Two Rediscoveries


Two or three weeks ago, "Variety" carried a story about the rediscovery of the only extant print of this long-lost film in a Canadian fishing town. This is not the same print, so another legend is scotched. Oh for the day when the print of the only extant print of the complete "Greed" are uncovered in a like manner! "The Viking", not to be confused with the MGM film of the same name dealing with authentic Norsemen, has its chief claim to fame in that it was Canada's first feature-length talkie. But like "The Jazz Singer", its value as a convenient milestone has obscured the fact that it is a pretty good film in its own right. These values however were further hidden when the limelight was rather taken away by a sensational follow-up story: almost the entire crew of the ship featured in the film was shortly thereafter lost at sea when the ship blew up, mysteriously.

What gives "The Viking" its punch is its often beautiful and certainly thrilling footage of seal-hunting. There are one or two rather heart-rending shots of seals being massacred, and the film would be better if less honest without them. (Momently, we were even tempted to do a little editing ourselves, before a superimposed vision of the Film Students' oath prevented us!) But some of the shots are truly staggering, especially the long panoramic scenes of the hunters (few of whom can swim, a title tells us) trekking over the thin ice-surface of the sea, the ocean swell billowing beneath their feet. These shots, with the strange blend of the obviously real with a kind of nightmare fairyland, are unforgettable. The climax is contrived melodrama perhaps, but contrived in the way that "S.O.S. Iceberg", "Igloo" and other great outdoor and post-"Trader Horn" epics of the early sound years were; the hazards and the dangers are quite real, and softened only a little by the knowledge that cameramen - and presumably, help - are not too far away.

Presumably most of the credit for "The Viking" goes to producer Frissell and his crew of photographers, one of whom - E.A. Penrod - will be remembered for his superb whaling footage in the silent "Down to the Sea in Ships". George Melford, a frank hacks whose work ranged from the silent "Sheik" to early sound quickies like "East of Borneo" and "Homicide Squad", obviously could have "directed" little of the film in the strictest sense of the word. This print, trimmed somewhat so that it actually becomes a documentary rather than a semi-fiction film, is actually an improvement on the original. The full version may take forever to get out of the fishing village, and takes up its opening two reels with dull (and badly recorded) dramatics.

Here we put to sea right away, and though some of the dirty looks that fellow crewmen throw at Charles Starrett are thus never explained, it hardly matters. Personalities as such do not emerge at all, and it is the crew as a body, and the wintry wastes, that emerge as the protagonists. And they are quite enough.

"DOCTOR NABUSE DER SPIELE" (Decla-Bioscop, 1922) 20 reels; released in two parts of 10 reels each. Distributed by UFA. Directed by Fritz Lang; scenario by Thea von Harbou from the story by Norbert Jacques, originally published in the Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung; Camerai: Carl Hoffman; Sets and design by Otto Hunte and Stahli-Urach; Costuming by Vally Heinsoe; modern version adapted by Erwin Kulker; by Peter Schirren.

With: Rudolf Klein-Rogge (Dr. Nabuse); Bernard Goetzke (von Wemk); And Rupold Wissmann (Cara Carozza); Alfred Abel (Count Told); Gertrude Velker (Countess Told); Paul Richter (Bull); Lydia Potechina (The Russian); Karl Huzsar-Puffy (Hawasch); Forster Larrinaga (Sperrri); Hans von Schlettow (Georg); Georg John (Pesch); Grete Berger (Fine); Julius Falkenstein (Karsten); Julius Hermann (Sohram); and Karl Faten, Anita Berber, Jur Brandt, Auguste Prasch-Grevenberg, Adele Sandrock, Paul Biesenfeld, Gustav Botz, Heinrich Gothe, Max Adalbert, Leonhard Hauss, Erna Habich, Gottfried Huppertz, Hans Junkermann, Adolf Klein, Erich Fabel, Edgar Pauly, Hans.
First of all, a few words on "completeness." Is there any such thing as a complete and definitive print? One would think that at 20 reels, not a frame of "Dr. Mabuse" could possibly be missing. And yet the 9-reel composite outtake that was released in this country in 1927 did contain at least one shot - an overhead view of one scene - missing from this version! However, one always finds these discrepancies in many works, especially those where the directors had sufficient control to have scenes thought up. Griffith never finished editing "Intolerance," and was still working on it in the 1940's. However, Erwin Leiser's "adaptation" credit should not be taken to indicate any tampering, and probably just covers control of printing materials, retranslation of titles, and so on. The official original length was nearly 18,000 feet. This print is actually a trifle longer. Possibly, with the story being better known, the original had less of the lengthy explanatory titles, and so this could account for the excess footage.

