THEODORE HUFF MEMORIAL FILM SOCIETY

Program for Thursday April 21st., at 3:00 p.m., in the Columbia Room, 14th floor, Hotel Capital, Eighth Avenue and 51st. Street, New York City.

A SPECIAL PROGRAM OF THE E. SILENT CLASSICS, PAIRED AGAINST THE RELAUNCH FAMILIES BY THIS SOCIETY

"THE GHOST THAT NEVER RETURNS" *** "THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF Usher" *** "VAST AND FURIOUS"

IMPORTANT NOTICE

Members who were not present at our last meeting will not be aware of a slight re-shuffling of arrangements; therefore we suggest that you make a special note of the details above.

The program was switched from the regular date (April 19th) until the Thursday of the same week, to avoid conflicting with Cinema Lark's Stanley Kramer evening, since we know that many of our members wish to attend this show. Future programs will revert to Tuesdays.

Please also note that for this show only we are screening in the Columbia room, on the 14th floor. While this particular program is not being advertised in any way, it is such a unique show that we feel we can count on a pretty full turnout among our own members, with a correspondingly increased percentage of guests. Thus, to avoid cramped quarters (or even having to turn away late arrivals) we have rented this much larger room. In doing so, we have of course had to pay double our normal rental, but we feel sure that this will be justified and that we can count on seeing a lot of old faces that we've missed of late!


Then we first screened this a few weeks ago, it was a completely unknown quantity - a film that we knew nothing about, and which started out as an amusing but seemingly unremarkable comedy of the twenties. But as the film got under way, it proved to be an astonishing revelation: each gag is followed by a sudden one, the pace quickens, and the final serial-like chase with its rapid cutting and self-executed stunts leaves one quite breathless. As in so many of the best silent comedies, there is comparatively little plot, but a great deal of slick invention in the development of gags. The first half of the film deals with steadily mounting mayhem in a department store; the second half consists of a wonderfully sustained chase involving a car, motor-cycles and a locomotive. One or two gags are rather obviously stolen from Keaton's "Sherlock Jr." - but one shouldn't dwell too indulgently on Buster's behalf since he retaliated by stealing other gags himself for use in "The General". The print is an original, and in perfect condition.

"THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF Usher" (1927; 1 reel) Directed and photographed by James Sibley Watson; continuity and settings by Melville Webber.

Most people have heard of this famed experimental film by Watson & Webber, makers of "Lot In Sodom", but comparatively few people seem to have seen it. This is the first New York screening certainly in a great many years, and we are fortunate to have a brand new print right off the original negative.

Stories by Edgar Allan Poe we have long presented a problem to movie-makers, who find the deliberate incongruity and the stilting, yet indefinable, atmosphere of doom and decay so typical of his work, extremely difficult to translate into visual terms. As a result there have been a number of experimental shorts (versions of "The Tell Tale Heart" by William Cameron Menzies, Charles Keaton, Fred Eimerman and UA), as well as an odd feature by Brion Gysin which, have proliferated among all the Poe stories) and several commercial features. Versions of "The Black Cat" have been made in America, France, Germany and other countries; the German was the only one to approximate it in plot content, the others having no connection whatsoever. Edgar Ulmer's 1931 version with Karloff and Langer did have a nightmarish Poe quality to the proceedings, but that was all. Griffith filmed Poe. The figure of Poe himself has been brought on to the screen, by Henry B. Walthall in "The Raven", by John Hodiak in "The Warning" and Joseph Cotton, and by others. And out of all the welter of Poe material that has been put on the screen, two versions of "The Fall of the House of Usher" stand out above all others. Epstein's feature represents perhaps the finest filmed Poe to date, and is certainly one of the screen's most astute stylistic essays in terror and the supernatural. (A more recent British version also had much to commend it). While Watson & Webber's version
Isn't as great a film as Epstein's, it is still a remarkable - and quite differently handled - avant-garde subject, with evidence of Caligari's influence in its set design. Although a little less than two reels in length, it took almost a year to make. Seeing it, one can understand why for its camera tricks are unusually complex - and unusually smoothly executed. Lewis Jacobs writes: "... (Uncer) displayed an original approach to its material and an imaginative and intense use of the means of expressionism which gave the picture a distinctive quality, different from any experimental film of the day. From the very opening - a horseman descending a plain obscured by white plumes of smoke - mystery and unreality descend. Surprising, eerie, sinister and startling, follow upon the other... the climax is touched with gesture and nightmarish terror... (There was) an individual technique which showed an assimilation of "Destiny", "Forbidden" and "L'Atlantide"... (there was) use of light on wall board instead of painted sets and optical distortion through prisms and a unique use of multiple exposure and dissolves to create atmospheric effects that were neither realistic nor stylized but had the qualities of both... (characters were) almost phantom-like, moving in a tenacious world of spectral surroundings. The entire film was saturated in a Quasimodo-like mannerism which ruined the unreal and evocative mood of Poe's story with a corresponding vivid unreality."


