THE HORROR FILM: Program Three

Tonight we're devoting ourselves to the scientific and pseudo-medical aspect of the horror film, with doctors sane and insane, dedicated and selfish. This is of course the dominant school of the entire horror film field, a school which overlaps several other types of Grand Guignol film. Very briefly, and admittedly far from comprehensively, we'll cover highlights of the genre from 1920 to 1951.

Program, in order of screening:

DR. JEKYLL & MR. HYDE (Paramount, 1920) EXCERPTS Dir: John S. Robertson
With John Barrymore, Nita Naldi, Martha Mansfield, Louis Wolheim
Brandon Hurst, Charles Lang

The seventh filming of the classic Stevenson tale (there are around a dozen by now, with the inevitable "son" and "daughter" follow-ups too), this Barrymore version was perhaps the first really important American horror film, preceding "Phantom of the Opera" and other Chaney subjects by a number of years.

Following Stevenson's basic premise, if not his details, it presented the doctor as a sincerely motivated scientist -- but also imbued him with many of the qualities of Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray. Indeed, many of the subtitles in the film were direct quotes from Wilde, and the character of Sir George is quite obviously patterned on Lord Henry. Like most Paramounts of the period, it was inexpensively made, and the direction of John S. Robertson is no more than straightforward. But it's Barrymore's show all the way, and it's because of his performance that the film is still as powerful and even genuinely horrifying as it ever was.

METROPOLIS (UFA, 1926) EXCERPT Dir: Fritz Lang; with Brigitte Helm, Gustav Froelich, Alfred Abel, Rudolf Klein-Rogge

Not a horror film in the accepted sense, though it had many truly bizarre sequences, Fritz Lang's wonderful futuristic melodrama nevertheless fits into the format of this program for its fine laboratory sequence of the creation of the robot. It was the forerunner of many similar sequences, particularly in Universal's Frankenstein epics. The format of bubbling test-tubes and gigantic electrical flashes changed but little, although sound added extra conviction and menace.

THE INVISIBLE MAN (Universal, 1933) EXCERPTS Dir: James Whale; with Claude Rains, Gloria Stuart, Dudley Digges

Although often playing for stunt comedy, and soft-peddling the medical angle and lab scenes by stressing the results rather than the experiment itself, "The Invisible Man" was a fine melodrama, done with all of James Whale's customary style, and with the usual excellent camerawork from Arthur Edeson. Like "The Old Dark House" and "Bride of Frankenstein", both also by Whale, it has dated hardly at all. (His original "Frankenstein" dates rather more due to the complete absence of a musical score).

THE MUMMY'S HAND (Universal 1940) EXCERPTS Dir: Christy Cabanne; with George Zucco, Dick Foran, Tom Tyler, Peggy Moran

Although a pot-boiler, and made by a hack director, Christy Cabanne, "The Mummy's Hand", like all Universal horror films, at least had the advantage of polish and slickness. Actually, in 1940 it still preceded the grade B formula horror film that was to become a standby at PRC, Monogram, Republic and Universal itself in the early 40's. It was one of several -- I should say "many" -- horror films in which the scientific element was both slight and
meaningless, and merely an additional gimmick to a standard monster story. The reasons for keeping the mummy alive (not only in this, but in a number of dull sequels) seem flimsy to say the least, and even George Zuoco seems to realise it because it isn't too long before he's casting aside his priestly zeal and offering the heroine "eternal life" -- to which she responds with the time-honored "You're mad!" Though routine, and with a dull middle section, "The Mummy's Hand" was the best (and the first) of the vague follow-ups to Karl Freund's original "The Mummy" -- and the flashbacks are of course from that quite fine film.


Although still carefully made and with some good sequences, "Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man" marked the beginning of the end insofar as Universal's Frankenstein series was concerned. The previous four, in varying degrees, had all been good; but now merely dull echoes of Whale's original creation were left. In this (and three more follow-ups) everything became as standardised as in a B western; in the others, Dracula joined in the fun too. Mood, reasonable logic, suspense, all was sacrificed for a parade of cheap and unthrilling thrills. "Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man" was the beginning of this decline, true, but it wasn't too bad a film in itself. It kept its thrills well spaced, and the laboratory sequence was well done. There was a Frankenstein in the plot (Ilona Massey) - but the title obviously referred to the monster himself, and thus furthered the misconception that Frankenstein was the monster rather than its creator.

