supply.

"When I started [Signature], what I saw was there was an opportunity – the right time, luck, whatever it was. The retailers, the supermarkets... Tesco had been reported in the trade press six, nine months before that they were interested in making their own movies. Here I was, just about to start my own business, and I thought that's incredible: not only the enthusiasm and ambition to do that as a retailer, but with due respect to them, how much do they know about making films and what goes into it? I saw that there was a better opportunity to work with them: where they could have more ownership and exclusive titles,

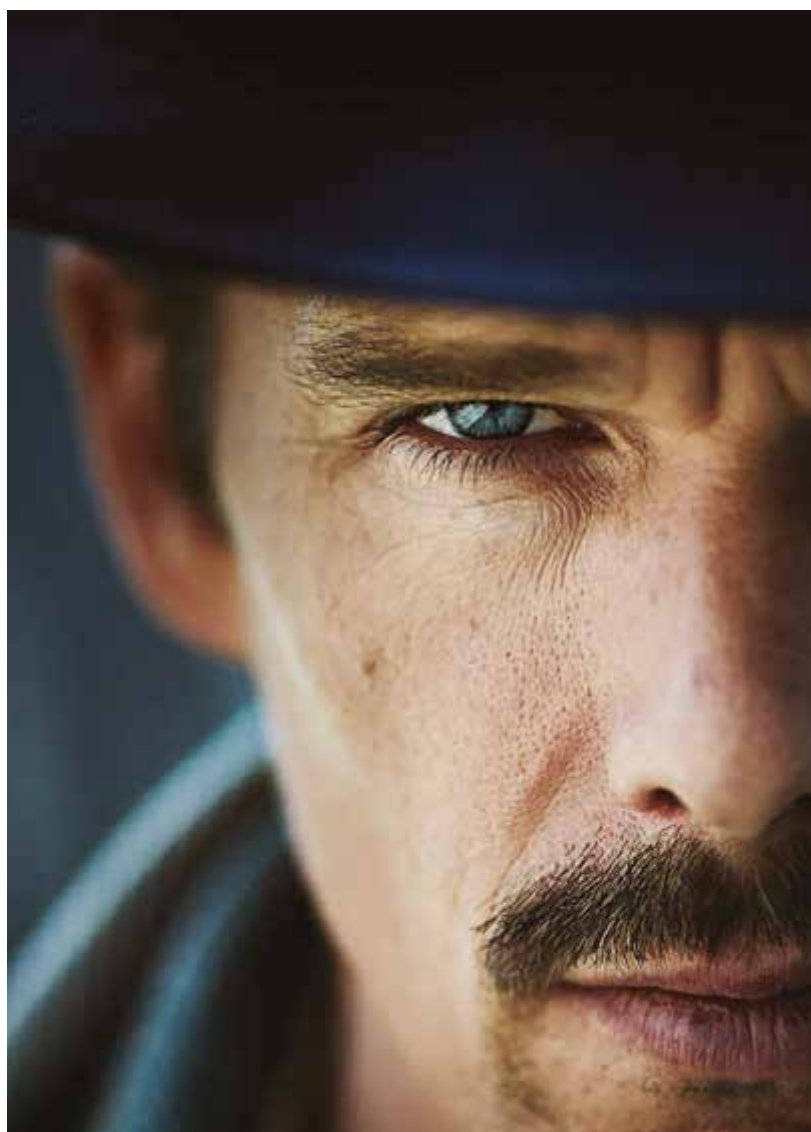
and I could license movies and work with them."

That's just what happened. It allowed Goldberg to ramp up his business quickly too.

"We had a big presence on the shelf in a short space of time. The DVD business for the first three, four, five years of [Signature] was dominant whilst others saw a decline in DVD. I was brand new and starting effectively from scratch."

Around the growing Signature, others who had bet the house of DVD were falling out of the trade, and that meant less competition to both acquire and sell new titles. Furthermore, there was an expansion in where DVDs were actually sold too: from supermarkets and clothes stores to corner shops and garden centres. Signature was savvy too about where it spent its marketing money.

DTV was the phrase [to that point] that people were using to describe Signature films, and I hated that phrase





"We felt that the most important thing was having the product on the shelf in the right place. To have it look like the one people would be drawn to."

That worked too. An audience was found, and tens of thousands of copies were being shifted.

Looking up and down

I always wondered if a bit of the film industry snobbery played in Signature's favour.

"Very much so," Goldberg nods. "I was driven by the fact that people in the industry didn't really like what we were doing."

It wasn't his sole drive, but Goldberg is happy to defend the quality of Signature's early releases.

"What I was providing was not low-end content. The movies that we were releasing... sure, there are movies out there that we put out that weren't five-star films, but before long the quality of the films got to a place where we were competing. Others who looked down on us, in a way made us go even faster and even harder. That time was probably the most exciting."

"There have been hugely fantastic things happen since, but that time when you can actually tangibly feel a business growing... I'd walk into retailers and see people putting our movies in their basket and that'd give me such a huge buzz at the time. To know that the work and effort we'd put in... it was a huge gratification."

Foothills

Many staff who were there at the start remain with the company today, and I put it to Goldberg that when it came to turning point titles, the sci-fi movie *Predestination* (pictured right) – starring Ethan Hawke – felt like a moment. That here was a film that earned tremendous reviews, and cut through.

As it happened, it followed on the heels of another big success: a family movie called *Dorothy: The Legends Of Oz*, which marked a major turning point for Signature. At the time, it had just moved to

offices in the midst of London, and had been looking at theatrical distribution as an option. Goldberg flew to Los Angeles to close the deal for *Dorothy*, a family feature that was a real gamble given the amount Signature had to pay for it.

"It went out theatrically, and I think it ended up doing around half a million pounds at the box office. It was an enormous achievement for us, a company then two to three years old. It then reached number two in the DVD charts. Then not longer after that, *Predestination* was obviously something completely different."

Predestination – a terrific film, if you've not had the pleasure – was also one of the first titles that Signature put out as a premium video on demand (PVOD) release. This was a novelty for the UK at the time, that whilst one or two others had a go at a theatrical release in tandem with being able to pay to watch the film at home, Signature really went for it.

"DTV was the phrase [to that point] that people were using to describe Signature films, and any film really, and I hated that phrase," Goldberg says. Standing for direct-to-video, he says it "sounded so low grade, like a D-movie."

Signature trialled what became known as PVOD with the Nicolas Cage-headlined *Dying Of The Light*, an approach that required a lot of negotiation with cinemas to secure screens. But the work paid off. *Predestination* was next.

"*Predestination* was a prime example of a movie that was an independent. You could sense that from the way it was made, but a great story, a really interesting story."

Signature picked it up, and Goldberg muses that "for us to have made an impact with that on a wide theatrical basis would have meant spending millions of pounds, in a crowded marketplace where we would have been number two of three movie of the week and then kicked off the screens a week later."



Into production

A real sea change in the Signature story was when Marc Goldberg moved into producing films.

“That wasn’t the play,” he smiles. “When I started the business I didn’t really know what a producer was.”

He certainly does now. Back in the mid-2010s, Signature backed *The Hatton Garden Job*, which was a crash course for Goldberg in producing, but an eye-opener as to how Signature could grow. It fully

funded that movie, and has since added *Final Score* (pictured top left), *The Courier*, *Confession* and several more, with more to be announced.

“It’s taken two to three years to get to a place where I’m really happy. We have a really broad spectrum of genre. I’m really passionate about making more British films too.”

Plenty more, yet to be announced, are on the way...

Instead, Signature backed a limited cinema rollout, but coupled it with its PVD release.

The film, which remains one of Goldberg’s favourites from the Signature catalogue, “went to number one everywhere, and got [the] five-star reviews, that it merited. It made people take notice that we had a great movie.”

For Signature, it changed the business. *Predestination* made ripples in America too, where people noticed the success of the film in the UK.

“Whilst there’s snobbery on the side of the industry in the UK, there’s also a snobbery on the side you acquire films from. Understandably, sales agents and producers want their product to get the best home in each territory, and Signature were known for DTV. A lot of it was good, but because we weren’t in the theatrical marketplace it was always more difficult approaching sales agents.”

And then 2020 happened...

Over the last year or so, studios have been holding back their films from release, leaving cinemas that were open with a lack of new movies to show. Signature was not shy in coming forward. *Honest Thief*, starring Liam Neeson, even got an IMAX release, and topped the UK box office.

“We’ve always been like that. If there’s an opportunity, we will go for it. Sometimes it won’t

If there’s an opportunity, we will go for it. Sometimes it won’t work, but more often than that it does work to some degree

work, but more often than that it does work to some degree. We’ll continue to be nimble.”

Some films will get to cinemas, some won’t, because, as Goldberg observes, the theatrical marketplace is now a “very different world”, especially in terms of the shortening theatrical exclusive windows.

“But what I think we’ll see is more opportunities for companies like Signature... for the next six, nine, 12 months I think it’ll be incredibly difficult for an independent to make a stand in the theatrical world. They held back all these films, and there’s going to be this juggernaut of movies studios have been waiting to release in the UK.”

That’s not to say that Signature isn’t looking for big screen releases, just that its instincts will need to be particularly sharp.

Goldberg has one thing to add as our time wraps up.

“I must say that whilst I started the company and I have a lot of pride in that, and a lot of say in what happens, a lot of the opportunities and successes are driven by the team. There are milestones, and a lot of the major ones were the recruitment of some of the staff and some of the

team... everyone has an opinion here, and nobody’s opinion should be disregarded.”

Wrapped

Looking ahead, the Signature slate is not empty. Goldberg is setting up more films from his Los Angeles base where he’s been for four years. There’s no shortage of ambition, with three films in post-production and four on the verge of shooting. What moments really stick in his mind, though?

“The excitement of selling 100,000 copies of *The Velveteen Rabbit* on DVD. Walking into an Asda and seeing someone put one of our DVDs in their basket. It was genuinely as exciting as wrapping on a \$10m movie. It’s those individual moments that really help build you as a person, and you need to remember those things and those times.”

Marc Goldberg clearly does. And it’s hard not to conclude that there are more of those individual moments for Signature lying ahead.

“I think the next ten years will be as exciting, and twist and turn in different ways as well,” he signs off. It’s just this time, he won’t be watching it all happen from his spare room... 

BREAKING

Emma Butt has built an award-winning career in post-production sound work — but as she tells Lauren Miles, it's been a difficult journey...

She might be working behind the scenes, but when it comes to pointing out issues in the film and TV industry, sound engineer Emma Butt isn't afraid to make some noise. After witnessing and experiencing discrimination in the workplace, she's passionate about campaigning for increased diversity in post-production sound.

The effects of Butt's work might go easily unnoticed by the average viewer, but it makes all the difference to the quality of a film or TV show. "A simplistic way that I can say it is I make TV

shows and films sound nice," she explains. When it comes to dialogue, she uses her sound-editing skills to remove distracting background noises and make the words audible. "Everything you see on screen, you probably assume that all the sound was recorded on the day. It wasn't. All the wind in the trees, the traffic going by, birds chirping, that's all been replaced by someone in sound editing."

Her job also involves re-recording lines of dialogue that were not captured well during filming, a process known as ADR, and ensuring that all sound is well balanced. Over the course of 14 years, she's worked on a variety of

films and shows, including *Game Of Thrones*. The HBO series might be high profile, but the work of a sound engineer often flies under the radar.

"A good sound engineer, you can't hear their work because it sounds so natural," she argues.

Background

Originally from Dublin, Butt decided to get into sound engineering after recording a charity album with her school choir. "This guy came along with his mixing desk and his microphone, and I was like 'that is so cool, that is what I want to do for the rest of my life'".

THE SILENCE

She went on to study the subject at university, and found she was one of two women in a class of 30. She says that this was seen as progressive at the time, but that she and her female classmate were treated differently to the men. "One lecturer in particular would constantly speak down to us, would constantly be dismissive of us," she says. "He wouldn't ask us answers to questions that we knew, just belittle us at every possible occasion, and that filtered down into the guys who we worked with on the course."

She also worked at a live music venue. It was there that she realised something in the industry was seriously wrong. "I absolutely hated it, it was one of the most sexist environments I have ever worked in."

She recounts tales of bands not believing that she was a sound engineer on account of being a woman, and the lead engineer telling her that she would need to dress like a man to be successful. "To this day, I go into sessions and I wear dresses constantly, and I don't even own a pair of jeans. I wear heels, I wear makeup, and that, to me, is my two fingers up to that guy."

Worst of all was the sexual misconduct. "The lead engineer had what he called a 'slut light', which was a little light at the top of his mixing desk." Located at the bottom of the stairs, the desk



gave the engineers full view of the customers walking down them. "They'd shine the light over at the stairs to see the girls in their short skirts, and sometimes try to look up them."

Butt swiftly moved from music into film sound, but found that the film industry was plagued by the same issues. "I've had situations where I've had bosses make inappropriate comments to me, telling me they want to fuck me." This incident happened before the #MeToo Movement, which exposed the widespread sexual misconduct in Hollywood and the industry at large. At the time, Butt was concerned that speaking out would jeopardise

her career before it had even really begun.

Similar to when she was in university, she has found herself spoken down to by male colleagues on a regular basis, and states that there's a double standard when it comes to the conduct of male and female employees. Where the former can become angry and have it dismissed as 'moodiness', Butt has been called into meetings over polite emails of complaint. She has also noticed discrimination against women in the hiring process. "You still have situations where women are told that they won't be hired onto post-production sound teams because

What's being done to address diversity in the industry?

Both broadcasters and training bodies are taking steps to improve matters. The BBC has launched a new Diversity and Inclusivity Plan, based on previous feedback and aiming to make their working environments more inclusive and welcoming to people from all backgrounds.

ScreenSkills is an organisation that provides career advice and identifies skills gaps in the film and TV industry. It sets aspirational inclusivity targets for both

itself and its training providers, including 50% women and 40% POC in Greater London. They have also launched schemes alongside the BFI to help people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds enter the industry or further progress their careers.

Butt names the Lenny Henry Institute and Bectu (the union for creative ambition) as organisations helping to shine a light on issues of diversity. Both are vocal about inequalities, and calling broadcasters to action.

the sound supervisor worries that they might get into a relationship with one of the male members of the crew.”

These prejudices still exist, even after #MeToo, and they're keeping women and people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds out of the industry. Which is why Butt is doing something about it. In November last year, she received the support of the Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity, who asked her to write a report on employees in post-production sound. Looking at the three highest rated TV shows over three months, Butt examined the diversity within all of the involved sound teams. “The report findings were appalling. 66 job roles were available, and out of those five or six were women, and one was mixed race. That was it, all of the rest were white men.”

After seeing those results, she has come up with two ways to address the problem. “I'm trying to secure funding to create a scheme that will help address diversity at entry level, but also at mid-career level, because one of the issues we have is that we do have women and people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds getting into the industry, but they get to a certain point and they get stuck”.

Another idea is to have every newly commissioned show meet a quota for the number of women and people of colour employed

in their post-production teams.

“It will force any programme makers to look at their post-production teams and say ‘do we have enough women? Do we have enough people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds? If they don't then they know their commission isn't going to happen, so they address that and they fix that issue.” She does, however, refer to this approach as near impossible. “That is essentially trying to change the wheel, and trying to change the wheel is very fucking difficult.”

But why is there such a lack of diversity in post-production? For Butt, it comes down to hiring practices. “Some of them will only hire runners who've gone to certain universities,” she says. “If you're someone who has a passion for working in film and TV, and you come from a background where you just could not afford to go to university, you don't even get a chance to get your foot in the door.” This approach naturally disqualifies those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Butt also mentions what she calls ‘little black book syndrome’. As budgets have tightened during the pandemic, people in hiring positions are increasingly turning to sound engineers they have worked with before. “Until that system is broken as well, we're going to end up with no diversity happening.”

Steps

While there's still a long way to go in diversifying post-production sound, Butt is not alone in her endeavours. She names ADR supervisor Tim Hands, who worked with her on *Game Of Thrones*, as a staunch ally to women in the industry. “He worked on *The Dark Crystal: Age Of Resistance* for Netflix. I think about 90% of his team were women. Very few men worked on the sound team on that job. He's just such a supporter.”

She notes that he also helped her when she moved from Dublin to London, and had difficulty getting work. “He made sure that when *Game Of Thrones* won the Emmy, I was one of the people to receive a certificate of merit for my work as an ADR mixer on the past five seasons.”

Butt's diversity campaigning has been largely well received on social media, and she is keen to start fundraising and meeting with broadcast commissioners. She remains hopeful that the industry will become increasingly inclusive in the near future, but acknowledges that not everyone shares her enthusiasm. “I see a lot of silence from people in the industry, who I thought would've been more vocal and more supportive. I think sometimes the silence speaks louder than the trolls could ever.” 



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NOTE PERFECT

Billy Padmore looks at some of the finest results when musicians cross the streams and move into film scores...

For many musicians, it's common practice to employ a portfolio career. Lady Gaga has written songs for some of the biggest names in pop, members of Toto moonlighted as the session band on Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, and Chic guitarist Nile Rodgers served as the producer for hit records by the likes of David Bowie and Madonna.

But what about when musicians cross mediums? Here we'll take a look at some of the best examples of rock stars who have turned their hand to film score composition, demonstrating just how talented these creative types are.

Nick Cave and Warren Ellis

Having fronted influential post-punk band The Birthday Party before forming The Bad Seeds,

Nick Cave is a living legend in the alternative rock scene. Together with his primary co-songwriter for the last 20 years of Bad Seeds material, violinist/guitarist/every other instrument player Warren Ellis, Cave took the dark, brooding nature of his goth rock sound to the film industry.

Working primarily within the alternative western genre, Cave and Ellis' sombre tones provide an emotional depth to the often

cold, complicated characters in their films. Having collaborated with Taylor Sheridan, John Hillcoat and David Mackenzie, the duo has formed tight partnerships with some incredible directors, but it is their score for Andrew Dominik's *The Assassination Of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford* that stands head and shoulders above the rest of their esteemed output. Relying on minor motifs and minimalist character themes, Cave and Ellis helped elevate the film with their solemn score, evoking sympathy for the darkest of characters by tugging on the heartstrings with their tender melodies.

Check Out: *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Andrew Dominik)

Ry Cooder

With a background in americana/ roots rock rather than more conventional radio music, Ry Cooder may not be a household name, but those in the know are more than familiar with his influence. Despite having a long and respected solo career, as well as multiple collaborations with big-name artists such as The Rolling Stones, Neil Young and Captain Beefheart, Cooder is equally known for his film scores, bringing his signature guitar playing to the big screen.

Providing the score for mostly alternative cinema, it's Cooder's work on the Wim Wenders film *Paris, Texas* that has attracted as much attention and acclaim as the film itself. With fingerpicked phrases underlying the more tranquil scenes, his slide guitar work defines the iconic score. The metallic rattle of slide on guitar strings emulating a rattlesnake's tail, and the solo guitar itself

mirroring the lonesome journey of Harry Dean Stanton's nomadic protagonist, Cooder composed a film score for the ages. Expertly conveying the desolation of the Texan desert, it's hard to hear slide guitar and not think of isolated film characters stranded under the blistering sun.

Check Out: *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders)

Explosions In The Sky

Lauded as one of the most accomplished bands in post-rock, the Texan four-piece is known for creating musical narratives with its multi-guitar setup, spanning from twinkly melodies to crashing crescendos most associated with orchestral music. With a focus on creating cinematic epics rather than conventional rock songs, it makes sense that Explosions In The Sky would try its collective hand at film composition.

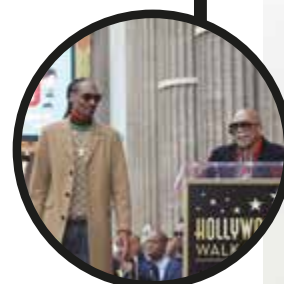
Working with directors Peter Berg and David Gordon Green on some of their smaller scale features, the band's scores are not a far cry from their studio album output. Sparse guitar lines weave in and out of focus, both stepping back to let the on-screen action speak for itself or providing a pedal tone drone to ramp up the tension, drenched in ethereal reverb to act as a counterpoint to some of the films' darker moments. Fans of Explosions In The Sky's records will relish the visual accompaniment provided with its work in film, just as fans of their scores should treat themselves to an album or two.

