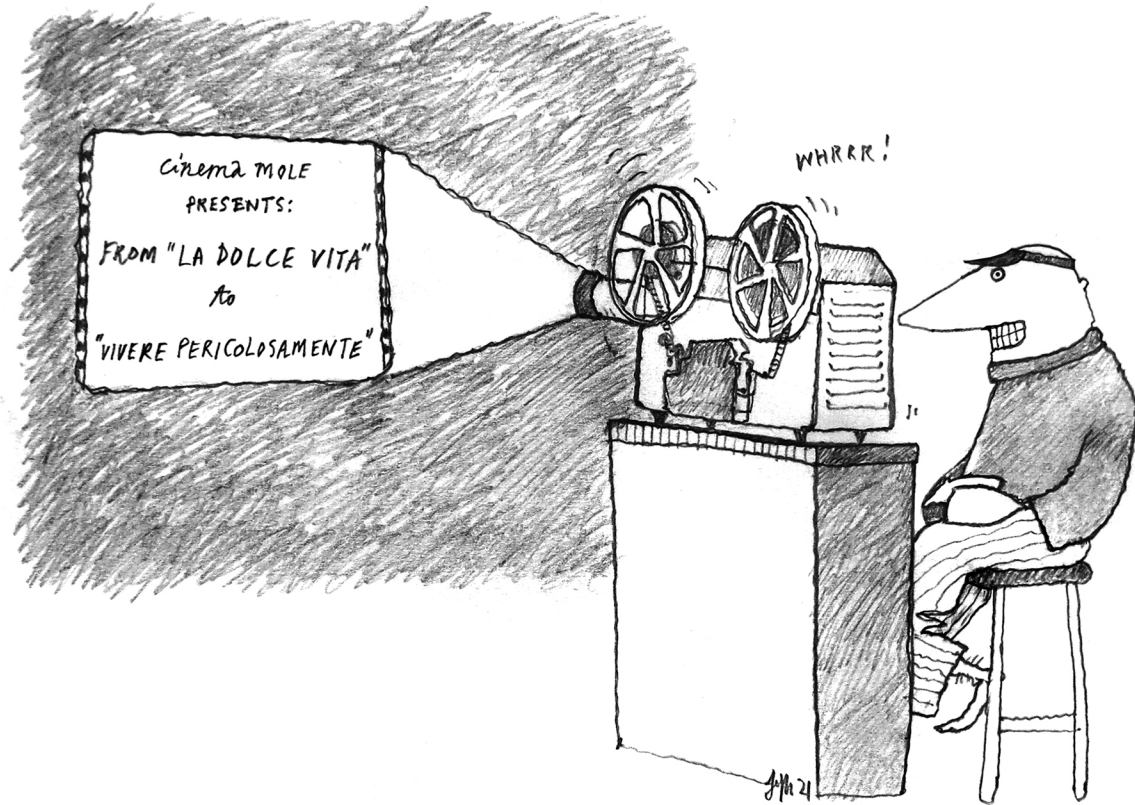


STICKY WICKET

Corona XXXV – the year of living virtually

Mole

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs - www.peterjeffsart.com

Yesterday was a messed-up year, wasn't it? I vaguely remember flying home from a meeting and being told that we are shutting down our institute. I remember cancelling several flights after that, and then more, and then everything. I remember my assistant asking me if we would reopen at the end of March, and me telling her that I didn't think we would reopen until at least June. I remember some colleagues announcing that we had had a close call, and others predicting that we would likely reach 100% infection in the coming months. I remember getting approval to study an infection cohort, then being concerned that we might not reach our target number, and later remembering how ridiculous that concern was. I remember difficulties in obtaining a mask to wear (we were conserving PPE for hospital staff) and then wearing it for weeks until I could find another. I remember empty shelves at the store. I remember considering writing a column to keep a record of all this. Most of all, I remember learning to live virtually. And then, suddenly, it was today. Yesterday was messed up.

Today I drove to work and there was traffic. Traffic! On my way, I stopped at the store to buy toilet paper. Arriving at the institute, I had to search a bit for a parking space. I sat and talked science with colleagues at work (masked, of course, and socially distanced, which is now automatic). It all felt normal. I don't know what normal is anymore. Can something be marginally *more* normal?

