There can surely be nobody who wants to see "Bride ...." and "Son ...." who hasn't already had an opportunity -- although it is surprising how many people do manage to miss the most obscure films. In my film history courses, I am constantly amazed at the number of people who have never seen "Citizen Kane" and "Modern Times" and desperately want to -- and to whom "The Treasure of Sierra Madre" is already an old, long-ago classic, not too far removed in their minds from "The Birth of a Nation". In any case, we really need no excuse to show these two films; between them, they're the best of their series, and good films as well as good horror films. For some reason, we never have shown them; their last NY showing was at the Museum of Modern Art's horror cycle a few years ago, and their last theatrical showing, in tandem, must go back some 15 years.

"THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN" (Universal, 1935) Directed by James Whale
Produced by Carl Laemmle jr., Camera: John H. Scofield; Music: Franz Waxman Screenplay by John Balderston and William Hurlbut, suggested from the original story by Mary W. Shelley; editor: Ted Kent; 8 reels

By far the best of Universal's eight Frankenstein films (the monster's activities dwindled after the first four, and in #8 he was merely a stooge for Abbott and Costello) "The Bride of Frankenstein" is probably also the best of the entire man-made-monster genre from any period. If one can separate the former film only by the genuine frill that it inspires, then "Bride" perhaps might have to take a secondary position, but in terms of style, visual design, literate scripting, performance, music and just about every other individual ingredient, it is practically unsurpassed. As an essay in Gothic grand guignol, it far surpasses its predecessor (which, good though it was, lacked pace and especially lacked the dynamics of a good musical score), and yet, despite its care and lavish budget, it also has an effective rough-hewn quality which the slicker and more polished later ones failed to realise, or more probably, deliberately avoided.

There are admittedly flaws in "The Bride". It tries a little too hard to become the absolute peak of its genre, and while it succeeded (so well, that it was not only the peak but also the climax of its particular cycle) its constant repetition of shock and sensation, from the first sequence on works against it. One is never as afraid of the monster as one is in his first scene in the charred mill; with less shock, and a subtler handling of the character, Murray's Nosferatu and Mamoulian's Mr. Hyde became more horrendous as their films progressed. Also, the occasional mixture of sex and religion is sometimes alarmingly close to being offensive, and is rescued only by James Whale's ever-present sense of good taste.

Just as the original "Frankenstein" derived a great deal from "The Gothic", so does "Bride" (originally made and publicised as "The Return of Frankenstein") also draw a great deal from some of the silent German fantasies. The movements of Elsa Lanchester's head, and the framing of her close-ups, are quite clearly patterned on those of Brigitte Helm as the robot in "Metropolis". Indeed, Brigitte Helm (and also Louise Brooks) was among the players Whale at one time had in mind for the role of the monster's mate.

The film shows occasional signs of having been reshaped, with sequences transposed, after completion; and a cut that has always been there (after the monster has kidnapped Frankenstein's bride) renders inexplicable one of Thesiger's lines. Continuity is the name, and continuity has been rather less than replete. Frankenstein has been living in sin for a while since he and his beloved are sharing the same quarters before their marriage. The period is somewhat in doubt too, with Thesiger beating Alexander Graham Bell to the invention of the telephone (herein called just "an electrical device") yet using a great deal of post-Bell equipment in his laboratory work! The post-code moralities of the 30's come through quite plainly however in the burgomaster's admonition that "it is high time every man and wife was home in bed!"

But it seems churlish to quibble over such a lavish and enjoyable fairy-tale, which has genuine pathos to offer along with all its thrills. Karloff's performance is one of his best. Incidentally, the scenes where he discovers the corpse of the young girl who is to be transformed into his bride were cut in Europe - thus making far less effective the scenes where he is ultimately confronted with another monstrousness. Thesiger of course steals the whole show with a marvellously written and played bravura performance, though Dwight Frye also gets the best and juiciest lines of his career in this one. Entirely studio-made (unlike "Frankenstein", which did use one or two actual exteriors) "Bride" is never at too many pains to make its sets convincing, but
since they are consistent, they work. The trick work — especially involving Theisger's miniature people — is ingenious, and the laboratory scenes are the best and most elaborate ever created for this kind of film. Waxman's score, ranging from the march as the dim-witted villagers take to their torches yet again, to the peals of church bells when the bride is presented, is likewise superb. The interior sets, making good use of painted shadows, and also of such standing sets as the crypt — also used in "Dracula" and "The Mystery of Edwin Drood", are all beautifully designed — though one does wonder what kind of oversized delinquents ran wild through the countryside with such regularity and jauntiness and partial prevalence of that huge stone throne and chains, conveniently just the monster's size!