Check Out: *Lone Survivor* (Peter Berg)

Cave and Ellis



Snoop Dogg



Jonny Greenwood

For many, Radiohead is the brainchild of frontman Thom Yorke. Credit where it's due, Yorke is responsible for the lyricism and is considered the driving force behind the band. But it's the quiet professor in the background, Jonny Greenwood, who moulds Radiohead's music into the experimental ventures that they are.

Starting initially as a keyboardist/guitarist, Greenwood began experimenting with unconventional instruments, as well as employing samples and loops. After arranging strings and brass sections for the band's albums, scoring music for film seemed the natural progression. Since his work on *There Will Be Blood*, Greenwood has scored every Paul Thomas Anderson film to date, also working with Lynne Ramsay for 2018's *You Were Never Really Here*. Utilising his broad musical knowledge and experience with Radiohead, the multi-instrumentalist has established a recognisable sound. Unconventional harmony, atonal melodies and jarring rhythms, Greenwood's film scores demand your attention.

Check Out: *The Master* (Paul Thomas Anderson)

Quincy Jones

Despite being primarily known as one of the world's most acclaimed record producers, Quincy Jones began his career in music as a performing musician. Dropping out of college to tour as a trumpeter, pianist and arranger for a jazz band, Quincy worked with Ray Charles, Duke Ellington and Count Basie, before going on to become a producer and film composer.

Even though Jones had already completed an admirable collection of work composing for film, he became a household name following his collaboration with Michael Jackson, that started in the late 1970s. Into the mid-1980s, this was then followed up by a collaboration with Steven Spielberg for *The Color Purple*. With an encyclopaedic knowledge of jazz and every instrument under the sun, Jones' score ranges from full orchestration of strings and woodwind, to solo performances from saxophone and harmonica. His music takes on a sentimental nature, softening the often-harsh content of the film concerned with a warm and comforting atmosphere, enabling the viewers to maintain their hope and optimism while watching.

Check Out: *The Color Purple* (Steven Spielberg)

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Mica Levi

The jump from performing musician to film composer was remarkably quick for Mica Levi. Having released their debut album under the Micachu moniker only five years prior, Levi was recruited to score the experimental sci-fi film *Under The Skin* at the age of 26.

Levi's own studio output, while rooted in indie pop, draws heavily

on strange and unconventional sounds rather than the traditional rock band set-up. Sound manipulation, harsh glitches and abrasive distortion abound, these elements were put to full effect with Jonathan Glazer's aforementioned film, crafting an eerie and disconcerting atmosphere with an overwhelming sense of foreboding.

The instrumentation is difficult to identify, sounding otherworldly when compared to that usually found in composing, reflecting the alien creature portrayed by Scarlett Johansson in the movie itself. With the *Under The Skin* score, Levi has composed a distinctive soundscape, that was a real talking point of all who experienced this haunting film.

Check Out: *Under The Skin* (Jonathan Glazer)

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Mike Patton

'Prolific' is not enough to describe the self-confessed workaholic Mike Patton. Most famous for fronting Faith No More (or maybe Mr. Bungle, depending on how crazy you like your music), the man has been in more bands than would be considered healthy.

Forming supergroup after supergroup, fronting hardcore icons The Dillinger Escape Plan, frequently collaborating with avant-garde saxophonist John Zorn and releasing an album of 1950s Italian pop covers, there's little the man hasn't done in the field of music.

Having provided the 'creature noises' in *I Am Legend*, it wasn't long before Patton added yet another string to his already crowded bow. Scoring the Derek Cianfrance drama epic, *The Place Beyond The Pines*, Patton presented his eclectic stylings with uncharacteristic restraint. With his arsenal of instruments

spanning woozy string sections, fuzzy synths and desert rock guitar, Patton's tasteful score takes a back seat to the on-screen performances, perfectly capturing the tone of each scene at hand.

Check Out: *The Place Beyond The Pines* (Derek Cianfrance)

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Trent Reznor

The benchmark for musician-turned-composer, Trent Reznor has become one of the most acclaimed film scorers in recent years. Having spent most of the 90s screaming into a microphone over the top of abrasive, industrial rock with his band Nine Inch Nails, the multi-instrumentalist has carved out a second career for himself alongside writing partner Atticus Ross.

Taking inspiration from NIN's ambient *Ghosts* records more so than the harsh grinding sounds for which the band is known, Reznor's film scores utilise sparse electronic tones to create a cold, ambient soundscape, providing the perfect accompaniment for the often dark and sinister films he is usually employed to score (Pixar's *Soul* not included).

With a focus on textures and timbre experimentation rather than motifs and identifiable melodies, the music bears little resemblance to the traditional compositions found in big-budget blockbusters. Having provided the music for all of David Fincher's films since *The Social Network*, Reznor's film scores have become as recognisable as his director collaborator. Bottom line: if the music makes you feel uncomfortable, you're listening to Reznor and Ross.

Check Out: *Gone Girl* (David Fincher) 



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HEADING INTO

Dan Cooper on how Hollywood's modern military advisors have evolved to walk the line between creative licence and historical accuracy

America as a country can be understood in the context of the wars it's waged throughout its relatively brief history. It's no surprise then that Hollywood, that enduring microcosm of American cultural imperialism, has been shaped by those wars too. Following World War I, films such as *All Quiet On The Western Front* began to explore the brutality of war, little wonder considering the terrifying evolution of mechanised death-dealing tanks, chemical warfare

and unfathomable casualty numbers in what was dubbed 'the war to end all wars'.

Of course, this proved not to be the case, and World War II would follow, where the horrific nature of the conflict, including the attempted genocide of the entire Jewish population by the Nazis, would characterise the war in a much more binary fashion, presenting one side as 'good' and the other as 'evil'. This oversimplification of a complicated geopolitical situation would be amplified by Hollywood in the wake of World War II, with films throughout

the 50s and 60s largely presenting glamourising tales of Allied heroism, such as *Where Eagles Dare* or *The Great Escape*.

Up until this point, the role of the military advisor in Hollywood (known at the time as a 'technical advisor') had been largely centred around preserving military accuracy, ensuring military insignia and weapons were present and correct on screen. This status quo, with Hollywood presenting America's military as one-dimensional heroes fighting an axis of pure evil, would be reinforced by the Pentagon, which in 1948

CONFLICT

HEADING INTO CONFLICT

Tom Berenger and Willem Dafoe in *Platoon*

established a movie liaison office. An office which demanded significant levels of control over film productions. In a symbiotic relationship fruitful to both parties, Hollywood would showcase the US military in their best light and, in turn, productions would be granted access to valuable military equipment.

Turning points

Then came the Vietnam War and everything changed. With reporters in combat zones alongside soldiers, the conflict became known as ‘the first

television war’, offering the American public a glimpse beyond government propaganda directly into the combat zone. America did not like what it saw, and Hollywood, never slow to surf the zeitgeist if it meant getting audiences in cinemas, responded in kind. Over the course of a decade, movies such as *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* and *Casualties Of War*, all based on the Vietnam conflict, would herald a new wave of ‘psychological war films’, fully exploring for the first time the interiority of war, the debilitating effects of conflict on the minds of soldiers.

Naturally, the role of the military advisor needed to evolve too. No longer would it suffice to simply make sure soldiers were wearing their berets properly. Actors and directors were now being tasked with portraying the mental trauma caused by the horror of war, and, as such, needed military advisors who could help them to understand what it truly felt like to experience combat. Dale Dye was a pioneer for this new role, first working alongside Oliver Stone on 1986’s multiple Oscar-winning *Platoon*, a film that was refused US military

assistance in part because of the Pentagon's appraisal that the film's script was too focused on 'concentrating action on brutality'.

It was exactly that, the harrowing, brutal nature of war that Stone was trying to portray, though, and for that he needed a new breed of technical advisor who could make his cast and crew understand the realities of conflict at a visceral level, beyond simple cosmetic concerns such as uniforms and weaponry. "I always thought there was a flaw in the whole so-called 'technical advisor' role in motion pictures," Dye told *Film Stories*. "Frankly, I campaigned against calling it that, I thought it was more appropriate to call it a 'military advisor', who had a larger role than just superficial trappings. That was very hard to sell to Hollywood almost 30 years ago when I conceived it."

Dye, a highly decorated 20-year military veteran, found himself frustrated by Hollywood's portrayal of soldiering and, upon exiting the armed services, was determined to use his experiences in Vietnam, Beirut and Lebanon to develop the psychological depiction of war in film.

"I thought, the problem is," Dye tells me, "the way us military people walk and talk and think and feel is alien to people who haven't experienced it, so my concept, very simply, was to make people experience it. To give them

a real dose and a curriculum that involved living as we lived. I could use that to get not just into their bodies, but into their hearts and their minds and their emotions."

Training day

To that end, Dye pioneered what has now become a staple for almost all war films: a pre-production bootcamp. After being rejected by several filmmakers, fellow Vietnam veteran Oliver Stone enlisted Dye, who put the film's actors, including Charlie Sheen, Willem Dafoe, Johnny Depp and Forest Whitaker, through a 30-day training regimen that included limiting their food and water and firing blanks at night to keep them awake. When they returned, straight into shooting, the cast were exhausted and on edge, resulting in the tormented performances that were so key to the film's success.

James D Dever, a 25-year military veteran who first got into military advising by working with Clint Eastwood on 1986's *Heartbreak Ridge* is one of Dye's early contemporaries. He would also go on to use the 'boot camp' to great effect, notably on 2003's *The Last Samurai*, where he had to teach hundreds of Japanese actors how to effectively use historical American weaponry like well-drilled infantry.

"I read books about the Civil War, about 1876, 1872, how they worked with horses back then, how the cannons were

set up with artillery, how they move their formations, that was done in pre-production, I had ten days with 500 Japanese actors. I was training them on the tactics of the time period."

It's an approach, first pioneered by Dye, that has since become synonymous with films in the war genre, although, as time has passed, military advisors have become increasingly valued for their creative input as well as their military knowledge.

"To me, Dale Dye was the one who really started everything with military advising," says Dever. "What he has done for military advising is unbelievable, he really set the tone." "There was a certain school of thought that anybody who was a professional military guy," remembers Dye, "couldn't conceivably have a creative bone in his body. It was just antithetical to what Hollywood thought about military people. They'd hire some guy who'd tell them if the ribbons were on the right side and they didn't want any further involvement."

Both Dye and Dever have worked hard throughout the intervening decades to arrest this notion however, despite facing initial resistance as to their ability to bring creative elements to the table. "Early in my career," states Dye, "I had to fight locked

The Forgotten War

Which conflict do our military advisors feel is underrepresented in cinema? "There hasn't been a Korean war movie for a very long time," says Dever. "I've seen Korean war movies made from the Korean and Chinese perspective, but not American."

"It's such a unique story," suggests Dale Dye.

"How America was in a post-WWII doldrum, the military was being squeezed, and suddenly it had to spin up and go against the Chinese... but it doesn't have the same global impact as WWII or even Vietnam. It's the misunderstood military story of the 20th century."

Tom Cruise in *The Last Samurai*



I didn't have a huge influence on it, but what I did have was fun."

Battles ahead

The ability to put their military experience to creative ends is vital when working on futuristic projects too. "I love science fiction," enthuses Dever. "Like I did *Battle: Los Angeles*, a period piece using real marines, but fighting aliens, where you have to come up with different ideas because it isn't reality." Dye agrees, citing his time on *Starship Troopers*. "The neat thing was nobody was concerned at that point, certainly the director [Paul Verhoeven] wasn't, with the military structure, how they would be organised, what the mobile infantry in space would look like. So they let me just invent it. I was able to project my imagination and my experience into the 25th century and I had a ball with it."

It isn't all fun, though. There's a serious side to the role, which involves honouring the contribution of fighting men and women, by accurately representing their sacrifices and hardships onscreen. Something that can sometimes run in opposition to serving the story. Being a steward for those who have proudly donned the uniform is a responsibility that both men feel. "I explain to actors and background crew, it doesn't matter if it's Japanese, Americans, Germans, all of these people fought in a war and you have to respect that. If you're in these uniforms, respect the uniforms."

Dye agrees, stating that "I feel that sense of responsibility. Popular media is so powerful,

Abort Mission

Despite having creative input throughout production, sometimes the final product simply doesn't reflect the work that military advisors put in. Says Dye, speaking about his work on 1997's science fiction action flick, *Starship Troopers*.

"I'd always been a fan of [author Robert] Heinlein's book. I carried it in my pack when I was on active duty," says Dye. "I busted my butt to get on that film, but the truth is I was very disappointed with it. A lot of what I contributed was ignored, and there was way too much groupthink Nazi stuff going on. I didn't care for that."

if we allow them [military personnel] to be mistreated in it, we're doing them a tremendous disservice... I feel that intensely, I feel that obligation and all of my guys feel that obligation."

Much like the military machine that they served with distinction, both men have come to accept that despite being respected advisors at the very peak of their profession, they are ultimately fulfilling one role within a complex, collaborative system of filmmaking. Ultimately, despite influencing events as much as they can, accepting the final product is beyond their control is part of the process. As Dye admits, "you always wonder. What you film sometimes is not always what ends up being projected on the screen. You always live in fear that all of that hard work you did, some editor is going to have left it on the cutting room floor, but on the whole the great films we've done, even the mediocre ones, they've kept our influence, and that's very rewarding." 

scripts and nobody wanted to hear about changes. We're in an ego-driven business and there are people who are way too much in love with their creative juices. You can charge into [those situations] with your bayonet fixed and cut a bloody swathe, but that's rarely very functional. It's part of understanding human nature... knowing how to win the war by losing the odd battle."

As Dye and Dever have steadily bought heightened levels of respect to the role of a military advisor, their creative input has become increasingly sought after, especially on projects where military protocols simply don't exist for the combat being depicted onscreen. Take 1998's *Small Soldiers*, for example, where the military personnel in the film are tiny plastic toys that have sprung to life.

"Spielberg was producing," recalls Dye, "and he said 'we oughta get someone with military experience to take a look at this.' They asked me to look at ways to make weapons out of [everyday] stuff, there was a long table full of kitchen utensils and I got to thinking how I could use them as weapons, laughing outrageously.

KICKING UP A STORM

The upcoming movie of *Dune* is the latest to try and bring sand realistically to the screen. Sian Williams Page discovers the challenges involved...

“What if I had an entire planet that was desert?” Frank Herbert wrote to himself while on a newspaper assignment in Florence, Oregon in 1957. He’d been sent to the coastal town by a newspaper to report on government plans to stabilise shifting sand dunes by planting grasses. It was part of an ongoing effort that had started during the catastrophic ecological disaster of the 1930s dust bowl in the American midwest. The government

was keen to keep soils firmly pinned to the ground.

Herbert’s story from Oregon was never published, but he began taking notes for *Dune*, which is now considered to be one of the greatest science-fiction novels of all time. Denis Villeneuve’s much-anticipated new movie adaptation of that book will be released in October, after its original release date was pushed back due to the pandemic. It will be the first feature-length attempt at an adaptation of Herbert’s novel

since David Lynch’s attempt in 1984. Critic Roger Ebert was disparaging of Lynch’s efforts: “This movie is a real mess, an incomprehensible, ugly, unstructured, pointless excursion into the murkier realms of one of the most confusing screenplays of all time,” he wrote. “Even the colour is no good; everything is seen through a sort of dusty yellow filter, as if the film was left out in the sun too long.”

Nevertheless, Herbert was quoted as being content in



the way the 1980s adaptation created the desert world of Arrakis from his novel. And desert environments and dust storms have since become a common backdrop, and sometimes key features, in many major science-fiction films. *Star Wars*, *Mad Max*, *The Mummy* and many more take place in harsh desert environments. They pose a reminder of what happens when self-balancing natural systems of nature are taken for granted, and then tipped too far. Perhaps most notably, Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* used a plot point of an ecological disaster – blight and loss of soil – as a springboard for the space exploration for which the movie is perhaps best remembered for.

Archive

Interstellar opens with archival footage from a Ken Burns documentary about the dust bowl. Elderly men and women describe childhood memories of placing plates and cups upside down to avoid dust settling in them, and wearing make-shift face masks. During the dust bowl, millions of acres of land were left unsuitable for farming, and over two million people were forced to migrate from the southern plains. It is thought that thousands of people died of pneumonia caused by the dust entering their lungs.

Andrew Lockley, who along with colleagues at Double Negative won an Oscar for the visual effects on *Interstellar*, explained how Christopher Nolan was inspired by Ken Burns' footage. "It was a man-made problem: the land was over-farmed, and it caused all the soil to blow away in the wind. It caused these enormous dust

storms that blew all across the country. And so the idea was that in *Interstellar*, without having to get sort of ham-fisted with all of the exposition, he wanted to show that a similar thing had happened again, and that's why we're back to this situation where there's no food and people are starving."

Dust storms also provide a visual representation of a threat from the environment, whereas other weather systems can be more challenging to capture. "It's very difficult to sell the idea of a storm or strong winds in film, because it's an invisible force," Lockley says.

Dust also has the benefit of reducing how far an audience can see into the set, meaning less dressing is needed. A similar technique was used in *Blade Runner*, Lockley explains. "It's not a particularly dusty film, but there's lots of smoke in the air that was pumped onto the set to hide the fact that it wasn't particularly big. And anything in the air always adds a lot of emotional atmosphere."

Exposed

Christopher Nolan is renowned for preferring shooting effects on camera and minimising the use of computer graphics, and the dust scenes in *Interstellar* were no different, Lockley says. "He loves actors to be exposed to whatever's going on, just I guess for the performance's sake. But dust particularly would have affected the lighting as well. He loves texture and the messiness that reality brings, so he's always a little suspicious that CG is overly polished and doesn't give you the craziness of nature."

While some larger particles were added in post-production,

the scene where Matthew McConaughey's character and his children try to escape a dust storm in his car was shot on location in the small town of Fort MacLeod in Alberta, Canada. The crew used large wind machines called Ritter fans, "like aeroplane propellers, really", Lockley says, to blow huge sacks of synthetic dust through the main street of the small town. Local news reports shared how, as part of the clean-up efforts, the production team arranged for every air conditioning unit on that road to be serviced, and the filters replaced. "The town was literally inches deep with dust all over it. We were there the day after for the clean-up, and it was just everywhere. It was inside everybody's houses and all over the windows."

Larger objects aloft in the high winds in that scene were added in with computer graphics, "Once they're in the car in the corner towards the house, they were throwing bits of polystyrene and sort of balsa wood type things at the car. But some of those weren't going particularly fast. So we've added some bigger pieces in that." Lockley jokes that even that was probably past the preference of Nolan, "I think if he knew it wasn't going to kill anybody, he probably would have thrown the biggest stuff in the fans as well."

Evolved

Despite the effort that went into producing dust scenes in *Interstellar*, both on set and in post-production, Lockley doesn't seem totally satisfied with the shot of the dust storm approaching from behind a baseball game, which was inspired by Ken Burns' footage. "I think it's okay. I think we're

better at it now.” The difference between what his team at DNEG managed in 2013 and what they could manage now, he says, is due to an increase in computing power.

“The big dust cloud coming across the baseball field, it’s actually really quite difficult to simulate, because there needs to be so much detail in it,” Lockley explains. “It was very difficult to get it to be soft, like it was in the archive photos, but still have shape and scale. You tend to get a lot of these sort of mushroom shapes and things that look like rising loaves of bread, which don’t feel right, feel synthetic, I guess they feel digital. You don’t very often see them in real dust elements. So getting rid of those is quite difficult. And so in the end, it was a really tricky balance between it just looking like a complete wash-out of just flat brown, and retaining shapes that gave it a good scale and a good size.”

Upgrade

Peter Kyme, a CG Supervisor at ILM, the visual effects company founded in 1975 by George Lucas, agrees that the sheer force of computing power has allowed for an improvement in these types of scenes. “There’s a lot of artistry and control that the individual artists will be kind of working on, Kyme explains. ILM has created dust effects for *Star Wars*, 1999’s *The Mummy*, and more recently *The Mandalorian*, a TV series set on Tatooine, the dusty planet where Luke Skywalker is first introduced in the *Star Wars* series.

Like the fluid dynamic simulations required for water and smoke, creating dust storms is a computationally intensive

heavy process. As the computing power available to special effects teams increases, they’re given the gift of more time to get the simulations as convincing as possible. “We’re always looking to sort of make our processes more efficient and so even if we have reached quite a high visual bar for something, we want to be able to do it more efficiently the next time, because the more efficiently you can do it, the more iterations you can do. And in general, the better the results,” Kyme says.

