



JULY 2020 NEWSLETTER

Hello to all our members,

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

Well, for one brief moment it looked like we might start up again with some restrictions, but we're back to square one for now.

In the meantime, our DVD libraries are still available.

The catalogue of films can be found on our website:

<https://www.yarrarangesfilmsociety.org.au>. Click on the Film Library tab, then click on the link "attached tabulation" under either Feature Films or Short Films. The catalogue will show if the DVD is available at Warburton, Healesville or both.

Contact **Jim Cluberton** (j.cluberton@bigpond.com) for Warburton or **Lorraine Sorrell** (lorrainesorrell@yahoo.com.au) for Healesville. The DVDs will then be left out for you to safely collect from their homes. Make sure your email has the subject "DVD request".

Please send any suggestions for films you would like to see in our future program to info@yarrarangesfilmsociety.org.au. Some suggestions have been received already.

Hoping to see you all soon.

Vivienne Bond
YRFS President

Much of Victoria, including the Yarra Ranges, is now under Stage 3 lockdown again. By the time this newsletter arrives in your inboxes, we'll still have roughly four more weeks of solitude to endure.

While I'm disappointed that we're now in this situation, this new lockdown is absolutely necessary to suppress and contain coronavirus, thus bringing our high rate of infection under control once more.

The Film Society committee is holding out hope that we'll have at least one more screening in 2020, but the worrying recent series of outbreaks and the new lockdown render this a very uncertain prospect.

We will keep you updated on how the Council's safety regulations develop in the coming months, and notify you at once if we get the go-ahead for a regular screening.

All we can do now is uphold social distancing, maintain good hygiene with frequent hand-washing and a face-mask when in public, take the new lockdown from day to day, try not to let the numbers overwhelm us, and enjoy cinema from the safety of our own homes.

Cheers.
Seth

BITE-SIZE CONSUMPTION

I would like to briefly address a small issue in modern digital culture: a phenomenon I call **bite-size consumption**.

As a film critic with a regular print column, I watch a new film every week. In the before-times, I mostly reviewed new cinema releases, but I've been exclusively watching new film releases on streaming services (mainly Netflix) for the past several months.

I was a latecomer to Netflix, having signed up in 2018 to watch the sombre, visually stunning science fiction drama *Annihilation*, and only began using Netflix in earnest in mid-2019.

Even so, I've never "binged" a franchise or TV show, wherein you watch the entire series or collection of media in one sitting, which is a common practice. I also never use Spotify, as I prefer to buy my music and store it on my computer and iPods.

I used to think I was just slightly too old to have fully embraced streaming culture, as I grew up watching movies on VHS and DVD and my household didn't get halfway-decent Internet until 2008. But I'm 29, and there are so many people significantly older than me who use Netflix every day and binge media, so I've abandoned this hypothesis.

An opposite of binging is "bite-size consumption", a phenomenon driven by video-sharing services such as YouTube.

(If someone else has coined this term or established the same concept under a different name, I fully relinquish all credit, just as I'm sure other people have independently "invented" the Reuben frittata)

I watch a lot of video essays, reviews and comedy on YouTube, but I must confess that the last film I watched outside of the Film Society or my film critic job was *Bone Tomahawk*, a chilling, superbly-written horror Western, which I watched back on SBS a couple of months ago.

YouTube hosts billions upon billions of videos, a considerable proportion of which are licensed or unlicensed clips of films and popular media. Some of these videos are transformative works, which use copyrighted media in creative new ways, but most are just unaltered clips from film or TV.

These bite-sized snippets of popular media, which you can call up in an instant with a quick search or mouse click, arguably reduce the incentive to watch the source work.

If I can bring up the awesome ten-on-one dojo fight in *Ip Man* and watch it in isolation, I'm less inclined to rewatch the full film again, even though it's sitting in my DVD shelf right now.

In hosting bite-sized snippets of films and TV – effectively, the "best bits" – YouTube and other video-sharing platforms almost present cinema as fast food: a short hit of excitement without the nourishing context.

While I love watching YouTube and follow a lot of insightful, funny content creators, I'm trying hard to overcome this bite-sized consumption problem and make the time to watch more films outside of my critic job.



STEPHEN KING'S DOLLAR BABY PROGRAM

Stephen King is a prolific and widely-praised American author, and may have more film and TV based on his work than any other modern writer.

Even his short stories have spawned dozens of films: *Graveyard Shift*, *The Lawnmower Man* and *Maximum Overdrive* (King's sole directorial credit) are based on stories in the anthology *Night Shift*, the critically-acclaimed *The Shawshank Redemption* is based on King's short story *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*, and *The Children of the Corn* (also drawn from *Night Shift*) now has ten film instalments.

