A reminder: there is NO program next week. Our next program, on Tuesday Aug. 10th consists of "SEVEN YEARS' BAD LUCK", the 1921 comedy classic directed by and starring MAX LINDE, two Edison melodramas of 1912/13, "Daughter of the Wilderness" and "His Mother's Hope"; a bizarre Starevitch fantasy, "Frogland", and "Moscow and its Environs", a 1913 documentary.

July 27, 1945

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

LANG and RENOIR -- FOX, 1941

"MANHUNT" (20th Century Fox, 1941) Directed by Fritz Lang; produced by Kenneth Macgowan; screenplay by Dudley Nichols from "Rogue Male" by Geoffrey Household; camera: Arthur Miller; Art Directors, Richard Day and Wiard B. Ihnen; music: Alfred Newman; editor, Allen McNeill. 10 rls.

With Walter Pidgeon, George Sanders, Joan Bennett, John Carradine, Roddy McDowell, Ludwig Stossel, Heather Thatcher, Frederick Worlock, Roger Imhof, Egon Brecher, Lester Matthews, Holmes Herbert, Ely Malyon, Arno Frey, Fredrik Vogeding, Lucien Prival, Herbert Evans, Keith Hitchcock, Kurt Kreuger, Sven Hugo Borg, Bruce Lester.

"Manhunt" was made during Lang's 5th year as a Hollywood director, and was his sixth American film. The preceding five had all been thoroughly American in locale and theme (if not always in treatment) -- three crime films with social undertones and two Westerns. "Manhunt" was his first opportunity to return to the milieu that he knew so well -- Germany, the chase, one man against an international conspiracy. In many ways, it is probably his best American film; "Fury" and "You Only Live Once" may have been more "important", but they seem both dated and pretentious today. And few of his later films gave him such scope for welding his own pictorial style to the kind of high-grade melodramatic tale that he told so well. "Manhunt" too has such a strong story foundation -- with its ultimate roots perhaps in "The Most Dangerous Game" -- that its pre-World War Two time period seems now to be merely a background that dates it not one whit.

In essence, "Manhunt" is but little removed from the Mabuse films, Hitler, seem but briefly, is the new super criminal, and George Sanders his equivalent of Professor Baum -- with more than a touch of Count Zaroff thrown in. The Nazis have a world-wide crime organisation rivalling that of Mabuse, and, as is traditional in this kind of film, England is curiously home-combined with Nazi agents and spies masquerading as policemen, post-mistresses and the like. The stakes are again power rather than personal gain, and the methods used are super-intellectual out-guessings of the opponent. All this is slammed over with tremendous pace, mood, fine atmospheric black-and-white photography by Arthur Miller, and classic melodramatic dialogue. Sanders' Nazi bigshot rivals Raymond Massey's in "Desperate Journey" as being the most colourful "fun" villain of the entire war.

In its London sequences, the film is a curious mixture of Lang's own nightmare world -- in which London streets, fog-ridden and dank, are peopled by phantom-like secret agents, one of whom wears glasses that give off a cat-like gleam in the dark -- and the different but equally unreal world of Pabst's "Die Drei Geschenkenössen". There are signs that some kind of technical adviser occasionally got his way; the subway sequences are surprisingly accurate, even to details on signs. But this accuracy is rare, and the film's London is largely an impressionistic one. Fish and chips for breakfast, for example, would not only be indigestible but also impossible to obtain, and in any case the monstrous chunks of something or other that Joan Bennett spreads on the table could never pass for fish and chips! To the cockney Pearly King, the button-embroidered clothes are almost ceremonial robes, and would never be worn out of his home territory, prowling around the Limehouse docks at night. The Dorset town of Lyme Regis is made to seem like nothing more than a village, whereas it is quite a thriving little community, with two cinemas (one closed at the present) and a population in the thousands!
These are picayune points, normally not worthy of criticism, but they do serve to illustrate the Lang method of deliberately distorting the normal into a kind of never-never-world in which villains seem more nearly phantoms than merely bad guys, as opposed to Hitchcock's method of using realistic locales and normal, even likeable villains, with the horror coming from the contrast of normalcy with abnormal happenings. Both methods work well, and films like "Sabotage" certainly show that Hitchcock's approach dates no more than Lang's, but Lang's is the more picturesque, and, in the long run, the more cinematic.

"Manhunt" has a literate script, and dynamic pacing. It maintains its tension admirably throughout, although undoubtedly the chase through the dock area, and later through the London Underground, are highlights. The film is superbly served by its cast too, although the obligatory feminine roles take rather a beating. Heather Thatcher's cliché socialite, learning a London slang that was all but obsolete by the mid-30's, is a trifle wearying at times, and Joan Bennett's cockney accent is a bit grating too. Of course, cockneys are grating and to be avoided if possible, but Miss Bennett's cockney is both grating and unrealistic. However, she looks so lovely, and plays some scenes quite touchingly, so it's easy to forgive her.

