"THE INVISIBLE MAN" (Universal, 1931) Directed by James Whale
Scenario by R.C. Sheriff, from the novel by H.G. Wells
Camera: Arthur Edeson 7 reels


There can surely be no one here this evening who has not seen "The Invisible Man". But it has been some time - several years in fact - since the Museum of Modern Art last screened it, and longer still since it was afforded a theatrical showing, so a revival today seems in order, despite frequent exposure on TV.

One of four outstanding horror films that James Whale made for Universal in the early 30's, it is the "lightest" of the quartet in terms of actual horror content. In fact, initially it was sold via a number of differing approaches; one sales angle was to emphasise the trick camerawork and to push it as purely a fantasy, while yet another emphasised its comic content and down-graded its thriller potentialities entirely. Certainly there is less of the Gothic sense of terror that Whale instilled into "The Old Dark House" and the first two Frankenstein features - perhaps because it isn't really a very terrifying story. But Whale's superlative style is there throughout, along with the wit and good taste that was a hallmark of all of his films. It dates not one whit, and other than giving Una O'Connor rather too much of her head - presumably Whale just liked her, because he indulged her in the same way in "The Bride of Frankenstein" -- it provides little cause for any kind of criticism. Certainly its expert camerawork, its well-etched English atmosphere and its taut pacing make it one of the smoothest and most handsome of the early horror films, and it remains by far the best of the not very prolific series of only casually related "Invisible Man" follow-ups.

In the role originally slated for Karloff, Claude Rains is excellent, using hand and body movements not unlike those employed by Chaney in "The Phantom of the Opera". The scene in which the increasingly-mad scientist, swathed in bandages, explains his plan of world conquest to his frightened fiancée, is a beautifully acted - and directed - episode. But for all the very real menace, there's a pleasing tongue-in-cheek quality to much of it. "I think we'll begin with a reign of terror", muses the Invisible Man at one point!

There are minor errors of logic perhaps. The naked footprints in the snow are clearly those of a man wearing shoes. And it never seems quite clear why the British railways should maintain a switch which enables trains to be diverted over near-by cliffs! (This sequence later proved invaluable as stock footage in serials and "B" pictures). But why quibble ... it's a beautiful job, and makes one wish that Whale had stayed in the horror field far longer than he did.

Incidentally, an excellent new book re-evaluating the work of science-fiction and horror writers (and commenting with authority on the films made from such works) makes the valid and important point that the script of "The Invisible Man" - really owes as much to Philip Wylie as to Wells. (Wylie had also written an "Invisible Man" story which Universal had bought earlier, and much of which was incorporated into Sheriff's adaptation of the Wells novel). Uselessly and annoyingly, I cannot recall the name of this very worthwhile new book, which sells for around $6, but it shouldn't be difficult to trace in any good bookstore. There are excellent chapters on Edgar Rice Burroughs, Wells, Bram Stoker etc., and a good deal of useful (and often new) information on films deriving from such works.
"THE BLACK CAT" (Universal, 1934) Directed by Edgar G. Ulmer
Screenplay: Peter Ruric; camera: John Mescall; 7 reels
Reissued under the title "The Vanishing Body", and released in Europe as "The House of Doom".

(Note: Herman Bing and Luis Alberni are listed in the original cast, but do not appear; presumably their roles were taken by Albert Conti and Henry Armetta, who are not listed in the official cast).

The first of three bona-fide Karloff-Lugosi co-starring vehicles (they often appeared together later, but never in such showcase offerings, and usually with Lugosi in a lesser role), "The Black Cat" was easily the best, and the only one of the trio in which both stars really had thoroughly equal opportunities. (In "The Raven", Lugosi dominated, and in "The Invisible Ray" it was Karloff). Although allegedly based on the Poe story, it has no relationship to it whatsoever -- any more than the equally Poe-credited "The Raven" or a much later "The Black Cat" did. However, in its mood, in its oppressive, claustrophobic and generally unhealthy atmosphere, it does evoke a very real Poe feeling. It is slow, stately, its macabre story of devil worship imbued with a sense of death and decay which is furthered by some extremely literate and well-delivered dialogue. In a way, it may be considered one of the most successful attempts to transfer Poe to the screen -- even though it transfers only a mood and not a plot!

As we mentioned in our notes for "The Raven" a few weeks back, Karloff's screen performances fall into three categories -- those where he genuinely respects the role and gives of his best; those, like "The Raven", "Mask of Fu Manchu" and the later "The Raven" where he realises that the role cannot be taken seriously and approaches them in a fruity, tongue-in-cheek bravura style; and lastly, the uninspiring "Frankenstein 1970" and "Voodoo Island" roles where (somewhat unethically I feel) he merely walks through the part without effort, apparently on the theory that for such junk the prestige is his name is contribution enough. "The Black Cat" falls into the first of these categories, and together with "The Mummy", "Frankenstein" and "The Body Snatchers", must be considered as one of his finest characterisations. With his black costume, Satanic hair-style, and beautifully modulated and accented lines, his Hjalmar Poelzig is a marvellous incarnation of evil. And Lugosi too -- never as good an actor as Karloff, but capable of extremely good things at times -- rises to the occasion too, with one of his best performances. Its their show all the way, and the supporting players matter but little. David Manners is typically useless as always, but there are some interestingly depraved faces among the devil-worshippers.

The modernistic sets, the lighting, the slow, gliding camerawork of Charles Stumar are all helped in their creation of mood by a brilliant score, drawing largely on the classics (as did so many early horror scores) and particularly on an imaginatively orchestrated arrangement of Liszt's Piano Sonata in B, and Schumann's quintet in E Flat Major, op. 44 -- with a few lashings of Tchaikovsky here and there. Incidentally, the story-line is both a sadistically "sick" and a complicated one. Unless we got our family trees mixed up, Karloff -- who marries both Lugosi's wife and daughter -- winds us up as Bela's father-in-law! All in all "The Black Cat" is probably the best film of that interesting but over-rated director Edgar Ulmer -- and needless to say, it's the one that the Cahiers critics never seem to write about. His later "B" melodramas seem to excite them far more.

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