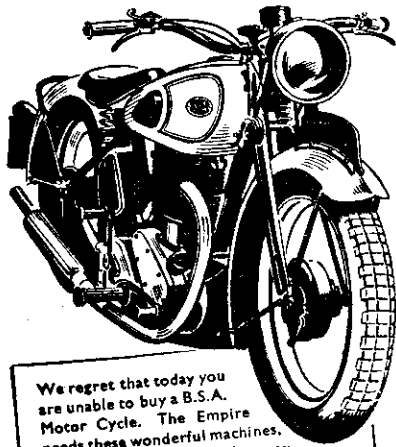


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Film Reviews by G.M.

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

H. M. PULHAM, Esq.
(M.G.M.)

AS created by John Phillips Marquand in a novel and filmed by King Vidor for M.G.M., H.M. Pulham, Esq. is Babbit on a rather higher social stratum than the original. He eats the same things for breakfast every morning, he puts on his hat and coat and goloshes with a kind of religious routine, he kisses his wife good-bye in the same absent-minded way, he walks to the office almost as if moved by clockwork, and he gets there exactly at 9 a.m. He has been doing this for years; he sees nothing remarkable in it, certainly nothing soul-destroying. He is the slave of habit.

And because so many of us are exactly that, I expect that there will be many people who will be slightly disconcerted by this chronicle of upper-middle-class ordinariness. Trite as the phrase may sound, it is true to life in its essentials, in its portrayal of a character in a groove. Only one thing throws Harry Pulham out of his deadly dull rut of orthodox behaviour, and that is his love affair with the bewildering, exciting Marvin Myles. But he does not stay out of it long enough to make a track for himself in another direction; the dead-weight of social custom and tradition, of what-is-expected-of-him by his family and his class, force him back to conformity. He goes half unwillingly, with a slightly baffled, querulous air.

At the end of the film the director has tried hard to suggest that, having had his mild fling, Harry Pulham will now be able to settle down, and that his wife has at last been awakened to his need for a little excitement in life; but this attempt at a "happy ending" should fool hardly anyone. This Boston gentleman, moving toward middle-age, will settle down all right—right down into the stifling comfort of his easy chair—but that rankling sense of frustration is likely to remain. It is the keynote of the picture, and one of the most disconcerting things about it.

However, although they may find much in *H. M. Pulham, Esq.* that is uncomfortably true and rather unsettling, picturegoers will also find much that is entertaining. They will chiefly find a first-rate performance by Robert Young as Pulham. The whole story is seen through his perplexed, dissatisfied eyes, as he sits at his desk, wondering what his life is all about, while he tries to write down his biography for a 25th Reunion Dinner of the men who were with him at university. We follow him back to childhood, note the deadening influence of well-meaning but ultra-sollicitous parents (an influence that is to become increasingly deadening as the years go by); see how the American equivalent of the old-school-tie philosophy is educated into him; follow him to the First World War and note how it briefly satisfies his craving for a departure from routine (which is something that anti-war idealists don't study



ROBERT YOUNG
Very like many of us

enough), and how on his return, this new-found will to be independent is sufficiently strong to take him, against his parents' wishes, from a sinecure job in the family business in Boston to a position with an advertising agency in New York. Then we see him meeting and falling passionately in love with a girl copywriter, who is so excitingly everything that Boston girls aren't. But this episode doesn't last; Harry Pulham finally marries the Boston girl his parents had always wanted him to marry, not because they can now influence him but because both he and the girl have more or less come to accept their marriage as inevitable. And so back almost to where it started—the same food for breakfast every morning, the casual kiss, the routine of the morning walk to work, the clock at 9 a.m.—what another critic has described as "the deadly divinity of trivial things."

Hedy LaMarr plays Marvin Myles, the disturbing copywriter, and not since I first discovered Miss LaMarr in *Algiers*, and was duly excited by the discovery, have I been so impressed—not this time, because she is beautiful, but because, for perhaps the first time, she really acts. Ruth Hussey portrays Pulham's wife, the good, ordinary Boston girl. It is no reflection on Miss Hussey to say that her performance is colourless alongside Miss LaMarr's; it is meant to be.

Just about everything in *H. M. Pulham, Esq.*, is at its best in the opening scenes, when the director lets the camera do most of the work. After that the film becomes increasingly slow and wordy, and the ending, as I say, is slightly off key. However, the slow pace of the action is not necessarily a fault, since it emphasises the monotony, the humdrum ordinariness of the kind of life against which the central character unsuccessfully rebels.

And if I came away from the theatre with a slight sense of frustration, the

attempt to provide a "happy ending" was perhaps not altogether to blame. Possibly I had taken the story too much to heart—even writing film reviews week after week for *The Listener* sometimes loses its savour!

Mr. BUG GOES TO TOWN
(Paramount)

MAX FLEISCHER, who made this coloured cartoon feature, is no Walt Disney, but if I were Max Fleischer I shouldn't let this worry me very much. As a matter of fact, I doubt if he does: he certainly doesn't try to imitate Disney, except in so far as anybody who now makes a full-length cartoon may be said to be doing that. As in Fleischer's first big effort, *Gulliver's Travels* (and, indeed, in many such films) his *Mr. Bug* employs the technique of combining essentially cartoon characters—in this case "humanised" insects—with cartooned human beings, and I have still to be convinced that the combination is aesthetically successful. My six-year-old daughter also seemed to find the intrusion of "real people" into a world of make-believe slightly confusing, and her reaction may or may not be typical of the child mind (which, with such pictures, is a not unimportant consideration).

At the same time, the human element provides *Mr. Bug* with an ingenious theme. In a corner of ground just off Broadway lives a community of insects under constant threat from trampling boots, smouldering cigar butts, and worst of all, the steam shovel of the building contractor. Mrs. Ladybird's house is burnt down by a casually thrown match, Mr. Bumblebee's honey shop is barely saved from a similar fate, every now and then an earthquake rocks the place as some heavy vehicle passes; and added to all this is Fifth Column work by that villainous capitalist, the black-coated, black-hearted C. Bagley Beetle (who plans to force beautiful Honeybee to marry him) and his ridiculous henchmen, Swat the Fly, and Smack the Mosquito. So, like many another threatened community, the insects at last decide to seek a better place in which to live and, led by the hopeful hero of the piece (Hoppy the grass-hopper), they set out on a trek which, in its tiny way, is just as epic as that of the Mormons in *Brigham Young* or of the Joads in *Grapes of Wrath*. After many days in the wilderness, the wanderers at last find sanctuary in the garden of a penthouse atop a New York skyscraper, from which they gaze down on the humans far below with the comment that they look "just like little bugs."

There is something of Karel Capek in this comedy-drama in miniature, but while the film is not without irony and satire, and certainly not without its moments of genuine beauty, it has little of the subtlety and delicacy of imagination characteristic of a Disney opus. Instead it gains its effects in a broader, more forthright manner. But so far as tuneful songs go, it is quite the equal of the average Disney.

While I should hesitate to estimate *Mr. Bug's* general appeal, it is certainly only one grade below the top in its special class, and so it wins the award of a sit-down clap.