“Ten years ago, you might have had to wait two or three days to get a simulation through and then you look at it and it’s not quite right and you get some notes, you have to run another one. Nowadays, it might be something you can get in a few hours and turn around a few versions in a day and it gives the artist more time to sort of shape it and make it tell the story in a way that the shot requires.”

One of the key challenges with dust, Kyme finds, is getting the sense of scale right. This can be tricky, with some dust storms in reality being hundreds of kilometres wide, with winds kicking up anything loose on the ground, from large bits of wood and big clumps of soil right down to tiny particles indistinguishable to the human eye, which create a haze. “If there is a sandstorm in a sequence, it’s normally fulfilling two roles. It should look kind of beautiful and epic, and, you know, this majestic thing. But it’s also supposed to be terrifying and scary. And a lot of that comes from setting the scale.”

Size

Achieving the right sense of scale was also a key challenge for

Lynch’s team on the 1980s *Dune*. In order to create the illusion of realistic scale to the sandworms – giant creatures that burrow under the desert – the crew needed a dust-like substance with grains smaller than you’d find in nature.

Dune visual effects artist Kit West described to *Cinefex* magazine in 1985 how the crew used tiny toxic particles called microballoons. “They are incredibly small, hollow spheres of borosilicate glass that are about 2.5 thousandths of an inch or 60 microns across,” he said. The microballoons posed more of a danger than typical synthetic dust used in film sets: “The damn things are very dangerous; once they get in your lungs, they stay there. So all of us on the worm set always had to wear face masks to filter out the air.”

Exactly how Denis Villeneuve has tackled the challenge of dust in the latest *Dune* adaptation will be revealed when the film is released this autumn. Like Nolan, Villeneuve is keen to get as much action on camera as possible, leaving the minimum to computer graphics. Much of 2021’s *Dune* was shot on location in Jordan and the UAE. Speaking at Shanghai International Film Festival last year, he said “the soul of a movie is the words and the actors and that in order to get the best out of it, you need the actors to be inspired, and to be inspired you think a certain amount of reality is needed.”

Fans of Herbert’s novel, which was dedicated to researchers of dry environments, are eagerly awaiting to see if Villeneuve has successfully captured *Dune*’s dusty soul. **fs**

LOST DÆMONS & DUST

Simon Gibbs explores the story of *The Golden Compass* movie, and how studio meddling undercut what was supposed to be a very different film...

It must be acknowledged just what director Zack Snyder has achieved with his new cut of the film *Justice League*. In a world where multi-million dollar films are often made by committee, many obstacles can stop a director from reaching their intended vision. Mix in the complexities of an existing property, and the chance to revisit the editing room fades. It can be devastating to the director as critics tear apart the work presented under their name.

The Golden Compass, New Line Cinema's attempt at bringing Philip Pullman's world of *His Dark Materials* to the big screen is a good example of this. Theatrically it was a confused film, containing a stellar cast and scenes, but ultimately a hollow story that never captures the depth of its source material.

It wasn't always meant to be like this. In 2002, New Line

Cinema was weighing up its options to follow up the *Lord Of The Rings* trilogy of films. Its eyes landed on the award-winning book series *His Dark Materials*. The narrative of those follows the adventures of Lyra and her soul, personified as an animal (called a

Dæmon). The story plays with parallel worlds and an overtly evil interpretation of the Catholic Church called the Magisterium.

Weighing up Weitz

Tom Stoppard was originally commissioned to write the screenplay. It was rumoured that Ridley Scott, Sam Mendes and others were lined up to direct. Less than a year later, the studio would reject Stoppard's script (without informing him).

New Line decided to go for the director and screenwriter Chris Weitz instead, who had submitted an unsolicited 40-page treatment and love letter to the series. He seemed an odd choice. His two most known films at the time were *About A Boy* and *American Pie*; and neither leant their image to a VFX-heavy blockbuster.

The studio needed this film to be a hit. A pessimist would say that New Line had already attempted its first manipulating move: hiring a director with less experience so it could assert more control.

Lord Of The Rings helmer Peter Jackson invited Weitz down to New Zealand to see *King Kong* being filmed. Not only did Jackson provide a one-week big-budget director's crash course, he provided insight into how to handle New Line. The enormity and scope of the project hit. Weitz panicked. Newsweek quoted him saying "you know what? I can't do this".

In September 2004, Weitz made contact with the biggest fan website of the time to organise an interview in hopes of reforging a connection with the story. He answered comprehensively, laying



out why he was right for the job and admitted concessions that the studio was already making on the source material.

In December, *The Times* wrote an article titled "God is cut from film of *Dark Materials*", taking excerpts from the interview and negative fan reactions to start a wave of bad press for the film, framing that New Line was putting money over the story and Weitz was allowing this to happen. Less than two weeks after the article, mounting pressure from religious groups, upset fans and a studio starting to feel at ill ease, it was announced that Weitz was leaving the project.

Fan's eye view

I still remember learning about *His Dark Materials*, in particular the second book, *The Subtle Knife*. The publisher had come into my school and was telling us about the story of a boy and his magical knife. It captured the imagination of my classmates.

A friend of mine pointed out that it wasn't the first book in the story and he leant me his copy of *Northern Lights* (the British title to *The Golden Compass*). As a dyslexic I struggle to read, but something about this world pulled me in. I



devoured the books, and the series became a lifetime friend.

Years later, as news of the film broke, I would consume every scrap of information to try and see if what I imagined would materialise on the big screen.

I remember upon discovering that Chris Weitz had been hired joining in discussions about his unproven history. Does a director whose main hit had been about a boy and his pie deserve to tell the story of a girl and her unravelling of the fabric of the universe? I can see now as fans we were gate-keeping the story, a toxic trait that festers in many fandoms.

I followed closely as Weitz left and his replacement Anand Tucker joined and pre-production began. I also watched as that relationship fell apart and Tucker parted ways with the studio citing creative differences. For a while, it seemed that the film had reached an impasse.

Filming begins

At this point, Weitz was given a letter from Philip

Pullman asking him to reconsider and take back the position of *The Golden Compass* director. Feeling he'd grown in the interim time, he accepted and filming began on the 4th of September 2006.

As principal photography progressed, and the studio started to exert its pressure once again, Weitz filmed extra alternative scenes where he kept the religious elements in the hope that they could be included. One such moment was Daniel Craig revealing what 'Dust' is (an essential part of the narrative). Weitz managed to include a line where Craig said – and spoiler – "Dust is Sin".

The director's right hand is that of the editor, and Weitz's was formidable. Editing the footage was Anne V Coates, who had worked on such greats as *Lawrence Of Arabia*. Early cuts were starting to come together.

At the same time, New Line's ill ease was starting to grow. It was unsure what it was expecting, but it wasn't what was being produced. The studio wanted an easily digestible, family-friendly, adventure film, but instead it was getting depth, religious meaning, and – true to the book – the kidnap and death of young children.

Intercision

Test screenings were run and, in the film's early state, there was some confusion. A couple of audience members thought that in the emotional ending sequence, the lead heroine had died and walked into heaven. It was enough for New Line to step in and take tighter hold on the film.

Weitz's editor was fired and new plans were sketched up.

During pre-production, it had been announced that Daniel Craig was to play the new James Bond, and Eva Green was to be part of the upcoming 007 movie. Craig was

brought back to film two extra action sequences (one in the snow that led to injury on set).

This started a tendency of New Line to try and appeal directly to fans of others films. It'd already started using the *Lord Of The Rings* connection, but to emphasise this Christopher Lee was asked to film a new scene and the voice of the hulking armoured bear called Iorek was replaced. Once played by Nonso Anozie, the voice was replaced by Ian McKellen and was jokingly known among the VFX teams as Gandalf the Bear.

Nothing was left untouched. Even the ending scene was reworked multiple times, trying to make the film end on a less dour note. Subplots and texture were removed to get the film down to less than two hours.

Re-dubbing and VFX techniques were applied to remove even the slightest hint of religious notion. Even the shape of buildings was reconsidered and reworked to be more to the suiting of the studio. Neat ideas that VFX supervisor Mike Fink had incorporated, such as the notion that any live-action animals would suggest a severed Dæmon (someone who's soul had been separated from their body) whilst CGI was for a whole person, were lost to the new scenes.

In the final edit, even some of the reshoot footage was changed, removing one of Daniel Craig's action sequence and muting the other greatly. Rhythm & Hues, a top tier VFX team, worked tirelessly on the film's ending sequence. The whole scene taking place around a swirling vortex with Nicole Kidman, Daniel Craig and the lead Dakota – Blue-Richards – was a spectacle that the team would use as a



Revival

Of course, the screen story of *His Dark Materials* has enjoyed a happier time of late. Over a decade after the feature film came and went, the BBC would work with New Line to retell the story on the small screen. But in a parallel world, the soul

would have been left intact in a trilogy of films that captured these stories and laid them out on crisp celluloid. Until travelling to that world is possible, there perhaps should be a constant shout asking to [#ReleaseTheWeitzCut](#).

demo to potential clients. However, New Line remained unconvinced.

In October 2007, less than two months before release, Weitz sent a message to fans. He expressed the plan that the last three chapters of the book would be moved to the beginning of the second film. It can be assumed that the message was sent somewhat under duress and a way of pleasing the studio. Fans were incensed.

A sequence that originally appeared in the second act was moved to the film's finale, leading to awkward storytelling, but New Line could now push out a film for Christmas that had talking Polar Bears, snow and a happy ending – exactly what it wanted.

To finance all the extra work in post-production, New Line sold all the international rights to the film and the rest of the trilogy. This would be the downfall the series.

Release and disappointment

I remember watching the trailers for the film. I initially felt unsure when seeing *The One Ring* turn into the Alethiometer. Things changed when an extended trailer appeared based upon footage that was shown at Cannes. I was ecstatic.

It's now odd to see the final trailer released in October 2007, a week before Weitz would tell fans the ending had been cut. The promo is a wealth of unused footage including sequences from the removed ending. It was not indicative of what reached cinemas.

I watched the film with my girlfriend and I still remember the palpable disappointment in the cinema. This wasn't the story I loved. My girlfriend said that she didn't understand why I would like the story we'd just been shown.

The film performed poorly in the US, only recouping \$70 million of



its \$180 million production budget. This would not be echoed overseas, where the film made a comfortable \$302 million. Sadly, New Line would see little of this money due to the sale of the international distribution rights. The nail was in the coffin for any sequels and to greater effect for New Line. The studio was merged into Warner Bros.

For Weitz, the reaction, particularly by fans of the series, was devastating. All his fears had crystallised and become true. He was heartbroken. Fans would often lay the blame at his feet, not being able to see beyond the final product. He often peppered interviews with the hopes that he would be allowed to create a director's cut in the spirit of the *Lord Of The Rings* extended editions.

Trial by fire

When the studio wasn't forthcoming with the idea of a director's cut, Weitz decided to take matters into his own hands. He took

low-quality DVD dailies mixed in with early cuts and started to piece together his vision.

It was rough and jumped from shot to shot where quality and background music would vary, but it was, in the truest sense of the words, a director's cut. Showing this to VFX experts, it was estimated that it would take \$17 million to restore to the quality that the final film held.

He presented the cut to Warner Bros, but it refused to proceed with the idea.

In 2010, Weitz would travel to Burning Man (a favourite haunt of his) and played the cut to his camp. This would be the one screening this version of the film would get. It hit him that maybe an adaption of this magnitude was out of his scope and that maybe the issues had all come from him.

At the same time back in England, I'd looked at all the pieces of pre-released footage from the ending sequence. Using



the materials I'd acquired (many of which followed the original version of the film) – such as the computer game, trailers, and even scanning in photos from books and stickers – I edited together a video to show what the ending scenes may have been like.

I uploaded the video to YouTube and it became a favourite among fans desperate to see what the climax of the story could have been on the big screen. It started to gather attention with the crew, it appeared on some VFX showreels, with people desperate to show the work they had done. I even got to speak to Philip Pullman about it. But most exciting of all was Chris Weitz.

We discussed the footage I'd come across and the ideas he'd filmed. Hearing each snippet made me intrigued at what his vision truly was. I sensed that the heartbreak was still raw but he had grown and new experiences had made him more confident.

Many worlds theory

Chris and I spoke occasionally through the years. When I got married and honeymoon plans meant that we would be travelling through LA, I asked Chris for advice on what we should do. We decided it would be nice to finally meet for a meal; my new family and his.

It wasn't long after meeting when the idea of watching his director's cut came to pass.

He warned me that it was rough, but I didn't mind. It was glorious. There was tension in scenes where none had existed before. Characters joked and had humanity. The villains were fleshed out and had genuinely chilling moments. It was an engaging and complete

experience, something that can't be said about the theatrical release. The VFX wasn't always there, but with a squint and a bit of imagination you could feel it. You could see the blood drip down as the defeated King of the Bear's tongue unrolled down his body.

Then there was the ending sequence as the film reached its climax. Moments of intimacy, horror and wonder all in front of a swirling vortex. As Lyra turns her back on the world she knows and travels into the unknown.

Breathtaking.

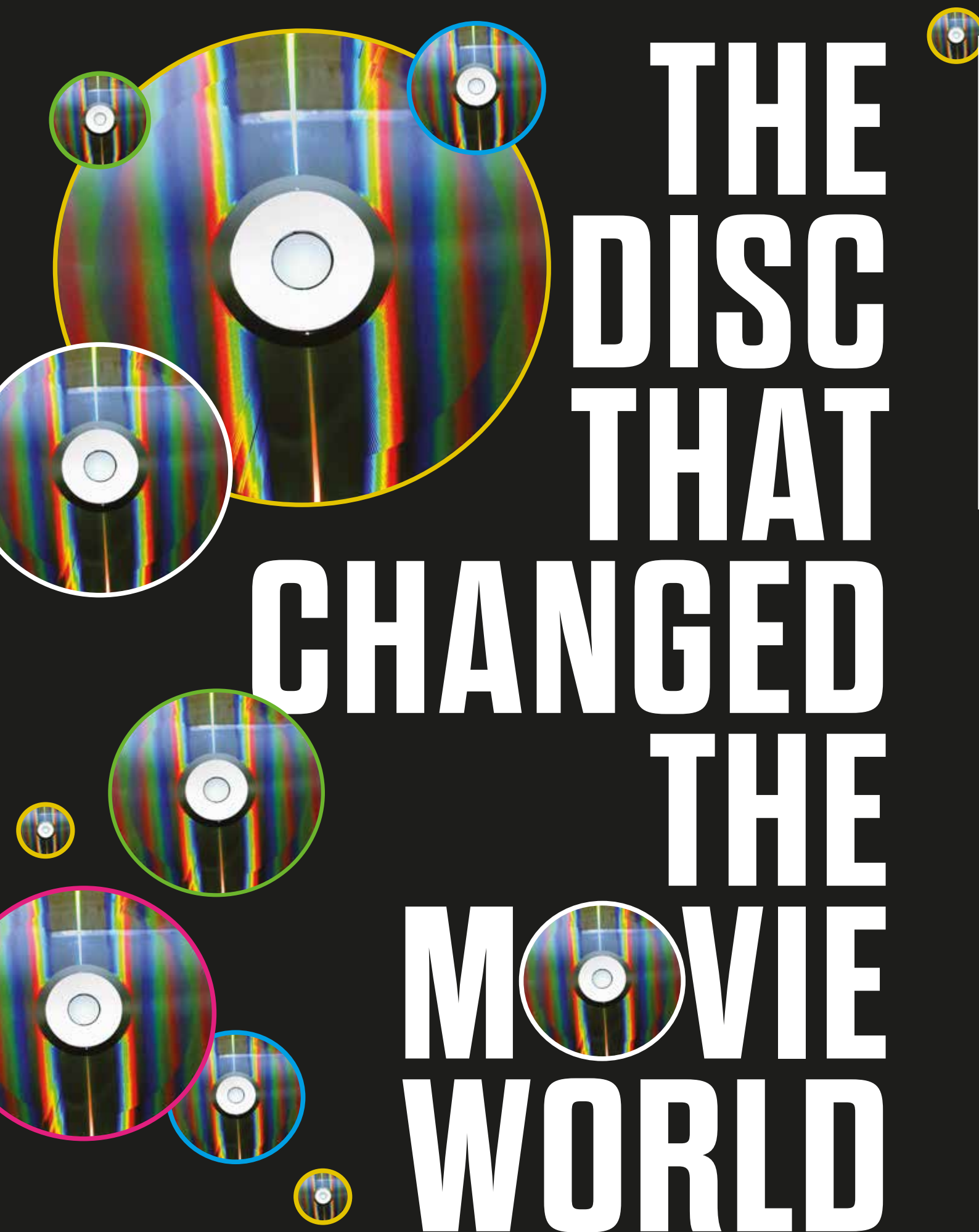
On leaving, my new wife turned to me and said that she finally understands why the story means so much to me. I think that's the biggest praise an adaption can get.

For me, the experience inspired a love of editing and how different material can feel in different hands.



I've been lucky enough to now edit a feature myself and understand some of the complexities it holds. For Chris, I hope that the pain has faded and that he can reflect on the lessons learnt in a positive light. Fans of the story should know that he is one of us and did tremendous work that never got to see the light of day.

He wasn't the first and surely won't be the last director to have their vision gobbled up. 



THE DISC THAT CHANGED THE MOVIE WORLD



Mark McManus tells the story of LaserDisc, and traces how we still feel a little of the format's impact today...

LaserDisc. Readers of a certain age may have heard of it, but chances are most mentions of the format will be met with blank-faced, slack-jawed indifference.

The 12" video disc format never really set the home video market alight, though its success did vary in different countries. It saw the most market penetration in Japan, while in the UK, despite valiant efforts from some studios and distributors, it really never took off at all, and we certainly never had the kind of deluxe or special edition releases that the US saw.

LaserDisc was launched by MCA and Philips in 1978 (initially under the name 'DiscoVision', until new majority owners Pioneer rebranded the format as LaserDisc), and was built on advances in optical video

disc technologies that had begun in the 60s.

It's now commonplace for the latest home video formats to rely on a collection of new and classic high-profile titles to get their launches off the ground, and LaserDisc was no different. The first US title released in 1978 was the mega-hit blockbuster *du jour* (and a movie guaranteed to make an early appearance on any new format), Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*.

The picture and sound improvement were immediately apparent when compared to the video tape formats common at the time, with a far higher resolution than VHS was able to offer. In addition, NTSC discs could carry multiple soundtracks, in the form of stereo digital and stereo analogue tracks (though PAL format discs – that we got in the UK – were limited to just one). While only stereo, the tracks often

used Dolby Pro Logic, which, when played back through an appropriate home cinema amplifier, would be decoded into four channel surround sound. Later advances allowed more cinema-like 5.1 Dolby Digital (known at the time as AC-3) and DTS tracks to be included on American NTSC discs as well.

A steady flow of releases would follow into the early 80s, but it took a new indie label to show the true potential of the format, and set the bar for all physical media formats since then.

Premium

The Criterion Collection has built a reputation over the decades as one of the premier home video labels, specialising in giving its releases the very best treatment they deserve, in the form of new director-approved video and audio transfers and restorations, audio commentaries, documentaries, booklets, liner notes, and more. All of this was a new concept when, in 1984, the company launched its first ever title, a LaserDisc edition of the classic *Citizen Kane*. As well as featuring a painstakingly remastered and restored version of the film, the release included a specially produced visual essay, an at the time very rarely seen trailer for the film, and a text essay.

Criterion would follow *Kane* with hundreds of titles over the years, including *King Kong*, *Akira*, *Dr Strangelove*, *This Is Spinal Tap*, and *Raging Bull*, to name just a few. Some of its releases would include the premier of previously unseen versions of some films, like the legendary uncut version of *RoboCop*.

Criterion opened the floodgates when it came to special edition and restored releases, and other labels soon appeared on the scene.

