OTHER MEN'S WOMEN (Warner Brothers, 1931) Directed by William A. Wellman
Story & Scenario by Maude Fulton; Dialoguer, William K. Wells; Camera, Chick McGill; 7 reels
With Grant Withers, Mary Astor, Regis Toomey, James Cagney, Joan Blondell, Fred Kohler, J. Farrell MacDonald, Lillian Worth, Walter Long, Lee Moran, Kewpie Morgan, Pat Hardigan.

There are often quite sound reasons why early films in important stars' and directors' careers remain unrecovered, and "Other Men's Women" is one of the boniest of skeletons in the Cagney-Wellman closets. Nevertheless, as an example of their work together before "The Public Enemy", it does have interest. However, it does have two basic flaws. First, it's trite formula stuff all the way, which wouldn't matter if it had better performances and more style. Reuel Walsh's "Manpower" (a very similar film) is formula too, but it is shot with such dynamism that it hardly seems to matter. Here, there's a shoddy, careless look to much of the film, and even though it's only a programmer, most Warner programmers of the period managed to look as though they were trying very hard to be better than that. The second major drawback is Grant Withers, who admittedly is saddled with an aishish and unsympathetic character, but who seems to add a unique caishiness all his own, so that one just doesn't care about this "hero". Withers, a good-looking, husky fellow, had been popular at Warners in the late silents, but just wasn't a good enough actor to continue in the same kind of roles when sound came in. Ironically, it was James Cagney who was to take over the majority of the roles Withers would probably have gotten. Over at MGM, though, on a much higher plane, the same thing was happening to John Mack Brown, erstwhile leading man to Garbo and Crawford, who was eased out and his roles given to another and more dynamic newcomer, Clark Gable.

"Other Men's Women" was formerly titled "Steel Highway", and much confusion still exists over this title switch; many reference sources still list them as two separate pictures. It was the third of Cagney's pre-"Public Enemy" movies, with only "The Millionaire" to follow before he achieved stardom in that gangster classic. He had been so good in his first two movies that it is strange indeed that the ways of contract-player usage should relegate him to such a comparatively minor role here. Nevertheless, and especially in the dance hall sequence, he dominates his scenes so completely that one wonders why the part wasn't built for him. If the scale of the story involved, one look at the dance hall scene would have been enough for them to junk all the Withers scenes thus far completed and start re-shooting with Cagney in the lead. For Wellman, the film was something of a low point too -- he hadn't really hit his stride again since "Wings" and "Beggars of Life" (the latter film due here in two weeks incidentally) and "The Public Enemy" later the same year would prove to be a Godsend for both him and Cagney.

Having criticised the film, let's now look at its more positive side. Like all Warner films of the very early thirties, it's earthy stuff and in its fairly realistic treatment of the day-to-day lives of working men (in this case, locomotive engineers) it does offer some (unintentionally) near-documentary footage of the times. The sets of home interiors and back gardens are honest and convincing, and the locations (railway stations, streets, the dance hall and environs. Some of this realism may derive from Wellman, but it's a casual, unconscious realism that permeates so many of the early WB talkies. In this respect, the film also has a very loose relationship to Jean Renoir's "La Bete Humaine".

It's a fairly fast little film, with enough snappy lines and railroad action to prevent rigor mortis from setting in. The storm climax is genuinely exciting and uses some nice miniatures, though it's somewhat lacking in suspense. It's as much a foregone conclusion that Regis Toomey running a train over a flood-weakened bridge is not going to make it, as it was that it would work when John Wayne pulled the same stunt in "Tycoon". For the rest, Mary Astor is a charmingly harried heroine, and Joan Blondell does well with the wisecracks but unfortunately isn't up to a drunk scene which she and Withers play into the ground. And surely "Other Men's Women" will go down in history if for no other reason than that it offers both Fred Kohler and Walter Long as lovable and sympathetic characters!

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

THE FRISCO KID (Warner Brothers, 1935) Directed by Lloyd Bacon; Screenplay by Warren Duff and Seton I. Miller; Camera, Sol Polito; 8 reels
With James Cagney, Margaret Lindsay, Ricardo Cortez, Lili Damita, Donald Woods, Barton MacLane, Fred Kohler, George E. Stone, Joseph King, Joe Sawyer, Robert Strange, Joseph Crehan, Robert McWade, Edward McWade, John Wray, Claude Coleman, Addison Richards, Walter Long, Karl Hackett, Charles Middleton, William Desmond.

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Cagney made six big ones for Warners in 1935 — "Devil Dogs of the Air", "G-Men", "The Irish In Us", "A Midsummer Night's Dream", "Frisco Kid" and "Ceiling Zero" — leading him to decide that he was being overworked, underpaid, and wasted. He removed himself from Warners, slummed at Grand National to make his point, and then returned to Warners a year or so later under decidedly improved conditions.

"Frisco Kid" was not rapturously received at the time, though Graham Greene was duly impressed by its big fight scene. First of all, the film was a blatant steal from Howard Hawks' "Barbery Coast" which had preceded it into release by only a month, the steal extending even to identical incidents and minor characters. Secondly, Cagney seemed ill-suited to what was essentially a Robinson ("Barbery Coast") or Gable ("San Francisco") role, though he gave it all of his accustomed nervous energy. Even the scenarists seemed aware of this, and constantly transplanted traditional Cagney gangster dialogue to this inappropriate setting.

Today, however, we can be both more and less critical. More in the sense that we can now recognize further examples of plot and situation lifting that were perhaps unavoidable in those days of mass production. There are striking parallels with the same year's "Dante's Inferno" and the slightly later "Slave Ship" allows the heroine (Elizabeth Allan) to pillage her climactic speech from Margaret Lindsay's here. On the other hand, a "formula" picture is no longer quite the object of scorn that it used to be, and indeed has taken on a certain patina, like an old friend, predictable but welcome. Since today's movies try so hard to be non-formula, to be personal and individual, they frequently wind up being very messy and confusing as well. It's rather relaxing to look back at a movie that lets you know exactly where you are and offers confirmations and reaffirmations rather than surprises. Maybe it's not what movies should aspire to, but many of them did and they are perhaps more entertaining today than then, because of it. There's room for Bacon and Bergman, for him as well as ego. (Please blame the spirit of the film for the spirit of those comparisons!)

"Frisco Kid" is big, blustery and quite spectacular, yet it doesn't wallow in its own elegance (as perhaps "Barbery Coast" did) and gets on with its no-nonsense plot with no time wasted. In fact, in order to speed up the narrative, the Lili Damita footage seems to have been pruned down quite drastically. And even if the plot is a little formularised, there's nothing hackneyed about the marvellous gallery of supporting players. Fred Kohler as The Shanghai Duck has his moment of glory when, being told that three men are needed to be shanghaied for a ship, casually notices Cagney's entrance and without missing a beat growls "We only need two, now!" But perhaps the highspot of the entire film is Barton Maclane's masterly elucidation of the more practical etiquette of a duel he is about to engage in:

"We stand back to back and take ten paces and fire. I turn on eight and fire. You'd better take a shot at him too, just to be safe!!"

Such simplistic, down-to-earth villainy for its own sake seems like a breath of fresh air amid the complex motivations of "The Marathon Man"!

William K. Everson