THE NEW SCHOOL  
FILM SERIES 28  
Program #11  June 15 77

Two 1932 European Classics

POIL DE CAROTTE (Les Films Marcel Vandel-Charles Delac, France, 1932)  
Written and directed by Julien Duvivier; from the novel by Jules Renard;  
Camera: Thirard, Monniot; Music: Alexander Tanasman; 80 minutes  
With Harry Baur, Robert Lynet, Catherine Fontenoy, Simon Aubrey, Maxime Promiot, Christiane Dor, Louis Gouthier, Mme. Marty, Colette Segal. English titles.

Both of tonight's films are lyrical works from the early European sound cinema when, however, the emphasis was still visual and the influence largely from the silent period. Lyricism - with perhaps the notable exception of Mamoulian's "Love Me Tonight" - had virtually disappeared from the American cinema at this time, though not permanently, deliberately suppressed in keeping with the feeling that sound films had to be "real". It was this retention of poetry and grace in the European film that enabled the best of them to maintain a tenacious hold on the American market, and to help build the growing sub-circuit of art houses.

In the thirties, with Rene Clair (after 1934) working in Britain, and Jean Renoir not fully appreciated, Julien Duvivier seemed to be the standard bearer of French film art, able to please both critics and public. Unlike Renoir, whose pictures seemed to get stronger with the years, establishing him without doubt as the finest French director of the sound period, Duvivier's films have had a more erratic history. One of the most popular at the time, "Un Carnet du Bal", has dated quite badly and no longer works at all; others disappoint badly. "Pepe le Moko" survives well however, as does "La Fin du Jour", which is unfortunately no longer in circulation. And "Poil de Carotte", which was not universally liked, now seems quite an astonishingly sophisticated film for its period. Duvivier had earlier made a silent film from the same semi-autobiographical novel, but sound gives it added nuances and subtleties. The film is quite possibly a trifle over-sentimentalised - in the novel, the child is far less sympathetic - and possibly too, one can see the mechanics of the boy's performance being guided by the director rather more in the sound version, where such a performance would be more difficult. Nevertheless, it's an appealing and often intuitive performance, and it's sad to recall that the child came to a tragic end in World War Two in occupied France.

Although the film is moving and dramatic throughout, it is nevertheless some bravura highlights of style that remain in the memory: the brief excursion into dream-like fantasy when the boy is sent out to the "haunted" garden at night; a charming pastoral excursion, when the animals of the fields add to the children's joy by singing to them; and on a more realistic level, the sequence of the boy whipping the horse up to a frenzy and driving a cart down a country lane at breakneck speed, frustrated by the love - denied to him - that he sees all around him.

Harry Baur's performance is quite superb as always. In a sense, he was France's equivalent of Germany's Jannings and Britain's Laughton, but he - perhaps quite deliberately - lacked their sense of showmanship, and their innate utilisation of humor, and never became as much of a "name" as either of them, although he was probably the best actor of the trio.

Duvivier, like Clair and Renoir, made some interesting wartime films in Hollywood and then went back to France, although (unlike Clair and Renoir) he seemed somewhat of an anachronism in post-war France, and never regained his former stature. "Poil de Carotte" is one of his best films and deserves to be shown regularly, but is not in general circulation at the moment. Tonight's print has been constructed from two different prints and is a little ragged in spots; one short scene at the end is partially repeated, and is missing subtitles for a few lines of dialogue. However, it is complete and should run smoothly, barring those always unforeseeable incidents when a "damaged" print, carefully raised on one projector, is suddenly introduced to a strange and unfamiliar projector and breaks or two because of this; we ask your indulgence, but the print has been repaired and groomed as much as possible, and we don't anticipate any problem.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

THE BLUE LIGHT (Germany, 1932)  
A Leni Riefenstahl Production for Sokal Film;  
Directed by Leni Riefenstahl; assisted by Bela Belazs; Screenplay by Belazs, directed by a script with Riefenstahl; Camera, Hans Schneeberger; Sets, Leopold Blonder; Music by Dr. Giuseppe Becce; Editorial assistant, Erna Peters;  
Asst. Camera: Heinz von Jaworsky;  
German and Italian dialogue, with English subtitles.

With Leni Riefenstahl, Mathias Wiemann, Ben Fuhrer, Max Holzboer, Franz Moldecn, Martha Mair.

