A Tribute to cinematographer JOHN ALTON

November 2, 1979

Tributes often suggest that the honoree is dead. John Alton is far from that, and although now retired from commercial film-making, and without particularly fine memories of his Hollywood years, he still engages in private research and other enterprises where his photographic skills can be utilized. His cinematographic career dates from the early thirties, when he photographed a number of Spanish-language features (in the U.S.) for Columbia Pictures, films which, in his opinion, contain some of his best work. Like many top cameramen, he did not seek prestige, and shuttled back and forth between major and minor companies, from MGM to Monogram, from special to quickies. Some of his most striking work can be found the most unprepossessing little "B" films, such as Republic's "End of the Road" or Monogram's "Enemy of Women". Too much of a professional to impose his own very recognisable stylistics, best associated with thrillers, on unsuitable material - for example, light musicals - he nevertheless managed to include at least one trademark scene, with dynamic lighting and composition, even in such films - at the one appropriate place. There is only one even remotely dramatic moment in the Verne Halston ice-skating musical "Lake Placid Serenade", and Alton pounces on it with glee to make it the most memorable shot in the movie. It's the scene in which Czech refugee skater is holding, upside down, a newspaper, the headlines of which announce the fall of her homeland to the Nazis. Alton found his true métier in the film noir thriller of the 40's - a genre or style of film-making that can't be adequately covered in a few lines, but that we'll say more about prior to the screening. Although primarily a lighting expert, his book on the art of cinematography, appropriately titled "Painting with Light", found him most felicitous collaborator in Anthony Mann, one of the leading American noir directors.

We will be starting with representative excerpts from two features. THE SPIRITUALIST, also known as THE AMAZING MR. X (1943, directed by Bernard Vorhaus), with Richard Carlson and Cathy O'Donnell, starts off with such a tour-de-force of eerie imagery that the rest of the film, more down-to-earth in its plotting, never quite regains that opening momentum. T MEN (1947, with Dennis O'Keefe and Wallace Ford) is Mann's first major film, and his first association with Alton. It was a huge success commercially, perhaps more so than it deserved to be since its much-touted documentary qualities were somewhat contrived and dishonest. But as a noir thriller, it contained some definative and superbly photographed sequences.

Shown complete will be RAW DEAL (1947) and its immediate Alton-Mann successor, REIGN OF TERROR (1948). There will be an intermission between these two films; credits are printed below.

At the time, RAW DEAL was not that impressive. It seemed, like Lang's YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE, to be more than a little loaded and to be covering well-trodden ground. But clichés have a way of becoming truer after a passage of time, and RAW DEAL holds up a lot of the "looser" characteristics of noir characters, plus the photographic style indigenous to this kind of film. If the dialogue is a little trite at times, it's at least delivered with conviction, and it's always good to see Marsha Hunt in a sizeable role. For all the more explicit violence on the screen today, the savagery of this film is still quite impressive.

REIGN OF TERROR (also known as THE BLACK BOOK) successfully carries modern noir style back to the French Revolution - though some contemporary reference to the McCarthy era is obliquely implied. As history it is not to be taken too seriously at all - especially to anyone versed in Abel Gance's "Napoléon" - and its name-dropping and anachronistic American dialogue is sometimes unavoidably amusing. But it's an exciting film in its own way, quite savage again (though not in the erotic fashion that its original ads promised) and most of all it's a visual stunner, due no doubt to Alton's collaboration with William Cameron Menzies, who, although he takes no Production Design credit, clearly filled that function. By the way, highly worthwhile and recommended reading on the Mann/Alton films - ANTHONY MANN by Jeanine Basinger from Twayne Publishers.


--- Wm. K. Everson ---

Program ends approx. 11.00 p.m.