

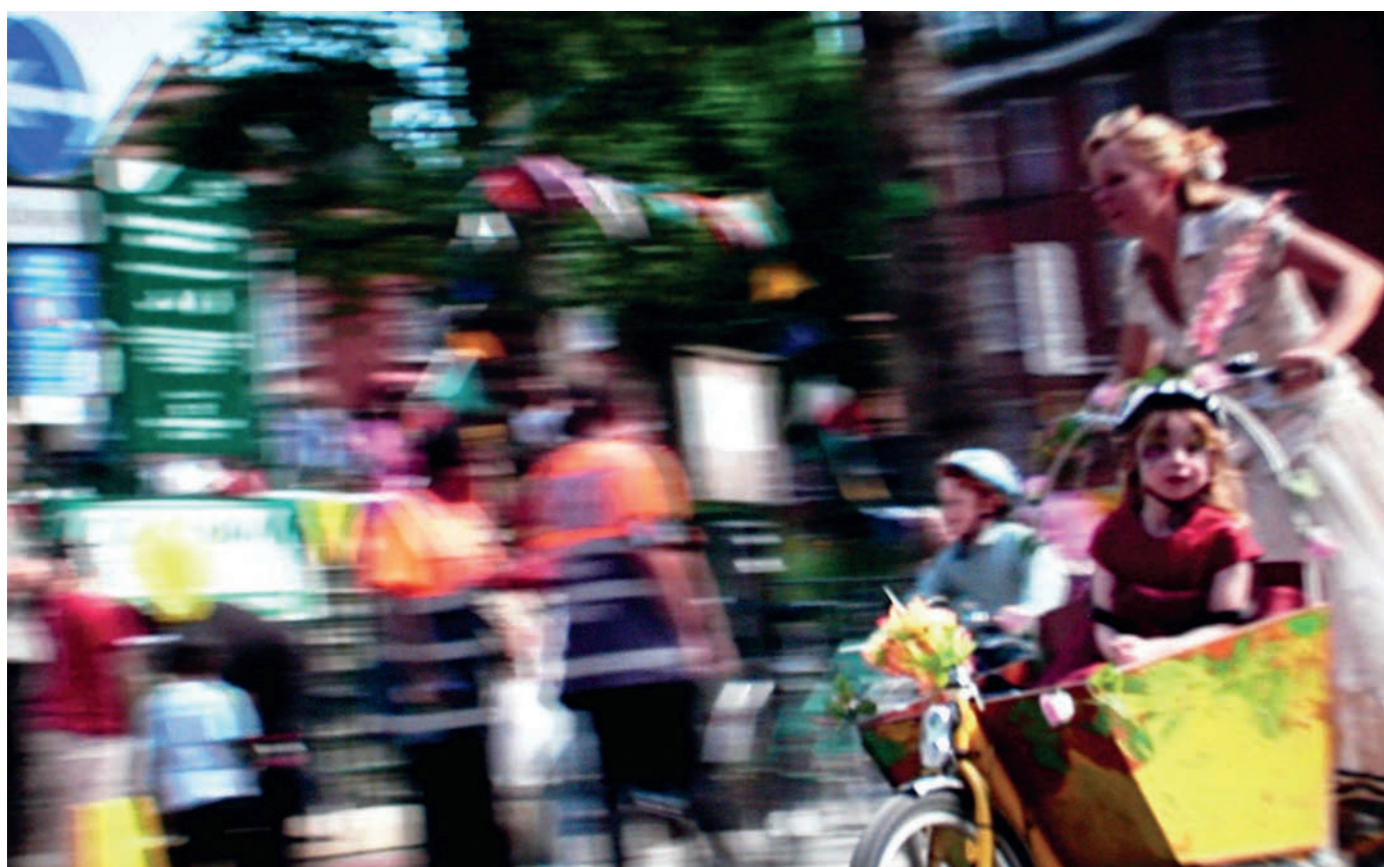
Forum

DEBATE AND OPINION

TALKING POINTS

NEWS ON THE MARCH

Up until the 1970s, the newsreel, with its stentorian tone and top-down sensibility, had become shorthand for the patronising, patrician voice of the establishment. Yet as a new wave of 21st-century protest movements takes shape, filmmakers around the world are finding the newsreel format to be the perfect vehicle for bottom-up documentation and reportage in the digital era. We hear from three directors who have each come to the form independently and, overleaf, revisit the story of 20th-century British newsreels



