Program One: Tuesday August 20th, in room 10-D.

"HIS WOOLEN TELLING" (Pathé-Hall Roach, 1925) 2 reels. Starring CHARLIE CHASE

This is our second Charlie Chase comedy in as many months, but since it is an exceptionally good one, we don't anticipate too many protests! Charlie plays a young swain who is tricked into believing that his bride-to-be has a wooden leg. After nightmarish dreams of raising a family of woolen-legged youngsters, he runs away from the wedding, and before the final, happy ending there is a good deal of fast slapstick aboard an ocean liner. This is a first-rate Chase, with a lot of that hilarious "cruel" humor which added so much bite to the comedies of the 20's, without ever becoming tasteless or offensive.

"LUCREZIA BORGIA" (Germany, 1922, 12 reels) Directed by Richard Oswald (Oswald-Film); from a story by Harry Ephra.

The Cast: COTTAL WALTZ (Cesare Borgia); Liane Haid (Lucrezia Borgia); Albert Lasser (Pope Alexander VI); Wilhelm (William) Lieberla (Alfonso Sforza); Anita Berber (Grafin Purissima); Lydia Salvador (Tierbandigerin); Lothar Müthel (Juan Borgia); Paul Wegener (Borgia's henchman); Ernst Pittschau (Manfredo); Heinrich George (Sebastiano); and Alexander Granach, A.E. Licho, Adele Sandock, Wilhem Liegelmann, Max Pohl and Hugo Löblin.

It is the job of the film society to show not only the established classics (or the neglected ones), the worthwhile failures, and the important star or director vehicles. It must also show films which throw illuminating light on periods of film history which are sparsely represented today, and on films which were considered of importance in their day, even though their value - as films - has not sustained itself through the years.

This preamble, and statement of policy of film societies (or rather, of this film society) is in the nature of a warning. "Lucrezia Borgia" is not one of those silent films which can still, on entertainment values alone, outshine most of today's product. Nor is it a film of marked artistic achievement. In short, its appeal is limited, rather more than most of the films we show, to the film historians and students. They will welcome the chance to see this very rare film, and it is for them that we are showing it. Others should come along prepared for a rather exhausting session.

Kirk Bond, a prominent authority on the German film, will be writing some supplementary program notes on this film to be issued at the screening, and has also provided some comments for these notes, which I will quote a little later. When I discussed the film with him, he put forward the theory that 1922, the year of "Lucrezia Borgia", was already too late a period to accept as being representative of Richard Oswald's best work. The pre-1920 years, says Mr. Bond, were the important ones for Oswald. So my own criticisms of Oswald should be read bearing in mind that I have seen only his post 1922 films, and comparatively few of those.

The basic fault of "Lucrezia Borgia" seems to be its lack of imagination in direction (it would seem to be impossible to make a stodgy film about such a colorful theme, but Oswald has certainly done so) and very static and stagy development. Despite a slow-moving and methodical pace, it is often extremely difficult to tell just what is going on - let alone why. This may in part be due to the comparative scarcity of English titles; minor and almost
imperceptible jump-cuts throughout the film, principally in dialogue scenes, indicate that there were many more titles in the original than in this version. There appears to be no cutting of picture however, and all 12 reels are there.

Historically it is more than a little vague, and at times suspect. It certainly seems unlikely that Cesare's recreations included a revival of the old Roman pastime of throwing maidens to the lions in a huge arena! The priest Savonarola is introduced briefly, but his role comes to nothing; remembering what a bore he was in "Romola", perhaps it is just as well.

For all its static quality, "Lucrezia Borgia" has many elements of interest. The cast seems to include every German player of stature except Jannings and Krauss. Some obvious miniatures apart, the production is lavish and sumptuous in the extreme, with some really magnificent sets. The climactic battle sequence is staged on a monumental scale, but again, rather unimaginatively. Oswald seems unable to build excitement by cutting, or by moving his camera, or by the use of iris and other effects. There are far too many returns to the same angle, and too many long takes of the huge army running away from the camera. Nor is the progress of the battle told visually. First we see the attackers swarming over the walls apparently close to victory; then a title tells us that they are "beaten back", and we next see them in full retreat. The climactic duel between Veidt and Dieterle is similarly confusing.

There are moments of great visual beauty, but they are not sustained, and photographically the film is surprisingly common-place for a German film of 1924. The moments stand out only because they are moments, and only one complete sequence is continually interesting -- the heroine's escape from a monastery, with the sinister hooded figures of the nuns seeming to bar every exit.

Like most German films of the twenties, there is an unnecessary element of comedy. And -- also as usual -- it seems to consist mainly of the delusion that a fat man is always funny, and even funnier when drunk, and with a fat woman. (Remember Jannings in "Faust"? Or the similar scenes in "Othello"?)

The acting is variable, with the best performance coming from Dieterle. Wagner and Veidt both overact badly -- Veidt playing this Cesare much as he did the other Cesare in "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari".