"THE THING" (Howard Hawks-Rko 1951) EXCERPT Dir: Christian Nyby; with Kenneth Tobey, Margaret Sheridan, Dewey Martin, and James Arness as "The Thing".

In the post-atomic age, science itself became the principal villain, with atomic experimentation the principal reason for (a) the revival of prehistoric monsters, (b) the creation of mutant-monsters, and (c) visitors (of a monstrous nature) from other planets. And the scientist himself, who in previous years had at least been interested in such potentially useful researches as transplanting brains or creating artificial hearts, could now, with even nobler motives (interplanetary understanding) create even greater havoc! "The Thing" was one of the first, and still one of the best, of the science-fiction horror films. However, it scored its thrills by logical understatement and by carefully built up suspense so that when the infrequent moments of physical horror came, they really paid off. In that sense, it is perhaps unfair to take a key (physical) sequence out of context, and use it as a representative excerpt. The film certainly is much subtler than our excerpt might lead one to expect. Rumors persist that it was actually directed (or at least co-directed) by Orson Welles, and certainly there are indications to that effect -- and not only in the non-stop overlapping dialogue either! Also, one always wonders when a director makes a gem of a film - like this one - and then does nothing else to even approach it. Nyby was an editor before he was associated with this film, and became an editor again afterwards. Directorial talents such as went into this film usually aren't discovered overnight; and if they are, they aren't shunted away again immediately. Beyond that, we'll make no comment ... one day perhaps the mystery will be cleared up conclusively.

INTERMISSION
"THE BODY SNATCHER" (Rko, 1945) Pro: Val Lewton; director: Robert Wise
Based on a short story by Robert Louis Stevenson;
photography: Robert de Grasse. 8 reels.
With Boris Karloff, Henry Daniell, Bela Lugosi, Russell Wade, Edith Atwater,
Eita Corday, Sharyn Moffett, Donna Lee.

Together with Jacques Tourneur's "Cat People", "The Body Snatcher" was quite
the best of the 9 Val Lewton horror films for Rko -- and the most literate.
(This literacy, incidentally, is not a legacy from the Robert Louis Stevenson
story, for the two have little in common). In a sense it was the most
"traditional" horror story in the Lewton group. The others dealt in super-
stition, fear, madness, black magic and devil worshipping, the supernatural,
ghosts, disease -- all basically unhealthy, or in the current vernacular,
"sick" subjects. Not that grave-robbing can be considered a really healthy or
commendable profession of course, but, in toto, "The Body Snatcher", unlike
the other Lewtons, dwells on constructive rather than destructive actions.
Its extremely well-written script utilizes the medical necessity (at that time)
of grave-robbing to provide some interesting ambiguities in character --
a hero who is weak, a villain who is strong. And even the villainy is not
prompted by the usual motives of greed or madness, but by far subtler, more
insidious ones ... the scene where Karloff explains just why he insists on his
unholy alliance with the doctor is a beautifully written (and acted) scene.
Although it's an unspectacular role, Karloff's performance here is quite easily
one of his best; and the same goes for Henry Daniell. Bela Lugosi makes his
weight felt in a supporting role, but it is obvious that he is there primarily
to provide the Karloff-Lugosi billing for the marquee.

As in "Cat People", there are but a few scenes of real terror here; but when
they come (and particularly in the nightmarish climax -- one of the finest of
horror sequences) they are really effective; even uncomfortably so.

Program Notes & Enquiries:
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Committee:
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Next programs:
Thursday Sept. 24th - room 10-C
"TEN NIGHTS IN A BAR ROOM" (1930) with William Farnum and Tom Santachi

CHAPLIN'S TRIP TO ENGLAND (1921 newsreel); I NEVER FORGET A FACE; Mary Fuller
in THE AFFAIR AT RAYNOR'S (ep.4 of "What Happened to Mary"); Lupino Lane &
Kathryn McGuire in NAUGHTY BOY (1927); Harry Langdon in HIS MARRIAGE WOW, with
Vernon Dent - a 1924 Mack Sennett.

Tuesday Sept. 29th:
Mal St. Clair's ARE PARENTS PEOPLE? (1925) Betty Bronson, Florence Vidor,
Adolphe Menjou, Andre Beranger
"HOODOO ANN" (Griffith-1916) Mae Marsh and Bobby Harron
"Dog Shy" (Roach-Leo McCarey) with Charlie Chase.