

Movies

Cameraman: The Life and Work of Jack Cardiff Critic's Pick

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Critic Rating:

He brought art to the silver screen

By Ann Hornaday
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Most mainstream movies these days possess all the visual depth, richness and texture of a "General Hospital" episode. Increasingly filmed on cheap digital video, composed of bland close-ups of stars reciting tired dialogue, the films themselves have become little more than prepackaged fodder for whatever dingus the masses choose to distract themselves on while waiting for their Big Macs or zoning out over flyover country.

It didn't have to be this way. And indeed, if Jack Cardiff was working on a movie, it probably wasn't.

Cardiff, a British cinematographer whose early work with Technicolor produced some of the most visually dazzling, psychologically jarring films of the 20th century, pioneered the art and craft of film photography. As the subject of Craig McCall's absorbing documentary "Cameraman: The Life and Work of Jack Cardiff," he also personifies cinema, not just as a medium of visceral entertainment but as an art form.

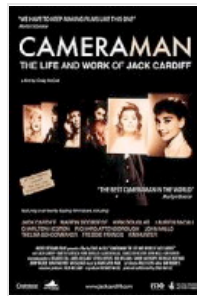
As Cardiff himself explains in "Cameraman," he began his career in 1918 as a child actor, eventually becoming a "clapper boy" and production runner until he learned how to operate a camera. (Luckily, McCall was able to interview Cardiff before he died in 2009 — with more than 100 films on his resume.)

In the 1930s, when Technicolor was invented, he was chosen to be the first cameraman in Britain to learn the technique. And it was in that format — with its bold, super-saturated color palette — that he did his most astonishing work, most often with the directing team of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger.

Viewers familiar with the 1947 Himalayan epic "Black Narcissus" will immediately recognize Cardiff's expressive images — inspired, he related in "Cameraman," by the paintings of Vermeer — but they may be surprised to learn that the entire production was filmed on a set, with Cardiff collaborating with production designer Alfred Junge to create those breathtaking vistas of the Himalayas. (Take that, CGI wizards.)

Taking his cues from the likes of J.M.W. Turner and the Dutch masters, Cardiff instilled painterly values into movie photography, plunging viewers into expressive worlds of light and shadow and by turn startling them with pops of lurid color and kaleidoscopic effects. The apotheosis of Cardiff's approach was surely Powell and Pressburger's ballet thriller "The Red Shoes," but McCall gratifyingly pays homage to the cinematographer's lesser-known works, such as Alfred Hitchcock's "Under Capricorn" and "Sons and Lovers," one of Cardiff's own directorial efforts that was nominated for seven Oscars.

Whether he was breathing on a camera lens to create an evocative mist or pushing the limits of surrealism, Cardiff was working with filmmakers and actors to create an immersive universe on-screen. "You wanted to be in that world with them," explains Martin Scorsese, who is interviewed in



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“Cameraman” along with Lauren Bacall, Kirk Douglas and the star of “The Red Shoes,” the late Moira Shearer.

“Cameraman” should be required viewing for anyone interested in becoming more visually literate in an ever-more-media-drenched age. What’s more, it’s chock-full of yummy anecdotes from Cardiff’s work with such stars as Audrey Hepburn, Marlene Dietrich and Marilyn Monroe, who inscribed a photo to him with the line, “Dear Jack, if only I could be the way you created me.” And if only movies could be the way Cardiff himself made them: drenched in color, spinning with movement and brimming with an intoxicating sense of life.

*Contains nothing objectionable.*

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