Tonight's films are all from the 9.5mm collection of Major George Mitchell, to whom we are grateful not only for making them available, but also for taking time out to project them for us. Despite a size nearer to 8mm, 9.5mm, a British size, actually is close to 16mm in quality, and very often its equal. 9.5mm is strictly for home movie use, and when it was at its peak, the powers at the helm felt that there would be little demand for full-length versions of films, especially since most of the titles available were limited to British and European silents. Thus, all the 9.5mm prints are condensations, ranging from two reels to four. Some of them are extremely skillfully done and manage to retain story line, action and dramatic highlights, and those moments of style that make all the difference. (David Lean was one of the editors who worked on these versions). Others even (dare we say it?) improve on the originals a little; some British silents, even those of Hitchcock, were incredibly slow and dull. The two reel versions seem too abrupt and suggest all sorts of butcheries -- but in some cases, examination of the original proves this not to be the case at all. However, whatever the merits or disadvantages of these shortened British versions, the fact is that in a great many cases, this is all that reains. Frustrating though some of these are, they all have sufficient body to be reliable representations of their originals, and as such are invaluable for study purposes today.

Due to the difficulty in screening these prints in advance, these notes are based on rather sketchy recollections of the films, and the mists will have to be solely an ad-lib affair. We hope you'll bear with us in any inadequacies.

THE RING (British International Pictures; produced 1927, released 1928)
Story, screenplay and direction: Alfred Hitchcock; continuity by Alma Reville; camera: Jack Cox; executive producer: John Maxwell
Distributed by湍提会, 9 original reels, 89 reels.
The Players: Carl Eyrison, Lilian Hall-Davis, Ian Hunter, Forrester Harvey, Gordon Harley, Billy Wells, Harry Terry.

Not a melodrama in the usual sense, and thus "living" Hitchcock: few opportunities for suspense or action, "The Ring" nevertheless is an interesting little film with occasional touches of real style. The shot of a glass of champagne bubbling, and then a subsequent one of it having gone "flat", is not only an ingenious time-lapse but also an oblique comment on the romantic emotions of the players involved. The opening fair-ground scene, so highly praised in the British Film Institute Index, seems quite common lice however -- either due to repetition through the years, or perhaps because the sequence as edited here does not represent the original opening. The film is not served well by its male leads either: Carl Eyrison is colorish, and Ian Hunter entirely too plump and inert in the ring to suggest a successful boxer. But if it's not top or even second drawer Hitchcock, it's also quite a way from being his weakest, and a consistently interesting if generally only workmanlike little film.

DIE WUNDERBARE LILSE DER NINA PETROVNA (UPA, 1929) Produced by Erich Pommer Directed by Hanns Schwarz Camera: Carl Hoffman
With Brigitte Helm, Franz (Francis) Lederer, Warwick Ward.

UPA's last silent, "The Wonderful Life of Nina Petrovna" was apparently never released in this country, a fate that befell many fine late European silents. Its story is fairly standard Viennese schmalz, not too far removed from either "Liebelie" or "Anna Karenina" (prologues to The Tolstoy, but it really is schmalz), and the kind of film that really should have been done by Max Ophuls. And as with Ophuls' films, the style matters far more than the story. It's an extremely handsome production, with fine sweeping camerawork, and some beautifully constructed, lit, and photographed interior sets. Brigitte Helm, always fascinating, is perhaps better when she remains tantalising and bitchy, but even when she finally turns noble, as here, it's a sheer pleasure to watch her in action -- and how much superior her performance is to the rather colorless one by Isa Miranda in the French sound remake.

