

A Listening Eye: The Films of Mike Dibb
Part One: The Play of Ideas

Week Three

Available to view 22-28 January 2021

For the third week of *A Listening Eye*, we focus on **Fields of Play**. It explored the significance of this key human activity in so many aspects of our daily lives, from learning, humour and creativity, to gambling, strategy and war games (from the board kind to the Pentagon). This series most clearly demonstrates Dibb's aspiration to engage with complex ideas and present them in an accessible and compelling style and format, with a lightness of touch and precision of vision that attempts to dissolve the all-too-frequent division between intellectual work and our commonly shared experience.

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Fields of Play, 1981-82, 5 x eps, 60'

Mirrors of Paradise, 1991-92, 52'

In Pursuit of Don Juan, 1988-89, 75'

Fields of Play

1981-82 5 x 60'

An original and very personal series of five one-hour films about 'Play', conceived, produced and directed by Mike. Filmed in a variety of locations in the UK and USA, the series focused on five different thematic areas in which to explore the huge, though frequently underestimated, significance of 'Play' in every area of our lives, from childhood development and learning to all forms of creativity, work, sports, gambling and war games.

- 1) *Plays of Meaning*** – an illuminating and richly illustrated journey through the various theories of 'play', revealing it to be an intriguingly elusive concept that refuses precise definition in the engaging company of the eloquent and appropriately playful New Zealand writer and Pennsylvania Professor of Folklore Brian Sutton-Smith, together with lively and perceptive contributions from the child psychologist Caroline Garland in London and Professor Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett in New York.
- 2) *Playing The Odds*** – about the psychology and socio-economics of gambling, forms of which are found in almost every known culture, often linked to religion. The first half consists of filmed encounters with a wonderfully diverse array of punters and dealers, each offering their personal insights into the gambling world of which they're a part, in and around the casinos of Atlantic City, whose booming streets and hotels interestingly form (and indeed now echo in real life) the US version of Monopoly, invented there in the 1930s!

The second half features Peter Fuller (UK author of 'The Psychology of Gambling') and Jack Dowie (Open University lecturer on 'Risk') and follows them as they comment on, as well as along with other big and small time punters, placing bets, and thus becoming actively involved themselves in the many betting activities surrounding the 1981 'Grand National' at Aintree in Liverpool, the UK's best-known and most heavily wagered horse race, covered each year by the BBC and attracting millions of TV viewers.

- 3) *Work and Play*** – an exploration of the often false dichotomy between these two concepts, each of which frequently turns into the other. Some of the most important sequences were deliberately shot in factories where the workers were making the objects on which other people play. The first half was filmed in Chicago on the Bally Company's Pinball and Space Invaders production lines and includes a major contribution from Chicago Professor Mihaly Czhizentmihaly who was fascinated by this topic.

The second half features a revealing conversation with the UK sociologist Margaret Talbot about women and leisure, as well as about the relationship between work and unemployment. It was filmed mostly in the North of England, in pubs, a huge Bingo hall and at the Dunlop/Slazenger tennis factory in Barnsley, where we meet and talk with workers involved in the mass-production of tennis balls and the making and marketing of the McEnroe / Maxply racquet (maybe the last wooden one ever produced), both products inextricably linked, and economically dependent upon, the result of the 1981 Borg / McEnroe showdown at Wimbledon.

- 4) *Playing Ball*** – A series of eight contrasting 'films within a film' about the astonishing cultural history and economic importance of ball games, and the huge role they now play in people's lives the world over. Each one is about a different facet of our extraordinary obsession with ball games of every kind. Shot in both the UK and the USA and ranging from juggling to pinball, soccer to baseball, tennis to bowls, American football to cricket, each film offers an unusual perspective on the ever-increasing cultural and socio/economic significance of ball games, and on the huge role they now play in people's lives and on television in countries all over the world.

- 5) *Playing for Real*** – A wide-ranging and provocative examination of our many games of strategy, from board games to war games, as they've evolved over time in relation to the increasing complexity of our socio-political lives and conflicts. From simple Noughts and Crosses to Chess, Poker and Go, via the then popular 'Dungeons and Dragons' to evermore elaborate video games, from board-type war games to war games in the Pentagon. With a fascinating cross-section of contributors, from play theorists and games inventors to games players and military personnel, the film continually moves backwards and forwards across the disturbingly thin line that exists between the 'play-world' of the game and the terrifyingly 'real' world of international conflict, between video operated arcade weapons and the actual weapons of mass destruction.

Mirrors of Paradise

1991-92 Channel 4/DD 52'

In January 1492, after 800 years, Granada, the last bastion of Islamic Spain, finally fell to the Christians, with the simultaneous expulsion from the country of all Jews who refused to convert. Thus ended one of the great medieval civilisations. *Mirrors of Paradise*, transmitted exactly 500 years later, was commissioned by Channel 4 to commemorate this hugely significant historical event. Through poetry, architecture, painting, landscapes, gardens, food, pottery and music, and with a variety of engaging, eloquent and informed contributions from craftsmen to scholars, this film attempted to bring to life something of that astonishingly rich period of cultural co-existence between Muslim, Christian and Jew which (often too little acknowledged) so influenced the European Renaissance.

In Pursuit of Don Juan

1988-89 BBC 75'

In literally hundreds of disguises, in music, movies, poetry, paintings, in novels and on the stage, Don Juan has had an astonishingly promiscuous life across almost four centuries of world culture. In this entertaining, provocative and multi-faceted film we explore the Don's origins in 17th century Spain as well as examine his relevance today, relentlessly pursuing him from Moliere to Mozart, Fairbanks to Flynn.