

AUGUST 2020 NEWSLETTER

Hello to all our members,

Here is a quick message from Vivienne Bond, our President:

I hope everyone is staying safe.

It is looking increasingly unlikely that we will return to our monthly screenings this year, but we can hope.

It has been requested that Healesville members be given the opportunity to see *Secrets and Lies* when screening recommences, as they missed out due to venue closure. This has been taken on-board by the committee, and fitting that it will be part of our future plans.

An Annual General Meeting will also be held before year's end, and this will almost certainly be via Zoom or some other remote means. You will be kept informed about this as new information arrives.

Our DVD libraries are still available.

See the catalogue on our website (<https://www.yarrarangesfilmsociety.org.au>) and contact j.cluberton@bigpond.com for Warburton or lorrainesorrell@yahoo.com.au for Healesville to reserve your titles. Make sure the subject of your email is **DVD request**. Under current restrictions, the DVD will be posted to you.

The Melbourne International Film Festival is now well underway. This year it is being done via streaming. Go to www.miff.com.au to see what's on offer.

Please remember that film suggestions for our future screenings are welcome at any time. Please send them to Bea at info@yarrarangesfilmsociety.org.au.

Vivienne Bond
YRFS President

We're now about two-thirds of the way through Victoria's new Stage 4 State of Disaster, and the steady and significant decline in new cases is very encouraging.

We mustn't get complacent, and should remain exceptionally careful – as ever, wear a face-mask in public, uphold social distancing, wash your hands as often as possible and avoid touching your face – but I am confident that we are bringing our state's coronavirus presence under control again.

Cinemas are reopening in some regions across the world, including New Zealand and less-affected Australian states, and *Tenet*, Christopher Nolan's latest film, became the first major studio release to come out during the full swing of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Tenet, a time-bending thriller with James Bond influences, opened to critical acclaim, and The Guardian ran an article about *Tenet*'s release with an amusing headline: '*Tom Cruise performs death-defying stunt: watching Tenet in a packed cinema.*'

Tenet presumably won't come out in Victoria until the new Covid restrictions relax, hopefully in mid-to-late September. While I'm still very much looking forward to *Tenet*, it is a slight shame that the exciting novelty of this new film will be somewhat diminished by the time it reaches us in locked-down Victoria.



I had hoped to include several film reviews in this issue of the newsletter, but the DVDs I ordered online have taken so long to get here that I won't have time to review them. Even so, this issue contains a review of the 1984 film adaptation of *1984* and the hilarious 1999 short film *Me and the Big Guy*.

Cheers.
Seth

VALE

We have been greatly saddened by the recent passing of three Film Society members: **Ken Peterson**, **Lech Sobiecki** and **Maureen Bond**.

They will be much missed. Our thoughts and condolences go to Kath, Klaudia and Maureen's family and friends at this time.

1984

George Orwell's novel *1984* is a foundational work of dystopian science fiction, but Michael Radford's 1984 film adaptation, starring John Hurt, Suzanna Hamilton and Richard Burton (in his final film role), is one of the best social horror films of the twentieth century.

The film superbly distills the oppressive atmosphere of Orwell's novel, with dim, grimy locations and a constant stream of propaganda from the omnipresent telescreens. The populace is flat and passionless, save for the regular public ritual of spewing hatred for the enemy and adoration for Big Brother, their symbolic leader. One of these rituals serves as the film's horrific opening sequence. The customary Oceanian gesture for displaying patriotism is holding your hands up and crossing them together to evoke bound wrists, in a genius interpretation by Radford of Oceania's motto "Freedom is Slavery".



Winston Smith (Hurt), an Outer Party office worker who edits print media to fit Party doctrine, stands out from the crowd in private, through his moments of contemplation and forbidden journal-writing, and in public, through his disinterest in conversation with his Party colleagues, his weariness on the job and his subtle shock at the mindless fervour around him during the aforementioned rituals. Winston's dreams are about the only moments in the film with a bright green colour palette, but even these are tainted by Party influence.

Winston forms a loving secret relationship with Julia (Hamilton), a fellow Outer Party member. This romance, through which they rent a spare room seemingly free of Party surveillance, is itself a forbidden act or "thoughtcrime", as the Party discourages any emotional attachment outside of loyalty to the Party.



Winston and Julia's chemistry is blunt and awkward, but still feels real and

passionate in a passionless regime, and Winston comes across as relaxed in their scenes together, rather than fatigued and constantly on-guard.

The several scenes of Julia naked are slightly gratuitous – Winston is naked in these scenes too, but not to the degree of Julia's exposure – but their comfortable nudity still contrasts against their drab, shapeless Party uniforms.

Their scenes have a different texture to the rest of the film: Winston and Julia speak in gentle tones or enjoy their company in silence, as opposed to the white noise of political jargon and regularly-scheduled Rage in Party life.

“Doublethink”, in which a person holds two contradictory thoughts and believes them both simultaneously, is a major concept in Orwell's novel, and Radford employs his own form of doublethink in the film's tone.

Winston and Julia's relationship is beautiful while it lasts, but carries a lingering sense of doom, as they both know it is only a matter of time before they are caught and punished for their thoughtcrime.

The third act is a gruelling process of hope, security and resistance being stripped away.

Winston and Julia's room is revealed to have been bugged the whole time, and the kindly antique dealer they rented it from is an agent of the Thought Police.