- Intemission -
LL-D ADVENTURES OF ROBERT MACAIRE (Jean Epstein-Albatross Films, 1925)
Directed by Jean Epstein; script by Charles Vayre from "L'Auberge des Adrets"; camera - Paul Guichard, assisted by J. Fouquet and M. Rondakoff; sets by J. Keroler; built by L. Pearson.
Original length: 14 reels; subsequently released in a shorter length of nine reels.
The Cast: Jean Aubel (Robert Macaire) Alex Allin (Bertrand) Suzanne Blanchetti (Mlle de Serreze) Mino Constantini (Jene de Serreze) Camille Sardou (The Policeman) Jeanne Herve Stoek (Herni) Lou Davoyra (Victorine) and H. Milian, Dolong, Bonediess, Marquissotte, Bocky, Dalart.
Interiors shot at Albatross Studio in Montreuil; exteriors shot at Dauphine, Grenoble and Vizille.

Just what the intended mood (or complete story-line) of "Robert Macaire" is, this version hardly tells us -- and with some ten reels missing, it's not too surprising. Something of a matinée of "Don Quixote" and "Fan Fan Le Tulipe", it's gay and bizarre, and quite impossible to fathom out! However, judging from the complete versions of other Epstein works, it's highly possible that all fourteen reels present a similarly obtuse picture. Epstein, like Gance, is forever being referred to by the historian, but seldom discussed or described -- not just because they haven't seen his films (such a shortcoming rarely stops most "historians") but because so few other people have seen them that there is just nothing to crib from. "The Film Till Now" for example has no less than thirteen references to Epstein -- but only two brief descriptive passages, and both relating to "Fringes Terrace". Books on the avant-garde and experimental cinema frequently refer to "Robert Macaire" in terms of its cost, but with no real comment. I suspect that most of these avant-garde endorsers have not seen the film either, but have merely seen stills. The film is full of bizarre compositions which, out of context and in stills, could easily suggest the work of a Cocteau or a Dalou; but within the context of action contain nothing that is surrealist or experimental.
"The Fall of the House of usher" apart, I am not an Epstein admirer; his documentaries to me have been laborious and unloving, his "experimantal work largely vacuous. "Robert Macaire" is, in the modern vernacular, an oddball film that neither adds to nor detracts from his reputation. His admirers will doubtless find in it even more things to admire; and the others will just ponder anew what all the fuss is about.

HELMKHAR (USA, 1928) Produced by Erich Pommer; Directed by Joe May; camera - Gunther Rittau; script by Fred Majo and Fritz Kondinnen from the novel "Karl und Anna" by Leonhard Frank.
With Lena Hanson, Vita Parlo, Gustav Freidlich.
Released in the USA by Paramount as "Homesick", in 8 reels; released in Britain as "The Prisoner's Song".

One of the most powerfully dramatic and pictorially beautiful of all the late silent films, "Helmkhah" in its original 75m form must well have been worthy of comparison with "Sunrise" and "Faust". Indeed, it frequently looks so much like a Kurman film that one wonders whether the credit shouldn't belong as much to Erich Pommer as to Joe May. May was an extremely interesting director, and admittedly few of his German films have survived; but few those that have, and from such American films of his as "The House of Seven Gables" and "The Invisible Man Returns", there seems little evidence that he ever made another film of quite the stature of "Helmkhah". (Similarly, A.A. Dupont never duplicated the quality of the Pommer-produced "Variety").

Incidentally, this stylized, powerful and extremely moving film makes an interesting (and depressing) comparison with the American remake of 1947. Titled "Desire", it starred Greer Garson, Robert Warwick and Richard Hart, and was a lugubrious mess that got progressively worse. Although Mervyn LeRoy, Clarence Brown and others worked on it, nobody was willing to take "credit" for it, so it went into release without any director credit, and merely a producer credit to Arthur Hornblow Jr.

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Next Tuesdays: Preston Sturges' THE PAIN BLACK STORY (1942) with Joel McCrea, Claudette Colbert, Earnst Lubitsch's DESIGN FOR LIVING (1933) with Gary Cooper, Freidrich March, Miriam Hopkins & Edward Everett Horton; written by Ben Hecht, from the play by Noel Coward.