

# DUEL IN THE DIRT

## DUEL IN THE SUN

(Selznick-B.E.F.)

WHEN a reviewer feels impelled to voice his disapproval of a film on moral grounds—and I've had the feeling twice this week—it is a little difficult to know just how emphatic to be, to decide how far one can discuss the unmoral or immoral element without producing an immoral or unmoral impulse in the minds of the feckless and the foolish.

On the reasonable assumption, however, that the average *Listener* reader belongs to neither of these classes I shall indulge my conscience to the extent of saying that I found *Duel in the Sun* a disgusting production.

It is a long film. It reputedly cost more (over six million dollars) than any other Western film ever made, and there are about a dozen important names in the cast, but apart from one or two sequences which feature horses rather than humans there is not a genuinely worthwhile scene in it. And a substantial proportion of the film is, to use

the word recently attributed to Lord Samuel, unmoral.

It would probably be more accurate to go further and say that a good deal of the film is immoral, since it is obvious that those who were responsible for its production were familiar enough with one sort of moral code—that of the Johnston Office—to know just how far to go without transgressing it. One thing, anyway, is certain. The old argument about art and morality can hardly be resurrected in the present instance. I agree that the artist is not concerned primarily with morality, that, indeed, he may not be concerned with morals at all except as an incidental effect or by-product of his activity. But so far as I could discover there is no art at all in *Duel in the Sun*—not even bad art.

The dominant motives of the film are lust and sadism, presented against a background of violence and lawlessness. I don't want to deny the existence in life of any of these elements, nor would I suggest that they are not proper subjects for serious attention—from time immemorial writers have concerned themselves with them. But

to present them for their own sakes, simply for the aphrodisiac effect and for the emotional excitement which they are likely to engender in impressionable minds is a degree lower than vulgarity.

What is going to distress a lot of people is that this picture, even more than *The Outlaw*, represents the final pollution of the last reasonably clean wellspring of American film entertainment—the Western film. For decades this class of picture enjoyed a marked freedom from sex and viciousness. It also enjoyed a marked freedom from intellectuality, but on the whole a Western film was an experience to which even children could be exposed without harm. In a sense, *Duel in the Sun* is the Western to end all Westerns.

Protagonists in the *Duel* are Jennifer Jones, in the part of a Mexican half-breed, and Gregory Peck, as her seducer—and if either could be said to act the film might be cited as evidence of their versatility, since Miss Jones will be remembered for her role in *The Song of Bernadette* and Peck for his portrayal of the priest in *The Keys of the Kingdom*. But neither has the oppor-

tunity to interpret anything more exacting than a conditioned reflex. Jennifer Jones spends a good deal of her time before the cameras hitching up her bodice, or weeping tears of remorse or frustration.

The technicolour, like the playing, is coarse, strident and hard on the eyes and the dialogue for the most part is banal and trashy. And there is over 12,000 feet of film. Boring as it inevitably is, one might just about endure it were it not for the final scene. In a last-minute attempt to prove (in terms of the Johnston code) that immorality doesn't pay and that sin against the moral law brings inevitable retribution, the studio has contrived a scene as shocking in its crudity—and as unbelievable—as any I can call to mind.

The villain who is wanted for two murders and should by rights have two or three other indictable offences chalked up against him, is in hiding in the desert. Finally convinced that she (and the world) would be better without him, the halfbreed keeps a last rendezvous with her demon lover, and takes a rifle along with her. When he discloses himself she shoots him neatly and painfully in the stomach. No sooner has she done so than she repents and runs towards him. He then shoots her. Her heart hardens, and she shoots again. Alternately shooting and protesting

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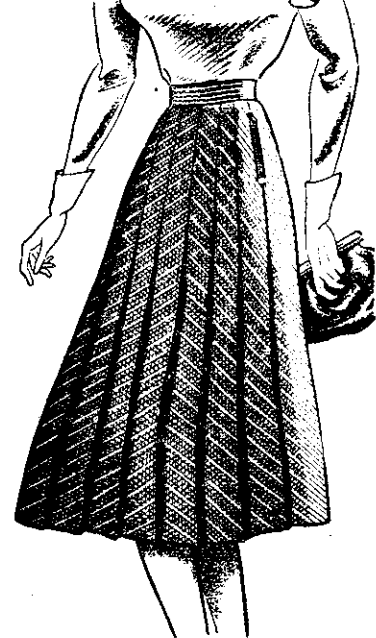
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