Monday next, November 23rd: Two British wartime semi-documentaries: "NEXT OF KIN" (1942), Thorold Dickinson's very Hitchcockian spy melodrama, and Harry Watt's "NINE MEN" (1943) with Gordon Jackson and Jack Lambert. November 16 1970
THE THEODORE HUFF MEMORIAL FILM SOCIETY

"THE MAD TWENTIES" (Agora Films, France, 1965) From "Les Annees Folles" by Leslie Mallory; Film Advisor, Terry Trench; Narrated by Robert Beatty; film supplied by Gaumont and Pathé News and (among others) La Cinematheque Francaise, Marcel L'Herbier, Rene Clair, Jean Previllie, Marcel Garne. 5 reels

Although this French documentary coverage of the 20's is more than a little suspect in some of its narrative information (if it includes Patty Arbuckle among the stars who came to prominence with the transition to sound, how reliable can it be in the less familiar fields of political history?) it does make an extremely welcome change from the American approach to this kind of material. It strikes a much more balanced note between purely political and historical landmarks and the everyday life of the period; it's got scenes with all the people at the beaches, riding bicycles in the country and locking in shop windows. Moreover, there are fascinating sections devoted to the expressionist art and fashions of the period, and a non-hard-sell approach which manages to cover wars, prohibition, Lindbergh, the KKK and sundry other highlights without the distortion, so prevalent in US documentaries, which seeks to make these events, or reactions to them, across-sections of national thinking. Much of the footage itself is new, and even the familiar is handled in new ways. There are glimpses of Isadora Duncan, Josephine Baker and other personalities rarely covered in this kind of compilation, a few glimpses too of semi-nudity to make it completely up-to-date, and some neat dovetailing of largely non-identifiable sequences from French fiction films by Rene Clair and others, together with some of that fascinating footage shot of the actual making of "L'Herbier's "L'argent". The narration tries hard to establish Paris as the centre of sophisticated depravity, but the accompanying visuals don't back it up - or maybe we have all become too jaded by what has happened to New York in the past year or so! To my knowledge, this film has had no U.S. release as yet, though it may have had a couple of trial exposures on television.

"THE BLACKBIRD" (MON, 1925) Produced and directed by Tod Browning; scenario by Waldoen Young from a story by Tod Browning; Camera, Percy Hilburn; Sets by Arnold Gillespie and Cedric Gibbons; titles, Joe Farnham; 7 reels With Lon Chaney, Renee Adoree, Owen Moore, Doris Lloyd, Andy MacLellan, William Westen, Lionel Belmore, Polly Moran, Willie Pyle, Ennie Adams, Sidney Bracey.

I must apologise for inevitably beginning a Tod Browning program note with an explanation that I both dislike his silents and an constantly disappointed in them, but I think it's a necessary preface to explain a possible bias to those of you who are not familiar with the bulk of his work. The more one sees of it, the more one realises how constantly he borrowed from himself, and how despite the off-beat, bizarre and ironic nature of his writing, the films themselves - as films - tend to be slow and unimaginative. The common denominator running through them all is not so much sadism (which is usually motivated, and often structurally quite interesting) as cruelty, which is a very different and often distasteful thing. Browning's silents, starts off well and then steadily deteriorates, and as in "The Sun", and "Rosemary's Baby", the climax is a point around reel 5 where one of the protagonists gets himself locked in a room and sweats out the development in a stagey rather than a cinematic manner. In fact, although it's a 1925 film "The Blackbird" has the look of one of those 1929 hybrid films released in both talkie and silent form. There's a certain bizarre charm in Chaney's disguise; that nobody should see through it seems rather unlikely, and for him to adopt such a singularly uncomfortable stance seems a trifle over-enterprising to me. Chaney's desperate attempt at one point to sustain the illusion of his dual identity by "shocking" himself seems, ironically, even more absurd and less convincing than Charley Chase's comical parallel of the same situation in "Nighth Like a Hoose" in 1926! Far too much of the film's limited action takes place off screen, to be merely talked about, and the London backgrounds, while pictorially colorful, are hardly convincing thanks to the distant utilisation of American rather than British ads for cigarettes etc. Nevertheless, Chaney's performance holds attention, and there are quite beautiful performances from Doris Lloyd and Renee Adoree - startling and horrific, redeeming some of the preceding tedium, but it is also - unfortunately - "Films in Review" recently rather blithely repeated the accepted (but increasingly unsubstantiated) adage that Browning was a master of the silent film, who failed in talkies because he didn't understand that medium. Yet the more one sees of his silents, the better his talkies become - perhaps because Browning really needed dialogue to get him out of some of his traps. "The Devil Doll" is quite possibly Browning's best thriller from any period, and "Freaks" is almost certainly his best. "Rosemary's Baby" and "Miracles for Sale" are more satisfying than, for example, "The Show". Still, it's good to have his talkies back for reappraisal, and either here or at the New School we'll be running through all that we can get, with "Where East is East" and "West of Zanzibar" due early next year.