Tuesday next, March 18th: King Vidor's BILLY THE KID (1930) with John Mack Brown, Wallace Beery; PAYMENT DEFERRED (1932) with Charles Laughton, Ray Milland.

March 11 1969

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"RENDEZVOUS" (WMH, 1935) Directed by William K. Howard
Produced by Lawrence Weingarten; screenplay by Bella Spewack, Samuel Spewack, P.J. Wolfson and George Oppenheimer from "American Black Chamber" by Herbert O. Yardley; Camera: William Daniels
Music: William Axt; 9 reels

For all of its size and talent, "Rendezvous" is a "fun" movie pure and simple, and really needs no more serious analysis than the better Republic serials. Powell's ultra-polished urbanity, and the mildly tongue-in-cheek approach with its frequent comic injections, prevents any of it from being taken too seriously. Perhaps because of that, the sequences of genuine suspense aren't quite as exciting as they might have been - but conversely, one isn't prone to quibble over plot absurdities either, or the almost total lack of conviction in the film's very sketchy World War One milieu. One can sit back and enjoy the pace, the polish, the grand parade of stars and character players, and then forget all about it after the "End" title. Possibly this is a negative kind of recommendation, but at least it's more than can be said for the average 1969 movie, where one certainly can't sit back and relax - or forget the experience afterwards, much as one would like.

As in Hitchcock's British spy movies, bullet-headed Huns appear everywhere - running elevators with dark suspicious glances and clicking heels, operating Washington hotels and Mexican farms - all without causing any suspicion among America's rather lax World War One counter-espionage. Also as in Hitchcock's movies, the spies are all dedicated and sincere people (sneaky Frank Reicher possibly excepted) so that one isn't altogether rooting for their downfall. In fact the only person that one really aches to see bite the dust is heroine Rosalind Russell, presumably in there because a female star was needed, but doing nothing to help the plot along, and succeeding only in irking William Powell - and us.

Made in the vanguard of William K. Howard's WMH period, it's not as recognisably a Howard film as one would like. Given the hokey aspects of the plot, he could well have gone all the way in making this a stylistic exercise (as John Boorman did with "Point Blank") replete with all the moving camerawork, striking angles and bizarre lighting that was so much his forte. It's a pity his old cohort James Wong Howe wasn't associated with him on this one; there's nothing wrong with Daniels' camerawork, but it's unadventurous and entirely too sober. However, there's nothing wrong with the film's direction, nor that it doesn't really bear Howard's signature. Without the credits, one could just as well believe that it was directed by W.S. Van Dyke. Indeed, since pace here becomes more important than visual style, it looks more like a Van Dyke picture, a "Thin Man" done against a World War one background - but, alas, without Myrna Loy.

Incidentally, William Axt's score is an oddly unambitious one, much of it being lifted quite bodily from his score for "The Big Parade".

Howard has always been one of the most interesting directors of the 20's & 30's, and it has always been a source of great regret that more of his films haven't been available for showing at the Huff - especially "Sherlock Holmes", which I did manage to see recently (on 35mm only, unfortunately) and which holds up beautifully. However, those of you who missed the French print of "White Gold" at the Museum of Modern Art a year or so back should be glad to hear that we now have our own print (with English titles) which will be shown at the Huff quite shortly.

--- William K. Everson ---

*** I should amplify that statement perhaps. Hitchcock's British spy films were full of British traitors and fifth columnists, not the obvious Huns that strut through this picture!