
AMERICAN GOTHIC: THE ROOTS OF US HORROR

Andrew Graves

Week 1: Out of the Silence.

Frankenstein (1910), *The Unknown* (1927) and *Dracula* (1931)

FRANKENSTEIN (1910)

J. Searle Dawley

Like many films from that era, it's basic – one still camera, giving the action a stayed theatrical feel. However, it also uses the kind of 'special effects' that had already been pioneered by the European George Melies. Charles Ogle is a suitably horrific 'creation'. More a demon from Hell than the result of spare-part surgery.

"I have the sincerest admiration for the Edison and Vitagraph studios, but it must be said, with all due deference to these distinguished producers, that such films as 'Frankenstein' and 'The Mystery of Temple Court', while delightful literature to coroners, undertakers, gravediggers, and morgue-keepers, fail to please the general public. 'Fail to please' is putting it mildly. (...) Death scenes and executions are interesting historical reading, when well described, but a portrayal of these things on a living screen may well be dispensed with."

W. Stephen Bush
The Moving Picture World

Tod Browning

Director Tod Browning began his showbiz career as part of a travelling carnival. His most celebrated act was that of 'The Living Corpse', where he would remain 'buried' for several days to the delight of the public and press alike.

It has been speculated that Browning (possibly due to a drunken car accident) may have developed or perhaps strengthened a seeming 'castration complex'.

Tod Browning and Freud

In his essay 'The Uncanny' Freud talked about the relationship between Castration Complex and Macabre Fantasy (or horror).

The Doppelganger

The basis for all 'monster' images.

- Jekyll and Hyde
- Frankenstein
- The Werewolf
- The Vampire

The Doppelgänger is “a defense mechanism; the unconscious mind, sensing a mortal danger to the ego, eye, limb or genital, creates an imaginative stand-in for the threatened part”

- Frankenstein creates another ‘self’
- Alonzo has an extra thumb

Tod Browning and Castration Fear?

“Tod Browning was turning castration symbolism into a cottage industry. The image of human beings paralyzed, mutilated, or otherwise ‘cut off’ below the waist occurs repeatedly in Browning films.”

David J Skal

Pre-Code Horror

The rise of the American horror movie coincided with the Great Depression and the dawning of the term the *American Dream*. The term was first coined by James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America*. The idea that there was ‘opportunity for each according to ability or achievement’ while millions went homeless or queued in bread lines, illustrated either the country’s naivety or perhaps its growing cynicism.

Early Hollywood

In 1915, the Supreme Court ruled that motion pictures were not covered by the First Amendment. Cities began to pass ordinances banning the public exhibition of “immoral” films, and the studios feared that state or federal regulations were not far off. This was followed in the 1920s by a series of public scandals. In 1929 Martin Quigley, editor of the Motion Picture Herald and Jesuit priest Daniel A. Lord created a Code of standards (which Hays approved of) and submitted to the studios. After some revisions, the Code was accepted by the studios in an attempt to head off direct government intervention.

The Production Code Was also known as the ‘Hays Code’. The Code was divided into two parts. The first was a set of “general principles” that mostly concerned morality. The second was a set of “particular applications”, an exacting list of items that could not be depicted. The men obligated to enforce the Code, Jason Joy and his successor Dr. James Wingate were seen as being ineffective. From March 31, 1930, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America formally pledged to abide by the production code. However, compliance with the Code was a verbal agreement and essentially it became difficult to maintain or enforce.

Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff

Both actors became defined by their breakout roles, however, Karloff was able to secure better parts and was used more by studios. This was largely due to discrepancies between the way that the two actors handled their business. Lugosi was not great with money and certainly would come across to producers as much needier than Karloff. Karloff, it could be argued, had more range and was not restricted by a strong Eastern European accent in the way Lugosi was.

“A strange thing happened to me following Dracula, I discovered that every producer in Hollywood had definitely set me down as a type, an actor of this particular kind of role...before Dracula I had played nothing but leads and straight characters, I was both amused and bitterly disappointed.”

Bela Lugosi

Lugosi effectively saved Universal Studios from bankruptcy, with his performance in Dracula, yet he was unceremoniously dropped by them just a few years after. Horror 'stars' of the day were seldom treated seriously and were unable to breakaway from studio typecasting. Universal though did attempt to cash in on the success of Dracula and Frankenstein by presenting a number of 'two monsters for the price of one' features.

Dracula – typical Browning?

- Not too far removed from his carnival days.
- Dracula is the 'ultimate con man'
- Renfield, to all intents and purposes is the side show geek, devouring insects and small animals alive.
- Dracula is also a 'Castrated Seducer' unable to penetrate in the usual manner –(un)dead from the waist down

Historical Context

“During the war women fought maneuvered, bribed and schemed to get into the front-line trenches. In their hearts, in their conscious minds, they believed that they were striving for that place in order to provide deeds of duty and mercy...but mixed in with this high motive was the ghoulish compulsion to see men torn and bloody and in agony...the need to look upon suffering”

Bela Lugosi

Dracula: The Ultimate Capitalist?

- Takes everything gives nothing
- Sucks the life out of victims
- Promises the world but offers destruction
- Despite the 'destructive' quality – remains highly seductive
- Victims – gladly submitting to 'his' power

“Ninety percent of the people are morbid minded...more people would gather to look at a dead horse in the street than would assemble to watch the finest coach go by.”

Tod Browning