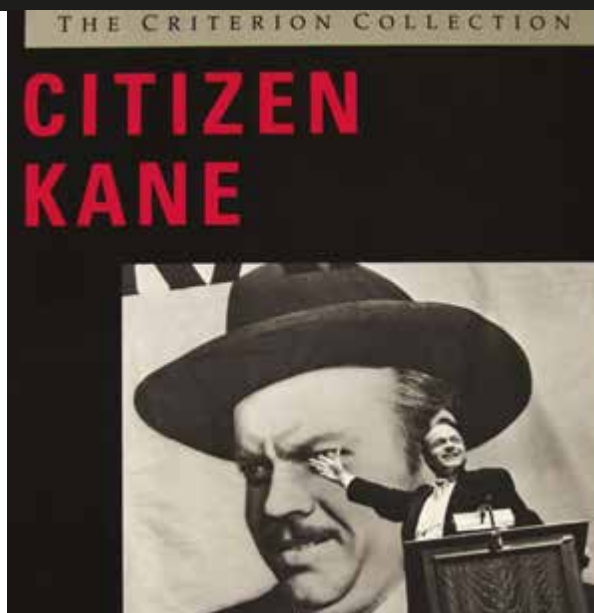
One of the best at the time was Elite Entertainment, whose debut release in 1994 was the classic horror *Night Of The Living Dead*, complete with a stunning – for the time at least – new restoration, and a great selection of extra features. Chief among them was an at times hilarious cast commentary track, which can still be found on the most recent Blu-ray release from – ironically enough – Criterion.

Other notable Elite releases included the special editions of *Maniac*, *A Nightmare On Elm Street*, *Dawn Of The Dead*, *I Spit On Your Grave*, and *Evil Dead 1 & 2*.

While these indie labels blazed the trail, it wasn't long before the big studios caught up and started getting in on the action with some incredible releases.

From Disney, for example, came an exquisite release of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Spread across three discs, the film was presented in a format that allowed the viewer to study the animation in previously unseen detail. The set also included a 'making of' documentary, animation tests, short films and more, not to mention a hardback book featuring design artwork and a ton of behind-the-scenes images and information.

Meanwhile, Fox brought us a release of cult classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which included an 'audience participation' audio track, an alternate ending and takes of some of the musical numbers, retrospective documentary, 24K gold soundtrack CD, and a book about the history of the film.



Extended

One of the benefits of the home video market has been the ability to release longer versions of films, free from the requirement for cinemas to fit in a certain number of screenings per day, and from the limitations of the human bladder. Here, LaserDisc once again led the way, with director James Cameron in particular taking full advantage of the format.

Over a few short years, we saw extended cuts of sci-fi sequel *Aliens*, underwater thriller *The Abyss*, and the epic *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, all restoring significant previously excised footage back into the film to flesh out characters, story and action. Plus, on top of that, was a treasure trove of bonus material, including audio commentaries, documentaries, behind-the-scenes test footage, stills galleries, and more.

The early to mid-90s were probably the golden age of the format, with releases like those mentioned above, as well as other contemporary blockbusters such as *Aladdin*, *Jurassic Park*, *True Lies*, *Die Hard*, and more, alongside new releases of classics

like the (then unaltered) *Star Wars* trilogy and *The Sound of Music*. An increasing number of releases also came with THX certification, which acted as an assurance of optimal video and sound mastering, squeezing the very best out of the format.

While for the average customer and casual movie fan VHS was good enough, and selling in huge numbers, LaserDisc represented

the best that the technologies of the time could offer. A tank-like LaserDisc player would often be at the heart of any home cinema set-up.

But LaserDisc didn't come without its... quirks.

'Challenges'

The main quirk of the format involved its limited running time capacity, which varied depending on the playback format used. The CAV format allowed for just 30 minutes of film per side, but did allow for 'trick play' features, such as slow motion, freeze frame, and so on. CLV discs, on the other hand, allowed for up to 60 minutes of playback per side, but didn't support those trick play features (you could fast forward or pause, but would just get a blank screen, rather than the film's picture).

This meant that, whichever format was used and depending on the length of the film, you were guaranteed at least one interruption to your movie viewing while you got up to change the disc side, or insert a second disc. Later, more advanced LaserDisc players would feature dual side play, achieved by

Groundbreaker

As the film collector's format of choice for almost two decades, LaserDisc offered superior video and audio, and set the standard for special edition movie releases by which today's formats are still measured.

Launched in the late 70s, the format was much loved by its fans, but struggled to get mainstream adoption.

While you may not have heard of LaserDisc, it really did pave the way for much of what we've now come to expect as standard for our home video releases, as

indie labels such as The Criterion Collection and Elite used the format to introduce definitive versions of hundreds of classic and contemporary movies. Soon, filmmakers like James Cameron took the opportunity to give fans extended cuts of their hits, including the ground-breaking *Aliens* Special Edition in 1991. If you really loved movies in the 80s and much of the 90s, LaserDisc was the ultimate viewing choice. But heck, you needed a wallet for it...

moving the laser assembly round to the underside of the disc (in a speedy 20 seconds or so), and would also be kitted out with the circuitry to allow trick play on CLV discs.

However, for all its pros and cons, perhaps the biggest hurdle to the widespread adoption of LaserDisc was cost. Even an entry-level player would cost several hundred pounds, while the films themselves would start around £25-30 for a new release, with a commentary and a couple of trailers if you were lucky. For the more fully featured special editions, prices approaching – and often exceeding – £100 were the norm. And that's for an American import, so add on shipping and customs charges, and it's clear that LaserDiscs were often almost luxury items, and not the kind of thing you'd just throw in the trolley with your weekly shop.

The competition

Over the years, several attempts were made to introduce new, cheaper formats, such as Video CD, also known as VCD. Aside from the more compact physical size, the format offered little in the way of benefits. One single disc could hold up to 80 minutes of audio and video, so multi-disc releases were still needed. In addition, the low video resolution only offered VHS-level pictures, although this was often marred by poor compression, further affecting the viewing experience.

While VCD took off across east Asia, in most territories the format was a dud, and LaserDisc's reign as the collector's format of choice continued, seemingly forever. Ahem...

DVD (or Digital Versatile Disc) was born out of two competing electronics industry projects to develop a new high-capacity optical storage format. In an effort to avoid a repeat of the Betamax and VHS war of the 80s, eventually the two projects combined their efforts into a single new format, the DVD, which could be used for computer data storage, as well as digital video and audio (hence the 'Versatile').

Launching in late 1996 in Japan and the US, and around the world in 1997, DVD was an instant hit. As a data storage format, the advantages were clear, and computer and console makers quickly adopted it as their removable storage media of choice.

As for the home entertainment consumer, DVD really did tick all the boxes. It boasted the same familiar, convenient size as the ubiquitous CD, more compact packaging than VHS tapes, with vastly improved picture and crystal-clear multi-channel digital audio, often in several different languages.

Best of all was the price. Players at first carried a premium, but thanks to the economies of scale quickly dropped, to the point where a player can now be bought for less than £30, making them almost disposable.

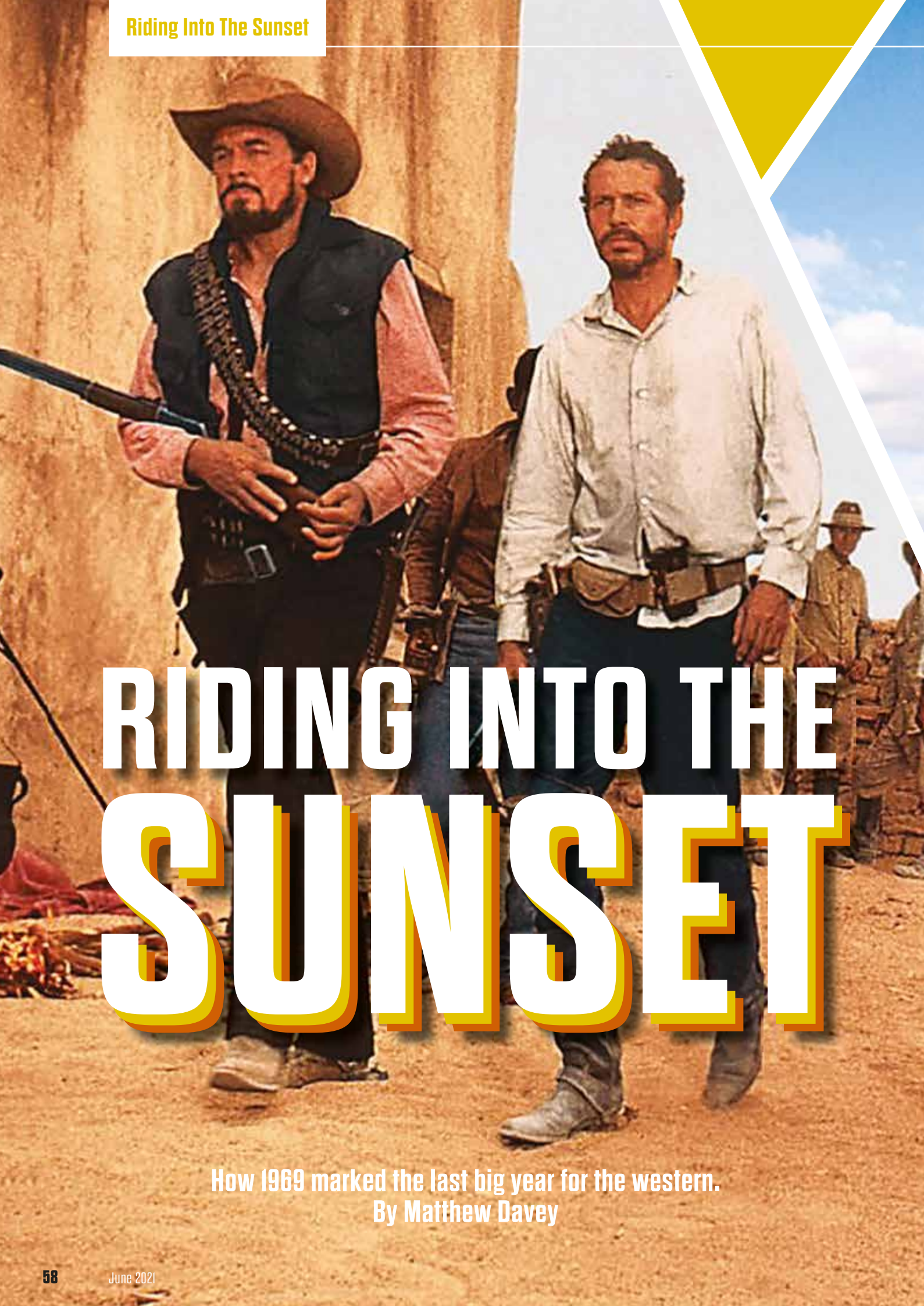
As for the discs, early titles were in the £20-£25 range, comparable with a standard LaserDisc, but would often include the kind of in-depth extra features only previously found on those £100+ collector's editions. Now, as HD and 4K disc formats have entered the market, a brand-new DVD release is usually priced around £10, while a whole TV season boxset can be bought for £30, an option that was never feasible from a cost point of view on LaserDisc.

Changes

While, as a collector, it was a shame to lose the often beautiful, sturdy and imposing LaserDisc collector's editions, you really couldn't argue with all of the benefits of DVD.

Despite the introduction of LaserDisc/DVD combi machines, there was no coming back from the success of the new format, and LaserDisc's days were truly numbered. By 2001, studios had dropped the format for home video releases, and while Pioneer continued to produce players until 2009, these were generally for specialist applications, such as karaoke.

Despite its ultimate failure, the format was groundbreaking, and its legacy lives on, responsible as it is for much of what we've come to expect from special edition releases of our favourite films on the latest physical formats. 



RIDING INTO THE SUNSET

How 1969 marked the last big year for the western.
By Matthew Davey

It might be hard to believe in an era of Marvel blockbusters that the western was the superhero film of its day. Filmmakers such as John Ford, Henry Hathaway and Anthony Mann all made their name in the genre and made movie stars out of the likes of John Wayne, Henry Fonda and James Stewart. The western dominated the big screen for decades leading into the 60s. Yul Brynner led an all-star cast in a remake of Akira Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* – *The Magnificent Seven* – and Sergio Leone redefined the myth of the west with his European 'spaghetti westerns'.

But the end of the decade was a swansong for the western, a genre that remains a sleeping giant to this day.

In 1969, Neil Armstrong was the first person to walk on the moon, the Beatles performed publicly together for the last time, and the first Concorde test flight was conducted in France. Yet for the western, it was the beginning of the end of its silver screen popularity – and that's despite *Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid*, *Paint Your Wagon* and *True Grit* all charting in the top 10 highest grossing films of 1969 at the US box office.

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid

A bicycle montage in a western to the song 'Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head' by B J Thomas shouldn't work, but thanks to George Roy Hill's innovative direction the scene is synonymous with *Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid*. It depicts the final days of the 'hole in-the-wall Gang' outlaws Butch and Sundance – played by Paul Newman and Robert Redford – who go on the run in Bolivia,

a posse of hired guns hot on their tail. *Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid* triumphed over *The Love Bug* and *Midnight Cowboy* as the highest grossing film of 1969 in America, winning a record nine BAFTAs too.

The New York music montage, the black and white opening and the ending have all endured. In large part that's due to the on-screen chemistry between Newman and Redford which is often comedic in nature. From "boy, I got vision, and the rest of the world wears bifocals" to "for a minute there, I thought we were in trouble" there's an array of quotable stuff in William Goldman's script. The dynamic duo of Newman and Redford would team up again in *The Sting*, four years later, but it's for their work in *Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid* that they're both fondly remembered. Arguably the closest Hollywood has come to recreating such a memorable on-screen bromance in more recent years would be in Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood*, with Leonardo DiCaprio alongside Brad Pitt. Yet it's the organic friendship between Newman and Redford as Butch and Sundance that endures over five decades later.

Paint Your Wagon

It's hard to imagine a musical being made in 2021 where two prospect partners share the same wife in a small mining town, looking to find fortune in the California gold rush. Yet the release of *Paint Your Wagon* in 1969 produced that very story. Starring Clint Eastwood and Lee Marvin, *Paint Your Wagon* was plagued with infamous behind-the-scenes problems. Looking to follow the success of *The Sound Of Music*, director Joshua Logan set

about making *Paint Your Wagon* on location. Ultimately, Logan's insistency on shooting the picture in the valleys of Oregon saw the movie's budget double to \$20 million, as all the sets had to be built away from the soundstages in Hollywood.

Paint Your Wagon was a tonal shift for its star Clint Eastwood, opting for an odd musical/western crossover when musicals were going out of fashion. He was a long way from his antihero persona in the 'Man with No Name' trilogy.

After the film's release, Eastwood claimed to have seen three versions of the movie: a director's cut, producers' cut and a studio cut. Eastwood admired Logan and his cut of the film, but "that wasn't the one that was released". Eastwood might have raised an eyebrow at the film's theatrical bow, but further eyebrows were certainly being raised during production as he had a 'relationship' with his co-star – Jean Seberg. To add to the troubled filming, legend has it that Lee Marvin was drunk on set regularly and got into sparring matches with the director.

Logan set the record straight shortly after the movie released in theatres, though. "Lee Marvin is a very close friend of mine and we will stay friends for many years to come," he declared. "It is true that we had a few mild discussions, never any violent ones. Lee Marvin is a great Southern gentleman. Therefore, when he is sober, it is absolutely impossible for him to have done such a thing, and when he is drunk, which he is once in a while I must admit, he is really drunk."

Marvin came under fire from critics for his eccentric performance, even though it was very similar to his Oscar-winning turn in *Cat Ballou*. In hindsight, it was probably too similar a role,

with even Eastwood joking that *Paint Your Wagon* was 'Cat Ballou II'. After filming wrapped, Joshua Logan dynamited the set after what had been a strenuous shoot.

Even though it was the seventh highest grossing film of 1969 in the US, grossing \$14.5 million, the film's hefty budget wasn't recouped. But still, it stands alone as a musical western. Not been too many of those...

True Grit

For those expecting another typical B-movie western from John Wayne in the 60s, *True Grit* couldn't have been more different. Wayne's virtually unrecognisable as an overweight, eyepatch-wearing, trigger-happy drunk.

Sporting a grey toupee for the first time in his lengthy filmography, Wayne plays Rooster Cogburn, a United States Marshal hired by a young girl alongside a Texas Ranger played by Glen Campbell, to track down her father's murderer. Kim Darby is at ease opposite Wayne in what is her most memorable film role as Mattie Ross. The all-star case also features Robert Duvall and Dennis Hopper, but it was Wayne who received the most recognition, winning the Best Actor Academy Award in 1970. Wayne's most versatile role, accompanied by Elmer Bernstein's score, elevates the film to one of the genre's greats. *True Grit* finished eighth at the US box office in 1969, grossing \$14.3 million.

The Wild Bunch

Although, *The Wild Bunch* was released in 1969, it feels like a modern western more suited for the 21st century. Its violent climactic shootout symbolises the end of an era for the western genre, as an ageing group of outlaws look for one last score, with the west as they know it changing around them.

Something of a metaphor of the cinematic landscape at the time, *The Wild Bunch* was critically divisive upon its release, with director Sam Peckinpah wanting to give the audience "some idea of what it is to be gunned down". Peckinpah was so specific about the way he wanted the film to look that he once screeched at his crew "that's not what I want!" before grabbing a loaded revolver and firing it into a nearby wall until the gun barrel was empty, exclaiming to his stunned crew "that's the effect I want!"

Ebert wrote of *The Wild Bunch* that "the message here is not subtle", but then Sam Peckinpah was not a subtle director. Yet he was at the peak of his powers following his previous two films, *Ride The High Country* and *Major Dundee*. *The Wild Bunch* features an ensemble cast full of the era's great western actors including William Holden, Ernest Borgnine and Robert Ryan. It's reminiscent of a time when star power was in its heyday, where the name of an actor on a movie

poster would have the power to put bums on seats at the cinema.

A new era

As the sun set on the 60s, the 70s dawned and the western became less notable in popular culture. The great western filmmakers of yesteryear were either no longer around or in decline. Figures such as John Wayne, Henry Fonda and James Stewart were winding down, and names such as Gary Cooper and Anthony Mann had passed on. From that era of filmmakers, it was only really Clint Eastwood who continued to make popular mainstream westerns throughout the decades, before departing from the genre in 1992 with *Unforgiven*. Kevin Costner has enjoyed great success in the western filmography with *Dances with Wolves* and *Open Range*. As has Quentin Tarantino with *Django Unchained* and *The Hateful Eight*. But the gap between large critical and commercially successful westerns is far larger than could have been believed in a post-World War II Hollywood, where they had a much more significant turnover. Although classic westerns continue to be championed, there are very few new ones being made to rival the old ones. It's not just that they don't make 'em like that anymore. They're barely making 'em at all...

A shift in trends

As for why the western genre went into decline after 1969, it

Duking It Out

John Wayne finally won his Oscar at a time when his popularity was waning. He'd drawn criticism for being in favour of the Vietnam War, particularly when he directed and starred in 1968's pro-war *The Green Berets*. Film critic Roger Ebert gave *The Green*

Berets a zero-star review, but Wayne believed that critics were attacking the Vietnam War itself, rather than his own film. It's been widely speculated that Wayne's Oscar win for *True Grit* was given to him more as a lifetime achievement award.

was largely down to circumstance. Times changes, and when the mantra become ‘make love not war’, well, westerns were more about the latter. As the Mount Rushmore of western filmmakers departed, there was an emergence of new American filmmakers in a changing time: the Scorseses, the Spielbergs and the Coppolas. In front of the camera? Al Pacino, Robert De Niro and Jack Nicholson – and just how many westerns have they made between them?

Instead, the 70s saw the rise of the gangster film with the likes of *The Godfather*, *The Valachi Papers* and *Mean Streets*. Movies were moving away from the myths and legends of a bygone time and were more focused on a grittier, hard-edged present day. Even vigilante films built on similar foundations as westerns took off with both the *Death Wish* and *Dirty Harry* film series. Ironically with Charles Bronson and Clint Eastwood in the respective lead roles, two actors with global appeal who first came to fame in westerns.

The western has clearly faded away from popular culture, and its success and decline could be attributed to the same thing... oversaturation. Perhaps the western films released in 1969 were guilty of that. No longer an issue of quality, but sheer quantity. For now, at least, the western genre remains a sleeping giant... 

In Control

Following difficult experiences making *Paint Your Wagon* and *Joe Kidd*, Clint Eastwood directed the remaining four westerns that he starred in: *High Plains Drifter* (1973), *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), *Pale Rider* (1985) and *Unforgiven* (1992).

