

When Nicolas Winding Refn announced his *byNWR* project in autumn 2017, and again when it was launched in summer 2018, there was lots of reporting about what this content platform (reporters' words) and cultural expressway (Refn's) would be and look like. However, since its launch it has screened for free to the world, on the purpose built site and in partnership with MUBI, nearly 20 of the strangest and most unique films ever made to no discernible critical response. *ByNWR* is at heart an archive and restoration project shared with the world in order to create a museum of culture to inspire future generations. It is a collaboration, in the truest sense of the word, between Refn, archivist Peter Conheim, writer Jimmy McDonough, designer David Frost and the team at London creative agency The Bureau, who host and coordinate the whole enterprise. The films that have been bought from libraries and collected and painstakingly restored and now released run the gamut from fetish, through cult, punk and propaganda to blaxploitation, covering all known bases in between.

Take for example, Jac Zacha's 1970 drama *Walk The Walk*, starring Bernie Hamilton as heroin addicted theological student Mike. The look, the music and the content - Mike gets in hock to drug-dealing entrepreneur Judy who is constantly tempting him into bed and back on to the demon dope - makes it feel like an early Blaxploitation outlier but it never veers into easy exploitation. Mike resists the advances of Judy and the lure of heroin as much as he can and the film resists overt sexualisation and violence in favour of something far more personal and soul-searching. *Walk The Walk* is just one gem in what is a remarkable experience and resource. *ByNWR*'s content is released in thematic chapters, each containing three films, with chapter titles such as 'Hillbillies, Hustlers and Fallen Idols', 'Smell of Female' and 'You Ain't No Punk, You Punk' suggesting the tone contained within. However, this is just the window dressing on what is a vast collection of original writing, video and photographic archive material, live performance and other ephemera both on the films and filmmakers contained within but also on myriad avenues of contextual interest that spring from the movies and take the writers and creators involved in each season to pretty much anywhere they please. Mostly, those destinations are worth the journey. It's criminal that more isn't being written about these films, presumably because the project is just seen as the benevolent folly of a strange artist when the reality is that this dark corner of the internet has some of the most vital and exciting film content and critical and personal response to emerge in years.

Since its launch, *byNWR* has mostly been operating in the shadows, aptly. However, 2020 sees them stretch out into the light a little more. There is a book on cult director Andy Milligan titled *The Ghastly One* and written by the site's editor in chief Jimmy McDonough. There's the continued use of the brand to signal Nicolas Winding Refn's strange forays into the space between cinema and television - 2019's *Too Old To Die Young* and the upcoming *Maniac Cop* series, both in partnership with Amazon. First up though, they have partnered with Indicator/Powerhouse for a special release of one of the key films of the *byNWR* collection, Curtis Harrington's *Night Tide*, out in the UK on January 22nd. For Little White Lies I talked to Refn about the philosophy of *byNWR*, how spending so much time in these strange and beautiful worlds may have rubbed off on his own filmmaking and the gems that he thinks viewers should check out and why.

LWL: How did you start collecting these films?

NWR: Pure accident, acquaintance introduced me to a company in the US that was selling their inventory. It was a company called 'Something Weird' that had been collecting and distributing obscure films in the US for 30 years. They specialised in public domain titles and I was able to get their inventory list. I gave it to Jimmy McDonough who put a red dot next to all the things that we should try to get. I have collector-mania. I've collected many things and I like the archival hunt for obscurities, especially if they're cultural artefacts. Some of these movies, and I'd never seen most of them, had great titles, and felt like cultural artefacts of an era. That led me then to other opportunities. Sam Dunn who used to

work for the BFI introduced me to some collectors who were selling. *Night Tide* was a film that I was personally very fond of as I knew the director Curtis Harrington a little bit before he passed away. I find that movie to be quite unique, so that was my own personal obsession. Peter (Conheim, byNWR archivist and head of restorations) introduced me to *Spring Night, Summer Night*, which I didn't end up buying at that time. We were lucky to get the entire Radley Metzger library. Sometimes we've been able to buy entire libraries of certain filmmakers or distributors. Other times it's been piecemeal, things have been given, found. I leave it to Peter Conheim to sift through the cracks, but it's a great hunt, I like the hunt.

LWL: Some collectors just want to have 'the thing', but that you seem to have a desire to share it. Why does it matter to you that these films are available for people to see, properly curated and written about so deeply?

NWR: We curate culture. If you want to see a movie on YouTube, there's millions of them. For us, it was, at least for me, about 'what are cultural artefacts of significance that maybe haven't been given the time of day, or potentially the proper respect, or been seen in a different light?' Most of the films that are in the collection are very extreme cinema and there's something for every kind of fetish taste. Nowadays, when culture is getting so neutralised and mundane it's important that we remember that cinema can still be an extreme language. And the more extreme it is the more interesting it becomes.

LWL: Do you see your role as being the figurehead for drawing an audience in to see this stuff, using your profile?