Everything however is meticulously detailed, there are no plot gaps, and the smooth print - free of jump-outs, scratches and spills - must obviously have been made from well-preserved original material.

Many rediscovered primitives (and despite its 1922 date, "Mabuse" is a "primitive" in its relation to other Lang works) turn out to have amazing vitality and beauty - as is apparently the case with the original French "Judex." (We're planning an article on that in a future issue shortly; but an announcement about this will be made in due course.) "Mabuse" on the other hand disappoints a little if one takes the attitude that it is only four years prior to "Metropolis." However, this is rather like being disappointed in "Judith of Bethulia" because it is only two years before "The Birth of a Nation." On its own merits, "Mabuse" is nevertheless a fascinating work: not only because of its clear ties with the detailed novel of mystery and detection, and for its roots deriving from the early serial films, but also because here one can see at the source so many of the themes, characters, actual incidents and individual shots that were to permeate Lang's later films, and most specifically "Metropolis," "Spies" and his other Mabuse films.

Lang himself claimed that his major interest in making "Mabuse" was that it enabled him at the same time to attack the shocking atmosphere of crime and perversion that was rampant in post-war Germany. It is true that none of Mabuse's heroes are very sympathetic. Most of them are society parasites, living an empty life. Mabuse himself feeds on them, like a wolf on a helpless or dying carcass, not from necessity but because playing with human destinies is the only exciting game left in a decadent world. But the socialological content plays a distinct second-fiddle to the melodrama. Lang claims he wasn't "allowed" to make the film the way he wanted, but one wonders. In all of his films where he allegedly has a message - "Metropolis," "Puritan," "You Only Live Once" etc. -- one has the feeling that he doesn't really give a fig for social content, and that he's much happier playing around with his talents on screens of bizarre scenes of suspense and thrill. For all of the implied degeneracy in "Mabuse" -- and the very first title refers to a dope addict -- the impression is not so much of a debauched Germany in the 20's as of a vintage Robert Louis Stevenson novel, somehow brought up to date with automobiles and night-clubs, much as the Sherlock Holmes stories were updated in World War Two.

More than in any of his other thrillers, Mabuse is really the "hero" in the sense that Fu Manchu was the hero of the Bohmer novels. Rudolph Klein-Rogge, Lang's favorite villain, was a kind of Chancy and Karloff rolled into one. (Curiously, he was the first husband of Thea von Harbou, who then became Mrs Lang!) His marvellous face - handsome and sinister at the same time - is here used to excellent effect in some superb disguises, which, rare in this kind of film, not only convince but work so well that the audience doesn't always realise right away that it is Rogge beneath it all! Perhaps because of the influence of the original novel -- a solid-selling number in German bookstores right through the 50's, long after Mabuse had apparently ceased to be of filmic value - far more emphasis is placed this time on the struggle between the Mabuse hero and the rather humorless but dogged policeman, Wenk. The hero of "Spies" was a carefree James Bond blueprint; Lehmann - from "Last Testament of Dr. Mabuse" and "M" - a more human but not very active opponent. Wenk here assumes the Sherlock Holmes or Nayland Smith role, and is much more involved personally in the proceedings.

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