Finger on the pulse: Alex Reuben's 'Newsreel'

By Kieron Corless

If I have a secret ambition, it is to be put in charge of the French newsreel service. All of my films have been reports on the state of the nation; they are newsreel documents, treated in a personal manner perhaps, but in terms of contemporary actuality.
Jean-Luc Godard

Newsreels seem to be making a comeback. In the last few months alone, I've stumbled across three filmmakers in three different countries – Jem Cohen in the US, Alex Reuben in the UK and Sylvain George in France – who, independently of and unbeknownst to each other, have fixed on newsreels as a vehicle for exploring that 'contemporary actuality' Godard refers to, in the process charging up the format and giving it renewed currency. There are doubtless many more I'm unaware of, especially in the Arab world.

It may seem a strange choice of format to those who remember the old Pathé and

Gaumont newsreels that used to show in cinemas: with their RP accents and pompously upbeat tone, they sounded stuffy and remote, the amplified voice of the establishment, their ideological agenda and subtexts perennially suspect (not unlike today's TV news coverage, in fact).

Overleaf, BFI curator Rebecca Vick gives a nuanced historical account of the British newsreel, but in light of the new tendencies I want to highlight, it's also worth recalling an equally vast and compelling lineage of (sometimes state-sponsored) politically militant newsreels: Dziga Vertov and others in the wake of the Russian revolution; the Newsreel Collective in the States; Santiago Alvarez in Cuba; various currents in France through Chris Marker, Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin and others; and those lyrical, surreally inflected documentary chronicles of the everyday purveyed by the likes of Humphrey Jennings, a colossal inspiration for both Reuben and Cohen.

But why now? In the case of Cohen and George, the triggers were Occupy Wall Street and the Spanish 15-M movement respectively; for Alex Reuben, several London protests sit alongside portraits of local communities. Central to each undertaking is a desire not to propagandise but to honour complex realities and counter simplifying and politically partisan media-imposed narratives; to bear witness and pay homage to ordinary people of every stripe imbued with a spirit of revolt in the wake of the financial crisis; to build an archive for the future of potentially overlooked moments, of battles fought and lost, to capture history being made from below; to immerse viewers in those moments and get something out there fast, using all currently available distribution networks. Despite the speed and urgency, they're still clearly the work of established filmmakers operating pretty much on their own, crafted and therefore distinct from the endless mobile-phone coverage on YouTube.

JEM COHEN

I had gone to Occupy Wall Street on the very first day, 17 September 2011, shot a little bit of a street parade, just for my own records, and was rather disappointed in the event. I left right before they parked in Zuccotti Park. I thought, "This isn't going to be anything." Then I started to revisit and, within a week, felt that I had been wrong and something very interesting was brewing. So I started to shoot, at that point in HD, but still had no outlet for it.

Then I had a conversation by chance with John Vanco, who programmes at the IFC Center in New York. He said, "What are filmmakers doing?" And I said, "Well, this is one of the most documented events I've ever encountered, but frankly the documentation is mostly going to be geared towards advocacy/propaganda films for, and then probably the same against." And he said, "Well, where are the newsreels?" I said to him, "If I get you newsreels, will you show them as newsreels?" He invited them to play at the IFC, which has five screens. So that was an extraordinary opportunity, and I have to give credit to John Vanco for sparking it.

I knew that even though it was right there in Lower Manhattan, a lot of people would never experience it, and the idea that people would randomly enter the movie theatre and have a sudden three- or five-minute immersion in this experience was more interesting to me than just showing it to the people already involved. But the newsreel idea also ties in to a certain tradition, not necessarily with newsreels specifically but [in terms of] people like John Ford making films for the US government or Humphrey Jennings for the British war effort, and of course Chris Marker – the connection with the early Russians and the propaganda trains, that whole Vertov/Medvedkin schema. I also used the term 'newsreels' with a grain of salt: I wasn't trying to pattern them literally on newsreels as we know them, which usually are quite propagandistic.

My intention was to make a non-propagandistic newsreel based around observation and an experiential sense of what it was like to be there. On one hand, I was a supporter and wanted to become a participant, and to me that became very powerful and moving. It took me by surprise because I'm usually cynical about these things. But the documentarian filmmaker side of me just isn't interested in making advocacy tools in the way that the Left usually manufactures them. I'm glad someone else does them, but it's not what I do. The basis of a newsreel is the 'you are there' sensibility. It basically says, "There's an event happening right now, or it's just happened, somewhere in the world that you're not, and here's what it's like." And that to me was the guiding principle, simply to create these little documents that had humility and respect but would also allow for some ambiguity and even ambivalence.

