A noted politician once remarked "Hindsight is so useful we should try to get it ahead of time" and to a degree that applies to tonight's program. Both films, in differing ways, are cold, protoformalistic and flat. The only (and) it does make them rather more specialised, and it might have been better to have sledged them in our "Archive Night" showcase. That we didn't was only because we were unable to re-screen the films until after the Fall program had been wrapped up. If you approach them as fitting in to our Archive night programming you'll be expecting less in terms of polish -- and may well be pleasantly surprised.

WAR NURSE (MGM, 1930) Directed by Edgar Selwyn; Screenplay by Becky Gardner from the anonymous "War Nurse: The True Story of a Woman Who Lived, Loved and Suffered on the Western Front"; Camera, Charles Rosher; Additional dialogue by Joe Farnham; 85 mins. NY premiere: Astor Theatre With Virginia Weidler (Warly), Virginia Page (Delta), Jules Walker (Babs), Robert Ames (Robin), Zsa Zsa Gabor (Nurse), Marie Prevost (Rosalie), B. D. Edy (Kansas), Hedda Hopper (Matron), Edward Nugent (Frank), Martha Sleeper (Helen); Michael Vavitch (Doctor) and John Miljan, Polly Ann Young.

Once considered a somewhat notorious film by virtue of everybody's preoccupation with what Preston Sturges termed "Teopic A", "War Nurse" now resurfaces as a decidedly pre-Code movie, but one far less startling than expected. Moreover, the anonymous nurse (?) who penned her memoirs presumably did them out of sheer nostalgia -- or a need for hard cash -- since she waited until 1950 to get into print. It's an uneven film, exciting here, moving there, and with a few surprises. Anita Page is again surprisingly good, though incredibly miscast -- one can hardly believe her to be "the child" she is made out to be in the film! Nevertheless, she steals all the limelight from the somewhat stolid3 officers played by Walker. Hardly a landmark movie, but the kind of fascinating oddity that we like to dig up at the New School because if we don't, nobody else will. -- 10 Minute Intermission.

THE GREAT MEADOW (MGM, 1930, rel: 1931) Directed by Charles Brabin; Screenplay by Brabin, Edith Ellis, from the novel by Elizabeth Maddox Roberts; Camera, William Daniels, Clyde de Vinna; 78 mins. NY premiere, Capitol Theatre.
With John Mack Brown (Berk Jarvis); Eleanor Boardman (Daisy Hall); Lucille LaVerne (Elvira Jarvis); Anita Louise (Betty Hall); Gavin Gordon (Evans Muir); Guinn Williams (Reuben Hall); Russell Simpson (Thomas Hall); Sarah Padden (Mistress Hall); Helen Jerome Eddy (Sally Toller); John Miljan (Daniel Boone); and Lloyd Ingraham, Steve Clark, James Marcus, William Bakewell.

Based (and apparently quite accurately, particularly in its retention of colloquial dialogue) on a highly regarded 1930 novel about Virginia settlers pioneering on into Kentucky, "The Great Meadow" as it stands seems to betray a certain lack of enthusiasm on MGM's part. It is particularly (and especially with that title) it was MGM's intention to offer their own equivalent of Fox's "The Big Trail". The boxoffice failure of "The Big Trail" wouldn't have been apparent early enough to effect the way "The Great Meadow" was shot -- but stories of its production problems and spiralling budget would. Clearly MGM curtailed the size of "The Great Meadow"; it is too short to attain genuine epic stature, and many of the really big scenes are merely talked about. The two whole years of the here's absence from home are covered in literally two lines of dialogue. In fact perhaps this is a little disappointing, but in another it provides a bonus in terms of the familiar and unoriginal and stereotyped nature of the standard cliches of the traditional epic, and a great deal more humanity and time for authenticity of detail. The retention of the rather stilted dialogue of the novel works surprisingly well (compare it with the hilariously "literate" pseudo-Fenimore Cooper dialogue used in the serial "The Last of the Mohicans" of the same year) and one does get a far greater sense of the tragedy of parting and the breaking-up of families than most epics ever have the nerve to bother with. Its economy-conscious production does prevent it achieving quite the societal stature of "Along the Mohawk", and (presumably) pre-production plet cuts minimise references to the ongoing rebellion against the British so that the sense of a whole nation on the march isn't as strong as it might be. Perhaps it was to counteract this that MGM added a foreword, dedicating the film to the women who pioneered the country, thus changing audience expectations somewhat. Nevertheless, it's an imposing film, offering, like "The Big Trail", considerable near documentary values, with enough action to keep it exciting, some of it quite grim. The similarity of the acting styles (in this film at least) of Brown and Gavin Gordon (both exuberant, both with strong accents) makes for a little confusion at times, but it's a minor complaint, and Eleanor Boardman (one of her last films) is as effective and sensitive as always. Apart from a little name-dropping involving George Washington, the script is a good one, though the fine photography by Daniels (interiors) and de Vinna (exteriors) is minimised by the -er robust 16mm print, all that is available.

Wm. A. Everson
Program ends approx. 10.28 Discussion period follows.