Two horror films by Lambert Hillyer

The career of the still living but filmically inactive Lambert Hillyer (his last work was for television, a few years ago) roughly parallels that of Elmer Clifton. Clifton, at his best, was probably the better director, but both made films efficiently, quickly and with versatility. Both were at their peak in the silent period, and in the sound years both found themselves directing primarily actioners and westerns. Hillyer had directed many of the best William S. Hart silents, as well as some of the Jones and Mix westerns at Fox; his talkie westerns, though less ambitious, generally maintained a high standard ("White Eagle" with Buck Jones, "The Gentleman from Texas" with Johnny Mack Brown). In 1936, despite the presence in the studio of James Whale, Louis Friedlander and other directors who had earlier made successful horror films, Universal curiously handed two horror scripts to Hillyer. Neither of the two films - THE INVISIBLE RAY and DRACULA'S DAUGHTER - can be considered major horror films. But they are remarkably smoothly done and succeed in establishing mood so well that it is worth noting that they represent Hillyer's only work in the genre. On other occasions too, the use of a western director on horror films has had happy results. Used to working quickly and improvising frequently, the western director, if he is worth his salt, is often able to extract far more in terms of production value from the still modest budget which is, however, practically in the "luxury" class compared with the money he is usually allocated. As producer, writer and/or director, another Universal western and serial veteran Ford Beebe brought real class values to such films as "Son of Dracula" and "The Invisible Man's Revenge", and over at Republic Lesley Selander did likewise on films like "Catman of Paris". Tonight's two Lambert Hillyer films however, are certainly the best and most ambitious of this small group of Grand Guignol epics made by directors on temporary leave from the horse opera.

DRACULA'S DAUGHTER (Universal, 1936) Directed by Lambert Hillyer
Produced by E.M. Arden; screenplay by Garrett Fort, suggested from characters created by Bram Stoker; camera: George Robinson; 7 reels.

For many years, "Dracula's Daughter" was always rather casually pushed aside perhaps because it lacked a key personality like Karloff or Lugosi on which to focus attention. Also, in 1936 the initial sound horror cycle was fading away, and a film like this - all plot and mood, little in the way of action or spectacular thrills - seemed tame indeed compared with such contemporaries as THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN and THE RAVEN. Today however,
when we have been surfeited with horror films that give us a maximum in shock and gore, to the usual exclusion of mood, its values seem rather more substantial. It’s a thoughtful, well-constructed little film with some excellent camerawork, a first-class score, and some really well-written passages of dialogue. The performances are uniformly good, only the irritating heroine (poorly played by Marguerite Churchill, then Mrs George O’Brien) and the amateurish acting by the bit player cast as a bookseller, being below par. The opening reel is fine, picking up exactly where "Dracula" left off, dropping a couple of characters and admittedly assuming that everyone saw "Dracula" so not bothering with a resume. With a well-controlled undercurrent of humor, this first section of the film is extremely well done. The middle portions have occasional lags, the pace slackens and there is too much bantering by-play between hero and heroine. But well before the end, the loose strings are tautened, and the pacing of the final reel leaves nothing at all to be desired. And even in the slower middle area, there are rewarding sequences, specifically the vampire’s utilisation of a young girl (well played by Nan Grey) to test her own powers of resistance to the vampire taint – a sequence that has the hint of a vampiric-lesbian relationship that was carried to a more erotic extreme in Vadim’s “Blood and Roses”.

Most of our favorite lines and situations are trotted out. Edward Van Sloan has his inevitable “Destroy it!” line, a product of the brand of single-mindedness that he brought to his earlier encounters with Dracula, the Frankenstein monster and the Mummy.

The doctors muse again about the significance of those two little punctures over the jugular vein, and the vampire, in addition to tossing off that one about eternal life, repeats intact one of her father’s best-remembered remarks — “I never drink wine.” Her entrances and exits from the coffins of native earth are photographed in exactly the same way as Lugosi’s similar scenes in the original — a hand raising the coffin, a cutaway, and a pullback — presumably on the theory that getting in and out of coffins is both cumbersome and graceless, and the illusion of undead elegance is better served by not showing the actual mechanics.

All told, "Dracula’s Daughter" holds up rather well. The few big sets look expensive even if they are not, and standing sets (e.g., Ming’s laboratory from "Flash Gordon") are cunningly disguised and put into service. In its own way, it’s almost a model of how care and style can really make a fairly inexpensive picture look like a much bigger one. Of course, it’s somewhat of a mystery why Universal didn’t do a much more elaborate sequel to "Dracula" with Lugosi repeating; just as it is a mystery why "Son of Kong" looked like such a quickie compared with "King Kong". But while "Son of Kong" was a most unworthy sequel, even playing it all for laughs as though to kill it off once and for all, "Dracula’s Daughter" is a follow-up that one can both enjoy and respect.

