Walter Wanger was well-known as a producer fascinated by "difficult" or controversial subjects, but in a sense this attack on racial prejudice was made just a shade too soon, considering that, as Wanger wanted to make a statement in favor of Oriental's right to equality as an "outcaste" the year before, had been outlawed by the revised Production Code, but was forced to make only a "token" statement because he didn't really have a story to back it up. It's a rather loosely constructed tale, Loretta Young (as the madcap heiress) and Boyer as the doom-laden Oriental, going their separate ways (with differing story moods) until they are brought together. Then their problems are prolonged by contrivance and repetition. Still Wanger could have taken an easy way out, but the final reel restores his intended integrity. (Curiously, there's a logical spot for an implied happy ending about a reel from the end — and some tv stations, possibly at the suggestion of the film's distributor, took advantage of that and ended the film there, lopping off a promising drama.) And oddly enough, considering the film's racial intentions, the film allows Loretta Young's black maid to make some rather disparaging remarks about Chinese cooies. If that was intended as a statement in itself, it doesn't come off that way. Boyer, who had just played a Japanese (well) in the French "The Battle", here plays a Russian/Chinese half-caste, without any kind of subtle makeup, and with no attempt at anything but his normal French accent. It's a good and subtle performance in many ways, but the odds are against it being totally convincing. Warner Oland, in a benevolent role, is given several pseudo Charlie Chan lines of dialogue, and nostalgia is further served by the presence of Keye Luke as his son. It's a handsome film and an interesting one, but it needed a better script and a stronger director to make it work fully on an emotional level. As it is, it's mainly a fascinating footnote to Hollywood's early toying with racial themes. Incidentally, can anyone identify the actress (rather like Martha Sleeper) who plays Boyer's secretary? She is not in any cast list (and I've checked several) and in her few scenes, creates a real character, suggesting loyalty and understanding far beyond what the script could have called for, rather like Maggie Smith in "The VIPs".

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10 minute intermission

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THE MAN WHO RECLAIMED HIS HEAD (Universal 1934, rel: 1935) Directed by Edward Ludwig
Produced by Henry Hamigson; Screenplay (from his original play) by Jean Bart; Camera, Merritt Gerstad; 81 mins; NY premiere, Rialto Theatre, January 1935.

With Claude Rains (Paul Verin); Joan Bennett (Adele Verin); Lionel Atwill (Henri Dumont); Baby Jane (Lenetta Verin); Henry O'Neill (de Marnay); Wallace Ford (Curly); Lawrence Grant (Marchand); William B. Davidson (Charlus); Henry Armetta (Laurent); Hugh O'Connell (Danglas); Robert Armstrong (Louise); Ferdinand Gottschalk (Biron); Gilbert Emery, Edward Van Sloan, Jameson Thomas, Walter Walker, The muntions cartel; John Harron, John Rutherford (soldiers in dugout); Lloyd Hughes (Andre); Doris Lloyd, Noel Francis (opera guests); Russ Powell (train guard); George Davis (driver); Valerie Hobson (carnival merrymaker); Montague Shaw, Harry Cording, John Ince, William Ruhl (men in street).

The main problem (if there is a problem) with "The Man Who Reclaimed His Head" is that it was originally sold as a semi-horror film, and in later reissues and tv release as a total horror film. With that selling approach in mind, Universal seem to have slanted the film so that it will attract lured in by false advertising. Thus the opening suggests Grand Guignol, and the closing supplies it. The social message lies in between; the structure of the film causes its introduction into the plot to be delayed for some 30 minutes (a long time in a relatively short film) and thus to be over-stressed rather unsubtly in the middle portions. (This includes the type-casting of the muntions cartel, only Edwin Maxwell seems to be missing, unless he was the "unknown" higher-up?) Nevertheless, it's a striking and powerful film, surprisingly topical today in its discussion of the commercial manipulation of war. There is even reference to oil and nuclear weaponry, although for the top fifty it is pastiche of the "phantoms", in which every Laurence Olivier line sounds like a Saddam Hussein press release. Based on controversial play of the same name (though it looks as though the relationship between Rains' wife and the charlatan/muntions profiteer has been toned down a bit), it also has a remarkable similarity in basic structure and theme to Abel Gance's "J'Accuse" of a couple of years later. While he was re-shaping his own silent film of the same name, it's highly possible that he saw either this film, or the play on which it was based, and was influenced by it.

