

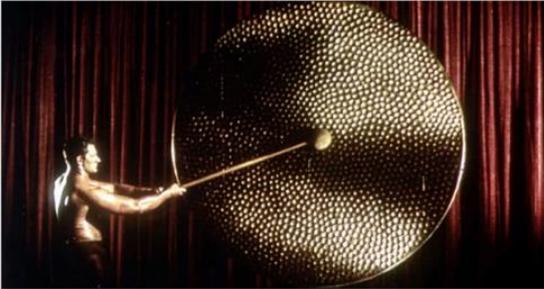


# NEWSLETTER C-9

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## Bang a Gong?



It being February, it must be awards season, even if there has been a dearth of films available for votes to be cast by the esteemed jury panels. But no, hold hard, the pandemic clearly means that not only will the red carpet have to be virtual, but events such as the Césars, the Oscars, the Baftas, etc. have all been moved back in the 2021 calendar. Only the Golden Globes ceremony takes place, virtually of course, this month (on the 28<sup>th</sup>), whilst in France, the Césars will be in mid-march, the BAFTAs are on April 11, and Oscar hits L.A. (and TV screens!) on April 25.

Sadly, as far as we critics of anything that damages the real film screening experience are concerned, streaming services have dominated nominations for the 78th Golden Globe Awards, showing a major power shift in Hollywood away from traditional movie studios and cable and broadcast television players towards digital upstarts. It's a move that we have spoken of before that has been accelerated during the coronavirus pandemic when much of the world has been stuck at home and cinemas have remained closed. There are a staggering 48 Netflix nominations for the Globe jury to consider, and the next biggest company is Amazon with ten, whilst the traditional movie companies are squeezed in almost as also-rans seeking the best this-or-that prize. We must hope this is not a genuine sign of where film-making and cinema-going are heading in the future, but who knows in these strange and challenging times? We will report any updates from all these junkets in future Newsletters, but for now we can announce another indication of the Covid impact is that the 74 years old Cannes Film Festival, initially scheduled for its customary May playdates, has been put back to July 6<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>, almost certainly refusing any input by Netflix once again!

## What is the worst film you have ever seen?

Somewhere, preferably in the darkest recesses of our minds, we all have one film title that ranks "in our honest opinion" as the worst piece of utter claptrap rubbish we have ever had the dire misfortune to see. Search those recesses for a moment to recall yours; a middle-European *hommage* to elm trees starring a fading 1930s Latvian lounge lizard and his canary? maybe a piece of Hollywood dross in which the baddie shoots his moll by mistake before OD-ing on fake heroin and a bowl of Frosties? perhaps a now politically incorrect British drama set in a rubber plantation in 1920s Malaya where the biggest stars are the gibbons roaming from rubber tree to rubber tree? Or, let's be brutally honest, quite simply the recent Judi Dench/Idris Elba version of **Cats**?

It might be as easy to look for the real cinematic turkeys in the lists of the annual Razzies, or, to give them their proper name, The Golden Raspberry Awards, an organisation whose name is synonymous with bad cinema and which exists to call out the worst in films from around the world. The Razzies, now in their 41<sup>st</sup> year (so trailing well behind the (93<sup>rd</sup>) Oscars!!), are given out in April, with nominations accepted up until the night before Oscars night. This year, aside from the film nominations, the organisers are



giving out a special award to 2020 saluting it as "The Worst Calendar Year EVER"! If we look at the history of the Razzies, going back in time reveals that the first Razzie Worst Picture was Allan Carr's 1980 movie **Can't Stop the Music** telling the story of the Village People pop group. Subsequent winners or nominations include **Heaven's Gate** (Michael Cimino's much-derided, but absolutely brilliant 1981 cult classic that broke United Artists' bank); John Derek's **Bolero** (in which his wife Bo strutted her stuff to Ravel's beautiful tune in 1984); the now popular **Indecent Proposal** (Adrian Lyne directing Robert Redford and Demi Moore in 1993); **The Postman** (1997, delivered by Kevin Costner no less, and described in the

