Gance -- Bennett -- Sternberg

J'ACCOUSÉ (Films Abel Gance, 1928-29) Distributed in France by Charles Pathé; released in the U.S.A. through United Artists, 1932. Written, produced and directed by Abel Gance; made with the cooperation of the French Army Cinematographic Service. Assistant to the director: Blaise Condurac; photographed by L.H. Burel, Andre Bujard, Maurice Foretage; montage by Andre Danis.

With: Severin-Nars (Francois) Maxim Desjardins (Mario) Martine Bary-Regis (His Daughter); Honore Jouve (Jean Bize) Mancini (Mrs Bize) Angela Guys (Little Angèle).

Most Gance films today (from his silent period at least) are frustrating affairs to attempt to research or see. Apart from abstract descriptions of style, critical comment on the film is usually uninformative; and the films themselves arrive in such fragmentary form that it is not only unfair but also impossible to reach any kind of a verdict on them. A further frustration lies in the fact that they seem to dare material which may come from the limited attempts by museums and archives to preserve his work. (When we revived a substantial, 7-reel version of his marvellous "Napoléon" a few years back, response was positively apathetic -- and the audience half the size of our average turnout for any Clara Bow film!)

"J'Acoussé", in its original form, was a monumental work that was premiered in four parts through April of 1932, and ran to a total of 17 reels.

This "condensation", running only four reels, thus represents less than a quarter of the original work. Too, the print derives from several sources and is only of fair quality. Titles are in French and Italian, and so brief as to be difficult to read even if one were fluent in those languages. There is overlapping footage from both Italian and French prints -- sometimes the same thing happens twice, but not quite in the same way! Obviously, one cannot judge the original by this version -- nor, we suggest, should you expend too much energy in trying to understand it all. (Even in complete and uncut form, the mystical Gance is sometimes tough to figure out!) But we can be thankful that these glimpses of a legendary film remain, and if one regards them as fascinating fragments rather than a unified whole, they are of considerable interest. Regardless of the lack of continuity, much of Gance's old power comes through. The images are often striking and imaginatively. The war scenes are sweeping and spectacular, the brief rape sequence a terrifying and dramatic episode with its use of exaggerated shadows, the occasional use of the moving camera and the hints of Griffith in the editing, continually interesting, and the famous episode of the war's returning to life to confront the Living (a story sequence that Gance re-used, though in quite different context, in his talkie "J'Acoussé", which was not a remake, although similar in being a passionately pacifist film) is still a bizarre and gripping piece of film-making.

WANDERING WILLY (Pathes-Mack Bennett, 1926) Director: Del Lord With Billy Bevan, Andy Clyde (in two roles), Konplete Morgan, Ruth Taylor. Two reels.

"Wandering Willie", like "J'Acoussé", is minus titles. But a titleless Bennett presents far fewer problems. Indeed, not a single title seems necessary, and their only function must have been to eliminate jump-cuts and certain establishing scenes. It's a gag from beginning to end, starting with the delightful idea of dressing a duck in baby-clothes to make a cop think a baby is drowning, going through the oyster-stew gag that was later to see service with the 3 Stooges, Abbott & Costello and sundry other comics, and after the inevitable Interlude with a Bennett lion, winds up with a grand slapstick chase. 1926 was the last really good year for Bennett; thereafter his two-realers slowed down and went in more and more for marital misadventures and situation (rather than sight) stories.

- INTERMISSION -

THE SCARLET EXPRESS (Paramount, 1934) Directed by Josef von Sternberg. Screenplay by Manual Konoff, based on a story by Catherine the Great; Art direction by Hans Dreier, assisted by Peter Balloucan and Richard Kollmar; titles and effects by Gordon Jennings; costumes by Travis Banton; musical score, based on Tchaikowsky and Mendelssohn, arranged by John M. Beyold and W. Frank Harline; photographed by Bert Glennon; 13 reels.