I had to make them very quickly to turn them around for the theatre. They ran the first

five and then the camp at Zuccotti Park was eradicated, and by that time I had about five or six more. So I went and made a series of 12, and now they're having a different life in different channels. But it really was nice to be making something that functioned as newsreels traditionally functioned, before feature films.

SYLVAIN GEORGE

Vers Madrid (The Burning Bright)! is a film that arose in response to circumstances, specifically in relation to the political events and social and political mobilisations taking place in Spain for more than a year now. When what became known as the 15-M protest movement began, just after the Arab Spring in 2011, I wondered, like many people, whether it was the first revolution of the 21st century in Western society. I felt the desire to see and understand what was happening so I went to Madrid as fast as possible to try to shoot some images without any intention of making a film. I didn't know the city, was not acquainted with anybody there and didn't speak the language at all. I just wanted to be there.

Once there, I was completely taken by the atmosphere that prevailed in the main square, by the energy that was being unleashed. I thought it was incredible that people could talk about politics like that. You could see gatherings in neighbourhoods, groups of people who didn't know each other assembling to talk politics on the squares and in the streets adjacent to the Puerta del Sol. As for the rallies, in all my life I had never been able to attend collective gatherings of up to 10,000 people!

I tried to be as close as possible to what was happening, to testify to what appeared to me to be very important. Gradually, I gathered material. Then I came to think that some of it was sufficiently interesting to try to make something with it. As I worked, I tried to find a form suited to my approach, the desire to go

These films aim not to propagandise but to honour complex realities, to bear witness and pay homage



A Jem Cohen newsreel

on site, the absence of production [equipment], the fact that I couldn't make a work of 'immersion' or be involved in a long drawn-out job on the site, as I was able to do for *May They Rest in Revolt (Figures of Wars I)* and *The Outbursts (My Mouth, My Revolt, My Name)*.

I quickly thought of working on a form that would update the idea of the newsreel, such as Robert Kramer had proposed and worked on – a form that echoes approaches such as early-20th-century Russian Kino, Dziga Vertov's cine-tracts or Medvedkin's experiments; but a form that also echoes images shot with a mobile phone or a small camera that one can see posted on the internet by people in revolt or those who wish to bear witness.

It also seemed to me that newsreels could be an interesting tool to explore the fact that disinformation is widespread in Spain. The big Spanish media are in the pay of power; they distort reality and don't report what really goes on in the square or the neighbourhood committees. Similarly, the French media say very little about what happens in Spain or about the Occupy movements around the world. Using the newsreel form helps to turn dialectics upside down and present absent or missing elements. That's what I tried to do: to present modestly and in an extremely spontaneous and essential way a certain number of things that are at stake – necessities – as well making my own contribution to the 'Spanish revolution'.

ALEX REUBEN

With *Newsreel* I wanted to show how you can shoot and put work in the cinema immediately – I guess it's a kind of punk ethos. New technology allows this fluidity with high quality. It doesn't cost a lot of money and Eisenstein didn't have Final Cut Pro! As producers and directors we don't have so many excuses. I don't have a magic wand yet Picturehouse [cinemas] put on both *Routes* (my first film) and *Newsreel* without any film-festival or distributor channel. At one point, *Newsreel* was in three cinemas every day in London – two more on a non-daily basis – and I think there's a political point in the fact that a little independent filmmaker can do it.



'Vers Madrid (The Burning Bright)!

FORUM

For me, they're very political films. There was the banking crisis – I was shooting right around then – and then there were two marches against the cuts. They were the three main events. And what's interesting is asking what the zeitgeist is; what's the feeling on the street? And then, how do you communicate that feeling in a way other than via a voiceover? Newsreels are beautiful: they can be quite poetic and it's a way of putting process on screen. And it really is the news, but it's a different kind of news to how we normally see events portrayed.