Grauniad as “such a fascinating display of egomania run amok that they should offer PhD courses in it” although Stuart Heritage went on to suggest it should not be in a top twenty bad films list because while it’s too long and far too *faux*-profound, it may as well have been one long close-up of Kevin Costner’s penis”; and in 2019 that feline foul-up mentioned earlier. Nomination contenders this year include **Dolittle** (Stephen Gaghan) the last Big Budget Bomb theatrically released before The Covid Lockdown); Jackie Chan and Arnold Schwarzenegger in **Iron Mask** (a mega-budget international production by Oleg Stepovchenko, released to home cinema channels and given just as bad a rating from couch potatoes as from critics); and **365 Days** (Barbara Bialowas, Tomasz Mandes), a Polish rip-off of *Fifty Shades of Grey* that holds a rare 0% Rotten Tomatoes rating, and was almost voted off Netflix by 100,000 petitioners worldwide begging it be removed from their schedule. We think such bad publicity serves Netflix right! and we will assume that as the film will probably not appear in any Best of World Cinema lists, it seems unlikely to figure in our film selection discussions for a possible future screening at the Phoenix!



In the meantime, once again this month, we refer to Mr. Cinema-on-TV, aka Mark Kermode, as part of our quest to find out which are the worst films people have seen. Like many, I enjoy hearing/watching Mark Kermode’s recommendations (or not) for films. Those he extols to the high heavens are indeed often very fine movies, but I also love the way he condemns certain titles to the dustbin of celluloid history. One recent example was when he was reviewing a new title **The Ringmaster (Finale)** (Søren Juul Petersen, 2018). He began by describing the film as “a pitiful slice of Danish torture porn”, going on to suggest it was “derivative bilge”. The titular character he said was “less funny than the Funnyman, less frightening than the Bogeyman, and less psychologically interesting than the man from the electric who came to read the meter while I was watching this garbage”. After a mercifully brief clip, Mark K. advised “**The Ringmaster** is available on DVD, VOD and allegedly in cinemas and I would advise you avoid it in any and all of those formats”. I was rather hoping this might be a Netflix release but sadly not.

But haven’t we all been to the cinema and eventually left after the closing credits thinking “what a waste of celluloid”? Now, whilst these days it is not celluloid that is used unnecessarily, there are still films being made in good faith by all manner of directors that are simply tripe, or to use Mr. Kermode’s word “bilge”. We asked Council members what is the worst film they have ever seen, and here are some of the comments they returned.

This from Stephen: My worst ever film? Well, I try to obliterate disappointing cinematic memories, but I still remember hating Jean-Luc Godard's mid-period political clap-trap experimental film making. There was one film that I saw in the 1980s, bizarrely enough on a boat in Lymington harbour that was operating as a restaurant, but showing films on Sunday evenings. I hated the picture so much that I managed to forget the exact title, but it could have been **Le vent d'est (Wind from the East)** (1970), a mind numbing lecture on Marxist-Leninist self-critique complete with revolutionary guards and executive kidnapping. Incidentally, it stimulated Peter Wollen's influential essay 'Godard and Counter Cinema'. Although Peter Wollen was mainly a critic and academic, he co-wrote Antonioni's **Professione: reporter (The Passenger)** (1975) and the Phoenix showed his only film **Friendship's Death** (1987) during an early Southampton Film Festival in a draughty church hall in the city ... but it was a lot better than his master's work. Score (for Godard) - 10 out of 10

**Peter Wollen:  
Godard and counter-cinema**

- Hollywood
- Linear narrative
- Identification
- Transparency
- Unity
- Closure
- Entertainment
- Fiction
- Counter-cinema
- Episodic narrative
- Distance
- Foregrounding
- Conflict
- Open-endedness
- Criticism
- Reality

As many of you know, John gets to see more films than most in normal times (and even in our confinement times, he is ready to go to see a film the minute Mr. Johnson and his chums allow it) and it is not unusual to find him traveling all over the south of England or up to London in his quest to see as many recent releases as he can (he draws the line at **The Lego Movie** franchise and other mainstream rubbish!). So you might expect he would reel off a list of “worst films”, but when we asked him, he said “I’m afraid I have no worst film to offer despite thinking about it since your first request. Either I only attend first class ones or dementia is on the way!” Perhaps John, who makes a note about every film he sees, is being polite to

the directors of some of the films he has seen; he is nevertheless a real authority on so many movies and his guidance and opinion on many titles are invaluable when we come to film selection time.

