Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"THE AVENGER" (Columbia, 1931) Directed by Roy William Neill. 6 reels
Scenario: Jack Townley, George Morgan; Camera: Charles Stumar, Ted Tetzlaff.

Considering how cheap and formulaized their later Westerns became, it is quite surprising what strong little Westerns Columbia made in their less affluent 1930-35 years, and how well many of them stand up. (In our next session, we plan for Dyer Martin and Calamity Smith). "The Avenger," a deeply felt, almost poetic pocket "Broken Arrow"），Buck Jones had his own co-stars: as a boy in "Columbia's" and later Universal, and always managed to get his personal imprint on his Westerns. Sometimes he went astray in his attempts to emulate William S. Hart, and too often he indulged his weakness for folkly Will Rogers humor. Occasionally, and incredibly, he would sometimes remake a property after only one year, using exactly the same plot, locations and camera set-ups! But on the whole his standards were high, and whether he was making a straight actioner ("White Eagle, Red River Low") or a film in which story dominated ("The Avenger"), his pictures were rugged, well-mounted, deliberately avoiding slickness and streamlining, and usually keeping well out of the formula rut. "The Avenger" is based on the career of Mexican bandit Joaquin Murietta, whose story was most ambitiously handled by William Wellman in "Robin Hood of El Dorado", with Warner Baxter. (Bill Elliott also essayed the role in a 40's remake of "The Avenger", and the most recent Murietta was Jeffrey Hunter -- even less convincingly cast than in "The King of Kings"). The reasons for Murietta's becoming a bandit (involving the rape-murder of his wife) have never needed whitewashing, but the murderer's and blood-thirsty revenge that he took, mainly against miners, has always been tactfully side-stepped by the various films based on his life. "The Avenger" is a strong little film, containing less Western action than usual (no fistfights for example), but with plus values in its script and suspense values, and especially in its production mountings. The sets are good, and there is no stinking in extras. Roy William Neill, not normally associated with Westerns (his forte is thrillers, including the Universal Sherlock Holmes and "Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man") directs for its dramatic rather than action values. "The Mummy" ("The Doomed Mutations"), likewise a cooperative stranger to Westerns, uses fine atmospheric lighting, effective low-angle shots and silhouettes in the riding scenes, and avoids the long static takes so common in cheap Westerns. Visually the film keeps moving even though there is less physical action than usual. Also unusual in a B western is the convincing depiction of an entire town; usually one is limited to the main street set, but here, as in Fred's "Stagecoach", one gets to know a town that has back streets and gardens as well. All in all, a most commendable little B.

"BLUE BLAZES Rawden" (Ince-Paramount, 1918) Produced & directed by Wm. S. Hart.
Camera: Joseph August; Story: J.G. Hawks. 5 reels.
The Cast: "Blue Blazes" Rawden (William S. Hart); "Ladyfingers" Hilgard (Robert McKim); Babette Du Prese (Maude George); The Mother (Gertrude Claire); Joe La Barge (Hart (Jack) Howie); Elyce Hilgard (Robert Gordon).

Made by Hart after his personal split with Ince, but while he was still contractually obligated to give Ince screen credit, "Blue Blazes Rawden" gives Hart the kind of role (silent, noble, self-sacrificing) that everyone who has never seen Hart always, and wrongly, assumes to be his standard screen characterisation. Actually, as also in "Singer Jim McGee", the role here is an extreme, and can probably be attributed to the fact that Hart was here his own director. In a sense of course, Hart directed all of his own films - but co-directors like Lambert Hillyer were able to keep his sentimental excesses in check. Here, on his own, Hart does tend to rather run wild, and his acting, particularly in his drunken scenes, gets a bit out of hand. His conversions from bad man to good man were always on the sudden side, but here, without even the inspiration of a heroine (after all, a one-minute reformation by a Beatie Love or a Jane Novak was quite understandable!), the change of heart doesn't hold too much water. Hart's personal gallantry towards women is here diverted to a saloon half-breed floosie, and an irritatingly clinging mother, and one is rather sorry to see the roistering brawling hero go soft and noble over it all.

Then, it's a good, rugged tale, with convincing sets, fine camerawork, and the usual maudlin touches. The scenes are superbly florid, western star-to-be Jack Howie has a good role, the fights are vigorous, and nobody could lean up against a bar plotting foul schemes as effectively as good old Robert McKim. Hart throws his all into everything - acting, fighting, chopping down a tree, and even translates his perennial title about the West and his belonging to the wide open spaces into Northern lingo - "I belong out there with the Big Timber and the White Water"! Despite that, Hart, it is certainly a good one and a typical one - and also, quite a rare one.

--- William K. Everson ---