For details of next Tuesday's program, see announcement on page two of these notes.

August 23, 1966

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"TIGRIS" (Italo Films, 1911/12) Directed by Denizot
U.S. release: 1913; scenario: Selimenga and Pastrone; with Eduardo Davesnes, Alex Berenard, Lydia Quarranta. 4 reels

Although no "Les Vampires," "Tigris" is a very lively distant relation — and considering how much earlier it was made, a more than honorable ancestor. The exact production date is difficult to trace, other than that it was sufficiently late in 1911 to have probably overlapped into 1912. For such an early feature, it shows remarkable sophistication in both plot structure and technique, and if continuity seems a little erratic, some of the blame can be laid at the door of missing scenes or titles. Also, it was the kind of story that was usually well-known before it got to the screen — and filling in all of the details then would be rather like having "Batman" today include a sequence showing the construction of the Bat-cave, or explaining why Robin wasn't in school.

"Tigris" starts off magnificently with a visual assurance — and proof — to the audience that three key characters are all played by the same man. Then there's a seemingly steady title about a mysterious car picking up a mysterious passenger at a certain time on a specific date — and Tigris hurtles out of mid-air into the rear seat of the auto, and the movie is off to a flying start. Like "Les Vampires," it takes pains to introduce each character with a lengthy title — and visual film grammar not being as yet fully developed, there are some rather curious side-effects. One title tells us that Leblanco lives with his sister Lydia — and we fade in on Leblanco sitting comfortably with a stuffed tiger. It is quite a few feet before sister Lydia manages to make her appearance! But on the whole, "Tigris" is a surprisingly able little film. The camera placement is so good that actual movement of the camera is often suggested when none has taken place; not that the camera is static, for there are quite a few travelling shots taken from moving vehicles, and the pans are smooth and to a purpose. One sequence in which detective Roland is dragged is quite remarkable for its skillful utilization of very polished super-imposition, slow-key lighting and special effects, an episode quite superior to anything of its kind than I can recall in any other film of such an early date. Apart from the comic-strip technique of a cut-away-wall set in one sequence, the treatment throughout is realistic, certainly with a touch of humour, but never approaching the tongue-in-cheek. Tigris is a more than respectable forerunner of Dr. Mabuse, proficient in disguises, adept at pulling off coups even when he has sent the police a challenge, note tipping off his intentions, and delighting in doing his own dirty work, despite a vast ring of minions who effect kidnappings in the street, tamper with telephone wires, and so forth. He also changes clothes with the rapidity of a character, his particular piece de resistance occurring when he enters a busy saloon clubs the bartender, and behind the bar — changes clothes, disguises himself as the bartender, and resumes serving drinks moments later with superb aplomb! In the short space of four reels, the film really keeps on the move, locations varying from charming street scenes — so almost devoid of motorised traffic as to belong to another age — to railroads and the inevitable sewer for the last reel escape.

The print seems to be substantially complete, though some titles are too short to be read comfortably; and two bits of action are curtailed. One is where Roland is placed on the railroad tracks — although not as much of his escape as we surmise may in fact be missing. The escape itself, of which we seem to see only the tail end, would be very tricky to stage, especially in the pre-stuntman days, and the fact that it is explained, in detail, by a title, leads me to suppose that all that may be missing are some of the build-up shots of Roland on the track and the train approaching. Obviously the train is missing at the end; when Tigris finds that his accomplice is actually Roland in disguise, but the dubious logic of the whole is not seriously impaired by this deletion. And at that, masked villains, disguises and all, it makes a great deal more sense — and is certainly a better movie than Joe Losey's absurd "Nakedy Blaise" which I suppose is some kind of decadent descendant of "Tigris", "Judex" and "Fantomas".

"THE SILENT MAN" (Paramount-Arthur, 1917) Directed by William S. Hart
Supervised by Thomas H. Ince; camera: Joe August; scenario by Charles Kenyon 5 reels.