To the best of our knowledge, only famous Russian film, known in the United States mainly (if not solely) through a couple of stills in the reference books, has received only one New York showing prior to this - and that a small, private screening in the mid-thirties. Proof of its rarity is the fact that Herman Weinberg, one of the country's foremost authorities on the silent Russian cinema, had not seen the film until this print was made available a week or two ago. We are very grateful to Mr. Weinberg for the following program note:

This is a real rarity, not only because it has never before been available to film societies here, but also because it represents yet another striking example of that unquenchable flowering of the great Soviet silent cinema that reached its climax with "Earth". Directed by Abram Room in the late twenties, it proved even further into complex psychological problems than did his early "Bed and Sofa". The latter first brought attention to Room as a director of extraordinary perception in the characterization of human beings at a time when character delineation hardly scratched beneath the surface, even in the work of a few similarly acutely perceptive pioneers like Von Stroheim, Chaplin, Lubitsch, Pudovkin, "Bed and Sofa" was a "serious comedy" dealing with the housing shortages in the large Russian cities following the first "World War" and the problems of morality that had to be confronted with a result of frequent "doubling up" of inhabitants. "The Ghost..." Lackled the themes of the exploitation of workers in and out of their unions under the oppression of ruthless industrial organizations. As such, it is interesting to compare this film, which deals with the "workings" of a powerful oil company in South America (doubtless Venezuela) with Nosot's "The Ages of Pear", which has a similar setting, and Pabst's "Joyless Louisiana Story" which, at least, is a "pass" to the Standard Oil Co. Certainly, Room is as left of centre as Pabst is to the right of it - with Nosot being somewhere between centre and Room, at least in the complete version of "The Ages of Pear" (which, contrary to statements made by its American distributors, eliminated the "strong" passages in management-labor relationships it originally contained. See "Film Culture" #3 for a detailed analysis of that war cut off from "The Ages of Pear".

Although "The Ghost..." isplete with cinematic pyrotechnics, for once these virtuoso effects are not what give the film its strength and validity. Rather is it the psychological effects achieved by the most subtle use of slow-motion, "freezing action" and protruded "long takes" in which the director forces the spectator to think with him every inch of the way until he is convinced he has "acted" the spectator with the thought he wishes to convey. There are unprecedented effects too, such as the thought-processes of the worker policeman in his cell, a fleeting release for his single day's freedom, wherein all the people in his thoughts - his wife, his father-in-law, his comrades - crowd his cell, individually or in groups, making the last minutes before his release endless with his anticipation. Years later, Article were to hail simplification of this extraordinary sequence in "Death of a Bachelor" and "Film Daily" as "original" creations of Bennek and Sjöberg, without realizing to that degree others had been done by Room a quarter century before.
This sequence, with its rhythmic pulse-beat wherein the worker-prisoner "counts off" the remaining seconds before his freedom, after ten years incarceration, ending with his facing a corner of his cell, sitting to be tapped on the shoulder by the guards to be informed that he is free, touching as deep a facet of the human psyche as ever has been touched in the cinema.

There are strange things in "The Ghost..." too. Never, before or since, has caricature gone to the extremes in which it is employed here - a frenzied, almost perversion extreme one might say, in the delineation of the "monkey-guardian" triggered by Vigo's physical hatred for the type. The character of the "external policeman" (like Hugo's Javert) who follows the worker-prisoner during his 24 hours of freedom in only loan poisons in degree, not in potency, but to know how to hate would not be enough without also knowing how to love and it is in the latter that Roman reaches his catharsis, and the film's, and the spectator's.

