

Dracula

by András Lénárt

This essay is a revised and extended version of a text that previously appeared as part of the author's "Hispanic Hollywood. Spanish-Language American Films in the 1920s and 1930s" in: Americana. E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary. Vol. IX. No. 2. Fall 2013.

In the 1930s, when dubbing was not a well-established method yet and subtitles were far from being popular, Hollywood started to work on multiple-language versions and double versions of the same films in order to indulge the foreign countries' audiences. After experimenting with various languages, they finally reduced the production to four, including French, Spanish, German and Swedish. Methods transformed throughout the years: in the beginning foreign-language versions were accurate translations of the English-language original film but the strictness slackened with time resulting in foreign directors' loose adaptations of the originals. Generally, the same sets, sceneries, and wardrobes were used to do the translated version. Among the targeted regions, Latin America turned out to be the most important area.

The quality of the original films and their copies usually differed substantially. For economic reasons, English films were shot during the day, while Spanish versions, mostly at night. The original version was produced in a matter of months, while new versions only in a period of several days. Due to the huge difference in quality, the founder of Universal Studios, Carl Laemmle, decided to have the same producer supervising both the American and the Spanish version of the same film. In terms of film stars, it was not unusual for famous American actors to do the same film several times in various languages; this procedure was quite common in the case of Spanish versions (eg. Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy). At the end of the 1920s and at the beginning of the 1930s, various Spanish filmmakers were invited to Hollywood and to Joinville in France; as a result, more than 130 films were produced in Spanish there. Spanish and Latin American (mostly



This photo featuring Carlos Villariás as Dracula and Lupita Tovar as his victim appeared in the January 1931 edition of Cine-Mundial, the Spanish-language version of Moving Picture World. [Courtesy Media History Digital Library.](#)

Mexican, Cuban and Argentine) actors travelled to both places to work in this international cinematographic project, but the situation often became close to absurd when the main actors of a film came from different Latin American countries and they had all different accents or talked in various dialects. Subsequently this 'war of accents,' among other factors, led to the decline of the double-versions.

One characteristic case of 'Hispanicized Hollywood' was the adaptation of Bram Stoker's classic novel "Dracula" (1897), one of the few Universal horror films that were converted into Spanish during the 1930s. Although both "Dracula" film versions made use of the same set, decorations and basic screenplay, there were notable differences between Tod Browning's original "Dracula" (1931) and George Melford's Hispanic version "Dracula" released the same year. The most remarkable discrepancy is their duration: the Spanish version is almost 30 minutes longer than the original because Melford didn't delete any of the necessary scenes and dialogues. Moreover, Browning shot his film during the day and when they finished, Melford and his crew occupied the same set and shot almost the same

scenes but this time with Spanish (as Carlos Villarías), Mexican (like the female lead Lupita Tovar) or Chilean actors. They even made use of Browning's alternate takes. Since Melford didn't speak Spanish, his co-director, Enrique Tovar Ávalos and some interpreters helped his communication with the Hispanic actors. Only a small part of the total budget was assigned to the Spanish version.

The producers of Universal took film shootings under strict control: they obliged Browning to eliminate various scenes and interfered in small details. At the same time, they paid little attention to the Spanish version, so Melford could work without any restrictions following the instructions of the original screenplay. It was obvious that the Spanish-language version was not as important to the studio as the English version. While producers were keeping a close watch on the original budget, on the controversial methods of Browning and on the difficulties concerning Béla Lugosi, Melford and his crew, outside the main limelight, worked much faster than the American team, sometimes even overtook them, so the Spanish version was completed days before the original was ready. Due to the studio's constant interventions, Browning's "Dracula" turned out to be a movie with a number of ambiguous scenes, while Melford's film came out as a basically clear-cut adaptation of the original screenplay. Occasionally, the director reinterpreted the original scenes in order to achieve more credibility or aesthetic harmony. Melford really cared about the *mise-en-scène*, therefore we can experience more sophisticated and artistic camera movements; some film historians and critics even claim that the Hispanic version's quality is superior to the original's merits.

The Spanish version included more violence and erotic content than its English counterpart because the distribution in Spain and Latin America was beyond the range of Hollywood's rising morality codes

and developing censorship. For instance, in the Spanish version we can see close-ups of the vampire's bites, while in the original they are always shown from a certain distance; furthermore, Lupita Tovar's Eva is much bolder and sexier than Helen Chandler's Mina. In relation to Béla Lugosi's and Carlos Villarías' acting skills, it is debated whether the Hungarian or the Spanish actor delivered a better performance, although Lugosi's mysterious, exotic and legendary persona cannot be dissociated from the count of Transylvania, while Villarías remains almost unknown for the international audience. In Spanish-speaking countries Universal Studios distributed only Melford's version, and thus the audience didn't have the chance to compare Lugosi's with Villarías's performance.

Melford directed other memorable Spanish versions too, always assisted by his co-director Tovar Ávalos. Among these were "La voluntad del muerto" (1930), which was the re-adaptation of Rupert Julian's and John Willard's "The Cat Creeps" (1930), while the romantic comedy "Don Juan diplomático" (1931) re-produced the plot of Malcolm St. Clair's "The Boudoir Diplomat" (1930).

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

András Lénárt, PhD., is senior assistant professor of Hispanic Studies and Film History at the University of Szeged (Hungary), he has been visiting professor at Spanish, British and French universities. His research interests include the relation between film studies and history, Spanish and Latin American cinema and history, as well as Inter-American studies. His essays and articles have appeared in Spanish, Hungarian, Italian, German, Canadian and Latin American journals and volumes. He is the author of a book on the Spanish film policy during Francisco Franco's dictatorship.