



PREVIEW

# The Afterlight

+ Q&A with director Charlie Shackleton

'More stars than there are in heaven,' MGM boasted in its heyday. That motto could apply to Charlie Shackleton's collage film, which places hundreds of screen presences in an eerie celluloid version of the beyond. They're not just stars: *The Afterlight* is populated by actors ranging from legendary to obscure, 'some that you recognise, others that you've never even heard of', as Ray Davies sang in 'Celluloid Heroes'. What they have in common is that they are all dead: the end credits list them in order of appearance (from Gérard Blain to Betsy Blair) and with dates, among the most recent losses being Anne Wiazemsky (d. 2017). In this film, they live on, enshrined – or entrapped – in a meticulously constructed simulation of immortality.

Shackleton has assembled clips from different eras and countries, in a way that at once emphasises discontinuity and multiplicity, and at the same time creates an effect of narrative unity. His montage evokes a world in which all these actors exist as lost souls, wandering landscapes and streets alone, then converging in a shape-shifting, multifarious drinking den called 'The Afterlight', before moving on. Each clip has a particular resonance in itself – each movement or spoken line seems significant rather than merely casual – and so we imagine all these players to be re-enacting the gestures and words they performed when alive, as if doomed to eternal repetition: not merely like ghosts, but like the mechanically reproduced and projected revenants of Adolfo Bioy Casares' 1940 novel *The Invention of Morel*, the inspiration behind Alain Resnais's *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961).

Placed together, the images evoke a post-death existence, perfect, poetic and yet irreducibly desolate. The actors are first seen wandering disparate, disconnected landscapes: an Alpine expanse, a desert, eerily unpopulated streets. There are city scenes, always deserted but for one player: the world has become a vast abandoned backlot, each set discrete from the others, as if occupying separate planes of being.

Some of the actors look stalked, others move with intent, as if stalking. That looks like Simone Simon in *Cat People* (1942), seen from behind, tensed for the approach of a beast, or a bus, that will never enter the shot. Dana Andrews doggedly walks through a ghostly city; Claude Laydu, the protagonist of Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), trudges glumly down a country road, which we suspect may stretch on forever; at night, Jeanne Moreau clicks along rainy streets, as if sullenly aware that there is no simmering assignation awaiting her any more.

Eventually, all these people seem to converge at a watering hole. In a clever sleight of hand, the neon sign reading 'The Afterlight' (where the afterlife is the converse of cinema's eternally promised place of forbidden after-dark pleasures) is the film's single non-sampled image, specially shot by cinematographer Robbie Ryan. Inside, this protean hotspot – assembled from fragments of Hollywood nightclub, Mediterranean taverna, London local, you name it – welcomes drinkers of all nations, eras and dispositions. It's hopping in some corners ('What atmosphere! It's electric!' chirrup a 1950s girl), morose in others: here's Bogart from *In a Lonely Place* (1950), waxing

philosophical ('There is no sacrifice too great for a chance at immortality'); here's Polish star Zbigniew Cybulski, still dreaming hip sedition behind cinema's coolest shades; and here's William Hartnell staffing the bar, in his TV days, a preeminent traveller through time and space, and breaker of the mortality barrier.

Eventually, everyone leaves to resume their wandering, then to take shelter from a thunderstorm. Later, people walk – some nervously, some deliberately – to buildings, and up staircases to the doors of flats they don't seem to recognise, on landings where Katharine Hepburn might be neighbour to the Mexican comic Cantinflas. In his room, Laydu's Priest holds his head in despair, as if there's no hope even after death: it's amazing how one shot, recontextualised, can infuse the overall picture with new metaphysical, theological connotations.

Alongside his essay documentaries on genre (*Beyond Clueless*, 2014; *Fear Itself*, 2015), Shackleton has cultivated a conceptual streak, notably in his ten-hour 2016 *Paint Drying* (talk about doing what it says on the tin), a protest against the BBFC's certification fees. *The Afterlight's* conceptual singularity, beyond its actual content, is that it is touring in a single 35mm print that will endure the damage of projection until it is unshowable: material transience built into an evocation of immaterial immortality.

