

An account of watching
all these
SUMMERS
with Peter Petrou

Tuesday 12th November 2024 at UCL Marshgate

I borrow the small cinema at UCL Marshgate to show Pete the film. On the Central Line I wonder how he might receive it. He has not seen any of the material yet, so I think about how it will affect him to see himself on screen. How will he feel about how he is portrayed? Am I nervous? A little, but less than I had expected to be. A desire to welcome his reactions, yet also a sense of unease, one that involves a kind of mental preparation for explanations, an anticipation of possible questions. I try to resist the presumptions emerging from my eagerness not to disappoint and remind myself to remain open and receptive.

We meet at Stratford Station. I spot him at a distance as I come out through the barriers. He is standing outside waiting for me. He smiles when he sees me, and we give each other a hug. We haven't seen each other for a while.

Marc picks us up on the ground floor and show us the way to the cinema, then says good luck and leaves us alone. Pete takes a seat in the middle on the third row. I go to press play and go to sit on the last seat of the second row. I turn my head, trying to ascertain his reaction, even before the film has begun. We start watching.

Pete quickly begins providing an occasional running commentary. 'Is your dad a Buddhist?'

Halfway through the film, the steaming mug appears. I turn my head once again, uneasily anticipating his reaction to the scene I feel most anxious about showing him. I know what follows the steaming mug. He doesn't yet.

You wanted to talk?

I look at Pete while he listens to himself talking.

I don't open up to people like that normally. Become friendly, I'm normally aloof and don't make friends, because you don't trust people here, and because I'm sensitive. Many things. But I'd just like to be able to maintain what we started, because it's good, but I also don't want to give off the wrong vibe, especially to you. Do you understand what I'm saying? I'm not getting out my point. I hope you understand. I can be more direct. If you ever felt that I am... I've got a crush on you too much. If you ever felt that and you don't like it, I don't want you to feel that, I don't want you to... I won't do it, I'm trying not to do it. I thought, as an old man, I can't fall in love with a girl that young, but I can, so I'm telling you I can, and I don't want it to be like that, I don't want it to be in love. I just want it to be how it is, friends.

He leans forward in his seat, rests his arms and his chin on the back of the seat in front. He whispers something. I don't hear him... 'What did you say?'

'I'm embarrassed', he repeats. Instinctively, I want to alleviate: 'No, don't worry. You're very articulate.'

I hadn't anticipated rejection but still feel a sense of relief at his response to revisiting his uncertainty of our encounter, his filmed declaration of affection, and my lack of statement of intent.

We stay silent as we watch him talking about the experience of losing his father. He seems pensive. Tears begin welling up in his eyes.

As we both contemplate the long exchange between my father and me at the end of the film, he starts interrupting by sporadically declaring observations of what he sees:

'He's crying. He's shocked. He's traumatized.' Then: 'You can't express with words what he's feeling.'

When my dad reaches out for me, Pete observes my hesitance in giving him my hand.

'He wants a hug', he says. 'Someone else said the same thing,' I respond. I feel a need to explain the reluctance, the fear of overwhelm: 'It's hard for me to do in the situation.' He nods and touches my shoulder.

When the film finishes, I can see that he's thinking. 'Is that how it feels?' he asks. 'Like a fellowship of sadness?' He doesn't seem convinced. I begin to think about the expression, drawn from Susan Sontag's description of the writing of Robert Walser. I'm intrigued that he questions it and begin to think about my use of it.

We leave the cinema and begin walking to have a beer at a pub near the station. 'You can look at it over and over', he observes, 'and you can have psychoanalysts look at it.' We laugh. 'We're all suffering,' he says.

He seems more inclined to comment on my dad's presence in the film over his own.

'He should be grateful for what he's got. However small it is. That little girl standing tall giving him love. Stood before him, helping him, his daughter. His daughter makes sense. He feels remorse that he spent too much time being depressed. He's an intelligent man; how did he get stuck? He can't get his words out. You can spend a lot of time in depression. Time goes by. Years go by. He's not able to get out of it psychologically. He tells you 'use your talents'. I feel he needs to put more power into his words. I haven't got a daughter. What have I got? A dog.'

There's a pause, as we both consider what he's said, before he continues.

'He does everything a fleshy man does. His spirit is very sad. His soul is lost, I can see that. You need to have a loving spirit to express yourself. Love is the strongest power we've got.'

'Why did you cry when you watched yourself talking about your dad?' I ask him.

'I relived the memories of those days with my dad. He was going to die 18 days before that. During those 18 days, they kept him alive. They should let you go.'

We have ordered a beer and sit down in a sofa at one of the tables at the pub. 'What did you think of the film?'

'It's a bit short. It's maybe lacking something, something is missing. Spirit. There needs to be more. If you're trying to unravel a puzzle, it needs an answer. It's sad the way it ends. Because I know you, I understand, somebody who doesn't might not understand.'

'I think I'm more trying to ask questions than provide answers,' I say. 'But how was it for you to see yourself in the film?' I'm aware that he has primarily commented on my father's condition and appearance.

'I'm an ugly bastard. I didn't realise my eyebrows were so bushy. You don't see yourself usually. Other people see you.'

I laugh. 'You come across really well, someone said you look like a film star. But apart from your eyebrows, what did you think of your own presence in the film?'

'You found me in my dark world. I go under the covers; you found me in that state. You asked me: Can I film? Your father says It's an honour. It helps to express. There's not enough power behind all that. I think I can open up to you because I can relate. Thanks for making me feel confident about being articulate.'

He looks at me with tears in his eyes, then whispers: 'Can I give you something verbal for you to protect yourself with? It's a gift from me to you. As a weapon to protect yourself. If you ever get stuck in these dark phases repeat: Lord Jesus have mercy upon me.'

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By Therese Henningsen

UK Premiere

Creative Nonfiction Film Weekend

The Rio Cinema, London, 6th July 2025