In terms of the politics, there's a small 'p' and a big 'P'. The big 'P' would be the definite presence of the protests, the banners and all these things. Then there's a small 'p', which is about individual expression – and which, for me, is especially about dance and music and movement. There is a structure to *Newsreel*, but it's maybe more to do with movement. I don't want to make it appear like it's thrown together; there is a sense of rhythm and

People are moved by these films. It's to do with seeing ourselves on the streets, how people walk. That's the story of our lives

progression. There's no point just putting three protests next to each other because people are going to get bored. The editing process is long and hard – hours and hours and hours finding how these things work together. I could have had a lot more protest in there. I took some violence out, for example. I tried to communicate the emotion of ordinary people marching, which is what it was about for me, not a few people fighting or causing trouble.

People have been moved, with *Routes* and now with *Newsreel*. And this is odd. Because if you say to someone after they've seen a film where there's a lot of talking, "Why were you moved?", they can say, "Oh, when so-and-so lost his wife, or when she lost her child." They can't do that for my films. So then you have this really interesting conversation where people struggle to articulate it. But we get there, because I've done so many Q&As. It's to do with the fact that they are narrative films and the narrative is this cumulative sense of emotion that comes through from bodies and movement and events. But it's especially to do with body language and sound and music. Most people don't see that consciously – I know what they are, but when people watch the film they don't. And in *Newsreel* it's also to do with seeing ourselves on the streets, just seeing how people walk and express body language in normal situations. That's the story of our lives. These things are more important than words, and I guess I take words out because there's a lot of bullshit about. People are less likely to lie with their bodies.

i Alex Reuben's 'Newsreel' screens at the ICA Cinema, London, on 15 January, followed by a Q&A. 'Vers Madrid' and Jem Cohen's newsreels will screen at the same venue later in the month

NEWSREEL HISTORY

WINDOWS ON THE WORLD

Almost as old as cinema itself, newsreels were for decades the newspapers of the film world

By Rebecca Vick

A pulsing vein of information, current affairs and entertainment marked by clipped-voice commentaries, dramatic music and rapid editing, newsreel was cinema's most iconic form of factual filmmaking. A forerunner of today's news on demand, it offered cinemagoers a unique window on their world: whether showing a speech by Churchill, the activities of the royal family or the suffragettes, a cricket match at Lord's or an eyewitness account from the Front, newsreel kept a nation's heart racing.

French-based Gaumont and Eclair were the earliest known sources of this new mass-produced form. Cheap to reproduce, newsreels were simultaneously screened in multiple venues. They eventually averaged five minutes and contained five or six stories.

The first successful British reel was Pathé's Animated Gazette, starting in June 1910. Pathé, along with Gaumont and Topical Budget, dominated the silent era but there were numerous other newsreel production companies, including Warwick Bioscope Chronicle and Williamson's Animated News. In the sound era, single reels doubled in length and each issue included eight or more items.

Their birth coinciding with the newspaper revolution, as 'animated newspapers' or 'topicals' borrowed from print formats, referring to themselves as the 'picture papers' of the moving-picture world. Two editions were released weekly, on Mondays and Thursdays, an integral part of the balanced diet of the full cinema bill; the title of cameraman Paul Wyand's autobiography reminds us that newsreels were 'Useless, If Delayed'. But they often weren't quite on the pulse for practical reasons: the heavy equipment restricted cameramen's ability to cover stories, image quality varied with weather conditions, and slow processing and budget limitations prompted heavy reliance on stock footage.

The silent newsreel lacked the broadsheets' context, immediacy and analytical content but its intertitles – headlines – were easily translated into many languages and they reached a broader audience than the printed word. Sometimes incorporating up to 70 per cent foreign content, newsreels remain compelling partly for their internationalism.

Many companies fell in the transition from silence to sound, but Pathé and Gaumont persisted, alongside new entrants such as British Paramount News, Universal News and British Movietone News, whose film of the Epsom Derby was the subject of Britain's first sound newsreel in June 1929. Between them, these five organisations developed the now-familiar newsreel form.

In the shift from silence to sound, some companies initially produced both versions; others incorporated background noises while continuing to deploy captions. Commentaries



Making the news: a Gaumont British team at work

efficiently conveyed information in the limited time available, sometimes galloping along at three times the average speed of speech. Pathé's Bob Danvers-Walker, Universal's R.E. Jeffrey and Movietone's Leslie Mitchell became familiar voices, while Ted Emmett's authoritative voiceovers for Gaumont became so iconic that one journalist described him as "just about the only star name the newsreels ever made".

