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Watershed May 2009 Podcast

This month there are great opportunities to revisit some classics of cinema. One is so rare you will be daft to miss it.

First though – a couple of weeks ago the great pioneering cinematographer Jack Cardiff died. Cardiff had a long and distinguished career in cinema – his career actually spanned the history of film from silent through to colour and beyond. He entered the industry at the age of 14 in 1928. He was a pioneer in the use of colour - being the first to shoot a film in Britain using Technicolor. Whilst he was cinematographer on a host of great films e.g. **The African Queen, Scott of the Antarctic** - he will be forever linked with Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger and the three extraordinary films he shot for them.

Powell and Pressburger were so impressed by his 2nd Unit work on **The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp** that they offered Cardiff lead cinematographer on their next project. The results would be three stunning and groundbreaking British films which have never really been matched in terms of sheer creative brilliance. The three were **A Matter of Life and Death, Black Narcissus** and **The Red Shoes**.

By coincidence we are screening **A Matter of Life and Death** this month as part of the Bristol Festival of Ideas. The context is actually in connection with a season looking at neurology through cinema. We are doing this in partnership with the Department of Neurology at the University of Bristol. What seemed like a reasonably obtuse connection

is actually quite intriguing if you think about how cinema portrays or has used neurological phenomenon or disorders e.g. **Memento** and amnesia, **A Beautiful Mind** and schizophrenia, **The Diving Bell and the Butterfly** and neurological shut down. These are all being screened with introductions from eminent neurologists looking at the films from their professional perspective.

In discussions about the topic **A Matter Of Life and Death** immediately came to my mind. If you remember – or haven't seen it – it is about a RAF bomber played by David Niven coming back from a mission, his plane is on fire and over the English Channel lost – even he presumes he will die. However an error in heaven means he is still very much alive and fallen in love with the radio signaller with whom he had his last conversation. This celestial battle to get him back is mirrored in reality by the intense headaches he gets - a neurological disorder which will require an operation to save his life - paralleled by a court case in heaven. It is magnificently balanced between the celestial and the real. And in discussion with Prof Ian Christie who not only wrote the excellent monograph for the BFI but was key to the critical re-evaluation of Powell and Pressburger from the 1970s onwards, I discovered that **AMOLAD** is currently being reappraised for its neurological verisimilitude and is the favourite film of neuroscientist Oliver Sacks - he of **Awakenings** and **The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat**.

From the context of neuroscience and the Festival of Ideas I am sure this screening, which will be introduced by Professor Christie, will be a homage and reminder of the great contribution made by Jack Cardiff to Powell and Pressburger's vision. Indeed I always remember the story where Powell described to Cardiff that when Niven makes the transition – he thinks – from earth to heaven – he comes out of a mist.

The challenge for Cardiff was to create this subtle effect. After some time Cardiff said to Powell he had the solution. What technical magic and trickery was he going to do with the focus and the film stock? Well, a simple breath on the lens was enough to create the out-of-focus mist and as it quickly dried and disappeared from the lens Niven would come sharply into focus.

A Matter of Life and Death is screening at **1400hrs** on **Sun 10 May**.

“Film is like a battleground. There’s love, hate, action, violence, death. In one word: emotions.”

This is the definitive definition of film as delivered by American director Sam Fuller playing himself in Jean Luc Godard’s 1966 brilliant and still astonishing **Pierrot Le Fou**. Pierrot is being reissued by the British Film Institute as part of the celebrations of the Nouvelle Vague – that great moment in the late 50s and early 60s when French critics-turned-filmmakers turned cinema on its head and introduced a much needed injection of energy.

Pierrot Le Fou is an extraordinary film which I would compare in effect and audacity to Picasso’s ‘Les Demoiselle’s d’Avignon’ and Marcel Duchamps’s urinal. At the same time it is the height of abstract modernism, all improvised, cut up, energetic, bursting with ideas and the boldness of the new - and the other: cheeky, brash and pisstakingly conceptual.

It was Godard’s tenth film and the idea of improvisation was at the core. Although adapted from a novel as source material there was no script. It was shot in truly glorious almost primary colour Technicolor by, at that time, Godard’s regular cameraman Raoul Coutard. It could

and should be argued that Raoul Coutard's name should be as recognisable in the Nouvelle Vague as Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol et al. His cinematography gave form to those auteurs' visions. **Pierrot Le Fou** is, well, I would say, pure cinema. The cinemascope frame is like a canvas with which you can feel Coutard and Godard playing quite magnificently.

I would be intrigued to know what conversation Cardiff and Coutard would have had. I am certain they would have approved of each other's stunning cinematography.

Pierrot Le Fou opens **Fri 22 May** for two weeks.

The very rare screening that you would be mad to miss is **La Roue** by Abel Gance, which is screening as part of **The Music of Light** season. Gance is one of the towering pioneers of silent cinema who introduced narrative complexity and character depth to this primitive art form. He is probably most famous for **Napoleon** which was restored in the 1980s in all its three screen projection and orchestral score glory. Gance's films are, in a word, epic. **La Roue** has been unavailable for over 80 years and is a stunning poetic piece of cinema, presented here with a live score by Neil Brand and Günther Buchwald. The man behind a lot of the restoration of early cinema is Kevin Brownlow and over the weekend of 23 and 24 May there will be opportunities to hear him talk about his work but also to see some of the films he himself has made. Brownlow is a towering figure in the world of restoration and bringing back to light lost masterpieces. This promises to be a very special weekend.

For more information on the weekend visit

<http://www.ideasfestival.co.uk>