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Watershed May 2010 Podcast

I became aware of Chris Morris' **Four Lions** when it premiered at the Sundance film festival in January this year. Morris is an expert satirist as seen by his brilliant television work – which includes *The Day Today* and *Brass Eye*. Morris' front man was like a deranged Jeremy Paxman revealing the absurdities of contemporary media's relationship with real life, puncturing the pomposity of the media's searching exposés and its sometime banal and simplistic approach to issues. So I was not surprised to discover **Four Lions** was a comedy about terrorists.

However, I approached with caution, as translating a successful television style to cinema does not necessarily work – see, *Rising Damp*, *Porridge*, even *Morecambe and Wise* as cases for the prosecution although **In The Loop** does make a considerable contemporary case for the defence. With Chris Morris it is most definitely the latter. The film is indeed hilarious with a biting satirical edge that is as deeply uncomfortable as it is thought provoking. I have described it as an Ealing Comedy about terrorism. My reason for the Ealing reference is that if you delve deeper into the cosy Ealing façade they make pointed attacks on e.g. corporate institutions or at their most devilish and dark the aristocracy as in *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. They are, in effect, quite subversive.

The effect of the **Four Lions** which follows four incompetent aspiring jihadists from Yorkshire is in a way to, I hesitate to say, humanise terrorism because that both sounds and is banal but in a way to bring to a human scale the issue of terrorism and the way it is played out in the media. It is near the knuckle: you weep as you laugh. I wept for

Jean Charles de Menezes. You laugh at the plain bumbling ordinary incompetence of people. A few weeks after seeing the film I saw in the news that two guys from Blackburn had been freed on suspicion of plotting terrorist acts. The media showed pictures of the two dressed in quasi paramilitary clothes elbowing through autumn leaves with a sonorous voice over. It could have been a scene straight out of **Four Lions**. The film will cause consternation. I can hear people saying that some subject matter is out of bounds but as you are laughing so the film makes you think and that is at the core of Morris' genius.

Werner Herzog may just get the prize for the most idiosyncratic director alive. From his early career defining films he was, along with Wim Wenders and Fassbinder, a leading exponent of New German Cinema. Herzog and his mad dangerous lead man Klaus Kinski created monumental, extreme and sometimes crazed but always electric cinema such as **Aguirre, Wrath of God** and **Woyzeck**.

For a few years he disappeared to resurface reinvented as a documentary filmmaker with a few odd cameos in friends' films on the way. When I read in the trade bible Variety that he was remaking Abel Ferrara's **Bad Lieutenant** I thought I had hit upon an early April fool when I read Nicolas Cage was cast – come on, please! I caught up with it a few weeks ago and improbably Herzog pulls it off, in fact he may well have found in Nicolas Cage – the determined alcoholic of **Leaving Las Vegas** - the flickering spirit of Kinski. Yes it could do with a few minutes trimmed off to move breezily along but it hangs together with a suitably deranged performance from Cage and some serious Herzog virtuoso direction.

Throughout May there are a host of **Festival of Ideas** events. As part of the festival we have contributed a season of films entitled **Politics**,

Paranoia and Punk to tie in with the publication of Francis Wheen's book *Paranoia and the 1970s*. When you think about that decade in cinema it produced some of the most exciting intelligent Hollywood films - films like **All The Presidents Men**, **The Conversation**, **3 Days of the Condor**, which addressed the immediate political reality of life in America: one of corruption in political and corporate life and intense paranoia. I thought "what a great season to tie in with the festival". Little did I know though that very few of the films around that time would be available to screen in the cinemas. This is not though a conspiracy – as though the spirit of Richard Nixon is preventing access to the political shenanigans of the past! It is a simple issue of film rights expiring and no one really giving a damn about film's history and heritage.

However the films we managed to get are still exemplary and perfectly illustrate the era from Alan J Pakula's defining **Parallax View** which features a quite brilliant performance from Warren Beatty – not an actor I used to rate until I re-watched this film, Polanski's **Chinatown** which although not set in the decade depicts the seeds of corruption which would inform it, **Coma** which moved political paranoia into a more corporate world and became an entertaining genre in itself and **The China Syndrome** which, made at the end of the 1970s, brought the nuclear threat into the plot.

So why the Punk? Well what exactly was happening in the UK whilst political corruption and paranoia gripped America? We were having power cuts, 3 day weeks, strikes, a labour government in terminal disarray. The result was Margaret Thatcher and the Sex Pistols – both of which changed the cultural landscape forever. Julien Temple was there with his camera to capture the tumultuous era in all its splendid, anarchic glory. His documentary **The Filth and Fury** is a brilliant

reminder of that era and is now also a testament to the legendary recently deceased provocateur Malcolm McLaren.

Four Lions is at Watershed from Fri 7 – Thu 27 May.

The Bad Lieutenant – Port of Call: New Orleans is at Watershed from Fri 21 May – Thu 3 June.