— Intermission —


Although Whale was still at Universal, and in '39 made "Green Hell", Lee was getting the bigger plums now and was handed "Son of Frankenstein" as well as "Tower of London". Lee had nowhere near Whale's taste, and he veered to the unpleasant far more than Whale has done. However, Lee was quite expert at imitating the style of others, and the beat of "Son" is the beat of Whale. However, Lee's own style, such as it was, was plodding and Germanic, and "Son of Frankenstein" is much too long to sustain feelings of terror or genuine excitement — especially since an obvious trait of a child obviously has no fear of the monster, and thus we, the audience, can't be expected to be too concerned either. Moreover, in its attempts at "class", the film downhill physical action: the monster's first appearance comes very late in the day, and scenes of violence — murders, the laboratory scenes — are quite cursory. Nevertheless, it's a fascinating film, and if only on the level of its art direction, sets, lighting, and overall visual elegance, must certainly rank as the second best film in the series. Via constant rain, thunder and gloom, it creates its own nightmarish world; we never see the sun or sense the fresh air, and the only trees we see are all dead. The little town is as unreal as Fairbanks' Bagdad, but as convincing since Lee, like Doug, never shows it to us in juxtaposition with things that are real. Everything — from the rain to the doorknocker to the distorted stairs — are magnified to giant nightmare proportions. It's one of the most exciting, and certainly one of the most Germanic, visual modes to be created by any Hollywood film, and especially in that rather prosaic period.

Mentally the monster continues to be somewhat inconsistent from film to film. The voice and humanity he had acquired in "Bride" are here forgotten. In the next one, "Ghost of..." he acquires Lugosi's brain and voice, but goes blind. #5 ("Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man") restored his eye-sight, but took away his voice again! The villagers however retain their own fickle reliability, of "Son" he has all manner and devotion as they bid Baron Frankenstein farewell at the railway station, unaware of course that Sir Cedric Hardwicke is due in on the 4:10.

The melodrama is a little more logical in "Son", which certainly doesn't have one of those convenient all-purpose levers that blew up everything in "Bride". The performances, generally, are restrained, Lugosi being especially good and touching as Igor (one of his most under-rated performances), though Rathbone, sad to say, is decidedly hammy even allowing for the hysterical note on which his role is written. The dialogue is joy, though the best lines are the unintentionally funny ones, as opposed to the rich and fruity theatrics of "Bride". "Strange country ...." mutters Rathbone, looking at the forest of dead trees and dry-ice mist. Examining the monster, he also diagnoses that "no human heart could beat like that", quite forgetting that it is the "very fresh" heart that Dwight Frye obtained by rather direct methods back in "Bride". The maid's solemn little verse — "When the house is filled with dread, place the bed at head to head" is a bit of Pennsylvania worth remembering, as is his solemn "He doin' things for me, referring to his omnivorousness with the monster. Atwill has one marvellous lapse of tact when he is describing a victim's mutilations ("The cart passed over his chest .... his heart burst") and raises the blanket just in time to give the corpse's grief-stricken widow a good eyeful. But perhaps the best line comes when poor Edgar Norton (the doctor's assistant in Mar's Jekyll and Hyde too) has vanished, and a helpful servant offers the information: "We sent him up to the nursery for the baby's supper-tray, and we haven't seen him since!" Lines like this quite seem to fit in the surrealistic-nightmare framework of the whole, in which a man-eating tot would seem not at all out of place.

— Wil, K. Everson —