Two Virtually Lost Film Noir Thrillers

THE GHOST SHIP (Rko Radio, 1943) Directed by Mark Robson; produced by Val Lewton; scenario by Donald Henderson Clarke from a story by Leo Mittler; Camera, Nicholas Musuraca; Music, Roy Webb; 7 reels

Although not officially withdrawn, "The Ghost Ship" has been generally withheld for many years, and for reasons none too explicable. It was the subject of a plagiarism suit which, although apparently without foundation, was lost by Rko. They paid up, and then, instead of trying to recoup those costs, kept a deliberately low profile on the film. Initial distribution was sparse, and subsequent theatrical showings virtually nil. It has shown up on tv very occasionally, but it is eminently unsuited to that medium: it is so black, physically, that it must be virtually unseeable on tv.

There also seems to be an official curse on screenings: the author of the book on Val Lewton records numerous unsuccessful attempts at screening, and on one occasion the projector burst into flames! When this print was run for a student class in NY just a few months back, all the power in the screening room was inexplicably turned off a few minutes before the end! So cross your fingers, light a candle, or invite the help of other powers, to ensure that tonight's screening goes off without a hitch! Incidentally, tonight's print is a dupe, but a good one: the original prints had more textural richness to the photography, but the dupe are a little lighter, and it's easier to see what is going on in those dark, unlit halls and cabins! It's a fascinating film, owing its inspiration perhaps to Jack London's "The Sea Wolf", but - like so many unavailable films - perhaps somewhat over-rated, though it is so different from the other Rko Lewtons that it is difficult to make direct comparisons with others in the series. Its main flaw is in the pretentious and rather ponderous direction of Mark Robson, who seems determined to make a name for himself and to let direction dominate. Robert Wise, who like Robson, started with Lewton as an editor and graduated to direction, was more generous in allowing script and actors to get their share of the limelight, and his "The Body Snatcher" is perhaps the best of this interesting series. Oddly, the careers (and talents; the latter balanced strongly in Wise's direction) of Wise and Robson have been roughly parallel ever since: Wise's "The Set-Up" went into release at the same time as Robson's "Champion", and more recently both entered the "disaster" areas. Wise with "The Hindenburg" and Robson with "Earthquake". The plot of "The Ghost Ship" really needs is not its plethora of pictorial style, but more time for the plot, tensions and characterisations to build steadily and logically. In order to fit into 70 minutes, there are too many short cuts - such as the Skelton Knaggs character, combining Lang's Destiny figure with a Greek chorus. Nevertheless, it's a literate, intelligent and stylish little thriller, and it's good to have it back.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

THE HOUSE BY THE RIVER (Republic, 1950) Directed by Fritz Lang; produced by Howard Welsch; Associate Producer, Robert Peters; Scenario by Nel Dinell from a novel by A.P. Herbert; Camera, Edward Cronjager; Music, George Antheil; Art Director, Bert Leven; 9 reels
With Louis Hayward, Jane Wyatt, Lee Bowman, Dorothy Patrick, Ann Shoemaker, Jody Gilbert, Peter Brocco, Howland Chamberlain, Margaret Seddon, Sarah Padden, Kathleen Freeman, Will Wright, Leslie Kimmell, Brie Laird.

Although only a quarter of a century old, "The House by the River" is, to all intents and purposes, a lost film. For reasons never made clear, the original 35mm negative deteriorated, and apparently no good 35mm prints remain in good enough condition for a new dupe negative to be struck. In any case, the film is physically so black and dark that any copy would lose so much detail and pictorial nuance as to be quite inadequate. The 16mm print we have tonight is, black or not, exceptionally good and may well be the best print extant. It has been used - with much care - over the past few years to represent Lang in various retrospectives, here and in Europe.

Although his films of the 30's and early 40's had been well spaced, Lang's career was even less active in the late forties, with only three films between Autumn of 1944 and "The House By The River", released in the Spring of 1950. However, it marked the beginning of his most prolific Hollywood period - the first of ten films over a six-year stretch. Most of them tended to be rather second-rate Lang; in later years, he repudiated the
strong visual style of his earlier films, and claimed that the plot should be everything, and the director’s signature of little importance. However, this may well have been because his eyesight was then beginning to fail and, of necessity, he was forced into stories where dialogue and acting, rather than pictorial virtuosity, carried most of the film, too, and equally important, in the 50’s theme rather than style was considered more important, and Lang, like any professional film-maker, looking for new assignments, would at least pay lip service to being a part of the current filmic fashion. With the exception of the much under-rated "Moonfleet", "The House By The River" is about the last stand of the old Lang: stark, nightmarish, abrasively anti-social in its parade of blacking, petty small-town types, and like most of his films, existing in its own little totally studio-created world, without any hint of genuine fresh air or real exteriors. Together with its companion film tonight, it must represent an extreme in the physically black entries in the film-noir genre. Although not a major Lang, it is certainly a typical one, and increasingly, an unfamiliar one: to my recollection its last New York showing was early in 1951 at the now defunct Chelsea Theatre on 8th Avenue. Lang himself seems to have liked the film, despite the censorship problems it posed (outlined in his interview book with Peter Bogdanovich). I was involved, very marginally, in a proposed Lang film some 13 years back. It was to be based on a famous murder case and trial in Maine at the turn of the century. Its bleak, snowbound, coastal setting fascinated Lang, as did the case itself, which had many amazing twists and ambiguities, despite the "Guilty" verdict ultimately imposed. He planned it as a semi-documentary reconstruction. He was to follow all the court records to the letter, but the setting and the characters involved were already suggesting legitimate "amplification" to him in the preliminary script talks. During these talks, he constantly referred back to "The House By The River" with obvious affection, and also hoped to re-use Lee Bowman in the lead, alas, the project came to nothing: budget estimates were far too high, and possibly Lang himself grew less enthusiastic when he realised the hardships involved (especially for a man of his age) in extended winter location shooting. He never did get to direct another film, but his filmic farewell could not have been more appropriate. It was "The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse". The hopefully definitive and certainly very ambitious book on Lang by Lotte Eisner should be out later this year.

William K. Everson

I am sorry to be away this week since both films are likely to provoke lively discussion sessions, but we can take up any questions next week. As a post-script to last week’s program, I would like to mention the notes - and remembered only during the discussion - that Francis Ford Coppola screened the 1914 "The Italian" before shooting "The Godfather" and was much impressed by it.