"PLANES" ("Clouds Over Europe") (Columbia, 1938) Directed by Tim Whelan; produced by Irving Asher; Screenplay, Brock Williams, Jack Whittingham, Arthur Wimperis; Camera, Harry Stradling; Art Director, Vincent Korda; Music, Muir Mathieson; 8 reels With Laurence Olivier, Ralph Richardson, Valerie Hobson, George Curzon, George Merritt, Gus McNaughton, Sandra Storme, David Tree, Hay Petrie, Ian Fleming, John Longden, Roy Emerson, David Farrar, John Laurie, Herbert Lomos, Raymond Lovell, Leslie Bradley.

Although basically a thick-ear, serial-like melodrama, "Q Planes" was elevated to a higher status by a jovial, tongue-in-cheek approach (which rendered the wilder flights of fancy acceptable) and most especially by the rich comic performance of Ralph Richardson. Such impact did Richardson make in the role that there was an immediate urging from critics (in this country as well as in Britain) that Richardson repeat the character in a series of similar films. (He didn't, and wouldn't). Olivier is pleasing in his straight hero role - one of the few times he played such a part without his condescension showing - but he is quite overshadowed by the wit and aplomb of Richardson, and the cool elegance of Valerie Hobson. The film was a big popular success in England, not least because a series of plane disasters at that time made it highly topical, though also because its modern swashbuckling approach to the growing threat of enemy aggression made it rather comforting propaganda. In this country it received outstanding reviews, and more than one critic oddly remarked that at last (for a while) we realized that the British did have sense of humor after all! Quite a harmonious production, it is also a fairly economical one; the front of Denham Studios serves as an airport exterior at one point, although most of the aerodrome scenes seem to have been shot at the old de Havilland aerodrome at Weybridge.

--- 10 minute intermission ---

"NIGHT TRAIN TO MUNICH" ("Night Train") (Gainsborough-20th Century Fox, 1940) Directed by Carol Reed; produced by Edward Black; scenario by Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat; Camera, Otto Kanturek; art director, Vetchinsky; 9 reels With Rex Harrison, Margaret Lockwood, Paul Henreid, Basil Radford, Naunton Wayne, James Hericourt, Felix Aylmer, Kenneth Kent, Raymond Huntley, Wynham Goldie, Roland Culver, Eliot Makeham, Austin Trevor, Moreland Graham, C.V. France, Fritz (Frederick) Valk, David Horne, Torin Thatcher, Allan Jesyes, John 'Engraf', Albert Lieven, Wally Patch, Eugene Deckers, Ian Fleming, Howard Marion Crawford.

War had arrived by now, but its full realities had not yet sunk in, and "Night Train" is still a film very much in the pro-war flippancy Hitchcock genre. Possibly no film has ever been quite so openly imitative of Hitchcock and pulled it off so well. So smoothly does Carol Reed keep it in motion that one wonders why he maintained such a serious mien in most of his later films. Perhaps a good deal of the credit should go to writers Launder and Gilliat, who here re-work much of their "The Lady Vanishes" material, and also lay a few foundations for their much later "State Secret", made when they were successful writer-producer-directors. So much is pure Hitchcock: the audacious use of the most obvious miniatures, the kindly English oculist whose consulting room is a front for Nazi espionage; the jingoistic British travellers, happily not nearly as exaggerated or as near-extinct as one might suppose, and the rather decent Nazi villain who, like Paul Lukas in "The Lady Vanishes", is a good sport about losing. All it really lacks is the carefully-developed inner vigilance - the political meeting at "The 39 Steps", or Cummings at the charity ball in "Scottsboro". Even the potentialities of the hero having to spend a night with the heroine in order to foil the Nazis into thinking that he is her lover, is underdeveloped in terms of comic pliability, and is cut short before it gets under way, almost as though Reed didn't want to bother with anything but essentials. However, he makes up for it with a marvellous chase and suspense climax, right out of Hitchcock's top drawer - similar to, and much less elaborate than, one of the longest sequences in the recent "Here Eagles Dare", and some more entertaining device for really spectacular or convincing action. Reed learns and applies a lesson from many of the better Hollywood westerns here too. One of their formulae was to eschew background music entirely until the action climax, when its sudden introduction enhanced the excitement. The same pattern is followed here, and it works. The print, rather worn, is complete, and the sound quality - a little rough at times in the first third - like the pace of the film, improves as it gets under way.

William K. Everson