NWR: I owned a company [that could form the basis of the business], so there's that part of it. But, for me, it's not so much about the movies themselves, it's more about the idea that culture can be so many different things and we have a tendency to forget that. Part of the concept of *byNWR* was to create an online museum, that celebrated the past. A digital domain that's endless, because, when you have physical barriers, there's always the limitation of the physical barriers, whereas here, it's limitless. It needed to be accessible to everyone, every month had to be free, because culture is everyone's domain. And, by not charging for it we also surpass all the norms, because what we're doing, generally no one else can do or does. Also, the philosophy of *byNWR* was that we would go past all the ideas of what is considered great, correct, taste, or good or bad. A lot of our work up until now has been very focused on the films themselves and we're starting now on the next phase of the philosophy by moving into different arenas. But, in terms of the films, we forget that films are actually more interesting the more personal they are. And the more personal they are, the more they rise past good or bad, you know, a rotten tomatoes score. We want to inspire young people by getting them to always remember that film, like any art form is a personal projection from the creator to the experiencer.

LWL: You've been going for over a year now, has the response to the site been what you hoped it would be? is it doing what you wanted it to do so far?

NWR: That's a very interesting question, because, once we started we realised it was like a moving train that can't really stop unless it implodes. When you begin, you make your share of mistakes, but to be frank, it's surprising how well it's going. It's very rewarding every week when we go through our weekly reports and see that things have just continued to escalate, in a very organic way. We don't promote, we don't buy advertising. We're not an institution that needs to gain something in the end, other than to inspire. We're a discovery process...

LWL: ...like the films themselves...

NWR: Yes...

LWL: ...one of the most thrilling moments was seeing the Ed Wood scripted *Orgy Of The Dead* pop up.

NWR: What a fantastic experience! It's a very, very peculiar movie. It's almost like an art installation to me. It's not a movie. It's more like an experience, right?

LWL: Yes, those repetitious sequences of dancing, hypnotically strung together. You can just imagine it being a loop. It is just really exciting to have experiences like this presented with such a loving approach. I watched *Too Old To Die Young* and what was interesting was after watching so many of these films and then seeing the *byNWR* logo at the front of *Too Old*, it made me think about the relationship between these kinds of films, not necessarily specific titles but this kind of extreme, exploitation cinema and your work. So many of the scenarios that pop up in *Too Old*, particularly in small moments between characters are the kinds of scenarios found in a lot of the films that are being released through your archive work - but obviously filtered through your own sensibility. I wondered if you were conscious of any kind of relationship or is this just one of the ways that you're talking about moving into other arenas?

NWR: it's a combination, but I think it's a pretty astute analysis. I was creating the site and the philosophy, we all were, while I was making my show. I think that certainly, the idea of what is good taste is an important part of it. Also ideas around giving it a personal touch, giving it a touch of currency, and realising that issues that were part of the past are actually still very current. Although, I think exploitation is the wrong wording and I've been very adamant to everyone who works in the company, and also the guest editors to not use the word exploitation in the future. Certain words people throw around without really understanding the basis of what they're talking about. Sure, some of the films are exploitative in their themes and nature but that has more to do with the political times they were made in. I think they are personal odysseys, by artists, more personal than most films made today. It's a wrong definition. I call them pop cinema.

LWL: Some of the humanity and emotional complexity in these films is astounding...

NWR: *Night Tide* is an absolute masterpiece in my opinion and, incredibly, one of the few films that actually was able to bring a fairy tale naturally on to the screen. I think *Maidens Of Fetish Street* is obviously a very personal film, and my God, whoever made it is so tormented.

LWL: There are so many creative innovations and amazing artistic flourishes caused by the production limitations these filmmakers faced...

NWR: limitations are far more rewarding artistically than just having everything at your disposal. Everything at your disposal also means a lot of people's opinions have to be heard, dealt with, or abided by.

LWL: These filmmakers find a lot of space to express themselves.

NWR: They were filmmakers that had one vision and that was their own. *The Nest Of The Cuckoo Birds* I found to be one the most amazing films I've ever seen. Is it good or bad? It's beyond that, in my opinion.

LWL: You've mentioned a few titles in our conversation, but what are your personal favourites to have come out of this project so far?

NWR: The things that I really enjoyed were, of course, *Night Tide*. I think *Spring Night, Summer Night* is a fantastic film. *Maidens Of Fetish Street* I have a very personal fondness for because it's so extreme. It has this very peculiar voiceover narrator. I love the pulpiness and almost installation sensibility of *Orgy Of The Dead*. *Olga's House Of Shame* I find fascinating. Joseph P. Mawra who made that film was a very interesting filmmaker. But, overall, probably *The Nest of the Cuckoo Birds* and *Night Tide*, for me, are the most treasured trophies so far. We have so many things coming down the pipeline but they really resonated. I think there was a reason why we started with *Nest Of The Cuckoo Birds* as our first film, in Jimmy McDonough's first programme. That was chosen because it set the standard for the frontier that we wanted to push.