

# ANTHONY BURGESS: A personal selection



I was brought up in the cinema in two very marginal senses. My father played the piano in a Manchester movie house during the silent era, and both my sisters worked as typists for Paramount. Since I learned to play the piano myself, I have always retrospectively envied my father, for the improvising of music to cinematic images still seems to me one of the most desirable occupations it is possible to have. I have fulfilled one ambition in my life – to play the piano for a presentation of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (in Iowa in 1965). I have also done what my father longed to do – write orchestral scores for films. One score was for an Italian documentary called *Gli Occhi di New York*, and the other for a Warner Brothers project – a musical based on Shakespeare's life. This latter was never made.

I have written film scripts, like most novelists, and, like most novelists, have discovered that the films actually made from commissioned scripts are the mere tip of the iceberg. But I still go on getting myself involved in cinematic projects, though I know that nothing will come of most of them. The truth is that film always fascinates novelists, not because of the hope of money, name up in lights, an Oscar, but because the most hellish of all the novelist's tasks, which is visual description, is taken out of his hands by a medium which can do little except visually describe. And I find the writing of film dialogue a tough skill which I know I will never master: it is altogether different from novelistic dialogue, and I am still trying to find out how and why.

I am also a convinced movie buff. I have lived in New York and Rome, where there are *cinémas d'essai*, Buster Keaton festivals and the like, but now I live in Monaco, where there is only one cinema and not much to watch on television. I like all films except highly intellectual ones, in which scrappy technique is supposed to be excused by powerful imagination. When I end my career as a novelist I shall retire to some fairly unviolent city (neither Rome nor New York can be described as such) and watch films all the time. Perhaps London. Meantime I propose a selection of movies that mean something to me for various reasons – sentimental association, nostalgia for the lost, genuine aesthetic admiration.

—Anthony Burgess.

One of the finest of the films Fritz Lang made for UFA. Where it seems postured and melodramatic, Lang was deliberately using a technique drawn from the expressionist stage. It still seems to me to be the best of the visions of the future on celluloid: its faults are woven into its fabric, but they are the faults of high ambition and a genius that exceeds talent. Germany 1926/Dir Fritz Lang. With Brigitte Helm.

Wed 4 Jan/  
Thu 5 Jan  
6.00

Metropolis



A great silent film which has the last laugh on the viewer who thinks it merely awkward and pretentious. The distortions and exaggerations are shown at the end to be all in the head of a madman. This is one of the rare essays in fiction which boldly enter into the mentality of the demented. Germany 1919/Dir Robert Wiene. With Conrad Veidt.

Thu 5 Jan  
8.30

The Cabinet of  
Dr Caligari

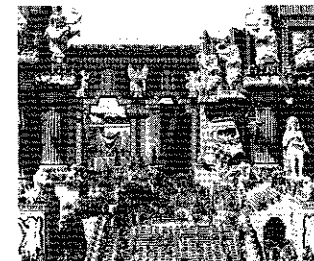
(Das Cabinet des Dr  
Caligari)



D W Griffith's masterpiece – epic, colossal etc, also somewhat ingenuous; but what mastery of the medium, what visual power. The crowd scenes are brilliantly managed and so are the close-ups. The social message is laid on somewhat heavily, but the mark of an outstanding personality is on every frame. USA 1916/Dir D W Griffith. 170 mins. All seats bookable at £3.30.

Sat 7 Jan  
3.00

Intolerance



This Korda film of the middle 30s has its faults – but it has two (perhaps irrelevant) features which never fail to move me: one is the excellence of the spoken English – which sometimes shows up the insufficiency of H G Wells's dialogue – and the other is the music. Wells insisted that Arthur Bliss write this first, reversing the regular pattern, and that certain sequences be fitted to it in a ballet-like manner. It works; and its power has not diminished in the last half-century. GB 1936/Dir William Cameron Menzies.

Sat 7 Jan  
8.45

Things To  
Come

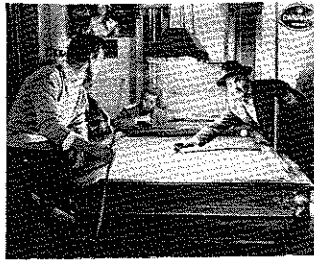


This film meant more to us during the war than it can mean now, but it is an admirable tribute to Canada, contains superb acting and has a great score, written by Ralph Vaughan Williams. That opening 'brotherhood of man' theme is surely one of the best film overtures ever penned. And the final sequence, with Raymond Massey, is one of the best things that actor ever did. GB 1942/Dir Michael Powell.

