



# NEWSLETTER C-2

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## Like the number 37 bus, suddenly Phoenix Newsletters all come in a row ...

We promised regular communications with our loyal Members during the unprecedented times that the covid-19 virus has brought upon us. Wishing to keep you as informed as possible about developments as they relate to the Phoenix, here is our second covid-times Newsletter, which we hope you will find both informative and interesting.

If nothing else, the world-wide problems through 2020 will doubtless be filling the inkwells of screenwriters across the world as they sharpen their quills to pen their latest all-action socially-distanced thriller, set in a leading surgeon's bookshelf-festooned study, and starring a bumbling world leader leading his cabinet of horrors through a mess of shillyshallying to some kind of fade-into-the-sunset. Everyone will have to be wearing different coloured PPE according to which tribe they belong to, and there will be one, just one, rogue world leader who kidnaps every scientist researching the miracle vaccine that will sort things out overnight, only to fall in love with the leading surgeon, now sadly a victim of the virus. Or possibly not; does anyone really know? Anyway, the word is out that it will be a directorial fight between James Cameron, Spike Lee, and the late Orson Welles.



## Lifting the lid on how Phoenix films get shown each week – part 2: John Marshall

There is nobody who knows more about the Phoenix, and films in general, than John, who has been with the society through good times and bad for a very long time, so I imagine the covid-19 disruption will seem like a brief and somewhat annoying interruption to our normal service. Here, in his own words, is a description of how he sees his role in helping to run the Phoenix.

I am nominally Minutes Secretary for the Phoenix, but in reality there is a whole host of other film-related activities that I am involved in for the society. As Minutes secretary, I record the discussions at full Council meetings and at the AGM in November. However, I also help with front-of-house duties, and am heavily involved in the film selection process, something very dear to my heart.



On Wednesdays, I arrive at the Union Films Cinema at about 5 o'clock, and check whether there is a UF presentation before ours. Very occasionally, an alternative booking may mean the Cinema is being used for a lecture of some kind. I then busy myself bringing down a table from by reception, and proceed to lay out our paperwork – our Weekly Film Notes, a Newsletter if one has been published, and various other bits and pieces we think worthy of bringing to the attention of our Members. The WFNs are laid out with a voting slip, and I know there will always be plenty of conversation once people arrive for the film and pick up those papers. I am so fortunate to have long-time Member Jenny Turner helping to set things up, and she helps to give them out before the film starts.

I then display the results of the voting from the preceding week's film, and I have noticed that this is something that is always of interest to folks as they go into the Cinema. It would be good to share the comments that Members have offered on films, but these quite often take up two sides of A4 so it would not be practical, but we do at least put a selection up as one of the images in our pre-film slide sequence on screen. There are the notices to put up as well, the ones advising latecomers that they will not be allowed to enter the Cinema once the film has started. These can cause problems, as we sometimes have a few such latecomers, who get a little stressed that they cannot go in, even if they have a ticket. It is usually another of my roles to persuade them that we mean what we say, and they cannot go in; I try to do that as diplomatically and nicely as I can though it isn't always easy!

Once the introduction has been given, and the film has started, I count the remaining voting slips, which are in packs of 100, so I can establish the number of people who have come to see the film. This is the number that is recorded on our various spreadsheets that you can see in the slides. Then I count out some more to prepare the 100-packs for the following weeks. I then reverse all the prepping jobs, removing notices, getting the table ready for taking the votes at the end of the film (I collect them in an ad hoc envelope), and then wait for the exodus once the credits start rolling. I

## WHAT A WASTE OF TIME

often have a chance to chat with those UF volunteers on duty who have not gone in to watch the film (although more and more have been doing so), and I am always ready should there be an emergency to deal with, including those rare problems with projection, sound, etc. and helping anyone who comes out during the film feeling unwell. I am also able to see how many “walk-outs” we might have, some of whom offer their reasons, such as “Too dark to see what’s going on”, “I realised I’d seen the film before”, and “What a waste of time!”. The voting process is always fascinating as it gives Members the chance not only to record their A to E vote and to comment on the back of the slips, but also to pass comments verbally about what they have just watched. Conversations develop in the area by the bar, and it would be wonderful to see this as a permanent organised feature of our screenings, but I guess the call of the U1C can be more pressing ... As the evening draws to a close, we tidy up by returning the table upstairs, check things with the UF volunteers on duty, and if there is any lost property to be dealt with - car keys are a particular problem usually resolved quickly so the owner can actually get home – I gather my things, say goodnight to the SUSU reception staff, and head home knowing that my night’s work is just beginning!

