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Dartmouth Film Society

HELL'S ANGELS (1930)

Monte Rutledge
Roy Rutledge

Ben Lyon
James Hall

Helen
Baron von Kranz

Jean Harlow
Lucian Prival

and Douglas Gilmore, Evelyn Hall, Roy Wilson, John Darrow, Frank Clarke, Jane Winton, Hans Joby, William B. Davidson, Wyndham Standing, Pat Somerset, F. Schumann-Heink, William von Brücken, Carl von Haartman, Stephen Carr, Thomas Carr, J. Granville-Davis.

Story by Marshall Neilan and Joseph Moncure March. Adaption and continuity by Howard Estabrook and Harry Behn. Dialogue written by Joseph Moncure March, staged by James Whale. Photographed by Antonio Gaudio, Harry Zech, Dewey Wrigley, Harry Perry, E. Burton Steene, Elmer Dyer. Edited by Frank Lawrence and Douglass Diggs. Sound by Lodge Cunningham. Musical arrangements by Hugo Riesenfeld. Technical engineer, E. Roy Davidson. Chief of aeronautics, J. B. Alexander. Sets by Julian Boone-Fleming and Carroll Clark. Assistant directors for air sequences: Reginald Callow, William J. Scully and Fred A. Fleck. Produced by Joseph W. Engel. Executive producer, Howard Hawks for the Cado Corporation, released through United Artists, August 15, 1930.

Directed by HOWARD HUGHES

Made at the astronomical cost of four million dollars, Howard Hughes' HELL'S ANGELS is one of the most famous films of the early sound period, but it has rarely been seen in recent years. Time has not been particularly kind to the film; the story seems very dated indeed. However, the excitement of the air sequences more than make up for the deficiencies of the plot.

Hughes began plans on the film in 1926, assigned Luther Reed to direct and Greta Nissen to play Helen. The story had been written by the famous director Marshall Neilan (1891-1958), who pleaded in vain with Hughes to let him direct. After over a year's work, Hughes junked the entire, nearly completed film because it was silent, and sound was definitely here to stay.

He then fired Miss Nissen and replaced her with his protégé Jean Harlow; Reed was dismissed and Howard Hawks put in charge. After a short time Hawks was fired and Hughes took over the direction with the aid of another half-dozen assistant directors including James Whale, who made FRANKENSTEIN soon after.

The statistics are still quite interesting. Four years of script revision and filming; six major cameramen and 24 assistants; 38 speaking roles; 78 pilots; 25 German Fokkers; 25 British SE-5's and Sopwith Camels; and one enormous dirigible. By the time of the film most of these aircraft were collector's items and it was only with great difficulty and expense that Hughes was able to bring them and their owner-pilots to Hollywood.

Premiered in 1930 with tickets selling for as much as \$2.50 for the evening show, HELL'S ANGELS was roasted by the critics but proved an enormous success at the box-office; it ranks today among the top fifty moneymakers of all time.

It has been said that HELL'S ANGELS was the film which made a star out of Jean Harlow. Viewing her performance here, which is not quite as bad as critics of the day rated it, it seems hardly possible that this film made her into a household word. Actually, it took quite a few more films before she became really famous, but HELL'S ANGELS gave her her first major part.

The rest of the acting varies from passable (Lucian Prival) to simply ghastly (James Hall) and to call the work Mr. Hughes did "direction" would be a misnomer. The air sequences are another matter, however. Here his skilled cameramen, editors and assistant directors took over, and these scenes still pack a punch.

The most famous episode was the dirigible battle, which appeared just before the intermission in the original screenings. Nothing of this scope had ever been tried in previous air films, and every critic commented on the astonishing spectacle. The final dogfight was also highly praised.

These battle sequences are so good that one can almost excuse the miserable dialogue and inadequate acting. Viewers today will find the first thirty minutes rather hard going, since the plot has to be set up, but after this the action takes over the most of the rest of the picture. However, some of the dialogue is good for a laugh, particularly the attempts of the actors to fake a British accent.

Howard Hughes' life is almost too well known to go into here. A considerable part of it was lightly disguised in the novel The Carpetbaggers (and the subsequent film version) and both contain passages about the filming of HELL'S ANGELS, as does the recent film about the Unhappy Miss Harlow. Mr. Hughes was also caricatured in The Barefoot Contessa.

His film work, however, is more than casually interesting. Every picture he made involved some kind of scandal; THE OUTLAW (1944) is perhaps his best known effort. As a Producer, he holds the record for director-replacement on an opus entitled VENDETTA (1946), starring his discovery of the moment, Faith Domergue. Before it was finished, and \$3,200,000 had gone down the drain, he hired and fired Max Ophüls, Preston Sturges, Stuart Heisler and Mel Ferrer, apparently finishing the film himself.

--David Hull

Films of Howard Hughes (as a producer): ARABIAN NIGHTS (1927, dir. unknown); THE RACKET (1928, dir. Lewis Milestone); HELL'S ANGELS (1930, dir. Hughes); THE FRONT PAGE (1931, dir. Milestone); SCARFACE (1931, dir. Howard Hawks); THE OUTLAW (1944, dir. Hawks and Hughes); VENDETTA (1946, dir. various); SKY DEVILS (1949, dir. unknown); THE RACKET (1951, dir. John Cromwell); HIS KIND OF WOMAN (1951, dir. John Farrow); JET PILOT (1951, dir. Josef von Sternberg); DOUBLE DYNAMITE (1951, dir. Jack Cummings); THE LAS VEGAS STORY (1952, dir. Robert Stevenson); MACAO (1952, dir. von Sternberg and Nicholas Ray); MONTANA BELLE (1952, dir. Alan Dwan); THE FRENCH LINE (1953, dir. I. Bacon); UNDERWATER (1955, dir. J. Sturges); SON OF SINBAD (1955, dir. Ted Tetzlaff).

We wish to thank a friend of the Dartmouth Film Society for the loan of a print of HELL'S ANGELS for our screening.

Our next program is a Film Society Bonus program, René Clair's SOUS LES TOITS DE PARIS (UNDER THE ROOFS OF PARIS) which will be presented Thursday at 4:00 and 8:30 p. m.