O'Brien (Burton), a relatively-affluent Inner Party member who took Winston under his wing and informed him of the Resistance, is shown to be completely loyal to the Party, and oversee's Winston's brutal “re-education”. Even the Resistance and their manifesto are revealed to be Party fabrications, in a bitter subversion of our and Winston's assumptions about the world.

The scenes of O'Brien torturing Winston are another startling instance of tonal doublethink: O'Brien speaks in a soft paternal tone as he describes inhuman principles of mental subjugation.

Winston desperately clings to some thread of hope, whether it be his love for Julia or the innate human desire to be free. But O'Brien wears Winston down with cruel efficiency, and his predictions of a world where all thought is in service of the Party feel disturbingly plausible.

The film establishes Winston's fear of rats through flashbacks in the second act, and this motif culminates in the film's harrowing climax.

Room 101 is the ultimate weapon of the Party's re-education apparatus, engineered to contain your greatest fear.

When Winston is confronted with a cage of rats ready to eat him alive, he begs for O'Brien to 'do it to Julia'.

Winston's love for Julia kept him sane, but by betraying Julia for his own survival, there are now no more barriers against Party control. Winston has lost.

The film has a more ambiguous and slightly more optimistic (though still devastating) ending than the novel.

Winston and Julia reunite in the Chestnut Tree Café, but are indifferent to each



other and appear completely loyal to the Party, and it is implied they will ultimately be executed and made “unpersons”, or erased from history and memory.

Winston appears to accept his fate and is happy to hear news of the war effort, but when Big Brother appears on the café telescreen, he tearfully turns away and his inner voice whispers 'I love you'.

It is uncertain whether Winston directs this to Big Brother or Julia, and this ambiguity suggests that some degree of resistance and thought independent from the Party may have survived. I choose to believe O'Brien and Room 101 did not entirely break him.

Michael Radford's *1984* is an outstanding adaptation of Orwell's novel and an atmospheric, well-paced and deeply-unsettling social horror film about a nightmarishly efficient totalitarian regime and a man's humanity being broken down.

Dystopian fiction certainly existed before Orwell's novel – for instance, the severely-stratified technocratic society in Fritz Lang's 1927 science fiction classic *Metropolis* – but *1984* codified the bleak style of literary dystopia and spawned countless references, homages and parodies. These include the TV shows *Big Brother* and *Room 101*, films such as George Lucas's *THX 1138*, Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* and Kurt Wimmer's *Equilibrium*, the iconic 1984 Macintosh commercial screened at the 1983 Super Bowl, and even Vault 101 in the game *Fallout 3* and City 17 in the game *Half-Life 2*.

I don't know if Radford's *1984* has notably influenced the dystopian films that followed it, but I must point out a supremely ironic casting development.

John Hurt played Winston Smith, the victim of a totalitarian future Britain, in *1984*, and later played Chancellor Adam Sutler, the **leader** of a totalitarian future Britain, in the 2005 dystopian thriller *V for Vendetta*.

Hurt's venomous portrayal of Chancellor Sutler is one of my favourite villain performances of all time, and stands as a shocking role reversal after *1984*. On a meta-textual level, Winston **became** Big Brother, or you could say that Winston was broken by his own regime.

Have you seen Michael Radford's *1984*? If so, what did you think of it? Have you read the source novel, and if so, how do you feel they compare? If they make another film adaptation of *1984*, which actors would you cast in it and who would you pick to direct it?



ME AND THE BIG GUY

Directed by Matt Nix, *Me and the Big Guy* is a hilarious parody of *1984*.

Mike Naughton stars as Citizen 43275-B, a relentlessly cheerful citizen of Oceania who loves talking to his telescreen about his day. 43275-B views Big Brother as a dear buddy and constant companion, and affectionately calls him “Big Guy”.

Without warning, Big Brother starts talking back, angrily telling 43275-B to stop calling him “Big Guy”. 43275-B is overjoyed to have Big Brother finally respond to him, and tries to engage with him further, much to Big Brother's annoyance. This leads to an

endearing montage of Boggle, sock puppets, hide-and-seek and one-sided pillow-fights, set to John Dickson's song *A Friend Like Me*.

Big Brother is ultimately fed up with 43275-B's silly antics, and explains that the "Big Brother" concept is designed 'to suggest an omniscient totalitarian presence... I'm your oppressor, not your friend!'

O'Brien also lays bare the Party's oppression for Winston in 1984, but does so because he has complete power over Winston, who will soon be erased.

In *Me and the Big Guy*, Big Brother explains the oppressive truth of the Party out of frustration and disgust toward 43275-B's hyperactive optimism, as 43275-B has so monumentally missed the point of the Party's actions.

Big Brother finally turns off the telescreen, leaving 43275-B alone. The focus of mockery has shifted from 43275-B to Big Brother, as Big Brother has found a man too obnoxious to watch or oppress.

43275-B is initially devastated, but then, in a brilliant twist, starts writing a guide to revolution in a hidden notebook, free from revolution.

Naughton has a manic persona reminiscent of Nicolas Cage, and handles the climactic twist masterfully. The film makes great use of a single location, and the sparse sound and art design still vividly convey the broader picture of life in Oceania.

You can find the full short story through this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYQKDqjCEBQ>