Historian Nicholas Pronay argues that soundtracks gave newsreels access to the "life-blood of journalism": politics and especially politicians' speeches. Editors could use this tool to address and persuade the audience; the absence of a politician from a report could be as telling as their presence. Different ideological slants have been discerned in different outputs, Pathé leaning slightly left, Movietone right.

Historian Anthony Aldgate wrote of newsreel companies being "permeated by ways of seeing and thinking which belonged to the dominant structures of power... which supported the dominant political consensus of the day". Newsreels were uniquely exempt from the censorship imposed on other parts of the film industry – a freedom that led in turn to criticism and questioning of their motives. Producers trod carefully, balancing editorial independence with sensitivities of exhibitors and audiences, though more frivolous items added to entertain crowds and appease renters were widely disparaged.

In times of threat, an umbrella organisation, the Newsreel Association of Great Britain and Ireland, worked to resolve industry-wide problems and promote and protect shared interests. During the war, producers were integrated into national power structures, harnessed for propaganda and morale-boosting. The companies joined forces in a rota system, allowing them all to cover agreed stories without duplication. Live events were planned, rehearsed and re-enacted and stock footage re-used; Pronay has argued that newsreels therefore created the "illusion of actuality".

In the 1950s, tastes changed, audiences became more questioning, production costs rose and editors' fingers slipped from the pulse. Cinemas ceased taking newsreels as they were overtaken by television, whose less heavy cameras caught more interesting stories. Most newsreels disappeared by the end of the 1960s, though Movietone held out until 1979. Yet even at this distance, the look, sound and feel of newsreel remain instantly recognisable to the public, and continue to resonate with some of today's filmmakers.

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FEEDBACK

READERS' LETTERS

Letters are welcome, and should be addressed to the Editor at Sight & Sound, BFI, 21 Stephen Street, London W1T 1LN Fax: 020 7436 2327 Email: S&S@bfi.org.uk

Shine on

Dr Neil Jackson is wrong to suggest ('Letter of the Month', *S&S*, January) that the publicity for the BFI's release of *The Shining* (US cut) was "somewhat misleading". His argument with regard to a limited number of TV transmissions is based on a misunderstanding of the term 'released', which is generally taken to refer to the widespread distribution of a film in cinemas and/or on DVD. The BFI was correct to say that the US cut of *The Shining* had never previously been released in UK cinemas. Our publicity also stressed the tremendous impact of Kubrick's feature on the big screen, and we are delighted that the US cut has now been seen in more than 150 cinemas across the UK.

Margaret Deriaz, Head of Film Distribution, British Film Institute

Cad reputation

I would be wary of falling in with Giles Coren's reading of Severine's death scene in *Skyfall* (Editorial, *S&S*, January). Bond wants to save her but will be shot if he makes the least move. His callous quip about the murder being a waste of good scotch is purely a trick, feigned insouciance being Bond's only way to make his captors lower their guard so he can spring a surprise attack. Everyone I ask takes that to be the point of the line.

Patrick Fahy, Documentation Team Leader, British Film Institute

In defence of popular Yugoslav cinema

Knowing the excellent standards of film criticism in *S&S*, I was surprised by the ignorance and cultural arrogance which radiate from the review of *Cinema Komunista* (*S&S*, December). Hannah McGill criticises the author of the film, Mila Turajlic, for seeing political intervention in Yugoslav cinema as "sweet and amusing rather than sinister"; she defines the Yugoslav official film industry as "insignificant".

McGill's text unfortunately displays the typical failure of many Western film scholars who observe the history of Eastern European cinema through the simplified dichotomy: dissident modernist mavericks vs regime cinema. I doubt that such a dichotomy works well in Poland and Hungary, but it doesn't work at all in the Yugoslav case.

During its 45-year history, Yugoslav cinema produced a broad variety of thrillers, crime movies, war films, comedies and melodramas within that very same party-controlled apparatus, but some were nevertheless great films. Yugoslav directors of classic narrative style such as Branko Bauer, France Stiglic, Nikola Tanhofer, Hajrudin Kravac or Zika Mitrovic do not fit into a Western pattern of dissidents, but they are truly relevant filmmakers. For Yugoslav cinema they have the same role as Ford, Hawks or Wilder have for American culture.

