"UNDERGROUND" (British International Films, 1929) Written and directed by Anthony Asquith; Camera: S. Rodwell; 8 reels With: Brian Aherne, Elissa Landi, Cyril MacKeglen, Nora Baring.

Never a very "commercial" film to begin with, and released in the USA in 1929, well after the general transition to sound, "Underground" was one of many notable late silents sadly lost in the shuffle at that time. Few of the reference books even afford it a footnote, though Paul Rotha in "The Film Till Now" gives it a rather condescending nod in passing, dismissing it for not being "a direct exposition of the spirit of an inanimate organisation". While the comment may be valid, who ever said that the film had to be that way? For that matter, how many films centered around such "inanimate organisations" as hotels, railway terminals, airports etc., ever really succeed as "direct expositions"?

Director Asquith himself seems unimpressed with the film (his first), considering it useful experience but no more, and hampered by budget and script limitations. Yet in many ways, and purely as a film, it is his best work - just as Nancoullan's first film "Applause" remains that director's best dramatic film. Asquith studied film in Hollywood in the 20's; of wealthy and titled parentage, he could afford to take a relaxed method of breaking into the movies, instead of working his way up from clipper boy. Although this film shows a certain amount of Griffith influence, particular in some of the lyrical and pastoral scenes, the dominating influence is that of the German cinema - understandably since German technique and especially German visual style was being lavishly imported, adopted and copied at that time in both Hollywood and British films, as witness the British "Moulin Rouge" by Dupont, and John Barrymore's "The Beloved Rogue", both to be made a couple of years later. There is a certain amount of Russian style editing too; almost obligatory for any aspiring young "art" director in the 20's. With the coming of sound, Asquith's great visual style vanished, and his career faltered. It wasn't until the late 30's and films like "Pygmalion" that he hit his stride again and moved in the ranks of major directors, though with a very different kind of picture. From then until the end of his career he was to be associated almost exclusively with "talk" films, primarily stage derivations done with skill and taste and elegance, but with a theatrical rather than cinematic excitement. A director who might have been another Hitchcock (something we never did get) became instead another Cukor, a niche already well filled by John Cromwell and others.

"Underground" itself is a curious mixture of styles, having something of the simple beauty of Paul Fejos' "Lonesome" and much of the melodramatic excitement of Hitchcock. I have left until last, not as a deception (in any case, you were forewarned!) but because it really isn't that important, a reminder that this is a film with French titles, no English titled print being extant. Few films ever needed titles less; everything moves smoothly and eloquently, and every point is made visually. (We know even before we are told that the hero has lost his job since we see him dejectedly leaning by a street clock at a time when we know he would normally be working). Some of the dialogue titles do have subtlety, but they are not that important, and in any case the art of title writing always reduced everything to simple basics.

--------------- intermission ---------------

"VOLTAIRE" (Warner Brothers, 1933) Director: John G. Adolfi Scenario by Paul Green, Maude Howell and Lawrence Dudley from the book by George Gibbs; Camera: Tony Gaudio; 7 reels With: George Arliss, Doris Kenyon, Reginald Owen, Margaret Lindsay, Theodore Newton, Alan Nowbray, David Torrence, Murray Kinell, Donald Lloyd, Douglas Dumbrille, Ivan Simpson, Helena Phillips, Leonard Mudie, Gino Corrado.

If not one of the best Arliss films, "Voltaire" is certainly one of the best Arliss vehicles, allowing the wily old impresario/actor ample opportunity to make good lines sound great, and routine lines sound almost inspired. His little speech denigrating Shakespeare as a hack writer is worth the admission price in itself! The lush and elaborate sets, some of Anton Grot's best, plus the good soundework make it seem far more of a movie than it really is - although following right after "Underground" it does rather stress just how much visual style and dynamism of charactere the cinema lost in those early days of sound. But one has no right to criticize an Arliss film for its theatriatics; it's what audiences expected and demanded, and the Arliss films are in fact an invaluable record of a theatrical mode and era that are no more.

--- Wm. K. Everson ---