

# DRINK TANIK



James Whale

The  
Invisible Man



## 52 WEEKS TO Science Fiction Film Literacy- Week 5: The Invisible Man (1933)

In the 1930s, Universal was on a role. They had some of the hottest properties in film, mostly in their horror series of films. Directors like Todd Browning and Karl Freund were making brilliant horror films with Bela Legosi and friends. It was an amazing time to be involved in film. These don't seem so scary today, or even in the 1970s when I watched them with my Dad when we first got our VCR, but they were great films, well-told stories shot by some of the best filmmakers of all-time.

While you can argue that Frankenstein, directed by James Whale, is the best of the Golden Age of Universal Monster films, I will argue with you saying that The Invisible Man is the most approachable and Stfnal. Look at the science fiction films from Universal in the 1930s, the one that jumps out at me is The Invisible Man, also directed by master James Whale and starring Claude Reins.

Of all the Universal Monster films, I would say that The Invisible Man is the most science fiction. Frankenstein was borderline horror; The Mummy, Wolfman and Dracula straight fantasy, and The Invisible Man also has another SF connection: HG Wells. Wells wrote the novel that the film was based on and was still alive when they made it. In fact, they even showed it to him at a special screening and he was slightly impressed, but had trouble with some of the decisions made by the producers. It's the constant battle that one faces when one adapts popular source material who is still alive. Wells, a very smart guy and one who really understood the ways of Hollywood and film better than most writers of his generation. There was much more subtlety to the Wells book, a lot of great sort of commentary from HG that didn't make it into the movie. He recognized that writing a screenplay and writing a novel are two very different arts once he started writing his own screenplays (one of which we'll be talking about in a couple of weeks).

This is the story of Jack Griffin, a scientist who has

found a way to make himself invisible using 'monocane', a sophisticated new drug. The drug also has the minor problem that it drives the person who uses it insane. It's a typical trade-off when it comes to drugs that give you superpowers. It ends with one of those 'I have meddled with forces man was never meant to know' scenarios that are so popular in science fiction. To remain seen, he wears bandages, making him look like a mummy, one of the biggest fears folks had at that point was the Mummy, not only because of the Universal films but because of the discovery of the tomb of King Tut and the supposed Curse of the tomb.

The movie is pretty darn faithful to Wells' book when you consider all the liberties taken by films like Dracula and Frankenstein. Of course, there were changes, many of the characters completely re-worked, and there are good reasons for it. One thing that it shows, and anyone who has read the novel and seen the movie will tell you, is that Wells' novel flows better; but it's rough going in the middle, just when the film gets good.

One of the matters that filmmakers in the silent era were always bumping up against is that telling the stories was very difficult when you had to rely on title cards and broad acting and shots. Film was still very young in the 1920s, and talkies grew quickly, using many of the broad techniques for storytelling that had been used in the Silent Era. There are those who believe that Talkies ruined both the art of acting and film in general. There are others who believe that the 1930s was the last great decade of film because you still had the silent actors who understood how to make everything understandable, if not believable. The films of the 1930s actually play worse to a modern audience than the Silents. There was an adjustment period that led to a long period of odd dialogue and rough music. Now, the same transition took place in television, though it took them 40 years to go from introduction to a cleaner, more subtle form.

What makes this one of the most important films of the 1930s while not being Frankenstein or Dracula, is that the special effects here were among the best of their time. The effects were done by John P. Fulton, John J. Mescall and Frank D. Williams were awfully inventive. They used wire-work for some of it, and they used a Matte method where Rains (or a slightly shorter body double) would be placed in a full-body black velvet outfit to blend with a black velvet background and then composited. It's a simple technique, and it was really effective in the film. Part of the reason for the success of the film was that it was a big-budget effect spectacular. Few



films up to that point had used as many effects shots.

As far as the need to view it for Science Fiction Film Literacy is that The Invisible Man has effected film for decades. You can see shots taken directly from the film in various other film and television shows. The Invisible Man also had a ton of sequels and remakes, the first being in 1940. They did a remake in 2006 for French TV that was more closely related to the book, but it was also way too computer animated. The SciFi Original version was shelved, if I remember correctly. Hollow Man, where you see Kevin Bacon's glory in the flesh and in heat vision, was a pale comparison to the original.

The Invisible Man launched Claude Rains as a Hollywood star. Gloria Stewart would be involved with film until she was in her late 90s, including getting an Oscar nomination for Titanic. James Whale fell and fell hard, but is still considered to have been one of the most important directors of the 1930s (and his story is almost as good as Todd Browning, who directed Dracula and Freaks) and an icon in the history of queer cinema. The Invisible Man was a major step in their careers, not to mention in the development of the Universal Monsters franchise.