What's more relevant is that these films are

LETTER OF THE MONTH
REINVENTING ARGENTINA

Happy as I was to see the Narcisa Hirsch retrospective at this year's Viennale reviewed in a two-page feature ('Restless Reinvention', *Wide Angle*, *S&S*, January), my joy was soon spoiled by Olaf Möller's rather peculiar take on Argentine cinema and history. Does Ms Hirsch (above) really "like to point out" that "during the 1970s and 1980s the lieutenants and generals weren't the only ones exercising

quasi-official terror: left-wing extremists had their own death squads"? However aberrant and ill-conceived the strategy of armed resistance against 20-odd years of military dictatorship might seem with the benefit of hindsight, to compare this to the systematic torture and assassination of tens of thousands of people at the hands of the Junta is a bit like saying: "Hey, after all the Jews and Commies also tried to kill the Führer not once but twice, didn't they?"

Whatever the veteran cineaste might have said – and one truly hopes she might have intended something slightly different from what your chronicler reports – "the kind of atmosphere in which Hirsch started to make films" in the late 1960s was certainly not one, as Möller suggests, of unblemished, experimental autonomy under siege from left and right-wing "death squads". And as for "a nation not known for this [experimental] variety of cinema": at least in my version of Latin American cinema, the work of Solanas/Getino, Gleyzer, Birri, Alberto Fischerman, Hugo Santiago or – closer to Hirsch's own – of a veteran film-artist such as Claudio Caldini represents one of the richest legacies of experimental cinema anywhere in the region. But then perhaps one needs a concept of experimentalism as wide as Mr Möller's command of Argentine (film) history to truly appreciate his insights. Jens Andermann, Zurich

still broadly popular in all Yugoslav countries – more so than those of internationally famous authors like Makavejev and Kusturica. I am a Croat; Turajlic is a Serb, 20 years younger than me; but the fact that we both consider Yugoslav popular cinema as our mutual heritage shows how these films transcend national and generational boundaries. Instead of criticising those who study this cinema with affection, Western critics should make an effort to learn more about it. For a start, I'd suggest they see Branko Bauer's *Don't Look Back, My Son* (1956), one of the best thrillers of the 1950s, in any cinema, in any country.

Jurica Pavicic, University of Split, Croatia

In defence of 'Twilight'

A feature of contemporary film franchises is that each film assumes its audience is familiar with the earlier episodes. Clearly Hannah McGill (*The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part II*, Reviews, *S&S*, January) has not been following the *Twilight* films, or she would know that all the actors who are seen and named in the final credits had important roles in the previous movies – making this closing sequence a coda to the whole saga. Her description of Bella's experience of motherhood as "bloodless" is also ironic,

given the Caesarean birth of her daughter in the previous film (which apparently had some male filmgoers fainting in the aisles).

Unfortunately, McGill also fails to notice scenes in the very film she is watching. She complains that no one consumes any blood. Did she not see Bella, having narrowly restrained herself from feasting on a rock-climbing tourist, rushing to wrestle a mountain lion to the forest floor and guzzle on its blood? Admittedly, this is shown in long-shot, to accord with the film's 12A certificate (the scene is far more graphic in the novel).

Ridiculing *Twilight* has become a competitive sport for giggling critics who misrepresent the stories to accord with their prejudices.

Peter Benson, London

Additions and corrections

January p. 73. Soundings: the screening of *Oruchi with benshi* narration was presented by Ciné Illuminé, not Silent London as stated; p.82 *Hors Satan*, Certificate 15, 109m 46s, 9,879 ft +0 frames; p.86 *Life of Pi* – some screenings presented in 3D; p.90 *Boxing Day*, Certificate 15, 94m 9s, 8,473 ft +8 frames; p.92 *Chasing Ice*, Certificate 12A, 80m 11s, 7,216 ft +8 frames; p.94 *Confession of a Child of the Century*, Certificate 15, 120m 12s, 10,818 ft +0 frames; *Dead Europe*, the actor pictured is Kodi Smit-McPhee, not Marton Csokas as stated; p.101 *McCullin*, Certificate 15, 95m 15s, 8,572 ft +8 frames; p.104 *Neil Young Journeys*, Certificate PG, 87m 8s, 7,842 ft +0 frames; p.106 *Safety Not Guaranteed*, Certificate 15, 85m 32s, 7,698 ft +0 frames; p.109 *Smashed*, Certificate 15, 80m 53s, 7,279 ft +8 frames December 2012 p.94 *The House I Live In*, Certificate 15, 108m 52s, 9,798 ft +0 frames