As with the co-feature, one of the problems with the film is its director. Edward Ludwig was always an interesting and often off-beat film-maker, but never an inspired one. Given this film's script and its cast, it would have been an ideal subject for James Whale. Possibly Universal's leaning towards at least a semi-horror treatment alienated him somewhat, since he was striving to avoid being associated with horror exclusively, and had
"The Bride of Frankenstein" coming up. Nevertheless, while it might have been a major film with Whale at the helm, it's still a good one without him. Possibly current war conditions might make it seem a little better than it actually is since its quite remarkable topicality gives it a tension and a sense of almost personal involvement that it wouldn't have in more peaceful times.

Some stature is added by the adroit yet disciplined use of stock footage, much of it of course from "All Quiet on the Western Front". There is also a seemingly careless sequence from "Waterloo Bridge". The opening air-raid sequence is clearly set in Paris, yet there is Waterloo Bridge, the Thames and St. Paul's in the background! But it might have been inspiration rather than carelessness; after all, at first sight it could be interpreted as the Seine with Sacré-Cœur in the background! Since editor Murray Sallenden was an intelligent man who had learned his trade from editor and later director Joseph H. Lewis, it might well have been a stroke of inspired genius on his part.

Other brief comments in passing. The score is gentle and unobtrusive, very unlike most Universal scores at the time. The film itself, shorn of its belligerent pacifism, was remade in the 40's as "Strange Confession", one of the "Inner Sanctum" series, with Lon Chaney jr. and J. Carrol Naish in the Rains-Atwill roles, incidentally, even for him, Atwill has seldom been more effectively reptilian and loathsome, quite stealing the limelight away from Rains' thoughtful and low-key but rather self-indulgent performance. (I seem to recall that Rains also played his role on stage, but cannot confirm it as I write these notes).

A final comment. I am surely giving away nothing by noting that the title refers to Rains' ultimate revenge on Atwill, an act none too subtly hinted at in the long opening sequence between Rains and Henry O'Neill. It's a pity that Rains, given his derailed state, couldn't have performed a similar act of vengeance on Baby Jane. Not only an obnoxious child and a poor actress, she even seems incapable of taking direction, ignoring necessary pauses and missing cues. "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?" almost takes on new meaning in light of this performance.

William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10:20.
Discussion/Questions follow.

A reminder: this semester's Jazz Concerts provide little conflict. The first is next week, a silent program (and a shortish one) and the second is for our 2nd silent program, also on the side short. One Jazz concert fortuitously takes place in March on a date when we're not screening, and the fourth is for our final program, which being a free session, will not entail your lining up for tickets.

An equally important reminder: talking during the performance (from a limited quarter it's true) seems on the upgrade again. It's not only discourteous, but also frustrating since sound reproduction on older prints is often not of the best. If you're one of the few offenders, please take note. I in turn will try to keep the balcony doors less blatantly open. (They have to be open a little so that we can monitor sound accurately). Thus we'll eliminate most of the cleaner-equipment and backstage noises. If any unforeseen noise crisis arises, I can always be reached in the projection booth — a quick bound or two up the stairs as you exit the auditorium to your right.

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A POSTSCRIPT COMMENT ON "THE MAN WHO RECLAIMED HIS HEAD":

The New York Times summing-up is worth repeating:

"...it) brews the kind of adult excitement that helps to make the screen a healthy institution!"