**STEAMBOAT ROUND THE BEND** (1935) - one of the loveliest and least-appreciated John Fords, with Will Rogers, Ann Shirley, Eugene Pallette, Robert Bevers, Raymond Hatton, Berton Churchill, Francis Ford, Irving S. Cobb; and **OTHER MEN'S WOMEN** (1931) - a really obscure early William Wellman talkie, a sex melodrama with a railroading background; with Grant Withers, Mary Astor, James Cagney, Joan Blondell, Regis Toomey, Walter Long, Fred Kohler. There are reasons for its obscurity, but it's still an oddity that can be checked off!

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The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

December 17, 1953

**SKI DEVILS** (Warner Bros., 1948) Produced and written by Robert C. Youngson; One reel.

Sports reels per se are items that we have always steered carefully clear of, but the Youngson shorts in that category are exceptions. The footage is always the best of its kind, the pacing taut and breathless, and the editing razor sharp. Few of Youngson's sportsmen last long in his sadistic little reels, and the smooth, expertly efficient skiers invariably get tossed into the cutting banes in favor of the jumpers who land off balance, trip, or otherwise dive head first into neck-breaking crackups. Even though this is documentary footage, one has more than a sneaking suspicion that Youngson had been tampering with a few ski-straps, or possibly concealing rocks on the runs.

Two off-beat and macabre cartoons

**SNOW WHITE** (Paramount, 1933) Produced by Max Fleischer; directed by Dave Fleischer; animated by Roland C. Crandall; song by Cab Calloway; one reel.

Although the Betty Boop were extremely variable — much of the visual humor was labored, and the entries in the late 30's were very tired affairs indeed, with Betty, her sex-appeal and vulgarity toned down, merely playing as a stooge to sundry other "guest" cartoon characters — the early ones were generally pretty lively, even though the drawing of subsidiary characters was sometimes both careless and ugly. This is a good one, with short-skirted Betty at her sexiest, and some really weird semi-surrealist drawing, backgrounds, and gags.

**SUPERMAN AND THE ARCTIC GIANT** (Paramount, 1942) Produced by Max Fleischer; directed by Dave Fleischer; one reel

Almost forgotten now are the exciting and serial-like "straight" cartoons built around Superman, and put out by Paramount in the early 40's. The series didn't last long, but it was fun while it did. Some of them were quite grim, and in Britain for example, the censors gave them an "Adult" certificate, which rarely happened with cartoons. (Only some of Disney's "message" cartoons, like "Education for Death", and some of the blatantly sexual MGM cartoons — "Uncle Tom's Cabana" — also rated the "A" classification. This didn't deny children under 16 the chance to see them, but it required that the be in the company of an adult.) "The Arctic Giant" is an interesting sci-fi opus, right out of the "King Kong" stable. In fact one of the images — the monster wrecking the elevated subway for instance — are quite clearly patterned on "King Kong" scenes. Originally of course, this series was in Technicolor, but the subject matter is such that it suffers hardly at all through being now only in black-and-white. In fact, the monster is more effective now than he originally was in a bright and cheerful green!


It has been some years since we ran this comedy, and since L&H always seems to emerge fresher than ever on repeat viewings, a revival seems in order. Very funny all the way, it's practically a two-man show (Billy Gilbert's one scene is unimportant, and no-one else appears, even as an extra) with plenty of violent slapstick, some of those traditional exchanges of wall controlled temper tantrums, and some excellent bits of quiet, underplayed pantomime from both comedians. It is almost one of their best comedies, and like so many of their top films it consists of the thorough and methodical milking of a single situation for every possible gag. It doesn't quite make it into the "inspired" category. Some of the timing seems just a little off, causing the payoffs of gags to fall a little flat at times; also the mixing of music and sound effects is miscast, and sometimes too much silence where an effect or music sting is needed also tends to work against specific gags. But it's still a very funny piece of work, and if not a top L&H, certainly well up in the second echelon.