All in all, this "Lucrezia Borgia" is probably the least exciting of the many films built around the famous clan. (Others have included Barrymore's "Don Juan", "The Prince of Foxes" with Orson Welles as Cesare, the strange but not uninteresting "Bride of Vengeance" with Paulette Goddard, and best of all, Abel Gance's version of 1926. In its untruncated French version, that was a picture -- with orgies that were orgies! Richard Carroll's recent version couldn't hold a candle to it.)

Richard Oswald, about whom Kirk Bond will have a great deal more to say in his special notes next week, was one of the most prolific German directors. He was a stage actor and director at the age of 18, and had some 155 films to his credit before he left Europe in the late thirties. These included such items as "Freysus", "Cagliostro", "The Hound of the Baskervilles", "Lilac Time", "The Captain of Kopenick", "My Song Goes Round the World" (filmed in England) and the French "Storm Over Asia", a lurid melodrama with only a very casual superficial relationship to the Pudovkin film. In America, he remade "The Captain of Kopenick" as "I Was a Criminal" (quite a good little picture, with Albert Basserman) and also made a pretentious B at Monogram, "Isle of Missing Men". Its main distinction was the presence of Gibson Gowland as an extra. Otherwise, it was cheaply done and afflicted with poor pseudo-literary dialogue. Still living in Hollywood, Oswald is currently inactive. His son, Gerd Oswald, recently completed direction on the Bob Hope-Fernandel film,
"Trouble in Paris".

Kirk Bond writes: Richard Oswald is today little known, but he seems to deserve far more consideration than he has generally received. At the end of World War One he was one of the two or three leading German directors. During the war he established his own company, shortly after the war he had his own theatre in Berlin, and in spite of the competition of the great companies he succeeded to a remarkable degree. He made a great quantity of films, particularly in the years 1916-24. These were his great years. He was known--uncomfortably well known--for his Aufklärung films, the films on sex that passed the censor because they were officially educational. But he made much else--films of the underworld, with prostitutes and murders; fantastic films, with the Devil; realistic films that approached kammerspiel; films from Jules Verne, Hoffman, Oscar Wilde and Schnitzler. He seems to have tried at least, almost every type of film. And he had the reputation of making all this virtually on the cuff, shooting a feature film in a week. He was something of a German Cecil B. DeMille, with a special mystique all his own.

After the historical film had become fashionable in Germany, he turned to this form himself and made in succession three big panoramas--"Lady Hamilton", "Lucrezia Borgia" and "Carlos and Elizabeth". This marked the end of his great period. He continued to make films into the sound years, but he no longer was the famous director of the earlier years. "Lucrezia Borgia" is perhaps his most ambitious, though not his greatest film. It has a tremendous cast of famous German actors and actresses, and winds up with a spectacular attack on a fortress that shows the influence of "Intolerance", but is none the worse for that. The Viennese Liane Haid, who plays Lucrezia, also had the lead in "Lady Hamilton". The film opened at the Berlin UFA Palast-am-Zoo on October 22, 1922.

Kirk Bond.

Program Two. Tuesday August 27th, 7.30., in room 10-B.

VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

This program is a compilation of films from France, Germany, and predominantly England, with futuristic themes. Today such themes would automatically be herded together under a collective "science-fiction" heading--and their underlying philosophical thoughts would be submerged by melodrama. Our program necessarily is not a complete coverage of the theme--some of the most choice examples, as for instance Fox's "Just Imagine", are not available--but it is a coverage of notable highlights, and affords an interesting contrast in styles. The complete feature is the British "Transatlantic Tunnel"; selecting it as the feature does not mean of course that we consider it superior to the films shown only in excerpt, but films like "Metropolis" and "Things to Come" are fairly widely known and reasonably available. "Transatlantic Tunnel" has not been shown in this country in many years, nor has it been sold for television, so it is very much of a rarity and we are happy to have such a good, and complete, print.

"THE LOVE STORY OF THE INVENTOR OF AN AERIAL TORPEDO" (Britain, 1910) 1 reel

Despite its flippant title, this early Urban one-reeler is an imaginative and graphic prophecy of future aerial warfare, and dreadful new weapons. Only four years later its imagination was to be made quite obsolete by the real thing.
Although the Pole had finally been conquered just three years before, it was still futuristic in its trappings and ideas. Rather too much time is spent on the flight to the Pole, but once there, there is a battle to the death with the Ice Monster (an equivalent of the Man in the Moon) which cheerfully chews and swallows one of Professor Mboul's party much in the manner of King Kong (in the scenes that were cut from the reissue and the TV prints). There is the customary wit, charm and invention that one had come to expect of Mboul. The titles are all in French, but they are simple ones even for non-linguists, and of no great importance.

"ULTIPOPOLIS" (UFA, 1928; released in the U.S. in 1987 by Paramount). Germany.

-excerpt-
directed by Fritz Lang, from a story by Thea Von Harbou.

This classic melodramatic vision by Fritz Lang is too well-known to need any recapitulation here; our excerpt has been chosen primarily to stress the film's affinity, particularly insofar as art direction is concerned, with both "Things to Come" and "Transatlantic Tunnel".


