"VIVA VILLA!" (MGM, 1934) Directed by Jack Conway and Howard Hawks. Produced by David O. Selznick; screenplay by Ben Hecht from a book by Edgcomb Pinchon and O. B. Stade; Camera: James Wong Howe and Charles G. Clarke.

With Wallace Beery, Fay Wray, Leo Carrillo, Donald Cook, Stuart Erwin, Joseph Schildkraut, George E. Stone, Katherine DeMille, Henry B. Walthall, Phillip Cooper, Frank Puglia, David Durand, Francis X. Bushman Jr., Adrian Rosley, Pedro Regas, George Regas, Harry Armetta, Leonard Mudie, Nigel de Bruijer, Pedro de Cordova, Ricketts Leo White, Emmet King, Harry Semels, Ed Coxen, Gino Corrado, Mischa Auer, Francis McDonald, Clarence Wilson, Paul Porcasi, Brandon Hurst, John Davidson.

Made in the interim year of 1934, when producers were adjusting to the new production code restrictions, "Viva Villa!" tends to romance and sentimentalise its history rather more than, for example, MGM's earlier "Asaputin and the Empress" -- but in still starker than it could have been two years later. The period of grace was over, and producers were having to toe the Code line to the letter. Basically it is a big "show" and an ideal Wallace Beery showcase, and it comes off rather well considering the disparate talents involved: Beery, an excellent and under-rated actor, but at his best only with a really firm director (King Vidor, William Wellman) to keep him under control; Ben Hecht, a florid, pretentious writer; Jack Conway, an unpretentious, workmanlike and straightforward director; James Wong Howe, an excellent cameraman, but at this time with normal style of his own, and dependent on the director to set his mood for him. One can't help wondering whether or not Howe had the opportunity to view any of the unedited footage for Eisenstein's ill-fated Mexican film; certainly his use of silhouettes, his juxtaposition of facial closeups against landscape, and the stark geometric design of many compositions, suggests Eisenstein consistently. Moreover, this is other borrowing in the film: the camera movements in the battle scenes are clearly influenced by Edeson's camerawork in "All Quiet on the Western Front." But perhaps it is unfair to suggest that Howe cribbed a little from Eisenstein; maybe Mexico itself is to blame for producing peasant faces and terrain and dry sunlight that of themselves dictate a photographic style. Certainly John Ford was the very antithesis of Eisenstein; and yet Ford's Mexican film "The Fugitive" came out looking like watered-down "Viva Vive Mexico!" The uneven and derivative quality of much of the film can also be attributed to its many production problems, not least of which was the famous debacle with the Mexican government when Lee Tracy, one of the stars, behulled himself on a hotel balcony. War was narrowly averted by the hasty firing of Tracy, and his substitution by an exact opposite in Stuart Erwin!

Occasionally subtle and moving - most especially when that superb actor Henry B. Walthall is on screen, inspired in his casting as Naderos - "Viva Villa!" at other times takes on the flavor of a brilliant Fairbanks romp like "His Majesty the American" (in which Villa featured briefly). It takes a great director to successful change moods and forth in mid-stream: Preston Sturges was a master at it. But the mood changing here is probably more the result of Howard Hawks (unbilled) being assigned as a back-up director to help speed production along. Reportedly he shot somewhat more than 40% of the picture, and was probably given the assignment because of his known fondness for essentially masculine themes like this one and because he had just finished a film for MGM - the Joan Crawford-Gary Cooper "Today We Live" - so the studio knew he could be relied upon. Oddly enough, these two consecutive films were his only films for MGM throughout his entire career.

A shade too glossy perhaps, its vivid location work sitting rather uneasily with all the studio back projection footage, and the expected "La Cucaracha" certainly over-used, "Viva Villa!" is nevertheless an impressive and certainly an entertaining movie, if never as important as it might have been. And Beery was quite certainly and quite easily the best of a long line of movie Villas that also included Yul Brynner, Akim Tamiroff, Leo Carrillo and Maurice Black.

Producing the film will be Robert Youngson's excellent 2-reel compilation "This Was Yesterday," covering the American scene in the pre-World War One era, and including some really impressive footage on the US campaign against Villa - newreel footage shot with the eloquence and poetry of a John Ford. The narrator however is rather non-plussed at Mexico's indignation at being invaded by US forces!

-- MM. K. Everson --