In 1964 the first president of Indonesia, Sukarno (who had been president since 1945 and would be until 1967) gave an Independence Day speech entitled 'Vivere Pericolosamente,' an Italian phrase meaning 'living dangerously.' The following year there was an attempted coup to overthrow his government. Thirteen years later, the Australian author Christopher Koch wrote his book, 'The Year of Living Dangerously,' set against the background of the Jakarta coup. I didn't read the book, but I did see Peter Weir's adaptation, which was really good (at least it was in 1982, I haven't seen it recently; if you watch it, let me know how it holds up). It starred Sigourney Weaver (who had terrified me three years earlier in 'Alien'), Linda Hunt (who would later spend what seems like decades in a police procedural in which nobody smiles and people say sciency-sounding things) and Mel Gibson (when he wasn't as crazy as a bat). That was when a bat virus wasn't a xenomorph utterly disrupting Ripley and the Weyland-Yutani Corporation's industrial ship, Nostromo. Wait, that was 'Alien'. The bat virus wasn't part of that story. The bat virus is our story. Yesterday, the bat virus scared me more than the Alien did. I'm marginally less scared now. Not because it isn't still killing people, but because, after a year, you get used to *vivere pericolosamente*.

A great film, like all great art, takes us out of ourselves and lets us gain perspective on what we may be going through. We escape into the film, and when we reenter reality, reality is slightly changed. In

our year of living virtually, I have been doing this a lot. But none of the films I've mentioned resonate with the current reality. Not 'Alien', not 'NCIS' (which is not a film, but does have Linda Hunt; she is a wonderful actor, but I really don't care for this series), not 'The Year of Living Dangerously' (although we certainly have been).

The film I have in mind is a short film by Eoghan Moloney, 'Mug.' Go watch it on YouTube, because I want to talk about it. (It's only 29 minutes long, and I really liked it; and I'm going to talk about it, so don't let me spoil it for you. Necessary disclaimer: there is profanity, recreational drug use and adult themes, so don't watch it with your kids, or if you are a kid.) Did you see it? (Really, just go see it, I hate being the spoiler.) The thing is, if I confess to having a phobia, it is being mugged – having a stranger threaten me with a weapon to obtain my possessions. I would rather have an alien in my chest (okay, I'd be afraid of that too, and since that really doesn't happen, I'm more afraid of being mugged). In the film (which you've seen, right?), John, "Snake Eyes to you," the muggee, is not at all afraid. Indeed, he insists that the mugger, Declan, stab him so that he won't have to kill himself. John is funny, charming, insightful and suicidal, and they talk about life and death and form a bond, however temporary. And of course, in the end, John congratulates Declan on his first successful mugging, then merrily goes off to hang himself.

So why in the world did I pick *this* film? Why did this resonate with me, instead of, say 'Da 5 Bloods' (I do like Spike Lee, but not this one especially)? (By the way, I screen short narratives for an independent film festival, which is how I first saw 'Mug'; can you

tell I like film?) It's this: we have been mugged by the virus, all of us; our lives have been inexorably changed and our lives have been threatened (and tragically, far, far too many lives have been lost), and we have found strength and friendship in our isolation. And support from unexpected sources. More support than I would have imagined a year ago. And all while living virtually. John saves Declan, Declan does not save John (Snake Eyes to you), life goes on, and will, despite our losses, and we are allowed to feel okay about it all.

Today, my friend Professor Dachshund told me that he has just had his fifth case of COVID infection in his clinic among those who had been immunized. My colleague Professor Egret confirmed that we have had four in our cohort. None are symptomatic, which is good news, but clearly, vaccination does not eliminate the possibility of transmission from immune individuals. If I worked in a pediatric cancer hospital (maybe I do, maybe I don't, just saying), I would be sure that we will not return to maskless, full-contact life for what may be years. Yesterday, we lived through the year of living virtually. Tomorrow, we have another year of living dangerously. We have been mugged, and we're okay. As Han Solo said to Luke Skywalker, "We're not out of this yet."

We are planning to start having our lab meetings outside, using laptops and still streaming, but in person, at least for those who can make it. I can't wait. I hope you get vaccinated soon. And if you have, I hope you will keep being careful out there. We are one year in, and not out of this yet. But it's okay to feel okay about where we are now. I do.