
Together with Michael Powell’s "The Edge of the World", "The Turn of the Tide" was one of the best of a small group of British movies of the 30’s that took rugged land and sea stories, simple fisher folk and unpretentious stories, and often came up with results superior to (though less acclaimed than) Flaherty’s in "Man of Aran". "The Turn of the Tide" is probably the best film of its director, Norman Walker, who eventually graduated to bigger (and duller) movies and then became an executive. His camera work marked the initial entry into the business of magnate-to-be J. Arthur Rank, who financed it with money from his flour mills and the Methodist Church. It’s a charming, simple and often lyrical film, relatively unknown in this country where it had no theatrical distribution, and but sparse tv showings. Its main asset is its very real sense of place and people; there is one basic studio-built village set, but everything else is done on location. There isn’t a process shot in the entire film, even the closeups in dialogue and romantic scenes being done on location. - while Franz Plancer’s Flaherty-like cameraman - gives the film a flair and a gloss that is quite unexpected. Considering the obvious slimness of the budget, I’m sure that the production managers couldn’t have been aware of his intention to place camera tracks all along the beach and through the woods, but the fluidity of movement and style more than justifies the expense. All the film really lacks is showmanship; the ending is satisfying but mild, and one wonders why a little poetic license wasn’t used in moving the dramatic storm sequence from the beginning of the film to its climax.

--- 10 minute intermission ---

"THE WHITE HELL OF PITZ PALU" (H.R.Sokal Film, Germany, 1929)
Directed by Dr. Arnold Fanck and G.W. Pabst; script by Frank and Ladislas Vajda; photography, Sepp Allgeier, Richard Lang and Hans Schmeeberger; sets by Erno Metzner; US editing, Edward Cahn; US original score composed by Heinz Roonfeld; a Universal release; 8 reels.
The Cast: Dr. Kraft (Gustav Diessel) Maria (Leni Riefenstahl); Ernest Udet (himself); Hans (Ernst Petersen); The Guide (B. Spring)

Peculiar to German film-makers in the 20’s was the cult of idealised mountain films, which were both brilliant documentaries and first-rate melodramas, with some embryonic propagandist symbolism on the side. They were the inspiration and largely the monopoly of Dr. Arnold Fanck, a former geologist who translated his great perspective for the mountains into film. Initially, his films carried an added punch in that the open air, in direct contrast to his German contemporaries who were making their heavy fantasies and psychological dramas almost entirely behind studio walls. "The White Hell of Pitz Palu" was the last of the great silent German mountain films, both one of the best and one of the most successful. Others are arguably better films - "The Sacred Mountain" had greater pictorial beauty, and Leni Riefenstahl’s later talkie "The Blue Light" had a more interesting stress on romantic mysticism. But there can be no disputing that "The White Hell of Pitz Palu" is really the definitive film of the group. Taking its audience and their reactions rather for granted, it offers little real exposition or motivation however; it does seem emotionally rather cold, and the characters one-dimensional. It’s rather like (if one hasn’t seen the earlier mountain films) being introduced to John Ford and John Wayne via "The Searchers", without first having seen "Stagecoach" and "Fort Apache".

The film’s great success over here induced Carl Laemmle to instigate several co-production follow-ups, all using the talents of either Leni Riefenstahl or Luis Trenker. Pabst’s later, and post-war, career is well-known. He, Vajda (a writer for Lubitsch, later a director), set-designer Metzner and co-star Diessel are now all dead, Riefenstahl is periodically active again as a director, World War One aviation ace Ernst Udet committed suicide in World War Two when he was unable to reconcile his military career with Nazi ideology; his story formed the basis of the Karl Zuckmayer play and film "The Devil’s General".

----- William K. Everson -----