KING KLUNK (Universal, 1933) A Walter Lantz "Pooch the Pup" cartoon; 10 mins.

Universal, home of the horror movie, must have enjoyed tweaking the nose of rival Rko with this unabashed lampoon of "King Kong". The cartoon (released six months after the feature) manages to include most of the memorable highlights of "King Kong" but is rigidly superb. It's surprising that Universal didn't face plagiarism suits. None of it is very funny, but it does have a nightmarish quality which must have been quite frightening to youngsters in a day when they were less inured to horror through its casual availability on tv. European censors were especially displeased with it, either refusing it a certificate or giving it an "Adults Only" rating which virtually reduced its exhibition to nil.

BEHIND THE MASK (Columbia, 1931; rel: 1932) Directed by John Francis Dillon;
Screenplay by Jo Swerling and Dorothy Howell from Swerling's story "In The Secret Service"; Camera, Ted Tetzlaff; 66 minutes.

With Jack Holt (Jack Hart); Constance Cummings (Julie Arnold); Boris Karloff (Henderson); Edward Van Sloan (Dr. Steiner); Bertha Mann (Edward); Claude King (Arnold); William Robertson (Capt. Hawkes) and Thomas Jackson.

"Behind the Mask" is what used to be known in the trade as a "thick-ear melodrama". Loosely translated as a thriller in which subtlety is not a strong point. In fact, it was caging-in on three current cycles -- the gangster movie (in this case, the basic crime being drug smuggling and peddling), the prison movie, and the still-in-its-infancy horror movie. Actually the movie was made at the same time as Howard Hawks' "The Criminal Code", using some of the same sets, much identical establishing-shot footage, and two of the lead players -- Karloff and Cummings, who seems almost too lady-like to be involved in such a farce. To prevent direct comparison with "The Criminal Code" and exposure of its economics, "Behind the Mask" was held up in its release for almost a year -- rather fortuitously since in the interim "Frankenstein" had been released, boosting Karloff's stock enormously, and further underlining Edward Van Sloan's position in the horror field. Karloff and Cummings were able to get booked into Times Square's Paramount Theatre, though Paramount, perhaps not too confident of its crowd-pulling ability, backed it up with a stage show headed by Guy Lombardo, Burns and Allen, the Mills Brothers and other musical top liner.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

THE SILVER HORSE (Rko Radio, 1930) Directed by George Archainbald; produced by William LeBran; Assoc. Producer, William Sistrom; Asst. Director, Thomas Atkins; Screenplay by Wallace Smith from the (1909) novel by Rex Beach; Camera, Leo Tover. 75 mins.

With: Evelyn Brent (Cherry Halotte); Louis Wolheim (George Balt); Joel McCrea (Boyd Emerson); Jean Arthur (Mildred Wayland); Blanche Sweet (Queenie); Raymond Hatton (Fraser); Gavin Gordon (Fred Marsh); Purnell Pratt (Wayne Wayland); William Davidson (William Hilliard); Ivan Linow (Swenson).

"The Silver Horse" went into release exactly a month after "The Spoilers", giving two von Sternberg women -- Evelyn Brent here, Betty Compson in "The Silver Horse" -- the roles which made them stars. "The Silver Horse" was the role in which von Sternbergian vamp, Dietrich, would take on in 1942. Actually, a couple of Evelyn Brent's lines could have been written with Dietrich in mind, though clearly in 1930 they weren't. It's a MUCH better film than one has a right to expect from the normally rather stodgy, stage-bound Rko of 1930. While its memorable cast is its main asset, still it has a good action director, some extensive location work (seemingly around Seattle), and a good bustling pace. The NY Times in 1930, perhaps spoiled by the magnificent "The Big Trail" which opened that same week, was quite snide and said that it could have been filmed in 1920. Possibly they didn't know the value of the role; in their 1920 review finds them being equally snide, and saying that this kind of material belonged back with the nickelodeons! Maybe it's its simplicity and lack of pretension that made it seem old-fashioned then, but so vigorous today. Its story may be familiar, but it tells it well, and with no punches pulled. In those pre-Code days if a no-good threatened everybody's happiness, then you just had him slaughtered, and no nonsense about "moral compensation" for the killer. And a real bonus if the small but well-played role allotted to Blanche Sweet in one of her last screen roles.

--- William K. Everson ---

Program ends: 10.25 Short discussion period follows.

A reminder: no class next week; we resume March 25th