

Launch of
Connoisseur
Video

DRAFT FOR SIR RICHARD'S SPEECH AT SOUTHEY'S, 18 SEPT
at 7.00pm approx, from the auctioneer's podium

Ladies and gentlemen

It's my pleasure as Chairman of the British Film Institute to welcome you to the 'first night' of Connoisseur Video, and I'm sure you'll agree this is a distinctively appropriate setting to promote the concept of connoisseurship. But I'm not going to try to sell you any of the individual masterpieces of cinema that we're proud to include in our launch catalogue. Instead, looking at this impressive list of titles, I'm reminded of one of Billy Wilder's great comedies. You may recall how Jimmy Cagney, in ONE TWO THREE, delivers the immortal line: 'A world that's produced the Taj Mahal and striped toothpaste can't be all bad'. Well, I put it to you that a video label which includes among its releases films by Welles, Cocteau, Ophuls, Tati, Pasolini - not to mention such living British talents as Mike Leigh, Peter Greenaway and Philip Saville - certainly can't be all bad. In fact it promises to bring a breadth and variety to the British video market which many have felt is sorely needed.

This is not to belittle the efforts of those commercial companies who have boldly blazed a trail with their releases of foreign-language and historical films. These will continue to be vital, and Connoisseur Video has no wish to engage in fruitless competition. But the British Film Institute is charged with an over-arching mission to promote appreciation and study of the arts of film and television; and in the Britain - indeed Europe - of 1990, this means that we would be failing in our duty if we did not take note of the great opportunities that home-video offers to bring a greater range of films than any other delivery system can to the discerning viewer - who may also be a collector, a student, a critic or historian, or indeed a film-maker.

For is it not true that all of us who work in and with cinema have found the emergence of home-video a great blessing? I know there are those who sincerely believe the video boom of the 80s was one of the last nails in the coffin of British cinemagoing; but they can surely take comfort from the fact that attendances are now rising dramatically year on year, while video purchases and rentals are also rising steadily. This suggests to me that the increased availability of films on video, especially films that were until very recently considered rare and hard to see, can in fact enhance our national awareness of, and appetite for, cinema.

Naturally none of us associated with the British Film Institute believes that video is any substitute for the cinema experience. But there can be no doubt that the video industry is already a major financial contributor to production; and we believe it also has enormous cultural and educational potential alongside proper theatrical distribution and exhibition - especially if the range of what is currently available on the British market can be greatly expanded.

And this, of course, is what has brought the Institute to the point of inventing Connoisseur Video, because that diversity has been very slow to develop here in Britain. You will hear more in a moment from Ian Christie about Connoisseur's ambitions for the future. But now I want to convey to you the very warm messages of support that we have received from two distinguished film-makers whose work is appearing on Connoisseur. Both Wim Wenders and Roger Corman are hard at work on their current productions and unable to be here tonight, but both are delighted that their films are now appearing on video in Britain - and Roger Corman has pointed out that THE INTRUDER is in fact his own personal favourite among all the films he has made.

Now I'm going to hand over to Wilf Stevenson, Director of the BFI, who will welcome some of our special guests this evening.

[WS to point out that Connoisseur is a joint-venture with the important French production company, Argos Films, and to welcome its chairman Anatole Dauman, who has taken a close personal interest in the formation of the company and come over specially for this launch. Other film-maker guests to be confirmed on Monday 17 Sept.

WS finally to cue IC, who will fill in some detail on intended range of CV releases - animation, shorts, documentaries, as well as features from all countries and periods; logical extension of BFI Distribution work, e.g. co-ordination of Pasolini re-launch in cinemas now includes video; possibilities for new sales outlets - BFI RFTs, bookshops with cinema sections etc; commitment to quality (of transfer, subtitling etc) and to contextualisation (with sleeve-notes and additional material on some tapes)]