CAIN and KYNE


With all the attention paid to James M. Cain over the past year, it’s surprising that nobody seems to have remembered this expert little film – especially as it’s about the most faithful adaptation ever of a Cain story. (Admittedly, the original posed fewer problems: it was short, and didn’t contain material at odds with the prevailing censorial code.) Cain wrote "The Rebsuzler" in the late 30’s; though it has been issued as a single slim volume, it is usually available in anthology editions of Cain’s shorter stories. At the time Cain was not unduly impressed with his story (writing the foreword to a reissue of some of his stories) he saw far more merit in it, and actually preferred it to "Double Indemnity". The deviations from story to screen are minor in the extreme. The original is told in the first person, which helps to overcome Cain’s shortcomings with dialogue. (There is nothing wrong with his dialogue, but it doesn’t have the sharpness or the wit of Chandler or Hammett. And reading it today, one tends to visualize the banker-hero more in the image of Fred MacMurray (thanks to "Double Indemnity") rather than the more sensitive Jeffrey Lynn. But that’s hardly the fault of either author or moviemakers.) The original story has a stronger note of sexual frustration than the movie, and contains an attempted seduction that falls flat (the reasons are too complicated to outline here), elements that are downplayed in the film, but not wholly because of censorship. These story threads in the story are told almost wholly by the first person narrator, and would take far longer to evolve in the movie, which manages without having the hero narrate the story. Since there are some interesting suris to the theme in "Dalliance and the Night" (in which I don’t want to make further comparisons, other than to say that all the characters and action are lifted verbatim from the original story, the only major (?) addition being the comedy relief of Willie Best. And even he serves a purpose: one of his comedy lines about the draft and fifth columnist brings the film effortlessly into a 40’s milieu. The film is also one of the last of the Hollywood Depression films that sought to glorify bankers and stress their integrity. Hollywood needed the banks of course, and from "American Madness" and "One More Spring" had conducted something of a love affair with them, to counteract the stigma of failed banks and lost savings earlier in the 30’s. Short and snappy, "Money and the Woman" needs no padding, and yet it’s long enough for motives and character development to seem like logical and sensible. Though it was perhaps the first real “EM” that one-time top director William K. Howard had made since his early quickies in 1923, it has all the style, pace, and slick acting and cutting of his peak-period (1928-35) thrillers like "Transatlantic," "Sherlock Holmes" and "Mary Burns, Fugitive." Incidentally, the interesting cast number a couple of old-timers from the silent period in bits, and four or five minor-stars-to-be on the way up, while Susan Peters can be glimpsed briefly as a bank depositary.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---


First, and most importantly, a repudiation of the color in the print. Nothing is safer than showing this film to a non-film-oriented audience as I have occasionally, apologizing for the abysmal color quality, and have people respond by saying that the color isn’t bad at all, especially for early color! The fact is that the early three-color Technicolor was not only stunning in itself, but given added vitality by the old 35mm nitrate stock which was given added life by the gunpowder and other ingredients. Originally "Valley of the Giants" was breath-taking, and I recall it vividly from 1938, seeing it several times just for the color alone. As for the usage, a cheap 16mm negative was made, and the film now looks like a B movie; white that has been artificially lit by a green leaf left in the movie, and the opening foreground stressing the beauty of the redwood trees now seems ironic indeed. However, it’s a GOOD action movie, and since the chances of seeing it in its original color are now virtually nil, it seems unfair not to show it. Brisk, full of action and lively stunts, it’s a Saturday matinee delight, but carefully made and in these ecology-conscious days, surprisingly topical. A print of Charles Bickford’s opening speech to the bankers and developers might profitably be sent to Secretary of the Interior Watts today! (Kyne, 1938) was a great American film and often little more than a political tract, but "Valley of the Giants" had quite a different story-line than this. But apart from being fast and a good thrill, the characters are a little more three-dimensional than usual. Virtually the entire Warner stock company is there, and Claire Trevor’s performance as the good-hearted saloon girl may well have been the reason that Ford selected her for the following year’s "Stagecoach," incidentally, much of the action back and forth on the same 120 years later was incorporated into "The Big Trees," a Kirk Douglas actioner of the 50’s.

--- Wm.K. Swenson ---

Program Ends: 10:26; Discussion follows.