"THE GENERAL DIED AT DAWN" (Paramount, 1936) Director: Lewis Milestone
Produced by William LeBaron; Camera: Milner; Screenplay by
Clifford Odets from a story by Charles G. Booth; musical score
by Werner Janssen.

With Gary Cooper, Madeleine Carroll, Akim Tamiroff, Dudley Digges,
Porter Hall, William Frawley, J. H. Kerrigan, Philip Ahn, Lee Sung Foo,
Leonid Kinskey, Hans Furberg, Russell Hicks, Benson Fong, Willie Pung,
Tetsu Komai.

At one time considered one of Lewis Milestone's major works, "The
General Died at Dawn" rather lost its reputation in later years, and
hasn't had any theatrical or museum showing in New York since 1950.
Reappraisers found that it suddenly seemed "too slow", although in
poetry, in fact, apart from being a trifle longer, it is no slower than
the Sternberg-Dietrich "Shanghai Express". It is unlikely to be a popular
and fashionable item at revival houses. I think what its detractors
really held against it was not so much the slightly dated technique,
about which more in a moment, as the fact that it was still
to serious and sincere a work to fall into a convenient "camp" or
more "fun" category, where its stars and plot content suggest it
should belong.

Although definitely an outgrowth from and in a sense a climax to
the cycle of exotically romantic "Yellow Peril" melodramas that began
with "Shanghai Express" and continued through such imitative films
as "Roar of the Dragon" and "The Bitter Tea of General Yen", "The
General Died at Dawn" is also somewhat of a forerunner to the
socially-conscious war films of the late 30's and early 40's, films
which cast their loose nets around such disparate items as "Blockade",
"Foreign Correspondent" and "For Whom the Bell Tolls". Hollywood
still didn't care a whole lot; they weren't taking much of a stand about anything in the
mid-30's. Words are not enough to describe how an any
critical comment to make tended to do so within a framework of
melodrama (Fritz Lang's "You Only Live Once" and "Fury") or softened
up into such highly palatable soap-opera as "Lost Horizon".

Surprisingly, any Odets dialogue in "The General Died at Dawn" aimed
at arousing the public conscience is sparse and relatively restrained;
occasionally it reminds us that this is the thirties, and that he was
a writer for theatre rather than film, but it has far less sledge-
hammer force than the theatre - and the documentary film of the 30's
might have had. The quality of the writing, as writing, is
something else again, and "peculiar" is about the only word to
describe some of it. Sometimes the film lurches to a halt for a
long dialogue exchange between Carroll and Cooper which seems to
have nothing in common with either the mood or the plot of the picture;
then, after Odets has purged himself, one gets the impression that
several pages of script have been junked to make up for lost time,
and we're off on quite a different tangent again! The whole literary
content of the film is so odd that it's hard not to be sure whether
or not a scene is missing from the beginning. The print's running
time is correct; there is no physical cut in the print (although that
does not rule out a negative cut), and if there were such a scene, at
the film's prevailing pace, it would occupy at least a reel. As led
up to and written, the script quite creatively eliminates much
exposition and introduces us to Cooper and Carroll at their second
meeting. It works - but it is strange movie-making for 1936. Did
their initial meeting take place off-screen, or was it cut? My own
memory from 30 years book tells me, and numerous telephone calls
including some to Hollywood - have failed to produce an answer.

Where the film does date is in its rather strange, absolutely formal
style, which locks it in so rigidly to the first half-dozen years of
talkies. (Surprisingly, Milestone's dynamic "The Front Page" also
suffers from this stiff formality today). Milestone's visual trademarks
are well in evidence - the very second shot of the film is a
fast horizontal tracking shot _but_ the lighting, the compositions,
the stylized two-shots, the striking but inconsistent subjective
camera shots (_it's_ nice to get a menacing low angle shot of Tamiroff
shot as from the eyes of a corpse _but_ why?), all smack of a too-
deliberate attempt at absorbing the Russian and German style of a
decade earlier. In fact, not least because of plot similarities, the
film bears quite a striking resemblance to G.W. Pabst's _even more
stylized_ (and faster-paced) late silent, "The Love of Jeanne Ney".
Such concentration of style makes the film continually fascinating,
but it does help to explain why it hasn't retained the perennial
popular appeal of Sternberg's "Shanghai Express", with its
colorful melodrama and the good performances from Cooper (one of his
best), Madeleine Carroll and an especially effective Tamiroff. --Wke--