British films in the 1930s were curiously prone to the prediction of "war two. "Things To Come" was preceded by "Tell England", "High Treason" and one or two others, and followed by one or two films of far less ambitious scope which nevertheless didn't leave much doubt as to which direction they expected the aggression to come from. With "Things to Come" however, impending war was merely the beginning of a vast chronicle that included plague, wholesale suffering, economic collapse, and ultimately, rocket exploration of the stratosphere. In a monumental piece of ill-timing, the film was reissued in London just after war broke out. It was hardly a comforting thought, sitting in a theatre, with the distant rumbling of guns and bombs without, and being told that all this was going to go on for close to a hundred years! In our two-reel excerpt, we are concentrating on the latter sections of the film - the semi-abstract "city symphony" sequence of the great modern underground city, and the climactic reel of the shooting of the space gun to the moon. Seldom have miniatures, special effects and actual sets been so well manipulated, and inter-related, as in these episodes. Dramatically, the film was occasionally weak (possibly it might have been stronger had Lewis Milestone directed, as was originally the intention), but visually it is quite outstanding, and altogether "Things to Come" is one of the very best, and most spectacularly impressive of all the futuristic films.

INTERMISSION

"TRANSLANTIC TUNNEL" (Gt. Britain, 1935, 10 reels)
A Gaumont-British Production; directed by Maurice Elvey; screenplay by Kurt Siodmey; art direction by Erno Metzner; scenario and dialogue by L. de Gerde Pesch; additional dialogue by Clarence Lane; editor: Charles Frend; musical direction by Louis Levy; based on "LER Tunnel" by E. Kellerman; camerawork by Gunther Krampf.
The Players: RICHARD DIX, MADGE EVANS, George Arliss, Walter Huston, Leslie Banks, Helen Vinson, C. Aubrey Smith, Henry Oscar, Allan Jeayes, Basil Sydney, Jimmy Hanley, Cyril Raymond, Hilda Trevalyan, Helen Haye, and Ralph Michael as an off-screen extra. (His voice is heard in crowd scenes).

Although an imaginative glimpse into the future back in 1935, "Transatlantic Tunnel" is already somewhat outdated. Presumably its period is supposed to be around 1950, since at one point Richard Dix is credited with having built "the tunnel from England to France in 1940". (It would have been completed just in time to facilitate the German invasion). Actually, just what purpose a London-NY tunnel would serve is never made too clear, and all the money, years, and lives expended on it seem a trifle excessive.

Although B.I.P. were the leaders in using imported talent, and predominantly German talent in the thirties, Gaumont weren't far behind, and "Transatlantic Tunnel" is a particularly interesting combination of British, American and especially German talents. In addition, it is a remake of the French "Le Tunnel", a rather inferior and stodgy film which starred Jean Gabin and Madeleine Robinson. These assorted talents sit together rather uneasily at times, and the strong, vivid visual elements (essentially Germanic of course, with Messrs. Krampf and Metzner at the helm) seem strangely at odds with the very British underplaying, and the classic theatrical dialogue of Clemence Dane. Such great lines as "Oh please be happy!", and the blind heroine's line as she smells the roses - "Pick the white ones, Mary!" - certainly derive more from Dane's theatrical tradition ("A Bill of Divorcement") than from German cinema tradition. Nevertheless, the dialogue is enjoyable throughout - full, rich, often absurd, but a welcome reminder of the days when dialogue was BIG in the way that pictures were big, and "The Method" had happily not invaded motion pictures.

If "Trans-Atlantic Tunnel" lacks anything, it is showmanship. (Even the British title, the dull-sounding "The Tunnel", was too underplayed!) Too often we leave the tunnel-digging operations to become immersed in conventional martial misunderstandings - the same misunderstandings that provided plot material for the American "China Clipper" and countless other movies of a man-with-a-mission and a neglected wife. But the great scenes in the tunnel, with the futuristic machines (in its lighting especially, this material is very reminiscent of "Metropolis") are beautifully done, and the climactic episode of the blasting through the undersea volcano is a real thriller. Incidentally, the giant drill bears a disconcerting resemblance to the Roto-Rooter sewer cleaner -- a familiar sight to those who suffer through the tv commercials for the sake of old MGM movies on Monday nights!

It's reassuring to note that in 1935 Gaumont took a far less bizarre view of Britain's future than did Alexander Korda in "Things to Come". As the futuristic Prime Minister and defender of the Empire's honor (against unnamed but ominous "Eastern"powers) George Arliss, in monocle and cutaway, plays Disraeli all over again. And Walter Huston, as the American president, is likewise no more modern than 1935 as he orates in a curiously shrunken and cramped Congress.

It is decidedly depressing to realise what a large contingent of the film's male stars have now passed on - Richard Dix, Leslie Banks, C. Aubrey Smith, George Arliss, Walter Huston, and some of the lesser players too. As the heroine, Madge Evans is, as always, fresh, lovely, and so thoroughly attractive that the hero's obsession with his sub-ocean tunnel is quite hard to understand.

Not as important a film as "Metropolis" or "Things to Come", "Transatlantic Tunnel" is nevertheless a vastly entertaining one, and one of the most ambitious and elaborate to come from the Gaumont studios in the mid-thirties.