As for Graham's selection of bad movies, there are several he has been happy to consign to Cinema 101, that movie theatre equivalent to the room where George Orwell had to endure tortuously boring BBC meetings. In 1995 **The Blair Witch Project** (Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) received a massive amount of pre-release publicity, so he says he gave it a try even though he instinctively felt it would not be his kind of film. It wasn't! He also recalls that back in the 1970s he had watched the classic **Jaws** (Steven Spielberg, 1975) for the first time ever, at an open-air beach cinema in the south of France and absolutely loved it, though he added that there were very few swimmers out the following day! But for him, following such a classic drama was unlikely to succeed and having watched too many of them, sure enough, they didn't, so all the **Jaws** sequels and spin-offs and rip-offs count in his bad movie list. One film he watched last year on the small screen during the first confinement was the music documentary, **Patti Smith: Dream of Life** (Steven Sebring, 2008). Despite good reviews he suggested this was a movie devoid of life, and awarded the film the sole adjective execrable, giving it no stars into the bargain. If boredom is the determining factor, he admitted there have been one or two films screened at the Phoenix that have urged a walkout (even though he didn't go that far) with the grim black-and-whiteness of such as **A torinói ló (The Turin Horse)** (Béla Tarr, Ágnes Hranitzky, 2011) leading the way, and the same directors' **Werckmeister harmóniák (Werckmeister Harmonies)** (from 2000) also aiming for cinematic nadir status. But, of course, to paraphrase, one wo/man's classic is another's nightmare! If you have a contender for the worst film ever award, please do send the title to our usual email address, perhaps with a short statement about why you have nominated it for Cinema 101.

### A very long engagement or just a very long film title?

Back in 2004, the Phoenix screened French director Jean-Pierre Jeunet's **Un long dimanche de fiançailles (A Very Long Engagement)**, the story of a young woman's relentless search for her fiancé, who had disappeared from the trenches of the Somme during World War One. Running at 133 minutes, it had neither an excessively long runtime, nor a very long title, unlike the following films, reading the title of which could possibly take you as long as watching an average hour-and-a-half movie! (and yes, these are genuine titles)

1. **Night of the Day of the Dawn of the Son of the Bride of the Return of the Revenge of the Terror of the Attack of the Evil, Mutant, Hellbound, Flesh Eating Subhumanoid Zombified Living Dead, Part 2: In Shocking 2-D** (James Riffel, 1991) 41 words, in case you weren't counting as you read it; this movie is self-evidently a parody of all the kind of films we love at the Phoenix!!!

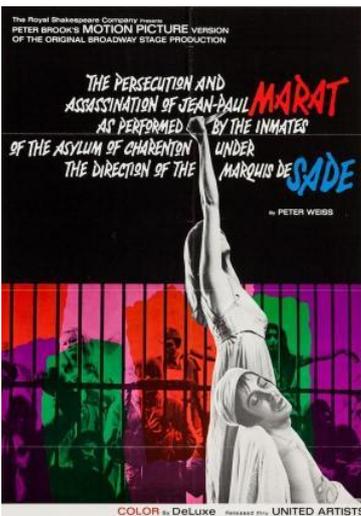
2. **Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat As Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade** (Peter Brook, 1967) Better known by its more succinct title **Marat/Sade!**

3. **On the Marriage Broker Joke as Cited by Sigmund Freud in Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious, or Can the Avant-Garde Artist Be Wholed?** (Owen Land, 1977) This experimental film "classic" was remade nearly shot-by-shot by the Land Camera Collective in 2009. Hmmm.

4. **Othon, or: Eyes Do Not Want to Close at All Times, or, Perhaps One Day Rome Will Allow Herself to Choose in Her Turn** (Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet, 1970) Based on Pierre Corneille's play, this West German French-language film had slightly fewer words in its original Gallic title!

5. **Réfutation de tous les jugements, tant élogieux qu'hostiles, qui ont été jusqu'ici portés sur le film "La Société du spectacle"** (Guy Debord, 1975) A 22-minute harangue by the director at folks who disagreed with him!