Tantalisingly, post-*High Plains Drifter*, Eastwood tried to direct and star in a western with John Wayne. Wayne rejected his offer, though – he didn’t want Eastwood to direct the film, and he disliked *High Plains Drifter* for its violence and criticism of the old west.

ANOTHER FINE MESS



**Johanna Kirkpatrick
celebrates the screen
work of Stan Laurel
and Oliver Hardy...**

I remember the first time I saw Laurel and Hardy. It was in Edinburgh's wonderful Filmhouse cinema and one of their silent shorts, 1928's *We Faw Down*, was presented by Paul Merton as part of his Silent Clowns show. I must have been about nine years old and it was my first real exposure to early silent cinema.

I was utterly transfixed by all of the featured stars: Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and the little-known Snub Pollard leapt off the screen

at me in vivid black-and-white. But Laurel and Hardy were special. They had something indelible, a spark that, even years later, I struggle to easily pin down.

We Faw Down still sticks in my memory today. The short sees Stan [Laurel] and Ollie [Hardy] lie to their wives and claim they are going to the theatre, when in fact they are going to a poker game. Unbeknownst to them, the theatre they claimed to be attending burns down, leaving Stan and Ollie frantically attempting to explain to their wives what happened

in the show they saw (or didn't see, in this case.) This final scene is the one which lingers, with Ollie attempting to describe the production while Stan, just out of view, creates an elaborate one-man show based on plays he sees advertised in the paper. It's a joyous piece of physical comedy, one which uses the lack of dialogue to its advantage. Laurel's performance becomes increasingly frantic as his mimes inevitably become lost in translation, before finally breaking down into infectious hysterics at Hardy's pathetic excuses.



Fandom

Since then, I have been a dyed-in-the-wool Laurel and Hardy fan, and was thrilled that the release of Jon S Baird's beautiful *Stan & Ollie*, threw 'the boys' back into popular conversation. While *Stan & Ollie* is set around the later years of their career, going back to the beginnings of their partnership through their films proves to be just as illuminating.

What really stands out in those early Hal Roach-directed shorts is how it took a while for the familiar Laurel and Hardy characters to fully develop. There was initially talk of presenting them as a triple act with James Finlayson, an idea which never seemed to get off the ground. Finlayson would go on to appear in many of the duo's shorts and feature films, often in an antagonistic role. So distinct was Finlayson's performance in

fact that his often-exasperated exclamation of "d'ohhhh" became inspiration for Dan Castellaneta when voicing Homer Simpson.

Shorts

A good example of just how quirky those earliest films were can be seen in 1928's *Flying Elephants*, a strange yet rather charming piece of early cinema. Perhaps the most striking thing about this short is the fact that Laurel and Hardy are not presented here as a double act, instead simply being two comedic leads in the same little movie.

The plot is simple, following two cavemen who are competing for the affections of a cavewoman and trying to impress her father (played by Finlayson.) Competing might be a slightly strong word for it though, as Laurel and Hardy

hardly appear together in the entire short, instead getting into their own mishaps before meeting towards the end. Some performance elements that would later become staples are clearly visible however, especially in Laurel's performance. His loose-limbed leaps will later be used to great effect in talkies such as *Any Old Port*. It's an oddity, but worth a watch, if just to see how far the leads develop their performances in a relatively short timeframe.

You only need to look one year ahead to see how quickly the shorts found a consistent tone and sense of character. One of the greats of the silent shorts is 1929's *Liberty*, a slightly more grounded affair with fewer flights of fancy (there are no flying elephants here!) The film shows Stan and Ollie as convicts on the run after escaping prison. While trying to evade the police, they wind up at the top of a skyscraper under construction, with only the metal girders providing any foothold. An absolutely masterful slapstick sequence ensues, with both leads' physical performances reaching – yes! – new heights. Ollie constantly shaking as he attempts to be brave, their constant hand holding, Stan's bow-legged panic as he makes his way from one handhold to another, it's all here and it's hysterical. Oh, and Stan has a crab down his trousers.

It's in later silent shorts like this and *We Faw Down* that the Laurel and Hardy dynamic truly comes together, with the iconic bowler hats becoming a firm fixture. These 1929 shorts also further aid their characterisation: Ollie's bullying, domineering nature comes to the fore more often, while Stan takes on the role of a slightly gormless doormat.

Out loud

While *Liberty* and the equally excellent *Big Business* showed the Laurel and Hardy characters start to take shape, it's inarguable that they reached new heights of success when they made the leap into sound. Many silent comedy stars struggled with the change from sound to silent, with Chaplin choosing to leave his Little Tramp character largely silent in *Modern Times*. Laurel and Hardy, however, took the technological leap in their stride. This was largely helped by their real-life voices, which brilliantly fit the personas they'd already been developing as silent stars. Hardy's pompous, southern accent perfectly complemented by Stan's reedy transatlantic mix (not quite English, not quite American). The quality of dialogue helped too, enabling more running jokes and, importantly, catchphrases to develop.

Of course, one of the pairs' most enduring being Ollie's resigned "well, here's another fine mess you've gotten me into."

The phrase was the title of an outstanding 1930 short which involves Stan and Ollie on the run from the law and hiding in a mansion. Ollie disguises himself as the lord of the manor, leaving Stan to take on the role of both Hives the Butler and Agnes the Maid. *Another Fine Mess* is an excellent example of what makes the 'talkies' so endearing. The ludicrous nature of their disguises puts the pair in an extremely difficult situation, and continually ups the comedic ante, with a highlight coming in Ollie's fruitless attempts to show off a billiard room to a couple seeking

to rent out the house they've hidden in.

Another underappreciated gem from the talkie era is *Me And My Pal*. This time we see Stan and Ollie living affluently, the latter about to marry into a rich oil family. However, what Ollie declares to be the "happiest day of his life" is disrupted when Stan, the best man, arrives before the wedding with his present – a jigsaw puzzle. Despite Ollie's insistence that he's no time for "such childish pursuits", he's soon pulled into assembling the jigsaw. They're then joined by his butler, their taxi driver and the



policeman who comes to give them a ticket.

It's a marvellously simple concept and one that lends itself well to the direct, basic storytelling requirements of the shorts. It's easy to see when watching why Stan famously hated their films and shorts being shown on commercial TV, believing that any sense of rising comedic tension and timing was destroyed by advert breaks. It's a hard position to argue against in light of shorts like *Me And My Pal*.

Featured

The massive success of the shorts and the consolidation of the Laurel and Hardy personas seen in well-remembered classics such as *The Music Box* gave Hal Roach the confidence to begin to produce

feature-length films. The expanded runtime of the features enabled much more ambitious settings and plots to surround the usual comedic set pieces.

The feature films are amongst Stan and Ollie's best-remembered work, particularly the likes of *Way Out West* and *Sons Of The Desert*, the latter of which was so successful it became the name of the international Laurel and Hardy Fan Club. However, I'd like to highlight one of the lesser-known features, 1936's *Our Relations*. Using the common trick of dual roles for the leads, *Our Relations* introduces us to Stan and Ollie's previously unmentioned, immoral, twin brothers, Bert and Alf. The film is a prime exercise in comedic misunderstanding, with Stan and Ollie quickly being confused for them.

The absurdities only intensify from there, with a precious ring being the focus of a superb chase scene on a vast restaurant set. The best sequence, however, doesn't even involve the twins. Instead, it's an outstanding moment where Stan and Ollie are about to be dropped into a harbour wearing concrete boots, though perhaps concrete Subbuteo bases would be more accurate. Watching Stan and Ollie desperately attempt to keep their balance as they teeter on the edge of the dock is an inspired piece of slapstick and one of their finest moments of physical comedy.

I still struggle to define what it is about Laurel and Hardy that makes them so special. Perhaps there isn't one singular, defining quality. Perhaps it really comes down to, as manager Bernard Delfont suggests in *Stan & Ollie*, "pure magic". Whatever the secret is, it continues to endure... 



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HAPPY ACCIDENT

Brimming with photos inspired by the director's filmography, bestselling *Accidentally Wes Anderson* has been endorsed by the auteur himself, who penned an endearing foreword in this hip coffee table book. By Frankie Lister-Fell

Since the release of his first movie 25 years ago, indie auteur Wes Anderson has inspired countless creatives. Whether you love or loathe his idiosyncratic narratives, wry sense of humour and offbeat characters, one thing almost everyone can agree on is: Wes Anderson's got style.

The Texas-born director's carefully crafted sets are what make his fictional universes so authentic – and they are quite literally crafted. In *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), the candyfloss-coloured 'Mendl's' patisserie boxes are hand-lettered rather than typed because fonts had not been invented by 1932 when the film was set.

Anderson created his own press – the Trans Alpine Yodel, Continental Drift and Daily Fact – for *The Grand Budapest Hotel*'s fictitious town Zubrowka, writing articles for those newspapers even though they aren't visible to viewers. I can only assume an equally meticulous array of real-life props will feature in the director's upcoming August release, *The French Dispatch* (2021).

But Anderson's iconic cinematography has translated into the real world – our messy, non-curated, often-grey world – thanks to the

Instagram account and now bestselling book *Accidentally Wes Anderson* (AWA).

Foundation

The premise is simple. People from around the world submit photos of buildings, places and interiors found in real life that look like they could be in an Anderson film. AWA's founder, Wally Koval, chooses which pictures go on the feed. Alongside his wife Amanda, they research the story (for there's always a story) behind the photo.

Removed from the studio-made timber boathouse in *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012), AWA illustrates that the symmetry, Millennial-pink hues and Art Nouveau architecture so beloved by Anderson can be found in the most unlikely of places. From a public yellow telephone on the London underground to a hotel in Prague where *Mission Impossible* and the *Titanic* were filmed, Koval and Amanda's accompanying caption provides "the stories of the people that have lived, walked and worked in those buildings".

Over three and a half years, the Instagram account has grown to 1.4 million followers and a spin-off book published in November 2020, authorised by Anderson himself. There are currently more than 200,000 copies of the book circulating across the world. How did it all happen?

Observation

"Honestly, the account started as a hobby, a travel bucket list,"

Koval recalls from inside his cosy home office in Brooklyn, New York, a *Life Aquatic* film poster displayed on the wall behind him. "It was a challenge to myself: Once a day I'm going to find an interesting-looking place and find out something about it. That's it.

"Maybe it was from watching too many Wes Anderson films and then coming off a plane and noticing things."

A long-standing fan of the director, Koval was so inspired by the emotive settings in Anderson's films that he travelled to Paris, Budapest and India where the first foundations of AWA were formed.

That was back in summer 2017, when Koval posted his first photo – Hotel Belvédère in Switzerland

– on the AWA page. As it happens, a different photo of the same site appears on the cover of the book. Someone commented on that first post, "Does this place have an interesting story behind it?", and things

took off from there. Followers direct messaged Koval with information about the buildings and, later, photos too. Koval set up a landing page on a website for photo submissions.

Now, the couple receives between 1,800-3,000 a month. They're helped out by supportive friends, contributors and their dog,



Dexter. Koval's filmmaker cousin assists with research. But the duo is AWA's only

full-time staff.

"It varies, but last weekend for example we had about 260 photos to look through," he explains. For the first couple of years, Koval and Amanda would spend their free time collating photos and researching historical context for those pictures after working at their day jobs in marketing and directing a catering company.

Researching is a long but integral process. For AWA, like the director's work it was inspired from, is more than just a pretty picture. Koval describes it as "a combination of aesthetic, interesting design and unexpected narratives that intersect at this bullseye that has become AWA". And there's something else too. An indescribable feeling that what you're looking at is Wes Anderson-esque; the ultimate indication of auteurship.

What AWA wants to elicit is a subdued reaction, unlike the shock-factor which the Instagram algorithm seems to reward. "I want people to read a titbit of information and just go 'huh, that's interesting'," Koval adds. "It's an incredibly subtle but insanely overlooked response."

Palette

As the submissions mounted over the years, Koval revamped their website. Now you can filter photos and stories by location; structures



such as lighthouses, pools and tiny houses; and, in true Anderson style, colour palette.

What's been gratifying to the team is the range of people using the site – from travellers hunting down places you can't find on TripAdvisor's Top 10 to Anderson aficionados looking for cinematic inspiration. Surprisingly, the pandemic has seen an increase in the number of photo submissions Koval and Amanda receive as people have taken to exploring their local surroundings.

"It doesn't matter where you live, just open the door and allow yourself to see it. Most places in the world have a courthouse, a post office, an old building. There are stories to be told about every place. In the smallest of towns we typically find the coolest things," Koval enthuses.

This is what makes up the very essence of the AWA book, which features stories from 200 locations, big and small. Koval started work on it over two years ago, wishing to move away from the "rented land" that is Instagram. He's also a big lover of print, buys newspapers most days and felt the photos AWA were receiving were too good not to be published.

"I was unfamiliar with how much time and work and effort it was going to take to make sure this was going to be the best possible version of itself," Koval says. Having never written a book before, the duo made the difficult decision that Koval would quit his job in January 2020 to commit to the AWA community for a year.

"Looking back, it probably wasn't the best decision considering this was in early 2020 before the world fell into a volcano. We didn't know then that Amanda would lose her job come March and that it would

be a full-time excursion for both of us," he reflects.

Times

The gamble paid off. Koval doesn't have the exact figures for how many copies they've sold in total. But they sold enough to become a *New York Times* bestseller and a finalist in American bookstore Barnes and Noble's Book of the Year awards. "We're going to keep going so long as we can keep paying our rent," Koval laughs.

Over two years ago, the AWA team began the mammoth task of whittling down 15,000 photos to just 200. This process took over a year and a half. About 95% of photos in the book weren't taken by professional photographers nor were they edited.

"I'm willing to bet the book wouldn't have become a *New York Times* bestseller if it was just pretty pictures; the stories add substance," Koval says. "We used every form of communication other than smoke signals and messenger pigeon to find stories for that book."

One such story, and Koval's favourite, is the small municipality of Glava in Sweden. It's fighting for its status to be officially recognised as a town, even though it doesn't have enough residents (less than 200 people live there).

There's zero on the internet about Glava. "I infiltrated Swedish Facebook groups and spoke to people through Google translator. They weren't very forthcoming. I messaged people on AirBnB who have properties nearby," he recalls.

Anderson's endorsement was the biggest stamp of approval of all. "Early on, we had to get his approval to do the project. He was very gracious and agreed. When I sent him the final PDF, it was obviously a very scary time

because he had the final say over the product and could pull the plug at any time.

"Luckily, the exact opposite happened and he said he wanted to write the foreword, which was the cherry on top."

That forward reads: "The photographs in this book were taken by people I have never met, of places and things I have, almost without exception, never seen – but I must say: I intend to. Wally Koval and his collaborators have put together both a very entertaining collection of images and also an especially alluring travel guide."

Happy ending

Personally and professionally, this was a gratifying moment for Koval, and it galvanised what AWA is trying to achieve. "We're taking the perfect sets and beauty that Wes creates in the studio and bringing it into the real world, where a lot of the stories don't have happy endings."

But AWA tries to find a bit of positivity, humour and unexpected narratives in the everyday. 📖

Book details

Price: £25 **Pages:** 368

Dimensions: 238 x 188 x 42 mm

Publisher: Orion Publishing Co

UK stockists: Waterstones, WHSmiths, Daunt Books, Blackwells, Foyles, Amazon

Wally's favourite Wes

Anderson film: *Rushmore*. "My favourite changes on a seasonal basis. Am I in the mood for exploring or something off the wall? My default is *Rushmore* because that's the first Wes Anderson film I ever saw."

Wes Anderson's favourite story in the book: Croatian pancake stand on page 95.

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VERY SPECIAL MEDICINE

Simon Hickson explains to Simon Brew how he ended up working for MediCinema — and just what staggering work the charity does

It wasn't deliberate, but perhaps it was fitting. In a moment that only those who saw Simon Hickson as a regular part of their Saturday morning television in their childhood can appreciate, I'd just popped my duvet in the wash before we chatted. He chuckles when I tell him this at least, and it's hard not to chat about his part of the Trev & Simon double act (with Trevor Neal) that, well, look it up if you've not had the pleasure.

Conversely, it thus seems rather odd to be interviewing someone who was such a big deal in children's television for his current role. There aren't many comedy stars who have jumped from Saturday morning TV to managing a fully-working cinema in a hospital, but Simon Hickson is one of them. He manages the cinema for the charity at the Chelsea & Westminster Hospital, and it was

no shoo-in at all that he got the job in the first place.

"It was kind of quite bizarre," he concedes. "Basically I got to a point where we [Trevor & Simon] were mainly just doing writing, and we were writing for other people and other programmes. And I found it soul destroying." He gives an example of one piece of feedback he got. "We had one editor on one sitcom we were writing. We got handwritten notes on our first draft. On page five, he'd scribbled out a character and written 'I think we can get rid of this character'. That's a fair enough note. I carry on reading, and on page ten the character's back in, and his new note is 'I thought I told you to get rid of this character'."

Simon Hickson wanted a change, and contemplating what he wanted to do next, he sought a role working for a charity, or the NHS. Turns out he'd end up with a bit of both. A friend of his pointed out a role at MediCinema, running a cinema

in a hospital. A film fanatic – his bookshelves are lined with movie books – he admits "my first thought was I'm not qualified for that". But he applied, and got an interview. He put the hours in to work out what was involved ahead of the competency-based interview he faced – including grilling the manager of his local multiplex on the way out of a screening of *Hidden Figures* – and he landed the job.

Action

MediCinema has been in existence since 1996, and it currently has six fully working cinemas in hospitals around the UK. Heavily supported by the UK film industry – distributors supply films for free, and talent from said films make occasional surprise visits too – its aim is to give patients and families a break from hospital wards, and let them escape for a couple of hours.

They're state-of-the-art cinemas (something Hickson is very keen



to stress: this isn't wheeling a telly in and sticking a video on), and the small team behind them works especially hard to make sure it's a special experience for patients, right down to a little intro at the start. It's one hell of a logistical effort, with patients taken to a screening in their bed if necessary, with nurses alongside them (one nurse last summer accompanied several patients to see Christopher Nolan's *Tenet*, and reportedly after many screenings still struggled to understand it!).

There are four screenings a week at the moment at Chelsea & Westminster Hospital, some for older patients, some for families, some for children. Films are carefully chosen too. For patients with dementia, for instance, Hickson explains that they look for movies which might trigger memories, such as the recent *Six Minutes To Midnight* or *Military Wives*. More broadly, the programme recently has included films such as *Minari*, *Wonder Woman 1984*, *Over The Moon* and *Chaos Walking*.

A kind of magic

Sometimes there's a chance to put on a private screening of a film. These are, Hickson tells

me, special screenings for those who are too poorly to attend other showings. The patients might be at high risk of infection, or having palliative care. And this is where he shared a very special story.

"Something that we take so much for granted can be so meaningful," he muses when we talk about the power of cinema. "You actually can't underestimate the value of it. We had one patient, Jasmine, and she was 43 when she died. We did quite a few private screenings for her and her family. One Tuesday evening we had *First Man* on and she was keen to see it. But she said 'I can't believe what you're doing on Thursday'." Turned out that *Bohemian Rhapsody* was scheduled that day, and she really wanted to see it, but was due to go to the hospice the day before.

"And what happened next is MediCinema at its best," Hickson says. "I got in touch with my boss on the Tuesday. We already had *First Man* on in the evening, so we've got a window of an afternoon. My boss got straight on to Fox, and Fox got *Bohemian Rhapsody* to us in no time at all. It takes me two hours then to get the film loaded. We have no nurses on duty and I've none booked. We put a call out for nurses and none were available. So one of the nurses on one of the wards frees up one of her staff to do a free shift with us so she can sit in. We get Jasmine in with her brother and his partner. They see the film, and at the end when Live Aid is recreated, the three of them are just at the back singing 'We Are The Champions' together! Jasmine had half an hour to go back to the ward and have

her tea, before coming back for *First Man*!"

When Jasmine died, Hickson went to her funeral – "a lovely affair," he says – and MediCinema was mentioned, much to his amazement.

