

# Thus Spake Jean Cocteau

## L'ETERNEL RETOUR

(Paulvé-Discina)

AND in every one of these cycles of human life there will be one hour where for the first time one man, and then many, will perceive the mighty thought of the eternal recurrence of all things—and for mankind this is always the hour of Noon.

THUS spake Friedrich' Nietzsche, mystically, on his doctrine of Eternal Recurrence. The extent of universal energy, he believed, was limited, but the field of action stretched from eternity to eternity. Consequently, since the number of states, changes, combinations or evolutions of energy was definite and limited, it followed that everything—every material circumstance, every thought, every action, and every combination of these—had existed (and would in the eternal future recur) an infinite number of times: "Fellow man! Your whole life, like a sandglass, will always be reversed and will ever run out again."

Anyone who has read patiently thus far will be wondering what this philosophising has to do with films, but it has a particular application to *L'Eternel Retour*, for not only is some understanding of Nietzsche's doctrine necessary to appreciate this Jean Cocteau film; one must also be prepared to believe in it.

*L'Eternel Retour* (screened in New Zealand under the title of *Children of the Sea*) was made in France during the Occupation, and I am sure must have been hugely successful with the Occupants. I would very much like to know how the French themselves reacted to it. (The mystical Teutonic atmosphere of the story could quite easily have been interpreted in left-wing Resistance circles as evidence of at least spiritual collaboration.) But this I do know: I did not sit through it with unalloyed delight.

For all its beauty—and at times it is pictorially superb—and in spite of the artistry with which Jean Delannoy has directed it, this solemn attempt to translate the heroic tragedy of Tristan and Isolde to the 20th Century pushes the sublime perilously close to the ridiculous. My own feeling was that several times it went right over the edge.

## BAROMETER

Fair to Fine: "Cage of Nightingales."  
Fair: "L'Eternel Retour."  
Overcast: "A Double Life."

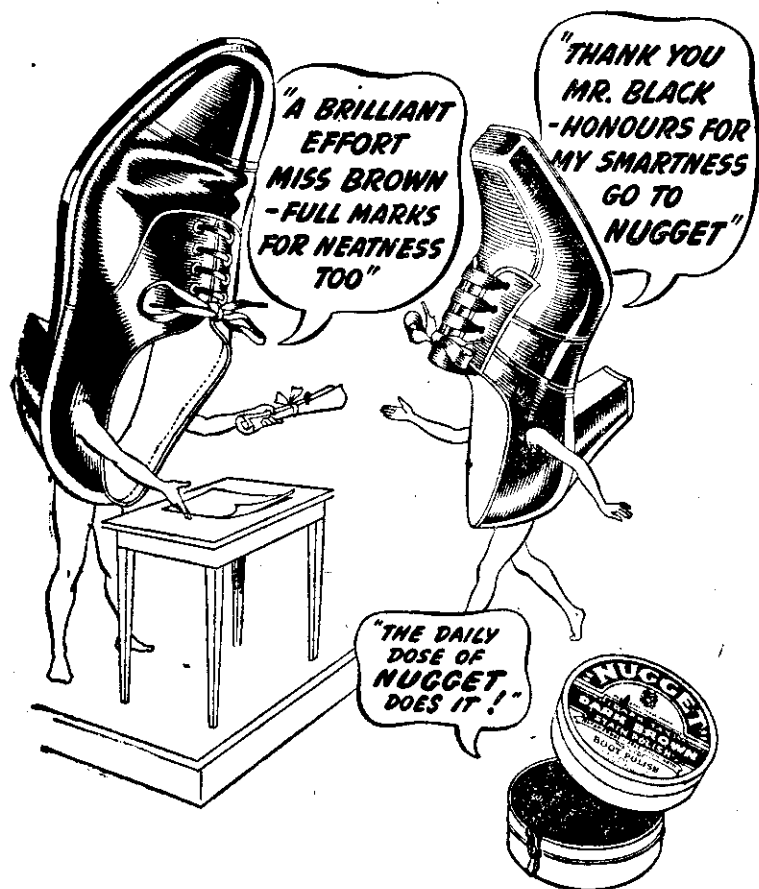
*Hamlet* in modern dress is just possible, for Hamlet's thoughts are modern thoughts, but the sight of the doomed, the star-crossed lovers fleeing from Uncle Mark in a flivver seemed to me as ridiculous as Henry V delivering his Harfleur oration from the turret of a tank, or Siegfried in an S.S. uniform.

