As indicated on last week's notes, I have to be away this week and therefore there will be no intro or discussion session, but I think that next week's audience should be virtually the same as tonight's — mystery and horror are, after all, fairly closely related, and so are their audiences! — so any of tonight's questions can be held over until next week.

(Relatively) Sophisticated Horror: the term "horror" of course is a misnomer today, and merely a convenient label by which to identify a group of stylish films from the 30's and 40's. Some of them may seem in the face of the unrestricted visual horrors so rampant on the screen today, in their time they did thrill and often chill. Audiences were less sophisticated then, and certainly less inured to casual horror on screen, via TV in the security of a home, and real horror through TV coverage of war and death. Censorship was stronger, especially abroad where many countries frowned on horror product, so Hollywood tended to be stronger on imagination and suggestion than on explicit carnage, and the films benefitted immeasurably thereby. Even though neither of today's horror films can be considered in the top echelon of their genre, they still have a good deal of craftsmanship, style, literacy and solid performances. Incidentally, on this occasion pressure of time prevented my re-screening the prints to make careful notes of the names of the many bit and extra players that always abound in these Paramount films. So those of you who enjoy keeping those kinds of records are advised to have your notebooks and pencils at the ready as the films unreel this evening.

AMONG THE LIVING (Paramount, 1941) Directed by Stuart Heisler; Produced by Sol G. Siegel; Associate Producer, Colbert Clark; Screenplay by Lester Cole and Garrett Fort from a story by Cole and Brian Naylor; Camera, Theodor Sparkuhl; 68 mins. Music: Gerald Carbonara.


When "Son of Frankenstein" started off a whole new horror cycle in 1939, most of the studios climbed aboard the proverbial bandwagon, some like Universal and Columbia turning out a fairly prolific year's worth of contributions, others, like Warners, MGM and Fox, making only token attempts to cater to the new market. Paramount however turned out a quartet of quite distinctive (and unrelated) horror films in 1940-41, of which tonight's duo are perhaps the most interesting. For the record, the first, and most elaborate, was "Doctor Cyclops," and the other one was "The Monster and the Girl" (also directed by Stuart Heisler), perhaps the least effective as a chiller, but fascinating for its cast and the incredible way that it thumbs its nose at the Production Code. It's really all about white slavery, yet played within the framework of our old friend, the gorilla with the transformed human brain. It's a film that we plan to run soon, more for its curiosity value than ingenuity than for its horror.

"Among the Living," which is as much film noir as it is a horror chiller, is in many ways the best of the lot. It has the most intelligent story-line, and were it not forced to accelerate everything to fit the needs of a 65-minute picture, it could have been quite a picture. More time ... more logic ... a bigger budget might have made it a minor classic — but on the other hand, with those advantages come added responsibilities too, and bigger stars to be catered to. As a more important film it might have been taken more seriously — but it might also have been far less interesting. As it is, it moves along nicely, and its one big bravura sequence — the dance hall episode, followed by the murder — is beautifully staged, photographed and edited, a model of how to create suspense and excitement without a payoff in gore. (The climactic killing is done in an extreme long shot, with virtually everything left to the imagination, and it's still a bigger thrill, if a less repellant one, than most of the knife and razor slashing killings in contemporary thrillers. Quite incidentally, if this sequence is a model of taste and craftsmanship, it also became a model of Hollywood's lack of taste in selling its product. This sequence, cut and re-arranged, became virtually the whole coming attraction trailer for the film, promising violence and savagery which the film itself was at pains to avoid.)

Stuart Heisler, with an apprenticeship as an editor and assistant director going back into the early 30's, was one of Paramount's most interesting new directors in the 40's, though somewhat overlooked because of the brilliance (and attendant publicity) of Preston Sturges. He had made the beautiful "The Biscuit Eater" in 1940, and was to make a number of other extremely interesting Paramounts of the early 40's, including "The Remarkable Andrew" and the much under-rated "The Glass Key." After cinematographic service with the army during the war, he resumed his directoral career on bigger pictures after the war, and his 15 odd pictures between 1945 and 1956 included some very successful and quite off-beat films (such as "Storm Warning") but somehow the tremendous early promise was never quite fulfilled. "Among the Living" and "The Glass Key" are probably still his best pictures.

Some of the other credits for "Among the Living" are rather interesting. Caseraman Sparkuhl, a German veteran, brings some typical expressionistic lighting to certain sequences. Writer Lester Cole was one of the more open of the "Unfriendly Ten," candidly admitting that he was a Communist, but no propagandist input into his films. ("Wright Flies High," "Chung King" and "The House of Seven Cables" provide ample evidence to the contrary!) However, despite the fertile field of a Southern mill community with rampant unemployment, he does pass up the opportunity for propagandising here; in fact the capitalist is the good guy, trying to re-open the mills, while the "little people" in this instance are generally uncouth and lymph-happy.

