SALESMEN'S CONVENTION REEL - 20th Century Fox, 1936. 2 reels

This combination pat-on-the-back and shot-in-the-arm promotion reel is actually the lesser of two that we have on hand, but the other - with Zanuck narrating - is being held over for a session in which several such reels, all designed for use within the company, will be shown together. The shots of studio activity and scenes of writers, directors and stars are all - and always - interesting, but in other respects the reel is rather depressing. The majestic police force that parades so proudly through the busy studio streets is now reduced to one man (when he can be found), and the unbounded optimism and soaring profits (despite the generally mediocre quality of Fox product in the mid-30's) have been replaced by desperation and losses. In its own way, and quite unintentionally, the film is a marvellous illustration of Hollywood's self-imposed importance in those days, and of an era that has gone forever.

ANTON GROT - BBC Television, 1972. 3 reels
Directed by Pax Dornellan; produced by Barry Brown; edited by Rowan Ayers; introduced by Philip Jenkinson.

It is a pity that far more of Anton Grot's sketches and scrapbook material weren't used in this film, and loss of the now increasingly familiar Warner Brothers clips - especially the now much over-used Busby Berkeley material. Nevertheless, Grot's art direction, design and surgical innovations were a major contributing factor to Warner films, especially of the 30's, and it is appropriate that we should show this tribute at a time when so much of his work will be on view in the MFA's Warner cycle. Clips used include "The Sea Hawk", "Dr. X", "Robin Hood", "Mystery of the Wax Museum", "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and "Svengali".

--- intermission ---

"THE WHISPERING CHORUS" (Famous Players-Leisy-Paramount, 1918) Produced and directed by Cecil B de Mille; an Artcraft production; Scenario by Jeanie Macpherson from a novel by Perley Poore Sheehan; Camera, Alvin Wyckoff; Art Director, Wilfrid Buckland; edited by de Mille; 6 reels.

de Mille's first two films in 1918 may well represent a kind of artistic zenith for him. "The Whispering Chorus" is certainly one of his most powerful and visually interesting films, while "Old Wives for New", which followed it a couple of months later, was - and is - notable for a sophisticated cutting pattern which predicts and parallels the flashback devices used by Bergman in "Wild Strawberries". In its combination of "Enoch Arden" and "Stella Dallas" plot-lines, with a little male-Madam X in it too, it could have been both over-wrought and artificial, and certainly it cannot altogether escape the accusation of being old-fashioned melodrama, but its acting and especially its camerawork make it a really remarkable film, especially for 1918. Oddly enough, the critics - though much impressed by its power - were not overly-impressed with the technical expertise, referring to "the usual tricks of double exposure" and indicating that there must have been quite a lot of such work which has long been unused and forgotten. There are the usual signs of de Mille's lack of subtlety; it is badly over-titled, and a perfect climactic fadeout (the flower falling from Hatton's hand) is spoiled by de Mille's insistence on added scenes and an underligned final scene which turn poignancy and beauty into near bathos. And as in such films as "Scarlet Street", one can't help but feel that the scenario does rather stack the cards against the helpless hero. But it is a bizarre and fascinating film, and a needed reminder of what a strong director de Mille was in his earlier years, and actually could have been again, as "The Godless Girl" and "This Day and Age" were to show.

William K. Everson