There's never any question that "Manhunt" is a Lang film. Quite apart from the overall style, there are many images that recur in Lang's films -- as for example the overhead shot of the cornered man trying to escape by prying a hole in the floor. And the way that the conversations are handled leave little doubt that the philosophy of the master-criminal is far more practical and sensible than the idealistic dreams of the man in the street! All in all, it holds up beautifully and it is somewhat of a mystery why it is usually so ignored in learned analyses of Lang's work. The print is a little worn in spots, and a couple of words are clipped from the last spoken sentence in the film, but it is quite complete and it should be a pleasure to see it on a large screen again after having been relegated exclusively to television for the last dozen years or so.

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INTERNISSION

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"SWAMP WATER" (20th Century Fox, 1941) Directed by Jean Renoir; produced by Irving Pichel; Associate Producer, Len Hammond; screenplay by Dudley Nichols from the book by Vereen Bell; Camera: Deverell Marley; Art Direction, Richard Day and Joseph C. Wright; Music: David Buttolph. (European release title: "The Man Who Came Back") 9 reels


Of the handful of European directors who came to America during the war as refugees, Jean Renoir moved most easily, and with the least sign of obvious compromise, into the Hollywood menage. Indeed, compared to the uncertain and sometimes unsuitable films made by Julien Duvivier and Rene Clair, Renoir maintained a batting average far higher than he had been able to do in France. With only the still interesting "Woman on the Beach" to be considered a misfire, he turned out a quartet of films -- "Swamp Water", "The Diary of a Chambermaid", "This Land is Mine" and "The Southerner" -- quite unmatched by any four consecutive films that he'd made in France.
Admittedly, like "Manhunt", "Swamp Water" is helped both by a strong original story, and by a literate and intelligent adaptation by Dudley Nichols. Yet withal, "Swamp Water" remains very much of a Renoir film. Its cast, its story, even its music occasionally, lead one to suspect that it is a property that might well have been designed for John Ford at one time. I suspect that Ford would have turned it into a warmer, even a more exciting film; but probably not quite such a good one. There is a certain coldness to some of "Swamp Water"; the characters seem real mainly because they are written and played with total understanding; and as for the Okefenokee swamp itself, Renoir seems more awed and intrigued than frightened by it. The film has little of the sense of dread and menace that the original novel did; indeed the original ads for the film, designed by the artist Thomas Hart Benton, seemed to capture the mood of the novel rather better than Renoir did. But for his first American film, it is a remarkable achievement, and indeed by any standards it is a fine film. Renoir's approach seems a trifle detached at times, as though he were indeed a foreigner stumbling into a strange land, but it is never as lacking in insight and understanding as was for example Benedek's direction of "The Wild One".

Bell's writing seems to have been somewhat influenced by John Steinbeck, his bums and farmers given to philosophic discussions which make fascinating reading, but never quite ring true. Nichols' screenplay has distilled much of this, keeping the basic points, but presenting them as statements or points of view instead of discussions. He also simplifies the motivations of many of the lesser characters (John Carradine especially) which helps, as there are rather too many of them. Only in the climax however does he digress in any real degree from the original novel; the Walter Huston-Mary Howard relationship is tied up too neatly, and the original tragic ending (the Brennan character dies in the book, lives in the film) is changed to a happy ending -- which however, under the circumstances, is hardly a sellout. (There is an interesting comparison here with "Duel in the Sun", where the book had a happy ending, and the movie changed it to a tragic one!)

The mixture of location work and studio scenes doesn't always work, but the locations predominate, and the film smacks of the studio far less than "The Grapes of Wrath". It is flawlessly cast, with the two girls -- Anne Baxter and Virginia Gilmore -- being especially good. Dana Andrews, then a new face and an interestingly different kind of actor, was perhaps more effective in 41 than today, but this is hardly his fault. What a pity that his career never quite fulfilled the promise that he showed in his early films for Fox. Incidentally, worthy of study -- and an interesting prospect for research -- is the number of really fine literary adaptations that Fox made in the early 40's, with the scripting usually by Lamar Trotti or Nichols. Few novels have ever had such sincere and faithful translations as Fox afforded to "The Grapes of Wrath", "Swamp Water", "The Ox-Bow Incident" and a handful of others.

"Swamp Water", like "Manhunt", hasn't been seen on a theatrical or film society screen since it took it over a dozen years ago. However, it was remade -- as "Lure of the Wilderness" -- in the early 50's. Jean Negulesco directed, Jeffrey Hunter and Jean Peters played the Andrews-Baxter roles, and Walter Brennan repeated in his original role. It was in Technicolor, more cheerful and more of an action film, but still not at all bad as remakes go.

William K. Everson