Sun 8 Jan  
6.15 8.30

49th Parallel

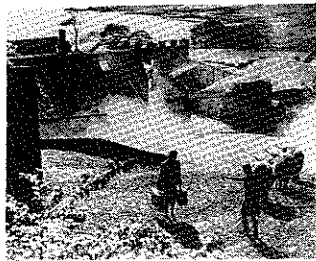




Sun 8 Jan  
6.30

**I Vitelloni**

I once asked John Simon, the New York film critic who seems to hate most films, if there was any film he unreservedly liked. He unhesitatingly said: *I Vitelloni*. This is conceivably the best film Fellini ever made: it has the smell of urban Italy; its characterisation is deep but economical; it sums up an epoch, a social class, a debilitated Latin culture. It is beautifully shaped and one's aesthetic response to it is highly complex. *Italy 1953/Dir Federico Fellini.*



Tue 10 Jan  
6.15

**I Know Where I'm Going**

This, like *49th Parallel*, is a Pressburger-Powell film (what an incredible team they were), and it is the only film I know, which, for all its occasional trickery, presents an honest picture of the Western Isles while telling a romantic story. Wendy Hiller is superb, and there are odd bonuses like the Glasgow Orpheus Choir. *GB 1947/Dir Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger*



Tue 10 Jan  
8.30

**Tunes of Glory**

Another film with a Scottish setting – totally authentic in its racial and social milieu – and unusual in that it deals with a phase of army life in which the clash of personalities within a regiment replaces the traditional theme of how that regiment confronts an enemy. The performances by Alec Guinness and John Mills are masterly, the decor is superb, and the grim story is altogether convincing. This is conceivably one of the ten best films ever made. *GB 1960/Dir Ronald Neame.*



Wed 11 Jan  
6.15

**One Night of Love**

I have not seen this film since it first appeared (I saw it then in Gibraltar when I was a soldier but also film critic for the *Gibraltar Chronicle*, and remember the attentive silence it received from a normally rowdy service audience). Grace Moore, who had already made her reputation in opera, turned this into an anthology of leading diva roles, but the production numbers seemed to be well welded into a plot about the conflicting claims of love and a career. I wonder how well it has worn. *USA 1934/Dir Victor Schertzinger.*



Wed 11 Jan  
8.45

**A Night at the Opera**

A selection that anyone could have made, but I offer no apology. I love the Marx Brothers as the most flamboyant expression of dissidence that the West has ever known, and I think that this is the best thing they ever did. There is a classic scene (the one in which a ship's cabin is turned into a black hole of Calcutta) whose comic ingenuity has never been matched. Groucho once gave me a cigar which I considered too precious to smoke. Somebody else smoked it when my back was turned. *USA 1935/Dir Sam Wood.*

Paul Muni, in the eponymous part, gave the best performance of his career in an incredibly brilliant – and, as the French grumpily admit, historically authentic – dramatisation of the Dreyfus trial. How well Hollywood used to be able to manage these historical dramas, and with what economy of gesture and line. There is only one bad moment – when Dreyfus's loss of his case sends Zola into British exile among uncompromisingly Milwaukee accents; otherwise it is a model of its kind. *USA 1937/Dir William Dieterle.*

Thu 12 Jan  
8.30

**The Life of Emile Zola**



This is the only film that Dustin Hoffman ever made in Italy, and I was involved in the production as the writer of the English language voice-overs. It is not a great film but it is very provincial Italian, and Hoffman – who had to speak English while everybody else spoke Italian – fits with remarkable skill into the ambience. It is what I consider to be a fine example of the sort of run-of-the-mill cinema fodder on which the Italians feed. *Italy 1972/Dir Pietro Germi.*

Sun 15 Jan  
6.15

**Alfredo Alfredo**



I don't think this film ought to have dated. It is very much a wartime product, with a professor played by Leslie Howard who, using a variety of disguises, succeeds in getting a distinguished scholar and his (inevitably) beautiful daughter out of the clutches of the Nazis. Howard is at his bland best and there is a memorable exit line, based on the Nazis' insistence that Shakespeare is really German; 'Good night, good night – parting is such sweet sorrow.' 'Was ist das?' 'One of the most beautiful utterances in all German literature.' *GB 1941/Dir Leslie Howard.*

Sun 15 Jan  
8.30

**Pimpernel Smith**



This was Jacques Tati's most ambitious film – plotless, very wide-screened, not generally popular and, so far as I know, never released in the United States. There are undoubted *longueurs*, but some bold chances are taken and some episodes are hilarious. For the first time in a comic film we have genuine counterpoint of action – two or three funny things going on simultaneously. The final episode – in which Paris, without undue exaggeration, is turned into a fairground – is quite brilliant. *France 1967/Dir Jacques Tati.*

Mon 16 Jan  
6.30

**Playtime**



Jean Cocteau was a fine film-maker, and this handling of a classical myth was a triumph of economical film-craft. When I say 'economical', I refer to the cost as well as the handling of the material. The resonance of this retelling of the Orpheus tale is of a quality very hard to define: like poetry, more is said than seems to be said, and the reverberations of the images in the unconscious mind are not easily driven out. *France 1950/Dir Jean Cocteau.*

Mon 16 Jan  
8.45

**Orphée**

