Tuesday next, April 12th: THE OFFICE WIFE (1930) with Lewis Stone, Dorothy Mackail, Joan Blondell; and LOVE ME FOREVER (1935) with Grace Moore, Bobi Allen

Tuesday April 5th 1966
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"ROAR OF THE DRAGON" (Rko Radio, 1932) Directed by Wesley Ruggles; Executive Producer, David O. Selznick; screenplay by Howard Estabrook from "Passage to Hong Kong" by George Kibbe Turner, and a story by Merian C. Cooper and Jane Bigelow; camera: Edward Cronjager; music: Max Steiner; 7 reels With Richard Dix, Gwill Andre, Edward Everett Horton, Arline Judge, C. Henry Gordon, Zasu Pitts, Dudley Digges, Arthur Stone, William Orlamond, Tetsu Komai, Toshiro Mori, Willie Fung, Harry Beresford.

Although Fu Manchu made his last screen appearance for a long time to come in 1932 (until his current revival, his only comeback was for a Republic serial in the 40's) The Yellow Peril was otherwise well and energetically represented on the Hollywood screen, and would be for quite a few years to come. Generally the Oriental menace appeared in one of three forms — as the gangster overlord of Tong War operations, as the second-in-command to American racketeers smuggling Chinese into the U.S. illegally, or, on his home ground, as the Bandit/War Lord. Tonight's film falls into this latter category; also since the War Lord bears a Russian name, he is presumably doubly despicable, and certainly without the dubious ethics presented by Warner Oland in "Shanghai Express" or Boris Karloff in "West of Shanghai".

"Roar of the Dragon" is one of at least two 1932 movies that rushed to capitalise on the success of the Sternberg-Dietrich "Shanghai Express". The other of course was Capra's "The Bitter Tea of General Yen", which was not only good Capra but pretty good pseudo-Sternberg too. "Roar of the Dragon" is less ambitious, and more openly imitative, but it's good rousing stuff none the less, entertaining on its own level of robust melodrama as well as being academically fascinating for comparison purposes.

The overall structure is pure "Shanghai Express", and so are most of the characters. Gwill Andre, made up to look as much like Dietrich as humanly possible, given a startling Dietrich-type introduction, and clearly established as a girl with a past and fairly liberal morals, is about as successful in copying Marlene as were Ellen Drew and Corinne Calvet in their respective official remakes of "Shanghai Express". It just can't be done with looks or lines or stunning lighting — but it's always fun to watch them try!

"Roar of the Dragon" starts off beautifully with real punch and stirring Max Steiner music from his dynamic "King Kong" period. There's a charming scene with C. Henry Gordon, rapidly giving orders quite unconcernedly as we learn that his ear has just been ripped off, and then continuing to give orders with hardly a change of tone or expression as a red-hot iron is applied. Thereafter the pace falters occasionally, giving time for the rather clichéd set of characters to be established and go through their bits of business, but on the whole the tempo of the film remains a fairly zippy one. The action is rough and gutsy, the conduct of the hero very much in the pre-Code idiom, and the cliché characters turn out to be quite effective when ultimately they are called upon to do un-clichéd things. In a formula film of this kind, it's quite a shock when the wrong people get killed off, and smirrelling Dudley Digges manages to emerge unscathed! The sets are handsome even if they do smack of the studio, and the camerawork — hardly as atmospheric as in the Sternberg film admittedly — is strong, well-lit and dramatic. Although hardly a major effort from the star and director of "Cimarron", it's still a successful little film within its unambitious borders. Just how well it is done, and how essentially a product of the 30's this kind of film is, can be seen by looking at John Ford's latest — "Seven Women" — a similarly plotted, totally unconvincing and thoroughly boring opus, quite the most unfortunate film Ford has been associated with in years, and quite possibly in his entire career.
"THE BATTLE OF PARIS" (Paramount, 1929) Directed by Robert Florey
Story by Gene Markey; Songs by Cole Porter ("They All Fall in Love", "Here Comes the Band Wagon") and by Howard Dietz and Jay Gorney; 8 reels.
Starring Gertrude Lawrence, with Charlie Ruggles, Arthur Treacher, Joe King, Walter Petrie, Gladys du Bois, Luis Alberni, & Robert Florey as an extra.

"The Battle of Paris" is one of those fascinating films that is unremembered, unheard of in the histories of film, and which admittedly made no dent in the onward march of the movies, but which seen today is a surprisingly able and enjoyable film, the more so in a sense for being so obscure and thus so unpredictable. Robert Florey has always been an extremely interesting director, but we have written so much about him in prior notes ("The House on 56th Street", "Murders in the Rue Morgue" etc.) and has been so thoroughly covered by Jack Spears in "Films in Review", that there is surely no need to re-introduce you to him in these notes. Suffice to say that "The Battle of Paris" was made during his second year as a director.

Considering how little real plot the film has, that it was made in Paramount's Long Island studios (fine large stages, but not many facilities for exterior shooting) and above all that it was made in 1929 - a year notorious for immobile, non-moving movies - "The Battle of Paris" moves along rather nicely. It has good pacing, no prolonging of dialogue scenes, smart editing and a pleasing visual mood. One of the basic street sets is clearly the same one used in Mamoulian's "Applause", shot during the same period; curiously too, one notices a street set from Griffith's "The Sorrows of Satan" made some three years earlier. It's odd that, with less space than at the coast, a set of rather limited usage would be left standing so long. But it is a good set, and doubtless saw use in several of the European-located Paramount films of the late 20's. Despite the wartime locale, war footage is comparatively brief. There's a good but short zeppelin sequence, too elaborate (and unimportant to the story) to have been filmed specifically, so it must have been lifted from some other film; and a montage of war action (prevented from being as exciting as it might be by the rather primitive sound mixing facilities of the day) which includes some stock scenes from "Wings", among others. The whole film comes to its conclusion with a wildly melodramatic episode in a Parisian den, in which Miss Lawrence is threatened with the proverbial fate worse than death, although she looks quite capable of holding her own. In the lighting of the very atmospheric sets, and in the costuming of the extras, and of course in the situation itself, this smack of the French serial adventures with which Florey had earlier been associated. Incidentally, he plays one of the Apaches in this sequence! The costuming by the way seems unusually authentic; Miss Lawrence wears some fine gowns of the period, and the vamp-villainess has a marvellous outfit with a crawling spider on the right bosom.
The film offers action, melodrama, plenty of songs ("They All Fall in Love" is one of Cole Porter's most charming and typical ditties), a curious episode of racial humor, interesting performances (though it takes a little time to get used to Charlie Ruggles with a French accent!) and good camerawork by an uncredited photographer. Curiously, none of the reference books list him either -- a search of all the credits for all the cameramen through 1929/30 reveals no mention of this film at all. One must assume it was photographed by George Folsey or one of the standard Paramount East-Coast cameramen, but it would be interesting to find out why credit was withheld. The main interest in the film was, and I suppose still is, vested in Gertrude Lawrence, making her film debut after her huge U.S. successes in "Oh Kay" and "Treasure Girl". She is both wonderful or irritating, depending on your attitude towards her. Always "on", fully conscious of being "THE STAR", she is nevertheless relaxed, quite graceful and often charming -- no mean feat for a star making her first movie at a time when even established stars were being hampered by the restrictions of the new sound medium. If one is irritated by it, one must also respect her tremendous verve and self-assurance.

--- William K. Everson ---