What's the best thing about The Invisible Man? It's a big showy film., the kind that Spielberg and Lucas would become masters of. It was a blockbuster, a effects-driven masterpiece that had a director who understood the entire world of film and not just the commercial, like the two aforementioned beasts.

In 2000, the National Film Registry named The Invisible Man to the ranks. That means it's one of the most significant films of the last century. I couldn't agree more.

# WHY THE INVISIBLE MAN SUCKS RUNNY EGGS

## by Frank Wu

Universal Studios had an impressive run in the thirties and forties. In those few years, they invented – and then made mockeries of – the quintessential versions of quintessential movie monsters. Frankenstein's creature. The Bride of Frankenstein. Dracula. The Mummy. The Wolfman. And... the Invisible Man.

There were Frankenstein movies before (e.g., the 1910 version we wrote about in ish 268), but it is the 1931 Universal version that was the artistic touchstone for all that followed. Same for the other monsters.

But the least interesting of the group is the Invisible Man.

I don't stand alone in this opinion.

If you search by "plot keywords" in imdb.com, the invisible man (74) loses to Frankenstein (118) and Dracula (215).

If you search in eBay for "model kit" + the names of various monsters. "Frankenstein + model kit" gave me 86 hits. Wolfman, 72. Dracula, 70. Mummy, 67. The poor, poor pitiful invisible man only got 15.

Why so lame? He has a lot going for him.

The 1933 movie is quite exciting. You can't take your eyes off the screen. The invisible man dominates the proceedings, even when – especially when – he's not there. The viewer has to be vigilant of the entire frame, because any background object – a chair or book or log – can rise into the air and become a weapon.

Similarly, in one scene in a production of "Harvey"

at my old high school, a door opened on one side of the stage. Moments later, a door opened on the other side – and every eye in the audience tracked across the empty stage to watch the invisible rabbit. Likewise, the brilliance of Steven Spielberg as a director is exemplified by the fact that he could hold audiences spellbound in terror – at shots of empty water in "Jaws".

Yes, 1933 "Invisible Man" is quite good. It has great effects, and it launched the career of Claude Rains, who even gets mentioned in the opening of "Rocky Horror" for his efforts.

But the problem isn't the film, but the main character itself.

The flaw can be summed up in one phrase: "Unbalanced game play." If a character is so much more powerful than the others, a game is not fun to watch or play.

We like equally-matched opponents. Sure the good guy (usually, eventually) wins, but it's a titanic, endless struggle. Superman vs. Lex Luthor. Samus Aran vs.

Ridley. Godzilla vs. Ghidrah. Spock vs. his emotions.

Invisibility gives one character too much power:

In the hands of a skilled Mortal Kombat III player, when Reptile goes invisible, he can juggle you at will from any direction. Within seconds, you're dead, but before that, you've already given up and lost interest. Other characters have what I call "functional temporary invisibility." Here, they disappear before you can hit them, then re-appear somewhere else before striking. This can be



through super-speed, teleportation or time distortion. Wesker in "Resident Evil". Juri in "Super Street Fighter IV". SHADO operative Turner in the "UFO" episode "Timelash."

You cannot beat these guys with skill – you can only rely on luck or wait for the invisible opponent to make a mistake.

But if the invisible man is clever – living in a warm place, not venturing near rain or snow or paint-balls – he is invincible. He can rob any bank, sneak into any bed, kill any enemy.

He becomes godlike.

But, as pointed out in the Hugo-winning "Dr. Who" episode "The Water of Mars," the invincible Dr. Who – the Time Lord Victorious – is wrong. Similarly, the "Homo sapiens invisibilis victoriosus" is also wrong.

Realizing this, filmmakers have tried to limit his powers. In the 1976 TV show "Gemini Man," Ben Murphy can only be invisible for 15 minutes. But time-limited powers are contrived and artificial. Dark Man's artificial skin only lasts 99 minutes. The folks in "Fantastic Voyage" can only stay miniaturized for one hour. All the character needs is good time management skills.

The only sure way to defeat the invisible man is... to allow him to defeat himself. He goes crazy (as in the 1933 film or the "Lord of the Rings" series). Or he becomes deranged in his loneliness, as per the "socially invisible" characters in Silverberg's "To See the Invisible Man" (later made into a "Twilight Zone" episode) – the "Homo sapiens invisibilis desperatus".

You have to wait (boring) until the invisible man does something stupid (boring) like walk into the snow, where he leaves footprints (boring) so you can shoot him with some conventional weapon (boring) because invisible men don't need a cool weapon like Kryptonite or silver bullets to beat them. Dull, dull, dull.

In a believable scenario, if you're brave and clever and strong enough, you can beat Frankenstein's monster or

Dracula. With the Invisible Man, you have to wait for him to make a mistake, which is like playing my wife at Super Street Fighter IV – it just ain't gonna happen.

