"MOULIN ROUGE" (British Internationals Pictures, 1928) US release:1929
by World Wide Pictures; written and directed by E....
Dupont; Camera, Werner Brandes and James Rogers;10 rls
With Olga Tschecnowa, Eve Gray, Joan Bradin, George Trevalle, Marcel
Vibert, Blanche Fernis, Forrester Harvey. (Theatre scenes shot at the
Casino de Paris during the Paris-New York Revue).

The long unseen "Moulin Rouge" (no connection with the two American
films of that title) finally unveiled proves to be a fascinating
experience - yet sheds no further light on the mysterious and
enigmatic career of the "director" of the brilliant German film
"Variety". I use the word director in quotes only because one wonders:
how can any man make such a superb film, and then never again turn
out anything within hailing distance of it? He had such superb
collaboration on that film - producer Pommer, cameraman Freund, stars
Emil Jannings and Lya de Putti - that one can't help but assume that
a lot of its quality came from them, one principally Pommer. Pommer
and Freund after all, continued to do outstanding work; Dupont's
steadily declined, and was really only at an interesting plateau in
that odd late-20's period in Britain when German style, and German
film-makers, seemed to have taken over the British cinema. Here
Dupont made the fascinating "Piccadilly" and "Moulin Rouge", and the
less interesting early talkie "Atlantic" - still, it seems, helped by the
stylists who still surrounded him. His one American silent,
"Love Ke and the "World Is Mine", was considered a disaster. His later
Hollywood career from 1933 through the early 50's was a singularly
undistinguished one in which he flitted from MGM, Universal, Warners
and Paramount making Grade-B product that was sometimes interesting
(e.g., Paramount's "On Such A Night") but never once achieving
the consistency of style of the work of, say, Robert Florey. His
last films included such quickie lemons as "The Neanderthal Man",
though also "The Scarf" - possibly his biggest American film, though
also his most pretentious. Apparently Dupont's few other German
silents nowhere near approached the quality of "Variety", and so if
that film can truly be considered his rather than Pommer's, he
represents a unique example of a one-picture director. Yet coasting
on the prestige of that one film, he carried a lot of weight and
autonomy for a few years at least. Among other things he refused to
descend to the level of rehearsal; assistants coached the actors and
arranged the camera set-ups, and he would arrive at the studio with
the day half gone before shooting started.

Nevertheless, while it is a substantial step down, "Moulin Rouge" is
still probably his best film after "Variety". Like so many films of
the very late 20's, its plot is negligible and a self-indulgent
visual style is all. Despite the lively and colorful cabaret scenes,
the first half of the film is extremely slow, mainly because the
triangle situation - rather like Clarence Brown's "Smouldering Fires"
in reverse, with many scenes likewise done in interestingly and
pointedly composed three-shots - seems to have so little potential
that one can't conceive of it being spread over ten reels. Happily,
the second half picks up in spectacular fashion, with a beautifully
staged and cut car-chase sequence, quite one of the most unique such
episodes ever filmed, sustaining interest (first in anticipation, then
in execution) for a goodly portion of the footage. But during that
first half, one's attention does tend to wander to an examination
of the style itself, an examination that is in itself quite
rewarding since the print - from a 35mm original negative - is
stunningly good. At a fashion show there's one remarkable shot where
the camera is tracking horizontally while a model is descending a
staircase vertically, and yet remains permanently in frame.
Although it looks effortless, it must have been a complicated
camera movement, and having devised it, Dupont used the shot more
than once. But the more fact that one has the time to ponder the
modus-operandi of such shots indicates that the dramatic values at
such points are not exactly overpowering!
There's little humor in the film (apart from the director focussing his cameras on a huge "Dupont" neon in the opening montage) and it could sorely do with some. Olga Tschechowa, whom we remember so fondly from Rene Clair's silent "The Italian Straw Hat" and such German talkies as "Maskerade", does totally dominate the film, occasionally looking rather like Pola Negri. She runs the gamut of gowns, emotions, glossy lighting and filtered closeups, but since the rest of the cast (especially the pouting hero!) is decidedly unamusing, all stress placed on her is understandable. Few films incidentally have ever looked more 100% German than this — there's never the barest hint that it is a British production. However, I suspect that the musical score (in the vein of "Sunrise" and "Extase") was put on in this country for the 1929 release. It's a good score and mechanically better and more subtly-mixed than the two-years-earlier score for "Sunrise", but it includes many essentially American themes (including a serial gagto used extensively by Sol Lesser) that would hardly have been used in British scoring at that time.

--- ten minute intermission ---

"AGIERS" (United Artists, 1936) Directed by John Cromwell
Produced by Walter Wanger; screenplay by John Howard Lawson and James M. Cain from the novel "Pepe le Moko" by Detective Aschelbe;
Camera: James Wong Howe; Art Direction, Alexander Tuluboff and Nade Rubottom; Music, Vincent Scott and Mohammed Iqoubouhsher.
110 rls.

Usually Hollywood remakes of French classics are a disaster, as witness Lang's reworking of Renoir's "Le Jour Se Leve" as "The Long Night". However, "Aigers" - out of the Duvivier-Jean Gabin "Pepe le Moko" - is an exception, a remake superior to its original. It goes the usual Hollywood route of course; it's over-produced, too glossy perhaps, rather too full of familiar Hollywood faces who just don't seem to belong in the seedy Casbah. But emotionally it works; it becomes a kind of lush Greek Tragedy which one can appreciate and enjoy at a distance, without really believing in it or becoming too involved with its characters. The original "Pepe le Moko" may have had more raw honesty, but it was much too tied in to the pessimism of the French cinema of the 30's that, like "Quai des Brumes", it now dates quite badly and seems almost as artificial in its own way as the typical Hollywood product of the day. The romanticism of "Aigers" is timeless however; its tragedy can never move us as the way the pompancy and warmth of "Of Men and Women" does, but it will always beguile us with its expertise. Boyer at his peak .... Gene Lockhart cringing in the corner as only he could .... Hedy Lamarr, obviously supremely confident of her youth and beauty, yet quite relaxed ..... and a wonderful gallery of underworld types who behave like Fritz Lang characters as they might have been re-written by Wm. Runyon, and despite the excesses of back projection, a common flaw in movies of the 30's, it is visually exciting (with the camera constantly thoughtfully mobile, as it had been in Cromwell's previous film, "The Prisoner of Zenda", also photographed by Howe) with some quite stunning silhouette and gauze work. Much of "Aigers" appeal depends on one's mood of the moment; it is easy it be entirely cinematically emotional frame-of-mind. If on the other hand, the pressures of modern living are upon us - or we're just about decided that the grammar-less, style-less "now" movie with passionate personal statements is what cinema is all about, then the bridge to this traditional cinema of old Hollywood may be unattainable. But the loss is ours, and the blame too. "Aigers" incidentally was later given another going-over, this time as "Casbah" with Tony Martin and Yvonne de Carlo — not quite as bad as one expected, but hardly to be considered in the same breath as this "definitive" 1936 version.

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NOTE: Incredibly, since tonight's program is one of the longest of the season, I've scheduled a discussion period to follow the show. Obviously this will not be practical, but we will have such a session after next week's much shorter program.