**Jean Painlevé**

Professor: Okay, we’ve been discussing films in the 1920s and 30s, and how back then film categories, as we know them today, had not yet been established. We said that by today’s standards, many of the films of the 20s and 30s would be considered hybrids, that is, a mixture of styles that wouldn’t exactly fit into any of today’s categories, and in that context.

Today we are going to talk about a film-maker who began making very unique films in the late 1920s. He was French, and his name was Jean Painlevé. Jean Painlevé was born in 1902. He made his first film in 1928. Now in a way, Painlevé’s films conform to norms of the 20s and 30s, that is, they don’t fit very neatly into the categories we use to classify films today. That said, even by the standards of the 20s and 30s, Painlevé’s films were unique, a hybrid of styles.

He had a special way of fusing, or some people might say confusing, science and fiction. His films begin with facts, but then they become more and more fictional. They gradually add more and more fictional elements. In fact, Painlevé was known for(not no for) saying that science is fiction.

Painlevé was a pioneer in underwater film-making, and a lot of his short films focused on the aquatic animal world. He liked to show small underwater creatures, displaying what seemed like familiar human characteristics – what we think of as unique to humans.He might take a clip of a mollusk going up and down in the water and set it to music.

You know, to make it look like the mollusk were dancing to the music like a human being – that sort of thing. But then he suddenly changed the image or narration to remind us how different the animals are, how unlike humans. He confused his audience in the way he portrayed the animals he filmed, mixing up on notions of the categories of humans and animals.

The films make us a little uncomfortable at times because we are uncertain about what we are seeing. It gives him films an uncanny feature: the familiar made unfamiliar, the normal made suspicious. He liked twists, he liked the unusual. In fact, one of his favorite sea animals was the seahorse because with seahorses, it’s the male that carries the eggs, and he thought that was great. His first and most celebrated underwater film is about the seahorse. Susan, you have a question?

Student 1: But underwater film-making wasn’t that unusual, was it? I mean, weren’t there other people making movies underwater?

Professor: Well, actually, it was pretty rare at that time. I mean, we are talking about the early 1920s.

Student 1: But what about Jacques Cousteau? Was he like an innovator, you know, with underwater photography too?

Professor: Ah, Jacques Cousteau. Well, Painlevé and Cousteau did both film underwater, and they were both innovators, so you are right in that sense(not accent). But that’s pretty much where the similarities end. First of all, Painlevé was about 20 years ahead of Cousteau.

And Cousteau’s adventures were high-tech, with lots of fancy equipment, whereas Painlevé kind of patched the equipment together as he needed it. Cousteau usually filmed large animals, usually in the open sea, whereas Painlevé generally filmed smaller animals, and he liked to film in shallow water.

Uh, what else, oh well, the main difference was that Cousteau simply investigated and presented the facts – he didn’t mix in fiction. He was a strict documentarist. He set the standard really for the nature documentary. Painlevé, on the other hand, as we said before, mixed in elements of fiction. And his films are much more artistic, incorporating music as an important element. John, you have a question?

Student 2: Well, maybe I shouldn’t be asking this, but if Painlevé’s films are so special, so good, why haven’t we ever heard of them? I mean, everyone’s heard of Jacques Cousteau.

Professor: Well, that’s a fair question. Uh, the short answer is that Painlevé’s style just never caught on with the public. I mean, it probably goes back at least in part to where we mentioned earlier, that people didn’t know what to make of his films – they were confused by them, whereas Cousteau’s documentaries were very straightforward, met people’s expectations more than Painlevé’s films did. But you are true: film history is about what we know about them. And Painlevé is still highly respected in many circles.