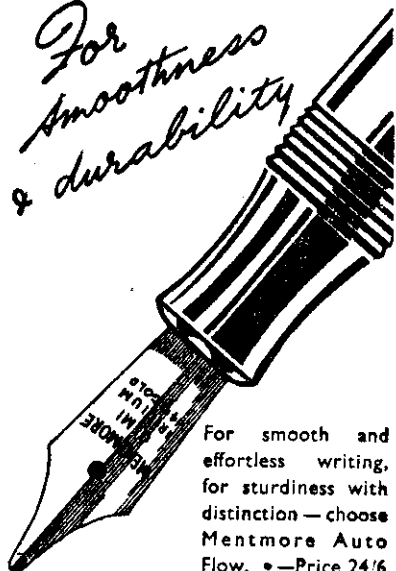


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Film Reviews by G.M.

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

THE SOUTHERNER

(United Artists)



IT is remarkable, but perhaps rather typical of Hollywood and even of the cinema as a whole, that a film which gets closer to the earth of America than almost any other, and which interprets so sensitively the relationship of the local countryside to the people who dwell in it, should have been made by a Frenchman. *The Southerner* was written (from the book *Hold Autumn in Your Hand*) as well as directed by Jean Renoir who, after one or two false starts in Hollywood, has here been given a chance to justify the reputation for fine craftsmanship which he carried across the Atlantic with him from his native France.

Even the title has been shrewdly chosen: in itself it points a critical comparison between romantic illusion and reality. For this is not, as I suspect a good many of the audience thought it would be, a piece of glamorous fiction about the Old South with its mint juleps, black mummies, and aristocratic landowners in the "Gone With the Wind" tradition; it is not even a cowboy picture, and its hero is far from being the Gary Cooper type with silver-ornamented high boots and large white stetson. Instead, the Southerner of this film is an impoverished, modern young Texan cotton-grower, and his story, as told here, is simply a record of back-breaking toil and unrelenting struggle against the elements in his attempt to bring a few acres of derelict land under cultivation: his inspiration comes from the belief that he is his own master and not just a migrant labourer. As I say, I suspect that many of the audience who filled the theatre on opening night anticipated something a lot less earthy and sweat-stained than this, but I am happy to record that if they did they showed no sign of disappointment. Though *The Southerner* is so far from being "popular" entertainment that it is almost a Hollywood freak, I noticed no walk-outs.

THERE are at least two films, and one in particular, with which *The Southerner* immediately provokes comparison. The one in particular is *The Grapes of Wrath*, which featured much the same physical surroundings and much the same sort of people. But whereas *The Grapes of Wrath* was bitterly militant in its outlook, this new picture, you might say, is resigned: there is a philosophic acceptance of conditions (it is, I suppose, the difference in attitude between Steinbeck the crusader and Renoir the near-pacifist). Though *The Southerner* reveals the existence of dreadful poverty and great ignorance in at least one part of modern America (the story takes place about 1939), which certain Americans would like to deny, the story does not set itself out, as *The Grapes of Wrath* did, to "expose" the cruelty and inequality of the social and political system or consciously to win sympathy for the hard lot of the tenant-farmers and sharecroppers. There is even a sense in which it seems to come out in support of the status quo by emphasising the young farmer's passionate desire to work and own his own land, even though the

"freedom" he seeks apparently entails harder toil and worse conditions for himself, his wife, and his family than before, with absolutely no guarantee of security. The dramatic conflict in this story is not with the System but with nature itself; with the land and the seasons, with hunger, cold, and disease. There is not even conflict with people, except in the case of the hero's misanthropic neighbour (J. Carroll Naish), who has become so pathologically embittered and frustrated by his own struggle that he tries his hardest to ruin the chances of the young couple who have moved in next to him.

YET I do not hold it against *The Southerner* that it moves in a narrower compass than *The Grapes of Wrath*. It does not pretend to be more than a chronicle of a year's work on a cotton-farm, a chronicle of alternating hope, misery, anxiety, pride, reward, disaster, despair, and determination; and within that compass it is a grand and memorable achievement. It is a picture with style, shape, and rhythm; a picture of stark simplicity, real integrity, and, above all, genuine poetic feeling in its conjuring up of seasonal atmosphere. In this it invites comparison, more than favourable comparison, with another Hollywood film of American farm life, *Our Vines Have Tender Grapes*. Here also one had the passage of the seasons and the struggle with the elements, particularly the element of water—but these things were largely incidental to the story, not an integral part of it as here.

Several commentators on the cinema have drawn attention to the persistent appearance of the water-motif in many of the world's best films: water, especially when in motion, is peculiarly cinematic. This is, indeed, one of the special themes developed in *Film and Reality*, Cavalcanti's "anthology" of the realist film; and I suggest you think back over the finest movie sequences you can remember, and notice how often this motif crops up in them. To the list you can now add *The Southerner*: some of the best drama in it is based on water—or the lack of it. The flood sequence, after the rain has flattened the cotton crop and the high hopes of the hero, is a notably exciting and skilful piece of direction and camerawork.

AS I noticed recently in *The Overlanders*, but to a much lesser extent here, a director has a better chance of achieving complete success in his treatment of natural environment than in his handling of the human element. Scenery is more pliable than people. In the cast of *The Southerner*, Zachary Scott is, I think, exactly right as the young farmer, physically as well as in his emotional attitude. He has his roots right down in the part. But the same cannot be said of some of the others. Betty Field, who plays his wife, is an actress with more sensitive appreciation in one finger-tip than many another has in her whole head, and she gives here a sincere and moving performance. Yet she is still not quite right; just a shade too beautiful, just a little too well-groomed. There is, one feels, a suggestion of compromise with the box-

(continued on next page)