Cocteau has, in fact, recreated the tale with painful fidelity. The reincarnated Tristan is called Patrice and Isolde becomes Natalie, but one does not think of them under these names. Almost every circumstance of the ancient legend is dragged in. Patrice, the flaxen-haired gallant (*blonde bestie?*), is devoted to his Uncle Mark, who sends him on a business trip to The Island (Ireland in the legend). There Patrice meets Natalie and for her sake fights Morolt (a hulking fisherman this time, instead of an Irish giant). In the fight he is wounded gravely and nursed to health again by Isolde's (I mean Natalie's) mother. Once he has recovered he makes the astonishing proposal to Natalie that she should marry his uncle. She consents and as she packs her bags her mother slips her a love-potion . . . and so on. Patrice does everything that Tristan did, except kill

a dragon. Perhaps Cocteau thought that would be carrying eternal recurrence a bit too far. Instead of a dragon there is a dwarf, Achilles, who scuttles through the corridors of Uncle Mark's castle, spying on the lovers and plotting their destruction. Achilles is apparently intended to represent envy, malice and evil generally, but his sub-human appearance makes him little better than a Grand Guignol character. But it is he who tricks Patrice and Natalie into drinking the love-potion, he who sets in motion the pre-ordained tragedy. And it follows the pattern faithfully to the end—Patrice's banishment, the other Isolde (or Natalie) with her final lie about the white sail, and the climactic *liebestod*.

Set in the period to which it belonged, the story would have marched splendidly with the artistry of the direction and the Wagnerian stature of the two principals, Jean Marais and Madeleine Solange, but for me the Nietzschean setting almost completely vitiated it.

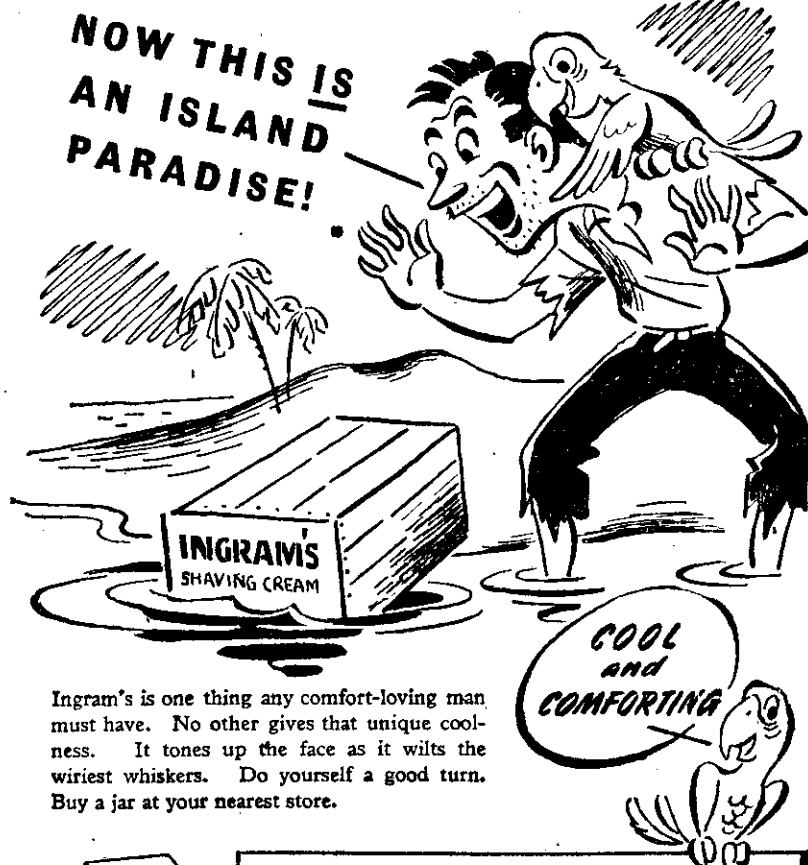
"Everything," wrote Nietzsche, "has returned: Sirius and the spider, and thy thoughts at this moment, and this last thought of thine that all these things will return." It is a chastening reflection that I even now may be dooming myself to damn *L'Eternel Retour* through all eternity—almost as chastening as the prospect of previewing it over an eternity of return seasons.



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