With: Marlene Dietrich, John Lodge, Sam Jaffe, Louise Dresser, Maria Sieber, C. Aubrey Smith, Ruthelma stevens, Olave et, Kevin Gordon, Jameson Thomas, Hans von Trambeck; Davidson Clark, Ervville Alderson, Marie Vella, Edward Van Sloan, Jane Darwell, Harry Woods, Phillips Stean, John Davidson, Gerald

The sixth of the seven Sternberg-Dietrich films, "The Scarlet Empress" is the next eye-toppling of them all, and the best - or weakest - of them all, depending on how one regards Sternberg. If one regards his pictorialism and elegance as the be-all and end-all of his films (never strong in a story sense at the best of times) then "The Scarlet Empress" is not only one of his best films, but also one of the landmarks of cinema. Historically, this interpretation of Catherine the Great is open to question; dramatically it is sometimes such a sham that Sternberg has to resort to titles to bring you up to date on what is going on in terms of time and place, before he launches into some new hallucinatory effect. But who cares? Visual treats like this are such a marvel that one can forgive them - the titles - it for what it has to offer, but also wonders how in blazes Sternberg ever got away with it. How could he have ever justified expenditure like this with the script that (presumably) Salkow and the front-office had read? Not that the extravagance doesn't pay off -- and a careful study of the sets reveals short cuts and economics that the overall grace and elegance conceals. But those sets! Those wonderful (if totally unmeasured) trucking shots over banquet tables! The decor! The marvellous gauze shoes, and stunning closeups of Dietrich. One really shouldn't write about such an essentially visual film from an objective evaluation (as, for instance, Von Sternberg Index is a first-rate analysis); rather one should just sit back and stare open-mouthed at it all.

Rather like a joyous and totally undisciplined collaboration between Welles, Dzubbel, Strickham and Sternberg - with Gregory Tadawa and W.C. Fields dashing in for odd scenes - it's a completely wild and unpredictable film, and the wonder is that the players get any kind of a shuffle at all. The "old guard" represented by O. Aubrey Smith is well under control. Dietrich looks stunning, and gives one of her best performances - one feels that despite Pola Negri, Tallulah Bankhead, Bergner, Betty Davis, Louise Dresser and Mae West (!) -- her Catherine probably comes the closest to reality. (Her own daughter, now an established actress as Marie Riva, plays Catherine as a child). That excellent actor John Lodge is, as always, first-rate - whether as Count Axel or here, as Bulldog Drummond, or in "Koenigsmark"; he always makes one wish he had stayed before the cameras and not wandered off into politics. Sam Jaffe, in his first movie role, was somewhat justifiably criticized as being too much like Harry Marx -- but then the bad Duke Peter probably was more like John Barrymore than like Douglas Fairbanks Jr (who played Peter in the Climax-Berger version). The supporting cast is a veritable who's-who of old favorites. But it is the wonderful madness of it all, the margayles, the giant doors, the stylish decor which imaginatively suspends Russian architecture instead of recreating it, that are the real stars and players of this astonishing work.

NEXT PROGRAM: Tuesday next, March 28th, room 10-3. As many of you know from our recent program notes, the original "Dress Key" has become temporarily unavailable, "Design for Living" and "Innocents in Paris" were tentative titles that we thought of substituting. So far however, those titles, though promised, haven't arrived, and rather than risk a last- minute switch we have finally set the program for next Tuesday as under:

FATHER BROWN (1935, with Cary Cooper, Ann Harding) - Henry Hathaway's lovely, poigniant, symbolic fantasy from the Dumas novel; regarded as a classic in Europe; overlooked in this country.

THE GREEN GODDESS (1934) - a thoroughly tough, and certainly the most enjoyable, of all the de luxe exploitation vehicles. He has a field-day in this brilliantly written and witty old melodrama; with Alice Joyce, H.B. Warner, Ralph Forbes, stock shots from the '23 version, and sets from Curtiz' "Noah's Ark".

"THE BIRTH OF A NATION" - shot-sheet by Theodore Huff.

Thanks to the energy and initiative of Mrs Eileen Bowser, to whom we all automatically owe a debt of gratitude, the Museum of Modern Art has issued in very handsome form a completely detailed shot-sheet (tantamount to an over- elaborate script) of this Griffith masterpiece. As compiled by Theodore Huff in 1939, it contains details of shots now missing from existing prints, and is an invaluable piece of study material. Only 100 copies were printed; available to members of the Museum at $2.06, and non-members at $2.75 -- and worth a good deal more. All enquiries to the Film Library of the Museum.