It is obvious that Roman was seen and was influenced by Dumas' "Strikes" and the work of Rutanet and Trauberg (especially, as regards the latter, in the slow opening scene of the oil-wells and its soldier-guards, which remind one of "China Express") and it is amusingly obvious to see that he was also quite taken by the opening train sequence of Stroheim's "Gloria". The chief setting too, that of a semi-circular prison, completely open to the sun on one side (like a Javanese caricature of, say, the Lower Building in New York) is one to invite the eye. If this was a specially constructed set, it is one of the most striking and original ever devised. If however (as seems remotely possible) it was, indeed, a real Soviet prison, irony could hardly go further.

We have very little about Roman and outside "Bed and Sofa" and "The Ghost..." his other work is almost totally unknown. But these two films were enough (as two films were enough for Vigo) to reveal to the world a great film talent whose place in the annals of the screen is assured. This will be the first screening of "The Ghost that Never Returns" in the United States. The print is good and appears to be complete. I urge you not to miss it. There are few enough such rarities around at this late date.

- JEREMIAH G. SIMBERG

Thorold Dickinson has this to say about Roman: "Probably the most imaginative exponent of the naturalistic school of direction was the Pole, Roman. He made four silent films of which two gained international recognition in 1927, "Triangle Love" ("Bed and Sofa")... a frank comedy about shocking nude sexual complacency and the female acceptance of abortion, and "The Ghost That Never Returns". Roman's style was simple, warm, and intimate. To convey psychological conditions he used camera and editing subconsciously but imaginatively; the matter which he photographed was always realistic. To this day Roman's work retains considerable vitality and freshness and bears comparison with much of the product of the progressive left wing who were making for and away the most significant Soviet contribution to the art of the cinema".

Henri Barbusse (1871-1935), the author of the novel on which Roman's film was based, also has some interesting comments to make. For this information, I am grateful to the diligence of George Baltes who unearthed a 1930 English translation of Barbusse's French original "One Looks at Russia". Barbusse says: "I saw at Sarkine's film based on a novel of mine, "Le Novecent Qui Ne Revient Pas" which interested me profoundly. The reason why the film work interested me so much was that my collaboration in it seemed to me infallible. The director, Roman, and his collaborators have shown the short, sentimental story I wrote into a vast tragedy in which the life of American prisoners is depicted with a wealth of prodigious detail. Roman has built up a whole prison, a monumental merry-storied cage, an enormous transparent building which can be completely surrounded by an armoured revolving turret in the centre, from which a murder has the incomparable calls continually under his vigilant eye. A prison gallery and the superimposed - among other means by the use of jets of water under high pressure, which keep the calls - are handled with masterly effect. I was unprovided in my appliance".

After such enthusiastic comments by such authors as Simberg, Dickinson and Barbusse, there is little left to say and we will finish off with a few brief remarks in general. Various authorities refer to Roman as either "Jewer" or "Alexianer" - ... his other notable early films include "The Death Ray" and "The Pits" - further "influence" of "Ghost" can be attributed to Von Sydow's semi-decadent woman in the latter portions of the film bear a remarkable resemblance to the Death Valley footage in "Greed" - the Russian conception of a "typical" saloon is interesting too, and indicates that Roman's old sets hadn't been forgotten - possibly it is too easy to read meaning "into" films like this, but it is more coincidental that the oil-wells are often shot in such a way that they remind one of the skyscrapers of New York. Incidentally, despite the really startlingstarted of the opening and closing reels, the middle sequences are almost devoid of it and become just darned good cinema - and enticing scenarios
"The Ghost..." provides yet another reminder of the tremendous power of persuasion that the cinema can possess. The rich sequence, and its suppression, in so skillfully done that one has the feeling of helpless victims being tortured sadistically... until one recalls that the riot was started entirely without provocation! In fact, despite the handling, it is difficult throughout to feel too much sympathy for the workers. The fact that they are workers seems to justify anything that they do, and since their energies seem devoted to strikes and armed rebellions, a little sympathy and understanding is certainly in order for the harassed "oppressors"!