Once home, I count the votes carefully, and calculate the percentage scores. I then type up all the (n.b., legible!) comments in the vote sections (A-E, usually with plenty of B/C type scores to make calculations more difficult!!), and usually at some ungodly hour of the morning I send this information to other Council members by email for their breakfast reading matter.

I have to admit that most of the other Council members don’t always follow my vote scoring system, but it’s really as clear as mud. It is obtained by sorting votes into piles A to E and counting each pile. Then A votes are multiplied by 5, Bs by 4 and so on down to E times one. Mixed votes, e.g. B/C, are multiplied by 3.5 or whatever the half vote represents. The totals are added together to give a total positive vote and that is multiplied by 100 and divided by the number of votes cast times 5 (i.e. the total number of points possible). This gives the score you see online and displayed at the cinema each week. It should be noted this is not a true percentage as E would need to be zero to obtain that. The way I have been calculating the scores is as was done before I took this job over so I have continued as instructed to make the earlier voting figures comparable. All the voting figures for our films screened since our 1999-2000 season are accessible in our catalogue of past screenings on the website.

You may or may not be aware that I seldom watch any or much of the week’s film, although you’ll now know that I am not idle during the 100 or so minutes of movie runtime. In virtually all cases, I will have seen the films beforehand, something which I consider essential to my own well-being, but also, hopefully, to the better operation of the Film Selection committee run by Stephen. I always attend the Spring National Viewing sessions offered by the ICO for organisations like the Phoenix, held at the National Film Theatre in London’s South Bank complex. About 24 films are shown, and I try to see the maximum possible, twelve, over a busy long weekend; I am not sure it is good for my eyes, but it is usually very enjoyable, albeit with a few turkeys seen over the years. I also visit many of the cinemas between Chichester (including the Festival) and Wareham’s lovely old Rex, plus the ICA and other venues in London, all the while trying to find those sometimes elusive “Phoenix films”. In all, I probably see in excess of 200 films a year – in the case of our local Harbour Lights, I have a favoured seat from which to view movies. In spite of that statistic, it still seems so difficult to find the necessary number of humorous titles to show, but at least I can contribute a lot to the selection discussions, and my “maybe 7/10” score for a given film means that I am often the arbiter of whether or not we pursue a particular movie for screening!

Despite my lack of linguistic knowledge, I have sometimes had to contact foreign embassies, Cultural attachés, and even distributors abroad to try to get a copy of a chosen film. I have only schoolboy French from a 60 year old O level.



Good enough for Paris art galleries though! I also did a term of Scientific German so that we could read papers never translated into English. Other than that I can only identify odd words or phrases in many other languages from my time as a shortwave listener, monitoring frequency changes and reporting them to Radio Sweden for distribution to other short wave listeners. It means I occasionally spot a mis-translation in film subtitles, but I'm certainly not a fluent linguist. I think my two most difficult search-to-screen missions involved the Polish (and favourite of mine) **Eva Wants to Sleep**, and the German comedy drama **My Blind Date with Life**; latterly, it was incredibly frustrating trying to get somewhere with this year's title **Kler**, although this attempt ended in failure because of constant “No reply” messages from Warsaw. But I have now been on the Council for over forty years and have never missed a Wednesday evening screening, so there must be something very good about all you Phoenix folk!

John



What's on the box tonight then?

It's a question I have found myself asking less and less over the past few months, fed up with endless repeats of repeats already – why, they have even recycled both **Love Actually** and **Pitch Perfect** three times in as many weeks recently! Like Stephen, I have nevertheless taken to using the NextFilm website and my trusty Radio Times to see which movies are on offer for terrestrial viewing (I do not subscribe to things like amazon prime, Sky, or, Dieu pardonne, the cinema-killing Netflix). As I type, I notice that NextFilm advises me that **Escape to Victory** is on ITV4 later today (second showing), starring several Ipswich Town footballers (alongside the likes of lesser-known stars like Michael Caine and Pelé), a definite classic in my portfolio of great movies!