--- Intermission ---

"THE INVISIBLE RAY" (Universal, 1936) Directed by Lambert Hillyer
Produced by Edmund Grainger; screenplay by John Calton from a story by Howard Higgin and Douglas Hodges; camera: George Robinson and John P. Fulton; 8 reels.

Made before "Dracula’s Daughter", "The Invisible Ray" was Hillyer’s first horror film, and the last of the trio of Karloff-Lugosi co-starring films. (Later they co-starred "in name only" for billing purposes, but in films like "Black Friday", "Son of Frankenstein", "You'll Find Out" and "The Body Snatcher" Lugosi’s role was always a much smaller one than Karloff’s). All three K-L specials were
surprisingly varied. The first and best, "The Black Cat", had real style, and
offered Lugosi a sympathetic role and Karloff one of his rare wholly evil
roles. The second, "The Raven", was the most fun — wild, serial-like stuff —
with Lugosi in by far the bigger role as the villain, and Karloff as a
sympathetic lesser menace. "The Invisible Ray" is in a sense the least of the
trio, but it is also the one with the best basic story and the longest running
time. An elaborate production in every sense, it is also unique in that this time
both Karloff (relatively speaking) and Lugosi are completely sympathetic. Alas,
they never got round to one in which both stars were unspeakable villains!

Perhaps because this was Hillyer's first horror film, it is less confident than
"Dracula's Daughter" in establishing mood. The opening visuals are fine — a
Gothic castle in a thunderstorm, forbidding sets, black cloaks and Wagnerian
music. Then somebody says "Who'd ever expect to find a place like this on top
of the Carpathian Mountains?" — and one wonders whether it is partially tongue
in cheek or not. Throughout, despite a good and potentially serious story-line,
odd characters and lines strike a violently theatrical note, especially Frank
Lawton and Frances Drake as the lovers, so determined to keep their relationship
"clean and decent". Rather obvious studio "exteriors" and clichéd jungle
costuming also tend to make one think of it as a full-blown barnstormer every
so often. But luckily there's far more pulling for it than against it. The
performances of Karloff and Violet Kemble Cooper are quite excellent; the
script follows a certain logic, and the special effects are well done without
straining for shock. Again, the music and George Robinson's camerawork are
prime assets. For the rest, the Flash Gordon sets and stock footage of the old
Frankenstein machines are put to work usefully, and interestingly enough the
footage of Karloff descending into the meteor crater was later used in a serial,
"The Phantom Cries", only then it was Lugosi who was after the precious
mineral! The cast is full of old reliables, including Walter Miller who presumably
couldn't speak French, since his voice is dubbed. In an attempt at a little
more depth than usual, there is also a foreword — something Universal rarely
bothered with in their horror films, though it was a device that Val Lewton was
later to use to the hilt in his RKO series. Perhaps if the horror cycle hadn't
seemed near its end, Hillyer might have followed through with more films as good
as these two. As it was, when the next horror cycle began three years later with
"Son of Frankenstein", Hillyer had left Universal and was concentrating on
westerns and actioners again, and it was to Universal contractees like Howland
V. Lee, Joe May, Christy Cabanne, Eric C. Kenton, Roy William Neill, George
Wagner and Arthur Lubin that the new horror properties went.

PUBLICATIONS I'm sure none of you need any urging to pick it up, but for the
record the new MMA book "D.W. Griffith" - a re-publication of the Iris Barry
volume, with a great deal of painstaking additional indexing and comment by
Eileen Bower, with some fine stills - is an absolute "Must". It's a handsome
volume and invaluable for study, reference, research and just the plain pleasure
of reading it. Eileen Bower has done a superb job on this, and deserves the
thanks and gratitude of us all. It is plainly going to be one of the most
important single volumes on the cinema.

On a less academic but equally specialised level, Alan Barbour and Screen Facts
Magazine have put out an issue devoted solely to the 56 serials of Republic,
with a good representative still from each, plus credits, chapter titles etc.
Because of the expense of all those stills and the very limited market, it isn't cheap at $3.95. But it's a good and recommended buy for the serial
devotees and collectors of miscellaneous historians. (Others probably wouldn't
want it anyway, so the price is perhaps no real barrier). Available from Gotham
Book Mart, or from Screen Facts, PO Box 145, Kew Gardens. We have one sample
copy of each publication for perusal this evening.