FORCOMING PROGRAMS:

May 17: A revival, exclusive to this society, of DMITRI BUCHOWETZK I S "OTHER " (UFA, 1922) starring BILL JUDDING, CHARLES BAUER and Theodore Loes.
Charlile Chase in "HEALTH: A MOOD" and other short subjects to be announced.

June 21: The Flaming Twenties and the Jazz Age.
SUE CAROL in "AKING BACK" - directed by Rupert Julian - and - CLARA BOW in "MY LADY OF MINE" - one of the finest four-toned prints we've seen.

July 19: J ACK J ACKOFF in "TOM SAWYER" - directed by WILLIAM DESMOND TAYLOR in "THE JUPITER TRAIL" - shorts to be announced.

Aug. 16: THE SILENT SCREEN: a complete program devoted to the chapter-plays of 1913-1930. Many complete episodes from serials with Pearl White, Helen Holmes, Herbert Mundin, Tim McCoy and Jack Radio, and extracts from serials with Walter Miller, Allan Grey, William Desmond, Bill Duncan, Ruth Roland and others. A really unique collection of rare material.

Sep. 6: THE KING OF CON - a rarely shown British (1917) version of Dickens' novel, directed by Maurice Elvey with Lillian Braithwaite.

THOUGHTS IN PASSING:

Universal seem to have outswarmed themselves with "ROGUE & NIGHTHAWK" and "THE KEYSTONE COP". For an old Nickelodeon sequence, they evidently wanted some old footage that today's audience would find dated and "quaint". So, although the period was (presumably) 1912, they inserted a generous portion of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (late 1927) - including the exciting chase across the ice-floes. Audiences love it and are accepting it seriously... not a laugh in the wrong place!... producer Albert J. Cohen seems to have been studying a few old Griffith films.

Following an uninspiring cast line-up on the cheaply made "Sign of the Fager", this credit appears: "And soldiers, statesmen, citizens of Rome and the heroes of Attica!"... from Swann come news that Lara Hansen, now concentrating on the stage, scored a hit as Captain Craig in "The Caine Mutiny"... a recent acquisition by the society in the pleasing OLLIE BEALS-DONALD CRISP film, "Dress Parade", starring William Boyd and Beulah Bondi, is the most promising of the year... more good things on route are some very early shorts, including "The Little Country House" (Majestic) with Blanche Sweet, Raoul Walsh and Wallace Reid, and "Her Heart's Desire" (Selig) with Bessie Kyton... and we're on the track of a print of William K. Howard's fine silent "A Ship Comes In"... talking about Howard, watch the cheap neighborhood houses for a reissue of his "Murder on Diamond Row" ("The Squeaker") - made in England in 1937, and the best of the stylish, high-powered Howard thrillers... signs of the times (alas!) At two recent screenings of "The Great Man Votes" at the West Side YWCA, West 63rd Street, less than a dozen people were watching this fine film - while in the next room, hundreds were rabidly absorbing the flaks on tv... drop Alan Dale of the TUCA a line if you'd like to be added to the mailing list... his shows occasionally feature worthwhile silents or early talkies... "-stern admirers should make a note to see "Stranger on Horseback" (Director: Tourneur; "Sheepshy" (Jim Colgan) - two fine, simple, austere westerns in the grand old Bill Hart tradition... the latest "FILM IN REVIEW" contains the best article on Bill Hart (by George Mitchell) that we've ever read... a really fine piece... Mitchell is now working on his for a future issue... Carl Th. Dreyer's "Ordet" is up to his usual high standard, although rather too harrowing. The usual "flicker" film should be released here shortly... bad to note the passing of William DeMille, but nice to note too that George Calzetti is preparing an index to his work for "Films in Review"... this society owns a print of DeMille's "His Double Life" (1933, Lillian Gish) which we can schedule if there appears to be any interest (the film has been shown on tv).


Program notes and enquiries - J.K. Mearns, Manhattan YWCA Hotel, 2156 Broadway, N.Y. 21.