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Intermission
"DEATH TAKES A HOLIDAY" (Paramount, 1933; released, 1934)  
Directed by Mitchell Leisen; screenplays by Maxwell Anderson, Gladys Lehman and Walter Ferris from a play by Alberto Casella; camera: Charles Lang; 9 reels  


Bearing more than a casual kinship to "The Sorrows of Satan" and "On Borrowed Time" — with a more distant relationship to "The Devil and Daniel Webster" — "Death Takes a Holiday" is one of those irksome films that one remembers because of a couple of great scenes, and an overall ornateness and style, while the bulk of the film has receded into a kind of rose-colored limbo. But it's good to see it again, even if a trifle disillusioning.

"Death Takes a Holiday" is annoying because it has marvellously exciting potential almost completely minimised by being given to the wrong director, Whale, Lang, Berzage, Santell, Tourneur. Browning, West, Van Dyke — all could have worked wonders with this material. (In fact, it would be rather fun to see them all try their hand at it, and compare the varying emphases on melodrama, fantasy and romanticism that they came up with). But few directors could have been a more unfortunate choice than Mitchell Leisen, a man who is expert at dressing up pictures without substance, who is tolerably good at frothy romantic comedy, but who has always come a cropper when handed meaty dramatic stuff or such period spectacles as "Bride of Vengeance", one of the permanent classics of ineptitude.

The most irritating aspect of "Death Takes a Holiday" is that for the most part Leisen seems content to follow the dictates of the stage, but when he is forced to become cinematic by a script which offers incident unplayable on a stage, he is able — due I suspect to some helpful collaboration from cameraman Charles Lang — to come up with some quite dynamic stuff. The opening festival scenes are so nicely done that one immediately thinks they are lifted from "The Devil Is a Woman" — until one realises that this precedes Sternberg's film. The subsequent chase along the mountain road (employing some expert miniatures), with the shadow of death hovering behind the cars, is a fine and chilling sequence. Death's first appearance; and the grim sequence when one of the guests recognises him for what he is, are likewise outstanding moments. But they are, alas, moments in a film which has far too few of them. Because of the opulent sets, interesting players and lush camerawork, one is too often inclined to let one's attention wander from plot to trimmings, and the story itself, despite its inherent interest, never has the dynamic power to hold one's undivided attention as, in differing ways, "On Borrowed Time" and "The Devil And Daniel Webster" did.

The staginess of presentation is heightened by Fredric March's at times quite abysmally bad performance. True, he isn't helped by some of the dialogue, which has a presumably all-wise Death commit some insane gaucheries of conversation. (Maria Casares in "Orpheus" was far more efficient!) But so many of his big speeches, especially as the film nears its climax, are staged and acted with the sure knowledge that he must be precisely in centre stage, the lesser players grouped below him, as the curtain falls. March has rarely been quite so disappointing before. What John Barrymore could have done with the role!

But if we are disappointed, it is only because the possibilities were so great. It remains an interesting and absorbing film, and in part wholly successful. The good things in it tend to make one charitable towards the failures. It's always a pleasure to see Evelyn Venable and Sir Guy Standing — the latter as urbane and unruffled as always, despite some trying circumstances. Edward Van Sloan is lifted from the original "Film Daily" cast for the film (and it is stated in most of his biographies), but he does not appear (the film is not cut) so presumably he was either edited out in the first place, or never actually made it. A pity. One longs to see him ride in, grimace at his crucifix, and murmur "We must destroy him!" in those quiet yet forceful tones of his.

Two economy notes: in one of the montages, you may spot some stock scenes lifted from "The Sign of the Cross"; and the Italian villa's pool seems to be Charles Laughton's old "Island of Lost Souls" pool, polished up a bit and redecorated by Mitchell Leisen.

Many of you I suspect are expecting a rediscovered masterpiece of the macabre. If you do, you'll be disappointed. But if you expect little, and just accept the good things it has to offer, you may be very pleasantly surprised by it.

William W. Everson