Pressures

MediCinema has had its bumps during lockdown, with its screenings inevitably interrupted over the past year, and a million pounds or so in funding lost as a result of the pandemic. There are plans for more cinemas to be built in hospitals – "literally we build a cinema, so you need a hospital that has the space for it, and the funding for it" – but there's a fundraising mountain to climb there. Even as you read this, though, at six hospitals around the UK there's a fully working cinema demonstrating that the power of film is more than just words. It can be a sliver of normality, something very special, even in very dark times. 🎬

One small story

"Tom Hiddleston came along to introduce *Avengers: Infinity War*. He spent time chatting to patients, and Disney sent along balloon artists making Loki headgear. Hiddleston looked at one child in the audience and said "you don't know who I am do you?". The child said no, so Hiddleston got one of the balloons and put it on his head, and their face promptly lit up". A quiet, golden moment.

You can find out more about MediCinema, and donate if you so wish, over at www.medicinema.org.uk

ON THE MAP

Nicola Ryan salutes the work of Cartoon Saloon, and a very special trilogy of films

In Kilkenny, Ireland there's an animation studio that has gradually made a growing impact on the film industry. With five Oscar nominations under its belt, including one this year for the stunning *Wolfwalkers*, that would be Cartoon Saloon, a firm that prides itself on taking inspiration from Irish history and folklore.

Founded in 1999 by Tomm Moore, Nora Twomey and Paul Young, the studio has grown to become one of the best in the world. Moore's directorial efforts, *The Secret of Kells* (2009), *Song Of The Sea* (2014) and *Wolfwalkers* (2020) are referred to as the 'Irish Folklore Trilogy'. They provide a mix of that folklore, mythology and history. As *Wolfwalkers* rounds off the trilogy, the connective threads between these films has become clear, despite their differing subjects and time periods.

Culture

When watching a Cartoon Saloon film, it's hard not to see similarities between its approach and that of the world-famous Studio Ghibli's. Both studios pride themselves on consistently using their respective homelands and



incorporating layers of history and culture into their films, down to minuscule details, regardless of era.

One particular similarity between them is their use of conflict between the urban and natural land. In Cartoon Saloon films, this conflict is seen through the contrasting animation style. In *Wolfwalkers*, there's the contrast for instance between how Kilkenny and the surrounding forest land are presented. Kilkenny is made up of neutrally toned geometric shapes and strong linework, whereas the forest has a free-form approach filled with bright colours and uneven circular shapes.

This also helps to add to the magic and whimsy of the mythological creatures and folklore that inhabit it. The same technique is used in both *The Secret Of Kells* and *Song of the Sea*, although the contrast is at its most jarring in *Wolfwalkers*. The surrounding forest in 9th century Kells in *The Secret Of Kells* is home to faeries who aim to protect the forest, whereas *Song Of The Sea* has creatures such as selkies and faeries that live in both the land and sea. The studio shows these clashing worlds through differing animation techniques to make these mythological creatures stand out even more.

Heroes

The protagonists in each film are from the perspective of a human child who encounters a magical child and chronicles their journey. In *Wolfwalkers* for example, we have Robyn and Mebh. The former comes from England and

reluctantly lives in Kilkenny, whereas the latter is a wolfwalker who lives in the woods. This is the only film in the trilogy where one of the protagonists isn't Irish and it's powerful because we see how Robyn's skeptical attitude is soon swayed by the magic of the natural land. It's also different because the mythology and folklore in *Wolfwalkers* fills in the historical blank of the extinction of Irish wolves in the 1600s. With a style that feels similar to the wolves in *The Secret Of Kells*, the *Wolfwalkers* could fit perfectly within Cartoon Saloon's portrayal of Irish folklore as it looks thematically consistent in design.

The natural world in the films is directly attached to the magic and mythology that comes to life. To bring in a human conflict, each film includes an adult figure who attempts to prevent the children from venturing into the natural world and confine them to an urban space instead. In *Wolfwalkers*, Robyn's excitement to explore the woods is contrasted with her father Bill's insistence that she remains within the city's walls. There are also examples of this conflict in both previous films. In *The Secret Of Kells* meanwhile, Brendan is forbidden from leaving the walls by his uncle and is punished for doing so despite claiming that it will potentially save them from the inevitable invasion.



Out of the three Cartoon Saloon films to date, *Wolfwalkers* has a heavier emphasis on its history than the other two, using local folklore and mythology to tell the story of England's oppression of the Irish in the 1600s. All three stories have a battle between some form of invasion that threatens the wellbeing of the natural land. *The Secret Of Kells* has its main focus on folklore as it explores the creation of the Book of Kells in the 9th century, and *Song Of The Sea* is filled to the brim with creatures from centuries of Irish mythology as we see selkies, faeries and Celtic gods and goddesses.

The trilogy prides itself on its blend of history, folklore and mythology. Having each film dominant in each category gives a different perspective, one that's inherently Irish in a way that feels connected yet still identifiable and distinguished. It's arguably this blend that creates a consistency in the trilogy and provides a connection that allows them to exist within the same thematic universe.

Future

Having kept itself an independent company, Cartoon Saloon can continue to make projects that it's genuinely passionate about. Tomm Moore has said that future films will differ greatly from his trilogy, but the impact his films have had is clear. Just as Studio Ghibli has made Japanese folklore accessible to the world through animation, Cartoon Saloon has done so with Ireland. Long may it continue. 

The Ghosts of Ipswich

Nick Woolgar, Matthew McGuchan and Julien Mery tell the story of how *The Haunted Hotel* came to be...

They say everyone loves a good ghost story – but is this enough to explain how 100 filmmakers found themselves haunting the corridors of a derelict Ipswich hotel in the sweltering summer of 2017, shooting four units simultaneously, with no budget and no running water?

FILM Suffolk was established back in 2014 to connect filmmakers across our region. Very quickly we discovered there were a lot of talented people hidden away here and, perhaps more importantly, a keen interest in working together to make things happen locally. *The Haunted Hotel* is a project that was made possible by this wave of enthusiasm and collaborative spirit.

Much like our first feature, *With Love From Suffolk*, we designed the film to be an anthology of short stories, breaking production into smaller shooting units. This created many more head of department and crew roles than on a conventional zero-budget feature, enabling more people to come on board and contribute to the project. Keeping the per-person commitment at only a few days also helped us attract some higher profile cast and crew that might otherwise have been unable to commit, such as actors Hugh Fraser and Reece Ritchie, and director Jane Gull. Having that sprinkling of stardust inspired everyone working on the film, and lent it an added weight of professionalism.

The story

The idea for the film's theme rather landed in our lap. Through our location services work at FILM Suffolk we had gained temporary stewardship of a derelict hotel with a fantastic history: Charles Dickens had both stayed in and written about the Great White Horse. Despite (or perhaps because of) its creepy, labyrinthine aesthetic, we decided we had to make a film inside it. And because everyone loves a good ghost story...

The stories we told all came from local writers who responded to our callout: the brief was a ten-page script based predominantly inside a hotel room. We received over 100 submissions that were whittled down to the chosen eight. The selection process was about trying to create the widest range of different flavours; the idea of setting the stories in different decades came about as we started to realise that the patchwork felt so much richer that way. We hadn't spared a thought for our production designer or the lack of budget at that point!

We raised some money through crowdfunding, but a third of it was instantly spent in getting the building up to a safe standard to work in. Another quarter went on our catering costs, despite being given an incredible deal there by a local business.

We also attempted a corporate fundraiser event at the hotel – staged performances, a guided tour – even a live seance! I say attempted: I think we took about £40 in donations that night.

Filming

We shot in two blocks for a total of nine days, with up to four units working at a time. Individual crews varied in size between six and 12, and there were also a number of shared team members: makeup, props, art department and production assistants, who would dash between shoots as and when needed.

The hotel was replete with all the creaks and groans you'd expect from a centuries-old timber-framed building, but the crews were far enough apart so that they were largely unaware of each other's presence. The exceptions were two common spaces in which nearly every story had a scene: the hotel reception and a spooky spiraling staircase. Shooting schedules in those areas were plotted with military precision, with the set construction and decorating team hovering just off camera, ready to leap in and transform spaces into entirely new eras as soon as they heard 'Cut!'.

It was a pretty unique way of working and not without its problems, but from a production standpoint it was highly efficient and a lot of fun to be in the midst of. With a mighty helping hand from line producer Saul Crockett, the wheels just about stayed on the whole time.

Our production designer Eileen Aldous took on an unbelievable challenge on the film: almost no budget and a brief for a dozen derelict hotel rooms to be authentically styled in eight different eras, from the 1830s

through to the present day. Eileen is as savvy and brilliant as they come, but even with all her expertise, the incredible generosity of local charity shops and an enigmatic furniture wholesaler called 'Sideboard Pete', I still don't know how she and set dresser Rebecca Gillies pulled it off.

The same must be said for costume designer Mary Hunt, who dressed three-dozen cast members with uncompromising attention to detail, casting director Agnes Lillis, who brought together an impressive ensemble cast of

local talent, and propmaker Will Goodman, who created everything from 70s pulp-fiction book covers to wartime cigarette packets and paintings that came to life.

Lastly a mention for David Atkins, whose credit 'The Ultimate Handyman' tells you everything you need to know. There's a particularly fond memory of a flickering light effect controlled by a toilet brush that only David could have come up with...

Post-production

We wrapped the shoot in July 2017, and threw together an edit for a cast and crew preview screening that October. It was fine, but we knew there was plenty of work still to do.

After that screening the film entered a hibernation period, and would remain there for several months. It's within the nature of these things that your drive and capacity to work on a project will wax and wane: post-production can be a lonely and difficult place at the zero-budget level.

We were helped massively by a team of composers led by Mark Aaron, who stepped forward in 2018 to reinvigorate the project, along with sound designer Toby Campen. A brand new score began to take shape, along with a high-end audio finish, and once again the fires were lit.

Fast forward to today. The film's finished, found distribution and has even picked up a few awards along the way. It's a testament to the hard work, creativity and dedication of dozens of individuals. Any revenue we generate from the film is being put into a fund in the hope that we can go and do it all again! 

More info including where to watch the film can be found here:
www.the-haunted-hotel.com

It's a testament to the hard work, creativity and dedication of dozens of individuals



Writing Clubland

Amer Nazir reveals the story behind his crime thriller, *Clubland*...



As a kid of 21 years old, I left behind the green hills of Sheffield to venture into the underground dance scene emerging out of Manchester. I bought a run-down city centre nightclub called Lazy Lils and relaunched it as The Limit, a nod to a much-loved club in Sheffield that had recently closed its doors. The Limit grew to become the only club in Manchester open six nights a week, with an all-night licence every Friday night.

Clubland is a fictional piece, drawn from my experiences as a young person of colour, who fell in love with the underground culture of the dance music scene. The Limit became an iconic club hosting household names such as Carl Cox, Grooverider, DJ Rap and many more.

After an unprecedented intervention by the establishment that forced the closure of the club some two years later, I went on to run nightclub door security in what was the notoriously dubbed 'Gunchester' era of the early 90s. A time when the city's gangland crime spree spiralled out of control.

I believe this film needed be realised, because its hero, setting and universal story are as relevant today as they were decades ago.

The story delves into the evocative music of the 'loved up' and uniquely diverse dance culture, shedding light on the fickle frailty of prejudices in wider society at that time. As dance culture spread from underground to mainstream, it inevitably began to attract a criminal underbelly across

What's it about?

A loyal soldier's quest for redemption leaves him in no man's land, when he's recruited to covertly gather evidence of a police-protected drug ring, run by murderous London mobsters, and masterminded by a powerful businessman's thirst for revenge.

Welcome to the world of *Clubland*. Our young hero, Jake, of mixed heritage, is an ex-soldier – still in his 20s – enlisted to go undercover as a nightclub manager into a den of ruthless and murderous villains. He struggles with his own identity, morality, and his very existence in a corrupt, cruel, and dark world.

With his life constantly on the line, he grapples between a crooked establishment and vicious criminal underworld, shaped by international feuds born from the ashes of Empire.

The script is threaded with historic socioracial undercurrents and populated with a myriad of

characters and scenes, woven into an original tale of blood, romance and death – yet all written from a real personal experience, often stranger than fiction.

The story explores the fickle frailty of prejudices of the time and lifts the lid on relationships between London's criminal underbelly, big business and the establishment. With the nostalgia of *The Godfather Part II* and the hard-hitting realism of *The Departed*, the world that our protagonist is thrust into takes no prisoners.

We follow Jake as he leaves behind his tight-knit covert intelligence team to go it alone undercover in London's clubland, tasked to seek out who is behind the mass production of ecstasy and amphetamine. Danger is around every corner in this murky labyrinth of drug dealers, gang bosses, corrupt police officers, white collar businessmen and greedy politicians.

the nation, that preyed on the masses along with big business and establishment figures.

Only those of us who lived through the era really know what it was like to enter a nightclub where every stranger wore a smile for you and danced shoulder to shoulder till the sun rose. The passion for that freedom lives on today in many of us and I wrote this screenplay in dedication to the millions who understand what it is to be free of the burdens of racial and cultural hatred that still perpetuate today.

The making of any feature film is a huge endeavour as it takes a great deal of planning, timing and luck to align all the elements, from acting talent to production specialists, to come together just at the right time. Independent filmmaking has additional layers of complexity in funding and distribution to say the least.

To do this film justice, we're lining up an amazing cast and brilliant production team. We are actively looking for the right producers to come on board

This story is driven by the voices that lived through the heady times of the Acid House scene

and take this iconic project to fruition. Can you help us attract producers and networks to *Clubland* and join our growing audience? Sign up at www.clublandthemovie.co.uk

and be part of our journey into the making of *Clubland*. We'll keep you posted with more exciting news as we build up our development and production team. 

Just another gangster movie?

Clubland looks back to a time when working-class kids across Britain reacted to the austerity of the day with an emergence of a sub-culture that promised unity, a sense of solidarity and even freedom. All borne out on the dancefloors of nightclubs across the land, leaving an indelible mark on those who experienced it.

This story is driven by the countless voices that lived through the heady times of the Acid House scene, who organised mass gatherings without social media and mobile phones, when all we had was landlines, bits of paper we called flyers and word of mouth.

A generation was moved by the beat, and as the scene spread from underground to mainstream, we witnessed the last great cultural uprising. Inevitably lawmakers and lawbreakers encircled us like sharks at shoals of fish and preyed upon the masses. What ensues is a slice of history, hitherto untold.

First Cow

Certificate: 12A

Director: Kelly Reichardt
 Cast: John Magaro, Orion Lee
 Release date: 15th March
 Reviewer: Linda Marrie



Stripped of artifice, sparse and socially minded, Kelly Reichardt's films have come to symbolise a brand-new movement and gone on to inspire dozens of up-and-coming filmmakers. In *Meeks Cutoff* – her critically acclaimed 2010 western – Reichardt's recounted the harsh conditions met by settlers travelling through Oregon in 1945. Three years later, she took a tragicomic look at environmental activism in *Night Moves*, while her 2016 feature *Certain Women* followed the lives of three headstrong women in rural America.

In *First Cow*, Reichardt returns to the western genre in this tale of friendship and entrepreneurship in the old West. She and regular writing partner Jonathan Raymond have adapted Raymond's 2004 novel titled *The Half-Life* with the commendable subtlety we've come to expect from them.

The film opens on a prelude set in present day in which a young woman (Alia Shawkat) walking her dog stumbles across two skeletons lying side by side in a shallow grave. In 1820, Otis 'Cookie' Figowitz (a sensational turn from John Magaro), a timid cook travelling in Oregon with a group of rowdy fur trappers, is often mistreated by his travelling companions. One night, Cookie discovers King-Lu (Orion Lee), an amiable Chinese immigrant on the run for killing a man. Cookie and Lu form an alliance, with the gentle chef allowing his new friend to hide in his tent for the night.

Weeks later, the two are reunited at a newly formed settlement and bond over their respective dreams of future riches. The duo soon learn that a wealthy English man (Toby Jones) has acquired the first milk cow in the region, and they subsequently hatch a plan to steal her milk for Cookie to make some baked goods to sell at market. Soon word gets around about Cookie's baking talents, leading the Englishman to ask that he make him a clafoutis cake for an upcoming dinner party.

Reichardt delivers another tour de force in this gentle and handsomely acted cautionary tale. *First Cow* finds tenderness in the most uncivilised and brutal places, and is as much about the pursuit of happiness and riches as it is about its protagonists daring to stand up to the callousness and hegemony of the class system.

I Used To Be Normal: A Boyband Fangirl Story

Certificate: PG

Director: Jessica Leski
 Cast: Elif Cam, Dara Donnelly, some boybands
 Release date: 31st May
 Reviewer: Simon Brew



The phenomenon of the boyband seems pretty ripe for someone to come in and make a really sneery, punching down documentary feature, to coast on their huge success. Thankfully, director Jessica Leski has no intention of doing so, and instead she

angles her film in a very welcome way. Rather than focusing primarily on the boybands themselves (although they do get quite an airing), she finds four women of varying ages, and tells the tales of their devotions, their fandom, and its impact on their lives.

What unifies them is their commitment to their causes, be it Take That, The Backstreet Boys, The Beatles or One Direction. There's some analysis as to what the magic ingredients for the perfect boyband are, but it's the human stories that are the most compelling.

The four subjects of Leski's film are thirtysomething Dana, teenager Elif, 25-year-old Sadia and the older Susan, now a TV producer who was a devoted Beatles fan. Because the film charts the quartet over the space of a couple of years, what *I Used To Be Normal* ultimately becomes is a coming of age story. In particular, seeing One Direction fan Elif bristle with her parents over her dreams, and Take That fanatic Dana talk about her sexuality and being an adult boyband fan proves particularly compelling.

That's not to say the other stories aren't of interest, just that Leski has let the stories evolve and



Magaro gives a beautifully understated turn as the quiet loner who finds solace in his new companion. For his part, Lee delivers a more upbeat and precise performance as the brains behind the duo's risky enterprise.

Gritty, heartfelt and stunning to look at – thanks to Christopher Blauvelt's remarkable cinematography – *First Cow* is a rare work of art full of beauty and complex themes. In short, there is a lot

more here than meets the eye and a huge amount to unpack, and it gets better and more awe-inspiring after every watch. A truly incredible feature from one of the greatest storytellers of her generation. [f5](#)

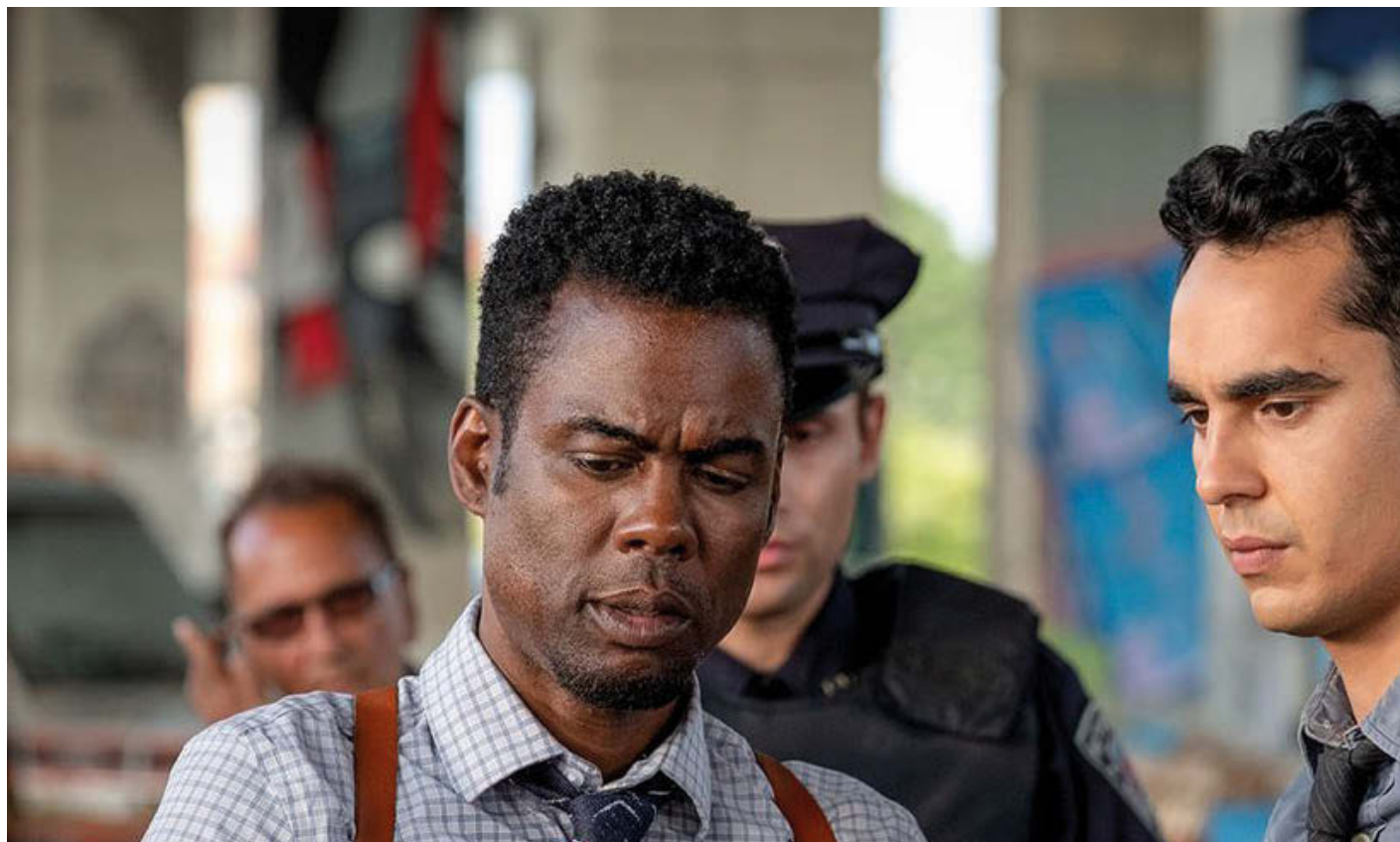
followed the ones that seemed the most conflicted.

