J'ACCUSE (Star Films, 1937) Directed by Abel Gance; Screenplay by Abel Gance and Steve Passeur; Camera: Roger Hubert; Art Direction, Henri Malé; Music, Henri Verdun; U.S. release in 1939 under the title "They May Live"; 7 reels; English subtitles.

With Victor Francen (Jean Diaz); Jean Max (Henri Chmatry); Marcel Dalaitre (Francois Lorin); Paul Amiot (Captain); Andre Nox (Liostard); Georges Saillard (Gilles Tenant); Rollin (Pierre Bondis); Renée Devillers (Helene) and Mary Lou, Line Noro, Sylvie Gance.

Although well-known to film scholars and students, Abel Gance may well be a virtually unknown name to many of our audience, and no-one film (especially an edited version such as tonight's) nor a single set of program notes could possibly serve to introduce him adequately. There is an excellent documentary on his life and work, titled "The Charm of Dynamite" and made by Kevin Brownlow, that I had thought to use prior to "J'Accuse" as that introduction - but it would have made the entire session run too long, and I will try to fit it into a later program - perhaps in tandem with another Gance film.

Gance was a literal giant among film-makers, perhaps second only to our own D.W. Griffin. Apart from being a cinematic innovator, he was also a poet, philosopher and somewhat of a mystic - and, on occasion, an actor too. He created films in the grand tradition, like epic pieces of music; in its full form, his magnum opus "Napoléon" ran for some 5½ hours and, for its major sequences, required projection on three adjacent screens! (This recently restored film should be shown, some time over the next year, at the Radio City Music Hall as a special attraction, with live orchestral accompaniment). Sometimes Gance the film-maker and Gance the philosopher get in each other's way, and certain films seem to have magnificent bravura passages linked by considerable tedium (a criticism one can certainly level at much great music too), but no one should make that criticism unless he has seen the full version. (For years I felt that way about "While You Were Sleeping" which I saw the full version as he made it, and including the three-screen projection, did it take on its full stature as a total and unqualified masterpiece). Most of his major works had "difficult" themes and ran to extreme length, resulting in heavily cut versions for non-French release, even assuming they got into release at all. "J'Accuse" fits very much into this category, and indeed probably got a U.S. release only because the advent of World War Two suddenly made it very topical. It is heavily cut, some 40 minutes being missing, and undoubtedly its tapestry is less rich now, and its rhythm (if one regards it, as Gance does, as the equivalent of music) disrupted. On the other hand, while one cannot justify such wholesale editing, in the case of Gance, editing does sometimes tend to clarify his theme and make it a more hard-hitting film by cutting away the seemingly extraneous material. "J'Accuse" is such a neglected film, and works so well even in this shortened version, that it needs no apology. Happily, the full version does exist and should be in circulation again before too long. At that time, the opportunity to have seen the edited version first may be of some value to film students. There are two basic changes, one of which (the shortening of the ending) I will discuss later. The other change is that of structure: there is a very careful interweaving of characters and relationships in the original; i.e., the man who orders the suicidal patrol in the film's World War One opening is the same man who later tries to make a profit from the threats of World War Two. Such relationships virtually disappear in the edited version, which concentrates almost exclusively on the anti-war obsession of the hero, so superbly played by Victor Francen.

Gance made a similar "J'Accuse" during World War One, although its stance was different. It was an anti-war film as it emerged, but was in a sense justifying that war as long as it did indeed turn out to be the war to end wars. With the gathering clouds of World War Two, Gance revised his original theme, though retaining certain characters and incidents, making a strongly pacific film designed, as was Renoir's "La Grande Illusion" of the same period, to manipulate public and political opinion, and head off the war itself. Gance frequently identified himself and his philosophies with his near-mystical heroes, and he was idealistic enough (if you like, arrogant and naive enough too) to believe that he could use film (much as his hero used his secret invention) as a means to end all war. (Griffith of course had the same conviction about the power of film). "J'Accuse" in its original form, ends with the death from World War One rising from their graves, and roaming over Europe to protest the folly of another war. They succeed: politicians change their minds, armies refuse to fight, and war is averted. By the time that the film arrived here, the war in Europe was already raging: not only was the ending dated, but it added a pessimistic note of futility. Thus the ending was shortened, leaving the armies of the dead on the march, in a sense turning it into a timeless plea against war, and perhaps, under the circumstances of 1939, a particularly poignant one. However, it does mean that the film finishes rather abruptly, lacking that rhythm and sense of climax that Gance had built into it so carefully.