There are clear affinities with other recent collage films: Bill Morrison's *Decasia* (2002), with its invocation of celluloid's ghost life; and Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010), although that film was rigorously constructed around a single non-narrative element, markers of time. By contrast, *The Afterlight's* loose narrative shape is closer to Guy Maddin's *The Green Fog* (2017), which stitched moments from assorted movies and TV shows into a faux-remake of *Vertigo* (1958). *The Afterlight's* own quasi-narrative is a sustained musing on the question: what do the dead do all day?

Taking these clips out of context and merging them into a new whole, Shackleton reminds us that a single detached film image can be more meaningful, evocative and rich in promise than the entire film it derives from (hence the almost mystical power of the movie still). As in *The Clock*, these orphaned moments can become little islands of intensified meaning, uncanny in their unmooring from any original narrative context. Sometimes a single snatch of dialogue catches our attention, taking on a meaning it can never have had originally. 'The time is so short,' someone says, 'I don't know how much time I have to spend.' But what can these words mean, coming from someone already dead?

The closing moments suddenly introduce a new formal trick – with shades of materialist cinema – that doesn't quite convince, feeling inconsistent with the rest. *The Afterlight* is arguably overstretched: the sequence towards the end, where people start driving cars towards another nightspot, feels too dynamic, too purposeful to match with the haunted drift of what's gone before. Certain earlier moments feel like ideal points for the film to end: a sudden eerie blackout, or a furious-paced montage of close-ups set to Jeremy Warmesley's propulsive piano music. But perhaps there is no natural endpoint: a collage film like this is always liable to seem too long, or too short, disappointing in that it doesn't go on forever. Just how long is long enough, when you're invoking eternity?

**Jonathan Romney, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 2022**

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## THE AFTERLIGHT

*Directed by:* Charlie Shackleton

©: Loop Projects Limited

*Presented by:* Loop Projects Limited

*Produced by:* Catherine Bray, Anthony Ing, Charlie Shackleton

*Production Manager:* Oskar Pimlott

*Original Cinematography by:* Robbie Ryan

*Clapper/Loader:* Connor Travis-Hunter

*Grip:* Andy Woodcock

*Assembled by:* Charlie Shackleton

*Original Music by:* Jeremy Warmsley

*Sound Design by:* Charlie Shackleton

*Additional Sound by:* Eleanor McDowall

*Re-recording Mixer:* Tom Jenkins

UK 2021©

82 mins

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**Art in the Making: Give Us This Day + intro** Thu 14 Jul 18:10

**Silent Cinema: Phil-for-Short + intro by BFI Curator Bryony Dixon** Sun 17 Jul 13:10

**Experimenta: The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies?! + live experimental music introduction by The Howling** Wed 20 Jul 18:15

**Woman with a Movie Camera: The Mirror Has Two Faces + intro by BFI Events Programmer Kimberley Sheehan** Thu 21 Jul 18:00

**African Odysseys: Commemorating Marikana** Sun 24 Jul 12:00-17:40

**Relaxed Screening: Electricity + intro and discussion** Mon 25 Jul 18:15

**Projecting The Archive: The Bay of Saint Michel (aka Pattern for Plunder) + intro by BFI curator Josephine Botting** Tue 26 Jul 18:30

**Terror Vision: Blood Games** Thu 28 Jul 18:20

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**Sankofa**

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Sat 2 Jul 20:30; Wed 13 Jul 20:40

**Yeelen Brightness**

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**Top of the Heap**

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Tue 5 Jul 18:20; Sun 17 Jul 16:00

**Atlantics (Atlantique)**

Thu 7 Jul 20:50; Sun 31 Jul 15:40

**Kuso**

Sat 9 Jul 20:50; Fri 22 Jul 18:10

**Touki Bouki**

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