I must apologize for starting off this Summer series in a slightly disorganized fashion. This is a program that needs introduction rather more than most, and will probably produce more questions than usual. I should have liked to be here to take care of that, but a conflicting series with Michael Powell in Minneapolis prevents it. However, I'll be on hand next week, and since it will be quite a long program, I will open the floor for discussion and questions prior to the screening. One minor change tonight - the announced short "Birds in their Nests" has not as yet been returned from a screening elsewhere, and though it undoubtedly would have been returned before tonight's show, these notes - and the film compilation - are being done a week ahead of time. It's safer all around to just switch that film to next week, when the juxtaposition of very early hand-colored material with the best and glossiest of 3-color Technicolor may make a particularly striking contrast. It seems unlikely that many people have been breathlessly awaiting "Birds in their Nests" (which is exactly what its title suggests) but if anybody is disappointed, our apologies. If you've waited 70 years to see it, hanging on for one more week should merely whet your appetite just a little more.

I should stress at the beginning that COLOR is very much the star of this program. Some of the items are great, some are good, some are abyssal - all are chosen because of one common denominator, they represent recently restored examples of early color, and primarily the odd two-color Technicolor. It must be stressed too, that in no cases can these examples be said to match the richness of the original 35mm nitrate release prints. 2-color Technicolor is difficult to copy, and even the copies are not stable. These prints will undoubtedly begin to fade and become distorted in a few years, since for the most part they are copied on to Kartman stock, which is inferior to the old Technicolor. But they do give a fairly reliable cross-section of the LOOK of the early color, even if they lack its richness.

In view of the number of subjects involved, these notes must be brief, but any unexplained details can be queried in next week's discussion session.

The early examples of partial and total hand-coloring from France: THE MISER (complete apart from a missing main title) is an example of an early Melies trick film released on toned stock, but with highlights hand-colored - yellow eggs, red eyes, etc. - to quite startling and often surreal effect DOWN IN THE DEEP, one of the best of the early Zoaca shorts (the date is often given as 1904, but I would suspect it is a few years later) is totally hand-colored, and both imaginative and charming. Unreal and artificial obviously - not only in its sets but in its use of color - but certainly indicative of the delightful exuberance with which the French pioneer tricksters approached film, as a kind of new magic toy.

FASHIONS OF 1927 - unremarkable fashion-wise, but pleasant hats, pleasant faces under them, and restful color. The models include a starlet or two (Jeanette Loff for example) and the old Pathe Studios, later taken over by Selznick, form a background to one shot.

MUSICALS: Segment 1:
DIXEBRA (1930) The climactic and long-lost musical finale to Wheeler & Woolsey's comedy; tableau-like, rather pointless, but certainly generous in the vibrancy of color.
THE VAGABOND KING (1929) Three numbers, delightfully stiff and artificial in their rendering, but thoroughly pleasing in their melody, performed by Jeanette MacDonald and Dennis King with some unfulfilled menace promised by Warner Gland.
WHOOPPEE (1930) The opening sequence was one of the few times that this western musical really ventured out into the genuine outdoors. The excerpt also includes a typical number with Busby Berkeley's girls, and a glimpse of Eddie Cantor.

PEACOCK ALLEY (1929) Fascinating but almost pathetic today, with a once-great star, Mae Murray, trying to be coy and girlish, playing down to her audience, and generally making herself look rather ridiculous. A real slice of film history - though not in the way its makers intended.

THE MARCH OF THE MOOSE (1929) MGM considered this musical so awful that, even with the novelty of musicals at their peak, they decided to protect the company image and not release it. However, the first number - with a Pan motif - was later used to add production value to a 3-Stooges comedy short. The second number, a bizarre prison routine, was never used at all, though it might have some value today as a deterrent to female criminals. The costumes, with vertical rather than horizontal stripes, hardly flatter the lady convicts.

THE FLORODORA GIRL (1930) Although the color here is rather harshly reproduced, and the song even more repetitive than "By a Waterfall", it does provide a nice glimpse of Marion Davies (with Lawrence Gray) and since it is at the end of the film, also manages to be a neat climax to this musical segment.

-over-
DAILY BEAUTY RITUALS (1937) A relaxed and informal session with Constance Bennett, who rises from bed, coffed and made-up to the nines, and then proceeds to show how to apply more makeup to the several layers that already exist. Good reproduction of the original Cinemascope, and a delightful example of many mid-30’s attempts to show that the stars are really human and as down-to-earth as you and me. Miss Bennett’s long-suffering maid in this reel might dispute that however.

THE HOUSE OF ROTHSCHILD (1934) With the new 3-color Technicolor system established, but very expensive and not available for too many full features at one time, many mid-30’s dramatic features and musicals added novelty and boosted boxoffice by doing just the closing sequence in color — never realising how dreadful the players would look with their excessive makeup when the films were later reissued with those sequences only in b/w. This is the climactic ballroom sequence from the George Arliss film which we have played complete, but with of course Rothschild, the Duke of Wellington and the King reduced to pale black-and-white.

KID MILLIONS (1934) Another climactic highlight, this time the big musical finale to an Eddie Cantor movie, really exploiting color in that it is built around a children’s party in an ice-cream factory ... so full of succulent sodas, ices, strawberries and other goodies that the New School could probably make a fortune if it turned off the air-conditioners and sold ice-cream immediately following this reel.

SANTA’S WORKSHOP (1932) To conclude the compilation portion of the program, a delightful example of Disney’s pioneering work in 3-strip Technicolor, with maximum animation and charmingly subdued color.

— Intermission —


A film with LeRoy Mason, Harry Woods and Dick Alexander in the leads sounds more like a "B" western of the 30’s than a major MGM release, but in all truth it is not traditionally or officially an MGM picture. It was actually produced by the Technicolor company to demonstrate just what their system could do, as there had been some criticism of both the practicality and the artistic merit of 2-color Technicolor in use at that time. So, just like Britain’s first 3-strip Technicolor "Wings of the Morning" in the mid-30’s, "The Viking" was designed to really exploit color — castles, seascapes, land, trees, costumes. It is a relatively cheap production, more like a Sam Katzman film of the 50’s that a mighty Metro release. Despite its spectacle/swashbuckler label, it is economically designed, shy of really big scenes - but it has style and it moves. If it had had a really big climax, it might even have made the grade as a relatively important picture. But its easy-to-take action background gave it a universal audience, and presumably the idea was to sell as many people — audiences, exhibitors, Hollywood executives — on the advisability of using more color. As such it undoubtedly served its purpose, and although its too even keel and a certain monotony of the type of action employed, keep it from being an interesting rediscovery dramatically or artistically, that hardly matters, since its key aspect of interest today is the same as it was then — the use of color! Although not entirely true to the 35mm originals, the reconstruction is good, and, again, gives a reliable cross section of what the system looked like, even though unavoidably it is below the standards that audiences saw in 1929.

The workmanlike direction is by Roy William Neill ("The Black Room", "The 9th Guest", most of the Rathbone-Bruce Sherlock Holmes films, and "Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man", the lively score adds a great deal, and was re-arranged and used again for MGM's sound reissue of their silent "Ben Hur".

William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10:25