There are smiles in the midst of this. I confess I never knew there was such a thing as a Backstreet Boys cruise, and seeing that on screen affirms to me I'm unlikely to buy a ticket. But within the boundaries of a fairly traditional documentary in presentation (albeit with some terrific illustrations to break things up), *I Used To Be Normal* is a very human, very likeable film. Long available in its native Australia, it arrives in the UK at the end of May. Warmly recommended, and not sneery in the slightest. [f5](#)



Spiral: From the Book of Saw

Certificate: 18



Director: Darren Lynn Bousman

Cast: Chris Rock, Max Minghella,

Samuel L. Jackson

Release date: Out Now

Reviewer: Simon Brew



It may surprise you, but it's taken until the ninth film in the *Saw* series for the franchise to finally take a bit of time out and dissect the film *Forrest Gump*. However, *Spiral: From The Book Of Saw* is barely up and running before Chris Rock's Detective Ezekial Banks has some words to say about the Oscar-winning 90s hit. It sets the tone for a slightly different – although not radically different – entry in the *Saw* franchise, a film that juggles being a mix of something old and something new.

The old? Well, by this stage most of us know what we're getting from one of these films. There are traps that human beings are put in, and decisions for said humans to make if they want to escape them. Those decisions generally involve accepting some loss of body parts as penance for previous sins, and *Spiral* makes sure you're not shortchanged in that department. The traps are present, they are gruesome, there's a sporting chance you'll wince.

But what this particular feature also does is bring in some comedy, and a little dose of the old mismatched cops dynamic that permeated so many 80s and 90s films. Rock's character therefore finds himself working with a rookie detective played by Max Minghella – and he ain't happy about it – with the pair of them having to get to the bottom

of who's behind the latest raft of killings. Those killings are on the extreme side, and may or may not involve Banks' father, who just happens to be played by Samuel L. Jackson.

If the involvement of Rock – who helped develop the story – feels like some degree of stunt casting from the outside, it proves the opposite once we're up and motoring. He's as committed to the horror angle of the film as the lighter material, and it mixes up the tone a little having him headlining. The involvement too of director Darren Lynn Bousman, who helmed the earlier *Saw* sequels, keeps the balance on the horror as well, all working from a script by *Jigsaw* writers Josh Stolberg and Peter Goldfinger.

It's all a bit of a generally successful, breezy balancing act, not least because *Spiral* feels

The Father

Certificate: 12A

Director: Florian Zeller

Cast: Anthony Hopkins, Olivia Colman, Imogen Poots, Olivia Williams, Rufus Sewell

Release date: 11th June

Reviewer: Clare Brunton



Written and directed by Florian Zeller, adapted from his stage play *Le Père*, *The Father* focuses on an aging dad as he struggles to come to terms with his rapidly advancing memory loss and hold on to what he holds dear.

Leading the film in an Oscar-winning performance is Anthony Hopkins as, well, Anthony. We see the film through his eyes, following him down the endless corridors in his London flat as times, days and memories fold in around him. His daughter, played by Olivia Colman, is keen to arrange a nurse to be with him, but his temper and independence mean potential nurses don't last long.

The Father is no straightforward story, and as Anthony struggles to keep hold of time and place, Zeller makes great use of flowing camera shots to switch the audience's perspective, always putting us on the backfoot as Anthony's illness does to him. It's a clever and interesting way to view the cruel disease that is Alzheimer's, and we are so rarely treated to a patient's view of this situation, but unfortunately it doesn't go much further than this central conceit.

Instead, the film feels like a collection of emotional beats that are ticked off one at a time. Moments of casual cruelty, domestic violence, even the simple moments of confusion as Anthony once again looks for a lost watch are

impressive. But as a fluid piece of film, it's stuck in one gear, never ramping up or slowing down, just moving steadily through the premise until the inevitable emotional end.

The use of casting, the perspective shifts and central performances are all to be admired but it may be tough going for many, not just because of the delicate subject matter or emotionally impactful third act, but also the heavy tone and unlikable central character. Hopkins does a great job presenting the vulnerability of Anthony in poignant moments, but often he is seen as unkind and dismissive to doting daughter Anne. At times, such as in an excellent mid-scene with Imogen Poots and Colman, this is to the film's advantage, but at other times it can make it a slow and drawn-out affair.

It's an impressive acting showcase that mostly manages to shed its stage show constraints whilst staying faithful to its roots, but struggles to lift off to greatness outside of the lead performances. For some, this will be a personal and devastating piece of cinema, but for others it may feel like a one note film that never truly examines what is at the core of the disease and the impact it has on a life. **fs**



like it's caught between tying itself to the rest of the franchise and also breaking away into its own thing. As such, whilst Rock and Jackson may well bring in new converts, when it settles it's still very much along the same lines as what we've had before.

Yet it's a solid film. It pulls back a little from the absolute extremities and nastiness of some of the earlier *Saws*, and whilst it's not the hardest story to second guess, and the whole ride feels very familiar, I enjoyed it more than any *Saw* film in a long time.

You still need a stomach for it, of course, and it doesn't stray far from the formula. But *Spiral* nonetheless offers an entertaining, bloody and surprisingly funny 93 minutes. And a slightly different path for the whole saga in doing so. **fs**

Last Man Standing: Suge Knight and the Murders of Biggie and Tupac

Certificate: TBC

Director: Nick Broomfield

Release date: 2nd July

Reviewer: Linda Marrie



In 2002, Nick Broomfield's documentary *Biggie And Tupac* lifted the veil on hip hop's deadly rivalry between East and West coasts, a rivalry that culminated in the murder of two of the industry's most talented artists.

Almost 20 years later, Broomfield picks up where he left off in his latest film *Last Man Standing: Suge Knight And The Murders Of Biggie And Tupac*. In it, the award-winning documentarian lays the blame for both killings on the hostile atmosphere generated by Death Row Records owner Suge Knight who, in 2018, was convicted of voluntary manslaughter for a fatal 2015 hit-and-run and is currently serving a 28-year

sentence, meaning he is likely to die in prison.

Once considered untouchable, Knight reigned supreme over the LA Hip Hop scene. "We were the Motown of the 90s," he says gleefully in an old interview from prison. Although born to a middle-class family and with more prospects than the average black kid in LA, college-educated Knight – real name Marion Hugh Knight Jr – became a hip hop mogul after dropping out of college and later setting up Death Row Records alongside former NWA member, Dr Dre.

Surrounded by hangers on, ex-cons and fellow 'Bloods' gang members, Knight was both feared and admired by those he helped in the industry. Nobody is quite sure when things started to go sour for Knight and his artists. Still, a fabricated rivalry between East side and West side soon culminated in a war of words between Knight and

New York rival Sean John Combs (AKA Puffy/Diddy/Puff Daddy), with Suge encouraging his brightest star, Tupac Shakur, to go to war with his former friend, Biggie Smalls.

Although Broomfield's film is a tad repetitive – there's a lot here that we already knew from watching the first film – *Last Man Standing* does a great job of dotting the i's and crossing the t's of this extraordinary story. Featuring old interviews, notably with the former cop turned LAPD whistleblower Russell Wayne Poole, Broomfield makes the case for a possible involvement of corrupt cops in Biggie's death. We also hear from former girlfriends, bodyguards and friends of both Knight and Shakur who all attest to the bad influence the Death Row boss had on his young star.

Broomfield has done a fantastic job in relying this fascinating story and is

Peter Rabbit 2

Certificate: U

Director: Will Gluck

Cast: Rose Byrne, Domhnall Gleeson, James Corden's voice

Release date: Out now

Reviewer: Simon Brew



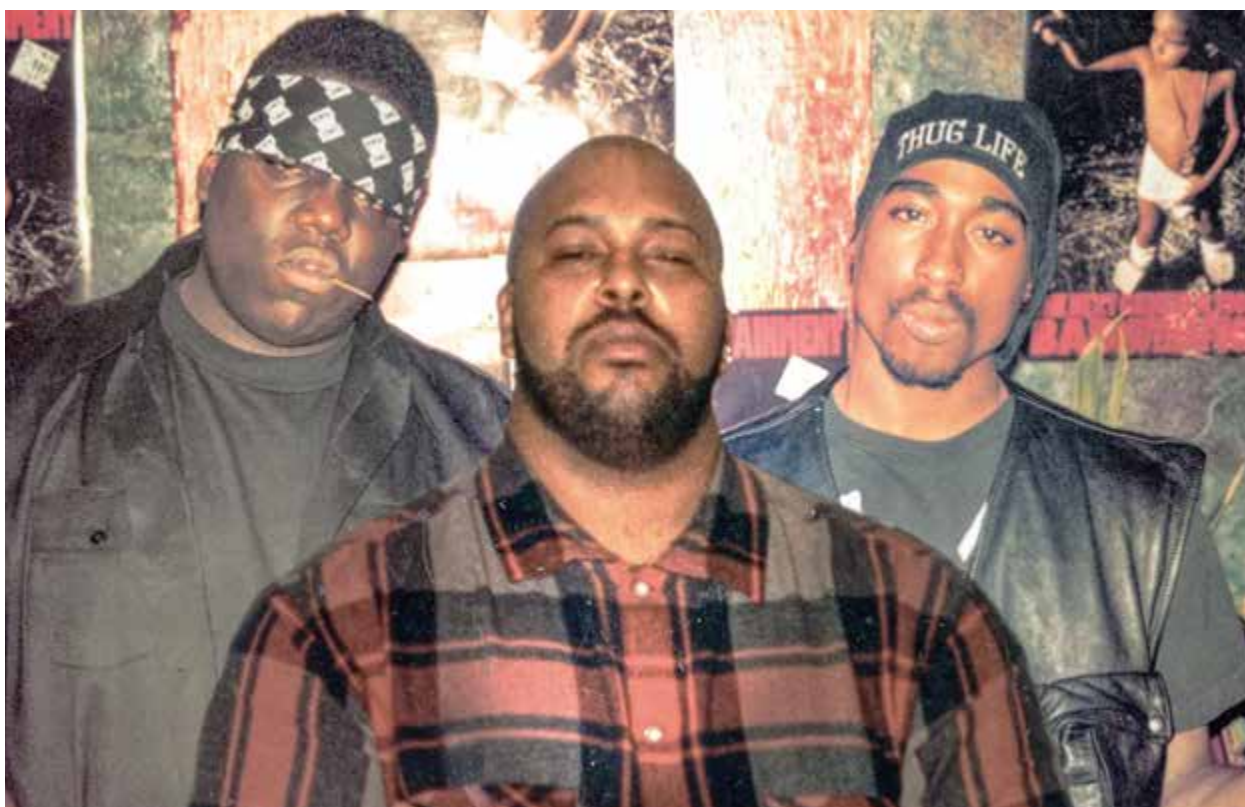
Count me among the many who had problems with the original *Peter Rabbit* film, a movie that left my youngest child – not unreasonably – questioning why Peter wasn't very nice. I can't confess to having particularly high hopes for the sequel, but I found this a pleasant surprise.

The tone is now more mischievous than edging towards unpleasant, and that's a lot easier to get on board with. Also, co-writer and director Will Gluck has broadened the focus of the film away from Peter himself, and made it into an ensemble piece.

The basics, then. Lead humans Thomas and Bea – Domhnall Gleeson and Rose Byrne – are now married, and still surrounded by rabbits. But the likes of Peter (James Corden), Flopsy (Margot Robbie), Mopsy (Elizabeth Debicki) and Cottontail (Aimee Horne) this time find themselves out of the garden and in the reasonably big

city. There, Barnabus (voiced by Lennie Jones, in splendid dulcet form) threatens to lead them astray. Chaos, as you might expect, ensues.

The cliché of the Hollywood sequel going bigger has a habit of working against the film in question. In the case of *Peter Rabbit 2*, it's quite the opposite. There's a broader ensemble of characters, slightly less focus on Peter, and a wider story to explore. There's a further trump card with the introduction of David Oyelowo as Nigel Basil-Jones, a publisher trying to take Bea's tales of rabbit action and making them huge and mainstream. He is a real delight,



unapologetic about sticking to his original theory about police involvement. In dedicating the film to the now deceased Russell Poole, there's a sense that the

director is finishing what Poole couldn't and this somehow feels rather admirable.

This is an engaging, informative and at times truly

shocking account of power, corruption and senseless violence which ended in one of the saddest chapters in the history of the music industry. [f5](#)

but he's not alone. Gleeson proves as adept at performing physical comedy as Gluck is at directing it, and my young co-reviewer loudly guffawed a couple of times. That didn't happen with the first film.

It's got a little more of the flavour of the *Paddington* films this time around, although those particular movies sit on a very high platform, seemingly unreachable by anyone else. Yet I found *Peter Rabbit 2* enjoyable fun and a real upgrade on the first. The character of Peter himself is still the weakness but, given there's plenty of others getting in the limelight, that's a far lesser problem this time around. [f5](#)



Gorillas in the Mist

FOR THE WATCHLIST

Real Female Scientists

Becky Clough has been adding movies to the watchlist again — here's a new collection of recommendations...

In honour of the many women involved in creating Covid-19 vaccines (who will no doubt be fictionalised in future pandemic dramas), here are some films about ladies working in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics).

Female scientists have been hugely influential in the area of animal research. 2017 documentary *Jane* highlights primatologist Jane Goodall's achievements, but surely a biopic must be due as soon as Andy Serkis is available with his chimp costume?

Claire Danes absolutely nails the difficult role of *Temple Grandin* (2010), whose autism gives her a unique view of the world and special insight into the way animals think. Professor Grandin's work has been used to create more humane ways of preparing cattle for slaughter. Dian Fossey, another dedicated (and eccentric) researcher, was portrayed by Sigourney Weaver in the epic *Gorillas In The Mist* (1988). The film won multiple awards for its unflinching look at the

hardships and beauty Fossey experienced alongside the animals she considered family. Weaver was the natural choice to make *Gorillas Revisited*, a 2006 documentary recounting Fossey's life.

Sigourney Weaver is also known for playing an iconic woman in space, but there are surprisingly few movies about real-life female astronauts. However, fiction can be inspirational: not only was *Star Trek's* Nichelle Nichols the first black actress to have a regular starring role on TV, she was also hired by NASA to encourage the recruitment of women and minorities. Her campaigning successfully changed the demographics of NASA's employees, a story told in documentary *Women In Motion* (2015).

Similarly — although more 'adventurer' than student of STEM — Amelia Earhart was the first female to fly solo across the Atlantic. Hilary Swank (looking uncannily like the fearless pilot) gives a solid performance in 2009's *Amelia*; the film looks spectacular, even if critics considered it a

dull representation of a thrilling life. While *The Aeronauts* (2019) is based on James Glaisher and Henry Coxwell's record-breaking exploits in a hot-air balloon, Coxwell is replaced by a fictitious woman, played by Felicity Jones. However, the character was inspired by Sophie Blanchard, who actually WAS an accomplished balloonist (and probably deserves a film of her own).

Ammomite (2021) stars Kate Winslet as Mary Anning, a British palaeontologist living in the early 19th century and fighting for recognition in the male-dominated scientific community. She was known for discovering dinosaur fossils, not for having a lesbian relationship with geologist Charlotte Murchison (Saoirse Ronan) as depicted here. The filmmakers argue that it could have happened; as she was single, we can't assume her sexuality. I can't decide if this is admirably progressive or confirmation that nobody thinks it's worth making a film about a fossil collector unless a hot sapphic affair is included.

I love it when a movie opens up a world that I knew nothing about: *Agora* (2009) stars Rachel Weisz as Hypatia, a 4th century mathematician, astronomer, philosopher and teacher. Alejandro Amenábar's movie covers the conflict in Roman-ruled Egypt as Christians fight Pagans and Hypatia struggles to protect precious scrolls (and her own beliefs). The movie fudges the facts for the sake of a neat narrative, but it remains an impressive story of an extraordinary woman.

Fellow mathematician (and scientist) Sofya Kovalevskaya was born in Russia in 1850, and broke so much new ground that she's been honoured onscreen twice, in Russian miniseries *Sofia Kovalevskaya* (1985) and Swedish film *A Hill on the Dark Side of the Moon* (1983), which focuses on her time as a professor at Stockholm University.

Finally, back to medical science: *Florence Nightingale* (1985) stars Jaclyn Smith as the young 19th century woman who rejected cultural expectations that she'd be a lady of leisure, instead choosing to work in hospitals (to her family's shame). She trained many other nurses, implementing such radical ideas as regular hand-washing. If you're short on time, TV movie *Florence Nightingale* (2008) squeezes an interesting history lesson into a mere hour (including the fact that Nightingale bitterly regretted some of her choices). *The White Angel* (1936) and *The Lady With A Lamp* (1951) also cover her achievements. Gugu Mbatha-Raw stars in upcoming *Seacole* (2021), which will finally give some airtime to Mary Seacole, a black nurse whose work throughout the Crimean War also made a huge impact. Hooray for innovative women! 📺

Five To Watch

Joy (2015)

Jennifer Lawrence stars as a young working mum who invents the "miracle mop". The all-star cast includes Robert De Niro, Bradley Cooper, Isabella Rossellini and Virginia Madsen (the real Joy Mangano may not have had quite such a colourful family as Lawrence has to put up with). An inspiring reminder that imagination, hard work and faith in yourself can take you to the top.

Hidden Figures (2016)

Mathematicians Katherine Johnson (Taraji P. Henson), Dorothy Vaughn (Octavia Spencer) and Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe) work at NASA in the 60s. Being black and female (not to mention working mothers) they inevitably encounter obstacles, but their skills and determination make it impossible for them to be held down. The film takes some liberties with facts, but is true to the spirit of the events.

Radioactive (2019)

Rosamund Pike stars as scientist Marie Curie, who discovered polonium and radium and contributed to X-rays becoming commonplace. The film's artistic license was criticised – it had originated as a graphic novel, after all. Greer Garson brought gravitas to *Madame Curie* (1943), while *Marie Curie, Une Femme Sur Le Front* (2014) focuses on Curie's work during WW1, developing mobile radiography units to be used in field hospitals.

Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C. J. Walker (2020)

"Inspired by" means this Netflix series is exactly as factually accurate as you might expect, but the story of the first self-made female millionaire in the USA is still lively and entertaining. Octavia Spencer stars as Walker, who understood the power of a good hair day: she made her money from a range of hair-care products specifically designed for the black women ignored by many manufacturers.

Bombshell: The Hedy Lamarr Story (2017)

Although (perfectly cast) Gal Gadot is attached to a future TV series, the movie industry's failure thus far to make a blockbuster about Hedy Lamarr forces me to sneak in another documentary. Lamarr was the epitome of glamour (starring in European films before hitting Hollywood) but also a self-taught inventor. Her idea for a frequency-hopping signal was the first step towards Bluetooth and Wi-Fi. Cheers, Hedy!

HOPE DICKSON LEACH

Fresh blood



Twitter: @hopedickle

Our director columnist reflects on the changing shape of BAFTA and Oscar nominee lists...

