"The Mask of Fu Manchu" ( MGM, 1932) Directed: Charles Brabin and Charles Vidor; Screenplay by Irene Kuhn, Edgar Allan Woolf and John Willard from the novel by Sax Rohmer; Camera, Tony Gaudio; 7 Reels With Boris Karloff, Lewis Stone, Karen Morley, Myrna Loy, Charles Starrett, Jenn Herholtz, Lawrence Grant, David Torrence, E.A. Warren

One of the chief delights of "The Mask of Fu Manchu" is its refusal to admit that it is an MGM glossy, and its determination to conduct itself at all times like a wild and woolly silent Pathe serial. Somehow this gives the whole film the look of a rehearsal which paid off so well in spontaneous gusto that they never bothered to shoot the film proper; this off-the-cuff look extends to both props (Fu Manchu's laboratory for example, with snakes and tantalizingly happily slithering out of containers that are too small for them) and performances. Despite the professional aplomb of Lewis Stone and Karloff, most of the players perform as though they had no idea into what context their scenes would fall, and indeed many of Karen Morley's reactions and lines do in fact contradict themselves. The art direction too seems to have a non-Oriental life of its own, since Fu's big laboratory has the lush yet sterile look of an Academy Award banquete hall, with decois lined up like glistening human Oscars. Yet we know that this was no off-the-cuff cheapie, and encountered the usual MGM travails; director #1 was fired to be replaced by director #2 (Brabin), and many scenes were shot for the film's least of reasons; e.g., at one point it was Lewis Stone who was trapped in the spiked torture device, until somebody thought it would be more menacing and potentially more gory to have fat and perspiring Jean Harlow quivering before those spikes! Its racism - Hollywood's concern with the "Yellow Peril" - was still at its peak - is too delightfully overdone to be offensive, and works both ways. Fu and his peppy mascot/hymenaphal daughter freely admit that it is the Oriental's purpose to kill all the white men and mate with their women; in return, Lewis Stone is less florid but no less biting in his insults, and in the climax even leaves a death ray running amok to mow down any hapless Oriental that might stray into its path. Whether the dialogue be jingoistically underplayed, as in the lovely opening sequence, or flamboyantly overplayed (as in most of the rest of the film) it's a constant joy; the pace never lets up, and Karloff gives one of his finest bravura heavy performances. Just as the book was one of Rohmer's best, so the film is easily the best of the surprisingly few Fu Manchu movies that Hollywood and England have made.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERLUDE ---

"Mad Love" ( MGM, 1935) Directed by Karl Freund

"Mad Love" has recently stirred up some belated intellectual interest thanks to Pauline Kael's references to it in her two-part article on "Citizen Kane", wherein she equates Welles' Welles' makeup with Lorre's, and also suggests that some of Toland's German expressionist style may have derived from his earlier work on this film - although the much later (and much closer to "Kane") "Son of Frankenstein" is far more marked in its Germanic photographic style. But if her remarks serve, like a tv teaser, to whet the appetites of those who might otherwise consider the film beneath them, all well and good. For "Mad Love", coming at the apex of Hollywood's big horror cycle (1935 was also the year of "The Bride of Frankenstein" and "Mark of the Vampire") is quite one of the best Hollywood chillers.

Unlike "The Mask of Fu Manchu", this is no tongue-in-cheek affair. While there is some levity in the film, it is largely limited to inside joking. Karl Freund, a superb cameraman who dabbled briefly in direction, and in 1932 had directed the Karloff film "The Mummy" repeats (in similar fashion) one of the key lines from that film ("It went for a little walk!") and there's a rather contemptuous humor in starting off the whole film in the framework of a gaily巡视 Guignol performance. Not only does it set up the bizarre character of Dr. Gogol (Peter Lorre in his first American film), but it rather maliciously teases the noses of audiences who dote on sadistic horror- namely, the audiences that have paid to see "Mad Love"

But apart from that, there is (rightly) little humor in the film, and Freund manages to overcome even the comedy-relief formula casting of Ted Healey. Healey does have an occasional funny line, but for the most part his role is distorted so that it provides pace and some punctuation, but never slows down for comedy injections. While the film is a visually handsome production, with some extremely good sets, it is much less of a cameraman's film than was "The Mummy"; if anything, though more erotic, it absorbs much of the stately gothic style of James Whale. (It's rather poetic justice too, to see Colin Clive, the erstwhile Dr. Frankenstein, himself the victim of an entreprizing mad doctor!) The story itself is a good one; the Leh's screen service many times (including once as a London stage vehicle for John Mills) and this screen adaptation - written by those specialists in the macabre, Messers. Endore and Balderston - is quite the best movie version, with several justifiable changes. The emphasis this time is shifted from the long-suffering hero to the twisted psychopathic villain. In the silent German version, Conrad Veidt played the pianist on such a sustained note of hysteria and madness that there was no room for his "deterioration"; furthermore, the sets for even the most commonplace of locations (a restaurant, for example) were so gloom and doom laden that there was no hint of normalcy
about any of the milieu, and thus the film took on the aspects of a nightmare. Conversely, a recent version with Mel Ferrer and Christopher Lee tried so hard to be "respectable" and psychological that it eased out all of the thrills. "Mad Love" has its flaws certainly; one of them is the casting of Ed Brophy as the killer who is guillotined. He is just too human and likeable (especially now, when he is even more familiar as a comic performer) to suggest exacting a baleful influence from beyond the grave. And the climax, while neatly disposing of the villain, does tend to gloss over the fact that the hero is still left with his rather embarrassing personal problems -- grafted killer's hands that insist on throwing knives and show no aptitude for piano playing. But perhaps one shouldn't quibble -- unless it be to complain that Karl Freund didn't see fit to go the whole way, and leave this black thriller with the suggestion that the hero will in fact, in time, kill his loving wife, thus fulfilling the old quotation that each man kills the thing he loves.

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