A strange (and infrequent) blending of the Gothic with the lyrical, "The Blue Light" was Leni Riefenstahl's first film as a director and is all the more remarkable for that. Although it is not altogether a lost film, it is not very
frequently shown, and in recent years has been limited to the occasional exposures (via an unsubtitled print) at the Museum of Modern Art. Now, however, Miss Riefenstahl has made available a new print from the Italian negative, the German material apparently not having survived.

There is however, one element missing from the Italian version. The film was originally placed in a flashback framework, important in stressing that this took place in the past and is therefore legend. When a legend is treated casually, and without build-up, it loses some of its force. To give an indication of what is missing, I have added this opening sequence from an old, silent, British print. Bear in mind that it comes from an edited 9.5mm home movie version issued some 40 years ago. Even here, it is not complete, probably cut in half, and runs some three minutes. The rapid pacing of this sequence certainly does not match the leisurely pacing of the film proper. Too, in blowing it up from 9.55mm to 16mm, and further showing it on a large screen, we are doing its original pictorial values a great disservice — but at least after those three opening silent minutes, you’ll be able to see it as it was, and into the bargain have an instant object lesson in the harm that dupe prints can do to important films.

The whole opening of "The Blue Light" is so pictorially reminiscent of Tod Browning’s "Dracula", and the film as a whole such an echo of it — though it is the beauty of the supernatural that lures men to their death more rather than the evil of the supernatural — that one must assume that Riefenstahl saw it. (She started work on "The Blue Light" in July of 1931, and "Dracula" had been available from February). However, as a novice director Riefenstahl undoubtedly familiarised herself with many related films, and one suspects that she saw quite a bit of Dreyer too.

The story of "The Blue Light" is fragile and should not be discussed; nor should the beauty of individual shots be described in advance. It’s a very leisurely film, and its poetry often comes from unexpected quarters. If one is unfamiliar with the film, the less one knows about it in advance the better. The outstanding musical score, incidentally, is the work of Dr. Giuseppe Becce, who composed a very similar score for "Extase". "Similar" is perhaps the wrong word since certain passages are identical in each score, but on the whole "Extase" tended to have a more romantic score, while the music here has a greater undercurrent of foreboding.

Siegfried Kracauer, in his book "From Caligari to Hitler", has some interesting observations about the film that are worth repeating:

"The statues of saints are carved in a rock by the road; the mule Dolomites partake of the life in the village. Closeups of genuine peasant faces thread through the whole of the film; these faces resemble landscapes moulded by nature itself and, in rendering them, the camera achieves a fascinating study in facial folklore. Beautiful outdoor shots stress the insoluble ties between primitive people and their natural environment, while the peasants are merely related to the soil, Junta is the true incarnation of elemental powers. Like the meteorologist in "The Avalanche", this mountain girl conforms to a political regime which relies on intuition, worships nature and cultivates myths. To be sure, at the end the village rejoices in its fortune and the myth seems defeated, but this rational solution is treated in such a summary way that it enhances rather than reduces Junta’s significance. What remains is nostalgia for her realm and sadness over a disenchanted world in which the miraculous becomes merchandise".

Apart from its other and greater merits, "The Blue Light" is perhaps the only one of Leni Riefenstahl’s films which can truly be called a Riefenstahl vehicle. Being both director and star, she not unnaturally guides the film to a concentration on her whenever possible, and seems to delight in bringing a healthy, near-erotic quality to many of her scenes. Although not a "mountain" film in the sense that "The White Hell of Pitz Palu" and "The Sacred Mountain" had been, it still has some striking and breath-taking climbing scenes, and some very natty matched-up studio scenes done in Berlin. Matthias Weimann, the male lead, subsequently made many Nazi propaganda films, and also the much later "Traumerei" in which he played Robert Schumann. Post-war German mountain films totally failed to recapture the inspiration of the pre-war myth and legend films, perhaps inevitably. But "The Blue Light" did inspire at least one post-war imitation of sorts, the 1949 British film "The Glass Mountain" — which had rather more opera than mountaineering, but did pay a kind of Homage to "The Blue Light" in that its complete opera, by Nino Rota, was built around a not-dissimilar Dolomites legend.

William K. Everson