Back in May, the BFI announced changes over at its Film Fund. For those who don't know, the BFI Film Fund awards lottery money to British films which fulfil its diversity standards and meet its artistic approval. The decision-making process is opaque and has been the source of much debate and frustration as long as I can remember.

Of course it has: this 'soft' money does not need to be paid back with all the fees and rights associated with other kinds of investors in films. With it come 'soft' advantages, such as support for the lifetime of the film with nudges to film festival selectors and the ability to unlock other funding which will allow the film to be made.

There isn't enough money for all British films to be supported in this way, and there's an understanding that the money is more likely to be awarded to films that need this cash because they might not get made if they are looking to be financed in a commercial marketplace. This understanding is of course challenged when, for example, *Ammonite* – a film starring two megastars, Kate Winslet and Saoirse Ronan – gets a million pounds via the BFI. And so filmmakers scratch their heads over why their films don't get funded, or are befuddled by what exactly will unlock this magic money chest.

Those running the Film Fund, and thus making those decisions, are employed with taxpayers' money. This means people are even more invested

(excuse me) in the way their taxes are being spent, if they don't agree with the awarding decisions.

As someone who has benefited from BFI funding and who has also had various applications rejected, I feel like perhaps I have a more measured relationship with this system than some. And my strongest opinion about the BFI Film Fund is that those running it should not have jobs for life. Not only does that mean the gatekeepers become more powerful than their roles, but it also means the lens through which decisions are made over which films are supported is never changed. This is the British Film Institute after all, and it should represent a wider range of films than those who certain personalities might connect with, no matter how hard they try to be broad in their thinking.

As such, the appointment of someone who has not worked within the BFI before, and who has worked in the sector both as a producer and in the exhibition sector, was welcome news to many. It's also been made clear that she will serve a three-year term, thus suggesting that the BFI has listened to those who have pushed for fixed terms for the gatekeepers.

The beauty of the fixed term system goes beyond the value of keeping the lens fresh. Not only will it mean that there is less likely to be a 'type' of film that gets funding from the BFI, but it also means that those who have served within it will return to the industry, and thus their knowledge gained, and the relationships they have made, will be extended beyond the institution to the filmmaking ecosystem at large. 

Kings of Summer (Amazon Prime)

Summer is here and, whether you're racing outside to join in the gradually relaxing new normal or chilling indoors, cinema has always been adept at soaking up the sunny mood and sharing it with whoever's watching.

Perhaps no film has done it better than this delightful debut from *Kong: Skull Island* director Jordan Vogt-Roberts, which joins three teenage boys as they decide to build a house in the woods and live their way from the world. Playing out like a cross between *Stand by Me* and *Son of Rambow*, it's an infectiously energetic ode to adventure, independence, adolescence and the open-ended possibilities of summer holidays.

There's thorny melancholy to be found amid the trees – watch out for Nick Offerman as a struggling father – but between the whip-smart script and 8-bit-tinged soundtrack, this nostalgic coming-of-ager is a charming tale of men not becoming men.



A Bigger Splash (Prime)

At the other end of the spectrum is Luca Guadagnino's sweltering page-turner, which leans into the intense, oppressive heatwave of a summer in Italy. Ralph Fiennes is hilariously obnoxious as a record producer disrupting the reclusive life of a rock star (Tilda Swinton), but conflict soon builds as this remake of *La Piscine* finds humid tensions hiding beneath the swimming pool surface. Steaming and superbly performed, this thriller is cinema worth basking in.

Roman Holiday (Sky/Now)

What better way to spend a summer than a day out on the town with Audrey Hepburn? William Wyler's classic romantic comedy sees Hepburn play a rebellious princess who sneaks out of her country's embassy in Rome. Along the way, she crosses paths with Gregory Peck's reporter – and the ensuing blend of witty chemistry, cute romance and stylish scenery makes for a delightful ride that's equally as charming as it is photogenic.

Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again (Sky/Now)

Whether you liked 2008's *Mamma Mia!* or not is irrelevant to this sequel, which is so irrepressibly feel-good that you can't help but love it. Bursting with sun-soaked vistas and beaming A-listers, it hops between the poignant present day and romantic flashbacks with a non-stop enthusiasm that will have you dancing round the living room. After all, who wouldn't want to go on vacation with Andy Garcia, Christine Baranski and Cher?

Sunshine (Disney+)

Our relationship with the sun has shaped not only human life but also science and philosophy. They both collide in this remarkable sci-fi thriller, which sees a group of scientists fly to the failing sun to recharge it with a massive bomb. Far from Michael Bay's *Armageddon*, Alex Garland's script takes us into existential, theological territory come its intense finale, and Danny Boyle's visuals are an eye-popping, scorching wonder. An underrated masterpiece.

You're so cool

There's been an explosion of release announcements since the last issue of the magazine, and chief amongst them is Arrow's long-rumoured upcoming 4K disc of Tony Scott's *True Romance*. Penned, of course, by Quentin Tarantino, the film is up for ordering now in a limited edition set, with both the theatrical and the director's cut included.

A 60-page booklet, double-sided poster and six postcards are the physical additions to the package, whilst the extras bring across earlier commentaries from previous releases, as well as a host of new interviews just for this one. Extra features, we're told, are still in production, and as such more may well be coming. The film is due on 19th July.

Arrow also has Dario Argento's directorial debut, the 1970 giallo thriller *The Bird With The Crystal Plumage*, set for release at the end of June. Penned too by the cult director, it was the first of a pseudo-series of films that kicked off the part of his career labelled the Animal Trilogy by fans.



Family Features

Just in time for the summer holidays, a trio of family movies are coming to the 4K format. Warner Bros is behind two of them, with the original *Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory* at the end of June and *Space Jam* in mid-July. Then Universal will celebrate the 20th (!) birthday of the original *Shrek* film by bringing it to 4K disc. That's due in June as well.

June

Further releases heading our way in June 2021? Glad you asked. Disney is bundling all four *Toy Story* films together into a single boxset (albeit with nothing new included), *Godzilla Vs Kong* hits on the 14th, along with Clint Eastwood-headlined thriller *In The Line Of Fire*. Then Second Sight releases its deluxe version of *The Babadook* on the 21st - and that's looking like a very, very special release.

Ice Picking

It's been rumoured for a long time, but Studiocanal has now officially confirmed its deluxe reissue of Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct*, which is also going to be available in a 4K version. The collector's edition will cost the best part of £40, and will come with three discs (two of them Blu-rays), a host of new extras, a booklet, poster and artcards too.

July

Finally, going even further ahead, if any of you had *Howard The Duck* in the sweepstake for the surprise 4K announcement of the year, help yourself to a biscuit. It arrives on 5th July, along with Edgar Wright's *Scott Pilgrim Vs The World*, *Demons* and *Demons 2*. *Snatch*, from Guy Ritchie, follows on 12th July, with the latest incarnation of *Mortal Kombat* pencilled in for release the same month.

Em, the host of the Verbal Diorama podcast, on revisiting work...

When I started this column all the way back in October 2019, I was doing things a little differently. I was more flexible about release dates of my own podcast. I didn't really schedule, and I still don't necessarily believe a rigid schedule is mandatory for any podcast. If you're an independent podcaster, you should always endeavour to do what you can, when you can.

At the time, I was producing episodes 19 or 20 of Verbal Diorama. They were *Logan* and *Edge Of Tomorrow*. I'm really proud of both of those episodes, but once an episode of the podcast is released I never listen to them again. There are a couple of reasons for this.

Firstly, no one wants to listen to themselves talk unless they absolutely have to; editing is an unfortunate necessity for podcasts. Secondly, why would I listen to my old episodes when I can listen to another brilliant podcast, hosted by someone else?

I'm proud of all my episodes, but that doesn't mean I revisit them. I can say with all certainty, they're probably still decent content-wise. They may be a little less audibly polished than newer episodes; I've improved my equipment and software a few times since 2019, but I'm not about to listen to them to find out. I shan't stop you from doing so, though. In fact, I actively encourage it!

Always remember, as a new listener to any podcast, start with newer episodes first. I think most episodic podcasts will agree with me on that. The point I'm trying to get to is that almost 80 episodes have been released during the time I've



been writing this column, because Episode 100 is due to be released next month. I guess to most people, 100 is just another number, but it feels really special to hit that milestone.

I'm using the time between now and then to recap all my episodes so far on social media. Thank the podcasting heavens for social media schedulers, like Buffer. It's a godsend for tasks like this. You just load up your Twitter, Instagram and Facebook material, and it posts them for you at scheduled times every day. With the best will in the world, no one has time to do it manually (unless podcasting is their full-time job).

I'm planning some fairly big episodes in the run-up to Verbal Diorama's episodic centenary; I'm just hoping I'm not going to peak at Episode 100. Thanks to my legendary scheduling skills, you needn't worry; episodes 101 onwards have already been chosen. In fact, I scheduled the Christmas episodes last Christmas...

Recommendation Of The Month: The Movie Journey

The IMDb Top 250 is generally seen as the go-to list for the greatest films ever made. Breaking down the Top 250 are Daniel and Dean, hosts of The Movie Journey (**themoviejourney.podbean.com**). Taking on the top 250 films of all time is no mean feat, but together they do in-depth breakdowns with fascinating criticism, engaging content and hilarious discussion. Join the journey!

Let's Get Cooking

with Rachel May Meaden

PLEASE REMEMBER:
All cookery is
undertaken at your
own risk.

BOTTOM LINE:
Please don't sue us. Ta!

Welcome back to 'Let's Get Cooking'! Recently, I've been craving comfort films. This phrase means different things to different people. For me, it's wholesome fare: the Muppets, the Paddington movies, and Disney. Anything that feels like a cinematic hug.

So, we're making shortbread this month – that's right, some honest-to-goodness baking! Shortbread is the simplest biscuit there is; three ingredients, a bit of mixing, in the oven, job's a good'un – or you can add chocolate chips or toffee pieces, whatever takes your fancy. I enjoy the simple, crumbly, basic biscuit though.

INGREDIENTS

- 125g butter, softened
- 55g caster sugar, plus extra for sprinkling
- 180g plain flour

EQUIPMENT

- 1 Mixing bowl
- 1 Mixing spoon or spatula (you can use a stand mixer or electric hand whisk)
- 1 or 2 Baking trays
- Baking paper

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat the oven to 190C and line a baking tray with baking paper, and leave to one side.
2. Beat the butter and the sugar (2.1) together until smooth (I used a stand mixer but you can use an electric hand whisk or a spoon and some elbow grease 2.2).
3. Sift in the flour and stir (3.1) until it starts to come together into a dough (3.2).
4. Turn the mix out onto a floured work surface (4.1) and form into a dough (4.2). Gently roll out until the dough is roughly 1cm thick (shortbread is crumbly, so don't worry if it crumbles a bit as you're trying to roll it out 4.3).
5. Use a biscuit cutter to cut rounds, or use a knife and cut the dough into fingers, and place onto the baking tray lined with baking paper. Gather the trimmings, reform into a dough, re-roll and cut out until all the dough is used (I used a 6cm fluted biscuit cutter and managed to get 10 biscuits from these amounts with the dough rolled out to 1cm).
6. Prick the biscuits with a fork, sprinkle with caster sugar and chill in the fridge for 20 minutes (6.1).
7. Bake in the oven for 10-12 minutes, or until lightly golden.
8. Once out of the oven, leave on the baking tray to cool for 10 minutes (8.1) then transfer to a wire rack to cool completely. Make a cup of tea, grab a couple of your yummy shortbread biscuits and watch whatever film soothes your soul.

> Shortbread!



Movie Clinic

Duncan Paveling returns with another examination of a movie that's had a real impact on someone's life

Twitter: @clinicmovie email: clinic@filmstories.co.uk

Welcome to Movie Clinic, where we chat about how movies can help us in difficult times. Thanks to our latest correspondent this month, we take a nostalgic look at the transition from VHS to DVD, the loss of physical rentals and how movies provided a template for future relationships, with particular reference to Michel Gondry's wonderful love letter to VHS in 2008's *Be Kind Rewind*.

Warning: Spoilers Ahead!

Dear Movie Clinic,
I've always watched movies, and on every format, starting with cinema, moving through VHS, to DVD/Blu-ray and now streaming. Whilst the way we watch movies has changed, the way I view them hasn't. They've always provided me with something I needed, at a time I was often lacking. Though I cannot deny, VHS has a special place in my heart.

My parents were slightly older than the norm when they had me and, looking back, perhaps a little overprotective in my early years. I didn't make friends easily and struggled to engage with others. I wasn't into sports or group activities, which is I guess one way we develop friendships, due to a common interest.

Growing up, it wasn't as easy to watch films collectively, only at the cinema could you do so. It wasn't until VHS did that occur, though by that time I'd not established a wide friendship base and found myself continuing to watch movies very much on my own. Though, thanks to my local Blockbuster Video store, this changed.

Before the birth of DVD in the late 90s, I'd visit Blockbuster on a Friday afternoon. I was a student at the time and found education a struggle, but always had Fridays to look forward to, with the excitement of a new release or deals on multiple rentals. I became familiar with the staff over time and eventually an employee, working my way up to a full-time manager role after I left college. It was the first time I could honestly say I had friends and began to visit more than

the cinema with them. I ventured out to pubs, restaurants and the occasional alternative club. Sadly the inevitable happened and eventually our store was closed.

For a long time I'd learnt so much from watching movies, especially relationships. Movies like *The Breakfast Club*, *Clueless*, *Before Sunrise* and even *Good Will Hunting* were favourites, all of which provided me with something I didn't have at the time, but ultimately gave me a template as to what I'd want. Something which I found in my Blockbuster, in the friendships I finally found.

Whilst my love of movies continued, I found myself moving from one job to the next, never able to recapture that which I had in the video store. Fortunately the friendships remained. Whilst I've never found someone to share my life with, in terms of a partner, I do have some wonderful friendships, all of which came out of my true love, the movies.

But if honest, there is a sadness as to the loss of that time I'd had in our Blockbuster. I recall that time so fondly, despite knowing the memories are perhaps warmed by the sometimes romanticised recollections I have, influenced by the nostalgia of the films I watched at the time or since. None more so than *Be Kind Rewind*, Michel Gondry's nostalgic comedy of a struggling video store and the desperate attempts of its staff to save its existence.

That film worked on so many levels. The idea of changing times, with Danny Glover's Mr Fletcher looking to move from VHS to DVD, whilst Mike (Mos Def), Jerry (Jack Black) and Alma (Melonie Diaz) attempt to regain and eventually recapture the past, by not only creating ('Sweded') their own VHS movies to replace those Jerry had 'Magnetised', but creating a romanticised history around Fats Waller in the hope of saving the store for historical purposes. These are all themes I got in so many ways.

Be Kind Rewind is a film I often revisit, just as I do others. I have a special relationship with those films. They remain transportive and very much part of my life and a constant reminder of the time I worked and formed relationships, with more than just the characters I loved.

Mel.



Change, of course, can cause its challenges. Often it comes without an experience we can hold onto and presents something new, an unknown

Thank you Mel, I'm sure there are many readers who will share your feelings of this period and being of a similar age. The love of physical media, and the way in which we rented it, is something that resonates with me personally.

Change, of course, can cause its challenges. Often it comes without an experience we can hold onto and presents something new, an unknown. Of course change doesn't necessarily mean something bad, just simply different, at times, even better. So often it's our fears and anxieties that may hold us back, dependent on what we're letting go from, positive or negative. Both can be difficult and create a sense of loss.

As Mel mentions, nothing has come close to the time she worked in that store, that period. Those experiences and friendships were special. Why? Because they were about that time and place, they were unique, that's what makes them special.

There may always be a sense of loss, moving on. We may have memories, that are and will always

be unique, our own 'Sweded' thoughts, that can be replayed, despite how things change and evolve around us. Like watching a movie for the first time, repeat viewing may not hold the same reaction, as our perceptions may alter over time with experience. But that's not to say repeat viewings don't remind us of that time and why it was so special. So when we encounter a similar feeling again, we know to hold onto it, nurture it and take it forward with others.

Be kind, rewind, be safe and take care.

If you want to contact this column, you can email me through clinic@filmstories.co.uk

FURTHER READING

CITIZENS ADVICE: www.citizensadvice.org.uk
RETHINK (Friendship and Support):
www.rethink.org



Having a tough day? Relax, grab a nice brew, and take a shot at these brain teasers until it all blows over...

Diner time quiz

Grab a refill and name the movies that feature these eateries!



GEODOKU

We're back... And, er... so's this.
Fill out that grid, ladies and gents! We're all counting on you...



Dinner time quiz: 1. Pulp Fiction; 2. Hell or High Water; 3. The Terminator; 4. Heat; 5. Diner; 6. Goodfellas; 7. Drive; 8. Spaceballs; 9. Baby Driver.

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1. December 2018



2. February 2019



3. March 2019



4. April 2019



5. May 2019



6. June 2019



7. July 2019



8. August 2019



10. October 2019



11. December 2019



12. January 2020



13. February 2020



1. Summer 2019



2. Autumn 2019



3. Easter 2020



4. Summer 2020



5. Autumn 2020



6. Spring 2021



14. March 2020



15. April 2020



16. June 2020



17. July 2020



18. August 2020



19. October 2020



20. November 2020



21. December 2020



22. February 2021



23. March 2021



19. April 2021

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ROMESH RANGANATHAN

Counting on the bear



Web: www.romeshranganathan.co.uk Twitter: @RomeshRanga

Romesh has been giving *Paddington 2* another spin — and it would be fair to say he prefers it to *Coming 2 America*. Spoilers ahead...

Paddington 2 has dethroned *Citizen Kane* as the greatest movie of all time, according to Rotten Tomatoes. I haven't seen *Citizen Kane*, but just the other day on our family movie night, which has essentially been every night during the last year, we decided to watch *Paddington 2* one more time. There are spoilers ahead, but the film came out in 2017 so I warn as a courtesy that I don't actually think is necessary.

I was trying to figure out why it's so great the other day. There are the obvious things – Paddington with his brilliant voice from actor Ben Whishaw is absolutely adorable – as well as being able to pull off slapstick with facial expressions that are pretty much bear. London is made to look like some sort of idyllic village, and they manage to escalate the jeopardy only to the point that you feel mildly alarmed rather than stressed. It also manages to make anything feel sad and poignant, seemingly whenever it feels like it.

The ending, where Paddington finds his Aunt Lucy on the doorstep, and their immediate hug is a very happy ending. But as Paddington pulled her close and whispered her name, I found myself immediately feeling sympathy for them for all the time together they had missed, and I hoped beyond hope that the credits would show them having a good time together in London because if it didn't there was a good chance that I was going to start crying and never stop.

The film also has a beautifully measured humour to it, which is completely uncynical, so much so that you find yourself wanting it to be funny and so laughing accordingly when it does make a joke. There's a

moment where the antagonist, played exquisitely by Hugh Grant, is dressed as a nun and breaks rank from the herd to go and commit some crime. It's very tame, but I found myself laughing out loud, because the film had put me in the mood to want everything about the film to work. It's quite magical.

There are flaws, of course. You never really feel like everything is ever going to work out as anything less than perfect, which is possibly the point, but there might be an argument for a touch more jeopardy. I also think it's a shame that the possibly greatest film of all time features an Asian character mispronouncing the bear's name as Puddington for laughs. There's also the issue of exactly how old Paddington is, which I found quite confusing. He talks about the fact he used to be a cub, and has a fully grown man's voice, but is still much shorter than Aunt Lucy.

But that's me being picky. We were all smiling for the entire duration of the film, and every single callback was received with a lot of laughter from my wife. She talked about how clever that all was as if I have never done a bloody callback in the whole of my career. And then, just when you thought that the film had given everything it's going to give, there's a mid-credits prison-based musical number with Hugh that would be the best scene in most other family movies.

I consider myself a bit of a contrarian, for example I seem to be the only person I know who thinks *La La Land* is one of the most overrated films in the history of cinema, but the two things I am happy to go with the majority on are: *Paddington 2* is superb, and *Coming 2 America* was so bad it actually made me like the first film slightly less. 

"A profound and moving experience"

The Film Stage

"This is a wondrous work"

The Hollywood Reporter

"As emotionally piercing as it is beautiful to behold"

Variety

the reason i jump

a film by Jerry Rothwell

Based on the best-selling book by Naoki Higashida



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