

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

OF HUMAN BONDAGE

(Warner Bros.)



MY judgment of this film is coloured inevitably by the comparison I make with the 1934 version, which brought fame (or notoriety?) to Bette Davis as an exponent of unpleasant women and which also contained one of the late Leslie Howard's finest performances. But perhaps that comparison means nothing to you and you are happy to accept the new film as it stands, without any regretful backward glances over your shoulder? If so, I wish you well of it: Eleanor Parker, though no Bette Davis, does a competent enough job as the malevolent slut from a London teashop who is the evil influence in the hero's life, and Paul Henreid, though woefully and wilfully miscast as the hag-ridden medical student, may seem to give a satisfactory performance if you have never seen Leslie Howard give a perfect one.

Here we have, however, a good example of the impermanence of the

cinema and the difficulty as a result of establishing critical standards for it (a difficulty which to some extent it shares with the drama). Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* is an interesting story in its own right—some say an autobiographical one—but its interpretation by Bette Davis and Leslie Howard in 1934 is generally (and I think rightly) spoken of as one of the screen's rare works of art; if you like, as one of the "classics" of the cinema. Yet to speak now of a classic or even of a work of art in the same breath with this new production will seem arrant nonsense to many people, including probably many of those who find the new version fairly enjoyable. The trouble is that whereas a literary classic is always on the shelves and therefore available for re-evaluation by succeeding generations, in the case of a bygone film you have, in the absence of any film museum or library, to take somebody else's word for it that it was once a great and important one.

So in the present case we have an example of Gresham's Law applied to the cinema: the inferior new film will,

I am afraid, seriously depreciate the value and reputation of the good old one. It is the essence of *Of Human Bondage* that one should be able to appreciate the nature of the hero's infatuation for the sluttish Mildred; should be able, in some degree, to see her through his eyes. This is therefore a role demanding the most sensitive and introspective sort of acting, and Leslie Howard was formerly able to supply it, for this was the kind of interpretation in which he excelled. On the other hand, Paul Henreid is now grossly ill-suited to the part: it is one of the cinema's major mysteries why a middle-ageing foreigner with a heavy Viennese accent should have been chosen to portray the character of a dreamy, thwarted, club-footed young Englishman. Lacking the necessary insight into the hero's tortured soul, which only an artist like Howard could give, any audience may be excused for regarding the infatuation which he supposedly feels for the slut, and the attraction which she supposedly exercises over him, as being both highly improbable, not to say incredible. There are some good bits of acting, notably by Edmund Gwenn and Alexis Smith; but without this core of sympathetic understanding, *Of Human Bondage* reduces itself in 1947 to the level of a redundant and artificial *fin-de-siecle* melodrama.

THE BIG SLEEP

(Warner Bros.)



TWENTY-FOUR hours after seeing this film, I can easily recall some of the wisecracks in it, but even to save my life from one of Mr. Raymond Chandler's gangsters I couldn't remember exactly how the story goes. I doubt if I am alone in my perplexity: leaving the theatre one picked up in several quarters the remark, with variations, "Yes, but what I didn't understand was . . ."

Actually I have little doubt that the plot all fits together as snugly as a jigsaw with none of the pieces missing. There was probably an adequate reason, if not a good one, why all those corpses were left littering the screen, why all those unworthy citizens were bashed up and bumped off: such mayhem and slaughter, though wanton in one sense, was not wholly irrational, and the murder of the glass-eyed blackmailer in his Chinese bungalow clearly had a link—if one could find it—with the messy demise of the unfortunate little crook (Elisha Cook Jr.) who was forced to drink poison about one hour later because, apparently, he knew too much. But knew too much about what? That's the question. I'm not saying it can't be answered: Private Detective Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) seemed to be satisfied, about one hour later still, that he had all the answers, and no one could



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