But seriously, as Stephen has said, the pandemic has forced us all to revise how we keep up our cinematic "fix" with Wednesday evenings being a particular gap in the weekly social calendar. So, I too have resorted to catching or recording films on the small screen, but more importantly have had the delights of Cinema Paradiso to help out with plenty of "Phoenix film" titles available. For those who do not know of it, CP (<https://www.cinemaparadiso.co.uk/>) is a DVD/Bluray rental company similar to LoveFilm of a few years ago before amazon prime swallowed it up. It has a huge roster of films, including many from our favourite World Cinema genre, with a catalogue of

such titles from Algeria to Yugoslavia, and including all manner of countries in between – Cuba, Ethiopia, Mali, and Vietnam to name but a few. In no particular order, and with some recommendations either way, here are some of the CP titles that have graced our ageing Samsung over the past few months.

Back just before all the confinement period began, I caught Jacques Audiard's western **The Sisters Brothers (Les frères Sisters)**, which I hoped would reinforce my love of the genre in a modern way. It was okay, but for me it warranted no more than six stars, even though it won the *Leone d'argento* at Venice in 2018. Then, being an admirer of Bill Nighy – like me he's a big Bob Dylan fan, dontcha know – I had **The Bookshop** and **Sometimes, Always Never**, but I found both rather disappointingly rated no more than 4-5/10, as did somewhat Danny Boyle's **Yesterday**, I mean come on, you just don't mess with The Beatles story!

With my interest in the Holocaust to the fore, I have seen Yael Hersonski's documentary **A Film Unfinished (Shtikat Haarchion)** (7/10), and Matthew Shoychet's **The Accountant of Auschwitz** (6/10), and I found the Emma Thompson/Brendan Gleeson title **Alone in Berlin** (6/10) inferior to the novel by Hans Fallada. Unlike Roberto Benigni's controversial 1997 movie **Life Is Beautiful (La Vita è bella)**, the recently-released **Jojo Rabbit**, which I had missed at Harbour Lights, disappointed big-time, although I know many who thought it worthwhile.



Films about right-wing terrorism have also crept into my list, firstly with **Utøya: July 22 (Utøya 22. juli)**, Erik Poppe's breathless single-take re-enactment of the Anders Breivik killing act in 2011, which I gave 7/10, and, more recently, but also from Scandinavia, Ulaa Salim's somewhat predictable **Sons of Denmark (Danmarks sønner)**. (5/10).

If all of these seem to be low to mid scorers out of ten, there have equally been some far better titles (imho) to watch.

Seeing Agnès Varda's last film **Faces, Places (Visages villages)** was almost a victim of the covid crisis when it arrived as I had a faulty Bluray player that would not screen it, but when it finally returned, on working equipment, it was quite wonderful, a "Phoenix film" without a doubt, and one which I strongly recommend, most especially if you are a Francophile like me. This was a beautiful idea beautifully executed by a wonderful starring double act in Varda and

photographer J.R. – in the words of the IMDB "the old cinematic veteran and the young

artistic idealist enjoy an odd friendship as they chat and explore their views on the world as only they can." Earning 9/10 from this viewer, that score also went to **Shirley: Visions**

**of Reality**, Austrian Gustav Deutsch's delightfully low-key adaptation of 13 of Edward Hopper's wondrous paintings, melded into a fascinating cross-the-decades story full of light and shadow (à la Hopper) and an entirely appropriate soundtrack. If you like Hopper's work as much as I do, I think you will love Deutsch's artistically cinematic film.



I tried **The Lighthouse** recently, as it had received much critical acclaim – "a black and white classic" read one review – but I found it unpleasant, even nasty, and gave it 4/10, whereas **Never Look Away (Werk ohne Autor)** from Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck (he of **The Lives of Others (Das Leben der Anderen)**) was another art-in-film offering, and despite its 189 minute runtime, it was impressive, though not without its flaws, and for me thus one of John's 7/10. Graham

So finally this issue, a request. We would be really pleased to read (and publish) your suggestions of films you have watched from whatever source during the confinement period, it would be good to share your thoughts and views – please do send them with your recommendations to our email address [enquiries@thephoenix.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@thephoenix.org.uk)