Nevertheless, much of the power remains and in an odd way is even increased, because the essential message is unaltered with much of the surrounding sub-plot material removed. Often it is both touching and beautiful, and since there is a science-fiction element, it also achieves peaks of subtle horror too - rather like a collaboration between James Whale, Val Lewton and Carl Dreyer. And far from least, there are frequent reminders that forgotten films can still have been of considerable influence. One suspects that Stanley Kubrick studied this film well, since both "Paths of Glory" and "2001" seem to have echoes from it. (And, at the other extreme, so does the "Night of the Living Dead"). When it was released, it was obviously something of a hot potato, trod on too many political toes, and outside France got limited distribution. It was even banned in Britain - not officially, but by the simple procedure of refusing it a censor's certificate. The rationale then was that it was too grim for children, and there was no equivalent of the "X" certificate to restrict it to adult audiences. Eventually it
did get a local certificate, permitting it to be shown in London (and in other localities that had their own censor system, and where the distributor was prepared to go through all the attendant red tape) - but it had to use the "H" certificate used for horror films, so, despite some extremely good reviews in London, it undoubtedly attracted (at least among the kind of audience - and kept away a good many others. Although in all honesty, its subject matter and its moments of horror could be said to justify that "H" rating, especially as there was a moratorium on horror films from Hollywood at that particular time, and it contained much rougher material than contemporary audiences were used to. Gance by the way is now in his 90's, has spent the last ten years of his life planning a super-production of "Christopher Columbus" and confidently expects to get it made.

LES DISPARUS DE ST. AGIL (Yog-Dulmeo Films, 1939) Directed by Christian Jaque; screenplay by Leo Lania, with dialogue by Jacques Prevart, from a novel by Pierre Vey; Camera, Marcel Lucien; Music, Henri Verdun; released in the U.S. in 1939 under the title "Boys' School";

English titles: 10 reels
With: Erich von Stroheim (Walter); Michel Simon (Lonel); Armand Bernard (Mazeud); Aime Clariond (Boisse); Serge Grave (Gueme); Moulonjil (Macroy); Jean Claudio (Sorgues); Pierre Larquey (Donadieu); Robert LeVigan (Cesar); Jean Rouquet (Forher); Claude Roy (Claude).

Based on a French mystery novel written for both children and adults - with no con cessions to either - this delightful film has something of the flavor of the British "Green For Danger" in its mixture of comedy and thrill in a restricted setting, and in the relative fair play it utilises in spreading the suspicion around. Although with a school faculty that includes Erich von Stroheim, Aime Clariond, Michel Simon and Pierre Larquey (only M.U.'s Cinema Studies Dept. can rival that lineup of suspicious characters) the mysterious goings-on are not too surprising. It's a perfect example of the kind of film that is just never made any more because styles, and audience expectations, have changed so much. It is quiet and unhurried, takes time out for character building and moments of pathos, and yet remains a "fun" film despite its gentle quality. Its plot is strong enough for a good remake to be done from it - but it would need someone with the clout of a Truffaut to retain its charm and the other indefinable qualities of the original. Otherwise, the normal procedure would be to jazz it up, to do it in color, and of course for it to take place in a co-ed school, thus permitting certain contemporary hijinks after class.

Christian Jaque, who directed, was perhaps France's most Hollywoodian director, although at this particular time his films remained essentially Gallic. But he admired Hollywood zip and style, and during the war years, when American films were cut off from occupied France, seemed to be deliberately cultivating an American style as if in compensation for the denial of the real thing. His "Sortileges" was a moody horror piece that Mal Lowton would have loved, and "Carmen" was virtually turned into a Western. "Les Disparus de St. Agil" however, probably one of his best films, was made before this period. The explanations at the end aren't totally satisfying, but can't be discussed here without giving too much away. However, it's the mood of the film, and the performances, that matter far more than plot. Erich von Stroheim is particularly touching in one of his best and most off-beat roles, and incidentally, his never-very-good French - and his slow delivery of it - makes him much easier to understand for those of us who are not fluent linguists. Incidentally, as in most of the films in which he worked as an actor, there are occasional signs of his personal involvement in either the direction or the writing via little unobtrusive touches. Particularly typical is a beautiful little scene in which his dejected schoolteacher sits down at his desk and looks longingly at photographs of a woman and child. It's a fleeting moment and nothing is said, no information provided - and yet this one scene suggests so much about this man's unknown past. (For does it make his character any less ambiguous - while it tends to swing sympathy in his direction, it could also be the justification for madness - if he ultimately turns out to be the villain of the piece). It's a beautiful moment which could only come from Stroheim himself (since it corresponds with so many other similar moments where we know he was responsible) - and it becomes doubly poignant with the knowledge that the portraits are in fact of Stroheim's own wife and son, whom he had had to leave in Hollywood while he found work in France.

Altogether, this is a film of considerable charm and style, not one that is overwhelming while one is seeing it, but a film that leaves a long-lingering affection. Quite incidentally, the music for both films is by the same composer, Pierre Vey; the score is quite different, yet entirely appropriate to the mood and content of the two films.

William K. Everson

Program Ends approx, 10,35, followed by brief discussion session.