The Cast: Silent Bud Marr (Wm. S. Hart); Handsome Jack Freshley (Robert McKim); Betty Bryce (Vola Vale); "Topaz" (Dorcas Mathews); Grubstaking Higgins (J.P. Lookney); "Frenchie" Bill Hardy (George Nicholls).
There are the great Hart westerns, and the good ones. It has been so long since a "new" old Hart western presented itself that it would have been nice if this had been up to the marvellous top standards of "Hell's Hinges", "The Narrow Trail" or "The Testing Block"; but because it has been so long since a fresh Hart has come our way, we can still be grateful for the average, formula Hart. Rum of the mill though it may be, it still has the expected austerity and guts, and while it is not over-generous in its action quota, it keeps its tale moving at a lively clip. It has many of the usual Hart ingredients, including his abducting of the heroine to save her from a marriage to insensitivity. (He makes it plain that the abduction occurs when the marriage is "but an hour old" so we know that he's in time!), his friendship with a boy, self-sacrifice, and the use of the church as a dividing-line symbol between good and evil. (More churches were burned to the ground by Inoe villains than by all the anti-religious crusades of history!) Robert McKim once more makes a superbly traditional old villain, and in this one his bad guy isn't too far removed from Jimmy Finlayson's lampoon of the character in Laurel & Hardy's "Way Out West".

On a fairly small scale, "The Silent Man" has no spectacular action highlights, limits its locations to the Santa Ynez hills and the Chatsworth scrubland, but doesn't stint on extras in the town and saloon scenes. Again, there is that curious Hart penchant for using running-inserts of a stagecoach -- but doing all the riding and chase scenes in long shot. The titles have all the rugged poetry typical of Hart and C. Gardner Sullivan -- superb if you like their work, admittedly rather old-time-movieish if you don't -- and, despite Charles Kenyon's scenegraphic credit, were probably written by Hart and/or Sullivan.

Hart's tendency towards sentimentality is held very much in check this time, although he still strokes the heroine's hair as though she were a pintxo before bestowing a very reverential kiss. Incidentally, several big chunks of this film, titles included, were used in the Warner film "One Foot in Heaven" of the early 40's, for the sequence in which the minister goes critically to the movies and is converted to them -- and subsequently, bits from this combined sequence were used in those Warner recapitulations of Semmett footage ("Happy Times and Jolly Moments" etc.) as establishing nickelodeon footage.

Joe August, Hart's photographer, was a superb cameraman and one can see how "The Silent Man" must have looked originally. Unfortunately our print leaves a great deal to be desired, annoyingly so because it is obviously copied from a first-class original, free of scratches, splices and decomposition, and there is just no excuse for such an inadequate lab job. The timing is often off, and there is sometimes a lack of definition. We have played far worse prints, and I don't think the quality will interfere with your enjoyment of the movie, but it is irksome that such shoddy work should be deemed acceptable by some labs. We had toyed with the idea of playing the film in our souped-up projector which does increase light when you play by some 50% -- but it also has the disadvantage of causing a gigantic flicker when we switch to silent speed, as we'll need to do several times this evening. On the whole, I think we'll be better off with slightly less light -- but the right speed and no flicker.

COMING PROGRAMS. We had hoped to issue the new Schedule today, but Lincoln Centre still haven't decided on which day they will this year hold their retrospectives. If they are again on a Tuesday, obviously we'll have to find some alternative dates for our shows. We've been promised a ruling by Wednesday, so the new schedules will be prepared then, mailed out on Thursday, and in your hands by the end of the week. In the meantime, since they aren't affected by the Film Festival, we can announce the first two programs.

Next Tuesday, the 30th, will be James Whale's "SHOWBOAT" (1936) with Irene Dunne, Helen Morgan, Paul Robeson and Allan Jones.

The following Tuesday, September 6th: "YEARS OF YOUTH" (1939), a fine complete print of the famous Clara Kimball Young earlier version of "The Love of Sunya", with Milton Sills, Rudolph Valentino, Edmund Lowe and Careh Hughes; plus "THE GHOST OF SLUMBER MOUNTAIN" (1919), Willis O'Brien's forerunner to "The Lost World", with fascinating prehistoric monster scenes; and "BENDING HOUR" (1928), a very funny spoof with Lurino Lame and Anita Garvin.

Program 3 - date to be announced - will be headed by a REAL find, "SUNNY SIDE UP" (1923), a charming and big-scale musical with Janet Gaynor & Charles Farrell.

PLEASE -- in view of the hot weather and special circumstances involved in getting "SHOWBOAT" we do not want an oversized crowd next Tuesday, and would appreciate your not spreading the word among non-members. Thankyou.