The “Dollar Baby”, established in 1977, is a type of film adaptation unique to King's work.

For a largely-symbolic fee of \$1, King grants students and aspiring filmmakers permission to make a non-commercial film adaptation of one of his short stories. King retains the exclusive film rights to the source story, which he can assign later at his discretion, and he effectively holds the copyright on the Dollar Baby adaptation.

Dollar Babies are generally only screened at film festivals and school presentations. *The Boogeyman* and *The Woman in the Room* (by *Shawshank Redemption* director Frank Darabont) were released on home video in the eighties, but for the most part Dollar Babies are a strictly non-commercial enterprise, empowering up-and-coming filmmakers to adapt King's work without putting themselves out-of-pocket with licensing fees.

The Dollar Baby system is generous in theory, but the extreme lack of control granted to the filmmakers feels unreasonable when you consider the freedom enjoyed by other small-scale filmmakers and derivative works, especially on the Internet.

One Dollar Baby I'm very keen to see is Maria Ivanova's *Beachworld*, an eerie black-and-white animated short based on the 1984 short story of the same name about a planet with a sentient, malevolent desert.

Unfortunately, while *Beachworld* screened at a few film festivals, Ivanova herself has stated that the Dollar Baby contract prevents her from releasing her short film on YouTube or other video-sharing platforms.

Strangely enough, a different *Beachworld* adaptation, a tense, well-produced live-action short directed by Jackie Perez, was released on YouTube in April 2020 with King's permission.

The Boogeyman, *The Woman in the Room*, Perez's *Beachworld* and the creepy student film *The Man Who Loved Flowers* are the only full Dollar Babies I can find on YouTube (and the former two are online by virtue of their commercial home video release in the eighties). *Paranoid*, based on a poem in King's anthology *Skeleton Crew*, was briefly released online in 2002, but now only exists as clips and trailers.

It makes sense that Dollar Babies are barred from commercial release, but the filmmakers should be allowed to release their Babies for free viewing online. King holds the copyright to every Baby, but these shorts are a one-off \$1 investment for him and are unlikely to compete with a more official studio-based adaptation later on.

Dollar Baby makers being unable to release their works online is even more confusing when you consider the fan film community.

Fan films are an offshoot of fan fiction, in which fans create new stories set within a franchise they enjoy. Fan films vary wildly in quality, but some are legitimately excellent works of cinema.

Patient J is an enthralling character study and a great distillation of Batman's history and the psychology of the Joker. *Kenobi* is an exciting, visually-polished *Star Wars* fan film, and *Kaydara* is a bizarre but engaging French spin on *The Matrix*. *Portal: No Escape* adapts the first *Portal* game into a more down-to-earth, claustrophobic thriller, and director Dan Trachtenberg went on to direct the outstanding feature film *10 Cloverfield Lane*.

Fan films are rarely made with the consent of the author or distributor, and authors



Anne Rice and Orson Scott Card are notoriously critical of fan fiction. Even so, copyright holders generally leave fan media alone for public viewing as long as it's non-commercial, and some artists even praise fan media based on their work.

Dollar Babies are essentially Stephen King fan films made with the author's permission and a nominal fee. Indeed, there are several short films on YouTube that are based on King short stories but not associated with the Dollar Baby program.

The Dollar Baby program has grown increasingly redundant in the digital age.

Decent camera equipment and video editing software are getting better and cheaper all the time. Anybody can shoot and edit a movie with their phone; Steven Soderbergh shot the 2018 psychological thriller *Unsane* entirely on an iPhone.

Contacting King or any artist for permission to adapt their work is an admirable show of respect, but for most people, contacting a copyright holder (in many cases, a massive corporation) is unfeasible.

The "Death of the Author" literary theory argues that the author has no special say (or even none at all) on the reader's interpretation of their work. Adaptation is a form of interpretation, or *reinterpretation* in a new medium or style. As long as the finished product is non-commercial, authorial blessing should not be required for a fan to make a short film adaptation, and by signing a Dollar Baby contract, filmmakers deny themselves almost all agency over their own Baby.

With the proliferation of fan media and affordable electronics, aspiring filmmakers are now in a position to adapt a Stephen King short story into a non-commercial short/fan film without the straitjacket of the Dollar Baby contract.

King has nothing to lose in amending the contract and allowing filmmakers to release their Dollar Babies for free viewing online, and the filmmakers have much to gain in sharing their work with a new audience.

The Dollar Baby program has altruistic aims, but the ban on online distribution is unfair for the filmmakers and holds their project in limbo, and the program is arguably irrelevant in the modern digital era.