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The murder victim, Jean Phillips, was once a stand-in for Ginger Rogers, and her uncanny resemblance to Rogers did not help her career. She played in a number of B's and programmers at Paramount and for Hal Roach but that was all; a pretty girl and a good actress, but the resemblance was just too startling to audiences.

Sugar Boyden, at a relatively early stage in her career, is vivacious and beautiful, and above all, gives a good performance — reminding us what we so often lose in a player when fame comes along and the star image takes over.

And it's rather bizarre and a little sad to find Albert Dekker and Frances Farmer (both from the New York stage, both once of tremendous promise, and both basically failures in Hollywood, at least by Hollywood standards) co-starring in one film in the virtual twilight of their careers. Farmer's films were now trailing off; they had been of decreasing importance, and only one was left - "Son of Fury", released a month after "Among the Living" before her gradual descent into mental breakdown and the incredible horror story that she lived just long enough to put into a partially ghost-written autobiography. As for Dekker, many active years of film acting remained - but he would never achieve the stardom or the worthwhile roles that he felt he deserved. His own rather spectacular suicide is still one of Hollywood's weirdest. The sense of tragedy and death that hangs over "Among the Living" gives it a kind of posthumous morbidity. But it's a good, solid, worthwhile little film that deserves far more recognition than it has received, and apart from (I think only one) showing at the St. Marks, it hasn't been on a large theatre screen for years. (Print quality is generally good though the print is a little worn; since it isn't in distribution any more, we are lucky to get it at all).

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Ten Minute Intermission
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THE MAD DOCTOR (Paramount, 1941) Directed by Tim Whelan; produced by George Arthur; Screenplay by Howard Green; Camera, Ted Tetzlaff; 90 min. Music: Victor Young

Paramount actually made "The Mad Doctor" right after "Dr. Cyclops", its length and scale indicating that they probably intended to follow through with more grade-A horror films. But they were over-producing at the same, and over-exposing certain stars — Ellen Drew especially, who was turning up in picture after picture. Many films were shelved for surprisingly long periods (some even later sold off to United Artists) and "The Mad Doctor" was actually held on the shelf for over a year. It was filmed under the much better and more appropriate title "A Date With Destiny" (a title retained for its British release), and the inappropriately titled "The Mad Doctor" downplays its merits, putting it (for sale purposes), on virtually the same level as the FRC shock horrors like "The Mad Monster" and "Dead Men Walk". Apart from being a cheap and lurid title, it isn't even an appropriate one, since Rathbone is at best eccentric and at worst a trifle peculiar, belonging to that great tradition of Hollywood wifie-murderers (Charles Boyer, Joseph Cotten, John Barrymore, Rathbone on other occasions) whose wives usually deserve it, and even if not get a good run for their money first.

Although it has the standard lightning flashes and graveyard scenes, "The Mad Doctor" keeps its Grand Guignol elements well in check. The killings are imaginative rather than visceral, and the real villain seems to be psychiatry as a profession. Sugar Boyden's frequent attacks on psychiatry seem to come from a place in Rathbone's mind along with the ghosts of the 40's ... although of course this was before psychiatry became fashionable via such lady doctors as Ingrid Bergman and Audrey Totter, and sensitive psychos like Gregory Peck and Robert Taylor! The film is glossy and well-done, but lacks a certain individual style; Tim Whelan was always a talented and good all-round director, but he was never a specialist, and this kind of film really needs one. The New York "locations" are a little sketchy; the public library comes off convincingly enough, but a murder on the subway at 79th St. and Broadway looks more Hollywoodian than upper West Side. And its victim is one of those creatures who literally asks for it; frail and helpless, he still has the temerity to inform his assassin-to-be that he is going to turn him in to the police.

Like "The Monster and the Girl", "The Mad Doctor" manages to outwit the production code rather nicely on a couple of occasions. The script never really spells out the relationship between Rathbone and Martin Kosleck, but a few lines of dialogue make it fairly clear that they're more than just pals. And the Production Code clearly forbade "Suicide in Flat Solution" in other words, suicide was ok as a plot element, but not as a way out of a climactic dilemma. Rathbone's death at the end is essential so that Ellen Drew will be free to marry John Howard (though a short, eventful marriage to Rathbone would seem to be an infinitely preferable alternative). Clearly he does commit suicide — but the dubbing over of a trigger-happy cop's bullets at least leaves the censors with the possibility that he might thus have been killed legally and more correctly! The film is perhaps a little too handsome and slowly-paced for its own good, and a bit more zip would have helped it — but it is a good-looking film, and these days it is a rare and real pleasure to watch Rathbone totally in charge in such a role and such a film. (Especially with Martin Kosleck as his hapless partner!) (The print is sometimes a little on the dark side, but for some reason all the 16mm on this film are like that; again it is a film not in official distribution, and the print is the best of several that we checked out).