6. **Powers of Ten: A Film Dealing with the Relative Size of Things in the Universe and the Effect of Adding Another Zero** (Charles & Ray Eames, 1977) Another (9-minute) short, this is a scientific



film essay, narrated by Phil Morrison, featuring a set of pictures of two picnickers in a park, with the area of each frame one-tenth the size of the one before; sounds like another one for our Countdown chums.

**7. The Fable of the Kid Who Shifted His Ideals to Golf and Finally Became a Baseball Fan and Took the Only Known Cure (Unknown, 1916)** Although it is rather long, it is worth reading the bizarre summary of this silent movie from the imdb website: 'A Messenger Kid stopped to Gaze at a picture of Jess Willard in a window and began to Weep bitterly. A soft-hearted Commuter halted. "Why do you weep?" he asked. "Aw, gee, what chance have I to ever be like him," came back the Tadpole. "What a perverted Ambition. Why don't you strive to be like me? I am a candidate for Director of our new four-hole golf club and I play whist on the train with a man who once lived in the same house with Billy Sunday." So the boy became a caddy and listened to the Poor Nuts who babbled about Tough Lies and Dubbing Approaches and reflected that they were much inferior to his own Dad, who had to Shove Lumber all day while these Superficial Johnnies had money to toss to the Birds. When the Kid reached the age of Sagacity he became a baseball fan. His wife never knew what the fan was talking about but she helped him into the house and mixed his Throat Gargle for him. Then the Fan came to his Ninth inning. She pleaded for one final message. His lips moved. She leaned forward. Fan wanted to know if there was anything in the Morning Papers about the condition of Heine Zimmerman's Knee Cap. Moral: There is a Specific Bacillus for every Classified disease.' Almost Dali-esque, that.

**8. Homework, or How Pornography Saved the Split Family from Boredom and Improved their Financial Situation (Jaime Humberto Hermsillo, 1991)** School prep will never be the same.

**9. Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines, or How I Flew from London to Paris in 25 hours 11 Minutes (Ken Annakin, 1965)** Our second mention for this travelogue film in recent weeks.

**10. The Fable of the Throbbing Genius of a TankTown Who Was Encouraged by Her Folks Who Were Prominent (Richard Foster Baker, 1916)** Another one where the imdb summary (qv) is surreally enjoyable; given that both this and number 7 were written by George Ade, can we assume Richard Foster Baker made both movies?

**11. The Man with the Smallest Penis in Existence and the Electron Microscope Technician Who Loved Him (Patrick O'Brien, 2003)** One assumes a certain degree of irony with this long title!

**12. Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex, Drugs and Rock 'N' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood (Kenneth Bowser, 2003)** Actually, this BBC documentary and the book of the title were quite entertaining.

**13. I Killed My Lesbian Wife, Hung Her on a Meat Hook, and Now I Have a Three-Picture Deal at Disney (Ben Affleck, 1993)** This one is already in the Phoenix film selection group's sights. I mean if it's Disney, it must be safe.

**14. The Lemon Grove Kids Meet the Green Grasshopper and the Vampire Lady from Outer Space (Peter Balakoff, 1965)** Innocent enough until it goes into orbit?

**15. Cafeteria or How Are You Going to Keep Her Down on the Farm after She's Seen Paris Twice (Unknown, 1973)** Evidently this 1 minute-long film is the short and sweet story of a girl and her 26 cows.

**16. The Saga of the Viking Women and their Voyage to the Waters of the Great Sea Serpent (Roger Corman, 1957)** Any guesses as to who won as this cult director flexes his verbiage skills?

**17. The Man Who Might Have Been: An Inquiry Into the Life and Death of Herbert Norman (John Kramer, 1998)** I mean, you've all heard of Herbert Norman, haven't you?

**18. The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies (Ray Dennis Steckler, 1964)** What is it about zombies and long movie titles?

**19. Long Strange Trip, or The Writer, the Naked Girl, and the Guy with a Hole in His Head (Peter Wick, 1999)** (yes, quite)

**20. Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan (Larry Charles, 2006)** And that's minus the transitive verb and the ablative absolute.

But, hey, enough already. Time to go to press. See you next month with our [C-10 Newsletter](#).

